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L'Idée de littérature: de l'art pour l'art aux écritures d'intervention. Par ALEXANDRE GEFEN. (Les Essais.) Paris: Corti, 2021. 384 pp.

What is literature? This simple question has unleashed a torrent of the most compelling critical writing over the past two hundred years, as Alexandre Gefen documents in his erudite and timely book. Detailing the emergence at the end of the eighteenth century of the idea of literature as an autonomous form of aesthetic writing and its dizzyingly complex permutations, from 'art for art's sake' all the way to Bob Dylan's Nobel Prize, Gefen offers a tour de force of literary history and thought in comparative literature. Across six well-documented chapters, the book returns to the history of literature several times in order to approach it from different angles. This allows Gefen to do justice to each formulation of literature on its own terms while also allowing a dialogue with competing conceptions of writing. Each chapter focuses on one aspect of literature's 'extension' of its reach: history; geography; themes; genres and media; politics; and sociology and institutions. Gefen concludes by saying that the logical limit to this extension is when literature is conceived as a means and not as an end in itself. Gefen argues that the original idea of literature was that of an aesthetic form autonomous from all other human activity, independent, and almost aristocratic. Its destiny, he shows, is to become increasingly democratic, by which he means that what is considered as literature opens up onto broader publics, with the publishing world progressively more accessible to any potential writer. However, I would counter that positivistic discourses were formed in the nineteenth century by distinguishing themselves from literature just as much as literature formed itself as a counter-discourse (as Foucault famously showed in *Les Mots et les choses* (Paris: Gallimard, 1967)). Our ideas of what literature is and what it can do are formed in relation to and in contrast with the development of

history, politics, social science, the hard sciences, and more recently journalism. Literature has always, from the beginning, proceeded by the contradiction between a limitless expansion of what it could represent and the restrictions of its experimental form (Rancière, *La Parole muette: essai sur les contradictions de la littérature* (Paris: Hachette, 1999)). Gefen's new formulation sees the institutions of literature (publishers, academics, critics) expanding literature's reach even as the political winds have instituted a draconian censorship on 'disinformation', on unsanctioned speech — writing is available to all, as long as it remains safely confined to the realm of 'literature'. Similarly, Gefen shows that literary theory, or 'French theory', is now common throughout the social sciences, but the transformative potential of literature, what Gefen calls 'autonomy', has been cast aside in favour of a discourse of writing as a journey towards a predetermined, even marketable identity. Ultimately, the idea of literature is born again whenever a writer composes a sentence and again still whenever a reader encounters it.

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