Historical Pyrrhonism and Enlightenment Historiography in France
Historical Pyrrhonism has always been with us; but if it has been most succinctly summarized in the twentieth century in the famous words of Henry Ford, it was most fully expounded, at the end of the seventeenth, by Pierre Bayle, above all in his *Dictionnaire historique et critique*. If the crisis of doubt about the reliability of history can be assigned to any period, it is to the decades that precede and follow the year 1700. Here, I wish to examine the reasons for this crisis and to consider some of the ways in which the early eighteenth century tried to surmount it, thus paving the way for the major historical writings of the Enlightenment. The subject is a vast one, and what follows can do little more than offer guidelines for a more thorough study yet to be undertaken.

If the art of history is as old as Herodotus, the science of history dates largely from the Renaissance and the Reformation. Serving at first as the handmaiden of theological and political controversy, it rapidly emancipated itself. By the end of the seventeenth century it was capable of dictating, at times, to its former masters.

In the seventeenth century the French contribution to the development of this science was outstanding. The compilations of Duchesne and Baluze opened the way to new knowledge of the Middle Ages, and the lexicographical studies of Du Cange offered a new key to the interpretation of rediscovered texts. The Bollandist *Acta Sanctorum* and the Bene-
dictine *Annales* showed that even hagiography could be critical. It was a disagreement between these two religious orders that led Mabillon, in his *De re diplomatica*, to produce the first textbook of the new science of diplomatics. His companion, Montfaucon, was soon to perform a similar service for Greek paleography.¹ Meanwhile, chronology was becoming exact enough to challenge the authority of the biblical text itself; archaeology and numismatics advanced sufficiently for a historian at the end of the seventeenth century to write a universal history “proved” by evidence derived from them,² and this evidence was of a nature to silence even the otherwise skeptical Hardouin.³

Potentially, these developments were of great importance. Yet they were developments in the auxiliary sciences, in the tools of the historian’s trade, rather than in the writing of history itself. The seventeenth-century érudit often stuck to lexicography or genealogy or concentrated on the compilation of texts. He was perhaps right to do so, for it was to the accurate establishment of texts that many of the new critical methods most naturally led. They did not provide criteria for assessing whether what the text said was true; still less did they offer guidelines for the development of historical explanation or the construction of historical narrative. Nor were the érudits unaware of their limitations. The learned Jansenist Tillemont, for example, spoke of his own *Histoire des empereurs* as merely a preparatory compilation for the work of the real historians, the “génies les plus beaux et les plus élevés” who could not be expected to “arrêter le feu qui les anime” to indulge in laborious discussions of minor points of fact.⁴ Many others made a similar absolute distinction between the erudite critic and the historian proper.⁵ For no one in the seventeenth century doubted that Clio was a muse.

The devotees of the muse meditated their mistress with varying degrees of strictness and with varied success. But they have enough in common to be classed together, in opposition both to the érudits and to the “philosophic” historians of the eighteenth century, as belonging to what has been
termed the "humanist" school of historiography. They took as their models the historians of antiquity (particularly Livy and Sallust) and as their theoretical guides the writings of Lucan and Cicero. Cicero's discussion of history in his *De Oratore* is constantly referred to as an authority and could well serve as an introduction to most seventeenth-century historical writing.  

The humanist historians had two types of aim: didactic and artistic. In theory, at any rate, the former was by far the more important. Men must "voir dans l'histoire, comme dans un miroir, l'image de leurs fautes," wrote Saint-Réal. The Jesuit Le Moyne and the Cartesian Cordemoy express similar sentiments. So, too, of course, do many eighteenth-century writers such as Fénélon and Rollin. The *philosophes* themselves do not abandon this concept, though with them the "lessons" of history become social and political. They had been political, too, in an earlier age, but as La Bruyère remarked, "les grands sujets" were taboo in Louis XIV's reign; and historiography, in the main, ceased to provide a forum for the discussion of social or political issues.  

If the historian could not study society, he could study man. A consequence of the relative interdiction of political themes was a greater interest in human nature—a tendency closely linked with the psychological interests of the salons and of the masters of classical literature. It is symptomatic, perhaps, that Louis XIV could choose Racine and Boileau as his royal historiographers. Theorists of "humanist" historiography took a similar view. Saint-Réal made a direct attack on political history and called his own method "une anatomie spirituelle des actions humaines." Rapin urged the historian to concentrate on the study of motives—especially the more curious and unusual ones. Another Jesuit, Le Moyne, even insisted on the alliance of history and poetry, thereby provoking the scornful comments of Bayle.  

The danger implicit in this is obvious. If history is a school of politics, it must strive for factual accuracy, for without that no "lesson" can be valid. But if the lesson of history is to be
moral and psychological, such accuracy is not essential. Provided that the portrayal of character is true to life, the narrative of events, though it should be *vraisemblable*, has no need to be *vrai*. The dividing line between history and the historical novel tends to disappear. "Pourvu que l'on suive la vraisemblance dans les choses douteuses, on instruit autant ceux qui lisent l'histoire que si on disoit la vérité," says Cordemoy.\(^{14}\) Historians like Varillas, Saint-Réal, and Vertot put this view into practice, manipulating the facts of history with the same freedom as Racine.\(^{15}\) They are further encouraged to do so, moreover, by the emphasis that the theorists place on form. "La forme qu'on doit donner à l'histoire est ce qu'elle a de plus essentiel," says Rapin;\(^{16}\) and Fénelon, though in many ways he exemplifies a new spirit, re-echoes this view when he states that "la principale perfection d'une histoire consiste dans l'ordre et dans l'arrangement."\(^{17}\) Voltaire, of course, can still say something very similar,\(^{18}\) but fortunately he is incapable of following his own advice. Moreover, "form" in the eighteenth century is no longer so formal as it was in the seventeenth, when a strict reliance on classical models seemed obligatory and imaginary portraits, harangues, debates, and other stylized rhetorical devices were *de rigueur*. Le Moyne, perhaps the most "literary" of the theorists, insists that "harangues are necessary in history"; and Rapin, though somewhat more skeptical, has no objection to a few "petits discours à propos."\(^{19}\)

All these psychological and literary preoccupations leave little room for a concern for factual accuracy. D'Alembert relates the following story of Varillas.

On représentoit à un historien du dernier siècle, connu par ses mensonges, qu'il avoit altéré la vérité dans la narration d'un fait; "cela se peut, dit-il, mais qu'importe? le fait n'est-il pas mieux tel que je l'ai raconté?"\(^{20}\)

And Vertot's reaction to the belated arrival of the documents he needed—"J'en suis fâché, mais mon siège est fait"—has become proverbial.
Of course, the "humanist" historians could, and often did, search for the facts. The search, however, did not always take them very far. Daniel, writing his *Histoire de France* at the beginning of the eighteenth century, shows some evidence of the new critical spirit. Yet he could still write, in the Introduction to that work:

La Citation des Manuscrits fait encore beaucoup d'honneur à un Auteur. J'en ai un assez grand nombre. Mais je dirai de bonne foi que cette lecture m'a donné plus de peine qu'elle ne m'a procuré d'avantage.\textsuperscript{21}

Moreover, the first part of Daniel's statement is not altogether true, for the historians are constantly being warned against the bad taste of displaying too much erudition. Saint-Réal objects to "un grand nombre de Dates, de Noms, et d'Événemens."\textsuperscript{22} Cordemoy admires Herodotus because "il n'apporte rarement les preuves de ce qu'il dit" and asserts of such proofs that "comme elles interrompent toujours la narration, elles sont toujours fort désagréables."\textsuperscript{23} Even Fénelon insists that the good historian "retranche toute dissertation où l'érudition d'un savant veut être étalée."\textsuperscript{24} Indeed, the conflict between a desire to demonstrate one's accuracy and a resolve to avoid the pedantic display of erudition remains a characteristic of much eighteenth-century historiography.

Thus, while the "antiquarian" historian was acquiring new skills, "popular" history was approximating more and more to the historical novel. It is hardly surprising that this state of affairs produced growing uncertainty and growing skepticism.

Nor was an appeal to the philosophers likely to help remove these doubts. Skepticism about history, as about much else, was characteristic of the libertins such as La Mothe le Vayer, whose *Du peu de certitude qu'il y a dans l'histoire* expressed doubts on many traditional beliefs and, more generally, on the veracity of historians who were so often moved by a desire to flatter, or by national prejudice.\textsuperscript{25} Truth, moreover, was not his unique concern, for he was humanist enough to say
of history that "je l’estimois principalement comme celle qui faisait les propres fonctions de la Philosophie morale."26 Here was no way out of the dilemma. Moreover, Cartesianism, increasingly the dominant force in French philosophical thought, was even more radical in doubting the value of the study of history. In the *Discours de la méthode* Descartes himself warned:

Lorsqu’on est trop curieux des choses qui se pratiquaient aux siècles passés, on demeure ordinairement fort ignorant de celles qui se pratiquent en celui-ci.27

"Les sciences des livres" were less likely to produce truth than were "les simples raisonnements que peut faire naturellement un homme de bon sens touchant les choses qui se présentent."28 Malebranche, if anything, went even further;29 and Vico, writing nearly a century after the *Discours*, could still complain of the crippling effect of Cartesian thought on historical studies.30

"Philosophy" and history were thus at odds; and if Bossuet, in his *Discours sur l'histoire universelle*, appeared for a time to have squared the circle by uniting Augustinian teleology with some aspects of more modern scientific thought, his vision and eloquence could not for long cover up the fact that his compromise was no longer acceptable.31

The stage was set for Bayle who, more than any other individual, gave substance to the concept of historical Pyrrhonism. Bayle re-echoed the doubts of Descartes and La Mothe le Vayer, but seemed to go even further when, in the *Critique générale de l'histoire du Calvinisme*, he asserted that:

Je ne lis presque jamais les Historiens dans la vue de m'instruire des choses qui se sont passées, mais seulement pour savoir ce que l'on dit dans chaque nation et dans chaque parti sur les choses qui se sont passées.32

It is true that he later modified this view to the extent of admitting that one would at least be sure that there had been a battle of Jarnac,33 but this was scant consolation.
However, if, like Descartes, Bayle doubted the value of historians, unlike Descartes he still kept on reading them. The results of his studies are visible, above all, in the *Dictionnaire historique et critique*, which in both form and content constitutes the greatest manifestation of historical Pyrrhonism. To demonstrate the truth of this statement would be impossible in an article of this nature, and in any case the task has been performed before. Here it is enough to say that Bayle’s “atomization” of history ancient and modern and his merciless demonstration of its errors and uncertainties constitute the essential document of the “bankruptcy of history” of which Paul Hazard has left so lively an account.

It would, of course, be a mistake to see in the publication of the *Dictionnaire* the manifestation of a unique moment of crisis. Historical Pyrrhonism lived on into the eighteenth century. It was not until 1738 that Beaufort effectively demolished the myths of early Roman history, and Voltaire still felt the need to publish a work entitled *Le Pyrrhonisme de l'histoire* in 1769. It is equally true that the answers to some of Bayle’s problems would be derived from the technical achievements of his predecessors and that answers to others were being formulated by contemporaries such as Saint-Evremond or Fontenelle. The *Dictionnaire* was not, strictly speaking, a watershed. For the purposes of this article, however, it may serve as such. Henceforth we shall turn our attention to efforts to create a “new” history.

Insofar as the problems involved were methodological, their solution was in part to be found in increased contact between the “humanist” historians and those érudits who were already in possession of relatively sophisticated methods. Probably the most important of the institutions that favored such contacts was the Académie des Inscriptions, which, though founded by Colbert, only became important after it had received its royal charter in 1701. Its membership was predominantly scholarly, but its debates had repercussions beyond the narrow world of the antiquarians. Fréret’s views on the historical origin of the French and Levesque de
Pouilly's *Dissertation sur l'incertitude des premiers siècles de Rome* were to provoke a wide measure of debate. Moreover, the Académie also contained men like Vertot, most famous for his "siège fait" and for his racy but untrustworthy histories of revolutions. And if Vertot was not altogether at home in this scholarly company, he made every effort to become so, making many contributions to the early proceedings of the Academy.

Increasing concern for scholarly method was to be found elsewhere. Fleury's *Histoire ecclésiastique* of 1691 was a not very critical compilation, but the *Discours* that accompanied it demanded careful citation of contemporary authorities and a close scrutiny of these according to methods that he proceeded to describe. Daniel's *Histoire de France* of 1703 was in many ways an even more unreliable work, but in his preface he showed a real concern with critical method, criticizing harangues as untrue, insisting on the accurate citation of sources, and demanding the unanimous agreement of his authorities before accepting any fact as established. The theorists, moreover, reinforced this attitude. Lenglet du Fresnoy, for example, in his *Méthode pour étudier l'histoire*, which first appeared in 1713 but was later greatly augmented and frequently reprinted, devoted a whole chapter to the discussion of the "Précautions qu'il faut apporter dans la lecture des historiens" and further chapters to the exposition of critical rules. De Juvenel, in his *Principes de l'histoire* of 1733, was far more concerned with critical method than was any seventeenth-century theorist and gave a long and careful list of "les marques les plus évidentes de supposition ou de suspicion." Le Long, in his *Bibliothèque historique de la France*, attributed the improvement he saw in historical writing to "le secours de la saine critique."

Yet this increased awareness of the importance of critical method, significant though it was, could not in itself constitute an adequate foundation for a new historiography. Without the presence of other factors, it could indeed merely have
served to reinforce Bayle's Pyrrhonism. Some more positive sense of purpose was necessary if the historian was not merely to end up collecting disconnected facts. If the details of events and the motives of individuals were to remain forever uncertain, as Voltaire, following others, was repeatedly to maintain, then narrative history had to find a new form.

Indications as to the nature of this new form are to be found in the work of one who owes much more to libertin skepticism than to the new methodology of the scholars. Saint-Evremond’s *Réflexions sur les divers génies du peuple romain* of 1695 attempts to explain Roman history in terms of its various génies; in terms, that is to say, which are mainly psychological, but which are concerned with the psychology of the group rather than with that of the individual. Fontenelle, in theory at any rate, calls for a similar approach, insisting that the most “philosophic” and most worthwhile history is “l'histoire de l'esprit humain.” In works like his essay *De l'origine des fables* he makes one of the earliest significant contributions toward a psychological solution of a problem with which the eighteenth century was to continue to wrestle—that of the explanation of mythology.

However, this increased awareness of group psychology—though it is clearly an ancestor of Montesquieu’s *causes morales*—has less immediate impact on the development of a new approach to history than has the reintroduction into the field of historical speculation of La Bruyère’s “forbidden subjects”—politics and religion.

Fénelon could not be called a political historian, but his discussion of history in the *Lettre à l'Académie*, published in 1716, illustrates the way in which political opposition can lead to the formulation of new questions. In many ways Fénelon is a “humanist” who insists on artistic excellence in history and opposes the display of critical erudition. Yet other aspects of his work strike a newer note. His demand for the accurate portrayal of what he calls “il costume,” even though it is an echo of Plutarch, implies a desire to see the historian
entering into the spirit of the age he is describing to a greater extent than was the case with most of the "humanists." When he turns to discuss the history of France, he shows particular interest in constitutional problems and, in particular, in the relationship between the different estates of the realm and the way these relationships have developed.

It is with Boulainvilliers rather than Fénelon, however, that historiography begins, once again, to become a vehicle of political propaganda. Though only published posthumously in 1727, his *Histoire de l'ancien gouvernement de France* is a product of the turmoil caused by the defeats of the War of the Spanish Succession. Its defense of an idealized feudalism and its insistence that this was the "natural" and therefore right form of government for France spark a controversy in which Dubos, Montesquieu, and later even Mably are to join. Of course, this use of history is not without its dangers, as Voltaire, for example, was to point out. Yet it is nevertheless fruitful in creating a new interest in social history. Boulainvilliers's work claims to be "une histoire de France qui proposerait plutôt celle du génie des Princes et du Gouvernement, que celle des événements." And if he does not quite fulfill his promise, he does so sufficiently for his biographer Renée Simon to assert that he rather than Voltaire is the true father of modern historiography.

With his *Vie de Mohamed*, published in 1730, Boulainvilliers also made a significant contribution to that opposition to Christian orthodoxy which was to be another outstanding feature of Enlightenment historiography. By this time, however, this movement of opposition was already well under way. If one had to choose a starting point for it, one could hardly do better than go back to Fontenelle's *Histoire des oracles*, which set out to refute the belief that the oracles of pagan antiquity were inspired by devils. With a fine command of an essentially Cartesian method, an all-pervading skepticism, and a constant use of irony, Fontenelle first examined and destroyed the evidence on which the traditional belief was based and
then proceeded to offer a more natural explanation in terms of the trickery of priests and the gullibility of men. If he showed the same skeptical attitude to human motives as did Bayle, he was not satisfied, as Bayle often was, with skeptical conclusions, but pressed on to positive results. Indeed, if his subject was not limited in scope and remote from contemporary problems, and if his material (adapted from Van Dale) was not secondhand, one might be tempted to call the *Histoire des oracles* the first work of Enlightenment historiography.

Yet these limitations are important, and similar doubts could be raised about any work written in the first two decades of the eighteenth century. If all the techniques and approaches that were to characterize the new historical writing were now to hand, they had still to be put to work.

At the threshold of Enlightenment historiography proper stand two works that have stood the test of time, that demonstrate the triumph of historical thinking over Pyrrhonism, and yet that could hardly be more dissimilar: Voltaire’s *Histoire de Charles XII* and Montesquieu’s *Considérations sur les causes de la grandeur des Romains et de leur décadence*. If Voltaire had not lived to become the most prolific of philosophe historians, the *Histoire de Charles XII* might not deserve this place of honor, for though it enshrines a “philosophic” message (the folly of aggressive war); though it contains brief but masterly analyses of political and social conditions in different countries of Europe; and though (in places at any rate) it shows Voltaire’s deep concern for reliable firsthand sources, it is still in many ways a superb adventure story rooted in the “humanist” tradition.52

The *Considérations*, on the other hand, must stand on its own feet since it is the only great work of Montesquieu’s that can be described as “a history.” However, it has no need of support from elsewhere. It is true that it lacks some of the characteristics often associated with “enlightened” historiography. The strong streak of skepticism that Voltaire never
loses is hardly found here. Montesquieu accepts what his authorities tell him, as one critic puts it, “like a jurist.”

His views of historical causation have not yet acquired the subtlety that characterizes De l’Esprit des lois, and he can use climatic determinism as a convenient method of explaining the inexplicable, as he does, for example, in speaking of the bravery of the Macedonians. Yet despite its limitations, this is the first great work of “philosophical” history. Montesquieu’s thesis, that the very determining factors that led to the growth of the small city-state were equally responsible for the collapse of the great empire, may be questioned. What cannot be questioned is the fact that this is the first great work in which all other factors are subordinated to this type of causal explanation.

With these two works, historical writing may be said to have regained its assurance. If Bayle could have read them, they would not have silenced all his doubts; but they would have shown him that historiography could be more than just the imaginative creation of poets or the negating atomization of his own critical method.


2. Bianchini, La Istoria universale, provata con monumenti, e figurata con simboli degli antichi (Rome, 1697).


4. See P. Hazard, La Crise de la conscience européenne (Paris, 1942), Notes et Références, p. 36.


6. Cicero, De Oratore, especially Bk. II, ch. 15. Lenglet du Fresnoy notes (Méthode pour étudier l’histoire [Paris, 1729], Preface) that Rapin’s

7. C. V. de Saint-Réal, De l'usage de l'histoire, Œuvres (The Hague, 1722), 1:72. See also the preface to his Conjuration des Espagnols contre Venise, 4:141.

8. P. Le Moyne's De l'histoire (1670) devotes a chapter to proving this. Cordemoy also emphasizes it in his Divers traitez de métaphysique, d'histoire, et de politique (Paris, 1691).


12. Le Moyne, De l'histoire, devotes a chapter to showing that “Wit is the first quality of the historian.”
15. This is shown by Dulong's examination of all three in his Saint-Réal. In Vertot's case it is also amusingly revealed in the Vie de l'auteur, which precedes the 1737 edition of his Histoire des révolutions arrivées dans le gouvernement de la république romaine.
22. Saint-Réal, Œuvres, 1:3.
23. Cordemoy, Divers traitez de métaphysique, d'histoire, et de politique, p. 35.
24. Fénelon, Lettre à l'Académie, p. 112.
25. La Mothe le Vayer, Œuvres (Dresden, 1756), 5:441 ff.
31. See the excellent chapter on Bossuet in P. Hazard, La Crise de la conscience européenne, pp. 203 ff.
33. Ibid., p. 12.
34. See, for example, the studies by Delvolvé, Cazes, Lenient, Robertson, and Cassirer's *The Philosophy of the Enlightenment*.
38. The first volumes of the Academy’s *Mémoires* contain a number of contributions from him, including one on “harangues” (3:83 ff.) in which he contrives to sit uneasily on the fence.
39. See particularly pp. 8 and 12 of the 1771 Paris edition of the *Discours*.
43. See Brumfitt, *Voltaire Historian*, p. 137.
47. Ibid., pp. 124-26.
48. For an account of this controversy, see Brumfitt, *Voltaire Historian*, pp. 63-65.
49. See, for example, the article “Histoire” in the *Dictionnaire philosophique*, ed. Moland, 19:356.
50. *Histoire de l’ancien gouvernement de France*, Preface. Boulainvilliers amplified his views in, for example, his *Lettre à Mlle Cousinot sur l'Histoire de France*.
52. See Brumfitt, *Voltaire Historian*, pp. 9 ff.