LITERATURE & EXISTENTIALISM

SARTRE

classical literary manifesto by the founder of French existentialism $1.75

Jean-Paul Sartre

literature & existentialism

TRANSLATED FROM THE FRENCH
BY BERNARD FRECHTMAN

THE CITADEL PRESS
NEW YORK

Original title: WHAT IS LITERATURE?
First paperbound edition, July, 1962

Library of Congress Catalog Card Number 62-17831
Manufactured in the United States of America
Published by The Citadel Press,
222 Park Avenue South, New York 3, N. Y.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

and earth, to express what their nature keeps them from expressing.

Similarly, the signification of a melody—if one can still speak of signification—is nothing outside of the melody itself, unlike ideas, which can be adequately rendered in several ways. Call it joyous or somber. It will always be over and above anything you can say about it. Not because its passions, which are perhaps at the origin of the invented theme, have, by being incorporated into notes, undergone a transubstantiation and a transmutation. A cry of grief is a sign of the grief which provokes it, but a song of grief is both grief itself and something other than grief. Or, if one wishes to adopt the existentialist vocabulary, it is a grief which does not *exist* any more, which *is*. But, you will say, suppose the painter does houses? That's just it. He *makes* them, that is, he creates an imaginary house on the canvas and not a sign of a house. And the house which thus appears preserves all the ambiguity of real houses.

The writer can guide you and, if he describes a hovel, make it seem the symbol of social injustice and provoke your indignation. The painter is mute. He presents you with *a* hovel, that's all. You are free to see in it what you like. That attic window will never be the symbol of misery; for that, it would have to be a sign, whereas it is a thing. The bad painter looks for the type. He paints the Arab, the Child, the Woman; the good one knows that neither the Arab nor the proletarian exists either in reality or on his canvas. He offers a workman, a certain workman. And what are we to think about a workman? An infinity of contradictory things. All thoughts and all

vinced, all one need do is take a look at contemporary production. "At least," critics say triumphantly, "you can't even dream of engaging it." Indeed. But why should I want to? Because it uses words as does prose? But it does not use them in the same way, and it does not even *use* them at all. I should rather say that it serves them. Poets are men who refuse to *utilize* language. Now, since the quest for truth takes place in and by language conceived as a certain kind of instrument, it is unnecessary to imagine that they aim to discern or expound the true. Nor do they dream of *naming* the world, and, this being the case, they name nothing at all, for naming implies a perpetual sacrifice of the name to the object named, or, as Hegel would say, the name is revealed as the inessential in the face of the thing which is essential. They do not speak, neither do they keep still; it is something different. It has been said that they wanted to destroy the "word" by monstrous couplings, but this is false. For then they would have to be thrown into the midst of utilitarian language and would have had to try to retrieve words from it in odd little groups, as for example "horse" and "butter" by writing "horses of butter."[3]

Besides the fact that such an enterprise would require infinite time, it is not conceivable that one can keep oneself on the plane of the utilitarian project, consider words as instruments, and at the same contemplate taking their instrumentality away from them. In fact, the poet has withdrawn from 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 penetrate it at

will like a pane of glass and pursue the thing signified, or turn his gaze toward its *reality* and consider it as an object. The man who talks is beyond words and near the object, whereas the poet is on this side of them. For the former, they are domesticated; for the latter they are in the wild state. For the former, they are useful conventions, tools which gradually wear out and which one throws away when they are no longer serviceable; for the latter, they are natural things which sprout naturally upon the earth like grass and trees.

But if he dwells upon words, as does the painter with colors and the musician with sounds, that does not mean that they have lost all signification in his eyes. Indeed, it is signification alone which can give words their verbal unity. Without it they are frittered away into sounds and strokes of the pen. Only, it too becomes natural. It is no longer the goal which is always out of reach and which human transcendence is always aiming at, but a property of each term, analogous to the expression of a face, to the little sad or gay meaning of sounds and colors. Having flowed into the word, having been absorbed by its sonority or visual aspect, having been thickened and defaced, it too is a thing, increate and eternal.

For the poet, language is a structure of the external world. The speaker is *in a situation* in language; he is invested with words. They are prolongations of his meanings, his pincers, his antennae, his eyeglasses. 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. The poet is outside of language. He sees words

inside out as if he did not share the human condition, and as if he were first meeting the word as a barrier as he comes toward men. Instead of first knowing things by their name, it seems that first he has a silent contact with them, since, turning toward that other species of thing which for him is the word, touching them, testing them, palping them, he discovers in them a slight luminosity of their own and particular affinities with the earth, the sky, the water, and all created things.

Not knowing how to use them as a *sign* of an aspect of the world, he sees in the word the *image* of one of these aspects. And the verbal image he chooses for its resemblance to the willow tree or the ash tree is not necessarily the word which we use to designate these objects. As he is already on the outside, he considers words as a trap to catch a fleeing reality rather than as indicators which throw him out of himself into the midst of things. In short, all language is for him the mirror of the world. As a result, important changes take place in the internal economy of the word. Its sonority, its length, its masculine or feminine endings, its visual aspect, compose for him a face of flesh which *represents* rather than expresses signification. Inversely, as the signification is *realized*, the physical aspect of the word is reflected within it, and it, in its turn, functions as an image of the verbal body. Like its sign, too, for it has lost its pre-eminence; since words, like things, are increate, the poet does not decide whether the former exist for the latter or vice-versa.

Thus, between the word and the thing signified, there is established a double reciprocal relation of magical resemblance and signification. And the poet does not *utilize*

his feelings into his poem, he ceases to recognize them; the words take hold of them, penetrate them, and metamorphose them; they do not signify them, even in his eyes. Emotion has become thing; it now has the opacity of things; it is compounded by the ambiguous properties of the vocables in which it has been enclosed. And above all, there is always much more in each phrase, in each verse, as there is more than simple anguish in the yellow sky over Golgotha. The word, the phrase-thing, inexhaustible as things, everywhere overflows the feeling which has produced them. How can one hope to provoke the indignation or the political enthusiasm of the reader when the very thing one does is to withdraw him from the human condition and invite him to consider with the eyes of God a language that has been turned inside out? Someone may say, "You're forgetting the poets of the Resistance. You're forgetting Pierre Emmanuel." Not a bit! They're the very ones I was going to give as examples.[4]

But even if the poet is forbidden to engage himself, is that a reason for exempting the writer of prose? What do they have in common? It is true that the prosewriter and the poet both write. But there is nothing in common between these two acts of writing except the movement of the hand which traces the letters. Otherwise, their universes are incommunicable, and what is good for one is not good for the other. Prose is, in essence, utilitarian. I would readily define the prose-writer as a man who *makes use* of words. M. Jourdan made prose to ask for his slippers, and Hitler to declare war on Poland. The writer is a *speaker*; he designates, demonstrates, orders, refuses, interpolates, begs, insults, persuades, in-

I emerge from it a little more, since I go beyond it toward the future.

Thus, the prose-writer is a man who has chosen a certain method of secondary action which we may call action by disclosure. It is therefore permissible to ask him this second question: "What aspect of the world do you want to disclose? What change do you want to bring into the world by this disclosure?" The "engaged" writer knows that words are action. He knows that to reveal is to change and that one can reveal only by planning to change. He has given up the impossible dream of giving an impartial picture of Society and the human condition. Man is the being toward whom no being can be impartial, not even God. For God, if He existed, would be, as certain mystics have seen Him, in a *situation* in relationship to man. And He is also the being Who can not even see a situation without changing it, for His gaze congeals, destroys, or sculpts, or, as does eternity, changes the object in itself. It is in love, in hate, in anger, in fear, in joy, in indignation, in admiration, in hope, in despair, that man and the world reveal themselves *in their truth.* Doubtless, the engaged writer can be mediocre; he can even be conscious of being so; but as one can not write without the intention of succeeding perfectly, the modesty with which he envisages his work should not divert him from constructing it *as if* it were to have the greatest celebrity. He should never say to himself "Bah! I'll be lucky if I have three thousand readers," but rather, "What would happen if everybody read what I wrote?" He remembers what Mosca said beside the coach which carried Fabrizio and Sanseverina away, "If the word Love

comes up between them, I'm lost." He knows that he is the man who names what has not yet been named or what dares not tell its name. He knows that he makes the word "love" and the word "hate" *surge up* and with them love and hate between men who had not yet decided upon their feelings. He knows that words, as Brice-Parrain says, are "loaded pistols." If he speaks, he fires. He may be silent, but since he has chosen to fire, he must do it like a man, by aiming at targets, and not like a child, at random, by shutting his eyes and firing merely for the pleasure of hearing the shot go off.

Later on we shall try to determine what the goal of literature may be. But from this point on we may conclude that the writer has chosen to reveal the world and particularly to reveal man to other men so that the latter may assume full responsibility before the object which has been thus laid bare. It is assumed that no one is ignorant of the law because there is a code and because the law is written down; thereafter, you are free to violate it, but you know the risks you run. Similarly, 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. And since he has once engaged himself in the universe of language, he can never again pretend that he can not speak. Once you enter the universe of significations, there is nothing you can do to get out of it. Let words organize themselves freely and they will make sentences, and each sentence contains language in its entirety and refers back to the whole universe. Silence itself is defined in relationship to words, as the pause in music receives its meaning from the group of

notes around it. This silence is a moment of language; being silent is not being dumb; it is to refuse to speak, and therefore to keep on speaking. Thus, if a writer has chosen to remain silent on any aspect whatever of the world, or, according to an expression which says just what it means, to *pass over* it in silence, one has the right to ask him a third question: "Why have you spoken of this rather than that, and—since you speak in order to bring about change—why do you want to change this rather than that?"

All this does not prevent there being a manner of writing. One is not a writer for having chosen to say certain things, but for having chosen to say them in a certain way. And, to be sure, the style makes the value of the prose. But it should pass unnoticed. Since words are transparent and since the gaze looks through them, it would be absurd to slip in among them some panes of rough glass. Beauty is in this case only a gentle and imperceptible force. In a painting it shines forth at the very first sight; in a book it hides itself; it acts by persuasion like the charm of a voice or a face. It does not coerce; it inclines a person without his suspecting it, and he thinks that he is yielding to arguments when he is really being solicited by a charm that he does not see. The ceremonial of the mass is not faith; it disposes the harmony of words; their beauty, the balance of the phrases, *dispose* the passions of the reader without his being aware and orders them like the mass, like music, like the dance. If he happens to consider them by themselves, he loses the meaning; there remains only a boring seesaw of phrases.

In prose the aesthetic pleasure is pure only if it is

the social and the metaphysical engage the artist in finding a new language and new techniques. If we no longer write as they did in the eighteenth century, it is because the language of Racine and Saint-Evremond does not lend itself to talking about locomotives or the proletariat. After that, the purists will perhaps forbid us to write about locomotives. But art has never been on the side of the purists.

If that is the principle of engagement, what objection can one have to it? And above all *what objection has been made to it*? It has seemed to me that my opponents have not had their hearts in their work very much and that their articles contain nothing more than a long scandalized sigh which drags on over two or three columns. I should have liked to know *in the name of what*, with what conception of literature, they condemned engagement. But they have not said; they themselves have not known. The most reasonable thing would have been to support their condemnation on the old theory of art for art's sake. But none of them can accept it. That is also disturbing. We know very well that pure art and empty art are the same thing and that aesthetic purism was a brilliant maneuver of the bourgeois of the last century who preferred to see themselves denounced as philistines rather than as exploiters. Therefore, they themselves admitted that the writer had to speak about something. But about what? I believe that their embarrassment would have been extreme if Fernandez had not found for them, after the other war, the notion of the *message*. The writer of today, they say, should in no case occupy himself with temporal affairs. Neither should he

paper. And when the critic reanimates these spots, when he makes letters and words of them, they speak to him of passions which he does not feel, of bursts of anger without objects, of dead fears and hopes. It is a whole disembodied world which surrounds him, where human feelings, because they are no longer affecting, have passed on to the status of exemplary feelings and, in a word, of *values*. So he persuades himself that he has entered into relations with an intelligible world which is like the truth of his daily sufferings. And their reason for being. He thinks that nature imitates art, as for Plato the world of the senses imitates that of the archetypes. And during the time he is reading, his everyday life becomes an appearance. His nagging wife, his hunchbacked son, they too are appearances. And he will put up with them because Xenophon has drawn the portrait of Xantippe and Shakespeare that of Richard the Third.

It is a holiday for him when contemporary authors do him the favor of dying. Their books, too raw, too living, too urgent, pass on to the other shore; they become less and less affecting and more and more beautiful. After a short stay in Purgatory they go on to people the intelligible heaven with new values. Bergotte, Swann, Siegfried and Bella, and Monsieur Teste are recent acquisitions. He is waiting for Nathanaël and Ménalque. As for the writers who persist in living, he asks them only not to move about too much, and to make an effort to resemble from now on the dead men they will be. Valéry, who for twenty-five years had been publishing posthumous books, managed the matter very nicely. That is why, like some

permits some individuals to put theirs into commerce, and all adults may procure it for themselves. For many people today, works of the mind are thus little straying souls which one acquires at a modest price; there is good old Montaigne's, dear La Fontaine's, and that of Jean-Jacques and of Jean-Paul and of delicious Gérard. What is called literary art is the ensemble of the treatments which make them inoffensive. Tanned, refined, chemically treated, they provide their acquirers with the opportunity of devoting some moments of a life completely turned outward to the cultivation of subjectivity. Custom guarantees it to be without risk. Montaigne's skepticism? Who can take it seriously since the author of the *Essays* got frightened when the plague ravaged Bordeaux? Or Rousseau's humanitarianism, since "Jean-Jacques" put his children into an orphanage? And the strange revelations of *Sylvie,* since Gérard de Nerval was mad? At the very most, the professional critic will set up infernal dialogues between them and will inform us that French thought is a perpetual colloquy between Pascal and Montaigne. In so doing he has no intention of making Pascal and Montaigne more alive, but of making Malraux and Gide more dead. Finally, when the internal contradictions of the life and the work have made both of them useless, when the message, in its imponderable depth, has taught us these capital truths, "that man is neither good nor bad," "that there is a great deal of suffering in human life," "that genius is only great patience," this melancholy cuisine will have achieved its purpose, and the reader, as he lays down the book, will be able to cry out with a tranquil soul, "All this is only literature."

II

WHY WRITE?

Each one has his reasons: for one, art is a flight; for another, a means of conquering. But one can flee into a hermitage, into madness, into death. One can conquer by arms. Why does it have to be *writing*, why does one have to manage his escapes and conquests by *writing*? Because, behind the various aims of authors, there is a deeper and more immediate choice which is common to all of us. We shall try to elucidate this choice, and we shall see whether it is not in the name of this very choice of writing that the engagement of writers must be required.

Each of our perceptions is accompanied by the consciousness that human reality is a "revealer," that is, it is through human reality that "there is" being, or, to put it differently, that man is the means by which things are manifested. It is our presence in the world which multiplies relations. It is we who set up a relationship between this tree and that bit of sky. Thanks to us, that star which has been dead for millennia, that quarter moon, and that dark river are disclosed in the unity of a landscape. It is the speed of our auto and our airplane which organizes the great masses of the earth. With each of our acts, the

world reveals to us a new face. But, if we know that we are directors of being, we also know that we are not its producers. If we turn away from this landscape, it will sink back into its dark permanence. At least, it will sink back; there is no one mad enough to think that it is going to be annihilated. It is we who shall be annihilated, and the earth will remain in its lethargy until another consciousness comes along to awaken it. Thus, to our inner certainty of being "revealers" is added that of being inessential in relation to the thing revealed.

One of the chief motives of artistic creation is certainly the need of feeling that we are essential in relationship to the world. If I fix on canvas or in writing a certain aspect of the fields or the sea or a look on someone's face which I have disclosed, I am conscious of having produced them by condensing relationships, by introducing order where there was none, by imposing the unity of mind on the diversity of things. That is, I feel myself essential in relation to my creation. But this time it is the created object which escapes me; I can not reveal and produce at the same time. The creation becomes inessential in relation to the creative activity. First of all, even if it appears to others as definitive, the created object always seems to us in a state of suspension; we can always change this line, that shade, that word. Thus, it never *forces itself*. A novice painter asked his teacher, "When should I consider my painting finished?" And the teacher answered, "When you can look at it in amazement and say to yourself '*I'm* the one who did *that*!' "

Which amounts to saying "never." For it is virtually

considering one's work with someone else's eyes and revealing what one has created. But it is self-evident that we are proportionally less conscious of the thing produced and more conscious of our productive activity. When it is a matter of pottery or carpentry, we work according to traditional norms, with tools whose usage is codified; it is Heidegger's famous "they" who are working with our hands. In this case, the result can seem to us sufficiently strange to preserve its objectivity in our eyes. But if we ourselves produce the rules of production, the measures, the criteria, and if our creative drive comes from the very depths of our heart, then we never find anything but ourselves in our work. It is we who have invented the laws by which we judge it. It is our history, our love, our gaiety that we recognize in it. Even if we should regard it without touching it any further, we never *receive* from it that gaiety or love. We put them into it. The results which we have obtained on canvas or paper never seem to us *objective*. We are too familiar with the processes of which they are the effects. These processes remain a subjective discovery; they are ourselves, our inspiration, our ruse, and when we seek to *perceive* our work, we create it again, we repeat mentally the operations which produced it; each of its aspects appears as a result. Thus, in the perception, the object is given as the essential thing and the subject as the inessential. The latter seeks essentiality in the creation and obtains it, but then it is the object which becomes the inessential.

This dialectic is nowhere more apparent than in the art of writing, for the literary object is a peculiar top which exists only in movement. 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. Now, the writer can not read what he writes, whereas the shoemaker can put on the shoes he has just made if they are his size, and the architect can live in the house he has built. In reading, one foresees; one waits. He foresees the end of the sentence, the following sentence, the next page. He waits for them to confirm or disappoint his foresights. The reading is composed of a host of hypotheses, of dreams followed by awakenings, of hopes and deceptions. Readers are always ahead of the sentence they are reading in a merely probable future which partly collapses and partly comes together in proportion as they progress, which withdraws from one page to the next and forms the moving horizon of the literary object. Without waiting, without a future, without ignorance, there is no objectivity.

Now the operation of writing involves an implicit quasi-reading which makes real reading impossible. When the words form under his pen, the author doubtless sees them, but he does not see them as the reader does, since he knows them before writing them down. The function of his gaze is not to reveal, by stroking them, the sleeping words which are waiting to be read, but to control the sketching of the signs. In short, it is a purely regulating mission, and the view before him reveals nothing except for slight slips of the pen. The writer neither foresees nor conjectures; he *projects*. It often happens that he awaits, as they say, the inspiration. But one does not wait for himself the way he waits for others. If he hesitates, he knows that the future is not

made, that he himself is going to make it, and if he still does not know what is going to happen to his hero, that simply means that he has not thought about it, that he has not decided upon anything. The future is then a blank page, whereas the future of the reader is two hundred pages filled with words which separate him from the end. Thus, the writer meets everywhere only *his* knowledge, *his* will, *his* plans, in short, himself. He touches only his own subjectivity; the object he creates is out of reach; he does not create it *for himself*. If he rereads himself, it is already too late. The sentence will never quite be a thing in his eyes. He goes to the very limits of the subjective but without crossing it. He appreciates the effect of a touch, of an epigram, of a well-placed adjective, but it is the effect they will have on others. He can judge it, not feel it. Proust never discovered the homosexuality of Charlus, since he had decided upon it even before starting on his book. And if a day comes when the book takes on for its author a semblance of objectivity, it is that years have passed, that he has forgotten it, that its spirit is quite foreign to him, and doubtless he is no longer capable of writing it. This was the case with Rousseau when he reread the *Social Contract* at the end of his life.

Thus, it is not true that one writes for himself. That would be the worst blow. In projecting his emotions on paper, one barely manages to give them a languishing extension. The creative act is only an incomplete and abstract moment in the production of a work. If the author existed alone he would be able to write as much as he liked; the work as *object* would never see the light of day and he would either have to put down his pen or

despair. But the operation of writing implies that of reading as its dialectical correlative and these two connected acts necessitate two distinct agents. It is the conjoint effort of author and reader which brings upon the scene that concrete and imaginary object which is the work of the mind. There is no art except for and by others.

Reading seems, in fact, to be the synthesis of perception and creation.[1] It supposes the essentiality of both the subject and the object. The object is essential because it is strictly transcendent, because it imposes its own structures, and because one must wait for it and observe it; but the subject is also essential because it is required not only to disclose the object (that is, to make *there be* an object) but also so that this object might *be* (that is, to produce it). In a word, the reader is conscious of disclosing in creating, of creating by disclosing. In reality, it is not necessary to believe that reading is a mechanical operation and that signs make an impression upon him as light does on a photographic plate. If he is inattentive, tired, stupid, or thoughtless, most of the relations will escape him. He will never manage to "catch on" to the object (in the sense in which we see that fire "catches" or "doesn't catch"). He will draw some phrases out of the shadow, but they will seem to appear as random strokes. If he is at his best, he will project beyond the words a synthetic form, each phrase of which will be no more than a partial function: the "theme," the "subject," or the "meaning." Thus, from the very beginning, the

1. The same is true in different degrees regarding the spectator's attitude before other works of art (paintings, symphonies, statues, etc.)

meaning is no longer contained in the words, since it is he, on the contrary, who allows the signification of each of them to be understood; and the literary object, though realized *through* language, is never given *in* language. On the contrary, it is by nature a silence and an opponent of the word. In addition, the hundred thousand words aligned in a book can be read one by one so that the meaning of the work does not emerge. Nothing is accomplished if the reader does not put himself from the very beginning and almost without a guide at the height of this silence; if, in short, he does not invent it and does not then place there, and hold on to, the words and sentences which he awakens. And if I am told that it would be more fitting to call this operation a re-invention or a discovery, I shall answer that, first, such a re-invention would be as new and as original an act as the first invention. And, especially, when an object has never existed before, there can be no question of re-inventing it or discovering it. For if the silence about which I am speaking is really the goal at which the author is aiming, he has, at least, never been familiar with it; his silence is subjective and anterior to language. It is the absence of words, the undifferentiated and lived silence of inspiration, which the word will then particularize, whereas the silence produced by the reader is an object. And at the very interior of this object there are more silences—which the author does not tell. It is a question of silences which are so particular that they could not retain any meaning outside of the object which the reading causes to appear. However, it is these which give it its density and its particular face.

To say that they are unexpressed is hardly the word; for they are precisely the inexpressible. And that is why one does not come upon them at any definite moment in the reading; they are everywhere and nowhere. The quality of the marvelous in *The Wanderer* (*Le Grand Meaulnes*), the grandiosity of *Armance*, the degree of realism and truth of Kafka's mythology, these are never given. The reader must invent them all in a continual exceeding of the written thing. To be sure, the author guides him, but all he does is guide him. The landmarks he sets up are separated by the void. The reader must unite them; he must go beyond them. In short, reading is directed creation.

On the one hand, the literary object has no other substance than the reader's subjectivity; Raskolnikov's waiting is *my* waiting which I lend him. Without this impatience of the reader he would remain only a collection of signs. His hatred of the police magistrate who questions him is my hatred which has been solicited and wheedled out of me by signs, and the police magistrate himself would not exist without the hatred I have for him via Raskolnikov. That is what animates him, it is his very flesh.

But on the other hand, the words are there like traps to arouse our feelings and to reflect them toward us. Each word is a path of transcendence; it shapes our feelings, names them, and attributes them to an imaginary personage who takes it upon himself to live them for us and who has no other substance than these borrowed passions; he confers objects, perspectives, and a horizon upon them.

Thus, for the reader, all is to do and all is already done; the work exists only at the exact level of his capacities; while he reads and creates, he knows that he can always go further in his reading, can always create more profoundly, and thus the work seems to him as inexhaustible and opaque as things. We would readily reconcile that "rational intuition" which Kant reserved to divine Reason with this absolute production of qualities, which, to the extent that they emanate from our subjectivity, congeal before our eyes into impermeable objectivities.

Since the creation can find its fulfillment only in reading, since the artist must entrust to another the job of carrying out what he has begun, since it is only through the consciousness of the reader that he can regard himself as essential to his work, all literary work is an appeal. To write is to make an appeal to the reader that he lead into objective existence the revelation which I have undertaken by means of language. And if it should be asked *to what* the writer is appealing, the answer is simple. As the sufficient reason for the appearance of the aesthetic object is never found either in the book (where we find merely solicitations to produce the object) or in the author's mind, and as his subjectivity, which he cannot get away from, cannot give a reason for the act of leading into objectivity, the appearance of the work of art is a new event which cannot *be explained* by anterior data. And since this directed creation is an absolute beginning, it is therefore brought about by the freedom of the reader, and by what is purest in that freedom. Thus, the writer appeals to the reader's freedom to collaborate in the production of his work.

It will doubtless be said that all tools address themselves to our freedom since they are the instruments of a possible action, and that the work of art is not unique in that. And it is true that the tool is the congealed outline of an operation. But it remains on the level of the hypothetical imperative. I may use a hammer to nail up a case or to hit my neighbor over the head. Insofar as I consider it in itself, it is not an appeal to my freedom; it does not put me face to face with it; rather, it aims at using it by substituting a set succession of traditional procedures for the free invention of means. The book does not serve my freedom; it requires it. Indeed, one cannot address himself to freedom as such by means of constraint, fascination, or entreaties. There is only one way of attaining it; first, by recognizing it, then, having confidence in it, and finally, requiring of it an act, an act in its own name, that is, in the name of the confidence that one brings to it.

Thus, the book is not, like the tool, a means for any end whatever; the end to which it offers itself is the reader's freedom. And the Kantian expression "finality without end" seems to me quite inappropriate for designating the work of art. In fact, it implies that the aesthetic object presents only the appearance of a finality and is limited to soliciting the free and ordered play of the imagination. It forgets that the imagination of the spectator has not only a regulating function, but a constitutive one. It does not play; it is called upon to recompose the beautiful object beyond the traces left by the artist. The imagination can not revel in itself any more than can the

other functions of the mind; it is always on the outside, always engaged in an enterprise. There would be finality without end if some object offered such a set ordering that it would lead us to suppose that it has one even though we can not ascribe one to it. By defining the beautiful in this way one can — and this is Kant's aim — liken the beauty of art to natural beauty, since a flower, for example, presents so much symmetry, such harmonious colors, and such regular curves, that one is immediately tempted to seek a finalist explanation for all these properties and to see them as just so many means at the disposal of an unknown end. But that is exactly the error. The beauty of nature is in no way comparable to that of art. The work of art *does not have* an end; there we agree with Kant. But the reason is that it is an end. The Kantian formula does not account for the appeal which resounds at the basis of each painting, each statue, each book. Kant believes that the work of art first exists as fact and that it is then seen. Whereas, it exists only if one *looks* at it and if it is first pure appeal, pure exigence to exist. It is not an instrument whose existence is manifest and whose end is undetermined. It presents itself as a task to be discharged; from the very beginning it places itself on the level of the categorical imperative. You are perfectly free to leave that book on the table. But if you open it, you assume responsibility for it. For freedom is not experienced by its enjoying its free subjective functioning, but in a creative act required by an imperative. This absolute end, this imperative which is transcendent yet acquiesced in, which freedom itself adopts as its own,

is what we call a value. The work of art is a value because it is an appeal.

If I appeal to my readers so that we may carry the enterprise which I have begun to a successful conclusion, it is self-evident that I consider him as a pure freedom, as an unconditioned activity; thus, in no case can I address myself to his passivity, that is, try to *affect* him, to communicate to him, from the very first, emotions of fear, desire, or anger. There are, doubtless, authors who concern themselves solely with arousing these emotions because they are foreseeable, manageable, and because they have at their disposal sure-fire means for provoking them. But it is also true that they are reproached for this kind of thing, as Euripides has been since antiquity because he had children appear on the stage. Freedom is alienated in the state of passion; it is abruptly engaged in partial enterprises; it loses sight of its task which is to produce an absolute end. And the book is no longer anything but a means for feeding hate or desire. The writer should not seek to *overwhelm;* otherwise he is in contradiction with himself; if he wishes to *make demands* he must propose only the task to be fulfilled. Hence, the character of pure presentation which appears essential to the work of art. The reader must be able to make a certain aesthetic withdrawal. This is what Gautier foolishly confused with "art for art's sake" and the Parnassians with the imperturbability of the artist. It is simply a matter of precaution, and Genet more justly calls it the author's politeness toward the reader. But that does not mean that the writer makes an appeal to some sort of abstract and conceptual freedom. One certainly creates the aes-

thetic object with feelings; if it is touching, it appears through our tears; if it is comic, it will be recognized by laughter. However, these feelings are of a particular kind. They have their origin in freedom; they are loaned. The belief which I accord the tale is freely assented to. It is a Passion, in the Christian sense of the word, that is, a freedom which resolutely puts itself into a state of passivity to obtain a certain transcendent effect by this sacrifice. The reader renders himself credulous; he descends into credulity which, though it ends by enclosing him like a dream, is at every moment conscious of being free. An effort is sometimes made to force the writer into this dilemma: "Either one believes in your story, and it is intolerable, or one does not believe in it, and it is ridiculous." But the argument is absurd because the characteristic of aesthetic consciousness is to be a belief by means of engagement, by oath, a belief sustained by fidelity to one's self and to the author, a perpetually renewed choice to believe. I can awaken at every moment, and I know it; but I do not want to; reading is a free dream. So that all feelings which are exacted on the basis of this imaginary belief are like particular modulations of my freedom. Far from absorbing or masking it, they are so many different ways it has chosen to reveal itself to itself. Raskolnikov, as I have said, would only be a shadow, without the mixture of repulsion and friendship which I feel for him and which makes him live. But, by a reversal which is the characteristic of the imaginary object, it is not his behavior which excites my indignation or esteem, but my indignation and esteem which give consistency and objectivity to his behavior.

Thus, the reader's feelings are never dominated by the object, and as no external reality can condition them, they have their permanent source in freedom; that is, they are all generous — for I call a feeling generous which has its origin and its end in freedom. Thus, reading is an exercise in generosity, and 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. Only this person will give himself generously; freedom goes through and through him and comes to transform the darkest masses of his sensibility. And as activity has rendered itself passive in order for it better to create the object, vice-versa, passivity becomes an act; the man who is reading has raised himself to the highest degree. That is why we see people who are known for their toughness shed tears at the recital of imaginary misfortunes; for the moment they have become what they would have been if they had not spent their lives hiding their freedom from themselves.

Thus, the author writes in order to address himself to the freedom of readers, and he requires it in order to make his work exist. But he does not stop there; he also requires that they return this confidence which he has given them, that they recognize his creative freedom, and that they in turn solicit it by a symmetrical and inverse appeal. Here there appears the other dialectical paradox of reading; the more we experience our freedom, the more we recognize that of the other; the more he demands of us, the more we demand of him.

When I am enchanted with a landscape, I know very

well that it is not I who create it, but I also know that without me the relations which are established before my eyes among the trees, the foliage, the earth, and the grass would not exist at all. I know that I can give no reason for the appearance of finality which I discover in the assortment of hues and in the harmony of the forms and movements created by the wind. Yet, it exists; there it is before my eyes, and I can make *there be* being only if being already *is*. But even if I believe in God, I can not establish any passage, unless it be purely verbal, between the divine, universal solicitude and the particular spectacle which I am considering. To say that He made the landscape in order to charm me or that He made me the kind of person who is pleased by it is to take a question for an answer. Is the marriage of this blue and that green deliberate? How can I know? The idea of a universal providence is no guarantee of any particular intention, especially in the case under consideration, since the green of the grass is explained by biological laws, specific constants, and geographical determinism, while the reason for the blue of the water is accounted for by the depth of the river, the nature of the soil and the swiftness of the current. The assorting of the shades, if it is willed, can only be something *thrown into the bargain;* it is the meeting of two causal series, that is to say, at first sight, a fact of chance. At best, the finality remains problematic. All the relations we establish remain hypotheses; no end is proposed to us in the manner of an imperative, since none is expressly revealed as having been willed by a creator. Thus, our freedom is never *called forth* by natural beauty. Or rather, there is an appearance of

order in the ensemble of the foliage, the forms, and the movements, hence, the illusion of a calling forth which seems to solicit this freedom and which disappears immediately when one regards it. Hardly have we begun to run our eyes over this arrangement, than the call disappears; we remain alone, free to tie up one color with another or with a third, to set up a relationship between the tree and the water or the tree and the sky, or the tree, the water and the sky. My freedom becomes caprice. To the extent that I establish new relationships, I remove myself further from the illusory objectivity which solicits me. I *muse* about certain motifs which are vaguely outlined by the things; the natural reality is no longer anything but a pretext for musing. Or, in that case, because I have deeply regretted that this arrangement which was momentarily perceived was not offered to me by somebody and consequently is not *real*, the result is that I fix my dream, that I transpose it to canvas or in writing. Thus, I interpose myself between the finality without end which appears in the natural spectacles and the gaze of other men. I transmit it to them. It becomes human by this transmission. Art here is a ceremony of the *gift* and the gift alone brings about the metamorphosis. It is something like the transmission of titles and powers in the matriarchate where the mother does not possess the names, but is the indispensable intermediary between uncle and nephew. Since I have captured this illusion in flight, since I lay it out for other men and have disengaged it and rethought it for them, they can consider it with confidence. It has become intentional. As for me, I remain, to be sure, at the border

cross a certain park) and of the expression of a deeper finality, for the park came into existence only *in order to* harmonize with a certain state of mind, to express it by means of things or to put it into relief by a vivid contrast, and the state of mind itself was conceived in connection with the landscape. Here it is causality which is appearance and which might be called "causality without cause," and it is the finality which is the profound reality. But if I can thus in all confidence put the order of ends under the order of causes, it is because by opening the book I am asserting that the object has its source in human freedom.

If I were to suspect the artist of having written out of passion and in passion, my confidence would immediately vanish, for it would serve no purpose to have supported the order of causes by the order of ends. The latter would be supported in its turn by a psychic causality and the work of art would end by re-entering the chain of determinism. Certainly I do not deny when I am reading that the author may be impassioned, nor even that he might have conceived the first plan of his work under the sway of passion. But his decision to write supposes that he withdraws somewhat from his feelings, in short, that he has transformed his emotions into free emotions as I do mine while reading him; that is, that he is in an attitude of generosity.

Thus, reading is a pact of generosity between author and reader. Each one trusts the other; each one counts on the other, demands of the other as much as he demands of himself. For this confidence is itself generosity. Nothing can force the author to believe that his reader

will use his freedom; nothing can force the reader to believe that the author has used his. Both of them make a free decision. There is then established a dialectical going-and-coming; when I read, I make demands; if my demands are met, what I am then reading provokes me to demand more of the author, which means to demand of the author that he demand more of me. And, vice-versa, the author's demand is that I carry my demands to the highest pitch. Thus, my freedom, by revealing itself, reveals the freedom of the other.

It matters little whether the aesthetic object is the product of "realistic" art (or supposedly such) or "formal" art. At any rate, the natural relations are inverted; that tree on the first plane of the Cézanne painting first appears as the product of a causal chain. But the causality is an illusion; it will doubtless remain as a proposition as long as we look at the painting, but it will be supported by a deep finality; if the tree is placed in such a way, it is because the rest of the painting *requires* that this form and those colors be placed on the first plane. Thus, through the phenomenal causality, our gaze attains finality as the deep structure of the object, and, beyond finality, it attains human freedom as its source and original basis. Vermeer's realism is carried so far that at first it might be thought to be photographic. But if one considers the splendor of his texture, the pink and velvety glory of his little brick walls, the blue thickness of a branch of woodbine, the glazed darkness of his vestibules, the orange-colored flesh of his faces which are as polished as the stone of holy-water basins, one suddenly feels, in the pleasure that he experiences, that the finality is not

so much in the forms or colors as in his material imagination. It is the very substance and temper of the things which here give the forms their reason for being. With this realist we are perhaps closest to absolute creation, since it is in the very passivity of the matter that we meet the unfathomable freedom of man.

The work is never limited to the painted, sculpted, or narrated object. Just as one perceives things only against the background of the world, so the objects represented by art appear against the background of the universe. On the background of the adventures of Fabrice are the Italy of 1820, Austria, France, the sky and stars which the Abbé Blanis consults, and finally the whole earth. If the painter presents us with a field or a vase of flowers, his paintings are windows which are open on the whole world. We follow the red path which is buried among the wheat much farther than Van Gogh has painted it, among other wheat fields, under other clouds, to the river which empties into the sea, and we extend to infinity, to the other end of the world, the deep finality which supports the existence of the field and the earth. So that, through the various objects which it produces or reproduces, the creative act aims at a total renewal of the world. Each painting, each book, is a recovery of the totality of being. Each of them presents this totality to the freedom of the spectator. For this is quite the final goal of art: to recover this world by giving it to be seen as it is, but as if it had its source in human freedom. But, since what the author creates takes on objective reality only in the eyes of the spectator, this recovery is consecrated by the ceremony of the spectacle

— and particularly of reading. We are already in a better position to answer the question we raised a while ago: the writer chooses to appeal to the freedom of other men so that, by the reciprocal implications of their demands, they may re-adapt the totality of being to man and may again enclose the universe within man.

If we wish to go still further, we must bear in mind that the writer, like all other artists, aims at giving his reader a certain feeling that is customarily called aesthetic pleasure, and which I would very much rather call aesthetic joy, and that this feeling, when it appears, is a sign that the work is achieved. It is therefore fitting to examine it in the light of the preceding considerations. In effect, this joy, which is denied to the creator, insofar as he creates, becomes one with the aesthetic consciousness of the spectator, that is, in the case under consideration, of the reader. It is a complex feeling but one whose structures and condition are inseparable from one another. It is identical, at first, with the recognition of a transcendent and absolute end which, for a moment, suspends the utilitarian round of ends-means and means-ends[1], that is, of an appeal or, what amounts to the same thing, of a value. And the positional consciousness which I take of this value is necessarily accompanied by the non-positional consciousness of my freedom, since my freedom is manifested to itself by a transcendent exigency. The recognition of freedom by itself is joy, but this structure of non-thetical consciousness implies another: since, in effect, reading is creation, my freedom

1. In *practical life* a means may be taken for an end as soon as one searches for it, and each end is revealed as a means of attaining another end.

does not only appear to itself as pure autonomy but as creative activity, that is, it is not limited to giving itself its own law but perceives itself as being constitutive of the object. It is on this level that the phenomenon specifically is manifested, that is, a creation wherein the created object is given *as object* to its creator. It is the sole case in which the creator gets any enjoyment out of the object he creates. And the word enjoyment which is applied to the positional consciousness of the work read indicates sufficiently that we are in the presence of an essential structure of aesthetic joy. This positional enjoyment is accompanied by the non-positional consciousness of being essential in relation to an object perceived as essential. I shall call this aspect of aesthetic consciousness the feeling of security; it is this which stamps the strongest aesthetic emotions with a sovereign calm. It has its origin in the authentication of a strict harmony between subjectivity and objectivity. As, on the other hand, the aesthetic object is properly the world insofar as it is aimed at through the imaginary, aesthetic joy accompanies the positional consciousness that the world is a value, that is, a task proposed to human freedom. I shall call this the aesthetic modification of the human project, for, as usual, the world appears as the horizon of our situation, as the infinite distance which separates us from ourselves, as the synthetic totality of the given, as the undifferentiated ensemble of obstacles and implements — but never as a demand addressed to our freedom. Thus, aesthetic joy proceeds to this level of the consciousness which I take of recovering and internalizing that which is non-ego par excellence, since I trans-

form the given into an imperative and the fact into a value. 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. And, thirdly, the preceding structures imply a pact between human freedoms, for, on the one hand, reading is a confident and exacting recognition of the freedom of the writer, and, on the other hand, aesthetic pleasure, as it is itself experienced in the form of a value, involves an absolute exigence in regard to others; every man, insofar as he is a freedom, feels the same pleasure in reading the same work. Thus, all mankind is present in its highest freedom; it sustains the being of a world which is both *its* world and the "external" world. In aesthetic joy the positional consciousness is an *image-making* consciousness of the world in its totality both as being and having to be, both as totally ours and totally foreign, and the more ours as it is the more foreign. The non-positional consciousness *really* envelops the harmonious totality of human freedoms insofar as it makes the object of a universal confidence and exigency.

To write is thus both to disclose the world and to offer it as a task to the generosity of the reader. It is to have recourse to the consciousness of others in order to make one's self be recognized as *essential* to the totality of being; it is to wish to live this essentiality by means of interposed persons; but, on the other hand, as the real world is revealed only by action, as one can feel himself in it only by exceeding it in order to change it, the novelist's universe would lack thickness if it were not dis-

covered in a movement to transcend it. It has often been observed that an object in a story does not derive its density of existence from the number and length of the descriptions devoted to it, but from the complexity of its connections with the different characters. The more often the characters handle it, take it up, and put it down, in short, go beyond it toward their own ends, the more real will it appear. Thus, of the world of the novel, that is, the totality of men and things, we may say that in order for it to offer its maximum density the disclosure-creation by which the reader discovers it must also be an imaginary engagement in the action; in other words, the more disposed one is to change it, the more alive it will be. 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 naming is already a modification of the object? And how could the writer, who wants himself to be essential to this universe, want to be essential to the injustice which this universe comprehends? Yet, he must be; but if he accepts being the creator of injustices, it is in a movement which goes beyond them toward their abolition. As for me who read, if I create and keep alive an unjust world, I can not help making myself responsible for it. And the author's whole art is bent on obliging me to *create* what he *discloses,* therefore to compromise myself. So both of us bear the responsibility for the universe. And precisely because this universe is supported by the joint effort of our two freedoms, and because the author, with me as medium, has attempted

to integrate it into the human, it must appear truly *in itself,* in its very marrow, as being shot through and through with a freedom which has taken human freedom as its end, and if it is not really the city of ends that it ought to be, it must at least be a stage along the way; in a word, it must be a becoming and it must always be considered and presented not as a crushing mass which weighs us down, but from the point of view of its going beyond toward that city of ends. However bad and hopeless the humanity which it paints may be, the work must have an air of generosity. Not, of course, that this generosity is to be expressed by means of edifying discourses and virtuous characters; it must not even be premeditated, and it is quite true that fine sentiments do not make fine books. But it must be the very warp and woof of the book, the stuff out of which the people and things are cut; whatever the subject, a sort of essential lightness must appear everywhere and remind us that the work is never a natural datum, but an *exigence* and a *gift.* And 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, that I might disclose them and create them with their nature as injustices, that is, as abuses to be suppressed. Thus, the writer's universe will only reveal itself in all its depth to the examination, the admiration, and the indignation of the reader; and the generous love is a promise to maintain, and the generous indignation is a promise to change, and the admiration a promise to imitate; although literature is one thing and morality a quite different one, at the heart of the aesthetic imperative we discern the moral imper-

ative. For, since the one who writes recognizes, by the very fact that he takes the trouble to write, the freedom of his readers, and since the one who reads, by the mere fact of his opening the book, recognizes the freedom of the writer, the work of art, from whichever side you approach it, is an act of confidence in the freedom of men. And since readers, like the author, recognize this freedom only to demand that it manifest itself, the work can be defined as an imaginary presentation of the world insofar as it demands human freedom. The result of which is that there is no "gloomy literature", since, however dark may be the colors in which one paints the world, he paints it only so that free men may feel their freedom as they face it. Thus, there are only good and bad novels. The bad novel aims to please by flattering, whereas the good one is an exigence and an act of faith. But above all, the unique point of view from which the author can present the world to those freedoms whose concurrence he wishes to bring about is that of a world to be impregnated always with more freedom. It would be inconceivable 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. One can imagine a good novel being written by an American Negro even if hatred of the whites were spread all over it, because it is the freedom of his race that he demands through this hatred. And, as he invites me to assume the attitude of generosity, the moment I feel myself a pure freedom I can not bear to identify myself with a race of op-

pressors. Thus, I require of all freedoms that they demand the liberation of colored people against the white race and against myself insofar as I am a part of it, but nobody can suppose for a moment that it is possible to write a good novel in praise of anti-Semitism.[1] For, the moment I feel that my freedom is indissolubly linked with that of all other men, it can not be demanded of me that I use it to approve the enslavement of a part of these men. Thus, whether he is an essayist, a pamphleteer, a satirist, or a novelist, whether he speaks only of individual passions or whether he attacks the social order, the writer, a free man addressing free men, has only one subject — freedom.

Hence, any attempt to enslave his readers threatens him in his very art. A blacksmith can be affected by fascism in his life as a man, but not necessarily in his craft; a writer will be affected in both, and even more in his craft than in his life. I have seen writers, who before the war, called for fascism with all their hearts, smitten with sterility at the very moment when the Nazis were loading them with honors. I am thinking of Drieu la Rochelle in particular; he was mistaken, but he was sincere. He proved it. He had agreed to direct a Nazi-inspired review. The first few months he reprimanded, rebuked, and lectured his countrymen. No one answered

1. This last remark may arouse some readers. If so, I'd like to know a single good novel whose express purpose was to serve oppression, a single good novel which has been written against Jews, negroes, workers, or colonial people. "But if there isn't any, that's no reason why someone may not write one some day." But you then admit that you are an abstract theoretician. You, not I. For it is in the name of your abstract conception of art that you assert the possibility of a fact which has never come into being, whereas I limit myself to proposing an explanation for a recognized fact.

him because no one was free to do so. He became irritated; he no longer *felt* his readers. He became more insistent, but no sign appeared to prove that he had been understood. No sign of hatred, nor of anger either; nothing. He seemed disoriented, the victim of a growing distress. He complained bitterly to the Germans. His articles had been superb; they became shrill. The moment arrived when he struck his breast; no echo, except among the bought journalists whom he despised. He handed in his resignation, withdrew it, again spoke, still in the desert. Finally, he kept still, gagged by the silence of others. He had demanded the enslavement of others, but in his crazy mind he must have imagined that it was voluntary, that it was still free. It came; the man in him congratulated himself mightily, but the writer could not bear it. While this was going on, others, who, happily, were in the majority, understood that the freedom of writing implies the freedom of the citizen. One does not write for slaves. The art of prose is bound up with the only regime in which prose has meaning, democracy. When one is threatened, the other is too. And it is not enough to defend them with the pen. A day comes when the pen is forced to stop, and the writer must then take up arms. Thus, however you might have come to it, whatever the opinions you might have professed, literature throws you into battle. Writing is a certain way of wanting freedom; once you have begun, you are engaged, willy-nilly.

Engaged in what? Defending freedom? That's easy to say. Is it a matter of acting as guardian of ideal values like Benda's clerk before the betrayal,[1] or is it concrete,

1. The reference here is to Benda's *La Trahison des clercs*, translated into English as *The Treason of the Intellectuals*.—Translator's note.

Authors too are historical. And that is precisely the reason why some of them want to escape from history by a leap into eternity. The book, serving as a go-between, establishes a historical contact among the men who are steeped in the same history and who likewise contribute to its making. Writing and reading are two facets of the same historical fact, and the freedom to which the writer invites us is not a pure abstract consciousness of being free. Strictly speaking, it *is not*; it wins itself in a historical situation; each book proposes a concrete liberation on the basis of a particular alienation. Hence, in each one there is an implicit recourse to institutions, customs, certain forms of oppression and conflict, to the wisdom and the folly of the day, to lasting passions and passing stubbornness, to superstitions and recent victories of common sense, to evidence and ignorance, to particular modes of reasoning which the sciences have made fashionable and which are applied in all domains, to hopes, to fears, to habits of sensibility, imagination, and even perception, and finally, to customs and values which have been handed down, to a whole world which the author and the reader have in common. It is this familiar world which the writer animates and penetrates with his freedom. It is on the basis of this world that the reader must bring about his concrete liberation; it is alienation, situation, and history. It is this world which I must change or preserve for myself and others. For if the immediate aspect of freedom is negativity, we know that it is not a matter of the abstract power of saying no, but of a concrete negativity which retains within itself (and is completely colored by) what it denies. And since the freedoms

of the author and reader seek and affect each other through a world, it can just as well be said that the author's choice of a certain aspect of the world determines the reader and, vice-versa, that it is by choosing his reader that the author decides upon his subject.

Thus, all works of the mind contain within themselves the image of the reader for whom they are intended. I could draw the portrait of Nathanaël on the basis of *Les Nourritures terrestres*: I can see that the alienation from which he is urged to free himself is the family, the real-estate he owns or will own by inheritance, the utilitarian project, a conventional moralism, a narrow theism; I also see that he is cultured and has leisure, since it would be absurd to offer Ménalque as an example to an unskilled laborer, a man out of work, or an American negro; I know that he is not threatened by any external danger, neither by hunger, war, nor class or racial oppression; the only danger is that of being the victim of his own milieu. Therefore, he is a white rich Aryan, the heir of a great bourgeois family which lives in a period which is still relatively stable and easy, in which the ideology of the possessing class is barely beginning to decline, exactly the Daniel de Fontanin whom Roger Martin du Gard later presented to us as an enthusiastic admirer of André Gide.

To take a still more recent example, it is striking that *The Silence of the Sea*, a work written by a man who was a member of the resistance from the very beginning and whose aim is perfectly evident, was received with hostility in the émigré circles of New York, London, and sometimes even Algiers, and they even went so far as to tax its author with collaboration. The reason is that Ver-

as ogres would have made them laugh and would have failed in its purpose.

As early as the end of '42 *The Silence of the Sea* had lost its effectiveness; the reason is that the war was starting again on our soil. On one side, underground propaganda, sabotage, derailment of trains, and acts of violence; and on the other, curfew, deportations, imprisonment, torture, and execution of hostages. An invisible barrier of fire once again separated Germans and Frenchmen. We no longer wished to know whether the Germans who plucked out the eyes and ripped off the nails of our friends were accomplices or victims of Nazism; it was no longer enough to maintain a lofty silence before them; besides, they would not have tolerated it. At this turn of the war it was necessary to be either for them or against them. In the midst of bombardments and massacres, of burned villages and deportations, Vercors' story seemed like an idyll; it had lost its public. Its public was the man of '41 humiliated by defeat but astonished at the studied courtesy of the occupant, desiring peace, terrified by the spectre of Bolshevism and misled by the speeches of Pétain. It was in vain to present the Germans to this man as bloodthirsty brutes. On the contrary, you had to admit to him that they might be polite and even likable, and since he had discovered with surprise that most of them were "men like us," he had to be re-shown that even if such were the case, fraternizing was impossible, that the more likable they seemed, the more unhappy and impotent they were, and that it was necessary to fight against a régime and an ideology even if the men who brought it to us did not seem bad. And, in short, as one

was addressing a passive crowd, as there were still rather few important organizations, and as these showed themselves to be highly precautious in their recruiting, the only form of opposition that could be required of the population was silence, scorn, and an obedience which was forced and which showed it.

Thus, Vercors' story defined its public; by defining it, it defined itself. It wanted to combat within the mind of the French bourgeoisie of 1941 the effects of Pétain's interview with Hitler at Montoire. A year and a half after the defeat it was alive, virulent, and effective. In a half-century it will no longer excite anyone. An ill-informed public will still read it as an agreeable and somewhat languid tale about the war of 1939. It seems that bananas have a better taste when they have just been picked. Works of the mind should likewise be eaten on the spot.

One might be tempted to accuse any attempt to explain a work of the mind by the public to which it is addressed for its vain subtlety and its indirect character. Is it not more simple, direct, and rigorous to take the condition of the author himself as the determining factor? Ought one not be satisfied with Taine's notion of the "milieu"? I answer that the explanation by the milieu is, in effect, *determinative*: the milieu *produces* the writer; that is why I do not believe in it. On the contrary, the public calls to him, that is, it puts questions to his freedom. The milieu is a *vis a tergo*; the public, on the contrary, is a waiting, an emptiness to be filled in, *an aspiration*, figuratively and literally. In a word, it is the *other*. And I am so far from rejecting the explanation of the

work by the situation of the man that I have always considered the project of writing as the free exceeding of a certain human and *total* situation. In which, moreover, it is not different from other undertakings. Étiemble in a witty but superficial article writes,[1] "I was going to revise my little dictionary when chance put three lines of Jean-Paul Sartre right under my nose: 'In effect, for us the writer is neither a Vestal nor an Ariel. Do what he may, he's in the thick of it, marked and compromised down to his deepest refuge.' To be in the thick of it, up to the ears. I recognized, in a way, the words of Blaise Pascal: 'We are embarked.' But at once I saw engagement lose all its value, reduced suddenly to the most ordinary of facts, the fact of the prince and the slave, to the human condition."

That's what I said all right. But Étiemble is being silly. If every man is embarked, that does not at all mean that he is fully conscious of it. Most men pass their time in hiding their engagement from themselves. That does not necessarily mean that they attempt evasions by lying, by artificial paradises, or by a life of make-believe. It is enough for them to dim their lanterns, to see the foreground without the background and, vice-versa, to see the ends while passing over the means in silence, to refuse solidarity with their kind, to take refuge in the spirit of pompousness, to remove all value from life by considering it from the point of view of someone who is dead, and at the same time, all horror from death by fleeing it in the banality of everyday existence, to per-

1. Etiemble: "Happy the writers who die for something." *Combat*, January 24, 1947.

suade themselves, if they belong to an oppressing class, that they are escaping their class by the loftiness of their feelings, and, if they belong to the oppressed, to conceal from themselves their complicity with oppression by asserting that one can remain free while in chains if one has a taste for the inner life. Writers can have recourse to all this just like anyone else. There are some, and they are the majority, who furnish a whole arsenal of ruses to the reader who wants to go on sleeping quietly.

I shall say that a writer is engaged when he tries to achieve the most lucid and the most complete consciousness of being embarked, that is, when he causes the engagement of immediate spontaneity to advance, for himself and others, to the reflective. The writer is, par excellence, a mediator and his engagement is mediation. But, if it is true that we must account for his work on the basis of his condition, it must also be borne in mind that his condition is not only that of a man in general but precisely that of a writer as well. Perhaps he is a Jew, and a Czech, and of peasant family, but he is a Jewish *writer*, a Czech *writer* and of rural stock. When, in another article, I tried to define the situation of the Jew, the best I could do was this: "The Jew is a man whom other men consider as a Jew and who is obliged to choose himself on the basis of the situation which is made for him." For there are qualities which come to us solely by means of the judgment of others. In the case of the writer, the case is more complex, for no one is obliged to choose himself as a writer. Hence, freedom is at the origin. I am an author, first of all, by my free project of writing. But at once it follows that I become a man

and percentage remuneration in modern society than there was between the poem and the royal pension under the old régime. Actually, the writer is not paid; he is fed, well or badly, according to the period. The system cannot work any differently, for his activity is *useless*. It is not at all *useful*; it is sometimes *harmful* for society to become self-conscious. For the fact is that the useful is defined within the framework of an established society and in relationship to institutions, values, and ends which are already fixed. If society sees itself and, in particular, sees itself as *seen*, there is, by virtue of this very fact, a contesting of the established values of the regime. The writer presents it with its image; he calls upon it to assume it or to change itself. At any rate, it changes; it loses the equilibrium which its ignorance had given it; it wavers between shame and cynicism; it practises dishonesty; thus, the writer gives society *a guilty conscience*; he is thereby in a state of perpetual antagonism toward the conservative forces which are maintaining the balance he tends to upset. For the transition to the mediate which can be brought about only by a negation of the immediate is a perpetual revolution.

Only the governing classes can allow themselves the luxury of remunerating so unproductive and dangerous an activity, and if they do so, it is a matter both of tactics and of misapprehension. Misapprehension for the most part: free from material cares, the members of the governing élite are sufficiently detached to want to have a reflective knowledge of themselves. They want to retrieve themselves, and they charge the artist with presenting them with their image without realizing that he will then make

them assume it. A tactic on the part of some who, having recognized the danger, pension the artist in order to control his destructive power. Thus, the writer is a parasite of the governing "élite." But, functionally, he moves in opposition to the interests of those who keep him alive.[1] Such is the original conflict which defines his condition.

Sometimes the conflict is obvious. We still talk about the courtiers who made the success of the *Marriage of Figaro* though it sounded the death-knell of the régime. Other times, it is masked, because to name is to show, and to show is to change. And as this activity of contestation, which is harmful to the established interests, ventures, in its very modest way, to concur in a change of régime, as, on the other hand, the oppressed classes have neither the leisure nor the taste for reading, the objective aspect of the conflict may express itself as an antagonism between the conservative forces, or the real public of the writer, and the progressive forces, or the virtual public.

In a classless society, one whose internal structure would be permanent revolution, the writer might be a mediator *for all*, and his contestation on principle might precede or accompany the changes in fact. In my opinion this is the deeper meaning we should give to the notion of *self-criticism*. The expanding of the real public up to the limits of his virtual public would bring about within his mind a reconciliation of hostile tendencies. Literature, entirely liberated, would represent *negativity* insofar as it is a necessary moment in reconstruction. But

1. To-day his public is spread out. He sometimes runs into a hundred thousand copies. A hundred thousand copies sold, that makes four hundred thousand readers. Thus, for France, one out of a hundred in the population.

peasants, but he did not speak *to* them, and if he took note of their misery, it was not for the sake of drawing an argument against the ideology he accepted, but in the name of that ideology: it was a disgrace for enlightened monarchs and good Christians. Thus, one spoke about the masses above their heads and without even conceiving the notion that one might help them become self-conscious. And the homogeneity of the public banished all contradiction from the authors' souls. They were not pulled between real but detestable readers and readers who were virtual and desirable but out of reach; they did not ask themselves questions about their role in the world, for the writer questions himself about his mission only in ages when it is not clearly defined and when he must invent or re-invent it, that is, when he notices, beyond the élite who read him, an amorphous mass of possible readers whom he may or may not choose to win, and when he must himself decide, in the event that he has the opportunity to reach them, what his relations with them are to be. The authors of the seventeenth century had a definite function because they addressed an enlightened, strictly limited, and active public which exercised permanent control over them. Unknown by the people, their job was to reflect back its own image to the élite which supported them. But there are many ways of reflecting an image: certain portraits are by themselves contestations because they have been made from without and without passion by a painter who refuses any complicity with his model. However, in order for a writer merely to conceive the idea of drawing a portrait-contestation of his real reader, he must have become conscious of a contradiction between

himself and his public, that is, he must come to his readers *from without* and must consider them with astonishment, or he must feel the astonished regard of unfamiliar minds (ethnic minorities, oppressed classes, etc.) weighing upon the little society which he forms with them. But in the seventeenth century, since the virtual public did not exist, since the artist accepted without criticism the ideology of the élite, he made himself an accomplice of his public. No unfamiliar stare came to trouble him in his games. Neither the prose-writer nor even the poet was accursed. They did not have to decide with each work what the meaning and value of literature were, since its meaning and value were fixed by tradition. Well integrated in a hierarchical society, they knew neither the pride nor the anguish of being "different"; in short, they were *classical.* There is classicism when a society has taken on a relatively stable form and when it has been permeated with the myth of its perenniality, that is, when it confounds the present with the eternal and historicity with traditionalism, when the hierarchy of classes is such that the virtual public never exceeds the real public and when each reader is for the writer a qualified critic and a censor, when the power of the religious and political ideology is so strong and the interdictions so rigorous that in no case is there any question of discovering new countries of the mind, but only of putting into shape the *commonplaces* adopted by the élite. in such a way that reading — which, as we have seen, is the concrete relation between the writer and his public — is a ceremony of *recognition* analogous to the bow of salutation, that is, the ceremonious affirmation that author and reader are of

the same world and have the same opinions about everything. Thus, each production of the mind is at the same time an act of courtesy, and style is the supreme courtesy of the author toward his reader, and the reader, for his part, never tires of finding the same thoughts in the most diverse of books because these thoughts are his own and he does not ask to acquire others but only to be offered with magnificence those which he already has. Hence, it is in a spirit of complicity that the author presents and the reader accepts a portrait which is necessarily abstract; addressing a parasitical class, he can not show man at work or, in general, the relations between man and external nature. As, on the other hand, there are bodies of specialists who, under the control of the Church and the Monarchy, are concerned with maintaining the spiritual and secular ideology, the writer does not even suspect the importance of economic, religious, metaphysical, and political factors in the constitution of the person; and as the society in which he lives confounds the present with the eternal he can not even imagine the slightest change in what he calls human nature. He conceives history as a series of accidents which affect the eternal man on the surface without deeply modifying him, and if he had to assign a meaning to historical duration he would see in it both an eternal repetition, so that previous events can and ought to provide lessons for his contemporaries, and a process of slight degeneration, since the fundamental events of history are long since *passed* and since, perfection in letters having been attained in Antiquity, his ancient models seem beyond rivalry. And in all this he is once again fully in harmony with his public which considers

work as a curse, which does not *feel* its situation in history and in the world for the simple reason that it is privileged and because its only concern is faith, respect for the Monarch, passion, war, death, and courtesy. In short, the image of classical man is purely psychological because the classical public is conscious only of his psychology. Furthermore, it must be understood that this psychology is itself traditionalist, it is not concerned with discovering new and profound truths about the human heart or with setting up hypotheses. It is in unstable societies, when the public exists on several social levels, that the writer, torn and dissatisfied, invents explanations for his anguish. The psychology of the seventeenth century is purely descriptive. It is not based so much upon the author's personal experience as it is the aesthetic expression of what the élite thinks about itself. La Rochefoucauld borrows the form and the content of his maxims from the divertissements of the salons. The casuistry of the Jesuits, the etiquette of the Précieuses, the portrait game, the ethics of Nicole, and the religious conception of the passions are at the origin of a hundred other works. The comedies draw their inspiration from ancient psychology and the plain common sense of the upper bourgeoisie. Society is thoroughly delighted at seeing itself mirrored in them because it recognizes the notions it has about itself; it does not ask to be shown what it is, but it asks rather for a reflection of what it thinks it is. To be sure, some satires are permitted, but it is the élite which, through pamphlets and comedies, carries on, in the name of its morality, the cleansings and the purges necessary for its health. The ridiculous marquis, the litigants, or

moral, it is because it regards religious, metaphysical, political, and social problems as solved; but its action is none the less "orthodox." As it confounds universal man with the particular men who are in power, it does not dedicate itself to the liberation of any concrete category of the oppressed; however, the writer, though completely assimilated by the oppressing class, is by no means its accomplice; his work is unquestionably a liberator since its effect, within this class, is to free man from himself.

Up to this point we have been considering the case in which the writer's potential public was nil, or just about, and in which his real public was not torn by any conflict. We have seen that he could then accept the current ideology with a good conscience and that he launched his appeals to freedom within the ideology itself. If the potential public suddenly appears, or if the real public is broken up into hostile factions everything changes. We must now consider what happens to literature when the writer is led to reject the ideology of the ruling classes.

The eighteenth century was the palmy time, unique in history, and the soon-to-be-lost paradise, of French writers. Their social condition had not changed. Bourgeois in origin, with very few exceptions, they were unclassed by the favors of the great. The circle of their real readers had grown perceptibly larger because the bourgeoisie had begun to read, but they were still unknown to the "lower" classes, and if the writers spoke of them more often than did La Bruyère and Fénelon, they never addressed them, even in spirit. However, a profound upheaval had broken their public in two; they had to satisfy contradictory de-

its independence. It was no longer to reflect the commonplaces of the collectivity; it identified itself with Mind, that is, with the permanent power of forming and criticizing ideas.

Of course, this taking over of literature by itself was abstract and almost purely formal, since the literary works were not the concrete expression of any class; and as the writers began by rejecting any deep solidarity with the milieu from which they came as well as the one which adopted them, literature became confused with Negativity, that is, with doubt, refusal, criticism, and contestation. But as a result of this very fact, it led to the setting up, against the ossified spirituality of the Church, the rights of a new spirituality, one in movement, which was no longer identified with any ideology and which manifested itself as the power of continually surpassing the given, whatever it might be. When, in the shelter of the structure of the very Christian monarchy, it was imitating wonderful models, it hardly fussed about truth because truth was only a very crude and very concrete quality of the ideology which had been nourishing it; for the dogmas of the Church, to be true or, quite simply, to be, was all one, and truth could not be conceived apart from the system. But now that spirituality had become this abstract movement which cut through all ideologies and then left them along the wayside like empty shells, truth, in its turn, was disengaged from all concrete and particular philosophy; it was revealed in its abstract independence; it became the regulating idea of literature and the distant limit of the critical movement.

Spirituality, literature, and truth: these notions were

the whole of literature and to cut out new paths. It is not by chance that the worst works of the period are also those which claimed to be the most traditional; tragedy and epic were the exquisite fruits of an integrated society; in a collectivity which was torn apart, they could subsist only in the form of survivals and pastiches.

What the eighteenth-century writer tirelessly demanded in all his works was the right to practise an anti-historical reason against history, and in this sense all he did was to reveal the essential requirements of abstract literature. He was not concerned with giving his readers a clearer class consciousness. Quite the contrary, the urgent appeal which he addressed to his bourgeois public was an invitation to forget humiliations, prejudices, and fears; the one he directed to his noble public was a solicitation to strip itself of its pride of caste and its privileges. As he had made himself universal, he could have only universal readers, and what he required of the freedom of his contemporaries was that they cut their historical ties in order to join him in universality.

What is the origin of this miracle by which, at the very moment he was setting up abstract freedom against concrete oppression and Reason against History, he was going along in the very direction of historical development? First, the bourgeoisie, by a tactic which was characteristic of it and which it was to repeat in 1830 and 1848, joined forces, on the eve of taking power, with those oppressed classes which were not in a condition to push their demands. And since the bonds which united social groups so different from one another could only be very general and very abstract, it aimed not so much at acquiring a clear

consciousness of itself, which would have opposed it to the workmen and peasants, as to have its right to lead the opposition recognized on the grounds that it was in a better position to let the established powers know the demands of universal human nature. On the other hand, the revolution being prepared was a *political* one; there was no revolutionary ideology and no organized party. The bourgeoisie wanted to be enlightened; it wanted the ideology which for centuries had mystified and alienated man to be liquidated. There would be time later on to replace it. For the time being, it aimed at freedom of opinion as a step toward political power. Hence, by demanding *for himself* and *as a writer* freedom of thinking and of expressing his thought, the author necessarily served the interests of the bourgeois class. No more was asked of him and there was nothing more he could do. In later periods, as we shall see, the writer could demand his freedom to write with a bad conscience; he might be aware that the oppressed classes wanted something other than that freedom. Freedom of thinking could then appear as a privilege; in the eyes of some it could pass for a means of oppression, and the position of the writer risked becoming untenable. But on the eve of the Revolution he enjoyed an extraordinary opportunity, that is, it was enough for him to defend his profession in order to serve as a guide to the aspirations of the rising class.

He knew it. He considered himself a guide and a spiritual chief. He took chances. As the ruling élite, which grew increasingly nervous, lavished its graces upon him one day only to have him locked up the next, he had none of that tranquillity, that proud mediocrity, which

And as the writer thought that he had broken the bonds which united him to his class of origin, as he spoke to his readers from above about universal human nature, it seemed to him that the appeal he made to them and the part he took in their misfortunes were dictated by pure generosity. To write is to give. In this way he accepted and excused what was unacceptable in his situation as a parasite in an industrious society; this was also how he became conscious of that absolute freedom, that gratuity, which characterize literary creation. But though he constantly had in view universal man and the abstract rights of human nature, there is no reason to believe that he was an incarnation of the clerk as Benda has described him. Since his position was, in essence, *critical,* he certainly had to have *something* to criticize; and the objects which first presented themselves to criticism were the institutions, superstitions, traditions, and acts of a traditional government.

In other words, as the walls of Eternity and the Past which had supported the ideological structure of the seventeenth century cracked and gave way, the writer perceived a new dimension of temporality in its purity: the Present. The Present, which preceding centuries had sometimes conceived as a perceptible figuration of Eternity and sometimes as a degraded emanation of Antiquity. He had only a confused notion of the future, but he knew that the fleeting hour which he was living was unique and that it was his, that it was in no way inferior to the most magnificent hours of Antiquity, since they too had begun by being the present. He knew that it was his chance and that he must not waste it. That was why he

eighteenth century it ran the risk in the nineteenth century of becoming the good conscience of an oppressing class.

Well and good, if the writer could have kept that spirit of free criticism which in the preceding century had been his fortune and his pride. But his public was opposed to that. So long as the bourgeoisie had been struggling against the privileges of the nobility it had given assent to destructive negativity. But now that it had power, it passed on to construction and asked to be helped in constructing. Contestation had remained possible within the religious ideology because the believer referred his obligations and the articles of faith back to the will of God. He thereby established a concrete and feudal person to person bond with the Almighty. This recourse to the free divine arbiter introduced, although God was perfect and chained to His perfection, an element of gratuity into Christian ethics and consequently a bit of freedom into literature. The Christian hero was always Jacob wrestling with the angel; the saint *contested* the divine will even if he did so in order to submit to it even more narrowly. But bourgeois ethics did not derive from Providence; its universal and abstract procedures were inscribed in things; they were not the effect of a sovereign and quite amiable but personal will, they rather resembled the increate laws of physics. At least, so one supposed, for it was not prudent to look at them too closely. The serious man kept from examining them precisely because their origin was obscure. Bourgeois art would either be a means or would not be; it would forbid itself to lay

hands on principles, for fear they might collapse[1], and to probe the human heart too deeply for fear of finding disorder in it. Its public feared nothing so much as talent, that gay and menacing madness which uncovers the disturbing roots of things by unforeseeable words and which, by repeated appeals to freedom, stirs the still more disturbing roots of men. *Facility* sold better; it was talent in leash, turned against itself, the art of reassuring readers by harmonious and expected discourse, in a tone of good fellowship, that man and the world were quite ordinary, transparent, without surprises, without threats, and without interest.

There was more: as the only relationship which the bourgeois had with natural forces was through intermediaries, as material reality appeared to him in the form of manufactured products, as he was surrounded as far as the eye could see by an already humanized world which reflected back to him his own image, as he limited himself to gleaning on the surface of things the meaning that other men had put forward, as his job was essentially that of handling abstract symbols, words, figures, plans, and diagrams for determining methods whereby his employees would share in consumer's goods, as his culture, quite as much as his trade, inclined him to consider ideas, he was convinced that the universe was reducible to a system of ideas; he dissolved effort, difficulty, needs, oppression, and wars into ideas; there was no evil, only pluralism; certain ideas lived in a free state; they had to be

1. Dostoievsky's famous "If God does not exist, all is permissible" is the terrible revelation which the bourgeoisie has forced itself to conceal during the one hundred fifty years of its reign.

integrated into the system. Thus, he conceived human progress as a vast movement of assimilation; ideas assimilated each other and so did minds. At the end of this immense digestive process, thought would find its unification and society its total integration.

Such optimism was at the opposite extreme of the writer's conception of his art; the artist needs an unassimilable matter because beauty is not resolved into ideas. Even if he is a prose-writer and assembles signs, his style will have neither grace nor force if it is not sensitive to the materiality of the word and its irrational resistances. And if he wishes to build the universe in his work and to support it by an inexhaustible freedom, the reason is that he radically distinguishes things from thought. His freedom and the thing are homogeneous only in that both are unfathomable, and if he wishes to readapt the desert or the virgin forest to the Mind, he does so not by transforming them into ideas of desert and forest, but by having Being sparkle as Being, with its opacity and its coefficient of adversity, by the indefinite spontaneity of Existence. That is why the work of art is not reducible to an idea; first, because it is a production or a reproduction of a *being*, that is of something which never quite allows itself to be *thought*; then, because this being is totally penetrated by an *existence*, that is, by a freedom which decides on the very fate and value of thought. That is also why the artist has always had a special understanding of Evil, which is not the temporary and remediable isolation of an idea, but the irreducibility of man and the world of Thought.

The bourgeois could be recognized by the fact that he

denied the existence of social classes and particularly of the bourgeoisie. The gentleman wished to command because he belonged to a caste. The bourgeois based his power and his right to govern on the exquisite ripening which comes from the secular possession of the goods of this world. Moreover, he admitted only synthetic relationships between the owner and the thing possessed; for the rest, he demonstrated by analysis that all men are alike because they are invariant elements of social combinations and because each one of them, whatever his rank, completely possesses *human nature*. Hence, inequalities appeared as fortuitous and passing accidents which could not alter the permanent characteristics of the social atom. There was no proletariat, that is, no synthetic class of which each worker was a passing mode; there were only proletarians, each isolated in his human nature, who were not united by internal solidarity but only by external bonds of resemblance.

The bourgeois saw only *psychological* relations among the individuals whom his analytical propaganda circumvented and separated. That is understandable: as he had no direct hold on things, as his work was concerned essentially with men, it was purely a matter, for him, of pleasing and intimidating. Ceremony, discipline, and courtesy ruled his behavior; he regarded his fellow-men as marionettes, and if he wished to acquire some knowledge of their emotions and character, it was because it seemed to him that each passion was a wire that could be pulled. The breviary of the ambitious bourgeois was "The Art of Making Good;" the breviary of the rich was "The Art of Commanding." Thus, the bourgeoisie considered

the writer as an expert. If he started reflecting on the social order, he annoyed and frightened it. All it asked of him was to share his practical experience of the human heart. So, as in the seventeenth century, literature was reduced to psychology. All the same, the psychology of Corneille, Pascal and Vauvenargues was a cathartic appeal to freedom. But the merchant distrusted the freedom of the people he dealt with and the prefect that of the sub-prefect. All they wanted was to be provided with infallible recipes for winning over and dominating. Man had to be governable as a matter of course and by modest means. In short, the laws of the heart had to be rigorous and without exceptions. The bourgeois bigwig no more believed in human freedom than the scientist believes in a miracle. And as his ethics were utilitarian, the chief motive of his psychology was self-interest. For the writer it was no longer a matter of addressing his work as an appeal to absolute freedoms, but of exhibiting the psychological laws which determined him to readers who were likewise determined.

Idealism, psychologism, determinism, utilitarianism, the spirit of seriousness, that was what the bourgeois writer had to reflect to his public first of all. He was no longer asked to restore the strangeness and opacity of the world, but to dissolve it into elementary subjective impressions which made it easier to digest — nor to discover the most intimate movements of his heart at the very depths of his freedom, but to bring his "experience" face to face with that of his readers. All his works were at once inventories of bourgeois appurtenances, psychological reports of an expert which invariably tended to ground the

rights of the élite and to show the wisdom of institutions, and handbooks of civility. The conclusions were decided in advance; the degree of depth permitted to the investigation was also established in advance; the psychological motives were selected; the very style was regulated. The public feared no surprise. It could buy with its eyes closed. But literature had been assassinated. From Émile Augier to Marcel Prévost and Edmond Jaloux, including Dumas *fils*, Pailleron, Ohnet, Bourget, and Bordeaux, authors were found to do the job and, if I may say so, to honor their signature to the very end. It is not by chance that they wrote bad books; if they had talent, they had to hide it.

The best refused. This refusal saved literature but fixed its traits for fifty years. Indeed, from 1848 on, and until the war of 1914, the radical unification of his public led the author to write on principle *against all his readers.* However, he sold his productions, but he despised those who bought them and forced himself to disappoint their wishes. It was taken for granted that it was better to be unknown than famous, that success — if the writer ever got it in his lifetime — was to be explained by a misunderstanding. And if, by chance, the book one published did not offend sufficiently, one added an insulting preface. This fundamental conflict between the writer and his public was an unprecedented phenomenon in literary history. In the seventeenth century the harmony between the man of letters and his readers was perfect; in the eighteenth century the author had two equally real publics at his disposal and could rely upon one or the other as he pleased. In its early stages, romanticism had been

was a pure contestation of the spirit of seriousness, he must have been pleased that they refused on principle to take him seriously. Thus, they found themselves, even though it was with scandal and without quite realizing it, in the most "nihilistic" works of the age. The reason was that even though the writer might have put all his efforts into concealing his readers from himself, he could never completely escape their insidious influence. A shame-faced bourgeois, writing for bourgeois without admitting it to himself, he was able to launch the maddest ideas; the ideas were often only bubbles which popped up on the surface of his mind. But his technique betrayed him because he did not watch over it with the same zeal. It expressed a deeper and truer choice, an obscure metaphysic, a genuine relationship with contemporary society. Whatever the cynicism and the bitterness of the chosen subject, nineteenth-century narrative technique offered the French public a reassuring image of the bourgeoisie. Our authors, to be sure, inherited it, but they were responsible for having perfected it.

Its appearance, which dates from the end of the Middle Ages, coincided with the first reflective meditation by which the novelist became conscious of his art. At first he told his story without putting himself on the stage or meditating on his function because the subjects of his tales were almost always of folk or, at any rate, collective origin, and he limited himself to making use of them. The social character of the matter he worked with as well as the fact that it existed before he came to be concerned with it conferred upon him the role of intermediary and was enough to justify him; he was the man who knew

landmarks in order to determine it, and consequently one knows it in its absolute truth. In an ordered society which meditates upon its eternity and celebrates it with rites, a man evokes the phantom of a past disease, dispels it with a wave of his magic wand and order, makes it glitter, embellishes it with old-fashioned graces, and at the moment when he is about to cause unsubstitutes for it the eternal hierarchy of causes and laws. In this magician who frees himself from history and life by understanding them and who is raised above his audience by his knowledge and experience we recognize the loftly aristocrat whom we spoke about earlier.[1]

If we have spoken at some length about Maupassant's narrative procedure it is because it constituted the basic technique for all the French novelists of his own generation, of the succeeding one, and of all the generations since. The internal narrator is always present. He may reduce himself to an abstraction; often he is not even explicitly designated; but, at any rate, it is through his subjectivity that we perceive the event. When he does not appear at all, it is not that he has been suppressed like a useless device; it is that he has become the *alter ego* of the author. The latter, with his blank sheet of paper in front of him, sees his imagination transmuted into experiences. He no longer writes in his own name but at the dictation of a mature and sober man who has witnessed the circumstances which are being related.

1. When Maupassant writes *Le Horla*, that is, when he speaks of the madness which threatens him, the tone changes. It is because at last something — something horrible — is going to happen. The man is overwhelmed, crushed; he no longer understands; he wants to drag the reader along with him into his terror. But the twig is bent; lacking a technique adapted to madness, death, and history, he fails to move the reader.

quences. . ." And from his point of view he is not wrong, since this present and future are both past, since the time of memory has lost its irreversibility and one can cross it backward and forward.

Besides, the memories which he gives us, already worked upon, thought over, and appraised, offer us an immediately assimilable teaching; the feelings and actions are often presented to us as typical examples of the laws of the heart: "Daniel, like all young people . . .," "Eve was quite feminine in that she . . .," "Mercier had the nasty habit, common among civil-service clerks . . ." And as these laws cannot be deduced *a priori* nor grasped by intuition nor founded on experimentation which is scientific and capable of being universally reproduced, they refer the reader back to a subjectivity which has produced these recipes from the circumstances of an active life. In this sense it can be said that most of the French novels of the Third Republic aspired, whatever the age of their real author and much more so if the author was very young, to the honor of having been written by quinquagenarians.

During this whole period, which extends over several generations, the plot is related from the point of view of the absolute, that is, of order. It is a local change in a system at rest; neither the author nor the reader runs any risk; there is no surprise to be feared; the event is a thing of the past; it has been catalogued and understood. In a stable society which is not yet conscious of the dangers which threaten it, which has a morality at its disposal, a scale of values, and a system of explanations to integrate its local changes, which is convinced that it is beyond

allow itself to be integrated, and does not even wish to be read.

The authors are not to be blamed; they did what they could; among them are some of our greatest and purest writers. And besides, as every kind of human behavior discloses to us an aspect of the universe, their attitude has enriched us despite themselves by revealing gratuity as one of the infinite dimensions of the world and as a possible goal of human activity. And as they were artists, their work covered up a desperate appeal to the freedom of the reader they pretended to despise. It pushed contestation to the limit, even to the point of contesting itself; it gives us a glimpse of a black silence beyond the massacre of words, and, beyond the spirit of seriousness, the bare and empty sky of equivalences; it invites us to emerge into nothingness by destruction of all myths and all

---

ler (I am not speaking here of that of Joyce which has quite different metaphysical principles. Larbaud, who, I know, harks back to Joyce, seems to me much rather to draw his inspiration from *Les Lauriers sont coupés* and from *Mademoiselle Else*). In short, it was a matter of pushing the hypothesis of a primary subjectivity to the limit and of passing on to realism by leading idealism up to the absolute.

The reality which one shows to the reader without intermediary is no longer the thing itself — the tree, the ashtray — but the consciousness which sees the thing; the "real" is no longer only a representation, but rather the representation becomes an absolute reality since it is given to us as an immediate datum. The inconvenient aspect of this procedure is that it encloses us in an individual subjectivity and that it thereby lacks the intermonadic universe; besides, it dilutes the event and the action in the perception of one and then the other. Now, the common characteristic of the fact and the action is that they escape subjective representation which grasps their results but not their living movement. In short, it is only with a certain amount of faking that one reduces the stream of consciousness to a succession of words, even deformed ones. If the word is given as an intermediary *signifying* a reality which in essence transcends language, nothing could be better; it withdraws itself, is forgotten, and discharges consciousness upon the object.

But if it presents itself as the *psychic reality*, if the author, by writing,

scales of value; it discloses to us in man a close and secret relationship with the nothing, instead of the intimate relationship with the divine transcendence. It is the literature of adolescence, of that age when the young man, useless and without responsibility, still supported and fed by his parents, wastes his family's money, passes judgment on his father, and takes part in the demolition of the serious universe which protected his childhood. If one bears in mind that the festival, as Caillois has well shown, is one of those negative moments when the collectivity consumes the goods it has accumulated, violates the laws of its moral code, spends for the pleasure of spending, and destroys for the pleasure of destroying, it will be seen that literature in the nineteenth century was, on the margin of the industrious society which had the *mystique* of saving, a great sumptuous and funereal festival, an invitation

---

claims to give us an ambiguous reality which is a sign, objective in essence — that is, insofar as it relates to something outside itself — and a thing, formal in essence — that is, as an immediate psychic datum — then he can be accused of not having participated and of disregarding the rhetorical law which might be formulated as follows: in literature, where one uses signs, it is not necessary to use *only* signs; and if the *reality* which one wants to signify is *one word*, it must be given to the reader by other words. He can be charged, besides, with having forgotten that the greatest riches of the psychic life are *silent*. We know what has happened to the internal monologue; having become *rhetoric*, that is, a poetic transposition of the inner life — silent as well as verbal — it has today become one method *among others* of the novelist. Too idealistic to be true, too realistic to be complete, it is the crown of the subjectivistic technique. It is within and by means of this technique that the literature of to-day has become conscious of itself, that is, that literature is a double surpassing, toward the objective and toward the rhetorical, of the technique of the internal monologue. But for that it is necessary that the historical circumstance change.

It is evident that the writer continues to-day to write in the past tense. It is not by changing the tense of the verb but by revolutionizing the techniques of the story that he will succeed in making the reader contemporary with the story.

aspersion on the freedom. The Jansenist ideology, the law of the three unities, and the rules of French prosody are not art; in regard to art they are even pure nothingness, since they can by no means produce, by a simple combination, a good tragedy, a good scene, or even a good line. But the art of Racine had to be invented *on the basis* of these; not by conforming to them, as has been rather foolishly said, and by deriving exquisite difficulties and necessary constraints from them, but rather by re-inventing them, by conferring a new and peculiarly Racinian function upon the division into acts, the cesura, rhyme, and the ethics of Port Royale, so that it is impossible to decide whether he poured his subject into a mould which his age imposed upon him or whether he really elected this *technique* because his subject required it. To understand what *Phèdre* could not be, it is necessary to appeal to all anthropology. To understand what it *is*, it is necessary only to read or listen, that is, to make oneself a pure freedom and to give one's confidence generously to a generosity. The examples we have chosen have served only to *situate* the freedom of the writer in different ages, to illuminate by the limits of the demands made upon him the limits of his appeal, to show by the idea of his role which the public fashions for itself the necessary boundaries of the idea which he invents of literature. And if it is true that the essence of the literary work is freedom totally disclosing and willing itself as an appeal to the freedom of other men, it is also true that the different forms of oppression, by hiding from men the fact that they were free, have screened all or part of this essence from authors. Thus, the opinions which they have formed about their profes-

of the world insofar as the world is His work; it is an inessential creation on the margin of a major Creation; it is praise, psalm, offering, a pure reflection. By the same token literature falls into alienation; that is, since it is, in any case, the reflectiveness of the social body, since it remains in the state of non-reflective reflectiveness, it mediatizes the Catholic universe; but for the clerk it remains the immediate; it retrieves the world, but by losing itself. But as the reflective idea must necessarily reflect *itself* on pain of annihilating itself with the whole reflected universe, the three examples which we have studied showed a movement of the retrieving of literature by itself, that is, its transition from the state of unreflective and immediate reflection to that of reflective mediation. At first concrete and alienated, it liberates itself by negativity and passes to abstraction; more exactly, it passes in the eighteenth century to abstract negativity before becoming in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century absolute negation. At the end of this evolution it has cut all its bonds with society; it no longer even has a public. "Every one knows," writes Paulhan, "that there are two literatures in our time, the bad, which is really unreadable (it is widely read) and the good, which is not read."

But even that is an advance; at the end of this lofty isolation, at the end of this scornful rejection of all efficacity there is the destruction of literature by itself; at first, the terrible "it's *only* literature;" then, that literary phenomenon which the same Paulhan calls terrorism, which is born at about the same time as the idea of parasitic gratuity, and as its antithesis, and which runs all through the nineteenth century, contracting as it goes a

thousand irrational marriages and which finally bursts forth shortly before the first war. Terrorism, or rather the terrorist complex, for it is a tangle of vipers. One might distinguish, first, so deep a disgust with the sign as such that it leads in all cases to preferring the thing signified to the word, the act to the statement, the word conceived as object to the word-signification, that is, in the last analysis, poetry to prose, spontaneous disorder to composition; second, an effort to make literature one expression among others of life, instead of sacrificing life to literature; and third, a crisis of the writer's moral conscience, that is the sad collapse of parasitism. Thus, without for a moment conceiving the idea of losing its formal autonomy, literature makes itself a negation of formalism and comes to raise the question of its essential content. To-day we are beyond terrorism and we can make use of its experience and the preceding analyses to set down the essential traits of a concrete and liberated literature.

We have said that, as a rule, the writer addressed all men. But immediately afterward we noted that he was read only by a few. As a result of the divergence between the real public and the ideal public, there arose the idea of abstract universality. That is, the author postulates the constant repetition in an indefinite future of the handful of readers which he has at present. Literary glory peculiarly resembles Nietzsche's eternal recurrence; it is a struggle against history; here, as there, recourse to the infinity of time seeks to compensate for the failure in space (for the author of the seventeenth century, a recurrence *ad infinitum* of the gentleman; for the one of the nineteenth century, an extension *ad infinitum* of the club

crete pretensions. The aim of *The Silence of the Sea* was to lead the French to reject the enemy's efforts to get them to collaborate. Its effectiveness and consequently its actual public could not extend beyond the time of the occupation. The books of Richard Wright will remain alive as long as the negro question is raised in the United States. Thus, there is no question as to the writer's renouncing the idea of survival; quite the contrary, he is the one who decides it; he will survive so long as he acts. Afterward, it's honorary membership, retirement. Today, for having wanted to escape from history, he begins his honorary membership the day after his death, sometimes even while he is alive.

Thus, the concrete public would be a tremendous feminine questioning, the waiting of a whole society which the writer would have to seduce and satisfy. But for that the public would have to be free to ask and the writer to answer. That means that in no case must the questions of one group or class cover up those of other milieus; otherwise, we would relapse into the abstract. In short, *actual* literature can only realize its full *essence* in a classless society. Only in this society could the writer be aware that there is no difference of any kind between his *subject* and his *public*. For the subject of literature has always been man in the world. However, 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. Not about the abstract man of all the

ages and for a timeless reader, but about the whole man of his age and for his contemporaries. As a result, the literary antinomy of lyrical subjectivity and objective testimony would be left behind. Involved in the same adventure as his readers and situated like them in a society without cleavages, the writer, in speaking about them, would be speaking about himself, and in speaking about himself would be speaking about them. As no aristocratic pride would any longer force him to deny that he is in a situation, he would no longer seek to soar above his times and bear witness to it before eternity, but, as his situation would be universal, he would express the hopes and anger of all men, and would thereby express himself completely, that is, not as a metaphysical creature like the medieval clerk, nor as a psychological animal like our classical writers, nor even as a social entity, but as a totality emerging into the world from the void and containing within it all those structures in the indissoluble unity of the human condition; literature would really be anthropological, in the full sense of the term.

It is quite evident that in such a society there would be nothing which would even remotely recall the separation of the temporal and the spiritual. Indeed, we have seen that this division necessarily corresponds to an alienation of man and, therefore, of literature; our analyses have shown us that it always tends to oppose a public of professionals or, at least, of enlightened amateurs, to the undifferentiated masses. Whether he identifies himself with the Good and with divine Perfection, with the Beautiful or the True, a clerk is always on the side of the oppressors. A watchdog or a jester: it is up to him to choose.

M. Benda has chosen the cap and bells and M. Marcel the kennel; they have the right to do so, but if literature is one day to be able to enjoy its essence, the writer, without class, without colleges, without salons, without excess of honors, and without indignity, will be thrown into the world, among men, and the very notion of clerkship will appear inconceivable. The spiritual, moreover, always rests upon an ideology, and ideologies are freedom when they make themselves and oppression when they are made. The writer who has attained full self-consciousness will therefore not make himself the guardian of any spiritual hero; he will no longer know the centrifugal movement whereby certain of his predecessors turned their eyes away from the world to contemplate the heaven of established values; he will know that his job is not adoration of the spiritual, but rather spiritualization.

Spiritualization, that is, *renewal*. And there is nothing else to spiritualize, nothing else to renew but this multicolored and concrete world with its weight, its opaqueness, its zones of generalisation, and its swarm of anecdotes, and that invincible Evil which gnaws at it without ever being able to destroy it. The writer will renew it as is, the raw, sweaty, smelly, everyday world, in order to submit it to freedoms on the foundation of a freedom. Literature in this classless society would thus be the world aware of itself, suspended in a free act, and offering itself to the free judgment of all men, the reflective self-awareness of a classless society. It is by means of the book that the members of this society would be able to get their bearings, to see themselves and see their situation. But as the portrait compromises the model, as the simple pre-

Thus, in a society without classes, without dictatorship, and without stability, literature would end by becoming conscious of itself; it would understand that form and content, public and subject, are identical, that the formal freedom of saying and the material freedom of doing complete each other, and that one should be used to demand the other, that it best manifests the subjectivity of the person when it translates most deeply collective needs and, reciprocally, that its function is to express the concrete universal to the concrete universal and that its end is to appeal to the freedom of men so that they may realize and maintain the reign of human freedom. To be sure, this is utopian. It is possible to conceive this society, but we have no practical means at our disposal of realizing it. It has allowed us to perceive the conditions under which literature might manifest itself in its fullness and purity.