Last minstrels: medievalism, emotion and poetic performance in Walter Scott and Goethe

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Abstract Walter Scott's narrative poem *The Lay of the Last Minstrel* (1805) employs the theme of improvised musical and poetic performance to an attentive audience as a model of the potential relation between a modern present and a medievalized past. Through varying fictions of 'minstrel' improvisation and its reception, both Scott's poem and Goethe's *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship* suggest the right relation of poetry to history can best be understood as neither a passing on of ancient truths nor an unalterable set of personal memories, but a changing critical 'conversation' that allows the emergence of new aesthetic and emotional alignments.

As a leading scholar has remarked, English-language literature from the mid-eighteenth century into the Romantic era developed a strong 'minstrelsy complex' (McLane, 2008, 144). Within this literary period, and beyond, the 'minstrel' takes on multiple guises: impoverished wanderer; cultural repository; national symbol; 'spokesm[a]n for freedom' (McGuirk, 1997, 144; Robinson, 2016, 134); archetypal poet; and sometimes a mixture of these categories. In the guise of the 'bard,' minstrels – and the poets who ventriloquize them – authenticate nationhood and lay claim to cultural authority. As the conduit of an imagined, loosely 'medieval,' past, the modern poet-as-minstrel asserts long-term cultural continuity, or at least creates possibilities of rapprochement with that past. Yet in the guise of 'aged' and 'last' minstrels, archaic survivors in a latter age, modern poets both assert a 'medieval' identity for themselves and their work and acknowledge the impossibility of realizing that identity when the past has already gone.

This double emotional move – simultaneously embodying the medieval past and mourning for it – has a long history. Its presence is betrayed, in one way, by the careers of James Macpherson and Thomas Chatterton, driven to write for themselves the 'medieval' poems that they claimed merely to be translating or editing. In another way, it appears as late as W. B. Yeats's 'The Curse of Cromwell,' written in 1937, which builds on poetry by Aodhagán Ó Rathaille (ca. 1675–1729) lamenting his loss of patronage and audience

(Marcus, 2001, 164–70). However it may play out for different writers, in emotional terms the impossibly trans-temporal nature of the modern ‘last minstrel’ and his poetry provides them with a way of ‘thinking how to feel’ and ‘feeling how to think’ about their relation to an imagined and medievalized past within the context of radical historical change. How far off is that past? How is it constituted? How is it desired and valued, feared and rejected? What material from it, and in what poetic form, can still ‘work’ aesthetically and emotionally for a modern audience?

In addressing these questions, imagined encounters with the medieval in musical and poetic performance take on particular interest. In a recent article, David Matthews argues, with reference to Percy’s *Reliques* and Thomas Warton, that eighteenth-century medievalist ballad romance was the particular form in which fear of the medieval was ‘killed,’ laying the basis for a ‘nostalgic reevaluation’ of it, and so sanctioning longing for a ‘primitive simplicity that has been lost’ (Matthews, 2018, 216). Something similar has been said about the generic relations of romance to history in Walter Scott’s novels: that ‘[w]hile the novels preserve romance on another level or in another form, what they represent is its death’ (Brown, 1997, 167). Harry Levin referred to Scott’s dual role as ‘last minstrel and first best-seller’ (Levin, 1963, 45). I shall argue here that in Scott’s poetry the Romantic literary trope of the last minstrel presents the relation between medieval past and modern present with a far less certain division of time and of emotional labor. My analysis focuses on *The Lay of the Last Minstrel* (1805), but reaches out briefly to related texts, including James Macpherson’s Ossian poems and Thomas Moore’s *Melodies*, and in a coda takes Goethe’s *Wilhelm Meister’s Apprenticeship* (German publication, 1796) for an outlying illustrative comparison. The argument centers on the theme of improvised musical and poetic performance to a listening audience as a model of the potential and the dangers in the present–past relationship that it creates.

Although the *Lay* shares aspects of its frame narration with Macpherson’s Ossian, its ‘minstrel,’ though often indifferently called ‘bard,’ suggests a very different relation to history from that of Macpherson’s ‘bard,’ who is never called ‘minstrel.’ Macpherson’s impression of directly rendering authentic ancient Gaelic manuscripts is altered in the *Lay* to an acknowledged improvisation more loosely ‘founded on local tradition,’ as Scott expresses it in the full title of the *Minstrelsy of the Scottish Border* (Scott, 1932, v). In Daniel Cook’s words, Scott sought to suggest ‘the spontaneous and occasional remit of traditional minstrelsy’ in a story that ‘turns on actions that are notionally unforeseen (*improvisus*) for an uninitiated reader of romantic ballads’ (Cook, 2017, 164). Macpherson had given the ancient

musician and his poem a monologic bardic grandeur, but Scott early rejected '[t]he tawdry repetitions of the Ossianic phraseology' (Lockhart, 2012, vol. 1: 36), and criticized Macpherson's homogenized medieval aura where 'all is elegance, refinement, and sensibility' (Scott, 1805, 446). By contrast, as Scott much later wrote, his old Minstrel was specifically introduced 'to remind the reader at intervals, of the time, place, and circumstances of the recitation' (Scott, 1904, 53). Where the harp in Ossian is 'the crucial accoutrement of the ancient bard,' and for Thomas Moore and his successors it personified Ireland, in Scott it is basically a tool of the trade, the sign of 'a poet' earning his living in the act of performance (Scott, 1904, 2).

Overall, in resembling himself to the minstrel as poet and performer to a present audience, not the utterer of ancient lore, Scott stresses variety in emotions, a shifting sequence of poetic moods in which both the work and performance are historicized, made contingent on the minstrel's memory, confidence and skill, and on the patronal kindness, audience appreciation and refreshment that help him surmount age, grief and loss. The contrast with Moore is strong. In Moore's relation to national history in the *Melodies*, the key words are 'remember' and 'forget not'; the unchanging maintenance of emotional ties to Ireland's past glory and present wrongs is a condition of his lyric persona's identity – 'Let Erin remember the days of old' (Moore, 1854, 54–55); 'Forget not the field where they perished' (Moore, 1854, 200–1). The harp of Erin is still in the same hands as of old, emotionally speaking. By contrast, in Scott emphasis falls on the greater uncertainty of the 'poet' in his emotional relation to historical memory, as staged in a self-consciously 'late' act of utterance under new conditions. The minstrel-poet, like a proxy for Scott himself, can 'no longer' 'pour' out an 'unpremeditated lay' to his audience, but must 'uncertain[ly]' 'recall an ancient' [and 'long-forgotten'] strain' from his 'faithless memory,' supplying the gaps by invention (Scott, 1904, 1–2). Then in the last canto Scott largely puts the central narrative aside to provide an anthological display of ballad varieties. The form and public performance of poetry take precedence as the poem's main concerns.

From the beginning, *The Lay of the Last Minstrel* presents its minstrel as a decidedly medieval maker in a tradition reaching back beyond the tradition of 'Border chivalry' (Scott, 1904, 1) to earlier times. As Michael Alexander points out, the chronology of the *Lay* is very flexible: its aged Monk, a hundred years old in the 1550s, has been a crusader and a companion of the thirteenth-century wizard Michael Scott (Alexander, 2007, 39–40). Chaucer is a major influence on the description of the last minstrel's early career: 'No more on prancing palfrey born / He caroll'd, light as lark at morn' (Scott, 1904, 1). We are in the

world of the *Knight's Tale* – ‘To the paleys rood ther many a route / Of lordes upon steedes and palfreys’ (Chaucer, 1987, 58), with reference to ‘Festes, instrumentz, caroles, daunces’ (Chaucer, 1987, 51) – and of Chaucer’s Squire and his *Tale*, where the king hears ‘his mynstralles hir thynges pleye / Biforn hym at the bord deliciously’ (Chaucer, 1987, 170). *Sir Tristrem*, a romance Scott had very recently edited from the Auchinleck Manuscript then in the Advocates’ Library in Edinburgh, speaks of ‘miche solas / Of alle maner soun / And gle; / Of ministrals up and doun’ (Scott, 1804, 166). Extracts from another item in the same manuscript, *Sir Orfeo*, had been included in Scott’s *Minstrelsy*. That poem features a ragged minstrel fallen on hard times and possessing only a harp, yet capable of bringing the (presumed) dead back to life. True poetic performance, it seems, has a continuing power not fully subject to the passage of time and change of fortune.

Accordingly, although the *Lay* is precise about the late seventeenth-century date, location and sociocultural setting of its minstrel, he is also made to stand for a much longer tradition of English medieval and later ‘romance’ literature still available to readers with a taste for it, like Scott himself. After the great public success of the *Lay, Marmion* (1808) would identify even him more confidently as a lover, and now a poet, of this genre:

But thou, my friend, can’st fitly tell,
(For few have read romance so well,)
How still the legendary lay
O’er poet’s bosom holds its sway;
How on the ancient minstrel strain
Time lays his palsied hand in vain. (Scott, 1904, 92)

In Scott’s view here, the line of ‘romance’ runs from medieval Arthurian literature, including Malory, and is filtered through Spenser and Milton down to Dryden, but Charles II’s cynical and ‘[l]icentious’ court rejects its ‘high design’ (Scott, 1904, 92–93.) In the *Lay*, which deals with Scotland in much the same period, romance falls foul of strict Presbyterian views and Hanoverian control (Scott, 1904, 1–2). Yet at the same time as Scott emphasizes the historical changes in religious culture, social organization, manners and tastes that have made romance archaic, he suggests its power survives still in imaginative literature, according to a poetic timeline that constructs history along lines of aesthetic pleasure and emotional allegiance, through which modern subjects can still feel close to the heart of the past. As Alison Lumsden writes, Scott’s method in the *Lay* tends ‘to dissolve the gulf between what has gone before and the time of story-telling’ (Lumsden, 2010, 45). This process involves nationalist sentiments – ‘O Caledonia!’ (Scott, 1904, 39) – but they themselves are

inseparable from audience emotional responses to past forms of poetry, in ways which do not fully respect normal historical periodization or socioeconomic facts. When Scott as ‘Bard’ speaks of ‘Yarrow’ and ‘Ettrick’ he means both familiar landscapes and famous names in the long tradition of border ballads. His looseness with time as story-teller, in contrast to the detailed precision of the poem’s extensive notes, violates literal historical possibility, but it accurately captures the emotional and cognitive layering of time that both a sense of place and reading from the past create in the experience of individual subjects, and it reflects the power of poetry and music to sustain continuing attachment to place. Conversely, Scott writes, when the poet’s ‘breath’ – the heard utterance of his poetry – ceases, the memory of place loses its past associations, and the environmental soundscape ceases to keep faith with the memory of its dead:

Not that, in sooth, o’er mortal urn
Those things inanimate can mourn;
But that the stream, the wood, the gale,
Is vocal with the plaintive wail
Of those, who, else forgotten long,
Liv’d in the poet’s faithful song,
And, with the poet’s parting breath,
Whose memory feels a second death. (Scott, 1904, 31)

As emotional experience, ‘history’ for Scott is intimately connected with the memory of poetry. Modern readers of Scott have noted the complications caused to the generic and period division between romance and history by ‘the strange persistence of the oral’ in Scott’s novels, which Andrew Lynn sees not as nostalgic but providing ‘a resource for the voice of self-avowedly modern works’ (Lynn, 2014, 103). ‘Song, in Scott, cannot quite be understood as the fragments of a culture, framed and sealed off from history. Song keeps turning into print, the outburst of authentic tradition into the manufactured response of modernity’ (Lynn, 2014, 117). Other studies have emphasized the theme of mediation in Scott’s verse romances – instanced in the *Lay* by its minstrel frame – as a means of making his own poetry visible as an aesthetic and social medium (Langan, 2001; McLane, 2008). I suggest here that the idea and effect of orality and musicality in *The Lay of the Last Minstrel* bears especially on the emotional relationship between ancient tradition and modern utterance. Scott is concerned to find a continuing audience for the history and the poetry that mean so much to him in a

period when the spread of literacy and printed editions of the ballads, such as his own, are weakening the oral tradition of the past. As Scott frames the *Lay*, he as its ‘LATEST MINSTREL’ (Scott, 1904, 2) – the word could mean both ‘last’ and ‘most recent’¹ – asserts a continuity with ancient maker-musicians, not by inserting quotation or direct imitation of a past style, but by showing both the minstrel and himself partaking in similar ‘open-ended’ (Cook, 2017, 164) processes of creative improvisation attuned to their present audiences. He stages his own concerns in using older metrical forms for his poem through the uncertain efforts of the aged minstrel to find his tune:

And much he wish’d, yet fear’d, to try
The long-forgotten melody.
Amid the strings his fingers stray’d,
And an uncertain warbling made,
...
But when he caught the measure wild,
The old man rais’d his face, and smil’d;
And lighten’d up his faded eye
With all a poet’s ecstasy.
In varying cadence, soft or strong,
He swept the sounding chords along:
...
Cold diffidence, and age’s frost,
In the full tide of song were lost;
Each blank, in faithless memory void,
The poet’s glowing thought supplied;
And, while his harp responsive rung,
’Twas thus the LATEST MINSTREL sung. (Scott, 1904, 2)

Scott and his minstrel, each a ‘poet’ for all their differences, both take the liberty of interpreting and adding to the ancient lay, in the way Scott had added to the ‘Historical and Romantic Ballads’ in his *Minstrelsy* ‘A Few of Modern Date, Founded Upon Local Tradition,’ including several ‘by the Editor’ (Scott, 1932, v). The *Lay* itself was originally to be an ‘imitation’ ballad of this kind (Lumsden and McIntosh, 2012, 37). ‘Local tradition,’ it seems, remains current, although its modes and circumstances of transmission may change,

because locality has continuities as well as time. Scott's minstrel, performing his 'lay' in about 1690 (Grierson, 1932, 175) is roughly as far in time from the mid-sixteenth-century events he relates – the period Scott sees as the end of the medieval in Lowland Scotland – as Scott is from the lay's imagined date of performance. The Minstrel, surviving 'the Revolution' of 1688 to catch 'somewhat of the refinement of modern poetry' and modern 'elegance of sentiment' (Scott, 1904, 1), has seen the end of the Stuarts and the Scots Catholic patronage he once knew. Scott, writing in 1805 to a mainly Protestant readership, separates his utterance almost equally in both years and sympathy from '[t]he bigots of the iron time' of 1690 (Scott, 1904, 2). In their different historical circumstances, Scott's project and his Minstrel's dovetail nicely: the rudeness of the Minstrel's ballad form is softened by touches of modern refinement; for Scott the rough form allows what he calls the 'puerile' 'machinery' of the old story to pass current with a modern audience (Scott, 1904, 1). So neither of these poet-figures is the representative of a pure tradition; their utterances are both staged as deeply contextual, hybridized by cultural change and the need to meet the tastes of different audiences: the Minstrel, fallen on hard times, and now without 'security to please' listeners of rank, anxiously sounds out the nature of his welcome at Newark Castle (Scott, 1904, 1–2); meanwhile Scott was himself carefully building an audience for the *Lay*, inserting clear references to his patron Lady Dalkeith and her husband's properties (Scott, 1904, 54–55, n.1; Olcott, 1913, 31–35) and circulating drafts of the poem 'not only to his own familiar friends, but to new and casual acquaintances' (Lockhart, 2012, vol. 2, 16).

For both Scott and his minstrel the aim is to make a performance of the past 'please' the present, and the pleasure is represented primarily as aural sensation. Despite the absence of actual 'melodies' or printed music such as Moore provided, Scott's poem is very particular about how the minstrel's lay *sounds*. His earliest reviewers mentioned his use of 'different species of verse ... individually better suited to the expression of ... different ideas, sentiments and passions' (*Critical Review*, 1805, 227). Although it has been observed that 'Scott uses a visual language for attention ... in his verse romances to model for the reader an experience of intense absorption' (Lynn, 2014, 29), readers of the *Lay* are constantly reminded that this is a music-narrative, with repeated injunctions to 'hear' and 'listen.' The poem is like a score filled with 'notes' – the word 'note' is associated with 'flame,' 'wild,' 'war,' 'woe,' 'death,' 'soft,' 'sad' and 'mirth' – and there are many interpretive markings of speed, dynamics, and 'tone.' The minstrel's harp 'swells' and 'dies,' 'resounds' and 'fades.' 'Sound,' in 'voice,' 'clang,' 'din,' 'clash,' 'murmur,' 'mutter,' 'yell,' 'cry,' 'moan' and 'shrill' is a constant presence. Sound dominates in description of the minstrel's performance, in the central story's

natural world (wind, water, rock and the ‘Spirits’ of ‘River’ and ‘Mountain’), and in the actions of its human, animal and supernatural creatures, providing a very varied narrative orchestration. The poem creates aurally for the modern listener’s present enjoyment the unrefined and elemental passions it associates with an archaic past. Moreover, it claims a license to present the violence, superstition, fantastic manners and wild horrors of the medieval as modern light entertainment – ‘my lay so light and vain’ (Scott, 1904, 47) – precisely *because* the subject matter is archaic and the ‘machinery’ is ‘puerile,’ as Scott says (Scott, 1904, 1), coming from the childhood of the modern nation. As a whole, the poem creates for readers a strange combination of distance, even bordering on disdain, in their cognitive relation to the medieval, and an aesthetic and emotional closeness to it established by sound. Scott wants to elicit both censure and affection.

In that last connection, Alexander has emphasized the playful, eclectic quality of the *Lay*’s medievalism, its ‘genial comic hyperbole’ and ‘protective self-burlesque’ (Alexander, 2007, 41–43). He suggests that Scott does not want to be seen taking the Middle Ages too seriously. Nevertheless, the plot of feud reconciliation through marriage that Scott first employs here would become a career-long staple for him. The *Lay*, the first of his major original works, introduces the ‘unextinguishable hate and defiance’ of Lowland enmity later shown in *The Monastery* of 1820 (Scott, 1906, 383) and ‘the fatal and cruel custom of deadly feud’ described in *Tales of a Grandfather* in the 1830s (Scott, 1865, 44). In her fierce opposition to her daughter’s marriage with a hereditary enemy, the *Lay*’s Countess of Branksome also looks forward to *The Bride of Lammermoor* (1819) where Lady Ashton’s pride destroys Lucy’s and Edgar’s happiness. The *Lay* is a poem about bereaved and damaged people, both in the central story and the frame: the duchess mourns her husband, the duke of Monmouth and Buccleuch, executed for rebellion in 1685 (Scott, 1904, 2), and the minstrel has lost a son fighting for Dundee at Killiecrankie in 1689, the year before the frame setting (Scott, 1904, 21). In the *Lay*’s central events, violent revenge, as in the border ballads still current, is the default response to trauma, handed down from generation to generation and remembered in detail by family descendants, including the poet himself: ‘While Ettrick boasts the line of Scott, / The slaughter’d chiefs, the mortal jar, / The havoc of the feudal wars / Shall never, never be forgot!’ (Scott, 1904, 4). With this in mind, the comic excess with which Scott renders the militarism of Branksome Hall at the poem’s outset might also be seen as part of a more serious strategy to critique the feud culture it depicts.

In this context, where ‘feudal’ basically means ‘feuding,’ the poem’s soundscape relates particularly to the theme of self-perpetuating violence – ‘[v]engeance, deep brooding

o'er the slain' (Scott, 1904, 4). The 'heavy sound' that the Countess hears 'moan' at her window (Scott, 1904, 4) is a projection from her own implacable mindset; its dynamics indicate that the source is not divine or fated but human. The elemental 'spirits' of the mountain and the river – 'polluted' with blood and tears (Scott, 1904, 5) – can foresee a potential end to feud, but they are not the operative factors: outside, the night is 'still and clear.' The problem is within:

The unearthly voices ceast
And the heavy sound was still;
It died on the river's breast,
It died on the side of the hill.
But round Lord David's tower
The sound still floated near;
For it rung in the Ladye's bower
And it rung in the Ladye's ear. (Scott, 1904, 5)

The *Lay*'s soundscape stages throughout its course a contest between the obsessive continuance of feud and the possibilities of benign resolution. It is soon made clear that in such a dysfunctional society religion cannot provide the answer because its tenets and practices simply become subsumed within the dominant culture of partisan antagonism, where 'piety,' 'love,' 'charity,' and 'grace divine' cannot operate:

... vainly to each holy shrine,
In mutual pilgrimage, they drew;
Implor'd in vain the grace divine
For chiefs their own red falchions slew. (Scott, 1904, 4)

Instead, the way forward to a better ending is found as if by adventure through an experimental mixture of character psychology, chivalric culture, clerkly knowledge and barely licit supernatural dealings.

The problematical relation between religion and feud culture is emphasized in the scene where William of Deloraine, a hardened moss-trooper of Branksome, seeks out the Monk of St. Mary's Cell at Melrose Abbey. The ambience of Melrose seems complicit with the violence of its benefactors:

The corbells were carv'd grotesque and grim;
And the pillars, with cluster'd shafts so trim,

...

Seem'd bundles of lances which garlands had bound. (Scott, 1904, 10)

And the stained glass window of St. Michael 'thr[ows] on the pavement a bloody stain.' Yet the former crusader, now penitent, Monk finds William's 'arms' 'strange to mine eyes' and their 'clang' 'strange to my ear' (Scott, 1904, 10), and the obdurate William feels 'remorse and awe' at the sight of the wizard's body (Scott, 1904, 12). The recovery of the fearful and forbidden 'mystic book' (Scott, 1904, 13), rather than normal religious ritual practice, turns out to be what Branksome needs to break its emotional deadlock of 'pride.'

The ultimately benign work of the book, nevertheless, depends upon a mixture of chance, malice and chivalry. The malevolent page, working without the knowledge or approval of any others, is unwittingly the main agent that lets the book help Branksome in its 'need.' Yet his otherwise random actions only turn out well because the better aspects of chivalry – loyalty, generosity and idealism – improvise new possibilities from the chances provided. When William of Deloraine is wounded by his enemy Richard of Cranstoun, Cranstoun takes him to Branksome to be healed, accompanied by the Goblin page who has stolen the book from Deloraine. On the English side Lord Howard is reluctant to make a full assault on Branksome. He avoids a full-scale Anglo-Scottish war by accepting instead a trial by single combat between William of Deloraine and Lord Musgrave to decide the fate of Branksome's young heir, captive to the English by the Goblin's doing, but unharmed through the decency of the English yeomen who find him. Cranstoun, the lover of the Countess's daughter Margaret, makes use of a spell stolen by the Goblin page from the magic book to disguise his entry to the castle and then takes on and wins the fight in Deloraine's arms, also obtained by the page. Deloraine generously regrets the death of his respected enemy: 'I'd give the lands of Deloraine, / Dark Musgrave were alive again' (Scott, 1904, 38). The Countess, moved by the rescue of her son – Cranstoun's victory means he will not be sent away to the English court – agrees to his marriage with Margaret. The happy ending Scott contrives, though in the fable's terms attributed to 'Fate' (Scott, 1904, 37), is shown to be the result of an improvised social performance with contributions from all sides: the boy is unharmed; Deloraine is healed; Margaret and Cranstoun remain chaste, thwarting the Goblin's plan to bring them into 'sin ... and shame' (Scott, 1904, 34); Lord Howard and the Countess restrain

vengeance; love wins over pride. It is, in effect, an ending achieved against the odds by making the best of a traumatic situation with the collective human resources available.

In a manner that would become typical of his works, Scott is less interested in the romance between Margaret and Cranstoun – ‘Needs not these lovers’ joys to tell’ – (Scott, 1904, 37) – than in the broader version of social amity and tolerance that their union represents. The presence of ancient personal and national enemies listening to minstrel performances at the marriage feast receives more attention than the ceremony itself, and provides Scott’s central image for new possibilities of social harmony. The Countess’s hospitality to minstrels matches that of the Duchess in the frame narrative, and with the same good results. She specifically commands the minstrels to begin in case the page’s malice should ‘mar the concord of the day’ (Scott, 1904, 41). Appreciation of ‘romance’ poetry unites all: ‘Both Scots, and Southern chiefs, prolong / Applauses of Fitztraver’s song’ (Scott, 1904, 44). It is only after this unity has been achieved that the Goblin page, symbol of enmity, is summoned by the wizard Michael Scott to his punishment.

While ‘love’ is one benign outcome of secular minstrelsy, another kind of music in the poem brings its complement, a salutary fear that ‘quell[s] ... pride’ (Scott, 1904, 5; 37). After the Goblin page is taken to his doom in a thunderbolt, the whole company at Branksome is filled with ‘terror,’ and makes a penitential return to Melrose Abbey, but now without the ‘feudal’ attitudes which previously made religious aid useless: ‘No lordly look, nor martial stride, / Gone was their glory, sunk their pride, / Forgotten their renown’ (Scott, 1904, 47). Scott invokes a mid-sixteenth-century monastic performance of the *Dies irae* to ‘close’ the *Lay*’s central story (Scott, 1904, 47), turning to the last days of Scottish monastic tradition for an endpoint of the medieval. Yet the Melrose scene also offers his readers a live pre-Reformation point of religious contact, uniting them with past believers in the common expectation of death, judgment and eternity. There may be censure of medieval error and superstition in the vows of the chiefs to various saints, pilgrimage to a shrine, and prayer for the souls of the dead (Scott, 1904, 46–47). But prayer for divine intercession to save the living from future punishment for sin is current Protestant orthodoxy, and asserts a deeper continuity with the medieval past: ‘Be THOU the trembling sinner’s stay, / Though heaven and earth shall pass away’ (Scott, 1904, 47). Melrose Abbey, which first features in the *Lay* as a picturesque ruin (Scott, 1904, 8), a local casualty of religious history, ends it as an unlikely moral center, with its ‘holy Fathers’ (Scott, 1904, 47) made ancestral figures. The collective and public nature of the event is crucial. Here, as in the ancient minstrel’s ability to reach a new audience with an old story, the point made is that human emotional

communication – and humane identity itself – are not simply externally controlled by historical alterations in beliefs, manners and societal forms. Through poetic performance they can persist across time and change as ‘feeling ... generated *in public*’ (Lynn, 2014, 9). Scott’s translation of a medieval Latin sequence as a vernacular ‘Hymn for the Dead’ to ‘close’ his ‘lay’ (Scott, 1904, 47) and the minstrel’s adaptive performance of local history in poetry that keeps it accessible to the present are instances and emblems of this humane potential.

Beside Scott’s *Lay*, Goethe’s *Wilhelm Meister’s Apprenticeship* (1796) must appear radically different in its narrative mode, size and scope, in its core themes of self-realization and social reform, and its plot of reconciling the hero’s ‘lived experience of the ideal ... with concrete social reality’ (Lukacs, 1963, 132). What influence it might have had on Scott’s *Lay*, if any, is uncertain. Scott had earlier translated a play by Goethe, and the first drafts of his *Waverley* (1814) in 1805, the year of the *Lay*’s publication, have been claimed to show the influence of *Wilhelm Meister* (Salmon, 2018, 59). A much later Scott novel, *Peveril of the Peak* (1823), rewrites Goethe’s *Mignon* (Steedman, 1998, 29; Cave, 2011, 128–34). The *Lay* is certainly no Bildungsroman, and Goethe’s harper could in no way serve as a guise for the author himself as Scott’s does, but he and his associate Mignon bring into play an interest like Scott’s in the emotional relation between the historical freight of the past and the performative possibilities of the present. In a text where the benign potential of youth has ‘symbolic centrality’ (Moretti, 2000, 5), their music introduces a strong counter-symbolism. Goethe’s old harper knows ‘a great number of songs which he hoped might please’ his audience. He draws on a stock repertoire, yet sings a song ‘with so much vigour and sincerity, that he seemed to have composed it at that moment, specially for this occasion’ (Goethe, 1995, 72). Like Scott’s minstrel, but more so, he rules his audience’s emotions while performing:

He sang of harmony and grace in limpid mellifluous phrases; but, suddenly, the music became harsh, discordant, and troubled when he expressed his disapproval of acrimonious indifference, short-sighted enmities and the dangers of strife – shackles of the mind that everyone listening was all too ready to cast off as the melody of his song soared upwards into praise of all peacemakers and of men’s joys at rediscovering each other. (Goethe, 1995, 72)

In this incarnation, the harper seems a bringer of social harmony, well fitted to operate in the idealist patriarchal schemes of moral education that Wilhelm will encounter later on: ‘singing

is like an airy spirit leading us heavenward and inducing our better self to follow' (Goethe, 1995, 72). Yet after receiving a drink of wine – as his song has hinted – the old man also agrees to accompany a crude song simply to please the increasingly drunken company. William praises the natural 'dramatic expression' of the harper's performance: 'music that tells stories really touches us' (Goethe, 1995, 74). But the theatre manager speculates cynically that he sings more for money than to inspire the world with his art. The end of the scene sees the group in a worse humor than before.

Later on the same day, feeling 'ill-tempered,' Wilhelm hears the 'somber, deeply moving music' of the harper, 'accompanied by anguished melancholy singing' of pain, grief and guilt. He begins a 'conversation' with the old man, whose contribution is in music and song alone:

The old man responded, as though agreeing with everything the young man said, by producing music that evoked all kinds of similar feelings and opened up the full range of the imagination. (Goethe, 1995, 79)

Again the impact of the scene is ambivalent. The narration likens the scene to a pietist prayer meeting in which the emotional associations aroused by a progressive exchange of hymns leaves members 'edified, quickened and fortified' and argues that from it 'our hero could receive only good in his present state' (Goethe, 1995, 79). Yet in enjoying having his own feelings mirrored back to him and enhanced by the harper, and so effectively containing the proceedings within an emotional loop, William fails to explore the old man's continued references to 'pain,' 'torment,' and 'guilt' in his songs (Goethe, 1995, 78–79). He learns nothing of the minstrel's feelings from their 'conversation.' His careless treatment of Mignon, another consequence of his emotional self-absorption, is one cause of her subsequent decline and death. Emotionally, he is only listening to himself.

As Goethe's long story progresses, the harper, intermittently encountered, becomes an ever more troubling figure. He commits crimes of arson and attempted murder, suffers spells of insanity, keeps threatening Wilhelm's hopeful child Felix, and eventually performs a slow suicide. We learn at the last of his youthful alternation of religious mania with amorality, his incestuous fathering of Mignon, and the subsequent life of guilt, depression and terror that has often pervaded his songs, and prevented them both from ever 'find[ing] a homeland' (Moretti 2000, 19). Mignon's song 'Kennst du das Land' ('Do you know the land where the lemon trees grow?') holds the secret of her abduction as a child from northern

Italy, and may reflect the harper's own talk of 'those groves where lemons and pomegranates surround us, and the tender myrtle unfolds its delicate blossoms' (Goethe, 1995, 357). His songs of misery and sin and hers of longing for a lost life and a 'Father' are related to their tragic story. He, and with him Mignon, are revealed to be of Catholic origin, and the lives of both outline a struggle between the strictures of the Church and the urgings of Nature. The harper is brother to an Italian marchese, a connoisseur in art, who identifies Mignon as his lost niece by 'the image of the Crucified One' tattooed on her arms (Goethe, 1995, 353). In all, the harper's seeming potential as enlightened emotional guide is fatally compromised by his guilty Gothic past – the dark side of the innocent medieval that Mignon represents: loyalty, 'humility' and 'self-debasement' (Goethe, 1995, 353). He remains an unredeemable figure, and a warning that song's ability to arouse passions and feed imagination on them is highly dangerous when principles of moral and social order are lacking.

I am not suggesting that Scott's *Lay* takes us very far into the mysterious and ironic atmosphere of Goethe's novel. But in his own way it also stages the uncertain relation between poetry and history. In each case, poetic performance is seen as multiply informed: by past history, personal memory, creative invention, and the disposition of the hearers. In both texts, the right relation of poetry to history, as of the present to the past, is understood as being a changing critical 'conversation' rather than simply a passing on of ancient truths *from* the past or an unalterable set of memories *of* the past. Poetry does not provide an authentic history, or undo historical change, but attention to its creative performance allows us new alignments with the past over the course of time. Scott, typically, models the happy opportunities in this scenario: the *Lay* shows social harmony prevailing over ancient feud; the last minstrel finds new patronage in his old age; a modern feeling for local history and ancient poetry 'recall[s]' the medieval past into a higher regard. And in the terms of 'media history,' as Nick Bujak says, Scott 'ends up suggesting [that] ... the form of print media (and the narrative voice that dwells in its pages) comes temporarily to interpenetrate (or intermediate) itself with the form of oral poetics' (Bujak, 2014, 699–700).

In Goethe, the tragic and ironic prevail: the brilliantly improvisatory harper represents a temporary power in poetic art to direct, uplift and console, yet also shows the song and the kind of 'medieval' past he represents as hopelessly entangled with unregulated passions rather than controlling or rising above them. As an extreme contrast to the Harper's grim end, the book's other medievalized singer, Mignon, more valued dead than alive, is entombed in an intellectualized ceremony that belies the deeply passionate nature of her songs. Eternized in marble, with 'balsam' instead of 'blood' in her veins, she is made an

artifact to provide a sanitized view of history. The book's last musical utterance is a hymn to her new status by four 'boys' dressed in white:

The treasure now is well preserved; the beauteous image of the past! Unconsumed, in marble it rests; in your hearts it lives and works.

Here song and poetry, pressed into the service of a 'zeal' that 'alone transforms life into eternity' (Goethe, 1995, 352), may gain in idealism, but lose their sensuous and spontaneous appeal, and with that, it seems, their social capacity and ability to reach an audience's emotions. All is scripted and staged. Improvisation is excluded in the cause of moral and mental guidance, but to little avail: at Mignon's funeral, we are told, 'no one heard ... the fortifying message, so absorbed were they all in the strange revelations and their own feelings' (Goethe, 1995, 354). The conclusion seems to be that poetry cannot in itself either stabilize the emotions of the present or make the past live eternally. What it can do with time depends on the combined work of the performer and the audience, and the kind of conversation established between them.

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NOTES

- 1 See *OED* online, s.v. ‘latest,’ adj., n., and adv. A 1: ‘Last, final. Now *rare* (*arch.* and *poet.* in later use),’ and A 3: ‘Most recent; (in later use also) belonging to or characteristic of the most up-to-date fashion or trend.’