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Burckhardt in Love: A Response to Lionel Gossman

Julia Reinhard Lupton

Burckhardt Symposium

John Madden's recent film, *Shakespeare in Love*, accrues its historical and indeed *historiographical* interest not from any antiquarian impulse, but rather from the way it links Shakespeare's artistic achievement to his engagement with the life and work of another dramatist, Christopher Marlowe. In the film, Marlowe's flamboyant farcicalness, grandiloquent poetry, and short, violent life lay the groundwork for the mimetic achievements of Shakespeare, who took both his inspiration and his negative example from the extremes mapped by Marlovian virtuosity. The film even introduces a third term: the Artaudian excess of the young John Webster, who confesses in the film to having "played the head in *Titus Andronicus*," and who is thus given the historical task of enunciating within Shakespeare's early work a theatre of cruelty at odds with the representational canons of the high Shakespearean tradition. Moreover, through its very liberties with history, the film manages to replicate some of the definitive moves of that most creative of historians, William Shakespeare. By applying the plot of *Romeo and Juliet* to the war of the theatres, the film reproduces not Shakespeare the man but rather that battery of playful revisionary and allusive techniques, of incessant double-plotting, that characterizes Shakespeare's relation to his own historical and literary sources.

Like the Marlowe-Shakespeare couple in Madden's film, the Rembrandt-Rubens dialectic charted by Lionel Gossman visualizes modernity as a set of competing paths laid out by the traditions and anti-traditions mobilized by artists of the past, a complex of alternate [End Page 929] routes that lead to an as-yet undetermined future of art. Gossman shows how Burckhardt's coupling of Rubens and Rembrandt sheds light not so much on these painters themselves as on the choices and constraints, the values and valences, that define Burckhardt's own contribution to and contextualization within the world of nineteenth-century historiography. Whereas the younger Burckhardt had preferred the fully classicist Raphael to the painterly Rubens, the older Burckhardt, acknowledging the inevitability of modernity, finds in Rubens a helpful and hopeful balance between classical and Romantic impulses, in contradistinction to Rembrandt's willful and subjectivist disregard for past tradition.

Gossman finds embedded within the work of the *art historian*, dedicated to reconstructing the world of the past, the project of the *art critic*, who speculates about the art of the future. Will German art,

wonders Gossman's Burckhardt, go in the direction of Rubens or Rembrandt? In Burckhardt's calculus, Rembrandt is *modern, all too modern*, and his "Promethean" overreaching finds dramatic precedent in the rebellious heroes, the Faustusses and Tamburlaines, of Marlowe and his Romantic imitators. Rubens, on the other hand, is *modern, but not too modern*; his *Existenzbilder*, like those of Shakespeare, are characterized by their "ennobled naturalism, individual depth, distinctive character and beauty"--words that Burckhardt could have borrowed from August Wilhelm von Schlegel's Shakespeare criticism to describe his own private Rubens. (When the younger Burckhardt somewhat disparagingly characterizes Rubens as the Shakespeare of painting, he is in a sense reading Shakespeare as Marlowe, as pure Romantic.)

The comparison of two artists, rather than the abstraction of a set of aesthetic principles (such as line and color or classical and baroque), allows Burckhardt to do this work in an historically grounded fashion. Although Burckhardt was Heinrich Wölfflin's teacher and mentor, he was temperamentally incapable of producing a drama of generalities. Gossman demonstrates how for Burckhardt, the work of every artist instantiates a particular arbitration between the artistic tradition, the extra-aesthetic demands of the cultural moment, and the talents of the artist himself. Thus Burckhardt's analysis of Rubens is as much about the conditions for artistic production represented by the Catholic mercantile culture of Antwerp as it is about Rubens' painterly appropriations of linear classicism. And these reflections on Antwerp in turn allow Burckhardt to engage indirectly, through the mediating mirror of the past, with the history and promise of his own city-state of Basel within the troubling arena of the new nationalisms of post-Revolutionary Europe. **[End Page 930]**

The foundational model of this reasoning by duet is surely the comparative rhythm--the movement between type and antetype, teacher and disciple, precursor and revolutionary--that gives Vasari's sprawling *Lives of the Artists* its local coherence and dramatic tension. For both Vasari and Burckhardt, every artist is *am Scheidewege*, bound to create at the crossroads of patron, patrimony, and personality. Although Burckhardt, unlike Vasari, preferred Leonardo to Michelangelo, the tradition of pairing these two artists in search of the historico-conceptual background behind current and future artistic challenges certainly stems from Vasari himself. Burckhardt's shocking judgment that Rembrandt could not draw simply restates Vasari's critique of the Dutch master's Venetian original, Titian. In Vasari at his best, as in Burckhardt at his best, *art history*--the study of visual forms and meanings--is also *biography*--the drama of individual choices. Biography in turn becomes *cultural history*, unfolding within a unique cityscape of patrons, landmarks, and social customs. Titian's Venice, Raphael's Urbino, and Michelangelo's Rome emerge in and between the works of Vasari and Burckhardt, the edges and outlines of their particular corners on connoisseurship sketching out the conditions of creativity exploited by their civic heroes, their secular saints.

In Gossman's analysis, Burckhardt stages an epoch-defining agon between Rubens and Rembrandt as exemplars of a set of serious artistic choices with both historical conditions and historical consequences. In the process, Burckhardt (and Gossman) is able to use past and present to reflect on each other in ways that are neither subjectively presentist nor objectively fixated on the pastness of the past. In Gossman's re-creative reconstruction, Burckhardt uses the mediation of past and present to point towards a future directed but not constrained by historical tendencies, latent possibilities best brought forward by the identification and analysis of constitutive historical examples. This opening towards the future is beautifully instantiated by the final moments of Gossman's essay, in which he maps the Rubens-Rembrandt ratio onto the reception of Burckhardt himself: "If Rubens was

Burckhardt's answer to Rembrandt, Burckhardt appears to have been Warburg's answer to Nietzsche." Just as Rubens embodied a classical moment within modernity, and hence the last best chance for salvaging a positive, non-reactionary tradition for the current moment, Burckhardt represented for Warburg an antidote to the modernist extremes of the Basel historian's overzealous admirer, Nietzsche.

We could easily extend such a dialectic further, to the reception of Warburg himself. In his biography of Warburg, at once an homage [End Page 931] and an uneasy assessment, Gombrich repeatedly finds in Panofsky a classicizing counterbalance to Warburg's Nietzschean strains, which remained in Gombrich's judgment insufficiently mitigated by the Burckhardtian influence. We could say that for Gombrich, Warburg plays Marlowe/Rembrandt to Panofsky's Shakespeare/Rubens. Who, then, might represent the third term, the John Webster of art historiography? Here I would place Walter Benjamin, the thinker who isolated and exacerbated that modernist substratum in Warburg that Gombrich finds so embarrassing. In 1927, Hoffmansthal tried to introduce Benjamin to the Warburg circle via Panofsky, who rebuffed him; a copy of Benjamin's *Origin of the German Tragic Drama* remains in the Warburg Library, inscribed in Aby Warburg's hand with a greeting to Fritz Saxl (Brodersen, 90). The inscribed volume remains as the material sign of a missed encounter between two practitioners of a radical iconography that takes shape just beyond the hermeneutic synthesis of iconology, as the allegorical formalization and exacerbation of its limit cases.

The larger question posed by Professor Gossman's paper can be framed in the following way: *Wozu* art historiography? Should we proceed out of Warburg's demonic classicism, following the Jew of Hamburg and Faustus of art history into the underworld of a maddening antiquity? Should we rather take our bearings from Panofsky's more balanced iconology, finding in him a magisterial Prospero, ultimate harmonizer of form and meaning in the perfection of the symbol? Or do we rather follow Benjamin, Duke of Malfi, into the allegorical wilderness of a perennially baroque modernism? These are the kinds of issues that take shape in the space that Lionel Gossman has opened up between Rubens and Rembrandt, as these two figures confront each other in the reflections of Burckhardt and their modern reception.

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