

*Marc Fumaroli*

## THE REPUBLIC OF LETTERS

The expression “*République des lettres*” is still used today. It appears in most recent dictionaries of the French language, and it even occasionally occurs in ordinary conversation or in the press, a pompous and ironic circumlocution to designate the Parisian literary “milieu.” This archaistic and pejorative survival masks (somewhat similarly to the word “rhetoric”) the attention that researchers are now according to the older meaning of this surviving expression, and to the concept of an international exchange of ideas that it represented for scholars of the *Ancien Régime*. As proof that this scientific interest is recent, Paul Hazard, in the famous *Crise de la conscience européenne* (1936), devotes not a single line to the “Republic of Letters,” while in the chapter dealing with Pierre Bayle he cites the “*Nouvelles de la République des Lettres*” (1684), the learned periodical published in Amsterdam by this erudite Calvinist, apparently without feeling a need to explain a title that seemed self-evident. For the history of ideas,

Translated by R. Scott Walker.

## *The Republic of Letters*

this notion was not a subject for history. It resided outside the field of perception of a discipline that was completely devoted to a sort of chemistry of pure ideas, removed from the literary form that carried them, and *a fortiori* from institutional circuits, and forms of sociability and dialogue that “invent” and spread them, and even more so from the awareness that “scholars” might have had of the solidarity that united them and of the meaning they might be able to attribute to it.

Numerous examples, however, from the eighteenth century at least, attest that for scholars of that time, who were then also called “men of letters,” the expression “Republic of Letters” crystallized both the society that united them across frontiers and the extremely articulated awareness they had of it. This “blind spot” in the history of ideas was inherited from more classic literary history. In the *Manuel d'histoire littéraire* (1932), Gustave Lanson, who has the great advantage of considering himself heuristic, among the fields of research that he describes and lists, passes over in silence a “Republic of Letters” whose European territory might coincide with the national boundaries of literary history, but not only with those. The discipline was created in the positivist atmosphere of the late nineteenth century, with a highly polemic attitude with regard to rhetoric, considered to be the empire “of great vague things,” which scholarly study should overcome. There was at that time a healthy reaction against the scholarly, clerical and rigid rhetoric that romantic authors had in turn derided. But this also meant condemning to oblivion the prior forms of the art of persuasion and of dialogue, precisely those forms that had provided the formal framework for the fertile activity and the sociability of the Academies and learned societies and, in general, for the network of relationships and the style of “disputes” that formed the pattern of the “*République des Lettres*” in the *Ancien Régime*.

This meant, in other words, excluding from the “archaeology of knowledge” the very territory upon which, ever since the Renaissance, a philosophical aristocracy had been constructed, with its usages, its conventions, its tradition, its legitimating myths, as well as its epistemology of a labor shared beyond generations and borders, a “republic” abstracted from the various States and various churches, and to a certain extent outside the control of its

historic “hosts” because it was essentially incomprehensible or even invisible to their short-sighted eyes. Even the masterpiece of René Pintard, *Le Libertinage érudit dans la première moitié du XVII<sup>e</sup> Siècle*,<sup>1</sup> which achieved a synthesis of literary history according to Lanson and the history of ideas according to Hazard, is limited to the psychology of the libertine scholar and to his moral duplicity, describing the situation of a European learned and philosophical aristocracy, each member of which had his own individuality, his own set-up—professional, social, national and religious—even while belonging to an invisible “Senate” in the midst of which each one enjoyed astonishing freedom of thought and behavior, and in the eyes of which the occupations that were pursued, the books that were published and the reflections that were shared acquired their meaning. To use Montaigne’s famous expression, it was the “*arrière boutique*”—the back room—of European thought, not just of one person, but an entire community long able to keep “commoners” (including the powerful) at a distance from its “secrets.” The expression “*République des Lettres*” itself is not even listed in the extremely detailed index of this book. Its absence is all the more striking in that René Pintard produced the best description yet offered of the style of being and of working together that prevailed at that time among the major scholars of the principal nations of Europe.

Thus appeared, but without being named or conceptualized, this unique institution, which stood out from the others, and which in the seventeenth century encompassed the “*sçavans*” or “*lettrés*,” recruited by a severe and subtle form of co-optation and protected against intruders by a discreet but effective system of initiation. This limit to the historical sketch drawn by René Pintard is widely compensated for by the scope and the precision of the research underlying it and by the literary talent that makes perceptible from within how the citizens of this aristocratic republic, absent from the political map of Europe, lived, and who they were.

\* \* \*

Yet in 1929 *Klopstocks Deutsche Gelehrten-Republik*, the thesis by Max Kirschstein, brought out, at least for the eighteenth century

<sup>1</sup> Paris, Boivin, 1943.

## *The Republic of Letters*

in the German-speaking world, the importance of the “Republic of Letters” phenomenon and the interest that this formula, then so vivid, represented for historians of high culture. In 1938 a French work by Annie Barnes, *Jean Le Clerc et la République des Lettres*, opened an area of research that Paul Dibon, in articles published in 1976 and 1978, attempted to have accepted by French researchers. In 1965 Krzysztof Pomian, in a Polish thesis unfortunately still unpublished, and Hans Bots in 1977 in a lecture in Dutch, both headed in the same direction. In 1982 Wilhelm Kühlmann published a major work in Tübingen that has every chance of being today the equivalent of what the work by René Pintard was for the first half of this century. This time the concept of the Republic of Letters appears in the title,<sup>2</sup> and the entire argument of this work is articulated around this central concept. The importance recognized in this work by German *Germanistik* can be seen in the ambitious seminar organized subsequently by the Research Center of the Wölfenbüttel Library and published in August 1987.<sup>3</sup> However, the realm of research of these two works is limited chronologically to “the baroque period” and geographically to the Germanic sphere. The European dimensions of the “Republic of Letters” phenomenon remain in the background, and the genesis of the concept itself, with its varying interpretations depending on times and places, remains out of view.

Nevertheless, there is currently in Germany a veritable resurgence, both thoughtful and critical, of research that was extremely fruitful in German universities at the end of the seventeenth century and during the eighteenth, which has given rise to the publication of many legal theses and works of literary history devoted to the *Respublica literaria*. At that time there was a collective effort of university scholarship in Germany aimed at understanding and assimilating a development from which the Thirty Years War had temporarily excluded Germany. There is a good example of this effort towards *aggiornamento*, for example, in the work of Emilio Bonfatti devoted to one of the fundamental

<sup>2</sup> *Gelehrtenrepublik und Fürstenstaat, Entwicklung und Kritik des deutschen Späthumanismus in der Literatur des Barockzeitalters*, Tübingen, Niemeyer, 1982.

<sup>3</sup> *Respublica literaria, die Institutionen der Gelehrtssamkeit in der frühen Neuzeit* (2 volumes).

aspects of the “mores” of the Republic of Letters: the politeness and affability among literary persons, and the art of conversation, which Italy had invented, France adopted and reinterpreted, and that scholarly Germany was eagerly to study, translate and systematize sometime later.<sup>4</sup>

It is evident that the history of the expression “Republic of Letters” and of the phenomenon it encompasses, having once more become topical in its German manifestation, is even more pertinent in those countries of Europe where it was invented and where it enjoyed unbroken development. We need but think of France in the eighteenth century, where use of the expression in French became amazingly widespread. How, without having interpreted the transition from *Respublica literaria* to “*République des Lettres*” and the wide public acceptance of the French expression, can we understand the theses of Condorcet in *Esquisse d'un tableau historique des progrès de l'esprit humain* (1793), or, *a fortiori*, the hopes of the Girondist Nicolas de Bonneville, who in 1790, in the *Tribun du peuple*, one of the organs of the Social Circle, wrote, “It is from the “*République des Lettres*” that we await the triumph of patriotism and of liberty”? Such a semantic shift, contemporary with the destruction of the entire academic edifice that had served as anchor for the French Republic of Letters during the *Ancien Régime*, cannot be overlooked as unimportant.

For the moment, however, in France, which indubitably played such a capital role in the history of the Republic of Letters, the bibliography devoted to it contains huge lacunae. Points of reference are especially abundant for the seventeenth century thanks to the work and published scholarly correspondence of Paul Dibon, Hans Bots, Bruno Neveu and Françoise Waquet. The eighteenth century and the Revolution remain *terrae incognitae* in this respect. And if we go back toward the sixteenth century, we are limited to the article in German by F. Schalk on Erasmus.<sup>5</sup> It is too early for research into the exact nature of the institution, and into the structure of concepts and the legal and poetic fictions that

<sup>4</sup> Emilio Bonfatti, *La civil conversazione in Germania, Letteratura del comportamento da Stefano Guazzo a Adolph Kniggel* (1574-1788), Verona, 1979.

<sup>5</sup> F. Schalk, “Erasmus und die Respublica literaria,” *Acts of the Erasmus Congress*, Amsterdam-London, 1971.

## *The Republic of Letters*

it supposes; but no questions are even being asked about the genesis and the purely semantic history of the phrase itself. Such a recognized and unquestionable scholar as Eugenio Garin once wrote that the expression did not go back beyond Erasmus. However, it is clear that even future studies into the French or German Republic of Letters of the eighteenth century, for example, can be profoundly vitiated by an absence of prior research into the origin and previous interpretations of the expression. At stake is no less than the history of the emergence of a European “philosophical and scientific community,” of the “democracy” of judgment and the criticism that it implies, of the institutional structures it gave itself, of the philosophical reflection that was applied to it.

\* \* \*

Why should such research be of particular interest to an historian of humanist rhetoric? The latter assumes as working hypothesis that the humanist Renaissance, the *renovatio literarum et artium* that Petrarch inaugurated, was characterized above all by a change in the dominant model for the dialogue between scholars. From the dialectical model of *quaestio* and *disputatio* that had articulated the scholastic structure, there was a shift to a rhetorical type model of dialogue, of which the “letter” according to Petrarch, before the “essay” according to Montaigne, offers the fundamental example. With a much greater variety of forms, this is another regime for the *subject* of knowledge, of this subject’s relationship to others and with the truth. But it is also the extension of scholarly dialogue beyond the realm of the university, beyond the exclusive privilege of specialists, to men and institutions until then excluded from access to knowledge: to laymen and craftsmen, merchants and gentlemen, chancery secretaries and notaries. The rhetorical mode of scholarly dialogue was more “open” than the one it tended to replace. It had its own discipline that imposed on the community of participants rigorous norms of discourse and sociability required to make collaboration and control possible. Dialogue of the rhetorical type was more related to legal argument than to the logical formalism of the scholastic *disputatio*. It is not an accident if a Roman manual for educating future magistrates and lawyers, the *Institutio oratoria* by Quintilian, rediscovered in 1417, more

than any other ancient text, dictated the rules and forms for discussion. The “dispute,” that could last several decades and involve dozens of scholars all over Europe, became, by the end of the fifteenth century, a special ritual of research. It would be absurd to reduce these arguments to a purely formal game; it would be no less so not to recognize the rhetorical regulations that moderated them and made them fertile. The aristocratic Republic of Letters functioned in the image of the ancient Forum, but a Forum whose citizens were above all co-opted.

To this new mode of learned dialogue there had to correspond new institutions for dialogue. Already in the fourteenth century, groups of disciples and friends (*coetus*) formed around Petrarch, Boccaccio and Salutati; in fifteenth-century Florence, around the *Studio*, private academies were grouped around Joannes Argyropoulos, then Marsilio Ficino. “Dialogues,” partly fictional, and “Correspondence” fixed in writing the forms as well as the content of these conversations where research was conducted in common. This first nebulous association of scholarly “companies” quite quickly took the collective name in Latin of *Respublica literaria*.

The name “Academy,” also bestowed quite early on federated research groups by this Republic, refers to the philosophical schools of Antiquity, especially the most glorious of these, that of Plato. Nevertheless, the rhetoric of Aristotle, Cicero and Quintilian can also be found therein. This was the occasion for historians to establish that the humanist art of persuasion was not a literary epiphenomenon, that it was not a hollow and pedantic repetition of ancient models, examples of which being limited to the praise of princes or sterile verbosity. Reflected in the work of scholars, penetrated by philosophy, it served as the tangible framework for a socialized mode of learning and knowing, to which Descartes, summoning up Petrarch, Erasmus, Budé and Montaigne, gave this definition in the peroration to the *Discourse on Method* in 1637:

“I judged that there was no better remedy against these limitations (the brevity of an individual life, the difficulty and cost of research) than to communicate faithfully to the public everything of the little that I might have discovered, and to invite good minds to go further beyond this by contributing, each one according to his inclinations and his ability, to the experiments that must be

## *The Republic of Letters*

made, and also by communicating to the public all the things that they might learn. In this way, with the later persons beginning where the earlier ones left off, and thereby linking the lives and the work of many people, we can all go forward together much further than each person individually would be able to do.”

In the Latin translation by Étienne de Courcelles, published in 1644 with the approval of Descartes, the word “public” is translated by the Latin expression *Respublica literaria*. Descartes did not invent this idea of a “scholarly community” that believes in knowledge, invisible to the uninitiated, existing beyond the death, separation and persecution of its members. It was a reality that he encountered along his way, one that he supported and whose conventions, customs, rituals and norms he accepted. He even wanted to be its reformer by proposing a common method that would make more fruitful and more efficient the collaboration of all scholars working to discover the truth, in the service of a universal “common good” of humanity. Thus did this enemy of traditions respect at least one, that of the Republic of Letters that he conceived in accordance with its Platonic origins and vocation, in the Florence of Marsilio Ficino. Rhetorical in its procedures, the classical Republic of Letters was philosophical through the devotion of its members to the truth; and Descartes himself was faithful to it by defining it by what it should be. In this way the literary Republic served as model for a “Republic of the arts,” conceived by its theoreticians, from Vasari to Quatremère de Quincy, as an ideal Academy where the most diverse talents would work together to serve beauty for itself, multiplying examples that would prevent artists and their public from deviating from integrity of invention and tasteful judgment.

\* \* \*

At the present state of research, this expression, unknown to Antiquity and the Middle Ages, seems to have appeared for the first time in 1417 in a Latin letter written by the young Venetian humanist Francesco Barbaro to Poggio Bracciolini congratulating him on the discovery of manuscripts that he had announced, including Quintilian’s *Institutio Oratoria*.<sup>6</sup> Several times in this

<sup>6</sup> *Francisci Barbari et aliorum epistolae*, Brixiaen 1743, letter of 6 July 1417, pp.



same letter, as in other subsequent examples of correspondence by F. Barbaro, the idea of a scholarly community transcending frontiers and generations, one that owed a debt of gratitude toward Poggio and that should pay him honor, appears in other forms: *eruditi homines, doctissimi homines ubicumque*, united together by the *necessitudo literarum* (the bond of letters), who render homage to Poggio through the pen of F. Barbaro for his *pro communi utilitate labores* (labors useful to the common good). And so for three generations, from Petrarch to Boccaccio, from Boccaccio to Salutati, in a network that extended from Milan and Padua to Florence and Rome, the *renovatio literarum* created bonds of solidarity and collaboration among scholars who adopted it as their ideal. And suddenly these bonds took on a name: *Respublica literaria*. It is not without import that this name appeared in an “incunabulum” of academic praise, more than a century before the appearance of the Academies governed by actual statutes.

Where did this original expression come from? I would posit that it is a variation on the much more ancient formula *Respublica christiana*. In later examples, in fact, the two expressions appear together, seemingly interchangeable or at best separated by an imperceptible nuance. *Respublica christiana* goes back to Saint Augustine’s *City of God*<sup>7</sup> where he contrasts the definition of the Roman State by Cicero (according to the dialogue *De Republica*, the complete version of which was lost at the time of the Renaissance) with his own definition of the State in general. This allowed him to set up an antithesis between the earthly City and the City of God, between States that divide from the City that unites, the love of false gods and false goods, and the Church, *ea respublica cujus Christus conditor rectorque est*. In the course of the discussion of the Ciceronian definition, where the *juris consensus* and the *utilitatis communio* create the unity of a people and the legitimacy of a State, Saint Augustine challenges the notion of law, a purely human convention, and the idea of a community of interests, which allows too great a role to selfish passions, to create his definition of the *res publica* based on “an association of

1-8; *The Renaissance Book Hunters, The Letters of Poggio Bracciolini to Nicolaus de Nicolaus*, ed. Phylis Walter Goodhart Gordon, Columbia, N.Y., 1974, p. 199.

<sup>7</sup> St. Augustine, *The City of God*, II, 21; XIX, 21-26.

## *The Republic of Letters*

reasonable beings participating harmoniously in the goods they love.” In place of the order of law and interests he substitutes the order of grace and love, with its reverse, its demonic caricature, the earthly City.

These texts, which the whole Medieval period had meditated, were even more present in the minds of the humanists since they featured a dialogue between the two heroes of Petrarch, Cicero and Saint Augustine. In the letter of F. Barbaro, the expression *utilitas communis* is a quotation from Cicero according to Saint Augustine. And the meaning the Venetian humanist gave to *Respublica* in this context is a synthesis of the two definitions discussed in the *City of God*, that is a society united both by *love* of the same goods, and by law and common interests. There is something of the Augustinian Church, but also of the ideal Roman State according to Cicero. And the rational element that Saint Augustine had been careful to inscribe in his definition is specified by the adjective *literaria*, that supposes both the *eruditio* of citizens of this Republic and the nature of the common good that unites them in the same love. *Respublica literaria* stands out against the background of *Respublica christiana*, not in opposition to it but in imitation of it, so to speak, on a literary level.

It should be mentioned that the letter in which this expression appears for the first time was addressed to Poggio in Constance where he had gone with the anti-pope John XXII appearing before the Council summoned by Emperor Sigismund to put an end to the Great Western Schism. In other words the letter was written under circumstances where concern for the unity of the *Respublica Christiana* was especially pronounced, and where the restorers of good letters, diplomats or chancery secretaries, could believe in a perfect coincidence of their scholarly civic obligations and their Christian civic obligations. The contemporary theses of conciliarist theologians, strengthened by the tragedy of the Great Schism, rightly insisted on the notion of *congregatio et universitas fidelium*, clergy and laity, called to establish the authority of the universal council above that of deficient or abusive popes. Francesco Barbaro was a layman who was soon to marry a woman from his Venetian senatorial milieu and play a major role in the affairs of the most serene Republic. But as Carlo Dionisotti has shown,<sup>8</sup>

<sup>8</sup> Carlo Dionisotti, “Chierici e laici”, in *Geografia e storia della letteratura italiana*

from Petrarch to Poliziano, from Boccaccio to Castiglione and Bembo, a great proportion of the *doctissimi homines* united by F. Barbaro in the “Literary Republic” lived off ecclesiastical benefices, held important positions in the pontifical Curia and aspired to or obtained an episcopacy or the rank of cardinal. It was not until the Republic of Letters spread to northern Europe, encompassing Gallicans and Protestants in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries and Masons in the eighteenth, that the original relationship of this literary aristocracy to the Roman church was dissipated, but without the disappearance of the idea of scholars united in a mystical body and working together toward a common good whose significance is universal.

But in fifteenth century Italy the divorce of *Respublica christiana* from the *Respublica literaria* was not even conceivable. The latter was still but a metaphor illustrating the self-awareness of a group of great Italian literary figures sharing the same areas of research, within the Roman Church and with aspirations for regaining its unity broken by the Great Schism. This metaphor was sufficiently vivid to produce the social rituals proper to the group it formed by its definition: the letter of praise by F. Barbaro is the symbolic equivalent of a university *laureatio*, in the presence and in the name of the laureate’s peers fictitiously assembled. Its “epideictic” tone supposes the existence, well attested-to elsewhere, of other forms of collaboration of a judicial or deliberative nature, dialogues as such, like that of Leonardo Bruni, *Ad Petrum Histrum*, an exchange of letters discussing points of morality, philology and so on.

\* \* \*

It is necessary, however, to pause for moment at the adjective *literaria*, which, since Petrarch, had become, along with the substantive *literae*,<sup>9</sup> the pass word and term of recognition among Italian reformers of scholarly learning. Once again, we must note, there are two levels of meaning here, one pagan and ancient and the other Christian and medieval. The *litera*, for ancient

na, Turin, Einaudi, 1967, pp. 63-67.

<sup>9</sup> Salutati, in his correspondence, employed the expressions “*studia literarum*” and “*studia humanitatis*” to designate what we call “humanism”.

## *The Republic of Letters*

grammarians, was the written notation of the smallest segment (*elementum*) of an articulated word. The literate person, the scholar, was above all one who knew how to read, who had a literary memory and who was able to create other phrases from this stock, which he dictated, since writing was a matter for specialized slaves. To be familiar with letters meant leaving the ranks of the *rudes*, that is *erudire*, to achieve *humanitas* and perhaps even *urbanitas*. In knowledge of letters and of the universe of books there is a “mystery” that separates the ancient, medieval or humanist man from his illiterate fellow men just as certainly as for Mallarmé “*Le mystère dans les lettres*,” known only to poets, separated them from the philistine ignorance of the bourgeois and journalists, no matter how educated these imagined themselves to be. The boundary was even clearer and with no room left for any allusion to the Middle Ages when the monk Nicolas de Clairvaux wrote, “There is an old proverb, a well-known maxim that we have received from the Ancients: there is as much distance between man and beast as between the literate man and the layman.”

Access to the world of letters, privilege of the “clergy”, provided a special mastery of time and space. Of space because the literate person is not enclosed in a single place; through letters he enters into communication with the absent, with those at a distance, with the dead. Of time because the literate man alone is capable of making *otium* (misfortune for the illiterate: intervals between *negotia*, disgrace, exile, old age) the source of a fruitful good fortune. According to Cicero, *otium literatum* (literate leisure) was the most perfect form of *otium cum dignitate*, but for him it was in particular a means for a man of action, temporarily removed from the political scene, to “reinvigorate” himself. For Seneca, on the other hand, especially in his last works, *studiosum otium* (studious leisure) became, for the first time in Rome, a sort of higher way of life, sufficient in itself. We are already on the slope that will lead to the retreat of the literate philosopher to Christian monasticism. *De Otio* even goes so far as to foreshadow the Augustinian concept of the two cities:

Let us suppose that there are two Republics: one great and truly public encompasses the gods and men; we are not confined to one or another particular point, and the city we inhabit has no other limits than those of the sun. The other, to which the accident of

our birth attaches us (this could be Athens or Carthage or any other city) does not include all men but only a specific group of men. There are people who give all their attention to both the great Republic and to the small one; others only to the small one, and others only to the great one. We can serve this great republic even in idleness, and perhaps better in idleness.

This idleness, for citizens of the invisible Cosmopolis, was entirely devoted to contemplative knowledge, with books and unchangeable laws that preside over the divine order of the world. But it is an immobile and solipsist knowledge, that in no way allows for the collaboration and the relays of the Republic of Letters such as we have seen defined by Descartes and that are also defined in the utopian cities of the Renaissance, from Thomas More to Campanella, in view of a theoretical, but also practical, "common good." We know the destiny of *otium literatum* in the Middle Ages from the works of P. Courcelle on St. Augustine and by the studies of Dom Jean Leclercq<sup>10</sup> related to the monastic life. And yet it is to precisely this ideal that the type of life chosen by Petrarch, founder of humanism, was linked. Petrarch had a brother who was a Carthusian and he thought of joining him; Petrarch himself was a cleric,<sup>11</sup> and few things are more important in his work than the symmetrical treatises *De Otio religioso*, written for monks, and *De Vita solitaria*, for literary scholars like himself. In many points the relationship is a direct one, and it is clear that the thousand-year experience of monasticism filters the imitation of the Ancients that the first humanists, spiritual sons of Petrarch, claimed. Thus the monastic elevation of writing to the rank of a spiritual exercise<sup>12</sup> removed the servile aspect that had been attributed to it by Antiquity. In the *Letters* of Petrarch, the *calamus*, that he held in his own hand, became the tangible measure of the degree of his availability and concentration:

It is only in solitude that I am master of myself and nowhere else.  
It is there that my pen is truly my own, whereas now, distracted

<sup>10</sup> Jean Leclercq, "L'Amour des lettres et le désir de Dieu," Paris, Cerf, 1957; *Otia Monastica*, Rome, 1963.

<sup>11</sup> Wilkins, "The Ecclesiastical Career of Petrarch," *Speculum*, 1953, pp. 754-775.

<sup>12</sup> Rabanus Maurus spoke of *Otium legendi et scribendi*, "the leisure devoted to reading and writing."

## *The Republic of Letters*

by occupations that overwhelm me, it sometimes rebels and ignores my orders. Where in my repose (*otium*) it furnishes constant work (*negotium*), when I am occupied (*negotium*) it requires repose (*otium*) for itself, like a capricious and arrogant servant who takes advantage of the fact that his master is busy in order to do nothing. But as soon as I have returned to my own domain, I force it once more to take up its yoke, and on the question you asked me I will write a book, dedicated to you, on what others have thought of this matter and on what I myself think. And this is good, for although I can write familiar letters while playing, or even in the agitation and tumult of a journey, to write a book I need a solitary peace, tranquil repose and a great uninterrupted silence.<sup>13</sup>

Many humanists were to be secretaries. Petrarch himself was asked many times to accept a pontifical office of secretary of briefs. His manner of forming letters, imitating the Carolingian cursive script, broke with the university Gothic style and set the stage for the development of “humanist” writing by Poggio Bracciolini, who did not hesitate to copy manuscripts. Removed from the monastic *scriptoria*, the *otium scribendi* became, with Petrarch, a spiritual exercise for all scholars without vows, of whom he represents the archetype.

This is not the only area where, as P.O. Kristeller points out, Petrarchian humanism seems to be “a transfer of the ideal of monastic life from the monk to the scholar.” The return to Antiquity was above all a return to the pre-scholastic period of Benedictine Europe, to the *sapientia scribae in tempore otii* (the wisdom of those who devoted their leisure time to writing), which sustained the conventual *theorica studia* and *philosophia*. It is, in a sense, the revenge of Saint Bernard on Abelard, of letters as *meditatio et gustatio* in common in the light of God over the logical exercises of Scholasticism. The eloquent genres so dear to monastic civilization, sermons and lyric hymns, history, epistolography (the *rotuli* that travelled all over Europe) won out once more over the *quaestiones disputatae* of the doctors. The difference between a monk and a humanist (and monks, from Ambrogio Traversari to

<sup>13</sup> Petrarch, to the Dominican Giovanni Colonna, *Familiari*, ed. Ugo Dotti, 1974, t. 2, pp. 625-626.

Battista Mantuano, were to embrace the “new learning” enthusiastically), was above all disciplinary in nature: the monk was subject to the rule of his Order and to the authority of his abbot; the humanist, to use a category of Saint Benedict in the Benedictine Rule, is *gyrovagus* (*errare* and *vagare* are key words in the correspondence of Petrarch). If he imposes a discipline on himself, if he accepts the rules of scholarly “civic-mindedness,” it is of his own volition, for the love of letters, within an independent *otium* that is, often, remunerated by ecclesiastical benefices. The metaphor *Respublica literaria* refers not only to the idea of a Church and a “mystical body” but also to the idea of an Order, a scholarly Order transcending borders and generations, but an Order without vows and based on an implicit free contract. Corresponding to the biographical and hagiographical activity of the great medieval Orders, quite soon there appeared in humanist circles “Lives” or cycles of “Lives” that determined the model for the scholar and the manners appropriate to him. This began in 1341 with the *De Vita et moribus Domini Francisci Petrarchi* of Boccaccio, and it was to become a cycle, in the second half of the fifteenth century in Florence, with the “Lives” of Vespasiano dei Bisticci. It became an academic genre in the Sixteenth century with the *Vitae* of Paul Jove, model for the *Vite* of artists by Vasari. If *dialogi*, *epistolae* and the various oratorical forms of the “treatise” determined the common norms for scholarly discussion and its epistemology, the “Lives” furnished the nascent and expanding community with moral “examples” and models of scholarly discipline.

\* \* \*

What separated the *litterati* from the *vulgus*, the *clerici* from *laici*, was not only the ability or inability to read and write, the having or not having access to scholarly memory or to the spiritual and intellectual discipline of scholarly work; there was also the use of different languages. The *sermo litteratorum*, the *lingua literata*, was Latin; the *sermo vulgi*, the *lingua vulgaris* was the multiplicity of vernacular idioms. A grammatical language, Latin obeys universal rules and was relatively stable. Vulgar language, made up of local idioms, fluctuating, unequipped with grammar, had an inferior

## *The Republic of Letters*

ontological status. The *Respublica literaria*, inheriting this medieval doctrine, had a universal vocation to the extent that its language was Latin. But what Latin? As soon as this question is asked, and it is the fundamental question since the humanist scholar was primarily one who rose up against the “corrupt” Latin of the universities, the immobile hierarchy that controlled the links between Latin and the Vulgar, between clerics and laymen, is shattered. An historical viewpoint of languages is introduced. If the *studia humanitatis* have as task to overcome a “corruption of eloquence” that had its origins in the barbarian invasions, how can this task not be extended to the “Vulgar,” or be limited just to scholarly Latin?

The problem was raised at the beginning of the fifteenth century in the humanist circles of the Florentine chancery and the pontifical curia. For Leonardo Bruni, there had already been a “vulgar,” corrupted Latin in ancient Rome. The scholarly language/vulgar language diglossia existed prior to the barbarian invasions and was a structural trait of *Romania*. For Flavio Biondo, for Leone Battista Alberti, this diglossia was a medieval phenomenon, and since Latin, as grammatical as it may be, had been susceptible to growth, corruption and restoration, why should it not be the same for the Vulgar? Such a discussion supposes not only an historical point of view, but, inseparably from this, a rhetorical point of view. What had developed and been corrupted was the rhetoricalness of the Latin language, its capacity for eloquence. For Bruni, this was not communicable to the Vulgar, then as in Antiquity. For those holding the opposite thesis, Latin, restored to its ancient strength, for thinking as well as for action, had a historic role of offering a model and serving as guardian for the development of the Vulgar and for its accession to literary and scholarly dignity.

From then on each generation would have its discussion on the destiny of the Vulgar. This prohibited the nascent Republic of Letters from being a closed society; it situated it in a perspective of expansion and dynamism that was not limited to the good news of the restoration of Latin eloquence. This very restoration was understood as being contagious and offered itself as model as well. What had succeeded in the case of scholastic Latin could also succeed in the case of vulgar Latin, corrupted but living, active and



efficient as Latin had been originally. The question of language<sup>14</sup> became immediately, and was to remain, one of the moving forces of the Republic of Letters, and in the eighteenth century, it was to lead to the conversion, itself controversial, to academic French as the “Latin of the moderns.”

\* \* \*

Hidden in the circuits of manuscript correspondence, the expression *Respublica literaria* would not come to public notice until the end of the fifteenth century, in a few incunabula, and especially in admirable dedicatory letters, veritable manifestos, which Aldo Manuzio used to preface his editions of ancient authors. In the meanwhile, another word, unused in the Middle Ages, entered the humanist vocabulary, and it has remained inseparable from the expression *Respublica literaria*. This is the word *Academia*. It first appears in a purely Ciceronian sense to designate, in the writings of Poggio Bracciolini and then Marsilio Ficino, a villa in the country, equipped with a library, and, in the case of Poggio, a collection of antiques, where learned friends came together with the owner of the house to discuss. Friendship, which the Ancients had described as the most excellent social bond, but also all the sociable feelings and attitudes that are summarized by the virtue of *humanitas*, linked groups of scholars together, united by their affinities in a sort of freely chosen secession. These feelings and this politeness created conditions favorable to dialogue, and *thus they also are an integral part of the new epistemology.*

But from the beginning, the revival of the word *Academia*, taken from the Ancients, from Cicero and Pliny, was rich in latent semantic developments. The memory of the Platonic Academy, the only philosophical school of Antiquity that had endured without interruption for a thousand years until it was broken up by Theodoric in 516, was revived by Byzantine scholars who first appeared as diplomats and later as refugees at the end of the fourteenth century, bringing with them from the Orient the Greek language and manuscripts along with zeal for Plato and for the

<sup>14</sup> Carlo Dionisotti, *Gli umanisti e il volgare*, 1970; C. Grayson, “Leone Battista Alberti and the Beginnings of Italian Grammar”, *Proc. of Brit. Acad.* 291-311, 1963; M. Tavoni, *Latino, Grammatica, Volgare*, 1984.

## *The Republic of Letters*

neo-Platonic tradition. The garden of *Academos*, the altar that Plato had erected there to the Muses, the role played in the transmission of Platonic philosophy by dialogue, banquets and music all constituted a scholarly myth that, from meetings with Marsilio Ficino in his Careggi villa to Raphael's *Parnassus* in the Vatican *Stanza della Segnatura*, was to give the gatherings of Italian humanists an aura of "rediscovered times." And even before the Academies took on legal status in the sixteenth century and became stable "corporations", they began by assuming the quite familiar and frequently appearing form of pious confraternities of laymen that in Venice were called *Scuole*. These confraternities had their charitable tasks common to all members, their annual feast day, the feast of their saintly patron, their shared banquets. The men who worked together in these confraternities, according to written statutes approved by the civil and religious authorities, had, in addition, their own trades, their careers, their families. They only gave part of their leisure time to the confraternity.

The humanists also, in their manner, lived a double life. They had their *officia*, their *negotia*, and they could only devote the best of their *otium* to solitary study and scholarly sociability. The model of the pious confraternity, rather than that of a corporation of craftsmen, impregnated the scholarly meetings with regularity, festive rituals and a zealous learned atmosphere that warmed and familiarized the ancient memories, keeping them from being spectral or affected. In Marsilio Ficino's Careggi villa, as in that of Pomponio Leto on the Quirinal in Rome, the anniversary of a "saint" was celebrated; in Florence the "saint" was Plato, in Rome, Romulus. In the intervals there were conversations, lectures, concerts, in Florence and in Rome (where there were also plays by Plautus and Terence, and group pilgrimages to the ancient ruins or to the catacombs) to add to the learned piety; and these carried the seeds of both the encyclopedic and the antiquarian character of the Academies of the classical era. Savonarola disbanded the Academy of Ficino in 1494, and by 1468 Pope Paul II was taking offence at the activities of the *Academia Romana* of Pomponius Laetus, at the fictive title of *Pontifex Maximus* that he had given himself and the ancient pseudonyms that the academicians were required to select. Paul II put an end to all of this by using the pretext that it

was a conspiracy. In Naples, on the other hand, the academy that formed around Antonio Beccadelli, which included in its ranks the great poet and essayist Pontano (who took the pseudonym *Giovanus*), lived in harmony with the court of Alphonse the Magnanimous and did not interrupt its work until the arrival of the French troops led by Charles VIII in 1495. Five years later Louis XII ended an analogous symbiosis between court and academy in Milan by sending Ludovic the Moor to France as a prisoner. In a few years, foreshadowing the sack of Rome, the fragility of the network of the first Italian academies became apparent as well as that of the “Republic of Letters” that had given to them all the feeling of working in the same spirit and for the same ends.

And it was precisely then that the effectiveness of printing was revealed, which until then had been considered by scholars as simply a useful supplementary technique for the diffusion of knowledge. The results of a century of Greek and Latin philology, as well as the formative works written by Italian humanists, found a “definitive” access to the printed page, spreading over Europe to form a network of libraries and multiplying the models of learned research and sociability developed in Italy. The expression “Republic of Letters” crossed the Alps, and “Academies” appeared in Germany, in France, in Spain and in England. Erasmus was the principal beneficiary as well as being the eloquent advocate of this *translatio* of the *Respublica literaria* to the very limits of the *Respublica christiana*. But before Erasmus, due honor must be given to Aldo Manuzio and to his publications bearing the crest of the anchor and dolphin that today still are the glory of the reserves of great libraries. With the first works that Aldo published in Venice, beginning in 1494, his epistle-prefaces, addressed to *studiosi bonarum literarum* and to *amantissimi bonarum literarum*, make of him a veritable spokesman for a Republic of Letters expanding across all of Europe, reading like editorials for a sort of international scientific politics.<sup>15</sup>

The fact that these works, addressed to a “learned public

<sup>15</sup> Martin Lowry, *The World of Aldus Manutius, Business and Scholarship in Renaissance Venice*, Oxford, Blackwell, 1979; Aldo Manuzio Editore, *Dediche, Prefazioni, Note ai testi*, introd. by Carlo Dionisotti, Milan, 1975, 2 vol.

## *The Republic of Letters*

opinion,” were published in Venice is no accident. Aldo was not Venetian but Roman. He was no longer young, according to the standards of those times: he was forty years old. If he had followed the wishes of his noble student Alberto Pio, Prince of Carpi, he could have contented himself with organizing yet another small academy in the castle of his sponsor. He chose instead to become a printer, and a printer in Venice. This city was no doubt the most favorable communications center, in Italy at least, for the distribution of books. Printers abounded there at that time. It was also the refuge of exiled Byzantines; Greek was taught and spoken there, which made less insurmountable the publication of Hellenistic classics. But Venice was also an aristocratic republic sheltered from the military adventures that were ravaging the rest of Italy, and it was then that was born the scholarly myth of Venice, fatherland of political wisdom and liberty. It was also neighbor to the University of Padua, which drew students from all over Europe, where scholastic theology had had little hold and where the repeated visits of Petrarch in the preceding century had sown the seeds for a conversion to philological and rhetorical humanism. Strategically, the choice of Venice was the best one. But for what strategy? Friend of Pico della Mirandola, correspondent of Poliziano and admirer of Marsilio Ficino, Aldo saw what his scholarly friends had overlooked: printing could cause their works to be lost if it spread texts corrupted by haste and the lure of profits, or if it simply circulated the Gothic heritage on a vast scale. On the other hand it could save their works if, by surrounding them with prestige, it spread the rediscovered and restored “common good.” In 1497, prefacing his edition of the Greek text of Aristotle’s *Physics*, Aldo spoke of the “Academy” he had formed around himself to oversee the critical exactness of the texts he published. He listed his collaborators, all philologists of quality. And he did not hide the immense hopes he placed in the spread abroad of the fruits of the Italian Renaissance. At the beginning of his edition of Aristophanes he wrote:

“I hope that in the near future, with barbarism destroyed and ignorance overcome, good literature and the true disciplines will be embraced not, as now, by a tiny minority, but by universal consent.”

In 1499, prefacing a collection of Greek astronomers, he rejoiced that among the texts he was publishing, some had been established by the Englishman Thomas Linacre, student of Chalcondyles in Florence. In 1502, confirmed by the success of his enterprise, he wrote in the introduction to his edition of Statius, dedicated to Marcus Mesurus, a poet and humanist from Crete:

“I have never been silent about the name of a scholar who has contributed to the establishment of the texts that I am publishing, or who has aided my work in one manner or another.”

And he adds:

“May it please Heaven that we may have a still greater number of benefactors for the Republic of Letters.”

In 1502, in a dedicatory epistle to the senator Marino Sanudo, he wrote

“See, my dear Marino, how much sweetness there is in your person; I would like to be at your side, to live in your company. This is not possible, neither for me nor for you, because of our occupations, me in the Republic of Letters, you in the illustrious Republic of Venice, which does not allow you a single hour of distraction from your public duties.”

\* \* \*

The underlying antithesis is, of course, that between *otium*, linked to private life, and the *negotia* of the Forum. But by the formulation of the old Roman antithesis in a new form, in the introduction to a book that was to circulate in all of Europe, Aldo conferred a public character on the collective *otium literatum* of the Republic of Letters, making of it a spiritual power comparable to civil power, which he raised to a community of judgment, in a distant, but direct, anticipation of the Republic of Letters of the eighteenth century. These prefaces, still included as part of the books, are themselves an anticipation of the scholarly press that was to develop at the time of Louis XIV. This can be clearly seen in the great dedicatory epistle to Pope Leo X, at the beginning of the edition of the *Complete Works* of Plato that appeared in 1513. This preface is a veritable manifesto of the Republic of Letters, an analysis both of the present condition as well as of prospects for

## *The Republic of Letters*

the future. Purely political reflection on the disasters that had struck the Italian academies twenty years earlier led Aldo to solicit an alliance between the Republic of Letters and the absolute ruler that the Pope was then becoming. Thus began a line of conduct that was to guide leaders of the Republic of Letters until the revocation of the Edict of Nantes, a tactical alliance with powerful political powers, capable of imposing itself on its enemies and of providing lasting institutions for the scholarly world.

Aware of the fragility of his own “academy”, too closely linked to the destiny of his printing industry, Aldo sought to transform it into an official Academy, guaranteed to continue on even after him; and he negotiated not only with the Pope but also with the Emperor. The two projects were not to succeed. On the other hand, several ephemeral “members” of Aldo’s academy scattered over Europe. The visit of Erasmus to Aldo in 1508 gave another boost and another vision to his work and his activity. In Basel, with the Amerbachs and Frobenius, he was to create the northern pole of the Republic of Letters. The group of young English humanists who collaborated with Aldo, Thomas Linacre and William Grocyn, William Latimer and Cuthbert Cunstall, were to contribute to making the University of Oxford a humanist Academy, according to an original formula that lastingly marked the history of English universities, crowning a pedagogical edifice inspired by the experiments of Guarino da Verona and Vittorino da Feltre, the Italian Quintilians of the fifteenth century. Aldo had sensed this turn of events in the preface to the *Astronomica* of 1499:

From the same England, where in other times barbarous letters void of erudition came to us and occupied Italy, where they still hold a citadel (i.e. “Scotist” scholasticism), now we receive good letters. There they speak Latin intelligently, and it is with the aid of Englishmen that we are putting barbarism to flight and regaining possession of the citadel, so that the same lance that had caused our wound is also bringing about our healing.”

We should note in passing the metaphor of the *militia literarum* that would continue, down to Voltaire and even beyond, to sustain the eloquence of the Republic of Letters, making of it a Church, scholarly, militant and missionary. Erasmus, in an addition to the commentary on the adage *Herculei labores*, which he had

composed while with Aldo, rendered homage to the latter by taking up his language of the *propagatio literarum*:

I saw clearly that this effort was not the work of a single man nor of a single library nor of few years, and we have completed our task, solely with our arms, so to speak, in less than a year and a half, and with the aid of a single library apparently. But this was the library of Aldo, very rich in itself and better furnished with good books, especially Greek ones, than any other has ever been. And so, from it, as from a fountain, good libraries are being born and are prospering all over the earth.

And with the visit of Guillaume Budé to Aldo in 1501, with the coming to Paris in 1508 of one of the most brilliant of Aldo's "academicians", Jérôme Aléandre, who taught Greek there with great success using texts printed in Venice, the Italian prince of the Republic of Letters indirectly contributed to the establishment of conditions favorable for the creation of the *Collège de France*. The sixteenth century, indeed, saw the institutional consolidation of the Republic of Letters in all of Europe, preserving its scientific unity in spite of schism, international and civil wars. And to a great extent, the strategy of the Company of Jesus at that time consisted in imitating its network and in trying to substitute itself for it. This was the age of the Academies, and in Italy as in northern Europe these institutions, apparently so disparate and often ephemeral, on the whole were able to hold their own against passions and violence and maintained, with the "common good of rediscovered Antiquity, criteria of judgment that prevailed definitively over political and religious vicissitudes."

\* \* \*

What for a long time harmed the expression "Republic of Letters" and left it in the margins of scholarly research is its aspect of legal fiction and metaphor, apparently completely ideal and pejoratively literary. However, these are the very traits that can today assure it of a return to philosophical and scientific favor. Neither fiction, as it is understood by Kendall Walton,<sup>16</sup> nor metaphor as understood

<sup>16</sup> See Thomas Pavel, *Univers de la fiction*, Paris, Seuil, 1988.

## *The Republic of Letters*

by Ricoeur<sup>17</sup> can any longer be taken as foreign to rational knowledge. The “ideal” character of the Republic of Letters takes on a less negligible meaning if it is considered in the light of this “ideal objectivity” dealt with by Karl Popper,<sup>18</sup> who makes of it the criterion proper to the “third world”, thereby opposed both to the empirical world as well as to the subjective world. In this “third world” Popper includes not only scientific theories but works of philosophy and the arts. Should we not see in the “ideal fiction” of the Republic of Letters in its classical form, an institution that takes precisely Popper’s “third world” as its territory, subject to its own jurisdiction? Since Thomas Kuhn and his relativist theory of scientific progress, which makes such progress jump from “paradigm” to “paradigm”, various researchers<sup>19</sup> have emphasized the role of the scientific community, with its disciplinary traditions, and its legislation of the true and false, which guarantees its continuity and preserves it from skepticism and nihilism. Did not the Republic of Letters already assume this role in the *Ancien Régime*? The theories of argumentation themselves are not always content with a model based on cyclical consensus. They sometimes invoke the tradition of tolerance to moderate the consensus of scholars, referring to transhistoric norms of judgment.<sup>20</sup> This is the indispensable corrective to the conformist tyranny of *doxa* (opinion). Was it not such a corrective that the Republic of Letters, transcendental and critical tribunal, was called upon to administer? The history of the Republic of Letters finds its modern justification in this series of extremely pertinent questions that, imperceptibly, have made it desirable.

Marc Fumaroli  
(Paris)

<sup>17</sup> See Paul Ricoeur, *La métaphore vive*, Paris, Seuil, 1975.

<sup>18</sup> See Karl Popper, *La Connaissance objective*, (chap. “La théorie de l’esprit objectif”), Brussels, Complexe, 1978.

<sup>19</sup> See Imre Lakatos, “The Methodology of Scientific Research Programs”, in *Philosophical Papers*, vol. I, Cambridge, 1978; Larry Laudan, *Le Progrès scientifique*, Brussels, Pierre Mardaga, coll. “Philosophie et langage”, 1988.

<sup>20</sup> See also Charles Pierce, “The Fixation of Belief”, in *Collected Papers*, t. V; and K. Popper, *Conjectures and Refutations, the Growth of Scientific Knowledge*, (chap. “On sources of knowledge and ignorance”), 1963; Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca, *Traité de l’argumentation*, 1970.