ADDENDA TO A CURRICULUM VITAE

Walter Cahn

Art historians are relatively latecomers to the world of learning. What they do (or should do) is not universally understood; by some it is not even taken altogether seriously. I think it was the social critic Barbara Ehrenreich, evidently inspired by Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger of California, who recently called us a "girly profession." A person who, like me, chose to devote himself to the study of *medieval* art—the art and architecture of the period conventionally defined as lying between the end of the Roman Empire and the dawning of the Renaissance—is apt to arouse even greater puzzlement, because the subject is widely seen as an unusually obscure choice for an academic specialization, one that will strike many as falling somewhere between collecting rare mushrooms and writing concrete poetry.

Some may wonder, moreover, whether someone like myself, who is Jewish, should study medieval art at all, or why. It is a well-meaning but mildly troubled questioner (in Israel, especially) who will ask, "What's a nice Jewish boy like you doing that kind of thing?"— the common conviction, not wholly unjustified, being that the topic properly belongs to the history, not to say the apologetics, of Christianity. It is the case, though, that some of the major students of medieval art—I think especially of such distinguished figures as Erwin Panofsky, Richard Krautheimer, and Meyer Schapiro—were Jewish, though, to be sure, most of them were assimilated in varying degrees. I have no ready explanation for this phenomenon, though it does seem to me worth pondering.

It may be best to begin with a few biographical details that will help to account for what I'm doing and then turn to some of the work that I've done. My family comes from Rülzheim, a small village in the Rhineland Palatinate (*Rheinland Pfalz*) situated on the west bank of the Rhine north of Karlsruhe, the largest town nearby, and a bit south of the more episcopal city of Speyer. Prior to World War II, Rülzheim had two or three thousand inhabitants, the Jewish community consisting of about forty families. I can trace my family history back to about 1800, when an ancestor named Lazarus Scharff, about whom I know nothing else, lived there and married his daughter, Klara, to one Joseph Cahn—my "Ur-Cahn," so to speak. But this is an area where Jews are known to have been settled since the ninth or the tenth century, around such centers as Mainz, Worms, and Speyer, and it is thus possible that my forebears

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resided there quite a while earlier. (Rülzheim is first mentioned in the documents, so far as I know, as a possession of the archbishops of Speyer in the fourteenth century.) Like most Jews of Germany, they were engaged, as best as I can judge, in petty commerce—trading and selling of farm animals or household goods—and not in any way conspicuous.

My father, Otto, one of ten children of Bartholomeus and Friederike Cahn (née Vollmer), was born in 1892. He served in the German army in World War I, after which he began a modest social ascent, establishing with a partner a cigar manufacturing business. Some time during the 1920s, after some ups and downs, he bought out his partner and became sole owner of the business. The factory, which by American standards was rather modest in size, was situated in the nearby town of Lingenfeld, and had twenty or so employees. I mention this only because it is connected with my first souvenir of an experience that could be called aesthetic. When I was about three or four, my father occasionally took me to the factory with him and let me look at and handle the boxes in which the cigars were packed. I was especially drawn to the decorative little bands that were placed around the cigars, with their chromolithographs of flowers and the little angels with curly hair. Immodestly imagining myself to be Proust, I would say that these colorful small things were my madeleines, though their stimulus to memory was visual and perhaps vaguely erotic rather than gustatory. These, at any rate, are the first intimations to which I can point of an interest in art.

Moderately successful, my father married my mother, Frieda, in 1928. She was the daughter of Simon Kahn, the teacher in the Jewish primary school of the village (schooling in Germany was at this time organized along confessional lines), and was therefore the first among my forebears to have a connection to the world of learning, albeit on a modest level. Her brother, my uncle Edmund, became a much-loved physician, for whom a street in Rülzheim is named. (He committed suicide with his family on the eve of deportation to Theresienstadt in 1941.) My father was also the first in the family to own a car, an Opel, though he apparently never learned to drive it. In November 1938, after the Kristallnacht, he lost both his business and the car, and the family— then consisting of my mother, himself, my older brother, Norbert, and I—moved to nearby Karlsruhe.

In October 1940, after the defeat of the French armies, all the Jews in the German provinces adjoining northeastern France—the Saarland, Palatinate, and Baden—were arrested and deported to internment camps in the south of France. It was a very efficient operation, still not fully understood by historians, in which the German authorities took great pride, described as having been carried out in secret and without any stress (*reibunglos,* as the police report has it) in that few took any notice of it. About six or seven thousand persons were involved, mostly elderly people. We were sent first to Gurs in southwestern France, where we resided in wooden barracks on one side of a road that bifurcated the camp. On the other side were Spanish Republican refugees who had fled across the Pyrenees after the defeat of the Republican govern-

ment in Spain. A bit later, we were transferred to another camp, Rivesaltes, located along the Mediterranean coast not far from Perpignan.

Sometime in 1941, I believe, my brother and I, though not my parents, unfortunately, were smuggled out of Rivesaltes by a children's aid society, the Oeuvre de Secours aux Enfants, and brought to Moissac, a small town which lies a bit north and west of Toulouse, near the confluence of the Tarn and Garonne rivers. Moissac was, until November 1942, in the unoccupied zone of France. A children's home had been established there by a Jewish youth organization known as the Éclaireurs Israëlites de France, or Jewish Boy Scouts of France. Why that site was chosen is not known to me, but it probably had to do with the collusion or complicity that the brave organizers were able to enlist from the local officials of the town in procuring false papers, and their ability to rely on informal but crucial protective measures obtained from them at threatening moments.

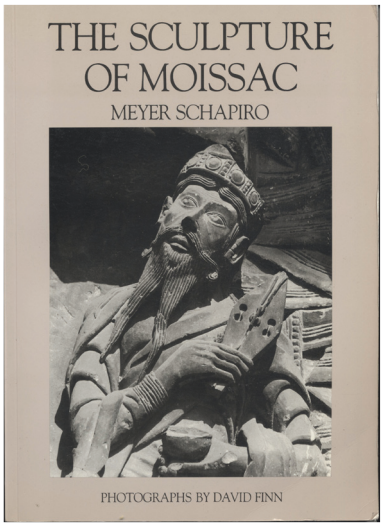


Fig. 1. Meyer Schapiro, *The Sculpture of Moissac* (New York: George Braziller, 1985)

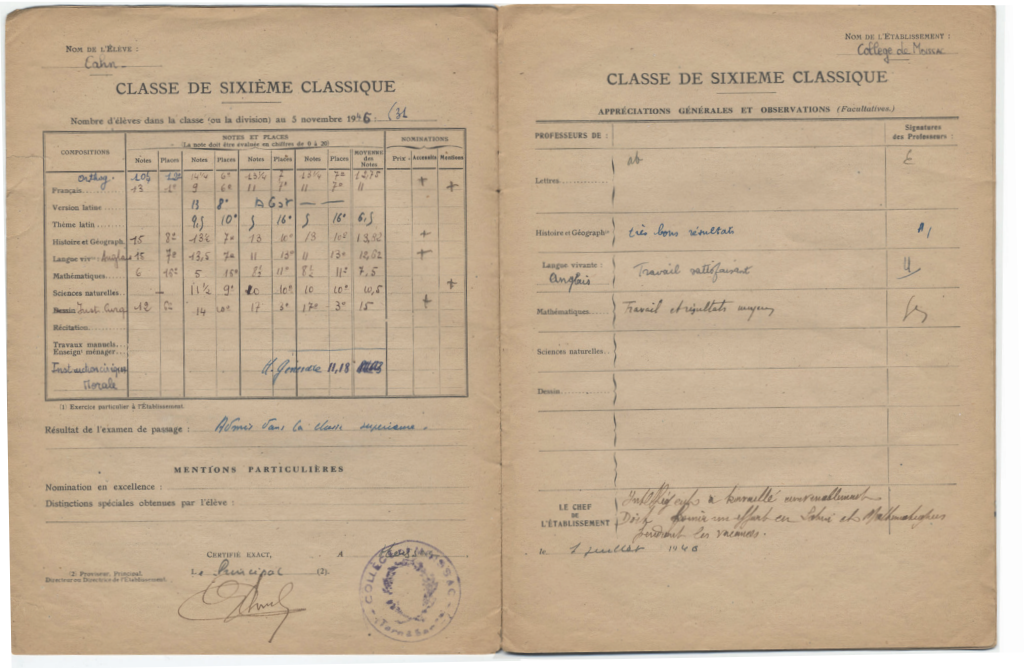
To refined palates, Moissac is known for the excellence of the large and succulent white table grapes which grow on the hills overlooking the town, marketed in peacetime as *chasselas dorés*. As some of you may know, Moissac is also the site of a famous Benedictine monastery, a splendid monument of Romanesque art and architecture, admired for the carved portal of its church and the sculpture of its cloister, the earliest known medieval cloister with figurative carvings, dated 1100 by inscription. One of the luminaries of our field, Meyer Schapiro, devoted his doctoral dissertation to the monastery in 1929 (fig. 1), and since then it has attracted a steady stream of visitors, as well as generating an imposing body of scholarship. I should say in all candor that I was too young to appreciate the fascinating sculpture myself, but I suppose it did leave some mark on me. I still vaguely recall the sign, now happily gone, that prohibited the parking of bicycles against the precious carvings, intended to discourage what was then a deplorable but no doubt widespread practice. But I have no recollection that the monument itself interested me in any significant way at that time.

My brother and I stayed in Moissac until November 1942, when the Allied forces led by the United States landed in North Africa, and the Germans responded by invading the southern part of France, heretofore administered by the Vichy government. It then became much more dangerous for anyone Jewish, and a foreigner to boot, and in the final years of the war we moved frequently from one hiding place to another, changing identity papers and assumed names whenever danger dictated. We stayed for some months in a village high up in the Alps, where one went to school on skis, and for a longer period on a farm near Dieulefit in southeastern France, where I mainly minded the owner's flock of sheep. On that farm, one fine day of August 1944, there appeared soldiers of the Canadian army that had landed some weeks before on the Mediterranean coast and made its way north behind the retreating Germans.

We then returned, my brother and I, to Moissac. After the Liberation, the children's home there had been reestablished. It now cared for a much larger number of persons—some from hiding places in France, others orphaned survivors from camps in Central Europe and farther east—whom it undertook to prepare for lives in the postwar world. Some were to remain in Europe, but America and Palestine were potential destinations for others.

The Éclaireurs Israëlites de France promoted an ideology of revival, based on a mixture of religious fervor and physical exercise, with an emphasis on manual labor and the tilling of the soil. In the spirit of Zionism (in agreement, curiously, with the ideology of Vichy's Révolution Nationale), it was thought that Jews, living in cities and mainly involved in commercial pursuits, had become soft and neurotic. It was hoped to make them healthy and useful again by encouraging a return to the soil. Workshops were also established to train the young people in such skills as metal and woodworking that might be useful in Palestine (and later, Israel). My brother was assigned to a bookbinding atelier—a skill that was then in greater demand than it is now, and still largely practiced by hand rather than given over to the machine. I was evidently thought not to be suited for anything manual and so was sent to the local lycée. In this rather accidental way I began serious studies. Up to then, I had gone to school only very fitfully.

The lycée, officially known as the Collège de Moissac, was a typical French secondary school. Upon admission, one elected either the classical or the modern track. The classical cycle meant that one started Latin and one other (modern) language in the sixth form. Two years later, in the fourth form, one added ancient Greek, while the other track added a second modern language instead. For reasons I no longer remember—perhaps an incipient touch of snobbery?—I chose the classical track, taking up English as my modern language alongside Latin.


NOM DE L'ÉLÈVE : Cahn

CLASSE DE SIXIÈME CLASSIQUE

Nombre d'élèves dans la classe (ou la division) au 5 novembre 1946 : 31

COMPOSITIONS	NOTES ET PLACES (La note doit être évaluée en chiffres de 0 à 20)								NOMINATIONS	
	Notes	Places	Notes	Places	Notes	Places	Notes	Places	MOYENNE des Notes	Prix	Accessits	Mentions
Orthog.	10,5	23e	14,4	6e	13,5	7e	13,5	7e	12,77			
Français	13	4e	9	6e	11	7e	11	7e	11			
Version latine			13	8e	0,5	—	—					
Thème latin			9,5	10e	5	16e	5	16e	6,5			
Histoire et Géograph.	15	2e	13,5	2e	13	4e	13	4e	13,92			
Langue vivante : Anglais	15	2e	13,5	2e	11	15e	11	13e	12,62			
Mathématiques	6	16e	5	18e	12	11e	8,5	11e	7,5			
Sciences naturelles			11,5	9e	10	10e	10	10e	10,5			
Dessin	13	2e	14	2e	17	3e	17	3e	15			
Récitation												
Travaux manuels. Enseign. ménager												
Prof. acharnement Morale												

(1) Exercice particulier à l'Établissement.

Résultat de l'examen de passage : Admis dans la classe supérieure.

MENTIONS PARTICULIÈRES

Nomination en excellence :

Distinctions spéciales obtenues par l'élève :

CERTIFIÉ EXACT, Le Principal (2).

(2) Proviseur, Principal, Directeur ou Directrice de l'Établissement.

NOM DE L'ÉTABLISSEMENT : Collège de Moissac

CLASSE DE SIXIEME CLASSIQUE

APPRÉCIATIONS GÉNÉRALES ET OBSERVATIONS (Facultatives.)

PROFESSEURS DE :		Signatures des Professeurs :
Lettres	ab	E
Histoire et Géographie	très bons résultats	R
Langue vivante : Anglais	Travail satisfaisant	H
Mathématiques	Travail et résultats moyens	Vs
Sciences naturelles		
Dessin		

LE CHEF DE L'ÉTABLISSEMENT : Satisfaisant dans l'ensemble mais manquant de travail en classe et à la maison. Doit fournir un effort sérieux pour les vacances.

le 4 juillet 1946

Fig. 2. My report card (*livret scolaire*) from the Collège de Moissac, 1946

Why English? Spanish and Italian were not looked on with too much favor at the time, because one tended to associate them with the fascist regimes of Mussolini and Franco. Our preference for English was nourished by an unbounded admiration for Winston Churchill and Franklin Roosevelt, not to speak of such imported delights as chewing gum and Charlie Chaplin movies. (I believe that *The Great Dictator* was, in the immediate afterwar years, the first film I ever saw, with French subtitles, of course.) German, I think, was on the books, but there was no German teacher at Moissac at that time, for obvious reasons.

My report card for the year 1945-46 shows that I was clearly no more than above average, as Garrison Keillor would say, if not altogether mediocre in some subjects, including English (fig. 2). This is how the principal characterized my performance: "Intelligent. A travaillé convenablement. Doit fournir un effort en latin et mathématiques pendant les vacances." (Intelligent. Has worked satisfactorily. Must make a greater effort in Latin and mathematics during the vacation). The French educational system was based much more than ours on competition. Your grades determined not only your ranking in every subject but even the class seating arrangements: the best students sat in front, so one could see at a glance who was very good, not so good, and so on to the rear. I did well in French composition. According to the report card, I was for a time ranked first among thirty-one pupils in the class, with an unspectacular grade of 13 out of a possible 20 (grade inflation was clearly not a problem then), though I must have slacked off, since I ranked only seventh by the end of the year. In math, I did no better than sixteenth. I think that my Latin has improved a bit, but in math I am still essentially where I was when this report left off.

Another piece of evidence for my intellectual trajectory is a French translation of a novel by Walter Scott—not *Ivanhoe*, as you might expect, but a popular later novel that he wrote in 1833, *Quentin Durward*. Scott had an enormous vogue in nineteenth-century France, admired as he was by leading literary figures of the time like Balzac and Hugo, and the Gothic Revival in that country more generally owes a good deal to the impact of his books. When a survey conducted in 1984 by the journal *Médiévales*, which addresses itself to professional medievalists, asked its readers to give the reasons which led them to become students of the Middle Ages, eleven of the thirty-five answers received, including that of the eminent and admirable Jacques LeGoff, mentioned *Ivanhoe* as a critical source of inspiration in their childhood years.

Quentin Durward was perhaps even better known in France than *Ivanhoe*, because while the latter novel is set mainly in England, the intrigue of *Quentin Durward*, which concerns the affairs of the devious Louis XI and his dealings with the Duke of Burgundy, Charles the Bold, is situated in France. (It is the only one of Scott's novels of which this is the case.) My abridged edition, with its very handsome binding, was published in 1893 and has nice steel engravings taken from tapestries and paintings of the period. I do not have a distinct recollection as to how I came by it (fig. 3). It may have been a school prize, because fine books were customarily distributed at commencement time to meritorious students, or, more likely, a gift.

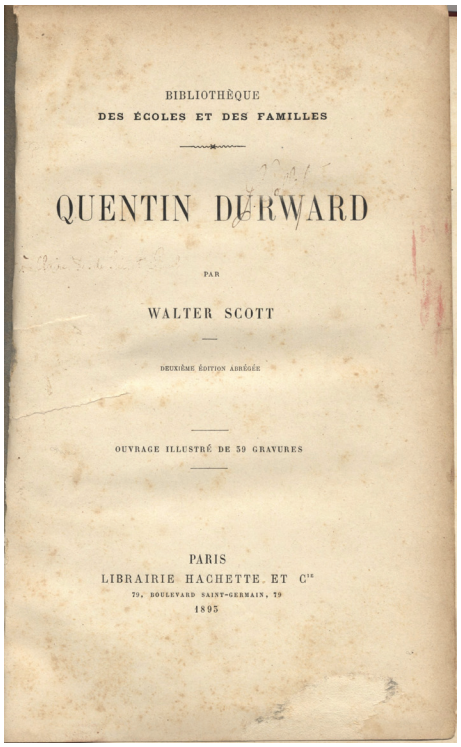


Fig. 3. Cover and title page from Walter Scott, *Quentin Durward*, anonymous and abridged French translation (Paris: Librairie Hachette, 1893)

Fig. 4. With a colleague, as a scout at Moissac, from the cover of *L'E.I.F.* (monthly review of the Jewish Boy Scouts of France), no. 6, 1945

In June of 1945, when I was twelve years old, a friend and I appeared in our scout uniforms on the cover of the monthly magazine published by the Jewish Boy Scouts of France (fig. 4, left). A little later—it must have been in 1946—some relatives who had managed to emigrate to the United States shortly before the war made inquiries about my brother and me through the Red Cross and other agencies. Having discovered that we had survived the war and were living in Moissac, they took steps to bring us to America. Affidavits were sought and obtained, and in January 1947 we landed in Boston, whence we proceeded by train to New York.

All of this accounts for my generally weird accent, which students have invariably found a subject of great interest and puzzlement. Is it Dutch, Swiss, or perhaps even of Serbo-Croatian origin? I have been asked. As best I can tell when I have listened to myself on tape recordings—a fairly dispiriting experience—my speech is an odd mixture of German, French, and academic English, and it must be a linguistic curiosity that of the three languages that I speak (with varying degrees of competence), I speak none without an accent of some kind.

My relatives sent me to public school in New York City. After graduation, needing to find something for me to do to earn a livelihood, and discovering that I had some artistic talent, they encouraged me to apply to art school, with a view to becoming a graphic designer. I applied to Cooper Union and Pratt Institute in New York, was admitted to both, and chose to attend Pratt. I subscribed to the reigning ideology of design in this country at the time, appreciably fostered by the impact of the Bauhaus and its esthetic: the view that our lives might be improved if we lived in functional, rationally organized settings rather than the cluttered mess that normally characterizes our surroundings. In the truly motivated, these convictions called forth a certain idealism, and for a long time I was a believer. In my first teaching job, at an art school in England from 1963 to 1965, I taught modern architecture and design, using the then authoritative books of Nikolaus Pevsner and Reyner Banham, among others, as my guiding lights (fig. 5). Eventually, however, I came to realize that I lacked both the talent and the drive to make a go of it as a practicing artist..

After graduating from Pratt in 1956, I was drafted into the United States Army. In the fall of 1958, after release from military service, I entered the Institute of Fine Arts of New York University, where I chose to specialize in the art and architecture of the Middle Ages. I came to Yale in 1965, when the Art History Department was in the process of rebuilding after certain problems that had developed, and the higher-ups had determined that new blood was to be brought in. Thus, I had the good fortune to be associated not only with some eminent men of an older generation, but with a young and dynamic faculty near the beginning of their academic careers, whose most prominent members were Robert Herbert, Jerry Pollitt, George Hersey, Jules Prown, Richard Barnhart, and Robert Thompson. I learned a great deal from them. My skills in modern architecture and graphic design were not, of course, required of a medievalist, and in any case venturing to display them in the presence of a virtuoso like Vincent Scully would have been like offering to sing the leading role in *La Traviata* in competition with Maria Callas.

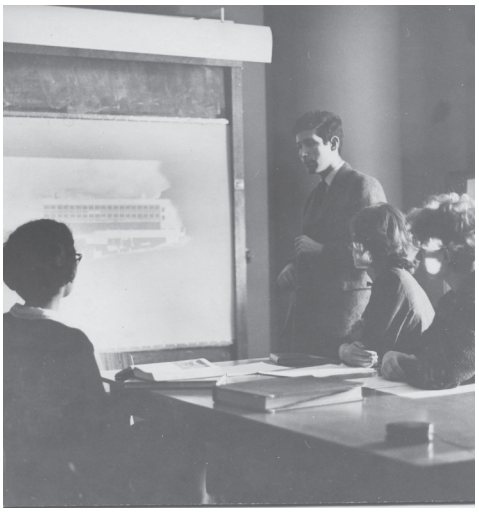


Fig. 5. In class at Ravensbourne College of Art, Bromley, Kent, ca. 1964

After finishing my dissertation, which was on a twelfth-century Romanesque Bible, one of the most important illuminated manuscripts of its kind from the period, I thought I should diversify my credentials a bit. So I chose to work on the Romanesque wooden doors of Le Puy cathedral in central France and a related set of doors in the region of Auvergne. This project, which became the subject of my first published book, coincided with the birth of our first child, Claude. Our journey to the historic sites, with a bale of disposable diapers strapped to the top of our car, was much enriched by his presence. The French have a reputation for being somewhat cold to foreigners, but traveling with a small child, one is immediately welcomed everywhere.

Around the same time, I initiated another project: a census of Romanesque sculpture in American collections. I began with the material in New England museums and branched out from there, with the assistance of colleagues based in other parts of the country. American collectors and museums had begun to acquire these wood and stone carvings in the 1920s and 1930s, when they were more easily available than they are now. They were very widely scattered, with important holdings in Boston, Cleveland, and Baltimore, as well as New York, and had never been comprehensively inventoried. It was not easy to determine the origins and dates of the sculptures, as they were fragments pried from larger ensembles. The task had a certain mental calisthenic value for me, since it took me away from grand speculation and forced me to focus on anonymous, often battered objects and seek answers to fairly mundane but often ignored questions: Where and how were these things made? For what purpose? How could the traditional tools of art-historical connoisseurship be made available

for their coherent scrutiny? The results of this collaborative enterprise, first published in regular installments of the journal *Gesta*, later appeared in an expanded form embracing two volumes.

A little book devoted to the concept of the chef d'oeuvre, entitled *Masterpieces: Chapters on the History of an Idea,* is really the only writing of mine that came out of my experience of teaching. I had and still have a fascination with what I will call value systems and how they come about, problems well encapsulated in the now overused term *masterpiece*. One could say that confronting the viewer (and surely, if in different ways, the reader and listener as well) with this issue is an essential property that works of art possess, a property that defines them even when, as now often seems to be the case, little else may arouse an interest in them. In this respect, an engagement with works we deem to be art differs from topics studied by scientists or historians—the development of Chinese aviation or the dairy industry of Wisconsin, let us say—which may be interesting or valuable in their own terms and need not possess formal or expressive qualities to which we feel called upon to respond. How we establish these values, how they were articulated, explained, set in some hierarchical order, or denied at different historical moments, are the questions that I sought to answer. I soon realized, of course, that this issue touches on so many aspects of our lives and experience that it would take an encyclopedically gifted person and several very thick books to do any kind of justice to it. So I took the somewhat cowardly way out, treating the matter in relatively brief and essayistic fashion, hoping to illuminate some central aspects of the subject rather than attempting a comprehensive treatment that would, I fear, have been well out of my grasp. The book was published in 1978 and has been translated into Spanish and Polish. (I was told that any royalties that would accrue to me in Poland, a country then in dire economic straits under its former Communist regime, could be collected only within its borders, but I have yet to take advantage of this opportunity, if it is still available.)

My next project was a book on Romanesque illuminated Bibles, which appeared in 1980. The idea came from a Swiss publisher whose firm specialized in books with respectably serious texts and lots of illustrations in beautiful color, aiming at an elusive target lying somewhere between high learning and the coffee table. The subject made special demands on the writer, since the story, usually treated in specialized studies with their own arcane vocabulary, had to be conceptualized and told in a manner accessible to the educated general reader. Moreover, the confection of such books involves constraints not native to those publications destined more or less exclusively for the academic market. Not only the number of words but even the number of characters they contained, including the spaces between them, was specified at the outset. The choice of illustrations, whose number was also predetermined, had to be made even before the arguments to which they pertained were formulated, since the tedious task of gathering photographs from a variety of sources throughout Europe and the United States had to be undertaken as quickly as possible. Because books devoted to

religious subjects, especially those embellished with images drawn from medieval art, are thought to sell particularly well as Christmas gifts, the deadline for the completion of the manuscript (and translations for the German and French editions) was exceptionally short and not at all easy to square with the academic calendar. Carrying out such a task, one finds oneself investing much ingenuity in order to use as few words as possible in order to make one's point, and the result at times resembles the telegraphic style of articles in *Time* magazine.

The next project that I want to mention is a large survey of French book illumination from 1100 to 1200, which appeared in 1996, after considerable delay. It was written for an English publisher as part of a series that will eventually encompass the history of this branch of art, from its earliest discernible beginnings at the dawn of the Middle Ages through the sixteenth century. The intention was to provide a convenient synthesis of the available information, along with directions for future research—a kind of reference tool or, as the Germans are wont to say, a *Handbuch*. In the aftermath of the French Revolution, many manuscript collections, originally found in the libraries of medieval monasteries and cathedrals for which they were made or acquired, came into the possession of the state or were otherwise dispersed. They are now mainly preserved in state or municipal libraries (increasingly known, in this digital age, as *médiathèques*) scattered throughout France. The description of each item in my catalogue thus required repeated trips abroad, usually in the summer months. My travels took me to a variety of places, not all of them on the itineraries of ordinary travelers, from former coal towns in the northeast to sleepy and sunny provincial agglomerations in the south.

Last, I will mention a venture that signalizes, I am afraid, the creeping onset of modest fame and old age. An English publisher who makes a specialty of bringing out editions of scholars' collected essays proposed a volume containing a selection of my articles scattered in a variety of journals and tomes of conference papers. I took the opportunity to correct some mistakes that had crept into the original publications. At the end of each piece, I added a summary of more recent research on the topic at hand and settled a few scores with those whom I had left unconvinced.

If I am unable in the final analysis to say why my intellectual trajectory took the path it did, I feel enormously privileged to have had the opportunity to pursue my career (and to have been more than decently compensated for it in the bargain). In a small way, the accidents in my biography mirror the global catastrophes of the past century. Perhaps, in some secretive sense, I have sought to recover something precious but forever lost.