

Renaissance Profiles

J.H.Plumb ed.

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Italy of the 15th century (*Quattrocento*) is a truly fascinating world in miniature. One is reminded of the Liliputs of Gulliver¹. Small city states constantly in war with each other, following a Brownian dance of shifting alliances. Dynasties, proud noble families, rubbing shoulders with successful businessmen and other upstarts. A tradition of family pride, yet remarkable tolerant of illegitimacy. Blood maybe after all thicker than mere paper. It seems to have lasted only a century or so, emerging from relative obscurity and disappearing into well-deserved one. What remains? The popes, and politicians, and patrons of arts, now only have a curiosity value, but the truly great men of the period, who transcended it, are surely the artists, among whom Michelangelo and da Vinci stand out. Petrarch, the first humanist, surely deserve to be mentioned in the same breath as that of Dante and Boccaccio, and of course for all his faults and notoriety, Machiavelli carved for himself a niche for which he is remembered by posterity. Those are four out of nine profiles (the last being a dual one of two sisters) which are being collected, each of them written by a different author. Of the authors, only Clark, Bronowsky and Trevor-Roper are known to me, and the name of Denis Mack Smith, rings a bell, maybe because he had written a biography on Mussolini languishing in my library². The book itself, Harper Torchbook, of which I bought a few during my Harvard days, I retrieved from my library. It is a strange edition. A certain J.H.Plumb appears as the editor, but nowhere is there a preface or explanation by him. Why were those profiles written? Where they just assembled from extant sources or were they commissioned? It makes a difference. Thus it is a bit hard what to make out of it. Clark I know from his 'the Nude' which I read in my late twenties. I recall being extremely impressed by the quality of his prose³. And Bronowski, known from his series 'the Ascent of Man', I am familiar with, finding him a most sympathetic voice, Those two provide the two most interesting essays in the collection. Clark on the young Michelangelo, and Bronowski on Leonardo.

Michelangelo belongs to the very great, Clark reminds us of, up there with Shakespeare, Dante and Mozart, but differs from them by the focus of his appeal. He was a master painter, but above all a divine sculptor, who managed to transcend the classical Greek, who hitherto had been seen as the inaccessible masters. Michelangelo was above all

¹ As well as the ancient Greek City States. Some maverick historians, mainly of Russian vintage, even go so far as to claim that there is a confusion between the two. That Plato really lived six or seven hundred years ago, not over two thousand. Unrestricted speculation knows no reasonable limits

² This is true in fact. I just checked. I bought that book many years ago at Cambridge,MA. The lady in the cashier asked me whether i really wanted to buy that one. maybe she thought it showed a lack of taste. So far I have obviously not read it.

³ From 1970 I remember him presenting a series on Civilization for the television. Then I was less impressed.

entranced by the beauty of the male body, and to assume that he was a homosexual is a foregone conclusion. So passionate was his admiration that regardless of our prejudices on the subject, we cannot but feel that he transcends them. If God condemns all such perverts to the fires of hell, as some people preach, surely even they would ask him to make that one exception. He was a strange man, what else do you expect of a genius, who combined great physical and moral courage with attacks of panic which led him to rash acts and craven escapes. His great luck and curse was his association with the Pope Julius, who clearly recognized his supreme gifts as well as acting capriciously towards him. Michelangelo, according to contemporary witnesses, stood his ground against the papal authority. He knew his worth. On the great statute of David, Clark has this to say. It was as a whole defective, as the block of marble out of which it was hewn, was not up to his vision. On the other hand it was perfect in details, unsurpassed by either the classical Greeks themselves or his successors, but each part awkwardly attached onto others. But the quality that the statue inspires is that of heroism, and that, according to the author, is the quality more than others, which imbues the work of the sculptor. And by the heroic Clark means the awareness that life is a struggle, and that in this struggle it is courage, strength of will and determination which are decisive, not intelligence or mere sensibility. The heroic involves a contempt of comfort and convenience, and a sacrifice of all those pleasures that constitute civilization, he continues. For the heroic, Clark announces, is not merely a struggle with material obstacles; it is a struggle with Fate, It involves the individual in his conflict with destiny, suitably magnified, and as such constitutes the highest expression of humanism. But by this extremal position it also lands at the border of the same and thus is set to look beyond it.

Some other works by the young Michelangelo are studied and commented upon. As to the Pieta, contemporaries wondered why such a tormented body of Christ could have such a young innocent mother. Clark sees that as a manifestation of Neo-Platonism, which was becoming fashionable at the time, edging out the medieval obsession with Aristotle. The material is just a manifestation of the form. The Virgin Mary has a truly beautiful soul, and this is why she is made to be so young and beautiful. As to the paintings of the Sistine chapels, the physical ordeal of whose execution I recall reading about as a child, Michelangelo was given free reins to his imagination. Few things are more detrimental to the stimulus of that faculty than to be given no explicit constraints. It took more than a flash of divine inspiration or two, to set the stage. Finally Michelangelo solved the problem beautifully, by reversing the story. What first meets the eye is the material debauchery of a Noah, it is only as we penetrate closer into the sanctum, that the spiritual basis presents itself. Is there anybody among us who does not have that image impressed on his or her retina, of a languid Adam being given the spark of life (and consciousness) by having his finger touched by God.

Towards the end of his life in exile in Ambois ⁴ Leonardo grew bitter. He made a portrait of himself, showing an aged man well beyond his years. Bronowski suggests that Leonardo may have been right in thinking that he has wasted his life, but not in assuming that he had wasted his gifts as well. Leonardo was only incidentally a painter,

⁴ I recall becoming aware of that final dwelling of the great Leonardo, when I visited the town one rainy day in 1975 together with my first wife.

and as a painter he was surely remarkable, but yet not out of bounds. Leonardo was foremost a scientist, having had the misfortune of being born far too early. As Bronowski remarks, one remarkable thing about his life is the date of his birth. He was born a century before Shakespeare, and half a millennium before our own time. His legacy is above all his sketches, which give a window into his mind. He was lucky, and ultimately cursed, by the freedom given to him by Lodovico Sforza in Milan. He was free to follow his fancy, there never being any pressure for him to conclude any of his projects, he was at liberty to abandon them at whim. Thus there is so little by his hand, so few paintings to grace the museums of the modern world. And also the paintings he did were marred by slap-dash preparation and conservation, partly due to his passion for experimentation, the most notorious example being his fresco of the last supper, which started to degenerate even during his lifetime. And the most famous of his paintings - the Giocondo, which by its contemporaries was lauded for the freshness and warmth of its flesh tones, has now taken on a slightly green and moldy hue⁵. Instead he diverted his time, not only with thinking up great projects and inventions, such as helicopters, which would take centuries to materialize; but also with pure trivialities, mere trinkets, to entertain and divert a jaded court. This readiness to let his imagination be so indiscriminately employed, was not only a sign of originality but also of perversity.

To emphasize, Leonardo was first and foremost a scientist not an artist. The combination of the artistic and scientific strikes us now as anathema, in fact we are taught to believe that one excludes the other, and that the demands and sensibilities required in one are incompatible with those requested in the other. In former times this was not true at all. In fact painting itself was a scientific problem that was only solved towards the 15th century. The problem of depicting a 3-dimensional world on a 2-dimensional canvas. The invention of perspective was of course as much a mathematical feat as an artistic. To Leonardo the scientific impulse found expression in his eye. He really wanted to see what there really was to see. As he explains, a drawing draws on accumulation. A drawing is not just an image of what the eye sees, but a careful explanation of what there is to see. A single anatomical image is the result of many autopsies, revealing what is not apparent by a single glance. And indeed so accurate and to the point are the anatomical drawings of a Leonardo, that they can be favorably compared to modern images⁶. The artist eye is a hungry and curious eye, and so is that of the scientific impulse. and of course Leonardo was abetted by his unique tactile gifts of being able to effortlessly translate the image presented to the eye to paper. According to Bronowski his contemporaries thought of commanding nature by bewitchment, by gaining power by substituting for the laws of nature those of

⁵ My first encounter with the painting was a reproduction in a woman's magazine which my mother was reading. I must have been five or six. I recall ripping it out of its context (after my mother was done with the magazine) and putting it up on my wall. Needless to add, I had no idea that it was famous. Thus when my mother encountered it on the wall, she was very intrigued and no doubt highly gratified by this manifestation of superior taste, and gently inquired why I had chosen it.

⁶ This actually shows the superiority of an informed drawing over a mindless picture. In fact drawings of mushrooms and birds are far more efficient in imparting to the eye and understanding the salient features, which enable us to make the discriminations, which in the former case could literally mean the difference between life and death.

their own cunning. Leonardo understood that we can only command the forces of nature if we truly study them and appropriate them by our intelligent understanding. He was even an engineer wanting to disclose the hidden structure of things, such as the flight of a bird, in order to understand how they really worked (and could be emulated?). As Bronowski emphasizes. Leonardo did not believe that an analysis of the processes of nature deprived them of life, on the contrary. And, this is of crucial importance, Leonardo surely understood the importance of detail, a legacy of his curious and discerning eye, that a hypothesis stands and falls with its compatibility with factual detail. That scientific practice meant a wedding of logic and experimentation. Bronowski claims that only a painter at the time could have made and thus formulated those insights. But I think that the author misses a point. Leonardo was as little a pioneer of science as Archimedes was an inventor of calculus, despite the fact that both of them accomplished what it took, except for a crucial ingredient. Karl Popper reminds us that science is a collective enterprise. There is not really such a thing as science performed by an individual. Leonardo's was exactly that, a science pursued by an individual. He did not start a school or set a precedent, as I understand it he was discovered in retrospect as a scientific genius in isolation and lacking in issue, and thus somewhat of a curiosity, as is the relevant recent discovery of the accomplishments of an Archimedes. His re-appraisal is a recognition of a wasted life, not a part of the history of science.

Of Petrarch and Machiavelli I will say very little, and of the remaining almost nothing at all. Petrarch is considered the first Humanist whose passion it was to collect old manuscripts, in particular Greek ones, the tongue of which he never managed to learn. He was also a skilled versifier, to whom writing came with no discernible effort. In fact he wrote as easily as he breathed, but with more impact. His poems were well-received, and what can be more gratifying to our ego than having your thoughts, your most intimate and personal possessions, appropriated and approved of the multitudes. To survive by your pen is really the epitome of surviving by your wits. What is humanism? According to the author of his profile it is the combination of Love and Reason. And how can you ever object to such a characterization? One size fits all indeed.

Machiavelli is seen as the evil genius, extolling the amorality of naked power, because of once dashing off a pamphlet ostensible giving advice to a Prince. If so there is a curious discrepancy between the private man, who was one of impeccable integrity, steadfast in his loyalties, always true to his word, and leaving governmental service as poor as he entered. Consequently his book 'The Prince' was seen in the 18th century as a work of pure sarcasm. This is an anachronistic view, the author on the subject, informs us. At the time of Machiavelli there were actual conventions in which form a satire should be written. More likely is that like so many intellectuals Machiavelli did after all nourish a fascination for the man of power, so different from himself. A fascination for the substitution of the passion for knowledge with the desire for power, intelligence for cruelty, deliberate thought for swift action. This fascination is still with them today. Thus it cannot be ruled out of hand that 'the Prince' was really written, as some commentators suggest, to ingratiate himself into service. One should also be aware that in practical political matters, Machiavelli was very crude, not to say inept. He sinned against the most elementary of rules of negotiation, unable to hide his cards, to present a face of specious good-will, to

indulge and delight in duplicity. His lasting contribution, beyond the insistent notoriety of his pamphlet, were his works on statesmanship, such as his Discourses, to which the serious student of Machiavelli should turn. But in view of his ineptitude of practical politics, how much should we trust them? Are they perhaps not more than poems, be they fashioned in factual prose? But there is undeniable value in theoretical exploration, beyond the beauty of flights of fancy.

The remaining profiles involve heads of state and patrons of arts such as the Florentine Lorenzo de Medici and Federigo da Montefeltro of Urbino. Of the latter I had never heard, yet the name of classical Urbino engenders in my mind a pictorial image, and checking the name in Wikipedia I encounter the portrait that I always automatically associate with Urbino, and sure enough it is of the above mentioned character, the nose of his bridge removed to enable a large field of vision, the needs of which brought about by an early eye-injury in youth. Lorenzo was a head, not to say a tyrant, of a powerful Italian Republic (although as noted the powers of the Italian states were only large internally, from an external point of view they were risible). Federigo on the other hand ruled a very small state, the independence of which was only assured by the present technology of warfare, greatly on the side of defense as opposed to attack. When technology changed with the introduction of heavy artillery in the next century, the saga of small states such Urbino came to an end. The mountain state being very poor, the only means to secure riches were by war and plunder, and Federigo became a very successful *condottieri* offering his services to the highest bidder, yet being scrupulous of respecting his terms of duty. The combination of a man of war with a man of culture is an example of yet another seeming incompatibility. Surely we do not see such men today? Why? This is an interesting question.

The personality of Pope Pius II strikes me as less compelling. The interesting aspect is of course the possibility at the time of combining worldliness, including the pleasure of the flesh, with a spiritual calling. A kind of hypocrisy we find today very offensive, regardless of our beliefs in Christianity. There is of course a certain pathos connected to the reign of that pope, committed as he was to what was to be the last attempt of a Crusade, which was to flounder spectacularly. Trevor-Rope gives us a tantalizing glimpse into the power politics of Venice and the ambiguous role and rule of a Doge. An elevation to which was as much of a curse as a blessing and opportunity. Given the constraints surrounding the office, why should it attract an ambitious man? But as the author notes, you can wield influence, even in the absence of authority. The long reign of Francesco Foscari was deeply tragic, as his power and dignity was usurped. Clearly a topic for a tragic play, of which history supplies aplenty, far more than lies within the power of artists to fully exploit. Finally the depiction of the fates of the two sisters d'Este provides a final panorama of the power politics of Italy. The impotence of political power of women has always been resented, but history teaches us differently. Women have, for better or for good, exercised undeniable power in the past, examples of which should readily come to mind. In so doing they have seldom if ever exhibited any feminine sensibilities, but been as level-headed and cruel, as it is supposed that only men can be. There are of course many venues through which a woman can exert great power, even if not formally endowed with any. As wives, and especially as mothers. Mothers exert, and have always exerted a powerful influence on

their children. An influence of an art that goes deeper back than mere social convention, and thus is able to bypass it.

Finally all the vignettes presented through the profiles hang together, as they all concern a rather narrow slice in space and time. Thus the same name occurs in profile after profile, testifying that those are glimpses of real life, which differs from fiction mainly in being multiply connected⁷. Nothing works as repetition, and indeed the glimpses given, induces in the reader a desire to take part in a more systematic presentation. But of course the impressionistic approach has many advantages, especially those that work on the imagination.

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⁷ As Russell remarks, what distinguishes a phantom image from a 'real' one, is that the latter is also connected with other sensory impacts.