

MASTER-MIND LECTURE

JACOB BURCKHARDT

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*Read 11 December 1984*

How does a historian qualify to be a master-mind? Not by mere professional competence: he must, of course, be professionally competent, but he must also rise above that modest virtue. He must be a general historian, and something of a philosopher. The great historians have always realized that history is not particular but general: that it is a *continuum* which cannot be understood in one age alone, and that the present, which is also a part of that *continuum*, is relevant to the past. Therefore they have always been conscious of the public problems of their own times: many of them, indeed, personally involved in them. There are dangers, of course, in such involvement: too often the committed historian becomes insensibly a propagandist and is shown, by a later generation, to have transformed the past by seeing it in contemporary terms. The great historian must survive that danger. His philosophy must be one which does not date. It must survive the criticism of later generations and be found illuminating even in a new and radically different age.

By this criterion Jacob Burckhardt certainly qualifies for inclusion in this series of lectures. He was not a committed public man like most of the great German historians who outshone him in his lifetime. He was an academic historian who taught, and was content to teach, in a provincial university in his native Switzerland. Though his range was vast, he did not write contemporary history: the historical books which he wrote for publication were on Greek civilization, on the later Roman Empire, and on the Italian Renaissance. In his time, he was best known as an art-historian: a title which he would have rejected but which still clings to him in works of reference. His most widely read book was his *Cicerone*, a guidebook to Italian art. Later, his book *The Civilisation of the Renaissance* became famous, although not in the form in which he

had written it. It was only after his death that some of his lectures on history in general and on his own times were published. But, like the German historians, he was profoundly influenced by the public events of his lifetime. Only, unlike them, he was not blinded by those events. He did not jump on the bandwagon of German unity, Prussian power, or see the hand of divine Providence in the creation of the German Empire. Indeed, he revolted against all these ideas and returned to Switzerland in order to attach himself to an older German tradition which his German colleagues, he believed, had distorted.

Burckhardt's implicit dialogue with the great German historians of his time is essential to the understanding of his historical thought; for his ideas were nourished in the same intellectual soil although they grew afterwards in a different direction. That soil was the philosophy of the German Enlightenment, of Winckelmann, Herder and Goethe, of that wonderful generation which, having come to maturity before the French Revolution, had been able to dissent from the complacent narrowness of the French *philosophes* without troubling themselves too much with the problem of political power.

For the German Enlightenment was the enemy of the French Enlightenment. How Herder hated the arrogance of those French philosophers who saw themselves as the prophets of progress and reason, the enemies of ancient superstition, the teachers and emancipators of Europe! No, exclaimed Herder, man is more than dry reason, and civilization than Parisian salons. Progress, the superiority of the present over the past, is a chimera, the slogan of French cultural imperialism. The past is as valid, within its own terms, as the present. Every age is its own justification: who are we to condescend to the men who wrote heroic poetry and built great cathedrals? *Kultur*, the organic totality of intellectual, spiritual and artistic life, in the individual as in society, is more important than this narrow 'reason', and literature and art, which are the living expression of that totality, are to be judged by their authenticity, not by the artificial canons of modern taste. Such was the essential doctrine of the great Germans of the late 18th century. It was a doctrine particularly acceptable in a country whose only unity was provided not by politics—politics only divided and weakened it—but by culture: which was saved from being a mere geographical expression by its newly discovered greatness as a *Kulturvolk*.

That was all very well before the Napoleonic conquests, but after 1815 the position was very different. German culture had

indeed survived that terrible shock, and its mere survival, to some, was proof of its vitality. The defeat of Napoleon, it could be argued, had shown that the ancient traditions of Europe were not merely the obsolete relics of a feudal past, for had they not prevailed over 'enlightened' French imperialism? However, it had been a damned close-run thing, and victory, it had to be admitted, had not been achieved by ideas alone. After 1815 the *Kulturvolk* of Germany had to recognize that it could only compete in the harsh world of modern politics if it had the protection of a powerful state: if, from a *Kulturvolk*, it became a *Kulturstaat*. These views were echoed loudest in the German state which had contributed most to the victory and which now, as its reward, had become a powerful kingdom, dominating north Germany from Königsberg to the Rhine: Prussia.

It was against this background that the school was formed which was to dominate German historical writing for over a century, from the earliest works of Leopold Ranke, in 1825, to the last work of Friedrich Meinecke, in 1948. The best of these historians never forgot the philosophy of the German Enlightenment. They believed that history was the history of culture, that culture was indivisible, organic, that the past was to be respected on its own terms, not judged by the present: that, as Ranke put it, all periods are equal in the sight of God. But they also, increasingly, saw the power of the state not as an irrelevancy (as it had been in eighteenth-century Germany) but as an essential part of the same organism, the protective carapace which society created out of its own substance, and which was therefore no less valid, no less autonomous, than the culture which it protected. Thus if differing forms of culture were all equally valid and not to be criticized by absolute standards, so were differing states. States too, like cultures, followed their own rules, their 'reason of state', which was thus legitimized, and not to be criticized from a standpoint of morality or natural law. These doctrines were easily accepted by liberal men in the early days after 1815 when the Prussian state was liberal. By the 1860s the situation would be somewhat different. The Prussian state had then ceased to be liberal. But by then the ideas were fixed. They had become an orthodoxy whose only effective challenger, among German-speaking historians, was Jacob Burckhardt.

Burckhardt was a native of Basel, a member of one of the old patrician families of the city. As he was destined for the Protestant Church, he began his university studies—classical studies and theology—at Basel; but he soon shed his theological beliefs

(though remaining profoundly religious in spirit). He was captivated by the ideas that came from Germany, the ideas of Herder and Goethe; he longed to escape from the stuffy atmosphere of Basel—a provincial city sadly sunk from its greatness in the age of Erasmus; and in 1839, at the age of 21, having taken his degree in theology, and made a brief, exciting visit to Italy, he found his way to the newest and most famous university of Germany, Wilhelm v. Humboldt's university of Berlin.

There were giants in Berlin in those days. They included the great classicist August Boeckh and the historians Ranke and Droysen. Ranke was by now the oracle of the new German historical school: his recent essays idealizing the state and the orderly, self-correcting balance of power had made him popular with the Prussian government. Droysen, a younger man, had made his name by his history of Alexander the Great and his 'Hellenistic' successors. He was indeed the inventor of the concept of a Hellenistic age, a Hellenistic culture. But he was also something else: the discoverer of the demiurgic 'great men' of history. To him, Alexander was the 'great man' whom divine Providence had called forth to implement its 'Theodicy'; for had he not, by conquering and hellenizing the East prepared the ground in which Christianity would spread? This 'Macedonian' theme would soon become very popular with Prussian historians, for obvious reasons.

When Burckhardt first arrived in Berlin, he was enchanted by it. The whole intellectual life of the place excited him. 'My eyes', he wrote to a friend at the time, 'were wide with astonishment at the first lectures which I heard by Ranke, Droysen and Boeckh. I realised that the same thing had befallen me as befell the knight in *Don Quixote*: I had loved my science on hearsay, and suddenly here it was appearing before me in giant form—and I had to lower my eyes. Now I really am determined to devote my life to it . . .' And to his sister, 'What can I tell you about Germany? I am like Saul the son of Kish, who went out to look for lost asses and found a king's crown. I often want to kneel down before the sacred soil of Germany and thank God that my mother tongue is German. I have Germany to thank for everything. My best teachers have been German, I was nourished at the breast of German culture and learning, and I shall always draw my best powers from this land. What a people! What a wonderful youth! What a land—a paradise!'

Burckhardt greatly respected Droysen and regretted his early departure from Berlin to Kiel. He attended Ranke's seminar and afterwards referred to him as 'my great master'. But let us not

be deceived by formal tributes. For in fact he soon became disillusioned with Ranke as a person—we may even say that he came to despise him as a snob, a toady of power, a man without conviction. And as time went on he would repudiate him intellectually too: him and Droysen and their whole school. He saw them as the men who had betrayed the ideal of German culture and the historical philosophy of the age of Goethe. He also came to believe that they were politically misguided and intellectually wrong.

The crucial years were the 1840s: that decade of intellectual ferment, of incubation, in which the thought of all our modern ideologues—of Marx and Carlyle and Gobineau and so many others—was hatched. Politically, those were the last years of Metternich's Europe, years in which the revolution was kept at bay, and the balance of power was held, by the unrivalled worldly wisdom, and the immemorial expertise, of the elder Statesman of Vienna. Ranke's concept of world-history was not unlike Metternich's European system, only on a more sublime, a more metaphysical level. High in the clouds, a bloodless, Lutheran God, whom Eternity had drained of all identifiable properties, calmly regulated the providential machinery—a touch here, a re-adjustment there—so that all temporary oscillations were corrected and the great engine of *Weltgeschichte* could proceed on its course, ensuring that, in the end, seen *sub specie aeternitatis*, all would be for the best in the best of possible worlds.

Burckhardt did not share this view. To him as to Herder, the life of the peoples of Europe was not their politics, or their religion, but their total culture, and a system which merely balanced politics and religion in order to preserve the *status quo*, without expressing and protecting the living culture behind them, was, in itself, worthless. The question which he asked was, therefore, Did Metternich's system express or protect the culture of Europe? And his answer was, No, it did not. That culture had indeed been threatened by the revolutionary imperialism of France, and the other powers of Europe had indeed defeated France; after which they had indeed restored the old political system. But they had not restored the organic society which Napoleon had destroyed, nor had they finally defeated the revolutionary forces which he had harnessed to his imperialist aims. The restoration of 1815 was therefore not a real restoration. It was merely the artificial imposition of a brittle crust which would hardly contain the next outbreak of the still active force beneath. In 1842 Burckhardt expected that next outbreak. He still looked forward, he said, to 'frightful crises'; but he added, hopefully—for he was still young,

still hopeful—that mankind will survive them and Germany will then perhaps achieve its golden age. Then, in 1846, when he was back in Basel, working as a journalist, he witnessed the civil war of Switzerland, the sectarian war of the *Sonderbund*: a premonitory symptom soon to be merged in the universal outbreak of revolution in 1848.

The revolutionary years 1846–52 crystallized Burckhardt's historical philosophy and marked his decisive break with the German historians. It was a break on both sides, a great divide. After the failure of the revolution in Germany, the German historians forgot any liberal views they may have held and invested their hopes and actions (for most of them were active in politics) in the authoritarian Prussian state. The German *Kulturvolk*, they declared, could not now be welded into a viable state by its own efforts. Like ancient Greece, it must be united by a 'Macedonian' military monarchy. It required a Philip or an Alexander, a 'great man' who would assume the burden of history and force the pace of beneficent historic change. It was in those years that Droysen ceased to write about Alexander and Macedon and began instead his immense fourteen-volume work on *The History of Prussian Policy*.

So, when Bismarck came to power, the classically and historically trained intellectuals of Germany were ready for him. They could welcome him as the necessary agent of *Weltgeschichte*. Nor would they demur at his methods, his *Realpolitik*. Why should they? The state, they had already decided, was the organ of a culture which could not be judged, and it had its own morality, which also could not be judged. On this, philosophers and historians were agreed. The state, Hegel had said, was the march of God on earth. The state, Ranke had written, was a living being, a spiritual substance, a thought of God. The state, wrote Droysen, was 'the sum, the total organism of all ethical communities, their common purpose'; it was a law to itself—a moral law; in following its 'real interests', it could not be wrong.

Against this whole philosophy Burckhardt now declared himself a rebel. He was not a liberal: indeed, he hated the liberals of 1848—men, who he believed, by their individualism and their patronage of the masses, were the destroyers of culture. 'We may all perish', he wrote to a liberal friend in 1846, 'but at least I want to discover the interest for which I am to perish, namely, the old culture of Europe.' The Rhineland liberals, he wrote in 1848, were merely play-acting under the protection of Prussian garrisons. But he equally repudiated the opportunist conservatism of Prussia

which was not defending German culture, as an earlier generation had supposed, but distorting, if not destroying it; and he was contemptuous of those German historians who could not see, or pretended not to see, that their professed homage to culture had turned insensibly into a blind worship of power.

From 1848 until his death fifty years later, Burckhardt remained in Switzerland. From 1858 he was professor of history at Basel. But he was determined not to be like a German professor. In fact, he made himself as different as he could from a German professor. The German professors were pompous, omniscient, magisterial. Burckhardt affected a deliberate informality, a self-mocking insouciance, a Socratic affectation of ignorance. The German professors were bureaucrats, or satraps, in an academic empire. With their hierarchy of patronage and their organized seminars they trained a professional class. Burckhardt remained an individual, an amateur. His only aim, he once wrote, was not to train 'scholars and disciples in the narrower sense', but only to interest his students and make them feel that they could 'appropriate those aspects of the past which appealed to them, and that there might be happiness in so doing'. It was a deliberate breach with the methods as well as with the philosophy of Ranke, an emphatic repudiation of the German academic world, to which he could never now be tempted back. He refused offers from Munich, Göttingen, Tübingen. In 1872 he was offered the succession to Ranke himself at Berlin. It was the most famous historical chair in Europe whereas Basel only had 200 students in all faculties. But he refused to go. 'I would not have gone to Berlin at any price', he wrote: 'to have left Basel would have brought a malediction on me.' As a historian, he once wrote, he wished to study the world 'from an Archimedean point outside events'; Basel was the next best thing.

Meanwhile he lectured and wrote, and the message which he uttered was constant. He was not a historian of state policy, like Ranke and his school; nor was he a historian of art or ideas in a narrow sense. He was a historian of 'culture' in the tradition which had passed from Winckelmann through Herder and Goethe, which had inspired the historians and philologists of the Napoleonic period, but which had now, in Germany, under the pressure of events, been diverted, carrying all its professional virtues with it, into the worship of that supposed organ of culture, the state.

Burckhardt's first work, *The Age of Constantine the Great*, published in 1853, can be seen as a sequel, and a rejoinder, to Droysen's *History of Alexander the Great*. Droysen had seen Alexander as the

'great man', the demiurge who had prepared the ground for the predestined spread of Christianity. If that interpretation were accepted, Constantine's function in the divine plan was also clear: he was the second demiurge, the man who established Christianity throughout that ground. But Burckhardt's approach to this great theme, we soon discover, is very different from Droysen's. Whereas Droysen had subjected the subject to the man, and made the man the agent of a World Plan, Burckhardt reversed the process. His subject was not the achievement of the hero (he detested Constantine), nor even the rise of Christianity (to which he was lukewarm), but the historical change itself: the replacement of one millennial culture by another; and this replacement was not, in his view, a pre-determined process. No Providence, no Theodicy, could be discerned behind it. Nor was it necessarily an improvement.

Nor was it a direct confrontation. Christianity, to Burckhardt, did not challenge, or even defeat paganism: it merely entered into the spiritual vacuum left by the death of paganism. For paganism, to Burckhardt, is not a mere set of beliefs: it is a 'culture', an organic system of life; and that whole system was already dying before Constantine withdrew imperial protection from it and so hastened its collapse. Do we doubt this? Burckhardt examines all the aspects of pagan culture in the third century AD, the years before Constantine, and everywhere—in art, literature, philosophy—he sees only the shadows of past greatness. So, when the new religion attacked, it met no serious resistance. It was not faced by the great classical philosophies—not even by stoicism, 'the noblest philosophy of defeat'—but only by enfeebled outgrowths from their dying trunks or by barbarous superstitions that had grown up around them. Why was this? he asks: Was it because poetry and art are blossoms that must fall before the fruit of science and material progress can mature? Was it . . . but Burckhardt never forces answers to his questions. The failure of ancient civilization is to him a fact—but also a mystery, and a melancholy mystery. 'Anyone', he concludes, 'who has encountered classical Antiquity, if only in its twilight, feels that with beauty and freedom there departed also the genuine antique life.' What was left of it 'can only be regarded as the lifeless precipitate of a once wonderful totality of being'.

'The lifeless precipitate of a once wonderful totality of being' . . . The phrase is pure Burckhardt: Burckhardt the disciple of Goethe. Hellenism, to him, is not a system of ideas; it is not a set of political institutions; it is not Greek religion; it is not even philosophy,



literature or art. It is a 'totality', a living organic whole holding all these things together, and giving them life; and by AD 300 that totality is no longer alive and neither art nor literature nor philosophy can express it.

Nor can it be revived by political power or political genius. Had that been possible, surely some of the heroic emperors of the third century would have done it: Alexander Severus, Probus, or, above all, Diocletian. But no: organic decay cannot be corrected by legislation, however enlightened; and so Diocletian failed and his dreadful successor Constantine threw open the gates, and let the new religion, the herald of a new culture, come in. If he had not done so, pagan culture still could not have survived. If its unmanned battlements had not fallen to Christianity, they would have fallen, three centuries later, to Islam.

Such was Burckhardt's interpretation of one great turning point in the cultural history of Europe. Next year he revisited Italy, and published his guidebook to Italian art *Der Cicerone*. Six years later, in 1860, it was followed by a less successful but ultimately more famous work, *Die Kultur der Renaissance in Italien*, 'The Civilisation of the Renaissance in Italy'.

We take the Renaissance, as a phase of cultural history, so much for granted that we do not realize how many of our assumptions we owe to Burckhardt. For although the word had been used before him, it had been used in a far more limited sense. It was *la renaissance des lettres*, the rediscovery of that classical literature which had been lost in the neglect and barbarism of the gothic Middle Ages. To Burckhardt this was far too narrow a concept. To him the Renaissance is an age, a 'totality of being', like classical Antiquity itself, and the revival of ancient letters is only one aspect of it. For after all, those ancient letters did not merely turn up; they did not merely tumble out of dusty libraries in western monasteries, or arrive in Italy in the pockets of refugee scholars from Byzantium. They were sought out and fetched; and they were fetched because Italy—the new Italian society—demanded them. If they had not been there, if they had all been destroyed by the barbarians, that society would still have been there, feeding on other nutriment; for it was original, organic, a civilization. In *The Age of Constantine* Burckhardt had examined the death of one civilization: now he was examining the birth of another.

For all his love of Italy and its art, Burckhardt did not idealize the Renaissance. He was not an idealist, but a profound, reflective analyst. But like most of the German historians, he proceeded from the spirit to the matter. Always the spirit came first. And

what was the spirit of the Renaissance? Seeking to isolate it, Burckhardt discovers a new concept which he was to make peculiarly his own: the concept of an agonistic society, a society of competitive individualism. And whence came that individualism? Looking at Italian society in the fourteenth century and afterwards, he saw that it was dominated by princes who, unlike the feudal princes of the North, owed nothing to tradition, inheritance, consecration: they were illegitimate, usurpers, sometimes *condottieri* who could command no customary loyalty; and they had to keep, by constant exercise of their wits, the unstable power which they had acquired by force or fraud. In other words, the new Italian princes, by their very illegitimacy, were driven to make a virtue of an individualism which had destroyed the fabric of inherited society. The political system which they set up was not organic: it was mere machinery, *lo stato*, the established system, the State. Here 'for the first time', says Burckhardt, 'we detect the modern political spirit of Europe, surrendered freely to its own instincts, often displaying the worst features of an unbridled egotism, outraging every right and killing every germ of a healthier culture.' Here also we recognize the authentic voice of Burckhardt: his distrust of power, his hatred of that idol of the German historians, the State.

Such, to Burckhardt, was the essential and original character of the Renaissance. It is not an admirable society, especially to a traditional patrician of Basel. On the contrary, it is artificial, immoral, detestable. And yet this agonistic society, by the intensity and ferocity and pace of its life, created masterpieces of art and became a distinct culture—a hectic, feverish culture—of its own. Then, effectively, it destroyed itself. The petty states of Italy consumed their strength in furious competition. The petty princes disappeared, or were reduced to conformity. The Papacy, which had nearly been secularized by brigand popes, was transformed by the Counter-Reformation and resumed its old theocratic character; and the peninsula, which the unscrupulous rivalry of the princes had nearly handed over to the Turks, sank into a less disastrous dependence on the rival empire of Spain. Only the intellectual and artistic creations remained as the permanent deposit of that complex historical era which Burckhardt had isolated, defined and named.

When he looked back on it, Burckhardt—in the true spirit of Herder—refused to judge. How can one judge a 'totality of being'? Those deplorable politics had been inseparable from that intense cultural vitality. So, as so often, the verdict is suspended. 'The

ultimate truth with respect to the character, the conscience and the guilt of a people remains for ever a secret . . . The people of Europe can maltreat, but happily not judge one another. A great nation, interwoven, by its civilisation, its achievements and its fortunes, with the whole of the modern world, can afford to ignore both its advocates and its accusers. It lives on, with or without the approval of theorists.'

Nevertheless Burckhardt has his heroes in the Renaissance. One of them is Machiavelli. At first, this may surprise us; for was not Machiavelli the most cold-blooded of political realists, the very godfather of that Reason of State which the German historians professed to admire? Yes, Burckhardt would reply; but Machiavelli, unlike the Italian princes whom he despised, though he studied all the mechanics of state power and sought to construct a powerful state, knew that, to be effective, a state needed more than institutional machinery: it must be animated, as the free commune of Florence had been, by a living spirit, by *virtù*, by that intangible force which gives authentic life to a society, but which in the Italy of his time, had withered away. Machiavelli, like Burckhardt, was the pessimist who, in a mechanical age, sought to recapture the formative virtue of a society from which it was fleeing, or had fled.

Another hero of Burckhardt is Aeneas Sylvius, the Siennese humanist who became pope Pius II. The Papacy, of course, was the one legitimate monarchy in Italy, a monument of stability in the swirling egotisms around it, and in the time of Pius II it was not yet corrupted by imitating the lay princes. Besides Pius II had a Virgilian love of the countryside which appealed to Burckhardt, and liked picnics in the mountains: 'He would often hold consistories or receive ambassadors under huge old chestnut trees or beneath the olives on the greensward by some gurgling stream.' And then this agreeable pope had founded the university of Basel: that naturally ensured him high marks from Burckhardt.

Burckhardt's love of Italy and of Italian art sustained him for another seven years. In 1867 he published his third work of scholarship on it, his *Baukunst der Renaissance in Italien*. But then, as in 1848, public events distracted him and forced his thought into new channels. For we are now in those critical years in which the old European balance, so precariously restored after the revolutionary years, was completely shattered by the *Realpolitik* of Bismarck. Three lightning wars in six years and the creation of a new empire, of enormous industrial power, in central Europe could not fail to excite historians—especially in the German-speaking lands.

Most excited of all were the Prussian historians at whose feet Burckhardt himself had once sat. To them the military victories of Prussia and the foundation of the Empire were the realization of their dream, the corroboration of their philosophy. The liberals of 1848 had failed to unite Germany, failed to convert the atomized *Kulturvolk* into a viable *Kulturstaat*. Now Bismarck had done it. How right Droysen had been to extol Macedon and Alexander and to despise that parochial Athenian windbag Demosthenes! The power of the state, wielded by the 'great man', the agent of destiny thrown up to meet the need in the crises of history—that was the necessary mechanism of historic change. How right Ranke was to emphasize the historic function, and the divine right, of the state, the primacy of foreign policy, the salutary function of war! It is true, Ranke, the old legitimist, had at first been uneasy about Bismarck, but by now he had swallowed his doubts. His disciples had no doubts. War, they declared, was the proper function of the state, its healthy exercise: 'ein frischer fröhlicher Krieg', as the historian Heinrich Leo put it, 'um das skrofulöse Gesindel wegzufegen'; and had not Herder himself extolled the superior culture of the Germanic barbarians whose native vigour was now armed and directed in accordance with the new science of *Weltgeschichte*?

It was in opposition to this gradual perversion of the ideas of Herder and Goethe that Burckhardt had formulated his own views of history—his antipathy to the state and state power, his insistence on the totality of culture, his refusal to identify state and culture, his distrust of the demiurgic 'great men' of history, his rejection of a metaphysical World Plan, Ranke's *Weltgeschichte*, Droysen's 'Theodicy'. Now, in the destruction of the European order, he saw the confirmation of his fears. He could not regard the immense power of the modern industrial state as merely the natural protective shell of the culture behind it. Power, he believed, was separate from culture, could be hostile to it, had a momentum of its own, and was, in itself, evil. The 'great men' of history were essentially wielders of power and therefore to be distrusted. They might indeed be the effective agents of historical change, but the idea that such change was part of a 'world plan' in which the occasional set-backs were more than compensated by the general advance seemed to him absurd. The laws of history, he insisted, are to be deduced from history itself—and from history in general, not from chosen periods only. And such deduction was best carried out at a distance—from an observation post in Basel, not in the intoxicating atmosphere of Berlin.

It had been Burckhardt's intention, after completing his work

on the Renaissance, to write (as he lectured) on the civilization of the Middle Ages, on the life of those free communes whose extinction had been the political condition of the Italian Renaissance. He never wrote such a work. The events of 1864–71 concentrated his mind, and directed it towards their explanation. Long ago, in 1851, he had planned a course on the Study of History. Now, in 1868, when Bismarck had smashed the Austrian army at Sadowa, set up the North German Confederation, and was already challenging the new French imperialism of Napoleon III, he resumed this old project in a new form. The result was the series of lectures which his nephew Jacob Oeri would publish after his death under the title *Weltgeschichtliche Betrachtungen*.

Those lectures, unsystematic as they are—for Burckhardt hated systems of thought—are the nearest he ever came to a profession of faith. In form, they deal with three essential forces in history which he now distinguished: Religion, State and Culture; and his particular interest, the force which he himself had introduced into the argument, was culture. To the German historians, all these forces were complementary, interdependent aspects of the same organism. To Burckhardt they were not: they could be antithetical; and, in particular, Culture was often opposed to and oppressed by both State and Religion. Throughout the lectures, in which he examined and illustrated the forms and the relationships of these three forces, and in three further lectures, which are outgrowths from the same stem, on 'The Present Crisis of the State', 'The Function of Great Men in History', and 'Good and Bad Fortune in History', he expressed his total dissent from the new German orthodoxy. Both here and in his correspondence he now offered his own very different views on the real nature of culture and on the present and future of civilization in Europe.

How can one summarize the views of Burckhardt on so wide and deep a subject, expressed, as they generally are, in Aesopian asides, sardonic apophthegms? No writer is such a master of profound but elusive wisdom as this deeply philosophical historian who disclaimed any philosophy, this observer of world history who explicitly disowned 'world-historical ideas'. Nevertheless, as we read his works, the lineaments of his philosophy emerge clearly enough.

First, like all the German historians, he hated the French Revolution; but, unlike most of them, he believed that its practical results had come to stay. The Restoration of 1815, which Metternich and Ranke saw as a real restoration, was to him a mere fiction. The legitimate dynasties, who had been restored,

were no longer effective rulers: they continued by permission only. The balance of power, which Metternich had operated and Ranke extolled, was to him a myth, an improper generalization from the exceptional circumstances of the years before 1848. In fact, he insisted, the effects of the French Revolution were irreversible, and the forces that had made it were continuously at work, as had been shown in 1848: the age of the masses had come. Secondly, he believed that this change was a cultural change, in his sense of that word: that is, that the old totality of European culture, like Hellenism in the third century AD, had been drained of its vitality and could not sustain itself against the new purely material culture of the masses, which was no culture at all. This was the goal to which the 'giddy optimism' of the European liberals was leading them. Thirdly, he believed that the state—that amoral state first called into being by those illegitimate princes of Italy and then continuously strengthened by centralizing governments, whether autocratic or revolutionary—would never give up the enormous increase of its power which was one of the results of the revolution. The German historians did not object either to its amorality (which they justified) or to its power (which was now German power). But Burckhardt thought differently. Power to him was distinct from culture; it was even the enemy of culture; it was also 'in itself evil'. It had a demonic character, and a momentum of its own.

From these premisses Burckhardt ventured to prophesy the future of Europe. His prophecies were less comforting than those of his contemporaries. The old dynasties, the old political systems, he believed, would linger on for a time, but only by permission, so long as prosperity lasted. Perhaps they would adapt themselves to mass rule, become 'Caesarian'. This was what Napoleon III had tried to do, what Bismarck was doing. Bismarck, with his clear political vision, had seen the forces of the future and had forestalled them: he had said, '*Ipse faciam*', and driven forward by the need to resolve internal difficulties, he had embarked on three wars, 1864, 1866, 1870. But what after Bismarck? And what if prosperity should fail? Power divorced from culture and morality, power based on enormous industrial resources, would then be at the mercy of populist demagogues. Then the old order, hitherto artificially sustained, may be expected to crumble. The old dynasties will be pushed aside, and new dictators, *Gewaltmenschen*, will step in, who will use the overgrown power of the state, so easily transferable from hand to hand, to end the luxury of nineteenth-century liberalism and set up a new form of life. 'I know the

modern state', he had written in 1863, 'and when the time comes, it will display its ruthless omnipotence in evident and most practical form.' At present 'we are only at the beginning . . .', he wrote in 1872: 'I have a suspicion which, at the moment, sounds completely mad, and yet I cannot rid myself of it'; and he envisaged the rise, first of all in Germany, of a military industrial state, driven forward to conquest by inner necessity, under demagogic dictators, 'the *terribles simplificateurs* who are going to descend upon poor old Europe'.

And what, in the meantime, of the culture of poor old Europe? That, Burckhardt believed, would be the victim. 'Now comes a monstrous war', he wrote in 1870, 'the State will once again put forth its hand to master culture . . . Later wars will do the rest.' Perhaps, he observed sombrely, we shall become like the Americans . . . for there is an idea of culture which Burckhardt hates, and which he ascribes to our transatlantic cousins: of art and literature divorced from history, from its historical context and continuity—in other words, from its life—and converted into a form of entertainment for rich *dilettanti*. Americans, he remarks, 'have to a great extent foregone history, i.e. spiritual continuity, and wish to share in the enjoyment of art and poetry merely as forms of luxury.' But culture to Burckhardt—it is the essence of his philosophy—is not detachable from the social forms which produce it. Its total external form is 'society in its broadest sense'. To detach it is to kill it.

What then must the heir of the German Enlightenment do in the new era which is dawning? How is he to preserve culture, the undivided personality, freedom of mind? What indeed except imitate those dissenters of the early centuries who separated themselves from the world, contracted out of society, and nursed their spiritual isolation in the desert. Already in 1853, in *The Age of Constantine*, he had defended the early Christian anchorites without whose example the Church 'would have become entirely secularised and have necessarily succumbed to crass material power'. That was their response to the crisis of their time. Now, in a comparable period of crisis, he looked for a new generation of 'ascetics' who would withdraw from the great cities and their cult of Mammon 'and the horrible luxury to which official literature and art are falling victim . . .'.

Burckhardt's prophetic period was in the years 1868–72, and we cannot fail to note that those years—the years of Bismarck and the founding of the German Empire—were the years in which another famous prophet had joined him as professor in Basel: the

young Nietzsche. Much has been written on the relations between Burckhardt and Nietzsche. Here it is enough to say that all the ideas which they have in common—opposition to Hegel and Ranke, appeal to Goethe and Schopenhauer, repudiation of German historicism and ‘scientific’ history, insistence on the antithesis of state and culture, belief in the inherent evil of power—had been expressed by Burckhardt long before Nietzsche’s arrival. The two men were very different: Burckhardt, by 27 years the older, so detached, so sane, so suspicious of philosophy, so elliptical in his language, so ready to leave insoluble questions suspended in mystery. Nietzsche so strident, so decisive, so suspicious of history, and, in the end, mad. But from beginning to end—from 1870 when Nietzsche was excited by Burckhardt’s lecture on Historical Greatness, till 6 January 1889, when he sent a four-page letter to Burckhardt declaring that he would rather be a Basel professor than God, and then disappeared into the darkness of total lunacy—there was a regular exchange of ideas between them, and that exchange, based on a large measure of previous, independent agreement, finds expression in the writings of both.

Particularly it is expressed in the last substantial work on which Burckhardt was engaged in precisely those years. For in 1868 he had decided that his next book would not, after all, be a work of medieval history: instead he would systematically read through ‘all Greek and Roman authors’ in order to write a work on ‘the Spirit of Antiquity’ comparable, as he himself said, with his book on *The Civilisation of the Renaissance*. It was an idea which had long tempted him, as it had previously tempted his classical teacher in Berlin, August Boeckh. Now, under the same pressure which had created his *Weltgeschichtliche Betrachtungen* (for the two works, as Werner Kaegi has written, are *Zwillingskinder*, twins), he decided to realize it. Next year, Nietzsche arrived in Basel as professor of classical philology, and at once became a close friend of Burckhardt. In 1871–2 Nietzsche published his first book, *The Birth of Tragedy*. In the same year Burckhardt gave, for the first time, his lectures on *Griechische Kulturgeschichte* to the largest audience he had ever drawn: fifty-four persons from the university.

Between Nietzsche’s *Birth of Tragedy*, which caused such a storm in the German classical establishment, and Burckhardt’s *Griechische Kulturgeschichte*, which was first published twenty-seven years later, in spite of all differences of form, there is much in common. Both writers sought to discover the ‘spirit’, the psychological springs, of the Greek character. What excited Burckhardt in Nietzsche’s book was the discovery—Nietzsche regarded it as his



discovery—of the ‘Dionysian’ spirit in Greek culture: the idea that the Greek achievement did not spring from a naturally balanced serenity—a view made popular by Schiller—but from a successful attempt to master and ritualize overpowering irrational impulses. Burckhardt incorporated this new idea in his lectures, which Nietzsche attended and urged him to publish, and Burckhardt acknowledged his debt to Nietzsche; but it is difficult to disentangle the debts of one to the other: the ‘agonistic’ interpretation of culture, which they shared, goes back to Burckhardt’s *The Civilisation of the Renaissance*, and many of the ideas which seem to have come from Nietzsche are foreshadowed in the draft of the *Weltgeschichtliche Betrachtungen*, written in the autumn of 1868, before Nietzsche’s arrival in Basel. What we can say is that Burckhardt’s posthumous *Griechische Kulturgeschichte* and Nietzsche’s precipitate *Geburt der Tragödie* were products of the same time and shaped by shared ideas: the ideas which they exchanged, in this period of their closest friendship, in the ‘long walks and talks’ recalled by Nietzsche.

They also shared the same immediate fate. Each, as it was published, was ritually slaughtered by the great champion of German classical studies, Ulrich von Wilamowitz. Wilamowitz’s shrill and savage attack on Nietzsche is notorious. By the time he came to deal with Burckhardt, he had mellowed a little; but he was unsparing. The work, he wrote, should never have been published: for the world of scholarship it had no significance, ‘it does not exist’; for it had not taken note of the philological contributions of the last fifty years . . .

Burckhardt had foreseen the attacks that would be made on his work. He had witnessed the reaction to Nietzsche’s book, and he knew that his own views would be unacceptable to the same critics. No doubt that is why he was so reluctant to publish them. As he said, to one who tried to lure him into print, ‘No, no, a poor outsider like me, who does not belong to the establishment, cannot take that risk: I am a heretic and an ignoramus, and with my questionable views I would be torn to pieces by those *virī eruditissimi*. Believe me, *Je connais ces gens*. I need peace in my old age.’ He even denied the existence of the text: that, he said was a fantasy, or a misunderstanding, of ‘poor Dr. Nietzsche’ who was now in an asylum . . . But in fact it is clear that he valued his work, for he ensured that it would be published after his death. It might not have achieved final form; but it represented his considered views. In it he sought to recapture and explain that ‘wonderful totality of being’ whose dissolution he had described in his first work, *The Age of Constantine*, and to do so when his vision had been

sharpened by the revolutionary events of 1868–71 and by the stimulating dialogue with Nietzsche.

The result was a book which did indeed ignore many of the gains of the philologists in the past fifty years, but which gave to the future study of Antiquity a new dimension and a new direction. As in Renaissance Italy, so now in ancient Greece, Burckhardt sought to explain the 'spirit' which distinguished and animated society by examining both the structure of political life and the psychology which it engendered. In Italy it had been the cut-throat individualism of illegitimate power, here it was the fierce political rivalries of the city states. But by now, under the pressure of events, he had refined his concepts, and so he applied to the interpretation of Greek history the analytical methods which he had set out in his lectures—the unpublished *Weltgeschichtliche Betrachtungen*. That is, having discovered the 'spirit' of Hellenism in its 'myth'—myth, to him, is the great universal source and strength of civilization—he follows its response to the changing interrelation of religion, state and culture. Burckhardt did not love the city states of Greece any more than the illegitimate princes of Italy. Greek political life might be the necessary condition of the Greek genius for freedom, but in action it was fierce, bitter and bloody, and the passions which it fostered had to be transcended, disciplined or sublimated in order that culture could flourish. And that culture, thus conditioned, was not the fresh, spontaneous expression of a genial, rounded personality, as his predecessors had supposed, but sombre and pessimist. Therefore, in the end, the greatest of the Greeks, to Burckhardt, are those who reject or escape from that exacting political loyalty: Pythagoras, who sought (like Burckhardt) to preserve the essential myth—the 'spirit'—of Greece while shedding its unacceptable or trivial formulations, and who founded an ascetic community outside politics; Socrates, the greatest critic, and the greatest victim, of the city state; Diogenes, 'the genial pessimist', the freest of 'free personalities'. In all of these, to some extent, Burckhardt saw himself: distrust of the state, whatever its form, especially if it enforced a religion of state, and respect for 'anchorites' who withdrew from it, were essential elements in his philosophy.

In the end, distrust of the city state, and respect for the culture which had transcended it, led Burckhardt to what may seem a paradoxical conclusion: to admiration for Alexander the Great who destroyed it, engulfing the city states of Greece in a universal 'Hellenistic' empire. This had been the theme of Droysen, before he was diverted from the Macedonian to the Prussian empire. But

as always, Burckhardt went his own way. He would not follow Droysen in his condemnation of the last great defender of Athenian democracy. As in *The Civilisation of the Renaissance*, he refused to be a judge. 'If I have said that Philip of Macedon was the man of his time, and his policy that of the future', he wrote, that does not mean that I cast even the shadow of a reproach upon Demosthenes, his political enemy . . .' Droysen had said that nobody cut a more pathetic figure than Demosthenes, who misunderstood his time, his people, his enemy, and himself. 'No one', retorts Burckhardt, 'cuts a more pathetic figure here than the *vir eruditissimus* Gustav Droysen.' If Demosthenes had preached surrender, like his Athenian adversaries, we would despise him, as we despise them. 'The minority, whether it conquers or perishes, has its part in world history.' Demosthenes may have been historically wrong—the Macedonian Empire may have preserved Greek culture; but we must respect a great man who, like the Titans, went down vainly resisting the inevitable course of history.

Thus in the end, Burckhardt accepted and reinforced the 'Macedonian' theory, and the idea that, in this case, but perhaps only in this case, the state—the Macedonian kingdoms afterwards absorbed by Rome—was the expression and the protector of culture. But this, to him, was merely a historical fact; not, as to Droysen, part of a divine purpose.

Six years after the publication of *Griechische Kulturgeschichte* had been repudiated by the philological establishment, Burckhardt's nephew published its 'twin', the *Weltgeschichtliche Betrachtungen*, in which he similarly challenged the historical establishment. The spokesman of the historical establishment at that time, its Wilamowitz, was Friedrich Meinecke. Meinecke had been young in the days when Bismarck created the German Empire. He had accepted with enthusiasm the historical philosophy of the Prussian school. Now, reviewing Burckhardt's lectures, less ferociously indeed than Wilamowitz, he lamented 'the great gulf which divides his historical outlook from that of his German contemporaries': those contemporaries who saw world history as an orderly process, and the Prussian state, pursuing its reason of state, as the embodiment and realization of German culture.

For in 1905 the German philosophy of history, and the German 'third humanism' in philology, were firmly entrenched. In 1914, when the German government went to war, the historians and philologists—Wilamowitz and Meinecke among them—sprang to its support, making public speeches and writing articles in which the established orthodoxy was cited and the war

presented as a crusade for German culture, the culture of Goethe and Schiller as redefined by Hegel, Ranke and their disciples. All through the war this philosophical orthodoxy was repeated, and even the defeat of 1918 did not shake it; for that defeat, it was agreed, was an undeserved misfortune not a historical necessity. Even when power in the state was handed to Hitler and German culture was redefined again as racial purity, the doctrine was not disowned. The rise of Hitler did indeed at first disturb Meinecke, as that of Bismarck had at first disturbed Ranke; but like Ranke, he would come round, and by 1940 he was openly exulting in the military victories of Hitler as Ranke had done in those of Bismarck. Historical Necessity, it was admitted, chose surprising instruments, but after an unfortunate interruption it was back on course and working according to plan. All this time the dissenting voice of Burckhardt was heard in Germany only in whispers or silenced by official disapproval. He was regarded as defeatist, parochial, unable to rise to the great events of history; and his *Weltgeschichtliche Betrachtungen* could be republished only in Switzerland: paper for it, in Germany, was not allowed.

However, by 1943, the tide had turned. As the impending defeat of Germany became clear, the established orthodoxy began at last to fail. In the last months of the war Meinecke himself turned to Burckhardt. 'Will Burckhardt triumph over Ranke?' he rhetorically asked; and when all was over, in 1947, at the age of 85, in a famous lecture on 'Ranke and Burckhardt', he declared his conversion. After confessing that all his life he had been guided by Ranke as his 'polar star', he admitted that 'today, we begin to ask ourselves, whether, in the end, we and our successors, as historians, will not look rather to Burckhardt than to Ranke.' At that moment the historical philosophy of Ranke (though not necessarily its scholarly deposit) may be said to have been declared bankrupt, and Burckhardt, the outsider, so isolated in his own time, to have been recognized as a 'master-mind'.