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British Intellectual History 1750–1950

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Part III

1 Historical distance and the historiography of eighteenth-century Britain

Mark Salber Phillips

I

In his essay 'Of Tragedy' David Hume offers a striking observation on Clarendon's *History of the Rebellion*. As Clarendon approaches the execution of King Charles, Hume writes, he

> supposes, that his narration must then become infinitely disagreeable; and he hurries over the king's death, without giving us one circumstance of it. He considers it as too horrid a scene to be contemplated with any satisfaction, or even without the utmost pain and aversion. He himself, as well as the readers of that age, were too deeply concerned in the events, and felt a pain from subjects, which an historian and a reader of another age would regard as the most pathetic and most interesting, and, by consequence, the most agreeable.[1]

Hume's sympathetic understanding of Clarendon's reticence, combined with the clear sense that the spectacle that had been most painful to an earlier generation had become most interesting to his own, highlights the issue I want to address in this essay: the question of historical distance, both as a general problem for historiographical narrative and as a specific issue in the historical writing of Hume's century. Hume clearly accepts the fact that both Clarendon and his audience found themselves in a kind of proximity to the regicide that ruled out many potential representations of that event, especially (we surmise) the kind of detailed, pathetic treatment that Hume himself would later offer his own readers in the *History of England*. Implicit, then, in his remarks, is an understanding that historical distance is a significant variable in historical accounts, affecting both the historian and his audience ('an historian and a reader of another age'). Implied, too, is the sense that the choice of historical distance (whatever the constraints under which the choice is made) is of fundamental

I am most grateful to Ed Hundert and Stefan Collini for their careful reading and criticism of this essay.

[1] David Hume, *Essays, Moral, Political and Literary* (Indianapolis, 1985), pp. 223–4. The present essay is a summary of a theme presented in greater detail in my forthcoming study, *Society and Sentiment; Genres of Historical Narrative in Britain, 1750–1820*.

importance in shaping the narrative and especially in governing the audience's emotional response to events.

Hume's retrospect on Clarendon points, then, to two kinds of distance. The first is the distance that separates the historian from the specific past under description. This is the sense of distance with which historians are most familiar. It refers, for example, to our present vantage on the horrors of the Holocaust or the Second World War, but its importance was already signalled in the early nineteenth century when Scott sub-titled his first great novel ''Tis Sixty Years Since'. Distance in this first sense has recently drawn a lot of attention, giving rise to a considerable literature on 'history and memory'. A second dimension of distance, however, remains largely unexplored and is my subject here. This is the sense, implicit in Hume's remarks, that historical narratives not only *reflect* distance but also *construct* it.

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. Thus historical distance, in the fuller sense I want to give it, refers to more than the passage of time that separated Hume from Clarendon or Clarendon from the regicide, just as it incorporates something more than the issue of affective engagement so prominent in Hume's essay as well as in other eighteenth-century descriptions. In this wider sense, historical distance indicates the sense of temporality constructed by every historical account as it positions its readers in relation to the past. It includes political as well as emotional engagement (or disengagement) and is the consequence of ideological choices, as well as formal and aesthetic ones. I would argue that in this enlarged and more complicated 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 or read history) it is one that has been neglected by both historians and literary scholars. I want to suggest, too, that paying attention to historical distance will help to shed light on some key issues in eighteenth-century historiography – not least the reasons why the works of even the greatest historians of this period came to be neglected or misread by later generations of readers.

The problems of historical representation Hume observed in relation to the traumas of the seventeenth century have become a major preoccupation for the historical consciousness of the twentieth, and it is disturbing to think that, in relation to the atrocities of this century, we too may now be swept up in the same transition from horrified reticence to pathos and even pleasure. (It would be hard to deny that some novelists, filmmakers, and scholars currently find the Holocaust a subject 'the most pathetic and most interesting, and, by consequence, the most agreeable'.)

By the same token, it must also be true that our growing recognition of the need to establish historical perspective even on the most horrifying events of recent times will give us some help in dealing with issues of historical distance as they arose for other generations. Unfortunately, the dichotomy of history and memory which structures so much current thinking about issues of historical representation is probably too simple to be of much help in exploring the larger stakes involved in historical distance. Indeed, the presumed opposition between the elongated perspectives of history and the closeness of memory may well obscure the issue: far from disclosing the potential variability of historical distance, as was suggested by Hume's remarks on Clarendon, such a dichotomy decides the issue before we have even begun.

I see two sorts of reasons why attention to questions of distance should be of particular interest to students of historiography. First, I want to argue that historical distance is a neglected, but important variable in historical accounts that is closely connected to both the politics and the poetics of historical writing. Consequently, attention to distance may give us ways of connecting a formal analysis of literary structures to an ideological discussion that seeks to place narrative in a world inhabited by active readers and their complex social and political interests. Second, I want to suggest that in the absence of critical attention to this dimension of historiographical practice, we have found it too easy to issue pronouncements on the nature of history that implicitly erect a single standard of distance as a norm for all historical work. In fact, norms of historical distance are themselves products of history and they have changed markedly over time. For this reason dogmatic constructions of distance are especially evident when historians and critics of one age set themselves in judgement on the works of another, a point which I will illustrate at the end of this essay by looking at some vicissitudes in Hume's reputation as a historian.

II

I began by suggesting that every historical account must position its audience in some relationship of closeness or distance to the events and experiences 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 recognise that there is no single stance that is proper for all works of history. Rather, appropriate distance can be highly variable and will shift markedly even within the confines of a single text. Moreover, the textual strategies that establish distance can range from ones that place events at a

considerable conceptual or emotional remove to those that demand immediate response. What I am calling distance, in other words, necessarily incorporates the full range of positionings, both near and far. Distance refers to the possibility of making 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 emphasise the objectivity, irony, or philosophical sweep of the historian's vision. At the same time, we need to recognise that a desire to evoke the closeness of the past does not necessarily lead to commemoration; as Nietzsche and Foucault both demonstrate, a keen sense of the presence of history can serve as the prelude to a repudiation of the past rather than its preservation. Equally, though the long view is often invoked for purposes of ironic detachment, it can also serve to ground a profession of faith, whether in the power of Reason (as in Hegel or Marx) or the endurance of the nation (as in Burke or Braudel).

In practice, the determination of historical distance is a matter of balance or tension between these opposing impulses, and, as I have said, even within a single work the balance will shift and adjust. These variations may register different emotional or ideological 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 concept 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.

This observation that historical distance is the product of a dialectic intrinsic to the way in which historical accounts work has a number of implications for the study of historiography. Some of these have to do with the dynamics of the individual work, some with questions of genre, and some with periodic changes in assumptions about historical thought and composition. For each of these levels of discussion – text, genre, period-style – I will begin by outlining some ways in which the question of distance can be approached. Later, I will return to each of these dimensions of the problem and offer some illustrations drawn from the historiography of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.

Let me begin at the level of the study of individual texts. Here recognition of the dialectics of historical distance points towards a broad inquiry concerned with identifying 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 features of historical writing that uniformly produce effects of proximity or distanciation in some equally universalised 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 historically specific reading publics.

Considering distance in the way I am suggesting calls for attention to matters of audience as well as of authorship. The consequence will be an added degree of complexity, since we will need both a social and a narratological analysis in order to comprehend the ways in which a history mediates the relationship between its intended readership and a chosen past. As a point of departure, however, this combination of formal and social concerns seems more hopeful than the usual habit of grouping histories under the flag of rival philosophical or political schools. Historical writing, it still seems necessary to say, is not simply an extension of politics by other means. Party labels serve a purpose, of course, but they encourage us to focus attention on the biographical circumstances of historians or their abstract intellectual programmes at the expense of pursuing genuine textual analysis.

On another level, distance is also an important feature of history considered as a genre, or as I prefer to think of it, as a family of related genres and sub-genres. (For the eighteenth century, this family would include not only the familiar narratives of national history such as Hume's, but also local histories, histories of manners, conjectural histories, and literary histories, as well as a good deal of writing in such closely related genres as biography, memoir, and travel.) This approach to history as a family of closely related genres is important to my argument for reasons I need to explain very briefly. First, all genres are defined by relationships of contrast and competition with other related and rival literatures.[2] Accordingly, genre study needs to be especially alert to those features that articulate this competition for audiences and differentiate one group of texts from another. Over time, as new audiences and new questions arise, these differentiating features will tend to change. Accordingly, genre study is closely involved in tracing intellectual histories, of which it becomes a key instrument. Second, when thinking about genre, it is important to think about history's location on a larger map of literatures

[2] On genre, see Alastair Fowler, *Kinds of Literature; An Introduction to the Theory of Genres and Modes* (Oxford, 1982). I have discussed the usefulness of genre study for historiography in a critique of the 'tropology' of Hayden White, in my 'Historiography and Genre: A More Modest Proposal', *Storia della storiografia/Histoire de l'historiographie*, 24 (1993), pp. 119–32.

and disciplines. In the period I am considering, the historical genres occupied a key mediating position: on the one side, history was flanked by the rising new genre of the novel, on the other it was touched by the key new discipline of political economy. This mediating position meant that history was an important foil in the formation of new genres; reciprocally, it also meant that history absorbed into its own repertoire many of the practices of surrounding disciplines and genres. As a result, neighbouring literatures often provide us with the clearest indications of the direction of change in historical thought and practice.

Variations in distance – whether formal, conceptual, or affective – appear to be an important part of the way in which readers distinguish between competing genres of historical writing, or differentiate history from its nearer neighbours. The eighteenth century's taste for biography and memoir, for example, clearly owes a great 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 judgement.

Variation in historical 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 some of the aloof philosophical generality that eighteenth-century readers associated with 'the dignity of history' and sought to capture some of the evocative closeness that in the earlier period belonged primarily to the 'minor genres' of biography and memoir. It would be a mistake, however, to characterise the changes too narrowly as a literary-aesthetic movement; rather what is commonly labelled 'romantic historiography' belongs to a much broader reconfiguration of historical thought that manifests itself in a desire for a new sense of immediacy or historical presence.

Since distance has not been recognised as an important variable in historical accounts, such shifts either go unnoticed or are given partial and misleading labels. (The so-called 'revival of narrative', widely discussed in the 1980s, is a recent example of this kind of insufficient characterisa-

tion.[3]) Early nineteenth-century interest in historical evocation is usually labelled without much differentiation as 'romantic', though one could argue that its roots were in eighteenth-century sentimentalism and that its strength in the nineteenth century had a great deal to do with the politics of Burkean tradition. An investigation of historical distance will not, of course, automatically supply a key to the relations between these aesthetic and ideological movements; nonetheless, distance may be a useful tool for thinking about their relatedness.

III

To this point, I have given a brief outline of some ways in which historical distance might be a useful point of departure for examining both the politics and poetics of historical writing. For the sake of clarity, I have divided the question into three levels of discussion: first, those issues that concern analysis of individual accounts; second, those that are directed to the characteristics of the various historical genres (and especially to the way these genres are differentiated and compete for readership); and third, those that concern periodic changes in styles of thought and writing. For each of these three levels of discussion, I would like now to offer some brief illustrations of the kinds of texts and problems where identifying distance as a dimension of historiography may be useful.

I will begin with Hume's *History of England* as an example of the ways in which distanciating and approximative impulses combine in a single text. Historians have long regarded Hume's work as a history strongly marked by irony. This assessment is largely a response to Hume's authorial voice, whose tone is often heavily ironic, especially when commenting on the follies of religious and political enthusiasts. More recently, however, students of English literature, who tend to be less literal minded in their reading of texts, have looked at aspects of Hume's literary practice and found some highly wrought scenes of virtue in distress.[4] Hume's staging of the death of Mary Queen of Scots, for example, or his picture of the last days of Charles I, far from being ironic, are clearly a product of eighteenth-century sentimentalism.

In short, we have been given two very different views of Hume's narratorial stance, with little sense of the need to reconcile the two or to coordinate both with other aspects of Hume's politics and aesthetics. From the perspective I have indicated above, however, it is clear that irony and

[3] See Lawrence Stone, 'The Revival of Narrative; Reflections on a New Old History', in *The Past and the Present* (London, 1981).

[4] See J. C. Hilson, 'Hume: The Historian as Man of Feeling', in J.C. Hilson *et al.*, eds., *Augustan Worlds: Essays in Honour of A. R. Humphreys* (Leicester, 1978).

sentiment are, in fact, two of the principal dimensions of historical distance in the *History of England*. Neither can really be understood in its own terms, since (along with a number of other formal and conceptual vocabularies) both irony and sentiment help to establish the dialectic of distance in the work as a whole. In fact, these two positionings are not as far apart as we generally think. Many of Hume's most sentimental moments involve not only innocent sufferers but also their tormentors, who are the same religious and political bigots that provoke his irony. Thus the evident sentimentalism of the scene of the execution of Mary Queen of Scots, for example, is intensified by the brutality of the behaviour of the Bishop of Peterborough, who continually harasses her to abandon her Catholic faith. The sentimental nature of this passage has everything to do with the fact that the spotlight rests on the suffering woman; turn it on her clerical tormentor and the same scene would be transformed by ironic distance.[5]

But it is not in the individual scene or event that we can see the full extent to which Hume's irony and his sentimentalism are inter-related; as his comments on Clarendon implied, there is a deeper level on which Hume recognised that the pleasures of historical sympathy were available only because of the conceptual distanciation that (in part) manifests itself as irony. Ultimately the lesson of Hume's narrative of the seventeenth century is that Hanoverian Britain could look back on the Revolution as a phase of history now properly over, its tragic and pathetic scenes no longer to be confined by the partisan debates of earlier generations of historians and politicians. It was only because this distance had finally been achieved (so Hume believed, though his critics made him wonder) that it was possible to move beyond the pained reticence of Clarendon's generation to the sympathies of his own; only in this politically distanciated perspective could a murdered king be represented as a suffering father and a loving husband.

Before I leave the question of the structures of individual texts, I want to return briefly to the matter of authorial voice. Until now I have spoken of irony only as a form of distanciation because the focus has been on the way in which an ironic stance removes both writer and reader from a simple or direct relation to the past. From another perspective, however, the reader may well register the ironic voice primarily as an invitation to recognise the shared perspectives linking reader and writer. In this sense, irony may well contribute to a sense of intimacy, more than one of aloofness or detachment.

Rather than illustrating this point by returning to Hume, let me offer an

[5] Hume, *History of England*, 6 vols. (Indianapolis, 1983), IV, pp. 247–51.

illustration from a younger writer who was also a master of the ironic voice. Here is a brief summary of the reign of Henry VIII:

> The Crimes and Cruelties of this Prince, were too numerous to be mentioned, (as this history I trust has fully shown) and nothing can be said in his vindication, but that his abolishing Religious Houses, and leaving them to the ruinous depredations of time has been of infinite use to the landscape of England in general, which probably was a principal motive for his doing it, since otherwise why should a Man who was of no Religion himself be at so much trouble to abolish one which had for ages been established in the Kingdom.[6]

This (and much else in the same delicious vein) is the work of the sixteen-year-old Jane Austen, who wrote this solemn spoof for the entertainment of her family. Clearly, we would be misjudging very severely if we thought that in this little circle of readers (or really auditors), the ironic voice added up to simple distanciation.

Let me turn now to the second part of my discussion, which is the question of genre. The works of Lucy Hutchinson, John Evelyn, and Samuel Pepys were all published for the first time in the early decades of the nineteenth century. These memoirs have long been appreciated as prime witnesses to English life in the time of the Revolution and Restoration, but we are less apt to recognise their significance for the historiography of the early *nineteenth* century. Contemporary reviewers made it clear, however, that the belated appearance of these eye-witness accounts responded to a widely felt desire for more immediate access to a dramatic period of English history. Francis Jeffrey summarised this spirit in commenting on a lesser memoir of the period, one that he had to admit did not live up to his highest expectations for the genre. Nonetheless, he wrote:

> it still gives us a peep at a scene of surpassing interest from a new quarter; and at all events adds one other item to the great and growing store of those contemporary notices which are every day familiarising us more and more with the living character of by-gone ages; and without which we begin, at last, to be sensible, that we can neither enter into their spirit, nor even understand their public transactions.[7]

As Jeffrey's words indicate, the great attractions of these historical memoirs was the sense of historical immediacy they conveyed. These belated publications, to put it another way, constituted a new, more intimate history of the seventeenth century, one achieved not by calling on the usual resources of historical narrative, but assembled by force of editorial appropriation. A prime example of this process, and the way in which it engaged with problems of distance, is Lucy Hutchinson's

[6] Jane Austen, *The History of England* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1993), pp. 13–14.
[7] *Contributions to the Edinburgh Review* (1846), p. 464.

memoir of the civil war, the *History of the Life of Colonel Hutchinson* (1806). Hutchinson's life of her husband held great attractions for an early nineteenth-century audience, but in this period of post-revolutionary reaction, there could also be some nervousness about celebrating the life of this prominent Cromwellian soldier and regicide. Evidently, the work's first editor, the Reverend Julius Hutchinson, felt the embarrassment acutely. His first defence is a crude version of Hume's argument for distance. We ought not to attempt to judge the colonel's actions, Hutchinson explained, 'considering the tempest and darkness which then involved the whole political horizon'. In the end, however, it was female authorship rather than the colonel's military and civic virtues that provided the best strategy, and Hutchinson closes his preface by linking the female biographer to a female audience and a presumptively female genre:

> The ladies will feel that it carries with it all the interest of a novel strengthened with the authenticity of real history: they will no doubt feel an additional satisfaction in learning, that though the author added to the erudition of the scholar, the research of the philosopher, the politician, and even the divine, the zeal and magnanimity of a patriot; yet she descended from all these elevations to perform in the most exemplary manner the functions of a wife, mother, and mistress of a family.[8]

Evidently, Julius Hutchinson's editorial efforts (which he also pursued in footnotes to the text) were calculated to emphasise sentimental and approximative elements in the *Life*, a strategy that aimed to de-politicise the text and reposition it as a kind of family memoir. But editorial manipulation did not always aim at sentimental proximity; it was equally possible for a belated publication to move a text towards increased distanciation. A notable case in point is John Wilson Croker's edition of Boswell's *Life of Johnson* (1831) in which a famous work of contemporary biography was transformed into an historical memoir, the eighteenth-century equivalent of Pepys or Evelyn.

In its original publication, the *Life* had struck many readers as gossipy, trivialising, and intrusive. Worse yet, Wordsworth, speaking for conservative opinion, later blamed Boswell for initiating a taste for a style of biography that undermined respect for privacy and weakened the sense of reserve essential to the British character. Boswell 'had broken through the pre-existing delicacies', Wordsworth charged, 'and afforded the British public an opportunity of acquiring experience, which before it had happily wanted'.[9]

Croker was, of course, aware of these charges, and he acknowledged that it would be possible to question 'the prudence or propriety of the

[8] Lucy Hutchinson, *Memoirs of the Life of Colonel Hutchinson* (1806), p. xiv.

[9] 'Letter to a Friend of Burns', in *The Prose Works of William Wordsworth*, ed. J. B. Owen and J. W. Smyser (Oxford, 1974), p. 120.

original publication'. The implication of his preface, however, was not simply that the time had long since gone to question the original decision, but that with the passage of time the impropriety itself had disappeared, to be replaced by a new and unquestionably *historical* interest. As the 'interval which separates us from the actual time and scene increases', wrote Croker, 'so appear to increase the interest and delight which we feel at being introduced . . . into that distinguished society of which Dr Johnson formed the centre, of which his biographer is the historian'.[10]

Boswell, in short, would make a new appearance in the more respectable guise of historian. To do so, however, he would need the cooperation of his editor, whose labours were devoted to elaborating an apparatus of scholarship to rescue the work from 'the gradual obscurity that time throws over the persons and incidents of private life'. As the reviewer in the *Monthly* put it, in enthusiastic echo of Croker's own prologue: 'He has succeeded far beyond any hopes which we had ventured to entertain, in arresting the progress by which one of the most entertaining memoirs in our language, was making towards the regions, not indeed of oblivion but of obscurity.'[11] The reviewer went on to admit that the resulting apparatus made the text less appealing 'to those classes of readers, unhappily too numerous, who like nothing but plain sailing'. But, though the bracketed additions and corrections or the 'perpetual reference to the notes' might be troublesome, he was sure that there was no better way of doing the job. And had the work of rescue not been undertaken now, in a very few years the witnesses would have disappeared and the effort could not have succeeded at all.

In all this, Croker's sympathetic reviewer was perhaps deliberately missing the point. He saw the success of Croker's efforts without acknowledging the antecedent political and moral problem that gave his editorial labours their full value. In the moral rescue of Boswell's *Johnson*, time was more of an ally than an enemy, and if the apparatus of footnotes and brackets impeded readers who were looking for 'plain sailing', so much the better. From the start the editor's central purpose was to remove the work from the category of gossipy amusement and position it in the higher one of instruction. In serving this effort the scaffolding of scholarship was undoubtedly there to shore up the crumbling building, but it also served to emphasise its value as a historical monument.

As in the question of genre, so too in that of period-style, contrast provides indispensable help towards definition. The implicit period-norms of eighteenth-century historiographical practice are never so obvious as in their repudiation by those who came after – the writers generally

[10] John Wilson Croker, ed., *The Life of Samuel Johnson* (1831), pp. v–vi.
[11] *Monthly Review*, n.s. 2 (1831), pp. 453–4.

known to literary history as the romantic generation. But we also have to be careful to contextualise this evidence, since the early nineteenth-century tended to caricature eighteenth-century precedents to which, nonetheless, it inevitably owed a great deal. This caution is particularly important since the shift in distance that occurred at this time was so powerfully felt that we remain in many ways under its influence. As a result, we still tend to read eighteenth-century texts through nineteenth-century eyes and lose the opportunity to historicise this important moment in the history of historiography.

John Stuart Mill was for a time a great admirer of Carlyle, who was pleased to consider James Mill's son a disciple. The younger Mill's enthusiastic review of Carlyle's *French Revolution* speaks for Carlyle's own sense of historical distance and at the same time offers very useful evidence of the way these norms stood between nineteenth-century audiences and the historical sensibility of the previous century. It would be difficult, Mill wrote, to explain Carlyle's virtues to anyone still satisfied with the histories of an earlier day:

> If there be a person who, in reading the histories of Hume, Robertson, and Gibbon (works of extraordinary talent, and the works of great writers) has never felt that this, after all, is not history – and that the lives and deeds of his fellow-creatures must be placed before him in quite another manner, if he is to know them, for them to be real beings, who once were alive, beings of his own flesh and blood, not mere shadows and dim abstractions; such a person, for whom plausible talk *about* a thing does as well as an image of the thing itself, feels no need of a book like Mr Carlyle's; the want, which it is peculiarly fitted to supply, does not consciously exist in his mind.[12]

As is evident, one of the striking things about Mill's criticism of Enlightenment historiography is that he pays full compliments to the talents of the earlier generation, while at the same time denying that their work should be considered history at all. What was lacking was a matter of sympathy and of method. 'Does Hume throw his own mind into the mind of an Anglo-Saxon, or an Anglo-Norman?' Mill asks; does any reader feel he has gained 'anything like a picture of what may actually have been passing, in the minds, say, of cavaliers or of Roundheads during the civil wars?'[13]

Anyone acquainted with the idealist tradition in historiography will recognise the tenor of Mill's criticism. In fact, his complaint that Hume

[12] *Essays on French History and Historians*, ed. J. M. Robson and J. C. Cairns (Toronto, 1985), p. 134. The review appeared in the *London and Westminster Review*, July 1837. Significantly, Mill supported his argument with the evidence of genre: the vast production of historical plays and historical novels, he wrote, were the best evidence that such a 'want' was generally felt.

[13] *Essays on French History*, p. 135.

had failed to 'throw his own mind' into past times has continued to shape Hume's reputation right up to the present. But before turning to twentieth-century commentary, I want to pursue a little further the evidence Mill gives us that a major shift in norms of distance had indeed taken place in the first part of his century.

Some of the most familiar pronouncements of 'romantic' historiography can be read as statements about the issue of distance. A prime example is Carlyle's definition of history as 'the essence of innumerable biographies'. This famous, but often misunderstood dictum has less to do with a preference for a particular narrative form than with the need to conceive of the historical process as something actual and experienced. As Carlyle put it, he wanted to gain 'some acquaintance with our fellow-creatures, though dead and vanished, yet dear to us; how they got along in those old days, suffering and doing'.[14] Carlyle certainly did not mean to suggest that biography offered a kind of short cut to historical understanding; on the contrary, in his view it was the political economists and other heirs of the Enlightenment ('cause and effect speculators') who gave history a false transparency by distancing it from the mysteries of experience. He contrasted his own desire to evoke history's immediate presence with the aloof philosophical style of Enlightenment and post-Enlightenment historians ('those modern Narrations of the Philosophic kind'), whose lofty generalisations he compared to the resonant emptiness of an owl hooting from a rooftop.[15]

Macaulay's early writings on history speak still more directly to the problem of distance. Writing history, he argued, has always involved a difficult effort to join reason and imagination, but recent times had witnessed a complete divorce between the two, which only the very greatest of historians might yet be able to overcome. Significantly, Macaulay posed the dilemma as a problem of genre. Much like those who today talk of history and memory, burying in each unspoken assumptions about distance, Macaulay saw modern historical understanding as having suffered a division between the distanciating rationality of analytical historians and the evocative power of the historical novel:

> To make the past present, to bring the distant near, to place us in the society of a great man on an eminence which overlooks the field of a mighty battle, to invest with the reality of human flesh and blood beings whom we are too much inclined to consider as personified qualities in an allegory, to call up our ancestors before us with all their peculiarities of language, manners, and garb, to show us over their houses, to seat us at their tables, to rummage their old-fashioned wardrobes, to

[14] 'Biography', in *The Complete Works of Thomas Carlyle: The Centenary Edition*, 30 vols. (London, 1897–1904), XXVIII, p. 47. [15] *Ibid.*

explain the uses of their ponderous furniture, these parts of the duty which properly belongs to the historian have been appropriated by the historical novelist.[16]

To overcome this division, Macaulay suggested, would require more than Shakespearean powers; a truly great historian would need to combine the science of Hallam with the imagination of Scott.

Macaulay's heroic conception of the great historian reworks on historiographical grounds the familiar romantic trope of divided consciousness according to which a self-conscious modernity had lost the naive unity of thought and feeling once possessed by the ancient Greeks. Consistent with this abiding mythos, Macaulay's terms of reference are to a literary history, not a political one, and nothing in these early essays suggests a conscious linking of his desire for a more evocative history with the ideological commitments that might be implied in the desire 'to call up our ancestors before us'. Nonetheless, historical evocation clearly had a politics as well as an aesthetics, which no discussion of historical distance can afford to ignore. Indeed, I want to suggest that, for all the evident importance of romanticism, Macaulay's desire 'to make the past present' owes most of all to Burke and that the most powerful influence reshaping early nineteenth-century assumptions about distance was Burke's doctrine of tradition.[17]

The reader who approaches Burke's *Reflections* looking to find a coherent view of tradition considered as a historical process of transmission will find this a frustrating text. Burke is more concerned to urge his readers to revere what is traditional than to define tradition as such. Mortmain, entail, natural growth, partnership, contract, the succession of generations – any of these ways of figuring continuity might have been made the basis for a description of the way tradition functions, but mixed together in the urgency of his polemic, the rapid play of metaphor creates the sense of a pervasive presence that nonetheless resists clear definition. In Burke, tradition is probably best understood not as a thing in itself, but as a manner of experiencing the world. Like sympathy or sublimity, it is a sentimental construction. As such, it is far from being limited to the constitution or any other institution of law or government. Rather, it enters into the whole texture of social life and is best expressed in the workings of manners and opinion, which for Burke, as for his Scottish contemporaries, constituted the most fundamental level of historical experience.

Though we do not normally think of Burke in the context of the Scottish Enlightenment, the differences as well as similarities are

[16] T. B. Macauley, 'Hallam', in *Miscellaneous Essays and Poems*, 2 vols. (New York, n.d.), I, p. 310. The essay was first published in the *Edinburgh Review* in September 1828.

[17] On Burke's importance for nineteenth-century historiography, see J. W. Burrow, *A Liberal Descent; Victorian Historians and the English Past* (Cambridge, 1983).

instructive. Hume looked upon the achievements of post-revolutionary Britain with a measure of confidence that allowed him to cultivate a certain detachment with respect to the revolutions of the previous century. Burke, on the other hand, wrote from what he saw as the brink of a threatened loss of that stability of manners on which Hume generally believed his polite and commercial society could rely. These differences expressed themselves in a notable shift of historical distance. As a result, in the writings of Burke and his followers the distanciation encouraged by Hume gave way to an anxious insistence on the affective power of historical presence.

To write history in the framework of tradition means, of course, to take the long view. Paradoxically, however, the long view of history may well be the path to the sort of presentism that Butterfield stigmatised as the 'whig interpretation', by which historical continuities are invoked to authorise a current creed. This, to use a more recent vocabulary than Butterfield's, amounts to marshalling history for the purposes of memory, and its stylistic signature is a rhetoric of immediacy designed to heighten history's prescriptive force. Thus, in the name of respect for a current of change that runs deep and slow, many nineteenth-century historical narratives foreshortened history in ways that are designed to endow particular episodes or experiences with a special power to shape both the present and the future. Reframed appropriately, the most remote events in history could be made emblematic of later destinies, while the manners of the earliest ages – divorced from the universalising ambitions of eighteenth-century historical anthropology – acquired new significance as evidence of deep and persisting traits that determined the character of the nation.

IV

The new norms of historical distance first initiated by sentimentalism and then given new force by the influence of both Burke and the romantics have continued to shape critical judgement on eighteenth-century historiography. Hayden White, for example, pronounces the following verdict on Hume's history and Enlightenment historiography in general:

> The sceptical form which rationalism took in its reflection *on its own time* was bound to inspire a purely Ironic attitude with respect to the past when used as the principle of historical reflection. The mode in which all the *great* historical works of the age were cast is that of Irony, with the result that they all tend towards the form of Satire, the supreme achievement of the literary sensibility of that age. When Hume turned from philosophy to history, because he felt that philosophy had been rendered uninteresting by the sceptical conclusions to which he had been driven, he brought to his study of history the same sceptical sensibility. He

found it increasingly difficult, however, to sustain his interest in a process which displayed to him only the eternal return of the same folly in many different forms. He viewed the historical record as little more than the *record* of human folly, which led him finally to become as bored with history as he had become with philosophy.[18]

It would be unfair to single out White's exaggerated views except that they help to clarify assumptions underlying comments that are far better informed. John Stewart, for example, in a careful study of Hume's politics, finds reason to dismiss Hume's history for reasons that in many respects are similar to White's:

The *History*, in an important sense, is antihistorical. The great stimulus to English historians, especially in the seventeenth century, had been the desire to trace up 'privilege' or 'prerogative' to the 'ancient constitution.' By demonstrating the invalidity of such a mode of argument, Hume annihilates much of the old justification for studying the past. It is notable that when he had finished his essentially negative task, he did not undertake another historical work.[19]

Stewart evidently assumes that there is only one acceptable relationship to the past, a relationship of (political) connectedness; thus seeking historical knowledge that enables a kind of *dis*engagement seems to him not simply a different sort of politics, but an illegitimate form of history. More broadly, Stewart's dismissal of a great historical narrative as essentially anti-historical depends on confidently held assumptions about what constitutes a properly historical attitude. Taking his cue from Butterfield and others, Stewart treats historiography as, by definition, a literature of recuperation, and for this reason he laments that Hume never displays 'the true historian's love for the past'.[20]

Stewart's criticisms echo what John Stuart Mill had written a century and a half before; more immediately, his views parallel those of R. G. Collingwood, though Collingwood was more explicit about the roots of his philosophy of history in the romantic and historicist legacy of the nineteenth century:

A truly historical view of human history, sees everything in that history as having its own *raison d'être* and coming into existence in order to serve the needs of the men whose minds have corporately created it. To think of any phase in history as altogether irrational is to look at it not as an historian but as a publicist, a polemical writer of tracts for the times. Thus the historical outlook of the Enlightenment was not genuinely historical; in its main motive it was polemical and anti-historical.[21]

[18] Hayden White, *Metahistory* (Baltimore, 1973), p. 55.
[19] John B. Stewart, *The Moral and Political Philosophy of David Hume* (New York, 1963), p. 299. [20] *Ibid.*, p. 298. [21] R. G. Collingwood, *Idea of History* (Oxford, 1956), p. 77.

Just as 'love of the past' serves Stewart as a way of distinguishing the polemicist from the 'true' historian, so 'sympathy' is a litmus test for Collingwood. Speaking of romanticism, Collingwood writes that when one compares the complete lack of sympathy for the Middle Ages shown by Hume to 'the intense sympathy for the same thing which is found in Sir Walter Scott, one can see how this tendency of Romanticism [i.e. sympathy] had enriched its historical outlook'.[22]

Collingwood was right, of course, about Hume's general lack of sympathy for the medieval world, but his own inability to accept the standpoint of Enlightenment historiography in its own terms seems at least as blatant a failure of sympathy as Hume's. Surely Collingwood's own philosophical programme would require us to look at eighteenth-century historiography, no less than any other practice or institution, as 'having its own *raison d'être* and coming into existence in order to serve the needs of the men whose minds have corporately created it.' In fact, as I have indicated, the criticisms offered by White, Stewart, and Collingwood stem from a conception of historical distance that only emerged as a consensus of European thought in the course of the half-century that followed Hume's histories. An uncritical application of this standard to eighteenth-century historical literatures amounts to a failure to achieve what Collingwood himself calls 'a truly historical view of human history'.

My point is making these remarks, however, is not (except indirectly) to defend Hume's reputation. Rather, by underlining the importance of unexamined assumptions about historical distance in shaping that reputation, I want simply to emphasise that these norms must themselves be understood as historically variable. It should be clear, then, that historical distance itself has a history which we will need to know more about if we are to appreciate the ways in which the historiography of any place or time has served 'the needs of the men whose minds have corporately created it'. But just because assumptions about distance lie close to the heart of what we think history's methods and purposes should be, these assumptions have seldom been brought to the surface, and have more often been the subject of dogmas than of questions.

[22] *Ibid.*, p. 87. The historian, he writes, 'must never do what Enlightenment historians were always doing, that is, regard past ages with contempt and disgust, but must look at them sympathetically and find in them the expression of genuine and valuable human achievements'.