

THE CIVILIZATION OF THE RENAISSANCE IN ITALY
Reflections on Aesthetics: Burckhardt and Croce

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Introduction

Writing in Basel - with More, Reuchlin and Erasmus at his shoulder - Jacob Burckhardt published *Die Kultur der Renaissance in Italien: Ein Versuch* in 1860. So mindful was Benedetto Croce of the continuity of classical and renaissance traditions in Europe that he proposed in the *Estetica* and *Breviario* that Renaissance culture in Italy triggered an aesthetic *Lebensform* that persists even today. Both could hardly have foreseen that their studies, Burckhardt introduced his modestly as an essay, would become not only a decisive interpretation of a great period in history, but also an integral moment in celebrating the christening of the *Foro di Studi Avanzati* 'Gaetano Massa' in Roma today.

When it is remarked that the Italian Renaissance is a thing of the past, what we encounter is a reformulation of Hegel's remark about art - that art is "a thing of the past" because it represents the end of a Christian tradition of imagery - which partially had its modern origins in a Renaissance humanism imaged into conceptual form. Hegel did not mean - how could he? - that Renaissance aesthetics made its appearance and then dissolved on the stage of human history - or that we witnessed the 'death of Renaissance art' with the birth of the Baroque or Neoclassical styles. His point is rather the time of its highest vocation is over and that the role once played by art is now fulfilled by philosophy.¹ What occupies Burckhardt and Croce is the thought that philosophy might also be 'past,' thereby transforming the meaning of Hegel's claim. They propose that as long as Renaissance art and philosophy occupies a legitimate cultural place despite its historical end, it is able to effect an integration between community, society and state on the one hand, and an understanding of an autonomous, creative self on the other. However, once this Renaissance self-understanding and self-evident integration falls apart, any universal understanding of western culture dissolves as well.

It is in these "facts" that we find the motivation for and expression of Burckhardt's and Croce's studies on the culture of the Renaissance in Italy. Both attempt to establish the continuing validity of art and philosophy, by drawing on Hegel's retrospective gaze, which shows that where the new claimed to replace the old, the old was taken up and preserved with the new in the process of negation. That is *Aufhebung*. In order to justify their recasting of Hegel's concepts, Burckhardt and Croce deny epochal rupture and discontinuity and so inevitably turn to a study of the Italian Renaissance to underscore their points. Their study of the continuing importance of Renaissance art and philosophy

¹ Hegel, *Aesthetics*, I.11.

illustrate their hermeneutic practice. In their view, privileging continuity [*Versoehnung*] over rupture [*Abriss*], the study of the Renaissance in Italy, particularly its poetry and philosophy not only extends our awareness of the depth and versatility of a shared humanist culture, but kindred aesthetic languages and their *Lebensformen* as well.

Burckhardt and Croce were well aware that mapping the rich totality of Renaissance thought remains a task that can never be completed. Their attempt by means of a dialectically mediated progression of thought and imagery, within the parameters of a Cartesian methodology, still remains only an approach. Perhaps this attempt is limited in the same way that the interpretation of any poem or philosophical theory is limited. When a poem is not a poem, it does not have its “own” tone; or when the empty formulae of philosophy do not ‘touch’ thought, the word breaks. However, where the word fulfills itself and becomes poetic and philosophical *language*, we must take it as its word. Why we should do so unfolds in their dialectical mapping of Renaissance self-bestowal and self-withdrawal.

i

Horizons

Burckhardt’s primary aim in *Die Kultur der Renaissance in Italien* was to map the characteristic states of mind and motivational patterns of the Italian peoples during the fourteenth, fifteenth, and sixteenth centuries in political, economical, and ecclesiastical institutions, as well as provide a description of the developments of philosophical, theological, literary and artistic activities and their production in the Italian Renaissance. The core of his image of the ‘consciousness’ of the Renaissance focuses on the emergence and development of the ‘self-conscious’ individual. In Italy: “man became a spiritual individual” and recognized himself as such. Thus emerged an awareness of the separateness of the self from a race, a people, a family, a party, a corporation or a state with which a capacity to objectively critique all things also became possible. The invention of the expressions *uomo singulae* and *uomo unico*, signify the highest stages of individual self-achievement.²

It was a Renaissance sense of a culturally urbanized people with which Burckhardt was primarily concerned. His thesis is that the self-contained culture of the Renaissance in Italy had a beginning and an end between 1300 and 1530 but emigrated across a wide European and eventually American compass. The weight that Burckhardt places on the social experiences of the upper classes of the Italian cities for the revival of antiquity explains the Renaissance cult of anything classical. With this observation he enters upon a description of the revival of antiquity, by which a certain form of ‘rationality’ was given to the Italians of the Renaissance, and which they passed on not only to their contemporaries, but also to a model of scholar and patron each relying solely on personal talent, devoting their lives to a humanist cultivation of classical antiquity. Where the Renaissance humanists excelled was in the areas of theology and ethics and the self’s role in life. Following the lead of Petrarch and Pico, many of the Renaissance humanists set

² Burckhardt, *The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy*, 143.

themselves against their scholastic rivals - on the grounds that the latter were technically and disinterestedly Ockhamites concerned with logic and truth, while as humanists they were concerned with the arts and humanities - which persuade and inspire men and women to a life of virtue on the basis of their subjective individuality.

Employed by Princes and republics, and some with the beginnings of humanistic chairs in universities, an important phase of the history of philosophy during the Renaissance, was the significance of Marsilio Ficino, who with the encouragement and a subsidy from Cosimo de' Medici, of an Christian early modern Neoplatonic philosophy and theology which had a wide and powerful impact on princes, courtiers, scholars, poets, artists, architects, and citizens. Burckhardt saw Italian Neoplatonism as a fusion, essentially modern in outcome of ancient, medieval, and renaissance spirituality to reconcile Christian and classical culture. Key here, Burckhardt argues, is the recognition of the relationship between 'classical cultures' and 'renaissance individualism' which was an objective-subjective drive to realize a unified *polis* of virtuous selves. About the middle of the sixteenth century, however, a large number of academies appeared and passed away in many Italian cities. The Academy of Naples at which Jovianus Pontanus [Gioviano Pontano] was at the center, and which sent out a colony to Lecce, and the circle of Lodovico di Moro, which formed at the Court of the *condottiere* Alviano, were viewed askance by the men of the Counter-Reformation and dissolved. Soon Latin poetry was replaced by Italian, a sign for Burckhardt of the historical end of Italian Renaissance humanism.

ii

Poetry and Philosophy

Pico emerges from Burckhardt's *Die Kultur der Renaissance in Italien*, "as the only man who loudly and vigorously defended the truth and science of all ages" in his own age:

We shall live forever, not in the school of word-catchers
But in the circle of the wise, where they talk not of the mother
Of Andromache or the sons of Niobe, but of the deeper causes
Of things human and divine.³

This Renaissance drama of man and culture reaches a historical denouement, not without ambiguity - for it remains a summons to a common cultural responsibility. Here Burckhardt read Pico della Mirandola in a common consciousness of a connection between philosophy and poetry that has not always been recognized. As a first indication in this direction, Husserl, the founder of phenomenology, developed for philosophy a method of self understanding by rejecting all the naturalistic and psychologistic misunderstandings that became wide-spread after the Renaissance. He called this the "eidetic reduction," by which all experience of contingent reality is bracketed as a point of method. For it is only the *a priori* essential structures of all reality that have always and without exception formed the realm of the concept, of the realm of Ideas, as Plato

³ Pico, *Oratorio de Hominis Dignitate*, Part IV.

called it. Whoever seeks to describe the character of art, and above all poetry, will not be able to avoid expressing himself in a similar way, and will talk of the idealizing tendency of art.

Husserl who taught the eidetic reduction, which implies the suspension of the positing of reality as the very method of philosophy, could say that eidetic reduction is “spontaneously fulfilled” in the realm of art.⁴ Wherever art is experienced, this epoche has already occurred: no one takes a painting or a statue for the real thing. We have only to look at painting, which raises the illusion of reality into the sphere of ideality, to experience its aesthetic delight in the vaulted ceiling of St. Ignatius in Rome, where the frescoes by Andrea Pozzo show the triumph of Ignatius, and to reflect on that human dignity Pico so nobly describes: if everything that happened on earth – every heroism, every sacrifice, every expression in human decency and worth was merely mechanical fulfillment, by helpless and meaningless men and women - what meaning has beauty and truth? Matter cannot rule spirit; man’s destiny depends on himself, *sors animae filia*.

There is nothing great on earth beside man, nothing great
In man beside the mind and soul; if you ascend therefrom,
You transcend the heavens, if you incline to the body and
Regard the heavens, you behold yourself as a fly and
Something less than a fly.⁵

iii

Poetry, Philosophy, Language

Not only is man the microcosm for Pico, the mean binding of earth and heaven together; he is the master and lord of his own destiny; a free and self-created spirit – what he is follows from what he creates. Here Pico raises a theme that is by no means a self-evident one. Insofar as creativity concerns language, any question concerning creativity and language is a hermeneutical one. Moreover, questions about creativity and language inevitably lead to the relationship of poetry and philosophy:

I seem two things in Plato, a Homeric power of eloquence, and
A sense entirely the same as Aristotle’s, so that if you consider
The words, there is nothing more opposed, but if the matter,
Nothing more in accord.⁶

Self-bestowal and self-withdrawal – such a dialectic of uncovering and obscuring holds sway in language both for poets and philosophers. Poetical and philosophical speech share a common feature: there is no external standard against which they can be measured and to which they might correspond to facts. Yet they are far from arbitrary because their language cannot be false. Rather poetry and philosophy represent a unique

⁴ Husserl, *Ideen*, SS70; 112.

⁵ Pico, *In Astrologiam*, III.27.

⁶ Pico, *Opera*, I.83.

kind of risk, for as ideal languages they fail to live up to the standards of ordinary language.

If the form of a poem is constructed by the shifting balance between sound and sense, what does this tell us about the ontological constitution of poetic and philosophical language? In cases where language is the medium, the relation between philosophy and poetry, how do these contrary forms of language, the language of concepts which suspends itself - leaving everyday reality behind it, and poetry which stands on its own - relate to one another? The very question of translatability, where the musicality of poetry is intensified, it is still a question of the musicality of *language*. Thus, Pico asks, what is poetry in the context of philosophy?

Croce, echoing De Sanctis [1817-1883], proposes that the essence of art lies in its form.⁷ Following a tried phenomenological principle, that we should first take as our starting point the dialectical concept in its Hegelian form: “the proposition in the form of a judgment is not suited to express speculative truths.”⁸ Secondly, since as Plato proposes, any turn toward the *logoi*, philosophy moves exclusively in the medium of the concept: “in Ideas, through Ideas, toward Ideas,” it is impossible to determine any single Idea by itself, independently of the totality or coherentism of Ideas.⁹ Thirdly, following Aristotle, since any logic of proposition and definition is the instrument of all conceptual clarification of experience, it reaches its limits in the realm of ‘first principles’ which cannot be classified save by a different kind of non-discursive and non-propositional reflection which following Plato he called *Nous*.¹⁰ Fourthly, as Hegel notes, poetry in the context of philosophy is defined reciprocally within the totality of the concept. Its aesthetic imageries represent the whole truth of the concept when they are all taken together in an *Aufhebung* or sublation of their own immanent positing. Thus the language of poetry and philosophy, once it turns to the *logoi* and *Nous*, is one that sublates itself, saying nothing and turning toward the whole at one and the same time, while the totality of its thought remains uncompleted as all definitions of the “Absolute” do.¹¹

Thus both poetical and philosophical language share a common feature: they cannot be false for there is no external standard or ‘verifiability thesis’ against which they can be measured and to which they might correspond. Yet they are not arbitrary. They represent a type of risk not because they do not correspond to empirical facts alone but because their language appears empty.

iv

Aesthetics as Dialectic

⁷ Croce, *Estetica*, 336-337.

⁸ Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, 36-41.

⁹ Plato, *Phaedo*, 99e; *Republic*, 511c.

¹⁰ Aristotle, *Posterior Analytics*, II.100b 5-17.

¹¹ Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, 142-143.

That Italy enjoys an enviable place in the world of art is a *communis sensus* but what is little appreciated outside Italy is that while Baumgarten was the first to coin the term *aesthetica* as a special science, Vico was the first to discover in his *Scienza Nuova* the promised land of aesthetic science itself.¹² Croce would later map its exact boundaries by challenging the notion that there is a hierarchy of knowledge and the type of knowledge gained through aesthetics is inferior to knowledge gained through the propositional-discursive languages of dialectic and logic – thus his attacks in *Primi saggi*, *Breviario* and *La Critica* against *versimo* and the anti-aesthetic materialisms and positivisms of Robert Ardigo and Mario Pilo in philosophy, Cesare Lombroso in sociology, Paolo Montegazza in physiology who reduced art and poetry to a “visceral aesthetic sense;” or to what Croce judged a scientific fanaticism of a cult of mere facts.¹³

Croce’s aesthetics offers a fuller development of Vico’s *scienza aesthetica* as well as Burckhardt’s denial that the Italian ‘Renaissance’ was a period bounded by time and place. What concern all three is not only the totality of the cultural values of the civilization of Renaissance Italy but a reluctance by Burckhardt and Croce in particular to confuse the theoretical problem as to the nature of Renaissance culture with the historical problem as to its origins in Greece, Rome, and the Middle Ages. It is the task of a philosophical aesthetics to discover what is common even in what is different – or with Plato: “to learn to see things together in respect to the one.”¹⁴ Plato designated the network of relationships among the *logoi* as dialectic, which pertains to being itself, which exposes itself to thought. Being itself may never be apprehended in the unrestricted presence of some *unus intuitus* [unitary intuition] with Epicurus and Locke, or of an infinite monad in the sense of Plotinus and Leibniz, or its synthesis - a *communis sensus* in the manner of Kant, but as with all human clarity and lucidity, it is clouded over by opaqueness, passing away and forgetfulness. Diotima knew this when she compared the knowing proper to humans with the life of a species that has its ongoing being only in the relentless process of its individual instances.¹⁵

Standing beyond the alternatives of transcendental reflection and empirical knowledge, it was the Hegelian theme of the ‘concrete universal’ tied to the hermeneutical task of concretizing the universal in art, poetry, philosophy, language, the individual, the state, universities and schools that preoccupied each. Burckhardt and Croce try to hermeneutically establish these ‘concrete universals,’ inasmuch as they characterize the ‘Renaissance’ contexts out of which they arise. They establish the questions out of which ‘universals’ arise and to characterize the historical and cultural contexts into which they are ‘concretized:’ in art, or poetry, or philosophy, or language, or the state, or the individual, or the state and the individual.

Thus there emerges behind all methodology and all epistemology the unity of dialogue and dialectic that not only relates Plato and Hegel to one another but which frees hermeneutics from the confinements of “being-toward-a-text” which is the procedure of

¹² Croce, *Estetica*, 258.

¹³ Croce, *Primi saggi*, 162.

¹⁴ Plato, *Phaedrus*, 265d.

¹⁵ Plato, *Symposium*, 207f.

interrogating and construing pre-given texts alone. Whenever a question arises; it imposes itself; and although it is, in Collingwood's sense based on an 'ultimate presupposition' that is itself 'indemonstrable,' an answer emerges to be mapped as a 'concrete universal.'¹⁶

v

Concrete Universals

Hegel charges that Kant did not draw sufficiently radical conclusions from the anti-empiricist claims he raised about the logical relation between universal and particular in his *Kritik der reinen Vernunft* – that there is an inaccessibility of pure particularity in sensations – “that intuitions without concepts are blind.” He should have rethought the distinction between ‘what is given to the mind’ and ‘what the mind does with the given.’ Hegel is confident that the theory of a ‘concrete universal’ fills in this Kantian impasse. His proposal is straight-forward: ‘concrete universals’ are concepts that cannot be understood as pale generalizations or abstract generalizations of given particulars because they are required for particulars to be apprehended in the first place. Moreover, they are not originally dependent on an immediate acquaintance with particulars. Rather particulars are inter-relations of universals [or concepts]. In nuce, ‘concrete universals’ are a synthesis of particulars or what is ‘given’ to consciousness with universals or what is ‘constituted’ by consciousness. Burckhardt and Croce apply the theory to their studies of the Renaissance in Italy.

Burckhardt's concrete image of the consciousness of the Renaissance in *Die Kultur* is the development of the individual. Before the Renaissance individuals existed but they were not conscious of this fact about themselves, nor did they especially value it. Individuals were conscious of themselves as members of a collective – a language, family, people, party, or guild. In Italy man became a spiritual individual and recognized himself as such. Indissolubly linked with this recognition and high evaluation of the self as individual was an awareness of the separateness of self from the rest of reality so that objective treatments of this world became possible. Since Italians from the time of Dante and Pico possessed a “double-consciousness” of themselves as subjective individuals and the world as something objective and external, they are the first-born among the sons of Europe.¹⁷ In brief, a particular image of self-consciousness is synthesized in the Italian Renaissance, wherein its particular form assumes the name of *civilization* or *culture*, while universal self-consciousness assumes the name of *philosophy*.

Croce's concrete image of artistic consciousness in the *Estetica* and *Breviario* rests on the assumption that the essence of art lies in its form by which is meant not something

¹⁶ Collingwood's logic of question and answer is based on the presupposition that one only understands a statement when one understands it as an answer to a question. Question and answer are utterly entangled with one another as a dialectic of question and answer in which question and answer are constantly exchanged and are dissolved in the movement of understanding. For his theory of 'ultimate presuppositions.' cf. Collingwood, *An Essay on Metaphysics*, 1-47.

¹⁷ Burckhardt, *Civilization of the Renaissance*, 143-144.

abstracted from content but the transformation of an emotional state into an object of contemplation or artistic vision. Anticipating the ‘hermeneutical’ debate between the *formalisti* [formalists] and the *contenutisti* [contentists] in aesthetics, he proposes that every work of art is actually a ‘concrete’ “synthesis” of both form and content - not as “opposites” but as “distincts” - in the abstract. Thus his emphasis on the cosmic or integral character of artistic truth. ¹⁸

In Ugo Foscolo’s ode *All’amica risanata* [*To the Recuperated Friend*] Ugo has a love affair with Countess Arese. What that love is and who that woman is can be documented from his letters. Yet when he loves her she is his universe and highest blessing. Under admiration’s spell, he aspires to change her as mortal into immortal, to transfigure her from the earthly to the divine for the faith of future generations, and to perform a new miracle through love’s power. In the last two lines of the ode he sees her taken up into heaven – an object of worship and prayer:

And thou, divine one, shall inherit through my hymns, the vows of the descendents of the
Insubrians [recuperated friends]. ¹⁹

Croce is keen to emphasize that when the lyrical image is changed for him and for us into a perception we enter into the ‘concrete universal’ and the vast field of the spirit - or the *aesthetic-logical a priori* synthesis of feeling, intuition; content, form, representation, category, subject and predicate. In nuce, aesthetic perception is synthesized in which its literary form assumes the name of *history*, while consciousness of the universal assumes the name of *philosophy*. From this he infers that poetry, philosophy and language are ‘substantially’ identical within any ‘concrete universal.’ ²⁰ This is not an aesthetic judgment but a concern with elucidating the roles that poetry and philosophy played as Nietzsche notes in “representing the absolute, that is, of the absolute definitively as such in the realm of historical man.”

Conclusion

To each eye, perhaps, the outlines of a given civilization
Present a different picture; and in treating a civilization
That is mother of our own, and whose influence is still
At work among us, it is unavoidable that individual judgment
Should tell every moment on the writer and on the reader.
In the wide ocean in which we venture the possible ways
And directions are many...Such indeed is the importance
Of the subject that it still calls for fresh investigation. ²¹

Burckhardt’s call for ‘fresh investigation’ raises the question: do we speak language or does language speak us? How is a meaningful language possible at all? The Renaissance answer was a *functionalist* view of language as distinct from Scholastic *representational* views as exemplified by Ockham. What is ‘modern’ in ‘early modern’ Renaissance

¹⁸ Croce, *Filosofia, Poesia, Storia*, 243

¹⁹ Foscolo, *Opere edite e postume*, IX.170.

²⁰ Croce, *Estetica*, 247.

²¹ Burckhardt, *Civilization of the Renaissance*, 21.

philosophy of language is that the very question at issue is what human contingencies, the anthropological facts, as Kant would have called them, presupposed in the adoption of humanist categories and concepts?

Pico's and Foscolo's use of language illustrate that expressions acquire their specific meanings from the procedures by which they are used in our dealings with one another and the world. Key here is the invention of a new language that expressed humanist notions of the individual who recognized himself as an autonomous self. So they focused on language as behavior or the pragmatic rules that govern the uses of different expressions, on the language games within which those rules are operative, and on the broader forms of life which give language games their significance. Look and see how our life is in fact linguistically structured by the actual features of human life on which the actual validity of our fundamental forms of thought depend - such as expressing the individual self in the meaningful languages of poetry and philosophy – and all this five hundred years before Wittgenstein!

Croce adds one significant neo-Kantian amendment to this view. He denies that pure and practical reason has any single, unique and universal structure that is compulsory for thinkers and speakers of all interests and all cultures expressed in a common system of “synthetic a priori principles.” Rather, different thinkers and agents speak experience in a variety of ways, characterized by different systems of regulative principles. Any particular structure of language is then compulsory and the “synthetic a priori truths” which express that structure are relevant and applicable within the scope of both a particular *Lebensform* such as Renaissance Italy and others that share its pragmatic rules and language games. Here resides the connection between Renaissance and modern *Lebensformen*: because of their roles as *Bestandteilen der Handlung* they share common aesthetic language games.