# What Is Literature?



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I shall discuss the question raised by the title of this book in historical terms. "What is literature?" I shall assume, asks for an answer to what has been or is now called literature. Very simply, one can distinguish today between meanings which gradually narrow down the most general and obvious meaning, justified also etymologically, the view that "literature" is anything in print. *Littera* means letter, and *litteratura* in Latin was a translation of the Greek word *grammatiké*, the knowledge of reading and writing, as Quintilian tells us in his *Institutiones*.[1] This widest use is obvious today when we speak of literature about a pharmaceutical product or about campaign literature. In many modern theories or prescriptions of what literary scholarship should be about, there is often the assumption that anything in print is its province. Edwin Greenlaw's *The Province of Literary History* (1931) argues that nothing in print can be excluded from literary study: with him, literary history is identified with the history of civilization, for which, of course, pictorial or other material records, unearthed by archeologists, also serve as legitimate documentation.

But historically literature has been used to define writings of





some significance, to books of whatever subject which made an impact. Some criterion of quality or value (intellectual, moral, aesthetic, political, national) is implied. This is the conception which prevailed for centuries since antiquity under two names: *litterae* and its derivatives in the modern languages: letters and *litteratura*. I have made a special study of this history which proves the continuity of these terms over many centuries and am therefore surprised when I am told, e.g., by Roland Barthes, that "literature" is a recent term, a creation of the nineteenth century, or by Maurice Blanchot, that it is a "mot tardif, mot sans honneur."[2] In Cicero, one of the most influential and widely-read writers of all times, we find the terms *Graecae litterae, historia litteris nostris,* and *studium litterarum*. The term *litteratura* is used by him in the sense of erudition, literary culture, when he speaks of Caesar having *litteratura* in a list of qualities which includes "good sense, memory, reflection, and diligence."[3] We have to go to Tertullian and Cassian in the second century A.D. to find the term used for a body of writing. They contrast secular pagan writing, *litteratura,* with *scriptura,* the Bible, the sacred Writ.[4] *Litterae* in antiquity is used exactly as many of us use it today: it refers to the corpus of Greek literature, to the history and study of literature, etc. In practice, it was, as Aulus Gellius tells us, identical with *humanitas,* or *paideia*.[5]

In the Middle Ages the two terms seem to have disappeared: *litteratus* is used in the sense of literate. In the trivium, poetry is of course recognized as an art assigned to grammar and rhetoric. But with the Renaissance the term *litterae* reappears, mostly combined with the adjective *humanae* to set it off from sacred theological writings, or *bonae* as a term of praise. You find it all over Erasmus, Rabelais, Du Bellay, Montaigne and others; and Dryden still speaks of "good letters."[6] In the seventeenth century the term "belles lettres" emerged. In 1666 Charles Perrault proposed to Colbert, the minister of finance of Louis XIV, an Academy with a section of *belles lettres* which was to include

grammar, eloquence, and poetry.[7] The term was felt to be identical with *lettres humaines*, as e.g. the *Dictionnaire de Trévoux* (1704) shows.[8] It had nothing of the faintly derisive implication with which we speak today of "belletristic." The French term spread quickly to England. It was used by Thomas Rymer in 1692.[9] Hugh Blair became the first Professor of Rhetoric and Belles Lettres at the University of Edinburgh in 1762.

By that time the term "literature" had emerged in the sense, at first, of literary culture, erudition, or simply knowledge of the classical languages. In the 1721 edition of the *Dictionnaire de Trévoux*, *littérature* is defined as "doctrine, connaissance profonde des lettres," and in the great *Encyclopedia* an article, signed D J, i.e., le chevalier Jaucourt, defines Littérature as "terme général qui désigne l'érudition, la connaissance des Belles Lettres." It is used in the same way in English, when in 1691 John Selden, the antiquary, was called "a person of infinite literature"[10] or when Boswell, almost a century later, referred to Giuseppe Baretti as "an Italian of considerable literature."[11] This use of the word survived into the nineteenth century. John Petherham wrote a *Sketch of the Progress and Present State of Anglo-Saxon Literature in England* (1840), in which "literature" must mean the study or the knowledge of literature. Incidentally, in the term "comparative literature," the older usage was revived. It means the comparative study of literature and is not as Lane Cooper complained "a bogus term which makes neither sense nor syntax."[12]

Apparently very early in the eighteenth century (to judge from the recent research of Claude Crispin in *Aux origines de l'histoire littéraire*, 1973), the term was used for a body of writing, though it is sometimes difficult to draw a sharp distinction between the concurrent use of "literary culture, erudition." Here is the title of a book by le Père Cl.F. Menestrier: *Bibliothèque curieuse et instructive des divers auteurs anciens et modernes de littérature et des arts* (1704). It clearly refers to a body of writing in François



Granet's little-known *Réflections sur les ouvrages de littérature* in 1737. Voltaire in *Le Siècle de Louis XIV* speaks in 1750 of "les genres de littérature" cultivated in Italy.[13] The Abbé Sabatier de Castres published *Les Siècles de littérature française* in 1772, the very year in which Girolamo Tiraboschi began his monumental, many-volumed *Storia della letteratura italiana*. In Germany the new use was completely established even earlier. Lessing's *Briefe die neueste Litteratur betreffend* (1759ff.) applies clearly to a body of writing, and so does Herder's *Über die neuere deutsche Litteratur* (1767).

In English the same process took place. The Oxford Dictionary is mistaken by at least 60 years when it quotes the first example for "body of writing" from 1822. In 1761 George Colman the elder thought that "Shakespeare and Milton seem to stand alone, like first-rate authors, amid the general wreck of old English literature."[14] In 1767 Adam Ferguson included a chapter "Of the History of Literature" in his *Essay on the History of Civil Society*. In 1774 Dr. Johnson, in a letter, wished that "what is undeservedly forgotten of our antiquated literature might be revived"[15] and John Berkenhout in 1777 subtitled his *Biographia Literaria, A Biographical History of Literature*, in which he proposed to give a "concise view of the rise and progress of literature." Examples from the late 18th century could be easily multiplied. Still, the first book in English called *A History of English Language and Literature* by Robert Chambers dates from as late as 1836.

In all of these cases literature is used very inclusively. It refers to all kinds of writing, including those of erudite nature, history, theology, philosophy, and even natural science. Only very slowly was the term narrowed down to what we today call "imaginative literature": the poem, the tale, the play in particular. This is a process intimately connected with the rise of aesthetics, of the whole system of arts which in older times was not clearly set off from the sciences on the one side and crafts on the

other. The traditional linkage of the arts and sciences was, I believe, first clearly dissolved in Charles Perrault's *Parallèle des Anciens et des Modernes* (1688-97) where the *beaux arts* are contrasted with the *sciences*, though the *Dictionnaire de Trévoux* in 1721 has still the term "Lettres" defined as: "se dit aussi des Sciences." In the polemics between the conservatives and the *philosophes* the term "littérature" emerges in the new narrow meaning of fictional literature, to set the humanities off against the new geometrical spirit, the new rationalism. Jean-Georges Le Franc de Pompignan in *L'Essai sur l'état présent de la république des lettres* in 1743, uses "littérature" as a synonym of *belles lettres* and narrows it expressly to the "epic poem, the tragedy, the comedy, the ode, the fable, history and eloquence."[16] Another early conscious declaration of this new use I found in the Preface to Carlo Denina's *Discorso sopra le vicende della letteratura* (1760), a widely-read book which was soon translated into French and English. Denina professes "not to speak of the progress of the sciences and arts, which are not properly a part of literature." He will speak of works of learning only when they belong to "good taste, to eloquence, that is to say, to literature."[17] That literature was used in this new aesthetic sense at that time may be illustrated by Aurelio de Giorgi-Bertòla's *Idea della bella letteratura alemanna* (1784), which is an expansion of an older *Idea della poesia alemanna* (1779). The change of title was made necessary by the inclusion of a new chapter about the German novel, in particular the *Sorrows of Young Werther*.

To speak sweepingly one can say, summarizing, that in antiquity and in the Renaissance, literature or letters were understood to include all writing of quality with any pretense to permanence. The view that there is an art of literature, which includes both poetry and prose insofar as it is imaginative fiction, and excludes information or even rhetorical persuasion, didactic argumentation or historical narration, emerged only slowly in the eighteenth century. The discussion of taste, the rise of the virtuoso, the invention of the term aesthetic by



Baumgarten in 1735—all this and much more led to Kant's *Critique of Judgment* (1790), the treatise which gave clear formulas for distinguishing between the beautiful, the good, the true, and the useful. The slow rise in the prestige of the novel, long frowned upon as frivolous, collaborated in establishing a concept of literature parallel to the plastic arts and to music which is still with us today.

I leave it to others to discuss the further question of how one can define the boundaries of fictionality, of the narrow concept of literature as imaginative fiction against the wider use as significant writing. Shall one exclude Montaigne, Pascal, Burke, Gibbon, Berkeley, etc., from literature because they do not even pretend to write fiction? And if we, sensibly, include them in this concept (for how can we imagine a history of English literature in the eighteenth century without Gibbon, Berkeley, and Burke?), we must still confront the problem of the peculiar nature of imaginative literature; of the play, the poem, and the tale. There will be inevitably borderline cases where it is difficult to distinguish between fiction and reportage: think of Defoe's *Memoirs of a Cavalier* or even his *Journal of the Plague Year* or between philosophy and myth-making as in Plato. But these cases have to be adjudicated individually: they do not refute the basic distinction between literature as an art, as fiction, as making, between Homer, Dante, Shakespeare, and Goethe, and the great philosophers and historians who, after all, make a claim to literal truth. The recent attempts such as that of Roland Barthes propagating the term *écriture* in order to eradicate this distinction or that of Hayden White in his *Metahistory* (1973) to assimilate historiography to fiction seem to me mistaken. In the case of Barthes and the French structuralists and their adherents in this country, they seem to be strategies to elevate criticism to the same status as creative writing, to defend a criticism which has become personal, fictional, and even completely arbitrary, proclaiming misunderstanding, misreading, misprision as positive virtues. But this is another topic.

## NOTES

1. Liber 2, Chapter 1, Section 4.

2. Roland Barthes, *Essais critiques* (Paris, 1964), p. 125. "Depuis que la 'Littérature' existe (c'est-à-dire si l'on juge d'après la date du mot, depuis fort peu de temps), on peut dire c'est la fonction de l'écrivain que de la combattre." Maurice Blanchot, *Le Livre à venir* (Paris, 1959), p. 242. "Littérature—mot tardif, mot sans honneur."

3. M. Tulli Ciceronis in M. Antonium, *Oratio Phillipica Secunda.* "Fuit in illo ingenium, ratio, memoria, litteratura [in some texts: litterae], cura, cogitatio, diligentia." Loeb Library edition of the *Phillipics*, trans. Walter C. A. Ker (London, 1926), pp. 178-79.

4. *De Spectaculis*, 17, 6. "Si doctrinam saecularis litteraturae ut stultitiae apud deum deputatum, aspernamur."

5. *Noctes Atticae*, 13, 7. "Sed 'humanitatem' appellaverunt id propemodum, quod Graeci *paideian* vocant nos 'eruditionem institutionemque in bonas artis' dicimus." Quoted in article "Humanitas" (by J. Heinemann) in Pauly's *Enzyklopädie der classischen Altertumswissenschaft*, Supplementband 5 (Stuttgart, 1931), column 285.

6. "Good letters" in Dedication to the *Aeneis* (1697) in *Essays*, ed. W. P. Ker (Oxford, 1908), 3, 240.

7. Charles Perrault, *Lettres*, ed. P. Clément (Paris, 1868), 5, 512f.

8. "On appelle des lettres humaines ou les belles lettres, la grammaire, l'éloquence, la poésie."

9. *A Short View of Tragedy* (1692) in *The Critical Works*, ed. C. A. Zimansky (New Haven, 1956), p. 83.

10. From NED quoting J. Edwards, *Author, Old and New Testament*, p. 239.

11. Boswell, *Life of Samuel Johnson*, ed. G. B. Hill, rev. L. F. Powell, 6 vol. (Oxford, 1934), 1, 302.

12. *Experiments in Education* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1942), p. 75.

13. Ed. René Groos, 2 vol. (Paris, 1947), 2, 145.

14. *Critical Reflections on the Old English Dramatick Writers. Extracted from a Prefatory Discourse to the New Edition of Massinger's Works* (London, 1761).

15. Letter to the Rev. Dr. Horne, April 30, 1774, in *Catalogue of the Johnsonian Collection of R.B. Adams* (Buffalo, 1921), no pagination.

16. P. 189: "le poème épique, la Tragèdie, la Comédie, l'Ode, la Fable, l'Histoire, l'Eloquence."



17. (Turin, 1760), p. 6: "Non parleremo . . . dei progressi della scienze e delle arti, che propriamente non sono parte di letteratura . . . al buon gusto, ed all eloquenza, vale dire alla letteratura." Denina's book appeared in French translation in Paris in 1776, and in English translation at Glasgow in 1771 and 1784. The connection with Glasgow is due to the fact that Denina knew Lady Elizabeth Mackenzie, the daughter of the Duke of Argyle, when her husband was the British Minister in Turin.

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