



Western Literature: Concepts and Questions

Ernst Robert Curtius
European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages

Ernst Robert Curtius (1886-1956)

Why European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages? (*Europäische Literatur und Lateinisches Mittelalter* published in 1948, English translation in 1953)

“My book is not the product of purely scholarly interests, [but] grew out of a concern for the preservation of Western culture. It seeks to serve an understanding of the Western cultural tradition in so far as it is manifested in literature. It attempts to illuminate the unity of that tradition in space and time by the application of new methods. In the intellectual chaos of the present, **it has become necessary, and happily not impossible, to demonstrate that unity.**”
 (“Foreword to English edition” viii)

relation past – present

methodology:

- historical approach – comparative philology
- show continuity – construct tradition

Ernst Robert Curtius (1886-1956)



1. Biography & Works
2. Analysis
3. Reception

1. Biography

- born in Alsace region
- German, bilingual household
- studied comparative philology
- University Bonn (1929 - 1951): Chair of Romance Literature and Language
- 1930s: starts working on *ELLMA*



1. Biography

Peter Godman, in *Ernst Robert Curtius and the Genesis of ELLMA* (1990), describes Curtius as “a German mandarin” (601):

“Students at the university of Bonn in the 1930s used to say that Hans Naumann was the professor of German and Ernst Robert Curtius the professor of everything else.” (605)

personal contacts with influential figures of international modernism: T.S. Eliot, Ortega y Gasset, Jung, Joyce...

Curtius's ‘modernism’: relation past – present

selected works

1919. *Die literarische Wegbereiter des neuen Frankreich.*

1925. *Französischer Geist im neuen Europa.*

- scholarship aimed at “a creative refashioning of Franco-German relations” (Godman 612)

E.J. Richards in *Modernism, Medievalism, Humanism* (1983):

- “Despite his original difficulties in finding a publisher, Curtius found an eager audience for his exposition of contemporary French authors among a postwar German public anxious to understand the sources of their former enemy’s strength, either as a first step toward reconciliation or as a means of understanding the debacle of Germany’s unexpected defeat at the hands of the ‘decadent’ French.” (6)

selected works

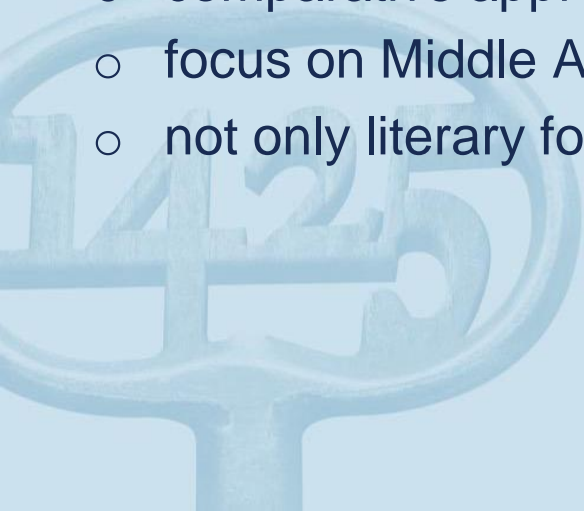
1932. *Deutscher Geist in Gefahr* turning point!

- more critical of Nazi-regime
- plea for supranational humanism
- historical example: Charlemagne's empire (742-814 AD)

starts working on *ELLMA* in 1930s

→ historical and transcultural orientation:

- comparative approach: exceeds national traditions
- focus on Middle Ages: before rise of modern nation-state
- not only literary focus, but comprehensive cultural history





2. Analysis

“My book, as I said, is not the product of purely scholarly interests. It grew out of vital urges and under the pressure of a concrete historical situation. But **in order to convince, I had to use the scientific technique which is the foundation of all historical investigation: philology**... The accidental truths of fact can only be established by philology. Philology is the handmaid of the historical disciplines.

But if the subject of this book is approached through philological technique ... [this] is not an end in itself. **What we are dealing with is literature – that is, the great intellectual and spiritual tradition of Western culture as given form in language.** It contains imperishable treasures of beauty, greatness, faith. It is a reservoir of spiritual energies through which we can flavor and ennoble our present-day life.” (“Foreword” x)

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Curtius: attention for recurrent *topoi*

“Originally [...] **topoi** are helps toward composing orations. [...] with the extinction of the Greek city-states and the Roman Republic [...] rhetoric lost its original meaning and purpose. Hence it **penetrated into all literary genres**. Its elaborately developed system became the common denominator of literature in general.

This is the most influential development in the history of antique rhetoric. By it the topoi too acquire a new function. **They become clichés**, which can be used in any form of literature, they spread to all spheres of life with which literature deals and to which it gives form. In late Antiquity we see the new ethos give birth to new topoi. **To trace this development will be one of our tasks.**” (ELLMA 70-71)

topology as method

“To study the tradition of topos is empirically to acquire the schemata by which the vast indigest mass of medieval literature can be organized. Tracing their anonymous recurrence is like writing art history without names, rather than a conventional chronology of individual masters” (Godman 633).

→ critical reception of topological approach: see part 3



Ch. 1: European Literature

book start with defense of historical scholarship:

- historical research can lead to a “widening of consciousness” (3)
- “can be of significance to the solution of practical problems” (3)

→ dynamic image of history:

“According to Toynbee, the life curves of cultures do not follow a fatally predetermined course... The individual cultural movements take their place in a general movement, which is not to be conceived as progress but as ascent... This ascent from the depths of subman and of stationary primitive man is a rhythm in the cosmic pulse beat of life.” (6)

transhistorical and philosophical dimension

- ex. Henri Bergson (8-9) on the creative imagination

→ literature exists in a “timeless present” (15), linking historical reality with a larger dimension

Ch. 1: European Literature

Why study Europe?

- "Europeanization of the historical picture has today become a political necessity, and not only for Germany" (7)
- cf. Kundera on 'provincialism'

How?

- "not in the geographical sense but in the historical sense" (9)
→ focus not on European history around 1500, but on Middle Ages

Curtius argues that this project requires a new methodology

- limitations of existing disciplines (11-12)

Ch. 1: European Literature

“[Modern *Literaturwissenschaft*] is incompetent as a discipline for the investigation of European literature for two reasons: a deliberate narrowing down of the field of observation and a failure to recognize the **autonomous structure of literature**. European literature is coextensive in time with European culture, therefore embraces a period of some twenty-six centuries (reckoning from Homer to Goethe).” (12)



Ch. 1: European Literature

“To see European literature as a whole is possible only after one has acquired citizenship in every period from Homer to Goethe. This cannot be got from a textbook. Even if such a textbook existed. One acquires the rights of citizenship in the country of European literature only when one has spent many years in each of its provinces and has frequently moved around from one another. **One is European when one has become a *civis Romanus*.** The division of European literatures among a number of unconnected philologies almost completely prevents this.” (12)

Ch. 1: European Literature

“[The student] has only to familiarize himself with the methods and subjects of classical, medieval Latin, and modern philology... He will learn that European literature it is an **intelligible unit** which disappears from from view when it is cut to pieces.” (14)

→ study of national traditions falls short: Curtius stresses the need for a comparative and transnational approach

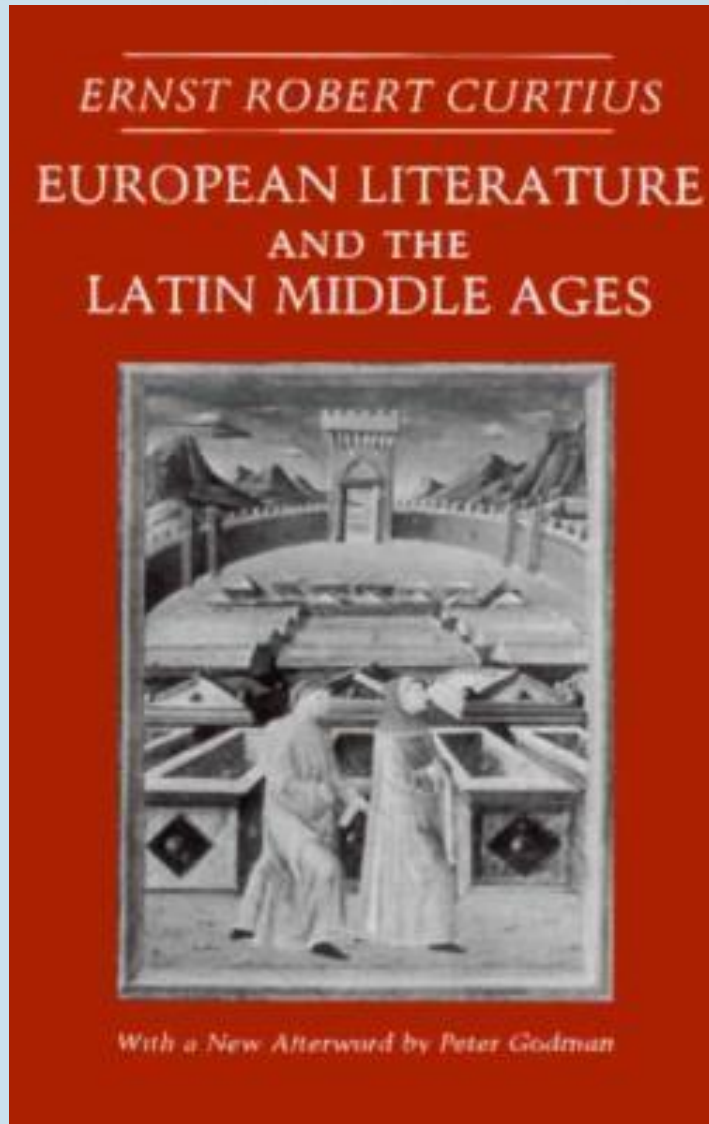
Ch. 2: The Latin Middle Ages

Five sections: what is the purpose of each? How does each section contribute to the general argument?

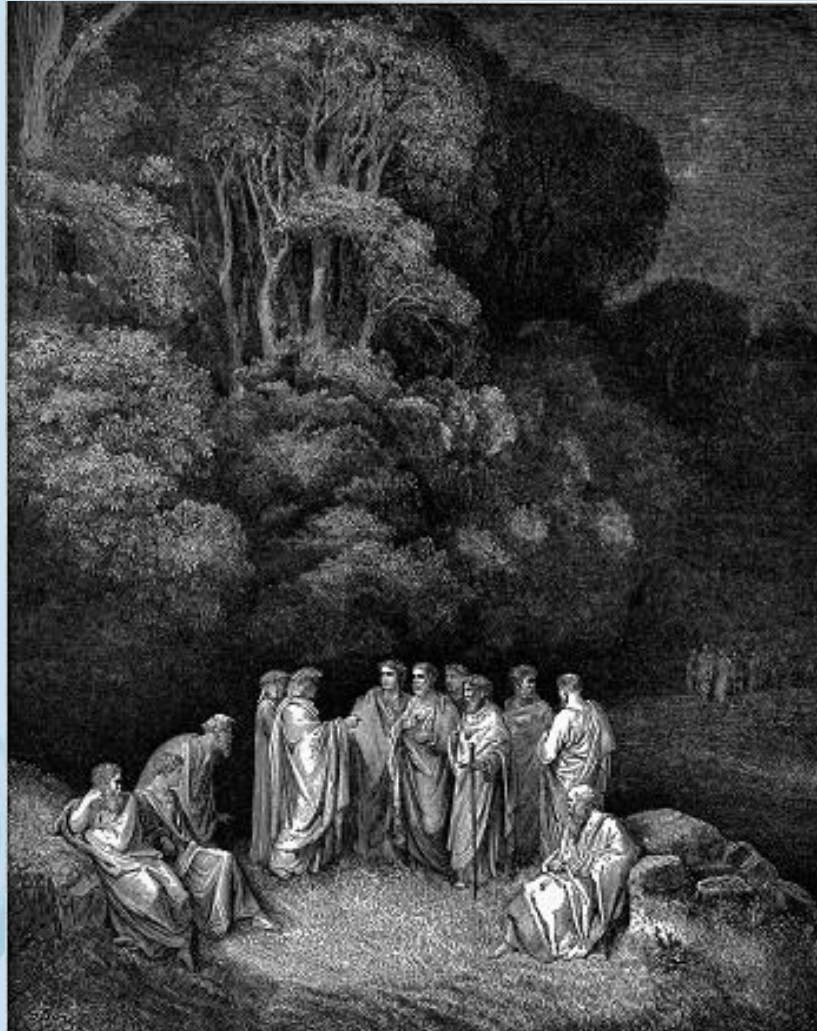
1. Dante and the Antique Poets
2. Antique and Modern Worlds
3. The Middle Ages
4. The Latin Middle Ages
5. Romania



cover English edition: Vergil leading Dante



Dante and *la bella scuola*



Villard de Honnecourt (1200-1250)



Raimbaut de Vaqueiras (1180-1207)

‘proof’ of Romania: multilingual poem

“Eras quan vey verdeyar”

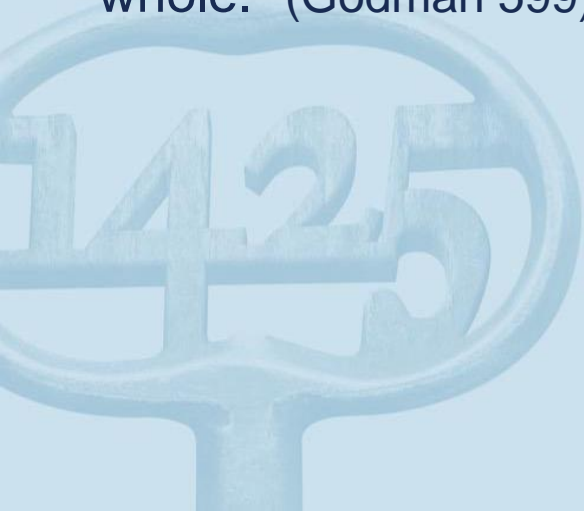
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3. reception ELLMA

“Thank you for your magnificent book. I do not know when I shall ever find time to read the whole of it.” (T.S. Eliot, letter to Curtius, 1949)

“Who has read and understood the whole of ELLMA? Curtius’s magnificent book, widely diffused and discussed, has become an **international monument that towers above the landscape of provincial literary studies**. No one can afford to ignore it. But like many monuments, its parts have proved easier to appreciate than the foundations and structure of the whole.” (Godman 599)



3. reception

“[*ELLMA*] almost immediately received an overwhelmingly positive response. Reviewers were sensitive to the ‘plea for Europe’ which stood behind the work and which critics viewed as the major ‘political’ statement of the book (...). No contemporary reviewer specifically refers to Curtius as an ‘intellectual resistance fighter’. That Curtius’ writings stemmed from his staunch opposition to Nazism was, however, clear to all reviewers.” (Richards 14)



3. reception

- 1953. English translation
“one of the first books of postwar continental scholarship considered sufficiently seminal by the Bollingen Foundation to be translated into English” (Godman 599)
- 1955. Spanish translation
- 1956. French translation
- 1957. Portuguese translation



3. reception

“One is inevitably reminded of Paul Lehmann’s suggestion in 1952 that Curtius’ book requires a second volume on literary discontinuities. Moreover, one should not forget that Curtius himself viewed the synthesis proposed in ELLMA as provisional at best (...). Thus a major problem in the reception of ELLMA lies in the mistake of succeeding generations of students in having turned a provisional synthesis into a fixed system or ‘research paradigm’.” (Richards 1983:16)



Erich Auerbach, *MLN* 65:5 (1950): 348-351.

“Mr. Curtius presents a unique combination of scholarship and modern literary background, of largeness of horizon and philological accuracy, of commonsense and refinement (...) a monument of powerful, passionate and obstinate energy.”

“Curtius is **less interested in certain basically Christian phenomena than in the continuity of classical patterns** (...). Furthermore, he has an almost exclusively aesthetic and literary approach to the Middle Ages – and he neglects, and sometimes seems to underestimate, its popular trends. Thus, this is magnificent book, a model of modern combinative and perspective scholarship, yet presents a somewhat **incomplete and one-sided picture** of the European Middle Ages.”

Leo Spitzer, *American Journal of Philology* 70:4 (1949): 425-431

“Personally, I am not convinced that **topology** is a new *method* – it is only a new, and very rich, source of historical information (...) a more systematic approach to the ultimate outward sources. But it is also platitudinously true that **the sum total of the sources does not explain the inward form of a particular work of art**. Does Curtius forget that the great work of art is always unique and that art strives for uniqueness? (...) The “common-place” in a poetic work is the prepoetic, that which has been dissolved and reworked into a new, the poet’s idiom.”



“**Curtius**, with his characteristic absolutism, tells us (...) that his historical-philological method should take the place of **history of ideas** (to which it obviously contributes), of the study of national temperaments, of aesthetic criticism (...) – in short, most of the recent trends in literary scholarship seem now superfluous or obsolete to him. But Curtius seems here to be throwing out the baby with the bath.”

“The admirable work of Erich **Auerbach**, *Mimesis*, written by a German in exile without any resentment against current German movements and interpreting, historically *and* aesthetically, individual texts that cover the same span of twenty-six centuries (...) leads us farther into the inner sanctum of medieval poetry. Such books truly interpret the **individual work of art** while Curtius informs us, more completely than his predecessors, about its general background.”

Max Laistner, *Speculum* 24:2 (1949): 259-263.

“The whole picture is badly out of focus because the author completely **neglects** both **the catalogues of mediaeval libraries** and the extant **manuscripts**.”



! important omissions:

- lacks consideration of lyric poetry and theatre
- lyric poetry: neglects influence from Islam
- neglects popular tales and Celtic subject matter

“Cet ouvrage entremêle de façon parfois inextricable les jugements subjectifs et les démonstrations objectives. Il **comporte une sorte de finalisme: l’auteur veut prouver une certaine vérité, qu’il semble admettre par postulat**: à savoir l’unité littéraire européenne. Mais en même temps, il fournit un ensemble si écrasant de preuves contrôlables, qu’il emporte une large conviction.”

[This work intertwines, in an often inextricable manner, subjective judgements and objective demonstration. It **projects a kind of finality: the author wants to prove a certain truth, which he appears to posit by postulate**: namely the European literary unity. Yet meanwhile, he presents such an overwhelming set of verifiable proof that he largely convinces.]

Harald Weinrich, *Romanic Review* 69:4 (1978):
261-277.

“Let us not look for ... an explicit theory in Ernst Robert Curtius. There is none (...). Running to the facts, that is what Curtius does The adequate method of scholarship therefore is observation, patiently trained observation, in order to become more and more sensitive to the concrete cultural facts. (...) Now is this faculty learnable, is it teachable? Certainly not in the direct way.”

“There was in Curtius – we have to admit it – **a certain tendency to overcome history**, once and for all.”

