

**FRIEDRICH NIETZSCHE**  
**"ON THE USES AND DISADVANTAGES OF HISTORY FOR LIFE" (1873)**  
 (Hollingdale Translation)

Here, in his most important 'untimely meditation,' Nietzsche's controversial thesis is that an "excess of history is harmful to man" (67). Writing during a period synonymous with the rise of historicism, he contends that he is "attempting to look afresh at something which our time is rightly proud – its cultivation of history – as being injurious to it" (60). We are all, he thought, "suffering from a consuming fever of history" (60) as a result of which a "hypertrophied virtue – such as the historical sense of our age appears to be – can ruin a nation just as effectively as a hypertrophied vice" (60). It is in this sense that he considers his meditation here to be "untimely" (60), that is, "acting counter to our time and thereby acting on our time and, let us hope, for the benefit of a time to come" (60). We need history, he admits, "for the sake of life and action, not so as to turn comfortably away from life and action" (59).

Animals, Nietzsche argues, have no sense of the past and live only in the present. The animal "lives *unhistorically*: for it is contained in the present" (61). By contrast, man "cannot learn to forget but clings relentlessly to the past: however far and fast he may run, this chain runs with him" (61). He "braces himself against the great and ever greater pressure of what is past" (61), it is a "dark, invisible burden which he would like to disown" (61). It is a reminder of "what his existence fundamentally is – an imperfect tense that can never become a perfect one" (61): if "death at last brings the desired forgetting, by that act it at the same time extinguishes the present and all being and therewith sets the seal on the knowledge that being is only an interrupted has-been, a thing that lives by negating, consuming and contradicting itself" (61).

If "happiness is what fetters living creatures to life and makes them go on living" (61), it is "always the same thing that makes happiness happiness: the ability to forget or, expressed in more scholarly fashion, the capacity to feel *unhistorically*" (62). Nietzsche proclaims his theme: "there is a degree . . . of the historical sense, which is harmful and ultimately harmful to the living thing, whether this living thing be a man or a people or a culture" (62). The "unhistorical and the historical are necessary in equal measure for the health of an individual, of a people and of a culture" (63). Too much of a preoccupation with history stands in the way of the "plastic power of a man, a people, a culture" (62), which is the "capacity to develop out of oneself in one's own way, to transform and incorporate into oneself what is past and foreign, to heal wounds, to replace what has been lost, to recreate broken moulds" (62):

The stronger the innermost roots of a man's nature, the more readily will he be able to assimilate and appropriate the things of the past; and the most powerful and tremendous nature would be characterised by the fact that it would know no boundary at all at which the historical sense began to overwhelm it; it would draw to itself and incorporate into itself all the past, its own and that most foreign to it, and as it were transform it into blood. That which such a nature cannot subdue it knows how to forget; it no longer exists, the horizon is bounded and closed. And this is a universal law: a living thing can be healthy, strong and fruitful only when bounded by a horizon. . . . (62-63)

The "capacity to feel to a certain degree unhistorically. . . constitutes the foundation upon which alone anything sound, healthy and great, anything truly human can grow" (63). It is "like an atmosphere within which alone life can germinate" (62). It is true that it is "only by imposing limits on this unhistorical element by thinking, reflecting, comparing,

distinguishing, drawing conclusions, . . . did man become man; but with an excess of history man again ceases to exist, and without that envelope of the unhistorical he would have never begun or dared to begin" (64).

Nietzsche then imagines what it would be like for man without a sense of the past to encumber him:

how different the world has become to him! Whatever he does perceive, . . . he perceives as he has never perceived before – all is so palpable, close, highly contoured, resounding, as though he apprehended it with all his senses at once. All his valuations are altered and disvalued; there are so many things he is no longer capable of evaluating at all because he can hardly feel them any more: he asks himself why he was for so long the fool of the phrases and opinions of others; he is amazed that his memory revolves unwearyingly in a circle and yet is too weak and weary to take even a single leap out of this circle. (64)

This "condition . . . is the womb not only of every unjust but of every unjust deed too; and no painter will paint his picture, no general achieve his victory, no people attain its freedom without having first desired and striven for it in an unhistorical condition" (64). "As he who acts is, in Goethe's words, always without conscience, so is he also always without knowledge; he forgets most things so as to do one thing" (64).

It is this "unhistorical atmosphere within which every great historical event has taken place" (63) and from which one attains to a "suprahistorical vantage point" (65). History compels us to recognise "how unaware even the greatest and highest spirits of our human race have been of the chance nature of the form assumed by the eyes through which they see and through which they compel everyone to see – compel, that is, because the intensity of their consciousness is exceptionally great" (65). Many see in the past a guide to the future:

looking to the past impels them towards the future and fires their courage to go on living and their hope that what they want will still happen, that happiness lies behind the hill they are advancing towards. These historical men believe that the meaning of existence will come more and more to light in the course of its *process*, and they glance behind them only so that, from the process so far, they can learn to understand the present and to desire the future more vehemently. (65)

The suprahistorical man, however, "sees no salvation in the process" (66) and understands that the "world is complete and reaches its finality at each and every moment: (66). Though they cannot agree on whether the meaning of the past is "happiness or resignation or virtue or atonement" (66), suprahistorical men are "unanimous in the proposition: the past and present are one, that is to say, with all their diversity identical in all that is typical and, as the omnipresence of imperishable types, a motionless structure of a value that cannot alter and a significance that is always the same" (66). "Just as the hundreds of different languages correspond to the same typically unchanging needs of man, . . . so the suprahistorical thinker beholds the history of nations and individuals from withing, clairvoyantly diving the original meaning of the various hieroglyphics and gradually even coming wearily to avoid the endless streams of new signs" (66).

Nietzsche proceeds to argue, however, that, though harmful in excess, history nevertheless pertains to the "living man in three respects: it pertains to him as a being who acts and strives, as a being who preserves and reveres, as a being who suffers and seeks deliverance" (67). This "threefold relationship corresponds to three species of history" (67), to wit, a "*monumental*, an *antiquarian* and a *critical* species of history" (67).

The monumental attitude to the past is favoured by the "man of deeds and power,

to him who fights a great fight, who needs models, teachers, comforters and cannot find them among his contemporaries" (67). The "man of action avoids despair and disgust by turning his gaze backwards" (68), his goal being "happiness, perhaps not his own but often that of a nation or of mankind as a whole" (68). His reward: a "place of honour in the temple of history, where he in turn can be a teacher, comforter and admonisher to those who come after him" (68). The "commandment" (68) which rules over such men of action is simply this: "that which in the past was able to expand the concept 'man' and make it more beautiful must exist everlastingly, so as to be able to accomplish this everlastingly" (68). The "fundamental idea of the faith in humanity which finds expression in the demand for a *monumental* history" (68) is simply this: that the "great moments in the struggle of the human individual constitute a chain, that this chain unites mankind across the millennia like a range of human mountain peaks, that the summit of such a long-ago moment shall be for me still living, bright and great" (68). The man of action gains "strength through reflecting on past greatness, are inspired with the feeling that the life of man is a glorious thing" (69) and the feeling that "that he lives best who has no respect for existence" (69). Such men know "on their way to immortality and to monumental history, how to regard it with Olympian laughter or at least with sublime mockery" (69). When they die, they do so with an ironic smile – for what was left of them to bury! Only the dross, refuse, vanity, animality that had always weighted them down" (69). But "one thing will live, the monogram of their essential being, a work, an act, a piece of rare enlightenment, a creation" (69) which "will live because posterity cannot do without it" (69). From this perspective, fame is not egoism but, rather, a "belief in the solidarity and continuity of the greatness of all ages and a protest against the passing away of generations and the transitoriness of things" (69).

However, this outlook is contradicted by the fact that "everything else that lives cries: No. The monumental shall not come into existence. . . . Apathetic habit all that is base and petty . . . casts itself across the path that greatness has tread on its way to immortality and retards, deceives, suffocates and stifles it" (68). All that most people, what Nietzsche calls the "common man" (69), want is to "live, at any cost" (68), not to participate in "that hard relay-race of monumental history through which alone greatness goes on living" (68). Of course, for even such people the "monumentalistic conception of the past" (69) offers hope: to be precise, the feeling that the "greatness that once existed was in any event once *possible* and may thus be possible again" (69).

The problem with this approach to the past is that comparing the present with the past in order to focus solely on greatness must necessarily be selective: "how inexact, fluid and provisional that comparison would be! How much of the past would have to be overlooked if it was to produce that mighty effect, how violently what is individual in it would have to be forced into a universal mould and all its sharp corners and hard outlines broken up in the interest of conformity" (69). In the hands of the monumental historian, the "past itself suffers harm: whole segments of it are forgotten, despised" (71) while "only individual embellished facts rise out of it like islands: the few personalities who are visible at all have something strange unnatural about them" (71). Monumental history "deceives by analogies, with seductive similarities it inspires the courageous to foolhardiness and the inspired to fanaticism" (71). At its core, monumental historians see the past as a reenactment of the same fundamental plot, the 'same complex of motives, the same *deus ex machina*, the same catastrophe . . . repeated at definite intervals" (70). Monumental history, accordingly, has little to do with "absolute veracity: it will always have to deal in approximations and generalities, in making what is dissimilar look similar; it will always have to diminish the differences of motives and instigations so as to exhibit the *effectus* monumentally, that is to say as something exemplary and worthy of imitation, at the

expense of the *causae*" (70). Because "it as far as possible ignores causes" (70), monumental history is nothing more than a "collection of 'effects in themselves,' of events which will produce an effect upon all future ages" (70). By contrast, an understanding of the "truly historical *connexus* of cause and effect . . . would only demonstrate that the dice-game of chance and the future could never again produce anything exactly similar to what it produced in the past" (70).

Nietzsche contends that as long as the "past has to be described as worthy of imitation, as imitable and possible for a second time" (70), it runs the risk of being "distorted, beautified" (70) and comes close to "free poetic invention" (70). The result, many times, is one becomes "incapable of distinguishing between a monumentalised past and mythic fiction" (71). In the "hands and heads of gifted egoists and visionary scoundrels . . . we see empires destroyed, princes murdered, wars and revolutions launched" (71). For example, those artists possessed of "inartistic natures" (71) most often wield a "monumentalist history of the artists" (71) against their "arch-enemies, the strong artistic spirits, that is to say against those who are alone capable of learning from that history in . . . a life-enhancing sense" (71). The path of the latter is blocked "if a half-understood monument to some great era of the past is erected as an idol and zealously danced around, as though to say: 'Behold, this is true art: pay no heed to those who are evolving and want something new!'" (71). To such critics, "any art which, because contemporary, is not yet monumental, seems to them unnecessary, unattractive and lacking in the authority conferred by history" (72). However, because they secretly fear that "art can be slain by art" (72), they "invoke the authority which the monumental derives from the past" (72) for they "do not desire to see new greatness emerge: their means of preventing it is to say 'Behold, greatness already exists!'" (72). Monumental history is the "masquerade costume in which their hatred of the great and powerful of their own age is disguised as satiated admiration for the great and powerful of past ages" (72). Their motto is "let the dead bury the living" (72).

Nietzsche then turns his attention to the antiquarian attitude to the past. This attitude belongs "to him who preserves and reveres – to him who looks back to whence he has come, to where he came into being, with love and loyalty; with this piety he as it were gives thanks for his existence. By tending with care that which has existed from old, he wants to preserve for those who shall come into existence after him the conditions under which he himself came into existence – and thus he serves life" (72-73). This can be a bad thing, however, for the "trivial, circumscribed, decaying, and obsolete acquire their own dignity and inviolability through the fact that the preserving and revering soul of the antiquarian man has emigrated into them and there made his home" (73). He reads into the history of his community the "history of himself" (73): "he reads its walls, its towered gate, its rules and regulations, its holidays, like an illuminated diary of his youth and in all this he finds again himself, his force, his industry, his joy, his judgment, his folly and vices. Here we lived, he says to himself, for here we are living; and here we shall live" (73). With the "aid of this 'we' he looks beyond his own individual transitory existence and feels himself to be the spirit of his house, his race, his city. Sometimes he even greets the soul of his nation across the long dark centuries of confusion as his own soul" (73). Hence, Goethe's claim to identify in the artwork of earlier artists, notwithstanding the generations which separated them, the manifestation of a 'German soul.' Nietzsche uses a familiar organic "metaphor" (74) to connote this sense: it is analogous, he argues, to the "contentment of the tree in its roots, the happiness of knowing that one is not wholly accidental and arbitrary but grown out of the past as its heir, flower and fruit, and that one's existence is thus excused and, indeed, justified" (74). This is what is usually designated as the "real sense of history" (74).

However, this preoccupation with the past is to the detriment of the present: the tree

is aware of its roots to a greater degree than it is able to see them; but this awareness judges how big they are from the size and strength of its visible branches. If, however, the tree is in error as to this, how greatly it will be in error regarding all the rest of the forest around it! – for it knows of the forest only that in it which obstructs or favours it and nothing beside. (74)

By analogy, the

antiquarian sense of a man, a community, a whole people, always possesses an extremely restricted field of vision; most of what exists it does not perceive at all, and the little it does see it sees much too close up and isolated; it cannot relate what it sees to anything else and it therefore accords everything it sees equal importance and therefore to each individual thing too great importance. There is a lack of that discrimination of value and that sense of proportion which would distinguish between the things of the past in a way that would do true justice to them; their measure and proportion is always that accorded them by the backward glance of the antiquarian nation or individual. (74)

As a result, “everything old and past that enters one’s field of reverence, while everything that does not approach this antiquity with reverence, that is to say everything new and evolving, is rejected and persecuted” (74). When the “senses of a people harden in this fashion, when the study of history serves the life of the past in such a way that it undermines continuing and especially higher life, when the historical sense no longer conserves life but mummifies it, then the tree gradually dies unnaturally from the top downwards to the roots – and in the end the roots themselves usually perish” (75). When not “animated and inspired by the fresh life of the present life of the present” (75), the antiquarian attitude degenerates into a “blind rage for collecting, a restless raking together of everything that has ever existed” (75) as a result of which man is “encased in the stench of must and mould” (75).

Even when it does not degenerate in this way, when it does not “lose the foundation in which alone it must be rooted if it is to benefit life” (75), certain dangers remain for “it knows only how to *preserve* life, not how to engender it; it always undervalues that which is becoming because it has no instinct for divining it – as monumental history, for example, has” (75). It consequently “hinders any firm resolve to attempt something new, thus it paralyses the man of action who, as one who acts, will and must offend some piety or other” (75). The “fact that something has grown old now gives rise to the demand that it be made immortal” (75) as a result of which it must seem sheer arrogance “to replace such an antiquity with a novelty and to set against such a numerical accumulation of acts of piety and reverence the single unit of that which is evolving and has just arrived” (75).

At this point, Nietzsche turns his attention to the third attitude to history which offers, in his view, a necessary corrective to the first two: the critical approach to the past. “If he is to live, man must possess and from time to time employ the strength to break up and dissolve a part of the past: he does this by bringing it before the tribunal, scrupulously examining it and finally condemning it; every past, however, is worthy to be condemned – for that is the nature of human things: human violence and weakness have always played a mighty role in them” (75-76). It is neither justice nor mercy which pronounces this verdict on human history but “life alone, that dark, driving power that insatiably thirsts for itself” (76). For life to blossom, this past filled with injustice must be left behind, forgotten. “Sometimes, however, this same life that requires forgetting demands a temporary suspension of this forgetfulness; it wants to be clear as to how unjust the

existence of anything – a privilege, a caste, a dynasty, for example – is, and how greatly this thing deserves to perish” (76). It is then that “its past is regarded critically, then one takes the knife to its roots, then one cruelly tramples over every kind of piety” (76). This is “always a dangerous process, especially so for life itself: and men and ages which serve life by judging and destroying a past are always dangerous and endangered men and ages” (76) for the simple reason that

since we are the outcome of earlier generations, we are also the outcome of their aberrations, passions and errors, and indeed of their crimes; it is not possible to free oneself from this chain. If we condemn these aberrations and regard ourselves as free of them, this does not alter the fact that we originate in them. The best we can do is to confront our inherited and hereditary nature with our knowledge of it, and through a new stern discipline combat our inborn heritage and implant in ourselves a new habit, a new instinct, a second nature, so that our first nature withers away. It is an attempt to give oneself, as it were *a posteriori*, a past in which one would like to originate in opposition to that in which one did originate. . . . What happens all too often is that we know the good but we do not do it, because we also know the better but cannot do it. But here and there a victory is nonetheless achieved. (76)

For those who “employ critical history for the sake of life” (77), there is a “consolation: that of knowing that this first nature was once a second nature and that every victorious second nature will become a first” (77).

Nietzsche believes that an encounter with the past is necessary: “every man and every nation requires, in accordance with its goals, energies and needs a certain kind of knowledge of the past” (77). Each of these three approaches to the past have an important role to play in the service of the present for the simple reason that each “belongs to a certain soil and climate and only to that” (72). It is when their functions become confused (e.g. the man of action needs to use the monumental approach as opposed to the antiquarian) that much mischief is caused by the “thoughtless transplantation of these plants: the critic without need, the antiquarian without piety, the man who recognises greatness but cannot himself do great things, are such plants, estranged from their mother soil and degenerated into weeds” (72). The “accumulation of knowledge” (77) of the past for the sake of knowledge, the product of “pure thinkers, who only look on at life” (77) is not the goal of looking to the past. An appreciation of the past is necessary “always and only for the ends of life and thus also under the domination and supreme direction of these ends” (77): “knowledge of the past has at all times been desired only in the service of the future and the present and not for the weakening of the present or for depriving a vigorous future of its roots” (77). This is the “natural relationship of an age, a culture, a nation with its history – evoked by hunger, regulated by the extent of its need, held in bounds by its inherent plastic powers” (77).