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INTRODUCTION

Literatures are rather improbable things. While storytelling and myth making seem to be fixtures of human society, literatures are much more rare. After all, very few spoken languages ever developed a script, let alone enduring institutions of the kind surveyed in this volume. And in those instances where a literary tradition does take hold, survival is far from guaranteed. Literatures require technologies for their preservation and circulation, groups interested in their continuing production, audiences invested in their consumption, and so on. Literatures are sustained over time by diverse practices. But much like individual lives or entire cultures, they also experience birth and death, periods of florescence and of decay, migration from one place to another, and transformation from one shape into another.

With all the specialized interest in individual literatures, in addition to the widespread use of big-picture categories like postcolonial and world literature, one can easily lose track of just how strange it is that literatures exist in the first place. This book embraces such strangeness, asking how an array of literatures, extending across time and space, came to be. By examining the factors that have brought forth and kept alive various literary traditions, the case studies presented here provide the occasion to rethink many of our most basic assumptions about literature in the singular and literatures in the plural.

It is not hard to recognize the risks built into such a project. Neither the concept of literature, nor that of a beginning, can be taken for granted. There are, to be sure, intrinsic difficulties in translating the concept of literature from one idiom to another, especially because of the term's modern European provenance. Using the term *literature* universally, that is, runs the risk of projecting a historically and culturally specific set of textual practices and aesthetic values onto times and places that worked very differently. Along the same lines, the search for beginnings can easily be construed as the attempt to uncover a single pattern or a uniform set of enabling conditions, common to each of the case studies included here. In reflecting on processes of literary beginning, it is all too easy to impose a hegemonic mold that all examples either manage or fail to live up to.

2 INTRODUCTION

This book began with the realization that these risks are real. As scholars trained in ancient and modern European literature, with a specialized focus on the German and Latin traditions respectively, we wondered whether the emergence of the two literary traditions we know best had any common factors. This narrow question quickly gave way to a more encompassing, but also more puzzling, one: is it possible, in general, to ask how literatures begin? Are there developmental processes, technological conditions, or institutional structures that must be in place as literary traditions come about? Any serious attempt to respond to this question, we quickly realized, required knowledge of languages and regions about which we lacked the requisite knowledge, such as the Far and Near East, the Indian subcontinent, Eastern Europe, and postcolonial settings. More concreteness, not greater abstraction, was essential—and this could be achieved only by a group with a broader set of specializations than the two of us possess alone. Beyond wanting to avoid the eurocentrism that a Germanist and a Latinist, left to their own devices, might well fall into, we also came to believe that the problem of literary beginnings called for a more richly comparative approach.

To this end, we organized a small workshop in April 2018 at Princeton University, loosely building on an advanced undergraduate seminar we had recently offered on the subject. As the invited scholars presented informal papers on literary beginnings in their respective fields, it became clear that our straightforward-enough question, in fact, raised wildly divergent issues and solicited surprisingly heterogeneous responses, depending on the field under consideration. We were left with the strong impression that the topic of literary beginnings presented an exceptional chance to engage in comparative inquiry, and we began to develop a plan for this book. Thanks to the clearly defined nature of the conceptual problem, it would be possible to commission chapters that would place traditions from vastly different times and places, with pronounced cultural-historical differences, alongside one another in a productive way. We came to see that beginnings provide a powerful framework for comparison, a *tertium comparationis*, that can remain respectful of specific contexts and also strengthen our grasp of the similarities among different traditions.

As this project developed, it became clear that beginnings are not themselves “literary units of value,” akin to commodities, circulating within a global literary system.¹ In other words, beginnings cannot be equated with a genre like the novel that may (or may not) have sprouted up across the globe from Korea to England and throughout time from late Greek antiquity to the present day.² Rather, beginnings are processes that unfold over time in unforeseeable, contingent, and often chaotic ways. Differences among beginnings are also especially revealing of the factors that shape the paths respectively taken

by literary traditions, clustering the factors that lend literatures their unique signature. By recognizing commonalities among the contributing factors, one does not thereby erase differences among literatures but rather shows how, to borrow a chemical metaphor, a single element can produce radically different compounds, depending on the other contributing elements and envioning circumstances. Just because a single factor like the invention of script or, relatedly, the dissemination of written language, plays a prominent role in many of the literary historical narratives present here does not mean that its impact can be uniformly accounted for.

In order to meet these demands, this volume proceeds as a series of case studies. As a glance at the table of contents makes clear, the contributions do not provide exhaustive coverage—inevitably, readers will find a lamentable absence or two. Our goal was not to create an encyclopedia or handbook of literary beginnings, but instead to offer a representative sample of responses to the conceptually robust question laid out in the book's title. In so doing, we have sought to create opportunities for, without overtly determining, comparative axes to emerge: ancient and modern, East and West, European and colonial, cosmopolitan and national, to name some of the most obvious categories. The sheer heterogeneity of literary traditions also brought with it stylistic and argumentative constraints. If one zooms in too closely on a historical moment or individual problematic, one risks losing readers unfamiliar with the broader historical and cultural context. And if one views a historical landscape only from afar, one may not get a granulated picture of the tradition under discussion. Thus all the chapters included here try to strike a balance between the sort of detailed precision that experts cherish and the broad-brushstroke narratives that grant newcomers access.

The following chapters lay the groundwork for comparison by framing their historical discussions in terms of institutions, processes, and structures that are potentially common to more than one example. Doing so makes it clear that, while the cases are far from identical, there are threads connecting them. These points of convergence among some literatures—which simultaneously mark out points of divergence from others—can provide a fresh perspective on this apparently natural mode of human expression and societal institution. The rubrics included below surely do not exhaust the points of overlap among the seventeen literatures discussed here, but they should facilitate the reader's appreciation of the individual traditions as well as the similarities that emerge when they are placed next to one another.

While it is important to use comparison of this kind to bring similarities into view, any act of comparison highlights difference as much as it does similarity, and this acknowledgment of difference is to be embraced. One of the main

contributions of this volume is precisely to reveal how varied the origins and development of literary traditions have been. This comparative exercise can enable students of any one literary tradition to undergo the surprise of defamiliarization that the editors experienced in exploring the subset of possibilities on display in the following pages. For someone working within one tradition, or even at the interface between traditions, it can be all too easy to take the terms of debate for granted. We hope that it will be as salutary for our readers as it has been for us to take stock of the tremendous variations within different societies' ways of constructing and working with literary traditions. Family resemblances certainly present themselves, and we are confident that the term "literature" continues to have heuristic value in transhistorical and transcultural analysis; yet in the sustained act of comparison involved in working on this volume, we have learned as much about our own disciplines as we have learned about others. We hope other readers will have the same experience.

Single and Multiple Beginnings

Counterintuitive though it may sound, literatures do not necessarily have a single beginning or even a single epoch of beginning. Depending on how one frames the literature under consideration, a different beginning can come into view. Consider the example of Chinese literature. Although contemporary disciplinary conventions lend immediate plausibility to the divisions of ancient, medieval, modern, and contemporary Chinese literature, these categories do not mark out contiguous segments along a single line. Instead, the different periods of Chinese history are characterized by such far-reaching changes that the factors shaping the literary tradition of the Han dynasty around 200 BCE are irreducibly different from the ones that gave life to a cosmopolitan literature in the early twentieth century. The question of how Chinese literature begins, in other words, demands further specification, since there is no single beginning that can possibly illuminate all its richly varied phases. Something similar could be said of German literature, with its historically consequential gaps between the epics, romances, and lyric poetry that exploded onto the scene around 1200 and the literary reform movements of the eighteenth century. In the case of Russia, we see numerous "false starts," as imperial attempts to foster a literature repeatedly fail to gain traction. While the concept of an origin points to a singular event (or sequence of events) that remains definitive for everything that came after, beginnings are often multiple and disjointed.

Moreover, not everything now recognized as an early work within a literary lineage contributed, in a meaningful way, to the formation of that tradition.

One good example of this is *Beowulf* in Old English, which was lost, only to be rediscovered and inserted into a lineage it did not give rise to. The same is true of the Old Russian *Lay of Igor*, which was probably written not long after a disastrous military defeat in 1185, but remained unknown until the turn of the eighteenth century. The fifteenth-century Korean poem *The Songs of Flying Dragons* is yet another example of an individual work that, while widely recognized today as an early, even the earliest, instantiation of a literature, did not launch a broader movement. The poem was, in fact, commissioned as part of an effort to wrest Korea free from Chinese cultural and political hegemony. But the project ultimately proved unsuccessful; it was two centuries before a practice of writing and reading literary works in the Korean vernacular gained traction. These two examples highlight the way that literary traditions, like so many other traditions, are formed in hindsight, retrospectively seen as emergent in ways that were often completely unavailable to the participants at the time (as Simon Gaunt argues in chapter 11). The interests and perspectives of those who “create” traditions in this way will always condition their choices, inclining some toward a more nativist position (as with *Beowulf* or the *Lay of Igor*), and others favoring more international moments of translation and cross-fertilization (focusing on Chaucer, for example).

Orality and Literacy

“Oral literature” is not necessarily an oxymoron, and many oral traditions of song, storytelling, and oratory across the world have been intensively studied.³ All our case studies are of literatures in textually transmitted form, and the question of how written literatures emerge from or interact with oral forms of expression is regularly of crucial importance, as may be seen especially in chapters 5 (“Greek”), 9 (“Arabic”), 11 (“Romance Languages”), and 15 (“African”).⁴ Because of the continuing special prominence of ancient Greece in discussions of the beginnings of literature and in European-centered university literature courses, it is easy to be misled into thinking of the Greek case as paradigmatic. In Greece we see written texts coming into view after long traditions of oral composition and performance, but we should guard against thinking of such a development as normal. A wider perspective—taking in China, for example, or Latin, Syriac, or Russian literature, and many other cases—makes it clear that there is nothing natural or inevitable about an oral phase as a precursor to a written literature.

It is always worth paying attention to the nature of the writing system that is used for any given literature, for writing is not just speech on a material surface,

and literature is never a matter of just writing down what people are saying. The distinctive nature of different scripts can have a significant impact on their literatures, as we see particularly clearly in the case of Japan, which developed its literature from within the penumbra of Chinese literature (chapter 2). The remarkable Chinese script, unlike the alphabet, is not phonetically based, and it could be read by people outside China who could not speak any of the various languages of the Chinese empire: the distinctive nature of this script made it possible for the Japanese to make adaptations and develop their own literature in dialogue with Literary Sinitic, even though very few people in Japan before the modern period could actually speak Chinese.

Writing systems have very seldom been invented *ex nihilo*, independently of other writing systems, and writing therefore almost invariably spreads from one region to another. Ancient Mesopotamia and China are obvious counter-examples, where the unique scripts remained in use for millennia, contributing—in the case of China—to the comparatively self-generating and enclosed nature of the literary system for so long. Elsewhere one regularly sees scripts taken over or adapted from neighboring or interpenetrating cultures, as in the case of Swahili, which first took over Arabic script but then developed its own writing system, based on the Latin alphabet, as a result of the perception that many Swahili sounds could not be captured in Arabic script (chapter 15).

Although we may instinctively think of literacy as enabling communication, scripts can create barriers. The Greek alphabet is a clear example. This extraordinary invention, an innovation based on the Phoenician version of the West Semitic writing system, had a dynamic effect on the production of literature in early Greece (chapter 5). At the same time, the alphabet isolated Greek literature from its deep original contacts with a more cosmopolitan hinterland in the Near East: in its oral phase, one could see Greek literature as a vernacular of Near Eastern literature, but the alphabetic revolution had the effect of propelling Greek literature in a different and separate direction, eventually becoming a new cosmopolitan literature in its turn.

The attainment of written form for any particular language by no means entails any necessary progression to its being a literary language (from “literization” to “literarization,” as Sheldon Pollock puts it in chapter 4; cf. Alberto Rigolio in chapter 8 on Syriac and Ksenia Chizhova in chapter 3 on Korean). Conversely, it is not always true that written languages are first devised for practical or administrative purposes before they come to serve literary purposes. Although it is regularly assumed that the Greek alphabet, for example, was first used for administration or commerce before it became the vehicle for transcribing oral song, a case can be made that its first use was precisely to capture the sound of the bards’ unique poetic language (see chapter 5 by

Deborah Steiner). Further, the mere fact of being encoded in script does not in itself dictate any necessary specific consequences for how literatures operate, and we have to allow for a wide variety of conditions in the larger literary culture when we consider written literatures. Some literary traditions might insist on a high degree of fidelity in copying and transmission, for example, while others might have such fluid patterns of circulation that the terminology of “original text” or “variation” is irrelevant. Again, European-derived traditions regularly show a heavy investment in the figure of the author, with sustained discussions of attribution and authenticity, and with authors such as Euripides, Vergil, or Dante becoming celebrities in their own day; but ancient Hebrew or early Chinese literature operate on entirely different principles, and literary texts in these systems circulate for prolonged periods without any necessary attribution to an originary “author.”

Nationhood and Cosmopolitanism

Sheldon Pollock introduced the concept of “the literary cosmopolis” to describe the preeminence of Sanskrit as a literary vehicle from Afghanistan to Java during the first millennium CE, and he develops it here in chapter 4.⁵ It is possible to pick out a small number of literatures, each in a particularly dominant and prestigious language, that have covered wide expanses of space and time, not coextensive with any particular imperial power or political center. Alexander Beecroft identifies a number of such “cosmopolitan literatures,” and we could add Sanskrit to his list: “Sumerian, Akkadian, Greek, Latin, Arabic, New Persian, and classical Chinese.”⁶ From the point of view of literary beginnings, as Beecroft stresses, the fascinating aspect of these cosmopolitan literatures is the way that they regularly give rise to vernacular literatures on their peripheries, like glaciers calving icebergs. We saw above that Greek literature itself may be regarded as one such case, emerging from an environment where Akkadian literature had high prestige, only to develop its own distinctive script and literary language. In time, even before the conquests of Alexander, and more sweepingly thereafter, Greek literature itself became a cosmopolitan literature, with participants eventually originating from Babylon, Egypt, Syria, Palestine, and Carthage. This new cosmopolitan literature then provided an environment from which new vernacular literatures, such as Latin in the third century BCE (chapter 6) and, much later, Syriac (chapter 8), split off. Latin literature in turn became the cosmopolitan literature of the western Mediterranean under the Roman Empire and itself became a breeding ground for the vernaculars of the Middle Ages, which distinguished themselves from Latin as

vehicles for literary expression in a slow and piecemeal process (chapter 10). Again, we see Japanese and Korean literatures forming themselves in their own vernaculars from within the penumbra of the prestige literature of China (chapters 2 and 3).

In all these cases, complex processes of envy and imitation are at play, as one group homes in on a distinctive cultural feature possessed by another group in order to appropriate it for its own purposes. A range of responses is possible, from a systematic reproduction of models and prototypes belonging to the “parent” culture (Latin’s response to Greek is an archetype) to an engagement with models that tracks them while stopping short of reproducing them (Japan and China). These relations of imitation are different still from the birth of literatures in languages that have previously given rise to literary traditions, albeit under very different geographical and social circumstances. African American literature (chapter 16) and Spanish-based Latin American literature (chapter 14) assumed their distinctive shape in large part because of the contexts within which speaking subjects expressed themselves. Regularly, the momentum behind the beginning of a vernacular literature out of a cosmopolitan one is to be found in the crystallization of a new sense of group identity, as when Rome suddenly found itself raised to the status of a Mediterranean Great Power after defeating Carthage and gaining control of Sicily in the mid-third century BCE; or when the newly won independence of the Kingdom of Osroene in the mid-second century BCE led Syriac speakers to develop a distinctive script used at first for administrative purposes and ultimately for translation and for literary creation (chapter 8); or when new regional kingdoms emerged in India after the middle of the first millennium (chapter 4). We could find strong analogies with the development of Latin American independence (chapter 14), or with the growing establishment of autonomous free Black communities throughout the nineteenth century in the United States (chapter 15). Such moments are easiest for contemporary readers to recognize when they are linked in the modern period to emergent nationalisms, which arose in a competitive international arena in which it came to feel “natural” that each “nation” of people should have its own literature (along with its own folk music, dress, and so on). Compelling examples abound, and the case of French literature’s conscious self-definition as a national project in the sixteenth century formed the starting point for Pascale Casanova’s influential study of “the world republic of letters.”⁷ Russian literature is a fine test case of another variety of nationalism at work in the creation of a literature, as we can observe a conscious and sustained state-directed effort, in tandem with numerous other Europeanizing initiatives, to modernize Russia by means of a “national” literature (chapter 13).

It is more challenging for modern readers to apprehend cases of emergent vernacular literatures that are not linked to the initiative of a state, a people, or a nation, as is normally the situation in the premodern period, before the nationalism that we can too readily take for granted as the default mode of group or ethnic self-identification. Even a case as recent as the German one predates a sense of political and territorial cobelonging: German speakers developed a consciousness of German national identity in the eighteenth century—one that gave rise to a German literature—before a German state, or even the popular desire for one, existed. Even more diffuse senses of identification are the norm in the premodern period in Europe. Dante, for example, clearly was attempting something new for his language as he enlarged its literary reach, but he did so in response to other literary traditions and literary languages, not in the service of any state or political identity. In the ancient world, although a vernacular literature in the Latin language was intimately involved in its origins with a quasi-imperial power's sense of its new stature, in Greece we see nothing of the kind until perhaps the Athenian state's fostering of the dramatic festivals in the fifth century BCE. "Greek" literature had a vital role to play in fostering a sense of communality among people who could call themselves "Greeks" (or "Hellenes"), but there was no Greek superstate whose interests were served by this literature, and anyone prepared to make the considerable effort to perfect his or her command of the Greek language and its canons could become, effectively, a Hellene.

Translation, Transfer, Interstitial Figures

If we focus on the cases where a new literature comes into view in response to new senses of group identity of one kind or another, we need to acknowledge that the petri dish in which this new set of reactions is cultivated almost invariably turns out to be an already multilingual and multicultural environment—cases such as premodern Japan, where virtually no one except immigrants spoke Chinese, are very rare, and even there a crucial factor in the development of the new literature was the arrival of a wave of refugees from the destruction of the Paekche state in Korea (chapter 2). To give just a selection of examples: later medieval Britain had a trilingual textual culture; mid-Republican Rome was home to speakers of Greek, Etruscan, and Oscan; the Swahili classic *Al-Inkishafi* came from a hybridized culture involving Arabic rulers and three competing Swahili dialects.

As a consequence, very strikingly, the beginnings of literatures are regularly venues for the transformative impact of interstitial figures, bilingual or trilingual intercultural actors, who become the catalysts for new forms of cultural

expression. These individuals are often able to import into the target culture their expertise in an outside literary tradition (regularly from a cosmopolitan literature). Such entrepreneurial experts shuttling in between cultures are key figures in the beginning of literatures in Rome (Livius Andronicus, Naevius, and Ennius); Russia (Antiokh Kantemir [1709–44]); Japan (the refugees from Korea in the seventh century CE, especially Yamanoue no Okura [660–ca. 733], from a Paekche immigrant family); and India (Maulana Daud, the Muslim who in the 1370s composed the first Hindi work, the *Candāyan*). The bi- or trilingual individuals who must have been crucial in mediating the epics and songs of the Near East into the Greek-speaking sphere in the period before Homer and Hesiod are now lost to history. As with any feature of culture, all literary traditions interact and appropriate to one degree or another: in their initial phases, the splitting off of vernacular literatures from their parental cosmopolitan literatures will provide ready opportunity for such middle men and culture brokers.

Translation is often a key mediating and galvanizing element at these moments, and the culture brokers are regularly the people responsible for such work. Translation—often to be understood in the broadest sense of adaptation and transformation—flourishes at moments of origin in many traditions, often being carried out by individuals who are also composing “original” works in the new literary language: Chaucer and Ennius are obvious examples. Yet translation of literary texts, however common it may be in the modern world, is not something we should take for granted. In the ancient Mediterranean the Romans are outliers and innovators in translating literary texts, and the later European attitude that it is normal to translate literature is one due ultimately to the Romans’ peculiar decision to translate large quantities of Greek literature, especially drama (chapter 6). By contrast, the astounding Greek-Arabic translation movement of the ninth and tenth centuries (chapter 9) concentrated on philosophical, medical, and technical writing and barely touched on literary texts at all; similarly, the extensive Syriac translation movement that was so important as a mediator for the later Arabic one did not include classical Greek literature either (chapter 8)—literature in the sense of fiction, poetry, or drama.

Such differences in selection prompt us to reflect on the criteria of categorization. Essentially all the cultures discussed over the following chapters operate with a set of assumptions about the differences between kinds of texts within the larger family of “literature.” If “literature” may include any texts that are codified, transmitted, and curated, then capacious definitions will include writings on agriculture or medicine along with love poetry or novels, and this is a state of affairs that obtained in Europe, for example, up until the eighteenth

century. Yet subdivisions within that larger family definition always have the potential to become important for whatever reason, and translation is certainly one of the key vectors that we can identify as encouraging or enforcing generic subcategorization, regularly homing in on “imaginative” literature as a category for inclusion or exclusion.

Outside Europe we see important cases where translation is not in play at all. India and Japan provide key examples of new literatures being formed out of intense cultural interaction without translation. Here, once again, script can be crucial. As Wiebke Denecke shows (chapter 2), the nature of the Chinese logographic script meant that translation was unnecessary for the elites of premodern East Asia, who could read Literary Sinitic even though they could not speak Chinese. If, then, heightened interaction between cultures appears to be indispensable for the creation of a new literature, this interaction may take many forms, and translation is by no means a necessary condition.

Criticism, Philology

Literatures do not exist in a vacuum. As we remarked at the beginning of this introduction, they form part of complex cultural practices and institutions. If the social practices that sustain them disappear, then they eventually disappear as well, as we see with the end of the cuneiform literature once the environment of palace and temple culture faded away, in a process that took centuries after the Macedonian conquest. In particular, literatures have a role in education, and they attract self-conscious critical attention, which ranges from oral discussion after group reading or listening all the way up to scholarly apparatuses of curatorship and commentary. What relationships do we find among texts or performances and societal institutions of education and scholarship if we adopt the vantage point of a beginning? Should we expect a time lag between the first productions of a new literary culture and the institution of the societal practices we have considered here?

Although the relationship between literature and literary criticism might seem to unfold as a natural sequence, with the literary works preceding commentary on them, the enclosed chapters reveal a much more nuanced and varied array of possibilities. Consider the case of ancient Greek, which within a European context has long set the analytic paradigm. While it is clear that the Homeric poems first had to be set down in writing before they could assume the prominent role in Greek education that they eventually did, needless to say forming the basis for Aristotle’s philosophical poetics, chapter 5 shows that reflection on poetic practices was embedded within poetry from the very start.

From the self-reflexive sections of Homeric poems to hexametric inscriptions on ritual or quotidian objects, critical reflection on literary activity was actually part and parcel of the work itself, not something contributed later. The concept of world literature (chapter 17), meanwhile, has swung between the scholarly and economic frameworks, often seeming more vital to the academy and publishing houses than to modern authors.

Sacred literatures—ones where texts are imbued with divine quality and embedded in ritual practices—illustrate vividly that commentary can promote the formation of an authoritative canon and institutionalize the practice of commentary. In the Hebrew tradition, from the third-century Mishnah through the Gemara approximately three hundred years later and up to the present day, an extraordinarily refined practice of rabbinic commentary has taken shape. Beyond the preservation of a select body of texts, in the Hebrew tradition—or the Arabic one discussed in chapter 9—such practices of commentary also provide a model for how the reading of literature often depends on the ascription of profound significance to the object under discussion. There is, in other words, a decisive link between literature and the sacred, insofar as the ennobled status of literature within culture is so often bound up with the belief that the texts deal with issues of ultimate importance.

As counterpole to the Arabic or Hebrew tradition, one might consider the modern German tradition, which, as chapter 12 argues, got its start only after a substantive body of criticism emerged. As early modern rhetorical handbooks gave way to new methods of reflection that express awareness of recent trends in European poetics (thus also an awareness that literatures change according to time and place), the mid-eighteenth century gave rise to a swell of critical commentary, which bemoaned the absence of a German literature of rank and stridently called for new authors to step forward. As in a number of other cases, including Latin, Japanese, and Russian, the knowledge of other literatures and the body of philological writing surrounding them proved essential to the formation of a new literary tradition: the prototypical case will be the formation of Akkadian literature, the earliest case in world history, which is inextricable from Sumerian literature and its apparatus (see part 2).

If one were to ask after the broader function of commentary, one might say that its purpose is to ensure rereading. This is the definition provided by Friedrich Schlegel in his landmark essay on the naturalist and revolutionary Georg Forster.⁸ Schlegel argues that attaining the status of a classical text does not depend on its preservation in manuscript or print, but instead on its being read and reread, included in school curricula, and circulated among the reading public through the form of reviews, second-order commentaries, and literary histories. Roland Barthes's definition may be brusque, but it catches something

crucial about this aspect of literature as an institution: “Literature is what is taught, period, that’s all.”⁹ Literature depends on circulation for its survival, and the various forms of commentary and criticism form an indispensable element of that circulation.

Literary Language

Perhaps one of the most recognizable features of literature is its specialized use of language—so much so that the linguist and philologist Roman Jakobson famously identified a distinctive poetic function available in all languages. Jakobson claimed that there are forms of expression squarely focused on the “message for its own sake,” drawing the individual linguistic formulation into the foreground and giving it a life independent of the world of things.¹⁰ One familiar way to describe literary language, with terminological roots in ancient Rome, relies on the distinction between poetry and prose. While bookstores today are filled with prose novels, many of which are interspersed with colloquial language, which offer a window onto the ordinariness of everyday life, this is a recent and unusual development. The earliest literary texts in European literature paint a different picture. Consider the two Homeric poems, which are written in hexametric verse, built on a centuries-long heritage of extemporized performance. Accompanied by a four-string lyre, the bard that sang the Homeric poems relied on a repertoire of standardized scenes and used a highly artificial, aesthetically charged language. Homer’s idiom was, in fact, never spoken by ordinary Greeks. It was a composite of different regional forms, full of antiquated language as well as newly minted terms. Essential genres of ancient Greek literature—lyric poetry, tragedy, epic—used strict and often intricate metrical structures in order to set off their works from ordinary communication.

While the primacy of verse is common to a number of different literary beginnings—Sanskrit, Arabic, ancient Chinese, Russian, the Romance languages, to give a few examples discussed here—it is not universal. Ancient Hebrew, for example, blends together prose and verse, often using poetry to create emphasis or to give an oration a final flourish. Syriac stands out as another literature from antiquity that begins with prose. Korean similarly first got off the ground in prose genres. And among modern literatures, African American literature is unique for the fact while its very earliest works are written in verse, its nineteenth-century efflorescence—both before and after the Civil War—relied heavily on prose genres from the novel to journalism and autobiography. Latin American literature in Spanish, meanwhile, was at home primarily in prose

and not poetry, in no small part because of the genres employed in the earliest phases of Spanish colonial writing. Any literature born in the nineteenth century encountered a radically new literary universe, particularly because of the rise of the novel and the acceleration of printing through the invention of the rotary printing press. In this respect and many others, the comparison of an ancient literary beginning and a modern one confronts us with fascinating questions that would not readily occur to us otherwise.

Such questions emerge out of attention to the context specificity of literary expression. Literary languages, that is, are deeply rooted in the life world within which they emerge, including institutional environments and ritual practices as well as political and social hierarchies. The tradition of Chinese verse that first began to take shape in the tenth century BCE was influenced as much by hieratic rituals as by the conventions of court culture. As chapter 1 shows, the beginnings of Chinese literature cannot be understood independently of how ritual vessels were used in ancestral rites, or of the patterns of social and political stratification that characterized the Western Zhou dynasty. The beginnings of Chinese literature are, in other words, profoundly informed by the contexts within which the responsible scribes lived and worked. If the Chinese tradition was shaped by its hegemonic status and rigid monolingualism, the exact opposite holds true for western European literatures. As the discussions of the multilingual situation in post-Norman England in chapter 10 and of the similarly fluid linguistic milieu of the troubadours in chapter 11 show, literary languages often emerge from the confluence of multiple different streams, just as they can be shaped in isolation. What ultimately differs, from one case to the next, is the resulting language and literature. By attending to the processes that lend literatures their distinctive patterns of development, the following seventeen case studies enrich our appreciation of the diverse range of phenomena that we call literary. At the same time, the attention to historical and cultural specificity cultivated here is meant to spur on the search for commonalities across time and space.

We have provided short introductions to each part of this book to underscore common themes of the volume—such as script, translation, social function—that are especially significant for each individual part. Since parts 1 and 2 concentrate on traditions from the ancient world, whose distant writing cultures are less familiar to most readers, we provide historical and philological context. In particular, the introduction to part 2 gives a brief account of Mesopotamian literature, the literature that begins all literatures, with particular attention to the streams that feed into ancient Hebrew and Greek literature. The volume is bookended by brief reflections on the value we recognize in arraying the seventeen case studies that follow.

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