In 1848, as revolutions swept continental Europe and a movement for
for social reform, known as Chartism, unsettled England, in a time
of industrialism and urbanization, of newspapers and expanding
means of communication, seven rebellious young artists in London
formed a secret society. They called themselves the Pre-Raphaelite
Brotherhood. Disenchanted with contemporary academic painting,
the Brotherhood were inspired by late medieval and early Renais-
sance art up to the time of Raphael. This art was characterized by mi-
nute description of detail and by subject matter of a noble, religious
or moralizing nature. Late medieval ideals in mid-nineteenth century
England – the concept appears an aberration: interesting, pleasing,
but an aberration none the less. This seemingly is historicity at it most
absurd, a total retreat into the past. To many artists and intellectu-
als of the nineteenth century the Middle Ages offered an asylum in
which to hide from the rapidly and relentlessly changing present.

Another symptom of European intellectual escapism during the
late 1900s and early twentieth century was the cult of the Renaissan-
cence. The veneration of this period, and of Italian history in particular,
by such thinkers as Gobineau, Nietzsche, Taine, Jacob Burckhardt,
John Addington Symonds and others - a phenomenon for which
Franz Ferdinand Baumgarten in 1917 coined the word ‘Renaissanc-
ismus’ – was associated with an intense contempt for the present. While
being swept headlong into an uncertain future, men sought certainty
and counterbalance in the past.

A passion for the Middle Ages or an intense admiration for the
Renaissance, these were the two strands of the nineteenth century’s
outlook on the past. Yet, each of these retrospective strands reflected
different attitudes towards the present as well. History, after all, was
not read or studied for history’s sake, but as a lesson for the here
and now. The past should teach the present, preferably with concrete
examples to be followed or avoided. The standard had been set by
Thomas Carlyle’s Past and Present (1843).

Of course, this ‘flight into the past’ is rarely a matter of pure esca-
pism. Most idolaters of Europe’s great tradition also had an agenda
that concerned their own time. Nostalgia is by implication cultural
criticism. Victorian neo-medievalists, for example, pitted their glori-
fied past against the contemporary reality of egoism, capitalism and gross materialism. Pre-Raphaelite painters depicted Renaissance and Romantic themes, mixed with contemporary subjects and criticism of society, including exploitation and poverty, and even taboos such as prostitution, suppressed sexuality or homosexuality. In poetry, the Pre-Raphaelites were no less critical of Victorian values. In forms reminiscent of Blake and Keats, they argued for women’s rights, exposed religious hypocrisy, and advocated pleasure for pleasure’s sake. They conceived themselves as neo-Renaissance and neo-Romantic artists, rebelling against prevailing Victorian values just as the Renaissance had confronted the Middle Ages and the Romantics rebelled against the Enlightenment. They countered the reality of Victorian dogmatism, orthodoxy and restriction with an idealized neo-pagan and hedonistic Renaissance, and celebrated alternative ethical and aesthetic values.

Futurism was another form of escape. Sacrificing the ‘horrors’ of the present for the idea of a radiant future was a common trait of nineteenth and early twentieth century thinking. Many indulged in anticipation, thinking about tomorrow, dreaming about next year, living for the future. They consoled themselves with the spectacle of a better world – and forgot to live. They made the future their goal, the present their means. Staring into the far distance, they were blinded to the present. Perversely, it was an industrialist who expressed the more rational outlook. In 1926, questions were put to Henry Ford about the future of the machine age. Shall we not have over-production? Shall we not some day reach a point where the machine becomes all powerful, and man of no consequence? ‘No man can say anything of the future’, Ford replied. ‘We need not bother about it. The future has always cared for itself in spite of our well-meant efforts to hamper it. If today we do the task we can best do, then we are doing all that we can do.’

One of the paradoxical aspects of nineteenth century thinking is the antagonism between a tendency towards historicity (Sainte-Beuve called the nineteenth century the most retrospective of all ages) and the demand for cultural innovation or modernity. This antagonism lies at the heart of Nietzsche’s Unzeitgemässe Betrachtungen (1876). The second essay in these ‘thoughts out of season’ is concerned with the use and abuse of history. Nietzsche represents German pride in historical culture as a fault and a weakness. History is needed for life and action, not as a convenient way to avoid initiative or an excuse for escape. In that sense, he argues, every generation must have the courage to break with the past and forcefully create space in order