

Twelve Ways to Know the Past

The past is always with us—in more ways than we think.

BY ATHANASIOS MOULAKIS

THE UNIVERSITIES' CULTURE WARS HAVE ABATED. Most people have grown tired of the debates between the worth of "dead white males" on the one hand, and the sins of politically correct ideologues on the other. Neither side can be said to have won. An uneasy truce reigns, broken by an occasional rear-guard action. But the underlying issues have not gone away. How we interpret the past affects the norms by which we live.

For all the ink spilled in these wars, surprisingly little clarity has been achieved. Even the notion that "history is more or less bunk," as Henry Ford put it, survives. Yet just as we read reality now in this manner and now in that, guided by different interests, motives, and sensibilities, so we have different everyday ways of using—and abusing—history. It is a practice we cannot put behind us.

A culture is a unique kind of inheritance. It represents a hoard that can be preserved, nurtured, imaginatively enhanced, and sometimes even invented. It can be wasted, neglected, or allowed to fall to ruin, but it cannot be spent. One cannot trade, say, some *hispanidad* for a bit of English stiff upper lip.

But a cultural legacy is never simply given. As Goethe observed, one must acquire it in order to possess it. To come alive, a cultural heritage needs to be read, deciphered, interpreted, and felt. It is like a landscape: What aesthetic,

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cultural, and social messages it conveys depend on how you look at it. The same valley looks different in the eyes of a painter, a rancher, or a military planner. Depending on who I am, I can see that valley as picturesque, as good for grazing cattle, or as suitable for deploying light cavalry. And landscapes are sometimes deliberately arranged to suit the expectations or taste of the viewer. The gondolier sings Neapolitan songs, to the delight of foreign honeymooners and the horror of true Venetians. The Houses of Parliament rebuilt after the Blitz are "Gothic," faithfully reproducing the Victorian fake. Revivals and renaissances are other ways of rearranging the past. As Ernest Renan wrote in his 1882 essay "What Is a Nation?" a nation coheres as much around what it forgets as what it remembers.

There are many ways of apprehending (and eliding) the past, but 12 stand out as most common:

Postmodernism. Our past is not revealed to us like a hitherto undiscovered continent. But neither is it a mere figment we can pull out of thin air, as some postmodernist thinkers contend. If Stanley Fish is right to argue that the meaning of a text cannot be reduced to the intention of its author, it does not follow that one reading is as valid or insightful as another. The careful historian and philologist, although aware, as the postmodernists warn, that he does not stand outside history and cannot avoid reading his own understandings into the past, can nevertheless collate and compare evidence,

identify anachronisms and contaminations, establish authoritative texts, and reconstruct contexts.

Fundamentalism. Fundamentalists, who want to live according to the literal meaning of authoritative texts, reject the inescapably metaphorical and hence potentially ambiguous qualities of language. They lift the composition of texts out of history, into a mythically privileged moment. That is why there is such resistance to “revisionist” interpretations of the Founding Fathers and why the “higher criticism” of the Bible, which has yielded precious insights into the devel-

THE CONNOISSEUR is not simply a creature of surfaces. Certain values are inscribed in a style.

opment of our civilization, is intolerable to fundamentalists. Paradoxically, fundamentalists share the radical relativists’ conviction that if a truth cannot be discovered or revealed as existing independently of the mental grasp and experience of the seeker, it is no truth at all. This is, in a sense, the very denial of faith.

Historiography. It may be a blessing to place cool reason over the passions, but it can also be a curse. A truthful image of the historical Thomas Jefferson, warts and all, may not offer an inspiring vision of democratic greatness, as the Jefferson of legend does. Perfect historiography is the death of living history. Those who bemoan that our children are no longer taught history are not generally worried about the students’ capacity to sift historical evidence. They want the young to be elevated by exposure to edifying and cautionary tales woven into their national identity. Second-guessing a formative cultural legacy is considered subversive. It is not surprising that critical, disinterested history is rare, arduous, and subject to censorship and persecution in democracies as in other regimes.

Aestheticism. An aesthetic reading of a cultural heritage introduces an element of play, and in some cases it amounts to nothing more than an amusing distraction.

The casual visitor to Pompeii escapes his humdrum existence by entertaining stereotypical visions of opulence, decadence, and the vanity of things human before the force of nature. What matters is not exactitude, the understanding of these lives and that death, but the ability temporarily to escape reality.

This is why earnest moralists such as St. Augustine fulminate against trivial curiosity. Augustine objects to it precisely because it detracts from the pursuit of the true and everlasting good. But he is too severe. Curiosity, for all the vanity and banality of many of its manifestations, is an expression of what Aristotle thought is most human: the desire to know. The vagabond quality of curiosity that bothered Augustine corresponds to the fragmented reality with which humanity is confronted. It is a first tug of the desire to encompass the world. Moving from a

lesser to a somewhat higher degree of coherence seems to be the way to make sense of the world, even though many people, perhaps most, will be happy just to daydream about the last days of Pompeii.

A more sophisticated aesthetic approach takes the form of a gallant amorism that savors the beautiful and the sublime and looks down upon moralizing literalism. It is possible, for example, to transcend the propagandistic intentions of Leni Riefenstahl’s Nazi-era films and photographs and appreciate the craft and beauty of her work. But the aesthete can go a step beyond that. The great art critic Bernard Berenson, following Nietzsche, preferred to judge works of art (as well as people and actions) as life enhancing or not, rather than as good or bad. Shielded from prosaic bourgeois morality, the aesthetic élan aspires to reach deeper into the drama of the human psyche and hence closer to the moral core of human existence than hackneyed conventions allow.

Connoisseurship. In a democratic age suspicious of qualities that set people apart for reasons that cannot be spelled out, the ideal of a gentleman is not easy to defend, whereas that of a connoisseur receives grudging recognition (and even admiration when the object of delectation fits an approved category such as wine, whose appreciation the upwardly mobile now value almost as

much as a low golf handicap). The gentleman aims to cultivate a lightly borne assurance, the connoisseur to develop a taste, a palate, a heightened sensibility, but not a body of knowledge. To the connoisseur, the masterpieces of the past are exemplary, but mostly because of the manner of their execution, not the worthiness of their content. Yet the gentleman and the connoisseur are not simply creatures of surfaces. Certain values and modes of conduct are implicit, inscribed in a style.



The Collector (1993), by P.J. Crook

Antiquarianism. The antiquarian's approach is very different. Surrounding himself with memorabilia of the Civil War, the schedules and menus of transatlantic steamers, or whatever it is, he seeks to enhance his familiarity with cherished things because they are familiar, because they are his. Strolling about in his physical or metaphorical home terrain, he revisits what he already knows in order to know it better. But the antiquarian also escapes the lonely happenstance of his own existence by attaching himself to history.

The local historian who makes a point of knowing every detail and every story behind the features of his town or neighborhood is a good example of this. In this way, he inscribes himself in a greater whole that is still intimately his.

Grand History. The antiquarian's punctilious attachment to small things is very different from the sweeping tones of the grand historian, as exemplified by Winston Churchill in his *History of the English-Speaking Peoples* (1956–58).

Often, the evocation of ancient grandeur, real and imaginary, is intended to dispel the drabness of the present and vouchsafe future glories. Besides telling a tale, histories of this kind function like anthems or memorials. Monuments of past greatness, valor, or sacrifice—the Iwo Jima memorial, the eternal flame of the Arc de Triomphe, the statue of Geoffroy de Bouillon in Brussels—are erected and preserved because, in commemorating exemplary individuals or acts, they exalt the idea of the community. They generally glorify courage and loyalty, but they seldom celebrate wisdom, justice, or goodness. They are also frequently conceived and interpreted with poetic license. This may involve deplorable falsifications of events, but it can also create realities of a higher order.

Textbooks and Encyclopedias.

The most common tool for imparting the lessons of a cultural inheritance, at the opposite pole from individual sensibility, is the textbook or manual. Textbooks teach subjects, not students. Materials are organized to serve classification, memorization, and repetition. The manual is not interested in the process of discovery, the active intelligence of the authors. It is interested in their results and in their methods divorced from their personalities. Even when individual figures, such as Galileo, are glorified, the worth of their achievements is seen not in the lived experience of their feats of talent, inge-

nity, sensibility, learning, or culture, but teleologically, in their “contribution” to our present capital of knowledge. Even where it is true that, as dwarves on the shoulders of giants, we see further than they did, our own stature remains that of dwarves.

The encyclopedic mode aims to create a broad frame of reference for the learner, a web of structured cultural memory. It is one of the purposes of college general-education

MEDIOCRITY IS ENCOURAGED by dumbing up as well as dumbing down.

requirements. This approach can receive an additional didactic twist when coupled with the idea that the cultural heritage consists of works, events, and stories from which to draw a moral. This is quite different from trying to understand the searching drama of past achievements. The fundamental idea is that the purpose of the author—Shakespeare or Thucydides, Michelangelo or Beethoven—is to *instruct*. The cultural inheritance then becomes an encyclopedia of stories with a moral. Elegance of expression and narrative power have no significance of their own. Insofar as the stories make learning more pleasant and therefore easier, they are useful, perhaps, but in any case subordinate to the central edifying mission of the encyclopedia.

Celebrating Identity. It is rare that cultural legacies are the objects of dispassionate study. It is much more common to “celebrate” a cultural inheritance as a claim to recognition, and the content of the culture is often subordinated to the claim. Pride takes the place of understanding.

Cultures are not inert objects that can be adequately understood from the outside, but neither is it possible for cultures to “speak for themselves.” Yet that is precisely the goal celebrants of cultural identity often embrace. The three-year-old National Museum of the American Indian on the Mall in Washington, D.C., is a good example. In designing their exhibits, the curators have abandoned all traditional classifications by tribe, language, or geographical distribution, and any attempt at chronological arrangement. Because they are extraneous to the cultures presented, such categories are thought to do them violence. Instead, visitors

are invited to “celebrate” the Native American cultures, not so much overcoming ethnocentric presumption as projecting the rhetoric of self-congratulation on cultural worlds not their own. The pose of respect is unaccompanied by any inducement to intellectual assimilation.

Since some kind of ordering of the materials is unavoidable, the truly magnificent collections of the museum are presented under “themes” such as “cosmology” or “landscape.” It is not evident, however, that these categories derive from the mental universe of the cultures presented. An interpretation that avoided all borrowed concepts, following the museum’s stated philosophy,

would require that all things Huron, for example, be presented in the Huron language—not very useful if the purpose is to explain a culture to those who do not belong to it.

The museum’s showcases group together objects found anywhere between Newfoundland and Tierra del Fuego, and made anytime between today and thousands of years ago, under headings such as “animals,” or “containers.” The effect of such classificatory chastity is total vacuity: All things are of equal value, that is, they are all equally worthless. This kind of critical abstinence goes hand in hand with the desire to entertain. At this and other museums, populism and a misplaced business mentality risk transmogrifying the institutional custodians of our cultural heritage into theme parks. The value of a cultural inheritance is abused when it is reduced to a badge of ethnicity.

Idol Worship. Mediocrity is encouraged by dumbing up as well as dumbing down. The notoriety of masterpieces eclipses what surrounds them. The immense crowds that line up around the block to see the *Mona Lisa* or Michelangelo’s *David* flow past other marvels of art with nary a look. It is an open question to what extent the very fame of a work prevents visitors from seeing it for themselves.

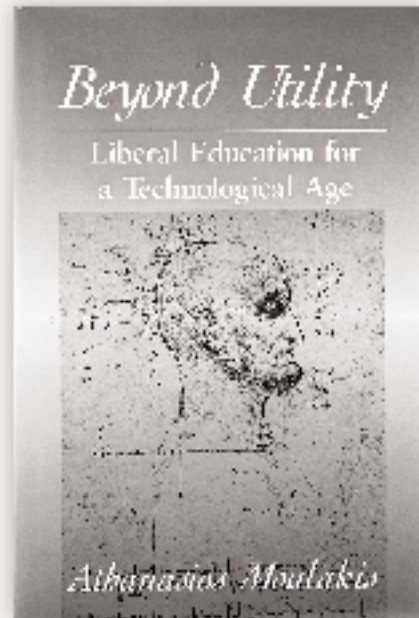
The deserved consecration of certain works as great, instead of stimulating a heightened aesthetic receptivity, encourages mental laziness and can become an excuse for philistinism: “You call that art? An ape can do better. Look at the Old Masters!” The legacy is available, but it needs to be read for its invitation to originality if it is to emerge from under the weight of

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conventional admiration. In one of his books, Le Corbusier includes two pictures showing a mass of redundant ornamentation on early skyscrapers juxtaposed against the perfectly proportioned, grand, and utterly simple staircase in the garden of Versailles. The gee-gaws, he remarks, are what come “from having seen Versailles without understanding.”

Creative Misunderstanding. Western art was influenced by contact with the East—from the chinoiseries of the 18th century to Egyptian motifs introduced after Bonaparte’s expedition to the Nile. The influence of Oriental art on the Impressionists and the effect of so-called primitive art, mainly African and Oceanic, on artists such as Pablo Picasso were even more decisive. Picasso was not, of course, attempting to recover the original intention of the makers of these artifacts—for whom they were neither “art” in the Western sense nor primitive. He sought instead to appropriate their forms for his own creative purposes. The profound renewal of Western art that resulted from its prolonged exposure to non-Western forms was the happy result of creative misunderstanding.

Forms inspired by exotic borrowings can, however, acquire a life of their own and create stereotypes projected back on their original. Often the stereotypes are negative, but people on the receiving end can also exploit stereotypes for their own ends. The average “Latin lover” doesn’t rush to disabuse the Nordic vacationer eager for adventure. Flamencos, hula dances, and other folkloric displays reflect the same truth. Entire peoples can play this game. The Dogon of Mali display the costumes, rituals, and professed beliefs in omnipresent spirits that affluent visitors have been programmed to find ever since the anthropologist Marcel Griaule made the Dogon and their intriguing practices known to the Western world in the 1930s. This has led to good practicing Muslims, which is what most Dogon are, passing themselves off as animists, the Dogon disguising themselves as “Dogon.”

The visitors do not just bring money. People feel confirmed in their identity when others seek them out as embodiments of something more meaningfully rooted than what their own bland modern lives yield. The thirst for tradition not only helps sustain “old ways” but is capable of inventing them. The traditional country fare on most Greek

islands, for example, used to be rather poor and limited in variety. Now, an increasingly affluent and sophisticated public demands both interesting food and local color. Restaurants respond with dishes supposedly based on “age-old local recipes.” By dint of repeating the story, the chef himself comes to believe in the culinary genius of his blessed peasant grandmother.

Meditation. A meditative approach to a landscape, a text, a work of art, though by no means necessarily religious, has an inward quality of which silence is the most telling outward sign. It does not proceed by analysis but by steady attention. Medieval monks recognized a mode of reading, a *sacra lectio*, that reinforces the community in faith. Each member is moved by an experience similar to that of his peers. The rule of St. Benedict prescribes absolute silence during the reading and prohibits any comments except for edifying remarks considered necessary by the prior. This may strike us as odd and authoritarian, but the discipline is directed not at the silencing of dissent but at the power of heeding what is being said. If it strikes us as impeding self-expression, we should also wonder how a self worth expressing is formed.

Meditative readings are iconolatric; the meaning they find does not emerge from analysis. Great works of all kinds are susceptible to both approaches. A reader of the *Iliad* does not need to know about the formal patterns of epic composition to be transported by the poem. One can be drawn into a Mark Rothko painting without knowing anything about its art-historical antecedents. Images and icons convey meaning beyond what they explicitly depict.

All of these modes of understanding the past come with difficulties and, sometimes, perils. The right kind of attention is not guaranteed. The collective mind is especially apt to be inattentive, attached to the literal. Where images—texts, constitutions, crowns—are venerated in common and thus form bonds of community, we find the beginnings of idolatry. The icon is no longer a vehicle or a window to the ineffable, but an opaque painted board that occludes rather than reveals the inspiring experience that gave rise to its form. This rigidity is the root of fundamentalism. Iconoclastic reactions can be cathartic, but, like reformations and revolutions that aim to recapture and restore the idea behind shopworn and corrupt forms,

they risk throwing out the baby with the bath water. The Italian Futurists of the early 20th century, repelled by the stale sentimentality of the received artistic ideas of their time, vowed to “kill the moonlight.” But their campaign was soon absorbed by a movement that killed people instead.

The consecrated character of a text, be it explicitly religious or ostensibly secular, sets limits to its interpretation. The authority of documents such as the Qu’ran or the U.S. Constitution seems essential to holding together a certain kind of community. Yet circumstances change and a literal interpretation of the authoritative text becomes incompatible with the new reality. The Sermon on the Mount, for instance, was pronounced in the expectation that the end was near. It is impossible for a community meant to last to live by its rules. The interpretative genius of the Church Fathers created effective institutional structures, informed by the spirit of the Sermon but adapted to a viable earthly community.

Who guards the guardians? Where meanings are not explicit, who are the legitimate interpreters who decide what conduct is required in response to apparently ambiguous readings? Averroës, the 12th-century Muslim philosopher who revived European awareness of Aristotle, nominates wise scholars. Machiavelli calls on “those who understand.” But once cut loose from the literal meaning of texts, how can we protect against false prophets, demagogues, and charlatans? In the American political system, the Supreme Court, fulfilling the role of Averroës’ scholars, is entrusted with deciding what constitutional provisions mean. “Activist” judges are nonetheless often accused of making rather than interpreting the law, but because they are embedded in the institutional status quo, they are not as radically suspect in their own land as are, say, Sufi mystics who claim an “inner voice” that trumps the authoritative Islamic texts and practices in many Muslim countries.

There are other modes of reading our patrimony in addition to those I have identified here, and none of these modes exist in pure form. They exist in a jumble. They do not represent different destinations in our quest for cultural memory but rather different ways of navigating the sea of culture. We can trim our sails or ply the oars as circumstances and our course demand, and our seamanship can be efficient, elegant, clumsy, or even disastrous. But, like it or not, we are launched upon the waters. ■