



Belknap Press
cloth • \$29.95
ISBN 9780674976122
220 pages

The Hatred of Literature

William Marx

Translated by Nicholas Elliott

For the last 2,500 years literature has been attacked, booed, and condemned, often for the wrong reasons and occasionally for very good ones. *The Hatred of Literature* examines the evolving idea of literature as seen through the eyes of its adversaries: philosophers, theologians, scientists, pedagogues, and even leaders of modern liberal democracies. From Plato to C. P. Snow to Nicolas Sarkozy, literature's haters have questioned the value of literature—its truthfulness, virtue, and usefulness—and have attempted to demonstrate its harmfulness.

Literature does not start with Homer or *Gilgamesh*, William Marx says, but with Plato driving the poets out of the city, like God casting Adam and Eve out of Paradise. That is its genesis. From Plato the poets learned for the first time that they served not truth but merely the Muses. It is no mere coincidence that the love of wisdom (*philosophia*) coincided with the hatred of poetry. Literature was born of scandal, and scandal has defined it ever since.

In the long rhetorical war against literature, Marx identifies four indictments—in the name of authority, truth, morality, and society. This typology allows him to move in an associative way through the centuries. In describing the misplaced ambitions, corruptible powers, and abysmal failures of literature, anti-literary discourses make explicit what a given society came to expect from literature. In this way, anti-literature paradoxically asserts the validity of what it wishes to deny. The only threat to literature's continued existence, Marx writes, is not hatred but indifference.

William Marx is Professor of Comparative Literature at the University of Paris Nanterre.