When I was asked to write a review on Mr. Marino's *The Hermeneutics of the Idea of Literature*, I reluctantly said O.K. The title itself seemed ominous and having read the book several years ago I thought it would prove a difficult enterprise. Then I remembered Anatole France’s, "To be quite frank the critic ought to say: "Gentlemen, I'm going to talk about myself on the subject of Shakespeare or Racine . . . or Goethe — subjects that offer me a beautiful opportunity"" and decided to beguile myself and take France for granted.

Yet, speaking of yourself sometimes does bring about useless entanglement so I made up my mind to say less of myself and more of the book. Now that things were settled, there had remained only one issue to solve out. As the publication first appeared in 1986, a period in which, as the author himself remembers, "a whole series . . . of tacit tolerances and mutual interests, of hypocrisies and ambiguities, of simulations and administrative farces were in function," should I elude the locale or otherwise praise Marino also for his ability to diddle the system and release the book? The latter had already been overdone and after all Marino did write as if nothing indeed was happening.

This is a book that enters soon your vocabulary. It is a book you are told of early in your life and required to read only a little bit later. Though bookish, the writer tries to make its reading easy and sometimes even frolicsome. Under the mask of seriousness and erudition, Marino is a joyful writer who likes to write joyfully. His ultimate purpose is twofold: he writes for the reader but also for himself. When you intend "a recovery of the whole historical tradition and present understanding of the idea of literature" you are aware of the values at stake. This is about prestige and acknowledgment. If you succeed, then you have both. And Marino copeș with everything simply because he writes about what he knows best. The book has that worn-out encyclopedic touch but the reader should not be mistaken. If it has it, it is only because the author knows too much and is willing to share.

Adrian Marino has the structuralist obsession of dichotomies, of binary oppositions, which actually define, in terms of form, the structure of the book. There is always a "versus" he enjoys to establish and if he starts with the polarity between written literature to oral literature, he knows what he is doing because he will return to this approach at the end of each chapter.

The Hermeneutics provides the reader with a lot of information, sometimes even in excess, specifications that come out from the author’s desire to cover everything. Yet, this ambitious attempt does not bemuse Marino who is both methodical and punctilious. He always looks for the very source, a beginning, a starting point that will lead him eventually to the present.

Above all, literature is “written” and “writing”. Literature is first and foremost letter and despite the nowadays ascent of the audio-visual media, Marino tells us not to worry. Oral literature still has a doubtful status, often questionable and ambiguous but, nevertheless, it completes and, alongside written literature, sets up the general frame of the idea of literature. From one dichotomy we slide into another. Writing is sacred by tradition, or at least Christian tradition. It is with the Christian apologist Tertulian that literature acquires the holy terminology. For the first time he speaks of a “divine literature” – divina litteratura – which finds its counter term in the profane, or secular literature.

Anything written, except for the Bible and some few official clerical writings, means to Tertulian profane literature. But this happened long in the past and to speak today of a profane literature, Marino assures us, is tautological. Paradoxically, it was also writing that weakened the authority of sacred literature when later to write is to live by writing.

Moving further, we are told of the etymological beginnings of literature. Litteratura is the Latin translation of the Greek grammatica which, in turn, means the "art" or even “science” of writing and reading the letters. Cicero is the remarkable figure of the times and together with others he is mentioned for trying to institutionalize the “new” word.

If not history per se, then the history of literature has the cyclic connotation for Marino. Everything starts from letter and returns to letter. The Cultural Cycle of the Hermeneutics deals mostly with this idea. To Marino, the fundamental meaning of literature that also stands for its original significance is culture. A new concept has thus appeared. Culture-literature means the sum total of human knowledge and once the identity is created, literature can and does acquire all sorts of novel imports. “Liberal arts”, the Humanities, “Good letters” all express the same idea of literature. The “Liberal Arts” are free men’s privilege, while the “mechanical,” productive, even lucrative ones belong to the servile class. To Erasmus living liberally means individual seclusion, study and meditation. Studia humanitatis launched by Humanism, of course, enhance the meaning of study to all its intellectual and pedagogical inferences. The Humanist watchword is vita contemplativa, otiosa tranquilitas. Happiness is study, contemplation, instinct exceeding, inwardness, self-knowledge. “Good Letters” become the Renaissance ultimate literary title, a synonym to literary intellectual excellence. Good, sound, lasting literature is unanimously accepted and recommended. It soon becomes exemplary, a model to follow. Literature has acquired the value of an institution. Now it decides what is good, rather than wrong, and viceversa. It vetoes when required, it becomes intolerant and censorship is initiated.

The dichotomies oral/written, sacred/profane confirm themselves once again crucial when Marino refers to “bøk,” the Old Norwegian for modern “book.” Initially, book is “oral,” “living” “that speaks”. It is memorized and recited, we are