

Procrastination

Robert J.C. Young

‘Too close to call, whether I am yet beyond the real deadlines that followed the final deadline because of course with deadlines you never know whether they’re really final or whether that is just the date you have been told by your editor, only to discover afterwards that another contributor sent their essay in six months later. And even then, if it really was the final deadline there is always the possibility of a later insertion, at proof stage or even second proof stage, or even perhaps—No. That is no longer procrastination, that is living dangerously, the very thing the procrastinator wishes to avoid. The procrastinator is no revolutionary, leaping into the future: every procrastinator is at heart a conservative creature, cautious, politic, polite, wishing to live on without the jolt of completion and the rush of emptiness that follows the offering up of a piece of writing no longer just one’s own, that private pleasure, becoming exposed now to the possibility of being read, ridiculed, rejected—and producing the inevitable question of what is coming next. Publish and perish. ‘What are you working on at the moment?’ ‘What is your current project?’ Nothing. Nothing at all. Unwilling to become the productive academic *prestigateur*, pulling ever more startlingly innovative writings out of a shiny top hat, the procrastinator eyes his enfeebled, flattened mortar board warily. No key player he.

Nor she—though there is something very gendered about procrastination, an inexorable malediction of maleness in the spirit of Tristram Shandy, Leopold Bloom or Saleem Sinai. Viagra falls. The procrastinator hangs over the past, like the monster over the dead body of Frankenstein, furtively stealing time's proffered moments, seeking to retrieve what has already gone, to delay what has not been done, deferring till tomorrow what could be done today. He who hesitates is rarely lost. It may never happen. Delicious to dream, to fantasize, to imagine as you lie there half-awake, without ever facing the actuality of actually having to do it. The present must live on into the future, at all costs it must be kept going, not detached from the past, but nurtured and maintained for its familiar comfort, recognizable, known, safe. The same. Wittgenstein, when asked what he wanted for lunch while he was being a worker, painting a college room, replied: 'I don't mind what you give me just as long as it's the same everyday'. That was the spirit. Let us linger on, procrastinate that act of fulfilment that belongs to tomorrow, meanly measure out our lives as they unroll slowly through the debris of what has long since lapsed and elapsed. Stay with me, Ludwig, delay with me. Hang on a while. Don't go yet. Just two more minutes.

No? Wait. Procrastination, let it be said in its defence, also makes up an intellectual as well as a personal pleasure: contemporary theory, for example, embodies the procrastinative spirit. The procrastinator no longer shamefully hides his transgressive tendencies, his perversities and privacies. He has flagrantly turned himself into an intellectual *flaneur*, wandering among the arcades of the academy and transforming its disciplinary wares as he touches them. Yesterday's insistent emphasis upon post, post—this and post—that, revealed the hidden workings of procrastination's power across the spectrum: past this and that and yet putting

off until tomorrow what we have moved on to or become. Always post, never pre. And why not, after all? The greatest achievement of it all was to shatter anti-procrastinative thought: grand narratives, progress, emancipation, liberation, revolution, utopias, all these ideas that promised the dynamic realization of the future, are procrastination's ideological enemies, those jarring interventions into the political status quo, interruptions of history, active refusals of delicious delay and the infinite deferral of equitable material rewards. The *procrastinateur*, as we may call the theoretical procrastinator, for whom procrastination has become not just a practice, a way of life, but a philosophy, even the condition of knowledge itself, has been the friend of difference, and while all *procrastinateurs* have been highly visible in developing that virtue, they have also been more quietly working at the instantiation of the other quality that makes up *différance*, namely that of delay. Only procrastination makes difference *différance*. Without deferment, *différance* is just difference. The *procrastinateur* triumphs in the happy coalescence of difference with delay. Farewell the hopes for the future, farewell progress, farewell radical goals, farewell utopian pomp. We are caught up in a nobler process of eeking out the present, entangling it with the virtues of an attenuated past, diluting its apparently unspent ideologies. Progression becomes circumlocution. Revolution transgression. Destination, determination, all cede helplessly to procrastination. Pointless, just to throw money at it. We shall never get to anything very much. '*Différance*', as Derrida puts it, 'which wishes to yield...'

The procrastinator is not just an academic figure, difficult though that may be to believe. He, or now perhaps more pertinently she, also forms an allegorical figure of the nation—as procrastination (though less lauded than in recent accounts

of dissemination it is true). The undoing of progress and revolution has been caught up in a symbiotic process of fascination with the nation, demonstrating that it, too, operates in the spirit of procrastinateness. For what, after all, can a nation be moving towards, except for itself? Once its desire for self-realization has been fulfilled, that desire is not emptied out but becomes desire proper, that is desire based on an irredeemable, irretrievable lack. Psychoanalysis, still dawdling discontentedly through its interminable analyses, murmurs reassuringly that desire involves not the desire for something more, but for something less, lost, a return to what once (perhaps never) was. So don't even think about it. The end of all our goals is not a transformed future but a nostalgia that keys us in to the very mythic form of the nation itself. The way we were. Yes, that.

Once created, the nation too walks backwards through time, deferring all threats of transformation and translation, putting off all futures as it loiters over the past, surviving at all costs in self-interested self-perpetuation. Marxist-Leninists, Trotskyists, always knew that the nation operates as a form of resistance, the enemy of change, the dream of the bourgeoisie for a society in their own image, replete with national poets, national literatures, culture and art (what are these things but the lingering tentacles of a procrastinating past? Repeated endlessly in performances, exhibitions which protract them into an interminable future). It works so well. No fear now of the international workers' revolution, which has been postponed indefinitely, for ever now. For its part, though it was pragmatically and radically employed by generations of anti-colonial nationalists, the post-colonial nation has subsequently struggled to maintain its popular status, endeavouring to turn its people into procrastinatives. The problem was that, before the BJP, proffering its fantasies of a return to a past five, six

centuries past, no one saw that. Even then, more difficult, though, than with those willing procrastinatives of Bucks, Surrey and Kent. In Britain, class after all is the social institution that has most successfully practised the art of procrastination, perpetuating itself against all odds. Procrastination we might call it. The cricket match provides its most visible figure, the sublime gentleman's game that goes on and on, so slowly that the teams break for meals, sleep, running on for hours, days, sometimes, one suspects, even weeks. What, after all, is the hurry? Will it ever end, one wonders, and then, when your team is losing, throwing away runs or wickets, will it never end? This is the ideology of the upper and middle classes at their best. Their achievements with respect to colonialism and imperialism look palid by comparison. Though imitating class rule, colonialism never managed to establish itself as a natural form of government: when it fails, that has always been the secret of its failure. Wherever. If it succeeds, then we know that it has done so because we no longer think of it as colonialism. Colonial failure occurred when its identity betrayed the fact that its interests were always elsewhere, helping the ruling class to hang on at home. Despite its ever more active attempts at protraction and self-preservation, the problem was that colonialism's procrastination into the wrong century looked more and more blatant, whereas to be successfully practised, procrastination itself must always remain hidden, lagging behind something else, such as difference for example, or the nation, or the monarchy. The procrastinator must always have something else to do, so as to allow the furtive putting off of what might have been done, so that it will never be done.

How reassuring that these things linger on. How clever to produce in the new something that ensures the survival of past privileges and social structures. Could it be capitalism itself

doing this and thus taking the palm in the league of procrastinators? Dragging on, we now know, far beyond its time, refusing, despite being told by the big boys that it is in its late phase, to give way to any other system, for ever disseminating into undreamt of areas of daily life and further reaches of the diasporic globe. The procrastinator takes solace from its unchallenged supremacy, from the images of history repeating itself in the present. There, after all, like compound interest accumulating on a bank deposit, are the processes that sustain him, his culture and his nation, so that they, we, linger and remain.

Don't go'.

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