**Anne Reverseau**

**L’Art pour l’art**

A French slogan launched in the 19th century, “L’Art pour art” is generally translated as “Art for art’s sake”. The slogan was intended to promote art as an object and practice without any political, moral or utilitarian function.

Although the idea of artistic or literary autonomy was not new at the beginning of the 19th Century, the slogan “L’Art pour l’art” gathered momentum with Théophile Gautier’s *Mademoiselle de Maupin* (*Mademoiselle de Maupin*). The preface he wrote for this novel in 1835 is a milestone in literary history well beyond France. In this well-known text, he vigorously argued for an art that would have no other function than Beauty : “Il n’y a de vraiment beau que ce qui ne peut servir à rien ; tout ce qui est utile est laid”(Nothing is truly beautiful unless it is useless: everything useful is ugly).This text, considered a manifesto of “L’Art pour l’art”, was a reaction against Victor Hugo and other advocates of an “art social” (social art). After 1848 and especially in the 1860s, the slogan reappeared because of several trials dealing with the impact of literature on social mores . Such cases were brought against Flaubert, Goncourt and Baudelaire who were accused of an offense against public [morals](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Morality" \o "Morality) and claimed, in turn, independence and autonomy of art*.* In this judiciary context, the slogan “*L’Art pour l’art”* glorified the writer’s freedom of expression. Throughout the second half of the 19th century, a debate went on between the inheritors of Romanticism on the one hand, who claimed that art had a social and political function (Georges Sand, for instance), and the *Parnasse* movement on the other (Leconte de Lisle and others), who sided for “L’Art pour l’art”. Impressionist painters and politically committed writers opposed the notion of art for art’s sake at the end of the 19th century. In the English field, Oscar Wilde played an important part in popularizing “aestheticism” or “Art for art’s sake”, with his preface to *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1891): “There is no such thing as a moral or an immoral book. Books are well written, or badly written. That is all”. From an historical point of view, “*L’Art pour l’art*” ends with the 19th century, but it will reappear in France during the interwar period through the notion of “poésie pure” (Henri Brémond and Paul Valéry) and later within the debates revolving around committed literature.

References and further reading

Paratextual material

### Full text of Théophile Gautier’s Mademoiselle de Maupin, in English: http://archive.org/stream/mademoiselledema00gaute/mademoiselledema00gaute\_djvu.txt

### A complete Baudelaire biography, with the details of the trial: http://www.poetryfoundation.org/bio/charles-baudelaire#poet