Het verlangen naar de Middeleeuwen. De verbeelding van een historische passie
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Summary

The Longing for the Middle Ages
The Representation of a Historical Passion

For centuries many felt an intense longing for the Middle Ages. Poets tried to revive the spirit of the era, people looked for the origins of their nation in the medieval past, and gradually the landscape filled with Gothic Revival manor houses and railways. The longing for the Middle Ages changed the face of the world. At the same time, the medieval façades of the railway stations hid modern interiors: the past, it was clear, was inextricably linked to the present.

This book tries to find an answer to the question how aspects of the medieval past were recalled, and what the reasons were behind them. Studying the representation of the Middle Ages, therefore, is always done from a dual perspective. On the one hand, the book examines how aspects of medieval history were evoked in the past. On the other, this interest is described and analysed in the light of the time when those evocations came into being.

Medievalism developed into one of the authoritative movements in Western historical consciousness. It could thus fuse with such divergent and sometimes opposite phenomena as, for instance, Romanticism, Decadence, Protestantism, nationalism, positivism, Catholicism, liberalism or socialism. Medievalism is a complex phenomenon, which, however, deserves to be studied and understood in its own right, not merely as an epiphenomenon of other movements. Indeed, it is by studying the representations of the Middle Ages that new connections can be revealed.

Giving shape to the past is by no means the work of historiographers only. Thinkers, writers, poets, painters, architects, social theorists and others, too, shape the past. That is why they will all be given ample scope to speak in this study. Concepts such as 'historical memory' and 'historical consciousness' are hard to make operational and for that reason preference here has been given to the concept of 'historical culture'. Historical culture is the practical articulation of historical consciousness in a particular period of history. Expressions of historical culture include literature, historiography, the visual arts, and political theory. Another central concept in this study of medievalism is the concept of 'appropriation'. Unlike the traditional term 'reception', which rather suggests a passive undergoing, appropriation suggests the process of giving new meaning to concepts passed on by others.
In the introduction to this book, three examples illustrate to what extent the Middle Ages dominated historical consciousness in Europe and the United States of America. The first example shows how the French citizen-king Louis Philippe tried to control the ‘feudal’ medieval past in his new museum at Versailles. The second example sheds light on the citizens of the United States creating a medieval past of their own. The last example concerns German, Russian, and French social and human scientists making a case for the New Middle Ages.

*The Longing for the Middle Ages* has the form of a triptych. The left panel shows a medieval figure: Charlemagne. After his death, the great emperor lived on in the collective memory of many Europeans. In the course of the centuries, however, he was revived in different ways again and again. The first chapter of this study, *The Representation of a Medieval Emperor*, examines in a diachronic way how and why individuals and groups, from the Early Middle Ages up to our time, always created their own Charlemagne. Individuals and groups including emperors and popes, Protestants and Catholics, liberals and conservatives, militarists and peacemakers, nationalists and ‘Euro-nationalists’ appealed to the medieval ruler. The cultural debate about Charlemagne took place especially on the interface between historiography, painting, political philosophy, and literature. An attempt has been made to link together these manifestations of historical culture and then bring to light various contexts or paradigms.

Some of those paradigms were granted long lives. For instance, from as early as the 12th century up to the present, many referred to Charlemagne as the patron of science and education. At the same time new meaning was given to the theme all the time. Some respectable universities, including those in Bologna and Paris, tightened the bonds with the medieval emperor in order to add to their independence and prestige. The 17th century antiquarian Benedictine Jean Mabillon tried to justify academic learning in the monasteries with an appeal to Charlemagne. Indeed, a long time after World War II, French pupils were still celebrating their *fête de Charlemagne*, since the emperor was considered patron of the national educational system. Other paradigms, however, were more short-lived. The paradigm dealing with the proper relationship between liege and vassal, as portrayed in the medieval Carolingian romances (*gestes de Charlemagne*), seemed only relevant in the heyday of the Middle Ages.

Sometimes a great number of groups were involved in a paradigm. When securing their privileges, for instance, many peoples, cities, dioceses, chapters, churches, and monasteries, appealed to the emperor. However, the debate about Charlemagne’s contribution to the process of the class struggle, yet another paradigm, remained largely restricted to Marxist historians. In addition, various paradigms showed a great wealth and diversity of expressions of historical culture. Within the context of cultural nationalism, for example, the medieval emperor was portrayed in science, poetry, education, painting, historiography, festival culture, sculpture, book illustrations and novels.
It was always clear that the paradigms were related to contemporary issues. In Europe after World War II, for instance, Charlemagne was expected to regenerate the European Movement. None of the themes could be sure of eternal life in the collective memory, for when certain paradigms lost their topical interest or usefulness, historical interest focused on different aspects of Charlemagne's activity. With respect to historical representations, shifting interest is not caused so much by shortcomings in a paradigm as by changes in the historical process itself. Rationality and historical criticism are important means to show that within a paradigm one representation is better than the other, but they do not put an end to a paradigm in any decisive manner.

On the central panel – The Representation of the Middle Ages – are the portraits of seven people. On the basis of different interests, expressions of historical culture and national backgrounds they looked back on the Middle Ages. Still, they had one thing in common: a profound interest in the medieval era – an interest sometimes turning to an overwhelming longing. The choice of testators, who all lived in the 18th and 19th centuries, is inspired by the fact that during these centuries a fundamental change in historical consciousness took place.

The Italian Lodovico Muratori (1672–1750) expressed his vision on the past in his numerous source editions and in his antiquarian and historical studies. At first he was interested in erudizione sacra or 'sacred learning'. With the help of historical-critical means he tried to purify the Christian tradition. In Muratori's view historical sources here had the same status as experiments in natural science. He saved innumerable medieval documents from oblivion. Forced by political circumstances he turned to erudizione profana. His patron, Rinaldo I of Este, Duke of Modena, asked him to defend the claims of the duchy to the Comacchio valley in the face of claims of the Roman Curia. Such a study motivated by giurisdizionalismo, in cooperation with the German philosopher and historian Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, gradually developed into a broadly-based study of the House of Este.

In his history of the House of Este, Muratori found that most of the Italian dynasties, including the Este family, were of Germanic, not Trojan or Roman origin. This led him to a revaluation of Italy's early medieval Longobard past. However, Muratori was anything but a Romanticist: he studied the medieval millennium to emphasise the welfare of his own time. He considered studying the Middle Ages necessary because there lay the roots of his own time. Moreover, by pursuing erudizione antica Italy was able to make up the intellectual arrears it had built up with respect to other European countries. And, finally, lessons for the present could be learned from the historical studies. For instance, contemporaries could take as an example the Longobards' simple codification of law or the way medieval brotherhoods organised poor relief. In the eyes of the Italian scholar, the Middle Ages were 'exemplary' in the medieval meaning of the word, that is: providing the present with examples worth following or rejecting. Muratori hardly ever used the term 'Middle Ages': he probably considered the period to be part of Antichità or Antiquity.
With his study of Italy's medieval history Muratori laid the foundations for Italian cultural nationalism. In the latter half of the 18th century, Italians preferred to leave the history of the vast and ethnically heterogeneous Roman Empire – which could hardly serve as a foreshadowing of the Italian nation – to foreigners such as Gibbon, Winckelmann, and Montesquieu. The history of the kingdom of Italy in the Middle Ages (and the study of the Etruscan past) was more in line with national desires. At the beginning of the 19th century, Muratori and the Middle Ages were joined together for good. Stendhal called him 'the father of Italian history in the Middle Ages'.

Editors of sources – including Muratori, Mabillon, and Jean-Baptiste La Curne de Sainte-Palaye – laid the foundations for the study of the Middle Ages, on which others could build. The Frenchman François-René de Chateaubriand (1768–1848), for instance, based his ideas about medieval knighthood especially on works by La Curne de Sainte-Palaye. Chateaubriand expressed his thoughts about the past in critical essays, historiography, and novels. Little did his romantic motivation of historical interest resemble Muratori's pragmatic approach. For the French writer the Revolution was the starting point and touchstone of his reflections time and time again. The Revolution had robbed the nation of its history and an appropriate relationship with the past had to be thought through again. A return, however, was out of the question. Wishing to touch the past was destroying it.

Chateaubriand wrote about Christianity and about medieval architecture and epic, but that did not mean that the Christian religion saw its highest mode of expression in the Middle Ages. In his historical studies, contrary to what has often been claimed, he did not consider the Middle Ages a purely Christian era. Christianity, it was true, tried to combat excesses but more often than not medieval men and women did not observe the word of God. The era was characterised by low moral standards. In his Génie du Christianisme the writer spoke especially highly of France's Grand Siècle. In the 17th century, not the Middle Ages, the country excelled thanks to a Christian revival as well as an exemplary orientation on Antiquity.

In his own way, Chateaubriand gave shape to the familiar myth of 'rejuvenating barbarians'. When invading a civilisation, such was his central line of thought, barbarism was able to fertilise it by means of its vigour. However, when a civilisation overwhelmed barbarism, the latter became powerless. An example of the latter development were the Red Indians in America. They had been made powerless by the arrival of civilised Europeans. The decadent civilisation of late Antiquity, on the other hand, had been reborn 'in the bed of Germanic savages' during the Middle Ages. After Chateaubriand, the myth of rejuvenating barbarians was to return in all sorts of forms. For instance, the French fascist Pierre Drieu la Rochelle contrasted the aged classical civilisation with the youthful zest of the barbarians and their 'boundless passion for war'. In our time, Umberto Eco gave his interpretation of the myth. In the Italian medievalist's view, the early medieval era was 'a time of unbelievable intellectual vitality' and 'of passionate dialogue between the barbarian civilisations'.
SUMMARY

One of the representatives of German Romanticism, Friedrich Schlegel (1772–1829), wrote about the Middle Ages in his essays about literary theory, visual arts, architecture, history and political theory. Like Muratori, he at first occupied himself with Antiquity. When he came across contemporary writers such as Goethe and Tieck and also discovered the relationship of their literature with the novels from the Middle Ages and the New Time, he shifted his interests. Together with his brother August Wilhelm, Schlegel promoted the revaluation of the romantic literature of the Middle Ages – ‘unser Mittelalter’, as he put it in a letter to August Wilhelm. Schlegel’s medievalism was greatly influenced by his friendship with Friedrich von Hardenberg, the poet Novalis. In 1799, the latter had delivered his famous speech about *Die Christenheit oder Europa*, in which he sang the praises of the splendid times of the Middle Ages under one supreme pontiff. In a way, Schlegel’s work was the historical as well as the practical development of Novalis’ utopian programme.

When, during a trip to France, he had crossed the border, he realised as if by magic the beauty of the German landscape with its woody mountains and impressive medieval castles. The Middle Ages, he wrote in his *Reise nach Frankreich*, were no ‘in-between centuries’. It was rather Schlegel’s own age that was a middle time, a period of transition, in which the Germans had to recover their lost religion and fatherland. At his arrival in Paris, Schlegel was one of the first to discover the painting of the medieval primitives. He admired Italian painters such as Fra Bartolomeo and Flemish artists such as Memling and Van Eyck. In Paris, he was also visited by the brothers Sulpiz and Melchior Boisserée, who convinced him of the beauty of Gothic style. Later, in an extensive essay, Schlegel defended the Nazarenes, painters who, among other things, were inspired by medieval examples.

After Napoleon’s coronation, he began to think about true emperorship. He saw Austria with its many peoples as a model for a future Europe. Charlemagne had shown the way before: he had been the founder of a free alliance of independent states, united in Christian spirit. Working harmoniously together with the church hierarchy, a Hapsburg emperorship would be able to restore the unity that had been lost after the Revolution. Unlike Chateaubriand, Schlegel, in his political opinions, was guided by medieval conceptions. Not a representative democracy, but a corporative, organic society organised along medieval lines would be able to restore the political truce in Europe.

Another German Romantic, Joseph Görres (1776–1848), expressed his vision of the Middle Ages in his literary studies, art-historical essays, philosophy of history and political theory. Disappointed by the course of the Revolution and by German impotence during the Napoleonic wars, he turned to the study of Old-German myths and legends. In them he hoped to find the *Volkgeist* that would point the way to a new future. Furthermore, it was his firm conviction that national feelings were evoked by reading medieval romantic stories rather than by reading empirical, historical studies. In connection with this, he also published old folk tales himself. In his early Romantic period, he was clearly influenced by Schlegel, but in a later period things
were rather the other way round. Görres’ political ideas exerted a strong attraction on the Viennese Romantic.

In his late Romantic period, Görres tried to find a middle way between Revolution and Reaction, between radical liberals who, in his view, propagated a revolution from the bottom, and despots bringing about a revolution from the top. This contrast roughly coincided with the distinction between supporters and opponents of history. In his dialectical philosophy, Görres argued that history was inevitable, but that old forms continued to return in new, ‘higher’ shapes. At first, that line of reasoning resulted in his preference for a ‘modern’ and ‘open’ variant of the class society. In his opinion, a division into Lehr-, Wehr- and Nährstände by no means was an exclusively medieval principle, but a universal historical fact. In time, he focussed his attention more and more on the Church, the only institution that, as a bastion against all forms of etatism, ensured true freedom. He now exchanged the Old-German myths for saints’ lives and mystical treatises which bore witness to ‘God in history’. If, in the past, he had been looking for the essence of the nation in medieval myths, he now hoped to find the essence of Christianity in saints’ legends and mystical writings. That change was reflected in his vision of one of Germany’s best-known monuments: Cologne Cathedral. In 1814, he had drawn a comparison between the unfinished Gothic House of God and the unfinished German fatherland. Three decades later, he saw in the Cathedral a monument where the faithful, through the symbolism, could penetrate the hidden reality.

Someone who cherished a longing for the Middle Ages and Gothic style all his life, was Augustus Welby Pugin (1812–1852). Unlike Chateaubriand, who displayed a nostalgic interest in the Gothic Age, Pugin really wanted to revive medieval architecture. He expressed his thoughts about the Middle Ages in very different forms of historical culture including architectural theory, historiography, architecture, interior art, textile processing, bookbinding and metalwork. In England conditions had been created for elevating Gothic style by the philosophy of the sublime which inspired awe for the hair-raising heights of gothic cathedrals; the theory of the picturesque sanctioning the fanciful and asymmetric shapes of Gothic style; antiquarian studies providing artists and craftsmen with exact examples of medieval decorations and architecture; and rising historicism putting an end to the universal validity of classical principles. The concept of Gothic style, like the term Middle Ages for that matter, could be associated with the most divergent and conflicting views and ideologies such as royalism and parliamentarianism, free-thinking and religion, liberalism and traditionalism.

In Pugin’s writings and works of art, the Middle Ages and medieval architecture were given different layers of meaning. From a social point of view, Pugin’s contemporaries could learn a lot from the Middle Ages. Unlike in modern workhouses, the needy were lovingly received and looked after in old monasteries. From an aesthetic point of view, pointed architecture was the most ‘true’ style. In classical sculpture, for instance, the ‘magnifying principle’ was applied making the statues on the colonnade of St Peter’s basilica in Rome disproportional in size. In the Middle Ages, however, the tympanums of medieval cathedrals were densely covered with images of saints. With
this 'multiplication-principle' sculptors did justice to human size. For Pugin art also had ethnic and religious connotations. Seeing works of art led to moral elevation. Since faith was eternal, the shapes and decorations of the 13th century – which were then most ideally expressed – were also suitable for the 19th century. Contemporaries had to focus on the shape of the cross, verticality, and the Trinitarian principle – Christianity's 'three great doctrines', to which medieval artists had given shape in architecture, vestments, and decorations. Gothic style, finally, also had a national connotation. In the Middle Ages, the English Catholic Church had felt united with, yet retained its independence from, Rome and the whole of Christendom. The Protestant element within the English Church, on the other hand, was an unpatriotic community set up by Geneva sectarians. Englishmen of Pugin's time, therefore, had to turn their minds to the national Church of the Middle Ages, which had produced superior architecture: Gothic style.

For the Dutchman Jozef Alberdingk Thijm (1820–1889), too, the nation had its roots in the Catholic Middle Ages. He expressed this vision in his literary and architectural treatises. Like Görres, Thijm thought that a nation could elevate itself religiously, morally, and socially by reading medieval poems and stories. In his view, the ideal ruler was Charlemagne, and by retelling the Carolingian stories he wanted to edify his readers. At the same time, Thijm went to great lengths to demonstrate that the Dutch Orange dynasty descended from the medieval Christian emperor. That way the contribution of the Catholics to the Dutch state was secured.

Presumably through his correspondence with the French antiquarian Alphonse Napoléon Didron, Thijm became familiar with Pugin's works. Like the British architect, Thijm believed in the moral effectiveness of the Gothic style, he emphasised its truthfulness and functionalism saying that it was only as Gesamtkunst that it took on a significance. Like Pugin he criticised the architects of modern Gothic style, who did not understand medieval symbolism. In spite of that, Thijm had to exercise greater caution. Pugin published his writings in a time when many Anglicans were in favour of a re-catholicising of the Church. Thijm, in turn, was faced with Protestants who had broken with the Catholic tradition once and for all. Moreover, in their view the Dutch state and culture had not come into being until after the Reformation. In his literary essays, Thijm tried to show that, in addition to medieval poets, Catholic poets such as Joost van den Vondel had made a contribution to Dutch civilisation as well. It was especially in his later architectural essays, when he got involved in building the new Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam, that he tried to reconcile Gothic style with Renaissance.

The last main figure of the central panel is the Frenchman Joris-Karl Huysmans (1848–1907). He gave his vision of the Middle Ages in art reviews and novels. In his work appeared the artificial, black, white, law-abiding, and mystical Middle Ages, in that order. Each case represented his interpretation of the sublime Middle Ages – in both senses of the word. Sometimes, after all, the era represented beauty in its highest form, sometimes this beauty was in a sublime way connected with the cruel and horrifying. Each time the writer evoked the millennium as an anti-présent. Unlike, for
instance, Pugin's longing for the Middle Ages, Huysmans' medievalism was a form of escapism. In his early writings, he showed a profound aversion to bourgeois-capitalist society. In the medieval millennium, everything had been different. Cherishing high, spiritual ideals, the higher classes had not yet been contaminated with liberalism. After his conversion to the Catholic Church, it was especially the secular clergy and Catholic citizens who suffered. These groups lacked the feeling for art and mysticism people in the Middle Ages had possessed in a high degree. The steady rise of socialism at the end of the 19th century led the writer to emphasise the harmonious labour relations in the Middle Ages and the unselfish commitment of the saints and other devotees. In his later work, he criticised – under the influence of the Dreyfus affair and his dispute with Émile Zola – especially freemasons and Jews. As in the late Middle Ages, all sorts of heresies had free scope again. It was only the mystical penance of a few chosen that could save mankind. Huysmans' medievalism thus displayed a highly personal vision on the Middle Ages. Consequently, his views showed little affinity with those of ultramontane or liberal Catholics.

All the main figures of this book took an interest in the Middle Ages partly on the basis of their Catholic convictions. A symbiosis of Catholicism and medievalism was not obvious. In post-Tridentine Rome, for instance, popes showed substantially more interest in Baroque than in medieval Gothic style. Muratori thought that in the Middle Ages all sorts of errors and incredibilities had crept into the Church. Chateaubriand criticised the era's unchristian morals, in spite of his admiration for Gothic style and medieval epics.

The Catholic appropriation of the Middle Ages was not done in a rush. From the 16th century onwards, Protestants had underlined the unchristian and superstitious nature of the preceding age. This characterisation was adopted by an Enlightenment author such as Voltaire, in the sense that he characterised the superstition of the Middle Ages in precisely the opposite way as Christian. Next it was Protestant Romanticists who, with their defence of Christianity, also made a revaluation possible of the Middle Ages which was considered to be a Christian era. They thought that modern society descended from the Christian inspired Middle Ages rather than the culture of Antiquity. In Johannes von Müller's view, the medieval Church was the embodiment of European unity. Novalis thought back longingly to the time when one leader, the pope, directed and united the great political powers. At a moment when Catholics were looking back on the medieval past with some diffidence, some Protestants, including the writer and literary historian Friedrich Schlegel and the painter Friedrich Overbeck, under the influence of medievalism, became Catholics. Gradually, Catholics, too, gave in to what Benedetto Croce called 'the religion of the Middle Ages'. The ever-growing Catholic longing for the Middle Ages was reflected in the development of people such as Görres, Pugin, Thijm and Huysmans.

If one thing becomes clear in this book, it must be the conclusion that every historical idea or interpretation has a history of its own. Events live on in the collective memory,
not so much as a result of the past, as of an (ever-changing) present attributing a certain value and meaning to the past. That is why representations of history at the same time are self-images of those creating it.

The last panel of the triptych presented in this book – *The Historical Memory* – looks beyond the boundaries of the Middle Ages. The association with the past can be approached in a thematic way in a ‘historical cultural science’. In this interdiscipline, various expressions of historical culture – including art, historiography, literature, politics, religion and law – are examined in the light of the time when they came into existence. Every historical representation, after all, has a history of its own. That conclusion, in turn, has philosophical implications, for, if historical conceptualisation itself is historically determined, how then are we to relate to history?

How anyone who is by necessity chained to their own historicity is capable of practising history, was an issue already under consideration in the 18th century. The German historian Johann Martin Chladenius thought it was impossible to write history if one did not belong to an order, party, religion or region: it was these very backgrounds that made it possible to represent the past. Historicity, in other words, was no impediment but a necessary condition to acquire historical knowledge. Later that century, Johann Salomo Semler argued that historians not only referred to events but also constituted them. In the course of history, conditions changed and with them the historians’ views. For that reason, Semler said, new histories had to be written over and over again. In the 20th century, hermeneutic philosophers, including Hans-Georg Gadamer, linked up with such notions. No one, according to Gadamer, is able to determine transience objectively from a superhistorical point of view. The interpreter is part of tradition and those who concern themselves with the past, are chained to their own historicity or ‘horizon’.

*Tempora mutantur, nos et mutamur in illis*, ‘times change and we change with them’ – this book proved that, too. ‘Every culture produces its own form of History, and does so by necessity’, wrote the Dutch historian Johan Huizinga, ‘The nature of the culture determines what will be History for it, and what it will look like’. Every time has its own questions which shape historical representations and which make historical knowledge possible in the first place. But at the same time, history is able to confirm or refute interpretations in a rational way. Thus history – as Friedrich Nietzsche put it – must itself solve the problem of history.