
Nietzsche and Arendt in Casterbridge: On the Burden of History

Ms. L. Mabile
University of Pretoria, South Africa

Abstract

The article raises the question whether postmodern attempts to re-write history does not, despite its best efforts, fall back into the homogeneity of metanarrative. By doing this, Nietzsche's critique of monumental and antiquarian history is addressed, as well as Gadamer's dialogical model of history writing and the rise of the museum, or archive as a modern phenomenon. In addition, I ask whether metanarrative is avoidable at all, and, by referring to Walter Benjamin and Hannah Arendt's image of the pearl diver, make a plea for a critical engagement with the past.

In what is commonly known as the "century of the historical" – the nineteenth century – an English novelist, like many of his Continental counterparts, turned to his country's Roman past for inspiration.

Casterbridge announced old Rome in every street alley and precinct. It looked Roman, bespoke the art of Rome, concealed the dead men of Rome. It was impossible to dig more than a few feet into about the town fields and gardens without coming upon some tall soldier of the Empire, who had lain there in his silent unobtrusive rest for a space of some fifteen hundred years. He was mostly found lying on his side, in an oval scoop in the chalk, like a chicken in its shell, his knees drawn up to his chest, sometimes with the remains of his spear against his arm; a fibula or brooch of bronze upon his chest or forehead; an urn at his knees, a jar at his throat, a bottle at his mouth; and mystified conjecture pouring down upon him from the eyes of Casterbridge boys and men who had turned a moment to gaze at the familiar spectacle as they passed by. Imaginative inhabitants who would have felt an unpleasantness at the discovery of a comparatively modern skeleton in their gardens, were quite unmoved by these hoary shapes. They had lived so long ago, their time was so unlike the present, their hopes and motives were so widely removed from ours, that between them and the living there seem to stretch a gulf too wide for even a spirit to pass.¹

Nietzsche would have approved of this refusal to be consumed neither by monumental nor antiquarian history. And that is more than can be said of us. For in our era, history has been reduced to a metanarrative to which in

the word of Francis Barker, "nothing but a famous incredulity is due",² or the process itself is judged to have come to an end.

At first sight, we have never been so aware of the historical. According to Schoeman³ historicism has become a permanent fixture of our culture. This is confirmed by the rise of the museum, the interest in the historical drama, endless commemorations, and the popularity of historical fiction in both literary and cinematic form. The reason for this interest in the past can be traced to the unprecedented developmental acceleration of modern society. The loss of a familiar framework and the feelings of alienation that accompanies it, generates a desire for compensation⁴ which often manifests itself in nostalgia. This nostalgia threatens to become melancholic – the refusal to mourn the losses generated by the passing of time. And melancholy can be a stubborn passion: Buried alive within a tradition fractured by what cannot be metabolised, the past continues to make its claim on the living, as much as we refuse to acknowledge it. For despite the superficial "interest" in the past, the prevailing passion at the moment seems to be, in the words of Christopher Lasch, "to live for the present".⁵ We are fast losing our sense of historical continuity – the sense of belonging to a succession of generations originating in the past and stretching into the future. Lack of care for posterity has become our defining feature.

The strange depthlessness which characterises the present, with its unprecedented resistance towards critical thought, demands careful analysis, if we are to benefit from a greater sense of historical clarity at all.

Cornelis Castoriades⁶ makes a worthwhile distinction between postmodernism and a term like *postindustrialism*. Something in empirical reality corresponds to the latter term. The wealthy part of humanity at least, underwent a fundamental change in their relation to material production, and for the first time in millennia, less than a quarter of the global labour input is absorbed by the primary industries. Was it not for the continuous manufacturing of new "needs" (Foucault), and the built-in obsolescence of most products, primary and secondary production would have come to absorb a vanishing quantum of human time. For the first time in history, the leisure society is theoretically within reach, whereas a society with creative, satisfying personal work roles for all seems as remote as it was during the nineteenth century. As Hannah Arendt put it, we have now progressed to a society of workers without work.

Taking the conventionality of designation into account, the meaninglessness of the word *postmodernism* should be obvious. However, its absurdity is derivative: Even the term *modern* is infelicitous, and its inadequacy was bound to become obvious with the passing of time. A period audaciously naming itself modern, implies that history has reached its end, and henceforth humans will be doomed to a perpetual present. After

Ezra Pound's famous urge to "*Make it New!*" any genuine further development is impossible. Furthermore, it contains an interesting paradox: The self-conscious term implies an indefinite openness towards the future, yet makes sense only with regard to the past. As in the famous Ancient/Modern debate: *they* are the ancients, *we* are the moderns. However, what are we to call the ones that come after *us*? The term contains a certain narcissism, because it rests on the assumption that this self-proclaimed period will last forever.

According to Foucault, modernity is to be detected not in changes in socio-political reality, but in the changes of attitude of thinkers towards that reality. The thinker became an ascetic – he wrote about writers for other writers. Thus Foucault asserts that modernity starts with Kant, especially with texts like *The Conflict of the Faculties* and of course the famous *An Answer to the Question: What is Enlightenment?* because the philosopher for the first time shows interest in the actual historical present and starts to enjoy "the realistic morning prayer" – Hegel's phrase for the morning newspaper! Thus modernity would seem to be consciousness of the historicity of the period in which one is living.

Not that this is an adequate description, since, according to Castoriades, the historicity of one's own epoch was just as evident for medieval thinkers, as one can see from a thinker like Gregoire de Tours in the sixth century with his concept of *mundus senescit*. According to Foucault, the novelty would rather lie in the fact that from Kant onwards, there are no longer simple value comparisons between past and present, but in what he calls the "sagittal relation to their own actuality". There *are* of course value comparisons in Kant, for whom history is mainly to be conceived in terms of progress. And, according to Castoriades, if a "sagittal" relation is to be opposed to valuation, it can only mean that thought, abandoning its critical function tends to borrow its criteria from historical reality "as it is". This tendency is a problem of modernity itself – it could never be taken as a "summing up" of the thinking of either the Enlightenment, or post-Enlightenment, nor as a reliable version of real socio-historical trends of the past two centuries.

I prefer postmodernity as a descriptive historical name for the present condition to much of what passes under "postmodernism". But this raises the important historical question of periodisation, and whether it is a quantitative "definition" of the crisis of late capital that is evoked in "postmodernity" – a chronological, and even a historical period – or whether the postmodern is a qualitative category describing a distinct moment of any given conjuncture, including some past ones. Then one could classify even someone like Augustine as a postmodernist, should one desire to do so. The question of names notwithstanding, are we to think the postmodern as a new era, or as a

component dimension of the present (and then, by implication, also of some earlier “presents”. Furthermore, has history moved since the Renaissance, through phases of early and late modernity, and on into postmodernity, that is to say, “through, and out of history”⁷, or are modernity and postmodernity moments of any historical construct, so that all “presents”, even those which from our point of view, would have, in their own simultaneity, their constituent modern and postmodern dimensions and temporalities?

I should clarify at this stage, perhaps, that I use the terms “postmodernity” and “postmodern” in a provisional, expository sense in describing the period. Bourgeois reality, from its earliest stages to the present, is closely connected with the self-revolutionising power of capitalism as an increasingly global system, and with revolutionary challenges to that system – there are definitely new developments in the strategies of capitalism, perhaps most tellingly so in the “culturalisation” of its self-presentation. These are of course historical developments after “postmodernism”, regardless of where one stands on the question of whether the modern project has been superseded (Lyotard) or remains incomplete (Habermas). Postmodernism does not, and cannot satisfactorily address its own historical status.

This is why it has so little sense of crisis – except of course crisis of representation – because it cannot properly address any continuum or totality, and even less any localised entities, despite its commitment to the latter. Rather than a sense of historical crisis, the present conjuncture is regarded by postmodernism as a seamless new condition. By depriving it of any real historical grounding (as impossible as such an endeavour would be), the representation of the historical present as crisis is erased.

The Aesthetic Effect

Among writers who embrace the term and concept of postmodernism, there is considerable variety between the degrees to which the condition represents new opportunities for critical action. On the other hand, there are those who regard the postmodern as new and oppressive, a mere repetition of “humanist” ideology. But in both cases the historicity of the postmodern creates a suspension – a timeless absence of historicity.

But it is not the first time that such a state has been the goal of a particular society. We find a similar situation in the Athens of Pericles, of all places. Consider for example Hannah Arendt's use of the Funeral Oration in *The Human Condition*⁸

The polis – if we trust the famous words of Pericles in the Funeral Oration – gives a guarantee that those who forced every sea and land to become the scene of their daring, will not remain without witness and will need neither

Homer nor anyone else who knows how to turn words to praise them, without assistance from others, those who acted together will be able to establish their everlasting remembrance of their good and bad deeds, to inspire admiration in present and future ages.⁹

Despite the common assumption of Arendt's "polis envy"¹⁰ – an uncritical admiration for the Greek polis, Arendt's rhetoric suggests a certain hesitance to endorse Pericles's passing conceit that his heroes would "need no Homer". According to Tsao¹¹ it is important to note the rhetorical style that Arendt employs: *If we trust Pericles's famous words. And this is not an endeavour Arendt expects of her readers. For she, with her well-developed sense of the importance of history, knew how dependent it is that political action be transformed into "the sayings of poetry, the written page or the printed book, into painting and sculpture, into all sorts of records, documents and monuments"*¹² so that they at least stand a chance of being remembered. Even Achilles would have been forgotten but for the record of his deeds written by Homer. Tsao¹³ points out that the only reason that have Pericles words at all, is because of Thucydides, Pericles's very own Homer. According to Arendt, the

organization of the polis, founded and secured in its physical condition by means of the city wall, and in its spiritual character by means of the law,... is in essence a kind of organized remembrance, in which however, unlike in what we, following the Romans, understand as memory – the past is not to be remembered through the continuity of time as the past, with the awareness of a temporal distance, (like Hardy's English countryfolk) but instead it is to be directly maintained in a perpetual present, in a temporally unchanged form.¹⁴

Pericles thus espouses a vain fantasy, a wish to remain in a perpetual present, the frozen aesthetics of a Grecian Urn – "the unravished bride of time".¹⁵

Today's counterpart is what Barker¹⁶ calls the "aesthetic effect". The autonomisation of the aesthetic under modernism turns into a sadistic totalising revenge (Baudrillard) on the alienation and marginalisation of elite art, and by strategies of "transaesthetics", the whole of reality becomes part of the aesthetic, and is "culturalised". There is at the same time both an over-dramatisation, and under-dramatisation of the postmodern: all is spectacle – something we experience *ad nauseum* – but lacking objective essence, a controlling gaze, a measure. If there is no measure on earth, there is certainly none in spectacle. Without a level of epistemological certainty or ontological grounding, and certainly none susceptible of representation, the reality which would otherwise be thought of as historical, becomes, according to Baudrillard, simulacra.

The minimalism of postmodern fiction sets one of the agendas for the localisation of the dialectic of intensity and flattened coherence of effect

(although not of thought, coherence is not postmodernism's strongest claim), which brackets the larger structures of historical time and social formation. The paradoxical nature of this situation can be seen in the renaissance of the short story: In the fiction of Pynchon and DeLillio, for example, the short story is no longer a *story*, and indeed narrative more widely is cancelled as part of the de-historicisation of the present. Perhaps the ever-increasing popularity of fantasy fiction indicates a certain nostalgia.

The celebration of machine intelligence sets another agenda in the existential short-circuiting of what is fondly remembered as historical time, offered by a "world" of instant information. The machines may well be "intelligent", but this will hardly be a human quality for much longer: machine intelligence will be (and is) matched by the mechanisation of people. With effects, but with nothing willed as political power – "neutral" in the sense of postmodern impersonality. One of the illusions with the greatest implications for human freedom: the confusion of neutrality with the impersonal. When all our information is say, finally (sic) stored on the moon, who will be able to interrupt this "obscene ecstasy of communication" with proper politics? Postmodernity with its information machines as metaphysical emblems is figured by postmodernism as a seamless if unbounded presence in the edgeless present of instantaneity.

Despite the excited radicalism of postmodernism, the aversion to the possibility of critical thought has a very definite political purpose. For despite having no proper sense of time, "*postmodernism is a historicism.*"¹⁷ Historicism is defined as the reduction of history to a single inner principle whether that inner principle was seen as willed or objective, providential or blind. And whether this principle was figured as unitary or dialectical, it is a determinate reduction, which turns history into an abstraction. To reject history in this sense is of course not to deny that history is interpretable, it is merely to reject the simplicity implied in the possibility of interpretation, and certainly to reject the idea that the ground of the possibility of interpretation is that history itself figures as a discursive figure, as idealism old and new, claims. Happy as it would make us that history is intelligible, because it is in principle like our interpretations of it, it is just as absurd as to suppose that science is a mirror of nature. A more empiricist version of historicism involves an interpretative flattening, which ultimately refuses historical interpretability as such. Whether as politically pragmatic, or epistemologically naturalist acceptance of the facts as "they appear to be" or a more sophisticated refusal to generate proper statements about historical intelligibility, the result is normally a passive acceptance of whoever (or whatever) is capable of giving a dramatically authoritative or "logical" history.

Most of the time, these historicisms are successful, but – the end result is the same: history becomes one-dimensional. Either hopelessly non-

negotiable, or infinitely interpretable, and at any rate, de-historicized.

Of course, on the surface, (sic) postmodernism looks *nothing* like historicism because its sense of the intelligibility of the past is so completely without ground or foundation, so and minimally speculative that it can hardly said to engage history at all. And of course, it is claimed, that history, like God, is dead. But for all its refusal of any totalised explanation or meta-narrative, postmodernism can be regarded as a historicism precisely on these grounds: Its dispersal of the real, for example, becomes a sort of essentialism: a centralisation around a new "inner" principle. The dialectic of identity and difference is thus not escaped by substituting the one for the other. The pluralisation of difference is also celebrated and said to relieve postmodernism of the burden to develop substantial historical thought, similarly comes to occupy the discursive position and to play what may be called the role of the totality, because it is held to be the homogeneous principle of postmodernity in all its aspects.

Despite itself then, postmodernism is a historicism. And a reductive one at that. Either it eternalises the essential principle of non-essentiality – while exempting its own project from what would be in all fairness, a totalising discourse – or it gallivants, in the surfaces of appearances.

The irony is of course that both cases have much in common with the familiar face of historicism, namely tradition, which, in the form of monumental history, stifles the present. Whether in the form of official historiography, or pastiche "heritage", all too often contemporary valorisation of historical material participates in a circularity by which the construction of the past by the present legitimates the present which can then construct the past. There are real forces that contend for the construction of past and present and perhaps even the future. Historicism upholds Livy's dictum *Vae victis* – down with the defeated, for it tells the story of the past from the victor's perspective. This is especially true of tradition: The historicist substitution of tradition for history feigns neutrality and the contesting of this at best it victimises by representation those whose continued subordination the telling of the traditional narrative seeks to secure. Constructing a common descent and a shared background, tradition is historicist, but not historical in that it suppresses other histories, which is its *raison d'être*. But in another sense, according to Barker¹⁸ "*tradition is only too historical, in that it has gained a certain sedimentation through imposition over time*", which makes it now a part of the history of the present. It is sometimes not how history remembers, but how it forgets, that determines what we think at present. Because postmodernism is a historicism, it pretends to have no memory, or if it remembers, it does so with the specific aim to forget. One of the meta-narratives it rejects, is "history", and the end of it, with which postmodernism determines much of its theory in this area. In this sense it is simply prepared

to forget, to let, in the words of Longfellow¹⁹, "the dead past bury its dead." A more radical approach just declares history to be over, and the matter of historicity is finalized at once. Often, "cultural" postmodernism participates in ending history even in the form of "remembering" it. The nostalgia of pseudo-classicism in its architecture may stand emblematically for its forgetful historicism. In as much as pastiche in particular is not a critical trope, postmodernism is again not essentially different in this respect from the more "traditionally historical" form of "tradition". Both are committed to an intense or causal remembering the present not only as something that may never have happened in the past, but with the definite purpose of forgetting what did. The legitimisation of what is dominant in the present is thus underwritten by this form of active forgetting – the pseudo-memory of historicism.

If there is a problematic of remembrance and forgetting, there is nothing earth shattering about this, for it was already in Nietzsche's invitation to meditate on the *Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life*, which is in essence a critical analysis of the powerful legacy of the Enlightenment. He would remind us that "*the historical and unhistorical are necessary in equal measure for the health of an individual, a people and a culture.*" Walter Benjamin, a terrible century later, would agree. For Benjamin, to gaze upon history, was to be confronted by a field of shattered ruins – which is why his Angel of History has her face to the past as the storm from Paradise drives her into the future to which her back is turned.

Despite their differences, Hannah Arendt and Benjamin share what is necessary in the representation of history. As contemporaries who both encountered the brutalities of Nazism, they possessed the critical abilities necessary to deal with the complexities that made up their present. History is a play of repetitions and representations, masks, disguises, and illusions, making it "the first time a tragedy, the second a farce".²⁰ This may mock the present, but also provide its most powerful idiom: "*The awakening of the dead in those revolutions served the purpose of glorifying new struggles, not of parodying the old, of magnifying the given task in imagination, not of fleeing from its solution in reality; of finding once more the spirit of revolution, not of making its ghosts walk about again.*"²¹ Neither Arendt's nor Benjamin's sense of the historical simply punctual. Although it is infused with the presence of the "now", it is certainly not homogeneous, but "blasted out of the continuum of history"²², galvanised by memory that flash up in moments of danger and so layered more complex historical imperatives than either univocal liberal democracy, or the fascism against which they struggled. Within their texts is a complexity in the figuration of history that defies univocal reduction. Benjamin's text in particular is an intervention against the double-edged amnesia, which appears as Barker suggests, "in the form of a selective remembering, and forgetting".²³

Writing about Benjamin, Arendt uses the image of the pearl diver – an image that applies equally well to herself – the one who descends into the depths to “*pry loose the rich and the strange*” from their hidden confinement. This endeavour is guided by

the conviction that although the living is subject to the ruins of time, the process of decay is at the same time a process of crystalization, that in the depths of the sea, into which sinks and is dissolved what was once alive, some things suffer a sea change and survive in new crystallized forms and shapes that remain immune to the elements as though they waited only for the pearl diver who would one day come down to them and bring them into the end of the living²⁴

Historicism, whether in the form of tradition, postmodernism, or positivism, on the other hand, use the past for its own purposes. There are of course interesting varieties of resistance that the past offers to the will to pacify it – positivism will of course continue to claim to represent the past in all its neutral neutrality, while other approaches may claim to have constructed it *ex nihilo*.

A sense of the historical has of course nothing to do with historicism – for all the theoretical laziness to speak of anything even remotely connected to the past as “historicism”. Historicism is the systematic deployment of a “history” that is flattened into a-temporality, either in the superficialities of postmodernism or as a simplified de-historicised past²⁵. A proper (non-historicist) historicity instead moves back and forth between past and future and present in movements of recognition and differentiation. The dominant historical discourse is interrupted by dialogue between the present and the other of the past. In an epistemological sense, a healthy scepticism regarding its own lack of foundation is necessary, but this is totally different from reading history in a programmatic way from that lack of foundation. A proper sense of the historical never falls victim to regressive nostalgias, but its sense of the complexity of historicity relieves one from the burden of responsibility that results from a one-sided narrative.

In the figuration of historical time and of historicity, history begins to look less like narrative and begins to resemble tragedy. It is certainly true of Benjamin’s position: With Arendt he shared a conviction that there had been an irreparable diremption of tradition, and an attendant loss of authority. Whereas histories tend toward either the replication of some dominant story, which seeks to justify what *is* actually dominant, tragedy, on the other hand discloses the problematicity – the unforeclosed character – of the historical. It is tragic in the sense that it is encountered not as an object in a different time and place, but is encountered as that which resists the grasp of my knowledge, and requires me to loosen my grip and experience the refusal of the other to be contained in the conceptual apparatus that I have prepared

for it. As Karl Jaspers said "*Failure and breakdown reveal the nature of things*".²⁶

But if history is violent in the complexity of its temporalities, it is also "tragic" to the extent in which it consists of violent depredation, although this state is usually occluded by its dominant historicism. In the whirlwind of transformations that is the now, there is a certain bourgeois nostalgia for a time where everything was more "stable". In a certain sense, nostalgia seems to be *the* form of decadence at present. But the truth is that the vast majority of the population of the world has experienced from time immemorial nothing *but* turbulence and instability. Thus the "ignorance" that thinks of "change" as "novelty" has been well schooled. But the arrogance with which the "ignorant" masses are instructed not to be afraid of change, has an ominous ring to it. Postmodernist, as well as traditionalists act in league with one another to achieve the occlusion of the ongoing crisis which history actually amounts to.

Thus as Benjamin suggests, history may have to be brushed against the grain, and think the underside of what we have been told by the victors. It will imply a taking up of Nietzsche's challenge to engage in critical history. And that is always more difficult, for it is always more personal than either monumental or antiquarian history: Any attempt to get at the root of the negativity of the past is bound to bring one face to face with the darker side of oneself. And once identified, it will demand to be addressed. Against Livy's aforementioned battle cry of "Down with the defeated!" one could posit Cato's equally powerful aphorism – made famous by Arendt: "The victor's cause pleases the gods, but the defeated one pleases Cato". In this sense Nietzsche's call to "forget history" is really a call for critical history – a rejection of the weight that has been officially deemed to be history. For, since there is no full closure, no certain utopian end towards history is going, there are certainly forces of termination at work, forces shaping the possibility of the future. If we must remember – and forget – history, the question as to *whose* history, and must remain open. So should the questions of what makes a society a society, and not merely a product of subjection. The answer will have to be found beyond the fettered memorialization of a dead past. A world haunted by its finitude, its mortality and vulnerability to the ravages of time has to be overcome, and time and "*time and worldliness will need to be reconciled*".²⁷ A history of the present will have to maintain a critical attitude to the past – history always remains always to be made, though not in Vico's sense of the term. And despite those who confuse nostalgia with history, a proper historical practice will have to be found, a sense of historicity, and the capacity to recognize, desire and shape change.

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