

JEAN-PAUL SARTRE "WHY WRITE?" (1947)

Sartre, Jean-Paul. "Why Write?" Twentieth Century Literary Criticism. Ed. David Lodge. London: Longman, 1972. 371-385.

For Sartre, in keeping with the central postulates of Phenomenology, the literary work exists only through the collaboration of writer and reader: "the operation of reading implies that of writing as its dialectical correlative and these two connected acts necessitate two distinct agents" (373). Each work is obviously 'intended' by someone. Indeed, one of the chief motives in producing art of any kind is that of "introducing order where there was none, by imposing the unity of mind on the diversity of things" (371). As a writer, "I interpose myself between the finality without end which appears in the natural spectacles and the gaze of other men" (378). However, the writer needs the reader to bring the work to fruition: "To make it come into view a concrete act called reading is necessary, and it lasts only as long as this act can last. Beyond that, there are only black marks on paper" (372). "[C]reation can find its fulfilment only in reading, since the artist must entrust to another the job of carrying out what he has begun" (375), Sartre writes.

Reading is, from this point of view, the "synthesis of perception and creation" (373). The reader is free to interpret the text in any which way (s)he pleases: the writer merely "appeals to the reader's freedom to collaborate in the production of the work" (375). The reader 'intends' the work to mean in a way that may or may not coincide with the writer's own intention: "Reading is induction, interpolation, extrapolation, and the basis of these activities rests on the reader's will" (379). Reading is what Sartre calls an "exercise in generosity" (377): "what the writer requires of the reader is not the application of an abstract freedom but the gift of his whole person, with his passions, his prepossessions, his sympathies, his sexual temperament, and his scale of values" (377). As a result of the productive role played by the reader, we never "fathom the artist's intention easily" (379). The writer's intention always remains the "object of conjectures" (379) on the part of the reader. However, whatever the "connections" (379) which the reader "may establish among the different parts of the book--among the chapters or the words--he has a guarantee that they have been expressly willed" (379), they are "intentional" (379). In other words, whatever the reader's interpretation, there is no doubt that the writer was motivated by a particular intention in writing the words in the way that he did.

Sartre's focus is not only on the role played by the reader in the production of meaning. He is also interested in theorising the impact of the work on the reader. The writer's goal is undoubtedly to stir the feelings of the reader, Sartre contends. The best writers have a commitment to their audience, to move them, to shape them, to make them in the final analysis take cognizance of their inherent freedom. The most effective way to accomplish this is via the medium of the feelings. The writer strives to affect the reader emotionally: through the medium of the work, (s)he "shapes our feelings, names them, and attributes them to an imaginary personage who takes it upon himself to live them for us" (375). However, Sartre stresses that the author "should not seek to *overwhelm*" (376) the reader with emotions because freedom is "alienated in passion" (376).

Sartre is also concerned with the notion of Realism, to be precise, the belief that literary works and, by extension art in general merely reflect a pre-given reality. He does not deny that the "objects represented by art appear against the background of the universe" (380). "To write is thus both to disclose the world and to offer it as a task to the generosity of the reader" (382). However, he contends that the "error of realism has been to believe that the real reveals itself to contemplation, and that consequently one could draw an impartial picture of it. How could that be possible since the very perception is partial, since by itself the

very naming is already a modification of the object?" (382). In other words, people inevitably impose interpretations upon the world as a result of which we do not 'access' the world as it really is. There is no question of merely *re-presenting* the world as it really is. In short, the "world is my *task*, that is, the essential and freely accepted function of my freedom is to make that unique and absolute object which is the universe come into being in an unconditioned movement" (381).

For Sartre, the "aesthetic imperative" (383) is thus also a "moral imperative" (383). Both writer and reader have a duty to use words to fight injustice and, thus, to change the world. The most precious thing which must be defended at all costs is humanity's inherent freedom. There is no question of being the "guardian of ideal values" (384) but, rather, of "concrete, everyday freedom which must be protected by our taking sides in political and social struggles" (384). It is for this reason that, through the "various objects which it produces or reproduces, the creative act aims at a total renewal of the world" (380). If "I am given this world with its injustices, it is not so that I might contemplate them coldly, but that I might animate them with my indignation" (383). "As for me who read, if I create and keep alive an unjust world, I cannot help making myself responsible for it" (382). Any work of art is thus an "act of confidence in the freedom of men" (383). The writer writes the gloomiest of literature only so that "free men may feel their freedom as they face it" (383). By the same token, it is inconceivable, Sartre argues, that this "unleashing of generosity provoked by the writer could be used to authorize an injustice, and that the reader could enjoy his freedom while reading a work which approves or accepts or simply abstains from condemning the subjection of man by man" (383). The "writer, a free man addressing free men, has only one subject--freedom" (384), he concludes.