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"Please, stop at Zuckerman"
Names and Memory in History

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Abstract: In discussing Dmitri Nikulin's book on history I start from the initial question regarding what one would like to have preserved of oneself, once one is no more. I then contrast this question with the overall argument of the book, which identifies in history a combination of names and narratives. While my first objection concerns the absence of names in much historiography, keener on privileging anonymous movements and not aimed at preserving the identity of its protagonists, I then examine the question of names to determine if it is possible at all to rescue what has been lost, and if it is always desirable to do so. I mention some examples of the possible futility of preserving names, not because I want to undermine its importance, but because I mean to stress that much of what remains of someone runs an unpredictable course and escapes one's control.

Keywords: Nikulin, Dmitri; names, historical; memory; history; fame; the dead; survival narratives.

History is nothing less than who human beings are. It results from their need to preserve themselves against non-being. A wonderfully erudite book, Dmitri Nikulin's *The Concept of History*—rich and complex, yet eminently readable—has more to do with the human condition and what it is to be a historical being, than with a philosophy of history or with history as a field of study.[1] Nikulin refers to the classical themes of *epimeleia heautou* or of *caritas sui* (*CH* 2, 129) in order to show that history is the personal and cultural memory of one's achievements, the way one manifests and leaves behind—the way one writes—what one desires to outlast oneself.

What is left of the past, and of those who were important or dear to a community, is one of the questions I find in this book along with the theme of the relative immortality of names. Taken literally, however, the question from which it admittedly originates is a slightly different one, and it seems to me not only fitting to recall it as it mentions a common friend, recently tragically departed, to whom the book is dedicated, but also quite pertinent in its disparaging bareness—in fact, it is one of the high points and among my favorite moments depicted in the book. In the book's dedication, Nikulin writes, "Agnes 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)? It is a bleak question, one that has nothing comfortably uplifting about it.

Yet, the book reads otherwise, and there is a thematic discrepancy between this question and the argument of the book. It identifies in history an underlying structure with varying degrees of combination of what Nikulin refers to as a "this" and a "what." History is the

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

telling of a "this" (either present or past) and a "what" (referring to what a human being is). It requires at once a name (in a list), the existence that is being preserved (called "the historical"), and a narrative, the fabula, the meaningful story about what had happened. Nikulin outlines in very precise and apt terms the relevant differences between history and fiction (particularly drama, literature, rhetoric, and myth). The difference between epic and history is clear in all its consequences, beginning with the written versus oral transmission. Still, there is a motivation common to history and epic: keeping score of the past is what both are about. Nikulin wavers, but sometimes I could not help but think that as he writes about history, the model of history he wants to emulate is Homer (the book is replete with brilliant pages on ancient historians, from Herodotus to Hecateus). The purpose of epic poetry Nikulin defines as "the preservation of acts and names from the historical nihil by placing them into an unreachable and exemplary ('heroic' and 'absolute') past" (*CH* 52). Now that may well be as good a characterization of epic as it gets, but does it hold equally well of history too?

In light of Nikulin's discussion (*CH* 42) of the difference between the *kleos* of the ancients and the glory of the moderns (does one want to be remembered for reasons of honor or for reasons of dignity), it is possible to object that this characterization applies, if at all, to ancient history, but not as much to modern history. It is certainly doubtful that it could characterize much of the recent historiography from the second half of the twentieth century that is being quoted by Nikulin. The idea of a long duration (*longue durée*) of historical changes in the *École des Annales* is presupposed, for example, in the works of Marc Bloch and Fernand Braudel who write about slow-moving economic, demographic, agricultural, and geographic transformations that operate beneath the surface of historical changes over centuries. Very few names are mentioned in Bloch's research on feudal society or in Karl Polanyi's *The Great Transformation* or Nathan Wachtel's *Vision of the Vanquished*. Likewise, most Marxist-inspired history deals with economic and political struggles that remain anonymous. In such instances individual changes and situations are epiphenomena of underlying currents. And, if it is against the history of facts that many historical schools argue, then memory slackens, if not severs, its ties from history, and history is being made less by individuals than it is made by anonymous movements.

And yet, though not as decisive as the question of "What is left?" when it comes to the dead, the question of names crucial in this book is a thorny one. Ernst Robert Curtius said that names are like rainchecks, endorsements of responsibility, IOUs waiting to be absolved and paid back. Insofar as they are promises to be fulfilled, names wait to be filled in with a narrative and a meaning, and thereby are the source of individuation, a fixed reference, a repeatable identity. The absence of names in any book on the colonized and downtrodden, however, differs from that of Emmanuel Le Roi Ladurie's book on rural France. It is one thing to deem names secondary, quite another to deal with the very effacement of names once one is trying to lend a voice to the losing side of history. If history, as Walter Benjamin has it, relentlessly amasses its rubble and ruins, what would be needed, paradoxically, is to give the names back to the nameless—the oppressed, the dispossessed, the forgotten—names that had been long gone. Paradoxical is the retrieval of a memory of the immemorable, and yet this is what Benjamin hopes for as being an ultimate gesture of justice toward them. If this paradox illustrates the virtual impossibility of a historical justice for the dead, it also highlights a task humans are being bound by. We have a debt toward the dead, argues Nikulin. Humans are beings of passage. We come after our ancestors, and will be followed by a faceless posterity. Humans connect two ends that strictly speaking are not given as present. We are not just ephemeral beings, but are, more to the point, the transmission of a loan: being summoned to hand down what had been temporarily received. This is not what humans happen to do; rather, it is what humans must do. History shows that human ontology is that of transitional beings. Now, if honoring the name of the nameless is paradoxical, also honoring the names of the dead that one had known, albeit seemingly at hand, is no less problematic. In the economic logic of capitalistic societies, a debt is the inverse of a credit: things have a value, and the value is an abstract form that makes everything commensurable as it institutes equivalences among things that are by nature different. Nothing of the sort holds for the living when being in debt toward the dead: as this is an absolute debt, which cannot be paid back since it is beyond any and all currencies one may acquire and spend (or fail to do so). One cannot repay a debt if what one fights against is time, which will always prevail. The debt is incumbent upon the living by its very essence; it defines one as a person in history and in time. This is what Nikulin has in mind when he writes: "If *what* is lost, if the story of one's life or exploits is not preserved, then at least one's *name* should

be, since anonymity amounts to historical death." The preservation of names is the "historical imperative" (*CH* 108-9).

Here, then, is a second problem with respect to names and memory. How to set right, remedy, and restitute being to what has been lost? How to save anything from nothingness––and ultimately, what should be saved? Hardly five years have passed since I have lost some dear colleagues and friends, including the sharpest philosophical mind I have had the luck of knowing, and nothing seems to survive of them other than progressively dimmer memories by the few others who befriended them: their books are hardly being read any more, their departments have nothing set up to remember them, incoming students do not even know their names. Given that the imperative is clear, the question becomes, can one really rescue anything from non-being? And, should it be done in the first place?

One can, and must attempt it, though very little can be done. Ideally, name and narrative must be restituted jointly. The *logos* of history to which chapter five is dedicated should tell a reader what is worth preserving and why, but I am not sure it succeeds. Undoubtedly, for Nikulin history cannot be what Leopold von Ranke wanted it to be, namely the reconstruction of the past *wie es eigentlich geschehen ist*, the reproduction of things as they had happened. There is a constructive moment to history, and interpretation is not only inevitable, but it is indeed a formative and constitutive element to history. Yet, the imperative makes sense insofar as faithfulness is a value and a virtue. The goal is preserving what has been, and Nikulin criticizes Hayden White for taking history to be rhetoric and a form of literature. At the same time, the *logos* of history "'decides' what to choose for a historical account or list, how to organize and thus how to preserve it" (*CH* 131). The risk is obviously that the element of choice becomes overbearing, and history artful: "Remembrance, like Rembrandt, is dark but festive. Remembered ones dress up for the occasion and sit still. Memory is a photo-studio de luxe," as Vladimir Nabokov has it.[2]

Nikulin does not leave the initial question hanging in the air, and on p. 116 he offers his answer: "in history the preservation of an imageless name is preferred to the preservation of an anonymous image." If I am Roland Barthes who is watching and commenting on photographs of earlier decades, say by Nadar, André Kertész, or Alfred Stieglitz, anonymous images retain a fascination for the viewer. Of course, even as one supplies a narrative to images and tries to divine a story out of few significant details, their subjects are exemplars, types: they are effaced in their individuality. Yet does this mean they are not effaced with respect to their individuality when their names are being retained? In fact, if a name may be more proper to individuality than an image, how essential can a name get? Name and narration seem equally important. For example, if both name and image are available to me, should I not ask for whom this should be meaningful? Why should I care to live on in the memory of a posterity I have no interest in or intimate relation to—more importantly, to whom I cannot even fathom how to connect? Besides, that posterity could have got it all wrong about me. In the end, the question remains how that is supposed to save me from non-being. What history allows is at best survival, not life. And this prefix is the key: sur- or *nach-* and *über-* (in the German *überleben*). This is, I submit, what Homer had in mind when he speaks of Odysseus embracing his mother in Hades and grasping nothing more than an *eidōlon*, a shadow and a dream. Is it worth it? If that was an image of his dead mother, what exactly can a name retain and transmit?

It is not surprising that in times when exposure of the minutest and most insignificant details of one's life is the widespread standard, some may prefer a basic form of modesty (and refrain, for example, from social media); they prefer, that is, not the anonymity of a secluded life or *lathê biôsas* necessarily, but a selective appearance: a discriminating attitude separating the meaningful from the trivial, driven by the sore consciousness that not everything one is and does is worth preserving and remembering. As Hannah Arendt says, certain actions demand being told. But most actions do not demand anything. It is even less surprising that a critical stance toward the natural desire not to perish with one's existence may betray one's vanity, and Nikulin recalls the Stoic deflation of the ambition to persist and the denunciation of the futile, self-centered desire for glory. It is, after all, reasonable to think that Socrates may have had a point when he wanted to leave nothing behind. Another paradox Nikulin is exploring regards the question of what to do with those who want to be remembered at all costs (Herostratus resorted to extreme measures in order to be remembered; he made a name for himself when he burned down the temple of Artemis at Ephesus): should their names no longer be

[2] Vladimir Nabokov, *Ada, or Ardor: A Family Chronicle*, New York, NY: Mac Graw Hill 1969, reprinted Vintage International 1990, p. 103.

mentioned, or are they to be remembered as symbols of evil? Roman law invented *damnatio memoriae* as a prohibition to preserve images and busts of the condemned. Once again, one can appreciate the affinity between name and image, and understand the ground common to damnation and iconoclasm. An icon may become an idol when it threatens to fascinate the viewer with its beauty, thereby deviating one's attention from the sacred it is meant to convey and celebrate; this substitution whereby an image is no longer a vehicle for remembering the absent it points to but absorbs our gaze on itself, and thus usurps its role, is what all prohibition of images stems from, ever since the Book of Wisdom in the *Old Testament* (14: 15-21). It seems to me that once again what claims to have absolute value, whether it is beauty or the sacred, is perceived as an intolerable threat, which explains the vertigo before revered works of art or holy sites and the instinctive desire many have to harm and deface them (I still remember as a child the reckless fury of a Polish madman who entered Saint Peter's church with a hammer and proceeded to destroy Michelangelo's *Pietà*). Curiously, this is a case where beauty represents what Immanuel Kant calls the sublime (as opposed to the aesthetic purposiveness of beauty), that is, the disproportion between an absolute beauty and the admission of insignificance of my being that it means to me insofar as I am a rational being.

So, is preserving a name so important? More to the point, can it deliver what it promises? For countless years and every year in the fall, as the Nobel prize for literature was about to be announced, many people thought it was finally the time it would be awarded to Philip Roth. Back in 1986, long before this became a refrain on newspapers and cultural magazines, Roth published a novel called *The Counterlife*, in which his well-known alias or alter ego Nathan Zuckerman was the protagonist. Roth writes:

> "If you're from New Jersey," Nathan had said, "and you write thirty books, and you win the Nobel Prize, and you live to be white-haired and ninety-five, it's highly unlikely but not impossible that after your death they'll decide to name a rest stop for you on the Jersey Turnpike. And so, long after you're gone, you may indeed be remembered, but mostly by small children, in the backs of cars, when they lean forward and tell their parents, 'Stop, please, stop at Zuckerman—I have to make a pee.' For a New Jersey novelist that's as much immortality as it's realistic to hope for."[3]

Roth is now no more, and he never won the Nobel Prize. The supreme irony is that in 2005 the city of Newark granted him the next best thing to a Jersey Turnpike rest stop: an intersection near Summit Avenue is now called Philip Roth Plaza.

If the gist of this passage is to question the worth, and illustrate the possible futility, of preserving a name once it is severed from its meaning, that does not mean one should dismiss all efforts at individual lasting. The question is: whose perspective shall be considered to determine how the balance of remembered name and meaning shifts, the perspective of the doer or the teller, the actor in history or the writer of history? It is Zuckerman who finds it a mockery to have his name remembered like that—not necessarily his affectionate readers. But if it were Zuckerman we should leave our last word to, then history ideally should be autobiography, where I, like Marcel Proust, get to choose what to tell, and preserve everything in my life that I deem worth preserving. Then what counts is the literary quality of fiction, and the first-person perspective history is supposed to suspend but the initial question in Nikulin's book—"if *we* had to choose"—does not. When the question of history is framed in terms of memory, it is difficult to keep personal and cultural memory apart. And this is the point: what is there to remember? It is difficult not to agree with Nikulin when he writes: "historically one is what and how one is remembered, as personally one is what and how one remembers" (*CH* 126). He also says: "To remember, then, means to be, to live on...to forget means to die" (*CH* 125). And yet, if individuality is best expressed by a proper name and a name without a fabula is little more than an empty reminder, what does a story capture of a name? Can a narrative exhaust the uniqueness of the name it is meant to remember? G. W. F. Hegel's sense-certainty twist on this question would be to point out that a particular narrative might as well apply to countless other names. Nikulin explains very well how for Aristotle poetry is superior to history because the poet strives for the "might have been," the historian for the individual "was" (*CH* 48): the former focuses on the plausible and meaningful plot in virtue of the light it can shed on universal human traits, while the latter seeks the individual "is" or "was" because this is the only way to be faithful to the past. Only the boring and inexhaustible filling in of details (as the Aristotelian historian's work would appear to his poet) could restitute what a name stands for. Apart from being undesirable, that would be useless, and, even more

[3] Philip Roth, *The Counterlife*, New York, NY: Farrar-Straus-Giroux 1986, p. 237.

basically, in principle impossible, as unmanageable as the memory of Jorge Luis Borges' character Funes El Memorioso who reproduces everything he sees. The historians instead choose what to tell and they must be clever at selecting the salient circumstances to report. This is important to stress as I now go back to the other question I had raised above, namely whether names (with or without narrative) ought to be preserved. As transitional beings, humans should preserve names, but must not underestimate the value of oblivion either. Oblivion can be good. It can be salutary and beneficial—in fact, precious for the future—when one needs to turn a page, start afresh, leave unwanted baggage behind, clear the table and dispose of what is no longer needed. Oblivion is also the appropriate verdict to almost everything we do, which has no business surviving us. Also, oblivion is the only protection against the exposure I was mentioning. It would be mad not to fear what might happen to experiences and actions when they go public ("if my thought-dreams could be seen, they'd probably put my head in a guillotine," in the words of Bob Dylan who eventually did become a Nobel laureate). Nikulin recalls that the muses were the daughters of Zeus and Mnemosune (memory). They were known as being "clear-voiced" (*CH* 85) because their role is that of telling and transmitting orally historical knowledge by recollection. They had a bad stepsister, though, if one pays heed to Virgil. In the fourth book of the *Aeneid*, Fame is the daughter of Zeus and the Earth, who brought her forth in her anger against the gods: she is the swiftest of all evils, living off the discord and alarm it thrives on disseminating. She is not just a capricious and malicious gossipmonger; she is "clinging to the false and wrong, yet heralding truth. At this time, exulting in manifold gossip, she filled the nations and sang alike of fact and falsehood."[4] Spreading rumor is where she is in her element, it is what fills people's head; and rumor is treacherous for it can sometimes be difficult to distinguish it from truth—as difficult as it is to tell fame from *kleos* and the light history is intended to keep alive.

[4] Virgil, *Eclogues. Georgics. Aeneid: Books 1-6*, transl. H. Rushton Fairclough, Loeb Classical Library 63, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press 1916, here *Aeneid Book 4*, 185 ff.