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SIR ERNST GOMBRICH AND THE BARBER FROM TUSCANY

KAREN LANG

Abstract: In the spirit of Sir Ernst Gombrich, this essay uses an anecdote—a chat between Gombrich and a barber from Tuscany—to illustrate a deeper point, namely, how cultural memory, tradition, and a canon give rise to an implied language of culture and cultural value. Gombrich staunchly defended tradition against relativism. By relativism, he meant something like "radical subjectivism." To his mind, subjectivism (in the cultural and social sense of the term) is not only impossible, since meaning is conferred through culture and society, but it is also dangerous (in the cultural and ethical sense of the term), since it denies the existence of shared values. Against consensus on the one hand and radical subjectivism on the other, Gombrich advocated a middle way: criticism and self-criticism to ensure latitude; the search for "truth" to ensure a limited plurality of interpretations.

Keywords: canon; cultural memory; E. H. Gombrich; relativism; tradition.

Gombrich's scholarly essays are peppered with anecdotes drawn from the street. This one comes from a 1975 correspondence with Quentin Bell:

> An Italian barber from Cambridge (Mass.) once told me, while he cut my hair, that he had lost all pride in his craft. When he had arrived from Tuscany he did his work with care and deliberation only to be upbraided by his boss: "Who do you think you are—Michelangelo?" I don't know whether either of them could have named many of Michelangelo's works, but they still knew what they were talking about. You and I have followed the rumor of that greatness to its origins and have tried to come to terms with it, but neither of us would have discovered Michelangelo in a civilization without memory, without a tradition—without a canon (Gombrich 1976, 181).

Like all good anecdotes, Gombrich's encounter with the barber from Tuscany is rich in allusion—to the United States as a country of immigrants; to the relative values of speed and craft in a capitalist society; to the demoralizing effects of mechanization (registered as a loss of pride in one's craft); to the common coin of cultural traditions. The social scientist might study the anecdote's implied social and economic contexts, and the impact of these on the individual. Gombrich, the cultural historian, employs the encounter as proof of "a living chain of tradition" (Gombrich 1951, 595). Tradition here implies the Latin term *traditio*, to hand down.

In spite of manifest differences in training and education (that is, whether the barber and his boss had a passing acquaintance with the Renaissance artist's work whereas Gombrich and Bell had followed the rumor of Michelangelo to its origins), they all knew what they were

talking about. Implicitly or explicitly, each referred to Michelangelo's artistic "greatness" and with it, to a canon of artistic value. As to the charge of elitism, Gombrich disparaged the way it prohibited mention of greatness and discussion of artistic quality more generally (Gombrich 1977). Snobbery, on the other hand, he considered as a species of close-mindedness to be avoided at all costs, including those of clubby affiliation, and hollow expression along the lines of "very interesting" (Gombrich 1951, 17-18). If the anecdote strikes a resounding note on behalf of cultural memory, tradition, and a canon, it also turns on Gombrich's belief that "any access to the past is better than that collective loss of memory with which we are threatened" (Gombrich 1971, 186). After all, he was quick to remind us, "civilizations have been known to die" (Gombrich 1985, 35).

Gombrich's encounter with the barber from Tuscany shows how "a living chain of tradition" gives rise to an implied language of culture and cultural value. It also demonstrates the way communication arises from a shared matrix. Throughout a long and distinguished career, Gombrich staunchly defended tradition against relativism. By relativism, he meant something like "radical subjectivism" (Gombrich 1976, 182). This is a key point, for while he did not subscribe to the use of all-embracing categories as stand-ins for explanation, he did recognize the necessary role of conventions—including cultural memory, tradition, and a canon—in a given culture or society. It was the subtype of relativism called "subjectivism," then, against which he strenuously argued. To his mind, subjectivism (in the cultural and social sense of term) is not only impossible, since meaning is conferred through culture and society, but it is also dangerous (in the cultural and ethical sense of term), since it denies the existence of shared values.

While Gombrich's opposition to relativism has had the effect of branding him as a died-in-the-wool traditionalist, he was careful to distinguish between tradition and traditionalism. The phrase "a living chain of tradition" signals vitality, receptivity, and openness to change. Traditionalism, by contrast, is inert, unreceptive, and static, qualities which tend toward ready acceptance and status quo. We must exercise criticism and self criticism continuously, Gombrich maintained. Nonetheless, he said, we never start from scratch. His encounter with the barber implies that cultural memory, tradition, and a canon make communication possible in the first place. These are necessary, he held, for the simple reason that "neither communication nor expression can function in a void" (Gombrich 1962, 56).

Gombrich defines civilization as "a web of value judgments implicit rather than explicit." Tradition is also implicit, and it consists in points of orientation or "rumors on our intellectual map" (Gombrich 1973, 164). Whether we follow these rumors to their origins or simply encounter them in the air, they form the background we assimilate by virtue of living in a society. Critical response (a form of communication and expression) may react back on this implied background, altering the living chain of tradition. Cultural memory, tradition, and a canon offer railings on which to hang our thoughts, or what Hannah Arendt felicitously called "banisters." Banisters make communication possible yet they should come under critical scrutiny, in turn. (Arendt 1958). No doubt, cultural memory, tradition, and a canon create privilege, value judgments, circumstances of inclusion and exclusion, along with consensus and shared meaning. They are partisan (Brzyski 2007). At the same time as he argued that understanding and interpretation require a background to make sense, Gombrich (1952, 22) maintained that "conformity is not a virtue," that values must be tested.

Gombrich came in contact with "the canon of excellence in art" in his youth, in books in the family library, in photographic reproductions on the walls of their apartment in Vienna, and at the city's celebrated art-historical museum. "Raphael and Michelangelo, Dürer and Rembrandt,

but also Fra Angelico and Memling were household gods," he recounted, "the divinities of that middle-class religion that was known as *Bildung*," or self-formation. *Bildung* fostered culture at a general level through the assimilation of the "mental furniture" of tradition. It supplied the "background knowledge" that enabled Gombrich "to see the whole mountain range of the history of art as a continuous outline." He drew on this background in England in 1949, when he composed his popular introduction, *The Story of Art*, by "merely looking up examples of illustrations in the books" he and his wife "happened to own" (Gombrich 1990, 38-39; Gombrich 1993, 26; Franke 2000, 696-727).

The "household gods" not only communicated "the notion of continuity." They also pointed to "the endurance of traditions behind the changing façades of period styles." From the outset, Gombrich was intrigued by the interplay of stylistic continuity and change. Even as he absorbed the accessories of *Bildung*, that "tradition going back to Goethe and the eighteenth century, in which the subject-matter of art was very relevant and the classics were of great importance," he was touched by Expressionism, "a new approach to art that did not chime in" with what he knew from the older generation. His senior essay, written in 1927-28, charted a subject that would preoccupy him for the rest of his career, namely, how the appreciation of art changes through time. Facile explanations of generational conflict aside, how was it that his parents' generation revered the order, balance, and restraint of the art of the Renaissance whereas contemporary Viennese critics found the slashing brushstrokes and emotive power of Expressionist art the pinnacle of artistic achievement? Gombrich was "puzzled." In an attempt to explain the dialectic of tradition and innovation, as well as the tides of taste, he proceeded to try "to do justice to every age on its own terms" (Gombrich 1996, 38-39).

If Gombrich has been unjustly cast as a traditionalist, then his concerted effort to explain "every age on its own terms" has not been adequately understood. As part of the so-called Vienna School of Art History, he studied late Roman, Mannerist, and Baroque art, styles only recently expiated of the punishing status of "decadent" or in "decline" by Alois Riegl, Hans Tietze, and Julius von Schlosser, among other scholars of the Vienna School's first and second generation. The Vienna School not only opened the compass of the history of art onto periods, regions, and objects previously considered unworthy of study, but it also refined art-historical method (Bakoš 1996, 234-257; Michalski 1984, 82-90). Insisting that "their discipline should aspire to the status and precision of the sciences," what became the Vienna School of Art History reacted against "easy chatter" and *belles-lettres* as stand-ins for more scientific and precise explanations of the riddle of artistic style and style change. In what Gombrich describes as an otherwise "brilliant" essay, Bernard Berenson's easy chatter, for example, claimed that the achievement of the Venetian painters of the Renaissance could be explained by "the character of the Venetian government."

For as much as the Vienna School aspired to the precision of the sciences, these scholars could consider all manifestations of an era—philosophy, art, government, and so on—as expressions of an essence, or identical spirit. In this tradition, ideas of the "spirit of the age," the "spirit of the people," or the pernicious and persistent *Weltanschauung*, or "world view," signaled an all-embracing totality (Gombrich 1988, 64; Gombrich 1993, 39, 136). Even Erwin Panofsky, the deeply learned, German art historian, relied on the idea of *Weltanschauung* to forge too close a link between Michelangelo's drawing technique and the Neoplatonic movement on the on hand, and between Gothic architecture and scholasticism on the other (Panofsky 1939, 171-203; Panofsky 1968). While he was wont to caution his students to "beware of the boa constructor," Gombrich rightly complained that Panofsky could force the evidence (Gombrich 1993, 137). By "every age on its own terms," Gombrich meant a fluid

and historically sensitive consideration of every time and place rather than a rigid and unifying characterization of an "age."

It was Julius von Schlosser, aloof, erudite, nevertheless with "his finger on the pulse," who directed Gombrich's doctoral thesis on the architecture of Giulio Romano. Although Mannerism was "all the intellectual fashion," the question remained whether there was a Mannerism in architecture, and more pressingly what accounted for the "strange shift" in architecture in the generation following Raphael. Scholars pegged this shift on a "spiritual crisis," yet Gombrich was "puzzled." At work in the archives in Mantua, he became skeptical about the current interpretation of Mannerism. Reading letter after letter by the family of the Gonzaga made him "gradually much more aware that these were human beings and not 'ages' or 'periods' or anything of the kind." As he moved away from the cliché "about art being the expression of the age," he discovered that court artists like Guilio Romano were expected to surprise and delight with the unexpected in art, and that depending on context, Romano's style could be more or less traditional (Gombrich 1991, 16-18). Years later, Gombrich mused that he had undoubtedly learned from Picasso that an artist could have different modes of expression (Gombrich 1993, 41).

From his student days, then, Gombrich railed against the banisters of all-embracing categories. Rather than succumb to the seductive, synthetic power of "spiritual crises," "ages," "periods," or "world views," he more modestly attempted to explain the particularities of "every age on its own terms." The opening lines of *The Story of Art* elegantly articulate his credo:

> There really is no such thing as Art. There are only artists. … There is no harm in calling all these activities art [from Paleolithic cave art to contemporary posters for the London Underground] as long as we keep in mind that such a word may mean very different things in different times and places, and as long as we realize that Art with a capital A has no existence.

This passage betrays that key point about Gombrich and relativism. What may be called "art" does not arise from a supraindividual, eternal ideal of "Art" and artistic essence. Nor does it arise from subjectivism, or individual opinion. Rather, "art" is socially and historically relative, determined by each culture on its own terms against an implicit background of what is and what came before.

Accordingly, *The Story of Art* does not answer the question, "what is art"?; it conveys what has been called "art" in the Western tradition. Introducing an intricately carved wooden lintel from a Maori chieftain's house, Gombrich warns the reader "against the belief that their work looks odd because they cannot do it any better. It is not their standard of craftsmanship which is different from ours," he wrote, "but their ideas." Indeed, "the whole story of art is not a story of progress in technical proficiency, but a story of changing ideas and requirements" (Gombrich 1951, 5, 25).

The author's well-known book of 1960, *Art and Illusion*, enlists perceptual psychology to investigate the conquest of realism, or fidelity to appearances, in Western art. *Art and Illusion* has been roundly criticized for seeming to describe progress toward illusionism in art as artistic Progress with a capital P. The book's subtitle, *A Study in the Psychology of Pictorial Representation*, reveals a more prudent aim, however—to study the perception of pictures from a particular point of view (Gombrich 1960). The author's studies of caricature, decoration, and the so-called primitive and primitivism, demonstrate a wide-ranging interest in a plurality of artistic styles, or chains of tradition. That said, Gombrich may have been motivated in part by fear of loss of the cultural memory of painterly illusionism at time when modern art had

cast aside this tradition. Viewed in this light, *Art and Illusion* preserves "an enormous stock of implicit knowledge" (Woodfield 1996, 13).

"Some idea of progress (as a possibility rather than as an impersonal force) is inseparable from the Open Society," Gombrich wrote. "Its members must believe that things and institutions can be discussed and improved"(Gombrich 1974, 79; Popper 1962). Why does art have a history? What accounts for changing ideas and requirements? Gombrich took Hegel to task for explaining the history of art as the teleological progress of an impersonal force, and he criticized art history's reliance on this kind of "poverty of historicism" (Gombrich 1969; Gombrich 1977; Popper 1957). Whether it be reason, progress, the spirit of the age, or *Weltanschauung*, these forces issue the same end result: the study of art is subjected to inexorable laws of history or to all-embracing categories as stand-ins for explanation. On this note, Gombrich made an important distinction between "the ideology of modern art and the work of modern artists." He was very critical of the cult of progress and of the avant-garde, for he considered this "ideology" to be "intellectually bankrupt" and harmful to the progress of art, which is to say, to the artist's inclination to follow a self-given path rather than a subscription to make it *new* (Gombrich 1993, 118).

Adopting what Sir Karl Popper termed the "logic of the situation," Gombrich focused on the specific circumstances in which the artist finds himself. The work of art is "the work of skilled hands and great minds in response to concrete demands" and the historian's task is "to reconstruct the choices in front of these men" (Gombrich 1957, 119; Gombrich 1987, 51). (Gombrich did focus on male artists.) His scholarship shows how, under concrete and changing conditions, artists test traditions, how they solve problems through trial and error, how they fulfill and deny expectations, how they respond to polarizing issues, and so forth, in order to push the work of art in new directions. His method is a synthetic cultural history of particulars. In order to avoid "the pitfalls of circular interpretations of images," he advocated an "outward spiraling movement" which draws "in new evidence from ever-widening circles, which may offer new vistas on the particular." Art and scholarship can only profit by wild questions being asked, by distrusting our own assumptions, by engaging in a quest for truth (Gombrich 1957, 118, 116).

Since works of art are aesthetic rather than scientific objects, criteria for understanding remain subjective. Gombrich had learned from Popper "the methodological principle, that you can refute a theory but never prove one" (Gombrich 1993, 123). Nevertheless, "truth" is the regulative idea which guides the quest for understanding. Gombrich searched for "truth" through "detailed questioning rather than generalizations," even as he studied interrelations of the general and the particular. Against consensus on the one hand and radical subjectivism on the other, he advocated a middle way: criticism and self-criticism to ensure latitude; the search for "truth" to ensure a limited plurality of interpretations. In a similar vein, he understood that engagement with works of art is objective and subjective. "There is no innocent eye," by which he meant an eye that sees apart from an implied background, at the same, works of art invite an individual, human response (Gombrich 1981, 23; Gombrich 1954, 82).

As I write in 2009, the centennial of Gombrich's birth, culture as "a living chain of tradition" encounters the forces of globalization. If what Gombrich meant by tradition has not yet died, it has suffered the fragmentation he feared, but on account of forces he might not have envisioned. Gombrich understood that the assimilation of tradition takes time. He also recognized that "our own past is moving away from us at frightening speed" (Gombrich 1969, 45). Viewing "the present eclipse" of the classical tradition in 1961, what he most regretted was "the loss of the historical frame of reference, the amputation of the time dimension from our culture" (Gombrich 1961, 21). Without the historical frame of reference, the "living chain

of tradition" becomes severed from an implied background. Cultural memory is set adrift, suspended in the present in what Hannah Arendt described as the gap "between past and future" (Arendt 1954). "The forms of humanity's own global societal constitution threaten its life," wrote Theodor Adorno, contemplating whether one could live after Auschwitz, "if a self-conscious global subject does not develop and intervene" (Adorno 1964, 127). Gombrich's encounter with the barber from Tuscany shows how "a living chain of tradition" gives rise to an implied language of culture and cultural value. Adorno's plea for a self-conscious global subject reminds us of something Gombrich also knew: understanding what happened before might spare us the experience of what may happen again.

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Art History Department
University of Southern California
VKC 351 MC 0047
Los Angeles, CA 90089
USA
E-mail:klang@usc.edu