

NIETZSCHE'S HISTORIOGRAPHY:
HISTORY AND CULTURE IN THE SECOND *UNTIMELY MEDITATION*

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ABSTRACT

NACONA J. NIX: Nietzsche's Historiography: History and Culture in the Second *Untimely Meditation*
(Under the direction of Michael Lienesch)

This thesis analyzes Friedrich Nietzsche's response to the growing professionalization of history in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. I begin by exploring traditional historians' attempts to answer the question of why we read and write about the past. In doing so, I highlight postmodernist objections to positivistic history and enumerate the various social and political uses to which contemporary histories are put. I then turn to the second *Untimely Meditation* to evaluate Nietzsche's claim that the products of the scientific pursuit of history overwhelm weak minds and prevent future generations from undertaking projects of cultural reform and renewal. I argue that while Nietzsche's description of the deleterious effects of German historicism contains much that is recognizable in twenty-first century liberal democracies, his historiography condones a cavalier attitude toward historical truth that privileges mythmaking and culture above science and politics. I conclude by suggesting how modern academic history could better serve the needs of a democratic citizenry.

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DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to my grandmother, Lorene, with my love.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

History, we can confidently assert, is useful in the sense that art and music, poetry and flowers, religion and philosophy are useful. Without it—as with these—life would be poorer and meaner; without it we should be denied some of those intellectual and moral experiences which give meaning and richness to life. Surely it is no accident that the study of history has been the solace of many of the noblest minds of every generation.

Henry Steele Commager

History, n: an account mostly false, of events mostly unimportant, which are brought about by rulers, knaves, and soldiers, mostly fools.

Ambrose Bierce

Attempting to answer the question of why we do history—why we write about the past or study it—the Scottish born historian and essayist Thomas Carlyle remarked that history—as “the letter of Instructions, which the old generations write and posthumously transmit to the new”—“recommends itself as the most *profitable* of all studies.”¹ But what do we gain by reading and writing about the past? Ancient, medieval, and modern historians all trumpeted the rewards of a historical education even though the purposes of their work were often markedly different. No one response is likely to satisfy everyone, but today’s historians generally agree on some combination of reasons why the disciplined study of the past forms an indispensable part of the humanities.

¹ Thomas Carlyle, “On History Again,” in *English and Other Critical Essays* (London: J. M. Dent & Sons, 1915), 91 (emphasis mine).

As Herodotus claimed in *History of the Persian Wars*, writing about the past preserves and celebrates the memory of great men and wonderful deeds.² Insofar as the actions of the altruistic, courageous, and compassionate are juxtaposed with the exploits of the selfish, cowardly, and merciless, knowledge of history can reveal general truths about human nature and behavior and provide moral and political lessons for future generations.³ History helps in the creation of personal and cultural identities and establishes links between the individual and the community; it helps create a “feeling of shared experience between generations, between ancestors and descendants, between the living and the dead.”⁴ History expands the range of our vision by making us privy to values, customs, and opinions of people of different national origins, racial groups, political allegiances, religious affiliations, and sexual orientations, thereby forcing us to confront our parochial partialities and prejudices head-on. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, the study of history empowers us

² See Herodotus, *The History*, trans. David Grene (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), 33: “Herodotus of Halicarnassus, am here setting forth my history, that time may not draw the color from what man has brought into being, nor those great and wonderful deeds, manifested by both Greeks and barbarians, fail of their report, and, together with all this, the reason why they fought one another.” Before Herodotus scribed his inquiries, Homer sang of the gods and the heroes of the Trojan War in his *Iliad*, committing to writing his interpretation of a tale that had served as a principal source of education, edification, and entertainment for centuries of Greeks.

³ See Robert B. Strassler, ed., *The Landmark Thucydides: A Comprehensive Guide to the Peloponnesian War* (New York: Touchstone, 1998), 1.23, 16: “The absence of romance in my history will, I fear, detract somewhat from its interest; but if it be judged useful by those inquirers who desire an exact knowledge of the past as an aid to the understanding of the future, which is the course of human things must resemble if it does not reflect it, I shall be content. In fine, I have written my work, not as an essay which is to win the applause of the moment, but as a possession for all time.” See also Niccolò Machiavelli, *Selected Political Writings*, ed. and trans. David Wootton (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1994), 216: “Wise men often say, and not without good reason, that if you want to predict the future you should look at the past, for everything that happens, no matter where or when, has its analogue in past history. The reason for this is that men have and always have had the same passions, so it inevitably follows that their passions have the same effects, and their deeds do not change.”

⁴ Theodore S. Hammerow, “The Bureaucratization of History,” *American Historical Review* 94, no. 3 (June 1989), 658.

to break and expose myths, to check empirically whether a story has its ultimate basis in fact or fiction—in essence, to discover truth.

Today many postmodernists, however, object to the notion that the study of the past amounts to a search for truth. They quickly point out that the products of our historical excavation work are always less than the past, for indeed the content of the totality of past events is virtually limitless.⁵ Making matters worse, the records of the past that we have been fortunate enough to recover are necessarily incomplete and often inaccurate. No matter how committed to honest investigation and open processes of research historians may be, they inevitably introduce bias in their research because they must decide what people, places, events and periods will be included in the historical narrative and which will be left out. And of course, no matter how great our stock of primary sources from which to construct an accurate portrayal of the past, there is no way to check the truth of an account by its correspondence with “what actually happened,” because there is no historical reality within reach. Whereas the scientist judges the validity of his theory by the outcome of an experiment in a laboratory or the observation of a phenomenon in nature, the historian can make no such appeal. Rather, he must rely on the fragmentary accounts of others, constructing a chronicle of the past that best makes sense of the available records and manages to survive the critical scrutiny of his academic peers. Nancy F. Partner neatly summarizes the findings of her survey of the scholarly literature within historiography when she writes,

⁵ Keith Jenkins, *Re-Thinking History* (New York: Routledge, 1991), 11.

All historians know that history is no longer the discipline fulfilling its positivistic promise to tell it all as it really happened. And, in fact, that cultural moment, of naive assertions about splicing together an entire, indubitable, objectivity once-existing Past, was a very brief digression in history's longer, more richly compromised life as the expressive artifact of tradition, culture, human defiance of time—the whole cultural baggage carried variously and jointly by religion, literature, art, and history.⁶

Fully aware now of the fact that history, as Claude Lévi-Strauss put it, is never history simply, but history-for, contemporary historians attempt to rectify the complaint that the historian is not ideologically neutral by writing histories that give the historically underrepresented—women, minorities, and the poor in particular—their due. Feminist historians, for example, attempt to re-read and re-interpret history from a female perspective, addressing the imbalance in history that has resulted from the near systematic exclusion of women from the historical, philosophical, artistic, and scientific tradition.⁷ Such historians write with a particular *purpose* in mind: the reappraisal of the role of women in the past and the mainstreaming of marginalized perspectives. There being no neutral ideological position from which to do history, the answer to the problem of historical objectivity has been, perhaps counterintuitively, *more* history.

The conditions of postmodernism have produced a multiplicity of histories encountered everywhere in our democratic, consumerist culture, a mass of genres to be variously used and abused: professional historians' histories, popularizations of professional

⁶ Nancy F. Partner, "Making Up Lost Time: Writing on the Writing of History," *Speculum* 61, no. 1 (January 1986), 117.

⁷ In *Northanger Abbey*, Catherine Morland explains something of what might be Jane Austen's view of history: "History, real solemn history, I cannot be interested in. I read it a little as a duty; but it tells me nothing that does not either vex or weary me. The quarrels of popes and kings, with wars and pestilence in every page; the men so good for nothing, and hardly any women at all, it is very tiresome." Consider also Philip Howard's remark that "most history is a record of the triumphs, disasters, and follies of top people. The black hole in it is in the way of life of mute, inglorious men and women who made no nuisance of themselves in the world."

histories, children's histories, popular-memory histories, black histories, women's histories, reactionary histories, revolutionary histories, etc., all of which are affected by local, regional, national, and international perspectives.⁸ But what are the implications of this endless production and circulation of histories for politics? Must we dispense with the idea that history contains past models that ought to be presented to young readers for emulation? Does the postmodern predilection for unconventional narratives and re-description necessarily undermine the notion that there are readily identifiable and universally salutary moral lessons embedded in history? Has the explosion in historical knowledge forced historians to abdicate their traditional role as the bulwarks of cultural heritage? And if so, what effects must this have on the psychic health of individuals and communities?

As a professor of Greek philosophy at the University of Basel and teacher in a local academy for five years, Friedrich Nietzsche worried that the tendency of nineteenth century German historians to pursue a scientific, perspective-free version of history might render traditional historical education psychologically detrimental and practically impotent. While anticipating the objections to history (*Historie*, in the sense of the academic investigation of the past, as opposed to *Geschichte*, the events of earlier times) proffered by postmoderns, Nietzsche routinely took it for granted that objective historical knowledge was possible.⁹ However, he maintained that history practiced for lucre and profession rather than for the benefit and use of mankind resulted in a highly deterministic view of history that left little room for human agency, overwhelming weak minds with the knowledge of world-views different from their own and preventing future generations from pursuing projects of cultural

⁸ Jenkins, *Re-Thinking History*, 65-66.

⁹ Peter Berkowitz, *Nietzsche: The Ethics of an Immoralist* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995), 27.

reform and renewal. The problem with history is not that historians cannot know about the past or that they have ignored multitudes worthy of mention; rather, the problem is that they fail to distinguish between useful and useless knowledge—knowledge that can promote, preserve, and moderate healthy society and knowledge that can impede and destroy it.

In the second of his *Untimely Meditations, On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life*¹⁰ (*Von Nutzen und Nachteil der Historie für das Leben*), Nietzsche catalogues the “striking symptoms” of cultural decline in his age and diagnoses his own culture as suffering from a “consuming fever” and a “malady” caused by its obsessive “cultivation of history.” Although his essay consists in part of a prescription for a cure—embodied in the plea that historians employ the monumental, antiquarian, and critical “species of history” in the service of culture with the knowledge of their respective potential for abuse—it comprises primarily a description of the deleterious effects of an excess of the “historical sense.” Commentators on Nietzsche’s polemic typically forgo a detailed analysis of the multifarious manifestations he offers as evidence of Germany’s crisis of historicism, but these sections merit greater scholarly attention, for they make plain Nietzsche’s unflagging demands for philosophical rigor and artistic unity in the High German culture of the future. I argue that while Nietzsche’s description of the deleterious effects of historicism contains much that is recognizable (and regrettable) in twenty-first century liberal democracies, his historiography condones a cavalier attitude toward historical truth that privileges mythmaking and culture above science and politics. Although the history of the twentieth century makes clear the tragic consequences of such illiberal priorities, Nietzsche’s lamentations over the

¹⁰ Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life*, in *Untimely Meditations*, trans. R. J. Hollingdale (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997).

psychological effects of the “mania for history” contain much that should unsettle postmodern defenders of an ironic approach to politics.

CHAPTER 2

THE PLACE OF HISTORY IN NIETZSCHE'S THOUGHT

*The second Untimely One (1874) brings to light what is dangerous and gnaws at and poisons life in our kind of traffic with science and scholarship—how life is made sick by this dehumanized and mechanical grinding of gears, the ‘impersonality’ of the laborer, the false economy of the ‘division of labor.’ The aim is lost, genuine culture—and the means, the modern traffic with science, barbarized. In this essay the ‘historical sense’ of which this century is proud was recognized for the first time as a disease, as a typical symptom of decay.*¹¹

*Lack of historical sense is the family failing of all philosophers.*¹²

Friedrich Nietzsche remains one of the most widely read philosophers of our time—a thinker whose name is as likely to arise in academic circles as in movies and television shows. Unfortunately, he is not among the best understood. Although his works are engrossing, they are often hard to follow, due in large part to an enigmatic, aphoristic writing style that eschews sober, reasoned analysis in favor of an approach employing sarcasm, irony, and intentional contradiction. Perhaps it should come as no surprise, then, that the attempt to get down to what Nietzsche *really* said and meant has given rise to a flourishing publishing industry in which “almost certainly more books appear on him each year than any other thinker, thanks to the appeal he has for so many disparate schools of thought and anti-

¹¹ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Ecce Homo*, in *On the Genealogy of Morals and Ecce Homo*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage Books, 1989), *The Untimely Ones* 1, 276.

¹² Friedrich Nietzsche, *Human, All Too Human: A Book for Free Spirits*, trans. R. J. Hollingdale (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 1:2, 12.

thought.”¹³ Indeed, the last published edition of the *International Nietzsche Bibliography*, edited in 1968—long before the recent explosion of scholarly interest in Nietzsche—lists more than 4,500 titles in 27 languages devoted to the philosopher’s work.¹⁴

Yet it has only been in recent years that scholars have given the writings of the Basel period, in particular the *Untimely Meditations*, their due treatment. As a result of this attention, Nietzsche’s view of history and his treatment of it in *On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life* have come to the forefront, and heretofore forgotten and neglected works such as *On the Future of German Educational Institutions* have attracted a scholarly following as well. Although the critical and interpretative literature on Nietzsche is too vast and intractable to give a full account of it here, I will attempt to outline in broad strokes the various scholarly approaches to Nietzsche’s philosophy in general and to the second *Untimely Meditation* in particular. Perhaps not surprisingly, as is the case with such topics as perspectivism, the eternal recurrence, and the *Übermensch*, I find that scholars are sharply divided over their interpretations of Nietzsche’s understanding of history.

Nietzsche was not nearly so popular in life as in death. Still yet to be recognized as a philosophical and cultural phenomenon in the fall of 1888, Nietzsche was undaunted by the failure of his works to reach the nobler spirits among the philosophically aware public, boldly declaring in the preface to *The Antichrist* that “some are born posthumously.”¹⁵ In fact, over the course of the twentieth century Nietzsche experienced not a single birth but

¹³ Robert Scurton, Peter Singer, Christopher Janaway, and Michael Tanner, *German Philosophers: Kant, Hegel, Schopenhauer, Nietzsche* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997).

¹⁴ Bernd Magnus and Kathleen M. Higgins, eds., *The Cambridge Companion to Nietzsche* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 1-2.

¹⁵ Walter Kaufmann, trans., *The Antichrist*, in *The Portable Nietzsche* (New York: Penguin Books, 1976), 568.

multiple incarnations. The Nazi Party's appropriation of him as a spiritual and intellectual forebear during World War II led early interpreters to brand Nietzsche a "proto-Nazi" who "would have joined the Nazi party had he lived long enough."¹⁶ Walter Kaufmann reviewed the Nazi literature on Nietzsche and deftly exposed its weaknesses in his *Nietzsche: Philosopher, Psychologist, AntiChrist*,¹⁷ the book that provided the basis for the long-standing interpretation of Nietzsche as a "fundamentally anti-political" thinker who reviled the state and loathed its consequences for ethics and culture.¹⁸ Since then the complexity of his artistic vision has allowed thinkers on the political right to interpret Nietzsche variously as a German nationalist,¹⁹ a social Darwinist,²⁰ and a thorough-going critic of liberalism,²¹ while leftist commentators construe him as a socialist,²² an opponent of social Darwinism,²³

¹⁶ Bruce Detwiler, *Nietzsche and the Politics of Aristocratic Radicalism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), 1.

¹⁷ Walter Kaufmann, *Nietzsche: Philosopher, Psychologist, Antichrist* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1974).

¹⁸ Detwiler, *Nietzsche and the Politics of Aristocratic Radicalism*, 37.

¹⁹ Richard Oehler, *Friedrich Nietzsche und die Deutsche Zukunft* (Leipzig: Armanen, 1935).

²⁰ John T. Wilcox, *Truth and Value in Nietzsche: A Study of His Metaphysics and Epistemology* (University of Michigan Press, 1974). John Richardson maintains that Nietzsche's repeated denunciation and ridicule of Charles Darwin only served to alert his readers to the deep ambivalence he felt about the perceived social, political, and biological implications of the British naturalist's theory. See *Nietzsche's New Darwinism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004).

²¹ George A. Morgan, Jr., *What Nietzsche Means* (New York: Harper and Row, 1941); Fredrick Appel, *Nietzsche Contra Democracy* (Cornell University Press, 1999).

²² Charles Andler, *Nietzsche: Sa vie et sa pensée*, 6 vols. (Paris: Boassard, 190-31) 5(1929): 321.

²³ Lewis Call, "Anti-Darwin, Anti-Spencer: Friedrich Nietzsche's Critique of Darwin and 'Darwinism'," *History of Science* 36 (111): 1-22. Kaufmann (1976) argues steadfastly against all Darwinian interpretations of Nietzsche's thought (see 66, 118, 143, 294, and 317).

an existentialist,²⁴ a pragmatist,²⁵ and most recently, a liberal whose thinking is compatible with egalitarianism, constitutionalism, and democracy.²⁶

The sheer breadth of Nietzsche's thought—covering such topics as the practice of historiography, the superiority of Greek culture, the consequences of Christian morality, and the value of modern science—has allowed his twentieth century interpreters considerable leeway in determining which of his myriad concerns ought to be regarded as the most central to understanding Nietzsche or the most useful for diagnosing the ills of modern political life. Following suit, Mark Warren declares at the beginning of his study that, “knowing a thinker's problematic is perhaps the most important thing we can know about the person's thinking as a whole.”²⁷ Virtually every author who has explored Nietzsche's view of history

²⁴ Karl Jaspers, *Nietzsche: An Introduction to the Understanding of His Philosophical Activity* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997); Alexander Nehamas, *Nietzsche: Life as Literature* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1985).

²⁵ Posner, Richard A. “Past-Dependency, Pragmatism, and Critique of History in Adjudication and Legal Scholarship.” *University of Chicago Law Review* 67, no. 3 (Summer 2000): 573-606.

²⁶ Henry S. Kariel, “Nietzsche's Preface to Constitutionalism,” *Journal of Politics* 25 (May 1963): 211-225. It is against those on the political left who are primarily interested in defending a politics of their own choosing through the instrumental and highly selective appropriation of Nietzsche's thought (e.g., Emma Goldman, Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida, Mark Warren) that Bruce Detwiler argues most directly, despite the fact that he is sympathetic to their political concerns. For however odious we might find Nietzsche's politics, “we stand guilty of both sanitizing and trivializing his [philosophical] contribution when we deliberately sweep up under the rug its unsavory political implications” (5). While Kaufmann sought to save Nietzsche's philosophical legacy from the editing of his unscrupulous sister Elizabeth and the propagandizing of the brutish Third Reich, Detwiler seeks to remind us that the man who lionized the likes of Caesar, Cesare Borgia, and Napoleon and alluded to supermen, blond beasts, master races, and breeding experiments is simply *not* a liberal. Indeed, “Nietzsche's artistic vision carries with it a willingness to aestheticize politics in ways that suggest distinct affinities with fascism” (113). See Emma Goldman, *Living My Life* (Mineola, NY: Courier Dover Publications, 1970); Michel Foucault, “Nietzsche, Genealogy, History,” in *The Foucault Reader*, ed. Paul Rabinow (New York: Pantheon Books, 1984); Jacques Derrida, *Spurs: Nietzsche's Styles* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978); Mark Warren, *Nietzsche and Political Thought* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1991).

²⁷ Warren, *Nietzsche and Political Thought*, 13.

and his treatment of it in the second *Untimely Meditation* agrees that while he remained a professor of philology at the University of Basel, Nietzsche regarded *history* as the central problem of modern philosophy. That is, his philosophy begins with the realization that modern man is conscious of his own historicity; he defines himself as a historical product that can seek self-knowledge only on the basis of historical criticism.²⁸ This historical sensibility, which the German poet and essayist Friedrich Schlegel dubbed *Historism* as early as 1797 to refer “a kind of philosophy” that “places its main emphasis on history,”²⁹ Nietzsche regarded as emblematic of philosophy in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Since then the terms *Historism* and historicism (its English equivalent) have been used in confusing, sometimes diametrically opposed ways to refer to the same basic underlying commitment to historical understanding. The historicism that Nietzsche criticizes in the second *Untimely Meditation* is a conflation of many senses of the term, best summarized perhaps as “a congeries of attitudes based on the assumption that the best way to understand a thing is to explain it historically and the recognition that everything human is subject to change.”³⁰

²⁸ Catherine Zuckert, “Nature, History, and the Self: Fr. Nietzsche’s *Untimely Considerations*,” *Nietzsche-Studien* 5 (1976): 55-56.

²⁹ Georg G. Iggers, “Historicism,” in *Dictionary of the History of Ideas: Studies of Selected Pivotal Ideas*, ed. Philip P. Wiener, vol. 2, *Despotism to Law, Common* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1973), 456.

³⁰ Harry Ritter, *Dictionary of Concepts in History* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1986), 186. For a fine exposition of the ways in which the word historicism has been variously used—and is still being used—see Maurice Mandelbaum, *History, Man, and Reason: A Study in Nineteenth Century Thought* (Baltimore, Johns Hopkins University Press, 1971).

Broadly conceived, the scholarly literature on the second of the polemical essays that form the *Untimely Meditations* can be divided into two categories.³¹ The first category consists of works by commentators who characterize Nietzsche's early undertaking as a timeless consideration of the cultural value of history—one that offers definite prescriptions for placing history in the service of human excellence; as such Nietzsche is to be regarded as a critic of historicism rather than its advocate. These scholars argue that the aim of Nietzsche's histories is not to expose the problematic foundations of both morality and knowledge but to discover and relay enduring knowledge about human nature and the rank order of forms of human life. They perceive no radical intellectual shifts in Nietzsche's thought after the period of the *Untimely Meditations* (at least insofar as the problem of history is concerned), preferring to focus less on his epistemological doctrines than on his experiments in cultural criticism.

For example, Peter Berkowitz contends in his article "Nietzsche's Ethics of History" that, along with Nietzsche's three other historically oriented studies—*The Birth of Tragedy* (1872), *On the Genealogy of Morals* (1886), and *The Antichrist* (1888)—*On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life* serves as a major attempt to "derive lessons about art, morality, religion, politics, and philosophy from the study of ancient [Greek] history," thus reflecting the "remarkable unity of his thought."³² So far from implying the "artificiality and transitoriness of moral and political standards," Nietzsche's speculative histories take the

³¹ For Nietzsche's own assessment of the tenor of these early essays, see Friedrich Nietzsche, *Ecce Homo*, in *On the Genealogy of Morals and Ecce Homo*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage Books, 1989), "The Untimely Ones," 276: "The four Untimely Ones are certainly warlike. They prove that I was no Jack the Dreamer, that I take pleasure in fencing—perhaps also that I am dangerously quick at the draw."

³² Peter Berkowitz, "Nietzsche's Ethics of History," *Review of Politics* 56, no. 1 (Winter 1994), 8. Reprinted in *Nietzsche: The Ethics of an Immoralist* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995).

possibility of objective historical knowledge, especially knowledge about morality, for granted.³³ What the genuine historian must concern himself with is the *value* of historical knowledge, its *moral* significance for the lives of individual human beings and the health of a culture. Echoing the perception of doctrinal unity between the *Untimely Meditations* and Nietzsche's later writings, Werner Dannhauser asserts in his essay "Friedrich Nietzsche" that the German philosopher

never repudiated but only deepened the view of his time as sick and critical, a view which is to be found in the writings of his first stage of development; and the problems he raised at this stage are problems with which he never ceased to wrestle.³⁴

Emphasizing the timeless nature of Nietzsche's historical typology, Catherine Zuckert and Laurence Lampert dedicate considerable portions of their analyses of the second *Untimely Meditation* to elaborating upon the so called three pure species of history: monumental, antiquarian, and critical.³⁵ These scholars recognize that each of these approaches to history proves advantageous to life in its own way—the monumental, by highlighting mankind's greatest achievements and providing man with suitable models for emulation; the antiquarian, by inspiring pride in his origins and cultivating an attitude of reverence for the past of his people; and the critical, by equipping him with the tools to critically reassess the present and negate the past when necessary. Certainly no section of *On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life* has garnered more scholarly attention than the one that contains these three famous categories. Unfortunately, however, very little has

³³ Berkowitz, "Nietzsche's Ethics of History," 8-9.

³⁴ Werner J. Dannhauser, "Friedrich Nietzsche," in *History of Political Philosophy*, 3d ed, eds. Leo Strauss and Joseph Cropsey (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), 829.

³⁵ Laurence Lampert, *Nietzsche and Modern Times* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993), 281-298.

been articulated in terms that amount to more than paraphrase (what Brian Leiter refers to as the “bane of the Nietzsche literature”).³⁶ Nor, surprisingly, has anyone attempted to speculate about what written history might look like were a historian willing to practice his craft in the vein prescribed by Nietzsche’s historiography.

The second category of scholarly literature on Nietzsche’s meditation on history, by contrast, comprises works by commentators who view Nietzsche’s early philosophical efforts, including *The Birth of Tragedy* and the *Untimely Meditations*, as transitional, albeit important, texts in his corpus, but not representative of Nietzsche’s final view of the value of historical research. They argue that beginning with the writing of *Human, All Too Human* (1878), Nietzsche changed his views on history to include a genealogical approach to moral inquiry, one that scarcely admits of absolutes with regard to knowledge or morality. They more readily acknowledge intellectual shifts in what has been characterized as Nietzsche’s early, middle, and late periods, and are thus more likely to face the contradictions and confusions inherent in the total of Nietzsche’s philosophy.

For example, in “Nietzsche’s View of the Value of Historical Studies and Methods” Thomas H. Brobjer scours Nietzsche’s writings after the second *Untimely Meditation* for evidence that would suggest an ongoing confrontation with the problem of historical knowledge identified in that early text. Instead, he finds an explicit rejection of the earlier writings, encapsulated in a note written in 1877:

³⁶ Brian Leiter, *Nietzsche on Morality* (New York: Routledge, 2002), xiii.

I want expressly to inform the readers of my earlier writings [i.e., *The Birth of Tragedy* and the *Untimely Meditations*] that I have abandoned the metaphysical-artistic views that fundamentally govern them: they are pleasant but untenable. He who speaks publicly is usually quickly forced to publicly retract his statements.³⁷

Regarding the second *Untimely Meditation* in particular, Nietzsche wrote little about it after 1874. The few explicit references to it are critical and dismissive, as is his 1883 remark that “Behind my *first period* grins the face of *Jesuitism*: I mean the deliberate holding on to illusion and the forcible annexation of illusion as the *foundation of culture*.”³⁸ To be sure, Nietzsche regarded the early essays as necessary occasions for learning. But in 1885, faced with the decision to write prefaces for his works in preparation for possible new editions, he declined the opportunity to revisit any of the *Untimely Meditations*. If Nietzsche himself had such serious reservations about the intellectual content of his work, it would seem to be a serious mistake to embark upon a study of Nietzsche’s history essay on the assumption that it represents his final, authoritative views on the subject.

Some of the best insights into the second *Untimely Meditation* have been gained by attempting to uncover Nietzsche’s impetus for writing the essay in the first place. Christian J. Emden’s “Toward a Critical Historicism: History and Politics in Nietzsche’s Second ‘Untimely Meditation’” serves as the best recent piece of scholarship on the essay inasmuch as it succeeds in linking the crisis of historical culture Nietzsche describes with the political culture of the new German nation-state after the Franco-Prussian War. So far from being a timeless, abstract meditation on the value of history for life, Nietzsche’s essay

³⁷ Quoted in Thomas J. Brober, “Nietzsche’s View of the Value of Historical Studies and Methods,” *Journal of the History of Ideas* 65, no. 2 (April 2004): 304.

³⁸ Quoted in Brober, “Nietzsche’s View of the Value of Historical Studies and Methods,” 307.

reacts to rather specific developments within his contemporary intellectual context; the establishment of specific historical foundation myths for a new German nation state, exemplified by the public monuments and commemorations of the 1870s, play a crucial role in this context as does the effect of such foundation myths of the political imagination of historical scholarship.³⁹

In assessing the coherence of Nietzsche's *argument*, however, Emden finds (as did nearly all of Nietzsche's contemporaries) that it is not wholly convincing, primarily because it is so abstract and devoid of concrete examples. For instance, what does Nietzsche mean when he says that the excessive study of history enfeebles one's instinct for creation? Why should modern man believe that he is an epigone? Is our own age plagued by a dangerous mood of irony and cynicism?

Curiously, relatively few English language scholarly articles and book chapters on Nietzsche's second *Untimely Meditation* remark upon the sections of Nietzsche's essay that constitute a far more elaborate explanation of the five respects in which a hypertrophy of the historical sense proves disadvantageous for life. If the three categories of history—monumental, antiquarian, and critical—embody Nietzsche's prescription for a cure to the sickness that plagued his age (and, presumably, or own), he apparently thought the record of the illness's diagnosis more immediately important, at least insofar as the organization and weight of his text can serve as a reliable guide. (Of the essay's eleven sections, including the foreword, six of the eleven are dedicated to a topic almost universally ignored in the scholarly literature). In any case, Nietzsche's reasons for the inclusion of these sections sufficiently undermine Walter Kaufmann's assessment that such a "lengthy development" is "altogether of subordinate importance."⁴⁰

³⁹ Christian J. Emden, "Toward a Critical Historicism: History and Politics in Nietzsche's Second 'Untimely Meditation'," *Modern Intellectual History* 3, no. 1 (2006): 2.

⁴⁰ Kaufmann, *Nietzsche*, 144.

Despite the fact that the second *Untimely Meditation* is part of Nietzsche's juvenilia, its insights ought not be discounted solely on the basis of their author's youthful exuberance. In doing so, scholars have fallen prey to some of the same academic pitfalls Nietzsche describes in his essay: attempting to understand the man and his thought in relation to a historical period, or in terms of his intellectual development, rather than simply on its own terms. Because large portions of the essay have been heretofore ignored, I want to study these sections carefully to determine whether Nietzsche's explanation of the consequences of historicism for nineteenth century German culture can help us understand better the cultural and political uses to which history is best put. In particular, I aim to recover the critical aspects of Nietzsche's thought that will allow us to evaluate the consequences of historical education for culture, academics, and, indeed, the practice of philosophy.

However, in order to understand Nietzsche's enumeration and explanation of the consequences of historicism, the nature of the problem as he sees it must be made clear. In the next chapter I will begin to outline in broad strokes the problem Nietzsche identifies precisely where he himself starts, through an analysis of the Foreword of *On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life*.

CHAPTER 3

THE INVOCATION OF GOETHE AGAINST THE CHANGING DIRECTION OF HISTORICAL RESEARCH

The special business of philosophy in the present... *The mania for history.*⁴¹

*The falseness of a judgment is for us not necessarily an objection to a judgment; in this respect our new language may sound strangest. The question is to what extent it is life-promoting, life preserving, species-preserving, perhaps even species-cultivating.*⁴²

It is clear from the numerous sketches, fragments, false starts, epigrams, outlines, and plans that abound in Nietzsche's notebooks and letters that he was, above all, a man of projects.⁴³ Although his philosophical output was prolific (for twenty years he published almost one book per year before his creative life abruptly ended), the existence of hundreds of pages of notes attest to the fact that Nietzsche perished—first intellectually, then physically—with a spate of books still within him. In some cases, Nietzsche's prefaces for planned works were worked over and polished for so long that detailed argumentation may have finally proven superfluous. Even so, because of their efficiency and perspicacity, one can easily sense what Nietzsche intended to argue. Thus while *On the Uses and*

⁴¹ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Philosopher as Cultural Physician*, in *Philosophy and Truth: Selections from Nietzsche's Notebooks of the Early 1870's*, ed. and trans. Daniel Breazeale (Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press International, 1993), 171, 73.

⁴² Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil: Prelude to a Philosophy of the Future*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage Books, 1989), 4, 11.

⁴³ Michael W. Grenke, ed., *Friedrich Nietzsche: Prefaces to Unwritten Works* (South Bend: St. Augustine's Press, 2005), 3-4.

Disadvantages of History for Life is the second of the four *Untimely Meditations* he eventually completed and published (he originally planned to write as many as thirteen), its foreword contains the whole of the essay's argument. In it, he reveals his concern that while history can promote, preserve, and moderate genuine culture, it can also impede and destroy it. In questioning the worth of the "mighty historical movement" of which his age is so manifestly proud, Nietzsche labors as a physician of culture, as the philosopher who must determine the value of knowledge and the level to which this new science of history ought to be allowed to develop.⁴⁴ Nietzsche's lamentations over the decadent state of German historical culture thus begin with an explicit identification of the problem, and in doing so he enlists the help of a man of letters, a man for whom he has almost unqualified praise.

Nietzsche begins his consideration of the value of history with a quotation from one of German culture's greatest luminaries, the poet Johann Wolfgang Von Goethe: "In any case, I hate everything that merely instructs me without augmenting or directly invigorating my activity."⁴⁵ Goethe takes it for granted that a direct relationship should exist between knowledge and life *and* that a standard exists by which people ought to judge the worthiness of particular teachings. In admitting his disdain for knowledge that has no apparent effects on his life, he expresses implicitly a preference for instruction that, when properly assimilated into his consciousness, results in either the commencement of new action or the enlivening of energetic activity already in progress. Thus Goethe himself teaches that knowledge has a purpose: to serve life. People ought to discriminate—on the basis of its usefulness for life—against knowledge that "merely instructs" (and is therefore best

⁴⁴ Nietzsche, *On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life*, Foreword, 59.

⁴⁵ Nietzsche, *On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life*, Foreword, 59.

ignored—if indeed it is possible simply to ignore what one has seen and learned) in favor of knowledge that “invigorates” one’s life (and is therefore worthy of acquisition).

While Goethe condemns knowledge that “merely instructs” because it is practically useless, he does not disallow the possibility that such knowledge is simply innocuous. If contemptible, knowledge that fails to invigorate—useless knowledge—need not be regarded as pernicious. Nietzsche, however, denies that knowledge can be at the same time useless and without detrimental consequences for human life. He admits that history, understood as both the knowledge gained from the study of the past and the recognition of one’s own historicity, is still needed. But insofar as the “superfluous is the enemy of the necessary,” knowledge of the past valued for its own sake can become an unfortunate obstacle to living well in the present.⁴⁶ The sentiment is roughly the same as that of the old Chinese proverb, “He who swims not against the current swims backwards.” The study of history, in other words, “can be valued to such a degree that life becomes stunted and degenerate.”⁴⁷ Some historical knowledge, while true, simply cannot be borne by a man, a people, or a culture if it wishes to remain healthy.⁴⁸ By Nietzsche’s analysis, the choice with which man is faced is

⁴⁶ Nietzsche, *On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life*, Foreword, 59.

⁴⁷ Nietzsche, *On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life*, Foreword, 59.

⁴⁸ Nietzsche’s omnibus critique of the German historical sense alternates at various points between different “levels of analysis,” to use the language of contemporary social-scientific methodology. He illustrates not only the psychological consequences of history for individual men, but also the political consequences for peoples, the artistic consequences for cultures, and the sum of their “interaction effects.” Regardless of the manner in which an excess of historical knowledge manifests itself, Nietzsche insists that his proposed philosophical standard of health is equally applicable to individuals, men, peoples, nations, cultures, and ages. See 1.3, 62; 1.4, 62; 1.4, 63; 1.12, 67; and 4.1, 77.

tragic: man can either know the truth and perish or dwell in error and live.⁴⁹ Or, as he poses the alternatives in the concluding section of his essay, either life is to “dominate knowledge and science,” or knowledge is to dominate, indeed, annihilate life. For Nietzsche there can be no doubt as to which of the two forces is higher.⁵⁰ Because “knowledge presupposes life and thus has in the preservation of life the same interest any creature has in its own continued existence,” man must recognize life as the dominating force.⁵¹ The indiscriminate knowledge drive is in effect the will to death; man should serve history only to the extent that it serves life.

Just as historians ought not study the past for its own sake, Nietzsche warns that history ought neither serve mere survival nor perpetuate “the self-seeking life and the base and cowardly action.”⁵² Unlike Thomas Hobbes, for whom the fear of violent death is the most powerful passion and the liberty for self-preservation is a right of nature, Nietzsche does not defend philosophically the conservation of life in the basest, biological sense.⁵³

⁴⁹ Here I preserve Nietzsche’s use of gendered term ‘man’ because it is what he uses throughout the second *Untimely Meditation*. When making claims about human nature, Nietzsche typically employs the word ‘man’ in the traditional philosophical sense to refer to all human beings—mankind—men and women alike. However, it is important to note that his philosophy often reflects at least some of the male chauvinism of his times—most notably that of his mentor, Arthur Schopenhauer. For example, Nietzsche never admits of the possibility that one of his ‘genuine’ historians might happen to be an especially gifted woman. This is in keeping with many of the notoriously misogynistic and sarcastic remarks he made regarding women. See, for example, *Beyond Good and Evil*, 238, 167: “A man...must always think about women as *Oriental*s do: he must conceive of woman as a possession, as property that can be locked, as something predestined for service and achieving her perfection in that.”

⁵⁰ Nietzsche, *On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life*, 10.10, 121.

⁵¹ Nietzsche, *On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life*, Foreword, 10.10, 121.

⁵² Nietzsche, *On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life*, Foreword, 59.

⁵³ Thomas Hobbes, *The Citizen: Philosophical Rudiments Concerning Government and Society*, in *Man and Citizen*, ed. Bernard Gert (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1991), 1.7, 115;

Instead, he implores historians to practice their craft as artists commissioned to advance the “higher life,” to promote “true culture,” and to secure the “unity of German spirit and life.”⁵⁴ Although these locutions reveal little about the constitution of the future culture Nietzsche hopes to inaugurate, each betrays an element of the critique of the present culture he finds so lacking. His fellow Germans lead lives that are regrettably *low*; they habituate themselves to a culture that is detrimentally *false*; and they refuse allegiance to a nation whose spirit is *divided*. Nietzsche is not so much worried, then, about the extinction of man as a species as he is concerned for the fate of man subject to cultural decline. A strong European culture is needed to rule all of mankind. When he recommends that history serve life, he has in mind a particular form of life morally superior to, and higher with respect to virtue than the form of life experienced by his contemporaries. Through his enumeration of the vices of nineteenth century German historical culture, Nietzsche contributes to our understanding of the virtues of genuine culture.

Because he disparages German historians as “idler[s] in the garden of knowledge”⁵⁵ and derides their work as a neurotic fixation indifferent to the ends and requirements of true

Hobbes, *Leviathan, with selected variants from the Latin edition of 1668* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1994) XIV.1, 79.

⁵⁴ Nietzsche, *On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life*, 3.3, 75; 4.3, 80; Foreword, 59; 4.6, 82.

⁵⁵ Nietzsche, *On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life*, Foreword, 59. Nietzsche intends that his readers recall the remarks made by Doctor Pangloss in the final chapter of Francois Marie Arouet deVoltaire’s *Candide*. Responding to Candide’s suggestion that he, Cunégode, Martin, and the rest would do well to forego all further attempts at philosophical investigation and simply cultivate their garden, Pangloss comments, “You’re right, for when man was placed in the garden of Eden, he was placed there *ut operaretur eum*—that he might work—which proves that man was not born to rest [or idle].” Even at the end of a harrowing adventure whose characters suffer the evils of exile, disease, rape, enslavement, murder, and cannibalism, Pangloss maintains that all of it was necessary for the best end, and that, through the sufficient exercise of reason and the acceptance of the logic of cause and effect, one must still recognize this as “the best of all possible worlds.” He opts to contemplate rather than toil. In much the same fashion that Voltaire satirizes the philosophical

culture, Nietzsche rightly anticipates harsh retaliation from the community of scholars he targets. What little effort he makes to diminish the sting of his invective he offers in the spirit of Plato's Socrates. Nietzsche appeals to sympathy when he claims that he makes his criticisms of German culture public first and foremost to release himself from the inner torment they cause him; he gestures at humility when he suggests that his arguments will provoke nothing more than an occasion for others to praise the German historical movement he criticizes. And, in a doubly ironic closing remark, he acknowledges that the response from his critics will provide him with something he values more than respectability: chiefly, the opportunity to learn the truth about the character of his time.⁵⁶ Not only does he admit the possibility of ignorance when his every argument attests to the greater likelihood that he knows the truth, he justifies his work on the ground that it is likely to yield a gain in

system of Optimism promulgated by Gottfried Wilhelm Leibnitz, Nietzsche criticizes the philosophy of History initiated by Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel. Hegel and his followers are hardly any less naïve and dogmatic than Leibnitz and his disciples in that while the latter teach that an omniscient, omnipotent, and benevolent God created the best possible world, the former proclaim that their age is "the necessary result of [the] world-process," and that every event that happens is a "victory of the logical or the 'idea'." Nietzsche denies that history is either the byproduct of Providence or the work of immanent reason. The desire of both camps to accommodate themselves to the brute facts of existence results in what he calls the "Idolatry of the factual," a stance towards the world that does not promote life. Germany's historians resemble Doctor Pangloss inasmuch as they attempt to uncover the facts of the past merely to account for the reality of the present. Like Pangloss, they refuse to either admit the bounds of their knowledge or concede the necessity of restraint. And finally, what knowledge they manage to excavate leads man toward the life of ceaseless contemplation as opposed to the life of inspired action. See Voltaire, *Candide*, in *Candide and Other Stories*, trans. Roger Pearson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), 99.

⁵⁶ Nietzsche, *On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life*, Foreword, 59-60. Here Nietzsche echoes the Socrates of Plato's *Gorgias*, who places himself among the few who take greater pleasure in being refuted when in error than in refuting others who are mistaken: "For I consider it a greater good, to the extent that it is a greater good to be released one-self from the greatest evil than to release another. For I think that nothing is so great an evil for a human being as false opinion about the things that our argument now happens to be about." See Plato, *Gorgias*, trans. James H. Nichols Jr. (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1998), 458a-b, 40.

knowledge, if only for himself. Nietzsche feigns a scholarly interest in knowledge typical of German intellectuals and, in doing so, mocks the disinterested historians he imitates.

The academic historians to whom Nietzsche refers understood themselves to be part of a larger tradition of German historiography that began as early as the eighteenth century and lasted well into the early twentieth century. Part of this discourse or philosophy that is now referred to simply as historicism included philosophers such as Johann Gottfried von Herder, G. W. F. Hegel, Auguste Comte, Karl Marx, and Herbert Spencer. Although their philosophical systems were in many respects mutually incompatible, these thinkers were united by belief in a “transcendent stream of history,” the idea that history develops toward a particular end according to predetermined laws.⁵⁷ Hegelians, for example, postulated human freedom as the end for their teleological conception of history; Marxists similarly understood the classless society as the end of an unyielding chain of historical development. Insofar as Nietzsche is concerned with conceptions of history that only serve to legitimate the present, that encourage us to be complacent with the culture we are born into or the politics to which we are accustomed, this is the historicism (*Historizismus*) that he takes umbrage with in the second *Untimely Meditation*.

However, there is a second understanding of historicism (*Historismus*) that Nietzsche also criticizes throughout the essay. Nietzsche conflates the two understandings by describing them variously as the “historical sense,” but context makes clear which conception he is undermining at any given time. Here historicism designates a specific conception of the past usually associated with such historians as Leopold von Ranke and Wilhelm von Humboldt. These thinkers emphasized historical development as well, but in a

⁵⁷ Ritter, *Dictionary of Concepts in History*, 186.

different way. Rather than trying to judge historical events according to how well they fit with certain norms and values postulated *a priori* by philosophers of history, these historians emphasized the individuality of every historical epoch and every historical event. They argued that historical phenomena—whether individual people or cultural institutions such as states and religions—developed according to their own unique principles and could not be understood in terms of universal law. According to Ranke in particular, then, the task of the historian is simply to establish empirically, through the careful study of primary sources, ‘how [the past] actually was’ (*wie es eigentlich gewesen*). So far from making normative judgments about the events of the past, the historian’s true task is to extinguish his own personality from his work as far as possible.

Nietzsche worried, however, that the cultivation of the noble dream of so-called objective history encouraged a kind of cultural and ethical relativism that proved detrimental to society. Here again, his decision to invoke Goethe at the beginning of an essay calling for the revival of German culture proves instructive. Although Nietzsche manifests a reverence for Goethe rivaled only by his respect for his other (later rejected) philosophical hero, Arthur Schopenhauer, he considers the former a historical curiosity that bears particular relevance to the present topic.⁵⁸ He remarks in one of his latter works that

⁵⁸ Including the quotation that forms the composition’s introductory lines, Nietzsche cites Goethe on no less than a dozen occasions, usually to express agreement with, or to expound upon his judgments on such subjects as poetry and history and individuals including Isaac Newton and William Shakespeare. See Nietzsche, *On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life*, 1.1, 59; 1.3, 60; 1.5, 64; 2.2, 67; 3.1, 73; 5.4, 85; 5.4, 86; 6.5, 92; 7.3, 99; 8.1, 100; 8.6, 106; and 9.6, 111.

in a certain sense the nineteenth century *also* strove for all that which Goethe as a person had striven for: universality in understanding and in welcoming, letting everything come close to oneself, an audacious realism, a reverence for everything actual. How is it that the over-all result is no Goethe, but chaos, a nihilistic sigh, an utter bewilderment, an instinct of weariness...?⁵⁹

Goethe indulged his drive to knowledge, embracing every field of human endeavor including science, politics, literature, and philosophy. His studies culminated in the self-creation of one of the paramount figures of world literature, and his dramatic poem *Faust* betrays in both its form and its content a mastery of the Western philosophic and literary tradition. Goethe, in short, exemplified the kind of “strong personality” Nietzsche explains is necessary in order to bear the weight of history.⁶⁰ He constitutes the extraordinary case for whom the entire spectacle of history is exhausted solely in the service of life. In the service of history, unfortunately, nineteenth century German culture has itself become exhausted. Nietzsche invokes Goethe not only to remind his contemporaries of the heights of individual artistic and intellectual achievement possible when a man of strong personality draws upon the whole of human accomplishment, but also to juxtapose his example to the depths of cultural decadence certain when men of weak personality suffer the burden of historical knowledge.

The failure of Nietzsche’s contemporaries to regard their culture’s inundation of historical information as burdensome prompts his radical consideration of the meaning of history for man and its relation to human life. Confronting an audience composed largely of academics that proclaim erudition and knowledge of the highest ideals, Nietzsche questions whether history contributes to the greater end of life and, indeed, happiness. His philosophical probing betrays a complex set of ontological and anthropological views

⁵⁹ Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols*, in *The Portable Nietzsche*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Penguin Books, 1982), 50, 555.

⁶⁰ Nietzsche, *On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life*, Foreword, 5.4, 86.

concerning the relationship between history and the self, memory and morality, time and politics. In this section of the essay, Nietzsche attempts to reconcile the inescapable historicity of human existence with the need humans feel to affirm their creative capacities, thereby overcoming both themselves and their pasts. It is to this highly original and illuminating discussion that we now turn our focus.

CHAPTER 4

THE HISTORICAL, UNHISTORICAL, AND SUPRAHISTORICAL SENSES

The valuation 'I believe that this and that is so' as the essence of 'truth.' In valuations are expressed conditions of preservation and growth. All our organs of knowledge and our senses are developed only with regard to conditions of preservation and growth. Trust in reason and its categories, in dialectic, therefore the valuation of logic, proves only their usefulness for life, proved by experience—not that something is true.

That a great deal of belief must be present; that judgments may be ventured; that doubt concerning all essential values is lacking—that is the precondition of every living thing and its life. Therefore, what is needed is that something must be held to be true—not that something is true.⁶¹

Not the power to remember, but its very opposite, the power to forget, is a necessary condition for our existence.

Sholem Asch

As has been mentioned, most commentators on the second *Untimely Meditation* limit their discussion of the work to Nietzsche's influential distinction between the monumental, antiquarian, and critical approaches to historical study. In doing so, however, they ignore the extent to which his understanding of the substantive content of history depends upon having understood correctly man's everyday experience of the world and his relationship to history. Nietzsche's foray into historiography is therefore preceded by an exercise in psychology. What it reveals is an ultimately antagonistic relationship between man and history—one that has profound consequences for the continued adherence to moral standards and the survival of culture.

⁶¹ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, trans. Walter Kaufmann and R. J. Hollingdale (New York: Vintage Books, 1968), 507, 276.

In order to establish history as a principal cause of man's distress, Nietzsche asks his readers to consider the condition of animals.⁶² The cows of the herd feed, sleep, digest, and frolic every day from dawn to dusk, aware of no difference between today and yesterday. They suffer neither sadness nor boredom because they are enthralled by every individual moment's pleasure or pain. As animals they cannot help but forget; thus they live continually in the present, remembering nothing about the past and expecting nothing from the future. Man, by contrast, cannot help but remember and "clings relentlessly to the past," no matter how earnestly he attempts to forget it.⁶³ The oppressive weight of the past encumbers his every action, and the constant anticipation of the future hinders his enjoyment of the present. An unfortunate awareness of time makes possible man's unique experience of struggle, suffering, and satiety, all of which make him long for the "blissful blindness" of both the animal that knows only the present and the child who has no past to deny.⁶⁴

Much as Aristotle understands man to be the only animal that possesses "reasoned speech," Nietzsche argues that man's faculty of memory distinguishes him from the animals insofar as it determines his capacity for recollection and imagination. Animals have no memory of the past; thus they live *unhistorically*.⁶⁵ That is, they live only with an awareness for present immediacy, ignorant of the temporal categories of past and future. Man, on the other hand, remembers the past and cannot evade it; thus he lives *historically*. That is, he gives meaning to his experience with an awareness of the passage of time, attentive to both

⁶² Nietzsche, *On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life*, 1.1, 60.

⁶³ Nietzsche, *On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life*, 1.2, 61.

⁶⁴ Nietzsche, *On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life*, 1.2, 61.

⁶⁵ Aristotle, *The Politics*, trans. Peter L. Phillips Simpson (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997), I.2.1253a7, 11.

the past and the future. The historical sense simultaneously bolsters man's pride in his place above the rest of the animals and makes him envious of their "untroubled stupor."⁶⁶ For even if the happiness that animals enjoy is "the smallest happiness," because it is experienced as one long uninterrupted moment, man cannot hope to share in a happiness as great.⁶⁷ However—and this is Nietzsche's central point—insofar as he experiences any happiness at all, he does so only while he is able, if only for a brief moment, to forget, "to feel *unhistorically* during its duration."⁶⁸

Nietzsche understands the requisite for happiness to be the ability to settle "on the threshold of the moment and forget all the past."⁶⁹ A man who could forget nothing would be so overwhelmed by the deluge of historical information that he could not possibly derive any meaning or order from the chaotic totality of his experience. Deprived of any "fixed points by which to take his bearings," he would "no longer believe in his own being, would no longer believe in himself, . . . and would lose himself in the stream of becoming."⁷⁰ A man without the power to forget would be entirely devoid of the inclination to act and would thus be completely incapacitated for life. Nietzsche, therefore, argues that man's happiness depends on his ontological relationship to, and experience of the world. A man who at all times perceives the world as constant flux and believes that all things change (or come into being) without any inherent purpose or direction can never be truly happy, for if nothing

⁶⁶ Berkowitz, *Nietzsche: The Ethics of an Immoralist*, 30.

⁶⁷ Nietzsche, *On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life*, 1.3, 62.

⁶⁸ Nietzsche, *On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life*, 1.3, 62.

⁶⁹ Nietzsche, *On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life*, 1.3, 62.

⁷⁰ Dannhauser, "Friedrich Nietzsche," in *History of Political Philosophy*, 830; Nietzsche, *On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life*, 1.3, 62.

endures then he will find nothing of any particular value of importance. Indeed, if he denies the existence of any stable entities, he will, “like a true pupil of Heraclitus, . . . hardly dare to raise a finger.”⁷¹ Man acts only when he thinks his actions meaningful—when his experience of the world leads him to believe that some things simply *are*, perfectly and unchangeably. When man forgets utterly, he loses himself in the moment, and its duration closely approximates the experience of Being that grants man a chance at happiness.

Nietzsche considers the experience of the unhistorical so vital to human life that he compares it to an enveloping “atmosphere within which alone life can germinate and with the destruction of which it must vanish.”⁷² The unhistorical does not necessarily incline man to justice, for giving each man his due usually entails nuanced historical considerations inimical to immediate action. However, in its absence the painter would never strive to imitate nature’s beauty; the army general would never risk life and limb; and the people would never attain their freedom.⁷³ Not only would man never achieve happiness for himself, he would never work to secure happiness for others.⁷⁴ Because the unhistorical is the region in which the greatest, and indeed all noteworthy deeds of mankind have been performed, the ever-

⁷¹ Nietzsche, *On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life*, 1.3, 62. Here Nietzsche alludes to Cratylus, a sophist who apparently adopted his philosophical predecessor’s elimination of Being from the picture of Milesian philosophy: “And further, it was because of seeing all nature around us in motion, while about what is changing nothing is true, or at least does not admit of being true about what is wholly changing in every way. For out of this conception the most extreme opinion of those mentioned burst into bloom, that of the people who announce that they are Heracliteans, and of the sort that Cratylus held, who at last believed that it was necessary to say nothing but only moved his finger, and who censured Heraclitus for saying that it is not possible to step into the same river twice, since *he* believed it is not possible even to step into it once.” See Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, trans. Joe Sachs (Santa Fe: Green Lion Press, 1999), IV.5.1010a.12, 69.

⁷² Nietzsche, *On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life*, 1.5, 63-64.

⁷³ Nietzsche, *On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life*, 1.5, 64.

⁷⁴ Nietzsche, *On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life*, 1.3, 62.

increasing encroachment of the historical upon the unhistorical puts cultures at risk of atrophy.

Still, inasmuch as the past can be employed in the betterment of the present and the advancement of true culture, man must somehow determine the “boundary at which the past has to be forgotten” before the wealth of historical knowledge becomes a liability.⁷⁵ Nietzsche identifies this boundary line dividing the historical from the unhistorical as a living thing’s “horizon.”⁷⁶ A man draws a horizon around himself to set limits to his world, to determine what must be included and excluded from his consciousness if he is to remain healthy, vigorous, and productive. The “protective and veiling cloud” of the unhistorical shrouds in an unilluminable darkness “his fundamental set of assumptions about all things” and “what he considers the absolute truth which he cannot question.”⁷⁷ Through his experience of the unhistorical man finds meaning in his existence, gives human suffering a purpose, and brings order to the senseless onslaught of experience. Within the confines of an unhistorical horizon, man can safely cultivate his historical sense, bringing to light the knowledge of the traditions, laws, religions, and philosophies of both foreign and past cultures for the purposes of self-development and the elevation of present culture. The historical is equally necessary to the good health of a man because it allows him to recover from his wounds, redeem his losses, and refashion damaged cultural molds.⁷⁸ If injustice or

⁷⁵ Nietzsche, *On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life*, 1.4, 62.

⁷⁶ Nietzsche, *On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life*, 1.4, 63.

⁷⁷ Nietzsche, *On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life*, 7.3, 97; Dannhauser, “Friedrich Nietzsche,” 831.

⁷⁸ Nietzsche, *On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life*, 1.4, 62.

disaster should give him pause to reconsider his way of life, knowledge of the past and the foreign allows him to discard what has been outlived for the sake of future health.

The value of the historical and the unhistorical vantage points having been established, Nietzsche concludes the second section of his essay with a consideration of the worth of the *supra-historical* point of view for health and life. In language that anticipates his doctrine of the eternal recurrence,⁷⁹ Nietzsche speculates that if a person were to ask his friends whether they would be tempted by the opportunity to “relive the past ten or twenty years,” all of his acquaintances surely would answer “No”—albeit for decidedly different reasons.⁸⁰ Some would decline the offer in the hopes that in the next twenty years they could achieve a happiness never realized during the previous two decades. Nietzsche identifies this lot as historical men; they would answer “No” because of their underlying faith in the future and their characteristic belief that the meaning of human life and existence “will come more and more to light in the course of its *process*.”⁸¹ Inasmuch as they believe in an order to things that constantly eludes them and look to the past only to desire the future more acutely, they “in fact think and act unhistorically,” despite their apparent preoccupation with

⁷⁹ Interpretations of the doctrine of the eternal recurrence vary according to the interpreter’s willingness to suspend disbelief with regard to the doctrine’s scientific and cosmological elements, but at base it functions as a kind of psychological test, as it does in the second *Untimely Meditation*. If time itself is cyclical, and if the same combination of atoms which once adhered together for a man and his environment to come into being will eventually coalesce again in the same configuration, then man must live through the same sequence of events over and over again. A gruesome notion to contemplate given the pain, suffering, and fruitless search for meaning that characterizes so much of life, Nietzsche considers it an existential imperative to face this prospect with enthusiasm rather than despair. See Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, Translator’s Introduction, 5, 15-21; 341, 273-274.

⁸⁰ Nietzsche, *On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life*, 1.6, 65.

⁸¹ Nietzsche, *On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life*, 1.6, 65.

history.⁸² Others, however, would reject the proposition on the grounds that in the next ten years they could learn nothing that they did not already discern during the last decade. Nietzsche identifies this rare lot as supra-historical men; they would answer “No” because of their fundamental perception of the unity of the past and the present and their fundamental doubt that salvation will come through the relentless study of history. Inasmuch as they perceive an order to things that constantly presents itself to them and acknowledge the “omnipresence of imperishable types,” they achieve a supra-historical vantage point from which they observe the never-ending but repetitive stories of nations and individual men.⁸³

Because the supra-historical man transcends all horizons—recognizing horizons as *mere* horizons and illusions—Nietzsche surmises that the ceaseless repetition of human events must reduce him to satiety and eventually to nausea.⁸⁴ Insofar as this symptom of

⁸² Nietzsche, *On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life*, 1.6, 65.

⁸³ Nietzsche, *On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life*, 1.8, 66.

⁸⁴ Nietzsche, *On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life*, 1.8,66. Elsewhere, Nietzsche’s understanding of the experience characteristic of the supra-historical vantage point serves as the basis for an unorthodox interpretation of Hamlet’s infamous inaction: “In this sense the Dionysian man resembles Hamlet: both have once looked truly into the essence of things, they have *gained knowledge*, and nausea inhibits action; for their action could not change anything in the eternal nature of things; they feel it to be ridiculous or humiliating that they should be asked to set right a world that is out of joint. Knowledge kills action; action requires the veils of illusion: that is the doctrine of Hamlet, not that cheap wisdom of Jack the Dreamer who reflects too much and, as it were, from an excess of possibilities does not get around to action. Not reflection, no—true knowledge, an insight into the horrible truth, outweighs any motive for action, both in Hamlet and in the Dionysian man.

Now no comfort avails any more; longing transcends a world after death, even the gods; existence is negated along with its glittering reflection in the gods or in an immortal beyond. Conscious of the truth he has once seen, man now sees everywhere only the horror or absurdity of existence; now he understands what is symbolic in Ophelia’s fate; now he understands the wisdom of the sylvan god, Silenus: he is nauseated.”

By Nietzsche’s account, Hamlet is not an ambivalent, grief-stricken prince torn between the pagan, Stoic, and Christian heroic ideals emphasizing anger and action, self-control and inner-reflection, and patience and forgiveness, respectively. Were he simply paralyzed by his inner torments, he would be characterized rightly as suffering from an excess of the historical sense. Rather, as Paul Cantor explains, Hamlet is a “cosmopolitan prince” whose supra-historical stance allows him to realize the ultimate worthlessness of all forms of political virtue, and knowledge of this

sickness is the result of wisdom, Nietzsche, therefore, juxtaposes wisdom—the end pursuit of traditional philosophy—to life, and deems a certain measure of *unwisdom* necessary for the health of any national culture. Man, no less than peoples and cultures, needs enveloping illusions, and the historians Nietzsche criticizes do their fellow man and their nation a disservice by discrediting the comprehensive mythologies that serve as the basis for their laws, customs, and traditions. He warns that if history continues on its current trajectory and becomes a “pure, sovereign science,”⁸⁵ it puts the future health of any culture at risk, for in revealing the “delusion, the injustice, and the blind passion”⁸⁶ characteristic of any great and memorable historical event, it renders the event incapable of inspiring similar acts of courage, valor, honor, and selflessness and, indeed, all other human accomplishments possible only in the womb of the unhistorical.

Nietzsche’s analysis of man’s relation to his history and of the burgeoning historical culture of his own nineteenth century Germany evidences the profound realization of a basic conflict within the soul of man: the demand for truth versus the necessity of illusion. Nietzsche puts the problem succinctly in a set of early notes when he writes,

fact proves to be the sole inhibition to his eventual action. That he acts so lethargically upon learning the demands of his father’s ghost and stages a play to establish his uncle Claudius as his father’s murderer only evidences his knowledge that revenge is as an illusory goal in an incorrigibly unjust world. By contrast, Laertes, who sets out immediately to avenge his own father’s death, embodies the unhistorical sense; his unwavering trust in familial obligation pushes him onward. See Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, in *The Birth of Tragedy and the Case of Wagner*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage Books, 1967), 7, 60.

⁸⁵ Nietzsche, *On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life*, 1.11, 67.

⁸⁶ Nietzsche, *On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life*, 1.10, 67.

There can be neither society nor culture without untruth. The tragic conflict. Everything which is good and beautiful depends upon illusion: truth kills—it even kills itself (insofar as it realizes that error is its foundation).⁸⁷

If history is to remain in the service of life rather than truth, history itself must remain in the service of “an unhistorical power, and, thus subordinate.”⁸⁸ Only a kind of thinking that could begin to call into the question the value of history for life in the first place would be adequate to the task. Elsewhere, Nietzsche makes it clear that only *philosophical* thinking is adequate to master the knowledge drive and therefore be of any positive significance for culture,⁸⁹ because science depends on philosophy for all of its goals and methods.⁹⁰ Quoting Nietzsche again,

If we are ever to achieve a culture, unheard-of artistic powers will be needed in order to break the unlimited knowledge drive, in order to produce unity once again. Philosophy reveals its highest worth when it concentrates the unlimited knowledge drive and subdues it to unity.⁹¹

Confident that both the historical and the unhistorical senses are equally necessary for the health of a man, a people, or a culture, and that an excess of the historical hinders individual action and destroys genuine culture, Nietzsche condemns nearly all human beings to an ideal of freedom to choose ends *only* while claiming external, metaphysical validity for them. Put

⁸⁷ Nietzsche, *On Truth and Lies in a Nonmoral Sense*, in *Philosophy and Truth*, 176, 92. Elsewhere he remarks, “When one considers on the one hand, the *value* of knowledge, and on the other hand, a beautiful illusion which has exactly the same value as an item of knowledge—provided only that it is an illusion in which one believes—, then one realizes that life requires illusions, i.e. untruths which are taken to be truths. What life does require is belief in truth, but illusion is sufficient for this. That is to say, “truths” do not establish themselves by means of logical proofs, but by means of their effects: proofs of strength.” See Nietzsche, *The Philosopher*, 47, 17.

⁸⁸ Nietzsche, *On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life*, 1.12, 67.

⁸⁹ Nietzsche, *The Philosopher*, 3, 56.

⁹⁰ Nietzsche, *The Philosopher*, 28, 8.

⁹¹ Nietzsche, *The Philosopher*, 30, 9.

simply, he denies the possibility of an ironic politics. One of the foremost contemporary advocates of an ironic approach to politics, Richard Rorty has asserted that citizens of the ideal community would dedicate themselves to a “postmodernist bourgeois” form of liberalism loyal to morality while devoid of any feigned, *ex post facto* “discoveries” of supposed metaphysical underpinnings. Nietzsche, however, contends that human beings require such ultimate foundations in order to avoid slipping into existential despair over the meaninglessness of life. Isaiah Berlin provides a summary critique of this view of the nature of human striving and moral virtue when he writes,

It may be that the ideal of freedom to choose ends without claiming external validity for them, and the pluralism of values connected with this, is only the late fruit of our declining capitalist civilization: an ideal which remote ages and primitive societies have not recognized, and one which posterity will regard with curiosity, even sympathy, but little comprehension. This may be so; but no skeptical conclusions seem to me to follow. *Principles are not less sacred because their duration cannot be guaranteed.* Indeed, the very desire for guarantees that our values are eternal and secure in some objective heaven is perhaps only a craving for the certainties of childhood or the absolute values of our primitive past. ‘To realize the relative validity of one’s convictions’, said an admirable writer of our time, ‘and yet stand for them unflinchingly, is what distinguishes a civilized man from a barbarian.’ To demand more than this is perhaps a deep and incurable metaphysical need; but to allow it to determine one’s practice is a symptom of an equally deep, and more dangerous, moral and political immaturity.⁹²

Interestingly, Nietzsche and Berlin agree on the human desire to guarantee the validity of values. However, whereas Berlin takes a page from Freud’s book to ridicule the desire (i.e., the *wish*) as patently infantile, Nietzsche takes the desire seriously as the philosophical, human longing for permanence, for Being. Indeed, only insofar as a man has developed a psychological immunity to the brute indifference of the universe can he be regarded as truly healthy and mature. By contrast, nineteenth century German historians

⁹² Isaiah Berlin, “Two Concepts of Liberty,” in *The Proper Study of Mankind: An Anthology of Essays*, eds. Henry Hardy and Roger Hausheer (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1997), 242, (emphasis mine).

continue to pollute the culture with knowledge that gives people reason to question the validity of their values. Nietzsche clearly thinks their efforts pernicious, and spends much of the remainder of his essay lamenting the remarkable degree of disunity that characterized the German culture of which he was still not an influential part.

CHAPTER 5

THE CONSEQUENCES OF HISTORICAL EDUCATION FOR LIFE AND PHILOSOPHY

*Our historical education is heading for the death of all culture. It enters into battle against religions and incidentally destroys cultures.*⁹³

Arguably the most important sections of the second *Untimely Meditation* are the ones that have been heretofore largely ignored: those that contain Nietzsche's extended account of the various manifestations of historicism in virtually all aspects of German culture. In these sections he not only addresses the changes in personality and psychology of people who are overwhelmed with knowledge of history, he also explains how academic study is made worse by history having become a scientific discipline. Its effects are felt in areas as wide ranging as fashion and academic philosophy.

That Nietzsche dedicates so much of his essay to an inventory of the symptoms associated with an excess of historical knowledge evidences his desire that his obtuse contemporaries "at least recognize that [they] are suffering from [a consuming fever of history]." ⁹⁴ He intends this truth first and foremost for Germany's youth. In contrast to Plato's Socrates, who "considered it necessary that the first generation of his new society (in

⁹³ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Philosopher: Reflections on the Struggle between Art and Knowledge*, in *Philosophy and Truth: Selections from Nietzsche's Notebooks of the Early 1870's*, ed. and trans. Daniel Breazeale (Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press International, 1993), 137, 46.

⁹⁴ Nietzsche, *On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life*, Foreword, 60.

the perfect state) should be educated with the aid of a mighty *necessary lie*,”⁹⁵ Nietzsche deems it necessary for his first generation to confront a *necessary truth*: “that the German possesses no culture because his education provides no basis for one.”⁹⁶ Modern man is not educated *to* culture; rather, he is “historically educated”⁹⁷ *about* cultures. The modern university no longer produces cultured human beings; rather, it produces philistines. With no reason to believe that his culture will be the last to suffer from this educational defect, Nietzsche vividly describes the ravaging effects of historical knowledge on his own nineteenth century Germany not only for the benefit of his time, but also “for the benefit of a time to come,”⁹⁸ in the hopes that the philosophers of the future will recognize similarly the negative roles history can play and take action to moderate the historical and scientific excesses of their cultures.

The Relationship Between History and Culture

According to Nietzsche, the practice of history as a scholarly discipline upsets “the natural relationship of an age, a culture, a nation with its history.”⁹⁹ The genuine historian

⁹⁵ Nietzsche, *On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life*, 10.4, 118. What Nietzsche refers to here as a *necessary lie*, the Socrates of Plato’s *Republic* proposes, apparently with some trepidation, as a *noble lie*—“one of those lies that comes into being in case of need.” Although Nietzsche makes reference to the *Republic* to juxtapose his own necessary airing of the truth for the sake of a national culture with Socrates’ necessary inclusion of a lie for the sake of a perfect polis, he apparently shares with Socrates the belief that historical truth and human reason alone are insufficient to keep the state cohesive. See Plato, *The Republic*, trans. Allan Bloom (New York: Basic Books, 1968), 414b-415d, 93-94.

⁹⁶ Nietzsche, *On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life*, 10.4, 119.

⁹⁷ Nietzsche, *On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life*, 4.3, 79.

⁹⁸ Nietzsche, *On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life*, Foreword, 60.

⁹⁹ Nietzsche, *On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life*, 4.1, 77.

remains attentive to his culture's hunger for his historical knowledge but accommodates his published work to a culture's true needs and its inherent capacity to incorporate knowledge of the past and foreign. The historians Nietzsche criticizes observe none of these natural limitations. Their motto is "*fiat, veritas, pereat vita*"—let the truth prevail, though life perish.¹⁰⁰ Committed to truth at any price, they engage in demythologizing strategies that explain away the irrational elements of a culture's heritage without the proper respect for the actual psychological needs of man that account for their genesis and justify their continued existence.¹⁰¹ They gorge themselves with history, accumulating facts and judging them only by the degree of certainty with which they can be verified. Because of this they seek "smaller and smaller objects" to study; they proclaim, "what is *small* shall be eternal, *because it is knowable.*"¹⁰² On the basis of these barbarian biases, the concept of historian dissolves "into mere curiosity and the pretense of knowing everything."¹⁰³ They are captivated by *objects* of knowledge when they ought to be concerned with the possible *uses* of knowledge for the betterment of culture.

Nineteenth century historians succeed all too well in accommodating historical research to the demands of scientific methodology, and their findings prove no less disconcerting than those of the natural scientists having preceded them. In order to dramatize

¹⁰⁰ Nietzsche, *On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life*, 4.1, 77.

¹⁰¹ See Nietzsche, *The Philosopher*, 92, 35: "The historical knowledge drive: Its goal is to understand human development and to eliminate everything miraculous from this development. This drive deprives the drive for culture of its greatest strength. This knowing is a mere luxuriating, for contemporary culture is raised no higher by means of it."

¹⁰² Nietzsche, *The Philosopher*, 41, 13.

¹⁰³ Nietzsche, *The Philosopher*, 22, 5.

the importance of the discovery of scientific history, Nietzsche draws out implicitly the comparison with two other great intellectual shifts in human history. Early in the seventeenth century, the astronomer Galileo Galilei published an essay reporting his discovery of four moons orbiting the planet Jupiter, thus undermining the geocentric theory of the universe that had long established earth as the center on the basis of its own satellite. In the mid-nineteenth century, the biologist Charles Darwin published *On the Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection*, suggesting that man was nothing more than a highly complex organism having evolved from simpler forms through the operation of natural causes, thus undermining the notion of a great chain of being that differentiated man from the animals on the basis of their place in an eternal hierarchy. For well over two millennia man was content to believe that God had placed the Garden of Eden at the center of the universe, and that He had created man in His own image to inhabit that paradise. The natural scientists, preferring scientific liberation to theological dogma, hastened childhood's end for man, burdening him with the knowledge that he inhabited instead a cold, indifferent universe. Man, they discovered, was no absolute; the stability of his values, indeed, the existence of his very species, was not guaranteed. If the natural scientists alienate man from his world by portraying the universe as a self-contained mechanism of matter in motion, devoid of purpose, the scientific historians alienate man from his culture by making accessible every other form and way of life of the past, in abundant detail. Previously man was content to pass moral judgment and discharge his obligations within the confines of a delimited horizon formed by his cultural tradition. The historians, preferring the proliferation of knowledge to the preservation of culture, burden man with the knowledge that he inhabits an ambivalent world marked by a plurality of possible perspectives on the good and the right. Culture, he

recognizes, is *mere* horizon; the validity of his values, indeed, the worthiness of his own cultural tradition, is subject to interrogation.

Because historians do not observe Nietzsche's dictum that the demands of life ought to "reign and exercise constraint on knowledge of the past,"¹⁰⁴ they allow historical knowledge to stream in "unceasingly from inexhaustible wells."¹⁰⁵ While man attempts to open the gates of his memory wide enough to accommodate the vast expanse of knowledge to which he is now privy, he simply cannot make room for all of these "strange guests."¹⁰⁶ Although he does his best to welcome, sort out, and seat his company, he cannot prevent them from coming into conflict with one another; he suspects that he will have to subdue all of them lest he, too, perish in their struggle. In time, accustoming himself to this boisterous household "becomes a second nature, though this second nature is beyond question much weaker, much more restless, and thoroughly less sound than the first."¹⁰⁷ Nietzsche thus analogizes man's psyche to a quarrelsome household in which the alien houseguests represent various cultural traditions all vying for supremacy. While he wishes to tolerate each of them, he cannot help but recognize that cultures distinguish themselves by more than their superficial and cosmetic differences—clothing, cuisine, and table manners. Cultures are vastly disparate and incommensurable with regard to the governmental principles, citizen obligations, religious practices, artistic styles, class conscriptions, wealth distribution, race relations, and gender roles; in short, different cultures embody different assumptions about

¹⁰⁴ Nietzsche, *On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life*, 4.1, 77.

¹⁰⁵ Nietzsche, *On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life*, 4.3, 78.

¹⁰⁶ Nietzsche, *On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life*, 4.3, 78.

¹⁰⁷ Nietzsche, *On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life*, 4.3, 78.

justice and the good life. When conflicting cultural traditions make competing claims to man's allegiance, he can either affirm one cultural practice as superior to another and act accordingly with confidence in his judgment, or he can remain ambivalent as to the virtue of either practice and act carelessly—if he acts at all—without faith in himself. Too often, regrettably, modern men lack the courage of their convictions (if they have any at all); their greater capacity for reflection, comparison, and analysis culminates in paralysis.

Nietzsche asserts that his contemporaries' regrettable tendency to drag around with them "huge [quantities] of indigestible stones of knowledge"¹⁰⁸ betrays "the most characteristic quality of modern man: the remarkable antithesis between an interior which fails to correspond to any exterior and an exterior which fails to correspond to any interior."¹⁰⁹ The acquisition of knowledge, as Goethe makes explicit in the quotation introducing Nietzsche's essay, ought to result in either the commencement of new action or

¹⁰⁸ Nietzsche, *On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life*, 4.3, 78. Rumbling, indigestible stones lead to the demise of a mischievous wolf in the Grimm's Fairy Tale, "The Wolf and the Seven Young Kids." After two failed attempts to adequately disguise himself as the little goats' mother, the wolf finally convinces the kids to let him inside their house and quickly devours all but one of the mother goat's offspring. Because of the wolf's gluttony, however, he swallows them whole, allowing the mother to cut open his stomach while he sleeps and recover her kids unharmed. Before sewing up the wolf's stomach, however, the mother goat stuffs his belly full of stones from a nearby field. When he awakens from his slumber, the wolf notices an awful rumbling sound coming from his stomach and bends over a well to take a settling drink, only to have the heavy weight of the stones pull him over the edge and drown him.

Although the details of this particular story reveal nothing of any esoteric importance, the Grimm Brothers' attempt to bolster pride in the German folk tradition through their scholarly and literary contributions probably did not go unnoticed by Nietzsche. His decision to allude to one of their fairy tales may embody a subtle tribute to what the translator of a recent edition of the brothers' work describes as their wish to "preserve, contain, and present to the German public what they felt were profound truths about the origins of civilization. Indeed, they saw the 'childhood of humankind' as embedded in the customs that Germans had cultivated, and the tales were to serve as reminders of such rich, natural culture." See Jacob Grimm and Wilhelm Grimm, "The Wolf and the Seven Young Kids," in *The Complete Fair Tales of the Brothers Grimm*, trans. Jack Zipes (New York: Bantam Books, 2003), xxx,18-20.

¹⁰⁹ Nietzsche, *On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life*, 4.3, 78.

the enlivening of energetic activity already in progress; it functions properly as “an agent for transforming the outside world.”¹¹⁰ Modern man, however, is so single-minded in his acquisition of knowledge that he never bothers to consider either the amenability of its application or the desirability of its consequences for culture. He familiarizes himself with the various eras of history along with the myriad overarching worldviews distinctive of common cultures; he takes note of the diverse social, political, legal, economic, military, religious, aesthetic, and technological elements of past societies. But he fails to incorporate his newfound knowledge of past cultures in any meaningful way in his own culture; the best his knowledge can approximate is “an idea of and feeling for culture” from which no true cultural achievement can emerge.¹¹¹ Modern man proves more adroit at acquiring historical knowledge than any of his predecessors, but inasmuch as he over-cultivates this virtue at the expense of others, he renders himself completely inexpert at exercising knowledge in the service of life and the advancement of culture. Confronted by the disparate moral and ethical imperatives of alien cultures, he questions his own fitness to adjudicate the quarrel and doubts his own culture’s adequacy to serve as any authority. Ironically, “modern man describes with a curious pride” this “chaotic inner world” of conflicting concerns and loyalties as “his uniquely characteristic inwardness.”¹¹² What Nietzsche understands as evidence of typically weak-souled men, his contemporaries attempt to pass off as profound introspection and, in doing so, confuse knowledge of culture with the thing in itself. Nietzsche registers his disgust with the current state of affairs by comparing man’s

¹¹⁰ Nietzsche, *On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life*, 4.3, 78.

¹¹¹ Nietzsche, *On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life*, 4.3, 78.

¹¹² Nietzsche, *On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life*, 4.3, 78.

relationship with knowledge to a gastro-intestinal affliction: that he ceaselessly consumes knowledge of the past without a hunger for it and contrary to his own needs for a healthy life puts him at risk of perishing of indigestion. Like a snake that swallows the knowledge of other cultures whole, he fattens himself to satiety, “lies in the sun and avoids all unnecessary movement.”¹¹³

The Greek Disposition Towards History

Although Nietzsche considers this pretentious inwardness to which nothing outward corresponds a fundamental characteristic of German culture altogether “unknown to the peoples of earlier times,”¹¹⁴ he does not think his contemporary Germans the only people to have ever been threatened by “the danger of being overwhelmed by what was past and foreign, of perishing through ‘history’.”¹¹⁵ Just as present German culture and religion amounts to an inwardly warring chaos of all foreign countries and past ages, the Greek culture of antiquity was “for a long time a chaos of foreign, Semitic, Babylonian, Lydian, [and] Egyptian forms and ideas, and their religion [was] truly a battle of all the gods of the East.”¹¹⁶ The Greeks, however, “gradually learned to *organize the chaos*” by distinguishing their true needs from the false ones and following the Delphic oracle’s famous decree: “Know yourself.”¹¹⁷ The Greeks, no less than the Germans, “possessed...an inherently

¹¹³ Nietzsche, *On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life*, 4.3, 78.

¹¹⁴ Nietzsche, *On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life*, 4.3, 78.

¹¹⁵ Nietzsche, *On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life*, 10.14, 122.

¹¹⁶ Nietzsche, *On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life*, 10.14, 122.

¹¹⁷ Nietzsche, *On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life*, 10.14, 122.

insatiable thirst for knowledge,” but they “controlled it by their ideal need for and consideration of all the values of life.”¹¹⁸ Rather than merely acquaint themselves with the knowledge of other living cultures for the sake of “learned pedantry”¹¹⁹ they absorbed the experiences of other cultures in order to live them through, to put foreign wisdom into practice. They took elements of philosophy and science from their neighbors only to fulfill, enhance, and elevate those elements and thereby raise themselves above their neighbors. As the greatest discoverers, voyagers, and colonizers in history, they knew first and foremost how to learn in the truest sense, to properly assimilate and appropriate every gain in knowledge with a view toward the elevation of human life and the preservation of cultural identity. Were one of these archaic Greeks suddenly marooned in the modern world, Nietzsche imagines, he would surely regard the Germans as “walking encyclopedias”¹²⁰ devoid of any real culture to call their own; insofar as they try to pass off inward thoughtfulness and study of culture as culture itself, the text on the cover of this haphazardly thrown together and loosely bound cultural scrapbook must certainly read “Handbook of inward culture for outward barbarians.”¹²¹

In contrast to the Greeks, who stubbornly preserved their unhistorical sense during the period of their greatest vigor, the Germans protect themselves from being overwhelmed by history by avoiding taking knowledge of the past and foreign too seriously; from this,

¹¹⁸ Nietzsche, *Philosophy in the Tragic Age of the Greeks*, trans. Marianne Cowan (Washington, D.C.: Regnery Publishing), 30.

¹¹⁹ Nietzsche, *Philosophy in the Tragic Age of the Greeks*, 30.

¹²⁰ Nietzsche, *On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life*, 4.3, 79.

¹²¹ Nietzsche, *On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life*, 4.3, 79.

Nietzsche notes, arises the “weak personality”¹²² that bears the weight of history only by accepting the contributions of other cultures as superficially as possible so that it might easily dispose of and reject them at will. Perpetually inattentive to even the smallest of cultural demands *as demands*, man becomes ever more lazy and self-indulgent. The inner man becomes increasingly disconnected from the outside world and “finally widens the dubious gulf between content and form to the point of complete insensibility to barbarism.”¹²³ Nietzsche defines barbarism negatively in relation to true culture as the marked disunity of artistic style in all the vital manifestations of a people whose individual personalities are wretchedly fragmented into inward and outward, or content and form.¹²⁴ His definition prefigures the postmodern erasure of all boundaries.

The disposition to no longer take things seriously manifests itself most immediately in a man’s physical appearance—in his mode of walking, standing, speaking, dressing, dwelling and the like. Nietzsche remarks that one need only wander through a German city and observe his contemporaries for a day to assure himself that his fellow Germans are suffering from a weakened personality. Once they had painstakingly sought to, and often succeeded at imitating the conventions of the French school; now they follow their own inclinations wherever they lead, adopting the precepts of other schools sloppily and indiscriminately. Nietzsche explains that the decision to abandon the French tradition rests on a reevaluation of convention as such. The conventions that once unified German etiquette

¹²² Nietzsche, *On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life*, 4.3, 79.

¹²³ Nietzsche, *On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life*, 4.3, 79.

¹²⁴ Nietzsche, *On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life*, 4.3, 79-80.

and dress are now regarded as fictions, as “vestments and disguises”¹²⁵ that while not exactly hated, are certainly feared. Because of the historical education that has made him a “strolling spectator” in a “cosmopolitan carnival of gods, arts, and customs,”¹²⁶ he recognizes cultural conventions as *mere* conventions, as customs and agreements developed and observed over time, representing nothing more than the dominate will of a majority of the people in any particular society. He has no *specific* disdain for French civilization and refinement; rather, he thinks himself without reason to keep the covenants of *any* culture. While he professes outwardly the wish to abandon the conventional in favor of the natural, and therefore more German, he desires inwardly only what is easy and comfortable. The prevalent passion for ease and comfort manifests itself in every stylistic convention adopted by the German people, from their boorish manners to their gaudy art and architecture. Everything in Germany, Nietzsche laments, is “colourless, worn out, badly copied, [and] negligent.”¹²⁷ Clothing requiring no ingenuity whatsoever to produce—because its design is “borrowed from abroad”¹²⁸ and copied with extreme sloppiness—comes as close as anything else to a genuine contribution to German fashion.

The Consequences of Scientific History for the University

Nietzsche faults the modern university for its preparation of a continual world’s fair in which man can wander around aimlessly and enjoy himself. Professional historians

¹²⁵ Nietzsche, *On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life*, 4.3, 80.

¹²⁶ Nietzsche, *On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life*, 5.2, 83.

¹²⁷ Nietzsche, *On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life*, 4.4, 80.

¹²⁸ Nietzsche, *On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life*, 4.4, 80.

assemble for public exhibition the customs, ages, arts, and religions of alien cultures, their wars and revolutions, but as circus attractions they make no deep impressions. Philosophy, “the most truthful of all sciences,”¹²⁹ according to Nietzsche, loses its rightful place at the top of the hierarchy of disciplines and becomes a subject of universal education as well, and as such it is reduced to an “unnatural, artificial...and unworthy state.”¹³⁰ Philosophy began out of genuine human curiosity and wonder about the nature and origins of the universe, the meaning of human life and conduct, and the ultimate destiny of man. Its practitioners—Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle, among others—posed questions with practical concerns and offered answers with direct implications for everyday life. Inasmuch as the Greeks attempted to answer the question of what sort of life is best and how one ought to live, philosophy itself was no mere theoretical discipline bereft of practical application; it existed as a comprehensive way of living and dying. Theory and practice *necessarily* affected one another. Moreover, the sheer effort in private thought and public discourse required to amass philosophical views in any great number evidenced a peculiar sort of character. Put economically, the philosophic life had opportunity costs: its initiates were few and far between because both the sizeable intellectual prowess and the abundance of leisure time required for philosophy were rare.

With the advent of professional philosophy in German universities, however, professors “write, speak, and teach” the philosophy of past ages, but none “dares to venture to fulfill the philosophical law in himself.”¹³¹ That is, such a professor amasses enough

¹²⁹ Nietzsche, *On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life*, 5.3, 85.

¹³⁰ Nietzsche, *On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life*, 5.3, 85.

¹³¹ Nietzsche, *On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life*, 5.3, 85. That Nietzsche cites the Stoic philosophy of self-discipline and self-knowledge associated with Cicero, Seneca, Emperor

historical knowledge to report accurately that Plato's Socrates famously equates knowledge with virtue, that Aristotle argues that the philosophic life is the best life a human can lead, that Epicurus demonstrates the groundlessness of the fear of death and divine retribution, that Epictetus teaches that wise individuals limit their desires to matters within their control, and so on, but he does not take any of these teachings seriously enough to begin the life-long process of testing their respective wisdom. He does not *live* philosophically, evaluating these philosophies on the basis of his own experience. Instead, professors teach the great books of philosophy and the lives of the great philosophers as the history of ideas and historical biography, seemingly oblivious to fact that for every philosophical genius before him history was no more than a technique, a repository of evidence drawn upon only to *supplement* an argument of greater importance. The scholarship these philosophical historians produce amounts to no more than a tired sigh of "if only," a gesture at what "there once was."¹³² Students, likewise, assume virtually none of the opportunity costs previously associated with the philosophic life, amassing just enough knowledge to engage in idle banter. The remaining contributions to philosophy outside of historical scholarship are "political and official, limited by governments, churches, academies," and other censors. What once existed as a disinterested search for truth, for the principles of the good society and the good life, now exists as mere ideology, as a rationalization for current or future political and social arrangements construed by parties with definite interests. Recognizing that scholarship

Marcus Aurelius, and Epictetus is in keeping with his primary criticism of German historians and culture: their failure to restrain the historical knowledge drive evidences a profound lack of self-knowledge with regard to their true individual and cultural needs. Concerning the overabundance of criticism in scholarship, Nietzsche alludes to Stoicism again when he remarks, "It is precisely in this immoderation of its critical outpourings, in its lack of self-control, in that which the Romans call *impotentia*, that the modern personality betrays its weakness."

¹³² Nietzsche, *On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life*, 5.3, 85.

about, and criticism of philosophy has all but completely replaced the thing itself, Nietzsche asks despairingly, “Are there still human beings...or perhaps only thinking-, writing- and speaking-machines?”¹³³

One suspects that Nietzsche is ready to answer “No” when he describes the rage for criticism in academic scholarship. Whenever something arguably good and just happens, whether its product is some action, a work of philosophy, a collection of stories, a piece of poetry, or a page of music, the modern observer ignores the work entirely and focuses his attention on the author’s biography.¹³⁴ The character of the author, his life story, and the historical conditions surrounding the work’s production become the subject of interest at the work’s expense. If the work is one amongst many, the scientific compulsion in the observer takes over. He does his best to classify and order the work according to its author’s past development and the putative course of his future development; he compares the author’s work to that of other writers and analyzes, dissects, and reassembles it before generally chastising and reprimanding the author for the supposed flaws inherent within. Even though these same scholars will not produce a work of comparable quality in their lifetime, they deem themselves fit to criticize the intellectual and artistic contributions of others. The work itself never produces an effect because no one gives serious consideration to its substance; thought results in no action outside of the requisite critique, which itself can beget only another critique. Cultural contributions are no longer judged morally as noble or ignoble, just or unjust, beautiful or vulgar on the basis of their effects on the lives of human beings, but simply as successful or unsuccessful on the basis of the attention they garner and the

¹³³ Nietzsche, *On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life*, 5.3, 85.

¹³⁴ Nietzsche, *On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life*, 5.5, 87.

number of critiques they warrant. People chatter a while about the latest novelty, but at bottom nothing changes; “they go on doing what they have always done.”¹³⁵

Much as Plato argues that the disintegration of the constitution of a state induces a corresponding degeneration within the souls of its citizenry, Nietzsche contends that the erosion of German high culture and national tradition enfeebles the moral sense of the German people and fractures their personalities. The historians allow “access to the labyrinths of unfinished cultures and to every semi-barbarism that ever existed on earth,” and in doing so engender “the sense and instinct for everything, the taste and tongue for everything—which immediately proves itself to be an *ignoble* sense.”¹³⁶ That is, the democratization of history itself as a form of inquiry results in a culture that is more democratic in its inclinations and therefore more base. Every German city regardless of locale becomes, in effect, its own Piraeus—a multicultural port city inhabited by foreigners and decadents. Its citizens freely and enthusiastically succumb to a succession of intellectual and social fads and fashions, wandering from one distraction to the next. They privilege no one cultural heritage over another and try on new pieces of prehistory as if they were costumes designed to entertain.¹³⁷ Lacking a basic sense of shared values, the German

¹³⁵ Nietzsche, *On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life*, 5.5, 87.

¹³⁶ Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, 224, 151.

¹³⁷ See Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, 223, 150: “The hybrid European—all in all, a tolerably ugly plebian—simply needs a costume: he requires history as a storage room for costumes. To be sure, he soon notices that not one fits him very well; so he keeps changing. Let anyone look at the nineteenth century with an eye for these quick preferences and changes of the style masquerade; also for the moments of despair over the fact that “nothing is becoming.” It is no use to parade as romantic or classical, Christian or Florentine, baroque or “national,” in *moribus et artibus*: it ‘does not look good.’ But the ‘spirit,’ especially the ‘historical spirit,’ finds its advantage even in this despair: again and again a new piece of prehistory or a foreign country is tried on, put on, taken off, packed away, and above all *studied*: we are the first age that has truly studies ‘costumes’—I mean those moralities, articles of faith, tastes in the arts, and religions—prepared like no previous age for a

people glut their lives with petty pleasures and go their own way as atomized individuals, ever distrustful of authority and resistant to the demands of true culture. Nietzsche imagines that the typical German, like Plato's democratic man,

lives along day by day, gratifying the desire that occurs to him, at one time drinking and listening to the flute, at another downing water and reducing; now practicing gymnastic, and again idling and neglecting everything; and sometimes spending his time as though he were occupied with philosophy. Often he engages in politics and, jumping up, says and does whatever chances to come to him; and if he admires any soldiers, he turns in that direction; and if it's monkey-makers, in that one. And there is neither order nor necessity in his life, but calling this life sweet, free, and blessed he follows it throughout.¹³⁸

Of course, that this democratic man occasionally dons the costumes of the flutist, the gymnast, the philosopher, the politician, the soldier, and the merchant only evidences the limitations of democratic culture. Although democracies generally allow citizens free reign to satisfy their fickle desires, they can never provide the kind of cultural nourishment men need to achieve a higher standard of health and maturity. Insofar as history is practiced democratically, it in fact produces injustice and disorder in the soul of man. Because historians are "attached to the law of equality,"¹³⁹ and confuse a lack of sound judgment for objectivity, Nietzsche questions the claim to justice made by his fellow German academics. In doing so, he offers a remarkable critique of the notion of "objective" history and, in takes needed steps toward offering a new account of what history should ultimately be about.

carnival in the grand style, for the laughter and high spirits of the most spiritual revelry, for the transcendental heights of the highest nonsense and Aristophanean derision of the world. Perhaps this is where we shall still discover the real of our *invention*, that real min which we, too, can still be original, say, as parodists of world history and God's buffoons—perhaps, even if nothing else today has any future, our *laughter* may yet have a future."

¹³⁸ Bloom, *The Republic of Plato*, 561c-561e, 239-240.

¹³⁹ Bloom, *The Republic of Plato*, 561e, 240.

CHAPTER 6

THE TRUE PURPOSE OF HISTORY

The researchers of many eminent antiquarians have already thrown much darkness on the subject; and it is possible, if they continue their labors, that we shall soon know nothing at all.

Artemus Ward

The main work of the historian is not to record, but to evaluate; for if he does not evaluate, how can he know what is worth recording?

Edward Harlett Carr

For most of the second *Untimely Meditation*, Nietzsche appears to take it for granted that objective historical knowledge is possible. Indeed, it is the ability of scientifically minded historians to expose the lowly human, all too human origins of many of Germany's most cherished cultural and religious traditions that compels Nietzsche to write his polemic against this newly emergent form of history. In section six, however, he appears to reverse his position entirely. Instead of criticizing German historians for the consequences of the successful practice of scientific history, he lambastes them for failing to realize that objective history is a chimerical, unrealizable ideal. Is Nietzsche simply confused here? If not, what purpose does he serve by making these seemingly irreconcilable arguments? I contend that Nietzsche's criticisms of the idea of objective history—many of which anticipate aptly the postmodern critique of history—are best understood as rhetorical and instrumental in nature. While he does not abandon his conviction that there are clear and unambiguous historical facts that we can all know, he exposes the bias inherent in all historical narratives in order to

exploit it. The guide for writing history that Nietzsche prescribes in his text is so necessarily subjective that its subjectivity must be excused first if his historiography is to persist as a credible alternative to the scientific practice of history. In short, Nietzsche is willing to deny the power of objective history (despite the fact that he believes in it) in order to ensure its undoing. He proceeds by way of a consideration of the relationship between history and philosophy.

The German reduction of philosophy from the pursuit of universal law and eternal verities to a branch of cultural history impels Nietzsche to defend the “honest naked goddess philosophy”¹⁴⁰ against the historians who deprecate her. In section six, he demonstrates philosophy’s superiority to history by refuting his contemporaries’ claim that by writing history “objectively,” i.e., by setting forth the record of human societies as the unattested facts are accumulated, they earn the right to call themselves just, “and just in a higher degree than men of other ages.”¹⁴¹ Philosophy proves its worth insofar as Nietzsche’s counterargument is steeped in the philosophy of historiography. Not only does he provide ample reasons for doubting that the course of their famous objectivity lies in an increased need and longing for justice, he also denies that objectivity in their sense is either achievable or desirable. Historians ought not strive merely for a correspondence between what actually happened in the past and their narrative account of the who, what, when, where, and why—an impossible goal, in any case. Genuine historians are judges, not accountants; they recognize that the devotion to fact must be subordinate to the willingness to pass judgment on the past in order to ennoble the present. The nineteenth century German historians

¹⁴⁰ Nietzsche, *On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life*, 5.3, 85.

¹⁴¹ Nietzsche, *On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life*, 6.1, 88.

Nietzsche criticizes not only fail to understand the true relationship between history and culture, but also refuse to acknowledge the epistemological limitations of their own discipline. Realizing what history *can only* be insofar as knowledge of the past and foreign is concerned, Nietzsche reminds his audience of what history *could* be were it written by philosopher-poets like Herodotus and Plutarch and not university scholars. The latter suffer a grave misfortune when they assume that they possess the virtue of justice when they in fact do not, unwittingly causing great harm to both themselves and the culture of which they are an influential part.

Nietzsche begins his interrogation of the German historians with a consideration of perhaps the weightiest issue in the entire essay: the nature of justice. In the nineteenth century, many intelligent thinkers attempted to provide a satisfactory conception of the elusive concept of justice. Jeremy Bentham, for example, sought to provide the ways and means for maximizing the happiness of society at large, arguing that justice is served when the greatest good for the greatest number is the adoptive ruling principle. Karl Marx, by contrast, attempted to demonstrate the scientific validity of his socialist doctrine, contending that justice can only be realized when the alienated industrial working class triumphs over the privileged bourgeoisie and administers to each according to his needs. Nietzsche, however, does not understand justice in terms of its modern social applications; that is, it has nothing to do primarily with incomes, status, social conditions, property, and other distributable goods and intangibles. Rather, Nietzsche understands justice as a particular trait of exceptional individuals, as a political virtue that unites “the highest and rarest virtues.”¹⁴² Just as Plato and Aristotle argued before him, Nietzsche maintains that justice involves the

¹⁴² Nietzsche, *On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life*, 6.2, 88.

strength to render to each person what is their due. In the present context, the just historian gives the past its due by seeking the right kind of knowledge with the right intentions and the strength to benefit humanity. The just man does not seek “cold, ineffectual knowledge”¹⁴³ merely to satisfy his curiosity, to stave off boredom, or to amuse himself. Instead, he seeks knowledge as a “regulating and punishing judge,”¹⁴⁴ as a delimiter of human horizons and the boundaries of good and evil. He “sets him[self] on a solitary height as the most *venerable exemplar* of the species”¹⁴⁵ because his task is the most difficult for a man: he must summon the will to act even though as a wanderer through the halls of history the “lines of his horizon are restlessly changing.”¹⁴⁶ While others become sick and collapse without a narrow horizon, the just man endures the widest horizons, yet still manages to legislate truth for an entire culture. Confronted by the arts, customs, religions, and philosophies of past ages, he judges confidently, pronouncing his verdicts on past and foreign practices neither harshly nor sorrowfully; if ever he questions the justice of his decisions, he tries to overcome the initial doubt and achieve certainty as to the usefulness of a particular element of history for the advancement of present culture. Nietzsche recognizes that magnanimity, too, is a virtue in its own right. But much as the just man cannot always afford to be generally generous and forgiving, the genuine historian must escape the tendency to tolerate the past and foreign and muster the courage to judge it, to give history its due with the proper consideration of true individual and cultural needs. Given these tall requirements, the just

¹⁴³ Nietzsche, *On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life*, 6.2, 88.

¹⁴⁴ Nietzsche, *On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life*, 6.2, 88.

¹⁴⁵ Nietzsche, *On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life*, 6.2, 88.

¹⁴⁶ Nietzsche, *On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life*, 1.5, 63.

man is indeed rare, and too often men are lacking in either the will or the capacity to be just. Especially harmful to humankind throughout history are those under the illusion that they have been called to legislate, when in fact they lack all ability to judge and discern justice truly. More often, however, men take upon themselves the task of seeking knowledge of no consequence and proclaiming indifferent truths; insofar as entire regiments of researchers dedicate themselves to the acquisition of knowledge that requires no strength to attain and eventuates in nothing, they fall far short of the demands of justice as Nietzsche describes them.

The university historians who pride themselves on their objectivity presume that to give the past its due, the historian must maintain a neutral stance towards all individuals, events, and ideas of the past, uninfluenced by emotion or personal prejudice. For Nietzsche, however, the claim to objectivity usually warrants the claimant's classification among one of the three species of wretched historian. The first type of historian reports the facts of history that are widely agreed upon and practically indisputable; he describes what happened in the past and explains why certain events happened as they did (or at all). In doing so, however, he accords equal treatment to all that is past and foreign, thereby lessening the seriousness of certain ideas and events that deserve a more careful exposition and judgmental tone if knowledge of them is to be introduced into German culture. His disinclination to judge betrays a weak soul seeking exemption from the duty to discriminate between the noble and the base, the beneficial and injurious. Yet his defects remain hidden—if not celebrated outright—inasmuch as the ignorant and “inexperienced,” routinely mistake the “mere

absence of abrasiveness and harsh condemnation of the past” for “evidence of a just disposition.”¹⁴⁷ That is to say, the people mistake universal tolerance for justice.

The second type of historian, by contrast, selectively reports the facts of history as they suit his purpose—if he injects the factual into his work at all. He practices history only as an egoist or a partisan, employing the “air of objectivity”¹⁴⁸ duplicitously with the knowledge that the ignorant and inexperienced are prone to take as fact what is reported soberly with a host of seemingly supportive arguments, anecdotes, figures, and statistics. He has a stake in political arrangements and judges only to justify a present or future system of power in society; his history borders on ideology, and the people mistake his rationalizations and distortions for the truth.

The third type of historian judges as well, but as Nietzsche notes, “all of [his] verdicts are false.”¹⁴⁹ This is because he writes history “in the naïve belief that all of the popular views of precisely [his] own age are the right and just views and that to write in accord with the view of the age is the same thing as being just.”¹⁵⁰ While Nietzsche thinks the second type of historian a crude abomination, he expresses the most disdain for the third type because this historian is so narrow-minded as to be religious in his thinking. Nietzsche does not criticize him for having a narrow horizon as such; rather, he thinks that the beliefs that constitute this historian’s horizon are too dependent upon contemporary community standards and vulgar, popular taste for him to serve as a cultural legislator. Ironically,

¹⁴⁷ Nietzsche, *On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life*, 6.3, 90.

¹⁴⁸ Nietzsche, *On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life*, 6.3, 90.

¹⁴⁹ Nietzsche, *On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life*, 6.3, 90.

¹⁵⁰ Nietzsche, *On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life*, 6.3, 90.

Nietzsche notes, this historian regards as “subjective”¹⁵¹ all historical judgment that has not been adapted to the triviality of the present.

Nietzsche identifies as the scourge of modern historical scholarship the failure to realize that objectivity is an illusory goal having nothing whatsoever to do with justice.¹⁵² The sincerest of these historians consider their defining task to be the search for truth, but even they fail to question whether, or what kind of truth is actually achievable. Insofar as they claim their account of history to be objective, they assume not only that the past exists independently of what anyone thinks about it, but also that they can achieve a correspondence between what “really happened” in the past and their account of it. Nietzsche thinks that this attempt at historical realism is both dangerously naïve and ignorant of the reality of historical method. As a philologist, translating and studying ancient texts that are themselves compilations of fragments of conflicting evidence derived from countless sources, he understands all too well the dream of recovering the chimerical *original* text. The historical *facts* that historians seek are analogous to these original texts inasmuch as the events of the past are forever inaccessible for purposes of reference. Unlike the natural scientists, who enjoy unfettered access to the natural world to test their theories, the historians can never observe the actions of people involved in historical events to determine whether their account matches the reality of history; while they do their best to imitate the scientific method, time denies them the luxury of experimentation. What history amounts to, then, is an unavoidably incomplete and relative account of the past, reliant upon the observations and memories included in the accounts of others, all of whom selected,

¹⁵¹ Nietzsche, *On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life*, 6.3, 91.

¹⁵² Nietzsche, *On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life*, 6.5, 91.

interpreted, and recorded the facts from their particular perspective. History is necessarily *less* than the past and different from it in innumerable, unknowable ways. And because the modern historians relate what they take to be the bare facts of history employing the most neutral, value-free language possible—operating on the assumption that the “driest phrase is the right phrase,”¹⁵³—their histories invoke none of the original emotions that surrounded the lives of merciless tyrants, great statesmen, revolutionary heroes, and artistic geniuses. The historian’s attempt at a carbon copy is so far from the original in both form and content that Nietzsche remarks, “it is as though the ‘Eroica’ Symphony had been arranged for two flutes for the entertainment of drowsy opium smokers.”¹⁵⁴

The historian can no more achieve neutral detachment from his account of history than a “stormy landscape with thunder and lightning”¹⁵⁵ or an angry sea can sketch, paint, or photograph itself. The painter who wishes to cover his canvas with the images of the night sky cannot help but introduce his own subjectivity into his work, inasmuch as he remains a conscious intermediary between the coarse material and the blunt, empirical reality of nature. So long as his goal is literal correspondence to an independently real world, he will ceaselessly fail to attain it. Citing this extreme example, Nietzsche means to undermine the

¹⁵³ Nietzsche, *On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life*, 6.6, 93.

¹⁵⁴ Nietzsche, *On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life*, 6.3, 90. The music to which Nietzsche refers is Ludwig van Beethoven’s third symphony, the *Eroica*. First performed privately in December, 1804 at the palace of Prince Lobkowitz of Vienna, the symphony was actually inspired by Napoleon Bonaparte while he served as First Consul. Beethoven’s initial regard for Napoleon as the great liberator and savior of war-torn France supposedly soured when he learned that the general had declared himself Emperor of the French. In response to the news, Beethoven angrily revoked his planned dedication, erasing the original *Bonaparte* from the title page and replacing it later with *Sinfonia eroica*, subtitled *per festeggiare il sovvenire di un grand Uomo*—“to celebrate the memory of a great man.” See Ferdinand Ries, quoted in Michael Hamburger, ed., *Beethoven: Letters, Journals and Conversations* (New York: Anchor Books, 1960), 29-30.

¹⁵⁵ Nietzsche, *On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life*, 6.4, 91.

notion of objectivity entirely, thereby making the subjectivity of the historian's work all the more obvious.¹⁵⁶ After all, anything that undergoes change has a history to be recorded; in the widest sense, history includes not merely all of the phenomena of human life, but all those of the natural world as well. The historian unavoidably imposes his own subjectivity upon his work by allocating significance. That is, he determines what the defining moments of history are and what people, places, events, and periods warrant inclusion in his account of the past. Consequently, certain perspectives are marginalized. In order to give his narrative the semblance of coherence, he "unites things when god alone knows whether they belong together" and routinely "substitutes something comprehensible for what is incomprehensible."¹⁵⁷ He "assumes the operation of chance where a thousand little causes have been at work,"¹⁵⁸ and imposes upon his comprehensive narratives a clearly discernable beginning, middle, and end, giving more consideration to the needs of modern readers of history than to the past itself. In short, history always bears the signature of an author, usually in the form of its myriad deficiencies. So far from constituting evidence of his justice, modern history reveals the German historian's inability to understand history in terms of its actual causes and effects. Nor does he comprehend the psychological motives of the people involved in historical events. As Nietzsche quotes Franz Grillparzer, history written

¹⁵⁶ Elsewhere, Nietzsche puts more plainly his denial that man can attain objective knowledge, so long as knowledge is measured by an ideal of literal correspondence to an outside world: "Against positivism, which halts at phenomena—'There are only *facts*'—I would say: No, facts is precisely what there is not, only interpretations. We cannot establish any fact 'in itself': perhaps it is folly to want to do such a thing." See Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, 481, 267.

¹⁵⁷ Nietzsche, *On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life*, 6.5, 91.

¹⁵⁸ Nietzsche, *On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life*, 6.5, 91.

in this manner is no more than “the way in which the spirit of man apprehends *events impenetrable to him*.”¹⁵⁹

The German historians only compound the problem further by attempting to derive from their errant histories broad generalizations about the social and political world in the same way that physicists make generalizations about the natural world. Nietzsche admits that in the natural sciences, generalizations are “the most important thing, inasmuch as they contain the laws.”¹⁶⁰ That is, man can accept the concept of inertia at face value because it describes a relationship between things in the world that has always been observed to be true: every object in a state of uniform motion tends to remain in a state of motion unless an external force is applied to it. Man does well to accept Newton’s first law of motion as universally true—at least until an exception is observed—because he can use it to make predictions about physical events and advance his understanding of the world. The meaning of history and its ultimate significance for humankind, however, does not lie in its general ideas and propositions. Although historical laws taking the form “whenever x occurs, y is bound to follow” probably exist, Nietzsche retorts, “whatever truth remains in such propositions after the obscurities referred to have been removed is something completely familiar and even trivial.”¹⁶¹ That is, human social behavior is so complicated that although recurrent, orderly, and empirically demonstrable patterns do exist, they are the stuff of common sense rather than curiosity. When scientific methodology is applied to social

¹⁵⁹ Nietzsche, *On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life*, 6.5, 91.

¹⁶⁰ Nietzsche, *On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life*, 6.5, 92.

¹⁶¹ Nietzsche, *On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life*, 6.5, 92.

phenomena, the findings yield little of interest for either the helmsmen steering the ship of state or the philosopher trying to comprehend what is man.

The task of the genuine historian, then, is neither to set forth a record of facts about the past, nor to seek general propositions about human actions. To be great and, indeed, just, the genuine historian “must possess the power to remind the universally known into something never heard of before, and to express the universal so simply and profoundly that the simplicity is lost in the profundity and the profundity in the simplicity.”¹⁶² True historians are first and foremost great *artists* with the creative capacity to draw the horizon lines that sustain a culture and direct it towards a noble future. By virtue of their “rare minds”¹⁶³ and their experience of great things, they are worthy to preserve and interpret “the great and exalted things of the past”¹⁶⁴ for the sake of the present, attentive to man’s true individual and cultural needs. The objective truth about history is of no concern to him if by relating it he is denied the right to judge it as noble or base. The greatest historians—Herodotus, Thucydides, and Plutarch among them—freely invented speeches for the figures in their histories, but they did so with an educative purpose; the truths these artists conveyed through fiction are greater than the literal truths documented by the most careful modern chroniclers. If, as Nietzsche contends, the truth about history is subjective in any case, the choice is not between an objective history that gets at “what really happened” and a subjective history that is filled with omissions, exaggerations, and outright fabrications.

¹⁶² Nietzsche, *On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life*, 6.7, 94.

¹⁶³ Nietzsche, *On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life*, 6.7, 94.

¹⁶⁴ Nietzsche, *On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life*, 6.8, 94.

Rather, the choice is between history that serves life and advances culture and history that is injurious to both.

Nietzsche's critique of the German historical sense is as thorough and unrelenting as it is because he claims to understand better than his contemporaries the tenuous relationship between historical knowledge and cultural cohesion. That is, Nietzsche believes that for a culture to remain stable and healthy, it must be able to maintain certain assumptions about the origins of its moral and political values and institutions. Nietzsche laments the impossibility of shrouding the origins of a nation or a religion in myth, given the methods and capabilities of this new form of historical education and research. In the remaining sections of Nietzsche's critique of German historicism, he extends his case against the whole of the new academic and philosophical approach to history by addressing the prospects for cultural progress in an age in which people are increasingly aware of their place in history.

CHAPTER 7

HISTORY AND CULTURAL PROGRESS

By way of comparison let us now picture the abstract man, untutored by myth; abstract education; abstract morality; abstract law; the abstract state; let us imagine the lawless roving of the artistic imagination, unchecked by any native myth; let us think of a culture that has no fixed and sacred primordial site but is doomed to exhaust all possibilities and to nourish itself wretchedly on all other cultures—there we have the present age, the result of that Socratism which is bent on the destruction of myth. And now the mythless man stands eternally hungry, surrounded by all past ages, and digs and grubs for roots, even if he has to dig from them among the remotest antiquities. The tremendous historical need of our unsatisfied modern culture, the assembling around one of countless other cultures, the consuming desire for knowledge—what does all this point to, if not to the loss of myth, the loss of the mythical home, the mythical maternal womb?¹⁶⁵

Throughout *On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life*, Nietzsche's principal argument against scientific history is that its practitioners inevitably lose the capacity to discriminate between the great and the small, the beneficial and the injurious, the life-preserving and the deadly. Such historians have no regard for the consequences of making public potentially unsettling truths about the often crude and humble origins of nations and religions. In sections seven and eight of the essay, Nietzsche makes his most forceful arguments against German historicism by describing its consequences for both individual human and collective social, cultural progress. Nietzsche believes that an overabundance of historical knowledge results in a disrupted instinct, a belief in the old age of mankind, and a

¹⁶⁵ Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, 7, 60.

dangerous mood of irony and cynicism. As usual, Nietzsche words his concerns cryptically and idiosyncratically, so they require considerable explanation.

The Enfeeblement of His Instinct for Creation

As I have already mentioned, despite Nietzsche's contention that no amount of German historical scholarship can ever produce an objective, definitive account of the past, working historians are either unaware of, or unconvinced by the theoretical and practical import of his argument, for they assume that widespread agreement about a host of historical issues justifies their belief in objective, historical fact. With the exception of his diversion in section six, Nietzsche himself takes it for granted that historical knowledge is attainable; his point, rather, is that value judgments are inherent to history as science inasmuch as the historian initially discriminates in favor of what he deems the *significant* issues of the past. If the historian cannot circumvent the necessity of making judgments about relative worth, then he ought to acknowledge the responsibility to consider the moral significance of the historical truth he promulgates. That is, the historian cannot lay claim to justice by judging his history solely by the criterion of truth, exempting the facts as such from moral judgment. Truth itself has consequences for life and culture, neither of which ought to be subordinate to the perpetuation of a scholarly enterprise.

One of the things that Nietzsche does in the second *Untimely Meditation*—foreshadowing his philosophy to come—is give his readers pause to reconsider the practical use of truth. “Truth,” Nietzsche declares, “makes its appearance as a social necessity. Afterwards, by means of a metastasis, it is applied to everything, where it is not required.”¹⁶⁶

¹⁶⁶ Nietzsche, *The Philosopher*, 92, 35.

Honesty is a virtue that arises out of man's pressing need to enter into societies with his fellows for the purposes of self-preservation and the elevation of human life. It quickly outlives its usefulness and becomes a vice when it is misapplied, hindering both life and action. Truth applied to history spreads like a disease; "it enters into battle against religions and incidentally destroys cultures."¹⁶⁷ "Historical verification always brings to light so much that is false, crude, inhuman, absurd, [and] violent" underlying the political, moral, and religious foundations of culture that man is led to discount his own cultural heritage and adopt a cynical attitude towards all existence. Put even more succinctly by Nietzsche himself, the highest values devalue themselves. The historian must overcome the Socratic intolerance for illusion inherent in his historical science if man and culture are to survive because "it has proven to be impossible to build a culture upon knowledge."¹⁶⁸ To the contrary, "every kind of *culture* begins by veiling a great number of things. Human progress depends upon this *veiling*."¹⁶⁹ Because the German historians indulge their historical knowledge drive without restraint, they rid the world of the comprehensive, grounding mythologies in which man interprets his life and struggles. They render the beautiful plain and transform the sacred into the profane. If this drive to deconstruct is not paired with a corresponding drive to construct, "if the purpose of destroying and clearing is not to allow a future already alive in anticipation to raise its house on the ground thus liberated," then man's "instinct for creation will be enfeebled and discouraged."¹⁷⁰ Man will become so

¹⁶⁷ Nietzsche, *The Philosopher*, 137, 46.

¹⁶⁸ Nietzsche, *The Philosopher*, 73, 29.

¹⁶⁹ Nietzsche, *The Philosopher*, 52, 18.

¹⁷⁰ Nietzsche, *On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life*, 7.1, 95.

accustomed to having the myths he mistakes for truth exposed as *mere* myths that no individual will emerge with the power or the creative capacity to act as a great legislator of truth and morality for a future culture, thereby marking man's descent into a decadence and nihilism.

Nietzsche has his reader consider the case of what must certainly become of the Christian religion if it is submitted to just this kind of relentless, thoroughly historical treatment. Were a couple of modern historians, these "biographers"¹⁷¹ as Nietzsche refers to them disparagingly, miraculously "transported to the birthplace of Christianity"¹⁷² and given free reign to indulge themselves in the actual truth of the origins of the Christian religion, the movement would be no more, its flame extinguished as easily as some creature of the forest might prevent a mighty oak from sprouting, growing, and flourishing by simply eating an acorn. Jesus Christ, the Son of God, Messiah to an entire people, and spiritual messenger for the whole human race would be reduced, one might assume, to but one more apocalyptic Jewish prophet of marginal significance to history. A religion of certain origin, unveiled by mystery, myth, and miracle is "condemned to revolve as a star without atmosphere,"¹⁷³ and thus has no hope of surviving. So long as historians, archaeologists, and anthropologists pursue the truth of the past ignorant of, or indifferent to the consequences of their discoveries, the number of true believers in Western religions based on divine revelation is destined to dwindle.

¹⁷¹ Nietzsche, *On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life*, 7.2, 97.

¹⁷² Nietzsche, *On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life*, 7.2, 97.

¹⁷³ Nietzsche, *On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life*, 7.2, 97.

Ironically, in his later works Nietzsche himself may have done as much, if not more than anyone in the last two hundred years to hasten Christianity's end in the West, as books like his *Genealogy of Morals* and the *Anti-Christ* both go a long way toward providing a secular account of the origins, and popularity of Christianity, and the shift in moral codes that took place in the early centuries of the common era. What distinguishes Nietzsche from his colleagues is, presumably, the fact that he understands and *wishes* the consequences of his actions. While university professors debate the authorship of the Books of Moses and the Gospels and expose the lowly, democratic, and all too human origins of the Bible Canon at the Councils of Nicea and Chalcedon, Nietzsche attacks Christianity at its roots by mocking the kind of man it produces. Envisioning himself in large part as a living example of the "critical" species of historian that he lauds early in his essay, Nietzsche sees Christianity as an unfortunate episode in the history of humankind that man would do well do negate. The historian's ability to expose the lowly origins of a phenomenon is important and useful, but it must not be applied democratically, lest even the most valuable, species-preserving and life-affirming untruths be exposed as fallacies.

In describing the enfeeblement of man's instinct for creation, Nietzsche registers his opinion on the whole of the Enlightenment project in general and its consequences for university education in particular. Whereas Kant famously dares man to *know*, to use his own reason in order to distinguish what is universally true from what are otherwise the domesticating effects of poets, preachers, and politicians, Nietzsche worries that the light of Enlightenment was "*too bright, too sudden, [and] too varying.*"¹⁷⁴ That is, despite their pure intentions, the torch-bearers of the Enlightenment were terribly naïve in assuming that, to

¹⁷⁴ Nietzsche, *On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life*, 7.3, 98.

recall Byron's *Manfred*, the tree of knowledge *is* indeed that of life. The only remaining truth after man's turn away from life and illusion to knowledge and truth is that *all* cultures are merely a sum of their domesticating effects, or "power-relations" in the broadest sense, as Michel Foucault insists. The young university student comes to realize this as he is "swept along through all the millennia: youths who understand nothing of war, diplomatic action, commercial policy are thought fit to be introduced to political history."¹⁷⁵ Indeed, there is no history to which he is not introduced, and the result is that he "becomes so homeless and doubts all concepts and all customs."¹⁷⁶ After a short time there is nothing to which he has not already been exposed, nothing that could possibly surprise him, nothing that could be truly considered taboo. And, to worsen matters, the universities cater first and foremost to the economic interests of a nation, teaching young men in the way that best suits the need of the current division of labor. Science itself is consumed by an interest in profit and is tailored to the needs and popular desires of the public, however vulgar or contrary to the real needs of a healthy culture. "No, to be so overwhelmed and bewildered by history is, as the ancients demonstrate, not at all necessary for youth, but in the highest degree dangerous to it, as the moderns demonstrate."¹⁷⁷ Here Nietzsche very well may be drawing on the authority of Aristotle:

¹⁷⁵ Nietzsche, *On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life*, 7.3, 98.

¹⁷⁶ Nietzsche, *On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life*, 7.3, 98.

¹⁷⁷ Nietzsche, *On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life*, 7.3, 98.

All people are good at making distinctions about the things they are acquainted with, and each is a good judge of those things. Therefore, good judgment goes along with the way each one is educated, and the one who has been educated about everything has it in an unqualified way. For this reason, it is not appropriate for a young person to be a student of politics, since the young are inexperienced in the actions of life, while these are the things about which politics speaks and from which it reasons.¹⁷⁸

The Belief that He is an Epigone

Section seven of the second *Untimely Meditation* marks the end of Nietzsche's examination of the various cultural consequences of the academic historians' pursuit of a new, purportedly objective approach to history. Up to this point, Nietzsche had dealt primarily with that species of historicism that makes people aware of the enormous diversity of political institutions and convictions across the vast expanse of human history. This variant of historicism stressed the ineluctable 'situatedness' of human beings within history, characterizing the moral and political thought of any given historical period as reactionary, meaning historically contingent upon the situational characteristics of the time. In the next two sections of the text, however, Nietzsche turns to the task of describing the cultural consequences of a different, if related species of historicism—namely, Hegelianism.

The overexposure of the young to the low and vulgar facts of history results indeed in “a kind of inborn grey-hairedness, and those who bear its mark from childhood must instinctively believe in the *old age of mankind*.”¹⁷⁹ Nietzsche worries that too much knowledge about the vast and varied accomplishments of peoples of the past discourage German youths from believing that they have it within their souls to produce monuments,

¹⁷⁸ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. Joe Sachs (Newburyport: Focus Publishing, 2002), 1094b28-1095a4, 2-3.

¹⁷⁹ Nietzsche, *On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life*, 8.1, 101.

paintings, music, novels, poetry, and philosophy of comparable worth. That this is his concern should come as a shock to no one with experience of contemporary university students. Students barely have the time to think for themselves, to create great works of their own because they are so busy studying the works of others across cultures and time. What work they do manage to produce becomes a vulgar imitation, a mish-mash of everything he has been exposed to yet totally devoid of any distinguishing characteristics that would make it unique. An entire culture that comes to believe that there is nothing left to do in the world, that the greatest feats of human possibility have already come to pass, has nothing to do but pass away. Perhaps it would be better for man to be extinguished altogether in the face of such a fate.

Nietzsche thinks that this kind of self-resignation—indeed, self-abnegation—is the logical conclusion of the historicist philosophy of G. W. F. Hegel. Such an interpretation must surely strike the reader as strange, given what is usually taken to be the inherently *optimistic* nature of Hegelianism. After all, Hegel argued that progress was built-in to history. History is an eternal process of the dialectic, with each historical moment being a concatenation of contradictions. Tension exists between the thesis and the antithesis, but out of the conflict a synthesis is born—one that preserves and builds upon the best of the old historical moment. The ‘best’ that history aims to preserve is freedom, self-actualization, the expansion of human consciousness. In the political realm, for example, modern democratic societies represent clear advancements in freedom over the kinds of societies that existed under medieval feudalism. Such an example of political evolution represents for Hegel a clear victory for the logical and rational processes that are inevitably playing themselves out in history.

For Nietzsche, however, Hegel's philosophy constitutes little more than an unexamined teleology with lamentably progressive or Whiggish consequences. He fiercely objects to Hegel's "pretentious gloss" on human history as rational or absolute because he thought that its emphasis on the collective left little room or purpose for individual free will, self-expression, and self-creation.¹⁸⁰ Far from explaining how freedom comes to be realized in the world, Hegel's philosophy deemphasizes the responsibility the individual has for creating situations of freedom or un-freedom.

Nietzsche similarly decries Hegel's attempt to systematize philosophy and history, combining the two in a single unified narrative. To Nietzsche, Hegel represents the attempt to render impossible the flourishing of distinctly different cultures whose primary legislators of value may have a way of life in mind quite different than that imagined by a German idealist philosopher. Nietzsche speculates in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* that the kind of man Hegel imagines will not have the decency to rid himself of the world; rather, this pitiable man will have no lofty goals whatsoever and will be concerned only with self-preservation. The *last man* is to be the fate of mankind, and Nietzsche openly laments this. He will be totally without the capacity to create new stories and found new cultures, and the result will be the debasement of mankind.

The moral lesson Nietzsche stresses here is the same as in his interpretation of chapter fifteen of *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, "A Thousand and One Goals." The chapter's title, didactic in and of itself, is an allusion to *A Thousand and One Nights* (better known in the West as simply *Arabian Nights*), a compilation of Arabic tales assembled between the twelfth and fourteenth centuries. In one of the collection's more famous stories, the vengeful King

¹⁸⁰ Solomon, Robert C. and Kathleen M. Higgins, *What Nietzsche Really Said*, 170.

Shahryar, having been betrayed by his adulterous wife, promises never to trust another woman again, deciding instead to have his way with a different virgin every night, only to have her executed the next day. The executions continue until three years later when the daughter of the king's vizier, Shahrazad, offers herself to Shahryar in hopes that she can pacify his bloodlust with her story-telling abilities. Shahrazad spends her first night with Shahryar relating one of her stories, holding the king's attention through the night until the early morning when he finally admits that he must be off to his work. Curious about the marvelous story's conclusion, Shahryar spares the young girl's life until the next night when she can finish the story, and he can be done with her. The next night brings more of the same: another marvelous tale uncompleted. This continues for a thousand and one nights until Shahryar makes Shahrazad his queen.

Nietzsche's allusion is chosen aptly in two respects. First, Nietzsche sees the human condition as that of Shahrazad, compelled to constantly construct a new, marvelous, yet utterly fictional story for the sake of her own mortality. A thousand peoples have existed with moralities based on stories holding the attention of an entire culture, whether those tales be of sirens and Trojan horses, serpents and forbidden fruit, or betrayers and a crucified man-God. Story telling preserves life. Only now does the coming of the last-men, marching behind the liberal democratic flag of tolerance and pluralism, endanger the ability of peoples to sustain themselves with their stories (i.e., their religions). Second, the Arabic tales demonstrated that stories without overtly religious overtones could teach valuable moral lessons. This is an important truth for Nietzsche: given Zarathustra's exclamation that "God is dead!" (12) the prophet will have to resort to other means if he wishes to unite mankind in a common story.

There is one very important difference, however, between Shahrazad's plight and the plight of humanity: it matters not whether Shahrazad believes the stories she tells to be true. According to Nietzsche, peoples *must* believe their stories to be true, lest they fall into nihilism and find themselves unable to tell a new story. Should mankind continue on its present course it will find itself tongue-tied and ensure its own execution.

The problem that Nietzsche foresees is a world so encumbered by historical knowledge that there can be no new stories. In such a world there can be no pretenses to the importance of a particular people or nation, for their histories are entirely knowable and therefore unremarkable. Thus Nietzsche predicts that the awareness of one's historically contingent origins will inevitably result in a spirit of cynicism that undercuts the kind of aesthetic politics he wishes to inculcate.

The Transition from Irony to Cynicism

The final danger that Nietzsche identifies as a consequence of the scientific approach to historical studies concerns the way that a culture, and indeed the individuals that inhabit it, understand both themselves and their communities. Nietzsche is adamant over the course of the second *Untimely Meditation* that for people to be considered truly mature, they must exist within the confines of an enveloping horizon. That horizon, beyond which they cannot see, provides the necessarily stability for their values—the reasons on which they act morally and immorally, justly and unjustly. They provide people with their definitions of good and evil so that they might act accordingly and judge the actions of others.

Nietzsche worries, however, that the awareness that one's culture is simply one amongst many—that ultimately there is no reason why its social *mores* and rules should be

treated as more sacred than any other—will ultimately mean the inculcation of an ironic mood in cultures and in individual psyches. This is to say that when one acts morally, it will be solely as a result of an individual's free choice and will; the person will be cognizant of the fact that there is no ultimate foundation for their moral choices, no metaphysics to justify certain behaviors. While Nietzsche's contemporaries seem to give no notice to this problem, he worries about it, expressing concern not so much with ironic behavior itself as with the eventual consequences of its continual practice. He begins the eighth section of his meditation with the following:

It may seem strange, though it ought not to seem self-contradictory, when I ascribe a kind of *ironic self-awareness* to an age accustomed to break into such a loud and innocent rejoicing at its historical culture, and say that it is infused with a presentiment that there is really nothing to rejoice about and a fear that all the merriment of historical knowledge will soon be over and done with.¹⁸¹

Here Nietzsche draws out what must be the necessary progression of the rise, decline, and fall of historical culture. In the beginning, historical culture prides itself on its ability to plumb the wisdom of past ages, to make available to all the information about cultures past and foreign. Eventually, however, historical culture exhausts its own resources. The novelty of recovering more and more information from the past is lost when a person realizes that the very culture of which he is a part is a small and insignificant part of the historical maelstrom. Hundreds of years from now his ancestors will have reduced his own lifetime, his generation, and his culture to a matter of the historical record. From this ironic self-awareness stems a feeling of cynicism, an understanding that ultimately one's actions mean very little, as do the ways of life that characterize one's culture.

¹⁸¹ Nietzsche, *On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life*, 8.1, 100.

What is particularly prescient in Nietzsche's observation here is the fact that the late twentieth century has seen certain thinkers embrace precisely this kind of ironic stance. What Nietzsche describes as a "troubled presentiment that he is in error" is in fact the first part of Richard Rorty's three-part definition of the liberal ironist.¹⁸² Whereas Rorty describes this sentiment as the first part of a personality sufficient to found a liberal utopia, Nietzsche sees it has a harbinger of society's final dissolution. The very ironic sentiment that Rorty wishes to inculcate in the most sophisticated and mature of citizens Nietzsche wants to discourage, characterizing such an ironic posture as the height of *immaturity*. Rorty believes that human beings have the capacity to commit themselves to values and to projects knowing full well that the universe provides no ultimate foundations for them, that they rest merely on individual will and personal preference. Although Nietzsche himself suspects that nothing more than individual will underlies human commitments, loyalties, and preferences, he does not expect the masses of humanity to live without some kind of over-arching story that gives meaning and purpose to their lives. For Nietzsche, both the German historians of his era and the postmodern "pragmatists" of our era ask too much of human beings, and the results of that overreaching is disastrous for mankind.

In order to save mankind from too much historical awareness, Nietzsche proposes that history be written in a way that takes into account specific human psychological needs. No longer may historical study remain the seemingly innocuous attempt to uncover historical facts. Rather, a select few, uniquely qualified individuals must undertake the task of writing history with a view toward a healthy, stable culture. Having reviewed the abuses to which

¹⁸² Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989).

history is put, we now turn to that task, considering what Nietzsche regards as history's proper uses.

CHAPTER 8

THE MONUMENTAL, ANTIQUARIAN, AND CRITICAL MODES OF HISTORY

History... is a tool we use each generation or each year to help get along in the world, discarding the old tool for a new one whenever necessary.

Paul K. Conkin

Although Nietzsche spends most of the second *Untimely Meditation* inveighing against the various dangers associated with an age oversaturated with history, his contribution to historiography is by no means entirely critical. As the essay's title makes plain, it includes a discussion not only of the abuses to which historical knowledge is put, but also of its proper uses—how history can be made to serve the interests of the living. For Nietzsche, the question is not *whether* we should remember; if we did not, we could scarcely distinguish ourselves from the beasts of the field. Rather, the question is *how* we should remember—how history should be written in order to best utilize the individual memories of human beings and the shared memories of communities and cultures.

In sections four through ten of *On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life*, Nietzsche extols the virtue of forgetfulness by describing the human costs—social, cultural, and psychological—of the modern belief in historical study and the assumption that history is progress. In sections two and three, however, Nietzsche praises the value of remembering by identifying the three ways life is actually in need of the services of history. History, Nietzsche argues, “pertains to the living...as a being who acts and strives, as a being who

preserves and reserves, [and] as a being who suffers and seeks deliverance.”¹⁸³ From these different dispositions in the soul of man arise the three pure species of history—the monumental, the antiquarian, and the critical. The genuine historian, Nietzsche argues, must have recourse to each of these modes of history because each ministers to specific human needs and longings.¹⁸⁴ Each method of historical writing, however, is subject to its own characteristic excesses and abuses, thus making the historian’s task all the more delicate and unruly.

On the surface, Nietzsche’s account of the proper uses of history is compelling. But close scrutiny reveals that his historiography casually subordinates science to culture, historical fact to political convenience. Because he thinks that the purpose of history is to secure the psychological health of a nation by imbuing its people with a sense of meaning and destiny, justifying the existence of its institutions, and sanctifying a common morality, Nietzsche’s ethics of history constitutes as much an exercise in mythmaking and aesthetic politics as a contribution to historiography.

Monumental History

The monumental approach to history exists to demonstrate human potential, to provide people images of past greatness. The writers of this sort of history preoccupy themselves with humanity’s highest exemplars—our greatest moral heroes, political statesman, military leaders, religious redeemers, and intellectual innovators. Nietzsche believes that by presenting human beings as historical models worthy of emulation, these

¹⁸³ Nietzsche, *On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life*, 2.1, 67.

¹⁸⁴ Berkowitz, *Nietzsche: The Ethics of an Immoralist*, 32.

histories will provide inspiring examples of courage, dignity, wisdom, and self-sacrifice, thus ensuring the cultivation of a new generation of remarkable human accomplishment. Monumental history is informed by the methodological assumption that acclaimed contributions in art, literature, philosophy, politics, and science share in common the indelible mark of greatness. Recognizing this greatness, the monumental historian dutifully records it, following the commandment which rules over him: “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.”¹⁸⁵ Because greatness is eternal, the achievement of human excellence through acts of greatness should similarly be eternal.

Nietzsche does not take it for granted that every age and every culture has lent itself equally to the pursuit of excellence. In fact, his recognition of the human need for monumental history stems in part from his deep dissatisfaction with German culture in the latter half of the nineteenth century. He takes as his examples of the highest human exemplars Goethe, Schiller, and the men of the Italian Renaissance. Lamentably, according to his account, Germany is sorely lacking in the kinds of people that could engender another great rebirth of learning in the West. In an historical age in which new cultural heroes are absent, people must be reminded of the fact that the past is replete with men of great deeds. Human greatness, Nietzsche argues, has thus far managed to perpetuate itself across time, but it waxes and wanes. He notes:

¹⁸⁵ Nietzsche, *On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life*, 2.2, 68.

...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 – that this is the fundamental idea of the faith in humanity which finds expression in the demand for a *monumental* history.¹⁸⁶

Although the monumental historian is charged with the preservation and promotion of human excellence, he can also serve to impede and destroy it. Monumental history, like antiquarian and critical history, has the potential to fall prey to a particular set of problems when historians practice it to excess or people interpret it in ways that are not conducive to the cultivation of great human beings. For example, confronted with the knowledge of the extraordinary achievements of philosophers like Plato and Aristotle, artists like Michelangelo and Raphael, and scientists like Galileo and Newton, one might reasonably come to believe that striving for greatness is ultimately a futile effort. Why bother with philosophy, painting, or stargazing when one's contributions to each field of human endeavor will inevitably pale in comparison to the gifts bestowed upon us by the giants? If the differences between great men of the past and those of the present are overemphasized, the human spirit for innovation and exploration can be crushed. Human beings ought to strive to emulate historical models, but only while fully cognizant of the fact that such models exist not to be worshipped as religious idols but surpassed as cultural competition.

Similarly, Nietzsche recognizes that human beings can get so caught up in the spirit of adventure and heroism that they are liable to conduct deeds not of courage and nobility but of foolhardiness and fanaticism. Presented with accounts of military valor that stress the character of steadfast leadership but provide little in the way of political context, human beings are liable to exploit any occasion for war in the effort to acquire honor and fame.

¹⁸⁶ Nietzsche, *On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life*, 2.2, 68.

Still, despite what Nietzsche understands as the human predilection toward recklessness in this regard, he maintains that the potential for harm presented by monumental history is relatively small; thus it remains one of the most important forms of history in Nietzsche's typology.¹⁸⁷

Antiquarian History

Whereas monumental history is meant to spur only the highest human individuals to action, antiquarian history serves the needs of humanity at large through the cultivation of psychically healthy individuals and nations. Nietzsche offers as a metric for an individual's psychic health the sense of "love and loyalty" he feels for his nation, the degree to which he can "look back to whence he has come, to where he came into being" and still retain a sense of piety and "give thanks."¹⁸⁸ That is, individuals and peoples are healthy insofar as they are able to preserve a sense of rootedness and historical continuity. Antiquarian history, what might well be titled ancestral history, teaches people to venerate the past; it makes them content with their homelands and customs by infusing them with the solemn significance that comes with being part of a grand historical narrative. It assures people of their special place by explaining the nature of the relationship between kin and countrymen, thus setting them

¹⁸⁷ Nietzsche was not the first political philosopher to articulate the importance of a genre of history that emphasizes the emulation of great historical figures. In the *Prince*, Niccolò Machiavelli argues that potential princes should "read histories and consider in them the actions of excellent men, should see how they conducted themselves in wars, examine the causes of their victories and losses so as to be able to avoid the latter and imitate the former. Above all he should do as some excellent man has done in the past who found someone to imitate who had been praised and glorified before him, whose exploits and actions he always kept beside himself, as they say Alexander the Great imitated Achilles; Caesar, Alexander; Scipio, Cyrus." See Niccolò Machiavelli, *The Prince*, 2nd ed., edited and translated by Harvey C. Mansfield (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), XIV, 60.

¹⁸⁸ Nietzsche, *On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life*, 3.1, 72.

apart from the rest of humanity. Antiquarian history emphasizes above all the familial and the sacred in culture in order to obviate the human experience of despair and anomie that sometimes accompanies lonely existential examination of one's place in a neighborhood, a city, a state, a country, and indeed, the universe. Only by means of a story about how one is intimately related to the past can a person find meaning and purpose. In this way the antiquarian mode of history seeks nothing less than to provide a local and time-bound justification for human existence.

Antiquarian history outlives its usefulness when it degenerates into antiquarianism—the study of the past for the past's sake, regardless of its usefulness for human life. The antiquarian historian maintains a love-hate relationship with the very concept of tradition. On the one hand, it is through the practice of traditional rituals, the maintenance of predictable social mores, and membership in longstanding political institutions that human beings are able to give meaning and purpose to their lives. Yet as Nietzsche readily admits, no way of life can be justified solely in terms of endurance; the passage of time does not confer authoritative status upon any culture. Nor, for that matter, does any particular way of life *deserve* to endure. Too often, Nietzsche argues, human beings become so comfortably inured in nostalgia and sentimentality that they forget that the purpose of historical knowledge is to push them forward, not pull them backward. In extreme cases, the antiquarian sense “paralyzes the man of action who, as one who acts, will and must offend some piety or other.”¹⁸⁹ Due to any number of unforeseeable cultural conflicts, the time will inevitably come in which changes must be made to a society if any part of it is to survive. The antiquarian historian is without recourse in such a situation, for while he knows how to

¹⁸⁹ Nietzsche, *On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life*, 3.4, 75.

preserve life, he is without the knowledge and expertise to help create it. Given this fact, Nietzsche contends that a final mode of history must be practiced as a necessary antidote to the excesses and shortcomings of antiquarian history.

Critical History

Despite the fact that the critical species of history most closely resembles the modern academic, scientific conception of history, it is arguably the most enigmatic of Nietzsche's three modes. It is distinguished most clearly by its negative orientation. While both monumental and antiquarian historians seek to preserve, promote, and indeed celebrate the subject matter of their histories, critical historians take as their subject matter those elements of the past they deem worthy of condemnation. Nietzsche provides an account for the theoretical foundations for critical history when he remarks that

every past...is worthy to be condemned...human violence and weakness have always played a mighty role in them. It is not justice which here sits in judgment; it is even less mercy which pronounces the verdict: it is life alone, that dark, driving power that insatiably thirsts for itself. Its sentence is always unmerciful, always unjust, because it has never proceeded out of a pure well of knowledge; but in most cases the sentence would be the same even if it were pronounced by justice itself. 'For all that exists is worthy of perishing. So it would be better if nothing existed.'¹⁹⁰

Like the historians of monumental and antiquarian history, the critical historian is obliged to make normative judgments about the content of his history. Unlike the first two historians, however, the critical historian is charged with the responsibility of evaluating the total health of a people, a nation, and a culture in order to determine whether history as it is currently taught and practiced is ultimately beneficial or injurious. He must decide what elements of a particular culture's history are emphasized or underemphasized, which

¹⁹⁰ Nietzsche, *On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life*, 3.5, 76. The quoted lines are from Goethe's *Faust*, Part I, 1339-1341.

elements are brought into the light and which ones must remain hidden. In short, he determines nothing less than a people's individual and collective self-understanding—how they view themselves and each other as members of a community in a world of vastly differing cultural communities.

The intellectual and artistic demands that Nietzsche makes of his critical historians betray his true Platonic intentions in the second *Untimely Meditation*: to make history the sole purview of the philosopher. In a compilation of rough notes amounting to a preliminary study of the nature of philosophy and the philosopher's relation to the people, Nietzsche likens the philosopher to a *physician* whose prowess admits the preparation, preservation, moderation, and destruction of culture.¹⁹¹ A reoccurring personage throughout his works, the philosopher as cultural physician can pursue “the problem of the total health of a people, time, race or of humanity,” only by first “applying the knife vivisectionally to the chest of the *virtues of [his] time.*”¹⁹² However, the philosopher, like the medical doctor, possesses the same potential for harm that he does for good. According to Nietzsche, the philosopher proves the most useful when he clarifies the muddled ideas of a culture or rids a people of its *unnecessary* superstitions.¹⁹³ Conversely, he proves the most harmful when he “dissolves the customary moralities” of a culture or deprives a people of its *necessary* illusions.¹⁹⁴ If he has any concern for culture, then, the philosopher must determine the value of ideas not by the standard of truthfulness but on the basis of their consequences for life; he must curtail the

¹⁹¹ Nietzsche, *The Philosopher as Cultural Physician*, 170-172, 73-75.

¹⁹² Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, 2, 35; Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil: Prelude to a Philosophy of the Future*, 212, 137.

¹⁹³ Nietzsche, *The Philosopher as Cultural Physician*, 171, 72.

¹⁹⁴ Nietzsche, *The Philosopher as Cultural Physician*, 171, 73.

unlimited drive to knowledge within himself and within his culture for the sake of both health and unity.

For Nietzsche, then, true history is as much an art as a science; its proper practice requires nothing less than the philosophical consideration of the psychological needs of a community and the constant evaluation of the extent of a community's cultural progress, stagnation, and decline. Although Nietzsche is to be lauded for recognizing that the writing of history—no matter whether it be done by his philosopher historians or by the nineteenth century German historians he criticizes—inevitably involves considerable judgment, his aesthetic approach to history presents a number of problems that should give us pause for consideration.

The problem that lurks in the background of Nietzsche's discussion of the three species of history concerns the rather cavalier attitude he takes toward historical truth. Except on rare occasions, and purely for instrumental and rhetorical effect, Nietzsche takes it for granted that objective, true historical knowledge is possible. Yet during his discussion of the proper manner in which history should be written, he evidences little concern over the increasing availability of large quantities of historical documents and artifacts. Scientifically minded historians rely upon historical excavation work to help them ascertain historical facts. To be sure, such historians unavoidably add an interpretative dimension to the facts they uncover, but their narratives must ultimately be shaped—indeed, determined—by what the available evidence will support. Because Nietzsche's historiography is ultimately an aesthetic one predicated on the intellectual judgment of a philosopher, it admits of no rigid methodological principles that cannot be broken for the sake of social utility. In fact, he explicitly relieves his genuine historians of the responsibility to render the past justly, i.e.,

objectively. Rather, Nietzsche defends history as one of the rhetorical tools that makes imagined national communities possible. Whatever obligations Nietzsche places upon historians are to present and future communities, not to the past. Because of the binary opposition he presents between truth and life, science and history, the view of history put forth in the second *Untimely Meditation* is ultimately one of mythmaking and poetry, the dangers of which deserve enumeration.

Although Nietzsche deems the subject of monumental history to be the enduring truth about human excellence, he admits that practitioners of this mode of history run the risk of having their work become “free poetic invention.”¹⁹⁵ While he correctly labels this as a problem, he provides no assurance to the reader that he has given any thought to how many noble lies of omission or commission are necessary before a story suddenly becomes inadmissible as history. Clearly, Nietzsche is not so much concerned that lies are being told as he is with the effects of such lies.

The monumental conception of the past purportedly exists to remind mankind of its greatest exemplars. However, by fabricating some of the details surrounding important historical figures and failing to disclose others, the examples posed by monumental figures only remain that much further away from ordinary people. Nietzsche does not want the monumental conception of history dedicated to mythic heroes, but he comes close to ensuring exactly that by not admitting the necessity of exposing the foibles of literary, artistic, philosophic, and scientific celebrities. For example, how much less would Americans know about Abraham Lincoln were we subject to the Nietzschean view of history? Presumably we would still know that he was president of the United States from

¹⁹⁵ Nietzsche, *On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life*, 2.5, 70.

1861-1865 and presided over a disastrous Civil War. We might know that he issued the Emancipation Proclamation on January 1, 1863, abolishing slavery in the states that rebelled against the Union. No doubt we would still read stories emphasizing his heroism, wisdom, courage, pride, loyalty, and selflessness. But would we know anything of the deep melancholy that characterized his demeanor? Would the increased speculation that Lincoln suffered from something like what we now call clinical depression make him any less an admirable statesman—a model worthy of emulation? Nietzsche is not forthcoming with answers to these questions.

Answers to such questions prove elusive in part because Nietzsche provides so scant an account of the educational process that his philosopher historians must undergo before they become qualified to write monumental history (or, indeed, any other kind of history). He remarks that only men of action, experience, and reflection are suited to the writing of history, but this serves only to further complicate the problem. Nietzsche is arguing quite explicitly that the history of great human beings can only be written by other great human beings. But would any society wish that history become the purview of such a philosophically and experientially rarified elite? How much good work would be lost if histories were written only by people who had direct experience of their historical subject before undertaking an historical research project of any kind? To take a concrete example, would Nietzsche pay no respect to John Keegan's *The Face of Battle* simply because its author had admittedly never experienced war on the ground? Relying only on Nietzsche's text to provide a response, the answer must be yes.

Similar problems plague Nietzsche's discussion of the antiquarian conception of history. Presumably he would have no problem with an entire cultural history of a people

being invented out of whole cloth were the philosopher historian to determine that such a history ultimately served to benefit culture. Here once again Nietzsche reveals his affinities with Plato by explicitly justifying the admission of noble lies as the necessary foundation for stable societies. Indeed, he shares with Plato the belief that historical truth and human reason alone are insufficient to keep the state cohesive. But if one accepts this argument, the ends identified by the philosopher historian will always justify the means. In such a society where the truth of history is determined by a privileged few, its people, as with the citizens of Oceania, should not expect to know for certain whether they are at war with Eastasia or Eurasia.

As for the critical historian, he faces perhaps the most difficult questions of all. On what basis does one judge the overall health and stability of a society? How does one go about the business of determining whether history as it is currently taught and practiced is ultimately proving beneficial or injurious for the society? How can he alone legislate changes in the curriculum and, by extension, change a people's self-understanding? Nietzsche provides no help in this regard. He tells us nothing specific about what histories are worthy of uncovering—nothing of what is worthy of knowing, preserving, or denying—except to proclaim that the genuine historian will somehow know all of these things. As Nietzsche's friend Erwin Rohde criticized the essay in a letter, Nietzsche unfortunately "deduces all too little," leaving up to his reader more "than is fair or desirable."¹⁹⁶

The second *Untimely Meditation* ends with a call for the recovery of Greek wisdom in the hopes that grand new art and religion would flourish in a renewed German culture made possible through this new conception of historical writing. However, the nostalgia displayed

¹⁹⁶ Quoted in Lampert, *Nietzsche and Modern Times*, 282.

in the closing does less to help the reader understand the nature of Nietzsche's philosophical and historical task than to remind him that at this time he was still very much under the spell of the composer Richard Wagner. With Wagner he was determined to reshape German culture on the model of Greek tragedy, to introduce new forms of opera and drama that would come as close as humanly possible to the art responsible for the original birth of wisdom in classical Greece. But with the burgeoning of science in the academy across all disciplines and the spread of bourgeois culture in Germany, Nietzsche's wishes were never fulfilled.

In the end, Nietzsche's attempts to reinvigorate nineteenth century German culture through the institution of a radical historical methodology was bound to fail. It failed because historical truth and life, or vitality as Nietzsche sometimes refers to it, need not be viewed as being in opposition. All of the goals that Nietzsche prescribes for history—to provide inspiration and motivation, preserve tradition and meaning, and make normative judgments about the value of particular historical narratives—are all largely achieved by historians who practice the scientific mode of history he so vehemently opposed. Nietzsche is right to ask academic historians to consider the value of their historical contributions, to work less as thinking, writing, and publishing machines and more as genuine contributors to national culture. But his demand that historical work be limited to a select few only serves to limit rather than expand the possibilities of good cultural history. History practiced democratically may allow a much wider range of useful and not so useful contributions, but it is from this variety that we distinguish the great historians from the mediocre ones, memorable and meaningful history from the accountant's record of the past.

CHAPTER 9

CONCLUSION

Historical sense and poetic sense should not, in the end, be contradictory, for if poetry is the little myth we make, history is the big myth we live, and in our living, constantly remake.

Robert Penn Warren

Although it has been my purpose to show that Nietzsche's historiography is far more complicated and far less innocuous than most interpreters have been willing to admit, I have also tried to show that his criticisms of nineteenth century German culture can still speak to us in ways that might help us improve our own democratic culture.

Every historian should have as his or her goal a deep and abiding dedication to uncovering and faithfully communicating historical fact. But the facts that one chooses to report, the reasons that undergird one's program of historical research can vary widely, and no apologies need be made for historical accuracy that happens to serve a political agenda. With this realization in mind, I think that the monumental, antiquarian, and critical approaches to history could be adapted in ways that serve the ends of democratic culture.

To be sure, even societies such as ours that promote pluralism, egalitarianism, and respect for inherent human dignity have their heroes to be lionized and traditions to be held sacred. In the American political tradition, such figures as Thomas Paine, Benjamin Franklin, James Madison, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Mark Twain, W. E. B. Du Bois, Jane Addams, and Malcolm X immediately come to mind, as do such values

as individualism, natural rights, equality before the law, upward mobility, religious tolerance, free and fair elections, and economic prosperity. One could easily imagine a corresponding genre of critical history that weighed the contributions of notable American citizens by their ability to help maximize the liberties and utilities of individuals and extend the sphere of human welfare and respect to the historically disadvantaged. Despite Nietzsche's protestations, the positive effects of such history in educating American citizens could only be increased by the historian's dedication to the unvarnished truths surrounding both progress and oppression.

If the political problems that abound in the United States can be ascribed to a failure of democratic political practice, it is due in large part to the failure to extend democratic culture to the outer regions of American society. Only a society intellectually prepared and genuinely eager to discuss the legitimate functions of government has the wherewithal to determine the general good in an objective fashion and finally realize the promise of democracy. And only a society genuinely schooled in the history of democracy—made fully aware of its heroes, its traditions, its pitfalls—can hope to achieve this goal. His deep antipathy toward democracy notwithstanding, Nietzsche's views on history are very helpful in this regard, and we should make no apologies for enlisting him in our own democratic project of cultural renewal.

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