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## In the Middle

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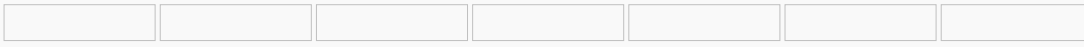
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In the Middle

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*Things do not begin to live except in the middle.*

–Gilles Deleuze, *Dialogues*

## A Land of Unlikeness

The English novel *The Go-Between* (1953) begins a tale of memory and loss with two sentences a historian could love: "The past is a foreign country. They do things differently there."<sup>1</sup> The novel's narrator should know: he is a librarian, someone who, as the memory ghost of his twelve-year-old self will remind him, spends his days cataloguing the relics of the book-past. And many who now live with the past for a living might nod in recognition: the metaphor slips on comfortably, like a well-worn shoe. The past can feel like a place as much as it does a time—a *foreign* place, outside the doors of the familiar, beyond the gate and the gatekeepers of the *now*.

Especially beyond the pale is the Middle Ages, definitional whipping boy for generations of citizens of the present who have needed an "all-purpose alternative" against which to define themselves.<sup>2</sup> The difference of medieval doing is embedded already in the names we still give the time: the "Middle Ages" makes parenthetical death of the interval between Classical life and its humanist "rebirth." "Premodern" gives life only in anticipation of the modern, directing the period toward a telos of recognizability in the *now* that the premodern, as such, will always fail to satisfy.

The Middle Ages were invented to be a foreign country.<sup>3</sup> The indigenous peoples are dead, and they didn't even know they were medieval—they thought they were living in modern times. They thought it was now: "There is no other age than ours," Raymond de l'Aire of Tignac told the inquisitors nosing for heresy in his town around 1320.<sup>4</sup> **[End Page 547]**

But *this* is "now," and there are elements about the "Middle Ages" that feel foreign—foreign in this modern, postmodern, or maybe even post-postmodern land we still call "now." Everyone who has ever read a medieval book cold or taught one to cold undergraduates has felt this foreignness intimately in his or her suddenly awkward flesh. All those quotations, all that Catholicism, all those arguments and counterarguments; not to mention those old words, weird verb forms, erratic spelling, and all that damn Latin.

There's no question that the Middle Ages is an other, perhaps even a foreign place, someplace, as the etymology indicates, beyond our own doors (from *for-is* "out of doors, outside"). What are we doing when we go there? What happens to "here" and "there" when we go? The question isn't whether medieval people

did things differently than we do now; the question is what we as putative nonmedievists are going to do with the difference. What stories do we tell ourselves about it? What do they do to and for us?

When medievalists talk about medieval otherness, it can feel like a slap in the face; it can feel like a come-on; it can of course be both at once. Take, for example, Paul Zumthor's monumental *Essai de poétique médiévale*. Published in 1972, the *Essai* set medieval poetry in dialogue with what was then high literary theory. The dialogue made the foreignness of medieval poetry accessible to a mid-1980s graduate student like me; it taught me that medieval texts could be active participants in the theoretical discussions I was learning to have with friends, professors, and texts. Returning to the *Essai* (published in English in 1992 as *Toward a Medieval Poetics*) now with the theory-midwifed births of "New Philology" and "New Medievalism" in the past, I was surprised to find that this text that I thought bridged temporal gaps begins by blowing up more bridges than it builds. "We are cut off from the Middle Ages by a divide that we should not attempt to ignore, but that we should rather see as..."

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