

## Antiquity

The biography of the idea of literature boasts a modest, banal and rather belated beginning: a lexical “accident,” as fecund as it was unforeseeable. For the time being, nothing permits us to glimpse the extraordinary destiny, abounding in unexpected turns and spectacular creative developments, of historical life of the idea of literature. All, or almost all of the basic acceptations of literature are revealed now, whether explicitly or in filigree.

### FIRST DEFINITIONS

#### *Written Literature*

The starting point is to be found in the idea of *writing* and *written text* that offers, from beginning to end, the original, central and prevailing acceptance of the idea of *literature*. The relationship is defining and permanent, although constantly subjected to historical conditioning. As Hellenic was the cultural language of Antiquity, the basic etymon can only be *ta grámmata* (= letters), the first main meaning of which is the graphic sign: “the written character or form.” It represents graphically, visually, the elements of language (*ta stoichea*),<sup>1</sup> first of all, the sound. *Ta grámmata* = sign + sound (written + spoken).<sup>2</sup>

The Latin word *litterae*, used to translate this notion beginning with the second century (series opened by Cicero, *Ad. Fam.*, V, 8, 5), takes over the same meaning, while adding others to it. The restricted sense—hence St. Augustine’s *litterae scriptae*—remains essential: *litterae seu scribendi ars* (see the same source.)<sup>3</sup> It is for the time being (and will be for a long time) a neologism, as those who use it always feel the need (even after one and one-half centuries) to explain it, to expand it, to implant it explicitly in the linguistic consciousness of the age:<sup>4</sup> *Grámmata enim Graeci litteras vocant.*<sup>5</sup>

The crucial event—the actual begetting of the biography of literature—was the transition from *grámmata* and *litterae* to *litteratura*, a term that inevitably takes on the original specific meaning. The phenomenon is easily observable with Cicero, the “author,” or, in any case—judging by

the evidence—the popularizer of this unforeseeable and extremely fecund lexical calculus. He assimilates the memory of wax tables,<sup>6</sup> on which written characters are inscribed, *genuina litteratura*. Cicero, too, uses the synonym *ingenium litteraturae*.<sup>7</sup> It is not only once that those who copy the Ciceronian manuscripts assimilate *litterae* to *litteratura*. It is a clear indication that the newer concept has become more powerful than *litterae*, which it absorbs.<sup>8</sup> *Litteratura*, in the sense of the alphabet, is also found with Tacitus.<sup>9</sup> An accurate comment on the problem can be found in the work of the late grammarian, Audax: *litteratura vel litteralitas*.<sup>10</sup> The sense becomes stable: Literature = the realm of (written) letters.

The second outstanding development experienced in ancient times by our biography is the transition from the idea of writing to that of literature, in the present (even if embryonic) sense of the word or, better said, the assimilation of the former by the latter. The apology of writing is quite frequent (for example, Lucretius, V, 1444–1448), but only for practical, that is, economic, judicial reasons: recording, *aide-mémoire*, consecration, "testimony,"<sup>11</sup> etc. *Epistula* (= *litterae*) *non erubescit*, "a letter does not blush," says Cicero.<sup>12</sup> Writing is the "trustworthy guardian of the memory of past events" (Livy).<sup>13</sup> Because of that, for a considerable time the transition to "literary" significances was only tacit, implicit. Writing produces writings (written texts) that are "worlds" of various genres. It is these—in their totality—that literature is made up of: a body of writings, that is, of literary writings.

Greek etymology also takes us close to "literature" in its later sense: *grámmata* (and the related words, such as *sin-grámmata*) also means "short writings, written verse," *Sammelrolle*. The basic sense of *graphie* (from *grapho* = to scratch, to draw lines) is ambivalent: "Writing," but also "drawing" or "painting." Similarly, in patristic Greek, *graphie* means "writing," "individual books," in general.<sup>14</sup> The meaning is inevitably preserved by the Latin word *litterae*, a notion with an obvious tendency to expand its meaning: To begin with, *litteris* is used to mean "letter," "epistolary communication."<sup>15</sup> But *littera(ae)*, in the sense of "work," "text," "written work," "literary work," is attested at the same time.<sup>16</sup> This last notion will soon be separated from that of "letters" = written signs, as St. Augustine already speaks of *litteris monumentis*.<sup>17</sup> In Pomponius Mela (1, 12) we came across *litteras et (litterarum) operas* (but what he means is not certain). At any rate, Tertullian will later refer to *litteraturae operibus*, a term that will assert itself with all its implications and ambiguities.<sup>18</sup> The philology of later Antiquity also records this semantic evolution: *grámmata* = *litteratura* has three meanings: "letter," "writing,"<sup>19</sup> and, of course, "literary work." An ancient type of writing, something in between "record" and "short poem," will even be called *epigrámma*.<sup>20</sup> It is a typical illustration of the way in which a purely graphic notion acquires a poetic, literary mean-

ing. This incipient tradition will gradually efface the mere "graphology" of the original meaning.

The idea of "literary work" is ever more firmly consolidated by the alternation and eventual substitution of the *litterae/scripturae* pair. In the beginning, "scripture" is the equivalent of the written letter, of the graphic sign, of the alphabet. Then it becomes the synonym of the "art" of writing, to become, eventually, "public or private writings," *scriptura publica o privata*.<sup>21</sup> A qualitatively superior meaning is "written monuments," *monumenta, scriptorum monumenta*,<sup>22</sup> as well as that of poetic products of a similar kind, also connotated by the word *scriptura*.<sup>23</sup> It again results that *literature* = the realm of written letters, an ancient, fundamental, hard sense, maintained uninterruptedly until today.

Finally, the first definition of a "writer," *lato sensu*, will inevitably be that of a *scriptor*, at the beginning, as *scriba*—scrivers, secretaries, accountants; then *poetae*—"writers" in a "general sense,"<sup>24</sup> rhetorists,<sup>25</sup> and even those who write on oratory, *artis scriptor*.<sup>26</sup> Just like "letters," "writer" has, *ab initio*, a polysemy of its own. It will accompany *literature*, in its spirit and letter, until our own times.

### Oral Literature

This fairly rapid semantic and terminological evolution occurs in a context still decisively dominated by a powerful orality. Ancient culture is preeminently dependent on the live word, on *logos*. The emergence of writing brings about a great rupture, hence a series of an ever more complex relationship between writing and orality. What will be named "oral literature" appears, by implication, exactly when these relationships, rich in semantic and terminological consequences, are formulated. This acceptance, however, remains marginal, and will only become relevant when examined against the whole pattern that recuperates it and underlines its value.

In a way, the *oral* versus *written* dispute is characteristic of Antiquity's entire spiritual life. It is relevant, at any rate, for the birth and evolution of the definition of literature. For a long time, eulogizing the word, the superiority of orality and of eloquence, was part of a dogma (Quintilian: "Nothing is worth more than live uttering," II, 2, 8; Diodorus Siculus: "The power of eloquence is man's most wonderful trait," I, II, 5, etc.)<sup>27</sup> It is therefore natural that *scripture* should adopt the oral model, knowing that the "science of style" is so closely linked to speaking.<sup>28</sup> The enormous importance of oratory also constantly pushes writing aside and, to a certain extent, makes it guilt-laden.

This has direct consequences for literary notions and terms. Poetry is conceived of as a form of speech, "speech with meter."<sup>29</sup> There are no poets who can be only read.<sup>30</sup> Reciting or reading poetry out loud is essential and obligatory. "The poet is a very near kinsman of the orator."<sup>31</sup>

As yet, writing is not implied in fundamental poetic acts: "inspiration," "reciting," "pleasure," "agreement," "performance" ("audience," "crowd of spectators").<sup>32</sup>

Hence exists the rhetorical acceptance of poetry, which redoubles the idea of *litterae* through what may be called the "literaturization of rhetoric."<sup>33</sup> For the time being, in any event, rhetoric takes over the definitions to and functions of literature. Assimilating poetry to a form of rhetorical "diction" (*bene dicendi scientia*)<sup>34</sup> is a central aspect of this process. Another, of particular relevance, is that the notions *litterae* and *eloquentia* are tacitly equalized. One of Tacitus's formulas, *omne eloquentia*,<sup>35</sup> has precisely this meaning: "All literature, that is, all literary genres."<sup>36</sup> The equalization of the two types of discourse, written and oral, points to the same thing.<sup>37</sup> Similarly, we observe the confusion between "retor" and "poet" and the setting up of Homer as a model of eloquence among others.<sup>38</sup> The (no less rhetorical) question regarding whether Virgil had been an orator or a poet (Anneaeus Lucius Florus)<sup>39</sup> is part of the same outlook. In any case, the definition of rhetoric as the "art of speech," oral or written (found in Plato's *Phaedrus*, 260 a–b) is the first recognition of literature as language art. So, the rhetorical acceptance has marked literature from the very beginning and, under its many guises, has been a central and, for many, an essential definition of *literature*.

All these confusions and interferences, typical of the Ancient World, point to a deepening crisis of orality. This crisis has several stages. The final one is the complete dismantling of the "oral definition" of literature, the assertion, in this domain as well, of the values and definitions of *writing*. In the beginning, it is voice alone that lends superior status to a piece of writing: the table, the letter "sings" or "cries aloud."<sup>40</sup> Tragedy, originally oral, becomes, gradually, written. In his turn, the orator must speak as he writes; written practice benefits him entirely.<sup>41</sup> Later, a separation, a neat delineation is effected. By transcribing orality, the language of conversation becomes distinct from the written language.<sup>42</sup> The written style (*inscribendo*) becomes specialized in *poetico* and *oratorio*.<sup>43</sup> According to this logic, "poet," "orator," and "writer" are distinct, specialized literary professions, enumerated in this order (Hermogenes).<sup>44</sup>

The natural and decisive outcome of this process is that orality is replaced by the written word. From the seventh century B.C. on, poets resort to writing ever more often. They are no longer satisfied with the initial stage of improvisation and declamation. Even more spectacular for the ancient mentality is the literaturization of rhetoric, in the form of a written draft of the speeches. The new procedure is sanctioned by the moral philosophers,<sup>45</sup> and especially by the rhetoricians themselves.<sup>46</sup> The old hierarchy is turned upside down: Written discourse is deemed superior to oral.<sup>47</sup> Written oratory is more accurate.<sup>48</sup> Written discourse is the "ar-

chetype" of oral discourse<sup>49</sup>—a conclusion one could hardly have anticipated at the time when *logos* held exclusive sway. The most important and far-reaching consequence is the structural change in the nature of literary composition: the transition from orality, from "song" and "dictation,"<sup>50</sup> to written composition, achieved quietly, in seclusion. Literature is slowly turning into a secluded, private activity, just like writing, but increasingly so in a particular and stylistic sense, rather than merely a graphic one. This is the direction in which the most important, implicit as well as explicit, definitions of literature will further develop.

### *Sacred Literature*

Of utmost importance in accurately understanding Antiquity's view of letters and literature is the overwhelming influence of the spiritual context, focused on sacrality, that supreme value of the primitive and ancient mentality. Part of the primeval structure of human consciousness, hugely efficient, tenacious and malleable, sacrality is also the first value to consecrate "letters" and their product. Literature's dominant and original prestige is far from having that of a cultural, let alone esthetic, nature. It has a sacred, mystical, magical nature. This phase—though obsolete in the spiritual history of Europe—cannot be profitably ignored, so numerous and decisive are the proofs of its existence.

The immense prestige of divine *logos* speaks to the importance of sacred orality, the real source from which literature sprang. Everything is created, invested, named, sanctified by the sacred word. It is the genesis of any creation, and *causa sui* as well. The Judaic,<sup>51</sup> Orphic and especially Christian traditions confer an outstanding efficiency, creativity and communicative power to the sacred words,<sup>52</sup> pouring all its demiurgic magic into words—the instruments of literature. Nothing is more natural, then, that literary endeavor, in its entirety, should acquire deeply sacralized meanings and significance.

Poetic creation is preeminently divine. Gods serve as inspiration, bestow poetic acumen, reveal, and dictate. All Hellenic Antiquity, from Homer<sup>54</sup> to Plato,<sup>55</sup> cultivates the myth of creating through the use of words of ecstatic and frenetic inspiration. Demons, divinities, and the muses of the poet's divine genius serve as agents. *Est deus in nobis* (Ovid)<sup>56</sup> is a professed belief and an *ars poetica* characteristic of the age.

Needless to say, the selfsame divinity creates letters, the alphabet, writing. There is a total misunderstanding or, better said, overlooking of the practical, graphic function of the *letter*. This honor is conferred upon (or claimed by) a long series of divinities: Toth, Saturn, Hermes, Orpheus, Cadmus, Wodan, Ogham, etc. Irrespective of the geographical or national position (Egypt, Crete, Phoenicia, etc.), letters are the product of divine creation and divine revelation. Sometimes, they drop straight down from

the sky.<sup>57</sup> Divinity conceived them so it might use them to its own advantage. Divinity writes, edits, "circulates." The Bible is replete with such testimonies, the law tables are "the writing of God."<sup>58</sup> God often inscribes things "on hearts," upon the table of thine heart."<sup>59</sup> Divinity "writes" in the hearts of true believers.<sup>60</sup> Its written message is priceless. "The age of communications"—to indulge in a pseudo-anachronism—has, therefore, an illustrious ancient patron and predecessor.

The direct result is the sacralization of the poet, leading, for the first time in European history, to the consecration of literature. The huge collective prestige, so typical of the ancient frame of mind, that the "divine singer" and *sacrus vates*<sup>61</sup> enjoyed, shall never again be reached. What he writes is called *vatum carmina*.<sup>62</sup> Homer's origin is divine.<sup>63</sup> This (entirely symbolic) situation defines in its essence, from an ancient perspective, the complex issue of the origin, status, and functions of literature.

This explains the belief, unanimously held at the time, in the divine nature of poetry.<sup>64</sup> It is expressed by poets (Pindar, Ovid, etc.), historians (Plutarch), and philosophers who generalize the *sacrarum opera* formula (Seneca, etc.).<sup>65</sup> The outlook confers prestige and sets up a stable value scale. It paves the way, in modern terms, to what will later be called the "morphology," even the "phenomenology" of poetry.

In the same spirit, the letters themselves, graphic art proper, will be considered no less sacred: *hieroglyphica, grámmata, ierográmmata*,<sup>66</sup> sacred inscriptions,<sup>67</sup> generally. In Latin-Christian terminology (extended to all the sacred monastic texts), they are translated by *sacris litteris*.<sup>68</sup> Antiquity identifies in these "sacred letters" a number of traits that already begin to take on the shape and coloring of what is later to be called "literature." Later on, they will be absorbed in definitions *expressis verbis*. "Sacred letters" are esoteric, therefore initiatory, undivulgeable. Their secret nature implies obscurity, an enigmatic style, a hermetic language. We find ourselves at the origins of incantations, of the poetic ineffable, of systematic symbologies, of a *je ne sais quoi* with a great career ahead. References are abundant.<sup>69</sup> Other traits also have, by undergoing complex derivations, a brilliant future: texts will acquire a fixed, typified character, leading inevitably to code and dogma. The setting up of Rome's pontifical annals (*litteris pontifex*)<sup>70</sup> provides the classical example. They reform Roman history, imposing a form, a content, and an inalterable, definitive chronology upon it. Sacred writings are radically, intransigently opposed to innovation. They are by nature conservative: *nomina nemo novit*.<sup>71</sup> What will be called "classization" has its roots in this ancient phenomenon.

As Christian faith becomes predominant, the product of "sacred writing" will be known as *divina Scriptura*.<sup>72</sup> Christianity acknowledges (and incorporates, in its own spirit) *Ta grámmata*, which, in the New Testament, provides the "laws," the "Holy Scripture." With the apologists we come

across the term *propheticæ litteræ*,<sup>73</sup> which designates the Old Testament. On the whole, these writings make up *Sancta Scriptura*, through canonizations, *scripturis canonicis*.<sup>74</sup> Christian connotations are and shall remain predominant in all of the lexical field of “scripture” (letter and content). This does not hinder the emergence of oral religious genres typical of patristic Christianity such as hymns, martyrs’ lives, and homilies.<sup>75</sup>

In the same context, the phrase *divina litteratura* appears as a matter of course in Tertullian.<sup>76</sup> It is the first attestation of the idea of “sacred literature” introducing and generalizing this notion, in an exact, stable, lexical form. Such synonyms as *littera Dei*,<sup>77</sup> *ecclesiasticæ*, *sacrae* or *apostolicæ litteræ*,<sup>78</sup> and *littera Christi*<sup>79</sup> enrich this terminology, inspired—completely—by one and the same crucial notion. It encompasses, through natural assimilation, the idea of poetry as well: *Christumque et sacro carmina*.<sup>80</sup> For Christianity, *vates*, *propheta*, and *poeta* are also synonymic notions.<sup>81</sup>

A number of characteristic notes of sacrality will inform, through implication or tacit adoption, the entire realm of literature. “Sacred” or “venerable”<sup>82</sup> literature has become, by now, a superlative. It is the supreme qualification of any literary genre. The theory of divine inspiration and of creating *ex nihilo*, which, in its essence, will continue to be met at least until the Renaissance, renders impossible, for the moment, any other psychology of creativity (rational, lucid, etc.) or the emergence of a truthful, realistic conception of art. We still linger in the realm of revelation, of sheer fantasy, of the predominantly ineffable. This is the starting point of a vigorous “irrationalist” tradition, to be found again and again, with variable intensity, throughout the course of the history of the idea of literature.

### *Profane Literature*

Equally characteristic of Antiquity is the emergence, first of the conception, then of the concept, of *profane literature*, running parallel and often at loggerheads with *sacred literature*. This is an enormous mutation, with crucial consequences. Laicizing is the end product of an equally basic process and spiritual category. One can even speak of immanent, original laicization and of a profane character, running parallel and diametrically opposed to sacrality. “Sacred” is everything that is “consecrated,” separated from the rest; “profane,” all that is not “consecrated” or “hallowed,” all that is not included in that sphere.<sup>83</sup> The sacred presupposes initiation and purification; the profane = parting with the transcendent, alienation from it, or an ignorance of it. Sacred or sacralized texts are “esoteric;” profane texts are “exoteric.” Ancient terminology frequently refers to *rerum humanarum et divinarum* (Varro).

One is aware that tacit laicizing was also implemented through all the practical and private uses of writing: lists, records, bookkeeping, deeds,

correspondence, etc. But it also appears in the definition and economy of literary creation, in the distinction between delirious inspiration and craftsmanship,<sup>84</sup> in the appearance of an awareness of inspiration and of the strictly human use of poetry (*hominem pagina nostra*),<sup>85</sup> in the transformation of (sacred) myth into a (profane) script, etc. If the *Odyssey* truly contains early laicized sacred poems, it again results that the process is immemorially old and, therefore, once again, original. Euhemerism, the discovery of the sacred origin of literature, the identification of the gods and goddesses of poetry and writing, the theory that deities were figments of poets' imagination—all these are important aspects that point to the same process.

As in the case of *sacred literature*, the conception and terminology of *profane literature* are Christian contributions; more precisely, they are contributions of second- and third-century Apologetics. The aim was to defeat, at any cost, paganism, idolatry, *gloria saecularis*.<sup>86</sup> In the following centuries, the rift between *humanis et divinis litteraris*<sup>87</sup> will be even deeper. The impact on literary terms will be equally direct and important.

Perhaps the most characteristic phenomenon is the recuperation of the exclusively profane sense of *littera*. With Tertullian,<sup>88</sup> *de litteris* connotes "secular" or "public" writings. Similarly, in the work of the same apologist, with a keen sense of semantic precision, we come across the formula *de saecularibus . . . scripturis*.<sup>89</sup> This category includes Homer and Virgil. The phrasing is polemical, deprecatory. With the same Tertullian,<sup>90</sup> we also meet (frequently used with an identical content) the phrase *litterae saeculares*. The phrase, in current use with St. Jerome,<sup>91</sup> as well as Cassiodorus (*scriptures saecularum litterarum*),<sup>92</sup> pairs off with *litterarum profanos*.<sup>93</sup> It clearly defines the bulk of non-Christian writings, that is, all ancient literature. This delineation and prohibition makes an essential contribution to the formation and clarification of a concept that will become traditional—the concept of literature.

In its present form, "secular literature" appears for the first time with the same Tertullian, a polemical vivacious spirit, endowed with a rich lexical imagination: *saecularis litteratura*.<sup>94</sup> A variant, *litteratura mundi*, used by St. Cassian,<sup>95</sup> more precisely defines both the content and its "worldly" destination. *Litteratura saecularis*, frequently used with the same meaning by St. Jerome,<sup>96</sup> is by now a consecrated, widespread formula. As we shall see, it tends to, more and more often, be taken to mean "literature," pure and simple, without any qualifier.<sup>97</sup>

The potentiality of "lay literature" is considerable. In a sense, it will even prove to be decisive for the destiny of the idea of literature. To begin with, laicization blazes a path for what will be called the estheticizing, the autonomy and heteronomy of literature. Escaping from the clutches of domineering sacrality, literature can cultivate and ponder itself and its



own interests more and more freely, and can open up to as many values as possible. Both autonomy and its opposite, with all their consequences, become feasible. At the same time, laicization instills a contesting principle in literature, the idea of insubordination, of criticism, of escape from a given order. It is debunking, preeminently "modern." While the sacred hankers for worship, the profane dissociates, contradicts, judges, criticizes. Hence, a number of literary genres and devices that are totally "unholy"—polemics, satire, pamphlets—now become possible. An awareness of myths, fables and legends also appears and becomes consolidated. It is relevant that Livy (Titus Livius) distances himself, from the start, from "tales" and "legends."<sup>98</sup> Hence, the rationale of creation, followed by that of the ever more desacralized literary fiction, becomes a natural process. Totally absorbed by the idea of literature, laicization no longer appears evident, so original and implicit is it viewed.

## LITERARY CULTURE

### *Grammar and Culture*

However, the really decisive event, as far as the value content and the historical dynamism of the idea of literature are concerned, is a different one. It resides not only in the transliterative *grámmatiki* = *litteratura*—another borrowing and a Latin purism, "a modest name" at any rate: "Grammar translated into Latin by *litteratura*"<sup>99</sup>—but especially in the fact that this *litteratura* (*grammatica*) was seen as being an "art" or a "technique," therefore, a purely didactic subject-matter: "The art of grammar, called in our language literature."<sup>100</sup> *Letters*, *litteratura* can be studied; consequently, they become essential school subjects. This insistent, stereotyped explanation, recurrent throughout Antiquity, is a sign that the problem was seen as a neologism of a "technical" nature. As it is not in current use, it is consolidated and explained with the help of etymology, the only efficient method of the era. It can be repeatedly met with in St. Augustine<sup>101</sup> and Martianus Capella,<sup>102</sup> as well as with a number of grammarians, such as Diomedes, Servius, Priscianus, Audax, Marius Victorinus, Asper, Valerius Probus, and Donatus.<sup>103</sup> It is, indeed, a mere lexicographical cliché, but an essential one. It launches literature into a cultural orbit, where we can still find it today. From now on, literature can no longer be dissociated from this structure and basic meaning.

From today's perspective, this view seems minor and marginal. Not so in Antiquity, when learning to read and write was an extremely important teaching goal, of crucial importance for man's later intellectual life. At this stage, literature is called *prima litteratura*,<sup>104</sup> respectively *litteratio principia litterarum*.<sup>105</sup> The phrases refer to knowledge, to the elementary notions acquired by pupils, *primae illae litterae*,<sup>106</sup> or *artis litterae communes*.<sup>107</sup> It

follows that the central, original value of literature is strictly cultural in nature, indissolubly linked to writing. In the Hellenic world as well, *téhni grámmatiki* means the "art of writing" and of "reading,"<sup>108</sup> that is, one elementary school skill. It is the fundamental study of Antiquity, "the speech mistress" (*magistra verborum*), the "ornament of human genius."<sup>109</sup> Grammar is defined by almost every grammarian of the age as *litteralis scientia*.<sup>110</sup> He who teaches it is a *grámmateus* (Greek), *grammaticus*<sup>111</sup> (Latin), "grămătic," in the Romanian language of old, the teacher of the first notions and rules regarding speech and writing, the master of *ludus litterarius* of the "primary school," the equivalent of today's primary school teacher.

All ancient culture is ruled by a true grammatical *koiné*, not extremely prestigious, but quite fecund. Its unity is ensured by this well-organized system of teaching grammar and rhetoric in schools. It alone makes what is usually called "Romania" as a cultural territory meaningful. This is defined through a series of *equivalent* or related terms, referred to as a scale of *progressive* knowledge. *Studio* is, needless to say, reading and writing, but a little more than that: it is the first of the "literary studies," *litterarum studium*,<sup>112</sup> *litteraturae ingenuitatis studia*,<sup>113</sup> whose basic meaning is always the study of a language, the acquisition of a system of elementary, but precise, cultural, and literary knowledge. Placed on a higher level is the beginning of specialization, seen as erudition, *litteratorie eruditionis*, associated by Christian apologists with *saecularis eruditio*.<sup>114</sup> *Doctrine* has the same meaning as knowledge, of superior theoretical culture: *litterae et doctrina*;<sup>115</sup> it becomes more and more distinct from and more highly placed than the mere *litterae*. It is the incipient equivalent of "science," which includes, absorbs, and, at the same time, surpasses "reading and writing." The purely scientific connotations ("natural sciences," for example) make their first appearance: *litterata scientia*.<sup>116</sup> We keep treading the firm ground of accumulating and assimilating knowledge (*litteraturae fiducia*),<sup>117</sup> with a perpetual tendency toward diversification and specialization.

The result is the complete identification of *literature* with the notion of culture, an obviously central definition, widespread, unanimously accepted, and preeminently classical. For many centuries, this will be the predominant and defining acceptance of literature. *Literature* = *written culture*. "Cultivated letters" (*litterarum cultu: non ignobilis*)<sup>118</sup> is, therefore, not a pleonasm, but the very synonym, the very doublet of the term "literature": an object and a method of knowing, that is, schooling, education, cultural upbringing (*Bildung*), *plena litterarum cognitio*.<sup>119</sup> Grammar, in the sense defined above, is the essential instrument that institutes, transmits, and organizes culture. It is "the most beautiful foundation of letters."<sup>120</sup> By analogy, the cultivated, well-educated man, "well-trained in literature,"<sup>121</sup> is a *litteratus: vir litteratus*;<sup>122</sup> the one who teaches literature is called *litterator*, the equivalent of *grammaticus*, the professor of literature. Degrees of

comparison are beginning to be used as a matter of course: the man with a broad knowledge is called *litteratissimus*,<sup>123</sup> while he who is illiterate and unread can only be dubbed *illiteratus*.

However, the orator, the rhetorician, continues to be Antiquity's loftiest ideal. "Culture is essentially literary, residing in grammar and rhetoric and tending to realize the ideal type of orator" (H. I. Marrou).<sup>124</sup> Letters are completely absorbed by the notions of instruction, knowledge, and culture (*cultura animi*).<sup>125</sup> The literary spirit of Antiquity is original and primarily pedagogical.<sup>126</sup>

### Vocation for Totality

This cultural spirit is at the same time engrossing, in the sense that it endeavors to express, through one work, all the writings and knowledge comprised in or derived from these writings. Before becoming diversified, specialized, classified, hierarchic, *literature* (= written culture) conceives itself metonymically, the part being conceived, defined as the total. For this reason, it "suffers" for want of a corresponding global term. This crucial moment in the biography of the idea of literature (its great ancient setback) is expressed by Aristotle in a masterly way. He deplores the fact that the art that uses simple words or words set in verses "but this has hitherto been without a name."<sup>127</sup> In a sense, this is the very birth certificate—negatively speaking—of the idea of literature: To lament the lack of a specific word that might refer to all literary genres. The concurrent term, *poetry*, seems to be better suited to this end. It suggests, as early as this, a substitute, a tacit, a functional synonym, acceptable for all poetic genres.<sup>128</sup>

The overtaking by *litterae* of the concept of totality is—from this vantage point—the decisive semantic act. It is progressively consummated within Latin culture, as the terms *litterae* and *litteratura* become ever more usual. The sum total of letters in a proper (graphic) and figurative sense, the sum total of *writings*, the sum total of *literature*, as with St. Augustine (*in omni litteratura*)<sup>129</sup> can, therefore, be conceived. In Cicero<sup>130</sup>—in every respect a true *incipit*—we already find the phrase *omni litterarum generi*.<sup>131</sup> Consequently, the historical memory of literature as writing becomes quite clear: It is progressively expanded to incorporate everything that can be expressed or recovered through writing, that is, the sum total of sacred and profane writings. Any literalization becomes, *ipso facto*, literature. That is to say, any discourse set on paper becomes literature.

The same cumulative mechanism is at work in the sphere of culture. It implies the transition from all writings, irrespective of genre, to all the activities and values linked to writing, as well as the connotations of any writing. According to the Greek poet, muses "know everything."<sup>132</sup> There are "poets knowledgeable in all the arts."<sup>133</sup> The Latin word, *litteratura* takes over, expresses, and determines to a better degree this integrated

cultural content: *omni litteratura, omnimodae litteraturae* are usual phrases, for example with Tertullian.<sup>134</sup> The central cultural meaning of the word literature lends itself to an even more unmistakable identification in a formula like *totius litteraturae ac scientiae*.<sup>135</sup>

### The Book

The basically formal content of "literature" undertakes a parallel development. First, one can notice a development, as well as an etymological updating of the terminology regarding writing material and technique. A book is "written;" it is a support, a written object by definition. This sense also is stabilized as early as Antiquity. To our day, a book has been an epiphenomenon, an avatar, a derivative product of writing. It is defined by a wide variety of technical concepts: *graphé, grámmata*, but especially *biblos* or *biblón* = document, epistle, writing; (Latin): *charta vel membrana, tabula, cortex, libellos, liber*, notions from outside the field of literature<sup>136</sup> (in the present, modern acceptance, then unknown, of the term). A popular etymology, seeing *liber* as derived from *liber* (= tree bark),<sup>137</sup> shows that we are still lingering in the same empirical, practical sphere. This is why all the material qualities of writing could be transferred to the book: pinning down the voice through "written words,"<sup>138</sup> memorizing (*De libris memoriam*),<sup>139</sup> communication, dissemination, etc.

The great spiritual categories of the age also leave their imprint on book terminology: orphic books and others in the same class are sacred, *hieroi logoi, sepher*. Christian faith turns the Bible into the Holy Book, par excellence. Latin polytheism is also replete with *libri sacri*. Christianity is content with its *sanctus volumen*.<sup>140</sup> The consequence is canonization, the imperative of the *only* book, often imposing a reign of terror. Such ravages—repeated periodically in the course of history—had an effect that can still be felt today. Conversely, lay books pass for *gentilium litterarum libros, codices saeculares*,<sup>141</sup> or *profanus codices* (Paulin de Nola).<sup>142</sup> It is worth mentioning that this notion conveys disdain and intolerance.

The same spiritual horizon makes a book an essential object of "learning." Knowledge depends on orality but, after the invention and dissemination of writing, it becomes more and more dependent on the text of the written book. Inevitably, therefore, it becomes bookish and didactic. It follows that at the dawn of its cultural life, the role of the book was mainly pedagogical: a schoolbook. The book is a "mute counselor."<sup>143</sup> Homer (then Virgil) passes for authors of all-comprehensive books, comprising not only all literature, but all the science of the age as well. One of the inscriptions of Roman Dacia proclaims the very same principle: "Learn . . . from Homer about the events of the Trojan war."<sup>144</sup>

The idea of the only book is, similarly, hatched in this manner and in this period. It will embark on a long career, continuing through the mod-

ern age. For the time being, a book is conceived as a synthesis of all spiritual life, a multivalent symbol of nature, of history, of the whole world.<sup>145</sup> All these become, as early as this, *topoi*: “the book of nature,” “the book of creatures,” etc., great, widespread clichés. “The book of history” records heroic deeds, triumphs, victories, etc. This is how the concept of a total, unique, source of knowledge is born, as an archetype of books, an only text, absolute and exemplary.

At the same time, the book is increasingly identified with “literary work,”<sup>146</sup> that is, with “literature” proper (in the present acceptation of the term). A substitute for and general synonym of literature, the book is diversified according to genres: dramatic,<sup>147</sup> poetic (Homer) and many others (Honorius: *historiae, fabulae, libri oratorie et ethicae*).<sup>148</sup> The definition is still extensive, global, loose. But it does break new ground, paving the way for the explicit analytical formulae to be used abundantly later on.

### The Library

First the material, then the intellectual organization of the book and of *literature* brings about the concept of *library*. Its meaning is equally cumulative and all-embracing; in addition, it is organizational. It sets forth the idea of collecting literature, conserving, and administering it and making it available to the public.

Derived directly from the Greek word *biblón* = book, (Greek) *bibliothēke* (*biblion* + *thēke* = chest, space to deposit books) the Latin word *bibliotheca* maintains, all through Antiquity, its primary meaning of deposit, archive, thesaurus of books: “book citadel;” *bibliopolis*,<sup>149</sup> *librorum repositio, ibi recondetur libri*.<sup>150</sup> Also ancient are the words *libraria* and *librarius*.<sup>151</sup> To confine ourselves to the Greek and Latin world, the first libraries are the products of collecting, accumulating, even of snobbery, starting with the famous library of Alexandria.<sup>152</sup> Ptolemy the Philadelphian was prone to exactly the same impulse, *studio bibliothecarum*;<sup>153</sup> likewise, some Greek despots, among whom Pisistrates, the founder of the first public library in Athens.<sup>154</sup> Asinius Pollio consecrates (39 B.C.) Rome’s first public library, made possible due to “war booty.”<sup>155</sup> Varro’s treatise, *De bibliothecis*, is, alas, lost.

The age’s great spiritual trends provide the first qualifiers for “library.” As the Bible is the prototype of all books, it will be, especially for Christian writers, the obvious synonym. *Bibliotheca divina*, or *sacra*.<sup>156</sup> The semantic amalgam leads to a play on words, Christian as well: *Bibliotheca mea servat meam bibliothecam*.<sup>157</sup> In the Imperial epoch, the idea of public editing and access, of stored and divulged writing, is also strangely asserted, in *bibliothecas referre*.<sup>158</sup> Similarly, a man of learning becomes, preeminently, a book-worm, *bibliothecae politus*.<sup>159</sup>

The ideal of reaching up to all the writings and to all culture is also

inevitably included. The program of the library of Alexandria stipulates the collecting of books and histories belonging to all nations.<sup>160</sup> The selection criterion (Callimachus, Suidas) is not lacking either; on the contrary, it is generalized. ("I am merely selecting from the different departments of literature, not reviewing complete libraries.")<sup>161</sup> Hence, two long-range consequences. Selection changes into a canon, first Alexandrine and then Christian,<sup>162</sup> while totalization makes it necessary to use genre classification, for practical reasons mostly. We are at the still remote origins of the modern age's decimal classification.<sup>163</sup> Finally, the two extremes of "book" and "library"—the sum total, universal, at the one end, the unique book at the other—are also present in ancient awareness and terminology. On the one hand, the idea of a "universal library" is created and begins to take hold (Diodorus Siculus, Apollodorus); on the other hand, there is an abridgment, a summing up, a concentration in a unique digest, as in Photius's "library" ("an inventory and enumeration of the books I have read"). Cultural compilation, in just one great accumulated synthesis, becomes the supreme ideal.

### *The Beginning of Bibliography*

In a book-revering ambience, the first techniques and reflections on bibliography were bound to appear as an activity ever more tightly bound to book production, in constant growth throughout Europe. The first catalogue of the library of Alexandria (*Pinakes*) is the world's first bibliography list. Its aim is exhaustive, "everything about everything," "the best extant writings of all men,"<sup>164</sup> without any selection. The organizing principle is enumeration, a book list, molded on the tables and ledgers of the same library of Alexandria.<sup>165</sup> The first catalogues of Christian works and writers (*De viris illustribus, de scriptoris ecclesiasticis*)<sup>166</sup> correspond to this cumulative-quantitative documentary record.

A banal, trivial fact, but with many consequences. The genre classification of the catalogue-bibliography of the library of Alexandria is the first typology, even "morphology," of European literature. As for the selection principle (to record what "was eminent in any kind of literature"),<sup>167</sup> along with classification, it can be considered one of the empirical origins of literary criticism. Similarly, the chronological order of the catalogues of Christian authors is a prefiguration of what will later be *literary history*. How poor a hold the idea of literature had at the time also results from the fact that the key notion in such a list is *auctores* alone ("nos auctores").<sup>168</sup> These remote, modest, purely bibliographical origins of two brilliant (and hypertrophied) future subjects are generally ignored.

### *The Encyclopedia*

We can gain even more insight into what culture (= literature) consisted of for the ancients if we analyze its content and basic trends.

The ever-predominant didactic sense is given more and more precise definitions. Organization of culture requires a "technical," specialized definition, which will be *encyclopedia* (Greek) *egkiklios paiadeia*, education, the sphere of knowledge. Thus, the first literary genre is the encyclopedia, the encyclopedic genre. In its original acceptance, the term only refers to the idea of ordinary schooling, primary studies, what is today understood by "general culture."<sup>169</sup> Latin will assimilate and at the same time incorporate the Greek term *literatura encyclique doctrinarum omnium disciplina* (= which encloses, as if in a circle, the knowledge of literature and of other sciences),<sup>170</sup> *orbis doctrinae* (= global science).<sup>171</sup> In this respect, the ancient world's first encyclopedists were, in fact, the sophists, men of a "professional" universal culture.

This is how the notion of totality, mentioned above, is given precise determination, as well as theoretical and practical legitimacy. However, ancient poetry in general is, actually, an "encyclopedia," a "tribal encyclopedia" of the community, of the *polis*.<sup>172</sup> The library itself is encyclopedic, by definition. So is written, cultivated, rhetoric learning. The orator's cultural and professional ideal is "to know all the questions and all the arts,"<sup>173</sup> a widespread desideratum in Antiquity (Macrobius, *Somnum Scipionis*, Clement of Alexandria, etc.). It sums up, in different terms, the old Hellenic ideal of universal knowledge: *polimathia*. The Hellenistic age cultivates it in the form of vast scholarly compilations. These tend to become extremely concentrated in Roman times, characterized by an eclectic syncretism.<sup>174</sup> Thus, compilation, universality, and synthesis become the intrinsic law of the encyclopedia. It is still instrumental today.

The cycle of knowledge consists in the study and assimilation of the seven fundamental subject matters grouped in the *trivium* (grammar, rhetoric, dialectics) and *quadrivium* (geometry, arithmetic, astronomy, music). This pattern remains intact through the course of Antiquity and is also adopted by Christian writers, including Cassiodorus, among others.<sup>175</sup> It is the first original systematization of European culture. The Middle Ages will take over and develop it fully.

### "Liberal Art"

Culture (= literature) is not only encyclopedic, but "liberal" as well, *liberal art*. The notion appears in the encyclopedic cycle (*De septem liberalibus disciplinis*)<sup>176</sup> and actually enriches the idea of literature through its new, technical connotation, hence the need to gloss, to provide lexical explications: *liberali dicuntur arte*,<sup>177</sup> *libros artium, quas liberales vocant*.<sup>178</sup> The fact that a false etymology was suggested is yet another proof of incertitude: *liberales liber<libris*. This can be explained by the fact that liberal arts indeed presuppose "books," "reading," etc. The error is disseminated

through authoritative treatises as well.<sup>179</sup> Nor is the proposed synonym, *litterae . . . communes aut liberales*,<sup>180</sup> a happier choice.

Again, the basic meaning can only be the fundamental, that is, didactic, one. A series of Latin synonyms for the notion of "literary study" and "culture" express it quite clearly: *disciplinae liberales*,<sup>181</sup> *liberalibus artibus erudire*,<sup>182</sup> *liberalium scholae*, *liberalia < studia . . . quae Graeci eleutheria > appellant*.<sup>183</sup> Connected phrases are attested at the same time: *Disciplinae liberales*,<sup>184</sup> *liberalium litterarum scientia*.<sup>185</sup> The framework and cohesive factor of all these "arts" is always the supreme "art": *grammar = source, base and integral study method: origo et fundamentum liberalium litterarum*.<sup>186</sup> That it should be considered identical to the encyclopedia<sup>187</sup> is also quite natural. Needless to say, all these "arts" are secular, freed from the burden of consecration and initiation: *liberalibus secularis litteraturae studiis*.<sup>188</sup> Their recuperation (*liberales* or *seculares artes*) in a Christian sense aims at consolidating Christianity and the Church.<sup>189</sup> The backdrop, of course, remains the radical dissociation, perpetually invoked, already examined above.

What is really new and of great import is the social, ideological, and moral status bestowed upon literature as a liberal art. It results from discriminating between manual toil and intellectual work, that is, between mechanical and liberal arts, *illiberales*, *sordidae* versus *liberales*, *ludicra*, *ingenua*.<sup>190</sup> The former are only performed by slaves, the latter alone are "worthy of a free man": *Homine libero digna sunt*<sup>191</sup> and of a civilized man: it is "shameful and boorish"<sup>192</sup> for a civilized, cultivated man not to have known them. Literature leaves the schoolroom and permeates society and its value hierarchy ever more thoroughly.

The psychological implications and those of a spiritual hygiene are even greater. This is the direction along which, in time, all the modern notions such as autonomy, gratuitousness, disinterested or useless activity, etc., will gather momentum. The vulgar, illiberal arts, *ad usum vitae*,<sup>193</sup> are *sordidae*, profitable, useful, venal, mercenary.<sup>194</sup> They do not cultivate pleasure, contemplation, disinterested emotions; on the contrary, liberal arts provide pleasure, are not useful, and do not target personal gains.<sup>195</sup> Thanks to them, the spirit is freed from practical, material worries. Progress is already considerable.

### "Human Letters"

Letters, literature in other words, are not only *liberal*, but *human* as well. These two notions have the same ancient origin—essentially didactic—but they acquire superior significances. Through them, the idea of literature branches out and starts to soar. Generating newer and newer meanings of the idea of literature, Classical Antiquity ever more forcibly proves its great generative and propulsive force.



This explains why, from the very beginning, “letters” and “humanities” seemed so closely intertwined (for example, the age of Cicero),<sup>196</sup> *de studiis humanitas ac litterarum: cum Musis, id est cum humanitate et doctrina*.<sup>197</sup> Literature is not only “literal,” but also “humanist” and will subsequently be described as such in European cultural and educational syllabuses, *regulis artium humaniorum*.<sup>198</sup> These “arts” are, at the same time, the expression and symbol of lay, profane culture, clearly dissociated from the sacred one, as shown by the basic structural pattern, *divinarum humanarumque rerum*.<sup>199</sup>

The original trait of “human letters”—another unprecedented phenomenon in the biography of the idea of literature—lies in granting culture an ethical and educational dimension. Literature is both humanized and moralized. General spiritual knowledge prepares youth for “humanity.”<sup>200</sup> Therefore, culture, that is, literature, undertakes one essential formative role: It defines, reveals and perfects human essence. The anthropologizing and humanizing of culture overlap. *Humanitas* instructs man, morally enobles him, *politior humanitatis*.<sup>201</sup> It is “the Greeks’ *paideia*; that is what we [Romans, our note]” call . . . education and training in the liberal arts”.<sup>202</sup> A most fecund form of “cultivating the soul” (*cultus animi humanitatis cibo*),<sup>203</sup> the only one worthy of free men: *humanissimus ac liberalissimum*,<sup>204</sup> it is the work of the spirit most worthy of a human and most becoming a free man (*hanc animi adversionem humanissimam ac liberalissimam indicaretis*).<sup>205</sup>

To sum up, the essential moral effect consists of the education, shaping and, especially the acquisition of the human condition, in humanization. “May be called men, only those are perfected in the arts appropriate to humanity.”<sup>206</sup> Only they who passionately love and cultivate arts and sciences are “the most human of humans,” *humanissimi*.<sup>207</sup> Humaneness, kindness (philanthropy, *humanitas*) is the supreme virtue, the equivalent of civilization (*humanus cultus civilisque*), a preeminently social quality (*humanitate provinciae*).<sup>208</sup> In short, humanity converted, through letters, to civilization.

### “Good Letters”

Antiquity experiences one other type of turning literature to good account, another definition of “letters.” They are “good” not only in a cultural sense—this is self-evident as the whole theory of *grammar = culture* is based on this assumption—but also in an ethical, pedagogical sense. *Bonae sunt litterae*<sup>209</sup> is a profound ancient belief. Turned into a motto, it is passed on to all European culture. The synonym, *bonas artes*<sup>210</sup> is part of the same predominant cultural ethos. This meaning is clearly put forth, especially by Aulus Gellius as *eruditio institutioque in bonas artes*.<sup>211</sup> Culture

can, be definition, be only "good." Never in its history—and this is not an accidental statement—will it be conferred higher honors.

It is therefore natural to invest letters with extremely exigent moral features. Literature is a "(moral) instrument of all life," *omnem vitam litteratura*.<sup>212</sup> Another, later definition sees it as the supreme virtue: "A knowledge of letters is the utmost virtue": *litteratura, que omnium virtutem maxima est*.<sup>213</sup> The reference, of course, is to good letters, equated with sacred letters, *sacrae litterae*. Symmetrically, profane letters are by definition "bad," condemnable, *malae litterae* a typically Christian discrimination,<sup>214</sup> as is, for instance, the theater (*histrionis*). As can be seen, literature's guilt complex—which now gets underway—can boast of deep, prestigious roots. It will be intensified with time.

### THE COORDINATES OF CULTURE

Inevitably, the first pinning down of literature in time and space also belongs to Antiquity. The spirit of history and the idea of a "national specificity" of literature begin to manifest themselves, similarly, the awareness of the universality of letters. These are new and considerably enriching dimensions of the idea of literature.

#### *New Versus Old Letters*

The conclusion that the origins of literature are quite remote in time, that poetry is by definition original, and that the inspiration for it is sacred, therefore, primordial, belongs both to Hellenic<sup>215</sup> and to Latin<sup>216</sup> spirituality. The idea of a literary tradition that can also boast of a respectable age is born in much the same manner. The current formula, *litterae antiquae*<sup>217</sup> defines ancient writing, in its entirety, in a double sense: graphic and cultural—literary. In time, as classical tradition is consolidated, it becomes *litterata vetustas*. The typical expression of this prestige is found in the exemplary model, the canon: Homer for the Greeks,<sup>218</sup> Greek literature, *exemplaria Graeca*,<sup>219</sup> for the Romans. The erudite, professorial, bibliographical, well-systemized origin of the ancient literary canon is quite well-known.<sup>220</sup> Through its very essence and mechanism, grammar invites classicism and authority. By definition, it provides and reinforces laws and rules.

Contrasting with the poet *Vetus*, we find the poet *Novus*, a well-defined category in Latin literature: *poetae novi*, or *neoterici* (first and second centuries A.D.). They oppose esthetic orthodoxy, rouse admiration, but also satirical irritation, because *omnia novat*.<sup>221</sup> The basic ideas are personality, freedom of inspiration, evasion from rules, originality, novelty (*carmina non prius audita*), the innovation that pleases.<sup>222</sup> These are essential concepts which, accompanied by ever-higher praise, will be more and

more frequently associated with the idea of literature. The dialectical relationship between the two terms already raises two problems, the importance of which has been preserved, and has, indeed, been enhanced, to this day.

One is that of establishing the date, which opens the way for an argument centered upon the historical relativism of literary development and evaluation. In Antiquity, it was found that literature possessed a historical dimension, that it passed from stage to stage, in a progression. And if there is *ancient* and *new* comedy,<sup>223</sup> which one is better? And just how "ancient" must you be in literature to be acknowledged as such and to pass for "perfect"?<sup>224</sup> The confusion and perplexity of the Latins is great. The second dispute is even more fertile: in fact, it is the very source of the famous *Querelle des Anciens et des Modernes*, periodically rekindled until today. Professional, official poetry, as represented by *Collegium poetarum*, clashes with the poets *novi*, "marginal," and "non-conforming." Hence, the confrontation between two literary "ages," two value-orders<sup>225</sup> and, in the last analysis, between two styles: the "archaics and the innovators,"<sup>226</sup> followed by the polemic between "Atticism" and "Asianism."<sup>227</sup> The introduction into literature of a historical perspective was of prime importance: Time alone will decide whether or not satire, to take one example, is poetry.<sup>228</sup> History resolves everything, including the semantics of poetry, value mutation, and value reception. This incipient literary historicism will prove to be very far-reaching. Literary history becomes necessary, legitimate, possible.

### *National Versus Universal Letters*

In Antiquity, the idea of literary totality is not limited to a cultural-encyclopedic acceptance. It also defines a consistent linguistic area, a specific historical and cultural tradition, even a spiritual "property" that can be neither alienated nor misidentified. These are the still embryonic roots of what will later be called "national literature." Prior to being written down, this literature is oral; its underlying reason is the consciousness of belonging to a spoken language. From this point of view, "national literature" appears—as an idea and term—to exist beyond and outside the sphere of literature.

The awareness of its existence is first formulated in two precise, historical-possessive syntagms: "old literature" (*litterarum veterum*)<sup>229</sup> and "our literature" (*nostrae . . . litterae*,<sup>230</sup> subsequently *nostra . . . litteratura*).<sup>231</sup> Thus, the first step of literature's "nationalization" is its "history," assumed and assimilated collectively. The second is an open proclamation of national identity: *romanae litterae*,<sup>232</sup> *latine littera*,<sup>233</sup> phrases that are frequently encountered, especially from the Imperial Age on. Hence, the awareness of a differentiation (Plautus: *fabula tota graeca est*), the acknowl-

edgement of the identity of other languages, writings and literatures: *Graeca litteratura* = Greek writings and the Greek alphabet,<sup>234</sup> the concept of a national alphabet, *graecis litterae*.<sup>235</sup> Similarly, *litteratura judaeorum* = all the sacred Judaic writings.<sup>236</sup> However, the consciousness of a linguistic identity still prevails (Varro, *De lingua latina*).

Very closely related, and branching off from the same stem, is what is to be called "popular poetry," the vernacular language and expression, outside the sphere of cultivated expression. The concept first sprouts with the Greeks (Socrates)<sup>237</sup> and begins to gain ground with the Romans through phrases such as *sermus cotidianus* (distinct from the idiom *poeta doctus*) or *vernaculas litteras* = the law of the Jews, sacred literature in Hebrew.<sup>238</sup> A fourth-century text speaks of *scripta latina rustica*.<sup>239</sup> The meaning is that of "common," "current writing," below the level of *cultivated letters* or outside them. With variable intensity, this sense will be periodically rediscovered and roused, until Romanticism.

At the other end, the prefiguration of "world literature" abides by the same geographical and spiritual laws of causality: In fact, *Graecis litteris et Latinis*<sup>240</sup> refers to all available literature of the age, national as well as supra-national. Ideas such as a common literary culture, literary community and international civilization acquire precise contours with Cicero.<sup>241</sup> In the Hellenic world, a cosmopolitan current (the Stoics, the Sophists) propagates, broadly speaking, the ideal of the universal Polis<sup>242</sup> and of the world citizen,<sup>243</sup> above fatherlands or national borders.<sup>244</sup> The decisive factors are the dissemination of Hellenistic culture, as well as the spreading of a Roman cultural *Koiné*. Asianism, through the opening up to universality of the Greek-Roman world, as well as Christianity, which, through its apologists, extends the global categories of *Christian* and *pagan* to the writings, culture, and literature of all peoples, become decisive factors in the recognition of the universal character of culture and literature (including the present-day sense of the word). In time, the idea of a *lingua franca* more firmly consolidates this primeval universalization of letters.

#### THE BEGINNING OF ESTHETICIZING

##### "Beautiful Letters"

Extremely fecund, in a sense even decisive for the development of this biography, are the interferences between the idea of literature and one of the central values of the Ancient world, *the beautiful*, especially when conceived as entering into a synthesis with *the good* and with *the truth*: *Kalokagathia*, *Kaloaletheia*. These interferences operate on several planes but, except for a few formulations that can be defined as "stylistic" or "formalist," it is hard to find, in Antiquity, definitions of literature and