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# Toward a Happy Ending
## Memory, Narrative, and Comedy in History

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**Abstract:** In his search for what possibly could it mean for history to end well, Dmitri Nikulin suggests that history can be rendered as being comical. This review takes up this possibility and identifies that Nikulin refers to comedy's narrative form and the rich conceptual prospects this offers. Drawing on ancient Greek and Roman precedents as models, this essay supports Nikulin's challenge to grand historical narratives and shows by example of comic literary narratives how a multiplicity of perspectives can become acceptable with regard to framing historical accounts.

**Keywords:** Nikulin, Dmitri; self-knowledge; historical narrative; comic literature; philosophy of history; story-telling; narratology; antiquity.

Dmitri Nikulin writes in the preface to *The Concept of History* what might initially appear a throwaway remark, namely that history is "not comic *a priori*, but should be rendered comic by us."[1] While this could be casually glossed over—and indeed references to comedy and the comical are only scattered throughout the book, I wish to inquire into this enigma as one worth pursuing. What does it mean to render history comical? I believe this provides a key that unlocks a connection between history and narrative, and it connects *The Concept of History* to Nikulin's previous work on comedy.[2]

*The Concept of History* toggles between contemporary and ancient sources, from philosophical theory to Homeric epic, and demonstrates Nikulin's vast scope of scholarship and synoptic vision. One central objective of the book is disassembling the vestiges of the grand narratives, those narratives that are suggesting history to be universal, or that are advancing into one direction, toward a *telos* that bestows meaning on humans by way of progressing toward it. Although Nikulin's arguments are compelling, I wish to ask a question implied by Frederic Jameson: if this view were correct, what happens to the grand narratives? Do they disappear, or are they, as Jameson suggests, driven underground where they continue to inform humans how to think and act in current historical situations? In other words, do we not secretly or subconsciously still believe that historically we are making some sort of progress, and that someday, for instance, science will know everything? Overall, human action is strongly shaped by such subconscious beliefs. By continuing to subconsciously subscribe to such beliefs, we become part of a fabula by which we can understand ourselves. These accounts of history, inclusive and pluralistic

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

[2] Dmitri Nikulin, *Comedy, Seriously: A Philosophical Study*, New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014. [Henceforth cited as *CS*]

though they seem, eventually become a narrative that legitimizes human action. In this sense, the philosophical concept of history, to which Nikulin's book title refers, appears to be a fabula of sorts.

If grand narratives become fabulae, or myths about coming to understand oneself, it might be prudent to seek out examples in ancient literature. In ancient Greek poetry, multiple and conflicting accounts of mythological events occur regularly and appear to have been accepted as such. Being accustomed to oral tradition, ancient Greeks tolerated contradiction, inconsistencies, and diverse accounts from diverse sources more than modern science-based societies. For example, Homer's account of the Trojan War, to which Achilles arrives as an established and well-reputed warrior in spite of the fact that the war is triggered by an incident at the wedding of Achilles' parents. Alternately, two disparate accounts existed as to Aphrodite's birth: on the Hesiodic narrative, she is motherless, born of the severed testicles of Uranus (Heaven), who was castrated by his son Cronus on the request of his mother Gaea (Earth); while in the Homeric narrative, she has a mother, Dione, as well as a father, Zeus. Later, the Ancient Romans straightened out such temporal and testimonial inconsistencies through dates and places specified in their adaptations, legitimizing a singular, authoritative account. The genre of comedy provides a more fruitful possibility for tolerating multiple accounts. For comedy permits the suspension of belief on such details (such as, for example, in Aristophanes, the possibility of actually riding a dung beetle, or founding a city amongst the birds) and comedy tolerates the existence of multiple, competing accounts without the tendency to seek legitimacy for only one. Comedy also encourages self-reflection, wherein one learns to laugh at oneself, as characters of Greek New Comedy do it regularly. This self-reflection opens the realm for one to be able to laugh at the unintentional comedy of the totalizing, universalizing, and teleological tendencies that are found in modern societies, and that become part of today's myths or fabulae.

Such a myth could be, so Nikulin tells us, "the plot of a comedy or tragedy" (*CH* 63). At first blush, comedy might seem less viable than tragedy, as a non-teleological narrative form that is facilitating memory. Comedy lacks what can sear memories:

> Tragedy remembers and is remembered better than comedy, because tragedy inflicts a wound on memory, whereas comedy does not. Moreover, comedy has a complex dialectically structured plot that represents reasoning on stage. [*CH* 146]

While trauma sears memories into remembrance, comedy resists trauma, and as such, "History has a clear preference for sublime tragic events and figures, and not ridiculous, comic ones" (*CH* 146). But in other arenas, comedy ameliorates what tragedy exacerbates, for comedy has the potential to steer one away from the solipsism and loneliness of modernity. For Nikulin, comedy "is the only genre that allows for the realization of human well-being and freedom as being with others" (*CS* viii). Comedy requires a shared effort and mutually responsive action. It tolerates multiplicity, and always ends with some sort of resolution of its conflicts. As such, comedy offers the promise of renewal and a "celebration of life" (*CS* ix).

Indeed, comedy's diminished capacity to retain memories appears not to be much of an obstacle for Nikulin. One paradox cited by Nikulin is that of the necessity of oblivion for historical preservation and memory (*CH* 143). Memory and historical preservation, as Nikulin argues, paradoxically require oblivion. Being requires oblivion, much as the shades in the realm of Hades must cross the river Lethe. The paradox prompts questions. If one of the dangers of the grand narratives of teleological accounts of history is that of their exclusion, how does or does not the loss of memory, which effectively amounts to historical oblivion, avoid exclusion? For instance, the countless forgotten or untold stories of heroic acts or atrocities during warfare, or other narratives of generosity or injustice that go unremembered, are all relegated to oblivion unless there is a role for poetry and myth to literarily remember what was lost and thus save it from oblivion and historical exclusion. Anne Frank may have had the historical fortune—if one may call it that—to have her diary found and eventually published, and likewise Roberto Benigni's comedy "Life is Beautiful" counts toward telling lost stories of the Holocaust. Benigni's film demonstrates that comedy can be applied in tragic circumstances, and arguably becomes even more crucial and life affirming in decidedly non-comical situations. It takes a different sort of character and a different sort of self-conception to find or forge the comical despite the sinister topic. So although comic narratives, such as the latter, are more easily forgotten than tragedies, it is comedy that proposes a humbler self-conception, one perhaps prone to forgetting or being mistaken, which might lend itself better to the tolerance required for the concept of history that Nikulin proposes.

The resulting comical humility takes on an assortment of forms. The sort of historical subject who could participate in such a comedy is one who is necessarily humble and self-reflective. Such a subject would be far from declaring possible human emancipation through Enlightenment, or affirming such liberation through a utopian ideal. Indeed, such emancipation may, on this view of history, prove more likely to come from a comical narrative in which the servant turns out to be the master of ceremonies, the driver of the action, and the paradigm of the philosopher, as the slave does so often in the New Comedy of the Roman comic playwright Plautus, the Roman comic dramatist Terence, and the Greek dramatist Menander each of whom Nikulin focuses upon in *CS*. By accepting their vantage point, philosophy would then return to the paradigm of a Socrates, Epictetus, or Diogenes of Sinope, rather than an Immanuel Kant or Jean-Jacques Rousseau.

For Nikulin, the enactment of memory has a dramatic quality. He differentiates between three types of poetic historical memory and he places historical comedy into the "memory of *thinking*, preserved in and by philosophy and comedy as a dramatic representation of the experience of thinking" (*CH* 138). In his earlier writings, Nikulin discusses the details for this assertion, when he writes, "comedy is the dramatization of philosophical reasoning" (*CS* 13, 18, 25, 43, 57, 81). While processing historical complications with the aim of finding a resolution, comedy proves to be neither linear nor teleological, as it always remains vulnerable to further complications. Nor is comedy univocal, as attested by Nikulin's focus on New Comedy, which employs communal action but is not choral. It is instead dialogical and aims at a communal and collective satisfaction. Dramatic action compels the audience to accept a narrative. By way of its dialectical unfolding it portrays a convincing rationale. In this way, comedy has a normative value, showing human life as it can and should be (*CS* 49). Nikulin thus brings comedy into a direct and intimate relationship with philosophy. If history is to be rendered comical, philosophy provides the tools with which this can be achieved. By rendering history in a comical manner, the atrocities of past human action certainly cannot be laughed away, however, a society can learn to hear and tolerate the different, oftentimes conflicting stories, in full realization of the dynamic forces that shape historical events. Nikulin carefully crafts an enigmatic assessment of historical narratives that is quoted at the beginning of this essay, when he identifies that comic narration of history ought to be done "by us." As history is written by those who make history, Nikulin's notion of comedy is both dialogical and dialectical, and in both instances, thoroughly philosophical.

By commissioning poets and myth-makers to write the fabulae of history, literature and the literary become historical and provide meaningful ways for self-reflection. On Nikulin's reading, mythical and literary poetry are now included in the mode of how a society understands itself. Comedy, though promising in offering the literary model fulfilling numerous demands made upon an alternative to a grand historical narrative, might yet prove recalcitrant in these efforts. Nikulin aptly shows that history is not done exclusively by historians, nor is comedy something superficial and antithetical to philosophy. His perspective is more akin to how ancient Greeks would have viewed these disciplines as aspects of a greater whole. To what extent this broader sense of history can bring together disparate cultures, similar in goal yet not in methodology to what Karl Jaspers envisioned regarding a world philosophy has yet to be determined. Clio and Thalia, the Muses of history and comedy, respectively, would be proud. History may thus yet have a happy ending.