

SERIOUS ENTERTAINMENTS

The Writing of History in
Twelfth-Century England

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THE QUESTION OF HISTORICAL EVIDENCE

IN A VERY SERIOUS AND ONCE IMMENSELY POPULAR AND controversial novel of 1888 called *Robert Elsmere*,¹ an intelligent and devout young English clergyman begins to study the sources for medieval history and ends by losing his faith. In spite of his scholarly disposition and a university education, Robert Elsmere found medieval narratives, especially chronicles and saints' lives, totally unnerving.

One day he was deep in the life of a certain saint. The saint had been a bishop of a diocese in Southern France. His biographer was his successor in the see, a man of high political importance in the Burgundian state, renowned besides for sanctity and learning. Only some twenty years separated the biography, at the latest, from the death of its subject. It contained some curious material for social history, and Robert was reading it with avidity. But it was, of course, a tissue of marvels. . . . [Here the author quotes, from the saint's life, a fairly conventional miracle involving demons.]

Robert made a hasty exclamation, and turning to Catherine, who was working beside him, read the passage to her, with a few words as to the book and its author.

Catherine's work dropped a moment on her knee.

"What extraordinary superstition!" she said, startled. "A bishop, Robert, and an educated man?"

Robert nodded.

"But it is the whole habit of mind," he said half to himself, staring into the fire, "that is so astounding. No one escapes it. The whole age really is non-sane."²

Robert Elsmere's Anglican faith was temporarily secure in the face of discredited Roman miracles, but an intellectual process had begun that would not stop, and "the comparative instinct—that tool, *par excellence*, of modern science" (as the author terms what we would call historical criticism) refused to halt at Protestant ground and inexorably death-marched Elsmere through the Old and New Testaments until he could no longer

believe in any revealed religion and had to take refuge in deism and good works. It was a route that many Victorians knew well.

We still value medieval biographies for their "curious material for social history," though we have lost the impulse to exclaim out loud at marvels, perhaps regrettably, since we really have no explanation of them more thorough or satisfying than Elsmere's charge that the whole age was "non-sane." We have simply grown patronizing and tolerant. (We are also very like Robert Elsmere and everyone his character was based on (those, at least, who had learned the new biblical criticism), for whom liveliness and general intelligence in a medieval historian were not enough to compel respect if the writer could not also display an ability to find and critically evaluate a variety of historical evidence.) And that is a test no medieval historian can pass very creditably. With Robert Elsmere, an articulate century milestone, we have somehow come an immeasurable distance from Eleanor Tilney's genial willingness to enjoy the invented speeches and edifying anecdotes of dubious provenance found in history books, "very well contented to take the false with the true," as she says, with a mild and undemanding skepticism. Admittedly, she would have found medieval histories distasteful and crude, but she would never, on their account, have ceased to be a Christian.

Since the Middle Ages and most noticeably since the nineteenth century, the writing of history has been strikingly transformed—and likewise its sensitive corollary art, the reading of history. (Modern readers have acquired fairly rigorous expectations as to form and content, and we have come to hold them so unself-consciously that they seem part of the very framework of our minds.) Medieval histories do tend, as a consequence, to feel unsatisfactory and, sometimes, positively baffling. There is, after all, something impenetrable, tiresome even, about books that promise a familiar array of contents, arrangement, and intentions, and then deviate in odd and irritating ways from expectations we consider not only proper but irresistibly natural. Classical histories, for all their occasional marvels, offer no serious affront to present sensibilities, while medieval histories often read like books from the other side of the looking glass—plainly recognizable, but altered in disturbing ways. It is not merely our high-minded rejection of entertainment in favor of analysis that causes our dissatisfaction with medieval history

(though that is part of it) but our basic assumptions about historical evidence and its organization into narrative sequence do not entirely help us to read medieval works with much sensitivity.

[The key elements of historiography—evidence and narrative structure—were approached by medieval readers and writers with expectations very different (though not entirely different) from our own. During the twelfth century, when historical writing of all kinds proliferated, we must suppose, at the least, that readers and writers were satisfied with the genre as they knew it, and yet, to modern tastes, medieval expectations about written history seem terribly slack. Putting aside for the moment the matter of narrative structure, which depends heavily on formal literary conventions and partly on historical interpretation, the most obvious questions about medieval histories concern evidence: that is, after all, what so upset Robert Elsmere. It would seem that in an age of high intellectual sophistication, with a widely diffused taste for classical literature and inquiry of all sorts, the best-educated people could not tell truth from falsehood in the most obvious instances, accepted quantities of complicated, distant, or unusual information on the assurances of one informant, and, worst of all, had a sense of probability that apparently excluded nothing.]

The lamentable sparseness of the last two books of Henry of Huntingdon's history, the very books in which he promises to tell what he himself has seen or has heard from eyewitnesses, testifies to the practical difficulty of writing history in an age of difficult and slow communications. It required determination and patience, well assisted by luck and a large acquaintance, to acquire full information about an event, even if it happened only a few miles away. Henry was well situated and well connected, but perhaps his very immersion in the world—his time taken up by the claims of cathedral and archdeaconal business and the welfare of his family—made him resort to sketchy accounts and a lot of poetry when he came to write contemporary history. He was, in any case, a man of bookish tastes, inclined to elegantly derivative work. Probably, his Latin prose rendering of the Anglo-Saxon poem on the battle of Brunanburh shows him most comfortably employed. However, even an historian more inclined to look about him and report to his readers in detail

could not tell times from falsehood

would not easily find many accounts of any single event, especially written accounts that could be considered at leisure.

Reference bibliography was nonexistent, and contemporary or near-contemporary histories evidently moved into general circulation slowly and erratically. Henry's discovery of Geoffrey of Monmouth's book at Bec, although the men had shared the same patron in England, is at first surprising, but suggests a common circumstance; much older works with more copies stored in monastery and cathedral libraries were more readily at hand. If books were of limited access, reliable witnesses were more so.

William of Newburgh frequently mentions that he learned something from several witnesses of good moral character, and he clearly regarded that as a circumstance deserving special notice. In general, if a medieval historian of contemporary events had refused to write until he had several accounts to compare, he would have had little enough to tell.

(We should remember that practical problems, even trivial ones, can be overwhelming when there is no methodical discipline to point to solutions and to shame the expedients of laziness with a high and widely acknowledged standard of work.) The amount of history read in the ordinary course of a boy's education was undoubtedly larger than it would seem from the circumstances of its not appearing formally in the trivium or quadrivium (it was subsumed under the category of Grammar), and we can be certain that all educated men had a clear idea of what ancient and modern history contained and sounded like. But casual reading of even the most scrupulously composed history books does not necessarily reveal their secrets, and without any formal or systematic study directed to some procedures and methods for composing history, prospective historians were left very much alone to cope with theory and practice according to their own lights. Henry of Huntingdon is exactly the instance of a highly educated man floundering in his task through the lack of any but the vaguest guidelines for accomplishing it. The absence of history writing from school lectures and exercises (as distinct from simple reading of history for general knowledge and exempla) ensured that its principles and methods as a special form of literature would not be debated, refined, and taught to every new writer to polish or supply the lack of his natural gifts. In compensation, history writing was

No blurring of history writing in schools.

left to develop freely, but too much freedom results more often in dreary, cautious sameness than in bold originality.

The reliance on uncorroborated, or very partially corroborated, testimony for natural events (to the almost complete exclusion of circumstantial evidence) and the acceptance of such testimony as evidence for supernatural events form a simple division of the subject of evidence that, however obvious to us, would not have been recognized in the twelfth century. Natural and supernatural events differed in immediate cause, intention, and frequency, but not in their inherent probability, and did not, at the time, require different kinds of evidence.

It is quite possible that the universal inclination to accept miraculous events on the basis of honest, or well-intentioned, testimony (inspired testimony, in the case of the Bible) had a pervasive effect, if one hard to define, on ideas about natural events and evidence for them. This acceptance generally tended to disarm suspicion about the worth of testimony and to eliminate any felt need for circumstantial or indirect evidence. I discussed this matter in particular relation to William of Newburgh and his struggles with the evidence for demonic agents and vampires, and those observations apply generally to twelfth-century historical practice. The complete and implicit belief in the frequent activity of supernatural beings in the natural order made necessary a trustful reliance on "moral truth" (which results "when you tell a thing sincerely and precisely as it appears to you") if anything at all were to be known about such important but elusive events. Miracles sometimes, but not often, left behind material clues. The attitudes and assumptions learned from religious study, reliance on the revealed truth of scripture and on those holy men of postbiblical authority, were naturally brought to the investigation of recent miracles; it was an easy, perhaps inevitable, step to the secular world. I am, for the sake of exposition, suggesting an artificial sense of logical or sequential progression from religious studies to secular, from supernatural events to natural; to suggest an untidier feeling for pervasive influences, for habits or states of mind, would be more accurate.

The acceptance of miracles on the basis of testimony was central to Christian faith and Christian history. It could hardly be expected that medieval Christians should have ready a

radically different set of intellectual assumptions and habits to bring to the problems of their own, more recent, history. In a general way, standards for accurate knowledge were not derived from experience and probability in the natural order and then applied to the supernatural but, rather, the other way around. What was adequate for knowledge of the superior order may inevitably have seemed adequate for the lower. It was, as the astounded Robert Elsmere observed, "the whole habit of mind" and "no one escapes it." (Whether he was quite fair in thinking that the whole age really was "non-sane" is, of course, another kind of question.)

The (development of procedures for studying historical events had to be somewhat discouraged by the universally held prejudice that the objects of such study were not very exalted. That persuasion was somewhat mitigated by another, equally universal, which held that the *saeculum* was theoretically dignified by an invisible cloak of the divine, and the most ordinary happenings might express, in some fragmentary way, an intention beyond immediate appearances—and historians certainly gave way often enough to the temptation to speculate about the eternal, "real" meanings of things before they had nearly exhausted the possibilities of the present and visible. It was, after all, a cliché of historical writing, but one sincerely held, that the major purpose of recording secular history was to expose the Divine Will working through lower agents. John of Salisbury, who wrote a first-rate history, the *Historia pontificalis*, a few years after Henry of Huntingdon died and a generation before William or Richard wrote, is particularly explicit about the relation of the natural to the supernatural world: "My aim, like that of other chroniclers before me, shall be to profit my contemporaries and future generations. For all these chroniclers have had a single purpose: to relate noteworthy matters, so that the invisible things of God (*invisibilia dei*) may be clearly seen by the things that are done."

Theoretically, all of secular history, the visible "things that are done," was related to the "invisible things" by an ultimate cause and purpose, usually quite obscure, and the categories of natural and supernatural beings and events could be seen as though ranged along a continuum from grossness and instability to refinement and permanence. Henry of Huntingdon, not, so far

as I can discern, a man given to theological speculation, was absorbed by the terrible impermanence of all human life (or at least human pleasures) and found consolation in thinking of the unchanging, unseen things that offered the true grounds for a Christian's hopes. Such a state of mind, however interesting and sensitive in itself, was not a promising beginning for history. Even William of Newburgh, a more critical man and a better historian, is most energetic and original in the pursuit of the supernatural or the explication of divine purpose in natural events. It is hardly wonderful that a preoccupation with the unseen, higher truths could be accompanied by a certain impatience with the minutiae of secular events, especially if it required tedious effort to discover and record them all. (High and low motives have always combined happily.) So long as an account seemed correct in its main elements, the main elements would have to suffice—unless the smaller aspects struck the writer as particularly apt or amusing. It would be a laughable illusion to think that all, or even most, medieval historians were of a devout or thoughtful temperament, given to deep reflections on the frangibility of human life; but the odd cursoriness and a kind of slackness of observation found, to some degree, in all the written history of the period may be the attenuated expression of a deeply felt view of the universe.

Historians also had to cope with the discouraging and again, pervasive, subtle assumption felt acutely throughout the twelfth century that nothing on earth would hold still, reveal itself in its true nature, and remain that way (Aelred of Rievaulx, who thought of life as a furious river, comes to mind). The highest objects of human knowledge were eternal and unchanging, complete and true, but everything beneath heaven was of a mixed nature, restlessly shifting and tossing up deceitful appearances. The human mind itself was gross and slow, so William of Newburgh complained, and incapable of penetrating even the secrets of the lower world.

Nonetheless, like the man who was astonished to discover that all his life he had been speaking prose without knowing it, all sorts of things only begin to exist once we have learned of them. Scarcely anyone in the twelfth century would have thought that "evidence" was a source of intractable problems. In common life a working method for determining the truth of things was

always available. The law courts, which had no choice but to pronounce something to be the truth, had their own procedures for obtaining information and, increasingly during the twelfth century (and most rapidly in England) were discarding the old system of ordeals in favor of the sworn, evidence-giving jury. The ordeal was a temptation of God; William of Newburgh thought that the poor army of half-prepared crusaders who rushed into battle arrogantly counting on divine assistance were also tempting God and almost deserved their defeat. Sensible and sophisticated people in the second half of the twelfth century were generally coming to feel that complacent reliance on supernatural intervention was both impractical and morally suspect.

The criterion that made evidence acceptable in a court of law was essentially similar to good historical evidence: "moral truth," unbiased and free from self-interest. In moving from ordeal to jury the courts had decided in favor of rationality and, incidentally, entered into all the difficulties faced by historians: "Witnesses are unreliable, corruptible, fearful, forgetful; the judges are not infallible, they are gullible."⁵ Still, most court investigations were more systematic than those of most historians, and they had the advantage of dealing with clearly limited circumstances, specific questions, and matters that were, in fact, susceptible of being unambiguously known (at least, compared with vampires).

Both the courts and the historians were seeking "moral truth" from their informants, but a more active skepticism was built into the law whose activities were all adversary procedures. Historians often obtained their information from sources that disarmed suspicion: friends, ecclesiastical superiors, men of high rank, bystanders with seemingly, nothing to gain by lying. (There were penalties for jurors who chanced to give wrong information, however innocently.) Both historians and courts characteristically directed their skeptical impulses toward exposing conscious deception. Even the "old books" mentioned by most historians were consulted in much the same spirit; the author's sources of information were not evaluated, especially if the book appeared rare and very old, nor was he scrutinized for unconscious bias. There was even a certain amount of inevitable confusion of fiction and nonfiction in an age when fiction was routinely prefaced by claims of historicity that, however con-

ventional and artful, were often quite artlessly believed. When William of Newburgh attacked Geoffrey of Monmouth, it was for simple deception, consciously done for self-aggrandizing purposes. Geoffrey was, in William's humorless eyes, a false witness with pernicious intentions. Henry of Huntingdon, perhaps moved by his love of effective literature, simply thought that Geoffrey had written an extraordinarily interesting history book.

We cannot accuse any clever twelfth-century writer of being so naive as not to realize that one honest story might not be the whole truth of any matter, but there was no systematic or thorough effort to find ways to detect mistaken or biased "moral truth." The concepts of "trustworthiness" and "accuracy" were not sufficiently distinguished, just as the difference between "possibility" and "probability" in the twelfth century was less marked than it is now. There was, in historians and everyone else one encounters through twelfth-century sources, skepticism in a hearty measure but directed chiefly to credulity and deception. Perhaps, among historians, the universal interest in motivation has been described as part of the pervasive legacy of Sallust to the Middle Ages: "... his analysis of motive, informed by cynical pessimism: suspect the worst. . . . His lesson was well learnt. . . . Naive they often were in their views on causation; but many show an acute awareness of self-interest covered up by hypocrisy, which they revel in exposing."⁶

Self-interested frauds have to be complemented by credulous fools, and, then as now, clever men looked down on honest fools and were inclined to confound stupidity with wickedness or at least moral laxness. William of Newburgh was very severe with people who believed in every new marvel or every dubious saint. Cases such as the Christian looter of Jewish houses (at Stanford in 1190), who was killed in a squabble over the plunder and then revered as a local saint until Bishop Hugh of Lincoln forbade his veneration, may seem to us a bizarrerie of popular piety and crowd psychology; William characteristically looked first for deception on the part of someone with something to gain. In the case of the sainted thief, the cult began with the dreams of some poor, old person (not the sort of witness William trusts) and the "illusory appearance of false signs"; he uses the word *praestigiis*, which suggests tricks as well as illusions.⁷ But if

the cult arose through suggestible ignorance, it was nurtured by venal fraud: "It was welcomed by certain clerks who saw that there was money to be gotten out of the superstition."⁸ In that case, and in others, when there is a strong suspicion of fraud, William's kind of moral skepticism is very effective. However, even in very odd cases, if there seems to be no agent of conscious deception, no opportunity for profit (one thinks of the vampires), he generally does not question vigorously but proceeds to the next level of interpretation. Richard of Devizes was, if anything, more skeptical, but to different purpose; what could outrage and anger William merely amused Richard. His account of the supposed child-martyr of Winchester is a brilliant study in fools and scoundrels, with the author laughing at them all.

This fairly static picture of one aspect of twelfth-century thought must be broken apart to allow room for some new and different elements that are peculiarly characteristic of the age and suggestive of things to come. When William of Newburgh blames both Henry II and Becket for persevering in stubbornness to the detriment of Church and state alike, and when he suggests that the English bishop's lax enforcement of adequate laws governing clerks was ultimately to blame for the conflict, he has taken a step far beyond the simplicities of truthful or lying witnesses. He has described a situation that turns about a cause, not a motive, and has recognized the many shades of ambiguity between right and wrong. When he suggests a connection between well diggers hitting a vein of toxic gas and the deaths in the lime pit at Malton, he is allowing the regular course of nature some of the consequence it deserves instead of turning too quickly to the supernatural. William's painstaking efforts to understand marvels as thoroughly as he could and to find some explanation by himself (though not a natural one, of course) rather than to accept pious formulas, and his evident disgust with looters and murderers who attacked the richer Jews for the greater glory of Christendom and the destruction of the records of indebtedness—all attest to a new self-confidence of moral feeling, common sense, and inquiry.

Henry of Huntingdon comes to life only when hit closely by the attack on clerical marriage or when troubled by thoughts of loss and death. Richard of Devizes is all personality, confident and self-conscious. The effect of his cynical eye is enhanced by

his resolute and urbane mundaneness; not many miracles dare to happen in his world. He is both fairly accurate and casually offhand about it; perhaps an increasingly secular point of view sharpened his judgment and powers of observation. Natural shrewdness and parochial concerns made him attend to what he knew best. In an age that liked its literature long and its authors reticent, he wrote a short book full of himself.

I have not intended to suggest a strict chronological progression through the century, but a kind of leavening—of resurgent personality, powers of observation, and an inclination to question (and to laugh)—that one notices more clearly in the second half of the century than in the first. It is an inchoate, growing taste for a more material, orderly, and original observation of the world, not transforming the selection of evidence, but blending new elements with the old.

THE QUESTION OF LITERARY FORM

ONE ESPECIALLY WITTY MODERN HISTORIAN HAS ROBUSTLY ACCUSED medieval histories of being just one damn thing after another (although in 1944 he said it a shade more politely)¹ and that uncompromising little phrase expresses exactly the experience of reading medieval histories. Of course, history has come a long way from the twelfth century. We are now perfectly accustomed to see a history book begin with the author's gratitude to his first mentors, present colleagues, and spouse, and end with an alphabetical index, and to find everything between in firm and logical order; we would be made slightly uncomfortable if it were otherwise. And with due allowance for the march of civilization, one might think that medieval readers, too, expected and recognized certain conventions of arrangement. Yet the best medieval histories, for all their success with vivid detail, sharp observation, and the like, seem to have no shape at all.

With certain internal lapses, backtrackings, and confusions, all medieval histories proceed chronologically, and that rudimentary principle appears to have been the only discipline to ensure anything like an orderly presentation. And orderliness, that modest substitute for logical structure, would seem the most we can hope to find in the twelfth century, because the modern reader assumes that the structure of historical narrative must be the result of some principle of causation informing and organically controlling the diverse materials of written history.² While even a limited understanding of causes, such as an exclusive interest in motivation, is enough to produce an intrinsic structure if it is pursued with strict consistency, we generally feel that some such concept is absolutely necessary if a work is to have any form at all. From this point of view, so natural and necessary to us, the apparent shapelessness of twelfth-century histories is the unhappy, inevitable corollary of the absence of natural causation from contemporary historical thought.

The fact that history was, in the past, a literary genre, a species of polite letters suitable for the practice of any person of

No causation

decent education is known in an offhand way by everyone, but this commonplace premise suggests a way of looking at the question of narrative structure. The medieval expression of this idea was the inclusion of history in the category of Grammar, the third of the trivium that embraced all literary studies. Isidore of Seville who always rewards consultation on many points of common knowledge and tradition divides his book on Grammar into the two broad categories of poetry and prose and further divides prose into *fabula* and *historia*. *Fabula* is the story of fictional happenings; *historia* is the narration of things that have actually taken place. The distinction is only one of content, not of form, much less of intellectual approach. This discipline belongs to the category of Grammar because whatever is worthy of memory is committed to writing.⁴ Isidore further distinguishes history from monthly or yearly notations (*kalendaria* or *annales*) by its larger chronological scope and by the fact that "annual memoranda are carefully expanded into books."⁵ The position assigned to history in Isidore's time and throughout the Middle Ages was perhaps a little vague, but comfortable; it was distinguished from other narrative compositions only by the presumed truth of its contents. There was, as has been remarked before, no special set of rules for writing history, either with regard to content or to form. Just as medieval historians brought with them their common assumptions and habits to the task of selecting evidence, so they quite naturally brought the conventions of contemporary narrative literature, whether unconsciously or studiously accumulated, to the task of composition.

This admittedly simple relationship between history and fictional narrative has not been much explored, perhaps because literary critics do not find medieval histories aesthetically interesting and historians deplore what they consider an illicit and improper connection. The idea of history imitating, though at some remove, the conventions of narrative fiction is nonetheless easier to accept than the alternative idea that medieval historians merely picked up a quill and rambled on in some fluffy-minded way until they had run out of *res gestae*. The fact that the writings of the best historians all sound more or less discursive and disconnected to us and all sound substantially similar to one another suggests that the historians were writing in accord with

tastes and standards recognizable to them and their readers, however obscure to us. Vernacular narratives, often treating similar subjects (heroes, wars, great exploits), were the natural contemporary models for history. The writer of history, like the writer of romance, was a *trouvère*—one who "found" stories and made them into literature. There was nothing in literary tradition or contemporary thought to suggest that history required a new and special mode of discourse.

(It is consoling to a historian to find the literary critics puzzling over "the rather loose and even disorderly appearance of much medieval literature" and the absence of causality, and generally complaining about the same characteristics in epic and romance that disturb the historian of written history. Literary scholars have devoted a great deal of effort to the question of organization in medieval narrative, and it would seem reasonable to suppose that any general theories of narrative structure derived from imaginative literature should apply to history as well. Literary critics, however, have often approached the Middle Ages armed with stern Aristotelian or subtle Coleridgean ideas of artistic unity, and their analyses are often so abstruse or refined as to be inapplicable to the uses of simpler historians, past and present. Analyses of structure based on symbolism, numerical systems, or motif duplication, while perhaps suitable for certain works of the finest literary craftsmen, cannot be applied to history without doing gross violence to common sense. Still, general theories of medieval narrative that attempt to isolate and describe narrative conventions and techniques in the broadest and most inclusive terms must have their usefulness for historiography.

If twelfth-century history was a familiar form to its readers and not a mere jumble of content, it cannot be classed among the most sophisticated literature of the age with respect to formal technique. The best historians exerted much more than perfunctory control over their materials, but they pursued literature as knowledgeable imitators; they did not set the pace. The "other" writings of most twelfth-century historians tend to be biblical commentary, hagiography, and similar works of a religious nature, though it can be confidently assumed that monks and clerks were not above reading secular stories and poetry. Of the three under particular discussion here, Henry of

Huntingdon was most truly a man of letters, writing essays on many subjects, poetry, and formal epistles, but he has never been considered a writer of the first rank. William of Newburgh composed a commentary on the "Song of Songs"; Richard of Devizes lent his pen to the Winchester Annals for some years, and his *Cronicon* contains a poem of his own composition. Given the general nature of medieval narrative and the particular talents of the historians under discussion, I have not attempted to construct a complete analysis of any one historical work. The facts that Henry of Huntingdon continued his book on several occasions after it was, ostensibly, finished; that he removed and replaced the epilogue and finally left it off altogether; that William of Newburgh's history is apparently unfinished, and many similar others, suggest that these works are probably not susceptible to the kind of formal scrutiny appropriate to imaginative literature. The construction of a scheme that would integrate beginning and end and would provide logical or other connections for all the narrative material of a history might very well strain ingenuity and credulity too far. I think that it is more appropriate and useful to describe in broad strokes some of the commonest narrative techniques of the twelfth century and to indicate their application to contemporary history, and in this cautious way to try to understand how the conventions and aesthetic standards that governed the authors of epic and romance also guided the construction of historical narrative.

It seems to me that first steps toward the problem of structure can safely be made under the capable and comprehensive guidance of Eric Auerbach, whose term *parataxis*, discussed in several of the essays in *Mimesis*,⁸ works as a focus for certain distinguishing characteristics of late classical and medieval literature. *Parataxis* in its basic sense is a grammatical term that indicates the juxtaposition of essentially equal elements without causal or temporal connectives and without the subordination of one element or another. *Parataxis* is opposed to *hypotaxis*, which is the form of construction in which elements are connected in subordinative relations. *Parataxis* is the single characteristic that most strikingly distinguishes medieval from classical or modern narrative; encountered in historical narrative, it is profoundly disturbing, both aesthetically and intellectually.

Auerbach expands these terms far beyond clauses and con-

Parataxis & *hypotaxis* strung together without causation.

On
high "

junctives. Hypotactic constructions, chosen with fine discrimination, are of the essence of classical thought exemplified by its "literary language . . . with all its ingenious and nicely shaded conjunctions, its wealth of devices for syntactic arrangement, its carefully elaborated system of tenses."⁹ The rational arrangements of language and, by implication, of thought, gave way in late antiquity to a simpler, less rational, but potentially more dramatic method of juxtaposition: "Dixit Deus: fiat lux, et facta est lux."¹⁰ The paratactic style, which had been, in classical terms, a "low" style suitable only for satire and comedy, became, in the hands of the Christian Fathers, the vehicle of a sublime subject matter once reserved for a formal, elevated (and hypotactic) style. For Auerbach, the fact that Jerome preserved the paratactic style of the Bible in his translation rather than recasting it into a "high" classical style signaled the inevitable dominance of a new literature that combined "low" style and lofty subjects. The Bible, once a stylistic embarrassment to educated pagan converts, became the model for a new, emotional, and powerful style whose connections were not causal or temporal but somehow "vertical," linking earthly events to the Divine Will.

Many examples are, I think, unnecessary, to illustrate the change from classical gradations of relationship to the disconcerting abruptness and unexplained juxtapositions so familiar in all medieval narrative, history not least of all. It is significant that the jaggedness of Gregory of Tours's prose does not disappear by the polished twelfth century, although so much else had changed. "The chancellor went to Dover . . . and the count turned over all the fortified places of the land, which had been surrendered to him, to whomever he pleased and most trusted. The king of the French sailed . . . home from Acre with a small force."¹¹ This example of paratactic prose is from the subtle, classically learned Richard of Devizes, and any page opened at random in his book can furnish more. It is inconceivable that Richard was unable to understand that there might be a better connective than *et* to describe the relationship between the chancellor's retreat to Dover and John's disposition of the castles. He also knew enough Latin to write a plausible transition for his next paragraph, which changes the scene abruptly from England to the Holy Land. Richard is so artful a writer that one

is forced to conclude that he wrote by choice in this style and that it was acceptable and satisfying to him and to his cultivated circle of friends. They could not have experienced the unexplained shifts and missing connections as rough and clumsy, much less as simpleminded.

The patrons and readers of Henry of Huntingdon and of William of Newburgh, as well, were men of education and taste who thought highly enough of history to commission books. It can be a useful test of our own reactions to imagine them reading passages such as the following one from Henry of Huntingdon: "In this year the king led an army into Wales. . . . A huge comet appeared at the end of May. The king went across to Normandy and made all the nobles of the country swear fidelity to the lord William his son, and he returned to England."¹² Every conjunction is *et*. We would, at the least, prefer to be told that the king went to Normandy "in order to" make the nobles swear fidelity and "then" returned to England; we also feel the lack of some specified relationship between the comet and the king's activities, regardless of what we think of portents. We are not at all justified in thinking that twelfth-century readers felt the same. William of Newburgh shows a taste for more hypotactic constructions, frequently using the ablative absolute or subordinating conjunctions in sentences within the passages of exposition or anecdote; the overall construction of his book, chapter by chapter or episode by episode, is paratactic.

In this case of a change in taste so extreme that we cannot pretend to reconstruct intuitively the reactions of earlier minds, we are forced to accept a great deal "on credit," as it were. Paratactic prose came into increasing use in late antiquity and was the norm in the twelfth century, in spite of well-known classical models. The general absence of causality from medieval thought is simply not a sufficient explanation for the quality of hard juxtaposition that characterizes so much medieval literature, fiction and history alike, the work of scholars and trouvères writing in Latin and in the vernaculars. We have to accept, for example, that any characteristic of narrative style commonly found throughout the works of educated men had to be there because everyone at the time liked it, regardless of how repugnant we find it.¹³ Perhaps the enhanced force of parataxis held a strong emotional appeal and classical hypotactic arrange-

Emotional appeal of
parataxis?

ments seemed long-winded and tedious, or seemed to weaken the overall effect, or were simply unnecessary—like saying "Paris, France." We can speculate that the homogeneous culture of a small literate class encouraged a shorthand style of writing, with the reasoned connections and much detail supplied by the reader or auditor.

Auerbach, with a well-earned largeness of vision, has speculated on the relationship between paratactic organization and Christian views of history. He sees in the Vulgate a signal literary concession to a lower style of syntax, "for the Latin translation of the Bible has preserved the paratactic character of the original,"¹⁴ and a corresponding, more grave, concession of classical rationality to a providential, figural conception of history. Syntax, in this view, is a key to mind.

For example, if an occurrence like the sacrifice of Isaac is interpreted as prefiguring the sacrifice of Christ, so that in the former the latter is as it were announced and promised, and the latter "fulfills" . . . the former, then a connection is established between the two events which are linked neither temporally nor causally—a connection which it is impossible to establish by reason in the horizontal dimension (if I may be permitted to use this term for a temporal extension). It can be established only if both occurrences are vertically linked to Divine Providence, which alone is able to devise such a plan of history and supply the key to its understanding. . . . This conception of history is magnificent in its homogeneity, but it was completely alien to the mentality of classical antiquity, it annihilated that mentality down to the very structure of its language, at least of its literary language, which . . . became wholly superfluous as soon as earthly relations of place, time, and cause had ceased to matter.¹⁵

Thus Auerbach concludes that paratactic structure and "the figural interpretation of history" emerged victorious together. The first and obvious objection that this plausible grand scheme, which integrates language and theology, cannot easily be reduced to a level that applies sensibly to "the king went across to Normandy and made all the nobles of the country swear fidelity, . . . and he returned to England," has been anticipated by Auerbach. He explains that, since the figural interpretation of history "was no fully adequate substitute for the lost compre-

hension of rational, continuous, earthly connections between things"¹⁶ and was too difficult to apply to most ordinary, everyday events, writers fell back on "passive observation, resigned acceptance, or active exploitation of whatever chanced to occur in the world of practical events—raw material which was absorbed in its rawest form."¹⁷ That is, they exerted almost no control at all.

While Auerbach's ideas about language and historical thought are brilliant and suggestive and are clearly the best, most dignified approach to medieval history, even he seems to think that most postclassical history, aspiring to neither rationality nor *figura*, was written in a kind of stylistic and mental vacuum. In a way, he asks too much or sees too much in the growing dominance of paratactic prose; it must either aspire to vertical links with Divine Providence or lapse into nothing. Without denigrating Auerbach's powerful and convincing analogy between style and thought, a less highly charged level of discussion is possible.

Stylistic elements such as parataxis, and others as well, can be regarded simply as the formal conventions of literary composition. Psychological and philosophical interpretations in appropriate cases are not negated by a more formalist or descriptive approach, but neither are they necessary to it. One recent study, *Structure in Medieval Narrative* by William Ryding, has presented a descriptive analysis of the development and chief characteristics of medieval narratives, especially in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries.¹⁸ Ryding's study is based primarily (but not solely) on French vernacular literature, but its conclusions are intended to have more general application; the particular interest for students of historiography lies in the wonderful aptness of Ryding's observations for historical narrative.

Medieval Latin history shares with the great mass of medieval fictional narrative the appearance of "a string of juxtaposed, mutually-independent episodes," which is called, in French, the *roman à tiroirs*, "a phrase that makes us think of a chest of drawers which are explored one after the other."¹⁹ Such cohesion as these narratives have is often provided by a single hero whose adventures make up the different episodes of the, often long, story; the analogy for historiography is obvious, as the *roman à tiroirs* is a reasonably apt description of Henry of Huntingdon's

or William of Newburgh's loose, episodic narratives of events in and concerning England. Ryding's comments on the *roman à tiroirs* organization apply equally well to fiction and nonfiction: "The structural pattern of such stories is basically repetitive and sequential, one event cluster after another; it is not developmental. Such stories have not a single beginning, middle, and end; each episode has its own beginning, middle, and end. Structurally unimaginative, stories of this sort may nonetheless prove very effective in the reading, depending on the quality and arrangement of the episodes."²⁰ The narrative that continued but did not develop is nicely exemplified by histories that only stopped but did not end and thus could absorb later additions by the author (Henry of Huntingdon's several editions) or even by another author. Single episodes from this sort of narrative could be discarded or rearranged without material damage to the logic of the whole. It was a comfortable form for the author who wanted to insert a favorite, if fairly unconnected, anecdote into his work, and for the historian who liked to place information of only private or provincial interest next to events of national importance.

The *roman à tiroirs* allowed for variations; there could be a frame of beginning and end with a string of episodes between, or more than one large episodic section, each with its own beginning and end. For history, one thinks of Henry's use of the idea of foreign invaders as divine retribution (successively Saxons, Danes, and Normans) as frames for books of looser, episodic, material. The range of artistry or simplicity found in the fictional episodic story is paralleled in history, from the simple chronological annal to the more focused and cohesive monograph, in which the basic *roman à tiroirs* form is controlled by a smaller period of time, a particular place, and/or a heroic figure. The basic narrative conventions were available to writers of varying skills, and more sophisticated and subtler artists than the historians could better manipulate the narrative and sometimes shape the multiplicity of events into a symmetrical balance. The essential point is simply the universality of episodic, nondevelopmental, serial organization—Auerbach's parataxis without the philosophic implications. It was clearly the preferred form for narrative of all kinds, the form readers and auditors expected and enjoyed. It was an aesthetic fact of

medieval life, symptomatic of a profound difference in taste and not of a failure of mind. As Ryding remarks, the problem for modern readers is that "in every case we are faced with a multiplicity where we should like to see unity."²¹ That dizzying, nonconnected multiplicity, so irritating to us, must have been a source of real enjoyment to twelfth- and thirteenth-century readers. Since we can no longer experience their enjoyment directly, perhaps we should learn to measure their pleasure by our annoyance.

The universal taste for compound narratives did not entirely rule out the possibility of some controlling design. The historians were not leaders in such artistic developments, but they were able to select some of the easier techniques, common throughout fictional narratives, that were appropriate and useful. The device of *interlacing*, which came into use during the twelfth century and grew especially popular in the thirteenth, was one in which the author began one episode, introduced a second episode before he had ended the first, and then returned to finish the first. More than two actions could be interlaced by a clever writer, who could thereby keep several different, simultaneous actions moving together at great length. Chrétien de Troyes was quite accomplished at this technique.²² Interlacing had good possibilities for history, and it is commonly found in historical works; it solved, for example, the problem of introducing a crusade into an English history.

Henry of Huntingdon inserts a ten-page account of the First Crusade into Book VII, between William II's first expedition into Wales in 1096 and his second expedition in 1097. He prefaces the account of the crusade with a brief justification for so long a digression and ends that account, remarking: "They subdued the provinces and the adjacent cities for Christ, except Ascalon, which to this day perseveres in its sin."²³ The next paragraph simply picks up the train of English history where it had left off. The Second Crusade is woven more complexly into Book VIII: In 1147 the earl of Chester attempts to take Lincoln; the French king leads a new crusade; Bishop Alexander visits Rome, returns home, and dies in 1148 (his character sketch is placed here); in the same year the crusade fails badly and only a small English force has any success before returning home; a new bishop is elected to Lincoln.²⁴ Interlacing the crusade with English ecclesi-

Crusades in Henry of H.

astical affairs in a way that strikes us as disconnected and odd was not the only possible way of narrating that material; Henry undoubtedly chose it for the sake of elegance.

William of Newburgh uses the same stylistic device for three crusades, each one more elaborately interlaced than the last. Book IV is worked out very thoroughly. It begins with the coronation of Richard I, his preparations for a crusade, and important events in England; changes scene to crusading adventures in Sicily and the Holy Land; interlaces the capture of Richard with the collection of the ransom money in England; and ends with the king safe again in England, wearing his crown at Winchester. The basic material lent itself easily and appropriately to the interlacing technique combined with the additional element of design in the frame of the two coronations. By the early thirteenth century, when William was writing, narrative interlacing was coming into increasing favor, and readers of William's Book IV must have admired the felicitous meeting of elegance and truth.²⁵

Richard of Devizes, whose book covers only the years 1189 to 1192, was a master of many styles. He understood classical satire and effective oration; he could parody the sentimentality of religious literature and yet compose a sincere, touching defense of the monastic life. The pervasive style of his book, as one should expect, conforms to contemporary taste, in that it is severely paratactic, with episode after episode in hard juxtaposition with paratactic construction (the dominance of *et* as conjunctive) of many sentences. His various and delightful *jeux d'esprit* (the child-martyr parody, the guide to English towns) are assembled episodically to create a compound narrative. Richard's work reports substantially the same historical events as William's Book IV, but he imposes a much more elaborate scheme of narrative interlacing on the basic materials.

In the first few pages of his book, after the prologue, Richard sets out his three major themes or subjects: the crusade of King Richard, the elevation of William Longchamp as royal chancellor, and the ambitions of the king's brother John.²⁶ When the book closes, the king has ended his crusade, Longchamp has been deposed from office and expelled from England, and Count John has been foiled in his attempts at usurpation. The book contains a variety of other subjects, but these three themes are

laced together from beginning to end. Although Richard wrote an unusually short book compared with those of his contemporaries—only eighty-four pages in Appleby's edition—he manages to change scene at least twenty-eight times—a veritable skein of narrative interlacing, far more complex than William's use of the technique. The changes of scene from England to Sicily, Cyprus, Acre, and back are done quickly, paratactically, without transition, and they achieve some fine effects that even modern taste can enjoy. All the actions move forward simultaneously and are held in suspense. A typical sequence of events has King Richard waging war in Tancred's Sicily while Queen Eleanor brings him the daughter of the king of Navarre to be his bride; meanwhile, back in England, John and William Longchamp are holding their first hostile conference; in Sicily, Richard negotiates his release from a promise to marry Philip Augustus's sister; in England, the priors of Winchester and of Bath decide to become Carthusians; Philip Augustus disembarks from Sicily for Acre—and so forth.²⁷ Because we find this technique somewhat disconcerting and difficult to follow, we can only guess at the effects intended; perhaps thinking of a cinematic montage, the pleasures of contrast and variety, and of suspense may help. At any rate, compared with the truly heroic feats of interlacing achieved by fiction writers (the early thirteenth-century prose *Lancelot* weaves numerous subplots for more than a thousand pages),²⁸ Richard was working in small and intelligible scale. In one truly splendid section, Richard interweaves the disastrous arrest of Geoffrey Plantagenet, archbishop of York, by Longchamp's men; the increasing tension between Philip Augustus and Richard I at the siege of Acre; Count John's successful contrivances against Longchamp, who retreats to the tower of London; the taking of Acre; and Longchamp's trial *in absentia*.²⁹ The building tension of competing ambitions, hatreds, and violence is genuinely powerful.

Accepting the fact that many of the general aesthetic conventions of twelfth-century narrative are applicable to the written history of the period should help us to recognize, or at least be reconciled to, a profoundly different standard of taste. It remains true, of course, that aesthetic considerations cannot meet our serious intellectual objections to what we now must see as grave defects in medieval history, but historical writing (and

fictional narrative) has had a radical development, and current standards can be applied to the Middle Ages only at the risk of grotesque anachronism. Our objection to the lack of causal or logical connections in history is met, in medieval aesthetic terms, by the taste for paratactic structure and compound or episodic literature. Our objection to the absence of a principle of design based on unity of action can be met by the recognition that unity as a literary quality was not highly prized and that techniques, such as narrative interlacing, which imposed some design on disparate materials, were considered interesting and sufficient. Even our confirmed grievances, that medieval histories seem to ramble along slackly and erratically, often at great and unnecessary length, that they are discursive and disorderly and filled with pointless material, can be explicated in terms of a basic medieval aesthetic impulse.]

Amplification was the essential work of an elegant writer. Even when his materials were fictive, a fine writer did not stake his reputation on his inventive genius (fiction writers, *trouvères*, generally used received stories or claimed to have found new ones) but on his ability to recast received materials into a magnified, elaborated, more impressive form.³⁰ The identification of elegance with fullness and decorative elaboration may largely explain the contemporary disregard for tidy cohesiveness. The same literary qualities that distinguish the romances and epics of high literature from brief, popular tales also marked the difference between true history and the jottings of annal keepers. The common fate of many popular stories, which grew longer and more elaborate as each succeeding redactor "improved" them, is paralleled by the practice of historians copying or amalgamating the works of previous writers and then extending them to a new chronological limit. Both the *trouvère* and the historian found his basic materials and amplified them, to the best of his ability, in accord with current taste. Henry of Huntingdon's insertion of poetry into sections copied from Bede or the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle is a good example of purely ornamental amplification; seen in this aesthetic light, his inclusion of epistles, genealogies, and the like, in various editions of his history is not quite so egregious an act. Henry undoubtedly considered such—to us—extraneous additions as reasonable and tasteful, as giving

his book dignity, fullness, and interest. We do not have to relinquish entirely our own conviction that Henry's choice of literary ornaments was not especially sensible or felicitous. Given a firm cultural bias in favor of expansive narrative, different authors still had different degrees of taste, judgment, and skill.

William of Newburgh exhibited better taste and more common sense, working within the same canons of convention and fashion, than did Henry of Huntingdon. Ryding defines two primary categories of narrative amplification: retorical amplification, in which the writer reproduces received material but gives it fullness with greater detail of explanation, and material amplification, in which the writer introduces new narrative matter within or at either end of his work.³¹ The distinction sometimes blurs a bit for historical narrative, but it is useful nonetheless. For example, William's frequent use of dialogue, especially invented dialogue, to liven an anecdote is rhetorical amplification, while his vampire episodes qualify as material amplification. Henry's poems, speeches, battle scenes, and his Latin translation of the Anglo-Saxon poem are instances of rhetorical amplification. A less frivolous sort of rhetorical expansion are William's thoughtful excursions on moral or theological issues, such as the Becket controversy, the nature of demons, the spiritual fate of dead crusaders, or the value of Geoffrey of Monmouth's work. Such passages elevate the intellectual stature of the book and fill out many events to a more complex level. The same techniques of composition were available to Henry and William, but William displayed better judgment of aptness and of appropriateness.

Free association, dependent on the writer's particular resources and intuition, played a large and legitimate role in fiction and nonfiction narratives. "It stands to reason that in the absence of strict logical control over a narrative sequence, some form of association would from time to time dictate the development of an episodic sequence."³² The historian was committed only to report "important" events of past or present time and was free to exercise his own intuitive judgment or his emotions in their selection. William tended to regard demons as important and interesting, and so he inserted all major demonic events

known to him into his history. If one event reminds him of another, he may write several in a row before taking up again the train of his original narrative. William ends his story of the London popular leader, William Fitz Osbert, with an account of how the misled populace tried to honor their demagogue as a martyr after he was executed by hanging. There immediately follows the first vampire story, although there seems to have been no direct chronological sequence. This sequence seems to have been the result of an associative process in William's mind that linked dishonorable death, sin, popular misfortunes with ominous consequences and an aura of spiritual unease.

Narrative could also be amplified quite logically in order to explain or elucidate some occurrence, as when William adds his special knowledge about the color of the teeth of the dead Archbishop William of York to disprove rumors of poison. Both commonsensical, explanatory amplification and looser digressions were regarded as legitimate and tasteful methods for creating important works of literature. The sacrifice, if it must be so regarded, of tight structure was an inevitable consequence of the preference for expanded narrative and was, apparently, of negligible importance to the twelfth-century reader.

A happy whim of fate has preserved the autographed manuscript of Richard of Devizes's *Cronicon* and, in preserving the author's draft, has given us a glimpse of the process of composition. In the editor's words:

A [MS 339, ff.25r-43v, Corpus Christi College, Cambridge] bears all the marks of an author's draft. It starts out as a conventional chronicle, with wide margins at the outside and bottom of the page and a line left blank after each entry. Then the author starts adding bits of information in the empty spaces. There is nothing in the context to distinguish text from marginalia; the story wanders from one to the other, apparently as the items occurred to the writer. Some bits in the margin are obviously intended to fit into the text and are so marked; others carry on an entirely different story. In the year 1190, for example, once the story is under way, the deeds of King Richard occupy the text and the misdeeds of Longchamp the margin. In 1191, on the other hand, Count John and Longchamp fill the text, and the king's

deeds are relegated to the margin. By f.40v things have got so far out of hand that the margin is entirely filled, and the space left blank for the text is used for an addition to the margin. . . . The writing varies from entry to entry, now careful and stately, now hurried and dashing. The ink varies throughout the manuscript. Spaces are left blank for names or better turns of speech, which are sometimes added later in a different ink. Corrections and interlineations abound. All these points would indicate that A is in the handwriting of Richard of Devizes.³³

The only other extant manuscript of Richard of Devizes's book, MS B, is a fair copy in a different hand. The visual impression of the manuscript, as described by Appleby, is entirely congruent with chief techniques and conventions of twelfth-century narrative art. The physical arrangement of parallel text and marginal material is a visual plan for interlaced narrative; the exploding, engulfing marginalia allow us almost to see the very process of associative and logical amplification.

Appleby has indicated marginal material and interlineations by typographical means, which permits the reader to notice, for example, that from the very beginning of the book, the marginalia combined rhetorical amplifications both explanatory and digressive, with vital narrative material.³⁴ The marginal material sometimes extends the subject of the text logically, as when the text is about Longchamp becoming papal legate and the margin adds that he held a council at Westminster;³⁵ or the margin can insert unconnected information of peculiar interest to Richard (often about monastic affairs) into a text concerned with major political or military events. One marginal story can, by clear association, lead to another. The marginal insertion about the usurping prior of Montacute who suffered a sudden and significant death, is followed directly, again in the margin, by the account of the improperly ambitious monk, who, well-deservedly, had a beam fall on his head.³⁶ Frequently, several marginal additions are grouped together, which is, I think, a natural occurrence, given the basic impulse to amplify. Margin and text are used, as noted before, for interlacing events in England with the crusade. The entire story of the child-martyr of Winchester is a marginal entry, and it is followed by another long marginal account of the bishop of Chester and his hatred

for monks—a passage that presents Richard's defense of the monastic life.³⁷ The margin is also where King Richard's defiant speech to God, "Henceforth my banners will lie prostrate, not for me, indeed, but for Thee,"³⁸ is to be found.

I have stressed the importance of the marginal material in order to counteract the natural, modern expectation that marginalia must be extraneous or obliquely connected to the "real" matter or, at best, explanatory, such as the notes we jot in the margins of books. Richard's use of the margins reveals something of the approach to composition when canons of taste were focused, not on tidy and unifying structure, but on amplitude, variety, and multiplicity. In a spatial metaphor, his narrative does not move forward with much impetus, but expands sideways from text to margin and back in a leisurely zigzag motion. The burgeoning marginalia of the center of the *Cronicon* shows the associative, amplifying process gaining momentum, growing richer and fuller as it draws on the reserves of a clever and cultivated mind. Richard, in common with all historians of his period, came to his work ready-furnished with a minimal structure of limited time, place, and major events, and that structure (if we can so dignify it by the name) was as much as contemporary taste demanded. The very choice of a monograph on England over a universal history was a considerable step toward specificity and was probably one aspect of the larger impulse to realism and clarity in twelfth-century thought. Intellectual movements and aesthetic conventions are, however, hardly ever identical. The true writer's task was, not to contrive neat organization through a process of careful selection and stern elimination, but to enlarge and enrich his basic narrative. Richard's book is, for the age, uncharacteristically short, but it covers only a brief period and a limited scope of event and does so at a leisurely pace of digressions, additions, and all the resources of amplified or "high" literature. It is not a brief or terse book but a slice, as it were, of a very large one.

→ What we have come to experience as rambling discursiveness and irrelevance was once appreciated for its variety and elegance, for the general conventions of narrative literature in the twelfth century were easily applicable to history as it was then understood. The looseness of narrative structure, the universal taste for digression, the technique of interlacing, the basic

impulse to juxtapose elements in accord with allusion or relations other than strictly logical or subordinating ones—all lent themselves to the materials and point of view historians commonly brought to their work. The expansiveness of narrative forms, their ability to include much diversity, along with an audience accustomed to understand connections or relations we find obscure, to read at length, and to appreciate ornament and digression—all conduced to fit history comfortably with existing narrative forms. History participated in the fashions and techniques of fictional narrative to the extent that historians were able to imitate the stylistic elements of "high" literature; nothing in an historian's education or cultural milieu would have prompted him to think that history needed a new and different set of techniques or forms.

Nine

THE QUESTION OF CHRISTIAN HISTORY

EARLY IN THE *Historia pontificalis*, JOHN OF SALISBURY, conscientious as always and attentive to the single uniting purpose of all Christian historians as he understood it, gives one firm example of how (the invisible things of God may be clearly seen by the things that are done):

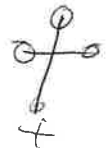
It happened after the council [1148], while the pope [Eugenius] was celebrating mass in the cathedral and the chalice was being brought to him by his assistants according to Roman custom, that through some carelessness of the assistants the blood of the Lord was spilled on the carpet before the altar. The pope at once sent his chancellor, the cardinal deacon Guy of Pisa, to cut out the piece of carpet on which the blood had fallen, and place it among the other relics; and he imposed penance on the assistants for such negligence. But this event frightened many thoughtful men; for the prevailing belief was that such a thing could never happen in any church unless some serious evil threatened it; and since this time the Apostolic See was involved the whole Church seemed to be in danger. And indeed this belief did not err.¹

John recognizes the fulfillment of this portent, explicitly and neatly, in the various disasters suffered by the French and German armies on the Second Crusade in that year.²

John of Salisbury was a thoroughly sensible man, and, for all the apparently genuine fright of the event, there is an air of calm and correctness about his relation of it; the terrible "accident" in the cathedral is dramatic in setting and action, and the explanatory unfolding in the Holy Land appropriate in scope and meaning. The dignity of this example of Christian explication (as rigorously "vertical" as Auerbach could demand) is only slightly unsettled by the persistent, vulgar, silly idea of that piece of wet carpet placed among jeweled bones. More seriously awkward is the fact, at the center of the event in many ways, that the pope punished his chalice-bearers for being clumsy. Presumably, the

assistants were, as they tripped on the carpet, the instruments of a higher will, bearing a message to such thoughtful men as could "read" more than words; the bearers of such grave news were surely no more responsible for spilling the wine than for ruining the Second Crusade. Some explanation could be constructed with terms like *proximate* and *ultimate cause*, but would, I think, only explain away the central reality of the event—that Eugenius's impulse to punish his assistants was a natural one (in the full colloquial sense of the word); that that impulse of common sense radically contradicted his own and John's theological sense of the occasion; that a miniature tension that passed unnoticed in the flurry of its own moment stands eternally and interestingly unresolved in John's book.

This small matter may very well be the artificially sensitive observation that betrays irrecoverable distances from writer to reader, but it nonetheless sets forth plainly enough the terms of a question that, for medieval historians, was neither small nor artificial. If historians at all times in the Middle Ages agreed that God did manipulate the natural world for purposes of His own, that principle never was adequately extended to account for particular cases; the explanation for any event that hesitated between natural and divine agency depended very much on the temperament and persuasions of the individual reporter. John himself held some deeply complicated views about portents, believing that genuine omens did occur as warnings from God to mankind, but that portended misfortunes would not necessarily follow, because God might, in the interval, alter His judgment—but without thereby impeaching the validity of His portent.³ There were undoubtedly many people whose minds could not conceive such complicated possibilities, who were restrained by innate reasonableness from overeager belief in signs and casual interferences by the Divinity. Many degrees of scrupulous caution and ordinary skepticism were available to the intelligent observer of John's age, but no one could simply deny the supernatural possibilities in human life, and no one could comfortably assume the guarded posture available to the modern Christian historian, as so forthrightly expressed by one of the most noted: "Hold to Christ, and for the rest be totally uncommitted."⁴ For the twelfth-century observer, the question of supernatural forces, phrased in its simplest and most intract-



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able form (who did, in effect, spill the consecrated wine?), was always waiting for the resolution that could never, finally, be given.

From a cavalier hindsight, the writing of history in accord with a Christian consciousness after the fifth century (and especially during the literate twelfth) would not seem to have been such a formidable undertaking. A great deal in the way of large design and clear example had been offered by Orosius, especially to prospective writers of history in the Christian era; Orosius's optimistic simplifications passed for Augustinian history—the bishop's thoughts about human history and Christianity being far too dense and subtle to be easily understood, much less imitated.⁵ One might theoretically expect—and according to a few modern students, may actually be able—to read postclassical histories as so many variations on a firmly set theme.⁶ In fact, the peculiarity of medieval histories is not that they are so thoroughly Christian but that they are so little so, and that those particularly Christian elements in them are so often perfunctory or odd. Following the loss of classical Latin syntax, which is itself a figure for the loss of rational, classical causality, Auerbach judges historical writing as bleak, with "vast regions of event . . . without any principle by which they might be classified and comprehended,"⁷ revealing the inadequacy of figural, Christian modes as a replacement for what had been lost.

(12th) The most commonplace instances of twelfth-century historians describing and explaining small but presumably supernatural events tell, in their own oblique way, more about Christian history than the bland clichés found in prefaces; at least they reward close attention more interestingly. (The most frequent and cursory moments of divine interference with the world consisted of bizarre or unexpected variations on natural phenomena and were interpreted as warnings of future misfortune or adverse judgments on the present.) These fleeting signs from God were naturally quite similar to pagan omens, except that the pagans sometimes foresaw good luck. Natural portents or prodigies or signs, their most common names, are the set pieces of medieval Christian histories—highly conventional in form—and yet, for all their banalized rigidity, they do reveal something of an historian's mind. The following passages were chosen as being characteristic of their authors and similar in content.

In his entry for 1098, Henry of Huntingdon notices, with his usual assiduity for the subject, that royal taxation was particularly unbearable that year:

The younger William in the eleventh year of his reign was in Normandy . . . all the same he was not merely abrading but excoriating the English people with the worst taxes and exactions ever. In the summer, blood was seen to bubble up from a certain pool in the Finchamstead in Berkshire. After this the sky looked as though it were burning almost all night.⁸ Tex

Several years later, King Henry I took his brother Robert prisoner and incarcerated him for the rest of his life; this, the historian explains, was God's punishment for Robert's refusal to govern the recaptured Jerusalem:

In that year a comet appeared as a sign of this event. Two moons were seen at Pentecost, one in the east, the other in the west.⁹

Two passages by William of Newburgh, chosen for their similarity to Henry's subjects, are to be considered in direct comparison. The first concerns an unusual red sky that first occurred in January of 1193; William seems to have been an eyewitness.

Through these storms occasioned by the capture of the king [Richard I], England groaned under multiple afflictions—so great they could not have been anticipated. The horror of this misfortune was made evident in recent times, it is believed, by prodigies of the sky. It happened in January of the very year in which the king fell into enemy hands that we saw a terrible sign in the sky, without any doubt a presage of our future affliction. For about the first vigil of the night, a middle zone of the sky, between the north and east, grew so red that it seemed to be burning.¹⁰

William proceeds to describe the appearance of the sky very exactly: the stars were not obscured but were reddened also and glowed with a blood-red light. This appearance lasted for "almost two hours" and then gradually faded. An exactly similar event occurred again in February, when the king's detention in Germany was not yet widely known; the fiery sky reflected in

glass windows so startled the monks at Lauds (William presumably among them) that they ran from church to see which of their buildings was on fire, and then, horrified, ran back to their prayers.¹¹ The same thing happened again in November, just before morning. The witnesses were less frightened this third time, "but the question and suspicion of a portent increased."¹²

In 1196 William again saw an interesting astronomical sight—a double sun. There was some question as to which was the true and which the false sun, but he thought that point was settled by the motion of the two bodies, in that one seemed to lead and the other to follow.¹³ "I saw the sign with my own eyes in company with certain others who were with me," he says; while they stood there staring, the second sun vanished. It was recognized as a portent of misfortune, and, not long after, war broke out again between Richard and Philip Augustus.¹⁴

Modern science would hardly be put to any difficulty to explain these four little "prodigies" as infrequent but quite natural events; still, the real phenomena in question are men, and not the aberrations of fire, earth, and water. Henry could have been only about fourteen when the pond of blood and the red sky were reported, and he was not a witness to either; his information was taken almost verbatim from the Peterborough Chronicle, suggestively rearranged.

The Peterborough Chronicle reports some seven events for the year 1098: King William II's stay in Normandy, the deaths of a bishop and two abbots (including the abbot of Peterborough), the appearance of a bloody pond in Berkshire during the summer, the murder of an earl by northmen, the red sky at the end of September, and generally heavy taxes and too much rain—in that order.¹⁵ Henry tightens and colors the scant material, having the absent king "excoriate" the English with his shameful exactions, and then he conflates the two prodigies to underline the royal rapacity. In fact, the Peterborough chronicler probably intended to indicate some relation between the bloody pond and either the death of his abbot just previously or the death of the earl reported immediately after (a little farther on in the chronicle, blood from the Berkshire earth clearly portends the death of William II);¹⁶ he also indicates slightly more concern over rainfall and crop failure than over taxes.

Henry's rendition of these assorted facts makes slightly better

reading; he freely altered the relations between supernatural signs and their earthly counterparts to suit his own taste. In this case and in many others scattered throughout Henry's work, no particular attention is paid to the sign itself; its validity is assumed, its significance stated or implied with matter-of-fact simplicity. He uses these flickering signals from heaven as a kind of moral punctuation.

To turn from Henry's burning sky, blazing with divine indignation at a king's fiscal policy and reported in nine words, to William's anxious, wordy, circumstantial report of the same sight in 1192–1193, thoughtfully compiled from the evidence of three events separated by many months, is to move from innocent complacency to something almost approaching intellectual morbidity. William is both more thoughtful and more emotional. His careful detailing of circumstance and his concern, very like John of Salisbury's, to fit an appropriately monumental misfortune to his omen are characteristic of the man and suggest doubts, the felt need to argue, to overwhelm objections. William invariably found things problematic that would not, one feels, have presented any problem to others. The emotion of the witnesses is what he most wants to convey: "We saw a fearful sign in the sky"; "this horrible sight . . . had held the eyes and minds of the witnesses fixed with stupefaction"; "seeing the horrifying sign, the amazed monks ran back to their psalms."¹⁷ This reaction is the basis of his own conviction, the unprovable proof, the shocked inner assent to a supernatural event. William did not take such things lightly.

It remains to remember what William's contemporary Richard, similar in all things but mind, had to say about seeing significance in the sky: "Those who do not understand the causes of things marvel greatly that, although the sun was not darkened by any clouds, in the middle of the day it shone with less than ordinary brightness. Those who study the working of the world, however, say that certain defects of the sun and moon do not signify anything."¹⁸ If one is to group the three men by their reactions to natural signs, Henry is the one who must stand apart. He was always inclined to see meaning in any infrequent occurrence, to accept it in good faith, and, probably, to think very little of it; he wasted very few words on the terrible sign he himself saw at Ramsey in 1144. His attitude toward such things

Infrequent occurrences must be explained

was the uninquiring and old-fashioned one that Richard, fifty years later, dismisses. Yet Richard's and William's minds are not so far apart as they first appear. Their treatment of portents—William's anxious wordiness, Richard's inattention—are both consonant with sophistication, generalized skepticism, and increased information. The mature alternatives to Henry's easy, somehow cheerful acceptance of fearful omens are greater seriousness about them or impatient disregard. *of portents*

The other pair of portents quoted above, Henry's double moon and William's double sun, follow the same pattern. Henry takes his basic information from the Peterborough Chronicle, adding comments and rearranging the order of events to shift the comet and moons into a more satisfying alignment with earthly sin.¹⁹ William was again an eyewitness, with companions; he gives the date, the time of day, the movement of the celestial bodies, and his state of mind. He wonders which is the true sun, stands in amazement for a long time, says they recognized the sight as a portent of evil. He offers the resurgence of Richard I's and Philip's chronic war as an explanation.

One step up, as it were, from signs were sudden deaths by accident, especially when effected by inanimate objects. These events were very like natural portents but much stronger in the effect they had on moral, thoughtful, or suggestible minds. The fatal accident, with its startling, saddening effect on observers, was the most persuasive example of God's judgment—inexorable and, given the usual state of human nature, unambiguously proper. Most victims met their sudden deaths in a satisfyingly sinful state, or if not, there was always the ancient theme of vanity, vanity to edify the conventional moralists. (Only the prosperous, well-born, or eminent attracted attention by untimely deaths; the illiterate and poor presumably all died without divine interference.) The well-deserved death, violent and swift, was an irresistible occasion for Christian (and some not very Christian) reflections. Even Richard of Devizes, scorner of portents, includes three extremely satisfying cases: a Cluniac monk who usurps the office of prior from its rightful holder is struck dumb and dies after his hypocritical speech of introduction to the monks; an ambitious monk who tries to bribe his way to unearned promotion is hit on the head by a falling beam; a traitorous monk who plays the dupe and fool for Bishop Hugh

of Coventry's antimonastic vituperation is brained by a falling stone.²⁰ These three providential acts were the expression of Richard's secure conviction that God loves the regular life in all of its tradition, privilege, and autonomous self-government—this conviction being the closest thing to religious passion Richard apparently felt.

The terrible descent from prosperity to the grave was the very heart of Henry's elegiac history. His *De contemptu mundi* is a virtual roll call of sudden, mortal falls from power, position, and happiness, and even natural death in old age is seen as the ultimate judgment on little human ambitions and fragile joys: vanity and emptiness, violence and disease. Throughout the *Historia*, its presence naturally more diffused, the judgmental death strikes often, teaching what Henry clearly believed, that God was not ever asleep or away (the desperate grumbling repeated by the Peterborough chronicler) but was the true *deus irritatus*, ever ready to strike in anger.²¹ The wicked Sigebert of Wessex, unrecognized and killed by a swineherd—"Behold the manifest judgment of God . . ."; the noblemen at Calne, fallen through a collapsed floor, leaving Dunstan, holy and unharmed, clinging to a beam; Henry I's homosexual son, dead in the drunkenly navigated White Ship; the fall of majesty in the young Philip of France's fatal riding accident—"Behold this great eminence, how quickly, how lightly it is annihilated";²² these are Henry's favorite moral vignettes and only a few chosen from many. His particular theme, his characteristic signature, was the cultivated gloom, the edgy distrust of his own and everyone else's happiness; it was a habit of mind that was more widespread and perhaps more fashionable at the period of his birth than at his death. *morality*

William, as his readers come to expect, was willing to attempt the hard cases. The spectacle of interesting persons dying in striking circumstances did not allow much scope for the Christian imagination, but a few instances did present difficulties. The death of Emperor Frederick who rode his horse into a river in Asia Minor at the very outset of the Third Crusade and drowned before he ever saw a pagan, was a puzzle and an embarrassment to the Christian world. The judgment of God visited on the emperor at that most meaningless of moments is conceded to be very obscure: "By the hidden judgment of God, a miserable

Ambiguous explanation of Frederick's death

accident (and one which no one could have anticipated) removed that man of great eminence from the world"; and "great abyss of the judgments of God! That such a man, prompted by a divine fervor, having left behind his imperial pleasures and wealth and exposed himself to a thousand dangers for Christ, is killed in so quick and wretched an accident."²³ Those expressions of real felt pain before the mystery of God's punishments (for William, like John, knew that a crusade involved the whole Christian world) are followed by some attempt at explanation. He finally, and awkwardly, reconciles fact with belief by suggesting that Frederick's great act of devotion to Christ, which took him to his wretched death in Asia Minor, effected the only sufficient atonement for his past sins and thus won his salvation.²⁴ It is a strangely complicated explanation, but it does not gloss over anything and has none of the complacency of Henry of Huntingdon's exclamations over fatal accidents.

Death
a gift for
pity?

In unusual coincidence with Richard of Devizes, William too has his own example of a monk hit on the head by a falling stone, in judgment on his violation of the dignity and propriety of his order. Richard's monk was the hapless wretch who let himself be used as the "straight man" to a routine of anti-monastic jokes. William's monk was a Premonstratensian hermit and priest who joined in the siege of the Jews in the tower of York in 1190 with loud and bloody enthusiasm: "He had so persuaded himself in his blinded mind that he even labored to persuade others, that the work under way was quite religious." He was crushed by a stone from the catapult because his guilt was greater than that of others "by reason of his profession and order."²⁵ The differences between William's and Richard's notions of the true dignity and propriety of regular life should by now be apparent and predictable.

[So much concentration on these small issues, the briefest manifestations of divine intelligence in the twelfth-century world, may seem to be begging the larger question of Christian history, of God's relation to human society.] But if Christian history did not consist of exactly those moments of startling and mysterious information, it is difficult to see in what exactly it could have consisted. During the lifetime of all the historians mentioned, and before and after them as well, no educated man

was satisfied with the conception of God working only in movements so ineffable, so large, and so deliberate that no individual could ever hope to see anything of it in his own time. The idea of a God who is "there" but never precisely here or there is suitable only for modern minds, embarrassed by too provincial a deity. Those who watched their world in the twelfth century for signs of the living presence took them as they found them. The very sporadicness and even triviality of most of the events that prompted medieval historians to open affirmation of their belief in divine superintendence of the world—a seepage of rusty water, the aurora borealis, the accidents so common around building sites and war machinery—are a kind of inverse measure of how much else was allowed to go assumed and unexpressed, and perhaps only half understood.

The specialness of human history in the Christian era, however any particular writer had learned of it and understood it, was, with a few exceptions, the most sketchily treated of historical themes. After a few prefatory remarks about history and God, graceful reference to previous writers, assurance of the propriety of the author's didactic intentions, most medieval histories get quickly under way, shedding almost cavalierly as they approach the author's lifetime every trace of dogmatic coherence in favor of increasing dependence on portents, demons, and all the debris of popular belief for a Christian tone.²⁶ Only the most strenuously philosophic of minds would attempt to work out the implications of their historical religion for their own, invariably disordered, time.²⁷ European Christendom was old by the twelfth century, its institutions stable or rigid, according to point of view; the urgent occasions for Augustine's *City of God* and Orosius's *Against the Pagans* belonged entirely to the past. The insistent and present sense of a large and inclusive plan for mankind, the need for that sense, had subsided into a quiet acceptance of the idea of such a plan without the need for very specific understanding of its provisions. Narrower problems dominated the mental and moral leisure enjoyed by the world. Only a very few historians seemed to have had the intellectual confidence or the interest to make systematically known their own understanding of any higher purpose informing recent history.

The incalculable effects of aesthetic conventions on the ex-

position of an historical theology must also be weighed, however imprecisely, into the cultural milieu that produced these works of apparently uncertain philosophical nature. The dominant literary conventions of the age, the taste for abrupt, paratactic composition, for episodic, compound narratives, had to make the conception of an orderly, linking theme of providential history as foreign to nonfiction as the well-made plot was to contemporary fiction. An unbroken web of reasonable and plausible motivation was not considered necessary to the most elegantly composed romances; history being an analogous, subsidiary kind of high literature, the genre carried no intrinsic necessity of a thoroughly exposed plot, even though its plot would be both divine and real. Any regular pattern of historical development, secular or spiritual, had to be brought into history from outside the dominant literary conventions that shaped the genre. An historian could expand or modify the prevailing conventions of narrative to accommodate larger historical or theological conceptions if he so chose, but the merely episodic and compound was perfectly acceptable to an educated audience. Christian history presented as a series of disconnected, startling events fit so well into the aesthetic habits of the twelfth century that it is not very surprising that so many historians ventured so little beyond what they felt, if not exactly thought, to be necessary.

The basic authority of the idea that all secular history is included in, and eventually explained by, a purpose only partially visible to men, and the basic impulse toward a Christian exegesis of history had not diminished since late antiquity; but the laborious and open insistence on those themes had been replaced by a more comfortable reliance on assumptions generally understood among all Christian readers. The best and the most serious-minded of twelfth-century historians allowed their own sense (it is usually too much to say "philosophy") of Christian history to surface occasionally, under the influence of special experiences or information. Between an author's vaguest prefatory remarks and the didactic purposes of written history, and his particular catalogue of demons, ponds of blood, and comets, there is usually a rather empty middle distance containing little that connects the movements of the empyrean with life in Berkshire. The prodigies and signs and amazing occurrences that

irregularly mark the surface of twelfth-century histories are the self-explanatory expressions of each author's special consciousness of the relation between his God and his world—the scattered and often unlikely pieces of a whole that can be only partially reconstructed.

The patterns through which a Christian consciousness of the meaning of human history was expressed at this period had been long since fixed: the alternations of sin and punishment, the pilgrimage of life, the warning signs from an outraged heaven. But even medieval religiosity had its fashions, and changing assumptions and encroaching questions seem to fill the distance between Henry of Huntingdon and William of Newburgh. When Henry acquires, from some unknown source, knowledge of an interesting portent whose application is unclear (a rare event), he offers only a brief, tepid gesture at interpretation. In the year 786 the sign of the cross appeared on certain peoples' clothing—a miracle to be sure, but whether it was some premature sign of a crusade to take place three hundred and nine years later or a sign to mark off some people from the suffering soon to be inflicted by the Danes, Henry is not sure. "We, however, do not venture to make our own definition, but leave God's secrets to God."²⁸ This is a hasty, prim retreat from the field of divine mysteries, almost suggesting that it would be impolite to inquire more aggressively. The recurring themes of God's stern relationship to His creation, of man's sin and vainglory, of the hopelessness and pain of the world, of waves of cruel conquerors succeeding one another at England's shores, and of disappointment and death overtaking individual happiness, anchor Henry's history in a secure and predictable, if pitiable, universe. His elegiac sensibility ("See how the honors and pleasure and glory of the world come to nothing"),²⁹ which favors the word *nihil*, with its flat, depressing sound, is expressed so consistently and so often that the whole effect is finally one of complacency—the comfortable gloom of a rich man whose family is on the ascendant. Every sign from heaven, every intelligible pattern in human history repeats the same lesson, without puzzles or mysteries.

More than the differences between an uninquiring or satisfied mind and an inquisitive one separated Henry and William, or at least their differences were more than merely personal and individual traits. Henry's world and his God were thoroughly

*
different
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traditional (from an early twelfth-century point of view); they immediately invoke the pictorial representations of the enthroned God of Judgment typical of a somewhat earlier age. It was not unreasonable for him to excise all the saints and their miracles from Bede's history and combine them with similar contemporary stories to make a separate book; saints did not quite fit in a dark world of sin and punishment. William's world, full of disturbing and half-explained things—demons, vampires, toads with golden collars—is also filled with calmness and goodness—Thurstan, Saint Godric, Gilbert of Sempringham, the Cistercian houses. Satan and his legions, so active a part of the later history, play virtually no role in Henry of Huntingdon's world; God alone is responsible for everything severe and painful.

Conventional patterns of Christian explication had not changed between Henry's death at mid-century and the time William was trying to fit his strangely more diverse world into them. The sheer effort required by this well-intentioned and thoughtful man to make form and content fit is what compels the reader's attention and sympathy. Our difficulties in trying to define and place those mental and moral efforts, at once so rational and so perversely misdirected, are caught up in the assumptions directing our choice of language. The growing impulse in the twelfth century, exposed through the various literary and plastic arts, to notice and record the natural world has been well documented.³⁰ It is true that observing reality and observing nature are identical activities now, but if "reality" and "nature," with their corresponding styles, methods, or intellectual systems of "realism" and "naturalism," are allowed to coincide in our descriptions of the twelfth century, the very words will enforce distortions and a kind of blunted sensitivity. The William of Newburgh who described Scarborough Castle will be included as one of the best of the new sort of observer in his own time, but the William who applied the same perspicacity to the investigation of vampires must be excluded, and misunderstood. If naturalism is regarded, with good dictionary authority, as a style or method characterized by close adherence to and faithful representation of nature, and if realism, by that same authority, is taken to mean an attachment to what is real and an inclination to render the precise details of some fact or

experience that actually existed or occurred,³¹ then the two words need not be rigidly synonymous when used to describe a society characterized by universal belief in the supernatural. No one in the twelfth century believed that the natural world encompassed all of the real world. Reality, in the firm and knowledgeable belief of intelligent people, contained a great many actually existing facts and experiences that nature knew nothing of; such facts and experiences could be made the objects of the same kind of attention usually employed in the understanding and manipulation of the natural world, with, admittedly, a great deal more difficulty and some odd results.

What may be observed throughout William's work is an attempt, though not consciously conceived as such, to extend the standards of bold mental activity appropriate to energetic life in the natural world to supernatural "reality." One may even, with the addition of many more authors, generalize this observation to a view of the twelfth century's peculiar feeling of energy and tension as the encroachment of the demands of "naturalism" into the supernatural realities of the traditional Christian world. In the end, the facts and experiences William tried to explain were not susceptible to the standards of probability, consistency, and concreteness taught by mundane existence, however informally. The result was that many of his best intellectual efforts look foolish, though not much more foolish than many subsequent attempts at the problem of "Christian evidence." He struggled on many occasions to rationalize what could not, ultimately, be rationalized, and his failure is less important than the fact of his attempt.

The effort that William gave to recording subjects like the green children who appeared in a ditch was not solely the impulse of a story collector; every painstakingly described grotesque was an expression of his felt conviction that God's governance of His creation is reasonable and intelligible. Clearly, the old, formal patterns of a universe ruled by a justly cruel lord whose presence was felt through punishments, never anticipated but always deserved, were no longer satisfying, and neither were the dark mysteries of arbitrary event and human helplessness that must accompany such a strict but distant dominion. (The kind of Christian universe that Henry appeared to accept as strong, at once sorrowful and comforting, must

have seemed to another generation as banal, inadequate, and superstitious. William talks often about superstition; Henry, never.

Devout and thoughtful (William) insisted on a detailed, living, bold *saeculum* informed with meaning—a world more emotional and rational than anything Henry had described. He was one of the most complete and unflinching reporters of the anti-Jewish horrors of 1189–1190, telling with unhidden disgust the base motives and vile conduct of the Christian townsmen. While William cannot be expected to have regarded the Jews with sympathy or understanding, his distaste for the violence and looting was still not the same as Richard of Devizes's fastidious recoil. He despised the Premonstratensian hermit who emerged to encourage the besiegers around the tower at York; he exposed the venality and foolishness that created a martyr out of a murdered looter at Stanford; but an attack on Jewish infidels had to mean something more than Christian dishonor. From the sad welter of a conscientious religious purpose and the ugly facts (which he did not try to conceal or soften) of Christian greed, violence, duplicity, and bloodiness, William found his way by resorting to a "rule" for historical interpretation—employed only once in his book.

The first day of the reign of the most illustrious King Richard was marked by this hitherto unheard-of event in the royal city, both by the uncompleted destruction of a notoriously perfidious people, and by a new confidence of the Christians against the enemies of the Cross. Clearly this was a presage of the advancement of Christianity in Richard's own time, not only according to the rule (*regulam*) which prescribes that ambiguous meanings (*ambigua*) be derived in the better rather than the worse sense, but even according to the most appropriate meaning.³²

This rule, whose original application was perhaps grammatical, is placed firmly at the beginning of several chapters given to a full and explicit chronicle of murder, looting, riot, impotent royal officers, false saints, in city after city, all told in pitiful (and perhaps pitying) detail. He warns the reader not to be distracted by the incendiary violence of the mobs from the certainty that the pious interpretation is the correct one: "The

Omnipotent One may fulfill His supremely good will through the will of the most depraved men and thoroughly wicked acts."³³ There must, after all, have been some question about it. The full effect of William's unyielding insistence on such events as a happy presage for Christendom, combined with his scenes of Jews killing their wives and children and then themselves rather than face baptism or murder by a Christian mob, is more than distasteful. But the strength of that revulsion by the modern reader is itself the result of William's relentless, one may say even courageous, clarity of vision—the scenes in London, York, Stanford, Lincoln are repulsive because he was repulsed and because he did not conceal anything. Once William had committed himself to thinking about such *ambigua*, he arrived, unsurprisingly, at the only Christian interpretation available to him, regardless of any rule he thought applied. No rule of history or theology impelled him to report the shabby and revolting story as honestly as he did. His emotional and intellectual attachment to a standard of realism as unflinching as any we now know was fully equal to his commitment to the other realities of a Christian universe.

William's confidence in the ultimate intelligibility and goodness of the world and of every perceived manifestation of divine intelligence is the implication gradually drawn from his essentially benign attentiveness to whatever the world offered, so different from Henry's conventional pessimism, is very like the tone that informs John of Salisbury's historical writing. The spilled wine at the pope's Mass is exactly the kind of problem to attract William.

(Richard of Devizes, William's contemporary, always enters as a counterpoise and an astringent. In his book is found an almost completely natural world, an even defiantly secular approach to life against a permanent backdrop of a secure Christian society. He like Henry, was a traditionalist, his loyalties and religious feelings engrossed by the institutions rather than by the dogmas of Christianity. His God is occasionally moved to the defense of His favorites, the monks of the established orders, but for the most part He remains at a polite and reserved distance.) Richard's reaction to the new orders and the new enthusiastic devotion is the recoil of offended propriety. Sensitive men of Richard's generation found their world unfeeling and constricting; he and

probably many like him regarded with fastidious suspicion any sort of emotive religiosity or mysteries. Religion had already been thoroughly and suitably accounted for in the rule and traditions of his own order. If William's resort to a rule for reconciling the imperative realities of Christian history to the murk of observed life was one way of meeting the demands made on his faith by a world more compelling and various than his ancestors had encountered, Richard's mundaneness and cold wit was another way. His God, one feels, would not be so vulgar as to work His will through the instruments of city mobs and the burning and looting of houses. The same events that for William were *ambigua* and horrible because of Christian depravity and that yet solemnly, painfully affirmed the triumph of Christendom, were for Richard merely crude riots, the uncivilized in pursuit of the unholy.

God had retired to His ancient homes and did not push the celestial bodies out of their accustomed courses, or put blood in country ponds, or insist that men live in squalid huts in order to worship Him. He left the world to its own ways and purposes; the part of mature wisdom, implied by Richard's words and tone, was to accept the world on its own terms and to preserve the ancient, dignified forms of Christian life as they had been inherited. It must be remembered that Richard cannot be considered an irreligious man: he attacked the Carthusians because they were presumptuous and excessive; the Benedictines were quite sufficiently Christian for the occasions of modern life. An account by Richard of Devizes of Pope Eugenius's accident-crossed Mass would, one feels, be instructive in many ways.

The existence, during the twelfth century, of a literary genre that may, not too inaccurately, be called Christian history is indubitable, but the exact nature of the quality that made written history "Christian" is very elusive. It is true that the bare recognition of supernatural influences on earthly life is a tacit affirmation of belief in some kind of providential history, but that affirmation is left, by most authors, very bare, promising a doctrinal fullness that is never given. The Augustinian or Orosian suggestions for historical pattern and the simplified variants like Henry of Huntingdon's *deus irritatus* and the vainglorious world were never challenged during the twelfth century; neither were they applied very thoroughly by working

historians. (It is useful to think about how vividly Otto of Freising stands out when he merely attempted the obvious—or so it seems now.) History was, after all, conventionally considered an easy kind of literature to write, and perhaps it was; it has merely grown harder to read. The writers who originally set the basic doctrinal patterns for Christian history had strong, polemical motives for creating a clearly patterned Christian course of history; they had urgent moral impulses, which overrode the trivial business of reporting the peculiar details of men and events and which justified any distortion or simplification necessary to the full defense of their still-threatened religion. In a world irrecoverably secured for the Church, with the pagan infidels off to a poetic biblical distance, a few men who had addressed themselves to the ancient task of writing history might very well begin again to notice that their world was immensely various and solid, and oddly resistant to easy interpretation.

The impulses toward Christian exegesis and toward history are not mutually repulsive, but in practice they seem to be combined only with great effort and great tact. Few historians have been able to do justice to both, even in the presumably Christian centuries. Augustine wrote one true work of Christian history, and that was his autobiography, for which he had the supreme advantage of interior knowledge of the events of his own life; autobiography may be the only entirely satisfactory form of Christian history. Autobiography, however, was not a popularly acceptable form of literature in the twelfth century (although it interestingly begins to appear then), and history was.

Christian history was being written during the twelfth century, but only with increasing difficulty. One way of expressing that observation, the cumulative experience of reading, is to say that the habits of mind, the expectations and involuntary judgments we associate with the word *naturalism* were beginning to encroach, however insensibly, upon a reality that passed the boundaries of the natural world. The cold division between religious and secular experience, almost to the exclusion of the supernatural from the world, found in Richard of Devizes's history is one contemporary expression of, and solution for, a pervasive cultural tension. That same tension impelled William of Newburgh to strenuous efforts of investigation and inner

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debate to force the supernatural to take on some of the straightforward plausibility of natural objects and events. Richard's radical solution, being our own, has the air of intrinsic rightness, while William's conscientious efforts to find a workable compromise fix him for eternity in solemn foolishness. The *invisibilia dei* that John of Salisbury wanted historians to expose bravely to the light were receding again into indecipherability, not as in a combative, half-pagan antiquity, but to a new and more unreachable distance.

Flashy
like
unexplainable

INTRODUCTION

1. Jane Austen, *Northanger Abbey* (1971), 34; the opening quotation is on pp. 97-98.
2. Oliver Goldsmith, *The History of England*, 1:iv.
3. Isidore of Seville, *Isidori Hispalensis episcopi etymologiarum sive originum*, ed. W. M. Lindsay, 1:xl-xliv.
4. See William Nelson, *Fact or Fiction*, for the ambiguous borderline between fact and fiction from antiquity through the Renaissance.
5. Goldsmith, *History*, 1:1.
6. A. E. Roy and E. L. G. Stones, "The Record of Eclipses in the Bury Chronicle," *Bulletin of the Institute of Historical Research* 43, no. 108 (1970): 125-33.
7. Antonia Gransden's survey, *Historical Writing in England c. 550 to c. 1307*, will be the starting point for all studies of medieval English historiography; an interesting briefer survey is by C. N. L. Brooke, "Historical Writing in England between 850 and 1150," in *La storiografia altomedievale*. The best interpretive essays on medieval historiography are Sir Richard Southern's four presidential addresses to the Royal Historical Society, "Aspects of the European Tradition of Historical Writing," *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, 5th ser.: 1. "The Classical Tradition from Einhard to Geoffrey of Monmouth," 20 (1970): 173-96; 2. "Hugh of St. Victor and the Idea of Historical Development," 21 (1971): 159-79; 3. "History as Prophecy," 22 (1972): 159-80; 4. "The Sense of the Past," 23 (1973): 243-63. These essays are rich, pointed, and sensitive about history writing, past and present.
8. R. W. Southern, "The Place of England in the Twelfth-Century Renaissance," *History* 45 (1960): 201-16 is thoroughly excellent; see p. 203 for his discussion of the dominance of Bede in English intellectual life, and pp. 207-13 on the historical impulse in post-Conquest England.
9. Colin Morris, *The Discovery of the Individual 1050-1200*, contains many well-chosen illustrations of emerging twelfth-century individuality; see also Walter Ullmann's discussion of changes in historical writing during the twelfth century in *The Individual and Society in the Middle Ages*, 110-11, 142-43.
10. Herbert Butterfield, *Man on His Past*, 16.
11. Gransden, *Historical Writing in England*, discusses Henry of