

Is It Time for a New Renaissance?

We live in an age that is committed to a form of “progress” that disavows the past. It is an age that paradoxically attempts to build upward by destroying foundations.

Recently, I came across a very brief essay that profoundly touches upon this disturbing trend. The essay is by the 19th century Russian thinker [Vladimir Soloviev](#) (1853-1900) and entitled “The Secret of Progress.” I will summarize it below:

Soloviev begins by recounting a story from his childhood: A man becomes lost in the woods, and begins to become despondent while seated next to a very strong stream. Suddenly, someone touches his shoulder, and the man looks behind him to see an old, frail, humpbacked woman. The woman tells the man that her homeland is on the other side of the stream and is a virtual paradise, and that she will take him there if only he carries her across the stream. Though the man doesn’t really believe the old woman, he decides to carry her across out of a sense of duty. At first, the old woman is surprisingly heavy, but the further into the stream he goes, the easier his task becomes. When he reaches the other side, he looks to see that the old woman has become a beautiful young woman. She takes him to her homeland, where he is no longer despondent, and no longer lost.

After recounting the story, Soloviev remarks:

“Everyone knows this fairytale in one variant or another, and I’ve known it from childhood as well, but it was just today that I sensed in it a completely un-fairytale like meaning. Modern man, hunting for fleeting, momentary goods and ephemeral fantasies, has lost life’s true path. The dark and irrepressible current of life is before him. Time, like a

woodpecker, relentlessly marks lost moments. Melancholy and loneliness, and ahead – gloom and ruin. But behind him stands the sacred antiquity of tradition – and in such unattractive forms! But what is to be made of that? Let him just think a bit about how he is obligated to it; let him respect its old age by means of an intrinsic sincere impulse, let him pity its infirmities, let him become ashamed to repudiate it on account of this appearance. Instead of scrutinizing illusive fairies behind clouds in vain, let him strive to convey this sacred burden of the past over the actual currents of history. This is the solitary way out of his misguided wanderings – the solitary one because every other one would insufficient, unkind, profane: the venerable one is not yet done for!”

Just as in Soloviev’s time, we today are in desperate need of men and women “to convey the sacred burden of the past over the currents of history.” We are in need of a new renaissance. Many of us have been cut off from the past through inadequate educations and a news media that keeps us mired in the fog of the present. We are without the reference points of tradition that provided previous generations with their identities, and helped them make sense of their own times. We may have briefly encountered Plato, Aristotle, Boethius, Dante, Chaucer, and Shakespeare, but for most of us they are not companions but distant relatives.

No one is going to make us recover the past; it is a labor that will have to be freely taken up. And as with the man carrying the old woman across the stream, the burden will not be easy. It will require people to find moments in between work and sleep to read the great authors of the past. It will depend upon parents who take time to supplement the education their children receive in the schools with the classics. It will take patience to become familiar with the language and style of previous centuries.

But, as Soloviev says, it is the only way to go forward: “Here is the secret of progress – there is, and will be, no other.” It will only be through creatively rediscovering the past that our age can truly be one of progress.

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