Consider the herds that are feeding yonder: they know not the meaning of yesterday or today; they graze and ruminate, move or rest, from morning to night, from day to day, taken up with their little loves and hates and the mercy of the moment, feeling neither melancholy nor satiety. Man cannot see them without regret, for even in the pride of his humanity he looks enviously on the beast’s happiness. He wishes simply to live without satiety or pain, like the beast; yet it is all in vain, for he will not change places with it. He may ask the beast—“Why do you look at me and not speak to me of your happiness?” The beast wants to answer—“Because I always forget what I wished to say”; but he forgets this answer, too, and is silent; and the man is left to wonder.

He wonders also about himself—that he cannot learn to forget, but hangs on the past: however far or fast he runs, that chain runs with him. It is matter for wonder: the moment that is here and gone, that was nothing before and nothing after, returns like a specter to trouble the quiet of a later moment. A leaf is continually dropping out of the volume of time and fluttering away—and suddenly it flutters back into the man’s lap. Then he says, “I remember . . . ,” and envies the beast that forgets at once and sees every moment really die, sink into night and mist, extinguished forever. The beast lives unhistorically; for it “goes into” the present, like a number, without leaving any curious remainder. It cannot dissimulate, it conceals nothing; at every moment it seems what it actually is, and thus can be nothing that is not honest. But man is always resisting the great and continually increasing weight of the past; it

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presses him down and bows his shoulders; he travels with a dark invisible bur-
den that he can plausibly disown, and is only too glad to disown in converse
with his fellows—in order to excite their envy. And so it hurts him, like the
thought of a lost paradise, to see a herd grazing, or, nearer still, a child that
has nothing yet of the past to disown and plays in a happy blindness between
the walls of the past and the future. And yet its play must be disturbed, and
only too soon will it be summoned from its little kingdom of oblivion. Then
it learns to understand the words “once upon a time,” the “open sesame” that
lets in battle, suffering, and weariness on mankind and reminds them what
their existence really is—an imperfect tense that never becomes a present.
And when death brings at last the desired forgetfulness, it abolishes life and
being together, and sets the seal on the knowledge that “being” is merely a
continual “has been,” a thing that lives by denying and destroying and contra-
dicting itself.

If happiness and the chase for new happiness keep alive in any sense the
will to live, no philosophy has perhaps more truth than the cynic’s: for the
beast’s happiness, like that of the perfect cynic, is the visible proof of the truth
of cynicism. The smallest pleasure, if it be only continuous and makes one
happy, is incomparably a greater happiness than the more intense pleasure
that comes as an episode, a wild freak, a mad interval between ennui, desire,
and privation. But in the smallest and greatest happiness there is always one
thing that makes it happiness: the power of forgetting, or, in more learned
phrase, the capacity of feeling “unhistorically” throughout its duration. One
who cannot leave himself behind on the threshold of the moment and forget
the past, who cannot stand on a single point, like a goddess of victory, with-
out fear or giddiness, will never know what happiness is; and, worse still, will
never do anything to make others happy. The extreme case would be the man
without any power to forget who is condemned to see “becoming” every-
where. Such a man no longer believes in himself or his own existence; he
sees everything fly past in an external succession and loses himself in the
stream of becoming. At last, like the logical disciple of Heraclitus, he will
hardly dare to raise his finger. Forgetfulness is a property of all action, just
as not only light but darkness is bound up with the life of every organism.
One who wished to feel everything historically would be like a man forcing
himself to refrain from sleep or a beast who had to live by chewing a con-
tinual cud. Thus even a happy life is possible without remembrance, as the
beast shows: but life in any true sense is absolutely impossible without for-
getfulness. Or, to put my conclusion better, there is a degree of sleeplessness,
of rumination, of “historical sense,” that injures and finally destroys the liv-
ing thing, be it a man or a people or a system of culture.

To fix this degree and the limits to the memory of the past, if it is not to
become the gravedigger of the present, we must see clearly how great is the
“plastic power” of a man or a community or a culture; I mean the power of
specifically growing out of one’s self, of making the past and the strange one
body with the near and the present, of healing wounds, replacing what is lost,
repairing broken molds. There are men who have this power so slightly that
a single sharp experience, a single pain, often a little injustice, will lacerate
their souls like the scratch of a poisoned knife. There are others who are so
little injured by the worst misfortunes, and even by their own spiteful actions,
as to feel tolerably comfortable, with a fairly quiet conscience, in the midst
of them—or at any rate shortly afterwards. The deeper the roots of a man’s
inner nature, the better will he take the past into himself; and the greatest and
most powerful nature would be known by the absence of limits for the his-
torical sense to overgrow and work harm. It would assimilate and digest the
past, however foreign, and turn it to sap. Such a nature can forget what it can-
not subdue; there is no break in the horizon, and nothing to remind it that
there are still men, passions, theories, and aims on the other side. This is a
universal law: a living thing can only be healthy, strong, and productive
within a certain horizon; if it is incapable of drawing one round itself, or too
selfish to lose its own view in another’s, it will come to an untimely end.

Cheerfulness, a good conscience, belief in the future, the joyful deed—all
depend, in the individual as well as the nation, on there being a line that
divides the visible and clear from the vague and shadowy; we must know the
right time to forget as well as the right time to remember, and instinctively
see when it is necessary to feel historically and when unhistorically. This is
the point that the reader is asked to consider: that the unhistorical and the his-
torical are equally necessary to the health of an individual, a community, and
a system of culture.

Everyone has noticed that a man’s historical knowledge and range of
feeling may be very limited, his horizon as narrow as that of an Alpine val-
ley, his judgments incorrect and his experience falsely supposed original, and
yet in spite of all the incorrectness and falsity he may stand forth in uncon-
querable health and vigor, to the joy of all who see him; whereas another man
with far more judgment and learning will fail in comparison, because the
lines of his horizon are continually changing and shifting, and he cannot
shake himself free from the delicate network of his truth and righteousness
for a downright act of will or desire. We saw that the beast, absolutely “unhistorical,” with the narrowest of horizons, has yet a certain happiness and lives at least without hypocrisy or ennui; and so we may hold the capacity of feeling (to a certain extent) unhistorically to be the more important and elemental, as providing the foundation of every sound and real growth, everything that is truly great and human. The unhistorical is like the surrounding atmosphere that can alone create life and in whose annihilation life itself disappears. It is true that man can only become man by first suppressing this unhistorical element in his thoughts, comparisons, distinctions, and conclusions, letting a clear sudden light break through these misty clouds by his power of turning the past to the uses of the present. But an excess of history makes him flag again, while without the veil of the unhistorical he would never have the courage to begin. What deeds could man ever have done if he had not been enveloped in the dust-cloud of the unhistorical? Or, to leave metaphors and take a concrete example, imagine a man swayed and driven by a strong passion, whether for a woman or a theory. His world is quite altered. He is blind to everything behind him, new sounds are muffled and meaningless though his perceptions were never so intimately felt in all their color, light, and music, and he seems to grasp them with his five senses together. All his judgments of value are changed for the worse; there is much he can no longer value, as he can scarcely feel it: he wonders that he has so long been the sport of strange words and opinions, that his recollections have run round in one unwearying circle and are yet too weak and weary to make a single step away from it. His whole case is most indefensible; it is narrow, ungrateful to the past, blind to danger, deaf to warnings, a small living eddy in a dead sea of night and forgetfulness. And yet this condition, unhistorical and antihistorical throughout, is the cradle not only of unjust action, but of every just and justifiable action in the world. No artist will paint his picture, no general win his victory, no nation gain its freedom, without having striven and yearned for it under those very “unhistorical” conditions. If the man of action, in Goethe’s phrase, is without conscience, he is also without knowledge: he forgets most things in order to do one, he is unjust to what is behind him, and only recognizes one law—the law of that which is to be. So he loves his work infinitely more than it deserves to be loved; and the best works are produced in such an ecstasy of love that they must always be unworthy of it, however great their worth otherwise.

Should anyone be able to dissolve the unhistorical atmosphere in which every great event happens, and breathe afterwards, he might be capable of rising to the “super-historical” standpoint of consciousness. . . . [A]s one
who took it could feel no impulse from history to any further life or work, for he would have recognized the blindness and injustice in the soul of the doer as a condition of every deed; he would be cured henceforth of taking history too seriously, and have learned to answer the question how and why life should be lived—for all men and all circumstances, Greeks or Turks, the first century or the nineteenth. Whoever asks his friends whether they would live the last ten or twenty years over again will easily see which of them is born for the “super-historical standpoint”: they will all answer no, but will give different reasons for their answer. Some will say they have the consolation that the next twenty will be better.

We will call them the “historical men.” Their vision of the past turns them toward the future, encourages them to persevere with life, and kindles the hope that justice will yet come and happiness is behind the mountain they are climbing. They believe that the meaning of existence will become ever clearer in the course of its evolution; they look backward at the process only to understand the present and stimulate their longing for the future. They do not know how unhistorical their thoughts and actions are in spite of all their history, and how their cultivation of history does not serve pure knowledge but life.

But that question to which we have heard the first answer is capable of another; also a “no,” but on different grounds. It is the “no” of the “super-historical” man who sees no salvation in evolution, for whom the world is complete and fulfills its aim in every single moment. How could the next ten years teach what the past ten were not able to teach?

Whether the aim of the teaching be happiness or resignation, virtue or penance, these super-historical men are not agreed; but as against all merely historical ways of viewing the past, they are unanimous in the theory that the past and the present are one and the same, typically alike in all their diversity and forming together a picture of eternally present imperishable types of unchangeable value and significance. Just as the hundreds of different languages correspond to the same constant and elemental needs of mankind, and one who understood the needs could learn nothing new from the languages, so the “super-historical” philosopher sees all the history of nations and individuals from within. He has a divine insight into the original meaning of the hieroglyphs, and comes even to be weary of the letters that are continually unrolled before him. How should the endless rush of events not bring satiety, surfeit, loathing?

But we will leave the super-historical men to their loathings and their wisdom: we wish rather today to be joyful in our unwisdom and have a pleasant
life as active men who go forward and respect the course of the world. The
value we put on the historical may be merely a Western prejudice: let us at least
go forward within this prejudice and not stand still. If we could only learn
better to study history as a means to life! We would gladly grant the super-
historical people their superior wisdom, so long as we are sure of having more
life than they, for in that case our unwisdom would have a greater future before
it than their wisdom. To make my opposition between life and wisdom clear, I
will take the usual road of the short summary.

A historical phenomenon, completely understood and reduced to an item
of knowledge, is, in relation to the man who knows it, dead; for he has found
out its madness, its injustice, its blind passion, and especially the earthly and
darkened horizon that was the source of its power for history. This power has
now become, for him who has recognized it, powerless; not yet, perhaps, for
him who is alive.

History regarded as pure knowledge and allowed to sway the intellect
would mean for men the final balancing of the ledger of life. Historical study
is only fruitful for the future if it follows a powerful life-giving influence, for
example, a new system of culture—only, therefore, if it is guided and domi-
nated by a higher force, and does not itself guide and dominate.

History, so far as it serves life, serves an unhistorical power, and thus will
never become a pure science like mathematics. The question how far life needs
such a service is one of the most serious questions affecting the well-being of
a man, a people, and a culture. For by excess of history life becomes maimed
and degenerate, and is followed by the degeneration of history as well.

The fact that life does need the service of history must be as clearly
grasped as that an excess of history hurts it; this will be proved later. History
is necessary to the living man in three ways: in relation to his action and strug-
gle, his conservatism and reverence, his suffering and his desire for deliver-
ance. These three relations answer to the three kinds of history—so far as they
can be distinguished—the monumental, the antiquarian, and the critical.

History is necessary above all to the man of action and power who fights
a great fight and needs examples, teachers, and comforters; he cannot find
them among his contemporaries. . . . Whoever has learned to recognize this
meaning in history must hate to see curious tourists and laborious beetle-
hunters climbing up the great pyramids of antiquity. He does not wish to meet
the idler who is rushing through the picture galleries of the past for a new dis-
traction of sensation, where he himself is looking for example and encour-
agement. To avoid being troubled by the weak and hopeless idlers, and those
whose apparent activity is merely neurotic, he looks behind him and stays his
course toward the goal in order to breathe. His goal is happiness, not perhaps his own, but often the nation’s or humanity’s at large: he avoids quietism, and uses history as a weapon against it. For the most part he has no hope of reward except fame, which means the expectation of a niche in the temple of history, where he in his turn may be the consoler and counselor of posterity. For his orders are that what has once been able to extend the conception “man” and give it a fairer content must ever exist for the same office. The great moments in the individual battle form a chain, a highroad for humanity through the ages, and the highest points of those vanished moments are yet great and living for men; and this is the fundamental idea of the belief in humanity that finds a voice in the demand for a “monumental” history.

But the fiercest battle is fought round the demand for greatness to be eternal. Every other living thing cries no. “Away with the monuments,” is the watchword. Dull custom fills all the chambers of the world with its meanness, and rises in thick vapor round anything that is great, barring its way to immortality, blinding and stifling it. And the way passes through mortal brains! Through the brains of sick and short-lived beasts that ever rise to the surface to breathe, and painfully keep off annihilation for a little space. For they wish but one thing: to live at any cost. Who would ever dream of any “monumental history” among them, the hard torch-race that alone gives life to greatness? And yet there are always men awakening who are strengthened and made happy by gazing on past greatness, as though man’s life were a lordly thing, and the fairest fruit of this bitter tree were the knowledge that there was once a man who walked sternly and proudly through this world, another who had pity and loving-kindness, another who lived in contemplation, but all leaving one truth behind them—that his life is the fairest who thinks least about life. The common man snatches greedily at this little span with tragic earnestness, but they, on their way to monumental history and immortality, knew how to greet it with Olympic laughter, or at least with a lofty scorn; and they went down to their graves in irony—for what had they to bury? Only what they had always treated as dross, refuse, and vanity, and which now falls into its true home of oblivion, after being so long the sport of their contempt. One thing will live, the sign manual of their inmost being, the rare flash of light, the deed, the creation; because posterity cannot do without it. In this spiritualized form, fame is something more than the sweetest morsel for our egoism; in Schopenhauer’s phrase it is the belief in the oneness and continuity of the great in every age, and a protest against the change and decay of generations.

What is the use to the modern man of this “monumental” contemplation of the past, this preoccupation with the rare and classic? It is the knowledge
that the great thing existed and was therefore possible, and so may be possible again. He is heartened on his way; for his doubt in weaker moments, whether his desire is not for the impossible, is struck aside. . . .

And yet if we really wish to learn something from an example, how vague and elusive do we find the comparison! If it is to give us strength, many of the differences must be neglected, the individuality of the past forced into a general formula and all the sharp angles broken off for the sake of correspondence. . . . [M]onumental history will never be able to have complete truth; it will always bring together things that are incompatible and generalize them into compatibility, will always weaken the differences of motive and occasion. Its object is to depict effects at the expense of the causes—“monumentally,” that is, as examples for imitation; it turns aside, as far as it may, from reasons, and might be called with far less exaggeration a collection of “effects in themselves” than of events that will have an effect on all ages. The events of war or religion cherished in our popular celebrations are such “effects in themselves”; it is these that will not let ambition sleep, and lie like amulets on the bolder hearts—not the real historical nexus of cause and effect, which, rightly understood, would only prove that nothing quite similar could ever be cast again from the dice-boxes of fate and the future.

As long as the soul of history is found in the great impulse that it gives to a powerful spirit, as long as the past is principally used as a model for imitation, it is always in danger of being a little altered and touched up and brought nearer to fiction. Sometimes there is no possible distinction between a “monumental” past and a mythical romance, as the same motives for action can be gathered from the one world as the other. If this monumental method of surveying the past dominates the others—the antiquarian and the critical—the past itself suffers wrong. Whole tracts of it are forgotten and despised; they flow away like a dark, unbroken river, with only a few gaily colored islands of fact rising above it. . . .

Consider the simplest and commonest example, the inartistic or half-artistic natures whom a monumental history provides with sword and buckler. They will use the weapons against their hereditary enemies, the great artistic spirits, who alone can learn from that history the one real lesson how to live, and embody what they have learned in noble action. Their way is obstructed, their free air darkened by the idolatrous—and conscientious—dance round the half-understood monument of a great past. “See, that is the true and real art,” we seem to hear; “of what use are these aspiring little people of today?” The dancing crowd has apparently the monopoly of “good taste,” for the creator is always at a disadvantage compared with the mere
onlooker, who never put a hand to the work; just as the armchair politician
has ever had more wisdom and foresight than the actual statesman. But if the
custom of democratic suffrage and numerical majorities be transferred to the
realm of art, and the artist put on his defense before the court of aesthetic
dilettanti, you may take your oath on his condemnation; although, or rather
because, his judges had proclaimed solemnly the canon of “monumental art,”
the art that has “had an effect on all ages,” according to the official definition.
In their eyes there is no need nor inclination nor historical authority for the
art which is not yet “monumental” because it is contemporary. Their instinct
tells them that art can be slain by art: the monumental will never be repro-
duced, and the weight of its authority is invoked from the past to make it sure.
They are connoisseurs of art primarily because they wish to kill art; they pre-
tend to be physicians when their real idea is to dabble in poisons. They
develop their tastes to a point of perversion that they may be able to show a
reason for continually rejecting all the nourishing artistic fare that is offered
them. For they do not want greatness to arise; their method is to say, “See,
the great thing is already here!” . . . [W]hether they wish it or no, they are act-
ing as though their motto were: “Let the dead bury the—living.”

Each of the three kinds of history will flourish only in one ground and cli-
timate: otherwise it grows to a noxious weed. If the man who will produce
something great has need of the past, he makes himself its master by means
of monumental history; the man who can rest content with the traditional and
venerable uses the past as an “antiquarian historian”; and only he whose heart
is oppressed by an instant need and who will cast the burden off at any price
feels the want of “critical history,” the history that judges and condemns. . . .

Secondly, history is necessary to the man of conservative and reverent
nature who looks back to the origins of his existence with love and trust;
through it he gives thanks for life. He is careful to preserve what survives
from ancient days, and will reproduce the conditions of his own upbringing
for those who come after him; thus he does life a service. The possession of
his ancestors’ furniture changes its meaning in his soul, for his soul is rather
possessed by it. All that is small and limited, moldy and obsolete, gains a
worth and inviolability of its own from the conservative and reverent soul of
the antiquary migrating into it and building a secret nest there. The history of
his town becomes the history of himself; he looks on the walls, the turreted
gate, the town council, the fair, as an illustrated diary of his youth, and sees
himself in it all—his strength, industry, desire, reason, faults, and follies.
“Here one could live,” he says, “as one can live here now—and will go on
living; for we are tough folk, and will not be uprooted in the night.” And so,
with his “we,” he surveys the marvelous individual life of the past and identifies himself with the spirit of the house, the family, and the city. . . . But the greatest value of this antiquarian spirit of reverence lies in the simple emotions of pleasure and content that it lends to the drab, rough, even painful circumstances of a nation’s or individual’s life. . . . How could history serve life better than by anchoring the less gifted races and peoples to the homes and customs of their ancestors, and keeping them from ranging far afield in search of better, to find only struggle and competition? The influence that ties men down to the same companions and circumstances, to the daily round of toil, to their bare mountainside, seems to be selfish and unreasonable; but it is a healthy unreason and of profit to the community, as everyone knows who has clearly realized the terrible consequences of mere desire for migration and adventure—perhaps in whole peoples—or who watches the destiny of a nation that has lost confidence in its earlier days and is given up to a restless cosmopolitanism and an unceasing desire for novelty. The feeling of the tree that clings to its roots, the happiness of knowing one’s growth to be not merely arbitrary and fortuitous but the inheritance, the fruit and blossom, of a past that does not merely justify but crowns the present—this is what we nowadays prefer to call the real historical sense.

These are not the conditions most favorable to reducing the past to pure science; and we see here, too, as we saw in the case of monumental history, that the past itself suffers when history serves life and is directed by its end. To vary the metaphor, the tree feels its roots better than it can see them: the greatness of the feeling is measured by the greatness and strength of the visible branches. . . . The antiquarian sense of a man, a city, or a nation has always a very limited field. Many things are not noticed at all; the others are seen in isolation, as through a microscope. There is no measure: equal importance is given to everything, and therefore too much to anything. For the things of the past are never viewed in their true perspective or receive their just value; but value and perspective change with the individual or the nation that is looking back on its past.

There is always the danger here that everything ancient will be regarded as equally venerable, and everyone without this respect for antiquity, like a new spirit, rejected as an enemy. . . . If the judgment of a people hardens in this way, and history’s service to the past life is to undermine a further and higher life; if the historical sense no longer preserves life, but mummifies it, then the tree dies unnaturally, from the top downward, and at last the roots themselves wither. Antiquarian history degenerates from the moment that it no longer gives a soul and inspiration to the fresh life of the present. . . .
It only understands how to preserve life, not to create it; and thus always undervalues the present growth, having, unlike monumental history, no certain instinct for it. Thus it hinders the mighty impulse to a new deed and paralyzes the doer, who must always, as doer, be grazing some piety or other. The fact that has grown old carries with it a demand for its own immortality.

Here we see clearly how necessary a third way of looking at the past is to man, beside the other two. This is the “critical” way, which is also in the service of life. Man must have the strength to break up the past, and apply it, too, in order to live. He must bring the past to the bar of judgment, interrogate it remorselessly, and finally condemn it. Every past is worth condemning; this is the rule in mortal affairs, which always contain a large measure of human power and human weakness. It is not justice that sits in judgment here, nor mercy that proclaims the verdict, but only life, the dim, driving force that insatiably desires—itself. Its sentence is always unmerciful, always unjust, as it never flows from a pure fountain of knowledge, though it would generally turn out the same if Justice herself delivered it. “For everything that is born is worthy of being destroyed: better were it then that nothing should be born.” It requires great strength to be able to live and forget how far life and injustice are one. The same life that needs forgetfulness sometimes needs its destruction; for should the injustice of something ever become obvious—a monopoly, a caste, a dynasty, for example—the thing deserves to fall. Its past is critically examined, the knife put to its roots, and all the “pieties” are grimly trodden under foot. The process is always dangerous, even for life; and the men or the times that serve life in this way, by judging and annihilating the past, are always dangerous to themselves and others. For as we are merely the resultant of previous generations, we are also the resultant of their errors, passions, and crimes; it is impossible to shake off this chain. Though we condemn the errors and think we have escaped them, we cannot escape the fact that we spring from them. At best, it comes to a conflict between our innate, inherited nature and our knowledge, between a stern, new discipline and an ancient tradition; and we plant a new way of life, a new instinct, a second nature, that withers the first. We stop too often at knowing the good without doing it, because we also know the better but cannot do it. Here and there the victory is won, which gives a strange consolation to the fighters, to those who use critical history for the sake of life.

This is how history can serve life. Every man and nation needs a certain knowledge of the past, whether it be through monumental, antiquarian, or critical history, according to his objects, powers, and necessities. The need is not that of the mere thinkers who only look on at life, or the few who desire
knowledge and can only be satisfied with knowledge; but it has always a refer-
ence to the end of life, and is under its absolute rule and direction. This is
the natural relation of an age, a culture, and a people to history; hunger is its
source, necessity its norm, the inner plastic power assigns its limits. The
knowledge of the past is desired only for the service of the future and the pres-
ent, not to weaken the present or undermine a living future. . . .

And now to take a quick glance at our time! . . . Let me give a picture of
the spiritual events in the soul of the modern man. Historical knowledge
streams on him from sources that are inexhaustible, strange incoherences
come together, memory opens all its gates and yet is never open wide
enough. . . . The modern man carries inside him an enormous heap of indi-
gestible knowledge-stones that occasionally rattle together in his body, as the
fairy tale has it. And the rattle reveals the most striking characteristic of these
modern men—the opposition of something inside them to which nothing
external corresponds, and the reverse. The ancient nations knew nothing of
this. Knowledge, taken in excess without hunger, even contrary to desire, has
no more effect of transforming the external life, and remains hidden in a
chaotic inner world that the modern man has a curious pride in calling his
“real personality.” He has the substance, he says, and only wants the form;
but this is quite an unreal opposition in a living thing. Our modern culture is
for that reason not a living one, because it cannot be understood without that
opposition. In other words, it is not a real culture but a kind of knowledge
about culture, a complex of various thoughts and feelings about it, from
which no decision as to its direction can come. Its real motive force that
issues in visible action is often no more than a mere convention, a wretched
imitation, or even a shameless caricature. The man probably feels like the
snake that has swallowed a rabbit whole and lies still in the sun, avoiding all
movement not absolutely necessary. The “inner life” is now the only thing
that matters to education, and all who see it hope that the education may not
fail by being too indigestible. Imagine a Greek meeting it; he would observe
that for modern men “education” and “historical education” seem to mean
the same thing, with the difference that the one phrase is longer. And if he
spoke of his own theory, that a man can be very well educated without any
history at all, people would shake their heads and think they had not heard
aright. The Greeks, the famous people of a past still near to us, had the
“unhistorical sense” strongly developed in the period of their greatest power.
If a typical child of his age were transported to that world by some enchant-
ment, he would probably find the Greeks very “uneducated.” And that dis-
covery would betray the closely guarded secret of modern culture to the
laughter of the world. For we moderns have nothing of our own. We only become worth notice by filling ourselves to overflowing with foreign customs, arts, philosophies, religions, and sciences; we are wandering encyclopedias, as an ancient Greek who had strayed into our time would probably call us. But the only value of an encyclopedia lies in the inside, in the contents, not in what is written outside, on the binding or the wrapper. And so the whole of modern culture is essentially internal; the bookbinder prints something like this on the cover: “Manual of internal culture for external barbarians.” The opposition of inner and outer makes the outer side still more barbarous, as it would naturally be when the outward growth of a rude people merely developed its primitive inner needs. For what means has nature of repressing too great a luxuriance from without? Only one—to be affected by it as little as possible, to set it aside and stamp it out at the first opportunity. And so we have the custom of no longer taking real things seriously, we get the feeble personality on which the real and the permanent make so little impression. Men become at last more careless and accommodating in external matters, and the considerable cleft between substance and form is widened until they no longer have any feeling for barbarism, if only their memories are kept continually titillated and there flows a constant stream of new things to be known that can be neatly packed up in the cupboards of their memory. The culture of a people, as against this barbarism, can be, I think, described with justice as the “unity of artistic style in every outward expression of the people’s life.” This must not be misunderstood, as though it were merely a question of the opposition between barbarism and “fine style.” The people that can be called cultured must be in a real sense a living unity, and not be miserably cleft asunder into form and substance. If one wishes to promote a people’s culture, let him try to promote this higher unity first, and work for the destruction of the modern educative system for the sake of a true education. Let him dare to consider how the health of a people that has been destroyed by history may be restored, and how it may recover its instincts with its honor.

An excess of history seems to be an enemy to the life of a time, and dangerous in five ways. Firstly, the contrast of inner and outer is emphasized and personality weakened. Secondly, the time comes to imagine that it possesses the rarest of virtues, justice, to a higher degree than any other time. Thirdly, the instincts of a nation are thwarted, the maturity of the individual arrested no less than that of the whole. Fourthly, we get the belief in the old age of
mankind, the belief, at all times harmful, that we are late survivals, mere
epigoni. Lastly, an age reaches a dangerous condition of irony with regard to
itself, and the still more dangerous state of cynicism, when a cunning egoistic
theory of action is matured that maims and at last destroys the vital strength.

To return to the first point: the modern man suffers from a weakened per-
sonality. . . . The modern man . . . is continually having a world-panorama
unrolled before his eyes by his historical artists. He is turned into a restless,
dilettante spectator, and arrives at a condition when even great wars and rev-
olutions cannot affect him beyond the moment. The war is hardly at an end,
and it is already converted into thousands of copies of printed matter, and
will soon be served up as the latest means of tickling the jaded palates of the
historical gourmets. It seems impossible for a strong full chord to be pro-
longed, however powerfully the strings are swept; it dies away again the next
moment in the soft and strengthless echo of history. . . . There is something
the child sees that he does not see; something the child hears that he does not
hear; and this something is the most important thing of all. Because he does
not understand it, the man’s understanding is more childish than the child’s
and more simple than simplicity itself, in spite of the many clever wrinkles
on his parchment face and the masterly play of his fingers in unraveling the
knots. He has lost or destroyed his instinct; he can no longer trust the “divine
animal” and let the reins hang loose when his understanding fails him and his
way lies through the desert. His individuality is shaken, and left without any
sure belief in itself; it sinks into its own inner being, which means here only
the disordered chaos of what it has learned, which will never express itself
externally, being mere dogma that cannot turn to life.

If the personality is once emptied of its subjectivity, and comes to what
men call an “objective” condition, nothing can have any more effect on it.
Something good and true may be done, in action, poetry or music; but the
hollow culture of the day will look beyond the work and ask the history of
the author. If the author has already created something, our historian will set
out clearly the past and the probable future course of his development, he
will put him with others and compare them, and separate by analysis the
choice of his material and his treatment; he will wisely sum up the author and
give him general advice for his future path. The most astonishing works may
be created; the swarm of historical neuters will always be in their place,
ready to consider the author through their long telescopes. The echo is heard
at once, but always in the form of “criticism,” though the critic never
dreamed of the work’s possibility a moment before. It never comes to have an influence, but only a criticism; and the criticism itself has no influence, but only breeds another criticism.

Let us turn... to a point of strength for which the modern man is much praised. Let us ask the painful question whether he has the right in virtue of his historical “objectivity” to call himself strong and just in a higher degree than the man of another age. Is it true that this objectivity has its source in a heightened sense of the need for justice? Or, being really an effect of quite other causes, does it have only the appearance of coming from justice, and really lead to an unhealthy prejudice in favor of the modern man?

Few in truth serve truth, as only few have the pure will for justice; and very few even of these have the strength to be just. The will alone is not enough. The impulse to justice without the power of judgment has been the cause of the greatest suffering to men. And thus the common good could require nothing better than for the seed of this power to be strewn as widely as possible, that the fanatic may be distinguished from the true judge, and the blind desire from the conscious power. But there are no means of planting a power of judgment; and so when one speaks to men of truth and justice they will be ever troubled by the doubt whether it be the fanatic or the judge who is speaking to them. And they must be pardoned for always treating the “servants of truth” with special kindness, who possess neither the will nor the power to judge and have set before them the task of finding “pure knowledge without reference to consequences,” knowledge, in plain terms, that comes to nothing. There are very many truths which are unimportant; problems that require no struggle to solve, to say nothing of sacrifice. And in this safe realm of indifference a man may very successfully become a cold “demon of knowledge.” And yet—if we find whole regiments of learned inquirers being turned to such demons in some age specially favorable to them, it is always unfortunately possible that the age is lacking in a great and strong sense of justice, the noblest spring of the so-called impulse to truth. . . . The measurement of the opinions and deeds of the past by the universal opinions of the present is called “objectivity” by these simple people. They find the canon of all truth here: their work is to adapt the past to the present triviality. And they call all historical writing “subjective” that does not regard these popular opinions as canonical.
Such historians cease to be instructive as soon as they begin to generalize; their weakness is shown by their obscurity. In other sciences the generalizations are the most important things, as they contain the laws. But if such generalizations as these are to stand as laws, the historian’s labor is lost; for the residue of truth, after the obscure and insoluble part is removed, is nothing but the commonest knowledge. . . . I hope history will not find its whole significance in general propositions, and regard them as its blossom and fruit. On the contrary, its real value lies in inventing ingenious variations on a probably commonplace theme, in raising the popular melody to a universal symbol and showing what a world of depth, power and beauty exists in it.

But this requires above all a great artistic faculty, a creative vision from a height, the loving study of the data of experience, the free elaborating of a given type—objectivity, in fact, though this time as a positive quality. Objectivity is so often merely a phrase. Instead of the quiet gaze of the artist that is lit by an inward flame, we have an affectation of tranquillity; just as a cold detachment may mask a lack of moral feeling. In some cases a triviality of thought, the everyday wisdom that is too dull not to seem calm and disinterested, comes to represent the artistic condition in which the subjective side has quite sunk out of sight. Everything is favored that does not rouse emotion, and the driest phrase is the correct one. . . .

You can explain the past only by what is most powerful in the present. Only by straining the noblest qualities you have to their highest power will you find out what is greatest in the past, most worth knowing and preserving. Like by like! otherwise you will draw the past to your own level. Do not believe any history that does not spring from the mind of a rare spirit. You will know the quality of the spirit by its being forced to say something universal, or to repeat something that is known already; the fine historian must have the power of coining the known into a thing never heard before and proclaiming the universal so simply and profoundly that the simple is lost in the profound, and the profound in the simple. . . .

Thus history is to be written by the man of experience and character. He who has not lived through something greater and nobler than others will not be able to explain anything great and noble in the past. . . .

The unrestrained historical sense, pushed to its logical extreme, uproots the future, because it destroys illusions and robs existing things of the only atmosphere in which they can live. Historical justice, even if practiced conscientiously, with a pure heart, is therefore a dreadful virtue, because it always undermines and ruins the living thing—its judgment always means annihilation. If there is no constructive impulse behind the historical one, if
the clearance of rubbish is not merely to leave the ground free for the hopeful living future to build its house, if justice alone be supreme, the creative instinct is sapped and discouraged.

... All living things need an atmosphere, a mysterious mist, around them. If that veil be taken away and a religion, an art, or a genius condemned to revolve like a star without an atmosphere, we must not be surprised if it becomes hard and unfruitful, and soon withers. Every people, every man even, who would become ripe, needs such a veil of illusion, such a protecting cloud. But now men hate to become ripe, for they honor history above life. They cry in triumph that “science is now beginning to rule life.” Possibly it might; but a life thus ruled is not of much value. It is not such true life, and promises much less for the future than the life that used to be guided not by science, but by instincts and powerful illusions.

... It may seem a paradox, though it is none, that I should attribute a kind of “ironical self-consciousness” to an age that is generally so honestly and clamorously vain of its historical training. Historical culture is really a kind of inherited grayness, and those who have borne its mark from childhood must believe instinctively in the old age of mankind. To old age belongs the old man’s business of looking back and casting up his accounts, of seeking consolation in the memories of the past—in historical culture. But the human race is tough and persistent, and will not admit that the lapse of a thousand years, or a hundred thousand, entitles anyone to sum up its progress from the past to the future; that is, it will not be observed as a whole at all by that infinitesimal atom, the individual man. What is there in a couple of thousand years—the period of thirty-four consecutive human lives of sixty years each—to make us speak of youth at the beginning, and “the old age of mankind” at the end of them? Does not this paralyzing belief in a fast-fading humanity cover the misunderstanding of a theological idea, inherited from the Middle Ages, that the end of the world is approaching and we are waiting anxiously for the judgment?

... The deep and serious contemplation of the unworthiness of all past action, of the world ripe for judgment, has been whittled down to the skeptical consciousness that it is anyhow a good thing to know all that has happened, as it
is too late to do anything better. The historical sense makes its servants passive and retrospective. Only in moments of forgetfulness, when that sense is dormant, does the man who is sick of the historical fever ever act; though he only analyzes his deed again after it is over (which prevents it from having any further consequences), and finally puts it on the dissecting table for the purposes of history.

... Close to the modern man’s pride there stands his irony about himself, his consciousness that he must live in a historical, or twilit, atmosphere, the fear that he can retain none of his youthful hopes and powers. Here and there one goes further into cynicism and justifies the course of history, nay, the whole evolution of the world, as simply leading up to the modern man, according to the cynical canon: “What you see now had to come, man had to be thus and not otherwise, no one can stand against this necessity.” He who cannot remain in a state of irony flies for refuge to cynicism....

O thou too proud European of the nineteenth century, art thou not mad? Thy knowledge does not complete Nature, it only kills thine own nature! Measure the height of what thou knowest by the depths of thy power to do. Thou climbest the sunbeams of knowledge up toward heaven—but also down to Chaos.

... In tracking out the dangers of history, we have found ourselves especially exposed to them. We carry on us the marks of that sorrow which an excess of history brings in its train to the men of the modern time. . . . I trust in the inspiring power that directs my vessel instead of genius; I trust in youth that has brought me on the right road in forcing from me a protest against the modern historical education, and a demand that man must learn to live, above all, and only use history in the service of the life that he has learned to live.