

# Commitment

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Since Sartre's essay *What is Literature?*, there has been less theoretical debate about committed and autonomous literature. Nevertheless, the controversy over commitment remains urgent, so far as anything that merely concerns the life of the mind can be today, as opposed to sheer human survival. Sartre was moved to issue his manifesto because he saw—and he was certainly not the first to do so—works of art displayed side by side in a pantheon of optional edification, decaying into cultural commodities. In such coexistence, they desecrate each other. If any work, without its author's necessarily intending it, aims at a supreme effect, none can thereby truly tolerate a neighbor beside it. This salutary intolerance holds not only for individual works, but also for esthetic genres or attitudes such as those once symbolized in the now half-forgotten controversy over commitment. There are two "positions on objectivity" which are constantly at war with one another, even when intellectual life falsely presents them as at peace. A work of art that is committed strips the magic from a work of art that is content to be a fetish, an idle pastime for those who would like to sleep through the deluge that threatens them, in an apoliticism that is in fact deeply political. For the committed, such works are a distraction from the battle of real interests, in which none is any longer exempt from the conflict between two great blocs. The possibility of mental life itself depends on this conflict to such an extent that only blind illusion can insist on rights that may be shattered tomorrow. For autonomous works of art, however, such considerations, and the conception of art which underlies them, are themselves the spiritual catastrophe of which the committed keep warning. Once the life of the mind renounces the duty and liberty, of its own pure objectification, it has abdicated. Thereafter, works of art merely assimilate themselves sedulously to the brute existence against which they protest, in forms so ephemeral (the very charge made *vice versa* by committed against autonomous works) that from their first day they belong to the seminars in which they inevitably end. The menacing thrust of the antithesis is a reminder of how precarious the position of art is today. Each of the two alternatives negates itself with the other. Committed art, necessarily detached as art from reality, cancels the distance between the two. "Art for art's sake" denies by its absolute claims that ineradicable connection with reality which is the polemical *a priori* of the very attempt to make art autonomous from the real. Between these two poles, the tension in which art has lived in every age till now, is dissolved.

## **The Confusions of the Debate on Commitment**

Contemporary literature itself suggests doubts as to the omnipotence of these alternatives. For it is not yet so completely subjugated to the course of the world as to constitute rival fronts. The Sartrean goats and the Valéryan sheep will not be separated. Even if politically motivated, commitment in itself remains politically polyvalent so long as it is not reduced to propaganda, whose pliancy mocks any commitments by the subject. On the other hand, its opposite, known in Russian catechisms as formalism, is not decried only by Soviet officials or libertarian existentialists; even "vanguard" critics themselves frequently accuse so-called abstract texts of a lack of provocation, of social aggressivity. Conversely, Sartre cannot praise Picasso's *Guernica* too

highly; yet he could hardly be convicted of formalist sympathies in music or painting. He restricts his notion of commitment to literature because of its conceptual character: "The writer deals with meanings."<sup>1</sup> Of course, but not only with them. If no word which enters a literary work ever wholly frees itself from its meanings in ordinary speech, so no literary work, not even the traditional novel, leaves these meanings unaltered, as they were outside it. Even an ordinary "was," in a report of something that was not, acquires a new formal quality from the fact that it was not so. The same process occurs in the higher levels of meaning of a work, all the way up to what once used to be called its "Idea." The special position that Sartre accords to literature must also be suspect to anyone who does not unconditionally subsume diverse esthetic genres under a superior universal concept. The rudiments of external meanings are the irreducibly nonartistic elements in art. Its formal principle lies not in them, but in the dialectic of both moments—which accomplishes the transformation of meanings within it. The distinction between artist and *littérateur*<sup>2</sup> is shallow: but it is true that the object of any esthetic philosophy, even as understood by Sartre, is not the publicistic aspect of art. Still less is it the "message" of a work. The latter oscillates untenably between the subjective intentions of the artist and the demands of an objectively explicit metaphysical meaning. In our country, this meaning generally turns out to be an uncommonly practicable Being.

The social function of the talk about commitment has meanwhile become somewhat confused. Cultural conservatives who demand that a work of art should say something, join forces with their political opponents against atelic,<sup>3</sup> hermetic works of art. Eulogists of "relevance" are more likely to find Sartre's *Huis Clos*<sup>4</sup> profound, than to listen patiently to a text whose language jolts signification and by its very distance from "meaning" revolts in advance against positivist subordination of meaning. For the atheist Sartre, on the other hand, the conceptual import of art is the premise of commitment. Yet works banned in the East are sometimes demagogically denounced by local guardians of the authentic message because they apparently say what they in fact do not say. The Nazis were already using the term "cultural Bolshevism" under the Weimar Republic, and hatred of what it refers to has survived the epoch of Hitler, when it was institutionalized. Today it flares up again just as it did forty years ago, at works of the same kind, including some whose origins now go a long way back and are unmistakably part of an established tradition.

Newspapers and magazines of the radical Right constantly stir up indignation against what is unnatural, over-intellectual, morbid and decadent: they know their readers. The insights of social psychology into the authoritarian personality confirm them. The basic features of this type include conformism, respect for a petrified facade of opinion and society, and resistance to impulses that disturb its order or evoke inner elements of the unconscious that cannot be admitted. This hostility to anything alien or alienating can accommodate itself much more easily to literary realism of any provenance, even if it proclaims itself critical or socialist, than to works which swear allegiance to no political slogans, but whose mere guise is enough to disrupt the whole system of rigid coordinates that governs authoritarian personalities—to which the latter cling all the more fiercely, the less capable they are of spontaneous appreciation of anything not officially approved. Campaigns to prevent the staging of Brecht's plays in Western Germany belong to a relatively superficial layer of political consciousness. They were not even particularly vigorous, or they would have taken much crasser forms after 13 August.<sup>5</sup> By contrast, when the social contract with reality is abandoned, and literary works no longer speak as though they were reporting fact, hairs start to bristle. Not the least of the weaknesses of the debate on commitment is that it ignores the effect produced by works whose own formal laws pay no heed to coherent

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<sup>1</sup>Jean Paul Sartre, *What is Literature?*, London 1967, p. 4.

<sup>2</sup>A literary man, a writer of literary or critical works.

<sup>3</sup>Terrible, hideous, foul

<sup>4</sup>*No Exit* (play)

<sup>5</sup>Reference to the Berlin Wall. [editor's note]

effects. So long as it fails to understand what the shock of the unintelligible can communicate, the whole dispute resembles shadowboxing. Confusions in discussion of the problem do not indeed alter it, but they do make it necessary to rethink the alternative solutions proposed for it.

## Philosophy and Art in Sartre

In esthetic theory, “commitment” should be distinguished from “tendency.” Committed art in the proper sense is not intended to generate ameliorative measures, legislative acts or practical institutions—like earlier propagandist (tendency) plays against syphilis, duels, abortion laws or borstals<sup>6</sup>—but to work at the level of fundamental attitudes. For Sartre, its task is to awaken the free choice of the agent, that makes authentic existence possible at all, as opposed to the neutrality of the spectator. But what gives commitment its esthetic advantage over tendentiousness also renders the content to which the artist commits himself inherently ambiguous. In Sartre, the notion of choice—originally a Kierkegaardian category—is heir to the Christian doctrine “He who is not with me is against me,” but now voided of any concrete theological content. What remains is merely the abstract authority of a choice enjoined,<sup>7</sup> with no regard for the fact that the very possibility of choosing depends on what can be chosen. The archetypal situation always cited by Sartre to demonstrate the irreducibility of freedom merely underlines this. Within a predetermined reality, freedom becomes a vacant claim: Herbert Marcuse has exposed the absurdity of the philosophical theorem that it is always possible inwardly either to accept or to reject martyrdom.<sup>8</sup> Yet this is precisely what Sartre’s dramatic situations are designed to demonstrate. But his plays are nevertheless bad models of his own existentialism, because they display in their respect for truth the whole administered universe which his philosophy ignores; the lesson we learn from them is one of unfreedom. Sartre’s theatre of ideas sabotages the aims of his categories. This is not an individual inadequacy of his plays. It is not the office of art to spotlight alternatives, but to resist by its form alone the course of the world, which permanently puts a pistol to men’s heads. In fact, as soon as committed works of art do instigate decisions at their own level, the decisions themselves become interchangeable. Because of this ambiguity, Sartre has with great candor confessed that he expects no real changes in the world from literature: a skepticism which reflects both the historical mutations of society and of the practical function of literature since the days of Voltaire. The principle of commitment thus slides towards the proclivities of the author, in keeping with the extreme subjectivism of Sartre’s philosophy, which for all its materialist undertones, still audibly echoes German speculative idealism. In his literary theory, the work of art becomes an appeal to subjects, because it is itself nothing other than a declaration by a subject of his own choice or failure to choose.

Sartre will not allow that every work of art, by its inception alone, confronts the writer, however free he may be, with objective demands of composition. His intention becomes simply one element among them. Sartre’s question, “Why write?”, and his solution of it in a “deeper choice,” are invalid because the author’s motivations are irrelevant to the finished work, the literary product. Sartre himself is not so far from, this view, when he notes that the stature of works increases; the less they remain attached to the empirical person who created them, as Hegel saw long ago. When he calls, the literary work, in Durkheim’s language, a social fact, he again involuntarily recalls its inherently collective objectivity, impenetrable to the mere subjective intentions of the author. Sartre therefore does not want to situate commitment at the level of the intention of the writer, but at that of his humanity itself.<sup>9</sup> This determination, however, is so generic that commitment ceases to be distinct from any other form of human action or attitude. The point, says

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<sup>6</sup>A reformatory for “juvenile adults.”

<sup>7</sup>Attached to (something).

<sup>8</sup>Reference to Marcuse’s essay “Sartre’s Existentialism”, included in *Studies in Critical Philosophy*, New Books, London 1972, pp. 157–90. [editor’s note]

<sup>9</sup>Because he is a man *Situations II*, Paris 1948, p. 51.

Sartre, is that the writer commits himself *in the present*, but since he in any case cannot escape it, his commitment to it cannot indicate a program. The actual obligation a writer undertakes is much more precise: it is not one of choice, but of substance. Although Sartre talks of the dialectic, his subjectivism so little registers the particular other for which the subject must first divest itself to become a subject, that he suspects every literary objectification of petrification. However, since the pure immediacy and spontaneity which he hopes to save encounter no resistance in his work by which they could define themselves, they undergo a second reification<sup>10</sup>. In order to develop his drama and novel beyond sheer declaration—whose recurrent model is the scream of the tortured—Sartre has to seek recourse in a flat objectivity, subtracted from any dialectic of form and expression, that is simply a communication of his own philosophy. The content of his art becomes philosophy as with no other writer except Schiller.

But however sublime, thoughts can never be much more than one of the materials for art. Sartre's plays are vehicles for the author's ideas, which have been left behind in the race of esthetic forms. They operate with traditional intrigues, exalted by an unshaken faith in meanings which can be transferred from art to reality. But the theses they illustrate, or where possible state, misuse the emotions which Sartre's own drama aims to express, by making them examples. They thereby disavow themselves. When one of his most famous plays ends with the dictum "Hell is other people," it sounds like a quotation from *Being and Nothingness*,<sup>11</sup> and it might just as well have been "Hell is ourselves." The combination of solid plot and equally solid, extractable idea won Sartre great success and made him, without doubt against his honest will, acceptable to the culture industry. The high level of abstraction of such thesis-art led him into the mistake of letting some of his best works, the film *Les Jeux sont Faits*<sup>12</sup> or the play *Les Mains Sales*,<sup>13</sup> be performed as political events, and not just to an audience of victims in the dark. In much the same way, the current ideology—which Sartre detests—confuses the actions and sufferings of paper leaders with the objective movement of history. Interwoven in the veil of personalization is the idea that human beings are in control and decide, not anonymous machinery, and that there is life on the commanding heights of society: Beckett's moribund grotesques suggest the truth about that. Sartre's vision prevents him from recognizing the hell he revolts against. Many of his phrases could be parroted by his mortal enemies. The idea that decision as such is what counts would even cover the Nazi slogan that "only sacrifice makes us free." In fascist Italy, Gentile's absolute dynamism made similar pronouncements in philosophy. The flaw in his conception of commitment strikes at the very cause to which Sartre wishes to commit himself.

## Brecht's Didacticism

Brecht, in some of his plays, such as the dramatization of Gorky's *The Mother* or *The Measures Taken*, bluntly glorifies the Party. But at times, at least according to his theoretical writings, he too wanted to educate spectators to a new attitude, that would be distanced, thoughtful, experimental, the reverse of illusory empathy and identification. In tendency to abstraction, his plays after *Saint Joan* trump those of Sartre. The difference is that Brecht, more consistent than Sartre and a greater artist, made this abstraction into the formal principle of his art, as a didactic poetics that eliminates the traditional concept of dramatic character altogether. He realized that the surface of social life, the sphere of consumption, which includes the psychologically motivated actions of individuals, occludes<sup>14</sup> the essence of society—which, as the law of exchange, is itself abstract. Brecht rejected esthetic individuation as an ideology. He therefore sought to translate the true hideousness of society into theatrical appearance, by dragging it

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<sup>10</sup>The mental conversion of a person or abstract concept into a thing.

<sup>11</sup>Book by Jean-Paul Sartre (1943)

<sup>12</sup>*The Game is Up* book by Sartre (1943), made into a film in 1947.

<sup>13</sup>*Dirty Hands* (1948)

<sup>14</sup>*occludes*: to close up or block off; obstruct

straight out from its camouflage. The people on his stage shrink before our eyes into the agents of social processes and functions, which indirectly and unknowingly they are in empirical reality. Brecht no longer postulates, like Sartre, an identity between living individuals and the essence of society, let alone any absolute sovereignty of the subject. Nevertheless, the process of esthetic reduction that he pursues for the sake of political truth in fact gets in its way. For this truth involves innumerable mediations which Brecht disdains. What is artistically legitimate as alienating infantilism—Brecht's first plays came from the same milieu as Dada—becomes merely infantile when it starts to claim theoretical or social validity. Brecht wanted to reveal in images the inner nature of capitalism. In this sense, his aim was indeed what he disguised it as against Stalinist terror—realistic. He would have refused to deprive social essence of meaning by taking it as it appeared, imageless and blind, in a single crippled life. But this burdened him with the obligation of ensuring that what he intended to make unequivocally clear was theoretically correct. His art, however, refused to accept this *quid pro quo*<sup>15</sup>: it both presents itself as didactic, and claims esthetic dispensation from responsibility for the accuracy of what it teaches.

Criticism of Brecht cannot overlook the fact that he did not—for objective reasons beyond the adequacy of his own creations—fulfill the norm he set himself as if it were a salvation. *Saint Joan* was the central work of his dialectical theatre. (*The Good Woman of Szechuan* is a variation of it in reverse: where Joan assists evil by the immediacy of her goodness, Shen Te who kills the good must become evil). The play is set in a Chicago halfway between the Wild West fables of *Mahagonny* and economic facts—But the more preoccupied Brecht becomes with information, and the less he looks for images, the more he misses the essence of capitalism which the parable is supposed to present. Mere episodes in the sphere of circulation, in which competitors maul each other, are recounted instead of appropriation of surplus-value in the sphere of production, compared with which the brawls of cattle dealers over their shares of the booty are epiphenomena<sup>16</sup> incapable of provoking any great crisis. Moreover, the economic transactions presented as the machinations of rapacious traders are not merely puerile, which is how Brecht seems to have meant them; they are also unintelligible by the criteria of even the most primitive economic logic. The obverse<sup>17</sup> of the latter is a political naïveté which could only make Brecht's opponents grin at the thought of such an ingenuous enemy. They could be as comfortable with Brecht as they are with the dying Joan in the impressive final scene of the play. Even with the broadest-minded allowance for poetic licence, the idea that a strike leadership backed by the Party could entrust a crucial task to a nonmember is as inconceivable as the subsequent idea that the failure of that individual could ruin the whole strike.

## Brecht's Treatment of Fascism

Brecht's comedy of the resistible rise of the great dictator *Arturo Ui* exposes the subjective nullity and pretense of a fascist leader in a harsh and accurate light. However, the deconstruction of leaders, like that of all individuals in Brecht, is extended into a reconstruction of the social and economic nexus<sup>18</sup> in which the dictator acts. Instead of a conspiracy of the wealthy and powerful, we are given a trivial gangster organization, the cabbage trust. The true horror of fascism is conjured away; it is no longer a slow end-product of the concentration of social power, but mere hazard, like an accident or crime. This conclusion is dictated by the exigencies of agitation: adversaries must be diminished. The consequence is bad politics, both in literature as in practice before 1933. Against every dialectic, the ridicule to which Ui is consigned renders innocuous the fascism that was accurately predicted by Jack London decades before. The anti-

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<sup>15</sup>One thing in place of another.

<sup>16</sup>*epiphenomena*: a secondary phenomenon accompanying another and caused by it.

<sup>17</sup>*obverse*: facing the observer or opponent

<sup>18</sup>*nexus*: a connected group or series

ideological artist thus prepared the degradation of his own ideas into ideology. Tacit acceptance of the claim that one half of the world no longer contains antagonisms is supplemented by jests at everything that belies the official theodicy<sup>19</sup> of the other half. It is not that respect for historical scale forbids laughter at house painters, although the use of that term against Hitler was itself a painful exploitation of bourgeois class consciousness. The group which engineered the seizure of power in Germany was also certainly a gang. But the problem is that such elective affinities are not extraterritorial: they are rooted within society itself. This is why the buffoonery of fascism, evoked by Chaplin as well, was at the same time also its ultimate horror. If this is suppressed, and a few sorry exploiters of greengrocers are mocked, where key positions of economic power are actually at issue, the attack misfires. *The Great Dictator* loses all satirical force, and becomes obscene, when a Jewish girl can bash a line of storm troopers on the head with a pan without being torn to pieces. For the sake of political commitment, political reality is trivialized: which then reduces the political effect.

Sartre's frank doubt whether *Guernica* "won a single supporter for the Spanish cause" certainly also applies to Brecht's didactic drama. Scarcely anyone needs to be taught the *fabula docet*<sup>20</sup> to be extracted from it—that there is injustice in the world; while the moral itself shows few traces of the dialectical theory to which Brecht gave cursory allegiance. The trappings of epic drama invite the American phrase "preaching to the converted." The primacy of lesson over pure form, which Brecht intended to achieve, became in reality a formal device itself. The suspension of form turns back against its own character as appearance. Its self-criticism in drama was related to the doctrine of objectivity (*Sachlichkeit*) in the applied visual arts. The correction of form by external conditions, with the elimination of ornament in the service of function, only increases its autonomy. The substance of Brecht's artistic work was the didactic play as an artistic principle. His method, to render immediately apparent events into phenomena newly alien to the spectator, was also a medium of formal construction rather than a contribution to practical efficacy. It is true that Brecht never spoke as skeptically as Sartre about the social effects of art. But, as an astute and experienced man of the world, he can scarcely have been wholly convinced of them. He once calmly wrote that when he was not deceiving himself, the theatre was more important to him than any changes in the world it might promote. Yet the artistic principle of simplification not only purged real politics of the illusory distinctions projected by subjective reflection into social objectivity, as Brecht intended, but it also falsified the very objectivity which didactic drama labored to distil. If we take Brecht at his word and make politics the criterion by which to judge his committed theatre, by the same token it proves untrue. Hegel's *Logic* taught that essence must appear. If this is so, a representation of essence which ignores its relation to appearance must be as intrinsically false as the substitution of a lumpen proletariat for the men behind fascism. The only ground on which Brecht's technique of reduction would be legitimate is that of "art for art's sake," which his version of commitment condemns as it does Lucullus.<sup>21</sup>

## Politics and Poetic Tone

Contemporary literary Germany is anxious to separate Brecht the artist from Brecht the politician. The major writer must be saved for the West, if possible placed on a pedestal as an all-German poet, and so neutralized *au-dessus de la mêlée*<sup>22</sup>. There is truth in this to the extent that both Brecht's artistic force, and his devious and uncontrollable intelligence, went well beyond the official credos and prescribed esthetics of the People's Democracies. All the same, Brecht must be defended against this defense of him. His work, with its often patent weaknesses, would

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<sup>19</sup>defense of God's goodness and omnipotence in view of the existence of evil.

<sup>20</sup>*fabula docet*: the fable's "message"

<sup>21</sup>Reference to Brecht's last play on the Roman general Lucullus. [editor's note]

<sup>22</sup>At the top of the (bunch).

not have had such power if it were not saturated with politics. Even its most questionable creations, such as *The Measures Taken*, generate an immediate awareness that issues of the utmost seriousness are at stake. To this extent, Brecht's claim that he used his theatre to make men think was justified. It is futile to try to separate the beauties, real or imaginary, of his works from their political intentions. The task of an immanent critique, which alone is dialectical, is rather to synthesize assessment of the validity of his forms with that of his politics. Sartre's chapter "Why write?" contains the undeniable statement that: "Nobody can suppose for a moment that it is possible to write a good novel in praise of anti-Semitism."<sup>23</sup> Nor could one be written in praise of the Moscow Trials, even if such praise was bestowed before Stalin actually had Zinoviev and Bukharin murdered.<sup>24</sup> The political falsehood stains the esthetic form. Where Brecht distorts the real social problems discussed in his epic drama, in order to prove a thesis, the whole structure and foundation of the play itself crumbles. *Mother Courage* is an illustrated primer intended to reduce to absurdity Montecuccoli's<sup>25</sup> dictum that war feeds on war. The camp follower who uses the Thirty Years' War to make a life for her children thereby becomes responsible for their ruin. But in the play, this responsibility follows rigorously neither from the overall situation of the war itself nor from the individual behavior of the petty profiteer; if *Mother Courage* had not been absent at the critical moment, the disaster would not have happened, and the fact that she has to be absent to earn some money remains completely generic in relation to the action. The picture-book technique which Brecht needs to spell out his thesis prevents him from proving it. A sociopolitical analysis, of the sort Marx and Engels sketched in their criticism of Lassalle's play *Franz von Sickingen*, would show that Brecht's simplistic equation of the Thirty Years' War with a modern war excludes precisely what is crucial for the behavior and fate of *Mother Courage* in Grimmelshausen's original drama. Because the society of the Thirty Years' War was not the functional capitalist society of modern times, we cannot even poetically stipulate a closed functional system in which the lives and deaths of private individuals directly reveal economic laws. But Brecht needed the old lawless days as an image of his own, precisely because he saw clearly that the society of his own age could no longer be directly comprehended in terms of people and things. His attempt to reconstruct the reality of society thus led first to a false social model and then to dramatic implausibility. Bad politics becomes bad art and *vice versa*. But the less works have to proclaim what they cannot completely believe themselves, the more telling they become in their own right; and the less they need a surplus of meaning beyond their being. For the rest, the real interested parties in every camp would be probably as successful in surviving wars today as they have always been.

Aporia<sup>26</sup> of this sort multiply until they affect the Brechtian tone itself, the very fiber of his poetic art. Undoubted though their uniqueness may be—qualities which the mature Brecht may have thought unimportant—they were poisoned by the untruth of his politics. For what he justified was not simply, as he long sincerely believed, an incomplete socialism, but a coercive domination in which blindly irrational social forces returned to work once again. When Brecht became a panegyrist<sup>27</sup> of its harmony, his lyric voice had to swallow chalk, and it started to grate. Already the exaggerated adolescent virility of the young Brecht betrayed the borrowed courage of the intellectual who, in despair at violence, suddenly hastens towards a violent practice which he has every reason to fear. The wild roar of *The Measures Taken* drowns out the noise of the disaster that has overtaken the cause, which Brecht convulsively tries to proclaim as salvation. Even Brecht's best work was infected by the deceptions of his commitment. Its language shows how

<sup>23</sup> *What is Literature?*, p. 46

<sup>24</sup> Reference to *The Measures Taken*, written in 1930, which contained an implicit justification in advance of the Trials. Zinoviev and Bukharin were condemned in 1938. [editor's note]

<sup>25</sup> Montecuccoli: (1609–1680) A military man, who wrote *Memorie della guerra*

<sup>26</sup> *aporia*: A figure in which the speaker professes to be at a loss what course to pursue, where to begin, to end, what to say, etc.

<sup>27</sup> *panegyrist*: one who extols or praises, either by writing or speaking.

far the underlying poetic subject and its message have come apart. In an attempt to overcome the gap, Brecht affected the diction of the oppressed. But the doctrine he advocated needs the language of the intellectual. The homeliness and simplicity of his tone is thus a fiction. It betrays itself both by signs of exaggeration and by stylized regression to archaic or provincial forms of expression. It can often be importunate, and ears which have not let themselves be deprived of their native sensitivity cannot help hearing that they are talked into something. It is a usurpation and almost contempt for victims to speak like this, as if the author were one of them. All roles may be played except that of the worker. The gravest charge against commitment is that even right intentions go wrong when they are noticed, and still more so when they then try to conceal themselves. Something of this remains in Brecht's later plays in the linguistic gesture of wisdom, the fiction of the old peasant sated with epic experience as the poetic subject. No one in any country of the world is any longer capable of the earthy experience of South German muzhiks: the ponderous delivery has become a propaganda device to make us believe that the good life is where the Red Army is in control. Since there is nothing to give substance to this humanity, which we have to take on trust as realized, Brecht's tone degenerates into an echo of archaic social relations, gone beyond recall. The late Brecht was not so distant from official humanism. A journalistically minded Westerner could well praise *The Caucasian Chalk Circle* as a hymn to motherhood, and who is not touched when the splendid girl is finally held up as an example to the querulous lady beset with migraine? Baudelaire, who dedicated his work to the coiner of the motto *l'art pour l'art*, would have been less suited to such catharsis. Even the grandeur and virtuosity of such poems as *The Legend of the Origin of the Book of Tao Te Ch'ing on Lao-Tzu's Journey into Exile* are marred by the theatricality of total plain-spokenness. What his classical predecessors once denounced as the idiocy of rural life, Brecht, like some existential ontologist, treats as ancient truth. His whole oeuvre is a Sisyphean labor to reconcile his highly cultivated and subtle taste with the crudely heteronomous demands which he desperately imposed on himself.

### **The Problem of Suffering**

I have no wish to soften the saying that to write lyric poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric; it expresses in negative form the impulse which inspires committed literature. The question asked by a character in Sartre's play *Morts Sans Sépulture*,<sup>28</sup> "Is there any meaning in life when men exist who beat people until the bones break in their bodies?", is also the question whether any man now has a right to exist; whether intellectual regression is not inherent in the concept of committed literature because of the regression of society. But Enzensberger's retort also remains true, that literature must resist this verdict, in other words, be such that its mere existence after Auschwitz is not a surrender to cynicism. Its own situation is one of paradox, not merely the problem of how to react to it. The abundance of real suffering tolerates no forgetting; Pascal's theological saying. *On ne doit plus dormir*,<sup>29</sup> must be secularized. Yet this suffering, what Hegel called consciousness of adversity, also demands the continued existence of art while it prohibits it; it is now virtually in art alone that suffering can still find its own voice, consolation, without immediately being betrayed by it. The most important artists of the age have realized this.

The uncompromising radicalism of their works, the very features defamed as formalism, give them a terrifying power, absent from helpless poems to the victims of our time. But even Schönberg's *Survivor of Warsaw* remains trapped in the aporia<sup>30</sup> to which it, autonomous figuration of heteronomy<sup>31</sup> raised to the intensity of hell, totally surrenders. There is something

<sup>28</sup>Play: *The Victors* (but literally, *Deaths without burial*)

<sup>29</sup>One should not sleep anymore.

<sup>30</sup>A perplexing difficulty.

<sup>31</sup>Subjection to the rule of another being or power; subject to external law. Opposite of *autonomy*



painful in Schnberg's compositions—not what arouses anger in Germany, the fact that they prevent people from repressing from memory what they at all costs want to repress. It is rather the way in which, by turning suffering into images, despite all their hard implacability, they wound our shame before the victims. For these are used to create something, works of art, that are thrown to the consumption of a world which destroyed them. The so-called artistic representation of the sheer physical pain of people beaten to the ground by rifle butts contains, however remotely, the power to elicit enjoyment out of it. The moral of this art, not to forget for a single instant, slithers into the abyss of its opposite. The esthetic principle of stylization, and even the solemn prayer of the chorus, make an unthinkable fate appear to have had some meaning; it is transfigured, something of its horror is removed. This alone does an injustice to the victims; yet no art which tried to evade them could stand upright before justice. Even the sound of despair pays its tribute to a hideous affirmation. Works of less than the highest rank are even willingly absorbed, as contributions to clearing up the past. When genocide becomes part of the cultural heritage in the themes of committed literature, it becomes easier to continue to play along with the culture which gave birth to murder. There is one nearly invariable characteristic of such literature. It is that it implies, purposely or not, that even in the so-called extreme situations, indeed in them most of all, humanity flourishes. Sometimes this develops into a dismal metaphysic which does its best to work up atrocities into "limiting situation" which it then accepts to the extent that they reveal authenticity in men. In such a homely existential atmosphere, the distinction between executioners and victims becomes bluffed; both, after all, are equally suspended above the possibility of nothingness, which of course is generally not quite so uncomfortable for the executioners.

### **Kafka, Beckett and Contemporary Experimentalism**

Today, the adherents of a philosophy which has since degenerated into a mere ideological sport, fulminate in pre-1933 fashion against artistic distortion, deformation and perversion of life, as though authors, by faithfully reflecting atrocity, were responsible for what they revolt against. The best exemplification of this attitude, still prevalent among the silent majority in Germany, is the following story about Picasso. An officer of the Nazi occupation forces visited the painter in his studio and, pointing to *Guernica*, asked: "Did you do that?". Picasso reputedly answered, "No, you did." Autonomous works of art too, like this painting, firmly negate empirical reality, destroy the destroyer, that which merely exists and by merely existing endlessly reiterates guilt. It is none other than Sartre who has seen the connection between the autonomy of a work and an intention which is not conferred upon it but is its own gesture towards reality. "The work of art," he has written, "*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."<sup>32</sup> It only remains to add there is no straightforward relationship between this appeal and the thematic commitment of a work. The uncalculating autonomy of works which avoid popularization and adaptation to the market involuntarily becomes an attack on them. The attack is not abstract, not a fixed attitude of all works of art to the world which will not forgive them for not bending totally to it. The distance these works maintain from empirical reality is in itself partly mediated by that reality. The imagination of the artist is not a creation *ex nihilo*<sup>33</sup>; only dilettanti and esthetes believe it to be so. Works of art that react against empirical reality obey the forces of that reality, which reject intellectual creations and throw them back on themselves. There is no material content, no formal category of an artistic creation, however mysteriously changed and unknown to itself, which did not originate in the empirical reality from which it breaks free.

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<sup>32</sup>What is Literature?, p. 34

<sup>33</sup>Out of nothing

It is this which constitutes the true relation of art to reality, whose elements are regrouped by its formal laws. Even the avant-garde abstraction which provokes the indignation of philistines, and which has nothing in common with conceptual or logical abstraction, is a reflex response to the abstraction of the law which objectively dominates society. This could be shown in Beckett's works. These enjoy what is today the only humanly respectable fame: everyone shudders at them, and yet no one can persuade himself that these eccentric plays and novels are not about what everyone knows but no one will admit. Philosophical apologists may laud his works as sketches for an anthropology. But they deal with a highly concrete historical reality: the abdication of the subject. Beckett's *Ecce Homo*<sup>34</sup> is what human beings have become. As though with eyes drained of tears, they stare silently out of his sentences. The spell they cast, which also binds them, is lifted by being reflected in them. However, the minimal promise of happiness they contain, which refuses to be traded for comfort, cannot be had for a price less than total dislocation, to the point of worldlessness. Here every commitment to the world must be abandoned to satisfy the ideal of the committed work of art—that polemical alienation which Brecht as a theorist invented, and as an artist practiced less and less as he bound himself more tightly to the role of a friend of mankind. This paradox, which might be charged with sophistry, can be supported without much philosophy by the simplest experience: Kafka's prose and Beckett's plays, or the truly monstrous novel *The Unnameable*, have an effect by comparison with which officially committed works look like pantomime. Kafka and Beckett arouse the fear which existentialism merely talks about. By dismantling appearance, they explode from within the art which committed proclamation subjugates from without, and hence only in appearance. The inescapability of their work compels the change of attitude which committed works merely demand. He over whom Kafka's wheels have passed has lost forever both any peace with the world and any chance of consoling himself with the judgment that the way of the world is bad; the element of ratification which lurks in resigned admission of the dominance of evil is burnt away.

Yet the greater the aspiration, the greater is the possibility of foundering and failure. The loss of tension evident in works of painting and music which, have moved away from objective representation and intelligible or coherent meaning has in many ways spread to the literature known in a repellent jargon as "texts." Such works drift to the brink of indifference, degenerate insensibly into mere hobbies, into idle repetition of formulas now abandoned in other art forms, into trivial patterns. It is this development which often gives substance to crude calls for commitment. Formal structures which challenge the lying positivism of meaning can easily slide into a different sort of vacuity, positivistic arrangements, empty juggling with elements. They fall within the very sphere from they seek to escape. The extreme case is literature which undialectically confuses itself with science and vainly tries to fuse with cybernetics. Extremes meet; what cuts the last thread of communication becomes the prey of communication theory. No firm criterion can draw the line between a determinate negation of meaning and a bad positivism of meaninglessness, as an assiduous<sup>35</sup> soldiering on just for the sake of it. Least of all can such a line be based on, an appeal to the human, and a curse on mechanization. Works of art which by their existence take the side of the victims of a rationality that subjugates nature are even in their protest constitutively implicated in the process of rationalization itself. Were they to try to disown it, they would become both esthetically and socially powerless: mere clay. The organizing, unifying principle of, each and every work of art is borrowed from that very rationality whose claim to totality it seeks to defy.

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<sup>34</sup>Behold the man.

<sup>35</sup>Unremitting, persistent, constant.

## French and German Cultural Traditions

In the history of French and German consciousness, the problem of commitment has been posed in opposite ways. In France, esthetics have been dominated, openly or covertly, by the principle of *l'art pour l'art*, academic and reactionary tendencies.<sup>36</sup> This explains the revolt against it. Even extreme avant-garde works have a touch of decorative allure in France. It is for this reason that the call to existence and commitment sounded revolutionary there. In Germany, the situation is the other way round. The liberation of art from any external end, although it was a German who first raised it purely and incorruptibly into a criterion of taste, has always been suspect to a tradition which has deep roots in German idealism. The first famous document of this tradition is that senior masters' bible of intellectual history, Schiller's *Treatise on the Theatre as a Moral Institution*. Such suspicion is not so much due to the elevation of mind to an Absolute that is coupled with it—an attitude that swaggered its way to hubris in German philosophy. It is rather provoked by the side that any work of art free of an ulterior goal shows to society. For this art is a reminder of that sensuous pleasure in which even—indeed especially—the most extreme dissonance, by sublimation and negation, partakes. German speculative philosophy granted that a work of art contains within itself the sources of its transcendence, and that its own sum is always more than it—but only therefore to demand a certificate of good behavior from it. According to this latent tradition, a work of art should have no being for itself, since otherwise it would—as Plato's embryonic state socialism classically stigmatized it—be a source of effeminacy and an obstacle to action for its' own sake, the German original sin. Killjoys, ascetics, moralists of the sort who are always invoking names like Luther and Bismarck, have no time for esthetic autonomy; there is also an undercurrent of servile heteronomy in the pathos of the categorical imperative, which is indeed on the one hand reason itself, but on the other a brute datum to be blindly obeyed. Fifty years ago Stefan George and his school were still being attacked as Frenchifying esthetes.

Today the curmudgeons whom no bombs could demolish have allied themselves with the philistines who rage against the alleged incomprehensibility, of the new art. The underlying impulse of these attack is petty bourgeois hatred of sex, the common ground of Western moralists and ideologists of socialist realism. No moral terror can prevent the side the work of art shows its beholder from giving him pleasure, even if only in the formal fact of temporary freedom from the compulsion of practical goals. Thomas Mann called this quality of art "high spirits," a notion intolerable to people with morals. Brecht himself who was not without ascetic traits—which reappear transmuted in the reserve of any great autonomous art towards consumption—rightly ridiculed culinary art; but he was much too intelligent not to know that pleasure can never be completely ignored in the total esthetic effect, no matter how relentless the work. The primacy of the esthetic, object as pure refiguration does not smuggle consumption or false harmony back by a detour. Although the moment of pleasure, even when it is extirpated<sup>37</sup> from the effect of a work, constantly returns to it, the principle that governs autonomous works of art is not the totality of their effects, but their own inherent structure. They are knowledge as nonconceptual objects. This is the source of their greatness. It is not something of which they have to persuade men, because it should be given to them. This is why today autonomous rather than committed works of art should be encouraged in Germany. Committed works all too readily credit themselves with every noble value, and then manipulate them at their ease. Under fascism, too, no atrocity was perpetrated without a moral veneer. Those who trumpet their ethics and humanity in Germany today are merely waiting for a chance to persecute those whom their rules condemn, and to exercise the same inhumanity in practice of which they accuse

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<sup>36</sup>We know very well that pure art and empty art are the same thing and that esthetic purism was a brilliant manoeuvre of the bourgeois of the last century who preferred to see themselves denounced as philistines rather than as exploiters. *What is Literature?*, p. 17.

<sup>37</sup>To pull or pluck up by the roots; to root up, destroy, or remove root and branch

modern art in theory. In Germany, commitment often means bleating what everyone is already saying or at least secretly wants to hear. The notion of a “message” in art, even when politically radical, already contains an accommodation to the world: the stance of the lecturer conceals a clandestine entente<sup>38</sup> with the listeners, who could only be truly rescued from illusions by refusal of it.

### **The Politics of Autonomous Art**

The type of literature that, in accordance with the tenets of commitment but also with the demands of philistine moralism exists for man, betrays him by traducing that which alone could help him, if it did not strike a pose of helping him. But any literature which therefore concludes that it can be a law unto itself, and exist only for itself, degenerates into ideology no less. Art, which even in its opposition to society remains a part of it, must close its eyes and ears against it: it cannot escape the shadow of irrationality. But when it appeals to this unreason, making it a *raison d'être*, it converts its own malediction<sup>39</sup> into a theodicy<sup>40</sup>. Even in the most sublimated work of art there is a hidden “it should be otherwise.” When a work is merely itself and no other thing, as in a pure pseudoscientific construction, it becomes bad art—literally pre-artistic. The moment of true volition, however, is mediated through nothing other than the form of the work itself, whose crystallization becomes an analogy of that other condition which should be. As eminently constructed and produced objects, works of art, even literary ones, point to a practice from which they abstain: the creation of a just life. The mediation is not a compromise between commitment and autonomy, nor a sort of mixture of advanced formal elements with an intellectual content inspired by genuinely or supposedly progressive politics. The content of works of art is never the amount of intellect pumped into them: if anything it is the opposite. Nevertheless, an emphasis on autonomous, works is itself sociopolitical in nature. The feigning of a true politics here and now, the freezing of historical relations which nowhere seem ready to melt, oblige the mind to go where it need not degrade itself. Today, every phenomenon of culture, even if a model of integrity, is liable to be suffocated in the cultivation of kitsch. Yet paradoxically in the same epoch it is to works of art that has fallen the burden of wordlessly asserting what is barred to politics. Sartre himself has expressed this truth in a passage which does credit to his honesty.<sup>41</sup> This is not a time for political art, but politics has migrated into autonomous art, and nowhere more so than where it seems to be politically dead. An example is Kafka’s allegory of toy guns, in which an idea of nonviolence is fused with a dawning awareness of the approaching paralysis of politics. Paul Klee too belongs to any debate about committed and autonomous art: for his work, *écriture par excellence*,<sup>42</sup> has roots in literature and would not have been what it was without them—or if it had not consumed them. During the First World War or shortly after, Klee drew cartoons of Kaiser Wilhelm as an inhuman iron eater. Later, in 1920, these became—the development can be shown quite clearly—the *Angelus Novus*, the machine angel, who, though he no longer bears any emblem of caricature or commitment, flies far beyond both. The machine angel’s enigmatic eyes force the onlooker to try to decide whether he is announcing the culmination of disaster or salvation hidden within it. But, as Walter Benjamin, who owned the drawing, said, he is the angel who does not give but takes.

*Translated by Francis McDonagh.*

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<sup>38</sup>An understanding.

<sup>39</sup>A curse; the utterance of a curse.

<sup>40</sup>a writing, doctrine, or theory intended to “justify the ways of God to men.”

<sup>41</sup>See Jean-Paul Sartre, *L'Existentialisme est un Humanisme*, Paris 1946, p. 105.

<sup>42</sup>writing by excellence