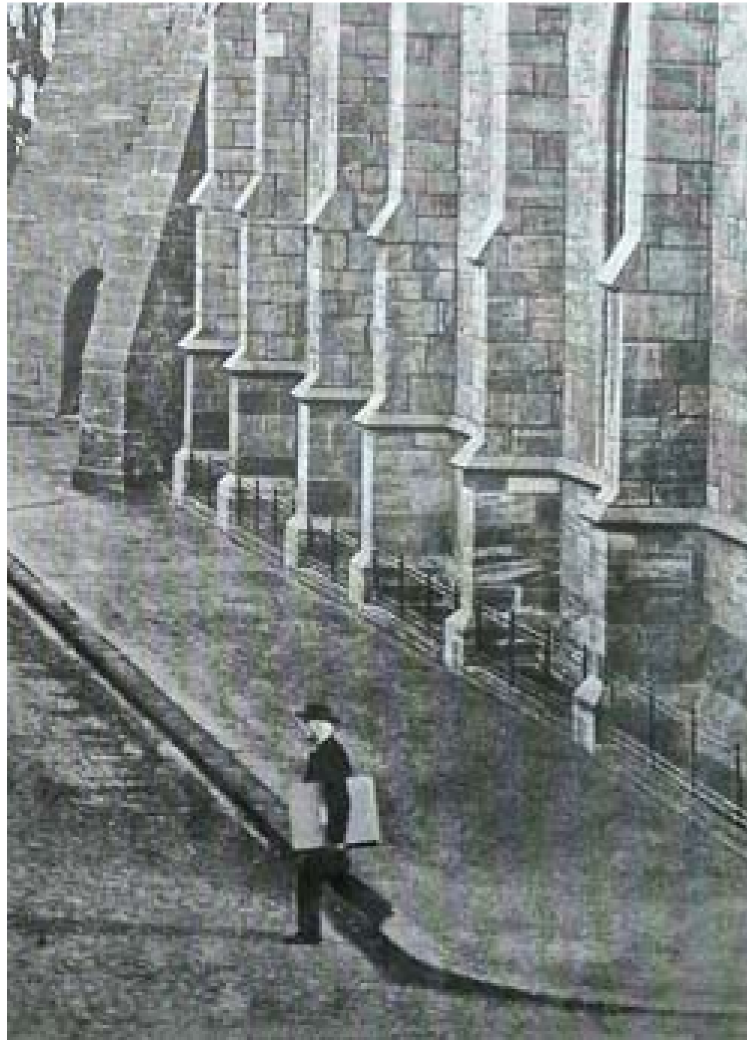
Burckhardt's *Renaissance*, 150 years later



The State as a Work of Art

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The title of Burckhardt's first chapter can be understood in two ways. 'Kunstwerk' can mean a work of art. It thus introduces Burckhardt's emphasis on culture as his main interest and as the most valuable human activity. But it can also mean 'a work of artifice', a contrivance, something consciously made by human beings as opposed to something that developed organically, and this latter sense is more important.

I shall deal first with the aesthetic aspect. As we know, in the lecture notes published posthumously as *Weltgeschichtliche Betrachtungen* Burckhardt defined culture as one of the three forces in history, alongside the state and religion. In culture, mere activity is transformed into reflection. Culture is able to criticize and judge the other two forces. And culture produces all that is durable in the purposeless flux of history. 'Aus Welt, Zeit und Natur sammeln Kunst und Poesie allgültige, allverständliche Bilder, die das einzig irdisch Bleibende sind, eine zweite ideale Schöpfung.'[1]

The importance that Burckhardt attaches to the Renaissance – and the sceptical view of Greek civilization taken in his posthumously published *Griechische Kulturgeschichte* – show his distance from the assumptions prevalent in German culture in the generations before his. The German idealization of the classical world begins with Winckelmann's 'Gedanken über die Nachahmung der griechischen Werke in der Malerei und Bildhauerkunst' (1755). When Goethe went to Italy in 1786, he wanted to see the remains of classical civilization. He was not particularly interested in the Renaissance, except for such neoclassical products as the Palladian villa at Vicenza. For German writers of the age of Goethe, Italy is first and foremost a land strewn with classical ruins. Part of Burckhardt's achievement was to make Renaissance Italy available to the imagination of his contemporaries.

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[1] Jacob Burckhardt, *Weltgeschichtliche Betrachtungen*, ed. by Rudolf Marx (Stuttgart: Kröoner, 1969), p. 61. Although the lecture notes which form the basis of this book have been re-edited by Peter Ganz, the older edition is the one which acquired the status of a classic. On Ganz's edition, see the review by Hugh Trevor-Roper, *TLS*, 8 Oct. 1982, 1087-8.

The opening chapter of CR in particular was read with enthusiasm as an account of an exotic and amoral culture, the antithesis of nineteenth-century civilization, dominated by tyrants and condottieri or soldiers of fortune.[2] The amoral Renaissance man, with his intelligence, artistic talents, powerful will, and intolerance for the weak, seemed a refreshing contrast to the tame, safe, dull nineteenth century. John Burrow says of Burckhardt's condottieri: 'Burckhardt makes this role, and the type of personality which embraces and can sustain it, into the conceptual core of his book, because the other skills and roles he sees as characteristic of the Italian Renaissance are in a sense civil versions of the military adventurer.'[3] In German literature, this type is prefigured in Schiller's play *Fiesco* (1783), which deals with the unsuccessful revolt by Count Fiesco against the Doria dynasty in Genoa in 1547, and in the strange libertine novel set in Renaissance Italy by Wilhelm Heinse, *Ardinghello oder die glückseligen Inseln* (1787). Its hero is a Florentine painter with a history of love-affairs and murders. He represents the ideal of natural man free from Christian morality. He founds a utopian colony dedicated to free love. Burckhardt's CR, however, founded a veritable cult of the Renaissance that pervades late nineteenth-century literature. It was supported by more popular works such as Count Gobineau's *Renaissance*, very popular in German translation, and by Nietzsche's praise of the despot Cesare Borgia as an example of the superman. In Burckhardt, Cesare Borgia is described as 'appalling' (CR 71), 'vollends grauenhaft' (KR 104); the violence he used showed 'devilish wickedness' (CR 70), 'nahm […] jenen völlig satanischen Charakter an, der notwendig auf die Zwecke zurückwirkt' (KR 104). Nietzsche, however, treats him in an explicitly amoral fashion: 'People completely misunderstand predatory animals and predatory people (Cesare Borgia, for example), they misunderstand "nature" as long as they persist in examining these most healthy of all tropical plants and brutes (as nearly all moralists till now have done) to find their fundamental "diseased state" or inborn "hell". […] Notes for a chapter on "morals as timidity".'[4] An Italian condottiere is the hero of the story by Burckhardt's younger Swiss contemporary Conrad Ferdinand Meyer, *Die Versuchung des Pescara* (1887). Renaissance Italy provided the setting for many of the Novellen by Paul Heyse, a now largely forgotten writer who won the Nobel Prize in 1910. Thomas Mann contributed a drama about Savonarola entitled *Fiorenza*, first performed in 1907, but he also satirized the cult of the Renaissance. In *Tonio Kröger* his artist resolves to travel, not to Italy, but in the opposite direction, to Denmark: 'Die ganze bellezza macht mich nervös.'

[2] Henceforth CR refers to *The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy*, trans. by S.G.C. Middlemore (Oxford: Phaidon Press, 1944); KR to *Die Kultur der Renaissance in Italien*, ed. by Walter Goetz (Stuttgart: Kröner, 1976). Future references in text. Middlemore's translation, first published in 1878, needs updating.

[3] John Burrow, *A History of Histories* (London: Allen Lane, 2007), p. 417.

[4] Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, trans. by Marion Faber (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), p. 83-84 (§197).

His brother, Heinrich, in the story *Pippo Spano* (1904), presented a modern, neurotic artist whose hero is the condottiere Pippo Spano; but unlike Pippo, whose 'grausame Selbstsicherheit' is twice mentioned, the artist is truly weak, so much so that he makes a suicide pact with his lover but having killed her is not strong enough to kill himself.

However, this aesthetic reading of Burckhardt obscures some other important things he had to say. As Lionel Gossman points out, by 'Der Staat als Kunstwerk' Burckhardt did not primarily mean an aesthetic object, but rather represented the state in Renaissance Italy as something deliberately constructed, 'an artificial construct or *Kunstwerk*' (283). Close attention to Burckhardt's language confirms this. Later in CR the derivative of 'Kunst' he most often uses is 'künstlerisch', artistic. But in 'Der Staat als Kunstwerk' we find 'künstlich', artificial, and 'kunstreich', ingenious. 'In so artificial a world only a man of consummate address could hope to succeed' (CR 32). Burckhardt says most Italian states were internally 'Kunstwerke, d. h. bewußte, von der Reflexion abhängige, auf genau berechneten sichtbaren Grundlagen ruhende Schöpfungen waren, so mußte auch ihr Verhältnis zueinander und zum Auslande ein Werk der Kunst sein' (KR 83). 'As the majority of the Italian States were in their internal constitution works of art, that is, the fruit of reflection and careful adaptation [better: 'precise calculation'], so was their relation to one another and to foreign countries also a work of art' (CR 57). In other words, the novel feature of the Italian states was that they did not rest on tradition. They were not dominated by semi-religious reverence for a monarch whose right to rule, and to transfer his rule to his heirs, was accepted as right and natural. To use a word that occurs frequently in the early sections of 'Der Staat als Kunstwerk', they lacked legitimacy.

This concern reflects Burckhardt's awareness of the changes that had transformed the German-speaking world since the late eighteenth century. The Holy Roman Empire had been dissolved by Napoleon in 1806, at a time when it had little more than a nominal existence. The Congress of Vienna, claiming to restore the past, in fact set up a new European order. The July Revolution in France in 1830 sent the Bourbons into exile, installed the citizen king Louis Philippe, and introduced a liberal regime with extended suffrage and a culture of free enterprise that we see portrayed in Balzac. Burckhardt was among many observers who became disillusioned with it; Heine was another. After describing the entombment of Napoleon's remains in Paris in 1841, Heine wrote: 'The Emperor is dead. With him died the last hero of ancient mettle, and the new world of Philistines breathes a sigh of relief, as though released from a brilliant nightmare. Above his grave rises an industrial bourgeois age which admires quite other

heroes, such as the virtuous Lafayette, or James Watt the cotton-spinner.'[5] The bourgeoisie, however, ignored the threat from the proletariat, which burst out in 1848.

Switzerland shared in modern disruption. In 1798, the revolutionary French government conquered Switzerland and imposed a new unified constitution. The new regime, known as the Helvetic Republic, was highly unpopular. It had been imposed by a foreign invading army and destroyed centuries of tradition, making Switzerland nothing more than a French satellite state. In 1803 Napoleon organised a meeting of the leading Swiss politicians from both sides in Paris. The result was the Act of Mediation which largely restored Swiss autonomy and introduced a Confederation of 19 cantons. Relations among the cantons, however, were uneasy, especially between the more liberal, Protestant cantons and the more conservative, Catholic cantons. In 1839, the appointment of the controversial German theologian David Strauss to the theological faculty of the University of Zürich by the liberal government provoked the 'Züriputsch', an attempt by the rural conservative population against the liberal rule of the city of Zürich. In 1841 the radical regime in the canton of Aargau forced eight convents to close. The Catholic government of the canton of Lucerne responded by repealing the anti-Jesuit laws and inviting the Jesuits to take over their schools again. This outraged the Protestant liberal cantons. 'In December 1844 and again in April 1845, brigades of volunteers from all over Switzerland – the so-called *Freischaren* – were organized for a march on Lucerne to bring pressure on the cantonal government.'[6] Burckhardt wrote about these events in the *Basler Zeitung*, which he helped to edit in 1844-5, stressing 'that freedom and respect for law are indissolubly linked'.[7] In letters he was still more forthright:

> Das Wort Freiheit klingt schön und rund, aber nur der sollte darüber mitreden, der die Sklaverei unter der Brüllmasse, Volk genannt, mit Augen angesehen und in bürgerlichen Unruhen duldend und zuschauend mitgelebt hat. […] Ich weiß zu viel Geschichte, um von diesem Massendespotismus etwas anderes zu erwarten als eine künftige Gewaltherrschaft, womit die Geschichte ein Ende haben wird.[8]

> The word freedom has a fine ring to it, but nobody has a right to comment unless he has seen the roaring mob called 'the people' with his own eyes and has lived patiently and observantly through civil unrest. […] I know too much history to expect this mass despotism to lead to anything but a future rule by force, which will bring the story to a close.

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[5] Heinrich Heine, *Sämtliche Schriften*, ed. Klaus Briegleb, 6 vols (Munich: Hanser, 1968-76), v. 341. My translation.

[6] Lionel Gossman, *Basel in the Age of Burckhardt: A Study in Unseasonable Ideas* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2000), pp. 128-9.

[7] Quoted in Gossman, p. 129.

[8] Burckhardt, letter to Gottfried Kinkel, 19 April 1845.

This diatribe against crowds and their malign influence on politics links Burckhardt with such later writers as Hippolyte Taine, who denounced the behaviour of the crowd in his account of the French Revolution in *Les Origines de la France contemporaine* (1875-93), and Gustave Le Bon, whose treatise on the crowd was read eagerly by both Freud and Mussolini.

The Swiss Civil War (the *Sonderbundskrieg*) broke out in November 1847 when some of the Catholic cantons tried to set up a separate alliance. The war lasted for less than a month, causing fewer than 100 casualties. The antagonism was not only religious but also economic. The conservative cantons, reliant on subsistence agriculture, wanted to retain as much autonomy as possible and forestall the development of Switzerland into a modern capitalist nation with banking and trade. Burckhardt looked on this development with the same forebodings as his friend and contemporary the great Swiss novelist Gottfried Keller did in the novel *Der grüne Heinrich* (1854). He came thoroughly to reject the 'ideas of 1830'.

CR can be read as an indirect critique of these events. Burckhardt sees in early Renaissance Italy the beginnings of two modern political developments. One is the excessive power of the state. The other is what Burckhardt, in one of the key sentences of this chapter, calls 'the great modern fallacy that a constitution can be made, can be manufactured by a combination of existing forces and tendencies' (CR 54). Both can be traced back to the abandonment of legitimate rule and the attempts by despots to model their own states centred on their person.

The tyrant who seized power in a small state in the fourteenth or fifteenth century had to justify his rule by his talents. Constantly insecure, he had to assemble men of ability around him. But these despotisms were unstable. Larger states tended to swallow up the smaller ones. Absolute power bred tyrants in the worst sense (CR 6). The succession was uncertain, as the principle of legitimacy no longer allowed rule to pass to the heir; instead, the most resolute member of the family would claim the succession, amid bloodshed, while disappointed relatives would plot against him. The outstanding example of such a despot is Giangaleazzo Visconti, Duke of Milan from 1395 to 1402, who took power by seizing and imprisoning his uncle Bernabò, and built such magnificent and massive buildings as Milan Cathedral and the palace of Pavia, and conquered numerous neighbouring states. But at his death his dominions disintegrated.

Despotism required objectivity and calculation: 'was den Fürsten Italiens wesentlich weiterhelfen muß, ist immer Talent und kühle Berechnung' (KR 15); 'Talent and calculation are the only means of advancement' (CR 10). One had to observe the real state of affairs. Any

illusion could be fatal. Burckhardt finds the spirit of objectivity and calculation present already in the rule of the Emperor Frederick II (1194-1250), who was 'gewöhnt an eine völlig objektive Beurteilung und Behandlung der Dinge' (KR 5), centralized the administration, drew up a register of taxpayers, destroyed the feudal state, and turned the people into 'ein kontrollierbarer Haufe von Untertanen' (ib.), 'a disciplined multitude of subjects' (CR 3). This made Frederick a modern man, 'der erste moderne Mensch auf dem Thron' (KR 5). (Middlemore weakens this into 'the first ruler of the modern type who sat upon a throne', CR 2). Such a well-organized despot anticipated the modern tendency to make the state responsible for everything. That tendency can also be found in Petrarch's eulogy of Can Grande della Scala, which presents, 'worked out in detail, the purely modern fiction of the omnipotence of the state. The prince is to take everything into his charge, to maintain and restore churches and public buildings, to keep up the municipal police, to drain the marshes, to look after the supply of wine and corn; so to distribute the taxes that the people can recognize their necessity; he is to support the sick and helpless, and to give his protection and society to distinguished scholars, on whom his fame in after ages will depend' (CR 6). We remember that in *Weltgeschichtliche Betrachtungen* Burckhardt shows himself suspicious of the excessive claims of the modern state: it should protect culture and administer conventional law, but it should not claim to direct the morality of its citizens; that is the province of society, which is different from the state.

The objectivity that Burckhardt considers modern is best displayed by Machiavelli. Burckhardt admires Machiavelli. 'He treats existing forces as living and active, takes a large and an accurate view of alternative possibilities, and seeks to mislead neither himself nor others' (CR 55). The English translation masks this admiration. When Burckhardt notes how coolly ('kaltblütig') Machiavelli in the *Discorsi* describes ancient and modern conspiracies, Middlemore's translation, 'cold-blooded indifference', goes too far (CR 36). Middlemore practises a similar distortion when he makes Burckhardt say: 'The objectivity of his political judgement is sometimes appalling in its sincerity' (CR 55; 'Aufrichtigkeit' should be 'frankness'). More generally, Middlemore foists upon Burckhardt a more moralistic vocabulary than he actually uses: e.g. 'Das Grundunglück' (KR 77) becomes 'the evil' (CR 53); 'Unheil' (KR 78) is 'evil' (CR 53); 'Missetaten' (KR 32) become 'crimes' (CR 21).

Burckhardt appreciates Machiavelli's realism. This is a refreshing development in the reception of Machiavelli. We know how much 'Machiavel' was demonized. Frederick II of Prussia published his *Anti-Machiavel* in 1740, with help from Voltaire, who was pleased that Frederick declared his hero to be Henri IV, in contrast to Machiavelli's Cesare Borgia. Yet Frederick's principles were hardly compatible with his invasion of Silesia. He denounced

Machiavelli while following his principles. Rousseau admired Machiavelli, taking *Il principe* to be a satire on princes and hence a disguised argument for republicanism. Burckhardt has no time for pious indignation at Machiavelli's honesty: 'Virtuous indignation at his expense is thrown away upon us who have seen in what sense political morality is understood by the statesmen of our own century' (CR 55).[9]

Burckhardt deplores the immorality of contemporary politics, but admires the realism which was a characteristic of his own time. Marx, in the preface to *A Critique of Political Economy* (1859), undertook to disclose that 'the relations of production constitutes the economic structure of society, the real foundation'. The term 'Realpolitik' was coined in the 1850s by August Wilhelm von Rochau in his *Grundsätze der Realpolitik, angewendet auf die staatlichen Zustände Deutschlands*. Rochau is not an amoral writer. He does not identify right with power. But he maintains that right needs to be based on power. He calls for an objective study of the forces that sustain the state:

> Das Studium der Kräfte welche den Staat gestalten, tragen, umwandeln, ist der Ausgangspunkt aller politischen Erkenntniß, deren erster Schritt zu der Einsicht führt: daß *das Gesetz der Stärke* über das Staatswesen eine ähnliche Herrschaft ausübt wie *das Gesetz der Schwere* über die Körperwelt.[10]

> The study of the forces that shape, sustain, and transform the state is the starting-point for all political awareness, which as its first step leads to the insight that *the law of strength* must exercise a dominance over the state similar to that of the *law of gravity* over the physical world.

Burckhardt also shows his realism by criticizing impractical and idealistic reformers. Rulers such as Frederick II and his murderous son-in-law Ezzelino were influential models, whereas Aquinas's theory of a constitutional state 'found no echo outside the lecture-room' (CR 4); similarly, Cola di Rienzo, trying to revive the Roman republic on the basis of the unstable passions of the Roman populace, appears by comparison with the despots as 'ein armer verlorener Tor' (a poor, doomed fool; KR 14). People with real power, not bookish idealists, shape the world.

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[9] Burckhardt actually writes 'die Mächte von rechts und links' (KR 80), which Middlemore misleadingly translates as 'statesmen' instead of 'the forces of right and left'; Burckhardt is no doubt thinking of the conservatives and liberals in Switzerland.

[10] August Ludwig von Rochau, *Grundsätze der Realpolitik, angewendet auf die staatlichen Zustände Deutschlands*, 2nd edn (Stuttgart: Göpel, 1859), p. 1.

However, Burckhardt criticizes Machiavelli on other grounds. He illustrates 'the great modern fallacy that a constitution can be made' (CR 54). Burckhardt is sceptical about the constitutional reforms Machiavelli proposed in his memorial to Leo X (*Discorso sopra il riformar lo stato di Firenze*) because it is too artificial (CR has 'ingenious'): 'Ein kunstreicheres Gebäude von Konzessionen an den Papst, die speziellen Anhänger desselben und die verschiedenen florentinischen Interessen ist gar nicht denkbar', KR 80). Here the 'objectivity' of the modern outlook turns into a fatal delusion.

Another aspect of modern objectivity is calculation. Burckhardt finds the spirit of calculation not only in the despotism of Frederick II, with its tax registers, but also, and above all, in the Republic of Florence. Florence is 'the first modern State' (CR 48) because the whole people was involved in politics; the 'wondrous Florentine spirit, at once keenly critical and artistically creative', was always judging the state. Florence became the home of political theories and experiments, and, like Venice, of statistical science. The Italians are the first to number the population by 'souls' (or 'mouths'), instead of people able to bear arms or able to walk, or by hearths, and thus they 'get the most neutral basis for further calculation' (CR 46). In Florence, more accurate information was available on financial affairs than anywhere else in the world: the public income and expenditure, the population, the number of children baptized annually, the number of schoolchildren who learnt reading and arithmetic (CR 50). 'Lastly, on the occasion of a great bequest, by which a childless philanthropist left six "danari" to every beggar in the city, the attempt is made to give a comprehensive statistical account of Florentine mendicancy' (CR 51).

If the state is merely a human contrivance, so must war be. Burckhardt devotes a chapter to 'war as a work of art'. He uses such terms as 'Befestigungs- und Belagerungskunst' (KR 91), 'the arts of besieging and fortification' (CR 62). War was, in the Renaissance, regarded realistically, as a neutral means to an end. 'It is obvious that this purely rational treatment of warlike affairs allowed, under certain circumstances, for the worst atrocities, even in the absence of a strong political hatred, as, for instance, when the plunder of a city had been promised to the troops' (CR 63).

Much as Burckhardt admires the Florentines, he finds their modernity to be double-edged. Their energies go not only into artistic creation but also into endless constitutional reforms. 'In many of their chief merits the Florentines are the pattern and the earliest type of Italians and modern Europeans generally; they are so also in many of their defects. When Dante compares the city which was always mending its constitution with the sick man who is continually changing his posture to escape from pain, he touches with this comparison a

permanent feature of the political life of Florence' (CR 54). It was also a feature of nineteenth-century Swiss life. After the Catholic cantons had lost their struggle in the Civil War for maximal independence, a new federal constitution was adopted in 1848. Just across the border in France, Burckhardt could observe the changes of government in 1830, 1848, and 1851.

This dual optic is characteristic of Burckhardt's vision of the Renaissance. The central theme of CR is ironic: 'According to Burckhardt, the simultaneous development of the modern individual and the modern state in fourteenth- and fifteenth-century Italy, of personal ambition and an enormously heightened subjectivity, and of a completely objective, rational, and desacralized view of the world of nature and politics ultimately turns back upon itself and undermines both the integrity of the individual as a moral being and the foundations (in tradition, religion, community feeling) of the state and of social order.'[11] Hayden White says in *Metahistory* (1973) that Burckhardt's treatment of history is satirical. That does not seem quite right. But certainly it is a theme in Burckhardt that extremes rebound upon themselves. And this process can have a moral dimension. Thus the extreme unscrupulousness of Cesare Borgia was self-defeating: it 'assumed that character of devilish wickedness which necessarily reacts upon the ends pursued' (CR 70). This theme is further developed when Burckhardt, in his chapter on the Papacy, comes to Clement VII and the sack of Rome. 'By a series of those falsehoods, which only the powerful can venture on, but which bring ruin upon the weak, Clement brought about the advance of the Germano-Spanish army under Bourbon and Frundsberg' (CR 77). Thus there is some justice in history, not however inserted by providence, but latent in human behaviour. But the guilt of course belongs to the Emperor Charles V, and here Burckhardt indulges for a moment in virtual history: 'The Catholic King and Emperor owed it to his luck and nothing else, that Pope and cardinals were not murdered by his troops. Had this happened, no sophistry in the world could clear him of his guilt' (CR 77). So there can be a moral element in history as Burckhardt tells it, but it is in no way the principal motive force. Rather, the way in which papal policies led to the sack of Rome provides a small, unusually clear example of how events lead to unexpected outcomes. But Burckhardt strongly opposes the favoured nineteenth-century notion of moral progress in history. In the *Weltgeschichtliche Betrachtungen* he says: 'Was man also für Fortschritt der Sittlichkeit zu halten pflegt ist die: a) durch Vielseitigkeit und Fülle der Kultur und b) durch die enorm gesteigerte Staatsmacht herbeigeführte Bändigung des Individuums' (WB 66). ('What people tend to consider the progress of morality is the restraint placed upon the individual by a) the richness and variety of culture, b) the enormously increased power of the state.') The alleged progress of morality is actually a process whereby the individual is brought

[11] Gossman, p. 285.

under greater control. Here Burckhardt joins hands with Nietzsche and his denunciation, in 'On the Use and Abuse of History for Life', of the insane delusion whereby nineteenth-century people imagine themselves to be at the climax of history; and perhaps he joins hands, more remotely, with Foucault and his deeply ironic understanding of history as a perpetuation of control and discipline by different means.