Sartre's Silence

Limits of Recognition in Why Write?

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On 1 November 1946, Jean-Paul Sartre participated in a conference celebrating the inaugural session of the UNESCO. An important argument in his presentation – 'La responsabilité de l'écrivain' – was that an author writes in order to achieve *recognition*. As Sartre puts it: 'The writer is a man who uses language, putting words together in a way he hopes will be beautiful. Why does he do it? I think the writer speaks in order to be recognised by the others in the sense in which Hegel talks about the mutual recognition of one consciousness by another.'.[1] This question – 'Why does he do it?', *Why Write?* – was also taken up in the second essay of *What is Literature?* In this longer and more complex text, Sartre not only reiterates his position from *La responsabilité de l'écrivain*, he adds that the reader, too, comes to the literary work with the hope of satisfying his desire for recognition.

The present article will examine this conjunction of writing and Hegelian recognition as it appears in *Why Write?* What happens when literature and recognition are brought together? Or perhaps, what does literature *do* to the dialectics of recognition? As this last question indicates, I believe it is significant that Sartre establishes his theory of recognition on the basis of the *aesthetic experience*; consequently I cannot agree with T Storm Heter's contention that 'Sartre might have just as easily used the model of conversation to describe mutual recognition'.[2] Indeed, I will argue that in *Why Write?* Sartre's theory of literature is precisely not only a theory of literature as conversation and communication, but also a theory about the relation to a certain silence, and since literature and recognition go together in Sartre's text, the presence of silence has consequences for his theory of recognition. However, before addressing these relations, I would like briefly to recollect the argument in *Why Write?*[3]

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I

In the opening pages of his essay, Sartre presents two incomplete dialectical experiences. He begins by looking at the relation between man and objective reality. When we walk in nature (for instance), we engage in a process of 'disclosure' ('dévoilement').[4] We observe the sky, the trees, etc., and we will then establish the relations between these elements. We may find that nature is beautiful, but the world exists outside of us and we will always remain 'inessential' to nature (WIL 28). There is an almost Mallarmean tone in these opening paragraphs as Sartre seems to rework one of the poet's more famous statements: 'nature takes place, one will add nothing to it' (we shall return to Mallarmé).[5] The second experience evoked at the beginning of the essay is that of an author reading his (or her) own writing. If nature remains exterior and too *objective*, the experience of reading your own text is too *subjective*. For the artist the work of art does not exist as an objective instance. The artist will face his own intentions, his own knowledge, himself. Reading yourself will be an unsatisfactory experience: you will never encounter anything radically new. This argument prepares the conclusion that 'there is no art except for and by others' (WIL 31).

These introductory remarks pave the path for the main part of Sartre's essay where we find a detailed description (covering some ten to fifteen pages) of the experience of literature. Here reading is presented as the place where the ideal balance between subjectivity and objectivity can be found: reading is precisely both a process of disclosure (like walking in nature) and a process of creation (like writing in a book).

Sartre famously defines the literary work as an appeal to the reader. The reader is called upon to realise the work. Reading is not simply a question of understanding the writer's message, but involves an active participation in the creation of the work. The work of art becomes a 'task to be discharged' ('tâche à remplir', WIL 35) and this task is of an ethical character. True, Sartre does not claim that it is our duty to read, but he argues that if you pick up a book, you have to engage in the creative process. On the other hand, the literary work should also meet the reader with 'politeness' (WIL 36). The author must not try to impose his views – political, moral or other – on the reader. The author is making an appeal to the *freedom* of the reader, and the reader is agreeing to use his freedom to create the work. In this process of objectivation the reader comes to realise his own freedom, and he now demands of the author that this will make

further appeals to his freedom. Reading becomes 'an exercise in generosity' (WIL 37) and Sartre sums up the process in an idyllic passage clearly demonstrating the source of inspiration he finds in Hegel's dialectics of recognition:

> Thus, the author writes in order to address himself to the freedom of readers, and he requires it in order to make his work exist. But he does not stop there; he also requires that they return this confidence which he has given them, that they *recognize* his creative freedom, and they in turn solicit it by a symmetrical and inverse appeal. Here there appears the other dialectical paradox of reading; the more we experience our freedom, the more we *recognize* that of the other; the more he demands of us, the more we demand of him. (*WIL* 38; my emphasis)

Over the next pages Sartre will be very generous with these descriptions of the harmonious resolution of subject–object relations.[6] The result is a number of semi-pleonasms – 'a symmetrical and inverse appeal' (above), 'a dialectical going-and-coming' (WIL 41) – that demonstrate Sartre's belief in literature's capacity to deliver an *Aufhebung* of the opposition between subject and object. At the end of the literary process we are left with 'a strict harmony between subjectivity and objectivity' (WIL 44) – in Hegelian terms: we have reached a state of mutual recognition.

The final part of the essay builds on this foundational analysis as Sartre moves towards the question of politics: what does it mean *politically* that literature can deliver the *Aufhebung* of the subject–object dialectics? Sartre will argue that the literary experience offers a model for democracy: the relation between author and reader constitutes an ideal example of how social relations should be. Sartre not only accords literature an exemplary role, though. He believes that literature can participate actively in the institution of these ideal social relations. In other words: he wants literature to become a motor for the construction of a free democratic society. This transition from literature as a *model* to literature as a *motor* remains rather undefined in *Why Write?* Sartre seems to presuppose a structural homology between the literary field and the political sphere: what we learn in the literary experience will influence our political actions. However, it should be noted that the question of a political realisation of the ontological structure of literature never takes centre stage in this particular essay. Indeed, it is remarkable to what extent the essay remains on an ontological and an ethical level. Sartre does not tell us what authors should write about, nor does he present literature as an ideological tool. In *Why Write?* committed literature is first of all about establishing the framework that allows mutual recognition between reader and writer, and in this context, 'It matters little

whether the aesthetic object is the product of "realistic" art (or supposedly such) or "formal" art' (WIL 41). Accordingly, the text not only refers to prose writers like Stendhal and Dostoyevsky, but also – and in greater detail – to painters like Vermeer, Cézanne and Van Gogh. As Suzanne Guerlac sums up: 'Literature is revolutionary in its essence, ontologically'.[7]

This description of mutual recognition in the literary process has met with very different reactions. In *The Politics of Prose* (1982), Denis Hollier argues that *Why Write?* completely distorts the Hegelian argument about recognition by effectively transforming the struggle for life and death into a naive humanistic collaboration between writer and reader:

> The chapter *Pourquoi écrire?* develops the Sartrean version of the struggle for recognition, a version whose most note-worthy trait is plainly the substitution of the bookish relation between writer and reader for the risk of death that in Hegel is the sole means by which desire can win recognition of its finitude. Literature is here a freedom managing to win recognition for itself without undue risks, sparing itself a relation to death.[8]

According to Hollier, you cannot maintain the Hegelian ideal of recognition if you remove the struggle for life and death.[9] This is precisely what Sartre attempts to do, and thereby his text manifests an optimistic humanism which Hollier considers as 'bordering on the comic' (ibid.).

T Storm Heter, on the other hand, is sympathetic towards Sartre's optimism. He considers *Why Write?* a pivotal text for the establishment of a normative, existentialist ethics of mutual recognition. Sartre has realised that the pessimism of *Being and Nothingness* was 'unwarranted',[10] and he now goes on to deliver 'a clear and persuasive portrait of mutual recognition'.[11] Furthermore, this ideal can easily be generalised: 'Sartre argues that mutual recognition is both possible and valuable. Since mutual recognition flourishes in the reader-writer relationship, it is only a short step to other social relationships where solidarity, not conflict, can be fostered'.[12]

Against both Hollier and Heter it can be argued that *Why Write?* describes a utopian situation and not an ideal with direct, political consequences.[13] In other words, Sartre is not as optimistic as they would like us to believe, he is more ambivalent. The following essay, *For Whom Does One Write?*, precisely seems to expose the utopian (i.e. non-realisable) status of the argument about mutual recognition:

> Thus in a society without classes, without dictatorship, and without stability, literature would end [*achèverait*] by becoming conscious of itself; it would understand that form and content, public and subject, are

> identical … that its function is to express the concrete universal to the concrete universal and that its end is to appeal to the freedom of men so that they may realize and maintain the reign of human freedom. To be sure, this is utopian. It is possible to conceive this society, but we have no practical means at our disposal of realizing it. (WIL 123)

Sartre longs for a literature delivering the *Aufhebung* of the opposition between subject and object, but he knows that in the present situation the ideal remains utopian. Only in a classless society would this be possible. In *Why Write?* he thereby occupies the position which Barthes sought to analyse six years later in *Writing Degree Zero*. The final chapter in Barthes's essay describes how contemporary authors anticipate a situation where there is no distance between themselves and their ideal readers, but in so doing – in seeking to leap out of the present – they risk alienating the revolutionary forces they wish to address.[14]

II

Without abandoning the idea that the key to Sartre's essay is the juxtaposition of the reading experience and the harmonious resolution of the Hegelian struggle for recognition, I will now argue that the text is more complex than this first reading suggests. Indeed, we may wonder if the complex relation between ontology and politics in *Why write?* points to a problem in the foundational parallel between the literary experience and recognition.

Five pages into the essay Sartre presents a series of brief and intriguing reflections on *silence*. These occur at the crucial point where he is making the transition from the preliminary presentation of the incomplete subject–object relations (walking in nature, reading your own text) to the first major part on literature as recognition. We may thus say that silence appears at the root of the Hegelian argument.[15]

As mentioned earlier, Sartre here suggests that reading offers a synthesis between perception and creation. When reading a book, the reader will both disclose (*dévoiler*) and create (*créer*), but what is the nature of this 'disclosure-creation' (WIL 45)? First of all it is an active process. The reader must be attentive; if he or she is tired or absent-minded it becomes impossible to create the meaning that lies beyond the specific words and sentences. According to Sartre this indicates that meaning is never given *in* language. Meaning results from a process of totalisation (a work of synthesising) and it is therefore situated beyond the actual textual manifestation. This level beyond

the words and sentences is given a number of names in Sartre's text. He writes about the 'theme', 'subject' and 'meaning'. He also uses expressions like 'the literary object', the organic totality of words[16] and 'a synthetic form'; finally he talks more enigmatically of a 'silence' that is 'an opponent of the word':

> Thus, from the very beginning, the meaning is no longer contained in the words, since it is it, on the contrary, that allows the significance of each of them to be understood, and the literary object, though realized *through* language, is never given *in* language. On the contrary, it is by nature a silence and an opponent of the word. (WIL 31–32, translation modified; Sartre's emphasis)

A commonsensical reading of this passage might argue that in order to grasp the meaning of a text, we have to move between its material level (whether this be the sound or the graphic image) and the idea; to some extent we have to forget the *signifiers* in order to grasp the *signified*. However, as Sartre continues, the idea of silence appears less semiotic and more ontological. The crucial passage is as follows:

> For if the silence about which I am speaking is really the goal at which the author is aiming, he has, at least, never been familiar with it ['du moins celui-ci ne l'a-t-il jamais connu']; his silence is subjective and anterior to language. It is the absence of words, the undifferentiated and lived silence of inspiration, which the word will then particularize, whereas the silence produced by the reader is an object. And at the very interior of this object there are more silences: that which the author does not say. It is a question of intentions which are so particular that they could not retain any meaning outside the object which the reading causes to appear. However, it is these which give it its density and its particular face. To say that they are unexpressed is hardly the word; for they are precisely the inexpressible. (WIL 32, translation modified)

This complex passage deserves a careful reading. In the first two sentences, Sartre makes a distinction between the silence of the author and that of the reader. The silence of the reader is the 'literary object' (op. cit.). This object is the result of the projections the reader makes from the basis of the words on the page. As Sartre says in one of the following paragraphs: 'each word is a path of transcendence' (WIL 33); this allows the reader to engage with the text and – ultimately – compose the objective silence. Therefore the silence of the reader comes *after* the words. The silence of the author, on the other hand, precedes them. Sartre writes about the inspirational silence, a silence dismantled word by word in the production of the text.

If we reconstruct the literary communication process, we first have an inspirational silence; this silence gradually disappears with the advent of words; and these words will then allow the reader to

produce a silence described as an object. It is important to underline that (to some extent) the literary work *escapes* the author in this process. The author will be aiming for the objective silence located at the end of the literary process, but he will never have known this silence ('du moins celui-ci ne l'a-t-il jamais connu'). We may therefore say that the author is trying to offer something he does not know.

The second part of the quotation complicates matters even further. We are now at the reception-side of the literary process; we are concerned with the objective silence of the reader. This objective silence – explains Sartre – is itself filled with 'more silences'. These silences have been introduced by the author, they are his 'intentions'. However, these intentions are defined as 'the inexpressible'. What can we say about the inexpressible? It is only meaningful within the literary work. The reader constructs his objective silence on the basis of this inexpressible; he uses one kind of silence to create another kind of silence. But outside the production of the literary object, the inexpressible remains elusive to the reader.

Summing up, the literary experience appears as a most singular exchange: the author aims to give something which he does not entirely know, and the reader receives something to which he has only limited access; something he cannot fully articulate. We may now wonder if this is the same Sartre who towards the end of this book famously writes that the role of the author is 'to call a spade a spade' (WIL 281) – and who then goes on to declare: 'I distrust the incommunicable; it is the source of all violence' (WIL 282).

Due to the brevity of these passages on silence it is tempting to disregard them as an inessential part of the argument. That would be a serious mistake. Instead we should ask what is at stake at this particular point in Sartre's argument. The answer is *liberty*. Are we free when we read a book? Are we free when we transcend the words and sentences on the page? Or are we just trying to recover what the author put into the book? Sartre will maintain that we are truly free. We are not just following a path the writer laid out for us and we are not just enjoying the pseudo-liberty of inventing everything ourselves. Silence is a key component in this argument; it serves to guarantee the freedom of both reader and writer. In *Why Write?* the double engagement with the unknowable (giving something one has never known) and the inexpressible (receiving something that cannot be said) allows literature to become an exercise in freedom. Therefore silence cannot be seen as an inessential part of the argument – even if Sartre does not pursue this more speculative dimension in the rest of his essay, and even if he later implies that a writer has full control over his text (WIL 40).[17]

One of the surprisingly few readers to have commented on the role of silence in *Why Write?* is Suzanne Guerlac. Reading the passages above, she hears echoes of Blanchot, Bataille and Valéry.[18] I agree, but believe that a more central reference is the work of Stéphane Mallarmé. It is well-known that Sartre took considerable interest in Mallarmé. According to Annie Cohen-Solal, Michel Contat and Michael Rybalka, he produced more than 500 pages on the poet before losing the main part of this work. Most of these pages were written in the late 1940s – at a time when Sartre no longer promulgated the cliché about Mallarmé's ivory-tower idealism (cf. *Présentation* of *Temps Modernes*), but instead regarded the poet as the revelation of modern man (PN 129, 145). Mallarmé is the first to 'create his *existence* via the consciousness he has of his impossibility' ('il se fait *exister* par la conscience qu'il prend de son impossibilité' (PN 129, translation modified)).

There were undoubtedly many other reasons why Sartre became so interested in Mallarmé.[19] Let me mention two which seem particularly relevant in this context. Firstly, it can be argued that the entire project of *What is Literature?* – to answer once and for all the fundamental questions about literature – comes straight out of Mallarmé (among others). In the polemical preface to *What is Literature?*, Sartre proclaims that 'since critics condemn me in the name of literature without ever saying what they mean by that, the best answer to give them is to examine the art of writing without prejudice. What is writing? Why does one write? For whom? The fact is, it seems that nobody has ever asked himself these questions' (WIL, p. xxiii). There is little doubt Sartre knew that these were precisely the questions Mallarmé struggled with. Mallarmé wonders 'If there is grounds for writing' ['S'il y a lieu d'écrire'][20], he furthermore asks: 'Do we know what it means to write?'[21] and 'In truth, what is, Literature';[22] it can even be argued that he goes one level deeper than Sartre: 'Does something like Literature exist?'[23]

Secondly, Sartre must have been interested in Mallarmé's many reflections on the literary process. Some of these can be found in *Le Mystère dans les lettres* (1896) where Mallarmé analyzes the role of silence and the whiteness of the paper in the reading process. In this typically complex passage, he not only writes about silence and whiteness: the text includes silence and whiteness in all possible ways:

> Lire –
>
> Cette pratique –
>
> Appuyer, selon la page, au blanc, qui l'inaugure son ingénuité, à soi, oublieuse même du, titre qui parlerait trop haut: et, quand s'aligna, dans

> une brisure, la moindre, disséminée, le hasard vaincu mot par mot, indéfectiblement le blanc revient, tout à l'heure gratuit, certain maintenant, pour conclure que rien au-delà et authentiquer le silence – (Mallarmé II, 234)

Mallarmé describes reading as an activity going from white to white. The reader first looks at the blank sheet, and then his eyes settle on the title. This title should then be forgotten because it speaks too loudly. From there the reader will work his way through the text. Gradually he will discover the relations between the elements in the text (he will overcome chance), and thereby move towards a whiteness no longer unfounded, but confirmed. This overcoming of chance is not a spiritual journey towards an absolute truth. At the end of the text, the reader concludes that nothing lies beyond (there is no religious transcendence) and silence will be 'authentic'. The reader has found his place in relation to silence and is now ready (as Mallarmé writes elsewhere) 'to perceive of himself, simple, infinitely on earth'.[24]

Although Mallarmé and Sartre are very different authors their descriptions of the reading process resemble each other in three ways. In both cases reading is an *activity* – a 'praxis' as Mallarmé writes with a word which must have appealed to Sartre's imagination (although for Mallarmé the Marxist connotations were probably unintended). Furthermore, this praxis will take the reader from one kind of silence to another: reading becomes a question of making the silence authentic. Finally, this authentification of silence is tantamount to finding a place in the world. In other words: Sartre considers literature as an activity in which the subject can establish a harmonious relation to the world (and its contingency); Mallarmé – with his ideas of doing away with religious beliefs – moves in the same direction.

III

The final part of this article will consider the relation between recognition and silence. Is there room for a theory of silence within the dialectics of recognition or does silence undermine the dialectical argument? In order to conceptualise the relation between recognition and silence, I will turn to another text written immediately after *What is Literature?*: *Notebooks for an Ethics.* In the passage on 'moral conversion' at the end of this unfinished work, Sartre again combines Hegelian dialectics with an attempt to institute the aesthetic experience as a model

for ethical relations. On several occasions he draws on Mallarmé (indeed, no literary author is quoted more often in *Notebooks for an Ethics*) and at crucial points he also introduces the theme of silence. We thus find all the key elements encountered in the analysis of *Why Write?*

From the beginning of the section, Sartre makes it clear that there will be no *Aufhebung* between subject and object. The subject cannot reach self-identity but will remain 'diasporic' (NE 479). Sartre writes that it will live in 'Hell': 'that region of existence where existing means using every trick in order to be, and to fail at all these tricks, and to become conscious of this failure' (NE 472). However, it will soon turn out that *failure* and *hell* are strong words. *Why Write?*'s dream of a '*strict harmony* between subjectivity and objectivity' (op. cit.) may be broken, but we can learn to live *in tune with* (or: in 'accord with', NE 478) ourselves. If we learn to live in solidarity with ourselves, we may even learn to live in solidarity with others (NE 479). In this way, the 'failure' turns into a relative success; it becomes the basis for a *moral conversion*.

How does this conversion come about? First the subject realises that it is fundamentally gratuitous. Then it takes upon itself passionately to live this radical contingency. 'We have to love that we might not have been' (NE 493, translation modified), because contingency is precisely the precondition for freedom. In the moral conversion, the subject thus comes to understand that because it is unfounded it is also free to invent itself. By fully engaging in a 'project of unveiling and creation' (NE 482),[25] it comes to terms with its inescapable unfoundedness. Precisely for this reason, the artist – as a producer of meaning – represents the archetypal man in these pages on moral conversion.

It is important for Sartre to underline that this coming to terms with contingency via a project of disclosure-creation is not a new way of founding the subject, but rather a way of living in relation to the absence of foundation: 'precisely because I am gratuitous, I can assume myself, that is, not *found* this gratuity which will always remain what it is, but rather *to take it up* as mine. That is, consider myself perpetually for myself *as an accident* [*comme une chance*]' (NE 492, Sartre's emphasis). The task of inventing (oneself) will not eliminate anxiety altogether, but the unhappy consciousness becomes – as Bruce Baugh explains with a quote from Jean Wahl – relatively 'happy in its unhappiness'.[26]

These subject-oriented aspects of Sartre's systematisations are tied to an ontological argument. The happiness of authentic living not only comes from converting gratuitousness into freedom but also

from being in contact with Being. How is this link between the gratuitousness of the subject and the sudden appearance of Being established?[27] Sartre will answer that embracing gratuitousness (in order to affirm it) is a way of giving oneself over to Being and thereby allowing it to appear.

In this pivotal passage on man's capacity to manifest Being, the theme of silence appears. Via the discussion of a quote from Pascal, Sartre argues that silence is the (unsettling) way in which Being calls upon man and invites him to bring it (Being) forth. 'Silence […] is the appeal of Being to man' (NE 510); it is the appeal to 'draw Being from its perpetual collapse into the absolute indistinctness of night' (ibid.). (This last reference to the night comes from Heidegger, for whom the *Night* is the symbol of 'pure Being' [NE 483]). Only if we answer this appeal, can we live authentically.

To sum up: in order to attain the 'jouissance' that comes from living authentically, man must answer silence by losing himself and thereby bring Being into the world. 'Here for the first time intervenes the true relation between things and the authentic man (which we shall rediscover in his relation to his work and to Others), which is neither identification nor appropriation: to lose oneself so that some reality may be. Mallarmé well understood this' (NE 495).[28]

The differences between *Why Write?* and these passages from *Notebooks for an Ethics* may seem considerable. In one case literature is put forth as a (utopian) model for the *Aufhebung* of subject–object relations, in the other this goal is abandoned and the 'disclosure-creation' (epitomised by art and literature) now becomes a way of dealing with the impossibility of an *Aufhebung*. But as already indicated the utopian optimism of *Why Write?* did not last to the following essay of *What is Literature?*, and the absence of *Aufhebung* did not lead to pessimism or unhappiness in *Notebooks for an Ethics*. Instead of trying to establish a radical difference between the two texts, it seems appropriate to underline the resemblances.

Both texts operate on the basis of a bipartition. *Why Write?* invites us to consider the literary experience as a two-sided phenomenon. Sartre's main interests lie with the interplay between author and reader via the literary work; he first of all presents literature at the level of intersubjective communication. However, he also suggests a less communicative aspect of the literary experience: the exchange between author and reader is complicated by a silence which in turn serves to guarantee the liberty of subjects. This theme of silence suggests that to some extent intersubjectivity and communication depend on elements we cannot fully grasp. The relation between

these two aspects of the literary experience (communication and silence) is not explicitly conceptualised in *Why Write?*, nevertheless the structure of Sartre's argument suggests that intersubjective communication follows on from the basis of ontological silence.

In *Notebooks for an Ethics* the distinction between ontology and intersubjectivity is clearer. Here silence is the voice with which Being appeals to man. Man must answer this appeal, and he will do so, first by losing himself, then by engaging in the production of meaning via a disclosure-creation which paves the path for intersubjective communication. The dealings with silence appear as a precondition for communication.

This distinction between what Barthes would call a transitive and an intransitive idea of literature must not be considered as a binary opposition. Reading *Why Write?* and *Notebooks for an Ethics* together suggests that without silence, there would be no freedom in the relation between reader and writer, and reading would be no different from taking orders. In other words: we are not communicating in spite of the inexpressible, but on the basis of the inexpressible. The inexpressible is a resource; it guarantees freedom and ensures that there is something to write about. In short, I am suggesting that the conversion of contingency to freedom in *Notebooks for an Ethics* finds a less developed, but nevertheless distinct parallel in the conversion of silence to communication in *Why Write?*

This suggestion has consequences for Sartre's theory of recognition. If Sartre considers the literary (and more generally the aesthetic) experience as a model for mutual recognition, and if silence is fundamental to his description of the aesthetic exchange, then we may also wish to look for something akin to silence within his dialectics of recognition. I would suggest this element is the theme of 'losing oneself'. In *Notebooks for an Ethics* intersubjectivity clearly depends on the subject's ability to lose itself. In *Why Write?* Sartre goes in the same direction. He may be talking of recognition between consciousnesses but in some passages the exchange between reader and writer has little to do with inter-subjectivity. The reader, for instance, is described as a generous person delivering 'the gift of his whole person' (WIL 37). Just as Sartre's theory of literature comes out of a relation to silence, his theory of intersubjectivity is closely associated with a thematics of the absence of subjectivity.[29]

My intention is not to imply that there is a cult for the inexpressible in Sartre's work or that his ethics should be fetishising a mystical experience of self-effacement. Nevertheless, the themes of silence and losing oneself do appear in his texts where they complicate the more

explicit insistence on intersubjectivity and communication. It is therefore important to determine, for instance, how we should read a sentence like 'there is no literature except for and by others' (op. cit.). Is Sartre delivering a critique of the doctrine of art for art's sake by insisting on literature's essentially communicative character? Or is he insisting on the necessity of radically exposing yourself to the liberty and the judgement of others? The answer, I would argue, is both. It may be that Sartre prioritises communication but he is not blind to the potential of radical self-exposure.[30]

This double nature of writing is admirably exposed in Sartre's well-known self-diagnosis of his inferiority complex:

> I have a real inferiority complex toward Gauguin, van Gogh and Rimbaud because they were able to lose themselves. Gauguin by his exile, van Gogh by his madness, and Rimbaud, more than everyone, because he was able to give up writing. I am more and more convinced that, to achieve authenticity, something has to break. But I have protected myself against these fractures. […] I have tied myself to my desire for writing.[31]

Two kinds of artists (and art) are here compared. Gauguin, van Gogh and Rimbaud were extremely generous artists who reached authenticity by losing themselves. The unrestricted generosity was a perilous adventure and ultimately these artists paid a very high price. What followed was either radical exile, (heroic) silence in the asylum or the end of writing. Sartre admits to never having gone that far. For him, literature and writing has precisely served as a protective barrier against radical transgression. Before the break, he flips literature back on to its front side: writing is not just an answer to the appeal of silence, but also an appeal to the freedom of the other.[32]

Notes

1. Jean-Paul Sartre, *La Responsabilité de l'écrivain* (Paris: Verdier, 1998), 22 (my translation).
2. T Storm Heter, *Sartre's Ethics of Engagement* (London: Continuum, 2006), 44.
3. In the mid-nineties Hegelian recognition became a key theme in many philosophical, feminist and multiculturalist debates. The social philosopher Axel Honneth's groundbreaking 1992 work on *The Struggle for Recognition* (trans. Joel Anderson (Cambridge: Polity Press [1995], 2004)) was instrumental in this regard; texts by Judith Butler, Nancy Fraser, Charles Taylor and Robert R.

Williams were also important (the debate, of course, continues). One of the ideas Honneth borrows from Hegel's early writings is that recognition should be theorised concurrently with questions of misrecognition, disrespect and crime. As T Storm Heter notes, Sartre's immediate post-war writings operate in precisely this way: on the one hand Sartre investigates the possibility of achieving the ideal of mutual recognition (by drawing on the aesthetic experience); on the other he explores problems of misrecognition and disrespect in his writings on anti-Semitism and colonialism. It is therefore unsurprising that many of the newer texts on recognition (for instance those by Honneth, Butler and Williams) explicitly discuss Sartre's views of recognition and misrecognition. However, because this article aims to demonstrate the importance of *aesthetics* for the Sartrean reading of recognition, I have not found space to engage in an explicit discussion of these more socio-philosophical texts. For a critical discussion of Honneth and Taylor via Sartre and Fanon, see Anita Chari, 'Exceeding Recognition', *Sartre Studies International* 10, no. 2, (2004), 110–22.

4. Jean-Paul Sartre: *What is Literature?*, trans. Bernard Frechtman (London: Routledge [1993] 2003), 27; hereafter WIL.
5. Stéphane Mallarmé, *Œuvres Complètes vol. II*, ed. B. Marchal (Gallimard, 2003), 67 (my translation); hereafter Mallarmé II. Sartre quotes this sentence in *Notebooks for an Ethics*, trans. David Pellauer (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 543; hereafter NE, and again in *Mallarmé, or the Poet of Nothingness*, trans. Ernest Sturm (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1988), 135; hereafter PN.
6. Three pages later we find a paragraph essentially reproducing the argument of the passage I have just quoted (cf. WIL, 41, middle section).
7. Suzanne Guerlac, 'Sartre and the Powers of Literature: The Myth of Prose and the Practice of Reading', MLN, vol. 108, no. 5 (Dec 1993): 820.
8. Denis Hollier, *The Politics of Prose. Essay on Sartre*, trans. Jeffrey Mehlman (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), 95.
9. Is Hollier right? Does Sartre forget the role of death in Hegel's dialectics? Suzanne Guerlac notes that the first essay, *What is Writing?*, in fact does present a 'version of struggle to the death' (Suzanne Guerlac, *Literary Polemics* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997), 65). It can be added that even if death plays a crucial part in *The Phenomenology of Spirit* (and in Kojève's reading of this work), it is less important in *System of Ethical Life* where the theory of recognition receives it first substantial development.
10. Heter, *Sartre's Ethics*, 42.
11. Heter, *Sartre's Ethics*, 45.
12. Heter, *Sartre's Ethics*, 35.
13. This reading comes close to the one offered by Bruce Baugh in *French Hegel: From Surrealism to Postmodernism* (London: Routledge, 2003), 109–10.
14. The problem of a political realisation of the phenomenological structure remains somewhat unresolved throughout *What is Literature?* This can be seen towards the end of the last essay, *Situation of the Writer in 1947*, where Sartre – like Georges Bataille before him, and Maurice Blanchot and Roland Barthes after him – develops the idea of a community of readers.

    Sartre first explains that 'the man who reads strips himself in some way of his empirical personality … to put himself at the peak of his freedom' (WIL 208). This ideal reader joins 'thousands of readers all over the world who do not know each other' and together they maintain 'that chorus of good wills which Kant has

called the City of Ends' (WIL 209). In a second step, this ideal scenario must materialise as readers will seek to establish real relations and produce actual events: 'these non-temporal good wills [must] *historicize* themselves' (ibid.). Surprisingly, this historicisation will still allow readers to remain ideal and pure: 'these non-temporal good wills *historicize* themselves while preserving their purity' (ibid.). These last four words clearly demonstrate Sartre's unwillingness to give up the bipartition between an ethical and a political sphere: it is important to recognise both the existence of a *pure* ethico-aesthetic level of a utopian character and the necessity of a concrete historical realisation of this ethical level. Less than one year before the opening night of *Les Mains sales*, Sartre thus calls for a historicisation with clean hands.

15. Silence is an important theme in Sartre's early literary essays. In *Situations I* it is discussed in the articles on Albert Camus, Georges Bataille, Francis Ponge and – in particular – Brice Parain and Jules Renard. According to Sartre, contemporary literature is marked by an 'obsession with silence' ['hantise du silence'] (*Critiques littéraires (Situations I)* (Paris: Gallimard-Folio, 1993), 103, my translation). This obsession is also found in what he describes as the surrealist attempt to destroy words with words, in the literary criticism of Jean Paulhan, in Blanchot's novels and in the philosophy of Martin Heidegger (where 'silence […] is the authentic mode of language' [ibid., 104]). Sartre's views on silence in *Situations I* are complex and they deserve a systematic treatment which I cannot offer in this context. However, in most cases the 'obsession with silence' appears in a very negative light. In the essay on Bataille, for instance, silence is associated with an absence of communication ('Does he even address himself to us?' [ibid., 141]) and in the study of Ponge, the quest for silence is described as a desperate attempt to 'finally rest from the painful duty of being a subject' (ibid., 266).
16. Sartre writes: 'le sens n'est pas la somme des mots, il en est la totalité organique' (Jean-Paul Sartre, *Qu'est-ce que la littérature?* [Paris: Gallimard-Folio, 1985], 51). Curiously, this sentence does not appear in Bernard Frechtman's translation.
17. As mentioned (see note 15), *Situations I* presents a critique of the obsession with silence which Sartre finds in contemporary literature. We now see that this critique has disappeared from *Why Write?* and we must therefore conclude that Sartre's relation to silence is ambivalent. It can be argued that this ambivalence is part of a more general vacillation. In *Sartre's Theory of Literature*, Christina Howells first follows Sartre's essay on Camus and associates 'silence' with Paulhan's idea of 'terror in literature', then she associates 'terror' with the notion of 'pure art' (Christina Howells, *Sartre's Theory of Literature* [London: Modern Humanities Research Association, 1979], 24–25). According to Howells, Sartre's attitude towards terror and pure art (and therefore also silence) is fundamentally ambiguous; indeed, one of her main arguments is that Sartre initially 'establish[es] a radical distinction between "pure" art and "committed" art which he spends the rest of his life trying to attenuate' (ibid., 1). The difference between Sartre's treatment of silence in *Situations I* and in *Why write?* can be seen as an example of this work of attenuation.
18. Guerlac, *Literary Polemics*, 69.
19. In his *Jean-Paul Sartre* (London: Reaktion Books, 2006) Andrew Leak reminds us that Sartre was a keen reader of biographies who often chose to conduct his existentialist psychoanalyses on authors whose lives resembled his own. Mallarmé is no exception to this rule: like Sartre, Mallarmé lost a parent when he was child and was therefore, to a large extent, brought up by grandparents; of Parisian

origins they both began their professional careers as high school teachers in the French province, before returning to Paris where they occupied key positions in the French intellectual intelligentsia (Sartre's reputation, of course, was worldwide). The resemblances between Sartre's auto portrait in *Les Mots* and his descriptions of the young Mallarmé are striking.

20. Mallarmé II, 65.
21. Mallarmé II, 23.
22. Mallarmé II, 68.
23. Mallarmé II, 65. Sartre quotes this passage in PN, 129.
24. Mallarmé II, 256.
25. In *What is Literature?* we found a process of 'disclosure-creation', here one of 'unveiling and creation'; in both cases the French original is 'dévoilement – création'.
26. Baugh, *French Hegel*, 117.
27. Sartre explains: 'This consciousness of gratuitousness (or of generosity as the original structure of authentic existence) is indissolvably linked to the consciousness of Being as a fixed explosion' (NE 493–94).
28. Sartre's incomplete text on Mallarmé precisely analyses the poet's multiple conversions. For instance: 'Mallarmé […] converts his personal failure into the Impossibility of Poetry; and then, in yet another reversal, he will transform the Failure of Poetry into a Poetry of Failure' (PN 128–29); and 'if indeed man is impossible, then you must *manifest* this impossibility by pushing it to the point of self-destruction' (PN 136, translation modified). Finally Mallarmé is of course also the poet who realises that he cannot escape contingency, but who then goes on to affirm it by making it the basis of one of his most famous poems: *Un coup de dés jamais n'abolira le hasard*.
29. Unfortunately, I cannot develop a reading of the relation between recognition and Potlatch in this context. On this complex relation, see Guerlac: *Literary Polemics*, 67–76, and Paul Ricoeur, *Parcours de la reconnaissance* (Paris: Gallimard, 2005), 341–78.
30. Of course my argument is related to the many newer readings in which Sartre no longer appears as the last philosopher of the subject, but to a considerable extent as 'the first to deconstruct the subject' (Baugh, *French Hegel*, 94). (See for instance: Christina Howells, 'Conclusion: Sartre and the deconstruction of the subject', in *The Cambridge Companion to Sartre*, ed. C. Howells (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 318–52; Bernard-Henri Lévy's many recontextualisations of Sartre in *Le Siècle de Sartre* (Paris: Grasset & Fasquelle, 2000); and the discussion of this 'new Sartre' (C. Howells, *The Cambridge Companion*, 1) in the two first articles of *Sartre Studies International* 13, no. 1, (2007): Rudi Visker, 'Was Existentialism Truly a Humanism?', 3–15 and Josh Toth, 'A *Différance* of Nothing: Sartre, Derrida and the Problem of Negative Theology', 16–34). In some cases, I believe this effort to (post)modernise Sartre by highlighting the parallels with thinkers such as Jacques Derrida, Gilles Deleuze and Jean Baudrillard leads to a curious historicisation where his complex relations to contemporary figures like Paulhan, Blanchot, Bataille and Kojève are unjustly neglected. See Nik Farrell Fox's otherwise stimulating *The New Sartre* (London: Continuum, 2003).
31. Jean-Paul Sartre, *Carnets de la dróle de guerre* (Paris: Gallimard, 1983), 43 (my translation).
32. This article was written during an AMRC-funded research leave.