

## Studying (if Possible) the Renaissance (if Any)

By Don M. Randel

It is an honor to be here at I Tatti and especially on this occasion. I seem to have gotten here the hard way, however. I remember I Tatti's early days as the Harvard Center for Italian Renaissance Studies in the 1960s, when I was doing my graduate work in music history and setting out as a young academic. Several of my friends were working on Italian music of the Renaissance, and I remember talk of spending time at I Tatti on a fellowship. It sounded almost magical. I on the other hand had made what in these terms was a dreadful mistake. I had decided to work on medieval Spanish music. No plausible case to be made for a fellowship at I Tatti. I controlled my envy. But after fifty years I did finally get here. In order to get here, however, I was obliged to devote too many of those fifty years to university and foundation administration rather than to scholarship, since I suspect that this part of my career has more to do with why I now stand before you than does my very clever work on the music of the Spanish Middle Ages. At least I now know that there is some reward in this life for undertaking administrative work. I am rather less confident of what might await me in the next life.

Actually, the purely scholarly part of my life turned out rather well even while my friends were enjoying the magnificent surroundings at I Tatti and the stimulating company that it afforded and affords. I spent two wonderfully pleasant and productive years in Madrid, thanks to a Fulbright-Hays grant. Lucky me. But too bad for the current generation of young scholars who might like to have an experience like mine. The federal budget agreement recently reached for the remainder of the current fiscal year (2011) has cut the budget for the Fulbright-Hays and the Department of Education's Title VI foreign language and area studies programs by 40%. This

will leave them with the pathetic sum, relatively speaking, of \$76 million. So that you will understand just how pathetic this sum is, I will point out that this is about half of the cost of one F-22 Raptor fighter-jet. Now, since this airplane, at the behest of the administration and much against the wishes of some in Congress, has been, at least for the time being, discontinued, you might be able to get a used one for less than the current list price. But you will not soon be able to get one for a mere \$76 million, at least not if you expect it to be in flying condition. In the meantime, we must not reduce the budget of the Department of Defense by any significant amount, since we do not yet know with certainty what the successor airplane will cost.

All of this is to say that Villa I Tatti, the Harvard Center for Italian Renaissance Studies, is now more important than it has ever been. It has the good fortune to be sustained by a university and by individuals who understand the value of, and remain committed to, the study of other times and of other places and their languages and cultures. Unlike the beautiful physical landscape on which it stands in Italy, the intellectual landscape on which it stands in the United States is becoming steadily more barren. I remind you that earlier this year a significant fraction of the U. S. Congress advocated the total elimination of the National Endowment for the Humanities and the National Endowment for the Arts. And one cannot be very optimistic about how the endowments and the Fulbright-Hays and Title VI programs will fare in the federal budget for the 2012 fiscal year. Meantime, the best of our public universities are under very substantial budgetary pressure, the University of California perhaps chief among them.

This budgetary pressure, furthermore, can easily have a disproportionate effect on the humanities and the arts. It is often observed that the percentage of the total operating budget of such universities that derives from state appropriations is now so small—in some cases down into the single digits—that state support matters less and less while imposing substantial

administrative burdens. But what many observers (including rating agencies) fail to understand is that many different colors of money flow through universities, and they are not all fungible. If one examines the budget of a major public research university and takes out everything associated with its medical center, all of its federally sponsored scientific research, most of what is associated with its law school and business school, and any programs mandated by the state or the federal government in support of agriculture or industrial development, what is left that is available to support the humanities and the arts in both teaching and research is principally undergraduate tuition (which may be constrained by the state) and the general state appropriation. Thus dollars coming from the state play a much larger role in support for the humanities and the arts than the percentage of state funds in the total budget might imply. I doubt that many state legislators have thought much about this. But it might be even worse if they did, since many would be glad to point out that the humanities and the arts are experiencing declining enrollments because they do not obviously lead to jobs in the way that some other pursuits at least claim to.

As state appropriations decline, public universities inevitably turn to the other largest share of their unrestricted funds, namely undergraduate tuition generated in their largest college, which will almost always be the college that houses the humanities, perhaps also along with the sciences and the social sciences. This results in increases in tuition in or approaching double digits, though on a relatively low base as compared with private institutions. Then someone will calculate an average rate of increase in tuition across all institutions, both public and private, and Harvard and other private institutions will be tarred with the same brush as the publics for raising tuition too fast. The publics are likely to raise tuition even faster for out-of-state students and to increase their numbers. At the University of California, out-of-state tuition is about \$23,000

more than in-state tuition, and this brings the total of tuition and mandatory fees for out-of-state students there to within about \$3,000 of the comparable figure at Harvard. In addition, the percentage of out-of-state students admitted to the University of California this year was 18%, up from 14% last year and 11.6% in 2009. This trend is, of course, not sustainable for all kinds of reasons.

The United States is clearly disinvesting in higher education at an accelerating rate, and it is disinvesting in the humanities even faster. How are we to think about this?

Right from the start on this occasion, we should probably skip over the deep anti-intellectual streak in the nation. This is not new, though one might think that it is getting even worse. None other than Bernard Berenson, as a freshman in college, wrote in his diary, “There is no civilized country on the globe where culture and serious higher instruction are less encouraged, nay more despised than in the United States.” One can imagine ways to combat it, but they would need to begin in grade school if not in the cradle, they would take a long time, and we seem to be disinvesting in those possibilities as well.

If we stick to higher education, we would be bound to recognize that we have almost always justified investments in the nation’s intellectual life of any kind whatsoever in narrowly instrumental terms. These will include contributions to the Gross Domestic Product, contributions to the national defense, and contributions to life expectancy, especially the life expectancy of the relatively well-to-do. The so-called STEM fields—science, technology, engineering, and mathematics—have been particularly good at justifying themselves in these terms, even though many scientists would admit or even insist that they do not do science primarily for reasons of this kind. The arts, too, have made considerable efforts to justify themselves in such terms. Many a study has been undertaken to demonstrate the economic

impact of the arts, especially in cities, where the ripple effect of investment in the arts creates jobs for restaurant and hotel workers, parking attendants, and baby sitters among others. Of course, almost no one actually engaged in the making of art would say that this is why they devote themselves to this activity.

The humanities have been rather less good at making such arguments even though instrumental arguments could perfectly well be made. There was a time, after all, when the National Defense Education Act provided funds not only for study in the STEM fields but also for study in the humanities. In 2006 President George W. Bush announced a National Strategic Language Initiative, which was intended to encourage the teaching of foreign languages. But the languages in question included only those of countries or regions where the U.S. was already at war or feared it might someday be. The announcement was made to a group of about 100 college and university presidents, and seated in the front row as the President spoke were the Secretary of State, the Secretary of Education, the Secretary of Defense, and the Director of National Intelligence. The amount of money provided, \$115 million, was once again pathetic in relation to the need. There was to be no money for Italian, French, Spanish, or German. I suggested to an official in the Department of State that it might be desirable not only to know the languages and cultures of our real and imagined enemies but also the languages and cultures of countries we would hope to have as allies. This suggestion was not taken up.

Both the national defense and the nation's global competitiveness would no doubt be much improved if more of the nation's citizens had some real knowledge of the languages and cultures of other parts of the world. And we need not apologize for advocating the study of language and literature and history and religion and the arts in these terms. But the instrumental

arguments, powerful though they be, cannot be allowed to be the only arguments or even the principal arguments for the study of these subjects.

First we should consider why it is that we human beings choose to study anything at all and where that activity is in the public's priorities. Aristotle's formulation of an answer to the first of these questions continues to hold up rather well. The goal of life is happiness (as distinct from mere pleasure), and this will derive from the exercise of that which is the best thing in us, namely reason, with the result that the happiest life is the contemplative life. Here I would draw together three terms that seem to me to refer ultimately to the same thing: *contemplation*, *study*, and *research*. All three have to do with the active exercise of reason and with the human instinct to find or make order and meaning where there might not at first appear to be any or where previously derived order and meaning might be improved. This is the activity that is common to scholars in every field, whether the humanities or the sciences, and to creative artists of every kind. Children are all born with this instinct. Unfortunately, society does much to beat it out of them and substitute boredom, which provides fertile terrain for the titillations of much of commercialized mass culture.

If we turn to the second question, namely the place of study in the public's priorities, we could become discouraged. If by *study* we mean much more than the memorization of inherited and sometimes useful bits of knowledge for practical gain—economic and even political gain—the activity would appear to be in decline, even among young people blessed with access to higher education. A recent book with the title *Academically Adrift* points out how little important study of any kind is for the great mass of undergraduates, who assign a much higher priority to their sometimes rather unwholesome social lives than to their academic lives. Many report studying only around fourteen hours per week. The number of them majoring in history or

literature has declined steadily and is now overwhelmed by the number majoring in business. If the College Learning Assessment examination is to be believed, students studying the humanities make gains over their undergraduate years in the ability to write, think critically, and reason about complex matters, whereas those studying business show essentially no gains in these abilities. Both students and faculty members testify to how intellectually frail many business programs have become.

The sad fact is that our culture does not much seem to value studying seriously anything, unless it seems to lead directly to wealth. This is as true in the sciences as in the humanities. Unfortunately, institutions of higher education are steadily dragged into complicity with this. The many critics of higher education like to complain that it costs too much in part because of the “amenities” on which institutions spend tuition dollars, and they like to complain that students are not learning anything. To the extent that the complaint is true—and it is not uniformly true across all of the 4,500 institutions of higher education in the U.S.—it is largely because students and their parents have demanded it. Parents are much more likely to complain about the grades their children get than about their children not having been asked to study enough. And it is the rare student indeed who complains that he or she is not being asked to study enough.

Quantity is of course not the only problem here. Another of the complaints frequently registered about higher education these days is that the faculty gives too much attention to research and that research is the enemy of proper undergraduate instruction. This complaint can drive institutions in precisely in the wrong direction if there is any merit in Aristotle’s view of what makes use of the best thing that is in us. Properly speaking, study and research ought to be exactly the same thing, that is, finding or creating order and meaning where there was none or none sufficiently satisfying. If students are to experience the thrill of discovery at any level, they

must study with people who teach this by example—who themselves continue to question received opinion and who will not be satisfied if students merely repeat what they have been told. To be sure, the faculty must make this attitude manifest in both its teaching and its own research, and students must genuinely have access to the culture of study and research of the faculty. But to say that students would be better off without a forceful encounter with the culture of research—without the experience of struggling to frame and articulate effectively an original idea about some body of scientific or literary or historical material—is to consign them to stuffing their heads for the sake of stuffing their heads with things that they may not long remember in any case.

The challenge in education today is how to make possible—indeed, how to insist on—the experience of study in the most meaningful sense—the sense that study shares with research and contemplation—for as many students as possible at all levels of their education. Many things about our culture conspire against that possibility. These include in the first instance the failure to recognize the importance of realizing that possibility and then the failure to commit the necessary resources to its realization.

And here we are at Villa I Tatti, an institution that calls itself a center for the study of something. We should take pleasure in the fact that the word *strategic* appears nowhere in its title. It is, nevertheless, somewhat amusing to contemplate where in the actual title of the center one might insert the word *strategic* and which of these possibilities would be most likely to capture the attention of the Secretary of Defense or the Director of National Intelligence and thus perhaps give access to the massive budgets of the one or the other. But rather than wait for a phone call from either of these two gentlemen, it might be better to think a bit about the something that is the object of this center's studies, for that something occupies a central place in



humanistic studies generally, and it has a great deal to do more broadly with how we might think about education and ultimately how we think about ourselves. How we think about ourselves and about what it means to be a human being is of course the ultimate object of all humanistic study broadly conceived. Here again we might recall some of Bernard Berenson's words. In his will leaving I Tatti to Harvard, he wrote of those who would study here as follows: "My ideal is that they should become ripe humanists and not mere teachers of facts about the arts."

The order of the words in the title of this center raises the first of a series of questions worth keeping in mind as we think about I Tatti's next fifty years. Does the word *Italian* modify *Renaissance*, as if to suggest that there were other renaissances that might or might not be similar in character, or does it modify *Studies*, as if to suggest that Italian studies are only one of the ways of studying a global phenomenon that we call the Renaissance. Over time, scholarship has tended to oscillate somewhere between these two poles, and that is important. Whatever else I Tatti does in the next fifty years, it must not risk allowing the question to be seen as settled but must instead always allow calling into question the precise nature of its studies. Study or research or contemplation that does not actively engage the possibility that received opinion might be thought better of does not constitute study or research or contemplation worthy of the terms—and worthy of lying at the heart of education and thus justifying the commitment of public and private resources. The risk at I Tatti is perhaps greater than it might be at a good many other places, precisely because it is so especially beautiful and because the aura of its earlier history might lead the uninformed to think that it is a place for the genteel pursuit of matters about which truly sensitive people are largely in agreement and a place to which people not truly sensitive in this way need not apply. As the most prominent center of its kind, I Tatti should

always want to be seen as I Tatti rampant—the center for the most vigorous debate, in which the force of ideas prevails over received opinion even of the most elevated kind.

The general form of this risk has been around for at least five centuries, and it lies at the heart of a debate still going on about what ought to constitute a proper undergraduate education as well as the proper set of activities of graduate students and faculty members. The latest public round in the current debate was launched by a recent study carried out by the National Association of Scholars showing that required undergraduate survey courses on Western Civilization have largely disappeared from the curricula of colleges and universities everywhere, and that relatively few of these institutions offer even optional courses of this type. Any course of this type would be bound to have at its heart a segment devoted to the Renaissance. And after taking such a course, undergraduates majoring in history, literature, art history, or music would be likely to have taken—perhaps even required to take—a semester's course in which the word *Renaissance* figured prominently in the title. No longer. Why was this ever the case, and why might one lament the present state of affairs?

The answer turns out often to be more nearly ideological rather than any claim about the benefits of such study that can be verified. This problem presented itself first in the Renaissance itself in relation to the study of the humanities as inherited from Greek antiquity. Anthony Grafton and Lisa Jardine pointed out some time ago that some humanists in fifteenth-century Italy believed too much in their own propaganda, inherited from the Greeks, about the degree to which an education in the liberal arts made one a better person and was the ideal preparation for distinguished participation in civic life while nevertheless restricting their own teaching to a narrow concentration on grammar and rhetoric. There was indeed a vigorous debate in the fifteenth century about the place of Classical learning in a proper education, and we should not

want to paper over that debate by declining to carry it on ourselves. Let me hasten to say that not everything about the debate in Renaissance Italy itself ought necessarily to be preserved in our own continuing debate. We might wish to adopt a more civil—one might say more humane—tone than the one sometimes encountered there. Here is what Poggio Bracciolini had to say about Lorenzo Valla at one point:

It does not surprise me that some deluded and demented idiot spews out his madness at me, since the innate imbecility of his mind, the ingrained insanity of his heart, the inborn perversity of his soul, lead him to condemn, reprehend, blame and spurn with wild arrogance all those ancient and most learned men, whose memory has been venerated throughout all generations with celebration in the highest terms of praise. As if he held the wheel of fortune in his hand, and turned it to and fro, and whirled everything around, and twisted it to fit his judgment.

In our image of the Italian Renaissance we must be sure to incorporate the vigorous presence of faculty politics. In more recent times, insistence on the study of Latin and on the mastery of a certain account of the revival of classical learning in Italy and its inheritance by the founding fathers of the United States as the ideal preparation for life itself has often not been justified by what was actually taught and learned and the uses made of those things.

This is not to say that the study of such things is not in and of itself valuable. It is to say only that the unquestioned study of anything is fruitless for other than ideological purposes and that it is easy to overstate the claims for the value of the study of a topic even as interesting and important as classical learning and its revival. Here we must be careful not to fall into either of the familiar traps: (1) studying Western Civilization and the Renaissance is good for you no matter what, and (2) no subject is better than any other in the modern, globalized world. Rather, we should study the *concepts* of Western Civilization and the Renaissance because these have

been powerful concepts in our history, whether or not we might now wish to think better of them in ways great and small.

I often think that the work of historians is captured admirably in the title of a novel by a friend of mine: *The Lies Boys Tell*. Perhaps rather than *lies* I should say *stories*, for we use *stories* to refer at one time and another to the whole range of discourses from lies to inventions to narratives said to rest on fact. Our most important stories are the stories that we tell about ourselves, and many of the stories that we tell about history are really stories about ourselves. The greatest of these in the West is surely the story of the Renaissance. It is the story of the first people like us or like we imagine ourselves to be—free from superstition, open to true feeling, and sensitive to the most sublime creations of the human imagination. We are likely to leave out of this story our ability and inclination to slaughter one another then as now and our readiness to use the story to justify the subordination of peoples whose stories we regard as inferior to our own. We are especially good at setting aside the fact that some of the greatest criminals of the twentieth century were extremely well versed in the story of the Renaissance and other stories emerging from nineteenth-century German romanticism.

It is wrong to suppose, as the National Association of Scholars seems to suppose, that the survey of Western Civilization of days gone by, with its central weeks devoted to the Renaissance, made us better people and provided the ideal structure for understanding everything about the world. And it is equally wrong to suppose that the rejection of this story is anything other than the mere substitution of some different story. To reject the inherited story of the Renaissance as if to do so were a liberation from the night into the day is simply to re-enact the creation by the story of the Renaissance of a story about the Middle Ages in largely negative terms. What matters is that we master as many stories as we can about ourselves and about

others, recognizing that some stories are better than others in their relation to what we can reasonably, if not necessarily, regard as the facts. What matters is that we demand the right to give up any story for a better one and that we search constantly for that better one. What matters is that all of the best stories are about what it means to be a human being, whether they are the stories of the scholar or the artist, who are after all engaged in the same pursuit—to make order and meaning where there was none or none discernible.

Lest anyone doubt that stories can lead to blindness as well as to insight, let me speak briefly as a medievalist and a musicologist. The story of the Renaissance in the history of music that dominated at around the time that the Harvard Center for Italian Renaissance Studies opened its doors at I Tatti was powerful then and has proved remarkably durable. It derived, I believe, from a certain needless musicological inferiority complex in relation to the history of art and the history of ideas. There were deeply intelligent and elegant people engaged in the study of art history, some of them in and out of I Tatti in the first half of the twentieth century, who, although often cultivated lovers of music from later periods, did not incorporate much or anything about music in their study of the Renaissance. Musicologists naturally wanted in, though there was nothing like connoisseurship in the field of music, or if there was, there certainly was not any money in it.

There were, however, certain inconveniences. Very little Italian music survives from the age of Petrarch, and almost none survives from the Italy of the fifteenth century. And essentially no music at all survives from classical antiquity. This would seem to eliminate the possibility of finding a place for music in Italian Renaissance studies as conceived in 1961. But if there was something as important as the Renaissance was said to be, music must surely have a place in it some way.

How to secure this place? Some sixteenth-century writers on music began to quote the writers of classical antiquity on music and to adopt some of their views, though without examples of ancient music to point to. Among the central themes of the ancient writers was that music had great power to arouse the emotions and that this was possible in part because words were the guiding force in relation to music. Sixteenth-century writers thus set about to describe the ways in which their music satisfied the criteria of the ancient writers whereas the music of previous generations did not. This was the central element in the definition of medieval music in essentially negative terms, and it fit very well with notions of the Renaissance liberating humankind from the shackles of the church and freeing humankind to be in touch with its feelings.

Music around 1500 did in fact display a number of novel characteristics. The norm for musical texture became four voices rather than three, with much greater use of one note per syllable of text rather than several notes per syllable. This seemed to suggest that composers were more concerned than they had been with the intelligibility of the text, which was thought to be an important factor in the dominance of words over music and in the power of music to arouse the emotions. Musicologists did not much worry about the fact that these same claims about the power of some new music in relation to what preceded, often citing the same ancient writers, were made in support of several of the most striking turns in musical style of later eras, perhaps most notably the new music (as it was literally called) of Monteverdi and his contemporaries around 1600 and the mature works of Richard Wagner, as described at great length by Wagner himself. There have been various reforms, especially of opera, in the history of music, and each has cited some ancient authority (not always classical) to justify the claim that what was being reformed was bankrupt.

The musicological project was to make music fit into a story of the Renaissance based on entirely different kinds of materials from outside the world of music. It led to the oft-repeated old saw that music lags behind the other arts. It literally prevented musicologists from even attempting to discover whether words and music had anything of consequence to do with one another before 1500. And it subordinated any attention to the biggest purely musical change of around 1500, about which classical writers necessarily had nothing to say, namely the change in musical texture from three voices to four. It left us all to feel as if the composers from around 1500 were the first to be like all of those who came after them in Western music and the first to be like us. Composers before 1500 simply didn't get it, though their music remained interesting as grist for musicology's philological tools.

Talk of interdisciplinarity is extremely fashionable these days, and increased interdisciplinarity is quite properly a goal of the environment that has been created here at I Tatti. But the tale I have just told about musicology might be seen as cautionary. The interdisciplinary story runs the risk of falsifying the disciplinary stories on which it claims to rest. This is not a reason to shrink from constructing the grandest story one can imagine. A healthy curiosity and an insatiable thirst for finding or making meaning will be satisfied with nothing less. To the gardener, the definition of a weed is any plant that appears in a place where you don't want it. Humanistic scholars need to be somewhat more tolerant in making their gardens and more careful in where they put their feet.

I Tatti is bound to change over the next fifty years in some of the same ways that it changed over its first fifty. It will continue to extend its reach to new disciplines and new perspectives from around the world. As new readers of our story of the Italian Renaissance (or the Renaissance in Italy) are invited in, they will give new meaning to that story, and the story

will become better. That story will then contribute new meaning to other stories previously thought unrelated. At its core, the subject of the story will remain the same and become known to ever more people. In the process, I Tatti will become ever more important as a place that fosters the continuous interrogation of the story that it is helping to create. It will thus contribute to the creation of the story that we tell about ourselves as human beings astride an unruly planet. That is the story that is every scholar's work.