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# On the Utility and Liability of History for Life (1874)

## Foreword

“Moreover, I hate everything that only instructs me without increasing or immediately stimulating my own activity.”<sup>1</sup> These words of Goethe’s, a boldly expressed *ceterum censeo*,<sup>2</sup> provide an appropriate beginning for our observations on the worth and worthlessness of history.<sup>3</sup> My purpose here is to demonstrate why instruction without stimulation, why knowledge that inhibits activity, why history as a costly intellectual superfluity and luxury must, in accordance with Goethe’s words, arouse our intense hatred – for the simple reason that we still lack the most basic necessities, and because the superfluous is the enemy of necessity. To be sure, we need history; but our need for it is different from that of the pampered idler in the garden of knowledge – regardless of the noble condescension with which he might look upon our crude and inelegant needs and afflictions. That is, we need it for life and for action, not for the easy withdrawal from life and from action, let alone for whitewashing a selfish life and cowardly, base actions.

1 Letter from Goethe to Schiller, December 19, 1798.

2 Latin: but I am of the opinion. Allusion to the famous sentence with which the elder Cato is purported to have closed every speech before the Roman Senate: “But I am of the opinion that Carthage must be destroyed.”

3 In German: *Historie*. This is the word Nietzsche uses throughout the Foreword, along with derived terms such as *historisch*. In the argument of the text he will also deploy the word *Geschichte* and frequently move between the two words. We have given an indication of his usage of the two terms in the notes that follow on section 1. In German *Geschichte* has the meaning of “event” or “happening,” being closely connected with *Geschehen* as that which has taken place. It refers primarily to the events that are retold, but has also assumed the meaning of a report of specific events in terms of their unfolding and connections. *Historie* comes from the Latin *historia*, meaning “inquiry.” In this second *Untimely Meditation* Nietzsche is taking to task not simply “history” as a chronicling or recording of what has happened and of events, but history in the wider sense of our need and desire to look backwards and recollect, to pursue “inquiry” in this historical sense.

We only wish to serve history to the extent that it serves life, but there is a way of practicing history and a valorization of history in which life atrophies and degenerates: a phenomenon that it will likely be as painful as it is necessary to diagnose in the striking symptoms of our present age.

I have sought to depict a feeling that has often tormented me; I am taking my revenge on it by exposing it to public scrutiny. Perhaps this depiction will cause someone or other to declare that he is also familiar with this feeling, but that I have not experienced it in all its purity and originarity, and that I hence have failed to express it with the confidence and maturity of experience that it requires. A few people may, perhaps, make this assertion, but most will say that it is a wholly perverse, unnatural, repulsive, and downright illicit feeling; indeed, they will say that by feeling it, I have proven myself unworthy of that powerful historical orientation of our age, which, as is well known, has made itself evident for two generations now, particularly among the Germans. However, the very fact that I dare to go public with the natural description of my feeling will tend to promote rather than injure general propriety, since I will thereby give many the opportunity to say flattering things about the aforementioned orientation of our age. But I stand to gain something for myself that is worth even more than propriety – to be publicly instructed and set right about our age.

The observations offered here are also unfashionable<sup>4</sup> because I attempt to understand something in which our age justifiably takes pride – namely, its historical cultivation – as a detriment, an infirmity, a deficiency of the age, and furthermore, because I am even of the opinion that all of us suffer from a debilitating historical fever and that we at the very least need to recognize that we suffer from it. But if Goethe was correct in saying that when we cultivate our virtues we simultaneously cultivate our faults,<sup>5</sup> and if, as everyone knows, a hypertrophied virtue – and the historical sensibility of our time seems to me to be just such a hypertrophied virtue – can cause the demise of a people just as easily as a hypertrophied vice, then perhaps just this once I will be permitted to speak up. By way of exculpation, I should not conceal the fact, first, that I have mainly drawn the occurrences that aroused in me those tormenting feelings from my own experiences and that I have drawn on the experiences of others only by way of comparison, and second, that it is only to the extent that I am a student of more ancient times – above all, of ancient Greece – that I, as a child of our time, have had such unfashionable experiences. But I have to concede this much to myself as someone who by occupation is a classical philologist, for I have no idea what the significance of classical philology would be in our age, if not to have an unfashionable effect – that is, to work against the time and thereby have an effect upon it, hopefully for the benefit of a future time.

## I

Observe the herd as it grazes past you: it cannot distinguish yesterday from today, leaps about, eats, sleeps, digests, leaps some more, and carries on like this from morning to night and from day to day, tethered by the short leash of its pleasures and displeasures to the stake of the moment, and thus it is neither melancholy nor bored. It is hard on the human being to observe this, because he boasts about the superiority of his humanity over animals and yet looks enviously upon their happiness – for the one

4 In German: *unzeitgemäss*.

5 See Goethe. *Dichtung und Wahrheit* (Poetry and Truth). III. ch. 13.

and only thing that he desires is to live like an animal, neither bored nor in pain, and yet he desires this in vain, because he does not desire it in the same way as does the animal. The human being might ask the animal: "Why do you just look at me like that instead of telling me about your happiness?" The animal wanted to answer, "Because I always immediately forget what I wanted to say" – but it had already forgotten this answer and hence said nothing, so that the human being was left to wonder.

But he also wondered about himself and how he was unable to learn to forget and always clung to what was past; no matter how far or how fast he runs, that chain runs with him. It is cause for wonder: the moment, here in a flash, gone in a flash, before it nothing, after it nothing, does, after all, return as a ghost once more and disturbs the peace of a later moment. Over and over a leaf is loosened from the scroll of time, falls out, flutters away – and suddenly flutters back into the human being's lap. Then the human being says "I remember," and he envies the animal that immediately forgets and that sees how every moment actually dies, sinks back into fog and night, and is extinguished forever. Thus the animal lives *unhistorically*,<sup>6</sup> for it disappears entirely into the present, like a number that leaves no remainder; it does not know how to dissemble, conceals nothing, and appears in each and every moment as exactly what it is, and so cannot help but be honest. The human being, by contrast, braces himself against the great and ever-greater burden of the past; it weighs him down or bends him over, hampers his gait as an invisible and obscure load that he can pretend to disown, and that he is only too happy to disown when he is among his fellow human beings in order to arouse their envy. That is why the sight of a grazing herd or, even closer to home, of a child, which, not yet having a past to disown, plays in blissful blindness between the fences of the past and the future, moves him as though it were the vision of a lost paradise. And yet the child's play must be disturbed; all too soon it will be summoned out of its obliviousness. Then it will come to understand the phrase "it was," that watchword that brings the human being strife, suffering, and boredom, so that he is reminded what his existence basically is – a never to be perfected imperfect.<sup>7</sup> When death finally brings him the much longed-for oblivion, it simultaneously also suppresses the present; and with this, existence places its seal on the knowledge that existence itself is nothing but an uninterrupted having-been, something that lives by negating, consuming, and contradicting itself.

If happiness, if striving for new happiness, is in any conceivable sense what binds the living to life and urges them to live on, then perhaps no philosopher is closer to the truth than the cynic, for the happiness of the animal, who is, after all, the consummate cynic, provides living proof of the truth of cynicism. The smallest happiness, if it is uninterruptedly present and makes one happy, is an incomparably greater form of happiness than the greatest happiness that occurs as a mere episode, as a mood, so to speak, as a wild whim, in the midst of sheer joylessness, yearning, and privation. But in the case of the smallest and the greatest happiness, it is always just one thing alone that makes happiness happiness: the ability to forget, or, expressed in a more scholarly fashion, the capacity to feel unhistorically over the entire course of its

6 In German: *unhistorisch*. The translation has been modified to "unhistorical" here and throughout the text.

7 The word Nietzsche uses here, *Imperfectum*, not only evokes the notion of imperfection but also signifies the imperfect tense.

duration. Anyone who cannot forget the past entirely and set himself down on the threshold of the moment, anyone who cannot stand, without dizziness or fear, on one single point like a victory goddess, will never know what happiness is; worse, he will never do anything that makes others happy. Imagine the most extreme example, a human being who does not possess the power to forget, who is damned to see becoming everywhere; such a human being would no longer believe in his own being, would no longer believe in himself, would see everything flow apart in turbulent particles, and would lose himself in this stream of becoming; like the true student of Heraclitus, in the end he would hardly even dare to lift a finger. All action requires forgetting, just as the existence of all organic things requires not only light, but darkness as well. A human being who wanted to experience things in a thoroughly historical manner would be like someone forced to go without sleep, or like an animal supposed to exist solely by rumination and ever repeated rumination. In other words, it is possible to live almost without memory, indeed, to live happily, as the animals show us; but without forgetting, it is utterly impossible to live at all. Or, to express my theme even more simply: *There is a degree of sleeplessness, of rumination, of historical sensibility,<sup>8</sup> that injures and ultimately destroys all living things, whether a human being, a people, or a culture.*

In order to determine this degree and thereby establish the limit beyond which the past must be forgotten if it is not to become the grave digger of the present, we would have to know exactly how great the *shaping power*<sup>9</sup> of a human being, a people, a culture is; by shaping power I mean that power to develop its own singular character out of itself, to shape and assimilate what is past and alien, to heal wounds, to replace what has been lost, to recreate broken forms out of itself alone. There are people who possess so little of this power that they bleed to death from a single experience, a single pain, particularly even from a single mild injustice, as from a tiny little cut. On the other hand, there are those who are so little affected by life's most savage and devastating disasters, and even by their own malicious actions, that, while these are still taking place, or at least shortly thereafter, they manage to arrive at a tolerable level of well-being and a kind of clear conscience. The stronger the roots of a human being's innermost nature, the more of the past he will assimilate or forcibly appropriate; and the most powerful, most mighty nature would be characterized by the fact that there would be no limit at which its historical sensibility would have a stiffening and harmful effect; it would appropriate and incorporate into itself all that is past, what is its own as well as what is alien, transforming it, as it were, into its own blood. Such a nature knows how to forget whatever does not subdue it; these things no longer exist. Its horizon is closed and complete, and nothing is capable of reminding it that beyond this horizon there are human beings, passions, doctrines, goals. And this is a universal law: every living thing can become healthy, strong, and fruitful only within a defined horizon; if it is incapable of drawing a horizon around itself and too selfish, in turn, to enclose its own perspective within an alien horizon, then it will feebly waste away or hasten to its timely end. Cheerfulness, good conscience, joyous deeds, faith in what is to come – all this depends, both in the instance of the individual as well as in that of a people, on whether there is a line that segregates what is discernible and bright from what is unilluminable and obscure; on whether one knows how to forget things

8 In German: *historischen Sinne*.

9 In German: *die plastische Kraft*.

at the proper time just as well as one knows how to remember at the proper time; on whether one senses with a powerful instinct which occasions should be experienced historically, and which unhistorically. This is the proposition the reader is invited to consider: *the unhistorical and the historical<sup>10</sup> are equally necessary for the health of an individual, a people, and a culture.*

Everyone has made at least this one simple observation: a human being's historical knowledge and sensitivity can be very limited, his horizon as narrow as that of the inhabitant of an isolated alpine valley; each of his judgments may contain an injustice, each experience may be marked by the misconception that he is the first to experience it – yet in spite of all these injustices and all these misconceptions, he stands there, vigorously healthy and robust, a joy to look at. At the same time, someone standing close beside him who is far more just and learned grows sick and collapses because the lines of his horizon are restlessly redrawn again and again, because he cannot extricate himself from the much more fragile web of his justice and his truths and find his way back to crude wanting and desiring. By contrast, we saw the animal, which is wholly unhistorical and dwells within a horizon almost no larger than a mere point, yet still lives in a certain kind of happiness, at the very least without boredom and dissimulation. We will therefore have to consider the capacity to live to a certain degree unhistorically to be more significant and more originary, insofar as it lays the foundation upon which something just, healthy, and great, something that is truly human, is able to grow at all. The unhistorical is like an enveloping atmosphere in which alone life is engendered, and it disappears again with the destruction of this atmosphere. It is true: only when the human being, by thinking, reflecting, comparing, analyzing, and synthesizing, limits that unhistorical element, only when a bright, flashing, iridescent light is generated within that enveloping cloud of mist – that is, only by means of the power to utilize the past for life and to reshape past events into history<sup>11</sup> once more – does the human being become a human being; but in an excess of history the human being ceases once again, and without that mantle of the unhistorical he would never have begun and would never have dared to begin. What deeds could a human being possibly accomplish without first entering that misty region of the unhistorical? Or, to put metaphors aside and turn instead to an illustrative example: imagine a man seized and carried away by a vehement passion for a woman or for a great idea; how his world changes! Looking backward he feels he is blind, listening around him he hears what is unfamiliar as a dull, insignificant sound; and those things that he perceives at all he never before perceived in this way; so palpably near, colorful, resonant, illuminated, as though he were apprehending it with all his senses at once. All his valuations are changed and devalued; many things he can no longer value because he can scarcely feel them any more; he asks himself whether all this time he was merely duped by the words and opinions of others; he marvels that his memory turns inexhaustibly round and round in a circle and yet is still so weak and exhausted to make one single leap out of this circle. It is the most unjust condition in the world, narrow, ungrateful to the past, blind to dangers, deaf to warnings; a tiny whirlpool of life in a dead sea of night and oblivion; and yet this condition – unhistorical, antihistorical through and through – is not only the womb of the unjust deed, but of every just

10 In German: *das Unhistorische und das Historische.*

11 In German: *Geschichte.* See note 3 above.

deed as well; and no artist will create a picture, no general win a victory, and no people gain its freedom without their having previously desired and striven to accomplish these deeds in just such an unhistorical condition. Just as anyone who acts, in Goethe's words, is always without conscience, so is he also without knowledge:<sup>12</sup> he forgets most things in order to do one thing, he is unjust to whatever lies behind him and recognizes only one right, the right of what is to be. Thus, everyone who acts loves his action infinitely more than it deserves to be loved, and the best deeds occur in such an exuberance of love that, no matter what, they must be unworthy of this love, even if their worth were otherwise incalculably great.

If in many cases any one person were capable of sniffing out and breathing once again this unhistorical atmosphere in which every great historical event is born, then such a person, as a cognitive being, would be able to elevate himself to a *suprahistorical*<sup>13</sup> standpoint, something Niebuhr<sup>14</sup> once depicted as the possible result of historical reflections. "History,"<sup>15</sup> he says, "when understood clearly and fully, is at least useful for one thing: so that we might recognize how even the greatest and loftiest intellects of the human race do not know how fortuitously their eye has taken on its manner of seeing and forcibly demanded that all others see in this same manner; forcibly, because the intensity of their consciousness is exceptionally great. Anyone who has not recognized and understood this fully and in many individual instances will be enslaved by the presence of any powerful intellect that places the loftiest passion into a given form."<sup>16</sup> Such a standpoint could be called *suprahistorical* because anyone who occupies it could no longer be seduced into continuing to living on and taking part in history,<sup>17</sup> since he would have recognized the single condition of all events:<sup>18</sup> that blindness and injustice dwelling in the soul of those who act. From that point onward he would be cured of taking history<sup>19</sup> overly seriously. For he would have learned, for every human being, for every experience – regardless of whether it occurred among the Greeks or the Turks, or in the first or the nineteenth century – to answer the question: Why and to what purpose do people live? Anyone who asks his acquaintances whether they would like to relive the last ten or twenty years will easily recognize which of them are suited for that *suprahistorical* standpoint. To be sure, they will all answer "No!" but they will give different reasons for this answer. Some, perhaps, by consoling themselves with the claim "but the next twenty will be better." Of such people David Hume once said derisively:

And from the dregs of life hope to receive,  
What the first sprightly running could not give.<sup>20</sup>

12 See Goethe, *Maximen und Reflexionen (Maxims and Reflections)*, no. 251.

13 In German: *überhistorischen.*

14 Barthold Georg Niebuhr (1776–1831), Prussian diplomat and historian.

15 In German: *Geschichte.*

16 The source of this quotation from Niebuhr is not known.

17 In German: *Geschichte.*

18 In German: *Geschehens.*

19 In German: *Historie.*

20 Quoted in the original English. The passage is taken from Part X of Hume's *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* (1776), where Hume himself is quoting from John Dryden's play *Aureng-Zebe* (IV. i).

We shall call them historical human beings;<sup>21</sup> a glance into the past drives them on toward the future, inflames their courage to go on living, kindles their hope that justice will come, that happiness is waiting just the other side of the mountain they are approaching. These historical human beings believe that the meaning of existence will come ever more to light in the course of a *process*; they look backward only to understand the present by observation of the prior process and to learn to desire the future even more keenly; they have no idea how unhistorically they think and act despite all their history,<sup>22</sup> nor that their concern with history stands in the service, not of pure knowledge, but of life.

But that question, whose first answer we have just heard, can also be answered differently. Of course, once again with a "No!," but for different reasons: with the No of the suprahistorical human being, who does not seek salvation in a process, but for whom instead the world is complete and has arrived at its culmination in every individual moment. What could ten new years possibly teach that the past ten could not!

Suprahistorical human beings<sup>23</sup> have never agreed whether the substance of this doctrine is happiness or resignation, virtue or atonement; but, contrary to all historical modes of viewing the past, they do arrive at unanimity with regard to the statement: the past and the present are one and the same. That is, in all their diversity, they are identical in type, and as the omnipresence of imperishable types they make up a stationary formation of unalterable worth and eternally identical meaning. Just as the hundreds of different languages conform to the same constant types of human needs, so that anyone who understood these needs would be able to learn nothing new from these languages, the suprahistorical thinker illuminates the entire history of peoples and individuals from the inside, clairvoyantly divining the primordial meaning of the different hieroglyphs and gradually even exhaustedly evading this constantly rising flood of written signs: for, given the infinite superabundance of events, how could he possibly avoid being satiated, oversatiated, indeed, even nauseated! Ultimately, perhaps the rashest of these suprahistorical human beings will be prepared to say to his heart, as did Giacomo Leopardi:

Nothing exists that is worthy  
of your emotions, and the earth deserves no sighs.  
Our being is pain and boredom, and the world  
is excrement — nothing else.  
Calm yourself.<sup>24</sup>

But let us leave the suprahistorical human beings to their nausea and their wisdom: today we instead want to rejoice with all our hearts in our unwisdom and to make things easier for ourselves by playing the roles of those active and progressive people who venerate process. Our evaluation of what is historical might prove to be nothing

21 In German: *die historischen Menschen*.

22 In German: *Historie*.

23 In German: *die überhistorischen Menschen*.

24 Nietzsche followed Schopenhauer in his admiration for the work of the Italian poet Leopardi (1798–1837). The lines Nietzsche quotes are taken from the poem "A se stesso" ("To himself").

more than an occidental prejudice, but let us at least move forward and not simply stand still in these prejudices! If we could at least learn how to pursue history better for the purpose of *life*! Then we would gladly concede that suprahistorical human beings possess more wisdom than we do; at least, as long as we are certain of possessing more life, for then, at least, our unwisdom would have more of a future than their wisdom. And so as to banish all doubts about the meaning of this antithesis between life and wisdom, I will come to my own aid by employing a long-standing practice and propound, without further ado, some theses.

A historical phenomenon, when purely and completely understood and reduced to an intellectual phenomenon, is dead for anyone who understands it, for in it he understands the delusion, the injustice, the blind passion, and in general the whole darkened earthly horizon of that phenomenon, and from this simultaneously its historical power.<sup>25</sup> At this point this power becomes powerless for him as someone who understands it, but perhaps it is not yet powerless for him as someone who lives.

History,<sup>26</sup> conceived as a pure science and accorded sovereignty, would be for humanity a kind of conclusion to life and a settling of accounts. But historical cultivation is beneficial and holds out promise for the future only when it follows in the wake of a powerful new torrent of life, for example, an evolving culture; that is, only when it is governed and guided by a superior power, instead of governing and guiding itself.

Insofar as it stands in the service of life, history<sup>27</sup> also stands in the service of an unhistorical power, and because of this subordinate position, it neither could nor should become a pure science on the order of mathematics, for example. But the question about the degree to which life needs the service of history at all is one of the supreme questions and worries that impinges on the health of a human being, a people, or a culture. For at the point of a certain excess of history, life crumbles and degenerates — as does, ultimately, as a result of this degeneration, history itself, as well.

## 2

That life requires the service of history must be comprehended, however, just as clearly as the proposition that will subsequently be proved — that an excess of history is harmful to life. History pertains to the living person in three respects: it pertains to him as one who acts and strives, as one who preserves and venerates, and as one who suffers and is in need of liberation. These three relations correspond to three kinds of history: insofar as it is permissible to distinguish between a *monumental*, an *antiquarian*, and a *critical* kind of history.

Above all, history pertains to the active and powerful human being, to the person who is involved in a great struggle and who needs exemplars, teachers, and comforters, but is unable to find them among his contemporaries and in the present age. This is how it pertained to Schiller, for, as Goethe observed,<sup>28</sup> our age is so wretched that the poet encounters no useful qualities in the lives of the human beings around him.

25 In German: *geschichtliche Macht*.

26 In German: *Geschichte*.

27 In German: *Historie*.

28 See Goethe, *Conversations with Eckermann*, July 21, 1827.

Polybius, for example,<sup>29</sup> was thinking of the person who takes action when he called political history the proper preparation for governing a state and the best teacher, who admonishes us steadfastly to endure the vicissitudes of fortune by reminding us of the misfortunes of others. Anyone who has come to recognize in this the meaning of history cannot help but be annoyed to see curious tourists or meticulous micrologists climbing about on the pyramids of great past ages; where he finds inspiration to emulate and to improve, he does not wish to encounter the idler who, longing for diversion or excitement, saunters about as though among the painted treasures in a gallery. So as not to experience despair and disgust amid these weak and hopeless idlers, amid these excited and fidgety contemporaries, who in fact only appear to be active, the person who takes action must, in order to catch his breath, glance backward and interrupt the progress toward his goal. However, his goal is some kind of happiness – not necessarily his own, but often that of a people or of all of humanity; he shrinks from resignation and uses history as a means to combat it. For the most part, he can hope for no reward other than fame, that is, the expectation of a place of honor in the temple of history, where he can, in turn, serve later generations as a teacher, comforter, and admonisher. For his commandment reads: Whatever was once capable of extending the concept of “the human being” and of giving it a more beautiful substance must be eternally present in order for it perpetually to have this effect. That the great moments in the struggles of individuals form links in one single chain; that they combine to form a mountain range of humankind through the millennia; that for me the highest point of such a long-since-past moment is still alive, bright, and great – this is the fundamental thought in the belief in humanity that expresses itself in the demand for a *monumental* history. Precisely this demand that what is great be eternal sparks the most terrible struggle, however. For every other living thing cries out: “No! The monumental shall not come into being” – this is the watchword of those who oppose it. Dull habit, the trivial and the common, fill every nook and cranny of the world, gather like a dense earthly fog around everything great, throw themselves in the path that greatness must travel to attain immortality so as to obstruct, deceive, smother, and suffocate it. But this path leads through human minds! Through the minds of frightened and short-lived animals who constantly return to the same needs and only with great effort ward off destruction for a short time. For first and foremost they want only one thing: to live at all costs. Who could possibly imagine that they would run the difficult relay race of monumental history that greatness alone can survive! And yet again and again a few awaken who, viewing past greatness and strengthened by their observation of it, feel a sense of rapture, as if human life were a magnificent thing and as if the most beautiful fruit of this bitter plant were the knowledge that in an earlier time some person once passed through this existence with pride and strength, another pensively, a third helpfully and with compassion – all of them leaving behind the single lesson that the most beautiful life is led by those who do not hold existence in high regard. While the common human being clutches to this span of time with such greed and gloomy earnest, those who were on the way to immortality and to monumental history at least knew how to treat it with Olympian laughter, or at least with sublime derision; often they went to their graves with a sense of irony – for what was left of them to bury! Certainly only that which as waste, refuse, vanity, and animality had

29 See Polybius, *Histories*, I. 1. 2.

always oppressed them, something that now would fall into oblivion after long being the object of their contempt. But one thing will live on: the signature of their most authentic being, a work, a deed, a rare inspiration, a creation; it will live on because posterity cannot do without it. In this, its most transfigured form, fame is something more than just the tastiest morsel of our self-love, as Schopenhauer called it;<sup>30</sup> it is the belief in the coherence and continuity of what is great in all ages, it is a protest against the change of generations and against transitoriness.

Of what utility to the contemporary human being, then, is the monumental view of the past, the occupation with the classical and rare accomplishments of earlier times? From it he concludes that the greatness that once existed was at least *possible* at one time, and that it therefore will probably be possible once again; he goes his way with more courage, for the doubt that befalls him in his weaker moments – Is he not, in fact, striving for the impossible? – is now banished. Suppose someone believed that no more than one hundred productive human beings, educated and working in the same spirit, would be needed to put an end to the cultivatedness that has just now become fashionable in Germany; would he not be strengthened by the recognition that the culture of the Renaissance was borne on the shoulders of just such a band of one hundred men?

And yet – so that we might immediately learn something new from the same example – how fluid and tentative, how imprecise that comparison would be! If it is to be effective, how many differences must be overlooked, with what violence the individuality of what is past must be forced into a general form, its sharp edges and its lines broken in favor of this conformity. Basically, in fact, what was possible once could only become possible a second time if the Pythagoreans were correct in believing that when an identical constellation of the heavenly bodies occurs, identical events – down to individual, minute details – must repeat themselves on the earth as well; so that whenever the stars have a particular relation to each other a Stoic will join forces with an Epicurean to murder Caesar,<sup>31</sup> and whenever they are in another configuration Columbus will discover America. Only if the earth always began its drama all over again after the conclusion of the fifth act, only if it were certain that the same entanglement of motives, the same *deus ex machina*,<sup>32</sup> the same catastrophe would recur at fixed intervals, could the powerful human being possibly desire monumental history in its absolute iconic *veracity*, that is, with every fact depicted in all its peculiarity and uniqueness. This is unlikely to happen until astronomers have once again become astrologers. Until then, monumental history will have no need for that absolute veracity: it will continue to approach, generalize, and ultimately identify nonidentical things, it will continue to diminish the differences between motives and causes in order to present, to the detriment of the *causae*, the *effectus* as monumental – that is, as exemplary and worthy of emulation. As a result, since it disregards all causes, one would with little exaggeration be able to call monumental history a collection of “effects in themselves.”

30 See Schopenhauer, “Von Dem, was Einer vorstellt” (“About That which One Imagines”), ch. 4 of “Aphorismen zur Lebensweisheit” (“Aphorisms for Worldly Wisdom”), in *Parerga und Paralipomena* (1851), vol. 1.

31 Allusion to the conspiracy between Gaius Cassius and Marcus Brutus to assassinate Julius Caesar.

32 Latin: god from the machine (cf. *BT* note 85 above).

134 of events that will have an effect on every age. What is celebrated at popular festivals and at religious or military commemorations is really just such an "effect in itself": this is what disturbs the sleep of the ambitious, what lies like an amulet on the heart of the enterprising – not the true historical *connexus* of causes and effects, which, once fully comprehended, would only prove that the dice game of the future and of chance would never again produce something wholly identical to what it produced in the past.

As long as the soul of historiography<sup>33</sup> lies in the great *stimuli* that a powerful person derives from it; as long as the past must be described as worthy of imitation, as capable of imitation and as possible a second time; it is in danger of becoming somewhat distorted, of being reinterpreted more favorably, and hence of approaching pure fiction. Yes, there are ages that are entirely incapable of distinguishing between a monumental past and a mythical fiction, because they could derive the very same stimuli from the one as from the other. Thus, if the monumental view of the past prevails over other modes of viewing it, over the antiquarian and the critical views, then the past itself is *damaged*: entire large parts of it are forgotten, scorned, and washed away as if by a gray, unremitting tide, and only a few individual, embellished facts rise as islands above it. There seems to be something unnatural and wondrous about those rare persons who become visible at all, much like the golden hip by which the disciples of Pythagoras claimed to recognize their master.<sup>34</sup> Monumental history deceives by means of analogies: with seductive similarities it arouses rashness in those who are courageous and fanaticism in those who are inspired; and if one imagines this history in the hands and heads of talented egoists and wicked fanatics, then empires will be destroyed, princes murdered, wars and revolutions incited, and the number of historical "effects in themselves" – that is, of effects without sufficient causes – further increase. So much as a reminder of the damage that monumental history can cause among powerful and active human beings, regardless of whether they are good or evil: just imagine the effect it would have if it were seized and exploited by the powerless and inactive!

Let's take the simplest and most common example. Just picture to yourself the unartistic and insufficiently artistic natures clad and armored in the monumental history of art: against whom will they now turn their weapons! Against their arch-enemies, the strong artistic spirits; in other words, against those who alone are capable of truly learning – that is, learning with an eye to life – from history and of translating what they have learned into a higher form of praxis. Their path is obstructed; their air is darkened when zealous idolators dance around the shrine at some half-understood monument of a great past, as if they wanted to say: "Look, this is the only true and real art; of what concern to you is art that is just coming into being or has not yet been realized!" Apparently this dancing mob even has the privilege of determining what "good taste" is, for anyone who himself actually creates has always been at a disadvantage to those who merely observe and do not themselves take a hand in creation; just as in all ages the bar-stool politician is more intelligent, just, and reflective than the governing statesman. But if one insists on transposing the custom of popular referendum and majority rule into the realm of art and thereby forcing, as it were, the artist to defend himself before

<sup>33</sup> In German: *Geschichtschreibung*.

<sup>34</sup> For the story of Pythagoras' golden hip, see Diogenes Laertius, *Lives and Opinions of Eminent Philosophers*, VIII. 11.

a jury of aesthetic do-nothings, then you can bet that he will be condemned; and this not despite the fact that, but precisely *because*, his judges have ceremoniously proclaimed the canon of monumental art – that is, according to our earlier explanation, of the art that in all ages "produced an effect": whereas for the appreciation of all art that is nonmonumental simply because it is contemporary, these judges lack, first, the need, second, the genuine inclination, and third, precisely that authority of history. On the other hand, their instinct tells them that art can be murdered by art: the monumental should by no means come into being again, and to prevent this they deploy the authority of the monumental derived from the past. Thus they are connoisseurs of art because they want to do away with art altogether; thus they masquerade as physicians, while in fact they intend to administer a poison; thus they cultivate their tongue and their taste in order to explain from their position of fastidiousness why they so persistently reject all the nourishing artistic dishes offered them. For they don't want great art to come into being: their strategy is to say: "Look, great art already exists!" In truth, however, they are as little concerned with this great art that already exists as they are with that art that is coming into being; their lives bear witness to this. Monumental history is the costume under which their hatred of all the great and powerful people of their age masquerades as satiated admiration for the great and powerful people of past ages, the costume in which they surreptitiously turn the actual meaning of the monumental view of history into its opposite; whether they are clearly aware of it or not, they act as though their motto were "Let the dead bury the living."

Each of these three types of history is valid only in one soil and in one climate; in any other it develops into the most devastating weed. If the human being who wants to create something great needs the past at all, then he takes control of it by means of monumental history; those, on the other hand, who wish to remain within the realm of the habitual and the time-honored, foster the past in the manner of antiquarian historians; and only those who are oppressed by the affliction of the present and who wish to throw off this burden at all costs sense the need for critical history – that is, for history that judges and condemns. Much harm stems from the thoughtless transplanting of these plants: the critic without affliction, the antiquarian without piety, the connoisseur of greatness unable to create something great are just such plants that, alienated from the natural soil that nurtures them, have degenerated and shot up as weeds.

## 3

Second, history pertains to the person who preserves and venerates, to him who looks back with loyalty and love on the origins through which he became what he is; by means of this piety he gives thanks, as it were, for his existence. By attending with caring hands to what has subsisted since ancient times, he seeks to preserve for those who will emerge after him the conditions under which he himself has come into being – and by doing so he serves life. For such a soul the possession of ancestral household effects<sup>35</sup> takes on a different meaning, for far from the soul possessing these objects, it is possessed by them. Small, limited, decaying, antiquated things obtain their own dignity and sanctity when the preserving and venerating soul of the antiquarian human being

<sup>35</sup> Allusion to Goethe's *Faust I*, 1. 408.

takes up residence in them and makes itself a comfortable nest. The history of his city becomes his own history; he understands its wall, its towered gate, its ordinances, and its popular festivals as an illustrated diary of his youth, and he rediscovers himself in all of this, his strength, his diligence, his joy, his judgments, his foolishness, and his ill manners. "It was possible to live here," he says to himself, "because it is possible to live here and will in the future be possible to live here, for we are tough and cannot be broken overnight." With this "we" he looks beyond his own transient, curious, individual existence and senses himself to be the spirit of his house, his lineage, and his city. At times he even greets across the distance of darkening and confusing centuries the soul of his people as his own soul; the ability to empathize with things and divine their greater significance, to detect traces that are almost extinguished, to instinctively read correctly a past frequently overwritten, to quickly understand the palimpsests, indeed, polypsests – these are his gifts and his virtues. It was with these that Goethe stood before Erwin von Steinach's monumental work; the historical veil of clouds that separated them was torn apart in the storm of his emotions: he recognized this German work for the first time, "exerting its effect out of a strong and rugged German soul."<sup>36</sup> It was just such a sensibility and impulse that guided the Italians of the Renaissance and reawakened in their poets the ancient Italian genius to "a marvelous new resounding of the lyre," as Jacob Burckhardt has expressed it.<sup>37</sup> But that antiquarian sense of veneration has its greatest worth when it infuses the modest, rough, even wretched conditions in which a human being or a people live with a simple and stirring sense of joy and satisfaction. Just as Niebuhr, for example, admits with honest frankness that he lived contentedly, without missing art, in moor and meadow among free peasants who had a history. How could history serve life better than by binding even less-favored generations and populations to their native land and native customs, helping them settle in, and preventing them from straying into foreign lands in search of better things for whose possession they then compete in battle? At times what ties individuals, as it were, to these companions and surroundings, to these tiresome habits, to these barren mountain ridges, seems to be obstinacy and imprudence – but it is an imprudence of the healthiest sort, one that benefits the totality. Anyone is aware of this who has ever come to understand the dreadful consequences of the adventurous joy of migration, especially when it takes hold of an entire population, or who has studied up close the conditions of a people that has forfeited loyalty to its own past and has succumbed to restless, cosmopolitan craving for new and ever newer things. The opposite sensation, the contentment the tree feels with its roots, the happiness of knowing that one's existence is not formed arbitrarily and by chance, but that instead it grows as the blossom and the fruit of a past that is its inheritance and that thereby excuses, indeed, justifies its existence – this is what today we are in the habit of calling the true historical sensibility.

36 Reference to Goethe's essay "Von deutscher Baukunst" ("On German Architecture") written in Strasbourg in 1772 and dedicated to the builder of Strasbourg Cathedral, Erwin von Steinach.

37 Quotation from the celebrated work of Nietzsche's colleague at Basel, Jacob Burckhardt's *Die Cultur der Renaissance in Italien* (*The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy*, 1860). The excerpt is from the section on "Neo-Latin Poetry" in Part III, "The Revival of Antiquity."

Now, to be sure, this is not the condition in which the human being would be most capable of reducing the past to pure knowledge; so that even here we also perceive, as we already perceived in the case of monumental history, that the past itself suffers as long as history serves life and is governed by the impulses of life. To take some freedoms with our metaphor: the tree feels its roots more than it sees them; however, this feeling estimates their size in analogy to the size and strength of the visible limbs. Even if the tree is wrong about this: how wrong must it then be about the surrounding forest, about which it knows and feels anything only to the extent that it hinders or promotes its own growth – but nothing else! The antiquarian sensibility of a human being, of a civic community, of an entire people always has an extremely limited field of vision; most things it does not perceive at all, and the few things it does see, it views too closely and in isolation; it is unable to gauge anything, and as a result it regards everything to be equally important, and consequently the individual thing to be too important. There is no criterion for value and no sense of proportion for the things of the past that would truly do them justice when viewed in relation to each other; instead, their measure and proportions are always taken only in relation to the antiquarian individual or people that looks back on them.

This always brings with it one immediate danger: ultimately, anything ancient and past that enters into this field of vision is simply regarded as venerable, and everything that fails to welcome the ancient with reverence – in other words, whatever is new and in the process of becoming – is met with hostility and rejected. Thus, in the plastic and graphic arts even the Greeks tolerated the hieratic style alongside the free and great style; indeed, later they not only tolerated pointed noses and frosty smiles, but even turned them into a sign of refined taste. When a people's sensibility hardens in this way; when history serves past life to the extent that it not only undermines further life but especially higher life; when the historical sense no longer conserves but rather mummifies it, then beginning at its crown and moving down to its roots, the tree gradually dies an unnatural death – and eventually the roots themselves commonly perish. Antiquarian history degenerates from the moment when the fresh life of the present no longer animates and inspires it. At this point, piety withers, the scholarly habit persists without it and revolves with self-satisfied egotism around its own axis. Then we view the repugnant spectacle of a blind mania to collect, of a restless gathering together of everything that once existed. The human being envelops himself in the smell of mustiness; by this antiquarian behavior he even succeeds in reducing a more significant impulse, a nobler need, to this insatiable curiosity – or more accurately, to an all-encompassing desire for what is old. Often he sinks so low that in the end he is satisfied with any fare and even devours with gusto the dust of bibliographical minutiae.

But even if that degeneration does not occur, if antiquarian history does not lose that foundation in which alone it can take root if it is to serve the well-being of life: there are still enough dangers that remain, should it become too powerful and stifle the other modes for viewing history. For antiquarian history understands only how to *preserve* life, not how to create it; therefore, it always underestimates those things that are in the process of becoming because it has no divining instinct – as, for example, monumental history has. Thus, antiquarian history impedes the powerful resolve for the new, it lames the person of action, who, as person of action, must always offend certain acts of piety. The fact that something has grown old gives rise to the demand

138 that it be immortal; for if we add up all the experiences such an antiquity – an old custom, a religious belief, an inherited political privilege – has accumulated over the course of its existence, calculating the entire sum of piety and veneration that individuals and generations have felt toward it, then it seems presumptuous or even impious to replace such an antiquity with a novelty and to oppose such a numerical accumulation of acts of piety and veneration with the single digit of something that is still in the process of becoming and is contemporary.

With this it becomes clear just how badly the human being often needs, in addition to the monumental and antiquarian modes of viewing the past, a *third* mode, the *critical*; and this once again in the service of life. In order to live, he must possess, and from time to time employ, the strength to shatter and dissolve a past; he accomplishes this by bringing this past before a tribunal, painstakingly interrogating it, and finally condemning it. But every past is worthy of being condemned – for this is simply how it is with human affairs: human violence and weakness have always played a powerful role in them. It is not justice that sits in judgment here; even less so is it mercy that passes judgment: rather, it is life and life alone, that dark, driving, insatiable power that lusts after itself. Its verdict is always merciless, always unjust, because it has never flowed from the pure fountain of knowledge; but in most instances the verdict would be the same, even if spoken by justice itself. “For everything that comes into being is *worthy* of perishing. Thus it would be better if nothing came into being.”<sup>38</sup> It takes great strength to be able to live and forget the extent to which living and being unjust are one and the same thing. Even Luther once expressed the opinion that the world came into being only due to an act of forgetfulness on God’s part: for if God had thought of “heavy artillery,” he would never have created the world. But at times this very life that requires forgetfulness demands the temporary suspension of this forgetfulness; this is when it is supposed to become absolutely clear precisely how unjust the existence of certain things – for example, a privilege, a caste, or a dynasty – really is, and how much these things deserve to be destroyed. This is when its past is viewed critically, when we take a knife to its roots, when we cruelly trample on all forms of piety. It is always a dangerous process, one that is, in fact, dangerous for life itself; and human beings or ages that serve life by passing judgment on and destroying a past are always dangerous and endangered human beings and ages. For since we are, after all, the products of earlier generations, we are also the products of their aberrations, passions, and errors – indeed, of their crimes; it is impossible to free ourselves completely from this chain. If we condemn these aberrations and regard ourselves as free of them, this does not alter the fact that we are descended from them. At best we arrive at an antagonism between our inherited, ancestral nature and our knowledge, or perhaps even at the struggle of a new, stricter discipline against what was long ago inborn and inbred. We cultivate a new habit, a new instinct, a second nature, so that the first nature withers away. This is an attempt to give ourselves *a posteriori*, as it were, a new past from which we would prefer to be descended, as opposed to the past from which we actually descended – this is always dangerous because it is so difficult to set limits on this negating of the past, and because second natures are usually feebler than first natures. Too frequently we stop at knowing what is good without actually doing it, because we also know what is better without being capable of doing it. But here and

there a victory is nonetheless achieved, and for those embroiled in this struggle – for those who make use of critical history in the service of life – there is one noteworthy consolation: the knowledge, namely, that even that first nature was once a second nature, and that every victorious second nature will become a first nature. –

[...]

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[...]

With the term “the unhistorical” I designate the art and power to be able to *forget* and to enclose oneself in a limited *horizon*; I term “suprahistorical” those powers that divert one’s gaze from what is in the process of becoming to what lends existence the character of something eternal and stable in meaning, to *art* and *religion*. *Science* – for it is science that here would speak of “poisons” – views in this strength, in these powers, antagonistic powers and strengths, for it considers the mere observation of things to be true and correct, that is, to be scientific observation, which everywhere perceives only what has already become something, something historical, and nowhere does it perceive something being, something eternal. Science lives in an internal contradiction with the eternalizing powers of art and religion, just as it hates oblivion, the death of knowledge; it seeks to suspend all the limitations placed on horizons and to catapult the human being into an infinite, unlimited light-wave sea of known becoming.

If only he could live in it! Just as in an earthquake cities collapse and are destroyed and human beings build their houses but fearfully and fleetingly on volcanic ground, so life caves in on itself and becomes feeble and discouraged when the *concept-quake* unleashed by science robs the human being of the foundation for all his security and tranquillity, his belief in what is lasting and eternal. Should life rule over knowledge and science, or should knowledge rule over life? Which of these forces is higher and more decisive? No one will doubt: life is the higher, the ruling force; for any knowledge that destroyed life would simultaneously destroy itself. Knowledge presupposes life; hence it has the same interest in the preservation of life that every creature has in its own continued existence. This is the reason why science needs the supervision and surveillance of a higher power; a *hygiene of life* occupies a place close by the side of science; and one proposition of this hygiene would be: the unhistorical and the suprahistorical are the natural antidotes to the stifling of life by the historical, to the historical sickness. It is likely that we, the historically sick, will also have to suffer from these antidotes. But the fact that we suffer from them provides no evidence that could call the correctness of the chosen therapy into question.

And it is in this that I recognize the mission of that *youth* of which I have spoken, of that first generation of fighters and dragon slayers who will advance a happier, more beautiful cultivation and humanness, without themselves ever having more than a promising inkling of this future happiness and coming beauty. This youth will suffer simultaneously from the illness and the cure, but despite this they believe that they can boast better health and even a more natural nature than the generations that preceded them, the cultivated “men” and “old men” of the present. But it is their mission to shatter the conceptions that this present age has of “health” and “cultivation,” and to arouse scorn and hatred against these monstrous conceptual hybrids. And the symptom that will vouch for their greater health will be that this youth will be able to use no concepts, no party slogans from among the verbal and conceptual coins that are

38 Goethe, *Faust I*, ll. 1339–41.



currently in circulation, to designate their own being. Rather, their conviction will derive only from a power active within them that struggles, discriminates, and analyzes, and from a feeling for life that is constantly heightened in every good hour. Some may disagree with the claim that his youth will already have cultivation – but what youth would consider this a reproach? We may accuse them of being crude and intemperate – but they are not yet old and wise enough to moderate their demands. But above all, they do not need either to feign or defend a ready-made cultivation, and they enjoy all the consolations and privileges of youth, especially the privilege of courageous, unreflected honesty, and the inspiring consolation of hope.

I know that these hopeful individuals have a concrete understanding of these generalizations and will translate them by means of their own experience into a doctrine that is personally meaningful. In the meantime, others may perceive nothing but covered dishes that could possibly even be empty, until one day they are surprised to see with their own eyes that these dishes are full and that assaults, demands, life drives, and passions that could not remain concealed for very long are packed into and compressed within these same generalizations. Calling the attention of these skeptics to time, which brings everything to light, I will conclude by turning to that society of hopeful individuals, in order to relate to them by means of a parable the course and progress of their cure, their redemption from the historical sickness, and hence their own personal history up to that point at which they will once again be healthy enough to pursue history anew and to make use of the past in the service of life in the sense of the three historical modes described above, namely, the monumental, the antiquarian, and the critical. At that moment they will be less knowledgeable than the “cultivated people” of the present, for they will have forgotten much of what they learned and will even have lost all desire to attend at all to the things that those cultivated persons want to know. Seen from the perspective of these cultivated persons, their distinguishing marks are precisely their “lack of cultivation,” their indifference and reserve with regard to many things that are otherwise celebrated, even with regard to many things that are good. But when they have arrived at the conclusion of their cure, they have once again become *human beings* and have ceased to be humanlike aggregates – that’s quite an accomplishment! There is still hope. Don’t your hearts rejoice at this, you hopeful individuals?

“And how will we arrive at this goal?” you will ask. At the very beginning of your journey to that goal the God of Delphi will call out to you his imperative, “Know thyself.” It is a difficult imperative, for this God, as Heraclitus has said, “neither conceals nor reveals, but merely alludes.”<sup>39</sup> What does he allude to?

There were centuries in which the Greeks found themselves threatened by a danger similar to the one we face today, the danger, namely, of perishing in a flood of things alien and past, of perishing of “history.”<sup>40</sup> They never lived in proud isolation; on the contrary, their “cultivation” was for many years a chaos of foreign – Semitic, Babylonian, Lydian, and Egyptian – forms and concepts, and their religion represented a veritable struggle among the gods of the entire Orient. This is similar to the manner in which today “German cultivation” and religion represent an internally struggling chaos of all foreign lands and all prior history. But despite this, and thanks to that

39 Heraclitus (Diels-Kranz edn), fragment 93.

40 In German: *an der "Historie" zu Grunde zu gehen.*

Apollonian imperative, Hellenic culture did not become an aggregate. The Greeks gradually learned how to *organize this chaos* by concentrating – in accordance with this Delphic doctrine – on themselves, that is, on their genuine needs, and by letting those pseudoneeds die out. They thereby took possession of themselves again; they did not long remain the gluttoned heirs and epigones of the entire Orient; based on the practical interpretation of Apollo’s imperative, they themselves became, after a difficult struggle with themselves, the happiest enrichers and increasers of that inherited treasure; they became the first cultured people, and hence the model for all future cultured peoples.

This is a parable for every individual among us: he must organize the chaos within him by concentrating on his genuine needs. His honesty, his sound and truthful character, must at some point rebel against the constant imitation – imitation of speech and imitation of learning – that he finds everywhere around him. He then will begin to grasp that culture can be something other than the *decoration of life* – that is, at bottom always only mere dissimulation and disguise, for all ornaments have the purpose of concealing what they adorn. In this way the Greek concept of culture – as opposed to the Roman – will be disclosed to him, the concept of culture as a new and improved *physis*,<sup>41</sup> without interior and exterior, without dissimulation and convention, a concept of culture as the harmony of life, thought, appearance, and will. He thus will learn from his own experience that it was the higher power of *moral* nature that made the Greeks’ victory over other cultures possible, and that every increase in truthfulness is always a necessary step toward the furthering of *true* cultivation – even though this truthfulness may sometimes do serious harm to that cultivatedness that is held in esteem at the time, even though it may hasten the downfall of an entire decorative culture.

41 Greek: nature. See PTG note 1 above.