The Renaissance in Europe

A Reader

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1 Richard Danson Brown 'From Burckhardt to Greenblatt: New Historicisms and Old'

Source: written for this reader.

At the beginning of *The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy*, Burckhardt admits that 'To each eye, perhaps, the outlines of a given civilization present a different picture' (p. 19). We have different images – different pictures – of the Renaissance and the individuals who lived at that time. But not only do we have different pictures of the past, the pictures we share are themselves subject to revision and reinterpretation as time goes on. Burckhardt's Renaissance, though highly influential and arguably still relevant, is not the Renaissance we see today. The outlines of the picture have changed.

This essay examines the images provided by New Historicism, a movement of the late twentieth century which has had a significant impact on the interpretation of the Renaissance. Though New Historicists are, typically, literature specialists with a central interest in sixteenth-century English literature, this movement has had a widespread influence across the Humanities through its interdisciplinary approach. For example, Richard Helgerson's *Forms of Nationhood* (1992) considers the construction of English nationhood not only in conventional literary forms like poetry and drama, but also in law, theology, map making and travel narratives. At its best, New Historicist scholarship studies the cultures of the past in all their various forms, without privileging one discourse above another. As we shall see, New Historicism also significantly revises Burckhardt's model of the Renaissance.

(1) NEW VS. OLD HISTORICISM

So what is New Historicism? The adjective 'New' suggests that such Historicism must logically be understood in relation to an 'Old' Historicism – the question would then be 'What is Old Historicism?' Unsurprisingly, there is no movement which defines itself as Old Historicism. Like any label, New Historicism attempts to seduce its audience by laying claim to a novelty it may or may not actually possess. In this context, I am reminded of the repackaging during the 1990s of the British Labour Party as 'New Labour' in opposition to and revolt from 'Old Labour'. People only became conscious of Old Labour as a political grouping with the advent of New Labour. According to its adherents, the novelty of New Labour lies in its move away from the centralising, state-control model of democratic socialism of Old Labour; similarly, New Historicism attempts to modify older historicism by refiguring and reconceiving the ways in which historical evidence may be used to illuminate cultures of the past.

For example, in his essay 'Invisible Bullets' (1981), Stephen Greenblatt reads Shakespeare's History plays through his retelling Thomas Harriot's 1588 account of his visit to Virginia. According to Greenblatt, Harriot's account of the colonisation of America is punctuated by an ambiguous dynamic: by reporting how English colonisers deceived Algonquin Indians, Harriot invites 'a skeptical cri-

tique of the function of Christian morality in the New World' which is then immediately closed off (p. 39). By juxtaposing Harriot with Shakespeare, Greenblatt argues that Shakespeare exhibits a similar dynamic: his plays open up potential critiques of power – say in the character of Prince Hal – which are then contained. In this way, Shakespeare's Histories, and indeed the whole production of the drama in late sixteenth-century England, become embroiled in that other infinitely more treacherous Elizabethan project of colonisation.

What does an 'Old Historicist' make of similar texts? E. M. W. Tillyard's *Shakespeare's History Plays* (1944) reads the Histories through the examination of sixteenth-century historiography – the Tudors' dynastic interpretation of fourteenth- and fifteenth-century English history. In this reading, Shakespeare's plays enact orthodox Tudor history: God punishes usurpers and eventually saves England by delivering it into the hands of the Tudors. Greenblatt and Tillyard contextualize Shakespeare's Histories very differently. Tillyard takes the narrative sources of Shakespeare's plays and argues that the plays replicate the political and moral values contained in the sources; Greenblatt juxtaposes Shakespeare with a text which has no explicit connection with the Histories to illuminate what he sees as a common dynamic within Elizabethan culture.

Indeed, when we read Tillyard and Greenblatt, we are comparing scholars writing at vastly different times and in the context of different institutional influences and pressures. So Hugh Grady argues that Tillyard's over-riding concern with the theme of order is a product both of English anxiety about disorder during the Second World War and Tillyard's own position as a Cambridge professor trying to reconcile conflicting intellectual traditions. In this reading, Tillyard was 'a consummate English moderate who had remarkable success in what was a nearly impossible balancing act' (Grady, p. 170). Tillyard was caught between a positivist commitment (dating back to the nineteenth-century) to the idea that the study of literature is morally improving, and a modernist aesthetic which is more sceptical about the moral value of literature. By contrast Greenblatt writes as an American academic based in California attempting to study Renaissance literature through the adoption of a range of theoretical positions. Greenblatt's concern with the uses and abuses of power can be traced to his engagement with the ideas of the French historian Michel Foucault, whose primary concern was with the ways in which power informs and constructs human identity. We could also note that Greenblatt and his fellow American New Historicists were attuned to how power was used in Renaissance England at precisely the historical moment when the right-wing Republican administration of Ronald Reagan governed twentieth-century America. Analysing past cultures' tensions and incongruities is often a way of exploring the related dynamics which underlie your own society. My point is that historcisms of all kinds are themselves shaped by the historical and ideological pressures which inform the mental worlds of their proponents.

How then do these different methodologies influence the interpretation of literary texts? The interpretative differences between Tillyard and Greenblatt can be seen through their readings of Shakespeare's Prince Hal in *Henry IV*, who notoriously spends his time 'With unrestrained loose companions' (*Richard II*

V.iii.7) like Sir John Falstaff. For Tillyard, Hal is a hero figure – 'a man of large powers, Olympian loftiness' (p. 269); for Greenblatt, Hal is 'a conniving hypocrite' (p. 41). Where Tillyard's Hal glamorously embodies Tudor ideas of kingship, Greenblatt's is a compromised representative of the morally ambivalent cultural practices he anathematises in Elizabethan colonialism. Tillyard celebrates Hal while Greenblatt rubbishes him. But paradoxically, both critics view the Histories as texts which support ruling class ideology. The key difference is in the way they arrive at these conclusions: Hal is Shakespeare's 'studied picture of the kingly type' (Tillyard, p. 269), or Hal's 'ideal image' requires 'the constant production of its own radical subversion and the powerful containment of that subversion' (Greenblatt, p. 41).

The issue here is not which interpretation is the most convincing, but rather the distance between Old and New Historicist examinations of the same text. Perhaps one of the more immediately striking differences between Greenblatt and Tillyard is in terms of the complexity of their written style – curiously, the more recent writer is the more complex of the two. In the sentence just quoted, you must work out what is meant by 'the constant production of its own radical subversion' by reading on: Greenblatt means that the 'ideal image' of Hal is subverted by the play's presentation of him as a hypocrite; this subversion is in turn 'contained' by the audience's '"ironical acceptance"' of Hal's authority. I am not sure that either interpretation convinces me. Neither critic considers the possibility that Shakespeare's Histories could modify Tudor political orthodoxy while avoiding the risks of wholesale subversion. For example, the extent to which *Henry V* (c. 1599–1600) is a straightforward glorification of English militarism has been increasingly questioned during the course of the twentieth century. Though at one level the play can lend itself to propagandist readings and productions, in comparison with its major dramatic source, *The Famous Victories of Henry V* (printed 1598), Shakespeare's play is sceptical about the necessity and cost of war. This interpretative shift can be gauged by comparing Laurence Olivier's 1944 film, which aims to glorify Henry and the English war effort while Britain was again at war in Europe, with Kenneth Branagh's 1989 film, which offers a more realistic sense of war. The idea that Shakespeare's Histories could embody a sceptical (rather than a subversive) critique of Tudor ideology is paradoxically one which neither Tillyard nor Greenblatt explores, though for very different reasons. More recent historicists like Peter Erickson have however tried to advance 'a model of Elizabethan culture that recognises the room for artistic maneuver [sic] between the two extremes of total affirmation of royal mythology and all-out, open subversion' (Highley, p. 4).

(2) BURCKHARDT, NEW HISTORICISM AND THE UNFREE SUBJECT

A more detailed overview of New Historicism in relation to Burckhardt's picture of the Renaissance may be derived from John Martin's article, 'Inventing Sincerity, Refashioning Prudence: the Discovery of the Individual in Renaissance Europe' (1997) (Text 2). According to Martin, the central innovation of New Historicism is the sense that the self is not 'an autonomous entity' but is 'a site on which broader institutional and political forces are inscribed' (p. 1313). Hel-

gerson provides an alternative formulation: 'people themselves, whether individually or in groups, are made and imagined. Their identity – *our* identity – is a structure, a cultural construct' (p. 13). The human subject, which for centuries had been assumed to be autonomous and independent, is revealed as being unfree – put bluntly, we are the products of cultural forces as much as buildings or books. Martin then makes the point that Burckhardt's *Civilization* 'now serves as a canonical marker of a paradigm surpassed' (p. 1317). Exactly reversing Burckhardt's idea that the modern individual develops in the Renaissance, New Historicist scholars seek to reveal the process whereby the idea of the self is constructed in response to the pressures of competing power systems. In Greenblatt's famous formulation, the self is something *fashioned* in the Renaissance rather than something which, according to Burckhardt, *develops* in the Renaissance. Martin also points out (pp. 1314–20) the influence of New Historicism on other Humanities disciplines like the History of Science (Biagioli on Galileo) and Art History (Koerner on Dürer). As a concept for the interpretation of the Renaissance, self-fashioning has been powerfully influential.

These are complex arguments which it is often difficult to grasp. As Martin notes (p. 1316), Greenblatt himself registers some resistance to the idea of the unfree subject by telling a personal anecdote in the Epilogue to *Renaissance Self-Fashioning* which signals his desire 'to sustain the illusion that I am the principal maker of my own identity' (Greenblatt, *Renaissance Self-Fashioning*, p. 257). But note that word 'illusion': Greenblatt *feels* that he is an independent self – as do the sixteenth-century writers he discusses – but he actually *thinks* otherwise. The differences between Burckhardt and Greenblatt can be seen from Burckhardt's section 'The Development of the Individual' and from Greenblatt's comparison of More and Tyndale in *Renaissance Self-Fashioning*:

> . . . at the close of the thirteenth century Italy began to swarm with individuality; the ban laid upon human personality was dissolved; and a thousand figures meet us each in its own special shape and dress . . . among these many-sided men, some who may truly be called all-sided tower above the rest. Before analysing the general phases of the life and culture of this period, consider . . . the figure of one of these giants – Leon Battista Alberti (b. 1404?, d. 1472) . . . He learned music without a master . . . he acquired every sort of accomplishment and dexterity, cross-examining artists, scholars . . . To all this must be added his literary works, first those on art, which are landmarks and authorities of the first order for the Renaissance of form . . . then his Latin prose writings . . . his elegies [and] eclogues . . . But the deepest spring of his nature has yet to be spoken of – the sympathetic intensity with which he entered into the whole life around him. At the sight of noble trees and waving cornfields he shed tears; handsome and dignified old men he honoured as 'a delight of nature' . . . It need not be added that an iron will pervaded and sustained his whole personality; like all the great men of the Renaissance, he said, 'Men can do all things if they will'. (Burckhardt, *The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy*, pp. 98, 102–03)

For More the self is poised between an ironic, self-conscious performance, grounded upon hidden reserves of private judgment and silent faith, and an

> absorption into a corporate unity that has no need for pockets of privacy . . . For Tyndale, the self is likewise poised, but between poles quite different from those glimpsed in More . . . Tyndale's own sense of his identity is marked precisely by his refusal to make a part for himself in the midst of the ongoing performance. As a tutor in Gloucestershire he did not keep silent, cloaking his judgments behind a cover of affability, but quarreled openly and violently with those whose views of the Church he could not accept, until he was forced to depart for London . . . If there is none of More's calculated role-playing, there is equally none of his absorption into a visible corporate body . . . Identity then is not defined by participation in a body – hence in visible, communal rituals – but by a place in a schema of communication, legal relationships and obedience. The book – for Tyndale, the printed book in the vernacular – displaces the communal body. (Greenblatt, *Renaissance Self-Fashioning*, pp. 157–59)

So which writer makes the stronger argument? Burckhardt is not really arguing at all. Rather, he fleshes out his picture – that 'many-sided men' or modern individuals emerged in Italy between the thirteenth and fifteenth centuries – through anecdotes and snapshots, like the lengthy description of Leon Battista Alberti's accomplishments. We might say that Burckhardt's case for the emergence of the individual rests on such evidence as Alberti shedding tears 'At the sight of noble trees and waving cornfields'. Paradoxically, like Burckhardt, Greenblatt also uses anecdotes; indeed, later in the same chapter he cites Burckhardt with qualified approval: 'Despite its age and its well-documented limitations, one of the best introductions to Renaissance self-fashioning remains Burckhardt's *Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy* . . . But his . . . assertion that . . . men emerged at last as free individuals must be sharply qualified' (*Renaissance Self-Fashioning*, pp. 161–62). Greenblatt's anecdotes firmly locate his sixteenth-century subjects in relation to power systems: for him their identities are fashioned by these interactions. He does not recount Tyndale's career to illustrate his personality – as Burckhardt would have done – but to elucidate the dynamic within Tyndale's life between his rejection of the Catholic Church and his corresponding submission to the Bible.

The real issue is not which writer is the more skilful at putting his case, but which model of the Renaissance is the more persuasive. Martin concludes his summary of the New Historicist contribution to the question of identity in the Renaissance by asking 'Are we simply to accept the view that the self . . . is a mere cultural artifact . . . ?' (p. 1320). This is the issue which divides Burckhardt and Greenblatt. Again, there is no simple answer to these questions. The New Historicist construction of the self has been immensely influential in literary studies – much of the most significant new work in Renaissance literature since the 1980s has either come from a New Historicist perspective, or has had to engage with that perspective. But I find Greenblatt's discussions of Spenser and Shakespeare often comically reductive, as when he makes assertions like 'Spenser loves power and attempts to link his own art ever more closely with its symbolic and literal embodiment' (p. 174). My problem here is not so much with Greenblatt's reading

of Spenser's poetry (which is often subtle and sensitive), but with the fact that for Greenblatt apparently all Renaissance writers 'love power' – this particular obsession would seem to be characteristic of More, Tyndale, Wyatt, Marlowe, Shakespeare and Spenser. We might suggest again that Greenblatt's preoccupation with power is as symptomatic of the period in which he was writing as was Tillyard's concern with order or indeed Burckhardt's interest in the individual. In short, Greenblatt's Renaissance is not a 'better' Renaissance than Burckhardt's but a different one, as fuelled by late twentieth-century American concerns as Burckhardt's was by late nineteenth-century European concerns.

Martin offers a related critique of the New Historicist view of the Renaissance. His article focuses on the refashioning of the traditional virtue of prudence and the invention of sincerity during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. So he contends that there was a genuine growth in the consciousness of individual subjectivity during the Renaissance. He summarises:

> The language of prudence and sincerity points to a sense of interiority . . . relatively immune to the sort of ideological forces . . . of the church or the monarchy that Greenblatt and other New Historicists have seen as determining . . . the formation of Renaissance identities.
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> (pp. 1339–40)

In other words, not every element in Renaissance culture is reducible to the discourses of power New Historicists are particularly attuned to. While power remains an important consideration in any cultural transaction, Martin usefully reminds us that it is not the only narrative that we should be attending to. As I remarked in relation to Greenblatt's 'Invisible Bullets' essay, Shakespeare's History plays could operate somewhere in between the poles of enacting Tudor ideology and outright subversion: I would suggest that Shakespeare was capable of making *artistic* decisions with *political* implications which were independent of the controlling influence of state power.

Martin concludes his essay by asserting 'the enduring significance of Burckhardt's questions' (p.1341). Indeed, much work following on from the first wave of New Historicism revisits Greenblatt's notion of the unfree subject, and by implication Burckhardt's model of the Renaissance discovery of the individual. As you may have spotted, Greenblatt pays little attention to the formation of female identity during the Renaissance: like Burckhardt, he focuses on the 'many-sided *men*' of Renaissance culture. He is absorbed by power and the play between discourses of power and the literary texts which he believes were shaped by those discourses. Because the majority of women were excluded from such power, books like *Renaissance Self-Fashioning* and Helgerson's *Forms of Nationhood* have little to say about the construction of female roles at this time. As an example of feminist New Historicism, Frances Dolan's *Dangerous Familiars* (1994) (Text 34), suggests through its examination of representations of domestic crime in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century England that there was the possibility of what she calls contingent and circumscribed 'human agency in historical process' (p. 5). By trying to explain the behaviour of wives who murdered their husbands, the writers of these pamphlets paradoxically confer a subjectivity on their sub-

jects. Dolan's book is also interesting because while revising some New Historicist assumptions, it nonetheless participates in the central manoeuvres of the movement: the pamphlets she discusses alongside texts like *Othello* and *The Winter's Tale* are given the same level of attention – no attempt is made to differentiate between the literary quality of her chosen texts.

Another criticism that has been levelled at New Historicism relates directly to this open-ended attitude towards cultural artefacts. For New Historicists, notions of artistic value are themselves culturally formed. The way Burckhardt (like many others) privileges Shakespeare and Leonardo as pre-eminent artists possessed of special gifts is from this perspective a dubious practice: by elevating Shakespeare and Leonardo, you exclude hundreds of other voices. The process of 'canon formation' (the construction of a select list of masterpieces like *Hamlet* and the 'Mona Lisa') becomes not just an issue of artistic taste but of the deliberate exclusion of divergent voices. New Historicists demonstrate their resistance to these traditional critical manoeuvres by extending the parameters of what should be discussed. A good example of this work is the growing attention paid to women writers of the Renaissance – a group which the traditional male-centred canon had excluded. But New Historicists can be accused of simply transferring value from traditional artists like Shakespeare and Leonardo either to neglected artists, or indeed to modern historians. The same need to privilege is constant, though the object of the critic's admiration has shifted.

Before closing, we must offset these criticisms with some sense of the value of the New Historicist approach. As Martin points out, the attention that has been paid to self-fashioning has helped to refocus attention on Burckhardt's questions and the whole issue of the formation of the modern individual. By resisting Burckhardt's picture, New Historicists have, in Heather Dubrow's phrase, 'sparked interest in tensions' within Renaissance culture (p. 42). Rather than being the progressive new age envisaged by Burckhardt, the Renaissance emerges as a cross-European cultural moment during which questions of identity were re-negotiated in response to rapidly changing social pressures. I would not be surprised if you find the whole idea of the unfree subject both a bit outrageous and mildly repellent – as Greenblatt's anecdote at the close of *Renaissance Self-Fashioning* is intended to show, we are very attached to the idea of our autonomy within larger social structures. Personally, I remain to be convinced whether my identity is a socially produced sample – an agglomeration of clichés and partly remembered texts – or whether it remains my own uniquely self-authored individuality. But I am sure that the New Historicist inspection of the construction of the self has changed both how I look at the past and how I look at myself. Identity – for so long something we took for granted – has become something we have to prove.

In summary:

- New Historicism reacts against 'old' historicism by reconceiving how historical context should be used to illuminate the study of cultural artefacts;
- Characteristically, that reconception focuses on issues of power and identity:

power shapes or fashions identity and so shapes the artefacts produced by past cultures;
- New Historicism therefore sees Burckhardt's model as fundamentally outdated by stressing the restrictions on individual autonomy in any given culture;
- New Historicism is vulnerable to criticism in its obsession with issues of power; its initial insensitivity to the formation of female identities; while the whole notion of the unfree subject remains contentious.

FURTHER READING

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2 John Martin **'Inventing Sincerity, Refashioning Prudence: The Discovery of the Individual in Renaissance Europe'**

Source: from *American Historical Review*, 102 (5) December 1997 pp. 1309–17, 1320–42.

In the Middle Ages both sides of human consciousness – that which was turned within as that which was turned without – lay dreaming or half awake beneath a common veil. The veil was woven of faith, illusion and childish prepossession, through which the world and history were seen clad in strange hues. Man was conscious of himself only as member of a race, people, party, family, or corporation – only through some general category. In Italy this veil first melted into air; an *objective* treatment and consideration of the state and of all things of this world became possible. The *subjective* side at the same time asserted itself with corresponding emphasis; man became a spiritual *individual*, and recognized himself as such. In the same way the Greek had once distinguished himself from the barbarian, and the Arab had felt himself an individual at a time when other Asiatics knew themselves only as members of a race.