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Excerpts from *The Use and Abuse of History* (1878)

By Friedrich Nietzsche

Forward

"Incidentally, I despise everything which merely instructs me without increasing or immediately enlivening my activity." These are Goethe's words. With them, as with a heartfelt expression of *Ceterum censeo [I judge otherwise]*, our consideration of the worth and the worthlessness of history may begin. For this work is to set down why, in the spirit of Goethe's saying, we must seriously despise instruction without vitality, knowledge which enervates activity, and history as an expensive surplus of knowledge and a luxury, because we lack what is still most essential to us and because what is superfluous is hostile to what is essential. To be sure, we need history. But we need it in a manner different from the way in which the spoilt idler in the garden of knowledge uses it, no matter how elegantly he may look down on our coarse and graceless needs and distresses. That is, we need it for life and action, not for a comfortable turning away from life and action or merely for glossing over the egotistical life and the cowardly bad act. We wish to use history only insofar as it serves living. But there is a degree of doing history and a valuing of it through which life atrophies and degenerates. To bring this phenomenon to light as a remarkable symptom of our time is every bit as necessary as it may be painful.

I have tried to describe a feeling which has often enough tormented me. I take my revenge on this feeling when I expose it to the general public. Perhaps with such description someone or other will have reason to point out to me that he also knows this particular sensation but that I have not felt it with sufficient purity and naturalness and definitely have not expressed myself with the appropriate certainty and mature experience. Perhaps one or two will respond in this way. However, most people will tell me that this feeling is totally wrong, unnatural, abominable, and absolutely forbidden, that with it, in fact, I have shown myself unworthy of the powerful historical tendency of the times, as it has been, by common knowledge, observed for the past two generations, particularly among the Germans. Whatever the reaction, now that I dare to expose myself with this natural description of my feeling, common decency will be fostered rather than shamed, because I am providing many opportunities for a contemporary tendency like the reaction just mentioned to make polite pronouncements. Moreover, I obtain for myself something of even more value to me than respectability: I become publicly instructed and set straight about our times.

This essay is also out of touch with the times because here I am trying for once to see as a contemporary disgrace, infirmity, and defect something of which our age is justifiably proud, its historical culture. For I believe, in fact, that we are all suffering from a consumptive historical fever and at the very least should recognize that we are afflicted with it. If Goethe with good reason said that with our virtues we simultaneously cultivate our faults and if, as everyone knows, a hypertrophic virtue (as the historical sense of our age appears to me to be) can serve to destroy a people just as well as a hypertrophic vice, then people may make allowance for me this once. Also in my defense I should not conceal the fact that the experiences which aroused these feelings of torment in me I have derived for the most part from myself and only from others for the purpose of comparison and that, insofar as I am a student more of ancient times, particularly the Greeks, I come as a child in these present times to such anachronistic experience concerning myself. But I must be allowed to ascribe this much to myself on account of my profession as a classical philologist, for I would not know what sense classical philology would have in our age unless it is to be effective by its inappropriateness for the times, that is, in opposition to the age, thus working on the age, and, we hope, for the benefit of a coming time.

Insofar as history stands in the service of life, it stands in the service of an unhistorical power and will therefore, in this subordinate position, never be able to (and should never be able to) become pure science, something like mathematics. However, the problem to what degree living requires the services of history generally is one of the most important questions and concerns with respect to the health of a human being, a people, or a culture. For with a certain excess of history, living crumbles away and degenerates. Moreover, history itself also degenerates through this decay.

The Trinity of Methods for History

However, the fact that living requires the services of history must be just as clearly understood as the principle, which will be demonstrated later, that an excess of history harms the living person. In three respects history belongs to the living person: it belongs to him as an active and striving person; it belongs to him as a person who preserves and admires; it belongs to him as a suffering person in need of emancipation. This trinity of relationships corresponds to a trinity of methods for history, to the extent that one may make the distinctions, a *monumental* method, an *antiquarian* method, and a *critical* method.

The Monumental Method for History

History belongs, above all, to the active and powerful man, the man who fights one great battle, who needs the exemplary men, teachers, and comforters and cannot find them among his contemporary companions. Thus, history belongs to Schiller: for our age is so bad, said Goethe, that the poet no longer encounters any useful nature in the human life surrounding him. Looking back to the active men, Polybius calls political history an example of the right preparation for ruling a state and the most outstanding teacher, something which, through the memory of other people's accidents, advises us to bear with resolution the changes in our happiness. Anyone who has learned to recognize the sense of history in this way must get annoyed to see inquisitive travelers or painstaking micrologists climbing all over the pyramids of the great things of the past. There, in the place where he finds the stimulation to breathe deeply and to make things better, he does not wish to come across an idler who strolls around, greedy for distraction or stimulation, as among the accumulated art treasures of a gallery.

In order not to despair and feel disgust in the midst of weak and hopeless idlers, surrounded by apparently active, but really only agitated and fidgeting companions, the active man looks behind him and interrupts the path to his goal to take a momentary deep breath. His purpose is some happiness or other, perhaps not his own, often that of a people or of humanity collectively. He runs back away from resignation and uses history as a way of fighting resignation. For the most part, no reward beckons him on, other than fame; that is, becoming a candidate for an honored place in the temple of history, where he himself can be, in his turn, a teacher, consoler, and advisor for those who come later.

For his orders state: whatever once was able to expand the idea of "Human being" and to define it more beautifully must constantly be present in order that it always keeps its potential. The greatest moments in the struggle of single individuals make up a chain, in which a range of mountains of humanity are joined over thousands of years. For me the loftiest thing of such a moment from the distant past is bright and great--that is the basic idea of the faith in humanity which expresses itself in the demand for a monumental history. However, with this demand that greatness should be eternal there is immediately ignited the most dreadful struggle. For everything else still living cries out no. The monumental should not be created--that is opposition's cry.

The dull habit, the small and the base, filling all corners of the world, like a heavy atmosphere clouding around everything great, casts itself as a barrier, deceiving, dampening and suffocating along the road which greatness has to go toward immortality. This way, however, leads through human minds! Through the minds of anxious and short-lived animals, who always come back to the same needs and who with difficulty postpone their destruction for a little while. As a first priority they want only one thing: to live at any price. Who might suppose among them the difficult torch race of monumental history, through which alone greatness lives once more! Nevertheless, a few of them always wake up

again, those who, by a look back at past greatness and strengthened by their observation, feel so blessed, as if the life of human beings is a beautiful thing, as if it is indeed the most beautiful fruit of this bitter plant to know that in earlier times once one man went through this existence proud and strong, another with profundity, a third with pity and a desire to help--all however leaving behind *one* teaching: that the person lives most beautifully who does not reflect upon existence.

If the common man considers this time span with such melancholy seriousness and longing, those men on their way to immortality and to monumental history knew how to bring to life an Olympian laughter or at least a lofty scorn. Often they climbed with irony into their graves, for what was there of them to bury! Surely only what had always impressed them as cinders, garbage, vanity, animality and what now sinks into oblivion, long after it was exposed to their contempt. But one thing will live, the monogram of their very own essence, a work, a deed, an uncommon inspiration, a creation. That will live, because no later world can do without it. In this most blessed form fame is indeed something more than the expensive piece of our *amour propre*, as Schopenhauer has called it. It is the belief in the unity and continuity of the greatness of all times. It is a protest against the changes of the generations and transience!

Now, what purpose is served for contemporary man by the monumental consideration of the past, busying ourselves with the classics and rarities of earlier times? He derives from that the fact that the greatness which was once there at all events once was *possible* and therefore will really be possible once again. He goes along his path more bravely, for now the doubt which falls over him in weaker hours; that he might perhaps be wishing for the impossible, is beaten back from the field. Let us assume that somebody believes it would take no more than a hundred productive men, effective people brought up in a new spirit, to get rid of what has become trendy...how must it strengthen him to perceive that the culture of the Renaissance raised itself on the shoulders of such a crowd of a hundred men.

Nevertheless, to learn right away something new from the same example, how fleeting and weak, how imprecise that comparison would be! If the comparison is to carry out this powerful effect, how much of the difference will be missed in the process. How forcefully must the individuality of the past be wrenched into a general shape, with all its sharp corners and angles broken off for the sake of the correspondence! In fact, basically something that once was possible could appear possible a second time only if the Pythagoreans were correct in thinking that with the same constellations of the celestial bodies the same phenomena on the Earth had to repeat themselves, even in the small single particulars, so that when the stars have a certain position relative to each other, a Stoic and an Epicurean will, in an eternal recurrence, unite and assassinate Caesar, and with another stellar position Columbus will eternally rediscover America.

Only if the Earth were always to begin its theatrical performance once again after the fifth act, if it were certain that the same knot of motives, the same *deus ex machina*, the same catastrophe returned in the same determined interval, could the powerful man desire monumental history in complete iconic *truth*, that is, each fact in its precisely described characteristics and unity, and probably not before the time when astronomers have once again become astrologers. Until that time monumental history will not be able to produce that full truthfulness. It will always bring closer what is unlike, generalize, and finally make things equal. It will always tone down the difference in motives and events, in order to set down the monumental *effectus* [effect], that is, the exemplary effect worthy of imitation, at the cost of the *causae* [cause]. Thus, because monumental history turns away as much as possible from the cause, we can call it a collection of "effects in themselves" with less exaggeration than calling it events which will have an effect on all ages. What is celebrated in folk festivals and in religious or military remembrance days is basically such an "effect in itself." It is the thing which does not let the ambitious sleep, which for the enterprising lies like an amulet on the heart, but it is not the true

historical interconnection between cause and effect, which fully recognized, would only prove that never again could anything completely the same fall out in the dice throw of future contingency.

As long as the soul of historical writing lies in the great *driving impulses* which a powerful man derives from it, as long as the past must be written about as worthy of imitation, as capable of being imitated, with the possibility of a second occurrence, history is definitely in danger of becoming something altered, reinterpreted into something more beautiful, and thus coming close to free poeticizing. Indeed, there are times which one cannot distinguish at all between a monumental history and a mythic fiction, because from a single world one of these impulses can be derived as easily as the other. Thus, if the monumental consideration of the past *rules* over the other forms of analyzing it, I mean, over the antiquarian and the critical methods, then the past itself suffers *harm*. Really large parts of it are forgotten, despised, and flow forth like an uninterrupted gray flood, and only a few embellished facts raise themselves up above, like islands. Something unnatural and miraculous strikes our vision of the remarkable person who becomes especially visible, just like the golden hips which the pupils of Pythagoras wished to attribute to their master.

Monumental history deceives through its analogies. It attracts the spirited man to daring acts with its seductive similarities and the enthusiastic man to fanaticism. If we imagine this history really in the hands and heads of the talented egoists and the wild crowds of evil rascals, then empires are destroyed, leaders assassinated, wars and revolutions instigated, and the number of the historical "effects in themselves," that is, the effects without adequate causes, increased once more. No matter how much monumental history can serve to remind us of the injuries among great and active people, whether for better or worse, that is what it first brings about when the impotent and inactive empower themselves with it and serve it.

Let us take the simplest and most frequent example. If we imagine to ourselves uncultured and weakly cultured natures energized and armed by monumental cultural history, against whom will they now direct their weapons? Against their hereditary enemies, the strong cultural spirits and also against the only ones who are able to learn truly from that history, that is, for life, and to convert what they have learned into a noble practice. For them the path will be blocked and the air darkened, if we dance around a half-understood monument of some great past or other like truly zealous idolaters, as if we wanted to state: "See, that is the true and real culture. What concern of yours is becoming and willing!" Apparently this dancing swarm possesses even the privilege of good taste. The creative man always stands at a disadvantage with respect to the man who only looks on and does not play his own hand, as for example in all times the political know-it-all was wiser, more just, and more considerate than the ruling statesman.

If we want to transfer into the area of culture the customs of popular agreement and the popular majority and, as it were, to require the artist to stand in his own defense before the forum of the artistically inert types, then we can take an oath in advance that he will be condemned, not in spite of but just *because* his judges have solemnly proclaimed the canon of monumental culture (that is, in accordance with the given explanation, culture which in all ages "has had effects"). Whereas, for the judges everything which is not yet monumental, because it is contemporary, lacks, first, the need for history, second, the clear inclination toward history, and third, the very authority of history. On the other hand, their instinct tells them that culture can be struck dead by culture. The monumental is definitely not to rise up once more. And for that their instinct uses precisely what has the authority of the monumental from the past.

So they are knowledgeable about culture because they generally like to get rid of culture. They behave as if they were doctors, while basically they are only concerned with mixing poisons. Thus, they develop their languages and their taste, in order to explain in their discriminating way why they so persistently disapprove of all offerings of more nourishing cultural food. For they do not want greatness to arise. Their method is to say: "See greatness is already there!" In truth, this greatness that is already

there is of as little concern to them as what arises out of it. Of that their life bears witness. Monumental history is the theatrical costume in which they pretend that their hate for the powerful and the great of their time is a fulfilling admiration for the strong and the great of past times. In this, through disguise they invert the real sense of that method of historical observation into its opposite. Whether they know it or not, they certainly act as if their motto were: let the dead bury the living.

Each of the three types of existing history is only exactly right for a distinct particular situation... If a man who wants to create greatness uses the past, he seizes upon it for himself by means of monumental history; in contrast, one who is habituated by tradition and custom insists on cultivating the past as an antiquarian historian; and only one whose breast is oppressed by a present need and who wants to cast off his load at any price has a need for critical history, i.e., history which tries and passes judgment. Many a harm stems from the thoughtless transplanting of plants: the critical man without need, the antiquarian without piety, and the connoisseur of greatness without the ability for greatness are the sort who are susceptible to weeds, alienated from natural mother earth and thus degenerate growths.

The Antiquarian Method of History

History belongs secondly to the man who preserves and honors, to the person who with faith and love looks back in the direction from which he has come, where he has been. Through this reverence he, as it were, gives thanks for his existence. While he nurtures with a gentle hand what has stood from time immemorial, he wants to preserve the conditions under which he came into existence for those who are to come after him. And so he serves life. His possession of his ancestors' goods changes the ideas in such a soul, for those goods are far more likely to take possession of his soul. The small, limited, crumbling, and archaic keep their own worth and integrity, because the conserving and honoring soul of the antiquarian man settles on these things and there prepares for itself a secret nest. The history of his city becomes for him the history of his own self. He understands the walls, the turreted gate, the dictate of the city council, and the folk festival, like an illustrated diary of his youth, and he rediscovers for himself in all this his force, his purpose, his passion, his opinion, his foolishness, and his bad habits. He says to himself, here one could live, for here one may live, and here one can go on living, because we endure and do not collapse overnight. Thus, with this "We" he looks back over the past amazing lives of individuals and feels himself like the spirit of the house, the generation, and the city. From time to time he personally greets from the far away, obscure, and confused centuries the soul of a people as his own soul, with a feeling of completion and premonition, a scent of almost lost tracks, an instinctively correct reading even of a past which has been written over, a swift understanding of the erased and reused parchments (which have, in fact, been erased and written over many times). These are his gifts and his virtues. With them stands Goethe in front of the memorial to Erwin von Steinbach. In the storm of his feeling the veil of the historical cloud spread out between them was torn apart. He saw the German work for the first time once more, "working from the strong rough German soul." Such a sense and attraction led the Italians of the Renaissance and reawoke in their poets the old Italian genius, to a "wonderfully renewed sound of the ancient lyre," as Jakob Burckhardt says. But that antiquarian historical sense of reverence has the highest value when it infuses into the modest, raw, even meagre conditions in which an individual or a people live a simple moving feeling of pleasure and satisfaction, in the way, for example, Niebuhr admitted with honest sincerity he could live happily on moor and heath among free farmers who had a history, without missing art...

Sometimes it seems as if it is an obstinate lack of understanding which keeps individuals, as it were, screwed tight to these companions and surroundings, to this arduous daily routine, to these bare mountain ridges, but it is the most healthy lack of understanding, the most beneficial to the community, as anyone knows who has clearly experienced the frightening effects of an adventurous desire to wander away, sometimes even among entire hordes of people, or who sees nearby the condition of a people which has lost faith in its ancient history and has fallen into a restless cosmopolitan choice and a

constant search for novelty after novelty. The opposite feeling, the sense of well being of a tree for its roots, the happiness to know oneself in a manner not entirely arbitrary and accidental, but as someone who has grown out of a past, as an heir, flower, and fruit, and thus to have one's existence excused, indeed justified, this is what people nowadays lovingly describe as the real historical sense.

Now, that is naturally not the condition in which a person would be most capable of dissolving the past into pure knowledge. Thus, also we perceive here what we discerned in connection with monumental history, that the past itself suffers, so long as history serves life and is ruled by the drive to live. To speak with some freedom in the illustration, the tree feels its roots more than it can see them. The extent of this feeling, however, is measured by the size and force of its visible branches. If the tree makes a mistake here, then how mistaken it will be about the entire forest around it! From that forest the tree only knows and feels something insofar as this hinders or helps it, but not otherwise. The antiquarian sense of a person, a civic community, an entire people always has a very highly restricted field of vision. It does not perceive most things at all, and the few things which it does perceive it looks at far too closely and in isolation. It cannot measure it and therefore takes everything as equally important. Thus, for the antiquarian sense each single thing is too important. For it assigns to the things of the past no difference in value and proportion which would distinguish things from each other fairly, but measures things by the proportions of the antiquarian individual or people looking back into the past.

Here there is always the imminent danger that at some point everything old and past, especially what still enters a particular field of vision, is taken as equally worthy of reverence but that everything which does not fit this respect for ancient things, like the new and the coming into being, is rejected and treated as hostile. So even the Greeks tolerated the hieratic style of their plastic arts alongside the free and the great styles, indeed, they not only tolerated later the pointed noses and the frosty smiles, but made them into an elegant fashion. When the sense of a people is hardened like this, when history serves the life of the past in such a way that it buries further living, especially higher living, when the historical sense no longer conserves life, but mummifies it, then the tree dies unnaturally, from the top gradually down to the roots, and at last the roots themselves are generally destroyed. Antiquarian history itself degenerates in that moment when it no longer inspires and fills with enthusiasm the fresh life of the present. Then reverence withers away. The scholarly habit lives on without it and orbits in an egotistical and self-satisfied manner around its own centre. Then we get a glimpse of the wretched drama of a blind mania for collecting, a restless compiling together of everything that ever existed. The man envelops himself in a moldy smell. With the antiquarian style, he manages to corrupt a significant talent, a noble need, into an insatiable new lust, a desire for everything really old. Often he sinks so deep that he is finally satisfied with that nourishment and takes pleasure in gobbling up for himself the dust of biographical rubbish.

But even when this degeneration does not enter into it, when antiquarian history does not lose the basis upon which it alone can take root as a cure for living, enough dangers still remain, especially if it becomes too powerful and grows over the other ways of dealing with the past. Antiquarian history knows only how to preserve life, not how to generate it. Therefore, it always undervalues what is coming into being, because it has no instinctive feel for it, as, for example, monumental history has. Thus, antiquarian history hinders the powerful willing of new things; it cripples the active man, who always, as an active person, will and must set aside reverence to some extent. The fact that something has become old now gives birth to the demand that it must be immortal, for when a man reckons what every such ancient fact, an old custom of his fathers, a religious belief, an inherited political right, has undergone throughout its existence, what sum of reverence and admiration from individuals and generations ever since, then it seems presumptuous or even criminal to replace such an antiquity with something new and to set up in opposition to such a numerous cluster of revered and admired things the single fact of what is coming into being and what is present

The Critical Method for History

[The final] method of analyzing the past is quite often necessary for human beings, alongside the monumental and the antiquarian: the *critical* method. Once again this is in the service of living. A person must have the power and from time to time use it to break a past and to dissolve it, in order to be able to live. He manages to do this by dragging the past before the court of justice, investigating it meticulously, and finally condemning it. That past is worthy of condemnation; for that is how it stands with human things: in them human force and weakness have always been strong. Here it is not righteousness which sits in the judgment seat or, even less, mercy which announces judgment, but life alone, that dark, driving, insatiable self-desiring force. Its judgment is always unmerciful, always unjust, because it never emerges from a pure spring of knowledge, but in most cases the judgment would be like that anyway, even if righteousness itself were to utter it. "For everything that arises is *worth* destroying. Therefore, it would be better that nothing arose." It requires a great deal of power to be able to live and to forget just how much life and being unjust are one and the same. Luther himself once voiced the opinion that the world only came into being through the forgetfulness of God; if God had thought about "heavy artillery," he would never have made the world. From time to time, however, this same life, which uses forgetting, demands the temporary destruction of this forgetfulness. For it should be made quite clear how unjust the existence of something or other is, a right, a caste, a dynasty, for example, and how this thing merits destruction.

For when its past is analyzed critically, then we grasp with a knife at its roots and go cruelly beyond all reverence. It is always a dangerous process, that is, a dangerous process for life itself. And people or ages serving life in this way, by judging and destroying a past, are always dangerous and in danger. For, since we are now the products of earlier generations, we are also the products of their aberrations, passions, mistakes, and even crimes. It is impossible to loose oneself from this chain entirely. When we condemn that confusion and consider ourselves released from it, then we have not overcome the fact that we are derived from it. In the best case, we bring the matter to a conflict between our inherited customary nature and our knowledge, in fact, even to a war between a new strict discipline and how we have been brought up and what we have inherited from time immemorial. We cultivate a new habit, a new instinct, a second nature, so that the first nature atrophies. It is an attempt to give oneself, as it were, a past *a posteriori* [after the fact], out of which we may be descended in opposition to the one from which we are descended. It is always a dangerous attempt, because it is so difficult to find a borderline to the denial of the past and because the second nature usually is weaker than the first. Too often what remains is a case of someone who understands the good without doing it, because we also understand what is better without being able to do it. But here and there victory is nevertheless achieved, and for the combatants, for those who make use of critical history for their own living, there is even a remarkable consolation, namely, they know that that first nature was at one time or another once a second nature and that every victorious second nature becomes a first nature.

Summary

These are the services which history can carry out for living. Every person and every people, according to its goals, forces, and needs, uses a certain knowledge of the past, sometimes as monumental history, sometimes as antiquarian history, and sometimes as critical history, but not as a crowd of pure thinkers only watching life closely, not as people eager for knowledge, individuals only satisfied by knowledge, for whom an increase of understanding is the only goal, but always only for the purpose of living and, in addition, under the command and the highest guidance of this life. This is the natural relationship to history of an age, a culture, and a people: summoned up by hunger, regulated by the degree of the need, held to limits by the plastic power within, the understanding of the past is desired at all times to serve the future and the present, not to weaken the present, not to uproot a forceful living future. That all is simple, as the truth is simple, and is also immediately convincing for anyone who does not begin by letting himself be guided by historical proof.