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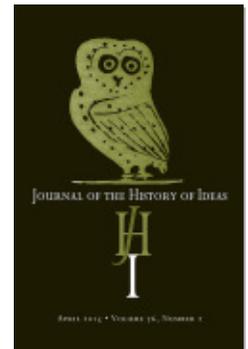
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## Reconsidering Literary Autonomy: From an Individual towards a Relational Paradigm

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*Reconsidering Literary Autonomy:  
From an Individual towards a Relational Paradigm*

Aukje Van Rooden

THE QUESTION OF AUTONOMY

Among all the sirens and alarm bells that accompany twenty-first century economic, ecological, and cultural crises, the death knell of literary culture keeps ringing steadily. For many years now, literary historians and theorists have been proclaiming the decline or imminent death of literature and literary culture.<sup>1</sup> According to them, literature is not dying a natural death and its knell is therefore more of a warning than an announcement. The cause of literature's declining role within present-day society, they argue, is directly or indirectly related to its "autonomy" ("self-regulation"). Although the idea of literary autonomy has been constitutive of the development of literature as we know it today, the nature and scope of this autonomy has always been under debate.<sup>2</sup> One of the central questions occupying these debates is whether or not autonomy is an inalienable aspect of modern literature. This article claims that the debate between so-called "autonomists" and "anti-autonomists" has been, and still is, based on a distorted

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<sup>1</sup> See: Alvin Kernan, *The Death of Literature* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992); Richard A. Posner, *Public Intellectuals: A Study of Decline* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2002); William Marx, *L'Adieu à la littérature. Histoire d'une dévalorisation, XVIIIe-XXe siècles* (Paris: Minuit, 2005); Tzvetan Todorov, *La littérature en péril* (Paris: Flammarion, 2007); Antoine Compagnon, *Littérature, pour quoi faire?* (Paris: Collège de France/Fayard, 2007).

<sup>2</sup> Most recently by Peter Kivy, "What Really Happened in the Eighteenth Century: The 'Modern System' Re-examined (Again)," *British Journal of Aesthetics* 52 (2012): 61–74.

historical picture of the notion of “autonomy.” It will be argued that this notion emerged within the eighteenth-century paradigm that one might call “individual” that has according to the general history of ideas gradually transformed into a paradigm that one might call “relational.” In the *literary* history of ideas, however, this shift has not been conceptualized, a result of which is the emergence of a theoretical impasse after the end of Romanticism. The present debate between autonomists and anti-autonomists is, so it is argued, an indication of this theoretical impasse.

Before comprehending the notion of autonomy within the successive individual and relational paradigms, let us first give a rough sketch of the present-day debate between autonomists and anti-autonomists. The anti-autonomists, firstly, argue that although, two centuries ago, the claim of literature’s autonomy from state, science, and church was the necessary pedestal for its emancipation and development, this pedestal gradually turned into a millstone around the neck of today’s literary writers. A very explicit form of this argument is to be found in William Marx’s *L’Adieu à la littérature. Histoire d’une dévalorisation, XVIIIe–XXe siècles* (2005). Marx’s thesis, indebted to Bourdieu’s *Distinction* (1979) and even more so to Sartre’s *What is Literature?* (1947), is relatively simple: “between the eighteenth and twentieth centuries, European literature underwent a radical transformation. Its form, idea, function and mission were all overturned in three subsequent phases: expansion, autonomy and devaluation.”—a history of growing illness according to Marx.<sup>3</sup> In accordance with the metaphor he uses for the disease, Marx argues that literature’s death is inevitable because it already bears the germ of its disease from birth. The fatal germ is what he calls literature’s “autonomy,” which is “the same power that inflated the bubble and pierced it.”<sup>4</sup> Marx does not claim, however, that literature’s death is inevitable. It rather implies that this imminent death can only be prevented or overcome by means of a *radical change in direction*; “A return to zero,” as he calls it, “from which a new cycle of transformation can emanate.”<sup>5</sup> According to Marx, this new cycle will only emanate when literature’s autonomy is renounced. A similar call to shake off the legacy of literary autonomy can be found in the largely Anglophone New Historicist and cultural materialist discourse, which presents the idea of literary autonomy as a Romantic illusion to be shattered in order to reveal literature as an active part of historical reality. The general assumption underlying these anti-autonomist claims is that literature can regain its

<sup>3</sup> William Marx, *L’Adieu à la littérature*, 12. Translations are mine.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 61.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 181.

social relevance when it tightens the bonds with society that it once severed in order to emancipate it, that is, when it abandons its autonomy.

This view is strongly opposed by theorists who claim that literature's autonomy is not so much the pedestal once needed to erect modern literature, but nothing less than its *spine*. According to them, this autonomy is the inalienable essence of our modern idea of literature. Having abandoned the idea of literary autonomy once and for all, autonomists claim, it will have become impossible to reclaim a literary sphere from those forces that had undermined literature's position in society. According to them, it is not the recognition of this autonomy, but precisely its *renunciation* that would therefore lead to literature's certain death. This is why autonomists try to adjust the eighteenth-century notion of literary autonomy to the present situation. In most cases this adjustment boils down to a conceptual refinement. Noël Carroll, for instance, suggests we should conceive of literary autonomy as a gradual scale, varying from "mild" to more "radical" modes of autonomy.<sup>6</sup> Furthermore, recent studies of Tony Bennett, Gregory Jusdanis, and Andrew Goldstone propose to distinguish between several *forms* of autonomy, most basically between a social and an aesthetic one, which should not be confused,<sup>7</sup> while Jonathan Loesberg argues for a more refined re-interpretation of the original eighteenth-century notion.<sup>8</sup>

The idea of literary autonomy is thus just as vigorously defended as it is under attack. Because the idea of autonomy is central to the conception of modern literature, contemporary debate between autonomists and anti-autonomists about what literature is or should be seems to have reached an impasse, a point where all possible positions are crystallized and fundamental debate has degenerated into an idle tug-of-war between autonomist and anti-autonomist positions. Although there is much to be gained from a meticulous conceptual unraveling of the notion of literary autonomy and its varying meanings (aestheticism, the literary field's independence of economic value, disinterestedness of the aesthetic judgment, the literary work's

<sup>6</sup> Noël Carroll, "At the Crossroads of Ethics and Aesthetics," *Philosophy and Literature* 34 (2010): 248–59.

<sup>7</sup> Tony Bennett, "Sociology, Aesthetics, Expertise," *New Literary History* 41 (2010): 251–76; Gregory Jusdanis, "Two Cheers for Aesthetic Autonomy," *Cultural Critique* 61 (2005): 22–54; and Gregory Jusdanis, *Fictions Agonistes: In Defence of Literature* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2010); Andrew Goldstone, *Fictions of Autonomy. From Wilde to De Man* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

<sup>8</sup> Jonathan Loesberg, *A Return to Aesthetics. Autonomy, Indifference, and Postmodernism* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005). For other contributions of literary autonomy's advocates, see also Richard Landsdown, *The Autonomy of Literature* (Houndsmills, U.K.: Macmillan, 2001); and Charles Altieri, "Why Modernist Claims for Autonomy Matter," *Journal of Modern Literature* 3 (2009): 1–21.

self-regulating qualities, the author's freedom from external constraints, to name just a few), the reason for the impasse of present-day literary debate is, in my view, more fundamental and less easily resolved. The fact that both the skeptics of literary autonomy and its defenders argue *in defense* of literature, and have done so for the past two centuries, is of importance. Moreover, the urgency to do so on both sides seems again to be a deep-rooted conviction of the social relevance of literature, as has already been the case for centuries. When and why, then, have both sides lost their common ground?

This article attempts to answer these questions by providing not only a conceptual but also an historical analysis of the notion of literary autonomy. It will argue that the present tug-of-war over literary autonomy is the result of a theoretical impasse that arose after Romanticism—the native soil of modern literature. Since the decline of the Romantic paradigm, a shared meta-narrative about literature and its role within society has been lacking. I will suggest that the Romantic paradigm can best be indicated as the *individual* paradigm—referring to the analytical category of the *in-dividuum*, the undivided—wherein autonomist and anti-autonomist arguments are entangled and combined. I will claim that, instead of a new paradigm, a *dualistic* poetic framework has emerged, a highly ambiguous framework that is strained by internal contradiction. It is this dualistic theoretical framework that *opposes* autonomists and anti-autonomists. The intention of this article is neither to defend nor to attack the notion of literary autonomy. Rather, it makes a plea for a more refined historical understanding of this notion and, as a consequence, re-evaluation or *re-gauging* of this notion within a new theoretical paradigm, a paradigm that I will call *relational*. Although the conceptualization of this relational paradigm, to which this article would give the initial impetus, is proposed as a succession to the individual paradigm, it implies not so much a completely new view on literature, but is first and foremost an attempt to re-conceptualize the basic assumptions underlying the individual paradigm.

### THE INDIVIDUAL PARADIGM

The Romantic period proves to be an inexhaustible subject for scholars. The rich and multifaceted spirit of the Romantics, the tempestuous dissemination of their works over Europe and the infiltration of their ideas into the veins of modern society persuaded theorists to elucidate increasingly different aspects of this paradigm. By and large, literary scholars agree upon

the most crucial of these aspects: for the Romantics, literature is first and foremost a matter of the expression of feelings and emotions, that is, the spontaneous and therefore pure and authentic eruption of the internal emotional life of the artist. As a consequence, the specific view on literature instigated by Romanticism is often called *expressive* as is, for instance, suggested by M. H. Abrams in his influential *The Mirror and the Lamp: Romantic Theory and the Critical Tradition*.<sup>9</sup> Although in due course, some have contested or refined Abrams' expressivist model of Romanticism,<sup>10</sup> it still is a landmark work. Accordingly, and apart from a few exceptions, works about Romanticism therefore all have a cover image illustrating some rich internal emotional life: a blushing young woman or a tableau of untamed nature. In the same vein, Romanticism is generally contrasted with the highly rationalistic approach dominant in the seventeenth century and described by means of key values such as imagination, creativity, and sensitivity.

In a more theoretical sense, this reception resulted in the fairly dominant view that Romanticism instigated a poetics of inwardness and of personality. In order to illustrate the first aspect, we can refer to Abrams' reading of Wordsworth. According to Abrams, Wordsworth, with his description of poetry as "the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings," provided the most concise formulation of Romantic poetics: "The metaphor 'overflow,' like the equivalent terms in the definitions of Wordsworth's contemporaries . . . faces the opposite direction of 'imitation' and indicates that the source of the poem is no longer the external world, but the poet himself. Elements, which once externalized, become the subject matter of the poem are, expressly, the poet's 'feelings.'" <sup>11</sup> Compared to earlier poetics, the Romantic paradigm would thus mean a turn inward, the opening not of the external world, but of and to the internal world of the poet. Because this internal world is inhabited by the poet's personal feelings, it

<sup>9</sup> M. H. Abrams, *The Mirror and the Lamp: Romantic Theory and the Critical Tradition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1953).

<sup>10</sup> Partly in contrast to Abrams' thesis, some critics have emphasized the continuities between Enlightenment and Romanticism, eg. Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe and Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Literary Absolute: The Theory of Literature in German Romanticism* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1988); Marshall Brown, "Romanticism and Enlightenment," in *The Cambridge Companion to British Romanticism*, ed. Stuart Curran (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993); and Marshall Brown, *The Cambridge History of Literary Criticism: Volume V: Romanticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000); and Charles LeBlanc et al., *La forme poétique du monde. Anthologie du romantisme allemand* (Paris: José Corti, 2003).

<sup>11</sup> M. H. Abrams, "Theories of (Western) Poetry," *The New Princeton Encyclopaedia of Poetry and Poetics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993): 639–49, here 643.

would not only be internal, but also personal, that is unique, private, unrepeatable, and untranslatable. From Romanticism onwards, it is claimed, literature—or more generally art—is no longer conceived as a matter of the collective, but as a matter principally bound to the uniqueness of the artist, its matchless genius, the intangible *je ne sais quoi* of the literary work.

All this is undoubtedly true, but the framing of Romantic poetics as a poetics of expression, inwardness, and personality also involves the risk of concealing a more fundamental notion of Romanticism that precisely forms the *basis* of these respective notions: that of the un-divided, or, in other words, of the *individual*. This concealment, I would like to claim, is one of the main reasons for the future misconception of the notion of autonomy. The notion of the individual reveals that the autonomy that forms the basis of Romantic aesthetics is not that of personal selfhood but implies a claim of undivided wholeness. In unpacking what from now on I will call the individual paradigm, I will focus solely on early German Romanticism, as it has provided the theoretical basis for European Romanticism as a *paradigmatic* view on the individuality of art, the subject, and society. As indicated by Martha Woodmansee in her marvelous *The Author, Art, and the Market* (1996), the first to use the notion of aesthetic autonomy in this sense was Karl Philipp Moritz. The introduction of this notion in Moritz's essay *Toward a Unification of All the Fine Arts and Letters under the Concept of Self-Sufficiency* (1785) marked, according to Woodmansee, "a dramatic shift in the theory of art."<sup>12</sup> The explanation of this dramatic shift is two-fold. On the one hand it is but a continuation of a shift in the theory of art that had started a few decades earlier with the efforts of eighteenth-century aesthetics—especially Baumgarten's—to legitimize itself as an independent philosophical discipline concerned with subjective aesthetic response, as opposed to the traditional concern of poetics, i.e. the creation of artworks. On the other hand, Moritz's claim of literature's autonomy was inspired by the unwished-for effects of the instrumentalism implied in the largely Horatian conception of the fine arts. In this instrumentalist theory, the essence of the fine arts was looked for in their ability to please and move the audience. According to Moritz, the explosive growth of literacy and the related emergence of a literary *market* in eighteenth-century Germany had gradually turned the aesthetic principle of pleasure into a license to cater to popular taste with easy forms of distraction for no other reasons than personal profit.

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<sup>12</sup> Martha Woodmansee, *The Author, Art, and the Market. Rereading the History of Aesthetics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 12.

It was with this two-fold motivation that Moritz developed his concept of “self-sufficiency,” i.e. autonomy. In contemplating the beautiful object, Moritz states, “I roll the purpose back into the object itself: I regard it as something that finds completion not in me but *in itself* and thus constitutes a *whole in itself* that gives me pleasure *for its own sake*. . . . Thus the beautiful object yields a higher and more *disinterested pleasure* than the merely useful object.”<sup>13</sup> The work of art is thus not considered as a means to yield a certain effect, but as a product that is intrinsically different from all other human activities in the sense that it can yield a higher, not to say the highest, form of pleasure, that is the pleasure felt by desiring a completely self-sufficient perfectly harmonious whole. It is this theory of art that is further developed in Kant’s *Critique of Judgement* (1790) and Schiller’s *Aesthetic Letters* and finds its most ardent adherents in early Romantics like the Schlegel brothers.

Schiller’s letters *On the Aesthetic Education of Man* (1794–95) reveal more clearly than Moritz’s work the socio-political dimension of this eighteenth-century shift to aesthetic autonomy. Drawing on Moritz’s critique of the instrumentalist view of art as a means to please the public, and inspired by Kant’s more philosophical underpinning of this critique in *Critique of Judgment*, Schiller situates this aesthetics within a broader project of social criticism. For Schiller, this aesthetics is first and foremost a way of dealing with the fragmentation and mechanization that resulted from the modern division of labor. “Man,” Schiller observes, “grew to be only a fragment; with the monotonous noise of the wheel he drives everlastingly in his ears, he never develops the harmony of his being.”<sup>14</sup> This fragmentation not only alienated man from himself, but also obstructed any kind of emancipatory political project. Although the collective self-government claimed by the revolutionaries of the French Revolution was widely considered among the German intellectuals as the most perfect of goals to be achieved by modern man, the disintegration of both the subject and society doomed such a project to failure. According to Schiller, the wholeness that was bound to get lost within industrialized and rationalized society should first be restored by means of poetry: “With the isolation and fragmentation of our mental faculties, necessitated by the expansion of knowledge and the

<sup>13</sup> Karl Philipp Moritz, *Versuch einer Vereinigung aller schönen Künste und Wissenschaften unter dem Begriff des in sich selbst Vollendeten*, in: *Schriften zur Ästhetik und Politik*. Cited from Martha Woodmansee, *The Author, Art, and the Market*, 12. Italics are mine.

<sup>14</sup> Friedrich Schiller, *On the Aesthetic Education of Man* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004), 40.

division of labor, it is poetry almost alone that reunites the separate faculties of the soul . . . that so to speak restores the *whole person* in us.”<sup>15</sup> Not the work of labor, nor, at first, political revolution, but the artistic work is the way for mankind to fully realize itself.

It is precisely this intricate connection of individuality and society—or, better still, of society *within* the notion of individuality—that is pushed into the background by the focus on what is now generally taken as the essence of the Romantic paradigm: expressiveness, inwardness, and personality. Within the individual paradigm, the concept of autonomy launched by Moritz operates on the integrated levels of the aesthetic work, the artist and the audience or society. As we can deduce from the above-cited passage, the essence of Moritz’s claim of autonomy lies in the fact that the work of art does not have its purpose outside of itself but within the inner harmony between the parts and the whole. This is, however, not to say that it is hermetically isolated from the outside world, as the dominant present-day reception of autonomist literature has it. In the individual paradigm, the often employed notion of the “microcosm” to describe the poetic work does not so much stress its being independent and isolated from the world, but rather its being un-divided, one, and therefore a small reflection of the being-undivided of the world as such. Writing, as Goethe had it, is “the reproduction of the world around me by means of the internal work which takes hold of, combines, creates anew, kneads everything and puts it down again in its own form, manner.”<sup>16</sup> This is also the key of the idea of the “progressive universal poetry,” of poetry becoming increasingly more universal by establishing an increasingly harmonious bond between the parts and the whole.<sup>17</sup>

As far as the poet is concerned, the reception of Romanticism as an “expressive” paradigm rightly claims that the autonomous artwork, instead of the product of a craftsman, has to be conceived of as the imprint of the individual soul of the poet. Replacing the conception of the writer as a craftsman by that of the genius, Romantic aesthetic theory stressed the moment of inimitable inspiration. In this respect, the early German Romantics are not only indebted to Moritz’s work, but also to Kant, who considered the judgment of taste as truly autonomous because it is freed of all prejudices, knowledge, and interests and therefore based on nothing other

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, Letter to Jacobi, August 21, 1774. Cited from Martha Woodmansee, *The Author, Art, and the Market*, 54.

<sup>17</sup> Friedrich Schlegel, *Philosophical Fragments*, trans. Peter Firchow (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991), Athenaeum Fragment 116.

than the subject's sensuous apprehension. A judgment determined on grounds *other* than the faculties of the judging subject himself, Kant argues, "would be grounded in heteronomy and would not, as befits a judgment of taste, be free and grounded in autonomy."<sup>18</sup> Like Kant, the German Romantics stress that a subject is poetic insofar as its acts are free and spontaneous. Hence, in terms of the *Athenaeum Fragments*, "the real vital power of inner beauty and perfection is temperament."<sup>19</sup>

But here again, the expressionist interpretation gave rise to a huge misunderstanding. In contradistinction to an expressionist interpretation, this temperament or vital power within the individual paradigm is far from purely personal. The expression of the Romantic poet's personal emotions is not so much an expression of the unique singularity of the individual poet, as many scholars of Romantic literature would have it, but of the creative faculty common to all individuals. This is why Schiller cautions the poet that "even in poems of which it is said that love, friendship etc., itself guided the poet's brush, he had to begin by becoming a stranger to himself, *by disentangling the object of his enthusiasm from his own individuality*."<sup>20</sup> It is thus universal Man, or rather what Seigel calls "universal selfhood"<sup>21</sup> that is at stake in the individual paradigm, rather than the purely subjective self. Although the German Romantics' aesthetics is indebted to Moritz's and Kant's writings on the nature of the aesthetic judgment, the fact that the Romantics choose mostly to avoid the notion of autonomy in their own writing proves, in my view, that they took the original aim of the eighteenth-century aesthetics a step further: the step, namely, to re-unite art and society, the singular and the universal within the idea of the undivided. Within the individual paradigm, the poetic individual is thus conceived as the basis of, and even the condition for, society being possible, because it is what society should be, according to the Romantics; in-dividual in the strict sense: undivided, one.

As far as autonomy is a relevant notion for understanding late eighteenth-century individual paradigm, it seems to have, on a poetic level, nothing of the problematic nature that has been attributed to Romanticism in writings like that of William Marx: a turn inward, a hermetic isolation

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<sup>18</sup> Immanuel Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgement*, paragraph 58 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 224.

<sup>19</sup> Friedrich Schlegel, *Philosophical Fragments*, Athenaeum Fragment 415.

<sup>20</sup> Friedrich Schiller, "Über Bürgers Gedichte." Cited from Martha Woodmansee, *The Author, Art, and the Market*, 115. My emphasis.

<sup>21</sup> Jerrold Seigel, *The Idea of the Self: Thought and Experience in Western Europe Since the Seventeenth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

of the text, a withdrawal from society, politics, and ethics. How then can it be explained that the Romantic view on literature has been increasingly interpreted as a plea for a deliberate retreat to the proverbial ivory tower? As I mentioned earlier, the remarkable development of the notion of literary autonomy may indeed partly be explained on a conceptual level, as does Jusdanis,<sup>22</sup> as an unjust or too easy conflation of the assumption of social with aesthetic autonomy. Another part may be explained, as we will see in the next paragraph, by the way in which the English and French Romantics have interpreted their German predecessors. I will claim, however, that the *underlying* reason for both this conflation and this re-interpretation has to be sought in the theoretical impasse that emerged after the decline of the individual paradigm and has led to a persisting dualistic approach to literature.

## TWO MODERNISMS, OR THE THEORETICAL IMPASSE

During the late eighteenth century, the atmosphere seemed filled with ideas and intuitions that could be found, in somewhat amended versions, among a variety of authors and critics. Although Schelling and the Schlegels, Hölderlin, and Novalis would certainly not agree in detail, they could agree on what they conceived of as the essence or basis of poetry or literature. After the decline of the individual paradigm, it is precisely this essence or basis that is under debate. What had functioned as a newly conquered, yet remarkably stable, common ground, became the object of incessant criticism. One could say that there were two main reasons why the individual paradigm as laid down by early German Romanticism lost its persuasive power during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Both concern fundamental changes in intellectual history, inside and outside of Germany.

The first reason is a general shift in the view of the human *subject*, wherein the idea, and subsequently also the ideal, of the subject as a self-determining and self-sufficient entity gradually gave way to a number of theories that conceive the subject as determined by external factors. At the end of the twentieth century, one could say, the presumed un-divided harmonious subject has become a torn, conflict-ridden, and highly unstable “dividual.” To give a very brief overview, one could say that the idea or ideal of the self-sufficient subject was first refined by Romanticism, Hegelianism, and Marxism and later criticized by Freud and Nietzsche. Despite

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<sup>22</sup> Gregory Jusdanis, “Two Cheers for Aesthetic Autonomy.”

their criticism on the Enlightenment ideal of the subject, in the end, though, the latter theories were but another affirmation of the subject's self-sufficiency, as Charles Taylor rightly observes, although now turned "into the idea that human nature is not simply a given, but is to be made over."<sup>23</sup> Nevertheless, these critical refinements opened up subjectivity, at least theoretically, to an almost limitless degree of control and the unbridled optimism of late nineteenth-century started to give way, during the twentieth century, to theories that lose hope for an ultimate triumph of the autonomous subject. As is elaborately discussed in key inquiries of modern selfhood, during the late nineteenth and twentieth century, subject-criticism becomes a dominant issue in the West, especially in the wake of Marx, Freud, and Nietzsche—the three so-called "masters of suspicion."<sup>24</sup> From existentialism, to structuralism and post-structuralism, feminism and deconstructivism—all stress the fundamental determination of the subject by, respectively, existential conditions, socio-cultural structures, power structures, sexual differences or other hierarchical differences.

A second, and to some extent related, reason why the individual paradigm came under attack is a shift, as from the beginning of the nineteenth century, in the conception of the *truth-value* of literature. One might call this shift, for lack of a better word, the hermeneutic turn of literature. Up to and partly including Romanticism, poetic debates revolved around the question what truth would have to be transmitted and by what means. The disconnection of literature and truth was instigated by the above-mentioned emphasis on the in-dividuality of the poetic that challenged a mimetic and referential understanding of poetry. "What the work reveals has to be read in it," Taylor summarizes this new hermeneutic stance.<sup>25</sup> In other words: the meaning of the Romantic poetic work could no longer be deduced by pointing to a referent external to the work, and poetic "truth" became, as Schleiermacher argues, a matter of *interpretation* rather than revelation. In this case, too, the one and undivided gave way for something more contingent, plural and unstable. What had been the basis of the individual paradigm was therefore largely undermined: the idea that the individuality of

<sup>23</sup> Charles Taylor, *Hegel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975), 561.

<sup>24</sup> See e.g. Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, *Le sujet de la philosophie* (Paris: Flammarion, 1979); Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of Modern Identity* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1989); Donald E. Hall, *Subjectivity* (New York: Routledge, 2004); Jerrold Seigel, *The Idea of the Self*; and Alberto Toscano, *The Theatre of Production: Philosophy and Individuation from Kant to Deleuze* (Palgrave: Macmillan, 2006).

<sup>25</sup> Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 420.

the poetic was a reflection or pre-figuration of the individuality of society. The original scene of modern literature was broken.

The notion of the “original scene” is Jacques Rancière’s. In his “The Aesthetic Revolution and its Outcomes,” he identifies this original scene more specifically with Schiller’s *Aesthetic Letters*.<sup>26</sup> The great merit of Rancière’s text is that he locates the *possibility* of the rupture of the individual paradigm already within the constitutive structure of this original scene. This is particularly insightful because it explains the dualistic framework that emerged after the decline of the individual paradigm. The constitutive structure of the Romantic paradigm is, as said, the assumption that the individuality of the poetic is a pre-figuration of the individuality of society, or, in Schiller’s words, that art is capable “of bearing the whole edifice of the art of the beautiful and of the still more difficult art of living.”<sup>27</sup> Again, as we have seen, art is immediately bound to society. The bond between the two, as well as their rupture, Rancière argues, lies in the simple conjunction of the word “and”: “In a sense, the whole problem lies in a very small preposition. Schiller says that the aesthetic experience will bear the edifice of the art of the beautiful *and* the art of living. . . . The aesthetic experience is effective inasmuch as it is the experience of this *and*” (Rancière’s emphasis).<sup>28</sup> The conjunction of art and life is indeed only as evident and effective as the Romantics present it as being when one assumes that the construction of both edifices are the *same*, that it is but one aesthetic-societal edifice because society as a whole is erected on the same principle as the poetic work and the regular citizen cast in the same mold as the poet. This is why the paradigm of the in-dividual is a *paradigm*—including not only aesthetics, but also an anthropology, sociology, and politics. The “aesthetic revolution” that Rancière discerns in German Romanticism is, as the subtitle of his text suggests, one of the “emplotment” (i.e. *mise en intrigue*, entanglement) of autonomy and heteronomy. As Rancière explains: “autonomy can be stressed over life, or life over autonomy—and these lines of interpretation can be opposed, or they can intersect.”<sup>29</sup> Because, as we saw, the individual paradigm tried to overcome the opposition between autonomy and heteronomy—most clearly by avoiding these terms—Rancière’s use of these terms is somewhat misleading. Nevertheless, he is right in highlighting the

<sup>26</sup> Jacques Rancière, “The Aesthetic Revolution and its Outcomes. Emplotments of Autonomy and Heteronomy,” *New Left Review* 14 (2002): 133–51, here 135.

<sup>27</sup> Friedrich Schiller, *On the Aesthetic Education of Man*, cited in Jacques Rancière, “The Aesthetic Revolution and its Outcomes,” 133.

<sup>28</sup> Jacques Rancière, “The Aesthetic Revolution and its Outcomes,” 134.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 137.

fundamental interrelation of the “autonomous” and “heteronomous,” i.e. of the beautiful and the useful, of individuality and society, of art and politics, that characterized e.g. Schiller’s *On the Aesthetic Education of Man*. Insofar as autonomy grounds art, it does so *only*, as Rancière has it, “to the extent that it connects it to the hope of changing life.”<sup>30</sup>

As soon as the common theoretical basis of this interrelation is broken, the whole edifice collapses. One could say that this is exactly what happened as a result of the problematization of the individual paradigm. The two sides held together by the Romantic aesthetic “and” became radically disjointed. Looking back upon history—and this is the hypothesis defended in this article—one may conclude that the coping strategy during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries was not to glue the two parts together, but to disjoin them even more radically. As we will see, a remarkable but necessary strategic way of decoupling them was to locate the individual paradigm’s heritage, which had formed the basis of their unity, on one side of the newly formed dividing line. In other words: instead of instigating a paradigm shift, the individual paradigm was regarded as being *only one side of the whole story*, as a one-sided view that demanded supplementation. And the lesson drawn from nineteenth- and twentieth-century shifts in intellectual history was, in a sense, that there was indeed more to the story of literature. Attention was paid, for instance, to the psychological effects on readers, the socio-economic structure of the literary field, the author’s biography, class struggle etc. It could be said that the problematization of the individual paradigm led, in a certain sense, to a growing awareness of what we are inclined to call, since the existentialist philosophies, the *situatedness* of the subject and his or her cultural products, that is, of their *embeddedness* in a historical era, in personal or collective exigencies.

In order to understand this remarkable development, it is important to realize that this idea of “situatedness” was already part and parcel of the individual paradigm. However, the early nineteenth-century mindset was such that this idea of situatedness could only arise in an indirect way, that is, *via the idea of heteronomy*, or indeed, as is rightly observed by Rancière, via a complex mutual entanglement of autonomy and heteronomy. This is to say that the nineteenth- and twentieth-century ideas of situated or embedded literature would imply a thorough reformulation of the Romantic “and,” but, by contrast, it was precisely the dividing line implicated by this “and” that determined the new status quo.<sup>31</sup> Whereas, as we saw, the

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 134.

<sup>31</sup> A quite similar thesis can be found in Alberto Toscano, *The Theatre of Production*.

individual paradigm aimed at a fundamental conjunction of art and life, the disjunction of the “and” sustaining the individual paradigm led to a relapse into their former oppositional structure. Whereas Romantic literature, in the individual paradigm, functioned as the common basis or shared blueprint of the mutually constitutive edifice of both literature and (the rest of) society because of its self-regulating nature, it is because of this same self-regulating nature that it was now reduced to a concept of autonomy *opposed* to that of heteronomy.

As a matter of course, critique on literary autonomy boiled down to an affirmation of elements that were considered “heteronomous”: the instrumental, the pleasant, the interested. And vice versa, a defense of literary autonomy boiled down to a renouncement of these heteronomous elements. Consequently, the dynamic proper to nineteenth- and twentieth-century literary debate, not only in Germany but also, and more clearly so, in France and England, is an *oscillation* between the two poles of this opposition and is the result of the theoretical impasse that arose after the decline of the individual paradigm—a theoretical impasse, moreover, that gave way to a full exploration of ideological struggles in which arguments over autonomy were implicated. In nineteenth-century France, for instance, those directly or indirectly inspired by German Romanticism, like Cousin and Gautier, faced those inspired by Saint-Simon (1760–1825), like Proudhon and Augier. Like the French Romantics, the Saint-Simonians believed that literature could play a key role in the realization of a harmoniously organized and truly equal society. It is nevertheless in polemical debate with each other that the positions of the French Romantics and the Saint-Simonianists became antagonistic. At the core of this antagonism lay the idea of instrumentalization. Drilled as they were with the eighteenth-century aesthetic conception of the instrumentalist as the heteronomous, enslaving force threatening the self-governance of the aesthetic, French Romantics declared war against all that smacks of instrumentalization. In order to let there be no mistake about the fact that art would never obey heterogeneous forces they coined it *l’art pour l’art*. Although, as Cassange rightly states, this slogan “had all that was needed to be misunderstood,” it became the main target of the Saint-Simonians who were as keen on instrumentalism as the Romantics were allergic to it—but for reasons that were not unrelated.<sup>32</sup> Like the French Romantics, in the end they wished society to be a seamless integration of its parts, an integration moreover that would be more than

<sup>32</sup> Albert Cassange, *La Théorie de l’art pour l’art en France chez les derniers romantiques et les premiers réalistes* (Seysssel: Champ Vallon, 1997 [1906]), 51. Translations are mine.

just the sum of these parts. Framed in the paradigm of instrumentalist progress, the Saint-Simonians believed the idea of art for art's sake opposed that. According to them, "the artist's task is to cultivate the sentiments needed for the development of mankind."<sup>33</sup> The polemical opposition to the French Romantics, however, blurred the fact that they shared most of their premises. Blind as they were to this shared goal, both camps only aggravated their polemical twist about the means to get there.

Also in Anglophone debates, the heritage of the individual paradigm ended up on one side of the dualist opposition. According to Jonathan Loesberg it is Coleridge who has played a pivotal role in the way in which this paradigm was conceived. Although Coleridge himself emphasized his indebtedness to the tradition of Kant and the early German Romantics, he gave a rather significant twist to this tradition. Coleridge took the notion of "organic unity" closely related to the idea of the undivided and divided it into two different types of organicism: an internal and an external one. Whereas, according to Coleridge, the *internal* organic unity refers to the Romantic idea of the undivided, the *external* unity is the atomized and mechanized civil society of the German Romantics that was under attack within this Romantic idea. But, although the individual paradigm indeed opposed itself to this atomized form of society, a differentiation between an internal and an external form of unity is diametrically opposed to the individual paradigm, if not to say to the very idea of an organic unity. Within the individual paradigm, organicism implies nothing but the *integration* of the internal and the external to one undivided organism. "Coleridge's claim of two forms of organization, external mechanism and internal and integral organicism, is," as is maintained by Loesberg, therefore "in terms of his German idealist sources, simply incoherent."<sup>34</sup> Nevertheless, it is this very idea of a dissociated internal coherence that has been taken by Coleridge as the core of Romantic aesthetics—an interpretation that lies at the basis of the widespread conception of the artwork as an isolated, self-referential unity that is for instance defended by the New Critics.<sup>35</sup>

<sup>33</sup> Albert Cassange, *La Théorie de l'art pour l'art*, 74.

<sup>34</sup> Jonathan Loesberg, *A Return to Aesthetics*, 25.

<sup>35</sup> For a more elaborate analysis of Coleridge's influence on New Criticism, see eg. Cleanth Brooks, "Implications of an Organic Theory of Poetry." For a more extensive analysis of Coleridge's relation to Kant and German Romanticism, see the chapter "Organic Form: From New Criticism to Coleridge and Kant," in Loesberg's *A Return to Aesthetics*. Loesberg is not the only one emphasizing the remarkable reception of German Romanticism by Coleridge. For an overview of studies that have investigated Coleridge's reception of German Romanticism, see Loesberg, *A Return to Aesthetics*, 241 n. 9.

Again, it is Rancière who has given one of the most tersely formulated analyses of these polemical oppositions. Rancière approaches nineteenth- and twentieth-century literary debate through “the shortcomings of the notion of Modernity.”<sup>36</sup> The confusion evoked by the notion of modernity lies in the fact that it presents itself in *two different forms*, forms that both stem from the “and” proper to the individual paradigm’s original conjunction. Both forms of modernity, Rancière maintains, “rely on the contradiction constitutive of the aesthetic regime of the arts, which [made] art into an autonomous form of life and thereby [set] down, at one and the same time, the autonomy of art and its identification with a moment in life’s process of self-formation.”<sup>37</sup> (What Rancière indicated as the “aesthetic revolution” is here referred to as the “aesthetic regime.”) In other words: what is generally cast under the presumably homogeneous notion of “modernity” is actually a schizophrenic reality that is instigated by the double basis of early German Romanticism. The notion of modernity is the patch that conceals the fundamental abyss between two forms of modernity.

I propose to call these two forms of modernity “autonomism” and “anti-autonomism.” The problem of conceptualizing modernity is thus that it reverts to a theoretical ground that is intrinsically contradictory. The two forms try to do away with this contradiction by highlighting one side only. The anti-autonomist form—called “modernatism” by Rancière—tends to isolate the social character of the arts. If Schiller’s letters on the aesthetic education of mankind indeed formulate the basis of modern aesthetics, one could say that the anti-autonomist strand focuses primarily on the latter part, that is, on the education of mankind. In other words: this form of modernity identifies art with a realization of human destiny, whether this is moral, capitalist, socialist, communist or other. This view can be found not only in early nineteenth-century French Saint-Simonianism, but also in Russian Futurism or Sartrean Existentialism.

The autonomist form of modernity—simply called “modernity” by Rancière—instead focuses primarily on the *aesthetic form* of this education. This is the modernity of the so-called pure form or style that one can find in all kinds of anti-realist and avant-garde movements propagating some form of *l’art pour l’art*. Contrary to the first form of modernity, these movements tend to isolate the exceptional nature of the artistic medium. By

<sup>36</sup> As one of the paragraph’s titles has it. Jacques Rancière, “The Distribution of the Sensible,” *The Politics of Aesthetics* (New York: Continuum, 2004).

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 26.

reducing both forms to the same denominator of modernity, Rancière of course wants to stress that the two forms *together* make up aesthetic modernity, like two sides of the same picture. The example of Russian Futurism, which, in addition to being a revolutionary movement, also aimed at a radical renewal of the literary form, illustrates this two-sidedness of modernity. In stressing this two-sidedness, however, Rancière did not explain *why* nineteenth- and twentieth-century dynamics resulted in the simultaneous isolation of these two sides. As I have tried to show, in nineteenth- and twentieth-century debates, these dynamics do not so much characterize the internal dynamics of particular literary movements like Futurism, as first and foremost the dynamics *between* literary movements that emerged after the decline of the individual paradigm. It is only in polemical debate with disciples of Saint-Simon, whose popularity blossomed with the increasing prosperity of French bourgeois culture, that French Romantics like Victor Cousin and Théophile Gautier insisted on the principle of *l'art pour l'art*. As it is in polemical debate with Surrealism that Sartre developed his ideas of literary commitment, as it is in reaction to popular art and kitsch that Adorno stepped into the breach for artistic autonomy, and as it is in reaction to historicist approaches that the New Critics defended the self-referential text.

In these polemical debates, both camps derive their persuasive force, even their *raison d'être*, from their entrenched opposition. This polemical opposition, however, blurs the fact that both camps share the most basic of premises, which is the very same premise that formed the original scene of modern literature: all camps agree that literature could and should serve a better world and that the writer should have an eminent role in realization of this goal.<sup>38</sup> The real difference between e.g. Saint-Simonianism and French Romanticism is, consequently, not that between art for the sake of art or art for the sake of society, but lies in a disagreement concerning the extent to which (*in casu*: bourgeois) society could fulfill this potential. These debates were therefore not so much *poetic* debates, but ideological debates revolving around the question of the ideal society. As a result, after the decline of the individual paradigm, literary debates did not so much result in a new poetic paradigm, but kept on oscillating within the framework set by the German Romantics. What is more, poetic arguments were a rather unreflective iteration of their arguments, but this time not with an eye to an ultimate synthesis, but to a continuous opposition.

Although Rancière is right in arguing that the intrinsic contradictory

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<sup>38</sup> See: Daniel Oster, "Préface," in Cassange, *La Théorie de l'art pour l'art*, 19.

force of modern aesthetics needed some form of appeasement by forcibly separating two forms of modernity, I think he overlooks the fact that this appeasement was not the internally discordant one that he describes, at least in literary debates, but became quite stable because of a new *dualist* theoretical foundation. The theoretical basis of this dualism does not so much rely on the distinction between what Rancière calls “modernatism” and modernity, but on the less ideological and more practical one between the literary *text* and its *context*. A clear example of this theoretical basis can be found in the conceptual framework of M. H. Abrams’s *The Mirror and the Lamp*, which has been as influential as its view of Romanticism. In this study, Abrams aims to map the field of literary criticism and, in doing so, makes an influential case for the existence of four “co-ordinates of art criticism”<sup>39</sup> that could help to dissect the research object of literary criticism: the “work,” the “artist,” the “audience,” and the “universe,” that would demand respectively objective, expressive, pragmatic or mimetic literary theories. Upon closer consideration, Abrams’ analysis appears, however, to superimpose a dualistic model on this quadrilateral one. The result is that the conceptualizations of all four coordinates, as well as their interrelations, ultimately boil down to a prior conceptualization of the work in relation to its context. It is only at a later stage that the work’s context is specified as being chiefly related to the author (“artist”), the reader (“audience”), or to reality (“universe”). Whereas objective theories focus *solely* on the literary text, as Abrams states, attention is *also* paid in expressive, pragmatic, and mimetic theories to anti-autonomist aspects such as the cultural or autobiographical background of the author, the alleged effects of literary works on readers, or topical events in everyday reality. In other words: compared to the last three, which *do* pay attention to the “whole situation of art,” the objective theory is fundamentally different because it considers the literary work “in theoretical isolation” from these external factors.<sup>40</sup>

It is within this theoretical framework that the conceptualization of the notion of autonomy could take the remarkable turn it has taken, which is perhaps most apparent in the New Critics’ account of the autonomous artwork. Because it is located along the same dividing line, the distinction between the autonomist and anti-autonomist stance happens to coincide with the distinction between text-oriented and context-oriented approaches to literature. That is to say that “autonomy” is no longer regarded as the

<sup>39</sup> M. H. Abrams, *The Mirror and the Lamp*, 6.

<sup>40</sup> M. H. Abrams, “Theories of (Western) Poetry,” 639.

interrelated characterization of the subject, the aesthetic judgment and society as it was in the individual paradigm, but is reduced to, or even identified with, the sole aspect of the literary practice that can best be opposed to “heteronomy-focused” approaches: the isolated text. This reduction has been so radical that notions such as “autonomy” and “autonomism” are now automatically associated with a text-oriented approach to literature. The gap between text-oriented and context-oriented approaches to literature has, moreover, been reinforced and even widened by the poststructuralist and the “sociology of literature” movements. It is analyses in particular such as those inspired by Foucault’s analysis of power relations and by Bourdieu’s sociology that informed defeatist, anti-autonomist theses. Although these turns in literary studies were presented and experienced as an all too necessary turning away from the hermetically studied text towards the context, it is, in its affirmation of the gap between the two, actually a reinforcement of the autonomist approach to literature. Although somehow appeasing and conveniently arranged, the division between text-oriented approaches and context-oriented approaches remains the implicit source of all kinds of difficulties, especially when it comes to making sense of literature’s functioning within the world. As a matter of fact, most literary research is motivated by research questions that aim to overcome this gap between text and context.

## THE RELATIONAL PARADIGM

The most important challenge today is therefore to overcome the dualistic framework that has determined literary debate since the end of the individual paradigm of Romanticism and to re-gauge the notion of autonomy within a new conceptual paradigm, a paradigm that can replace the individual one and its essentially dualistic blueprint. In the remaining section of this article, I will briefly outline such a new paradigm, which I propose calling the “relational paradigm.” As stated, rather than proposing a completely different view of literature, it advances a reinterpretation of the aspiration that formed the inalienable foundation of modern aesthetics: i.e. the aspiration to overcome or entangle the opposition of autonomy and heteronomy, art and society. The relational paradigm is thus an attempt to re-gauge, from a contemporary perspective, what is and has always been at stake in modern literature.

Although its great merit is to regain the complexity and versatility of

the notion of literary autonomy, I believe that the scope of a historical-conceptual analysis like Rancière's, but also like that of Adorno, is limited. The reason is that they are still rooted within the nineteenth-century conceptual framework that opposes autonomy and heteronomy by emphasizing the "emplotment of autonomy *and* heteronomy"—in Rancière's case—and "art's *double* character as both autonomous *and* fait social" in Adorno's.<sup>41</sup> A newly formulated paradigm should not take as a starting point the opposition between autonomy and heteronomy—an opposition that is inextricably bound to the eighteenth-century mindset from which it emerged—but should start from the underlying aspiration of modern aesthetics to overcome this opposition. I am certainly not the first to propose that we conceive of modern literature as relational. One could say that anti-autonomist movements like Dickie's institutionalism or Bourdieu's art sociology, as well as the movements of New Historicism or, broader, Cultural Studies, already marked something like a "relational turn."<sup>42</sup> In all cases, attention is paid to socio-cultural, political or historical constructions that are taken as fundamentally determinative of the production, reception, and meaning of the literary work.

In a way, all these insights boil down to an increasing emphasis on what Seigel, in his study on *The Idea of the Self*, calls the "relational dimension" of selfhood, i.e. the perspective on selfhood in which "our selves are what our relations with society and with others shape or allow us to be."<sup>43</sup> The relational paradigm as proposed in this article, however, differs from the above-mentioned views. Instead of conceiving the relational on the socio-cultural or institutional level, it proposes to understand it on the *ontological* level. Whereas socio-cultural or institutional approaches ultimately imply a form of contextualism and in doing so subscribe to the problematic dualist framework that opposes autonomism and anti-autonomism, the ontological conception of the relational makes the more radical claim that co-existence is the transcendental condition of all beings—including literature. This perspective results from a conceptual thread prefigured, as is also illustrated by Toscano, in post-Kantian philosophy and is truly carried out in the works of, for example, Simondon and Deleuze.<sup>44</sup>

<sup>41</sup> Theodor Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 98), 5. A similar critique of Rancière's analysis can be found in Tony Bennett, "Sociology, Aesthetics, Expertise," 264.

<sup>42</sup> See George Dickie, *Art and the Aesthetic: An Institutional Analysis* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1974); Pierre Bourdieu, *La Distinction. Critique sociale du jugement* (Paris: Minuit, 1979).

<sup>43</sup> Jerrold Seigel, *The Idea of the Self*, 5.

<sup>44</sup> Alberto Toscano, *The Theatre of Production*, 2–3.

One of the first to introduce this ontological relational perspective into the domain of aesthetics is Nicolas Bourriaud. In his *Relational Aesthetics* (2002), Bourriaud—at that time curator of the Palais de Tokyo—tried to conceptualize the art practice of participatory art in the 1980s and 1990s. How to conceive, for instance, of the work *Turkish Jokes* (1994) of Jens Haaning, consisting of the transmission of Turkish-spoken jokes through speakers located at one of Copenhagen’s public squares, thereby temporarily creating a small society of insiders? According to Bourriaud, the essence of this kind of participatory artwork is not to be sought anymore in the signature of the artist or the closed form of the artwork itself, but in its “formation,” that is, in the dynamic relation between the more or less contingent elements of the material, the participants, the space, the time, and so forth.<sup>45</sup> The ontological status of these relational works is by definition precarious. These works disappear as easily as they emerge and are, according to Bourriaud, for this very reason exemplary expressions of our present mode of existence, in which identities have become fluid as a result of globalization and multiculturalism and are dependent on multiple and often temporary networks.

Bourriaud’s relational aesthetics is restricted to a very specific form of art—participatory art—and is received, often critically, as a specific view on the political dimension of modern art. I believe however that the scope of this relational aesthetics is potentially much broader, because it puts us on the track of a different, i.e. ontological, interpretation of the relational. In order to sketch, in broad outlines, what such a relational re-understanding of literature could be, I shall refer to the work of Jean-Luc Nancy. In his work, Nancy sets himself the task of understanding several facets of our community—globalization, arts, technology, religion—via a reconsideration of their ontological conditions. In doing so, he reverts not to the idealism of Kant, but to Heidegger’s existential ontology, reinterpreted from a post-structuralist perspective. Instead of conceiving literature’s functioning within the world as a conjunction of literature *and* the world, Nancy’s work invites us to conceive literature as a form of being-*in*-the-world. The first step, according to Nancy, in considering literature as a form of being in the world rather than as opposed to it, is a fundamental change in our conception of the *world* itself. Whereas eighteenth- and nineteenth-century thinkers like Kant were inclined to speak of “the world” as if it were some homogenous entity, according to Nancy it is a mistake to think in terms of

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<sup>45</sup> Nicolas Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics* (Dijon: Les Presses du Réel, 2002).

a world, of *the* world as distinct from an unworldly realm or, for that matter, of possible worlds.<sup>46</sup> The present-day interpretation of literary autonomy as a retreat from the world is still supported by this eighteenth- and nineteenth-century view of the world. According to Nancy, however, neither the world, nor being are fixed entities. Because being is always a relational mode of being in the world, everything is at any moment a specific form of *co-existence* that is each and every time both singular and plural.<sup>47</sup> Being is always co-being, one could say.

But how to understand this co-being in the case of literature? Here, Nancy reverts to a seemingly traditional poetic idea. Literary works, Nancy argues, are relational because they are *symbolic*. “The proper value of symbolism,” he argues, “is in making a *symbol*, that is, in making a connection or a joining, and in giving a face to this liaison by making an *image*.”<sup>48</sup> Whereas in the aesthetic paradigm opened up by Kant, the symbolic was conceived of as being precisely the worldly representation of some *otherworldly* realm (i.e. the beautiful as a symbol of morality), Nancy interprets the symbolic in the original sense of *sumbolon*, combining or joining, thereby referring to the ancient Greek practice of matching the two pieces of a broken piece of pottery to identify friends. Symbolization, according to Nancy, is thus not a form of representing, but a form of relating, as are the jokes transmitted on the Copenhagen square. Insofar as an artwork is an image, i.e. imaging something, it is first and foremost the imaging of this relating itself. Nancy continues: “Insofar as the relation is imagined [*se présente*], and because the relation as such is nothing other than its own representation, the symbolic is what is real in such a relation . . . the relation is, and is nothing other than, what is real in the representation—its effectiveness and its efficacy.”<sup>49</sup> In other words: in a similar way as the Romantic category of the individual defined the poetic as an exemplary manifestation of the assumed in-dividuality of nineteenth-century subject and society, the category of the relational can define the poetic as an exemplary manifestation of the assumed relationality of our being in society.<sup>50</sup>

<sup>46</sup> See Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Sense of the World* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998); and *The Creation of the World or Globalization* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2007).

<sup>47</sup> Jean-Luc Nancy, *Being Singular Plural* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000), 3.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 57–58.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>50</sup> This relationality resonates with a variety of contemporary reflections on the “common” as the desired middle way between nineteenth-century ideals of the autonomous, individual, and twentieth-century fusions of the individual in political or economic collectives, for instance contemporary theories of the social (see Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Common Wealth* [Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press, 2009]); and Bruno Latour,

Insofar as this being can be considered not as individual, but as being-with, literature is this mode of being stripped bare to its essence. It is, both in writing and in reading, an exemplary expression of the temporary weaving of networks of relations, not only between words and ideas or between writer and reader, but also between the written, the lived, and the memorized, and between groups and generations of readers. As the above-cited Goethe already had it, literature “takes hold of, combines, creates anew, kneads everything and puts it down again in its own form, manner”—a form and matter that are nothing but the form and matter of our being in the world itself. This creation of relations is not only temporary but also singular, each and very time anew. Not only is every poem or novel unique but, moreover, a poem read in a volume is a different one than the same poem read on a wall in the city. It is the extrapolation of this existentialist ontological conception of our being in the world to the field of literary theory that will help overcome the unfruitful dualistic approach of modern literature as a more or less autonomous text referring to a surrounding context. It is in this vein that we have to re-gauge the idea of literary autonomy. Understood from within the relational paradigm, the exemplary image of literary autonomy would not be the germ-like microcosm of the individual paradigm, or the ivory tower of the dualist approach or its more activist version, the watchtower. It would be the admittedly less easy to grasp, but all the more flexible image of co-creation.

This is not to say that sociological, historical or institutional<sup>51</sup> analyses will suffice. From the viewpoint of the relational paradigm, it is impossible and even ridiculous to think of literature as something that does *not* imply a social reality, a context, or a certain historic and local embeddedness. The underlying claim of the relational approach, however, is more fundamental than that. It implies that literature’s context is singular in each instance. After all, the relation the literary work performs is tied anew with every act of writing and reading. A literary work comes into being with each new act

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*Reassembling the Social* [Oxford/New York: Oxford University Press, 2005]); contemporary theories on (postcolonial) language and literature (see Édouard Glissant, *Poetics of Relation* [University of Michigan Press, 1997]; and Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht, *Atmosphere, Mood, Stimmung* [Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2012]); contemporary theories of agency (see eg.: Catriona Mackenzie and Natalie Stoljar (eds.), *Relational Autonomy: Feminist Perspectives on Autonomy, Agency and the Social Self* [New York: Oxford University Press, 2000]); and in neurobiology (see Francisco Varela, Evan Thompson, and Eleanor Rosch, *The Embodied Mind* [Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1991]), as well as contemporary aesthetic theories like Bourriaud’s *Relational Aesthetics*.

<sup>51</sup> In the sense Alex Neil and Aaron Ridley have it in their “Relational Theories of Art: The History of an Error,” *British Journal of Aesthetics* 52 (2012): 141–51.

of writing and reading and, moreover, it only comes into being *as literature* when it represents the relating itself more than what is being related. In this sense, every work of art, including a literary one, should be called “participatory,” since it demands a receiver in order to exist, not as an artifact, but *as art*. This is to say that works are not intrinsically literary, but *become* literary in interaction. One of the most powerful aspects of this paradigm of relationality is that it reveals that it is not only the writer, but also the (professional) reader and society that *let literature be*, each time anew. Of course, there are socio-cultural, institutional, and historical factors that make it more likely that a work will be received as a work of literature. The radical implication of the relational paradigm, however, is that these factors are never imperative. Co-creation of literature’s autonomy reveals the extreme fragility of art’s relationality: as soon as one decides *not* to co-create literature, it ceases to work that way. This is why, for instance, Ayatollah Khomeini could refuse to read *The Satanic Verses* as literature. However, it also increases our own responsibility as (professional) readers. Literature’s death knell is thus only to be feared when we ourselves have decided to turn our back on it.

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