WHAT THE PAST IS FOR

by Leszek Kołakowski

The following speech was delivered in the Coolidge Auditorium on Nov. 5, 2003, upon Kolakowski's receipt of the first Kluge Prize.

Futurology, on my definition, is a very serious science whose subject is not only non-existent but necessarily non-existent: for the future does not exist and never will. We would not find this worrying if it did not immediately bring to our attention an analogous but more terrifying insight: namely, that the past does not exist either. From the time of St. Augustine and his classic reflections on the subject, the mystery of time has absorbed and tormented nearly all major philosophers, up to Bergson, Husserl and Sartre. The past by definition is an ocean of events that once happened; and those events are either retained in our memory, that is to say they exist only as part of our psychological reality, or reconstructed by us on the basis of our present experience—and it is only this present experience, our present reconstruction of the past, that is real, not the past as such. In other words, the entire realm of the past exists only as a portion of our (or strictly speaking, my) consciousness; the past in itself is nothing.

This argument can strike us as sophistry or as a bizarre philosophical exercise. But it is not sophistry; it is serious. However, we can also look at the question from another angle. Everything we see or touch is obviously a product of events that happened once, perhaps 10 seconds ago, perhaps 10 million years ago. Is it not, therefore, proper and reasonable to say that whatever we see or touch is the past? In metaphysical terms, the past is perhaps nothing, but in terms of our direct experience the past is everything. Our entire knowledge of the so-called "external" world is nothing but a continuous, uninterrupted stream of acts whereby what was the past becomes present. Yes, we may say that far from being nothing, the past is everything. And the enigma of time is not just something philosophers have constructed to amuse themselves with as they try to unravel its mysteries. The mystery is accessible to everyone, although, of course, not everyone likes to

spend their time thinking about time; it is only philosophers who try to express this everyday experience.

Philosophy is not there to be liked. I remember a colleague of mine, a professor of philosophy, describing his 6- year-old-son's first day at school. The teacher asked all the children to say their names and then what their fathers did. The boy refused to say anything, and the teacher was angry. Later, at home, he explained: "But I couldn't tell them that my daddy is a philosopher, because all the children would have laughed at me." Indeed, they would have laughed at him. But if the boy had said that his father was a circus clown, they would have laughed as well, even though it is a nice, respectable job to be a circus clown. And they would have laughed if the boy had said that his daddy was a garbage collector, too, although the profession of garbage collector is not only respectable but one of the most important in today's world; without garbage collectors we would not survive for long. And so, in matters of philosophy, let us not rely on the opinions of children. One might add that the profession of philosopher has a significant affinity with the two professions just mentioned: that of a circus clown and that of a garbage collector. But let us return to the problem of the past.

So our direct experience may be plausibly interpreted as a form of contact with the past. But we can also speak of knowledge of the past in a more specific sense, namely our knowledge of human history; and we may ask what this kind of knowledge of the past is for. In the tradition of the Enlightenment we sometimes find scorn or disrespect for historical knowledge: either because history, more often than not, is an infinite display of human stupidity and cruelty; or because nothing profitable can be learned from what mankind was up to earlier on; or else because history is not a science.

It is indeed arguable that we cannot use our historical knowledge to help us in our present work. It may be true that whatever people know about the military exploits of Alexander the Great or Hannibal would not be of much use in improving the skills of today's generals, and that knowledge of the political intrigues at the French royal court in the 17th century would not be of much help to a contemporary politician. However, the limited technical support to be gained from an acquaintance with historical events is not a good reason for concluding that historical knowledge is irrelevant to our life. We are the cultural, though not necessarily physical, heirs of Alexander the Great, Hannibal and French monarchs; and to say that their lives, their deeds

and misdeeds, do not matter to our lives would be almost as silly as saying that it would not matter to me if I were suddenly to erase from my memory my own past personal life, just because— obviously—I live in the present, not in the past. The history of past generations is our history, and we need to know it in order to be aware of our identity; in the same sense in which my own memory builds my personal identity, makes me a human subject.

From the assumption that history is not a science, but rather an art, it does not follow, of course, that it is not interesting or unworthy of being cultivated. This is a trivial point. But saying that history is not a science may suggest that, unlike the natural sciences, it does not try to establish general law but is concerned only with particular events, unique and unrepeatable. This question has been discussed since the 19th century and resulted in the well-known distinction, made by Rickert, between nomothetic and ideographic disciplines: between disciplines in which laws are discovered and disciplines which are just concerned with the narration of singular occurrences.

In fact, there is no such thing as "the laws of history," in the sense of true and justifiable statements that would tell us that in certain well-defined conditions certain well-defined phenomena invariably occur. The belief in laws of history was a Hegelian and Marxian delusion. Human history is a collection of unpredictable accidents, and we can all easily cite any number of instances where an event that was clearly decisive in shaping the destiny of mankind for subsequent decades or centuries could have gone a different way than it did; there was nothing necessary in its happening or in its results.

The phrase "the laws of history" has also been used to describe a tendency or trend that is bound to prevail in the near future. This use was particularly frequent in Marxist doctrine, and its ideological meaning was that future events could be foreseen on an allegedly "scientific" basis. Alas, all the predictions made by Marx or, later, by Marxists, were demonstrably false; social development went in an entirely different direction. The middle classes, instead of gradually shrinking and disappearing as the Marxist prophecy would have it, grew and grew; the market, far from being an obstacle to technological progress, proved to be its most powerful stimulus; the relative and absolute pauperization of the working class failed to occur; the falling rate of profit, which was to cause the collapse of capitalism, proved a vain hope; the proletarian revolution, a revolution resulting from the

conflict between industrial workers and capitalists, never happened. (The Russian revolution was in no way an example of it; what came closest to such a revolution, at least conceptually, was perhaps the workers' movement in Poland in the early 1980s, a movement directed against a socialist state and carried out under the sign of the cross with the blessing of the Pope.) One may say that, in general, futurology is not in a healthy state, for a number of reasons.

There is another important way in which the nihilistic approach to history is expressed today. This is the post-Nietzschean faith, also known as postmodernism. It says "there are no facts, only interpretations."

This is trivially true in one sense and absurd and dangerous in another. It is trivially true that any description of a fact, even the simplest, involves the entire history of human culture. When I say, for instance, "This morning, on the 29th of October 2003, I ate yogurt for breakfast," my words encompass the entire history of the European calendar, with its arbitrariness; they encompass the concept of breakfast and the concept of yogurt, which are all human inventions. The language I use is a product of human history and in this sense, whenever we use it, we interpret the world; for the world never shows itself to us directly, stripped and naked, in its purity; we always perceive it mediated by our culture, our history, our language.

But saying that "there are no facts, only interpretations" has another, dangerous meaning. Since historical knowledge is supposed to consist in the description of facts, of things that really happened, the idea that there are no facts in the normal sense implies that interpretations do not depend on facts but the other way around: that facts are produced by interpretations. Let us suppose that I stole a bottle of wine from a shop. Saying, "Mr. K stole a bottle of wine" would be an interpretation which generates the fact; the fact in itself does not exist. Consequently, phrases like "Mr. K is guilty of stealing a bottle of wine" or "Mr. K should be punished for his crime" have no meaning in relation to a fact; they are just parts of the interpretation. In other words, the concept of a moral judgment, and therefore also the concepts of good and evil, are empty; they do not refer to any empirical reality but only to our way of judging reality according to our a priori conceptual framework that we have constructed. The doctrine that "there are no facts, only interpretations" abolishes the idea of human responsibility and moral judgments; in effect, it considers any myth,

legend, or fable just as valid, in terms of knowledge, as any fact that we have verified as such according to our standards of historical inquiry. In epistemological terms, any mythical story is just as good as any historically established fact; the story of Hercules fighting against the Hydra is no "worse—no less true—in historical terms, than the history of Napoleon being defeated at Waterloo. There are no valid rules for establishing truth; consequently, there is no such thing as truth. There is no need to elaborate on the disastrous cultural effects of such a theory.

The upshot of my remarks is modest and banal: although the legacy of myth is certainly an important and fertile source in human culture, we must defend and support traditional research methods, elaborated over centuries, to establish the factual course of history and separate it from fantasies, however nourishing those fantasies might be. The doctrine that there are no facts, only interpretations, should be rejected as obscurantist. And we must preserve our traditional belief that the history of mankind, the history of things that really happened, woven of innumerable unique accidents, is the history of each of us, human subjects; whereas the belief in historical laws is a figment of the imagination. Historical knowledge is crucial to each of us: to schoolchildren and students, to young and old. We must absorb history as our own, with all its horrors and monstrosities, as well as its beauty and splendor, its cruelties and persecutions as well as all the magnificent works of the human mind and hand; we must do this if we are to know our proper place in the universe, to know who we are and how we should act.

One might ask what is the point of repeating these banalities. The answer is that it is important to keep on repeating them, again and again, because these are banalities we often find it convenient to forget; and if we forget them, and they fall into oblivion, we will be condemning our culture, that is to say ourselves, to ultimate and irrevocable ruin.