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No historian worthy of the name is only an historian

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This essay discusses an almost forgotten text by Hayden White: a 1959 book review published in the journal *Speculum*. The brief text offers an interesting glimpse on the medieval historian that was White in 1959 – though one who clearly was on his way of becoming a historical theorist. At the same time, the review raises a number of questions with which historians still find themselves struggling. What are the moral interventions that historians make through their books and articles? And is it true, as White memorably put it, that “no historian worthy of the name is only an historian”?

Keywords: Hayden White; Louis Lekai; Christopher Dawson; history and ethics.

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Este ensaio debruça-se sobre um texto quase esquecido de Hayden White: uma resenha publicada em 1959 na revista *Speculum*. Este breve texto oferece um interessante vislumbre do medievalista que White ainda era em 1959, embora já a caminho de se tornar um especialista em teoria da história. Simultaneamente, a resenha levanta um conjunto de questões com que os historiadores ainda se deparam hoje em dia. Que intervenções morais faz o historiador através dos seus livros e artigos? E será verdade que, nas palavras de White, “nenhum historiador digno desse nome é apenas um historiador”?

Palavras-chave: Hayden White; Louis Lekai; Christopher Dawson; história e ética.

No historian worthy of the name is only an historian

Herman Paul*

Slightly over a week ago, I received the saddening news that Hayden White has passed away. Since then, my thoughts have been wandering back almost daily to the Stanford campus where I first met White, back in 2002. I reread some of our email exchanges, most notably on *The Practical Past*, and kept responding to messages from colleagues across the world, all of whom felt urged to devote a few lines (two pages even, in one case) to a death that seems to mark the end of an era in the history and theory of history.

Just a few days ago, when I was sharing memories of White with a colleague in Cambridge, I found myself commenting on that famous 1966 essay that David Harlan once described as the polestar guiding virtually everything that White has written since: “The Burden of History.”¹ Among all of White’s essays, this is, I think, the one I like best and the one I most frequently assign to students, mainly because it so eloquently gives voice to White’s existential concern about the moral act that is historical writing.

Still, when I browse through my ring binders with photocopies of White’s articles – a large collection that starts with a virtually unknown piece on “The Printing Industry from Renaissance to Reformation and from Guild to Capitalism” (1957) – my eyes end up resting on a 1959 book review. It’s a four-page text on Louis J. Lekai’s *Les*

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¹ David Harlan, *The Degradation of American History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997), 106.

moines blancs (The White Monks), a French translation of an originally English-language book on the history of the Cistercian Order.² I see that I have underlined several passages and, near the end, even encircled a Whitean one-liner: “No historian worthy of the name is only an historian.”

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What makes this book review worthy of singling out for discussion? I think the piece shows us a young White, recently appointed at the University of Rochester, still working as a medievalist, but increasingly being fascinated by what he called “questions *about* history”: How to write historically about a monastic order that is still around? What is “past” about an institution that endures into the “present”? How does this work out a book written by Father Lekai, a Cistercian monk himself, who already in the second sentence of his book boldly asserts that “the truth of Revelation is timeless”?³ How do such theological beliefs affect Lekai’s historical writing? And how appropriate is it, more generally, to write history from such a markedly religious perspective?

Striking about White’s book review is the ambiguity it displays vis-à-vis Catholic interpretations of history such as developed in the 1950s by Christopher Dawson, the British Catholic historian whose then widely influential views White believed to see shimmering through Lekai’s prose. On the one hand, White saw them as incompatible with good historical writing: “[I]n so far as this seemingly *a priori* schema intrudes itself into the organization of the material, it must be recognized as a non-historical element in the work.” Yet, on the other, he did *not* deny the validity or fruitfulness of religiously inspired historiography. White’s only wish was “that the assumptions of the study be made ex-

² Hayden V. White, review of *Les moines blancs: histoire de l'ordre cistercien* by Louis J. Lekai. *Speculum* 34 (1959), 304-08.

³ Quoted from the original, English-language edition: Louis J. Lekai, *The White Monks: A History of the Cistercian Order* (Okauchee, WI: Cistercian Fathers, 1953), 3.

plicit” – a phrase that in retrospect seems to anticipate *Metahistory*’s analysis of “presuppositions about the nature of the historical field.”⁴ In this 1959 book review, then, the medieval historian that was White at the time and the historical theorist that he was soon to become met each other.

Interestingly, this challenges part of the story, no doubt familiar to most readers of this journal, according to which White underwent something like a “conversion” to philosophy of history after reading Benedetto Croce and Carlo Antoni during his two-year research stay in Rome (1953-1955). Thanks to these Italians, or so the story goes, White came to know the historicist tradition, began to reflect on the “science” and “art” of history, and was led into the adventures (modernist writing, French existentialism) that eventually produced “The Burden of History.”

Although this story is broadly convincing – the 1959 book review also testifies to Italian influence in using the typically Crocean phrase, “what is living and what is dead” (*ciò che è vivo e ciò che è morto*) – it underestimates the importance of White’s original field of study, medieval church history, for his later work in historical theory. More specifically, the story tends to overlook, in the first place, that White continued to work on medieval history long after his appointment at Rochester. Based on his PhD thesis (1956), he wrote learned articles on Pontius of Cluny and Bernard of Clairvaux. Also, he reviewed a pile of books by fellow-medievalists such as Norman F. Cantor, Adriaan H. Bredero, and M. David Knowles. Notably, as late as 1964, White spoke frankly about “we medievalists.”⁵

Secondly, during his years in Rome, White not only read Giambattista Vico and Giovanni Gentile, in addition to Antoni and Croce, but also Arnold J. Toynbee and Christopher Dawson. In Mario Praz’s journal, *English Miscellany*, he wrote at length about these British

4 Hayden V. White, *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1973), 13.

5 Hayden V. White, review of *Perspectives in Medieval History*, ed. Katherine Fischer Drew and Floyd Seyward Lear, *The American Historical Review* 70 (1964), 109-10, at 110.

authors – specifically about Dawson’s views on Christian Europe in the Middle Ages and Toynbee’s attempts to come to terms with the challenge of a “post-Christian era” in the latter volumes of *A Study of History*. Interestingly, it was in these essays that White first engaged in “metahistorical” analysis of historiographical texts.⁶

Thirdly, in the field of medieval church history, “ideological implications” were never far away. Commenting on Lekai’s *Les moines blancs*, White observed that the book was not only “an historical study of Cistercianism” but also, at the same time, “a product of the contemporary Cistercian revival,” to which Lekai sought to contribute by identifying “what is living and what is dead” in the Cistercian tradition. So, when White concluded that “no historian worthy of the name is only an historian,” this was not just a programmatic statement, but also, if you want, a sociological observation. Medieval church history such as written by Dawson or Lekai was saturated with theological meaning of a kind that clearly fascinated the young, non-Catholic White.

Strange, then, as it may sound to readers who associate White more with Croce and Vico, or with Kenneth Burke and Northrop Frye, than with Catholic church historians, the 1959 review in *Speculum* shows that White’s original field of study was conducive to theoretical reflection – not because of sources (chronicles) of the sort that “The Value of Narrativity in the Representation of Reality” (1980) would later discuss, but rather because of a tempting “tendency to abandon history for the techniques of legend, metaphysics, or theology,” even among mid-twentieth-century scholars like Lekai.

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As I close my ring binder, the phrase keeps resonating in my mind: “No historian worthy of the name is only an historian.” Admittedly, I selected White’s review of Lekai for discussion in this issue, not merely

⁶ Herman Paul, “A Weberian Medievalist: Hayden White in the 1950s,” *Rethinking History* 12 (2008): 75-102.

to make an historical argument about White's intellectual trajectory, but also because this aphorism has something deeply intriguing about it. Obviously, it means that historical writing is always laden with moral, political, and/or religious meaning. Also, in good Whitean fashion, it suggests that historians "worthy of the name" do not quarantine themselves within a single discipline. Most interestingly, however, the phrase conveys that White regarded historical writing as a means of intervening in the present. "It is not, as Lekai rightly emphasizes, the function of the historian to foretell the future; but every historical work is, in some sense, a judgment of the present."

Like the White of 1959, I am inclined to think that the value of such judgments – critical mirrors that the past as constructed or reconstructed by historians holds up to present-day readers – is disproportionate to the amount of presentism found in them. Superimposing current value systems on the past is harmful, not only from a "professional" historian's point of view, but also with an eye to what readers can actually learn from historical studies. They can expand their universe and enrich their imagination only by encountering a past that is foreign, different from the world they inhabit, perhaps even offending in its otherness.

Does this imply that historians serve the project of moral self-questioning best by focusing on what they are traditionally good at: representing the past in all its peculiarities? Although this is not how White would have put it, my answer would tend towards the affirmative. It is a moral responsibility of historians to confront the present with a past that calls current-day wisdom into question. Historians, then, are moralists, engaged in "judgment of the present," not by presenting a past that fits or confirms their own moral views, but by confronting present-day readers with ideas and practices they would never have encountered except in historical writing.⁷

"No historian worthy of the name is only an historian": it is a phrase that makes me think about the moral purposes of writing on

⁷ Herman Paul, *Key Issues in Historical Theory* (New York: Routledge, 2015), 123-38.

nineteenth-century historians, epistemic virtues, and secularization narratives. What kind of interventions in the present am I making by devoting articles and books to these themes? What current-day conventions does my work uncritically endorse and what fashions, if any, does it challenge by holding up alternatives? To what (no doubt small) extent do my publications actually contribute to a spirit of moral self-questioning?

Appropriately, then, White's death calls for a moment of reflection on the historian's vocation. As long as we believe that a well-developed historical imagination is capable of enriching our moral imagination, we will remember White's example, return to his work, and admire the virtues that he so brilliantly embodied.

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