

Rough Notes on Sartre, "Why Write?" (*What is Literature?*, 1949)

At the end of Merleau-Ponty's reflections on Cezanne, a deep underlying concern came to the surface — freedom. What kind of freedom?

Two things are certain about freedom: that we are never determined and yet that we never change, since, looking back on what we were, we can always find hints of what we have become. It is up to us to understand both these things simultaneously, as well as the way freedom dawns in us without breaking our bonds with the world. ("Cezanne's Doubt", 21)

What does it mean to be free? And what are we to do with our freedom? Merleau-Ponty's essay was published in 1945, just after the Second World War and the Nazi occupation of France. The question of freedom was pressing. "Now that we have our political freedom, what are we to do with it?" The philosophers, of course, would also take up the question of our metaphysical freedom. And that's precisely what we see in "Cezanne's Doubt". Four years later, Merleau-Ponty's compatriot, Jean-Paul Sartre published a small book called *What is Literature?* It was also a philosophical text concerned with the metaphysics of freedom and also focused on the role and responsibility of the artist in post-war Europe.

What **justification** is there for writing? Why should one **choose** to write? The first question addresses a **public** concern, the second addresses a **personal** motivation. How are the public and the personal related? Do one's motives provide the justification? Do they address the "requirement" that a writer be "engaged", "committed", as a writer? The answer, according to Jean-Paul Sartre, seems to be yes.

Reading, Revealing, Collaborating

As perceptual human beings we are, Sartre claims, agents. We act; we do things. More specifically, we are "revealers". What does that mean? We perceive the things that exist in the world in relation to one another.



Take, for example, what I see on a warm, overcast afternoon looking at several people in a rocky landscape adjacent to a waterfall. My attention may be drawn to any number of things: the

photographers in the foreground; the three people on the bench in the background; the little girl on the left standing in the stream and peering into a large clump of grass; or the boy sitting alone just below the path, his left arm in a brace. As my attention actively shifts from one part of this scene to another, I see things in relation to one another. Little vignettes emerge, some more revealing and compelling than others. And many things, as well, go unseen.

We are "directors of being", Sartre says, not the producers of it. "Man is the means by which things are manifested. It is our presence in the world which multiplies relations.... With each of our acts, the world reveals to us a new face.... [But] to our inner certainty of being 'revealers' is added that of being inessential in relation to the thing revealed." (38f) We are not necessary. The world goes on with or without us.

As **artists** we also begin as perceivers. The world shows up for us in certain ways — things in relation to one another, things experienced in particular ways. And as artists we are compelled to bring our ways of seeing to other human beings by creating works of art, knowing that the perspectives embodied in these objects, these creations, are always provisional, always subject to change, always in "a state of suspension". (39)

Sartre is saying something important here about the relation of the **artist** to the **world**. It also raises questions about the relation of the **spectator** to the **object** created by the artist. We'll look more closely at these relations in just a moment.

But first let's consider Sartre's extraordinary claim that **an artist cannot both reveal and create at the same time**. The painter looking at the landscape creates a painting — an object — by setting up relations among the things he sees, making them salient, while leaving other things and relations hidden "in their dark permanence". A painting is created from these aspects of the world grasped and chosen by the artist. But from **his** perspective, everything chosen is provisional. The artist creates the work of art. It comes into being through the artist's choices. And, ultimately, it is made the thing it is through the **process** of painting, drawing, writing, carving, etc. And while any part of the object is inessential in the sense that it could be changed, **the artist feels essential in that process**. This reverses the relation experienced by the artist as perceiver.

"Thus, in the **perception**, the **object** [a particular set of relations in the world] is given as the **essential** thing and the **subject** (the perceiver) as the **inessential**. The latter [the artist] seeks essentiality in the **creation** and obtains it, but then it is the **object** [any particular relation chosen and depicted by the artist] which becomes the **inessential**." (40; emphases added.)

And that's because it is we, as artists, who "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." (40)

Things may be **discovered** in the process of creating, things I may have never noticed. But nothing is **revealed** to me **in** my painting, poem, or story. What is in those objects comes **from** me, not **to** me.

Artistic creation comes after "directing", that is, after setting up ("revealing") the relations that are otherwise undisclosed in the world.

What about the viewer, the listener, or the reader?

"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." (46; emphases added.)

[Elaborate]

The writer is never a reader of his or her own work. Why? Because the work is not there in advance of the writing. The writer must create or "project" the story for there to be a story to read. (Sartre is thinking primarily of the novel, although his analysis can be, and often is, extended to the other arts.)

To read is to anticipate, to foresee, to wait. (39ff) The reader "foresees the end of the sentence, the following sentence, the next page. He waits for them to confirm or disconfirm 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." (41)

This is not a possible experience for the writer. For the writer who tries to read her own work, it is "always already" too late. She knows what's going to happen next. She can never occupy the subjective position of the reader of her own work. "The future [for the writer] is then a blank page, whereas the future for 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." (42) [Something could be learned here by comparing Iris Murdoch's distinction between fantasy and imagination in her writings on art and ethics. See, for example, "The Sublime and the Good".]

It follows that the writer cannot, and does not, write for herself. (42) [Does it also follow that the reader cannot be a reader more than once?]

"Why write?" One writes to collaborate with a reader. What Sartre describes as the "dialectic" of reading and writing (40) is the ground for the collaboration of reader and writer.

A Question About Method [An Aside to My Readers]

Sartre is giving us a compelling and persuasive story. If it's true, does that mean it would be equally convincing in the form of a more concise, logical, abstract argument? Can its truth sustain such a transposition, assuming of course that the argument captures all the essential propositions?

When I experience Sartre's account as convincing, is it because I imagine myself **having** that kind of experience? Is it that I say to myself, yes, that's what it's like when I read — it does seem to be distinct from my experience of writing in just the way Sartre describes it? Perhaps I've never articulated it this way, but now that Sartre has so nicely pointed it out, I can see that it's quite like my own experience. Is that what makes Sartre's story seem accurate and "true"?

Or is it, in fact, that he has given me a way of seeing that now directs my imagination, fills in the missing account, the story I had not yet articulated for myself, and provides a filter through which I can now, with great ease and conviction, see in a particular way what I and others are doing? I'm now, having read his essay, captivated by Sartre's interpretation of the processes of writing and reading.

One may object that this would disqualify or undermine my so-called "understanding". Is that true? Have I been seduced by a story, beautifully told, that plays on my preferences and predispositions? Do I have another means of evaluating my conviction? These are questions to consider as we try to understand the philosophical method employed by Sartre.

The Constitutive Role of the Reader

"It is the conjoint effort of author and reader which brings upon the scene the concrete and imaginary object which is the work of the mind. There is no art except for and by others." (43)

In this section, Sartre pushes further into the metaphysical nature and identity of the work of art. The literary object, he claims, "transcends" language. It is "realized *through* language...[but] never given *in* language". It is the role of the reader to "realize" it. (44)

What literature ultimately articulates is the "inexpressible". (45) "Reading is directed creation.... 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." (46; emphasis added.)

[Question: How is reading an "absolute beginning"? What does this mean? Is this just Sartre making unsubstantiated claims about "freedom"?)

Sartre raises and answers an objection that might be raised. Is the book, in its freedom, similar to a tool — that it can be used to do whatever you choose? On the contrary, he claims, "the book does not **serve** my freedom; it requires it." (47; emphasis added.) The role of the reader not only regulates, but **constitutes** the work of art.

Incorporating Kant's theory of aesthetic judgment, Sartre explores the relevance and limits of art. There is "finality" in the work of art, but not open-ended. "The work of art *does not have* an end; there we agree with Kant. But the reason is that it **is** an end." (48; emphases added.) What Kant's view misses is "the appeal" to the perceiver to contribute to the ongoing creation of the work.

If Sartre is correct, we would have to conclude that many, if not most, readers today fail to live up to their responsibility. "You are perfectly free to leave that book on the table. But if you open it, you assume responsibility for it." (48) And if we as readers **constitute** the work, we have far fewer works today than we should. So many would be incomplete, unrealized.

Reading as a Gift — Generosity

"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." (51; emphasis added.)

That is an extraordinary claim by Sartre. (The essay is so full of them!) Here's another one. "When I am enchanted with a landscape, I know very well 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." (51f) Here we encounter a dialectic of looking and perceiving, a counterpart to writing and reading. This claim also brings to mind Merleau-Ponty's account of perception. (Cf., "Eye and Mind".)

Sartre touches on the artist's intentions and the reader's "conjectures", in light of the reader's **experience**, of course. All of this is still part of Sartre's distinguishing sharply between **nature** and **art**, apropos of Kant. (54)

"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." (55)

Attentive and Constitutive Reading

Sartre now extends his case, somewhat metaphorically, for art's reaching out into the "world" and the "universe". The work opens out onto the world and the spectator (viewer, reader, listener, etc.) and goes beyond what is immediately given in the work. "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.” (57) We can hear echoes of Heidegger's "Origin of the Work of Art" in this (and other) passages.

[Sartre's discussion of "aesthetic joy" in relation to freedom pushes further into his metaphysics and makes use of his distinction (from *Transcendence of the Ego*) between positional and non-positional consciousness. (58ff) Positional consciousness is Non-positional consciousness is "Transcendent" is used by Sartre to designate ...] {FILL IN THE DEFINITIONS.}

"To write is thus both to **disclose** the world and to offer it as a **task** to the generosity of the reader." (60, emphases added.)

Moral and Aesthetic Imperatives Linked

"[A]though literature is one thing and morality a quite different one, **at the heart of the aesthetic imperative we discern the moral imperative.**" (62f, emphasis added.)

In concluding, Sartre extends his account to contemporary political issues in postwar France, linking freedom to democracy. "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." (65)

Timothy Quigley, revised 20 Apr 15

Source

Jean-Paul Sartre, "Why Write?", in *Literature and Existentialism* (Original title: *What is Literature?*), trans. by Bernard Frechtman, Secaucus, NJ: Citadel Press, 1949.