

Lionel Abel

## "WHAT IS LITERATURE?"

An Open Letter to Jean-Paul Sartre

Dear Sartre;

May I take public issue with you for the claims you make in *What is Literature?* You claim literary importance, even preeminence, for socially committed, or "responsible" writing; you claim also that anyone who happens to be unprejudiced must necessarily support such writing with you. And in line with this, your second contention, you hold the question of what one should be *for* in literature to be fundamentally an *intellectual* question, answerable by the disclosure of the essence of literature, the unveiling of what literature *is*. Now here is the nub of my disagreement with—or misunderstanding of—your way of thinking. It strikes me that whatever the essence of literature may be, the disclosure of this essence can hardly persuade us to side with one school or trend or style of writing against other schools or trends or styles. Surely romanticism is no more in conflict—or, for that matter, in accord—with the essence of literature than are classicism, realism, naturalism, symbolism, surrealism, or the socially "responsible" writing you yourself advocate. The "rightness" of the school or trend or style of literature one supports seems to me to derive, to a very great degree, from the power of one's prejudice for it. Your prejudice is for a "responsible" literature. So be it. But you claim to be able to justify this stand of yours, a stand which I call prejudiced—and not in the pejorative sense of that word—by examining the art of literature as such, by showing literature to be what it essentially is, by regarding it—these are your own words—"without prejudice of any sort."

Of course, the fact that I do not understand all this, does not mean that you are in error; it may only mean that I am philosophically old-fashioned, and, holding fast to traditional distinctions, have simply failed to grasp the revelation implicit in your way of thinking: namely, that the disclosure of essence is no longer entirely an affair of contemplation but has now also become an affair of action. For you, to be a

partisan of essence does not mean, as I still assume, to be on the side of nobody and out of the battle; quite the contrary, you think it means to be in the press and middle of the fighting, with essence performing wonders for your particular side . . .

Instead of justifying their prejudices by an appeal to essence, some men have made their prejudices essential to us. Verlaine, to convey his rejection of any kind of writing other than poetry, and poetry in which music, music, came before everything, exclaimed—but musically, musically—“*Et tout le reste est littérature!*” All the rest—the phrase remained, set many dreaming, and clarified little; nonetheless, it was not uttered without effect. One of these effects is your own book, I think; for *What is Literature?* can be described as a resaying of Verlaine’s phrase, only with the opposite bias, and this time, eloquently, eloquently. In speaking for prose, of course, you have to be logical to convince us; Verlaine called only on the music of words. . . .

Now, it is your logic again that I want to question; this time your distinction between poetry and prose. You say these are entirely different arts, each having its own form, or *eidōs*. The universes of poetry and prose are distinct and separate, for all that they are both creations of language. In poetry, you say, words are not really used. Whereas prose—which you make synonymous with literature—is “in essence utilitarian.” You go on: “I should define the prose writer as a man who makes use of words.”

Your purpose in framing this distinction, I take it, is to show that the prose writer, unlike the poet, is committed to some attitude or project which he wants others to adopt or support, using language as a means to this end. He is trying to accomplish something—the poet, I suppose, is trying to be a failure, in which effort, with luck and talent, he sometimes succeeds! Thus only the writer of prose can be queried about what it is he wants to effect; he should be able to answer such questions responsibly. Your argument runs like this; on the one hand there is poetry, in which nothing is recommended, since the physical properties of words are essential to the meaning of whatever is asserted; on the other hand there is prose in which something has to be recommended, since the physical properties of words in prose writings must in the main be disregarded by the writer. Not being a propagandist, the poet cannot be responsible. Since he is a propagandist, the prose writer ought to be responsible.

But is it the case that a distinterested use of words excludes propaganda, and that the interested use of words involves responsibility? Both poet and prose writer can with just as much truth be regarded as pro-

pagandists who are irresponsible. This view was set forth in the late '20's very cleverly by the English critic Montgomery Belgion. He argued that writers, poets not excepted, are bent on winning their readers' assent to some by no means clear conviction about life, and with devices scarcely fair or reasonable. The question of responsibility rests of course on whether the writer can foresee what he is going to say; knowing that the poet requires inspiration, one tends to forget to what extent any writer not a hack depends and has to depend on forces quite beyond his control. In *The Human Parrot*, Belgion, drawing on the testimony of Balzac, Pascal, Nietzsche, Bergson—all prose writers—makes the point that it is impossible for a writer to choose the time best suited for composition. The writer, moreover, “. . . cannot hit upon the subject for a literary work by means of a deliberate exertion of his will.” So he cannot know in advance what he is going to say or when. Which does not prevent him from being a propagandist.

Belgion writes: “Every narrative is the illustration of a theory of life . . . every narrative is propaganda for its theory. And the propagandist is irresponsible.” Just to give this view of the matter a pat, let me cite the case of Tolstoy, who, after *War and Peace* and *Anna Karenina*, confessed that in writing these novels he assumed he had been teaching something, but questioning himself, was forced to admit he did not know what. And in fact, that he had had nothing to teach worth the effort of writing. He insisted also that this was true of all the Russian writers of the period—it was the great period of Russian literature, whose chief glory was the novel. If we are to believe Tolstoy, the masters of Russian prose were teachers who did not know what they were teaching, they were irresponsible propagandists, so was he. You write: “. . . if prose is never anything but the privileged instrument of a certain undertaking, if it is the business of poets alone to contemplate words disinterestedly, then we have the right to ask of the prose writer directly: ‘What is your aim in life? What undertaking are you engaged in, and why does it require you to use writing as a means?’” Now Tolstoy could not answer these questions, and having put them to himself, abandoned literature. And it was literature he abandoned, not poetry, at least not poetry as you understand it.

Since you define writing as “taking a position,” you want writers to take sides on current questions and to assume the guilt and responsibility of trying to be as “right” as they can in their books.

Against this bias, you say the only stand that could be made would be the old one represented by the slogan: “art for art's sake.” But your stand is not new either. The same general line was taken by George

Bernard Shaw at the beginning of the century—for example in his *Letter to Arthur Bingham Walkley*, published as a preface to *Man and Superman* in 1903. Shaw here frankly characterized himself as a clergyman and schoolteacher with a contempt for belles-lettres. Speaking from more than a half century ago, he shows himself in thorough agreement with your view that the writer should be a sayer of *something* as against the aesthetic position which would have the writer an accomplished sayer of no matter what. Of the writer you remark: "He knows that words 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." This is Shaw in the same vein: "No doubt I must recognize, as even the Ancient Mariner did, that I must tell my story entertainingly if I am to hold the wedding guest spellbound in spite of the siren sounds of the loud bassoon. But for 'art's sake' alone I would not face the toil of writing a single sentence; I know that there are men who having nothing to say and nothing to write are nevertheless so in love with oratory and with literature that they delight in repeating as much as they can understand of what others have said or written aforetime . . . I can pity their dotage and even sympathize with their fancy. But a true original style is never achieved for its own sake: a man may pay from a shilling to a guinea, according to his means, to see, hear or read another man's act of genius; but he will not pay with his whole life and soul to become a virtuoso in literature, exhibiting an accomplishment which will not even make money for him, like fiddle playing. Effectiveness of assertion is the Alpha and Omega of style. He who has nothing to assert has no style and can have none. . . ."

I am aiming at you, of course, but I shall make my point at the expense of G.B.S. When he says "but for 'art's sake' alone I would not face the toil of writing a single sentence," I feel admiration for a drastic choice cleanly made. I feel that *Shaw* was right not to compose a single sentence for "art's sake" alone. But when immediately afterwards, he goes on to argue that no other choice would be possible, what appeared as a true decision takes on the shape of an intelligent calculation. "He who has nothing to assert has no style and can have none. . . ." The element of choosing is contradicted by the contention that there was no other course to follow than the one he took. And I have the same difficulty with your remark about the choice of content and of form: "Often the two choices are only one but among good writers the second choice never precedes the first."

I call your position, and Shaw's too, one of propaganda for art's sake. For finally, like him you are given (committed?) to a curiously defeatist aestheticism: the literary composition is to express opinions and attitudes, but, with Shaw, you look beyond the correctness of the writer's convictions, expecting them to serve ultimately the purposes of art and be the necessary condition for achieving form. You admit that "style makes the value of the prose." You remark: "In the course of centuries, the ideas have turned flat, but they remain the little personal objectives of a man who was once flesh and blood; behind the reasons of reason, which languish, we perceive the reasons of the heart, the virtues, the vices and the great pain that men have in living. Sade does his best to win us over but we hardly find him scandalous. He is no longer anything but a soul eaten by a beautiful disease, a pearl-oyster. The *Letter on the Theatre* no longer keeps anyone from going to the theater, but we find it piquant that Rousseau detested the art of the drama." And here is Shaw: "... he who has something to assert will go as far in power of style as its momentousness and his conviction will carry him. Disprove the assertion after it is made, yet its style remains... All the assertions get disproved sooner or later... but the form is still splendid."

If one believes sufficiently that what one knows in advance will one day not be believable—or even worth believing in—one can succeed in communicating with those to whom one no longer has anything to say. In other words, in the long run, even the "responsible" writer is turned into a "poet" by the discrediting of his ideas. History seems to be curiously intolerant of "prose."

I grant your position this much, however: it is *morally* appealing, as no exhortation to be irresponsible in writing can be. I noted in reading the criticisms of your position that most of what I thought right in what was said against you was purely negative. I am sure of this, though: a literary program—necessarily assailable—can never follow from a definition of what literature is. Should you not have distinguished what literature is, at its best, from what at some particular moment literature, for political or moral reasons, might devote itself to being? In fact, I think your failure to make this distinction has made your whole analysis ambiguous. Perhaps at certain moments of history writers ought to be more socially "responsible" about the effects of their writings, perhaps not. But, in any case, prescription for what writers should devote themselves to at any given moment can hardly come from a general or essential definition of literature as such. •

And in fact your program for writers does not come at all from your definition of literature.

What do you want writers to do? You want them to become aware of the causes they are advocating and use their creative skills to win others to the support of such causes. Also you think it morally best for writers not to be too interested in the art of writing, or at least in this art for its own sake. And you point out that there are media today, such as the film and radio, which reach larger numbers of people than the poem, the novel, the play, can hope to influence. You suggest that writers avail themselves of these media, no matter what form their own talents and interests predispose them to work in. Would you go so far as to say that in this age of mass movements a writer is irresponsible if his audience is confined to a very few persons? Such, I take it, is your contention, and that is why I say you have taken your notion of responsibility in literature from the sphere of politics.

And what is more, you have not made clear what responsibility in the political sphere is. Fortunately, there is the essay by Max Weber on the vocation of politics, which does clarify, as you have not, in what sense the man who has taken politics for his vocation may be called "responsible."

According to Weber, there are two possibilities for the man who has elected a political career: He can insist on realizing his ideal, whatever it be, totally, uncompromisingly, and at once; he can be at one with his ideal, and never deviate from it, whatever the consequences. But if he behaves in this way, he has to be prepared to fail his ideal altogether, not realize it even in part. In one sense, of course, he can never fail—he is at one with his ideal before having done anything to advance it. This kind of idealist in politics is always a romantic and often, as Weber says, a "windbag." He is not responsible.

The responsible politician is he who tries to realize his ideal, whatever it be, to the maximum degree possible under given circumstances. His pathos is that he is never at one with his ideal, but is always separated from it. He does not effect all that he would have liked to, but convinces us that no one else could have effected as much as he did. He, the truly responsible politician in Weber's sense, is right to compromise, to trim, to alter and weaken his program as circumstances may require. An instance of responsibility of this kind would be Lenin's attitude during the Brest-Litovsk negotiations with the Germans. It will be remembered that the Germans wanted the Bolsheviks to surrender the whole of the Ukraine, and only on these terms would end the war. Ideally, the Bolsheviks would have preferred to continue the war and not surrender the Ukraine. Moreover, they would have liked to bring about a revolution in Germany itself, a revolution Lenin had said would

be more valuable to humanity than the one made in Russia. But when Trotsky, opposing peace with the Germans, suggested that his disagreement with Lenin be put to a vote, Lenin is said to have remarked: "The soldiers have already voted—with their feet." In fact, the whole Russian army was in disorderly retreat.

In the light of Weber's analysis, I would say that Lenin's attitude on this occasion can be taken as a model of responsibility in the political sphere. For Lenin's remark expresses the pride of a man who has understood politics to be his true vocation. I doubt very much whether anyone whose true vocation is literature could express an equal pride in adopting a course not set by him, the writer. I have in mind Joyce's hero of his play *Exiles*, the writer Richard Rowan, who when his wife tries to explain his behavior to her, answers: "I don't take my ideas from other people."

In this self-definition, Joyce's hero expresses the ethos of the writer who, unlike the responsible politician, has to be at one with his ideal. For there is nothing the writer is able to gain by trimming, weakening, or compromising his ideal, since he is not dependent for its realization on the action of anyone other than himself. Flaubert was quite right to insist on the *mot juste* in his descriptions. And Tolstoy was quite right to have excised from his novels and stories sentences which seemed to him too beautifully phrased and thus inappropriate to the ethical tone he wanted for his narration. Thus if we compare writers to politicians we find that writers are like those politicians Weber refused to consider fully responsible. Should the writer give up what is proper to his vocation, literature, and try to acquire what is proper to an entirely different vocation, politics? But why should the writer do this? I can see no reason, nor have you yourself given any. No, you have not really analyzed what responsibility means, not in politics, and not in literature either, though your avowed aim was to define a kind of responsibility covering both.

No wonder you had to distinguish literature from poetry and call them two entirely different arts. For the kind of maneuvering with ideals characteristic of the responsible politician would be utterly fatal to the art of poetry. My claim, too, is that such maneuvering with ideals would be equally fatal to literature, which is by no means as distinct from poetry as you have tried to make it appear.

I want to consider here in more detail your notion that literature is entirely different from the art of poetry.

In arguing for this notion you say that a poem is not merely a collection of words, since the words are so glued together in a poem as to

form an object or a thing. You write: "... the poetic word is a microcosm and when the poet joins together several of these microcosms, he is doing what the painters do when they put their colors on canvas; one thinks the poet is composing a phrase, but this is just an appearance; he is creating an object. His word-things are grouped by magical associations . . . like colors and sounds, they attract each other, they repel each other, they *burn* and their association composes the real poetic unity which is the *phrase-object*."

Word-thing—that is your notion of what a poem is. And literature, as you distinguish it from poetry, does not address itself to the creation of word-things. But you never try to define for us what a thing is, so that your notion of the poem, as distinct from the literary work, necessarily remains obscure. This seems all the more surprising, since in Heidegger's *The Origin of the Work of Art*, which I must assume you were acquainted with when you wrote *What is Literature?*, the German philosopher, asserting that all works of art are in the first place things, then went on to try and say what things are. I must add that Heidegger, in describing every work of art as a thing, was denying any difference between art and literature, poetry, according to him, being essential to both.

While Heidegger in his essay did not succeed in making clear what a thing is, he did succeed in liberating us from all the unsatisfactory definitions of things, received from past philosophy, which we had relied on. Heidegger's aim was to render things more mysterious, even to give back to things their initial mystery which our past definitions tended to deprive them of. Perhaps you agree with this effort; maybe this is why you have not tried to say in your turn what things are. *You* do not mind conceding a certain mystery to the poem, since you define it as being made up of words to form a thing. So I see you are willing to concede mystery to things and to poems, which you say are also things; on the other hand, you want to withdraw any taint or trace of mystery from works of literature, which are not things in any sense, in your definition of them. This is why, no doubt, you think the author of a literary work can be so responsible for it, for of course no one can be altogether responsible for what does not come without some mystery from his hands.

But if literature is without mystery, then what is literature? It cannot be the novel, the short story, or the play, certainly not as handled by the masters of these forms. For in the stories of Poe and Maupassant, of Chekhov and Tolstoy, in the novels of Flaubert and Balzac, in the plays of Pirandello and of Ibsen, not to speak of Shakespeare and Racine,



who, of course, did write in verse—though it would seem strange to me to say that what they wrote does not belong to literature but to some other domain—mystery is present and perhaps to a greater degree than in those word-objects or word-things you designate as poems. According to you, these stories, novels, plays would not be literature. Then what can literature be? Must we come to the conclusion that literature can only be that kind of intellectual journalism you yourself are making so important in the pages of *Les Temps Modernes*, and at which you so excell all the rest of us? Should we say then that journalism alone is literature, and that all we have been accustomed to thinking of as literature is not?

Let me go back to what Heidegger said about the work of art, including the literary work. Why did he insist on relating such works to things, regarding them as essentially poetic, as essentially mysterious? In taking this view Heidegger used terms which philosophers have found objectionable, but to which I myself do not object. I think his new terms were intended to suggest rather than to clarify directly, though a certain clarification, for me at least, does result from submitting to their suggestiveness. In his essay, Heidegger refers to the "earth," contrasting it with the "world" and what he says, if I may rephrase it, amounts to this: Things are mysterious because they belong to the earth as well as to the purely historical or human world in which they have been fashioned and put to their specific uses. If we do not think of things as mysterious, this is because we have forgotten that they belong to the earth, however much they may seem to be entirely ours. Now in a work of art or a work of literature we do recognize, Heidegger claims, the presence of the earth itself as well as the presence of that specific world or culture or civilization in which the work was articulated. The thingness of the literary or art work is the earth's; its intelligibility is the world's. The world is the intelligibility of the earth; and the earth is the unintelligibility of the world. And the unity of these contraries is most securely fixed in words of art or literature.

But to return to your own view and contrast it with Heidegger's. What you want, it seems to me, is to eliminate from literature any element of or reference to the earth, that is, to that which lies beyond our understanding, and to make of literature something entirely useful, pliable, worldly, if you please, calculated to achieve given and desirable ends. You want literature to be entirely rational and purposive, just as the bureaucrats in Russia want literature to be, though their purposes are, of course, not the same as yours. Your aim is to remove the element of the incalculable from literature—I should say that element is one of

its main charms, and with that charm removed, of course, literature could be made to fit into any number of purely utilitarian or political schemes. On the one side are poetry, things, the incalculable, the unintelligible earth; on the other, no thingness, no mystery, no imponderables—but clarity, responsibility, and literature. I should say by this last term “literature” you can only mean journalism.

But journalism has no need of those combinations of words which, Valery writes, “. . . can be charged with more force than evident meaning, being better understood by things than by men, also by rocks, waters, animals, gods, hidden treasures, by the powers and resources of life than by the reasonable soul . . .” But can literature do without such combinations of words? Edmund Wilson in a bold and searching essay *Is Verse a Dying Technique?* noted that such words appear in modern works not written in verse, in plays like Synge’s *The Playboy of the Western World* and in novels like Joyce’s *Ulysses*. One could of course give many other instances. But the even more important point Wilson made in his essay—quite contrary to your main point—was that the equivalent for that poetic vision of life (he was thinking, I suggest, of that confrontation of the world and the earth referred to by Heidegger) found in the greatest poets of the past, has not been found since the nineteenth century in any literary production written in verse. Where then has it been found? In the prose writings of Dickens, Balzac, Dostoyevsky, Flaubert and Joyce.

You have separated poetry from literature as if these were entirely different arts, as different from each other as music and painting are from literature. And you have disregarded the element of inspiration and of chance in composing even prose works; you have confused responsibility in political action with responsibility in writing; finally, you have disguised the moral value of writing for some definite moral or social purpose behind what I take to be a pseudo-intellectual judgment of what literature must inescapably be.

Since these positions of yours are so dubious, I think I am entitled to regard your advocacy of them as based not on reason but on a particular prejudice. So we do not *have* to agree with what you wrote in *What is Literature?* But should we anyway, if not because your views are valid, then because your bias is valuable? Here I am inclined, after having argued against you, to look on your bias with sympathy. I do not promise to adopt it.

The aim of your *What is Literature?* is, simply stated, to place polemics, pamphlets, movie and radio scripts, propaganda plays and propaganda novels above (morally? esthetically?) all other forms of

literary production insofar as such works might have an invigorating effect on the masses and lead them to more responsible behavior in politics. Together with the moral purpose all this might serve, I think, Jean-Paul Sartre, you are also interested, intellectually interested, in showing how limited in its effect on events the intelligence is, in this case, your own.

Of course, only individuals of great intelligence can want to make their minds useful to others in preference to always showing their minds at their best. And only individuals of the greatest intelligence can become aware of how little use even the best mind is on the questions which torment us all. It is from this recognition, felt most keenly by the intellectual, that the desire is born to be one among many; also, I think, the willingness to hold and sustain views of a kind only one very skilled in argument is able to defend at all. There is a point in the life of the mind where the moral impulse blends subtly with the talent for casuistry. There is an intellectual pride in holding opinions beneath one's intelligence, as there is a moral pride in performing acts that seem foolish to others. After all, nowadays the most morally insignificant person can criticize Tolstoy for going to the peasants in the manner he did. Tolstoy, was however, without any doubt one of the most intelligent men of his century. Yet Knut Hamsun, so inferior to Tolstoy as an artist, in moral feeling, and in general intelligence, is able, in his novel *Mysteries*, to ridicule the Russian writer, and in a way that is convincing and gains our assent.

Bertrand Russell, writing on Ludwig Wittgenstein, does not hesitate to convict his friend, student and teacher of folly, very much as Hamsun did Tolstoy. Moreover, Russell does not fail to relate Wittgenstein to Tolstoy—also to Pascal. He writes: "There are two great men in history whom he (Wittgenstein) somewhat resembles. One was Pascal, the other was Tolstoy. Pascal was a mathematician of genius but abandoned mathematics for piety. Tolstoy sacrificed his genius as a writer to a kind of bogus humility which made him prefer peasants to educated men and *Uncle Tom's Cabin* to all other works of fiction. Wittgenstein, who could play with metaphysical intricacies as cleverly as Pascal with hexagons or Tolstoy with emperors, threw away this talent and debased himself before common sense, as Tolstoy debased himself before the peasants—in each case from an impulse of pride. I admire Wittgenstein's *Tractatus* but not his later work which seems to me an abnegation of his own best talent very similar to those of Pascal and Tolstoy."

In making these judgments Russell seemed to have overlooked the fact that a very similar judgment has been made of him too,

For why should Russell, those who admire his mathematical and logical thought continue to ask, have done so little in these fields for a good part of his life and concerned himself with writing about education, marriage, happiness and politics—topics on which he had no extraordinary insights to offer and could do little more than show that he held progressive opinions? Personally, I honor Russell for having written on these topics, though in these writings it cannot be said that he showed his mind at its full strength. But my point is that in taking up current and topical problems of interest to the many Russell was, I think conducting himself in the very manner he dispraises in Pascal, Tolstoy, and Wittgenstein. I do not want to concur in a similar dispraise of you.

And so I am ready to grant that the wrong views you have asserted in *What is Literature?* spring from a more generous impulse than many truer views, including some I have marshalled against you. Your narodniki are, I suggest, the masses you think you can reach through the plays you yourself told me were written as “myths for the general public,” through your novels and your movie scripts. Perhaps you can reach the masses through these media, and I, for one, am not going to predict that no good will come of it. But why pretend, as you do pretend in *What is Literature?*, that it is for the sake of some new and brilliant idea that you are using your mind—in the interest not of mind, but of others? You do not say, as Tolstoy did, that most of our literature is altogether useless, and that there ought to be an entirely different kind of writing which might edify even the ignorant. You claim in *What is Literature?* that you are going to continue with journalism; you announce, too, that you are going to write for the films, for radio, and for television; and you are not content to justify your writing for these media on moral or political grounds; you also claim, you are going to realize the essence of literature.

#### **Post Scriptum**

This postscript to my open letter is directed exclusively to American readers. I could not expect Sartre to be acquainted with texts that have not appeared in French publications. Nor could I very well call his attention to matters that are purely of local concern. Finally, I owe American readers further clarifications about Sartre's views which it would be pointless to express to him.

(1) Does Sartre hold the same position today that he held in *What is Literature?*, published almost fifteen years ago? I think he does. To be sure, in his latest book, *The Words*, there are certain remarks which suggest that he has abandoned his earlier view. For example, in *The Words* he says: “I still write. What else can I do? *Nulla dies sine linea*. It's a habit, and besides, it's my profession. For a long time, I took my pen for a sword; I now know

we're powerless. No matter. I write and will keep writing books; I have to; and they may serve some purpose." Now these remarks do seem to contradict the position he took in *What is Literature?* when he did not feel powerless and, as he says, took his pen for a sword. Nevertheless, we may regard these recent statements by Sartre as the expression of a mood held at the moment. When questioned by an interviewer for *Encounter* (June, 1964) about whether he had changed his position on literature, Sartre replied: "What does literature stand for in a hungry world? Like morality, literature needs to be universal. So the writer must put himself on the side of the two billion starving, if he wishes to speak to all and be read by all. Failing that, he is at the service of a privileged class, and like it, an exploiter." It will be seen that Sartre still identifies the *universality* of a literary work with its support of a *particular* segment of humanity, those who are exploited or oppressed.

(2) Is the view expressed by Sartre in *What is Literature?* relevant to the problems of American writers today? I think it is. When *What is Literature?* appeared, it received scant attention here. This, I think, was the result of the disillusionment with social action felt by the writers and critics of the fifties. So Sartre's call for a committed literature went disregarded. However, times have changed. Recent events, especially the Negro struggle for civil rights, have in fact changed the whole literary situation, though many are loath to admit that this has happened. A case in point. When Irving Howe in his recent book of essays, *A World More Attractive*, criticized Ralph Ellison for trying to ". . . write simply about 'Negro experience' with the aesthetic detachment urged by the critics of the fifties . . ." Ellison replied with a powerful, but often abusive, polemic. Howe's point was that it is a moral and psychological impossibility for any writer, particularly for a Negro writer, to deal unideologically with Negro experience since, Howe wrote, ". . . plight and protest are inseparable from that experience . . ." Quite a few writers thought Howe was wrong in taking this attitude and were prompted to say so strongly. So strongly in fact that in most cases Howe's critics deformed and disfigured what he said. Why was there so much heat about this matter? Evidently because it is not so easy for a writer these days to take an attitude of aesthetic detachment. But this is just what Irving Howe said!

(3) Is Sartre's reduction of literature to journalism as strange today as it might have appeared more than a decade ago when he wrote *What is Literature?* I think not. Something quite close to his radical view was asserted by Norman Podhoretz in his recent book, *Doings and Undoings*. There Podhoretz maintained that in our epoch—he did not venture to speak for the ages—literature of an important kind is more likely to be found in magazine pieces than in poems, stories, novels, or plays. Podhoretz was, of course, not trying to limit literature by defining it in a certain way; he was merely trying to overcome the prejudice that true creation appears only in recognized literary forms; he was also expressing the conviction that "creation" is more likely to occur in pieces expressing some social purpose than in set literary works. Nor do I think Podhoretz was off the mark in this judgment. James Baldwin's *The*

*Fire Next Time*, originally a magazine article, can hardly be called less creative than novels written recently, including Baldwin's own novel, *In Another Country*.

(4) In reducing literature to journalism, is not Sartre making literature something thoroughly worldly? I should say he is. But by the term "worldly" I do not understand something *unspiritual*. What I have in mind is Heidegger's distinction between the *earth* and the *world*, and my point is that Sartre's preference is clearly for the *world*. This same preference is expressed in modern technology and in all of our sciences, by which I do not mean to criticize either technology or the sciences. The relevant question here is: Does not such a preference go against the distinctive function of art and literature? Take, for example, the standing of the moon in our thought, now that it is approachable by our astronauts. Certainly it is going to become a much more important part of the *world*, and, as certainly, a less significant part of the *earth*. Is this to be desired?

(5) Is Edmund Wilson's view of literature entirely opposed to Sartre's? No. For there is a point on which both Sartre and Wilson agree. They both assert that modern verse has become a specialized function. However, for Wilson, what might be called "big" poetry has been taken over by prose writers, "little" poetry remaining the province of those who want to express themselves in verse. Verse, though, for both Wilson and Sartre serves a real need which prose writing can only occasionally satisfy. This is to renew our feeling for words as such.

On this point Meyer Schapiro has pointed out to me that both the French and English languages lack a word like the German word *Dichtung*, which cannot be translated as *poetry*, even though the word *Dichter*, to which *Dichtung* is related, is synonymous with the English word *poet*. *Dichtung*, however, stands for an imaginative work written in either verse or prose.

(6) Does Sartre's position on literature come down to demanding that the writer make some sacrifice of intellect in taking up the cause of those in need? I think it does. However, I would point out that the expression of intelligence was never the highest function of literary works. And I would point out too, against our aesthetes that it is not possible to argue successfully against Sartre's position from a purely literary standpoint, which I think they believe to be the case. I think one can deny his position only from the standpoint of an intellectualism, which like Paul Valery's, sets intelligence as such above *both* literary and social values.

L. A.