

The Aesthetic Imperative as Moral Imperative: From the Ontology of *Being and Nothingness* to the Ethics of *What is Literature?*

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Does the ontology of *Being and Nothingness* preclude a compatible ethical theory? More specifically, does Sartre's early account of being-for-others leave room for a positive account of human relations, one that is essentially based in freedom and authenticity rather than in conflict? Questions such as these have divided critics and commentators of Sartre's work.¹ The picture of human relationality that emerges from *Being and Nothingness* is a particularly bleak one: the "look" of the Other is an intrinsically objectifying, and therefore alienating, gaze;² being-seen by the Other strips us of our subjectivity and freedom, such that we are enslaved;³ the very existence of the Other constitutes our original fall into *thing-ness*, into being-in-itself.⁴ Because the relationship between ourselves and the Other is not an unilateral relationship—because, in other words, we stand to the Other as the Other stands to us—Sartre's investigation into the concrete

¹ Thomas C. Anderson's essay, "Sartre's Early Ethics and the Ontology of *Being and Nothingness*" provides a useful review of the various positions which scholars have taken on this and similar issues (in *Sartre Alive*, edited by Ronald Aronson and Adrian van den Hoven [Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1991], 183-201). In this paper, I agree substantially with the arguments Anderson puts forth in his essay; nevertheless his purpose is to bring Sartre's *Cahiers pour une morale* to bear on the questions I have raised, whereas my purpose is to consider how we might understand the account of human relations in *What is Literature?* in light of the ontology of *Being and Nothingness*.

² "The Other has to make my being-for-him *be* in so far as he has to be his being.... Thus for the Other I have stripped myself of transcendence.... This is accomplished, not by a distortion or by a refraction which the Other would impose on my transcendence through his categories, but by his very being" (Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, translated by Hazel E. Barnes [New York: Washington Square Press, 1984], [hereafter *BN*], 351-352).

³ "I am a slave to the degree that my being is dependent at the center of a freedom which is not mine and which is the very condition of my being. In so far as I am the object of values which come to qualify me without my being able to act on this qualification or even to know it, I am enslaved" (*BN*, 358).

⁴ Cf. *BN*, 352.

forms which being-for-others takes reveals conflict at the heart of interpersonal relationships: “We are by no means dealing with unilateral relations with an object-in-itself, but with reciprocal and moving relations.... descriptions of concrete behavior must therefore be envisaged within the perspective of *conflict*. Conflict is the original meaning of being-for-others.”⁵ What is more, while he does acknowledge the psychological experience of a “We-subject,” a *Mitsein*, nevertheless in *Being and Nothingness* Sartre insists that the essence of human relations is not cooperation, but rather conflict: “It is therefore useless for human-reality to seek to get out of this dilemma: one must either transcend the Other or allow oneself to be transcended by him. The essence of the relations between consciousnesses is not the *Mitsein*; it is conflict.”⁶

Thus, the very ontological structure of being-for-others seems to preclude a positive ethics altogether. And yet Sartre concludes *Being and Nothingness* with a promise to devote a future work specifically to ethics.⁷ The possibility of such a future ethics is supported by an important remark which Sartre makes in a footnote to his considerations of interpersonal relationship: “These considerations do not exclude the possibility of an ethics of deliverance and salvation,” writes Sartre. “But this can be achieved only after a radical conversion which we can not discuss here.”⁸ While one should be wary of basing any claim on a single footnote, nevertheless when this note is taken together with a series of other remarks made by Sartre,⁹ there seems to be some warrant for maintaining that the account of being-for-others which we are given in *Being and Nothingness* operates exclusively within “an eidetic of bad faith.” If this is indeed the case, then Sartre’s treatment of being-for-others in *Being and Nothingness*, while it reveals an important dimension of being, nevertheless does not constitute *all* human relationships. There remains the possibility of authentic intersubjectivity, and of a mutual recognition of freedom between persons.

Along with his unpublished *Notebooks for an Ethics*, one of Sartre’s earliest

⁵ *BN*, 475.

⁶ *BN*, 555.

⁷ “All these questions, which refer us to a pure and not an accessory reflection, can find their reply only on the ethical plane. We shall devote to them a future work” (*BN*, 798).

⁸ *BN*, 534, n. 13.

⁹ For example, Sartre indicates that an escape from bad faith is possible: “... that does not mean that we can not radically escape bad faith. But this supposes a self-recovery of being which was previously corrupted. This self-recovery we shall call authenticity, the description of which has no place here.” Or again, Sartre hints at a human project founded on freedom, rather than alienation: “This particular type of project, which has freedom for its foundation and its goal, deserves a special study. It is radically different from all others in that it aims at a radically different type of being.... But such a study can not be made here; it belongs rather to an *Ethics*....” (*BN*, 742).

explorations into the possibility of authentic human relations can be found in *What is Literature?*. Originally printed in Sartre's monthly *Les Temps Modernes*, the chapters comprising *What is Literature?* grew out of the political and literary concerns of that journal. Published as a single monograph in 1947 (four years after *Being and Nothingness*), the work as a whole constitutes a phenomenology of literature, one that is meant to underwrite the unique opportunity for engagement—what Sartre termed *littérature engagée*—which *Les Temps Modernes* provided.¹⁰ This phenomenology reveals that literature is constituted not only by the creative act of writing, but also by the correlative act of reading. Furthermore, because literature requires imagination, and because imagination for Sartre has always been the realm of freedom (since one of his earliest philosophical work, *The Psychology of the Imagination*), the reciprocal acts of the writer and the reader must be founded upon a mutual recognition and respect of the Other's freedom. Thus, in Sartre's work on literature, we find one of his earliest examples of a necessarily cooperative endeavor: literature reveals itself as a paradigm for authentic human intersubjectivity, and therefore as a paradigm for a positive ethics: "although literature is one thing and morality a quite different one, at the heart of the aesthetic imperative we discern the moral imperative."¹¹

Accordingly, although it may initially strike us as an unlikely source, the mutual recognition of freedom which Sartre unveils in *What is Literature?* provides an important occasion for reflecting upon the relationship between the ontology of *Being and Nothingness* and the possibility of a positive account of being-for-others. In what follows, I will argue that *What is Literature?* provides an account of authentic human relationship which: (1) is compatible with the ontology of *Being and Nothingness*; and (2) constitutes a paradigm for Sartre's continuing ethical investigations. In what follows, I will first review Sartre's early philosophy, and its relationship to the *Being and Nothingness*. I will then turn to his presentation of the ontological structure of consciousness in this latter work, and will consider at length his account of the ontological structure of being-for-others. Finally, I will analyze the authentic human relationship which obtains between the reader and the writer in *What is Literature?*, and I will attempt to show not only that his remarks there are in continuity with the ontology of *Being and Nothingness*, but also that they stand as a pivot point for his ethical investigations.

¹⁰ "I recall, in fact, that in 'committed literature' [*littérature engagée*], *commitment* must in no way lead to a forgetting of *literature*, and that our concern must be to serve literature by infusing it with new blood, even as we serve the collectivity by attempting to give it the literature that it deserves" (Jean-Paul Sartre, *Introducing Les Temps modernes*, translated by Jeffrey Mehlman, in *What Is Literature and Other Essays* [Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1988], 267).

¹¹ *What is Literature?* (hereafter *WIL*), 67.

1. *Consciousness and freedom: a phenomenological
prelude to Being and Nothingness*

Sartre's philosophy is a philosophy of consciousness. His early encounter with Husserl's phenomenology convinced him that consciousness and the world are strictly distinct, though intentionally related, entities.¹² The old Cartesian distinction between *res cogitans* and *res extensa* thus stands at the heart of Sartrean philosophy. But it has undergone a crucial modification through Sartre's interpretation of the "fundamental idea" of Husserlian phenomenology. Sartre interprets Husserl's insight that "all consciousness is consciousness of something" by identifying consciousness with a radical break from the intended world: according to Sartre, the intending consciousness and its intended objects are completely separate.¹³ Furthermore, although consciousness must be consciousness of something (i.e., of some object), this intentional structure does not preclude consciousness from being aware of itself. Consciousness can always reflect upon its own activity: Descartes not only doubted, he also became aware of his doubting. Consciousness can intend an act of consciousness just as much as it can intend an external object.

Here, however, Sartre breaks rank with Husserl by introducing a more radical divide within the structure of consciousness. Sartre now claims that the *cogito* does not penetrate to the heart of consciousness; he objects that Descartes and his successors (including Husserl) have objectified consciousness.¹⁴ To overcome this objectification, Sartre introduces a distinction between *positional* consciousness (in which an object, including an act of consciousness, is directly intended) and *non-positional* consciousness (in which there is an implicit, non-objective awareness of the self).¹⁵ Behind each positional act of consciousness, Sartre

¹² "Husserl persistently affirmed that ... consciousness and the world are given at one stroke: essentially external to consciousness, the world is nevertheless essentially relative to consciousness" ("Intentionality: A Fundamental Idea of Husserl's Phenomenology," translation by Joseph P. Fell of "Uné Idée fondamentale de la phénoménologie de Husserl: l'intentionnalité", in *Situations I* (Paris: Gallimard, 1947).

¹³ "If, impossible though it be, you could enter 'into' a consciousness you would be seized by a whirlwind and thrown back outside, in the thick of the dust, near the tree, for consciousness has no 'inside'. It is just this being beyond itself, this absolute flight, this refusal to be a substance which makes it a consciousness" ("Intentionality").

¹⁴ "All those who have described the *cogito* have presented it as a reflective operation—i.e., as a secondary operation at a higher level. This *cogito* is performed by a consciousness which is oriented toward a consciousness, by a consciousness which takes consciousness as an object" (Jean-Paul Sartre, *Transcendence of the Ego*, in *The Philosophy of Jean-Paul Sartre*, edited by Robert Denoon Cumming [Random House: New York, 1965], 52).

¹⁵ "Insofar as my reflecting consciousness is consciousness of itself, it is *non-positional* consciousness. It becomes positional only as directed upon the reflected consciousness, which itself, before being thus reflected upon, was not a positional consciousness of itself" (*Transcendence*, 52).

maintains, there is simultaneously a “non-positional” self-awareness. This distinction between non-positional and positional consciousness constitutes for Sartre a radical and permanent break between subjectivity and objectivity: non-positional consciousness is the domain of the subject; positional consciousness always intends some object.

The distinction between positional and non-positional consciousness leads to an important consequence: rather than functioning as a transcendental unity (as it does in various forms for Descartes, Kant, and Husserl), for Sartre the “I,” the ego, does not go to the heart of subjectivity. Rather, the ego remains on the level of positional reflection; it is objectified consciousness. The pure consciousness uncovered by non-positional reflection, by contrast, breaks from such objectification; it is utter subjectivity, radical freedom, “spontaneity.” Because the ego is distinct from the radical spontaneity revealed by non-positional reflection, the ego is in fact a hindrance to human freedom. “Perhaps the essential role of the ego is to mask from consciousness its very spontaneity,” writes Sartre. “Everything happens as if consciousness constituted the ego as a false representation of itself, as if consciousness hypnotized itself with this ego it has constituted, absorbed itself in the ego, as if to make the ego its guardian and its law.”¹⁶ Sartre insists that we can and should transcend this objectifying ego, but this in turn opens our pure subjectivity up to an ever-present “vertigo of possibility.”¹⁷ Sartre’s early reflections on phenomenology have thus led him to the verge of the existentialism which he will develop at length in *Being and Nothingness*.

II. *The ontological structure of consciousness in Being and Nothingness*

Sartre’s task in *Being and Nothingness* is to derive an ontological structure from his phenomenological analysis of consciousness. The modes of being which emerge in the first two parts of the work—being-for-itself and being-in-itself—result from Sartre’s search to provide an ontological explanation for consciousness. The key to this explanation lies in Sartre distinction of the in-itself from the

¹⁶ *Transcendence*, 55.

¹⁷ This “vertigo of possibility” is illustrated by Sartre in the famous example of the young wife who is suddenly terrified of acting as a prostitute to passers-by. As Sartre analyses the situation, what the woman experiences is explainable only as a sudden recognition that the identity of the ego does not constitute the whole of the woman’s possibilities: “It seems to me that a negligible circumstance ... had produced what might be called a ‘vertigo of possibility’.... But this vertigo is understandable only in terms of consciousness suddenly appearing to itself as infinitely overflowing in its possibilities the I which ordinarily serves as its unity” (*Transcendence*, 55).

for-itself in terms of *identity*: whereas being-in-itself is constituted by being “that which it is” and by being “wholly within itself without distance,” being-for-itself on the other hand “does not coincide with itself in a full equivalence.” Rather, being-for-itself—which corresponds to the radical subjectivity of consciousness which non-positional reflection revealed to be beyond even the identity of the ego—is “a being such that in its being its being is in question.”¹⁸ This last cryptic phrase is Sartre’s way of translating intentionality into ontology. The self is an ambiguity: on the one hand, the self desires the permanency of identity; on the other hand, the ontological structure of consciousness entails a constant surpassing of identity.¹⁹

Thus the ontological structure of the self entails an anguished sort of existence. The most common response to this anguish is to flee from one’s lack of identity. However, such a flight is doomed to failure: “I flee in order not to know, but I can not avoid knowing that I am fleeing; and the flight from anguish is only a mode of becoming conscious of anguish.”²⁰ What Sartre wants to establish in *Being and Nothingness* is not merely that the radical subjectivity of the self opens up a “vertigo of possibility” hitherto hidden from the ego; rather, Sartre argues, the very ontological structure of the self absolutely precludes the collapse of self into identity:

We definitely establish that the ontological structure of ‘not being what one is’ renders impossible in advance all movement toward being in itself or ‘being what one is.’ And this impossibility ... is the very stuff of consciousness; it is the embarrassing constraint which we constantly experience; it is our very incapacity to recognize ourselves, to constitute ourselves as being what we are. It is this necessity which means that, as soon as we posit ourselves as a certain being ... then by that very positing we surpass this being—and that not toward another being but toward emptiness, toward *nothing*.²¹

An investigation into the various ways the self attempts to flee into an im-

¹⁸ Cf. *BN*, 120.

¹⁹ “The *self* does not designate being either as subject or as predicate.... It is not the subject, since the subject without relation to himself would be condensed into the identity of the in-itself.... The subject cannot *be* self, for coincidence with self, as we have seen, causes the self to disappear. But neither can it *not be* itself since the self is an indication of the subject himself....” (*BN*, 123-124).

²⁰ *BN*, 83.

²¹ *BN*, 106.

possible identity constitutes the remainder of Sartre's project in *Being and Nothingness*. However, such an attempt at flight—what Sartre terms “bad faith”—constitutes only one of two possible responses to the ontological structure of consciousness. There remains the possibility of a radical *escape* from bad faith, one which “supposes a self-recovery of being which was previously corrupted,” a self-recovery which Sartre terms “authenticity.”²² This possibility of authentic response to the human condition is not precluded *a priori* by the ontological structure of consciousness, but in *Being and Nothingness* Sartre declines to explore it. If there is to be some account of authenticity, we will have to look for it elsewhere.

Before searching for such an account, however, let us first consider the third main ontological structure which Sartre uncovers in *Being and Nothingness*. Just as Sartre derived the ontological structure of being-for-itself and of being-in-itself from a phenomenological analysis of consciousness, so too does he derive the ontological structure of being-for-others from a prior phenomenological account. The central experience in this account is that of shame: although shame is a mode of consciousness which has every mark of the for-itself,²³ nevertheless the experience of shame cannot occur in isolation. Shame *requires* the recognition of an Other: shame is shame “*of oneself before the Other*; these two structures are inseparable.”²⁴ Phenomenologically speaking, the Other appears initially in my world as simply another object for my intentional consciousness;²⁵ the Other is one object among many in my field of perception, and as such the Other stands in relationship to objects as an additional in-itself *datum* of my experience.²⁶ Yet if the Other were merely an object for me, there could not arise the experience of shame; shame requires another point of view, the possibility of “being seen” by the Other: “if the Other-as-object is defined in connection with the world as the object which sees what I see, then my fundamental connection with the Other-as-subject must be able to be referred back to my permanent possibility of

²² BN, 116, n. 9.

²³ “Here we are dealing with a mode of consciousness which has a structure identical with all those which we have previously described. It is a non-positional self-consciousness, conscious (of) itself as shame; as such, it is an example of what the Germans call *Erlebnis*, and it is accessible to reflection.” (BN, 301).

²⁴ BN, 303.

²⁵ “This woman whom I see coming toward me, this man who is passing by in the street, this beggar whom I hear calling before my window, all are for me *objects*—of that there is no doubt. Thus it is true that at least one of the modalities of the Other's presence to me is *object-ness*” (BN, 340).

²⁶ Cf. BN, 341.

being seen by the Other.”²⁷ This possibility of being seen reveals that the Other is a unique subjectivity; as such, I must posit that the Other *also* enjoys a privileged, independent, non-positional self-consciousness.

Sartre draws out the implications that the ontological structures of being-for-itself and being-in-itself have for this phenomenological account of the Other. On the one hand, the presence of the Other breaks down the unilateral relationship between being-for-itself and being-in-itself which has thus far constituted my existence. The Other inhabits a point of view which eternally *escapes* me: “I apprehend the relation of the green [lawn] to the Other as an objective relation, but I can not apprehend the green *as* it appears to the Other. Thus suddenly an object has appeared which has stolen the world from me.”²⁸ The very existence of the Other becomes a threat to my encounter with the world: there now exists in my world an object which is more than an object, a being-in-itself which is simultaneously being-for-itself, a being which escapes my intentionality. The experience is one of instability, of decentralization, of vertigo.

The Other also poses a direct threat to my own ontological status as a being-for-itself. For the Other levels a gaze not only upon the objects in my world, but also upon *me*; the experience of shame, after all, reveals an intentional gaze on behalf of the Other which takes me as the intended object. If I am ashamed before the Other, it is because I am ashamed about how I *appear* to the Other. But to appear to the Other is to exist precisely as an intended *object*,²⁹ and what the ontological structure of consciousness has revealed is that to be an intended object of consciousness is to be a being-in-itself:

If there is an Other, whatever or whoever he may be, whatever may be his relations with me, and without his acting upon me in any way except by the pure upsurge of his being—then I have an outside, I have a *nature*. My original fall is the existence of the Other. Shame—like pride—is the apprehension of myself as a nature although that very nature escapes me and is unknowable as such. Strictly speaking, it is not that I perceive myself losing my freedom in order to become a *thing*, but my nature is—over there, outside my lived freedom—as a given attribute of this being which I am for the Other.³⁰

Sartre makes clear that the gaze of the Other cannot destroy my lived free-

²⁷ BN, 344.

²⁸ BN, 343.

²⁹ “By the mere appearance of the Other, I am put in the position of passing judgment on myself as on an object, for it is as an object that I appear to the Other” (BN, 302).

³⁰ BN, 352.

dom, nor can it reduce me to an object. I remain in my subjectivity, and comprehend myself through the non-positional self-consciousness that is constitutive of all being-for-itself. At the same time, however, the gaze of the Other reveals to me an aspect of my being which I can never reach through reflection: for the Other, I am given as a nature, as an object which exists for a consciousness other than my own. It is in this sense that being-for-others is experienced as alienation and enslavement: “I am a slave to the degree that my being is dependent at the center of a freedom which is not mine and which is the very condition of my being.”³¹

Yet being-for-others is not an *intrinsically* alienating mode of being. In fact, being-for-others plays an important role in revealing to the self the complex relationship which attains between being-for-itself and being-in-itself. “The Other has not only revealed to me what I was;” remarks Sartre, “he has established me in a new type of being which can support new qualifications.... I need the Other in order to realize fully all the structures of my being.”³² It is true that the gaze of the Other “fixes” me from without as an object. But at the same time, I remain a non-positionally self-conscious subject, and as such I am always free to take up a particular attitude toward the new dimension of my being which the Other has revealed: “The objectivity of my flight I experience as an alienation which I can neither transcend nor know. Yet by the sole fact that I experience it and that it confers on my flight that in-itself which it flees, I must turn back toward it and assume *attitudes* with respect to it.”³³

Thus it is understandable that Sartre should define the “original meaning of being-for-others” as *conflict* in *Being and Nothingness*.³⁴ Within a narrative of bad faith, one which interprets being revealed by the Other as alienation, the reciprocal relationship which obtains in being-for-others can only be envisioned under the aspect of conflict.³⁵ It is telling that Sartre’s examples of concrete relations with others in *Being and Nothingness*—love/masochism, indifference, hate/sadism, etc.— are all envisioned within the perspective of the bad faith project, a project which is a *false* attempt at a recovery of being. The “original” attitude I take toward the Other is either to co-opt or to conquer his freedom for the sake

³¹ *BN*, 358.

³² *BN*, 303.

³³ *BN*, 473.

³⁴ *BN*, 475.

³⁵ “While I attempt to free myself from the hold of the Other, the Other is trying to free himself from mine; while I seek to enslave the Other, the Other seeks to enslave me. We are by no means dealing with unilateral relations with an object-in-itself, but with reciprocal and moving relations” (*BN*, 175).

of my own project: either I “[cause] myself to be absorbed by the Other and [lose] myself in his subjectivity in order to get rid of my own,”³⁶ or else I attempt to “get hold of this freedom [of the Other] and reduce it to being a freedom subject to my own freedom.”³⁷ There is no alternative to these two attitudes, once the bad faith project has been adopted.

Even genuine experiences of community—what Sartre terms the We-subject or the *Mitsein*—have in the context of *Being and Nothingness* only conflict as their essence.³⁸ In the first place, the ontological categories of being-for-itself and being-in-itself preclude any sort of collective consciousness: the experience of togetherness is a psychological experience of a single consciousness, one that can in no way can be verified in the consciousness of the Other, which always escapes me.³⁹ In the second place, because any experience of a “We” requires first an encounter with the Other,⁴⁰ and because the “original” encounter with the Other is experienced as an alienation, even the genuine experience of a shared We-project has at its root the conflict of being-for-others.⁴¹

Nevertheless, it still remains that the ontological structure of being-for-others does not *necessarily* preclude an authentic account of human relationality. We must repeatedly remind ourselves that Sartre’s analysis of being-for-others in *Being and Nothingness* assumes bad faith. In his less hyperbolic moments, Sartre acknowledges that the existence of the Other is simply revelatory of an additional dimension of my being, one to which I do not have access via non-positional self-consciousness. In light of this, the careful reader might conclude that the Other is necessary *precisely to establish the freedom of the self*. As Sartre himself remarks, “I need the Other in order to realize fully all the structures of my being.”⁴² Indeed, in his later *Notebooks for an Ethics*, Sartre arrives explicitly at this conclusion.⁴³ Thus there remains the possibility of “an ethics of deliverance and salvation” which goes beyond *Being and Nothingness*, an ethics that is possible precisely because it entails an account of being-for-others which is not restricted to the bad faith project.

³⁶ *BN*, 491.

³⁷ *BN*, 477.

³⁸ “It is therefore useless for human-reality to seek to get out of this dilemma: one must either transcend the Other or allow oneself to be transcended by him. The essence of the relations between consciousness is not the *Mitsein*; it is conflict” (*BN*, 555).

³⁹ Cf. *BN*, 550

⁴⁰ Cf. *BN*, 552.

⁴¹ Cf. *BN*, 555.

⁴² *BN*, 303.

⁴³ “Through the Other I am enriched in a new dimension of Being, through the Other I become an object. And this is in no way a fall or a threat in-itself. This comes about only if the Other refuses to see a freedom in me.” (Jean-Paul Sartre, *Notebooks for an Ethics*, translated by David Pellauer [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992], 500).

3. *Toward authenticity: freedom and the other in What is Literature?*

What is Literature? is not the systematic work on ethics which Sartre promised his readers at the close of *Being and Nothingness*. The work is many things—an apology for the journalism of *Les Temps Modernes*, a more sustained engagement with thinkers such as Kant and Marx, a first attempt at providing history with meaning, a plea to understand literature within a political context—but it is not first and foremost a work on ethics. In fact, the unifying project of *What is Literature?* is to provide a phenomenological account of literature: “What is writing? Why does one write? For whom?” asks Sartre. “It seems that nobody has ever asked himself these questions.”⁴⁴ *What is Literature?* is Sartre’s attempt to answer these questions. However, because Sartre’s answers will reveal that both writing and reading are necessary components of literature, and furthermore because the reciprocal acts of the writer and the reader depend upon a mutual recognition and respect of freedom, in *What is Literature?* Sartre provides one of his earliest accounts of authentic intersubjectivity. Accordingly, I shall now turn to Sartre’s account of intersubjectivity in *What is Literature?*, and I shall consider the extent to which it can be reconciled with the ontological structure presented in *Being and Nothingness*.

Sartre begins his examination of literature by asking the question, “What is writing?” His answer to this question compares prose and poetry. The distinction which Sartre makes between these two literary forms is one of *utility*: whereas the prose writer deals with the meanings of words, such that words are treated as instruments for expression,⁴⁵ the poet refuses to use words as instruments, and instead treats them as things.⁴⁶ The instrumentality of the word for the prose writer is fundamental to Sartre’s understanding of literature. For the prose writer, the word is transparent; it is not primarily an object, but rather is a window into the object signified. For the poet, on the other hand, the word itself is an object rather than a sign: “The ambiguity of the [word-]sign implies that one can penetrate it at will like a pane of glass and pursue the thing signified [as does the prose-writer], or turn one’s gaze towards its *reality* and consider it as an object

⁴⁴ *WIL*, 23.

⁴⁵ “The writer deals with meanings... The quest for truth takes place in and by language conceived as a certain kind of instrument” (*WIL*, 28-29).

⁴⁶ “Poets are men who refuse to *utilize* language.... The poet has withdrawn from language-instrument in a single movement. Once and for all he has chosen the poetic attitude which considers words as things and not as signs” (*WIL*, 29).

[as does the poet].”⁴⁷ The prose writer, then, is a utilitarian because she uses language to express meaning.⁴⁸ And if this is the case, then writing must be understood not as the creation of some aesthetically pleasing object, but rather as a moment of profound human *praxis*: to speak is to act, to reveal something about the world, to bestow meaning, and, ultimately, to affect change:

To speak is to act; anything which one names is already no longer quite the same; it has lost its innocence.... By speaking, I reveal the situation by my very intention of changing it; I reveal it to myself and to others *in order* to change it. I strike at its very heart, I transfix it, and I display it in full view; at present I dispose of it; with every word I utter, I involve myself a little more in the world....⁴⁹

Literature for Sartre is not a dead, passive thing; it requires lived *commitment* on the part of the writer.⁵⁰ Such a commitment is manifest in the act by which the writer reveals something of the world. This disclosure requires the writer to take responsibility for what she has revealed. Such a commitment is the unique prerogative of a being-for-itself. The break in being which Sartre discovered in the non-positionally self-aware consciousness is precisely what makes possible the writer’s disclosure: “Each of our perceptions is accompanied by the consciousness that human reality is a ‘revealer’, that is, it is through human reality that ‘there is’ being, or, to put it differently, that man is the means by which things are manifested.”⁵¹ Given the ontological structure of consciousness, if words were not immediate and transparent expressions of transcendent subjectivity, then they would necessarily fall into sheer objectivity. The words of the prose writer, because they are *used*, are taken up into the life of being-for-itself, and become occasions for the freedom of the subject to express itself. By contrast, the words of the poet, because they are *felt* rather than *used*, remain for Sartre in the givenness of being-for-itself.

Just as the ontology of *Being and Nothingness* plays a crucial role in Sartre’s answer to the question, “What is writing?”, in like manner this ontology plays a crucial role in Sartre’s answer to the question, “Why write?” Sartre’s initial answer to the question of literary motivation depends upon the motivation of bad

⁴⁷ *WIL*, 29.

⁴⁸ “Prose is, in essence, utilitarian. I would readily define the prose-writer as a man who *makes use of words*” (*WIL*, 34).

⁴⁹ *WIL*, 36-37.

⁵⁰ Cf. *WIL*, 46-47.

⁵¹ *WIL*, 48.

faith which he elaborated in *Being and Nothingness*: the artist creates because she wishes to constitute for herself an identity in her artistic creation, an identity which Sartre has shown to be impossible for the self.⁵² While the impossibility of self-identity holds for all artistic creation, it is even more apparent in the case of literary creation: the writer cannot delude herself into thinking that she might find identity in her writing, because the writer remains incapable of reducing her writing to an object for herself; to approach what has been written as a literary object, one must perform the act of *reading*, and Sartre maintains that a writer can never truly read what she has written.⁵³ But if the writer cannot read her own writing,⁵⁴ nonetheless her writing *can* be read *by someone else*. The act of writing implies the act of reading, and thus the writer as agent implies the reader as agent. Since Sartre denies that the writer and the reader can be the same agent, what constitutes literature *in its very ontological structure* is a cooperative and communal effort between two agents: “The operation of writing implies that of reading as its dialectical correlative and these two connected acts necessitate two distinct agents. It is the joint effort of author and reader which brings upon the scene that concrete and imaginary object which is the work of the mind. There is no art except for and by others.”⁵⁵

Sartre’s claim that literature is constituted by a cooperative venture requires some unpacking. On one level, Sartre is making the mundane observation that literature requires both a writer and a reader in order for it to exist and function practically: without a reader, the writer’s “words” are merely black marks on a piece of paper. But Sartre is also making a more profound point, one which depends upon his previous account of the ontological structure of being-for-others. When Sartre claims that “there is no art except for and by others,” he is claiming that the very existence of art depends upon the cooperation between two unique actors working together at a common project: “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.... Thus, the writer appeals to the reader’s freedom to collaborate in the production of his work.”⁵⁶

⁵² “One of the chief motives of artistic creation is certainly the need of feeling that we are essential in relationship to the world” (*WIL*, 48-49).

⁵³ “To make [the literary object] come into view a concrete act called reading is necessary, and it lasts only as long as this act can last. Beyond that, there are only black marks on paper. Now, the writer cannot read what he writes, whereas the shoemaker can put on the shoes he has just made if they are his size, and the architect can live in the house he has built” (*WIL*, 50).

⁵⁴ “The writer ... touches only his own subjectivity; the object he creates is out of reach; he does not create it *for himself*. If he re-reads himself, it is already too late. The sentence will never quite be a thing in his eyes. He goes to the very limits of the subjective but without crossing it” (*WIL*, 51).

⁵⁵ *WIL*, 51-52.

⁵⁶ *WIL*, 54.

This language of “appeal,” “collaboration,” and “freedom” is a far cry from the “conflict” which Sartre maintained was at the heart of being-for-others in *Being and Nothingness*. But we should recall that conflict is only the essence of relationships which are still mired in bad faith; *Being and Nothingness* did not preclude the possibility of authentic, cooperative relationships. Sartre maintains in *What is Literature?* that the very existence of literary art *requires* a cooperative relationship between writer and reader, and so he must hold that such relationships are possible. Furthermore, because his account of literature depends upon so much of his earlier thought, it is highly improbable that he is here abandoning wholesale his previous view of being-for-others. Rather, for what appears to be the first time, I would argue that Sartre has found an example of authentic intersubjectivity.

Although it remains true that *What is Literature?* is not an extended treatise on ethics, nevertheless the cooperative ontological structure of the literary-aesthetic object does have important ethical implications. Because the dialectically correlative acts of writing and reading constitute the literary-aesthetic object through the use of the imagination, and because imagination is an expression of freedom, literature depends upon a mutual recognition of freedom between the writer and the reader:

Since the one who writes recognizes, by the very fact that he takes the trouble to write, the freedom of his readers, and since the one who reads, by the mere fact of his opening the book, recognizes the freedom of the writer, the work of art, from whichever side you approach it, is an act of confidence in the freedom of men.⁵⁷

Literature reveals the precariousness of being-for-others, but it also reveals the possibility of its authentic expression. The author cannot *force* her reader to recognize her freedom; she can only appeal to her reader to complete the work she has begun. But to make this appeal is to recognize and uphold the freedom of the reader.⁵⁸ Likewise, if the reader is to answer the appeal that the writer has made, he must recognize the freedom of the writer through a generosity that attempts to understand what the writer is venturing to express.⁵⁹ At the heart of

⁵⁷ *WIL*, 67

⁵⁸ “If I appeal to my reader so that we may carry to a successful conclusion the enterprise which I have begun, it is self-evident that I consider him as a pure freedom, as an unconditioned activity...” (*WIL*, 56).

⁵⁹ “Thus, reading is a pact of generosity between author and reader. Each one trusts the other; each one counts on the other, demands of the other as much as he demands of himself. For this

literature is a paradox of mutually implicating freedoms: “the more we experience our freedom, the more we recognize that of the other; the more he demands of us, the more we demand of him.”⁶⁰ Such a mutual recognition of freedoms is precisely the way in which we anticipated Sartre would account for authentic being-for-others: it remains that the Other reveals to me a new dimension of my being; but in recognizing and upholding my freedom, the authentic glance of the Other becomes liberating rather than enslaving.

By way of conclusion, recall the startling claim which Sartre makes in *What is Literature?*: “Although literature is one thing and morality a quite different one, at the heart of the aesthetic imperative we discern the moral imperative.”⁶¹ This positive ethical statement can now be grasped in its full meaning. Both writing and reading are intrinsically ethical acts: they are “acts of confidence in the freedom of men.” Accordingly, both the writer and the reader have a responsibility to engage the literary-aesthetic object through a free creativity; and both the writer and the reader have reason to hope for a reciprocal return of generosity. Indeed, the very production of literature depends upon the reciprocity of authentic intersubjectivity. But because the writer originates the disclosure to which the reader is then invited to respond, the writer has a particular moral responsibility. The writer must never write in such a way as to violate the freedom of her reader: “It would be inconceivable that this unleashing of generosity provoked by the writer could be used to authorize an injustice, and that the reader could enjoy his freedom while reading a work which approves or accepts or simply abstains from condemning the subjection of man by man.”⁶² For the writer to abuse the freedom of her reader would constitute not only an injustice; it would dismantle the very essence of literature. Thus, for Sartre, the subject of all writing is freedom, and this is so because the freedom of the writer and the freedom of the reader are always inextricably bound up together.

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confidence is itself generosity. Nothing can force the author to believe that his reader will use his freedom; nothing can force the reader to believe that the author has used his. Both of them make a free decision” (*WIL*, 61).

⁶⁰ *WIL*, 58.

⁶¹ *WIL*, 67.

⁶² *WIL*, 67.

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