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Kathleen Verduin  
*Hope College*

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## Remembering Leslie J. Workman (1927-2001)<sup>1</sup>

Part of the journal section "Forum: Falling into Medievalism"

Kathleen Verduin, "Remembering Leslie J. Workman" (1927 - 2001)<sup>1</sup>



It is May of 1980. I am a still relatively young Assistant Professor at Hope College, and because classes are over and Kalamazoo is only an hour away and I nurse aspirations of becoming a Dantist as well as an Americanist I attend the International Congress on Medieval Studies at Western Michigan University. On Sunday, the last day of the Congress, I decide to take breakfast in the dining room of one of the Goldsworth Valley dormitories. This is why I believe-or at least will say for effect-that Fate was stepping in, for in those days I never ate breakfast.

The dining room was crowded, and I was about to give up finding a chair when I noticed an empty place at a big round table near the exit where somebody I had met the day before was already sitting down. Yet here's a spot, I said to myself, and took a seat. A lively conversation was apparently already in progress, dominated by a broad-shouldered, white-haired Englishman whom I had not previously noticed. He clearly considered it his obligation to entertain the entire company, and he was joking and quoting poetry and occasionally even waxing a little flirtatious. Some brilliant scholar, I thought, probably from Oxford or Cambridge. As it happened, he did come from Oxford, but it was Oxford, Ohio. Furthermore, he told us all quite unselfconsciously, that though previously on the faculty of the Western College for Women he currently held no academic post at all, but was employed doing manual labor for the Oxford Natural Gas Company.

I left thinking that this was a truly remarkable man: so obviously brilliant and cultivated, yet bearing with such good grace the fickle reverses of academic fortune. The following year, 1981, I returned to Kalamazoo, this time to present a paper, my first ever, on Dante. To my delight, the broad-shouldered, white-haired Englishman again was present as well-not at my session, of course, and thus still oblivious to my scholarly brilliance, but at the Saturday night banquet where, by yet another unmistakable intervention of Fate, he turned up at my table and, between pouring regular refills into my wine glass, flirted throughout dinner with a children's literature specialist from California. Yet my moment was to come: on Sunday morning we found ourselves waiting out a rain shower in the lobby of Valley III and commenced a long and fascinating conversation that ranged from the scholarship of C. S. Lewis to the old radio jingles in celebration of Ovaltine.

I will now recount the epic story of my first visit, that summer, to Leslie Workman-for that indeed is who he was-and how the completely unexpected invitation from an old college friend in Cincinnati provided the occasion to invite myself to lunch in nearby Oxford. But how indeed could my audience appreciate

the doubts and fears of my six-hour road trip, the maidenly trepidation that rose in my heart as sheets of rain poured down on the highway-and, at length, the chagrin with which I surveyed the house at 328 West Church Street where he lived-an old two-story in a state of acute disrepair and fronting in plebeian ignominy the local Kentucky Fried Chicken? This was not, alas, not quite what I had expected. Gingerly I ascended the front steps, taking care to sidestep the row of empty beer bottles-Stroh's was apparently his brand-that lent their accent to the front porch. If the exterior of Mr. Workman's house was a little startling, the interior beggared the imagination: ragged shades decked the windows where half-dead plants strained for sunlight; most of the furniture was what one might describe as Goodwill Reject; and beyond the living room arch loomed strange and massive shapes, draped in old bedspreads-second-hand pianos, Leslie explained, he was working on them. I was beginning to feel a little like Alice in Wonderland: I had clearly entered a world unto itself. But I remember best that there were also books, books everywhere, books about everything-neatly, meticulously organized, and stacked high in, dare I reveal it, fifty or sixty orange crates.



AND SO WE WERE MARRIED. And so began my twenty-year relationship with the brilliant, witty, eccentric, stubborn, compassionate, and totally individualistic man whom the world knew as Leslie J. Workman. Today as it happens is the twenty-first anniversary of our wedding. But I want to tell mainly what I know about Leslie's creation of the academic subject we know as medievalism.

Leslie had been educated in England, at the University of London, in the field of English constitutional history, with a heavy emphasis on the Middle Ages; he had been exposed there to what he called the Awful Trinity of the great English historians Stubbs, Maitland, and Round. It was in this great age of English historicism, the nineteenth century, I think, that Leslie had his true intellectual home: he loved the old Victorians and did a very convincing imitation of an archbishop. Nonconformist at home and Church of England at school, he had memorized great passages of the Bible and took delight in quoting its more obscure and cryptic verses: "strong bulls of Bashan have compassed me about," or "the horseleech hath two daughters." This was of course the discourse of the nineteenth century; listeners of our own time found it rather startling. And especially he loved the work of Walter Scott, whom he described as one of his five heroes-the others being Pope Gregory the Great, King Alfred the Great, the Duke of Wellington, and his own grandfather.

In 1954 he sailed to America on the *Queen Mary*; he landed in New York and telegraphed his mother, "Natives friendly; proceeding to the interior." He was here in order to embark on graduate study, first at the Ohio State University, then Columbia, and his surviving letters to friends soon begin to show his frustration with current trends in American higher education, the intense pressure to specialize. Leslie's mind resisted specialization; he was interested in everything, and he looked for overarching connections. It was his dual historical consciousness, of the Middle Ages and of the nineteenth century, that started him on the road to the project that eventually defined him: somewhere in the course of his teaching, he told me, he had awakened to the realization that the Middle Ages he had learned and was purveying in his classroom was a nineteenth-century construct, a Middle Ages shaped and colored by nineteenth-century perspectives. I do not know when he first stumbled on Ruskin's coinage of the word "medievalism," in his essay on the Pre-Raphaelites, to denote the Middle Ages; or when he first discovered the *Oxford English Dictionary's* second meaning of the word, "the adoption of or devotion to mediaeval ideals." But his

historical researches had always gravitated toward the concept of historical periodization: among his papers is an early review of Burckhardt's *Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy*, and he often referred to Wallace Ferguson's volume *The Renaissance in Historical Thought*. When the Western College collapsed in the early 1970s, Leslie was paradoxically liberated, so to speak, to pursue his growing interest in the Middle Ages as an idea and his resolve to institutionalize the study of that idea in the postmedieval world.

Leslie was blessed in those days with a good friend, the late Alice Kenney, an American historian who like him had studied-and experienced frustration-at Columbia. Alice's knowledge of American cultural history deepened his sense that the idea of the Middle Ages had mattered on American soil as well, and together they published a long article, "Ruins, Romance, and Reality," in the *Winterthur Portfolio*. This article was an important landmark, I suspect, in his developing faith in the importance of medievalism. As he himself told the story, however, the study of medievalism as an academic subject in its own right was born in a single session which he organized at the Tenth International Congress on Medieval Studies in 1976; another important occasion was the Colloquium on Modern Literature at West Virginia University in 1979, devoted that year to "The Presence of the Middle Ages in Modern Literature." Leslie's participation in these scholarly meetings helped him attract enthusiasm for the study of medievalism, and with high resolve, a little help from his friends, and what he referred to as "sheer bloody ignorance" he printed the first issue of *Studies in Medievalism*<sup>2</sup> in 1979. His editorial to this issue was his manifesto. "*Studies in Medievalism* has been established," he wrote, "in the conviction that it is time to begin the inter-disciplinary study of medievalism as a comprehensive cultural phenomenon, analogous to classicism or romanticism"-because medievalism, in Leslie's view, "has affected every aspect of European life, not only literature and the arts, where its influence has been most perceptible, but politics, economics, and religion." In later definitions he began to add "scholarship" to that list. Well before words like "discourse" and "construct" entered scholarly jargon, Leslie in other words was theorizing the Middle Ages as an idea of widespread influence whose importance had been obscured by its wrongheaded subordination to Romanticism. In later years he would come up with his simplest and most elegant definition: "Medievalism is the continuing process of creating the Middle Ages."



So: in 1979 *Studies in Medievalism* was a fact, its first issue was out, it had an editorial board, and its editor had commissioned not only future topical issues but a massive and comprehensive bibliography of scholarship. The academic world is always crying for new ideas, and so the rest should be easy, right? Wrong. The academic world, as a microcosm of the real world, is also fraught with suspicion, pusillanimity, and narrow-mindedness, and despite his considerable charm and personal flair, Leslie in 1979 lacked institutional affiliation and suffered, like a character in Rabelais he used to love to invoke, of a disease called lack of money. The first issue of *Studies in Medievalism* was produced more or less under the table with help from Leslie's friend Britton Harwood at Miami University; Brit and Leslie hoped, of course, that once the issue was a physical reality Miami's administration would leap to its continuance. Not so. Years went by. When I first visited Leslie in 1981, he was jubilant because he was about to see the journal adopted by the University of Akron. Akron subsidized three more issues, but in time the arrangement disintegrated. Leslie and I had married by that time and he had moved to be with me in Holland, but although an office had been found for him by our Dean, a benevolent man named Elton Bruins whom I delight to honor, my college was not interested in funding the series. So Leslie decided the next strategy should be the founding of an academic conference. This we did in 1986: the first Conference on Medievalism was held at the University of Notre Dame that fall. And it has of course continued and

has been held across the U.S., in England, and in Austria, and for the first time in Canada. In 1990 came the great windfall, when Richard Barber of Boydell & Brewer adopted *Studies in Medievalism* on the condition that the series be reborn as an annual volume, and we gratefully complied. In 1996 Leslie and I organized a four-week summer session on medievalism at the University of York in England, and repeated the event in 1998. And in 1998 Leslie's achievement was honored in a way he never expected: with a Festschrift in his honor, edited by the present editor of *Studies in Medievalism*, Tom Shippey, and my dear friend Richard Utz.

Looking back on all this from my present blissful perspective of whatever the feminine form of avuncular



is, I have to say that it was all a whole lot of work. This picture from *Through the Looking Glass*<sup>3</sup> always seemed to me to be about us: Leslie as the White Knight, reeling forward in all directions, and I standing on the sidelines looking concerned but utterly ineffectual. But now that my part in the mounting of medievalism has become a story, I take pride in that story, and it's fun to remember. I remember the pleasure of typing Leslie's correspondence—yes, I admit it, I typed it, and not only that, I took dictation—because his style was absolutely inimitable.<sup>4</sup> He would open his letters to his old friend Bill Calin, for instance, with "Calin! Workman speaks!" He said this was the greeting affected by Shaw in his letters to Chesterton, and he liked it. I remember moments of triumph: the day the phone rang in our kitchen, how

Leslie kicked aside the cats and answered it, and the look of astonishment on his face when the voice at the other end identified itself as Norman Cantor. Mr. Cantor had heard of Leslie's work and was interested, since he himself was then drafting his book *Inventing the Middle Ages*. Norman Cantor had his enemies in the academic world, I know, but he was always kind to us and did what he could to promote our work. I remember Leslie's excitement when we learned, in 1984, that Paul Szarmach and Bernard Rosenthal at SUNY Binghamton had decided to offer a conference on Medievalism in America—surely a sign that medievalism was coming of age as an academic subject. I remember his delight as he reported meeting Dr. Ulrich Müller of the University of Salzburg, who had been working for years with *Mittelalter-Rezeption* and solemnly declared, "I have been thinking. I think we should have a joint conference. I think I can get the government to give us a castle." Which indeed the Austrian government did, for our conference at Kaprun in 1990. I remember our pleasure in learning that there was a Japanese interest in medievalism emanating from Keio University in Tokyo. That a Danish pastor-mathematician-musician named Nils Holger Petersen had composed an opera—a lovely opera—on St. Thomas Becket, and that he was willing to feature it at one of our conferences.

There were of course the moments of fury as well: when the editor of the *Spenser Encyclopedia* rejected Leslie's offer of an entry on medievalism because medievalism was "just a Victorian fantasy." Leslie never forgave that. Or when Lionel Gossman, who had written what was back in the 1970s one of the few good books on medievalism in France, told Leslie that the subject was exhausted. Or when the NEH obtusely rejected Szarmach and Rosenthal's fine proposal for a summer seminar on medievalism on the grounds that the topic was dubious. Or—most maddening of all, and this became something of a saga—when a prominent twosome of medievalists pre-empted the word medievalism in a series of books all published by Johns Hopkins and distorted it back to its obsolete meaning as the Middle Ages. But these irritations



now seem minor. At this point, I feel only great gratitude for the exhilaration of all that I learned; for the rewards of collegial association with scholars literally across the world, in five continents; and for the friendship of wonderful people like Richard, Bill Calin, Clare Simmons, Gwendolyn Morgan, and Nils Holger Petersen.


I look back over these words and feel that I have barely begun to convey Leslie's uniqueness; I have said nothing of his paradoxical insecurities, his recurrent self-doubt, the tendency toward procrastination he brought, frankly, to epic proportions; his love for his native England, so deeply part of him that he could quote even Kipling and make me believe it ("the Saxon is not like us Normans"); his kindness to my father and especially to my nieces and nephews, who all adored him. I've said nothing of his jokes, the way he kept me laughing literally around the clock, even when the jokes were (as was frequent) at my expense; I've said nothing of his bursts of exasperation, when he would bellow, "Kathleen! Do something! It's a scene of horrors! It's a bloody nightmare!" I've said nothing of the grace with which, three years ago, he met his death. But this is perhaps enough.

*Kathleen Verduin is a Professor in the Department of English at Hope College*

<sup>1</sup> This memoir was originally presented at the Nineteenth International Conference on Medievalism, held at the University of New Brunswick in October of 2004.



CALL FOR PAPERS



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**DEADLINE: JUNE 10, 1995**

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October 15, 1993

William F. Calin  
Department of Romance Languages  
University of Florida  
Gainesville, Florida 32611

Calin! Workman speaks!

This style of address was used on a famous postcard from Shaw to Chesterton. I think you will agree it has much to commend it.

But whoever goes to Belgium? Either you are contemplating joining the Bollandists or another learned order of the Roman Church, or else you tossed the letter out of the window of the Orient Express on your way to Transylvania with a sinister swirl of your cape.

But thank you. Your comments, as always, are to the point, and I enclose a copy of Mary Anne's paper, on which I should like comments by later November, when we return from Cambridge.

As you will see, we have postponed our departure by a week, and our proposed four weeks of uninterrupted scholarship in the Houghton Library are beginning to seem like a well deserved rest cure, but I hope to come back with the Round Table paper converted into either three papers or a monograph, and Kathleen, I am determined, will return with her shield or on it--that is to say, with a book on Dante in America or the prospect of domestic recrimination.

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