

“What Can Literature Do?”¹

Simone de Beauvoir

Translated by Chris Fleming

Abstract: In this article, Simone de Beauvoir defends a conception of literature as a kind of unveiling of something that exists outside itself, a mode of action which reveals certain truths about the world. What we call “literature” is eminently capable of grasping the world—a world which de Beauvoir, following Jean-Paul Sartre, conceives of as a “detotalized totality”; one that is real and independent of us, which exists for all, but is only graspable through our own projects and our perspectives. Yet far from keeping us stranded within our unique subjectivities, literature restores to subjective experience its generality; it allows us to “taste” the world as it exists for others. We can communicate through literature because in it our world, our languages, and our projects overlap. Ultimately, for de Beauvoir, literature is what allows us to see the world as others see it—all the while remaining, irreducibly, ourselves.

1. Translator’s Note: This essay was originally presented as a talk at the Mutualité Theatre in Paris on 9th December, 1964, published as *Que peut la littérature?*, ed. Yves Buin (Paris: Union Générale d’Éditions, 1965). Organised by the Union of Communist Students (UEC), the topic was—as the volume suggests—“What can literature do?”, and was billed as a debate between proponents of “committed literature” and the “new novel.” The debate pitted existentialists Jean-Paul Sartre (1905–1980), Simone de Beauvoir (1908–1986), and the communist author and agitator Jorge Semprun (1923–2011) against apologists for what might broadly be called “uncommitted literature”: the editor and writer Yves Berger (1931–2004), and two advocates of the new novel—Jean-Pierre Faye (1925–) and Jean Ricardou (1932–2016). All page references in the notes below are to the volume *Que peut la littérature?*, unless otherwise noted. Thanks to Miriam Thompson and Alice Caffarel-Cayron for invaluable assistance with this translation. Sincere thanks also to Sylvie Le Bon de Beauvoir, for granting rights to this piece and her trust—hopefully not misplaced—in the translator.

Well, I do not need to tell you that my conception of literature is not the same as Ricardou's.² For me, it is an activity that is carried out by humans, for humans, in order to unveil the world to them. This unveiling is an action.

However, Ricardou touched on an issue that I find very interesting, an issue I wanted to talk to you about—the relationship between literature and information. It is a critical issue today, when there are modes of conveying information to which Semprun was alluding earlier, and which are so successful.³

I actually think that he dismissed them a bit too quickly because there may be—I am not saying there is, but there may be—a use of television and radio which would be entirely legitimate, a use which would function to inform people very widely.

And there are, in any case, already, whole areas of research in sociology, psychology, and comparative history, that broadly inform the public about the world we live in. And the fact is that, as Semprun also said, there is today a great desire from the public for this kind of work; the public is more or less turning away from works that are truly literary.⁴

Is this the fault of literary works as they are today or does literature no longer have a place in our world? This is what I would like to look at with you; it will be a way of answering, in short, the question: "What can literature do?"

Doubt briefly entered my mind, last year in particular, when I read a book that many of you may have read and that I find truly remarkable, called *The Children of Sánchez*.

2. T/N: Ricardou's opening position in this colloquium was to defer the question of "what can literature do?" by first objecting that such a question already assumed that we know what literature *is*. He pursues the issue via Roland Barthes' (1915–1980) distinction between the *écrivain* and the *écrivain*. The *écrivain* is the writer who thinks of writing as a means of communication and writing as the medium by which such information is communicated; he calls such writers "informers," and their writing "information" (Ricardou, 51). The *écrivain*, on the other hand, does not write to communicate something; language, for them, is not a vehicle through which information is transmitted, but the primary material itself. It is only for this latter kind of writing that Ricardou reserves the term "literature" (Ricardou, 51–52).

3. T/N: Semprun asks questions about the future viability of literature *itself*, given the increasing popularity of "audio-visual" media (45).

4. T/N: "In the domain of the book itself, the proportion of works requiring a minimum of effort, of the active participation of the reader, tends to increase constantly" (Semprun, 45).

It is an investigation undertaken by an American sociologist, in the slums of Mexico City. For a period of eight years—at different intervals, and for long periods of time—this sociologist lived with a family and recorded the stories that a father and his four children told about their life. These stories overlapped and contradicted each other; it was not at all a straightforward narrative, but a story with several dimensions, as certain novelists have tried and sometimes even managed to produce. This information, therefore, went far beyond most sociological work, which usually offers only one point of view. There was a great amount of material for the psychoanalyst, the sociologist, and the ethnologist here, and for anyone else interested in the world and in the people who live in it.

So I asked myself: "If we multiply works of this kind—which is technically possible to do—if there were a very large number of such works that revealed the secrets of cities, the diverse milieus, the different parts of the world, would literature still have a role to play?"

And I answered, yes. If the world were a given totality, if it were a being, something immobilized that we could easily examine and skim over as we would a map of the world, if we could see the totality of the world in its unity, what then would be important? Only increasing more and more our objective knowledge of the world, to understand it more completely.

But in the philosophy called existentialism to which I subscribe, the world is, as Sartre said, a detotalized totality [*une totalité détota­lisée*].

What does this mean? It means that, on the one hand, there is a world that is indeed the same for everyone; but, on the other hand, we are all situated in relation to it, this situation necessarily including our past, our class, our condition, our projects; in short, everything that constitutes our individuality.

And each situation encompasses the whole world in one way or another. It can do so even through an absence of knowledge; I do not know what is going on, for example, in a city in India today; and that is part of my condition of being a French person living in Paris, the condition in which I exist.

So to implicitly encompass the world does not mean one knows it but that one reflects it, that one summarizes it or *expresses* it in the way Leibniz spoke of *expressing* the world.⁵

And yet this unity of the world that we express is this singularity, this detotalization of the points of view that we adopt about the world. However, the expression "point of view" is a little idealist, the situations in which

5. T/N: Reference here undoubtedly to G. W. Leibniz's *La Monadologie* (1714).

we find ourselves in a rapport [*rapport*] with the world are precisely what defines what is most essential in the human condition and in the human relation [*rapport*] to the world.

It is here that literature will find its justification and its meaning because these situations are not closed off from one another. We are not monads; each situation is open to all others, and it is open to the world which is nothing but the way all these situations whirl around and envelop one another.

So we can communicate; we can communicate through this world that is a totality, although detotalized, this world that exists for all of us and that allows us to agree on what green or red are, for example.

We can understand one another and we can communicate. I am not one of those who believe that there is no communication in everyday life. I think we communicate when we act together for certain ends or when we speak.

I think that at this very moment we are communicating; I think I say what I say and that is what you hear; there is present a true relationship that is forging itself through language: language is opaque but it is also a vehicle of meaning shared by all and accessible to all.

However, at the heart of this communication there is a separation that remains irreducible. I who speak to you am not in the same situation as you who listens; and none of those who listen to me are in the same situation as their neighbor, who does not come here with the same past or with the same intentions or with the same culture. Everything is different; all these situations which, in a certain way, open up onto and communicate with each other, nevertheless possess something incommunicable according to the means of the moment: whether they be oral presentation, discussion, or debate.

There is an irreducibility in the singularity of our situation. But, at the same time, there is a communication in this very separation. What I am saying is that I am a subject that says "I," I am the only subject for myself that says "I," and it is the same for each of you.

I will die a death that is absolutely unique to me, but it is the same for each of you. There is a unique flavour to each person's life, which, in a way, no one else can know. But it is the same for each of us.

And I think that literature presents us with the opportunity to go beyond other modes of communication and will permit us to communicate in that which otherwise separates us.

Literature is—if it is authentic—a means of overcoming separation by affirming it. It does this because when I read a book, a book that matters to

me, someone speaks to me; the author is part of their book. Literature only begins at the moment when I hear a singular voice.

In fact, we attach much more importance to language than we sometimes say; there is no literature if there is not a voice—that is to say, language that bears the mark of someone. You need a language that bears the mark of someone. It takes a style, a tone, a technique, an art, an invention—it can be something quite different depending on the writer; the author must impose their presence on me; and when they impose on me their presence, at the same time, they impose their world on me.

There has been a lot of discussion in recent years about the writer's relationship to reality. It was discussed at the meeting in Leningrad that was mentioned earlier. And we wondered, for example, if Robbe-Grillet, who distances himself from reality, comes more or less closer to it than Balzac, who thinks he is transmitting reality in an objective manner.

I find the question to be badly formulated; put in this way, the question does not admit of an answer because reality is not a fixed being—it is a becoming. It is, I repeat, a whirl of singular experiences which envelop and overlap while still remaining separate.

Therefore it is impossible for a writer to reduce reality to a frozen, finished spectacle, which the writer could show in its totality. Each of us captures only a moment: a partial truth. A partial truth is an illusion if it is taken to be the whole truth. But if a partial truth takes itself for what it is, well, it is a truth and it enriches the one to whom it is communicated.

In the past, we used to talk about a worldview. Well, it is an expression that is idealist, and embarrassing because of that, as if the relation of the human being to the world was simply to represent it in one's own mind, to see it from one angle or another.

But if we speak of situations, we can take up the idea of this singularity of the world offered to each writer, and by each writer. It is obvious that the writer manifests the world as it envelops her, as she implicitly summarizes it; her world.

And in my opinion, it is only the very naive readers, or children, who believe that through a book they jump into reality. When I read *Father Goriot*, I know very well that I do not walk in Paris as it was at the time of Balzac; I walk in a novel by Balzac, in Balzac's universe.

And so, when I read Stendhal, it is not Fabrice's Italy that I see; it is Stendhal's Italy.

Basically, it does not matter that the author imagines herself to be transmitting reality as it is, or that she is more critical and realize that she is in

a situation in the world, and that she gives us the world as the world gives itself to her. Anyway, as reader, what matters to me is to be fascinated by a singular world that overlaps with mine and yet is different from mine.

This raises the question of identification. There is a tendency in today's literature to refuse identification with the character, and more radically, to reject even the character itself.

But I also find this discussion pointless because, in any case, whether there is a character or not, for reading to take place, I must identify with someone. I must identify with the author; I must enter her world and her world must become mine.

That is the essential difference between literature and information. When I read *The Children of Sánchez*, I stay at home, in my room, in this moment, at my age, with Paris all around me; and Mexico City is far away with its slums and with the children who live there; and I take an interest in them, I add them to my universe, but I do not change my/the universe.

Whereas Kafka, Balzac and Robbe-Grillet ask and convince me to live, at least for a moment, in the heart of another world. And that is the miracle of literature, and what distinguishes it from information: that an *other* truth becomes mine without ceasing to be other. I renounce my own "I" in favour of the speaker; and yet I remain myself.

It is an intermingling constantly begun and constantly undone, and it is the only form of communication which is able to give me what cannot be communicated, and to be able to give me the taste of another life. I am thrown into a world that has its own values, its own colours; I do not annex it for myself, it remains separate from mine, and yet it exists for me; and it exists for others who are separate from it and with whom I also communicate, through books, in the deepest parts of themselves.

This is why Proust was right to think that literature is the privileged site of inter-subjectivity.

There is a literary work, in my opinion, as soon as a writer is able to render visible and impose a truth: the truth of her relationship to the world; the truth of her world. But we must understand what these words mean: to have something to say is not to possess an object that one might carry in a bag, then spread out on the table and look for words to describe it.

The relationship is not given because the world is not given; nor is the writer a given; the writer is not a being, but an existent, one that transcends itself, that has a praxis, and that lives in time. In this world that is not given, in the face of a man who is not given, the relation is obviously not a given

either; it has to be discovered. Before uncovering it for others, the author has to discover it; and that is why every literary work is essentially a search.

On this, Lukács agrees, saying that the novelistic hero is a problematic being in search of his values;⁶ and Robbe-Grillet—to return to him—who said last year in Leningrad, "I write in order to know why I write."

Novel, autobiography, and essay—there is no worthwhile literary work that is not this search. Critics say willingly, when they think they are smarter than the writer whose book they read: "Mr.—or Ms.—Such-and-Such was completely wrong, they completely failed; they wanted to produce this book, but they produced that book."

Well, the critic is lucky to have known in advance what the writer wanted to do because they did not want to produce this book or that book; they did not know which book they were going to write; they simply had a line of inquiry and the result, for them, is always something unexpected. And that is why the distinction between content and form is out of date; they are inseparable.

On that, I do not agree with Semprun when he says that the search is only about form and that content is imposed.⁷ If there were definite content, which could be packaged in words as we pack chocolates in a box, then the search for form would be of no interest.

In scientific works, the author already has her content in mind; she has her index cards, she has her notes, she writes a history book or a maths book; I mean, she is not pursuing anything other than a clear and simple arrangement of the things she wants to say, and which already exist in her mind, on the paper, in a draft state that must then be clarified, and that's all.

There are also merchants of literature, of false literature, who have a ready-made story at hand, and who then choose a fashionable packaging that they wrap this story in. But that's not literature either.

When there is an authentic work where the author tries to find herself, the research is global. We cannot distinguish the way of telling from what is told, because the way of telling is the very rhythm of research, it is the way of defining it and it is the way of living it.

6. T/N: The reference here is almost certainly to Georg Lukács, *The Theory of the Novel: A Historico-Philosophical Essay on the Forms of Great Epic Literature*, trans. Anna Bostock (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1971).

7. T/N: "Research, too, can only be formal. The content is not an object of research: it is imposed on us. Or by the world, or by our ideas, our personal obsessions, about the world" (Semprun, 31).

Kafka's *Metamorphosis* and *The Trial* are not symbols under some veneer, but the actual means by which Kafka strives to realize for himself and for the reader the truth of his experience.

And on this point I would like to address the following remark to Mr. Ricardou; you are very precise in your terminology, but when you refer to "literature," in Kafka's sense, we do not know, from your quote, whether he spoke of literature in the sense that you take it or in the sense that we take it.⁸ He says he lives for literature, but Sartre would say the same thing; and for Sartre, literature is not merely the exercise of language in the way you have defined it. Nothing entitles you to claim Kafka for yourself. I think it is something else than what you take it to be.

In any case, when it comes to the way Kafka tells a story, or Proust's sentences, or Joyce's inner monologue, well, in all these cases it is absolutely inseparable; the material that they use, the way they use it, and the research they conduct, and which constitutes (Proust says this explicitly but it is also clearly the case for all the others) their literary work.

Ok. As long as there is research and discovery there is a truth manifested and there is a literary work.

That said, it does not mean that any research and any discovery holds the same interest for us; yes, each one of us expresses the whole world—but he expresses it implicitly; it can be in the mode of ignorance, through mystifications it can be mystified/mystifying, it can be alienated. There are many ways of expressing the world, some of which allow no explicit revelation of a truth.

And it is here that I will take up the idea of committed literature; the committed individual in his own time, the one who tries to engage history through action or through indignation or revolt, has much richer and much deeper ties to the world than the one who withdraws from the world into an ivory tower.

A writer can only interest us in what really interests her. If the ambit of her interests is narrow and petty, she will offer to us a petty universe; she establishes an extremely constricted and poor form of communication with us.

8. T/N: In his essay, Ricardou (58–59) refers to two statements by Kafka: "Everything that is not literature bores me and I hate it"; and "My job is unbearable to me because it conflicts with my only desire and my only calling, which is literature. Since I am nothing but literature and can and want to be nothing else, my job will never take possession of me, it may, however, shatter me completely, and this is by no means a remote possibility." Franz Kafka, *The Diaries: 1910–1923* (New York: Schocken, [1948] 1976), 230–231.

I am not going to dwell on committed literature—we have talked enough about it already; and Semprun mentioned it earlier in a way that I almost completely agree with.

In closing, I would like to speak to you about what interests me today and about what literature can do for me, as a writer. It is also a way of answering the question, "What can literature do?"

I said earlier that the world was detotalized, but our own experience is also detotalized. It is a totalization still in progress but which is never completed and which escapes us. Since consciousness is always both overcoming and negation, we fail to live any moment in its fullness, and we always remain on the other side of misfortune, on the other side of joy.

An emotion or a feeling or a sadness or a joy lasts for a time, but regardless of the time it lasts, it dies; we are incapable of sustaining these emotions forever.

On the other hand—and this is even more radical—no single emotion and no thought can encompass all of our experience; sadness, joy, and ambiguity are the contradictions which constitute the truth of our human condition. That escapes our lived experience.

And we must not believe that memory is able to make miracles; memory itself fails to bring back the moment, to give it its fullness, and memory also fails to unify the diversity of moments.

There is only one way of driving something to its extreme, to the anguish of its death, for example, or of abandonment, or the joy of having succeeded, or the exultation that a young man can experience at the sight of flowering hawthorns:⁹ only literature can do justice to this absolute presence of the moment, to this eternity of the moment that will have always been.

And it alone can bring together, in a work that is a totality, these hawthorns and the death of a grandmother. It alone can manage to reconcile all these irreconcilable moments of a human experience.

Words thus fight against time, against death; but they also fight against separation because they have the power—I think this is one of their most obvious and necessary functions—to restore to us what we experience that is singular to us: the passage of time, the particular flavour of our life, of death, of loneliness—its generality.

Every writer has been brought to literature by a very different path, but I think that no one would write if he had, in one way or another, suffered separation and was not looking, in one way or another, for a way to break it.

9. T/N: The allusions here—to hawthorns and death—is almost certainly to volume three of Marcel Proust's *À la recherche du temps perdu*, *Le Côté de Guermentes*.

As for me, I know that personally, in those moments of collective joy, in the moments of joyous communication—for example, I felt this during the Liberation—I have absolutely no desire to write; at such a moment, literature seems to me quite useless.

Literature is impossible—not useless, but impossible—when one falls into absolute despair, since to despair is to no longer believe that there is some remedy. This is a truism, but the opposite of this truism is not one, or at least it is not recognized as such.

If one can never write in absolute despair, one can say reciprocally that there can be no truly despairing literature. But that is much less commonly accepted.

Actually, if one expresses anguish it is because one thinks that by this expression it takes on a meaning, it asserts a certain *raison d'être*: it is that we still believe in communication, therefore in people, in their fraternity.

And that, if I speak about it, it is because I was much criticised, in the name of socialist optimism, for the end of *Force of Circumstance* and the theme of my last book.¹⁰ I was told: “The anxiety provoked by the passage of time, the horror of death, these are all well and good, and you have every right to feel those, it is very honourable; but that is your business ... do not talk about it!” I received letters from people of the left who told me that.

I do not see why, under the pretext that we have faith in the future—or that we believe that one day there will be a socialist society—that we should therefore silence those parts of our lives, of all lives, which involve failure and misfortune. Or I find that a certain socialist optimism is strikingly similar to the technocratic optimism that prevails today, which calls misery abundance and uses the future as an alibi.

If literature seeks to overcome separation at the point at which it seems the most insurmountable, it must speak of anguish, loneliness, and death, because these are precisely situations that lock us most radically into our singularity. We need to know and understand that these experiences are also those of all other human beings.

Language reintegrates us into the human community. Misfortune that finds words to express itself is no longer a kind of radical exclusion; it becomes less intolerable. We must talk about failure, scandal, death, not to evoke despair in our readers, but, on the contrary, to try to save them from it.

10. T/N: See, Simone de Beauvoir, *Force of Circumstance*, trans. Richard Howard (London: Penguin, 1968). Cf. de Beauvoir, *La Force des Choses* (Paris: Gallimard, 1963).

Each person is constituted by all people; and one only comes to understand oneself through what others reveal of themselves and what is revealed of oneself in others.

And I think this is what literature can and must give. It must make those aspects of ourselves that are most opaque transparent. There are other tasks, there are other endeavours: action, technique, politics; but in any case they are destined for humans, and they become absurd, even odious, if they are taken as an end in themselves, and if they cut themselves off from humankind.

To safeguard against technocracies and against bureaucracies what is truly human in humankind—to deliver the world to us in its human dimension, that is to say, as it is revealed to individuals who are at the same time interrelated and separate—this, I believe, is the task of literature, and what makes it irreplaceable.