Anyone who studies the historical writing of the eighteenth century soon becomes aware of the great contribution – great at least in bulk – of émigré Huguenot scholars, the victims of the Revocation of the Edict of Nantes in 1685. Driven out of France, dissidents from the established culture of the grand siècle, and yet, at the same time, self-consciously French, refusing to be assimilated – at least for so long as they might hope to return with dignity to France – into the society of their host-countries, they became the representatives of an alternative France, the intermediaries between the two cultures of Europe: the firm classical–Catholic–Cartesian synthesis of the France of Louis XIV and the diversity of Europe.¹

If we ask what was the general intellectual characteristic of the Huguenot Diaspora, the answer must be that it was essentially critical, not constructive. The Huguenots had always rejected the Catholic synthesis, the grand scheme of history set out by the greatest of their persecutors, Bishop Bossuet; but in exile they also escaped from their own. As long as they had been a depressed minority in France, they had been dominated by their clergy, preaching doctrines of self-defence: fundamentalist, prophetic, apocalyptic – the expression of a siege-mentality. But in exile the situation changed. Some of their pastors, like Pierre Jurieu, ‘the Grand Inquisitor of the Refuge’, tried hard, by anathemas and persecution, to keep their flocks faithful to the old doctrines and discipline; but that was now difficult. In the new open pastures to which they had escaped, many of the sheep – and some of the pastors themselves – ran riot. They faced the necessity, or discovered the luxury, of doubt.

The two most famous of the émigrés, Pierre Bayle and Jean Leclerc,² adversaries in almost everything else, agreed in one thing: that there was no certainty, no possible system, in history. Of Bayle’s great Dictionaire Historique et Critique, ‘there is not a single page’ says Voltaire ‘which does not lead the reader to doubt, and often to disbelief’,³ but he would also add that it was ‘the first work of this kind

I. Scouloudi (ed.), Huguenots in Britain and their French Background, 1550–1800
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from which one can learn to think'; and Leclerc, attempting to formulate the rules of history, concluded that it was so difficult to arrive at historical truth, which was nevertheless so important, that very few persons should be allowed to write it: for to get it wrong could be fatal. On this his fellow-Huguenot Henri Basnage de Beauval commented that 'his reflexions tend to fortify historical Pyrrhonism'.

'Historical Pyrrhonism', scepticism, distrust of all great schemes of history – that was the chief contribution of the Huguenots to the study of history in the half-century after the Revocation. Because they had not been assimilated into French culture, and because they refused, for that time, to be assimilated into the culture of their host-countries, they became a distinct, coherent 'third force' dissolving the certainties of the previous century. Thereby they gave a new character to historical philosophy: 'Pyrrhonism' was to be its chief characteristic throughout that period – a period in which the great systems of the past were dismantled in preparation for the new synthesis of the Enlightenment.

However, the work of the Huguenot historians was not entirely destructive. They responded to their own challenge. For if the historical systems of the past were inadmissible, and had to be disintegrated, how was the historian to begin again? Obviously he must go back to first principles, re-examine the sources, collect and test the facts, eliminate the conjectures and prejudices, and so provide a new basis on which, perhaps, a more accurate system could afterwards be built. So the Huguenot scholars took to the study of detailed, factual, objective history with the same scrupulous technical exactitude which their more practical co-religionists devoted to jewellery, enamelling, clock-making, and other delicate mechanical crafts. Serious-minded, industrious collectors and compilers, pedestrian writers, critical not constructive, judicious not elegant or vivacious, they compiled great 'lexicons', edited huge collections of documents. Their enemies complained that thereby they smothered all thought and drove men, through despair, even deeper into Pyrrhonism. But stronger minds knew how to use their labours, and today we can still detect their relics pickled in the footnotes of Gibbon or half-dissolved in the easily-flowing prose of Voltaire.

I have spoken of the Huguenot historians as a coherent 'third force' in the intellectual world. Their cohesion came from the French language, which they insisted on using, and from their ubiquitous international journalism. Bayle's *Nouvelles de la République des Lettres*, Leclerc's *Bibliothèque Universelle et Historique* with its