



Reply to Thomas Vaessens

Antwoord aan Thomas Vaessens

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Thomas Vaessens lists a number of issues that, in his view, have rightly been placed back on the literary studies agenda: questions about the impact, justification, authority and the commitment of literature. He acknowledges that we do address these crucial questions. However, he claims that, in doing so, we fall prey to a specific poetics: a poetics of literary autonomy. Vaessens argues that the whole idea of literary autonomy is just an outdated 'belief' or an 'ideology'.

Yet by simply using the terms 'literature' and 'literary', Vaessens adopts a discourse which already takes this autonomy for granted. Moreover, by using the term 'literature', he reproduces this discourse and 'un partage du sensible' (Rancière),¹ in which literature is a phenomenon with a specific function. Admittedly, it is by no means easy to pinpoint what this function or role exactly entails but, whichever way you look at it, it certainly does not simply coincide with the role that science, morality, news, entertainment, etc. play in our society.

This has nothing to do with an 'essentialist' view on literature, but all the more with the acknowledgement of a contingent historical constellation, which is characteristic for modernity. This constellation gave rise to an episteme, or regime, in which literature and art in general have been allocated a role of their own.

Many scholars, most recently by Arnold Heumakers in his study *De esthetische revolutie* [The Aesthetic Revolution] (2015),² have recorded the emergence of this episteme. The subtitle of this book is telling: *How the Enlightenment and the Romantic Movement Invented Art*. Indeed: art is a modern invention. Just like football (also a typically modern invention) it is a game you may or may not play. And if you play it, you believe in it. But you cannot change the rules without simultaneously changing the whole nature of the game.

It is beyond dispute that 'the rules of art' (Bourdieu)³ are endlessly more complex than those of football. The reason for this is that aesthetic autonomy is closely interwoven with the rise of the modern subject and thus with our self-image and our self-experience, in short: our being in the world. Vaessens does not seem to be aware of this connection. He seems to believe that autonomy implies that there is no relation at all with the extra-literary context, that the

¹ Jacques Rancière, *Le Partage du sensible. Esthétique et politique* (Paris : La Fabrique, 2000).

² Arnold Heumakers, *De esthetische revolutie: Hoe Verlichting en Romantiek de kunst uitvonden* (Amsterdam: Boom, 2015).

³ Pierre Bourdieu, *The Rules of Art: Genesis and Structure of the Literary Field* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1996).

artwork is a self-enclosed reality of which the parts only internally refer to each other. It is not easy to envision something that meets such a description of autonomy, since a literary work unavoidably refers to reality. With language, referentiality is a given, however problematic this referentiality may be. Nothing can abolish the relationship between language and reality, not even the literary. Of course the literary may modulate this referentiality: it may simplify or complicate it, or even obstruct it. Indeed there are examples of abstruse literary experiments, which aim for this last strategy, but these examples are certainly not what we have in mind when we use the notion of literary autonomy.

Yet the fact that a literary work emphatically refers to the external reality does not make it heteronomous, as Vaessens seems to think. A heteronomous work also has autonomous features, provided it is literary. The difference between autonomous and heteronomous is non-existent. At most they are two modes of connecting to the extra-literary, proceeding from a certain literary singularity. We are interested in this relation, which could be called 'the commitment of autonomy' (which is different from the commitments of science, morality, journalism, etc.).

Therefore, literary discourse is different from non-literary discourse (otherwise it would not be perceived as literary). But at the same time it is connected to it. Derrida has thoroughly reflected on this curious phenomenon through the notion of *parergon*.⁴ It is this connectedness-in-dividedness that creates a possibility to cast a different look at the non-literary. We would not go as far as Aukje van Rooden does in this issue. She argues that this amounts to an ontological difference. But she certainly hints in a direction we sympathise with. 'Like in a dark mirror' is the suggestive metaphor Frank vande Veire⁵ uses to indicate the singular effect of the aesthetic. It seems to us an excellent way to phrase the relation between the literary and the non-literary.

Bibliography

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⁴ Jacques Derrida, *The Truth in Painting* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987).

⁵ Frank vande Veire, *Als in een donkere spiegel: de kunst in de moderne filosofie* (Amsterdam: SUN, 2002).