"The Gorgeous History of Feudalism": Medievalism and Walt Whitman

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In his book *Transatlantic Insurrections* (2001), Paul Giles urges the comparative study of British and American cultures in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries as "a play of opposites, a series of reciprocal attractions and repulsions between opposing national situations."[1] Perhaps nowhere is this push-pull more evident than in the nineteenth-century American response to contemporary medievalism. Giles, whose transatlantic perspective led him eventually to speculate on what he terms "medieval American literature," stations Walt Whitman as polar opposite to the presumably backward-looking Longfellow—for whom, Giles argues, New England constituted "a continuation not only of Old England but of medieval Europe more generally."[2] My contention in this essay, however, is that although Whitman (1819-1892)—the man who famously compared the past to a corpse "slowly borne from the eating and sleeping rooms of the house"[3]—rightly remains the uncontested bard of American democracy, his nationalistic vision developed in direct relation to the medievalism then burgeoning abroad.

In the conversations devoutly transcribed by Horace Traubel in the poet's last years, Whitman acknowledged the importance to him of three texts inseparable from the medieval revivals at the turn of the eighteenth century: Thomas Percy's *Reliques of Ancient English Poetry* (1765), of which Whitman said, "It takes you in to the birth of man: it is always a young book"; George Ellis's *Specimens of Early English Metrical Romances* (1805), which Whitman called "better than Percy's Reliques; richer, deeper, larger," and named "a text-book for me—a sort of work-tool: I have made use of it time and again"; and the poems of Ossian, forged by James Macpherson in the 1760s. Whitman knew, of course, that Macpherson had been discredited, yet admitted, "I have always had an Ossian about me" and described himself as "one of the few persons now living in whom there persists an admiration of Ossian."[4] His preferred identity as "one of the roughs" (*CPCP* 50) notwithstanding, Whitman was a voracious reader, well versed in the classics and alert to current literary tastes. A number of his writings show him capable of rehearsing the standard imaginary of literary medievalism—"the Merlin of Celtic bards; the Cid, Arthur and his knights, Siegfried and Hagen in the Nibelungen; Roland and Oliver"—and he recognized the *Idylls of the King* as among Tennyson's "very best work" (*CPCP* 959, 1164).

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[1] Paul Giles, *Transatlantic Insurrections: British Culture and the Formation of American Literature 1730-1860* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2001), 1.
[2] Paul Giles, *The Global Remapping of American Literature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011), 86.
[3] Walt Whitman, *Complete Poetry and Collected Prose*, notes by Justin Kaplan (New York: Library of America, 1982), 5 (further citations in text as *CPCP*).
[4] Horace Traubel, *With Walt Whitman in Camden*, 9 vols. (New York: Rowman and Littlefield, 1906-1996), 1:127; 2:23, 464; 2:17; 5:257-58. Further citations in text. These volumes are available online from the Walt Whitman Archive (www.whitmanarchive.org).

Predictably, however, the single most important source for Whitman's appropriation of medievalism was Walter Scott. In her recent survey of Scott's reception, Ann Rigney designates the decades following the 1814 publication of *Waverley* as "the Scott century,"[5] and Traubel noted that in the year of Whitman's birth "Walter Scott was at the meridian of his fame" (8:563). In his autobiographical collection *Specimen Days* (1882), Whitman recounted that in his youth, a benevolent employer had "subscribed for me to a big circulating library": "For a time I now revel'd in romance-reading of all kinds; first, the 'Arabian Nights,' all the volumes, an amazing treat. Then, with sorties in many directions, took in Walter Scott's novels, one after another, and his poetry . . ." (*CPCP* 699). In his memoir "A Backward Glance O'er Travel'd Roads" (1888), Whitman recorded his own acquisition of Scott's works in the Lockhart edition: "Along in my sixteenth year I became possessor of a stout, well-cramm'd one thousand page octavo volume (I have it yet) containing Walter Scott's poetry entire—an inexhaustible mine and treasury of poetic forage (especially the endless forests and jungles of notes)—has been so to me for fifty years, and remains so to this day" (*CPCP* 664-65). He showed Traubel the copy, "with a title-page," Traubel reported, lovingly "drawn and written in his own hand, in red and black ink" (1:235). "W.'s love for Walter Scott never dies out," Traubel remarked, citing Whitman's request to the publisher David Mackay for "typographically readable Scott books" with which, when they arrived, Whitman was delighted (1:261-62). As he gushed to Traubel in 1891, "Scott was the great troubadour—the singer—tremendous in fire (almost fury). I can see him now—see the castle—the processions of ladies—the grand dames—robes—color—gaiety—Scott ahead—the minstrel. O yes! I can hear his songs—voice—the cadence—the stir—listeners. All fresh, a new day. Scott will always do that for *me*. And for the world? Well, the world will never lose sight of him" (8:529). As Whitman's health declined, Traubel's faithful chronicle attests that he read Scott's novels constantly: "They are a rest to my mind—are always fresh, new—give me the quiet, the peace I crave" (2:391).[6] "Read Scott, read Scott," Whitman exhorted Traubel, "you can get none better" (6:263).

On the surface, obviously, Whitman's innovative poetry shows no affinity with the narrative poems or historical novels of Scott, and a passage in *Specimen Days* recounts how reading Scott revealed in fact the crying need for a uniquely American literature:

> Lying by one day in Missouri to rest after quite a long exploration—first trying a big volume I found there of "Milton, Young, Gray, Beattie and Collins," but giving it up for a bad job—employing however for awhile, as often before, the reading of Walter Scott's poems, "Lay of the Last Minstrel," "Marmion," and so on—I stopp'd and laid down the book, and ponder'd the thought of a poetry that should in due time express and supply the teeming region I was in the midst of . . . . One's mind needs but a moment's deliberation anywhere in the United States to see clearly enough that all the prevalent books and library poets, either as imported

[5] Ann Rigney, *The Afterlives of Walter Scott: Memory on the Move* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 13-14.
[6] See also 2:152; 5:230; 6:58, 286; 8:234; 9:68, 75.

> from Great Britain, or follow'd and *doppelgang'd* here, are foreign to our States, copiously as they are read by us all. (*CPCP* 866)

Yet Whitman also insisted on Scott's seminal influence: "How much I am indebted to Scott," he told Traubel in 1888, "no one can tell—I couldn't tell it myself—but it has permeated me through and through. If you would reduce the Leaves [*Leaves of Grass*, Whitman's general title for the successive collections of his poems] to their elements you would see Scott unmistakably active at the roots" (Traubel 1:96). Although Whitman never elaborated on this assertion, other statements suggest that Scott's impact derived from his multi-volume collection *Minstrelsy of the Scottish Border* (1802-1812), to Whitman "the richest vein [Scott] ever worked" (1:235). "All the poems were thoroughly read by me," Whitman acknowledged, "but the ballads of the Border Minstrelsy over and over again" (*CPCP* 665).

Whitman himself, of course, composed no ballad but "O Captain, My Captain" (1865), a poem he later vehemently disowned (Traubel 2:304); his attraction to the Border ballads lay rather in their status as repository of the people's common voice. "The Scotch have their born ballads," Whitman noted, "subtly expressing their past and present, and expressing character" (*CPCP* 980-81)**.** As John Engell proposed some decades ago, Whitman may have taken further inspiration from Scott's prefatory "Introductory Remarks on Popular Poetry," and as David S. Reynolds has pointed out more recently, "The early ballads, Scott stressed, represented the very beginnings of poetry, written before the corruptions of civilization and the constraints on literary influence had arisen."[7] Scott maintained, moreover, that a national poetry depended primarily on the appearance of "some highly gifted individual, whose talents influence the tastes of a whole nation, and entail on their posterity and language a character almost indelibly sacred."[8] Along with his valorization of indigenous ballads, then, Scott projects the outlines of a semi-mythical "bard" embodying the nation's soul—a figure recognizably akin to Whitman's affirmation of "my own physical, emotional, moral, intellectual, and aesthetic Personality, in the midst of, and tallying, the momentous spirit and facts of its immediate days, and of current America . . ." (*CPCP* 658). Traubel went so far as to dub the *Minstrelsy* volumes "the first start of all" (8:563).

Scott may therefore be credited with authorizing Whitman's assurance of personal vocation, and it was probably fitting that a member of Whitman's worshipful circle commemorated the poet's death by turning to "his favorite book, The Border Minstrelsy, those homely ballads of the people" (Traubel 9:616). Like most of us, Whitman appropriated medievalism at its intersection with his own preoccupations, and specifically with the advancement of democracy that was his self-appointed

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[7] John Engell, "Walt and Sir Walter or the Bard and the Bart.: Balladeers," *Walt Whitman Quarterly Review* 5.4 (Spring 1988), 3-5; David S. Reynolds, *Walt Whitman's America: A Cultural Biography* (New York: Knopf, 1995), 40. See also *CPCP* 672, Whitman's reference to J. G. Herder.

[8] Walter Scott, "Introductory Remarks on Popular Poetry," *The Minstrelsy of the Scottish Border*, ed. Walter Scott, 3 vols. (Edinburgh: Robert Cadell, 1850), 1:10-12.

cause. Nevertheless, it was this very focus on democracy that propelled Whitman by logical inevitability into an increasingly aggressive denunciation of the medieval, primarily as mediated by the works of Scott and others of his generation. As Alice Chandler acknowledged in *A Dream of Order* (1970), the book that broke much of the ground for current study, Victorian medievalism was frequently hierarchical and conservative, rooted in approbation of time-honored class distinctions: "In contrast to the alienated and divisive atmosphere of an increasingly urbanized and industrialized society, the Middle Ages were seen as familial and patriarchal. The feudal structure was said to give each man his place in society and, despite many tyrannous and cruel exceptions among its leaders, to have provided men with responsible masters." Thomas Carlyle, Chandler reminds us, stated confidently in *Past and Present* (1845) that Gurth, the Saxon thrall in *Ivanhoe*, "to me seems happy . . . . Gurth had the inexpressible satisfaction of feeling himself related indissolubly, though in a rude brass-collar way, to his fellow mortals in this Earth."[9]

Whitman had no choice, therefore, but to condemn the Wizard of the North on political grounds, charging in the *Brooklyn Daily Eagle* in 1846—exactly the year, as Reynolds has shown, that Whitman's political engagement intensified—that Scott "and many others well known in America, exercise an evil influence through their books, in more than one respect; for they laugh to scorn the ideal of republican freedom and virtue."[10] The following year, in a piece for the same newspaper titled "Anti-Democratic Bearing of Scott's Novels," Whitman dilated on the reasons for his disapproval:

> But Scott was a tory and a high church and state man. The impression after reading any of his fictions where monarchs or nobles compare with patriots and peasants, is dangerous to the latter and favorable to the former. In the long line of those warriors for liberty, and those large-hearted lovers of *men* before *classes* of man, which English history has recorded upon its annals, and which form for the fast anchored isle a far greater glory than her first Richard, or her tyrannical Stuarts, Scott has not thought one fit to be illustrated by his pen. In him as much as in Shakspere [*sic*], (though in a totally different method) "there's such a divinity as does hedge a king," as makes them more than mortal—and though this way of description may be good for poets or loyalists, it is poisonous for freemen.[11]

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[9] Alice Chandler, *A Dream of Order*: *The Medieval Ideal in Nineteenth-Century English Literature* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1970), 3, 146.

[10] David S. Reynolds, "Politics and Poetry: *Leaves of Grass* and the Social Crisis of the 1850s," *The Cambridge Companion to Walt Whitman*, ed. Ezra Greenspan, Cambridge Companions to American Literature (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 66ff.; Walt Whitman, *The Journalism*, vol. 1: 1834-1846, ed. Herbert Bergman, Douglas A. Noverr, and Edward J. Recchia, The Collected Writings of Walt Whitman (New York: Peter Lang, 1998), 463.

[11] Walt Whitman, *The Journalism*, vol. 2: 1846-1848, ed. Herbert Bergman, Douglas A. Noverr, and Edward J. Recchia, The Collected Writings of Walt Whitman (New York: Peter Lang, 2003), 258. See also Vickie L. Taft, "Scott, Sir Walter," *Walt Whitman: An Encyclopedia*, ed. J. R. LeMaster and Donald D. Kummings, Garland Reference Library of the Humanities 1877 (New York: Garland, 1998), 619-20.

The medievalism accessed through his reading, in other words, provided Whitman with a grand enemy, a formidable but odious opponent against whom to define his own ideals. Indeed, Whitman's animus against medievalism so contextualizes his developing ideology that his most characteristic statements are hardly intelligible outside it. Whitman's preface to the first edition of *Leaves of Grass* (1855), for example, begins with a declaration of independence from tradition:

> America does not repel the past or what it has produced under its forms or amid other politics or the idea of castes or the old religions . . . is not so impatient as has been supposed that the slough still sticks to opinions and manners and literature while the life which served its requirements has passed into the new life of the new forms . . . perceives that it waits a little while in the door . . . that it was fittest for its days . . . [but] that its action has descended to the stalwart and wellshaped hero who approaches . . . and that he shall be fittest for his days. (*CPCP* 5)

And unlike literary artists of earlier generations, Whitman continues, "the American bard shall delineate no class of persons" but bear witness to the inviolable dignity of all. In "A Backward Glance," Whitman retrospectively articulated the purpose of his career along similar lines: "For grounds for 'Leaves of Grass,' as a poem, I abandon'd the conventional themes, which do not appear in it: none of the stock ornamentation, or choice plots of love or war, or high, exceptional personages of Old-World song . . ." (*CPCP* 658).

As his resistance to the "high exceptional personages" found in Scott—so vivid in Whitman's imagination that he cast Ulysses Grant as "Saxon" and William Sherman as "a Norman baron, lord of many acres" (Traubel 8:6)—underlay Whitman's counter-formation of a poetry in celebration of the masses, it was Carlyle's reactionary *Shooting Niagara* (1867), with its praise for the "chivalry and magnanimity" of the English aristocracy and tirades against "these ballot-boxing, Nigger-emancipating, empty, dirt-eclipsed days,"[12] that provoked Whitman to compose his major manifesto, *Democratic Vistas*. Appearing in early form immediately upon the publication of Carlyle's polemic—"so insulting," Whitman remonstrated, "to the theory of America" (*CPCP* 943; see also Traubel 5:135)—Whitman's essay unrolls directly from its opening challenge: "The United States are destined either to surmount the gorgeous history of feudalism, or else prove the most tremendous failure of time" (*CPCP* 930). An entry on "Feudalism" is duly included in the *Walt Whitman Encyclopedia*, and *Democratic Vistas* has lately been recognized as "a distinctly American rejoinder to a distinctly British feudalism":[13] but divorcing the term from its matrix muffles the thematic centrality

[12] Thomas Carlyle, *Shooting Niagara: And After?* (London: Chapman and Hall, 1867), 21, 33. I quote from Whitman's copy, available at archive.org.
[13] Phyllis McBride, "Feudalism," in LeMaster and Kummings, 223-24; Günter Leypoldt, *Cultural Authority in the Age of Whitman: A Transatlantic Perspective*, Edinburgh Studies in Transatlantic Cultures (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2009), 11.

of medievalism for the piece. For by the postbellum period Whitman was indicting medievalism, especially in its literary manifestations, as *fons et origo* of everything inimical to democracy:

> It is not generally recognized, but it is true, as the genius of Greece, and all the sociology, personality, politics and religion of those wonderful states, resided in their literature or esthetics, that what was afterwards the main support of European chivalry, the feudal, ecclesiastical, dynastic world over there—forming its osseous structure, holding it together for hundreds, thousands of years, preserving its flesh and bloom, giving it form, decision, rounding it out, and so saturating it in the conscious and unconscious blood, breed, belief, and intuitions of men, that it still prevails powerful to this day, in defiance of the mighty changes of time—was its literature, permeating to the very marrow, especially that major part, its enchanting songs, ballads, and poems. (*CPCP* 933)

Whitman's footnote to this passage cites as "hereditaments, specimens":

> Walter Scott's Border Minstrelsy, Percy's collection, Ellis's early [*sic*] English Metrical Romances, the European continental poems of Walter of Aquitania, and the Nibelungen, of pagan stock but monkish-feudal redaction; the history of the Troubadours, by Fauriel; even the far-back cumbrous old Hindu epics, as indicating the Asian egg out of which European chivalry was hatch'd; [George] Ticknor's chapters on the Cid, and on the Spanish poems and poets of Calderon's time. (*CPCP* 933)

The catalogue documents Whitman's familiarity with the older literature, much of it only recently accessible, but more obviously his resolute assembly of these texts under the baleful aegis of feudalism: "It is clear to me," Whitman warned, that unless "the new frame" of democracy "goes deeper, gets at least as firm and as warm a hold in men's hearts, emotions and belief, as, in their days, feudalism or ecclesiasticism, and inaugurates its own perennial sources, welling from the centre forever, its strength will be defective, its growth doubtful, and its main charm wanting" (*CPCP* 935). Hence, once again, the mandate for uncompromisingly republican works of art: "The great poems," he complained, "are poisonous to the idea of the pride and dignity of the common people, the life-blood of democracy. The models of our literature, as we get it from other lands, ultramarine, have had their birth in courts, and bask'd and grown in castle sunshine; all smells of princes' favors" (*CPCP* 955). Even "the prolific brood of the contemporary novel," as Whitman saw it, was perpetuating a "tangled and superlative love-story, inherited apparently from the Amadises and Palmerins of the 13th, 14th, and 15th centuries over there in Europe" (*CPCP* 975).

The past was therefore due for supersession. In his poem "Song of the Exposition," published the same year *Democratic Vistas* appeared in final form, Whitman accordingly stages a recessional:

> Amadis, Tancred, utterly gone, Charlemagne, Roland, Oliver gone,

> Palmerin, ogre, departed, vanish'd the turrets that Usk from its waters reflected,
> Arthur vanish'd with all his knights, Merlin and Lancelot and Galahad, all gone, dissolv'd utterly like an exhalation;
> Pass'd! pass'd! for us, forever pass'd, that once so mighty world, now void, inanimate, phantom world,
> Embroider'd, dazzling, foreign world, with all its gorgeous legends, myths,
> Its kings and castles proud, its priests and warlike lords and courtly dames,
> Pass'd to the charnel vault, coffin'd with crown and armor on,
> Blazon'd with Shakspere's purple page,
> And dirged by Tennyson's sweet sad rhyme. (*CPCP* 343)

As the poem indicates, Whitman placed Shakespeare in a *longue durée* of feudal oppression reaching back to Arthurian legend, and his antimedievalism reverberates loudest in the marked aversion to the playwright that accelerated into outright ranting in his later years. Though Whitman had delighted in great Shakespearean actors like Edmund Kean—whose eyes as he played Richard III, Whitman exulted, "used to burn almost lurid with hate and wicked wishes!"[14]—Shakespeare was tarred with the same aristocratic brush that had sullied Scott: "He is not only the tally of feudalism, but I should say Shakspere is incarnated, uncompromising feudalism in literature" (*CPCP* 1058). Their distance from Shakespeare formed a standard by which to evaluate other poets: Robert Burns, Whitman maintained, had commendably attempted none of the "Shaksperean compositions . . . the spirit and letter of the feudal world, the Norman lord, ambitious and arrogant, taller and nobler than common men" (*CPCP* 1157). Friends like Robert Ingersoll and William Douglas O'Connor attempted to challenge Whitman's opinion (Traubel 7:333, 9:238), but he held his ground, averring in 1890 that Shakespeare, "for all he stands for so much in modern literature, he stands entirely for the mighty aesthetic sceptres of the past, not for the spiritual and democratic, the sceptres of the future" (*CPCP* 1151). The dramas of Shakespeare, Whitman charged in "A Thought on Shakspere" (1886), preserved and glamorized "the dragon-rancors and stormy feudal splendor of mediaeval caste"; even the comedies offended because the "low characters, mechanics, even the loyal henchmen—all in themselves nothing—serve as capital foils to the aristocracy" (*CPCP* 1151-52). In another piece, ominously titled "What Lurks behind Shakspere's Historical Plays?" (1889), Whitman literally railed against his appointed adversary:

> Conceiv'd out of the fullest heat and pulse of European feudalism—personifying in unparallel'd ways the mediaeval aristocracy, its towering spirit of ruthless and gigantic caste, with its own peculiar air and arrogance—(no mere imitation)—only one of the "wolfish earls" so plenteous in the plays themselves, or some born descendant and knower, might seem to be the author of these amazing works—works in some respects greater than anything else in recorded literature. (*CPCP* 1148)

[14] Walt Whitman, *The Journalism*, 2:25; see also 125-26.

"Luxuriant as the sun," Shakespeare was mounted by Whitman as at once the climax and valedictorian of the Middle Ages, "artist and singer of feudalism at its sunset, with all the gorgeous colors"—"gorgeous" connoting a necrotic grandiloquence, "when Feudalism, like a sunset, seem'd to gather all its glories, reminiscences, personalisms, in one last gorgeous effort, before the advance of a new day, a new incipient genius" (*CPCP* 973, 1245). Even contemporary attributions of Shakespearian authorship to Francis Bacon failed to swerve Whitman: "Bacon himself loved all this show, this fustian . . . . feudalism is gone—well gone: peace to its dung: may my nostrils never know its stink again" (Traubel 4:55).[15]

Near the end of his life, ironically, the great singer of the divine average was dismayed to see Central Park full of carriages with "conspicuously borne *heraldic family crests*." Whitman was aghast: "Can this really be true?" (*CPCP* 1176). Whitman's last public statements bring us from the heady optimism of the early republic into the Gilded Age; by the twentieth century medievalism was wedded to wealth and rank, ritually displayed in Gothic edifices and ossified into imperatives of propriety. Yet in his years of infirmity Whitman was hardly likely to relinquish the evolutionary vision that had so long sustained him. In a moving passage in one of his last poems, "Old Chants," he pictures once again the fading ensigns of medievalism in a stately but inexorable pageant of retreat:

> . . . Merlin, Arthur,
> The Cid, Roland at Roncesvalles, the Nibelungen,
> The troubadours, minstrels, minnesingers, skalds,
> Chaucer, Dante, flocks of singing birds,
> The Border Minstrelsy, the bye-gone ballads, feudal tales, essays, plays,
> Shakspere, Schiller, Walter Scott, Tennyson,
> As some vast wondrous weird dream-presences,
> The great shadowy groups gathering around,
> Darting their mighty masterful eyes forward at thee,
> Thou! with as now thy bending neck and head, with courteous hand and word, ascending,
> Thou! pausing a moment, drooping thine eyes upon them, blent with their music,
> Well pleased, accepting all, curiously prepared for by them,
> Thou enterest at thy entrance porch. (*CPCP* 646)

[15] See also Phyllis McBride, "Shakespeare," in LeMaster and Kummings, 632-33; Floyd Stovall, "Whitman, Shakespeare, and Democracy," *Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 51 (1952): 457-72.