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# Jean-Paul Sartre's Theory of Literature

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**JEAN-PAUL SARTRE'S THEORY OF LITERATURE**

**A Thesis**

**Presented to**

**the Faculty of the Department of Philosophy and Religion  
Western Kentucky University  
Bowling Green, Kentucky**

**In Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree  
Master of Arts  
in Humanities**

**by**

**Timothy Jobe**

**July 1973**

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JEAN-PAUL SARTRE'S THEORY OF LITERATURE

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## INTRODUCTION

The thesis of this paper is twofold. First, there is the general concern to investigate and demonstrate clearly that there are relationships between certain superficially unrelated disciplines, namely philosophy, aesthetics, and literary criticism. Second, by way of accomplishing the first aim, there is an attempt made to synthesize and explicate the contributions of a significant twentieth century intellectual. The particular procedure employed to attain these ends is the consideration of an academic field which is continually being reshaped by other separate but related disciplines. For my purposes the figure of Jean Paul Sartre and the field of literary criticism are both, as shall be demonstrated, appropriate for this investigation.

The format for analyzing Sartre's literary criticism shall be as follows. (1) There is an investigation of Sartre's philosophical claims. (2) There follows a discussion of Sartre's view of literature, its value, significance, and role in society. (3) The next section relates Sartre's views of literature to traditional problems in literary criticism. (4) In the final portion there is a brief evaluation of Sartre's contributions to a contemporary literary criticism.

## JEAN-PAUL SARTRE'S THEORY OF LITERATURE

The evaluation of the work of a contemporary figure is never easy; and when the figure is as controversial as Jean-Paul Sartre, the task becomes doubly difficult.<sup>1</sup> Besides the obvious fact that at any moment the living philosopher may add to, and thus change, the body of his work, we already have at our disposal, a voluminous literature of great variety. Sartre has written philosophy, novels, plays, screen scenarios, and literary and social criticism; during the maturer years only poetry seems to have escaped his attention.<sup>2</sup>

In order to interpret this massive body of primary and secondary literature, can we construct a body of principles which will enable us to evaluate Sartre's contribution, if any, to philosophy and literary criticism? I think we can; and the number of such principles need not be excessively large. First, although the social message communicated by existentialism was adopted in extreme form by the younger generation seeking liberation partly from the arbitrary decisions of parents and partly from the political strictures imposed by the occupying Germans, we should admit that the head of a movement is not necessarily responsible for the conduct of his would-be followers. In the second place,

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<sup>1</sup>Jean-Paul Sartre, *L'Imagination* (3rd ed.; Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1950), *passim*, Introduction. See also the pre-reflective *cogito*, Jean-Paul Sartre, *L'Être et le néant* (Paris: Gallimard, 1943), pp. 16-23.

<sup>2</sup>Sartre, *L'Être et le néant*, pp. 23-27. Later in *L'Être et le néant* being-in-itself is given two additional characteristics.

we can avoid the extremes of unthoughtful acceptance or rejection of the philosophy in favor of an impartial analysis of its claims, only if we can isolate the distinguishing marks of that philosophy. For this task, the third, it is not unreasonable to separate the literary efforts of Sartre from his already dense body of purely philosophical works. The claim here is not that literature cannot be philosophy, but that historically considered, the literary interpretations of his philosophy are secondary; they were initiated, in the main, merely to reach that larger section of his audience which is composed of readers for whom philosophy is too forbidding a fare. Les Mouches illustrates, but does not defend, the thesis of personal freedom; La Putain respectueuse illustrates, but does not defend, the bad faith of society; Le Diable et le Bon Dieu shows the consequences in a fictional context of personal choices of good and evil, as the unfinished tetralogy, Les Chemins de la liberte, shows the plight of the existentialist individual, in the role he established, "condemned to be free."<sup>3</sup>

Only one of Sartre's novels has a truly ambitious character. It is generally held that La Nausee holds a peculiar status among the works of the author.<sup>4</sup> Is it an essay or a novel? Is its purpose to illustrate without defending a thesis, or to develop an idea which will later be defended at greater length? It certainly can be read as either, and if we are inclined to consider it here as an essay rather than as a novel—as it should be, according to its publisher<sup>5</sup>—our reasons are historical

<sup>3</sup>Elton, ed., Essays.

<sup>4</sup>Cleanth Brooks, The Well Wrought Urn, passim.

<sup>5</sup>Santayana, Sense of Beauty, p. 9.

rather than textual. Textually, the theme of La Nausee is the subjective reaction to the discovery of one's personal existence as a free and responsible individual. If it presents a philosophy, it is a philosophy considered as a philosophy of life. But as a matter of historical fact, the theme of freedom as the defining property of consciousness was already expounded in the first of Sartre's works, L'Imagination, which appeared in 1936. The psychological case history suggesting the connection between the freedom of consciousness and the experience of metaphysical anguish is described in an article of the Recherches Philosophiques of 1936-37. La Nausee appeared in 1938. To this extent, La Nausee represents illustration of a thesis. But freedom is not an easy thesis to uphold in an age of territorial occupation or of philosophical positivism. A thoughtful reader of the book could recognize the thesis, but would feel unsatisfied at the lack of evidence for it. How is this freedom possible? This is the question Sartre spent so much effort trying to answer, first in L'Imaginaire (1940) and at still greater length in L'Etre et le Neant (1943). When the historical relations of these texts are thus established, the ambivalent nature becomes more apparent; it fits into the general sequence of Sartre's work, making a clear-cut stage in the development of his thought; but at the same time, the style of the work is predominantly literary rather than analytic.

Besides his books, Sartre has written several articles of a purely philosophical nature, the consideration of which sheds light upon the development of his early philosophy. In addition to "La transcendence de l'Ego," he has presented "La structure intentionnelle de l'image," in Revue de Metaphysique et de Morale, 1938. Both of these indicate the extreme dependence of Sartre's beginnings on the world of Edmund

Husserl, a subject to which I shall return. The second of these articles appeared as the first section of L'Imaginaire. A third article, "Une idee fondamentale de la phenomenologie de Husserl, intentionnalite" (Nouvelle Revue Francaise, 1939) was written in the concise, almost poetic style identified with the person of Alain,<sup>6</sup> and appeared in the same journal as the essays of the latter. The article heralds a new theory of the passions, which Sartre took the trouble to outline in a book published by Hermann in the same year, Esquisse d'una theorie des emotions.

Finally, there appeared two books of a more special interest. The first of these is L'Existentialisme est un humanisme. Since this work is nothing but a series of offhanded answers by Sartre to unconnected questions concerning his theories, we would cautiously extend the meaning of "primary source" should we include it in that capacity. It appeared in 1946, well after the theoretical justification of Sartre's philosophy had been attempted.

In sum, the following gives a selective bibliography for primary sources of the early Sartre. The arrangement is by date of appearance, no respect being paid the distinction between books and articles:

1. L'Imagination, 1936.
2. "La transcendence de L'ego," Recherches Philosophiques, 1937.
3. La Nausee, 1938.
4. "La structure intentionnelle de l'image," Revue de Metaphysique et de Morale, 1938.
5. "Une idee fondamentale de la phenomenologie de Husserl, l'intentionnalite," Nouvelle Revue Francaise, 1939.

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<sup>6</sup>Ibid., p. 10.



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6. Esquisse d'une theorie des emotions, 1939.
7. L'Imaginaire, 1940.
8. L'Etre et le neant, 1943.
9. Qu'est-ce que la litterature?, 1947.

Keeping in mind that any day there may appear further contributions to his work we might consider this list definitive for our purposes.

The question that remains is, "What can be done with such a list?" I propose to isolate the peculiar problem posed by the entire list of works, to point out the distinctive marks of the method adopted by Sartre to solve this problem, and finally to evaluate briefly Sartre's claims to having solved the problem by the methods he has adopted.

As has been pointed out, the key philosophical work relevant to our inquiry is Sartre's L'Imagination (1936). In brief this work is concerned with a traditional epistemological problem: the problem of perception. According to L'Imagination, a perceiver intuitively becomes aware of himself as a spontaneous individual while "intending" external objects by means of images.<sup>7</sup> Consider an object. Given normal circumstances while looking at an object, a perceiver in this case is reporting on an immediate impression of an object, which in some sense is located outside the perceiver in his perceptual field. When the subject closes his eyes, an image of the object may remain awhile before disappearing. When this after-image disappears it can be said that the object ceases to exist for the subject, but there is no reason to believe that the object ceases to exist in-itself. This external object, for Sartre, is

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<sup>7</sup>Jean-Paul Sartre, L'Imagination (3rd ed.; Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1950), passim, Introduction.

defined as being-in-itself. The defining characteristic of this perceived object is merely the fact that it is, that it may become the object of someone's perceptual experience.<sup>8</sup>

The perceiving consciousness (subject), on the other hand, cannot be the object of someone's perception. A perceiving consciousness does not exist for something else. It cannot exist for consciousness since it can only be known directly and not by means of images.<sup>9</sup> Consciousness, that which exists but does not exist for someone else's perceptive awareness, is said to exist only for itself. Consciousness is characterized as existence for itself.

The result of the above is therefore a distinction between two kinds of existence: being-for-itself (subjects or minds), and being-in-itself (objects and body). By establishing a dualism such as this, Sartre now faces a traditional philosophical problem—the mind-body problem: what is the nature of the relationship between the body and the mind in an event implying both? Sartre spurns the traditional attempts made by both the materialists and the idealists to solve this problem. Taking his clue from the methodological principles set down by Husserl, Sartre tries to harmonize this ontological dualism by his own particular form of the phenomenological method.<sup>10</sup>

In L'Imagination, Sartre examines the views of various classical thinkers concerning the existence and function of images, showing that most of them rest upon an error in ontological assumptions. Sartre

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<sup>8</sup>Sartre, L'Etre et le neant, pp. 23-27. Later in L'Etre et le neant, being-in-itself is given two additional characteristics.

<sup>9</sup>Ibid., pp. 26-27.

<sup>10</sup>Ibid., p. 34.

spells out this erroneous assumption. He argues that, although images play different roles in the epistemological theories of Descartes, Leibnitz, and Hume, these systems, whether idealistic or materialistic, conceive of the image as if it were a thing, an object having the same nature as any perceived object.<sup>11</sup> Sartre maintains that the only way to avoid the ultimate philosophical problems of both the Idealists and Materialists is to avoid the initial error of considering an image as a thing. The question then is: If an image does not have the ontological status of a perceived object, what kind of ontological status does it have?

Sartre sets forth his method of investigation and conclusions regarding the nature of an image in his work L'Imaginaire (1940). In this work Sartre commends a phenomenological procedure as the method that best explains the relation of the consciousness to its environment.<sup>12</sup> In short, the method of the phenomenologist, as Sartre defines phenomenology, is to contemplate an instance of consciousness, reflect on the essence of the consciousness, and offer a description of that essence.<sup>13</sup> Since Sartre's phenomenological analysis is of images, his procedure is, therefore, to produce an image, to reflect upon it, and to describe the essence reflected upon. Since any normally-equipped human can verify the first two steps, Sartre immediately attempts a description of the essence he has intuited from his consciousness.

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<sup>11</sup>Sartre, L'Imagination, p. 19.

<sup>12</sup>Jean-Paul Sartre, L'Imaginaire (18th ed.: Paris: Gallimard, 1948), p. 12 ff.

<sup>13</sup>Whether this sketch is a true representation of the phenomenological method is not at issue here. It suffices that this is Sartre's adaptation of the phenomenological method. Ibid., pp. 8-9.

Sartre claims to intuit four characteristics essential to the nature of an image. The first is that an image is a conscious event, i.e., that an image cannot be conceived of as a content.<sup>14</sup> An image is a conscious event that is the means by which the consciousness "gives itself an object."<sup>15</sup> The second characteristic is that the imagination intends an unreal object, which is not other than consciousness and is, in fact, constituted by it. The unreal object constituted by this consciousness, then, actually has no relation to other objects that exist in the world.<sup>16</sup>

Sartre expands this notion of an unreal object as a third characteristic of the imagining consciousness. Images are said to posit their objects as non-existent. In order to understand what is meant here, a comparison of the imagining consciousness, that of quasi-observation, with veridical perception may be helpful. A truly perceptual image, according to Sartre, refers to a transcendent object. (Sartre uses "transcendent" in its Kantian sense: being beyond the limits of possible experience.) The perceptual consciousness poses the existence of a real object. The imaginative consciousness, on the other hand, may posit the existence of its object, in one of four ways: as non-existent, as absent, as existing in some imaginary context elsewhere, or as making no ontological claim whatsoever. Each of these positional acts bear an element of negation, and this negative element constitutes the essence of the imagining consciousness. The imagined object is given, but given in a particular way; it is given as absent.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>14</sup>Ibid., p. 15.

<sup>15</sup>Ibid., p. 17.

<sup>16</sup>Ibid., pp. 19-22.

<sup>17</sup>Ibid., p. 25.

Sartre explains this idea of negation: In order to have an image produced by the imagining consciousness, the world must recede into nothingness for the act of consciousness. Like a figure and its background, the image and the world are complementary. In short, "The intentional object of the imagining consciousness has this particularity: either it isn't there and is posited as such, or it doesn't exist, and is posited as non-existent or not posited at all."<sup>18</sup>

The final characteristic of the image, according to Sartre, is its spontaneity. Continuing his phenomenological investigation of the image Sartre says that the image, which is a consciousness, reveals itself to be creative. The object of an image does not determine the conscious image because the object of the imagining consciousness is, as we have seen, non-existent. Whereas in a perception the consciousness is to some extent passive, being determined by the object, in an act of imagining, the consciousness is completely free and self-determining. The force of this assertion is that images can be conjured at will. In short, the image owes nothing to its object since the object is instantiated and maintained—as non-existent—in the act of imagining.<sup>19</sup> It is because of this spontaneity that artists are said to be creative.

After outlining the four essential characteristics of an image, Sartre gives a summary definition for the term "image" in its generic sense.

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<sup>18</sup>"L'objet intentionnel de la conscience imageante a ceci de particulier qu'il n'est pas la et qu'il est pose comme tel, ou encore qu'il n'existe pas et qu'il est pose comme inexistant, ou qu'il n'est pas pose du tout."—*Ibid.*, p. 25.

<sup>19</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 25-26.

...an act which, in its corporeity, aims at an absent or non-existent object by means of a physical or psychical continuent which is not given in itself, but in the guise of an 'analogical representative' of the object aimed at.<sup>20</sup>

Having a sketch of the nature of the image that is produced by the imagination, we now move to a consideration of the imagination. Since the imagination, according to Sartre, functions at its highest (most spontaneous) degree when it creates its own object, and this is assumed to be the case in aesthetic experience, we proceed to consider Sartre's theory of aesthetics.

Sartre's comments on the aesthetic object occur as the second part of his conclusion to L'Imaginaire. In this conclusion he tries to solve certain outstanding aesthetic questions by his phenomenological psychology of the imagination. Although Sartre talks in his psychology of the imagination (L'Imaginaire) about the status of art works in general, he speaks at greater length in Qu' est-ce que la litterature? about the status of literary works in particular. Our concern with these two texts will be to discuss the ideas set forth concerning the imagination in the production and appreciation of works of art and not a discussion of the aesthetic problems Sartre thought he could resolve with his psychological theories.

Sartre employs his concept of the imagination, which according to him is freely creative, to explain the creation of art works. Sartre begins by discussing the creative process from the point of view of the creator, or as Sartre would put it, to describe the function of the

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<sup>20</sup> "...un acte qui vise dans sa corporeite un objet absent ou inexistant a travers un continu physique ou psychique qui ne se donne pas en propre, mais a titre de 'representant analogique' de l'objet vise."--L'Imaginaire, p. 75.

imagination in the production of an art object. A prime requisite for such a description is an adequate account of the artist's freedom, which according to Sartre, no determinist psychology can provide. In L'Imaginaire we have seen that Sartre was attempting to describe the conditions which permit the appearance of images to consciousness; an image, in his view, is a spontaneous, conscious event in which the attitude of the subject is a quasi-observation of a non-existent or absent object. But the subject is in the world, and can intend an object which is not in the world, and can intend an object which is not in the world only by negating the relevance of the objects of the world for the given experience.

To entertain an image is to constitute an object on the margins of the totality of the real world; thus to hold the real world at a distance, to free himself from it, in a word, to negate it.<sup>21</sup>

The meaning of this claim is simply that one can only have an image when he is marginally aware of the world; when he frees himself from the real world. In other words, the existence of an image precludes from the world of objects the presence of that object which appears in the imagination. In short, the conditions necessary for the appearance of an image are the ability to posit the existence of the world of objects which appear in an act of perception and in a succeeding act of consciousness to posit the inexistence of the imagined object within that world.<sup>22</sup>

In order to appreciate the phenomenological model of the creative imagination and its relation to aesthetic experience, we will first

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<sup>21</sup>"Poser une image c'est constituer un objet en marge de la totalite du reel, c'est donc tenir le reel a distance, s'en affranchir en un mot le nier."—L'Imaginaire, p. 223.

<sup>22</sup>Ibid., pp. 234 ff.



briefly lay out a model that conflicts with Sartre's position. The contrasting model is a realistic model based upon, but not limited to, Alains's (pseudonym of Emile Chartier) suggestion offered in her Systeme de beaux-arts (1920).<sup>23</sup> In an exceedingly brief manner here is how Alain explains artistic creation.

Like Sartre, Alain appeals to the imagination to explain creation. But here psychological resemblances cease. For Alain, the imagination is not a faculty for synthesizing, nor is the imagination a means by which to refer to unreal objects. Imagination for Alain is false perception. Imagination differs from perception as a false judgment differs from a true one. According to this theory (realism), the art object is not distinct from the artifact. The creative process proper to art is the fixing of imaginary experience in works of art. As a creator, an artist is not a visionary. The artist's vision results from a manipulation of his body in contact with the external world. His idea is his expression and his expression is a physical fact, the artifact.

For Alain there are no images; an imaginary construct is an erroneously perceived object. Since emotions are thought to be the source of error in human perception, and they are defined as movements of the human body, the artist's emotions and works are considered to be one and the same thing. The object, which results from that activity, fixes the imaginary experience; the emotion is given an object. Works of art are objects corresponding to the physiological processes of the artist by which they are created and appreciated.

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<sup>23</sup>Alain (pseudonym of Emile Chartier), Systeme de beaux-arts (Paris: Gallimard, 1920), passim.

We shall now consider the phenomenological model offered by Sartre. Sartre explains that in his estimation works of art are the creative images of the artist and not the concrete artifact produced by the artist.<sup>24</sup> If the works of an artist are, as Sartre claims, images, and not mere objects created by a physiological process, then a distinction is necessary between the artifact and what the artifact means--whatever is referred to by the image. This distinction allows communication to take place in the usual manner; the image intends an object which is understood in its unique sense by the person having the image. Briefly, Sartre's phenomenological account of artistic creation is this: an artist creates an object when his consciousness intends an absent object via the physical object he creates. "The work of art is an unreal object."<sup>25</sup> But for there to be a complete act of artistic communication, a second consciousness, that of the appreciator, is necessary. The appreciator by assuming the aesthetic attitude intends the same unreal or absent object via the image created by the artist. It follows that in an act of artistic creation there is a physical object (a presentation, or image) which serves as an instrument for uniting two consciousnesses in one act of communication. Both consciousnesses intend the same object, the unreal, ideal, or absent object, which is the work of art.<sup>26</sup>

We now turn to a consideration of the function of artistic objects, in particular, literary objects. In What is Literature? Sartre is quite explicit regarding the function of literary works--to permit communication

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<sup>24</sup>Sartre, L'Imaginaire, pp. 239-240.

<sup>25</sup>Ibid., p. 231.

<sup>26</sup>Ibid., p. 239.

between members of society. Art is communication and not empty expression. Literature fulfills its primary function when it acts as a social force.<sup>27</sup> And the best way for literature to become a social force in addition to being an aesthetic object of worth in itself, is for the author to adopt the point of view of the least favored individuals in contemporary society.<sup>28</sup> This is the way existentialist authors are encouraged to produce changes in their own society and not merely in the souls of their readers.<sup>29</sup> Existential literature is committed to be social action. It is intended to produce social change by offering its audience a conception of the human individual as a free individual working out his destiny within an unfriendly environment. Sartre is quick to point out, however, that existential literature is not to lack aesthetic quality.

In effect, I should like to recall that in "committed literature" the commitment must not, in any case, make one forget the litterature, and that our preoccupation must be to serve literature in giving it new blood, just as much as to serve society in trying to give it the literature fitting its circumstances.<sup>30</sup>

As mentioned above, the notion of communication is central to Sartre's view of literature. For Sartre, the putting of words on paper

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<sup>27</sup>Jean-Paul Sartre, What is Literature?, trans. and ed. by Bernard Frechtman (New York: Philosophical Library, 1949), pp. 67 ff.

<sup>28</sup>Jean-Paul Sartre, Situations II (Paris: Gallimard, 1948), pp. 261-277.

<sup>29</sup>Ibid., p. 16.

<sup>30</sup>"Je rappelle, en effet, que dans la litterature engagee, 'l'engagement' ne doit, en aucun cas, faire oublier la litterature et que notre preoccupation doit etre de servir la litterature en lui infusant un sang nouveau, tout autant que de servir la collectivite en essayant de lui donner la litterature qui lui convient."--Ibid., p. 30.

is only the beginning of the literary creation which, if it is to be complete, must be completed in the act of reading. Thus the creative process involves three parts: the author's production, the reader's contemplation, and the aesthetic object which emerges in the reader's mind. Sartre's model of communication consists of the union of two consciousnesses by the use of language. However, maintaining consistency with his theory and function of images and art objects in general: "the literary object, though realized through language, is never given in language."<sup>31</sup>

With this note concerning the process of social communication in mind, we will now trace Sartre's argument as developed in What is Literature? Sartre begins by asking the question, "Why does one write?" He immediately rejects two answers as trivial--some writers write to escape the undesirable conditions that normally are associated with earning a living; others write in order to exercise their will to power.<sup>32</sup> But whatever the author's motive for writing, the author's decision is one of choice. In order to sense the force of this last assertion one must refer to a section of L'Etre et le neant in which Sartre explains the sense in which man is responsible for the world in which he lives.<sup>33</sup> Sartre claims that although a man is motivated by the situation surrounding him, man is responsible to choose to change his environment or to go along with the consequences of accepting the environment as it is. In either case a choice must be made. One either chooses to change the

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<sup>31</sup>Frechtman, What is Literature?, p. 44.

<sup>32</sup>Sartre, Situations II, pp. 89-115.

<sup>33</sup>Sartre, L'Etre et le neant, Part IV, Chapter I.

situation or chooses not to change the situation.

An author, like his characters, must choose to reveal the world as it is if they are to exercise their freedom of choice responsibly. As an artist this is his commitment--to reveal the world as it is. He expresses his freedom in addressing himself to the freedom of another.

...the writer has chosen to reveal the world and particularly to reveal man to other men so that they may assume full responsibility before the object which has been laid bare.<sup>34</sup>

Thus, in sharing the writer's situation, the reader shares in the communicating of freedoms. The condition necessary and sufficient for the appearance of a literary object is the participation of the reader in the author's attempt to reveal the nature of the world. It is in this communication of freedoms that both the reader and the author find commitment to a specific mode of action through the aesthetic object. It is at this point that Sartre's critics object: What distinguishes the commitment of literature from propaganda? As we have seen (pp. 11,12) Sartre refers to the aesthetic properties of the literary work to distinguish it from mere propaganda.

We shall now look at the aesthetic qualities of the literary work that separate it from propaganda. First we look at the form and subject matter of the literary work as recommended by Sartre. The subject matter of the literary work is the life of some individual:

Praxis as action in history and on history; that is, as a synthesis of historical relativity and of the moral and metaphysical absolute, with this hostile and friendly, terrible and derisive world which it reveals to us. There is our subject.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>34</sup>Frechtman, What is Literature?, pp. 12-13.

<sup>35</sup>Ibid., p. 239.

The protagonist is placed in a specific time and place, and the work becomes a cultural phenomenon that demands historical criticism.

The form of a work (Sartre means a novel) must be suited to the subject depicted. Poetic prose which may obscure clear meanings, is proscribed. Poetry is excluded on much the same basis.<sup>36</sup> In Sartre's terms, poetry is not acceptable because the poet uses words "inside out."<sup>37</sup> Sartre says that the poet considers language as a structure of the external world rather than as the living extension of the poet's own body.<sup>38</sup> A word, as a sign, is imprecise. It intends a meaning. In reading words one may become aware of the physical qualities of the words themselves and lose intellectual comprehension. In order to avoid this potential loss of clarity, due to poetic language, Sartre forbids its use.

...the poet has withdrawn from the language-instrument in a single movement. Once and for all he has chosen the poetic attitude which considers words as things and not as signs. For the ambiguity of the sign implies that one can pursue the thing signified, or turn his gaze toward its reality and consider it as an object.<sup>39</sup>

A consequence of these claims is that the style of the author is to be regulated by the aim of reader comprehension, and will therefore depend upon his audience, rather than upon literary convention or his, the artist's, own personal taste.

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<sup>36</sup>Ibid., p. 284.

<sup>37</sup>Ibid., p. 20.

<sup>38</sup>Sartre, L'Être et le néant, Part III, Chapter II. The literary interpretation of this principle follows below.

<sup>39</sup>Frechtman, What is Literature?, pp. 12-13.

According to Sartre, "The writer is a speaker; he designates, demonstrates, orders, refuses, interpolates, begs, insults, persuades, insinuates."<sup>40</sup> The writer finds himself in a social situation.

The speaker is in situation in language; he is invested with words. They are prolongations of his meanings, his pincers, his antennae, his eye-glasses. He maneuvers them from within; he feels them as if they were his body; he is surrounded by a verbal body which he is hardly aware of and which extends his action upon the world.<sup>41</sup>

What follows from the novelist's situation? A point of view: "Since we were situated, the only novels we could dream of were novels of situation, without internal narrators or all-knowing witnesses."<sup>42</sup> Therefore, the techniques of the omniscient narrator that tend to destroy the aesthetic distance of the work are prohibited. Also proscribed is the third person, or internal narrator through whose eyes the reader is forced to view the work.

Sartre rejects as appropriate for the point of view, the analytic method used in Newtonian mechanics for the more synthetic notion of "Einsteinian relativity."<sup>43</sup> The proper point of view in the novel should be one-half lucid and the characters should interact with others only half understanding each other. The novel should not have a definite end; as in life, the completion of an action in a novel should be tentative. There ought to be a suggestion of a given ending, but no possibility of other events should be excluded.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>40</sup>Ibid., pp. 19-20.

<sup>41</sup>Ibid., p. 13.

<sup>42</sup>Ibid., p. 224.

<sup>43</sup>Ibid., pp. 244 ff.

<sup>44</sup>Ibid., pp. 224-225.

Sartre calls the metaphysical position of existential writers "historical relativism." Existential books are supposed to exist by themselves; to be held together by the relations between the characters and their environments.

We hope that our books remain in the air all by themselves and that their words, instead of pointing backwards toward the one who has designed them (as Alain assumed to be the case), will be toboggans, forgotten, unnoticed, and solitary, which will hurl the reader into the midst of a universe where there are no witnesses; in short that our books may exist in the manner of things, of plants, of events, and not at first like products of man. We want to drive providence from our works as we have driven it from our world. We should, I believe, no longer define beauty by the form nor even by the matter, but by the density of being.<sup>45</sup>

The existential novel was not to be an abstract dissertation, but an idea put in the form of an immediate presentation--a philosophical idea existing in the everyday manner of things. In short, a philosophical idea is not the content of a novel, but it may determine a novel's form.

The last step in describing the artist and the work of art is in relation to the audience. The members of an author's audience are those who are capable of reading the words in such a way that their meanings fall together into a self-consistent and complete imaginary whole. What Sartre proposes is to enlarge the audience of the existential novelist by writing in a style understandable to a larger group of readers.<sup>46</sup> If the style does not follow the audience, it is not likely that the audience will follow the style. Since all men do not live in the same social and political situation and do not, therefore, think in the same terms,

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<sup>45</sup>Ibid., p. 229.

<sup>46</sup>Ibid., pp. 238 ff.



it may never be possible to write understandably to all men in the life span of any given society. In order to reach the largest possible number of readers, however, some workable idealization of this largest possible group of appreciators must be accepted. Sartre finds in the Marxist ideal of a classless society the fitting solution to this problem.

If the public is hopelessly divided into various social and political classifications, then as author, to be understood by the greatest number of individuals, he must address himself to the whole man as if he were "unclassed." The problem of committing literature to a social function in the past had been that it (literature) had simply been used by the different classes to achieve their own selfish ends.<sup>47</sup> True literature of commitment must "unclass" literature and thus society. Sartre calls this unclassified literature litterature totale.<sup>48</sup> Total literature integrates the artist with his audience and the audience will all of society. The literature becomes authentic in that the writer becomes aware that there is no distinction between the subject and the public.

...as long as the virtual public remained like a dark sea around the sunny little beach of the real public, the writer risked confusing the interests and cares of man with those of a small and favored group. But, if the public were identified with the concrete universal the writer would really have to write about the human totality.<sup>49</sup>

The final portion of Qu est-ce que la litterature? is an analysis of French literature. In brief, his analysis is as follows: from the 12th to the 16th century, the profession was limited to clerics writing for other clerics; in the 16th and 17th centuries, it was preempted by

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<sup>47</sup>Sartre, Situations II, pp. 9-30.

<sup>48</sup>Ibid., pp. 26-266.

<sup>49</sup>Frechtman, What is Literature?, p. 156.

the aristocratic intelligentsia, and revolved primarily around the salon. But with the rise of the bourgeois in the 18th century, various philosophical points of view, all committed to the technique of analysis, were expressed in literature; Sartre mentions these as idealism, psychology, determinism, utilitarianism, and seriousness, i.e., the assumption that one's existence is necessary. In the 19th century there was a brief reaction in the form of romanticism, based upon an ideology which extolled the virtues of the individual as the center of feeling; Sartre felt that the romantics' appeal to human feeling had at least the virtue of universal reference.<sup>50</sup>

For a description of the task of the literary critic one must turn to the second part of Sartre's Situations II. According to Sartre the critic is a member of the author's audience.<sup>51</sup> The critic's task is to help the general audience to understand the literary work; to widen the literary artist's audience to include as many readers as possible. He thus functions in the literary process, which is basically a communication between consciousnesses. As we have seen, the value of the literary work is in disclosing being in some aspect of its totality; and the critic has fulfilled his function when he has analyzed the texture and structure of the work under consideration in such a way as to disclose the manner in which it reveals the inner structure of the world.<sup>52</sup> All efforts on the part of the critic to classify a work according to one

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<sup>50</sup>Ibid., pp. 67-157.

<sup>51</sup>Sartre, Situations II, p. 38.

<sup>52</sup>Ibid., p. 40.

or another of its properties will miss the essence of the work itself.<sup>53</sup>

In conclusion, it can be seen that Sartre is a more profound and consistent aesthetician than is commonly recognized. It is not as certain, however, that his literary theory is as significant or as adequate. Sartre's distinctive contribution to the theory of literature has been his study of creativity (emphasizing the creative activity of the aesthetic consumer), and its relation to social function. Sartre's goals for committed literature, its aiming at social action and enlarging the reading audience place literature in danger of becoming barren of aesthetic qualities and merely propagandistic. Although this need not necessarily be the case, it is easier to avoid this pitfall in theory than in practice, as demonstrated by the fact that Sartre's own literary themes have become more and more political in their nature. Another point worthy of criticism is Sartre's rejection of poetry and "poetic prose." They have been proscribed because of their tendency to turn the "...gaze towards its (an object's) reality and consider it as an object." Logically there has been an error: species (lyric poetry) and genus (poetry) have been confused. There have been, after all, poets who tried to effect social change and disclose some truth about the world by means of their art work.

Sartre is also open for criticism in his reducing all questions concerning style to the principle that one should write in the style that more successfully enlarges the reading audience. Such a capitulation to practical ends may well jeopardize the aesthetic qualities of a work. Along with this objection one can challenge Sartre's denial that

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<sup>53</sup>Ibid., p. 43.

the intellectuals should in fact be the leaders of the world of letters.  
Finally, Sartre's aim to "unclass" literature is subject to the same  
"realistic" criticisms as the utopianism of Marxism from which it springs.

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