

SUZANNE GEARHART

# The Open Boundary of History and Fiction

*A Critical Approach to the French  
Enlightenment*



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THE OPEN BOUNDARY OF  
HISTORY AND FICTION



# THE OPEN BOUNDARY OF HISTORY AND FICTION

*A Critical Approach to the  
French Enlightenment*

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Suzanne Gearhart

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*The boundaries between fiction and nonfiction, between literature and nonliterature and so forth are not laid up in heaven. Every specific situation is historical. And the growth of literature is not merely development and change within the fixed boundaries of any given definition; the boundaries themselves are constantly changing.*

—M. M. Bakhtin



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With the exception of references to *De l'esprit des lois* in Chapter Four, the English translations of eighteenth-century works cited in this study are my own. I have used English editions of all other texts cited whenever possible, but where the reference is to a French edition, the translation is also my own.



THE OPEN BOUNDARY OF  
HISTORY AND FICTION



## INTRODUCTION

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### The Open Boundary of History/Fiction

BOUNDARIES are established to separate and distinguish entities one from the other, but by the very same process, they link the delimited entities together. As a boundary is traced, it defines the integrity of each entity in terms of and in opposition to the others; it establishes where each begins and ends. A boundary therefore should be clearly marked or posted with visible signs in order to function as a boundary. When one crosses it, one should know immediately that one is in a different place where a different language is spoken, and different laws, rules, and procedures are followed. Because boundaries mark areas and limits, they assure us that we are where we think we are, and that wherever we are, we are on safe, familiar ground—for each area has been charted and defined, made recognizable and mastered before our arrival there. To be at home when we cross over boundaries, all that is necessary is to conform to the practices established on the other side by those inhabiting the area, by those who respect its boundary and remain within it.

The problem with the boundary separating history and fiction is that it does not function this way. It is more open than closed, more often displaced than fixed, as much within each field as at the limits of each. It is in play throughout history, whenever and wherever the question of history or fiction is raised, but nowhere does it function in an unproblematic, unequivocal manner. It is not just open, then, in the sense that it permits passage over it—all boundaries do this. It is open

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in a more radical sense, for the very domains it is supposed to separate and delimit continually cross over it also. This creates an unstable situation with which all theories of literature and all theories of history seem uneasy and which they have tried to remedy. They have consistently sought to fix the boundary between them and to establish once and for all the specificity of the fields in one of two ways: democratically, in that each accepts a mutually agreed upon boundary which grants to each its own identity and integrity; or, just as often, imperialistically, in that each tries to extend its own boundary and to invade, engulf, or encompass the other. In the first case, history and fiction exist side by side as uncommunicating opposites; in the second, one dominates the other—as when history makes fiction into its subject and treats it as just another historical document, or when fiction makes history into one form of fictional narrative among many possible forms. In the first case, the other is kept “outside,” under surveillance, at a safe distance. In the second, it is overcome, cannibalized, incorporated into the sameness of the imperializing field, and frequently the incorporation or invasion may even be facilitated by the existence within the invaded area of elements already cooperating actively with the invaders. In either case, the location of the boundary, the assumptions that permit it to be traced, and the strategies elaborated for its defense or destruction are the crucial problems.

Contemporary criticism abounds with theories of history and fiction; some are concerned with the integrity of these objects or domains, others stress their overlapping. The interdependence of theories of history and fiction has been increasingly apparent in the work of a broad range of contemporary theorists, but, I would argue, the question of this relationship on its most fundamental level—that of the open boundary—has not been directly addressed by the great majority of theorists, historiographers, and literary critics. Or rather, when the question of the boundary between history and fiction has

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been the object of critical scrutiny, a prior assumption concerning the nature of the relationship between the two permits that relationship to be fixed or closed in one of the two ways already outlined. As a result, the potentially critical aspect of the analysis is undercut from the start.

The contradictory situation the French structuralist anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss finds himself in is perhaps the best example of what occurs when the question of the open boundary is pursued in all its complexity. Much of his work challenges the certitudes upon which the distinction between history and fiction (or myth) is based. In particular, in *The Savage Mind*, Lévi-Strauss criticizes Jean-Paul Sartre's conception of history and argues that it is itself a myth that places Western consciousness and Western culture at the center of the world, just as the myths of so-called primitive peoples invariably designate their own tribes as uniquely human and all others as inhuman.<sup>1</sup> And yet, although he thus erases the boundary between history and myth, Lévi-Strauss nevertheless continues to an important extent to accredit the rigid distinction between them, inasmuch as he posits them as a pair in which each term defines the other through a process of mutual exclusion. Thus in criticizing Sartre, Lévi-Strauss champions analytical thought as opposed to dialectical thought and compares this opposition to one between myth and history. Lévi-Strauss's approach to the problem is typical of the most complex theories of history and fiction in that he sometimes defends the integrity of the boundary between them and at other times allows this boundary to be overrun, erased, or simply ignored. But Lévi-Strauss does not directly confront the contradictions in his position, nor do most other contemporary theorists. In the context of contemporary theory, the boundary between fiction and history thus remains largely unquestioned; as an open boundary it works, as it always has,

<sup>1</sup> Claude Lévi-Strauss, "History and Dialectic," *The Savage Mind* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1966).



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to separate history and fiction, but at the same time it inevitably indicates the way they overlap and are inextricably and internally implicated in each other. The most fundamental problem posed by this relationship, then, is not that of determining which term has priority over the other, nor of determining the identity or integrity of either term. It is rather that of understanding the significance of this open boundary as it defines from the outset and in a contradictory way both history and fiction.

The work of Lévi-Strauss exemplifies the difficulties involved in addressing the question of the relationship between history and fiction in a definitive fashion, and, equally important, indicates that the importance of the question goes beyond one or two disciplines to affect our understanding of the broader context of contemporary theory as a whole. The question of this particular boundary is most often a background issue in debates concerning the status of language, perception, memory, culture, reason, and the subject, as well as in the definition and practice of the various disciplines that take these terms as objects of inquiry. But at crucial moments in contemporary theoretical debates, the problem has emerged as an explicit and fundamental issue. If Claude Lévi-Strauss's critique of Sartre represents one such moment, another is Michel Foucault's critique of traditional history in the name of a madness for which, he argues, history has been radically unable to account. Foucault's opposition of "madness" to "civilization" also relates to the opposition between history and fiction, for there is a profound affinity between Foucault's concept of madness and his concept of fictive or poetic language. It is not just madness that lies in some sense outside history, but also the fiction of Cervantes, Bataille, Sade, Roussel, and others. The "new history" or archaeology proposed by Foucault models itself after this type of "superhistorical" fiction as it captures the silence of "cosmic" or "tragic" madness, and not after any traditional, dialectical, or evolutionary historical theory. One could argue that Foucault, unlike Lévi-Strauss, thus postulates a boundary even more absolute and closed than that presup-

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posed by traditional rationalist history, but closed now in order to protect the integrity of madness (and a certain form of fiction). In this way, no matter how important and powerful his critique of history is, he limits his critical enterprise by directing it at history alone and by not questioning the boundary that makes such a critique possible.

Roland Barthes represents still another position on this question when, in "Historical Discourse," he discusses the relationship of history to (fictional) narrative and makes explicit a critique of history implicit in all structuralist theory of narrative.<sup>2</sup> History, he argues, is essentially a form of narrative, constituted, like other narrative, by a set of relationships internal to it. Only its own denial of its determination by these internal relationships distinguishes history from other forms of narrative, and this distinction itself is only relative, inasmuch as "realist" fiction implies the same sort of denial. Here Barthes forcefully questions the traditional opposition between history and fiction, but at the same time he continues to accredit it in a somewhat different form, as an opposition between different categories of narrative: the "realist" narrative and narrative that in some way acknowledges its fictional status. In a similar vein, Hayden White, though accepting to some degree the distinction between history and (fictional) literature, nonetheless posits history as ultimately determined by formal and rhetorical structures and argues that the "impasse" history now faces can be overcome only through an ironic consciousness of the formal nature of history—in other words, by accepting its similarity to fiction.<sup>3</sup> White's position could thus in a sense be considered even more radical than that of Foucault or Barthes, and yet it too depends on a delimitation or boundary closing off fiction and making it a dis-

<sup>2</sup> Roland Barthes, "Historical Discourse," *Introduction to Structuralism*, edited by Michael Lane (New York: Basic Books, 1970). The essay was originally published in *Social Science Information* (International Social Science Council), vol. 6, no. 4 (August 1967).

<sup>3</sup> See, in particular, his *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1973).

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crete object that can be represented in a formal system that is itself given as clearly distinct from fiction. In a different context—that of the Anglo-American philosophy of history—W. B. Gallie, like White, stresses the similarity of history and fiction when he argues that history should be understood as offering the same type of explanation of events as the story.<sup>4</sup> Despite the radical implications of his analysis, however, Gallie never seriously questions the distinction between history and fiction, preferring instead to view his work as complementing the research of others who have sought simply to establish rather than to question the specificity of history.

All of the above, then, could be seen as resolving the complex issues raised in their critical analysis of the boundary between history and fiction by falling back on another form of that boundary, one they argue or imply can be more surely defended. And yet each in a different way attests to the central, strategic importance of this problematic relationship for contemporary theory. Because of its general ramifications and because of the difficulties it poses—difficulties that, as in the case of Lévi-Strauss, often put the theorist who seeks to address them at odds with himself, on both sides of the boundary at the same time—the relationship between history and fiction merits attention as one of the most important questions facing contemporary theory. Ultimately, I shall argue that, analyzed from the perspective of their open boundary, history and fiction each represents a radical critique of the other. And yet, because of their interdependence, there can be no unique perspective from which to formulate this critique and no simple, direct way to analyze its implications for the various disciplines directly involved or for theory in general. In order to come to terms with the openness of the boundary between history and fiction it does not suffice to note that history has formal, narrative aspects or that fiction attains its ends through the formal organization of what are essentially historical materials. Instead, it is necessary to understand how,

<sup>4</sup> See his *Philosophy and the Historical Understanding* (New York: Schocken Books, 1964).

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before either history or fiction is constituted as such, a theory of what the other is has already defined the space, the scope, and the limitations of each.

Though more or less explicit theories of the relationship between fiction and history are at the center of contemporary theoretical debates, the pervasiveness of such theories should not be interpreted as a reflection of the self-evident, universal, or empirical nature of the terms of this relationship. Both have complicated histories, and their existence is tied to that of specific institutions. Any debate concerning their status is thus also a debate about that history and those institutions. Indeed, modern history and modern institutions—academies of science, learned societies, and, above all, the university—have for some time determined that most of the explicit discussion of the relationship between history and fiction shall take place within the context of two disciplines: history and literature. Even if in the modern period at least, the boundary between history and fiction is commonly identified with a boundary between these two disciplines, the concepts and the institutions of history and literature are in an important sense relatively recent. It was in the course of the nineteenth century that the gradual specification and specialization occurred that give history and literature their modern aspect and accentuate so radically the difference between them. As Lionel Gossman has argued:

In the final phase of neo-classicism . . . the term "literature" gradually became more closely associated with poetry, or at least with poetic and figurative writing, and, especially among the Romantics and their successors, took on the meaning of a corpus of privileged or sacred texts, a treasury in which value, truth and beauty had been piously stored, and which could be opposed to the empirical world of historical reality and even, to some extent, to historiography as the faithful record of that reality. Indeed, it was at this point that historians began to look in the history of historiography itself for the origins

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of a divorce—which they felt their own time was about to consummate—between historical writing and poetic writing.<sup>5</sup>

To understand the sense of contemporary debates over the boundary between history and fiction, it seems necessary, then, to look at a very particular moment in the history of such debates, the eighteenth century, when “literature” does not yet have the specificity it will acquire later on and which, in many ways, it still possesses even in the eyes of those modern critics who see it as one use of language among others. In its more broadly defined, eighteenth-century form, literature may include philosophy, political philosophy, and history, as well as those domains covered by the contemporary use of the term. What was for the eighteenth century a distinction between history as a category of literature on the one hand and fable, fiction, or the irrational on the other has been transformed into a modern opposition between history and literature. The difference between the eighteenth century and the modern era is not the sign, however, of a cataclysm or an absolute discontinuity separating the Enlightenment concept of fiction from the modern concept of literature. Nor does it mean that dogmatism concerning the status of history or fiction is confined to one period or the other. But if the two sets of terms—fiction/history and literature/history—are not unrelated, neither can the difference between them be ignored. An analysis of the relationship between history and literature is necessary in order to confront the “modern” significance of the relationship of history to fiction. Conversely, an analysis of the relationship between history and fiction in the premodern period is necessary in order to confront both terms with their own historicity, that is, to question the “self-evidence” of the relationship between history and literature as it has been institutionalized in the modern university.

<sup>5</sup> Lionel Gossman, “History and Literature,” *The Writing of History: Literary Form and Historical Understanding*, edited by Robert H. Canary and Henry Kozicki (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1978), p. 5.

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The boundary between history and fiction thus has a history, but that history is not continuous and uniform.<sup>6</sup> Its nineteenth-century phase opens with an intense reaction to the historical and literary practices of the Enlightenment, and its form and development follow from the character of this initial reaction. Moreover, the effects of the conflict or difference between the *philosophes* and their successors are as significant for historical as for literary institutions. The historiographical conflict between the Romantics and their predecessors is described by Ernst Cassirer in *The Philosophy of the Enlightenment*, where he roots historicism and, more broadly, modern historical thinking in a rejection of what the nineteenth century saw as the inadequate historical sense of the classical age. According to Cassirer, the Romantics' negative assessment of the Enlightenment involved them in a contradiction: "This movement, which devotes itself so wholeheartedly to the past in order to grasp its pristine reality, fails to live up to its ideal when it encounters that past with which it is still in direct contact. . . . Romanticism never attempted to judge the Enlightenment by its own standards, and it was unable to view without polemical bias the conception of the historical

<sup>6</sup> In "The Logical Status of Fictional Discourse," *New Literary History*, vol. 6 (1975), John R. Searle takes the position that literature and fiction are overlapping but ultimately distinct categories. He asserts that while fiction can be logically and rigorously defined, literature cannot. I would argue, however, that the definition of fiction is not purely logical and thus that fiction and literature cannot be distinguished in the way Searle says they can. The fictional status of a discourse is determined, Searle asserts, by the author, not the reader. Moreover, he claims that unlike fiction, literature is continuous with the nonliterary. In contrast to Searle, the historiographers of the Enlightenment were concerned precisely with those forms of discourse that had once functioned as science or history both for their authors and for previous cultures, but that had come to be seen as myths or fictions by later civilizations. For the Enlightenment, then, there is a troubling continuity between the fictional and the nonfictional, and even a suspicion that their own "science" might be a "myth." This continuity cannot, moreover, be interrupted by an author or his intentions, for no author can completely control the context in which his discourse will be interpreted by succeeding generations—or his own.

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world which the eighteenth century had formulated.”<sup>7</sup> In Cassirer’s view, the contradiction in the position of the Romantics stems from their failure to practice in the case of the eighteenth century what they preached as historians and philosophers of history. But the contradiction goes even deeper than this assessment would lead one to believe. The conception of the historical world that the eighteenth century had formulated was, according to Cassirer, one whose “condition of possibility” was that it could be understood by a universal reason (*The Philosophy of the Enlightenment*, pp. 197, 199). However, from the perspective of the Romantics, reason was not universal, but rather a metahistorical value which the Enlightenment had erected as a supreme standard for the judgment of other historical cultures as well as for the transformation of its own. The contradiction in which the Romantics found themselves was thus not the result of a practical failure to apply their principles in a particular and especially difficult case. Rather it was a contradiction inherent in historicism, and so much so that the Romantics could not choose between being faithful or unfaithful to the Enlightenment, but only between two ways of being unfaithful. They could seek to treat the Enlightenment in “its pristine reality.” But in that case their method itself would constitute a betrayal of and a negative judgment passed on the Enlightenment and on the Enlightenment’s use of history in the defense of its own political rallying cry—“reason.” Or they could treat the Enlightenment in the way Cassirer claims they did: they could reject it out of hand. Either way, the Romantics’ respect for the “pristine reality” of the historical subject would be revealed for what it is: a historicism as polemical and arbitrary in substance as the “rationalism” of the Enlightenment. The very existence of a competing historiography could only reveal that nineteenth-century historicism was not as neutral as it claimed to be, and to undermine this claim to neutrality was to undermine the very basis

<sup>7</sup> Ernst Cassirer, *The Philosophy of the Enlightenment* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1965), p. 198.

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of historicism. In this sense, it was inevitable that the historical thinking of the Enlightenment should be ignored in one way or another by the Romantics and their successors.

It follows, then, that it is always too late to ask why we must turn to the Enlightenment in order to understand the relationship between fiction (or literature) and history. For we *do* return, either negatively, by dogmatically asserting that the relationship is purely logical, or positively, by recognizing that it has a history. But if we continue to frame our investigation of this relationship solely within the context of the contemporary university and the disciplines as they are presently defined, we prejudge the question of that relationship and claim, at least implicitly, that fiction (or literature) and history are uncommunicating opposites as the Romantics argued they were or should be and that our own concepts of history and reason are neutral, at last purged of all ideology and myth.

Such a stance would not be neutral, it would imply that we were taking a position in the conflict between the Romantics and the Enlightenment, and thus, whatever its subtleties, our own position would be more or less dogmatically historicist. The present work returns to the French Enlightenment in order to pose the question of the contradictory nature of the relationship between history and fiction, and in the light of the history of the institutions that serve as the modern context for this question, this appears to be the only possible course. For we must either ignore this conflict and the way it has shaped our institutions and our knowledge, in which case it will continue to determine theoretical discussion in an "unconscious" way, or make of it an explicit problem.

The present work, then, seeks to understand the implications for theories of literature and history of a critical analysis of the philosophy of the Enlightenment. It argues that the relation between history and fiction is not peripheral but rather the central question in the philosophy of history of that age; and, moreover, that, in this form, the problem of history itself was not peripheral to the French Enlightenment but was instead a major, if not the major problem it faced. Several prac-



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tical aspects of the present work follow directly from these two general theses. The texts whose interpretation serves as the basis for my argument include works that today would be more likely to be treated as representative of differing disciplines; notably, of history, literature, philosophy, and political theory. If the relationship between fiction and history is a key to understanding the philosophy of history of the Enlightenment, then it follows that the "literary" work has as much to say about history as the more properly "historical" or "philosophical" work, and vice versa. The parceling out of individual works to specialists of various disciplines seems the most artificial and gratuitous when one is confronted, as one often is in eighteenth-century studies, with texts that, despite their range, comprise the work of a single writer. A second tendency when dealing with writers whose work encompasses as many fields as that of the writers treated here is to subordinate one aspect of a writer's work to another or to consider certain works more central than others. Jean Starobinski, for example, considers Rousseau's political works to be "failures" whose ultimate function is to pave the way for a later, more successful group of literary works reflecting a private world of imagination, and this interpretation typifies the arguments of many less important scholarly works.<sup>8</sup> By focusing on the relationship between two spheres touched on by each of these writers, and by not seeking to privilege one aspect of their work over the other, I have sought to open the boundaries closed by the specialization and departmentalization of literary criticism and historical interpretation.

Because this study seeks to demonstrate the crucial nature of the relationship between fiction and history to a general understanding of the French Enlightenment, it is based on the interpretation of the works of four figures generally acknowledged to be the principals of the age—Voltaire, Montesquieu,

<sup>8</sup> Jean Starobinski, *Jean-Jacques Rousseau, la transparence et l'obstacle* (Paris: Gallimard, 1971), pp. 49-63.

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Diderot, and Rousseau.<sup>9</sup> For in the French Enlightenment, history is not only the concern of a relatively anonymous group of scholars and philosophers; it is also a central issue for precisely those figures who have received the most attention from subsequent scholars and critics, but without the question of their role as historical thinkers having been vigorously pursued, except from a standpoint that, like the Romantics', tends to subordinate it to their "rationalism."

The question of the significance of these figures in the history of the philosophy of history has been explored through an interpretation of several of their major works. I have sought to avoid merely applying the labels—such as "determinist," "sensationalist," "relativist"—most frequently used to characterize these works, for, more often than not, their use naively presupposes a universal agreement as to their meaning. The labeling of texts and of thinkers is to some extent inevitable and necessary, for one could argue that in many cases it begins with the texts and thinkers themselves. Moreover, the label is clearly unavoidable in the sense that it belongs to our historical and philosophical language and thus provides a currency without which intellectual exchange would be impossible. But

<sup>9</sup> This is one of the most significant respects in which the present work contrasts with Lionel Gossman's *Medievalism and the Ideologies of the Enlightenment* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1968). The latter focuses on a large network of scholars and philosophers whose writings both shaped and reflected Enlightenment attitudes toward history. Major figures such as Voltaire and Montesquieu are treated, but they do not dominate; rather they serve as background figures for La Curne de Sainte-Palaye, whom Gossman selects as his central figure in part because of the intrinsic interest of his work but, more important, as a representative of this larger network. In individual essays, Gossman has focused more closely on the historical thinking of the "major" figures: see, in particular, "Voltaire's *Charles XII*: History into Art," *Studies on Voltaire*, vol. 25 (1963). Other essays by Gossman that treat the problem of the relationship between history and fiction are the already cited "History and Literature," and *Augustin Thierry and Liberal Historiography* (Middleton, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 1976). Readers interested in the relationship between historiography and the novel in the Enlightenment will also want to consult Leo Braudy's *Narrative Form in History and Fiction: Hume, Fielding, and Gibbon* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1970).

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it can never be a substitute for the process of reading and interpretation from which it derives its legitimacy. Labeling is just one version of a tendency, built into all interpretation, to postulate the unity of the work in an a priori way and then to produce an interpretation that conforms to that postulate. While there is no reason to prefer the complex and the contradictory to the simple, there is no reason to privilege the simple either. Each of the texts analyzed here exhibits a basic complexity which I have not sought to reduce, a complexity that gives these texts their fundamental historicity. In other words, it is only inasmuch as they remain open to new interpretations and are not fixed within the narrow boundaries of their own age that these texts "live on" in history. A text whose sense would only be that determined by the explicit context of its "own" era (as in a historicist reading) would be a text without a history, a text produced, read, and interpreted in a single instant without duration. This concept of the text is the ideal of critics who look to the consciousness of the author, or to his or her biography for evidence of an authorial intention, or to the social context or "history" for a meaning with which the work would coincide perfectly. It is a reductive and ultimately ahistorical version of the text, one that simplifies its historical no less than its literary complexity.

Just as it is arbitrary to posit in advance the unity of a given work, so it is arbitrary to posit in advance the unity of history or of a historical period. "The Enlightenment" is itself also clearly a kind of label, and as such its use often presupposes such a unity. The problem, however, is not so much how to do away with this label as how to analyze critically the unity it implies, a unity based on the concept of "lumières" or reason. The view that the eighteenth century is above all an age of reason is shared by a broad and heterogeneous group of philosophers, historians, and literary critics that includes traditional eighteenth-century scholars and such radical critical thinkers as Michel Foucault. A critical analysis of Voltaire, the most militant "rationalist" of the eighteenth century, indicates, however, that what historians from Cassirer to Foucault

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have called "reason" in the eighteenth century signifies not one but many contradictory things. In Voltaire's histories, reason is shaped and defined by its struggle with the forces "external" to it, just as those forces are shaped and defined by reason itself, and thus reason is determined by an open, "dialectical" process that is in principle infinite, that arrives at no ultimate synthesis, and that, as a result, can never be said to vindicate reason. A reason "defined" through such a conflictual process cannot be assumed to be at one with itself, and thus, even if it continues to play a central role in the interpretation of the Enlightenment, it cannot be simply posited as the basis of the homogeneity of the Enlightenment as an age.

The conflict within history as it is portrayed, for example, in Voltaire's *Essai sur les mœurs* is both "substantial" (for Voltaire, it involves conflict between what he considers to be reactionary cultures or groups such as Egypt, the Jews, the Greeks, medieval civilization, and the "noblesse de robe," and the forces of Enlightenment, such as the Chinese philosopher-civil servant, the enlightened despots, and eighteenth-century *philosophes*—or at least some of them!) and "formal" or generic. In its formal aspect, the struggle is one between different kinds of historiography: a true historiography or history and a false one which Voltaire calls fiction or fable. Theorists of history have frequently pointed out the semantic "confusion" inherent in the term "history"—between history as a substance or process and history as the totality of historical writing (or as a description of a type of writing). Voltaire implies that this is not confusion at all, for the political triumph of philosophy is one and the same with the formal triumph of history over fiction. In this sense, the substantial questions of history are, for Voltaire, formal questions as well.

The significance of the form of history is a topic that has been largely ignored, not only by contemporary scholars who have looked at the historiography of the Enlightenment, but by modern historians and philosophers of history as well. The Enlightenment is particularly well suited for an investigation of this issue, for it is a period when such modern concerns as

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the authentication of documents and textual criticism exist side by side with the view that history is a form of literature. That history can be subjected to the same kind of formal analysis as literature is a relatively novel thesis in our own century, and to date it has been extensively treated and forcefully argued by only one historiographer, Hayden White. Although the present study parallels White's insofar as it seeks to emphasize the formal nature of history, it is not formalist in the way his is. Though White uses his tropology to describe and differentiate between historical periods, he openly asserts that formal categories are metahistorical. For him, a history of historiography is possible, but it would always be subject in the last instance to formal analysis, that is, classifiable within the categories of a transhistorical, formal system. Like White's *Metahistory*, this study is designed to show that the form of history is never inconsequential, that is, that history is never "metaformal." Unlike White, however, I am equally concerned with demonstrating that form (as a system of tropes) cannot be considered metahistorical. The interdependence of history and form and the limitations they mutually impose on each other become evident when one considers Voltaire's historiography. There the concept of a metahistorical form or genre is shown to be entirely compatible with a naively mimetic, "metaformalist" concept of history, because both depend on the assumption that the literal meaning of language preexists and thus can be distinguished from its figurative or rhetorical meanings. My point is to show that in Voltaire as in White, the premises that make possible both metaformalist and metahistorical systems limit the scope and complexity of the concepts of history and form being defended or opposed.

The present study emphasizes the problem of form in eighteenth-century historiography and literature while remaining cognizant of the limitations of formalist approaches. It attempts, moreover, to take a critical perspective not just on form, but on history as well, to confront one with the other. One could say that this study practices a kind of historical criticism, but that, at the same time, it rejects the metahistor-

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ical concepts of history that in most cases provide the basis for such criticism. In the chapters that follow, different critical strategies are used to frame questions of interpretation of special thematic, formal, or historical relevance to the work in question. Though the focus is on methodologies and theorists whose work has figured prominently in recent debates in "critical theory," the aim of this study is not simply to "apply" these "new" theories to a group of "old" texts, but rather, to create genuine dialogues between them. In each chapter the theories of literature or history in question have provided a point of departure for the reading of the eighteenth-century work, but the consideration of those works has invariably revealed the contradictions as well as the coherence of the modern theories themselves and their place in a complicated historical series that extends at least as far as the eighteenth century. Historical criticism in this sense does not merely demand that one consider the absolute historical specificity of any given "event"; it is not historicist in form. It requires rather that one question the degree of specificity of the "event," the way in which it continues, repeats, and transforms other "events." In many respects, the eighteenth century and our theoretical modernity are part of a single age, and it is as frequently the case that an eighteenth-century work represents a critique of a modern work as the reverse. The present study thus does not privilege the "contemporary" approaches to the theoretical problems that are evoked. To do so would be to practice a historicism different in style but not in substance from that of the scholar who strives to treat texts in their "own" context, in their "pristine reality." To privilege "contemporary" categories and "contemporary" methods (or to deny that they could possibly be relevant to "past" writings) is to assume that their meaning is transparent to "us" and not implicated in and limited by the contradictory history they carry on and transform. The same critical method must thus apply to these modern texts as to those of the past.

History is not always concerned with contradictions. It may be more concerned with discovering totalities or with locating

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a cause or a complex of causes thought to explain a historical event or set of events in a way that is "consistent" or "logically satisfying." History, moreover, is not always concerned with the historical nature and historical specificity of its own methods. Whereas it may serve to debunk myths of progress in other domains, it is not necessarily interested in doing so with respect to historiography. Most liberal historians decry teleological views of history from Aristotle to Marx and would no doubt argue that history progresses and becomes more scientific as it leaves such teleologies behind. Yet it is only fairly recently that a number of historians, principally the group known as the *Annales* School, have sought to analyze the role of "hidden" teleologies, based on concepts of the "event," in liberal historiography itself. Anglo-American philosophers of history have frequently distinguished sharply between teleological history and a history that would conform to general laws as in the natural sciences.<sup>10</sup> The difference between teleological views of history, scientific views, and those of a philosopher of history such as Collingwood, who rejects both teleology and science as models for history, are ultimately not as substantial as might first appear, however. For all of them assume the existence of "one historical world" that serves as the ultimate basis of the criteria of unity and of noncontradiction in each particular form of historical explanation.<sup>11</sup> Assumptions such as this very frequently form the basis for historical inquiry without ever becoming the object of historical inquiry. When viewed in a critical light, history can be said to be determined by a more or less explicit decision to treat only

<sup>10</sup> Carl G. Hempel, "The Function of General Laws in History," *Theories of History* (Glencoe, Ill.: Free Press, 1962). In his essay, Hempel considers attempts "to account for features of organic behaviour by reference to an entelechy" to be "pseudo-explanations" based on "metaphors rather than laws" (p. 347), and contrasts them with genuine historical explanations based on general hypotheses identical in kind to those of science.

<sup>11</sup> A notable exception is W. B. Gallie, who criticizes the notion of the "one historical world" in his *Philosophy and the Historical Understanding*, pp. 56-64.

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*certain* concepts, *certain* events, and *certain* methods as having a history, and to treat all others as though they do not. Clearly, however, historical criticism by right extends to all "concepts," "events," and "methods," including those of history itself and those that philosophers of history have ascribed to "extrahistorical" disciplines such as science.

If the term "history" is such an unreliable one, if there is always a danger, in seeking to use it in a critical way, that it will be interpreted in keeping with previous definitions, why use the term at all and why place it at the center of an investigation? One answer is that "history" is no different in this respect from many other terms that might also have served as a focal point for this work. To make "language," "text," "form," or "representation" the center of an inquiry entails the same sort of risks and the same necessity of redefinition and reworking. This answer, however, still leaves the question open, for if history is one "unreliable," contradictory term among others, the decision to make it a center of attention still must be explained. In response, it is important to state first of all that this work does not have a single center. History is *a* center; fiction is also a center. Second, if history is, nonetheless, one of the centers, it is because in the context of the theoretical developments that constitute a point of departure for the methodological reflections in this work—developments that, for better or for worse, are known as "structuralism" and "poststructuralism"—history is the discipline that has been the most heavily criticized, both implicitly and explicitly. Although there exist a structural linguistics, anthropology, and psychoanalysis, it is still unclear whether or not such a thing as a structural history is possible, and inasmuch as structuralism is now generally spoken of only in the past tense, it is doubtful that the question will be taken up in the future.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>12</sup> Michel Foucault has consistently denied that his own work can be considered a structuralist historiography, arguing instead, in *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (New York: Harper and Row, 1972) and elsewhere, that it represents a continuation and refinement of autonomous developments in economic and intellectual history. In many respects, however, Foucault's work