*“European Literature” (1948)*

*Ernest Robert Curtius*

* **Advances in Historical Knowledge**

🡪 Advances in understandings of nature have advanced since the 19th century

🡪 This includes historical knowledge (“forms of thought”) which differ from knowledge of nature (“forms of life” ex: developments on the periodicity of the chemical elements)

🡪 This leads to a widening and clarification of consciousness, which is not impractical, but useful in that it can be used to resolve practical problems left unsolved by the narrowness of consciousness

🡪 But to enter developments in Historical Knowledge is always based on voluntary participation, leading Curtius to say that “the protagonists of progress in historical understanding are always isolated individuals.”

* **Key Developments**

🡪 “Through publications of sources and the excavations of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries an immense amount of material accrued to history.”

🡪 Curtius “others” the “erotic cultures” of the Mayas or of ancient India. Says that European Culture contrasts these “erotic cultures” and other findings based on its unique positioning as an “intelligible unit.” This leads to definition of “Europeanism” (Troeltsch)

* **World War I and European Culture**

🡪 Of course, The first world war brought the question of a European Culture into crisis.

🡪 “How do cultures, and the historical entities which are their media, arise, grow, and decay?”

🡪 Toynbee as historian who tries to answer this question by a comparative morphology of cultures

* **The 21 Historical Units**

🡪 Divides the course of history into 21 “units” (also called historical entities which “we may call cultures”) which a historian can look at the obtain “intelligible fields of study”

🡪 Each historical entity is faced with problems via its physical and historical environment. How they respond to such problems shapes their destiny

🡪 EX: Greek City States from 725 to 325 BCE are a part of the same historical entity, but how each individually reacts to the common problem of “an increasing inadequacy of the food supply as a result of population growth” will differ between the city states.

- Corinth and Chalcis choose to colonize overseas

- Sparta conquered its neighbour Messene

- Athens specialized his agricultural and industrial programs

🡪 According to Toynbee, “Though their courses are analogous, every culture is unique because it has freedom of choice between different ways of behaving. Individual cultural movements may be independent of one another, but they may also be connected genealogically.”

🡪 This applies to Antiquity and the West or Oldy Syriac and Arabic cultures

\*\*\*”The individual cultural movements take their place in a general movement, which is not to be conceived as progress but as ascent. […] like men climbing a cliff – some remain behind, others mount higher and higher. \*\*\*

* **Guiding Minorities**

🡪 Within the historical units, there are some minority individual cultural movements that ultimately move the majorities to them. This leads to “the rise of an inner and outer proletariat, and thus to loss of social unit” according to Curtius

* **Historical Units and Europe**

🡪” Europe is merely a name, a geographical term if it is not a historical entity in our perception.” But schools, according to Curtius, do not teach General European history, they teach the coexistence of unconnected histories of peoples and states, dismembering Europe into geographical fragments.

🡪 Simultaneously, Europe is dismembered in terms of time by separating it between the current division of Antiquity, the Middle Ages, and the Modern Period

* **Freedom and the 20th Century**

🡪 Sees a Europeanization of history in the 20th century that wasn’t there in the curriculums of school before

🡪 This is in part out of political necessity. Concepts of freedom allow for the questioning of religion and science. Historians are now looking back to the past for clues about the rise of culture. Also thinks this can tell us about “the number of human cultures yet to be expected”

🡪 “The convergence of our knowledge of nature and our knowledge of history into a new, ‘open’ picture of the universe is the scientific aspect of our time.

* **History and Fiction**

🡪 Looking at history from comparative perspective is attainable when looking at the six millenniums of development in front of us. But if one imagines the stretch of history to be ten times or hundred times as long, scientific technique becomes impossible, and “it must yield to a poetic form of presentation” (such as, for Curtius and Toynbee, the *Divina Commedia*)

🡪 “The creative imagination which makes myths, stories, poems, is a primary function of mankind.”

* **Bergson and *élan vital***

🡪 Bergson looks at cosmic process under the image of *élan vital*, meaning life force

🡪 While bees are completely guided by instinct, making them unchangeable, humans are guided by a realized consciousness, revealed partially in development of intellect which accompanies instinct.

🡪 But with the development of an intellect not solely guided by instinct (as with the bees), individuals and society are more at risk. This developing risk associated intellect is only “kept in check” by facts or perceptions.

🡪 How then does “Nature” respond to this? By the production of fictitious perceptions and facts that keep the intellect from falling to far into risk.

- “Since the intellect reacts only to perceived images, instinct creates ‘imaginary’ perceptions.”

- These perceptions can take the form of superstition, showing why “only intelligent beings are superstitious.”

🡪 Thus the “fiction-making function” has become “necessary to life.” (Also called “fabulatory function”

🡪 Bergson thus sees the “fiction-making function” in biological terms. It comes from “Nature,” “Life,” or “the creative drive” which underlies both

\*\*This ‘fabulatory function’ is the “root & inexhaustible spring of all great literature” \*\*\*

* **Europe from a (Literary) Historical Sense**

🡪 Wants to look at Europe outside of the geographic sense, in accordance with advancements in education today (see Freedom and the 20th Century bullet point)

🡪 “If Europe is an entity which participates in two cultures (two historical units), the Antique-Mediterranean” and the “Modern-Western,” thus is also true of its literature.

🡪 BUT that literature then can only be understood as a whole IF the two components are united in one view. This is contractor to those who state that European literature does not begin until about 1500.

🡪 Analogy of the Rhine:

- By saying European literature only started in 1500, is the same as only viewing the Rhine from Mainz to Cologne.

-If “Medieval” literary history, beginning in about 1000, is taken into account, that takes one’s view of the Rhine to Strassburg.

- BUT what about the stretch from 400 to 1000 that would take the view of the rhine to Basel? This is stretched over in silence because, it is in Latin. Why in Latin? “Because the Germanic peoples, as we have indicated, allowed themselves to be assimilated by Rome in the form of the Roman Church.

-But still, must go back even further if we are to connect Modern-Western literature with the Antique-Mediterranean.

🡪 Attempts to show the ties between Germany, the Roman Empire, and Rome via testimony of some poets.

🡪 Just as the history of Europe was dismembered in two different ways (geography and temporal separations) so as the literary history of Europe been separated. Curtius talks about how the curriculum tends to separate literature into periods that align with arti-historical system of periodization by successive styles (Romanesque, Gothic, Renaissance, Baroque, Etc.).

-This is followed by the “essence-intuition” meaning that each stylistic period than endows these artists with a special “essence;” the “Gothic man” the “Baroque man” and etc.

- Of course, this forms literary problems because then you get questions of what “era” some writers fall under. Is Shakespeare Renaissance or Baroque?

- This mode of investigation for literature (called Literaturwissenchaft) is thus incompetent as a disciple for the investigation of European Literature because it

1.) deliberately narrows the field of observation

2.) fails to recognize the autonomous structure of literature

🡪 European Literature should be viewed as coextensive in time with European culture, therefore embracing a period of some twenty-six centuries (Homer to Goethe)

\*\*\* “Anyone who knows only six or seven of these from his own observation and has to rely on manuals and references for the others is like a traveller who knows Italy only from the Amps to the Arno and gets the rest from Baedeker. Anyone who knows only the Middle Ages and the Modern Period does not even understand these two.” \*\*\*

\*\*\* “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 get 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 about from one to another. \*\*\*

\*\*\*One is a European when one has become a *civis Romanus*\*\*\*

* **National Literatures**

🡪 Modern philologies disrupt the unity of European Literature by dividing it unconnected national literatures.

🡪 This development can principally be dated back to the establishments of nationalities under the pressure of the Napoleonic superstate (19th century)

🡪 Ironically, the specialization of modern philologies in accordance with national literatures has provided a significant number of resources and linguistic equipment that would make it possible (possibly even more possible) for one to see the universalization of European literature… But it is hardly approached this way.

🡪 some of these resources include new translations, the ability of the printing press to create lots of copies. (This differs from art in which one loses a sense of the objects essence via photographs of the real thing, according to Curtius. This is not the “whole thing” whereas we can have the whole thing with the literary text).

\*\*\* More importantly, modern philology can be used to help us understand the “difficult” passages of a text in our journey through European Literature.

* **The Latin Middle Ages**

🡪 The Latin Middle Ages is, according to Curtius, the primary “piece of the Rhine” that has been ignored in the history of European literature.

🡪\*\*\* EVEN THOUGH “the historical view makes it clear that precisely this stretch occupies a key situation as the connecting link between declining Antiquity and the Western world which was so very slowly taking shape.”\*\*\*

🡪 This period is left to a small number of specialists under the title “medieval Latin philology.” For everyone else, it is more divided into specializations (Scholastic historians, medieval Latinists, political historians, etc) who rarely engage with one another… “THUS THE MIDDLE AGES IS DISEMBERED INTO SPECIALTIES WHICH HAVE NO CONTACT.”

🡪 Without a general disciple for Middle Ages, the study of European Literature is hard to come by. This is why book titled “European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages”

* **Guardians of Zion?**

🡪 Title given to those, according to Curtius, who act as gatekeepers for the model of academic specialties.

🡪 But Curtius doesn’t care about their opinions as “The problem of the broadening of our humanistic disciplines is real, pressing, general – and solvable” (via Latin Middle Ages)

* **European Literature**

🡪 Student who take up Classical, Medieval Latin, & Modern Philology will, in the process, learn enough to “see the modern national literatures with different eyes.”

🡪 European Literature is an “Intelligible Unit” which disappears from view when it is cut to pieces.

🡪 Interesting that he says Literature is the medium of idea and art isn’t. I think he is also just trying to generally separate the two as, in Bullet point titled “Europe from a (Literary) Historical Sense” he doesn’t want their developments to be conflated

🡪 For literature, all the past is present, or can become so. He refers to this as “the timeless present” which carries a bit of an almost spiritual weight to it.

\*\*This leads to an inexhaustible wealth of possible interrelations. \*\*

* **The “Science of European Literature”**

🡪 As Curtius notes, one can only find the structures hidden in European Literature by comparative perusal of literatures, using history and philology as methodological guides

🡪 This leads him to say the universities ultimately fail at providing such a model. That a modernized study of European literature in line with his ideas must be implemented.

🡪 European Literatures founder is Homer, and its last universal author is Goethe.

*“The Latin Middle Ages” (1948)*

*Ernest Robert Curtius*

* **Dante and the Antique Poets**

🡪Dante’s meeting with the Antique Poets in the *Divina Commedia* legitimizes his poetical mission; the six writers represent a selection from the antique Parnassus, a “school” that epitomizes the medieval idea of Antiquity:

🡪 On Homer:

- “The first among equals” (primus inter pares)

- It isn’t just Homer he meets

- in the Middle Ages, medieval Antiquity is Latin Antiquity, So Homer is important but not the singular best (though the name still has to be listed)

🡪 On Virgil:

- The great poet for Dante, as well as to Late Antiquity and the whole of the Middle Ages, is actually Virgil.

- Why is Virgil so great? Because while there would be no *Aeneid* without Homer – no Virgilian journey through the other world without Odysseus’ descent into Hades – there would be no Divina Commedia without Virgil.

- Greek Antiquity is important, but it also comes through Roman antiquity, such as Virgil, for the Middle Ages.

🡪 On Horace:

- The representative of Roman Satire.

🡪 On Ovid:

- Ovid was appreciated differently for the Middle Ages than for us today

- The *Metamorphoses* served as a “Who’s who” for a thousand of questions. You would have to know Ovid in order to understand Latin poetry.

- Ovid was also a treasury of morality

🡪 On Lucan:

- Versed in the underworld and witchcraft

- Source for the Roman Civil War

- Source for the panegyrist of the austere Cato of Utica

🡪 On Statius:

- Source for the Theban War

-“The Take of Thebes” was a favourite book in the Middles Ages

🡪 How is this selection received?

- The assembly of the Western Emperors (Augustus, Trajan, Justinian), Church Fathers, Masters of Seven Liberal Arts, Luminaries of Philosophy, Luminaries of Philosophy, the founders of Monastic Orders, the Mystics, follows the grouping (as shown above in the Divine Comedy) as organized in the Latin Middle Ages.

- Trying to show how the Latin Middle Ages acts as the transition from “Antique” to the “Modern-Western”

* **Antique and Modern Worlds**

🡪What is the Antique World?

- The whole of Antiquity from Homer to the tribal migrations

- The idea of “Classical” Antiquity is a 18th century creation rooted in art history,

🡪 Antiquity and the Middle Ages

- There is “nonclassical” antiquity which was preserved by the Romans. This can then be categorized in the Middle Ages based on 1.) its reception and 2.) its transformation. This becomes “medieval Antiquity” or “Antiquity as the Middle Ages saw it”

🡪 “Universal-Historical View

- Idea that European world is based not upon a reception of Antiquity (nor severance from it) but a conscious coalescence with it.

- The modern world has its own spirit, but it conditioned at every point by antique culture, tradition, language, etc.

- This view sets the beginning of the “modern” world to be about 675 (Beginning of Middle Ages). The End of the Roman Empire is the universal-state end phase of the Hellenic civilization. Between 375 and 675 is an “interregnum” before being replaced by “Western Civilization” or “Modern World.”

- The fundamental point here is that the substance of the antique culture was never destroyed

* **The Middle Ages**

🡪 Antiquity, the Middle Ages, and Modern Period are the names of three epochs of European History. It is scientific “preposterous” to separate them in such a way but helps with practical comprehension.

🡪 Section dedicated to key events during the Middle Ages while also revealing some of the controversy its dating.

🡪 “The period from Theodosius to Charlemagne is one of the utmost importance to the European tradition. Among its writers are the great personalities whom the American scholar E.K. Rand has called the “founders of the Middle Ages.” (Jerome, Augustine, Prudentius, Orosius, etc.)

🡪 Question: When do the Middle Ages end? When did the Modern Period begin? Answers differ. And the titled “Modern” has also been uprooted after seeing the destruction caused in it. Some say Medieval period doesn’t actually even end to the Industrial Revolution, which changed human life more than did the Renaissance and the Reformation.

* **The Latin Middle Ages**

🡪 Note: Germanic people assimilate into the world of late Antiquity, the Arabs do not

🡪 “While the Germanic peoples had nothing to oppose to the new Christianity of the Roman Empire, the Arabs burned with the fire of a new faith. That, and that alone, made the unassimilable.” But they had no prejudice over the people they had subdued:

- For science they go to schools to the Greeks

- For art to the Greeks and Persians

🡪 The Germanic invader entering the Roman Empire was however romanized while the Roman, on the other hand, became an Arab the moment the Arab conquest reached him.

🡪 Germanic peoples also allowed the Latin language to remain as main means of communication (with the exception of the Anglo-Saxons in the 8th century). Because the Latin language lived on through the Germanic invasions, “the unity of Romania is preserved into the eighth century.”

🡪 But Latin became a learned language for the priestly class in the Carolingian 8th century. “The Carolingian Renaissance” is at once a resumption of antique tradition and a break with the wreck of Roman culture. New culture: Roman-Germanic

🡪 Though vernacular literature flower in the 12th and 13th centuries onward, there is still a presence of Latin literature. Indeed, “The 12th and 13th centuries are a culminating point of Latin poetry and learning.

🡪 The common man knows as well as the educated man that there are two languages: the language of the people and the language of the learned (Latin). Latin continues to hold a long legacy as such as language. Notably it wasn’t abolished as the language of the law in France until 1539.

🡪 But also as a literary language did it survive. “In France, England, Holland, and Germany it also had brilliant representatives in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.”

🡪 “Petrarch and Boccaccio are still affected by the heritage of the Latin Middle Ages.”

🡪 “As late as 1551 an Italian Humanist feels himself obliged to be on his guard against the “bad poets” of the 12th century. So they were still being read!”

🡪 Beside, within, and beneath the great movements of the dawning Modern Period – Humanism, the Renaissance, the Reformation, the Counter-Reformation – the influence of medieval Latin literature persisted”

\*\*\* It was through Charlemagne that the historical entity which I call the “Latin Middle Ages” was first fully constituted.

🡪 Though the elevation of Christianity to the position of the state religion, Rome’s universalism acquired a twofold aspect. To the universal claim of the state was added that of the church.”

🡪 “The Bible furnished medieval historical thought with yet another theological substantiation for the replacement of one empire by another”

🡪 “The medieval Empire took over from Rome the idea of world empire; thus it had a universal, not a national, character.”

* **Romania**

🡪 “In contemporary scholarly usage ‘Romania’ is taken to mean the sum total of the countries in which Romance languages were spoken. These languages developed on the soil of the Roman Empire – from the Black Sea to the Atlantic.”

🡪 Idea that Romance languages all independently developed from Latin

🡪 But “Romance” and “Romania” have deep history

- Romania, derived from *romanus* as Latin is derived from *Latinum*

- After those conquered by Rome received Roman citizenship in 212 (if they were free), they would be *Romani* though still speak the language of their original nations (Gauls, Iberians, Greeks, etc.); hence the development of Romania

- Then, in Ottonian period, it changes. It means the Roman portion of the empire (Italy). Then, lastly, restricted to the Italian province of Romagna, that is, the old Exarchate of Ravenna.

- *Enromancier, romancar, romanzare* mean: to translate or compose books in the vernacular

- Thus it refers to the “popular books” in contrast the literary Latin works

- in this context, “one can continue to speak of a Romania which constitutes a unity in opposition to the Germanic peoples and literature.”

🡪 A knowledge of Spanish and of Spanish literature is as important for a “European” literary histography as it a knowledge of Spanish painting for art history”

🡪 Not England’s relation to Romania is a special kind” England was for centuries an annex to French culture. Thus Paris is the literary capital of England.

🡪 The English language is a Germanic dialect transformed by Romance and Latin.

**Questions – Ernest Robert Curtius, “European Literature” ; “The Latin Middle Ages”**

1. “The culture of the Middle Ages cannot yet be presented, because its Latin literature has as yet been incompletely studied” (13). Why is Latin so important to Curtius’s argument? Should Latin also be an important object of study for us today?

2. Consider a comparison between contemporary Europe, or the West, and the European Middle Ages: does one particular language (or several!) currently fulfill a role similar to Latin in the Middle Ages?

3. Curtius states: “For literature, all the past is present, or can become so” (14). That is, literature exists in a “timeless present" (15). What might this mean? How does this inform his approach to the canon of European literature? Does this apparently anti-historicist statement contradict his historicizing approach?

4. How does Curtius define the idea of European Literature? Where does it start and where does it end? How is it chronologically and geographically delineated? Above all, do you agree with his approach?

5. What does the term “Romania” mean? Does it effectively aid to define European culture? Does the term impose limitations on the construction of Europe?