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Crossroads of Literature: Sartre versus the New Novelists

Abstract

The following article aims to present the debate around the question "Que peut la littérature?" between the partisans of committed literature like Sartre, on the one side, and some defenders of Nouveau Roman like Ricardou, on the other. Some of the major arguments of the debate will be outlined in order to show that it essentially ends up being a conversation between Ricardou and Sartre, with the intent to sort out what issues are really at stake. Also the question will be elucidated why Sartre felt the need to return to some of his earliest arguments when he had evolved on so many points.

Keywords: Jean-Paul Sartre, Jean Ricardou, literature, commitment, work of art, language, writer, reader

Fifty years ago, on December 9 in the Mutualité in Paris, the communist student magazine *Clarté* organized a debate around the question "Que peut la littérature?" featuring Jean-Paul Sartre, Simone de Beauvoir, and Jorge Semprun on the side of committed literature and Jean Ricardou, Jean-Pierre Faye, and Yves Berger on the opposing side. Ricardou and Faye were both on the editorial board of *Tel Quel* and were considered defender of the Nouveau Roman. As the editor of *Clarté* and the organizer of the debate, Yves Buin, states in his opening remarks, the debate was conceived as a means of aligning the French Communists with one goal of the recent Congresses of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, namely: "The critique of dogmatism in all its forms and most specifically dogmatism with regard to sectarian positions on art and culture." (Hallier 1965, 18) He rejects the tendency to reduce literature to ideology or to make it serve any sort of political agenda, communist or otherwise, and says that absolute respect must be given to the autonomous development of art, whose fundamental condition is total freedom with regard to the means and form of creation.

Last fall, the *Nouvelle Revue Française* dedicated its September issue to the fiftieth anniversary of the debate in which Sartre's lecture was republished for the first time since

the original publication of the entire debate in 1965. Editor Philippe Forest signals Buin's important claim that, despite being opposed on aesthetic grounds, none of the respondents doubted literature's ability to change the world or at least to act upon it. The real question was how it does this. Toril Moi published an article in 2009 on Simone de Beauvoir's lecture in the debate. For her, the importance of the entire discussion was that it came at an important historical juncture. "In December 1964 it was by no means clear that Ricardou and Faye represented the future of French intellectual life. On the contrary: Beauvoir and Sartre probably never enjoyed greater fame and recognition than at that moment. In the spring Sartre published *Les mots*. In October he was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature, which he refused. In fact, the debate took place the same week that the Nobel Prizes were awarded in Stockholm." (Moi 2009, 190) In the NRF issue Philippe Forest laments the small amount of attention the conference has received since its initial publication. In fact, the debate has not been republished since 1965 and it has never been translated into English. But perhaps this should not come as a surprise as far as Sartre's role is concerned because even Sartre scholars have dismissed the importance of the conference. According to Contat and Rybalka "[Sartre's] lecture, with its repetition and overwhelming abstraction, is certainly not one of his best, Sartre defends himself against the attacks leveled against him by focusing on the reader and not on language and redefines the relationship between the reader and the work." (Louette 2014, 35)

What I would like to do here is outline some of the major arguments of the debate, which essentially ends up being a conversation between Ricardou and Sartre, with the intent to sort out what issues are really at stake. I am also intrigued by why Sartre felt the need to return to some of his earliest arguments when he had evolved on so many points. And what I find most surprising is how much the Sartre of *L'Imaginaire* haunts the entire debate. The other respondents frequently refer to literature as another world, different yet similar to the real, that fascinates the reader. It seems in many ways that the younger generation absorbed the ideas in that book and also in Blanchot and now Sartre finds himself speaking to a younger version of himself. In fact, Ricardou never refers to literature as an absolute and makes continual references to its power to question and contest the real. He even states at the end of his lecture that he chose his original publishing house because it had published Henri Alleg's *La Question* and because the act "donner à lire" (giving something to read) implies "permettre de lire" (allowing one to read), which I am taking to mean that writing and reading must necessarily involve human freedom. This makes Sartre's choice to lead with a discussion of the reader even more surprising. Perhaps Ricardou is out-Sartre-ing Sartre on literature's relationship to the real all the while preserving the creative autonomy of the author? We should also remember one more thing that haunts the

debate and that is Sartre's interview in *Le Monde* in April of that year where he made several incendiary remarks about literature: "I saw children dying of hunger. In the face of a dying child, Nausea carries no weight. What does literature mean in a world of hunger?" And also "Do you believe that I can read Robbe-Grillet in an under-developed country? (...) I think he's a good writer but he writes for the comfortable bourgeois."

Ricardou begins his lecture by setting aside the question "What can literature do?" on the grounds that this question implies that the prior and more fundamental question of "What is literature?" has been sufficiently answered. In an interesting move, he then proceeds to take issue with some of the concepts in Sartre's 1948 essay "What is literature?" a text that was already 16 years old that point. And what is even more interesting, as we will see, is that Sartre allows himself to be dragged back into that old debate using the old terms as if he had not evolved on certain issues and had not written, for example, *Orphée Noir*, *Saint Genet*, or *Les mots*.

After briefly invoking Sartre to let the audience know that his lecture will be mainly a critique of committed literature as it is theorized in "What is literature?" he immediately switches to a discussion of Barthes's notions of the *écrivain* and the *écrivain*. The *écrivain* is the writer who considers language as a means of communication, a vehicle for a message rather than an end in itself. He says that the *écrivain* is also an *informateur* and that he is concerned with information rather than literature. The *écrivain*, on the other hand, is concerned with language itself. He does not write to communicate information, he simply writes. And what he writes is called literature. Ricardou then maps the *écrivain/écrivain* distinction onto Sartre's opposition between the poet and the prose writer in "What is literature?" Ricardou's point in doing this, he explains, is to show that we sometimes talk about the same things using different terms and different things using the same terms. He then goes on to explain: "Therefore we see that what I propose to call literature, Sartre calls poetry, and what I call the domain of the *écrivain* or *information*, he calls literature." (Hallier 1965, 54) While Ricardou insists that he might be splitting hairs, referring to this question of terms as "byzantine minutiae," he insists that what is at stake in this debate is not far from this question of terms. His main point is that he wants to save literary prose and the novelist, which he considers to have more in common with poetry than anything resembling an *écrivain*, from being sullied by Sartre's notion of the prose-writer.

While it may be easy to equate Sartre's poet with Barthes' and Ricardou's use of the term *écrivain*, I would argue that it is not so easy to reduce Sartre's prose writer to the *écrivain* but for more basic reasons than Sartre himself gives in the 1965 interview "L'écrivain et sa langue," where he says that all writing involves some overcoming of these two oppositions. While it is true that Sartre's prose writer is more focused on language as a

tool rather than language as an end in itself the real issue at stake is that of communication and the extent to which the writer succeeds at communicating. Sartre states at the beginning of "For whom does one write?" part three of "What is Literature?", that the preceding explanation of the prose writer is an ideal that remains abstract given the current historical situation. Literature, being comprised of language, which is universal, should in theory be accessible to all but in practice it is not because of certain adverse material conditions. What is more pertinent to the topic of "What can literature do?" is Sartre's brief outline of the history of literature, not for its value as information, but for its demonstration of how language develops historically. This idea of literature considers the historical situation of the writer and the reader and asks who is communicating with whom, who has the ability to communicate, to what extent is there failure or success, and what exactly is being communicated. If there is an essence of literature for Sartre, it is the equivalent of what it does. In times where literature realizes itself successfully, there is progress toward the liberation of oppressed groups, whether it be the rising bourgeois class of the 18th century or black Americans during Jim Crow, literature works because it is read by members of different and often opposing social groups. Literature, viewed here as the expression of subjective lived experience, must be read and understood, or at least grasped through the powers of the imagination in order to bring about a greater understanding and work towards eliminating social barriers.

Sartre gives the example of Richard Wright, whom is said to be understood more or less implicitly by his black readership, which shares a common situation of oppression, as opposed to his white audience, which struggles to understand. Does this mean that for Wright's black audience his work more literary because communication is more successful? Or is it less literary because it is understood implicitly and not with the imagination? As for his white audience, can it be said that Write communicates with them? "They have not lived through what he has lived through. They can understand the negro's condition only by an extreme stretch of the imagination and by relying upon analogies which at any moment may deceive them." (Sartre 1948, 87) In order for literature to do what Sartre says it does historically, working toward overcoming oppositions, then it must involve the successful communication of something that is inherently difficult to communicate: difficult, but not impossible, for Sartre seems to believe unwaveringly throughout his career that no subjective experience is truly incommunicable. As far as this conception of literature is concerned, there is no need to do as Ricardou does and separate literature's essence from its potential, for Sartre what literature is is synonymous with what it does.

This may not sound revolutionary, but it certainly adds nuance to the dismissive equation of Sartre's prose writer and the *écrivain*. This kind of communication does not

subordinate the work of art to any particular message and does not necessarily involve the transmission of information. The message is the literature itself, communication that overcomes the self-other conflict in *Being and Nothingness*. Sartre says that he would rather bury literature with his own hands than make it serve ends which utilize it. In a certain sense, I believe that Sartre's conception of literature evolves to become more in line with Ricardou's statement that "...if the writer has nothing to say before he writes his book, this does not in any way mean that the book, itself, says nothing." (Hallier 1965, 57) Of course the Sartre of "What is Literature?" would not agree with the idea of literature as silence, but probably only on polemical grounds. At the end of his lecture he even refers to literature as "the silence that surrounds language." (Ibid., 121) Where Ricardou is justified in his argument is when he points out the tendency of committed literature to privilege certain subjects over others. He argues that if the essence of literature is situated in language and if the subject of the book is its own composition, then there can be no hierarchy of subjects : "...the death of one man or ten thousand has no more importance than the evolution of a cloud, nor any less." (Ibid., 56) Sartre's preference for a literature of experience does not seem to include much room for the objective viewpoint and formalism of the New Novel.

Ricardou's last line of attack involves the relationship between literature and the physical world. As I mentioned earlier, the proponents of the New Novel, while maintaining their opposition to the idea of commitment, willingly admit that there is an important relationship between literature and the real, which has long been a central tenet of committed literature. Ricardou outright rejects any theory of art for art and suggests that the literary is an aspect of man's existence that is always present and that allows us to see our reality for what it is. Toward the end of his lecture he returns to the more fundamental question of language and says that while language does not necessarily correspond to the physical structure of the world, it nonetheless allows for the creation of a world of fiction whose very existence opposes and questions the physical world.

Jean-Pierre Faye takes a more basic approach and defends the New Novel's ability to explore the basic structure of language to reveal how our reality, is given to us: "Literature (or the novel) can no doubt do anything – nothing besides show how signs are spoken to us. Literature is the ability to say by which signs reality is presented to us." (Ibid., 72) While this sounds similar to Sartre's original claim in "What is Literature?" that literature shows us the present, for Faye, this reality is a product of language itself and is more a determining feature of language rather than something we can control as committed literature would have it. Yves Berger, whose general position leans more toward art for art's sake, agrees that while literature does nothing on its own outside of the acts of reading and writing, another very Sartrean idea, the experience of the imaginary leaves an impression on the

reader that continues in reality. "Literature can do nothing because in the best case scenario, that is to say, when books succeed, are praiseworthy for their literary merit, the images give us the real in themselves, and that makes the real seem depressing, but we have to return to the real because, of course, we have to live." (Ibid., 100) Berger's notion that literature allows the reader to detach from the real recalls Sartre's argument in *L'Imaginaire* whereby the imagination allows us to posit the world as a totality that can then be negated by the image. The world appears as world because of consciousness's ability to imagine.

For Sartre, the power of literature is inextricably linked to the power of the imagination to negate the real in a move that produces a mirror world, or "irreal" *irréel*. Literature must differ enough from reality in order to be seen as literature but retain enough similarities that it can create what he calls in his lecture, "something homologous to reality." The possibility of literature's existence allows the reader to be present to a world that does not exist at the same time that it shows him his world for what it is. "...I only wanted to say that we must know what will be the meaning that the reader looks for by means of the book. Yet, I believe this meaning must be one that the doesn't have in his own life; something escapes him, he has words at his disposal, like any other, but there is something that escapes him in his life since he is looking for something in books." (Sartre 2014, 30)

All of the uncommitted writers seem to be in agreement that literature constitutes a world that is different and separate from reality but that its power comes from the ability to contest the real and allows the writer and reader access to a different world which he can then compare to reality. For Ricardou, man's capacity for literature is exactly what makes a world of hunger appear to us as scandalous. Arguably, this is not far from what Sartre defines at the end of his lecture as literature's power to give *a meaning* to the world, not *the* meaning but *a* meaning. Nonetheless, Sartre finds that the respondents on the opposing end commit an error when they define literature as an absolute, even though I think he is the only one who speaks of it in those terms, because it treats the reader as a means rather than a creative collaborator. He rejects Berger's equation of literature with a dream, and for that matter anything having to do with death (as in Blanchot) or memory (as in Proust) : "Yet, nothing is more false, for the majority of literary works, for first of all creation is temporalized, and then the work of art is not a dream, it is work ; therefore it is engaged in a struggle with reality, a reality that is perfectly verbal, as I acknowledged, but that nonetheless offers the most staunch resistance." (Hallier 1965, 115)

Perhaps what is most central to this debate but never made explicit is the question of language and its relationship to reality. As literature is made up of language, then any debate about literature's power also necessarily involves a discussion of language and how it relates to the world. For Ricardou, the physical world is structurally different from reality,

while for Sartre it is perfectly verbal. I would argue that this has everything to do with why Sartre begins his lecture with a discussion of the reader, because it is the reader who lends his perception to the creation of the literary work and whose perception of the real is shaped by language. This entire process, which I believe is similar to what Sartre calls the dialectic of the real and the imaginary, reflects the true power of literature. However, it is also a willingness on his part to ignore the common ground which all of the authors share when he begins: "What does that mean today, the statement 'the literary work is its own end, its own lesson'? That means that you, readers, you are only a means; that means that the act of reading is only serves to close the circuit ('boucler la boucle')." (Ibid., 110) Even if the respondents believe literature to be an absolute, it is not an absolute that plays no role in the real. If all are in agreement that the power of literature involves both writers and readers, whose experience of the literary helps define reality, how do we really tell if the reader is being used or if he is a creative collaborator as Sartre would have it? Sartre's choice to shape his argument in these terms seems all the more surprising given that he makes the exact opposite argument with regard to Genet. Sartre's Genet is a writer who has nothing to communicate, albeit because he is not allowed to communicate, who uses his reader as a means to simply recreate his own poetic self. Nonetheless it is in the Genet study where we find Sartre's most interesting explanation of the relationship between language and reality up until that point in his career and provides important background to the question of what literature can do by explaining how language relates to being.

What is unique about the Genet study that sets it apart from a work like *Being and Nothingness* and *What is Literature* is that Being is now defined as a linguistic reality controlled by the ruling class, or whom Sartre refers to as the Just. Prose has become the politicized guardian of being, nature, and goodness and also defines what it is considered as truth. From the beginning we see just how far Sartre's faith in prose and communication has been eroded. Hardly any authors other than Genet are mentioned and when they are it is with a derisive tone. The few times he mentions prose in this work, other than to describe Genet's false prose, it is in reference to mundane and non-literary tasks, drawing up an insurance contract, setting up a catalog in a library, for example. While Sartre's refusal to acknowledge any other cases of literary prose and other prose writers in *Saint Genet* could have many reasons, it seems that Genet represents a kind of exquisite paradox for Sartre, whereby a writer whose ability to communicate is sacrificed to give birth to a purely literary voice. Through his radical inability to communicate, Genet avoids the stagnant pool of clichés into which prose has fallen. What Lyotard says of the Flaubert study seems equally appropriate here: "In capitalism prose has ceased being, for Sartre, the medium within which transcendences communicate. It has become the accumulation of established mean-

ings. We no longer speak within it, but are rather spoken. The rule is no longer free usage, but the constraint of commonplaces and received ideas. It is within that collapse that the crisis of democracy and the decline of the bourgeoisie are to be situated: meaning, become immanent, is escaping signifying subjects." (Hollier 1986) For Sartre, Genet is not only hope for language, but hope for new meaning, a challenge to the stagnation of the bourgeois order and conventional morality.

Genet is able to do this because he relies on what Sartre calls the *sens* of language, which is associated with poetry, instead of its *signification*, which is associated with prose. *Signification* and *sens* are two simultaneously occurring aspects of language that pull in opposite directions: the *sens* moves toward nothingness, evoking the presence of the absence of the thing to which it refers in the case of Genet while *signification* points toward things or concepts in the world. Sartre explains: "...the word is at the same time sonorous object and vehicle of meaning. If you direct your attention toward the *signification*, the word disappears and you move past it to ground the "meaning" in the thing signified. If, on the other hand, exiled from the Universe, you are only attentive to the verbal body, the only reality that you can possess and hold between your tongue and your lips, then thing signified disappears and the *signification* becomes a fading away of being, a haze beyond the word that dissipates." (Sartre 1952, 346) For Sartre, Genet's work represents pure *sens*, or the idea of language with no signified. His position as an outsider cuts him off from the linguistic reality of the Just where words readily disappear in front of the objects or concepts they signify. The *sens* of words, of which Genet is keenly aware, on the other hand, refers to the opaqueness of words as they are viewed as things themselves and no longer a transparent signifier that points to something: "a transcendence fallen into immanence." (Ibid., 340) Lacking a real signifier, words cause the things they refer to evaporate like smoke. The reality of words becomes a substitute for the reality of things. When used outside of the realm of reciprocal relationships, the realm where communication takes place, language becomes, for Genet and, I would argue, for literature in general, a detachment from the world, or a world unto itself.

Sartre's *Genet* is able to make full use of the *sens* of language because reality is structured like language. He creates a trap for the reader and lures him. His language pulls the reader away from the real and causes him to follow the words as empty signifiers toward the vanishing point to which they refer. "Genet tempts us by the best of ourselves; he appeals to our generosity, to our free will, he demands as any other artist that we lend ourselves to his enterprise..." and further down "Since to read is to recreate, we recreate, for beauty's sake, the homosexual intercourse that is sumptuously bedecked with the rarest of words. But the words fade away, leaving us face to face with the residue, a mixture of

sweat and filth, terrible perfumes, blood and excrement." (Ibid., 552) To read Genet is to enter the subjectivity of the outcast, to see the world through the eyes of the one that society objectifies to the extreme, the homosexual criminal. By assuming Genet's subjectivity in this imaginary world, the reader opens himself to a new set of possibilities: namely the possibility that he could be like Genet. For Sartre, a willingness to imagine that one could be other, or be oneself and other, is probably its greatest power.

Rather than envision literature as an absolute, which would essentially undo all ties between literature and the world, Sartre sees the literary as a relative absolute. Its existence is a parasite on the original linguistic structure that we come to know when we are introduced to language, which is a structure of prose. Genet was born into the world of prose and learned it like any other child until he was named a thief and transformed into a poet. In this regard, Sartre's theory of commitment provides the framework in which literature can contest reality because it has its origins in reality. As he explains in *Les mots*, literature is not a holy order to be contemplated respectfully from a distance, it has a place in the real world. While words take on a life of their own, as in the case of Genet, they never completely lose their relationship to the world; as absolute and distant as language and literature become, they must retain at least a small element of their signifying function in order to make sense.

So where does all this leave us? Arguably, there is bad faith on both sides and a willingness to not find common ground but there is also convergence toward a more central position as well. Ricardou was still clinging to an outdated theory of commitment and an understanding that lacked nuance. However, his reference to the literary as something that is always present in the human experience, that gives meaning to the world, recalls Sartre's argument in *L'Imaginaire*. Sartre also refuses to acknowledge the possibility that even if literature were an absolute it could still play an important social role. Sartre's rejection of literature as absolute must be seen in light of *Les mots* and also his critique of Flaubert, which amounts to a rejection of art for art's sake, another idea that Ricardou also rejects several times in his lecture. There must be some room for agreement on the spectrum between art for art's sake and commitment. And then there is also a convergence of opinion. Sartre moves closer toward a more Blanchot-like definition of literature as silence, which is also how he defines Genet's work. The most successful literature allows the reader to recreate a global signification, something homologous to his own reality, the world as if it had as its origin in human freedom, a unifying structure which he lacks in everyday life, which is certainly not far from a kind of absolute. In these highly political times, even the New Novelists, whose literature seemed gratuitous and unhumanistic for Sartre, agreed that literature plays an important social role by shaping the readers experience of reality.

I will end with a quote from Berger that I think summarizes, if not the theoretical position, at least the spirit with which all six respondents, all men and women of letters and of the left. "And all of us here, we are all reactionary writers are we are so by necessity, inevitably, we are all concerned about dying children, each one according to his degree of courage and the firmness of his convictions and the quality of his sensibilities. For the reactionary writers and the men of the left that we are, I only know one solution, le va-et-vient." Without literature, we will never know when it's time to put down the book for a minute and do something else.

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