

INTRODUCTION  
THE GROUP AND THE INDIVIDUAL:  
RECOLLECTING BURCKHARDT'S  
RENAISSANCE

[T]he human being can never be fully understood apart from his or her relation with others.

– Martin Buber, *I and Thou*

[H]istorical change, even at its most radical, takes place not in the form of absolute ‘epistemic’ rupture, but rather as the dynamic reconfiguration of words, categories, [and] concepts within pre-established forms. . . .

– Albert Ascoli, *Dante and the Making of a Modern Author*

An Altogether Wild Plant

WRITING FROM BASEL, SWITZERLAND, ON THE FIRST OF AUGUST, 1860, to his friend Heinrich Schreiber, the cultural historian Jacob Burckhardt (Figure I.1) described the impending release of a new book:

As soon as the printing is completed, I will send you a copy. My dear old friend will no doubt smile and shake his head at such dilettante work, but will surely concede that the author has not spared trouble and sweat. It is an altogether wild plant dependent upon nothing whatever already existing. One eulogy I should like to receive from your lips, namely, that the author firmly resisted many opportunities to let his fancy wander, and virtuously stuck to his sources.<sup>1</sup>

That “altogether wild plant” was Burckhardt’s *Die Cultur der Renaissance in Italien* (*The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy*), a cultural history of a transformative era in world history – an era that Burckhardt would play a significant role in defining for later generations. Burckhardt’s appraisal of his own book as “an altogether wild plant” is doubly striking when held up

<sup>1</sup> “[E]ine durchaus wildgewachsene Pflanze.” Burckhardt, *Letters*, 125; *Briefe*, 4: 53.

against the book's central hypothesis: namely, that the Renaissance in Italy was an age of flamboyant individualism. New modes of self-perception and desire, together with a seismic shift in subjectivity, marked the onset of an era that seemed to Burckhardt distinctively modern and secular in its contours, and that also represented a clear break with the medieval past. Obsessed with fame, status, appearances, and other modes of self-distinction, the men and women of Burckhardt's Italian Renaissance, unlike their medieval forebears, wanted to be unique and believed themselves to be so. Their art and their politics, insistently driven by the creative will to self-expression, told a very particular story, and for the Swiss cultural historian, a compelling one.

Burckhardt's story, like many great imaginative works, still attracts new audiences and new responses. His hypothesis concerning Renaissance individualism remains foundational in many ways, despite the fact that it has often been challenged by historians and cultural critics. For these reasons, Burckhardt's work might be called, in Foucauldian terms, a "transdiscursive" work, producing the possibilities and "rules" for the formation of other texts.<sup>2</sup> Although later theorizations of the Renaissance often diverge significantly from that of Burckhardt, many interpretations of the era still remain situated within the discourse that he established a century and a half ago. As the historian Joseph Mali has argued, *The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy* remains a genuine classic work of historiography, even though "the application of new methodologies, such as cultural anthropology, psychology, and narratology in historical studies has of course extended Renaissance scholarship well beyond the conventional categories and boundaries of Burckhardt's study."<sup>3</sup>

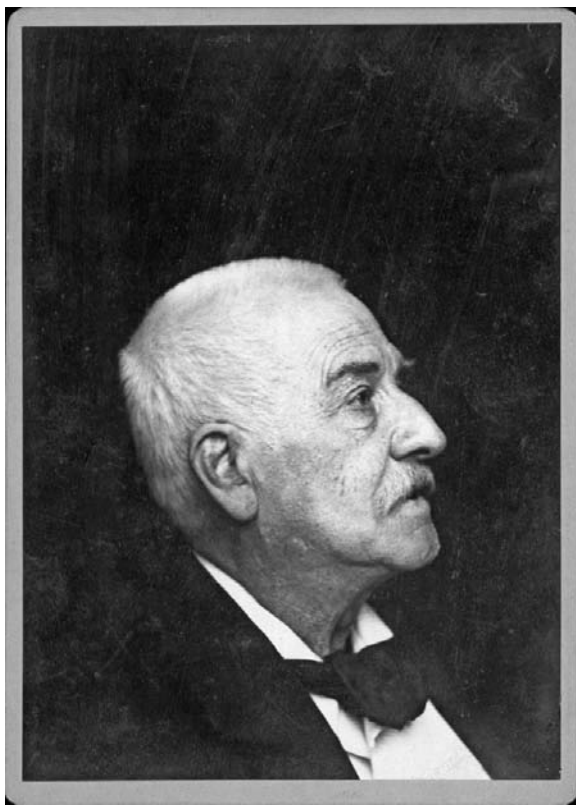
### To Wake or Dream: The Veil of the Group

Before reviewing some of the principal critiques of the nineteenth-century historian's work, let us first recall Burckhardt's most influential and also problematic claim – namely, that "the individual" was reborn during the

<sup>2</sup> Foucault, *What is an Author?* in *The Essential Foucault*, 387. Foucault's prime examples of modern "founders of discursivity" are Marx and Freud.

<sup>3</sup> *Mythistory*, 108. In his assessment of the continuing endurance of Burckhardt's theory of the Renaissance, Mali concurs with earlier such assessments by Paul Kristeller ("Changing Views, 29) and Denys Hay ("Historians and the Renaissance," 1–2). Mali also notes challenges to Burckhardt's work, including Brown's edited collection, *Language and Images of Renaissance Italy*; Baron's essay, "The Limits of the Notion of 'Renaissance Individualism'" in *In Search of Florentine Civic Humanism*, 2: 155–181; and Kerrigan and Braden's book, *The Idea of the Renaissance*, 3–35.

See also Sigurdson, *Jacob Burckhardt's Social and Political Thought*, 254, n. 60, for a list of key discussions of Burckhardt's individualist hypothesis.



I.1. Jacob Burckhardt, 1892. *Universitätsbibliothek Basel*, Basel.

Renaissance. In *The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy*, Burckhardt describes the emergence of individualism at the end of the European Middle Ages with the curious metaphor of *unveiling* – specifically, the unveiling of a group that is half-asleep or dreaming. For many centuries, he held, the dampening force of collective consciousness inhibited individuals from recognizing themselves as such. Over time, however, that “veil” of shared identity began to lift. In what might be the most quoted paragraph ever written about the Renaissance, Burckhardt stated exuberantly,

In the Middle Ages, both sides of human consciousness – that which was turned within as that which was turned without – lay dreaming or half awake beneath a common veil (*wie unter einem gemeinsamen Schleier träumend oder halbwach*). The veil was woven of faith, illusion, and childish prepossession, through which the world and history were seen clad in strange hues. Man was conscious of himself only as member of a race,

people, party, family, or corporation – only through some general category (*in irgendeiner Form des Allgemeinen*). 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. The *subjective* side at the same time asserted itself with corresponding emphasis; man became a spiritual *individual*, and recognized himself as such (*der Mensch wird geistiges Individuum und erkennt sich als solches*). In this same way the Greek had once distinguished himself from the barbarian, and the Arabian had felt himself an individual at a time when other Asiatics knew themselves only as members of a race. It will not be difficult to show that this result was owing, above all, to the political circumstances of Italy.<sup>4</sup>

In Burckhardt's conception of the European Middle Ages, a dreamlike state (*träumend oder halbwach*) consisting of "faith, illusion, and childish prepossession" had long veiled a more objective view of the world and of history, which would soon emerge in the Renaissance. More specifically, Burckhardt contended, medieval men and women were trapped in the "general categories" of collective identity. Unaware of themselves as possessing, either actively or potentially, individual subjectivity, they perceived themselves solely as "member[s] of race, people, party, family, or corporation." Burckhardt defined individualism as a form of waking up from the slumber of collective identity. For him, the principal feature of the Renaissance was not only individualism but also, implicitly, the condition of being awake.

In this crucial passage, Burckhardt linked the dynamics of groups to what Freud would a few decades later call *das Unbewusste*, "the unconscious." Here Burckhardt seems to suggest, in anticipation of Freud, that group processes – the behaviors, functions, and organizing principles of groups – are not identical to those of individuals. To be in a group, he implied, was to remain trapped in a dream; however, persons might escape from that communal dream-state by individuating, by unbinding themselves from the group and thereby transcending the categories of collective identity.

Arguing more, perhaps, against the Basel of his day than against the purportedly conformist Middle Ages,<sup>5</sup> Burckhardt perceived the rise of individualism as not only indicative of dramatic historical changes but also as highly desirable: "The Italians of the fourteenth century knew little of false modesty or of hypocrisy in any shape; not one of them was afraid of singularity, of being and seeming unlike his neighbours."<sup>6</sup> Within his formulation, the condition of nonindividualism – that is, the sense of belonging to a

<sup>4</sup> *Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy*, I: 143; *Die Cultur der Renaissance in Italien*: I: 131.

<sup>5</sup> See, for example, Gossman, *Basel in the Age of Burckhardt*, 223ff.

<sup>6</sup> *Civilization of the Renaissance*, I: 144.

group – would be regarded as a problem indicative of misplaced modesty, conformity, or even hypocrisy. Significantly, Burckhardt held that Renaissance men and women were not the first individualists in history; he noted that the ancient Greeks and “Arabians” were also individualistic – that is, advanced – civilizations. Burckhardt viewed the rise of individualism as a developmental stage of certain great civilizations, of which the Renaissance in Italy was a comparatively recent instance.

What did this supposed rebirth of individualism enable in Burckhardt’s model of early modernity? Rather than serving as an end in itself, individualism was instead the condition facilitating the free thought, creative expression, and cosmopolitanism that so mesmerized the Basel aesthete. For Burckhardt, to remain ensconced in one’s group identifications meant to hide one’s light under a veil, and thereby to suppress the sublime creative gifts likely to be expressed through highly individuated forms of human behavior. Individualism was at the root of what Burckhardt admired most about the Renaissance and also what he celebrated – its art and culture.

Even the state (i.e., the Italian political sphere) was, in his view, a work of art.<sup>7</sup> Although Burckhardt linked individualism with the despotism of Italian city-states during this transitional era, he insisted on a generative vision of those states and the dynamic between a people and its ruler: “Despotism, as we have already seen, fostered in the highest degree the individuality not only of the tyrant or *condottiere* himself, but also of the men whom he protected or used as his tools – the secretary, minister, poet, and companion.” What trickled down from despotic power in Renaissance Italy was something of great value, in the Swiss historian’s view: “These people [the right-hand men of the despot] were forced to know all the inward resources of their own nature, passing or permanent; and their enjoyment of life was enhanced and concentrated by the desire to obtain the greatest satisfaction from a possibly very brief period of power and influence.”<sup>8</sup>

It is striking that in this passage at least, Burckhardt minimized the pronounced violence of Italian Renaissance culture while foregrounding it in other parts of his book. In a later chapter of the book entitled “Morality,” however, he argued that, “the fundamental vice of this character [of men and women of the Italian Renaissance] was at the same time a condition of its greatness – namely, excessive individualism.”<sup>9</sup> Burckhardt’s powerful impulse to aestheticize violence as a significant, even as the defining aspect of that

<sup>7</sup> Part I of *Civilization of the Renaissance* is entitled “The State as a Work of Art.” The title of my first chapter tropes on that title.

<sup>8</sup> *Civilization of the Renaissance*, 1: 144.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 2: 442.

culture entailed that his assessment ultimately focus on the *collective* effects – as well as the individual and particular ones – of that great sea change he chose to characterize as a rebirth. The fears, traumas, and anxieties that individual men and women might have suffered under a particular despot (e.g., Cesare Borgia or Sigismondo Malatesta, tyrant of Rimini<sup>10</sup>), or that they might have experienced in the wake of intermittent warfare and invasion, internecine violence, crisis, and upheaval, mattered less to Burckhardt than the sum total of the effects of such transformations. In balance, he took these to be markers of civilization. Although the Italian Renaissance witnessed certain depths of human depravity, as he frequently noted, Burckhardt also found much to celebrate: the pinnacles of intellectual and creative achievement that were reached, and the passionate extremes of that era, as well: “By the side of profound corruption appeared human personalities of the noblest harmony and an artistic splendour which shed upon the life of man a luster which neither antiquity nor medievalism either could or would bestow upon it.”<sup>11</sup>

Burckhardt’s account of the Renaissance is highly ambiguous, as the political scientist Richard Sigurdson has observed, because it “wavers between a horrified condemnation of unfettered subjectivism and a fascinated admiration for the vitality and creativity of even the most wicked men of that period” – men whose actions he often appeared to glamorize.<sup>12</sup> In later life, Burckhardt sought to draw a moral to his story of the Renaissance, partly against his critics, by claiming that such tyrants were *Flagella Dei*, or scourges of God – men whose bad behavior must have served some higher, providential purpose. In an 1896 letter to Ludwig von Pastor, written half a lifetime after the publication of *Civilization of the Renaissance*, Burckhardt sought not only to defend his earlier work but also to distinguish his views from those of his former friend and protégé, Friedrich Nietzsche. He wrote,

I for my part have never been an admirer of *Gewaltmenschen* and *Outlaws* in history, and have on the contrary held them to be *Flagella Dei*, willingly leaving their precise psychological construction to others, a point on which

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 2: 442.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 2: 443.

<sup>12</sup> Sigurdson explains that this is one reason why many see Burckhardt’s tyrants as perhaps the principal models for Nietzsche’s theory of the *Übermensch*. *Jacob Burckhardt’s Social and Political Thought*, 213, *et passim*.

In *Jacob Burckhardt and the Crisis of Modernity*, John R. Hinde offers a different view of *Civilization*, which follows that of Wolfgang Hardtwig (*Geschichtskultur und Wissenschaft* [1990]). Both historians argue that Burckhardt sought to underscore the amorality of the Renaissance, although in no sense validating the ruthless behaviors of *condottieri* and other seekers of power, including the humanists (220–226).

one can be most astonishingly mistaken. I really interested myself more in the creative aspect of things and that which makes people happy, the vitalizing aspect, which I thought was to be found elsewhere.<sup>13</sup>

In Burckhardt's retrospective view, creativity and its wellsprings had always been the primary focus of his research. Despite such late-life attempts at recuperating the ethical ambiguities of his earlier historiography – ambiguities rendered still more unsettling through Nietzsche's adaptations of his mentor's ideas – Burckhardt's perspective on his own material was and remains difficult to determine at times. This is perhaps because he emphasized the individual at the expense of the group, or some individuals at the expense of others. Meanwhile the history of the Renaissance group, or collective, remained largely hidden, at least in the historian's account, seemingly cast aside with the "common veil" of medieval group consciousness, which was implicitly nonvitalizing.

One of the great ironies of *The Civilization of the Renaissance* is that it reinscribed a general category of man – that majoritarian grouping of Renaissance individuals who flourished privately, notwithstanding their "political impotence" – in place of the other categories (i.e., race, people, party, family, or corporation) that were supposed unveiled or dismantled. In so doing, Burckhardt inadvertently raised an important question: can one talk about individuals as a group? Conversely, can one talk about groups individually, or about individual groups? Assuming that one can, then Burckhardt himself might have been amenable to such a project, not least because it squarely rests on the historiographic foundation that he laid a century and a half ago. Burckhardt did not deny the importance of the social, yet neither was it the emphasis of his book.<sup>14</sup> Nevertheless, the dynamics of group identity remain veiled in *The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy*, perhaps because of Burckhardt's own deep distrust of groups, especially large ones. His anti-egalitarian politics are as well known as his fear of the

<sup>13</sup>Letter to Ludwig von Pastor, January 13, 1896, in *Letters*, 234–235. Dru leaves *Gewaltmenchen* in the original German, but we might translate it as "power-mongers" or "brutes." It is a word Nietzsche uses in *Die fröhliche Wissenschaft* (*The Gay Science*), for example ("Joke, Cunning, and Revenge," 17). Here Burckhardt seems to turn up his nose not only at the *Gewaltmenchen* of history but also the preoccupations of his former friend, which he would distinguish from his own.

For an excellent analysis of the Burckhardt/Nietzsche divide, see Mali, 115ff.

<sup>14</sup>Sigurdson explains, "Burckhardt spends little time discussing the actual structures and processes of government ('one could die memorizing the constitutions of Florence,' he once said) but points out that Florentine politics involves 'a supreme political consciousness as well as the participation of a large proportion of the citizens in public life and in constitutional questions.' Yet the main factor in Florence's greatness is not so much that its politics determined its civilization, but that its politics did not impede culture." *Jacob Burckhardt's Social and Political Thought*, 185.

mass movements of his time, which he believed could pave the way toward totalitarianism.<sup>15</sup>

### Some Critiques of Burckhardtian Individualism

Whether medieval or modern, groups seem to have inspired in the Swiss historian a certain anxiety; hence, his aestheticized portrait of the Italian Renaissance leaves groups more or less out of the picture – or rather, consigns them to the distant background, like the hilltop villages that appear in numerous paintings of that era. Perceiving the limitations of Burckhardt's position, however, many later historians, particularly since the late 1960s, have sought to factor the social back into their accounts of the Renaissance. In light of recent social histories of the early modern age, Burckhardt's views seem increasingly old-fashioned, although they have not gone away. Rather, they remain important reference points in our collective attempts to understand the history of subjectivity, a field of research that has expanded exponentially since Burckhardt's time.<sup>16</sup>

Among the objections to Burckhardt's individualist thesis are the following, summarized by historian Gene Brucker: Burckhardt's insistence on a radical break from the medieval past; his focus on the high-ranking and the renowned at the expense of other groups; his problematic insistence on the secularism of the Renaissance; and above all, his perception of individual freedom and autonomy as the credos of the age.<sup>17</sup> As Brucker explains,

[Burckhardt] believed that the unique historical conditions in thirteenth- and fourteenth-century Italy had fostered the creation of a new type of man: free and independent, detached from the traditional social and psychological bonds of kinship and solidarity; above all, self-conscious, acutely aware of himself and his world, and capable of ordering and controlling his life. Burckhardt's concept thus has a social and a psychological dimension.<sup>18</sup>

Burckhardt's view of Renaissance man as free and independent has long functioned as a stereotype of the period. Meanwhile, Brucker draws attention

<sup>15</sup>On Burckhardt's conservatism, see, for example, *ibid.*, 52–53, and Hinde, 113–136, *et passim*.

<sup>16</sup>See Lukes, *Individualism*, and Taylor, *Sources of the Self*. On the many studies of individualism and individual subjectivity, see Martin, *Myths of Renaissance Individualism*, Chapter 1 (1–20), which surveys the extensive literature on this topic, and Ascoli's ground-breaking book *Dante and the Making of a Modern Author*, especially Chapter 1, “The Author in History,” 3–64.

<sup>17</sup>“The Italian Renaissance,” in *A Companion to the Worlds of the Renaissance*, 23–38. Brucker points out that Burckhardt was relying on a narrow set of sources – primarily literary works – and that he lacked “a solid scholarly edifice that has since been constructed by the labor of thousands.” In sum, we know more today than in the nineteenth century. *Ibid.*, 24.

<sup>18</sup>*Ibid.*, 25.

to what Burckhardt had relegated to the background – the elaborate networks of communal relations in that era. The notion of Renaissance individualism becomes harder to sustain, Brucker maintains, when we take into consideration the highly complex relations of persons to groups during that period (indeed, in any period).<sup>19</sup> Renaissance men and women generally held a complicated set of perspectives about their own destinies, which few would have viewed as within their control or personal choosing.<sup>20</sup> In these ways, Brucker contends, Burckhardt's hypothesis concerning Renaissance individualism cannot be sustained.

In his recent book, *The Myth of Renaissance Individualism*, historian John Jeffries Martin has offered a further revaluation of Burckhardt's legacy. While acknowledging that the Renaissance was an era of profound social changes, Martin holds that the birth of the individual at the end of the European Middle Ages must be considered a myth. Not coincidentally, Burckhardt's concept of the "*geistiges Individuum*," of Renaissance man or woman as free-thinking, autonomous, and exuberantly creative, was more a feature of nineteenth-century German Romanticism than of the Italian Renaissance.<sup>21</sup>

Martin contrasts this Romantic notion of subjectivity with that of post-structuralist scholarship on the Renaissance, especially Stephen Greenblatt's groundbreaking book *Renaissance Self-Fashioning* (1980). In this book, Greenblatt offered a influential revision of Burckhardt's thesis.<sup>22</sup> Where Burckhardt had seen evidence of powerful agency on the part of the individual, Greenblatt perceived a more determinist and socially oriented view of early

<sup>19</sup>For an outstanding introduction to that topic, see Trexler's edited collection *Persons in Groups*. In his introduction to the work, Trexler wrote, "The subject matter of this book, social behavior as it relates to individual and group identity formation in human beings, has as yet no discrete location in the academic division of labor" (3). The current work is very much inspired by and related to the impulse Trexler describes – the desire to determine what it is that makes a group a group. My thanks are due to Albert Ascoli for drawing my attention to this important work.

<sup>20</sup>Along this line, see also my book *Old Masters, New Subjects*, which discusses how the debate over free will versus predestination was not simply a theological conundrum, but an ideological struggle that affected many other areas of late medieval and Renaissance intellectual and cultural life.

<sup>21</sup>Martin is not the first to do so. Martin and many other contemporary historians hold that Burckhardt's concept of Renaissance individualism had more to do with the politics and culture of the nineteenth century than with the fifteenth or sixteenth. The Swiss cultural historian lived in a century, Martin writes, that was "largely defined by the growing recognition that traditional solidarities – communal, familial, and religious – had broken down. The rush of workers into the cities in the midst of the Industrial Revolution – and the demands for democratic institutions in the wake of the American and French revolutions – made the question of the individual and his or her role in society one of the most pressing issues of the day." *Myths of Renaissance Individualism*, 10.

<sup>22</sup>Greenblatt, *Renaissance Self-Fashioning*, 256–257, discussed in Martin, 6, *et passim*.

modern identity. Although some Renaissance men might have cultivated a belief in their own power to determine the course of their own lives – and sometimes those of others – their fantasies of autonomy were in Greenblatt's view by-products of the cultural institutions in which they found themselves.<sup>23</sup>

Navigating between the theories of Burckhardt and of Greenblatt, Martin proposes a *via media*, exploring the interface between the internal and the external selves as they were then understood. Martin writes,

In the end, the selves I portray are not the apparently modern or postmodern figures that we often assume were the norm in this age.

Sixteenth-century selfhood was, in fact, something far more elusive – indeed it is something tantalizingly difficult to grasp. To be sure, for many, one's identity was largely prescribed by the larger social groups (family, guild, community) to which one belonged. Nonetheless, European culture in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries was shaped to no small degree by struggles over questions of identity, even questions of collective identity.<sup>24</sup>

According to Martin's model of subjectivity, the self is not a thing (e.g., soul, heart, mind, *res cognitans*) but a *relation* between “those dimensions of experience that people describe as *internal* (conscious or unconscious thoughts, feelings, beliefs, emotions, desires) and those they describe as *external* (speaking or writing, hating or loving, praying or blaspheming, laughing or crying, stealing or buying, and so on).”<sup>25</sup> Through his concept of the relational self, Martin offers an important reformulation of the interface between the individual and the collective that takes both into account.

### Analyzing the Group: Some Methodological Questions

While Martin moves beyond poststructuralist readings of Renaissance identity such as Greenblatt's, his point of departure for the relational theory of selfhood nevertheless depends on a central tenet of both structuralism and poststructuralism: that is, the differential nature of the sign. According to Ferdinand de Saussure, one of the founders of structuralism, linguistic signs do not have meaning in themselves but rather in relation to what they are

<sup>23</sup> As Martin explains, “[W]hen we think about the history of Renaissance identities, we tend to hold them up as mirrors to ourselves, and what we see depends almost entirely upon where we stand. For Burckhardt, the Renaissance witnessed the birth of the modern individual; for Greenblatt, glimmerings of the postmodern self” (7).

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 19.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 14.