



Can There Be History Without Representation?

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Abstract: Dmitri Nikulin argues that history is a discursive activity making use of names and images for the preservation of historical events. Names form an essential component of the historical account while images supplement and substantialize names. In this essay, I raise the question of whether or not, on Nikulin's account, there can be history without names and images – that is, without representation. I juxtapose Nikulin's account with Jean-Luc Nancy's essay "Finite History" in order to see whether or not the latter exceeds the purview of Nikulin's conception of history. Without providing an answer to that question, I hold that Nancy's text (when read alongside Nikulin's) helps one to perceive the complexity of this topic with more clarity.

Keywords: Nancy, Jean-Luc; Nikulin, Dmitri; history; image; name; representation; philosophy of history; fabula.

The first thing to be noted regarding Dmitri Nikulin's exciting and nuanced study, *The Concept of History*,¹ is that it is a vigorous rethinking of the topic in a pre-nineteenth century manner. For Nikulin, history is an inquiry undertaken in order to gain perspective and knowledge through remembrance. In this way, and with regard to the long-standing "quarrel between the ancients and the moderns," he sides decisively with the former. Nikulin construes history as discursive – that is, as a discursive record of past events and deeds that, as Herodotus had already pointed out, preserve them from the ravages of time. He does not consider the concept of history as meaning *Geschichte* – the German word for identifying an existential embeddedness in which humans live, work, act, and die; moving from past, through present, and are ultimately directed toward the future. In the penultimate chapter, "Memory and

History," Nikulin makes this difference in perspective very clear:

The future is not historical but is an imaginary concept, meaningful only within an anticipated teleological history in which the future is already postulated non-historically from and in the very beginning and is immanent in the past, which is then reconstructed in and for the present. [CH 128]

In a sense (although Nikulin does not voice this radical claim), the entire modern (nineteenth century) philosophical conception of history is the result of what Benedict de Spinoza refers to as a mistaking of imagination for reason.² Differently stated, what appears as an historical *telos* is actually an imaginative

¹ Dmitri Nikulin, *The Concept of History*, London, UK: Bloomsbury Academic, 2017. [Henceforth cited as CH]

² See the critique of final causality in the Appendix to Part One of Benedict de Spinoza, *Ethics*, ed. James Gutmann, New York, NY: Hafner Publishing 1949, pp. 72-8, Hathi Trust, <https://hdl.handle.net/2027/uc1.b4251452>.

projection of archaic desires or affects. In elaborating a conception of historical inquiry that refuses the postulation of history as an existential structure, Nikulin is able to dispense with the problematic of teleology and substitute in its place, trans-historical structural elements (one might even say "conditions of possibility") that are present in all historical inquiry, namely *fabulae*, such as plots or fables, as well as the historical, such as the factual description of events (CH 7, 10). All histories contain these two elements, regardless of whether they are conceived of as historiological components or merely as the modalities through which we speak or write about events. With reference to Aristotelian terminology, we can say that instead of indexing history as final causality, Nikulin envisions it as a formal one.

If *fabula* and the historical are the elements out of which history is comprised—through which the memory of deeds and words persists—it should not surprise that he places great emphasis on the question of names and images as content for historical inquiry. One can even go so far as to suggest that this perspective has productively determined Nikulin's inquiry from the outset. In the dedication of the book, Nikulin explains how his project arose:

This book originated in a simple question that Ágnes Heller and I once discussed at length: If we had to choose, what would we have liked to be preserved of us once we are not physically present here anymore—an imageless name or an anonymous image? [CH v]

In this dedication, all the components of Nikulin's conception of history are present in (as it were) seedling form: the emphasis on the past with a certain degree of the present, preservation through remembering, and the question of the role and priority of names and images within such remembering. Nikulin's project can appropriately be viewed as emerging from an "Ágnes Heller moment," insofar as his conversation with Heller served as the impetus for the event that is his book. Likewise it is not surprising to find his answer to the "dear friend, wise colleague, and passionate interlocutor" question posed in Chapter 5, with the apt title "The Logos of History," where it is noteworthy to find the Homeric enumeration of virtuous traits. This *logos* is intimately bound up with that which, through remembering, gives subjects of history their "historical being":

A person lives within a history once her *name* (that and who she was) is retained in the historical along with the *story* of her life as a *fabula* (what she was and has

achieved in life). Since historical being keeps a person in a history, the existential aspect or *that she was*, lived and existed, becomes the minimal necessary condition for historical being. [CH 108]

For Nikulin, the name acts as the gravitational center of a historical inquiry for yoking together the plot and the description of events into a meaningful whole. He goes further: "that a name must be preserved in and for a history is itself a historical imperative" insofar as the named person is "saved for a history by and in her name" (CH 109). This is a far more radical claim than Walter Benjamin's statement to the effect that dates provide a physiognomy for history; for Nikulin, names are part of the very substance of historical being—without names, it is hard to know of what history would be comprised.

Nikulin has thus made good on part one of the "Ágnes Heller moment" that is laying at the foundation of his text—namely, identifying names as being the substance of history. What then of the image? For Nikulin, images are important, but secondary:

My claim here is that while images may have normative meaning and be prohibitive, permissive, or prescriptive...in a history they function as *illustrations* of an entry in the historical, and as such they complement or provide a visually enfolded narrative for names. [CH 114]

Images, for Nikulin, provide something like a secondary orientation, but no real direction for historical inquiry; they certainly provide no self-evident understanding: "to be understood within a history, an image always needs some kind of an accompanying narrative, a *fabula*" (CH 114)—a *fabula* which necessarily includes names. A couple pages later, Nikulin provides a direct answer to his fulfillment (or exhaustion) of the Ágnes Heller moment:

Since a historical narrative is primarily a written text or orally told story, it can exist and live on without an illustrating image, whereas an image cannot live by itself in a history without a clarifying text, whether the text is an inscription or developed narrative. Therefore, in history the preservation of an imageless name is preferred to the preservation of an anonymous image... in a history names take precedence over images, and writing gains the advantage over painting. In this sense, the medieval Jewish Biblical tradition of telling and transmitting stories in written form without images, but accompanied by successions of names that are explained by narrative and commentary, exactly expresses the structure of history. [CH 116]

In this context, I would like to point out a practice in the Jewish tradition, where a person's mourning the death of a loved one is addressed with the words: "May their memory be a blessing." The emphasis on the remembrance of the named person through recitation also exhibits the structure of history that Nikulin so deftly articulates in his work.

Given that Nikulin's pre-modernesque conception of history is intended to be comprehensive, it presumably can render a verdict on other conceptions of history (both in order to show their historical character as well as to disclose conflicts where they emerge). In light of this distinctiveness, I wish to put Nikulin's conception in conversation with another quite different contemporary account of history—namely, Jean-Luc Nancy's "Finite History."³ This is not meant to question the comprehensiveness of Nikulin's conception; rather, I am interested as to whether, under Nikulin's scheme, Nancy's account would register as referring to history at all? That I have, for some time, found Nancy's account—is it technically even a conception?—to be provocative, fascinating, and unsettling, is of secondary importance.

In the aforementioned quarrel between history as discursive inquiry and as existential structure, Nancy's account would fall (as it were) on the hither side of the latter conception—this means, it takes as its starting point the very existential structure of history that (it claims) has reached its exhausted end. For Nancy,

history—if we can remove this word from its metaphysical, and therefore historical, determination—does not belong primarily to time, nor to succession, nor to causality...History is suspended, without movement, and we can anticipate only with uncertainty or with anxiety what will happen if it moves forward again (if it is still possible to imagine something like a "forward movement"), or if it does not move at all. [FH 143-4]

Drawing on conceptions of the "end of history" as they are conceptualized by G. W. F. Hegel and Alexandre Kojève—but most acutely, by Martin Heidegger's thinking of history as *Ereignis*, as an event of appropriation (FH 164)—Nancy's text amounts to a questioning of how history might be conceived (or

even what might take its place) after it has reached its exhaustion point. But the exhaustion of history does not entail the complete disappearance of history altogether. For this reason, Nancy can hold that such a history-at-its-end still bears a relation to history as an existential structure: "we treat historicity as performative rather than as narrative and knowledge" (FH 144).

However, if determination in history is neither temporal or conceptual, nor representational, what physiognomic character does it have? With regard to its happening, Nancy holds that history amounts to "an unending production of effects—but never the effectivity of a beginning" (FH 146). Upon history's end, there is simply occurrence. Without a beginning, and some form of continuation after its end, history would have to be thought as the existence of (to use Friedrich Schelling's term) the *Unvordenkliche*—that which cannot be thought in advance. Our existence is an occurrence that antedates and continuously exceeds our conceptual grasp and representation of itself. This is to say that history itself is not discursively exhaustible:

The end of history means, therefore, that history no longer represents or reveals the Idea of the self, or the Idea itself. But because metaphysical history, by developing the visibility of the Idea...not only develops "content," but also develops itself as the "form" and the "formation" of all its contents...we shall conclude that history now no longer presents or represents any history, any idea of history. [FH 148]

To say that history now no longer occurs (or can be thought) under the province of the Idea is, among other things, to say that it is not predominantly determined according to what Nikulin has called "fabula" and the historical—that is, discursively articulated plots, and descriptions of events. And if this is so, one might wonder what the epistemological status of names and images are in such an account of history, and if there is any such status at all. Nancy gestures toward this direction when he proposes, "we are perhaps exposed to another kind of 'history,' to another meaning of it or perhaps to another history of history" (FH 150). However, not being located in this other conception of history, one does not yet know what the status of plot, description of events, names, and images would be:

Between both possibilities, to be outside history or to enter another history (for which the name "history" no longer perhaps applies) is the "suspense" specific to our time. [FH 150]

It is precisely this suspense that gives one a clue

³ Jean-Luc Nancy, "Finite History," in *The Birth to Presence*, eds. Werner Hamacher and David E. Wellbery, transl. Brian Holmes and others, Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press 1994, pp. 143-66. [Henceforth cited as FH]

in this essay as to how Nancy intends to think history. Following Heidegger (and Jacques Derrida's essay "Différance"), Nancy characterizes time by means of its punctuatedness—to be suspended is to occupy a certain space that exists prior and posterior to other spaces. Having reached its end, human time is not characterized by a simple flow; thus its suspension (and our awareness of being between two "theres"—two dispensations of presence) can only be understood in quasi-spatial terms: "time presents itself to us as this spatiality or 'spacing' of a certain suspension—which is nothing else than the epoch, which, of course, means 'suspension' in Greek" (FH 150). Time, in other words, occurs as emplaced.

What is it, ultimately, that gets spaced in time (in addition, that is, to time itself)? More conventionally stated, what are the elements that make up the historical happening (regardless of whether this happening is within the first history, or some other history, or between both)? Nancy's answer relates to community:

From the beginning of historical time...history belonged to community, and community to history. The story of a single person, or of a single family, becomes historical only insofar as it belongs to a community. That means also that history belongs to politics, if politics means...building, managing, and representing being-in-common as such. [FH 152]

But who is this community that constitutes the substance of Nancian history? Nancy asserts, "The 'we' is nothing but finitude" (FH 156). Again, in keeping with Heidegger, Nancy holds that it is our mortal communal occurrence in the world that constitutes history. The happening of history is simply the occurrence of human finitude in its communality:

history is community, that is, the happening of a certain space of time—as a certain spacing of time, which is the spacing of a "we." This spacing gives space to community and spaces it, which means that it exposes it to it(self). [FH 160]

History, in other words, is the temporally punctuated partitioning of community whereby that community discovers itself as community, or in Nancy's words:

History, in its happening, is what we are never able to be present to, and this is our existence and our "we." Our "we" is constituted by this nonpresence. [FH 160]

If humans are constituted by continual discovery of

themselves as finite historical beings, we can never simply discursively grasp once and for all our direction, plans, hopes, or dreams—we are always in the midst of things. It is this midst that constitutes for Nancy (in a rereading of Heidegger's *Mitsein*) the being-in-common, called "community." But to say that this temporally-punctuated midst is neither graspable nor representable is also to locate it as a space in which we are never sure what to expect:

History...is a "coming-into-presence," it is the coming ("from the future") as coming, as happening, which means: as not present. This is not the permanency of a becoming. History becomes nothing—for history is not becoming, but coming. [FH 161]

If history is simply the exposure to the as-yet-ungraspable, it opens itself up to the irruption of the new; it is a conception of history that articulates "openness and heterogeneity" (FH 165). In this sense, too, Nancy's conception of history remains within a modern proximity, at least if it envisions itself as having passed that designation.

As stated earlier, my desire is not to confront Nikulin's provocative study with a conception that attempts to deconstruct it. Rather, I want to pause at the moment just prior to it in order to juxtapose Nikulin's pre-modern conception with Nancy's hyper-modern (not to say postmodern) one. As such, I pose two questions to Nikulin—the first conceptually moving from Nancy to Nikulin, the second from Nikulin to Nancy. My first question: Is Nancy's conception of history thinkable within Nikulin's schema of historical inquiry? Is Nancy, in fact, referring to history in his conception of history (or instead, that which takes history's place)? It may be that Nancy has, on Nikulin's terms, exceeded history altogether by making it unrepresentable. My second question: Do all instances of naming, imaging, fabulating, and describing evince the problem of representational closure? Do Nikulin's resources allow for a conception of naming and imaging that could meet Nancy's thinking of history as nonpresence? It may be that they do not insofar as, on Nikulin's terms, history is a site of representative activity. Put differently (and in conclusion), do these different conceptions of history find a narrative (if not an outright plot) that do justice, Nancy's existential concerns as well as to the Ágnes Heller moment that is developed so forcefully and persuasively in Nikulin's wonderful text?