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978-1-107-03699-4 - The Italian Renaissance in the German Historical Imagination, 1860–1930

Martin A. Ruehl

Excerpt

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CHAPTER I

*Introduction: Quattrocento Florence
and what it means to be modern*

On 20 October 1786, after having travelled in the Veneto and Emilia Romagna for several weeks, Goethe stopped in Florence on his journey south. It would be a short stay. He found the city ‘densely packed’ with villas and houses and very hastily (‘eiligst’) took in its major sites: ‘the cathedral, the baptistery’. Florence, as he summed up his impressions a little later on, was an ‘entirely new’ and ‘foreign’ world in which he ‘did not want to linger’. Soon enough, he was on his way again. Following further stops in Perugia and Foligno – and a lengthy discussion about the nature of Protestantism with an Italian fellow passenger – his *vetturino* delivered him to Rome, ‘the capital of the world’ and the fulfilment of his ‘every wish’. Charmed by its ancient splendour, Goethe would spend the next three months in the Holy City, finish *Iphigenia* (‘at last’) and return for a second, ten-month sojourn in June 1787.¹

A little less than 120 years later, Thomas Mann embarked on a similar, if much less grand, tour through Italy. His first stop was Florence. Gathering material for a verse drama about Lorenzo de’ Medici, he was overwhelmed by the collections in the Uffizi and the imposing architecture of the Renaissance palaces. Florence, he told his brother Heinrich, was the place where he hoped to realize his ‘innermost dream’ (‘den Traum meiner Seele’).² Mann felt at home in the bohemian circles of

¹ J. W. von Goethe, *Italienische Reise*, in: *Goethes Werke* (Hamburger Ausgabe), ed. E. Trunz, 14 vols., 13th edn (Munich, 1994), vol. XI (Autobiographische Schriften III), pp. 113, 115–16, 125–6 (25 October–1 November 1786). Lessing was similarly underwhelmed by Florence: see G. E. Lessing, *Sämtliche Schriften*, ed. K. Lachmann, vol. XV (Leipzig, 1900), p. 224. See W. von Löhneysen, ‘Leopold Ziegler’s Interpretation der Kuppel Filippo Brunelleschi’, in: W. von Löhneysen (ed.), *Der Humanismus der Architektur in Florenz: Filippo Brunelleschi und Michelozzo di Bartolomeo* (Hildesheim, 1999), pp. 15–21, for other reactions to Florence by nineteenth-century German intellectuals.

² Thomas Mann to Heinrich Mann (29 December 1900), in: H. Wysling (ed.), *Thomas Mann–Heinrich Mann: Briefwechsel 1900–1949*, 2nd edn (Frankfurt/Main, 1984), p. 11. See also Thomas Mann to Heinrich Mann (5 June 1901), *ibid.*, p. 29. On Mann and Italy see I. B. Jonas, *Thomas Mann und Italien* (Heidelberg, 1969).

German painters, writers, and art dealers who colonized Florence at the turn of the century,³ and decided to stay put throughout May 1901. He did not make it to Rome.

The different routes taken by Goethe and Mann on their respective Italian journeys indicate more than personal preferences or touristic whims. They reflect a shift in taste that took place in the German lands between the eighteenth century and the *fin de siècle*: a new aesthetic orientation and with it a new perception of the Italian as well as the European past. Goethe's virtual omission of Florence and his desire to go straight to Rome reflect the longing for the artistic traces of antiquity typical of the neo-classicist ideals that dominated German cultural sensibilities for much of the long nineteenth century.⁴ Italy was interesting to Goethe and his contemporaries primarily as the storehouse of Ancient art, in particular the remnants of classical Greek civilization.⁵ By the time Thomas Mann embarked on his journey south, Italy's cultural and historical significance had been transformed in the eyes of her German visitors. At the turn of the century, she was no longer seen as a mere repository of the long-lost world of classical antiquity. Alongside the Roman copies of Praxiteles and Myron, the sculptures of Donatello and Michelangelo increasingly caught the eye of German travellers. The Forum Romanum, the Pantheon and all the 'ruins... triumphal arches and columns' that had captured Goethe's imagination⁶ ceased to be the main attractions for a new generation of *Italienfahrer* (travellers to Italy) that now flocked to the Duomo, the Pitti Palace and Brunelleschi's Basilica di San Lorenzo. Seventy years after the *Goethezeit* (age of Goethe), the German *Drang nach Süden* (drive southwards) had found a new target: Italy primarily meant Renaissance Italy, and its capital was Florence.

The shift from Rome to Florence, however, signifies not just the crumbling of the cultural hegemony of German neo-classicism and the rise of a new aesthetic ideal. The veneration of Renaissance Italy,

³ See B. Roeck, *Florenz 1900: Die Suche nach Arkadien* (Munich, 2001), esp. pp. 85–134.

⁴ See S. Marchand, *Down from Olympus: Archaeology and Philhellenism in Germany, 1750–1970* (Princeton, 1996), esp. pp. 3–116; and E. S. Sünderhauf, *Griechensehnsucht und Kulturkritik: Die deutsche Rezeption von Winckelmanns Antikenideal 1840–1945* (Berlin, 2004), pp. 1–241.

⁵ Most of the 'Greek' material that Goethe saw in various local Italian collections were, of course, Roman copies of Greek statues, or modern plaster casts of Roman copies of Greek statues. See F. Haskell and N. Penny, *Taste and the Antique: The Lure of Classical Sculpture, 1500–1900* (New Haven, Conn., 1981).

⁶ Goethe, *Italienische Reise*, p. 131 (5 November 1786).

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Excerpt

[More information](#)*What it means to be modern*

3

1 *Florence* (by Carl Ludwig Frommel, 1840)

Frommel's engraving shows Florence about fifty years before it became the destination of countless German *Bildungsbürger* eager to explore its Renaissance monuments. Some of these monuments, for instance Brunelleschi's *cupola*, are clearly discernible in the background, but they seem dwarfed by the city's bucolic surroundings. Florence looks provincial, sleepy even – nothing like the playground of ruthless despots and neo-pagan aesthetes glorified by German writers at the end of the nineteenth century.

which culminated at the end but originated around the middle of the nineteenth century, points to a larger transformation in the German *Geschichtsbild* or historical imagination. When Thomas Mann marvelled at the collections in the Uffizi, the Renaissance was no longer identified exclusively with the 'revival of the arts and sciences', a glorious but evanescent rebirth of classical antiquity at the hands of a few select artists and scholars. Rather, it was conceived and idealized as a momentous epoch in its own right, an intellectual and cultural revolution that fundamentally transformed man's understanding of his place in the natural as well as the social world and gave birth to the central values (rationalism, secularism, individualism), ideologies (humanism, republicanism) and institutions (capitalism, the centralized nation-state) of modern Europe.

The invention of the Renaissance as the 'mother of modernity', to use Jacob Burckhardt's celebrated phrase, was by no means the work of German scholars and writers alone, but the latter played

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2.1 Piazza della Signoria, Florence (c. 1900)

Framed by the Palazzo Vecchio (on the left) and the Loggia dei Lanzi, the Piazza della Signoria represented the political heart of the Florentine city-state. It was here that Girolamo Savonarola, the ‘ascetic hero’ of Thomas Mann’s Renaissance drama *Fiorenza* (1905), staged his Bonfire of the Vanities in 1497 – and it was here that he was hanged and burnt the following year. The Loggia dei Lanzi (see opposite page), built between 1376 and 1382, was the inspiration for Munich’s *Feldherrnhalle* (1841–44) and numerous other neo-Renaissance buildings in nineteenth-century Germany. It was a dubious model. As Burckhardt reminded his readers in *The History of the Italian Renaissance* (1868), ‘a loggia was a thing for tyrants, not for a republic’.

a particularly prominent role in the formation of a periodic concept, the *Renaissanceidee* or *Renaissancebegriff*, which is, *mutatis mutandis*, still with us today. In their drawn-out struggle against an old regime that proved more persistent in the German lands than in France or England, these scholars and writers, almost without exception members of the educated middle class or *Bildungsbürgertum*, constructed the Italian Renaissance as a heroic new beginning in European history, one that served as a genealogy and legitimization of their own emancipatory efforts: a concerted attack on the corporate, feudal structures and religious beliefs of the Middle Ages and the establishment of a rationally organized, meritocratic society based on the humanistic ideals of the

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Excerpt

[More information](#)*What it means to be modern*

5



2.2 Loggia dei Lanzi (postcard, after a late nineteenth-century drawing)

Ancients.⁷ The Renaissance served as a not-so-distant mirror of these ideals, a prototype of the modernity that was taking shape around

⁷ On the *Bildungsbürgertum* as a class (and concept), see J. Kocka, 'Bildungsbürgertum – Gesellschaftliche Formation oder Historikerkonstrukt?', in: J. Kocka (ed.), *Bildungsbürgertum im 19. Jahrhundert*, vol. IV: *Politischer Einfluß und gesellschaftliche Formation* (Stuttgart, 1989), pp. 9–20; U. Engelhardt,

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

them and that was moving them inexorably, or so it seemed, to the centres of power in civil society and the state. Renaissance Man, for these bourgeois authors, was the epitome and model of the unfettered individual – cultivated, self-reliant, energetic – and his home was early modern Italy, in particular the city-states in the northern half of the peninsula and, more often than not, the Florence of the Medici.

This image of the Renaissance, which in some respects goes back to Wilhelm Heinse and the writers of the *Sturm und Drang* period and which was popularized by a number of German Romantics, notably Ludwig Tieck, found its most influential expression in Burckhardt's *Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy*, published in 1860. Illustrating its stark claims with a wealth of fresh source material, presented in a vivid, literary style, Burckhardt's reading of the Renaissance as the mother of modernity became the mother of subsequent interpretations. More than any other work, the *Civilization of the Renaissance* determined the scholarly as well as the popular perceptions of early modern Italy in Germany over the next seventy years. Disseminated more widely by Nietzsche, its central tenets – about the emancipation of the self and the emergence of a secular, increasingly scientific worldview, including an objective, i.e. realist approach to politics and art – absorbed the imagination of fin-de-siècle playwrights and novelists who glorified Renaissance artists and princes as unchained, free-spirited individuals, imbued with a new sense of subjectivity and a neo-pagan zest for beauty. Throughout the period under consideration here (1860–1930), the *Civilization of the Renaissance* also furnished the principal reference-point for academic research and debate on the topic of the Renaissance and its significance. The most important German Renaissance historians of the early twentieth century – Alfred Doren, Walter Goetz, Alfred von Martin, and Hans Baron – all positioned their arguments in relation to the 'Burckhardt thesis'.

Though it influenced interpretive communities outside Germany, notably in England, both directly through Middlemore's translation of 1878 and through the work of John Addington Symonds, and, to a lesser degree,

'Bildungsbürgertum': *Begriffs- und Dogmengeschichte eines Etiketts* (Stuttgart, 1986); P. Lundgreen, 'Zur Konstituierung des "Bildungsbürgertums": Berufs- und Bildungsauslese der Akademiker in Preußen', in: W. Conze and J. Kocka (eds.), *Bildungsbürgertum im 19. Jahrhundert*, vol. 1: *Bildungssystem und Professionalisierung in internationalen Vergleichen* (Stuttgart, 1985), pp. 79–108; D. Langewiesche, 'Bildungsbürgertum und Liberalismus im 19. Jahrhundert', in: J. Kocka, *Bildungsbürgertum im 19. Jahrhundert*, vol. IV pp. 95–121. On the *Bürgertum's* conceptions of modernity, see T. Nipperdey, *Wie das Bürgertum die Moderne fand* (Berlin, 1988). For a different angle on the social position and the ideologies of the German middle class see D. Blackbourn, 'The German Bourgeoisie: An Introduction', in: D. Blackbourn and R. J. Evans (eds.), *The German Bourgeoisie: Essays on the Social History of the German Middle Class from the Late Eighteenth to the Early Twentieth Century* (London, 1991), pp. 1–45.

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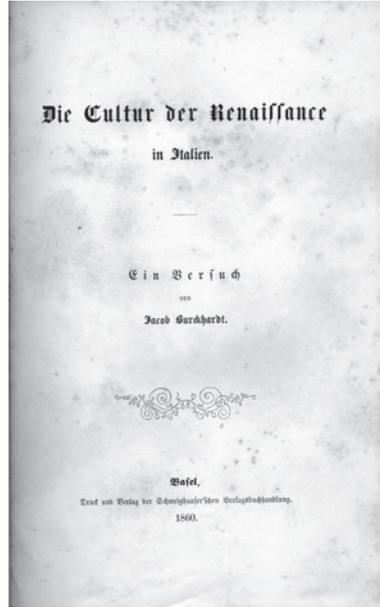
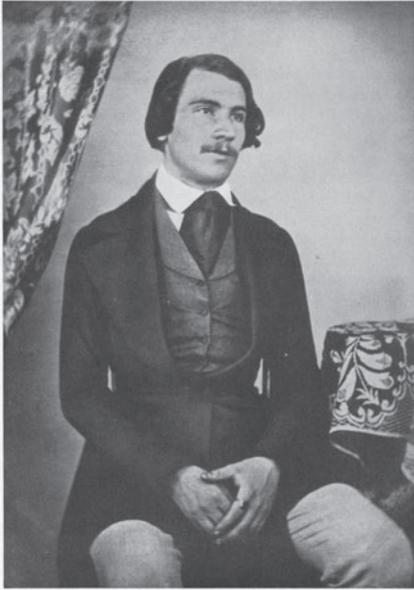
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Excerpt

[More information](#)*What it means to be modern*

7



3 Jacob Burckhardt (photograph, 1843) and his *Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy* (title page of the original edition, 1860)

More than anyone else, the Swiss historian Jacob Burckhardt anchored a periodic concept of the Renaissance in the German historical imagination. Published in 1860, his *Civilization of the Renaissance* established Quattrocento Italy as the ‘archetypal image of modern culture’ (‘Urbild moderner Kultur’): a fiercely secular, individualistic age that marked a decisive break with the collectivist, otherworldly spirit of the Middle Ages. Burckhardt’s interpretation remained the principal reference-point for historiographical debates over the next seventy years – and beyond.

in France, through Émile Gebhart,⁸ the *Civilization of the Renaissance* had a unique impact on the debates about the Renaissance in the Second Empire and the Weimar Republic, and the ‘Burckhardt effect’ accounts at least in part for what might be called the peculiarities of the German *Renaissancebild*. Burckhardt set the course for the particular development of these debates in three related, yet distinctive, ways.

His first intervention concerns the place of humanism in the civilization of the Renaissance, in particular the political and moral import of

⁸ See J. A. Symonds, *The Renaissance in Italy*, 7 vols. (London, 1875–86) and É. Gebhart, *Études méridionales* (Paris, 1887).

humanism in the development of the individual ('die Entwicklung des Individuums'). In stark contrast to previous historians of early modern Italy, for instance Sismondi and von Rumohr, Burckhardt saw little or no causal relationship between political and individual emancipation. With characteristic bluntness, he remarked that the absence of political freedom, for instance in the despotic states of the Visconti and Sforza, frequently gave the process of self-fashioning 'a greater impetus' ('einen höheren Schwung'). The various 'scribes, officials, and poets' employed by the despots, though they may have lost in 'moral character', nonetheless gained substantially in 'individual character' through their servitude.⁹ Similarly, the educational programme of the humanists, in particular their revival of the Ciceronian ideal of *studia humanitatis*, was not a necessary precondition or even a catalyst for the awakening of the individual personality ('das Erwachen der Persönlichkeit') or the flowering of Renaissance culture more generally. Overall, the humanists cut a rather unimpressive figure in Burckhardt's book, which explicitly relegated their attempted rebirth of classical antiquity to a secondary – if not altogether negligible – characteristic of the age. It was 'one of the central theses' of his book, he remarked, that the revival of antiquity alone had not 'conquered the Western world', but rather 'its close alliance with the Italian national spirit'.¹⁰

A year before the publication of the *Civilization of the Renaissance*, the Königsberg historian Georg Voigt had presented a rather different interpretation of the Italian Renaissance in which the humanists played a principal, indeed central role.¹¹ Voigt's *The Revival of Classical Antiquity or The First Century of Humanism* (1859) made Petrarch's revival of the Ancient Roman concept of *humanitas* the *fons et origo* of the Renaissance and argued that it was the new relation towards classical antiquity, established by the artists and scholars associated with the humanist movement, that fundamentally

⁹ J. Burckhardt, *Die Kultur der Renaissance in Italien*, ed. K. Hoffmann, 11th edn (Stuttgart, 1988), pp. 100–1.

¹⁰ See Burckhardt, *Kultur der Renaissance in Italien*, p. 128: 'Darauf aber müssen wir beharren, als auf einem Hauptsatz dieses Buches, daß nicht sie [i.e. die Wiedergeburt des Altertums] allein, sondern ihr enges Bündnis mit dem neben ihr vorhandenen italienischen Volksgeist die abendländische Welt bezwungen hat . . .' On the relative ineffectiveness of the humanists, see also Burckhardt's disparaging remark (*ibid.*, p. 178) on the 'geringe dogmatische Wirkung der alten Philosophen und selbst der begeistertsten florentinischen Platoniker auf den Geist der Nation'.

¹¹ See A. Mazzocco, *Interpretations of Renaissance Humanism* (Leiden, 2006), p. 74: 'Voigt identified the rediscovery of classical antiquity as the fundamental cultural achievement and intellectual signature of the Renaissance.'

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Excerpt

[More information](#)*What it means to be modern*

9



4 Villa d'Este (pencil sketch by Jacob Burckhardt, 1847)

A fine amateur draughtsman with a good eye for buildings as well as landscapes, Burckhardt made many sketches of Renaissance monuments while travelling in Italy in the 1840s and 1850s. Though they featured more prominently in his art historical writings, notably *The History of the Italian Renaissance* (1868) and *The Cicerone* (1855), the villas and palaces established by early modern rulers like the Este also played a role in *The Civilization of the Renaissance*, where Burckhardt made much of princely patronage as a catalyst for Renaissance culture and self-fashioning.

defined the spirit of the new age.¹² Although Voigt received a call to a professorship at Rostock the following year and shortly after embarked on a relatively successful career at the University of Leipzig, his reading of the Renaissance failed to set a precedent in Germany. Scholars like Paul Oskar Kristeller would later pick up and develop some of Voigt's arguments, but in the period under consideration here, the humanistic *Renaissancebild* he proposed was, by and large, the road not taken. Burckhardt's unflattering portrait of all the *scriptores* and *rhetores* since Petrarch, as we shall see, proved much more influential and lastingly shaped the image of the Renaissance humanists, especially in the popular imagination, as uprooted

¹² G. Voigt, *Die Wiederbelebung des classischen Alterthums oder das erste Jahrhundert des Humanismus* (Berlin, 1859). On Voigt see M. Todte, *Georg Voigt (1827–1891): Pionier der historischen Humanismusforschung* (Leipzig, 2004), and P. F. Grendler, 'Georg Voigt: Historian of Humanism', in: C. S. Celenza and K. Gouvens (eds.), *Humanism and Creativity in the Renaissance: Essays in Honor of Ronald G. Witt* (Leiden, 2006), pp. 295–326.

intellectuals, political opportunists and inconsequential ‘Schöngeister’ (aesthetes). Insofar as it conditioned much of the subsequent research in the field, Burckhardt’s interpretation might be considered the original and principal reason for what Christopher Celenza has recently called ‘the lost Italian Renaissance’, that is, the continuous neglect of humanist thought in the scholarship on the early modern period.¹³

Nietzsche went one step further in cutting the ties between humanism and the emancipation of the modern self in the Quattrocento by describing Renaissance individualization as a violent liberation from the Christian ‘slave morality’ of the Middle Ages – and the ‘uncanny’ rebirth of the ‘noble’, inhumane values of pagan antiquity. This anti-humanist animus, which defined much of the German discourse on the Renaissance between 1860 and 1930, is still discernible in Heidegger’s *Letter on Humanism* of 1947, which denounced the humanist revival of classical antiquity during ‘the so-called Renaissance of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries’ as a mere *renascentia romanitatis*, thrice removed from the true essence of Ancient, viz. Greek culture.¹⁴ Hans Baron’s reconstruction, sixty years after Burckhardt, of a specifically ‘civic’ variant of humanism, formulated by Florentine scholars such as Leonardo Bruni, who placed a premium on the active involvement of the citizen in the political affairs of his *res publica*, was a late, and ultimately unsuccessful challenge to this peculiarly German idea of a Renaissance without humanism.

Burckhardt also set the course for the development of this idea in that he sharply distinguished the Renaissance from her two chronological neighbours: the Middle Ages and the Reformation era. Few nineteenth-century historians had contrasted the civilization of the Renaissance as sharply with that of the Middle Ages as Burckhardt.¹⁵ Though he was hardly as critical (or ignorant) of the Middle Ages as many later commentators

¹³ See C. Celenza, *The Lost Italian Renaissance: Humanists, Historians, and Latin’s Legacy* (Baltimore, 2004).

¹⁴ See M. Heidegger, *Brief über den Humanismus* [1947], in: Heidegger, *Gesamtausgabe*, vol. ix, ed. F.-W. von Herrmann (Frankfurt/Main, 1976), pp. 313–64 (320). For a contextual analysis of Heidegger’s ‘Letter’ that situates it in an earlier ‘humanism debate’ in Nazi Germany, see A. Rabinbach, ‘Heidegger’s *Letter on Humanism* as Text and Event’, *New German Critique* 62 (Spring/Summer 1994), 3–38 (esp. 15–20). See also E. Grassi, *Heidegger and the Question of Renaissance Humanism: Four Studies* (Binghamton, 1983).

¹⁵ A notable exception is the French classical scholar Jean-Pierre Charpentier, whose two-volume study *Histoire de la renaissance des lettres en Europe au quinzième siècle* (Paris, 1843) idealized the revival of classical antiquity in Quattrocento Italy as an intellectual and cultural revolution that established a clean break with the Middle Ages. In the introduction to the seventh volume of his massive *Histoire de France* (Paris, 1833–62), Jules Michelet also emphatically distinguished Renaissance from medieval civilization. As early as 1835, Burckhardt’s teacher Ranke had hinted at the ‘vollständige Umwandlung, welche das Mittelalter von der modernen Zeit trennt’ and described this