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What was the Republic of Letters?

A brief introduction to a long history (1417-2008)

This article provides a chronological introduction to the long history of the Republic of Letters, moving beyond its usual early modern time-frame into the modern age. I follow the history of the Republic of Letters through its many paradigm shifts, showing that it was a far more dynamic community than is suggested by the steady use of the term itself throughout the ages. At the end of the article, I address the still unanswered question as to how many people were involved in this network. A well corroborated answer to this question (and to many others) will only be possible once the records of all surviving letters exchanged by its participants are pooled and made digitally accessible. Steps towards reaching this goal are currently being made in a large digitization project in which more than thirty countries participate.¹

Prelude

In 2008, the American reporter Charles Henry Winer on one of his research journeys encountered something so unsettling, that he chose to have his story published in German, a language which he thought hardly anybody reads. He had visited an island in the Pacific where a community of about eight hundred people was involved in a collective enterprise of science, literature and art. They came from all over the world and were assisted by an extensive administrative staff. Winer called them the *Gelehrtenrepublik*, the 'Republic of learned people' or 'Republic of the erudites'. Winer only observed one major problem: the island was divided into an American and a Russian part – an outcome of the recent nuclear Third World War.

The Republic of Letters

Winer is the hero in Arno Schmidt's Science Fiction-novel *Die Gelehrtenrepublik*, published in 1957. The title is the German translation of the *Respublica litteraria* or *Respublica literarum*, a concept known in French as the *République des lettres*, in English as the Republic of Letters or the Commonwealth of Learning, and in Dutch as the *Republiek der letteren*.¹ The term plays a central role as well in another novel, about a dystopia populated by the world literature's most celebrated authors of all ages, into which John Myers Myers lets his character Silverlock descend in his eponymous fantasy novel of 1949. What does this 'Republic of Letters' refer to?

The Republic of Letters was the network of the scholarly and scientific community of the sixteenth, seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. It consisted of scholars and scientists who worked as professors, secretaries, courtiers, physicians, lawyers or whoever was rich enough to support themselves. By frequently corresponding with each other, they formed a flexible, self-regulating and international conglomerate of networks spanning the whole of Europe. People became part of this community by the very act of writing letters: those scholars who failed or refused to establish sustained lines of communication, could not be reckoned as citizens of this Republic. It was like social media today: if you are not connected, you are not part of it, however 'social' you might be as a person outside the medium of communication. Learned men (and almost exclusively behind the scenes some women, as far as we know) shared information about work-in-progress and published books, they gossiped about colleagues and recommended students, they reflected on the politics of universities, princes, and the church, and they reported on family matters and their health. Letters were meant to be answered: reciprocity was a vital principle, and the letter writers honored the cult of communication. Idealism and pragmatism converged in the tendency of scholars and scientists to ignore political and religious differences with their interlocutors.² Often, they even avoided making explicit that they respected other people's different backgrounds, as it was wiser not to draw attention to what divided them. After all, for the exchange of texts, objects and ideas, it was more effective to seek common ground with one another than to stress differences.³ Thus, modesty, friendliness, openness, constancy, patience, forgiveness and industry were upheld as the moral codes of the Republic of Letters. In

reality scholars often vilified each other in numerous pamphlet wars and vicious polemics, battling against charlatanism, plagiarism, vanity, and arrogance, but doing so often by no less making themselves guilty of lying, spying, prying and mudslinging. The excuse for engaging in such verbal confrontations was usually the urge to defend 'the' truth.

The fifteenth-century Republic of Letters appears hardly on the radar of historians, whereas the sixteenth-century Republic of Letters is usually studied in isolation from its seventeenth- and eighteenth-century history. The eighteenth-century Republic of Letters, moreover, has grown into an cottage-industry of its own. Although historians tend to agree that the Republic of Letters disintegrated near the end of the Enlightenment, a history of the Republic of Letters in the modern age is certainly conceivable. I therefore take the nineteenth, twentieth and twenty-first century into account as well, in this first-ever attempt to provide an overview, however brief, of what we might call the long history of the Republic of Letters.

The Fifteenth Century: Revitalizing Ancient Literature

Our first recorded use of the expression *Respublica litteraria* dates from the early fifteenth century. In 1417, the Italian humanist Francesco Barbaro (1390-1454) wrote a long letter to his colleague Poggio Bracciolini (1380-1459), praising him for his many discoveries of manuscripts with new texts of ancient Roman authors. The carefully crafted letter, obviously meant for a larger public than just the recipient, bestows on Poggio the early modern equivalent of a life-time achievement award for 'bringing to this Republic of Letters the largest number of aids and equipments': he wanted Poggio's 'immortal merits to be placed in the light of Europe.'⁴

After that one incidental bleep on the historians' radar, the term remains hitherto unrecorded for most of the fifteenth century. But during the course of that century, Italian humanists frequently idealized learned communality by such terms as the society of the learned (*societas litteratorum*), the erudite world (*orbis eruditus*), or the fellowship of letters (*sodalitas litteraria*). A particular popular ideal was the learned conversation between a handful of friends gathered round a dinner table in some villa in the countryside – a setting reminiscent of the ancient Greek philosophical symposium.⁵ If friends could not meet, the letter acted as a medium for long distance communication. Already in Antiquity, correspondence was conceptualized

as a dialogue between absent friends.⁶

The expression Republic of Letters reappeared in 1494, in a seminal work by Desiderius Erasmus (1467/69-1536) against ignorance of intellectual culture, the *Anti-Barbari*:

'Some people desire as it were the total destruction of the Republic of Letters, whereas others not so much want to destroy its dominion but rather strive to lock it within firm boundaries. The latter want to save the Republic, but in such a horribly afflicted state that they themselves can tyrannize it.'⁷

The restless traveler Erasmus, who fared by the motto 'I wish to be citizen of the world', was the exemplary spider in a pan-European epistolary web of learning,⁸ and his contemporaries frequently employed the term *Respublica litteraria* and *Respublica litterarum* (republic of 'letters' as in literature/learning, not republic of epistles, although that felicitous second meaning enriches the communal connotation of the expression).⁹ Since Luther's break with Rome, inaugurated in 1517, the term took on renewed significance, because it could act as an alternative to the idea of the pan-European *Respublica Christiana*, which now lay in tatters. Latin remained as the *lingua franca* of this somewhat stripped down ideal of at least a unified secular learning in Europe, although Italian was often employed in the Italian peninsula, and similarly French in the kingdom of France and Spanish on the Iberian peninsula. In the fifteenth century, sociable Italian humanists formed local or regional pockets with a European outreach. They largely engaged with classical philology and ancient history, with Greek as the new fashion, in particular after the fall of Constantinople in 1453, which led to the appearance in Italy of Greek scholars who brought knowledge and manuscripts. When the Italian Renaissance started to spread beyond the Alps in the second half of the century, the learned networks became wider and more interconnected.

The Sixteenth Century: the Turn to Christian History

In the sixteenth century the Republicans of Letters turned to the Bible and the church fathers. In their study of the interplay of Greek, Roman and Christian Antiquity, humanists relied not only on texts, but increasingly on material culture: the remnants of Antiquity which might anachronistically be called archaeological objects: coins, statues, and monuments, often showing images and inscriptions. Frequently, the letters which the humanists sent

to one another contained attachments in the form of such objects, or of paper copies thereof: rubbings of coins, drawings of architectural remnants, and transcriptions of texts which industrious note-takers copied out from funeral monuments.¹⁰ But the exchange of knowledge was not limited to such antiquarian objects. Increasingly, scholars communicated about the results of medical experiments and sent each other recipes. While some turned to the skies to see if what they observed confirmed what ancient authors had written about the stars, planets and comets, others bowed their noses to the ground in search of plants and flowers, in an attempt to match them with the herbs described by Greek and Roman authors. An attachment or appendix added much the letter's sense of being of a gift: 'Why does your letter come to me devoid of any of the spices of our art?', the Zurich town physician Conrad Gessner (1516-1565) in 1560 complained to a colleague of his in Schaffhausen.¹¹

It was only through intense cooperation and exchange of letters that it dawned upon the learned men and a small number of women that the ancients had not been omniscient. Letters were carried to and from Africa and the East Indies. After the Europeans learned of the existence of a continent they referred to as the 'New World', letter exchange became a global affair. The information about flora, fauna, and minerals, which poured in from overseas, was avidly discussed on the European continent.¹² From the second half of the sixteenth century onwards, specialized information networks started to develop, devoted primarily (but never exclusively) to, for example, astronomy or botany, antiquarianism or theology.¹³ Most of the erudites were both scholar and scientist, theologian and philosopher, but many took a more special interest in one of these subjects, for the number of observations communicated in the Republic of Letters accumulated to such an extent that scholars felt overwhelmed by the overload of information. The appearance of the printing press halfway through the fifteenth century had contributed much to the dizzying feeling that it was impossible to keep up with the knowledge enshrined in the hundreds of books churned out by industrious printers – often scholars themselves with an eye to beautiful and practical monuments of learning as well as to profitable theological stock.¹⁴

The wars of religion, which scourged France, the Low Countries and the Holy Roman Empire in the half centuries before and after 1600, sparked off endemic controversies over the history of the early church, the authority of

the church fathers, and the good and the bad parts of ancient philosophies, new confessions and future politics. This intense bickering created a buzz, which drew ever more people into the realm of the Republic of Letters and made them participate in both the cult of communication and the practice of polemic. Yet, the European dimension of the Republic of Letters was not forgotten: scholars still communicated across religious, political and ideological boundaries. In order to get access to much coveted information, it was wise to ignore such hot-button issues and pretend that all learned people were working towards the same goal of universal peace and justice – and by doing, many in fact advanced precisely that ideal.¹⁵

They did so by communicating with letters. From the fifteenth century onwards, Renaissance humanists had trained their students in the art of letter writing, modeling their letters on those of Cicero and Pliny the Younger instead of on the apostolic letters of the Bible or the formal administrative and diplomatic correspondence of the late Middle Ages. They churned out manuals on the art of letter writing. But the letter only stood in for a better way of communication: the conversation *in vivo*. Scholars continued to gather in libraries, private salons, academic botanical gardens, and princely courts. Manuals also appeared on the right way of conduct at court or in other companies, such as Baldassare Castiglione's (1478-1529) famous *The Courtier* (1528) or Erasmus' charming booklet on *Civility* (1530). It was, again, Erasmus who wrote a very popular treatise on the art of letter writing, and who in another work, published 150 alternative variants on the opening sentence 'Your letter pleased me very much'. Opening a letter with a paragraph on the value of friendship was a wise thing to do at a time when people relied heavily on the willingness of one's correspondent. Take for example one of the earliest surviving letters of the French scholar Joseph Scaliger (1540-1609). In 1565, we find him, twenty-five years old and isolated on a castle in the countryside in the Poitou in southern France, writing to a friend in Paris. First, he says he values his correspondent's friendship, although they have never met. He then proceeds to report that he has corrected part of a lexicon, which his friend sent him. He asks for the rest of this dictionary, of which the famous French scholar Jacques Cujas (1522-1590) once gave him an abstract (Scaliger was obviously already well-connected). He then moves on to correcting a Greek passage quoted by the Roman satirist Juvenal. Furthermore, he asks to be sent a lexicon of Papias via a Parisian printer known to both: 'I promise that I will pay

for the costs', he added. (This particular copy of the lexicon still happens to survive today: it is kept in the University Library of Amsterdam, with a note by Scaliger's correspondent on the title page, stating that he bought it for eight sous in Paris for Scaliger); and finally, Scaliger asks his friend to contribute something to his own book on the Roman author Varro. This letter, now kept in a library in Bern, tells us much about the way a young scholar built his network, about his work-in-progress, about the lines of communication in early modern France (which was in the midst of a civil war; Scaliger had just converted from Catholicism to Calvinism), and even reconnects with a sixteenth-century book currently in Amsterdam to reveal something about the prices of books in Paris in 1564.¹⁶

As long as learned activity was communicated, it was seen as beneficial for the learned common good. Thus, when the Dutch humanist Hadrianus Junius (1511-1575) wrote to his old college friend Justus Velsius (1502-1582) in 1552, congratulating him with obtaining a teaching post at a newly established school in Cologne, recommending the bearer of his letter (a student of his) to Velsius and asking to be sent Velsius's latest book, he ended with a common expression: 'Greetings, my splendid Velsius, and do help, as you indeed are doing, the Republic of Letters'.¹⁷

The Seventeenth Century: the Rise of Natural Science

Until halfway through the seventeenth century scholars had relied exclusively on letters and books for news about the world of learning. This century has been called the 'Golden Age' of letter writing.¹⁸ Thus, the well-connected scholar Johann Georg Graevius (1632-1703), according to a close friend and colleague of his, was such an industrious letter writer that 'the cost of postage swallowed up almost a fifth of his annual income'.¹⁹ Letter writing remained a daily business after the arrival, in 1665, of the first learned journals. The journals appeared in Paris and London and were published by newly established academies. These academies, loosely modeled on the fifteenth- and sixteenth-century Italian societies of humanists and learned courtiers, were now sponsored by centralized monarchies, who hoped to profit from the results of the rapidly transforming and increasing research into the natural world. The natural sciences emancipated themselves from the influence of Aristotelian thought, in which natural history, natural philosophy and physics had been neatly organized into a metaphysical framework. Openly criticizing previous traditions, but

in fact heavily indebted to them, Francis Bacon (1561–1626) and René Descartes (1596–1650) inspired new generations of both radical thinkers and pious observers of God's creation to reread the Bible and the Book of Nature in the light of new philosophical and historical frameworks.²⁰ Mathematics and the cosmos, cometology and meteorology, motion and matter, atomism and the vacuum – such themes occupied many of the greatest minds of the century. Yet, other brilliant intellectuals, such as the earlier mentioned Calvinist scholar Joseph Scaliger, the Church of Ireland archbishop James Ussher (1581–1656) and the Catholic theologian Denis Petau (1583–1652) continued to deepen the insight into human and biblical history by developing comparative chronologies, while Jesuit scholars such as Athanasius Kircher (1602–1680) studied Asian history and Egyptian antiquities.²¹ The world deepened chronologically, expanded geographically, and grew more complicated mathematically. And all of it continued to be hotly debated in the letters, which the scholars and scientists exchanged.²²

Professors at universities, whose task it was to teach but many of whom had published results of privately conducted research, faced competition from full-time researchers of the Academies. Many university teachers followed the trend and engaged in what became a craze in learned journals. Results of research were published in the form of letters, but slowly, these were formalized into something resembling research reports. Busy-bee intellectual journalists and knowledge-brokers stuffed journals with welcome reviews and outlines of recently published books. In the first decades of the eighteenth century, contributors to these journals discussed not only what science was, but also how it should be conducted and how scholars and scientists ought to behave. There always had been some implicit consensus about the duty of scholars to communicate and respect the authorial rights of one's colleagues, as appears from the many polemics arising from the infringement of such codes. Yet, from the late seventeenth century onwards the Republicans of Letters consciously reflected on the ideals of tolerance, and on the codes of conduct, which should structure the Republic of Learning.²³ In this period of Enlightenment, Jürgen Habermas located the emergence of what he famously termed a bourgeois public sphere. From the early eighteenth century onwards, new audiences in scholarly and scientific societies discussed the results of science and scholarship. Profiting from the fact that Latin had given way to French, the

new bourgeois vernacular people who took a passive interest in learning yearned for shorthand introductions into the world of learning. Meanwhile, the explosion in information also left students at universities in confusion. The response came in the form of bio-bibliographies, densely supported by footnotes and ideal classifications of universal knowledge, and accompanied by histories of the most recent centuries of learning. Periodization was designed, labels were introduced to describe schools and currents, and the authors of such handbooks on *Historia Litteraria* (History of Learning) feasted on earlier encyclopedic accomplishments, embodied in humanist lexicons and dictionaries. One of the results was the craze in encyclopedias, which characterized the Enlightenment.²⁴

The Eighteenth Century: the Philosophical Republic of Letters

After the classical turn of the fifteenth century, the ecclesiastical and biblical turn of the sixteenth century, and the natural scientific turn of the seventeenth century, the Republic of Letters experienced a philosophical turn in the eighteenth century, when obsessive letter writers such as Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz (1646–1716; twenty thousand letters have been identified to date, and we are still counting) were relieved by no less maniacal correspondents as Voltaire (1694–1778). For many, the French enlightened Republic of Letters was too dismissive of the study of the text and remnants of Antiquity to count as truly learned, but the new generation in fact built upon the accomplishment of the humanists, scholars and scientists of the Renaissance. Denis Diderot (1713–1784) and Jean le Rond d'Alembert (1717–1783) in their famous *Encyclopédie* (1751) ransacked not only recent predecessors such as the 'critical' histories of Pierre Bayle (1697) and Jacob Brucker (1742–1744), but also the seventeenth-century journals and the sixteenth-century commentaries on pagan and Christian texts from Antiquity and early Middle Ages. And the Republicans of Letters kept on corresponding, on unprecedented scales.²⁵ Diderot and d'Alembert were energetic correspondents, as were Montesquieu (1669–1755), Paul-Henri Thiry d'Holbach (1723–1789) and Jean-Jaques Rousseau (1712–1778). But philosophers were not the only Republicans of Letters. Take for example the famous botanist Carl Linnaeus (1707–1778). He corresponded with about two hundred people within Sweden and twice as many from other countries, in Europe but also from Asia and Africa. About three thousand of the letters, which he received from 660 people, have survived. On top of

that, there are about as many letters which he wrote himself and sent off.²⁶ The omnivorous Benjamin Franklin (1706-1790) was also an avid letter writer: a constant flow of letters from and to him crossed the Atlantic. His surviving correspondence numbers some fifteen thousand letters. In the letters he addressed politics and electricity, naturally, but they also show that Franklin was interested in subjects ranging from meteorology to morality. And if we look at the greatest philosopher of the century, Immanuel Kant (1724-1804), we observe that he, too, exercised the praxis typical of a citizen of the Republic of Letters. He kept on an extensive and lively correspondence, which was inscribed in the learned sociability characteristic of the Republic of Letters. He composed poems for visiting scholars and funeral poetry for deceased colleagues, and he took great pleasure in learned conversation at the dinner table. He received many students who called on him with letters of recommendation, often from scholars who merely used those students as an excuse to address Kant. Others introduced themselves directly, as for example a certain Samuel Collobusch (1724-1803), who describes himself in a letter to Kant as an old man who is nearly blind. After having had someone read to him a couple of times 'your Moral and Religion' (referring, apparently, to Kant's *Die Metaphysik der Sitten* (1785) and *Die Religion innerhalb der Grenzen der bloßen Vernunft* (1793), this bible-thumping pietist snares at Kant: 'What you have written there, a pure faith, devoid of all hope, and utterly pure moral, devoid of love is a rare phenomenon in the *Republick* [sic] *Der Gelehrten*.'²⁷ Walter Benjamin (1892-1940) included this letter in his famous selection *Deutsche Menschen*, as it was, according to Theodor Adorno (1903-1969), his favourite letter of all times.²⁸ Here, we see Kant in opposition to the Republic of Letters, in a conflict between Kantianism and revealed religion. Indeed, whereas Johann Gottlieb Fichte (1762-1814) still spoke of a 'literary Republic of the learned', Kant never once mentioned the concept of the Republic of Letters in his writings. This seems to be symptomatic for the diminishing currency of the metaphor.²⁹

The Nineteenth Century: a Republic of *Belles-Lettres*?

Historians of knowledge generally agree that the Republic of Letters disintegrated in the last decades of the eighteenth century.³⁰ The term 'Republic of Letters' seems to slip almost out of usage in the circles of nineteenth-century scientists and humanists, who specialized in their

own branches of learning, which crystallized into the disciplines. It was not enough to be a natural philosopher or a classical scholar anymore: one specialized in chemistry or in Greek philosophy, in astronomy or in the medieval lore in which the new states sought the roots to create their national identities. But recent voices argue for the endurance of our pan-European network of information-junkies into the nineteenth century, in particular in American intellectual life.³¹ In fact, it might be that the nineteenth-century Republic of Letters endured by taking yet another turn: the literary turn. While the abbé Henri Baptiste Grégoire ('abbé Grégoire', 1750-1831) published 'Plans' for the association of 'erudites, men of letters and artists' (1816-17) to advance what he called the 'literary solidarity between the erudites of all nations' (1824) in a belated effort to retain the erudite, philosophical and scientific communality of the Enlightened Republic of Letters,³² the term Republic of Letters was in fact given to anthologies of poetry. Did the Republic of Letters transform into a Republic of *Belles Lettres*? Indeed, Charles Baudelaire (1821-1867) and other representatives of the decadent French and English literatures of the second half of the nineteenth century thought hard and deep about how poets and novelists could form a cosmopolitan counter-culture against the narrow-mindedness of national literatures.³³ In the Americas, authors used the phrase *República de las letras* to denote their own, often nationally grouped, network of literary coteries.³⁴ It remains to be seen to what extent the 'Republic of Letters' was still a vital ideal or merely a metaphorical shorthand to refer to poets, playwrights and novelists, regardless of whether they communicated by letters or not. But the enlightened tradition of literary journals had not come to an end, on the contrary.

The Twentieth Century: from the Intellectual to the Scientific Community

Even the onslaught of the Great War failed to destroy the cosmopolitan ideals of the world of learning. It was, in fact, after this war that such authors as Romain Rolland (1866-1944), Paul Valéry (1871-1945), Stefan Zweig (1881-1942) and T.S. Eliot (1888-1965), attempted to recreate the Republic of Letters by forging new correspondence networks, setting up interdisciplinary journals, and organizing international literary conferences to celebrate the shared European literary and artistic heritage.³⁵ The pacifist

Rolland in 1919 initiated the establishment of a 'European Republic of the mind', Eliot founded a journal *Criterion* in 1921 to facilitate cross-European literary criticism, and the League of Nations in 1924 set up an *International Committee for intellectual cooperation*. The term 'Republic of Letters' was frequently referenced in these circles. Rolland and Zweig kept up an intense correspondence on the necessity of building a European sense of intellectual community. To another friend Rolland wrote in 1920:

The Internationale of the Mind is endowed with an absolute and eternal character: not to tell lies, neither in words, nor even in thinking. Never to tolerate interference into free research and the public ascertainment of the truth. And, therefore, she admits free grouping of people, but refuses all official unitarianism commanded by the state, the church or the party.³⁶

The ideals of these highly spirited intellectuals shipwrecked brutally on the horrors of the Second World War, but even then, it was Eliot who in 1944 wrote:

All men of letters ... have, irrespective of nationality, language or political bias, a common interest, and about which we might hope to have a common mind ... Such agreement would give more content to the phrase "the republic of letters". The "republic" or (to use a stronger term) the "fraternity" of letters, does not, fortunately, demand that all men of letters should love one another – there always have been and always will be, jealousy and intrigue amongst authors: but it does imply that we have a mutual bond, and a mutual obligation to a common ideal.³⁷

This sounds close to Francesco Barbaro's praise in 1417 of Poggio Bracciolini for his contributions to the common good of all scholars and authors of Europe.

Perhaps it was these novelists and poets who offered the inspiration of Schmidt's post-Second World War satirical projection of the same phenomenon into a post-Third World War future. In the second half of the twentieth century, the Republic of Letters has kept the ring of a nostalgic yearning back to a time when Knowledge and Literature were highly esteemed, universally worshipped and freely exchanged in a world tied together by bonds of mutual respect and friendship between men and woman, the embodied seats of knowledge who enshrined the treasures of their brains in tolerance, humility and a liberal attitude to both the mediocre and the most respected colleagues. This Republic of the mind saw the

integration of visual artists and composers, leading to what we might term the artistic turn.

After the Second World War, the utopianism of the interwar period seemed forever lost. While German intellectuals who had been displaced in the 1930s injected Anglo-American academia with new research traditions (while keeping on lively correspondents with their continental colleagues – or what was left of them), German scientists were shipped to the US after the war to work on the far opposite of the Republic of Letters' ideals: the knowledge-transfer was not free, not reciprocal, and not open. With the beginning of the arms' race, we might speak of the international scientific community rather than of the Republic of Letters. In the second half of the seventeenth century, the Republic of Letters already experienced a natural scientific turn, but now natural science completely took over. However, the vacillations of Robert J. Oppenheimer (1904-1967), head of the Manhattan project, with regard to the development of the H-bomb, show that a leaning towards pacifism and internationalism informed a man of science, who was accused of communist sympathies on account of his critique of the arms' race. Ethics never stopped to structure the discourse of the international scientific and scholar community. It is this tradition, which Martha Nussbaum (1947-) has been building on in her twenty-first century quest for maintaining the tradition of the humanities. And this brings us to our own age.

The Twenty-First Century: the Digital Republic of Letters

Peter Burke (1937-) has argued that we still live in the Republic of Letters. For aren't we all assiduous e-mail writers, supporters of open access policies and fans of the Google books library, a universal library that is larger and better searchable than the most imaginative Republicans of Letters could previously have ever dreamt of?³⁸ Assuming that we still live in the Republic of Letters, today's international scientific and scholarly community marks a new stage in its history: the digital turn. The sharing economy is back on the agenda, and we might conceive of the Republic of Letters as a knowledge commons, which prefigured the open-access movement.³⁹

The digital turn not only revolutionized our own means of communication, but also promises to do the same for our studies of past communication and social networking. As a constantly present concept in the history of

European knowledge, a *Begriffsgeschichte* of the Republic of Letters offers a framework for an alternative intellectual history of Europe and European identity formation which integrates aspects which are usually disconnected: it transcends traditional boundaries in chronology, nationality, language, discipline, genre, gender, and institutions. It links the legacy of Greek and Roman Antiquity to its appropriation in the Renaissance; it ties Late Humanism to the Scientific Revolution and it provides a bridge between the Enlightenment and the formation of the disciplines; it shows how Romantic yearnings lived on in the twentieth century, when the Republic of Letters transformed from an ideal into utopia, seemingly lost for ever in the Cold War. But in our century, the Republic of Letters is back in a new format, as long as we continue communicating cross-culturally, transreligiously and internationally by means of letters.

The fascinatingly Protean history of the Republic of Letters is also a challenge: how can we sensibly integrate all these aspects into a synthesis? What sources are we going to take into account? We do not even know how many people populated the Republic of Letters throughout the centuries. To give an idea of the challenges we are facing, let me present a case.

Big Data: Analyzing the Stratification and Size of the Republic of Letters

From the first four decades of the sixteenth century, some 3200 letters, exchanged with over seven hundred people, have come to down to us from Erasmus' correspondence.⁴⁰ Erasmus dwelt in what we might call the elite circles of the Republic of Letters. There were hundreds, perhaps even thousands, of learned people in his age of whom we have no evidence of contact with Erasmus at all. One of the many examples of the 'middle-classes' of the Republic of Letters is the already mentioned Dutch humanist Hadrianus Junius. He corresponded with more than one hundred people, including luminaries such as the Venetian legal scholar and emblemist Andrea Alciato (1492-1550), the Sieneese botanist Pietro Mattioli (1501-1577), the Spanish biblical humanist Benito Arias Montano (1527-1598), the Hungarian Latin poet Johannes Sambucus (1531-1584), and the Antwerp-based Christopher Plantin (1520-1589), head of Europe's largest printing house. It is understandable that Junius never corresponded with Erasmus

(he had just turned 25 when Erasmus died in 1536) or the great French polymath Guillaume Budé (1467-1540), but he could have corresponded with the upcoming new stars on the firmament of European learning: the earlier mentioned French polymath Joseph Scaliger and his Flemish counterpart Justus Lipsius (1547-1606). Even though Junius lived in Italy, Paris and England for sustained periods, he had no epistolary contact with famous contemporaries such as the Italian born Julius Caesar Scaliger (1484-1558), the Swiss physician-botanist-zoologist-poet-philologist Conrad Gessner (1516-1565), the French philologist Adrianus Turnebus (1512-1565), the great Pleiade-poet Jean Dorat (1508-1588) or the specialist of Greek Dénis Lambin (Dionysius Lambinus, 1520-1572). Yet, he had much in common with these men, with whose books he was intimately familiar: Junius, who in his native country became known as the 'second Erasmus', was no provincial scholar: a prolific Greek and Latin philologist, historian, physician, botanist, poet, he also produced a successful emblem book, Latin translations of Greek texts, commentaries on well known and obscure Greek and Roman poets, as well as an octolingual dictionary which remained in general use in Northern European schools for over two hundred years. He cooperated with the noble Latin poet Janus Dousa (1545-1604), the libertine vernacular philosopher Dirk Volckertsz. Coornhert (1522-1599), and the Haarlem based painter Maarten van Heemskerck (1498-1574).⁴¹ Of his correspondence, 426 letters survive.⁴² Junius' network formed one of the perhaps dozens of epistolary sub-networks, linked by a number of nodes to other networks. Above him, two degrees separated him from the older Erasmus, with whom he had three correspondents in common: Alciato, the London bishop Stephen Gardiner (1483-1555) and Erasmus' one-time student Petrus Vulcanius (before 1521-after 1559). Below him, he was tied into more localized epistolary networks of small-time school rectors, some of whom were proud to call themselves the correspondent of Junius. Through him, they were only three degrees apart from Erasmus. If Erasmus' network counted six hundred men, Junius' hundred, and each of Junius' correspondents perhaps a dozen on average, the number of 'citizens' of the Republic of Letters around 1550 may have counted thousands of important and unimportant citizens.

One estimate has it that by the time of the French Revolution there were about five thousand active correspondents in France alone and in the whole of Europe perhaps some thirty thousand.⁴³ If all of these produced hundreds

of letters, the numbers of letters reach staggering amounts, running into the millions. Only a fragment of these have survived the wreckage of time, but to give an idea of what has come done to us: hundreds of German and Dutch libraries together keep over four million letters, dated from the early stages of the Renaissance to the present day. From the early modern period of the Republic of Letters perhaps some one or two million letters survive, scattered over hundreds of libraries and archives in and outside of Europe. If we would be able to digitize a fragment of these, we would already be talking 'big data'. Fortunately, several initiatives have recently been developed to do exactly that: to map the Republic of Letters by centralizing the library records of letters and digitizing their contents.⁴⁴ Learning from theoretical sociologists and digital text-mining specialists, historians begin to gain insight into the structure of this grand social network, its geographical scope, its chronological development, its linguistic range, its co-citation networks and its changing paradigms. But it will cost much time, huge investment and admirable application before we can fathom the deep structure of the social history of Europe's intellectual heritage embodied in that wonderful medium: the letter.

Noten

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2. J.A.H.G.M. Bois, *Republiek der Letteren. Ideaal en werkelijkheid* (Amsterdam: APA-Holland University Press, 1977); Lorraine Daston, "The Ideal and Reality of the Republic of Letters in the Enlightenment", *Science in Context* vol. 4 (1991): 367-386.
3. Hans Bots and Françoise Waquet, eds., *Commercium Litterarum. La Communication dans la République des Lettres. Forms of Communications in the Republic of Letters, 1600-1750* (Amsterdam and Maarssen: APA-Holland University Press, 1994).
4. Marc Fumaroli, "The Republic of Letters", *Diogenes* vol. 143 (1988), 129-154.
5. Fritz Schalk, "Von Erasmus' Res publica literaria zur Gelehrtenrepublik der Aufklärung," in *Id., Studien zur französischen Aufklärung* (Frankfurt am Main: Vittorio Klostermann, 1977), 143-163.

6. Dirk van Miert, "Letters, and Epistolography", in Anthony Grafton, Glenn Most & Salvatore Settis eds., *The Classical Tradition* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010), 520-523.
7. The book was only published twenty-five years later: Antibarbarorum liber unus, Basel: J. Frobenius, 1520, 41: 'Alii enim literariam Remp[ublicam] tanquam funditus deletam cupiunt; alii imperium non quidem protius extinguere, sed arctioribus finibus includere moliantur. Postremi ita Remp[ublicam] salvam esse volunt, ut afflictissimam velint, quippe in qua ipsi tyrannidem occupent.'
8. Lisa Jardine, *Erasmus, Man of Letters: The Construction of Charisma in Print* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993).
9. Constance M. Furey, *Erasmus, Contarini, and the Religious Republic of Letters* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006).
10. William Stenhouse, *Reading Inscriptions and Writing Ancient History. Historical Scholarship in the Late Renaissance* (London: Institute of Classical Studies, 2005).
11. Candice Delisle, "'The Spices of Our Art': Medical Observation in Conrad Gessner's Letters", in Dirk van Miert, ed., *Communicating Observations in Early Modern Letters, 1500-1675. Epistolography and Epistemology in the Age of the Scientific Revolution* (London and Turin: The Warburg Institute and Nino Aragno Editore, 2013), 27-42 (27).
12. Brian W. Ogilvie, *The Science of Describing. Natural History in Renaissance Europe* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2006).
13. See the examples in Van Miert, *Communicating Observations*.
14. Ann M. Blair, *Too Much to Know. Managing Scholarly Information before the Modern Age* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2010).
15. Jeanine De Landtsheer and Henk Nellen, eds., *Between Scylla and Charybdis. Learned Letter Writers Navigating the Reefs of Religious and Political Controversy in Early Modern Europe* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2011).
16. Joseph Scaliger ('Touffou) to Pierre Daniel (Paris), 24 March [1565], in Paul Botley and Dirk van Miert, eds., *The Correspondence of Joseph Scaliger, 8 vols* (Geneva: Droz, 2012), vol. 1, 7-9.
17. Hadrianus Junius, *Epistolae, quibus accedit eiusdem vita* (Dordrecht: V. Caimax, 1652), 132: 'Vale, ornatissime Velsi, et Remp[ublicam] literariam, ut facis, adiuva.'
18. Paul Dibon, "Les échanges épistolaires dans l'Europe savante du XVIIe siècle", *Revue de synthèse* vol. 81-82 (1976), 31-50.
19. Petrus Burmannus, "Oratio funebris in obitum Joannis Georgii Graevii" [1703], in J. G. Graevius, *Orationes quas Ultraieci habuit* (Leiden: Johannes du Vivie, 1717), 559-607 (589): '... quantum molestiae et laboris, quo sibi totos saepe dies perire querebatur, iis exarandis exhausserit: quanti ipsi hoc commercium literarum steterit, ut quintam fere stipendii partem quotannis pro vectura merces absumeret, si singulatim recensere vellem, patientia vestra abuterer.'
20. Eric Jorink, *Reading the Book of Nature in the Dutch Golden Age, 1575-1715* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2010).
21. Anthony Grafton, "A Sketch Map of a Lost Continent: The Republic of Letters", *Republics of Letters* vol. 1:1, 2008, at: <http://arcade.stanford.edu/roll/sketch-map->

- lost-continent-republic-letters.
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23. Dena Goodman, *The Republic of Letters. A Cultural History of the French Enlightenment* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1994); Anne Gologar, *Impolite Learning. Conduct and Community in the Republic of Letters, 1680-1750* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1995); Martin Mulson, *Die unanständige Gelehrtenrepublik. Wissen, Libertinage und Kommunikation in der Frühen Neuzeit* (Stuttgart and Weimar: J.B. Metzler, 2007).
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25. Ulrich Johannes Schneider, ed., *Kultur der Kommunikation. Die europäische Gelehrtenrepublik im Zeitalter von Leibniz und Lessing* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 2005).
26. For the edition of Linnaeus's correspondence, see <http://linnaeus.c18.net/Doc/lbio.php>.
27. Collenbusch to Kant, 23 January 1795 (Kant, Briefwechsel, Bd. 3: 1795-1803. Nachträge und Anhang (Berlin: Reimer, 1902 (= AA XII)), no. 649, p. 2); 'Was Sie Da Geschrieben Haben, Ein Von aller Hoffnung ganz reiner Glaube und ein Von aller Liebe ganz Reine Morall, - Daß ist eine seltsame Erscheinung in Der Repuplick Der Gelehrten.'
28. Dettel Holz [=Walter Benjamin], ed., *Deutsche Menschen. Eine Folge von Briefe* (Luzern: Vita Nova Verlag, 1936), 28-30.
29. Dirk van Miert, "Immanuel Kant and the Republic of Letters", paper read at Oxford, Annual Meeting of the British Society for Eighteenth-Century Studies, 8 January 2015; Kasper Risbjerg Eskildsen, "How Germany Left the Republic of Letters", *Journal of the History of Ideas* vol. 65:3 (2004), 421-432.
30. Hans Bots and Françoise Waquet, *La République des Lettres* (Paris: Belin, 1997), translated into Italian in 2005. This is the only book-length history of the Republic of Letters, and its conciseness and clarity make it the best available introduction into the Republic of Letters. Marc Fumaroli's *La République des Lettres*, Paris: Éditions Gallimard, 2015 (published first, in 2013, in Spanish translation), draws on a lifetime engagement with the Republic of Letters and consists of papers published or presented predominantly in the 1980s and 1990s. Like Bots and Waquet, Fumaroli proceeds no further than the French Revolution.
31. Caroline Winterer, "Where is America in the Republic of Letters?", *Modern Intellectual History* vol. 9 (2012), 597-623 (see in particular the literature mentioned there in note 12 on p. 602).
32. Bernard Plongeron, ed., *Labbé Grégoire et la République des Savants* (Paris: Éditions du CTHS, 2001).
33. Matthew Potolsky, *The Decadent Republic of Letters. Taste, Politics, and Cosmopolitan Community from Baudelaire to Beardsley* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012).
34. Belem Clark de Lara and Elisa Speckman Guerra, eds., *La republica de las letras.*
- Asonos a la cultura escrita del México decimonónico, 3 vols* (Mexico: Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, 2005).
35. Antoine Compagnon, ed., *La République des Lettres dans la Tourmente* (1919-1939) (Paris: CNRS and Alain Baudry et Cie, 2011).
36. 'L'Internationale de l'Esprit a un caractère absolu et éternel: ne pas mentir, ni en parole, ni en pensée; ne jamais tolérer une entrave à libre recherché et à la constatation publique de la vérité. Et, par suite, elle admet de libres groupements, mais elle se refuse à tout unitarisme officiel et commandé d'état, d'égglise ou de Parti' (letter to J.R. Bloch, cited by Marleen Rensen, "The Republic of Letters in Interwar Europe", unpublished conference paper).
37. T.S. Eliot, "The Man of Letters and the Future of Europe", *The Norseman*, July and August 1944, 243-248. Adapted from an unpublished conference paper by Marleen Rensen (Amsterdam: University of Amsterdam, 2012).
38. Peter Burke, "The Republic of Letters as a Communication System. An Essay in Periodization", *Media History* vol. 18, nos 3-4 (2012), 395-407.
39. Joel Mokyr, "The Market for Ideas and Economic Growth: A Historical Perspective", appositely referred to here in digital multimedial format as a live recording of a paper delivered under this title: <https://innovationpolicyplatform.org/content/ideas-and-economic-growth-historical-perspective>.
40. Christoph Kudella, "Erasmus and the Sixteenth-Century Respublica Litteraria: Of Letters, Data, and Networks" (Oxford: Cultures of Knowledge Seminar Series, 7 November 2013), at: http://www.culturesofknowledge.org/?page_id=4472.
41. Dirk van Miert, ed., *The Kaleidoscopic Scholarship of Hadrianus Junius (1511-1575). Northern Humanism at the Dawn of the Dutch Golden Age* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2011).
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44. www.republicofletters.net and www.culturesofknowledge.org, with links to a variety of resources with digitized letter collections and podcasts of lectures on epistolary networks. A now somewhat outdated list of articles, editions of correspondences and online resources is available at my old project website: <http://warburg.sas.ac.uk/research/projects/scaliger/sources-for-early-modern-letters/>.