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POSSIBLE HISTORY

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Presidential Address, Medieval Academy of America
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We scholars of the Medieval Academy "do" history or "do" studies of art, philosophy and literature, as a common verb has it. And inelegant as it is, I am rather drawn to the vague, busybody little word. It has the advantage of reminding us of our participation with the dead. We assemble our (we hope soundly based) conclusions from our (we hope well chosen) data and say: here is the significant pattern, here is the principle that underlay the series of actions or thoughts I have analyzed. But we choose the data. We draw the conclusions. We choose to speak. And this choice involves us in responsibilities, as we all are aware. We need to ask ourselves: to whom are we speaking? But let me put that aside for the present. We have another, overriding responsibility. The dead have no voice but ours. How best can we find the voices of our dead, and speak of patterns and principles to which they would have assented, however shruggingly? This question, to me as a scholar, is of far greater importance than the first. For I take the two fundamental assumptions of a scholar to be: that there was a unique, though not necessarily fully recoverable past, and that our activity as scholars is to understand -- insofar as we are able -- that

past. For myself I feel no responsibility to please the living, nor to entertain, nor to improve them: only to keep my hypothetical reconstructions falsifiable and thus testable; to engage in fruitful debate. My own sense of my ultimate responsibility is to the dead: to try to "get them right" as far as I can.¹

Few would be so optimistic as to claim today that we are going to cobble together an "entire, indubitable, objectively once-existing Past," in Nancy Partner's phrase.² But that does not mean that we need abandon hope of constructing closer and closer approximations to the truth of the past. We have every reason to assume that there is a large measure of recoverable truth. We have every reason to feel that, thanks to the careful honing of the research tools available to scholars, and thanks to honest, vigorous debate we have indeed a closer approximation to the truth than was possible in even the not-so-distant past. Whole new disciplines have shone light into hitherto dark and neglected areas of the human experience, and suddenly we do see more clearly. An insightful individual asks a new series of questions -- and the door to richly furnished, unsuspected rooms of the past suddenly begins to open. We look at a consensus, puzzle perhaps over oddities it does not appear to account for -- and proceed by saying, "See here, isn't this a more plausible hypothesis, for it after all explains the otherwise loose ends? Wasn't the past at any rate possibly more like this?" And thus we do proceed.

And I think we proceed more surely if as individuals we can manage to abandon our own hopes that our individual reconstructions are at

last the true ones. One so much wants to know. And one so much wants to have been right! Yet we will best serve the cause of the successive approximations to the truth when we accept that the most we are likely to achieve in our individual contributions will be possibility. We bring too much of ourselves to the work for it to be otherwise. Possible history is debatable history. And debated history is not only intellectually exhilarating. It is the way to approximations closer to the truth. It has its own disciplines, such as testability, to add to those rigorous methodologies of assessing documents that we are continually employing and refining. And I would suggest that a useful discipline is introspection, for myself the most difficult of all. We must attempt to understand the nature of the contribution that we may be unreflectively bringing to the job of reconstructing the past. With what pleasant irony John Gillingham puts the lesson, in his reexamination of the chronicler Ademar of Chabannes: "The only historian to have made a systematic study of Ademar's material on the 9th century is Levillain. His conclusion is that the material is accurate, that in the 11th century monk we have a man with a passion for genealogical research. In other words Levillain saw in Ademar of Chabannes a mirror image of himself. What I propose to do . . . is to take a look at Ademar and see in him a mirror image of myself -- in other words a man with a certain ingenuity for combining odd bits and pieces of information but essentially a thoroughly unreliable historian."³

Now John Gillingham is anything but an unreliable historian, but

with characteristic wit he has made a serious point. Patterns are ours first and foremost, and to a not-insignificant degree readings that propose patterns resemble Escher prints, in which the drawing may be of gray doves flying downwards or of white doves soaring up. No reading of an Escher print is privileged, and no one's reading of the past is necessarily so. One scholar's white doves may be another's gray. To say this is not to abandon the subject to relativism. It is, rather, a way of pointing out that any individual scholar's sense of configuration and of significance will depend strongly on his/her own world view. And world views must be taken into account in searching for the successive approximations to the truth, of which scholarship consists. Let me quote the philosopher W. T. Jones, whose work bears so much upon ours. "By world view I mean a configuration of cognitive and evaluative sets, analogous to the perceptual sets that cause different aspects of the experiential field to 'stand out' and become noticeable -- analogous, that is, to the sort of set that causes my name to stand out (for me) from the noisy and otherwise undistinguishable babble of sound at a cocktail party."⁴

We often, Professor Jones argues, engage in disagreements that are simply "non-terminable" because one scholar is convinced by the sort of argument or evidence that another scholar finds quite irrelevant. And this stems from deeply felt preferences, deeply differing world views. It is instructive to reflect upon those preferences held by ourselves (and our colleagues) that would affect our evaluations. One of Jones' illustrative examples will show what I mean, his "static/dynamic

dimension": "people with a strong static-orientation not only notice the enduring aspects of experience more than do people with a strong dynamic-orientation. They also tend, because they are interested in the static, to feel more comfortable in stable situations. In contrast, people with a dynamic-orientation tend to dislike stability and find change exhilarating and exciting."⁵ I think Dante and Machiavelli occupy opposite extremes of this dimension, and depending upon our own orientation, we will respond more sensitively to the one or the other. Furthermore our interpretations of the past will be colored by our assumptions that the medieval world was, or sought to be, static and in equilibrium, or that it was unstable and even in disequilibrium -- and that medieval men and women not infrequently felt exhilarated by change. We will find some arguments persuasive and others wrong-headed. My peasants, I find, are generally a calculating lot, on the make, manipulative of tradition and wary of their lords' manipulations. Other people's puzzle me: they shelter within time-honored tradition, creatures of the seasonal round, patiently accepting the prerogatives of their lords.⁶ We all get the peasants we deserve. Unless we can recognize, and then learn from, the assumptions we and our colleagues bring to the evidence, we will talk past one another, not only puzzled, but often somewhat irritated. When scholars get -- as of course they often do -- to that deeper level of disagreement, or when a later generation perceives what the trouble had really been, then our understanding of the past can be modified, and we may hope to have achieved a closer approximation to the truth of the past.

If we think seriously of the question of world views, it suggests that we refine continually our ways of mapping-out the world views of past societies and of the individual texts we rely on, and that we attempt to look at past world views as independently of our own as possible. The first step surely is to acknowledge the hypothetical nature of our work. Our reconstructions are "possible history" and our approximations will be surer if we proceed by hypothesis and alternative hypothesis. Such scholarly discourse requires the greatest tact and courtesy. For we will never be more irritating, and never more irritated with one another's world views. Professor Constable has recently and strikingly brought up the topic of such mapping of past preconceptions.⁷ He has suggested that "plagiarism" is a modern concept, better avoided when we attempt to think of medieval minds. He would restrict the term "forgery" to "deliberate falsifications . . . intended to promote selfish ends," prohibited and punished in the Middle Ages as they are now.⁸ This is certainly serious food for thought. I do not assume that men and women of the past were in any important way different from ourselves. Yet they lived in societies often almost unimaginably different from ours -- in their means of communication, economic bases, political and juridical institutions. It may be that modern terms for modern criminal behavior imply judgments about past individuals that we do not intend. Now, I have worked on a series of monastic forgeries, and I found a less restricted application of the word useful, but I tried to employ it sparingly, and to concentrate not only on the exposure of the charters' unreliability,

but rather more on the circumstances, which I thought were recoverable and which shed light on the monks' motives. For my pains in my (I hoped) delicate recovery of a human dilemma, I was sharply criticized by a beloved friend and mentor, Professor V. H. Galbraith: "Call a spade a spade -- they were forgers!" Galbraith had no time for all that "understanding" piffle -- not when documents were concerned.⁹ Deep preferences -- world views -- lie often far apart, and affect even our tolerance for words. At least we must be precise about what we mean to convey -- and careful about how we may be understood. Our vocabulary certainly will carry a weight of connotation personal to ourselves. One might or might not agree to restrict the use of a word; it will depend upon the connotations of the word to ourselves. But we should be aware that our words, or our restrictions, may cause our argument to go unheard by someone with whom we want to discuss.

Surely as one enters the world of charters and texts of the epochs before about 1200 in particular, one must leave behind one's modern self as far as possible. Quite aside from forgery, one is entering a world that did not enjoy the stability and restraints of our world, or even those of a society in which literacy was reasonably common and governmental administration relatively effective. In such a world there was a zone of fiction and staged performance immensely wide in comparison with that of our own. We may well feel discomfort in their reliance upon (and indeed pleasure in) fictions that in our lives would be as disruptive as they were stabilizing in theirs. Charters can lead us into a hall of mirrors in which time and events are

recalled in as vertiginous a series of half-stories as Italo Calvino's Upon a Winter's Night a Traveller -- all of the complexities of a property's descent, earlier transfers, family claims and confirmations set out -- story within story (and no doubt much enjoyed), in order that posterity might admit to the weight of the main event.¹⁰

Our reconstructions become particularly difficult if we are not constantly aware that we cannot take as their reality their creations. In the mid-twelfth century the Norman chronicler Robert of Torigny added to an earlier chronicle a series of genealogies that identified a large part of the ruling class of Normandy and England as cousins, related through the daughters and granddaughters of the unnamed parents of the lady Gunnor, wife of Richard the Fearless. A strange principle of kinship one might think, for it emphasizes not the paternal but the maternal, and it does not celebrate lineage but linkage. Yet if one may entertain the possibility that the Norman principle of power-building was more elementary than that of prince, vassals and administration, one may see the genealogies in a new light. They come indeed to seem a powerful principle of alliance. In a kinsman Normans recognized a member of a group loyal within itself. In that case it matters not at all whether the genealogies were biologically true or not. Biology is not the point in primitive politics; as anthropologists often point out, it scarcely matters whether the Smiths fight side by side because they are Smiths, or whether they are Smiths because they fight side by side.¹¹

All our careful methodology will not penetrate to a unique past

actuality; we see only a part of the immensity of possibility. For their evidence reflects their imperatives. They did not create it for us.

Even that evidence that reports the actions of the men and women we seek to understand is very possibly the report of stage-managed acting. And, oddly enough, in the case of women especially, some very revealing world views of historians get bizarrely in the way. Take for example the familiar tale of the romance that resulted in the birth of William the Conqueror. We have all heard it so often it has come to be a commonplace. Still let me briefly remind you of it yet again. In the late 1020s, Robert, the dashing young son of Duke Richard II of Normandy, was given an apanage centering on the castrum at Falaise in Central Normandy. There, we are taught, the young man saw, and burned with passion, for the lovely young girl Herlève, she but the daughter of a lowly tanner or embalmer. In Falaise they will even point out the very window high in the castle built a hundred or so years later, from which the noble youth spied the girl doing the family wash in the stream below. Locals aside, responsible modern historians have told of how the low pariah's daughter was conveyed to the noble bed, how the youth then doted upon her, and how in the ripeness of time not even the disparity in their stations prevented the young Duke Robert from acknowledging her baby as his son and heir, William, future conqueror. A tanner-embalmer the grandfather of the leader of the haughty Norman warriors! "She was a remarkable girl", Professor Douglas wrote of Herlève. Never mind the fact that the earliest source for her

parentage, the one that also gives her name, calls her father Duke Robert's cubicularius, keeper of his sleeping chamber. It was one of the positions of greatest trust in the ducal household. A tanner-embalmer was the lowest of the lowly town craftsmen, a worker with dung and death. That being so, the source of the calumny is more readily understood. For Orderic Vitalis, author of the information that Herlève's father was a household official told his readers in his Ecclesiastical History that in William's young manhood (before men had come to know him) the burgesses of Alençon hung skins from their walls in defiance of his demand for surrender. Were they not acting out in extreme form an insult? William was not fully a Norman noble, but the descendant too of administrators, burgesses -- how better to taunt him than as the descendant of the lowest, most noisome burgess possible? They showed contempt and wit. But whether they showed a "correct" knowledge of genealogy in a town far away, we may doubt.¹² I suspect that many historians have rather liked the notion of romantic, helpless, lowborn mistresses. It is only a suspicion, but it makes me wonder whether there are not more ladies who need rescuing from historians.

A version of the story had passed certainly into one of the romantic legends that Henry II encouraged at his court. By then it could be used as a piece of shorthand wit between the king and St. Hugh of Lincoln, in which the one could establish his courage, and the other his rollicking good-fellowship, to be tried just so far, and then only by just such a man. If one can believe the Life of St.

Hugh.¹³

Such theater was the very stuff of reputation and of memorability. What does one make of the character of William the Conqueror from his manner of conceding a favor to the monks of Marmoutier? He was at dinner at one of his properties in the Cotentin, with his friends Robert of Montgomery and William fitzOsbern. One Hugh the Forester protested the favor, and in reply William nearly hit him with a pork shoulder, so the charter records.¹⁴ Does this tell us about William's violence, or that he was giving the monks an event to use? Or both? The fact is that in a disquietingly large area the evidence that remains to us is a mine field of fictions. If we walk warily there we will be wise, but we must not expect our wariness alone to bring us through safely. In mine fields I expect one needs luck. And anyone who feels unbearably uncomfortable in the realm of uncertainty my own world view has sketched, I should advise to head for the later Middle Ages -- or of course to argue with me. Our own world views will get in the way of our argument as they inevitably get in the way of our reconstruction of the world views of the past. But we will never speak for our dead unless we listen to one another's approximations instead of squaring off and talking past one another. We will never speak for our dead unless we keep trying to enter what we think we make out of their imperatives.

But for us, I think, the voices of our dead are our deep concern. It is to catch their whisper that we so obsessively visit archives, manuscript collections, libraries. And we are mildly surprised when

others find us ridiculous. For they do. The Presidential Address at the recent American Historical Association made it clear. Professor McNeill finds us, I fear, even lacking in propriety and social responsibility as we squeak away, trying on voices, and debating among ourselves, our noses meantime in our documents. "Historiography that aspires to get closer and closer to the documents", he writes, "all the documents and nothing but the documents -- is moving closer to incoherence, chaos, and meaninglessness."¹⁵ This is an unfair caricature, for there is no such thing as "all the documents and nothing but the documents." But Professor McNeill is exhorting us to write for our societies, to join in making myths "more adequate to public life, emphasizing the really important aspects of human encounters and omitting irrelevant background noise more efficiently so that men and women will know how to act more wisely. . . ." We are called, it appears, to provide "a useful instrument for piloting human groups in their encounters with one another and with the natural environment."¹⁶ "Mythistory," he calls it.

Julien Benda's The Betrayal of the Intellectuals is a good deal dated when one reads it today.¹⁷ But it appeared in the world of the nineteen twenties, and it wildly protests a world being poisoned by intellectuals who were willingly piloting their groups to murder and death with myths about themselves. For myself as an historian -- for most medievalists I believe -- I do not intend to be speaking to my contemporaries, save to my colleagues. For it is possible, by discussion and debate and listening, to demythologize the past.

Without being dogmatic about the nature of history, Professor McNeill represents one world view; I another. From the point of view of someone writing history from within my world view, the danger of writing history from within McNeill's world view is that it looks to us like an exceedingly slippery slope. Once a commitment to some moral or political or religious value, however noble, replaces a commitment to evidence as the only relevant consideration in reaching a conclusion about the past, how does one prevent the discipline of history from sliding farther and farther down that slope -- as far as Benda's intellectuals even?

We medievalists are in a far greater tradition, and if we are respected (as we are in our society) it is because we are seen to be interested in approaching the truth and serving no other master, disdainful of lesson-giving. Not as men and women who are historians can we claim a privileged podium from which to speak of contemporary matters, we who listen for, and try to be, the voices of the dead. What we say may not be devoid of wisdom, but it cannot be direct. Our wisdom, insofar as it exists, is that of the Delphic oracle perhaps. Ours is a far less sure world view than that of Benda's intellectuals, but it is the world of Newton and Einstein, who knew in their depths that they had found truths, but that each individual contribution was so partial that they seemed to play with stones upon the beach, while the sea lay before them all undiscovered. Ours is above all the supreme, ambiguous confidence expressed by Henry James, "We work in the dark -- we do what we can -- we give what we have. Our doubt is our

passion, and our passion is our task."¹⁸ The rest, he said, is the madness of art. For us perhaps it is the tentative hope of approaching nearer to the dead's not-quite-vanished reality.

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¹ Nancy Partner has recently put this thought very well in her stimulating essay, "Making up Past Time," Speculum 61 (1986), p. 110: "only historians can betray all the generations of the dead."

² Ibid., p. 117.

³ John Gillingham, "Ademar of Chabannes and the history of Aquitaine in the reign of Charles the Bald," in Charles the Bald: Court and Kingdom, ed. Margaret Gibson and Janet Nelson, BAR International Series 101, (1981), pp. 3-4.

⁴ W. T. Jones, "Philosophical Disagreements and World Views," Proceedings and Addresses of the American Philosophical Association, 43 (1973), pp. 24-25. See also his "World Views: Their Nature and their Function," Current Anthropology, xiii (1972), pp. 79-108.

⁵ Jones, "Philosophical Disagreements and World Views," p. 29.

⁶ This seems to me the point really at issue in the debate on merchant. See "Debate: Seigneurial Control of Women's Marriage," Paul A. Brand and Paul R. Hyams, with a "rejoinder" by Eleanor Searle, Past and Present 99 (1983), pp. 123-160.

⁷ Giles Constable, "Forgery and Plagiarism in the Middle Ages," Archiv für Diplomatik 29 (1983), pp. 1-41.

⁸ Ibid., p. 39.

⁹ He was commenting privately to me on my treatment of the Battle monks in my Lordship and Community: Battle Abbey and its Banlieu 1066-1538, (1974), pp. 30-35.

¹⁰ An example is to be found in Marie Fauroux, Recueil des Actes des Ducs de Normandie de 911 à 1066 (Caen, 1961), no. 42, and such complex accounts will be familiar to all historians who use early charters. The rituals that accompanied compromise are equally dwelt upon. Stephen D. White, "Pactum . . . Legem Vincit et Amor Judicium": the Settlement of Disputes by Compromise in Eleventh-Century Western France," The American Journal of Legal History, xxii (1978), pp. 281-308, esp. pp. 297-98.

¹¹ R. Keesing, Kin Groups and Social Structure (1975), esp. chapter 8.

¹² Orderic's direct identification of Herlève, William's mother, is to be found in his interpolation of the text of William of Jumièges' Gesta Normannorum Ducum, ed. Jean Marx (Rouen, Paris, 1914), p. 157. For the best summary of the evidence concerning the Conqueror's mother, see D. C. Douglas, William the Conqueror, Appendix A, pp. 379-382. In order to make both of Orderic's accounts "true" (that is, to make Herlève a tanner-embalmer's daughter), Douglas chose to interpret the interpolation, "Willelmus enim ex concubina Rodberti ducis nomine Herleva, Fulberti cubicularii ducis filia natus," not in its plain sense, but must suppose that Fulbert subsequently became cubicularius.

Few young men, one may imagine, would have wanted the smell of a tanner or the presence of an embalmer about their beds.

13 Magna Vita Sancti Hugonis: The Life of St. Hugh of Lincoln, ed. Decima L. Douie and D. H. Farmer, vol. I (1961), pp. 115-118.

14 Fauroux no. 151.

15 William H. McNeill, "Mythistory, or Truth, Myth, History, and Historians," American Historical Review 91 (1986), p. 8.

16 Ibid., p. 10.

17 Julien Benda, La Trahison des Clercs, 1927, transl. Richard Aldington (Beacon Paperback, 1955).

18 The Notebooks of Henry James, ed. F. O. Matthiessen and Kenneth B. Murdock, 1947, p. 122, quoted from James' story The Middle Years.