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# S O C I A L   S C I E N C E

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## David Hume, Historian

Wilson E. Strand

David Hume, remembered today chiefly as an 18th century English philosopher, was more famous in his own time as a historian, but his *History of England* has been almost totally neglected for more than a century because politics, writing styles, and, above all, the very nature of history itself have changed. Professor Strand reexamines his history by today's historical standards, demonstrating that his historical writing should remain as a major achievement.

David Hume, the philosopher, is well known, and properly so, but who remembers Hume, the historian? Today his reputation as a historian stands much as does his funeral monument on Calton Hill: a relic of the past, ignored and forgotten. Calton Hill in modern Edinburgh hosts one of the most eccentric collections of man-made ornaments in the world. These include memories of ancient Greece, a Parthenon, and a monument of Lysicrates; a towering obelisk, reminiscent of the Washington Monument; Lord Nelson's ugly telescope-shaped monument and the city observatory, which somehow seems the oldest of all. Ignored near the shadow of the statue of Abraham Lincoln is the inconspicuous funeral monument of David Hume. It resembles a circular Roman temple and several bishops wrote pamphlets after Hume's death attacking the pagan tomb. The old skeptic would have enjoyed the commotion, for he loved public recognition. Yet, his grave stele said modestly only "David Hume 1711-1776." Hume would let posterity add the rest.

His plump figure and childlike gaiety were a conspicuous part of a self-conscious Scottish literary brilliance in the second half of the 18th century. The intellectual constellation included Adam Smith and William Robertson and continued, centered about Sir Walter Scott, in the 19th century.

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In his own time, Hume was thought of as much more than a philosopher. *A Treatise of Human Nature*, now considered his major work, was a literary dud when it appeared anonymously in 1739. Hume was then only 27. Slowly, however, scholars began to recognize its significance; at least they paid the author enough attention to reject his application for a professorship at the University of Edinburgh, where as a student he had earlier majored in the classics. His interests began to shift about 1746 toward history and politics and six years later he became librarian at the Advocates Library in Edinburgh. The position was fortunate for the writer in that it gave him three vital prerequisites for writing a great history: a secure income, constant leisure, and access to a large library of 30,000 volumes. That this number was insufficient for his needs is shown by the orders he constantly placed for more books.

Hume was first of all a personality, albeit a rather eccentric one. His famous literary dinners were sparkled by his lively conversation and good humor. Hume himself was a skillful cook, as his great size was thought to prove. He was then, as now, "the Atheist Hume," well known for his skepticism, yet his works show an intimate familiarity with religion. Some of his best friends were ministers and professors of religion. For a number of years, the young and religious-minded Boswell idolized Hume above even the great Samuel Johnson. Hume once described himself in a letter as "a sober, discreet, virtuous, regular, quiet, goodnatured man *but* of a bad character."<sup>1</sup> Although his mother had once described her son as "uncommon weak minded,"<sup>2</sup> the young Hume was completely convinced of his own brilliance and undoubtedly enjoyed the fame it led to.<sup>3</sup>

It was when he was a librarian that he wrote his *History of England*, "backwards" as was frequently said. He first produced a volume on the Stuarts, which appeared in 1754 and immediately caused a storm of criticism. The second volume was on the Tudors, written partly to defend his earlier volume. The third and final volume covered from Julius Caesar to Henry VII.

Taken altogether, his history filled a definite need: it was the first relatively complete national history of England. But what kind of history had he written? And what sort of a historian was Hume? Very possibly, he was the ablest of the 18th century, a century which included Gibbon and Macaulay.

Historical fashions may change as rapidly as party leadership. Almost all histories are shelved to be forgotten as more modern histories update them. But the words often associated with Hume, such as "Tory," "atheist," and "philosopher," helped to make him obsolete before today's historians were born. Finally, in much the same way as modern archeologists view Schliemann, modern historians see Hume as neither great nor "scientific." Yet, both groups stand on the shoulders of the beginners they try to dismiss with contempt. It is an unfair sort of comparison. A historian should be judged relative to the age that produced him.

How did Hume's contemporaries view him? Adam Smith saw Hume as "by far the most illustrious philosopher and historian of the present age."<sup>4</sup> Yet, upon his death, Hume was more famous as a historian than philosopher. Edward Gibbon ranked him ahead of Robertson and himself as the greatest historian of his time and called him "the Tacitus of Scotland."<sup>5</sup> Robertson refused to compete with him. Voltaire, a historian himself, said that Hume was the only writer of a good and "impartial" history of England, called his work philosophical history, and later called Hume the epitome of the

serious and reliable historian.<sup>6</sup> By the early 19th century, Hume's position as a historical great was taken for granted. Macaulay began writing where Hume left off. He realized, as Xenophon had in the presence of the history of Thucydides, that it would have been superfluous to repeat him.<sup>7</sup> An American reviewer in 1849 who mentioned Hume simply took Hume's greatness as a historical writer for granted, saying it was unnecessary to elaborate upon it.<sup>8</sup> George Macaulay Trevelyan, writing in our own century, declared that "no country house of any pretention" would ever be without its Hume—or its Gibbon, Robertson, and Clarendon.<sup>9</sup> Hume's achievement in history was real.

Did Hume realize what he had accomplished? Before he began to write history, he greatly admired the writings in French on English history by Nicolas Rapin, a 16th century French Huguenot who was part of the humanistic group of writers surrounding Jean Bodin. There were also several earlier Whig historians, but they wrote what was obviously party history. Hume, as he began his research, discovered that no field was so lacking as the field of history. "Style, judgement, impartiality—everything is wanting," he decided. As he proceeded with his own history, he became more and more convinced that the history of England had never really been written. Eight years after completing his history, he proudly declared that he felt his own age to be "the Historical Age and this the historical nation."<sup>10</sup> Hume knew what he had done. He had been in large part responsible for making Great Britain historically conscious of its past. Despite a strong interest in antiquity and considerable effort to collect and publish historical records, historical writing in England before Hume was chaotic and immature.

Was his own historical writing really better? Did Hume add what he found wanting in other historians—style, judgment, and impartiality? The fairest way to judge him is by his own standards, by what he attempted to do.

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Did Hume possess good style as a writer of history? There seems little doubt of the high quality stylistically of Hume's *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, which he wrote in the middle of his volumes of English history. In the opinion of many critics, it was his best work stylistically. Mossner calls its author "a master of English prose."<sup>11</sup> His contemporaries Gibbon and Kant, considering his works as a whole, also praised his style. Gibbon, more interested in Hume's history, called him an oracle of style.<sup>12</sup>

Hume himself was greatly concerned with style. He saw history as an art. History should be entertaining as well as instructive, agreeable as well as useful.<sup>13</sup> History was of great value to the individual. It should amuse the fancy, improve understanding, and strengthen virtue.<sup>14</sup> That the 19th century historical movement of painstaking "scientific" research had not yet arrived should not blind us as to the merits of the earlier historian.

The historian in a letter to a friend described English literature as "still in a somewhat barbarous state."<sup>15</sup> Hume, through his own writing, did his best to improve it. He was so bothered by what he called "Scottisms" that he drew up lists of them so as to avoid them when he wrote. He showed a fondness for French, as the great Johnson recognized, and used such words as "vacance" and "Herod (for Herodotus)." His habit of constantly revising his works demonstrated his interest in style, perhaps partly a result of his frequent reading of the classics. He blamed the lack of a favorable public reaction to his *A Treatise on Human Nature* on style. He speaks of "my

love of *literary* fame, my ruling passion.”<sup>16</sup> Certainly, style was of great concern to Hume in all his writings and he wrote with great care.

Literary styles change rapidly and it is difficult to judge style from reading pages more than 200 years old. Yet, his is clear, orderly, logical in organization, steady, and consistent. The transitions are smooth. His character studies of major historical figures are essays which are still delightful to read.

Critics have attacked Hume's history for his sections on manners and especially for the sections he unfortunately entitled “Miscellaneous Transactions of this Reign.” From the criticisms it seems likely that some of the critics were so horrified by the title that they did not bother to read what they contained. These chapters are not insignificant and irrelevant historical leftovers or odds and ends for which, as some say, Hume could find no other place to fit them. The sections are, in fact, so well integrated that if one reads the chapter without looking at the table of contents, he cannot tell where the “miscellaneous transactions” begin. Moreover, they are not tidbits of unimportant information, but rather some of the most important information contained in the book, including fiscal and economic policies, legal and parliamentary development, and aspects of religion. If the reader overlooked these sections, for example, he would miss the entire four-page discussion centering about John Wycliffe.

Some also act as excellent summaries, as does the miscellaneous section at the end of the chapter on Edward III. The few sections on manners usually treat the behavior in the royal court, but also include such matters as chivalry and at times discuss manners in the very broad sense of behavior. These sections are important in reflecting Hume's approach to history. At one point he declares that manners of an age are often more instructive than wars and foreign policy.<sup>17</sup> Histories before Hume were customarily political and military. Hume offered his reader a new approach, something more. In general, Hume's history reads surprisingly well, even today. In terms of style, he is more enjoyable than most modern historians.

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Did Hume display unusual judgment as a historian in his interpretation and synthesis? Was he really a “philosopher historian,” as Voltaire said? Probably no more so than Voltaire. But how could a philosopher's writing of history be unphilosophical in the larger sense? Upon examination, his history does not sound philosophical. Rather, it is merely historical interpretation. The interpretation is valuable, though it is understandably annoying to those moderns who merely want the facts *wie es eigentlich gewesen* in the Rankian sense.

Hume, at times, is admittedly high flown. He makes Queen Elizabeth I, for example, more philosophical than she really was. It is doubtful that, upon hearing of revolt, “Elizabeth began to reflect on the instability of human affairs, the precarious state of royal grandeur and the danger of encouraging rebellious subjects” and resolved thereupon to alleviate the calamities of her unhappy kinswoman Mary Stuart.<sup>18</sup> But the antiquated English style makes it seem more high flown today than it would have to an 18th century Englishman. Hume was merely pointing out the proper inferences and conclusions, which he once said were the duty of the historian.<sup>19</sup>

One of the most valuable aspects of his historical writing is the elaborate notes in the back of each volume. His three-page note on Parliament, for

example, is essentially an analysis of the development of Parliament, which he associated with the struggle for liberty. Had he ever been asked, Hume undoubtedly would have agreed that the historian has the right to judge the past. But, more significantly, he felt that history should improve understanding and strengthen virtue. Though interpretative and analytical, Hume prefers to understand the characters of history rather than to condemn them. Hume never condemns any historical character.

His character studies are delightful because they are psychological. Hume continually searches for motives, ambitions, hopes, and hatreds in the personalities he portrays. He is continually asking why so-and-so behaved in such a way. He seeks the air and nature of the person himself. He relates, for example, how Elizabeth found Mary, Queen of Scots, guilty of complicity with Bothwell in the death of Lord Darnley. Yet, while condemning the act as criminal, Hume excuses her lapse of character, or at least makes allowance for it, by explaining the conduct of Darnley toward Mary, her frailty of character, and Bothwell's seductive charm.

In short, Hume attempted to see things through the eyes of the people of whom he was writing. He tried to follow their point of view in order to explain why they acted the way they did. He sought to view their lives not from his own time but in the context of theirs. As such, he was something of a relativist, perhaps the first follower of historicism in some ways. At least he anticipated such later historians as Dilthey and Collingwood in their psychological approach.

Was the "philosophical" historian a philosopher of history? No. Though themes such as civilization, parliament, and law persist in his history, there is no vast or grandiose general scheme into which everything fits.

Did he see history, as Carlyle and Bolingbroke did, as philosophy teaching by example? There are some indications that he did. Hume makes some comparisons, though not many, with his own day. For example, he compares the price of corn at the time of James I with the price in his own day. Elsewhere he comments sadly that despite the efforts of Bacon, still no organization exists in his day for the fixing of the English language. There is much more moralizing of this sort, but it is only that, not philosophy.

Hume, as already seen, says that history should be "instructional," but this is meant in the sense of useful. He stresses the utilitarian quality of history. Hume, for example, is not concerned whether Henry IV of France was or was not sincere as he changed religions in order to become king of France. Rather, he is interested in the motives and usefulness of the act, i.e., to gain support of the French Catholics and to gain a kingdom. Hume does not see cause and effect as such, but motives and actions which successively follow without necessarily a causal relationship. This is consistent with his philosophical skepticism and his belief that sense and perception were the basis of knowledge. He rejected cause and effect as guesswork. It was merely sequence and not predictable. But he did, like modern historians, search for probabilities and found them highly reliable. His history was consistent with his deeper beliefs concerning history. His history was first and foremost history as such, not philosophy.

At times Hume showed at least a little anthropological insight as well. He declared that from primitive myths man should be able to detect the environment or climate of their origin. This may have influenced such later romantic writers as Johann Gottfried von Herder, who followed these lines

more deeply after reading Hume. In a variety of ways Hume shows unusual judgment as a historian.

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The third qualification Hume established for a good historian was impartiality. Was Hume himself impartial? His contemporary, the critical Voltaire, thought so, declaring Hume "neither Parliamentarian, nor royalist, nor Anglican, nor Presbyterian," but "equitable." For the 18th century, that was a remarkable achievement. Coming from Voltaire, that was a substantial compliment.

Certainly, Hume saw himself as impartial, as all historians no doubt do. He declared that though he might be criticized for his ignorance of certain matters, at least no one could accuse him of partiality.<sup>20</sup> He sought as a writer, he declared, to avoid "extremes of all kinds"<sup>21</sup> and followed this principle in his history.

In his character sketches Hume went out of his way to be fair, to show the different sides. He notes, for example, the unpopular execution of Sir Walter Raleigh, but mentions in a footnote a letter which seems to prove Raleigh guilty in the death of Essex. Elsewhere he calls Raleigh a great but "ill-regulated mind."<sup>22</sup> In another, more extended footnote he seeks to explain the motives and the charges of King James against Raleigh and thus to deflate the public image of Raleigh because, as he explains, he feels it necessary to rectify the image of Raleigh, which he feels is "generally mistaken in so gross a manner that I scarcely know its parallel in the English history."<sup>23</sup>

Elsewhere he finds Mary Tudor full of "obstinacy, bigotry,<sup>24</sup> violence, cruelty, malignity, revenge, tyranny. . . bad temper and narrow understanding . . . a weak bigoted woman, under the government of priests."<sup>25</sup> He is harsher on her than on any other public figure, yet, he grants her sincerity, vigor, and resolution. Similarly, he sees some good in all. History's characters are complex and thus very human.

Was Hume, as some charged, a "Tory historian" or a historian who favored monarchy? He did see the purpose of the state as that of guaranteeing property and justice. He once declared that obedience to the state was necessary if society was to exist.<sup>26</sup> On the other hand, however, he supported liberty and condemned despotism.<sup>27</sup> He even supported rebellion against an oppressive king under desperate emergencies.<sup>28</sup> He was surely on the side of peace and order, but he was more anti-Whig than pro-Tory and consciously he tried hard to be neither. The charge of his being a Tory historian tells more of a pro-Parliament, later England than it does of Hume. He criticizes Parliament in the time of Charles II for acting beyond its constitutional past, yet, a moment later he condones Parliament from the point of view of its future efforts. Hume is two-sided even when evaluating gunpowder. While admitting that it is destructive, he also sees that it has "rendered battles less bloody and has given greater stability to civil societies."<sup>29</sup>

There is also a cosmopolitan aspect of his history. Though by title only a history of England, it does contain considerable European, particularly French, history. Hume sizes up the French Henrys, as well as the English Henrys. He tells of Henry of Navarre's conquest of Paris by becoming Catholic, even though it has no direct relation with English history. At times, he goes out of his way to be fair to an English opponent. For example, he sees France's part in the Hundred Years' War as more just than that of England. He blames the English King Edward III for the fruitless desolation of France

and the impoverishing of England. He was not a chauvinistic or a strongly nationalistic Englishman. He was a Scot.

Was he “objective”? There are many, many footnotes, notes, and references to his sources. Hume seems as objective as his sources permitted. Certainly, he made use of his position as librarian to order the books he needed for his research, including parliamentary journals and other primary sources. By his own admission, however, he did not use unpublished manuscripts,<sup>30</sup> perhaps feeling it improper to do so. It is also true that he used secondary sources and annals much more than modern historians would approve of, but this was the 18th century.

His historical research did not stop with the publication of his history. There is evidence that he dug into the archives of the French foreign office and found a secret treaty between Charles II and Louis XIV. He also discovered 14 volumes of personal memoirs of James II while searching through college records.<sup>31</sup> Hume had something of the modern historical spirit.

Was Hume “scientific”? Perhaps it is not a fair question, since the concept of history as a science developed only later. He applied his philosophical skepticism to history. While it may be dangerous and discrediting in principle for the historian to extend his philosophical ideas to his history, it made Hume a better historian. Viewing reason as the slave of passions seems incredibly naive and unhistorical to many in the 1970’s, but it prompted Hume to dig into the psychological motives of the characters of history. For philosophical reasons he was also greatly concerned with probability. Hume was scrupulously concerned with the truth, according to Peter Gay, and carefully sifted the evidence in its pursuit.<sup>32</sup> He once remarked that he believed that politics could someday be reduced to a science based on a study of human nature.<sup>33</sup> There is no evidence, however, that he ever said the same about history. Though his methods were surprisingly modern for his age, he never presumed to see history as a science. He did see records as probable evidence from which to draw conclusions. He did examine each action psychologically, against human nature, to see if the action was naturally possible according to human nature. He thus had a criterion for selecting and testing his information before developing a historical synthesis. In intention and generally in execution, Hume seems to have been surprisingly impartial for his age.

As a historian, Hume lived up to his own standards in terms of style, judgment, and impartiality. Modern historians insist on the same three qualifications and often on others. One of their basic working assumptions that they sometimes find lacking in Hume is that of progress. Did Hume believe in progress? Peter Gay says “no.”<sup>34</sup> Yet, there seems to be some sort of a fundamental belief, even if it is undeveloped, in progress. In discussing the growth of religious belief among the masses of the people, Hume generalizes “according to the natural progress of human thought.”<sup>35</sup> This implies a belief in at least intellectual improvement and progress. He goes on to trace the collective mind of mankind from a lower state of consciousness to a higher state of consciousness, i.e., from polytheism to monotheism. He traces movement in general from the concrete to the abstract, from ideas based on sense to those based on rationalism. Hume, in this sense, sees religious advance, even though his two-sided nature makes him ask whether or not this advance is good for man, noting that monotheism has generated more vicious character types than has polytheism. He also, however, suggests at times a cyclical view of at least religion when he states that men follow



“a natural tendency to rise from idolatry to theism,” but then sink back to a state of idolatry.<sup>36</sup> Hume was not a champion of reason in the way that the *philosophes* were. He could not have believed that most men would ever believe in a rational religion.

In a brief essay entitled “Of the Study of History,” Hume saw primitive “human activity, in its infancy making its first essays towards the arts and sciences . . . the policy of government and the civility of conversation refining by degrees, and everything that is ornamental to human life advancing toward its perfection.”<sup>37</sup> This bold statement seems to prove that Hume believed in progress in the arts and sciences, government, and manners. But Hume saw as well in history “the rise, progress, decline and final extinction of the most flourishing empires; the virtues which contribute to their greatness and the vices which drew on their ruin.”<sup>38</sup> Politically and militarily, the story of man seems to him more morphological or cyclical even while there is general cultural progress.

In his *History of England* one senses a general rise or progress, but it is neither steady nor regular. Hume saw the ancient world peak in the Augustan Age, decline during the Middle Ages to a depression, then peak to the Renaissance as a revival of letters, rise again to the Industrial Revolution as a preparation for the Enlightenment, and finally reach its greatest height in the Enlightenment. He did not comment on the future nor try to predict. His skepticism would not allow it.

More specifically, Hume in his history notes the rise of Parliament. Though he blames it for disorders at times, he also realizes that it is leading to representative government and liberty. There are hints of material increase as well, particularly an increase in English commerce and national wealth from the Restoration to the Glorious Revolution.

Hume believes, it seems, in both linear and cyclical aspects of a theory of irregular progress. He believes in the rise, but also in the decline, of different aspects of life and of societies. He sees history leading to a high point intellectually, politically, and economically, as well as in literature, science, and perhaps in other areas. He sees advance in religion even while questioning it. Perhaps most significantly, he assumes general progress in human thought in such a way that it may be taken to include the future, even though Hume, ever the skeptic, remains silent on the future as such.

Even if Hume’s belief in progress is not fully developed, his credentials as a historian remain impressive and forward-looking. His psychological approach to history is sympathetic and empathetic, as well as analytical. He includes cultural, economic, and social aspects in his history, which began to appear two years before, and independent of, the publication of Voltaire’s grand cultural history on manners. Hume’s history is still chiefly political, but it does say something of the spirit of the different ages it covers. It also makes use of people other than military and political leaders. Hume writes of Newton, Harvey, Spenser, Milton, F. Bacon, and many other such figures. He includes the opinion of the people at large, though chiefly as public opinion. He tried, and to a significant extent succeeded, in freeing English historiography from the political parties and, in the process, wrote one of the first great histories of England.

#### Notes

<sup>1</sup>Thomas Huxley, *Hume*, New York: Harper, 1879, p. 35.

<sup>2</sup>John Randall, *The Career of Philosophy*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1962, p. 638.

- <sup>3</sup>David Hume, "My Own Life," Introduction to *History of England*, New York: Harper, 1879.
- <sup>4</sup>Ernest Mossner, "An Apology for David Hume, Historian," in Modern Language Association, *Publications*, September 1941, p. 680.
- <sup>5</sup>Hugh Trevor-Roper, "Hume as a Historian," *David Hume*, London: Macmillan, 1957, p. 89.
- <sup>6</sup>Paul Meyer, "Voltaire and Hume as Historians," in Modern Language Association, *Publications*, March 1958, p. 52.
- <sup>7</sup>Thomas Macaulay, "On History," *Critical and Historical Essays*, New York: Dutton, 1961, pp. 80-81.
- <sup>8</sup>Mossner, *op. cit.*, p. 657.
- <sup>9</sup>Quoted in Fritz Stern, *Varieties of History*, New York: Meridian Books, 1956, p. 242.
- <sup>10</sup>Trevor-Roper, *op. cit.*, pp. 89-90.
- <sup>11</sup>Ernest Mossner, in Introduction to Hume's *An Inquiry Concerning Human Understanding and other Essays*, New York: Washington Square Press, 1963, p. ix.
- <sup>12</sup>Mossner, "An Apology for David Hume, Historian," *op. cit.*, p. 688.
- <sup>13</sup>J. Black, *The Art of History*, New York: Crofts, 1926, p. 84.
- <sup>14</sup>Alban Widgery, *Interpretations of History*, London: Allen and Unwin, 1961, p. 163.
- <sup>15</sup>Mossner, *op. cit.*, p. 687.
- <sup>16</sup>Hume, *op. cit.*, pp. 3-5, 9. Emphasis added.
- <sup>17</sup>*Ibid.*, Volume 3, p. 251.
- <sup>18</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 301.
- <sup>19</sup>Mossner, *op. cit.*, p. 660.
- <sup>20</sup>Trevor-Roper, *op. cit.*, p. 91.
- <sup>21</sup>Mossner, *op. cit.*, p. 663.
- <sup>22</sup>Hume, *op. cit.*, Volume 4, p. 42.
- <sup>23</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 601.
- <sup>24</sup>Bigotry was a favorite word with Hume.
- <sup>25</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 208-209.
- <sup>26</sup>Black, *op. cit.*, pp. 109-111.
- <sup>27</sup>Meyer, *op. cit.*, p. 61.
- <sup>28</sup>Black, *loc. cit.*
- <sup>29</sup>Quoted in Meyer, *op. cit.*, p. 60.
- <sup>30</sup>Mossner, *op. cit.*, pp. 682-685.
- <sup>31</sup>Trevor-Roper, *op. cit.*, p. 98.
- <sup>32</sup>Peter Gay, *The Party of Humanity*, London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1964, p. 202.
- <sup>33</sup>George Catlin, *The Story of the Political Philosophers*, New York: McGraw-Hill, 1939, p. 356.
- <sup>34</sup>Gay, *op. cit.*, p. 272.
- <sup>35</sup>Emery Neff, *The Poetry of History*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1961, p. 39.
- <sup>36</sup>Frank Manuel, *The Eighteenth Century Confronts the Gods*, Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1959, pp. 175-179.
- <sup>37</sup>Widgery, *loc. cit.*
- <sup>38</sup>*Ibid.*