

Falls from old walls

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Paul Eggert

SECURING THE PAST

Conservation in art, architecture and literature
290 pp. Cambridge University Press. Paperback,
£17.99.
978 0 521 72591 0

Restoration is impossible. "One can no more restore an area of natural beauty – or a painting or a tugboat – to its original state", admonishes the Dutch biologist Midas Dekkers, "than one can turn women into the little girls they once were." Yet a yearning for restoration is perennial. "Every city and village and field will be restored, just as it was", forecast the fourth-century Syrian Bishop Nemesius. What was once divine promise became the goal of human agency. "Not a thing in the past has not left its memories", mused H. G. Wells. "Some day we may learn to gather in that forgotten gossamer, weave its strands together again, until the whole past is restored to us."

Virginity, landscape and memory are not covered in Paul Eggert's book, which the author describes as the "first concerted effort" to link building restoration, art conservation, and the editorial retrieval of original or intended texts. Yet legendary analogies are legion in *Securing the Past*. They include restoring the fertility of exhausted soil or of barren women, the Davidic kingdom, the exiles to Israel, Israel itself to godly obedience, the rebuilt Temple as restoration to divine favour: all intertwined throughout the Old Testament. Augustus' restoration of Rome's temples symbolized political restoration – an analogy more telling than intended, for the "restored" temples were utterly transformed, dedicated to other gods with new functions and festivals. Devoted to restoring theology, Erasmus hoped the physician Paracelsus might restore him also.

Lessons drawn from paintings and sculpture have inspired restorers of human and ecological health; Eggert taps art and architectural conservation to illuminate textual editing, his own field. His Australian Academy Editions dismantle the "textual distortions" imposed by British abridgements of antipodean classics. He treats artefacts, like texts, as works that embody multilayered histories of creation, use, interpretation, revision, erosion, accretion, repair and reanimation. They do differ: unlike the restorers of material objects, "scholarly editors do not physically alter the original documents". Hence non-destructive "editing is less heroic than art conservation". But restoration in all three realms reflects a similar mindset. The cherished object – a medieval church, a historic house, an Old Master painting, a writer's oeuvre – is viewed as an original creation, which has to be stripped of later corruptions and restored to its initial perfection, actual or intended. Much as the grime- and varnish-free Sistine Chapel revealed Michelangelo's true colourist genius, literary editors strip away the veil of print to reveal an author's intended text. But devotion to the idea of initial condition or intent often proves incompatible with demands for aesthetic legibility. An archaeological purism that scraps everything not original can fragment works beyond viewers' tolerance. As Eugène Viollet-le-Duc said, of restoring Notre-Dame de Paris, "one cannot leave incomplete so admirable a text without risking making it unintelligible". Similarly, readers dislike synoptic editions lumbered with diacritical marks or lemmatized footnoting.

Since the 1960s, conflicts between conserving, ongoing use and historicity have increasingly embroiled restorers of texts, buildings and paintings. Post-structural and postmodern doubts about the concept of original intent have led some to disown such criteria altogether. Authorial intentions have proved hard to determine; they appear inconsistently changeable, suborned by financial need, the requirements of clients, and audience response. The 1964 Venice Charter, a ground-breaking guide to the restoration of historic monuments, required emendation, as the idea of heritage expanded from its stone-built classical origins to Norway and Japan, where woodworking traditions ratify enduring

form rather than impermanent material. And in many cultures intangible tradition – oral recital, folkloric performance, craft skills – trump both material substance and form. Heritage agencies have abandoned universality for diversity. What and how to conserve depends on culture, epoch and purpose.

"To restore a building", Eggert quotes Viollet-le-Duc again, "is to reinstate it in a condition of completeness that could never have existed at any given time." That no work can be returned to an original or any previous state is ever more evident. All conservation is irrevocable; as the restorer Sergio Palazzi put it, "any action, including no action, causes an irreversible modification to the condition of any given object". Works not only undergo physical alteration – erosion, accretion, malformation by transfer to new premises or media – they are differently experienced by audiences who lack previous insights or are furnished with new ones. Any restoration is filtered through and tintured by irremediably modern minds.

Victorian architects found it hard to realize, and harder to admit, that they were being

unfaithful to their fondest restoration tenets. Giles Gilbert Scott was blind to his own wholesale changes. Hired to "restore" a dilapidated fifteenth-century chapel at Wakefield, he was later "filled with wonder how I ever was induced to consent to it at all, as it was contrary my own principles. I think of this with the utmost shame and chagrin". George Edmund Street reproached the restorers of Burgos Cathedral and St Mark's, Venice, for the same sort of meddling that led Street himself to replace a fourteenth-century choir arm of Christ Church Cathedral in Dublin with a sorry pastiche of the "original". Yet even as they manufactured simulacra, Scott and Street believed they were restoring the true past.

Eggert vividly contrasts "Scrape" (restorers' Gothic is better than the medieval original) with "anti-Scrape" (historic buildings are organic beings, their unrestored evanescence integral to their essence). He condemns the refabricated past at Colonial Williamsburg, English Heritage's "William-burgered" Uppark, and the "false virginity" given to the Hyde Park Barracks in Sydney by wholesale restoration. He shows how the Rembrandt Research Project shifted in the 1980s from laboratory-based certitude of attribution to tolerant confession of unresolved provenance. He discusses text- versus stage-based restorations of Shakespeare, and opposing views of the heavily corrected proofs of D. H. Lawrence's *Sons and Lovers*. Conflicts surround most restoration projects. The restored Sistine Chapel struck some as a revitalized revelation and others as destructive desecration. And while one critic likened the Pennsylvania edition of 1981 of Theodore Dreiser's *Sister Carrie* to "art historians cleaning a da Vinci fresco, uncover[ing] the original glowing with an ancient newness", another judged that "restoring Dreiser to his original form involves restoring him . . . to his original ineptitudes".

In line with Eggert's view that "honest curation will acknowledge its interpreting hand", restorers, like editors, increasingly own up to their interventions. They participate in the work's ongoing life. More and more they recognize that their restorations are provisional, no less certain to be damned and superseded than previous work.

Paul Eggert's conservation philosophy embraces malleable intentions, historicity, and aesthetic legibility. But it is at odds with his title. To secure is not the same as to restore. Securing presupposes actual survival and the desirability of gaining lasting control over the past. Restoring presupposes loss and seeks retrieval. Children believe in restorative powers to rejoin broken things and bring the dead back to life. Residues of restorative faith permeate adult speech and behaviour. Whether with lost or stolen property, damaged paintings, deteriorated health, reputations damaged by accusation or slander, security from danger, or undermined trust and relationships, the previous state is better – healthier, safer, more enduring, beautiful or authentic – than now. To restore is to make whole, in plain defiance of "All the king's horses, and all the king's men, [who] couldn't put Humpty together again".



The Angel Window in Ely Cathedral, Cambridgeshire, being worked on by a stained glass restorer, Judy Hill, 1998