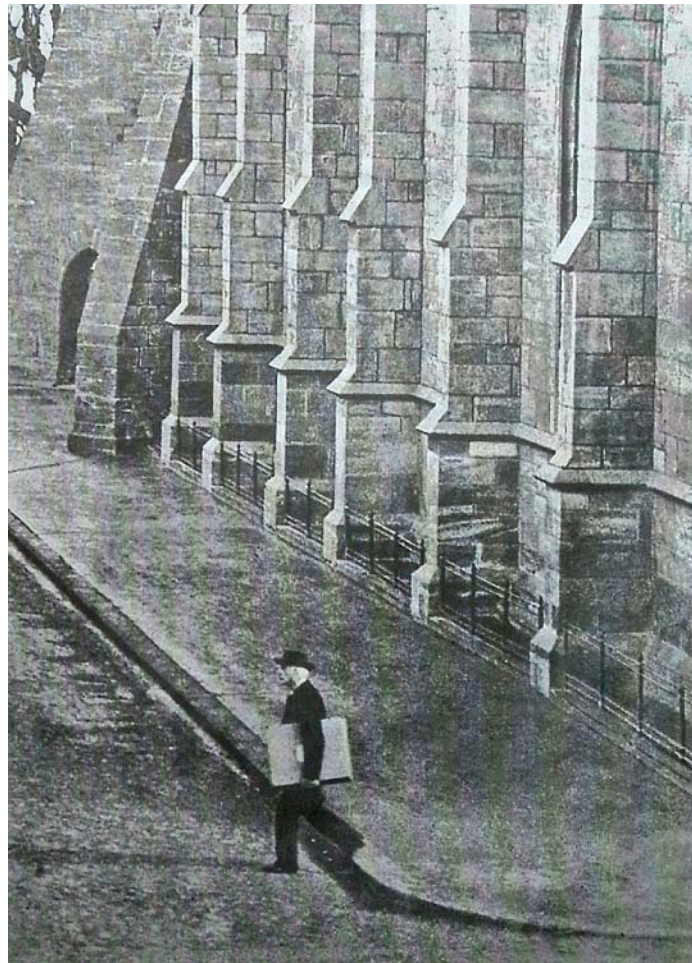


Burckhardt's *Renaissance*, 150 Years Later



The Discovery of the World and of Man

Dr Gervase Rosser
(St Catherine's College, Oxford)

The papers of the symposium are made available on-line by the Society for the Study of Medieval Languages and Literature. The copyright remains with the author.

This paper was uploaded on the SSMLL website on 26th May 2011. Any queries should be directed to the editor of the papers, Oren Margolis.

The Discovery of the World and of Man

Gervase Rosser

(St Catherine's College, Oxford)

http://mediumaevum.modhist.ox.ac.uk/Burckhardt150_4.shtml

One of Burckhardt's most powerful and enduring legacies has been his characterisation of the Renaissance as the moment at which humanity rediscovered its own identity and, liberated from the 'faith, illusion and childish prepossession' of the Middle Ages, saw the natural world again in all its immediacy and beauty. A veil had been interposed between mankind and its natural inheritance, but at last: 'In Italy this veil first melted into air; an *objective* treatment and consideration of the state and of all the things of this world became possible' (CR 81). To Burckhardt, who had grave reservations about the modern world and who in later life would become gloomy about its future, one positive feature of the modernity inaugurated by the Renaissance was this claimed direct encounter with the world, free from imposed ideologies. Despite the passage of a century and a half, this Burckhardian myth retains much of its potency, especially in a cultural context in which scepticism about the effects on humanity of religious dogma is at least as respectable in *bien-pensant* circles as it was amongst intellectuals of mid-nineteenth century Europe. Given the subsequent influence of Burckhardt's view, it is worth reconsidering its genesis. The lofty rhetoric of the book continues, even today, to conceal the personal apologia which runs through *The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy* – not that the author did not warn his readers, in his opening paragraph, of the influence upon his interpretation of 'individual judgement and feeling' (CR 1). If we reconsider the roots of Burckhardt's thesis about the Renaissance and the natural world, we may find that it is not quite the thesis we thought it was. In consequence we may have to adjust its implications, both for its engagement with Burckhardt's immediate cultural context, and for its potential continuing pertinence in our own day.

Freed from the countless bonds which elsewhere in Europe checked progress, having reached a high degree of individual development and been schooled by the teachings of antiquity, the Italian mind now turned to the discovery of the outward universe, and to the representation of it in speech and in form. (CR 171)

With this grandiose gesture to a wide horizon, Jacob Burckhardt opened the fourth chapter of his *Kultur der Renaissance* (1860). The title of the chapter, ‘The discovery of the world and of man’, had been taken from Jules Michelet’s *Histoire de France*. The seventh volume of Michelet’s history, appearing in Paris in 1855, provided Burckhardt not only with a recent usage of the still unfamiliar term, ‘Renaissance’, but also with the idea that its defining features were ‘la découverte du monde, la découverte de l’homme’.¹ Burckhardt’s nod to the great French historian is an important clue to the origins of *The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy*. The very different characters of the two writers have perhaps led to a subsequent underestimation of this link. Michelet, politically radicalised by the experiences of 1830 and 1848 in Paris, deliberately celebrated the Renaissance as a time of liberation from the oppression of the medieval Church: an argument designed to provoke both Romantic and Catholic enthusiasts for the Middle Ages. Burckhardt would not follow Michelet and his friends in the extremism of their attacks on the Church; he retained great respect for the medieval period; and he even expressed dislike for the term ‘Renaissance’. Burckhardt’s political trajectory, meanwhile, was the opposite of Michelet’s. Both the European revolutions and the Swiss civil war of the mid-century soon dampened Burckhardt’s youthful liberalism, and his disillusionment with the Enlightenment confidence in the perfectibility of all men was clearly expressed both in his writings and in his disengagement from public life. Nevertheless, Michelet’s phrase about ‘the discovery of the world and of man’ evidently struck a chord, for the whole of the fourth chapter and parts of the remainder of Burckhardt’s book read as an expanded commentary on the French historian’s definition of the Renaissance as ‘the reconciliation of man and nature after the long detour imposed upon the world by Christianity’. For both men, the period was characterised by the novel freedom from ecclesiastical oppression; and for the Swiss historian of culture, this liberated artists, no longer so dependent upon institutional patronage, to follow their genius and produce great art based upon their own observation and understanding of the world.

To understand the prominence of this theme in his essay, it is necessary to note another crucial source of Burckhardt’s own view of the world: Goethe. When in 1846 the twenty-eight-year-

¹ Jules Michelet, *Oeuvres complètes*, ed. by Paul Viallaneix, 21 vols (Paris: Flammarion, 1971-82), vii. 51.

old former theology turned history student first crossed the Alps, he would certainly have reflected on the parallel between his own experience and that of his famous predecessor on the road to the land of lemon trees and blue skies. Like Goethe uncertain about his future, but similarly attaching more importance to poetry than to his academic studies, Burckhardt would follow the sage of Dresden in experiencing his first Italian journey as a return, after a separation both from social ties and from the Christian religion, to lost innocence: a direct encounter with the simplicity of things and the purity of nature. By the time of Burckhardt's travels, other European writers and artists were adventuring to remoter parts of the globe to find their Eden; but the Swiss pastor's son, who spoke of himself as a 'Spätling', one born out of time,² was more than content to find the Golden Age just across the mountains. His own letters from Italy, at diverse times, echo Goethe's enthusiasm on his first arrival south of the Brenner Pass, aged thirty-seven, in September 1786:

As evening draws near, and in the still air a few clouds can be seen resting on the mountains, standing on the sky rather than drifting across it, or when, immediately after sunset, the loud shrill of crickets is heard, I feel at home in the world, neither a stranger nor an exile. I enjoy everything as if I had been born and bred here and had just returned from a whaling expedition in Greenland... If someone who lives in the south or was born there were to overhear my enthusiasm at all this, he would think me very childish. But I already knew all about it when I was suffering, alas, under an unfriendly sky, and now I have the pleasure of feeling as an exception this happiness which by rights we ought to be able to enjoy as a rule of our nature.³

The freshness of this idealised vision, made familiar through the publication of Goethe's *Italian Journey*, informed Burckhardt's descriptions of his own encounter with the south:

Italy opened my eyes, and since then my whole being is consumed by a great longing for the golden age, for the harmony of things.⁴

That sense of having his eyes opened by the culture and landscape of Italy would remain with Burckhardt as a vital principle throughout his life as a writer and teacher. In the manner of

² Lewis W. Spitz, 'Reflections on early and late humanism. Burckhardt's morality and religion', in *Jacob Burckhardt and the Renaissance 100 Years After* (Lawrence: Museum of Art, University of Kansas, 1960), pp. 15-27, at p. 17.

³ Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *Italian Journey*, trans. by W. H. Auden and Elizabeth Meyer (London: Collins, 1962), p. 22.

⁴ *The Letters of Jacob Burckhardt*, ed. and trans. by Alexander Dru (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1955), 27 February 1847.

Goethe, he repeatedly stressed to his students the importance of direct and unprejudiced looking – *Anschauung* – as the necessary first stage of understanding the world. Speaking of the greatest artists, such as Raphael or Rubens, he would say that they shared with Goethe this visual ability to ‘grasp, through observation aided by intuition, a thing in its wholeness.’ Late in life, he complained to Wölfflin that the modern traveller had ceased to take a sketchbook – as Burckhardt himself, again following Goethe, had done – and failed to *look*.⁵ There was an affinity here with a contemporary of Burckhardt’s, whose views, although apparently unknown to the scholar of Basel, were in some ways very similar. These lines were published in 1888:

...the majority of spectators are totally incapable of appreciating the truth of nature, when fully set before them; but it is both singular and disgraceful that it is so difficult to convince them of their own incapability. Ask a connoisseur who has scampered all over Europe, the shape of the leaf of an elm, and the chances are ninety to one that he cannot tell you; and yet he will be voluble of criticism on every painted landscape from Dresden to Madrid, and pretend to tell you whether they are like nature or not. Ask an enthusiastic chatterer in the Sistine Chapel how many ribs he has, and you get no answer; but it is odds that you do not get out of the door without his informing you that he considers such and such a figure badly drawn.⁶

John Ruskin’s insistence on the truth in nature and art, truth which was visible only to the attentive observer, would have seemed sympathetic to Burckhardt, even though he could emulate neither Ruskin nor Goethe, either as an artist (his own sketches are pedestrian) or in his detailed knowledge:

...unfortunately, I am altogether ignorant of botany; I delight in every pretty little flower, but I have never learnt anything about them, and so have to take nature more or less *en bloc*.⁷

Very much in the manner of Ruskin, Burckhardt would tell students in his art history classes:

The essential condition [for viewing both nature and works of art alike] is that the eye must still be capable of seeing and must not yet have been dulled in relation to the visible world by overexertion or have become incapable of reacting to anything but the world of writing and print.⁸

⁵ Lionel Gossman, *Basel in the Age of Burckhardt: A Study in Unseasonable Ideas* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2000), p. 350

⁶ John Ruskin, *Modern Painters*, 6 vols. (Orpington: Allen, 1888), i. 54.

⁷ *Letters*, 30 May 1877.

From this admonition to his audience, it is apparent that Burckhardt felt his primary goal as a teacher to be, not the study of particular forms or periods of art as ends in themselves, but rather the opening of eyes, and the engagement of an active process of looking at and response to the world in all its diversity. In case we, in a period of far greater access to the art of our own and other cultures, are tempted to feel complacent on account of the millions who now visit sites of ‘natural beauty’, tourist centres and cultural museums throughout the world, we should reflect that Burckhardt would have been unimpressed by these crowds, most of whom respond passively to what passes before their eyes, without really seeing these places and things in order to make them a part of themselves.

Burckhardt’s credence in the absolute value of the direct, unmediated encounter with things explains his repudiation, throughout his life, of general philosophical positions.

My whole life long I have never yet thought philosophically, and never had any thought at all that was not connected with something external. I can do nothing unless I start out from contemplation.⁹

I have never, my whole life long, been philosophically minded.¹⁰

This protestation makes a degree of sense in relation to Burckhardt’s visual empiricism. He claimed that ‘we murder to dissect’, and that *a priori* ideas interfered with the sincere response to art or nature. Most dangerous of all were academics, with their artificial theories. Hence, at least in part, Burckhardt’s reluctance to publish, and his defiant statement: ‘My lectures are not for art historians.’¹¹ Wölfflin, his sole pupil to continue as an academic historian of art, reported of Burckhardt’s lectures, with some exasperation, that they lacked any discernible system.¹² Insofar as this truly represents his teaching, Burckhardt is likely to have been influenced by Rumohr, who in

⁸ Gossman, *Basel in the Age of Burckhardt*, p. 351;

⁹ *Letters*, 14 June 1842. See also *Letters*, 19 June 1842.

¹⁰ *Letters*, 26 September 1896 (to Nietzsche).

¹¹ Lionel Gossman, ‘Jacob Burckhardt as art historian’, *Oxford Art Journal*, 11 (1988), pp. 25-32, at p. 28.

¹² id., *Basel in the Age of Burckhardt*, p. 357. Significantly Burckhardt receives no more than a passing reference in Michael Podro, *The Critical Historians of Art* (Yale and London: Yale University Press, 1982), p.99.

1827 had insisted that ‘art is a thoroughly visual way of grasping and representing things... which is diametrically opposed to concepts and conceptual thinking.’¹³

Yet at the same time, and notwithstanding his protestations, particular motifs running through Burckhardt’s writings may indicate at least the elements of a philosophical position. Not, certainly, that he was a Hegelian: Gombrich’s attempt to demonstrate that Burckhardt was really an idealist disciple of Hegel remains unconvincing, and Sigurdson has well said that Burckhardt was ‘outside positivism, Hegelianism, and other forms of optimistic rationalism.’¹⁴ The signs of Burckhardt’s consistent underlying view of the world lie in another direction. It is the recurrent celebration of the nature and art of Italy in his writings which begins, at least, to acquire the seriousness and the coherence of a metaphysical belief.

By the time Burckhardt reached almost to the age of Goethe at the time of his *Italienische Reise*, he would claim a greater maturity of self-knowledge, yet he would continue to experience Italy as a place of blessed escape from the corrupting ugliness of modern life north of the Alps:

My illusions are no longer those of a youth of twenty, who expects to find paradise in the south. But my poor soul expects from time to time to be plunged into a refreshing bath of beautiful forms, particularly the landscape.¹⁵

That reference to ‘my poor soul’ is revealing of a third influence upon Burckhardt’s conception of the Renaissance encounter with nature, and one no less vital than either Michelet or Goethe. His early abandonment of the theological studies for which his father’s profession and hopes had prepared him did not divert Burckhardt from a continuing quest for spiritual meaning. As he wrote to a friend, a fellow theology student who had also left the Church, in 1839:

...now here I am grubbing about in the ruins of my former view of life, trying to discover what is still usable in the old foundations, though in a different way...¹⁶

¹³ Gossman, *Basel in the Age of Burckhardt*, p. 351.

¹⁴ Richard Sigurdson, *Jacob Burckhardt’s Social and Political Thought* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2004), p. 221. See Ernst Gombrich, ‘In search of cultural history’ [1969], in his *Ideals and Idols* (Oxford: Phaidon, 1979), pp. 24-59, at pp. 34-42.

¹⁵ *Letters*, 18 December 1852.

¹⁶ *Letters*, 1 December 1839. See also Thomas Albert Howard, ‘Jacob Burckhardt, religion and the historiography of “crisis” and “transition”’, *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 60 (1999), pp. 149-64.

As professor of art history at Basel University, Burckhardt would tell his students that through art, it was possible to obtain ‘a glimmer of light from our lost paradise’, a ‘revelation similar to what was once vouchsafed through the prophets’.¹⁷ These phrases are informative, both about the momentous importance which Burckhardt attached to that *Anschauung* of the world which he recommended to his pupils, and about his own methods as a student of the landscape and art of Italy. His approach, throughout his life, remained that, not of the dry academics whom he mocked,¹⁸ but of the poet. He had ambitions as a writer of poetry, which he sustained for many years. And he proved himself an unusual pupil of Ranke, whose lectures he attended in Berlin, in his comment upon his own, source-based but also intuitive, approach to history: ‘History, to me, is always poetry for the most part’.¹⁹ Resistant to the increasingly favoured notion that history should be a science, Burckhardt retained his allegiance to the belief that it was, rather, a branch of literature (as it had been for most of his predecessors, including Michelet) and, moreover, a form of poetry – with all the connotations of spiritual insight associated with that genre.

In fact, Burckhardt’s most enduring project was metahistorical, transcending time-bound events and periods. As he described it to the philologist and poet Albert Brenner in 1855, this was a plan, born during a recent visit to Italy, to undertake ‘a wider enquiry into the history of the beautiful.’ The Renaissance, in his view, marked a historic turning point in humanity’s capacity to appreciate the world – ‘the Italians are the first among modern peoples by whom the outward world was seen and felt as something beautiful’ – but the real object of his study were the eternal qualities of nature. These qualities were summed up in Burckhardt’s idea of revealed, transcendent beauty. So, justifying to a friend his flight in 1846 from the political turmoil of ‘this wretched age’, he wrote that he was ‘escaping from it to the beautiful, lazy south, where history is dead’.²⁰ As this quotation indicates, Burckhardt’s notion of beauty was forged in contradistinction to what he perceived as the negative features of the present epoch, especially as witnessed in the cities of northern Europe. Above all, his definition of beauty was formed in reaction against what seemed to him to be the vulgarity and transience of mass culture in the industrial age.

¹⁷ Gossman, *Basel in the Age of Burckhardt*, p. 347. See also Jonathan Woolfson, ‘Burckhardt’s ambivalent Renaissance’, in *Renaissance Historiography* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), pp. 9–26, at p. 11.

¹⁸ Gossman, *Basel in the Age of Burckhardt*, pp. 367–9; Wilhelm Schlink, ‘Le “rôle” de l’historien de l’art’, in Maurizio Ghelardi and Matthias Waschek (eds.), *Relire Burckhardt* (Paris: ENSBA, 1997), pp. 23–53, at pp. 38–9.

¹⁹ *Letters*, 14 June 1847. See Gossman, ‘Jacob Burckhardt as art historian’, p. 31; also Regine Prange, *Die Geburt der Kunstgeschichte* (Cologne: Deubner, 2004), p. 154.

²⁰ *Letters*, 28 February 1846. See Gossman, ‘Jacob Burckhardt as art historian’, p. 27.

Burckhardt's sense of nostalgia, his turn backwards to the 'good old Europe', has led to confusion about his message, and to unjustified neglect of his ideas in modern times. He was a conservative in politics – or rather, he was apolitical. But his evocation of the achievements of the Renaissance was not a project to escape the present in an elitist vision of a Golden Age – but rather a call, to those of his contemporaries who would listen, to learn from the literature and the visual arts of the earlier period. That he recognised and valued in particular (not exclusively – his range was enormous) the achievements of the Renaissance was not a sign of retardataire escapism. The modest, even reclusive bachelor scholar wore the character of the 'Spätling' as a means of self-protection; but his message was prophetic, and it has only become more pertinent with the passage of time.

A particular and crucial strength of Burckhardt's understanding of the human response to nature and art was his historical sensitivity. Unlike his successor Wölfflin, who in order to make art history more scientific turned away from history to focus on the supposedly autonomous life of artistic forms, Burckhardt was always conscious of the dynamic and complex interaction between cultural developments and changes in contemporary society and politics. In this, he acknowledged the pioneering example of Winckelmann, who had seen the greatness of classical Greek art as simultaneously resonating with, and yet to a vital degree independent of, the surrounding social and political context of its time and place. Burckhardt acknowledged, therefore, that difference between cultures which renders understanding problematic. What we call the postmodern condition would not, in this sense, have caused him surprise. Yet beginning with his earliest encounters with art in the galleries of northern Europe, and above all from the moment of his epiphany in the presence of Italian landscape and painting, he held to the belief that the possibility of redemption from the oppressions and divisions of history lay in the human capacity for engaged and attentive observation of the world in all its diversity: a process which, properly pursued, could at once reach across the divisions of time and culture, and have the effect of a lasting spiritual transformation.

Burckhardt consistently taught that disciplined visual attention to the forms of nature and art had the potential to open up a world of timeless harmony, which offered to bind together individuals of any period who were ready to receive it.²¹ Like the beauties of the landscape, he held that great art could communicate, regardless of differences of cultural context, across the centuries:

²¹ See Lionel Gossman, 'The *Existenzbild* in Burckhardt's art historical writing', *Modern Language Notes*, 114 (1999), pp. 879-928, at p. 892.

that it was, as he stated in a lecture of 1884, ‘immediately intelligible to all.’²² A prime example of this, in Burckhardt’s view, was Raphael. Burckhardt recognised the gulf which separated the modern observer from the culture of Raphael’s day.²³ Yet, finding that the visionary insight of a great artist provided a bridge over that gulf, Burckhardt wrote of Raphael that he ‘always appears much closer to our feelings than any other artist. There is no separation between him and the intimate desires of all the following centuries, and those yet to come.’²⁴

Burckhardt believed that the function of art at all times was to act as a catalyst to open viewers’ eyes to the beauty of the world, leading to life-changing fusion with the observed object. In his *Der Cicerone* (1855) or handbook to the art of Italy, he gave as his motive in writing the intention ‘to facilitate the enjoyment of works of art’, which led Aby Warburg to speak deprecatingly of the work as ‘a hedonistic travel guide to beauty’.²⁵ But it is clear from Burckhardt’s various statements about the ‘delight’ which was to be won from the encounter with landscapes and artworks that he attached great importance to the process, and that he felt a mission in his work to communicate this potential to all who would listen. For the new Renaissance response to landscape, Burckhardt’s chosen spokesperson was Aeneas Silvius Piccolomini, the pope whose accounts of his travels through Italy around the middle of the Quattrocento, notwithstanding certain literary debts to his classical reading, were said to reveal, in their immediacy, a ‘genuine modern enjoyment’ (CR 183). Similarly, by the pleasure they themselves found in nature, the best artists of the period conveyed its essential beauty to beholders of their work. Thus Filippo Lippi was, in Burckhardt’s view, ‘the first artist to take pleasure in considering life in all its aspects, even the most trivial.’²⁶ Of the many diverse character types depicted in Benozzo Gozzoli’s frescoes in the Camposanto of Pisa, Burckhardt wrote that ‘the viewer too shares the pleasure in life which emanates from this new genre of images.’²⁷ And of a great artist such as Rubens, the lofty claim was made that the artist was capable of a miracle of transubstantiation of his subject matter, enhancing its power to work upon the viewer:

²² Gossman, *Basel in the Age of Burckhardt*, p. 359; Dieter Jähnig, *Maßstäbe der Kunst- und Gesichtsbetrachtung Jacob Burckhardts* (Basel: Schwabe, 2006), pp. 44-5.

²³ This awareness of distance is the basis of the art historian’s melancholy discussed in Michael Ann Holly, ‘Cultural history, connoisseurship, and melancholy’, in Allen J. Grieco et al. (eds.), *The Italian Renaissance in the Twentieth Century* (Florence: Olschki, 2002), pp. 195-206. Burckhardt’s notion of the transcendent communicative power of great art, however, could be seen as an antidote to such melancholy.

²⁴ Jacob Burckhardt, *Il Cicerone. Guida al godimento delle opera d’arte in Italia*, trans. by Paolino Mingazzi and Federico Pfister, 2 vols (Florence: Sansoni, 1952), ii. 1020. See further Gossman, ‘The *Existenzbild*’, pp. 909-10.

²⁵ Cit. Holly, ‘Cultural history, connoisseurship, and melancholy’, p. 196.

²⁶ Burckhardt, *Il Cicerone*, ii. 877.

²⁷ *Il Cicerone*, ii. 882.

What nature said to him, at times, we may be sure, in whispers, was transmuted within him into moving visions of his own soul, and thus he gave it back to the world.²⁸

This Burckhardtian conception of the significance of the beauty of nature and art seems to have drawn part of its strength from a reading of the Renaissance Neoplatonists. Burckhardt's discussion of the Quattrocento humanists in general is not complimentary: by contrast with scholars of his own day such as Voigt, for whom the revival of classical letters was the defining feature of Renaissance Italian culture, Burckhardt saw the humanist reverence for ancient texts and philological pedantry as having a dampening effect on the imagination and creativity. However, he singled out for admiration the so-called 'Platonic Academy' of Florence, and the writings of Poliziano and of Pico della Mirandola (CR 309, 215, 215-6). In these sources Burckhardt would have found strong encouragement for the belief in an underlying harmony in the world, manifest to the attentive eye in the beauties both of nature and the arts.

Reflecting at the end of his career on his role as a teacher, he remarked that, unlike certain philosophers (he was speaking of Nietzsche), 'I really interested myself more in the creative aspect of things and that which makes people happy, the vitalising aspect'.²⁹ Burckhardt's account of the transformative potential of the beauty to be found in either art or nature reveals the profundity of his belief in its power:

No textbook in the world could replace with its quotations the kind of chemical reaction (*chemische Verbindung*) that is produced when our intuition and attentive vigilance yield a self-discovered message, so that a real spiritual bonding takes place (*eine wirkliche innere Verbindung mit unserem Geist*).³⁰

Burckhardt's announcement of the withdrawal of a veil from nature at the Renaissance thus amounted to something more than an echo of Michelet's celebration of the liberty of the people. For Burckhardt, considerably more than this was at stake. The momentous nature of his argument about mankind's encounter with the world and its expression in art is evident from the curious, yet emphatic, and over the years enormously influential, distinction which he drew between the

²⁸ Jacob Burckhardt, *Recollections of Rubens* [1897], trans. by Mary Hottinger (London: Phaidon, 1950), p. 153.

²⁹ *Letters*, 13 January 1896.

³⁰ Jürgen Gröbe, 'Reading history: On Jacob Burckhardt as source-reader', *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 60 (1999), pp. 525-47, at p. 540; Jähnig, *Maßstäbe der Kunst- und Geschichtsbetrachtung Jacob Burckhardts*, pp. 73-4.

Quattrocento artists of Italy and those of northern Europe. For it was not ignorance of the northern painters that led Burckhardt to marginalise their contribution to the artistic conquest of nature, in favour of the Italian. As a young man, researching *Die Kunstwerke der belgischen Städte* (1842) in the early 1840s, he had looked closely at the Van Eycks, at Van der Weyden, and at Dürer; and that familiarity stayed with him as a slightly awkward foil to the special claims which he came to make for Italy.

In the fifteenth century, the great masters of the Flemish school, Hubert and Jan van Eyck, suddenly lifted the veil from nature. Their landscapes are not merely the fruit of an endeavour to reflect the real world in art, but have, even if expressed conventionally, a certain poetical meaning – in short, a soul. Their influence on the whole art of the West is undeniable, and extended to the landscape-painting of the Italians, but without preventing the characteristic interest of the Italian eye for nature from finding its own expression. (CR 181)

Burckhardt granted that northern artists were capable of representing nature, and he cited as an instance the rustic scenery in Albrecht Dürer's engraving of the Prodigal Son. 'But it is one thing if a painter, brought up in a school of realism, introduces such scenes, and quite another thing if a poet, accustomed to an ideal or mythological framework, is driven by inward impulse into realism' (CR 184).

It was just such an 'inward impulse' that Burckhardt recognised in the Italian painters whom he most admired. The ideal, in his view, was attained by Titian in certain paintings – a Madonna in a landscape, a Bacchanal – from which narrative subject matter had been all but excluded. Burckhardt saw in these 'tranquil images' a representation of 'pure and simple existence'. He even coined the term *Existenzbild* to describe this admirable quality of an art which could so focus the beholder's enrapt and engaged attention: 'Here, where a single sound, a single feeling pervades the entire picture, and where the particular historical subject is relegated to a secondary level, Titian reaches his highest peak.'³¹ That Burckhardt developed this idea partly in reaction against what he found to be the excessively pious aesthetic of the Nazarenes underlines the unspoken religious connotations of his own concept.

To say of certain aesthetically minded men of the nineteenth century that art was for them 'a religion' has only a superficial significance. But in Burckhardt's case, his lifelong devotion to his

³¹ *Il Cicerone*, ii. 1058, 1063. See Gossman, 'The *Existenzbild*'.

preferred subject of beauty amounted to a religion in all but name. Art alone, in his view, was eternal: 'Die Kunst aber will ewig sein'.³² The difference between him and the aesthetes lay in the fact that for Burckhardt, unlike the devotees of 'l'art pour l'art', the various forms of culture were in constant dialogue with the separate forces of religion and the state.³³ Recognising the frequent alliance of art and religion, he was yet at pains to point out that 'religions, however, are very much mistaken in imagining that art merely seeks its bread from them'.³⁴ Detaching itself from the perennial banality of popular and commercial taste, liberating itself wherever possible from the constraining influence of materially minded patrons, the human power to respond to art and beauty also rose above all human churches and ideologies. To the poet and – despite himself – professor of the history of art who in other respects withdrew himself from the world, the active cultivation of this human capacity was a goal to which one might worthily devote one's energies and one's life. Hardly less conscious in our own day of the danger to the human psyche of our alienation from the world around us, our sense of separation from what we nostalgically mythologise as 'nature', we may yet have something to learn from Burckhardt's invitation to regain our equilibrium by the practise of deliberate, sustained, attentive and reflective looking.

³² Jacob Burckhardt, *Aesthetik der bildenden Kunst*, ed. by Peter Ganz (Munich: Beck, Basel: Schwabe, 1982), pp. 56, 58; cit. Gossman, 'The *Existenzbild*', n. 25.

³³ Jähnig, *Maßstäbe der Kunst- und Geschichtsbetrachtung Jacob Burckhardts*, pp. 37-8.

³⁴ Jacob Burckhardt, *Reflections on History*, trans. by Mary Hottinger (London: Allen & Unwin, 1943), p. 134.