
**Remembrance of Things Past**

It has been almost sixty years since Wallace Ferguson brought forth this compendium of historical analysis, reprinted by Toronto and the Renaissance Society of America. In 1948 it was a remarkable achievement, and it is a stunning achievement today. Indeed, in this first part of the twenty-first century, it would also be impossible to amass such a volume. The simple reason is that so very few could even conceive the idea of such a volume, much less know what they are reading. It is not that historical analysis has disappeared in current literary criticism; in fact, the strains of New Historicism, the most viable of criticism going at the moment, have led to impressive uses of history. They remain, however, just that: uses. It would be difficult to find many young literary critics or scholars who did not think that the purpose of using history was not for understanding the larger movements in a process, but for understanding how the past totally and completely serves the present. How can historicism serve our time, our ideology, our special “truth” about human life? Gone are the days of irony, paradox, and sheer surprise that validate the freedom of human history and often enhance the wonder of literary art coming from what would appear an impossible tangle of violence and greed as are most historical periods.

Even more difficult to comprehend by a modern generation of writers and readers would be that this volume depicts and narrates, like an action novel, just how the Renaissance was interpreted in the periods beginning with the Italian Renaissance itself and lasting until the 1940s. Even more maddening is that this is all ethno-European and white—and the term “Renaissance” appears a little ridiculous when the period is relegated, as any serious student knows, to simple “Early Modern.”

Like so much in criticism today, after the onslaughs of the late twentieth-century academy on its own canons, recovering the past appears generally pointless. The enormous political power in the
academy has moved into realms of Marxist-inspired methodology and anthropology. In such a world, how to take on the lonely task of recovery? It is to take on what the Renaissance itself—from da Valla to Erasmus—saw as the most civilizing work of its time: simple acts of archaeology.

In fact, reading Ferguson’s book today would be impossible for almost all students and, if taken on by a student (or critic or scholar, for that matter), Ferguson could only be taken seriously if approached by a process of archaeology. But we should first have to recover and resituate our own *raison d’etre* before we could begin the task of reconstruction. Why does one analyze literature at all? For its beauty or its service to society, to a digital order of truth, of which “political correctness” is only the surface—the Orwellian frames so many universities at the moment have resigned themselves to? The Platonic basis of society, with its rising and converging toward beauty—inhomherent in line after line in Shakespeare—has descended toward the immediate, the time that Aristotle understood as the place to make beauty. The problem in most modern literary criticism and even action theology is that the transcendental cannot exist because it is considered by Foucault, much less Derrida, for example, or even Richard Rorty, as the ultimate lie. Ferguson’s book, for all its “busy” surveying and Aristotelian inductive form, is still developed with the basic premise of a condition of human life (immediate and social) called “literature”—poetry and its beauties that go beyond the immediate and involve memory and will. Ferguson’s implicit premise sees his survey as analyzing literature, creating deeper understanding of texts, working from an ideology that ends not in use but in contemplation—the action to which a poem or narrative can lead.

In this sense, the nineteenth-century nature of this book keeps Newman’s distinction and definition of the contemplative. A Hegelian-Marxist sense of *Realität* does give the order of Ferguson’s sweep of “five centuries of interpretation” a certain play and immediacy, but the eagerness and excitement of its participants comes not from their sense of how literature can service society only but how it can transform it. When in Chapters Six and Seven, Ferguson does deal, in fact, with phenomenon of the nineteenth-century Jacob Burckhardt, who dealt with the concept of uses, it is still to defend the concept of art as capable of transforming life and society, not the
other way around. From its start, the *Rinascimento* conceived of beauty as the center of society, the politics only existing for the purpose of rendering art as a system of transformation originally modeled not least on that of the Catholic Church, however it rewrote Rome and later Greece.

Beginning with the Italian humanist tradition itself, Ferguson shows how the very period of the Renaissance began interpreting itself as history, a period imbued with the goal of understanding how beauty transforms within time. Transformed by the evolutions and revolutions signaled by the Northern Humanists and the religious interpretations in response, and then by later Humanists, where the emphasis on art was particularly strong as it melded with the revolutionary religious cultures. When the eighteenth-century rationalists invented their own form of classicism out of such early Humanist endeavors, the revolt of the Romantics redefined the whole process. Romantics in general moved from the beauty they saw in the Renaissance to the more startling canons they found in the Middle Ages. They therefore re-established the Middle Ages as the greater provider of beauty. The great voice of Burckhardt brought back the special beauty of the Renaissance as a greater center of creative power, especially to invent a future. Reaction to Burckhardt in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries continued the emphasis on the depth of the Middle Ages. The theories of these apologists saw the Renaissance only as a continuation of a greater understanding of human beauty. Ferguson ends his book with the relative triumph of these apologists.

One of the advantages in reading Ferguson again is that it can help us see how these methods he has dissected and the interpretations of their leading proponents would drastically alter, and be altered in, the New Criticism and the New Historicism that would follow it. There is a further obvious advantage of Ferguson’s analyzing these traditions in his rather Hegelian format. It gives the survivors today of the various “New” criticisms some hope of objectivity and not the hopeless meandering through criticism that has become little more than “blogs” of subjectivity. Ferguson’s format objectifies the older ways of interpreting the Renaissance with the realism (and inherent idealism) of the Old Historicism and its own special search for transcendent beauty. We see Ferguson’s format like a splendid narrative built on the purpose
of dramatizing how these scholars and critics over five centuries sought beauty.

To recover that lost vision of beauty as transformative of both the self and society for the purposes of deepening it, i.e., through contemplation of the art work, may no longer be possible, except as fragmentary and lonely heroic effort. Most of all, the codes of interpretation the earlier centuries worked with have disappeared as any kind of societal framework. The need is for a new archaeology.

What a scholar soon discovers in reading Ferguson’s text is that the approximate sixty years between our own intellectual and academic scene and the appearance of this book are like the sixty years between Thomas Cromwell, who killed the medieval Church of England, and James I, who used archaeology to create his own distinctive Church of England out of the medieval but could never recover the old frames of meaning. We simply cannot read as we did. Like Ishmael, we bobble up from time and use the flotsam and jetsam of a shipwrecked past to construct meaning, however limited, in order to survive on a drowning ocean. There is no longer any direct life, however, except in certain remaining voices and certain texts. Finding those earlier voices and texts is crucial.

The Renaissance Society of America is one of those voices seeking the independence of literature from currently enforced morality, and the issuance of this text in its excellent reprint series marks just an attempt to recover. The Society is to be highly commended for this attempt to recover these voices like Ferguson’s and texts in their new series like his *The Renaissance in Historical Text*—not least because the Society assumes a concept like history exists. This assumption is a major contemplative accomplishment in itself, and shows depth-perception of a new kind. The motive behind the series, then, leads us to the glories (and limitations) of an old method of literary criticism that was concerned, first and foremost, with metaphysical aims and not just material or social incentives to power found in literature. The Series points, therefore, to one of the urgencies of contemporary criticism itself. Remembrance might indeed lead to recovery.

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