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Maverick Medievalism: Remembering William C. Calin (1936-2018)

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In 2021, when medievalism has become a common and generally accepted field of academic study, it may be hard to imagine that this was not at all the case only 30 years ago. Then, most medievalists still preferred to think of medievalism as a “Victorian whim” or at least a topic any serious medievalist would only undertake as a side-show to more *serious* scholarship on the ‘real’ Middle Ages.¹ I shared some of these same prejudices when, in 1991, I attended my first meeting of the International Society for the Study of Medievalism, at the University of Tampa, Florida. To my surprise, the conference did not only feature novices like me or scholars of Victorian studies dabbling in medieval subject matter. During a lunch meeting, I sat next to a small, dapper man who introduced himself as Bill Calin. As I would find out later when checking on his biography, he received his Ph.D. at Yale, had taught at Dartmouth College, Stanford University, University of Oregon (as head of Romance Languages), was a Guggenheim Fellow and Graduate Research Professor at the University of Florida. By the time I encountered him, Calin had written nine monographs and close to 100 essays in refereed journals, and his areas of interest spanned nine centuries and included Breton, French, Scots, and Occitan languages, literatures, and cultures. During our 1991 lunch conversation, he explained to me that: medieval studies had for too long been in the service of national traditions and nationalism (he did much work on minority literatures and languages); that being a medievalist necessarily meant knowing the Middle Ages through the multiple reflections provided by the Renaissance, Reformation, Age of Reason, Victorianism, modernity, and the history of the modern university and academy, from philology through postmodernism; and that therefore every medievalist was always also a scholar of medievalism, someone who needed to see their own work and position as framed by all these simultaneously present intellectual and cultural responses to the medieval past, including those in popular

¹ On the resistance of traditional medievalists to medievalism studies, see Kathleen Verduin, “The Founding and the Founder: Medievalism and the Legacy of Leslie J. Workman,” in *Studies in Medievalism XVII*, ed. Karl Fugelso (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2009): 1-27; Leslie J. Workman, “Speaking of Medievalism: An Interview with Leslie J. Workman,” in *Medievalism in the Modern World: Essays in Honour of Leslie J. Workman*, ed. Richard Utz and Tom Shippey (Turnhout: Brepols, 1998), 433-9. On the issue of studying the ‘real’ Middle Ages vs. the inclusion of reception studies, see Clare A. Simmons, Introduction to *Medievalism and the Quest for the Real Middle Ages*, ed. Clare A. Simmons (London: Routledge, 2001), 1-28; and Juanita Feros Ruys, “Playing Alterity: Heloise, Rhetoric, and *Memoria*,” in *Maistresse of My Wit: Medieval Women, Modern Scholars*, ed. Louise D’Arcens and Juanito Feros Ruys (Turnhout: Brepols, 2004), 211-43.

culture.² As I look back at my own career as a medievalist and medievalism-ist, I realize that I later integrated all of his observations as elements of my own scholarly credo. Bill Calin, who became a dear mentor after our first encounter, played an important role in allowing me to engage more readily and deeply with medievalism studies, a career risk I might not have taken at the time without his example and support. Bill also helped me find my own voice as a scholar, one at times somewhat more edgy and on the maverick side than my earnest German academic teachers would have encouraged.³ Some of Bill's own contributions to medievalism studies exemplify those qualities.

Around 2012, when pulling together the final list of themes and names for what was later to be published as the essay collection, *Medievalism: Key Critical Terms*, Elizabeth Emery, my co-editor, and I agreed that we should add a chapter on "Christianity." After all, Christianity was and still is one of the terms omnipresent when we asked students about their associations with what defines "medieval." But who, we asked ourselves, should write this essay? We had conceived the essay collection specifically to enhance and complicate existing histories of medievalism that focused on acknowledging the "makers" of the Middle Ages: those who re-discovered the period from 500 to 1500 CE by engaging with its cultural works, seeking inspiration from them, reenacting them, or fantasizing about them. We felt that such approaches organized by time period, geography, famous medievalists, or themes often lacked an overarching critical framework. And we intended to make a first stab at such a framework, by calling into question the often quite nebulous yet commonly accepted vocabulary used in Medievalism Studies. We also intended to showcase, for academic and non-academic readers, the ongoing lively debate about the essential terms employed when speaking of the reception of medieval culture in postmedieval times.

As we were collaborating on a Google Doc, both of us editing into the document ideas and names while sitting in Atlanta, GA, and Montclair, NJ, respectively, we had a long list

² On Calin's own perspective on his career path and publications, see the interview he provided Barbara and David Petrosky for the School of Modern Languages at the University of Florida, in 2009: <http://languages.ufl.edu/files/extended-interview.pdf>, accessed March 16, 2021.

³ See, for example, *Medievalism: A Manifesto* (Bradford: ARC Humanities Press, 2017), or "Don't Be Snobs, Medievalists," *Chronicle of Higher Education*, August 24, 2015, accessed 16 March, 2021: <https://www.chronicle.com/article/dont-be-snobs-medievalists/>. Bill also mentored and actively supported numerous other colleagues. Some of them organized a conference session on the occasion of his 75th birthday, Makers of the Middle Ages: Papers in Honor of William Calin, at the 46th International Congress on Medieval Studies at Western Michigan University (2011). He was given a Festschrift, *Cahier Calin: Makers of the Middle Ages: Essays in Honor of William Calin*, ed. Richard Utz and Elizabeth Emery (Kalamazoo: ISSM, 2011; available as *Makers of the Middle Ages* at <https://www.lulu.com/shop/richard-utz-and-elizabeth-emery/shop/elizabeth-emery-and-richard-utz/makers-of-the-middle-ages-essays-in-honor-of-william-calin/paperback/product-1k9858p7.html>). The volume includes essays by 20 of his friends and colleagues. Following his death in 2018, colleagues organized two conference sessions in his honor, Remembering Professor William Calin I and II, at the 54th International Congress on Medieval Studies (2019).

of the terms that had, in the past, found their space in *Studies in Medievalism* and *The Year's Work in Medievalism*, and those that needed including because they had been absent. In the end, we decided to propose the essay on Christianity, a topic almost completely absent from journals in medievalism studies, to Bill Calin. Based on his education, background, and experience, we could have requested he write on pretty much any of the other topics in the volume. He would have written a great 3,000-word essay on Archive, Authenticity, Authority, Continuity, Feast, Genealogy, Gesture, Gothic, Heresy, Humor, Lingua, Love, Memory, Middle, Modernity, Monument, Myth, Play, Presentism, Primitive, Purity, Reenactment, Resonance, Simulacrum, Spectacle, Transfer, Trauma, and of course Troubadour, but somehow we thought we needed Bill if we wanted an incisive and original perspective on this most difficult topic on our list. After all, as Randy Cohen, the long-time New York Times *Ethicist* blogger once opined, nothing will upset readers more than feeling tread upon because of their religious beliefs. Cohen writes:

When I take up a secular question that provokes broad disagreement, I typically receive a few hundred responses by e-mail that begin: "Dear Sir, I am appalled..." When I write about religion, I cause a tidal wave. The week I rebuked an Orthodox Jewish real estate agent whose beliefs forbade his shaking the hand of a female client, I stopped counting after receiving 4,000 ferocious messages, lambasting not only my argument but my character, my appearance and my parentage: it was speculated that dogs played a part.⁴

I knew we would not be in any danger of being similarly lambasted, and not only because our academic Boydell & Brewer volume wasn't going to be read by the large audience that religiously reads the *New York Times* every day. I knew, or at least hoped, that Bill Calin would pull off what I always thought of as his "maverick medievalism."

In 1998, when writing for the voluminous *Festschrift* honoring Leslie J. Workman, the founder of medievalism studies in North America, Bill had submitted two different contributions: One, "Dante on the Edwardian Stage: Stephen Phillips's *Paolo and Francesca*," was a concise and beautifully crafted, but at first sight rather traditional reception history of Edwardian dramatist Stephen Phillips's partially medievalist renewal of the national English tradition of tragedy in verse. What got my attention as co-editor, with Tom Shippey, was Bill's unexpected conclusion, in which he explained in a few short phrases Phillips's location of his story of the corruption of innocence, passion, adultery,

⁴ Randy Cohen, "Can We Talk About Religion, Please?" *New York Times*, October 27, 2009, <http://ethicist.blogs.nytimes.com/2009/10/27/can-we-talk-about-religion-please/>, accessed March 16, 2021.

treachery, murder, and incest not in modernist London, but in Italy and the Middle Ages. Bill opined that

[e]very student of postcolonialist theory and the works of Edward Said will recognize at once a classical example of Orientalism. 'Orientalism!' you may object. 'In Rimini? In Rome?' Yes, I reply, in Said's voice. Orientalism is not a fixed topographical locus; it is a creation of the mind according to which the Westerner displaces onto the Orient his dread of, and yearning for, sensuality, violence, lawlessness, barbarism, decadence, and, especially, the feminine, and the effeminate. After all, for a reasonable portion of Phillips's audience, the Orient began at Calais. And medievalism? I submit that the displacement can occur over time as well as in space. For those who accept the liberal myth of progress, if we go back far enough we are all Orientals. But that is the subject for another paper in another volume.⁵

For the Festschrift on Leslie Workman, Bill also tackled a second topic, and instead of taking a full 6 ½ printed pages, he used only 1 ½ pages for this one: In "Leslie Workman: A Speech of Thanks," he expressed, better than Tom Shippey and my introduction or anyone else's contribution, what he considered Workman's abiding contribution to the academic study of medieval culture. Workman, according to Bill, was the first to define medievalism as "the perception (and the continued existence, the impact) of the Middle Ages in all succeeding periods [...] to the present," and as "the one determining cultural forces in the history of the modern West, [...] as the opposite of and a counterweight to classicism."⁶ Moreover, he credited Workman with recognizing, from a historical and phenomenological perspective, the predominant role of medievalism in the emergence of romanticism. In Bill's words, Workman saw romanticism "as a discovery, formulation, and reconception of the Middle Ages," and most manifestations of medievalism as "outgrowths of or throwbacks to romanticism," whether "partially or wholly [...] romantic in their essence."⁷ And commenting on the disparity between Workman's successful propagation of these two original ideas and the founding of the field of medievalism, and his status, for most of his career, as an independent scholar, Bill offered the following:

Years ago, at another university, whenever we discussed tenure or promotion questions, a friend of mine, one of the pioneers in D.N.A., regularly said: "Has X or Y contributed a significant original idea?" I had to

⁵ William Calin, "Dante on the Edwardian Stage: Stephen Phillips's *Paolo and Francesca*," in *Medievalism in the Modern World*, ed. Richard Utz and Tom Shippey (Turnhout: Brepols, 1998), 255-61, 261. Another brilliant essay in the same tradition is his "Medievalism in a Minority Language: Frédéric Mistral's Wish-Fulfillment Provençal Past," *Revue Électronique de Littérature Française* vol. 8, no. 1 (2014): 48-60.

⁶ Calin, "Leslie Workman: A Speech of Thanks," in *Medievalism in the Modern World*, 451-2, 451.

⁷ Calin, "Leslie Workman," 451.

answer: “Look, Aaron, if we in the Humanities had to operate under those conditions, none of us would have tenure. There would be tens of thousands of us, all adjuncts, wandering from job, like the tired ones on the Mountain of Purgatory.” On the other hand, under those conditions, Leslie Workman would have an endowed chair and an institute named after him.⁸

Admittedly, Bill did not foresee today’s adjunctification of the academy, especially in the humanities, which has little to do with the originality or banality of anyone’s work. However, I think you can understand by now why Bill Calin’s unusual ability to express complex matters concisely, clearly, and just a little unconventionally made him a perfect candidate for the 3,000-word essay on “Christianity” in a volume that intended to provide concise and accessible essays on terms that are central to the understanding of medievalism as a cultural phenomenon. I guess I believe that “accessible” stands in for “unconventional,” in the same sense that the author of the 2004 *New York Times* obituary for medievalist historian Norman Cantor called Cantor’s graceful prose style and narrative drive unusually “readable.”⁹ It was the most noble task of the academic historian, Cantor explained in his wonderfully ironic 2002 biography, *Inventing Norman Cantor: Confessions of a Medievalist*, to make history “communicable to and accessible by the academic public at large,” to lower, as I prefer to parse this, the linguistic and conceptual drawbridge to a point where more than ten colleagues in the world can fully grasp what one is writing; to acknowledge that we are always amateurs *and* specialists when we research and write; and to do this without compromising facts and epistemological rigor.¹⁰

How did Bill Calin resolve this issue, of which he was keenly aware, for his essay on “Christianity”? Brilliantly. He writes:

We have learned from structuralism that no intellectual construct can be comprehended as a monad, unique and self-sufficient, independent from all others. On the contrary, any such construct will be bound to other constructs, often in a binary position of identity or antithesis. Consequently, the notion of a Christian Middle Ages—simple, unproblematic, uniform, communal—is meaningful, indeed can exist, only when contrasted with its binary antithesis, the Renaissance, presumed to be complex, problematic, diverse, individual, and, most of all, secular. The Age of Faith set against the Age of Humanism.

⁸ Calin, “Leslie Workman,” 451.

⁹ Wolfgang Saxon, “Norman F. Cantor, 74, a Noted Medievalist, Is Dead,” *New York Times*, September 21, 2004, http://www.nytimes.com/2004/09/21/obituaries/norman-f-cantor-74-a-noted-medievalist-is-dead.html?_r=, accessed March 16, 2021.

¹⁰ *Inventing Norman Cantor: Confessions of a Medievalist* (Tempe: Arizona Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies, 2002), 223.

Given that this notion—the simple, unproblematic, Christian Middle Ages—did not exist among the medievals, nor did it exist during the Renaissance, it can be deemed an example of medievalism. It is one of the most important medievalism phenomena, for it determines how many academics and the public at large view the Middle Ages—what it means to them. I propose that, for the most part, modern scholars launched this “myth,” and it lives on today.¹¹

Everything a student of literary and cultural history needs to know about the issue at hand is already traced in this first paragraph, traced effectively and without precious polysyllabicity to describe the palimpsestic character of our current image of the Middle Ages as continually developing and transforming, layer upon layer, forgotten and memorialized, archived and lost to weather and war, revived and reviled. After this statement, Bill proceeds, just as readably and accessibly, first debunking the myth of Renaissance humanists as critical of Christianity. Bill calls them “Bloomian strong sons, riddled with the anxiety of influence, eager to slay their fathers and to rely instead upon very distant, dead grandfathers.”¹² But, as Christians, they had no business berating their forebears for being Christian.

He then moves on to demonstrate how the epistemological separation between the Middle Ages and the Renaissance happened in the later nineteenth-century, alongside reaction to or in reaction to the medieval revival and as one result of the new German sense of *Historismus* (historism or historicism). Those who proclaimed the separation in a serious manner were scholars—historians whom today we might think of as gifted amateurs, but who, in their day, earned the respect of a broad public for their scholarly and intellectual endeavors, the Burckhardts, Michelets, or Adamses. He surveys the likes of Scott, Coleridge, Wordsworth, Carlyle, and Disraeli, who celebrated the Middle Ages as a time when a harmonious society was allegedly held together by bonds of common faith and an unquestioned social order. He sees the next layer of how we read the Christian Middle Ages in the development of medieval studies programs in North America, accompanied and influenced as they were by the Catholic Church’s turn back towards the Thomist Middle Ages and against modernity. What follows then is Robertsonianism, at least in the powerful American English departments, with its Augustinian exegetical approach that seemed to differentiate all serious medieval literature as speaking for *caritas* and against *cupiditas* or *concupiscentia*. Then, there is C.S. Lewis who exalted the Renaissance by emphasizing its medieval-ness. Then, Bill’s comparatist approach

¹¹ William C. Calin, “Christianity,” in *Medievalism: Key Critical Terms*, ed. Elizabeth Emery and Richard Utz (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2014), 35-41, 35.

¹² Calin, “Christianity,” 36.

helps readers understand how the “Christian Middle Ages” was never something embraced by the French scholarly tradition, either because there were too many secular-feudal-aristocratic texts in that tradition or, as Bill notes tongue-in-cheek, because French scholars in the 1960s and 1970s never read anything written in English.

Bill ends on a view that surveys the American twentieth century, in which Catholic Christians still feel nostalgia for the spiritual and communal Middle Ages that may have preceded the materialism, alienation, and secularization of contemporary society. For Evangelicals this same premodern prehistory is found in the age of Luther and Calvin or the age of the Puritan settlers.

Bill doesn’t advance his *tour de force* into the twenty-first century, avoids computer games and social media, practices with which he was not comfortable, but ends his personal scholarly history of medievalism with what he sees as the conflation of academically constructed historical periods in the creative anachronism of North American reenactment and festivals. He muses that at such events can be found

[...] a king and queen who are expected to speak with an English accent. There will also be dukes and duchesses, and knights and ladies, but rarely Christian monks, priests, or bishops. This Middle Ages is expanding and all-consuming. It devours the Renaissance/early modern, the Baroque, and the Classical—all periods which do not speak to the popular imaginary. One day it may well be The Past, the only historical past aside from the Bible and the American Revolution, in that imaginary. And because Hollywood is afraid of religion, and overtly hostile to Christianity, that Middle Ages may well be strictly heroic, chivalrous, aristocratic, and secular.¹³

I have used Bill’s essay in three classes at Georgia Tech over the last five years, “Medieval Atlanta,” “The Worlds of Robin Hood,” and “Global Medievalisms,” and students respond very well to its allusive style, tongue-in-cheek tone, and invitingly clear language. They realize that the essay’s author has a deep desire to communicate with them and understands that they, like he himself, are imbricated in the continuing medievalist experience he delineates. They are fine with looking up “Robertsonianism” in *Wikipedia*; recognize, after a moment of hesitation, the towering figure of C. S. Lewis, albeit more for the *Chronicles of Narnia* than for *The Discarded Image*; and find it revealing to see how their own daily experience of medievalisms is just as multi-layered and reflected through centuries of different histories as that of their forebears. When comparing Bill’s essay with all the other contributions to *Medievalism: Key Critical Terms*, they often express how

¹³ Calin, “Christianity,” 41.

they find it the most honest, smart, and joyous of the contributions.¹⁴ Because of its openly opinionated and unorthodox nature, one student even called the essay a kind of “maverick” within the volume. I am absolutely sure that Bill would be quite proud of this characterization.

¹⁴ In the 2009 interview with Barbara and David Petrosky, Bill specifically mentioned the pleasure he experienced at practicing medievalism: “I joyed in the new discipline of medievalism—the impact of the Middle Ages in subsequent periods, including ours, and in both high culture and popular culture.”