Transactions of the American Philological Association 127 (1997) 381–388

Democracy and Debate: Otto Brendel's "Prolegomena to a Book on Roman Art"*

Natalie Boymel Kampen
Barnard College

My paper looks at the question of debate in a text that has been central to the study of Roman art for more than 40 years; it involves a close and somewhat perversely political reading of Otto Brendel's "Prolegomena to a Book on Roman Art." Published in 1953, the "Prolegomena" is a historiographic analysis of mainly European scholarship in the field. I first read this essay as a student in 1965 and have since taught it to my own students, and I always thought about it in relation to its author's German background and experiences.[1] But recently I have become more aware of the extent to which it is, as well, a product of a very specific moment in U.S. history.[2] I argue here that certain elements of the essay indicate that its moment of production helped to shape it in such way that, just when it seemed to be *about* debate, it was actually participating in a process of muting debate.

This idea that we can seem to be debating but really are silencing or muting debate is an important one in our own historical moment, I think. The process can be an obvious one, as is the case of public fora for debate by classicists on Afrocentrism as well as on the book *Black Athena*; there the full weight of the field bears down on the opposition to prove it wrong and stop

*For help in the research for this essay, thanks go to Paul Rogers and Robert Nemes.

[1]Brendel was born in Germany in 1901, educated at Heidelberg, acted as curator at the Ny Carlsberg Glyptotek in Copenhagen, taught at Erlangen, and went to the German Archaeological Institute in Rome as First Assistant to his professor and mentor Ludwig Curtius from 1932–36. In 1936–37 he and his wife Maria Weigert Brendel went to England; they came to the U.S. in 1938 He taught for two years at Washington University in St. Louis, and from 1941 to 1956 at Indiana University. From 1949–51 he was at the American Academy in Rome, perhaps working part of the time on the "Prolegomena," and also spending time with the now-retired Curtius. In 1956 Brendel became professor at Columbia University, from which he retired in 1970. He died in 1973.

[2]It seems worth telling the reader that I was nine years old in 1953, and my clearest memory is of the pairs of agents of the Federal Bureau of Investigation, always wearing hats, who were a shadowy presence and source of fear in my life at the time; it seems odd now, so many years later, to remember them so vividly and to mention them in print.

debate. But the process can also be more complicated and subtle, as is the case with Brendel's essay. The essay raises an interesting question: if a democratic social system believes that its debates are fruitful, does that mean that they must lead to some form of consensus or to a productively balanced resolution? Further, if the actual practice of debate in twentieth-century America often involves opposing forces trying desperately to silence one another, it also involves, more significantly, a belief that the center, as defined by its most conservative interpreters, is where debate must resolve itself. If this is the case, then how do we imagine fruitfulness? What changes? Intellectual debate in a democratic context can be seen as potentially terribly dangerous; the fear of an extreme position, of vehemence or stridency, of being marginalized, all work to mute debate just as much as does the fear of losing one's job.

My reading of Brendel's "Prolegomena" is designed then not to be "fair" to the text so much as to read it oppositionally and to try to understand the period of its initial publication. The "Prolegomena" having been reissued in 1979, most students read it (if they read it) without any sense that it first appeared at the height of the investigations of academics and others by the House Un-American Activities Committee and the Senate Internal Security Subcommittee (Brendel 1979). I will not argue that Otto Brendel was intimidated by the committees, or even that he noticed that they were at work; the text doesn't indicate any such thing. Did Brendel know that Moses Finley was in the process of being fired by Rutgers in 1952 for having refused to answer a committee's questions about his political associations (Schrecker 165–86)? I don't know, but I do know that Brendel never took a stand in print like that of Erwin Panofsky whose essay, "The History of Art," also published in 1953, devoted its last three pages to a heart-felt condemnation of the policing of academics and to a comparison of McCarthyism and Hitler's Germany (Panofsky). Nor can I connect Brendel with the more than 50% of American social scientists who, questioned in the mid-1950's about whether they felt intellectually or pedagogically constrained by the current political environment, said that they worried more than before about what they published and about how their ideas might be misconstrued within and outside the classroom (Lazarsfeld and Thielens). In this case, the author is indeed dead, and I cannot reconstruct his motives or character.[3] Rather, what my reading attempts is a

[3]Brendel's papers are as yet uncatalogued and are mainly in the archives of the Getty Research Center where they are unavailable until January of 1998 because the archive and library are moving into new quarters. I have not yet consulted the papers. I have, however, seen a memo addressed to the Faculty of Indiana University from its president in December 1946, reporting on the findings of the Board of Trustees in the matter of subversive teaching

demonstration of the way a scholar, any scholar, can make use of existing strategies that avoid or mute debate even while describing debate.

The task of the "Prolegomena" (I apologize for referring to this plural in the singular of its material form) was to examine and categorize the existing scholarship on Roman art according to its positions on several questions that Brendel felt were central to the field during the twentieth century. The first of these questions could be articulated as "does Roman art have any aesthetic identity and value?" (10), whereas the second, implying the resolution of the first, asks, in Brendel's words, "What is Roman about Roman art?" (29). According to Brendel, the first, or aesthetic, question seems to be answered, if not altogether silenced, at the beginning of the twentieth century, mainly by Franz Wickhoff and Alois Riegl who, in a sense, set the agenda for much of the century by replying in the affirmative in such way as to raise the second question (27).

Brendel sees the second question, about what's Roman in Roman art, as being debated along two different lines. One position sees Romanness in undying formal concerns such as the treatment of space, i.e., as a definable style: Brendel characterizes Wickhoff's position in this way. The other position argues for a more historical answer in which Romanness is what Brendel calls "not a style but a general condition of art in historically definable circumstances" (71). In the latter stance, the author finds the possibility of temporal change in art, pointing to this element in Riegl's work. Here he also sees a chance to avoid the dangers of the former position, dangers that led some scholars in the 1920s and '30s to theories that refused any freedom or individual choice for artists. Brendel writes, "In all theories which impose a totalitarian uniformity on the historical-cultural periods..., art...appears to be a mere function of circumstances" (26). Or again, "[t]heories of this kind presuppose a complete domination of the impersonal 'style'—expressions of national character—over the personal 'will' of the artists" (36). His governing concern, then, is to find a way to talk about the relationship between the individual and the supra-individual in the production of Roman art. His critique of previous theories stems from his sense of the inadequacy of their attention to the individual and choice as well as to the matter of change.

---

at the University. The local American Legion had requested an investigation because three faculty of the Law School had signed a petition urging the reinstatement on the Indiana ballot of the Communist Party after it had illegally been removed. The *Indiana Alumni Magazine* reported on the event, as did the Louisville (KY) *Times*. Whether Brendel read any of this material I do not know, but it was available to him.

Reviewing various theories of the pre-war period, including those that invoked race, ethnicity, or class as determining style, Brendel classified scholarly debates in the following ways: first, as concerned with a single ethnic or historical variable (Italianness, for example, or class); second, with a dualism of forces such as "Rome or Orient" as shaping style; and third, with dualism in historical rhythm, as in theories of the rising and falling prominence of classicism. His analysis of the force of European nationalism in shaping many of these debates is as masterful as his serene comments about the vehemence of the debates are startling: he notes at one point that modern readers will be surprised by the fierceness of the arguments over *Orient oder Rom* (27).

Articulating his own position most explicitly in the essay's final section, entitled "Pluralistic Theories: The Inequality of the Contemporaneous," Brendel takes up one more time the relationship between individual and supra-individual forces; now, however, he puts forward a theory in which multiple causes and multiple voices can speak (presumably without ferocity) in the formation as well as the explanation of Roman style (68ff.). Here, interestingly, the essay participates in a liberal discourse that opposes not only "totalitarianism" (26), but also "vehemence" (27) in debate; both terms are the author's. In its appropriation of elements of the language of 1950s U.S. liberal social sciences and philosophy, the essay constructs a Roman art history, and a Rome, that has room for the individual, for freedom, and for pluralism. It sounds very American (Novick).

Pluralism, a concept much favored in the post-war work of anti-Communist liberal intellectuals in the U.S., is a central issue here, because in its late '40s and early '50s forms it suggested the possibility that the multiple participants in an industrial democracy might balance their claims and thus avoid the consolidation of power in the hands of any one group (Macpherson; Rosenblum; Powers 256–57). For post-war liberals, unified determinist theories were in bad odor, utterly enmeshed with "totalitarianism" (McAuliffe). So not only is pluralism put forward to suggest that a complex industrial society can be democratic, can avoid the terrors of totalitarianism, by the self-regulation of equal participants governed by rationality in the exercise of freedom, it also permits debate to be moderated by good will. For the "Prolegomena," a concept of pluralism that allows for multiple formal options freely chosen by artists is as important as one that permits multiple explanatory structures to operate (Popper).

Resisting the absolutism of theories in which there is "no freedom, perhaps not even a want of freedom, since no one can look beyond his preordained conditions" (68), Brendel uses this section of the "Prolegomena" to advance, tentatively, a notion of freedom rooted in pluralism. He says that

conditions in Roman Italy made it possible for artists to choose "at will" among "various competing traditions" (69). "One cannot," he says, "doubt the ability of Roman artists to work in different 'styles' of their choice" (70). And finally, for him a viable interpretation must "consider the possibility that artists adopt styles individually, adhere to existing standards by free choice and devise means of expression personally for specific purposes" (70).

These and the essay's many other comments about the artist as individual and about freedom and choice go hand in hand with Brendel's use of the term "pluralistic" in his section heading and elsewhere (e.g., 22, 26–27, 36, 59, and 63). Neither occurs in the 1936 essay he wrote in Rome, which looked at the German historiography of Roman historical relief sculpture and which is recapitulated in the first two sections of the "Prolegomena" (Brendel 1936). The individual and freedom are new in the 1953 essay. To some extent, this is no doubt due to Brendel's having adopted some of the freedom rhetoric of his new land.[4] But there are clearly more complex reasons as well. At least one of these becomes visible when Brendel says of contemporary theories, his own included, that they reveal stylistic trends that appear to be "comparatively free, perhaps interchangeable, aesthetic attitudes and experiments.... Neither the reasons nor the pace of these stylistic changes are predictable in theory; they can only be described empirically" (71).

What he seems to be looking for is an empirical theory of culture. To find a way out of the impasse created by the deterministic theories he's been analyzing in the "Prolegomena," Brendel says that a "cultural definition will...make it easier to explain how collective style and individual artistic creation are related to one another within a given area, for cultural standards in the main are voluntarily, and not unconsciously, accepted or changed" (66). Clearly wanting something "objective" in the way of methodology, Brendel opts for the formal analysis of objects *without* esthetic evaluation but *with* a concrete connection to individual producers who operate freely within temporally and geographically specific cultural conditions. These producers consciously and voluntarily do or don't accept cultural standards, so there's no

[4]It is worth noting that Brendel later (1963) published an essay, "Art and Freedom in Evolutionary Perspective," in *The Concept of Freedom in Anthropology*, edited by an Indiana University colleague from the Anthropology Department, M. D. Bidney. The essay seems an artifact both of his conversations with social scientists and of the general concern in this period with the rhetoric of freedom. The latter can be seen as well in the book published by another German émigré historian of Roman art, Karl Lehmann: *Thomas Jefferson, American Humanist* (1947).

need for a theory of the unconscious or of ideology here (68–70). The Rome in the "Prolegomena" is strikingly transparent.

I am suggesting here that Brendel used pluralist theory to try to resolve what he couldn't get an ideology-less theory of culture to cope with. Given the Cold War resistance to theories of ideology in so much of U.S. social science and philosophy at the time, and assuming that his experience in 1930s Europe may have made him leery of them as well, it hardly seems surprising that Brendel turned instead to pluralism.

Pluralism, individual choice, freedom, empiricism, and resistance to the predictive potential of theory all go together in Brendel's text. All help to differentiate the "Prolegomena" from the text he wrote in 1936 before the war, before he came to America. The author's new discursive frame can be seen through his theoretical positions in relation to determinist theories: note, for example, his use of the term "totalitarian" to characterize them, a word at the height of its popularity in the 1950s among anti-Communist intellectuals who forged the rhetorical connection between Hitler and Stalin.

Resisting determinism, he opts for the liberal solution of a free individual who freely chooses to accept or reject cultural standards. But this option requires that Brendel keep his focus squarely on style, as he does throughout the "Prolegomena," for the moment the gaze shifts to content, viewers and patrons are implicated. As Brendel knew well, there is no evidence that Roman artists selected their own subject matter any more than that they produced work purely for themselves, to satisfy some inner need. And as soon as one acknowledges the power relations between maker and patron, one will need to ask what role both patron and audience could play in determining *style*. This is a question with which Brendel does not engage. And indeed, given the frequent resistance in 1950s academic work in the U.S. to discussions of power inequalities, to theories of class or ideology, and to anything reminiscent of determinism, perhaps it is unsurprising that he avoided straying far from style and the artist as free producer.[5]

The avoidance of the social or economic context, the skirting of content issues, the absence of patron and audience, all are telling in this essay, it seems to me, because all could be imagined as leading into dangerous territory. It is not simply a matter of a failure of imagination on Brendel's part, for he had often written about content, and so had some of the authors he discussed in the

[5]An interesting comparison is Ranuccio Bianchi Bandinelli 1979: "L'arte romana due generazioni dopo Wickhoff," a lecture given in London at the Third International Congress for Classical Studies, 1959, in which the author comments directly on Brendel's text.

"Prolegomena" (33, 60, or 72–73). Indeed, some such as Ranuccio Bianchi Bandinelli and Gerhard Rodenwaldt had written about class and social determinants, but Brendel spends little time with these theories (60, 66). Rather, he returns constantly to form in what could be seen as a liberal move that both avoids the pitfalls of determinist theories and participates in the art-historical and critical language of Greenbergian modernism and New Criticism.[6] Keeping the artist at the center of production allows Brendel to remain safely inside a discussion of art as style, yet it gives him the ability to speak of choice and to question the relationship of the individual to the supra-personal.

The rhetoric and the choices Brendel made in what he would discuss and how he would focus categories and emphases in the essay reveal the way debate can seem present just at the moment of its muting. To speak of this kind of muting of debate seems important in our own historical moment as one politician after another runs in terror from the appellation "liberal" and as debate about social welfare in the U.S. grinds to a cruel consensus. What this paper has tried to do is to show that debate in a democratic society is deeply problematic, far more problematic than I believe we who study societies of the past have been indicating in our work. To see how debates are shaped, for what and by whom, is crucial, but so too is recognizing the ways debate is muted or silenced.

[6]This in no way denies the much broader tendency in the pre-war study of classical archaeology in Germany and elsewhere to concentrate on problems of dating, sources, artist attributions, and style as much as, if not more than, iconography; problems of "context" were rarely dealt with.

Works Cited

Bianchi Bandinelli, R. 1979. "L'arte romana due generazioni dopo Wickhoff." In R. Bianchi Bandinelli, *Archeologia e cultura*. Rome. 224–46.

Brendel, O. J. 1936. "Gli studi sul rilievo storico romano in Germania." *Gli Studi Romani nel Mondo* 3: 129–44.

———. 1953. "Prolegomena to a Book on Roman Art." *Memoirs of the American Academy in Rome* 21: 9–73.

———. 1963. "Art and Freedom in Evolutionary Perspective." In M. D. Bidney, ed., *The Concept of Freedom in Anthropology*. The Hague. 245–71.

———. 1979. *Prolegomena to the Study of Roman Art*. New Haven and London.

Crawford, W. R., ed. 1953. *The Cultural Migration: The European Scholar in America*. Philadelphia.

Lazarsfeld, P., and W. Thielens. 1958. *The Academic Mind*. Glencoe, IL.

Macpherson, C. B. 1973. *Democratic Theory: Essays in Retrieval*. Oxford.

McAuliffe, M. S. 1978. *Crisis on the Left: Cold War Politics and American Liberals, 1947–1954*. Amherst.

Novick, P. 1988. *That Noble Dream: The "Objectivity Question" and the American Historical Profession*. Cambridge.

Panofsky, E. 1953. "The History of Art." In Crawford, ed. 82–111.

Popper, K. 1969. "A Pluralist Approach to the Philosophy of History." In E. Streissler, ed., *Roads to Freedom: Essays in Honour of Friedrich A. von Hayek*. London. 181–200.

Powers, R. G. 1995. *Not Without Honor: The History of American Anticommunism*. New York.

Rosenblum, N. L. 1989. "Pluralism and Self-Defense." In N. L. Rosenblum, ed., *Liberalism and the Moral Life*. Cambridge and London. 207–26.

Schrecker, E. W. 1986. *No Ivory Tower: McCarthyism and the Universities*. New York and Oxford.