

The Freedom of Commitment: The Role of the Writer in Sartre's *What is Literature?*

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Abstract

The commitment of literature stirred up controversy in the face of European cataclysm of the post-war period. The significance of literature in political spheres fell under suspicion. It came to be looked at as a passive, impractical activity that could not express the horrors of W W II. Jean-Paul Sartre, the leading literary figure of existentialism in France, faced with such criticisms, decided to investigate the role of the writer and the reader, and endeavored to open a gateway for writers to participate in their societies actively. This study is concerned with the first three chapters of the monograph including "What is Writing?," "Why Does One Write?," and "For Whom Does One Write?" The present analysis does not address Sartre's Existential philosophy *per se*; however, it briefly examines the roots of Sartre's conception of literature in continental philosophy and the critical responses to his work from the perspectives of Alain Robbe-Grillet and Theodor W. Adorno. This paper endeavors to give a clear insight into Sartre's idea of commitment and the freedom of the writer, and what he introduced as "human right literature" as an antithesis to both Marxism and Capitalism.

Keywords

Sartre; Writer; Freedom; Historical Situation; Commitment.

1. Introduction

"Since critics condemned me in the name of literature without ever saying what they mean by that, the best answer to give them is to examine the art of writing without prejudice" (*What is Literature?* 23). Like most of his contemporary writers, Sartre was confronted with the question of the *aim* of literature in the social life of modern man. Throughout history, many philosophers have tried to find a purpose behind literature, but they have always encountered a

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considerable problem. The problem is that literature resists a particular universal recipe for all humanity, and it avoids any essentialization; in other words, “there is no ‘essence’ of literature whatsoever” (Eagleton 8). Literature, as a discipline, could not be merely a philosophical, historical, scientific, or any other discourse. In addition, many Marxist thinkers contend that literature is always bound to the historical situation and is understood within ideology and time. Literature is inevitably relative and historically bound. Therefore, it is an ideological discourse and impossible to be defined *independently*.

2. Commitment and Freedom: Contrary Definitions

In 1948, Sartre introduced a different approach to what literature should stand for. He began by looking into different literary works and found that if one had to essentialize literature, he would contradict the freedom of the writer, in the sense that the task of a writer would be predetermined by a set of standards, imposed on him from outside, either from academic establishments or political ideologies. Whereas for Sartre, the writer, as the creative force, has a *substantial* autonomy in what course of action to take as if literature is in-itself *anti-totalitarian*. As a result, setting a purpose for literature constraints the freedom of the writer and forces her/him to yield to dominant ideologies and practices. Sartre argues that the writer is responsible for her/his freedom of writing, and s/he must grant this freedom to the reader as well. The writer is not merely an “imitator” as Roland Barthes maintains in “The Death of the Author” that “his only power is to combine the different kinds of writing, to oppose some by others, so as never to sustain himself by just one of them; if he wants to express himself, at least he should know that the internal ‘thing’ he claims to ‘translate’ is itself only a readymade dictionary” (4-5).

In contrast to Barthes, Sartre contends that the writer is, above all, *an agent of freedom*. S/he must not only be responsible for what s/he writes about, but also how that writing will affect the society and readers’ liberation; she is responsible for readers, the fate of the society, and other individuals as well as herself. Moreover, if writers are to become the agent of liberation, if it is the writer’s task to remind readers of their freedom, to what extent it is possible in a century “where it is safe to say, has made all of us into deep historical pessimists” (Fukuyama 3).

A theoretical problem now emerges: the more Sartre emphasized on his concept of freedom and literature as the agent of liberation, the more it appeared that humans’ freedom is not inherent but conditioned by material and social circumstances. This was, of course, a criticism expressed by Marxists, particularly the second generation of Frankfurt school. Sartre could not fulfill his earlier expectations of literature, especially after WWII and the rise of communist

totalitarianism under Stalin in Russia. However, he hoped that literature and the act of writing, in particular, could serve as an *impetus* for political and social freedoms in the face of the deplorable condition of post-war Europe. He thus started formulating a new concept, i.e. the *commitment of the writer*. Any writer is inevitably committed in that s/he cannot soar above history; the commitment of the writer indicates her very purpose of writing, and there is no way a writer, whether literary or non-literary that could escape the ideological implication of her/his work.

Sartre wrote *What Is Literature?* (*WL*) as a part of his revolutionary movement in French society in the aftershock of the Nazi's occupation of Paris when the anxiety regarding the end of human history escalated. "Sartre's main argument in *What Is Literature* is basically related to the notion of freedom and the relation between author and the reader" (Babaie and Bezdoodeh 152). At this time, most of the revolutionary writers were quite disappointed about their earlier fervent hopes about the place of literature and arts; this attitude is succinctly tumbled down in the prophetic words of Adorno: "to write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric. Moreover, this corrodes even the knowledge of why it has become impossible to write poetry today" (*Prisms* 33).

Consequently, any task for art, literature, and writing was deemed futile and pointless. Contrary to earlier pessimism about literature, Sartre endeavored to resuscitate the impulses of literary commitment in social and political upheavals and to urge writers in many totalitarian countries to realize their freedom, however difficult it might sound. Although this book has been written to revitalize the European literature after the great shock of WW II, it has never lost its potency and urgency. Ever since its publication, the book has been a beacon for the writers who wish to participate in their society actively and who refuse to be stuck in their academic ivory towers.

3. Critical Treatment of the Role of the Writer in Sartre

Sartre, in the first essay, "What is Writing?" endeavors to distinguish literature from other kinds of arts. Although there are some affinities between literature and other arts, they differ *significantly* in terms of form and content. In literature, particularly prose, the form is separated from the content, whereas in other arts, it is usually not the case. A painting has a form and content, but its form is not separated from its content. As Merleau-Ponty has pointed out in *The Phenomenology of Perception*, the significance of abstraction (e.g. the meaning of a color) remains inherent in the thing itself (72). When someone looks at the color blue in painting and receives some responses from it, s/he is looking at a *color-object*. A feeling is transformed into a color, which makes understanding the abstraction possible. A painter or sculptor does not create signs; rather, she

creates an object. If a painter puts several colors together, it does not mean that these colors have to mean anything. A painter has intentions and motives in choosing colors or styles, but these can never be precisely described from another point of view. If one tries to separate form from the content in painting or music, s/he goes beyond the form to a series of endless, confusing abstractions. For instance, if a viewer looks at a rose in a painting, s/he is free to see in it whatever s/he likes. If s/he tries to appeal to *external* ideas, s/he would stop looking at the picture as a rose, loses her/his touch with the actual picture, and falls into futile abstractions (*WL* 26).

Sartre argues that in not only music, painting, and other kinds of arts, but also in poetry, authors shape *images* rather than *signs*. A poet does not use language in the same way a writer does; s/he does not utilize it in the same way; instead, s/he tries to build up images employing a language, but not in a usual way. A poet, much like a painter, employs a language as her/his colors to build up imageries. For the most part, a poet never utilizes a language to just *name or communicate something explicitly*. We can illustrate this point by referring to William Blake's "The Sick Rose":

*O Rose, thou art sick!
That invisible worm,
That flies in the night,
In the howling storm,

Has found out thy bed
Of crimson joy;
And his dark secret love
Does thy life destroy. (83)*

The poem is more like a painting rather than a piece of writing since sick rose is not merely described; it is preferably made into a cluster of images. Blake is not only telling us that this rose is sick or that the poem is only made of words to express something. Blake constructs images and calls the red rose as if it can *genuinely* hear (personification); the image of rose does not merely stand for something; rather, it goes beyond to a set of living dynamic imageries that are interpreted from a variety of perspectives. Once the poem was written, Blake stands outside the poetry or beside the reader to interpret it. It is as if the poem is inherently inviting and demanding the readers to point out to their freedom by an interplay of different perceptions. In other words, for Sartre, a great many poems are inherently *anti-authoritarian* and thus display the freedom of the readers. Therefore, Sartre has little to say of poetry in *WL* since it could not be established through a transparent, communicative act of language. This issue might appear disconcerting from other perspectives; since poets sometimes do make a statement that can be obvious and serve just like a piece of writing, yet

by and large, poetry, which its value surpasses that of ordinary language, is generally deemed as the highest form of imagination and the crown of literary achievement since the days of antiquity.

One finds Sartre's stance towards poetry *somehow* similar to the likes of Adorno in the respect in which they both find literary craft seconded by the urgency to reform and changing the social conditions. Even though Sartre hesitates to put aside poetry and other kinds of arts for the prose, he has no concerns for an independent stature of literature and art, and it is safe to say that *WL objects to the disinterested practices in arts and literature*. It seems that Sartre prefers an antidote that immediately proves efficient and does not only engage with the men and women of the letters but also with the ordinary citizens. The engagement with the workers and social conditions and abolishing the hierarchical structure of art and literature has always been one of the significant objectives of Sartre throughout his life. Sartre takes on prose as a tool for his objectives:

Prose is, in essence, utilitarian. I would readily define the prose-writer as a person who makes use of words ... The writer is a speaker-, he designates, demonstrates, orders, refuses, interpolates, begs, insults, persuades, insinuates. If he does so without any effect, he does not therefore become a poet; he is a writer who is talking and saying nothing ... it often happens that we find ourselves possessing a certain idea that someone has taught us by means of words without being able to recall a single one of the words, which have transmitted it to us (*WL* 34-5).

Unlike poetry, prose utilizes language to express more concrete ideas; language becomes a means to an end. The words and sentences no longer matter, as long as they tell us something. It is not a poem in which every word matters, and words are etched to the reader's mind. On the contrary, the reader of prose does not focus on each individual words. The prose is like an instrument one grabs; when s/he is in danger, s/he grasps it. As soon as the danger is past, s/he does not remember whether it was a hammer or a stick. The writer makes use of words for a particular purpose. Dickens wrote prose to condemn Victorian society or St. Augustine to organize Christian doctrines. In Sartre's view, the prose is a *disclosure of intention*. An intention made explicit by words and sentences. It goes without saying that these intentions could not be impartial, as Sartre put it, "man is the being towards whom no being can be impartial, not even God" (*WL* 37).

For Sartre, the writer of prose is the person who commits herself to an idea because s/he can affect the reader in the way she wants. S/he can feed the reader with ideas and thoughts. This commitment *rarely* happens in poetry or painting because a poet or painter builds images. Moreover, these images could be interpreted in *whatever way one pleases*. A picture of a working-class could refer

to social injustices of the bourgeoisie, or it might refer to a pastoral setting in which people live out of the hustle and bustle of cities. An image could represent an infinity of contradictory things. An artist cannot really commit herself to anything since there is no way that what she attempts to convey corresponds with the viewer's interpretation and experience in its *totality*.

On the contrary, the writer of prose can lead the reader to see an image from her/his perspective, to make the reader assume something or react against it. For instance, Orwell wrote several books to oppose Nazi and communist totalitarianism at his time. Sartre emphasizes the same point that the writer must be concerned with the present problems, negating the dominant ideology, and providing a critical attitude towards any kind of positive ideology. Sartre maintains that "the function of the writer is to act in such a way that nobody can be ignorant of the world and that nobody may say that he is innocent of what it's all about" (WL 38). There is no escape from the ideology of the time; humans surrounded by beings and time have to either conform to the existing conditions or to seek their freedom in a variety of ways, such as debunking the present ideology or oppressive discourses. Sartre has a daunting task for a writer and equates the position of the writer with a political and revolutionary liberator, or in one word an *intellectual*, a role that, at its very essence, characterizes Jean-Paul Sartre himself.

As soon as we get to know that the writer is committed, we have the right to ask the prose writer from the very beginning, what is your aim? To what are you committed? Even if the writer tries to evade these questions, s/he has *already* committed herself; commitment is an integral part of writing. Throughout history, many literary groups have tried to avoid commitment to a particular political and social *agenda*. As an example, Parnassians struggled to write poetry in a way that they would be committed only to an eternal conception of art, and disregarded the values of society or any involvement with political reforms. The end of this literary group was marked with the failure of impartial writing. They turned into a closed circle of literary figures who unwittingly committed themselves to distract people from the real problems in the French society and became the propagators of the ruling class. In addition to the inevitability of commitment, the writing should be written in a simple, straightforward language. Here, Sartre takes the view of early Marxist critics that the fundamental aspect of art is its content, not the form. Often a beautiful form acts as a charming siren to persuade the reader in selling the argument to her *rather than* engaging her with the real ongoing problems.

What is Literature? Concentrates mostly on prose, which is inevitably committed to an idea. Having recognized the inevitability of commitment, Sartre

tries to find an answer to what the writer should be committed. Before answering that question, one has to know, why does a writer write? And for whom? All writers have their own reason to act in this way: for one writing is the way of life; for another, it is just a financial transaction. Nietzsche believed that writing serves as a foil to immune the writer from life's deeply felt moments (e.g. grief, depression) so that the writer stands upright to rein over her overwhelming emotions (Krystal 183). From another point of view, one writes to overcome the feeling of death and destruction by preserving her life in the works and future legacy; in the same way that the life of a father is maintained through a son.

It seems, however, for Sartre, these are not very compelling reasons for why someone writes. Instead, there is something far more critical lying behind. When one starts writing, s/he cannot be a reader of her/his own writing because s/he already knows the effects of the writing. If Shakespeare had read *Hamlet*, he would know, from the very start, the character's reluctance and feelings. The writer could only look at the book from a limited perspective; s/he can scarcely discover something new or unprecedented in her/his own work. The writer could not be a *revealer* and *producer* simultaneously. The writer's main task is not to foresee or discover, but to *project*. S/he builds a map *to be read, not to read it herself*. The writer needs the reader to look at her/his work *objectively*. The reader can discover new things; s/he can understand the work from her/his totality of being without the presence of the writer. Unlike the writer, the reader feels the effects of the work. Thus, *it is not true that one writes for herself, but rather one writes to be read by others*. Sartre's conception is that one cannot write something as literature in an ivory tower without either social and political consequences; that is, one is always *already* committed.

Since the creation can find its fulfillment only in reading, since the reader has to carry out what the writer has begun, literary work is an *appeal*. An appeal, made on the side of the writer to the reader, to bring the writing into the objective existence. If it should be asking what exactly the writer is appealing to, the answer lies in the reader's *freedom*. The writer appeals to the freedom of the reader, and s/he requires it in order to make her/his works exist. The reader is never under any obligation to read a work; s/he can put it away any time s/he wants. The reader is respected in that she chooses to read in the first place, and can withdraw some parts of the work and pays more attention to some other parts. For example, if a reader chooses to read *Animal Farm*, s/he pays more attention to the totalitarianism, if s/he lived in the Soviet Union. At the same time, by reading Orwell's novel, an English reader would think of promoting democracy in her/his country. The animals' concern for liberty is the reader's concern, which s/he lends the characters. The reader understands a work based on her/his own

experiences, or based on her/his *historical situations*.

In the third essay, "For Whom Does One Write?" Sartre addresses the relationship between the reader and the writer. To understand each other, the reader must belong to the same historical situation as their writer. This is *rather* a controversial notion since many of the books that one reads do not belong to the exact historical situation. It was already mentioned above; once the writer chooses to write, s/he needs someone to read her work. S/he becomes the writer, only if s/he answers to some demands made by readers within a particular social function. Let us take the case of the African- American writer, Ralph Ellison. If he lived in a society in which his people were oppressed, he certainly would write about them from the viewpoint of the oppressed. He wrote to reply to the demands of his people, and he criticizes the white community and urges the Black community to make a change. African-Americans understand the work with their heart and soul. However, if sixty years after the book's publication, an English literature student in Iran reads the book, he becomes *the universal man*, a notion that is not involved in any age, a pure abstraction. S/he does not understand the Black community better than the poor Victorian working class. What s/he perceives is one strand of freedom perceived in history. Sartre contends that works of mind are like ripe bananas; they should be eaten on the spot to accomplish their full responsibility (*WL* 75). A work of literature has its decisive effect, if those, for whom the work is written, read it first. Now, having dealt with the first two questions, the last one is raised: to what the writer should commit herself?

Sartre, like many other philosophers, was entangled with the historical situation. It seemed unavoidable that life, one learns to live, is constructed within a limited environment. This predetermined condition of humanity is manifested, at its best, in the pessimistic words of Pascal: "We are embarked on a ship of living that makes us who we are" (qt. in *WL* 76). This view has a close affinity with the idea of *thrownness* by Heidegger as one of the main characteristics of Dasein:

An entity of the character of Dasein is its "**there**" in such a way that, whether explicitly or not, it **finds itself** [sich befindet] in its thrownness... The way in which the mood discloses is not one in which we look at thrownness, but one in which we turn towards or turn away (174).

The notion of *thrownness* is one of the main characteristics of the human condition. Human life is already determined to follow a course of events that make us who we are. At every moment of reflection, we find ourselves in a situation bound to time, history, society, and religion. Influenced by Heidegger's philosophy of being, Sartre marries this concept with historicity; the fact that human life is bound and made by history and the courses of history determines

human life. Sartre shared this idea with the masters of dialectics (i.e. Hegel and Marx); he fully adhered to Hegel's commitment to historical engagement of thought that "*everyone is a son of his time*, so philosophy also is its time apprehended in thoughts. It is just as foolish to fancy that any philosophy can transcend its present world ..." (Hegel 19).

Despite *WL*'s significant influence on the writers of the 1950s and 60s, Sartre was also *severely* criticized for his limited vision of literature from two widely different perspectives. The first observation stemmed from *the Nouveau Roman*, a French literary movement in the 1960s principally established by Alain Robbe-Grillet. Robbe-Grillet was a critic and filmmaker who believed that literature has no obligation to be involved in either political or ideological commitments: *the ways of literature are not the ways politics*. For Robbe-Grillet, Sartre reduces the value of literature simply to its effects, not much different from a political wrangling or a pamphlet. Robbe-Grillet is not opposed to the commitment of the writer *per se*; however, he considers a writer is as much committed as any other citizen in society:

The writer is definitely committed ... yet his commitment extends as far as any other person ... The writer suffers, like everyone, over the misfortune of his fellow human beings; it is dishonest to pretend he writes to allay it ... The writer can't know what end he's serving [in the society]. Literature isn't a means he's to place at the service of some Cause. (33-35)

It is convenient to demonstrate that Robbe-Grillet takes seriously a professional commitment to literary form and aesthetics, which is apart from a political and social commitment. For him, there are two kinds of commitments, one is the political and social commitment, and another is the artistic and aesthetic commitment that Sartre fails to recognize and distinguish between.

The second wave of criticism came from the same leftist camp that Sartre was *traditionally* assumed to belong. Theodor W. Adorno, a senior at Frankfurt school, reprimanded Sartre's distinction between the committed and autonomous art in his essay "Commitment." Adorno perceives a *dialectical* relation between committed and autonomous art that are intermingled and "negate themselves with the other" (178). While he appreciates the commitment of literature in and of itself, he finds Sartre's "distinction between artist and *litterateur* shallow" (178-9). There is no discernible difference between prose and other arts in their capacity of being committed or autonomous. On the one hand, Adorno concurs with Sartre that "that the object of aesthetic philosophy... is not the publicistic aspect of art" (179). Still, he is quite dubious about how the "message" of a work would function in society (179). Contrary to the simple and

straightforward commitment of Sartre, for Adorno, the commitment of an artist can function against the very motivation of its creator and turn easily into a game of marketing and ideological confrontations.

Adorno distinguishes between the concepts of “tendency” and “commitment.” “Committed art is not intended to generate ameliorative measures [...] but to work at the level of fundamental attitudes” (180). The commitment of art is for Adorno stripped of its radical revolutionary voices. Nevertheless, it must *paradoxically* continue its existence as the only medium that can express human suffering (188) and, along with the autonomous works of art, negate the empirical reality against all the odds (190). Adorno’s vision of commitment is a lot more *pessimistic* than Sartre’s, whose ultimate aim of commitment is the realization of *unbridled* existential freedom. Adorno contemplates the possibility of such freedom and finds it unobtainable in the modern world: “within a predetermined reality, freedom becomes an empty chair. “The lesson that we *ironically* learn from his [Sartre] plays is that of “unfreedom” (180). Such criticisms always put Sartre’s authentic freedom in a straitjacket and sometimes made him reluctant to believe in an *ideal* conception of freedom

Sartre observed that if the commitment is conditioned by ordinary life, all his quest for freedom would become pointless. He thus began to illustrate the role of literature in society. If one is always embarked, it does not mean that they are aware of it. There are not many people who know that their standards of living are one *truth* among many; most people consider their principles of life to be inherent everlasting truth. Both the writer and the reader can cooperate in building up their freedom from all forms of suppression and control; they could lay bare the temporality and constructive nature of our essences. This notion goes back to the origins of Sartre’s humanistic philosophy; in his magnum opus *Being and Nothingness*, Sartre demonstrates that being precedes essence. The only real origin for man is its being in the world, and all else are surpluses added through different historical and social conditions. The essence is constructed through our life and is imposed from outside ideologies, religions, and ideologies. The mixture of our being and essence is our existence in daily life. Most people often fail to see the conditionality and temporality of their essences, and regard it as being-in-itself.¹ For Sartre, this is a considerable source of existential alienation

¹ Sartre divides the being into three kinds or modes: being-in-itself, being-for-itself, and being-for-others. The being-in-itself constitutes the entities that are no other than what they represent like objects and most of the animals. Their lifetime is conditioned by their essential essence that they have, whereas man has no essence but is forced to be conditioned, for example, an alienated waiter thinks that his conditions are part of his existence

and a lack of authenticity. Sartre argued that the only factor that affects our existence is our decisions; the hidden freedom of humankind must be revealed and reminded to her/his by writers through multiplicity, negation, and conditionality of forces that suppress and subjugate human freedom. This task will be more and more crucial since such controlling forces have increased in the modern world.

As a result, it is the primary responsibility of literature to free men of their historical situation and make them re-evaluate their values. The writer must commit herself/himself to awake people of their historical sleep to make them cut off their historical ties. It is only then that literature is truly fulfilled. The readers would become self-aware of their conditions, and seek to transform it. The writer should not necessarily rebel against the ideas, but rather s/he should make people aware of their condition and ask them to act upon it. This notion became known as "human right literature." In this genre, writers are revolutionaries; they are free to choose their ideas and their readers. One of the best examples is perhaps Voltaire (*WL* 97; 224-5). Although he was an aristocrat, he started writing for lower classes and found many readers among them. His satirical writing made him free because he was no longer forced to write for the elites. He thought that he had no obligation to anyone to let him become a writer. The result was that the oppressed became conscious of their conditions and started changing it. Voltaire not only had an enormous influence on the French revolution but also now is one of the liberal voices in the world. He has become the universal man, an idea for all readers to become conscious of their historical situation. He is no longer a man but an idea of the historical struggle against oppression and the enemies of freedom.

4. Conclusion

When Sartre wrote *WL*, he hoped that he could make people realize their conditions to make their own values. Only then, a man would become an individual. The authors are responsible for carrying out this difficult task. The main responsibility of the author is to negate the values in society to reconstruct them. Literature, entirely liberated, would represent negativity as a decisive moment in reconstruction. Sartre had significant problems to put this idea into practice. Firstly, he never could communicate with the working class in many countries like the Soviet Union, in that they were walled off from writers like himself in a closed society. Secondly, to become a writer of freedom is quite hazardous, since s/he takes the reader to realize that her/his beliefs, ideas, and

and he cannot exert his freedom and he looks upon his being as being a waiter in itself just like a stone in itself. Sartre named this process of becoming-in-itself "bad faith". (*Being and Nothingness* 59)

standards of living are only *conditionally* true. The writer of freedom does not reaffirm what has already been said, but rather *negates* it. S/he is then susceptible to hatred since it is unpleasant for people to fall from their unshakeable truth. Sartre approached his ideas of freedom and class-consciousness with more modesty later in his life, but he never stopped trying. Having encountered many problems with his revolutionary notion of freedom, he truly understood that the only force that could make people realize their freedom was literature and writing. Nowadays, despite many obstacles, many writers believe that their work could make their readers step on the path to freedom.

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