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Daniel Just

Excerpt

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Introduction

Literature and engagement

A major challenge of literature is that it is stubbornly indeterminate. Both a vice and a virtue, the indeterminateness of literary language has acquired the status of an impasse, one which was perhaps most directly and resolutely faced by Jean-Paul Sartre and Stéphane Mallarmé. The question of whether the indeterminateness of literary language is a vice or a virtue, however, has rarely been treated without some degree of ambiguity. Not even for Sartre and Mallarmé was the issue so neatly polarized. Although for Sartre indeterminateness was clearly a vice, for Mallarmé it was not necessarily a virtue. Mallarmé too saw it as a vice, but one which he, unlike Sartre, did not want to, or did not think could be, overcome. Whereas Sartre, as his *What is Literature?* (1947) and *The Roads to Freedom* (1945–1949) demonstrate, wanted to correct the propensity of literature to defer and diffuse meaning, and make literary language and what it talks about coincide by finding a transparent language in which words – in a twist on J. L. Austin – would *do* things, Mallarmé chose to follow the imprudence of literary language and, because it could be neither ignored nor directly contested, accepted the stakes and decided to defeat language at its own game. What these two projects, in their ever intensifying versions – the increasing frenzy of Sartre’s writing that could not hide the anxiety that if it came to a standstill it would expose the unsteadiness of its language, and Mallarmé’s growing obsession with silence and the vision of the blank page, as his preface to *Un Coup de dés* reveals – bring to our attention is that both the effort to stabilize meaning and the attempt to dispose of it prove equally futile.¹ The more one tries to make literary language convey the intended meaning, the more it slips away; and the more one attempts to eradicate it, the more obvious it becomes that referentiality will not go away. As meaning can be neither fixed nor destroyed, literary language is forever suspended between the referential and the figural.

This book discusses writers and critics who related to the indeterminateness of literary language in a new and original fashion: by way of suspending

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the vehement struggle with referentiality and the resulting dialectical return of either meaning or its volatility. Heirs to both Sartre and Mallarmé, Roland Barthes, Maurice Blanchot, Albert Camus, and Marguerite Duras wrote and theorized a type of literary narratives, addressed here as exhausted, slow, and minimalist. This type of narrative borrowed from Sartre the conviction that literature and politics are not isolated endeavors, and from Mallarmé the goal, with a substantially modified strategy of achieving it, of weakening signification. Detailing the particular literary and historical circumstances under which the two diverging practices, Sartrean and Mallarméan, lost their incompatibility, this book suggests that all language is political and that even apparently self-involved, semantically deficient, and narratively minimal types of stories can carry substantial ethical and political weight. The premise of the political nature of literary language rests less on the conviction that language and literature always take place in concrete historical milieu, and that their relation to it, or refusal to assume one, inevitably generates political effects. What is more important than the belief that even art for its own sake, in spite of its apoliticism, is political, is the problematic nature of the prevailing understanding of the relationship between literary language and politics. Based on the myth of fixedness and semantic stability, language that serves as the foundation of political society, that is, conceptual language, is not stable, because like all language it oscillates between the referential and the figural semantic fields. As the political dimension of language cannot be limited to its referential aspect and separated from the unavoidable instability that defines all language, language is political precisely to the extent of being unstable. And literature is where this instability is most sharply brought into the open. As a privileged site of revealing the interplay between language's stability and instability, literature is political because it deliberately and systematically shapes the tension between the two semantic fields of language. Literature is political because it is sensitive to its fictionality and dependence on figural language, and because it exercises the workings of language and its indeterminateness in a rhetorically self-conscious fashion. When Paul de Man discussed Rousseau's discovery of mankind's "linguistic deceit" with respect to the possibility of government, he argued that literature is "condemned to being the truly political mode of discourse."² Literature is aware of how language works and self-aware in enacting it. Roland Barthes expressed a similar idea, claiming that "the 'truest' literature [la littérature la plus 'vraie']" is the one that uses its knowledge of language to explore "the *unreal reality* of language [la *réalité irréal*e du langage]": Literature, he proposed, is "*the very consciousness of the unreality of language . . . that tension of a consciousness*

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which is at once carried and limited by words, and which wields through them a power that is *both absolute and improbable*.²³

The war of writing

When conceptualizing the relationship between literature, politics, and ethics, this book keeps to the classical unity of time and place. The main focus is on France in the 1950s, and the writers who receive most attention are Roland Barthes, Maurice Blanchot, Albert Camus, and Marguerite Duras. The choice, although not fortuitous, does not suggest that these writers and critics formed a group, let alone that they composed a common program. In fact, with the exception of Blanchot and Duras in the late fifties, and again the late sixties, there was only modest contact among them. They devoted a substantial amount of writing to each other's works – especially Blanchot and Barthes – but there was very little collective effort and coordination. Neither is their association a generational issue. Although they were born within only eight years of each other – between 1907 (Blanchot) and 1915 (Barthes), with Camus, Duras, and Barthes within just three years – whereas Blanchot and Camus were already established figures by the early 1950s, Barthes and Duras, having written in the 1940s, were still awaiting their breakthroughs. The writers also came from different backgrounds. Camus and Duras came from impoverished families from the French colonies, and Blanchot and Barthes from a middle-class environment in provincial France; Barthes had training in classics, Blanchot in philosophy, and Camus and Duras had literary and journalistic ambitions. But despite this absence of instantly recognizable links, the loose set of ties that connects these writers does not discredit the relevance of what they had in common as public personae. If writers of varying personal histories, political backgrounds, and ideas about writing express, relatively independently, an analogous set of concerns, it is all the more reason to describe these concerns, as they reveal something important about their time and the urgency of their call. What Barthes, Blanchot, Camus, and Duras had in common was their critique of the genre of the novel, a penchant for a certain type of storytelling, and desire to be politically engaged while at the same time remaining writers of literature. In other words, all of them were in a dialogue with Sartre and wanted to recast his notion of committed literature in light of recent events.

Much changed for Sartre and those who challenged his take on the indeterminateness of literary language in the decade following his *What is*

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Literature? (1947), with its vigorous appeal to committed writing and renunciation of the Mallarméan approach as disengaged. The most crucial event, one that for many redefined their understanding of literature and the role of the writer, was the war in Algeria that took place between November 1, 1954 and March 19, 1962. The Algerian war, a “battle of writing,” as Michel Crouzet dubbed it, or, as Jean-François Sirinelli called it, a “war of petitions,” was both a decisive and a divisive event for the self-definition of many French writers and intellectuals.⁴ With the dream of French universalism finally disintegrating, the ensuing discussions about freedom, violence, and national identity produced surprising alliances (between the left and conservative Christians, for example) and rifts and separations (the famous discord between Camus and Sartre, or the making of Raymond Aron into a major polemicist on the more conservative side of the political spectrum). Political allegiances were rearranged again in 1956 after Nikita Khrushchev’s revelation of the crimes of Stalinism at a Communist Party congress and the Soviet invasion of Hungary later that year, undergoing further shifts (e.g., Sartre’s move towards Tiersmondism) and detachments (e.g., Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s distancing from the far left, and especially from Sartre).

With the exception of Camus, and slightly later Pierre Bourdieu, most French intellectuals, however, knew relatively little about Algeria first-hand or from extensive research. Neither did they perceive it as a problem. Personal experience and comprehensive knowledge were often thought to act as a restraint, preventing one, as the main line of Sartre’s reproaches against Camus went, from seeing the larger picture and endorsing historically necessary changes. Even the preference for political factions in Algeria and Algeria’s future directions were sometimes driven by this greater historical vision, as demonstrated by, for instance, the support for the National Liberation Front (FLN), with its younger progressive activists, over the Algerian National Movement (MNA), with its older, more conservative, and less revolutionary-leaning members. It was this dismissive attitude that led to Tony Judt labeling the postwar decade in France an “age of irresponsibility” during which everyone – except Camus and Aron, in Judt’s view – accepted the fact that they had to pick sides: left or right, East or West, pro- or anti-colonialism.⁵ Notwithstanding their perspective and depth of insight, nevertheless, for most French intellectuals – with perhaps the exception of those affiliated with the French Communist Party (PCF), which, as Danièle Joly insists, kept a dual and alibistic stance (illustrated by the PCF’s abstaining from a vote of confidence on Algeria in June 1956 while supporting the government’s proposal on “special

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powers” for the Minister-Resident in Algeria earlier that year) of being in favor of the French presence in Algeria but not supporting military intervention: being in favor of “French Union,” as the party put it, in which Algeria would not have independence but “liberty”⁶ – the Algerian war was a site of genuine political interests and engagements, serving as a vehicle for intellectuals’ self-conceptions and redefinitions, regardless of whether they argued for unconditional independence or only social, cultural, and political transformation.

This book engages in a conversation with historical events, but it is not primarily about the political views of the writers and critics that it examines. It is mainly about their ideas on literature. It describes how these writers and critics responded to historical events, not so much in terms of their political interventions, but in their fictional narratives and essays on literature. Interestingly, for them it was literature and writings on literature that became the focal point of major political contentions. Their position was shaped throughout the 1950s in response to Sartre’s growing insistence that even the most committed literature proved useless to deal with reality in any practical way, and hence had to be condemned.⁷ Sartre wanted to abandon literature altogether, and even though he ultimately was not able to do so, he was adamant in promoting concrete political acts in relation to which literature was relegated to an ever more inferior position, a diversion of attention, or, at best, a second-rate fellow traveler.

As Sartre was urging for a move from literature to politics in order to facilitate a more direct and effective critique of the French campaign in Algeria, popular writers within mainstream French culture who were in support of the state policy appealed to the power of literature to lend itself to the status quo and externalize prevalent values. Literature has always shown a remarkable ability to subvert the status quo. But it has perhaps even more often done the opposite, that is, it has reflected taken-for-granted beliefs and presented unquestioned values as natural. One of the central topoi – or, “myths,” as Barthes would say – of the second case, by which writers of more conservative stripes appealed to these spontaneous values during the Algerian war, was the figure of the paratrooper. Best exemplified by Jean Lartéguy’s bestselling *The Centurions* (1960), a novel about a group of paratroopers who, though alienated from French society after leaving Indochina, prove themselves and their devotion to France in Algeria, the figure of the paratrooper symbolized steadfastness to national values and functioned as a conduit of the view that the Algerian conflict was a defense of Western civilization. Although *paras*, as they came to be called, often went directly to Algeria from France’s humiliating 1954 defeat

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at Diên Biên Phu, Vietnam, they retained their heroic reputation and, as John Talbot showed, held an important place in French imagination as symbols of physical strength and high moral principles⁸ – strength, as Barthes points out, is often “mythified” by being given the moral “form of a duty”⁹ – despite attempts to debunk this vision as a quasi-fascist delusion. Although the central place of paratroopers in popular French imagination during the Algerian war was a blatant distortion of facts – Philip Dine underlines how paratroopers “dominated the news coverage of the conflict, in spite of the fact that they made up less than 5 per cent of the total French forces in Algeria”¹⁰ – this misrepresentation was in line with the deeply embedded evocation of the Maghreb as a place where the French naturally belonged: a Latin place, a Mediterranean culture of undeniably Roman origins.

Much of the response to the Algerian war in mainstream French literature and media was an expression of frustration at France’s loss of stature and identity. As suppressed memories of the Vichy regime, the defeat in Vietnam, the loss of Tunisia and Morocco, and the increasingly precarious situation in Algeria undermined France’s sense of national prominence, its blatant exclusion from international politics exacerbated this feeling of disappointment. France’s status as a non-nuclear power, the way it was kept out of the intelligence exchange loop between the US and the UK, and how it was sidelined from any political decisions on Germany were, among other humiliations – as these blows were perceived in France and which, as Irwin Wall details, France countered with calculated anti-American foreign policies¹¹ – both symptoms and consequences of the loss of grandeur. The US’ very critical stance on French involvement in Algeria, driven, as Matthew Connelly argues, by the concern that Algeria might become a Cold War battleground, only fueled the French complexes.¹² After the 1956 Suez crisis – with France feeling betrayed when Britain, under US pressure, rapidly withdrew from a joint French, British, and Israeli attack on Egypt, an operation that France joined with the goal of suppressing the potential spread of pan-Islamism espoused by Egyptian president Gamal Abdel Nasser into its holdings in Northern Africa – France decided to reassert its importance and independence. France would now induce a massive modernization of its industry, work towards developing atomic capability, and, most importantly, hold onto Algeria, as it was seen as a question of national identity and prestige.¹³

It was this old-fashioned sense of national identity and prestige that, together with its cultural articulation and reiteration in mainstream culture, was put into question by left-leaning intellectuals. What united

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otherwise diverse leftists against the predominant national sentiment was their opposition to axiomatic truths, cultural shortsightedness, and national myths. While for Christian critics, such as François Mauriac, the problem was not so much the tradition itself but its implementation – not too much tradition, but too little of it – for Barthes, Blanchot, Camus, and Duras the problem was more profound. Although these writers and critics lacked a unified political position – Camus was a moderate leftist whose views on Algeria were seen increasingly as conservative; for Blanchot the Algerian war continued his slow departure from a dubious prewar far-right agenda to his late 1960s leftist radicalism; Duras was a self-proclaimed communist operating outside the PCF; and Barthes was a progressively more politically engaged literary and cultural critic – what they had in common was a critique of their culture and its unquestioned values, and what differentiated them from more radical activists, such as Sartre, Francis Jeanson, and Frantz Fanon, was their rejection of the latter figures' unconditional endorsement of action.

The writers and critics that are examined in this book formulated their approach to literature and politics against the various national frustrations and the way they were culturally enacted, as well as against the radical views of those such as Sartre. They not only refused to use literature as a tool of agitation, whether one of opposing the status quo or reinforcing it, but also to abandon literature altogether in favor of direct political engagement. Not that they ignored the need for concrete political action. Their public involvement sometimes rivaled that of Sartre. Neither did they merely point to the obsolete nature of Sartre's conception of literature and its unsuitability to cope with the latest narrative forms. What bound them together was their attempt to readdress the notion of literary commitment while at the same time showing that Sartre's call to action was part of the problem it wished to rectify, not its solution. Their concern was that Sartre's rhetoric of work, projects, and action replicated what it wished to overcome. More was needed, they believed, and literature – a specific type of literature – was vital to the enterprise.

Literature and politics

The dominant view of literary engagement in France at the beginning of the Algerian war was still that of Sartre's *What is Literature?*, which stressed the obligation of prose literature to represent reality and communicate with a concern for clarity. What this utilitarian approach meant in the 1950s was that writers and critics who wanted to be politically committed

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needed to articulate an unambiguous opposition to mainstream culture. Mainstream French culture during the Algerian war was at the peak of repressed memory through which the Fifth Republic tried to suppress all past divisions (i.e., the Vichy regime) in the name of modernization and for the sake of a new beginning.¹⁴ France's rapid socio-economic transformation and soaring prosperity – which, as Tony Judt remarked, were surprisingly unaccounted for and often completely ignored by the intellectual left¹⁵ – were accompanied by a discourse of ahistoricity that enacted the state-induced modernization, facilitated erasures of both the past (Vichy) and the present (Algeria), and promoted a dehistoricized and form-driven art. An unequivocal opposition to this mainstream cultural trend was seen as paramount to any engaged response.

When during the course of the Algerian war Sartre, inspired by Francis Jeanson's unmitigated dedication to direct action, further radicalized his view of engagement, urging for a turn from literature to politics because even the most committed literature, he started to realize, averts our attention from real events in the present, he was not defending an entirely different set of principles than before. He still advocated action. Both at the present moment – political action as an instance of real and consequential public involvement – and before – committed literature as a means of awakening freedom and inciting action via a literary language that is *in actu*, directed outside of itself, towards reality and the future, instead of being contemplative and self-involved – the emphasis on action was the driving force of his conception of engagement. Except in this instance, this conception challenged the very existence of literature. According to Sartre's amended scenario of engagement, one becomes part of history not by writing fiction, but only by taking part in political action.¹⁶

Barthes, Blanchot, Camus, and Duras were not unsympathetic to the questions Sartre raised. They were neither against political action, nor did they think that literature could be a substitute for action. Their problem was Sartre's persistence in promoting categorical action, including violence, which stemmed from his unshakable conviction of the inevitable historical progress and individual's role in it. Others too, such as Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Claude Lefort, drew attention to the peculiarity of Sartre's mix of necessity and voluntarism and his reduction, as Howard Davis puts it, of all human relations to a conflict between consciousnesses and all historical activity to a voluntarism that bows to the inevitability of historical progress.¹⁷ What is intriguing about Sartre's views is that after the escalation of violence in the 1957 Battle of Algiers, a majority of the urban French public turned against the war and favored negotiations with the

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FLN, suggesting that in 1957 the nation was already opposed to violence and open to the idea of Algerian independence; a view supported by John Talbott, who shows that as of the following year 56 percent of the population supported withdrawal from the war, with the figure rising to 78 percent in April 1961 at the onset of negotiations with the FLN.¹⁸ Even though Sartre's resoluteness and devotion to militancy after 1957 – arguably shaped, at least in part, by his guilt over not getting engaged enough when the opportunity had presented itself previously (i.e., the Spanish Civil War and the Resistance) and by his fear of not missing the train of history again – were instrumental in shifting public opinion even more against the war, Sartre's explanations and theoretical justifications were often questionable. As James D. Le Sueur claimed, Sartre's expositions contributed to Algeria's "epistemological recolonization" after independence by influencing Algeria's leaders with political philosophy that, as Pierre Bourdieu added, was irresponsible because it did not fit Algeria's demographics and history.¹⁹

What Barthes, Blanchot, Camus, and Duras found objectionable about Sartre's argument for unconditional political action and against literature was the pragmatic evaluation and functional comparison of literature and politics. Indeed, at times of great emergencies literature interrupts itself in favor of action. But this interruption cannot be posited as literature's duty. Although there are moments in history that are more critical than others, and that is when literature gives way to action, there is never a time of absolute tranquility and inconsequentiality of action when all is resolved and when one can finally turn to literature. As there is always a need for social change, and thus for action rather than literature, the functional assessment of the two is predicated on the false assumption that literature and political action pursue the same goal with identical means. Barthes, Blanchot, Camus, and Duras do not suggest that there is a time for literature and a time for action, and that one needs to find a balance between the two, or know when one takes precedence over the other. Their critical and fictional writings, which were never bereft of political considerations, unsettle the dichotomy between literary intransitivity and direct political engagement. In this respect their position is less extreme than that of Georges Bataille, who proclaimed that literature is, in fact, guilty – and not only when measured against political, ethical, and social concerns that he deemed utilitarian, but essentially and inevitably.²⁰ For Bataille, the purpose of literature, as well as any other fundamental and not merely utilitarian human activity, such as eroticism, ritual, and sacrifice, is to resist practicality and preserve the distance from anything that could be

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transformed into utility. If Barthes, Blanchot, Camus, and Duras complied neither with the rhetoric of duty nor with the paradigm of guilt, it was because for them the choice was not between responsible politics and guilty literature, between only utility or only a resistance to utility. Theirs was a conception of literature that was political, but that did politics differently – as *literature*.

The main conviction behind Barthes, Blanchot, Camus, and Duras's contributions to the issue of literary commitment is that true change, the aim of all engagement, cannot rely solely on politics. One surely needs to get involved in political activities, but while keeping to them, a more fundamental, even if less conspicuous, change has to take place, because without it all politics falls on barren ground. This change is not a mere transformation of the imaginary. Even though much of what these authors offered in their literary and essayistic writings in the 1950s are either fictional responses to reality or critical reflections on similar responses by others, these writings regard the changes in the imaginary as inseparable from the changes in reality. Literature not only introduces new ways of perceiving reality. It also transfigures what can be thought, felt, and imagined. Literature is not a matter of political activism and the constitution of political subjects. Literature and politics are driven by demands that emerge only in their respective realms, with the role of the former being a catalyst of new perceptual forms. By augmenting ethical and political sensibilities, literature opens different and innovative ways for conceiving the self and its interaction with others. Only rarely, though, are these new directions descriptive and prescriptive in an unequivocal fashion. Arguably they even cannot be, because in such a case they would be expressed in a language burdened with conventional meanings and tied to the old mode of perception. Instead of depicting a positively described counter-order to the status quo, literature fashions alternatives by suspending established orders of meaning and signification. What binds together Barthes, Blanchot, Camus, and Duras is the particular form of this suspension. The type of literature they theorize and practice suspends the order of signification by creating a literature that repels any new hierarchies because it undermines the transmission of meaning. Against literature of action and denotation defended by Sartre, these writers propose literature that is engaged because its mode of writing destabilizes the dominant conception of the self and the concomitant valorization of action.

When Pavel Zemánek, a character from Milan Kundera's novel *The Joke* (1967), insists that to turn away from politics is not an apolitical gesture, he talks about how young people do not want to sit at endless political