

## Introduction

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### “The More Permanent and Peaceful Scenes of Social Life”

ROBERT HENRY’S *History of Great Britain from the Invasion by the Romans under Julius Caesar* (1771–93) has never enjoyed the reputation of David Hume’s more polished *History* and now is all but forgotten. Yet in many ways this large work, as laborious in its researches as it was inventive in its narrative arrangements, is more revealing of the tensions that shaped eighteenth-century historiography. Henry (1713–1790), a prominent minister of the Church of Scotland, brought out the first edition at his own expense, but the eventual success of the history allowed him to sell the rights for a considerable sum. After his death, the history was republished with a continuation by James Petit Andrews; there was also a French translation, and even a Victorian revision.<sup>1</sup>

From the start, the distinctive feature and selling point of this history was the “new plan” on which it was written. Henry’s self-imposed program required him to compose seven simultaneous narratives for each of the periods his history recounted:

Each book begins and ends at some remarkable revolution, and contains the history and delineation of the first of these revolutions and of the intervening period. Every one of these ten books [i.e. the successive chronological epochs of his history] is uniformly divided into seven chapters, which do not carry on the thread of the history one after another, as in other works of this kind; but all the seven chapters of the same book begin at the same point of time, run parallel to one another, and end together; each chapter presenting the reader with the history of one particular object. (xxxi)

Each of the seven parallel narratives pursued its own special theme. As outlined in the preface, these are (1) civil and military history; (2) ecclesiastical history and the history of religion; (3) history of our constitution, governments, laws, and courts; (4) history of learning, of learned men, and of the chief seminaries of learning; (5) arts, useful and ornamental; (6) history of commerce, and of prices and commodities; (7) manners, virtues, vices, remarkable customs, language, dress, diet, and diversions.

<sup>1</sup> Robert Henry, *The History of Great Britain, From the First invasion of it by the Romans under Julius Caesar. Written On A New Plan*, 6th ed. (London, 1823). Subsequent citations appear in the text. Henry’s sixth volume, edited by Laing, appeared posthumously with a “Life” of the

Henry's arrangement was governed by two strong, but contradictory impulses. On the one hand, his work aimed to expand the sphere of historical understanding to incorporate a range of social activities well beyond the limits of traditional historiography as written on humanist lines. On the other, Henry wanted as far as possible to save the appearances of linear narrative, which was the identifying marker of that earlier, still authoritative tradition. For this reason, he promised to pursue each of his separate narratives in ways that fully respected and even improved upon the traditional demand for perspicuousness in narrative order—all the while juxtaposing these narratives in a fashion that demonstrates the utter inadequacy of the humanist framework.

Henry's plan for seven simultaneous narratives represented an ingenious experiment with narrative conventions designed to solve the problems brought on by an expanded definition of history's object of study. Where once it had been sufficient to pursue a narrowly defined narrative of public action, history now needed to comprehend a whole range of experiences that are best defined as social. This redrawing of boundaries on so much wider a scale certainly did not mean the elimination of political-military history, and in the most literal sense, political narrative retained its priority. But in this enlarged context, there was an inevitable displacement of the older narrative within the broadly drawn horizons of a new history that took society, not politics, as its definition. As a result, political and military events, once the whole frame of humanist historiography, now figured as simply one theme in a multiplicity of plots.

Henry joined a chorus of voices in the second half of the century who celebrated the contemporary expansion of the horizons of historical study. By this plan, he wrote, "the sphere of history will be very much enlarged" (xxxiii) and many useful and entertaining subjects, hitherto excluded, will be added. Most historians, he explained, have restricted themselves to detailing civil, military, and ecclesiastical histories. A few have included dissertations on the constitution, government, or law; but none had even pretended to give "any thing like a history of learning, arts, commerce, and manners" (xxxiv). Are these subjects, he asked rhetorically, unworthy to be included in the history of a country where learning, arts, and commerce flourish? Should history be written

without ever attending to their conduct and condition, in the more permanent and peaceful scenes of social life? Are we now in possession of prodigious stores of natural, moral, and religious knowledge; of a vast variety of elegant and useful arts; of an almost unbounded trade, which pours the productions of every climate at our feet, to all which our forefathers were once strangers? And have we no curiosity to know, at what time, by what degrees, and by whose means, we have been enriched with these treasures of learning, arts, and commerce? (xxxv)

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author. The French translation by Rowland and Cantwell appeared in 1789–96. Andrews' continuation appeared in 1794, with successive expansions and editions in 1796 and 1806.

As these comments indicate, Henry addressed his enlargement of history's social vision to the needs of present-day audiences in a great commercial and polite nation. And as an author who had incurred risks that were financial as well as literary, he might well express a hope that his attempt to comprehend "these important objects within the bounds of history, will be received by the Public with some degree of favor" (xxxv). He says nothing, however, that explicitly connects the expanded scope of his history to another salient feature of his work, its insistence on utmost symmetry in its narrative arrangements. It is left to us as readers to draw the conclusion that this rigorousness of outline indexes the need to bring an extra measure of discipline to a history written on this enlarged basis.

Henry promised to pursue his program in all possible strictness, so that within its chronological limits each of the ten books would be complete in itself, while at the same time being a "perfect pattern and model" of the whole work.

To render this plan still more perfectly regular and uniform in all its parts, the author has disposed the materials of all the chapters of the same number, in all the ten books, in the same order, as far as the subject treated of in these chapters would permit. For example: The arts, which are the subject of the fifth chapter of every book, are disposed one after another in the same order of succession, in all the fifth chapters throughout the whole work. (xxxii–xxxiii)

The rigid symmetries of this arrangement, Henry acknowledged with some pride, meant putting himself under an obligation to examine every part of his subject with the same "constant anxious attention" (xxxix). In truth, as he later remarked to Walpole, the demands of such an undertaking were beyond any individual historian.<sup>2</sup> Yet remarkably, Henry also saw that this degree of self-discipline in the writer opened a kind of freedom for his readers. For them, it meant the possibility of following their own interests, choosing those "particular subjects" that seemed "most useful and agreeable in themselves, or most suitable to their respective ways of life" (xxxvii).

Jane Austen caught the sense of this invitation and responded with her own characteristic spirit. "I am now laying in a stock of intelligence to pour out on you as *my* share of Conversation," she told a friend, announcing that she was now reading Henry's *History*, "which I will repeat to you in any manner you may prefer, either in a loose, disultary, unconnected strain, or dividing the

<sup>2</sup> Robert Henry to Horace Walpole, March 3, 1783, *The Yale Edition of Horace Walpole's Correspondence*, ed. W. S. Lewis et al., 48 vols. (New Haven: Yale UP, 1952), 15:169. Henry pronounced his own plan "too bold and too extensive, I believe, for any one man." Walpole praised Henry's work, especially its "plan": "You have helped us, Sir, to read every period of our story with a map of the understandings of each age in our hands; and the plan of your work is so new and so just, that whencesoever you took materials, the design, arrangement and utility can be claimed by no man" (H. Walpole to R. Henry, March 16, 1782, *Correspondence*, 42:7).

recital as the Historian divides it himself, into seven parts . . . so that for every evening of the week there will be a different subject.”<sup>3</sup> Austen counted off each branch of Henry’s sevenfold narrative, remarking, “The Friday’s lot, Commerce, Coin and Shipping, You will find the least entertaining, but the next Eveng:’s portion [i.e. manners] will make amends.”

If individual readers had the freedom to single out themes most appropriate to their private occupations, Henry clearly expected that the work as a whole would reflect the broad interests of the contemporary British public. And in a country rich in trade, in arts, and in knowledge, what could be more “natural, laudable, and useful” than the enlarged curiosity about the past. The historical horizon, in short, would stretch to match contemporary experience, incorporating for the first time “the more permanent and peaceful scenes of social life.” At the same time, Henry’s comments indicate that he also expected his readers’ curiosity to be enlarged by a corresponding recognition that the social experiences of earlier generations differed substantially from many features of present-day life—“to all of which our forefathers were once strangers.” Thus, in Henry’s view, contemporary interest in the economy and the arts was joined to an associated awareness of a kind of historical distance that separated current readers from social life in the past. Such an audience would want something more than a narrative of statecraft because it was eager to understand how the modes of contemporary social life first sprang into being.

Henry’s remarks about his need to address his audience in terms of contemporary social realities make explicit a process of historical rewriting that we can take as axiomatic. Every society, it is clear, rewrites its history in ways that allow it to recognize itself in the mirror of its own past. But the rigidities of Henry’s “new plan” also remind us that there is a historiographical corollary to Marx’s dictum that while we make history, we do not make it under conditions of our own choosing. Not simply the outline of events, but in some ways even more compellingly the instruments of historical thought and representation are an inheritance of earlier social needs. In short, Henry and his audience shared a historical language and a set of narrative conventions that, to use the jargon of hermeneutics, were pregiven. Even the most thoroughgoing radicalism could not have changed the fundamentals beyond recognition, but for Robert Henry, a sober-minded churchman with a full printing of his book to sell, no innovation would be desirable that did not also reaffirm the tradition.

I will return to Henry’s *History* in a later chapter in the context of eighteenth-century debates over linearity in historical composition and other experiments with narrative form. I have introduced it now because no other work I know of exhibits so plainly the full range of issues that constituted the problem of historical narrative in this period, especially the conjunction of questions of

<sup>3</sup> Jane Austen to Martha Lloyd, November 13, 1800, *Jane Austen’s Letters*, ed. Deirdre Le Faye, 3d ed. (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1995), 59.

narrative structure with those of audience and social understanding. Much of this study will be preoccupied with formalist questions of the kind raised by Henry's experiment; and I will confess that these questions are made all the more enjoyable to explore because they contradict the received wisdom that sees historical writing in this period as anything but innovative, reserving that honor for that favored child of eighteenth-century literary studies, the novel, or to what are thought of as the "novelistic" practices of Romantic historians, which amounts to much the same thing.

But equally, Henry's *History* points to the ways in which consideration of narrative form opens out onto larger issues that are social and historical. For Robert Henry, experiment with narrative was hardly an end in itself. The impetus sprang from his desire to overcome the inadequacy of the inherited instruments of historical writing when measured by the needs and questions of the contemporary audience. His effort to broaden the historical horizon signals his recognition that history had to participate in the reconceptualization of social knowledge that was so pervasive a feature of contemporary thought.

In this sense, the challenges to historical writing were not so different from those that faced political economy, moral philosophy, or even the novel. What did set history apart from most other literatures, however, was the extent to which this reconceptualization complicated the central conventions of the genre, shaped as they had been for so long by an ancient and authoritative tradition of political narrative. For no other literature of social description, in short, was the formal problem of narrative so significant to the continued identity of the genre itself.

It needs to be said that the fundamental elements of the tension I have pointed to in historical composition had been present in British society for a very long time. Thus there is no question of a sudden revolution in social outlook producing a wholly new situation for historical writing. Since at least the middle of the seventeenth century, Britain had not only been a commercial society, but also one in which there was an increasing recognition that commercial interests constituted a new focus for political understanding, as well as for state action.<sup>4</sup> Nor was the course of intellectual change any more abrupt if we turn our attention from social to sentimental themes, to introduce a shorthand that will be useful in subsequent discussion. Exploration of inward and everyday experience was a growing preoccupation of postrevolutionary Britain, hence an important part of the interest that a historian like Robert Henry might expect to encounter in his readership.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>4</sup> On the economic thought of the earlier period, see for instance Joyce Oldham Appleby, *Economic Thought and Ideology in Seventeenth-Century England* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1978).

<sup>5</sup> As we have already seen in Austen's comments, interest in the history of manners was a prime element in the appreciation of Henry's work. See, for example, the appreciative comments of Joseph Berington, a Catholic medievalist of decidedly sentimental interests, who in discussing his own appendix on manners, arts, and learning, calls Henry's work "far the most valuable compi-

My purpose, however, is not to fix an exact moment when new ideas of economy or new understandings of personality first appeared on the horizon of historical writing. It is enough to know that the middle of the eighteenth century represented a moment of particular richness for the central genres that expressed what I have called the social and sentimental interests of this culture. Hume's economic essays in *Political Discourses* (1752) were the first classics of Scottish political economy, followed by Smith's *Wealth of Nations* (1776). Philosophical history came into its own with the appearance of Hume's *History of England*, the first two volumes of which were published in 1754 and 1757, and with Voltaire's *Essai sur les mœurs* (1756), while for conjectural history, the equivalent milestones were Montesquieu's *De L'Esprit des lois* (1748), Ferguson's *Essay on the History of Civil Society* (1767), and Kames's *Sketches of the History of Man* (1774). The midcentury was equally engaged in exploring the sentiments. Richardson's *Clarissa; or the History of a Young Lady* (1748–49) and *Sir Charles Grandison* (1753–54) are obvious landmarks, as is Adam Smith's *Theory of Moral Sentiments* (1st ed. 1759). And yet—crucially for the situation of historical narratives—the prestige of these works was not accompanied by a movement to jettison classical models of historical narrative. On the contrary, in many ways the polite taste of the eighteenth century heightened the requirement for elegant composition. If this no longer meant the strictest adherence to conventions that were purely classical, it continued to entail that the best productions of modern letters would be held up to standards still deeply imbued with classical ideals, including the linearity and perspicuity that Henry strained so hard to achieve.

My point, then, is not that the tensions we see manifested in Henry's *History* are novel, but that they were deeply characteristic of the literary and philosophical culture of this period. Moreover, the fertility of this period in a variety of genres of historical writing suggests that these tensions may also be an important clue to its productivity. In particular, we need to consider the way in which Henry's sense of having successfully faced a distinctive set of challenges operated not only to stimulate innovation but also to confer a sense of concrete and indisputable progress. Nothing else, I believe, can so fully explain that sense of collective achievement that attaches to eighteenth-century pronouncements on historiography. When Hume asserted that "this is the historical age and this the historical nation," he surely had such accomplishments in mind.<sup>6</sup>

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lation we possess." *The History of the Reign of Henry the Second* (Birmingham, 1790), xxvii. Berington is discussed further in chapter 5.

<sup>6</sup> Hume wrote a favorable review of Henry's *History* intended for the *Edinburgh Magazine and Review*; but it was suppressed by the editor, Gilbert Stuart, who was hostile to Henry. The text of the review is published in David F. Norton and Richard Popkin, eds., *David Hume: Philosophical Historian* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1965), 377–88.

## Defining a New Perspective

Unfortunately, there is not much in recent historiographical study that offers immediate help with the problems of narrative suggested by works like Henry's. British historiography in the eighteenth century has generally been studied in terms of the lives and opinions of a narrow canon of great authors: Hume and Gibbon, principally, but sometimes expanded to take in Robertson or Ferguson. The range of questions, too, has often been equally narrow. On the one hand, students of the classical tradition, preoccupied with the evolution of scholarly methods, have studied eighteenth-century historians primarily in terms of their contribution to a metanarrative of disciplinary development.<sup>7</sup> On the other, intellectual historians engaged in tracing the fortunes of political or philosophical ideas have read historical texts in terms of their doctrinal commitments. Neither approach has a stake in exploring narratological issues, nor, speaking more generally, much interest in examining the particular textual features that distinguish historical writing as a body of literature.

From the perspective of narrative, Hayden White's broad theoretical challenge to traditional scholarship seems more hopeful. Ironically, however, White's theorization of the literary character of historical texts built on prevailing modes of literary study that were themselves ahistorical; thus the impulses that fed the theoretical boldness of *Metahistory* also worked against its claim to be considered as a history of historical writing.<sup>8</sup> In practice, White's analyses prove to have much less to do with the "narrative prose discourses" that histories "most manifestly are" than his opening program indicates.<sup>9</sup> Rather his focus is on the "poetic act" by which the historian "prefigures" the historical field. The accompanying emphasis on "deep structure" shifts attention from what is most manifest in historical narratives to what is often most hidden, even from the historian himself. For this reason White's analysis turns to philosophers of history, arguing that there is no essential difference between the

<sup>7</sup> Levine, *Battle of the Books*; and Arnaldo Momigliano, *Studies in Historiography* (London: Weidenfeld, 1966). On some problems in Momigliano's conception of disciplinary progress in this period, see Phillips, "Reconsiderations on History and Antiquarianism: Arnaldo Momigliano and the Historiography of Eighteenth-Century Britain," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 58 (1996): 297–316.

<sup>8</sup> For a contrary view, see Frank Ankersmit, "Bibliographical Essay," in Ankersmit and Kellner, *New Philosophy of History*. Ankersmit argues that in White's hands historical theory lost its "abstract, aprioristic character" and became instead "a new and highly sophisticated form of historiography (i.e., the history of historical writing)" (281). I have outlined my unease with White's methods at greater length in "Historiography and Genre: A More Modest Proposal," *Storia della storiografia/Histoire de l'historiographie* 24 (1993): 119–32.

<sup>9</sup> "In this theory," he stated flatly in the preface, "I treat the historical work as what it most manifestly is: a verbal structure in the form of a narrative prose discourse" (White, *Metahistory*, ix).

works of the great historians and their counterparts in philosophy. In fact, for White's purposes, the "deep structures" of historical thought are actually clearer in nonhistoriographical texts than in the histories themselves.<sup>10</sup> The result is that *Metahistory* restricts itself to a tiny canon of philosophically elite "masterworks" and studiously ignores all other arts and literatures, even those most resembling history as "narrative prose discourses."<sup>11</sup>

In contrast to these approaches, this book shifts the focus away from the individual text to a concern with the features that for eighteenth-century readers distinguished history as a genre—or, more precisely, a group of overlapping and related genres. Thus I would begin by recognizing that history no more constituted a single, unified genre than did the novel or the drama.<sup>12</sup> And since genres cannot be studied isochronically or in isolation, my real concern is the development of the broader system of genres in which all historiographical texts participated. In short, my interest is not (to quote White again) so much in the individual text as an "icon" of the past, as in the ways in which historical understanding structured and was in turn structured by a historically dynamic literary system.

I do not mean to downplay the appreciation of individual histories, which constitutes much of the pleasure of historiographical study. But in reading individual narratives, "masterworks" or otherwise, I am especially interested in the articulating signals by which authors reached out to unseen readers and sought to position their writings in relation to the conventions of genre. Powerful works, of course, might revise or combine existing conventions or even initiate new genres and subgenres. But unlike "deep structures" that seem to enjoy a transhistorical life, genres are historical formations that mediate the communication of readers and writers. For this reason, the marks of genre, though certainly susceptible to complex interpretation, had to lie within the grasp of the "ordinary" competent reader, as he or she was shaped by the literary conventions of the day.<sup>13</sup>

For this reason, genre-study presumes a reader who is historically situated, not the universal reader presupposed by grand taxonomies like those presented in *Metahistory*. We need, in fact, to join in with the eighteenth-century writer,

<sup>10</sup> "What remains implicit in the historians is simply brought to the surface and systematically defended in the works of the great philosophers of history" (ibid., xi).

<sup>11</sup> In a history of the historical imagination in nineteenth-century Europe, practically no attention is given to the novel, to the Gothic revival in architecture, to history painting, to the influence of archeology or geology, or to many other topics of compelling interest. See Raphael Samuel's exasperated outburst in his recent *Theatres of Memory* (Verso: London, 1994), 41–42.

<sup>12</sup> It is not always easy to make this plural sense explicit; "the genres of historical writing" makes too awkward a phrase to repeat very often. I would like, however, to be understood as referring to history in this more inclusive way.

<sup>13</sup> My view of genre as a historical formation (and by implication as an index to changes in literary history) has been much influenced by Alastair Fowler, *Kinds of Literature: An Introduction to the Theory of Genres and Modes* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1982); and Ralph Cohen, "History and



who, in the conditions of an expanded and anonymous book market, was also engaged in an effort to imagine the audience for whose attention he or she competed.<sup>14</sup> In this respect, we will be helped by the notable self-consciousness characteristic of this moment in the history of authorship, when the relationship of writer and reader often betrays uneasiness and writers seem to need to make sure that someone is still listening. Hence the recurring apologies for venturing into publication, the convention of anonymous publication, the continued importance of dedications, though with new meanings, and the recurrent invocation of readers through various forms of addresses in advertisements, prefaces, and textual interruptions. Much of this apparent anxiety disappeared in the following century, or became bad manners to display, presumably because both sides were more used to the idea that writers were engaged in a commerce of ideas with unknown others, that there was a market for words, and that ideas had become a kind of property.<sup>15</sup>

Examining these sorts of gestures will not, with some exceptions, give a picture of the responses of actual readers, for which evidence must be sought elsewhere. But it will point to what we might call the historically specific ideal reader. Such a figure, albeit still an ideal type, has to be grounded in the reading habits of this time. It matters a good deal, for example, that the idea of a female readership for history became a point of issue in just this period. (See chapter 4.) It is important, too, not to imagine this reader in too restrictive a literary context; the audience for history did not confine itself to reading histories alone. For this reason, I am particularly interested in understanding how the cluster of genres most closely associated with historiography was constituted in the eighteenth century and how it changed over time to admit new genres or to acknowledge the power of other, competitive literatures.

Genre, of course, is not a self-contained system. It is a way of mediating and ordering experience, literary and extraliterary. An investigation of eighteenth-century historical writing must obviously ask what subjects eighteenth-century writers and their audiences considered appropriate to historical representation, and it must be alert to changes in the focus of historical interests. Conversely, signals of tension and competition within the cluster of historiographical and

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Genre," *New Literary History* 17 (1986): 203–18. On problems of literary classification more widely conceived, see also Claudio Guillen, *Literature as System* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1971).

<sup>14</sup> The best guide to the complex of issues connecting eighteenth-century prose genres and audience is Hunter's *Before Novels*, a book that has helped shape a good deal of my approach here. .

<sup>15</sup> Recent scholarship has given us a great deal better sense of the expansion of the book market and its consequences for writing in many genres. See, among others, James Raven, *Judging New Wealth: Popular Publishing and Responses to Commerce in England, 1759–1800* (New York: Oxford UP, 1992); Mark Rose, *Authors and Owners: The Invention of Copyright* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1993); Trevor Ross, "Copyright and the Invention of Tradition," *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 26 (1992): 1–27; and Cheryl Turner, *Living by the Pen: Women Writers in the Eighteenth Century* (London: Routledge, 1992).

parahistoriographical genres can be an important clue to the ways in which historical experience was understood, and especially to the tensions that arose when new areas of experience were being annexed to the traditional competencies of historical narrative. For a modern historian, one of the most intriguing aspects to be revealed by this kind of genre-study may be what it can tell us about how an ancient literary “kind” subtly and often silently transformed itself to remain relevant to the needs and interests of ever-new audiences.<sup>16</sup>

In short, the writer’s need to imagine and create readership links the various genres that competed for the contemporary audience to a wider literary system. For my study it also stands as the point of connection between its formalist concerns and a broader intellectual history concerned with revisions in the contemporary framework of social understanding. Much of this book details the ways in which the formal repertory of historical representation responded to new images of the social world, but it is important to stress the reciprocities involved in this process. The genres of historical writing were not simply receiving an imprint of a problem articulated elsewhere. Rather, historical writers must be understood as actively engaged in revising the social questions that complicated their own formal activity.

### Continuities and Reframing

Historians as well as students of other literatures often proceed on the assumption that the period around 1790 marked a sharp break in the history and literature of western Europe. There are advantages, however, to adopting a vantage point that permits us to discern enduring features in literatures so often divided into separate epochs. To a surprising extent, we have continued to see eighteenth-century historical concerns through nineteenth-century eyes, often uncritically accepting the complaints of early-nineteenth-century writers, without taking note of their need to distance themselves from their fathers and grandfathers. Some of the thinnest passages in Collingwood’s *Idea of History*, for example, as well as in White’s *Metahistory*, can be cited as evidence of this kind of prejudice—one that can only be corrected if we try to hold the writings of both periods at the same critical distance. (See chapter 2.)

A related advantage of the longer view is the opportunity it affords to examine the assumption of continuity itself. If continuities are to be found across this long and eventful period, these must have been continually reinscribed as

<sup>16</sup> In this context, it is worth considering the contrasting fates of history and epic. With hindsight, it is too easy simply to assume that history would inevitably reshape itself as a modern discipline, while traditional epic became more or less impossible to write. On epic and the mock-heroic, see Claude Rawson *Satire and Sentiment, 1660–1830* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1994).

well as subtly reshaped. In fact, one of the prime tasks that challenges a more historical understanding of historiography is an investigation of the processes of reassertion and adaptation that enabled (and still enable) historians simultaneously to claim the prestige of an ancient art and the authority of a modern discipline.

Key to the way in which lines of continuity are asserted and controlled is the creation of authoritative textual canons, a process little studied for historiography. It is evident that eighteenth-century Britain not only saw a continuing revaluation of ancient authors, but also the establishment of a modern national canon. In the first part of the eighteenth century it is common to find worried reference to England's weakness in historical writing, but by the later decades of the century a rapidly formed consensus confidently declared that Hume, Robertson, and Gibbon had removed this stigma.<sup>17</sup> We need both to take note of the sources of the earlier unease about English historiography and to explore the grounds of the growing conviction that Britain now possessed a modern historical literature that had outstripped its French and Italian rivals.

Faced with the baffling combinations of persistence and movement that constitute the real challenge of intellectual history, we need more differentiated conceptions of change than those we usually work with—especially the ideas of “origin,” “discovery,” and “invention” that are still the intellectual historian's stock in trade. As metaphors for historical change, these notions focus attention on the enunciation of new truths: they assume, in other words, the autonomy of the statement and hence a world of positive knowledge. It is better, I believe, to begin with a figure that takes the situatedness of understanding as its point of departure. For this reason, I prefer to think in terms of “reframings” rather than inventions.

The idea of reframing suggests that statements identical in form may bear very different weights or meanings, depending on the context of questioning. For this reason, I would argue that the primary way in which the movement of ideas takes place is not through the formulation of ideas that are unambiguously novel, but through a repositioning that responds to changing contexts and needs. Reconfigurations of this kind may well be the result of a desire to accommodate new discoveries (e.g. the expanded geographical and ethnographical knowledge of the eighteenth century), but at a more profound level they are also a reflection of the hermeneutics of historical interpretation as it shapes our conversation with history and tradition. In the process, familiar but subordinated notions may acquire a new centrality, thereby taking on new meaning and seriousness in relation to other concerns. (The centrality of “manners and customs” in eighteenth-century thought, discussed in chapter 5, is a

<sup>17</sup> On the English sense of inferiority in historical writing, see Hicks, *Neoclassical History* and chapter 1 below.

prime example.) Equally, older ideas may slip to the side, though without in any real sense disappearing. This has frequently been the fate of prestigious literary genres, for example, as they are relegated within the literary system to places of prestige that no longer hold responsibility.

### Classical Eloquence and a Postclassical Subject

The questions I want to raise concern the ways in which history was reframed by eighteenth-century writers working in a variety of related genres. No simple answer is possible since this reframing involved shifts in the underlying conception of the object of historical study as well as in the modes of representation and tools of analysis. As a start, let us examine two contrasting characterizations of history's purposes and concerns, each of which presents itself as the common sense of the age. The obvious differences that emerge have to do with the way in which the initial question is phrased.

If we approach eighteenth-century sources seeking an answer to the question, "What is the purpose of History"—especially if the context is literary or one that indicates the need for abstract definition—the answer is likely to run along the following lines:

As it is the office of an Orator to persuade, it is that of an Historian to record truth for the instruction of mankind. This is the proper object and end of history, from which may be deduced many of the laws relating to it. . . . As the primary end of History is to record Truth, Impartiality, Fidelity, and Accuracy, are the fundamental qualities of an Historian.<sup>18</sup>

This passage opens Hugh Blair's description of historical composition, a discussion undertaken as part of a larger, formal discussion of belles lettres as a whole. In the more detailed description that follows, Blair will go on to modify the classical outline in a number of important ways (see chapter 1), but the gravity of this initial pronouncement well represents his rather traditional sense of history's high moral purpose and decorum.

If, however, we change the angle of questioning by placing under discussion a text that clearly belongs to a different part of this period's historical interests, we get a very different idea of the consensus of the age. Here is the *Monthly Review* on Sir John Sinclair's *History of the Public Revenue* (2d ed. 1790):

History, till of late, was chiefly employed in the recital of warlike transactions. . . . The *people* were not known; the circumstances that affected *their* domestic prosperity

<sup>18</sup> Hugh Blair, *Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles Lettres*, ed. H. F. Harding (London, 1783; rpt., Carbondale: U of Southern Illinois P, 1965), 259–60. Subsequent references will be given in the text.

and happiness were entirely overlooked; and the records of many ages might have been perused without obtaining the least information concerning any fact that led to a knowledge of the internal economy of the state, or the private situation of individuals.

Thanks, however, to the more enlightened spirit of modern times, things are much altered in this respect. Readers now expect to find, not only the *warlike* exploits, but the *civil* transactions, of princes, recorded in the historic volume. The *people* claim their share of attention; the progress of arts is considered as an object of importance; industry, agriculture, manufactures, commerce, manners, population, and personal security, are now viewed as objects that deserve a particular degree of investigation. Finance is become a science, and *begins* to be studied as an object of primary importance, by those who aspire to dignified offices in the state.<sup>19</sup>

The easiest way to reconcile these two views of historical writing would be to accede to the reviewer's assertion that the second framework had simply succeeded the first. But, as we will see in examining Adam Smith's views on historical narrative, the wide social understanding called for by the *Monthly* is not necessarily incompatible with Blair's literary conservatism. (See chapter 3.) Accepting the idea that both outlooks are, in fact, characteristic expressions of this time involves some complications, but it surely offers a more rounded understanding of the expectations that eighteenth-century audiences brought to their historical reading.

This juxtaposition of eighteenth-century views makes the obvious point that frameworks of historical understanding depended to a considerable extent on the nature of the occasion that called for such a framework to be articulated. For readers coming to such texts two centuries later, this means that a great deal will depend on the genres that we study and the questions that guide our research. It is important to recognize, too, that although significant aspects of the challenge to traditional practices expressed by the *Monthly* can be traced right across the spectrum of historiographical genres, this challenge is often registered most distinctly in the "minor" genres. That is, it is frequently on the margins of formal historiography, not at its more prestigious and conservative center, that we find the clearest clues to the new demands and interests that operate in modified ways right across the cluster. By the same token, the literary conservatism for which Blair speaks must also be taken as exerting its influence across this whole spectrum, including those genres like biography or the novel that take history as a countergenre against which to define their own audience and identity.

The most easily identifiable reason for the eighteenth century's reframing of historical narrative came from the self-evident power of commerce in contemporary Britain. As Robert Henry put it, "No apology is necessary for introducing the history of Commerce into the history of Britain, which hath derived

<sup>19</sup> *Monthly Review*, 2d ser., vol. 3 (1790): 93–94 (henceforth *MR*).

so many advantages from that source.”<sup>20</sup> Behind this unapologetic apology we hear the echo of a deeper difficulty. This was a distinctively modern subject, since commerce had no place in classical definitions of politics and history. As Hume pointed out in the *Essays*, even the Italians, who pioneered the modern study of politics, had barely taken trade into account, though it had since become a preeminent concern for all governments (see chapter 1). Nor was this a casual exclusion; classical historiography, as well as its early modern humanist revival, was predicated on a sharply drawn separation between public and private concerns. Commerce—which we now see as a principal agent in blurring the division between private and public and creating the new form of commonality that Hannah Arendt calls “the social”—had no place in historical narrative because it had no legitimate place in the pursuit of the *vita activa*.<sup>21</sup>

Despite the continued prestige of classical literary models, this exclusion of commerce could not survive the conditions of writing in a modern commercial nation. At stake was the self-recognition of a society keenly aware of how much it owed to the power of trade. Inherited traditions of historical narrative needed to be reshaped so that the political class of a commercial empire could examine and celebrate a history recognizably their own. The only real alternative was that some of the central functions of historical narrative might be taken over by other genres less tied to ancient prescriptions—and, in part, of course, this did indeed occur. Yet to abandon historical writing for more modern genres might mean losing the sense of dignity and consequence that came with incorporating oneself into history’s ancient lineage. The larger outcome, therefore, was the incorporation of some aspects of classical tradition into a new, postclassical definition of the nature and subject of historical study.

The power of commerce, however, only gives us the beginnings of the eighteenth century’s groping toward a new definition of its historical interests. A much wider spectrum of subjects is implied when the *Monthly* reviewer speaks, for example, of the need for “knowledge of the internal economy of the state, or the private situation of individuals.” As is so often the case, it is easiest to say what was displaced: gone, certainly, was the old restriction of history to statecraft and military maneuver—and with it an easy accommodation to the clarity and linearity of classical ideals of narrative. In its place stood a much wider, but less easily defined set of concerns for which contemporaries did not really have a name, though *philosophical history* was a useful term for designating the literary form that did its best to encompass all the parts of this expanded subject. As the philosophical histories of Hume, Robertson, and others attest, the “matter” that history now needed to “imitate” (to adopt the

<sup>20</sup> Henry also stressed that, given the lack of “genuine authentic materials,” this was a history that would be difficult to write for many periods of British history (*History of Great Britain*, 6:255).

<sup>21</sup> Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1958).

terms of Aristotle's *Poetics*) had enlarged itself enormously. It incorporated not only commerce and navigation, but the history of literature, of the arts and sciences, of manners and customs, even of opinion and sentiment. It needed to consider the experiences of women as well as of men, of "rude nations" living without the institution of property, as well as of those of commercial societies. But this diversity of subject matter was only a part of the problem; a further challenge was added by the belief that to write history at its highest level would mean being able to describe the underlying connectedness of all of these different aspects of life in the past, each of which was acquiring a literature of its own.

The simple, but fundamental point is that in light of this enlargement of the boundaries of the historical, it was increasingly hard to think of history as exclusively concerned with the narrative of political action. The consequence was not, of course, a loss of interest in politics as such, which continued to occupy a large (though no longer exclusive) place in most forms of historical writing, especially in its most prestigious genres. But Montesquieu, Hume, Smith, Ferguson, Millar, and others made it clear that the possibilities of political action were shaped in a hundred ways by the often invisible movements of economy, custom, or opinion. Considered in relationship to the social framework argued for by these writers, politics as it had been conceived by classical histories—the *vita activa* as a narrative subject—could no longer be thought of as an autonomous field of activity. To an alert eighteenth-century reader, its traditional terms had become superficial, if not unintelligible.

This realization stands behind the repeated observation that Greek and Roman historians failed to concern themselves with much that modern readers would like to know about the conditions of life in the ancient world.<sup>22</sup> Of course, the eloquence of classical narratives was still much admired, and this admiration continued to be linked to the notion that history serves as a literature of moral instruction. But the humanist conviction that this ethical content also amounted to an effective political analysis could hardly stand up when history could no longer define its terms as exclusively concerned with either males or public actions. Indeed, as a definition of history's subject matter, "action" itself would need to give way to more inclusive categories of experience.

The challenges posed by this expanded subject were severe, and they still confront historians two centuries later. But for a culture that remained so close to its classical inheritance, the fact that history confronted a task that seemed largely unknown to the ancients also had a liberating effect. Historians, like

<sup>22</sup> See for example Blair's remarks on the insufficiency of the ancient historians: "From the Greek historians, we are able to form but an imperfect notion, of the strength, the wealth, and the revenues of the different Grecian states; of the causes of several of those revolutions that happened in their government; or of their separate connections and interfering interests" (*Lectures on Rhetoric*, 269).

other writers, felt the “burden of the past” that eighteenth-century literatures inherited with their classicism.<sup>23</sup> Indeed, the problem of belatedness was particularly powerful for British historiography, which suffered not only by comparison to the great histories of the ancient world, but also (as already mentioned) to the modern classics of Italy and France. (See chapter 1.) The construction of a new, definitively postclassical subject for historical narrative meant, therefore, that a new generation of historians could find a useful distance on the still-revered models of antiquity and bring a new confidence to their own distinctive forms of historical inquiry.

### **Society and Sentiment: The Eighteenth Century’s Discourse of the Social**

The argument for examining the reframing of historical practice in the eighteenth century can now be given a clearer focus. The reconfiguration I wish to explore is bound up with what I would like to call the eighteenth century’s discourse of the social. In using this rather awkward designation, I am following Hannah Arendt’s lead in using *social* as a shorthand to identify the characteristically postclassical interpenetration of private and public life, which gave new meanings to both;<sup>24</sup> at the same time, by *discourse* I mean to indicate something wider, if less easily located than a term like “the Scottish enquiry,” though Hume, Smith, and their contemporaries certainly played a central part in this reconfiguration. It is important, however, to avoid the impression that these philosophers were the discoverers of a brave new commercial world that was then translated, already formed, into historiographical terms. Equally, it is crucial to understanding the environment in which history was written not to separate disciplines like political economy from contemporary developments in biography or the novel.

<sup>23</sup> Walter Jackson Bate, *The Burden of the Past and the English Poet* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1970). This newfound confidence is evident in proliferating celebrations of the historiographical achievements of the age: “Among the various improvements of the eighteenth century, the advances in historical composition deserve a principle rank. Men of genius and philosophical reflection have disentangled the chaos, and, by pursuing a route hitherto unknown, have destroyed the fictions and romances of monkish ignorance and credulous superstition. . . . Latter [*sic*] historians have not contented themselves with a sterile narrative of facts, but, by investigating the causes of the facts they relate, and having discovered them in the passions and interests of men, they assign the true motives which influenced to action, those who make a figure in the history of nations. . . . Such are the writings of a Hume and a Robertson, of a Gibbon, Gillies, and several others, both British and foreigners, who, having written as philosophers, and not as annalists, their histories are a pleasing and instructive picture of the human mind.” George Thomson, *The Spirit of General History, in a series of lectures, from the eighth to the eighteenth century*, 2d ed. (London, 1792), iii–iv.

<sup>24</sup> See Arendt, *The Human Condition*, chap. 1.



The discourse of the social incorporates two dimensions of enquiry, which might be thought of schematically as the social and the sentimental. On the one hand, reexamination of the social was directed to the material and moral life of humankind; on the other, to the play of the passions and sentiments in the individual mind. In the final analysis, however, what most fully characterizes the historical understanding of this period is its reliance on the reciprocities linking the social and the sentimental as two complementary kinds of knowledge—the belief that human beings are naturally led by their passions to form communities, and, conversely, that the way to understand society is to picture it as a place shaped by the meeting of experiencing and sociable minds. These reciprocities encouraged the conjectural historian to speculate on the sentiments of the ancient Britons out of his reading of contemporary missionar-ies, just as they led the “philosophical” traveler to intersperse his notes on foreign places with observations on manners and the lessons of history.

A key unifying element was this pervasive eighteenth-century interest in manners (see chapters 6 and 7). The phrase *manners and customs* is ubiquitous in widely differing genres, where it bridges the most individual questions of conduct and the most remote customs of distant peoples. And, crucially, the language of manners not only brought the hitherto excluded experiences of women into history, but it also made both men and women creatures of custom and habit. These and other reciprocities mean that the literatures most adapted to exploring inward and affective experience—biography, the novel, and various forms of lyric most obviously, but also conduct literature, pedagogy, and even rhetoric—must also be read as part of the formation of this larger social discourse.

For the student of historical writing, the broad range of this discourse and the reciprocities that hold it together are especially important because of the strategic place the historical genres hold between so many didactic and narrative literatures, “low” as well as “high.” This means that in considering the evolution of historiography we need to break the habit of consulting only “serious” works of philosophy and politics and search more widely through the literary system. Clues to the reframing of historiographical practice lie in all the surrounding genres and disciplines.

No one will have trouble identifying the ways in which the displacement of political action in eighteenth-century historical writing brought social questions to the fore; the inwardness of history, however, may raise more doubts. The answer to this skepticism lies in the suggestion made earlier that the reframing of historical understanding meant that historical writing would need to grapple with representing something wider, but less easily defined, than action. Poetry, Aristotle says, is the imitation of action, but when we undertake the biography of a poet (as dozens of eighteenth-century biographers pointed out) there is often very little in the way of “action” to recount. Nonetheless, one of the achievements of eighteenth-century literature was to find ways to

make compelling reading of lives lived in thought and private conversation. (Boswell's *Johnson* is the outstanding example.) As a result, the emerging genre of literary history became a prime vehicle for those who wanted to evoke the textures of life in another age (see chapters 10 and 11). But the problems of literary history were not unique in this respect: ancient tribes, women at all stages of history, and most men in private life also lacked the capacity to act in this traditional sense. Nonetheless, the new frameworks of social discourse demanded that their experiences somehow be included. In this reorientation from action to experience lay some of the most interesting challenges to history's narrative resources. (See chapter 3.)

## Genre and Reframing

It was not very long ago that genre-study was generally understood as an attempt to discover distinct and enduring formal characteristics beneath the fluctuations of literary history. More recently, however, these assumptions about the unity and fixity of genres have been discarded in favor of approaches emphasizing precisely the opposite qualities of instability, mixture, and historical specificity. Reconsidered in this light, genre-study emerges as a prime avenue for exploring historical change and one that lends itself particularly to the idea of "reframing" that I outlined earlier.

Summarizing the changed emphasis in genre-study from fixity to historicity, Alastair Fowler writes that "if we describe the genres in fuller detail, we find ourselves coming to grips with local and temporary groupings, perpetually contending with historical alterations in them. For they everywhere change, combine, regroup, or form what seem to be new alignments altogether." He goes on to say that the instability of genres may upset our aspiration to build systems. "But it is just the activity that genre's communicative function should have led us to expect. If literary meaning works by departing from generic forms, successions of meanings over a long period are bound to change them extensively."<sup>25</sup>

This emphasis on the communicative functions of genre is helpful because it makes it clear that we are not dealing with something either arbitrary or passive, a purely conventional structure confined to a separated world of purely literary usage. On the contrary, genre is a central part of the capacity literature gives us for questioning and ordering the world. Genre, to put it in the terms already used, is a key element of literary framing. As such, genres, like other communicative frameworks, must necessarily remain open to reframing, if they are to stay in active use.

<sup>25</sup> Fowler, *Kinds of Literature*, 45–46.

Thus the communicative function of genre leads us to the historicity of genres; it also points to a recognition that what is communicated is simultaneously something about the world and about the literary system itself. Because of this element of reflexivity, generic self-definition necessarily involves contrasts and hierarchies that establish the place of a particular genre in the wider literary system. Without such contrasts, in fact, readers would have no way of understanding the terms that mark an individual “kind.” Since genre is by nature a contrastive category, it follows that individual genres cannot really be examined on their own. But contrast is only a part of the picture. This same logic of contrast and competition leads to the frequency with which genres combine and recombine, which is a further element in their historicity.

The results of this contrastive and combinatory dynamic may be the formation of new genres or something more individual and temporary. The outcome obviously depends on the responses of readers, a central consideration for any investigation of genre. In fact, everything I have said about genre could be restated in terms of the activity of readers—their competence to recognize the markers of genre, their ability to adapt to new demands, their understanding of a wider literary system, the sense of status or even membership that comes from constituting oneself as an audience to a given literature. From the writer’s point of view, then, much of what is at stake in working within an existing genre or attempting to move beyond it can be seen as a matter of selecting or creating an audience.

### History as Instruction and Mimesis

To make this general framework relevant to the history of historical writing it is necessary to bring into relief some of the characteristic features of historical writing as they were identified in contemporary discussions. Though the effort is likely to seem overly schematic, as definitional exercises always are, it would be worse to begin by simply assuming that we know what histories are and what place they held within the literary system of another time.

In the classical tradition, persisting well into modern times, a perpetual feature of debates over the nature of historiography was a division between those who identified history primarily as a faithful narrative and those who saw it above all as a literature of instruction. Faced with the possibility of conflict between two versions of history’s fundamental purpose, most commentators chose to elide the choice, while in practice giving emphasis either to the instructive or mimetic function.<sup>26</sup> Thus Greek historians generally emphasized

<sup>26</sup> I have discussed tensions between mimetic and didactic thrusts in historiography with particular reference to Italian Renaissance texts, in “Representation and Argument in Renaissance Historiography,” *Storia della storiografia* 10 (1986): 48–63.

the idea of history as a strict mimesis, while the Romans—reframing the idea of mimesis to mean political impartiality—gave most weight to the instructive value of history. The Renaissance was heavily indebted to Roman rhetorical traditions, and most writers continued to value history primarily for its persuasiveness and didactic power. This stress on instruction continued to be dominant in the eighteenth century, when it was given a famous formulation in Bolingbroke's phrase, "philosophy teaching by example." But alongside of arguments for "exemplary history," strongly antirhetorical views also flourished in early modern Europe.<sup>27</sup> This counterlineage was associated especially with antiquarian studies, whose practitioners insisted that history's function had less to do with eloquence than with the need to establish a strict record of the past.

Bolingbroke's formula is not only a memorable example of definitions emphasizing history's didactic purpose, but also a useful instance of the way in which classical and neoclassical writers successfully glossed over the differences between mimesis and instruction, ignoring as best they could the potential conflicts between the two goals they set for historical composition. It was not until the end of our period that writers in the Romantic tradition reversed this aspect of their classical inheritance and built a newly heroic image of the historian as a genius capable of meeting and transcending a contradiction that was now treated as self-evident.<sup>28</sup>

The persistent interplay between mimetic and instructive definitions of history provides a useful heuristic in dealing with questions of genre because it points to a range of choices facing eighteenth-century writers and readers. As conceived by classical and postclassical audiences, historiographical narrative emerges as a kind of mixed genre governed by two distinct principles that must be reconciled in practice, but that always stand in some tension.<sup>29</sup> These ten-

<sup>27</sup> For "exemplary history," see George Nadel, "The Philosophy of History before Historicism," *History and Theory* 3 (1963): 291–315.

<sup>28</sup> Macaulay wrote that the contrary demands of truthfulness and imagination make great history even more difficult to achieve than great poetry. Only the truly great historian will be able to reconcile the analytic power of political economy with the poetry of Herodotus. Michelet's famous definition of the goals of history is equally pertinent and even more self-aggrandizing. "Thierry called it a *narration* and M. Guizot *analysis*. I have named it resurrection, and this name will remain." Both passages can be conveniently consulted in Fritz Stern, *Varieties of History* (New York: Random House, 1972), 72–88, 117.

<sup>29</sup> It is interesting to note how thoroughly this tension persists even in our own times where doubling formulas still continue to be required in definitions of history. Stuart Hughes's description of history "as art and science" is an obvious example. Hayden White, too, expresses this tension—as well as the desire to overcome it—when he defines the work of history as purporting to *explain* the past by *representing* it. For White, a history purports to be a "model, or icon" of the past, but Nancy Struever, criticizing White, argues that history is primarily a discipline and a body of argument. White and others have reduced rhetoric to poetics, Struever writes. Yet in fact "the discipline of history is argument," so that the appropriate rhetorical analysis should be "a topics, rather than a tropics of historical discourse." See Nancy Struever, "Topics in History," in

sions were not, of course, unique to historiography—they also reflect the long history of efforts to define the purpose of poetry—but in the terms I have underlined they evidently had a special relevance to historical writing.<sup>30</sup>

In general, as narratives move toward a focus on the mimetic, they concentrate on recording the concreteness of events. Given the breadth of eighteenth-century interest in history, historical mimesis might involve anything from a chronicle of battles to the manners of “savages.” Most often presenting the past in this way means emphasizing the satisfactions of detailed narrative, but the mimetic impulse, when taken further, can also result in dissolving the connected narrative in favor of compiling diverse or discrete data. Encyclopedias and biographical dictionaries, as well as the many forms of antiquarian publication, exemplify these possibilities. Perhaps the greatest challenge to historical mimesis in this period, however, came from the desire to represent experience as well as action, and the many narrative experiments that register this ambition stand among the most interesting histories of this time. They also stand, it should be added, among the most neglected, since they do not conform to our conception of what historians should be about in a neoclassical age.

Didactic impulses, too, can take many forms, but in general they involved privileging intellectual order over representational concreteness. This means paring and shaping the narrative to give it coherence and point, endowing narrative with some of the clarity of argument. Pursued far enough, however, the argumentative impulse, like the mimetic one, could break down narrative structures, with the result that the text is reorganized into a set of dissertations. This is a characteristic tendency of eighteenth-century philosophical histories, which generally include dissertations appended to the main body of narrative. By extension, conjectural histories—the intellectual avant-garde of Enlightenment historiography—abandoned conventional narrative entirely in favor of didactic formats, thus bringing history into line with other literatures of instruction.

The heuristic I have outlined can be useful in two ways. First, by bringing into relief the implicit tension between two foci of historiographical practice, the schema helps to account for the range and variety of historical writings in this period. Second, since it seems to be a distinctive characteristic of historical narrative that it acknowledge *both* purposes, the schema also allows us to identify more clearly the lines that connected the historical genres to wider families of mimetic and didactic genres.

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“*Metahistory*”: *Six Critiques*, History and Theory Beiheft 19 (Middletown: Wesleyan UP, 1980), 66–67.

<sup>30</sup> Given the isolation in which historiographical analysis has often been conducted, it is important to underline the point that definitions of history like Nadel’s “exemplary” tradition are incomprehensible outside of the larger tradition of efforts to define the purpose and value of poetry. I have explored this idea and pointed to the ways in which the “expressive” literary views of romantic criticism shifted the grounds on which history and fiction competed, in my essay,

Eighteenth-century historiography encompassed a wide and diverse body of writing, but the same interests and structures that created or expressed this diversity also tied history to other literatures.<sup>31</sup> Historical narrative, in other words, constituted a broad middle ground on which mimetic and instructive impulses were worked out, but a fuller picture must take account of other genres that carried further the didactic or mimetic practices that, in more moderated forms, characterized historiography itself. Over time, both literary sensibilities and social discourses shifted, and these neighboring literatures played their part in determining which frameworks of historical representation now seemed adequate to historians and their publics.

### The Dignity of History

All genres are not, of course, born equal. An important feature of eighteenth-century definitions of history is their stress on decorum. Witness this definition, taken from Thomas Sheridan's pronouncing dictionary of 1780: "History . . . A narration of events and facts delivered with dignity; narration, relation; the knowledge of facts and events."<sup>32</sup> In Sheridan's formulation, history is both a body of knowledge and a form of narration, but its instructive and mimetic purposes are both subordinated to his emphasis on "genre height." In fact, decorum was inseparable from history's instructive and mimetic purposes. When people spoke in a commonplace way of the "dignity of history," they implied that history should be concerned only with representing events of a certain order of public importance and, correspondingly, that its lessons were addressed primarily to those in a position to profit by them. In the end, then, these definitions were as much social as formal, and, in keeping with the contrastive nature of genre, they were also hierarchical. Thus eighteenth-century readers defined history by the rank and gender of its audience, while "lesser" genres, like romance or biography, had equivalently lower audiences.

As I will show in some detail in the chapters that follow, this definition came under considerable pressure during this period, a result of the expanded tasks set by changing visions of the social, as well as of the presence of new audiences wanting to assert their competence to read history (see chapter 4). Nonetheless the idea that history enjoyed the privileged position of a "high" genre remained important to ways that the genre-map was drawn—perhaps espe-

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"Scott, Macaulay, and the Literary Challenge to Historiography," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 50 (1989): 117–33.

<sup>31</sup> This point is made very nicely by John Burrow, who insists that narrative historiography is a "mixed mode" that incorporates a variety of kinds of writing: "It touches on one side the abstraction of constitutional law and political theory, on the other the full-bodied representations of the novel. It demands correspondingly eclectic treatment" (*A Liberal Descent*, 4).

<sup>32</sup> Thomas Sheridan, *A General Dictionary of the English Language* (London, 1780).

cially as “History” was seen from the vantage of competitive literatures and audiences.

Given the prestige of history in this period, writers working in a group of contrastive genres found it a prime referent for their own efforts to secure an audience; or, to be more precise, they constructed an image of history (now too often taken as innocent) against which to produce the formal and social outlines of their own literatures. In this sense, history served as a kind of countergenre helping to define a cluster of related literatures. This strategy of appropriation is common in novels, but it was also a feature of biography, travel, and memoir, as well as literary history, antiquities, political economy, and conjectural history.

The signals given off in this game of maneuver can tell us a great deal about the reciprocities and pressures shaping the historical genres. These genre-signals should not be read literally, though some twentieth-century critics have rushed in to perpetuate the image of history that suited the genre strategies of the eighteenth-century novelist, endorsing an image of a pompous and monolithic history against which to celebrate the agile and populist genre of the novel. This is a form of presentism that, despite all its protestations, fails to take into account the very different relationship between genres before the novel achieved its later centrality. Critics would do well to consider whether—although our current designation of history and biography as “nonfiction” tells much about a *subsequent* literary history—eighteenth-century fictions might not better be defined as “nonhistory.”

We need to be better readers of Jane Austen, for example, when in *Northanger Abbey* Catherine Morland confesses she cannot bear to read history, “real solemn history”: “The quarrels of popes and kings, with wars or pestilences in every page; the men all so good for nothing, and hardly any women at all.” This passage has been treated as an encapsulation of Jane Austen’s view of history, but that it clearly is not. Rather it is a lovingly ironic characterization of a girl who still lacks the maturity and education of her companions, the history-reading Tilneys. The deftness of Austen’s irony is all her own, but the amount of information that she could convey by so quick a device speaks to the fact that the history/novel contrast was part of the understanding of the literary hierarchy that every novel-reader possessed.

Catherine Morland’s reading habits may not say much about Austen’s personal views of history, nor about the “deep structures” of the historical imagination. But the reading habits of young women, fictional or real, do tell us a good deal that we might want to understand about how both histories and novels were seen in Austen’s time. By extension, they point to questions that need to be considered across a broad spectrum of mimetic and instructive genres before we can understand what history—“real solemn history”—meant to British readers.

## The Politics and Poetics of Historical Distance

I want, finally, to introduce one more analytic frame, which is the idea of historical distance. Distance is not explicitly mentioned in eighteenth-century prescriptions for writing history, nor has a concept of distance been a tool of twentieth-century scholarship. Even so, I would argue for its interpretative value, since almost every feature of eighteenth-century practice will prove to have some bearing on the way in which distance is managed. Some degree of temporal distance is, of course, a given in historical writing, but temporal distance may be enlarged or diminished by other kinds of distances, which we might think of as formal, conceptual, and affective. Historical distance in the full sense I want to give it refers to the sense of temporality constructed by every historical account as it positions its readers in relation to the past. Distance includes political as well as emotional engagement (or disengagement) and is the consequence of ideological choices, as well as formal and aesthetic ones. In this enlarged sense, historical distance is an intrinsic feature of all historical accounts, though (for the very reason that it is implicit in so much of what we do when we write history or when we read it) it is one that has been neglected by historians and literary scholars alike.

I began by suggesting that every historical account must position its audience in some relationship of closeness or distance to the events and experience it recounts. Historical distance, in other words, is an issue that confronts everyone who writes in the historical genres and one that is registered in every reading of a historiographical text. But we must also recognize that no single location is proper for all works of history. Rather, norms of distance vary both by genre and by period, and even within a single narrative, effective distance is never uniform. It is important to stress, too, that what I am calling distance necessarily incorporates the full range of positioning, both *near* and *far*. In this sense, distance incorporates the desire to make past moments close and pressing—in order to intensify, for example, the affective, ideological, or commemorative impact of an event—as well as that of stepping back from the historical scene—perhaps to emphasize the objectivity, irony, or philosophical sweep of the historian's vision.

In practice, historical distance is determined by the balance between these opposing impulses, and, as I have said, even within a single work, the tensions between engagement and disengagement will shift and adjust. These variations may register different ideological or emotional responses to events; they may also reflect the ways in which the historian constructs an authorial voice, or chooses to vary the rhythms of a narrative. Unfortunately, we lack a vocabulary for describing these choices and tensions. For want of better English words, I will label the opposing impulses *approximative* and *distanciating*: what matters, however, is not the terms we use, but rather the recognition that the con-



cept of historical distance must be capable of incorporating *both* the desire to figure the past as close or present and (in the more normal sense of distance) the opposing impulse to seek detachment or removal.

The push and pull of historical distance is observable at every level of narrative construction, beginning with the dynamics of the individual work and moving on to broader questions of genre and period. At each of these levels—text, genre, period-style—issues of distance will be explored much more fully in the body of this book; here, I want only to provide a preliminary outline of the sorts of issues that thinking about distance will help to illuminate.

Let me begin with the study of individual texts. Distance is not the property of any single dimension of historical writing. Rather it is a complex response that results from the workings of a whole range of formal, rhetorical, and ideological structures. Thinking about distance, then, involves a broad inquiry into the variety of features of historical accounts that shape the reader's relationship to past events. Stated so abstractly, however, the question may give the misleading sense that I am speaking of universal qualities that uniformly produce effects of proximity or distancing in some equally universalized reader. On the contrary, questions of distance should be addressed to the specific vocabularies of historical thought in a given time, as well as to all the particular conditions of literature and social life that shape the expectations of specific reading publics.

On another level, distance is also an important feature of historiography considered as a genre, or as I prefer to think of it, as a family of related genres and subgenres. Variations in distance—whether formal, conceptual, or affective—appear to be important to the ways readers distinguish between competing genres of historical writing, or differentiate history from its nearer neighbors. A recent example that will be familiar to most readers is the popularity of microhistory, a form of narrative that is principally distinguished by a flexible combination of the distanced perspectives associated with general histories and the strong approximative impulses of biography and contemporary anthropology. Similarly, the eighteenth century's taste for biography and memoir clearly owed a good deal to a sentimentalist desire to endow the past with strong evocative presence. But conceptual distance also had a strong appeal in this period: the philosophical and conjectural histories that were such a marked feature of the Enlightenment were generally thought to promise a deeper understanding of the past than conventional narratives of statecraft, a claim that was principally based on the longer perspectives opened up by philosophical judgment.<sup>33</sup>

<sup>33</sup> Hume was typical of his age in expressing the superior power of general explanation. (See chapter 1.) On the ways in which eighteenth-century writers and painters associated the capacity to take a broad view with social prestige and gentlemanly wealth, see John Barrell, *English Literature in History, 1730–1780: An Equal, Wide Survey* (London: Hutchinson, 1989).

Variation in distance affects period-style as well as genre. I do not mean to suggest that each period possesses one invariable norm of historical distance. But it has gone largely unnoticed that such norms do change over time and that changes of distance may have considerable impact on the way in which readers in one period respond to the writing of another. Clearly there was a notable shift in the predominant sense of distance between the generation of Hume and Robertson and that of Macaulay and Carlyle (though not one that was unprepared for in the earlier writers). In the interval, historical accounts lost the air of aloof generality that eighteenth-century readers associated with the dignity of history as historians sought to capture some of the evocative closeness that in an earlier time had been associated primarily with the minor genres of biography and memoir. This change of distance erected considerable barriers between nineteenth-century readers and the historical writers of the previous century. Indeed, the changes in reception proved so powerful and so enduring that (as will be explored in more detail in the conclusion) nineteenth-century assumptions about distance have continued to shape the reputation of eighteenth-century historiography ever since.

Historians of early-nineteenth-century Britain have registered such changes primarily in aesthetic terms, that is, as an extension of Romantic currents of feeling into the literature of historical writing. I want to suggest, however, that if we think of the new historical climate of the early nineteenth century in terms of the framework of distance, we can give the question both a longer history and a more concrete political setting. In the longer perspective I am working with it should be clear that eighteenth-century sentimentalism played an enormously important role in encouraging the idea that we go to history in order to experience a sense of the evocative presence of other places and other times. What is more, I will also argue that the nineteenth century's desire to make history compellingly immediate has as much to do with the ideology of Burkean traditionalism as with the specifically literary influence of romanticism (see chapter 9).

The choices historians make regarding historical distance structure the relationship of the past to the present on every level. Distance, in other words, is both a formal and a social construction, a place where the poetics and politics of narrative combine in ways impossible to separate. As a result, distance has the potential to be an integrating notion in historiographical studies, one that helps us to frame questions that cut across some of the conventional divisions of textual analysis and makes it easier to align the formal features of narrative construction with the figurative dimensions of language and the ideological implications of historical representations.

To this point, I have said nothing about the political frameworks of historical writing that preoccupy so many students of early modern historiography. Indeed, since the central theme of this book is the displacement of political action as the central subject of historical narrative, it might appear that the ideological

dimension of historical writing will receive little notice. But the fact that the most remarkable developments in eighteenth-century historiography involve a displacement of the classical *vita activa* hardly means that historical writing lacked a politics. On the contrary, it is important to recognize that the move to reframe historical experience in terms that contemporary philosophical, social, and aesthetic ideas made compelling had important ideological as well as narratological implications. Hume's sentimentalist depiction of the execution of Charles I and Burke's famous invocation of the memory of Marie Antoinette are just two examples of the way in which, despite an apparent turning away from politics, an aestheticized history can carry a powerful ideological current.

There is certainly no difficulty in identifying political commitments in early modern historiography. Historians were often men of party, and their histories were frequently published in the context of partisan debate. In fact, the conventional criticism of British historical writing before its philosophic expansion in the midcentury was that it was entirely too partisan. But pinning party labels on historians (was Hume really a Tory or a special sort of Whig?) is not one of the more interesting questions that confronts students of historiography. It simply continues a long established habit of setting historical writing into already established lines of political debate and thereby obscures the deeper challenge of investigating ideological dimensions intrinsic to any attempt to frame a narratable past.

At another level, the politics of historical narrative can be approached as a dimension of the "fusion of horizons" that Gadamer argues all historical understanding demands.<sup>34</sup> Gadamer's well-known phrase suggests a double engagement with history that joins opposed acts of comprehension and self-recognition in a dialectic of distance. To comprehend history means framing it in ways that aim to give us a sense of meaningful oversight. When this is achieved, we are rewarded with the comforts of moral, intellectual, or aesthetic coherence, even when there is no possibility of turning any of these understandings into action. Yet our comprehension of the past would have little meaning if it were not also joined to some form of self-recognition that makes the history our own. In this way we insert ourselves into the larger narrative, allowing ourselves to be comprehended by history as well as comprehending of it. Thus self-recognition takes its place next to comprehension as two parts of an essential dialectic of historical understanding.

In ideological as well as sentimental terms, this dialectic can be understood to define the need every society has for a usable past. From this point of view, we can say that the reframing of historical writing that took place in this period

<sup>34</sup> *Truth and Method*, trans. Joel Weinsheimer and D. G. Marshall (New York: Continuum, 1995), 306. Gadamer, of course, was certainly not interested in tracing signs of this fusion in the poetics of historical narrative, and he can be criticized for failing to clarify the ideological dimensions of his own work.

is the sign that neither comprehension nor self-recognition was really possible within the framework of traditionally sanctioned narratives. Thus the eighteenth century's reluctant acceptance of the fact that classical forms, though eloquent in themselves, no longer comprehended the sorts of understanding that a modern, commercial society required can be taken as a point of departure for asking more specific questions about what eighteenth-century audiences felt was missing, which literatures they looked to for answers, what kinds of historical frames were in the process of being constructed, and whose need for self-recognition they served.

These are not questions that can be responded to simply by invoking broad generalizations about social structures and ideological positions. Rather, the answers should be traced in concrete problems of narrative construction, where this same dialectic of comprehension and self-recognition takes the form, already mentioned, of the determination of historical distance. Clearly, we should not expect to find a single politics characterizing all the historical productions of this age, any more than we expect to encounter narratives of only a single type. Nonetheless, questions of distance do offer a common focus for an investigation of the widest range of formal and stylistic practices. The play of ironic and sentimental constructions; the seductive power of vast conjectural histories as well as that of unmediated documents; the persistence and prestige of classical narrative, even when overlaid by histories of the arts, manners, and letters; the fascination of ethnographies, literary anecdotes, and memoirs; the prominent use of notes and appendices to amplify the range of narrative; the explanatory power of stadial theories; occasional experiments in epistolary writing; the allure of philosophical fictions; the burgeoning interest in literary biography and literary history; the emerging ideas of public opinion and national tradition as frameworks of historical narration and explanation: all these and still other features of eighteenth-century historical practice play a part in this essential dynamic of presence and distancing. Whatever other purposes or meanings each of these features of historical narrative reveals, they are also key elements in the ways eighteenth-century historical writings offered their readers possibilities for both comprehension and self-recognition.