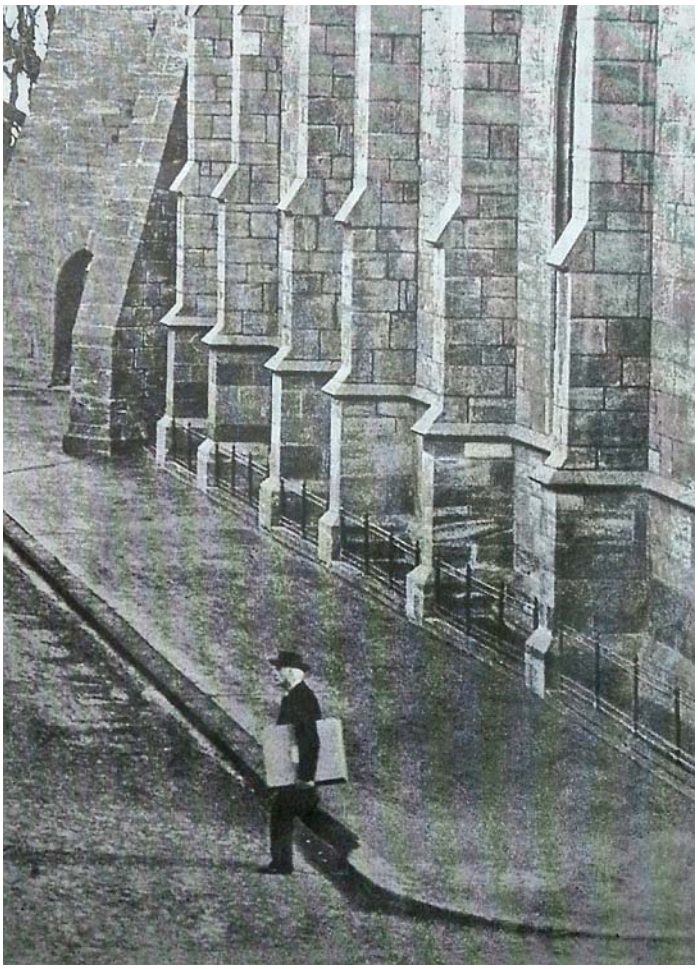
Burckhardt's *Renaissance*, 150 Years Later



Closing Remarks

Dr Matthew Kempshall
(Wadham College, Oxford)

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Matthew Kempshall

(Wadham College, Oxford)

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Medievalists, even late medievalists, would seem *prima facie* to possess no particularly pressing reason to champion Jacob Burckhardt's *Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy*. This is a work, after all, which characterises – and caricatures – the Middle Ages as a period in which people laboured, half-conscious, under a 'veil… of faith, illusion and childish prepossession' (CR 81), their potentialities stifled by the twin forces of corporatism and superstition. Whilst it should certainly be acknowledged that Burckhardt is sometimes prepared to allow, within this generalisation, for the lifting of that veil, it is also true that he does so only sporadically and for exceptional individuals (Einhard, Gerbert of Rheims, Abelard, Alan of Lille, Roger Bacon, Vincent of Beauvais, Joinville, Hubert and Jan van Eyck), not for any 'culture' as a whole. *Caveat lector.* Such disparagement, of course, might be thought to provide, in and of itself, one very good reason why Burckhardt's work should be studied by historians. It is precisely because of Burckhardt's subsequent influence on the propagation of this particular paradigm of 'medievalism' in the twentieth century, after all, that he needs to be read seriously and critically, even by those scholars who might naturally take issue with some of his central, and most cherished, assumptions about what was 'new' or 'renewed' in Italy in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. By the same token, however, cavilling at, or at least questioning, Burckhardt's historical judgments is also hardly the point. Historiographically, Burckhardt's approach to the 'Middle Ages' and to the 'Renaissance' reflects particular conceptions of both history-writing and the historical process, each one of which needs to be understood within its own terms of reference, which themselves require personal and historical contextualisation, before any broader claims are attempted *sub specie sempiternitatis*. If *The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy* deserves its place in the canon, therefore, if it continues to be worth reading one hundred and fifty years after its publication, then the grounds on which it has merited such attention are worth clarifying and reviewing. In the process, indeed, the results may throw up a very different 'Burckhardt' to both the authority and

the thesis which all too often go under his name. As a starting-point for such a discussion, it might prove useful to divide potential areas of debate under the two broad headings of 'method' and 'content'.

1. Method

By his own account, in his lectures on the study of history, Burckhardt professed that he would have nothing to do with 'the philosophy of history'.[1] This disclaimer was aimed specifically at Hegelians and, for *The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy* at least, should certainly not be taken at face value. Five points in particular can be highlighted which, when taken together, provide an index to the methodological underpinning that lies beneath Burckhardt's own understanding of the nature both of history and of historiography. In the process, this list also yields at least some suggestions as to why his work has continued to be read by, and indeed resonate with, historians of subsequent generations, up to and including the present day.

(i) The first observation concerns Burckhardt's commitment to identifying the particular 'spirit' of a people, the *Volksgeist*, in his case for Italy, and the consequent influence which was exercised on his writings by the ideas that had been propagated by Montesquieu and Herder.[2] For some twentieth-century historians, it did not take much to claim a methodological affinity to their own attempts to identify and/or construct a social or collective *mentalité* for the past. It is no accident, for example, that Peter Burke was the modern historian who introduced the re-issued Middlemore translation for Penguin Classics in 1990, given the opportunity, and the appeal, of tracing a direct methodological lineage from Burckhardt's *Kulturgeschichte* to his own 'new' cultural history.

(ii) A second, and related, aspect concerns Burckhardt's choice of primary material for this 'spirit', especially his concentration on the sources provided by poetry and by popular festivals. Burckhardt's focus on poetry originally reflected, on his own part, something more than just an unconventional choice of historical evidence. It also embodied an attachment to a specific intellectual tradition, namely the close relationship of the historian to the poet as prophet or *vates*, that is, to a writer who is akin to the philosopher in interpreting the significance of past, present

[1] Burckhardt, *Reflections on History*, trans. by Mary Hottinger (London: Allen & Unwin, 1943) p. 15: 'we shall... make no attempt at system, nor lay any claim to "historical principles".... Above all, we have nothing to do with the philosophy of history'. cf. *Reflections*, p. 74: 'history is actually the most unscientific of all the sciences, although it communicates so much that is worth knowing. Clear-cut concepts belong to logic, not to history, where everything is in a state of flux, of perpetual transition and combination. Philosophical and historical ideas differ in essence and origin; the former must be as firm and exclusive as possible, the latter as fluid and open'.

[2] Ibid., pp. 17, 56, 67.

and future in order to declare universal, rather than just empirical and particular, truths.[3] This was the 'vision' (*Anschauung*) to which Burckhardt laid claim:

> History finds in poetry not only one of its most important, but also one of its purest and finest sources. Firstly, it is indebted to poetry for insight into the nature of mankind as a whole; further, for profound light on times and peoples. Poetry, for the historical observer, is the image of the eternal in its temporal and national expression, hence instructive in all its aspects and, moreover, often the best, or only thing to survive.[4]

(iii) The third, and perhaps most marked, element in Burckhardt's historiographical methodology is the way in which he explicitly eschews political or chronological narrative in favour of what he calls 'the recurrent, the constant and the typical' (*das sich Wiederholende*, *Konstante*, *Typische*).[5] His is a topical approach, taken via what he calls 'transverse sections' (*Querdurchschnitte*),[6] and as a result it expressly excludes subjects such as philology and philosophy, not because they are unimportant in themselves, but on the grounds that they are insufficiently reflective of what was popular or general to the culture and the age. This appeal to metonymy, to a principle of microcosmic selectivity, is quite deliberate: 'we are here occupied', Burckhardt writes, 'not with the learning of the Italians in itself, but with the reproduction of antiquity in literature and life' (CR 118); with 'the spirit of the people at large' (CR 149); with 'the consciousness of a wider public' (CR 309). In so doing, Burckhardt's writing has again proved fertile ground for later historians to train their roots. As with culture, however, so too with microhistory – the attraction here to modern historians lies, in large part, with the opportunity to fashion Burckhardt in their own image.

(iv) The fourth dimension to Burckhardt's approach is provided by his understanding of historical causation. The apparent determinism of such phrases as 'historical providence' and 'historical necessity' (CR 164, 264, 279) is considerably softened once these categories are (perhaps better) translated in broader terms of historical fate, destiny, resolution or simply a coincidence of (often unknown) causes and therefore as the concurrence or interaction of circumstances.[7] Burckhardt's scepticism towards any universalising historical 'philosophy' left

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[3] Ibid., pp. 59, 65-72, 178, 181-3.

[4] Ibid., p. 65, and p. 176: 'artists, poets and philosophers have a dual function – to give ideal form to the inner content of time and the world and to transmit it to posterity as an imperishable heritage'.

[5] Ibid., p. 17. cf. CR 3-4, 49, 54, 107, 114, 178, 181, 203, 261, 275.

[6] *Reflections*, p. 15: 'we shall confine ourselves to observation, taking transverse sections of history in as many directions as possible'.

[7] CR 42: 'The cause of the stability of Venice lies rather in a combination of circumstances which were found in union nowhere else'. cf. *Reflections* pp. 211 and 213.

him sensitised to the specificity of particular conjunctions of events. In *The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy*, this led him to emphasise the absence of a sufficiently strong papal or imperial authority from the Italian peninsula in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. This is the historical and circumstantial development which Burckhardt identifies as the key factor that allowed regional, civic and ultimately personal autonomy to flourish. These secondary principles then produced a dynamic all of their own – discovery of the world and of man which used classical antiquity as a guide – but Burckhardt remains insistent that the revival of antiquity was always more of an effect than a cause. For many people, he argues, even for the very learned, it was only a fashion (CR 149). In Burckhardt's view, although perhaps not in the view of some of his subsequent readers who nonetheless claimed his authority (at least until the relatively recent vogue amongst some modern historians for identifying humanist 'self-publicism'), this last qualification was critical – classicism was an expression, a symptom, an epiphenomenon of much wider, structural forces in society.

(v) The fifth, and final, element is an approach to the writing of history which, once again, was to re-appear in the later twentieth century in a different guise (albeit this time in a rather more debased form) as counter-factualism or 'virtual history'. Like Weber, Burckhardt was fascinated by what did not happen as much as by what did – why, he asks, did Italy only produce second-rate tragedy, why did it produce no Shakespeare (CR 190)? His most pressing, and significant, question, however, concerned the Protestant Reformation and the reasons why it did not take place, or take root, in what might otherwise seem the fertile soil of the Italian peninsula in the fifteenth century (CR 280). Why were the mendicant orders not dissolved under the pontificate of Leo X? How did the Papal States end up not being secularised after the corruption of Popes Sixtus IV and Alexander VI (CR 71)? Burckhardt's rueful answer is that, following the purgative sack of Rome in 1527, the Protestant Reformation in Germany (and in Switzerland) had the paradoxical effect of saving the Roman Church in Italy: 'who can say what fate had in store for the papacy itself if the Reformation had not saved it?' (CR 78-9, 284). The bitterness of this irony, perhaps revealingly, became still more evident in the answer to the question 'what would have happened without the Counter-Reformation?'. For Burckhardt, the consequences of the Catholic Counter-Reformation in Italy were, not least, its disruption of the spiritual insight into a truer, deeper reality for which Pico della Mirandola is made to serve as a symbol of what might have been. Pico 'was the only man who loudly and vigorously defended the truth and science of all ages against the one-sided worship of classical antiquity':

> Looking at Pico we can guess at the lofty flight which Italian philosophy would have taken had not the Counter-Reformation annihilated the higher spiritual life of the people. (CR 120)[8]

2. Content

If Burckhardt's approach to the writing of history was conditioned by a particular 'philosophy', by a conceptual and methodological underpinning which could readily be translated and appropriated by successive schools of twentieth-century historiography, it becomes all the more imperative to return that philosophy to its own terms of reference. Much the same consideration applies to the actual contents of the historical interpretation which Burckhardt's approach to fourteenth-, fifteenth- and sixteenth-century Italian history ended up producing. It is a truism that Burckhardt's historiography reflects his own equivocal and ultimately pessimistic engagement with modernity, a modernity which, in his eyes, was characterised by industrialisation, vulgar democratization, money-making and an all-inclusive 'nation-state' ('worshipped as a god and ruling like a sultan'),[9] and which was epitomised by the political upheavals of 1847 and 1848 (and indeed subsequently by the despair of 1870-71). It is this fundamental equivocation, this ambivalence towards 'the modern', which remains such a striking feature of *The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy*, despite the ostensible familiarity of its narrative of the discovery or development of 'the individual' and the rise of 'the state'. Burckhardt's understanding of both these last two terms, in fact, reflects a much more complex and nuanced view than the one with which the author is often credited; so too does his analysis of the revival of classical antiquity and developments in morality and religion. There are four points here which would therefore seem open for further discussion.

(i) In Chapter 1, when Burckhardt defines the state as 'a work of art', he means specifically that it is artifice, 'the fruit of reflection and careful adaptation' (CR 57). His account accordingly begins with Emperor Frederick II and Ezzelino da Romano and continues in the same vein. When it concludes with the republics of Florence and Venice, therefore, this is specifically because of their achievements in the systematic statistics of government. Burckhardt's narrative of the Renaissance 'state', in short, is a long way from Sismondi's liberal critique of Medici tyranny as subversion of communal freedom. Burckhardt is certainly fascinated by Florence and by Machiavelli (that 'constitutional artist' whose 'objective judgement is sometimes appalling in its sincerity'), but it is not for their embodiment or championing of any tradition of civic

[8] cf. CR 329.
[9] *Reflections*, p. 113.

republicanism (CR 54-5). Instead, it is because Florence represents 'the most important workshop of the Italian, and indeed of the modern European spirit' (CR 56). It is this guardedness, this reserve, which has prompted the suggestion that the choice of title for Chapter 1 (*Der Staat als Kunstwerk*), with its nod to Hegel, is intended not so much by way of consolation as to be 'facetious'.[10] As ever, it is as well not to underestimate Burckhardt's use of a rhetorical trope – in this case, not metonomy, but irony. Satire may be too strong a term, but throughout Burckhardt's narrative there is certainly a keen, consistent and deliberate sense of the double-edged.

(ii) Precision of terminology (or rather the imprecision of the deceptively transhistorical, especially in Middlemore's English translation) is an equally critical factor when Burckhardt moves from 'the state' to 'the 'individual'. The idea of the individual which is developed in Chapter 2 is defined, in the first instance, not in terms of self-consciousness and moral autonomy, although these characteristics do come later in the context of 'the discovery of man' (CR 188), but in terms of two other marked qualities. First, there is the individual's desire for fame (defined as 'distinction won by a man's personal efforts') whose counterpart, or as Burckhardt calls it, 'corrective', is ridicule and wit (CR 92, 93, 165). Second, there is the individual's calculated self-interest, whose counterpart is an ultimately destructive egotism and profligacy, a cult of historical greatness which ends up replacing the hitherto prevailing Christian ideal of life (CR 279, 267). In Burckhardt's narrative, Leon Battista Alberti provides a paradigm of the positive version: 'like all the great men of the Renaissance, he said, "men can do all things if they will"' (CR 87); so does Aeneas Silvius Piccolomini (whose correspondence Georg Voigt collected and whose life he then published in three volumes) (CR 181); so too does Benvenuto Cellini (whose autobiography Goethe translated) (CR 203). Alongside the usual suspects, however, Burckhardt also places Piero Aretino – the paradigm of ridicule and egotism and, as a result, in Burckhardt's view, the father of modern journalism (CR 101). More ambivalence, in short, more irony, more double-edged terminology of praise and castigation. What is still more interesting here, however, is the connection which Burckhardt explicitly establishes with the narrative he has set up in Chapter 1. For Burckhardt, there is an important and revealing symbiosis between the tyrant and the scholar, both of them reliant on their own talent and calculation and on nothing else. He traces it all the way from Can Grande della Scala through to Sigismondo Malatesta and Lodovico Sforza. This is the fundamental connection which

[10] Peter Ghosh, 'After Burckhardt – Max Weber and the Idea of an Italian Renaissance', id., *A Historian Reads Max Weber – Essays on the Protestant Ethic*, (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2008), p. 216.

Burckhardt wants to lay bare with his idea of 'the individual', what he terms 'the natural alliance between the despot and the scholar, each relying solely on his personal talent' (CR 132),[11] or, to express it in strictly nineteenth-century terms, the capacity of *Kultur* to become interwoven with, and assimilated to, *Macht*.[12]

(iii) The title of Chapter 3, 'The Revival of Antiquity', belies the complexity of the process to which it refers and which it is all too often denied in modern summaries of Burckhardt's views. First, there is an insistence, already mentioned, that 'with many, antiquity was only a fashion, even among very learned people'. In part, Burckhardt's judgment was the result of his attempt to juggle more modern ideas of both neo-classicism and Romanticism, but the resulting distinction *between* humanism and the Renaissance (for which there were parallels in the work of Voigt) produces a very clear narrative analysis. On Burckhardt's account, the vitality and originality of Dante and, to a lesser extent, of Petrarch and Boccaccio were gradually lost sight of and occluded in the course of the fifteenth century, as native Italian impulses were 'paralysed' or atrophied by a narrower and more exclusive humanism which elevated slavish imitation and quotation of Latin models as the sole criterion of literary merit (CR 121). This stifling of independence and creativity in the literary arts is evident in the 'insipid and conventional' historiography of Leonardo Bruni and Poggio Bracciolini (CR 145), but also in the degeneration of poetry, especially in its epic form (CR 156). Machiavelli and Guicciardini are accordingly presented by Burckhardt, in a very carefully constructed sentence, as having 'passed through the school of humanism', but not themselves as humanists (CR 148). Poliziano, too, is noted, but he is celebrated here as a poet, not as a humanist, a writer who had benefited from the 'sacred refuge' which Lorenzo de' Medici managed to establish in the midst of a society that otherwise worshipped antiquity (CR 131). Fifteenth-century humanists, in fact, emerge from *The Civilization of the Renaissance* as a pretty unattractive group. Spiteful, envious and vindictive towards one another, they therefore come in for a damning verdict: 'of all men who ever formed a class they had the least sense of their common interests and least respected what there was of this sense' (CR 163). We should not perhaps be surprised by all this invective, by these wars conducted by other means, once humanism is viewed in the light of the affinity of scholars to despots on which Burckhardt has earlier been so insistent. It should also not be surprising biographically (and therefore metahistorically), given Burckhardt's own experience of the academic profession in nineteenth-century Germany.

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[11] cf. *Reflections*, p. 79.

[12] For the interaction, and different permutations, of 'State', 'Religion' and 'Culture', see *Reflections*, Chapters 2 and 3.

The 'revival of antiquity' was thus itself neither necessary nor sufficient for 'the development of the individual' and 'the rise of the state' – in Burckhardt's view, classical antiquity provided a guide but it was not essential; it reinforced a movement which would have occurred anyway. As Burckhardt puts it right at the start of Chapter 3:

> The conditions which have hitherto been described would have sufficed, apart from antiquity, to upturn and mature the national mind; and most of the intellectual tendencies which yet remain to be noticed would be conceivable without it…. [Nevertheless] though the essence of the phenomena might still have been the same without the classical revival, it is only with and through this revival that they are actually manifested to us. (CR 104)

Antiquity was a fashion, it was an expression, the effect of something deeper – it was not a dynamic force in its own right.

(iv) Fourthly, and finally, Burckhardt's concluding discussion of morality and religion (including immorality and irreligion) is by no means the monolithic account of secularisation which might have been expected from the summaries, and citations, made by some modern commentators. In the first instance, this is the result of what Burckhardt identifies as a residual paganism and a specifically Italian 'excess of imagination', '*die Phantasie*' (CR 300).[13] As a result, whilst worldliness and Epicureanism are certainly in evidence from Dante's *Inferno*, they are also counterbalanced by a belief in the immortality of the soul expressed in Macrobius's *Commentary on the Dream of Scipio* and Plato's *Phaedo*. Thus, Burckhardt concedes that, as far as Italian religiosity was concerned, there was indeed an increasingly pervasive scepticism in the fifteenth century. It was this spirit of doubt, after all, which, when coupled with the corruption of the Roman Church, produced a situation whereby the revival of antiquity undermined Christian dogma without putting anything else in its place – the result was to leave people open to the spiritual bankruptcy of fatalism and astrology (CR 313-20). However, there was also, in Burckhardt's eyes, always a countervailing trend, a positive religious 'belief' which he traces to the theism of Ficino's Platonic Academy, 'a remarkable oasis in the humanism of the period' (CR 309).[14] Stripped of its theurgy and its magic, this interiorized Neoplatonism represented a constructive religious outlook which Burckhardt locates, once again, in Pico della Mirandola. It is contained in Pico's *Oration on the Dignity of Man*, cited in a quotation that ends Chapter 4:

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[13] cf. *Reflections*, pp. 129-30.
[14] cf. *Reflections*, p. 134: 'in Italy at the Renaissance, religion... was really alive only in the form of art'.

> I created you a being neither heavenly nor earthly, neither mortal nor immortal only, that you might be free to shape and to overcome yourself. You may sink into a beast, and be born anew to the divine likeness… To you alone is given a growth and a development depending on your own free will. You bear in you the germs of a universal life. (CR 215-6)

Given that Pico's words are made to stand for the same Neoplatonic spirit of creative transformation which was curtailed, if not choked, by the Counter-Reformation, it is all the more striking that it is with the theistic Platonism of Pico (and of Lorenzo de' Medici) that Burckhardt therefore chooses to to conclude the entire book, in the very last paragraph of Chapter 6: 'While the men of the Middle Ages look on the world as a vale of tears', he writes;

> While the fatalists of the Renaissance oscillate between seasons of overflowing energy and seasons of superstition or of stupid resignation, here, in this circle of chosen spirits, the doctrine is upheld that the visible world was created by God in love, that it is the copy of a pattern pre-existing in Him, and that He will ever remain its eternal mover and restorer. The soul of man can by recognising God draw Him into its narrow boundaries, but also by love of Him itself expand into the Infinite – and this is blessedness on earth. (CR 341)

Burckhardt's finely-drawn distinctions are worth noting, and emphasising, for it is this particular strand of Neoplatonism which allows Burckhardt finally to salvage a positive comment from the successive ages of the world, provided, that is, the present epoch chooses to listen and to follow:

> Echoes of medieval mysticism here flow into one current with Platonic doctrines, and with a characteristically modern spirit. One of the most precious fruits of the knowledge of the world and of man here comes to maturity, on whose account alone the Italian Renaissance must be called the leader of modern ages. (CR 341)

It was a Neoplatonism, in short, which Burckhardt himself sought to champion, not just in matters of religion and art, but also in his own poetic – and prophetic – historiography.[15]

[15] cf. *Reflections*, p. 20 ('mind is the power of interpreting all things in an ideal sense. It is of its nature ideal; things in their outward forms are not'), p. 179 ('to give tangible form to that which is inward, to represent it in such a way that we see it as the outward image of inward things, as a revelation – that is a most rare power').