

A Postmodern Renaissance?^{*}

by RANDOLPH STARN

The place of the Renaissance in historical narratives of modernity was problematic long before recent bouts of dismissal, denial, or indifference. However, the idea is a hardy survivor and the old phoenix is at it again. Has the Renaissance gained a new, postmodern lease on life? Plurality, discontinuity, and contingency are hallmarks of that protean, much-contested label and of current Renaissance studies, not to mention the Renaissance boom in pop culture. Is this a mirror reflecting only our own preconceptions or a window that discloses a Renaissance that was never convincingly modern in the first place? What are the implications, one way or another, for the present and future of Renaissance studies?

In one of the first articles ever published in *Renaissance News*, Josephine Waters Bennett wrote about the expanding boundaries of Renaissance Studies.¹ The Dartmouth College Library had taken on the *News* in 1948 after its peripatetic career as the newsletter of The Committee on Renaissance Studies, founded under the auspices of the American Council of Learned Societies in 1941. The early issues reported on bibliography, translations, editions, library resources, conferences, scholarly projects, and news from Europe. The 1947 *Progress of Medieval and Renaissance Studies*, compiled by S. Harrison Thomson at the University of Colorado, had listed 910 North American scholars and taken the count as a welcome sign of recovery after the war. *Renaissance News* editorialized about mistakes in the Renaissance listings: the medievalists, as usual, had slighted the Renaissance. “We welcome Professor Thomson’s gifts but with something of the wry smile of stepchildren. For the Renaissance remains, in the *Progress*, something of the afterthought it was when it was added in 1940. . . . Evidently the crowding in of renaissance scholars has swamped the boat.”²

We are still swamped in our own boat. The Society has long since gone from the twenty slim pages of the first issue of *Renaissance News* (1948–66) through the hefty *Renaissance Studies* (1954–74) and the amalgamated

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¹Bennett.

²Parks, 10.

Renaissance Quarterly (1967–) and on to digits and pixels; from scores of members it has grown to thousands, from early meetings with one or two sessions this Annual Meeting boasts a burgeoning program and registration fees to match. Regional Renaissance associations, Renaissance teaching programs, and international affiliates are represented here; the book exhibit tables offer hundreds of books and journals. Meanwhile, the public Renaissance is booming to the mingled satisfaction and alarm of the academic Renaissance. The hotel we are meeting in belongs to the “Renaissance” chain, with branches in Seoul, Kuala Lumpur, Amsterdam, and Las Vegas. *Renaissance* is a brand, label, and logo: it’s in the movies and mystery thrillers with a Renaissance hook (*The Da Vinci Code* is just the scum on the froth). We have Renaissance television documentaries and docudramas with talking heads, who, fortunately for them, have tenure. We have Renaissance Faires and Reenactments, Living Last Suppers, Renaissance Weekend Conferences, and neocon think tanks where Machiavelli rules. Shakespeare, from “Schlockspeare” to scholarly studies and crossover books written for a seemingly insatiable public, is a multinational consortium.³

John Addington Symonds must have had it right when he proclaimed the Renaissance “the most marvelous period the world has ever known.”⁴ Not least because it has been pronounced dead so often. Not counting the medievalists’ longstanding professional disdain, its passing had the solemn authority of William Bouwsma’s American Historical Association Presidential Address in 1978. As if to confirm the bad news, in 1996 the scholarly quarterly *Journal of Medieval and Renaissance Studies* became the *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies*. Just last year Monty Python’s Terry Jones gave the Renaissance a pop burial. While allowing that the Renaissance had never done him any harm personally, he said he was sick and tired of people putting on airs about it and wished it good riddance.⁵

We can deny such exaggerated rumors, as Mark Twain did of his own demise not far from this spot. For one thing, they are partly the wages of success. As old and new hands at these meetings know, the big tent of

³In a nice coincidence the San Francisco meeting coincided with the publication of Grendler, in which the veteran Renaissance scholar meets and documents the Public Renaissance in all its brazen glory. The essays in Burt offer a searching academic guide to the mediatized Shakespeare.

⁴Bullen, 252 (quoting “The Renaissance: An Essay Read in the Theatre, Oxford, June 17, 1863” [Oxford, 1863], 8–9).

⁵Bouwsma, 1990a; Woolfson, 9 (quoting Terry Jones in the *London Observer*, 8 February 2004).

Renaissance Studies that brings us together is also an arena of difference, indifference, and sometimes outright hostility. It is also a big target, inviting potshots from the specialized fields or subfields that have proliferated within the *horror vacui* of academic professionalization. Then too, with the comfortable spread of advancing middle age in Renaissance Studies, we should expect age-appropriate anxieties and complaints. The most common of these is that an upstart early modernity has mugged, disabled, or downsized the Renaissance. It is true that academic books, reviews, and articles with *Renaissance* in their titles regularly disavow or ignore the “R-word” altogether. The prognosis is mixed, but I would not want to be blocking the exits if all early modernists were asked to leave the room.⁶

An early modern exodus would be unseemly, to say the least: most of us owe our jobs to the Renaissance. It certainly would be confusing — in the world at large *early modern* might possibly mean sometime before 1970, while *Renaissance* is arguably more comfortably familiar than ever. The new label is also old hat, since the academic credentials of early modernity go back to the 1950s, to the Marxist journal *Science and Society* and to Wallace K. Ferguson’s bourgeois version of an Age of Transition between medieval and modern times. During the late 1950s and early 1960s early modernity incubated sluggishly in classrooms and textbooks.⁷ The boom began in the 1970s, but for some years now early modernist critiques of Renaissance Studies’ elitism, sexism, Eurocentrism, imperialism, and a host of other real and imagined evils, seem to have given way to a state of edgy coexistence.⁸

⁶Martin Elsky organized a series of “Renaissance vs. Early Modern” panels at the RSA Annual Meetings in Florence (2000) and Chicago (2001). For analysis of the literary critical and historiographical issues at stake, see Marcus; Starn.

⁷What began as a Marxist dispute over the belated transition from feudalism to capitalism evolved into a long-running, but by now largely depleted, debate over the crises of the fourteenth and seventeenth centuries: *The Transition from Feudalism to Capitalism*; Aston; Parker. According to Ferguson, 1962, vii, “it was [a] transitional process, involving as it did the co-existence of medieval and modern elements in a constant state of flux, that gave the period we know as the Renaissance its special character, and which justifies us in regarding it as a distinct historical period”; Ferguson, 1951, had already sketched out the basic idea of a Renaissance synthesis of medieval and modern traits. Between 1957 and 1966, Oxford University Press published three editions of Clark, the first explicitly early modern Europe textbook (with an appropriately slapdash title). Evidently there was a market (but not a very booming one), as Rowen was the only competition until the 1970s.

⁸See, for example, the proliferation of centers, societies, and programs in Renaissance and Early Modern Studies (such as those at Brown University, York University, and the University of London) and the mix of Renaissance and early modern titles and topics in field-designated journals such as *RQ*, *Renaissance Studies* (UK), *Early Modern Literary Studies* (Canada), and the *Journal for Early Modern Cultural Studies* (Indiana University Press).

One way or another, conflict and ambivalence are nothing new in the genealogy of Renaissance scholarship. In one of the inaugural texts of Renaissance culture, Petrarch writes up a carefully staged ambivalence in his Mount Ventoux letter and in another archly defends his ignorance against the scholastics of Padua; the field has favorite endgames in Hamlet and Lear and Caravaggio and Rembrandt. The RSA was originally a mild-mannered insurgency against disciplinary specialization, nationalism, political history, and the ultimately disastrous failure of Europeans to get Western Civilization right on their own. Renaissance scholars were harassed by revolting medievalists arguing that the Renaissance had accomplished little that was either new or, for that matter, true; they had to defend scholarship over and against the aesthetes, ideologues, publicists, and literati who had made a cult of the Renaissance. Ferguson wrote his precocious book on the Renaissance in historical thought to redeem it from a checkered career “over which learned men have argued with all the vigor of theologians”; a key lesson of J. B. Bullen’s survey of the nineteenth-century myth of the Renaissance is how long it remained divisive.⁹ Today, depending on the perspective, the Renaissance may look like a dusty, perhaps rather sinister museum exhibit, a professional enterprise that brings us together even when we think we can’t go on meeting like this, and a media sensation that you are more likely to google than to find on JSTOR.

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There is a thin line between conciseness and caricature in the labels we apply to cultural moments or movements. This is one reason why I’ve steered clear so far from the question posed by my title. Even though the ardor of the old debates over periodization has faded, the periodic conception of the Renaissance remains as problematic as it is persistent. Postmodernism and postmodernity, one a fissile cluster of ideas and styles, the other an alleged state of affairs, have become red flags inciting intellectual and even political arguments, or Medusas that freeze the selfsame arguments in place. When we have not only a first but a second edition of the *Routledge Companion to Postmodernism* we can be fairly sure that the movement and the condition are both.¹⁰ In some circles they are a slam and

⁹Ferguson, 1948, x; cf. Bullen, 1: “[D]ivergence . . . is characteristic of the nineteenth-century myth of the Renaissance. The reason for the contradictions is that in the mid-nineteenth century the concept of the Renaissance was relatively new and unstable.”

¹⁰Sim is probably the most useful single guide — with multiauthored topical chapters and a glossary — to the runaway literature of and about postmodernism. The packaged introduction and the anthology are standard genres in the literature, partly because of the

a scandal, in others already passé. For true believers postmodernist criticism is a weapon against present and past configurations of power and authority; for self-important defenders of traditional values postmodernism is the jargon-ridden stalking horse of nihilism; for an odd alliance of disillusioned critics and spin-doctoring opportunists it is part and parcel of late capitalism's marketeering of desires, commodities, and illusions, the only truth of the post-truth era. A new generation drawing on a postmodern kit of interpretative tools may wonder what the fuss was about. Indeterminacy comes with the terminology — for example, whether *post* means a continuation, diminution, or rejection of something defined as modern; this is compounded by aggressive stereotyping and unargued assumptions on all sides. But whatever they mean, postmodernism and postmodernity are about fragmentation, plurality, and disjuncture within a system of floating signifiers in the wake of concepts of modernity.

This is of course a stripped-down version of a contentious, often bristlingly technical literature. I have no illusions about making a contribution to postmodern studies here. For our purposes it is enough that the broad working definition I've offered would not be a bad description of Renaissance Studies. Labels may be serviceable for those purposes after all. Let us see what happens when we look at a few of the major themes in Renaissance Studies with an eye to seeing them as a postmodern domain.

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To begin with genealogies, a postmodern Renaissance historiography can claim an illustrious and perhaps unexpected ancestor. Thanks to the painstaking research of his editors and biographers, Jacob Burckhardt has shaken off the simplifiers who wanted him to be an implausible Whig, a grim reactionary prophet, or a magisterial academic icon.¹¹ He has emerged in exquisite detail as a complex, conflicted, and rather disagreeable figure who came to think of himself as living belatedly, neither able to turn back nor to accept the forces unleashed, first by the French Revolution, and later by

diversity and difficulty of the foundational texts by Roland Barthes, Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault, Luce Irigaray, Fredric Jameson, Julia Kristeva, Jacques Lacan, Jean-François Lyotard et al. For a vast anthology of texts, see Taylor and Winquist.

¹¹Although Burckhardt famously published relatively little — in fact, no new books during the thirty years before his death in 1897 — his *Nachlass* is immense: ten volumes of letters edited by Max Burckhardt (Basel, 1949–92); fourteen volumes of a *Gesamtausgabe* (Stuttgart, 1929–34); and a projected twenty-seven volumes of a new critical edition of his works, *Jacob Burckhardt-kritische Gesamtausgabe* (Munich, 2000–). Kaegi runs to seven volumes. See the useful bibliographical overview by Cesana.

the upheavals of 1830 and 1848. A note for his course on the study of history (1851) captures the tone of exalted and petulant disillusionment: “In the nineteenth century one can only beat one’s breast and amidst aspirations for liberty admit and confess the frightful unfreedom outside and within.”¹² Burckhardt picked at his wounds in his comfortable life in Basel. He was an academic hostile to the academy, who said of meetings like ours, “Congresses are attended by people who like to sniff at each other.”¹³ He was the *Schöngeist* who was certain that culture could not stand up to religion and the state; he was an acknowledged founder of cultural history, who insisted that “[e]very method can be challenged and none is universally valid.”¹⁴ He was a lifelong researcher who avoided manuscripts and archives, partly because the archives were still mainly the preserve of political historians and were a Prussian obsession. Five years before the publication of his most famous book, he declared that he would be glad to abolish the “all too one-sided” term *Renaissance* — “the so-called Renaissance,” as he phrased it in the book.¹⁵ The founding father of Renaissance Studies did not think of himself as a Renaissance historian. The Renaissance recedes with only a glimmer from his Basel lectures on European history, and beginning with the third edition of 1878 he farmed out the revisions and annotations that began to clutter the pages of his Renaissance book.

Even before Burckhardt-bashing became an oedipal ritual in Renaissance Studies, the contrarian sage of Basel was an embarrassment who needed to be made presentable for academic use. Through several editions, Ludwig Geiger — the son of a leading Jewish Reform activist who became a prominent scholar with a chair in modern history in Berlin — transformed Burckhardt’s “essay” into a “handbook of average understanding,” as Burckhardt’s biographer Werner Kaegi (more charitably than other critics) put it.¹⁶ Walter Goetz took over the editorial task in the 1920s; the illustrated 1929 Middlemore translation of the Geiger-Goetz fifteenth German edition with its pedantic footnotes still stands on the shelves of some of us

¹²Quoted by Fubini, 2001a, 220.

¹³Gossman, 2000, 239 (Burckhardt’s remark to Heinrich Wölfflin).

¹⁴Ganz, 233 (from Burckhardt’s lectures on historical study [1868]).

¹⁵See Gossman, 2000, 385, for these and other references by Burckhardt to the Renaissance. Burckhardt especially objected to the received view of the “revival of arts and letters”: cf. Ferguson, 1948, especially 133–78; Fubini, 2001a, 212–14.

¹⁶Kaegi, 4:188; Hermann, who suggests that Kaegi’s views of Geiger’s edition vacillated over the course of his long biography from hostile to, eventually, somewhat sympathetic when charges of anti-Semitism were raised against Burckhardt, partly in protest against his portrait on the 1,000 Swiss-franc banknote.

as a broken-down old paperback in the two-volume Harper Torchbook edition of 1958. By then Burckhardt had long since been recruited as a conscientiously conservative philosopher of history against totalitarianism (and his somewhat-too-ardent Nazi admirers), and Renaissance Italy had become a scholarly staging ground for a contest between despotic tyranny and republican liberty that the Atlantic Alliance meant to win once and for all. Three English editions of *The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy* were printed or reprinted between 1935 and 1945, four in the 1950s. By a cultural alchemy and a *translatio imperii* that still boggle the mind, the more so as the work of Jewish refugee scholars, the West found political forebears and cultural beacons in a Mediterranean, Catholic world of oligarchs and petty despots, an immigrants' language, and a suspiciously sensuous art. Ferguson's *The Renaissance in Historical Thought: Five Centuries of Interpretation* was a precocious book, published in 1948 and written before then, but it was right on time with a consensus history that made Burckhardt safe for Cold War politics and the Western Civ syllabus as the even-handed synthesizer of the periodic concept of the Renaissance.¹⁷

It would be hard to decide which of these clean-up operations most misrepresents Burckhardt. Far from being a synthesizer, let alone a consensus-builder, he saw himself as working against the grain of the ideologies and historiographies of his youth. He rejected the democratic pinings of Michelet, Guizot's wishful liberalism, and Ranke's majestic progression of Providence through the rise and triumph of the European great powers. His method was to jam narrative with pastiche, fragment, vignette, anecdote, and contradiction. His Renaissance essay, unevenly driven and inconsistently directional, without pretenses to being, as Ranke would have it, history "as it really was," is a self-conscious construction meant to be seen as a picture might be. It was explicitly experimental and subjective, casually negligent about periodization, and given to exaggeration, flashbacks, and fast-forwards.¹⁸ Most of the famous, and notorious, quotations come with counterstatements or qualifiers. If the Renaissance state became "a work of art," it took different and inconsistent forms; if the Italians became the "first born" of modern Europe, their story begins with the Middle Ages and German emperors; if Renaissance Italy, in a particularly

¹⁷Muir; Molho, especially 279–81; Sheehan. Gossman, 2002, is authoritative on Burckhardt's mid-twentieth-century political afterlife.

¹⁸Gombrich famously argues the contrary view, that Burckhardt was a closet Hegelian; but cf. recent and judicious assessments by Sigurdson, 221, of Burckhardt's position "outside positivism, Hegelianism, and other forms of optimistic rationalism." On Burckhardt's style, see Holly.

grating phrase, was “swarming with individuals,” they were not autonomous and free-standing but bound up with the dark, destructive force of power.¹⁹ Burckhardt staged the “revival of antiquity” in the streets as well as the studiolo. Even his borrowing of Michelet’s phrase “The Discovery of World and Man” had its contrary side. Michelet’s formula was a catchphrase for humanity’s longing for “the natural sources of life” and the triumphant progress of liberty that burst forth in the French Revolution — all demagogic illusions for Burckhardt.²⁰

How could we have thought that Burckhardt was not a skeleton in the modern closet?²¹

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Once upon a time, the Renaissance set its clocks and calendars to keep modern time. According to Reinhart Koselleck — this is a standard taxonomy — modern time is distinctively linear, directional, defining history as a set of unique sequences, each leading to delimitable and potentially distinct futures.²² Imagine a splendid engraving depicting the gods of a new temporal order; with their precision instruments and chronological tables, they triumph over the false gods, whose temporality was jumbled, reversible, recursive, simultaneously past and present. Scholars have relentlessly marched modern time toward the Enlightenment and the eighteenth century; this would not be a Renaissance print. The magnificent clock in the cathedral of Strasbourg is a Renaissance marvel. Erected in the 1570s, it kept any number of times, not only the hours of the day, trumpeted its designer Conrad Dasypodius, but “eternity, the century, the periods of the planets, the yearly and monthly revolutions of the sun and moon”; an iconographer’s dream, the clock was ornamented with “everything from history and poetry, sacred texts and profane ones, in which there is or can be a description of time.”²³ This could be a description of postmodern time, where everything in the past is at once historical and indiscriminately available in the present.

¹⁹Burckhardt, 81.

²⁰There are succinct revisionist accounts, with bibliography, by Fubini, 2001b; Woolfson; Rüsen. For Michelet’s ideas on “discovery” in the Renaissance, see Mitzman.

²¹And yet the identification of Burckhardt with the modernist paradigm persists: see, most recently, Martin, 2003, 16.

²²I abbreviate the richly complex argument in Koselleck, especially 3–20, 231–66.

²³Grafton, 1995, 140 (quoting C. Dasypodius, *Heron mechanicus; seu de machanicis artibus atque disciplinis. Eiusdem horologii astronomici Argentorati in summo Templo erecti descriptio* [Strasbourg, 1580], sig. [F. iiii r–v]).

The Strasbourg clock is only the first exhibit in Anthony Grafton's exuberant shakedown of the Renaissance discovery of anachronism. In the beautiful symmetry of the old account, Renaissance artists positioned observers in space, Renaissance scholars positioned texts and artifacts in history, and the perfect union provided a time for everything and everything in its time. The corollary — critical reading of evidence of the past in correct temporal sequence — had its academic elaboration, from critical philology, archeology, and classical studies to a new historiography. But Grafton would have us understand that Renaissance chronographers were not clearheaded technicians of anti-anachronism so much as proto computer hackers scrambling and unscrambling programs, or bloggers linking a vast network of information and misinformation. Their timelines often interweave bona fide and dubious texts and traditions. Jean Bodin's famous *Method* was from the title devoted to "histories," not history, and when Bodin criticizes the idea of a golden age, it is not because he rejects it — his is exactly 250 years long — but because he thinks it was actually inhabited by biblical villains who appeared under other names in Greek myths. In his book on the then-recently-discovered Capitoline tables in Rome (1556), the scholarly antiquarian Onofrio Panvinio goes from Romulus to Charles V, emending his texts (as he says) where necessary and making them up (as he does not say) when they are lacking. Among the great antiquarians of the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, a trade-off for chronological certainty was the proposition that mythology was allegorized history, as Eusebius thought in the fourth century and Peter Comestor in the twelfth. Scholars fought over the results, and still do.²⁴

The integration of classical form and classical content as a crowning Renaissance achievement has gone the way of synchronized clocks and lockstep chronologies. In retrospect, the clearest lesson of Panofsky's elegantly erudite lineup of medieval renaissances is that there were too many of them to be trumped by a so-called "real thing" at the end of the fifteenth century. Panofsky's High Renaissance synthesis has long since collapsed under its own weight, to be looted for spare parts. We have learned to factor other calls for restoration and renewal into the revival of antiquity: campaigns for religious reform, radical or reactionary social movements seeking a new golden age, scholastic quarrels over the authentic Aristotle, political propaganda summoning up ancestral myths and histories, and vernacular echoes of antiquity that have little or nothing to do with learned

²⁴For these and many other examples, see Grafton, 1983–93, especially vol. 2.

culture.²⁵ Fakes and forgeries, once driven from the Renaissance temple of learning have returned to join, say, Michelangelo's *Bacchus* as proofs that people were quite willing to be fooled. At the far end of the Renaissance, where the idols of antiquity used to be toppled by the reason and experience of the moderns, we've come to see how often the old learning intermingled with the new.²⁶

The failings of Renaissance time to go modern are surely as significant as the successes. They point to multiplication and complication rather than to the reduction and simplification of historical time around 1500. We do not need to suppose with Bruno Latour that "we have never been modern" to doubt that we have ever been altogether traditional — that there was a uniform Other, organic, ingrown, and ahistorical, to modern time.²⁷ Sanjay Subrahmanyam has recently argued that a new world history emerged in the sixteenth century with the circulation and compilation of inherited lore, travelers' reports, chronicles, and histories. These coexisted and overlapped with old-style universal history, in which Christendom or Islam, a dynasty or an empire, centered the universe on its own time, leaving the rest of the world to its alien times. But there were differences between world history and symmetrical and well-ordered universal history — or perfect history — which sought to master time by compacting it. "[W]orld histories," writes Subrahmanyam, "are accumulative in character, often disordered, and certainly not symmetrical in nature. Its authors are always tempted to add on yet another chapter, and still another one, substituting conjunctions for arguments, and rarely articulating a clear notion of what the skeletal structure of their text is. . . . [T]he world historians were enlarging the scope and coverage of history while also rendering it distinctly imperfect."²⁸

In Natalie Zemon Davis's new book we have a miniature of this large panorama in the life of al-Hassan al-Wazzan. This son of Andalusian exiles who settled in Morocco became a scholar and well-traveled official with ties to the court of Fez; captured in 1518 and taken to Rome by Christian pirates, he became Pope Leo X's trophy geographer Leo Africanus, converted

²⁵Panofsky is the full elaboration of a basic thesis already presented in 1932–33 and several times after that; Landauer offers an informed and searching analysis. For alternatives to classicizing revivals, see the useful survey by Strauss.

²⁶Grafton, 1990 and 1991, is far and away the most influential advocate of both forms of rehabilitation. For a genial confirmation and coda, see Findlen.

²⁷Latour.

²⁸Subrahmanyam, 36; for confirmation of such "imperfect" mixtures in other genres, see Barbour; Županov.

to Christianity as Giovanni Leone, and eventually returned to North Africa an apostate after the Sack of Rome in 1527. Davis's portrait "is of a man with a double vision, sustaining two cultural worlds, sometimes imagining two audiences, and using techniques taken from the Arabic and Islamic repertoire." She asks: "Did the Mediterranean waters not only divide north from south, believer from infidel, but also link them through similar strategies of dissimulation, performance, translation, and the quest for peaceful enlightenment?"²⁹ The sixteenth century is a pivotal period for the *Journal of World History* (University of Hawaii, 1990–) and now the *Journal of Global History* (London School of Economics and Political Science, 2006–), both of them committed to transcending the dichotomy between "the West and the rest." According to Peter Burke's comprehensive survey of a new wave of scholarship that is "globalizing" the Renaissance, "the danger today is not the neglect of non-Western contributions but the exaggeration of their importance."³⁰

Be that as it may, multiple times and spaces suit the intertexts, imitations, adaptations, hyperlinks, and networks of texts, images, and artifacts in the world of postmodern Renaissance scholarship. Rather than disregarding historical time, as hardline critics of postmodernism suppose, it is full of history to overflowing.

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The autonomous, self-centered individual who was once the protagonist of the Renaissance historiography would have looked askance at this decentering rush of history. But the Renaissance self has long since exfoliated, dissolved in language, or moved back into social groups from which it supposedly emerged. Where the Renaissance individual survives, he (hardly ever she) is usually a ward or, in all senses, a subject of the disciplining powers of the court, the state, or church. Burckhardt has much to account for in those sonorous phrases about the new-style individual breaking through the old consciousness of self "only as a member of a race, people, party, family, or corporation."³¹ But the anti-modernist in Burckhardt

²⁹Davis, 12–13; her point is written large by Brotton, vii, whose thesis is that modern Europe arose in "the period between 1400 and 1600 known as the Renaissance . . . by competing and exchanging ideas and commodities with its eastern (and predominantly Islamic) neighbors." See also Darling.

³⁰Burke, 66; see also Bethencourt; Goffman; Marino. For the parallel globalization of a historiography of early modernity, see *Early Modernities*, an issue of *Daedalus, Journal of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences* 127, no. 3 (1998).

³¹Burckhardt, 81.

clearly did not believe that he was writing about, let alone endorsing, a seemingly unbounded freedom. Individualism was a new, still predominantly negative word in 1860. Despite his insouciance about linear time and narrative, Burckhardt's part 2, "The Development of the Individual," deliberately followed part 1, "The State as a Work of Art." The cultured individual's independence from politics was a dream of Burckhardt's after the disillusionments of 1848, but his very real nightmare was that the state and the individual were partners in a dangerous dance that neither could quite abide or quite do without.³²

The limited means and methods for the exercise of power have become a familiar theme in studies of Renaissance politics, at least as familiar as the projection of modern political institutions back to the Renaissance used to be.³³ This does not make Renaissance states any the less arbitrary or violent of course: to the contrary, perhaps. But in states without dependable institutions and allegiances, force is easily expended in its exercise and beholden to circumstance, one reason why Fortune was an imperious arbiter in Renaissance politics. It did not take a Machiavelli to understand that appearances could substitute for, even become, reality. The most acute analysts knew that tenuous political authority, challenged from above and below, rattled by intrigue and violence, called for a politics and an art of compensation. The standard historians' claim that Renaissance political actors, hedged in by constraints of traditional values and factional interests, could not play politics as "the outcome of calculation and reflection" (in Burckhardt's formula) suggests, if anything, that artfulness was not just a style, but a survival skill and a political necessity besides.³⁴

In a persistent double-bind, studies of Renaissance statecraft take Italy

³²This interdependence is fundamental (and explicitly Burckhardtian) in Greenblatt, 1–2, the charter text on "Renaissance self-fashioning." The thesis of containment — that is, that individual resistance and opposition were contained within, and incapable of opposing, Renaissance power relations — became a critical and political litmus test in the responses of the 1990s to the New Historicism of Greenblatt and other literary critics, particularly in English Renaissance literary studies. *The New Historicism* remains perhaps the best sampling of the reception of New Historicist criticism; but see the retrospective and update by Gallagher and Greenblatt.

³³There will obviously be exceptions to such a broad generalization, but it is in keeping with the best historiographical surveys I know: see, with an Italian emphasis, Najemy; Discimon and Guéry; for persistently limited and dysfunctional states in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, Brewer and Hullmuth.

³⁴Burckhardt, 2. Hence the many studies of the rituals, images, and rhetoric of Renaissance political culture since the 1980s: symptomatic of this tendency, the chapters in *Renaissance World* have much to say about the symbolic uses of power but give short shrift to the institutions of politics and government.

to be a primal scene, both the exception and the rule, of modern politics. In one variation, the Italian states were exceptional (though eventually outclassed) as early bloomers, but paradigmatic too because Renaissance state-building outside Italy no longer looks like a straight track to the nation-state. There has always been a certain amount of wishful thinking to the idea of an Italian national history. Microhistory is an Italian specialty; the multivolume Einaudi *Storia d'Italia*, as close as we come to a national history, is a marvelous hodgepodge of articles arranged partly by time, partly by topic, and largely by editorial whim. The territorial states of Italy were, to quote one of their prominent historians, Giorgio Chittolini, anything but “the semi-imaginary state that historians like to label modern”; their trajectory does not lead to “a history of public structures of government, tidily planned institutions, hierarchies of power, and actions of magistrates and officials.” Summing up, Julius Kirshner observes that Italian political historians have adopted “the notion of the state as a non-teleological network of multiple interconnected sources of social and political power.”³⁵

The ultramontane rulers whose dynasties arose out of the intrigues, revolts, and wars of the fifteenth century used to be called “new monarchs.” While the Italians squandered their advantages on petty strife and cultural glitter, the Valois, the Tudors, and the Catholic Kings of Spain, so the story went, consolidated and centralized their territories, instituted bureaucracies, created standing armies, and regularized their finances at the expense of the feudal aristocracy. These makers of the modern state prepared the way for absolute monarchs and enlightened despots. As historians have chipped away at this Whiggish account, nation building has come to look as suspect to historians as it has to our disillusioned foreign-policy makers. Machiavelli’s famous retort to the charge of Italian military incompetence was that Northerners did not understand politics.³⁶ If we add to *The Prince* the long list of famous Italian generals, strategists, and military architects, Machiavelli was, for once, conceding too much. In any case, some of the most important recent studies of Renaissance nation building are literary rather than institutional. Trumping the messy realities of politics on the ground, England was written, Queen Elizabeth imagined, France invented, and Spain composed in literature and an obliging mix of history and myth.³⁷

Whether or not the new monarchs were new, Renaissance empires

³⁵Chittolini, 35; Kirshner’s gloss on the scholarly consensus is on 9.

³⁶Machiavelli to the Cardinal of Rouen according to *The Prince*, chap. 3.

³⁷Helgerson; Montrose; Hampton; Kagan.

certainly were, cobbled together as they were out of old titles and territories and new possessions on a global scale. In that earlier age of globalization, superpower politics, and triumphalist ideologies, the idea of empire beguiled the political imagination and real-world policies. Then as now, political image-makers and political actors had mixed success overlooking the disconnect between the two. The Roman Empire was the Renaissance ideal, but the Holy Roman Empire of the German Nation was the only titular empire in West, its least potent and most intractable state, already the butt of jokes and a political morass where imperial ambitions foundered. Their reach was wider and their hold, sporadically at least, more powerful, but Renaissance empires were cat's cradles of ad hoc titles, dynastic ties, and political compromises. The multiple titles of a Charles V, not to mention his German problem, are a reality check on his grandiose motto *Plus Ultra*. His son Philip II left the imperial title with his Austrian cousins and failed to obtain the title Emperor of the Indies for himself. As Philip Pomper somberly notes, a cardinal rule of empire is that "[empires] generally evolve opportunistically and unpredictably . . . and imperial variations and failure are spread out over a wide spectrum."³⁸

As a function of the precariousness as much as the pretensions of power, Burckhardt's ambivalent version of Renaissance individualism manages to survive the lowered expectations for Renaissance politics quite handily. It is more resilient than the competition: Calvinist saints, capitalist entrepreneurs, and Cartesian egos.³⁹ The title of John Jeffries Martin's engaging recent book, *Myths of Renaissance Individualism*, means to provoke a little but mostly to acknowledge the fallible meanings of individualism in Renaissance studies. Martin wants to tack between two myths, the myth of a hard-nut modern self and what he takes to be a postmodern myth, in which the self and individual consciousness are an illusion of ideology and language: only a function of roles played and selves fashioned. It is easy enough for him to show the persistence of sticky webs of collective identity, allegiance, and obligation, but this does not mean that people didn't negotiate these relations, so to speak, self-consciously and individually. To insist otherwise is to get caught up in the narrative of opposition between collective identities and unbounded individuality that revisionists think they are revising out of existence. In the end, saving the

³⁸Pomper, 2; see also *On Imperialism*, an issue of *Daedalus* 134, no. 2 (Summer 2005). The current scholarly and policy-oriented preoccupation with empire obviously reflects the challenge to the nation-state by globalizing economies and macropolitical aspirations: Dandeleit is a pathbreaking essay; for comparative analysis over a longer term, see Pagden.

³⁹Heller, Sosna, and Wellbery; Shanahan; Porter.

Renaissance individual after all, Martin settles for a constant factoring between an inside — Hamlet’s “within,” Montaigne’s *arrière-boutique* — and the external world: this is a dynamic of what he calls a “relational self.”⁴⁰ He does not want to think of this as a postmodern self, but the idea that postmodern criticism has completely obscured the self is surely yet another myth of Renaissance individualism. There must be a residue and an operator in the most assiduous self-fashioner.

One of my favorites is Momus, part mortal, part god, capable of a “hundred guises,” living “in theaters, in loggias, and public buildings of all types,” even in “the very fortress of the tyrant.” He figures in the ram-bunctious philosophical fable (ca. 1455) by Leon Battista Alberti, and in a dialogue (1504) by the Mantuan humanist doctor Battista Fiera that features the painter Andrea Mantegna. Alberti’s Momus, having been overheard bad-mouthing Jupiter, has fled Olympus and set himself up in Tuscany as a sharp-tongued poet, then as a bearded philosopher with a grudge and many arguments against the gods. The troublemaking master of deception is, among his other roles, a courtier to Jupiter with a split personality. He tells himself “keep the real you, the man you want to be, deep inside your heart, while using your appearance, expression and words to pretend and feign that you are the person the occasion demands. Laugh at the absurdity of it all — at your own absurdity because you can pretend so beautifully.”⁴¹ Alberti’s Momus connives to have the king of the gods create a new world, but after an unseemly quarrel among the Olympians and the ancient philosophers they are consulting, he ends up banished in the form of a woman chained to a sea crag. He gets his revenge when the new theater in which the gods come to bask in praise collapses in a windstorm that topples both the building and the statues representing the deities. The alluring fantasy of fusing divinity and its representations, being and seeming, has wrought devastation, and the gods are now permanently alienated from mortals. Only after the catastrophe does Jupiter look at the notebooks which Momus had prepared for him on the sober virtues of moderation and discernment in the good ruler. We cannot tell whether this is the real Momus or his ultimate masterpiece of deceit. When the Momus of Battista Fiera’s dialogue complains that no one cares any longer about justice or faith, Mantegna agrees — self-consciously. The opinions of the philosophers he has sought out are full of contradictions. Still, he has a

⁴⁰Martin, 2004, 14–19.

⁴¹Alberti, 45 (bk. 1, para. 43).

commission to paint justice and will have to manage somehow: “Orders are orders.”⁴²

Momus used to be one more proof that Renaissance religion was cynical, corrupt, and pagan, not to say an oxymoron. It was either the spiritually slack interval between a medieval Age of Faith and the Reformation, or a flash of liberation that would catch fire in the Enlightenment. In recent scholarship, however, Alberti’s *Momus* is not just a satirical Renaissance Lucian: he also echoes the Book of Revelations, Lactantius, and hermetic theology, and voices a reformist critique of the politics of papal magnificence.⁴³ It is practically an article of faith that religion has moved from the margins to the center of Renaissance Studies. Born again, this new Renaissance is post-medieval but pre-Confessional, with its “myriad new religious institutions, new devotions, sacred spaces, cults, and complex negotiations with authority (ancient and modern).”⁴⁴ This openness would look dangerously freewheeling to both the mainline Protestant confessions and the post-Tridentine Church. With religion on the rebound today, the rash of Renaissance alternatives looks unsettlingly familiar, particularly the calculus of impulses to secularize and at the same time to sacralize the world, to give free rein to, but also to rein in, the needs of the spirit. Part of the current fascination with Renaissance religion comes from the shock of recognition that reason and shared secular values have not disenchanting the world.⁴⁵

With religion brought in, the Renaissance world looks all the more fraught with conflicting claims of identity. In Renaissance Studies these days the consummate practitioners of relational identities are Renaissance women. Since Joan Kelly asked her famous question in the 1970s — “Did women have a Renaissance?” — several waves of rethinking and research have drowned out both the boorish hoots of derision and the defensive rallying cries her article elicited at first. Women’s history, feminist rewriting of cultural history, and gender studies have gone far beyond Kelly’s question. With the opening of new materials and the reinterpretation of

⁴²Fiera, 28.

⁴³Timothy Kircher reviews the scholarship and argues for a multileveled interpretation of the text in “Masks and Metamorphosis in Alberti’s *Momus*,” a paper read at the San Francisco Annual Meeting: I am grateful to Professor Kircher for sharing with me a draft he is preparing for publication. On the wider context, see Grafton, 2000.

⁴⁴Peterson, 856; similarly, Martin, 2005. Bouwsma, 1990b (originally published in 1971), seeks to bridge the gap between Renaissance and Reformation studies. The argument would certainly receive a more sympathetic, but probably not an altogether approving, hearing today: see Benedict; Karant-Nunn.

⁴⁵The essays in Sterk are especially helpful on current views.

familiar ones, generalizations about the status of women have given way to nuanced accounts that depend on many variables, including the shifting dynamics of gender relations varying from time to time and from group to group. In so patriarchal a society as Florence, the painted wedding chests intended to box in upper-class women with moralizing pictures were also, in Cristelle Baskins's exacting readings, screens of anxiety and contradiction. *Reclaiming Female Agency*, a new collection of essays edited by Norma Broude and Mary Garrard, is concerned with art and not limited to the Renaissance, but it points to a key word that we've heard a number of times in papers on women and gender at this meeting. In current scholarship, women writers, artists, religious women, widows, working women, married and unmarried women appear, above all else, to have been active agents. They have come to be central figures and, so to speak, heroes of the postmodern Renaissance.⁴⁶

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I have pointed to what I take to be postmodern inflections in Renaissance Studies. First, because they have come after — in time and in pursuit of — a modernist paradigm; second, because they belie identifying the Renaissance as the first modern age. This is not merely a result of postmodern theorizing as the theory-minded and the theory-shy like to imagine; nor is it just a reflection of the postmodern discombobulation we are supposed to be experiencing. Much of what has been happening in Renaissance Studies comes from widening the margins, not only by research on places, classes of people, and materials that were not so welcome in the charmed circle before, but also by fresh scrutiny and close scholarship on canonical materials. Three days of papers across any number of fields should be enough to make the point that we live, quite contentedly, in the ramshackle tenements that have grown up in the precincts of Renaissance Studies.

It used to be that we had great controversies, wars, and even revolutions in the humanities and allied fields. We still quarrel, as humanists will, and some of us still mobilize for the culture wars even though, temporarily at least, the front seems to have shifted away from the academy. But as the academic smoke has cleared, we can discern few victories and many accommodating turns in the workaday agendas of humanities scholars. Here

⁴⁶In their papers for "The Renaissance of Women," a plenary session at San Francisco, Maureen Quilligan, Sheila Ffolliott, and Sharon Strocchia offered a cross-section of recent scholarship; Wiesner is the fullest and one of the most discriminating surveys, with extensive bibliography. On Florentine *cassoni*, see Baskins. Broude and Garrard is the third of the editors' anthologies in feminist art history since 1982.

is a list since the late 1970s: the interpretive turn in the softer social sciences, soon followed by the historical turn in sociology; the linguistic turn to the text or textuality, which has had a diffuse impact in history, art history, and, though outsiders might have thought it superfluous there, literary studies. Sometimes sharing, sometimes opposing the linguistic turn, is what Hillis Miller called “a lurch” of literary studies “toward history, culture, society, politics, institutions, class and gender, the social context, the material base.” I should add the visual turn and now even a “re-turn” to the real; and even then there are probably some turns I’ve missed.⁴⁷

Some twenty-five years of turns testify to the volatility and the increasingly short half-life of academic work; they are also evidence of continuity and academic gridlock. Some turns stop by turning into Studies, as in Cultural Studies or Visual Studies, a development that makes Renaissance Studies look ahead of its time. Turns also end up vetted and selectively absorbed into existing disciplines.⁴⁸ One way or another, culture has remained an axis, a keyword, a conjuring word, and a fighting word in this period of disciplinary cross-wiring. In their valuable survey, Victoria Bonnell and Lynn Hunt lump together most of the instances I’ve cited in one big cultural turn. This is something of an anticlimax — or a lead balloon, except that culture as they mean it is not the cozy “cake of custom,” the imperious zeitgeist, the conservative redoubt against philistines, or, least of all, a safe haven from contention and contradiction. Current usage is turbulent and chastened. Culture may be high and low, formal and informal, canonical and under construction, medium-specific and multimedia — and circulate, besides, across and between the variables. We are used to hearing cultural anthropologists blame simplistic notions of culture for dodging the complexities and complications of ethnographic work; critical theories take to task the ideological functions of culture as a screen of false consciousness and the accomplice of a junk culture of marketed desires and political passivity under global capitalism. Humanities scholars, used to jibes about ivory towers, have been known to take even the most devastating criticisms as flattering proof that culture makes the world go round.⁴⁹

We have moved far from Renaissance Studies at this point, but perhaps

⁴⁷See, for example, Rabinow and Sullivan; MacDonald; Rorty; Miller; Schwartz and Przyblyski; Cohen and Higonnet; Wilson; Brown.

⁴⁸Klein is a comprehensive and informed analysis of the past and present of interdisciplinary study in the humanities.

⁴⁹Sewell; Biernacki. The indispensable texts on postmodernist anthropology and capitalist postmodernity are Clifford and Marcus; Jameson.

not so far as it may seem. Bonnell and Hunt, asking what lies beyond the cultural turn, underscore widespread worries that “the cultural turn threatened to efface all reference to social context and causes without any systematic ground to replace them.”⁵⁰ There might be a freefall, like Epicurean atoms or, updating the point, a postmodern semiogenesis, a continuous and arbitrary grouping and dissolution of interpretations.

Renaissance Studies suggests a different story.⁵¹ Its cultural turn and whatever lies beyond it did not need to wait so long. Renaissance humanists had already taken it, and with it the confusion of genres, identity thefts, author-deaths, and shady flirtations with power that Renaissance scholars two generations ago would have preferred to airbrush out of the picture. The shopping spree, conspicuous consumption, and showy materialism have come to seem as Renaissance as Neoplatonism, perhaps more so.⁵² For all that, there is not much evidence that anything goes in Renaissance Studies. Scholars still expect to do and be judged by the strenuous work of scholarship, and the old taunt that Renaissance scholars are like medievalists without sufficient training has not struck home for a long time.

* * * * *

I am a little surprised to be heading toward what looks like a happy ending. There are after all dark currents running in the expansive stream of business-as-usual, certainly in the routinization of violence in the real world and even in the teapot tempests of the academic one, where we have good reason to worry about cultural amnesia and illiteracy, the sacrifice of the humanities to science, the market, technology, and political convenience, not to mention short-sighted colleagues and bottom-lining deans. But one worry we can surely dispense with is that postmodern interests will undo Renaissance Studies. In the modernist *organon* information is supposed to put an end to discussion in definitive conclusions; in the postmodernist one we continue to seek and to find important work to do and important matters to talk about. We have our work cut out for us these days, when Donald Trump is supposed to be a Renaissance man and Paris Hilton a Renaissance woman. This will not come as a shock to Renaissance scholars. We understand that Camus’s Sisyphus must have been happy.

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⁵⁰Bonnell and Hunt, 9.

⁵¹Celenza is a good example of his postmodern insights and social history, productively combined with traditional intellectual history and textual scholarship.

⁵²See, for example, Jardine.

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