

重新評估沙特的何為文學?

Jean-Paul Sartre's What Is Literature?: A Reevaluation

孫維民 遠東科技大學應用外語系講師

摘 要

一九四七年，何為文學？初次面世，其後便成為文學批評的重要里程碑。書中披露的主張影響深遠，預示了若干年後的文學理論盛況。後現代的某些議題，例如對語言和符號的探究，在這本書中已然述及。不過，此書也有偏見。沙特將詩和散文斷然分開，藉此賦予二者不同的功用，即是一例。身為存在主義的哲學家，沙特有時過度強調作家的社會責任與文學的教化功能，也因此，他會刻意貶低某些書寫形式。在本文中，我從現代讀者的角度，重新檢視何為文學？裡的觀點，試圖釐清沙特在文學批評中的位置。

關鍵詞：存在主義、自由、責任、文類、行動、境況

Wei-min Sun, Instructor, Depart. of Applied Foreign Language, Far East University

Abstract

Since its first publication in French in 1947, What Is Literature? has remained one of the most significant critical landmarks of literature. The literary opinions expressed in this book are influential not only to the author's time. They also anticipate forms of criticism which are to flourish in the coming decades, such as the postmodern enthusiasm for the theory of language and the sign. There are prejudices in this book, nevertheless. For instance, Sartre makes a drastic distinction between poetry and prose, so that he can invest them with essentially different functions. A philosopher of the existentialist movement, Sartre sometimes overemphasizes the social responsibility of the writer and the moral function of literature, and thus he devalues, unjustly, certain kinds of writing. In this study, I reexamine the viewpoints in What Is Literature? from the perspective of a modern reader, hoping to outline more clearly Sartre's position in literary criticism.

Keywords: existentialism, freedom, responsibility, genre, action, situation

I. Introduction

There are insights and blindness in this book of Sartre's on literature. A professional philosopher, Sartre demonstrates in his book how consistently and effectively he can reason and make others reason. His statements throughout the four chapters seem temperate and well grounded, arriving naturally and inevitably at the final conclusions that he anticipates: writing is a commitment or an engagement which should bring about changes in the reader and the world; the writer discloses knowledge, so that the reader can not plead ignorance and must act; always in a particular situation, the writer has to find out and express the truth regarding contemporary matters; accordingly, one's readers are those confined to a certain time and place; in short, the writer undertakes a social responsibility and writing is a moral activity.

Sartre's literary theories derive largely from his philosophy known as existentialism. A few words concerning the "doctrines" of such a philosophy may be helpful in the understanding of Sartre's What Is Literature?. As well-known, the first principle of existentialism is that existence is prior to essence. In other words, there is neither God nor First Cause by which human beings can hope to realize the meaning of their existence.

[E]ach individual man is what he makes of himself by a succession of actions undertaken in complete freedom of choice in a situation which constitutes his particular physical and historical context. (Horton 466)

Since there is not any transcendent Absolute, human beings are condemned to freedom. Such a freedom is frequently terrible because one has to determine the value of one's own life alone. Nevertheless, the loss of the Absolute is not always mourned. When accepting the freedom and responsibility of constantly surpassing oneself, one can finally achieve

one's authentic and valuable existence.

II. Freedom and Responsibility

It may be just to say that "freedom" and "responsibility" are two of the most important concepts in Sartre's existentialism. They are no less important in his essays on literature. In the first chapter of Being and Nothingness, Sartre gives an account of human freedom:

Human freedom precedes essence in man and makes it possible; the essence of the human being is suspended in his freedom. What we call freedom is impossible to distinguish from the being of "human reality." Man does not exist first in order to be free subsequently; there is no difference between the being of man and his being-free. (25)

The writer's responsibility, therefore, is to appeal to the freedom of readers, making them become aware of such a freedom. A literary work is unaccomplished when it is not read; it is a bad work when it fails to reveal the freedom in both the writer and the reader. In his What Is Literature?, Sartre returns to such points of view repeatedly:

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 that they in turn solicit it by a symmetrical and inverse appeal. (45)

We must bear in mind that the writer, like all other artists, aims at giving his reader a certain feeling that is customarily called aesthetic pleasure, and which I would very much rather call aesthetic joy.... The recognition of freedom by itself is joy.... (52)

For, 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)

Thus, whether he is an essayist, a pamphleteer, a satirist, or a novelist, whether he speaks only of individual passions

or whether he attacks the social order, the writer, a free man addressing free men, has only one subject—freedom. (58)

Its function is to express the concrete universal to the concrete universal and ...its end is to appeal to the freedom of men so that they may realize and maintain the reign of human freedom. (154)

Readers are conscious of the world they are in and the lives they lead as they are conscious of their freedom which the writer discloses. They may be slaves without knowing it if the writer does not reveal such a fact. Now they know it, but, in Sartre's understanding, it is not enough just to know it. They should take action in order to make some substantial improvements. To Sartre, writing seems no more than an action, which should be disregarded when other actions appear more effective in maintaining the "reign of human freedom." As Sartre asserts,

[o]ne does not write for slaves. The art of prose is bound up with the only regime in which prose has meaning, democracy. When one is threatened, the other is too. And it is not enough to defend them with the pen. A day comes when the pen is forced to stop, and the writer must then take up arms. Thus, however you might have come to it, whatever the opinions you might have professed,

literature throws you into battle. Writing is a certain way of wanting freedom; once you have begun, you are engaged, willy-nilly. (59)

It is not so difficult to understand such an attitude Sartre has toward literature. About a decade before his What Is Literature? is published, Sartre is captured and imprisoned by the Nazis. When liberated nine months later, he returns to Paris and becomes an active member in the Resistance. Such an experience undoubtedly influences his views of human freedom and responsibility.

III. Insightful Observations

It can not be denied that one often finds sparks of wisdom in Sartre's book. In the first chapter, for instance, Sartre makes a distinction between prose and poetry, echoing the poetics of Roman Jakobson:

In fact, 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. 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 his gaze toward its reality and consider it as an object. The man who talks is beyond words and near the object, whereas the poet is on this side of them. (6)

Language, to the poet, is not a mere instrument for the exchange of ideas. On the contrary, the poet regards words as "things" rather than "signs," putting emphasis on the independency of the poetic language. Jakobson's poetics is reminded here:

The poetic functioning of language "promotes the palpability of signs," draws attention to their material qualities rather than simply using them as counters in communication. In the "poetic," the sign is dislocated from its

object: the usual relation between sign and referent is disturbed, which allows the sign a certain independence as an object of value in itself. (qtd. in Eagleton 98)

When Sartre says that “anything which one names is already no longer quite the same; it has lost its innocence” (16), we are reminded of Kenneth Burke’s discussion, some fifteen years later, of the nature of language. Burke suggests that the language one chooses to use is like a “terministic screen” which necessarily directs one’s attention and understanding:

Even if any given terminology is a reflection of reality, by its very nature as a terminology it must be a selection of reality; and to this extent it must function also as a deflection of reality.... Not only does the nature of our terms affect the nature of our observation, in the sense that the terms direct the attention to one field rather than to another. Also, many of the “observations” are but implications of the particular terminology in terms of which the observations are made.(45-46)

We are also reminded of Jacques Derrida’s proclamation that to name is in fact an act of violence in that, when inscribed in language, the referent is permanently suspended or excluded. The “thing” becomes the linguistic sign which is incapable of re-presentation:

To name, to give names..., such is the originary violence of language which consists in inscribing within a difference, in classifying, in suspending the vocative absolute. To think the unique within the system, to inscribe it there, such is the gesture of the arche-writing: arche-violence, loss of the proper, of absolute proximity, of self-presence.... (112)

Hillis Miller, another deconstructionist, even goes

further to announce that “all words are metaphors” (The Linguistic Moment 264) because the relationship between words and their referents, like that between the tenor and the vehicle in a metaphor, is difference. As Miller puts it, “[l]anguage is from the start fictive, illusory, displaced from any direct reference to things as they are” (Theory Now and Then 89), and “[signs] are fictions, arbitrary emblems, rather than substantial analogies or symbols. They do not participate in what they name, nor is the sign similar to its referent” (The Linguistic Moment 237).

IV. Debatable Points

Nevertheless, there are some debatable points in Sartre’s What Is Literature?. First of all, is there any clear or functioning line of division between poetry and prose? When discussing the difference between poetry and prose, Sartre seems to disregard the fact that the distinction between the two genres is itself a problem. There are prose poems, and in prose works there are sometimes sentences or paragraphs which remind us of poetry. Are they instrumental and utilitarian? Or are they “things?” It seems only more confusing and confining, for both the writer and the reader, to make the distinctions between literary genres.

Also, it seems a prejudice to invest prose and poetry with essentially different functions. To Sartre, prose is a “commitment,” a “disclosure” of freedom and an invitation to act, while poetry is not:

*Poets are men who refuse to utilize language.
Now, since the quest for truth takes place in
and by language conceived as a certain kind
of instrument, it is unnecessary to imagine
that they aim to discern or expound the true.
(6)*

This is questionable. It does not seem just to say that poets do not aim at “the true” and that poetry is

thus little committed or engaged. Is a poem by, say, Wordsworth or Auden, less powerful in the disclosure of knowledge or truth than a novel by Austen or Hardy? Does Gulliver's Travels or Look Homeward, Angel invite more actions for a change than "The Marriage of Heaven and Hell" or "The Waste Land?" In a sense, one is always "changed" internally after reading some poems which one is unfamiliar with before, and such a change is the start for action. Even the poetry of the art-for-art's-sake school, which Sartre calls "empty art" (21) quite unjustly, initiates changes in the reader's consciousness and is thus not entirely futile. It seems that Sartre deliberately ignores the fact that there are different kinds of poets and prose writers. His clear distinction between the two serves a premise in order to dismiss poetry from his discussions. Since poetry is mentioned only slightly in the first few pages of Sartre's book, the title of this book seems exaggerated and improper.

Due to the social responsibility of the writer and the moral function of literature, Sartre argues, one must write in a "situation" (218) for certain readers. One does not write for the "universal man" because "the essential characteristic of the notion of the universal man is that he is not involved in any particular age" (72). "The universal man can think of nothing but universal values," (72) which, to Sartre's view, are abstract. Here, it is not difficult to see again that Sartre's literary criticism corresponds with his existentialist philosophy. For Sartre, writers should not write about any transcendental value or universal "human nature" since there isn't any innate "essence." It is easy to refute such a literary theory, however, if one is familiar with some of the best literary works in the past. The plays of Shakespeare, for instance, still appeal to the readers, English or not, in our age. What are the elements in them which make such a lasting and universal appeal possible? One may be situated," and yet in one there may be

something unable to be confined by space and time.

V. Conclusion

What Is Literature? is originally published in French in 1947 and is translated into English in 1949. In other words, this book makes its first appearance before the full bloom of literary theories in the second half of the twentieth century. When coming out, however, this book demonstrates its significance and influence. Some of the topics Sartre brings up have remained fresh and provocative beyond his generation. Sartre's definition of the poetic language, for instance, associates him with Jakobson, and his concept of naming foreshadows the language theory of Burke's and the deconstructive theory of the sign.

Undeniably, there are suspicious opinions in this book, such as the insistence to make a drastic distinction between poetry and prose and thus to invest the two with essentially different functions. Sartre's much emphasis on action, as well as situation, is also debatable.

Nevertheless, it seems certain that What Is Literature? has stood as one of the most thought-provoking books of literary criticism after World War II. In it there are genuine insights ahead of the author's time, though there is also blindness due to the author's passion for the existentialist doctrine.

Note

Burke explains what "terministic screens" resemble as follows: "When I speak of 'terministic screens,' I have particularly in mind some photographs I once saw. They were different photographs of the same objects, the difference being that they were made with different color filters. Here something so "factual" as a photograph revealed notable distinctions in texture, and even in form, depending upon which color filter was used for the

documentary description of the event being recorded”
(45).

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