Reading Guide, Sept. 10-12

These questions will help you focus your attention as you do the readings for this week. You don’t need to come up with definitive answers, but you should jot down your thoughts so you can bring them up in class. They are not exhaustive—jot down other questions that occur to you as you read!

Though some of the questions address specific passages in the reading, you should (of course) do all the assigned reading.

Tues. 9/10: Introducing the Renaissance: approaches to Renaissance history
Read: Reader, vii-xviii; Burke, 1-39 (introduction and ch. 1-2); Martines, ix-xi (prefaces).

1. Read Burke, 1-10 (introduction). How does Burke define cultural history? What are the four trends that he identifies in cultural history in the last thirty years?

2. Why did the Renaissance seem more modern to Jacob Burckhardt than it does to Peter Burke?

3. Read Burke, 13-17 (from chapter 1). Why does Burke prefer to discuss “innovation” in the arts rather than their “flourishing”? What did Renaissance artists and writers think about the immediate past? the ancient past?

4. Read Burke, 17-26 (the rest of chapter 1). What three characteristics are often attributed to the arts in the Renaissance? How does Burke qualify each of those characteristics? Does he reject them?

5. Read Burke, 27-39 (chapter 2). How would you characterize the difference between what Burke calls “macrosocial” and “microsocial” explanations of the Renaissance (p. 38)? Which of the historians discussed in this chapter took microsocial approaches, and which took macrosocial approaches?

Thurs. 9/12: Introducing the Renaissance: Petrarch
Read: Reader, 1-59 (Petrarch: “Letter to posterity,” “The ascent of Mount Ventoux,” and selections from the Canzoniere).

1. On p. 5, Petrarch claims, “I have always taken pride in others but never in myself.” Do you think this is true? Why or why not?

2. Why was Petrarch so interested in antiquity? How did he display his knowledge of antiquity in his poetry and prose?

3. Why did Petrarch decide to climb Mount Ventoux?

4. Much of Petrarch’s account of his ascent of Mount Ventoux is allegorical. What is the allegory? What does Petrarch’s letter tell us about his view of fame and the good Christian life?

5. How does Petrarch describe the experience of love? (Find some specific descriptions or metaphors.) Does his description in the selected poems bear out his claim in #1 (p. 22) that “from my vanities comes fruit of shame/. . . and the clearest knowledge/that worldly joy is a quick passing dream”?