

---

# Attempts on the Image in Literature

---

SERGEY ZENKIN 

Free University (an independent institution, <https://freemoscow.university>), Russia.  
Email: [sergezenkine@hotmail.com](mailto:sergezenkine@hotmail.com)

Nineteenth-century European narrative literature repeatedly refers to the deliberate destruction (or intentions, attempts to destroy) of artificial images. The old artist in Honoré de Balzac's novella *The Unknown Masterpiece* burns his collection of art; the hero of Alexander Pushkin's poem *The Bronze Horseman* threatens the monument to the Emperor Peter the Great in St Petersburg; the inhabitants of a French village in Prosper Mérimée's novella *The Venus of Ille* re-melt the 'evil' antique statue found in the soil; the painter in Nikolai Gogol's novel *The Portrait* compulsively buys and destroys masterpieces of painting; another picture, in Emile Zola's novel *L'Œuvre*, is burned after the suicide of its author; the hero of Oscar Wilde's novel *The Picture of Dorian Gray* attempts to stab his own portrait, which is displaying his sins; in *The Adventure of the Six Napoleons*, a short story by Arthur Conan Doyle, six busts of the French emperor are broken, in turn first by a thief, and finally by a detective. Being destroyed or disappearing seems to be the recurrent destiny of intradiegetic images (material images included into a narrative text as its actors), and the attempts of their obliteration always constitute a highlighted, spectacular moment in the narrative, and not just an outward sign of someone's inner feelings; they are typically presented as a sacrifice of 'excessive' (magical, demonic) objects. In some cases, they are explained by a deviant behaviour of the character (madness, delinquency), but the literary text is organized in order to make the reader sympathize with the experiences of that 'iconoclast', and mentally reproduce his acts. An analysis of texts should disclose the mechanism of this self-identification and put the stories about the attempts on the image into the general framework of nineteenth-century visual and literary culture.

The question here will be not of real but of fictional iconoclasm in narrative texts, leaving aside drama, lyrical poetry, and literary essays. Such texts were produced in different countries from the beginning of the nineteenth century onwards (we will return to this point of chronology). In such texts (and later, also in movies), a curious phenomenon took place: visual images (paintings, sculptures, and others) became actors of the narrative plot, functioning as seducers, objects of desire, adversaries and so on. We propose to name them *intradiegetic images*. Their stories should

be analysed in connection with the general transformations of the image in the history of culture.

An intradiegetic image does not appear as an isolated incident but shapes the whole narrative, which is often titled with the image's name: *The Sandman* by E.T.A. Hoffmann (1817), *An Unknown Masterpiece* by Balzac (1831), *The Bronze Horseman* by Alexander Pushkin (1833), *The Venus of Ille* by Prosper Mérimée (1837), *The Portrait* by Nikolai Gogol (1835–1841), *L'Œuvre* by Émile Zola (1886), *The Picture of Dorian Gray* by Oscar Wilde (1890–1891), *The Worshipper of the Image* by Richard Le Gallienne (1899), *The Adventure of the Six Napoleons* by Arthur Conan Doyle (1904).<sup>4</sup> The visual image undergoes various adventures, sometimes including its destruction or an attempt to delete it; those adventures may be summarized under two great tendencies.

The first is *serialization*: an intradiegetic image does not act alone, it is almost always accompanied by other visual representations. So in Balzac's short story the main, 'unknown' painting, endlessly amended by its maniac author to the point that it becomes completely unreadable, appears only in the last scene but, during the story, other works of visual arts are created, shown, amended, admired, discussed and destroyed by the characters (artists). The place of iconoclastic violence varies in different versions of Balzac's text. In the final version, established after 1837, it is situated at the end of the story, when the mad genius Frenhofer, disillusioned with his hidden *chef-d'oeuvre*, 'dies in the night after having burnt all his pictures' (Balzac 1979: 438; here and henceforth, translations are mine); but in the first version, published in 1831, there was no holocaust of pictures at the end. Instead, an iconoclastic attempt was produced on another work of art, the first to be mentioned in the narrative, a fictional painting, failing to become a victim of iconoclasm. The main story is set in 1612, and two centuries later, during the Napoleonic wars, a captain of artillery saves the painting from imminent destruction, after his soldiers had already painted a moustache on the face of Saint Mary of Egypt represented on the canvas 'and, in their drunken blasphemy, were going to use her as a target for shooting' (Balzac 1979: 1412). Literary iconoclasm itself is not serial, but it takes place at the beginning or at the end of the narrative series of images.

In Gogol's tale, the young painter, Chartkov, discovers a magical portrait among trivial paintings in a St Petersburg market store. That portrait brings him glory, money, but also malediction and madness, and leads to iconoclastic acts. Becoming a renowned painter, Chartkov compulsively collects other artists' masterpieces, only in order to lacerate them to pieces. The destruction of visual images follows a logic of serial substitutions: instead of the main 'ill-sacred' image, which was initially surrounded by profane visual objects and which remains finally undamaged, many beautiful works of art are sacrificed, and this iconoclastic series can never end, unless with the hero's death.

In Wilde's novel, the main painting – a portrait of Dorian Gray, functioning by its magical transformations as his moral mirror – appears against the background of various images: theatrical performances, art book covers, and works of art. Dorian Gray gathers those works for many years, trying to distract himself from

the fatal portrait; when he finally tries to destroy it, stabbing the canvas, he does not deteriorate the painting but he himself dies, and his death marks the end of the series.

The iconoclastic acts, in these cases, are motivated by various moral and psychological reasons: the artist's creative crisis (Balzac), the insanity of the painter, pathologically jealous of other people's successes (Gogol), the bad conscience of the villain, to whom his terribly changing portrait reproaches for his bad deeds (Wilde). What is common, however, is the structure of seriality into which the visual image is included and which leads to iconoclasm. The deployment of the series follows the development of the narrative, introducing movement to motionless images.

The series is relatively short in Emile Zola's novel: there are only three paintings by the same artist, the last of which, conceived as his masterpiece, drives him mad and leads him to suicide; after his death, a friend of his destroys the unfinished canvas. Contrasting with this tragic story is a euphoric experience of destruction of images, conditioned by the serial plot logic of Conan Doyle's short story: Sherlock Holmes investigates the strange behaviour of a thief who steals and breaks serial plaster busts of the late French emperor. The psychological explanations turn out to be inept (could anyone really hate Napoleon enough to pursue his banal effigies?). The solution of the riddle lies in seriality: one of the six copies of the bust contains a precious pearl hidden in it earlier by the thief, who is now trying to locate the proper copy. The latter is not found by him (he has been arrested), but by the detective Holmes, who solemnly, in front of witnesses, breaks into pieces the last bust (of course, not stolen, but purchased by him from its rightful owner) and retrieves the treasure. The reader's pleasure is caused not only by the explanation of those criminal actions, but also by the depletion of the series, which ends up with an act of happy iconoclasm.

The second major tendency of intradiegetic images which leads to iconoclastic destruction is their *expansion* beyond their own limits. A visual representation acquires additional dimensions, a flat image becomes three-dimensional, and a spatial image becomes mobile and evolves in time. This dramatic transformation of the virtual image into a sensitive material object may be independent of any fantasy. Balzac's 'unknown masterpiece' is a materially possible picture (despite the text's subtitle 'Fantastic story'), but at the same time an extraordinary visual object, for it accumulates many layers of paint, under which, as the result of the author's endless amendments, the female figure depicted on it almost completely disappears: the image becomes not profound but thick and opaque.

Sometimes it is not the whole image but a single feature that, through a specific optical effect, steps beyond its framework. In the large painting featured in Zola's novel, there is a strange central figure, which seems to 'break through the picture' by its brilliance (Zola 1886: 346). This energetic effect foreshadows the destructive influence of the canvas on its author and the subsequent mutual death for both.

The situation is inverted in Gogol's tale. The fatal portrait depicts a mysterious and terrible old man who comes alive at night, after the artist Chartkov has brought the portrait home from the market. But before the figure leaves the canvas (a common theme of romantic fiction), the whole image seems to expand onto its frame: in

the old framework, Chartkov discovers a hidden treasure, gold coins belonging to the devil that will give him wealth, but also bring a curse upon him, resulting in an iconoclastic mania.

The framework is one of the peripheral elements of an image, situated on its edge and separating it from the external reality. These elements, named after Immanuel Kant *parerga*, also appear in Wilde's novel: it mentions more than once a heavy frame of the portrait, as well as the artist's signature on it; it's only by his signature that the painter himself can identify his unrecognizably changed work, and this happens a minute before his being murdered. The aggressive image, displaying to bystanders its external paragon surroundings, incites to crime and to iconoclastic suicide.

The poet Anthony, the main character of Richard Le Gallienne's 'tragic fairy-tale', has purchased a kind of decadent idol: a plaster copy of 'The Unknown from the Seine', the supposedly posthumous mask of a drowned girl. This idol enslaves him, in the manner of a *belle dame sans merci*, and leads him to madness. It transgresses its limits: the mask seems to become a complete human figure, and finally becomes animated. Not daring to break it, Anthony vainly attempts to bury it. Once again, the expansion of the image precedes the challenge to destroy it: the act of iconoclasm is a revenge for the image's aggressive behaviour.

The heroine of Prosper Mérimée's fantastic story is a bronze statue of an ancient goddess, dug out of the ground in a French village (exceptionally, it is the only visual image in the text, there is no serialization). This wicked deity causes all kinds of disasters to the local residents, so they decide to melt down the pagan statue and transform it into a church bell in order to obliterate its power – but, so the story tells, 'some evil fate pursues the owners of this bronze. Since the bell rings over Ille, the vineyards have been frozen twice' (Mérimée 1967: 118). People have demolished the form of the visual image, but preserved its material substance, and, by the same token, its aggressive force which they wanted to redeem by their pious iconoclastic action. The expansion of image, initially manifested through its animation, persists after its destruction, by its evil magic spreading over the country.

Another example of an imperious and expansive image, and by coincidence another bronze statue, is the monument to the Russian emperor Peter the Great in St. Petersburg, which plays a central role in Pushkin's narrative poem. Not only does it become alive, steps off his pedestal and chases the visionary hero through the streets of the city; it expands its influence over the surrounding space – traces the visual perspective of the square and the bridge next to which it stands, directs the hero's glance and movements. The foolish iconoclastic gesture of the latter – he does not try to destroy the monument but addresses it with a menace – results from this spatial domination of the visual image (Zenkin, 2021).

Madness is a frequent motivation of iconoclasm in romantic and post-romantic prose. However, it should not be understood in a purely psychopathological sense, but in the structure of a literary plot, where an image invades the fictional world and thus provokes a violent reaction. One of the most phantasmagorically intense scenes of romantic iconoclasm is the hero's vision in Hoffmann's short story, where two

sinister mechanics violently tear apart the talking doll which they had fabricated. This visual image of a pretty young lady has acquired too much power over the world and over the main character – by her mobility, her ability to communicate – and, so as to restore proper order, it is to be destroyed. It is not the hero himself who does it, but (in his imagination) other people; and he will not survive the loss of his beloved mechanical image.

What can then be deduced, from this brief survey of literary plots, about the structure of the stories of Romantic and post-Romantic iconoclasm?

Among the fictional motivations explaining iconoclastic acts we hardly meet the three traditional reasons of iconoclasm in real life: (1) theological resistance to any visual representation made by human hand; (2) political or individual hostility to the represented persons; and (3) censorship of violent or erotic images (Freedberg 2017). There are very few cases of actual mutilation of images which could be read as an appropriative superscription upon them (Freedberg 2017: 75 et seq). In literary fictions, visual images are destroyed completely, and not for external but for internal reasons: they are too odd (Balzac, Zola); or dangerously ambivalent (Gogol, Le Gallienne); they tell a man the terrible truth about himself (Wilde); or they just serve as a simple storage for treasures (Conan Doyle). Even when Pushkin's character throws his challenge to the emperor's monument, he has in view not only the real, historical Peter the Great, but his bronze effigy dominating the space here and now. Even when a statue of the pagan goddess Venus is melted down at the end of Merimée's story, people do it less for properly religious purposes, than for fearing the evil deeds the statue has allegedly committed; they do not kill the goddess, but her very bronze image.

The logic according to which iconoclastic acts take place in literature is not a common logic of human behaviour, but a specific logic of literary narration. It requests the intradiegetic image to be included into a series, deploying itself with the development of the story and serving as its basis. It makes the visual image expansive, going beyond its own framework, invading the fictional world and provoking iconoclasm as a reaction. This dynamic stance of the visual image in literary texts indicates a new situation as to the relationship between the image and the word in nineteenth-century Western literature.

At that time, on the one hand, experiencing visual images as real objects and persons was definitively rejected (in the non-religious sphere, it was still acknowledged as justified in the early European period – van Eck 2015). Purely conventional, the visual image had become independent of its object and could thus acquire its proper destiny, its proper story. On the other hand, in the same period, modern literary discourse abounded with visual representations, conditioning 'realistic' or 'artistic' writing. Literary iconoclasm expressed this new tension between verbal and visual principles of culture.

A visual image profoundly embedded in a verbal text functions as a heterogeneous semiotic object, whose encoding (continuous and analogous) is opposed to the encoding of the text (discontinuous and digital). Projected onto the narrative plot, this semiotic difference makes the intradiegetic image absolutely different from

the other objects taking part in the action. In fantastic stories of the Romantic epoch, the animated visual image (for example, a portrait in Gogol's tale or a statue in Mérimée's) goes along with another typical narrative theme – the ghost; the image actually belongs to the not-quite-human, not quite real characters, like spectres. It does not need to be a pagan or accursed representation (like the statue of Venus in Mérimée), nor even to have any supernatural faculties (the hidden masterpiece in Balzac has none); nevertheless, its very nature as a visual image makes it mystical and often 'ill-sacred'.

In these circumstances, its destruction may be an act of purification (not always successful, as shown in Mérimée's story) or a sacrifice; and can be lived out as a happy event, liberating people from their secret inner tensions (as, for instance, in Conan Doyle's story). Its transformations, serialization and expansion shape a narrative framework in which its iconoclastic destruction derives from its heterogeneity. The iconoclastic gesture may be spectacularly and dramatically displayed (in Pushkin's or in Wilde's texts) or be just briefly noticed at the end of the story (in Balzac or Zola). In the latter case, the narrative absorbs visual images and their destruction is substituted by their oblivion: a strong mode of deletion by a weak one.

To conclude, Romantic literary iconoclasm bears witness to a new cultural configuration where the symbolic and iconic elements of nineteenth-century culture enter into a closer interaction than in earlier periods. Moving from real life into literary fiction, the iconoclastic acts alter their meaning: instead of external (religious or political) cultural conflicts, they express the internal dynamics of the works of art. Since the visual image has long served in European culture as a symbol of artistic representation, including in literature (*ut pictura poesis*), its destruction in these nineteenth-century narratives prefigures a subversion of the aesthetics of representation, undertaken by the avant-garde in the following twentieth century.

### Note

- a. Almost all these texts are well-known and exist in many editions – so I don't refer to a particular one, unless when quoting some of them (in most cases I only relate their plots). In numerous scholarly works on these texts, I did not find special reflections upon iconoclastic acts; for this reason, my critical bibliography may seem poor too, only limited to a few general studies.

### References

- Balzac H** (1979) *Études philosophiques. La Comédie humaine, X*. Paris: Gallimard (Bibliothèque de la Pléiade).
- Freedberg D** (2017) *Iconoclasia*. Buenos Aires: Sans Soleil Ediciones.
- Mérimée P** (1967) *Romans et nouvelles*, t. II. Paris: Classiques Garnier.
- Van Eck C** (2015) *Art, Agency and Living Presence*. Boston: De Gruyter.
- Zenkin S** (2021) Prostranstvo idola: Visual'nye struktury v 'Mednom vsadnike'. *Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie* 172, 130–162.
- Zola É** (1886), *L'Œuvre*. Paris: Charpentier.

### **About the Author**

**Sergey Zenkin** is a specialist in the theory of literature, particularly with regard to nineteenth- and twentieth-century French literature. He has conducted important research on intellectual history, particularly the history of twentieth-century theoretical ideas in the humanities. Recent publications include: *Cinq lectures de Roland Barthes* (in French; Paris, Classiques Garnier, 2017); *Theory of Literature: Problems and Results* (in Russian; Moscow, Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie, 2018) and *La Forme et l'énergie: L'esthétique du formalisme russe* (in French; Clermont-Ferrand, Presses Universitaires Blaise-Pascal, 2018).