

## Intellectual History Meets Literary Studies, or What Happens to Ideas in Literature

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### Abstract

Ideas in literature are immersed into a huge mass of non-conceptual discourses; take very often a metaphoric form; they are in many texts entrusted to fictional persons, to imaginary characters; they have a specific, and even paradoxical, form of responsibility. These features of ideas in literature, making them a privileged object of study in intellectual history, are exemplified by Théophile Gautier's novel *Mademoiselle de Maupin*, more precisely by its preface, considered to be a manifesto of *Art for Art's Sake* doctrine.

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### Parole chiave

Théophile Gautier, intellectual history, responsibility, ideology

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Intellectual history approaches ideas nearly in the same way as literary studies approach literature. Abstracting away from their verity or falsehood and considering false ideas along with true ones, a historian of ideas operates like a literary historian with fictional characters and plots. To a certain extent, the history of ideas may be envisaged as a disciplinary exclave of literary history, projecting onto non-literary, non-fictional domains. Of course, the inverse projection is also possible and largely practiced; intellectual history often takes literature as its object or material of study. Indeed, it is proper for ideas to circulate and to transform so that they do not always possess a conceptual form. Literature is revealed to be a privileged area of such transformations, and in what follows I will survey a selection of these mutations.

First, ideas in literature are immersed into a huge mass of non-conceptual discourses: narratives, evaluations, expressions of passions, jokes, and so on. Very frequently, they are present implicitly, in sentences which do not aim to express or clarify any ideas. This implicit and seemingly inessential character to literary ideas is confirmed, among others, by the traditions of censorship, which in literature pursues mostly revelations of secrets, transgressions of religious and moral prohibitions, subversive political tendencies, obscene words and images, but almost never abstract notions and statements (as it does towards political, religious, and sometimes scientific discourses), even when such notions or statements are obvious in literary texts. In the best cases, – in fact, quite bad! – censorship imposes on literature an ‘ideology’, mostly constituted by vague convictions and ‘myths’, rather than by clearly formulated ideas. To be sure, literature is not the only field of this ‘impure’, infra-conceptual discourse, as it shares this status with countless everyday conversations. Only in literature (and partly in journalism), however, are such conversations noted down and conserved in documentary form. That is why literature pos-

sesses an exceptional value for intellectual history, as a laboratory where we can observe *on texts* the real circulation and transformation of ideas in ordinary social communication.

Second, and this point is more specific to literature and arts, literary ideas take very often a metaphoric form. To a certain extent, metaphoric function is even an obligatory condition for the 'artistic' status of a text. A work of art is supposed to tell us something more general than a singular 'story'; it must express some ideas – be it Platonic immutable ideas, Hegelian self-unfolding ideas, or otherwise – in order to take place in the history of art. "Only things that have been ideologically appropriated by culture are introduced by it into history", states Mikhail Iampolski (Iampolski 15). In this sense, all that is the history of literature and of arts is a history of ideas. This is particularly clear in literature, being the aesthetic activity with linguistic, semantically meaningful material. Each word of a literary text brings already, before its aesthetic use, an intelligible sense, an 'idea', but this primary sense can interest only a 'historian of concepts', not a 'historian of ideas' as such, who analyzes not common linguistic elements belonging to nobody, but semantic units that correspond to certain people, are discussed among them, are proposed by some against others, and so forth. Such twice-meaningful (linguistically and socio-historically) ideas must be highlighted in a text and detached from its neutral verbal background, or 'estranged' (to borrow a term from Russian formalists). The best device for this effect is precisely a metaphorical transformation, giving an altered, 'figurative', and hard-to-read expression. The word *liberty* had been present in literary texts long before the Romantics, but only in the 19<sup>th</sup> century did it begin to designate an idea in literature – symbolized for example as a torn-away leaf or a solitary sail in Mikhail Lermontov's poems, *The Leaf* and *The Sail* respectively – while the same idea was allegorized as a young woman in French painting (Eugène Delacroix' *Liberty Leading the People*) or sculpture (Frédéric Auguste Bartholdi's *Liberty Enlightening the World*). For a historian of ideas the problem is to track intellectual units – ideas or proto-ideas – under sensual, metaphorical, sometimes unrecognizable forms. Fortunately, literature can give the historian some help, as text points to figures and expressions suitable to bear such intellectual charges.

Third, ideas in literature are in many texts entrusted to fictional persons, to imaginary characters. This entails not only a fictionalization of ideas, transformed into poetic inventions of a kind, as this fictionalization results from the general attitude of intellectual history towards historical ideas. It also involves an intense *discussion* about the ideas in question. In literary narratives, in dramatic texts, and often in poems too, an idea belongs to somebody; there is someone in the text to argue it and other persons to understand and/or to debate it. Mikhail Bakhtin, in his famous book on Dostoevsky's poetics (Bakhtin, *Problems*, chapter 3), proposed a distinction between "monologic" and "dialogic" types of narration, which implies two different states of ideas. In the former type ideas declared by literary characters or suggested by the author remain equal to themselves, and the writer cares only to make them internally consistent. In the latter type they collide with one another, disputing and dividing the verity. Associated with people who think and support them, with "characters-ideologists" (Bakhtin's word), they become individuals themselves; they come to possess an *image*. In monologic narratives, Bakhtin explains, the only possible individualization of an idea is an error – ideas have images inasmuch as they are wrong, and their supporters blind and ridiculous; true ideas are without image, like God. In dialogic narratives each idea (there may be several at once) possesses its part of truth, and their most interesting quality is their incompleteness, being always particular and relative, contrasting with the total truth or falsehood of 'monologic'

ideas. By their imperfections they can communicate. In fact, they do so nearly in the same way as humans, who, according to Georges Bataille, can communicate only by their physical or moral flaws and defects (Bataille 266).

Intellectual history, of course, may treat such productive conflicts of ideas as dialectics, although Bakhtin himself did not like this method of thinking and considered it as a restrictive and artificially ‘frozen’ form of dialogue, neglecting the interpersonal character of the latter. But even ‘monologic’ ideas, for example in a satirical parable intended to discredit them, undergo some important modifications as compared to non-literary ideas. So, in Voltaire’s *Candide* a general philosophical idea of the “best possible world”, supposedly borrowed from Leibniz and once entrusted to fictional characters, turns out to be, first, logically distorted – instead of being applied to an imaginary range of *possible* worlds it is confronted by all the evils of the real one – and, second, related to the experience of several men and women, one of whom at the end of his quest decides not to seek for a better world but to improve the existing one by ‘cultivating his garden’. An implicit discussion underlies Voltaire’s plot, manifesting itself not only in the direct speeches of the characters but in their deeds and adventures as well.

Fourth, – and here I come closest to the sociological view of things – ideas in literature have a specific, and even paradoxical, form of responsibility. Like any other cultural activity, literature constitutes a special field and its agents are evaluated and ranked according to diverse internal and external criteria. The originality of literature, in the sense that interests us, consists in the fact that literature cannot do without ideas, it consumes ideas on a large scale, but its internal evaluations are based not upon ideological criteria. Only external evaluations can be so, taking the form of ideological censorship (see above) or of political *engagement*, while mostly ignoring literary ideas altogether. Writers and works of literature are generally appreciated for the *form* they impose on ideas. This Buffon has named the *style*, supposing that ideas can freely migrate from one author to another, maintaining their identity and even undergoing improvement under their new users. By contrast, the style characterizes the uniqueness of an author (“the style is the man himself”, Buffon said in 1753) (Buffon 503). As a result, ideas contained in a literary work, on the one hand, should be well displayed, recognizable, preferably profound and ‘philosophical’, but on the other hand, nobody is really responsible for them – neither the characters who declare them and who are fictional, nor the author who generally is not supposed to share the ideas he or she relates in a novel. A literary idea, as I have said, always belongs to somebody, but its fictional character finally removes responsibility. Paradoxically, ownership and responsibility do not come together here; normally we are responsible for the things we own, but it is not so in literature. Unlike pedagogical texts, the works of literature do not even have to expound their ideas exactly: confusions and contradictions are welcome. As a further consequence, these ideas, stated by concrete persons but in fact engaging nobody’s responsibility, tend to be *radicalized*. Responsible ideas, constantly proofed and measured through discussions and social evaluations, are generally forced to moderation, as happens in sciences, philosophy, religion, and politics. In literature, where any discussion of ideas remains itself fictional, nothing prevents ideas from reaching extreme forms and from justifying the most intransigent judgments. The intratextual dialogue, mentioned above, can but intensify their radicalization. So it is that, in Dostoevsky’s *Crime and Punishment*, characters discuss unceasingly and in doing so unfold the riskiest, most dangerous possibilities of their initial insights. In nearly the same sense, Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht defines not only literature itself but also its *study* as an exercise of “riskful thinking” (Gumbrecht 126). The radicalism of literature has been con-

ceptualized metaphysically by Maurice Blanchot, who treated the “essential solitude” (Blanchot 7) in which a literary work is produced. Critics and philologists expound much upon intertextuality, upon circulating themes and semantic units (for instance, ideas) in verbal culture, but this circulation does not affect the uniqueness of the writer’s and reader’s experience. Creating or perceiving a work of literature can be but a singular act, incomparable to any other. Within such experience, the ideological content of the work has no essential relations to the content of others. It seems to grow by itself, without external limitations, and quite naturally comes to the most radical conclusions.

To exemplify these abstract speculations, I have chosen a French novel first published in 1835, namely Théophile Gautier’s *Mademoiselle de Maupin*. More precisely, I have selected for study its famous foreword, considered to be an outstanding manifesto of the idea named *Art for Art’s sake*. The intellectual and social origins of this idea are well known. Intellectually it derives from German aesthetics of the Romantic epoch, which proclaimed the independence of literature and arts as special forms of spiritual activity. Socially it corresponded to the autonomy of the literary field in the 19<sup>th</sup> century when, for the first time in history, literature became a profession sufficiently remunerative that men of letters needed no longer to solicit personal awards from aristocratic patrons and could earn their living by selling copyrights. The autonomous state of this social field implied that its internal peer-evaluations could prevail over the external (commercial) ones, and the idea of “pure literarity”, as Pierre Bourdieu has pointed out (Bourdieu 393 ff.), expressed this new freedom of men of letters in and from the society. So, to the sociological point of view, it is only natural that it was a writer as young and ambitious as Gautier – 24 at the moment his first novel was published – and eager to secure a position within the field, who formulated the most vehement, the most aggressive version of *l’Art pour l’Art*. This doctrine is self-referential, serving to justify its own application by the very same man professing it.

What is in question now is how literature shapes Gautier’s argument, how the form, and partly the content of this argument are overdetermined by literary discourse. We find here all the features of literary ideas listed above. 1) The intellectual claim, in Gautier’s text, is mixed with personal appreciations, polemical insults addressed to his opponents (critics supporting the ‘moral’ and ‘progressive’ destination of literature), some self-promotion of the novelist himself, and so on; all this is typical for the 19<sup>th</sup>-century journalistic discourse to which Gautier’s critical text belongs, even though it was not published in a journal or a newspaper. 2) The idea of the independence of art is systematically expressed by metaphors, among which the metaphor of *home* is particularly important and meaningful. Paradoxically, while discussing a problem of public life the writer feigns to leave the public space and to retire into the intimacy of private pleasures (“rereading *Pantagruel* between my bottle and my pipe”) (Gautier 178); the metaphorization is typical of literary discourse, but in Gautier’s text it is highlighted by the paradoxical nature of his metaphors, which highlight in turn the defiant nature of his idea. 3) Gautier emphasizes its *personal* involvement with the debate, by simulating in his printed text an oral speech and a particularly loud and familiar kind of speech proper to fair barkers, and by staging his speech as a public show – apostrophizing the audience, anticipating its reactions, and thus producing highly dialogic discourse, which should have interested Bakhtin (the mention of Rabelais’ book *Pantagruel* is also quite symptomatic; cf. Bakhtin’s book on Rabelais – Bakhtin, *Rabelais*). 4) Finally, Gautier radicalizes the meaning of the idea he is defending. Instead of discarding the morality in arts, he affects the immorality of the dandy, and, criticizing the principle of utility as applied to poetry, he goes so far as to af-

firm a general superiority of the beauty over the utility, even in the ordinary life. Moreover, and this is the most curious, he would like to discredit the expression of any ideas in literature, be it religious, moralistic, republican, Saint-Simonian, or otherwise. He employs the word *idea* with a sarcastic tone, putting it into ironic quotation marks as a claim that his ‘stupid’ opponents supposedly repeated it: “in every work an idea, an idea is required... an idea moral and religious...”, and so on (Gautier 180). Gautier seems unaware that by his depreciation of ideas in literature he undermines his own discourse, intended after all to assert an idea of aesthetics! The self-referentiality of his doctrine thus becomes self-destruction. Of course, Gautier does not do so in a novelistic narration; rather, he does so in a foreword that serves as a text of criticism. Nevertheless, his discourse is obviously shaped as a brilliant literary one, ruled by artistic principles. Symptomatically this discourse radicalizes its idea (the independence of art) insomuch that ideas and literature are presented as enemies.

But is it really so? This is the last question I would like to examine. From what I have said one can conclude that literature only *deforms* ideas, obscures them with formal (particularly logical) distortions, deafens them with irrelevant informational noise. In that case, the only thing that intellectual history has to do with literature would be cleaning ideas of their literary pollution: subjecting literary texts to ‘historical criticism’, in the same way that a historian filters his or her sources in order to extract from them some reliable factual information. According to this point of view, an intellectual historian is interested in literary texts but not for long; his or her task is to work them out and then to forget them. But this view is not exact, for literature has the privilege to display ideas in their becoming, their emergence from ‘impure’ cultural elements, and this process of idea-building cannot be indifferent to intellectual history. Literature puts ideas in relation to their authors and users, intentionally staging their interaction; such phenomena are close to those explored by the sociological branch of intellectual history. Literature does not present them statistically but individually, as personal acts and utterances of ‘character-ideologists’. Finally, literature offers to an intellectual historian some privileged examples of radicalized ideas, proper to semantic and historical analysis but at the same time related to the structure of specific social fields. So, literature should not be considered as an indifferent or even alien material to intellectual history but rather as a condominium of literary and historical studies. The cooperation of literary scholars and intellectual historians will be all the more productive the better they will be aware of its theoretical conditions.

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