

INTERVIEW WITH PATRICK J. GEARY

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Having earned his Ph.D. at Yale University in 1974, Patrick J. Geary has taught at Princeton University (1974-1980) and the University of Florida (1980-1993), and has been a professor of history and Director of the Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies at the University of California, Los Angeles, since July of 1993. Winner of numerous fellowships and awards, and member of a host of professional organizations and activities, Professor Geary is also the author of many articles and books on medieval history, including general surveys [*Civilization in the West* (New York, 1990); *The Unfinished Legacy: A Brief History of Western Civilization* (New York, 1992); *Societies and Cultures in World History* (New York, 1994), with Mark Kishlansky, Patricia O'Brien, and Bin Wong], translations of fundamental primary and secondary sources [*Readings in Medieval History* (Peterborough, Ontario, 1989); Heinrich Fichtenau, *Living in the Tenth Century. Mentalities and Social Orders* (Chicago, 1991)], and specialized studies [*Furta Sacra: Thefts of Relics in the Central Middle Ages* (Princeton, 1978, rev. ed. 1991); *Aristocracy in Provence: The Rhône Basin at the Dawn of the Carolingian Age* (Philadelphia, 1985); *Before France and Germany: The Creation and Transformation of the Merovingian World* (Oxford, 1988); *Living with the Dead in the Middle Ages* (Ithaca, NY, 1994); *Phantoms of Remembrance: Memory and Oblivion at the end of the first Millennium* (Princeton, 1994); *Imagination, Ritual, Memory, Historiography: Concepts of the Past* (Cambridge, in press), with Johannes Fried and Gerd Althoff], many of which have been translated into French and German. He also has edited memoirs of Louisiana in the nineteenth century [*Leon Fremaux's New Orleans Characters* (Gretna, LA, 1987); *Céline: Remembering Louisiana 1850-1871* (Athens, GA, 1988)]. Among the number of programs Professor Geary has initiated while at UCLA, and certainly one of the most popular, has been the inter-University of California Medieval History Seminar, which meets quarterly at the Huntington Library in San Marino, California.

Prompting this interview is the news of Professor Geary's imminent departure from UCLA for a position at Notre Dame University. Before taking his leave, he enthusiastically agreed to share his thoughts on

medieval history, his role in the field, and the legacy he leaves behind as a medieval historian at UCLA.

Q: Three of the great teachers and scholars of medieval history at the University of California—C. Warren Hollister at Santa Barbara, and Gerhart B. Ladner and Robert L. Benson at Los Angeles—have recently passed on. Is there a tradition of medieval history at the University of California, and at the Los Angeles campus in particular? As a former colleague of theirs, do you have any specific memories of them which you would like to share?

A: Warren Hollister († 1997) I did not know that well. He was a UCLA Ph.D. and went to Santa Barbara when that university was being established, as a founder of the history department. So he was a real pioneer. Anglo-Norman is a tough field to break into, and he was not coming out of a stable of Anglo-Norman historians. Thus, I think that he suffered for a long time in gaining recognition in this very tight, closed field—who was this guy from southern California, people asked? He persevered and became a respected figure and an organizing figure and a great teacher. He really worked to train his students. He had a very close mentoring relationship and then worked to promote them. Frankly, sometimes we got a little bit perturbed at Warren, because every time there was a conference he would submit one or more panels of Hollister students. Either he or a senior student would preside, another student would comment, and three graduate students would present papers. They had all rehearsed, and it was a beautiful performance with very well presented papers. These performances were intended to showcase his students so that they could get jobs. Finally, a number of times, different organizations would say, “Look, we’re not going to take any more Hollister panels that are all Hollister. You’ve got to have someone from the outside chairing or commenting or whatever.” On the other hand, what he was doing is vital; he knew how tough the job market was.¹ He knew that students had to be mentored to find positions, and then showcased. He was there for his students in a way that very, very few people, living or dead, had ever been, and I think he has been very successful in doing that. If you look around the country and see where Hollister’s students went, you would realize that he

¹Cf. Hollister’s own comments in P. Kidney, “Interview with C. Warren Hollister,” *Comitatus* 12 (1981): 5–12.

made a difference in these people's lives. And he was very, very successful.²

Gerhart Ladner († 1993) represented a tradition in European medieval studies that is poorly understood in North America.³ He was a product of the Austrian Institute for Historical Research, which had an option of History and Art History, although usually one thinks of it as a school for diplomatics and paleography for archivists. Ladner studied art history and continued his work in Rome during the period when he could not be in Austria because, although he was a convert to Catholicism, he was born Jewish. His work in iconography and intellectual history were really of a piece and represented an important tradition of Central European scholarship. He was a poet, as well as a historian of church history, but even more of ideas. Through his life he was an extraordinary figure, one who had maintained cordial relationships with his Viennese colleagues. He went back frequently, and they really venerated him. Herwig Wolfram⁴ considered him one of his three fathers, along with his own father and Heinrich Fichtenau.⁵

The great founder, of course, here was Lynn White, Jr. († 1987), who was an American phenomenon, very much the Westerner.⁶ He was brought in by Franklin Murphy, who was the brilliant and extraordinary builder of this university—the one great chancellor that we have ever had—who created this institution as a place for these kinds of scholars; and White founded the Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies.

Robert Benson († 1996) was a brilliant scholar but published almost nothing.⁷ He had difficulty getting things out—a perfectionist

²See the forthcoming tribute to Hollister, which will include the collected sessions papers on “Obligations of the Anglo-Norman World” originally presented in his honor at the Kalamazoo Medieval Congress of 1996, to be published by the Charles Homer Haskins Society. See also the memoir by J. Baldwin, G. Constable, P. Meyvaert, and J.B. Russell, “Charles Warren Hollister,” *Speculum* 73 (1998): 952–954.

³See the memoir by R.L. Benson, G. Constable, and J. Van Engen, “Gerhart Burian Ladner,” *Speculum* 71 (1996): 802–804, together with J. Van Engen, “Images and Ideas: The Achievements of Gerhart Burian Ladner, with a Bibliography of His Published Works,” *Viator* 20 (1989): 85–115.

⁴Professor of History, University of Vienna; Director of the Austrian Institute for Historical Research.

⁵See the brief biographical sketch of Fichtenau by Geary in H. Fichtenau, *Living in the Tenth Century. Mentalities and Social Orders*, trans. P. Geary (Chicago, 1991): xi–xiii.

⁶See the memoir by M. Clagett, R. Rouse, and E. Grant, “Lynn Townshend White, Jr.,” *Speculum* 63 (1988): 769–771.

⁷See the memoirs by R. Rouse, R. Somerville, and G. Constable, “Robert Louis Benson,” *Speculum* 71 (1996): 798–799, and H. Fuhrmann, “Nachruf: Robert L. Benson,” *Deutsches Archiv* 52 (1996): 809–811.

who worked and reworked but didn't finish and didn't publish—but every presentation he gave was a jewel, polished, brilliant, beautifully delivered, insightful; but very little of it ever entered the print world. His reputation was largely among people who had met him and heard him, rather than people who had read him, because there was very little to read. This was a problem for the field because he was the one person in America who really was completely connected to that tradition of canon law and imperial history within a German tradition of scholarship, and yet did not produce, in published and permanent form, the results of his work.

Q: It seems a common thread between both Ladner and Benson, someone who seems implicit in both of these discussions, was the great medievalist at U.C. Berkeley, Ernst H. Kantorowicz († 1963).⁸ I believe Kantorowicz was Benson's advisor, and that Kantorowicz and Ladner certainly had ties. Was Kantorowicz a part of the U.C. tradition, or influential to these scholars?

A: He was, but not, I believe, officially. He was at Berkeley for a time [1939–1950], but he refused to sign the loyalty oath during the McCarthy witch hunts.⁹ As you know, every professor in the University of California system had to sign a loyalty oath to swear that he was not a Communist. Kantorowicz, who had fought the Communists in the Spartacus Uprising,¹⁰ who was a very, very conservative person, said that he had seen one Fascist regime, one kind of approach to control thought and to demand acceptance and conformity; and he refused to participate. He was fired by the State of California and then immediately hired by the Institute for Advanced Study, where he spent the remainder of his career, and it was there that Benson, who was a graduate student at Princeton,

⁸There have been many studies on Kantorowicz. For a concise biographical sketch with full bibliography, see R. E. Lerner, "Ernst H. Kantorowicz," in *Medieval Scholarship. Biographical Studies on the Formation of a Discipline*, ed. H. Damico and J.B. Zavadil (New York and London, 1995): 263–276, to which one can now add A. Boureau's essay, "Kantorowicz, or the Middle Ages as Refuge," in *Medievalism and the Modernist Temper*, ed. R.H. Bloch and S.G. Nichols (Baltimore and London, 1996): 355–367.

⁹See E.H. Kantorowicz, *The Fundamental Issue: Documents and Marginal Notes on the University of California Loyalty Oath* (San Francisco, 1950).

¹⁰The Spartacus Uprising was a series of socialist revolts in 1918–1919, led by Kurt Eisner, Karl Liebknecht, Rosa Luxemburg, and Eugen Levinè, centered in Berlin and Munich, which were brutally suppressed. The leading force of military reaction was drawn from a group of demobilized lieutenants and N.C.O.'s (nationalist university students, patriots, and drifters) that constituted the notorious Freikorps, a group of which Kantorowicz was a proud member. See G.A. Craig, *Germany 1866–1945* (New York, 1978), 396–424.

worked with him. There was really no one at Princeton University who did that kind of work. Joseph Strayer († 1987) was a French institutional historian,¹¹ so the availability of Kantorowicz to work with was very, very important. Kantorowicz, for Benson, was the great figure. He represented a very different kind of history from that of Gerhart Ladner.

Benson went to the *Monumenta Germaniae Historica*¹² as a young scholar. He was under the influence of Kantorowicz, then of the *Monumenta* scholars, and was one of the very first, perhaps the first, American to show up at the *Monumenta* after World War II. The Germans were just amazed at this character, this American speaking terrible German—to them the archetypal young American—and they fell in love with him. They just found him wonderful. His German became beautiful. He was always teasing, always joking. He had a wonderful cultural background, a brilliant mind, and to the Germans he represented everything that America seemed to hold that was fresh and different and irreverent, and yet very, very powerful. Thus he became a tie to that world. Ladner represented the older tradition, and Benson was his successor. In fact, Benson had been given a chair in Berlin when he was offered to be Ladner's successor at UCLA. Ladner lived a very long time after retirement and remained very active, so they were really more like colleagues. Benson worshipped Ladner and felt that Ladner represented what he wanted to be. I think he probably felt that he could never measure up to the tradition that Ladner had created.

As a result, UCLA was really the one place in America where one might pursue German imperial history and law. There are a few other Americans such as Robert Lerner at Northwestern, who was also at the *Monumenta* and who studied with Herbert Grundmann († 1970).¹³ However, Lerner's interest is in religious history, not imperial history, and thus not in the kind of questions that had dominated mainstream German historiography for the last seventy years. Benson was virtually the only person in America who was deeply involved in this type of history.

¹¹See the memoir by J.F. Benton, T.N. Bisson, and E.A.R. Brown, "Joseph Reese Strayer," *Speculum* 63 (1988): 767–769.

¹²The venerable German institute for historical research on the Middle Ages. See H. Grundmann, *Monumenta Germaniae historica. 1819–1969* (Munich, 1969); and D. Knowles, "The 'Monumenta Germaniae Historica,'" in his *Great Historical Enterprises* (London, 1963), 65–97.

¹³For Grundmann, see the memoir by A. Borst, "Herbert Grundmann," *Deutsches Archiv* 26 (1970): 327–353, and H. Lietzmann, "Bibliographie Herbert Grundmann," *Deutsches Archiv* 26 (1970): 354–367.

When I came to UCLA five years ago, Ladner was very ill but still around; Benson had not yet retired; David Sabeen had just returned to do early modern German history; Peter Reill was doing eighteenth-century intellectual German history; and Peter Baldwin was doing more contemporary German history. Thus, we were really the only place in North America where one could study Germany from its origins to the twentieth century. It was the only place with a critical mass of German-oriented scholars—not that I’m a German historian, but I work with issues and people there in a way that very few people in North America do.¹⁴

Q: How did you first develop your interest in medieval history?

A: I was an undergraduate at a small Jesuit college in Mobile, Alabama, Spring Hill, where my ancestors had gone in the nineteenth century. I had gone there because I had wanted a Jesuit education and I wanted to be a biologist, and they had a very fine biology department. But I was offered the opportunity to get into an honors program that was an experimental, interdisciplinary Western Civilization great-books program. It combined fourteen credit-hours per semester of history, literature, theology, philosophy, and art in a chronological sequence taught by a team of professors in seminar format, with outrageous amounts of reading, about two or three thousand pages a week, beginning with prehistory. The first semester was an integrated block of Antiquity, the second semester was an integrated block of the Middle Ages, the third was an integrated block of modern history in the European sense, and the fourth an integrated block of contemporary history. The organizing genius was John William Rooney, who had received his Ph.D. from the Catholic University of Louvain, and who had created this extraordinary program. It just lasted a few years, but it just blew me away; and within three months I had dropped out of biology and joined this program because it was not possible to do all this science and math that one had to do, and this tremendous amount of reading. I tried it for a while, and I was just going out of my mind. Something about the medieval block seized me, and because this was a small liberal-arts college, I saw very early that if I wanted to learn more about the medieval world and to focus on this, I couldn’t do that there.

¹⁴Cf. P. Geary, *Medieval Germany in America*, German Historical Institute, Annual Lecture Series, no. 8 (Washington, DC, 1996).

I decided to go to Europe to study medieval history for a year, but Spring Hill didn't have a junior year abroad program; so I withdrew from the college and went off to Louvain, and, through John William Rooney's assistance, talked my way into the university as a free student attached to the Philosophy Department. I just ran amok in medieval courses. I took practically an entire B.A. program in philosophy, medieval as well as modern. Their foci were Aquinas and thirteenth-century integral-Averroësism with Fernand van Steenburgen, and then contemporary phenomenological existentialism. My advisor was H.L. van Breda, who was the director of the Husserl archives, and I worked with a number of very interesting phenomenologists, particularly in the tradition of Maurice Merleau-Ponty.¹⁵ But at the same time, I was doing a first year of advanced study in history. Essentially I did the first year of the licentiate sequence in ancient, medieval, early-modern, and contemporary history. I also did advanced seminars in medieval history and philosophy. I was going to stay on, to the objection of my parents, but because of the Vietnam War I would have lost my college draft deferment if I tried to stay on in Belgium. So, after a summer's study in Germany, I returned to Spring Hill and completed my senior year, graduating in philosophy but determined to become a medieval historian with a strong interest in interdisciplinary studies.

At Louvain I had worked with Léopold Genicot († 1995),¹⁶ who had recommended that I go to Yale. I contacted Robert Lopez († 1986),¹⁷ and after graduating, I enrolled in the Yale Medieval Studies program. Because of the war, I joined the Army after being an undergraduate, spent the summer in boot camp, went to Yale in their Medieval Studies program, did medieval studies and military science, and completed my degree in Medieval Studies, with Medieval History as the major field, and Old French and History of Christian Doctrine rounding out my three fields. I also took courses in

¹⁵Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1908–1961), the innovative French Marxist theorist informed by a wide range of intellectual influences, such as anthropology, German phenomenology, and psychoanalysis. In 1946 he co-founded, along with Jean Paul Sartre, the independent socialist journal *Les Temps modernes*, which became the most influential theoretical journal in France following World War II. See the entry in *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. P. Edwards, V–VI (New York, 1967), 279–282. See also D. Archard, *Marxism and Existentialism: The Political Philosophy of Sartre and Merleau-Ponty* (Belfast, 1980).

¹⁶See the memoir by A. Joris, "Léopold Genicot (1914–1995)," *Le Moyen-Age* 102 (1996): 179–181, and G. Constable, P.J. Geary, and M. McCormick, "Léopold Genicot," *Speculum* 73 (1998): 959–961.

¹⁷See the memoir by A.R. Lewis, J. Pelikan, and D. Herlihy, "Robert Sabatino Lopez," *Speculum* 63 (1988): 763–765.

comparative literature, Latin, Germanics, and art whenever I could. I was also commissioned a lieutenant in Air Defense Artillery.

Q: How did you happen upon your dissertation topic?

A: It came from an interest that I had developed at Louvain in what was then called History of Mentalities. I wanted to understand people's thought patterns, not explicit ideas. I had gotten away from philosophy because I found philosophy was too abstract—I couldn't find people in it. I was much more interested in human beings, and ideas to the extent that they are incarnate, as phenomenologists would say, in a place and a time. I wanted to understand the relationship between the thoughts and the representation of a world, and the physical, economic, social structures that are both determining and determined by these thought processes. Well, how to do that? I thought that religious culture was an interesting thing—the cult of saints, for example—but much of that seemed to be very floaty. I thought that if one looks at relics rather than generalized saints' cults, one could locate practices in time and place. These physical objects tie together ritual practice and belief, but belief as experientially manifested in a specific place by a specific group of people.

Why stolen relics? Robert Lopez was a great anti-cleric, a very typical Italian economic historian, who liked to say, "I'm a complete agnostic. I don't even believe in psychoanalysis." Years before, he had done something on stolen relics, and he thought the idea of stealing saints' bodies was just wonderful and suggested that I look at that. I did and decided that it was not just a joke, but it was a way to look at the problematization, if one can use the term, of the cult of relics. Whereas normally what one sees is just the reproduction of the cult, here we have something that, at least *prima facie*, seems to be a contradictory situation. There was, in fact, a little literature on the theft of relics, and the problem of why one would talk about stealing bodies. I thought that the justifications for these things, the fabrications of stories about them, the discourse and dispute about them, these were points at which I could see in more detail the problems of clashes of representation, of understanding, and of perspective. Thus, *Furta Sacra* was the result of a very calculated attempt to try to look at people interacting in a world that was at a conjuncture of what we would call religion, economy, society, and institutions.

Q: How has your interest in critical theory influenced your work? What has led you and other “New” historians to take the “linguistic turn”?

A: At Yale I had very little introduction to anything that even then would be called critical theory, or theory of any sort. Outside of some very general readings, most of my seminars were very content-oriented, and I think that I left there a very naive historian. Much of what I was doing in *Furta Sacra* was rediscovering the wheel. I had not read widely in anthropology. I had read some of Peter Brown,¹⁸ but more of his work on Augustine than on holy men and saints. I had read some anthropology, but in no systematic way. What happened was that my first job was at Princeton, and at Princeton I fell under the influence of Lawrence Stone¹⁹ in the Shelby Cullom Davis Center, which was a marvelous experience for a young historian. Every Friday a predistributed paper would be discussed, shredded, dissected, attacked under the direction of Stone and the Davis Center fellows and the faculty. So every Friday, largely in early-modern history—which was really then, and remains to a great extent, the place of great innovation in historiography—under Lawrence Stone’s tutelage, we would engage in the kind of exciting, free-form debate about history that I had learned to love as an undergraduate, in these free-form seminars. History was a blood-sport in the Davis Center. There are horrible stories about the brutal attacks that people made on people’s work, usually in good fun, normally richly deserved; but regardless, it was a great experience, and that’s where I learned to be a historian. That’s where someone coming with a philosophy and a medieval studies background learned historical method, by doing. It was also the way that Lopez had taught. Lopez, in his seminars, would never allow a student to read a paper. One would speak on a topic. He would constantly interrupt and jump around and raise questions and pull books off the shelf and read to you and often reduce students to tears who couldn’t handle it. But if you enjoyed that kind of give and take, it was great.

Well, the Davis Center was a prolongation of that, and all the great figures in early-modern history, particularly from France, but also from England and the States, came through there, presented their papers; and the discussions were always about how one does

¹⁸See the historiographical essay on Brown following this interview, on pp. 21–46 of this journal.

¹⁹For Stone, see *The First Modern Society: Essays in English History in Honour of Lawrence Stone*, ed. A.L. Beier, D. Cannadine, and J.M. Rosenheim (Cambridge, 1989).

history, and what are the issues here? What are the methodological constraints? At the same time, there were a number of important social scientists, anthropologists, people like Victor Turner, Mary Douglas, Clifford Geertz, passing through either the Davis Center at the university or the Institute for Advanced Study. Listening to them, talking with them, working with them, I developed a sense of some of the issues that I had been trying to struggle with, and had never really understood that people were doing this in a very serious way. So it was through that that I learned how to be a historian and how to add theoretical questions, methodological questions—not in some broad history-theory, metahistorical direction, but in terms of application, which was largely 1970's social anthropology, and then cultural anthropology applied to historical issues in a very critical way in both directions—and that was very important.

The “linguistic turn,” *per se*, had come after that. This is something that in a way grows out of that, but in a way I see as very much related to the kind of philosophical issues that I had studied years before. The so-called “linguistic turn” is nothing new.²⁰ This is the crisis of epistemology that developed in Vienna in the nineteenth century. Some of it, I feel, is rediscovering the wheel, going through problems that were confronted by linguistic philosophers in the 1880's and 1890's. My personal take on this is heavily dependent on Ludwig Wittgenstein, after he wrote the *Tractatus logico-philosophicus* and then abandoned that logical, positivist attempt to create a language which would adequately represent reality—this kind of linguistic philosophy that he thought was moving towards nonsense, in a technical sense—and got into therapeutic linguistic philosophy, as represented by the later Wittgenstein.²¹ In a way, some of the post-

²⁰For much of what follows, cf. Geary's comments in his article “History, Theory, and Historians,” *Exemplaria* 7 (1995): 93–98, and in his “Frühmittelalterliche Historiographie. Zusammenfassung,” in *Historiographie im frühen Mittelalter*, ed. A. Scharer, and G. Scheibelreiter (Vienna and Munich, 1994): 539–542.

²¹Ludwig Josef Johann Wittgenstein (1889–1951), the Viennese-born philosopher who reshaped twentieth-century logic and theories of language. His extremely complex writings tackle issues relating to the possibilities, limitations, meaning, and use of language. In the *Philosophical Investigations*, his seminal later work, Wittgenstein rejected his earlier assumption that there is a universal form of language, and posited that each sentence presupposes a “language game.” He now argued that all languages are like so many disparate games—each “overlapping and criss-crossing,” but ultimately operating by completely independent sets of rules. Furthermore, Wittgenstein contended that the meaning of a sentence is reducible solely to its use, employment, or application. This later skepticism, however, does not deny the significance of rules for linguistic meaning. Rather, the way in which a particular rule is applied in a specific case determines the meaning of a linguistic sequence. For a treatment of Wittgenstein's philosophy, see G. Pitcher, *The Philosophy of Wittgenstein* (Englewood Cliffs,

modernist linguistic-termed discourse is still tied into this dead-end direction, which was abandoned by the later Wittgenstein, and still lives on very strongly in American philosophical departments. So I have some problems with that; but the importance of language, and the possibility of ignoring language to do old-fashioned positivist history, is something that I've always felt very strongly about, both from my philosophical background and my training with people like Stone, who had no use for these traditions—in fact, wrote a really vicious review of these people—and nevertheless was a critical historian.²² So, doing critical history has always been a very important aspect of what I do, although the particular methodological approaches within that vary.

Q: You have contributed sections to textbooks designed for both World History and Western Civilization courses. However, many have recently argued that the Western Civ. course has become “obsolete.”²³ Can these two courses co-exist in college curricula of the twenty-first century?

A: I think that they definitely can. Much of the objection against Western Civ. is Whiggish Western Civ.—the glorious progress of Western civilization against Asiatic barbarism. I think that that is dead, except as a rhetorical device. The important issue is that, for good and for ill, the world in every corner has been very, very profoundly affected and transformed by certain kinds of cultural attitudes and institutions, which need to be understood, and which developed in, and then out, of western Eurasia. Whether one likes them or not, we have to understand them. If the largest country in the world, China, adopts a philosophy which is at least theoretically developed by a German Jew in the nineteenth century, then to ignore the profound influence of Marx on China is absolutely catastrophic. So I think there is a place to understand this development. Western civilization, of course, is a construct. It is a selective process of saying

New Jersey, 1964). For a more contextual analysis of Wittgenstein and his impact upon modern European thought, see A. Janik, *Wittgenstein's Vienna* (New York, 1973).

²²See the debate, in which Stone was a participant, on “History and Post-Modernism,” in *Past and Present* 131 (1991): 217–218; 133 (1991): 204–213; 135 (1992): 189–208.

²³For the nature of this debate, see M.F. Doyle, “‘Hisperanto’: Western Civilization in the Global Curriculum,” *Perspectives: The American Historical Association Newsletter* 36 (May, 1998): 1, 24–28; T. Davis, “Starting from Scratch: Shifting from Western Civ to World History,” *Perspectives* 34 (December, 1996): 27–29, 38–39; G. Allardyce, “The Rise and Fall of the Western Civilization Course,” *American Historical Review* 87 (1982): 695–743.

“What is this thing?”, and it must not be taught as a heroic tale. But I think it needs to be done.

World Civ. is great. It would be wonderful if one could write a non-situated World Civ. The fact is, however, again to use that term, we are “incarnate” in a place, in a time, in a culture. We didn’t invent it, but we are in it. We work with it. We’re all situated and we have to understand our situation. Now, you cannot understand China simply by understanding Karl Marx. You’ve got to understand China. But you’ve got to start someplace, and I think that because we are where we are, an important thing to understand is that tradition. The world tradition that we’re trying to struggle to come to terms with is laudatory. I think we need this. I think our society needs it very, very badly. But I think we need both, and I don’t think that we can abandon an understanding of these traditions that we arbitrarily call “Western Civilization.”

I would prefer to do Western Civilization in a way that is not what we construct today, which leaves out America, first of all. When you get to the eighteenth, nineteenth, twentieth centuries, Western Civ. becomes European history. That’s silly. But it also ought to turn into something else; and Western civilization is what’s wrong with Indonesia right now. It is the basis for Japan. Japan is a very Western country. But they have changed what Western civilization is. It’s thoroughly Japanese, and we have to understand that tradition as well. So I think there’s a place for both of these in an educational program. I think the students need this. We need it in our society.

How it’s done, though, is the question. Who is capable of doing it? And so I’m very happy contributing to both of these programs. If World History can be done well, great. There are problems teaching it because few people can. I don’t think it can be taught from the perspective of Mars. One has to start where one is. I think it would be done differently in different places. I recently sent a bunch of copies of my Western Civ. textbook to a colleague in Korea, who is teaching Western Civ. there. I’d love to sit in on his class. I’m sure that what he is doing is very different from what we would do here, or what one would do in Paris or Berlin. I’m still comfortable with this process, as long as it is not seen either as bashing Western civilization or as the glorification of the rise of democracy and liberality and all of these “good” Western creations. The historian is supposed to understand, and either one is a way in to understanding ourselves in historical perspective.

Q: Have advances in computer technology had an impact on your work in particular, and medieval studies in general?

A: Yes, in a very basic sense. I'm dyslexic. I cannot spell. I cannot see letters in words; and the most important thing in my life, in terms of computer technology, is Spellcheck, and the ability to have something proof my work, and then just change what's wrong. Various mechanical things. But it almost wrecked my career, when *Furta Sacra* came out with enormous numbers of misspellings, errors, typographical mistakes—none of them substantive. I later hired someone to go through the book, page by page, for the revision and correct all of these things that I just can't see. There were enormous numbers, but with Spellcheck I can do that. So that's a very mechanical thing. Secondly, database searches are very, very important. Things like the *P[atrologia] L[atina]* and other databases allow us to find and to work through material in ways that we never could before. Communication is terribly important—being in a network, an intellectual community through electronic mail that is a virtual community. I'm in regular correspondence with people all over the world on an instantaneous basis. This is very important in terms of the sharing of ideas and of work. And then, gradually, I'm working technology into certain aspects of my teaching. I find it very important because it allows me to communicate with students and to share visual material with students in a way that books really don't allow. So I think that, with computer technology, we can return to an integration of images and words that has been somewhat lost in print culture. I hope that this will really change how people encounter the past, as well as other places, because what we lack in America is a sense of the physicality of the past when we study Europe. Computer technology allows possibilities of communicating about the past to students in a very different way. So I think that these are all positive.

It's also a tremendous waste of time. I find a lot of these “list-serves”²⁴ ways for people who don't want to publish, or who are scared of publishing, to spend their time in silly and meaningless debates, rather than getting on with the serious work of their career. I find that when there are useful electronic debates and discussions, they ought to be very limited; they ought to remain electronic. I was involved in a debate on the year 1000, which is now going to be published; and at the end of that I was very unhappy with the

²⁴Informal electronic forums for discussion held over the Internet, to which one “subscribes” and in which one participates by means of electronic mail.

medium, I was very unhappy with the level of discussion, and I was very unhappy with the fact that it is now going to be textualized in print. That was not the medium in which it was generated, and the transformation, I think, is an unfortunate preservation of something which at best should have remained as an electronic discussion that had its moment and then should vanish when you turn off the machine.

Q: How has the Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies changed during your tenure as Director?

A: I think that the Center has institutionalized in some important way. First of all, we are on a much better financial footing because I have been able, with the assistance of the Dean, to secure some permanent endowment funding. I regret that I wasn't able to raise more money, but I do now have an endowment fund that allows certain core activities to go on. I think that we have reached out to faculty and students in a somewhat broader spectrum of the medieval and Renaissance community than was always the case in the past—not so much under my immediate predecessor, but further back. We've also established a number of ongoing programs that, if my successor [H.A. Kelly] wishes, can continue without a lot of problems: a History of the Book program, a Women's Studies conference, a series of seminars, a modified version of the visiting professor program that allows people to come in on the short term for teaching, a number of other programs that happen pretty much every year and that are organized according to those that can be fitted. I think that we have been able to take the Center's potential and structure it so that one doesn't have to reinvent the wheel every year. I think we've been moderately successful in drawing more people into our programs and communicating about what we are and what we do, not only here, but partly through the Internet, to a wider, international audience. So those are some of the things I feel that have changed in the Center, building primarily on what Michael Allen [the previous Director of the Center] was able to do.²⁵

²⁵Cf. the brief statements by Geary on the role of the Center in D. Gordon, "What's Past is Prologue," *UCLA Magazine* 7(1995): 49, and those of Herwig Wolfram fourteen years earlier in H. Wolfram, "Medieval Studies in America and American Medievalism," *Journal of the Rocky Mountain Medieval and Renaissance Association* 2 (1981): 6–7.

Q: Do you consider yourself a part of any particular intellectual “school”? Who would you consider formative in your intellectual training? Given the dissertation topics of your students, do you believe you have created a particular, identifiable “school” of medieval history?

A: No. I don’t think so. I think that I belong to a loose conspiracy of medievalists that somebody calls the “New American School of Social History,” but I don’t think that I am creating a school. Indeed, I hope not, because I see what I do as very mixed. I cut across different boundaries. In some places I’m known as the “Relic Man,” and people think of me as somebody who works on hagiography. I’m always being asked to participate in conferences on hagiography, and that’s what people know, particularly in the art history world. In certain kinds of intellectual-cultural history circles, that’s what I am. In Germany I’m known as the “Merovingian Man,” and I am frequently asked to be involved in conferences dealing with the seventh-eighth century social structure, institutions, and these kinds of questions in the peripheral regions of the Frankish world in the seventh and eighth centuries. That’s how many of the Germans know me. They don’t know anything about the relic book [*Furta Sacra*] or articles on relics.²⁶ More recently, I’m seen as a historian of memory, and that’s what I’ve been involved in. You know, it’s interesting—last week when I was in Zürich, I was described as “a historian of memory, best known for his book on memory and oblivion at the end of the tenth century [*Phantoms of Remembrance*],” and no mention of relics, and no mention of Merovingian history; and I very much like that. I think that the memory book draws all of these together because I see a kind of unity, but in France I’m also seen as someone using German methodology and introducing the French to German methodology. In Germany and Austria I’m seen as the French *Annaliste* introducing the Germans to that kind of work. I like to be someone who slips over boundaries. In Italy I’m seen as the peculiar American asking questions about Italian materials that Italians would never ask. I like to be this kind of amphibian, or changeling—I guess chameleon is a better term. I hope that my students do exactly the same thing, that they don’t connect to any one school. My mentors are Robert Lopez, Georges Duby († 1996),²⁷ and Herwig Wolfram.

²⁶Many of which are now collected together in P. Geary, *Living with the Dead in the Middle Ages* (Ithaca, NY, 1994).

²⁷For Duby, see the recent translation of his intellectual autobiography, *History Continues*, trans. A. Goldhammer (Chicago, 1994).

Three very, very different historians, who did radically different kinds of work, and yet I draw tremendously from all of them; but I am not a clone of any one of them, and I don't want any of my students ever to be doing "the Geary thing" to their material.²⁸

Q: You have edited a book on Céline Fremaux Garcia, *Céline: Remembering Louisiana 1850-1871* (Athens, GA, 1988). How did you become interested in this project?

A: My daughter's name is Céline, my mother is Céline, my grandmother is Céline. Céline Fremaux Garcia's father was my great-great-grandfather. He was a French immigrant. His family came to Louisiana in 1830. His father had been in the Napoleonic army and was one of these pensioners who lost everything in 1830 and emigrated to Louisiana. He married the granddaughter of the count of Fleury, whose mother and father had had to flee France because the father was a ne'er-do-well aristocrat musician who was in bankruptcy and had to get out of the country to escape his creditors. They had a child, Leon Victor, in 1857.²⁹ That was my great-grandfather. His mother immediately died, of yellow fever, in 1857. Then my great-great grandfather married Caroline, the older sister of his wife, and their first child was named Céline after his first wife—Caroline gave birth to a daughter named Céline, and this is the author.

I got interested in it unwillingly. An aunt showed me this thing, and said, "Oh, you're a historian; you have to read it." I thought this was going to be horrible. But actually, because of my interest in memory, it is a very interesting, very strange account of a deeply dysfunctional family, of great animosities and loves and hatreds nurtured by this woman over forty to fifty years, from her childhood, and then written after the turn of the century, looking back and transforming a distant past of what it meant to be a sort of middle-class, Southern immigrant becoming American. I found the way that she remembered this past, the way she recreated it, the way objects, mementos of her childhood, triggered memories—memories that

²⁸For additional comments by Geary on the field of medieval studies, see his essay "Visions of Medieval Studies in North America," in *The Past and Future of Medieval Studies*, ed. J. Van Engen (Notre Dame, 1994): 45–57, and his "Mittelalterforschung heute und morgen. Eine amerikanische Perspektive," in *Stand und Perspektiven der Mittelalterforschung am Ende des 20. Jahrhunderts*, ed. O.G. Oexle (Göttingen, 1996): 75–97.

²⁹Geary also has edited a book of sketches by Leon, *Leon Fremaux's New Orleans Characters* (Gretna, LA, 1987).

were then transformed and filtered through forty years of life in Louisiana—very interesting in terms of how memory works. So it's my past, and I see more of myself and my own family dynamics in some ways in that memoir about my great-great grandfather's family than I am altogether comfortable with; but it's also a very interesting way of looking at memory filtered through life, and connects to the sorts of things that I'm interested in professionally.

Q: What is the direction of your current research?

A: I'm continuing on memory, and trying to deal with two things. One is the place of orality, or what one might call vocality, in memory: how the past is verbalized and expressed, and then how we can see that through various kinds of documents, particularly archival—court situations, where somebody has to speak the past rather than just read it. The other is in images. I'm very interested in the extent to which images and iconography can present an alternative language for the past, which also has to work in relationship with textuality, but is not simply illustration of textuality. I'm trying to understand an image's own dynamics of creating different responses from a public or from an observer, as opposed to those that occur when a text would describe the past. Pretty vague, but that's what I'm doing.³⁰

Q: What advice would you give to students who are now preparing to enter the field?

A: *Don't.* The job situation is horrible. It's terrible. It's soul-destroying. I see too many wonderful young people, who are pursuing this out of hope that they will someday have a career; and I am getting very close to my own personal moral crisis about whether or not I can let people work in the field because I find that the very best are not likely to be able to make a career. So the only advice I can give people who want to do this is to claim what Georges Duby told me: "I'm not a historian because I want to be. I'm a historian because I have to be." If one has to do it, then one has to do it. But if one simply wants to do it, don't.

³⁰See now his contribution to *Imagination, Ritual, Memory, Historiography: Concepts of the Past*, ed. J. Fried, G. Althoff, and P. Geary (Cambridge, in press).

Q: What have been some of the most rewarding moments of your career?

A: Moments of teaching students and seeing people do exciting work. Moments of working as the translator between Germanic worlds and French worlds in various directions. Moments of reflecting on, and realizing the relationship between, the deep past of our civilization and the present, and seeing that vision shared a little bit with people who suddenly realize that what we are doing matters terribly in our present and for our future.³¹

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³¹The author would like to thank Eugene Sheppard for his generous editorial assistance.