The Gothic Cathedral and Medievalism

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The juxtaposition of these two terms would surprise few, for who would question that the medieval edifice and the study of it in archaeology and art history, and its use in promoting religious, political, social, or aesthetic ideologies since the fifteenth century is a rich subject of medievalism? And yet, at three recent conferences dedicated to the subject: *La Cathédrale* (2000), *The Idea of the Gothic Cathedral* (2005), and *L'imaginaire moderne de la cathédrale* (2006), medievalism as a point of view or even point of departure for the discussions about modern representations of the Gothic edifice, was practically non-existent. This might be explained by the fact that the majority of scholars were focusing on modern discursive or visual techniques for representing the cathedral, in which context medievalism might be considered retrograde. Of course, it may also be that the medieval origins of the Gothic edifice are entirely taken for granted, which makes medievalism seem superfluous; more likely, however, is that since most of the speakers hail from the French Academy, which until recently, has conveniently ignored that a medieval revival or medievalism even existed in classically-oriented France, medievalism is an unfamiliar discourse.[1] And yet, looking beyond the national discourses which have created or neglected medievalism, it is evident that the Gothic cathedral touches upon such a wide array of fields of study that perhaps medievalism falls short of encompassing the rich plethora of meanings and interpretations of the Gothic edifice. Indeed, after more than a decade of research on the subject, I have become convinced that the Gothic cathedral and its reception both in academic fields as well as in literature, the visual arts and music often transcend medievalism and constitute a discourse of their own.

While the "cathedral discourse" can be traced from the Middle Ages through post-modernity and embraces architecture, religion, ritual, literature and the arts, my research looks specifically at the post-medieval aspects of the discourse. This perspective encompasses what Richard Utz has insightfully called the "Concept Cathedral"[2] and traces how the concept-or the idea-of the Gothic cathedral has generated texts and visual works in different national and cultural contexts. Moreover, because the Gothic cathedral as a physical edifice as well as an ideological symbol was implicated in nearly all aspects of cultural discourse and practice: political and social thought, issues of national history and identity, aesthetic stances and artistic creation, as well as religious dogma, architecture, and practice from the late eighteenth through the early twentieth centuries, the "cathedral discourse" falls naturally within the domain of cultural studies.

My purpose in this essay is to analyse how this discourse, which has had such wide-reaching implications in the cultural consciousness of modern society, might be enriched or limited by medievalism. In other words, I would like to see how useful medievalism can be in understanding and in interpreting specific representations of the Gothic cathedral. Though I will not be able to discuss in depth all aspects of the subject, I will bring up representative texts and paintings which might illuminate the types of relationships-or lack of them-that I have found between the Gothic Cathedral and medievalism both on a primary level,

that is to say, in the works themselves and their cultural context, and on a secondary, or critical, disciplinary level. Limiting my discussion here to the post seventeenth-century understanding of the cathedral and placing this modern interest in the edifice within the context of the reawakening to the Middle Ages and Gothic architecture, I aim to show in the first part of this essay, the important role played by the Gothic cathedral in pre-Romantic and Romantic medievalism as well as in Gothic Revival, two interrelated though non-identical phenomena, which take on varying degrees of importance in England, Germany, or France. In so doing, I will point to the academic discourses about these phenomena in those countries. In the second part of the essay, I will discuss specific works in order to differentiate between three types of relationships between medievalism and representations of the Gothic cathedral. In this, I am consciously taking a tentative step toward discovering if categories of medievalism can be distinguished and to what extent these prove useful in understanding the works in question as well as the significance of the Gothic cathedral in them, and in shedding light upon the larger inquiry about medievalism. In the end, I believe this essay will leave more questions than answers, but if it incites reflection, discussion, or criticism then it will have proved useful as a point of departure.

The Gothic Cathedral, Medievalism, and Gothic Revival

The Gothic cathedral's importance since the eighteenth century naturally goes hand in hand with the popular and scholarly interest in things medieval. The edifice was key in the study of the origins, classification, and dating of medieval architectural styles during the latter half of the eighteenth century, and was thus fully implicated in the beginnings of the discipline of art history and the awakening consciousness of a post-Classical architectural history.[3] This latter brings us to the familiar terrain of Gothic Revival, the revival of Gothic architecture in style and decoration. Like the discourse on medievalism, Gothic Revival has been primarily an Anglo-Saxon preoccupation, and its unvaried understanding has been passed on from Charles Eastlake through Kenneth Clark and Nikolaus Pevsner to Megan Aldrich.[4] These histories of Gothic Revival, begin with Horace Walpole and his villa at Strawberry Hill, and discuss A. W. N. Pugin, the Ecclesiologists, and George Gilbert Scott, William Butterfield, George Edmund Street, and William Morris. They invariably ignore similar phenomena in Europe and the Americas; moreover, they make little mention of the Gothic cathedral, ignoring that behind the craze for abbeys and castles and Pugin's parish churches, the Gothic cathedral was at least of equal importance for Gothic Revival.[5]

The conventional Gothic Revival narrative has been recently enriched and restructured by Michael J. Lewis, who takes into account the international scope of the phenomena, pointing especially to its immediate effects in the United States: collegiate Gothic and skyscrapers. In his earlier work, *The Politics of the German Gothic Revival. August Reichensperger*, Lewis focused on the widespread importance of the Cologne Cathedral completion project for Gothic Revival in the German-speaking lands, and in so doing, he has complemented W. D. Robson-Scott's pioneering work *The Literary Background of the Gothic Revival in Germany*. Their mutual use of the English term "Gothic Revival" to describe events in Germany underscores the Anglo-Saxon character of the concept, for, to my knowledge, neither of their German colleagues, Alfred Kamphausen and Klaus Niehr, use the German equivalent, which would be *Wiederaufleben*.[6]

Importantly, and in contrast to those writing about English Gothic Revival, Lewis and Niehr place the Gothic cathedral center stage. Their research thus reflects and attests to the fundamental role played by the cathedral within German Romanticism. At that time-and this idea was again brought to the fore early

in the twentieth century by Wilhelm Worringer-the Gothic cathedral was considered to be the Germanic art par excellence, the supreme expression of the Germanic soul, as Goethe put it in 1773.[7] Its importance was heightened during the Napoleonic Wars, when the medieval period was thought of as a time of German unity and strength, which had disintegrated since then. Sustained by this image of a glorified Middle Ages, the Gothic cathedral became the symbol of religious, social, and political unity as well as of artistic genius, and as such became crucial to much Romantic thinking.

Romanticism, Gothic Revival, and medievalism thus share many of the same impulses: interest in the national past, concern for the architectural and artistic patrimony, the image of an ideal golden age, a renewal of ancient chivalric, courtly, spiritual, or artistic values. This was as true for France as for Germany and England, and a number of Anglo-Saxon scholars, Janine Daykins, Barbara Keller, Elizabeth Emery and Laura Morowitz, have shown this. French scholars have traditionally looked at these subjects from a different perspective-they study "le patrimoine," a field which covers archeological research on medieval architecture, the history of the restoration and preservation of France's cathedrals and other medieval artefacts, and the contributions of leading nineteenth-century figures responsible for the salvage and understanding of medieval architecture: Arcisse de Caumont, Prosper Mérimée, and Eugène-Emmanuel Viollet-le-Duc.

In French Gothic Revival (I use the English term for clarity and consistency) the Gothic cathedral played a vital role: it was held up as supreme example of architecture, eminently suited to the customs, needs and environment in which it was created, and because of this, its principles were thought to be worthy of imitation-and were through the early twentieth century. Moreover, it provided the model for neo-Gothic architecture and decoration: in stark contrast to Pugin's modest churches, France's first neo-Gothic church, Sainte-Clothilde, possessed the dimensions and aspects of a Gothic cathedral. The decorative fashion for furniture, clocks, lamps, and other bibelots was known as "à la cathédrale."[8] The cathedral's importance could partially be due to the obsession with the Middle Ages during the Bourbon Restoration, but also to Victor Hugo's hugely successful novel, *Notre-Dame de Paris* (1831, 32) which he intended not to initiate the medieval vogue that it did, but to awaken the public's sympathy for France's ancient monuments which were at that time falling into ruin or being wilfully destroyed.[9] Through its main subject, the cathedral, the novel thus intertwines our three key terms, medievalism, Gothic Revival, and Romanticism.

The Gothic Cathedral in the Arts

If medievalism can be defined as the continual reception and use of the Middle Ages and its artefacts to serve contemporary ideologies, then I would consider Victor Hugo's *Notre-Dame de Paris* (1831, 32) to be an exemplary medievalistic novel. Set in Paris in 1482, it recreates the brilliancy of the medieval city and its architecture, gives body and life to the social outcasts that make up its grizzly underbelly, and dramatizes raw acts of divine and secular justice. Although lacking historical accuracy by twentieth-century standards, the novel creates a convincing world, where the medieval reflects Hugo's concerns about modern France, and the Parisian cathedral is central to the analogy between the medieval and the modern. As the title indicates, it is the focal point of the novel: the picturesque backdrop for medieval Paris and the theatre where the principle events of the novel occur; thematically, it is the psychological and physical extension of Quasimodo; aesthetically, it embodies the sublime and the grotesque, qualities which Hugo privileged in literature; moreover, it is not fully achieved Gothic, which Hugo saw as a democratic style expressing liberty in society and the genius of the artist: its style is transitional, which means that the edifice is in a state of becoming, just like the medieval society Hugo depicts and imagined

in his own day.[10] Thus the medieval edifice serves in uniting past and present, aesthetics and politics, the act of writing and the poetic genius.

The rich and very modern meanings ascribed to the cathedral here, are not in any way obscured by the medieval setting, rather they are heightened by it, made memorable because of it. Indeed, through the recreation of the Middle Ages, the text resonates with layers of meanings that profoundly affected the way his contemporaries viewed the medieval period, their own society, and particularly the Gothic edifice. Works such as this, which cultivate a medieval setting, however fanciful, for the Gothic cathedral, can be considered as consciously medievalistic. Their medievalistic details do not contradict, but actually serve in underscoring the non-medieval meanings ascribed to the edifice.

Such is the case of a painting contemporary to Hugo's novel: *Idealansicht des Kölner Domes* (1834-6) by Carl Georg Hasenpflug, in which Cologne Cathedral rises majestically and brilliantly in the twilight, its immensity accentuated by the tiny figures in medieval religious or civic attire moving across the cathedral square. While the size of the figures serves to highlight the principle characteristic that the Germans saw in the Gothic: its sheer height and vastness, their medieval tract aids in situating the scene in the Medieval period. This, however, makes the scene historically inaccurate, for since the Middle Ages the cathedral had stood unfinished, its choir truncated from its half-built towers. It could never have been seen as it is represented in the painting at any time before 1880; even in Hasenpflug's time, its completion remained a dream that seemed as if it would never be realized. Placing in a medieval setting the yet-to-be perfectly achieved edifice with all the grandiosity the nineteenth-century saw in the Gothic cathedral, the painting appears as a plea for the cathedral's completion. Without the medievalizing details, it would be one among many representations of Cologne cathedral, losing its emotional appeal and much of its intellectual interest. Though more modest in its medieval detail than Hugo's novel, it shares with the novel a similar use of the medieval: rather than merely adding local color, the medieval detail bestows a certain depth to the representation of the cathedral. Both works are consciously medievalistic, and looking at them from this perspective proves fruitful.

Another case might be made, however, for John Constable's 1823 painting *Salisbury Cathedral from the Bishop's Grounds*, in which the cathedral is part of an idyllic country scene contemplated by the Bishop and his companion, whose presence, in contrast to the figures in Hasenpflug's painting, sets the scene in nineteenth-century England. The theme of the painting seems to be the harmony between man, nature, and the cathedral. This is underscored by the arching tree branches which frame the choir of the cathedral, the spire, and a view of cattle grazing tranquilly in the fields before the edifice. On the one hand, this natural arch seems to allude to the popular eighteenth-century theory that interlacing branches first gave the idea of the pointed arch,[11] on the other, it calls attention to the famous spire, which served as a model for Jean-Antoine's Alavoine's 1823 design for the Rouen Cathedral spire and earlier for the supradimensional spire crowning (and which eventually proved the downfall of) William Beckford's Fonthill Abbey. In thus framing the spire, the arch invites the beholder to marvel at the spire's delicate Gothic tracery. Besides this, there is no other reference to the Middle Ages. Indeed, this picturesque and Romantic painting presents a calm and peaceful England, with the cathedral representing the long-standing and hierarchical order of society.[12] Can this painting, whose subject seems to be modern England rather than the medieval past, in contrast to Hugo's novel which put the medieval and the modern in a metaphorical relationship, be designated medievalistic just because it represents a cathedral? And, on another level, can we even usefully look at the painting in terms of medievalism?

We might approach an answer by considering Joseph Mallord William Turner's paintings of cathedrals in their modern settings. Typically, the cathedrals dominate the city. Viewed either from a promontory or from a standpoint within the city itself, they rise gigantesque, yet light and almost transparent, above the busy nineteenth-century town. In his 1794 watercolor *Cathedral Church at Lincoln*, the cathedral might evoke the Middle Ages, indicating perhaps the historical dimension of the city; but given that landscape painting had taken on a national character at the time, it might add a nationalistic note to the work.[13] On another level, the transparency of the spires seems to evoke the spiritual realm, or the idea of transcendence, which might be-but doesn't have to be-associated with the Middle Ages, but which unquestionably contrasts with the hustle and bustle of the nineteenth-century city. Like Constable's painting discussed above, Turner's bears no medieval details outside the cathedral, and to my knowledge, none of Turner's cathedral paintings have been studied from a medievalistic point of view. If we were to do so however, what would it bring to the paintings? Would their meanings change? Would it shatter our image of Turner as harbinger of modernity?

I don't think it would, nor do I think their fundamental meanings would change. I do believe, however, that looking at them from a medievalistic perspective, would help us to better understand how the Gothic cathedral was viewed at the time and why it became a privileged painterly subject. If we contextualize these paintings within eighteenth-century and Romantic medievalism, we might see how Gothic Revival and the in-depth study of medieval archaeology played out in different ways: such as in awakening the artistic sensibility to Gothic's ornamental detail, in making knowledge of indigenous medieval artefacts-and not just Italian antiquities-necessary to the artist's education,[14] or in consolidating the idea of the Gothic's national character, which actually opened the way for other meanings besides the religious and medieval. Medievalism thus helps us see the import of the cathedral, but it does not necessarily tell us more about these particular paintings, which, to my mind, represent a non-medievalistic tendency in cathedral representations.

A more radical departure from medievalism is Eugène Delacroix's 1830 painting, *Le 28 juillet, la Liberté guidant le people*, which portrays the towers of Notre-Dame de Paris in the upper right-hand corner. Though not a cathedral painting in the sense of Constable's or Turner's, Delacroix's representation of the cathedral is an important element of the painting. On the one hand it situates the scene as the decisive moment which turned the tide of the three-day revolution, like contemporary paintings of the revolution, which also place the cathedral in the background to indicate the events of that day, when the insurgents took the cathedral, hoisting the tricolour on its towers, and later broke through the barricades to seize the Hôtel-de-ville and declare the people sovereign.[15] On the other hand, Delacroix's use of the cathedral is more than simply topical, for the structure of the painting puts the edifice in relation to Liberté, and thus connects it to the people and their quest for democracy.[16] The significance of the cathedral here is similar to its importance in the novel *Notre-Dame de Paris*, and can be more clearly understood in light of Romantic medievalism. The historians François Guizot and Augustin Thierry held the Middle Ages to be the cradle of democracy, and consequently the Gothic cathedral came to be associated with social and artistic liberty, an idea which probably influenced the study of medieval archaeology, and led French scholars to see the Gothic as a revolutionary style breaking with the traditional institutions and ways of building. Thus the cathedral is not at odds with the modernity and tradition-breaking nature of this painting, these are in fact actually underscored by an understanding of contemporary attitudes towards the Middle Ages.

A final category of cathedral representations might be called latently medievalistic, and is exemplified by Marcel Proust's *A la Recherche du temps perdu*. Although the novel is not medievalistic in the same way as Hugo's, medievalizing details are present throughout, and medieval legend and history are fundamental to the early volumes, providing a kind of map for interpreting the work as a whole. Moreover, from Proust's own writings, we know that the Gothic cathedral was fundamental to his conception of the novel,[17] and his knowledge about the edifice was gained from nineteenth-century scholars. He came to conceive of the cathedral as a motor for structuring meaning, and like a cathedral, his novel is didactic (John Ruskin's view of the cathedral), replete with signs and symbols (Emile Mâle's understanding of the edifice), and meticulously constructed (the Gothic cathedral à la Viollet-le-Duc).[18] Yet each of these characteristics need not be connected to the Gothic cathedral, they can be and have indeed been understood as novelistic principles in their own right.[19] Thus, the cathedral is part of the deep structure of *La Recherche*. It is also a remnant of nineteenth-century medievalism, which is why I have categorized it as "latent." It is not necessary to know about the cathedral or medievalism to appreciate the richness and depth of the text.

A similar relationship might be conceived between the Gothic cathedral and a skyscraper. Though early skyscrapers such as the Woolworth Building, known at the time as the "Cathedral of Commerce", and the Chicago Tribune Tower, known as the "Cathedral of Journalism", possess medievalizing details in their decoration and structure, it is neither in these details nor in their nicknames that their likeness to the Gothic cathedral is most plainly manifest: it is rather their height which connects them to the Gothic. Height was the province of sacred architecture and until the Eiffel Tower was completed in 1889, Gothic cathedrals were the tallest buildings on earth. With the Eiffel Tower, modern engineering transformed the conquest of the heavens from a medieval triumph to an unmistakable sign of modernity. It is hard to imagine this fact occurring to the tourists of New York or Chicago, but the skyscrapers in those cities are as surely rooted in nineteenth-century medievalism and Gothic Revival, as is *La Recherche*. Through the latent medievalism of a skyscraper or of *La Recherche,* both emblems of modernity in architecture and literature, the Gothic cathedral provides a link between modernity and the Middle Ages.

Conclusion

I have endeavoured to distinguish three categories in which representations of the Gothic cathedral can be understood in relation to medievalism. The first is perhaps the most straightforward: consciously medievalistic works like Hugo's *Notre-Dame de Paris* and Hasenpflug's painting of Cologne Cathedral, where the medieval setting and details contribute to the very modern meanings associated with the cathedral. The second category, which I have called anti-medievalistic, contains those representations of the cathedral which omit medievalizing elements: Constable's and Turner's paintings exemplify this tendency, as does Delacroix's *Liberté*, although the cathedral is not the main object of the painting. In the third category, which I have called latently medievalistic and illustrated with Proust's *A la Recherche du temps perdu* and the skyscraper, the connection between medievalism and the cathedral is covert, and can easily be overlooked. This latter category seems particularly apt to describe modern representations of the cathedral, perhaps because it reflects the self-consciousness characteristic of twentieth-century creative endeavours. By contrast, the first two categories have been exemplified by works from the Romantic period, but could apply to other works from other periods. Although these categories are artificial, and thus limited in their usefulness, the underlying principle of grouping works into certain types of representations is useful. On the one hand, it highlights similar means of representing the Gothic cathedral across different media, and on the other it helps to distinguish major differences in the use and portrayal

of the Gothic edifice in literary texts and the visual arts. In the end, I believe this exercise has shed light on types of medievalism that exist and has brought to the fore the various connections between medievalism and the Gothic cathedral.

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[1] In 2004 a group of French scholars founded a society for medievalism, *Modernités médievales*. Before this, the centennial celebration of Viollet-le-Duc's death had stimulated some interest in medievalism in France, as demonstrated by the exhibition catalogue *"Le Gothique retrouvé" avant Viollet-le-Duc*. Caisse National des Monuments Historiques et des Sites, 1979, but it was not until Christian Amalvi's *Le Goût du moyen âge*, Paris: Plon, 1996 that medievalism became a topic for French scholars not immediately involved in patrimony research.

[2] Richard Utz, "The Medieval Unconscious 5: Concept Cathedral," *Falling into Medievalism*, Workshop Presentation, Centre for the Study of the Cultural Heritage of Medieval Rituals, University of Copenhagen, May 19-20, 2005.

[3] This is discussed in my doctoral dissertation, *Explorations of the Gothic Cathedral in Nineteenth-Century France*. PhD Diss. Indiana University, 2002. Ann Arbor: UMI 2002. ATT 3075993. 22-33.

[4] Charles Locke Eastlake, *A History of the Gothic Revival*. 1872; Kenneth Clark, *The Gothic Revival. An Essay in the History of Taste*. 1928; Nikolaus Pevsner, *Some Architectural Writers of the Nineteenth Century*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1972; Megan Aldrich, *Gothic Revival*. London: Phaidon, 1994.

[5] I have endeavoured to show the presence and importance of the Gothic Cathedral in England through the Gothic Revival period in my dissertation.

[6] Michael J. Lewis, *The Gothic Revival*, London: Thames and Hudson, 2002; and *The Politics of the German Gothic Revival. August Reichensperger*. Cambridge, Mass. and London: The MIT Press, 1993; W.D. Robson-Scott, *The Literary Background of the Gothic Revival in Germany. A Chapter in the History of Taste*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1965; Alfred Kamphausen, *Gotik ohne Gott: ein Beitrag zur Deutung der Neugotik und des 19. Jahrhunderts*. Tübingen: Matthiesen, 1952; Klaus Niehr, *Gotikbilder-Gotiktheorien. Studien zur Wahrnehmung und Erforschung mittelalterlicher Architektur in Deutschland zwischen ca. 1750 und 1850*. Berlin: Gebr. Mann Verlag, 1999.

[7] Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *Von Deutscher Baukunst. D. M. Ervini a Steinbach. 1773*. (1772/3). in Johann Gottfried Herder, *Von Deutscher Art und Kunst*. 1773. Ed. Hans Dietrich Irmscher. Stuttgart: Philipp Reclam, 1995. 93-104; Wilhelm Worringer, *Abstraktion und Einfühlung: Ein Beitrag zur Stilpsychologie* (1907), and *Formprobleme der Gotik* (1911).

[8] *"Le Gothique retrouvé" avant Viollet-le-Duc* , 152-155. Louis Maigron, *Le Romantisme et la mode*. Paris: Librairie ancienne Honoré Champion, 1911.

[9] Victor Hugo, *Notre-Dame de Paris: 1482*. 1830. Paris: Gallimard, 1966, 1991, Note to the 1832 edition. Louis Maigron, *Le Romantisme et la mode.* Paris: Librairie ancienne Honoré Champion, 1911.

[10] This theme is discussed at length in my dissertation, 381-85.

[11] Glaser, *Explorations*, 25.

[12] I discuss this painting in detail in my dissertation, 38-40.

[13] Paulson, Ronald. *Literary Landscape: Turner and Constable*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1982. 41-44

[14] For an example of this see David Bindman, "Blake's 'Gothicized Imagination' and the History of England." *William Blake. Essays in Honour of Sir Geoffrey Keynes.* Ed. Morton D. Paley and Michael Phillips. Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1973. 29-49

[15] Contemporary paintings of the subject are discussed by Michael Marrinan, *Painting Politics for Louis-Philippe. Art and Ideology in Orléanist France, 1830-1848*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1988.

[16] Glaser, *Explorations*, 385-393.

[17] Philip Kolb, ed. *Correspondance. Marcel Proust*, Plon, 1976-87 vol. XVIII , p.288.

[18] For a more in-depth discussion see Stephanie A. Glaser, "Labyrinthe et cathédrale : architecture médiévale et écriture moderne." *Littérature et architecture contemporaine*. Ed. Pierre Hyppolite : Presses Universitaires de Limoges, forthcoming; and Stephanie A. Moore, "'Bâtir un livre.' The Architectural Poetics of *A la recherche du temps perdu*." *Das visuelle Gedächtnis der Literatur*. Ed. Manfred Schmeling, Monika Schmitz-Emans. Würzburg: Königshausen und Neumann, 1999. 188-203.

[19] See for example Gilles Deleuze, *Proust et des signes*, Paris, PUF, 1964.