

Modern Adventures of Procrastination

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Cras, in Latin, means tomorrow. The word used to be also semantically stretchable, so as to refer to an undefined 'later' – future as such. *Crastinus* is what belongs to tomorrow. To pro-crastinate, is to put something among things that belong to tomorrow. To *put* something there; which suggests that tomorrow is not that thing's natural place, that the thing in question does not belong there by right. By implication, it belongs elsewhere. Where to? To the present, obviously. In order to land in the tomorrow, the thing needs to be first forced out from the present or barred access to the present. 'To procrastinate' means *not* to take things up as they come, to act according to a natural succession of things. Procrastination is not a matter of submission, quiescence or lassitude; it is an *active* stance, an attempt to assume control over a sequence of events and make that sequence different from what it otherwise would be. To procrastinate is to manipulate the possibilities of the *presence* of a thing by putting it off, to delaying and postponing its becoming present, keeping it at a distance and deferring its immediacy.

Procrastination as a cultural practice came into its own with the dawn of modernity. Its new meaning and ethical significance derived from the new meaningfulness of time: from time having a history, time *being* history. That meaning derived from time conceived as a passage between the presents of *different* quality and *varying* value; time considered as travelling towards another present distinct from (and as a rule more desirable than) the present lived through now. To put it in a nutshell: procrastination derived its modern meaning from time lived as pilgrimage, as movement towards a target.

In such time, each present is evaluated by something that comes after. Whatever value the present may possess, is but a premonitory signal of a higher value to come. The use – the task – of the present is to bring about that higher value. By itself, the present time is meaningless and devoid of value. It is for that reason flawed, deficient and incomplete. The meaning of the present lies ahead; what is at hand is evaluated and given sense by what does not exist yet.

Living life as pilgrimage is therefore intrinsically aporetic. It obliges each present to serve something which is-not-yet, and to serve it by closing up the distance, by working towards proximity and immediacy. But were the distance closed up and the goal reached, the present would forfeit everything that made it significant and

valuable. The instrumental rationality favoured and privileged by the pilgrim's life prompts the search for such means as may perform the uncanny feat of keeping the end of the efforts forever in sight while never reaching proximity; of bringing the end ever closer – while preventing the distance from being overcome altogether. Pilgrim's life is a travel-towards-fulfilment, but 'fulfilment' in that life is tantamount to the loss of meaning. Travelling towards the fulfilment gives the pilgrim's life its meaning, but that meaning cannot survive the completion of the journey.

Procrastination reflects that ambivalence. The pilgrim procrastinates in order to be better prepared to grasp things that truly matter. But grasping them will signal the end of the pilgrimage, and so the end to such life as derives from it its sole meaning. For this reason, procrastination has an in-built tendency to break any set in advance time-limit and stretch indefinitely. *Procrastination tends to become its own objective.* The prime object put off in the act of procrastination tends to be the termination of the procrastination itself.

The attitudinal/behavioural precept which laid the foundation of modern society and rendered the modern way of being-in-the-world both possible and inescapable – was the principle of *delay of gratification* (of a need, a desire, a pleasurable experience, an enjoyment). It is in this avatar that procrastination entered the modern scene (or, more exactly, rendered the scene modern). As Max Weber explained, it was that particular dilatoriness rather than haste and impatience, that resulted in such spectacular and seminal modern innovations as on the one hand accumulation of capital and on the other the spread and entrenchment of work ethic. Desire of improvement gave the effort its spur and momentum; but the caveat 'not yet', 'not just now' directed that effort towards its unanticipated consequence which came to be known as modern society.

In the form of 'delay of gratification' procrastination retained all its inner ambivalence. Libido and Thanatos vied with each other in every act of deferment, and each delay was the triumph of libido over its (literally) mortal enemy. Desire prompted the effort through the hope of gratification, yet the prompting retained its force as long as gratification remained but a hope. All effectiveness of the desire was vested in its un-fulfilment. In the end, in order to stay alive desire had to desire only itself.

In the 'delay of gratification' procrastination promoted ploughing and sowing over harvesting and ingesting the crops, investment over creaming the gains, saving over spending, self-denial over self-indulgence, work over consumption. Yet it never played down or denigrated the value of the things it denied priority. Those things were the prizes of the self-inflicted abstinence – rewards for voluntary dilatoriness. The more severe was the self-restraint, the greater would be, eventually, the opportunity for self-indulgence. Do save, since the more you save, the more you will be able to spend. Do work, since the more you work, the more you will consume. Paradoxically, the denial of immediacy, apparent demotion of goals, rebounded as their elevation – the need to wait magnified the teasing/seductive powers of the prize. Far from degrading the gratification of desires as a motive of life efforts, the precept of delay

made it into the supreme purpose of life. Delay of gratification kept the producer in the consumer toiling – by keeping the consumer wide awake and wide-eyed.

Due to its ambivalence, procrastination fed two opposite tendencies. One led to the *work ethic* which prodded the means to swap places with the ends and proclaimed the virtue of *work for work's sake*, delay as a value in its own right and a value more exquisite than those other values it was supposed to serve; work ethics pressed the delay to be extended indefinitely. Another tendency led to the aesthetic of consumption, demoting work to a purely subordinate, instrumental role of soil-mulching, an activity that derives all its value from what it is not but what it prepares the ground for; and to the casting of abstention and renunciation as sacrifices perhaps necessary, but cumbersome and resented, and preferably reduced to a bare minimum. Being a two-pronged sword, procrastination could serve modern society in both its producer and consumer stage, though it burdened each phase with tensions and unresolved attitudinal and value conflicts.

The passage to the present-day consumer society signified therefore a shift in emphasis rather than a change of values. And yet it stressed the principle of procrastination to the breaking point. That principle stands now vulnerable, as it lost the protective shield of the ethical injunction. No more is the delay of gratification a sign of moral virtue. It is a hardship pure and simple, a problematic burden signalling imperfections in social arrangements, personal inadequacy, or both. Not an exhortation, but a resigned and sad admission of an unpleasant (yet curable) state of affairs.

If work ethic pressed towards indefinite extension of delay, aesthetic of consumption presses towards its abolition. We live, as George Steiner put it, in a 'casino culture' – and in the casino the never-too-distant call *rien ne va plus!* sets the welcome limit to procrastination; if an act is to be rewarded, the reward is instantaneous. In the casino culture waiting is taken out of wanting, but the satisfaction of the wanting must also be brief, lasting no longer than until the next run of the ball, be as short-lived as the waiting – lest it should smother, rather than replenish and reinvigorate, the desire, that most coveted of rewards in the world ruled by the aesthetic of consumption.

And so the poles of procrastination meet, the distance between desire and its gratification condenses into the moment of ecstasy – of which, as John Tusa has recently observed (in *The Guardian* of 19 July 1997) there must be plenty: 'Immediate, constant, diversionary, entertaining, in ever-growing numbers, in ever-growing forms, on ever-growing occasions'. No qualities of things and acts count 'other than instant, constant and unreflecting self gratification'. Well – demand for the gratification to be *instant* militates against the principle of procrastination. But being instant, gratification cannot be constant unless it also is short-lived, barred from lingering beyond the life-span of its diversionary and entertaining power. In the casino culture the principle of procrastination is under attack on two fronts at the same time. Under pressure are the delay of the gratification's *arrival*, as well as the delay of its *departure*.

This is, though, one side of the story. In the society of producers, the ethical principle of delayed gratification secured the durability of the work effort. In the society of

consumers, the same principle may still be needed in practice to secure the durability of desire. Desire being much more fragile and dessication-prone than labour, and unlike work un-fortified by institutional routines, it is unlikely to survive putting off the satisfaction *ad calendas graecas*. To stay alive and fresh, it must be time and again, and quite often, gratified – yet gratification spells the end of the desire. A society ruled by the aesthetic of consumption needs therefore a very special kind of gratification – akin to the Derridean *pharmakon*, the healing drug and a poison at the same time, or rather a drug which needs to be apportioned sparingly, never in full, murderous dosage. A gratification-not-really-gratifying, never drunk up to the bottom, always abandoned half-way...

Procrastination serves the consumer culture by self-denial. The source of creative effort is no more the induced desire to delay the gratification of desire – but the induced desire to shorten the delay or abolish it altogether, coupled with the induced desire to shorten the stay of gratification once it comes. Culture waging a war against procrastination is a novelty in modern history. It has no room for taking distance, reflection, continuity, tradition – that *Wiederholung* (recapitulation) that according to Heidegger was the modality of Being as we know it... Can a culture find other modes of Being than those thus far operating under the sign of procrastination? This is, I propose, the big question which the postmodern troublesome adventure of procrastination puts on the agenda of matters most urgent; the matters which truly do not allow procrastination.

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