Books by Peter Gay

The Bourgeois Experience: Victoria to Freud
  Education of the Senses (1984)
  The Tender Passion (1986)
  The Cultivation of Hatred (1993)
  The Naked Heart (1995)
  Pleasure Wars (1998)

Reading Freud: Explorations and Entertainments (1990)

Freud: A Life for Our Time (1988)

A Godless Jew:
  Freud for Historians (1985)
  Freud, Jews and Other Germans:
    Masters and Victims in Modernist Culture (1978)

Art and Act: On Causes in History—Manet, Gropius, Mondrian (1976)

Style in History (1974)

Modern Europe (1973), with R. K. Webb

The Bridge of Criticism: Dialogues on the Enlightenment (1970)

  The Enlightenment: An Interpretation
  Weimar Culture: The Outsider as Insider (1968)

A Loss of Mastery: Puritan Historians in Colonial America (1966)

The Enlightenment: An Interpretation

The Party of Humanity: Essays in the French Enlightenment (1964)

  Voltaire's Politics: The Poet as Realist (1959)
  The Dilemma of Democratic Socialism:
    Eduard Bernstein's Challenge to Marx (1952)
CHAPTER ONE

The Useful and Beloved Past

I. HEBREWS AND HELLENES

As cultivated men in a cultivated age, the philosophes loved classical antiquity and took pure pleasure in it; as reformers, they did not hesitate to exploit, shrewdly and unscrupulously, the classics they loved. They could exploit them because, though their affection was authentic, they confronted the ancients with the self-confidence of men who had become their own masters. "Boerhave utilior Hippocrate, Newton tota antiquitate, Tassus Homero; sed gloria primis," Voltaire jotted down in one of his notebooks: "Boerhaave is worth more than Hippocrates, Newton more than all antiquity, Tasso more than Homer; but glory to the first."

For the men of the Enlightenment, glory to the first ancestors implied disrespect for the second. All men have a single past with many facets, but the philosophes divided their past into two sectors and put both to work. The Christian sector gave them an adversary worthy of their hostility: when the philosophes proclaimed that it was their mission to eradicate bigotry and superstition, they meant that it was a historic mission. At this point, on this issue, history became not past, but present politics: the philosophes never tired of pointing to the record Christians had compiled through the ages as evidence confirming the need for drastic remedial action in their own time. In the same manner, the pagan sector had its uses: it supplied them with illustrious...
models and a respectable ancestry. The philosophes liked to visualize themselves reenacting historic battles, to denounce religious fanaticism and popularize Newton wrapped in the toga of Cicero or Lucretius. This is how they gave their polemics the dignity of an age-old struggle between reason and unreason, a struggle that had been fought and lost in the ancient world and was now being fought again, this time with good prospects of success.

The historical writings of the Enlightenment are more than special pleading; they are comprehensive, critical, often brilliant—they are true history. Reversing Tacitus' famous precept, the philosophes wrote history, with rage and partisanship, and their very passion often allowed them to penetrate into regions hitherto inaccessible to historical explorers. Yet it also made them condescending and oddly parochial: their sense of the past merged all too readily with their sense of the present. Whether they were imitating Lucretius, maligning St. Augustine, or flattering Catherine the Great, they were the same men facing different quarters of their intellectual horizon. Even more often than they intended, Enlightenment historians advanced the mission and buoyed up the missionaries; they looked into the past as into a mirror and extracted from their history the past they could use. This limits the range of philosophic history but enhances its value as a clue: it permits us to look over the philosophes' shoulders to discover in their historical portraits a portrait of themselves, and to read in their accounts of Seneca's heroism, or the iniquities of the Inquisition, the mind of the Enlightenment.

II

With all their passion for history, the philosophes' vision of the past was remarkably pessimistic. History was a register of crimes, a tale of cruelty and cunning, at best the record of unremitting conflict. All was not black: each age, each civilization had its defenders of the oppressed, its champions of reason and humanity. Diderot's bleak *Essai sur les règles de Claude et de Néron* pits courageous Stoics against superstitious tyrants; Hume finds a minority of sensible men in the midst of darkest medieval England. In general, barbarism and religion had dominated the past, but a few glorious ages testified to the possibility that reason might not merely be the critic but the master of civilization.

It is possible to explain this pessimism as a projection of the philosophes' own situation, as a mixture of self-pity and self-importance which exaggerates the difficulties of their position to enhance the significance of their achievement. But it was more than that: it was a coherent account of the motive power both within and among epochs. As the Enlightenment saw it, the world was, and had always been divided between ascetic, superstitious enemies of the flesh, and men who affirmed life, the body, knowledge, and generosity; between mythmakers and realists, priests and philosophers. Heinrich Heine, wayward son of the Enlightenment, would later call these parties, most suggestively, Hebrews and Hellenes.

This conflict between two irreconcilable patterns of life, thought and feeling, divided historical periods internally; it also divided them from one another. Each era had a dominant style, with either reason or superstition in control, but the philosophes insisted that this dominance was merely the temporary ascendancy of one combatant over the other: few periods in history were without their admixture of reason or superstition—the darkest, most primitive ages had their philosophers, the most brilliant ages of reason and cultivation were infected by the survivals of old, or the seeds of new superstitions. This is what Voltaire meant when he said that the eighteenth century was both the Age of Philosophy and the Age of Superstition; it gives new meaning to Kant's observation that his age was the Age of Enlightenment, but not an enlightened age. The conflict between Hebrews and Hellenes was at once the source of disaster and of progress.

This dualist view of history, rather than the celebrated theory of progress, characterizes the mind of the Enlightenment. The theory of progress was a special case of this dualism: it gave formal expression to the hope that the alternations between Ages of Philosophy and Ages of Belief were not inescapable, that man was not forever trapped on the treadmill of historical cycles. Philosophical sociology and philosophical history supported and
confirmed each other: both studied the conflict between reason and unreason. The first sought laws that might decide the struggle; the second traced its course through the ages. In fact, the philosophes developed a kind of comparative history which they explicitly distinguished from the study of the past for its own sake. This history, first practiced by Montesquieu, later explored by Scottish sociologists like Adam Ferguson, and finally christened "Theoretical or Conjectural History," was sociology. But whatever history the Enlightenment historians pursued, they focused their attention on the rise and decline of the philosophic party, on the fortunes of criticism.

The Enlightenment's conception of history as a continuing struggle between two types of mentality implies a general scheme of periodization. The philosophes divided the past, roughly, into four great epochs: the great river civilizations of the Near East; ancient Greece and Rome; the Christian millennium; and modern times, beginning with the "revival of letters." These four epochs were rhythmically related to each other: the first and third were paired off as ages of myth, belief, and superstition, while the second and fourth were ages of rationality, science, and enlightenment.

I should observe immediately that the philosophes did not propose this scheme as a rigid system. They recognized the stubborn individuality of cultures, and the continuities that link the most disparate ages. "The arts and sciences, indeed," David Hume remarked, "have flourished in one period, and have decayed in another; but we may observe, that at the time when they rose to greatest perfection among one people, they were perhaps totally unknown to all the neighboring nations." Some philosophes called attention to the autonomous development of Eastern civilizations: Voltaire, partly in calculated rebellion against Bossuet's narrow vision of the past, partly in unfeigned awe of Oriental sagacity, opened his Essai sur les moeurs et l'esprit des nations with some appreciative passages on the civilizations of the Indians and the Chinese. Others, like Condorcet, musing on the uneven

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2 The phrase is by Ferguson's favorite pupil, Dugald Stewart. See Gladys Bryson: Man and Society (1945), 88.

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development of social classes and neighboring cultures in their own time, sympathetically described the plight of contemporary savages (who seemed to have undergone little significant historical development), and of the lower orders (which remained much like their ancestors in the darkest of dark ages). Besides, despite some extravagant epithets, the most fanatical anti-Christians among the philosophes did not claim that the two pairs of ages matched precisely; they conceded that the Christian millennium was more rational and more civilized than the early civilizations, just as they took pride in the superiority of their own time over Greece and Rome.

But while the philosophes themselves sensibly insisted on these variations, the exceptions they adduced did not invalidate their general scheme; they wrote the history of the human mind as the history of its rise from myth in classical antiquity, its disastrous decline under Christianity, and its glorious rebirth. In one manner or another, whether expressed in the prophetic fervor of Condorcet or the ironic detachment of Hume, the scheme dominates philosophical history. The famous first chapter of Voltaire's Siècle de Louis XIV specifies "four happy ages": the centuries of Pericles and Plato, and of Caesar and Cicero (which correspond to what I shall call the First Age of Criticism); and the ages of the Medicean Renaissance, and of Louis XIV (which constitute the prehistory of the Enlightenment). These happy periods are embedded in two Ages of Belief, which Voltaire dismisses with superb disdain as miserable, vicious, and backward.

4 This periodic scheme, interestingly enough, was first developed in the last two of these four happy ages. Renaissance historians like Giorgio Vasari periodized Italian art from its perfection in Greece and Rome, through its decay after Constantine, to its rebirth in the time of Giotto. And Francis Bacon wrote: "Only three revolutions and periods of learning can properly be reckoned; one among the Greeks, the second among the Romans, and the last among us, that is to say, the nations of Western Europe; and to each of these hardly two centuries can justly be assigned. The intervening ages of the world, in respect to any rich or flourishing growth of the sciences, were unprosperous. For neither the Arabs nor the Schoolmen need be mentioned; who in the intermediate times rather crushed the sciences with a multitude of treatises, that increased their weight." The New Organon, LXXVIII, in Works, IV, 77.
Other historians use a similar vocabulary, suggesting the rhythmic alternation of periods: "Mankind," writes Hume, "having at length thrown off this yoke [of Aristotelianism], affairs are now returned nearly to the same situation as before, and Europe is at present a copy at large, of what Greece was formerly a pattern in miniature." Rousseau, with all the extravagance of his early Discours sur les sciences et les arts, characterizes medieval history as a return to the grossest of antiquity: "Europe had relapsed into the barbarism of the earliest ages. The peoples of this part of the world, so enlightened today, lived some centuries ago in a condition worse than ignorance." D'Alembert, too, speaks of the "revival of letters" as emerging from a long interval of ignorance which had been preceded by centuries of enlightenment, of the "regeneration of ideas," the "return to reason and good taste," the "revival of spirits," and the "rebirth of light." Condorcet, finally, portrays early modern Europe smarting under medieval tyranny, awaiting the moment when a new enlightenment would allow it to be reborn a free civilization. Clichés, all of them, but therefore all the more eloquent witnesses to the mentality of the philosophes.

This historical scheme will find few defenders today. It bears all the stigmata usually imputed to Enlightenment historiography in general—inadequate grasp of development, deficient sympathy with cultures alien or hostile to the movement, assimilation of past events to polemical interests, smuggling in of moral judgments, and rationalistic interpretations. I have no intention of denying that these indictments, first presented by nineteenth-century historicists and current today, are weighty and valid, but they concentrate on the failings of philosophic history at the expense of its merits. In fact, the historical writings of the Enlightenment were part of a comprehensive effort—of physicists, epistemologists, and literary critics as much as of historians—to secure rational control of the world, reliable knowledge of the past, and freedom from the pervasive domination of myth. In the midst of the struggle for objectivity they could not themselves be objective: myth could be sympathetically understood only after it had been fully conquered, but in the course of its conquest it had to be faced as the enemy. The "pure insight" characteristic of the Enlightenment, writes Hegel in some fine pages of his Phenomenology, "only appears in genuinely active form in so far as it enters into conflict with belief." The Enlightenment had to treat religion as superstition and error in order to recognize itself. Worship of the Chosen People and submissive concentration on saints' lives could be overcome only by a violent, and hence one-sided reaction. Scholars could see the Christian millennium fairly only after polemicists had freed themselves from it by seeing it unfairly.

The historians of the Enlightenment, then, did much. They did not do everything because they could not do everything, but at least they freed history from the parochialism of Christian scholars and from theological presuppositions, secularized the idea of causation and opened vast new territories for historical inquiry. They went beyond tedious chronology, endless research into sacred documents, and single-minded hagiography, and imposed rational, critical methods of study on social, political, and intellectual developments. As the organizing principle of Enlightenment historiography, the fourfold periodic scheme therefore shares its excellences as much as its shortcomings. Its most glaring and most notorious defect was its unsympathetic, often brutal, estimate of Christianity; yet it achieved the rudimentary recognition that historical epochs have a prevailing mental style which informs their science, their morals, their whole way of seeing the world; that the spectrum of available styles may be divided into two kinds, the mythmaking or religious and the critical or scientific; and finally, that history has discontinuities as well as continuities, dramatic revolutions as well as slow changes.

Paradoxical as it may sound, then, Enlightenment historians, rationalist in sensibility, partisan in purpose, careless in detail,
hasty in judgment, unfair in characterization, and deficient in empathy, willful, sectarian, even vicious, still made a historical discovery of enduring validity. This emergence of truth from error is neither a dialectical miracle nor an instance of pre-established harmony. It is something far more modest. For all their misjudgments and prejudices—and sometimes because of them—the philosophes took first steps, no more, toward a scientific history of culture. Montesquieu's distinction between forms and principles of government; Turgot's ladder of theological, metaphysical, and positive forms of thought traversed by succeeding epochs; Hume's analysis of the religious impulse in primitive and civilized countries; Lessing's speculative account of the evolution of religious beliefs; even Gibbon's feline dissection of Christian meekness insinuating itself into the Roman mind—all these are attempts to grasp the deepest, and hence least visible, convictions that hold a culture together and give it its distinctive shape.

It is largely the philosophes' own fault if later writers rarely appreciated their contribution to historical understanding. The philosophes' perception of a distinction between mythmaking and scientific mentalities was the perception of a fact, but since they came to it first of all through their position as critics and belligerents, they almost inevitably converted the historical fact into a moral judgment, praising, indeed identifying themselves with, one mentality and denigrating the other. They translated their insight into an indictment, and this made it not only less valid, but also less palatable and less visible, to succeeding generations. It is hardly surprising that those who later rejected the philosophes' verdict failed to give them credit for their discovery. But whatever the ingratitude of a later time, the discovery was theirs, and it reassured them and gave them a place to stand. It must be a peculiar pleasure to be able to kill one's father and choose another.

*Life of Johnson (under May 8, 1781), IV, 102.

2 See Horace: Epistles, I, 2, 40-1: "Dimidium facti qui coepit habet: sapere aude: incipe"—"To have begun is to be half done; dare to know; start!"