

SARTRE'S PHENOMENOLOGY OF HISTORY:
COMMUNITY, AGENCY AND COMPREHENSION

ABSTRACT

The paper argues that Sartre's work as both a literary critic and social philosopher is deeply indebted to his early commitment to phenomenology. The first part of the paper examines the nature of reading and writing in the account of literary meaning that is presented in the transitional text, *Qu'est-ce que la littérature?* While acknowledging the political turn that occurs in Sartre's work, we then discuss how the theme of history emerges in the later essay, *Questions de méthode*, as one that opens up a "double reading" of human motivation. Our conclusion maintains that the Marxist phase of Sartre's work is based on the hermeneutical notion of comprehension, which provides an anthropological grounding for his existential philosophy.

Jean-Paul Sartre's contribution to philosophy was crucial to the reception of Husserlian phenomenology in France during the early post-war period. This reception was mediated by a growing interest in the work of Martin Heidegger, but it also provided Continental philosophy with a unique agenda that can be examined as a special case. However, the widespread view that Sartre abandoned phenomenology for political concerns has made a thoughtful appraisal of his work difficult to sustain in professional circles. Underlying this view is the perception that Sartre's 'conversion to history' was basic to the political turn that occurs in his later work. We would like to reconsider the degree to which this historical thematic can be linked to Sartre's long-standing commitment to phenomenology, which remains important to all phases of his work. With this goal in mind, this paper will begin with a discussion of Sartre's early attempt to define literature and to clarify the space in which it appears. The paper will then examine how Sartre assesses the performances of history in phenomenological terms. Our conclusion will establish links between phenomenology and the hermeneutical orientation that accompanies this new historical outlook.

I

Only in the perspective of time can we appreciate the phenomenological importance of Sartre's seminal 1947 essay, *Qu'est-ce que la littérature?* Various interpretations of this widely read study have prevented the phenomenological dimension from emerging in an essential way. Sartre's proclivity for philosophical realism is probably the major obstacle to a rediscovery of this crucial dimension. No one would deny that the early Sartre privileges the virtues of prose over the values of poetic association. This early essay notoriously revives an apparently Fregean opposition between psychic meaning and the indications of sense. However, when considered in phenomenological terms, Sartre's interest in verbal transparency has less to do with the actual existence of objects than with the capacity of language to clarify our engagement with the world on a subjective level. From this standpoint, we might say that Sartre's dismissal of poetry is less of a rejection than a displacement that restores an 'active' role to language as it functions in everyday life. The distinction between prose and poetry rests on the difference between a language that signifies and one that mutely evokes but cannot communicate what it improperly intends. The artist detaches meanings from the world and presents them as autonomous, whereas the prose writer mingles with the world in order to *signify* what can be directly known.

At the same time, Sartre contends that the distinction between prose and poetry reveals how language can be approached from different standpoints. This basic distinction enables Sartre to define the poet as someone who relates to words as things rather than as signs. This virtual possibility is perhaps inscribed in the nature of language. Language functions through signs that are always in some way ambiguous. Ambiguity, however, provides us with opportunities for taking up different positions with regard to how the sign can function in the world. The sign can be considered from two points of view: "For the ambiguity of the sign implies that one can penetrate it at will like a pane of glass and pursue the thing signified, or turn one's gaze towards its *reality* and consider it as an object."¹ The first mode of access is that of the prose writer who produces literary works that establish a dialogue with those who act in the world, whereas the second mode of access is that of the linguist who approaches language as the object of a human science. At the beginning of his argument, Sartre seems to have limited himself to two proper modes of access to language, relegating the poetic use of language to a marginal role in a rational semiology.²

Nonetheless, we cannot interpret this limitation as a subordination of language to a contemplative view of the world. Sartre emphasizes that the prose writer is not simply a stylist for whom "the word is a gentle breeze which

plays lightly over the surface of things, grazing them without altering them," any more than the person who speaks is a pure witness who remains outside a visible order.³ On the contrary, the writer is not only self-conscious but conscious of *being seen* at the moment that he becomes conscious of himself. In his early masterwork, *L'Être et le néant*, Sartre situates the conscious ego in a fundamental relation to an emergent other whose sudden appearance accompanies the upsurge of self-consciousness.⁴ Subjectivity, therefore, is already intersubjectivity, as Husserl contends. Moreover, we demonstrate a capacity to transform ourselves to the degree that we are able to integrate social perceptions of our various moves in a revised self-image. Sartre's conception of the self as a being-in-the-world is quasi-dialectical to the extent that it rests on a phenomenological analysis of subjectivity as co-constituted. However, the movement of self-consciousness cannot be interpreted according to a rigid or formulaic conception of dialectics. The role of beauty in this unfolding process is to persuade in a manner that does not involve coercion or angry force. When beauty "acts by persuasion like the charm of a voice or a face," we can be sure that the point of contact between self and other is a place of mediation, rather than a site of conflict.⁵

Furthermore, the world of the prose writer leads as a matter of course to an assessment of how literature requires both writers and readers, instead of existing on its own in a depersonalized setting. Literary works should not be confused with the products of a craft: "When it is a matter of pottery or carpentry, we work according to traditional patterns, with tools whose usage is codified; it is Heidegger's famous 'they' who are working with our hands."⁶ Here Sartre could be responding to the reduction of art to craft that seems to occur in Heidegger's hermeneutical approach to the work of art.⁷ In distancing himself from Heidegger, Sartre also looks forward to a conception of art that is centered around literature rather than around the visual arts. No doubt literature is concerned with how our lives are given shape and form through the signs of writing: "It is our history, our love, our gaiety that we recognize in it."⁸ Our proximity to literary results is precisely what prevents us from considering them as objective. Sartre contrasts the place of objectivity in the perception of art to the preeminence of subjectivity in artistic creation.

The dialectical nature of art is particularly evident in the case of literature, which demonstrates how the act of writing always entails the act of reading. Sartre contends that the writer never reads himself but produces signs that require an outside interpreter in order to be understood. The writer creates a work that exceeds the limits of his own subjectivity and only discovers its objective meaning after he ceases to recognize it as his own. What this means is that, contrary to popular doctrines, the writer does not write for himself but always writes for others. The reader for whom he writes functions as a subject

in relation to a literary object that never fully appears. This non-appearing object cannot be thought apart from the reader's subjectivity. It would seem, therefore, that the construction of the literary object is dialectical to the precise extent that it engages the reader on a subjective level, just as it derives meaning from an inexhaustible literary work.

Sartre contends that the dependence of the writer on the attentive reader challenges the formalist view of reading as inessential to the literary work. This dependence assumes existential importance to the extent that literature can be envisioned as an appeal: "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."⁹ Sartre's mode of address highlights the emphatic but non-coercive nature of literary production. Moreover, in claiming that writing is an appeal, Sartre underscores both the irreducible nature of the literary work and the role of the reader in responding to the work itself. In the former case, we learn that writing can be an appeal because it is in some sense irreducible. Literature derives from the writer's subjectivity so that "the appearance of the work of art is a new event which cannot be *explained* by anterior data."¹⁰

At the same time, when considered from another point of view, the literary work engages the reader in an essential way: "The book does not serve my freedom; it requires it."¹¹ The freedom of the reader does not extend to the point of determining the work's content; on the contrary, it serves as the formal condition that grounds the reception of the work in a delimited consciousness. Sartre readily acknowledges that his own conception of freedom resembles what can be found in Kant's aesthetic thinking. However, unlike Kantian aesthetics, Sartre's approach to literature provides the imagination with a constitutive, rather than a regulative, function. The imagination participates in the grounding of aesthetic interpretation, but its spontaneity is restricted when "it is called upon to recompose the beautiful object beyond the traces left by the artist."¹²

Sartre's conception of reading would be incompletely understood if it did not allow us to see how literature negotiates between self and other. His concern for the role of the reader in co-constituting the literary work anticipates the hermeneutics of Paul Ricoeur and the phenomenology of Wolfgang Iser. Reading brings to life what literature evokes, and the relationship between reader and text is asymmetrical.¹³ But Sartre also looks forward to a position that was more fully and somewhat differently developed by Emmanuel Lévinas. The writer provides us with an experience of freedom through which we recognize the other as other than ourselves. Sartre contends that reading requires an atmosphere of trust which cannot be conveyed apart from a spirit of generosity. Both writer and reader must give themselves over to an acceptance of the other without whom freedom would remain purely subjective.

In relating the history of Western literature to the evolution of the reading public, Sartre discusses how the heterogeneous nature of writing derives from a division in the way that language can be understood. Far from functioning as a seamless totality, language possesses a material character that the writer invariably accepts in taking up a unique literary style. However, rather than separate the writer from the world, language functions on the basis of a productive distinction between things and thought. The material aspect of language does not conceal the world but maps over this more basic distinction.¹⁴ It also helps us understand how in thinking we do not merely transform things into 'ideas' but allow Being to "sparkle as Being, with its opacity and its coefficient of adversity, by the indefinite spontaneity of Existence."¹⁵ Being exceeds us and produces in us an awareness of what cannot be freely changed. At the same time, Being cannot be thought apart from the categories of subjective existence.

Sartre's reflections on the development of literature throughout the nineteenth century culminates in a discussion of how the writer might have responded to the reality of a divided reading public. By addressing a particular readership in concrete terms, the writer might have performed a critical function in awakening the less privileged social sectors to enduring injustices. This unexplored option might have produced a diversity of works and brought together divergent points of view. Sartre reminds us, however, that the defeat of the Paris Commune in 1870 distorted the potential of Marxism to provide a more pluralistic vision of social life.¹⁶ By suppressing ideological options that might have enriched the Marxist tradition, this historic event had the devastating effect of reducing socialism to a rigid orthodoxy. At this stage in his analysis, nonetheless, Sartre is not yet prepared to explain how phenomenology can contribute in fundamental ways to historical understanding.

II

Those who argue that Sartre's contribution to social philosophy involves a radically new departure tend to restrict phenomenology as a guide and influence to the early phases of his thought. To be sure, Sartre began with a strong interest in psychology and epistemology, which yielded only in time to historical and political concerns. However, the argument in favor of considering Sartre's investment in phenomenology as *continuous* with his entire life's work has not yet received its due, nor has it been clearly stated in a way that adds something original to the phenomenological heritage. Sartre's preamble to his philosophical attempt to renovate Marxism, *Questions de méthode*, provides a basis for interpreting the data of history in systematic terms, allowing the past to be revisited and relived as essentially intelligible. What remains to

be proven is that phenomenology can illuminate Sartre's social philosophy in fundamental ways.

In discussing how existentialism might correct and supplement dialectical thinking, Sartre reminds us that Kierkegaard, no less than Hegel and Marx, has become irreplaceable to a contemporary view of the world.¹⁷ He readily acknowledges that, compared to Hegel, Kierkegaard is not even a philosopher. However, in suggesting that the *existing* human being cannot be reduced to an intellectual abstraction, Kierkegaard indicates a realm of being that is heterogeneous to pure thought: "Whatever one may say or think about suffering, it escapes knowledge to the extent that it is suffered in itself, for itself, and to the degree that knowledge remains powerless to transform it."¹⁸ Kierkegaard, unlike Hegel, established an infinite distance between man and God. Moreover, the faith that he identifies with subjectivity cannot be reduced to a moment in a dialectical process that culminates in philosophical knowing. While Hegel opens up the possibility of mediation, Kierkegaard "marks a progress toward realism, since he insists on the *primacy* of the specifically real over thought."¹⁹ In this case, Sartre emphasizes the non-identity of reality and knowledge. With certain qualifications, we might even compare Kierkegaard's realism to that of Husserl, who refers to the object that *transcends* whenever the mind confronts it on an intentional basis.²⁰

Furthermore, in criticizing Marxist orthodoxy, Sartre once again discusses how the hasty assimilation of facts to ideal hypotheses can distort a genuine appraisal of concrete situations. The false essentialism of Marxist historiography does not allow us to uncover the relationship between part and whole. Marx himself was more perceptive: "In other words, he gives to each event, in addition to its particular signification, the role of being revealing."²¹ The quest of the historian is for a synthetic ensemble rather than for a Platonic idea. If Marxists during a later period move too quickly from facts to conclusions, they have lost touch with the concrete realities that are always subject to interpretation. Concepts lose their elasticity in systems of thought that exclude actual encounters: "They are no longer *keys*, interpretive schemata; they are posited for themselves as an already totalized knowledge."²² Change in this situation has been reduced to identity in a system of interpretation that depends on preconceived notions of its subject-matter.

Sartre's response to this situation would be difficult to understand apart from his starting-point in phenomenology, which provides a coherent basis for reconsidering the role of human agency in public life. Sartre argues against an economic determinism that would reduce historical events to conflicts between rival interests. When the Girondists opt for war in the wake of the French Revolution, they do not merely express a mercantilist bias in the sphere of policy. Sartre disagrees with the historical analysis of Daniel Guérin, which

he considers in some respects to be exemplary. Hence, instead of reducing Girondist attitudes to economic considerations, Sartre reminds us that "the political reality for the men of 1792 is an absolute, an irreducible."²³ From a certain standpoint, therefore, Sartre's view of historical causation can be interpreted as an attempt to restore an old-fashioned view of human agency that accepts political motivation at face value.²⁴ No doubt Sartre is opposed to the tendency of various historians to bury political contradictions in economic facts. We might object, nonetheless, that the Girondists *disguised* their true objectives in political rhetoric in order to conceal an underlying commitment to economic imperialism.

Sartre offers a fascinating counter-argument to this sophisticated objection to the more political reading. An actor playing Hamlet, who crosses his mother's room and kills Polonius, not only 'acts out' a set of stage directives but also earns his living as an actor in a certain society. This is entirely obvious. However, Sartre contends that long-range results which are present in an imaginary act cannot be understood in a restricted setting.²⁵ The values of an imaginary prince are expressed in an actor's movements, just as the actor imagines that he is Hamlet when he thinks of himself as appearing on stage. By way of analogy, when the revolutionaries of 1789 call themselves Cato, they position themselves as members of a class that discovers History and also attempts to stop it. Historical fabulation enables specific individuals to emerge as "heirs of a classical culture" that is both universal and outmoded.²⁶

The historian who fails to grasp the *double meaning* of historical fabulation is invariably at a loss to interpret a particular course of action in complex terms. Sartre clarifies how impersonation can be an imaginative response to a political and economic challenge. The revolutionaries who imitate Cato are interested in substituting virtue for politics and in forming a myth that carries them into an unknown future. The fundamentally ambiguous nature of this gesture is what renders it useful to historical interpretation. A careful examination of this rhetorically charged gesture demonstrates how a particular class can have the dual role of both advancing a revolutionary movement and bringing it to a premature end. Nonetheless, double meaning is perfectly compatible with the singularity of historical events. The French Revolution, for example, is a singular 'event' that cannot be reduced to economic concerns or assigned an entirely political meaning. From this standpoint, existence constitutes the site of praxis and provides the motive for a whole school of thought: "Existentialism, then, can only affirm the specificity of the historical *event*; it seeks to restore to the event its function and its multiple dimensions."²⁷

Sartre's approach to historical agency can be related to his interpretation of writers and their works. Literature is a vocation that enables the writer to order his own life according to specific ends while assuming a basic comportment in

the world. Sartre argues that literature is a fundamental choice that allows us to infer the unity of a life as a productive task.²⁸ Flaubert, for instance, chooses literature over other options during a period of experiencing intense rivalry with an older brother who has already won paternal esteem. The choice of becoming a writer is inseparable from a personal trauma, and yet the outcome of this trauma establishes the parameters of a life that will remain the same from beginning to end. This does not mean that our original choice must prevent us from maintaining some sort of tension between identity and difference. On an interpretive level, nonetheless, we remain interested in discovering the underlying coherence of a life that would otherwise lack integrity: "What the totalization must discover therefore is the multidimensional *unity* of the act."²⁹

Nonetheless, Sartre clearly rejects the strategy of reading literary works from a purely biographical standpoint. The production of a literary work is a singular 'event' that contains a plurality of meanings. These meanings are not reducible to what emerges at the moment of the work's composition. To be sure, the literary work enables us to pose questions concerning the life that surpass the experience of the lived. At the same time, the explanation of the work exceeds whatever can be learned about the life that produces the work in the first instance. Sartre discusses the relationship between the life and work in a way that sustains the work's relative autonomy:

The life is illuminated by the work as a reality whose total determination is found outside it – both in the conditions which produce it and in the artistic creation which fulfills it and completes it by expressing it. Thus the work – when one has examined it – becomes a hypothesis and a research tool to clarify the biography.³⁰

In the domain of criticism, Flaubert's work reveals the traits of a certain writer who discovers his place in a limited social structure and remains related to a unique childhood drama. Nonetheless, the critic must be willing to acknowledge at every interpretative juncture that the literary work contains meanings that exceed the scope of biographical inferences.

Sartre also suggests how the literary work, like the historical act, contains different meanings when examined from different perspectives. A writer who constructs a work that embodies the values of one period may anticipate the concerns of a world that lies ahead. The attitudes inscribed in Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* were prevalent in the post-romantic generation of 1830. They shaped the young Flaubert in ways that have long-term significance and became evident only in retrospect. However, while falling behind his contemporaries, Flaubert looks forward to the anti-romantic disgust of 1845 and writes a 'prophetic' novel that could be enlisted in the cause of social or political criticism.³¹ In addressing two different audiences, Flaubert demonstrates how temporal distance can be overcome on the basis of shared attitudes. Of course,

the novel only achieves a critical meaning if the new historical situation can be interpreted in ways that at least partially contradict the values of romantic defeatism. The novel from this standpoint would enact a despair that is by no means inevitable but expresses only a temporary setback for a more creative response to human existence.

While discussing how the literary object can be recovered as both complete and in the process of formation, Sartre opens up two possible readings of *Madame Bovary* that are perhaps equally valid. We might identify one possible reading with a 'classical' conception of phenomenology that begins with an analysis of Emma Bovary herself.³² The classical reading would demonstrate how Emma is consumed by the imaginary in her failure to master the real. This reading would emphasize how Emma's inability to distinguish imagination from reality brought about her own undoing. Sartre's own remarks on Flaubert, however, are dismissive of the 'realist' label and also support a reading that takes the author's identification with Emma Bovary as the starting-point for a very different analysis. This second reading would also be phenomenological in emphasizing the appearance of the self as a fictional construct, just as it would enable us to discover the writer in his own creation, thereby validating his image of himself as the female protagonist.³³

More importantly, this second reading would suggest how the creation of an imaginary being fulfills a role of the writer and pertains to a unique human project. While it would be easy to make use of this equivalence in order to fault the writer for his femininity, pessimism and escapism, we might achieve more by showing how he attempts *to invent a way out* that seeks recourse in the imaginary. Sartre cautions us against assuming that Flaubert merely evaded a responsible sense of self in constructing his literary surrogate: "This project has a *meaning*, it is not the simple negativity of flight; by it a man aims at the production of himself in the world as a certain objective totality."³⁴

III

There can be little doubt that Sartre assumes an increasingly hermeneutical attitude when approaching the problems of history. Nonetheless, we are often at a loss in trying to contextualize the strain of hermeneutics that characterizes his ambitious undertaking. The tradition that begins with Schleiermacher and extends to Dilthey and Heidegger is certainly a crucial influence on his later position. Manfred Frank has discussed how Sartre's reading of Flaubert continues this tradition, while combining a hermeneutics of the individual with the insights of historical materialism.³⁵ While Frank's remarkable analysis deserves close study, we might go one step further in suggesting how the notion of the individual provided Sartre with a non-foundational thematic that

departs from traditional theories of knowledge. Sartre's view of comprehension is completely at odds with an appropriative conception of knowledge that resolves all differences in a seamless totality. We discover his distance from this tradition when we learn that comprehension is never reducible to a contemplative stance. Comprehension is either related or identical to *praxis*, which lies at the heart of every human project that organizes a meaningful life.

Our discussion of Flaubert has already shown us that Sartre assigns phenomenological significance to the literary work as a possible source of biographical knowledge. To insist on the relative autonomy of the literary work is not to argue that it is unrelated to the life of the writer. Flaubert's vocation as writer is central to an existential project that reveals the singularity of a particular individual who embodies a general truth. We would not be able to grasp this singularity apart from the writer's achievements: "It is the work or the act of the individual which reveals to us the secret of his conditioning."³⁶ In maintaining that the significance of the work or act does not derive from external conditions, Sartre reaffirms the 'space' of the imaginary as an improvisatory site in which human destiny can be assessed and varied. It would seem that Sartre assigns literature a unique role in demonstrating how singularity reveals the general in any particular instance.

However, literature is perhaps only the expression of a more basic capacity that defines human beings as perpetually in the process of becoming. Man is a signifying being who constantly goes beyond the present and explains his actions in the light of future goals. The signs that he creates refer to absent objects or to objects that remain hidden in time. Sartre identifies signifying with an act of surpassing that enables human beings to separate themselves from their empirical conditions:

To surpass present conditions toward their later change and to surpass the present object toward an absence are one and the same thing. Man constructs signs because in his very reality he is signifying; and he is signifying because he is a dialectical surpassing of all that is simply given.³⁷

The capacity for language is what distinguishes man as a cultural being and sets him apart from the order of nature. In the act of signifying, human beings begin to move in a space that is irreducible to the empirical conditions in which they find themselves. From the standpoint of what is yet to come, this space is 'empty' but it also provides the basis for imaginative variation and free invention, which enable the individual to discover both absence and presence in the movement of verbal signs in a world of meaning.

Human conduct, however, is not only constituted through significations but presents itself to us as the occasion for hermeneutical comprehension. In observing someone cope with a shared situation, I grasp the field of my material space as something that can be crossed and unified through practical

activity. Comprehension is the term that describes this synthetic effort of bringing together self, other and material space. Moreover, in opposition to a short-sighted positivism, Sartre argues that our comprehension of the other necessarily takes place through a certain perception of human ends. This does not mean, of course, that such ends are equivalent to the objective results which enable living persons to establish contact with the world. Flaubert's early and tentative reflections on a novel that would eventually become *Madame Bovary* should not be confused with the novel itself. However, these reflections are significant as ends and turn out to be binding to the degree that they allow us to relate the future to the present in all of its concrete detail. By the same token, we recover Flaubert himself through a regressive effort that moves from the objective book to the set of subjective intentions that once animated the living writer.

This concern for ends is ultimately what enables Sartre to identify existentialism with anthropology as a human concern. Edmund Husserl earlier discussed how the sciences in general make use of their own subject-matter but never question their relationship to what they assume to be true.³⁸ In a similar manner, Sartre will argue that the human sciences have generally failed to ask questions about their own foundations. The reason for this failure resides in the mistaken notion that scientific activity allows us to constitute the laws of the human world instead of providing an existential basis for revealing them. Anthropology has despaired of discovering a human essence that could provide us with an objective source of scientific legitimacy. In offering the 'ideology' of existence as the basis for anthropological reflection, Sartre merely suggests that the role of comprehension in the acquisition of knowledge can show how every human project embraces a mode of *praxis* that unites immediate existence with an incomplete but always vital understanding of the other. Words sometimes have regressive meanings and function as mere indicators, but they also refer us back to a process that is interminable. This process is none other than comprehension itself, which should not be confused with knowledge but functions as the indirect 'foundation' of all we know. Sartre's philosophical contribution to the study of man challenges the way that knowledge is usually grounded in a stable relationship between knower and known:

This perpetual dissolution of intellection in comprehension and conversely, the perpetual redescend which introduced comprehension into intellection as a dimension of rational non-knowledge at the heart of knowledge is the very ambiguity of a discipline in which the questioner, the question, and the questioned are one.³⁹

Sartre's reference to ambiguity in this remarkable excursion into anthropology as a human science is perhaps what best preserves the openness of his phenomenological approach to history. In accepting the indeterminate

relationship between knowledge and comprehension, we have already begun to place the ‘event’ of existence within the contested site of historical experience.

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NOTES

¹ Jean-Paul Sartre, *What is Literature?* (London and New York: Routledge, 2001), p. 6.

² Dominick LaCapra, however, has argued effectively that Sartre’s opposition between poetry and prose quickly breaks down upon close examination. He even suggests that the category of the proper, in this case represented by prose, ‘deconstructs’ itself during the course of an exposition that becomes increasingly ‘poetic’ as it unfolds:

The writing is in no sense pure ‘prose,’ and it even seems to be more on the side of poetry – heavily allusive, evocative, connotative, persuasive, if not cajoling, even lyrical, and replete with metaphors and obscure resonances. It shows that what the text tries to say cannot be taken at face value.

Dominick Lacapra, *A Preface to Sartre* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1978), p. 73.

³ Sartre, *What is Literature?*, p. 13.

⁴ Cf. Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness* (New York: Washington Square Press, 1966), pp. 340–400.

⁵ Sartre, *What is Literature?*, p. 16.

⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 28–29.

⁷ Cf. Martin Heidegger, “The Origin of the Work of Art,” *Poetry, Language, Thought* (New York: HarperCollins, 2001), pp. 15–86. This essay employs craft production to renovate the concept of the work for hermeneutical purposes. Nonetheless, Heidegger’s use of the peasant shoes as an example of a *work* leads back to Van Gogh’s *painting*, which opens up the question of truth as ontological disclosure. It could be argued, therefore, that Heidegger never dispenses with art as a key to revealing what would otherwise remain inadequately revealed in everyday life.

⁸ Sartre, *What is Literature?*, p. 29.

⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 33–34.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 34.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 34.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 35.

¹³ Cf. Wolfgang Iser, “Asymmetry Between Text and Reader,” *The Act of Reading: A Theory of Aesthetic Response* (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978), pp. 163–79. Iser discusses the concept of indeterminacy in Roman Ingarden’s approach to literary works. His criticisms suggest how interpretive discord can shape the reader’s assessment of textual meaning. Hence reception theory could be understood as an attempt to deepen Sartre’s more radical claim about the way that literary meaning is co-constituted, rather than merely constituted on an eidetic basis.

¹⁴ The material aspect of language is precisely what complicates Sartre’s later conception of the writer as a *poet* who employs ordinary language as a non-literal resource: “The literary writer is a custodian of ordinary language, but he goes beyond it, for his material is language as non-significant or misinformation.” Cf. Jean-Paul Sartre, “A Plea for Intellectuals,” *Between Existentialism and Marxism* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1975), p. 272. While Sartre’s later position seems to be diametrically opposed to the earlier reduction of literature to prose, we cannot

help but notice that he sometimes fails to exclude 'poetic' uses of language from his earlier, rather programmatic agendas.

¹⁵ Sartre, *What is Literature?*, p. 88.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 114. Sartre briefly discusses how another sort of Marxism might have triumphed if the Paris Commune had not been crushed by external forces. This imaginary socialism "would have been coloured with a thousand nuances" and thus could not have developed into a monolithic ideology. While Sartre's historical reflections have a speculative cast, they cannot be dismissed as entirely implausible or outmoded in a time that has witnessed the collapse of Communist orthodoxy. Paul Ricoeur has explored this aspect of the Marxist tradition more extensively in *Lectures on Ideology and Utopia* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986).

¹⁷ A more complete discussion can be found in Jean-Paul Sartre, "Kierkegaard: The Singular Universal," *Between Existentialism and Marxism*, pp. 141–69. In this essay, Sartre explores the notion of the singular universal as a hermeneutical category and places Kierkegaard in the company of Marx as a seminal intellectual influence.

¹⁸ Jean-Paul Sartre, *Search for a Method* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1967), p. 10.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 12.

²⁰ Husserl explains that the thing is transcendent, rather than immanent to experience, in a manner that brings phenomenology close to 'classical' realism. Transcendence in this sense is not a concern of experience but pertains to the thing as such in its mode of being given: "Thus the Thing itself, *simpliciter*, we call transcendent. In so doing we give voice to the most fundamental and pivotal difference between ways of being, that between *Consciousness* and *Reality*." Cf. Edmund Husserl, *Ideas: General Introduction to Pure Phenomenology* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1931), pp. 133–34.

²¹ Sartre, *Search for a Method*, p. 26.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 27.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 41.

²⁴ Jameson argues that Sartre's acceptance of political motivation at face value does not correspond to what occurred after most revolutionary upheavals in the twentieth century. Cf. Frederic Jameson, *Marxism and Form* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1971), pp. 267–68. We might suggest in response that Sartre's phenomenological analysis indeed qualifies the value of economic reform as a strategy that has little chance of success if it is inadequately linked to political tasks.

²⁵ Sartre, *Search for a Method*, pp. 45–46.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 46.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 124.

²⁸ The concept of an original project is presented theoretically for the first time through the example of Flaubert, the monumental figure who enables Sartre to produce a lengthy intellectual biography in which the vocation of literature performs a central role:

The irreducible unification which we ought to find, which is Flaubert, and which we require biographers to reveal to us – this is the unification of an *original project*, a unification which should reveal itself to us as a *non-substantial absolute*.

Cf. Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness* (New York: Washington Square, 1956), p. 717.

²⁹ Sartre, *Search for a Method*, p. 111.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 142.

³¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 64–65.

³² The 'classical' reading of Flaubert would center around the opposition between the imaginary and the real as well as the attempt to substitute imagination for reality. Hazel E. Barnes has pursued this reading in her insightful account of *Madame Bovary* in *Sartre and Flaubert* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), pp. 340–61.

³³ Needless to say, both the 'classical' and the autobiographical readings of Flaubert could be combined in various phenomenological analyses to argue that literature and history are important to the novels themselves. In emphasizing the writer's failure on the level of social engagement, Sartre tends to offer a literal interpretation of Flaubert's famous statement, "I am Madame Bovary." This same statement could be used to support that idea that literature saved Flaubert, while it doomed Emma Bovary. Flaubert's text, however, provides an image of his age that places in question the possibility of authorial detachment.

³⁴ Sartre, *Search for a Method*, p. 147.

³⁵ Cf. Manfred Frank, "Archäologie des Individuums. Zur Hermeneutik von Sartres *Flaubert*," *Das Sagbare und das Unsagbare* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1993), pp. 256–333.

³⁶ Sartre, *Search for a Method*, p. 152.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 152.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 168.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 174.

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