

Ernst Robert Curtius (1886–1956) and Medieval Latin Studies

By Jan M. Ziolkowski

“It is customary today to oppose the conservative principle to the revolutionary. In this I can see only conceptual confusion. Conservation without new creation is as fruitless as mere overthrowing.”¹

The progress of scholarship has been likened, by Friedrich Nietzsche (1844–1900) among others, to the construction of pyramids: whether in isolation or in groups, researchers toil to quarry and raise blocks of erudition that individually are relatively insignificant but that collectively form a pyramid.² This image has its shortcomings. For one, it hardly succeeds in conveying the joy of research. By implication it casts scholars as enslaved Israelites, drudging under the power of a hostile Pharaoh. Second, it perhaps suggests that the more and better the laborers in a given discipline, the more substantial and lasting the pyramid. Yet generations of specialists in a given discipline can erect something large and durable without attaining the visibility or even the permanence of a pyramid. If an architectural image for scholarship must be devised, then it could more appropriately be accorded a subterranean setting; for many of us sweat out our lives beneath the ground, far below the public eye, laying the foundations for monuments which we have no assurance will ever be built. (For us Nietzsche had an image, too: the mole, scraping away blindly without ever seeing the light.³) And even of the others who reach the surface now and then in writings for a general public, many fail to produce edifices more substantial than stage sets, structures that give the illusory appearance of solidity only to be disassembled or collapse once the show has ended.

This is not to say that there are no enduring constructions, since there are rare thinkers whose expressions of learning and insight acquire pyramidal status, whose books retain both popular appeal and lasting value long after their initial appearance. Confining myself to the field of medieval literature, I can think of at least five books

¹ Quoted by Peter Dronke, “Curtius as Medievalist and Modernist,” *Times Literary Supplement* 3 October 1980, pp. 1103–6, at 1105.

² For a very important instance of the metaphor, see Friedrich Nietzsche, *Der Antichrist*, section 57, in *Twilight of the Idols* and *The Anti-Christ*, trans. R.J. Hollingdale (Baltimore, 1968), pp. 178–79: “A high culture is a pyramid: it can stand only on a broad base, its very first prerequisite is a strongly and soundly consolidated mediocrity.” For this reference I am grateful to Theodore J. Ziolkowski.

³ See “Nietzsche on Classics and Classicists (Part II),” selected and trans. William Arrowsmith, *Arethusa* 2/3 (1963), 5–27.

that have passed one key test of monumentality in the English-speaking world: more than forty years after first being published, they remain in print as paperbacks.⁴ In order of year of publication these five books are *Epic and Romance: Essays on Medieval Literature* (1908) by W.P. Ker (1855–1923), *Chaucer and His Poetry* (1915) by George Lyman Kittredge (1860–1963), *The Wandering Scholars* (1927) by Helen Waddell (1889–1965); *The Allegory of Love: A Study in Medieval Tradition* (1936) by C.S. Lewis (1898–1963), and *European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages* [=ELLMA] (1948) by Ernst Robert Curtius.⁵

Within this handful Curtius's book is exceptional in several regards.⁶ First, and most obviously, it is the only work translated from a foreign language into English. Second, although all five books pay at least passing notice to Latin materials, only Curtius's book makes Latinity or Latin-ness the fulcrum of its content and title. By emphasizing compositional techniques and materials that were disseminated by Latin students and masters throughout Western Europe, Curtius in *ELLMA* makes a massive attempt to establish the relevance of medieval literature in a Latin tradition to the unity of later European vernacular literatures. The novelty of this effort is evident in the very expression *Latin Middle Ages*, which Curtius himself appears to have coined.⁷

A third reason to accord special status to *ELLMA* is the cottage industry—what one scholar has called “a kind of Curtius-Philology”—that has sprung up around it and its author.⁸ Here there are sharp distinctions to draw between Ernst Robert Curtius and C.S. Lewis. For instance, whereas much of the biographical attention that has been paid to Lewis has been elicited by his creative and religious

⁴ For convenient information on the publication and translation history of Ernst Robert Curtius's book, see Peter Godman, “Epilogue: The Ideas of Ernst Robert Curtius and the Genesis of *ELLMA*,” in Curtius, *European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages*, trans. Willard R. Trask. Bollingen Series 36 (Princeton, 1990), pp. 599–653, at 599.

⁵ I exclude Erich Auerbach, whose *Mimesis*, translated by Willard R. Trask (Princeton, 1953), is not presented as a study of medieval literature and whose *Literary Language and its Public in Late Latin Antiquity and in the Middle Ages* has rightly or wrongly remained in the domain of the specialist, although it has been reprinted in paperback recently: trans. Ralph Manheim, with a foreword by Jan M. Ziolkowski. Bollingen Series 74 (Princeton, 1993). One other book of extraordinary longevity on medieval literature and culture that has recently reentered the pantheon of paperbacks is Domenico Comparetti, *Vergil in the Middle Ages*, with a new introduction by Jan M. Ziolkowski (Princeton, 1997).

⁶ On the monumentality of *ELLMA*, see André Vernet, review of *ELLMA*, *Bibliothèque d'Humanisme et Renaissance* 12 (1950), 377–87, at p. 378: “Il ne saurait être question d'apprécier dans le détail un travail aussi dense, ni de scruter chaque pierre d'un édifice aussi imposant... Nous nous contenterons de passer en revue les thèses principales, d'apporter quelques pierres...”

⁷ The expression struck readers as being unusual when *ELLMA* first appeared: see Friedrich Panzer, review of *ELLMA*, *Historische Zeitschrift* 170 (1950), 109–15, at p. 109. For the hypothesis that Curtius coined the phrase, see Dronke, “Curtius as Medievalist and Modernist,” p. 1103.

⁸ Ulrich Wyss, “Mediävistik als Krisenerfahrung. Zur Literaturwissenschaft um 1930,” in *Die Deutschen und ihr Mittelalter. Themen und Funktionen moderner Geschichtsbilder vom Mittelalter*, ed. Gerd Althoff (Darmstadt, 1992), pp. 127–46 and 206–10, at p. 137.

writings, by his association with the circle of Oxford friends and scholars known as the Inklings, and even by his personal life,⁹ the analyses of Curtius and his impact have been prompted largely by his literary scholarship—not only *ELLMA* and the essays that preceded it but also his voluminous writings on modern literature.¹⁰ Curtius's social life hardly constitutes the stuff of paperbacks, nor is his personal life likely ever to inspire a film on the order of "Shadowlands"—or indeed any film at all!

Finally, as important as the books of Ker, Kittredge, Waddell, and Lewis were and are, none of them advances a method that has been directly responsible for as many articles, dissertations, and books as *ELLMA*. For all the meticulous, even obsessive, detail of the book, each chapter in Curtius represents a limited probing of a topic that could be extended into a monograph—as many of the chapters have been.¹¹

Even as literary theory and methodologophilia swept through the humanities in North America in the 1970s and 1980s, Ernst Robert Curtius's *ELLMA* remained a repository of thought, wisdom, and knowledge that authors of learned articles and books continued to consult or at least to cite. Indeed, his tome is not simply the only work on the Middle Ages, but it is the sole work (with the partial exception of Mikhail Bakhtin's *Rabelais and His World*)¹² avowedly on an earlier period among the fifty twentieth-century books most cited in a tabulation of arts and humanities publications between 1976 and 1983. *ELLMA* occupies tenth place, coming after Thomas S. Kuhn's *Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, James Joyce's *Ulysses*, Northrop Frye's *Anatomy of Criticism*, Ludwig Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations*, Noam Chomsky's *Aspects of the Theory of Syntax*, Michel Foucault's *Order of Things*, Jacques Derrida's *Of Grammatology*, Roland Barthes's *S/Z*, and Martin Heidegger's *Being and Time*.¹³

Yet for all the attention that Curtius's book has attracted to Medieval Latin literature, its standing among the specialists who study such literature has been at

⁹ Humphrey Carpenter, *The Inklings: C.S. Lewis, J.R.R. Tolkien, Charles Williams, and Their Friends* (London, 1978).

¹⁰ See Hans Helmut Christmann, *Ernst Robert Curtius und die deutschen Romanisten*, Mainz: Akademie der Wissenschaften und der Literatur, *Abhandlungen der Geistes- und Sozialwissenschaftlichen Klasse*, Jahrgang 1987, nr. 3, (Stuttgart, 1987), and Stefan Gross, *Ernst Robert Curtius und die deutsche Romanistik der zwanziger Jahre: zum Problem nationaler Images in der Literaturwissenschaft*, Aachener Beiträge zur Komparistik 5 (Bonn, 1980).

¹¹ The starting-point for exploration of work inspired by Curtius is Earl Jeffrey Richards, *Modernism, Medievalism and Humanism: A Research Bibliography on the Reception of the Works of Ernst Robert Curtius*, Beihefte zur Zeitschrift für romanische Philologie 196 (Tübingen, 1983).

¹² Trans. Hélène Iswolsky (Cambridge, MA, 1968; repr. Bloomington, 1984)

¹³ Eugene Garfield, "A Different Sort of Great-Books List: The 50 Twentieth-Century Works Most Cited in the *Arts & Humanities Citation Index*, 1976–1983," reprinted from *Current Contents* 16 (20 April, 1987) pp. 3–7, in: *Arts & Humanities Citation Index 1989 Second Semiannual*, vol. 1: "Guide & Lists of Source Publications, Citation Index A to Z" (Philadelphia: Institute for Scientific Information, 1990), pp. 7–11, at 8.

best equivocal. In this essay I will explore the causes and nature of this ambivalence. I propose to look first at Curtius's participation in the Medieval Latin studies of his day, then at the reception of *ELLMA* by reviewers after the initial appearance of the German edition and of subsequent translations, and finally at the sorts of influence that *ELLMA* has exercised on Medieval Latin scholarship in recent years. But before turning to any of these considerations, it would be wise to delineate what constituted a Medieval Latinist in Curtius's day—and what constitutes one today.

The term *Medieval Latinist* is vaguer than many of its closest comparanda. For example, as used most commonly in academic writing today, *Classicist* designates a person whose interest in ancient Greek and Roman culture leads at least to extensive studies and usually also to degrees in Classics.¹⁴ But whereas with few exceptions classical Latinists have received their main certification in Classics programmes, the case with Medieval Latinists¹⁵ is not analogous. Many Medieval Latinists begin their studies and even careers either as classicists who follow the Latin language and classical heritage vertically through time or as medievalists in national language and literature or history departments who move horizontally into Latin.

If to be a Medieval Latinist requires holding a degree in Medieval Latin or occupying a position explicitly designated for an instructor of Medieval Latin, then Ernst Robert Curtius was no Medieval Latinist. Yet defining a Medieval Latinist so narrowly has the absurd effect of excluding the very founders of the field, together with many other scholars who have produced dictionaries, editions, handbooks, and monographs essential to the constitution and interpretation of Medieval Latin texts, since few of them had the opportunity or felt the need to secure degrees or positions in Medieval Latin.

At the beginning of the nineteenth century in Europe and North America the only literature that was studied formally was classical literature, and it was studied within the context of classical philology. In the course of the century the national literatures of Europe, especially in their medieval manifestations, elicited interest that led to the establishment of different philologies along linguistic lines: for instance, Germanic philology, Romance philology, and English philology.

In view of the attention that this cultural project paid to the Middle Ages, Medieval Latin philology should have occupied a central position; but it emerged as a discipline in its own right only in the *fin de siècle* and in the first decade of the twentieth century.¹⁶ Indeed, Ludwig Traube (1861–1907), who is exalted in many

¹⁴ *Webster's New Universal Unabridged Dictionary*, 2nd ed. (New York, 1955): "1. a person who advocates or follows the principles of classicism. 2. a student of or specialist in ancient Greek and Roman literature. 3. a person who advocates the teaching of Greek and Latin in the schools." The second definition is omitted in the *Oxford English Dictionary* entry.

¹⁵ *Webster's New Universal Unabridged Dictionary*: "one skilled in Latin"; *Oxford English Dictionary*: "1. One who is versed in the Latin language; a Latin scholar."

¹⁶ Karl Langosch, *Lateinisches Mittelalter. Einleitung in Sprache und Literatur* (Darmstadt, 1983), p. 13.

circles as the founder of Medieval Latin philology,¹⁷ was the first Medieval Latinist to receive an official position as such within a teaching institution when he was promoted to an *Ordinariat* in 1902.¹⁸ Until then, Medieval Latin philology had been an appendage, first of Romance philology and then of Classical Philology.¹⁹ Even afterward it remained a small, slow-growing entity.

Once one transcends the self-evident fact that a Medieval Latinist is a person who for one reason or another works with Latin writings produced during the Middle Ages, the task of defining becomes embroiled. The difficulties result inevitably from the evasiveness of the term, since *Medieval Latinist* designates the language of the material with which a person works but it leaves undeclared the approach or approaches taken. In contrast, the term *Medieval Latin philologist* specifies both material (Medieval Latin) and approach (philology). Thus *Medieval Latinist* is less restrictive than *Medieval Latin philologist*. To use a time-worn analogy drawn from geometry, the one is a rectangle but not a square, the other a rectangle and a square: all Medieval Latin philologists are Medieval Latinists, but by no means are all Medieval Latinists Medieval Latin philologists.

Curtius acknowledged the contributions that various disciplines had made to an understanding of the Middle Ages, but because of his own literary interests he especially prized philology. For instance, when Curtius assessed the development of American Medieval Studies in the lecture he delivered in 1949 to the Goethe Bicentennial Convocation in Aspen, Colorado, he identified three major figures: "Historians such as Charles Homer Haskins [1870–1937], philologists such as Charles H. Beeson [1870–1949] and Edward Kennard Rand [1871–1945], have shed much light on the Middle Ages" (*ELLMA*, p. 587). The proportion of two philologists to one historian in his formulation, although not necessarily deliberate, bespeaks his assumption that the study of Medieval Latin texts and medieval culture must begin with philology. Put differently, "The accidental truths of fact can only be established by philology. Philology is the handmaid of the historical disciplines" (*ELLMA*, p. x).

Curtius openly pledged allegiance to "the philological method," as when in the foreword to *ELLMA* he proclaimed his reliance on "the scientific technique which is the foundation of all historical investigation: philology" (*ELLMA*, p. x). He waxes sarcastic at the attempt to subordinate literature to art: "Now, if it is possible to learn the 'essence of Gothic' from the cathedrals, one need no longer read Dante" (*ELLMA*, p. 15). Having awarded primacy to the text as medium of intellectual

¹⁷ For an explicit statement, see Siegmund Hellmann, "Das Problem der mittellateinischen Philologie," *Historische Vierteljahrschrift* 29 (1935), 625–80, at p. 625. The same assumption lies behind *Tradition und Wertung. Festschrift für F. Brunhölzl zum 65. Geburtstag*, ed. Günter Bernt, Fidel Rädle, and Gabriel Silagi (Sigmaringen, 1989), the publication of which was timed to coincide with the centennial of the year in which Traube delivered his first lectures upon Roman literature in the Middle Ages.

¹⁸ Ernst Robert Curtius, "Gustav Gröber und die romanische Philologie," in Ernst Robert Curtius, *Gesammelte Aufsätze zur romanischen Philologie* (Bern and Munich, 1960), pp. 428–55, at 618, n. 2.

¹⁹ Curtius, "Gustav Gröber und die romanische Philologie," pp. 618–19.

communication,²⁰ he avers that a text cannot be comprehended without philology. Without philology any effort at literary criticism will fail, because it will have no technique for unraveling “difficult” passages (*ELLMA*, p. 15).

Curtius seems to have inherited his esteem for philology as an exact science, and as a means of attaining truth and understanding, from Gustav Gröber (1844–1911). To sum up the impact that Gröber had had on the direction of his research, Curtius described how his professor pushed him to a revelation about philology: “Philologie als Erkenntnis—das war es, was ich in jenem Augenblick begriff. Und seitdem habe ich mir vor eigenen und fremden Arbeiten immer wieder die Frage gestellt: ‘Was ist damit für die Erkenntnis geleistet?’”²¹ In keeping with this epiphany, Curtius admired classical philology, the most venerable and refined branch of philological enquiry, and regarded it as a model for the study of the Middle Ages. Thus he approvingly quoted August Wilhelm von Schlegel’s (1767–1845) challenge: “pour faire avancer la philologie du moyen âge, il faut y appliquer les principes de la philologie classique.”²²

Yet Curtius’s devotion to philology was not blind and total. In the final paragraph of the foreword to the English translation of *ELLMA* he avers “that philology is not an end in itself” (*ELLMA*, p. x). At times he alluded to the drawbacks from which certain strains of philology suffered. Siding with Nietzsche against Ulrich von Wilamowitz-Moellendorf (1848–1931) in a debate that had divided classicists since the nineteenth century, Curtius faulted Classical Philology for its preoccupation with facts at the cost of ideas.²³ In general, he disliked philology when it was conceived so narrowly as to preclude the projects of comparison and criticism that appealed to him personally. In his view a resistance to expansive thought characterized not only the conservative Classical Philology but also the innovative *Neuphilologie*, the “New Philology” of the mid-twentieth century: “Für einen beschränkt ‘neuphilologischen’ Standpunkt mußte die Einbeziehung des lateinischen Mittelalters befremdend sein.”²⁴ In a starkly pessimistic assessment of the academic organization of his day, Curtius contended that the system of philological and literary studies was as outdated as the train system of 1850.²⁵ This backward state of affairs preoccupied him greatly, because he saw it as jeopardizing the preservation of “the European tradition,” which he regarded as a sacred trust in

²⁰ For a brief attack on Curtius’s position, see Clifford Davidson, “Curtius and the Primacy of the Book,” *EDAM Newsletter: Early Drama, Art and Music* 10 (1987), 1–6.

²¹ “Gustav Gröber und die romanische Philologie,” p. 455.

²² “Gustav Gröber und die romanische Philologie,” p. 440 (which cites Gröber’s *Geschichte der romanischen Philologie*, 2nd ed., vol. 1, p. 103).

²³ *Deutscher Geist in Gefahr* (Stuttgart, 1932), pp. 13 and 105. My attention was drawn to these passages by “Ernst Robert Curtius and Aby Warburg,” the typescript of which David Ganz graciously allowed me to see.

²⁴ “Gustav Gröber und die romanische Philologie,” p. 444; compare *ELLMA*, p. 13.

²⁵ *ELLMA*, p. 16.

the hands of scholars in various disciplines: "Without a modernized study of European literature there can be no cultivation of the European tradition."²⁶

Ernst Robert Curtius's training and accomplishments encompassed more than the terms *Medieval Latin philologist* or *Medieval Latinist* convey.²⁷ Either designation would misrepresent his range both linguistically and chronologically, since he went beyond Latin to interpret French, Italian, Spanish, English, and German literature, and beyond the Middle Ages to write criticism even on then-contemporary literature as Hermann Hesse's (1877–1962) *Glasperlenspiel* (1943) and T.S. Eliot's (1888–1965) *The Waste Land* (1922). Yet it would be an equal distortion to label Ernst Robert Curtius a Romanist or Romance philologist and to stop there, without adding that his background inclined him to view European literature as a cultural continuum to the integrity of which both classical and Medieval Latin texts were essential. On the first page of his foreword to the English translation of *ELLMA* Curtius made no bones about the centre of his scholarly interests: "My central field of study is the Romance languages and literatures" (p. vii). But he was not so quick to fix the circumference that lay beyond this midpoint, because he held the firm conviction that European literature must be studied as a whole to be understood: "One is a European when one has become a *civis Romanus*. The division of European literature among a number of unconnected philologies almost completely prevents this" (*ELLMA*, p. 12). Accordingly, the ideal student of European literature "has only to familiarize himself with the methods and subjects of classical, Medieval Latin, and modern philology" (*ELLMA*, p. 14).

In the foreword to *ELLMA* Curtius asserted that his book "grew...under the pressure of a concrete historical situation" (*ELLMA*, p. x). By this statement he adverted particularly to National Socialism in Germany and to other nationalist movements in Europe that threatened to prohibit a unified view of Western culture. But however formative the political situation of the 1930s was to Curtius's outlook, *ELLMA* was the product not only of historical circumstances but also of its author's own intellectual background. Even if Curtius himself had not espoused the value of setting the work of scholars in a biographical context, there would be ample justification for taking stock of his contact with Medieval Latin scholarship.

Whatever early exposure to Medieval Latin literature Curtius may have gained through his family or elementary schooling, his systematic grounding in Medieval Latin literature came through graduate studies under the Romance philologist Gustav Gröber; their relationship was grounded in seminars and culminated in Gröber's serving as Curtius's *Doktorvater*. Through the depth and range of his learning Gröber was uniquely qualified to impart an appreciative knowledge of Medieval Latin

²⁶ *ELLMA*, p. 16. Quoted as the final words in M.L.W. Laistner, review of *ELLMA*, *Speculum* 24 (1949), 259–63; reprinted in Laistner, *The Intellectual Heritage of the Early Middle Ages: Selected Essays*, ed. Chester G. Starr (Ithaca, NY, 1957; repr. New York, 1983), pp. 83–90, at 90. On Curtius's concept of tradition, see Claus Uhlig, "Tradition in Curtius and Eliot," *Comparative Literature* 42 (1993), 193–207.

²⁷ Dronke, "Curtius as Medievalist and Modernist," p. 1103.

literature to his advisees in Romance philology. As one volume in his encyclopedic guide to Romance philology, Gröber had produced his *Übersicht über die lateinische Litteratur von der Mitte des VI. Jahrhunderts bis zur Mitte des XIV. Jahrhunderts* (1902), a 335-page overview of Medieval Latin literature—an overview so dense and well organized that it remains unsurpassed and indispensable nearly a century after its initial publication.

If in genealogical terms Gröber was father to Curtius's commitment to Medieval Latin, Gröber's own professor Adolf Ebert (1820–1890) was grandfather. Ebert, Gröber, and Curtius shared a number of family traits, among which one was a conviction that as Romance philologists they must pay heed to the history of Medieval Latin literature; and the three were prepared to do so, even if through their attentiveness to Medieval Latin they provoked the censure or resistance of classical philologists.²⁸ In Curtius's description of Ebert, this esteem for the relevance of Medieval Latin received prominent notice: "Drei Momente sind es demnach, die Eberts wissenschaftliche Leistung kennzeichnen: Organisation der Forschung; synthetischer Zug in der literargeschichtlichen Arbeit; Einbeziehung der mittellateinischen Literatur."²⁹ The latter phrase also appears when Curtius assessed Gröber's approach towards Medieval Latin literature, which Curtius praised for "der Einbeziehung der mittellateinischen Literatur in die Domäne der romanischen Philologie."³⁰

In spite of the reverence for Ebert and Gröber that Curtius declared in his essay celebrating the latter, little in Curtius's early career signals that he had been endowed by Gröber with a lifelong commitment to the Middle Ages. After producing an edition and study of an Old French work as his dissertation, Curtius devoted most of his writings over the next two decades to modern literature. Indeed, an early article entitled "Zu Guibert von Nogent" (1913) is the only real hint in his publications before the 1930s that he entertained a special interest in Medieval Latin. Yet it would be mistaken to conclude that *ELLMA* sprang into being without preparation. Already in 1936 Curtius began publishing copious studies of medieval literary works, in 1938 the first in a series of medieval articles that formed the backbone of the future book.³¹ How closely Curtius read in Medieval Latin literature and followed its scholarship before 1936 is difficult to assess, although the expertise apparent in the late 1930s could not have come after a complete hiatus of more than twenty years.³²

²⁸ "Über die altfranzösische Epik," *Zeitschrift für romanische Philologie* 64 (1944), 233–320, at pp. 237–38; repr. in *Gesammelte Aufsätze zur romanischen Philologie* (Bern, 1960).

²⁹ "Gustav Gröber und die romanische Philologie," p. 429.

³⁰ "Gustav Gröber und die romanische Philologie," p. 444.

³¹ If one includes the article on "Jorge Manrique und der Kaisergedanke," which also served as a preliminary study for *ELLMA*, the series opened in 1932.

³² Curtius used Beeson's *A Primer of Medieval Latin* in his lecture on Medieval Latin literature in the winter semester of 1932–1933: see Lausberg, *Ernst Robert Curtius*, p. 156.

An acute understanding of Medieval Latin literary history as it had evolved through 1946 is evident in Curtius's review-article entitled "Eine neue Geschichte der mittellateinischen Literatur" (1947). In this appraisal of two books by Joseph de Ghellinck (1872–1950), Curtius indicates their place at the end of a spectrum leading from Gröber's *Übersicht* through Max Manitius's (1858–1933) three-volume *Geschichte der lateinischen Literatur des Mittelalters* (1911–1931), F.J.E. Raby's (1888–1966) one-volume *A History of Christian Latin Poetry* (1927) and two-volume *A History of Secular Latin Poetry in the Middle Ages* (1934), and Karl Strecker's (1861–1945) concise *Einführung in das Mittellatein* (Berlin, 1928; 2nd. ed. Berlin, 1929). In the 1920s or early 1930s it would have been surprising to find Curtius admitted to the brethren of contributors to commemorative volumes honoring Medieval Latinists, such as the *Ehrengabe* presented to Karl Strecker on 4 September 1931,³³ for at the time he would have been identified almost exclusively as a modernist; but given the deep knowledge of Medieval Latin literature that he had demonstrated by the end of the 1930s, it is no cause for wonder to note that a decade later Curtius wrote an essay ("Beiträge zur Topik der mittelalterlichen Literatur") for the *Festschrift* that was published in 1941 to celebrate Strecker's eightieth birthday. The fact that he was a contributor signals that he had acquired acceptance for his knowledge of Medieval Latin literature, a stretch of European literary history that was by his own admission "cultivated—under the name of 'Medieval Latin philology'—by a very small number of specialists. In Europe there might be a dozen of them" (*ELLMA*, p. 13).

In a brief bibliography at the end of *ELLMA* Curtius restates in two quick paragraphs the gist of the 1946 review-article. More important, in the "Author's Foreword to the English Translation" he details the political convictions and intellectual inspiration that had led him to the Latin Middle Ages. According to his account, he wrote the pamphlet *Deutscher Geist in Gefahr* (1932) as a polemic response to "the barbarization of education and the nationalistic frenzy which were the forerunners of the Nazi regime" (p. vii).³⁴ In place of the barbarization and frenzy, he pleaded for a new humanism to integrate the Middle Ages from Augustine to Dante. He professed (*ELLMA*, pp. viii and 597) that his vision of this new humanism was prompted by reading *Founders of the Middle Ages* by the North American Edward Kennard Rand.³⁵

Studies such as the present reflect the process that Curtius and others called *Erforschung des Forschers*, a German phrase which could be rendered in English as

³³ *Studien zur lateinischen Dichtung des Mittelalters: Ehrengabe für Karl Strecker zum 4. September 1931*, ed. Walter Stach and Hans Walther (Dresden: Wilhelm und Bertha v. Baensch Stiftung, 1931).

³⁴ For a detailed study of the progression from *Deutscher Geist in Gefahr* to *ELLMA*, see Dirk Hoeges, *Kontroverse am Abgrund: Ernst Robert Curtius und Karl Mannheim: intellektuelle und "freischwebende Intelligenz" in der Weimarer Republik* (Frankfurt am Main, 1994), pp. 139–209.

³⁵ This profession is borne out by an observation he makes in *Deutscher Geist in Gefahr*, p. 126, n. 12: see Heinrich Lausberg, *Ernst Robert Curtius (1886–1956)* (Stuttgart, 1993), p. 111.

“researching the researcher” or “an investigation of the investigator.”³⁶ In Curtius’s view, the scholarly investigation of scholars entailed examining not only their publications, but also their teaching, attitudes toward students, and approaches to research. For instance, after noting the advanced age at which the philosopher Moritz Drobisch (1802–1896) consented to retire, Curtius commented “Für die ‘Erforschung des Forschers’ sind solche Angaben nicht gleichgültig.”³⁷

Through such proclamations Curtius seemed almost to invite future investigators of his scholarship to examine his teaching career. The results of such *Erforschung* are not without relevance to a portrait of Curtius against the backdrop of Medieval Latin studies; for in the 1930s Curtius directed not only his research but also his teaching towards the goal of firming his command of Medieval Latin literature. After having been Professor in Marburg (1920–1924) and Heidelberg (1924–1929), Curtius came to Bonn in 1929 and remained there until death. Although he had taught courses in both medieval and modern literature throughout his career, the proportion shifted not long after he arrived in Bonn—and not long after he published *Deutscher Geist in Gefahr*. He lectured upon Medieval Latin literature first in 1932–1933 with a series on “Lateinische Literatur des Mittelalters,” again in 1941 with “Mittellateinische Übungen,” and a third time in 1947–1948 with the lecture-form of his book, “Europäische Literatur und lateinisches Mittelalter.”³⁸

At least three writers with very different perspectives have construed the direction of Curtius’s scholarship in the 1930s and 1940s as reflecting a distasteful tendency to self-preservation, escapism, and elitist reactionism. Stephen Spender (1909–1995) considered Curtius’s shift from modern languages and literatures a retreat dictated by political imperative rather than intellectual desirability (“He had to stop teaching French and took to Medieval Latin”). Leo Spitzer (1887–1960), who accused Curtius of nursing a grudge against Germans who emigrated before the war, used still stronger language in describing what he perceived as the sudden swings in Curtius’s scholarship:³⁹ “How should we explain, in the later work of a great scholar and critic, the repudiation of his earlier work: the prophet of a new Europe become ‘a prophet turned backward,’ a historian of the Europeanism of the Middle Ages; the aesthetic and cultural critic become a philologist; the acolyte of [Henri] Bergson’s [1859–1941] intuitionism and of [Max] Scheler’s [1874–1928] phenomenology become a ‘neopositivist’? The obvious political explanation (that under the Nazi regime a European point of view on cultural questions was

³⁶ “Gustav Gröber und die romanische Philologie,” p. 428: Curtius recognizes the validity of this undertaking, as expressed by Hugo Schuchardt.

³⁷ “Gustav Gröber und die romanische Philologie,” p. 429.

³⁸ Heinrich Lausberg, “Ernst Robert Curtius, 1886–1956,” in *Bonner Gelehrte, Beiträge zur Geschichte der Wissenschaft in Bonn, Sprachwissenschaften: 150 Jahre Rheinische Friedrich-Wilhelms-Universität zu Bonn, 1818–1968* (Bonn, 1970), pp. 214–35, at 228.

³⁹ On Curtius’s resentment of German emigré scholars in Romance philology, see Leo Spitzer, review of ELLMA, *American Journal of Philology* 70 (1949), 425–31, at p. 431. On the swings in Curtius’s scholarship, see Spitzer, review of ELLMA, pp. 425–26. The relationship between Curtius and Spitzer was more complicated than is indicated in Lausberg, *Ernst Robert Curtius*, pp. 116–17.

dangerous) is too superficial; the change in Curtius had come from within. As early as 1932, he had become aware of the 'perils' for the German mind which lay in its too easy, too lovingly-fostered irrationalism and which was able to engender a barbarous movement such as Hitlerism. With his flair for the duty of the hour, Curtius turned towards "solid philology" and towards medieval philology where sobriety and discipline of mind had reached their greatest triumphs. It was logical that an aristocratic mind such as Curtius's should, before the onslaught of the plebeian hordes, retreat into the Latin past of Germany, into a difficult subject matter..."⁴⁰

At one point in his analysis of the motivations behind *ELLMA*, Spitzer resorts to accusing Curtius of escapism: "Before the forces of barbarism that encircle us, Curtius has found an escape by immersing himself in the necropolis of a past that was alive as late as the eighteenth century (this is for Curtius the dividing line between his Middle Ages and modernity)."⁴¹ Whether coincidentally or not, Spitzer's accusation resurfaces with twofold inappropriateness years later, when Hans Robert Jauss (1921-) refers to *ELLMA* as "the retreat of Philology into the catacombs of the past during Hitler's period."⁴² The metaphor is unfitting on one level because if ever a book about the Middle Ages lacked a religious undercurrent, and if ever a book of literary history tried to demonstrate the durability and vitality of the past, that book is *ELLMA*. On another level the metaphor is unseemly for its implications of cowardice on Curtius's part. Although the horrors of World War II have happily receded, many people would still admire Curtius for the boldness of his convictions in publishing *Deutsches Geist* and would prefer to have been in his catacombs rather than participating in the Waffen-SS, as Jauss did. If more people had retreated to Curtius's lively underworld, Europe would have been a very different place during the 1940s.

The move into the Middle Ages could be explained less cynically as a redirection of Curtius's efforts to promote international understanding through literary history: whereas in the two decades, 1913-1933, he placed Franco-German issues at the top of his agenda, from 1933 to the end of his life he set out to document conclusively how *all* of Europe shared a common culture that had taken shape in the Latin Middle Ages. Healing the wounds left by the Franco-Prussian and First World Wars grew less urgent in his eyes than demonstrating the essential unity of European culture, which Curtius defined as a literary culture first and foremost; for of the few means available to a professor of Romance philology, such a demonstration was the means best suited to reduce the nationalistic tensions that set the stage for the Second World War.

⁴⁰ Spitzer, review of *ELLMA*, p. 426.

⁴¹ Spitzer, review of *ELLMA*, p. 428.

⁴² Jauss, "Paradigmawechsel in der Literaturwissenschaft," *Linguistische Berichte* 3 (1969), 44-56, at p. 47: "den Rückzug der Philologie in die Katakomben der Vergangenheit während der Hitlerzeit, und dieser Ursprung des Curtiusschen Hauptwerks bedingt noch heute die fehlende historische und gesellschaftliche Dimension in der Methode seiner Epigonen."

On the first page of *ELLMA* Curtius quotes a passage from Max Scheler's *Die Wissensformen und die Gesellschaft* (1926) that stresses the dangers of mass democracy to the "relatively 'small elites'" of men that promote science and philosophy (*ELLMA*, p. 3). In part because Curtius himself attributed the achievements of European culture in literature (as in other realms) to such elites, it is worth surveying the reactions that his book elicited from members of the academic guilds around him. To be specific, it is worth examining the reception of *ELLMA* by reviewers after the first printing of the German edition and of translations into English, French, and other languages. The responses of these reviewers to Curtius's conception of philology, definition of European literature, method of topology, and organization of his book have played a role in determining the ways in which *ELLMA* is received today.

Few reviewers attempted to brand Curtius as an interloper into the field of Medieval Latin philology. One of the exceptions was Paul Lehmann (1884–1964), a Medieval Latin philologist, who made Curtius's amateur status an implicit issue when he referred to him as "der Bonner Romanist."⁴³ But while labelling Curtius an outsider, Lehmann admitted readily that the scholar from Bonn, although he had trespassed outside the bounds of Romance philology, had said much that Lehmann and his fellow Medieval Latinists had failed to say. Another reviewer who considered Curtius outside his area of competence was Gustavo Vinay (1912–1993). Vinay, acting as self-proclaimed spokesman for Medieval Latinists as a group, belittled the value of *ELLMA* to his comrades in Medieval Latin studies: "il mediolatinaista, invece che incantato, resta deluso."⁴⁴

To justify his disenchantment Vinay expresses the opinion that studies such as Curtius's are not adequately founded upon textual evidence. As he explains, because many Medieval Latin texts either have never been edited or else need to be reedited, any judgements based on the limited number of texts available will be no more than "balbettamenti scolastici."⁴⁵ The reasoning that no one should undertake synthetic work in poorly developed fields overlooks the reality that basic work is out of the question until researchers have entered these fields of study. Only by demonstrating that the Latin literature of the Middle Ages deserves to be edited or

⁴³ Paul Lehmann, review of *ELLMA*, *Deutsches Archiv für Geschichte des Mittelalters* 9 (1952) 303–4, at p. 303).

⁴⁴ Gustavo Vinay, "Filologia e ambizioni storiografiche," *SM* ser. 3, 1 (1960), 195–202, at p. 202. The results of Curtius's opposition to Croce and of Vinay's to Curtius remain in force even today among Italian scholars. To conclude a recent essay that rates Erich Auerbach (as well as Franceschini and Vinay) over Curtius, Massimo Oldoni says that "Sono trascorsi quaranti anni dall'*ELLMA* ed abbiamo compreso che Curtius ha scritto questo libro per sé stesso, molto meno per i medievisti" and that "la letteratura mediolatina dà torto a Curtius": see Oldoni, "E.R. Curtius e gli studi mediolatini in Italia," in *Ernst Robert Curtius: Werk, Wirkung, Zukunftsperspektiven. Heidelberger Symposion zum hundertsten Geburtstag 1986*, ed. Walter Berschin and Arnold Rothe (Heidelberg, 1989), pp. 209–14.

⁴⁵ Vinay, "Filologia e ambizioni storiografiche," p. 202. In a related complaint, Charles W. Jones, "The Tradition of Rhetoric," *Yale Review* 43 (1954), 459–61, at pp. 460–61) faults Curtius for neglecting manuscript evidence.

re-edited by coming generations will Medieval Latinists of our day satisfy the shortage of first editions and definitive editions—the shortage that compels us to consult many essential works of prose and poetry in manuscripts or in centuries-old editions reprinted in Migne's *Patrologia Latina*, the shortage that creates the bizarre incongruity of electronic databases that offer basic texts in digitized versions based ultimately upon sixteenth- and seventeenth-century printings.

Vinay looks isolated when measured against the many other reviewers who admired the breadth of Curtius's philology and of the research possibilities that it had thrown open. A Latinist such as F. Châtillon was moved by the unity that Curtius achieved in *ELLMA*. In terms of method, Châtillon waxed eulogistic about "ces pages d'une philologie si sûre d'elle, si riche, si captivante."⁴⁶ Another Latinist, J. G. Préaux, believed that *ELLMA* had established a landmark in the study of national literatures, thanks to its demonstration that such study would benefit not only from an intimate knowledge of the methods and literary domains of classical philology but also from constant commerce with the writings of Medieval Latin authors.⁴⁷

Precisely because Curtius championed the virtues of practising exact philology, reviewers were quick to challenge his acceptance of approaches they felt lacked philological rigor. Thus Max Wehrli (1909–) charged that Curtius was inconsistent and un-philological in adducing Jung's theory of the archetypes to elucidate the topos of the *puer senex* and the worship of Mary.⁴⁸ Similarly, Paul Oskar Kristeller (1905–) took Curtius to task for being unstintingly critical of Croce, Burdach, Jaeger, Marxism, and existentialism, but indiscriminately acceptant of psychoanalysis and Toynbee.⁴⁹

Philology was only one and hardly the most pressing of the questions posed by *ELLMA* to most reviewers; and yet the reactions to the philological achievement of *ELLMA* typify reactions to the book as a whole: on the one hand awe and admiration, on the other questions of inconsistency or narrowness in scope, scholarship, method, and organization. Although *ELLMA* is a substantial book, many reviewers believed that it claimed to present a totalizing view of Western literature and that therefore it was liable to criticism for its shortcomings in scope. In the assessment of Erich Auerbach (1892–1957), the book is not so much a study of literature as a history of rhetoric or literary doctrine. This observation finds support in Curtius's description of *ELLMA* as "a kind of *Nova Rhetorica*."⁵⁰ If Curtius had entitled his book *Classical Rhetoric in the European Literature of the Latin Middle Ages*, he would have reduced its readership but forestalled accusations of an imbalanced outlook on literature. In general, he was criticized by early reviewers for

⁴⁶ F. Châtillon, review of *ELLMA*, *Revue du moyen âge latin* 8 (1952), 170–76, at p. 171.

⁴⁷ Préaux, review of *ELLMA*, *Latomus* 9 (1950), 99–102, at p. 99, p. 102).

⁴⁸ Wehrli, review of *ELLMA*, *Anzeiger für deutsches Altertum und deutsche Literatur* 64 (1948–1950), 84–91, at p. 89.

⁴⁹ Kristeller, review of *ELLMA*, *Annali della Scuola Normale Superiore di Pisa. Lettere, Storia e Filosofia*, ser. 2, 19 (1950), 205–8, at p. 207.

⁵⁰ Dronke, "Curtius as Medievalist and Modernist," p. 1105.

having focused on Greco-Roman written rhetoric at the expense of non-Greco-Roman cultures; he was chided for ignoring the religious and popular elements that have endowed European literature with many of its distinguishing features and that were often recorded and transmitted through Medieval Latin.⁵¹

One topos among reviewers was to laud *ELLMA* as being a *summa*.⁵² This designation is amusing, both because of Curtius's rough words for Aquinas and because of his seeming disinterest in the religious dimensions of the Middle Ages. Curtius's indifference to "basically Christian phenomena," his *tour de force* of writing "as if the medieval Church had not existed" did not escape notice.⁵³ María Rosa Lida de Malkiel expressed shock at the omission of a chapter on the Bible in a study of European cultural unity,⁵⁴ Châtillon at the relatively insignificant treatment of the patristic tradition: the latter points out that the ape as metaphor receives more attention than does either Jerome or Augustine!⁵⁵

Since Curtius focused on the literary techniques and commonplaces that developed as Greco-Roman rhetoric evolved in the Middle Ages, he paid little attention to the times and places when such rhetoric exercised less of an influence. Curtius could be blamed for the tacit assumption that only after the first decade of the twelfth century were the Middle Ages truly Latin. His prejudice against the earlier centuries is manifest in such statements as "medieval thought and expression became creative only around 1050" (*ELLMA*, p. 589) and "St. Anselm, who died in 1109, is the first original thinker of the Middle Ages" (*ELLMA*, p. 590). This predisposition to dislike the earlier Middle Ages corresponds to a lack of appreciation for the monastic mode of reading, writing, and thinking that has been analysed sympathetically by Jean Leclercq (1911–199) in *The Love of Learning and the Desire for God: A Study of Monastic Culture*.⁵⁶ This lack is what Charles W. Jones (1905–1989) condemned explicitly, and what André Vernet had in mind when he suggested that *ELLMA* should be revised in the light of Edgar de Bruyne's *Études d'esthétiques médiévales*.⁵⁷

Christianity was not the only large cultural concern to fall outside the purview of Curtius's book. On an equally grand scale, all that would pass in present-day academic chic under the buzzwords "the Other," "diversity," and "marginality" was

⁵¹ Auerbach points out that "he neglects, and sometimes seems to underestimate, its popular trends": see review of *ELLMA*, *Modern Language Notes* 65 (1950), 348–51, at p. 350.

⁵² F. Châtillon, review of *ELLMA*, p. 172; J. G. Préaux, review of *ELLMA*, p. 99; Vernet, review of *ELLMA*, p. 387; Paul Zumthor, "Moyen Age et Latinité," *Zeitschrift für romanische Philologie* 60 (1950), 151–69, at p. 161.

⁵³ The first quotation is taken from Auerbach, review of *ELLMA*, *Modern Language Notes* 65 (1950), 348–51, at p. 350; the second from Jones, "The Tradition of Rhetoric," 459–61.

⁵⁴ Lida de Malkiel, "Perduración de la literatura antigua en Occidente," in *La Tradición clásica en España* (Barcelona, 1975), pp. 271–338 and 336–38, at p. 297.

⁵⁵ Châtillon, review of *ELLMA*, p. 173.

⁵⁶ Translated by Catharine Misrahi (New York, 1961; repr. 1988). Curtius is cited within Leclercq's text only once in the epilogue (p. 310), twice in the notes.

⁵⁷ Jones, "The Tradition of Rhetoric," p. 460; Vernet, review of *ELLMA*, p. 379, n. 3.

rigorously excluded from *ELLMA*, and several reviewers noted its absence.⁵⁸ For example, Charles W. Jones regretted that the book paid no attention to Celtic, German, Byzantine, and Hebrew literature⁵⁹; Paul Lehmann called for Curtius or someone else to present the counter-currents against continuity together with the influences of Greco-Oriental and Germanic cultures in a sequel⁶⁰; Arno Schirokauer (1899–1954) faulted *ELLMA* for insufficient attention to non-European influences and pointed out that the chapter on vernacular literatures omitted Scandinavia, England and Germany⁶¹; and Paul Zumthor (1915–1994) observed that Curtius lacked perspective on non-Greco-Roman elements in medieval culture, understated the differences among various Merovingian cultures, and exaggerated the thesis of European cultural unity.⁶²

As the remarks by these four reviewers intimate, *ELLMA* was seen to suffer from a strong localism—and a strong localism that gave especially short shrift to the times and places in which Germanic culture dominated.⁶³ Lida de Malkiel saw a paradoxical relationship between the strong localism of the book and its fervor for European unity.⁶⁴ Most reviewers went further than she and, disregarding Curtius's explicit statements of purpose, faulted the book for not containing consideration of the major poems in all of Europe's medieval literary traditions. Seen in this light, the omissions (not a word is breathed of *Beowulf*, *Heliand*, *Hildebrandslied*, or *Nibelungenlied*) and disproportions (Wolfram von Eschenbach is cited only twice to Chrétien's eight times) were indeed startling. Curtius's conviction that "of all so-called national literatures, German literature is the most unsuitable as the field of departure and field of observation for European literature" was heard as an alarming battle-cry (*ELLMA*, p. 12). Germanists and German scholars were quick to point out that German literature is shunned in the chapter on the beginnings of vernacular literature, even though Curtius was qualified to provide excellent treatment of it,⁶⁵

⁵⁸ For the sake of the record, it should be noted that the reviewers who pointed out its absence were (like Curtius himself) white, male scholars of European literature.

⁵⁹ "The Tradition of Rhetoric," p. 460.

⁶⁰ Lehmann, review of *ELLMA*, p. 304.

⁶¹ Schirokauer, review of *ELLMA*, *Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 49 (1950), 395–99, at pp. 397–98.

⁶² Zumthor, review of *ELLMA*, pp. 153 and 161.

⁶³ For a more recent perspective on Curtius's image of Germany and German culture, see Harald Weinrich, "E.R. Curtius: Das Deutschlandbild eines großen Romanisten," in *Ernst Robert Curtius: Werk, Wirkung, Zukunftsperspektiven. Heidelberger Symposion zum hundertsten Geburtstag 1986*, ed. Walter Berschin and Arnold Rothe (Heidelberg, 1989), pp. 135–52.

⁶⁴ Lida de Malkiel, "Perduración de la literatura antigua en Occidente," p. 305.

⁶⁵ Walther Bulst (1899–1986) notes that "Im Kapitel *Die Anfänge der volkssprachlichen Literatur*, S. 387 ff., ist allein von der französischen, italienischen, spanischen die Rede": "Europäische Literatur und lateinisches Mittelalter. Grundsätzliche Bemerkungen," *Wirkendes Wort* (1952–1953), 56–58, at p. 58. Similarly, Friedrich Panzer (1870–1956) states, "Das Buch geht freilich auf unsere mittelhochdeutsche Dichtung nirgend näher ein, obwohl sein Vf. auch dafür gerüstet gewesen wäre...": review of *ELLMA*, *Historische Zeitschrift* 170 (1950), 109–15, at p. 113.

and that *ELLMA* leaves the impression that vernacular literature had no life of its own, no forms that were not derivative.⁶⁶

According to two reviewers, Curtius's systematic avoidance or suppression of German culture was not restricted to medieval German literature but extended to modern German scholarship. These reviewers were pained that *ELLMA* cast doubts on the stature of philologists from the Romantic era, such as Jakob Grimm (1785–1863) and Ludwig Uhland (1787–1862), and they regarded the topological method as being supremely anti-Romantic.⁶⁷ They would not have found much solace in the realization that Curtius was fully aware of this aspect to the book—that he “had come to see himself as ‘the German Roman’, chosen by ‘beloved and holy Rome’ to express in the book he was writing ‘ideas...that were profoundly anti-Teutonic.’”⁶⁸

As the criticisms described in the last paragraph indicate, flaws in Curtius's definition of European literature were seen to be intimately related to limitations in his method of literary analysis. Although usually after paying tribute to the value of *ELLMA*, many reviewers voiced doubts about the ultimate value or utility of a topological approach to literature. They worried that Curtius's emphasis on the ubiquity of topoi precluded proper appreciation of the uniqueness and individuality inherent in each work of art.⁶⁹ Furthermore, they felt that the topological method, in its excessive commitment to continuity, minimized diachronic changes and literary discontinuities. Paul Lehmann proposed that Curtius write a second book on literary discontinuities.⁷⁰ The challenge inherent in this proposal has been answered twice, first by Peter Dronke in his *Poetic Individuality in the Middle Ages* (Oxford, 1970; 2nd ed. London, 1986) and later by Hans Robert Jauss, who rejects continuity for discontinuity in his *Alterität und Modernität der mittelalterlichen Literatur* (Munich, 1977).

Reviewers celebrated the utility of the book as a reference work to be consulted “für all die materiellen historischen Fragen, die sich bei jeder Arbeit an Form- und Motivelementen der europäischen Literaturen ergeben.”⁷¹ Despite apprehensions that *ELLMA* might spawn less qualified epigones than Curtius who would mechanically collect examples of topoi, reviewers saw that *ELLMA*, beyond

⁶⁶ Wehrli, review of *ELLMA*, p. 90.

⁶⁷ Panzer, review of *ELLMA*, p. 113, and Schirokauer, review of *ELLMA*, p. 398.

⁶⁸ Peter Godman, “T. S. Eliot and E. R. Curtius: A European Dialogue,” *Liber: A European Review of Books* 1, no. 1 (1989), 5–7, at p. 7, and Peter Godman, “Epilogue,” pp. 635–36. For a fuller examination of Curtius's outlook on Rome, see Wolf-Dieter Lange, “Have Roma immortalis—Aspekte der Romerfahrung bei Ernst Robert Curtius,” in *Bonn—Universität in der Stadt. Beiträge zum Stadtjubiläum am DIES ACADEMICUS 1989 der Rheinischen Friedrich-Wilhelms-Universität Bonn*, ed. Hejjo Klein. Veröffentlichungen des Stadtarchivs Bonn 48 (Bonn, 1990), pp. 103–17.

⁶⁹ Spitzer, review of *ELLMA*, pp. 429–30.

⁷⁰ Lehmann, review of *ELLMA*, p. 304.

⁷¹ Wehrli, review of *ELLMA*, p. 86.

being a mine of information,⁷² had pedagogic utility as a source of inspiration for assigning scholarly exercises to students.⁷³

Like most summaries, *ELLMA* is so long that it is seldom read in its entirety. In a letter Curtius revealed an awareness of this possibility, saying "I fear few people will have the patience to read the whole book though many would like to have a nip. Yet one has to read it from A to Z in order to grasp what I intended."⁷⁴ Even those who have perused the book from cover to cover have sometimes expressed bafflement at its principles of organization. Auerbach commented that "the organization of the book...is not always easy to understand"; Kristeller remarked upon a lack of system in *ELLMA*; Schirokauer judged that "Die organisatorische Kraft reicht fast nirgends an die inventarisierende heran..."; and Vinay condemned the book as being structurally inorganic and arbitrary.⁷⁵

As the frequency of *ELLMA* in the *Arts & Humanities Citation Index* indicates, Curtius's book has enjoyed virtually unrivalled prestige among books on the Middle Ages during the more than forty years that have elapsed since its publication. But the strength of the influence has not been constant or equal across all areas of literary scholarship or in all places. In my judgement, the community of scholars who publish extensively on Medieval Latin literature has been strikingly reticent about *ELLMA*.⁷⁶ There is absolutely no reason why Curtius's *magnum opus* of literary history and philology should figure in such sharply focused manuals as Bernhard Bischoff's *Paläographie des römischen Altertums und des abendländischen Mittelalters*;⁷⁷ but it bears note that *ELLMA* is not cited a single time in *Lateinische Dichtungen des X. und XI. Jahrhunderts. Festgabe für Walther Bulst zum 80. Geburtstag*;⁷⁸ or Alf Önnorfors' *Mittellateinische Philologie. Beiträge zur Erforschung der mittelalterlichen Latinität*.⁷⁹ Tellingly, when Karl Langosch refers to *ELLMA* in his *Lateinisches Mittelalter: Einleitung in Sprache und Literatur*, he hedges it with caveats, characterizing it as "eine nicht vollständige und nicht gleichmäßige Sammlung von Figuren und Topoi...die christliche Topik fehlt; der

⁷² Zumthor, review of *ELLMA*, p. 169.

⁷³ Châtillon, review of *ELLMA*, p. 171 (with a reference to Auerbach); Wehrli, review of *ELLMA*, pp. 86 and 91. Contrast Vinay, review of *ELLMA*, p. 202.

⁷⁴ Dronke, "Curtius as Medievalist and Modernist," p. 1104 (quoting Curtius).

⁷⁵ Auerbach, review of *ELLMA*, *Modern Language Notes* 65 (1950), 348–51, at p. 349; Kristeller, review of *ELLMA*, p. 205; Schirokauer, review of *ELLMA*, p. 397; and Vinay, review of *ELLMA*, p. 196. Contrast Châtillon, review of *ELLMA*, p. 170.

⁷⁶ The same judgement has been implied by Lothar Bornscheuer, "Neue Dimensionen und Desiderata der Topik-Forschung," *MJ* 22 (1987), 2–27.

⁷⁷ *Grundlagen der Germanistik* 24 (Berlin, 1979); trans. Dáibhí Ó Cróinín and David Ganz, *Latin Palaeography: Antiquity & the Middle Ages* (Cambridge, 1990).

⁷⁸ Ed. Walter Berschin and Reinhard Düchting (Heidelberg, 1981).

⁷⁹ *Wege der Forschung* 292 (Darmstadt, 1975). Curtius does not appear in the volume except in the bibliography, where his article on the Archpoet is cited.

Blick is zu stark auf das aus der Antike tradierte, zu wenig auf das mittelalterliche Eigene gerichtet; Europa ist als rhetorisch formelhafte Lateinliteratur gesehen."⁸⁰

The proclivity of Medieval Latinists to ignore or underappreciate *ELLMA* has not been universal. To take two examples, Josef Szövérfy (1920–) devotes much of the first page of the introduction to his *Weltliche Dichtungen des lateinischen Mittelalters* to Curtius's definition of the Middle Ages.⁸¹ In a more restricted context, Janet Martin credits Curtius for his contribution to our understanding of medieval style: "Perhaps the single most important study of medieval style to have been published within the last fifty years is Ernst Robert Curtius, *ELLMA*. By demonstrating the rhetorical orientation of much medieval writing, the work has corrected decisively an earlier perception that medieval literature was the product of untutored spontaneity."⁸²

A particularly visible tribute to *ELLMA* has come in three important books on Medieval Latin culture published since 1970: they have echoed its title in their own. Although Peter Dronke set himself a mission very different from Curtius's, the title of his *Medieval Latin and the Rise of the European Love-Lyric*⁸³ clearly invites comparison with *ELLMA*. Dronke's *Poetic Individuality in the Middle Ages: New Departures in Poetry 1000-1150*, though not so neatly parallel to *ELLMA* in its title, is meant in part to counterbalance Curtius's concentration upon topicality—or typicality—in Medieval Latin poetry.⁸⁴ Finally, there is Walter Berschin's *Greek Letters and the Latin Middle Ages From Jerome to Nicolas of Cusa*. Despite the fact that the original German title (*Griechisch-lateinisches Mittelalter. Von Hieronymus zu Nikolaus von Kues*) sounds a shade less resonant of *ELLMA* than does the title of the English translation, Berschin's book has been rightly compared with Curtius's *ELLMA* for reasons that the translator pinpoints in his preface: "coupled with Curtius's study, Berschin's completes the 'Greco-Latin diptych' of the antique tradition in the medieval West. ... the two works have in common their comprehensive scope and astounding mastery of both primary and secondary research materials."⁸⁵

ELLMA is likeliest to receive discussion in writings of three sorts. One is books and articles that deal substantially with a single topos identified and discussed in *ELLMA*. Such books tend to confess the extent of their indebtedness by citing *ELLMA* early in the text or notes as their examination of the topos begins, and perhaps by citing it occasionally later, but without paying special homage to it.⁸⁶

⁸⁰ 3rd ed. with expansions (Darmstadt, 1983), p. 76.

⁸¹ (Berlin, 1970), p. 13.

⁸² "Classicism and Style in Latin Literature," in *Renaissance and Renewal in the Twelfth Century*, ed. Robert L. Benson and Giles Constable with Carol D. Lanham (Cambridge, MA, 1982), pp. 537–68, at 566–67.

⁸³ 2 vols., 2nd ed. (Oxford, 1968).

⁸⁴ (Oxford, 1970); 2nd ed., Westfield Publications in Medieval Studies 1 (London, 1986).

⁸⁵ Jerold C. Frakes, "Translator's Preface," p. ix (Washington, D. C., 1988).

⁸⁶ For example, see J.A. Burrow, *The Ages of Man: A Study in Medieval Writing and Thought* (Oxford, 1986), pp. 95–97, 115, 120–21; Carl Joachim Classen, *Die Stadt im Spiegel der Descriptiones*

Another genre in which *ELLMA* is often still mentioned is books and articles that seek to arrive at general theories of medieval literature. Naturally, publications of this sort have numerous criticisms and modifications to suggest, since many developments have occurred in the more than forty years that have elapsed since the initial appearance of *ELLMA*. Finally, *ELLMA* will obviously figure in studies by Medieval Latinists of Curtius and his influence, such as the collection of essays edited by Walter Berschin or the extensive epilogue by Peter Godman to the most recent English reprint of the book.

Still, there are at least two causes for distress. One is that, with rare exceptions, Medieval Latinists have not been participating vocally in discussions of the directions that the study of medieval literature should take. Of course, this lack of participation is consistent with the sad irony that it took a person from outside the narrowly focused positivism of Medieval Latin philology to undertake a book as expansive as *ELLMA*. Part of the explanation is that—though there are happily exceptions in such areas of study of the Latin literatures of the British Isles—many Medieval Latinists, who are known for anatomizing rather than for integrating, have had little interest in engaging with vernacular literatures and the popular cultures that often contributed to them. For understandable reasons, many Medieval Latinists measure themselves and their field by the standards of Classical Philology, and they are so insecure about the standing and achievements of Medieval Latin philology in comparison with Classical Philology that they react by trying to outdo the Classical Philologists at the earnest game of technical proficiency.

Compounding the detachment from non-Latin cultures in the Middle Ages is a disengagement among Medieval Latinists from a broad public in our own day. The centrality of European culture to the enterprise of universities (despite the fact that the university is itself a thoroughly European institution) is contested now, especially in the United States. Even in Europe the sanctity of a high culture based on a literary canon will be questioned increasingly as countries attempt to direct learning to the service of economic and technological competitiveness, and to satisfy the cultural needs of their ever more importunate ethnic minorities. For Medieval Latin to thrive in an age of increasing materialism, particularism, and ethnocentrism (even if the ethnocentrism comes in the guise of multiculturalism), its advocates must stress the value not only of the skills they acquire—for the sensitivities of grappling with the subtleties of difficult words that emanate from distant cultures can be applied in many spaces outside the ivory tower—but also of the entire effort of coming to terms with the European Middle Ages through its documents, many of which are in Latin.

und Laudes urbium in der antiken und mittelalterlichen Literatur bis zum Ende des zwölften Jahrhunderts, 2nd ed. Beiträge zur Altertumswissenschaft 2 (Hildesheim, Zurich, and New York, 1986), pp. 1–2; George D. Economou, *The Goddess Natura in Medieval Literature* (Cambridge, MA, 1972), pp. 3, 43 (see esp. pp. 40, 60, 97, 115–16); Annette Georgi, *Das lateinische und deutsche Preisgedichte des Mittelalters in der Nachfolge des genus demonstrativum*. Philologische Studien und Quellen 48 (Berlin, 1969), p. 8, n. 1; p. 28, n. 35; and p. 60, nn. 11 and 13.

The relative inattention that Medieval Latinists have shown to *ELLMA* is not intrinsically problematic, except insofar as it indicates a disposition not to confront larger issues. Ultimately the field of Medieval Latin studies owes its origins to scholars in the Romantic era such as the brothers Grimm, whose high standards did not prevent them from attaining nationalistic and moralistic objectives through reaching out to a broad public. Yet by and large, since the institutionalization of their field in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century Medieval Latinists have distrusted attempts to set the field within a broader context, whether in an effort to popularize or not.

The second cause for distress is an ineluctable consequence of the first: if Medieval Latinists do not set the pace in responding to *ELLMA*, they leave this patrimony to other medievalists or even to other literary scholars outside medieval studies. As Earl Jeffrey Richards has rightly observed, "Curtius' work has received its most favorable reception among comparatists."⁸⁷

Curtius would be depressed, but not surprised, if he were treated as the seal upon a tradition. He saw the writing on the wall, attributing it in part to the rise of American power and influence. As he indicated in a cool assessment of enrolments in classical language classes as reported in a New York newspaper:

Im Dezember 1949 meldete eine New-Yorker Zeitung, daß von den 884000 Zöglingen der dortigen höheren Schulen zur Zeit 9000 Latein trieben und 14 Griechisch: sieben Knaben und sieben Mädchen. Dagegen lernten 5000 Hebräisch, das als lebende Fremdsprache 1929 eingeführt wurde. Diese Zahlen sind aufschlußreich. Sie werden bestätigt durch die Eindrücke, die man auf den Universitäten und den philologischen Fachtagungen Amerikas gewinnt. Der Rückgang der humanistischen Bildung in den Vereinigten Staaten ist "katastrophal," wie das *Times Literary Supplement* sich kürzlich ausdrückte. Die Entwicklung vollzieht sich in Europa nur in etwas langsamerem Tempo. Es ist ein geschichtlicher Vorgang, den man als Tatsache anzuerkennen um zu begreifen hat—wobei es unerheblich bleibt, ob das persönliche Lebensgefühl mit Klage, mit Entrüstung, mit inselhafter Absperrung oder mit einem Idealismus reagiert, der seine Kräfte überschätzt und bestenfalls dazu führt, daß einige Abiturienten für das Studium der klassischen Philologie gewonnen werden—wodurch sich nichts ändert.⁸⁸

In unserer Zeit bildet sich in Amerika ein Bewußtsein kultureller Selbständigkeit heraus. Ihm entspricht eine historische Denkweise, welche die europäische Geschichte als Prähistorie Amerikas auffaßt.

⁸⁷ *Modernism, Medievalism and Humanism*, p. 125, no. 343.

⁸⁸ Curtius, review of Gilbert Highet, *The Classical Tradition*, in *Gesammelte Aufsätze* (as in n. 28, above), pp. 456–60, at 456.

Das muß dazu führen, daß die komplexe und nuancierte Struktur des Europäismus dem Blick entschwindet.⁸⁹

But the ascendancy of the New World (or of the non-European—for the highlighting of Hebrew in the statistics he cites is salient) was only one element in the collapse of the humanism that Curtius revered. Another was the hegemony of philosophy, a discipline he distrusted profoundly. To quote from the essay with which the *ELLMA* closes: “I have tried to show that humanistic tradition is from time to time attacked by philosophy. It may suffer a serious setback from these aggressions. Many signs seem to point to the fact that we are faced once more with an incursion of philosophers, existentialists, or others” (p. 592).

According to some, what Curtius presented as a defensive war against philosophy was lost decisively within a quarter-century after he wrote *ELLMA*. For instance, Eugene Vance treats Curtius’s notion of “historical topics” as a philological formulation designed to provide solace to “medievalists and nonmedievalists alike during the period of anguish following the crisis of European culture that occurred with Second World War.”⁹⁰ As the context makes clear, Vance is convinced that the “originary paradigm” towards which philologists strive has been replaced by more sophisticated models inspired by linguistics and semiotics.

Such may be the case in some areas of scholarship. But in Medieval Latin studies the struggle has not ended, because the “originary paradigm” has not been replaced but complemented and extended. Thus Curtius’s contribution continues to inspire new accumulation, synthesis, and analysis of knowledge. Whether above or below ground, the construction or reconstruction of the humanistic tradition as Curtius envisaged it will proceed, however many metamorphoses it undergoes; for the literature of the past is too rich, too attractive, too instructive, and too mysterious to abandon, no matter how much broadening it may need. So long as we treasure the past, the pyramids of stone will remain; and those of words will grow. If we forsake the past, we stand to surrender much more than mere hieroglyphs. We will lose the monuments of past humanity, and in so doing our own humanity will itself be diminished.

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⁸⁹ Curtius, review of Gilbert Highet, *The Classical Tradition*, in *Gesammelte Aufsätze*, p. 458.

⁹⁰ *From Topic to Tale: Logic and Narrativity in the Middle Ages*. Theory and History of Literature 47 (Minneapolis, 1987), p. 42.