

Ryszard Kasperowicz (Catholic University of Lublin)

A Portrait of Renaissance Man in the Writings of Jacob Burckhardt

In 1860, two years after his return to Basel from Zurich, from half voluntary and half imposed “exile,” Jacob Burckhardt published *Die Kultur der Renaissance in Italien*. With the exception of the volume devoted to the architecture of Italian Renaissance that was published seven years later, *Civilization of Renaissance* was the last book of the great Swiss historian. Both *Weltgeschichtliche Betrachtungen* and *Griechische Kulturgeschichte*, which are rightly thought to be the fullest expression of the historiographic mastery of the scholar from Basel, saw the light of day only after his death (1897). It was for this reason, as Werner Kaegi, the most outstanding biographer of Burckhardt, observed, that the 19th century remembered this great historian as the author of *Kultur der Renaissance*; the 20th century, however, saw in him a prophetic thinker, lost in reverie about the dread of the coming century, known for his heartbreaking letters and foreboding pages of *Weltgeschichtliche Betrachtungen*.¹

It might be thought that this situation shows expressively not so much the inner problems of Burckhardt’s writings on history, but rather about the nature of the last two centuries. Nonetheless, *Kultur der Renaissance* has been, and will certainly remain, his most famous and popular work, a book that represents a unique and deeply considered, many-sided picture of the Renaissance, full of ambivalence, a “draft” of the epoch, “ein Versuch” which has not ceased to fascinate either a wider audience or the subsequent generations of scholars. And to tell the truth it would be rather difficult to find a title from the canon of the 19th century historiography of culture devoted to the Renaissance which would retain a narrative magic comparable to that of Burckhardt’s work with its freshness and power of observation, as well as topicality in the choice and interpretation of the key problems of Renaissance culture. Sometimes,

¹ I quote this remark after: Lionel Gossman, *Basel in the Age of Burckhardt. A Study in Unseasonable Ideas* (Chicago–London, 2002), 239–240.

in the same breath, people list *Die Wiederbelebung des classischen Altertums* (1859) by George Voigt next to *Kultur der Renaissance*, quite rightly so, as it is a great work, yet today it seems known only to specialists. In one of his lectures Ernst Hans Gombrich mentioned that in his youth, that is before the Second World War, in German speaking countries (he himself lived in Vienna then) *Kultur der Renaissance* “was still a classical work [...], a ticket to «Bildung,» culture in the Victorian understanding of the word.”²

Nevertheless, the question of whether today Burckhardt is a popular author and whether the fact that you read his books guarantees you an entry to the group of cultured people is not worth asking. The shape of culture and its understanding have been subject to such deep transformations today that it is no longer possible to even dream of establishing a canon of masterpieces of historical literature if its themes were to go beyond ideological disputes and conflicts of deeply consolidated traditions. One can notice in it a sign of barbarization of taste and arrogance towards the great school of thought about the past, but also a visible sign of the fall of the elitist, disgraced interpretation of culture, which was rooted in the political attitude “altliberal sceptical humanist,” as described by Lionel Gossman,³ and which drew its vitality from the faith in the existence of the spiritual and everlasting “Alt-Europa,” a model of excellent taste and the sense of incessant continuity of the axiological order, whose guardian Burckhardt appointed himself to be.

As early as 1846, with undisguised self-irony, but with the bitterness of a wiser man, he wrote in a letter to Hermann Schauenburg that his trip to Italia was to become “Modernitätсмüde,” as he described himself, a kind of spiritual revival, refreshment, but also a move away from the present of history, as nobody knows better than he with what ease people can change into a “barbarian riff-raff,” what kind of tyranny will soon control intellectual life under the pretext that “Bildung” is a latent ally of capital (Letter 174).⁴

² E.H. Gombrich, “W poszukiwaniu historii kultury” [*In Search of Cultural History*], translated by A. Dębicki, in *Pojęcia, problemy, metody współczesnej nauki o sztuce. Dwadzieścia sześć artykułów uczonych europejskich i amerykańskich* [The Notions, Problems and Methods of the Contemporary of Art. Twenty-Six Papers by European and American Scholars], the choice, revision of the texts translated, and introduction by J. Białostocki (Warszawa, 1976), 317.

³ See on that: Gossman, “*Per me si va nella città dolente*: Burckhardt and the polis,” in *Out of Arcadia. Classics and Politics in Germany in the Age of Burckhardt, Nietzsche and Wilamowitz*, ed. I. Gildenhard and M. Ruehl (London, 2003), 47–59; but also a commentary to an article by E. Flaig, *ibid.*, 41.

⁴ A letter of Jacob Burckhardt according to the edition: J. Burckhardt, *Briefe. Vollständige und kritisch bearbeitete Ausgabe*, mit Benützung des handschriftlichen Nachlasses herge-

However, it is not important that the cognitive significance of *Kultur der Renaissance* be judged according to its popularity. Besides, one might suspect that its author would not be too pleased with it – he himself preferred to cultivate an image of an apolitical scholar, indifferent to any honors and words of appreciation, who would choose the mask of a philistine lifestyle in “Krähwinckel,” as Burckhardt mercilessly called his beloved Basel, but who would in fact take on the role of a staunch ascetic, who would, on his own, face the vulgarisation of culture and popularisation of the world of politics in the name of the “Bildung Alteuropa” already referred to. This mission, its authentic seriousness and a studied pose was most accurately interpreted by Hermann Hesse, who, as we know, modelled the character of father Jacob, the Benedictine scholar, known to all readers of *Das Glasperlenspiel*, on Burckhardt. Knecht, the main character of the novel, makes notes and predictions, among which one can find the following declaration, which is in fact an excerpt from *Historische Fragmente*, the historical lectures of the Swiss scholar: that the days of catastrophe, deepest despair and direst poverty can come, but a certain kind of happiness is still to exist – spiritual happiness, to be sure, directed towards the saving of the culture and education of past times, and trying to represent fearlessly the spiritual sphere of our epoch which otherwise could become strictly materialistic.

In the eyes of Hesse, Burckhardt remained an embodiment of a wisdom acquired thanks to a unique insight into history, intellectual independence and honesty. These features of personality and art of the author of *Kultur der Renaissance* were admired by Aby Warburg, one of the most exceptional art historians of the 20th century. Warburg, when studying the demonic aspects of the Renaissance culture which constituted a prelude to reflection over the irrational aspects of European culture in the context of the history of visual expression, sought the greatness of Burckhardt as an historian in his ability to listen raptly to “mnemonic waves” of the past. An interpreter of *Pathosformeln* and the creator of the atlas *Mnemosyne*, whose historical fascinations and the terrifying presence of the First World War pushed him to the edge of nervous breakdown, treated Burckhardt as his spiritual predecessor.⁵ Warburg infallibly found in his figure all this that he desired himself – the retaining

stellt von M. Burckhardt, I–X Bände und Gesamtregister (Basel, 1949–1994). In brackets there are the numbers of letters.

⁵ See on that: Bernd Roeck, “Aby Warburgs Seminarübungen über Jacob Burckhardt im Sommersemester 1927,” *Idea. Werke – Theorien – Dokumente. Jahrbuch der Hamburger Kunsthalle X* (1991): 65–89.

of distance and composure in the face of history which would mesh with contemporary history.

Therefore a key question for the assessment of *Kultur der Renaissance*, so accurately recognized by Warburg, is the legitimacy of Burckhardt's method, as well as the complicated network of relations between an interpretation of the Renaissance culture and the concrete cultural and political situation of the 19th century.

However, it is worth making it clear at the beginning that the aim of this presentation is not at all to show that some of the elements that make up Burckhardt's vision of culture and the man of the Renaissance are simply a reaction to the challenge issued to history by the present, or an attempt to draw perforce an anachronistic parallel between the past and the present. It would be an observation as much obvious as banal, another unconvincing voice in the discussion about the borders of historical interpretation and the hindrance of an historian by the horizon of his own history, which he experiences at present. It is indeed an obvious and natural thing that certain areas of the past take on a clarified form only in the light of the events which are contemporary with the historian, when they uncover so far unsensed meanings. However, Burckhardt never updates history by harnessing it to the dynamics and the sequence of events of the contemporary world; he does not force history to stand before of the tribune of the present. To the contrary, the historian from Basel laughed at this simplified to the extreme version of the dogma which had been pampered in its mature form by German idealistic history of philosophy, he stated that he had a knowledge of the order and plan of history which could be best expressed in the statement that all history followed an established track which led directly to us, its inheritors. Burckhardt ironically commented on this faith as the philosophy of history, which philosophers become imbued with when they are three or four years of age.⁶

One should add as well that for the author of *Kultur der Renaissance* history is a domain of a fairly wide range of interpretations and assessments. This is why he was very sensitive to the attempts of legitimization of contemporary times by means of a pseudo-historical explanation; he categorically rejected the boasting axiology of the historical world on the basis of the categories of "happiness" and "unhappiness." In *Weltgeschichtliche Betrachtungen* Burckhardt unmasked the inside story of the

⁶ Burckhardt, *Werke. Kritische Gesamtausgabe*, vol. 10: *Aesthetik der bildenden Kunst Über das Studium der Geschichte, mit dem Text der Weltgeschichtlichen Betrachtungen in der Fassung von 1905*, ed. P. Ganz (München-Basel, 2000), 355.

operation of the assessment of the past as the fulfillment of success and happiness in the following way:

Unsere tiefe und höchst lächerliche Selbstsucht hält zunächst diejenigen Zeiten für glücklich, welche irgend eine Ähnlichkeit mit unserem Wesen haben; sie hält ferner diejenigen vergangenen Kräfte und Menschen für löblich, auf deren Tun unser jetzigen Dasein und relatives Wohlbefinden gegründet scheint.

Ganz als wäre Welt und Weltgeschichte nur unsertwillen vorhanden. Jeder hält nämlich seine Zeit für die Erfüllung der Zeiten und nicht bloss für eine der vielen vorübergehenden Wellen. Hat er Ursache zu glauben, dass er ungefähr das ihm Erreichbare erreicht hat, so versteht sich diese Ansicht von selbst; wünscht er, dass es anders werde, so hofft er, auch dies in Bälde zu erleben und noch selbst bewirken zu helfen. Alles Einzelne aber, und wir mit, ist nicht nur um seiner selbst, sondern um der ganzen Vergangenheit und um der ganzen Zukunft willen vorhanden.⁷

The author of *Weltgeschichtliche Betrachtungen* understood very well that such a one-dimensional interpretation of history stems partly from the optimism and didacticism of Enlightenment historiography, partly it draws from Hegel's pattern of history as a dialectical climb towards the summits of self-knowledge. If we add to that a dash of the positivist faith in the moral advancement of the human race, exemplified in the eyes of Burckhardt by Buckle, we will get a recipe for the interpretation of history in the categories of a homogeneous process of a man's self-improvement.

It could be said without any hesitation that nothing was more alien to the Swiss historian than such an attitude to history. The decisive moment turns out to be here not so much Burckhardt's infamous pessimism – from his childhood (that is from his mother's death) the awareness of the fragility of all earthly matters is present or the conservative political temperament – but the conviction that such a model of history is in fact a lethal enemy of historical cognition. Within its framework a perverse selection of facts takes place, perverse because dictated by an apparently objective sense of human happiness and an apparently inerasable authoritative graph of historical consequence and continuity. Burckhardt tenaciously fought against the things that about forty years after his death Herbert Butterfield discredited in a classical essay on a Whig interpretation of history.⁸

But this is not everything; Burckhardt's criticism goes even further. It turns out that the historiographic stand described makes it impossible for its adherents to judge their own position in history and to understand

⁷ Ibid., 532.

⁸ H. Butterfield, *The Whig Interpretation of History* (New York, 1965).

the active role of an historian himself: a researcher in the operation of creating an historical fact. Naturally it is nobody's intention to make the author of *Kultur der Renaissance* a forerunner of contemporary narrative or of hermeneutics *à rebours*. Burckhardt tirelessly warned us against treating history as a one-dimensional group of events, a game whose result is known. The practice of history should teach one to perceive alternative solutions, unfulfilled possibilities in it, where the establishing of coincidence or even a casual relation belongs to the rarest strokes of understanding of "the higher necessity" as defined by Burckhardt himself. It is not a matter of chance that he belongs to the most popular and most frequently cited authorities in the fascinating treatise on "the histories that never happened" by Alexander Demandt.⁹

There is nothing surprising about the fact that the inner logic of Burckhardt's method differs both from other historians of the culture of the second half of the 19th century, as well as from the great masters of historicism, Leopold von Ranke and Johann Gustav Droysen, who were, as a matter of fact, his teachers in Berlin. In his works the author of *Kultur der Renaissance* inducted into life a surprising project of a multidimensional history, built from cross sections that permeated one another, drawn from different perspectives whose direction axes mapped out three "potencies" of the historical world: religion, state and culture.

Burckhardt did not hide that the distinction between the three potencies, three points of observation is, to a certain degree, a free operation – one can be tempted to look for other distinctions in the picture of the past. The thing of prime importance is yet to show the relations between the three historical spheres; it should be stressed that an historian should always fix his eyes, as if on a Plato's pattern, on the principle that demands caution when deciding what the conditioning factor was and what the conditioned phenomenon was. And it becomes clear here that an extreme caution should be retained in the face of cultural facts as "[...] existiert in Zeiten hohen Kultur immer alles auf allen Stufen des Bedingens und der Bedingtheit gleichzeitig, zumal, wenn das Erbe vielen Epochen schichtweise übereinander liegt."¹⁰

The final aim of sectional views of history is to obtain and present a clear examination of history – "Anschauung" – that is a vivid manifestation of that which by definition already no longer exists. A rhetorical ekphrasis and the dynamization of events through a fully artistic de-

⁹ A. Demandt, *Ungeschehene Geschichte ein Traktat über die Frage: was wäre Geschehen, wenn...?* (Göttingen, 1984).

¹⁰ Burckhardt, *Werke. Kritische Gesamtausgabe*, vol. 10: *Aesthetik der bildenden Kunst...*, 371.

scription and bold synchronous combinations and surprising analogies are indispensable tools, but in fact they do not play the main role. The fundamental function is given, then, to the ability to synthesize memory and imagination, and thanks to that a single event or a work of art, suddenly, in a surprising stroke, culminates in itself, in the likeness of a symbol, different meanings of a given time. Such a direct, intense contact with the past is not the result of some intuitional insight, but a long-term communion with texts and works of art of the past, the penetration of their mysteries, and finally in the process of "chemische Verbindung" will smelt "ein wirklich geistiges Eigentum."

It might be said that one possesses this when an historian and the reader of his works, on a possibly colourful map of events, see what is typical, what is permanent – the shape of the past, which is present in the ways of thinking and the perception of the world of the mankind, and which is also the thing of the past – "[...] wie diese war, wollte, schaute, dachte, schaute und vermochte" ["This kind of history aims at the inner core of bygone humanity, and at describing what manner of people these were, what they wished for, thought, perceived, and were capable of."] ¹¹

For such a search the artifacts of culture have a meaning which is incomparably greater than single events or the deeds of great men. It is works of art and literature that most vividly show, frequently in an unintended and unselfish way, even against themselves, the most important tendencies and structures of thinking and assessment which dominate in a given time. ¹² The seizure of a single factor or single power, the energy that shapes the past does not entitle us at all to state that the previous epoch has become comprehensible to us. From this point of view the thing that is only intended is as instructive as the thing that has actually happened, whereas the sole form of perceiving the event "das Typische der Darstellung" reveals more than the presence of some rhetorical formula or a characteristic stylistic device.

¹¹ Idem, *Griechische Kulturgeschichte*, ed. J. Oeri (Berlin–Stuttgart, 1898–1902), corrected by F. Stähelin and S. Merian and edited with critical comments (Stuttgart–Basel, 1930–1931), unveränderter Nachdruck der Ausgabe von Schwabe & Co. (Basel, 1956–1957), mit einer Einführung in die *Griechische Kulturgeschichte* zur Taschenbuchausgabe von W. Kaegi, vol. I–III (München, 1977), 23. An English translation quoted according to: Burckhardt, *The Greeks and Greek Civilization*, ed. O. Murray, transl. S. Stern (New York, 1998), 5.

¹² In *The Greeks and Greek Civilization* we read: "Cultural history by contrast possesses a primary degree of certainty, as it consists for the most part of material conveyed in an unintentional, disinterested or even involuntary way by sources and monuments; they betray their secrets unconsciously and even, paradoxically, through fictitious elaborations [...]." Loc. cit.

Burckhardt tirelessly warned us against a blind faith in facts, against the naive assumption that they themselves, as if drops of frozen water in a snowflake, will form a sensible and interesting pattern. His letters are full of mockery of "viri eruditissimi, viri doctissimi," whose activity as historians ends in a capitulation, cautiously called the retaining of objectivity in the face of "a rubble heap of facts." This kind of scholarship Burckhardt left to the historians and critics of ancient literatures, at least in the case of the history of Greek culture. He himself, however, would stress the duty of the researcher to take responsibility for the called for in his lectures on the culture of the Greeks, bring out these events which join the truly inner unification with our mind; here co-participation should be born either through kinship or through contrast. The crowning intention is not at all a deepened specialization – historical cognition claims the rights to become "ein lebenslang aushaltendes Mittel der Bildung und des Genusses."

This is how history is able to illuminate our contemporary world, to bring closer the understanding and explanation of the phenomena which we eyewitness. It would be wrong to assume that thanks to proximity of time, an inconsiderable move away in time, it is easier to understand their sense. This is an illusion which metaphorically can be compared to the view of the tip of the iceberg. In actual fact the present becomes readable only because it is surrounded by the cosmos of history, a bundle of weaker and stronger present traditions, attitudes and beliefs. The depth and the form of the understanding of the world that surrounds us here and now depends on the energy of their actualization or the rhythm of their dying out. History does not justify the present, and it is not an auto-referential statement about ourselves, who examine and study it, either. However, in the cosmos of history we always look for the thing that like the sound of a bell evokes in us reflection and alertness towards the present – das Anklingende. An historical question will always remain a question about the sources of our cultural experience – turning away from history is the shortest way to barbarity, and at the same time to enslavement in the area of things that are temporary, immediate, present – to blindness that is characteristic of a short-sighted person, to the painless forgetting of the fact, as the Polish romantic poet Cyprian Kamil Norwid used to say, that the mankind had to survive a few thousand years to learn at least good manners.

No matter how paradoxical the statement might sound, our point of departure, the Swiss historian says, is man as he has been, is and will be. The return to human nature takes place, then, via history. The source-like nature of history is hidden in this disturbing observation. Of course,

it would be a total misunderstanding to expect from history that it could transform into the philosophy of history and dare to solve the mystery of the world and existence as is done by religion and philosophy. However, history has its own, separate territory where, to use Kant's language, for itself, as a discipline of cognition, it is legislative. The fundamental condition here is the awareness of spiritual continuity, a vision of history as an uninterrupted activity of the human spirit, which ultimately fulfils itself in our privilege and at the same time in the duty of a free contemplation of the past – a guarantor of our freedom.

It is high time to ask the question of how, in the light of this necessarily lengthy outline of the methodological rules of Burckhardt's writing, *Kultur der Renaissance* presents itself. And one should admit that the answer is not at all as easy as it might seem at first – around no other work by Burckhardt have so many contradictions and often unjust interpretations emerged as with the book mentioned. It is worth stressing at the very beginning that this book fully realizes the postulate of "Anschauung" – examination of the past with one's own eyes. *Kultur der Renaissance* puts before the reader's eyes, almost in accordance with the imperative of the ancient rhetoric – *energeia* – human deeds, characters, attitudes, ways of thinking, which, despite their incredible diversity, are subject to some constant powers and habits, which are connected with strictly defined aims. Peter Ganz, an eminent expert on Burckhardt's work, did not hesitate to call *Kultur der Renaissance* a study from the area of the history of mentality, and there is much truth in the assessment.¹³ However, one should not lose sight of a very important thing – the author of *Kultur der Renaissance* does not go in the direction of a psychological description of the man of the Renaissance, but x-rays, sticking to this unfortunate metaphor, the spiritual skeleton of the epoch. The presentation of the unity of primary strivings, the homogeneity of intentions and aspirations that unite the world of the scholar and politician, artist and clergyman, humanist and merchant of the Renaissance times allows one to capture this epoch as a whole, a time of its own "physiognomy" as Paul Oskar Kristeller might say. Contrary to common opinion, this wholeness does not have an aesthetic sense, yet it is not deprived of it. Burckhardt does not make the past look aesthetic; the problem of the moral assessment of human actions is clearly present in *Kultur der Renaissance*. It is this ethical perspective, carefully cleared out of any temptations to moralize, accompanied by Burckhardt's lack of faith in

¹³ P. Ganz, "Jacob Burckhardts *Kultur der Renaissance in Italien*. Handwerk und Methode," *Deutsche Vierteljahrsschrift für Literatur und Geistesgeschichte* 62 (1988): 24–59.

meliorism, that gives rise to a closer examination of the turning point which was the close of the Middle Ages and the dawn of the Renaissance.

The essence of this turning point is not deprived of a garish ambiguity. By tearing off a curtain woven from "faith, childlike naivety and delusion," to remember this famous wording, the man had acquired a new form of self-knowledge – an objective presentation of all phenomena, especially state matters. At the same time, the way to individualism had been cleared, with all its promises and traps. A one-sided culmination of Renaissance individualism seems for Burckhardt to be a man deprived of any moral inhibitions, who creates a new form of the "existence of the state," drawn from the negative principle of the lack of any legitimization of the power that has been attained by deceit and violence.

In *Kultur der Renaissance* one comes across a number of such characters, for example, brutal men such as Ezzelino da Romano or Cesare Borgia. The measure of the atrocity of their deeds is not the fact that they have committed them – people have always committed crime. Now, however, their deeds become a certain principle of acting, a practical rule of behaving in the world, which in the name of the objective examination of things has taken the form of a moral vacuum. Nothing illustrates this metamorphosis of life better than the people of the North, who could not understand it at the beginning: "A character like that of Charles the Bold, which wore itself out in the passionate pursuit of impracticable ends, was a riddle to the Italians" – Burckhardt writes.¹⁴ Not surprisingly the Italians are the first modern nation in the history of Europe – it was here that the state was created, in which the retaining of power and taking great delight in it achieved the peak of virtuosity – the state as a work of art, a finished and autonomous creation, the aim in itself.

And exactly this feature of Renaissance personality aroused the greatest controversy. And so Burckhardt was accused of a hidden Hegelianism (Gombrich), of the deification, in the mode of Renaissancism, Nietzschean in spirit, of amorality and the will to power, of making history aesthetic, and finally of underestimating the role of economic factors in history. The aim of this paper is not to decide whether these accusations were right or not. The important thing is that we will misunderstand Burckhardt's intentions if we do not take into consideration the source-like nature of history, which was mentioned earlier. By listening raptly to the things that sound familiar, to the things which echo in us, to "das Anklingende," the author of *Kultur der Renaissance* looks for a key that

¹⁴ Quotation after: Burckhardt, *The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy*, introduction by B. Nelson and C. Trinkaus, vol. 1 (New York, 1958), 34.

might help him understand the present. The Renaissance appears to be the beginning and the principle of modernity – “das Moderne” – *arche* with a face of Janus.

It is not possible to hide that Burckhardt was a persistent and one of the most insightful critics of modernity. Its spiritual sources stem from the culture and mentality of the Renaissance, which was rooted in uncontrollable freedom of deed, free expression of personality, subjectivity and the power of imagination, so violent, according to Burckhardt, that it defines even the spiritual life of the inhabitants of Italia of the 15th/16th centuries. “It colours,” Burckhardt judges, “all their virtues and misdeeds; under its influence their uncontrollable selfishness develops itself in its whole terror.” The liberation and the auto-creation of an individual become so overwhelming that the ordinary ethical methods seem not to match their deeds. Pope Alexander the 6th, with the whole criminality of his character, is “a strong and fine personality,” we read.

One can easily cling to the illusion that Burckhardt is in fact a devotee of unhindered individualism and a negatively understood freedom, an admirer of powerful individuals, the *Gewaltmenschen*, who can do the cruelest things provided that these are extraordinary deeds, pulled out from an infinite imagination. It looked as if the Swiss historian had succumbed to the fascination of Machiavelli and rejected Platonic inner beauty of deed and character in the interest of the external polish of the Renaissance *virtù*. If we take into account at the same time his aversion to the mass modern world, with its city – a behemoth, inhabited by riff-raff, with its democratic praise of mediocrity, false philanthropy, selfishness and the desire for safety that suppresses individual freedom, we will obtain an apparently cohesive jigsaw puzzle.

But this is an illusion. An aversion to *petit bourgeois* modern culture, with its lack of taste, originality and disrespect for tradition, the disgust which Burckhardt shared with a number of critics of the “machine age” and *Notexistenzen*, did not make him an uncritical devotee of Renaissance magnificence. Only with a considerable amount of bad will could the scholar from Basel be regarded as an unwitting co-creator of 19th century Renaissancism.¹⁵ A proper apologist of the unbridled freedom of the Renaissance, which posed life as a formalistic adventure, free of any moral restrictions and social conventions, an existence devoted to the creation of oneself “beyond the good and the bad,” ornamented with the cult of the pagan, sensual beauty and an art that be-

¹⁵ See: August Buck, “Burckhardt und die italienische Renaissance,” in *Renaissance und Renaissancismus von Jacob Burckhardt bis Thomas Mann*, ed. A. Buck (Tübingen, 1990), 5–12.

lieved in the saving powers of magic, was Wilhelm Heinse, the author of the novel *Ardinghello und die glückseligen Inseln*. Heinse practiced what Werner Hoffman rightly called "a hedonistic religion of beauty."¹⁶ He loved Winckelmann, whom he called straight out a "Divine man" and with all his strength he desired to revive some of the customs of Ancient Greece, among them above all the custom of exercising and portraying oneself without any clothes on. In *Ardinghello* Heinse depicted a utopian picture of a community freed from any bans, existing happily beyond any morality, leading a creative life, full of simplicity and passion. Apart from the admiration of the Renaissance ideal of an artist, Heinse developed a particular liking for the infernal figure of Cesare Borgia, who perfectly matched his uncomplicated vision of humanity, which was taken from the reading of the writings of Machiavelli, and which could be summed up in the statement that a man is the greatest beast. Like a slur in a score, which makes the performer play the sounds of legato, history joins Heinse's avocations with the idea of Stendhal's energy of passion and the idea of the superman from the writings of Nietzsche and his faithful follower, Arthur de Gobineau.

In this company Burckhardt's voice would sound like a false, a creaking note. Burckhardt's true *Gewaltmenschen* are people like Leon Battista Alberti or Raphael – the most admired creator in Burckhardt's artistic pantheon next to Rubens. Contrary to ruthless hirelings they are characterized by a sense of harmony, inner balance and an iron will, which granted their life universality and dignity. Both Alberti as a researcher and moral philosopher and Raphael as an artist are distinguished by a new, different attitude to nature. Slowly it stops being perceived as a hierarchical order with a sacred core, it appears now to be an individual phenomenon, a challenge for the scholar's inquisitiveness and the sense of the rhythm of life, an artist's inner harmony. Each thing possesses individual, inner energy; it demands an artistic manifestation *sub specie pulchritudinis*. Alberti saw through the mysteries of human perception and closed them in the principles of perspective, Raphael discovered the rules of an almost timeless beauty and sweetness, Leonardo, this disturbing sage, "a mirror with a dimmed gleam," as Baudelaire beautifully speaks of him, used to, we remember from reading of Vasari, buy birds which were imprisoned in cages and immediately let them out.

Apart from the developed cult of individualism and the sense of an historical nostalgia for the lost perfection of the ancient people, so nursed by

¹⁶ W. Hoffman, *Anhaltspunkte. Studien zur Kunst und Kunsttheorie* (Frankfurt am Main, 1989), 91–92.

the otherwise envious humanists, repulsive in their petty-mindedness, apart from the brilliant synthesis of a merchant's calculation, nowhere else to be found, and an excessive pride, religious imagination and an unscrupulous desire for power, fed on a pre-cultural drive to rule,¹⁷ and curbed only with honour, "a mixture of ambition and conscience," finally apart from the modern state, which would place a solitary citizen in front of huge, ruthless bureaucracy and exploitation, the Renaissance granted to us a legacy of incredible art. After all, the picture of the man of the Renaissance which emerges from the writings of Burckhardt would not be complete without the Renaissance portrait. What is interesting is that it was the artists of the North who presented an uncompromising, fearless realism. As far as the Italians are concerned, Burckhardt remarks in one of his public lectures that the problem of: "wieweit Porträt? Wieweit Ideal" remains one of the most charming mysteries of the history of art. The creators of Italia outran their friends from behind the Alps in one thing: "in den bewegten Darstellungen aber gelangt die italienische Malerei durch eben dasselbe Naturstudium zu einer Kraft und Freiheit, wie sie der Norden nicht erreichte, und wer dieses Phänomen näher verfolgt, wird leicht zu dem Schlusse gelangen, dass die Italiener an ruhiger und bewegter Lebenswahrheit so unendlich vieles und neues zu leisten vor sich sahen, das Ihnen, das heisst ihren Malern, am Einzelporträt kaum etwas gelegen sein konnte."¹⁸ The curiosity about the world won, it triumphed over the glorification of an individual.

We should thus agree with Burckhardt that authentic greatness always emerges from ascetic self-restraint, "Verzichtkönnen." Freedom and moderation make an artist a great master, Rafael and Rubens were like that, embodiments of harmony and perfection, Michael Angelo lacked this feature, as an uncompromising will and the creative "I" outran his talent and understanding of artistic harmony. Excessive pride and scarcity of critical understanding of the past make, in Burckhardt's eyes, a symbolic abbreviation of modernity.

The gap between the greatness of artistic achievements and the political and moral decay of Italia, so clearly marked, for example, in the description of the fall of the humanist's ethos in the 16th century, made some researchers suspect in Burckhardt a peculiar inconsistency. Actually it was suggested that *Kultur der Renaissance* was a perverse, partly

¹⁷ See: Wolfgang Hardtwig, "Jacob Burckhardt. Trieb und Geist - die neue Konzeption der Kultur," in *Deutsche Geschichtswissenschaft um 1900*, ed. N. Hammerstein (Stuttgart, 1988), 97-112.

¹⁸ Burckhardt, *Die Kunst der Betrachtung. Aufsätze und Vorträge*, ed. H. Ritter (Köln, 1997), 331.

autobiographical reply to the times of the fall of culture and the disappearance of tradition in the 19th century world of mass democracy. What is more, Burckhardt in a way compensates with this work for the weakness of his own situation as a scholar, a humanist with an artistic bent – after all, in his youth he wrote poetry and composed music, he played the piano with particular pleasure. Who else if not he, an heir of a family with great traditions, a patrician of Basel, he himself somewhat a man of the Renaissance – as Peter Burke said,¹⁹ would be able to present such a splendid and at the same time deceptive picture of Florence, a republic of artists, scholars and humanists, which is in fact an idealized, historically projected vision of Basel? Who else if not Burckhardt would be able, with such a suggestiveness, to impose on subsequent generations, a picture of an apolitical sage, who looked for an escapist escape from the paltriness of the modern world in the world of Renaissance art and culture – David Norbrook asked?²⁰ Such doubts will not stop gnawing at us – we have become accustomed, in the epoch of the narrative, to see in an historical narration a reflex, a reflection of our times. Even if *Kultur der Renaissance* is a reflection of the 19th century, let us admit it honestly, it is a mirror with a truly Renaissance brightness and setting. The man of the Renaissance, who looks at himself in it, has his own features, is real. Real to the extent to which history can balance between factual barrenness and cultural myth.

¹⁹ P. Burke, *Kultura i społeczeństwo w renesansowych Włoszech* [Culture and Society in Renaissance Italy], transl. W.K. Siekierski (Warszawa, 1991), 34.

²⁰ D. Norbrook, "Life and Death of Renaissance Man," *Raritan* 8 (1989): 91.