

Philosophic historiography in the eighteenth century in Britain and France

Mary Catherine Brereton

Faculty of English Language and Literature
University of Oxford, Wadham College

D.Phil. Thesis

Trinity Term, 2007

ABSTRACT

Philosophic historiography in the eighteenth century in Britain and France

Mary Brereton
Wadham College

DPhil
2007

The subject of this thesis is the by now traditional grouping of certain innovative works of historiography produced in eighteenth-century Britain and France; namely the historical works of Voltaire, and the historical writings of the *philosophes*; and, in Britain, the histories of Hume, Robertson, and Gibbon. This thesis gives a historical and expository analysis of the individual strategies of literary self-fashioning and generic appropriation which underlie this impression of resemblance. It particularly demonstrates that the major characteristics of the contemporary vision of philosophic historiography – the idea of a European history of manners or *l'esprit humain*, and the insistence on the rejection of the practices of the *érudits* – which have become incorporated within scholarly definitions of ‘Enlightenment historiography’, are well-established generic tropes, adapted and affected in France as in Britain, by authors of diverse ambitions. The invitation to assume inauthentic connections contained within the practice of philosophic historiography is shown to be embraced by Gibbon, in a notable literary challenge to the paradigms of intellectual history.

This study contrasts the textual evidence of these authors’ experience of literary, personal, and political challenges regarding the definition of their role as public, intellectual writers, to the acquired image of an ideal of ‘Enlightenment writing’. It considers the Frenchness of *philosophie*, and the potential Britishness of Hume, Robertson, and Gibbon. As part of its wider analysis of the practice of intellectual writing with a historical focus, its scope includes the writings of British clerics and writers on religion; of French academicians; and of the late *philosophe* Volney, and Shelley his interpreter. The major conclusion of this thesis is that eighteenth-century British and French history writing does not support any synthesis of an Enlightenment historical philosophy, narrative, or method; while it is suggested that one of the costs of the construct of ‘Enlightenment’, has been the illusion of familiarity with eighteenth-century intellectual culture, in France as well as Britain.

Table of Contents

INTRODUCTION	5
CHAPTER 1. VOLTAIRE AND PHILOSOPHIC HISTORIOGRAPHY	19
1. Unphilosophic historiography	20
2. Daring to praise	32
3. The meaning of <i>moeurs</i>	38
4. Voltaire, constitutional historian	46
CHAPTER 2. ENLIGHTENMENT WITHOUT <i>PHILOSOPHES</i>	56
1. Licentious readers	59
2. ‘Burlesque Divinity’	67
3. Two clerical historians	74
CHAPTER 3. AFTER THE ANCIENT CONSTITUTION	86
1. Speaking reason to the British	88
2. ‘The chief use of history’?	98
3. ‘Interrupted by the Reformation’	108
4. Escaping constitutional history	118
CHAPTER 4. THE LIMITS OF PRESCRIPTION	133
1. ‘La gloire d’être auteur et inventeur’	135
2. ‘Beaucoup de préceptes, & peu de grands artistes’	141
3. The philosophic personality of the <i>Histoire des deux Indes</i>	149
4. Why be a <i>philosophe</i> ?	161
CHAPTER 5. IDENTIFYING THE HISTORIAN IN THE <i>DECLINE AND FALL</i>	170
1. The embarrassment of facts	171
2. The character of the historian	183
3. The evolution of the scholars	190
4. Identifying the subject of the <i>Decline and Fall</i>	204

CHAPTER 6. INHERITING THE FRENCH ENLIGHTENMENT	215
1. ‘Le ton de vérité’	217
2. Reading the ruins	225
3. Shelley’s philosophic historiography	235
CONCLUSION	243
BIBLIOGRAPHY	254

INTRODUCTION

This thesis demonstrates how the unity and coherence of British and French Enlightenment or ‘philosophic’ historiography is more apparent than real, and still less apparent than is commonly alleged. Historiography has been a notable survivor of the general wreck of comparative Enlightenment studies, brought about by the increased awareness of the importance of national context to the historical interpretation of eighteenth-century European intellectual culture; but this study shows that in the history of history writing in the period, differences of nationality, of political and religious affiliation, and, equally importantly, of individual intention, conspire to disrupt any such assumption of commonality. Yet the image of such a commonality persists; and the impression of there being a unitary tradition of eighteenth-century philosophic historiography was fostered by its practitioners themselves and by their contemporaries almost as much as it has been adopted by subsequent scholars. This thesis identifies the strategies of generic appropriation and literary self-fashioning which underlie this cultivation of resemblance, and proffers a remarkable historical testimony of the liberal scope of willed cultural affinities.

The scholarly interpretation of the great collection of innovative histories written in eighteenth-century Britain and France, from Voltaire to Hume, Robertson, Gibbon and Diderot and Raynal, has proved a signal exception to the general fragmentation of the concept of a pan-European Enlightenment. The central problem for modern historians of Enlightenment has been how to preserve a working definition of European commonality, while taking account of the contribution of recent studies emphasising the need to base interpretation within particular national contexts.¹ Yet in the same period of time, the concept of a coherent tradition of Enlightenment historiography which cuts across national borders has in fact gained in popularity.² Similarly, in the important collection of essays *Le Monde des Lumières* edited by Daniel Roche and Vincenzo Ferrone, the challenge of national difference and the

¹ See especially John Robertson, *The Case for the Enlightenment: Scotland and Naples 1680-1760* (Cambridge: 2005) for the challenge to Enlightenment studies. The major survey publications on ‘Enlightenment in national context’ are Roy Porter and Mikuláš Teich eds., *The Enlightenment in National Context* (Cambridge: 1981), and more recently, Vincenzo Ferrone and Daniel Roche eds., *Le Monde des Lumières* (first published in Italian as *L’Illuminismo. Dizionario storico*, Rome and Madrid, 1997; French translation, Paris, 1999).

² See especially Karen O’Brien, *Narratives of Enlightenment: Cosmopolitan history from Voltaire to Gibbon* (Cambridge: 1997), and John Pocock’s series of volumes on Gibbon and Enlightenment historiography under the title *Barbarism and Religion* (Cambridge: 1999-2005, four volumes to date).

subtleties of comparative history are made an organising principle of the collection, but again, in the editors' concluding summing-up of the distinctive character of Enlightenment, the usual historiographical suspects appear as a chief exhibit of Enlightenment unity.³ It certainly appears that historiography has come to represent the palladium of comparative Enlightenment studies, and that, its unity and coherence once abandoned, the whole concept of the European Enlightenment loses one of its most durable defences. It is also evident that one of the chief attractions of historiography is that this is one activity, at least, in which eighteenth-century Britain deigned to join its neighbours. If historiography is Enlightenment's palladium, Gibbon's *History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* (1776-88) is the very fulcrum of Britain in Europe.

While it is a central contention of this thesis that eighteenth-century British and French history writing does not support any such synthesis of an Enlightenment historical attitude, philosophy, narrative or method, the approach taken is historical and expository, based on a constructive engagement with the literary character of Enlightenment, in the two senses of the term; in the first place as the literary (meaning stylistically sophisticated and generically self-conscious) nature of Enlightenment writing, here in the particular case of historiography, and also in the sense of how Enlightenment comes to define itself through the medium of print. It is a marked feature of all attempts to define Enlightenment in the terms of textual practice (that is, as distinct from the more various methods of the cultural historians⁴) that the discursive character of Enlightenment writing is held both to constitute and to reflect the polemical single-mindedness and above all the commitment to rational demonstration and to intellectual endeavour which are such characteristic features of any Enlightenment deemed worthy of the name. For example, John Pocock identifies Enlightened intentions as 'a series of programmes for reducing the power of either churches or congregations to disturb the peace of civil society'; and John Robertson insists that Enlightenment is characterised by 'the commitment to understanding, and hence to advancing, the causes and conditions of human betterment in this world', and repeats for good measure that 'the Enlightenment was committed to understanding,

³ *Le Monde des Lumières*, p.563.

⁴ See Ferrone and Roche, 'Historiographie des Lumières' in their *Le Monde des Lumières*, pp.547-51 on 'la nouvelle histoire culturelle des Lumières'.

that is to analysis on the basis of good argument, leading to reasoned conclusions'.⁵ Jean Goulemot has described how in modern France the eighteenth-century *philosophe* still represents 'un imaginaire de l'écrivain',⁶ but it is also the case that the entire idea of Enlightenment writing as a category, as 'intellectual' writing from a writer-philosopher with a coherent aim to persuade, is as much of an honorific 'imaginary'. This fact of the restricted understanding of self-expression in print permitted to Enlightenment is the less acknowledged for the almost total marginalization of literary criticism, at least in its more unabashed forms, within contemporary Enlightenment studies. Indeed, the implicit suggestion of John Robertson's magnificent review of the history of Enlightenment studies as a discipline in his introduction to his recent monograph, *The Case for the Enlightenment: Scotland and Naples 1680-1760*, is that the activities of the 'literary historians' were a phenomenon of the 1960s, and (it seems) best left there; and it is assumed that Enlightenment is now to be pursued by means of the methodological rivalry between 'social' and 'intellectual' historians.⁷

This study demonstrates how the method and address of eighteenth-century philosophic historiography is far from simply suasive or demonstrative. Indeed, philosophic historiography as a literary practice is positively characterised by an exceptional degree of self-reflexivity, and this to a great extent precisely because what is at stake is the valorised status of the *philosophe*; for philosophic historiography is not only the history writing written by *philosophes*, but is equally the history writing which confers philosophic status on its author. For historians with political or controversial ambitions, this competition for authority and influence becomes more, not less important; and naturally, for those without, it is the work's whole reason for existence. It is a notable characteristic of even the most philosophic of philosophic historians, that their engagement with the philosophic ideal of the selfless furtherance of public enlightenment and political and ecclesiastical reform, which has since been refracted through modern historians' understanding of the discursive practice of Enlightenment, can be the focus for authorial ambivalence, personal reserve, inconsistency of intent, and uncertainty regarding their relationship with their readers.

⁵ John Pocock, *Barbarism and Religion Volume One: The Enlightenments of Edward Gibbon, 1737-1764* (Cambridge: 1999), p.7; John Robertson, *The Case for the Enlightenment*, p.28.

⁶ Jean Goulemot, *Adieu les philosophes. Que reste-t-il des Lumières ?* (Paris: 2001), p.20.

⁷ *The Case for the Enlightenment*, p.11; p.28.

In particular, the fundamental question of the philosophic historians' understanding of historical method is shown to be resolved on the plane of style and in response to the local exigencies of composition, and in the terms of the competitive relationship between philosophic historiography and its non-philosophic counterparts, more than it is as a matter of principle. Indeed, the whole status of their histories as 'histories', as evidence of their authors' own interpretations (however much they are acknowledged by scholars as flawed, limited or biased) of the historical past, from which assumption ultimately derives all such constructs of 'the Enlightenment sense of history', is shown to be a very complex subject for textual analysis, given the dense rhetorical texture of the works in question. This most fundamental feature of the generic character of the philosophic histories varies from author to author, from text to text, and in certain cases, from chapter to chapter or paragraph to footnote. The analysis here presented is explicitly intended as a methodological alternative to the treatment of philosophic historiography as the embodiment of an etiolated form of the 'literature of ideas', and this thesis particularly seeks to emphasise the dangers of a merely partial or avowedly paradigmatic reading of the major texts and their surrounding documents.

The most influential paradigm at present for the special character of Enlightenment historiography is of course the 'Enlightened narrative', John Pocock's term, which also closely corresponds to Karen O'Brien's description of the content of her own paradigm of 'cosmopolitan history'.⁸ The eighteenth-century correlate to the 'Enlightened narrative' is the French philosophic ideal of a new history of *moeurs* or *l'esprit humain*, and as such it forms a central part of the history of philosophic historiography.⁹ In this way, even in addition to the necessary importance of the

⁸ John Pocock understands Hume, Robertson and Voltaire to be all 'concerned to write' the 'Enlightened narrative'; which he defines as the history of 'the Christian millennium' in Europe after the fall of the Roman Empire and the dominance of feudalism and the Papacy, and subsequently, the narrative of 'the emergence from "the Christian millennium" of the political, social and cultural orders in which the Enlightened historians believed themselves to be living and to which they applied the term "Europe"'. (John Pocock, *Barbarism and Religion Volume Two: Narratives of Civil Government* (Cambridge: 1999), pp.1-2). Karen O'Brien's concept of 'cosmopolitan history' includes Voltaire, Hume, Robertson and Gibbon, and has a very specific definition; that of works which display 'an attitude of detachment towards national prejudice' and 'an intellectual investment in the idea of a common European civilisation'. (*Narratives of Enlightenment*, p.2). The narrative the cosmopolitan historians tell is understood to be 'a new and quickly canonical reading of European history as the transition from medieval, feudal to modern, commercial social systems'. (*Narratives of Enlightenment*, p.11).

⁹ John Pocock, for example, offers 'what were called *les progrès de l'esprit humain*' as an equivalent to the Enlightened narrative (*Barbarism and Religion Volume Two*, p.6).

question of the generic identity of the philosophic histories – as ‘histories’ which aim to offer a ‘narrative’ – to the question of the ‘Enlightened narrative’, the potential manifestations of the ‘Enlightened narrative’ reach beyond actual textual accomplishment, and encompass philosophic reflection on a contemporary generic ideal. This thesis does not engage with the paradigm of an ‘Enlightened narrative’ by testing the works in question against a presumed or constructed norm. John Pocock is explicit about the normative principles on which his own study of the philosophic historians is constructed, *Barbarism and Religion Volume Two: Narratives of Civil Government*, in which the works of Hume, Voltaire, Robertson and others are considered ‘as establishing norms’ which are then applied as a ‘context’ to the *Decline and Fall*; and Pocock is careful to note the distinction between his and a historically expository approach to philosophic historiography, ‘this is an interpretative device useful to the historian, rather than a historical statement about any pressures to conform which [Gibbon] may have been under’.¹⁰ Instead, this study examines how the various components which have been assigned to the ‘Enlightened narrative’ are used in their immediate textual context, and considers how far this may intimate why they are used, and also what the author in question thinks about them; and it pays particular attention to the precise nature of the significance invested by different authors in the contemporary ideal of a new philosophic history of manners. It is a major argument of this thesis that the ‘Enlightened narrative’ as contemporary ideal or constructed norm manifests itself in eighteenth-century philosophic historiography neither in fact – as a textual accomplishment – nor in intention, in the sense of the philosophic historians’ perceiving such an undertaking to be of primary interpretative significance. A considerable part of the attraction of the ideal philosophic history of manners is indeed precisely that it is almost wholly empty of interpretative or ideological content, and that as such, it lends itself easily to creative and strategic deployment as a generic disguise. One of the more subversive implications of the history of philosophic historiography is that membership of the history of ideas may be purchased in counterfeited language.

Once stripped of its acquired function within comparative Enlightenment studies, the apparent existence of an eighteenth-century tradition of philosophic historiography in Britain and France becomes an interpretative challenge of a

¹⁰ *Barbarism and Religion Volume Two*, p.1.

different kind, or rather from a different direction. This thesis asks what were the characteristics of ‘philosophic historiography’ as contemporary construct and as literary practice which made it possible for the concept and the tradition to be employed by both British and French authors, and for such various purposes, and yet still invoke a general perception of resemblance in the eyes of both the historians themselves, their contemporaries, and subsequent scholars.

To dissolve the coherence of content and ambition of philosophic historiography in this way certainly challenges its hitherto largely unquestioned capacity to exemplify the discursive practice of Enlightenment at its most unitary and philosophically engaged. At the same time, this examination of the genre of historiography also points towards some of the fundamental structural tensions and constraints acting on eighteenth-century philosophic writing, and so in still more general terms disrupts the rhetorically simple and idealistically pure paradigms appealed to by cultural and intellectual historians when identifying the peculiar character and strategy of Enlightenment writing. Yet the contribution of an appropriately responsive and various reading of philosophic historiography to the understanding of Enlightenment need not necessarily be on the side of the vogue among historians to fragment Enlightenment into a plethora of either competing or merely parallel Enlightenments, described by John Robertson as ‘a postmodern kaleidoscope of diversity and difference’.¹¹ Quite the contrary, it is a major aim of this thesis to demonstrate how a fully complex and flexible model of the literary character of Enlightenment that is accommodating of nuance, variety and contradiction can in fact be a site for the reconciliation of the different ‘traditions’, interpretations and paradigms for eighteenth-century intellectual culture which have been severally argued for by modern historians as definitive. Setting aside the search for a unitary or hegemonic paradigm of Enlightenment, this study explores how within the confines of a single text, of an individual literary career, or of a controversial exchange, the contemporary formulations of the distinctions and contrasts which have informed the various conceptions of Enlightenment, are policed or manufactured anew, manipulated and appropriated, or for that matter strategically concealed, or even locally reconciled. These boundaries include those between erudition and philosophy,

¹¹ *The Case for the Enlightenment*, p.3.

populist and elite, national and cosmopolitan, literary and intellectual, and in France that between the sphere of politics and the sphere of manners, and in Britain that between religion's orthodox mainstream and its radical margins. Eighteenth-century practitioners of Enlightenment themselves show how competing allegiances can combine, and partial representations be woven into a single culture, given a sufficiently ample definition.

One consequence of the vast scope of the historical phenomena now permitted an association with 'Enlightenment' which has proved a particular dilemma for historians, is of course the subversion of a now much-valued nomenclature, and in particular, debates over the use of the definite article have acquired a disconcertingly scholastic degree of importance.¹² Indeed, one of John Robertson's central concerns in his *The Case for the Enlightenment* is with the effects of this territorial expansion of Enlightenment studies (or, conversely, its invasion from outside) on intellectual history as a discipline, 'many intellectual historians have found that they have less and less stake in the Enlightenment as such',¹³ and therefore with the need to reinstate some form of acceptable definition. This thesis is of course explicitly framed against the methodological presuppositions of the search in the eighteenth century for a paradigm of Enlightenment; one of its aims is precisely to illustrate the utility of a lack of critical investment in the maintenance of the term, in undertaking to describe in their historical context the major authors and the high-profile cultural activities which still retain their central place in the Enlightenment's big and ever-growing tent. Throughout this thesis, the term 'Enlightenment' is therefore employed (albeit without the distraction of inverted commas) to connote both the main contours of the critical construct – the project of eighteenth-century men of letters to reform their societies by means of rational argument – and also its cognate manifestations as a cultural ideal in the period itself.

The term 'philosophic historiography' is also employed throughout this thesis in preference to the more usual 'Enlightenment historiography' for a number of additional reasons to that of the forcing of interpretation which almost inevitably follows on from an early commitment to the use of the term 'Enlightenment'. In the context of France, it serves to emphasise the intimate connection between the works

¹² For John Pocock's choice of article and number, see *Barbarism and Religion Volume One*, p.9; and see also John Robertson, *The Case for the Enlightenment*, p.9 n.23.

¹³ *The Case for the Enlightenment*, p.16.

which have come to be so central to any discussion of ‘Enlightenment historiography’ – Voltaire, the *Encyclopédie*, and more recently Raynal – and the public image and personal ambitions of the self-described *philosophes* who produced them. Eighteenth-century British writers did not, of course, describe themselves as *philosophes* (Gibbon’s francophone writings naturally providing the intriguing contrary case); and it is a central aim of this thesis to consider, in particular relation to both the public image and the actual practice of the *philosophes*, the ways in which writers who might be understood as constituting a British Enlightenment conceived of their place in the wider culture. Where Britons are described as in some way ‘philosophic’ writers, it is therefore within this frame of reference of identity and difference. At the same time, the particular case of historiography, as a set of stylistic precepts and interpretative stances, as well as a canon of major exemplars accumulating throughout the century, furnishes textual ground for the description of ‘philosophic’ features in non-*philosophe* authors in Britain as in France. Yet, for all the flexibility of the adjective, a noun is still lacking for describing ‘writers who might be understood as constituting a British Enlightenment’, and the occasional use of the unattractive anachronism of ‘intellectuals’ has unfortunately been found necessary, although of course with a full sense of how the boundaries of the category are defined by contemporary interventions. The terms ‘intellectual culture’ and ‘intellectual writing’ have however been found useful as alternatives to the inevitably restrictive function of any idea of an Enlightenment, however many separate manifestations are conceded.

This thesis is also faced with the employment throughout of one further term which has acquired a uniquely contested status in Enlightenment studies. The imprecision habitual to ‘English Literature’ has here been sacrificed in favour of the deliberate use of ‘Britain’ and ‘British’, and even where it appears surprisingly strange to the eye. That the problem of terminology remains acute for historians of the European Enlightenment is notably illustrated in the recent survey *Le Monde des Lumières*. It is true that the editors Vincenzo Ferrone and Daniel Roche have boldly opted for an article on ‘Grande-Bretagne’ by John Pocock, although they still follow the original editorial principles of the earlier survey *The Enlightenment in National Context* (1981) edited by Roy Porter and Mikuláš Teich – which of course assumes the contrary case of a separate England and Scotland – in not discussing the basis of their decision. It is, however, very strange indeed to find an article on Britain, Ireland and America – and moreover one which opens with the phrase ‘les pays à

prédominance anglophone'¹⁴ – displaying such a title. The capaciousness of the title of the chapter 'Monde Allemand' may legitimately be contrasted. The simple disappearance of Grande-Bretagne from the editors' concluding historical overview is, however, wholly inexplicable; and given the fact that there is no mention of 'Écosse' to accompany that of 'Angleterre', perhaps a return to the habitual imprecision of the francophone eighteenth century may even be suspected.¹⁵ In this thesis, therefore, just as 'Enlightenment' appears without its inverted commas, but still remains a central object of the whole enquiry, so 'Britain?' appears without its typographical ornamentation. Yet at the same time, aside from demonstrating a respect for the constitutional proprieties currently pertaining which would have pleased the main protagonists of the British Enlightenment, it is also the case that the literary focus of this thesis affords a particular perspective on the problem of Britain – as of course at once a nation, a union of nations, and a supra-national entity – within the scholarly debate centred around 'Enlightenment in national context'.

The theme of this thesis in published writings and their imagined publics, necessarily locates it at the most vulnerable point of the construct of a distinctly Scottish Enlightenment. It is a marked feature of the most extended treatments of the Scottishness of Hume, Robertson and *confrères*, that the scholars in question recognise the need to bind their subjects' writings closely to a specifically Scottish audience. Such is the general implication of the whole tradition of analysis which aims to understand the theme of the Scottish Enlightenment to be the Enlightenment of Scotland, and the current focus of scholarly interest in the material existence of Edinburgh as an explanatory 'cultural context' also has a perceptible tendency to elide the activity of publication with the exercise of the other forms of properly personal 'sociability'. John Robertson, who focuses his analysis on Hume the political economist concerned to apply 'the attention of the Scottish public'¹⁶ to the specific problems of Scotland as a province, is particularly explicit on this point. In his account, the fact that Hume published many of his works in London (sometimes of course after having done so in Edinburgh) is ascribed solely to a disinterested desire for profit, 'Hume needed direct access to the London market to achieve good sales

¹⁴ John Pocock, 'Grande-Bretagne' in *Le Monde des Lumières*, pp.467-84, p.467.

¹⁵ See Vincenzo Ferrone and Daniel Roche, 'Historiographie des Lumières' in *Le Monde des Lumières*, pp.564-65.

¹⁶ *The Case for the Enlightenment*, p.374.

(and the financial rewards he felt were his due)'.¹⁷ Yet, as Peter Ghosh has pointed out in relation to Robertson, the inescapable Britishness of the book market must present a 'radical challenge'¹⁸ to such assumptions of provincial separateness; 'to what extent did the commercial quality of the Scottish Enlightenment undercut its Scottishness, given that Scottish authors were // primarily reliant on an English readership, so far as they relied on or looked to book income?'.¹⁹ This thesis pays great attention to the formative effect of their imagined audiences on the writings of all the historians considered. It is also especially attentive to the ways in which the inherent arbitrariness of print identities, a quality even especially sought after by some, can present an interpretative challenge to the preference for faithful connections which is implicit in the employment of any idea of 'context' as a primary means of textual exegesis.

This thesis undertakes a broadly chronological examination of the works in English and in French which, throughout the century, present themselves as interventions in what is now, or was then understood to be the tradition of philosophic historiography, or came to represent such an intervention. As *philosophes*, French writers prescribe the version of historiography thought proper to their role, a particular focus of which is the need to distinguish the historiographical practice of the *philosophe* as *philosophe* from that of his historic enemy the *érudit*. At the same time, even before any of the major philosophic histories are written, the founding concept of a philosophic history of *moeurs*, defined against the humanist or merely populist concern with kings and battles, is already established as a generic ideal; a feature of French philosophic historiography which is of central importance to the narrative of its (ambiguous) achievement. Innovatory Britons, foreign to *philosophie*, still aspire after critical historical positions and new historiographical forms, defined against what has gone before, and even after a history of 'manners', and themselves as historians must frame their relationship to the traditions of historical scholarship. Individual patterns of influence and imitation offer particular points of connection between individual authors, and the two national literatures. The analysis of texts is

¹⁷ *ibid.*, p.373.

¹⁸ Peter Ghosh, 'Review of *William Robertson and the Expansion of Empire* by Stewart J. Brown', *English Historical Review* 113, No. 453 (1998) 1005-1006, p.1005.

¹⁹ *ibid.*, pp.1005-1006.

also at the same time framed around the questions of what assumptions about intellectual writing, and about the role of the author and the nature of his readership, are at work in their composition, and an overall aim of this thesis is to assess the degree of correspondence between such contemporary forms of cultural self-understanding, and the acquired image of Enlightenment as a particular, much valorised form of discursive practice.

Chapter 1, ‘Voltaire and philosophic historiography’, shows how Voltaire, instead of himself being responsible for defining a new philosophic historiography, encounters fully-formed the French cultural assumption that a professed *philosophe* should aim to write a history of *l’esprit humain*, or *moeurs*; and it explores what use he makes of the concept, the significance he ascribes to it, and how far his own work may be said to exemplify it. The question of the public role of the *philosophe* in France is shown to be central to the range of inflexions ascribed to the ideal of a new philosophic history, and Voltaire’s works are shown to incorporate a variety of possibilities of public engagement in a singularly ambivalent fashion. Chapter 1 identifies the ways in which, insofar as Voltaire does himself attempt to write the philosophic history of manners, he exposes the difficulties inherent in the realization of such a project, and it is particularly demonstrated that the argument that his historical works offer an integrated narrative, or give voice to a defined historical idea, must founder on the fact of their irreducibly complex textual nature.

Chapter 2, ‘Enlightenment without *philosophes*’, assesses the disjunction between the contemporary self-perception of the putative members of the British clerical establishment, as embattled, anxious, and divided against each other, and subsequent historians’ claims on their behalf that they or a particular conservative ‘party’ among them evince a cultural confidence and unity in some manner comparable to that of the French *philosophes* (or at least, to the paradigmatic version of French *philosophie* that has become central to the historiography of Enlightenment). The historical work which John Pocock envisages as a classic composition of the British conservative and clerical Enlightenment to be set alongside the *Decline and Fall*, William Warburton’s *The Divine Legation of Moses, demonstrated on the Principles of a Religious Deist* (1738-41), is shown to be in fact informed, even in its very idiosyncrasies, by the sense of a crisis of intellectual authority and of literary standing which positively characterizes the British clerical writers of the period.

Chapter 3, 'After the ancient constitution', turns to the second grouping of historically-minded eighteenth-century Britons who have claimed in the historiography of Enlightenment some resemblance to a *parti des philosophes*, the Scottish Whigs Hume and Robertson. It is shown how, for all the evident points of correspondence between the native Whiggish concept of manners and the French ideal history of *moeurs*, and for all the superficial resemblances between their historical works and those of Voltaire, Hume and Robertson's immediate aim to present their British readers with an alternative to national constitutional history, entirely transforms the interpretative weight and the cultural meaning of the concept of a 'philosophic' history, whether considered in any of its various guises as a history of Europe, a history of civilization, or a history of manners. Chapter 3 particularly considers the extent to which the very specific framing of Hume and Robertson's historical works, as embodying a rhetorical strategy even in advance of their claim to being 'histories', disrupts their basic generic claim to constituting a historical narrative, let alone what has been identified as the 'Enlightened narrative'.

Chapter 4, 'The limits of prescription', examines the attempts to define a stable form for philosophic historiography which centre around the pinnacle of the philosophic prescriptive tendency, the *Encyclopédie* (1751-65). It is demonstrated how, for all the appearance of co-ordination and confidence projected by the French *philosophes*, their discussion of some of the most basic features of what should constitute a new and properly philosophic historiography exposes the fundamental tensions in their conception of their role as *philosophes*, tensions which the 'official' rhetoric of *philosophie* – which has had so much influence on the establishment of the paradigm of Enlightenment applied to the whole of Europe – leaves largely unexplored. One of the most eccentric productions of the philosophic historiographical tradition, Diderot and Raynal's *Histoire philosophique et politique des établissemens et du commerce des Européens dans les deux Indes* (1770; rev. 1774, 1780), is shown to be a natural literary development out of some of the problems inherent in *encyclopédisme* which were identified by *philosophes* themselves, and the espousal of literary eccentricity in fact to be the perverse outcome of the very rigour of philosophic prescription. The concluding section of Chapter 4 examines the stylistic effects on historians' actual practice of the most venerable part of philosophic prescription, the contrast between the *philosophe* and the *érudit*, and considers how the very spectacle of the philosophic historians attempting to police

that boundary is seen as a literary opportunity by a certain British historian. The results of that attraction are presented in Chapter 5, 'Identifying the historian in the *Decline and Fall*'.

Chapter 6, 'Inheriting the French Enlightenment', considers the contrasting perspectives on the works of the late French *philosophe* Volney, afforded by Gibbon and, decades later, by Shelley. Volney's attempts to infuse a firmer and more explicit philosophical rationale into the literary practice of the *philosophes* are shown, ironically enough given the claim of the *philosophes* to the status of writers-as-philosophers, to result in the effective dismantling of the whole ideal of philosophic communication. The Romantic poet is shown to be better placed than the Enlightenment historian to appreciate such intimations of discursive scepticism, and to be still better placed than the French *philosophe* to turn the limits of philosophic communication into an opportunity to describe, once more, a new historiographical form proper for a new literary culture.

CHAPTER 1. VOLTAIRE AND PHILOSOPHIC HISTORIOGRAPHY

Even before any of the major works of philosophic historiography are written, the French *philosophes* know what kind of history writing is expected of them; theirs is to be the history of *l'esprit humain*, and different from all the forms which have preceded it. Voltaire, the great exemplar of the *historien philosophe*, pays homage to this ideal in countless instances in his private correspondence as well as in his published works. It is therefore a founding irony of the eighteenth-century tradition of philosophic historiography, or indeed of the eighteenth-century tradition of imagining a tradition of philosophic historiography, that Voltaire's entire historiographical career is structured around the questions the philosophic prescription leaves unaddressed, questions of form, of interpretative content, and especially of political relevance. At the same time, it is this very feature of the ideal of the history of the *esprit humain*, that for the *philosophes* it is a distinct generic prescription, to the point even of representing a cliché, and moreover one which beyond its designation as characteristic of the *philosophe* is demonstrably lacking in specific content, which enables Voltaire to employ it in the first instance as an aspect of his self-image, and also for a range of purposes, and notably sometimes as an alibi for his activities as a rather different kind of historian. The complex, persistently ambivalent nature of Voltaire's approach to the much-desired philosophic history of *l'esprit humain* (or of its cognate, the history of *moeurs*) is illustrative of the hidden tensions and uncertainties behind the image of confidence and unity projected throughout the century by the *philosophes* in France.

1. Unphilosophic historiography

Voltaire, the most iconic of philosophic historians, without whose example it may legitimately be questioned whether there would ever have arisen a concept of 'Enlightenment historiography', came to philosophic historiography rather late in his career. Not only may this be deduced from the poor modern critical fortunes of his first historical work, the *Histoire de Charles XII* (1731), but Voltaire himself effectively confesses as much in the preface to his later, more obviously Enlightenment history concerning Peter the Great, the *Histoire de l'empire de Russie sous Pierre le Grand* (1759-63):

Dans les premières années du siècle où nous sommes, le vulgaire ne connaissait dans le Nord de héros que Charles XII. Sa valeur personnelle qui

tenait beaucoup plus d'un soldat que d'un roi, l'éclat de ses victoires et même de ses malheurs, frappaient tous les yeux qui voient aisément ces grandes événements, et qui ne voient pas les travaux longs et utiles. [...] //

[...] On juge aujourd'hui que Charles XII // méritait d'être le premier soldat de Pierre le Grand. L'un n'a laissé que des ruines, l'autre est un fondateur en tout genre. J'osai porter à peu près ce jugement il y a trente années, lorsque j'écrivis l'histoire de Charles. [...] L'histoire de Charles XII était amusante, celle de Pierre I^{er} est instructive.¹

The international reading public has evidently grown in philosophic maturity since the heady days of Narva, and – which is the necessary implication of Voltaire's appeal to cultural periodisation – this process can be dated as recently as the date of the publication of the *Histoire de Charles XII*, in 1731. The fact that Voltaire retained this careful explication of the relationship of the *Histoire de l'empire de Russie* with the *Histoire de Charles XII* in spite of objections from his correspondents in St. Petersburg to his even mentioning the earlier work, is a particular intimation of the importance to Voltaire of formally distancing himself from his former, unregenerate publication.²

Voltaire could be in no doubt that in writing a history of a vulgar military hero, he had violated the most fundamental precept of the new philosophic historiographical model. That the *historien philosophe* should disdain the narratives of kings and battles, and tell the story of the progress of the arts and the human spirit, is a constant refrain in his works and in his correspondence, and it evident that, even in the correspondence, the display of such philosophic priorities is very closely associated by Voltaire with the question of his own self-representation as *philosophe*:

Une loi utile y sera préférée [in the *Siècle de Louis XIV*] à des villes prises et rendues, à des batailles qui n'ont décidé de rien. On verra dans tout l'ouvrage le caractère d'un homme qui fait plus de cas d'un ministre qui fait croître deux épis de blé là où la terre n'en portait qu'un, que d'un roi qui achète ou saccage une province.

Si vous avez, monsieur, sur le règne de Louis XIV quelques anecdotes dignes des lecteurs philosophes, je vous supplierai de m'en faire part.³

¹ Voltaire, *Histoire de l'empire de Russie sous Pierre le Grand* ed. Michel Mervaud et al., in 'Anecdotes sur le czar Pierre le Grand'; and, 'Histoire de l'empire de Russie sous Pierre le Grand' ed. Ulla Kölvig et al. (Oxford: 1999), volumes XLVI and XLVII of Voltaire, *Oeuvres complètes* ed.

Christiane Mervaud, Nicholas Cronk et al. (Oxford: 1968-), vol. XLVI, p.413, pp.414-15.

² See the General Introduction to the *Histoire de l'empire de Russie* ed. Mervaud et al., vol. XLVI, pp.136-37 (Part One of Introduction, by Michel Mervaud).

³ Letter to Jean Lévesque de Burigny, 19th October 1738, number D1630 in Voltaire, *Correspondence and related documents* ed. Theodore Besterman (Oxford: 1968-77), volumes LXXXV-CXXXV of *Oeuvres complètes* ed. Mervaud, Cronk et al. All future references to Voltaire's letters are to this edition, and use its numbering.

Already in 1738, before the publication of Voltaire's own *Siècle de Louis XIV* (part published, 1738; first complete edition, 1751) and well in advance of any of the major philosophic histories, a central philosophic orthodoxy, the superiority of the history of the *esprit humain* and the desirability of its being written, has become established, and Voltaire's phrasing emphasizes the importance to the identity of the *philosophe* that his history writings should conform to this model, it is their role to reflect *le caractère de l'homme*. Voltaire himself invokes the generic categorization of 'une espèce d'histoire philosophique'.⁴

No amount of retrospective manoeuvring could transform the history of Charles XII of Sweden – conqueror, philistine, destroyer of states – into the semblance of a history of *l'esprit humain*. It may legitimately be suspected that Voltaire had simply succumbed to the allure of *grandes événements*, and it is indeed a marked feature of his private discussions of the history of *l'esprit humain*, that, in spite of the presumed high-mindedness of his *lecteurs philosophes*, the philosophic history of the human spirit is accepted as not very interesting, compared to the unreconstructed narratives of kings and battles. In a letter written during the process of composition of the Russian history, Voltaire describes the costs involved in pursuing philosophic credibility:

Aureste, je doute fort que cette histoire réussisse en France; je suis obligé d'entrer dans des détails qui ne plaisent guères à ceux qui ne veulent que s'amuser; les folies héroïques de Charles 12 divertissaient jusqu'aux femmes; des aventures romanesques, et telles même, qu'on n'oserait les feindre dans un Roman, réjouissaient l'imagination; mais deux mille lieues de païs policées, des villes fondés, des loix établies, le commerce naissant, la création de la discipline militaire, tout cela ne parle guères qu'à la raison.

Ajoutez à ce malheur, celui des noms barbares, inconnus à Versailles et à Paris, et vous m'avoüerez que je cours grand risque de n'être point lû de tout ce que vous avez de plus aimable.⁵

Yet in the Avant-Propos to the *Histoire de l'empire de Russie* Voltaire makes greater claims for the *Histoire de Charles XII* than a mere holiday from the rigours of *philosophie*; he claims that in it he still remained faithful to the philosophic disdain for conquerors – or 'à peu près'. The *Histoire de Charles XII* is thus made of much greater significance than merely as an early false start. It is in fact the case that, in establishing a model for how to write an unphilosophic history while the historian

⁴ Letter to Jean Lévesque de Burigny, 19th October 1738, D1630.

⁵ Letter to Jacques Lacombe [no date], D8898.

retains his philosophic principles intact – exploring the contours of that ‘à peu près’ – and how to maintain a saving sense of disjunction between the historian and his history, Voltaire pioneers the rhetorical strategies of authorial self-concealment, narrative manipulation, and ambiguous judgement, which he will later apply to historical subjects with much greater *prima facie* claims to being Enlightenment histories. Voltaire includes in his *Histoire de Charles XII* a ‘Discours sur l’histoire de Charles XII’ which, in the first edition an appendix and in later editions a preface, does indeed effectively declare the maintenance of a constructive stylistic ambiguity to be the dominant theme of the entire text. The ‘Discours sur l’histoire de Charles XII’ gives voice to the philosophic judgement on what constitutes the good prince, and describes how ‘entre les tyrans et les bons rois sont les conquérants, mais plus approchants des premiers’.⁶ Charles XII is, of course, a *conquérant*. As Voltaire presents the question here, *conquérants* inhabit a peculiar discursive space; between the languages of praise and blame, the impression is one of a curious kind of neutrality, and a distinctly curious form of neutrality is very much the rhetorical strategy of the *Histoire de Charles XII*. There is no term more misleading as a description of the strategy of Voltaire’s histories than ‘neo-classical’, with its connotations of generic stability and stylistic conservatism, and, especially, the accompanying assumption that what the author achieves or even desires to achieve is a single, foregrounded, and authoritative interpretative standpoint.⁷

The contrast between the presentation of Charles’s despotism in the *Histoire de l’empire de Russie*, where Voltaire has constituted himself chief counsel for Charles’s even more infamously despotic rival, and that in the *Histoire de Charles XII*, is a particular illustration of the care and deliberation with which Voltaire has excluded the dissonant language of political and moral judgement from the earlier text. The great turning point of Voltaire’s representation of Charles is the execution of the Livonian patriot Patkul. In the *Histoire de Charles XII*, Voltaire recognizes the need to assign some form of textual space to judgement of the king’s conduct, but does so in a manner which excuses the interposition of the historian himself:

⁶ Voltaire, *Histoire de Charles XII* ed. Gunnar von Proschwitz (Oxford: 1996), volume IV of *Oeuvres complètes* ed. Mervaud, Cronk et al., p.151.

⁷ See for example Karen O’Brien, *Narratives of Enlightenment*, pp.28-32 on ‘Voltaire’s quest for an authorial point of view which absorbs neo-classical seriousness into the present tense, but which remains committed to the organising, authoritative proficiency of traditional genre’ (p.30); and John Pocock, *Barbarism and Religion Volume Two*, pp.74-79 on how ‘the perfection of neo-classical art-forms was central and indispensable to Voltaire’s conception of Enlightenment’ (p.76).

Ceux qui ne voyaient en lui [Patkul] qu'un sujet révolté contre son roi, disaient qu'il avait mérité la mort; ceux qui le regardaient comme un Livonien, né dans une province, laquelle avait des privilèges à défendre, et qui se souvenaient qu'il n'était sorti de la Livonie que pour en avoir soutenu les droits, l'appelaient le martyr de la liberté de son pays. Tous convenaient d'ailleurs que le titre d'ambassadeur du czar devait rendre sa personne sacrée. Le seul roi de Suède, élevé dans les principes du despotisme, crut n'avoir fait qu'un acte de justice, tandis que toute l'Europe condamnait sa cruauté.⁸

Judgement on this crucial point is fractured among competing interpretations of the event, and Voltaire demonstrates a range of techniques to proffer and then to forestall critical judgement. The historian dilutes this interpretative emergency into a disquisition on international law, in preference to the more emotive language of rights and national liberty, thus reducing the implications of the whole affair into a narrowly technical question; and constructs a saving ambiguity around the question of what he actually intends the weighty term 'despotisme' to mean (whether in relation to domestic or diplomatic affairs or both).

The complete contrast with the *Histoire de l'empire de Russie* shows how much this is the effect of deliberate choice:

Il n'est point de jurisconsulte en Europe, il n'est pas même d'esclave, qui ne sente toute l'horreur de cette injustice barbare. Le premier crime de cet infortuné était d'avoir représenté respectueusement les droits de la patrie à la tête de six gentilshommes livoniens, députés de tout l'Etat: condamné pour avoir rempli le premier des devoirs, celui de servir son pays selon les lois, cette sentence inique l'avait mis dans le plein droit naturel qu'ont tous // les hommes de se choisir une patrie. Devenu ambassadeur d'un des plus grands monarques du monde, sa personne était sacrée. Le droit du plus fort viola en lui le droit de la nature et celui des nations. Autrefois l'éclat de la gloire couvrait de telles cruautés, aujourd'hui elles la ternissent.⁹

Throughout, Voltaire's restricted stylistic register pares down the history of Charles XII into an assembly of basic narrative terms, so that Charles's character is defined entirely by the ruling passion of the love of glory, 'avec le mot de gloire, on obtenait tout de lui'.¹⁰ Similarly, his associated characteristic of 'opiniâtreté insurmountable'¹¹ can connote either praise or blame, depending on circumstances. Charles's defining stubbornness has the further effect of justifying the historian's two-dimensional representation of him, and to the extent that Charles's inability to change ultimately

⁸ p.301.

⁹ Vol. XLVI, pp.660-61.

¹⁰ p.167.

¹¹ p.166.

itself constitutes his major claim to be represented in the heroic style, ‘cette inflexibilité eut quelque chose d’héroïque’.¹² Voltaire is also careful to mention only in passing the rather more controversial assessment of the king’s ‘opiniâtreté’, that it was motivated by a Calvinist belief in ‘une prédestination absolue’.¹³ In this context, the fact that Charles is a despot, and certainly leans as a *conquérant* towards the *tyran* rather than the *bon roi*, is a mere fact of his character to be noted among the rest; the historian records that the king was ‘élévé dans les principes du despotisme’,¹⁴ just as he always wore riding boots, and never drank alcohol. The end result of such stylistic manoeuvring in the *Histoire de Charles XII* is a complete mastery of tone. The carefully preserved distance between historian and *récit* never collapses into a simply hostile presentation, thus bringing into question the initial choice of subject, while the historian does not become suspected by his silence, at the same time as dextrously deferring any definitive statement of the philosophic meaning of his narrative. The image of *philosophie* is preserved, and the substance eluded.

In the case of the *Siècle de Louis XIV*, of course, no such art should be necessary, as this history, pre-eminently, is the very model of the philosophic history of manners. Voltaire claims so repeatedly in the letters, and indeed, many of his most comprehensive statements of allegiance to the idea of the philosophic history of manners are made in the context of the preparation and dissemination of the *Siècle de Louis XIV*. For example, in the ‘Lettre à M. l’abbé Dubos’ which serves as a preface, Voltaire bestows philosophic status on his history in a classic formulation, ‘ce n’est point simplement la vie de ce prince que j’écris, ce ne sont point les annales de son règne; c’est plutôt l’histoire de l’esprit humain, puisée dans le siècle le plus glorieux à l’esprit humain’.¹⁵ Further confirmation of the author’s unimpeachably philosophic priorities is given in the 1753 edition at the end of the first volume, this volume being solely concerned with the military and diplomatic events of the reign:

Voilà le précis peut-être encore trop long des plus importants événements de ce siècle. Ces grandes choses paraîtront petites un jour, quand elles seront confondues dans la multitude immense des révolutions qui bouleversent le monde, et il n’en resterait qu’un faible souvenir si les arts perfectionnés ne répandaient sur ce siècle une gloire qui ne périra jamais.¹⁶

¹² p.304.

¹³ p.255.

¹⁴ p.301.

¹⁵ Voltaire, *Le Siècle de Louis XIV* in *Oeuvres historiques* ed. René Pomeau (Paris: 1957), p.605.

¹⁶ Editorial appendix in *Siècle de Louis XIV* ed. Pomeau, p.889.

Yet, as such, and in a far from isolated instance in Voltaire's works, this passage confesses the philosophic historian for all his desire for *moeurs*, to remain in some degree reliant on the category of mere 'events'; and in particular, political, military, and diplomatic history. However, the history of the insertion of this passage in the *Siècle de Louis XIV* calls attention to the particular character of the events therein recounted, in the context of eighteenth-century France. First published in 1753, Voltaire claims in a letter to the Président Hénault in 1752 that this passage was accidentally omitted by his publishers, but he does so explicitly as a reply to Hénault's (astute) suspicion that there is 'l'apparence d'ironie' in the telling of the military and diplomatic history of Louis's reign:

Je suis bien étonné de l'apparence d'ironie que vous trouvez dans ce premier tome: j'ai voulu n'y mettre que de la philosophie et de la vérité: j'ai voulu // passer légèrement sur ce fatras de détails de guerres qui dans leur temps causent tant de malheurs et tant d'attention, et qui, au bout d'un siècle, ne causent que de l'ennui.

Having given the Président the text of the passage later added in truth to the next edition, Voltaire can reassure him that 'vous voyez par là que mon second tome est mon principal objet',¹⁷ the second volume being that dealing with the topics of court life, religion, and arts and manners. Indeed, Voltaire is even more explicit elsewhere in the letters regarding how the attractions of the history of *l'esprit humain* do not necessarily depend on its inherent importance, but on the extent to which such a model can provide a useful retreat for the embattled French *philosophe* from alternative historical preoccupations of greater topicality and, ultimately, greater importance. In a letter of 1739, for example, Voltaire ingenuously lauds the advantages of the history of the human spirit as opposed to the political history of the court, 'l'objet que je me propose, a, me semble, un grand avantage; c'est qu'il ne fournit que des vérités honorables à la nation'; and in a letter to Frederick crown prince of Prussia in the same year, he rejoices for the same reason that 'dans tout cela il n'y a point de vérité dangereuse'.¹⁸

The generic ideal of a philosophic history of manners is thus variously approached by Voltaire as a conventional rhetoric to be subverted (*Histoire de Charles XII*), as a high-minded intellectual obligation which he may on occasion be

¹⁷ Letter to Hénault, 28th January [1752], D4780.

¹⁸ Letter to Berger [c. 26th April 1739], D1993; letter to Frederick crown prince of Prussia, 18th January [1739], D1793.

prepared to meet (*Histoire de l'empire de Russie*), and, most intriguingly of all, as perhaps a literary disguise under cover of which other interests may be pursued (*Siècle de Louis XIV*). Yet the subject of the *Siècle de Louis XIV* draws out from within the idea of philosophic history its qualities beyond mere literary genre. The history of *moeurs* is, after all, a rejection of kings and battles for a more democratic historical perspective, and it implies and enjoins a criticism of wars of conquest. Beyond the concept, there is also the example; of how Voltaire's philosophic contemporaries Montesquieu and the Abbé de Saint-Pierre had made judging Louis XIV, and the questions of good kingship and of France's diplomatic policies which the controversies of his reign bequeathed to the nation, a central concern of the French Enlightenment. Indeed, the writings of Montesquieu, Saint-Pierre and Montesquieu's follower La Beaumelle demonstrate the great extent to which, having adopted Louis XIV as a philosophic historical problem, the *philosophes* have also established the fundamental contours of the standard philosophic interpretation of what he represents. In particular, Montesquieu's writings on universal monarchy, and especially his *Réflexions sur la monarchie universelle en Europe* (1733/34), show how the philosophic suspicion of *conquérants*, so blithely violated as a mere generic platitude in the *Histoire de Charles XII*, retains a hard political edge in early eighteenth-century France. The fact is further confirmed by the author's eventual withdrawal of the *Réflexions* from publication, for all their careful references to 'un grand Prince qui a régné de nos jours', and disclaimers such as 'dans tout ceci je n'ai eû en vue aucun Gouvernement de l'Europe en particulier'.¹⁹ The philosophic writer La Beaumelle, personal enemy of Voltaire and disciple of Montesquieu, is still bolder than his idol in his *Mes pensées, ou Le qu'en dira-t-on* (1751-52), and he confirms the general sentiment; 'Louis XIV ne parvint à cet instant de la monarchie universelle qu'en foulant ses sujets pendant tout son règne.'²⁰

As for the Abbé de Saint-Pierre, Voltaire actually requested to see the manuscript of Saint-Pierre's *Annales politiques* (1757) on the last years of Louis's reign while he was composing his own *Siècle de Louis XIV*, reassuring the nervous memoirist via his intermediary that 'nous n'en tirerons point de copie, nous le luy

¹⁹ Montesquieu, *Réflexions sur la monarchie universelle en Europe* ed. Catherine Larrère and Françoise Weil (Oxford: 2000), p.358; p.364.

²⁰ Laurent Angliviel de La Beaumelle, *Mes pensées, ou Le qu'en dira-t-on* ed. Claude Lauriol (Geneva: 1997), p.173.

renverrons, bien cacheté, il n'aura point sorti de nos mains, et je tâcherois de faire de l'extrait de son journal, un usage dont aucun bon citoyen ne me saura mauvais gré'.²¹ It was, however, reported back to Voltaire that 'pour M. L'Abbé de Saint-Pierre il a été tellement réprimandé par sa famille au sujet de l'ouvrage dont vous me parlez qu'il n'y a point d'apparence qu'il veuille le communiquer',²² and, true to the report, the *Annales politiques* were in the end published posthumously. While the *Annales politiques* do not present an unprecedented revelation of Saint Pierre's criticisms of the government of Louis XIV – the critical tendencies of his treatise *Polysynodie* (1718) were clear enough for him to be deprived of his chair at the Académie Française for it – they are an important statement of how, starting from the same philosophic self-positioning as pursued by Voltaire, political judgement necessarily becomes a central component of philosophic historiography, and especially of a philosophic history of Louis XIV. Saint-Pierre, like Voltaire, has a mind above petty detail, 'que nous importe, par exemple, de savoir précisément le degré de parenté d'entre César et Lucius César, ou de savoir au juste le jour du mois de la bataille de Pharsale?'; and he insists that the fact that his *Annales* concentrate on questions of government rather than on notable personages is a sign of their superiority, 'si je m'arrête ici plus aux détails des réglemens & des établissemens qu'aux détails des caractères des hommes, c'est que j'écris, non des histoires d'Hommes illustres, mais l'histoire de nôtre gouvernement'.²³ Saint-Pierre is unequivocal on the point that intellectually serious historiography, philosophic historiography, is political historiography:

Nos historiens content assez bien, & pourroient conter encore mieux; mais ils jugent souvent assez mal des entreprises qu'ils racontent avec agrément; cependant le but de l'Historien ne doit pas être uniquement de plaire au Lecteur, son but doit être encore, de perfectionner le jugement de ceux à qui il plait, & de leur apprendre à estimer juste les talents & les qualités, afin de rendre leurs concitoyens & plus heureux & plus utiles à la patrie.²⁴

Within the text of the *Siècle de Louis XIV*, therefore, Voltaire is, it seems, necessarily confronted with the need to reveal himself; to make explicit how far and in what ways he fulfils the philosophic requirement for political judgement.

²¹ Letter to Nicholas Claude Thieriot, 31st October 1738, D1644.

²² Letter from Jean Baptiste Dubos to Voltaire, 3rd December 1738, D1672.

²³ Charles Irenée Castel, Abbé de Saint-Pierre, *Annales politiques*, 2 vols. in-8^o (London: 1757), I, p.11, p.13.

²⁴ I, p.9.

In the event, of course, the *Siècle de Louis XIV* follows the *Histoire de Charles XII* as an example of Voltaire's peculiar generic innovation, the ambiguous history of conquerors. The close stylistic correspondence between the two works is particularly evident in the way in the *Siècle de Louis XIV* in which Voltaire again turns to the capacity of the pure pursuit of *gloire* to suspend the reader's, and save the author's judgement. Louis, like Charles, is ascribed a single, simple motivation for all his actions, 'il ambitionnait toute sorte de gloire'.²⁵ Voltaire's treatment of one of the interpretative cruxes of the whole reign, the twice laying waste of the Palatinate, is a notable illustration of how his heroic historiographical style is exactly crafted so as to forestall hostile judgement. Criticism is relegated to a non-committal authorial aside:

Il faut avouer que ceux qui ont plus d'humanité que d'estime pour les exploits de guerre gémirent de cette campagne si glorieuse. Elle fut célèbre par les malheurs des peuples autant que par les expéditions de Turenne.²⁶

Having paid lip-service to the philosophic perspective, Voltaire then continues with his heroic narrative, recounting with emotion the famous death of Turenne, and the general's last words that are 'comparables à tout ce que l'histoire a consacré de plus héroïque'.²⁷ Authorial *réflexions* from within a markedly impoverished register of political vocabulary – in spite of previous rebellion, and the commission of what even in the eighteenth century were thought to be crimes against humanity, the historian concludes that '[Turenne] conserva la réputation d'un homme de bien, sage et modéré, parce que ses vertus et ses grands talents, qui n'étaient qu'à lui, devaient faire oublier des faiblesses et des fautes qui lui étaient communes avec tant d'autres hommes'²⁸ – are so many concessions to the necessity of offering political judgement and of recording unpalatable truths, while at the same time deliberately failing to convey that these are matters of any great consequence. In the case of Turenne, 'sa gloire couvrait tout'.²⁹

The features of Louis XIV as a monarch which for Saint-Pierre are at the heart of his inadequacy as a model of French kingship, are presented by Voltaire in language denuded of specific political content, and so as if they were mere quirks of personality. For Saint-Pierre, the crucial point to emphasize is that Louis's personal

²⁵ *Siècle de Louis XIV* ed. Pomeau, p.688.

²⁶ p.730.

²⁷ p.734.

²⁸ p.735.

²⁹ p.732.

qualities of glory-seeking and independent-mindedness were directed towards false objects:

Si je m'arrête tant à montrer que Louis XIV. ne connoissoit pas la vraie gloire, la gloire la plus précieuse, qui consiste à imiter l'Être parfait, & qu'il étoit idolâtre de la vanité, & de la fausse gloire que l'on trouve à étaler sa grande puissance; c'est que cette fausse gloire a été son seul défaut, le principe de la plûpart de ses entreprises, qui a causé les plus grands malheurs de sa vie, les plus grands malheurs de l'Europe, & les plus grands malheurs de ses sujets.³⁰

Louis is found guilty by Saint-Pierre of possessing a bourgeois mentality, 'ce n'est plus un Héros, ce n'est plus pour les sentimens qu'un homme du commun qui ne pense pas d'une manière plus élevée que des bourgeois, tels qu'étoient ses Ministres';³¹ and his mode of personal piety comes in for particular criticism, 'c'étoit une Religion d'enfant'.³² Throughout his analysis of Louis's character, Saint-Pierre in this way situates the king's personal failings within a bold and precise assessment of the total political reality Louis must answer for; his dysfunctional system of ministerial government, his neglect of France's natural custodians, the great nobles, in favour of *arriviste* yes-men, and his pursuit of military victories at the expense of economic development and true national greatness.

For Voltaire, on the other hand, the personal stays personal, and the past stays in the past, at least as far as he is able to sustain it. The disaster of the revocation of the Edict of Nantes is certainly in Voltaire's account the product of a particular mentality and manner of governing – the violent suppression of the Huguenots was the result of 'l'esprit qui régnoit alors à la cour, que tout devait fléchir au nom de Louis XIV',³³ and the king's personality certainly exerted its usual influence, 'il envisageait dans ces [...] entreprises cet éclat de gloire dont il étoit idolâtre en toutes choses'³⁴ – but there is no emphasis on how this might contain lessons of more general application. It is therefore significant that it is the insistent clarity of Saint-Pierre's political judgement which Voltaire turns to satirizing, as a form of impractical idealism, in a footnote to the *Siècle de Louis XIV*:

L'abbé Castel de Saint-Pierre, connu par plusieurs ouvrages singuliers, dans lesquels on trouve beaucoup de vues philosophiques et très peu de praticables, a laissé des *Annales politiques*, depuis 1658 jusqu'à 1739. Il

³⁰ I, p.267.

³¹ I, p.217.

³² I, p.410.

³³ p.1052.

³⁴ p.1053.

condamne sévèrement en plusieurs endroits l'administration de Louis XIV. Il ne veut pas surtout qu'on l'appelle // Louis le Grand. Si *grand* signifie *parfait*, il est sûr que ce titre ne lui convient pas, mais par ces mémoires écrits de la main même de ce monarque il paraît qu'il avait d'aussi bons principes de gouvernement, pour le moins, que l'abbé de Saint-Pierre. Ces mémoires de l'abbé de Saint-Pierre n'ont rien de curieux que la bonne foi grossière avec laquelle cet homme se croit fait pour gouverner.³⁵

By means of this conventional satire of the earnest political projector, and the equally conventional contrast between the languages of realism and of idealism, and between principles and practice, Voltaire aims to justify the exclusion of an entire layer of philosophic language from the *Siècle de Louis XIV*.

Appreciation of the influence of competing images of the political role of the *philosophe*, and of the lingering question of Voltaire's own political intentions, on the most minute features of the text of the *Siècle de Louis XIV*, of course conveys the impression of a generic conception utterly removed from the self-enclosed discursive certainties of a 'neo-classical' tradition. Indeed, the problem of political judgement, and especially of its philosophic inflexion, lies behind many of the features of Voltaire's historiographical practice which seem most essential, or which appear to be the effect of a personal aesthetic preference; notably his abstract approach to characterization, his selective presentation of facts, and of course especially the curious combination of dominance and anonymity in his authorial voice. In a letter to no less a personage than the Duc de Noailles, Voltaire explains his decision to edit the memorandum sent by Louis to his grandson the king of Spain, as an attempt to avert precisely the stylistic emergency of satire – an overt comment by the historian – becoming necessary:

Le conseil d'aller à la chasse, et d'avoir une maison de campagne, paraîtrait petit et déplacé. Je dois songer que c'est à l'Europe que je parle, et à l'Europe prévenue. L'Esprit philosophique qui règne aujourd'hui remarquerait peut-être un trop étrange contraste entre le conseil d'honorer dieu, de ne manquer à aucun de ses devoirs envers dieu, d'aimer sa femme, d'en demander une à dieu qui convienne, & c., et la conduite d'un prince qui, entouré de maîtresses, avait mis le Palatinat en cendres, et désolé la Hollande, plutôt par fierté que par intérêt.³⁶

Voltaire is acutely conscious of the limitations of his stylistic defences against the importunate advance of the *esprit philosophique*, and knows that too close an

³⁵ Footnote, p.952.

³⁶ Letter to Adrien Maurice, Duc de Noailles, 28th July [1752], D4960.

encounter with historical reality could upset his whole enterprise. His contempt for the popular contemporary genre of historical anecdotes – memorably dismissed with palpable disdain in the *Siècle de Louis XIV* as ‘les *ana*’³⁷ – is accordingly motivated by more than condescension towards a vulgar and unreliable genre. Anecdotes might, on the contrary, be too authentic for comfort, and the history of public events a welcome distraction, as Voltaire candidly explains to his St. Petersburg correspondent in relation to the projected *Histoire de l’empire de Russie*:

NB: Il parait important de ne point intituler cet ouvrage *Histoire, ou vie de Pierre Ier*. Un tel titre engage nécessairement l’historien à ne rien supprimer. Il est forcé alors, de dire des vérités odieuses, & s’il ne les dit pas, il se déshonore sans faire honneur à ceux qui l’emploient.

Il faudrait donc prendre pour titre, ainsi que pour sujet, *La Russie sous Pierre Ier*. Une telle annonce écarte toutes les anecdotes de la vie privée du Czar qui pourraient diminuer sa gloire, et n’admet que celles qui sont liées aux grandes choses qu’il a commencés & qu’on a continuées depuis lui.³⁸

It is ironic that the genre of anecdotes or biography, considered low-status in the eighteenth century itself, and since largely excluded from histories of historiography, is acknowledged by Voltaire himself to be of greater interpretative consequence and historical fidelity than his own immediately and designedly canonical performance in the *Siècle de Louis XIV*; which appears to positively be defined by the careful avoidance of interpretative consequence. However, while its complex textual nature certainly resists any simple classification as ‘a history’, or ‘a narrative’, the question of what it does in fact mean (if anything), and of what Voltaire intends it to mean (if anything), still remains.

2. Daring to praise

Voltaire certainly gives the technical challenge of maintaining the image of *philosophie* without drawing any taint of anti-establishment controversy much attention in the letters. Regarding the *Siècle de Louis XIV*, he pleads to the Président Hénault and to d’Argenson, ‘sans m’écarter de la vérité, j’ai loué autant que je l’ai pu, et autant que je l’ai dû, la nation, et ceux qui l’ont bien servie’, and insists that his only wish is simply that ‘j’ai prétendu ériger un monument à la patrie et à la vérité; &

³⁷ Footnote, p.930.

³⁸ Letter to Ivan Ivanovitch Shuvalov, 7th August 1757, D7336.

j'espère qu'on ne me prendra pas les pierres de cet édifice pour me lapider'.³⁹ Yet Voltaire himself also calls attention to how the *Siècle de Louis XIV* might be understood as having a political intention, and, fittingly, in a letter regarding Saint-Pierre. As part of his request to see the manuscript of the *Annales politiques*, Voltaire declares that there are more ways than martyrdom (or in fact, than posthumous publication) to spread the philosophic message:

Je pense comme Mr l'abbé de S^t Pierre, qu'il faut écrire l'histoire en philosofe, mais je me flatte qu'il pense comme moy qu'il ne faut pas l'écrire en précepteur, et qu'un historien doit instruire le genre humain sans faire le pédagogue.⁴⁰

It is certainly true that a large part of Voltaire's objection to the *Annales politiques* is to their naïve vocabulary and style; for example, having read them at last in 1756, he writes how 'c'est un fou sérieux qui traite Louis 14 de grand enfant'.⁴¹ In context, Voltaire's address to Saint-Pierre is clearly an opportunistic suggestion of rhetorical indirection actually being in the service of communicating with the reader in the *Siècle de Louis XIV*, as opposed to being only a means to authorial self-concealment; but it does identify a plausible reading of the nature of the *Siècle de Louis XIV* for which there is considerable textual support. Concealed criticism is not only an accepted part of contemporary French political writing, but it also forms part of the field of possible meanings Voltaire aims to establish for the *Siècle de Louis XIV*. In particular, Voltaire's own changes to the text of the *Siècle de Louis XIV* during the course of its many revisions call attention to the critical function latent within it from the start.

It should be recognized that it did not take a great deal to attract the suspicion of subversive political intentions in eighteenth-century France. For example, the literary correspondent Mathieu Marais applies his decoding antennae to the *Histoire de Charles XII*, and, especially given the prior reputation of the author, finds sufficient evidence to convict Voltaire of subversive intent:

L'Historien n'est pas ami des rois, c'est un anti-monarque, et il ne paraît pas respecter beaucoup les puissances de la terre, ni tout ce qui peut dominer. [...] Au reste, je n'ai rien trouvé contre la France sinon que dans un petit discours qui est à la fin, où il méprise l'histoire en général, il donne au feu Roi la *magnificence* pour toute vertu et tout talent, ce qui est bien fou et bien hardi à

³⁹ Letter to Hénault, 28th January [1752], D4780.

⁴⁰ Letter to Nicholas Claude Thieriot, 31st October 1738, D1644.

⁴¹ Letter to Thieriot, 20th August [1756], D6976.

ce petit homme qui juge les rois & les dieux et qui distribue ses grâces comme il lui plaît.⁴²

Marais adds darkly, 'je prévois une mauvaise fin à tout cela'. It is interesting that Voltaire himself echoes Marais's words in his letter to the Duc de Richelieu in 1751, in which he tries to explain why it was simply too dangerous for him to attempt to publish the *Siècle de Louis XIV* in France; 'je me suis constitué de mon autorité privé juge des rois, des généraux, des parlements, de l'église, des sectes qui la partagent'.⁴³ The very act of assuming the right to judge of public affairs is a potentially dangerous political assertion; while at the same time, in a context of institutionalized deference, anything short of fulsome flattery of Louis XIV constitutes a daring critique. In a notable instance of such a reading, Voltaire's friend d'Argenson professed himself dissatisfied with how Voltaire had contrasted the characters of Louis and William of Orange, despite the fact that this parallel is, as ever, very carefully balanced; and in response Voltaire, having first protested that this is a generic commonplace, 'Louis XIV et Guillaume ont toujours été deux objets de comparaison dans l'Europe', and further, that 'l'histoire ne doit être un fade panégyrique', promises to tip the balance more obviously in Louis's favour in the next edition.⁴⁴ It is certainly the case that, perhaps solely as a result of Voltaire's recognition that he must display an adequate degree of philosophic duty to the truth, or indeed perhaps as a result of his own critical position, there is plenty of evidence contained within the *Siècle de Louis XIV* to assist the formation of a hostile interpretation of that monarch; and it may well be said that it is just that the historian himself does not follow the Abbé de Saint-Pierre, in leading the reader on his own authority to that conclusion.

Such is the very balance of tone and argument in the *Siècle de Louis XIV* that it is only necessary for there to be a slightly ironic inflexion of tone, or the merest suspicion of such, to cause Voltaire's muted and balanced historical judgements to topple over into political critique. For example, the treatment of Louis's last, foolhardy attempt to support the Pretender is surely permeated with authorial irony:

Il est difficile de croire qu'à son âge de soixante et dix-sept ans, dans la détresse où était son royaume, il osât s'exposer à une nouvelle guerre contre l'Angleterre en faveur du prétendant reconnu par lui pour roi, et qu'on appelait

⁴² Mathieu Marais, letter to the Président Bouhier, 22nd December 1731, in Jean Bouhier, *Correspondance littéraire du président Bouhier* ed. Henri Durantion (Saint-Étienne: 1974-88), volume XI, No. 507.

⁴³ Letter to Louis François Armand du Plessis, Duc de Richelieu, 31st August 1751, D4561.

⁴⁴ Letter to Hénault, 28th January [1752], D4780.

alors le chevalier de Saint-George; cependant le fait est très certain. Il faut avouer que Louis eut toujours dans l'âme une élévation qui le portait aux grandes choses en tout genre.⁴⁵

The most telling evidence for a subversive design in the *Siècle de Louis XIV* is the fact that Voltaire himself chooses to exploit this quality of variable intonation in his authorial voice, in the course of changes made in the numerous subsequent editions of the *Siècle de Louis XIV*, nearly all of which are in the direction of a more hostile presentation of their subject. Changes can be as slight as the amplification of a philosophic sentiment; as in the way Voltaire in 1756 supplements his previous *réflexion*, 'il est certain que les frais de tous ces préparatifs de destruction suffiraient pour fonder et pour faire fleurir la plus nombreuse colonie', with the (stronger, more general, and more personally committed) restatement, 'tout siège de grande ville exige ces frais immenses; et quand il faut réparer chez soi un village ruiné, on le néglige'.⁴⁶

Certain major additions, such as the footnote to the account of the destruction of the Palatinate, do, however, show Voltaire to be quite deliberately experimenting with a more radical rhetorical stance. In the footnote added in 1768, Voltaire recounts how the historiographer to the Elector Palatine (and his own former secretary) Cosimo Collini has challenged the Président Hénault's blithe dismissal of the Elector's despairing challenge to Turenne at the time of the devastation, and for his own part, Voltaire now sides with the anti-French camp:

M. Colini reproche à M. le président Hénault d'avoir dit, dans son *Abregé chronologique*, que le prince de Turenne répondit à ce cartel avec *une modération qui fit honte à l'électeur de cette bravade*. La honte était dans l'incendie, lorsqu'on n'était pas encore en guerre ouverte avec le Palatinat, et ce n'était point une bravade dans un prince justement irrité de vouloir se battre contre l'auteur de ces cruels excès.⁴⁷

In the footnote, Voltaire condemns the action in unequivocal terms, 'plût à dieu qu'il fût douteux que le Palatinat ait été embrasé deux fois! Voilà ce qui n'est que trop constant, ce qui est essentiel, et ce qu'on reproche à la mémoire de Louis XIV'.⁴⁸ The element of equivocation is, however, still affirmed, by the retention by Voltaire in the actual text of his earlier, more forgiving judgement, where Turenne is merely noted to

⁴⁵ p.887.

⁴⁶ p.841.

⁴⁷ Footnote, p.731.

⁴⁸ Footnote, p.731.

reply to the Elector with his usual ‘modération et ambiguïté’.⁴⁹ Still, by making this more radical addition, Voltaire has called attention to a feature of his authorial voice which was already present, the way it preserves a textual space for political criticism; one which may on the right occasion – a hint of irony or the suspicion of such on the part of the reader, the disposition of a reader to interpret self-contradiction as a form of code, or a later revision by Voltaire – become fully active.

Historiography for Voltaire represents a field of engagement, still more than it does a literary genre, or an intellectual pursuit; and as such, it is certainly very far removed from the simplistic rhetorical personae affected in the public self-representations of the *philosophes*. Voltaire’s fraught defence of his *ménagement* of his subject in the *Siècle de Louis XIV* against the assault from the more radical *philosophe* La Beaumelle, indeed reveals how difficult it is for him to shelter behind any single contemporary cultural norm.⁵⁰ However, the corollary to such unsuitability for classification, is the opportunity for outright resistance to being classified; and Voltaire’s flexibility is such that he can assert that, if to be a *philosophe* is to be like La Beaumelle, he would rather not be a *philosophe* at all. The disagreements of La Beaumelle with Voltaire are manifold, and include objections to Voltaire’s alleged admiration of despotism, and his failure to indict Louis as a bigot (La Beaumelle was a Huguenot), and La Beaumelle’s line-by-line criticisms appended to the Hague edition of the *Siècle de Louis XIV* in 1753 mercilessly expose Voltaire’s rhetorical compromises. For example, where Voltaire aimed to bring himself off regarding Louis’s secret pleasure in being able to intimidate people, with the softness of ‘une démarche qui ne pouvait convenir qu’à lui et à son rang, et qui eût été ridicule en tout autre’,⁵¹ La Beaumelle comments forthrightly that, ‘donc, elle étoit ridicule en lui’.⁵² Much of Voltaire’s and La Beaumelle’s battle centres on Voltaire’s alleged character as an establishment man, and the effect this has on his independence of judgement in the *Siècle de Louis XIV*. To La Beaumelle, Voltaire’s self-congratulation regarding his personal contacts among the French ruling classes is embarrassing to witness, ‘au

⁴⁹ p.731.

⁵⁰ For an account of the thirty years of antagonism between Voltaire and La Beaumelle, and notably Voltaire’s involvement in La Beaumelle’s twice being sentenced to the Bastille, see Claude Lauriol, ‘Voltaire vu par La Beaumelle’, in *Voltaire et ses combats* ed. Ulla Kölving and Christiane Mervaud, 2 vols. (Oxford: 1997), II, pp.773-84.

⁵¹ p.903.

⁵² [La Beaumelle], *Tome trois; contenant les additions et corrections données par l’auteur, avec un très grand nombre de remarques, tant par M. de la B *** , que par le Sr. Marc Phrasendorp*, volume III of Voltaire, *Histoire du Siècle de Louis XIV*, 3 vols. in-8^o (The Hague: 1753), p.103.

nom de dieu, point d'ouï-dire. On sait bien que l'auteur a vû le grand monde'.⁵³ Voltaire is inveigled into a convoluted defence of his relations with Cardinal Fleury in his *Supplément au Siècle de Louis XIV* (1753) which was written solely to respond to La Beaumelle, and he insists that he did in fact reject most of Fleury's anecdotes, as being too petty and personal for inclusion in a work of the ambitions of the *Siècle de Louis XIV*; 'il avait la faiblesse de croire que ces bagatelles pouvaient entrer dans l'histoire du siècle; il n'est pas le seul qui ait eu cette faiblesse'.⁵⁴ The irrepressible La Beaumelle, newly released from the Bastille for libelling Madame de Pompadour in 1754, issues his *Réponse au Supplément au Siècle de Louis XIV* with the volubility of a man 'qui a passé six mois avec lui-même',⁵⁵ and he congratulates Voltaire on his new-found resistance to the glamour of power:

Courage, Voltaire! devenez enfin décidément Philosophe & indépendant; car jusqu'ici, soit dans votre conduite, soit dans vos écrits, vous n'avez fait que des complimens à la liberté.⁵⁶

It is, however, interesting to note how little La Beaumelle succeeds or even attempts to succeed in presenting the image of the wholly independent *philosophe* as an actual model to be followed by contemporary French writers. La Beaumelle looks backwards in time to summon up the image of a truly independent Republic of Letters, 'tel homme qui dans un autre siècle eût eû la réputation la plus pure, le respect le plus // constant, fait dans ce monde un rôle équivoque, & flotte entre l'estime et le mépris';⁵⁷ and this Republic appears to swap engagement with the world for retreat from it, 'l'esprit est fait pour vivre avec l'esprit, et [...] il vaut mieux se répandre dans son cabinet, que se contraindre dans une antichambre'.⁵⁸ The stark choice, as La Beaumelle chooses to present it, is that if the radicalism of the *esprit philosophique* is to be treated as a serious aspiration, 'dans les Païs où il n'est pas permis d'être vrai dans ses réflexions, que doit faire l'Historien? Se taire'.⁵⁹

Voltaire, however, instead of relying solely on a demonstration of his philosophic credentials, or on a pragmatic defence of the need for circumspection if anything is to be published in its author's lifetime, boldly counters La Beaumelle by

⁵³ La Beaumelle, *Siècle de Louis XIV*, p.84.

⁵⁴ Voltaire, *Supplément au Siècle de Louis XIV* in *Oeuvres historiques* ed. Pomeau, p.1243.

⁵⁵ La Beaumelle, *Réponse au Supplément au Siècle de Louis XIV* (Colmar: 1754), p.12.

⁵⁶ p.90.

⁵⁷ pp.97-98.

⁵⁸ p.98.

⁵⁹ p.114.

simply opting out of the Enlightenment. There are other responsibilities for the historian than truth, or conformity to the radicalism of the *esprit philosophique*:

Je sais combien la loi que Cicéron impose aux historiens est respectable: ils ne doivent oser dire rien de faux; ils ne doivent rien cacher de vrai. Mais cette loi ordonne-t-elle que l'histoire doit être une satire?⁶⁰

If the spectre of the Bastille haunts Voltaire's works, it is accompanied by the nightmare vision of the grasping Dutch bookseller, calling on a bastardized idea of the *esprit philosophique* while commissioning low satires against the French nation from hack refugees just like La Beaumelle himself, that 'misérable réfugié affamé'.⁶¹

La France et l'Angleterre sont pleines d'écrivains qui croient plaider la cause du genre humain quand ils accusent leur patrie. Il y a des gens qui pensent qu'un historien doit décrier son pays pour paraître juste, et immoler son roi à la haine des siècles à venir pour paraître libre. Plusieurs ont écrit avec plus de licence que moi, nul avec plus de liberté. Mon livre n'est pas assurément imprimé à Paris avec approbation et privilège: je n'en veux que de la postérité. Mais ma liberté a été celle d'un honnête homme, d'un citoyen du monde.⁶²

It is highly ironic that, in a context of philosophic orthodoxy, Voltaire claims his true radicalism to lie in his daring to praise his unphilosophic subject. In a later defence of Louis against a new generation of *philosophes*, here the Physiocrats in their journal *Éphémérides du citoyen* in 1769, Voltaire presents himself as martyred by *philosophes*, and not a martyr of *philosophie*; 'j'ai obtenu quelquefois la persécution et la calomnie. Je ne me suis point découragé'.⁶³ Even within Voltaire's undeniably serious ambition for philosophic status, lie alternative identities; that of the 'honnête homme', the 'citoyen du monde'. The only single conclusion pressed by Voltaire's actual historiographical practice is that it is very far removed from the generic coherence and the platitudinous serenity aspired to by the ideal philosophic history of manners.

3. The meaning of *moeurs*

Voltaire's most biting criticism of the philosophic project of a history of manners, is intended as a form of praise; namely, its inability to cause offence. For *philosophes* to

⁶⁰ Voltaire, *Supplément*, p.1269.

⁶¹ Voltaire, *Défense de Louis XIV contre l'auteur des Éphémérides* in *Oeuvres historiques* ed. Pomeau, p.1294.

⁶² *Supplément*, p.1270.

⁶³ *Défense de Louis XIV*, p.1294.

cast themselves as the creatures of the sphere of manners – a contemporary self-representation which has had great influence on representations of the French Enlightenment – can be little more than a retreat from public engagement, and conceptual significance. However, Voltaire is himself moved to explore in some measure the range of possible forms for a philosophic history of manners; and as a question of technique, particularly reveals how the founding contrast between *moeurs* and *événements*, still raises more questions than it answers. The ‘Lettre à M. l’abbé Dubos’ from 1738, which forms the preface to the *Siècle de Louis XIV*, as the classic statement of the terms of the philosophic ambition, also identifies some of the initial problems of composition. The history of *moeurs* is defined as representing a departure from the mere history of events; ‘ce n’est point simplement la vie de ce prince que j’écris, ce ne sont point les annales de son règne; c’est plutôt l’histoire de l’esprit humain, puisée dans le siècle le plus glorieux à l’esprit humain’.⁶⁴ The contrast with biography and annals immediately emphasizes that the philosophic historian will shape his own subject; he is no slave to natural chronology, to detail, or to traditional or official historiographical priorities. Voltaire does not, however, propose that the historian of manners should jettison events entirely (even if he could); and the *Siècle de Louis XIV* will still include a narrative of events, told in chronological order, and with respect to characterization and commonly-accepted degree of importance. Voltaire assigns a whole twenty chapters of the *Siècle de Louis XIV* to what he describes as ‘l’histoire générale’, and again as ‘tableaux des événements du temps’,⁶⁵ as contrasted to the topics of the *esprit humain*.

The philosophic historian, by submitting to the necessary inconvenience of events, must therefore include among his various textual personae that of the historian of events. The interpretative status of the history of events still included in a *soi-disant* history of manners, is thus strangely undefined; and one of philosophic historiography’s most curious off-shoots is indeed the self-hating military and diplomatic historian, promoting an impression of disjunction between historian and his history to be set alongside that encouraged by the need to simultaneously proffer and reserve political judgement. The major technique granted to the philosophic historian of *histoire générale* as a means of reasserting his philosophic distinctiveness is a fastidiousness over length and detail, ‘malheur aux détails: la postérité les néglige

⁶⁴ *Oeuvres historiques* ed. Pomeau, p.607.

⁶⁵ loc. cit.

tous'.⁶⁶ In complete contrast, the history of arts and sciences is wholly sweetness and light to the philosophic historian:

A l'égard des arts et des sciences, il n'est question, je crois, que de tracer la marche de l'esprit humain en philosophie, en éloquence, en poésie, en critique; de marquer les progrès de la peinture, de la sculpture, de la musique, de l'orfèvrerie, des manufactures de tapisserie, de glaces, d'étoffes d'or, de l'horlogerie. Je ne veux que peindre, chemin faisant, les génies qui ont excellé dans ces parties.⁶⁷

Voltaire's prescription for the *Siècle de Louis XIV* does, however, also reveal how, in addition to the fundamental cleavage between *moeurs* and *événements*, within the very concept of *moeurs* itself there is a potentially problematic variousness. In his initial definition of the topics of *l'esprit humain* in the letter to Dubos, Voltaire cites great changes in domestic policy, in commerce, and in the state finances, ecclesiastical affairs, and of course the arts and sciences. Yet the history of the arts and sciences evinces its own proper qualities; it concerns individuals, 'génies', it is naturally allied to the idea of historical progress, and overall, it has a marked tendency to become a synecdoche for the totality of *l'esprit humain*. Even at the level of prescription, there are difficulties contained in the project for constructing a narrative of *moeurs*, which Voltaire will largely confront only in the execution.

The astute and hostile La Beaumelle perceives a disjunction between Voltaire's description of the nature of the *Siècle de Louis XIV*, and the work he in fact produces:

Le livre de M. de Voltaire est donc mal fait: (horresco referens) il a manqué son plan: il a donné une histoire étranglée du regne de Louis XIV. au lieu d'un tableau de l'esprit des hommes dans le siècle de Louis XIV. comme il nous l'avoit promis.⁶⁸

Voltaire has in the end only given a compressed *tableau des événements du temps* (nicely translated by La Beaumelle as *une histoire étranglée*), not a true *histoire générale* or an actual history of manners, neither one thing nor another. La Beaumelle particularly emphasizes Voltaire's unaccountable reluctance to privilege *moeurs* on a structural level in the *Siècle de Louis XIV*, and insists that in order to fulfil his proposal, Voltaire should have divided his work into four parts; 'dans la première il auroit dit ce que [les hommes] étoient avant Louis XIV. dans la seconde ce qu'ils

⁶⁶ loc. cit.

⁶⁷ p.606.

⁶⁸ La Beaumelle, *Siècle de Louis XIV*, p.xvi.

furent sous ce Prince, dans la troisième ce qu'ils forcèrent les étrangers de devenir, dans la quatrième ce qu'ils sont aujourd'hui'.⁶⁹ For his own part, La Beaumelle would have broken entirely with the conventions of public annals, and simply organized his information under the headings of *arts, politique* and *moeurs*. Voltaire's best excuse for the embarrassingly traditional form of the *Siècle de Louis XIV* must therefore be that it is the life of no ordinary monarch, that as cultural patron Louis connected the history of the arts and sciences more closely than ever before with political events.

Indeed, this question of the overall interpretative coherence of the *Siècle de Louis XIV* has acquired a greater importance since John Pocock has made the association between the history of arts in that text and the wider topics of the 'Enlightened narrative' a crucial part of his argument that telling this narrative is Voltaire's aim. So, for example, in his analysis (for Voltaire) 'the fine arts and their perfection are the chief means of instituting courtly manners, which spread downwards through society [...] they presuppose a foundation in commerce and the useful arts, and if these are to be thought of as *bourgeois*, the court and its manners are the patrons and the historical allies of the *bourgeoisie*'.⁷⁰ Yet, even apart from the construction of the *Siècle de Louis XIV* according to complex, various and conflicting conventions of public speech in eighteenth-century France, and so not as a 'narrative' in any normative sense, Voltaire himself does not defend the connection between *moeurs* and his monarch. In the text itself Voltaire notes the spontaneous association of citizens which becomes the Royal Society, and which leads to discoveries 'qui pourraient à cet égard faire appeler ce siècle le *siècle des Anglais*, aussi bien que celui de Louis XIV'.⁷¹ Still more explicit, however, is his undermining of the cultural importance of Louis, and explanation of his apparent centrality as a mere narrative convenience; 'j'ai appelé ce siècle celui de Louis XIV, non seulement parce que ce monarque a protégé les arts beaucoup plus que tous les rois ses contemporains ensemble, mais encore parce qu'il a vu renouveler trois fois toutes les générations des princes de l'Europe', and in the final analysis, Louis might be regarded as simply lending his name to an *époque*, 'c'est dans cet espace de temps que l'esprit humain a fait les plus grands progrès'.⁷²

⁶⁹ *ibid.*, p.xv.

⁷⁰ *Barbarism and Religion Volume Two*, p.87.

⁷¹ p.998.

⁷² p.1022.

One of the most interesting aspects of the history of arts in Voltaire's histories, is indeed the way that it draws out from him an unreconstructed literariness, even a sense of privacy, which moves through the retreat from politics enacted by the philosophic ideal history of manners, all the way to a pure belletrism. The severer *philosophes* of the journal *Éphémérides du citoyen* did in fact blame Voltaire's praise of the reign of Louis XIV for precisely this reason, 'la gloire de ce grand siècle, si cher à nos beaux esprits, était passée comme des étoupes qu'on brûle devant le pape à son exaltation', in which criticism Voltaire correctly discerned irony at his expense, and to which he could only retort 'oui, sans doute, ce siècle doit être cher à tous les amateurs des beaux-arts, à tous ceux que vous appelez beaux esprits'.⁷³ Just as Voltaire asserts alternative visions of his literary identity, as an 'honnête homme' and 'citoyen du monde', against La Beaumelle's uncompromising vision of the public responsibilities of the *philosophe*, the history of arts permits Voltaire to retreat from propagandizing for Enlightenment into the reflectiveness (or frivolity) of the man of letters. In Chapter XXXI 'Des Sciences' of the *Siècle de Louis XIV*, Voltaire contemplates the progress of *critique* and philosophy, and is moved to praise its effect on the rest of society; 'l'esprit de sagesse et de critique, qui se communiquait de proche en proche, détruisit insensiblement beaucoup de superstitions',⁷⁴ and 'il est vrai que cet esprit philosophique qui a gagné presque toutes les conditions, excepté le bas peuple, a beaucoup contribué à faire valoir les droits des souverains'.⁷⁵ However, in the following Chapter XXXII 'Des Beaux-arts', Voltaire turns to what is clearly a particularly personal diagnosis of a present cultural malaise:

La route était difficile au commencement du siècle, parce que personne n'y avait marché; elle l'est aujourd'hui, parce qu'elle a été battue. Les grands hommes du siècle passé ont enseigné à penser et à parler; ils ont dit ce qu'on ne savait pas. Ceux qui leur succèdent ne peuvent guère dire que ce qu'on sait. Enfin, une espèce de dégoût est venue de la multitude des chefs-d'oeuvre.⁷⁶

The 'dégoût' of Madame du Châtelet at the barbarous spectacle of history is of course the starting point for Voltaire's attempt to rescue history for a philosophic audience in the *Essai sur les moeurs et l'esprit des nations* (first complete edition, 1756), which makes it all the more fascinating to behold the description in the *Siècle de Louis XIV*

⁷³ *Oeuvres historiques* ed. Pomeau, p.1284.

⁷⁴ p.1000.

⁷⁵ p.1001.

⁷⁶ p.1015.

of a culture wearied with the success of its own Enlightenment, and even psychologically inhibited by its achievements. The history of individual genius follows its own rules, and disputes the certainties of the philosophic narrative of the progress of *l'esprit humain*.

The clue in the title *Essai sur les moeurs et l'esprit des nations* certainly appears to suggest that here, if anywhere, Voltaire's true history of manners is to be found, and indeed in the Avant-Propos printed in the *Mercure de France* in 1745 as coming from the journal's editors, Voltaire solicits praise for the project of 'une espèce d'histoire universelle à laquelle nous croyons ne pouvoir donner le titre plus convenable que celui d'*Histoire de l'esprit humain*'.⁷⁷ Yet the fact that even by his own standards, Voltaire indulges in a remarkable degree of obfuscation over how his actual text is to be described, is a further testament to the difficulty of identifying where, if anywhere, the philosophic history of manners is to be located, and what form it should take. In the preface to the 1754 edition, Voltaire describes the process of composition of the *Essai sur les moeurs*; how, after promising Madame du Châtelet to 'démêler dans les événements l'histoire de l'esprit humain',⁷⁸ he began his project to find any history worth the telling, and came to discover that 'la seule chose qui me soutenait dans des recherches si ingrates, était ce que nous rencontrions de temps en temps sur les arts et sur les sciences'.⁷⁹ Yet the *Essai sur les moeurs* does not in the end represent even the partial reconciliation between the necessity of *événements* and the desire for *moeurs* pioneered in the *Siècle de Louis XIV*. In the 1754 preface Voltaire goes on to explain that 'tous ces matériaux concernant les arts' were lost 'après la mort de cette personne respectable',⁸⁰ and therefore that what is left for publication derives solely from the 'manuscrit historique'.⁸¹ The only feature of the *Essai sur les moeurs* which marks it out as a philosophic history is therefore the dominant presence in it of the voice of the *philosophe*, nearly always expressing his contempt (as a self-hating historian) for the history he recounts:

Il est vrai que dans ce volume que je donne malgré moi, je laisse toujours voir l'effet qu'ont fait sur mon esprit les objets que je considère. Mais ce compte que je me rendais de mes lectures avec une naïveté qu'on n'a presque jamais quand on écrit pour le public, est précisément ce qui pourra être utile. Chaque

⁷⁷ Voltaire, *Essai sur les moeurs et l'esprit des nations* ed. René Pomeau, 2 vols. (Paris: 1963), II, p.815.

⁷⁸ *Essai sur les moeurs* ed. Pomeau, II, p.883.

⁷⁹ II, p.884.

⁸⁰ II, p.885.

⁸¹ II, p.886.

lecteur en est bien plus à portée d'asseoir son jugement en rectifiant le mien; et quiconque pense fait penser.⁸²

Again, the distinctive nature of philosophic historiography is shown to reside not in a new form, or in a new historical thesis or overarching narrative, but in the insistent voice of the *philosophe*, who is to be understood as not entirely at home in his own text. At the same time, however, Voltaire's involved tale of personal discovery and thwarted intentions has the effect of bestowing an utterly characteristic generic indeterminacy on the *Essai sur les mœurs*, a quality which the text itself will fully exploit.

Never bound by his own disclaimers, Voltaire does in fact still attempt some version of the history of *mœurs* in the *Essai sur les mœurs*, and in doing so, he again exposes the fissures within the idea of *mœurs* as a historical category, the extent to which the different strands in the philosophic ideal of a history of *mœurs* – anticipated in its various designations, as the history of *mœurs*, of arts and sciences, of the progress of the *esprit philosophique*, and of the *esprit humain* – resist becoming united into a single narrative thread. One such strand is identified in the Avant-Propos of 1745, where Voltaire contrasts the history of kings with his new history, 'il semble en lisant les histoires que la terre n'ait été faite que pour quelques souverains, et pour ceux qui ont servi leurs passions; presque tout le reste est abandonné', thus conferring on the idea of *mœurs* a close relationship with the history of common life and civil society, and even accompanied by overtones of democratic sentiment; 'les historiens en cela ressemblent à quelques tyrans dont ils parlent: ils sacrifient le genre humain à un seul homme'.⁸³ (Perhaps Voltaire is atoning in advance for the *Siècle de Louis XIV*). This reading of the meaning of *mœurs* is later endorsed in the text of the *Essai sur les mœurs* itself, notably in Chapter LXXXI on 'Mœurs, usages, commerce, richesses vers les XIII^e et XIV^e siècles':

Je voudrais découvrir quelle était alors la société des hommes, comment on vivait dans l'intérieur des familles, quels arts étaient cultivés, plutôt que de répéter tant de malheurs et tant de combats, funestes objets et [sic] l'histoire, et lieux communs de la méchanceté humaine.⁸⁴

⁸² II, p.888.

⁸³ II, p.817.

⁸⁴ I, p.757.

Yet Chapter LXXXI itself demonstrates why such concerns, for all their apparent attractiveness, and undeniable philosophic correctness, are relegated to the occasional chapter, rather than being permitted to prescribe the form of the text itself.

The most consistent and most emphatically stated feature of Voltaire's self-representation as a philosophic historian is that the methods and the concerns of the antiquarians are anathema, and yet, as his editor René Pomeau notes, this and the following chapter on the same theme are heavily reliant on the Italian antiquarian Muratori. That it is simply not possible to cry 'malheur aux détails' while practising an art that is entirely concerned with *détails* is a fundamental flaw in the idea of a philosophic history of *moeurs* where *moeurs* are to be understood as the history of common life and civil society. Indeed, while an honorable mention should be made for Voltaire's consistent interest in the history of state finances, even where he does make the attempt in the *Essai sur les moeurs* he is palpably embarrassed by the stylistic problems such variation presents. In a particular example, in Chapter CXXI on *moeurs* in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, his subject leads the historian seamlessly from duels, to clothes, to the fact that Pope Julian II was the originator of the fashion for beards; only for the analysis to be then broken by an exculpatory aside, 'c'est une petite observation, mais elle entre dans l'histoire des usages'.⁸⁵ Given that part of Voltaire's difficulty appears to lie in the challenge of ranking his material, particularly such 'petites observations', in what is, despite the use of chapter divisions, a predominantly narrative history in which footnotes are used sparingly, it is significant that in the 1754 preface, where Voltaire explains that the *Essai sur les moeurs* did not in the end become a philosophic history of manners, an entirely different textual model is envisaged; 'il se trouve heureusement exécuté par des mains plus habiles, manié avec profondeur, et rédigé avec ordre dans l'immortel ouvrage de l'*Encyclopédie*'.⁸⁶ The conclusion of Voltaire's excursus in the humble history of *usages*, is therefore to prescribe a return once more to the powerful but ambiguous claim of the history of arts and sciences to be itself capable of fulfilling the philosophic prescription.

⁸⁵ II, p.168.

⁸⁶ II, p.886.

4. Voltaire, constitutional historian

Voltaire's willingness to exploit the political overtones of the history of common life in the 1745 Avant-Propos to the *Essai sur les mœurs*, as a rhetorical resource, but little more than that – 'n'y a-t-il donc eu sur la terre que des rois'⁸⁷ – contrasts markedly with his reluctance to advertise his insistent, engaged and precisely targeted assault on contemporary French constitutionalism in that same text. In a similar discrepancy between self-representation and actual activity, Voltaire the incorrigible *bel esprit*, rebuked publicly for frivolity by *Éphémérides du citoyen*, is responsible for one of the rarest of all occasions in French philosophic writing, a direct intervention as a historical and intellectual authority in a public political controversy, in the form of the *Histoire du Parlement de Paris* (1769).⁸⁸ In a situation which is, curiously enough, the precise inverse of its British counterpart, it is both safer and preferable for Voltaire to speak grandly of universals, than it is to represent himself as a controversial historian. Just as in the case of political criticism of Louis XIV and the pursuit of universal monarchy, Voltaire's engagement with constitutional history exposes the insufficiency of the rhetoric of *philosophie* as the sphere of manners to fully account for the ambitions of French philosophic writers.

The *Essai sur les mœurs* takes on a controversial function in the French context as much for what it is not, as for what it is. It is manifestly not an account of the special destiny divinely ordained for the Catholic kingdom of France, and in a letter to the Marquise du Deffand in 1759 Voltaire specifically calls attention to this function of the *Essai sur les mœurs* as a critique of French national complacency:

La demi liberté avec laquelle on commence à écrire en France, n'est encor qu'une chaîne honteuse. Toutes vos grandes histoires de France sont diaboliques, nonseulement parce que le fonds en est horriblement sec et petit, mais parce que les Daniels sont plus petits encore. C'est un bien plat préjugé de prétendre que la France ait été quelque chose dans le monde depuis Raoul et Eudes jusqu'à la personne de Henry 4 et au grand siècle de Louis 14. Nous avons été de sots barbares en comparaison des Italiens dans la carrière de tous les arts; nous n'avons même que depuis trente ans, appris un peu de bonne philosophie des anglais.⁸⁹

⁸⁷ II, p.815.

⁸⁸ For an examination of Voltaire's specific intentions regarding the *Histoire du Parlement de Paris* on its first publication in 1769, and of his and the following editions' relationship to political events after 1769, see Peter Campbell, 'Voltaire et le parlement de Paris' in *Voltaire et le Grand Siècle* ed. Anne-Sophie Barrovecchio and Jean Dagen, *SVEC* 2006:10, 301-14.

⁸⁹ Letter to Marie de Vichy de Champrond, Marquise du Deffand, 13th October [1759], D8533.

After a review of the various national humiliations experienced in the ongoing war with Britain, Voltaire appeals to the Marquise, ‘jugez après cela si l’histoire de France est un bon morceau à traiter amplement, et à lire’. Even apart from immediately decentring French national history, by subsuming it within a declaredly broader historical enquiry, the *Essai sur les mœurs* actively sabotages the conventional high-points of French history one after the other, and with a particular emphasis on occasions where the facts of the matter run counter to what might be expected of a francophile and Christian providence. Charlemagne is a usurper, a murderer and a polygamist, ‘la réputation de Charlemagne est une des plus grandes preuves que les succès justifient l’injustice, et donnent la gloire’,⁹⁰ and Voltaire savages the failure of his venal compatriots to notice the despotic nature of Charlemagne’s rule in Germany, ‘Daniel ne dit pas un mot de cette cour Veimique; et Velly, qui a écrit sa sèche histoire, n’a pas été instruit de ce fait si public: et il appelle Charlemagne *religieux monarque, ornement de l’humanité!*’.⁹¹ Similarly, Voltaire (and, as he again points out, in contrast to Daniel) pauses to contemplate the dark character of Louis XI, and to remark on the fact that it was ‘cependant lui qui le premier des rois de France prit toujours le nom de *Très-Chrétien!*’.⁹² This emphasis in the *Essai sur les mœurs* on assaulting the complacency of the French also casts a new light on the almost complete absence from the text of the history of literature and the arts. For the *Siècle de Louis XIV* Voltaire is pleased to dwell on the subject precisely because ‘il ne fournit que des vérités honorables à la nation’,⁹³ but in the *Essai sur les mœurs* he is determined to deny his French readers even this apparently innocent satisfaction. Voltaire is even prepared to do violence to his own sentiments in order to undercut any creeping sense of national pride. For example, the historian reminds himself to resist the aesthetic attractions of medieval French chivalry:

La noblesse française eut seulement l’avantage d’un extérieur plus brillant que les autres nations.

Quand Charles Valois, frère de Philippe le Bel, avait passé en Italie, les Lombards, les Toscans même, prirent les modes des Français. Ces modes étaient extravagantes: c’était un corps qu’on laçait par derrière, comme aujourd’hui ceux des filles: c’était de grandes manches pendantes, un capuchon dont la pointe traînait à terre. Les chevaliers Français donnaient pourtant de la grâce à cette mascarade, et justifiaient ce qu’avait dit Frédéric

⁹⁰ I, p.324.

⁹¹ I, p.328.

⁹² II, p.8.

⁹³ Letter to Berger [c. 26th April 1739], D1993.

II: *Plas me el cavalier français*. Il eût mieux valu connaître alors la discipline militaire: la France n'eût pas été la proie de l'étranger sous Philippe de Valois, Jean et Charles VI.⁹⁴

Voltaire's prose visibly wavers between instinctive love of the French cultural exception, and the sober necessity to bring home to his readers a sense of the historical failings of the nation.

The central question raised by the controversial function of the *Essai sur les mœurs* in relation to its French readers is the nature of the intervention; what effect Voltaire aims to achieve, in what sphere, and what such engagement reveals about his understanding of his role as author, Frenchman and *philosophe*. Karen O'Brien includes the *Essai sur les mœurs* within her definition of 'cosmopolitan history', as a work which expresses and seeks to convey 'an attitude of detachment towards national prejudice', and suggests a highly differentiated mode of intervention; that Voltaire 'by turns, endorsed, admonished and rebuked France's political sphere from the normative cultural domain in which he imaginatively positioned himself as a European writer'.⁹⁵ However, while national pride may be challenged as a general topic of common 'prejudice', and while it is certainly true that the *Essai sur les mœurs* is deliberately framed to do just that, Voltaire's challenge to his French readers has wider, more controversial, and specifically political ambitions than the idea of 'prejudice' conveys. The *Essai sur les mœurs* is a closely-argued riposte to contemporary French *parlementaire* attempts to define the French constitution in such a way that limits the power of the monarch and secures (or extends) the powers of the *parlements*, and, in particular, in such a way that might strengthen the claim of the Parlement of Paris to be the permanent representative of the nation.⁹⁶ Even in the *Siècle de Louis XIV*, in complete contrast to O'Brien's presentation of contemporary 'political certainties'⁹⁷ and the 'reassuring stories which nations tell to themselves',⁹⁸ Voltaire himself concedes that France can call on no such resource. In treating of the conduct of the Parlement of Paris during the wars of the Fronde, he remarks how

⁹⁴ I, p.775.

⁹⁵ *Narratives of Enlightenment*, p.2.

⁹⁶ For Voltaire's attitude to the *parlementaires*, see especially pp.1-33 of John Renwick's Introduction to his edition of the *Histoire du Parlement de Paris* (Oxford: 2005), volume LXVIII of *Oeuvres complètes* ed. Mervaud, Cronk et al.; and for an account of the ideology of the *parlementaire* faction, and of the intensification of its controversial deployment from the 1750s onwards, see his Introduction, pp.33-52.

⁹⁷ p.1.

⁹⁸ p.3.

‘cette compagnie, depuis longtemps, était regardée bien différemment par la cour et par le peuple’;⁹⁹ although, true to the pacific pretensions of the *Siècle de Louis XIV*, Voltaire is still obliged to maintain the fiction of a fair and balanced presentation of the sentiments of both sides. The court appeals to a specific historical argument in support of its contention that ‘le parlement de Paris était une cour de justice faite pour juger les causes des citoyens’, and that ‘il tenait cette prérogative de la seule volonté des rois’.¹⁰⁰

[I]l avait succédé à ces parlements qui représentaient autrefois la nation française; mais il n’avait de ces anciennes assemblées rien que le seul nom; et, pour preuve incontestable, c’est qu’en effet les états généraux étaient substitués à la place des assemblées de la nation, et le parlement de Paris ne ressembloit pas plus aux parlements tenus par nos premiers rois, qu’un consul de Smyrne ou d’Alep ne ressemble à un consul romain.¹⁰¹

It is immediately obvious how the philosophic pose of historical scepticism favoured in the *Essai sur les mœurs* can be employed in the service of a very particular political argument, against there being a French constitution historically established, as the *parlementaires* insisted. Voltaire’s summing-up of his ‘impartial’ account in the *Siècle de Louis XIV* therefore combines the rhetoric of philosophic superiority and detachment, with a latent political partisanship; ‘car enfin il n’y avait de loi bien reconnue que celle de l’occasion et du temps’.¹⁰² Voltaire’s presentation of the *Essai sur les mœurs* in the letters explicitly calls attention to how it represents a new willingness on his own part to engage more directly in political controversy than in his previous histories; and this is why, to Madame du Deffand, he calls attention to his own *hardiesse* or daring, ‘je suis devenu plus hardi que je n’étais’,¹⁰³ which would surely be unnecessary if his design were merely to intimate to his readers that France had not always been as important as they might like to think.

The repeated rhetorical enactment of a turning away from history which is so characteristic of the *Essai sur les mœurs*, is therefore more particularly orchestrated than at first appears. For example, the barely relieved grimness of Voltaire’s presentation of the fourteenth century, its wars, plagues, and internal anarchy – ‘quels temps! et nous nous plaignons encore du nôtre!’¹⁰⁴ – establishes a sense of the vast

⁹⁹ p.647.

¹⁰⁰ p.647.

¹⁰¹ p.647.

¹⁰² p.648.

¹⁰³ Letter to Marquise du Deffand, 13th October [1759], D8533.

¹⁰⁴ I, p.712.

distance between the present and the past, and the inability of any feature of that past to have anything of substance to contribute to an immeasurably more enlightened present, which the following chapter will rely on to support its contemptuous account of the Estates General of 1355, the proceedings of which, for the *parlementaires*, were a crucial evidence of the historical right to national representation.¹⁰⁵ Similarly, Chapter LXXXV ‘Du parlement de Paris jusqu’à Charles VII’ harnesses an elegantly sceptical philosophic *réflexion* in the service of a complete dismissal of constitutional history as a very concept; ‘c’est donc une idée bien vaine, un travail bien ingrat, de vouloir tout rappeler aux usages antiques, et de vouloir fixer cette roue que le temps fait tourner d’un mouvement irrésistible’.¹⁰⁶ Instead, Voltaire encourages the reader to concentrate, for political purposes at least, on the present, and for his own part associates himself with the political stance of rational reform, where the only contribution made by the past is an accumulation of unjust institutional practices. He even finds a place for a directly campaigning rhetoric in the *Essai sur les moeurs*, as seen, for example, in his praise of the Marquis d’Argenson’s project to reform the *taille* applicable to soldiers in Chapter XCVIII ‘De la noblesse’. In the letters, Voltaire frankly avows the fact of his engagement within the sphere of French national politics. To his friend d’Argental in 1763, Voltaire recalls how in the *Siècle de Louis XIV*, ‘la conduite du parlement est toujours ménagée’, but that nevertheless his work had been forbidden and publicly burned. However, already meditating the *Histoire du Parlement de Paris* as well as further additions to the *Essai sur les moeurs*, he still gives notice of a cautious desire to assume a new historiographical incarnation, as a constitutional historian, ‘je veux bien qu’on décrète un quidam qui pouvait prouver que le parlement n’a aucun droit de faire des remontrances que par // la pure concession des rois, et qui ne l’a pas dit’.¹⁰⁷

Given such evidence of Voltaire’s practice as some form of constitutional historian, and of his desire to assume such a role, it is still more significant that in the text itself of the *Essai sur les moeurs*, such an intention evidently cannot be acknowledged. Voltaire’s self-presentation is entirely as *philosophe*, in search of the universal history of the human spirit. There are indeed particular instances where

¹⁰⁵ For Voltaire’s distortion of the question of 1355 see editorial note, *Histoire du Parlement de Paris* ed. Renwick, p.175 n.3.

¹⁰⁶ I, p.790.

¹⁰⁷ Letter to Charles Augustin Feriol, Comte d’Argental, and Jeanne Grâce Bosc du Bouchet, Comtesse d’Argental, 23rd [April 1763], D11174.

Voltaire is willing for a moment to cast aside the mask of inoffensive *philosophie*, and to assume the constitutional historian; such as in his severe rebuke to other historians for failing to perceive the importance of establishing the precise composition of the French court which tried the king of England *in absentia* in 1203, ‘c’est un point très important que nos historiens auraient dû examiner, au lieu de ranger à leur gré des armées en bataille, et de s’appesantir sur les sièges de quelques châteaux qui n’existent plus’.¹⁰⁸ Yet, in spite of this intriguing prospect of philosophic high-mindedness being harnessed in the service of a rejuvenation of French constitutional history, the philosophic disdain for barbarism and resistance to historical continuity which is the dominant stance of the *Essai sur les moeurs* persistently undercuts any partial attempt by Voltaire to rehabilitate the legal historian, and, where roles conflict, philosophic self-positioning comes first. In a notable example, after an extensive and balanced consideration of the pivotal reign of Louis XI in Chapter XCIV, ‘le premier roi absolu en Europe depuis la décadence de la maison de Charlemagne’,¹⁰⁹ Voltaire drifts back into the satire of barbarism, and ends with a typical call to reject the theme entirely, ‘il ne faut connaître l’histoire de ces temps-là que pour la mépriser’.¹¹⁰ The dominance of the *philosophe* is thus once more asserted; but Voltaire is then moved to provide for certain exceptions, ‘si les princes et les particuliers n’avaient pas quelque intérêt à s’instruire des révolutions de tant de barbares gouvernements, on ne pourrait plus mal employer son temps qu’en lisant l’histoire’.¹¹¹ The telling feature of Voltaire’s defence is its hesitancy and vagueness, as the experience of ‘quelque intérêt’ on the part of (in an uncharacteristically weak phrase) ‘les princes et les particuliers’ to instruct themselves, with no intimation of why they might wish to do so, or where such an enquiry might lead. In the *Essai sur les moeurs* just as in the *Siècle de Louis XIV*, instead of attempting to redefine *philosophie* or the public role of the intellectual writer in a way which takes full account of the involvement of French *philosophes* with the sphere of national politics, Voltaire takes refuge in his polyphonic texts.

A notable feature of Voltaire’s constitutional histories, and especially the *Histoire du Parlement de Paris*, is indeed the perceptible inadequacy of the textual

¹⁰⁸ I, p.531.

¹⁰⁹ II, p.2.

¹¹⁰ II, p.11.

¹¹¹ II, p.11.

voices available to him. For the *jurisconsulte*, the national past contains precedents which have normative value for the present, whereas the *philosophe* appeals to rational judgement from universal experience and the nature of things: both positions are strong, coherent interpretative stances. However, to assume the *philosophe* and to play the *jurisconsulte* where it suits him, that is, solely where historical precedents can be shown to prescribe the nature of the Parlement of Paris in a manner contrary to the ambitions of the *parlementaires*, which is of course what Voltaire does, is on the face of it a distinctly ambiguous argumentative strategy. In this respect, Voltaire's incapacity to intervene in person, to make explicit his own political position, seriously compromises his ability to define and to delimit the significance of his argument. In the *Histoire du Parlement de Paris*, the artificially stunted nature of the argument becomes a glaring oddity. For example, Voltaire recounts in emphatic detail in Chapter V how king Jean had his own constable arrested by the *prévôt* of Paris, judged and condemned by the same personage in three days, and then beheaded in his palace in front of the entire court, 'sans qu'aucun des conseillers de la chambre du parlement y fût mandé'.¹¹² Now the point of the anecdote Voltaire wishes to impress on his readers is of course the simple one, that the Parlement had no criminal jurisdiction in the period in question; but, quite apart from the instinctive (and, surely, 'Voltairean') response to the event being to cry injustice, or indict barbarism, if historical precedents are relevant to present practice in the case of the jurisdiction of the Parlement of Paris, this example seemingly inevitably also raises the parallel question of how to prescribe the role of the monarch. Voltaire himself is evidently aware of the need for some further explanation of his meaning, and for an acknowledgement of the wider philosophic concerns he has set aside, as he adds the palpable afterthought that 'nous ne rapportons pas ce trait comme un acte de justice; mais il sert à prouver combien les droits du nouveau parlement sédentaire à Paris étaient alors peu établis'.¹¹³ The fear of being misunderstood, and the inconsistent appeal to the local limitations of his enquiry, are the consequence of Voltaire's assuming the *jurisconsulte* without the requisite legalistic narrow-mindedness, or, in the opposite view, of his betrayal of the universalist sensibilities of the *philosophe* for a few domestic certainties. The evident impossibility of assuming the authentic voice

¹¹² Voltaire, *Histoire du Parlement de Paris* ed. Renwick, p.178.

¹¹³ p.178.

of political-historical controversy in France is again an instructive contrast with eighteenth-century Britain.

Voltaire himself doubts the universality of the historiographical forms he has created. For *philosophes* of his political alignment, France is by its very nature a peculiarly insubstantial historical entity; as a country without a constitution, it is subject to repeated re-creation, in defiance of its history, rather than as a result of it. In Voltaire's account, historical uncertainty is part of the lived experience of the French nation in the eighteenth century, in the form of repeated political crises. Establishing the definitive version of France is, for Voltaire, the political achievement of Louis XIV: before him, for nine hundred years 'le génie des Français a été presque toujours rétréci sous un gouvernement gothique, au milieu des divisions et des guerres civiles, n'ayant ni lois ni coutumes fixes'.¹¹⁴ However, by the 1760s, the 'fixing' of France is all to do again; as in the *Histoire du Parlement de Paris* the conflict between king and Parlement calls into question fundamental features of the French national settlement, 'cette étonnante anarchie ne pouvait pas subsister; il fallait ou que la couronne reprît son autorité, ou que les parlements prévalussent'.¹¹⁵ The coup d'état of 1771 fortunately provides a theatrical re-assertion of the royal authority, Voltaire clearly delighting in the spectacle of (at last) decisive force; while again, in a last addition to the 1775 edition of the *Histoire du Parlement de Paris*, on the death of Louis XV in 1774 Voltaire can contemplate in his successor 'l'aurore d'un règne sage et heureux',¹¹⁶ words which in their deadpan serenity are obviously a provisional substitute for the next instalment, which, in the end, Voltaire himself would not provide. Voltaire's whole historical sensibility, his 'philosophic' scepticism and the historiographical forms which derive from it such as the *Essai sur les mœurs*, are closely tied to a very specific eighteenth-century French narrative of political conflict. Voltaire makes provision for other writers, with a different national subject and with a different political affiliation, to write history, even philosophic history, differently.

For all the repeated statements of the universal fluctuation of laws and the impermanence of all things in the *Essai sur les mœurs*, Voltaire still presents this observation as having a particular application to France. There are numerous instances of the wheel of caprice being said to turn more consistently in France than in other

¹¹⁴ *Histoire du Parlement de Paris*, p.619.

¹¹⁵ p.557.

¹¹⁶ p.560.

countries, ‘tout change chez les Français beaucoup plus que chez les autres peuples’,¹¹⁷ and again, ‘l’histoire des usages, des lois, des privilèges, n’est en beaucoup de pays, et surtout en France, qu’un tableau mouvant’.¹¹⁸ Such particular emphasis is, of course, a sign of the rhetorical purpose of the *Essai sur les moeurs* as an anti-history of the French constitution, and yet Voltaire goes much further, and in fact envisages a complete exemption from historiographical scepticism for one nation in particular, this nation, inevitably, being England. English historical continuity is explicitly invoked by Voltaire as a contrast to France, and even on the grounds of an essential difference in national character; so the fact that the great French charter of 1355 was only in the end ‘un règlement passager’, in contrast to the ‘loi perpétuelle’ of Magna Carta, proves that ‘le caractère des Anglais est plus constant et plus ferme que celui des Français’.¹¹⁹ France’s failure to admit the bulk of the nation into the legislature in the course of its emergence from the common feudal anarchy highlights by contrast the English (and Dutch) success, the effects of which are still being felt:

C’était une des véritables raisons qui avaient fait languir le royaume de France en étouffant toute industrie. Si en Hollande et en Angleterre le corps de l’État n’était formé que de barons séculiers et ecclésiastiques, ces peuples n’auraient pas, dans la guerre de 1701, tenu la balance de l’Europe.¹²⁰

The anti-constitutional nature of philosophic historiography may therefore, in the end, be a peculiarly French interpretation, and English historical Whiggism unexpectedly retains a place even in the universal wreck of history represented in the *Essai sur les moeurs*. The final historiographical ecumenism of the *Essai sur les moeurs* is a strong evidence of Voltaire’s deep-rooted personal instinct for intellectual variety, but at the same time, in the general context of the eighteenth-century development of the idea of a new, philosophic historiography, it is also testament to how national and political allegiances will disrupt any single universalist prescription, and indeed, to Voltaire’s recognition that this must be the case.

There is very little doubt that Voltaire was in fact a *philosophe*. He resists inclusion in no school of historians’ model of Enlightenment; cultural, intellectual, history of the book. Indeed, such is his status as Enlightenment raised to the level of

¹¹⁷ I, p.788.

¹¹⁸ I, p.790.

¹¹⁹ I, p.725.

¹²⁰ I, p.778.

instinct, he is even in danger of being taken for granted. The fact that his writings are so often constructed precisely to elude any obvious display of cultural anchorage, nakedness of suasive purpose, or singleness of identity, therefore provides a signal instance of how self-expression in print opens up new ‘spaces’ of other than the material kind, in an otherwise well-mapped territory. Voltaire confronts the variety of self-images available to the French Enlightenment; if political, of what kind, and in what language or tradition; if radical and independent, whether its logic must in fact lead it to the rootless rationalism of the Huguenot diaspora; if an elite literary practice, whether the history and practice of imaginative literature is entirely congruent with the severe progressivism of Enlightenment. As a historian, the ideal philosophic history of manners offers Voltaire a clear opportunity to be the *philosophe* in print as assuredly as he was the *philosophe* in fact, and yet he consistently refuses to permit such a generic exercise to define and delimit the scope of his intentions as an eighteenth-century French man of letters. The idea of manners itself in Voltaire’s hands becomes a site of stylistic manoeuvre, lending itself to the expression of a various identity in a single text; leading Voltaire notably in such opposite directions as to law and thence to constitutional history, or to the history of arts and to the personally inhibiting effect of living in an Enlightened nation.

Voltaire’s activities as a historian – so important in the eighteenth century and since as the example of what it means to be an Enlightenment historian – are a particular illustration of the inadvisability of attempting to synthesise a specific (and least of all coherent) Enlightenment attitude to history, or a single Enlightenment genre of history; in particular, given the fact that every historical judgement, every narrative priority, and every stylistic feature his works contain form part of a highly complex and nuanced textual strategy that is at once culturally grounded and utterly individual. It is also a particular irony that it is when Voltaire is least the *philosophe*, and most the partisan French writer, in the *Histoire du Parlement de Paris*, that he is closest to the self-conception of his putative fellow *philosophes* in Britain, Hume and Robertson; and this in a work which rarely informs discussion of Enlightenment historiography. Voltaire’s revelation of how much the public self-representation of *philosophie* in eighteenth-century France leaves unspoken concerning the actual activities and the ambitions of even its firmest exponents, affords some degree of comfort to its more rhetorically reticent, and irrepressibly diverse, British counterpart.

CHAPTER 2. ENLIGHTENMENT WITHOUT *PHILOSOPHES*

If Enlightenment must have *philosophes* in order to be Enlightenment, John Pocock's observation that eighteenth-century England displays all the signs of 'enlightenment *sans philosophes*'¹ points to either a clear paradox, or to a need to redefine terms. Of course, if it is once accepted that *philosophes*, far from being a distinct eighteenth-century cultural phenomenon which was common to a number of countries in continental Europe, and in addition achieved an unexpected flowering in Scotland, were in fact 'une spécialité bien française',² the paradox disappears. Yet the question of the personnel of the English Enlightenment still remains, and with it the related question of how far, once identified, they might correspond to Franco Venturi's wider definition of *philosophes*, as 'a new intelligentsia, conscious of its own function and strength'.³ The argument of John Pocock's essay 'Clergy and Commerce. The Conservative Enlightenment in England' is framed as a direct response to this perceived need for some native counterpart to the organizing powers of *philosophie*.

In his essay, Pocock identifies the defenders of the Whig regime and 'the Anglican and Scottish Moderate clergies'⁴ who had formed an alliance with it, as coalescing in a 'Magisterial Enlightenment';⁵ and such a movement, while certainly an elite and even institutional phenomenon, might indeed be understood to have possessed at least the co-ordination and coherence of Venturi's 'new intelligentsia'. As a concept, this understanding of a conservative Enlightenment in Britain also has the great advantage of addressing the inter-relations of eighteenth-century England and Scotland, thus ending the utterly counter-intuitive assumption of the southern kingdom's isolation, however splendid, from the rest of Britain as well as the whole of Europe. Indeed, Pocock discerns the aims of what he suggests should be termed an 'Arminian Enlightenment', defined as the campaign of the Protestant establishment in Britain in company with similar endeavours in Protestant Europe against the forces of seventeenth-century enthusiasm, at work among British writers who in their own time understood themselves to be inimically opposed; Gibbon's *Decline and Fall* and

¹ John Pocock, 'Clergy and Commerce. The Conservative Enlightenment in England', in volume I of *L'Età dei Lumi: Studi Storici sul Settecento Europeo in onore di Franco Venturi* ed. R. Ajello, E. Cortese, V. Piano Mortari, 2 vols. (Naples: 1985), pp.524-62, p.528.

² Georges Benrekassa, 'France', in *Le Monde des Lumières*, pp.369-91, p.369.

³ Franco Venturi, *Utopia and Reform in the Enlightenment* (Cambridge: 1971), p.133; and quoted in Pocock, 'Clergy and Commerce', p.526.

⁴ Pocock, 'Clergy and Commerce', p.558.

⁵ 'Clergy and Commerce', p.548. John Pocock here adopts the terminology of the 'Magisterial Enlightenment' from the work of Margaret Jacob.

William Warburton's *Divine Legation of Moses* in his view representing the 'two major English works'⁶ which stem from it.

The perception of such a unity of aim either among themselves, or alongside those whom most would indeed persist in describing as 'infidels', was, however, not at all one commonly expressed by eighteenth-century British clerics. Clerical writers such as Conyers Middleton, John Jortin, John Leland and John Brown, and most notably Warburton himself, in a number of publications including the *Divine Legation of Moses*, describe how division within even the Enlightened part of the clerical establishment, and the real presence of its enemies, had had the effect of rendering impossible such an assumption of cultural leadership and collaborative strength.⁷ At the same time, the assertion of many of the qualities which in France the *philosophes*, blessed with their own proper tradition and an unyielding religious 'establishment' as an opponent, simply assumed for themselves, and especially those of critical judgement and the ability to speak to and for a modern audience, became the focus of intense competition among the divided membership of the 'Arminian Enlightenment'. In this contest over the ownership of Enlightenment in Britain, literary style and authorial self-fashioning became at least as important to these establishment professionals as to the French *philosophes*, who for their part frankly confessed their origins as the creatures of print. Controversial writing on the history of religion, a form of philosophic endeavour greatly suited to Britain's peculiar intellectual climate, is central terrain for this literary engagement, and Warburton's major contribution to the genre in the form of the *Divine Legation of Moses* takes as its starting point a particularly acute diagnosis of the challenges facing any attempt at a Magisterial Enlightenment in Britain. For all its achievement of scandal and notoriety, Warburton's *Divine Legation of Moses* is very precisely framed as one form of solution to the British clerical Enlightenment's cultural and stylistic dilemma.

⁶ 'Clergy and Commerce', p.554.

⁷ This chapter is concerned with the ways in which practising as an 'Enlightenment' could be understood by eighteenth-century British clerical writers, and does not undertake a representative analysis of the varieties of clerics, or indeed of Britons; but in the interests of precision, Jortin, Middleton, Brown and Warburton were all Anglican priests, to a greater or lesser degree of orthodoxy, and Leland an Irish dissenting clergyman.

1. Licentious readers

What to its eighteenth-century participants was understood as the conflict between the forces of ‘religion’ and the assault of ‘infidelity’, in the service of which conflict Warburton pursued his stellar career as a controversialist, has since been refracted in Enlightenment studies through the medium of the concept of the Magisterial (or merely ‘moderate’ or ‘mainstream’) Enlightenment and its Radical challenger. Such an opposition forms a necessary part of John Pocock’s argument in his essay ‘Clergy and Commerce’, and it is central to Jonathan Israel’s recent study *Radical Enlightenment: Philosophy and the Making of Modernity 1650-1750*; and the question of which Enlightenment has the greater claim to the term almost inevitably (given the persistence of the honorific value of ‘Enlightenment’ and of its wider paradigmatic significance) informs both historians’ treatment of the interaction between the two. Israel sets out to demonstrate how ‘the Radical Enlightenment’ was ‘far from being a peripheral development’; and that, ‘frequently, the moderate mainstream were consciously, even desperately, reacting to what was widely perceived as the massively dangerous threat posed by radical thought’.⁸ Pocock, on the other hand, not only incorporates such apparent stalwarts of the infidel fringe as Hume and Gibbon into his vision of an ‘Arminian Enlightenment’, but also, by defining true infidelity as a peculiar form of enthusiasm, effectively excludes Toland and the rest of the British freethinkers from any dignified claim to being in an Enlightenment of their own; ‘the English deists who caused such disturbance in European countries as well as their own were in some cases *libertins* rather than *philosophes*; hermeticists and illuminists rather than doubters; rationalists rather than empiricists [...] we are at a point where scepticism and enthusiasm draw together, and the Magisterial and Radical Enlightenments draw apart’.⁹ The umbilical connection between an honorific use of ‘Enlightenment’ and an imminent crisis of nomenclature is nowhere more evident than in attempts to schematize the relationship between ‘religion’ in the eighteenth-century and the phenomenon identified as ‘infidelity’.

The impact of infidelity on the intellectual culture of early eighteenth-century Anglicanism was, however, exerted at an even more fundamental level than that of

⁸ Jonathan I. Israel, *Radical Enlightenment: Philosophy and the Making of Modernity 1650-1750* (Oxford: 2001), p.vi.

⁹ Pocock, ‘Clergy and Commerce’, p.552.

the formation of parties, or even than that of specific philosophical controversies. The ability of the clerics to assume a guiding role in British intellectual culture, to express their ideas in print, to communicate with their readers, in effect their ability to form ‘an Enlightenment’, had been as they themselves understood it irrevocably compromised by the freethinkers’ campaign. John Leland, himself an Irish dissenting clergyman dedicated to fighting the infidel in an ecumenical spirit, in his *View of the Principal Deistical Writers that have Appeared in England in the Last and Present Century* (1757) encapsulates the enlightened cleric’s dilemma:

Instead of promoting the good work of reformation, and of contributing to restore religion in its primitive purity, they bring a disgrace upon those who would in good earnest attempt it, and furnish the patrons of those corruptions with a plausible pretence for reproaching and misrepresenting such persons as having an ill intention against Christianity itself, and as serving the cause of Deists and Infidels.¹⁰

Railing against the ‘corruptions’ of Christianity, a position frequently assumed by British infidel writers including Bolingbroke to whom Leland is here replying, whether or not it was espoused genuinely in the service of a purer Protestantism or in fact with an ultimately anti-Christian goal (a question which still remains difficult to answer in a number of individual cases, and which also in the end must depend on some normative definition of what constitutes Christian belief), has had at least one lasting effect on the intellectual culture of eighteenth-century Britain. It has inhibited the clerical intellectuals, among whom Leland, who bravely proclaims that ‘the Christian religion is in no danger from a free and impartial enquiry’,¹¹ and who proudly recalls the believing names of Grotius, Pascal, Locke, Bacon, Newton and Addison as a token that no-one should ‘be apprehensive, as if his appearing to shew a zeal for Christianity, might be looked upon as a reflection upon his understanding, or as a mark of a narrow and bigotted way of thinking’,¹² must be counted, from assuming their proper role. Caught between self-revealed infidels and the use made of the infidel panic by the doctrinal traditionalists, enlightened clerics endure their own form of persecution, not through actual censorship or the experience of social

¹⁰ John Leland, *A View of the Principal Deistical Writers that have Appeared in England in the Last and Present Century; with observations upon them, and some account of the answers that have been published against them. In several letters to a friend*, 2 vols. in-8^o (third rev. edition; London, 1757), II, p.241.

¹¹ I, p.ii.

¹² Leland, *Reflections on the Late Lord Bolingbroke’s Letters on the Study and Use of History*, included in volume II of *A View of the Principal Deistical Writers*, p.cclviii.

restrictions as endured by the French *philosophes* (and also more subtly by their own infidel compatriots), but through the medium of the polemical culture encouraged by a liberal publishing regime.

A particularly interesting engagement with this question of the pressures exerted on Anglican clerics in their attempt to assert Enlightenment principles is presented by one of Warburton's earliest works, the *Critical and Philosophical Enquiry into the Causes of Prodigies and Miracles, as related by Historians* (1727). The fact that the *Critical and Philosophical Enquiry* is a work which is explicitly aimed at furthering the novice author's career, in which Warburton takes care to extensively flatter his patron Sir Robert Sutton, certainly increases the need for caution; but at the same time, Warburton's biographer Richard Hurd notes that that and other early pieces were published 'to try the judgement of the publick',¹³ and the author takes it for granted that what that public wants is a 'critical' and 'philosophical' approach to the study of history. For all its slight and inconsequential appearance, the *Critical and Philosophical Enquiry* centres around the sheer difficulty of reconciling institutional responsibilities with Enlightenment ideals, and emphasizes how the contribution of the freethinkers has been to make this perennial dilemma worse.

At the beginning of his exposition, the vigour of Warburton's rhetoric appears to be on the side of the scientific historian:

How comes it to pass that, // while the *other Sciences* are daily Purging and Reforming themselves from the Pollutions of superstitious Error, that had been collecting throughout a long Winter of Ignorance and Barbarism; History, still the longer it runs, contracts the more Filth, and retains in it the additional Ordure of every Soil through which it passes: How this happens, I say, is somewhat of difficult Disquisition.¹⁴

Here, history is a science, and 'superstitious Error' is ranged alongside 'Barbarism' and 'Filth'. Warburton goes on to contrast history with philosophy, in which errors, having 'only the Patronage of single Philosophers, or Sects', are purged over time because 'Men take full liberty to examine them, and, unrestrained by any Authority that can claim a Sanction from Nature or Religion, take a Pleasure in laying open the

¹³ Richard Hurd, *A Discourse, by way of General Preface to the quarto edition of Bishop Warburton's Works* (London: 1794), p.7.

¹⁴ [William Warburton], *A Critical and Philosophical Enquiry into the Causes of Prodigies and Miracles, as related by Historians. With an Essay towards restoring a Method and Purity of History. In which, the Characters of the most celebrated Writers of every Age, and of the several Stages and Species of History, are occasionally criticized and explained* (London: 1727), pp.1-2.

Weakness and Folly of Unreasonable Opinions'.¹⁵ Immediately, the question of 'Authority' and respect for religion intrudes on Warburton's Enlightenment rhetoric; yet crucially, he is still not moved to repudiate or to reassess his initial enthusiasm for the actual principle of rigorous philosophical cleansing. Instead, historical criticism retains its character as good philosophy, but acquires a potentially disabling tincture of moral ambiguity:

But in *History*, these Things being deliver'd as the Sentiments of whole Nations; or, perhaps, as the Belief of our own Brave Ancestors, whose Benefits to Posterity have advanced them to the Rank of Demi-Gods and Heroes; this sanctifies Superstition, keeps us at an awful Distance, restrains our Enquiries, // and gives Error the Eldership of Reason.¹⁶

The ambivalence of such a phrase as 'this sanctifies Superstition' would be apparent even if the author had not commenced by identifying 'superstitious error' with 'filth'. At the same time, Warburton's distinctly non-committal use of the first person plural, whether it connotes an objective presentation of a universal failing or in fact enjoins a normative precept, serves even to spread a suspicion of irony over the term 'our own Brave Ancestors'.

The chief peculiarity of the *Critical and Philosophical Enquiry* (described by Leslie Stephen as a 'queer little book'¹⁷) in this way lies in Warburton's refusal, or inability, to openly confront the question of the Enlightened cleric's role; how the ideal of independent judgement might be reconciled with the need to defer to established opinions, or alternatively, the degree and kind of compromise that might be exacted. Where the infidels and *libertins* have a well-worked-out typology of religious hypocrisy, Warburton, not unreasonably, declines to commit himself on this point at such an early stage in his career. At the same time, however, the *Critical and Philosophical Enquiry* shows its author to be uneasily aware of infidel scorn for the self-imposed difficulties of the establishment intellectual. The orientation of his whole discussion in the *Critical and Philosophical Enquiry* is unmistakably defensive; it shows the extent to which the establishment Enlightenment not only must confront its own internal tensions, but is also engaged in a contest with an alternative, perhaps more convincing version. In his list of the causes of error in history, Warburton first

¹⁵ p.2.

¹⁶ pp.2-3.

¹⁷ Leslie Stephen, 'Warburton, William (1698-1779), bishop of Gloucester', *Dictionary of National Biography Archive* (Oxford: 2004-2005) [<http://www.oxforddnb.com>, accessed 6th April 2005].

cites weakness and self-deception, only to immediately encounter one of the prime varieties of such credulous weakness in ‘superstition’; at which point Warburton, desperate to defuse the anticlerical charge of his own logic, is then reduced to attempting to maintain the hair-splitting distinction that ‘Superstition is of a later Growth’¹⁸ than general human weakness. Similarly, his defence of national sentiment as a sympathetic source for fabulous history (in which ‘Enthusiasm’ may also be found, just as ‘Superstition’ is ‘sometimes found mixed with the former Weakness, viz. the Love of Falshood’¹⁹) is animated by a polemic against the unpatriotic philosophy of the modern ‘Sect of Anti Moralists, who have *our Hobbes*, and the *French Duke de la Rochfoucault* for their Leaders’,²⁰ a notable instance of Warburton demonstrating a precocious understanding of the usefulness of polemic against the infidel as a distraction from the unpalatable complexities of the Anglican position. However, it is in the course of his presentation of the third cause of historical error – the love of fame – that Warburton explicitly concedes ground to the infidels. Freethinking historians, however prone they may be to the love of fame, must still be acknowledged even by Warburton to be ‘above the Reach of these two *Weaknesses*, so largely descanted on, in the preceding Heads’,²¹ and so, according to Warburton’s own argument, must have the dominant claim to immunity from the constitutional weakness that makes ‘*Deceit* the Darling of the Mind’.²² Freethinkers may be bad citizens, but they are, it seems, better historians. The most significant feature of the *Critical and Philosophical Enquiry* is, however, not its grudging admission that, in the contest for superiority of historical detachment, the infidels might have the better *prima facie* claim, or even its sketching out of a potential defence for intellectual falsehood on the grounds of social utility. It is rather Warburton’s insistence on finding a way, however inconsistent his argument or declamatory his style, for the clerics to retain possession of the rhetoric of Enlightenment, and in this respect in particular, the overlooked early work is the herald of the *Divine Legation of Moses*.

The great British controversy over the history of miracles which was stoked by Conyers Middleton, and in which Warburton naturally took part ex officio as controversialist-in-chief, is especially revelatory of the Enlightened clerics’ anxieties

¹⁸ p.12.

¹⁹ p.25.

²⁰ p.26.

²¹ p.37.

²² p.7.

about their role as intellectuals, and of their divergent approaches to defining the nature of that role. Most commonly, the defenders against infidelity choose to present ‘readers’ as a group as potential victims, vulnerable to unwitting seduction by infidelity’s stylistic cunning, which Leland claims is the truth of the matter as he himself has experienced it:

And there is great reason to apprehend, that not a few [readers] have been unwarily led to entertain unhappy prejudices against revealed religion, and the authority of the Scriptures, through too great an admiration of [Lord Shaftesbury’s] writings. Some instances of this kind have come under my own particular observation.²³

Conyers Middleton, on the other hand, in his *Letter to Dr. Waterland; containing some Remarks on his Vindication of Scripture* (1731) insists on the integrity of doubt, and commands the refuters of infidelity to address themselves as to serious people and honest citizens:

[F]or every man, who has practiced the world, and used the conversation of men of letters, must needs have met with many persons of // much seeming honour, virtue, and sobriety of life, who partly *profess to have scruples*, partly an *entire disbelief of all Revelation*: and what way, think you, is the most likely to convince men of this character? Is it possible to work any good upon them by the method you here take; by telling them that they are *profligate and abandoned, contemners of God, and enemies to Man*? Is not such treatment sure to have a contrary effect? and being conscious to themselves, that your charge upon them is both false and malicious, instead of considering *your book*, as a *charitable attempt* to recover a soul from ruin, they will reject it with scorn, as an *infamous and scandalous libel*.²⁴

For Middleton, loose talk of ‘attack’ and ‘defence’, of ‘infidelity’ and the Apocalypse, is to be resigned in favour of civilized debate; and, even further, Waterland must be brought to recognize in his *bête noire* Toland a commonality of aim, ‘since in every part of his work [Toland] professes a very high notion of the excellency of *Reason, Truth and Virtue*; professes to believe *a God, a Providence, a Future State*; both reason and // charity oblige us to look upon him as sincere, till we are forced to think otherwise’.²⁵ Cleric and infidel alike are members of the Protestant Enlightenment.

On the basis of this wager on the viability of a philosophic community among British Enlightened Protestants, Middleton prosecutes his challenge to the patristic

²³ I, p.66.

²⁴ Conyers Middleton, *A Letter to Dr. Waterland; containing some Remarks on his Vindication of Scripture: In Answer to a Book, intituled ‘Christianity as Old as the Creation’*. Together with the *Sketch of Another Answer to the said Book* (London: 1731), pp.5-6.

²⁵ pp.3-4.

tradition in his *Free Inquiry into the Miraculous Powers, which are supposed to have subsisted in the Christian Church, from the earliest ages through several successive centuries* (1749) and in the *Introductory Discourse* (1747) which precedes it. It is simply taken for granted by Middleton in the *Introductory Discourse* that there is both a natural and a historical congruence between the language of Protestantism and the language of Enlightenment:

For as it is the part of every Christian, to inform himself, as far as he is able, of every thing, which his religion requires him, either to believe or to practise, so it is more especially of those, whom Providence has blessed with a Capacity, and Leisure, and the Opportunities of inquiring; nor yet merely for their own information, but for the instruction likewise of others, who want the same advantages.²⁶

In complete contrast to Warburton's caution and Leland's fears, it is simply the case that there is a positive responsibility for every good Protestant to think boldly and to publish. At the same time, however, Middleton does underline the limitations of such a vision compared to the cosmopolitanism (however easily affected) of *philosophie*; as it still proves necessary for his call to Protestant unity to invoke a common enemy, and for the alarm against infidelity to still be sounded, only now against 'the late growth of Popery in this kingdom, and the great number of Popish books, which have been printed and dispersed amongst us, within these few years'.²⁷

Middleton's publications on the history of miracles in fact deconstruct even as they make use of the idea of a united British Protestant Enlightenment. In the first place, it is of course very obvious that over Middleton's espousal of historical detachment hovers the spectre of Arianism, and that to contemporaries such as Waterland (and Warburton) this was the salient fact regarding his performance. Indeed, the continuing uncertainty regarding the ultimate tendency of Middleton's challenge to miracles, and what were the consequences he envisaged for the status of Revelation, further emphasizes the largely strategic nature of his rhetorical self-positioning, the fiction of Anglican unity, and the sheer fantasy that Waterland could ever sympathize with Toland or vice versa. After the (entirely predictable) indignant

²⁶ Conyers Middleton, *Introductory Discourse to a Larger Work, designed hereafter to be published, concerning the Miraculous Powers which are supposed to have subsisted in the Christian Church, from the earliest Ages, through several successive Centuries; tending to shew, that we have no sufficient Reason to believe, upon the Authority of the Primitive Fathers, that any such Powers were continued to the Church, after the Days of the Apostles* (London: 1747), p.2.

²⁷ p.4.

clamour over his *Introductory Discourse*, Middleton himself significantly revises his account of his ambitions in his later Preface to the *Free Inquiry* itself:

I was aware, that the very novelty of it would offend, and the matter of it still more: that many would rise up against it, and some of them by writing, others, by noise and clamor, try to raise a popular odium upon it; but my comfort was, that this would excite the candid inquirers also, to take it into their consideration, and to weigh the merit // and consequences of it; and it was the judgement of these alone, by which I proposed to determine my future measures and resolution with regard to it.²⁸

For all their manifest superiority, Middleton's 'candid inquirers' do not convey any particularly strong associations of cultural influence or establishment solidarity, and again, the sheer power of the British *odium theologicum* let loose in print is both a symptom and a cause of the lack of cultural co-ordination on the French philosophic model.

Middleton and his clerical colleagues were entirely aware of what a coherently Magisterial Enlightenment should look like, but were equally convinced that it was not visibly in operation in eighteenth-century Britain. Instead, the major question was what impact this should be permitted to have on their own practice as intellectuals. Warburton, in his own intervention in defence of the patristic tradition (and the orthodox doctrine of the Trinity) in his *Julian. Or A Discourse concerning the Earthquake and fiery Eruption, which defeated that Emperor's Attempt to rebuild the Temple at Jerusalem* (1750), again insists that the infiltration of religious debate by the infidels must be understood to have irrevocably compromised the freedom of intellectual writing:

In considering the state of this new controversy, concerning MIRACLES, two things seemed to be wanting, as of use to oppose to the insinuations of licentious Readers, who are commonly more forward to come to a conclusion than the Disputants themselves: The *one* is, to shew that all the Miracles recorded in *Church-History*, are *not* forgeries or delusions: The *other*, that their evidence doth *not* stand on the same foot of credit with the Miracles recorded in *Gospel-History*. For most theological debates amongst Churchmen, notwithstanding their use to clear // up and confirm the truth, are attended with this apparent evil, that the Enemies of religion draw their own

²⁸ Conyers Middleton, *A Free Inquiry into the Miraculous Powers, which are supposed to have subsisted in the Christian Church, from the earliest Ages through several successive Centuries. By which it is shewn, That we have no sufficient Reason to believe, upon the Authority of the Primitive Fathers, That any such Powers were continued to the Church, after the Days of the Apostles* (London: 1749), pp.ii-iii.

consequences from them, how contrary soever to the express reasonings and declarations of the Parties involved.²⁹

The great irony of Warburton's lament is, of course, the fact that, for all his attempt to police the boundary between licensed and responsible professionals ('Church-men') and mere 'licentious readers', the lesson of Middleton's campaign was that the infidel enemy was already within, and that the degree of confidence that might be placed in his declarations of intent was precisely the point at issue. Middleton, for his own part, has no hesitation in disavowing his professional responsibility to protect his readers from the full revelation of his own sentiments:

But to speak my mind freely on the subject of consequences. I am not so scrupulous perhaps in my regard to them, as many of my profession are apt to // be: my nature is frank and open, and warmly disposed, not onely to seek, but to speak what I take to be true, which disposition has been greatly confirmed by the situation, into which Providence has thrown me. For I was never trained to pace in the trammels of the Church, nor tempted by the sweets of its preferments, to sacrifice the philosophic freedom of a studious to the servile restraints of an ambitious life.³⁰

Middleton begins his historical career in an attempt to assert the united front of Enlightened British Protestantism against the encroachment of Popery, only to end by recognizing that if British Protestantism is truly to be Enlightened, it must cease to be a function of the establishment, and take up a position on the cultural margin.

Warburton, on the other hand, will search for any rhetorical trick or historical demonstration that will defer his having to make such a choice. Again, the wider context of the meaning of the crisis over infidelity for eighteenth-century British intellectual culture in this way points towards some of the more idiosyncratic features of the *Divine Legation of Moses*.

2. 'Burlesque divinity'

It is evident that the question of the relationship between 'infidelity' and 'religion' animated contemporary debate precisely because it was not possible to fix

²⁹ William Warburton, *Julian. Or a Discourse concerning the Earthquake and Fiery Eruption, which defeated that Emperor's Attempt to rebuild the Temple at Jerusalem. In which the reality of a divine Interposition is shewn; the Objections to it are answered; and the nature of that Evidence which demands the assent of every reasonable man to a 'miraculous' fact, is considered and explained* (London: 1750), pp.1-2.

³⁰ *Free Inquiry*, pp.vi-vii.

authoritatively what was mainstream in the intellectual culture of eighteenth-century Britain, and what was marginal. Indeed, in addition to the participants' own perspective, Justin Champion's argument in his study *The Pillars of Priestcraft Shaken: The Church of England and its Enemies 1660-1730* that the freethinkers should not be understood as inhabiting a separate sphere (that is, as 'infidels' by definition), and that they 'participated in a public debate about true religion rather than the conventicles of private infidelity',³¹ further confirms the insufficiency of the concept of rival Magisterial and Radical Enlightenments in Britain. The idea of a mainstream Protestant Enlightenment in fact lent itself to being manipulated and converted into a rhetorical strategy by disputants themselves, as for example by Middleton in his attempt to isolate Daniel Waterland as a Popish fringe extremist. It is particularly notable that the very perception of 'infidelity' as a cultural phenomenon achieved a lasting impact on Enlightenment discourse in Britain in a manner which was to a remarkable extent independent of the interventions of specific freethinkers; as the problems of division and bitter doctrinal controversy within Anglicanism, and the fear of the communication of ideas being received as a provocation to polemical attack and misrepresentation, generated their own momentum, and were certainly sufficient to destroy any nascent consciousness of a proper function and strength among Britain's Enlightened clerics. Yet one distinct contribution made by the actual writings of the freethinkers, and one which is of great importance for the *Divine Legation of Moses*, was the challenge to the traditional textual practices of the intellectual establishment laid down by the freethinking style. Confronted with a domestic version of the *philosophes'* espousal of stylistic avant-gardism, the clerics are forced to engage with the independent power of literary self-creation to disrupt and even reverse hegemonic assumptions about what constitutes authority.

The whole address of Shaftesbury's *Characteristicks of Men, Manners, Opinions, Times* (1711) turns on its demonstration of how the cultural connotations of literary style can be remodelled as a consequence of individual intervention.

Shaftesbury rehabilitates freethinking from its clerically-sponsored 'misrepresentation' – 'tis to them doubtless that we owe the Opprobriousness and Abuse of those naturally honest Appellations of *free-Livers, free-Thinkers, Latitudinarians*, or whatever other character implies a Largeness of Mind, and

³¹ Justin Champion, *The Pillars of Priestcraft Shaken: The Church of England and its Enemies 1660-1730* (Cambridge: 1992), p.233.

generous Use of Understanding³² – by re-presenting the distinctive features of the freethinking style, its use of irony and elliptical satire, and its practice of authorial self-concealment, ‘that the Enemy may be amus’d, and they only *who have Ears to hear, may hear*’,³³ both as a necessary strategy to avoid persecution, and as the natural expression of the wit and humour of a gentleman. Shaftesbury’s confidence in his power to reverse cultural assumptions about the relationship between literary style and personal character by means of sheer rhetorical sleight-of-hand is such that the conservative fear of uncensored debate destroying civilization is turned on its head simply by a metaphor:

All Politeness is owing to Liberty. We polish one another, and rub off our Corners and rough Sides by a sort of *amicable Collision*. To restrain this, is inevitably to bring a Rust upon Mens Understandings. ’Tis a destroying of Civility, Good Breeding, and // even Charity itself, under pretence of maintaining it.³⁴

However, even while himself making use of the malleability of literary self-representation, Shaftesbury immediately moves to establish a unique form of cultural authority for the style of the gentleman-freethinker, and simultaneously to deny the clerics the liberty to respond with their own experiments in stylistic self-fashioning. On the basis that ‘the Temper of the Pedagogue sutes not with the Age. And the World, however it may be *taught*, will not be *tutor’d*’,³⁵ the style of the gentleman-freethinker is not to be thought of as just clever and amusing, it masters the eighteenth-century *Zeitgeist*:

If the best of our modern Conversations are apt to run chiefly upon Trifles; if rational Discourses (especially those of a deeper Speculation) have lost their credit, and are in disgrace because of their Formality; there is reason for more allowance in the way of *Humour* and *Gaiety*. An easier Method of treating these Subjects, will make ’em more agreeable and familiar. [...] We shall grow better *Reasoners*, by reasoning pleasantly, and at our ease; taking up, or laying down these Subjects, as we fancy.³⁶

Clerics, however, are given no choice but to act their character in print, and the character Shaftesbury assigns them is one of true Christian humility, and patience even under the relegation of Christianity itself to a kind of niche specialization:

³² Anthony Ashley Cooper, Earl of Shaftesbury, *Characteristicks of Men, Manners, Opinions, Times*, 3 vols. in-8^o (third edition; London, 1723), III, p.306.

³³ I, p.63.

³⁴ I, pp.64-65.

³⁵ I, p.67.

³⁶ I, p.77.

If a Philosopher speaks, Men hear him willingly, while he keeps to his Philosophy. So is a Christian heard, while he keeps to his profess'd Charity and Meekness. In a Gentleman we allow of Pleasantry and Raillery, as being manag'd always with good Breeding and never gross or clownish. But if a mere Scholastick, intrenching upon all these Characters, and writing as it were by Starts and Rebounds from one of these to another, appears upon the whole as little able to keep the Temper of Christianity, as to use the Reason of a Philosopher, or the Raillery of a Man of Breeding; what wonder is it, if the monstrous Product of such a jumbled Brain be ridiculous to the World?³⁷

The *Characteristicks* do, of course, illustrate the difficulties involved in being both the witty gentleman-freethinker and the philosopher, but it is clearly evident from Shaftesbury's presentation of each proper role that the gentleman has at the very least the inestimable advantage of setting the rules for his own performance, only himself being the proper judge of what is 'gross' and what is not. As for the clerics, however, even though '*Pedantry* and *Bigotry* are Mill-stones able to sink the best Book, which carries the least part of their dead weight',³⁸ Shaftesbury leaves them little else.

Shaftesbury's patient answerers are fully appreciative of the nature of the cultural conundrum he has set for them. John Brown provides a notably sophisticated analysis in his *Essays on the Characteristics* (1751):

It must be confessed, that in the Conduct of the literary Warfare, they who depend on the Regularity and Force of *Arguments*, have but a sorry Chance against these nimble Adventurers in the *Sallies* of Wit and Ridicule; these *Hussars* in Disputation, who confide more in their Agility, than Strength or Discipline; and by sudden *Evolutions*, and timely *Skulking*, can do great Mischiefs, without receiving any. Ill qualified, indeed, is the *saturnine* Complexion of the dry *Reasoner*, to cope with this *mercurial* Spirit of modern *Wit*: The *Formalist* is under a double Difficulty; not only to *conquer* his Enemy, but to *find* him.³⁹

In keeping with his astute awareness that in the very act of refuting Shaftesbury as a 'formalist', he could be said to be further confirming Shaftesbury's thesis about the plodding dullness of clerical writers, Brown nicely contrasts the respective strengths of the dry reasoner and the skulking Hussar. Both Brown and Leland profess their greatest defence to be a reassertion of the primacy of traditional forms of philosophical and historical exposition over Shaftesbury's perhaps reckless association of his own practice with that of the scoffers at religion. Leland severely

³⁷ I, p.67.

³⁸ I, p.67.

³⁹ John Brown, *Essays on the Characteristics* (second edition; London, 1751), p.9.

reprimands Shaftesbury that ‘the best and wisest men in all ages have always recommended a calm attention and sobriety of mind, a cool and impartial examination and enquiry, as the properest disposition for finding out truth and judging concerning it’,⁴⁰ and it is particularly significant that both he and Brown are especially confident regarding the failure of the freethinkers to achieve a position of authority as historians. Brown is positively scathing over Shaftesbury’s opportunistic venture into controversial scholarship over the textual history of the Scriptures:

Here, as his Lordship drags us into the *beaten Track of Controversy*, the best Compliment that can be paid the Reader, is to carry him thro’ it by the shortest Way. The stale Objections here raked together by the noble Author have been so often, and so fully refuted, by a Variety of excellent Writers, that, to many, it may seem a needless Task, even to touch upon the Subject.⁴¹

Even the wittiest gentleman is no match for the massed ranks of Tillemont, Lardner, Bentley and Jortin.

However, while it is clearly advantageous to the clerical ‘formalists’ to base their refutation on the question of what constitutes a convincing argument, Leland and Brown remain uneasily aware of the wider question raised by the demonstrable success and influence achieved by freethinking writings; whether, in the end, the incipient corruption of British intellectual culture is in fact driven by the desires of the reading public, for which the actual purveyors of infidelity share only partial responsibility. Leland focuses on the illegitimate form of authority Shaftesbury procures by his fashionable style, where ‘the quality of the writer, his lively and beautiful imagination, the delicacy of taste he hath shewn in many instances, and the graces and embellishments of his style’, bring it about that ‘these things have very much prejudiced many persons in his favour, and prepared them for receiving, almost implicitly, whatever he hath advanced’.⁴² Shaftesbury’s bid to confuse his contemporaries by presenting them with the oxymoron of the polite (and even noble) infidel is thus acknowledged by his enemies to have succeeded, and Brown similarly concedes the power of ironic insinuation over readers, to the detriment of rational conviction:

For in the Way of open War, there is fair Warning given to put Reason upon Guard, that no pretending Argument be suffered to pass without Examination. On the contrary, the noble Writer’s concealed Method of *Raillery*, steals

⁴⁰ Leland, *View of the Principal Deistical Writers*, I, p.60.

⁴¹ p.263.

⁴² I, p.49.

insensibly on his Reader, fills him with endless Prejudice and Suspicion; and, without passing thro' the Judgement, fixeth such Impressions on the Imagination, as *Reason*, with all its Effects, will be hardly able afterwards to efface.⁴³

Perhaps, after all the polemics against the wickedness of Britain's small group of freethinking authors, it is readers who are to blame; their failure to read rationally, by means of their 'Judgement', their susceptibility to prejudice and to the allurements of the imagination. Just as the phenomenon of 'infidelity' exerts its greatest effect by revealing and playing on the tensions within the 'religious' position, the successes of the freethinking style expose the extent to which Enlightened Protestantism also had a deep-rooted problem with its readers; and accordingly, it is readers and not the freethinkers who are the main target of Brown's infamous jeremiad *An Estimate of the Manners and Principles of the Times* (1757).

For Brown, it is the failings of British opinion-formers as participants in the national intellectual culture as well as their failings as Christians – 'the sublime Truths, the pure and simple Morals of the Gospel, are despised and trod under foot'⁴⁴ – which are to be blamed for the clerical intellectuals' sense of creeping marginalization, and the crowning irony of this corruption of the national intellect is that the serious-minded infidel is as much a victim of it as the orthodox scholar:

But notwithstanding the general Contempt of Religion among the fashionable World, the uninformed Reader is not to imagine, that the present Age is deep in the Speculations of Infidelity. No such Matter: for that would imply a certain Attention to these Subjects; a certain Degree of self-converse and Thought; and this would clash with the ruling Manners of the Times.⁴⁵

Brown ascribes the poor sales of the first volume of Hume's *History of England* to a miscalculation that the addition of some fashionable infidelity would be a guarantee of popular acclaim, for on the contrary, as Brown commiserates, 'it was whispered him, that he had totally mistaken the Spirit of the Times: that no Allurements could engage the fashionable Infidel World to travel through a large Quarto'.⁴⁶ Instead of the putative fear of an encroaching Radical Enlightenment, perhaps a shared disdain for the eighteenth-century British book-buying public might be enough to rally Britain's divided intellectuals into a semblance of a united Enlightenment; and indeed,

⁴³ p.243.

⁴⁴ John Brown, *An Estimate of the Manners and Principles of the Times* (second edition; London, 1757), p.54.

⁴⁵ p.55.

⁴⁶ p.57.

Shaftesbury himself had been moved to rebuke the tendency for freethinking to become restricted to a mere vehicle for immorality and frivolity, ‘the Men of Wit and Raillery, whose pleasantest Entertainment is in the exposing the weak sides of Religion, are so desperately afraid of being drawn into any serious Thoughts of it, that they look upon a Man as guilty of foul Play, who assumes the air of a *free writer*, and at the same time preserves any Regard for the Principles of natural Religion’,⁴⁷ in order to secure a hearing for the *Inquiry concerning Virtue, or Merit*. Shaftesbury anticipates Brown in his description of fashionable British readers as supine searchers after confirmation of their own opinions, ‘we are too lazy and effeminate, and withal a little too cowardly, to dare *doubt*’,⁴⁸ and Brown himself points out how the programmatic embrace of wit and humour can in the end become the witty philosopher’s literary straitjacket:

[H]is Lordship insists, that ‘Gravity is of the very Essence of Imposture’. Yet this will do little for his Purpose, unless he can prove too, that ‘Imposture is of the Essence of Gravity’. And if so, what will become of the *Enquiry concerning Virtue*?⁴⁹

Yet the general tendency of the *Estimate of the Manners and Principles of the Times* is not, of course, in the direction of sympathy for the infidel. For Brown, there is a pressing necessity for a solution to the Enlightened cleric’s stylistic dilemma, and the *Estimate* argues for one solution, while itself embodying another.

The second part of Brown’s libellous anecdote about Hume represents a hugely important qualification to his general presentation of the miserable state of the clerical party. In his account, Hume is advised ‘that as the // few Readers of Quarto’s that yet remain, lie mostly among the serious Part of Mankind, he had offended his best Customers, and ruined the sale of his Book’.⁵⁰ The ‘serious Part of Mankind’, however marginalized by fashion and declined in numbers, still belongs to the clerics; and yet if, as Brown implies, the clerics (and serious-minded infidels) should then continue to write seriously, and address themselves to this embattled few, surely the clerics end by fulfilling Shaftesbury’s typology of intellectuals, where the cleric and his niche specialism of religion are forever relegated to a marginal place. Brown, however, for all that he casts himself as the apostle of the old intellectual seriousness

⁴⁷ *Characteristicks*, II, pp.7-8.

⁴⁸ II, p.190.

⁴⁹ *Essays on the Characteristics*, p.69.

⁵⁰ *Estimate*, pp.57-58.

in the *Estimate*, demonstrates by his own practice the alternative to stylistic and therefore cultural ossification. The *Estimate* itself is daringly stylish, was hugely popular, and takes as its presiding genius Montesquieu, ‘the greatest of political writers’,⁵¹ and in it the author effectively grants himself permission to write even of religion and morality in a secular idiom by declaring at the outset that, instead of starting from questions of principle, ‘this Estimate [...] confines itself to such Consequences only, as affect the *Duration* of the *public State*: So that the leading Question will be, “How far the present ruling Manners and Principles of this Nation may tend to its Continuance or Destruction”’.⁵² Leland, in contrast, concludes his *View of the Principal Deistical Writers* with ‘Reflections, on the present State of Things in these Nations’, where portents of divine displeasure at the spread of infidelity are amply canvassed, up to and including the events of ’45. Brown innovates stylistically, refashions the literary persona of the clerical writer, in order to recapture the literary mainstream, precisely the strategy Shaftesbury proscribes the clerics in the *Characteristicks*; yet this attempt in the *Characteristicks* to enforce a prohibition in fact responds to a visible trend in contemporary apologetic, Shaftesbury remarking for example on the adoption of the dialogue form by certain refuters of freethinking, that ‘this Burlesque-Divinity grows mightily in vogue’.⁵³ The choice for the clerical writer is thus made clear; to shore up pre-existing strengths and to write to the serious few as a ‘formalist’, or to submit to learning from the freethinkers’ ability to lead literary fashion. Albeit from the mouth of an infidel, there is no more appropriate description of Warburton’s project in the *Divine Legation of Moses* than ‘Burlesque Divinity’.

3. Two clerical historians

There is a kernel of reasonableness concealed within the many-layered eccentricity of the *Divine Legation of Moses, demonstrated on the Principles of a Religious Deist, from the Omission of the Doctrine of a Future State of Reward and Punishment in the Jewish Dispensation* (1738-41), and the major question the whole work raises is why Warburton should ever have wished to conceal it. As an astute observer of how

⁵¹ p.12.

⁵² p.24.

⁵³ III, p.291.

Anglican apologetic had too often formulated its historical arguments as a reaction to perceived infidel attack, Warburton claims to rescue the orthodox position on the question of the relationship between Judaism and the religion of ancient Egypt from its past inconsistency:

For by an Odd Chance, tho' not uncommon, in blind Scuffles, the Infidels and we have chang'd Weapons; and our Enemies attack us with the *Bible* to prove the *Egyptians* very learned and very superstitious in the time of MOSES; and we defend ourselves against it with the *New Chronology of Sir Isaac Newton*, to prove them very barbarous and very innocent.⁵⁴

The antiquity of Egyptian learning was once an uncontroversial focus for pious scholarship, as having the satisfactory tendency to support the historical verisimilitude of the Bible; but, once taken up by the freethinkers as a means of besmirching the purity of the Judeo-Christian origin, 'the Defenders of Revelation, surprized with the Novelty of the Argument, did that in a Fright, and in Excess of Caution, which one may observe unprepared Disputants generally do to support their Opinions',⁵⁵ and turned to arguing the contrary case. Warburton points out that there is nothing to stop the freethinkers from shifting their ground and leaving the 'Defenders of Revelation' prey to a mass of contradictions of their own making, 'then we shall be sure to have the great Name of *Newton* set against the Bible; the last of all great Names one would wish in opposition to it'.⁵⁶ Instead, Warburton proposes largely to accept the freethinking argument, but to dispute the inference, and in the same way to transmute the base metal of the freethinking arguments regarding the absence of a future state in the Mosaic dispensation, and the historical function of religion as a support to the state, into golden proofs of the truth of Revelation.

The *Divine Legation of Moses* is for these reasons a risky enterprise by definition. Warburton must undertake to deliver in his own person historical arguments which had become closely associated with the freethinkers, and therefore deeply tainted if not absolutely proscribed for any orthodox scholar. Accordingly, Warburton demonstrates his awareness throughout the *Divine Legation of Moses* of the need to manage his readers' expectations, and to reassure them that by concurring in a little local infidelity they will ultimately be led to the final triumph of orthodoxy.

⁵⁴ William Warburton, *The Divine Legation of Moses, demonstrated on the Principles of a religious Deist, from the Omission of the Doctrine of a Future State of Reward and Punishment in the Jewish Dispensation*, 2 vols. in-8^o (London: 1738-41), II, p.20.

⁵⁵ II, p.21

⁵⁶ II, p.207.

He repeatedly acknowledges ‘that what I have here said, will be esteemed at first sight, an unreasonable and licentious Paradox’,⁵⁷ and he can only hope that ‘the Reader’s Surprize and Prejudice may be so much abated, as to attend fairly to the Proofs that are to // follow.’⁵⁸ The sheer length of the *Divine Legation of Moses*, even leaving aside the fact of its publication in two parts, exacerbates the disjunction between the insistent voice of the infidel historian and the mere promise of a pious intention on the part of its orthodox author; ‘I come, at length, to my *second* Proposition: which, if the Reader, as is not unlikely, should by this Time have forgot, he may be very well excused.’⁵⁹ Only great faith in Warburton’s judgement could lead believing readers to associate with such dangerous company as Warburton keeps in the course of his argument in the *Divine Legation of Moses*:

In doing this, we have presumed to enter the very *Penetralia* of // Antiquity, and expose its most venerable Secrets to open Day: some Parts of which having been accidentally, and obscurely seen by Owl Light, by such as *Toland, Blount, Coward*, and others of that execrable Crew, were imagined, as is natural for Objects seen in the Dusk, to wear strange Gigantic Shapes, to the Terror and Affrightment of many good *Christians*.⁶⁰

As an exercise in apologetic brinkmanship, such a project presents dangers for its readers, for the Anglican fight against the freethinkers, and especially for Warburton’s reputation. The remarkable feature of the *Divine Legation of Moses* is, however, the way this air of danger is positively encouraged by the author.

If the *Divine Legation of Moses* really were intended primarily as a piece of apologetic, a number of its most notable characteristics would remain simply inexplicable, chief among which is its inflammatory title, ‘demonstrated on the principles of a religious deist’. Warburton leaves it to the publication of his second volume to explain precisely what is meant; disposing of the allegation that he merely intended ‘common Principles’ by means of ‘an affected Expression’,⁶¹ disdaining the excuse of ‘a mere Argument *ad // hominem*’ which (he insists) would have ‘unreasonably bespoke the Reader’s long Attention’,⁶² and coming to rest at the true meaning of ‘*the Deist’s own Principles*’, as ‘such of them as are true, yet being generally held by the Enemies of Religion, and almost as generally rejected by the

⁵⁷ I, p.304.

⁵⁸ I, pp.306-307.

⁵⁹ II, p.281.

⁶⁰ I, pp.415-16.

⁶¹ II, p.26.

⁶² II, pp.26-27; II, p.26.

Friends of it, come, for this Reason to be termed *Deistical Principles*'.⁶³ Warburton's refutation of the charge of mere attention-seeking (or still more nefarious purposes) shows in what manner his choice of title was received by his contemporaries, an entirely predictable reaction, in anticipation of which Warburton could of course very easily have glossed his terms in a preface to the first volume. An even more suspicious feature of the *Divine Legation of Moses* is the fact that its thesis is presented in a back-to-front fashion. The whole of the first three books in Volume I, provocatively addressed 'To the Freethinkers', is devoted to presenting religion as a creation of the state, and so cannot but make the believing reader anxious about the ultimate tendency of the author's argument; and yet by the end of Volume II, Warburton is securely bogged down in an argument over types and the nature of the relationship between the Jewish and the Christian revelations, an argument which, far from being included for its own sake, is absolutely crucial to his explanation for the omission of the doctrine of a future state in the Mosaic dispensation. It is important to note that the *Divine Legation of Moses* is in fact unfinished, Warburton having planned three further books, the last of which was intended to contain what Hurd calls 'a *rationale* of Christianity',⁶⁴ and so the overall proportion of deistical to Christian kinds of argument in the text should have been even smaller. There is therefore nothing whatsoever preventing Warburton from writing like a real apologist, such as William Sherlock whose *The Use and Intent of Prophecy* (1725) he cites as a classic of the genre to which the *Divine Legation of Moses* properly belongs; unfolding his major and minor premisses in due order, placing his particular arguments squarely in the context of an overview of the entire Christian dispensation, and hiding his challenge to the current trend in Christian historiography under some more obvious signs of piety. Instead, Warburton exaggerates the novelty of the *Divine Legation of Moses* and intensifies the challenge it presents to the reader, and this is clearly the result of a deliberate choice as opposed to the mere ineptitude to which its failure as a work of apologetic is usually ascribed.

In his *Critical and Philosophical Enquiry* and in the later *Julian*, Warburton makes only cosmetic changes to his literary persona in response to the freethinking challenge, indulging Enlightenment rhetoric with a view to limiting its application.

⁶³ II, p.27.

⁶⁴ Hurd, *Discourse*, p.98.

The peculiar innovation of the *Divine Legation of Moses* is to identify a means by which the clerical writer can imitate the freethinkers' efforts towards a transformation of the relationship between writer and reader, where an air of mutual confidence and earnest intellectual endeavour is replaced by daring stylistic experiment and authorial self-display. Whereas the emphasis on the detached language of political utility over the piety of the divine in the ecclesiological argument of Volume I is entirely reasonably accounted for by Warburton, and merely reflects the Enlightened Anglican consensus on the need to make stylistic changes in order 'to get the Advocate of Revelation a fair Hearing',⁶⁵ given the penetration of the 'Evil' of infidelity within 'the higher Part of the World',⁶⁶ Warburton's explanation of his choice of argument 'over several others of equal Strength, which I have in my Choice'⁶⁷ is rather more unusual. He aims by it to so far expel the stereotype of the authoritarian cleric, as to demonstrate that clerics can be freethinkers too:

Nor less friendly is this Liberty to the generous Advocate of Religion: for how could such a one, when in earnest convinced of the Strength of Evidence in his Cause, desire an Adversary, whom the Laws had before disarmed, or value a Victory, where the Magistrate must triumph with him? [...] And if my dissenting, in the course of this Defense, from some common Opinions needs an Apology, I should desire it might be thought, that I ventured into this Train with greater Confidence; that I might shew by not intrenching myself in authorized Speculations, I put myself upon the Same Footing with you [that is, 'the Freethinkers'], and would claim no Privilege that was not enjoyed in common.⁶⁸

For all that this passage forms part of an address 'To the Freethinkers' in Volume I, Warburton of course firmly repudiates the idea that the *Divine Legation of Moses* is an *ad hominem* composition, and he focuses his argument throughout on the assumed sensitivities of the orthodox reader. The *Divine Legation of Moses* is not framed for the conversion of the freethinkers. Its formative aim is to ensure that, by means of its very specific historical argument, and the author's provocatively counter-intuitive presentation of his thesis, even the most orthodox of readers can enjoy the *frisson* of danger and the teasing ironies proper to a freethinking text, because here, for once, they are employed in the conservative cause.

⁶⁵ II, p.vii.

⁶⁶ II, p.vii.

⁶⁷ I, p.6.

⁶⁸ I, p.3.

The framing of the *Divine Legation of Moses* at the same time enables the clerical author to foreground his literary persona, and assert his intellectual status, in a manner which might otherwise be thought unsuitable to his office. Indeed, Warburton presents the very eccentricity of his argument, its marginality to the serious business of defending Revelation, as permitting a greater degree of authorial self-display. While he is careful to salute the heroes of the internal proof like Sherlock, who tackle the big questions that demand ‘the most delicate Operation of a great Genius, and Master-workman’,⁶⁹ Warburton happily confines himself to one of the ‘no less illustri- // ous, but more univocal Marks of Truth’,⁷⁰ which compensate for their lack of volume with the charm of novelty, ‘the Demonstration is so strong and beautiful, and, at the same time, appears to be so easy and simple, that one cannot tell whether the Pleasure of the Discovery, or the Wonder that it is now to make, [is] the greater’.⁷¹ However, the fact that the *Divine Legation of Moses* is indeed concerned with the internal proof of Revelation, also grants it a superior status in its character as a work of historiography, as by definition dealing with philosophical argument and comparative perspectives. Where the mere historian of miracles ‘needs only the usual Requisites of Church-history, common Diligence, and Judgement’,⁷² Warburton must call upon an array of talents which a French philosophic historian would claim for his own; namely ‘a thorough knowledge of Human Nature, Civil Policy, the universal History of Mankind, an exact Idea of the *Mosaic* and *Christian* Dispensations’, and above all, that definitively philosophic characteristic, ‘a certain Sagacity, to investigate the Relations of human Actions, through all the Combinations of natural, civil, and moral Complexities’.⁷³ The author’s responsibility to control the interpretation of his evidence, to illustrate, to analyse, and of course to deny what might perhaps be the obvious inference, constantly focuses the reader’s attention on Warburton, to the extent that by the end of Volume I his description of how now at last ‘we emerge into open Day’⁷⁴ leads to the obvious quotation from Virgil, thus casting him as the hero of his own epic.

⁶⁹ I, p.4.

⁷⁰ I, pp.4-5.

⁷¹ I, p.5.

⁷² I, p.3.

⁷³ I, p.3.

⁷⁴ I, p.442.

At the same time, the potential for digression in such an extended argument, where ‘proofs’ may be adduced in series, is fully exploited by Warburton, in a manner which Samuel Johnson would appreciatively endorse:

The table is always full, Sir. He brings things from the north, and the south, and from every quarter. In his *Divine Legation*, you are always entertained. He carries you round and round, without carrying you forward to the point; but then you have no wish to be carried forward. [...] Warburton is perhaps the last man who has written with a mind full of reading and reflection.⁷⁵

In his biography of Warburton, Hurd notes that it was an early ambition to play the scholar, Warburton attempting an edition of Velleius Paterculus as a response to ‘the high credit in which emendatory criticism [...] was held in the very beginning of the century, occasioned by the dazzling reputation of such men as Bentley and Hare’,⁷⁶ although he was in the end advised against it. Bentley does of course figure largely in the *Divine Legation of Moses*, while Warburton also presents what amounts to a commentary on the whole of Book VI of the *Aeneid*, and modestly expresses the wish that, after his account of the Egyptian mysteries and hieroglyphics, they should now become ‘the cardinal Points on which the Interpretation of Greek Antiquity should from henceforth turn’.⁷⁷ It is highly suggestive that Hurd presents the vogue for emendatory criticism as a fashion that had passed, pointing towards the role of the *Divine Legation of Moses* in providing an occasion to revive the heroic age of British egotistical scholarship; and Warburton explicitly presents himself as ‘more frequent, and exact in our Quotations from the learned Languages, than the prevailing fastidious Delicacy of Taste seems willing to allow’.⁷⁸ In Hurd’s account, Middleton himself presciently advised Warburton in relation to his scholarly ambitions that, instead of ‘trifling on words’, his genius was ‘calculated rather to correct the opinions and manners of the world’,⁷⁹ and in the *Divine Legation of Moses* Warburton shows how the role of the defender of Revelation against the infidel can infuse a new spirit and confidence into both pursuits.

Shaftesbury, of course, prescribes charity and meekness as the proper style of the Christian. Warburton shows his sensitivity to the charge of having departed from

⁷⁵ James Boswell, *The Life of Johnson* ed. R.W. Chapman and introd. P. Rogers (Oxford: 1998), p.1101.

⁷⁶ Hurd, *Discourse*, p.8.

⁷⁷ II, p.206.

⁷⁸ I, p.87.

⁷⁹ Hurd, *Discourse*, p.8.

that character in his rather bizarre excuse for the late appearance of Volume II of the *Divine Legation of Moses*; that ‘he would not follow the Example of Paradoxical Writers, who generally aim to strike by a Novelty’, and so ‘was content his Notions should become stale and common, and forgo all Advantages but their native Evidence, before he submitted them to the public Judgement’.⁸⁰ David Womersley has described how Gibbon in his *Critical Observations on the Design of the Sixth Book of the Aeneid* (1770) contests the Bentleian heritage with Warburton,⁸¹ and Gibbon unerringly focuses on Warburton’s egotistical dogmatism, ‘much fitter for the Hierophant of Eleusis, than for a modern critic, who is observing a remote object through the medium of a glimmering and doubtful light’,⁸² as a target for satirical attack. It is, however, clearly evident that if Gibbon had confined himself to gentlemanly disdain for scholarly self-indulgence – ‘I have perused the two thousand and fourteen pages of the unfinished *Legation*’⁸³ – and the pose of elegant doubt, he would never have permitted himself the indelicacy of the *Decline and Fall*. Britain’s conservative Enlightenment would thus lack one of its two ‘masterworks’; while the stylistic contrast between Warburton’s works and those of the Anglican scholar John Jortin exemplifies the contribution of rhetorical self-presentation to Warburton’s acquired status as avatar of Enlightenment.

Jortin’s response to Warburton’s argument regarding the *Aeneid*, his *Sixth Dissertation: On the State of the Dead, as described by Homer and Virgil* (1755) is deliberately denuded of the insistent authorial ego and the combative stance which characterise the *Divine Legation of Moses*. It is merely a ‘dissertation’ appended to a short collection which includes such homiletic topics as ‘On the duty of judging candidly and favourably of others, and of human nature’; and Jortin, instead of haranguing his reader, is positively deferential, apologising for his last essay being ‘rather of the philological kind’.⁸⁴ Jortin also has no feeling of embarrassment or sense of generic propriety which might prevent him from doing his duty as a divine, and makes sure to convey to his readers the moral corruption attendant on Augustan

⁸⁰ II, pp.xiv-xv.

⁸¹ See David Womersley, *Gibbon and the ‘Watchmen of the Holy City’: The Historian and his Reputation 1776-1815* (Oxford: 2002), pp.73-77.

⁸² Edward Gibbon, *Critical Observations on the Design of the Sixth Book of the Aeneid*, included in volume IV of *The Miscellaneous Works of Edward Gibbon, Esq.*, ed. John Holroyd, Lord Sheffield, 5 vols. in-8^o (London: 1814), p.468.

⁸³ p.471.

⁸⁴ John Jortin, *Six Dissertations upon Different Subjects* (London: 1755), p.iii.

religion. As such, his temperate correction to Warburton's rhetorical pyrotechnics is engaging, scholarly, and rational. Gibbon for his own part describes the *Sixth Dissertation* as 'moderate, learned, and critical';⁸⁵ but it is the potentially double-edged nature of the first part of his encomium which is at issue. In his own major historical work, the *Remarks on Ecclesiastical History* (1751-73), which covers much of the same ground as Middleton's *Free Inquiry*, and some of the same ground as the *Decline and Fall*, Jortin explicitly presents a necessary moderation of ambition as part of a general counsel of despair, at the threat to liberty of expression in Britain presented by fashionable infidelity and clerical disunity:

These considerations may incline melancholy persons to imagine, that it is vain to expect amendments of a more refined nature, which seem to depend on a favourable concurrence of circumstances seldom united, and that we have not a foundation which can bear the superstructure.⁸⁶

In the same decade which in France would see the triumph of *encyclopédisme*, Jortin advises his compatriots to settle for a 'satisfactory' grading for their efforts at Enlightenment:

Let us in the mean time be thankful for what we have; for our religion and liberties; for a disposition, which may be called national, to acts of charity public or private, and for that portion of learning, and that skill in liberal arts and sciences, which we possess, sufficient to secure us from the contempt of our Neighbours, though not to give us any claim in precedency.⁸⁷

It may indeed be possible to make the case for the British clerical Enlightenment for reasons of the sheer intellectual commitment of its participants, as Brian Young has done for the English clerics and for Warburton himself.⁸⁸ However, it certainly appears that literary sophistication, most particularly in the form of success at constructing a distinct sense of personality in print, evidently still remains a central, if unacknowledged criterion; and that the afterlife of the *Divine Legation of Moses* within the historiography of Enlightenment is one additional compliment to the perennial success of the French *philosophes* at influencing the expectations of Enlightenment in countries other than their own. The particular cultural circumstances which stood in the way of Warburton's eventual assertion of himself as a literary

⁸⁵ *Critical Observations*, p.510.

⁸⁶ John Jortin, *Remarks on Ecclesiastical History*, 2 vols. in-8° (second edition; London, 1767), I, p.xxviii.

⁸⁷ *Remarks*, I, p.xxix.

⁸⁸ See Brian Young, *Religion and Enlightenment in Eighteenth-Century England: Theological Debate from Locke to Burke* (Oxford: 1998), and in particular pp.167-212 on Warburton.

personality, help identify the nature of some of the difficulties encountered by Britain's Enlightenment in catching the eye of posterity.

The curiosity of an 'English' exception would perhaps have been granted a much greater degree of attention within comparative Enlightenment studies, were it not for the fact that beneath the widespread acceptance of a true exception, lies an intuitively appealing historical explanation capable of defeating the latent, profound challenge to the Enlightenment paradigm 'England' must otherwise have presented. The basic contours of the tradition of English Enlightenment studies as initiated by Roy Porter in his seminal article in *The Enlightenment in National Context*, are well summed up by John Robertson as 'there is a sense in which in England modernity pre-empted Enlightenment'; 'most English men of letters were already confident of their liberty, and of enjoying the benefits of commerce; they evidently felt no need to study them systematically'.⁸⁹ Porter specifically cites the capaciousness of the native version of Protestantism as a prime cause of the fact that '*nuance* is key to Enlightenment in England'.⁹⁰ Warburton's self-presentation as reviving in the face of a suffocating politeness the heroic age of egotistical scholarship in Britain, and as harking back to the heroic age of controversial divinity in the face of a creeping mediocrity of ambition – 'the *Geese* of the *Capitol*, we know, remained for Ages, after those true Defenders of it, the *Manlii*, the *Camilli*, the *Africani*, were extinct and forgotten'⁹¹ – offers a fascinating perspective on the literary consequences should such an Enlightenment once truly take root. Voltaire's reflections on the decline of genius in the midst of Enlightenment at the end of the *Siècle de Louis XIV* may indeed be compared. One of the properties of literary style is, however, to resist necessary connections; and Warburton's creation of a sense of urgency and of cultural centrality by means of a disingenuous appropriation of the language of the 'war' between 'religion' and 'infidelity', precisely the features which enable the *Divine Legation of Moses* to lend support to the argument that Jortin's diffuse and muted 'enlightenment' in the lower case, was in some measure an 'Enlightenment' in the full, French, and

⁸⁹ John Robertson, *The Case for the Enlightenment*, p.42.

⁹⁰ Roy Porter, 'The Enlightenment in England', in *The Enlightenment in National Context* ed. Roy Porter and Mikuláš Teich (Cambridge: 1981) pp.1-18, p.7.

⁹¹ *Divine Legation of Moses*, II, p.xiii.

philosophic sense, carries perceptible overtones of the infamous strategy of Chapters XV and XVI of the *Decline and Fall*.

One of the features of ‘England’ which is adduced as a telling reason why eighteenth-century English men of letters may quite legitimately have bypassed the whole drama of *philosophie*, is the national acceptance of public intellectual debate, facilitated by the freedom (by contemporary standards) of the press. For Roy Porter, ‘in England the educated and propertied who espoused Enlightenment rationality did not need to storm barricades’;⁹² and for Vincenzo Ferrone and Daniel Roche, ‘un climat nouveau’ from the 1720s was built ‘sur l’acceptation d’une cascade de variétés d’espèces religieuses plus ou moins bien intégrées, sur un véritable pluralisme, et sur le refus des fanatismes’.⁹³ The ‘English’ authors – Warburton and Gibbon – who find some reason to embrace the effects of the satirical violence, the mutual bitterness, and the suspicion and the dishonesty endemic to public debate on religion in early- to mid eighteenth-century Britain are the exception. However, the contrast with the literary practice of *philosophie* as exemplified in Voltaire also illustrates certain of the consequences of such a firm grounding in a controversial ‘print culture’ for the British practice of Enlightenment. There is, of course, an immediately obvious disruption to any individual’s attempt to declare a position of cultural authority; but at the same time, the vigorous engagement with or even assault upon their own readers pursued by the British clerics, their grim acknowledgement that as intellectuals they must master the literary marketplace or be martyred by it, rests on a sense of suasive intimacy with their readership which is in great contrast to the impression of locutionary ambiguity which can characterise Voltaire’s writings. Considered as cultural ‘institutions’, the polemical divines call on the British to pay attention, with perhaps a firmer grasp on the national audience than the *philosophes*’ claim to the attention of the French. The publishing adventures of the clerics illustrate the necessity to move beyond a merely instrumental understanding of the activity of publication, as of a similar order to other ‘sociable’ cultural pursuits such as joining societies or engaging in correspondence, and convey how, alongside the question of

⁹² Roy Porter, ‘The Enlightenment in England’, p.8.

⁹³ Vincenzo Ferrone and Daniel Roche, ‘Historiographie des Lumières’, *Le Monde des Lumières*, p.564.

what the Enlightenment does with print, is the question of what print does with the Enlightenment.

CHAPTER 3. AFTER THE ANCIENT CONSTITUTION

It is a notable tendency of both of the most theoretically informed historical approaches to Enlightenment – the cultural and the intellectual – to further confirm the separation of England and Scotland as distinct ‘national contexts’. The preference for material connections in cultural history naturally lends itself to the representation of London and Edinburgh as separate spheres of Enlightenment ‘sociability’.¹ At the same time, the detailed scholarly exposition of the intellectual concerns of the Scottish Enlightenment has particularly stressed their relationship to the peculiar dilemma of a politically disenfranchised ‘province’.² Even Whig politics, which might appear to promise to unite at least a certain portion of the British nation, in its Enlightenment form as ‘sociological Whiggism’ can be explained entirely satisfactorily in terms of its Scottish intellectual roots, although Colin Kidd’s identification of certain English influences is, at the very least, suggestive.³ Even where the Britishness of the book market might seem to positively compel some form of mutual regard between the putatively separate nations, John Robertson’s account of Hume as primarily a political economist concerned with the Enlightenment of Scotland, notably relegates Hume’s English audience to the function of a lucrative sideline.⁴ It is indeed significant that Robertson’s Scottish Hume is exactly that, a political economist; and that in his study, Hume’s *Essays* are accordingly mentioned only in an aside, and the *History of Great Britain* only as representing a lesson in the limitations of Scottish publishers.⁵ In their character as constitutional historians, Hume and Robertson assert a British theme, and as political Whigs, address a British audience. Just as in the case of the clerical writers, the eighteenth-century British culture of controversy – so far removed from France – provides a forceful, if not exactly ‘sociable’ or ‘intellectual’, impulse towards inter-national (intra-national) engagement.

Defining the precise generic terrain of this engagement in Hume and Robertson’s histories is, however, of considerably greater difficulty than the

¹ See, for example, Roy Porter on ‘The Enlightenment in England’ and Nicholas Phillipson on ‘The Scottish Enlightenment’ in Porter and Teich eds. *The Enlightenment in National Context*, pp.1-18, and pp.19-40.

² See Phillipson, op. cit., and John Robertson, *The Case for the Enlightenment*, especially Chapter 2.

³ See Colin Kidd, *Subverting Scotland’s Past: Scottish Whig Historians and the Creation of an Anglo-British Identity, 1689-c.1830* (Cambridge: 1993), pp.108-117 for the Scottish roots of ‘sociological Whiggism’, and see also p.120 n.47 for its intellectual debts to England.

⁴ See the Introduction to this thesis, pp.15-16.

⁵ *The Case for the Enlightenment*, p.373; p.362.

impression of their canonical status and of their reassuringly conservative textual presentation conveys. It is indeed a particular characteristic of the constitutional histories of Hume and Robertson that their suasive intention as Whig historians necessarily subjects them to an enforced intimacy with their readers, to a need to second-guess response and to frame their address accordingly; with large consequences for both the formation of their literary identities as historians, and also for the basic generic character of the texts concerned, that is, their status as in fact 'histories'. As well as the exceptionally problematic nature of their claim to being 'histories', even by the standards of the extreme self-consciousness exemplified in all philosophic historiography, the works of both Hume and Robertson at the same time subject the expository coherence of the chief components of the 'Enlightened narrative' – the idea of manners, and the European perspective – to a notably searching examination, even if largely in spite of their authors' own desire that such a narrative might be found.

1. Speaking reason to the British

For Voltaire, to write history as a *philosophe* would be fortunately non-controversial while definitively avant-garde, and certain to meet with universal applause from a waiting crowd of philosophically-inclined readers. The major difficulty Voltaire found in realising the project was merely that he did not himself find it very interesting. Unlike Voltaire, and as a Scottish philosopher encountering a British literary culture dominated by open and vicious political partisanship and devoid of *philosophes*, Hume could summon up no such image of pre-existing philosophic goodwill. The confident rhetoric of the *Treatise of Human Nature* (1739), with its appeal to his readers' investment in British intellectual history and to a British form of cultural prestige that is unmistakably superior to the belletrist achievements of a certain neighbouring kingdom, stands out among Hume's works precisely because it was not repeated:

'Tis no astonishing reflection to consider, that the application of experimental philosophy to moral subjects shou'd come after that to natural at the distance of above a whole century; since we find in fact, that // there was about the same interval betwixt the origins of these sciences; and that reckoning from THALES to SOCRATES, the space of time is nearly equal to that betwixt my Lord BACON and some late philosophers in England [in a footnote, listed as Locke, Shaftesbury, Mandeville, Hutcheson and Butler] who have begun to

put the science of man on a new footing, and have engag'd the attention of the public. So true it is, that however other nations may rival us in poetry, and excel us in some other agreeable arts, the improvements in reason and philosophy can only be owing to a land of toleration and liberty.⁶

Here, Hume's confidence stands comparison with that of France's most enthusiastic *philosophes*, and encourages the British philosopher to rejoice in the social importance granted by the 'attention of the public', and to repose upon the commitment among his readers to the scientific ideal of rational exposition. The two notorious facts of the actual failure of the *Treatise* to attract the attention of the public, and also of Hume's removal of religiously controversial material in order to shield his first publication from orthodox hostility, of course give the lie to the rhetoric, and in the *Essays, Moral and Political* (1741-42) Hume gives a rather different description of his British audience, and, more particularly, of the way they read.

What confronts the essay-writer of the 1740s is, of course, the febrile climate of party-political division, and Hume's *Essays* are particularly concerned with how language itself has become corrupted, including and especially the language of demonstration, and how the natural confidence of a shared endeavour between author and readers that is such a marked feature of the rhetorical presentation of the *Treatise* has become infected with mutual suspicion. The first casualty of party zeal is shown to be the philosophical wisdom of proportioning belief to the evidence, but in the process, the language of demonstration has become contaminated by its association with the dogmatist, such as those of the Country party in 'Of the Independency of Parliament', who, 'being accustom'd to prevail in company, [...] cannot endure to hear their Opinions controverted, but are as confident on [sic] the publick favour, as if they were supported in all their Sentiments by the most infallible Demonstration'.⁷ Throughout the *Essays*, Hume aims not only to establish his credentials as a politically impartial philosopher, but also to disarm his readers by distancing himself from any obnoxious display of authority that, however proper it might be thought to his role as philosopher, might offend their sense of their own independence. Hume's suspicious readers in this way exert a formative influence on the whole style of the *Essays* and the rhetorical stance of the author. In 'Of the Progress of the Arts and Sciences', Hume treats himself and his readers to a virtuoso display of sweeping

⁶ Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature* ed. David Fate Norton and Mary J. Norton (Oxford: 2001), Book I, pp.4-5.

⁷ [David Hume], *Essays, Moral and Political*, 2 vols. in-8° (Edinburgh: 1741-42), I, p.81.

historical analysis, with a liberal use of the language of ‘infallible Operation’⁸ and ‘the necessary Progress of Things’⁹ which would not have disgraced Montesquieu; but in order for such an indulgence to be permitted, the essayist must first produce a caricature of the figure of the confident and authoritative philosopher, and repudiate him in full view of his readers. At the very start of ‘Of the Progress of the Arts and Sciences’, Hume makes use of the classic caricature of the systematic thinker:

There is not a matter of greater Nicety, in our Enquiries concerning human Affairs, than to distinguish exactly what is owing to *Chance*, and what proceeds from *Causes*; nor is there any Thing, in which an Author is more apt to deceive himself, by false Subtilties and Refinements [...] [W]hen the event is supposed to proceed from certain and stable Causes, he may then display his Ingenuity, in assigning these Causes; and as a Man of any Subtilty can never be at a Loss in this particular, he has thereby an Opportunity of swelling his Volumes, and discovering his profound Knowledge, in observing what escapes the Vulgar and Ignorant.¹⁰

Hume apologises for the very existence of his essay before he gives it, pleads only the weakness of curiosity, ‘’tis so curious a subject, that ’tis a Pity to abandon it’, and assures his sceptical readers that he submits his observations ‘with entire Deference, to the Censure and Examination of the Learned’.¹¹ No such concession would ever have been made by Montesquieu.

The whole tenor of Hume’s address to his audience in the *Essays* is to present eighteenth-century British readers of intellectual writing as having a serious problem with the authority of authors, an experience far removed from Voltaire’s image of a serene philosophic hegemony. It is particularly significant that on the occasions where the *Essays* appear for a moment to envisage the possibility of remaking the philosopher’s audience in his own image – to compel his readers to read philosophically, just as in the rousing call to arms to British intellectuals in the *Treatise* – the possibility is negated. Abstract constitutional speculation is offered up in ‘That Politics may be reduc’d to a Science’, but as soon as the philosopher reaches the demonstration that the citizens of a free state must zealously maintain ‘those Forms and Institutions by which Liberty is secured, the Publick Good consulted, and the Avarice or Ambition of private Men restrained and punished’,¹² the recollection

⁸ *Essays*, II, p.65.

⁹ II, p.66.

¹⁰ II, p.53.

¹¹ II, p.59.

¹² *Essays*, I, p.42.

that Hume's readers simply cannot be trusted with any such principle intervenes, and sends the argument of the essay in a different direction which will end in the self-consciously weak conclusion that a 'suitable degree of Zeal'¹³ is what is needed:

But this is a subject that need not be longer insisted on at present. There are enough of Zealots on both Sides to kindle up the Passions of their Partizans, and under the Pretence of publick Good, pursue the Interests // and Ends of their particular Faction. [...] Let us, therefore, try, if it be possible, from the foregoing Doctrine, to draw a lesson of Moderation.¹⁴

From demonstration and the 'universal Axiom'¹⁵ to 'Doctrine'; the tone of sermon-style resignation to the task of extracting a moral appropriate to the capacities of his audience after such a high-flying philosophic excursus is unmistakably sardonic. There is, however, still more resignation than satire in Hume's prefatory self-abnegation as a philosopher on the occasion of the daringly speculative essay 'Idea of a perfect Commonwealth', even though it was published as one of the *Political Discourses* (1752), a collection which for the most part enjoys a relatively greater degree of authorial dominance; 'I shall deliver my sentiments in as few words as possible', as 'a long dissertation on that head wou'd not, I apprehend, be very acceptable to the public, who will be apt to regard such disquisitions, both as useless and chimerical'.¹⁶

Hume's non-historical writings thus contain a number of suggestive implications for the question of what kind of philosophic historiography is to be expected from a nation that had no *philosophes* to write it. It is immediately evident that the virtuous circle which forms the ideal model for philosophic writing – the philosophic author with a distinct and authoritative identity, his philosophic readers, and a method and style of reasoned argument – is according to Hume's analysis, subject to considerable interference. Hume shows that a readership that is simultaneously dogmatic and sceptical of authority almost compels an author to espouse a profound and necessary artfulness on controversial subjects. Since the language of rational demonstration relies for its cogency on the establishment of a particular form of relationship between author and readers which Hume accepts it is not always possible to assume, a philosophic argument may have to submit to a

¹³ I, p.41.

¹⁴ I, pp.42-43.

¹⁵ I, p.34.

¹⁶ Hume, *Political Discourses* (Edinburgh: 1752), p.283.

disguise, and the author himself descend to use the language of his readers, in place of attempting the impossible task to convert them to his. Yet the self-consciousness of such a manoeuvre, the way it represents an occasional and merely generic solution, must mark the fact and so the limits of the author's condescension, and the meaning and the ultimate scope of his argument be considered relative to the intention which informs his present rhetorical strategy.

In this respect, the *History of England* (1754-62) is a work conceived in a spirit of low expectations. Not only does Hume decline to employ the abstract language of constitutional theory, or to appeal to the impartial perspective of general history, the entire rationale for his *History* turns on a serene endorsement of the Whiggish sentiment of British national particularity:

The revolution forms a new epoch in the constitution; and was attended with consequences, much more advantageous to the people, than the barely freeing them from a bad administration. By deciding many important questions in favor of liberty, and still more, by that great precedent of deposing one king, and establishing a new family, it gave such an ascendant to popular principles, as has put the nature of the English constitution beyond all controversy.¹⁷

Hume's readers will attain a position of historical detachment not through intellectual exertion, but as the free gift of their own national history. Unreconstructed historical atavism is not therefore to be repudiated immediately and on principle as a fault of the temper or of the understanding, but may be rebuked as a simple error of historical interpretation; as 'not giving due honor to that great event, which not only put a period to [the Stuarts'] hereditary succession, but made a new settlement of the whole constitution'.¹⁸ It is particularly significant how Hume's presentation of the unique character and method of his *History* repeatedly emphasises how the historian undertakes to bring about the desired conclusion of political moderation by means of the sheer skill of his narrative in disabling the atavistic response; as in his promise that 'nothing will tend more to abate the acrimony of party-disputes, than to show men, that those events, which they impute to their adversaries as the deepest crimes,

¹⁷ All quotations throughout are taken from the first editions of the several volumes of the *History*, unless explicitly stated otherwise: however, for ease of reference, the *History* is referred to in the text as a single work under the title of the *History of England*, and the volume numbers given in the notes are those assigned in the complete standard edition. Volumes I and II therefore refer to *The History of England, from the Invasion of Julius Caesar, to the Accession of Henry VII*, 2 vols. in-4^{to} (London: 1762); Volumes III and IV to *The History of England, under the House of Tudor*, 2 vols. in-4^{to} (London: 1759); and Volumes V and VI to *The History of Great Britain*, 2 vols. in-4^{to} (Edinburgh: 1754-7). The present reference is to volume VI, p.443.

¹⁸ VI, p.443.

were the natural, // if not the necessary result of the situation, in which the nation was placed, during any period'.¹⁹ In a rather unexpected echo of William Warburton's rationale for his own tour-de-force of counter-intuitive historical argument *The Divine Legation of Moses*, Hume promises his Whiggish readers that with his *History* they might be made to walk through the fires even of the civil wars of the previous century, and yet will still emerge with their Whiggism to all intents and purposes unscathed.

Even according to Hume's own account, therefore, the status of the historical narration of the *History of England* is less a 'story' or a chain of evidences, than it is a distinct discursive space carved out by means of a close and ongoing negotiation between the historian, his readers, and alternative versions of the same material. Hume, however, clearly intimates in the text of the *History of England* that he is not wholly satisfied with such a role, and that he is actively exploring alternatives. The topics of 'manners, finances, arms, trade, [and] learning'²⁰ which share their chapter in Volume V with 'government', achieve their independence in Volume VI, and as a group are granted by Hume a generic status which is utterly different to the general presentation of the strategy and purpose of the *History of England* elsewhere in the text:

At this aera [1660], it may be proper to stop for a moment, and take a general survey of the age, so far as regards manners, finances, arms, commerce, arts and sciences. The chief use of history is, that it affords materials for disquisitions of this nature; and it seems the duty of an historian to point out the proper inferences and conclusions.²¹

This bundle of historical topics does of course strongly recall the French philosophic understanding of *moeurs*, and Hume invokes the idea of history of manners as a rhetorical stance which evidently holds an intuitive appeal in Britain also;²² but here, it is the interpolated reader of the *History of England*, so clearly defined, so parochial, and so prejudiced, who is assumed to assent to the softer topics of manners as being 'the chief use of history'. The eighteenth-century rhetoric of the historiography of manners certainly cannot account for the totality of Hume's historical practice any

¹⁹ V, pp.245-46.

²⁰ V, p.116.

²¹ VI, p.117

²² For a survey of the pervasiveness of 'manners' in eighteenth-century British literature, and the range of generic contexts in which the term can be found, from the self-descriptions of a 'polite' age to exotic travel narratives, see Mark Salber Phillips, *Society and Sentiment: Genres of Historical Writing in Britain, 1740-1820* (Princeton, NJ: 2000), pp.147-70.

more than it can for that of Voltaire, but the importance of Hume's statement of the 'chief use of history' is as a statement of ambition. In his incarnation as the historian of manners in the Stuart volumes, and in marked contrast to the tense and embattled form of argument necessary elsewhere in the *History of England*, Hume's authorial voice rhetorically foregrounds the historian's freedom to shape his material, and addresses the reader with confidence, and an assumption of shared priorities and sentiments. From this shared perspective, the *History of England* can proffer a narrative. In the above example, it is the historian-philosopher's duty 'to point out the proper inferences and conclusions', and mutual confidence is sufficient for the historian to encourage freely satirical enjoyment in the parliamentarians' 'gloomy enthusiasm', as being 'the most curious spectacle presented by any history; and the most instructive, as well as entertaining, to a philosophical mind'.²³ In this way, insofar as Hume actually attempts to make good his words in the *History of England*, he offers a commentary on the viability of an 'Enlightened narrative' in Britain, or more particularly, on how far it can procure conviction in his readers, and he also reveals just how far it convinces him as a historical exposition.

It is certainly clear from the actual narrative presented by the Stuart volumes of the *History of England* that, whatever the interpretative content of Hume's concept of the progress of manners, or, for that matter, whatever the argumentative force of his analysis of the British constitution, his approach to specific questions of historical representation remains curiously undefined. There is an obvious conflict between the usual obligation to tell a coherent tale, and the need to second-guess his readers' response to any given part of it, and to forestall any unpleasantness thence arising. The fragility of Hume's interpretative stance of historically justified temperamental moderation is particularly evident in his vexed approach to representing the parliamentarians. At their first appearance in Volume V, they are the harbingers of Enlightenment:

In England, the love of freedom, which unless checked, flourishes extremely in all liberal natures, acquired new force, as well as more enlarged views, suitable to that cultivated understanding, which became, every day, more common, among men of birth and education. A familiar acquaintance with the precious remains of antiquity excited in every generous breast a passion for a limited constitution, and engendered an emulation of those manly virtues,

²³ VI, p.118.

which the Greek and Roman authors, by such animating examples, as well as pathetic expressions, recommend to us.²⁴

Duncan Forbes notes the importance of the argument from the progress of civilisation to Hume, as providing a crucial element of justification for the parliamentarians whom, given Hume's own general principles of political obligation, the historian would otherwise be obliged to present as wholly at fault.²⁵ Yet only two hundred and fifty pages later, precisely the same intention, that of instilling moderation in his readers, leads Hume to endorse an entirely opposite account of the parliamentarians as a historical phenomenon, of their fundamental character and motivation. Hume calls attention to the Whiggish penchant for viewing the parliamentarians as exemplars of the Classical love of liberty, 'some persons, partial to the leaders, who now defended public liberty, have ventured to put them in balance with the most illustrious characters of antiquity; and mention the names of Pym, Hambden, Vane, as a just parallel to those of Cato, Brutus, Cassius';²⁶ but concludes that, for all their 'capacity' and 'courage', on the question of character and motivation, 'the whole discourse and language of the moderns were polluted with mysterious jargon, and full of the lowest and most vulgar hypocrisy'.²⁷ This later passage also represents a similarly vertiginous reversal of judgement between Hume's conclusion twenty pages previously from the 'philosophy of government', that it was from naturally occurring disagreements concerning the constitution that there 'arose all the factions, convulsions, and disorders, which attended that period',²⁸ and his present insistence that 'it may be worth observing, that all the historians, who lived near that age, or what perhaps is more decisive, all authors, who have casually made mention of those public transactions, still represent the civil disorders and convulsions as proceeding from religious controversy, and consider the political disputes about power and liberty as entirely subordinate to the other'.²⁹

The important point to recognise is not that Hume's narrative has a rhetorical purpose (which has frequently been pointed out, and which he himself openly proclaims); it is the way that rhetorical purpose defines the textual nature of the

²⁴ V, p.15.

²⁵ See Duncan Forbes, *Hume's Philosophical Politics* (Cambridge: 1975), pp.275-81.

²⁶ V, p.266.

²⁷ V, p.266.

²⁸ V, p.245.

²⁹ V, p.266.

History of England as a self-reflexive interchange between Hume and the assumed reaction of his readers, and the historian for this reason having no fixed point from which to deliver his narrative. The disruptive effect on Hume's narrative of this kind of anxiety over reception on such a crucial point of interpretation as the motivation of the parliamentarians certainly appears great enough to undermine the claim of the *History of England* to the status of being, even in the most basic sense of generic affiliation, a work of historical exposition; in the vulgar sense 'a history'. It is highly suggestive that one particularly attentive contemporary reader of Hume, annotator of the Bodleian Library copy of the first edition of the *History of Britain*, was moved to mark beside Hume's excursus into the 'philosophy of government' a page reference to the subsequent passage on the fundamentally religious origins of the conflict.³⁰ If contemporaries did indeed read the *History of England* as 'a history', with all the assumptions of consistent exposition so encouraged, they were right to be perplexed. One sign of Hume's own dissatisfaction with his account is, of course, the fact of his infamously numerous and minute changes to his text. For example, in his relation of the trial of Sir John Hampden, Hume gives a long imaginative re-creation of the thoughts of the parliamentary faction on the occasion, where the crucial qualification 'they said' is duly inserted, and yet prefaces it with what appears to be an endorsement of their position by the historian:

Hampden, however, obtained by the trial the end, for which he had so generously sacrificed his safety and his quiet: The people were roused from their lethargy, and saw plainly the chains, which were prepared for them.³¹

Yet at the beginning of the chapter immediately following, Hume reverts to denying that such rational political motivations were uppermost, or indeed that they were at all justified; 'the grievances under which the English labored, when considered in themselves, scarce deserve the name'.³² Hume's changes in subsequent editions show his recognition that his account as it stands is simply contradictory, and that, for all its exemplary moderation and useful contribution to disguising the historian's own sentiments, the *History of England* is still the kind of work in which such expository incoherence may legitimately be objected to. The emotive language of 'chains' with its suggestion of absolutist conspiracy is replaced by the more neutral '[they] became

³⁰ Bodleian Call Number: DD 35,36 Jur.

³¹ V, p.219.

³² V, p.220.

sensible, of the danger, to which their liberties were exposed’,³³ while his contemptuous dismissal of the English grievances is modified by the insertion of the highly ambiguous qualification, ‘considered in themselves, without regard to the constitution’.³⁴

The *History of England* therefore persists in its ambiguous deployment of a two-faced textual identity; as ‘a history’, and as the embodiment in a conventional generic form of an utterly specific rhetorical strategy, based on local accommodations with potential alternative versions and characterised by an extreme degree of self-reflexivity. Hume’s inconsistency of exposition is, however, also further exacerbated by an observable inconsistency of intent, for which a major form of censorship practised in eighteenth-century Britain provides a catalyst. In a letter to John Clephane on the publication of the first volume of the *History of Britain*, Hume calls attention to how, by taking upon himself the role of political historian, and setting out with a genuine intention to bring his readers round to his point of view, he has had to make sacrifices on the score of (what is for him) the true history of religion in Britain:

A few Christians only (and but a few) think I speak like a Libertine in religion: be assured I am tolerably reserved on this head. Elliot tells me that you had entertained apprehensions of my discretion: what I had done to forfeit with you the character of prudence, I cannot tell, but you will see little or no occasion for any such imputation in this work. I composed it *ad populum*, as well as *ad clerum*, and thought, that scepticism was not in its place in an historical production.³⁵

Hume intends the *History of England* to be a controlled textual space for the transmission of a specific, and specifically political argument, and so, as a gesture of goodwill towards the ‘populace’ of his readers, chooses to maintain prudence on matters of religion.

This fact of prior self-censorship does, of course, ensure that the *History of England* must be from the very start an incomplete expression of Hume’s historical views, but it is also the case that Hume frequently undermines his own bid for popularity and for popular assent, by erupting into overt infidelity. Again, the status of the narrative of the *History of England* is compromised by the nature of Hume’s

³³ Hume, *The History of England, from the Invasion of Julius Caesar to the Revolution of 1688* ed. and introd. William B. Todd, 6 vols. (Indianapolis: 1983), volume V, p.248; the text of this edition is based on Hume’s edition of 1778.

³⁴ *History of England* ed. Todd, V, p.249.

³⁵ Letter to John Clephane, 1st September 1754, in *The Letters of David Hume* ed. J.Y.T. Greig, 2 vols. (Oxford: 1932), I, p.189.

rhetorical strategy. Hume clearly signals his retraction (on the basis of their character as zealots) of the parliamentarians' putative claim to being heroes of Classic stature as an exasperated response to Whig myth-making, but the way he changes his mind over the motivation of the parliamentary clamour for the Spanish war appears to be a more personal and infidel indulgence, and in defiance of the moderate priorities of his own political argument (and, as ever, in defiance of narrative consistency). Warmed by his own vision of the Commons' leaders as 'a set of men of the most uncommon capacity and the largest views',³⁶ Hume is moved to bestow on them the inestimable gift of what he elsewhere describes as 'the tribunitian arts'.³⁷

And perhaps, it had partly proceeded from expectations [of political advantage against the Crown], that popular leaders had been so urgent for a rupture with Spain; nor is it credible, that religious zeal could so far have blinded all of them as to make them find, in such a measure, any appearance of necessity or any hopes of success.³⁸

Hume has done his best for them; and yet the parliamentarians continue to resist his attempts at a moderate and magisterial characterisation. After the spectacle of more of the same behaviour over the Spanish alliance, he concludes at last that 'of all European nations, the British were, at that time, and till long after, sunk into the lowest and most odious bigotry'.³⁹ Such occasions serve to remind Hume's readers that for the greatest part of the *History of England* he wears a mask, and to intimate the extent to which the artificially constructed genre of 'political history' and its conventions can only ever yield a partial historical representation.

2. 'The chief use of history'?

The history of manners has already been identified in the Stuart volumes as a potential 'third way' for presenting British history; beyond the public-pleasing 'Whiggery' and 'Piety', 'Qualities so useful both for this World and the next',⁴⁰ of works like Lord Lyttelton's *History of Henry II* (1767-71), but equally, less dangerous and less involved than the tense negotiation with the prejudices of 'those Blockheads who call

³⁶ V, p.147.

³⁷ VI, p.445.

³⁸ V, p.147.

³⁹ V, p.150.

⁴⁰ Letter to Adam Smith, 14th July 1767, *Letters* ed. Greig, II, p.150.

themselves the Public, & whom a Bookseller, a Lord, a Priest, or a Party can guide',⁴¹ which is the rhetorical stance Hume deems necessary for procuring his readers' assent to his philosophical constitutional argument. In the two chapters on manners in the Stuart volumes, 'manners' as a subject is presented solely as a refreshing contrast to the weighty concerns of the rest of Hume's narrative, but there are instances in the *Essays* and also elsewhere in the Stuart volumes where Hume explores how the historian of manners may lay claim to rather larger ambitions. In 'Of the Rise and Progress of the Arts and Sciences', manners are an essential component in constitutional history; explaining the function of civilised monarchies, defining the present against the ancient past, and describing Europe in a way that transcends confessional and national boundaries. Similarly, when Hume is searching in Volume V of the *History of England* for a form of justification for the constitutional innovations of the parliamentarians, instead of having to settle for a furtive manipulation of detail or of perspective, he can revel in the rhetorical possibilities of the history of the progress of European civilisation:

About this period, the minds of men, thro'out all Europe, but especially in England, seem to have undergone a general, but insensible revolution. Tho' letters had been revived in the preceding age, they had been little cultivated beyond the limits of the college; nor had they, till now, begun to spread themselves, in any degree, among men of the world. Arts, both mechanical and liberal, were every day receiving great improvements. Navigation had extended itself over the whole globe. Travelling was secure and agreeable. And the general system of politics, in Europe, was become more enlarged and comprehensive.⁴²

The history of civilisation is a civilised history, even in a country of book-buying blockheads; and it can also provide a means of translating the history of the national constitution, into the more flexible idiom of a libertarian history of the progress of manners in Europe. In this instance, the concept is betrayed by Hume's use of it merely to meet an expository emergency, by his later contradiction of the specific application he has made of it, and also by the fact that it is isolated in the midst of a political history which appears to endorse by its own practice the primacy of national constitutional history and its methods and priorities. It is the pre-Stuart volumes of the

⁴¹ Letter to Gilbert Elliot, 9th August 1757, *Letters* ed. Greig, I, p.262.

⁴² V, p.16.

History of England which particularly illustrate this question of how far Hume is willing or able to make the words of the ‘Enlightened narrative’ into historical flesh.

The whole question of the historian’s responsibility to provide a narrative, some version of the connection between past and present, is made especially pressing in the pre-Stuart volumes precisely as a result of their susceptibility to a nagging lack of narrative interest. In the first place, the argument of the Tudor narrative of the *History of England* is effectively finished with by the end of the second volume of the *History of Britain*. In a substantial footnote to Volume V, Hume argues that ‘how little [the principle of personal freedom] had prevailed, during any former period of the English government, particularly during the last reign, which certain writers, from a shameful ignorance, would represent as the model of liberty, will easily appear from some passages, extracted from Sir Simon Dewes’s journal, and Townshend’s collections’, which he then appends in detail.⁴³ In Volume IV itself, Hume insists that, if the origin of modern liberty is enquired after, the reader should refer to the Stuart volumes; ‘it was only during the next generation that the noble principles of liberty took root, and spreading themselves under the shelter of puritanical absurdities, became fashionable among the people’.⁴⁴ Not only are the pre-Stuart volumes subject to the emphasis on historical discontinuity which is a major portion of the whole argument of the *History of England*, they also represent a tale whose moral has already been given. Furthermore, as Hume’s subject becomes progressively more remote from the present, the specific details of his narrative lose progressively more of the lingering heat of controversial warfare, which still animates the portraits of the Stuart monarchs and the parliamentarians. The parameters of Hume’s political argument in this way conspire against narrative interest. Duncan Forbes describes how ‘the essence of ancient constitutionalism is the idea of a unity and continuity behind the vicissitudes of history and the differences of constitutional forms’,⁴⁵ and Hume now has four whole volumes in which to discover an equivalent sense of historical connection.

That he himself viewed this as a distinct challenge in the Tudor volumes is evident from the letters, as is the fact that he remained undecided on the question of

⁴³ V, footnote p.106.

⁴⁴ IV, p.716.

⁴⁵ Duncan Forbes, *Hume’s Philosophical Politics*, p.244.

their nature and function. There is, of course, no denying the attractions of an opportunity to give a more detailed expression of his argument:

I wish, indeed, that I had begun there [Henry VII]: for by that means, I should have been able, without making any digression, by the plain course of the narration, to have shown how absolute the authority was, which the English kings then possessed, and that the Stuarts did little or nothing more than continue matters in the former tract, which the people were determined no longer to admit. By this means I should have escaped the reproach of the most terrible *ism* of them all, that of Jacobitism.⁴⁶

Yet alongside the satisfactions of denying the ancient constitution in greater detail than before, the history of the Tudors can also yield a more positive historical vision, a national glimpse of the progress of civilisation:

It is properly at that Period modern History commences. America was discovered: Commerce extended: The Arts cultivated: Printing invented: Religion reform'd: And all the Governments of Europe almost chang'd. I wish therefore I had begun here at first. I should have obviated many Objections, that were made to the other Volumes.⁴⁷

This alternation between 'positive' and 'negative' versions of the function of the pre-Stuart volumes of the *History of England* thus contributes a more general context of generic indeterminacy, for Hume's engagement with the more minute, local challenges of chronology and style bestowed by the history of the progress of manners. Hume certainly viewed the Tudor volumes as a challenge to his ingenuity, writing to Gilbert Elliot 'I shall be able, I think, to make a tolerable smooth, well told Tale of the History of England during that period; but I own I have not yet been able to throw much Light into it',⁴⁸ and his uneasy sense that having begun his history backwards had had consequences for his own room for manoeuvre, particularly in the area of periodisation, which it was no longer in his power to control, would be amply justified in his text.

Given that the reign of Henry VII with which Hume opens Volume III is the historical moment which in the letters is envisaged as a new departure for the *History of England*, but which is yet suspected of having been already compromised by Hume's having locked himself into a retrospective sequence of publication, it is entirely fitting that Hume's presentation should encapsulate the peculiar interpretative dynamic of the pre-Stuart volumes. This is a dynamic defined by the hollowing-out of

⁴⁶ Letter to John Clephane, 3rd September 1757, *Letters* ed. Greig, I, p.264.

⁴⁷ Letter to Andrew Millar, 20th May 1757, *Letters* ed. Greig, I, p.249.

⁴⁸ Letter to Gilbert Elliot, 9th August 1757, *Letters* ed. Greig, I, p.262.

Hume's narrative entailed by his argument, the siren promise of the 'Enlightened narrative' to fill the void, and the problematic nature of the co-existence of two such distinct methods of historical exposition. It is clear from the start that, for all his anticipation, Hume does not find Henry very interesting. Although, or perhaps for the very reason that Hume can easily produce a strongly biographical and well-documented account based on the studies of the reign by Bacon and Polydore Vergil, his commentary is purely incidental, and lacking in any interpretative urgency. One moment the historian is *politique*, '[Henry] carried into the throne all the partialities which belong to the head of a faction, and even the passions, which are carefully guarded against by every true politician in that situation';⁴⁹ and the next moment, a moralist of somewhat conventional temper, the disgrace of Elizabeth Woodville furnishing 'ample materials for reflections on the instability of fortune; reflections, which history, as it relates the adventures of the great, does more frequently suggest than even the incidents of common life'.⁵⁰ Still remaining in thrall to the traditional stylistic model of the annals of reigns, Hume sums up his argument relating to Henry on the king's death, but even here, there is the sense of desultoriness. Hume may well dispute Bacon's praise of Henry's legislative innovations, and instead seek to emphasise the relative impuissance of laws compared to general social processes such as 'the encrease of the arts';⁵¹ but by refuting the evidence that might be alleged in favour of the hagiographic argument in repetitive detail, Hume concedes to the literary form what he denies to the political principle, and entirely fails to privilege such general causes on a structural or expository level.

It is therefore in this context of a dull alternation between narrative without argumentative interest, or argument without narrative interest, that Hume suddenly erupts into the 'Enlightened narrative', just when his account of Henry seems to have already dwindled to a conclusion. From the analysis of foolish occasional laws against the export of horses, Hume turns to the considerably more exotic terrain of Columbus's discovery of America, and the 'most important consequences'⁵² it entailed for Europe as a whole:

The enlargement of commerce and navigation increased industry and the arts every where: The nobles dissipated their fortunes in expensive pleasures: Men

⁴⁹ III, p.4.

⁵⁰ III, p.14.

⁵¹ III, p.63.

⁵² III, p.66.

of an inferior rank both acquired a share in the landed property, and created to themselves a considerable stock of property of a new kind, in stock, in commodities, art, credit, and correspondence.⁵³

In itself, this reads as an exemplary piece of explanatory narrative; this is the ‘history’ told by Volume III of the *History of England*. Yet the fact that it has been preceded by sixty pages of close, national, high-political and legalistic narrative where neither this event nor international commerce were invoked, nor even anticipated as being of any potential importance, again undermines the interpretative status of Hume’s words, bringing into question their position along the spectrum from ‘rhetoric’ to actual ‘interpretation’. At the same time, the dullness of what has preceded it, and the historian’s own lack of confidence in the effectiveness of its conclusion, are almost openly confessed by the contrast. Hume’s own concern that his succumbing to the allure of foreign parts and large generalisations may indeed seem out of place is given a particular expression in his fairly desperate attempt to relate Columbus back to Henry; ‘it was by accident only, that the king had not a considerable hand in these great naval discoveries, by which the present age was so much distinguished’.⁵⁴

Yet Hume still goes on to reinforce the impression of interpretative divergence by immediately returning to the large and general perspectives of the ‘Enlightened narrative’, and relating how the fall of Constantinople facilitated the spread of Greek learning in the West; and on this occasion, there is not even any invocation of the language of causal reasoning to justify the historian’s departure from his ostensible subject, and the annalistic style. Thematically related developments such as the improvement of Latin learning ‘about the same time’,⁵⁵ and the invention of printing ‘about that time’,⁵⁶ are swept up into a general narrative of change, which explicitly serves to connect what, at the beginning of Volume III, appeared to be the irredeemably remote and alien past of Henry VII, with the modern present:

And thus a general revolution was made in human affairs throughout this part of the world; and men attained that situation with regard to commerce, arts, sciences, government, police, and cultivation, in which they have ever since persisted.⁵⁷

⁵³ III, p.66.

⁵⁴ III, p.66.

⁵⁵ III, p.67.

⁵⁶ III, p.67.

⁵⁷ III, p.67.

The major challenge for the readers of the *History of England* is not that there is a lack of interpretation offered, but an excess of it. There are simply too many pivotal events on offer; the reign of an English king, the discovery of America, the fall of Constantinople. They are not integrated into a single narrative, but exist in parallel, and the most serious consequence is that the historian's declaratory language of certainty, of causation, of the turning point, by being applied with equal conviction in each case, undermines its use in all. Similarly, the interpolated perspective of universal history is macro-narrative in its rhetoric, but annalistic on the level of structure, giving a curiously zigzag impression to the chronological unfolding of Hume's narrative overall. The inherent flaws in such a summary account, of a lack of detail or precise chronology, and its complete separation from the language of documentary proof, are further highlighted by the surrounding context of more conventional exposition. Hume's persistent uncertainty about the nature of the conviction his exposition could and should produce in the reader is a fascinating feature of the *History of England* which his excursions into the 'Enlightened narrative' do much to reveal, and his dissatisfaction shows itself here in a desire to start Volume III again:

Here therefore commences the useful, as well as agreeable part of modern annals; certainty has place in all the considerable, and even most of the minute parts of historical narration; a great variety of events, preserved by printing, give the author the power of selecting, as well as adorning, the facts which he relates; and as each incident has a reference to our present manners and situation, instructive lessons occur every moment during the course of the narration.⁵⁸

Hume's want of 'certainty', 'power', and 'instruction' in his account of Henry VII of course had nothing to do with a lack of good historical evidence; and his immediately following account of the high politics of the subsequent reign certainly has little to distinguish it from that preceding, for all Hume's presentation of this being a transformational moment for the *History of England*. Yet this list of requirements does represent a particularly interesting account of the scope of Hume's ambitions for the *History of England*; and it appears from it, that for all his diligence in the pursuit of its negative constitutional thesis, Hume still seeks a vision of the past and a position for himself as author which might permit a sympathetic connection with the reader, and evoke some form of imaginative continuity in history.

⁵⁸ III, p.67.

The demonstrable tendency of Hume's medieval volumes (that is, Volumes I and II) to indulge certain aspects of the traditional Whig narrative of the ancient constitution, which Duncan Forbes approaches according to the ideological question of whether or not such occasions show Hume giving in to 'the gravitational pull of vulgar Whiggism',⁵⁹ should therefore be understood as forming part of the same ambition. These, too, represent purely rhetorical epiphanies, vulnerable to being made false by their narrative context. To the reader of Volume I on its first publication, Hume's unexpected sympathy with the liberty of the ancient Germanic forests is only the latest in a long series of transformational moments, which, because of the zigzag movement of the *History of England* backwards into the past, together give the strange impression of a kind of infinite deferral:

The free constitutions then established, however impaired by the encroachments of succeeding princes, still preserve an air of independence and legal administration, which distinguish the European nations; and if that part of the globe maintain sentiments of liberty, honour, equity, and valour, superior to the rest of mankind, it owes these advantages chiefly to the seeds implanted by those generous barbarians.⁶⁰

Hume's first readers have already been variously informed that the Revolution, the Reformation, the discovery of America and the sack of Constantinople provide the trigger for the development of the past into the modern present. Here, the European reach of Hume's endorsement of the ancient constitution provides enough evidence for Forbes to absolve the historian of vulgarity, although it should be noted that this is at the cost of an even greater vulgarity at the expense of the rest of the globe. However, what is chiefly remarkable about Hume's vision of Germanic liberty is precisely its vagueness; it is an 'air', a 'sentiment', not a set of institutions or a legal code, or a present political model, and the invocation of the European context, in the absence of any further argument or detailed analysis on this point here or elsewhere in the *History of England*, only serves to further dilute its consequence. The programmatically lightweight nature of Hume's ancient constitutionalism also shows itself in the continuity of rhetoric between this and similar occasions in the *History of England*; and the 'generous barbarians' of the German forests anticipate the 'generous barons'⁶¹ of Magna Carta, who themselves anticipate the 'generous'⁶² sentiments of

⁵⁹ Duncan Forbes, *Hume's Philosophical Politics*, p.299. Forbes does, of course, find evidence enough on each occasion, to absolve Hume from any such taint.

⁶⁰ I, p.141.

⁶¹ I, p.589.

the seventeenth-century English reformers, who on this occasion are to be understood as being animated by the example of Classical liberty.

Hume does not ask much from medieval England, only that it sustain an overall impression of an ‘air’ of continuous liberty, and in this the optimism of the historian and his readers is repeatedly betrayed by the evidence of Hume’s own narrative, and also traduced by Hume’s insistence on fighting the argument from historical continuity when the clamours of the hard core of ancient constitutionalists become too importunate to be ignored. Hume’s presentation of Magna Carta echoes the balance of sentimental libertarian rhetoric and expository reticence at work in his account of the ancient Germans; the ‘new species of government’ it introduced developing ‘by degrees’, and not in the naïve sense of an immediate effect of the actual statute, there being ‘a considerable interval’ between its proclamation and its actual establishment.⁶³ Hume is, however, optimistic about its effect on the character of his narrative, ‘the ensuing scenes of our history are therefore somewhat different from the preceding’;⁶⁴ just as he will be at the conclusion of his account of Henry VII, and just as he was with the constitution of the ancient Germans. Yet the actual narrative of this ‘new species of government’ shows the effect of Magna Carta to fall far short of a transformation, and Hume is repeatedly brought to admit as much, the government of Edward II, for one example, being ‘a government of will, not of laws’.⁶⁵ Hume therefore looks for a continuous ‘air’ of liberty behind and indeed beyond the facts of his own narrative. Behind Magna Carta lies a ‘secret revolution in the sentiments of men’;⁶⁶ under Edward I there are ‘alterations, which had insensibly taken place in the general state of affairs’;⁶⁷ and under Edward III the commons, ‘tho’ they sunk under the violence of tempests, silently reared their head in more peaceable times’.⁶⁸ The obvious difficulty with ‘secret’, ‘insensible’, and ‘silent’ events is of course that they are not visible to the eye of the historian, and in this respect the narrative Hume desires, which is the development of commerce and the middling sort, is crowded out by the narrative he has the evidence to tell, namely the incidents of high politics and the creation of statute law. Indeed, sometimes where Hume thinks

⁶² V, p.15.

⁶³ I, p.423.

⁶⁴ I, pp.423-24.

⁶⁵ II, p.149.

⁶⁶ I, p.327.

⁶⁷ II, p.84.

⁶⁸ II, p.241.

positive evidence can be found, he changes his mind. The large assertion of the first edition that by Edward I ‘during two centuries, the Kings of England, in imitation of the European princes, had embraced the salutary policy of encouraging and protecting the lower and more industrious orders of the state’,⁶⁹ is later modified to the more strategically vague time period of ‘the course of several years’,⁷⁰ surely as a result of Hume’s reflection that he has no evidence for it. Even more often, however, there is the simple disjunction between Hume’s insistence on making the argument for discontinuity against the partisans of the ancient constitution, and his desire to encourage a more general sentiment of a national identity acting through history. He is desperate enough for some evidence of the libertarian nature of the English national character to argue that under Edward IV, the exception proves the rule, ‘were it not for the violence of the times, [the king’s abuses] would probably have appeared exceptionable to a nation so jealous of their liberties as the English were now become’,⁷¹ but still enumerates in a footnote all the uses of martial law from feudal times to the reign of Charles I, and there once again reiterates the sober lesson of the *History of England* for its Whiggish readers, whether they are doctrinaire or indeed merely sentimental; that only the English Civil War ‘was the epoch of true liberty, confirmed by the Restoration, and enlarged and secured by the Revolution’.⁷²

Hume in this way shows himself more than capable of envisaging what an ‘Enlightened narrative’ would look like, but rather less conviction regarding its cogency as historical exposition. The suspicion (sometimes frankly encouraged by Voltaire) that the themes, the turning points, and the bold rhetoric of what has become identified as the ‘Enlightened narrative’ do not reflect a transformational historical idea, but rather have all the weight or lack of weight of a collection of commonplaces, is thus further strengthened by the expository hesitations of the *History of England*. It is certainly Hume’s own view that the *History of England* may not be the ‘Enlightened narrative’, but that it is the history the eighteenth-century British have brought upon themselves.

⁶⁹ II, p.89.

⁷⁰ *History of England* ed. Todd, II, p.105.

⁷¹ II, p.389.

⁷² II, footnote p.390.

3. 'Interrupted by the Reformation'

For even the most committed proponents of the 'Enlightened narrative', Robertson's *History of Scotland, during the Reigns of Queen Mary and of King James VI, till his Accession to the Crown of England* (1759) is an unsatisfactory example of the genre. John Pocock argues that, compared to Hume, Robertson 'makes less use of "philosophical history", if by that term we mean the generalisations recording changes in the distribution of land, the control of armed force, and the conduct of human manners, which were supposed to make the difference between an ancient, or a medieval, and a modern society'.⁷³ Similarly, Karen O'Brien states that the *History of Scotland* lacks the 'complicating dimension of social theory' at work in his later histories, which she perceives as achieving 'greater diagnostic precision' in this respect.⁷⁴ For both critics (and indeed, for all such constructions of 'Enlightenment history'), it is the *History of the Reign of the Emperor Charles V. with a View of the Progress of Society in Europe* (1769) which represents Robertson's true consummation of the 'Enlightened narrative'. Yet the relevance of the *History of Scotland* to understanding Robertson's practice of philosophic historiography lies precisely in the manner of its failure as an exemplar. The presence in the text of a number of the central tropes and rhetorical strategies of the 'Enlightened narrative' demonstrate the extent to which for Robertson as for Hume, the interpretative significance of that narrative is constructed around a textual negotiation with the forms, the priorities, and most importantly the readers of national constitutional history; which in turn reflects upon the nature of Robertson's achievement in the later work the *History of the Reign of Charles V*, in which the 'Enlightened narrative' seems at last to have cast off its national constitutional shackles, and become a truly independent method of historical exposition. The *History of Scotland* also at the same time illustrates the profound effect on Robertson's historical style generated by his unique status among all the French and British claimants to philosophic historiography, his institutional affiliation, as minister of the Church of Scotland and no mere man of letters. Where Hume willingly submits himself to the demands of communicating with an unphilosophic readership, taking on the task of enlightening

⁷³ *Barbarism and Religion Volume Two*, p.271.

⁷⁴ *Narratives of Enlightenment*, p.95.

the factious barbarians in a philosophic spirit of *noblesse oblige*, Robertson's responsibilities are part of his corporate identity, and are of a nature that weighs heavily on the philosophic historian, and, of course, on the coherence of his narrative.

If it is Hume's confrontation with the hollowness of his own narrative which provides the impetus behind the participation of *History of England* in the history of civilisation, however inconclusive its effect, the need for some form of imaginative compensation for the loss of the traditional satisfactions of the ancient constitution is still greater in Robertson's savagely negative *History of Scotland*. For Robertson, if the history of Scotland is the history of anything, it is the history of a remarkable lack of development or positive change. In Scotland, 'the feudal aristocracy, which had been subverted in most nations of Europe by the policy of their Princes, or had been undermined by the progress of commerce, still subsisted with full force'.⁷⁵ In the absence of progress or of policy, there is little room for philosophic generalisation, and the historian's only task is to point out that his desultory, violent narrative has itself the force of an argument in favour of Scotland's backwardness. Even this one feature of Scottish exceptionalism, a pre-eminence in backwardness, is deprived of any inherent interest; it is for the most part accidental, the untimely death of James II alone preventing Scotland from becoming 'the first kingdom in Europe, which would have seen the subversion of the feudal system'.⁷⁶ The history of England, however, glimpsed in the interstices of Robertson's drab tale, has all the interpretative significance the history of Scotland lacks. Where Queen Mary follows the example of her predecessors and flounders ineffectually, the good fortune of the English is that even their monarchs' failings end by furthering the nation's advancement:

But the vices of [Henry VIII] were more beneficial to mankind, than the virtues of others. His rapaciousness, his profusion, and even his tyranny, by depressing the ancient nobility, and by adding new property and // power to the Commons, laid the foundations of the British liberty.⁷⁷

Robertson is willing to permit to England the same traditional association between providential destiny and national self-determination which he denies to Scotland, and sees no need for self-restraint in his account of the defeat of the Armada:

⁷⁵ William Robertson, *The History of Scotland, during the Reigns of Queen Mary and of King James VI, till his Accession to the Crown of England, with a Review of the Scotch History previous to the Period; and an Appendix containing original papers*, 2 vols. in-4^{to} (London: 1759), II, p.249.

⁷⁶ I, p.47.

⁷⁷ I, pp.98-99.

And by the blessing of Providence, which watched with remarkable care over the Protestant religion, and the liberties of Britain, the English valour scattered and destroyed the Armado on which they had arrogantly bestowed the name of Invincible.⁷⁸

The point is of course that the liberties of England are indeed the liberties of Britain, and Robertson insists throughout that, at least as far as the political argument of the *History of Scotland* goes, this should be a wholly adequate conclusion. It is with almost comical promptness that in Robertson's concluding summary, Scotland rejoins in 1688 the narrative of the progress of civilisation, '[the Scots'] minds began to open, and to form more extensive plans of commerce, of industry, and of police';⁷⁹ and it is with an equal degree of sacrifice of historical plausibility to ideological necessity that development is still held back just enough for 1707 to claim its role, as 'another great event [which] completed what the Revolution had begun'.⁸⁰ It should, however, be noted to his credit that Robertson, with a candour exceedingly rare among adepts of the large generalisations of the 'Enlightened narrative', confesses that here, 'events and their causes have been mentioned rather than developed'.⁸¹

Colin Kidd has described in detail how specific points of Robertson's historical representation are determined by his concern to promote the ideology of the Moderate party of the Church of Scotland.⁸² The sheer artfulness of Robertson's manipulation of his material in the service of his political message is made manifest by the contrast between his approach and Hume's on the same topics, and particularly in their engagement with Knox. Hume, profiting from the liberty of the infidel to cause offence among the godly of all denominations, delights in giving examples of Presbyterian pulpit rhetoric in the spirit of anthropological curiosity, and slyly appropriates for his justification the vogue for the history of manners:

We have here related these circumstances at greater length, than the necessity of our subject may seem to require: But even trivial incidents, which show the manners of the age, are often more instructive, as well as entertaining, than the great transactions of wars and negotiations, which are pretty similar in all periods and in all countries of the world.⁸³

⁷⁸ II, p.166.

⁷⁹ II, p.253.

⁸⁰ II, p.253.

⁸¹ II, p.254.

⁸² See Colin Kidd, *Subverting Scotland's Past*, pp.192-98.

⁸³ IV, p.239.

The silencing of Knox is, however, one of the most notable features of the *History of Scotland*. An especially interesting instance of Robertson's flight from thick description is the passage where he describes the inflammatory effect of Knox's oratory, appears to tremble on the brink of a quotation, and then ends by referring the reader elsewhere; 'the heads of this discourse are // inserted in his history, and afford a striking example of the boldness and freedom of reproof assumed by the first Reformers, as well as a specimen of his own skill in chusing the topics most fitted to influence and rouze his readers'.⁸⁴ Similarly, Hume is able to refer directly to Knox's own account of the murder of Cardinal Beaton, and to reflect how 'it is very horrid, but at the same time somewhat amazing to consider the joy and alacrity and pleasure which that historian discovers in his narration of this assassination';⁸⁵ a fact which Robertson ignores, choosing instead to carefully discriminate the motives of the assassins in such a way that absolves the Protestant party from complicity, as only 'a private revenge, inflamed and sanctified by a false zeal for religion'.⁸⁶

John Pocock notes this failure of the *History of Scotland* to give an adequate account of Scottish religious history, 'we look for some hint of the Moderate Robertson's history of the rise and fall of the Covenanting clergy, of which the reign of James VI might serve as an admonition, but it cannot be said that we find it',⁸⁷ but this question of religion exposes the tension that is at the heart of the *History of Scotland*, just as it is of the *History of England*; that between the art of polemic and the responsibility of narrative, a question of generic identity on which the outward label of 'a history' has only a small degree of influence. In an intriguing letter to Robertson on the first publication of the *History of Scotland*, Gilbert Elliot strongly implies that to informed readers, Robertson's consummate artfulness should be considered a major part of his achievement:

I was afraid you might have been interrupted by the Reformation, but I find it much otherwise; you treat it with great propriety, and, in my opinion, with sufficient freedom. No revolution, whether civil or religious, can be accomplished without that degree of ardour or passion, which, in a later age, will be a matter of ridicule to men who do not feel the occasion, and enter into the spirit of the times.⁸⁸

⁸⁴ I, pp.184-85.

⁸⁵ III, footnote p.299.

⁸⁶ I, p.96.

⁸⁷ *Barbarism and Religion Volume Two*, p.273.

⁸⁸ Letter from Gilbert Elliot to Robertson, 20th January 1759; quoted in Dugald Stewart, *Account of the Life and Writings of William Robertson, D.D.*, in volume I of his edition of *The Works of William Robertson*, 12 vols. in-8^o (London: 1812), p.173.

William Warburton, himself no stranger to the art of managing religious controversy, expressed his own understanding of Robertson's need for reticence in the *History of Scotland*, 'were it not for fear of offence, (which every wise man in his situation would fear to give,) [the author] would have spoken with much more freedom of the Hier- // archical principles of the infant Church of Scotland'.⁸⁹ Such sentiments from Robertson's sympathisers irresistibly recall the comradeship in arms of two historians of a different persuasion, who were rather more readily accused by their contemporaries of committing the sin of artfulness and strategic historical untruth; 'when I heard of your undertaking (which was some time ago), I own I was a little curious to see how you would extricate yourself from the Subject of your two last Chapters...'.⁹⁰ The contemporary emphasis is that the achievement of the *History of Scotland* is not necessarily that it is done well, that it procures conviction as 'a history', but that it is done at all.

There are a number of features of the *History of Scotland* which do indeed still show Robertson acknowledging some generic demand for narrative interest, for a positive story to tell about the relationship between Scotland's independent past, and the British present, rather than the purely negative satisfaction of undermining the pre-existing but ideologically compromised ways of describing that relationship. Dugald Stewart understood Robertson's scrupulously balanced but evidentially indefensible presentation of Queen Mary, as proven adulteress but not conspirator against Elizabeth (notoriously, a position which Robertson maintained in spite of strong objections from Hume and the availability of new material establishing the contrary), as quite simply an attempt to compensate for the lack of interpretative or literary interest otherwise afforded by his subject:

Indeed, without the aid of so interesting a character, the affairs of Scotland, during the period he treats of, could not have derived, even from his hand, a sufficient importance and dignity to engage the curiosity of the present age.⁹¹

It is ironic that the *History of Scotland* is harmed as a literary production by Robertson's very success in making the argument for Whig constitutional modernism in relation to Scotland, his political principles bestowing on his work the challenge of

⁸⁹ Note from Warburton to Andrew Millar in response to receipt of advance presentation copy of the *History of Scotland*, text given by Millar in letter to Robertson, 27th January 1759; quoted in Stewart, *Account of the Life and Writings of William Robertson*, pp.17-18.

⁹⁰ Hume, letter to Edward Gibbon, 18th March 1776, *Letters* ed. Greig, II, p.310.

⁹¹ Stewart, *Account of the Life and Writings of William Robertson*, p.28.

avoiding the marginal status conferred on its subject by the historical thesis it is framed to present. Hume, having followed the lure of historical significance to England, can afford to be cutting and categorical on the question of Scotland:

The Scotch nation, tho' they had never been subject to the arbitrary power of their Prince, had but very imperfect notions of law and liberty; and scarce in any age had they ever enjoyed an administration, which had restrained itself between the proper boundaries. By their final union alone with England, their once hated antagonist, they have happily attained the experience of a government perfectly regular, and exempt from all violence and injustice.⁹²

For Hume, Scotland should consider itself fortunate to be subject to a total historiographical devolution upon England, but for Scotland's historian, this presents a particular dilemma. A sentimental indulgence towards Queen Mary is one means by which Robertson aims to substitute a form of interpretatively empty rhetorical plenitude for the substantive manifestations of Scottish constitutional and historiographical independence.

It is in this context, of Robertson's ambition to achieve the full generic significance of 'a history of Scotland', without incurring any proscribed associations of ideological consequence, that the two notable instances where the *History of Scotland* manifests sympathy with the 'Enlightened narrative' should be understood; the first being Robertson's curious insistence on Scotland's international role in the period, and the second being his belated demonstration of interest in Scottish cultural history. After having demolished a string of cherished contemporary illusions about the integrity and significance of the national past in his 'Review of the Scotch History previous to the Death of James I' which opens the *History of Scotland*, Robertson turns to 'a view of the political state of Europe at that period, where the following history commences';⁹³ on the large-minded principle that 'a thorough // knowledge of that general system, of which every kingdom in Europe forms a part, is not less requisite towards understanding the history of a nation, than an acquaintance with its peculiar government and laws'.⁹⁴ The narrative which follows is unmistakably Enlightened. The development of strong monarchies in Europe after the feudal anarchy, and the refinements of policy developed in Italy concerning 'the maxim of preserving a balance of power',⁹⁵ are the historical conditions which give rise to the

⁹² VI, p.183.

⁹³ I, p.71.

⁹⁴ I, pp.71-72.

⁹⁵ I, p.73.

sophisticated machinations of Francis I and the emperor Charles V. In this grand narrative Robertson grants Scotland an important place, and in terms which carry a distinct air of national destiny:

In this situation of Europe, Scotland, which had hitherto wasted her strength in the quarrels between France and England, emerged from her obscurity, took her station in the system, and began to // have some influence on the fate of different nations. Her assistance was, frequently, of consequence to the contending parties, and the balance was often so nicely adjusted, that it was in her power to make it lean to either side. The part assigned to her was to divert Henry from carrying his arms into the continent.⁹⁶

From its appearance in the *Siècle de Louis XIV* in 1751, the idea of the history of Charles V and Francis I as a narrative structured by the peculiar European achievement in diplomacy, ‘la sage politique de tenir entre [les nations européennes], autant qu’elles peuvent, une balance égale de pouvoir, employant sans cesse les négociations, même au milieu de la guerre, et entretenant les unes chez les autres des ambassadeurs ou des espions moins honorables, qui peuvent avertir toutes les cours des desseins d’une seule, donner à la fois l’alarme à l’Europe, et garantir les plus faibles des invasions que le plus fort est toujours prêt d’entreprendre’,⁹⁷ enjoyed a small philosophic vogue. In Volume III of the *History of England*, Hume pauses to reflect on how these events ‘proved a kind of aera in the general system of Europe’,⁹⁸ and to draw out the pleasing contrast in the characters of the two protagonists, the romantic against the politician, a rhetorical theme which had also been mined by Voltaire in the *Essai sur les moeurs* of 1756, just as it is here by Robertson in the analogous part of the *History of Scotland*. Robertson echoes Voltaire especially closely in his singling out of ambassadors, ‘a kind of honorable spies, authorized by the mutual jealousy of kings, resided almost constantly at every // different court, and had it in charge to watch all its motions’.⁹⁹ It is significant that Robertson’s invocation of the ‘balance’ is unreservedly eulogistic; Voltaire’s ‘espions moins honorables’ disappear into an honorific synonym, and the bitter *realpolitik* of ‘des invasions que le plus fort est toujours prêt d’entreprendre’ becomes subsumed into a vision of order being the more natural state, ‘confederacies were formed to humble any power which rose above its due proportion’.¹⁰⁰

⁹⁶ I, pp.76-77.

⁹⁷ Voltaire, *Siècle de Louis XIV* in *Oeuvres historiques* ed. Pomeau, p.621.

⁹⁸ III, p.109.

⁹⁹ I, pp.73-74.

¹⁰⁰ I, p.74.

There is very little in the *History of Scotland* to support Robertson's assertion of the importance of Scotland to European diplomacy, and there is nothing at all to support his flattering vision of intelligent intervention on this basis as characterising Scottish foreign policy. While Robertson chooses to assert that the development of the 'balance' has enhanced the importance of small states like Scotland, 'almost every war in Europe became general, and the most inconsiderable states acquired importance, because they could add weight to either scale',¹⁰¹ the actual consequence of Henry VIII falling 'at last, upon the true secret of policy, with respect to Scotland',¹⁰² is the division and conquest of a venal Scottish nobility, and the complete subversion of the capacity of the Scottish state for independent or even coherent political action. Robertson's promise that the foreign policy dimension is crucial to the interpretation of his text is not followed through; and, just as in the case of Hume's invocation of the 'Enlightened narrative' only inconsistently, and to meet particular emergencies, the historian's fickleness legitimately questions the degree of intellectual investment which the 'Enlightened narrative' connotes. The extent to which Robertson has co-opted the rhetoric of the 'Enlightened narrative' to his particular purposes in the *History of Scotland* is also evident from the fact that the other practitioners of the same genre fundamentally disagree with his argument in relation to Scotland's place in it. Hume is typically bracing in the *History of England* on the subject of the diplomatic pretensions of his native country:

We have here carried on the Scotch history some years beyond the present period; that as that country had little connexion with the general system of Europe, we might be the less interrupted in the narration of those memorable events [that is, Charles V and Francis I], which were there transacted.¹⁰³

Even Voltaire makes cruel use of his foreigner's detachment, and turns to Scotland in Chapter CXIX of the *Essai sur les moeurs* immediately after surveying the uncultivated wastes of Dalmatia and the Ukraine, 'l'Écosse entrain un peu plus que le reste dans le // système de l'Europe',¹⁰⁴ albeit solely as a notably cheap proxy for France, 'il n'en coûtait pas beaucoup aux rois de France pour faire armer les Écossais',¹⁰⁵ and the Scottish tragedy of domestic subversion by a richer neighbour is merely one illustration of a general political axiom, 'un État pauvre voisin d'un État

¹⁰¹ I, p.74.

¹⁰² I, p.79.

¹⁰³ III, p.101.

¹⁰⁴ Voltaire, *Essai sur les moeurs* ed. Pomeau, II, pp.156-57.

¹⁰⁵ II, p.157.

riche est à la longue véral'.¹⁰⁶ In spite of the impression of unanimity among Voltaire, Hume and Robertson on the question of the historical emergence of the balance of power in Europe, even the composition of the 'Enlightened narrative' at its most conventional is not proof against particular, polemic shaping.

The second notable occasion on which the *History of Scotland* shows signs of desiring assimilation to the 'Enlightened narrative' is at the very end, where Robertson signals a transition in his concluding summary of events since the accession, from the history of politics and religion, to the history of culture:

Nor did the influence of the Accession extend to the civil and ecclesiastical constitutions alone; the genius of the nation, its taste and spirit, things of a nature still more delicate, were sensibly affected by that event.¹⁰⁷

Just as in the case of chivalrous sentiment and European diplomacy, the language of cultural history is employed as a means of translating the hard facts of doctrinaire Whiggism into a 'still more delicate' historical idiom, which can provide the reader with some form of consolation and imaginative resolution. Robertson proceeds to re-tell his history of the fifteenth- and sixteenth-centuries in Scotland, praising the achievements of the Scots in the sphere of Latin learning, 'the Scotch writers were not inferior to those of any other nation',¹⁰⁸ and permitting himself to dwell for a while on the psychological consequences of the loss of national independence, 'the unhappiness of their political situation'¹⁰⁹ in the previous century, through a history of the Scottish prose style. The history of Scottish culture concludes the whole *History of Scotland*, just as the claims of Scottish diplomacy conclude the 'Review of the Scotch History previous to the death of James I', and this distinctive combination of rhetorical plenitude and prominent placing, with emphatic interpretative insignificance in the context of the work as a whole, encapsulates how the 'Enlightened narrative' represents to Robertson a way out of the minuteness and negativity of the reformed Whig history of Britain, and at the same time, how he himself remains undecided on the question of its function; whether it can move to fully supplant constitutional history, or in fact whether its capacity for ambiguity on this point, for existing in parallel with other kinds of narrative, is the major part of its appeal.

¹⁰⁶ II, p.157.

¹⁰⁷ II, p.256.

¹⁰⁸ II, p.256.

¹⁰⁹ II, p.260.

The local inconsistencies incurred by Robertson's suspension of the international tropes of the 'Enlightened narrative' within the domestic concerns of Whig revisionism, are, however, as nothing to the vertiginous shift to providence which Robertson's clerical character positively forces on the *History of Scotland*. There is not a lot of providence in the *History of Scotland*, but there is certainly enough to reassure any timid or suspicious readers regarding the ultimate tendency of Robertson's argument, even though the actual contribution of providence to that historical argument is still somewhat baffling; as it acts to raise up Francis I to save the liberties of Europe from Charles V, makes sure to defeat the Armada, but appears to have nothing to say to the unfortunate life of Queen Mary or to the accession of James VI. The example of Hume, who as an acute if not unbiased critic mocked 'the godly strain of [Robertson's] history',¹¹⁰ demonstrates why Robertson might feel obliged to invoke providence as a form of personal guarantee, even if not as a true tool of interpretation. In the characteristic rhetorical pincer movement beloved of Britain's subtle infidels, the *History of England* simultaneously enjoins the language of historical detachment on its clerical competitors, and punishes them in the attempt. If Scottish Protestants identify themselves with their forebears, they must also become heir to 'that cant, hypocrisy, and fanaticism // which long infested that kingdom; and which, tho' now mollified by the lenity of the civil power, is still ready to break out on all occasions',¹¹¹ but if they laud the role of the civil power in the administration of religion, they land in dangerous company. The strangely naked Erastianism of Warburton's *The Alliance between Church and State* (1736) had already exposed the disconcertingly infidel overtones of certain aspects of Enlightened Protestant ecclesiology, and Hume delights in exploiting the slippage between the language of orthodoxy and its opposite. The *History of England* is overall a monument to such stylistic techniques, but a particularly fine example is Hume's 'Digression concerning the ecclesiastical state' in Volume III, where he moves easily from a positively Hookerian admiration of the Anglican via media, 'of all the European churches, which shook off the yoke of the papal authority, no one proceeded with so much reason and moderation as the church of England',¹¹² through the language of detached comparative analysis, to a conclusion which baldly includes providers of religion

¹¹⁰ Letter to Hugh Blair, 25th March 1766, *Letters* ed. Greig, II, p.31.

¹¹¹ IV, pp.421-22.

¹¹² IV, p.505.

among the other ‘arts and professions’ and describes their adherents as ‘customers’.¹¹³ Robertson’s sensitivity to the danger of condemning himself with too convincing a display of detachment, for all Elliot’s encouragement, shows in his late reversal of his otherwise unambiguous praise of the ‘wisdom’ and ‘moderation’ of the Protestant leaders in restraining the ‘impetuous spirit’ of popular anti-Catholicism.¹¹⁴

But, at the same time, whoever reflects upon the encroaching and sanguinary spirit of Popery, will be far from treating the fears and caution of the more zealous Reformers as altogether imaginary and destitute of any real foundation.¹¹⁵

The pursuit of a polemical intention at the expense of the detached consideration of the truth is, of course, essentially opposed to the idea of philosophic historiography, condemning Hume as much as Robertson; but it is a peculiar effect of the invasion of religious debate in Britain by the self-disguising infidels, that Robertson’s adoption of even the language of detachment can be no consistent endeavour.

4. Escaping constitutional history

Hume’s advice to Robertson in 1759 on the question of where next for Scottish Whig historiography, after the histories of England and Scotland have been told, is little short of an admission that for them, the spring of historiographical renewal had already run dry. To the history of ancient Greece, Hume cannot see that he or Robertson could have anything distinctive to add, and he is firmly sceptical regarding the proposal of a history of ‘the Age of Charles the Fifth’; ‘that subject is disjointed; and your hero, who is the sole connection, is not very interesting’.¹¹⁶ Instead, Hume proposes a naked bid for publishing success in the form of a series of modern lives after the manner of Plutarch, ‘an idea which has sometimes pleased me, and which I had once entertained thoughts of attempting’.¹¹⁷ So far is such a project from any philosophic or political consequence that Hume frankly lauds its ease of composition and certainty of popular appeal, ‘were you to write the life of Henry the Fourth of France after that model, you might pillage all the pretty stories in Sully, and speak

¹¹³ III, p.117.

¹¹⁴ I, p.229.

¹¹⁵ I, p.229.

¹¹⁶ Letter to William Robertson [Summer, 1759], *Letters* ed. Greig, I, p.315.

¹¹⁷ loc. cit.

more of his mistresses than of his battles'.¹¹⁸ Any true *philosophe* would have been scandalised. Hume, of course, never wrote the ecclesiastical history or the modern political history he occasionally envisaged in his letters, both representing a natural extension of his concerns in the *History of England* in even more controversial form, and neither project could conceivably have been carried on by Robertson. It is clear that, according to Hume's analysis, aside from the narrative innovations enjoined by their ideologically motivated engagement with national constitutional history, the natural tendency of the historical tradition of the Scottish Whigs is to drift still further away from that of the *philosophes*, and even into the territory of mere belletrism, so becoming sadly invisible to later historians of ideas in search of a native Enlightenment. Robertson's riposte to such a craven retreat from intellectual significance takes the majestic form of the *History of the Reign of the Emperor Charles V. with a View of the Progress of Society in Europe, from the Subversion of the Roman Empire, to the Beginning of the Sixteenth Century* (1769), which, as an outstanding example of commitment to the 'Enlightened narrative', may certainly be said to encourage comparison with its philosophic counterparts. Yet Robertson remains no *philosophe* writing to *philosophes*; and this question of the interpretative relationship of the 'Enlightened narrative' to its national constitutional counterparts, and of the degree and kind of intellectual significance that may be ascribed to it, is still fundamental to the whole textual strategy of the *History of the Reign of Charles V.*

In the *View of the Progress of Society in Europe*, the 'Enlightened narrative' seems at last to have established its independence from its national constitutional frame, having been gifted its own volume and an emphatic dignity as a historical theme. The entire rationale of the *History of the Reign of Charles V* hinges on Robertson's assertion in the Preface that 'an aera should be pointed out, prior to which, each country, little connected with those around it, may trace its own history apart; after which, the transactions of every considerable nation in Europe become interesting and instructive to all'.¹¹⁹ By means of this axiom that history and historiography changed, on or about the accession of Charles V, Robertson consigns

¹¹⁸ *ibid.*, p.316.

¹¹⁹ William Robertson, *The History of the Reign of the Emperor Charles V. with a View of the Progress of Society in Europe, from the Subversion of the Roman Empire, to the Beginning of the Sixteenth Century*, 3 vols. in-4^{to} (London: 1769), I, p.x.

national history – the history of ‘such transactions, as tend to illustrate the progress of [a country’s] constitution, laws, or manners’¹²⁰ – and its sentimental and interested readers effectively to the margins, and declares the subject of his own history of the Emperor’s reign to instead be ‘Europe’. It is taken for granted that the readers of European history read as detached observers, whom Robertson chooses to imagine as a cohort of armchair diplomats:

It is necessary, then, // not only for those who are called to conduct the affairs of nations, but for such as inquire and reason concerning them, to remain satisfied with a general knowledge of distant events, and to confine their study of history in detail chiefly to that period, in which the several states of Europe having become intimately connected, the operations of one power are so felt by all, as to influence their councils, and to regulate their measures.¹²¹

It is, of course, an irreconcilable flaw in Robertson’s reasoning that the history of Europe is to be approached as the history of ‘foreign states’¹²² (and therefore from a position of detached analysis), that the history of Europe is also the history of Britain in Europe, or Britain’s relationship with Europe, which might well connote a different kind of composition, and of response. The otherwise inexplicable narrowness of Robertson’s conception of Europe – as merely the sphere of diplomatic relations – similarly provides grounds for suspicion that ‘Europe’ is for Robertson first and foremost a discursive space, a vision of a historical theme that permits him to be a certain kind of historian, and to write a certain kind of history far removed from the uncomfortable intimacies of the *History of Scotland*, much more than it is a fully worked-out historical argument (or ‘cosmopolitan’ political programme). It is curious that the precondition for a Whiggish historian to write history with the inconsequential serenity of a *philosophe*, is that he should model himself as a politician. Voltaire’s own fondness for military and diplomatic history is more of a guilty, defiantly unphilosophic pleasure.

The role of the *View of the Progress of Society in Europe*, which deals with the events before the magic transformation of the sixteenth century, is therefore to clear the ground for Robertson’s embrace of European diplomatic history, still escaping the toils of national constitutional narrative. The design and ordering of its three sections reflect this aim. In the first, ‘with respect to interior government, law

¹²⁰ I, p. ix.

¹²¹ I, pp. ix-x.

¹²² I, p. ix.

and manners’, Robertson demonstrates his intention to silently replace the quest for the ancient constitution with the ‘Enlightened narrative’, as an alternative to open confrontation. He asserts ‘it is not my province to give a minute detail of the progress of government and manners in each particular nation, whose // transactions are the object of the following history’,¹²³ and will only commit to marking out ‘the great steps by which they advanced from barbarism to refinement’,¹²⁴ and to pointing out ‘those general principles and events which by their uniform as well as extensive operation conducted all of them to that degree of improvement in policy and in manners which they had attained at the period when Charles V. began his reign’.¹²⁵ Stylistic sleight-of-hand, and a pose of generic humility, have silently substituted ‘refinement’ for ‘institutions’, ‘policy and manners’ for ‘government and manners’, and the lowest common denominator for historical particularity. Robertson’s otherwise rather odd separation of his account into ‘interior’ and ‘exterior’ government is also clearly in the service of the division and conquest of the ancient constitution. The second section of the *View of the Progress of Society in Europe*, ‘with respect to the command of the national force requisite in foreign operations’, would give Robertson’s reader to believe that the only real significance of the actions of the European Princes to destroy the power of the nobles and enlarge ‘the boundaries of prerogative’, is the effect thus exerted on European diplomacy, by ‘rendering their kingdoms capable of acting with union and with force’.¹²⁶ Robertson, in his character as diplomatic historian, simply assumes that any such tendencies which encourage the attainment of ‘that state, in which extensive monarchies act with united vigour, or carry on great undertakings with perseverance and success’,¹²⁷ must represent a positive sign of ‘refinement’. Indeed, his diffusion of the language of constitutional liberty into ‘refinement’ is sufficiently successful for it to appear entirely reasonable that the fact that the military innovations of Louis XI were ‘fatal [...] to the liberties of his subjects’¹²⁸ should be mentioned in section two only as an aside.

¹²³ I, pp.11-12.

¹²⁴ I, p.12.

¹²⁵ loc. cit.

¹²⁶ I, p.103.

¹²⁷ I, p.84.

¹²⁸ p.101.

Robertson's third section, 'the political constitution of the principal states in Europe, at the commencement of the sixteenth century', at first sight appears a completion of his strategy for marginalising constitutional history. It is included after 'interior' and 'exterior' government, is presented as nothing more than a summary – 'to sketch out the great lines which distinguish and characterize each government, is all that the nature of my present work will admit of, and all that is necessary to illustrate the events which it records'¹²⁹ – and in it, Robertson provocatively argues that the history of France can provide an adequate paradigm for 'the other feudal kingdoms'.¹³⁰ Yet, by failing to confront the political constitution of England, even in the etiolated form sponsored in this last section, Robertson ends by openly confessing the insufficiency of his approach to produce conviction. He has side-stepped the constitutional history of Britain, and not defeated it, and he compounds his failure by acknowledging as much in the footnotes:

Before I conclude these Proofs and Illustrations, I ought to explain the reason of two omissions in them; one of which it is necessary to mention on my own account, the other to obviate an objection to this part of the work. [...] //
[...] As to the other omission [apart from his failure to acknowledge Voltaire]; every intelligent reader must have observed, that I have not entered, either in the historical part of this volume, or in the Proofs and Illustrations, into the same detail with respect to the ancient laws and customs of the British kingdoms, as concerning those of the other European nations. As the capital facts with regard to the progress of government and manners in their own country are known to most of my readers, such a detail appeared to me less essential.¹³¹

Robertson cannot convince even himself of the expository cogency of his 'European' perspective, where all are to read history as foreigners, forgetful of their ancient constitutions. Nor, it seems, are manners and diplomacy enough; although Montesquieu and Hume, for example, are willing to make large claims for historical generalisation and fundamental causes, and Voltaire, for his part, has no qualms in dismissing detailed exposition on a subject he regards as unimportant. Robertson simply accepts the insufficiency of the *History of the Reign of Charles V*, that it is in itself incomplete. It is of course especially significant that his admission is framed as a response to querulous 'intelligent readers', and their unregenerate expectations.

¹²⁹ I, p.124.

¹³⁰ p.165.

¹³¹ I, p.392-93.

Robertson goes on to speculate on the kind of work the *View of the Progress of Society in Europe* might have been, if perhaps he and his readers were different. The ‘European’ perspective could have been fully realised, now as a comparative perspective, and in the service of the Enlightened Whig constitutional argument:

While engaged in perusing the laws, charters, and early historians of the continental kingdoms, I have been led to think that an attempt to illustrate the progress of the English jurisprudence and policy, by a comparison with those of other kingdoms in a similar situation, would be of great utility, and might throw much light on some points which are now obscure, and decide others, which have been long contraverted.¹³²

The form of ‘Enlightened narrative’ that might transcend rhetoric, and convince as historical argument, exists only as an idea forming in Robertson’s mind in the process of composing the *History of the Reign of Charles V*. In this respect, for all its apparent promise, the *History of the Reign of Charles V* is not the ‘Enlightened narrative’ at all. Robertson permits himself to conduct only covert warfare against the ancient constitution, striking occasional blows in the footnotes; for example, he points out the light that might be thrown on English history by the evidence of the prior existence of the spirit of liberty in France and its subsequent decline, but then once again takes refuge in the modesty of his work’s ambitions, ‘what were the accidental events, or political causes which occasioned this difference, it is not my present business to enquire’.¹³³

The question of the points of correspondence between the ‘Enlightened narrative’ of the *History of the Reign of Charles V*, and that of the *philosophes*, is in fact addressed by Robertson himself in the next-to-last footnote in the Proofs and Illustrations, in which he reveals his awareness of a similarity great enough to stimulate a guilty conscience in respect to Voltaire. He voices the belated admission that ‘in all my inquiries and disquisitions concerning the progress of government, manners, literature and commerce during the middle ages, as well as in my delineations of the political constitution of the different states of Europe at the opening of the sixteenth century, I have not once mentioned M. de Voltaire, who, in his *Essay sur l’histoire generale*, has reviewed the same period, and has treated of all these subjects’.¹³⁴ Against the imputation of servile imitation, Robertson wields his

¹³² I, p.394.

¹³³ I, p.267.

¹³⁴ I, p.392.

greatest weapon, his unique selling point among all the philosophic historians, which is his impeccable religious correctness; ‘if [Voltaire] had left religion untouched, he is instructive and agreeable’.¹³⁵ This is what Hume refers to in his marvellous letter to Robertson on the publication of the *History of Scotland*, ‘the great success of your book, beside its real merit, is forwarded by its prudence, and by the deference paid to established opinions’.¹³⁶ However, Robertson also appeals to his inclusion of references to sources as a means of distinguishing himself from his towering French predecessor, yet does so in terms which powerfully suggest how limited he has found the opportunities for actual interpretative differentiation:

I have often, however, followed him as my guide in these researches; and he has not only pointed out // the facts with respect to which it was of importance to inquire, but the conclusions which it is proper to draw from them. If he had, at the same time, mentioned the books which relate these particulars, a great part of my labour would have been unnecessary, and many of his readers who now consider him only as an entertaining and lively writer, would find that he is a learned and well-informed historian.¹³⁷

If Voltaire has pointed out the facts, and provided the interpretation, where is Robertson’s contribution? Only in his footnotes; and in this light, the luxuriance of Robertson’s Proofs and Illustrations is less a reflection of the innate British resistance to Gallic superficiality, than a calculated assertion of the author’s moral, if not interpretative independence. This implication that the great danger of the ‘Enlightened narrative’, as well as a major part of its attraction, is that it repeats, is a point of considerable importance to Gibbon, the most belated of the philosophic historians.

Robertson’s uneasy conscience about his work’s similarity to the *Essai sur les mœurs*, however appropriate to individual passages and points of interpretation in the *History of the Reign of Charles V*, should not, however, obscure the crucial differences between his conception of the ‘Enlightened narrative’ and that of Voltaire. The price paid for Robertson’s such explicit shaping of his narrative to suit his purpose to remodel diplomatic history as a philosophic medium, is a rather odd version of the history of Europe, which certainly suffers by the comparison with its more expansive original. Robertson’s idea of Europe as a site of civilised connections between centralised modern states has a marked tendency to present the simple fact of connectedness as a good in itself, and to figure diplomacy and the form of

¹³⁵ I, p.392.

¹³⁶ Letter to William Robertson, 20th [February?] 1759, *Letters* ed. Greig, I, p.299.

¹³⁷ I, pp.392-93.

connectedness it embodies, as a benign adjunct of its more obviously Enlightened *doppelgänger*, commerce; ‘as soon as the commercial spirit begins to acquire vigour, and to gain an ascendant in any society, we discover a new genius in its policy, its alliances, its wars, and its negotiations’.¹³⁸ Voltaire, as much if not more interested in the history of diplomacy as was Robertson, understands the great republic of Europe in the fifteenth century in markedly different terms:

En réfléchissant sur ce concile [de Constance], tenu sous les yeux d’un empereur, de tant de princes et de tant d’ambassadeurs, sur la déposition du souverain pontife, sur celle de Venceslas, on voit que l’Europe catholique était en effet une immense et tumultueuse république, dont les chefs étaient le pape et l’empereur, et dont les membres désunis sont des royaumes, des provinces, des villes libres, sous vingt gouvernements différents. Il n’y avait aucune affaire dans laquelle l’empereur et le pape n’entrassent. Toutes les parties de la chrétienté se correspondait même au milieu des discordes: l’Europe était en grand ce qu’avait été la Grèce, à la politesse près.¹³⁹

Just as in the parallel between Robertson’s benign presentation of the ‘balance’ in the *History of Scotland* and that of Voltaire, Voltaire emphasises power where Robertson emphasises balance, but the consequences of this reorientation of perspective in the *History of the Reign of Charles V* are far-reaching.

The idea of ‘Europe catholique’ simply disappears, the confessional emphasis rendering this perhaps unsurprising in a text written by a Northern Protestant. The structural role of the Papacy in bringing about the idea of Europe is replaced by an emphasis on its unchristian encroachment, ‘there was not a state in Europe which had not been disquieted by [the popes’] ambition’,¹⁴⁰ and its importance is disputed on the grounds of a bizarre claim that the rest of Europe was indifferent to the popes’ relations with the Empire, no degree of artifice ‘could induce any of the powerful monarchs of Europe to engage in their quarrel’;¹⁴¹ but what is particularly remarkable, given the fact that Robertson’s history is at least ostensibly about the reign of the *emperor* Charles V, is his sheer lack of interest in the Empire itself. Robertson lists Germany last among his survey of ‘political constitutions’ in the *View of the Progress of Society in Europe*, and he is anxious to assure his reader that, ‘in explaining the political constitution of this vast and complex body at the beginning of the sixteenth century, I shall avoid entering into such detail as would involve my readers in that

¹³⁸ I, p.81-82.

¹³⁹ Voltaire, *Essai sur les mœurs* ed. Pomeau, I, p.703.

¹⁴⁰ I, p.125.

¹⁴¹ I, p.89.

inextricable labyrinth, which it formed by the multiplicity of its tribunals, the number of its members, their // interfering rights, and by the endless discussions or refinements of the publick lawyers of Germany with respect to all these'.¹⁴² It is evident throughout that Robertson's commitment to his paradigm of centralised nation states interacting with each other in their pursuit of their own interests, which are clearly modelled on France and England, has the effect of marginalising Germany, as an exception to what Robertson insists is the European norm. Notably, its constitution 'was of a species so peculiar, as not to resemble perfectly any form of government known either in the ancient or modern world',¹⁴³ and in the context of the 'balance', its jurisdictional and regional pluralism is simply a flaw, as being productive of a 'slow, dilatory, distrustful and irresolute spirit'¹⁴⁴ in its management of its external relations. It might perhaps have been expected that Robertson's domestic Whiggism would have encouraged a more positive evaluation of such constitutional 'balance', but instead, the curious affection for despotism to which the diplomatic perspective of his narrative commits him again shows itself in his high praise for Charles's ability to force the Empire to behave like an absolute monarchy. Voltaire, on the other hand, emphasises the diversity of forms of government in Europe as one of its chief characteristics, and in comparison, Robertson appears positively parochial, as well as in possession of only a superficial awareness of the importance of multi-state formations, and the aspiration towards such, in the history of Europe. His Charlemagne is only a brief personal intervention prefatory to a 'succession of uninteresting events',¹⁴⁵ but Voltaire easily recognises a continuity of political ambition between the modern empire and its remote predecessors, 'la chancellerie de Maximilien écrivait aux Suédois, comme celle de Charlemagne eût écrit aux peuples de Bénévent ou de la Guyenne'.¹⁴⁶ The fact that Robertson himself was, of course, a citizen of one of the more remarkable multi-state organisations of his own time, may indeed encourage the suspicion that such idiosyncratic emphasis had at its root some form of ideological squeamishness. The overall effect, however, is that in contrast to Voltaire, for whom the idea of Europe exhibits a certain depth and density of

¹⁴² I, pp.172-73.

¹⁴³ I, p.180.

¹⁴⁴ I, p.186.

¹⁴⁵ I, p.18.

¹⁴⁶ *Essai sur les mœurs* ed. Pomeau, II, p.146.

historical and ideological texture, Robertson's 'Europe' for all his efforts to situate it historically, still has all the appearance of a primarily imaginative space.

The insubstantiality of Robertson's idea of Europe, a mere peculiarity of the *View of the Progress of Society in Europe*, becomes an interpretative vacuum in the main narrative of the *History of the Reign of Charles V*. It is clear that a major part of the reason why Robertson was so attracted to the subject of Charles V and Francis I, and why he persisted in his intention in spite of Hume's scepticism, lies in the nature of the precise terms of the character contrast between the two protagonists, terms already established in the versions of Voltaire and Hume. Unlike the 'desultory and irregular sallies of Henry VIII. or Francis I', Charles's actions 'had the appearance of a consistent system, in which all the parts were arranged, the effects were foreseen, and the accidents were provided for'.¹⁴⁷ Charles as hero therefore both brings about and reflects Robertson's conception of Europe as 'one great poli- // tical system',¹⁴⁸ his personal vision becoming a synecdoche for the 'balance', and his history a form of diplomatic sublime. The crippling disjunction between Robertson's axiomatic establishment of Charles's diplomatic character and the actual facts of his narrative, when his hero shows himself to be in fact a chivalric braggart and compulsive overreacher, is one sign of the difficulties inherent in his enterprise, but an especially interesting and important point is the glaring inconsistency of Robertson's approach to the question of whether or not Charles aspired to universal monarchy.

In his essay 'Of the Balance of Power', Hume does not hesitate to assert that 'mankind were anew alarm'd by the danger of universal mon- // archy, from the union of so many kingdoms in the person of the emperor, Charles'¹⁴⁹ (and his modern editor reaffirms that Charles 'sought to establish a unified empire in Europe'¹⁵⁰). Hume considers Louis XIV and Charles as in this respect two of a kind; a traditional association to which Voltaire responds in his own account in the *Essai sur les moeurs*, in which (on the basis of a distinctly casuistical approach to the question of intention and as part of his general posture of defending the foreign policy of Louis XIV) he absolves both monarchs, 'l'idée de la monarchie universelle qu'on // attribue à Charles-Quint est donc aussi fausse et aussi chimérique que celle qu'on imputa depuis

¹⁴⁷ III, p.147.

¹⁴⁸ III, pp.432-33.

¹⁴⁹ *Political Discourses*, pp.108-109.

¹⁵⁰ Hume, *Essays Moral, Political, and Literary* ed. Eugene F. Miller (Indianapolis: 1985), editorial footnote p.338.

à Louis XIV'.¹⁵¹ Robertson, on the other hand, avoids using the dreaded term throughout, and addresses the question only at the end, in his exculpatory summary of the 'defects in [Charles's] political character which must considerably abate the admiration due to his extraordinary talents':¹⁵²

Charles's ambition was insatiable; and though there seems to be no foundation for an opinion prevalent in his own age, that he formed the chimerical project of establishing an universal monarchy in Europe, it is certain that his desire of being distinguished as a conqueror involved him in continual wars, which exhausted and oppressed his subjects.¹⁵³

Even aside from the difficulty of supporting such a firm distinction ('no foundation') between the effects of a 'desire of being distinguished as a conqueror' and those of an attempt at universal monarchy, Robertson here contradicts his earlier acknowledgement that at a certain point, 'Charles was suspected by all his neighbours of aiming at universal monarchy, and [...] was really forming projects of this kind'.¹⁵⁴ Robertson's decision to depart from the standard British account of Charles's ambitions, and even from his own instincts and the evidence he himself reports, clearly forms part of his consistent attempt in the *History of the Reign of Charles V* to justify his presentation of diplomatic history as an Enlightened genre by stressing the civilised and normative function of the 'balance of power'. Indeed, to concede the question of universal monarchy would entail the utter transformation of Robertson's narrative, as his presentation of the subject in the *History of Scotland* attests:

[Charles's] abilities were equal to his power, and neither of them would have been inferior to his designs, had not Providence, in pity to mankind, and in order to preserve them from the worst of all evils, Universal Monarchy, raised up Francis I. to defend the liberties of Europe.¹⁵⁵

It is here taken simply for granted that European liberty is not to be left to the vagaries of the progress of civilisation, but is an achievement fought for by individual nation states under the immediate oversight of the Almighty. In the context of the *History of the Reign of Charles V*, it would represent a stretch of any North Briton's europhilia to devote 1000 pages and a promising literary reputation to telling the story of How French Gallantry Saved the Liberties of Europe. It is precisely in order to banish this emotive rhetoric of the epic national struggle, and to avoid the hyper-stimulation of

¹⁵¹ *Essai sur les mœurs* ed. Pomeau, II, pp.189-90.

¹⁵² III, p.419.

¹⁵³ III, p.419.

¹⁵⁴ II, pp.235-36.

¹⁵⁵ I, p.75.

the political imaginations of his British readers who are already conditioned to detect the shadow of Louis looming behind the figure of Charles, that Robertson acts to deflect what remains the obvious interpretation of his narrative in the *History of the Reign of Charles V*. On this point especially, just as in the *History of Scotland*, Robertson shows how in an unphilosophic climate, a basic condition for the exercise of historical detachment on controversial subjects must be an unabashed artfulness in the historical exposition.

Hume, of course, remained stubbornly unconverted to the Enlightened significance of the main narrative of the *History of the Reign of Charles V*, ‘neither the Character of Charles V, nor the Incidents of his Life are very interesting; and were it not for the first Volume, the Success of this work, tho’ perfectly well writ, woud not have been so shining’,¹⁵⁶ and his valuation of the preface above the body of the text is generally either implicitly or explicitly followed by subsequent scholars. In comparison to the much-favoured *View of the Progress of Society in Europe*, the claims to philosophic status of the main narrative of the *History of the Reign of Charles V* are a little uncertain, and in need of careful demonstration. John Pocock calls attention to the possible doubtfulness of its interpretative significance, ‘it would [...] be easy for us to dismiss or marginalise it as “conventional” or “traditional”’,¹⁵⁷ and he also identifies what must be, and what Robertson himself has claimed from the beginning to be, the major part of its claim to such significance. The main narrative of the *History of the Reign of Charles V* shows the ‘balance of power’ in action; Charles’s ‘moment in history [...] was one at which the states of Europe formed such a system that actions in any one had effects for all the others, and princes could not foresee the effects of their own initiatives’.¹⁵⁸ However, after having maintained precisely this argument throughout the text, even in defiance of what his narrative actually recounts, Robertson in fact concludes by covering his own definition of the period in question in a thick layer of ambiguity:

It was during [Charles’s] reign, and in consequence of the perpetual efforts to which his enterprizing ambition roused them, that the different kingdoms of Europe acquired internal vigour, that they discerned the internal resources of which they were possessed, that they came to feel their own strength, and to know how to render it formidable to others. It was during his reign, too, that the different kingdoms of Europe, formerly single and disjointed, became so

¹⁵⁶ Letter to Hugh Blair, 28th March 1769, *Letters* ed. Greig, II, p.197.

¹⁵⁷ *Barbarism and Religion Volume Two*, p.289.

¹⁵⁸ loc. cit.

thoroughly acquainted, and so intimately connected with each other, as to form one great political system, in which each took a station, wherein it has remained since that time with less variation than could have been expected after the events of two active centuries.¹⁵⁹

The immediately obvious point is that Robertson here admits that his main narrative is not that of the operation of the ‘balance’, but one of the coming into being of the ‘balance’, but still more significant is the manner in which he describes its coming into being. It is here presented as a shift of perception, a process of discerning and feeling and self-recognition, which must imply that, by seeking to yoke a traditional form of diplomatic narrative to the wider concerns of the history of civilisation, Robertson has made a poor choice of genre; he has been telling a history of events, but was searching for a history of ideas.

The association of the histories of Hume and Robertson with the scholarly construct of the ‘Enlightened narrative’ is a particular illustration of the capacity of prior assumptions regarding the historical function of the personages of Enlightenment as some version of ‘intellectuals’, to even silently inform critical expectations regarding the nature of their textual practice in any given instance. If there was a British Enlightenment, Hume and Robertson must be regarded as members of it. They evince an undeniable intention to influence their society (although the wider Enlightened significance of defending the British constitutional settlement may legitimately be questioned), and Hume is even a philosopher in the real sense of the term. They, if anyone, are eighteenth-century British intellectuals. Yet in their histories, they are as much shaped by as shaping their discursive environment. As controversial historians, they are constrained to take for granted shibboleths they may otherwise have wished to refute; as part of their aim to procure conviction in their readers, their historical judgements are inflected by the need to palliate, to propitiate, and to seduce; and in the absence of any sympathetic climate of intellectual enquiry regarding the history of religion, their engagement with the subject is condemned to be tangential, glancing, or limited to a form of coded allusion. The importance of some form of integrity to the practice of ‘narrative’ to the ‘Enlightened narrative’ is evident in the fact that the most committed scholarly proponents of the ‘Enlightened narrative’ take as their starting point particularly

¹⁵⁹ III, pp.432-33.

schematic models for the relationship between the historian and his text. John Pocock situates the ‘narrative’ part of the ‘Enlightened narrative’ within the highly differentiated discursive model of ‘neo-classical’ history;¹⁶⁰ whereas Karen O’Brien, without applying the term ‘neo-classical’ to all the subjects of her study, emphasises their authorial role as orchestrators of response, and particularly argues for the connection between ‘the persuasive oratorical presence’ of the historians in their histories, and their actual persons, ‘a function of the historian’s social authority often secured elsewhere in the public and political sphere’.¹⁶¹ It is the very fact that Hume and Robertson could not lay claim to any established position of (in Karen O’Brien’s formulation) ‘cultural centrality and spokesmanship’ in eighteenth-century Britain which prevented them from assuming such as an ‘authorial posture’.¹⁶²

An alternative approach to that of assessing the histories of Hume and Robertson for conformity to the ‘Enlightened narrative’, is, however, to consider how Hume and Robertson reflect on the idea of an ‘Enlightened narrative’ as an enterprise. Hume’s remark that ‘this is the historical Age and this the historical Nation’¹⁶³ was uttered in response to a deluge of publications of variable quality, but the contrast to Voltaire’s approach to the history of France illustrates a very particular sense in which this may be said to be true of eighteenth-century Britain. Both Hume and Robertson understand themselves as historians to be under the obligation to present their readers with some form of imaginatively – if not truly historically – satisfactory representation of the connection between past and present. A mere dismantling of the existing narratives is not enough, hence their highly problematic and often disconcertingly superficial employment of certain of the tropes of the ‘Enlightened narrative’, the idea of manners and the idea of Europe. Voltaire, on the other hand, variously assaults the constitutional, the monarchical, and the providential historical narratives established for France, and looks forward to the political character of France being re-made and even re-thought by the judicious interposition of executive power. Any construct of an ‘Enlightenment sense of history’ must be responsive to historical, national, political and even personal differences regarding what the

¹⁶⁰ See John Pocock, *Barbarism and Religion Volume Two*, pp.7-10.

¹⁶¹ Karen O’Brien, *Narratives of Enlightenment*, p.8.

¹⁶² *Narratives of Enlightenment*, p.8.

¹⁶³ Letter to William Strahan [August 1770], *Letters* ed. Greig, II, p.230.

possession of a 'sense of history' should entail.¹⁶⁴ At the same time, the united efforts of Hume and Robertson certainly may be said to have achieved the ambiguous enthronement of the 'Enlightened narrative' as a British historical genre; textually present, if signally unsatisfactory as a historical exposition; but also conceptually absent, in that it never wholly frees itself from the primary interpretative cogency of national constitutional history. For all the ideological and philosophical connotations in Britain of the idea of a history of manners and of Europe, the British version of the 'Enlightened narrative' ultimately has little to distinguish it from the largely rhetorical status of the French philosophic concept of the history of *moeurs*; a positive invitation to insincere appropriation, to which Gibbon, notably, would respond.

¹⁶⁴ The phrase 'a sense of history' is John Leigh's; see his *Voltaire: a sense of history*, *SVEC* 2004:05, and p.xv for his definition.

CHAPTER 4. THE LIMITS OF PRESCRIPTION

In contrast to the shifting perspectives afforded by the diverse and divided intellectual writers of eighteenth-century Britain, the French *Encyclopédie* (1751-65) has all the aura of Enlightenment made explicit. Even within the context of the French Enlightenment only, the *encyclopédistes* exert a gravitational pull,¹ and in general, as John Pocock remarks, the *Encyclopédie* and the *encyclopédistes* have come to represent ‘Enlightenment in its paradigmatic form’.² It is also the case that, for all that Voltaire – too old, too remote, and too much the unclubbable *grand seigneur* for current emphases on a sociable and egalitarian Enlightenment – may yet retain his place in histories of Enlightenment historiography, the single text most consistently appealed to as evidence of the (French) Enlightenment historical method is the *Encyclopédie*; the result both of the refreshing willingness of the *encyclopédistes* to commit themselves on such questions, and also of course of Gibbon’s decision to bestow upon it a relationship with his own practice. The discussion of historiographical matters in the *Encyclopédie* does, however, particularly illustrate the extent to which the rhetoric of philosophic hegemony and the programmatic emphasis on ideas and method which make the *encyclopédiste* project so attractive as a means of locating the thought of the French Enlightenment, derive their impression of certainty and strength from the very extent of what is excluded from the scope of their prescription. Indeed, the evidence of the actual works of historiography produced by members of the *encyclopédiste* project, including and especially the *Histoire des deux Indes* (1770; rev. 1774, 1780) by Diderot and Raynal, a relative latecomer to the canon of philosophic historiography, is rather that the distinctive feature of French philosophic historiography is the search for a literary solution to the failure of philosophic prescription. Recognition of this character of French philosophic historiography, as the stylistic embodiment of an implausible idea, is of great importance in assessing the precise nature of Gibbon’s interest in the *encyclopédiste* literature regarding erudition.

¹ See, for example, Dena Goodman, *The Republic of Letters: A Cultural History of the French Enlightenment* (New York: 1994).

² John Pocock, *Barbarism and Religion Volume One*, p.137.

1. 'La gloire d'être auteur et inventeur'

In a 1756 addition to the catalogue of authors in the *Siècle de Louis XIV*, Voltaire's commemoration of the life of the unsung *encyclopédiste* and grammarian Dumarsais causes him to reflect on a new cultural phenomenon, the advent of the corporate body of *philosophes*:

Il était du nombre de ces philosophes obscurs dont Paris est plein, qui jugent sainement de tout, qui vivent entre eux dans la paix et dans la communication de la raison, ignorés des grands, et très redoutés de ces charlatans en tout genre qui veulent dominer sur les esprits. La foule de ces hommes sages est une suite de l'esprit du siècle.³

This definition contains within it all the major elements of the paradigmatic version of *philosophie* of which the *encyclopédistes* are still held to be the truest manifestation; the emphasis on *philosophes* as a collective, on their internal cohesion, their devotion to sound judgement, and their independence of 'les grands'. It is therefore a significant fact in itself that such a definition, enunciated by a contemporary, is spoken not without irony, and with a clear sense that it does not reflect his own practice (and indeed, with an equally clear sense of the function of the *philosophes* of the *Encyclopédie* generation as a Parisian literary clique). However, the most important aspect of Voltaire's account is that it calls attention to how the potential of the *encyclopédiste* version of philosophic practice rests within marked boundaries, a restriction of political (or public, in the full sense of the term) relevance, and a sacrifice of literary individuality. The prescriptions for philosophic historiography in the *Encyclopédie* repeatedly founder on the question of the precise positioning of those boundaries.

The fact that the description of the philosophic historian's public role in the *Encyclopédie* oscillates wildly between the anonymity of the factual writer, and the dominant assertion of moral and political authority presented for example in Marmontel's article 'Critique', is one intimation of ambivalence among the *philosophes* themselves regarding with what degree of emphasis and in what manner their 'public' role might be construed:

[L]'Histoire, dans sa partie morale, est une espece de labyrinthe où l'opinion du lecteur ne cesse de s'égarer; c'est une guide qui lui manque; or cet guide seroit un critique capable de distinguer la vérité de l'opinion, le droit de

³ *Siècle de Louis XIV* in *Oeuvres historiques* ed. Pomeau, p.1160.

l'autorité, le devoir de l'intérêt, la vertu de la gloire elle-même; en un mot de réduire l'homme, quel qu'il fût, à la condition du citoyen; condition qui est la base des lois, la règle des mœurs, & dont aucun homme en société n'eut jamais droit de s'affranchir.⁴

However, the more general tenor of the presentation of historiography in the *Encyclopédie* is to present it as the science of facts. Voltaire himself, invited, as the grand old man of philosophic historiography, to contribute the article 'Histoire' to the *Encyclopédie*, takes colour from his surroundings, and gives a particular emphasis to the need for the philosophic historian to adopt a philosopher's rigour with regard to facts:

Mais en se modélant en général sur ces grands maîtres [that is, the Classical historians], on a aujourd'hui un fardeau plus pesant que le leur à soutenir. On exige des histoires modernes plus de détails, des faits plus constatés, des dates précises, des autorités, plus d'attention aux usages, aux lois, aux mœurs, au commerce, à la finance, à l'agriculture, à la population. Il en est de l'*histoire* comme des Mathématiques & de la Physique. La carrière s'est prodigieusement accrue. Autant il est aisé de faire un recueil de gazettes, autant il est difficile aujourd'hui d'écrire l'*histoire*.⁵

Voltaire's approach to the idea of *mœurs* in his own works has an ambivalent regard to its function as a category of information, and also as a potentially transforming interpretative concept, but here the former definition is emphasized, and included in the philosophic historian's general mission to provide facts, and, it seems, facts alone.

Yet even while securing for historiography a place in the new, dominant voice of the philosophic project, Voltaire reveals the true extent of the price to be paid. In his article in the *Encyclopédie* as throughout his historical writings he insists that, parallel to the expansion of the sphere of history, a defining characteristic of the work of philosophic historiography is that it is selective with regard to facts; and this in a publishing context where the same forces that bring new areas of knowledge to the philosophic historian's attention, and create a demand for such among his readers, threaten to overwhelm any sense of the proper value of facts and to grant them a dangerous degree of importance for their own sake, 'on est accablé sous le poids des minuties'.⁶ The paradoxical status of the factual philosophic historian – both a creature of the expansion of printed information, and at war with it – is encapsulated

⁴ *Encyclopédie ou Dictionnaire raisonné des arts et des sciences, par une société de gens de lettres* (Paris: 1751-65), s.v. 'Critique'.

⁵ *Encyclopédie*, s.v. 'Histoire'.

⁶ loc. cit.

in the ambiguous nature of Voltaire's attempted distinction between the creation of a mere 'recueil de gazettes', which is 'easy', and that of a work of philosophic historiography, which is somehow to be understood as 'hard' despite the fact that, considered as textual productions and in terms of their method of composition, the two forms appear indistinguishable. So far from presenting a refuge from the interpretative complexities and potential political entanglement enjoined by the historiography of *moeurs* in the full sense of the term, the factual model for philosophic historiography thus presents the *philosophe* with a surprising new danger, that of incipient literary anonymity.

The noble tone of dedication to furthering the progress of knowledge which dominates in the *Encyclopédie* grants no room for lamenting how becoming the *philosophe* must represent a sacrifice for the author. Diderot, too, as editor of the *Encyclopédie* presents the role of the *philosophe* as being to rescue the general reader from the peculiar kind of vertigo induced by an excess of printed information:

Tandis que les siècles s'écoulent, la masse des ouvrages s'accroît sans cesse, & l'on prévoit un moment où il seroit presque aussi difficile de s'instruire dans une bibliothèque, que dans l'univers, & presque aussi court de chercher une vérité subsistante dans la nature, qu'égagée dans une multitude immense de volumes; il faudroit alors se livrer, par nécessité, à un travail [that is, the composition of an *Encyclopédie*] qu'on auroit négligé d'entreprendre, parce qu'on n'en auroit pas senti le besoin.⁷

As a collaborative enterprise, the *Encyclopédie* does of course itself exemplify the ensuing anonymity of the factual philosophic writer. Diderot describes the battle of the editors against the attempts of contributors to indulge themselves, 'j'ai fait souvent une observation, c'est que l'émulation qui s'allume nécessairement entre des collègues, produit des dissertations au lieu des articles', and, in the supreme act of editorial self-abnegation, he claims to look forward to how subsequent editors will further dilute any elements of 'le ton emphatique & oratoire' which have hitherto escaped his scrutiny. He nevertheless permits himself an anticipatory note of regret for the loss of the 'air original' of the first edition. However, the persistent implication, just as in Voltaire's statement of the question, is that sacrificing literary personality in the individual writer may have larger consequences for the identity of the *philosophes* as a *corps*. The greatest threat to the *philosophe* of such a literary anonymity is not necessarily the blow to the individual ego, but the way it threatens

⁷ *Encyclopédie*, s.v. 'Encyclopédie'. The quotations immediately following are from the same article.

the very idea of the distinctiveness of philosophic writings. There is nothing inherently philosophic about encyclopedias as a genre, as Diderot himself admits in his *Prospectus*, ‘l’utilité sensible de ces sortes d’ouvrages les a rendus si communs, que nous sommes plutôt aujourd’hui dans le cas de les justifier que d’en faire l’éloge’;⁸ and in order to defend the whole genre against accusations that it does nothing but encourage smatterers, he is forced to make common cause with the much-maligned general ‘multiplication des méthodes, des élémens, des abrégés, & des bibliothèques’, and also with certain of the ‘Journalistes’ and their practice of making excerpts.⁹ To describe such productions as unphilosophic texts would of course be to beg the question, but it is clearly evident that journals and abridgements have no particular need of *philosophes* to produce them. Far from being the pinnacle of philosophic achievement, factual writing may simply not be capable of bearing the weight of philosophic self-fashioning, and the status of the *historien philosophe* as *philosophe* may have to be projected on to some alternative, extra-textual form of demonstration. Philosophic historiography may have joined the sciences only to dissolve as a form, and evaporate as an ambition.

It is a further insult to the philosophic claim to distinction, that the definitively unphilosophic historian Charles Rollin, the some-time university professor and popular educationalist who is singled out for contemptuous dismissal in Voltaire’s article, ‘le tems est si cher, & l’histoire si immense, qu’il faut épargner aux lecteurs de telles fables & de telles moralités’,¹⁰ shows himself in his *Histoire ancienne des Egyptiens* (1730-38) to be as clear-sighted as any *philosophe* regarding the consequences of becoming a factual historian for an author’s literary status:

Je dois avertir par avance, avec la franchise dont j’ai fait profession jusqu’ici, que j’entreprends de traiter une matière [that of the arts and sciences], dont plusieurs parties me sont presque entièrement inconnues. J’ai besoin, pour cette raison, d’une nouvelle indulgence. Je demande qu’il me soit permis d’user librement, comme j’ai toujours fait, (& j’y suis forcé plus que jamais) de tous les secours que je trouverai à ma rencontre. Je courrai risque de perdre la gloire d’être Auteur et Inventeur. J’y renonce volontiers, pourvu que je puisse avoir celle de plaire à mes Lecteurs, & de leur être de quelque utilité.¹¹

⁸ Denis Diderot and Jean Le Rond d’Alembert, *Discours préliminaire des éditeurs de l’Encyclopédie*, in volume I of d’Alembert, *Mélanges de littérature, d’histoire et de philosophie*, 2 vols. in-8° (Berlin: 1753), I, p.166.

⁹ I, p.167.

¹⁰ *Encyclopédie*, s.v. ‘Histoire’.

¹¹ Charles Rollin, *Histoire ancienne des Egyptiens, des Carthaginois, des Assyriens, des Babyloniens, des Medes et des Perses, des Macedoniens, des Grecs*, 6 vols. in-4° (Paris, 1740; first published 1730-38), I, p.474.

Diderot also describes the necessary sacrifice of *gloire* in the compilation of the *Encyclopédie*, ‘il est vrai que ce plan a réduit le mérite d’Editeur à peu de chose; mais il a beaucoup ajoûté à la perfection de l’Ouvrage; & nous penserons toûjours nous être acquis assez de gloire, si le Public est satisfait’.¹² The whole tenor of the *Encyclopédie* and its rhetoric of the progress of knowledge is, however, to actually reinforce the glory of being an *inventeur*; a superior kind of *philosophe* who is called upon to make no such submission to the taste of the public for easy reading, and who could never be found to give the impression of a common cause with establishment pedagogues like Rollin.

In his article ‘Encyclopédie’ Diderot presents the question as a simple matter of separate spheres, ‘je distingue deux moyens de cultiver les sciences: l’un d’augmenter la masse des connoissances par des découvertes; & c’est aussi qu’on mérite le nom d’*inventeur*’ and the other to communicate discoveries to the general public, ‘et l’on appelle *auteurs classiques*, ceux qui réussissent dans ce genre qui n’est pas sans difficulté’;¹³ yet the faint praise of ‘not without difficulty’ is no match for the homage to the powers of reason which continually escapes the editors’ attempts at epistemological fair-mindedness. Even in the celebrated article ‘Erudition’, d’Alembert quickly surrenders the serene impartiality of his *de haut en bas* apology for scholarship – ‘aucun genre de connoissance n’est méprisable’ – when Cicero’s assertion that ‘pour réussir dans les Mathématiques, il suffit de s’y appliquer’,¹⁴ threatens to class his own intellectual specialism as of a similar kind. A new term of intellectual classification is now introduced, that of ‘génie’:

[Pour] être inventeur dans ces sciences, pour ajoûter aux découvertes des Newtons & des Descartes, il faut un degré de génie & de talents auquel bien peu de gens peuvent atteindre. Au contraire, il n’y a point d’homme qui, avec des yeux, de la patience, & de la mémoire, ne puisse devenir très-érudit à force de lecture.

Rollin surrenders his claim to high literary status with a good grace; the *philosophe*, on the other hand, remains haunted by the image of superior intellectual qualities which the factual writer, philosophic or otherwise, is condemned to forgo. For all the efforts of the editors of the *Encyclopédie*, and their hymning of the virtues of self-sacrifice and of the duty of spreading the message of Enlightenment, it is the image of

¹² *Discours préliminaire*, in d’Alembert, *Mélanges*, I, p.175.

¹³ *Encyclopédie*, s.v. ‘Encyclopédie’.

¹⁴ *Encyclopédie*, s.v. ‘Erudition’. The quotation immediately following is from the same article.

the reasoner and not that of the communicator whose self-image best accords with the ambitions of *philosophie*, and yet the latter function is evidently all that can be envisaged as the role of the philosophic historian. Literary ambition in the *Encyclopédie* certainly persists, and yet perhaps as still more than solely a private desire that dare not speak its name in such company. To achieve literary distinction may in fact be a philosophic obligation.

While the retreat to facts in philosophic historiography brings about a clash of representations of what it means to be a philosophic author, the venerable stylistic problem of how to introduce *réflexions* into an information-based text shows the status of the philosophic author to be engaged in a zero-sum conflict with the dignity of the philosophic reader. The nature of the problem of *réflexions* in historical composition is encapsulated in Rollin's apology in his Avertissement to the fourth volume of the *Histoire ancienne des Egyptiens*, where he responds to the accusation that his authorial voice dominates in a way that is offensive to the reader who wants only information:

Quelques personnes croient que, dans mon Histoire, les réflexions sont trop longues & trop fréquentes. Je sens bien que cette critique n'est point sans fondement, & qu'en cela je me suis un peu écarté de la règle que les Historiens ont coutume de suivre, qui est de laisser pour l'ordinaire au Lecteur le soin, & en même tems le plaisir de faire lui-même ses réflexions sur les faits qu'on lui présente; au lieu qu'en les lui suggérant, il paroît qu'on se défie de ses lumières, & de sa pénétration.¹⁵

Moreover, philosophic readers are by very definition those who judge for themselves; as the *Encyclopédie* article 'Philosophie' insists, 'un vrai philosophe ne voit point par les yeux d'autrui, il ne se rend qu'à la conviction qui naît de l'évidence'.¹⁶ Yet if the reader is to be presented only with facts in their pure form, the philosophic author disappears, and is prohibited from demonstrating the superior intellectual qualities which the same article presents as the definitive characteristic of the *philosophe* and his greatest distinction from the mere *érudit*; 'la connoissance des faits est sans contredit utile, elle est même un préalable essentiel à leur explication; mais être philosophe, ce n'est pas simplement avoir beaucoup vû & beaucoup lû [...] c'est avoir des principes solides, & surtout une bonne méthode pour rendre raison de ces faits, & en tirer de légitimes conséquences'.¹⁷ However, should the philosophic historian

¹⁵ Rollin, *Histoire ancienne*, I, p.liv.

¹⁶ *Encyclopédie*, s.v. 'Philosophie'.

¹⁷ loc. cit.

presume to offer his *réflexions*, as Rollin acknowledges, he implicitly insults his reader's capabilities. Where Rollin can simply take refuge in the humble status of the writer for children, 'je reviens encore à mes jeunes gens, il faut qu'on me le pardonne',¹⁸ the whole framing of the *Encyclopédie* is of course as a philosophic text responding to the needs of a philosophic public.

2. 'Beaucoup de préceptes, & peu de grands artistes'

If joining the sciences brings the very concept of philosophic historiography to a form of rhetorical impasse, the obvious solution is to return to the powerful vision of the public function of philosophic historiography expressed even in the *Encyclopédie* itself by Marmontel. However, even beyond the immediately obvious distance between prescribing political *hardiesse* and actually undertaking to practise it, the specific example Marmontel gives of what the ideological content of a philosophic historical-political campaign should be, demonstrates precisely why such matters could never be made the subject of explicit discussion by the *philosophes*:

Par exemple, il n'est point de préjugé plus généralement ni plus profondément enraciné dans l'opinion des hommes, que la gloire attachée au titre de conquérant; toutefois nous ne craignons point d'avancer que si dans tous les tems les Philosophes, les Historiens, les Orateurs, les Poètes, en un mot les dépositaires de la réputation & les dispensateurs de la gloire, s'étoient réunis pour attacher aux horreurs d'une guerre injuste le même opprobre qu'au larcin & à l'assassinat, on eût peu vû de brigands illustres.¹⁹

The suggestion that it is the proper role of the *philosophe* to provide a counterpoint to the glorification of kings and battles is of course familiar from the works of Voltaire, which themselves also illustrate how such an ambition spans the range of significance from literary commonplace (often deceptively employed) to targeted political programme. Even Rollin the despised pedagogue, for all that he writes in advance of the Enlightenment proffered by the *Encyclopédie*, takes up the burden of historiographical pacifism in the chapter 'Des Arts & des Sciences' in his *Histoire ancienne des Egyptiens*:

L'Histoire des Arts & des Sciences, & de ceux qui s'y sont distingués par un mérite particulier, est, à proprement parler, l'histoire de l'esprit humain;

¹⁸ Rollin, *Histoire ancienne*, I, p.lv.

¹⁹ *Encyclopédie*, s.v. 'Critique'.

laquelle, en un certain sens, ne le cède point à celle des Princes et des Héros, que l'opin // ion commune place au suprême degré d'élevation.²⁰

Even aside from his use of the classic philosophic formulation 'l'histoire de l'esprit humain', the close correspondence of Rollin's presentation of the question with the terms of the philosophic challenge to the historiography of *conquérants*, and his comparably forceful use of the rhetoric of Enlightened mission, are remarkable; incorporating a positively Voltairean assault on how 'les conquêtes, qui occupent la plus grande partie de l'Histoire, & qui attirent le plus l'admiration, n'ont pour effet ordinaire que le ravage des terres, la destruction des villes, le carnage des hommes',²¹ and a homage to how 'les Inventeurs des Arts & des Sciences ont travaillé pour tous les siècles'²² that is *encyclopédiste avant la lettre*. The fact that Rollin immediately feels called upon to retreat in the face of his own rhetorical boldness, and to assure his readers that 'je ne prétends point, en parlant ainsi, donner atteinte à la différence des états & des conditions, ni confondre ou égaler les rangs que Dieu lui-même a distingués parmi les hommes',²³ illustrates how there is in France a latent radicalism in such speculation on the virtues of kingship, but also how it needs a specific, contextualized emphasis to take on a political function. It does indeed appear that it is precisely this very quality of the injunction to criticize *conquérants*, as inherently responsive to local inflexion, and thus as a particular illustration of what Keith Baker describes as 'the ambiguities and uncertainties of French political discourse at the end of the Old Regime',²⁴ which makes it of such great use in the self-fashioning of the philosophic historians. Still, to actually prescribe the deliberate cultivation of ambiguity, however strategic, hardly suits the ambitions of the *Encyclopédie*.

The residual insufficiencies of the ideological vocabulary of *philosophie* are of course in great contrast to the secure grounding of Hume and Robertson in the vigorous if parochial traditions of British political debate. However, the historiographical prescriptions of the *philosophe* but certainly not *encyclopédiste* Abbé de Mably (the brother of Condillac) demonstrate the great extent to which the *philosophes'* dilemma is not a reflection of a want of ideas, but of the difficulties they

²⁰ Rollin, *Histoire ancienne*, I, pp.467-68.

²¹ II, p.469.

²² II, p.470.

²³ I, p.468.

²⁴ Keith Baker, 'A Script for a French Revolution: The Political Consciousness of the abbé Mably', *Eighteenth-Century Studies*, 14 No. 3 (1981) 235-63, p.236.

encounter in locating their own practice within a specific (and so prescribable) set of relationships between themselves as writers, the ‘public’ or the ‘political’ sphere, and a defined readership. The devotion to a severe and Classical republicanism which has made Mably such an intriguing subject for historians of political thought²⁵ has the particular effect of enabling him to be one *philosophe* who does transmute the commonplace of the undesirability of a conquering monarch into a fully worked-out political philosophy. In his treatise for the Prince of Parma *De l’étude de l’histoire* (1775) Mably incorporates the standard Enlightened sentiment, ‘vous serez certainement, Monseigneur, un grand prince, si plein d’admiration pour le génie de Philippe inépuisable en ressources, et le courage audacieux d’Alexandre une raison prématurée vous a cependant porté à blâmer leur ambition, et désirer qu’ils eussent fait un meilleur emploi de leurs grands qualités’,²⁶ into a thoroughgoing reassertion of the historical truths of Classical republicanism; in essence, the necessary connection between fidelity to the national laws and respect for the moral dictates of natural law, and a given society’s eventual flourishing and long-term survival. Indeed, Mably’s interpretative single-mindedness notably restores some form of purity to history as a subject and as a genre, after its philosophically-sanctioned expansion (or collapse) into the category of ‘useful knowledge’. In his treatise *De la manière d’écrire l’histoire* (1783), he is indignant at Voltaire’s penchant for informing his readers of useful facts in the *Histoire de Charles XII*, ‘que m’importe d’apprendre qu’on ne connoît en Suède que deux saisons, l’hiver et l’été’,²⁷ and simply bemused at Robertson’s desire in his *History of America* (1777) ‘de m’apprendre mille choses qu’il est bon de savoir, mais dont je ne me soucie point dans le moment où je suis impatient d’apprendre comment les Européens ont soumis [ce] vaste pays’.²⁸

The fact that, for all his ideological certainties, Mably, too, envisions the textual embodiment of *réflexions*, representing an assertion of the historian’s judgement in the face of the reader, in the terms of a rhetorical impasse, is therefore a strong evidence of this curious kind of diffidence within French philosophic historiography; the way that the persistent appeal to the proud image of general

²⁵ See Johnson Kent Wright, *A Classical Republican in Eighteenth-Century France: The Political Thought of Mably* (Stanford: 1997).

²⁶ Gabriel Bonnot, Abbé de Mably, *De l’étude de l’histoire*, in ‘*De l’étude de l’histoire*’; suivi de ‘*De la manière d’écrire l’histoire*’ ed. Barbara Negroni (Paris: 1988), p.10.

²⁷ *De la manière d’écrire l’histoire* ed. Negroni, p.355.

²⁸ p.371.

cultural dominion, does not extend to exerting that dominion in the most intimate of literary relations, that between author and reader. If anything, it is as if the greater the importance a given *philosophe* ascribes to the role of the philosophic historian, the less likely he is to leave the safe haven of the literature of prescription, and to actually attempt to become a practitioner of his self-described art. In *De la manière d'écrire l'histoire*, Mably lectures his young interlocutor Théodon who is considering becoming a historian, 'prenez de l'historien [...] l'idée relevée que vous devez en avoir, *il doit exercer une sorte de magistrature*; et vouloir le réduire à ne coudre que des faits et les raconter avec agrément pour amuser notre curiosité ou plaire à notre imagination, c'est l'avilir, et n'en faire qu'un insipide gazetier ou bel esprit';²⁹ and yet the sole fruit of his discourse, given the extreme seriousness of his prescription, is to dissuade Théodon from daring to make any such attempt in the first place. Mably's ally in the dialogue Cidamon remarks that, after hearing Mably's prescription, 'personne n'osera écrire l'histoire',³⁰ but Théodon concludes on a more positive note that 'si vous m'avez dégoûté d'écrire l'histoire, il me semble que vous m'avez appris à la lire avec plus de plaisir'.³¹ It is precisely this emphasis on the reader's perspective which underlies Mably's severity. For all that readers in general are in danger of being led astray by meretricious or merely ill-informed commentary – and Mably's long roll-call of infamy includes all the major eighteenth-century historians, from Gibbon to Robertson to Raynal, while even Tacitus is not spared – the serious, the philosophic reader must have his intelligence and interpretative autonomy respected:

L'instruction que j'attends ne doit point être pédante, elle me fatiguerait et me dégoûterait. Pour plaire aux bons esprits, elle doit en quelque sorte échapper à tous les autres. [...] Pour moi, j'aime qu'un historien, en me frappant vivement, m'oblige quelquefois à suspendre ma lecture. Je ferme mon livre, j'admire, je réfléchis pendant une demi-heure, et je reviens avec un nouveau plaisir à une histoire que me fait méditer.³²

Needless to say, to intrude upon the delicacy of such a relationship with the heavy didacticism of 'réflexions longues, entortillées ou hardies'³³ is an unforgivable solecism. If writing for 'des esprits encore incapables de réfléchir',³⁴ as in the case of Rollin and his childish readers, *réflexions* may be overt; otherwise, the historian must

²⁹ p.280.

³⁰ p.349.

³¹ p.350.

³² p.351.

³³ p.351.

³⁴ p.397.

address himself in a manner worthy of ‘personnes dignes de lire l’histoire et qui cherchent à éclairer leur raison’.³⁵ The ultimate conclusion of *De la manière d’écrire l’histoire*, in the form of Théodon’s abandonment of his project to become a historian, is, of course, that such a textual authority, a *magistrature*, however expressed, still remains too great for words.

It is in this way a peculiarly ironic consequence of the French philosophic predilection for self-description and precise classification – a characteristic which contributes to a large part of its attraction as a location for a paradigm of Enlightenment – that in the case of historiography, the *philosophes*’ desire for a philosophically justified practice of literary genre, for a kind of discursive purity, is turned against them. The casting of writers and readers into the Enlightened roles of equal participants in the progress of knowledge dissolves historiography as a genre and collapses the voice of the historian into the display of a collection of facts, and ends by making the works of *philosophie* practically indistinguishable from other trends in contemporary popular publishing. Similarly, and as a question of form, the emphasis on an equal and scientific communion between author and reader invests a particular dilemma of eighteenth-century history writing, the stylistic problem of how to present commentary as well as facts and narrative, with too much significance for it to be satisfactorily resolved. At the same time, the persistent necessity of personal reserve and rhetorical indirection in writing for the public in eighteenth-century France ensures that the relationship between *philosophie* and ‘politics’ (in the proper national manifestations) remains resistant to explicit definition, or discussion even. The proud image of philosophic cultural hegemony exists in the political sphere largely as an additional means of self-condemnation for the *philosophes* themselves.

However, if French philosophic historiography struggles with two sets of specific relations – that between the author and his readers, and that between philosophic practice and political engagement – a still greater irony of *encyclopédiste* prescription is that it is the severest *philosophe* of them all, d’Alembert himself, who should demonstrate in his own practice how at least author and readers can arrive at a form of working solution. Voltaire, faced with La Beaumelle’s uncompromising definition of the public role of the *philosophe*, grants himself a local exemption from fidelity to *philosophie*, and declares himself instead an *honnête homme*, as evidently a

³⁵ p.397.

more flexible form of literary practice. D'Alembert in his own historical work, the *Réflexions et anecdotes sur Christine, reine de Suède* included in the *Mélanges de littérature, d'histoire et de philosophie* (1753), the same collection which presents the *Discours préliminaire* of the *Encyclopédie*, similarly breaks out from the austerities of prescription, and takes refuge in the irreducible variousness of literary form. He describes how at first he intended (in impeccably *encyclopediste* spirit) to extract 'une histoire abrégée de Christine'³⁶ from the unappetizing mass of information that had been published about her, and yet found that such a work was not at all 'de mon goût':

La marche uniforme & le style un peu monotone auquel on a jugé à propos d'assujettir l'Histoire, auroit été pour moi une entrave continuelle: je ne sai par quelle raison on est convenu presque généralement de réduire l'Histoire à n'être qu'une espèce de gazette renforcée, exacte pour des faits & pour le style.³⁷

The irony is obvious, that it is d'Alembert who subjects historians in the pages of the *Encyclopédie* to his own taste for classificatory rectitude, and himself does much to make an escape from the sterile 'gazette renforcée' an attractive proposition. In his character as a historian, d'Alembert wants more; and he proceeds to mount a defence of *réflexions*, going even so far as to claim that they help fix facts in the mind of the reader in an analogous fashion to the way 'les démonstrations de Géométrie'³⁸ convey propositions. This is a rare abuse of technical vocabulary for d'Alembert the mathematician, and also clearly in context an attempt to compensate for the unphilosophic insouciance with which he had earlier declared that he is 'fort aisé' that an author should spare him 'la peine' of forming his own *réflexions*.³⁹ Historiography the genre thus pulls away from the austerities of history the science; and this for all that d'Alembert's preface begins with the *encyclopediste* sentiment that 'la science de l'Histoire, quand elle n'est pas éclairée par la Philosophie, est la dernière des connoissances humaines'.⁴⁰

The significant feature of d'Alembert's presentation of the *Réflexions et anecdotes sur Christine*, is not, however, that his discussion of the principles of philosophic historiography is offered as a rationale for the form of his historical work, or conversely that he aims to construct an alternative prescription for philosophic

³⁶ D'Alembert, *Réflexions et anecdotes sur Christine, reine de Suède*, included in *Mélanges*, II, p.7.

³⁷ II, p.6.

³⁸ II, p.6.

³⁹ II, p.6.

⁴⁰ II, p.3.

historiography to that promulgated in the *Encyclopédie*. It is that d'Alembert confesses, and proceeds to make use of, the limits of literary prescription:

Cependant, pour ne pas heurter de front un préjugé assez généralement établi, ce n'est pas l'Histoire de Christine qui je donne; ce sont simplement des observations sur les principaux traits de la vie de cette Princesse, ce sera, si l'on aime mieux, un extrait raisonné des Mémoires de Christine, une conversation avec mon Lecteur, une Lettre sur ces Mémoires, en un mot ce qu'on voudra. Quand il n'en coûte que de changer un titre, il faudroit être de bien mauvaise humeur pour ne se pas mettre à son aise.⁴¹

Voltaire, too, shows exceptional care over the choice of titles for his major histories with respect to the kind of expectations each might raise in the reader, and d'Alembert here abandons prescription, throws himself on the goodwill of his readers, and rests on the untheorized strengths of general literary practice. The contrast is that between the literary self-fashioning practised within the tradition of *philosophie*, searching for clarity, precision, and rational justification, and the more amorphous and individualistic quality of literary personality. Voltaire himself concludes his article 'Histoire' for the *Encyclopédie* with what amounts to a plague on all prescription:

Ces règles sont assez connues. Mais l'art de bien écrire l'*Histoire* sera toujours très-rare. On sait assez qu'il faut un style grave, pur, varié, agréable. Il en est des lois pour écrire l'*Histoire*, comme des celles de tous les arts de l'esprit; beaucoup de préceptes, & peu de grands artistes.⁴²

The *Encyclopédie* provides for the necessary defeat of its own classificatory project.

D'Alembert does, however, exemplify the sacrifices demanded by the philosophic espousal of unphilosophic historiography, as well as its liberating potential. The *philosophe* may indeed remain a *philosophe*, by the very act of confessing his difficulties to the reader; if he is *philosophe* enough, the *philosophe* may bestow some form of philosophic status on unphilosophic historiography, with the important corollary that his identity as a *philosophe* is not assumed to be dependent on the objectively philosophic qualities of his text. In this respect the presence of the *Discours préliminaire* in the same collection as the *Réflexions et anecdotes sur Christine*, does indeed help to spread a glow of philosophic rectitude over all. The penalty of such a strategy must be a necessary impoverishment of properly historiographical ambitions. This is not the grand, total formal reinvention which haunts Voltaire's engagement with the idea of a new philosophic

⁴¹ II, p.7.

⁴² *Encyclopédie*, s.v. 'Histoire'.

historiography of *mœurs*, just as it does the prescriptive endeavours of the *Encyclopédie*. As a mathematician, d'Alembert can of course afford the concession, and he is notably keen to remind the readers of the *Mélanges* of the fact that here, he is an amateur only, and that the *Réflexions et anecdotes sur Christine* and his translations from Tacitus in the same collection are framed to represent a holiday from the burdens of philosophic historiography, and not a new direction:

Les opuscules que contient ce recueil, sont le fruit des momens de loisir & de délassement que m'ont laissé des travaux longs & pénibles. Si le public honore ces Mélanges de son suffrage, j'oserois de loin à loin en donner une suite; s'il me refuse son approbation, cet arrêt respectable pour moi, servira tout à la fois de leçon & d'exercice à ma Philosophie; je cesserai de faire des excursions dans un genre qui n'est pas le mien, je supprimerai mes réflexions bonnes ou mauvaises, je ferai de la Géométrie, & je lirai Tacite.⁴³

Mably, similarly, in his own *Observations sur les Grecs* (1749) eschews the terrible burden of assuming the role of the philosophic historian, and echoes d'Alembert in his exploitation of the greater freedom afforded by a genre less freighted with larger cultural concerns :

L'Ouvrage que je vous adresse, n'est qu'une suite de réflexions sur les mœurs, le gouvernement & la politique de la Grece; je recherche les causes de sa prospérité & de sa décadence. L'histoire envisagée sous ce point de vue, devient une école de Philosophie: on y apprend à connoître des hommes: on y enrichit, on y étend sa raison, en mettant à profit la sagesse & les erreurs des siècles passés.⁴⁴

The French Enlightenment stands in no danger of banning itself from historical reflection, or from writing on historical topics; the genre of philosophic historiography, however, is threatened with a seemingly inexorable dissolution into occasional writings, cognate genres, and of course, the literature of prescription. The unabashed ambition of the *Histoire philosophique et politique des établissemens et du commerce des Européens dans les deux Indes* (1770; rev. 1774, 1780) by Diderot and Raynal, is therefore an unexpected late flowering of a tradition which, to the extent it ever existed, seemed already to have rationalised itself into non-existence.

⁴³ I, p.xiv.

⁴⁴ Mably, *Observations sur les Grecs* (Geneva: 1749), unpaginated dedication.

3. The philosophic personality of the *Histoire des deux Indes*

Mably singles out the vainglorious title of the *Histoire des deux Indes* for especial criticism, ‘je gagerois que l’historien aura fait un mauvais ouvrage, puisqu’il ignore que toute histoire raisonnable doit être politique et philosophique, sans affecter de le paroître’,⁴⁵ of course crying trespass where he himself feared to tread. The career of Raynal, the prime mover behind the collective enterprise that is the *Histoire des deux Indes*, and who puts his name to the voice of the historian, is indeed a perfect illustration of the reasons why *philosophes* themselves might plot an escape from the ghetto of minor historical writers, however popular, ‘raisonnable’ (Mably’s word), and of course impeccably ‘philosophic’ their writings might be. The tendency of Raynal’s early historical work to conform to the minor pattern of philosophic historiography is encapsulated in the *Anecdotes historiques, militaires et politiques de l’Europe depuis l’élévation de Charles-Quint au Trône de l’Empire jusq’au Traité d’Aix-la-Chapelle en 1748* (1753-54), a work which is revealingly described by its author as an ‘Ouvrage considérable’⁴⁶ compared to its still slighter predecessors, but which is itself merely a further exercise in the unmistakably minor genre of ‘anecdotes’. Still more importantly than the fact of its genre, however, Raynal’s authorial persona is philosophic only in its determined humility, and ritual performance of abject submission to the desires of the philosophic reader:

Toutes les Histoires deviennent intéressantes sous la plume d’un homme de génie. Pour moi dont les talents sont si bornés, j’ai senti que j’avois besoin d’être soutenu par l’agrément du sujet & la curiosité du Lecteur.⁴⁷

Accordingly, Raynal in the *Anecdotes* proclaims obedience to the dictates of philosophic textual utilitarianism, promising his reader that he will be puritanical regarding details, and severe on harangues; and he professes acceptance of his lowly status as mere *compilateur* with Rollin-like serenity, apologizing in advance to the ‘grands Ecrivains’ who have preceded him for his temerity, ‘les gens les plus chagrins ne penseront sur cela rien de si humiliant pour moi que je ne sois dit moi-même’.⁴⁸

⁴⁵ *De la manière d’écrire l’histoire*, p.381.

⁴⁶ Guillaume-Thomas Raynal, *Anecdotes historiques, militaires et politiques de l’Europe depuis l’élévation de Charles-Quint au Trône de l’Empire, jusq’au Traité d’Aix-la-Chapelle en 1748*, 3 vols. in-12° (Amsterdam: 1753-54), unpaginated introduction.

⁴⁷ loc. cit.

⁴⁸ loc. cit.

In the *Histoire des deux Indes*, on the other hand, the historian assumes the voice of a prophet:

Elevé au-dessus de toutes les considérations humaines, c'est alors qu'on plane au-dessus de l'atmosphère, & qu'on voit le globe au-dessous de soi. C'est de-là qu'on laisse tomber des larmes sur le génie persécuté, sur le talent oublié, sur la vertu malheureuse. C'est de-là qu'on verse l'imprécation & l'ignomine sur ceux qui trompent les hommes, et sur ceux qui les oppriment. C'est de-là qu'on voit la tête orgueilleuse du tyran s'abaisser et se couvrir de sang, tandis le front modeste du juste touche la voûte des cieux. C'est-là que j'ai pu véritablement m'écrier: je suis libre, & me sentir au niveau de mon sujet.⁴⁹

Where the 'historian' of the *Anecdotes* defers to his readers, the *historien philosophe* of the *Histoire des deux Indes* rounds on the 'homme avare, homme sans goût'⁵⁰ who might begin to murmur at the historian's fondness for natural history over explaining a territory's prospects for mining gold, 'je vois que tu es entré dans la lecture de mon ouvrage, comme les féroces Européens dans ces riches & malheureuses contrées'.⁵¹ In addition to the novel indignity for his readers of *tutoiement* from a philosophic author, 'Raynal', the voice of the historian in the *Histoire des deux Indes* constructed by several hands, also on one notable occasion deploys the charge of 'lecteur oisif'.⁵² Bibliographical scholarship has demonstrated the important fact that the most eye-catching passages of the *Histoire des deux Indes* were contributed by Diderot, and they are most prevalent in the last revised edition of 1780, the one which brought exile from France on its putative author Raynal.⁵³

The dominant persona of the historian in the *Histoire des deux Indes* might be without example, but it is nevertheless firmly rooted in the tradition of philosophic prescription; in its implicit lesson, that given the internal contradictions of the assumptions regarding what must constitute a properly philosophic nature and address in the case of historiography, only the individual literary personality can provide a solution; and also that the secret to achieving the status of the canonical philosophic historian can be little more than somehow managing to play the role with a sufficient degree of conviction. Voltaire's conclusion to his article 'Histoire' that there is no

⁴⁹ Raynal, *Histoire philosophique et politique des établissemens et du commerce des Européens dans les deux Indes*, 4 vols. in-4^{to} with Atlas (Geneva, 1780; first published 1770, rev. 1774), Volume I, Book 1, Introduction, p.3.

⁵⁰ Volume II, Book 7, Chapter XXVIII, p.221.

⁵¹ loc. cit.

⁵² Volume III, Book 13, Chapter XXXI, p.405.

⁵³ See Michèle Duchet, *Diderot et l' 'Histoire des deux Indes', ou l'écriture fragmentaire* (Paris: 1978).

prescribing to ‘grands artistes’⁵⁴ gives their works a legitimacy that is beyond the philosophic law, while Mably’s anguished conservatism has as its obverse a slavish adulation for innate genius, ‘on naît historien, comme on naît poète, orateur, etc’.⁵⁵ In his vigorous counterattack on the ‘indignes satrapes’ who criticized the *Histoire des deux Indes* in the name of a ‘goût sévère’, for lacking ‘le ton moderne de l’historien’,⁵⁶ Diderot appeals to precisely this feature of eighteenth-century historiography, and even of philosophic historiography, namely that for all that by 1781 a canon of significant names had been firmly established, the actual works of which that tradition is composed can bear surprisingly little resemblance to one another:

De Voltaire n’a point écrit l’histoire comme l’abbé de Vertot, ni l’abbé // de Vertot comme Rollin, ni Rollin comme Hume, ni Hume comme Robertson. Est-ce que le philosophe traite l’histoire comme le moraliste, le froid moraliste comme l’homme éloquent? Eh bien! Raynal est un historien comme il n’y en a point encore eu, et tant mieux pour lui, et tant pis pour l’histoire.⁵⁷

The limitations of the project of the *Histoire des deux Indes* in relation to the philosophic ambition to redefine historiography as a genre, for all its status as a high profile contribution to the tradition, are, however, the same as those of d’Alembert’s happily minor history of Queen Christina. In the same *Lettre apologétique de l’abbé Raynal à Monsieur Grimm* (1781), Diderot follows d’Alembert in professing a willingness to collapse the great business of philosophic prescription into a simple switching of titles; ‘effacez du frontispiece de son livre le mot d’“histoire”, et taisez-vous’.⁵⁸ The *Histoire des deux Indes* illustrates both the immediate challenges, and also the large literary possibilities opened up in the practising of *philosophie* without fixed generic boundaries.

D’Alembert’s desire to portray himself in his *Réflexions et anecdotes sur Christine* as a mathematician holidaying in historiography, is revealing of the fundamental dilemma of the *philosophe* attempting to address the reader as a literary personality; the need for some prior right, as acknowledged *philosophe*, to do so. To attempt to achieve a successful wager on becoming an instant classic, is of course a

⁵⁴ *Encyclopédie*, s.v ‘Histoire’.

⁵⁵ *De la manière d’écrire l’histoire*, p.270.

⁵⁶ Diderot, *Lettre apologétique de l’abbé Raynal à Monsieur Grimm* in volume III of *Oeuvres* ed. Laurent Versini (Paris: 1995), p.772. Diderot’s *Lettre apologétique* was never published.

⁵⁷ *ibid.*, pp.771-72.

⁵⁸ p.772.

highly risky strategy. Mably for one calls attention to the danger of becoming exposed to the inevitable bathetic contrast between rhetoric and achievement, should such a bold strategy not succeed, in a comment which forms part of his assault on the project of the *Histoire des deux Indes*:

Un [historien] dans son épigraphe invitera-t-il l'auguste vérité à descendre du haut des cieux pour instruire les rois? La prophétie d'Horace s'accomplira:
*Nascetur ridiculus mus.*⁵⁹

There are also telling signs of diffidence in the Avertissement to the *Histoire des deux Indes* itself:

J'ai fait tout ce qui étoit en moi pour m'élever à la hauteur de mon sujet. Mais combien les gens d'un goût délicat me trouveront encore éloigné du ton réservé aux Ecrivains de génie!⁶⁰

Yet the historian of the Avertissement then proceeds to reinforce his appeal to the reader, and calls attention to the way in which the *Histoire des deux Indes* could be said to repose on a more secure and more predictable foundation for its success, than the elusive quality of mere personal charm:

Il doit m'être permis de dire que, sous un autre point de vue, on pourra n'être pas mécontent de mon travail. Les nouvelles recherches que j'ai faites, les secours que j'ai reçus de toutes parts m'ont mis heureusement en état de donner à mon Ouvrage toute l'étendue, toute l'exactitude dont il étoit susceptible. La plupart des détails qu'il renferme ont été tirés de Pièces originales. Ceux qui n'ont pas une base aussi solide ont pour appui le témoignage des hommes les plus éclairés de toutes les Nations.⁶¹

For all that the most memorable feature of the *Histoire des deux Indes* is its foregrounding of the personality of the historian, the basic structure of the work is that of an information-based text. It even fulfils a specific *encyclopédiste* prediction, as Voltaire in his article 'Histoire' adduces the fact that 'nous avons vingt *histoires* de l'établissement des Portugais dans les Indes; mais aucune ne nous a fait connoître les divers gouvernemens de ce pays, ses religions, ses antiquités'⁶² and so on, as a prime evidence for the need for the *philosophes* to address their efforts towards extending the sphere of information included in historiography. Raynal's wager on the indulgence of the public is thus underpinned by a virtuously utilitarian concept of the

⁵⁹ *De la manière d'écrire l'histoire*, p.381.

⁶⁰ Volume I, Avertissement, p.v.

⁶¹ loc. cit.

⁶² *Encyclopédie*, s.v 'Histoire'.

generic identity of his text, establishing the necessary prior relationship with the reader.

Yet what are two contrasting models for how the *Histoire des deux Indes* is to be read, to acquire facts, or to form a sentimental bond with the historian, become a stylistic dilemma on the page. The historian ‘Raynal’ has one personality, but two textual voices. In a particularly notable instance, immediately after ‘the historian’ has promised to the deceased Eliza Draper (with whom Raynal, unlikely as it seems, was in fact acquainted) ‘DE NE PAS ÉCRIRE UNE LIGNE, OU L’ON NE PUISSE RECONNOÎTRE TON AMI’, the narration drily resumes in the next paragraph with ‘Cochin étoit fort considérable, lorsque les Portugais arrivèrent // dans l’Inde’,⁶³ a line with no immediately compelling relation to the muse of British sentimental fiction. It is in this respect that the disjointed impression contributed by the process of its composition by several hands merely further exposes a structural faultline in the *Histoire des deux Indes* as an original concept. The German translator of the American part of the *Histoire des deux Indes* notes this tendency of ‘Raynal’ to speak above and around, but rarely through his narration:

Mises à part les données statistiques les plus actuelles, il ne nous rapporte aucune information historique, mais ne fait que présumer celles-ci et utilise l’histoire comme un fil directeur lui permettant d’articuler ses réflexions philosophiques et politiques.⁶⁴

The unique sophistication of the *Histoire des deux Indes* is, however, to go a considerable way towards resolving this structural weakness into a general strength, and to show how the conceit of the personality of the historian can be used to dramatise this very failure of the *Histoire des deux Indes* to cohere.

The tension between oratorical appeal and utility in the construction of the text, instead of being approached as a problem to be resolved (or simply avoided as impossible to resolve), is made a subject of self-reflexive discussion in the ‘Parallèle de l’histoire ancienne & moderne’ which opens Book 6, a passage which appears to have been contributed by Diderot. Here, Diderot confronts the fact that the *Histoire des deux Indes* is itself a sign of a historical process, whereby the ‘magnifique spectacle’⁶⁵ of ancient history has irrevocably passed:

⁶³ Volume I, Book 3, Chapter XV, p.320; pp.320-21.

⁶⁴ Christoph Wilhelm Dohm, introduction to *Geschichte der Revolution von Nord-Amerika* (Berlin: 1786); quoted and translated in Martin Fontius, ‘L’*Histoire des deux Indes* de Raynal vue par des Allemands’, *SVEC* 286 (1991) 155-87, p.164.

⁶⁵ Volume II, Book 6, Chapter I, p.1.

Les nations, après de longs ébranlemens, après les combats de l'ambition & de la liberté, semblent aujourd'hui fixées dans le morne repos de la servitude. On combat // aujourd'hui avec la foudre, pour la prise de quelques hommes puissans: on combattoit autrefois avec l'épée, pour détruire & fonder des royaumes, ou pour venger les droits naturels de l'homme. L'histoire des peuples est sèche et petite, sans que les peuples soient plus heureux.⁶⁶

'Raynal's' proffering of useful information to the reader is not a sign of a divided identity, but is an act of submission to cultural expectation:

Le tems n'est pas loin, où [...] [d]ans ces sociétés mercantiles, la découverte d'une isle, l'importation d'une nouvelle denrée, l'invention d'une machine, l'établissement d'un comptoir, l'invasion // d'une branche de commerce, la construction d'un port, deviendront les transactions les plus importantes; & les annales des peuples demanderont à être écrites par des commerçans philosophes, comme elles l'étoient autrefois par des historiens orateurs.⁶⁷

In this way, the text itself can be made to dramatise the disjunction between the personality of the historian, and the genre he inhabits; where he is dry and tedious on commercial history, he is at all times, privately, to be supposed to be bathed in tears. The provision of an entire sentimental autobiography for the historian, in the form of his narrative of his relations with Eliza, thus emphasises how the *Histoire des deux Indes* issues forth from a distinct individual, on a point at which the composite nature of the text threatens mere incoherence. The utility of personality in reconciling generic contraries is notably also recognised by Gibbon, 'Raynal's' unlikely contemporary, and it is put to good use in the equally strange late production of *philosophie* that is the *Decline and Fall*.

It is indeed entirely fitting that the one dominant work of French philosophic historiography which follows on from *encyclopédisme* is one in which a way is found to make authorial ambivalence part of the work's own subject. The alternation in the generic identity of the *Histoire des deux Indes*, between the desire to inspire and the duty to inform, embodies the internal contradictions within the idea of the role of the *philosophe*, and also the simple lack of consensus among *philosophes* themselves. Diderot's own thinking on historiography is characterised by a founding, original ambivalence towards philosophic austerity and the utilitarian idea, which further evolves towards an outright critique in the period between his editorship of the *Encyclopédie*, and the beginning of his involvement in the *Histoire des deux Indes*.

⁶⁶ Volume II, Book 6, Chapter I, pp.1-2.

⁶⁷ Volume II, Book 6, Chapter I, pp.2-3.

Already in his article 'Encyclopédie' Diderot looks towards a new philosophic project, a recapture of the terrain of the moralist from the *encyclopediste* obsession with the imagery of the sciences:

Comme il est au moins aussi important de rendre les hommes meilleurs, que de les rendre moins ignorans, je ne serois pas fâché qu'on recueillît tous les traits frappans des vertus morales. Il faudroit qu'ils fussent bien constatés: on les distribueroit chacun à leurs articles qu'ils vivifieroient. Pourquoi seroit-on si attentif à conserver l'histoire des pensées des hommes, & négligeroit-on l'histoire de leurs actions? celle-ci n'est-elle pas la plus utile? n'est-ce pas celle qui fait le plus d'honneur au genre humain?⁶⁸

In his reports on the art exhibitions of the 1760s, Diderot turns specifically on the way that *philosophie*, led by its devotion to a utility narrowly conceived, has become in thrall to political economy, 'les têtes tournés vers les objets d'intérêt s'occupent d'administration, de commerce, d'agriculture, d'importation, d'exportation, et de finance', and he cites Raynal as a sign of the times, 'l'abbé Raynal pourra se vanter d'avoir été le héraut de la révolution'.⁶⁹ Gianluigi Goggi situates Diderot's assault on political economy in the wider debate among the *philosophes* following the controversial publication of Galiani's *Dialogue sur le commerce des bleds* in 1765, and has reviewed the evidence for Diderot's already having seen a draft of the *Histoire des deux Indes*.⁷⁰

In the *Salon de 1767*, Diderot perceives the so much desired success of this technocratic vision of the *esprit philosophique* to have had a singular effect on historiography as a genre, one of a crippling stylistic and imaginative impoverishment:

Partout décadence de la verve et de la poésie, à mesure que l'esprit philosophique a fait des progrès. [...] La règne des images passe à mesure que celui des choses s'étend. Il s'introduit par la raison, une exactitude, une précision, une méthode, pardonnez-moi le mot, une sorte de pédanterie qui tue tout. [...] L'esprit philosophique amène le style sentencieux et sec. Les expressions abstraites qui renferment un grand nombre de phénomènes se multiplient et prennent la place des expressions figurées. Les maximes de Tacite succéderont partout aux descriptions animés, aux tableaux de Tite-Live et de Cicéron; Fontenelle et La Mothe à Bossuet et Fenelon.⁷¹

⁶⁸ *Encyclopédie*, s.v. 'Encyclopédie'.

⁶⁹ Diderot, *Salon de 1769*, in *Salons de 1769, 1771, 1775, 1781* ed. Else Marie Bukdahl, Michel Delon, Annette Lorenceau et al. (Paris: 1995), p.100.

⁷⁰ Gianluigi Goggi, 'Quelques remarques sur la collaboration de Diderot à la première édition de l'*Histoire des deux Indes*', *SVEC* 286 (1991) 17-51.

⁷¹ Diderot, *Salon de 1767* ed. Else Marie Bukdahl, Michel Delon, Annette Lorenceau (Paris: 1995), p.215.

At the same time, far from marginalizing the actual historical subject of the *Histoire des deux Indes*, the foregrounding of the historian's response in all its complexity liberates the work as a whole from the interpretative straitjacket of Enlightened progressive platitudes, which can be seen comfortably stifling the same historical theme in Robertson's *History of America*. 'Raynal' (here, it seems, Diderot) on the appropriate occasion firmly holds the Enlightenment line against the detractors of commerce, asking his readers to imagine the world without it, and to ask themselves 'si nous l'aimerions mieux tel que nous le verrions que tel qu'il étoit';⁷² but still, radical doubt about the natural tendency of human civilization repeatedly irrupts into his narrative, for example a long series of reflections on the origin of government culminating in the exclamation, 'qu'en est-il résulte? C'est que l'histoire de l'homme civilisé n'est que l'histoire de sa misère'.⁷³ The fantasy figure of the philosophic historian, authoritative, scientific, and confident in his message, thus ends by confirming how the French Enlightenment was much better suited to dialogue all along.

The relationship between reason and imagination in the *esprit philosophique* is, however, only one of the concealed fractures in the *philosophes'* conception of their role which historiography makes visible, and is far from being the least amenable to some form of resolution, given the happy self-contradictions of the *Histoire des deux Indes*. How to define the relationship between the *philosophie* of the philosophic historian and the wider sphere of political discourse in eighteenth-century France, particularly given the *philosophes'* expectations of themselves as leaders of opinion, must be the subject of a rather larger commitment than the occasional deployment of rhetorical sleight-of-hand to meet a particular stylistic emergency. The *Histoire des deux Indes* does in fact embody certain of the most important among the range of forms in which the *philosophes* could practise, and envisage themselves as practising political intervention. In particular, its relation to French colonial policy exemplifies the complex texture of what can be described as *ancien régime* political life as a whole. Michèle Duchet – on the rigorous principle that 'la Pensée des

⁷² Volume I, Book 5, Chapter XXXII, p.678.

⁷³ Volume IV, Book 18, Chapter XLII, p.392.

Lumières n’a rien à gagner à la sacralisation dont elle a été trop longtemps l’objet⁷⁴ – has called attention to the close relationship between the *Histoire des deux Indes* of Raynal and the present concerns of the French foreign ministry in the reform of colonial policy, and notes Raynal’s state pension awarded in 1761 “en considération d’ouvrages relatifs à l’administration du département des Affaires étrangères”⁷⁵ as well as the fact that it continued to be paid even after the exile of the author on the publication of the most strident edition in 1780. Even the contradictions of the published work regarding slavery in the colonies can be related to contemporary official and semi-official debate, and Duchet concludes that ‘la “fabrication” de l’*Histoire des Indes* a eu un but politique, si même elle n’a pas été une commande officielle, comme l’*Histoire des voyages* de Prévost’.⁷⁶

However, the lasting reputation of the *Histoire des deux Indes* as a political text – and ensuring its status as a favourite of the Revolutionary generation – rests on the war against despotism pursued in its pages by Diderot, the intensification of which in the 1780 edition led to the exile of its putative author. D’Alembert, as an instance of contrast to such novel explicitness, may have liberated *réflexions* in his *Réflexions et anecdotes sur Christine*, but he has done little or nothing towards asserting the political aspirations of the *philosophe*. His commentary on the revocation of the Edict of Nantes and the question of the personal culpability of Louis XIV follows the tried-and-tested philosophic (and particularly Voltairean) method of rhetorical expansiveness on a general political theme, ‘les Rois qui n’ont que de la puissance ou même que de la valeur, toujours les premiers de tous pour leurs courtisans, sont les derniers pour le sage’,⁷⁷ and reticence regarding the national illustration, ‘ce sont-là, s’il m’est permis de parler ainsi, de ces problèmes de politique et de religion qui demanderoient une autre plume que la mienne, & un autre écrit que celui-ci’.⁷⁸ In the *Histoire des deux Indes*, on the other hand, the tribunal of philosophic judgement dreamed of by Marmontel in the *Encyclopédie* seems at last to have been realised, and Diderot speaks directly, and, if not precisely as of right, with an unmistakable assumption of authority, as *philosophe* to king:

⁷⁴ Michèle Duchet, *Anthropologie et histoire au siècle des lumières: Buffon, Voltaire, Rousseau, Helvétius, Diderot* (Paris, 1977; first published 1971), p.10.

⁷⁵ *Anthropologie et histoire*, p.112; Duchet gives no citation for what is evidently a quotation from an official document.

⁷⁶ p.112.

⁷⁷ *Mélanges*, II, p.73.

⁷⁸ II, p.11.

Jeune prince [Louis XVI], toi qui as pu conserver l'horreur du vice & de la dissipation, au milieu de la cour la plus dissolue, & sous le plus inepte des instituteurs, daigne m'écouter avec indulgence; parce que je suis un homme de bien & un de tes meilleurs sujets; parce que je n'ai aucune prétention à tes graces, & que, le matin & le soir, je lève des mains pures vers le ciel, pour le bonheur de l'espèce humaine & pour la prospérité & la gloire de ton règne. La hardiesse avec laquelle je te dirai des vérités que ton prédécesseur n'entendit jamais de la bouche de ses flatteurs, & que tu n'entendras pas davantage de ceux qui t'entourent, est le plus grand éloge que je puisse faire de ton caractère.⁷⁹

Furthermore, the *Histoire des deux Indes* lays the ground for its later reputation as a herald of the Revolution in its celebration of the right of a people to change its government, occasioned by the example of America:

Si les peuples sont heureux sous la forme de leur gouvernement, ils la garderont. S'ils sont malheureux, ce ne seront ni vos opinions, ni les miennes; ce sera l'impossibilité de souffrir davantage & plus long-tems qui les déterminera à la changer, mouvement salutaire que l'oppressur appellera révolte, bien qu'il ne soit que l'exercice légitime d'un droit de l'homme qu'on opprime, & même de l'homme qu'on n'opprime pas.⁸⁰

Here, Diderot excuses the radicalism of his 'spéculations' for the fact that discussion 'en philosophes' is without political consequence; 'point de sujets plus patiens que nous'.⁸¹ How far the *philosophes* are masters of such irony, and how far subjected to it, is given no simple definition in Diderot's exploration of the possibilities presented by the *Histoire des deux Indes*.

In the first place, it is evident that the intimacy of the address of the historian in the *Histoire des deux Indes* does not lend itself to a direct engagement with the political concerns of Diderot's French readers. Quite the contrary; as Georges Dulac, who himself asks 'quelle est la portée politique de ce type d'intervention?'⁸² points out, in each case of potential relevance to political intervention in contemporary France, Diderot speaks either in an assumed persona, in the conditional, or regarding a foreign nation, 'inséré dans un tel dispositif, le langage le plus violent n'a qu'un effet indirect, et pour ainsi dire métaphorique sur le lecteur'.⁸³ Still in the *Histoire des deux Indes*, which forges a newly urgent sense of connection with its readers, the political

⁷⁹ Volume I, Book 4, Chapter XVIII, p.469.

⁸⁰ Volume IV, Book 18, Chapter XLII, p.393.

⁸¹ loc. cit.

⁸² Georges Dulac, 'Les modes d'intervention de Diderot en politique', in *Diderot, les dernières années 1770-84* ed. Peter France and Anthony Strugnell (Edinburgh: 1985) pp.121-39, p.133.

⁸³ *ibid.*, p.134.

engagement of the *philosophe* must be at a tangent or from the margins, and be contained within the shifting field of possible relations of the general with the particular. The address to Louis XVI is an interesting case. Diderot confines himself throughout to the language of economic patriotism, until the end where he anticipates murmurs among the king's advisers that such reform represents innovation:

L'art de bien gouverner est-il donc le seul qu'on ne puisse perfectionner?
L'assemblée des états d'une grande nation; le retour à la liberté primitive;
l'exercice respectable des premiers actes de la justice naturelle, seraient-ce
donc des innovations?⁸⁴

In his unpublished apology for the *hardiesse* of the *Histoire des deux Indes* in response to the criticisms of Grimm, Diderot argues on the basis that his address to the king is largely composed of commonplaces, 'et qu'est-ce qu'on peut imaginer de neuf sur les devoirs des rois?',⁸⁵ but this concluding comment is clearly different in kind, a carefully embedded call for the summoning of the Estates General. This kind of immediate political reference (however ambiguously expressed) highlights the lack of such elsewhere in the *Histoire des deux Indes*, for all its rhetorical strength in asserting war on despotism in general.

The position of the *Histoire des deux Indes* in the context of Diderot's political ambitions in the 1770s is also a particular illustration of the extent to which the commitment of the *philosophes* to the large perspectives of international history, far from representing a dedication of themselves to an Enlightenment principle, can tend to disguise the great hole at the centre of their historical tradition, where their account of their own national history should be. After the striking down of the *parlements* in 1771, Diderot took the opposite position to Voltaire, and with a new sense of political emergency, allied himself to the parliamentary cause.⁸⁶ In the unlikely medium of a memorandum to Catherine the Great, he explains that at this time he also particularly sought a means of intervening in print:

Dans ce temps, il me vint en tête de lui [that is, to Maupeou] adresser une petite lettre, sous le nom d'un avocat bien connu et bien diffamé et le titre de *Projet pour renverser sûrement une monarchie*. Je n'en fis rien pour deux raisons: la première, c'est que l'homme pervers était homme à se servir de mes moyens; la seconde, c'est qu'il est fou à un honnête citoyen de s'exposer sans aucun fruit.⁸⁷

⁸⁴ Volume I, Book 4, Chapter XVIII, p.475.

⁸⁵ *Lettre apologétique* ed. Versini, p.770.

⁸⁶ See Dulac, 'Les modes d'intervention de Diderot en politique' pp.127-29.

⁸⁷ Diderot, *Mémoires pour Catherine II* ed. Paul Vernière (Paris: 1966), p.31.

The memorandum in question is an ‘Essai historique sur la police de la France depuis son origine jusqu’à son extinction actuelle’, and is effectively a history of the French constitution and of the coup of 1771, comparable to Voltaire’s own *Histoire du Parlement de Paris*, that philosophically stunted but still published intervention against the *parlementaires*. Diderot’s political history of France remained in manuscript in St. Petersburg, while his pamphlet was never even written; instead, there are only the glancing references, and oratorical pronouncements of a fictionalised voice in a declaredly fractured text.

Indeed, it certainly appears that it is this peculiar character of ‘Raynal’ – as a fictional construct speaking the language of personal authenticity – which Diderot finds liberating in the *Histoire des deux Indes*, and as much more than a mere vehicle for anonymous intervention. The most interesting feature of the *Lettre apologétique de l’abbé Raynal à monsieur Grimm*, is how Diderot is genuinely stung by the accusation that for a *philosophe* to assume the role of a political orator, is an infringement of good taste, somehow a betrayal of his proper role in relation to his own society. Diderot turns repeatedly to the authentic impulse of the historian as his best justification:

J’en conviens: l’homme qui parle ou qui écrit selon son coeur, qui est enflammé d’un véritable enthousiasme, en qui la vertu, la vérité, l’innocence, la liberté ont trouvé un défenseur ardent, peut facilement se laisser emporter au-delà des limites de la circonspection, il sera loué des âmes fortes; il sera blâmé des âmes pusillanimes; mais on reconnaîtra généralement qu’il s’est peint lui-même, et qu’il ne se battait pas les flancs pour avoir de la véhémence; mais ni ses contemporains qui auront quelque goût, ni la postérité qui ne réglera pas son jugement après nos petits intérêts, ne l’appelleront déclamateur.⁸⁸

If the expression of literary personality is necessary for defeating the generic contradictions of philosophic historiography, the impulse of actual personality turns out to be an essential precondition for the *philosophe* to legitimately engage in political speech. That such a personality did not exist, but had to be invented, is a further evidence of the persistent ambivalence among the *philosophes* regarding the nature and scope of their public role as French writers.

⁸⁸ p.767.

4. Why be a *philosophe*?

Despite the fact that the philosophic attempts to decisively shape the common inheritance of expectations regarding the form and purpose of historiography are repeatedly compelled to confront the levelling tendencies of the literary marketplace, as well as the residual uncertainties of their own position, philosophic prescription should at least be amply equipped to dispose of any lingering uncertainties regarding the relationship between the history writing of the *philosophe* and that of the *érudit*. On the face of it, the opposition between the *érudit* and the *philosophe* cannot be subject to any degree of the uncertainty which informs the more open-ended questions of context and of reception, those which in the end demand a constant stylistic negotiation; it is a typological distinction, and one with a long history reaching back to the Querelle, and so to the very origins of the distinctive French phenomenon whereby the idea of the philosopher became enthroned as the best representation of the independent, critical, modern writer.⁸⁹ Both the history of the opposition, and its character as a fundamental typology, are evident throughout the *Encyclopédie*. In the article ‘Philosophie’, the opposition is presented in its classic formulation as a contrast in function and as a difference in status, ‘le plus grand philosophe est celui qui rend raison du plus grand nombre de choses, voilà son rang assigné avec précision: l’érudition par ce moyen n’est plus confondue avec la *Philosophie*’, and no less a figure than Malebranche is resurrected to scarifify the shameful passivity and intellectual shallowness of a status acquired through reading:

La sote vanité qui nous fait souhaiter d’être estimés savans; car on appelle savans ceux qui ont plus de lecture: la connoissance des opinions est bien plus d’usage pour la conversation & pour étourdir les esprits du commun, que la connoissance de la vraie *Philosophie*.⁹⁰

The *Encyclopédie* continues to evince its homage to an inherited vocabulary in its perpetuation of the image of scholarship as a target for satire, for example the article ‘Philosophie’ singling out the study of rabbinical texts and ancient coins, and Voltaire in his article ‘Histoire’ acidly noting the vogue for local antiquarianism.

⁸⁹ See Blandine Barret-Kriegel, *Les historiens et la monarchie*, 4 vols. (Paris: 1988), *Volume Four: La défaite de l’érudition*, pp.271-80 for rich echoes of the *encyclopédiste* vocabulary of *philosophie* and *érudition* in Perrault, Fontenelle, and Fénelon.

⁹⁰ *Encyclopédie*, s.v. ‘Philosophie’.

D'Alembert famously appears to make the typology of *érudit* against *philosophe* a founding concept of the whole enterprise of the *Encyclopédie* in his *Discours préliminaire*:

La division générale de nos connoissances suivant nos trois facultés [that is, into memory and history, reason and philosophy, and imagination and the arts], a cet avantage, qu'elle pourroit fournir aussi les trois divisions du monde littéraire, en Erudits, Philosophes, & Beaux-Esprits; ensorte qu'après avoir formé l'Arbre des Sciences, on pourroit former sur le même plan celui des Gens de Lettres.⁹¹

D'Alembert's attempt to inaugurate a new era of cooperation between the various parts of the 'monde littéraire', here in the *Discours préliminaire* ('les gens de lettres entendraient mieux leurs intérêts, si au lieu de chercher à s'isoler, ils reconnaissent le besoin réciproque qu'ils ont de leurs travaux, & les secours qu'ils en tirent'⁹²) just as in his article 'Erudition', would therefore seem to be made in the spirit of *noblesse oblige*, issuing forth from the impregnable certainties of *philosophie*. For d'Alembert the happily self-sufficient mathematician, 'un Géometre qui aime son art',⁹³ this is assuredly the intention. The conclusion pressed by the *Encyclopédie* as a whole is, however, that historiography is the weak point of philosophic definition; that it lends itself to no fixed prescription, and, even more importantly, that the prescription sponsored by the principles of *encyclopédisme* in fact leaves the philosophic historian uniquely vulnerable to being confused with the mere *érudit*. The simple mapping of intellectual faculties on to spheres of knowledge, and thence on to literary personnel, is a fantasy which founders on the generic anonymity of 'facts', and d'Alembert's rhetoric of high-minded collaboration conceals the actuality of an uneasy co-existence between the philosophic encyclopedia and the bookseller's digest, the *philosophe* and the *compilateur*, the latter being, in the mythology of the Querelle, one of the several faces of the *érudit*, and also one of the least attractive.

There are a number of ways in which the literature of philosophic prescription can afford some form of rationale for the eruption of the personality of the historian as evidenced in the *Histoire des deux Indes*, such as the concept of the responsibility of the philosophic historian to engage in a wider project of social and political reform, although of course in the event, Diderot and Raynal find their ultimate security in the

⁹¹ *Mélanges*, I, p.85.

⁹² *ibid.*, I, p.87.

⁹³ *Discours préliminaire*, I, p.78.

argument that their work is strictly *sui generis*. The major means by which philosophic historians may permit themselves to be similarly explicit concerning the difference between their own practice and that of the *érudits* is the loud and consistent proclamation of brevity. However humble the status of d'Alembert's *Réflexions et anecdotes sur Christine* as a mere *abrégé*, it lays claim to the sovereign and philosophic virtue of brevity in comparison to its unregenerate source, 'deux gros volumes de Mémoires sur Christine Reine de Suede, qu'on vient de publier en Hollande',⁹⁴ a text which provokes in him the haughty reflection that 'il seroit à souhaiter que tous les cent ans on fît un extrait des faits historiques réellement utiles, & qu'on brûlat le reste'.⁹⁵ D'Alembert proclaims his perfect indifference to the clamours of the scholars at such brutality, 'je ne doute point qu'un desir si raisonnable ne soit pour bien des Savans, un crime de leze-érudition, digne des injures & des anathêmes de tous les compilateurs; mais heureusement ces anathêmes sont moins redoutables que ceux de Messieurs des Théologiens'.⁹⁶ Such satirical attacks and such disclaimers are of course scattered throughout the works of Voltaire. The idea of a summary is, however, at best a relative distinction, and one which must be constantly reaffirmed, even leaving aside the uncomfortable fact that the proud claims of *philosophie* have thus become reduced to a quarrel among varieties of *compilateur*; and it certainly appears as if it is the very activity of asserting the virtue of abridgement with a force and elegance which might compensate for the originality and the *hardiesse* that are otherwise absent from the actual work, which itself constitutes the major part of the philosophic contribution. In this respect, even the alleged 'principle' of brevity provides a further demonstration of how the personality of the historian, indeed the imaginative complicity the individual historian can forge with the reader, relieves the problems of definition contained within the actual text.

This lesson of the philosophic personality providing a form of solution to the problem of keeping apart the *philosophe* and the *érudit* is repeated by philosophic historians with even greater self-consciousness on still more challenging terrain. Montesquieu, despite being the philosophic historian who comes closest to achieving a form of historiography that can match the desire of the *historien philosophe* to demonstrate his superior qualities of intellection, is also responsible for the closest

⁹⁴ *Mélanges*, II, p.4.

⁹⁵ *ibid.*, II, p.3.

⁹⁶ II, p.4.

exchange between French *philosophie* and controversial antiquarianism, in Chapters XXX and XXXI of *De l'Esprit des lois* (1748) on the feudal history of France. However, in the opposite view, just as in the case of d'Alembert and his *Réflexions et anecdotes sur Christine*, it could be said that it is indeed precisely Montesquieu's serene philosophic orthodoxy elsewhere in the text which effectively underwrites his later excursion into a form of generic heterodoxy. Accordingly, Montesquieu's address to the reader in his antiquarian chapters is openly framed to support his identity as a *philosophe*, even when to all intents and purposes he is in the act of playing the *érudit*. The solution to the apparent self-contradiction of a philosophic antiquarianism is shown to be as simple as an appeal to the reader's sympathy:

Je supplie le lecteur de me pardonner l'ennui mortel que tant de citations doivent lui donner: je serais plus court, si je ne trouvais toujours devant moi le livre de l'établissement de la monarchie française dans les Gaules, de M. l'abbé Dubos. Rien ne recule plus le progrès des connaissances, qu'un mauvais livre d'un auteur célèbre; parce que, avant d'instruire, il faut commencer par détromper.⁹⁷

Just as the historian's personality in the *Histoire des deux Indes* provides sufficient excuse for the text's wild oscillation between the dry communication of information and the tearful demand for broad social reform, Montesquieu displays himself to the reader, inviting sympathy for the hard reading he has been forced to undergo, 'tous ces écrits froids, secs, insipides et durs, il faut les lire, il faut les dévorer, comme la fable dit que Saturne dévorait les pierres',⁹⁸ thus ranging himself on the reader's side, contemplating unpleasant works of scholarship together, and so enforcing his immunity from generic contamination. The price of practising erudition as a *philosophe* is for the author to become in some measure the subject of his own history. It is a far from unreasonable inference, that there might be eighteenth-century scholars for whom the necessity of self-display could indeed be a positive recommendation for practising as a *philosophe*.

The place of the *Encyclopédie* in studies of philosophic historiography is, of course, almost solely retained for its connection with Gibbon's *Essai sur l'étude de la littérature* (1761), and the path from there to the heights of the *Decline and Fall*. The *Histoire des deux Indes* remains something of a problematic newcomer, and minor texts such as those by d'Alembert and Mably figure not at all, for all that their minor

⁹⁷ Montesquieu, *De l'Esprit des lois* ed. Victor Goldschmidt, 2 vols. (Paris: 1979), II, p.330.

⁹⁸ II, p.320.

status is to a significant degree a direct response to the contemporary elevation of philosophic historiography into a major genre. The importance of the *Essai* does not lie in any resolution it presents to the opposition between *philosophe* and *érudit*, and given that the former term relies on the suppression of the latter for its own self-definition, no argument ever could. As a piece of argument, the *Essai* effectively follows d'Alembert's attempt to give a positive, philosophic value to erudition in the *Encyclopédie*; with the difference that where d'Alembert, aloof as a mathematician, seeks to reduce most philosophic writing to the same dull level traditionally ascribed to the *érudits*, Gibbon seeks to raise scholarship to the level of glamour and intellectual prestige traditionally ascribed before d'Alembert's revisionist austerity to *philosophie* in general. Gibbon appeals to the ineffable nature of the *esprit philosophique*, the demonstrable 'diversité'⁹⁹ of the works that are commonly held to display it, as a token that it may be pursued in any genre; its possessor 'peut être // géomètre, antiquaire, musicien, mais il est toujours philosophe'.¹⁰⁰ However, the most important feature of the *Essai* is not the question of its argument, but its status as evidence of Gibbon's facility at insinuating himself within the discourse of tortured self-interrogation that is such a central characteristic of the French philosophic tradition. His description of the *esprit philosophique* unerringly chimes with the aspirations of the French *philosophes*:

L'esprit philosophique consiste à pouvoir remonter aux idées simples; à saisir et à combiner les premiers principes. Le coup d'oeil de son possesseur est juste, mais en même tems étendu. Placé sur une hauteur, il embrasse une grande étendue de païs, dont il se forme une image nette et unique, pendant que des esprits aussi justes, mais plus bornés, n'en découvrent qu'une partie.¹⁰¹

Gibbon has no truck with the self-delusion promoted by *encyclopediste* austerity that philosophic writing is by nature humble and collaborative; his concept of *philosophie* is unashamedly one of the productions of a 'petit nombre de génies', and he simply asserts that 'en ce sens cet esprit est bien peu commun'.¹⁰² It could be said that, of Gibbon and d'Alembert, Gibbon is the more orthodox *philosophe*.

⁹⁹ Gibbon, *Essai sur l'étude de la littérature*, included in volume IV of *Miscellaneous Works* ed. John Holroyd, Lord Sheffield, p.57.

¹⁰⁰ pp.58-59.

¹⁰¹ p.58.

¹⁰² p.59.

In order to introduce himself into the French debate, Gibbon speaks the language of the Republic of Letters; describing the decline of the fashion ‘de nos pères’¹⁰³ for *belles-lettres* (the term Gibbon prefers to that of ‘érudition’), and the rise of the exact sciences, ‘la physique et les mathématiques sont à présent sur le trône’.¹⁰⁴ It is simply impossible to argue for the latter statement to hold good for mid-century Britain, and Gibbon does not try; and the same could be said for his assertion that in respect of the *esprit philosophique*, ‘il n’y a point d’écrivain qui n’y aspire’,¹⁰⁵ given the notorious fact that the sole Englishman at any rate to evince such an aspiration was Gibbon himself. This impression of Gibbon embracing an alien vocabulary, and for purposes undefined, is further confirmed by the evidence that in Britain, any divisions produced by the native version of the French Querelle had to all intents and purposes already been healed. John Pocock notes how, in the absence of its institutionalization by means of academies (and, by implication, also by means of the cognate ‘institution’ aspired to by the *philosophes*), in Britain ‘the politics of intellect, including the “polite” campaign against clerical learning, were conducted among factious but freely operating lay and clerical elites’;¹⁰⁶ and also that it is the rather softer language of politeness which provides the only real British counterpart to the French ‘*défaite de l’érudition*’.¹⁰⁷

British scholars certainly did not wait on the permission of the *encyclopédistes* to refit themselves for a new readership. The antiquarian John Whitaker in his *History of Manchester* (1771-75) proposes a reformation of antiquarian writing without recourse to theories about the role of a creature called a *philosophe*:

Those who have hitherto treated our topographical antiquities seem to have trodden only in mazes overgrown with thorns, neglecting the flowery paths with which the wilderness of obscurity is diversified. Incorrect pedigrees, futile etymologies, verbose disquisitions, crowds of epitaphs, lists of landholders, and such farrago, thrown together without method, unanimated by reflections, and delivered in the most uncouth and horrid style, make the bulk of our county histories. Such works bring the study of antiquities into disgrace with the generality, and disgust the most candid curiosity.¹⁰⁸

¹⁰³ p.16.

¹⁰⁴ p.16.

¹⁰⁵ p.57.

¹⁰⁶ John Pocock, *Barbarism and Religion Volume One*, p.150.

¹⁰⁷ *ibid.*, p.148.

¹⁰⁸ John Whitaker, *The History of Manchester*, 2 vols. in-4^{to} (London: 1771-75), I, p.v.

It should also be noted that Whitaker is far from parochial in his stylistic influences. He invokes the example of the Italians and the French, ‘both will teach us a style, when we have ascertained our knowledge’;¹⁰⁹ and asserts that the latter nation in particular have distinguished themselves by ‘an animated style and pertinent reflections; while our language, as capable of concise judicious remarks, is drawn out into tedious unanimated narrative in such compositions’.¹¹⁰ Whitaker can learn from the French example, without himself feeling threatened by the shadow of the exact sciences, in complete contrast to Gibbon’s hair-raising vision of impending catastrophe, now that the exact sciences have all their sister arts ‘prosternées devant elles, enchainées à leur char, ou tout-au-plus occupées à // orner leur triomphe’.¹¹¹ The works of Hume and Robertson provide similar evidence of the sometimes tense, but certainly far from anguished relations between polite writing and scholarship in eighteenth-century Britain. Both writers disdain the remote researches of the antiquarians, for reasons that are transparently ideological, as well as avowedly stylistic and methodological; yet on important points in the *History of England*, Hume succumbs to the use of footnotes, and elegant apologies and an important theme are more than adequate to justify his incursion into scholarship in the essay ‘Of the Populousness of Ancient Nations’. Similarly, Robertson acknowledges in the *History of the Reign of Charles V* that he may well have trespassed on the tolerance of some of his readers by so extensively footnoting his introductory historical survey, ‘in this part of my work, I have been led into several critical disquisitions, which belong more properly to the province of the lawyer or antiquary, than to that of the historian’;¹¹² but, instead of quaking at the prospect of exclusion from the ranks of the *philosophes*, calmly anticipates that ‘many of my readers will, probably, give little attention // to such researches’,¹¹³ while indeed ‘to some they may, perhaps, appear the most curious and interesting part of the work’.¹¹⁴ On the question of the textual practice of scholarship, confronted with the hardy politeness of his true and native peers, Gibbon actively chooses the exquisite agony of the French philosophic historian, and the opportunities for self-display it entails.

¹⁰⁹ I, p.v.

¹¹⁰ loc. cit.

¹¹¹ *Essai sur l'étude de la littérature*, pp.16-17.

¹¹² Robertson, *The History of the Reign of the Emperor Charles V*, I, p.xii.

¹¹³ I, pp.xii-xiii.

¹¹⁴ I, p.xiii.

The idea of Enlightenment making itself explicit in the activities of the *philosophes* of mid-century Paris – this characteristic of the *philosophes*, to organize themselves, to propagandize on their own behalf, and to analyse with great intensity their own practice – has certainly been recognised to present something of a methodological challenge for historians of the French Enlightenment, the dilemma of being reduced to ‘using a descriptive language that might be implicated in the language being described’.¹¹⁵ While it is certainly possible to argue that this problem of method, how to disentangle contemporary self-representation from the scholarly interpretation of a total historical reality, must still remain a major problem for proponents of the Enlightenment’s historical existence, it has been less noted that finding a real medium and context for their own self-representations presents considerable challenges to the *philosophes* themselves, and further that this is made most clearly evident in the bastion of philosophic prescription, the *Encyclopédie* itself. Print communication, one among the varieties of ‘cultural practice’, and one which seems to have acquired a curiously minor role within the cultural history of Enlightenment, can offer the opportunity for a moment of contact between philosophic self-representation and historical reality; engagement with a specific audience, the manifestation of a particular intention, an entry into the sphere of action.

Indeed, for all the attempts to schematize the relationship between *philosophie* and politics in France, the most fascinating aspect of the historical expression of this relationship is the way it is not schematized; that it represents a field of engagement for the *philosophes*, one which, within the imagined boundaries of political engagement and political retreat, is subject to individual choices regarding the sphere of reference that is to be established for an individual text. The evidence of intended political (in even the very strictest sense) intervention in Diderot’s historiographical career can be set alongside that regarding Voltaire, and be profitably contrasted to the vision of the political significance of *philosophie* currently much favoured in the conceptual histories of the *ancien régime*, as chiefly consisting in representing (perhaps even unwittingly by the parties in question) a new cultural ‘sphere’

¹¹⁵ Daniel Gordon, *Citizens without Sovereignty: Equality and Sociability in French Thought, 1670-1789* (Princeton: 1994), p.7.

characterised by ‘sociability’.¹¹⁶ The understanding of *philosophie* as the sphere of egalitarian and sociable ‘manners’, and of its chief pursuit being ‘science’ and the rational education of the public, is a concept elaborated by the *philosophes* themselves, which utterly fails to account for the totality of their activities, or of their interests or their ambitions. Gibbon for his part embraces the creative possibilities contained within French philosophic historiography’s chief legacy, that of a textual drama of authorial self-fashioning; yet, while certain features of the philosophic style may be fitted for travel, the forms of the *philosophes*’ self-definition in relation to the sphere of politics certainly appear to be of rather more strictly local relevance. The nature of the significance of the obvious forms of contrast with Britain – as drawn by John Robertson, for example, who notes how outside France ‘the scope for treating public opinion as an independent tribunal of intellectual authority was much less’, and ‘perhaps least in England’ for the reason that ‘there it was already politicised’¹¹⁷ – may legitimately be questioned, given the rootedness of the whole discursive model of *philosophie* in French political culture, and the truly contextual meaning of even its most attractively cosmopolitan features. With the proper reservations regarding the evidence from other countries in continental Europe, it may be speculated that the paradigmatically wholesome French Enlightenment is as much of a national peculiarity as its allegedly diseased British counterpart.

¹¹⁶ See especially Daniel Gordon, *Citizens without Sovereignty*; and also Dena Goodman, *The Republic of Letters*.

¹¹⁷ John Robertson, *The Case for the Enlightenment*, p.36. Robertson of course distinguishes between England and Scotland in this regard.

CHAPTER 5. IDENTIFYING THE HISTORIAN IN THE *DECLINE AND FALL*

Gibbon's *History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* (1776-88) is positively characterized by the historian's keenness to expose the depth of his work's roots in eighteenth-century European intellectual culture, and to assist the tracing of the various traditions of which it may modestly be presented as a culmination. In this respect, the venerable scholarly activity of contextualizing the *Decline and Fall* is already begun in the work itself. It is, however, certain specifically literary affinities which inform the original conception of the *Decline and Fall* on which all other textual engagements depend. The most important is Gibbon's imaginative communion with French philosophic historiography. The remarkable intensity of his insight is attested by his *Essai sur l'étude de la littérature*; and especially in the fact that, even beyond the few great exemplars of the philosophic tradition, and beyond its small while far from uncontested collection of positive precepts, Gibbon is able to find literary majesty in the very spectacle of French philosophic historiography's defeat. The textual embodiment of the agonized negotiation between *philosophie* and *érudition* promises stylistic distinction to the scholar, while at the same time, the demonstrable fact of the sheer impossibility of definitively banishing historical scholarship from philosophic historiography provides the crucial element of generic flexibility, which might even be stretched far enough to provide a philosophic covering for the explosion of useless facts and arcane learning in the *Decline and Fall*. In keeping with his first act of wilfully insinuating himself within an alien generic tradition, Gibbon's engagement with specific traditions in contemporary historiography, both philosophic and learned, is similarly characterized by his distinguishing gift for a variety of forms of imaginative cannibalism.

1. The embarrassment of facts

The burden of the *Decline and Fall* to engage in a continual series of minute (and some large) textual negotiations between two established historical styles, one of which is predicated on the suppression of the other, is the common predicament of philosophic historiography. By choosing an ancient subject, Gibbon has certainly raised the stakes, even if he has not fundamentally altered the nature of the game. At the same time, however, Gibbon is utterly distinctive in refusing the usual philosophic strategy of undermining, sidelining or merely ignoring the norms of erudite history,

and in positively inviting the scrutiny of the scholars. This philosophic historian takes on all comers:

[I] have been obliged to compare the following writers, who mutually supply, correct, and illustrate each other. Those who will take the same trouble, may acquire a right of criticising my narrative.¹

Gibbon subjects philosophic historiography to an entirely new sense of readership, of method, and of genre, and the question of how far the *Decline and Fall* is in fact able to sustain such scrutiny is rather more open than is commonly assumed. The term ‘a history’ in the title of *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* is not an appeal to the simple pleasures of an honest tale, it is the subject of a distinctive form of continual generic contestation which is embodied throughout in the structure of the text. The tale told by the ‘history’ Gibbon presents is necessarily determined by nature of the literary task he has set himself, and the *Decline and Fall* demonstrates how indeed the sympathetically advertised embarrassment prescribed to the philosophic historian who finds himself in uncongenial (that is, erudite) circumstances, constantly threatens to become real.

A particular example of the effects of the collision of disparate historical styles is the treatment of national antiquarianism; national antiquarianism simultaneously furnishing a classic topic for philosophic satire, and a vigorous contemporary tradition of scholarly dispute, while also having provided the occasion for the *philosophes*’ furthest incursions into erudite terrain. Ancient Britain’s notorious appearance in Volume I is in the first instance an object lesson in the established rules of conduct for the philosophic historian embarrassed with a barbarous history. In his account of the Roman conquest, Gibbon is elegant, brief, and unsentimental, and skillfully eludes antiquarian entanglements. National humiliation during a war ‘undertaken by the most stupid, maintained by the most dissolute, and terminated by the most timid of all the emperors’ (I (I), p.33) may be treated with ironic detachment as an ‘amusing enough’ (I (I), p.33, n.7) contrast to subsequent British success. The historian’s serenity is pointedly contrasted to the embittered Irish writers who cannot stop themselves from being ‘jealous of their national honour’ (I (I), p.34, p.9), and the brilliant satire of Gibbon’s rebuke to the Ossianic warriors of the 1770s, that the poems may be cited as

¹ Gibbon, *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* ed. David Womersley, 3 vols. (London: 1994), volume I, (first edition, Volume II), p.660, n.45. All references to the *Decline and Fall* are to this edition, incorporated in the text.

evidence of the small attractions of life in the Highlands on the basis that they, ‘according to every hypothesis, were composed by a native Caledonian’ (I (I), p.34, n.12), is a very good joke which additionally serves to further emphasize this particular historian’s aloof superiority. Through the medium of the imagined distaste of the civilized Romans for barbarous Scotland, Gibbon shows his temperamental affinity with Voltaire, who similarly counsels the philosophic historian, when confronted with barbarism, to avert his eyes:

The masters of the fairest and most wealthy climates of the globe, turned with contempt from gloomy hills assailed by the winter tempest, from lakes concealed in a blue mist, and from cold and lonely heaths, over which the deer of the forest were chased by a troop of naked barbarians. (I (I), p.34).

Yet at the same time, Gibbon’s account of ancient Britain is carefully framed to permit antiquarian sympathies to flourish behind its contemptuous façade. In the first place, he departs from the tradition of philosophic embarrassment by making no apology for including it; while a still more unambiguous sign of antiquarian affinities is the inclusion in a footnote of what amounts to a small dissertation on British pearls, a luxuriance in detail for its own sake which a historian of a purely philosophic persuasion would simply never permit. Similarly, Gibbon uses footnotes to give references that go beyond the grudging acknowledgement of primary sources found in Hume, for example, and proffers his own, authoritative assessment of the works of antiquarians, as in the note which advises ‘see the admirable abridgement given by Tacitus, in the life of Agricola, and copiously, though perhaps not completely, illustrated by our own antiquarians, Camden and Horsley’ (I (I), p.33, p.8). Gibbon, at the very same time as foregrounding the *philosophe*, thus keeps company with the antiquarians in full view of the reader.

The stylistic balancing-act of the *Decline and Fall* is in this way defined from the very start, but it is notable that of his two literary characters, as *philosophe* and *érudit*, Gibbon is markedly more sensitive to the demands of the former; whether as inherently more vulnerable, or in fact as more desired. In his account in Chapter XXXI of the thorny and much contested subject of the state of Britain on the departure of the legions, Gibbon follows the tried-and-tested philosophic technique of begging his readers’ indulgence, which can, however, save the *philosophe* only at the expense of the scholar :

I owe it to myself, and to historic truth, to declare, that some circumstances in this paragraph are founded only on conjecture and analogy. The stubbornness

of our language has sometimes forced me to deviate from the *conditional* into the *indicative* mood.(II (III), p.232, n.179).

The problem is of course not with ‘our language’, but is the perennial philosophic problem of how to incorporate the language of conjecture and of *critique* into a philosophic historical narrative. Gibbon simply abandons the attempt to do everything, and the fact that he continues to adhere to his usual practice in Chapter XXXI, for example expanding on his dubious source Richard of Cirencester in the footnotes but making only the assertion of the fact in the text, cannot compensate for the way that the long chain of assumptions and conjecture behind statements such as ‘the jurisdiction of each city over the adjacent country, was supported by the patrimonial influence of the principal senators; and the smaller towns, the villages, and the proprietors of land, consulted their own safety by adhering to the shelter of these rising republics’(II (III), p.233), is left entirely concealed, and therefore historically unjustified. Gibbon drops the scholar again in Chapter XXXVIII, on the similarly vexed question of the Saxon invasion of Britain:

The declamations of Gildas, the fragments, or fables, of Nennius, the obscure hints of the Saxon laws and chronicles, and the ecclesiastical tales of the venerable Bede, // have been illustrated by the diligence, and sometimes embellished by the fancy, of succeeding writers, whose works I am not ambitious either to censure, or to transcribe. Yet the historian of the empire may be tempted to pursue the revolutions of a Roman province, till it vanishes from his sight; and an Englishman may curiously trace the establishment of the Barbarians, from whom he derives his name, his laws, and perhaps his origin.(II (III), pp.493-4).

Gibbon declines to do battle with ‘the laborious Mr. Carte, and the ingenious Mr. Whitaker’(II (III), p.494, n.127), but at the same time refuses to give up the subject entirely. Instead, he transforms the terms of engagement from scholarship to sentiment, presuming on the reader’s consent to him giving in to temptation and the feelings of an Englishman without having fully to assume the *érudit*, and so, while the *philosophe* may contribute the literary pose of embarrassment, it is the scholar who is ultimately its victim.

Given the ancient subject of the *Decline and Fall*, the most immediate generic context is for the most part that of the *philosophe* trespassing on the *érudit*’s terrain. In particular instances, however, philosophic historiography has already demonstrated how the generic invasion is to be managed. The most the tradition of philosophic historiography can furnish Gibbon in relation to the ancient history of Britain is a

legacy of contempt and embarrassment bestowed by Robertson and Hume, but the history of the ancient Germans via Tacitus and his admirers, and the history of the feudal law in France via Montesquieu, are uniquely rich in philosophic precedent. Instead of presenting a free space for stylistic experiment, therefore, in these instances Gibbon's commitment to the scholarly study of barbarism sits alongside his necessary homage to his philosophic predecessors, and provides a fascinating although sometimes inopportune commentary on the philosophic received version. In this way, the *philosophe* himself, for all his privilege, can suffer from his union with the *érudit*. Gibbon's history of the ancient Germans is a particularly notable example. It would be hard to imagine any philosophic history of barbarism without Tacitus, who enables the historian entirely to bypass the tortured intricacies of professional antiquarian debate and the antiquarians' uncouth monkish sources, and to proceed straight to the philosophic strengths of causes, values, and political significance. As Hume puts it in relation to the Saxons, 'the dark industry of antiquaries, led by imaginary analogies of names, or by uncertain traditions, would in vain attempt to pierce into that deep obscurity, which covers the remote history of those nations';² and so why not proceed on the assumption that 'the same principle of a fierce and bold liberty, which is drawn by the masterly pencil of Tacitus, will suit those founders of the English government'?³ The danger, however, of such consensus is repetition, as Robertson sadly notes in the 'Proofs and Illustrations' to the *View of the Progress of Society in Europe*, these particulars being 'well known to every person conversant in ancient literature', although Robertson still cannot resist including them, if only for 'such of my readers as may be less acquainted with these facts'.⁴ The danger that the philosophic history of barbarism in Europe has become reduced to cliché is similarly implied in Hume's wearied acceptance of the necessity of giving some account of the feudal law and manners for the sake of completeness, while knowing that he 'must here repeat many observations and reflections, which have been communicated by others',⁵ citing Montesquieu and Robertson in particular in support.

It is in this context, of a philosophic obligation and of a philosophic dilemma, that Gibbon launches his own version of the ancient Germans in Chapter IX of the

² Hume, *History of England* ed. Todd, I, p.17.

³ *History of England* ed. Todd, I, p.161

⁴ Robertson, *History of the Reign of the Emperor Charles V*, I, p.208.

⁵ I, p.455.

Decline and Fall. The only guide offered is the ‘masterly pencil’ (I (I), p.230) of Tacitus, Gibbon preparing to suffer the indignities of belatedness alongside Robertson in order to maintain his claim to the philosophic tradition:

The expressive conciseness of his descriptions has deserved to exercise the diligence of innumerable antiquarians, and to excite the genius and penetration of the philosophic historians of our own times. The subject, however various and important, has already been so frequently, so ably, and so successfully discussed, that it is now grown familiar to the reader, and difficult to the writer. We shall therefore content ourselves with observing, and indeed with repeating, some of the most important circumstances of climate, of manners, and of institutions, which rendered the wild barbarians of Germany such formidable enemies to the Roman power. (I (I), p.230).

Gibbon’s performance is indeed self-consciously philosophic in the extreme; engaging with the ‘climate theory’ debate sponsored by Hume amongst others, and the great debate over the population of the ancient world; satirizing the ‘immense but rude superstructure of fable’ (I (I), p.233) erected by national antiquaries; and employing the universalizing reasoning on the stages of society, the ‘general character’ of the warrior culture in ‘a savage nation in any part of the globe’ (I (I), p.236), which the *philosophes* have made their own. And yet, as throughout the *Decline and Fall*, the footnotes continue to provide a commentary in an alternative, *érudit* mode, and furthermore, in relation to Chapter IX Gibbon has chosen to heighten this generic division by following Chapter IX with a detailed, particular and learned account of the Goths in Chapter X. The change in the status of barbarism as a historical subject reflects a shift in historical genre; but typographical sleight-of-hand in the form of footnotes and chapter divisions, and stylistic variation in the form of Gibbon’s accommodating authorial persona, prove insufficient to police the boundary between two rival approaches to the history of European barbarism. Here, the practices of *philosophe* and *érudit* reflect on each other, and in a way which runs counter to Gibbon’s evident desire to assert the primacy of the former.

Philosophic historians prefer the barbarism of their barbarians to be barbarism pure and simple, because it encourages the forms of analysis in which they excel, such as the science of causes and effects and the study of the progress of the human mind; and permits forms of historical writing in which they are at a disadvantage, such as the analysis of obscure texts and languages, historical geography, and archaeology, to be set aside with all the appearance of principle. Gibbon’s Tacitean and philosophic Chapter IX accordingly makes the methodological adjustments which permit the

general analysis of barbarism to flourish. He begins in the classic philosophic manner, with a satire on the antiquarians in which, as ever, there is more at stake than at first appears. In the person of the ‘entertaining’ (I (I), p.234) Olaus Rudbeck, professor at the university at Upsal, who according to Gibbon asserts that ‘from Sweden (which formed so considerable a part of ancient Germany) the Greeks themselves derived their alphabetical characters, their astronomy, and their religion’ (I (I), p.234), Gibbon succeeds in marginalizing the antiquarian study of barbarian peoples on the basis of the Biblical account of the dispersal of nations after Babel. It is one of the chief preoccupations of this tradition to provide barbarism with a narrative, formed of cultural contact, assimilation, and change, and it is Gibbon’s aim to deprive barbarism of precisely this resource. On the contrary, the ancient Germans are to be understood as barbarians *tout court*. Gibbon asserts that ‘all this well-laboured system of German antiquities is annihilated by a single fact, too well-attested to admit of any doubt, and of too decisive a nature to leave room for any reply’ (I (I), p.234): the Germans according to Tacitus had no system of writing, and from this fact Gibbon not only defeats Rudbeck’s hypothesis, but concludes that the Germans neither possessed a legitimate history, nor do they presently demand one; ‘we may safely pronounce, that without some species of writing, no people has ever preserved the faithful annals of their history, ever made any considerable progress in the abstract sciences, or ever possessed in any tolerable degree of perfection, the useful and agreeable arts of life’ (I (I), p.235). The first casualty of the philosophic history of barbarism, therefore, is chronology, and the second is particularity, the entire burden of Gibbon’s analysis tending towards the ‘general character’ (I (I), p.237) of barbarians and the general truths about the history of civilization they exemplify.

Gibbon’s *érudit* commentary in the footnotes and in Chapter X cruelly exposes the inadequacies of the philosophic history of barbarism, and it is precisely his *érudit* retention of historical detail and chronology which allows this to happen. Gibbon’s presentation of Tacitus is from the start a homage to the implicit Whiggism of the philosophic history of barbarism after Robertson and Hume, and is marked by the assumption that ‘in the rude institutions of those barbarians we may still distinguish the original principles of our present laws and manners’ (I (I), p.230). It is axiomatic that ‘the enjoyment of liberty’ (I (I), p.239) was the compensation for their savage state, and so exceptions found in Tacitus are treated by Gibbon as just that,

exceptions to the ‘great character of German liberty’(I (I), p.240). Yet Gibbon simply cannot help himself from returning to the problem of these exceptions in a footnote:

May we not suspect that superstition was the parent of despotism? The descendants of Odin (whose race was not extinct till the year 1060) are said to have reigned in Sweden above a thousand years. The temple of Upsal was the ancient seat of religion and empire. In the year 1153 I find a singular law, prohibiting the use and profession of arms to any except the king’s guards. Is it not probable that it was coloured by the pretence of reviving an old institution?(I (I), p.240, n.42).

The function of religion and kingship in Germanic society is immediately complicated by the serious attention Gibbon gives to Tacitus’s exceptions to the rule of Germanic liberty. The fact that he refuses to permit such detail to inform his general presentation demonstrates the extent to which he is determined to tolerate the interpretative straightjacket of the philosophic history of barbarism in order to exhibit his conformity to philosophic precedent. The Temple of Upsal may be cited in the main text of Chapter X in order to provide local colour for Gibbon’s presentation of the Gothic religion, but there is no connection made between their superstition and a despotic political system. On the contrary, Gibbon prefers to select a more philosophically correct statement from among the range of comments on the Northern nations proffered by Tacitus, and continues to pay homage to the commonplace generalization of the ‘manly obedience which [the Goths] yielded to hereditary kings’(I (I), p.258). The contrast with the serene insouciance of Hume’s transparently political account of the Germans is instructive:

The government of the Germans, and that of all the northern nations, who established themselves on the ruins of Rome, was always extremely free; and those fierce people, accustomed to independence and enured to arms, were more guided by persuasion than authority, in the submission which they paid to their princes.⁶

Gibbon’s *érudit* sympathies cause him to be anxious about exceptions in a way that Hume is not, with the effect that the primacy and the adequacy of the philosophic mode to which he has allied himself from the outset are called into question.

Gibbon’s evident inability to rid himself of respect for chronology and events is a further impediment to his apparent desire to maintain the philosophic certainties regarding the nature of barbarism. At the very end of Chapter IX he remarks how ‘these formidable barbarians made few considerable attempts, and not any material

⁶ *History of England* ed. Todd, I, p.160.

impression on the luxurious and enslaved provinces of the empire' (I (I), p.247) during a period of two hundred and fifty years; and yet, where a prudent philosophic historian would leave this as his conclusion, Gibbon in fact employs it as an introduction to a summary account of barbarian inroads on the Empire, which has the disconcerting effect of restoring to the German tribes the history which it had been Gibbon's philosophic obligation to deny them. Here, the Germans follow a trajectory of improvement in the military arts through contact with the Romans, and in what should be inconceivable from the lethargic judgement and enervated imagination characteristic of their stage of social development, they produce characters such as Civilis, 'that artful and intrepid Batavian' (I (I), p.248) who 'formed a great design of freedom and ambition' (I (I), p.249) in his rebellion against the Empire. At the same time, in contrast to the culturally pure and simple-mindedly libertarian political forms that are their legacy to their British posterity, the Germans are embedded with the Romans in a system of negotiations, factions and bribes which demonstrates a surprisingly sophisticated grasp of the mechanics of political corruption. This demonstration that Gibbon can simply be too much of a historian for his own good may certainly be taken as a form of confirmation of his place in the historiographical pantheon as a true scholar at heart, but the impact of his generic experimentation on the ultimate coherence of his account is considerable.

It is, however, the case that the ultimate judgement on Gibbon's success at playing both the *érudit* and the *philosophe* lies in the eye of the beholder, and not in the ambitions of the author; and while philosophically-inclined readers who (it may be assumed) have already survived the various crimes against scholarship and verisimilitude perpetrated by Hume, Robertson and Voltaire, are certainly well placed to admire the spectacle of Gibbon's stylistic balancing act, any scholarly readers drawn to the *Decline and Fall* by the historian's air of erudition might well prove rather harder to satisfy. Even the greatest stylistic flexibility can founder before established methodological norms, and evidence that British philosophic historiography was not thought to be above (or below) scholarly scrutiny is provided by the antiquarian John Whitaker's response to both Hume's *History of England*, and the *Decline and Fall*. For a churchman, Whitaker is in fact surprisingly sympathetic to Hume, and respectful of his literary achievements. Given their shared opposition

(from diametrically opposed ideological directions) to contractual theories of government, it is possible the politician softened the cleric, but Whitaker in his *History of Manchester* (1771-75) finds Hume's treatment of ancient Britain, Whitaker's own specialism, peculiarly obnoxious, and his deconstruction of Hume's narrative is an acute exposure of the philosophic historian's methodological embarrassments, which no stylistic manoeuvring can disguise from a properly informed reader.

Whitaker does indeed concede that Hume's compressed style, exactly as Hume intended it should, helps to protect him from close critical scrutiny:

Mr. Hume gliding over these parts of his history in a hasty superficial manner, so as scarcely to give us any real information concerning the interior state of the island during the whole Roman period, he could not possibly fall into so many mistakes as must unavoidably attend a minute and particular detail of them. Such is Mr. Carte's.⁷

Whitaker is, however, more than shrewd enough to notice how, for Hume, philosophic discretion in matters of scholarship often supplies the want of true antiquarian valour. The major example he cites is that of the vexed question of the state of the Roman fortifications in Britain at the departure of the legions, where Hume decides to silently omit the problematic testimony of Gildas, despite the reliability of Gildas being a central question in the historiography of Roman Britain, and despite Carte, whom Whitaker demonstrates to be Hume's chief guide and whom Whitaker proceeds to refute ferociously on this very point, having proposed a solution to the difficulty. Whitaker decries the tentativeness of Hume's approach, and his disingenuous use of sources:

In all the earlier parts of our history Mr. Hume is merely the copier of Mr. Carte, escaping many of his amplified absurdities from the contracted nature of his plan, passing by some perhaps from a sense of their dangerousness, and possibly avoiding others from a conviction of their folly; but giving us, after all, the general air and features of his work in miniature.⁸

Hume is also found guilty of concealing the extent of his reliance on Carte, and emphasizing instead his direct use of primary sources; 'Euphelia serves to grace his measure, // But Chloe is his real flame'.⁹ Whitaker's analysis particularly demonstrates how, deprived of the strategies embodied in *critique* for dealing with

⁷ John Whitaker, *The History of Manchester*, 2 vols. in-4^{to} (London: 1771-75), I, p.466.

⁸ II, p.550.

⁹ II, p.551.

historical uncertainty and scholarly controversy, the philosophic historian can be left solely with a choice between avoiding a subject altogether, or recounting it in a manner the evidence does not warrant. For example, Hume's account of the military engagements between the ancient British and the Scots and Picts is deliberately bland and brief:

The Picts and Scots, finding that the Romans had finally relinquished Britain, now regarded the whole as their prey, and attacked the northern wall with redoubled forces. The Britons, already subdued by their own fears, found the ramparts but a weak defence for them; and deserting their station, left the country entirely open to the inroads of the enemy.¹⁰

Yet Whitaker points out that, for all that this section of the *History of England* is peppered with brief references to the standard testimonies of Bede, Gildas and Alured of Beverley, Hume is here attempting simply to bypass a large and complex scholarly debate; and shows how in the context of this debate, the description 'northern wall' is deliberately non-committal, and the phrase 'with redoubled forces' is found in no source, but is Hume's purely conjectural solution to finding a single and rational connection between the confused tales of repeated incursions. Whitaker concludes that 'with all [Hume's] cautious treading upon the embers, he has actually burnt himself'; and 'he has done it, in leaving his history embarrassed by this questionable mode of registering transactions'.¹¹

While to analyse the *History of England* in such a hostile manner brings to mind the act of breaking a butterfly on a wheel, Gibbon has, of course, positively invited such scrutiny, and Whitaker in his splanetic yet penetrating *Gibbon's 'History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire', in Vols. IV, V, and VI, reviewed* (1791) is keen to provide it, having previously broken with Gibbon his former friend over the infidelity of the *Decline and Fall*. Whitaker points out that Gibbon's use of footnotes as almost a parallel text invites a fractured reading experience:

His notes are so frequent in themselves, and so full of foreign matter, that the reader is perpetually drawn off from the subject of the text, and his mind is distracted // in an endless variety; being tossed backwards and forwards, between historical narrative and critical observations, the deeds of the actors on the stage above, and the characters of the writers in the 'cellarage' below.¹²

¹⁰ *History of England* ed. Todd, I, p.13.

¹¹ II, 553.

¹² Whitaker, *Gibbon's 'History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire', in Vols. IV, V, and VI, reviewed* (London: 1791), pp.253-54.

Whitaker's sheer loathing of Gibbon licenses in his own opinion all the current calumnies against Gibbon's faithfulness with references, yet his dogged pursuit of the strange affair of the Vandals of Brandenburgh almost redeems his review, and provides some evidence for his assertion that as a consequence of contemporary historiographical fashions, 'we lose in *veracity* what we gain in *embellishments*; and the *authenticity* of the narration fades and sinks away, in the lustre of the *philosophy* sur- // rounding it'.¹³

In Chapter XLI of the *Decline and Fall* Gibbon considers sympathetically the plight of the Vandals of Africa, and is then led to make a rather daring assertion of the existence of their modern-day brethren:

In the country between the Elbe and the Oder, several populous villages of Lusatia are inhabited by the Vandals: they still preserve their language, their customs, and the purity of their blood; support with some impatience, the Saxon, or Prussian yoke; and serve with secret and voluntary allegiance, the descendant of their ancient kings, who in his garb and present fortune is confounded with the meanest of his vassals.(II (IV), p.643).

Yet even in the text Gibbon proceeds immediately to retract the linguistic evidence for this connection with the true Vandals, despite such a connection providing the only motive for the entire episode's inclusion, and the justification for Gibbon's sentimental presentation; and the confusion deepens when, in the relevant footnote, he then undermines his original source for the present-day existence of this mysterious people, asserting that its veracity 'may justly be suspected'(II (IV), p.643, n.38). Here Gibbon, by wishing to indulge the looseness with sources and indiscriminating fondness for attractive circumstances which permit Hume, for example, to pick and choose among the sources for the history of the fall of Roman Britain and to add local colour of his own, while at the same time seeking to preserve his scholarly credibility by operating according to stricter standards in the footnotes, lays bare the contradictions within the generic identity of the *Decline and Fall*. The overall effect is bizarre, and, to an unsympathetic (or merely scholarly) eye, undermines the reliability of Gibbon's standards of scholarship. It is of course unsurprising that Whitaker for his own part views Gibbon's 'antiquarian dream'¹⁴ about the Vandals of Brandenburgh as an example of 'that weakness of historical credulity, which often attends the most

¹³ *Gibbon's 'History' reviewed*, pp.3-4.

¹⁴ p.41.

vigorous exponents of religious infidelity',¹⁵ but his account of the correspondence on this very question provoked by the first publication of his review of the *Decline and Fall*, and carried on by several hands in the pages of the *English Review* in 1788, testifies to the fundamental incompatibility of such Gibbonian shape-shifting with the contemporary culture of scholarship. In the pages of the *English Review* earnest correspondents duly weigh in on both sides, but, as Whitaker points out to Gibbon's defenders, Gibbon has already effectively retracted his own opinion; 'by this movement of dexterity, he steals out at the back-door, while the letter-writer is waiting for him at the fore-door; and slips off from him, and from his own assertion, together'.¹⁶ This is not the conduct of a contributor to learned debate, or of the author of a work of reference. There are numerous other instances in the *Decline and Fall* of the philosophic preference for bold statement, a clean text, and the unqualified assertion coming directly into conflict with Gibbon's scholarly responsibilities; such as the real (and surprising) difficulty of discerning his actual position on the authenticity of Ossian, and the sheer casualness of his controversial claim in Chapter XIII that feudalism has a Celtic origin. The question of how far the *Decline and Fall* participates in the culture of scholarship or seeks to be understood as participating in that culture is therefore not as easily answered as Gibbon's personal credentials and the profusion of scholarly apparatus in the text would seem to suggest, and it seems at the very least that Gibbon varies in the degree of his commitment to his *érudit* activities, such as from the incidental Vandals of Brandenburg to the history of church doctrine. To this extent Gibbon's *érudition*, ostensibly the more stable partner in the union with *philosophie*, is considerably compromised by Gibbon's insistence on the necessary dominance of the voice of the *philosophe*, as is the overall claim of the *Decline and Fall* to be an *érudit* text.

2. The character of the historian

The dominance of Gibbon's literary persona in the *Decline and Fall*, the insistence with which he invites the reader's attention to focus on himself as author, is more than merely a personal preference for self-display, but is positively demanded by the

¹⁵ p.40.

¹⁶ Footnote, p.46.

compromising nature of his subject. Gibbon's gamble is that a knowingness shared between author and reader regarding the generic characteristics of philosophic and erudite writing can be a substitute for the clarity of form and purpose to which philosophic historiography, at least in theory, should aspire. It is in this respect that the referential quality of the *Decline and Fall*, the way it advertises its connections with sources and predecessors, and brings Gibbon's literary judgement into the foreground, helps to establish the boundaries of philosophy and erudition which form the generic identity of the *Decline and Fall*. Instead of flying from the reader's scrutiny, Gibbon invites it, and by proffering his own literary character as an object for criticism, he ensures that all criticism takes place according to terms he himself defines.

The most memorable characters in the *Decline and Fall* are not historical agents, but other scholars; Tillemont, Ducange, Mosheim, Muratori, Pagi. In creating his scholarly characters, Gibbon takes possession of the traditional discourse of the satire on pedantry that is especially dear to an anglophone reader brought up on the writings of the Scriblerians, and by this means, both displays his self-awareness, and forestalls the use of such satire at his own expense. A further benefit is that the sheer entertainment value of a beloved cultural stereotype is liberated to the great advantage of the *Decline and Fall* itself. Gibbon's preferred method is to cultivate a critical style of precise, measured praise which, to those sufficiently knowing, reads as a form of satire, as, for example, in his character of the Count de Buat:

The Count de Buat was French minister at the court of Bavaria: a liberal curiosity prompted his enquiries into the antiquities of the country, and that curiosity was the *germ* of twelve respectable volumes. (II (IV), p.538, n.44).

The image of innocent, neither philosophic nor professional and therefore unembarrassed 'curiosity' is neatly set off by the implied satire of a culture of scholarship where size rules, and by the mild irony of the contrast between the 'respectable' bulk of what it produces, and the mere 'germ' of thought in which it originated. The suggestion of an organic, undirected growth of material amassed by an enthusiastic gentleman amateur is further developed in Gibbon's characterization of de Buat's major work, the *Histoire des anciens peuples de l'Europe* (1772):

These dark transactions [between Alaric and Stilicho] are investigated by the Count de Buat (Hist. des Peuples de l'Europe, tom. vii. c. iii-viii. p.69-206.), whose laborious accuracy may sometimes fatigue a superficial reader. (II (III), p.155, n.101).

Again, Gibbon's satire works by means of an ironic lightness of touch: the quarrel is between the 'superficial reader' and the 'laborious' Count de Buat, with Gibbon himself acting as disengaged observer. The primary purpose of Gibbon's satire is not to frame an alternative, but to display his ability to identify with, and therefore anticipate in his own case, the sophisticated reader's response to works of erudition which to some degree the *Decline and Fall* must resemble. Gibbon's use of terms such as 'accurate' to describe the works of other scholars can therefore range in inflexion from certain satire to truly meant praise, but no reader can be left in any doubt that Gibbon has ascribed to himself an authority over their meaning.

Gibbon's own scholarly voice in the *Decline and Fall* is, therefore, shot through with the ironic awareness which informs his other scholarly characters. Gibbon may indeed be pleased to take his place as a successor to 'the learning and ingenuity of Pagi, Tillemont, Valsecchi, Vignoli, and Torre bishop of Adria' on the question of the date of the death of Elagabalus, but there is a distinctly ironic inflexion to the roll-call of names, the double-edged praise of 'ingenuity', and the judgement of the question as 'most assuredly intricate'; while Gibbon's self-interrogation, 'but what shall we reply to the medals...? We shall reply with the learned Valsecchi...' (I (I), p.170, n.62), exploits the comic potential in the pursuits of scholars, especially for the benefit of readers who have heard neither of the medals in question, nor of the learned Valsecchi. A further, and particularly interesting instance is the footnote on the methods of blinding employed in the later Classical world:

The word *abacinare*, in Latin and Italian, has furnished Ducange (Gloss. Latin.) with an opportunity to review the various modes of blinding: the more violent were scooping, burning with an iron, or hot vinegar, and binding the head with a strong cord until the eyes burst from their sockets. Ingenious tyrants! (III (VI), p.747, n.22).

The note describes a moment of ironic self-recognition in that Gibbon, like Ducange, clearly cannot resist the 'opportunity' to provide a list; yet it further gains in significance by being a rewriting in a quasi-*érudit* mode of an aside by Voltaire in the *Essay sur l'Histoire Générale, et sur les Moeurs et l'Esprit des Nations* (1756). Voltaire notes, on the same occasion of the blinding of John Lascaris by Michael Palaeologus;

L'usage recommença de crever les yeux. Michel Paléologue se signala d'abord en privant son pupille de la vue & de la liberté. On se servait

auparavant d'une lame de métal ardente: Michel employa le vinaigre bouillant, & l'habitude s'en conserva; car la mode entre jusques dans les crimes.¹⁷

There are numerous other points in the *Decline and Fall* where Gibbon responds in form and as *érudit* to Voltaire's assertions, notably regarding the cage of Bajazet, and the invasion of Spain by the Arabs. Yet, just as in the case of John Brown's 'formalist' and the wit and humour of the gentleman, there is a distinct danger that asserting one's authority as a traditional scholar can appear doggedly literal-minded. Gibbon's subsequent exclamation, 'ingenious tyrants!', serves to identify him with Voltaire, underlining both his awareness of the precedent, and his naturally philosophic sensibility. Such is the intensity of Gibbon's concentration on fashioning his own persona, that even a single footnote reveals a series of layers of negotiation between disparate generic contexts. At the same time, however, as being the focus for such fine stylistic modulations, Gibbon's self-presentation as a scholar can also make its appeal to a literary culture that is by no means impervious to the charm of the *grande lecture*. Gibbon's description of Sir William Jones's *Essay on the Law of Bailments* (1781) pays tribute to the intellectual flair that can be displayed in wide reading elegantly disposed; 'he is perhaps the only lawyer equally conversant with the year-books of Westminster, the Commentaries of Ulpian, the Attic pleadings of Isaeus, and the sentences of Arabian and Persian cadhis' (II (IV), p.830, n.168). Gibbon therefore deploys his learning on well-placed occasions in a way which lessens the distinction between the scholar (or indeed, the *philosophe*) and the mere cultured reader, disarming any suspicion of the dreaded charge of dryness of spirit; as, for example, in the self-conscious modesty of his admission 'astronomers may study Newton and Halley. I draw my humble science from the article COMETE, in the French Encyclopedie by M. d'Alembert' (II (IV), p.770, n.76). Fenced in by his own rigour, d'Alembert the historian casts beyond the genres of *philosophie*, postponing the burden of maintaining an intellectual aloofness from vulgar literary enjoyment. If such a strategy is good enough for an *encyclopédiste*, it is more than permissible for Gibbon, a philosophic volunteer.

Gibbon's sleight-of-hand is to emphasize how he reconciles the tensions within his authorial persona, as a means of distracting the reader's attention from how

¹⁷ Voltaire, *Essay sur l'Histoire Générale, et sur les Moeurs et l'Esprit des Nations, depuis Charlemagne*, 7 vols. in-8° (s.l.: 1756), I, p.392.

in the *Decline and Fall* those same tensions between the generic conventions of philosophic and of erudite history inform everything he does; which is naturally not necessarily the same as what he claims to be doing at any given time. Whitaker, for one, recognises the high-risk nature of the *Decline and Fall*, and is deeply frustrated by Gibbon's success in carrying it off:

This is a work of a very extraordinary nature. It is not in the common rank of publications, aiming at a moderate share of reputation, and content to rest in a mediocrity of character. It must either be highly censured or strongly praised, or praised and censured with an equal degree of energy.¹⁸

Gibbon succeeds in the *Decline and Fall* in recasting the disputes of the Classical scholars of even the previous century into a modern, fashionable idiom – and indeed, into the avant-garde, philosophic idiom which had been predicated from the start upon a rejection of the traditional practices of erudition. However, at the same time, Gibbon's authorial voice treads the line between a strategic flexibility of tone and argument, and visible fracture. In a notable example, Gibbon has recourse to sheltering behind the substantial figure of Ammianus Marcellinus in Chapter XXXI on the manners of the nobles of Rome. The excuse proffered for such an extensive quotation in the main text is typically insouciant, 'their luxury, and their manners, have been the subject of minute and laborious disquisition: but [...] such enquiries would divert me too long from the design of the present work, which is more peculiarly applicable to the period of the // Gothic invasion' (II (III), pp.174-5), but the mere fact that Gibbon invokes an entirely separate voice in order to deliver this information denotes a certain failure of nerve. Naturally, the profuse footnotes provide space enough for small dissertations on topics such as Roman travelling habits, and a kind of ancient squirrel, but again, as Whitaker points out, the scholarly voice of the footnotes cannot be satisfactorily integrated with the fastidious voice of the main text. Gibbon chooses the office of commentator over that of antiquarian, evidently because the nature of the subject as a 'minute and laborious disquisition' simply cannot be given a philosophic treatment, and he ends by having recourse to the blunt instrument of simple satire against Hyde, who 'pours forth, on this trifling subject [of the history of backgammon] a copious torrent of classic and Oriental learning' (II (III), p.180, n.46), Gibbon having first, of course, given the substance of the argument. Just as in the case of national antiquarians such as Rudbeck the

¹⁸ Whitaker, *Gibbon's 'History' reviewed*, p. 253.

Swedish professor, this kind of satire is more revealing of philosophic uncertainties, and of the limits of what can be accommodated within the philosophic historical style, than of the sins of the scholars. Gibbon's historical persona is flexible, and tolerant of disguise, but there are occasions in the *Decline and Fall* where even his careful forms of disguise fail, and flexibility is revealed as self-contradiction.

There is in fact a danger for the *Decline and Fall* in that Gibbon's rehabilitation of Classical erudition might simply be too successful. Eighteenth-century publishing in Britain and France abounds in digests, dictionaries and guides, which describe their function as being to mediate between the world of erudition and the general reading public. The *Encyclopédie* itself wrestles with the problem that such mediation represents a legitimate philosophic aim, but at the same time lacks the excitement, the distinctiveness, and above all the scope for individual self-assertion which the idea of philosophic writing holds out to its adherents. Gibbon finds additional protection against the destiny of a glorified Goldsmith, or indeed of a supplement to the vast collaborative publication the *Universal History* (1736-44), by displaying the kind of disregard for pious and polite conventions which never fails to identify a writer as being on the intellectual cutting-edge. His decision to open his account of Christianity in the first instalment of the *Decline and Fall* in Volume I in the guise of an infidel, with gestures towards Voltaire and Hume, certainly serves if nothing else to distinguish him from his competitors, and establishes from the start a scandalous *frisson* even around his less stridently infidel approach to the subject in the later volumes.¹⁹ Whitaker notes, in an echo of John Brown's notorious rebuke to Hume, in relation to Gibbon's 'dull' history of the doctrine of the incarnation, that 'nothing keeps the historical mind, from slumbering over the pages of it; but the bold sallies of blasphemy in it'.²⁰

Whitaker also indicts Gibbon's fondness for obscene innuendo, which he views as of a piece with his infidelity:

¹⁹ See David Womersley, *Gibbon and the 'Watchmen of the Holy City': The Historian and his Reputation 1776-1815* (Oxford: 2002), Part I, for Gibbon's motivation in playing the infidel in volume I of the *Decline and Fall* ['when preparing volume one for first publication, Gibbon's desire for literary celebrity led him to lace chapters fifteen and sixteen with some sophisticated, but inessential, irreligious and deistical language' (p.38)], and for the consequences of Gibbon's initial decision for his self-positioning in the subsequent volumes.

²⁰ Whitaker, *Gibbon's 'History' reviewed*, p.64.

A soul, deeply tintured with sensuality, loves to brood over sensual ideas itself, to present sensual objects to others, and so to enjoy its own sensuality of spirit over again.²¹

Whatever Gibbon's propensity to sensuality of spirit, it is evident that obscenity is deliberately affected in the *Decline and Fall*, as a means of saving the philosophic historian from ever becoming fully domesticated. Whitaker's remark refers to Gibbon's Chapter XLIV on the Roman jurisprudence, and it is no coincidence that Gibbon indulges in obscene innuendo at a point where he is most virtuously playing the polite scholar, taming works of terrifying erudition for a non-specialist audience. In the text, Gibbon is coy, 'I touch with reluctance, and dispatch with impatience, a more odious vice, of which modesty rejects the name, and nature abominates the idea' (II (IV), p.837), and then confirms the immediate suspicion of overt self-parody in the markedly less fastidious footnotes:

A curious dissertation might be formed on the introduction of paederasty after the time of Homer, its progress among the Greeks of Asia and Europe, the vehemence of their passions, and the thin device of virtue and friendship which amused the philosophers of Athens. (II (IV), p.837, n.192).

Gibbon notes that 'a crowd of disgraceful passages will force themselves on the memory of the classic reader' (II (IV), p.838, n.195), although he nobly restricts himself to only one quotation; and, by means of the evocation of a shared, implicitly masculine (and here, distinctly schoolboy) fondness for the seamy side of Classical erudition, declares the *Decline and Fall's* independence of the virtuous self-improvement of the fine feathered ladies.²² The element of calculation in Gibbon's rudeness is exemplified in the way his speculation on the private life and the 'natural or preternatural gifts' (III (V), p.216) of Mahomet is anticipated in the 1784 *Sermons* of Joseph White, which it is clear from the references in the *Decline and Fall* Gibbon had read with some attention. White's prudery marks out the territory for the enterprising infidel to occupy:

I will not presume to shock the feelings of this audience by a nearer prospect of the chamber of the prophet: indeed the most abandoned libertine would

²¹ p.55.

²² For Gibbon's delight at attracting a respectable female readership, see his letter to Dorothea Gibbon of 26th March 1776, in *The Letters of Edward Gibbon* ed. J.E. Norton, 3 vols. (London: 1956), [volume I having been well received 'even by fine feathered Ladies' (II, p.100)]; and, in a version suited to solely masculine company, his letter to Georges Deyverdun of 7th May 1776 [the praises 'des femmes de condition, surtout si elles sont jeunes et jolies, sans etre du plus grand poids ne laissent pas de m'amuser infiniment' (II, p.106)].

blush at the particular representation of the horrid and disgusting scenes which there unfold themselves to our astonished view.²³

In the *Decline and Fall*, of course, an entire sub-section of Chapter L is devoted to just such a nearer prospect and particular representation. It is surely emblematic of the relative impoverishment of the British *philosophe*'s ambitions – or indeed, conversely, and as a matter of preference, of his devotion to the more subtle points of literary self-creation – that Laurence Sterne can be invoked in the *Histoire des deux Indes* by Gibbon's contemporaries Diderot and Raynal as an inspiration to a global call for Enlightened revolution, and appealed to in the *Decline and Fall* as a pioneer of the subversive art of mildly obscene suggestion; 'I may exclaim, with poor Sterne, that it is hard if I may not transcribe with caution, what a bishop could write without scruple' (III (V), p.477, n.14).

3. The evolution of the scholars

The legacy of French philosophic historiography to the *Decline and Fall* is a range of stylistic resources, a mass of canonical precedent, and a sense of a distinctive identity that is frequently defined against the idea of the *érudit*; who, being naturally a caricature, is conceived of as an essentially static figure. Gibbon, however, in his character as *érudit*, can also invoke contemporary developments in historical scholarship, in the light of which the stereotypes of the Classical pedant and the credulous antiquarian, having sustained philosophic satire since the days of the Quarrel generations previously, start to show their age. In the *Decline and Fall* Gibbon seizes on promising models within the various and evolving contemporary practice of erudition which can assist the embarrassed philosophic historian out of his self-inflicted dilemma.

Ancient Oriental history in the *Decline and Fall* imposes on Gibbon a very similar complex of negotiations to the theme of the European barbarians. It is a subject that is on the face of it a veritable quagmire of erudite obscurity, which might on its own present problems enough; and yet it has also already been broached by Gibbon's philosophic predecessors, thus bestowing on him the obligation to balance

²³ Joseph White, *Sermons preached before the University of Oxford, in the year 1784, at the lecture founded by the Reverend John Bampton* (Oxford: 1784), p.184; [<http://galenet.galegroup.com/servlet/ECCO>, accessed 24th August 2006].

philosophic allegiances with equally philosophic independence. At the same time, again just as in the case of the ancient Germans, the threat of descending into literary cliché dogs the historian, but in this case, and as a further impediment, Gibbon's lack of knowledge of the Oriental languages leaves him entirely reliant on the standard, translated sources. Here, however, it is the *érudits* themselves who come to Gibbon's rescue, in the form of the huge impact on the *Decline and Fall* exerted by the *Histoire des Huns* (1756-58) of the French scholar Joseph de Guignes. It is clear that Gibbon's treatment of the history of Oriental nations in general owes much to Voltaire, in that he can simply assume that it is legitimate to include in a philosophic history accounts in the heroic historical genre of figures such as Ghengis and Timour, Voltaire having done the same in the *Essay sur l'Histoire Générale*, and indeed, the *Decline and Fall* exposes the extent to which the philosophic form of Oriental history is so easily assumed that it is in danger of shading into the merely popular. Gibbon lightly satirizes the account of Timour by Sir William Temple, 'that lover of exotic virtue' (III (VI), p.856, n.79), but at the same time appeals to Temple's *Essay of Heroic Virtue* (1690) and the popular historical sentiments it represents, when following John Huniades with Scanderbeg for no other reason but that 'in the list of heroes, John Huniades and Scanderbeg are commonly associated' (III (VI), p.926). Although Gibbon is confident enough in his status to openly profess his willingness to follow the style of the Oriental history as represented by its eighteenth-century compilers, with its descriptions of magnificence, preoccupation with the despotic virtue of magnanimity, and fondness for sententiae on the vanity of human wishes, 'from the paths of blood, and such is the history of nations, I cannot refuse to turn aside to gather some flowers of science or virtue' (III (V), p.526), such condescension can on occasion land him in unfortunate company. In Chapter LII Gibbon reports the lament of Abdalrahman, and in the notes acknowledges the use made of such material by Johnson and Prior, and how it may be 'triumphantly quoted by the detractors of human life' (III (V), p.346, n.50): he therefore feels the need to reassure his own reader that he has no intention of continuing much further in the ungrateful guise of the moralist, '*my happy hours have far exceeded, and far exceed, the scanty numbers of the caliph of Spain; and I shall not scruple to add, that many of them are due to the pleasing labour of the present composition*' (III (V), p.346, n.50).

The terms of Gibbon's rebuke to Johnson over the latter's unreconstructed fondness for Richard Knolles's *General History of the Turks to the Present Year* (1603) in fact reveal the fundamental problem Oriental history presents to Gibbon as a scholar, even leaving aside the ambitions of the *philosophe*:

[...] I much doubt whether a partial and verbose compilation from Latin writers, thirteen hundred folio pages of speeches and battles, can either instruct or amuse an enlightened // age which requires from the historian some tincture of philosophy and criticism.(III (VI), pp.810-11, n.41).

Gibbon's account, too, is structured around 'speeches and battles', and so of rather ambiguous philosophic status, and, even more importantly, his ability to infuse a tincture of 'criticism' is severely limited by the fact that he does not read any of the Oriental languages. In relation to Greek and Latin sources, Gibbon can advertise his original contribution to scholarship, but for other material his learning is at second hand, and invites the danger of appearing mere repetition. Gibbon, naturally, has developed stylistic strategies for countering such a negative association; beginning with a frank acknowledgement of his situation, 'as in [Chapters L and LI] I shall display much Arabic learning, I must profess my total ignorance of the Oriental tongues, and my gratitude to the learned interpreters, who have transfused their science into the Latin, French, and English languages'(III (V), p.151, n.1), and continuing with a knowing appeal to his readers' sympathy, 'I pass slightly; I am not fond of repeating words like a parrot'(III (V), p.164, n.39). Similarly, Gibbon transforms the dangerous passivity of the role of redactor of translations into a suitably active one by constantly emphasizing his scrutiny of his sources, even if need be on the superficial grounds of style; and is delighted to point out his greater boldness, 'I am bolder than Mr. Ockley', in inserting in his own text the simile derived from 'that useful and familiar animal'(III (V), p.261, n.65) the camel, and also to note his suspicion that in Dow's translation 'by some odd fatality, the style of Ferishta has been improved by that of Ossian'(III (V), p.529, p.13). Yet Gibbon's continuing anxiety concerning the potentially marginal status of his Oriental history is clearly evident in his unusually vehement attacks on the *Universal History*, which also has treated the history of the Arabs. Its authors' bias is held to nullify the supposed advantage of their superior erudition, Gibbon thus translating the contest on to philosophic ground:

They enjoyed the advantage of reading, and sometimes correcting, the Arabic texts; yet, notwithstanding their high-sounding boasts, I cannot find, after the

conclusion of my work, that they have afforded me much (if any) additional information. The dull mass is not quickened by a spark of philosophy or taste: and the compilers indulge the criticism of acrimonious bigotry against Boulainvilliers, Sale, Gagnier, and all who have treated Mahomet with favour, or even justice.(III (V), p.232, n.187).

Gibbon is, however, rather too keen to find the authors of the *Universal History* to be bigots. The ‘nameless doctor [...] [who] has formally *demonstrated* the truth of Christianity by the independence of the Arabs’(III (V), p.158, n.21) has done no such thing, and has instead presented a reasoned and detailed argument in favour of the fact, which Gibbon himself ends by accepting; namely that the exceptions that can be cited ‘are temporary or local; the body of the nation escaped the most powerful monarchies’(III (V), p.158). Gibbon’s rebuke to the ‘self-sufficient compilers of the Modern Universal History’(III (V), p.287, n.125) for failing to note the evidence of the obscure Murtadi, might perhaps indeed be a justified correction; but to describe a thirteenth-century source, which Gibbon himself subsequently acknowledges to be ‘wild and legendary’(III (V), p.288, n.128) in places, as ‘authentic intel- // lidence’(III (V), pp.286-87, n.125) regarding a seventh-century event, is rather more revealing of his own anxieties regarding how to distinguish himself from the competition.

It is de Guignes’ *Histoire des Huns* which offers Gibbon an opportunity to revivify his Oriental history in a manner that is at once suitably philosophic as well as erudite. The fact that de Guignes’ project in itself represents a sophisticated intervention in the competition in France between Voltaire and the *érudits* over the ownership of Oriental history makes his work uniquely suited to Gibbon’s wider purpose. Although Voltaire can tolerate Oriental heroes in his philosophic history, and although the mischievous use of Chinese chronology has strong philosophic appeal, the patient antiquarian investigation into the more obscure transactions of the East lies under a philosophic interdiction which is given forceful, absolute and canonical expression in the treatment of the early history of the Turks in the *Essay sur l’Histoire Générale*:

On se fatigue à rechercher l’origine de ces Turcs. Elle est la même que celle de tous // les peuples conquérans [...] Leurs antiquités ne méritent guères mieux une histoire suivie que les loups et les tigres de leur païs.²⁴

²⁴ I, pp.333-34.

De Guignes presents his *Histoire des Huns* as an argument to the contrary, ‘je suis bien éloigné de penser avec un Auteur du siècle, que les Turcs ne méritent guère plus que l’on recherche leur origine & leur histoire, *que les loups et les tygres de leur pays*’,²⁵ and he seeks to reaffirm the validity of the antiquarian study of the East with all its traditional tools; knowledge of the original authors, comprehensive attention to chronology and detail, and, in his *Memoire dans lequel on prouve que les Chinois sont une colonie Egyptienne* (1760), heroic conjecture on a level with the ‘excellente théorie’ of ‘Monsieur Varburton’.²⁶ In the context of the French quarrel over the meaning of the history of China, de Guignes’ learning and his chronological tables acquire polemic force. The presumption of writers such as Voltaire is firmly rebuked, and the territory of China regained for the *érudits*:

Si ceux qui ont été à portée d’entendre les livres des Orientaux, ne se sont pas attachés à nous donner une Histoire de l’Orient, combien d’autres, quoique privés de ce secours, n’ont pas laissé de tenter l’exécution d’un pareil Ouvrage? Mais ils sont de vains efforts; ils ne présentent jamais qu’un même personnage sous un masque différent, & qui souvent cache de nouvelles difformités.²⁷

De Guignes insists that the history of the East is one of change, revolutions and the mysterious movements of barbarian *hordes*, in the first place because this overturns the polemic use made by Voltaire of the idea of China as a self-contained and superior civilization of vast antiquity (of course, as a challenge to the parochial vision and contracted chronology of Judeo-Christian universal history), but also because the tools of the antiquarians thus become central to the enquiry; ‘c’est un beau monument que l’on a admiré parce qu’on ne l’a aperçu que de très-loin’.²⁸

Such learned disdain for the amateur Orientalist would seem to exclude Gibbon just as much as it does Voltaire, and yet de Guignes’ ambition to supplant Voltaire causes him to draw out the potential in the subject of the *Histoire des Huns* for a specifically philosophic refashioning, a process which Gibbon himself will complete. De Guignes is not content for the *Histoire des Huns* to appeal to his own *érudit* faction, but frankly aims for a wider success, having first made the necessary stylistic adjustments:

²⁵ De Guignes, *Histoire Générale des Huns, des Turcs, des Mogols, et des autres Tartares Occidentaux, & c. Avant et depuis Jesus Christ jusqu’a present*, 5 vols. in-4^{to} (Paris: 1756-58), I, p.vi.

²⁶ De Guignes, *Memoire dans lequel on prouve que les Chinois sont une colonie Egyptienne, nouvelle édition* (Paris: 1760), p.63.

²⁷ *Histoire des Huns*, I, p.vii.

²⁸ I, p.6.

Comme souvent il est inévitable d'examiner en Critique quelques événements importants sur lesquels les Historiens ne sont pas d'accord, je renvoie toutes mes recherches au bas des pages dans des notes particulières: j'y rapporte les différences que j'ai observées dans les Auteurs; par ce moyen je n'insère dans cet Ouvrage aucun passage en langue Orientale. Cela n'est propre qu'à rebuter la plupart des Lecteurs.²⁹

More importantly, however, de Guignes is moved to aggressively counter the supposedly marginal status of his subject by making large claims for its significance for the history of the later Roman Empire through the offices of Attila, 'c'est une occasion indispensable d'éclaircir une partie de l'Histoire du bas Empire, & surtout de remonter jusqu'à l'origine de quelques autres Peuples barbares',³⁰ and, further, to associate his comprehensive vision of the vast wanderings of amorphous barbarian hordes with that elusive object of the philosophic historian's desire, the cause:

Les Historiens Grecs ne suffisoient pas pour porter jusques-là nos connoissances: mais en les rapprochant de ceux de la Chine, la plupart de ces Barbares nous deviennent connues; nous les suivons pas à pas depuis le fond de la Tartarie & le Nord de la Chine jusqu'en Pannonie & en France. Nous apprenons les causes de leur irruption.³¹

De Guignes' rhetorical presentation of his unique ability to connect the histories of East and West is indeed sufficiently stylish on occasion to have Voltairean affinities. Voltaire summons up the imaginative power of the idea of the great revolutions in universal history in the person of Ghengis Khan, 'l'imagination des hommes oisifs, qui s'épuise en fictions romanesques, n'oserait pas imaginer qu'un Prince partît du fond de la Corée, qui est à l'extrémité Orientale de notre globe, pour porter la guerre en Perse & aux Indes',³² and de Guignes does the same at strategic intervals throughout the *Histoire des Huns*, 'c'est en considérant l'histoire générale du genre humain, & en comparant ses différentes parties les unes avec les autres, que l'on parvient aussi à connoître les grandes révolutions qui ont changé la surface de la terre; nous voyons leur origine, leur marche, & le rapport qu'elles ont entre elles dans les pays les plus éloignés'.³³

De Guignes' philosophic moments are, however, few and far between in the *Histoire des Huns*, which has all the characteristics readers of philosophic writings

²⁹ I, p.xviii.

³⁰ I, p.xii.

³¹ I, p.xii.

³² *Essay sur l'Histoire Générale*, II, p.6.

³³ V, p.228.

have been told to expect from the work of an *érudit* and declared *anti-philosophe*. It is extremely long, strangely organized, and so respectful of chronology that the obscurity can become crushing, and unfortunately thus providing evidential support for the philosophic historian's praise of the sovereign duty of selection. In his *Lettre à MM. les Auteurs du Journal des Sçavans*, appended to the *Histoire des Huns*, de Guignes professes himself puzzled by the perverse review the journal had given to his work, where the reviewers have confined themselves to particular objections to statements of fact, and to minor articles such as the dynasties of the Franks which de Guignes views as 'le moins considérable et le moins intéressant';³⁴ yet it is certainly true that the beauty of his general plan is very hard to discern among the mass of detail. It is, however, very clear to Gibbon. The *Histoire des Huns* is commended in Chapter XXVI of the *Decline and Fall* for having connected the history of the ancient Huns in the East with their irruption into the West, which then causes the Goths to pour into the Roman territory: de Guignes has 'thus laid open new and important scenes in the history of mankind'(I (II), p.1029, n.10). Gibbon proceeds to extract the historical core from de Guignes' account, but also at the same time aims to distil the imaginative essence of his project, and it is precisely de Guignes' ability to imagine transcending his *érudit* persona, coupled with his failure to realize his own project, which assists Gibbon in his act of literary cannibalism.

In the *Decline and Fall*, the ancient revolutions of the Huns are given an elegant retelling, Gibbon characteristically seizing on the sentimental charm of the lament of the captive Chinese princess which de Guignes himself buries under a mass of chronological exactness, and wisely refraining from engaging with the distinctly tenuous reasons proffered in the *Histoire des Huns* for associating the Hiong-nou of the Chinese chronicles with the much later nation of the Huns. So far, Gibbon's use of de Guignes is a form of mere distillation; Gibbon, however, at the same time participates vicariously in the intellectual excitement the idea of connecting East and West presents. He notes 'the strange connection of human events'(I (II), p.1035) whereby a hitherto obscure Eastern revolt explains the retreat of the Parthians from Syria, as envisaged by means of the 'comprehensive view' (I (II), p.1036, n.30) of de Guignes. He particularly enjoys the bold reversals in historical perspective induced by the contemplation of such vast migrations, 'the course of [the Huns'] emigration soon

³⁴ V, p.346.

carried them beyond the mountains of Imaus, and the limits of the Chinese geography; but *we* are able to distinguish the two great divisions of these formidable exiles' (I (II), p.1040). In this way, in contrast to the rigid formulae for what constitutes an original contribution to scholarship, or for that matter the ever-greater philosophic refinements on established historical attitudes, the imaginative concept behind the *Histoire des Huns* is more easily shared and undeniably novel, and enables Gibbon to give certain areas of his Oriental history a confidence and distinctiveness which it otherwise lacks.

This confidence shows in Gibbon's unabashed delight at being able to rebuke Montesquieu, the originator of the canonical philosophic version of the causes of the decline and fall of the Roman Empire, from a position of serene superiority:

As we are possessed of the authentic history of the Huns, it would be impertinent to repeat, or to refute, the fables, which misrepresent their origin and progress, their passage of the mud or water of the Maeotis, in pursuit of an ox or stag, les Indes qu'ils avoient decouvertes, &c. (I (II), p.1044, n.56).

Gibbon is here adopting the sentiment of de Guignes on the very same 'expédiens imaginaires'³⁵ alleged by Jornandes whom Montesquieu follows, and it is entirely typical that Gibbon does not enter into the detail of the alternative version of events which de Guignes is at pains to establish. The fact that it is the idea of the *Histoire des Huns*, and not the specific nature of its contribution to knowledge (its 'authenticity') which attracts Gibbon, can be seen in the way he generously asserts that 'we may be assured' that Attila 'sent ambassadors to negotiate an equal alliance with the empire of China' (II (III), p.299), where de Guignes claims only that 'il y a lieu de croire'³⁶ that Attila did so, and acknowledges the question to be sufficiently uncertain to demand the insertion of the actual words of the ambiguous Chinese chronicles, while making no mention of anything like an 'equal alliance'. Similarly, Gibbon provides a historical account for the first emigration of the Turks in Chapter XLII that is in fact formed out of the conflation of two incompatible myths which de Guignes carefully describes separately. Yet the mere idea of the *Histoire des Huns* is powerful enough for Gibbon to aim to wholly cannibalize de Guignes' historical persona in Chapter LXIV on Ghengis Khan, first assuring the reader that although de Guignes 'is ever learned and accurate', 'I am only indebted to him for a general view, and some

³⁵ II, p.290.

³⁶ II, p.298.

passages of Abulfeda' (III (VI), p.795, n.18). Gibbon wants to make the most of the opportunity for a classic scholar's boast:

[T]he brevity of [the Mogul] annals may be supplied by the Chinese, Persians, Armenians, Syrians, Arabians, Greeks, // Russians, Poles, Hungarians, and Latins; and each nation will deserve credit in the relation of their own disasters and defeats. (III (VI), pp.794-95).

Gibbon is quick to present himself as an active scholar, even by means of translations, rather than the mere student of de Guignes, and yet the whole passage is a tribute to how far de Guignes has succeeded in transforming the antiquarian activities of fixing chronology and comparing sparse sources, into an intellectual exercise worthy even of the *philosophe*. Naturally, the obscure Russian, Polish and Hungarian sources Gibbon has adduced in order to swell his footnotes and dazzle the imagination do not appear again. In the introductory paragraph to Chapter LXIV Gibbon justifies his inclusion of the Mogul history by appealing to the precedent he himself has set, 'I have long since asserted my claim to introduce the nations, the immediate or remote authors of the fall of the Roman empire' (III (VI), p.791). The fact that Gibbon in the end can cannibalize his own precedent is an ironic tribute to the debt owed by philosophic historiography, for all its attempts to police its own internal coherence, to the power of individual example.

The idea of the barbarian migrations presented by de Guignes links the histories of East and West in such a way that what was obscure, minute and unimportant in the history of the East gains by association with undisputedly major events in the West. The *Decline and Fall* profits in a similar way from the change in the status of the history of the Classical world effected by the evolving tradition of eighteenth-century geography, where ancient history can shelter behind a modern subject and discipline. For the French geographer d'Anville, a colleague of de Guignes at the Académie des Inscriptions, ancient history need not be subjected to the anxious deliberation of relative value, or of political significance, which exercises the philosophic historians, but can find a sufficient degree of justification in the natural growth of curiosity based merely on its contiguity to the present:

Cette discussion Géographique pouvoit bien paroître ne regarder d'autres circonstances que celles d'un état actuel & moderne. Mais, je n'ai pu prendre sur moi de négliger une étude qui m'a toujours été en grande recommandation.

C'est de démêler dans l'examen d'un local positif & circonstancié, ce qui peut prendre quelque rapport à ce que l'Antiquité fournit à la Géographie.³⁷

Similarly, the geographer James Rennell, attached to the British military mission in India, in his *Memoir of a Map of Hindoostan* (1783) barely pauses between 'places that are the most interesting, either from // having been the subjects of history, or as being connected with the politics of present times'.³⁸ In his preface to the *Antiquité Géographique de l'Inde* (1775), d'Anville describes the natural gestation of a new genre of historical geography, where the ancient geographers such as Pliny demand first elucidation and then illustration, from which follows comparison to the present, 'le Lecteur, en qui vous faites naître de la curiosité, est // en droit de vous demander, si [une ville] existe, de quelque manière que ce soit',³⁹ and which entails as a matter of course, 'en supposant, que dans les circonstances données sur l'emplacement de cette ville, il s'en trouve quelqu'une qui puisse y mettre de l'équivoque', the employment of 'la critique'.⁴⁰

Despite, however, sharing interests, methods, and readership with the *érudits*, d'Anville is insistent on his separate status as a geographer. His determinedly fair-minded characterization of the 'deux gros volumes'⁴¹ of the great Cellarius encapsulates how d'Anville is pleased to present himself as participating in the traditions of scholarship, but not to surrender his claim to disciplinary superiority:

Il n'est pas infiniment rare de remarquer dans des hommes du premier ordre par un grand savoir, que les notions positives en Géographie ne prennent que peu de part à leurs connoissances. Il y a indépendamment de ce qui est érudition, un talent qui n'est pas universel.⁴²

Another scholar is similarly put in his place as 'un savant, que l'érudition n'a point rendu habile en Géographie'.⁴³ The attractions of such a position, as both 'scholar' and 'better than a scholar', to a writer engaged in a project of the kind of the *Decline and Fall*, are immediately apparent. At the same time, however, d'Anville's new historical geography also shares with de Guignes's *Histoire des Huns* the character of being a project that fails to exploit fully its imaginative potential, because of a

³⁷ Jean-Baptiste Bourguignon d'Anville, *Antiquité Géographique de l'Inde, et de plusieurs autres contrées de la Haute Asie* (Paris: 1775), p.vii.

³⁸ James Rennell, *Memoir of a Map of Hindoostan; or the Mogul Empire* (London: 1783), pp.48-49.

³⁹ *Antiquité Géographique de l'Inde*, pp.vii-viii.

⁴⁰ *ibid.*, p.viii.

⁴¹ *Antiquité Géographique de l'Inde*, p.ix.

⁴² *ibid.*, p.x.

⁴³ D'Anville, *L'Euphrate et le Tigre* (Paris: 1779), p.10.

residual loyalty to the stylistic conventions of the various genres of *érudit* writing, and so again presents a unique opportunity for a writer like Gibbon who has already made the commitment to sustaining a truly hybrid literary identity.

D'Anville perceives himself to be under an obligation to justify repeatedly his inclusion of historical detail, or indeed any kind of material which goes beyond deducing locations and the correspondence of names:

Pourroit-on trouver à redire, qu'un tissu de discussions, & d'analyses sèches par elles-mêmes, & épineuses, soit quelquefois coupé par des circonstances, qui sans être purement Géographiques, ne sont point indifférentes en pareille matière, & que la curiosité de s'instruire admet volontiers.⁴⁴

Similarly, James Rennell in his *The Geographical System of Herodotus examined* (1800) acknowledges in the conclusion that 'it is possible that some readers may have condemned the work, // for its containing matter, in their opinion, foreign to the main subject',⁴⁵ and finds his strongest excuse, like d'Anville, in an admission of the natural tediousness of his subject; 'it happens that the dryness of geographical detail is such, that a continued series of them would be rather *referred to* than *read*'.⁴⁶

D'Anville's anxiety regarding becoming too historical also extends to a concern to justify his use of *critique*, and his works abound with disclaimers that he is 'indispensablement obligé d'entrer ici dans une discussion',⁴⁷ or that he is unfortunately engaged in a 'carrière plus épineuse par le détail // qu'elle renferme, que considérable par l'étendue de son objet'.⁴⁸ Rennell, on the other hand, is forced to admit that he relies on translations of his Greek sources, and to acknowledge that scholars who are also geographers would be fitter persons to undertake the task of illustrating Herodotus; and he only asks that 'his work may be allowed to pass until the desired coincidence may take place'.⁴⁹ The new historical geography in this way shows itself to be considerably ambivalent towards the scope of its own ambitions. D'Anville's works especially are marked by a self-deprecating stylistic dourness, which is encapsulated in his rare attempt at the very end of the *Antiquité Géographique de l'Inde* to enthuse the reader regarding the full potential of his project:

⁴⁴ *Antiquité Géographique de l'Inde*, p.160.

⁴⁵ Rennell, *The Geographical System of Herodotus examined* (London: 1800), pp.745-46.

⁴⁶ p.746.

⁴⁷ *L'Euphrate et le Tigre*, p.76.

⁴⁸ *ibid.*, pp.147-48.

⁴⁹ *The Geographical System of Herodotus examined*, p.x.

La lecture de l'ouvrage, avec l'oeil ouvert sur les cartes qui l'accompagnent, peut bien prendre quelque ressemblance au récit d'un voyage, que le désir d'éclaircir l'ancienne Géographie dans une grande partie couverte d'obscurité auroit fait entreprendre. L'esprit de curiosité a voulu (par un motif de s'instruire) s'arrêter en différens endroits qui s'offroient sur la route, se rappelant (sans aucune prétention) ce vers de Lucrèce. *Floriferis ut Apes in saltibus omnia libant.*⁵⁰

It is of course the parentheses which give him away; the anxiety to explain that the 'curiosité' his works indulge is strictly 'un motif de s'instruire', and the acute sense of disciplinary propriety in the aside 'sans aucune prétention'. For his part, Gibbon has constructed his scholarly character in such a way that he positively thrives on the ostentatious display of learning and the enjoyment of historical detail, and it is certain that he would never meekly submit to being tedious. It is evident from the *Decline and Fall* that he has clearly perceived how the imaginative promise of the new historical geography envisages a new role for the Classical scholar that is sufficiently ambitious even for the *philosophe*.

Just as in the case of *Histoire des Huns*, Gibbon seeks in the first instance to associate the *Decline and Fall* with d'Anville's project by means of generous critical praise. D'Anville and de Guignes are in fact coupled together in the *Decline and Fall* as 'two inhabitants of Paris, from whom the Orientals may learn the history and geography of their own country' (III (VI), p.809, n.39), and Gibbon's praise of d'Anville is notable enough to attract the particular attention of Whitaker, who, splenetic as ever, challenges Gibbon's 'extravagant panegyrick' in his own work of historical geography, *The Course of Hannibal over the Alps ascertained* (1794).⁵¹ The terms of Gibbon's praise establish the imaginative qualities he wishes to draw out from the tradition of historical geography, so that d'Anville is said to be 'equally at home in every age and every climate of the world' (III (V), p.239, n.16), the very image of scientific universality, while Rennell's work conjures up the exciting alliance between the scholar and the march of progress, or rather of national destiny:

Our geography of India is improved by commerce and conquest; and it has been illustrated by the excellent maps and memoirs of major Rennel [sic]. If he extends the sphere of his enquiries with the same critical knowledge and sagacity, he will succeed, and may even surpass the first of modern geographers. (II (IV), p.582, n.71).

⁵⁰ p.238.

⁵¹ Whitaker, *The Course of Hannibal over the Alps ascertained*, 2 vols. in-8° (London:1794), II, p.27 n.2.

It is necessary to recognize the weight of the philosophic arguments against the entire project of the *Decline and Fall* – that it is pointless, old-fashioned, and consumes time that could be better spent on objects of greater practical utility – in order to appreciate how simply gratifying it is to Gibbon to be able to associate himself in this way with the cutting-edge of state-sponsored research in the humanities. The writer who can exult in the ‘pure and generous love of science and mankind’ demonstrated in the voyages of discovery launched by ‘his present Majesty’(II (III), p.516, n.15) cannot be mistaken for a narrow-minded pedant.

Gibbon seizes upon the newly scientific persona of the historical geographer as a means of giving a newly scientific image to whole categories of information which otherwise would be stigmatized as an *érudit* indulgence, and, in contrast to the Oriental learning of the *Histoire des Huns*, this is a form of scholarly endeavour in which Gibbon considers himself to be fully equipped to participate. Gibbon follows a method analogous to that of d’Anville throughout the *Decline and Fall* in comparing ancient and modern accounts, locations, and descriptions of places, and his constant emphasis on the up-to-date nature of his information underlines the important distinction to be made between himself and old-fashioned *érudits* like Cellarius. Stylistic flourishes such as the unexpected exactitude of his description of the Indian city of Kinnouge further contribute to the general impression of scientific seriousness:

Kinnouge, or Canouge (the old Palimbothra) is marked in latitude 27° 3', longitude 80° 13'. See d’Anville (*Antiquité de l’Inde*, p.60-62.), corrected by the local knowledge of major Rennel (in his excellent Memoir on his map of Hindostan, p.37-43.).(III (VI), p.525, n.6).

However, far from promoting utilitarian austerity, Gibbon exploits the role of the geographer throughout the *Decline and Fall* as a means of indulging his erudite proclivities, the kind of excess which would profoundly shock the truly austere d’Anville, as examples such as the great set-piece description of Constantinople in Chapter XVII amply attest. There, Gibbon openly appeals to the reader’s imagination to envisage the scene, where ‘those who steer their westward course through the middle of the Propontis, may at once descry the high lands of Thrace and Bithynia, and never lose sight of the lofty summit of Mount Olympus, covered with eternal snows’(I (II), p.589). Where d’Anville can only diffidently affirm that his work might be considered in some measure as in the form of an imaginative voyage, Gibbon’s

greater stylistic flexibility permits him to give actual rhetorical expression to d'Anville's original idea.

This function of historical geography, to open up a new textual space for otherwise proscribed material, is also evident in Gibbon's achievement of a scientific makeover of the narratives of military campaigns, the so often maligned accounts of 'kings and battles', as narratives of geographical discovery. Just as Gibbon himself notes in relation to Rennell's maps of India, that conquest and the expansion of commerce, and geographical discovery go hand in hand, Rennell's own works invoke just such an association as a fundamental element of the genre. The *Memoir of a Map of Hindoostan* promises to 'explain the local circumstances of our political connections, and the marches of our Armies', which 'cannot but be highly interesting to every person whose imagination has been struck by the splendor of our victories, or whose attention is roused by the present critical state of our affairs, in that quarter of the globe'.⁵² The role of the armchair general, following the marches of armies with the aid of maps and local information, is a favourite preoccupation of the ancient historian just as much as it is of the modern politician, and it seems entirely natural to Rennell to comment on the campaigns of Alexander and Timour in the *Memoir of a Map of Hindoostan* in a similar fashion to his account of Cornwallis' campaign in his *The Marches of the British Armies in the Peninsula of India, during the campaigns of 1790 and 1791* (1792). This correspondence of subject and of genre raises the status of ancient military history, answering the utilitarian challenge, and is directly invoked in Rennell's unabashed fascination with the conquests of Alexander:

Which expedition, besides the *eclat* of the military history belonging to it, furnished in Greece and Egypt, an *epoch* of geographical improvement and correction, which may not unaptly be compared with that of the discoveries of the Portugeze, along the coasts of Africa and India; or of that of the present time, in which geography has been improved in every quarter of the globe.⁵³

Even d'Anville declares in the *Antiquité Géographique de l'Inde* that 'en partant d'Aléxandrie du Paropomise, ce qu'il y a de plus convenable pour nôtre objet est de suivre les pas d'Aléxandre dans son expédition de l'Inde', and that 'la Géographie n'offrira rien de plus intéressant par rapport à l'histoire'.⁵⁴ The *Decline and Fall* certainly attests to Gibbon's love of being on campaign, whether it is that of the

⁵² p.i.

⁵³ *The Geographical System of Herodotus examined*, p.10.

⁵⁴ p.5.

unsung Emperor Heraclius, the tragicomedy of the victories of Belisarius, or the self-conscious Classicism of the Emperor Julian, which unfolds in complicity with Gibbon's own.

4. Identifying the subject of the *Decline and Fall*

Given the nature of the previous deployments of the 'Enlightened narrative' in Britain and in France, it is immediately evident that divergence from precedent should be expected from the *Decline and Fall*, and this even aside from the fact that the *Decline and Fall* is infamously alone among the canon of Enlightenment historiography in sounding an ancient historical theme. The complex manoeuvrings of the French *philosophes* on the terrain of *moeurs*, in response to national cultural expectations as well as to their expectations of themselves as *philosophes*, have no counterpart in Britain; while the strategic deployment of the topics of the 'Enlightened narrative' in the service of the polemical design of mid-century Scottish Whiggism on a number of counts excludes Gibbon from participating. The unique character of the 'Enlightened narrative' in Britain is, however, that it possesses a narrative of its own. From its first, supporting role in the national histories of Hume and Robertson, Robertson in his subsequent works enables the ascent of the 'Enlightened narrative' to the status of an independent historical theme, albeit one which for the Scottish Whigs possesses as its chief recommendation that it permits a carefully sustained illusion of interpretative consequence. In British Enlightenment historiography by the period of composition of the *Decline and Fall*, the flames of ideology have been doused, and a hegemonic belletrism enthroned; and so, just as in the case of the presumed conflict between *philosophie* and erudition, Gibbon again stands ready to profit from an intellectual current that had already provided for its translation into a literary style.

In this regard, the sheer difficulty of extracting from the *Decline and Fall* any definitive statement from Gibbon regarding his intentions – an answer to the question as to whether, in the end, his work has any point at all – and the huge amount of interpretative effort which it has been found necessary to expend if such an answer is to be derived from the text itself, evinced by the most sophisticated of exegetes both contemporary and subsequent, become significant facts in themselves. John Whitaker is sufficiently astute to seize on the question of the coherence of Gibbon's sense of his subject, as the weak point of the *Decline and Fall*, and diligently pursues Gibbon's

shifting perspective throughout his review; noting that where Gibbon has promised to keep his eye fixed upon Constantinople, by Chapter XLIX ‘we have merely one or two squinting looks at it’,⁵⁵ and summing up Gibbon’s strategy as ‘he writes, and writes, and digresses, and includes one historical *parenthesis* within another, in an almost infinite series’.⁵⁶ Yet the fact that Whitaker is obliged constantly to refer back to a stray comment in the first paragraph of the *Decline and Fall*, where Gibbon asserts that he will deduce the ‘most important circumstances’ (I (I), p.31) of the decline and fall of the Roman empire, is, ironically enough, a tribute to the sheer difficulty of pinning Gibbon down to any statement of argumentative intent at all; and to how, to adopt another of Whitaker’s most insightful phrases, ‘Mr. Gibbon’s vast system of history, like that of the universe, moves for ever upon an imaginary pole’.⁵⁷

The usual textual moments for pressing a conclusion – the beginning, the end, and the overview in the ‘General Observations on the Fall of the Empire in the West’ – offered by the *Decline and Fall* are notoriously resistant to critical exegesis. It would be hard to extract any sense of suasive purpose from Gibbon’s muted Preface, where the historian conceals himself behind the obviousness of his subject, and will promise in his ‘Advertisement’ no more than the expected ‘diligence and accuracy’ (I (I), ‘Advertisement’, p.5). Similarly, while the clearly mischievous expository vagueness of the last (if not precisely ‘concluding’) Chapter LXXI has won some admirers as an evidence of the scope of Gibbon’s historical imagination,⁵⁸ the ‘General Observations’ mostly remain a disappointment. Indeed, the disappointment would be still more severe if the status of the ‘General Observations’ as a first-drafted piece did not permit their marginalisation as a feature of the published *Decline and Fall*, as a lingering evidence of an early stage in the process of composition.⁵⁹ Overall, the fact that the patient excavation of what John Pocock describes as ‘layers

⁵⁵ Gibbon’s ‘History’ reviewed’, p.79.

⁵⁶ p.105.

⁵⁷ p.126.

⁵⁸ See Karen O’Brien, *Narratives of Enlightenment*, pp.202-203; and more extensively, David Womersley, *The Transformation of ‘The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire’* (Cambridge: 1988), Chapter 18.

⁵⁹ See especially Peter Ghosh, ‘Gibbon’s Dark Ages: Some Remarks on the Genesis of the *Decline and Fall*’, *Journal of Roman Studies* 73 (1983) 1-23; and John Pocock, *Barbarism and Religion Volume Two*, pp.392-96. Karen O’Brien remains neutral on the potential for disappointment in the ‘General Observations’ (*Narratives of Enlightenment*, p.172 and n.). David Womersley, on the other hand, is their chief defender; he rightly emphasises the fact of their being revised immediately prior to actual publication in the *Decline and Fall* (see especially his Introduction to his edition of the *Decline and Fall*, Volume I, pp.lxv-lxvi), although he notes their expository insufficiencies (‘the coherence of [Gibbon’s] argument suffers badly’; *The Transformation of ‘The Decline and Fall’*, p.189).

of intention'⁶⁰ is such a dominant feature in critical attempts at explaining the *Decline and Fall* – an approach which is so very rarely extended in studies of Enlightenment historiography to other major figures, including those such as Voltaire who might appear positively to demand it – is revealing. Without even examining the text itself, it is hard to avoid the conclusion that the *Decline and Fall*, for all its acquired status as the very culmination of philosophic historiography, remains for its very admirers a stubbornly elusive instance of the Enlightened genre.

Still more important than questions of perceived generic affinities, however, is the question of the most basic generic affiliation of all, the status of the *Decline and Fall* as 'a history'. The dangerous impression of expository incoherence in its first three chapters, chapters which are surely so crucial to Gibbon's putative argument, and are yet so strangely formed, has invited particularly intense scrutiny, most notably by David Womersley and John Pocock, both of whom rightly perceive instead the evidence of a larger design.⁶¹ Both critics do not doubt Gibbon's intention to meet his reader's legitimate expectations of being presented with a historical explanation; an assumption which for John Pocock is contained within the very concept of 'narrative', while David Womersley situates such expectations of the *Decline and Fall* as 'a history' in a specific eighteenth-century generic context, that of 'the reader who, attuned to modern, philosophic historiography, would have opened *The Decline and Fall* in quest of causal enlightenment',⁶² a generic identification which it should be noted he does not apply to the later stages of the *Decline and Fall*, but certainly to its first volume. However, alongside the philosophic praise of causes, lies the actual textual practice of Hume and Robertson; and in their treatment of the topics of the 'Enlightened narrative' – as distinct from the national constitution, and of which the theme of the emergence of modern civilisation gestured towards in the *Decline and Fall* forms one – they show the exposition of the 'Enlightened narrative' to even naturally lend itself to treatment by means of a kind of rhetorical collage, where 'causes' are displayed not in the service of an overarching analysis, but in parallel, and with variation. The eighteenth-century, even (or, perhaps, especially) the philosophic reader's expectations of a work which calls itself 'a history' are therefore

⁶⁰ John Pocock, *Barbarism and Religion Volume Three: The First Decline and Fall* (Cambridge: 2003), p.9.

⁶¹ See John Pocock, *Barbarism and Religion Volume Three*, Part IV, Chapter 17; and David Womersley, *The Transformation of 'The Decline and Fall'*, Part II, Chapters 4-8.

⁶² *The Transformation of 'The Decline and Fall'*, p.79.

considerably more open to local negotiation than the apparent transparency of the term suggests.

While Robertson's *View of the Progress of Society in Europe* is certainly recognised as in some degree relevant to the *Decline and Fall*, as the most extended treatment in the philosophic canon, for all its summary character, of the fall of the Roman empire and the barbarian invasions, the little-noted fact that Gibbon's tripartite division of his introduction to his subject – into Chapter I, 'The Extent and Military Force of the Empire, in the Age of the Antonines', Chapter II, 'Of the Union and internal Prosperity of the Roman Empire in the Age of the Antonines', and Chapter III, 'Of the Constitution of the Roman Empire, in the Age of the Antonines' – specifically follows Robertson's example intimates a rather closer, and perhaps even a generic relationship. This opening echo of the *View of the Progress of Society in Europe* also calls attention to an immediately curious feature of Gibbon's approach. Robertson begins with 'interior government, laws and manners', then proceeds to the question of 'the command of the national force, requisite in foreign operations', and concludes with 'the political constitution of the principal states in Europe'. Gibbon therefore inverts the order of Robertson's first two sections, placing a subordinate, 'external' and largely technical aspect of his subject in the most prominent space. While Gibbon's teasing treatment of the great themes of the tradition of interpreting the fall of Rome has informed the most sophisticated analyses of the first three chapters of the *Decline and Fall*, it has still been assumed that as 'a historian' Gibbon must in the end bring his complex stylistic ironies to a defined point; his own analysis, perhaps concealed but still discoverable to the initiated, of the causes of the fall of Rome. However, the importance of the Robertsonian precedent and its 'Enlightened narrative' to the *Decline and Fall* can instead explain why Gibbon might on the contrary have very little desire to confront the acquired meaning of the history of Rome, and rather seek to demonstrate to the reader his absolute liberty to leave the question of the thesis of the *Decline and Fall* subject to an indefinite deferral.

Gibbon's 'General Observations on the Fall of the Roman Empire in the West' inserted at the end of Volume III, despite being the most critically despised portion of the whole of the *Decline and Fall*, directly confront the paradox that, although the genre of the history of the human mind, as developed in the first section of

Robertson's *View of the Progress of Society in Europe*, is an attractive philosophic precedent for the historian of the fall of the Roman empire, its natural tendency is entirely to sideline Rome as a historical subject. The evidence that the 'General Observations' were composed before the *Decline and Fall* proper was begun, further emphasizes how this problem was central to Gibbon's thinking about how an ancient history known to exhibit a foregone conclusion might be renewed through the cultivation of a various identity. In the 'General Observations' at least, it is Gibbon's view that the history of the decline and fall of the Roman empire has become reduced to a 'stupendous' cliché:

The rise of a city, which swelled into an empire, may deserve, as a singular prodigy, the reflection of a philosophic mind. But the decline of Rome was the natural and inevitable effect of immoderate greatness. Prosperity ripened the principle of decay; the causes of destruction multiplied with the extent of conquest; and as soon as time or accident had removed the artificial supports, the stupendous fabric yielded to the pressure of its own weight. The story of its ruin is simple and obvious; and instead of inquiring *why* the Roman empire was destroyed, we should rather be surprised that it had subsisted so long. (II (III), p.509).

Far better to resort to summary and metaphor, than to persist in 'inquiring *why*'; and far better to retire to the contemplation of the modern system of 'one great republic, whose various inhabitants have attained almost the same level of politeness and cultivation' (II (III), p.511), and to pursue an entirely tangential tour-de-force on the difference between ancient and modern barbarians, than to become entangled in the archetypal themes of the political imagination which represent the true significance of Rome as Montesquieu would recognize it, and which Gibbon is scrupulous not to dwell upon. If Rome is a cliché, however, the 'Enlightened narrative' for Gibbon the latecomer to philosophic historiography is little better.

Robertson's *View of the Progress of Society in Europe* provides the example of how the history of the Roman empire is to be kept in its place. Once it has been established that the empire 'was far from being happy, or favourable to the improvement of the human mind',⁶³ the style of history by means of metaphor comes naturally:

A society in this state could not subsist long. There were defects in the Roman government, even in its most perfect form, which threatened its dissolution. Time ripened these original seeds of corruption, and gave birth to many new disorders. A constitution, unsound, and worn out, must have fallen in pieces of

⁶³ I, p.2.

itself, without any external shock. The violent irruption of the Goths, Vandals, Huns, and other barbarians hastened this event, and precipitated the downfall of the empire. New nations seemed to arise, and to rush from unknown regions in order to take vengeance on the Romans for the calamities which they had inflicted on mankind.⁶⁴

The problem for Gibbon, however, is immediately obvious, namely that by associating himself with Robertsonianism, he has irreparably impoverished his own narrative. In the ‘General Observations’ Gibbon expertly ventriloquizes the complacent presentism of the purely illustrative use of the history of the remote past, where his initial assumption of ‘anxious curiosity’ (II (III), p.511) regarding the lessons of Rome for the present, is shown to be the ironic prelude to a rhetorical exercise, the sole end of which is to provide the reader with a ‘source of comfort and hope’ (II (III), p.515), and a ‘pleasing conclusion’ (II (III), p.516) in which to finally acquiesce. The focus on the emergence of modernity in the *Decline and Fall* might indeed liberate Gibbon from an over-reliance on the stale orthodoxies of Classical history, but, as Robertson himself had found, the ‘Enlightened narrative’ swiftly becomes repetitive; while, for Gibbon, to commit too seriously to the consequences of his own logic in the ‘General Observations’ would defeat his own undertaking as a historian of Rome.

The characteristically Gibbonian solution is, of course, precisely to ignore the logic of his position, and to trust to stylistic dexterity to extricate himself both from the burden of being obvious, and also from the obligation to repeat on a larger scale the enactment of historiographical collapse prefigured in the ‘General Observations’. As early as Chapter II, he demonstrates to the reader his marshalling of his resources. In the third from last paragraph, the ‘Enlightened narrative’ suddenly erupts:

It was scarcely possible that the eyes of contemporaries should discover in the public felicity the latent causes of decay and corruption. This long peace, and the uniform government of the Romans, introduced a slow and secret poison into the vitals of the empire. The minds of men were gradually reduced to the same level, the fire of genius was extinguished, and even the military spirit evaporated. (I (I), p.83).

Much exegetical labour to save the historian’s reputation for consistency could be saved if this passage in the mode of *moeurs* and of the long perspective were set alongside its predecessors; for example, Robertson’s attempt to apply his rhetorical celebration of the discovery of modern diplomacy to the actions of his power-crazed

⁶⁴ I, p.3.

and bigoted ‘hero’, or Hume’s late conversion to the transforming effects of the Renaissance, after having pursued the dour and violent history of England’s dynastic wars. Gibbon’s Chapter II then concludes with a perfect exemplification of the natural tendency of the ‘Enlightened narrative’ to leave Rome far behind:

This diminutive stature of mankind, if we pursue the metaphor, was daily sinking below the old standard, and the Roman world was indeed peopled by a race of pygmies; when the fierce giants of the north broke in, and mended the puny breed. They restored a manly spirit of freedom; and after the revolution of ten centuries, freedom became the happy parent of taste and science. (I (I), p.84).

Yet the *Decline of Fall* does, of course, still continue; Chapter III notoriously as almost a new beginning, an energetic and analytical political narrative of the Empire and the twists and turns of its later stages, nothing so simple as a mere ‘decline’. The *Decline and Fall* presents a variety of faces to the reader, precisely to avoid the ominous logic pressed by being reduced to the simple condition of ‘a history’.

Gibbon’s famously ambiguous tribute to Robertsonianism in Chapter III, in the assertion that ‘if a man were called to fix the period in the history of the world, during which the condition of the human race was most happy and prosperous, he would, without hesitation, name that which elapsed from the death of Domitian to the accession of Commodus’ (I (I), p.103), is therefore rather more than an opportunity seized for an ironic joke (and surely, if merely this, one a little obvious for Gibbon); it reveals much about the strategy of the *Decline and Fall*. The original conceptual relationship of the *Decline and Fall* to the ‘Enlightened narrative’ is not one of supplement, or illustration, or even of scholarly revision; it is a relationship conceived of in terms of genre, and one of theme and variation, a balancing of similarity to and difference from Gibbon’s iconic predecessors. In the context of what might be described as the British tradition of philosophic historiography, it is a particular irony that Gibbon thus to an extent re-enacts Robertson’s own dilemma in the *View of the Progress of Society in Europe* with respect to Voltaire. But for some necessary variation, Gibbon’s role would be little more than to add the footnotes to Robertson’s footnotes to Voltaire. At the same time, Gibbon’s natural separation from the frankly-confessed polemical Whiggery of his native predecessors, has the unexpected consequence of granting the *Decline and Fall* a rather similar impression of interpretative reserve, even of locutionary ambiguity, which is truly proper to the histories of the *philosophes*.

This vision of the *Decline and Fall* as participating creatively in what had by 1776 become the possibility of a distinct generic tradition, is furthermore of considerable utility in explaining ‘perhaps the strangest of all Gibbon’s decisions and that which perplexed him most’,⁶⁵ the succumbing to the allure of the Eastern empire, instead of pursuing the great business of civilisation in the West. Similarly, given the fact that his understanding of the subject of his *History* carries it far beyond a mere history of the decline and fall of the Roman empire, and encompasses the central themes of the progress of society in Europe since the Classical era, Gibbon’s rejection of this clear opportunity to represent himself as an Enlightened historian, and continued insistence that his *History* is indeed one of the ancient world, and not one of the origins of the modern, appears an entirely unnecessary disguise. Why not simply jettison the decline of the Roman empire, and concentrate on the formation of Christendom, and later, modern Europe? The presence of such cherished philosophic topoi such as the ancient Germans, the settlement of the Goths, the power of the Popes and the progress of letters in the *Decline and Fall* further contributes to the impression of a deliberately perverse emphasis. Gibbon’s actual treatment of such themes demonstrates how it is precisely this opportunity for perverse emphasis which he is keen to derive from the ‘ancient’ disguise of the *Decline and Fall*, and that Rome can revivify the history of the origins of modern Europe, just as the occasional invocation of the idea of modern Europe can be made to give a philosophic spin to the history of Rome.

Gibbon’s massive Chapter XLIX, for example, is one of the greatest celebrations in the whole of the *Decline and Fall* of the irreducible autonomy of the ancient historian. It is certainly true that Chapter XLIX contributes to Gibbon’s demonstration of his allegiance to the major precepts of the ‘Enlightened narrative’; and, once its interpretative essence has been duly extracted, that it provides strong evidence for those who would wish to understand the illustration of that narrative to be Gibbon’s major purpose. Statements such as ‘the mutual obligations of the popes and the Carlovingian family, form the important link of ancient and modern, of civil and ecclesiastical history’ (III (V), p.109), and that ‘Europe dates a new aera from [Charlemagne’s] restoration of the Western empire’ (III (V), p.127) appear to unambiguously assert Gibbon’s priorities to lie with the origins of modern Europe.

⁶⁵ John Pocock, *Barbarism and Religion Volume Three*, p.1.

And yet, far from being the turning point of ancient and modern, Charlemagne is buried by Gibbon inside a chapter which begins with a leisurely account of the quarrel over images which leads to the schism between East and West, and mentions the Carolingians' support for the popes before returning to the images in the East, then back again to Charlemagne's coronation in Rome, before at last condescending to give an actual account of his reign and character and to describe his empire; only to continue by summarizing Charlemagne's successors in a brusque two pages, then subsequently turning to Germany while pausing to relate what the Byzantine ambassadors thought of Charlemagne, and finally concluding with a partial account of Germany up to the fourteenth century.

Gibbon even has the effrontery to preface Chapter XLIX with a *bon mot* regarding the Enlightened correctness of his narrative priorities:

In the connection of the church and state, I have considered the former as subservient only, and relative, to the latter; a salutary maxim, if in fact, as well as in narrative, it had ever been held sacred.(III (V), p.86).

The justification Gibbon proffers for his mere sketch of the German constitution – and this, as a *soi-disant* historian of empire – is also notably insouciant. The reader is advised 'it is in the fourteenth century, that we may view in the strongest light the state and contrast of the Roman empire of Germany, which no longer held, a single province of Trajan or Constantine'(III (V), p.147), and after a brief and satirical presentation of the contrast between the limited political power and the ceremonial pretensions of Charles IV, Gibbon uses the perspective of the Classical world to decisively dismiss the claims of the modern form of empire to prolonged attention:

If we annihilate the interval of time and space between Augustus and Charles, strong and striking will be the contrast between the two Caesars; the Bohemian, who concealed his weakness under the mask of ostentation, and the Roman, who disguised his strength under the semblance of modesty.(III (V), p.149).

In a neat reversal of the philosophic historians' satire of medieval barbarism in order to exalt the modern, Gibbon employs the same theme to restore the primacy of the ancient, and it is with a palpable sense of relief in the following chapter that he declares 'after pursuing above six hundred years the fleeting Caesars of Constantinople and Germany, I now descend, in the reign of Heraclius, on the eastern borders of the Greek monarchy'(III (V), p.151), in order to concentrate on the more gratifying topics of exotic erudition and baiting the clerics; thus carelessly dismissing

together the corrupt ruins of the Eastern empire, and the Western pillars of the modern 'Enlightened narrative'.

Gibbon's pivotal decision to remain the historian of the Roman empire even after the fall of the empire in the West, and so to view the rise of Christendom through Eastern (and ancient) eyes, is indeed used throughout in his search for novel ways of illustrating the 'Enlightened narrative' without having to resort to repetition. Gibbon pays tribute in Chapter LVIII to 'the spirit of freedom, which pervades the feudal institutions' (III (VI), p.610), while his views of the importance of the enfranchisement of the serfs are impeccably orthodox, 'among the causes which enfranchised the plebeians from the yoke of feudal tyranny, the institution of cities and corporations is one of the most powerful' (III (VI), p.613). Indeed, he duly refers the reader to the 'judicious remarks' of Robertson for its 'origin and effects' (III (VI), p.613, n.141). Yet instead of treating the theme in form, and in relation to the great monarchies of France and England, Gibbon chooses to address it in a postscript regarding the deeply obscure legal codes of the short-lived French kingdom of Jerusalem. Gibbon does not attempt to conceal his delight at finding that Godfrey of Bouillon may have been the first to institute corporations, a full nine years before Robertson's preferred candidate Louis le Gros became king of France, and he has few observable scruples over using a source which was reconstructed in the thirteenth century from oral tradition. Gibbon's enthusiasm for the legal innovations of the kingdom of Jerusalem, described as 'a precious monument' (III (VI), p.610) and illustrated with quotations to convey the 'noble simplicity of freedom' (III (VI), p.612, n.138), does indeed contrast markedly with his earlier, perfunctory treatment of the standard philosophic topic of the settlement of the Franks in Gaul. From the narrative position of the ramparts of Constantinople, the great topics of the 'Enlightened narrative' move in and out of focus, and indeed sometimes with gauche effect; so that Gibbon's brief statement in Chapter XLIX of how Charles Martel 'by his signal victory over the Saracens, had saved his country, and perhaps Europe, from the Mahometan yoke' (III (V), p.107), is a spoiler for Gibbon's later, full-dress account of how but for Charles 'perhaps the interpretation of the Koran would now be taught in the schools of Oxford, and her pulpits might demonstrate to a circumcised people the sanctity and truth of the revelation of Mahomet' (III (V), p.336). Venice, similarly, for all Gibbon's professed celebration of the 'invincible genius of liberty' (III (V), p.143) in the resistance to the German emperors by the Italian city-states, has to suffer the indignity of a swift

recapitulation in Chapter LX in time for the fourth crusade. In its occasionally distracted perspective, and still more in its tantalizing glimpses of the history of the West only in the interstices of the history of the East, the *Decline and Fall* surely profits once more from the example of the cognate eccentricities of the *Histoire des Huns*.

Gibbon has long been the odd man out of the European Enlightenment. The evidence that in the *Decline and Fall*, the dominant testament to his literary existence, Gibbon has quite deliberately set out to construct an oddity, both simplifies and complicates the venerable scholarly activity of putting him in context. As presented in this thesis, the idea of philosophic historiography in Britain and France had indeed acquired by the period of composition of the *Decline and Fall* an especial scope for the assumption of literary disguises. The *Encyclopédie*, even in spite of itself, had merely further called attention to how the distinction between the *philosophe* and the *érudit* was not methodological, but a matter of style; while in North Britain, the united activities of Hume and Robertson had invested the ‘Enlightened narrative’ with all the promise, and all the potential hollowness, of a distinct literary genre. In the national perspective, the *Decline and Fall* may therefore be accepted as at once intensely French – to the extent that Gibbon can with almost disconcerting ease wholly cannibalise the writings of *philosophes* and Academicians – and also intriguingly British, in its willed identification with the works of a domestic but still alien intellectual tradition. Granted the parallel with the *Divine Legation of Moses*, the *Decline and Fall* is perhaps also English, if it is concluded that there is a kind of national facility in writing unclassifiable books in borrowed languages. In general terms, Gibbon’s engagement with specific traditions in eighteenth-century intellectual culture is of great importance, independently of any larger tendencies which he and his major work may be claimed to represent. The *Decline and Fall* itself, however, without any necessary connection to the now established criteria for an Enlightenment character, may have to trade its paradoxical role as Enlightenment historiography’s consummation in an unEnlightened country, for the different but no less stimulating categorisation as a work of astonishing creative daring.

CHAPTER 6. INHERITING THE FRENCH ENLIGHTENMENT

If eighteenth-century intellectual culture were to be thought of as a totality (indeed, as perhaps an ‘Enlightenment’), there would be an apparent contradiction between its capacity to give voice to a profound scepticism concerning the nature of reason and of its role in belief, and also to at the same time sustain what appears to all intents and purposes to be a traditional or even intuitive practice of ‘rational’ communication. Historians such as Robertson and Gibbon – who take no pains to be philosophers, but are content with the literary example of the *philosophes* – do of course immediately give the lie to any predilections for philosophical unity and coherence, and the evidence of occasional anxiety on their part regarding the degree of conviction their histories can produce, can be comfortably accommodated within a conceptual framework based on verisimilitude. Hume, of course the true philosopher to put the *philosophes* to shame, notoriously arrives at some form of solution to the particular conundrum of living as a sceptic in his *Treatise of Human Nature*; although, for all his status, and for all the scholarly attempts to apply such connections, he does not present his literary or historiographical practice as explicitly informed by his philosophical arguments. It is the French *philosophes*, who erect the practice of rational communication into a cultural ideal, and who seek to elaborate a philosophically justified practice of literary genre, who with a much greater degree of legitimacy might be said to exemplify such a contradiction. Within the *Discours préliminaire* to the *Encyclopédie* itself, d’Alembert attempts to mediate between conflicting contemporary epistemologies of ‘science’, while his favoured compromise would very shortly be unpicked by his own fellow editor, Diderot in *De l’interprétation de la nature* (1753); such apparently radical problems, and fundamental disagreements, notably failing to inform their confident presentation of their collective, definitively philosophic enterprise.¹ The anxious interrogation of the dynamics of personal historiographical conviction in the works of the late *philosophe* Volney is a particular demonstration of how, on a number of counts, the discursive ideal of Enlightenment writing could be said to have been living on borrowed time. Gibbon himself makes use of Volney’s works in the *Decline and Fall*, and his engagement is seconded by that of a still less likely Briton in Shelley. While the counterpoint of their separate readings certainly provides a further illustration of the

¹ See Jessica Riskin, *Science in the Age of Sensibility: The Sentimental Empiricists of the French Enlightenment* (Chicago: 2002) pp.121-23 on d’Alembert, Diderot and the *Encyclopédie*.

extent to which *philosophie* lends itself to being apprehended as literary style, it also demonstrates how stylistic exchange alone was by no means the only or indeed the most compelling force capable of bringing British literary culture into some alignment with France.

1. 'Le ton de vérité'

Volney's *Voyage en Égypte et en Syrie, pendant les années 1783, 1784, & 1785* (1787) has all the appearance of a paradigmatically philosophic text, a quest after accurate facts in the service of the progress of knowledge, in the direct succession to the ambitions of the *Encyclopédie*. It is certainly read as such by Gibbon in the *Decline and Fall*, who in one of his many acts of appropriation of the language of the French Enlightenment singles it out for firm and philosophic commendation. The nature of the attraction of Volney's *Voyage en Égypte et en Syrie* for Gibbon is clear, as it permits him to indulge his love of appearing up-to-the-minute, and, still more importantly, provides an opportunity for exhibiting his authority over the terms of philosophic judgement. As *philosophe* to *philosophe*, therefore, Gibbon lauds the 'judicious' and 'instructive' traveller over his weaker predecessors, and wishes he might 'travel over the globe'.² In the text itself, Volney himself calls attention to how his style is to be understood as a reflection of his philosophic status. Where other travellers have been fabulists and raconteurs, succumbing to the base desire to entertain the reader, Volney professes the rigour and the principled dourness of a scientist:

Dans ma relation, j'ai tâché de conserver l'esprit que j'ai porté dans l'examen des faits; c'est-à-dire, un amour impartial de la vérité. Je me suis interdit tout tableau d'imagination, quoique je n'ignore pas les avantages de l'illusion auprès de la plupart des lecteurs; mais j'ai pensé que le genre des voyages appartenait à l'histoire, et non aux romans. Je n'ai donc point représenté les pays plus beaux qu'ils ne m'ont paru; je n'ai point peint les hommes meilleurs ou plus méchants que je ne les ai vus; et j'ai peut-être été propre à les voir tels qu'ils sont, puisque je n'ai reçu d'eux ni bienfaits ni outrages.³

² *Decline and Fall* ed. Womersley, II (IV) p.991, n.138 (and again 'judicious' III (V), p.154, n.9); 'instructive' III (VI), p.551, n.68; Gibbon's 'wish' III (V), p.290, n.137.

³ Constantin-François Chasseboeuf de Volney, *Voyage en Égypte et en Syrie* ed. Jean Gaulmier (Paris: 1959), p.23.

The *Voyage en Égypte et en Syrie* amply fulfils such a prescription, so amply that the nineteenth-century critic Sainte-Beuve was moved to complain ‘il est bien de rien ajouter aux objets; mais faut-il mettre tant de soin à les dénuder toujours?’.⁴ It is structured geographically, and to the point that it becomes a task in itself for his modern editor to extract his itinerary from the text, and Volney’s authorial voice is sufficiently anonymous for it to be difficult to discriminate between his accounts of Balbek, which he had visited, and of Palmyra, which he had not. Volney’s accuracy (and maintenance of an appearance of accuracy) was enough for his *Voyage* to become definitive in his own time, and it formed essential reading for the leaders and the observers of the French invasion of Egypt.⁵

Indeed, Volney’s concern solely with the present state of the countries he visits, again in contrast to ‘la plupart des voyageurs [qui] se sont occupés de recherches d’antiquités’,⁶ and which surely represents the supreme act of stylistic self-denial for a traveller through the ancient places of the Classical East, is a kind of consummation of the seemingly perverse effect of the *encyclopédiste* concentration on ‘information’ as a synonym for ‘history’, namely the decline of the understanding of ‘history’ considered as ‘the past’. In a notable instance in the *Histoire des deux Indes*, Raynal assaults his ‘lecteur oisif’ who murmurs at the absence of narrative:

Ici, l’exactitude fait le mérite de l’ouvrage; & l’on doit peut-être tenir compte à l’auteur des agrémens qui lui manquent, en faveur de l’utilité qui les remplace. Assez de tableaux éloquens, assez de peintures ingénieuses amusent & trompent la multitude sur les pays éloignés. Il est tems d’apprécier la vérité, le résultat de leur histoire, & de savoir moins ce qu’ils ont été que ce qu’ils sont: car l’histoire du passé, sur-tout par la manière dont elle a été écrite, n’appartient guère plus au siècle où nous vivons que celle de l’avenir.⁷

The *Histoire des deux Indes* as a whole is of course greatly dependent on travel narratives, and in particular on the compilation by Prévost, the *Histoire générale des voyages* (1746-59). Volney’s statement of principle, ‘j’ai pensé que le genre des voyages appartenait à l’histoire’, therefore extends beyond the contrast with ‘romans’, to a reflection of the position of the *voyageur philosophe* as the prophesied next incarnation of the philosophic historian.

⁴ Charles-Augustin Sainte-Beuve, *Causeries du Lundi Volume VII* (Paris: 1853), p.317.

⁵ See Jean Gaulmier, *L’Idéologue Volney, 1757-1820: Contribution à l’Histoire de l’Orientalisme en France* (Paris and Geneva, 1980; first published, 1951), pp.117-19.

⁶ *Voyage en Égypte et en Syrie*, p.23.

⁷ *Histoire des deux Indes*, Volume III, Book 13, Chapter XXXI, p.405.

Gibbon's happy receptiveness to Volney's self-representation as *philosophe* is also revealed in his absorption of the terms of Volney's self-drawn contrast between his own work and the *Lettres sur l'Égypte* (1785-86) of Claude Savary; 'in two recent voyages into Egypt, we are amused by Savary, and instructed by Volney'.⁸ For his own part, Savary has no hesitation in moving from allegiance to a scientific objectivity, 'devenu citoyen de l'univers, [l'homme qui veut voyager avec fruit] s'élevera au-dessus de la partialité & de l'opinion, & en décrivant les villes, les pays, il remettra à la vérité le soin de conduire ses pinceaux',⁹ to prescribing to the traveller an instinctive sensibility and enjoining a sentimental communion with the reader:

Aux lumières et au génie de l'observation, il faut qu'il joigne encore cette sensibilité vive, profonde, pénétrante, qui seule sait voir & écrire avec intérêt. S'il n'a point été attendri à l'aspect du lieu où le grand Pompée fut assassiné en débarquant près de Péluse; si les merveilles de l'Égypte ne l'ont point frappé d'étonnement & d'admiration; s'il n'a pas gémi sur les débris augustes d'Alexandrie, & sur la perte de 400 000 volumes dévorés par les flammes; si le feu de l'enthousiasme n'a point embrasé son coeur près des ruines de Troye, de Sparte & d'Athènes, qu'il se garde d'écrire, la nature ne l'avoit pas formé pour transmettre à ses semblables les grandes impressions que doivent produire les grands objets.¹⁰

Volney's distaste for the fashionable permeability of the language of reason and the language of sentiment is abundantly evident from the *Voyage en Égypte et en Syrie*, and the function of his work as a stylistic riposte to the *Lettres sur l'Égypte* shows itself in a number of specific instances. They are cited by name in Volney's Préface as the most relevant competition, and at a number of points in his account he moves to substitute his negative account of Egypt for Savary's effusions, sometimes on relatively minor points of detail. Where Savary lauds the beauty of Egyptian women bathing in the Nile, Volney remarks on the muddiness of the river, and so on. Savary is also surely one of the major targets of Volney's dissertation 'Des exagérations des voyageurs', Volney having immediately before firmly refuted one of Savary's most notably enchanted descriptions, 'en vain célèbre-t-on les jardins de Rosette et du Kaire'.¹¹

⁸ *Decline and Fall*, III (V), p.290, n.137.

⁹ Claude Savary, *Lettres sur l'Égypte, Où l'on offre le parallèle des moeurs anciennes & modernes de ses habitans, où l'on décrit l'état, le commerce, l'agriculture, le gouvernement, l'ancienne religion du pays, & la descente de S. Louis à Damiette, tirée de Joinville & des Auteurs Arabes, avec des Cartes Géographiques*, 3 vols. in-8° (Paris: 1785-86), I, p.iii.

¹⁰ I, p.iv.

¹¹ p.148, and see editorial note.

The *Voyage en Égypte et en Syrie* has thus reasserted the hegemony of the *encyclopediste* style, and convinced as close a reader as Gibbon of its scientific earnestness, although it should be noted that in his Préface and again in his conclusion, Volney asserts one aspect of the purpose of his work to be the provision of a lesson for the French in the evils of despotism:

‘Si jadis, me suis-je dit, les Etats de l’Asie jouirent de cette splendeur, qui pourra garantir que ceux de l’Europe ne subissent un jour le même revers?’ Cette réflexion m’a paru affligeante; mais elle est peut-être encore plus utile. [...] Ce qu’ils n’ont pas fait, nous le pouvons faire; leur exemple peut nous servir de leçon. Tel est le mérite de l’histoire, que par le souvenir des faits passés, elle anticipe aux temps présents les fruits coûteux de l’expérience.¹²

The ideologically-driven nature of Volney’s account – as a paradigmatic illustration of the effects of despotism – is indeed evident throughout, from asides such as the opening statement in his chapter ‘État du peuple en Égypte’ that ‘on jugera aisément que dans un tel pays, tout est analogue à un tel régime’,¹³ to his use of a quotation from Hippocrates on the indolence of Asiatics, ‘voilà précisément la définition des Orientaux de nos jours’.¹⁴ The comparison with the broad tolerance for incidental detail professed for example by the *Description of the East* (1743-45) by Richard Pococke, and especially with its generously envisaged concluding chapter entitled ‘Conclusion, with reflections on travelling, on customs and manners, and the great change of things’¹⁵ which enunciates a very similar political morality to that of the *Voyage en Égypte et en Syrie*, exemplifies how travel writing is one eighteenth-century genre which cannot be said to be improved by the philosophic assault on the imaginatively porous tendencies of unregenerate humanism. However, on its own terms, the *Voyage en Égypte et en Syrie* is entirely successful, which is precisely what makes Volney’s marked tendency to succumb to a distinctive form of scepticism regarding the solidity of facts and the reliability of judgement, and even to encourage such a scepticism in his readers, all the more inexplicable.

Having so carefully framed a scientific stylistic anonymity, what the French royal censor described as ‘le ton de vérité’,¹⁶ and having sacrificed so much literary

¹² p.413.

¹³ p.111.

¹⁴ p.405.

¹⁵ Richard Pococke, *A Description of the East, and Some other Countries*, 2 vols. in 4-¹⁰ (London: 1743-45), Volume II, Book 6, Chapter III.

¹⁶ Quoted in Gaulmier, *L’Idéologue Volney*, p.87.

interest to the lure of the progress of knowledge, Volney's self-presentation in the *Voyage en Égypte et en Syrie* has as its chief characteristic a sense of being assailed by the distorting powers of the imagination. As an author, he is also to be understood as being under the threat of becoming corrupted by serving the imaginations of his readers. The first intimation of Volney's interest in deconstructing his own authority is in the Préface, where, in context, his reflection on his own practice could well appear to be merely a sign of sophisticated honesty, an acknowledgement of a difficulty overcome:

Sans le temps, l'on ne peut juger sainement; car le premier aspect des objets nouveaux nous étonne, et jette le désordre dans notre esprit; il faut attendre que le premier tumulte soit calmé, et il faut revenir plus d'une fois à l'observation, pour s'assurer de sa justesse. Bien voir est un art qui veut plus d'exercice que l'on ne pense.¹⁷

Yet when Volney returns to the question at the very beginning of his first chapter, the effect is to simultaneously affirm the value, even the necessity of first-hand testimony, and yet to undermine it. He begins by insisting on the impuissance of verbal communication to convey the nature of exotic objects, 'car l'imagination ne trouvant pas alors des termes de comparaison tout formés, elle est obligée de rassembler des membres épars pour en composer des corps nouveaux; et dans ce travail prescrit vaguement et fait à la hâte, il est difficile qu'elle ne confonde pas les traits et n'altère pas les formes'.¹⁸ Yet the presentation of the traveller which immediately follows, assailed by sights and sounds and simply not knowing what to think, does not impress on the reader the superiority of first-hand perception either, and Volney appears dangerously near to asserting a truly relativistic conclusion:

Les habitans, accoutumés à ce // spectacle [de l'ancienne Alexandrie], n'en reçoivent aucune impression; mais l'étranger, en qui les souvenirs qu'il rappelle s'exaltent par l'effet de la nouveauté, éprouve une émotion qui souvent passe jusqu'aux larmes, et qui donne lieu à des réflexions dont la tristesse attache autant le coeur que leur majesté élève l'âme.¹⁹

The unpreparedness of the traveller could so easily be presented as 'detachment', his 'souvenirs' as informed reflection, yet Volney signally fails to offer any argument why, as a perspective, it should be considered superior to the instinctive familiarity possessed by the local inhabitants.

¹⁷ p.23.

¹⁸ p.25.

¹⁹ pp.26-27.

This curious epistemological diffidence at the core of such an apparently paradigmatically philosophic text is further exposed in the dissertation ‘Des exagérations des voyageurs’ positioned in the very centre of the *Voyage en Égypte et en Syrie*. For all that Volney has previously asserted that, in the case of the traveller, reflection may compensate for the sensory shock of the new – a principle that a true *encyclopédiste* would so easily have lauded as an ideal epistemological union of experience and the intellect – he here ends by asserting the very contrary. Once the traveller has returned home, ‘loin des objets dont elle a joui, l’imagination privée s’enflamme; l’absence rallume les désirs, et la satiété de ce qui nous environne prête un charme à ce qui est hors de notre portée’.²⁰ A further source for the corruption of the value of testimony is found in the vicious interaction of narrator and listeners in ‘une société oisive et curieuse’, where mutual desires seemingly inevitably stimulate the creation of fiction, ‘bientôt il s’établit entre ses auditeurs et lui une émulation et un commerce par lequel il rend en étonnement ce qu’on lui paie en admiration’.²¹ Distance and proximity, novelty and indifference, first-person and second-hand, are all shown by Volney to be unreliable routes to factual knowledge and right judgement. The *Voyage en Égypte et en Syrie* in this way insinuates the French Enlightenment’s questioning of the most fundamental aspects of the concept of scientific communication – of the meaning of ‘facts’, of ‘science’, and of ‘belief’ – into the genre of travel writing, the forward line of defence for eighteenth-century confidence in the cultural pursuit of the progress of knowledge.

Controversies in France over the epistemological value and definition of ‘reason’ and ‘sentiment’, ‘imagination’ and ‘experience’ are if anything at their peak in the decade of publication of the *Voyage en Égypte et en Syrie*, notably centring around the *cause célèbre* of mesmerism.²² Volney’s own association with the philosophical programme known to contemporaries as *Idéologie* at the turn of the century, the name of which connotes the ‘science of ideas’ and which takes as its starting point the psychology of sensibility and its relationship to science, is well known. The unique feature of the *Voyage en Égypte et en Syrie* is not that it discusses such questions, but that Volney does so in a manner which undermines his own

²⁰ p.149.

²¹ p.149.

²² See Jessica Riskin, *Science in the Age of Sensibility*, and especially Chapter 6 on the controversy over mesmerism in the 1780s.

authority, the most precious possession of the *philosophe*; and the way that this contrasts so markedly with his commitment to fighting for the traditional language of *philosophie* against the incursions of the literature of sentiment. The *Voyage en Égypte et en Syrie* is thus a bastion of philosophic stylistic conservatism, but one hollowed out of all confidence in the viability of the whole discursive model of *philosophie*.

The contrast with the *Histoire des deux Indes* is therefore double; Diderot and Raynal are pleased to add the language of sentiment to the rhetorical arsenal of *philosophie*, but visibly draw back from inviting the descent into discursive impasse which shadows Volney's work. Indeed, the prospect of a sentimental-scientific travelogue on a Savaryan model holds few terrors for the authors of the *Histoire des deux Indes*. Diderot imagines an expedition to view the savages of America carried out by the rather unlikely travelling party of Locke, Montesquieu and Buffon, and looks forward to being enchanted, 'quelle lecture eût été aussi surprenante, aussi pathétique que le récit de leur voyage!'.²³ Similarly, the perspective of the traveller is evoked in the *Histoire des deux Indes* for more than its simple value as testimony, 'Raynal' encouraging the reader to imagine the spectacle of mountains 'pour distraire notre imagination de tant de tableaux désolans':

Livrons-nous aux sentiments [que les astronomes] éprouvèrent sans doute & que doit éprouver le voyageur instruit ou ignorant, par-tout où la nature lui offre un pareil spectacle.²⁴

The extent to which Volney has chosen to make integral to his text conceptual tensions which the *Histoire des deux Indes* ultimately exploits for effect, is particularly encapsulated in the latter work's treatment of the marvellous country of Bisnapore.

In the first edition of 1770, the eulogy of this virtuous and antique nation is delivered straight, and even as a particular instance of the greater reliability of testimony to historical research:

Il ne nous reste des anciens peuples que de l'airain & des marbres, qui ne parlent qu'à l'imagination & à la conjecture, in- // terprètes peu fidèles des mœurs & des usages qui ne sont plus. Le Philosophe, transporté dans le Bisnapore, se trouveroit tout-à-coup témoin de la vie que menoient, il y a plusieurs milliers d'années, les premiers habitans de l'Inde.²⁵

²³ Volume II, Book 6, Chapter I, p.3.

²⁴ Volume II, Book 7, Chapter XXIV, p.197.

²⁵ Volume I, Book 3, Chapter XXIX, pp. 351-52.

However, by 1780 contrary testimony has intervened, a potential embarrassment which nevertheless ‘Raynal’ is well placed to convert into a triumph for scientific objectivity. Diderot has already offered a sober exposition earlier in the *Histoire des deux Indes* of ‘l’incertitude de nos connoissances’,²⁶ in a demonstration of philosophic humility which (as in the case of d’Alembert’s *Discours préliminaire*) does not appear to present any particular barrier to continuing research, the limitations of which Diderot largely ascribes to lack of funding and of time; ‘on trouve parmi nous plus d’un Aristote; mais où est le monarque qui lui dira: ma puissance est à tes ordres; puise dans mes trésors, & travaille’.²⁷ Bisnapore might therefore still be retained as an object lesson in such sober humility. There is, however, nothing in the least sober about the actual version of ‘Raynal’s’ retraction, which openly addresses the sentimental basis of the historian’s and the reader’s original belief, and simply accepts the influence of sentiment on any final adjudication:

Lecteurs, dont les ames sensibles viennent de s’épanouir de joie au récit des moeurs simples & de la sagesse du gouvernement de Bisnapore: vous qui, fatigués des vices & des désordres de votre contrée, vous êtes, sans doute, expatriés plus d’une fois par la pensée, pour devenir les témoins de la vertu & partager le bonheur de ce recoin du Bengale, c’est avec regret que je vais peut-être détruire la plus douce des illusions, & répandre de l’amertume dans vos coeurs. Mais la vérité m’y contraint. Hélas! ce Bisnapore & tout ce que je vous en ai raconté, pourroit bien n’être qu’une fable.

Je vous entends. Vous vous écriez avec douleur [...] // [...] Ah! laissez du moins à l’Innocence cette étroite enceinte sur laquelle vous avez attaché nos regards; & que notre imagination, franchissant l’intervalle immense qui nous en sépare, se plaisoit à parcourir.²⁸

There is, of course, no suggestion that this episode has any relevance to the reliability of the factual information which surrounds it, or to the reader’s capacity and desire to receive such information. The historian insouciantly resumes, ‘quoique le reste du Bengale soit bien éloigné de la félicité réelle ou fabuleuse du Bisnapore, il ne laisse pas d’être la province la plus riche & la plus peuplée de l’empire Mogol’,²⁹ and the possibility of conflict between the judgement and the imagination is safely relegated once again to the mere question of a contrast in styles. Gibbon recognizes in Volney the true language of *philosophie*, and without hesitation accords it its usual status; there is no sign of the possibility that that language, and even the cultural hegemony

²⁶ Volume III, Book 10, Chapter X, p.128.

²⁷ loc. cit.

²⁸ Volume I, Book 3, Chapter XXIX, pp.353-54.

²⁹ Volume I, Book 3, Chapter XXIX, p.354.

of *philosophie* itself or its identity as a coherent phenomenon, for reasons political, philosophical, and literary, might already have been engaged in retreat.

2. Reading the ruins

It is a further evidence of the extent to which the confidence of philosophic rhetoric is proportionate to the restrictions on its sphere of application, that the writers who pay most attention to their effect on their readers, to their ability to persuade, are those with larger ideological motivations than the mere pursuit of the progress of knowledge. Convincing the reader matters greatly to the clerics both British (Brown, Leland) and French (Rollin), just as it does to the political writers (Mably, Hume, on certain occasions certain of the *philosophes* themselves). The distinguished public career of Volney in the Revolution was marked by his being entrusted with the position of professor of history at the new *École Normale*, charged with instructing and inspiring a whole generation of politically-correct history teachers. The cherished eighteenth-century exercise of prescribing philosophic historiography, at surely its moment of greatest cultural influence, is never more infused with ambivalence. Sainte-Beuve notes regarding Volney's *Leçons d'histoire* (1826), which were given in 1795, that 'ces Leçons, très-ingénieuses et très-inattendues, ont cela de remarquable qu'elles sont plutôt contre que pour l'histoire',³⁰ and it is certainly the case that their curious feature (given the fact that Volney's brief is to instruct and inspire) is the prominence given to the theme of how historiography corrupts.

Volney himself points out his reservations regarding his allotted task, and declares that he must simply take it for granted that history as a discipline has social and practical utility, otherwise his own analysis would point in a rather different direction, one not suited to his supposed purpose:

[A]u lieu que, si j'eusse mis en question l'existence de cette utilité, il eût d'abord fallu faire la distinction de l'histoire telle que l'on l'a traitée, ou telle qu'elle pourrait l'être; puis la distinction entre tels et tels livres d'histoire; et peut-être eusse-je été embarrassé de prouver quelle utilité résulte de quelques-uns, même des plus accrédités, et des plus influens que l'on eût pu me citer; et par-là j'eusse donné lieu d'élever et de soutenir une thèse assez piquante, savoir *si l'histoire n'a pas été plus nuisible qu'utile, n'a pas causé plus de mal que de bien, soit aux nations, soit aux particuliers*, par les idées fausses, par

³⁰ Sainte-Beuve, *Causeries du Lundi Volume VII*, p.334.

les notions erronées, par les préjugés de toute espèce qu'elle a transmis et // comme consacrés.³¹

Yet, for all his avowed determination ('puisque l'instruction a un caractère saint, qu'elle ne doit pas se permettre même les jeux du paradoxe, j'ai dû en écarter jusqu'aux apparences'³²) to preserve the possibility of an ideal form of historiography that might separate it from its own compromising past, the whole tendency of Volney's presentation of how historiography acts on the reader, is to assert its inherent appeal to dangerous passions. Narrative is especially involving:

[C]hacun a pu remarquer que, lorsqu'on se livre à la lecture de l'histoire, et que l'on y cherche, soit l'amusement qui naît de la variété mobile des tableaux, soit les connaissances qui naissent de l'expérience des temps antérieurs, il arrive constamment que l'on se fait l'application des actions individuelles qui sont racontées; que l'on s'identifie en quelque sorte aux personnages, et l'on exerce son jugement ou sa sensibilité sur tout ce qui leur arrive, pour en déduire des conséquences qui influent sur notre propre conduite.³³

One of the most cherished principles of the tradition of prescribing philosophic historiography is, of course, the article of faith that once historiography has been cleansed of its unregenerate preoccupation with tales of kings and battles, a new, more philosophic form of reading will be inaugurated. Only the occasional lamentations that the history of *moeurs* may not offer the same degree of interest as battles show the *philosophes'* fears that readers might resist being re-made in the *philosophes'* own image. What is remarkable about Volney's argument is his insistence on the universal reach of the lure of narrative; it draws equally on those who read for amusement and those who read for instruction, far from there being a possibility of defining some form of rational, philosophic approach to the reading of historiography, here 'jugement' and 'sensibilité' are coupled in a disconcerting impression of equivalence.

Volney's tendency to relate his analysis of the effects of reading on different ages and intellects to physiology, further emphasizes their universality, and perhaps also the impossibility of replacing them with anything more dignified. Biography draws on 'ce *désir d'imitation*, qui est un attribut physique de notre nature, et qui

³¹ Volney, *Leçons d'histoire prononcées à l'École Normale in Oeuvres* ed. Anne Deneys and Henry Deneys, 2 vols. (Paris: 1989), I, pp.542-43.

³² I, p.544.

³³ I, p.544.

détermine le plus nos actions’,³⁴ while the danger of becoming morally corrupted by the spectacle of vice is ever present:

En vain dira-t-on que les maux qui en résultent suffisent pour en détourner. Il est en morale une vérité profonde à laquelle on ne fait point assez d’attention; c’est que *le spectacle du désordre et du vice laisse toujours de dangereuse impressions; qu’il sert moins à en détourner, qu’à y accoutumer par la vue, et à s’y enhardir par l’excuse que fournit l’exemple. C’est le même mécanisme physique qui fait qu’un récit obscène jette le trouble dans l’âme la plus chaste, et que le meilleur moyen de maintenir la vertu, c’est de ne pas lui présenter les images du vice.*³⁵

The *Leçons d’histoire* do indeed show the extent to which one factor behind Volney’s development of such a sophisticated interest in the psychology of reading is his ability to apply his own experience as a reader to the question, in complete contrast to the tradition of philosophic prescription which for the most part holds close to its own generic standards. Jean Gaulmier cites a diary entry from 1789 where Volney describes how reading a scandalous court memoir has damaged his faith in human nature and in the Revolution, ‘[il] me donne pour l’espèce entière une sorte de dégoût et de mépris dont l’impression affaiblit l’enthousiasme si précieux du bien public et sappe sourdement les vertus par la contagion que porte l’exemple du vice’.³⁶ The *Leçons d’histoire* themselves, even aside from the use throughout of a generalizing ‘nous’, offer a moment of personal reflection, as Volney reviews the small success of Rollin’s *Histoire ancienne* in reforming his literary instincts as a schoolboy, ‘vous observerez qu’en lisant l’histoire ancienne, par Rollin, ou l’histoire de France, par Velly, nous glissons rapidement, ou nous nous traînions languissamment sur les articles de mœurs, de // lois, de politique, pour arriver aux sièges, aux batailles, ou aux aventures particulières: et dans ces aventures et dans les histoires personnelles, nous préférons ordinairement celles des guerriers à grands mouvemens, à la vie paisible des législateurs et des philosophes’.³⁷

The adult Volney is, however, at one with Rollin on what must constitute the history writer’s response to unreliable readers; prior censorship, and the didactic style. Volney prescribes for the primary schools edifying tales on the model of ‘ce genre d’ouvrage que l’on appelle *Vie des Saints*’,³⁸ and, just like Rollin, the category of

³⁴ I, p.557.

³⁵ I, p.565.

³⁶ Quoted in Gaulmier, *L’Idéologue Volney*, p.338.

³⁷ I, pp.560-61.

³⁸ I, p.557.

‘enfants’ extends to a fair proportion of adults also, ‘j’étends ce nom à tous les hommes simples et sans instruction’.³⁹ When finally obliged to present some possible plan of instruction for more advanced students, Volney’s description of the knowledge to be required as an indispensable preliminary to entering upon the study of history is crafted so as to be practically unattainable:

Je sens que l’on me dira qu’un tel plan d’études exige des années pour son exécution, et qu’il est capable d’absorber le temps et les facultés d’un individu; que par conséquent il ne peut convenir qu’à un petit nombre d’hommes, qui, soit par leurs moyens personnels, soit par ceux que leur fournirait la société, pourraient y consacrer tout leur temps et toutes leurs facultés. Je conviens de la vérité de cette observation, et j’en conviens d’autant plus aisément qu’elle est mon propre résultat. Plus je considère la nature de l’histoire, moins je la trouve propre à devenir le sujet d’études vulgaires et répandues dans toutes les classes.⁴⁰

The most interesting of Volney’s readers are, however, those excluded from the safety of the didactic text or the directed classroom, namely the philosophic readers, and it is in fact the remarkable persistence of Volney’s commitment to the ideals of the philosophic model of reading, in spite of all the dangers of intellectual independence, which informs his perceptible distaste for the whole business of didacticism.

Didacticism itself exerts a moral effect; it is an education in submission to authority, and Volney laments the fact that even his ‘enfants’, if permitted at all to encounter historiography, must be ‘obligés de croire // sur parole et sur autorité magistrale’.⁴¹

The starting point of his ideal method (which he does, of course, immediately concede is practically impossible to achieve) is the reader or the student having attained independence of judgement:

[L]e parti le plus sage serait d’attendre que les jeunes gens eussent déjà un jugement à eux, et libre de l’influence magistrale, pour les introduire à la lecture de l’histoire; leur esprit neuf, mais non pas ignorant, n’en serait que plus propre à saisir des points de vue nouveaux, et à ne point fléchir devant les préjugés qu’inspire une éducation routinière.⁴²

The *Leçons d’histoire* thus reproduce the dilemma of the *Voyage en Égypte et en Syrie*; at once the necessity for the *philosophe* to pursue his independent judgement, but at the same time, his lack of a definitive form of immunity to the common seductions of error. It is this context of Volney’s commitment to the great philosophic

³⁹ I, p.560.

⁴⁰ p.570.

⁴¹ I, pp.559-60.

⁴² I, p.566.

optimism regarding the progress of knowledge, an optimism which still sounds in the pages of the *Leçons d'histoire* which laud past successes and call repeatedly for more and better research, that makes his belief that 'le demi-savoir est un savoir faux, cent fois pire que l'ignorance'⁴³ not a banality but a profound and pressing problem.

It is, accordingly, the necessary loneliness of the philosophic reader, condemned to encounter history at first hand, which provides the central focus of the hermeneutic morality play that is *Les Ruines; ou Méditation sur les Révolutions des Empires* (1791). *Les Ruines* is indeed presented by Volney as a working-out of questions only gestured at in the *Voyage en Égypte et en Syrie*, and he explains in the Avertissement how 'le projet de cet Ouvrage remonte à une époque déjà reculée, puisqu'il date de près de dix ans',⁴⁴ its late publication in 1791 being ascribed to political interruptions; and also, more particularly, how 'l'on en voit des traces sensibles dans la préface et la conclusion du *Voyage en Syrie*',⁴⁵ the preface and conclusion including the passages where Volney turns to the political lessons the study of history contains for the present. It is central to the meaning of *Les Ruines* that the Traveller should be a traveller of a very particular kind; he is the *voyageur philosophe*, who 'portant tout [son] attention sur ce qui concerne le bonheur des hommes dans l'état social'⁴⁶ travels for instruction. At stake, therefore, is the ideological health of the philosophic traveller, faced with the interpretative complexities and the sentimental seductions of history without intervening commentary. The allure of the ruin causes Volney's Traveller to fail the test Volney himself had passed, and brings him to despair at what appears to be the lack of moral order in history, and so to fall into the waiting trap of religion:

Ah! malheur à l'homme, dis-je dans ma douleur! une aveugle fatalité se joue de sa destinée! Une nécessité funeste régit au hasard le sort des mortels. Mais non: ce sont les décrets d'une justice céleste qui s'accomplissent! Un dieu mystérieux exerce ses jugemens incompréhensibles!⁴⁷

Volney remarks in a footnote, 'c'est le préjugé universel et enraciné des Orientaux: *cela étoit écrit*, est leur réponse à tout; de-là résulte une incurie et une apathie qui sont

⁴³ I, p.560.

⁴⁴ Volney, *Les Ruines; ou Méditation sur les Révolutions des Empires*, in Volume I of *Oeuvres* eds. Deneys and Deneys, I, p.167.

⁴⁵ loc. cit.

⁴⁶ I, p.171.

⁴⁷ I, p.178.

le plus grand obstacle à toute instruction et civilisation'.⁴⁸ It is axiomatic in *Les Ruines* that an ideological correctness in the interpretation of history is of the greatest importance to political action.

It is at this emergency that the supernatural figure of the Génie descends, in order to restore the Traveller to a correct political attitude. His discourse effectively represents a vigorous primer in the historical vision proper to republicanism, from the origins of society in mutual wants, to the naturalness of republican equality, and to a demonstration of the 'causes générales' of the rise and fall of the great ancient states which Montesquieu would gladly recognize, 'les anciens Etats prospérèrent, parce que les institutions sociales y furent conformes aux véritables lois de la *nature*, et parce que les hommes y jouissant de la *liberté* et de la *sûreté* de leurs *personnes* et de leurs *propriétés*, purent déployer toute l'étendue de leurs facultés, toute l'énergie de l'amour de soi-même'.⁴⁹ Volney's emphasis in *Les Ruines* on the physical laws of human psychology may be distinctive, but the language and the message is consistent enough for the Génie to represent in general a distillation of the philosophic voice of republican historiography; a late, and surprising incarnation for Montesquieu (or Mably for that matter), which Shelley will improve further by turning him into a fairy in *Queen Mab*, and again subsequently into a host of unlikely characters in *Laon and Cythna*. Indeed, Mably's own *De l'étude de l'histoire* defines very precisely the terms of the argument of *Les Ruines*, in the author's rhetorical address to his pupil, the young Prince of Parma:

Perses, Egyptiens, Grecs, Macédoniens, Carthaginois, Romains, tous ces peuples sont détruits. Leurs propriétés, leurs disgraces, leurs révolutions, leur ruine ne devoient-elles être considérées que comme les jeux d'une fatalité aveugle? Ne rapporterons-nous de leur histoire, Monseigneur, que la triste et fausse conviction que tout est fragile, que tout cède au coup du temps, que tout meurt, que les états ont un terme fatal, et quand il approche, qu'il n'y a plus ni sagesse, ni prudence, ni courage qui puissent les sauver?

Non. Chaque nation a eu le sort qu'elle devoit avoir: et quoique chaque état meure, chaque état peut et doit aspirer à l'immortalité.⁵⁰

Mably proceeds briskly to the 'principes fixes, immuables et certains'⁵¹ of political history, all tending to reinforce how 'la fortune n'est rien, la sagesse est tout'.⁵² So

⁴⁸ I, p.380.

⁴⁹ I, p.213.

⁵⁰ Mably, *De l'étude de l'histoire*, ed. Negroni, p.17.

⁵¹ p.19.

⁵² p.18.

closely does Mably anticipate *Les Ruines*, that he also includes the motif of the speaking (and republican) ruins of the ancient East, ‘les rois de Babylone, d’Assyrie, d’Egypte et de Perse, ces monarques si puissans sembleront vous crier de dessous leurs ruines, que la vaste étendue de provinces, le nombre des esclaves, les richesses, le faste et l’orgueil du pouvoir arbitraire hâtent la décadence des empires’.⁵³

It is, however, important to note that the Génie is not – as in Mably’s expression of the motif of the speaking ruin – ‘the voice of the ruins’, and that it is carefully pointed out by Volney that at most he speaks on the ruins’ behalf. The Génie magnificently invokes the great ruins of the East, ‘lieux // témoins de la vie de l’homme en tant de divers âges, retracez-moi les révolutions de sa fortune! Dites quels en furent les mobiles et les ressorts’,⁵⁴ but the chapter immediately following opens with a kind of embarrassed pause, before the Génie himself puts an end to it with a lecture to the Traveller on human physiology, ‘et après quelques momens de silence, le Génie reprit en ces termes’.⁵⁵ In epistemological terms, therefore, the Génie represents intellectual authority, and in textual terms, the capacity of rhetoric to persuade. Sainte-Beuve himself cites Raynal as a parallel – ‘quelque chose comme du Raynal plus jeune, en turban et au clair de lune’⁵⁶ – and there are indeed echoes throughout the Génie’s discourse of the great exemplar of the apostrophizing, self-dramatizing philosophic historian:

O scélérats! monarques ou ministres, qui vous jouez de la vie et des biens des peuples! est-ce vous qui avez donné le souffle à l’homme, pour le lui ôter? [...] Ah! en voyant la cruauté et l’orgueil des puissans, j’ai été transporté d’indignation, et j’ai dit, dans ma colère: Eh quoi! il ne s’élèvera pas sur la terre des hommes qui vengent les peuples et punissent les tyrans! Un petit nombre de brigands dévore la multitude; et la multitude se laisse dévorer! O peuples avilis! connoissez vos droits!⁵⁷

Similarly, the ascent of the Génie to a position above the atmosphere in order to comprehend the whole globe recalls the sublimity of the historian at the beginning of the *Histoire des deux Indes*. Jean Gaulmier testifies that the *Histoire des deux Indes* ‘a formé l’une des lectures favorites de Volney’.⁵⁸ The fact that the Traveller remains incapable of being persuaded thus defeats another of the literary genres of

⁵³ p.18.

⁵⁴ I, pp.192-93.

⁵⁵ I, p.195.

⁵⁶ *Causeries du Lundi Volume VII*, p.326.

⁵⁷ I, p.236.

⁵⁸ Gaulmier, *L’Idéologue Volney*, p.273.

philosophie, the dominant oratorical persona so daringly espoused by Diderot and Raynal:

Le Génie se tut... Cependant, prévenu de noirs sentimens, mon esprit demeura rebelle à la persuasion; mais craignant de le choquer par ma résistance, je demeurai silencieux... Après quelque intervalle, se tournant vers moi et me fixant d'un regard perçant... tu gardes le silence, reprit-il! et ton coeur agite de pensées qu'il n'ose produire!... Interdit et troublé: ô Génie, lui dis-je, pardonne ma foiblesse: sans doute ta bouche ne peut proférer que la *vérité*; mais ta céleste intelligence en saisit les traits, là, où mes sens grossiers ne voient que des nuages. J'en fais l'aveu: la conviction n'a point pénétré dans mon âme, et j'ai craint que mon *doute* ne te fût une offense.⁵⁹

Les Ruines has tried personal experience and philosophic argument, and neither have achieved their goal, and the only method the Génie can employ to procure the sense of hope in his recalcitrant listener is a literal miracle. He transports the Traveller forward in time (from the situation of the 'plot' of *Les Ruines* in 1784) to the glad spectacle of the Revolution, deciding 'soutenons l'espoir de cet homme: Car si celui qui aime ses semblables se décourage, que deviendront les nations?'.⁶⁰

The function of *Les Ruines* as philosophic anti-historiography is consummated by means of its employment by Volney as a preface to his *La loi naturelle; ou catéchisme du citoyen français* (1791). After the Génie has magically transported the Traveller to witness the Revolution, the tableau presented of the Legislators holding a historical enquiry into the origins of political and religious tyranny in front of the assembled populace inspires in the Traveller admiration and 'une crainte secrète' at 'l'opposition de tant de préjugés, de tant d'opinions', and the 'choc de tant de passions d'hommes si mobiles'.⁶¹ The climax of *Les Ruines* is where the bewildered and volatile populace obey the distinction made for them by the Legislators between the certainty of fundamental principles which they apprehend as a form of sensation, and the uncertainty of historical and philosophical enquiry, known only through conjecture, 'il faut tracer une ligne de démarcation entre les objets vérifiables et ceux qui ne // peuvent être vérifiés'.⁶² Fortunately enough, it in fact turns out to be possible to discern from nature a civil code that is epistemologically distinct from the fruitless contestations which darken 'opinions théologiques et religieuses',⁶³ and the *Loi*

⁵⁹ I, p.247.

⁶⁰ I, p.250.

⁶¹ I, p.273.

⁶² I, pp.377-78.

⁶³ I, p.378.

naturelle immediately follows. As a whole, therefore, *Les Ruines* enacts the abandonment of history, in favour of the altogether more certain (or simply more rhetorically malleable) territory of nature.

As far as the opening scenario of *Les Ruines*, however, the part of it which would achieve a kind of afterlife in British Romantic poetry, Volney remains profoundly ambivalent about the status of the work he has created. On the one hand, the Traveller's sensibility is shown to lead him straight to political perdition, and *Les Ruines* clearly carries on Volney's fight against the self-pleasuring indulgences of the literature of sentiment. That there is something calculated, even clichéd, and indeed (from the perspective of the 1850s) rather dated about Volney's sentimental style is astutely perceived by Sainte-Beuve, who – ironically enough given Volney's fear of how history corrupts – describes the whole exercise of *Les Ruines* as a sign of a personal stylistic crisis brought on by the excitement of being involved in great historical events:

Dans son *Voyage*, Volney n'avait été qu'un observateur inflexible; il n'avait point déclamé, il n'avait point professé. La Révolution, en lui montrant le triomphe présent, exalta tout à coup sa passion mal contenue; elle mit cet esprit éminent et froid dans un état en quelque sorte pindarique, et le fit sortir de ses tons. Il voulut se grinder jusqu'à l'imagination qu'il n'avait pas, et ne réussit qu'à produire, dans le genre sec, un livre fastueux, quelque chose comme du Raynal plus jeune, en turban et au clair de lune.⁶⁴

Sainte-Beuve also cites 'un espèce d'Ossian arabe ou turc'⁶⁵ as a second late eighteenth-century comparison. Volney's imitation of the language of the contemporary sentimental-scientific traveller, and still more specifically of his personal *bête noire* Claude Savary, is, however, close to the point of parody, in particular his extended description of the picturesque nature of the scene, 'le soleil venoit de se coucher; un bandeau rougeâtre marquoit encore sa trace à l'horizon lointain des monts de la Syrie'⁶⁶ and so on, with its long list of chiming adjectives. In the *Lettres sur l'Égypte*, Savary similarly describes how the spectacle of the ruins of Rosetta 'est bien pittoresque'⁶⁷ and 'fait entrer dans l'ame un sentiment de tristesse',⁶⁸ and shows himself notably prone to indulging his sensibility to a degree which can

⁶⁴ *Causeries du Lundi Volume VII*, pp.325-26.

⁶⁵ *ibid.*, p.327.

⁶⁶ I, p.173.

⁶⁷ I, p.52.

⁶⁸ I, p.53.

lead him to doubt the value of scientific enquiry, as on the occasion of his sighting the pyramids from afar:

Assis sur ce riant belvedere on se livre à d'agréables méditations; mais bientôt la mélancholie vient en troubler la douceur. On se dit à soi-même: Ces riches contrées où florissoient autrefois les arts & les sciences, sont occupés par un peuple ignorant & barbare qui les foule aux pieds. Le despotisme écrase de son sceptre de fer le plus beau pays du monde; il semble que les malheurs des hommes croissent en proportion des efforts que la nature fait pour les rendre heureux.⁶⁹

The danger is, however, that even in the act of satire, Volney has offered up an act of homage to the utility of the language of sentiment in procuring conviction in the reader; and that *Les Ruines* may thus be understood as following the *Histoire des deux Indes*, as a peculiarly ironic example of a new philosophic genre, the sentimental autobiography of the philosophic historian. The ambiguous relation of the Traveller to Volney – their travels sharing the same date, but in a different place – and Volney's willingness to claim the identification in his Invocation, but not to the point of taking upon himself the Traveller's experience of personal doubt, are certainly illustrative of a persistent degree of ambivalence on his part, which invites comparison with Diderot's attitude to his part-creation 'Raynal'.

For all its composition under the *ancien régime*, *Les Ruines* remains, however, an intervention in the political life of the new. In his Avertissement, Volney is anxious to justify his stylistic innovations according to politically virtuous 'motifs d'utilité',⁷⁰ and that he was right to be concerned that his employment of such eye-catching literary devices might be thought ideologically suspect, is confirmed in the review of *Les Ruines* in the *Mercure de France* of 1791 by the former man of letters Chamfort, now leader of the cultural wing of the Revolution. Chamfort remarks specifically on how Volney throughout makes 'du merveilleux un usage aussi heureux que hardi',⁷¹ and acknowledges that 'quelques esprits sévères'⁷² might find it out of place. Just like Volney in the Avertissement, Chamfort concludes with homage to the principle that ideological rectitude must be the chief qualification of the author, 'également riche d'imagination & d'érudition, l'usage sobre et mesuré qu'il fait de l'une et de l'autre n'est pas le moindre éloge qu'on puisse faire de son Ouvrage, quoiqu'elles n'y soient

⁶⁹ I, p.93.

⁷⁰ I, p.167.

⁷¹ Sébastien-Roch Nicolas Chamfort, compte rendu of *Les Ruines*, *Mercure de France* 46, Samedi 12 Novembre 1791, p.55.

⁷² p.62.

toutes les deux qu'un mérite bien subordonné à celui de la Philosophie forte & profonde qui a dicté cet excellent écrit'.⁷³ Yet for all the persistence of conventions regarding style, the Revolution had made the whole problem of what constitutes safe forms of intellectual communication into an acute emergency as never before. In the *Leçons d'histoire*, Volney bitterly indicts the Rousseau-infatuated *philosophes* for their betrayal of their own proper discursive traditions in favour of a terrifying historical naivety:

Enfin, la vraie philosophie, la philosophie amie de la paix et de la tolérance universelle, avait amorti ce ferment [of religious fanaticism], et le dix-huitième siècle croyait toucher à la plus belle époque de l'humanité, lorsqu'une tempête nouvelle, emportant les esprits dans un extrême contraire, a renversé l'édifice naissant de la raison, et nous a fourni un nouvel exemple de l'influence de l'histoire, et de l'abus de ses comparaisons. Vous sentez que je veux parler de cette manie de citations et d'imitations grecques et romaines qui, dans ces derniers temps, nous ont comme frappés de vertiges.⁷⁴

In a culture dominated by the pious followers of Rousseau, Volney is moved to a form of nostalgia for the stylish insouciance of Voltaire, 'il m'a paru que Voltaire, parlant à l'esprit plutôt qu'au coeur, à la pensée plutôt qu'au sentiment, n'échauffait l'âme d'aucune passion', and for the inconsequential Voltairean way of controversy, where 'si vous attaquez Voltaire devant ses partisans, ils le défendent sans chaleur, par raisonnement et par plaisanterie, et vous regardent tout au plus comme un homme de mauvais goût'.⁷⁵ Sentimental confidences and *outré* literary devices may be compromising to the Revolutionary *philosophe*, but they embarrass British Romantic poets not at all, and Shelley will show how the interpretative practices of a historiographical form that is actually constructed around the non-rational features of individual response, can in fact be very far from naïve.

3. Shelley's philosophic historiography

The combined efforts of Shelley and Thomas Love Peacock ensured that the supernatural motif of Volney's *Les Ruines* enjoyed something of a vogue. In Peacock's *Palmyra* (1806) the lessons told by 'the voices of th' illustrious dead'⁷⁶ at

⁷³ p.62.

⁷⁴ I, p.601.

⁷⁵ Footnote, I, p.545.

⁷⁶ Thomas Love Peacock, 'Palmyra' in *Palmyra and other poems* (London: 1806), l.35.

the ruins of Palmyra illustrate the truth that ‘Man, and the works of man are only born to die!’,⁷⁷ and a last and final voice points the moral that it is best to have faith in God, thus completely perverting Volney’s polemic intention. In *Queen Mab; a Philosophical Poem* (1813) on the other hand, while the translation of the Génie to a fairy and the replacement of the vision of the Legislators with a lush description of a vegetarian Golden Age certainly appears to mark a greater distance between Shelley’s poem and *Les Ruines* than the more sober *Palmyra*, Shelley’s shared concern with republican political principles in fact enables him to give a remarkably accurate rendering of the vocabulary of French philosophic historiography. When Ianthe speaks, it is with the republican voice of Mably and Volney, asserting the connection between the science of history, and the legitimate hopes for directed political change:

I know
The past, and thence I will essay to glean
A warning for the future, so that man
May profit by his errors, and derive
Experience from his folly.⁷⁸

It is, however, Shelley’s *Laon and Cythna; or, The Revolution of the Golden City: A Vision of the Nineteenth Century* (1818), and not *Queen Mab* or Peacock’s *Palmyra*, which fully engages with the central theme of Volney’s whole approach to history in *Les Ruines* as elsewhere; that of the psychology of the individual response to historical phenomena in all their forms as spectacle, narrative, or argument, and what it means for political action.

Peacock’s *Palmyra* wholly flattens out the intricate interpretative dynamic between Volney, the Traveller, and the Génie, by having his traveller speak in the same voice as the poet, and by having the ruins intervene only to confirm what both were thinking already. Even *Queen Mab*, and for all that it is a dialogue, disregards the complexities of historically-induced doubt, and the limits of persuasion. There is none of the respectful and on occasion unconquerable distance which characterizes the Traveller and the Génie, but instead Ianthe thrills instinctively to the eloquence of the Fairy, ‘All touch, all eye, all ear, // The Spirit felt the Fairy’s burning speech’, and her sole expression of despair serves only to reaffirm the persuasiveness of the Fairy, who (in complete contrast to the philosophic Génie) scoffs at doubt; ‘Oh! rest thee

⁷⁷ 1.37.

⁷⁸ Shelley, *Queen Mab*, in volume I of *The Poems of Shelley* ed. Kevin Everest and Geoffrey Matthews, 2 vols. (London: 1989-2000), Section III, ll. 6-10.

tranquil; chase those fearful doubts, // Which ne'er could rack an everlasting soul, // That sees the chains which bind it to its doom'.⁷⁹ Yet in *Laon and Cythna*, Shelley takes up Volney's question of the sentimental, instinctive, non-rational impulses which form a necessary part of the act of reading historical narrative, and converts a point of philosophic failure into a triumph for the Romantic style. The terms of Shelley's Preface forcefully state the power of the language Volney had forbidden himself to use, as a means of achieving the goal Volney himself had come to see as the most crucial end of philosophic historiography, the political conversion of the reader:

[The Poem] is an experiment on the temper of the public mind, as to how far a thirst for a happier condition of moral and political society survives, among the enlightened and refined, the tempests which have shaken the age in which we live. I have sought to enlist the harmony of metrical language, the ethereal combinations of the fancy, the rapid and subtle transitions of human passion, all those elements which essentially compose a Poem, in the cause of a liberal and comprehensive morality, and in the view of kindling within the bosoms of my readers, a virtuous enthusiasm for those doctrines of liberty and justice, that faith and hope in something good, which neither violence, nor misrepresentation, nor prejudice, can ever totally extinguish among mankind.⁸⁰

It is, however, significant that Shelley is moved to explicitly define the relationship between his sentimental experiment and more orthodox modes of political persuasion, 'I have made no attempt to recommend the motives which I would substitute for those at present governing mankind by methodical and systematic argument';⁸¹ and to in fact present *Laon and Cythna* as no more than a stimulus to an intellectual enquiry which it seems will call on alternative traditions, 'I would only awaken the feelings, so that the reader should see the beauty of true virtue, // and be incited to those enquiries which have led to my moral and political creed, and that of some of the sublimest intellects in the world'.⁸² Enlightenment is not dead, it has been banished below stairs, in a manner reminiscent of Whitaker's description of Gibbon's confinement of the scholars in the 'cellarage' of his text; and the mind of the poet and his footnotes testify to its continued existence.

⁷⁹ VI, ll.1-2; VI, ll.26-28.

⁸⁰ Preface to *Laon and Cythna* in Volume II of *Poems* ed. Matthews and Everest, p.32.

⁸¹ p.32.

⁸² pp.32-33.

Naturally free from the burdens of the philosophic stylistic and generic traditions, *Laon and Cythna* positively embraces the two versions of philosophic historiography which most disturb Volney, historical narrative, and the sentimental autobiography of the philosophic historian. The main narrative of *Laon and Cythna*, that of the revolution of the golden city, represents what Shelley describes in a letter as ‘the *beau ideal* as it were of the French Revolution’;⁸³ and, far from employing the liberty of historical fiction as Volney intends it, as a means of banishing the unsettling effects of encountering the complexities of history at first hand, Shelley’s narrative is precisely framed to intensify and exacerbate the emotions unleashed by the spectacle of the real Revolution’s failure. In the same letter, he qualifies his ‘*beau ideal*’ as a revolution ‘produced by the influence of individual genius, and out of general knowledge’;⁸⁴ and thus a more promising prospect than the real Revolution, which in retrospect Shelley demonstrates to have been doomed from the start:

The revulsion occasioned by the atrocities of the demagogues and the re-establishment of successive tyrannies in France was terrible, and felt in the remotest corner of the civilized world. Could they listen to the plea of reason who had groaned under the calamities of a social state, according to the provisions of which, one man riots in luxury whilst another famishes for want of bread? Can he who the day before was a trampled slave, suddenly become liberal-minded and independent? This is the consequence of the habits of a state of society to be produced by resolute perseverance and indefatigable hope, and long-suffering and long-believing courage, and the systematic efforts // of generations of men of intellect and virtue. Such is the lesson which experience teaches now.⁸⁵

It is entirely possible that events on the scale of the Revolution and its failure were exactly what was needed for the history of manners to at last be approached as a serious and pressing intellectual endeavour. However, in the poem itself the revolution of the golden city is brought about through an often quite literal magic of sentiment, Laon and Cythna are chosen beings of mystical inspiration, blessed with the power to move the people; and yet even their revolution fails, destroyed by overwhelming force. Philosophic republican historiography characteristically flees from the idea of chance, taking as its working assumption that every political disaster may be ascribed to some failure of virtue or policy. In this context, it is ironic that, for

⁸³ Quoted in editorial introduction to *Laon and Cythna* in Volume II of *Poems* ed. Matthews and Everest, p.21.

⁸⁴ loc. cit.

⁸⁵ pp.36-37.

all that *Laon and Cythna* is itself a fiction, it is Shelley's readers who are the least disposed to fictional consolations; his lesson is that they must instead address themselves to learning to save what they can from the ruins.

There is a veritable kaleidoscope of sentimental autobiographies of philosophic historians in the main narrative of *Laon and Cythna*, and all of them are marked by the complete absence of doubt. Laon has no difficulty in correctly reading ruins:

I knew not who had framed these wonders then,
Nor, had I heard the story of their deeds;
But dwellings of a race of mightier men,
And monuments of less ungentle creeds
Tell their own tale to him who wisely heeds
The language which they speak.⁸⁶

Laon finds in the testimony of historical struggles a lesson of political hope, 'And ever from that hour upon me lay // The burden of this hope, and night or day, // In vision or in dream, clove to my breast',⁸⁷ just as Cythna achieves her own, still more idiosyncratic moment of insight in a subterranean cave in the form of a Pythagorean understanding of the mystical underpinnings of historical reality, the 'Clear, elemental shapes, whose smallest change // A subtler language within language wrought: // The key of truths which once were dimly taught // In old Crotona'.⁸⁸ Even the Hermit, by far the most conventional historian of the piece, derives from his studies a calmness from the conviction of the pattern of historical necessity, and is ready to burst forth into inspirational writings on the arrival of Laon and Cythna, 'from shore to shore // Doctrines of human power my words have told, // They have been heard'.⁸⁹ Yet the first canto of *Laon and Cythna*, which frames the first-person narrative delivered by Laon, and in which the strange Woman-Serpent intervenes just like Volney's Génie to save the Poet in despair at history's betrayal, 'When the last hope of trampled France had failed // Like the brief dream of unremaining glory',⁹⁰ provides a counterpoint to the main narrative's orgy of historical inspiration, and in doing so, faithfully reproduces the ultimately ambiguous stance of *Les Ruines*.

⁸⁶ Canto II, ll.757-62.

⁸⁷ II, ll.796-98.

⁸⁸ VII, ll.3111-14.

⁸⁹ IV, ll.1518-20.

⁹⁰ I, ll.1-2.

The Woman-Serpent offers her own sentimental autobiography to the Poet, in which she anticipates the remarkable immunity to the politically disabling power of historical knowledge demonstrated by the main characters of the revolution of the golden city:

Thus the dark tale which history doth unfold,
I knew, but not, methinks, as others know,
For they weep not; and Wisdom had unrolled
The clouds which hide the gulf of mortal woe:
To few can she that warning vision show,
For I loved all things with intense devotion;
So that when Hope's deep source in fullest flow,
Like earthquake did uplift the stagnant ocean
Of human thoughts – mine shook beneath the wide emotion.⁹¹

Yet the fable she explicates for the Poet in order to instruct him in the doctrines of necessity and hope through history, that of the entwined eagle and serpent, is irredeemably ambiguous, and resistant to independent interpretation; just as, for all his didacticism, the Génie ends by conceding to the Traveller the sheer difficulty of interpreting the evidence of the ruins. Shelley also shows a subtle appreciation of the curious dynamic between the Traveller and the Génie, for Volney's sense of the limitations of even the most powerful rhetoric to persuade. The only direct response of the Poet to the Woman-Serpent's long discourse, and after she has repeatedly insisted that hers is the party of the serpent and not the eagle, is testament to a failure of communication:

'Thou fear'st not then the Serpent on thy heart?'
'Fear it!' she said, with brief and passionate cry,
And spake no more.⁹²

Such a moment is a precise reproduction of the awkward silences of *Les Ruines*. In this way, through this open-endedness embedded within the frame of *Laon and Cythna*, and the lack of any final resolution to the question of what the poet makes of the revolution of the golden city, the sentimental inspiration of the poem's protagonists is made as much of a problematic interpretative ideal for Shelley's readers, as is the literally unnatural rationality of the Génie in *Les Ruines* for the Traveller. However, where Volney has recourse to prescribing immediate remedial action, a retreat into aloof and fearful privacy for the *philosophe* and a submission to

⁹¹ I, ll.460-68.

⁹² I, ll.541-43.

authority for the rest, Shelley insists probing the responses of his readers to be not only a legitimate subject in itself, but in fact the preliminary science of a republican recovery.

Volney certainly provides a particular illustration of how even the philosophical part of the public face of *philosophie*, the confident talk of science and the optimism regarding the progress of knowledge, diverges from the reality of the debates among the *philosophes*, their questions and their uncertainties. The irony is that it is Volney's very rigour regarding the necessity for the literary practice of the *philosophe* to have a fully-worked out philosophical justification, which utterly undermines his faith in the entire discursive model of *philosophie*. Volney's continued desire to defend the tradition of the philosophic style against encroaching literary competitors, even those sponsored on occasion by *philosophes* themselves, also provides an intriguing counterpart to Gibbon's own insight regarding the extent to which *philosophie* could be understood as being constituted by its style. At the same time, the pattern of stylistic transfer from Sterne to Diderot to Volney and back to Britain and Shelley, is a further testament to the resistance to natural boundaries and even to sheer probability proper to at least the more discretionary features of literary composition.

However, the fundamental difference in character between Gibbon's use of Volney in the *Decline and Fall* and that by Shelley in *Laon and Cythna*, is also particularly revealing of the kinds of factors at play in such instances of cultural transfer. Gibbon would have had little chance of envisaging the specific application of Volney's republican sentiments in the *Voyage en Égypte et en Syrie* in 1787, and, given the fact that all interpreters of the apparent radicalism of the philosophic rhetoric under the *ancien régime* (all the French censor found was 'le ton de vérité') encounter the same challenge, Gibbon would not have been alone. Shelley, on the other hand, by virtue of mere events, is privileged to share with Volney a common sense of what constitutes the sphere of politics, and within that sphere, of what matters. It is indeed a particular characteristic of republicanism that it travels well as an ideological language,⁹³ and as such it provides a point of contrast to the way that

⁹³ See Johnson Kent Wright, *A Classical Republican in Eighteenth-Century France: The Political Thought of Mably*, especially Chapter 8, for a description of the possibilities of trans-national connections via eighteenth-century Classical republicanism.

the intensely contextually-embedded nature of the political positions of all the major British and French philosophic historians actually conspires to deny them this opportunity for a closer and deeper cosmopolitanism. As a particular case, David Womersley has described the fascinating spectacle of Gibbon's post-Revolutionary coming to terms (in the cultural context of a 'profound shift from *insouciance* to reverence'⁹⁴) with the end of the age of nuanced political self-expression. Shelley's serious attention to the question of the historical meaning of his own times – and of the relationship between manners, political constitutions, and historical change – perhaps also affords some intimation of how differently eighteenth-century philosophic historians might have approached their generic obligation to write a history of the emergence of modern manners, if impelled by a comparable sense of interpretative urgency.

⁹⁴ David Womersley, *Gibbon and the 'Watchmen of the Holy City*, p.202, and see further pp.196-206.

CONCLUSION

This thesis is a study of Enlightenment or philosophic historiography in the eighteenth century in Britain and France. As a consequence of its demonstration of how there are no grounds for the by now intuitive synthesis of an Enlightenment historical attitude, philosophy, narrative or method, contained in the collection of eighteenth-century British and French histories near-universally adduced in support of such a claim; and therefore that, in the acquired meanings of all the relevant terms, and with of course specific reference to Britain and France, Enlightenment historiography cannot be said to exist, any group noun for this collection of works – ‘Enlightenment historians’, ‘philosophic historians’ where applied to non-*philosophes* – from this point at last assumes its inverted commas. The important and interesting question therefore regards what may be described as the precise manner of the non-existence of ‘Enlightenment historiography’, how this impression of a pattern of resemblances arises; whether willed or indeed faked, or subsequently discovered, or for that matter, simply illusory.

It is indeed surely the case that ‘philosophic’ or ‘Enlightenment’ historiography represents the definitive instance of a canonical theme for scholarly disquisition. To consider together Voltaire, Montesquieu, Hume, Robertson, Gibbon, the *Encyclopédie*, and Raynal, represents the subject review raised to the level of instinct, and this thesis is also in form a comparative study, Enlightenment studies as a discipline being positively built around comparative analysis, in the breach as in the observance of the paradigm of European unity. This thesis does, indeed, afford the occasional contrary indication; in Chapter Two, the critical conjunction of the Bishop of Gloucester with the *soi-disant* English *philosophe* might well be thought a minority view, and the whole subject of Chapter Six be considered an epilogue to the main event. Equally, the selection of Britain as a ‘national context’ is far from universally sanctioned; and, given the general tenor of the arguments concerning the relationship of England to the European Enlightenment, to compare at least the southern part of Britain to the true home of Enlightenment in France, might be thought an example of the seeking-out of extremes. Yet still, this thesis must invite classification as a study of ‘Enlightenment historiography’. However, just as in the case of philosophic historiography itself, an impression of generic resemblance may be effected, where the method of exposition, and the original focus of enquiry, are in fact very different.

Beyond the cultivation of a necessary sense of distance, this study’s preferred term of ‘philosophic’ historiography, and the first definition of the term being found

not in the analysis of a canon of major works, but in the question of how the writers known as *philosophes* in eighteenth-century France thought of and practised history writing, permits a significant re-appraisal of the Enlightened character of French philosophic historiography. The historical instances of contemporary approaches to the idea of philosophic historiography in France centre around the promise of genre, of erecting philosophic historiography into a fixed literary kind, with its own proper form and function. It is in this respect that the peculiar Frenchness of the French Enlightenment informs the most fundamental expectations of what an Enlightenment historiography should be; for it is France which has *philosophes*, articulate and organized men of letters, who seek explicitly to define their role as men of letters in relation to their country's political, religious and cultural institutions. The idea of a genre of philosophic historiography therefore forms part of this desire to make themselves explicit, and even in some degree as an Enlightenment. Within the *philosophes'* approach to the idea of a genre of philosophic historiography, there is, however, a persistent tension with a contrary self-image and ambition, one precisely to avoid being explicit; to establish instead historical writing as a field of engagement with the sphere of French politics, an undertaking which necessarily defeats the explicitness of genre both for the obvious reasons of self-preservation, and also, and more interestingly, as a consequence of the very ambivalence of the most dominant of the *philosophes* – most notably exemplified in Voltaire and Diderot – towards the assumption and the character of such a role. Yet if historiography has a distinct capacity to expose the uncertainties and the self-contradictions in the *philosophes'* conception of their own role as *philosophes*, the discursive flexibility of historiography as a literary practice, and also and especially the inherent susceptibility of the fixed terms of the idea of a philosophic genre of historiography – the subversion of kings and battles, and the embrace of *moeurs* – to local inflexion, and even employment as a disguise, converts a challenge of self-definition in print, into an opportunity to master its processes.

The *philosophes* have rarely been called upon to justify their membership of the French Enlightenment; the connection has become axiomatic. However, this study's exposition of French philosophic historiography certainly poses incidental challenges to a number of the scholarly paradigms of the Enlightened character of *philosophie* currently pertaining; in particular, the characterization of *philosophie* as inhabiting a defined sphere of 'sociability' distinguished from the sphere of politics,

and the related question of how to interpret the philosophic appeal to ‘public opinion’, and associate it with a particular historical context; and also the assumption of unanimity among the *philosophes* regarding the function of *philosophie* itself, and especially how far the *encyclopédiste* rhetoric of science and the diffusion of knowledge accounts for the ambitions of the *encyclopédistes* themselves, even aside from those of alternative traditions of *philosophie*. This study’s identification of disagreement and ambivalence among the *philosophes* regarding these most fundamental aspects of their self-understanding, also points towards the sheer importance of mere events in shaping the politics of *philosophie*; whether the divergent responses to the meaning of the reign of Louis XIV shared by Voltaire, Montesquieu, Saint-Pierre and La Beaumelle, or the impact of the political crisis of the 1770s on the form of Voltaire’s engagement with French politics, and the new urgency it transmits to Diderot. However, the particular focus of this thesis on the literary construction of philosophic personae, not only serves to reflect back on the historical position of the *philosophes* within eighteenth-century French culture, but also illustrates certain aspects of the function of a ‘print culture’ which the instrumental understanding of self-expression in print which is highly characteristic of all models of the discursive practice of Enlightenment, tends entirely to occlude.

Any attempt to guide society by means of print communication, must begin with guiding readers. In the context of the proud philosophic appeal to the opinion of the ‘public’, the evidence of Voltaire constrained to meet his readers’ expectations of him as a philosophic writer, and of the *encyclopédistes* engaged in a careful negotiation with a pre-existing etiquette of textual address, offers an intriguing perspective on how receptive eighteenth-century French readers were to being guided by *philosophes*. The pervasive concern of the philosophic historians, even in spite of themselves, with their own status, also provides a particular reflection on the legitimacy of transferring a rhetoric of equality and sociability, to actual literary practice. The readership for philosophic writings is at the same time anticipated by philosophic authors themselves to be of various, and in certain quarters hostile composition; as particularly illustrated in the fascinating letters of Voltaire, which describe the challenge of meeting the contrary expectations of his philosophically-inclined readers, his critical philosophic interrogators, the *anti-philosophes*, his personal connections within the French political establishment, and the readers who like a good story. Indeed, it is a distinctive characteristic of French philosophic

writings to of necessity transfer an active interpretative role to the reader; who must arrive at some way of responding to Voltaire's shifting political judgements as in fact some form of code, or, alternatively, navigate the vertiginous oratory of the *Histoire des deux Indes*. As a general perspective, the *philosophes* themselves describe the function of philosophic writings as a literary genre, in the wider literary culture and in the market for books. The effects are double-edged; the *encyclopédistes* may fear anonymity and a minor status, but Voltaire finds an additional resource in the alternative identities to that of *philosophe* available to him as a French writer. It is of course the promiscuous literary sympathies of the reader which assist the *historiens philosophes* out of their prescriptive dead end, and it is in alternative literary traditions that Diderot finds the stylistic tools for a philosophic renewal.

This thesis particularly seeks to emphasize the utility of a properly literary history – one which understands the writing of books to be a ‘cultural practice’ of a very special kind, not reducible to attending salons, writing letters, or visiting exhibitions – to the historical study of Enlightenment. In their concluding discussion of the need to define a new, ‘cultural’ approach to the study of Enlightenment in their collection *Le Monde des Lumières*, Vincenzo Ferrone and Daniel Roche identify the difficulties within ‘intellectual’ and ‘social’ approaches regarding assigning the proper weight to individual autonomy and to established cultural practices, to ‘ideas’ and to the inherited mechanisms of the expression of ideas, to contemporary self-representations and to historical context.¹ The close literary analysis of Enlightenment writing, far from representing a recondite indulgence in a tangential enquiry, shows eighteenth-century writers attempting to prescribe a specific cultural context for their own interpretation, and identifying certain of the interpretative contexts which their own contemporaries might be moved to apply. It is an unfortunate consequence of the very fertility of French philosophic writing in authoritative self-representations, that their intuitive appeal as characterizations of an Enlightenment totality has encouraged their application (once a necessary preliminary choice has been made from among the variety offered) as general explanatory narratives. It is still more unfortunate that the philosophic rhetoric of modernity and manners, a central part of the French approach to philosophic historiography, has not only stimulated the isolation of an ‘Enlightened

¹ See Vincenzo Ferrone and Daniel Roche, ‘Historiographie des Lumières’ in their *Le Monde des Lumières*, p.548.

narrative' as the chief theme and purpose of philosophic historiography, but has also bestowed on the *philosophes* a markedly impoverished understanding of the complexities of their own historical moment, complexities which their own literary activities show to have been lived to the utmost.

However, if the plenitude of authoritative self-representations has been a particular danger to the interpretation of the French Enlightenment, the historian of or indeed the historian in quest of an eighteenth-century British Enlightenment would be grateful to run any portion of such a risk. Aside from the clerics, who represent an 'institution' in the real sense, the sheer lack of interest, and of course especially in comparison to the *philosophes*, evinced by Hume, Robertson and Gibbon for all their long-accepted membership of the Enlightenment, in addressing the definition of their cultural role, is an interesting fact in itself. For cultural historians, alongside the history of institutions should perhaps be the pursuit of 'institutional thinking', and national differences perhaps prepared for. This study has been concerned to describe the very specific form, address, and function of the histories of Hume and Robertson within the context of Whig revisionism. While it has also questioned the precise extent to which the apparent cosmopolitanism of the French *philosophes* should itself be ascribed to the nature of their position as French writers, and interpreted accordingly, the pervasive influence of criteria of detachment or superiority to a merely national context on paradigms of Enlightenment makes the privileged status of the histories of Hume and Robertson something of a peculiarity. If Whig revisionism counts as an Enlightened historical attitude, why not include the Walpolean pamphleteers?² This thesis has of course from the outset declined to participate in the activity of defining 'Enlightenment', and for precisely such reasons; the natural tendency of even the firmest of Enlightenments to either divide or dissolve on closer inspection.

The specific argument of this thesis regarding the Enlightened status of the histories of Hume and Robertson is that the scholarly search for a normative function in their writings, most notably of course in John Pocock's pursuit of the 'Enlightened narrative', has invested what may be described as the very particular history of their histories with a teleological significance which it does not in the least possess. In their

² See Colin Kidd, *Subverting Scotland's Past*, p.120 n.47 on the Walpolean pamphleteers' assault on the ancient constitution.

British histories, Hume and Robertson aim to directly confront and also in some measure to replace the accepted English Whig and Scottish nationalist accounts of the histories of England and Scotland. Certain of the topics of what has come to be identified as the ‘Enlightened narrative’ – more particularly, the idea of manners, and the European perspective – are invoked by both historians to cover the insufficiencies of their historical exposition. These topics are evidently not unheralded in a British context, or they could not be appealed to as a stable focus for otherwise unfocused narratives; and both historians, although of course chiefly Robertson, enhance their rhetorical resources by judicious borrowings from the writings of Voltaire. The intention and the result is a form of imaginative compensation for the fractures and the discontinuities it is their polemical purpose to emphasize, and not a coherent historical exposition. Indeed, the manner of Hume and Robertson’s employment of topics such as the Renaissance or the political balance of the European states, connotes historical commonplaces, and certainly not a subject of primary expository significance. While the histories of Hume and Robertson do not therefore support the idea of the construction of an ‘Enlightened narrative’ being either their ambition or their achievement, its putative materials are granted a novel and ambiguous status, which is brought to a point in Robertson’s *History of the Reign of Charles V*. Robertson’s *History of the Reign of Charles V* is a work with the singular status of being of very simple intention, and yet of rather complex effect; its topics may by the very terms of their elaboration in a national constitutional context have no significant interpretative weight, as Robertson himself openly concedes, but their assembly in a single text, teeters on the brink of instituting a literary genre. Gibbon’s glad response to this opportunity to arrange canonical macro-narratives in a disingenuous and highly entertaining manner in the *Decline and Fall*, is a particular illustration of how for literary genres to function as genres, they must first be perceived as genres, even in defiance of the originals’ intentions. Just as in the case of the commissioning of Voltaire to prescribe the form of philosophic historiography in the *Encyclopédie*, Gibbon’s late assumption of a Robertsonian affinity is an instance of how literary and intellectual ‘traditions’, if not to reside solely in the eye of the scholar, must be constructed according to contemporary interventions, and of the challenging degree of sheer arbitrariness thus infused.

Gibbon is, of course, this study’s great exemplar of the literary possibilities of inauthentic connections. This study’s demonstration of how the *Decline and Fall*’s

relationship to the writings of Hume, Robertson and the *philosophes* is affirmed by Gibbon on the plane of stylistic self-fashioning and, quite simply, very little else, must considerably affect the *Decline and Fall*'s acquired status as the true and final consummation of a tradition of 'Enlightenment historiography'. The effect might be thought to be a significant decentring; Gibbon's engagement being 'only' literary. Conversely, it might also be very legitimately objected that, given this study's account of the ways in which eighteenth-century 'philosophic historiography' cannot be said to exist, and of the nature of the 'tradition' of philosophic historiography, as in part an effect of willed and strictly limited affinities, and also as a subsequent trick of historical perspective, there is nothing that Gibbon can be said to consummate in the *Decline and Fall*. Yet Gibbon's unique contribution from his situation in the 1770s is his perception of how the merest generic impression of just such a narrative tradition may be extracted from Hume, Robertson and Voltaire, and of how the dominant voice of the *historien philosophe* could be affected as a literary persona. Gibbon still remains an insightful, if not precisely faithful guide to eighteenth-century historiography. It is just that he points in a very different direction to that commonly sought from the *Decline and Fall*.

The eighteenth-century collection of British and French so-called 'Enlightenment histories' are exceptionally dangerous terrain for historians of ideas. The early, hegemonic literary enthronement of a number of the most characteristic features of the French idea of philosophic historiography, encourages imitation. At the same time, these same features – the idea of Europe, the rhetoric of *moeurs*, the distinction between *philosophe* and *érudit* – sustain a simultaneous impression of semantic plenitude, and a persistent lack of interpretative or methodological specificity, and thus provide for their own translation into a style. All historical disciplines which engage in the analysis of texts are necessarily attuned to the potential for disjunction between what is said, and what is meant. The 'philosophic historians' certainly evince more than their fair share of rhetorical disguises. However, discriminating between something that may be said, and may indeed be meant, only not particularly seriously, and certainly not to the exclusion of alternative, contradictory meanings, is a still more challenging focus for textual exegesis; and where a discipline has already constructed a specific model of intention and sphere of reference as a pre-condition for being the object of study (writing intellectual writing, being a personage of ideas, thinking political thought), identifying a commonplace

when it is just that, is uniquely demanding of a different methodology. In such cases, the primary focus of contextualization must be textual contextualization. Themes, allegiances, ideological positions and of course 'ideas' themselves, invested with a very particular meaning within their immediate textual context, where authorial intention, generic convention and rhetorical positioning can be taken account of in their full complexity, support only a spurious impression of co-ordination and consensus when extracted and re-assembled in the form of illustrative quotations and narrative summaries.

The application of an intuitive understanding of the meaning of 'historiography' to the eighteenth-century 'philosophic histories' is also a particular source of insufficiently responsive interpretation. It appears an obvious manoeuvre to seek 'the Enlightenment sense of history' in the Enlightenment's works of historiography. The discursive model proper to historiography, as simple as the idea of a writer actually writing about the past, is, however, of distinctly ambiguous relation to the 'philosophic histories'. It is a notable feature of the most sophisticated approaches to the 'philosophic histories' *qua* histories (that is, as in some degree embodying their authors' sentiments about the past) that specific generic contexts for the epistemological status of 'histories' in the period are established from the outset. David Womersley establishes the philosophic expectation of causal analysis as a primary generic context for the *Decline and Fall*, while John Pocock's definition of the relevant meaning of 'narrative' for Gibbon is 'neo-classical', and so as embodying a rhetorically foregrounded voice of the historian and an intentionally coherent narrative behind him.³ The persistence of the term 'neo-classical' in studies of 'Enlightenment historiography' is a telling sign of the exegetical need for some form of locutionary stability in the texts under discussion. This study has demonstrated how the presence of a complex of intentions, and the sometimes simultaneous invocation of a range of imagined audiences, are even characteristic of the French histories. The very specific rhetorical strategy of Hume and Robertson has been shown to be essentially reactive, to pre-existing narratives and to specific textual emergencies, and also driven by anticipation of their unruly British readers' instinctive responses. Even as a question of method, the venerable typology of the *philosophe* and the *érudit* is a distraction from the sheer variousness of epistemological strategy evinced in the

³ See Chapter 5 of this thesis, p.207.

‘philosophic historians’ textual practice, and from the way it can vary even within individual texts, and to an extent which strongly implies that, in certain cases, any final adjudication on the historical character of the history recounted, lies in the eye of the beholder. Gibbon is the especially interesting case. He certainly varies his commitment to the contemporary norms of scholarship depending on the subject under discussion, and it is particularly evident that the macro-narrative of the *Decline and Fall* – such as it is – is not deemed by him to be especially worthy of detailed justification. The question of the satisfactoriness of the expository strategy of the *Decline and Fall* must perhaps ultimately depend on whether the critic’s sympathies lie with the *philosophes*, or with the *érudits*. John Whitaker’s account of the bemused response among the scholars is highly suggestive in this regard, and may be compared to the annotations of Hume’s anonymous reader as contemporary testimonies of expectations disappointed. For these reasons, therefore, no more than any other aspects of the ‘philosophic historians’ intentions, can the intention to write ‘a history’ be taken for granted as explicit, consistent, or necessarily formed in response to a pre-defined and fixed interpretative tradition.

The question of ‘intellectuals’ and the question of ‘Britain’ – terms employed throughout with only the implicit suggestion of inverted commas – have not been made the focus of any specific investigation, given this study’s necessarily restricted focus on historiography, and that of a certain kind. However, the examination of the eighteenth-century British and French ‘philosophic histories’ has certainly permitted the identification of a number of particular points of interest. In relation to the question of ‘intellectuals’, Anne Goldgar has described the eighteenth century as beginning with in some ways the end, and in others the change in function and sphere of reference of a well-established model of the Republic of Letters, and indeed specifically cites Voltaire as marking the transition.⁴ The great change wrought on many features of British and French cultural life through the events of the Revolution at the century’s end has of course been frequently remarked. The question of what comes between, therefore centres around a peculiarly interesting cultural moment. In France, there is the remarkable phenomenon of the *philosophes*; although this thesis has pointed out a number of ways in which the definition of the role of the *philosophe*

⁴ Anne Goldgar, *Impolite Learning: Conduct and Community in the Republic of Letters, 1680-1750* (New Haven: 1995); and see especially pp.243-50 on Voltaire.

is rather less transparent than it can appear, or indeed, than the *philosophes* liked to suggest, and it is certainly the case that the *philosophes* are far from accounting for the totality of eighteenth-century French intellectual life. The clerics and the academicians may particularly be adduced in evidence of the fact. Britain, however, is notably lacking in a contemporary descriptive language. Hume's fraught engagement with his readership is still highly suggestive of certain of the ways in which an eighteenth-century British intellectual life might have been imagined, and be described as such historically. The sophisticated engagement of the British clerics with the new world of a competitive literary marketplace, an unruly and demanding readership, and a lack of state intervention both to censor transgressions and to establish the location of authority, similarly affords a contemporary perspective on the implications for actual practice of the translation of the Republic of Letters into the eighteenth century.

On the question of 'Britain', this thesis has pointed towards the importance of the sphere of print communication as a medium for the transmission and even the experience of a single national identity, a process which can of course equally work to contrary effect. At the same time, the patterns of willed cultural affinities this study has particularly sought to describe, leave Gibbon's celebrated comment in the *Decline and Fall* on the 'strong ray of philosophic light [that] has broke from Scotland in our own times'⁵ still subject to a mass of questions this thesis is not framed to answer. Did Gibbon call attention to the association because his contemporaries would not have thought to make the connection between an Englishman and Scots? How was the rise of the Edinburgh literati perceived in South Britain, and did its inhabitants either consider them to be a phenomenon different in kind from anything that had been seen before ('an Enlightenment'), or indeed consider themselves lacking in comparison? This study has, however, been particularly framed to illustrate how one of the great, unacknowledged costs of the idea of Enlightenment, has been the illusion of familiarity with eighteenth-century intellectual culture, in France as well as in Britain.

⁵ *Decline and Fall* ed. Womersley, III (VI), p.728, n.69.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

(List of Works Cited)

1. Primary

Alembert, Jean Le Rond d', and Diderot, Denis, *Discours préliminaire des éditeurs de l'Encyclopédie*. In Volume I of d'Alembert, *Mélanges de littérature, d'histoire et de philosophie*.

Alembert, Jean Le Rond d', *Mélanges de littérature, d'histoire et de philosophie*. 2 vols. in-8°. Berlin: 1753.

Anville, Jean-Baptiste Bourguignon d', *Antiquité Géographique de l'Inde, et de plusieurs autres contrées de la Haute Asie*. Paris: 1775.

_____ *L'Euphrate et le Tigre*. Paris: 1779.

Boswell, James, *The Life of Johnson*. Ed. R.W. Chapman and introd. P. Rogers. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998.

Bouhier, Jean, *Correspondance littéraire du président Bouhier*. Ed. Henri Duranton. Saint-Étienne: University of Saint-Étienne Press, 1974-88.

Brown, John, *Essays on the Characteristics*. Second edition. London: 1751.

_____ *An Estimate of the Manners and Principles of the Times*. Second edition. London: 1757.

Chamfort, Sébastien-Roch Nicolas, [Review of *Les Ruines*], *Mercure de France* 46, Samedi 12 Novembre 1791.

Diderot, Denis, *Oeuvres*. Ed. Laurent Versini. Paris: R. Laffont, 1995.

_____ *Salons de 1769, 1771, 1775, 1781*. Ed. Else Marie Bukdahl, Michel Delon, Annette Lorenceau et al. Paris: Hermann, 1995.

_____ *Salon de 1767*. Ed. Else Marie Bukdahl, Michel Delon, Annette Lorenceau. Paris: Hermann, 1995.

_____ *Mémoires pour Catherine II*. Ed. Paul Vernière. Paris: Garnier, 1966.

Encyclopédie ou Dictionnaire raisonné des arts et des sciences, par une société de gens de lettres. Paris: 1751-65.

Gibbon, Edward. *The Miscellaneous Works of Edward Gibbon, Esq.* Ed. John Holroyd, Lord Sheffield. 5 vols. in-8°. London: 1814.

_____ *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*. Ed. David

- Womersley. 3 vols. London: Allen Lane The Penguin Press, 1994.
- _____ *The Letters of Edward Gibbon*. Ed. J.E. Norton. 3 vols. London: Cassell, 1956.
- Guignes, Joseph de, *Histoire Générale des Huns, des Turcs, des Mogols et des autres Tartares Occidentaux, &c. Avant et depuis Jesus Christ jusq'a present*. 5 vols. in-4^{to}. Paris: 1756-78.
- _____ *Mémoire dans lequel on prouve que les Chinois sont une colonie Egyptienne, nouvelle édition*. Paris: 1760.
- Hume, David, *A Treatise of Human Nature*. Ed. David Fate Norton and Mary J. Norton. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001.
- _____ *Essays, Moral and Political*. 2 vols. in-8^o. Edinburgh: 1741-2.
- _____ *Political Discourses*. Edinburgh: 1752.
- _____ *Essays Moral, Political, and Literary*. Ed. Eugene F. Miller. Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1985.
- _____ *The History of Great Britain*. 2 vols. in-4^{to}. Edinburgh: 1754-7.
- _____ *The History of England, under the House of Tudor*. 2 vols. in-4^{to}. London: 1759.
- _____ *The History of England, from the Invasion of Julius Caesar, to the Accession of Henry VII*. 2 vols. in-4^{to}. London: 1762.
- _____ *The History of England, from the Invasion of Julius Caesar to the Revolution of 1688*. Ed. William B. Todd. 6 vols. Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1983.
- _____ *The Letters of David Hume*. Ed. J.Y.T. Greig. 2 vols. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1932.
- Hurd, Richard, *A Discourse, by way of General Preface to the quarto edition of Bishop Warburton's Works*. London: 1794.
- Jortin, John, *Six Dissertations upon Different Subjects*. London: 1755.
- _____ *Remarks on Ecclesiastical History*. 2 vols. in-8^o. Second edition. London: 1767.
- La Beaumelle, Laurent Angliviel de, *Mes pensées, ou Le qu'en dira-t-on*. Ed. Claude Lauriol. Geneva: Droz, 1997.
- _____ *Tome trois; contenant les additions et corrections données par l'auteur, avec un très grand nombre de remarques, tant par M. de la B ***, que par le Sr. Marc Phrasendorp*. Included as Volume III of Voltaire, *Histoire du Siècle de*

Louis XIV. 3 vols. in-8°. The Hague: 1753.

_____ *Réponse au Supplément au Siècle de Louis XIV.* Colmar: 1754.

Leland, John, *A View of the Principal Deistical Writers that have Appeared in England in the Last and Present Century; with observations upon them, and some account of the answers that have been published against them. In several letters to a friend.* 2 vols. in-8°. Third revised edition. London: 1757.

Mably, Gabriel Bonnot, Abbé de, *'De l'étude de l'histoire'; suivi de 'De la manière d'écrire l'histoire'*. Ed. Barbara Negroni. Paris: Fayard, 1988.

_____ *Observations sur les Grecs.* Geneva: 1749.

Middleton, Conyers, *A Letter to Dr. Waterland; containing some Remarks on his Vindication of Scripture: In Answer to a Book, intituled 'Christianity as old as the Creation'. Together with the Sketch of Another Answer to the said Book.* London: 1731.

_____ *Introductory Discourse to a Larger Work, designed hereafter to be published, concerning the Miraculous Powers which are supposed to have subsisted in the Christian Church, from the earliest Ages, through several successive Centuries; tending to shew, that we have no sufficient Reason to believe, upon the Authority of the Primitive Fathers, that any such Powers were continued to the Church, after the Days of the Apostles.* London: 1747.

_____ *A Free Inquiry into the Miraculous Powers, which are supposed to have subsisted in the Christian Church, from the earliest Ages through several successive Centuries. By which it is shewn, That we have no sufficient Reason to believe, upon the Authority of the Primitive Fathers, That any such Powers were continued to the Church, after the Days of the Apostles.* London: 1749.

Montesquieu, Charles-Louis de Secondat, Baron de, *Réflexions sur la monarchie universelle en Europe.* Ed. Catherine Larrère and Françoise Weil. Oxford: Voltaire Foundation, 2000.

_____ *De l'Esprit des lois.* Ed. Victor Goldschmidt. 2 vols. Paris: Garnier-Flammarion, 1979.

Peacock, Thomas Love, *Palmyra and other poems.* London: 1806.

Pococke, Richard, *A Description of the East, and Some other Countries.* 2 vols. in-4^{to}. London: 1743-45.

Raynal, Guillaume-Thomas, *Anecdotes historiques, militaires et politiques de l'Europe depuis l'élevation de Charles-Quint au Thrône de l'Empire, jusq'au Traité d'Aix-la-Chapelle en 1748.* 3 vols. in-12°. Amsterdam: 1753-54.

_____ *Histoire philosophique et politique des établissemens et du commerce des Européens dans les deux Indes.* 4 vols. in-4^{to} with Atlas. First published 1770,

- rev. 1774; Geneva: 1780.
- Rennell, James, *Memoir of a Map of Hindoostan; or the Mogul Empire*. London: 1783.
- _____ *The Geographical System of Herodotus examined*. London: 1800.
- Robertson, William, *The History of Scotland, during the Reigns of Queen Mary and of King James VI, till his Accession to the Crown of England, with a Review of the Scotch History previous to the Period; and an Appendix containing original papers*. 2 vols. in-4^{to}. London: 1759.
- _____ *The History of the Reign of the Emperor Charles V. with a View of the Progress of Society in Europe, from the Subversion of the Roman Empire, to the Beginning of the Sixteenth Century*. 3 vols. in-4^{to}. London: 1769.
- Rollin, Charles, *Histoire ancienne des Egyptiens, des Carthaginois, des Assyriens, des Babyloniens, des Medes et des Perses, des Macedoniens, des Grecs*. 6 vols. in-4^{to}. Paris: 1740. First published, 1730-38.
- Sainte-Beuve, Charles-Augustin, *Causeries du Lundi Volume VII*. Paris: 1853.
- Saint-Pierre, Charles Irenée Castel, Abbé de, *Annales politiques*. 2 vols. in-8^o. London: 1757.
- Savary, Claude, *Lettres sur l'Égypte, Où l'on offre le parallele des moeurs anciennes & modernes de ses habitans, où l'on décrit l'état, le commerce, l'agriculture, le gouvernement, l'ancienne religion du pays, & la descente de S. Louis à Damiette, tirée de Joinville & des Auteurs Arabes, avec des Cartes Géographiques*. 3 vols. in-8^o. Paris: 1785-86.
- Shaftesbury, Anthony Ashley Cooper, Earl of, *Characteristicks of Men, Manners, Opinions, Times*. 3 vols. in-8^o. Third edition. London: 1723.
- Shelley, Percy Bysshe, *The Poems of Shelley*. Ed. Kevin Everest and Geoffrey Matthews. 2 vols. London: Longman, 1989-2000.
- Stewart, Dugald, *Account of the Life and Writings of William Robertson, D.D.* In Stewart ed. *The Works of William Robertson*. 12 vols. in-8^o. London: 1812.
- Volney, Constantin-François Chasseboeuf de, *Voyage en Égypte et en Syrie*. Ed. Jean Gaulmier. Paris: Mouton, 1959.
- _____ *Oeuvres*. Ed. Anne Deneys and Henry Deneys. 2 vols. Paris: Fayard, 1989.
- Voltaire, François-Marie Arouet de, *Oeuvres complètes*. Ed. Christiane Mervaud, Nicholas Cronk et al. Oxford: Voltaire Foundation, 1968- .
- _____ *Correspondence and related documents*. Ed. Theodore Besterman. Volumes LXXXV-CXXXV of *Oeuvres complètes*. Oxford: Voltaire Foundation, 1968-

77.

_____ *'Anecdotes sur le czar Pierre le Grand'; and, 'Histoire de l'empire de Russie sous Pierre le Grand'*. Ed. Ulla Kölving, Michel Mervaud et al. Volumes XLVI-XLVII of *Oeuvres complètes*. Oxford: Voltaire Foundation, 1999.

_____ *Histoire de Charles XII*. Ed. Gunnar von Proschwitz. Volume IV of *Oeuvres complètes*. Oxford: Voltaire Foundation, 1996.

_____ *Histoire du parlement de Paris*. Ed. John Renwick. Volume LXVIII of *Oeuvres complètes*. Oxford: Voltaire Foundation, 2005.

_____ *Oeuvres historiques*. Ed. René Pomeau. Paris: Éditions Gallimard, 1957.

_____ *Essai sur les mœurs et l'esprit des nations*. Ed. René Pomeau. 2 vols. Paris: 1963.

_____ *Essay sur l'Histoire Générale, et sur les Mœurs et l'Esprit des Nations, depuis Charlemagne*. 7 vols. in-8°. N.p.: 1756.

Warburton, William, *A Critical and Philosophical Enquiry into the Causes of Prodiges and Miracles, as related by Historians. With an Essay towards restoring a Method and Purity of History. In which, the Characters of the most celebrated Writers of every Age, and of the several Stages and Species of History, are occasionally criticized and explained*. London: 1727.

_____ *Julian. Or a Discourse concerning the Earthquake and Fiery Eruption, which defeated that Emperor's Attempt to rebuild the Temple at Jerusalem. In which the reality of a divine Interposition is shewn; the Objections to it are answered; and the nature of that Evidence which demands the assent of every reasonable man to a 'miraculous' fact, is considered and explained*. London: 1750.

_____ *The Divine Legation of Moses, demonstrated on the Principles of a religious Deist, from the Omission of the Doctrine of a Future State of Reward and Punishment in the Jewish Dispensation*. 2 vols. in-8°. London: 1738-41.

Whitaker, John, *The History of Manchester*. 2 vols. in-4^{to}. London: 1771-75.

_____ *Gibbon's 'History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire', in Vols. IV, V, and VI, reviewed*. London: 1791.

_____ *The Course of Hannibal over the Alps ascertained*. 2 vols. in-8°. London: 1794.

White, Joseph, *Sermons preached before the University of Oxford, in the year 1784, at the lecture founded by the Reverend John Bampton*. Oxford: 1784.

2. Secondary

- Ajello, R., Cortese, E., Piano Mortari, V., eds., *L'Età dei Lumi: Studi Storici sul Settecento Europeo in onore di Franco Venturi*. Naples: Jovene, 1985.
- Baker, Keith, 'A Script for a French Revolution: The Political Consciousness of the abbé Mably'. *Eighteenth-Century Studies*, 14 No. 3 (1981) 235-63.
- Barret-Kriegel, Blandine, *Les historiens et la monarchie*. 4 vols. Paris: PUF, 1988.
- Barrovecchio, Anne-Sophie, and Dagen, Jean, eds., *Voltaire et le Grand Siècle*. *SVEC* 2006:10.
- Benrekassa, Georges, 'France'. In Ferrone and Roche eds. *Le Monde des Lumières*, 369-91.
- Campbell, Peter, 'Voltaire et le parlement de Paris'. In Dagen and Barrovecchio eds., *Voltaire et le Grand Siècle*, 301-14.
- Champion, Justin. *The Pillars of Priestcraft Shaken: The Church of England and its Enemies 1660-1730*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992.
- Duchet, Michèle, *Diderot et l' 'Histoire des deux Indes', ou l'écriture fragmentaire*. Paris: A.-G. Nizet, 1978.
- *Anthropologie et histoire au siècle des lumières: Buffon, Voltaire, Rousseau, Helvétius, Diderot*. First published 1971; Paris: Flammarion, 1977.
- Dulac, Georges, 'Les modes d'intervention de Diderot en politique'. In France and Strugnell eds. *Diderot, les dernières années*, 121-39.
- Ferrone, Vincenzo, and Roche, Daniel, eds., *Le Monde des Lumières*. French translation, Paris: Fayard, 1999. First published in Italian as *L'Illuminismo. Dizionario Storico*. Rome and Madrid: Editori Laterza, 1997.
- Fontius, Martin, 'L' 'Histoire des deux Indes de Raynal vue par des Allemands'. *SVEC* 286 (1991) 155-87.
- Forbes, Duncan, *Hume's Philosophical Politics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975.
- France, Peter, and Strugnell, Anthony, *Diderot, les dernières années 1770-84*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1985.
- Gaulmier, Jean, *L'Idéologue Volney, 1757-1820: Contribution à l'Histoire de l'Orientalisme en France*. First published 1951; Paris and Geneva: Slatkine, 1980.

- Ghosh, Peter, 'Review of *William Robertson and the Expansion of Empire* by Stewart J. Brown'. *English Historical Review* 113, No. 453 (1998), 1005-1006.
- 'Gibbon's Dark Ages: Some Remarks on the Genesis of the *Decline and Fall*'. *Journal of Roman Studies* 73 (1983) 1-23.
- Goggi, Gianluigi, 'Quelques remarques sur la collaboration de Diderot à la première édition de l'*Histoire des deux Indes*'. *SVEC* 286 (1991) 17-51.
- Goldgar, Anne, *Impolite Learning: Conduct and Community in the Republic of Letters, 1680-1750*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995.
- Goodman, Dena, *The Republic of Letters: A Cultural History of the French Enlightenment*. New York: Cornell University Press, 1994.
- Gordon, Daniel, *Citizens without Sovereignty: Equality and Sociability in French Thought, 1670-1789*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994.
- Goulemot, Jean, *Adieu les philosophes. Que reste-t-il des Lumières?*. Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 2001.
- Israel, Jonathan I., *Radical Enlightenment: Philosophy and the Making of Modernity 1650-1750*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001.
- Kidd, Colin, *Subverting Scotland's Past: Scottish Whig Historians and the Creation of an Anglo-British Identity, 1689-c.1830*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993.
- Kölving, Ulla, and Mervaud, Christiane, eds., *Voltaire et ses combats*. 2 vols. Oxford: Voltaire Foundation, 1997.
- Lauriol, Claude, 'Voltaire vu par La Beaumelle'. In Kölving and Mervaud eds. *Voltaire et ses combats*, II, 773-84.
- Leigh, John, *Voltaire: a sense of history*. *SVEC* 2004:05.
- O'Brien, Karen, *Narratives of Enlightenment: Cosmopolitan History from Voltaire to Gibbon*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997.
- Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004-2005. <http://www.oxforddnb.com>.
- Pocock, J.G.A., *Barbarism and Religion*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999- ;
Barbarism and Religion Volume One: The Enlightenments of Edward Gibbon, 1737-1764. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999;
Barbarism and Religion Volume Two: Narratives of Civil Government. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999;
Barbarism and Religion Volume Three: The First Decline and Fall. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003.

- _____ 'Grande-Bretagne'. In Ferrone and Roche eds. *Le Monde des Lumières*, 467-84.
- _____ 'Clergy and Commerce. The Conservative Enlightenment in England'. In Ajello, Cortese, Piano Mortari eds. *L'Età dei Lumi*, I, 524-62.
- Phillips, Mark Salber, *Society and Sentiment: Genres of Historical Writing in Britain, 1740-1820*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000.
- Phillipson, Nicholas, 'The Scottish Enlightenment'. In Porter and Teich eds. *The Enlightenment in National Context*, 19-40.
- Porter, Roy, and Teich, Mikuláš, eds., *The Enlightenment in National Context*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981.
- Porter, Roy, 'The Enlightenment in England'. In Porter and Teich eds. *The Enlightenment in National Context*, 1-18.
- Riskin, Jessica, *Science in the Age of Sensibility: The Sentimental Empiricists of the French Enlightenment*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002.
- Robertson, John, *The Case for the Enlightenment: Scotland and Naples 1680-1760*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005.
- Venturi, Franco, *Utopia and Reform in the Enlightenment*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1971.
- Womersley, David, *Gibbon and the 'Watchmen of the Holy City': The Historian and his Reputation 1776-1815*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002.
- _____ *The Transformation of 'The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire'*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988.
- Wright, Johnson Kent, *A Classical Republican in Eighteenth-Century France: The Political Thought of Mably*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997.
- Young, Brian, *Religion and Enlightenment in Eighteenth-Century England: Theological Debate from Locke to Burke*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998.