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**Mark Salber Phillips: Society and Sentiment**

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# One

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## David Hume and the Vocabularies of British Historiography

LET ME BEGIN by looking forward for a moment from David Hume to Walter Scott, the great legatee of the Scottish Enlightenment's vision of history. When Scott gave his famous subtitle *'Tis Sixty Years Since* to the first of his historical novels, he called attention to the extraordinary transformation of Scotland since 1745. In the course of two generations, a new Scotland had emerged that was almost unrecognizable from its earlier history. "There is no European nation," he wrote, "which, in the course of half a century or little more, has undergone so complete a change as this kingdom of Scotland. The effects of the insurrection of 1745 . . . commenced this innovation. The gradual influx of wealth and extension of commerce have since united to render the present people of Scotland a class of beings as different from their grandfathers as the existing English are from those of Queen Elizabeth's time."<sup>1</sup>

Along with the rapid transformation of eighteenth-century Scotland, Scott's subtitle also calls attention to an important dimension of historical perception that is more universal: the span of two generations to which he refers not only witnessed remarkable changes, it also provided Scott and his audience with a privileged distance from which to observe this transformation. Two generations put the '45 just on the horizon of living memory. At this remove, when events are still close enough to recall, yet distant enough to have been overtaken by other developments, there is a need both to recover past events and to begin to resolve their singularity into the wider patterns and plots of history. At just such a distance, in short, both recuperation and resolution seem possible. Hence, as many a commentator on Scott's novels has affirmed, the genuine engagement with the past that sets the *Waverley* novels apart from so many imitative historical costume dramas; hence, too, Scott's ability to celebrate the distinctive textures of other times while affirming the present social order, which is also the product of history.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Walter Scott, *Waverley*, ed. Andrew Hook (New York: Penguin, 1972), 492.

<sup>2</sup> Among many important studies on Scott and the historical novel, see Harry Shaw, *The Forms of Historical Fiction: Sir Walter Scott and His Successors* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1983); Alexander Welsh, *The Hero of the Waverley Novels: With New Essays on Scott* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1992); Ina Ferris, *The Achievement of Literary Authority: Gender, History, and the Waverley Novels* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1991); and Peter Garside, "Scott and the 'Philosophical' Historians," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 36 (1975): 497–512.

The commemorative experiences of recent years confirm the value of Scott's perception and may, I believe, help us to view David Hume's historical task with more sympathy than Enlightenment historiography has usually received. The half century that now separates us from the closing acts of World War II has brought with it a flood of remembrance, often mixed with bitter controversy. Fifty years have certainly not resulted in consensus on the significance of Auschwitz or Hiroshima, much less in resolution and forgetfulness. On the contrary, the stunned silence that followed the end of the war has been replaced in recent decades with an ever growing literature in both history and fiction, accompanied by an equally urgent need both to remember and to reconsider. Daily we are coming closer to the poignant moment when living memory cedes, finally and without possibility of appeal, to the constructed narratives provided by histories, novels, movies, and museums. As we absorb this realization, on which one could say all writing of history is founded, with respect to the most terrible events of this century, we may perhaps reach a better understanding of the ways in which earlier generations responded to their own irrevocable passages.

I am not, of course, trying to assert some sort of comparability between the Regicide or Culloden and the Holocaust. Rather, I want only to enlist our present heightened sensitivity to the complexity and importance of historical memory as an aid to understanding the historical outlook of a period when Britain, both north and south of the Tweed, looked back upon a particularly difficult and divisive heritage. In this context, it seems reasonable to call attention to the fact that Hume and his audience stood at much the same remove from the Revolution of 1688 as Scott stood from Culloden. More particularly, I want to suggest that Hume's Stuart volumes can be read as seeking a kind of historical distance that would allow the turbulent epoch that closed in 1688, "sixty years since," to be both accepted and transcended.

This chapter and the one that follows will examine the various frameworks of historical understanding and representation available to Hume and trace the ways in which his *History of England* seeks to find a kind of mastery over the complex narrative problem of historical distance. As indicated in the introduction, historical distance (in the sense I am using it here) does not imply simple detachment. It incorporates a desire to recuperate aspects of the past and make them temporarily present, as well as the reciprocal need to establish longer perspectives or to impose a kind of closure. Nor is historical distance an abstraction. In Hume's history, as much as in Scott's novels, it is an effect of a complex and varied narrative practice: one might even say that it constitutes an important dimension of the meaning of Hume's narrative. This being the case, I will begin with a broad discussion of Hume's vocation as a historian and follow with an exploration of neoclassical and philosophical history, the two principal frameworks of historical understanding in his time. The balances

and tensions between these two modes of historical thought and writing, complicated by Hume's attraction to both sensibility and irony, make up the fundamental vocabulary of his *History of England*.

### “My Own Life”

In “My Own Life,” the brief autobiography he wrote shortly before his death, Hume summed up for the last time his sense of his own accomplishments as a historian:

I was, I own, sanguine in my expectations of the success of this work. I thought that I was the only historian, that had at once neglected present power, interest, and authority, and the cry of popular prejudices; and as the subject was suited to every capacity, I expected proportional applause. But miserable was my disappointment: I was assailed by one cry of reproach, disapprobation, and even detestation; English, Scotch, and Irish, Whig and Tory, churchman and sectary, freethinker and religionist, patriot and courtier, united in their rage against the man, who had presumed to shed a generous tear for the fate of Charles I and the Earl of Strafford.<sup>3</sup>

This brief autobiography was intended, it is clear, not only as a record of the philosopher's life, but also as a testament to a philosopher's death. His parting summary of his career as a historian carries, therefore, all the poignancy of this moment, when it had become proper, as he puts it, to speak of himself in the past tense.<sup>4</sup> Yet for all Hume's characteristic composure, there is a good deal more than simple acceptance in his retrospect on his first steps as a historian. Though he had long since established himself as the preeminent historian of England, he invoked once more the disappointment of the *History's* first reception in order to restate his central conviction about his aims and achievements. With all the sincere conviction imparted by the situation in which he wrote, Hume reiterates his faith in his own impartiality and presents his superiority to faction as his highest aim and greatest success as a historian.

The claim to write, as Tacitus famously said, “sine ira et studio” had long been enshrined in the classical tradition as the chief duty of the historian. Nonetheless, Hume's claimed indifference to “present power” and “popular prejudice” bears little real resemblance to Tacitus's impartiality. The story Hume wanted to tell, in fact, reverses that of imperial Rome, moving toward the establishment of liberty, not away from it. The real threat to an impartial account of English history was not subservience to an imperial tyrant, but

<sup>3</sup> David Hume, “My Own Life,” in *Essays, Moral, Political, and Literary*, ed. Eugene F. Miller (Indianapolis: Liberty, 1987), xxxvi–xxxvii.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, xl.

the blind prejudice of party. As Montesquieu had put it, whereas in absolute monarchies historians betray the truth because they are unable to speak out, in free states they do so “because of their very liberty,” which enslaves them to the prejudices of faction.<sup>5</sup>

The consequence of factionalism, Hume believed, was that eighteenth-century Englishmen had been unable to achieve a proper detachment from their past—a reflective distance that, wisely managed, would confer a balanced understanding of the weaknesses as well as the strengths of their much admired, much mythologized constitution.<sup>6</sup> Nor did Hume exempt himself from feeling the power of this mythology: in his autobiography he stressed that his own emancipation had only come in stages and had occupied a process of many years. This is the meaning, I take it, of his declaration—so often used against him—that his revisions to the history, undertaken after “farther study, reading, or reflection,” had all worked against the preconceptions of the reigning Whig establishment.<sup>7</sup>

In part, of course, all this is no more than Hume’s proud insistence that his work owed nothing to the patronage of the great. But the detachment Hume seeks is more than personal; it is also historical. It speaks to his conviction that the conflicts of the previous century could finally be left behind because they had resulted in a new order of government as well as, more comprehensively, in accompanying changes in manners and opinions. This new order was not the work of any single party, but emerged as an indirect consequence of the irregular and self-contradictory politics of the times. “It is ridiculous,” he concludes flatly, “to consider the English constitution before that period as a regular plan of liberty.”<sup>8</sup>

Perhaps the most striking phrase, however, in Hume’s brief rehearsal of his first steps as a historian, sounds a rather different note, which must also be taken into account. Hume’s self-dramatization as “the man who had presumed to shed a generous tear” for King Charles and Strafford stands as a further claim to independence of mind, but the personal and sentimental tone seems to move in quite the opposite direction from the reflective distance sought in earlier and later passages. Yet there is no real contradiction. As readers of the

<sup>5</sup> Montesquieu, *The Spirit of the Laws*, trans. and ed. Anne M. Cohler, Basia Carolyn Miller, and Harold Samuel Stone (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1989), 333.

<sup>6</sup> For Hume’s views on party, see especially his essays “Of the Coalition of Parties,” “Of Passive Obedience,” and “Of the Protestant Succession,” in *Essays*. In a letter regarding publication of the last-mentioned essay, Hume offers a good example of the search for philosophic distance that made up one element of his historiography: he explains that he examines the issue of the succession “as coolly and impartially as if I were remov’d a thousand Years from the present Period: But this is what some People think extremely dangerous, and sufficient not only to ruin me for ever, but also throw some Reflection on all my Friends.” *Letters of David Hume*, ed. J. Y. T. Greig, 2 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon, 1932), 1:112–13.

<sup>7</sup> Hume, “My Own Life,” xxxviii.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

*History* we soon learn that our sympathy is free to respond to the individual dramas of Charles and Strafford precisely because, on another level, the historian's faculty of impersonal judgment has secured us the necessary distance. But Hume also knew from long experience that this capacity for generosity in detachment could not be taken for granted; it requires careful cultivation and certainly had not yet become general among readers when the *History* first appeared. For this reason, Hume also solicits our sympathy for his own situation as a writer, faced with the combined rage of so many and such different enemies, alike only in their shared inability to distinguish the events of the past from their own immediate interests. Thus the comprehensive list of his enemies—"English, Scotch, and Irish, Whig and Tory, churchman and sectary, freethinker and religionist, patriot and courtier"—becomes the final guarantor of his own claim to reflection, distance, and composure.

To David Hume, writing at the midpoint of the eighteenth century, two generations from the decisive events of 1688, it evidently seemed possible at last to write an impartial and reflective history of this earlier and more turbulent age. He set out to show that the settled liberties of England after the expulsion of the Stuarts were primarily an indirect consequence of the Commons's struggle to wrest powers from the Crown, not—as the Whigs contended—a direct consequence of their defense of traditional powers guaranteed by an "ancient constitution." Of the political results of this irregular and often unprincipled struggle, Hume had no doubt. He believed that the commercial society of Hanoverian England enjoyed a new constitutional order whose liberties were wider and more systematic than was ever the case under the Tudors or Stuarts. In this sense, despite his criticism of Whig prejudices or his sentimentalizing of Tory heroes, Hume remained substantially Whiggish in his politics.

My main concern, however, is not with party labels. Hume's recognition of an evolving constitutional and social order entailed historiographical consequences that go well beyond the issues of political allegiance that so often have monopolized assessments of his work. His overwhelming ambition was to compose a history of lasting value, one raised above its predecessors not only by the elegance of its style, but also by its intellectual clarity and critical distance. But poise and detachment alone would not be enough; a successful narrative that eventually grew to encompass all of British history from the Roman conquest to the Glorious Revolution would need to cultivate a variety of ways of relating to the past, incorporating sympathy as well as philosophic elevation, actuality and vivacity as well as irony.

To accomplish all this, Hume called upon some of the most traditional elements of Western historical thought, as well as many of its most recent and innovative features. The still authoritative conventions of classical narrative historiography, dating back to Herodotus and Thucydides, the new tools of philosophical history to which Hume himself was a major contributor, eighteenth-century wit and sensibility: all these historiographical and literary

modes contributed in essential ways to the richness of Hume's narrative. Other historians, as we will see, developed separate elements of this historiographical inheritance further, displaying more openly the tensions that underlay it. Hume's temperament, however, led in the opposite direction, establishing harmony between the several frameworks he had at hand. In the end, the greatness of the *History* lies both in the richness of its intellectual resources, new and old, and in the apparently easy mastery with which Hume summoned them to support his vision of England's past.<sup>9</sup>

### The Prospect of Parnassus

"My Own Life" possesses the complexity of retrospect; the prospective view was simpler. In January 1753, writing to his friend Clephane, Hume described his hopes for the history:

As there is no happiness without occupation, I have begun a work which will employ me several years, and which yields me much satisfaction. 'Tis a History of Britain, from the Union of the Crowns to the present time. I have already finished the reign of King James. My friends flatter me (by this I mean that they don't flatter me), that I have succeeded. You know that there is no post of honour in the English Parnassus more vacant than that of History. Style, judgement, impartiality, care—everything is wanting to our historians.<sup>10</sup>

For all the characteristic self-deflating wit, Hume speaks here without disguise or reservation about his desire for fame in English letters. More to the point, he makes it clear that his hopes rest as much on an absence in English letters as on confidence in his own literary powers. Style, judgment, impartiality, care—these were the hallmarks of the classical tradition, to whose continued authority in historiography Hume seems not to want to offer the slightest challenge. On the contrary, the failure of England to produce a suitable national history beckons to him, offering the promise that a literary Scotsman of no particular political connection might reasonably make his mark as a historian of England.

<sup>9</sup> All students of Hume's historical work are indebted to the scholarship of Duncan Forbes: *Hume's Philosophical Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1975). Other important studies include Giuseppe Giarrizzo, *David Hume, politico e storico* (Torino: Einaudi, 1962); Victor Wexler, *David Hume and the History of England*, *Memoirs of the American Philosophical Society*, vol. 131 (Philadelphia: Philosophical Society, 1979); David Fate Norton and Richard H. Popkin, *David Hume: Philosophical Historian* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1965); Nicholas Phillipson, *Hume* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 1989); David Livingstone, *Hume's Philosophy of Common Life* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1984); David Wootton, "Hume, 'the Historian,'" in *The Cambridge Companion to Hume*, ed. David Fate Norton (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1993), 281–312; Kidd, *Subverting Scotland's Past*; Hicks, *Neoclassical History*.

<sup>10</sup> David Hume to John Clephane, January 5, 1753, *Letters*, 1:170.

Hume's ambitions were personal, but they also coincided with a long-felt need.<sup>11</sup> Critics agreed that England possessed no national histories that could be compared to the modern classics of France and Italy, much less the best of the ancients. "Our writers had commonly so ill succeeded in history," wrote one reviewer of Hume's *History*, "the Italians, and even the French, had so long continued our acknowledged superiors, that it was almost feared that the British genius, which had so happily displayed itself in every other kind of writing, and gained the prize in most, yet could not enter in this. The historical work Mr. Hume has published discharged our country from this opprobrium."<sup>12</sup>

Britain's lack of dignified and correct histories made for a notable absence. In general, the country's slowness to develop national schools of arts or letters aggravated a sense of inferiority to France that is a persistent theme of British cultural history. It is worth speculating, however, on the particular anxieties that attach themselves to historical writing, since it is hard to silence the doubt that a nation lacking a great national historian also lacks a great history. Indeed, it had long been a rhetorical commonplace that without the eloquence of a poet or a historian to praise them, the deeds of even the greatest heroes would soon be forgotten. Writing in just this vein, Adam Ferguson observed that much of the fame of Greece and Rome could be attributed, not so much to the substance of their history, "but to the manner in which it has been delivered, and to the capacity of their historians, and other writers." If the Greek world had come to us only in the trivial factual records of "the mere journalist," Ferguson concludes, we would never have distinguished the Greeks from their barbaric neighbors.<sup>13</sup>

Hume's own circle in Scotland shared this disparaging view of English historiography. In his *Lectures on Rhetoric*, first delivered in 1748, Adam Smith heaps praises on the classical historians, but dismisses Clarendon, Burnet, and Rapin with brief and unfavorable remarks.<sup>14</sup> (See chapter 3.) Hugh Blair, Smith's successor as lecturer on rhetoric, offered similar views. To him it was evident that in modern times the "Historical Genius" had shown itself most prominently in Italy, though France, too, had made great contributions. Britain, however, "till within these few years," has had little to show (284). But Blair's

<sup>11</sup> Hicks, *Neoclassical History*, chap. 1.

<sup>12</sup> *Annual Register* 4 (1761): 301–4, quoted in Hicks, *Neoclassical History*, 197–98.

<sup>13</sup> Adam Ferguson, *An Essay on the History of Civil Society*, ed. Fania Oz-Salzberger (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1996), 185. It should be added that Ferguson's recognition of the power of eloquence takes a form very characteristic of his age. His meditation on the historical fame of the Greeks and Romans reflects a conflict between his veneration of the classics and the new stadial view of history that he pioneered. In light of the Enlightenment's historical sociology, it was difficult to assert that "the character of civility pertained even to the Romans" until late in their history.

<sup>14</sup> Adam Smith, *Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles Lettres*, ed. J. C. Bryce (Indianapolis: Liberty, 1985), 115–16. Subsequent references will be given in the text.

*Lectures on Rhetoric* was published late enough to reflect the reversal of this old deficiency. “During a long period, English Historical Authors were little more than dull Compilers,” he adds, “till of late the distinguished names of Hume, Robertson, and Gibbon, have raised the British character, in this species of Writing, to high reputation and dignity” (285).

### **The New Rules of Historical Composition: Hugh Blair**

As his letter to Clephane indicates, Hume’s ambition to write a national history that would earn lasting fame meant that he would largely work within the prestigious idiom of the classical tradition. What was at stake, then, as Hume set out to accomplish his task, was not so much whether he would model his work on classical lines, but how successfully he could adapt the conventions of ancient historiography to the needs of a society whose commitment to commerce and modern manners rendered the task of the historian decisively different from what it had once been. In fact, though recent commentary has had surprisingly little to say about the classicizing strain of Hume’s historiography, there are many signs of the *History of England*’s filiation to a long tradition of classical narratives. Its elevated diction, its pairing of “speeches” or analyses on significant occasions, its retrospective summations of character at the end of reigns, its annalistic structure, the linearity of the narrative, combined with strong didactic motifs, all mark out the importance of this lineage.

In the next chapter, I will examine in detail some of the ways in which Hume adapted classicizing conventions to his own purposes and audience. For the present, I want to look more programmatically at what it meant to work within the broad compositional or rhetorical structures set by contemporary prescriptions for historical writing. A helpful resource here is Hugh Blair’s *Rhetoric* (1783), a work that better than any other tells us about the expectations that both Hume and Clephane would have had in mind when imagining the sort of history that could earn a post of honor in the English Parnassus.<sup>15</sup>

Blair’s *Lectures* not only sets out the broad assumptions of the age regarding historical composition, but also shows how easily its conventional classicism absorbed other contemporary influences. His opening definition, speaking in long-familiar terms, attempts to fix the nature of history as a mix of mimetic and didactic purposes:

<sup>15</sup> Blair was less original a rhetorician than Smith, whose work will be discussed in chapter 3. For this very reason, Blair’s popular and influential work seems a better guide to opinion. The book was not published until 1783, but it began life as a course of public lectures in 1759–60 and apparently underwent very little revision after 1760—six years after the first volume of Hume’s *History* appeared. See Wilbur S. Howell, *Eighteenth-Century British Logic and Rhetoric* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1971), 648–74.

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. He must neither be a Panegyrist, nor a Satyrist. He must not enter into faction, nor give scope to affection: but, contemplating past events and characters with a cool and dispassionate eye, must present to his Readers a faithful copy of human nature. (259–60)

To this point, the emphasis rests on truthful imitation, but in the course of further discussion, the balance shifts from imitation to instruction. A faithful record of facts, Blair goes on to say, is not enough; properly speaking, history is the kind of “record as enables us to apply the transactions of former ages for our own instruction.” What is more, the facts recorded must be “momentous and important,” and they must be “unfolded in a clear and distinct order” so that events are connected to their causes and their consequences. “For wisdom is the great end of History” (260).

Like his classical mentors, from whom the idea of history as both imitative and didactic literature derives, Blair seems unself-conscious about this shifting emphasis, and certainly he has no inclination to probe the possible tensions between the two. In practice, the mixture is stabilized by his sense of decorum. History as a public discourse is endowed with its own particular obligations and responsibilities: witness, in the passage just quoted, the connection that is assumed between great events, the tracing of causes and consequences, and the wisdom that history teaches. History, Blair goes on to say, serves “to enlarge our views of the human character, and to give full exercise to our judgment on human affairs.” Accordingly, the historian “must sustain the character of a wise man, writing for the instruction of posterity” (260).

In short, history’s public responsibilities determine its style, structure, and decorum. The historian must maintain a proper dignity, avoiding colloquialism, vulgarity, or affectation of wit. Equally, his narrative must be clearly articulated and tightly controlled. “The first virtue of Historical Narration,” writes Blair, “is Clearness, Order, and due Connection” (272). The history should not seem to be made up of unconnected parts. Rather it should be held together by “some connecting principle”—an effect that is easiest in histories of the Sallustian type that trace a single episode, but one that it is still possible to achieve even in general history. In larger narratives of this type—Polybius is cited as the preeminent example—unity in the story depends on a wider intellectual clarity. The historian must master his subject, seeing it whole and comprehending “the chain and dependance of all its parts, that he may introduce every thing in its proper place” (273).

All this stands as a summary of the qualities of rationality, linearity, and dignity that continued to define narratives written in the classical tradition—

the same qualities Hume had evoked in his letter when he spoke of “style, judgment, impartiality, care.” But there are elements in Blair’s longer description that indicate the presence of other literary and rhetorical ideas, largely sentimentalist in inspiration. These elements blend with the dominant classicism to produce a mix highly characteristic of the literature of the second half of the eighteenth century.

Some of the most telling examples come from passages written in praise of the ancient historians. It is only to be expected, of course, that Blair’s aesthetic vocabulary would be that of the age of Gray or Goldsmith; even so, it is striking to see the great ancient histories applauded as “picturesque” or “interesting.”<sup>16</sup> Tacitus in particular comes in for praise voiced in distinctively sentimentalist terms: Blair salutes him as a writer “eminent for his knowledge of the human heart . . . sentimental and refined in a high degree” (270). Tacitus’s descriptions of the deaths of several of his characters are deeply affecting. “He paints with a glowing pencil; and possesses, beyond all Writers, the talent of painting, not to the imagination merely, but to the heart” (279).<sup>17</sup>

Blair stresses that historical narrative needs to create interest through the sort of details that give a sense of actuality to events: “It is by means of circumstances and particulars properly chosen,” he writes, “that a narration becomes interesting and affecting to the Reader. These give life, body, and colouring to the recital of facts, and enable us to behold them as present, and passing before our eyes.” This facility is what is “properly termed Historical Painting” (274–75).

Sentimentalist judgments of this sort were a common feature of historical criticism in this period. They appear to reduce the traditional stress on truthful mimesis and public instruction in favor of other qualities that bring the historical scene before the reader’s eyes. In fact, spectatorial criticism of this sort does not so much abandon mimesis and instruction as redefine both in important ways. Blair’s remarks on “Historical Painting” establish actuality (or presence) as the guiding principle of mimesis, while redefining instruction as dependent upon readerly interest or sympathy. Yet Blair, like other critics who wrote in the same vein, says nothing to indicate that he saw any conflict between these sentimental revisions and his general view of the dignity and rationality of historical writing—a genre that he continues to insist is “addressed to our judgment, rather than to our imagination” (260–61).<sup>18</sup>

Blair also found some important deficiencies in the ancient historians—deficiencies that reveal other pressures to revise the canons of neoclassical

<sup>16</sup> Despite some defects, Blair writes, “it may be safely asserted, that we have no such historical narration, so elegant, so picturesque, so animated, and so interesting, as that of Herodotus, Thucydides, Xenophon, Livy, Tacitus, and Sallust!” (*Lectures on Rhetoric*, 257).

<sup>17</sup> Blair is probably echoing Smith’s views on Tacitus. On which, see below, chapter 3.

<sup>18</sup> For spectatorial views in Smith and Kames, see below, chapter 3.

taste. While the ancients excelled in the art of narrative, it was also clear to Blair that they lacked the “political knowledge” that the modern world, with its wider horizons, possessed. Their distrust of foreigners, their narrowly confined political experience, and the limited audience for which their histories were written meant that they gave little attention to explaining the questions of “domestic policy” that interest modern readers:

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. (269)

Here we see the impact of new understandings of society on conventional definitions of historical knowledge. Traditionalist though he was in so many ways, Blair felt sure that it was the historian’s task to describe “the political constitution, the force, the revenues, the internal state” of the country (270). For the same reasons, he praised Thucydides, Polybius, and Tacitus, while pronouncing Livy an elegant writer, but one who is little help in understanding the real causes of Roman greatness or decline (269). Even so, Blair remained faithful to the narrative traditions of classical historiography, and he cautioned against allowing excessive didacticism to interrupt the flow of narrative. In doing so, he demonstrated clearly, if unwittingly, the added strain that the philosophical tone of much eighteenth-century writing put on the customary compromise between mimesis and instruction. “But when we demand from the Historian profound and instructive views of his subject,” he writes, “it is not meant that he should be frequently interrupting the course of his History, with his own reflections and speculations” (270–71). When a historian is too ready to “philosophize and speculate,” the reader will suspect that he has shaped his “narrative of facts” to the needs of a favorite system. In short, history must instruct us through the medium of narrative itself; only rarely is it advisable for the historian to deliver his instruction “in an avowed and direct manner” (271). Even so, Blair rejected the Thucydidean convention of inserted orations, which he felt solved the problem of maintaining narrative continuity only by introducing fiction into its pages. In this regard, he went against the judgment of his predecessor, Adam Smith, who—still more the classicist—firmly maintained the propriety of this device.

Blair completes his review of historiography by examining “the inferior kinds of Historical Composition”—an indication of the contemporary popularity of these minor historical genres, which so diversified the literature of history in the eighteenth century.<sup>19</sup> Annals he quickly dismissed as mere compilations of fact—mimesis, we might say, without instruction. Memoirs, on the other hand, held more interest, though of a rather dangerous kind. A few

<sup>19</sup> Blair also discusses “Fictitious history” (i.e. the novel) in a subsequent section.

memoirs approach the dignity of legitimate histories, but in general Blair was contemptuous of the negligence and self-display of the lesser genre—one that, significantly, he associates with French tastes and talents (285–86). In contrast, Blair warmly praised the usefulness of biography. Less formal and stately than history itself, biography is no less instructive for most readers. The biographer is concerned as much with the private life of his subject as with public actions and may legitimately “descend” to giving an account of small and intimate details: “nay, it is from private life, from familiar, domestic, and seemingly trivial occurrences, that we often receive most light into the real character” (287).

Blair does not characterize the biographical reader, but other texts of the time make it clear that biography’s concern with private life makes it more suitable than history for women, youths, and a wide variety of other readers looking for private, rather than public, instruction. In these ways, biography occupies its own sphere of understanding, where it stands in a complementary relationship to history (see chapter 7). This distinct, if subordinate, dignity of biography contrasts with the less reliable qualities of memoir, where the division between private and public life is far less clear and the writer is tempted—or, as Blair says, “witched”—into self-revelations that lead him to wander capriciously through matters high and low, without due dignity or decorum. Biography also had the sanction of antiquity, particularly as practiced by its great ancient exemplar Plutarch, who was “fond of displaying his great men to us in the more gentle lights of retirement and private life” (288).

Having explored this hierarchy of lesser genres, Blair has not quite finished with his subject. “I cannot conclude the subject of History,” he writes, in a passage whose placement at the end of this section seems to indicate a modification of his earlier views,

without taking notice of a very great improvement which has, of late years, begun to be introduced into Historical Composition; I mean a more particular attention than was formerly given to laws, customs, commerce, religion, literature, and every other thing that tends to show the spirit and genius of nations. It is now understood to be the business of an able Historian to exhibit manners, as well as facts and events; and assuredly, whatever displays the state and life of mankind, in different periods, and illustrates the progress of the human mind, is more useful and interesting than the detail of sieges and battles. (288)

This concluding remark returns us to the unacknowledged tensions running through the discussion of history in his time, but does so characteristically with an air of imperturbable balance. Blair seems well aware of the innovative character of contemporary historical interests, but he found no difficulty in appending this discussion to a lecture that in so many ways reflected traditional prescriptions for historical narrative. Examined closely, the passage might be

read either as recognizing a substantial disruption of historical studies or as assuming a smooth continuity. The placement of the passage and its emphasis on the “improvement” in historical composition succeed in conveying the sense of effective continuities within an ancient and respected tradition. Yet Blair names vast areas of study that in classical or Renaissance practice were at best the domain of antiquarians. In doing so, he indicates clearly that these are not now matters of peripheral concern, but are as much the “business of an able Historian” as facts and events, and he concludes by insisting that the military subjects that had formed the core of ancient narratives have only a trivial interest by comparison.<sup>20</sup>

### A Matter of Balances

Hume’s practice, like Blair’s prescriptions, can be read as pointing to new, disruptive demands on historical writing or to the remarkable adaptiveness of older traditions. In the remainder of this chapter I will examine some of the balances in Hume’s writing, but my purpose is not simply to point out that Hume’s narrative depends on classical models even while it incorporates important elements of “philosophical” history, that his theory of politics makes him a “scientific whig” while his political commentary often has the appearance of Toryism, or that new readings of Hume have discovered sentimentalism in a style once regarded as typically ironic. These elements are all important, as is their diversity, but there seems limited value in simply pointing to their presence in the text. Rather, as I indicated at the outset, I want to trace the ways in which these different elements in Hume’s historical vocabulary come together and especially to note the way each contributes to Hume’s control of both the politics and the poetics of historical distance. To restate this point in the manner of an earlier distinction, I want to indicate how in the *History of England* the modes of representation as well as the forms of argument combine to establish the sense of critical distance that, I believe, was a central objective of Hume’s historical studies.

When he had completed work on the second volume of this history, which covered the period of Charles II and James II, Hume summed up for his publisher the differences that the public might find between the two volumes: “I have always said to all my Acquaintance that if the first Volume bore a little

<sup>20</sup> On the importance of antiquities in ancient and early modern historiography, see the classic articles by Arnaldo Momigliano collected in successive volumes of his *Contributi* and reprinted in *Studies in Historiography*, as well as *The Classical Foundations of Modern Historiography* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: U of California P, 1990). I have offered a critique of these views in “Reconsiderations on History.”

of a Tory Aspect, the second wou'd probably be as grateful to the opposite Party." The difference, he explained, was owing to a fundamental shift in the way government was understood:

The two first Princes of the house of Stuart were certainly more excusable than the two second. The Constitution was in their time very ambiguous and undetermin'd, and their Parliaments were, in many respects, refractory and obstinate: But Charles the 2d knew, that he had succeeded to a very limited Monarchy: His long Parliament was indulgent to him, and even consisted almost entirely of Royalists; yet he cou'd not be quiet, nor contented with a legal Authority. I need not mention the Oppressions in Scotland nor the absurd Conduct of K. James the 2d. These are obvious and glaring Points.<sup>21</sup>

The passage is a useful compression of Hume's views on the politics of this crucial period and especially of his verdict on the policies of the Stuart kings. Hume's judgment on these rulers as individuals clearly rests on his central constitutional thesis, namely that the English constitution before 1688 (and especially before 1660) was an uncertain and irregular arrangement, not to be compared to the better-regulated mix of liberty and prerogative initiated by the Glorious Revolution. Equally, the passage reminds us that in Hume's eyes many of the failures of English historiography sprang from the willingness of both Whig and Tory historians to ignore the changing foundation of English government, so strongly did both sides share a desire to make of the constitution a firm and transhistorical entity. Characteristic, too, is the lesson Hume drew for the success of his own work. Attentive as always to audience and reputation, he writes that he now wished he had published the two volumes together: "Neither one Party nor the other, wou'd in that Case, have had the least Pretext of reproaching me with Partiality."<sup>22</sup>

In a letter of the following year, Hume returned to much the same concern, but found a new way to formulate his commitment to impartiality: "With regard to politics and the character of princes and great men, I think I am very moderate. My views of *things* are more conformable to Whig principles; my representations of *persons* to Tory prejudices. Nothing can so much prove that men commonly regard more persons than things, as to find that I am commonly numbered among the Tories."<sup>23</sup>

Unlike the previous letter, this passage says nothing about specific historical interpretations, but its apparently simple division between things and persons points to fundamental balances that give the *History* some of its most character-

<sup>21</sup> David Hume to Andrew Millar, April 12, 1755, *Letters*, 1:217–18.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 218

<sup>23</sup> David Hume to John Clephane, 1756 (month uncertain), *ibid.*, 1:237. Hume begins with the still more dangerous question of religious partisanship, an area where he now admitted to have demonstrated a lack of judgment in appearing *too* detached.

istic qualities. Hume's explicit meaning, of course, has to do with the issues of party politics, which I have touched on several times. But beyond these political questions, Hume's distinction carries implications for historiographical method that for our purposes are still more important. Hume's phrasing suggests that he has had in mind two quite different kinds of histories, which he has tried to marry in a single work. On the one hand, the *History* offers philosophical "views of things"; on the other, it showcases several brilliant "representations of persons." Thus, in this quickly drawn distinction between modes of writing appropriate to personal and to impersonal subjects, Hume signals the tension emerging in his day between two historiographical conventions: the exemplary narrative of humanist or neoclassical historiography and the newer, more systematic arguments of philosophical history. Historiographically, then, as well as politically, he represents himself as having to balance two large and seemingly antithetical frameworks, neither of which alone is sufficient for the work he wants to do.

Unfortunately, the scholarly literature on Hume does not make it easy to assess this balance. Intellectual historians have given more thought to Hume's political and philosophical views than to the complex achievement of his narrative. This prejudice in favor of those elements of history that can be reduced to abstract doctrine ("my view of things") is all too common in historiographical studies, but it has seemed almost irresistible in dealing with a philosopher of Hume's eminence. In consequence, scholars have particularly stressed Hume's contributions to the new eighteenth-century genre of philosophical history, leaving a virtual silence about the large proportion of the *History of England* that is so evidently founded on classical models of historical narrative.<sup>24</sup>

It is not hard to understand why this selective picture has come into being. In recent decades historians of ideas have reacted against the long-standing prejudice that dismissed Hume's social and historical concerns as irrelevant to his philosophical career. The result has been a new recognition that his interest in historical subjects did not date from 1752, when serious work on the history began, but was in fact lifelong.<sup>25</sup> Not surprisingly, however, many commentators engaged in reintegrating Hume's historical interests into his philosophical career have focused on the explicitly philosophical elements in his thinking about history. Several scholars, for example, have stressed the importance of skeptical and conjectural methods in both the *Essays* and the *History*.<sup>26</sup> At the same time, the recent upsurge of interest in the Scottish Enlightenment's "contribution" to the development of the human sciences has brought with it

<sup>24</sup> Hicks's recent study is an exception: on Hume as neoclassical historian, see his *Neoclassical History*, chap. 7.

<sup>25</sup> On Hume's early interest in history, see Ernest Campbell Mossner, *The Life of David Hume* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1980), 301–2.

<sup>26</sup> See especially Norton and Popkin, *David Hume*; Phillipson, *Hume*; and Wootton, "Hume, the Historian."

a new sense of Hume's significance as a social and economic thinker. As a result, Hume can now be seen much more clearly as a practitioner as well as a theorist of the "Scottish enquiry."<sup>27</sup>

From a historiographical point of view, these revisions have brought some losses as well as gains. As I have already noted, renewed interest in Hume's historical career has come with an unbalanced reading of the *History* in which the "philosophical" elements capture all our attention at the expense of other, apparently less innovative features of the work. At the same time, to substantiate this picture of the philosopher-historian, scholars have drawn heavily on more plainly stated arguments found in the *Enquiries* and the *Essays*, overlooking important distinctions of genre. In consequence, those elements of Hume's historical thought that can be reduced to philosophical or political doctrines have been emphasized, at the cost of neglecting the complex understandings embodied in a variety of narrative practices.

### The "Philosophical Eye"

It is well beyond my scope to carry out an extensive review of Hume's philosophical writings. Rather I want to restrict discussion to the ways in which philosophical history enters into the overall narrative structure of the *History of England*. But before we turn to the *History*, it may be useful—especially for readers less familiar with this aspect of the Scottish Enlightenment—to indicate some of the main lines of Hume's thinking with regard to philosophical history.

Hume's distinction between "persons" and "things" can serve as a useful point of departure. We have already seen that this dichotomy implied the need to reconcile two modes of composition, summarized by Hume as "views" and "representations." In the essay "Of the Rise and Progress of the Arts and Sciences," however, the problem of history is reformulated as a matter of possibilities for philosophical understanding. "What depends upon a few persons is, in a great measure, to be ascribed to chance, or secret and unknown causes: What arises from a great number, may often be accounted for by determinate and known causes." The effective division, however, is not really between chance and causality, since Hume sets aside chance as an analytic dead end; instead, his real concern has to do with a contrast between causes operating

<sup>27</sup> For an early appreciation of Hume's contribution to political economy, see the editor's introduction to David Hume, *Writings on Economics*, ed. Eugene Rotwein (Madison: U of Wisconsin P, 1970). Somewhat earlier, A. F. Tytler gave his opinion that Hume was wrong to assign more lasting success to his philosophy than to his political essays, "which have served as the basis of that enlarged system of polity, which connects the welfare of every nation with the prosperity of all its surrounding states." *Memoirs of the Life and Writings of Henry Home of Kames*, 2 vols. (Edinburgh, 1807), 1:104–5.

on the many and those affecting the few. “The latter are commonly so delicate and refined, that the smallest incident in the health, education, or fortune of a particular person, is sufficient to divert their course . . . ; nor is it possible to reduce them to any general maxims or observations.”<sup>28</sup>

Thus, the difference between what affects the few and what affects the many (a distinction close to the earlier division between persons and things) has a good deal to do with what can be known in general terms and what must be understood in more contingent ways—implicitly the particularized world of narrative. “To judge by this rule,” he continues, “the domestic and the gradual revolutions of a state must be a more proper subject of reasoning and observation, than the foreign and the violent, which are commonly produced by single persons, and are more influenced by whim, folly, or caprice, than by general passions and interests.”<sup>29</sup> For this reason, Hume continues, the rise of commerce is more easily accounted for than that of learning, since avarice is a more universal passion than curiosity for knowledge. Hume’s point, however, is obviously not to discourage an investigation of “the rise of the arts and sciences,” but to treat a subject dear to his heart with the caution it requires. In short, under the rubric of his general point about knowledge, Hume wants to indicate that historical knowledge incorporates a spectrum of understanding. Experiences common to all of humankind—those responding to “general passions and interests”—are simply those most susceptible to philosophical observation.

The “domestic and the gradual revolutions of a state,” the rise of commerce, the progress of learning, these subjects were open to the possibility of systematic understanding, and for that reason they were the proper territory of the philosophical historian. But there was another key reason to focus on questions concerning gradual change and the “general passions and interests” of humanity. This is Hume’s conviction that ultimately all government is founded on opinion, a view that turns all history, in effect, into a history of the human mind.

“Nothing appears more surprizing to those, who consider human affairs with a philosophical eye,” writes Hume in another essay, “than the easiness with which the many are governed by the few; and the implicit submission, with which men resign their own sentiments and passions to those of their rulers.” Force, he continues, is always on the side of the governed, while the governors have nothing to support their position but opinion. “It is therefore, on opinion only that government is founded; and this maxim extends to the most despotic and most military governments, as well as to the most free and most popular.”<sup>30</sup> Opinion in this sense is necessarily a very capacious term, and in this brief

<sup>28</sup> Hume, *Essays*, 112.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>30</sup> Hume, “Of the First Principles of Government,” in *Essays*, 32.

essay Hume includes under it “opinion of interest” and “opinion of right”; the former amounts to a recognition of social utility, the latter incorporates ideas of power, property, and tradition (“sanction of antiquity”).<sup>31</sup> Hume admits that fear, affection, and self-interest also enter into governing, but they suppose the “antecedent influence” of opinion; they are, he says, the secondary principles of government, not the original.<sup>32</sup>

Hume’s “axiom” that beneath the appearance of force lies the reality of opinion carries large implications not just for origins of government, but for the writing of history. Historical writing, after all, had traditionally focused on the actions of the few, whereas Hume suggests that a history written with a “philosophical eye” would depict the changing climate of opinion as it affected the interests, fears, and affections of humankind. How, in practice, would such a history be written? A model of a kind, though one remote from politics, might be Adam Smith’s remarkable (and very Humean) early “History of Astronomy”: a survey of astronomical doctrines from the Egyptians to Newton in which all such systems are considered “as mere inventions of the imagination.”<sup>33</sup> Among Hume’s own works, the *Natural History of Religion* is certainly a history of opinion, though as a conjectural history of religious feeling in the earliest stages of history, it lacks the concreteness of Smith’s essay. In this respect Hume’s essay “On the Populousness of Ancient Nations” is perhaps a better candidate. Though cast in the form of a treatise rather than a narrative, the essay examines a wide range of historical evidence concerned with the “moral causes” of population increase in order to cast doubt on the idea that the ancient world was more heavily populated than the modern.

Hume’s essay on population has been applauded as an example of his antiquarian abilities and his concern for source criticism.<sup>34</sup> But Hume shows very little of the antiquarian’s concern for textual criticism or recondite learning. Rather, as a reader of ancient sources, he most impresses us with his ability to pursue clues to the social habits of antiquity by asking questions that are oblique to the literal messages of the text. In turn, this ability to read texts symptomatically reflects the real strength of the essay, which lies in its resourceful pursuit of a simple but powerful hypothesis about the conditions affecting population levels. For Hume, the causes are not primarily physical

<sup>31</sup> For further discussion of Hume and the idea of tradition, see below, chapter 9.

<sup>32</sup> In the essay “Whether the British Government Inclines More to Absolute Monarchy, or to a Republic,” Hume repeats the central assumption of the earlier essay: “It may farther be said, that, though men be much governed by interest; yet even interest itself, and all human affairs, are entirely governed by *opinion*. Now, there has been a sudden and sensible change in the opinions of men within these last fifty years, by the progress of learning and of liberty” (*Essays*, 51).

<sup>33</sup> Smith, *Essays on Philosophical Subjects*, ed. W. P. D. Wightman and J. C. Bryce (Indianapolis: Liberty, 1982), 105.

<sup>34</sup> Wootton, “Hume, the Historian,” 288.

but “moral”—a matter of mind and manners (opinion), not of physical limitation. Since almost “every man who thinks he can maintain a family will have one,” Hume speculates, population will naturally increase, unless limited in some way.<sup>35</sup> For Hume, this question of limitation implies important consequences since it involves “their whole police, their manners, and the constitution of their government.” Accordingly, much of Hume’s effort is concerned with investigating the widespread ancient practice of slavery and establishing the depressing effect slavery must have had on the fertility of this broad sector of ancient populations.<sup>36</sup>

Two additional features of this essay should be mentioned. First, as a comparison of ancient and modern societies, the “Populousness of Ancient Nations” necessarily works with an extensive chronology, but the time-scale of the essay is owing to something more than its subject alone. In essence, the essay stands as a fragment of a universal history—a study of fertility in all times and places—and this distancing frame is essential in establishing many of the particular judgments it contains. Second, the essay is avowedly skeptical in its stance. “If I can make it appear,” writes Hume, “that the conclusion is not so certain as is pretended, in favour of antiquity, it is all I aspire to.”<sup>37</sup> This deliberate methodological skepticism in the face of received truths is also characteristic of the “philosophic eye.”

We could pursue these themes much further in Hume’s nonnarrative works, but my real interest lies in examining the philosophical outlook as it helps shape the *History of England*. Before exploring the *History*, however, it may be useful to summarize some of the basic features that have already been mentioned. The essence of philosophical history is the desire to move toward more general truths and systematic methods in the study of history. As a result, the philosophical method does not stand wholly apart from traditional narrative, but is linked to it as a form of critique. In a positive vein, the philosophic method links the possibility of systematic knowledge to the historian’s engagement with the most general of causes, namely the “general passions and interests” of humankind. Reciprocally, by establishing historical understanding on the basis of the passions, the philosophical historian can be said to put the human mind at the center of the story, thus shifting the ground of history from action to experience and perception (“opinion”). Clearly the new approach shifts the center of historical concern away from statecraft to a wider terrain that incorporates both everyday activity and inward life: what Hume calls the “domestic and the gradual revolutions of the state.” At the same time, by appealing as far as possible to the most general causes, philosophical history

<sup>35</sup> Hume, “Of the Populousness of Ancient Nations,” in *Essays*, 381.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 383 ff.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 381.

constitutes itself as a kind of universal history, encompassing (potentially) not only the fullest chronologies and geographies, but also the widest range of human experience in society.

### **Philosophical History and the *History of England***

Both the manner and the materials of the philosophical historian can be found throughout the *History of England*, but since Hume gave particular prominence to these concerns in four appendices, I will begin with them. In these four chapters, Hume surveys the constitutional order, manners, commerce, and arts in Saxon, feudal, Elizabethan, and Jacobean England. Hume composed his *History* in reverse order, however, beginning with the Stuart volumes and working his way back to the earliest times, so these sections were composed in reverse order. Not surprisingly, the appendices pursue many of the same themes as the essays and exhibit many essaylike features. Yet despite the obvious similarities in content, the change in context creates very significant differences. Here the arguments of the philosophical historian, though frequently relished in themselves, inevitably take on a narrative function, if not always an explicitly narrative form.

The appendices should not, then, be taken as so many essays dropped into the body of the history. Rather, they are part of Hume's attempt to solve some of the pressing difficulties he faced in moving between two very different concepts of historical composition. The appendices make it possible for the historian to give full attention from time to time to aspects of society that in the main stream of political narrative could find only a limited scope. At the cost of violating the decorum of humanist narrative in this way, Hume's procedure—one of a number of such experiments in this time—establishes sight lines that run through the work as a whole, connecting together a distinctive set of themes and observations. The effect is to ensure that every reader will understand that the *History* always requires attention to more than one level of narrative and explanation. Yet by labeling these chapters "appendices," an innovation that he settled on only in the second edition, Hume also paid deference to the primacy of narrative as prescribed by classical tradition. Sometimes the narrative implications of Hume's philosophical "views" are quite clear. In the third appendix, for instance, which closes the Tudor volume, we encounter again the distinction between particular and general causes already familiar from the essay "Of the Rise of the Arts and Sciences." In the context of the *History*, however, albeit in one of its nonnarrative sections, the observation inevitably takes on new concreteness. "There were many peculiar causes in the situation and character of Henry VII. which augmented the authority of

the crown: Most of these causes concurred in succeeding princes; together with the factions in religion, and the acquisition of the supremacy, a most important article of prerogative: But the manners of the age were a general cause, which operated during this whole period, and which continually tended to diminish the riches, and still more the influence, of the aristocracy, anciently so formidable to the crown."<sup>38</sup>

Even where the fit between philosophical instruction and mimetic narrative is less obvious, Hume's philosophical "views" necessarily carry narrative implications, since, for all their didacticism, the appendices are to be read as representations of manners and customs of the times. As such, they describe four crucial moments of English history: Saxon barbarity, Norman feudalism, Elizabethan absolutism, and finally the confused progress of constitution, arts, and manners that marked off early Stuart society from its successor in the eighteenth century. Static when read singly, these four nonnarrative chapters are linked together as a history of a different sort—one that moves above or below the ordinary level of political action to constitute a kind of sketch for a history of civilization in England.

I have spoken of four historical moments, but a crucial fifth stage, the mid-eighteenth-century present, is implicit throughout. In the fourth appendix, which falls after the death of James I, comparison to the present is particularly frequent and explicit. (This section, we should remind ourselves, though it deals with the most recent period of history, was the first in order of composition.) Here, in the absence of the high degree of thematic unity that would mark his first and second appendices (examinations of barbaric and feudal societies), the comparison between the present and the relatively recent past becomes a major organizing principle of the chapter.

Whether silent or voiced, reference to the present is particularly useful to Hume in discussing manners, in part perhaps because contrastive distance provides a kind of thematic unity to a discussion of everyday life that is hard to unify in any other way. "High pride of family then prevailed," Hume writes, "and it was by a dignity and stateliness of behaviour, that the gentry and nobility distinguished themselves from the common people. . . . Much ceremony took place in the common intercourse of life, and little familiarity was indulged by the great" (5:132). In such descriptions, the manners of the past are only visible against the backdrop of present assumptions. "The country life prevails at present in England beyond any cultivated nation of Europe; but it was then

<sup>38</sup> There is no critical edition of the *History*; I cite the most available edition: *The History of England from the Invasion of Julius Caesar to the Revolution in 1688*, foreword by William B. Todd, 6 vols. (1778 ed.; rpt. Indianapolis: Liberty, 1983), 4:383–84. Subsequent citations are given in the text. For more on Hume's explanation of the ascendancy of the crown and the decline of aristocratic power, see chapter 9 below.

much more generally embraced by all the gentry. The encrease of arts, pleasures, and social commerce was just beginning to produce an inclination for the softer and more civilized life of the city" (5:133). A similar structure underlies much of what Hume has to say about the history of commerce, as, for example, when Hume asserts that a "catalogue of the manufactures, for which the English were then eminent, would appear very contemptible, in comparison of those which flourish among them at present" (5:143).

Such passages may remind readers of Macaulay's famous review of the state of British society at the accession of James II. Macaulay's chapter is often cited as a forerunner to the social concerns of modern historians, an honor not extended to Hume. But the real difference between their surveys of British society has less to do with the nature of their fundamental questions than with their different attitudes toward historical change and what I have been calling historical distance. In Macaulay the signs of material change serve to give tangible evidence to support his vision of pervasive progress. Hume, for his part, saw signs of rupture as well as of progress. Accordingly, the appendices insist on the essential differences that make it unwise to draw any direct lines from past to present.

The fourth appendix, for example, begins with just this note: "We may safely pronounce, that the English government, at the accession of the Scottish line, was much more arbitrary, than it is at present; the prerogative less limited, the liberties of the subject less accurately defined and secured" (5:124). Similarly, mention of the "ancient constitution" at the beginning of the third appendix is followed by the explanation that in fact there was a still more ancient constitution before that, and yet another before that (4:355). Nor should we see these ruptures as confined to some abstraction called the constitution. Witness Hume's remark in the fourth appendix that the "manners of the nation were agreeable to the monarchical government, which prevailed; and contained not that strange mixture, which, at present, distinguishes England from all other countries" (5:132).

At the opening of the fourth appendix, Hume writes that without a knowledge of the constitution and manners of the age, "history can be little instructive, and often will not be intelligible" (5:124). Beyond this, however, he offers almost nothing on the way in which the history sketched in the appendices would relate to the main body of the narrative that surrounds and contains it. Yet it is perfectly clear that he aligned these two elements of his work with great self-consciousness. In the first edition of the Stuart volume, for example, this same survey of government and manners appears in the body of the work, where it is introduced with a brief apology for "departing a little from the historical style." In later editions this apology was dropped, but the survey became the "Appendix to the Reign of James I." This change obviously brought the narrative proper closer to classical models, but it also indicated Hume's preference for a structural solution to the problem of balancing his

two histories. Henceforward, he left the counterpoint between the two elements entirely unspoken.

The placement of the first appendix is also instructive. Here Hume surveys the customs and manners of the Anglo-Saxons, making little distinction between the Germanic tribesmen described by Tacitus and the rulers of England many centuries later. Yet Hume positions this rather static overview of barbaric society very precisely between the close of the battle of Hastings and the further stages of Norman conquest that followed the death of the Saxon king. For the space of twenty-five pages, the narrative is temporarily suspended, while the character of the defeated people is anatomized.<sup>39</sup> This digression into early ethnography does not suggest, however, that Hume intended to emphasize the disjunction between these two elements of his work. Rather, the placement of the appendix bears considerable resemblance, in function as well as form, to the character sketches that historians traditionally inserted at the end of the reigns of important monarchs—an impression that is reinforced by the similar placement of the other appendices. Indeed, it may well be that for a writer who had his eye on Parnassus, this analogy with an older convention made the formal innovation possible, against the objections of purists, like his friend Adam Smith, who thought that in historical writing any deviation from narrative was simply unacceptable.

### **The Philosophical Method: Criticisms and Constraints**

I want to end this discussion of the various historiographical programs of the eighteenth century by looking at some objections that were raised against the philosophical method. These criticisms had much to do with the way in which this innovation in historiography was absorbed into practice. In the absence of any explicit commentary from Hume, once again it will be necessary to look to his Scottish contemporaries, Smith and Blair, whose views on historical composition shed some light on Hume's intentions.

In this connection, it is worth reminding ourselves of the extent of the contradiction between the two predominant modes of historical representation. As an innovation in historical understanding, the philosophical method ran counter to many of the assumptions of humanist historiography. The new emphasis on manners and opinion as the foundation of social experience radically undercut

<sup>39</sup> "The Norman army left not the field of battle without giving thanks to heaven, in the most solemn manner, for their victory: And the prince, having refreshed his troops, prepared to push to the utmost his advantage against the divided, dismayed, and discomfited English" (1:159). So ends chapter 3, which immediately precedes the first appendix.

It should be noted that Hume includes smaller surveys of arts and manners at the ends of a number of reigns.

the authority of the traditional narrative of public events. As a result it became a commonplace to decry the emptiness of conventional histories with their stories of kings and generals. It is characteristic, however, of the sideways movements of intellectual history that the answer to the philosophical critique was not pitched at this level of historical understanding; rather, it came effectively in continued discussions of rules of historical composition, such as Smith's and Blair's, where the norms of Thucydidean narrative, however modified, remained predominant. Traditional historiography, in short, was defended as a matter of genre, not of social analysis, and on this level there was as yet no real reply.

Adam Smith's *Lectures on Rhetoric* is highly critical of philosophical innovations. "The Dissertations which are everywhere interwoven into Modern Histories," writes Smith, "contribute among other things and that not a little to render them less interesting than those wrote by the Ancients" (102). Smith has primarily in mind the interruption of the narrative to prove a learned or controversial point—an objection also shared by Hume—but he is just as severe about philosophical as about learned digressions:

The same objections that have been mentioned against Long Demonstrations hold equally against Reflexions and observations that exceed the length of too [*sic*] or three sentences. If one was to point out to us some interesting spectacle, it would surely be very disagreeable in the most engaging part to interrupt us and turn our attention from it by desiring us to attend to the fine contrivance of the parts of the object or the admirable exactness with which the whole was carried on. (102)

This is a nice parody of the excesses of the "philosophical eye," but for Smith this sort of inappropriate kibitzing is exactly what is produced by philosophical digressions: "The historian who brings in long reflections acts precisely in the same manner, he withdraws us from the most interesting part of the narration" (103).

Smith connects the modern habit of intruding dissertations into historical narration to the spread of political and religious sectarianism. Since all parties now make arguments from history, the "Truth and Evidence of Historicall facts" has come to be more closely scrutinized (102). This is an astute observation, which makes particular sense in relation to the kind of inelegant and contentious factional narratives Hume thought typical of English historiography. Smith's observation misses the possibility, however, that—in reaction to these same sectarian battles—a historian might very well wish to "withdraw us" from some parts of history that others have found all too "interesting." As I have already indicated, just such a distancing motive was, in fact, fundamental to Hume's procedures.

Smith's view derives in part from a kind of purism about ancient practices, as well as from the strict division he maintains between historical and demonstrative writing. (See chapter 3.) But a further element here is his assump-

tion that the main aim of historical narration is to cultivate in the reader a kind of immediate engagement that digressions can only undercut. Hume's practice suggests that he did not share Smith's view, or—more accurately—that rather than prescribing a single historical style or normative distance, as Smith seems to do, Hume wanted to balance passages that aim at cultivating sympathetic engagement with others that deliberately foster a kind of reflective detachment.

Hugh Blair was far less the purist than Smith on the matter of narrative, and his comments on philosophical history place him considerably closer to Hume's practice. Blair, we remember, speaks unequivocally in favor of philosophical method, which he considered a recent and "very great improvement" in historical composition. Though he attributed the change to Voltaire rather than Hume, Blair embraced the attention now given to laws, customs, commerce, religion, literature "and every other thing that tends to show the spirit and genius of nations" (288).

Still, Blair too had some doubts about the literary consequences of this new emphasis, and his comments on this score tell us something of the dangers as well as the advantages of the new method. In a passage I have already quoted, he writes: "But when we demand from the Historian profound and instructive views of his subject, it is not meant that he should be frequently interrupting the course of his History, with his own reflections and speculations." The historian should inform us about the "political constitution, the force, the revenues, the internal state of the country"—all characteristic topics of Hume's appendices. He should "place us, as on an elevated station, whence we may have an extensive prospect of all the causes that co-operate in bringing forward the events which are related" (270). Occasionally, too, Blair concedes, the narrative may be held in suspense while the historian enters into some weighty discussion. But for Blair, the philosophic historian's invitation to us to enjoy his "elevated station" and his "extensive prospects" also comes with a considerable risk to his credibility, and he warns that the historian should be careful to avoid too much airing of his own opinions. History should instruct by judicious narration rather than by too much explicit instruction: "When an Historian is much given to dissertation, and is ready to philosophise and speculate on all that he records, a suspicion naturally arises that he will be in hazard of adapting his narrative of facts to favour some system which he has formed to himself" (270).

The difference between Blair's objections and Smith's are instructive. Smith had warned that argumentative interruptions would distract attention from the narrative, resulting in a loss of the sense of actuality on which, so he believed, historical representation relies. Blair, for his part, worries that if the didactic intention is too strong, the mimetic dimension of the narrative of events will lose its appearance of fidelity. In effect, the reader will suspect that the narrative is contrived and one-sided: that is to say, not so much a faithful representa-

tion of events as a disguised argument. By extension, the history would also lose much of its power of instruction if its credibility as a faithful representation were lost.

In short, while Smith thought philosophical histories risked being dull, Blair suspected readers would find them strained or even false. In fact, in the case of David Hume, Blair's comments came very close to the mark, since a particularly vociferous group of contemporary critics read Hume's work as a work of irreligious propaganda. No doubt, Hume's reputation as a freethinker made such an attack more or less inevitable, but it is worth noting the way in which his stance as a philosophical historian unwittingly contributed to the particular angle of attack. One of the qualities of the history that gave enormous offense was Hume's air of lofty detachment in discussing matters of religion. Behind the historian's pose of detached, philosophical observation, Protestant critics like the Edinburgh clergyman Daniel MacQueen saw only a propagandist's attack on the Protestant Church and the party that supported it. MacQueen's outraged response is worth dwelling on for a moment, since—beyond the specifics of religious controversy—it serves to confirm the general tendency of the “philosophical” approach to produce a sense of historical detachment and distance.

Daniel MacQueen was offended by two passages in particular.<sup>40</sup> In the first, Hume applied his customary typology of religious behavior to the Reformation, seeing it as a contest between “two species of religion, the superstitious and the fanatical.” Hume's characterization of the leading reformers as “men inflamed with the highest enthusiasm” was certainly not calculated to please, nor did he bother to veil his irony when he speaks of how they “preached the doctrine of peace, and carried the tumults of war through every part of Christendom.”<sup>41</sup> But as much as anything else, what enraged these critics was Hume's pose of disengaged neutrality regarding the Reformation. The “elevated station” Hume occupied in matters of religion, already clear in the methods of his historical sociology, was made utterly explicit in a second passage attacked by MacQueen. The principal subject this time is the Roman Church:

Here it may not be improper in a few words, to give some account of the Roman-Catholic superstition, its genius and spirit. History addresses itself to a more distant posterity than will ever be reached by any local or temporary theology; and the characters of sects may be studied, when their controversies shall be totally forgotten.<sup>42</sup>

<sup>40</sup> Daniel MacQueen, *Letters on Hume's History of Great Britain* (1756; rpt. Bristol: Thoemmes, 1990), 7–11.

<sup>41</sup> Hume, *History of Great Britain* (Edinburgh, 1754), 8.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 25.

This elevation of history over theology understandably infuriated MacQueen, but another of Hume's critics, Joseph Towers, responded with an irony that was still more effective. It was indeed fortunate, Towers observed, "that the memory of these two inconsiderable sects should be transmitted to posterity through the channel of Mr. Hume's history."<sup>43</sup>

Hume eliminated both offending passages in subsequent editions, a recognition that in matters concerning England's national church, too much distance might be a dangerous thing.

<sup>43</sup> Joseph Towers, "Observations on Mr. Hume's *History of England*," in *Tracts on Political and Other Subjects* (1796), 319.