Introduction
Directions of Thought – The Middle Ages at the Midcentury
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I have heard the key
Turn in the door once and turn once only
We think of the key, each in his prison
Thinking of the key, each confirms a prison

– T. S. Eliot

In the decades following the end of World War II, the medieval reemerged as a category freighted with the weight of the past, ready to carry new significance. Its historical status, sociological properties, and artistic creations were taken up at this pivotal moment by intellectuals in radically novel and divergent ways that not only would influence the narrow field of scholarship on the Middle Ages itself, but at a much deeper level would also shape the future of humanistic enquiry more widely.1 The essays in this book are interested in those midcentury writers whose enduring scholarship and criticism touched on the medieval: the ways these intellectuals were thinking of the Middle Ages and the ways the Middle Ages served as a point of intellectual departure and connection between them.

Many of the thinkers whose paths cross in the pages of this book are not, strictly speaking, known as medievalists: Kingsley Amis (1922–1995),

1 To a certain extent, we will use the Middle Ages and the medieval period as synonymous terms, with the understanding that both phrases are, necessarily, the product of later intellectual periods (see also Jay’s Afterword on this issue). That said, we are also cognizant of the fact that the adjectival form “medieval” serves as a base for the nominalization “medievalism,” a term on which we have much more to say. For this volume, we are primarily interested in thinkers who are engaged with the culture of the Middle Ages and the way that influences their understanding of “the medieval” as a conceptual formation produced from that direct engagement, rather than an understanding of the period produced at a remove, a reaction to an already metabolized version of the Middle Ages that one would call “medievalism.” The lines between the two are never clear cut, and the way that thinkers understand the Middle Ages will always be in conversation with the medievalism of their own moment, but nevertheless we believe there is something to be gained by considering those writers who are using medieval material in formulating their own thoughts, the fruits of which are borne out by the essays collected here.

In this respect, the present book shares similar aims with two recent books that demonstrate the significance of the Middle Ages in modern thought. Bruce Holsinger’s *The Premodern Condition: Medievalism and the Making of Theory* attends to the influence of medieval studies upon French theory, covering figures such as Georges Bataille (1897–1962), Pierre Bourdieu (1930–2002), Jacques Derrida (1930–2004), Jacques Lacan (1901–1981), and Emmanuel Levinas (1906–1995). Andrew Cole’s and D. Vance Smith’s edited collection of essays, *The Legitimacy of the Middle Ages: On the Unwritten History of Theory*, cuts a longer and larger swath through theory’s history – covering figures such as G. W. F. Hegel (1770–1831), Karl Marx (1818–1883), Martin Heidegger (1889–1976), and Theodor Adorno (1903–1969) – and argues for the centrality of the Middle Ages in its account of modernity. The present book, in contrast, focuses on a narrower period (the mid-twentieth century) but in other ways ranges more widely, addressing figures that are not normally covered by that loose categorization of Theory with a capital T (such as Sayers, or even Curtius) as well as those who are (such as Barthes or Fanon). Our purpose in considering this wider purview over a shorter period of time is to show how endemic the medieval as a conceptual object was for intellectuals of all

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1 Despite being concerned with the lives of individual thinkers, this volume is not one of those biographies of the “great” twentieth-century medievalists, such as Norman Cantor’s highly problematic *Inventing the Middle Ages* and J. Aurell Cardona’s *Rewriting the Middle Ages in the Twentieth Century*, which focus their attention on the lives of scholars within the field of medieval studies. Nor is this volume specifically concerned with the rapid growth and development of new movements within medieval studies itself, such as the emergence of the *Annales* School; on that topic, see, for example, Burke, *The French Historical Revolution*. For a representative critique of Cantor, see Howe, “Review of Norman F. Cantor,” discussed later.
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different stripes at a shared moment in history. That is, instead of tracing an intellectual genealogy of Theory over the longue durée, we are mapping a mentalité of the medieval at the midcentury, as it were, and demonstrating its importance for our own thinking today. The essays in this volume illustrate how the Middle Ages served as an object of thought: how mid-twentieth-century thinkers used different aspects of medieval literature, art, history, and culture to think through contemporary political and philosophical problems. Taken together, these essays reveal a nexus of influences, illuminating these thinkers genealogically in relation to one another and in light of their own contemporary moments, offering a fuller and clearer sense of the lasting contributions that each of these figures has made to so much of today’s scholarly work in literature, philosophy, and the humanities more broadly.

Each of the thinkers explored in this volume has shaped our understanding of the Middle Ages and many other critical methodologies in use today: literary, historical, philological, political. Auerbach’s figura and Curtius’s book of nature, Kantorowicz’s two bodies and Arendt’s political action, Fanon’s manicheanism and Zumthor’s naïve historicism are now commonplace concepts widely employed. Often disconnected from the thinkers who first mobilized them, they nevertheless carry particular meanings precisely because of the work done by these thinkers and their medieval points of reference. Paradoxically, as citations of their work by medievalists have declined steadily since the 1980s, their ideas have become ever more ingrained in scholarly assumptions about the Middle Ages and how we come to approach the study of the literary and artistic cultures of this period. It is now, therefore, an ideal time to revisit these ideas and directly address the intellectual contexts in which they were formed.

At the same time, the fundamental and broad influence that these figures have had on a range of other and later fields of study, especially within the province of critical theory, is well recognized. Auerbach’s theory of representation, for instance, lies behind Fredric Jameson’s (he was, after all, Auerbach’s student). Kantorowicz’s work has recently motivated a debate among such diverse thinkers as Giorgio Agamben, Victoria Kahn, Simon Critchley, and Eric Santner. Arendt’s writings on political action as a manifestation of the will (indebted to St Augustine of Hippo [354–430] and John Duns Scotus [c. 1266–1308]) continue to shape her

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1 See Bill Brown, “The Dark Wood of Postmodernity.”
reception by J. M. Bernstein, Wendy Brown, and Judith Butler among others. Panofsky’s homology between the structures of scholastic thought and the architecture of the Gothic cathedral stressed the importance of habitus, a concept that influenced the oeuvre of his early French translator, Pierre Bourdieu, and has continued to be an important concept in sociology and discourse analysis. The debate between Karl Löwith (1897–1973) and Hans Blumenberg (1920–1996) abides as a faint backdrop to recent studies of secularization by, say, Talal Asad and Charles Taylor. And Paul Zumthor’s engagement with French poststructuralism underlies many current debates in literary studies about formalism and historicism.

But the Middle Ages have also often served as a darker catalyst. In our own contemporary intellectual and political moment, as the medieval is being dangerously appropriated by the alt-right and white supremacists, it can be helpful to remember that this kind of political misappropriation has a long history, as do strategies for its resistance. To take one of too many possible examples from the twentieth century, the medieval historian Percy Ernst Schramm (1894–1970) had worked in the Warburg Library in the 1920s and 1930s alongside Erwin Panofsky and other influential art historians. He would go on to become the official diarist of the Nazi High Command between 1943 and 1945. These two commitments were not unconnected in the least and coalesced in the serialized biography of Hitler he would eventually publish in the 1960s. Schramm’s study of medieval portraiture, according to Eliza Garrison, forced the artworks to “serve as models for his own time,” and with the rise of National Socialism he “saw an opportunity for the modern realisation of political ideals visualised in medieval images.” In other words, for Schramm and likeminded German intellectuals of the period, “the clear goal was to construct the history of their own time as an answer to and a fulfilment of events and ideas set in motion in the eighth through early eleventh centuries by people who were perceived as the first ‘Germans’.” His biography of Hitler, as Garrison demonstrates, was thus unmistakably modeled on Einhard’s (c. 770–840)

1 For example, Bernstein, “Promising and Civil Disobedience;” Wendy Brown, Manhood and Politics, 23–31; Wendy Brown, Edgework, 101–2; Butler, Notes Towards a Performative Theory of Assembly; Butler, “Hannah Arendt’s Death Sentences.”

4 On Bourdieu, see Holsinger, The Premodern Condition, 94–113.

5 See Chapter 2 in this volume, Saltzman, “Hermeneutics and the Medieval Horizon.”

6 See, for example, Kim, “White Supremacists”; and see n. 36.

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early ninth-century Life of Charlemagne in its opening description of the leader’s physical appearance. Panofsky, for one, despised this ideological position of his former colleague, and in 1967 when deciding whether to accept an award from Schramm, apparently told his wife he had no interest in “letting Hitler’s Thucydides hang a medal around [his] neck.”

Figures such as Ernst Kantorowicz illuminate a more complicated picture of how the ideologies of the early twentieth century could become wrapped up in the study of the Middle Ages. Panofsky’s principles, for instance, influenced not only his view of Schramm, but also his view of Kantorowicz, whose appointment at the Institute for Advanced Study was “by no means predetermined, for until the spring of 1950 Panofsky had associated him with right-wing positions he abhorred.” His 1927 Habilitationsschrift on the Emperor Frederick II (1194–1250) is accordingly famous for its powerful praise for the German despot, and its message was embraced in bourgeoning Nazi discourses. The swastika on its cover made this connection particularly visible, even though it was originally an apolitical signet for the book series published by Georg Bondi (1865–1935) — also a Jew — which preceded Nazi usage by a decade. And yet Kantorowicz publicly protested the Nazi regime, refused to sign a Nazi loyalty oath, and as a Jewish academic fled Germany, eventually taking up a position at the University of California, Berkeley. In 1950, he was fired from the University of California for refusing, once again, to sign a loyalty oath — the decision that would convince Panofsky to recommend his appointment at the Institute of Advanced Study. Then in 1957, he published his most well-known work, The King’s Two Bodies — a study of medieval kingship that Giorgio Agamben would decades later engage with as “one of the century’s great critical texts on the state and techniques of power.” Even this most cursory account of this one scholar’s life serves as an important reminder of how scholarly engagements with the Middle Ages can become politically charged in unpredictable ways.

12 Garrison, “Ottonian Art and Its Afterlife,” 221; for more on the Nazi interest in the Middle Ages, see Diebold, “The Nazi Middle Ages”; Johnson and Caputo, “The Middle Ages and the Holocaust.” For a biographical survey of medieval studies during the 1930s, see Wallace, “Medieval Studies in Troubled Times.”
13 Lerner, Ernst Kantorowicz, 331. On the events of Spring 1950, see Chapter 3 in this volume, van Deusen, “Ernst Kantorowicz, Carl Schmitt, and the University of California Regents.”
14 Kantorowicz, Kaiser Friedrich der Zweite.
15 Lerner, Ernst Kantorowicz, 2, 113–14.
16 See Chapter 3 in this volume, van Deusen, “Ernst Kantorowicz, Carl Schmitt, and the University of California Regents.”
17 Agamben, Homo Sacer, 91.
The postwar period saw a variety of responses to such ideological misappropriation of the Middle Ages. Hannah Arendt’s critique of totalitarianism – in taking up medieval thinkers such as Augustine to imagine a progressive politics of willed and thoughtful neighborly love – is perhaps one of the most overt, if also the most controversial and complex. But even amidst the rise of National Socialism in the 1930s, a period when “one frequently heard that the Nazis wished to turn the clock back to the ‘dark’ Middle Ages” (as Salo W. Baron [1895–1989] put it in his report on the Eichmann Trial), thinkers such as Ernst Bloch, in his 1935 examination of the rise of National Socialism and Nazi uses of history, made the case against the idea that anyone gets to own the Middle Ages. And indeed, writing in 1962, Baron himself was arguing that this common pejorative sentiment about Nazi medievalism unfairly “maligned the Middle Ages, which tried to establish the reign of morality and order…. The unprecedented character of Nazi racial antisemitism could not be camouflaged by references to the Middle Ages.” But as the medieval is so susceptible to misappropriation – even to this day – it is often employed as a source of historical authority just as easily as it is pejoratively deployed as a regressive attribute.

Looking back to the nineteenth century, we can easily see where these paradoxical tactics originate and how they then become dangerously exacerbated in the early twentieth century. “The Heroic Age of medieval scholarship,” to borrow Emily Thornbury’s befitting characterization of the nineteenth century, witnessed a shift in the study of the Middle Ages from romantic and antiquarian interests to the emergence of new “scientific” approaches in the disciplines of, say, philology and art history. But that romantic inheritance was never fully displaced. As Paul Zumthor mused in Speaking of the Middle Ages, its quest for mythical origins, its “well-ordered dreams,” its “nostalgias for epochs full of meaning,” its “naive historicism,” all became “cross-bred with positivism.” These scientific

18 For a sense of this range, see the 2014 postmedieval special issue on “The Holocaust and the Middle Ages,” ed. Johnson and Caputo. See also Hart, “Modern and Genuine Mediaevalism.”
19 See Chapter 4 in this volume, Perry, “Hannah Arendt’s Middle Ages for the Left.”
20 See Chapter 4 in this volume, Perry, “Hannah Arendt’s Middle Ages for the Left.”
21 Baron, “The Eichmann Trial,” 37. A Columbia University professor, Baron was making this argument in relation to his recent testimony at the Eichmann Trial, but he had already been making these arguments in 1935; see his essay, “Germany’s Ghetto.”
22 Zumthor, Speaking of the Middle Ages, 43–45. In many ways, Zumthor’s little book also provides a helpful introduction to the midcentury trends in medieval studies. See Chapter 2 in this volume, Saltzman, “Hermeneutics and the Medieval Horizon.”
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approaches to the Middle Ages in the nineteenth century by the so-called Fathers of medieval studies thus embraced “the romantic myth of continuity, appropriated but displaced,” which, especially after the European revolutions of 1848 and the Franco-Prussian War (1870–1871), facilitated medieval scholarship’s enmeshment in nationalist politics. At the same time, many nineteenth-century investments in the Middle Ages – literary, architectural, scholarly, artistic, economic – also worked to reimagine the present and the future as a kind of new Middle Ages, a nostalgic return to the pre-industrial, pre-capitalist past. The two modes of appropriation went hand in hand.

By the twentieth century, this nationalist mythologization of the Middle Ages, as we have seen, reached a crest in emerging totalitarian ideologies. But even after the wave of totalitarianism had broken, the same fundamentally romantic approach to tracing the origins of the present back to the medieval would still occasionally persist, as it does, for instance, in Ernst Robert Curtius’s magisterial – or “magnificent,” as his sometime interlocutor T. S. Eliot (1888–1965) deemed it – European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages. Published in 1948, Curtius’s book replaced the nationalist frame with a pan-Europeanism: a postwar philological recuperation of European unity and continuity through its shared legacy of Latinity.

In Curtius’s own words, the book “grew out of a concern for the preservation of Western culture…. [and it] attempts to illuminate the unity of that tradition in space and time by the application of new methods. In the intellectual chaos of the present it has become necessary, and happily not impossible, to demonstrate that unity.” Such heroic unification amidst the intellectual – and

Zumthor, Speaking of the Middle Ages, 46. For a wider overview of the association between nationalisms and medieval studies, see Evans and Marchal, eds., The Uses of the Middle Ages.

See Saltzman, “Towards the Middle Ages to Come.” That is not to say that such modes of medievalism did not continue into the twentieth century. Framed by the medieval legend of Saint Eustace, for example, Russell Hoban’s post-apocalyptic novel Riddley Walker seems to take its cue from nineteenth-century novels such as Richard Jefferies’ After London, or Wild England (1885) or William Morris’s News from Nowhere (1890) (we thank Gabriel Ojeda-Sague for bringing Hoban to our attention). One could also point, in a different vein, to the midcentury growth of Disney and Disneyland (which opened in 1955); see Pugh and Aronstein, eds., The Disney Middle Ages (we thank Heather Glenny for her insights on the midcentury medievalism of Disneyland). To countless individual and amateur forms of medievalism; see Dinshaw, How Soon Is Now? And on twentieth-century literary medievalism, see Chapter 6 in this volume, Lees, “Old English at the Midcentury.”

See Chapter 5 in this volume, Thornbury, “Curtius and Jung,” Curtius and T. S. Eliot had several intellectual exchanges (Curtius even translated The Wasteland into German in 1927), on which see Burrow, “Introduction,” xiv.

Curtius, European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages, xxiv. On this Eurocentric mode of “civilizational survival” shared by Auerbach and Curtius (but unheeded by the emergent field of comparative literature), see, Said, Culture and Imperialism, 47.
political – chaos of the 1940s sounds perfectly magnificent. Indeed, for Leo Spitzer (1887–1960), the book conveyed the sensation of being “aroused precisely by the realization of the historical continuity of our European civilization” such that “one feels as though the world-clock stood still: man appears here as a being consisting in continuity.”

But for Spitzer, Curtius’s project could not merely have been a political reaction to the idea “that under the Nazi regime a European point of view on cultural questions was dangerous”; Curtius’s project was about deploying philology as a response to the very “irrationalism” that engendered “a barbarous movement such as Hitlerism”:

With his flair for the duty of the hour, Curtius turned toward “solid philology.” … It was logical that an aristocratic mind such as Curtius’ should, before the onslaught of the plebian hordes, retreat into the Latin past of Germany, into a difficult subject matter, inaccessible to the minds of the Rosenberg stamp, and should limit itself to strictly rational methods that could have a sobering effect on the ideology- and world-drunk German, thus avoiding the pitfalls of a Karl Vossler [1872–1949] whose vague irrational or idealistic categories … seemed ironically enough, dangerously close to those of Hitlerism.

Could “solid philology” rescue Europe from its ideological maelstrom, stirred up as it had been by ideologues such as Alfred Rosenberg?

Spitzer had his doubts, for he concludes his review by noting the conspicuous “bias against French classicism” and Curtius’s other lingering “resentments,” which “seem to include the German emigré scholars in Romance who have worked before him in the same direction: there is no mention in his book of Auerbach.”

In other respects, Auerbach’s study of prefiguration, notes Spitzer as a fellow Jewish emigré to Istanbul, would have fit well in Curtius’s account of medieval topoi had he thought to include it.

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99 Spitzer, “Review of Ernst Robert Curtius,” 428.
100 Ibid., 426. In his Foreword to the English translation of European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages, Curtius explains that the “tradition of thought and art” from Homer to Goethe “was severely shaken by the war of 1914–18 and its aftermath, especially in Germany. In 1932 I published my polemical pamphlet Deutscher Geist in Gefahr. It attacked the barbarization of education and the nationalistic frenzy which were the forerunners of the Nazi regime. In it I pleaded for a new Humanism, which should integrate the Middle Ages, from Augustine to Dante…. When the German catastrophe came, I decided to serve the idea of a medievalistic Humanism by studying the Latin literature of the Middle Ages. These studies occupied me for fifteen years. The result of them is the present book” (xxiii–xxiv).
102 Zakai and Weinstein, in “Erich Auerbach and His ‘Figura’,” argue that Auerbach’s approach to figura was in fact a sharp rejection of Nazi philology that sought to demonstrate Christianity’s opposition to Judaism, rather than (as Auerbach’s essay shows) its indebtedness.
Mimesis is a similar kind of project, taking up a long stretch of European literary history in which the Middle Ages holds a pivotal place. Yet it employs a different mode of philological inquiry: its focus is placed on the individuality of literary examples, rather than on generalizable commonplaces and continuities of the sort that interest Curtius. Mimesis signaled another kind of break as well. After its publication in 1946, Auerbach found himself fending off criticism, not only from Curtius, but also from those accusing the book of being “especially pro-French” and “unjust toward German literature” (a noticeable inversion of the critique of Curtius by Spitzer). Other readers accused the book more generally of being “all too much determined by the present.” Auerbach embraced this charge: “in the end I asked: How do matters look in the European context? No one today can see such a context from anywhere else today than precisely from the present, and specifically from the present that is determined by the personal origin, history, and education of the viewer. It is better to be consciously than unconsciously time-bound.”

Through Auerbach’s words one begins to sense a sea change around the necessity of acknowledging one’s own historicity in relation to the past. And as we will consider again in a moment, scholars after World War II increasingly began thinking of the medieval less as a source of continuity than as a detached object of study. The medieval has long been (and still is) a contested period: ripe for mythologizing, heritage-making, and the bolstering of nationalisms and white-supremacy. So readily appropriable, so easily drawn into the ideological or the political, is it ever possible for the period to be a neutral object of study? Is it possible to draw the uncomfortable line between medievalism and appropriation? With the postwar rupture of historical distance came entirely new ways of thinking of the Middle Ages. Perhaps therefore the most important word in the title of this present book is actually the preposition. What does thinking of the Middle Ages entail? What relation does it insinuate between the thinker and the medieval past? The process implied in thinking of is distinct from that implied in thinking with or thinking about or thinking through or thinking for. Less entangled, less objective, less penetrative, the preposition of suggests a casual yet productive relation,

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33 See Zakai, Erich Auerbach, 54–56.
aimless yet full of possibility. Indeed, of etymologically suggests detachment, related as it is to an Indo-European root shared by Latin ab- and Greek apo- and their senses of removal and separation. We therefore want to distinguish the practice of thinking of from a practice of appropriation, which is about taking ownership (proprius), bringing the object towards and into one’s own position (a movement implied by the prefix ad-). The thinking catalogued in this volume is therefore largely, though not entirely, in the mode of distinction, of thinking away from, rather than grabbing toward.

The term “medievalism,” however, has tended to describe the latter mode of thinking, though it is used in reference to all manner of engagements with the medieval world, from the amateur to the professional, from the scholarly to the fictional and fantastical. When the term “medievalism” was first used to refer to a way of being (in the mid-nineteenth century), its sense was primarily pejorative: retrograde, backwards, feudal, anti-industrial. Over the course of the nineteenth century, this retrogression gave way to nostalgia in cultural movements that sought to imagine a future that would resemble the Middle Ages (or at least a nineteenth-century futuristic fantasy of the Middle Ages). The term “medievalism” reached its peak in the 1920s and 1930s, often referring back to various earlier forms of medievalist engagement: early modern antiquarianism, the Gothic revival, the Arts and Crafts movement. And then in the 1940s and 1950s its usage dropped off considerably and was rarely applied to contemporary intellectual activities. Given the trajectory of the term “medievalism” during the