# Burke, P: ‘Reading History’, *History Today, vol: 34, issue: 6*, 1984

A discussion of recent studies of the Italian Renaissance needs to begin by questioning the assumption that there really was such a movement. Historians are somewhat more reluctant than they used to be to assert confidently that Italian culture of the period (say) 1350-1600 (no one can agree on the dates, which is one of the problems), was different in kind from what went before it, and that there was a sharp break in tradition. Two recent books which cut usefully across the conventional divide between 'Middle Ages' and 'Renaissance' are John Larner's vivid and perceptive Italy in the Age of Dante and Petrarch (Longman, 1980), and the vigorous, crude study by Lauro Martines, Power and Imagination (1979; Penguin, 1983). Another helpful introduction is Denys Hay, The Italian Renaissance in its Historical Background (second ed., Cambridge University Press, 1977).

Every decade produces an extensive crop of books on some aspect of Renaissance Italy, without making the general picture of that culture much clearer. Modern academic specialisation has cut 'ordinary' historians off from art historians, historians of literature, historians of music, and intellectual historians (themselves now subdivided into historians of philosophy, science, political thought and so on), while the foundation of 'Renaissance Studies' in some institutions has added an extra subject rather than bringing the others together. When these modern divisions are superimposed on a Renaissance 'Italy' which was culturally as well as politically and geographically fragmented, it is no wonder that the general trends are difficult to discern. For the sake of clarity I shall discuss art, ideas and society in that order, returning to more general problems at the end of this survey, which is deliberately brief and limited to works available in English.

On the art of the Italian Renaissance, more especially the study of its meaning, or 'iconography', the work of the great generation of central European exiles of the 1930s remains indispensable. Among its most notable productions are Erwin Panofsky's Studies in Iconology (1939; Harper, 1962); his Renaissance and Renascences in Western Art (1960; Paladin, 1970); Rudolf Wittkower's Architectural Principles in the Age of Humanism (1949; Tiranti, 1962); Edgar Wind's Pagan Mysteries in the Renaissance (1958, revised ed. Oxford University Press, 1980); and, the youngest of that generation, Sir Ernst Gombrich's essays, collected in Norm and Form (Phaidon, 1966), Symbolic Images (Phaidon, 1972), and The Heritage of Apelles (Phaidon, 1976).

In the next generation, the work of Michael Baxandall, who, like Gombrich, is a member of the Warburg Institute, is outstanding. His Giotto and the Orators (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971), and Painting and Experience in Fifteenth Century Italy (Oxford University Press, 1972) draw the iconographical and sociological approaches, together with the history of taste, into a kind of visual anthropology. The emphasis, in the work of Panofsky and others, on learned programmes for paintings, has evoked a reaction, a good example of which is Charles Hope's article, 'Artists, Patrons and Advisers in the Italian Renaissance', in Patronage in the Renaissance, ed. G.F. Lytle and S. Orgel (Princeton University Press, 1981).

For reference, three volumes of the Pelican History of Art are of great value; S.J. Freedberg's Painting in Italy 1500-1600 (1971), Charles Seymour's Sculpture in Italy 1400-1500 (1966), and Ludwig Heydenreich and Wolfgang Lotz, Architecture in Italy 1400-1600 (1974). Of the vast production of monographs it is impossible to mention more than a few good recent studies of major artists, such as Bruce Cole's Giotto and Florentine Painting (Harper, 1976); Leopold and Helen Ettlinger, Botticelli (Thames and Hudson, 1976); Howard Hibbard, Michelangelo (1975; Penguin, 1978), supplemented by David Summers, Michelangelo and the Language of Art (Princeton University Press, 1981); and James Ackerman, Palladio (Penguin, 1966). Roger Jones and Nicholas Penny, Raphael (Yale University Press, 1983) looks at Raphael's 'achievements and ambitions as a painter, architect, archaeologist and entrepreneur', while Martin Kemp, Leonardo da Vinci (Dent, 1981) attempts, with success, to present that many-sided man as a whole.

Humanism is of course the other great theme of Renaissance studies. The dominant approach, as in the case of art, is that of scholars – often central European – who made their mark in the 1930s, notably Paul Kristeller, Hans Baron, and Eugenio Garin. Kristeller's essays, brought together in his Renaissance Thought and its Sources (Columbia University Press, 1979), remains the best introduction to Italian humanism, defined with characteristic precision as a movement associated with teachers of the 'humanities', in other words grammar, rhetoric, poetry, ethics and history. Baron's Crisis of the Early Italian Renaissance (Princeton University Press, 1955), is a powerful, if not entirely persuasive attempt to relate the humanism of Leonardo Bruni and other Tuscans of the early fifteenth century to Florentine traditions of republican liberty. It was Baron who coined the now popular term 'civic humanism'. Bruni's Panegyric to the City of Florence, on which Baron's argument depends, is now available in English in The Earthly Republic, ed. B.G. Kohl and R.G. Witt (University of Pennsylvania Press, 1.978). Garin is best known for his general study of Italian Humanism (1947; English translation, Greenwood Press, 1975). He has also done important work on the history of education, though this has not been translated, and he was one of the first to make a serious study of the occult interests of Italian humanists, in his Astrology in the Renaissance (1976: English translation, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1983), and in earlier essays. He was followed by the late Frances Yates, whose Giordano Bruno and the Hermetic Tradition is concerned not only with Bruno but also with earlier humanists such as Ficino and Pico della Mirandola, emphasising their interest in the secret Jewish tradition of cabala and in the ideas attributed to the ancient Egyptian sage 'Hermes Trismegistus'.

The interpretations of humanism put forward by Kristeller, Baron and Garin have all been questioned by younger scholars. Baron, for example, was criticised by Jerrold Seigel in the article ' "Civic Humanism" or Ciceronian Rhetoric?', Past and Present no. 34, 1966, which argues that rhetoric, rather than liberty, was the major preoccupation of the humanists in general and of Bruni in particular. Anthony Grafton and Lisa Jardine, in their 'Humanism and the School of Guarino', Past and Present no. 96, 1982, reject Garin's suggestion that humanist education produced ideal statesmen, and emphasise the gap between ambitious educational ideals and narrow educational practice. However, no major new interpretation has yet emerged to replace the Kristeller-Baron-Garin synthesis. Charles Trinkaus, In Our Image and Likeness (Constable, 1970), differs from them chiefly in his greater emphasis on the Christian concerns of the humanists. The old idea of Renaissance 'paganism' or 'syncretism' has been abandoned, and the new consensus stresses humanist interest in the fathers of the Church, particularly in their attempts to reconcile classical culture with Christian faith. From the other side, Donald Weinstein, Savonarola and Florence (Princeton University Press, 1970), has integrated that apparently anti-Renaissance figure into his age and his milieu. If there is a distinctive approach to Italian humanism in the younger generation, it is a compound of this stress on theology with the interest in rhetoric shown by Seigel's critique of Baron and by other studies, such as Nancy Struever's The Language of History in the Renaissance (Princeton University Press, 1970), an intriguing if obscure book which adopts the approach of structuralist literary criticism.

The writing of history in Renaissance Italy has inspired a cluster of valuable studies. Donald Kelley's Foundations of Historical Scholarship (Columbia University Press, 1970) includes an important chapter on Lorenzo Valla; Louis Green's Chronicle into History (Cambridge University Press, 1972) focuses on changes in the world-view of Florentine historians of the late fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries; Mark Phillips, Francesco Guicciardini: the Historian's Craft (Manchester University Press, 1977) is concerned with Guicciardini's History of Italy as literature, as well as with its reliability as an account of the past; while Eric Cochrane provides an ambitious and lively overview in his Historians and Historiography in the Italian Renaissance (University of Chicago Press, 1981).

The political thought of this period has long been an intensely cultivated field. Recent harvests include several good surveys, notably Nicolai Rubinstein, 'Political Theories in the Renaissance', in The Renaissance: Essays in Interpretation (Methuen, 1982); Quentin Skinner, Foundations of Modern Political Thought, volume I (Cambridge University Press, 1979), and, rather more idiosyncratic, John Pocock, The Machiavellian Moment (Princeton University Press, 1975j, more especially the first part. Among the more recent studies of Machiavelli, Felix Gilbert, Machiavelli and Guicciardini (Princeton University Press, 1965) deserves to be singled out, as does Quentin Skinner's lucid and elegant Machiavelli (Oxford University Press, 1981).

The Italian literature of the Renaissance has of course been the subject of innumerable studies in Italian. In English there is no satisfactory general book on Petrarch (though one is promised by Nicholas Mann). There are, however, some important essays, including Hans Baron, 'The Evolution of Petrarch's thought' in his From Petrarch to Leonardo Bruni (University of Chicago Press, 1968), and the chapters on Petrarch's poetry and his sense of the past in Thomas Greene's The Light in Troy (Yale University Press, 1983). Greene has also contributed to an important recent collective study of that archetypically Renaissance man, Castiglione, ed. Robert Hanning and David Rosand (Yale University Press, 1983), which is concerned not only with the ideas expressed in The Courtier but also with the literary strategies of that highly dramatic dialogue, of which the best English translation is that by George Bull (Penguin, 1967).

It is, however, in the social history of Renaissance Italy rather than in the history of art or ideas that the rising generation is making its most important and original contribution. Florence has, naturally enough, attracted most attention. Studies include Gene Brucker's Renaissance Florence (second ed., University of California Press, 1983) and his more specialised Civic World of Early Renaissance Florence (Princeton University Press, 1977); Samuel Cohn's The Laboring Classes in Renaissance Florence (Academic Press, 1980); Dale Kent's The Rise of the Medici (Oxford University Press, 1978), which deals with faction and neighbourhood in Florence between 1426 and 1434; F.W. Kent's Household and Lineage in Renaissance Florence (Princeton University Press, 1978), which emphasises the continuing vitality of the extended family among patricians such as the Rucellai; Richard Trexler's Public Life in the Renaissance Florence (Academic Press, 1980), which is concerned with the importance, meaning and functions of ritual; David Herlihy's Cities and Society in Medieval Italy (Variorum, 1980), which collects important articles; and Ronald Weissman's Ritual Brotherhood in Renaissance Florence (Academic Press, 1982). Stimulated by the work of historians, demographers and anthropologists on more recent centuries, this group of Florentine specialists are giving us a new picture of Florentine society, which will perhaps lead before long to a new interpretation of Renaissance culture. There has been less work on other cities. Venice is the best served, with Brian Pullan, Rich and Poor in Renaissance Venice (Blackwell, 1971), John Hale (ed.) Renaissance Venice (Faber, 1973), Edward Muir, Civic Ritual in Renaissance Venice (1981), among the most important contributions. In English, Peter Partner's Renaissance Rome (University of California Press, 1976) stands virtually alone.

There is still good work being done on the more traditional history of institutions. Nicolai Rubinstein's Government of Florence under the Medici (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1966) is a landmark, a kind of Namier for fifteenth-century Florence. Robert Finlay's Politics in Renaissance Venice (Benn, 1980) is a lively study based on the diary of a patrician, Marin Sanudo, as gossipy as Pepys but much more concerned with politics. Randolph Starr, Contrary Commonwealths (University of Califomia Press, 1982) is an imaginative exploration of the world of the political exiles. Denys Hay sums up recent research on ecclesiastical history in The Church in Italy in the Fifteenth Century (Cambridge University Press, 1977), while warfare is analysed in Michael Mallett's Mercenaries and their Masters (Bodley Head, 1974) and John Hale's essays, now collected in Renaissance War Studies (Hambledon Press, 1983).

With works like these we seem to have moved from the Renaissance as 'movement' to the Renaissance as 'period'. The problem is to fit the two together, to specify the links between the culture and the society. Among the attempts to do this (besides the works cited at the very beginning of this survey) there are Peter Burke, Culture and Society in Renaissance Italy (Batsford, 1972) and Richard Goldthwaite, The Building of Renaissance Florence (Johns Hopkins University Press, 1980), which is concerned with the links between economic and architectural history. Iain Fenlon's Music and Patronage in Sixteenth-Century Mantua (Cambridge University Press, 1980) explores similar connections between music and society. Yet these attempts at synthesis do not dissipate a general impression of fragmentation. It is perhaps appropriate that the book I would have to select, if asked to choose one book which sums up recent work on Renaissance Italy, is not an interpretation but a dictionary – John Hale (ed.) A Concise Encyclopaedia of the Italian Renaissance (Thames & Hudson, 1981).

 \* Peter Burke teaches history at Emmanuel College, Cambridge.