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“*What Is
Literature?*”

and Other Essays

JEAN-PAUL SARTRE

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“What Is Literature?”

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Contents

Introduction by Steven Ungar 1

What Is Literature? 21

What Is Writing? 25

Why Write? 48

For Whom Does One Write? 70

Situation of the Writer in 1947 141

Writing for One's Age 239

Introducing Les Temps modernes 247

The Nationalization of Literature 269

Black Orpheus 289

Notes 333

A Note on the Texts 349

Index 351

Introduction

Introduction

Men make their own history, but they do not make it just as they please; they do not make it under circumstances chosen by themselves, but under circumstances directly encountered, given and transmitted from the past.

Marx, *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* (1852)

A WRITER as widely read as Sartre invariably suffers from a contempt bred by familiarity. Long after his death in April 1980, the reactions elicited by mention of his name range from adulation to dismissal, with many of the latter in the vein of what Sartre once described as the superiority of live dogs to dead lions. For a man who wanted above all to write for his time, dismissal is the harshest of condemnations: "It seems to be generally accepted that the Sartrean problematic has by now been essentially relegated to the past. Smiles are quick to surface whenever anyone is still interested in Sartre or still writes about him, as though the person were all but suspect of still being 'with' Sartre, of having stuck with him" (Denis Hollier, *The Politics of Prose: Essay on Sartre*, trans. Jeffrey Mehlman [Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986], p. 92). The quick smiles are a professional hazard, a result of the notoriety Sartre maintained by choice. His detractors—many of them the "live dogs" noted above—would do well to note Sartre's awareness of this notoriety and the strategic uses to which he puts it.

Instead of asking ironically whether the Sartrean problematic is passé or whether Sartre has faded as a key figure of postwar modernity, I want to cast my comments around the question of what it might mean to read Sartre today. In so doing, I want to echo the heightened sense of history and circumstance Sartre confers on the acts of writing and reading throughout the four texts in the present volume, versions of which appeared in early issues of *Les Temps*

modernes, the monthly Sartre started in 1945. The following pages are intended to trace the evolving concept of *littérature engagée* in the aftermath of World War II.* Chronology provides a context and a first order of specificity. Whenever possible, it serves to ground the issues of theory that Sartre's postwar writings on writing engage directly or by implication. The secondary literature on Sartre is overwhelming and I make no claims to do more than address selected issues.

We would be hunters of meaning, we would speak the truth about the world and about our own lives.

Sartre, "Merleau-Ponty" (1960)

March 1941: Jean-Paul Sartre returns to civilian life in Paris after eight months of captivity by the Germans. Almost immediately, he recruits students at the Lycée Pasteur and the Ecole Normale Supérieure for Socialisme et Liberté (Socialism and Freedom), a small cell of intellectual *résistants* including Simone de Beauvoir, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Jacques-Laurent Bost, and Jean Pouillon. The group holds grand visions. If—as Simone de Beauvoir puts it in *The Prime of Life*—the democracies win the war, the French left will need a new program. But if, on the other hand, the Axis nations defeat the Allies, it will be necessary to see that Germany loses the peace. Party politics intervene when the Communists, fearful of a potential rival in Sartre, spread rumors that he is a German agent. After a

* I have retained the original French in place of the expression "engaged literature" used by Bernard Frechtman. My alternative translation is "committed writing." This for two reasons: First, the transitive usage of the verb "commit" denotes the conscious assertion of value that the concept is intended to convey. Second, "writing" rather than "literature" because the program set forth in "What Is Literature?" involves practices and media—journalism, radio, film—beyond traditional conceptions. On the notion of commitment and/or *engagement*, see David L. Schalk, *The Spectrum of Political Engagement: Mounier, Benda, Nizan, Brasillach, Sartre* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979) and my discussion below of Theodor Adorno, "Commitment," *New Left Review* 87–88 (1974).

number of friends and contacts are arrested, Sartre feels personally responsible and disbands the group in October 1941.

Socialisme et Liberté allows Sartre to draft a constitution of some 120 articles mixing economics with a utopian vision freely adapted from the writings of Marx and Proudhon. Although none of the ten reputed copies of the constitution survives the war, accounts by group members suggest that it addresses concerns ranging from parliamentary representation to military service and the division between judicial and executive branches of government. The lost constitution provides evidence that Sartre's vision of a non-authoritarian socialism precedes the postwar period. It supports Fredric Jameson's view that Marxism coexists with Sartre's existentialism; it is not something he comes to afterward (*Marxism and Form* [Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1971], p. 207). Three years after *Nausea*, Sartre's early attempts to lay bare the structures of consciousness articulate with issues of collective action and social change.

In the wake of Socialisme et Liberté, Sartre's wartime activities are increasingly devoted to writing. When *Being and Nothingness* appears in 1943, he is writing for the theater and working with the Comité National des Ecrivains (National Committee of Writers), an underground group founded with the help of Communists who have either forgotten or repressed their accusations of two years earlier. By September 1944, an editorial committee of Raymond Aron, Michel Leiris, Albert Ollivier, and Jean Paulhan is created around the nucleus of Sartre, de Beauvoir, and Merleau-Ponty. Albert Camus and André Malraux—major figures of the Resistance underground—are invited to join, but turn down the invitation.*

* The 1987 Klaus Barbie trial is a reminder that full disclosure of the Occupation has yet to occur. Survivors of the period remain the objects of allegation and rumor. For a sense of the issues involved in such disclosure, see Pierre Assouline's *L'Epuración des intellectuels* (Brussels: Complexe, 1985) and Herbert Lottman's *The Purge: The Purification of French Collaborators after*

Temps modernes marks a changing of the literary guard even before its first issue appears. With the *Nouvelle Revue française* discredited because of Pierre Drieu La Rochelle's collaboration, Sartre and *TM* are prime candidates to assume the preeminence enjoyed by Gide and the *NRF* between the wars. By 1944, all indications are that at the age of seventy-five Gide is to be cast in a postwar role of gray eminence. The problem is that the role is not one of his personal choosing. Following the Liberation, ongoing and new rivalries place Sartre and *TM* in conflict with an older literary generation. The conflict goes beyond individual personalities to a change in the economy of the cultural review allying functions of production, distribution, and legitimation that usually compete with one another (Régis Debray, *Teachers, Writers, Celebrities: The Intellectuals of Modern France*, trans. David Macey [London: Verso, 1981], p. 67). Embodied respectively by writer, publisher, and critic, these functions converge in a successful marketing strategy when the *NRF* features works-in-progress it later reviews as books published by Gallimard. When the books compete for literary prizes funded by publishers, the result is a literary and economic hegemony Sartre emulates in *TM*'s program.

Initial reactions to *TM* are mixed. In *Esprit* (December 1945), Emmanuel Mounier calls it a "review-event" and notes the convergence of its vision with his own Personalism of the interwar period. Gide mixes caution with praise. Writing on *TM* in his short-lived weekly, *Terre des hommes*, he evokes the specter of Soviet art in the service of the Party.

World War II (New York: Morrow, 1986). The question of Sartre's wartime activities resurfaces in June 1985 when the Parisian daily *Libération* prints a statement by the late Vladimir Jankélévitch to the effect that Sartre's political activities after the war are an unhealthy compensation, "a remorse, a quest for the danger he did not want to run during the war" (quoted in Ronald Hayman, *Sartre: A Biography* [New York: Simon and Schuster, 1987], p. 189). My account of Sartre's wartime activities is based on Michel Contat and Michel Rybalka, *The Writings of Sartre*, trans. Richard C. McCleary (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1974). The recent biographies by Hayman and by Annie Cohen-Solal (*Sartre: A Life*, trans. Anna Cancogni [New York: Pantheon, 1987]) do little to substantiate Jankélévitch's purported claim.

A later issue of the weekly notes with deference that “although Sartre speaks of committing himself to our times, it is our times which are committed through him” (Anna Boschetti, *The Intellectual Enterprise: Sartre and “Les Temps Modernes,”* trans. Richard C. McCleary [Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 1988], p. 9). Predictably, the Communists see the new monthly as a symptom of bourgeois decadence. Jean Kanapa, an acquaintance from the Socialisme et Liberté days who joins the Communists, ranks the existentialists among the Party’s major foes, alongside proponents of Surrealism (“the Trotskyism of literary cafés”). When Gabriel Marcel describes him as an existentialist, Sartre replies that his philosophy is a philosophy of existence and that he doesn’t even know what Existentialism is!

October–November 1945: Just over a year after the Liberation, Sartre launches *TM* with “Introducing *Les Temps modernes*” and “The Nationalization of Literature,” two statements of purpose that outline an agenda based on the program of *littérature engagée* later developed in “What Is Literature?” and “Black Orpheus.” Taken as a set or unit with this common focus, all four texts extend questions of definition—what literature *is*—toward inquiry into what it *should* and *could* be. In each instance, urgency is a result of the historical immediacy from which the activity of writing derives. This sense of writing for one’s time expresses what Edward Said describes as Sartre’s missionary aim of upholding literature’s singular capacity to disclose and reveal the present: “Literature was about the world, readers were in the world; the question was not *whether* to be but *how* to be, and this was best answered by carefully analyzing language’s symbolic enactments of the various existential possibilities available to human beings” (“Opponents, Audiences, Constituencies and Community,” in Hal Foster, ed., *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture* [Post Townsend, Wash.: Bay Press, 1983], p. 139). The point here is that the disclosure promoted by writing and reading is intended as praxis: the action in and on history that Sartre is to expand into his theory of revolution.

Sartre draws immediate attention to the social function of writing when—in the first sentence of “Introducing *Les Temps modernes*”—he refers to the temptation of irresponsibility known by all writers of middle-class origin. In a capitalist society dominated by material value, Sartre openly addresses the issue of where the money to finance writing comes from. This might be nothing more than a jab at the low esteem in which writers—and critics, in particular—are held, were it not for the fact that *TM*’s first issue marks Sartre’s decision to abandon his teaching career in order to live from his writing. No longer a civil servant in the French educational system, Sartre is in a singular position. As a graduate of the *Ecole Normale Supérieure*, his ties with an intellectual elite are not fully broken by his resignation. Likewise, his role in the *Comité National des Ecrivains* puts him on working terms with the Communists. Finally, his ability to combine the prestige of literature and philosophy holds the promise of recognition by academics and specialists as well as by the general public. In 1945, Sartre embodies the writer-intellectual as an independent agent whose removal from state institutions and political parties allows him to function as critic or mediator as circumstance dictates.*

On a sour note, Sartre’s references to Flaubert and Proust are strident and abusive, as though he feels compelled to make negative examples of writers who represent views he may once have held but now condemns. When, in “Intro-

* While Sartre remains on the Gallimard payroll as author, reader, and special editor, *TM*’s ties with the publisher are broken after a run-in with Malraux results in eviction from the rue Sébastien-Bottin. Soon, the editorial board relocates at Editions Julliard, on the nearby rue de l’Université (Claude Francis and Fernande Gontier, *Simone de Beauvoir*, trans. Linda Nesselson [New York: St. Martin’s, 1987], p. 212). Gallimard’s offer to help finance *TM* is motivated in part by a desire to placate suspicions about his wartime activities. Unlike his rival publishers Bernard Grasset and Robert Denoël, Gallimard is never openly accused of collaboration despite the fact that he resumes control of his publishing interests in October 1940 and that the *NRF* under Drieu La Rochelle is a showcase of “new” Franco-German solidarity. After the war, the *NRF* does not reappear until 1954 when, with his monthly renamed the *Nouvelle Nouvelle Revue française*, Gallimard’s desire to break with the past is evident.

ducing *Les Temps modernes*," he writes that Flaubert and the Goncourts are to be held responsible for their silence following the 1871 Paris Commune, his virulence recalls the ongoing purge of Nazi collaborators: "The writer is *situated* in his time; every word he utters has reverberations. As does his silence." This misplaced use of *situation* is inexcusable and embarrassing. Concerning Proust, in particular, Sartre overlooks some of the very problems of subjectivity he soon explores in *Saint Genet*. In this instance, he inadvertently practices the very terrorist attitude he rejects in "The Nationalization of Literature."

"Introducing *Les Temps modernes*" also extends debate over the role of the writer as social critic in the wake of *The Treason of the Intellectuals*, Julien Benda's 1927 tract against the modern commitment to political passions. The resemblances between Benda and Sartre are striking. Both cast the writer in the role of social conscience, assert the primacy of moral concerns, and employ a rhetoric of accusation. Benda wants the writer-intellectual (*clerc*) to intervene in temporal affairs in the name of mankind: "An intellectual seems to me to betray his function by descending into the public arena only if he does so . . . to secure the triumph of a realist passion of class, race, or nation" (Benda, *La Trahison des clercs* [Paris: Grasset, 1975], p. 136). The decision to write is irreducibly historical; it constitutes an instance of a universal condition that the individual experiences in specific circumstances: "By taking part in the singularity of our era, we ultimately make contact with the eternal, and it is our task as writers to allow the eternal values implicit in such social or political debates to be perceived . . . We proclaim that man is an absolute. But he is such in his time, in his surroundings, on his parcel of earth. What is absolute, what a thousand years of history cannot destroy is *that* irreplaceable, incomparable decision which he makes at this moment concerning these circumstances ("Introducing *Les Temps modernes*," p. 254).

For Sartre, a clear sense of history is of strategic importance if he is to make commitment viable to the concerns of

traditional philosophers. His use of the terms "eternal" and "absolute" in the preceding passage is unusual and conciliatory; it suggests that the differences between Benda and Sartre are differences of emphasis rather than substance. At the same time, Sartre's position clearly echoes that taken by Marx in the passage from *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* quoted at the start of this essay. The polyvalent affinities with Benda and Marx point to Sartre's problems in establishing *littérature engagée* as a program grounded in a fully articulated philosophy of history. Only later does he accept this polyvalence as a condition rather than a consequence of his notion of commitment.

TM's literary program extends to all writings irrespective of genre. Yet Sartre confers a privileged status on the journalistic essay as the form of writing best suited to disclose the experience of freedom: "It strikes us, in fact, that journalism is one of the literary genres and that it can become one of the most important of them. The ability to grasp meanings instantly and intuitively, and a talent for regrouping them in order to offer the reader immediately comprehensible synthetic wholes, are the qualities most crucial to a reporter; they are the ones we ask of all our collaborators" ("Introducing *Les Temps modernes*," p. 266). The importance of reportage in *TM*'s program responds to the conditions of ceremony dominating French literature between the wars. "The Nationalization of Literature" describes how texts become pretexts for judgment. From the side of ceremony, each new book provides the opportunity to reassert its contribution to the interests of the Republic. The result is an empty literature of "national treasures."

"The Nationalization of Literature" also contains Sartre's views on literary terror, defined by Jean Paulhan in *The Flowers of Tarbes* (1941) as a fear of the potential of all language to betray the purity of thought prior to expression.* Paulhan ultimately assimilates the terrorist

* Paulhan's inclusion on *TM*'s editorial board reinforces Sartre's ties with Editions Gallimard. As director of the *NRF* between 1925 and 1940, Paulhan mediates between the founding group led by Gide and younger

attitude into a rhetoric of communication. For Sartre, however, terror turns literature into an alibi when it projects the meaning of a text into the future, thereby accommodating those who prefer to remain at a safe distance from the conflicts of the historical present. Sounding like a Jacques Derrida twenty years before the fact, Sartre concludes that we cannot be simultaneously inside and outside history. Concerning history, we are always (*toujours déjà!?*) *inside!*

"What Is Literature?" begins with a two-part definition of writing that opposes an instrumental prose to a poetic attitude more focused on the materiality of language. For the prose writer who *makes use* of words, language is a particular moment of action in the real world and almost an extension of the body ("a sixth finger, a third leg, in short, a pure function"). The prose writer is always looking toward the world beyond words while the poet considers them primarily as objects: "For the former, they are useful conventions, tools which gradually wear out and which one throws away when they are no longer serviceable; for the latter, they are natural things which sprout upon the earth like grass and trees" ("What Is Literature?" p. 29). For Sartre, prose and poetry are relations to language growing out of distinct attitudes and decisions. Both disclose the world, but in different ways: "For the word, which tears the writer of prose away from himself and throws him into the world, sends back to the poet his own image, like a mirror" ("What Is Literature?" p. 31). Of the two, only prose discloses the world with the intention of changing it. Only prose uses language to confer meaning on objects in the real world, thereby demonstrating that to speak is indeed to act.

Critics mistake the prose/poetry distinction as absolute when it clearly falls within a practice of writing relative to circumstance. The poetry rejected in "What Is Literature?"

contributors such as Malraux, Leiris, Sartre, and Raymond Queneau. After France falls to the Germans in June 1940, Paulhan refuses to direct the monthly under censorship. Over the next four years, he becomes a double agent who publically advocates literary publishing under the Vichy regime while he supports the underground Editions de Minuit and cofounds *Les Lettres françaises*.

is embodied by the Surrealists and by a pretension to political revolution that Sartre sees as overblown and dangerous: "They were the proclaimers of catastrophe in the time of the fat cows; in the time of the lean cows they have nothing more to say" ("What Is Literature?" p. 164). As with Flaubert and Proust, history refutes the Surrealists. In 1947, Sartre does not forget the lessons of the Occupation. If, as he argues, Surrealism is entering a period of withdrawal, it is one he is ready to advance . . . with a vengeance! Sartre's hostility is aimed at the Surrealists and at a relation to language he deems incompatible with *TM*'s ambitions. Thus Sartre displaces—rather than rejects—poetry because it does not transmit the clear and unambiguous meaning he requires for *TM*'s 1947 program. The poet's involvement with the materiality of language neglects the reader and the world. As a result, poetry does not attain the disclosure and praxis Sartre wants to promote.

"Black Orpheus," written as the preface to an anthology of works by African and West Indian poets, revises the program of *littérature engagée* in two significant ways. First, it allows for poetry to be reconsidered in the context of colonialism, thereby transposing its marginal status in "What Is Literature?" into a meaningful function tied to social change: "For once at least, the most authentic revolutionary plan and the purest poetry come from the same source" ("Black Orpheus," p. 330). Second, it allows Sartre to mediate on behalf of Senghor and the poets in order to address the white European readers for whom the anthology is intended. The conflict between colonial and native cultures converges on a practice of poetry resistant to the conventional usage imposed on the Africans by the French. The black African and Caribbean poets who appropriate the French language "received" under colonial rule deny the instrumentality of a dominant culture much as the Surrealists sought to deny conventions of representation and expression: "When the Negro declares in French that he rejects French culture, he accepts with one hand what he rejects with the other; he sets up the

enemy's thinking-apparatus in himself, like a crusher" (p. 301).

The refusal of prose imposes a revised function for poetry as a means of generating self-awareness and liberation within an alienating culture. *Négritude* poetry does not simply export the Surrealists' spirit of revolt. Whereas Breton and his followers want poetry to help liberate the unconscious in order to overcome alienation, the poetry in the Senghor anthology grows out of an oppression whose social and economic reality is lived on a daily basis. This context inverts the relationship between prose and poetry in "What Is Literature?" In "Black Orpheus," prose is denied and poetry asserted: "Strange and decisive turn: *race* is transmuted into *historicity*" (p. 324). When *Saint-Genet* appears in 1952, Sartre's rehabilitation of poetry is complete.

I recall, in fact, that in *littérature engagée*, *engagement* must in no way lead to a forgetting of *littérature*, and that our concern must be to serve literature by infusing it with new blood, even as we serve the collectivity by attempting to give it the literature it deserves.

Sartre, "Introducing *Les Temps modernes*" (1945)

Sartre's advocacy of journalism extends his postwar vision of the individual as both subject and agent of history. In this context, *TM*'s early program also supports the hybrid of academic disciplines known in France as the human sciences: "We would like our journal to contribute in a modest way to the elaboration of a synthetic anthropology. But it is not, we repeat, simply a question of effecting an advance in the domain of pure knowledge: the more distant goal we are aiming at is a *liberation*" ("Introducing *Les Temps modernes*, p. 261). The apparent eclipse of literature and philosophy by politics points to Sartre's growing involvement with practical knowledge over other ("purer") forms after World War