It is conventional nowadays in any discussion of eighteenth-century historical thought to make at least a small gesture in the direction of rebalancing the nineteenth-century charge that the Enlightenment was deficient in historical sensibility. And it would seem obligatory to make such a gesture in a discussion of the concept of the irrational in eighteenth-century historical thinking, for the nineteenth century's indictment of the historical sensibility of the age turns in large part on allegations regarding the Enlightener's incapacity to entertain sympathetically any manifestation of the irrational in past ages or cultures whose devotion to reason did not equal its own. But it seems to me that any analysis of eighteenth-century historical thinking which begins with the assumption that the nineteenth century was justified in making the kind of criticism it did of the eighteenth century grants too much to the nineteenth-century historians' conception of what a proper historical sensibility ought to be. It was Nietzsche who reminded his age that there are different kinds of historical sensibility, and that sympathy and tolerance are not necessarily the most desirable attributes for all historians in all situations. There are times, he said, in the lives of cultures no less than in the lives of individuals, when the "proper" historical sensibility is marked
by a selective forgetfulness rather than by an indiscriminant remembering. And part of his respect for the Enlightenment derived from his appreciation of its willingness to practice "critical" history rather than the "monumental" and "antiquarian" varieties which constituted the historiographical orthodoxy of his own time.

If we were to use Nietzsche's terminology, we would be permitted to say that the Enlightenment attitude towards the past was less ahistorical or unhistorical than "superhistorical," willing to bring the past to the bar of judgement, to break it up and, when necessary, condemn it in the interests of present needs and the hope of a better life. To be sure, as even Nietzsche admitted, this willingness to "annihilate" the past is as dangerous in its way as that indiscriminate sympathy for old things just because they are old which is the sign of a culture grown stale. For once one begins the work of annihilation, it is difficult to set a limit on it and to retrieve that reverence for roots and respect for the conservative virtues without which the human organism cannot survive. Still, for its time, the Enlightenment's superhistorical attitude was as necessary as it was desirable, and its consistent hostility to unreason was not unproductive of significant historical insights. Without their uniquely "critical" approach to history, the Enlighteners would not have been able to carry out their work of dismantling tired institutions and discrediting the authority of a tradition long since degenerated into mechanical routine. A critical approach to the historical record as given by tradition was a necessary precondition of the Enlighteners' program for planting a second nature in place of the first, which had been willed to them by their predecessors as the sole possible form that any specifically human life might take.

The principal charge against the Enlighteners is that their militant rationalism short-circuited any impulse to entertain sympathetically and to judge tolerantly the many manifestations of the irrational that they found in the historical record, and especially in the records of the Middle Ages and remote antiquity. The charge is accurate enough as a description of the approach of the best historical thinkers of the age in the main line of rationalism—Bayle, Montesquieu, Voltaire, Robertson, Hume, and Gibbon—though it hardly does justice to representatives of the variant convention—Leibniz, Vico, Moser, and Herder. But as a judgment suggesting a crucial limitation on the rationalists' historical sense, it implicitly begs the question of the uses to which knowledge in general, and historical knowledge in particular, ought to be put. This question is metahistoriographical—having to do with the value that one assigns to the disinterested study of the past—and cannot therefore be adjudicated from within historical thinking itself. The way one approaches the past, the posture one assumes before the data of history, the voice with which one reports one's findings about the past, the ratio between one's capacities for
tolerance and one’s interest in interpreting and criticizing—all these are functions of a metahistoriographical, and specifically ethical, decision regarding the uses to which one’s knowledge ought to be put. It is true that eighteenth-century historical thinkers tended to overvalue the irrational as a causal factor in the historical process and to undervalue it as a possible source of creative social force. But if they were intolerant of what we no longer regard as unreason but value rather as faith, they were guilty only of a misjudgment; their instinct was sound enough. The important point is not whether they failed to distinguish between unreason and faith but what critical insights into the nature of historical existence their failure to draw that distinction adequately may have provided them with.

It is not as if the eighteenth century was unacquainted with the forma mentis which, in the nineteenth century, would triumph as historicism and which would, in the event, establish tolerance and sympathy for everything in the past, rational as well as irrational, as an unquestioned canon of orthodoxy in historical thought. In Leibniz’s philosophy, for example, we encounter attitudes which do not so much endow the irrational with a specific value as simply dissolve the distinction between reason and unreason as a criterion of evaluation. In the Monadology (1714), the very concept of the irrational is ruled out as a category of significant historical being, since the notion of intrinsic irrationality would have suggested some inadequacy in the Creation and hence, by implication, in the Creator. Leibniz’s doctrine of continuity, with its cognate ideas of analogical reasoning in epistemology and of evolution in ontology, generates the conception of transition by degrees from one spatial location to another and from one temporal instant to another, which effectively denies the adequacy of any characterization of the world in terms of oppositions. So too, in his conception of human nature, Leibniz sees no discontinuity between the physical and spiritual attributes of men, between different kinds of men, or between different spiritual states within men. Just as the very notion of a “monstrous” man was an anomaly, reflecting more a failure of knowledge or imagination in the knower than an inadequacy in the thing known, so too the notion of an inherently “irrational” man reflected either a want of knowledge or an inadequate conception of human nature. Contiguous in space, continuous in time: such were the presuppositions of the notion of the historical process which Leibniz brought to his attempts at historical writing. The antinastic form of historical representation which he promoted was thus more than a device for mechanically organizing the historical field: it reflected the order of being in time, evolution by degrees, that continuity in the historical process of which the cosmos itself was a spatial equivalent.

The implications of this conception of history were fully worked out only during the last two decades of the eighteenth century, particularly by Herder, whose Ideen zur Philosophie der Geschichte des Menschenheits ap-
peared between 1784 and 1791. Between 1714, the year of Leibniz’s Monadology and the 1780s the doctrine of continuity, the concept of evolution, and the principle of analogical reasoning had fallen on evil days, not only in natural philosophy, from which they had been expelled by Newton and Locke, but from historiography as well. Their return to historiography with Herder, however, does not so much signal the rebirth of a genuine historical sensibility as mark an important transition from one form of historical thought to another, a transition from the “critical” historiography of the Enlightenment to the historical “pietism” of the nineteenth century. Such a transition can be regarded as an absolute progressus only to those who fail to credit the Nietzschean distinction between different ways of approaching the historical field.

Even Cassirer, who was among the first to oppose the view that the Enlightenment was deficient in historical sensibility, has stressed the revolutionary nature of Herder’s attack upon “analytical thinking and the principle of identity” that—in Cassirer’s view—had hampered the development of a fully tolerant historiography throughout most of the preceding century. Herder, Cassirer says, “dispels the illusion of identity”; nothing for him is really identical with anything else, nothing ever recurs in the same form. For Herder,

History brings forth new creatures in uninterrupted succession, and on each she bestows as its birthright a unique shape and an independent mode of existence. Every abstract generalization is, therefore, powerless with respect to history, and neither a generic nor any universal norm can comprehend its wealth.

But, revolutionary as this application of the doctrine of continuity may have been, it does not follow, as Cassirer believed, that the historical sensibility of the next age was absolutely superior to that of the rationalists of the eighteenth century. For Herder’s type of thinking not only dissolved the distinction between the “exotic” and the “familiar,” it also dissolved the distinction between the rational and the irrational, without which “critical” historiography cannot be practical at all.

To Herder, everything in history is equally exotic or equally familiar, that is to say, equally worthy of being entertained as simply one more manifestation of man’s marvelous capacity for survival, adjustment, accommodation, growth, or adaptation. For Herder, existence itself is a value. He delights in the fact that “what can anywhere occur, does occur; what can operate, operates.” And on the basis of this fact, he is permitted to warn his readers against any “concern” about history of either a “provident or retrospective” sort. “All that can be, is,” he says, again and again; “all that can come to be, will be, if not today, then tomorrow… Everything has come to bloom upon the earth which could do so, each in its own time and
in its own milieu; it has faded away, and it will bloom again, when its time comes.''

Herder does not presume to place himself above, or to judge, anything in the historical record. He has neither more nor less respect for the Romans than he has for the slovenly natives of Southern California, news of which has reached him from missionaries to those exotic shores. These Californians, who change their habitation "perhaps a hundred times a year," who sleep wherever and whenever the urge seizes them "without paying the least regard to the filthiness of the soil or endeavouring to secure themselves from noxious vermin," and who feed on seeds which, "when pressed by want, they pick with their toes out of their own excrement"—these humble Californians are neither more nor less than the noblest of Romans. Both were, as he says of the Romans specifically, "precisely what they were capable of becoming: everything perishable belonging to them perished, and what was susceptible of permanence remained." It is in history as it is in nature, Herder concludes, "all, or nothing, is fortuitous; all, or nothing, is arbitrary . . . . This is the only philosophical method of contemplating history, and it has been even unconsciously practiced by all thinking minds."

Of course, needless to say, for Herder nothing is fortuitous, nothing arbitrary; and nothing—not even the most irrational act—is without its reasons for being precisely what it was in the time and place in which it occurred.

This pietistic posture before the particular historical event—before the irrational as well as the rational in human nature—differs radically from that ironic attitude which prevails in the main line of historical thought in the eighteenth century from Bayle to Gibbon. Which is not to say that the rationalists were utterly lacking in sympathy for irrational humanity or totally incapable of tolerance for the irrationality of man displayed all too amply in the historical record. In general, the skepticism of the Enlighteners guarded them well enough against the tendency to set the folly of past men over against the presumed wisdom of their contemporaries. That kind of simple-minded Manichaeism which saw reason and folly as opposite and mutually exclusive states of mind is to be found among doctrinaire rationalists such as Turgot and Condorcet; but among the best historians in the rationalist tradition—Voltaire, Hume, Gibbon—such Manichaeism functions more as a rhetorical device than as a notion about the relation of reason to unreason in mankind everywhere and in all times and places.

As historians, the Enlighteners tend in general to ground their apprehension of—and consequently their judgments on—folly in the situation in which it is manifested. In his History of Charles XII, for example, Voltaire distinguishes quite rigorously and consistently between the kind of miscalculation which led Charles to undertake the conquest of Russia and the deeper folly reflected in his attempts to win glory through conquest.
Unlike the *Philosophy of History*, which is marked by a tendency to conceive the conflict between reason and unreason (or charlatanry and stupidity) in Manichaean terms, the *History of Charles XII* subtly distinguishes between a number of different *kinds* of irrationality in Charles's career. Voltaire is not above taking delight in the exposure of stupidity in the past as well as in the present, but this mock-epic (as Lionel Gossman has called it in his brilliant analysis of it as a work of art) is shot through with a sympathy for a ruler whose reason was insufficient to guide him to use his talents for pacific rather than martial ends. The passages in which Voltaire describes the death of Charles in the trenches before Frederikshall and goes on to draw the moral of a life misspent in pursuit of martial glory are worthy of comparison with anything produced by the historians of the next century. The didactic aim is manifest, but the judgments as specifically *historical* judgments are unexceptionable. And they are rendered more convincing by the presence of a melancholy recognition that neither talent itself nor even reason of a certain kind is sufficient warrant against the power of folly. Voltaire, like Bayle, took a perverse delight in cataloguing the wide range of forms that folly might take; but this very apprehension of the forms that irrationality might take drives him in the end to the recognition that folly might prevail in human nature in the long run. And his knowledge of folly's power over men of even the most exceptional talents guarded Voltaire against the naive optimism which a doctrinaire rationalist faith in the power of reason fostered in thinkers like Turgot. And much the same can be said of both Hume and Gibbon.

In my view, the causes of the Enlighteners' failures as well as of their successes as historians are not to be found in any inability to understand, or even to sympathize with and to tolerate, the irrational in history. They lie rather in their incapacity to conceive historical knowledge in general as a *problem*. When they write on the question of historical knowledge or the writing of history, both Bayle and Voltaire tend to draw the line too rigidly between *history* on the one side and *fable* on the other. Although recognizing that "history, generally speaking, is the most difficult composition that an author can undertake," Bayle seems to think that the principal requirement for the writing of good history is a *desire* to tell the truth. Thus, in the article "Historical Talent" in his *Dictionnaire historique*, Bayle remarks: "I observe that truth being the soul of history, it is an essential thing for a historical composition to be free from lies; so that though it should have all other perfections, it will not be a history, but a mere fable or romance, if it want truth." But the will to truth is an insufficient methodological principle for the production of an adequate history. The great antiquarians of the age, men like Muratori and Curne de la Sainte-Palaye, appear to have recognized this truth when they stressed the necessity of philological, epigraphical, and numismatic evidence for the proper assessment of the documentary record.
But even they did not appreciate the difficulty of choosing among several different possible accounts of the past, and they appeared to have no notion at all of the problem of translating an apprehension of the past into a plausible picture of it in a narrative account.

The historical Pyrrhonism which flourished at the beginning of the eighteenth century, and which could be used to justify the writing of histoire galante or romanesque on the one side and what Bayle and Voltaire called satirical history on the other, was effectively demolished by the antiquarians’ achievements in actually reconstructing a true chronicle of remote ages. But the translation of a chronicle into a history required more than erudition, and it required more than learning augmented by common sense. Learning alone could yield what Nietzsche called “antiquarian” historiography, necessary for the promotion of the human capacities for reverence and respect for the roots of human culture and society; and common sense could promote that “monumental” historiography which inspired heroic actions in the interest of a better future. But something more was required if historical knowledge was to contribute to that effort to “distance” the past, an act necessary for the proper assessment of present possibilities. Voltaire was on the right track when, in the Philosophy of History, he insisted on reason’s right to submit the historical record to criticism in the light of current science, on the right of critical intelligence to treat past pieties with the scorn which present exigency required. Yet not even he was able to appreciate the ambiguity of the messages which the past transmitted to the present in the form of historical documents and records.

The failure of the age to appreciate the problematics of historical knowledge is shown clearly in the work of the abbé de Mably. In his De la manière de l’écrire l’histoire (1782), a work which is sensibly critical of the ironical element in the histories of Voltaire, Hume, and Robertson, Mably suggests that “character” is the ultimate basis of good historiography. Historians are born, he says, not made. According to the Mably, the historian’s principal problem, once his investigation of the historical record was done, was to choose between the plot structures of Comedy and Tragedy for depicting those events in the past worthy of having a history written about them. And in his discussion of this problem, Mably assumes, as most of his contemporaries appear to have done, that the rules of classical rhetoric and poetics are sufficient for its resolution. All historical manifestations of heroism and villainy, of good and evil, or of reason and folly could be drawn together and woven into a story of general human interest and edification by the application of the principles of narration contained in tested classical models. Wisdom was necessary for the selection of the model to be used in a specific instance, but in Mably’s view one was either born wise or not. Tact was the important thing, to know how to “emplot” the events appropriately.

Mably’s counsels on how to write history reveal an important hidden
assumption in Enlightenment historiography, a contradiction which hindered the efforts of its best historians to deal with the main problems of historical representation, whether of the irrational or of anything else. This contradiction is caused by Enlightenment historians’ dependence upon the rules of classical rhetoric and poetics as the methodology of historical representation and a simultaneous suspicion of the figurative language and analogical reasoning required for their proper application. Voltaire still views historiography in classical terms; it is philosophy teaching by example, imaginatively as it were rather than by discursive logic. At the same time, however, he explicitly rules out figurative language as an appropriate instrument for conveying the meaning of a historical account. Thus, he writes in his *Philosophical Dictionary*, "Ardent imagination, passion, desire—frequently deceived—produce the figurative style. We do not admit it into history, for too many metaphors are hurtful, not only to perspicuity, but also to truth, by saying more or less than the thing itself." And in his discussion of poetic tropes, he criticizes the Fathers for their excessive use of them, which in his view leads to *fabulation* rather than a *representation of the truth*. Figurative language can be appropriately used only in poetry, he says; and he cites Ovid as a poet who uses figures and tropes in such a way as to "deceive" no one.

What Voltaire and most of the Enlighteners failed to see was that figurative language is just as often a way of expressing a truth incompletely grasped as it is of concealing an error or falsehood incompletely recognized. The rigid distinction between figurative language for poetic effects and discursive prose representation for reporting the truth of things prevented the Enlighteners from taking seriously the fables, legends, and myths which came to them as the truths by which men in past ages had lived. The Enlighteners did not regard the passions or the imagination as expungeable elements of human nature, to be set over against the reason as its enemies; on the contrary, what they sought was a judicious balancing of the reason and the emotions in the construction of a just humanity. But they did tend to compartmentalize the psyche in such a way as to lead them to draw rigid distinctions between the imagination’s area of legitimate expression on the one side and reason’s proper domain on the other. And this compartmentalization of the psyche blocked their understanding of the ways in which reason and the imagination might work in tandem as both guides to practical activity and instruments of understanding. And therefore, in their contemplation of the evidence of the remote past, they failed to see how truth might be contained in fable, and fable in truth, in civilizations whose commitments to reason were not as fully developed as their own.

Peter Gay has recently argued that, whatever the limitations of the Enlighteners’ historical sensibility, in the distinction which they drew between mythical thought and scientific thought they anticipated the modern scien-
tific histories of culture produced by our own age. But that distinction was not unique to Enlightenment thought; it was as old as Greek philosophy and was a mainstay even of Christian theology during the Patristic period. In any event, modern scientific theories of culture are as much dependent on the conception of the functional similarities between mythic and scientific thinking as upon the recognizable formal differences between them. Where the Enlightenments failed was in their inability, once they had drawn the distinction between mythical thinking and scientific thinking, to see how these might be bound up with one another as phases in the history of a single culture, society, or individual consciousness. As long as they identified the "fabulous" with the "unreal," and failed to see that fabulation itself could serve as a means to the apprehension of the truth about reality and was not simply an alternative to or an adornment of such apprehension, they could never gain access to those cultures and states of mind in which the distinction between the true and the false had not been as clearly drawn as they hoped to draw it.

To put the matter another way, to conceive the fabulous as the opposite of the true was legitimate enough as a principle by which to characterize the differences between an aesthetic apprehension of reality and a scientific, or philosophical, comprehension of it. But when treated as a principle of psychology, or of epistemology, such an opposition dissolved any effort to search for the ground on which mediations between them might be achieved. Truth and fable are no more opposed than science and poetry, and to make of the true and the fabulous the categories of a historical method is as dangerous as the opposition of reason to imagination in a psychological theory or a theory of knowledge. And it was the mark of Vico's genius to perceive the fallacies contained in such oppositions and to attempt, in the New Science (first edition, 1725; definitive edition, 1744), to provide a historical method in which the principle of distinction would supplant the reductionist tendencies in both the Leibnizian and Lockeian approaches to the study of human consciousness.

In the New Science Vico criticizes Bayle for advancing the belief that nations might grow and prosper without any belief in God; but it is the kind of skepticism about the beliefs of primitive peoples in general which Bayle's rationalism fosters that is a principal target of Vico's book. The historical consciousness of his own age, Vico believed, was informed by misconceptions about primitive peoples that engendered two conceits: that of the "scholars," who tended to assume that earlier peoples must have possessed the same learning as that possessed by the scholars themselves, and that of the "nations," which assumed that primitive peoples must have conducted their affairs in the ways that fully civilized peoples do. These two conceits permitted the philosophers to solve the historical problem, which is to explain how humanity might have lived on the basis of principles different
from those honored in the present, by simply denying that the problem existed: by simply asserting that primitive man must have solved his problems in the same way, and by the same means, that modern men do. This, in turn, promoted the conviction that all of the original evidence—oral, written, and monumental—about the style of life of ancient peoples, evidence which was uniformly "fabulous," was a product either of error or of duplicity.

Yet, Vico argued, such an assumption offended against reason itself, which taught that humanity in general and society in particular could not survive if founded on nothing but error and deceit. There must have been some adequacy of mythical belief to reality, or pagan humanity could not have raised itself from the condition of savagery to that of civilization. And this suggested the possibility of a third kind of knowledge between the literally true and the fabulous, on the basis of which the relationship between primitive consciousness and the world could be mediated and the adequacy of the one to the other be progressively realized.

This third order of knowledge, which is a combination of truth and error, or is, rather, half-truth treated as certain truth for practical purposes, is a species of what we would call the fictive in a precise sense. What Vico does is transform the notion of the fabulous into a generic concept, generally descriptive of consciousness, of which the literally true and the poetic are species. If we admit the use of the notion of the fictive as a way of designating the general nature of human consciousness, we can then regard the true and the fabulous as simply different ways of signifying the relationship of the human consciousness to the world it confronts in different degrees of certitude and comprehension. Vico conceives the fictive as unconscious hypothesis-making of the sort consigned by Aristotle to the poets; for him, "poetry" figures reality. And his conceptualization of the notion of the "poetic wisdom" of primitive man as a form of proto-science permits him to break down the distinction between the true and the fabulous which blocked the rationalists' understanding of those ages not endowed with a commitment to rationality commensurate with their own.

Instead of setting the imagination over against the reason as an opposed way of apprehending reality, and poetry over against prose as an opposed way of representing it, Vico argues for a continuity between them. This conceptualization of consciousness gives him a way of reconceiving the relationship between the irrational and the rational in the life of culture. Moreover, it allows him to view philosophy not as an alternative to, but as merely a different way of speaking about, truths originally apprehended in poetic forms. By reversing the relationship between the imagination and the reason, and seeing the former as the necessary basis of the latter, Vico succeeds in clearing the way to an understanding of those myths and fables in which earlier cultures expressed their lived experiences of the worlds they occupied.
Unlike Leibniz, then, who was inclined to place everything on the same ontological plane and thus dissolve the distinction between the rational and the irrational in life, Vico provides a means of at once distinguishing between the irrational and the rational manifestations of consciousness and then linking them in time as stages of a single evolutionary process. The mechanism which directed this evolutionary process was in his view neither rational nor irrational per se, but a prerational factor, unique to man, which served as a mediating agency between mind and body on the one side and between human consciousness and its milieu on the other. This mediating agency was speech, which, in the dialectical relationship between its capacities for poetic articulation and prosaic representation, provides the model for comprehending human evolution in general.

The most significant difference between the first edition of the New Science (1725) and the last edition (1744) was the expansion of the discussion of the creative aspects of language. In the first edition, Vico does little more than assert that language is the clue to the understanding of primitive man's construction of a world in which he can feel at home. But in the later editions he goes on to explain how poetic language might have served as the basis of primitive man's closure with a natural world that must have appeared alien and threatening to him in all its aspects. It was by metaphorical projection of his own nature onto that world, Vico theorizes, that primitive man was able progressively to humanize it. By identifying the forces of nature as manlike spirits, primitive man invented religion. By the progressive topological reductions of those forces—by metonymy and synecdoche especially—primitive men gradually came to the realization of their own godlike natures. Then, by the trope of irony, they came to an awareness of the possibility of distinguishing between truth and error in the conceptualization of both the natural world and society. Thus, science and philosophy themselves were rendered possible by an insight into the nature of the relationship between consciousness and reality provided by poetry; they were not to be viewed as creations of reason, but rather as products of poetic, and specifically tropological, consciousness. And thus, the relation between the imagination and reason can be conceived as both a temporal and an ontological relationship, the one being contained in the other rather than being opposed to it.

These insights into language and consciousness permitted Vico to break down the opposition of truth to fable and to conceive the fictive as a third ground between them, but they also permitted him to conceive of the theory of language as the methodology for comprehending the function of myth and fable in primitive and archaic cultures. This was the basis of his attack upon the philological method of the antiquarian historiography of this time, which assumed that it was enough to know the history of words and their etymologies without inquiring into the more basic problem of the
function of language in the process of civilization.

The Enlightenement’s indifference to the kinds of questions that Vico raised helps illuminate some significant presuppositions of their thought. One way of characterizing the thought of an age is to identify the questions which its representative thinkers consistently beg. One question begged by the Enlightenment was that of the nature of historical knowledge—not the question of what happened in history or the meaning of the historical process, but of how historical knowledge is possible. This is what I meant when I said that history as such was not a problem for the Enlightenements. By the same token, neither was language a problem for them. This is not to say that they did not study languages or recognize the importance of language in the evolution of culture, but rather that they did not take language itself, with its powers to illuminate as well as to obscure, as a problem. And this crucially limited their capacities for understanding the modes of expression of cultures radically different from their own.

As long as it was considered sufficient for the historian simply to learn the language in which documents from the past had been written, rather than to penetrate the modes of thought reflected in different linguistic conventions, the minds of past ages had to remain closed to anything approximating full understanding of their operations. The Enlightenements’ bias in favor of recent, as against remote, history therefore reflected a commendable tact. As long as they were dealing with cultures not too dissimilar from their own, they produced historiography such as the History of Charles XIV, The Age of Louis XIV, or the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire that was as good as anything produced by later historians. When they tried to deal with radically different ages and cultures, they tended to overvalue or undervalue their originality and uniquenesses, as Gibbon did with Byzantium, Winkelmann with Greece, Robertson with America, and Hume with the Middle Ages. When they found things to admire in these remote ages and cultures, they were inclined to temper their admiration with benign irony. When they found things they despised, they were inclined simply to berate them rather than to try to comprehend their functions in worlds different from their own. Their failure lay in their unwillingness to credit fully their own prodigious capacities for poetic identification with the different and strange. They did not trust their own poetic powers. But given the task they had set themselves, which was to discredit any institution or idea that hampered the construction of a just society in their own time, this was a legitimate decision. For as Nietzsche said, it is not always a creative decision to seek understanding when the situation calls for criticism, or to show tolerance when what is needed is an assertion of the rights of the present over the claims of the past.

Vico remained unappreciated throughout the eighteenth century, not merely because his thought was especially complex, but because the most
progressive thinkers of the age could not, given their purpose, afford the luxury of conceiving historical knowledge in general as a problem. The historical thinkers in the main line of rationalism—Bayle, Montesquieu, Voltaire, Hume, and Gibbon—were engaged in a ground-clearing operation on behalf of an ideal which necessarily required that the crucial cultural relationships be conceived in terms of oppositions rather than continuities or subtle gradations. Their most creative work was critical rather than constructive, directed against irrationalism in whatever form it appeared, whether as superstition, ignorance, or tyranny, emotion, myth, or passion. It was in their interest to view the past (and especially the remote past) as the opposite of that which they valued in their own present, not as the basis of it. Vico appeared to make reason dependent upon unreason, to make of it a refined form of unreason, the products of which were essentially the same as those produced by unreason. But if the philosophes had seriously entertained the notion of the identity of reason with unreason in human consciousness, at whatever level, their critical work would have been undermined from the beginning.

The essentially conservative implications of Vico's system conflicted with the conscious interests of the rationalist philosophers of history and their counterparts in historiography. Vico had to be ignored or set aside for the same reasons that Leibniz had to be rejected and satirized. His system might be recognized as doing more justice to the facts of history, but it was not justice so much as truth that the Enlighteners demanded. Justice was what was demanded for living men, and justice for living men could be provided in part by bringing those residues of the past still living in the present to the bar of judgment, exposing their irrational bases and the unreason involved in continued loyalty to them, and consigning them to a past that was genuinely dead, a fit object of antiquarian interest but nothing more.

Yet, the radical skepticism of the age, a skepticism which existed alongside of a conscious devotion to reason, was ultimately destructive of the faith in reason which it had originally promoted in its purely critical function vis-à-vis tradition and custom. Reason itself, reason hypostatized, could not long remain exempted from the second thoughts about the irrationality of its own hypostatization which skepticism inevitably inspired. We can see in the best historical thought of the age and in Hume especially a growing recognition of the limitations of a historical vision dedicated to the unmasking of past folly as its principal aim. Hume's ironical approach to history breeds ennui, turns upon and dissolves the conviction originally inspiring it that men in the present age had progressed absolutely beyond the irrationality characteristic of their remote ancestors.

Actually, Hume was forced to conclude that the ratio of folly to reason in his own age had not significantly changed from what it had been in different ages in the past, that the only change had been in the forms which
reason and unreason assumed over time. Gibbon was still able to maintain the fiction that his own age was superior to the Dark Ages, but this was largely an aesthetic preference, the result of a decision to treat his own time with more sympathy than he might lavish on the Middle Ages, not a conclusion derived by a reasoned argument. And Kant himself, in a late essay, "An Old Question Raised Again: Is the Human Race Constantly Progressing?" was forced to concede that the best grounds for believing in progress were moral, not scientific.

Historical evidence alone, Kant noted, permitted belief in any of three views of history: eudaemonistic, terroristic, and abderitic, reflecting belief in historical progress, decline, or stasis, respectively. It was one's moral duty to believe in the progressivist view, because the other two views promoted attitudes unworthy of a morally responsible man. One's view of the meaning of history depended, Kant insisted, on the kind of man one was, the kind of man one wanted to be, and the kind of humanity that one desired to see take shape in the future. If one chose to believe that humanity was either declining or remaining essentially the same, one would live one's life in such a way as to bring to pass the condition of degeneration or stasis perceived to be reflected in the record of the past. The way one looked at the past of the race conditioned and, in the long run, actually determined the shape that the future must have. Kant continued to believe to the end of his life that past history taught nothing about human nature that could not be learned from the study of humanity in its present incarnations. But he insisted that we are not permitted to believe that there has been no progress in the passage from past to present lest we prohibit ourselves from believing that the future will be better than the present, and cut the nerve of human effort to bring such a better future to pass in the process.

This growing desire to believe in progress in the face of skepticism's teaching that we have no rational grounds for believing in it, accounts for the enthusiastic reception of Herder's philosophy of history at the end of the eighteenth century. Here, the problem of the relationship between reason and unreason is placed on another ground, though in such a way as to dissolve the distinction as a criterion for assessing the nature of the relationship between past, present, and future. Everything exists in a timeless present for Herder; history is a totality of individualities, each of which is equally valuable as an individual and all of which manifest the same mixture of reason and unreason in their specificity. Herder's insistence that reflection on history be informed by no "concern" either of a "provident or a retrospective" sort removes from the historian the burden of judging the past. But at the same time, it removes from him the burden of having to judge the present and, moreover, all responsibility for having to speak about the course that human society in the future ought to take. The naive faith which Herder has in the power of history to take care of itself, to produce what is
required for the whole of humanity in the time and place that it is required, is the perfect antithesis of that skepticism, with its debilitating irony, which Hume had brought to perfection as a system of thought.

Yet, what Herder experienced as a rebirth of man's capacity of faith in the essential adequacy of individuated existence, Kant recognized as the dogmatism which it truly was. The Herderian belief in the adequacy of the whole, and in the adequacy of the individual parts of the whole to the totality, denied the problematics of historical existence quite as effectively as Hume's skepticism did. The principal difference between Hume's skepticism and Herder's dogmatism lay in the fact that, whereas the former led to despair in the face of history's meaninglessness, the latter promoted a groundless optimism which neither reason nor morality sanctioned. It put historical reflection back on the ground of aesthetic sensibility, made of it nothing more than the endless entertainment of things in their formal coherency, the richness and variety of their forms, and the ceaseless coming to be and passing away of things each in its own season. The tone was different, but the resultant picture of the whole was the same.