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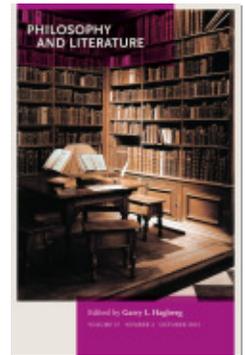
Exhausted Literature: Work, Action, and the Dilemmas of  
Literary Commitment

Daniel Just

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DANIEL JUST

## EXHAUSTED LITERATURE: WORK, ACTION, AND THE DILEMMAS OF LITERARY COMMITMENT

**Abstract.** This article examines Jean-Paul Sartre's concept of committed literature as a manifestation of the tendency in Western modernity of conceiving literature as a form of praxis anchored in work. Discussing an alternative idea of engagement formulated by Maurice Blanchot, Roland Barthes, and Albert Camus, the essay develops a notion of exhausted literature that questions the prioritization of work and action in predominant models of commitment. Exhaustion is proposed as a politically and ethically motivated literary strategy of suspending the group-forming morality which, as a product of modern valorization of work and action, has accompanied literature of verisimilitude, activity, and oriented time.

WORK IN WESTERN MODERNITY is production of more than is needed, and regardless of whether the surplus is regulated by the state or reinvested by individual entrepreneurs, the social space that modern work brings to being is inseparable from alienated labor. Paradoxically, work has been also the preferred means for curing alienation. A crucial component of political ideologies, work has played a central role in various totalitarianisms, their social ideas, and political organizations. Fascism, for example, posited work as the essence of man, and with the vision of community in fusion, implemented work as a tool of self-appropriation, collective strength, and expulsion of otherness.

Work retained its systemic significance after World War II as well. Although not a vehicle of collective defense against finitude anymore, work was still the trusted answer to alienation. And not only in the Eastern bloc, where the doctrinal status of work was crucial in the project

of building socialism. Work also remained the fundamental cultural value and principle of social life in the West. Key to the plan of postwar reconstruction, work was adopted as a shield against both fascism and communism, as a catalyst of progress, and as a means of overcoming the past and moving to the future. As Adorno suggests, work became an ideological device and instrument of self-imposed amnesia, which, however, led not to an overcoming of the past, but to its permanence and a systemic continuity of fascism in late capitalist societies.<sup>1</sup> In the postwar years, as Werner Hamacher quips, work was not “worked-through,” but merely “worked-off.”<sup>2</sup>

In this scenario of modern life as a *vita activa* governed by work, non-work does not seem to have a place. Non-work is incompatible with the ideology of labor, the intensifying historical tendency of erasing the labor/leisure division, as well as with the current trend of functionalizing leisure and activating the recreants. However, non-work and practices that belong to the sphere of non-work have not been completely eradicated. Although expelled from modern life, non-work has retreated to, among other places, literature. Or, more precisely, a specific type of literature: a literature that operates under different principles than those associated with active life and that displays a distinct relation to work, action, and activity.

## I

Within the framework of modern life as active life, literature emerges as a type of work that fosters the social ideal of the self as an active agent. Perhaps most powerfully within this framework, Jean-Paul Sartre’s *What Is Literature?* defines literature as an active “quest for truth” that “utilizes language.”<sup>3</sup> According to Sartre, literature is, and must stay, practical because writers work with words that refer to something beyond themselves, and that are therefore a “particular moment of action that has no meaning outside of it” (*WL*, p. 21). Knowing the words before writing them down and only “controlling the sketching of the signs [le tracé des signes]” (p. 41), writers use literature as a medium of their projection to the future.

Because of this power to uproot from the given and offer an outline for the future, literature has a duty to communicate with the concern for clarity. As writers’ premeditated projections, words act on readers’ freedom, and have to be clear and effective in order to elicit their active response. Sartre stresses that only active writing—one that is engaged

and engaging—belongs to its time. In many respects, writing for Sartre *is* time, because even though, as a form of projection, it is directed at the future, it happens in the present and has to remain rooted in it. As with Sartre's legendary bananas, which, as he notes, taste the best when eaten directly from a tree (*WL*, p. 74), writing has to be both created and consumed immediately, without temporal delay and geographical displacement. Writing is truly committed only when it contains a direct rapport with reality and where it is heading.

When endorsing the primary dimension of time for the act of writing, Sartre's postwar texts oscillate between the present and the future. Although literature is supposed to give an account of the present—to the extent of describing everything in a perpetual commentary in which, as Denis Hollier observes, words take place of the present and reporting becomes, ironically, the event itself—the value of the present depends on the future.<sup>4</sup> At one point Sartre even declares that “future is here, more present than the present.”<sup>5</sup> This oscillation between the present and the future, and the emphasis on the indissoluble bond between the two, stems from Sartre's insistence on a present moment that is not isolated and hence meaningless in its autonomy.

This insistence appears in his work from very early on. Even in his first literary essays, Sartre supplements his attack on narrative omnipresence and its role in François Mauriac's novels as a technique that violates narrative perspective by instituting a “privileged observer” with an equally skeptical attitude to the use of the past perfect.<sup>6</sup> As a foil to narrative omnipresence and its mutilation of space, the past perfect mutilates time because, by cutting the past from the present, it eliminates the future. American novelists, such as William Faulkner, and “Americanized” writers, such as Albert Camus, were Sartre's primary examples of this literary practice of decapitating narrative time and depriving it of the dimension of intentional actions—that is, the dimension of freedom and the future.<sup>7</sup> For Sartre, engaged writing, a writing that belongs to its time, has to take place in the present; but it is also a writing of the future, because it shuns away from the present that is absorbed in itself, disconnected from the future, and lacking in direction. In Sartre's portrayal, committed literature is one such use of denotative language in which the writer's act of projection integrates the present and the future with the aspiration of generating further action and projection on the side of the reader.

For Sartre, commitment has nothing to do with the image of literature as an altruistic act of a writer who sacrifices himself so as to incite social

change. Committed literature is a redundant concept, a pleonasm that states what literature is as a form of art. Since literature *is* an engaged type of text, committed literature takes responsibility for what constitutes it as an art. Whenever literature refuses this responsibility, the result is a literature of noncommunication, which strictly speaking is not literature anymore, because it betrays its essence. Reviving traditional notions of referentiality and intentionality, Sartre's concept of commitment rejects the crisis of the sign announced by Saussure and Mallarmé in favor of literature as communication of meaning. The conceptual underpinning of this politically motivated preference is unambiguous: meaning, action, intention, language that is not preoccupied with itself, and consciousness that is in the act and that does not reflect on itself. There is no space for intimacy here, whether of the self or of language, because man, according to Sartre's existentialist theory of consciousness, is always outside of himself, his consciousness always of something other than himself, and his ego a pure transcendence that, on its own, is empty.<sup>8</sup>

Language plays the same active role in this self-transcending movement as the self. Emulating the same motion that drives the self, speaking and writing have to be constantly in the act of stepping outside of themselves and their entrenchment in the present moment, and move toward the world and the future. As a form of action, language is obliged to avoid intimacy, accept the permanent movement away from itself, and advance active agency. Only narcissistic and decadent language—a “bourgeois” language, in Sartre's parlance—leaps back on itself and gives the self the solace of wrapping itself comfortably in its ego. Against the autism and inactivity of such a language, Sartre postulates the openness and energy of committed literature: an active language that does not listen to itself and that is always *in actu*, in the middle of an interminable movement forward.

In Sartre's model of engagement, work, activity, and the vision of the self as a resolute individual find their symbolic representation in committed literature, which, in turn, finds the privileged expression in the genre of the novel. Although conventionally a genre of acculturation and a symbol of the bourgeois social project—bourgeois subjectivity as universal and the world of work as an apprenticeship in the formation of the self, as Georg Lukács showed<sup>9</sup>—for Sartre the novel becomes the genre of committed literature par excellence, because only novels can provide synthesis between the subject and the object, unite the three dimensions of time, and establish a historical whole. But however much Sartre wants the novel to shed its bourgeois disposition of instituting

work as a conservative value of self-restraint by seeking to turn it into a site of work as a progressive value of change—condemning, for example, the bourgeois novel’s retrospective narration that emphasizes the calm and distance of both the narrator and character from their chaotic past and turbulent youth—his reappropriation of this genre for the purposes of literary commitment does not evade what the novel shares with the bourgeois project—its nemesis, laziness.

The cult of work, purposeful deeds, and goal-oriented action, rather than assisting Sartre in breaking away from bourgeois values, make him a continuator of the tradition that he longs to dismantle. The transformative power of the present and the future that Sartre opposes to the once-tumultuous but now safely overcome past featured in bourgeois novels does not beget as radical a transformation of novelistic principles as Sartre believes. The emphasis on action, projects, and the future challenges the outdated bourgeois calm, only to replace it with the historically more appropriate time of rapid change. Instead of overcoming the old tradition, Sartre extends it by modifying its constituent elements, adjusting them to the contemporary social condition of accelerating time and work consuming an ever larger part of life. Although developed as a critical response to the postwar social and political order, Sartre’s notion of commitment, together with its rhetoric of projects, work, and activity, reinforces the status of the present as something that has shrunk to almost nothing: an always ahead-of-itself place of work and future-oriented action.

## II

Describing the Paris Commune as an event that subverted the state at the moment when capital expanded to its imperialist phase, Kristin Ross presents Arthur Rimbaud’s *A Season in Hell* (1873) as a literary complement to the Communards’ refusal of work, productivity, and the state. Addressing Rimbaud’s prose poem as a *récit*, Ross opposes it to the novel: whereas the novel describes action from a distance, and thereby as a genre identifies with the state by epitomizing bourgeois values of work and calm meditation on the past, Rimbaud’s *récit* embraces an attitude of laziness that allows it to capture the present in its immediacy. According to Ross, the *récit* undermines all forms of hierarchical power because the type of laziness it embraces is not a total indolence and absence of action, but a kind of “absolute motion [that] escapes from the pull of gravity,” hiding an “activity not subordinated to certain necessities.”<sup>10</sup>

In the early nineteen-fifties, in the aftermath of Sartre's call for a literature of stronger and more clearly defined commitments, Maurice Blanchot returns to the genre of the *récit*. As Rimbaud before him, Blanchot is interested in the potential of the *récit* to bypass representation and detached contemplation, and enact the event itself. In Blanchot's version of the *récit*, this genre's laziness—or worklessness (*désœuvrement*), as he prefers to call it—nonetheless undergoes a significant modification. Retaining the *récit's* connection to reality, as well as its generic difference from the novel, Blanchot adapts the *récit* to the changed historical situation and refashions it as a literary genre and a critical concept that contest the dominance of work and action in contemporary society.

Blanchot defines the *récit* as an antinovelistic mode of narration that employs feeble characters, austere style, and inhibited tempo of storytelling. Instead of straightforward depiction, realist detail, instrumental use of language, and characters' self-conception and active projection to the future—all cornerstones of Sartre's notion of committed literature—the narrative foundation of the *récit*, as Blanchot envisions it, is dramatic slowness, stylistic asceticism, exhausted characters, and simplicity of plot. Not much happens in the *récit*, and this paucity of action is carried out by unusually weak characters and recorded in an equally deactivated language. In this mode of writing, saying less—and saying it more slowly and wearily—is not a manifestation of the proverbial “less is more.”

Unlike traditional minimalism, in which small forms are devised to either display the unrepresentability of certain events or, via understatement and litotes, disclose the more in the less (as Hemingway's metaphor of literature suggests: an iceberg of which only a modest part is visible, but that small part reveals the richness underneath) “lessness” in the *récit* does not hide anything under the surface. Avoiding rhetorical figures and stylistic embellishments, the *récit's* slow and cautious manner of narrating offers a language that, instead of expressing a meaning or drawing attention to what is left unsaid, is just *there*, in its inactivity and preinstrumental lack of expressiveness.

Formulated as a response to Sartre's conception of commitment and its emphasis on strong individuality, action, and instrumental use of language, Blanchot postulates the *récit* as a narrative strategy of not establishing an individual identity. Blanchot, as his essay “Idle Speech” illustrates, targets the heroism and authenticity with which Sartre endows the speech of a resolute individual who is determined to transmit a message.<sup>11</sup> Blanchot identifies the *récit* as an alternative to the novelistic image of the self as a strong individual. Following his earlier portrayal

of the *récit* in “The Song of the Sirens”—in which the *récit* is opposed to the novel on the basis of its refutation of the novel’s drive to completion, construction of robust selfhood, and mastery of the story’s content, and thus rejection of what Blanchot describes as the “frivolity of a fiction [that] says nothing but what is credible and familiar”<sup>12</sup>—the emphasis in “Idle Speech” is on the *récit*’s frail narrative voice and characters’ difficulty in exerting their voices.

In the emptiness of words and the absence of things to which they refer, the stylistic and compositional asceticism of the *récit* upholds a language in which the self does not achieve the fullness of a speaking subject capable of generating discourse. In the *récit*, the self is weakened, flattened, and depersonalized. In the slow literary language that draws attention to the fact that words are being spoken and that constantly falls into silence as it tries to speak, the self is emptied out, stripped of its activities, and divested of its identity.

Blanchot’s main difficulty with Sartre’s notion of commitment is the danger inherent in its propagation of narratives that wish to stabilize meaning and communicate it to others. For Blanchot—as well as for others at the time, such as Roland Barthes, whose *Writing Degree Zero* (1953) was, together with Blanchot’s “Literature and the Right to Death” (1948) and the articles collected in *The Space of Literature* (1955), among the most systematic responses to Sartre—the problem with such a notion is its political and ethical effect. According to Barthes (but the statement could have been as easily made by Blanchot), a committed novel promotes a literary image of action and active self that transforms “life into destiny, memory into a useful act, and duration into an oriented and meaningful time.”<sup>13</sup> This transformation has potentially dire consequences because it implies intransigence, self-involved values, and self-righteous actions. Against this predicament of imposing a given order on life and others, Blanchot and Barthes present a different kind of literature, one in which the emphasis on weakness, exhaustion, and slowness inhibits action and undermines characters as well-demarcated individuals.

While the immediate literary effect of the devices championed by Blanchot and Barthes is inhibition of characters’ actions and obstruction of the appropriative movement of language, Blanchot and Barthes are interested in implications of the suspended action and the self beyond the confines of the text. Static syntax, weak characters, and repetitive vocabulary that appear in the modes of writing theorized by Blanchot and Barthes hinder the process of reading and immobilize readers’

appropriative movement toward the story. Unlike in “impoverished literature,” however—a concept developed by Leo Bersani and Ulysse Dutoit with regard to Samuel Beckett<sup>14</sup>—slowness and exhaustion in the literature advocated by Blanchot and Barthes preclude any ardent struggle with language. This type of literature is not preoccupied with staging a breakdown of meaning and “boring one hole after another into language,” as Beckett once described his technique.<sup>15</sup> Utilizing literary devices neither for their positive function of denotation nor for their negating faculty, this literature deactivates language and the self in a slow, controlled, and sustained manner that prevents meaning and action from being dialectically reintroduced. Fundamentally exhausted, the type of literature introduced by Blanchot and Barthes arrests movement, withdraws from work and action, and by draining the energy out of the dialectic of positing and opposing meaning, foregrounds the present moment and exposes the mediacy of language itself.

In Blanchot’s and Barthes’s imaginations—their projects remain largely feats of theoretical imagination that are often betrayed, as I have demonstrated elsewhere, by their inability to find actual narratives that would substantiate their claims—the  *récit* and *writing degree zero* represent a literature that rejects work, action, and the transmission of meaning, and instead tries to create a simple effect of presence.<sup>16</sup> Interpretation of meaning does not always do justice to literary works because it disregards what Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht calls “presence effect”—experience of a sudden emergence of the materiality of the thing that comes as a result of silent perception of things and “the desire to be ‘quiet for a moment’,” which Gumbrecht associates with Heidegger’s concept of *Gelassenheit* (serenity, composure, capacity to let things be).<sup>17</sup>

The type of literature introduced by Blanchot and Barthes creates a similar effect. But here the effect of presence is inextricable from language. For these writers, meaning and presence cannot be opposed, because language and silence form an indissoluble pair. In this type of literature, the effect of presence has nothing to do with the fullness of the present envisaged by Sartre as an excess of energy that spills over into the future, or with the present of Heidegger’s unveiling (*alêtheia*) in which art brings out into the open the revelation of Being. Nothing can be brought to a disclosure here, as no positively given truth can transpire in the threadbare presence this exhausted and austere literature creates. In this essentially “non-dialectical experience of language,” as Blanchot describes it, literary language, while not unaware of *différance*, exhausts it and renders it inoperative.<sup>18</sup> A discourse based neither on

negations nor on constative or performative utterances—acting as if it could either fix meaning or coincide with itself and render itself present in the act of self-performance—exhausted literature presents a language that is prepositing, preinstrumental, and preperformative, and which generates a presence that is indeterminate and thin to the point of near inexistence.

Unlike for Rimbaud, for Blanchot what makes up the texture of the *récit* is not the burst of a pure transformational energy. While Rimbaud opposes the *récit* and the novel on account of presence and absence of this energy, and while Sartre keeps the same perspective but delegates this energy not to the lazy *récit* but to the industrious novel, in Blanchot's *récit* calm and unrest are not unyielding opposites. If for Rimbaud the determining principle of engaged literature is youthful energy and non-work, and for Sartre youthful energy and work, for Blanchot and Barthes it is calm and exhaustion. Calm and exhaustion for these writers do not imply distance from the object of narration, as they do for Sartre, for whom they are attributes of the bourgeois novel. Defiant of the novel as a genre of acculturation and mastery over reality, the modes of writing presented by Blanchot and Barthes undo the opposition between non-work, youth, and energy, on the one hand, and work, adulthood, and calm responsibility, on the other. Valorizing non-work, calm, and absence of energy, this type of literature undermines the dialectic of work, action, and the self.

### III

“There is no literature,” Barthes declares at the beginning of *Writing Degree Zero*, “without an ethic of language [morale du langage]” (*WDZ*, p. 6). Sartre would not dispute this statement, if it meant that for a text to be literary it must bestow an ethic on the language it uses. For Sartre, literature must make an effort to create ethical language. But Barthes's declaration is not prescriptive. Leaving his statement deliberately equivocal, Barthes leads the readers of *Writing Degree Zero* to identify the Sartrean preoccupations of his book and to disentangle them only slowly from its anti-Sartrean suppositions. It soon becomes clear that Barthes does not share the view of literature as a medium in which language has an ethic only when it communicates meaning. In *Writing Degree Zero*, ethics still implies a relation to others, but this relation is deemed to take place in literature regardless of whether its language communicates clear messages. Barthes proposes not only that

all literature produces an ethic of language. He insists that the ethical relation appears most prominently in a literature of noncommunication in which language emerges as an empty medium and a means that is largely divorced from content.

In one of his late interviews, Barthes talks about the attitude of laziness and idleness and its disappearance from modern life. He argues that modern society, which is obsessed with work and activity, “does not get along very well with neutral attitudes, and it finds laziness intolerable.”<sup>19</sup> Barthes admits that laziness can be a very trivial and absentminded attitude, but adds that it can be also the most thoughtful one. He opposes the banal boredom of the stereotypical laziness to a laziness of “‘not deciding’, of ‘being there,’ of doing nothing ‘in the sense of ‘moving nothing’, determining nothing” (GV, p. 342). He finds the poetic definition of this particular kind of idleness and laziness in the simplicity of this Zen poem: “Sitting peacefully doing nothing,/ Springtime is coming,/ and the grass grows all by itself.” Barthes draws attention to the poem’s anacoluthon. The break in the poem’s grammatical construction makes the one who is sitting not the subject of the sentence—since it is not springtime that is sitting—a fact that Barthes regards as indicative of the situation of idleness and literature’s role in facilitating it. He concludes that in idleness, and in the literature that expresses it, the subject is “dispossessed of his consistency as a subject”: “He is decentered, unable even to say ‘I.’ That would be true idleness. To be able, at certain moments, to no longer have to say ‘I’” (GV, p. 342).

Postulating the notions of exhaustion, weakness, and idleness as nonpossessive states that neutralize the violence of positing, work, and appropriation, Blanchot and Barthes theorize the *récit* and *writing degree zero* as modes of writing that are ethical because by exhausting language, they exhaust subjectivity. As withdrawal from work and action, literary exhaustion empties the self of its content and lessens its subjective drives. At the same time, it also encumbers the dynamic, which threatens to turn the suspension of language and the self into what Leo Bersani interprets as libidinal investment of the ego that violently enjoys the moment when signification collapses. This situation revives the narcissistic self-containment that defined its existence before the acquisition of language.<sup>20</sup> Creating neither intimacy into which the self could retreat nor an opportunity for it to engross itself in the experience of destruction of its self-contained identity, exhaustion, weakness, and idleness undercut the self and take away the ground for its immediate reconstitution.

For Blanchot and Barthes, literary exhaustion is ethical because, instead of the return to the self, it generates a greater connectedness to the outside. As Blanchot notes, in exhausted literature language does not engage in work, “language [parole] here does not speak anymore, but is,” suspended in “the tension of an infinite beginning.”<sup>21</sup> Driven not by intentionality—which, as Jacques Derrida reminds us, entails a *telos*, authority, and the power to perform—but by performative weakness, language in this type of literature purposely displays its impersonality and powerlessness.<sup>22</sup> What weakens the self, and thus is ethical, is not an act of positing language as personal, but the exposure of language’s impersonality. Unlike Emmanuel Levinas, who in *Totality and Infinity* (1961) conceives of ethical relation as a personal bond—that is, in absolute terms (Good) because it is always directed at a third observer (God)—Blanchot and Barthes contend that no third party can rescue ethical relation from its uncertainty, as one cannot replace the I of speech with the Other and make the Other speak in the first person. Ethics cannot be only prescriptive. What is ethical is the specificity of the relation in which, as Blanchot maintains in his answer to Levinas, both entities are unhinged, not just the Other.<sup>23</sup> This double dissymmetry is experienced in the slowness, weariness, and impersonality of exhausted literature.

Presenting exhausted literature as a means of recovering the preindividual experience of sharing language, Blanchot and Barthes propose it as a privileged narrative codification of ethical intersubjectivity. In the semantic thinness and phenomenological blankness of exhausted literature, the frail and weary words deplete the self and divest it of its subjective—narcissistic, sadistic, and masochistic—drives. The self is no longer a carved-out interior. It is also not destroyed in a self-shattering *jouissance*, or disseminated into the outside world. Instead, it is thinned out, flattened, and exposed to other equally weakened and flattened selves. Unlike the novel, which remains attached to the symbolic role of representing the monadic kind of individuality, exhausted literature depersonalizes the individual and replaces it with a nondialectical intersubjectivity.

Blanchot and Barthes suggest, in a twist on Mikhail Bakhtin, that what is truly dialogic can be never found in the novel. Dialogism functions on ethical grounds, not when it gives the other person a role that is as important as the self. It is ethical when it rids the self of the drives that lead to the all-embracing struggle for recognition. The notion of exhausted literature purports that words cannot be turned into swords;

it also demands that words be weakened and disarmed. Only in a slow language that leaps back onto itself and that at each moment begins anew can words move toward an affirmation that is not a mere exchange of one set of values for another. Guided by different principles than work, action, and the dialectic of positing and negating, exhausted literature is a form of engagement that rejects all valuation.

Although initially directed against Sartre's conception of literary engagement, exhausted literature also runs against the dominant view in recent literary theory, which considers only stories rich in descriptive detail to be ethically and politically committed. A somewhat unseemly successor to Sartre, this position insists on the priority of the novel in forming our ethical sensibilities. Only the genre of the novel, critics such as Martha Nussbaum and Wayne Booth claim, can record the historical detail, emotional richness, and the dilemmas of human action that are necessary for an engaged response. Only the fullness of description and complexity of situations offered in novels—the subtle ethical conflicts depicted by, for example, Charles Dickens, Henry James, Pierre Choderlos de Laclos, and Vladimir Nabokov—allow readers to follow, as Nussbaum phrases it, the “relevant activities of searching and feeling, especially feeling concerning their own possibilities as well as those of the characters,” and, by making them “reflect and feel about what might otherwise be too distant for feeling,” extend their experiences and propose specific norms of behavior.<sup>24</sup>

By emulating what Booth calls “moral sensitivity”—“not so much,” as he explains, “the sensitivity of any one character (because sometimes there is no dramatized character who exhibits special moral insight) but, rather, that of the author who insists that I *see* what these people are doing to each other”—novelistic prose carries out its ultimate ethical value in “educating in full human perceptiveness.”<sup>25</sup> According to this scenario, even literature that does not promote concrete ethical standards can still make ethical requests on readers, as for instance by forcing them to resist the depicted values. But all these ideas in recent literary theory rest on the condition that the literature in question is one of representation, depiction, and explanation.

While Booth's and Nussbaum's model of literary ethics takes for granted the stability of literary expression, thereby, like Sartre, disclaiming the crisis of the sign and entrusting readers with the work of abstracting general morals from given situations, the notion of exhausted literature displays the instability of the sign as well as of the moment in which it takes place. In exhausted literature, the ethical does not

manifest itself in the particularity of situations and norms of behavior, as exhaustion undermines referentiality and depiction of emotion. The ethical here is in the language that refuses to work, and whose primary function does not lie in portraying situations that raise ethical questions and point to their solutions. Blanchot and Barthes suggest that literary ethics cannot be limited to the described ethical dilemmas and statements articulated in propositional discourse. Language, style, and form are equally important, if not more so, as vehicles of the ethical in literature. The notion of exhausted literature consigns the question of literary ethics to a domain outside of the mimetic principle and shows that the type of personhood other than individualized interiority can materialize only in a particular literary aesthetic—an aesthetic that accentuates the story's performative powerlessness and withdrawal from action.

#### IV

Growing out of Sartre's postwar effort to reconcile his literary and political ambitions, and continued in Blanchot's and Barthes's reactions to Sartre in the late forties and early fifties, discussions about committed literature were revived again in 1954, thanks to a major event that erupted that year and that further complicated and polarized the debate by getting other writers, such as Albert Camus, involved. The event in question was the Algerian war. In response to the expanding French military deployment in Algeria, Sartre intensified his political campaign and increasingly emphasized that literature is never engaged enough, because it takes us away from real events in the present moment. Although Sartre in the early nineteen-fifties had already lost confidence in the writer's redemptive mission, as he admitted shortly after the end of the Algerian war in his autobiographical *Words* (1963), the war in Algeria was what finally convinced him that literature, even when at its most committed, is deactivating. Literature, by turning events into images, makes these images a source of aesthetic pleasure.

The issue for Sartre was, again, work and action. As in *What Is Literature?* (1947), the programmatic *Search for a Method* a decade later was permeated with the rhetoric of projects, actions, and counteractions as attributes of praxis that were directed against idleness, silence, and lack of concreteness. "Man defines himself by his project," Sartre wrote in *Search for a Method*, and "this material being perpetually goes beyond the condition which is made for him, and reveals and determines his

situation by transcending it in order to objectify himself—by work, action, and gesture.”<sup>26</sup> Project and action make humankind historical, and the current historical task for humanity, according to Sartre, was “to bring closer the moment when History will have *only one meaning*.”<sup>27</sup> In this quest, literature was now clearly marked as inferior to any other form of action and lacked any legitimacy in the unjust world.

For Sartre, Camus in the course of the Algerian war became the epitome of political nonengagement and a literature of passivity, ahistoricity, and self-involvement. Camus’s own position vis-à-vis Sartre’s political convictions was widely known following the well-publicized break between the two in 1952.<sup>28</sup> Although not entirely different from Blanchot and Barthes, Camus was more direct in criticizing Sartre for being a blind activist, arguing that Sartre’s politics of action, strength, and self-certainty was detached from the immediate reality and driven by an abstract notion of history.

According to Camus, the privileged place that Sartre gave to work and action in his political philosophy implied judgments of acts—including literary undertakings—by their service to historical progress, the outcome of which Sartre was confident of knowing. Similarly to Blanchot and Barthes, Camus criticized the self-righteousness of Sartre’s rhetoric and the force of his theoretical justification as an existential stance that was both ethically and politically contentious since it entailed violence—for Camus, literal violence, and for Blanchot and Barthes, symbolic violence of the struggle for recognition. In the realm of ethics, Camus saw Sartre’s approach as problematic because it justified misjudgments: in cases when one was wrong for the right reasons, Sartre believed, one was right to be wrong. And in the realm of politics, as Camus stated in his 1958 preface to *Algerian Reports*, the emphasis on action nourished the dialectic of resentment in which the oppressed turned into victimizers of their former oppressors.<sup>29</sup>

Although the dispute between Camus and Sartre regarding engagement and action took the form of a political argument over history, justice, and rebellion, literature, as I detail elsewhere, became ever more essential as a platform in Camus’s continuing disagreement with Sartre.<sup>30</sup> As had Blanchot and Barthes, Camus remained involved politically throughout the Algerian war. He brought low-profile interventions—mostly in defense of individual Algerian rebels—even after his formal retreat from public involvement in matters regarding Algeria. In the aftermath of the December 1957 Stockholm colloquium, asked pointedly by a young Algerian why he did not speak out against injustices in Algeria

as he did against those in Eastern Europe, Camus agreed that justice was important, but ending terror was even more so—a position that gained notoriety after his impromptu statement that he would defend his mother before defending justice.<sup>31</sup> Camus's controversial decision to withdraw from all political discussions was, he insisted, inevitable, so as not to fuel the conflict's violence by taking sides. After this withdrawal, and as a counterpart to his ongoing private political interventions, literature took on a vital role for Camus as a mode of engagement. For Camus, as for Blanchot and Barthes, literature became central to his critique of the political paradigm propounded by Sartre—a paradigm that measured engagement by the amount of work and action through which it was expressed, and which it generated.

Blanchot, Barthes, and Camus do not stipulate exhaustion, weakness, and blankness as applicable universally to all forms of engagements. They present them as principles of a specifically literary type of engagement. While on the narrative level the most obvious manifestation of this engagement is ethical, just as the aesthetic of exhausted literature cannot be divorced from its ethics, its ethics cannot be separated from its politics. As an ethical stance of weakness that undermines the drive to dominate others and reduce them to the sphere of one's self-sufficiency, the narrative principles of exhaustion, weakness, and blankness promote a political conception of commonality that defuses the divisiveness of identity. For Blanchot, Barthes, and Camus, exhaustion is as much ethical as it is political because, as a literary response to the social and cultural validation of work, action, and strong individuality, it hampers the violence intrinsic in the struggle for recognition to which this validation gravitates.

The conjunction of the aesthetic, the ethical, and the political in the notion of exhausted literature unsettles the dichotomy between literary intransitivity and direct political engagement. This notion does not bring the two together in an attempt to encode political engagement into a message communicated in the language of denotation. Such attempts, as Barthes concludes in his reading of Sartre's novels, tend to reproduce conventional syntax, recitative tone, and the time of the narrator, and are thus merely "nominal commitments" (*WZ*, p. 83) because they fabricate a homogeneous time that "burdens the unfolding of History with a parasitical unity" (p. 85).

What is more, this notion does not separate political causes and literary practices. It does not illustrate the aporia of ethics and politics that tells us that ethics needs to reject the political in order not to

compromise the ethical, and that politics needs to curb the ethical in order to be able to pursue political goals. Instead, it exemplifies Simon Critchley's more recent statement that "ethics without politics is empty, [and] politics without ethics is blind."<sup>32</sup> In exhausted literature, the political is neither opposed to the ethical nor relegated to a defense of particular policies and systems of administration. The ethical here is political not in spite of, but because of interrupting both the ethical (situational ethics articulated in propositional language and functioning as prescription to action) and the political (specific agenda determined by the political choices delimited by the existing system). The notion of exhausted literature suggests that the political gesture of interruption can be made only in literature.

Despite the fact that literature that upholds a radical ethical vision inexorably runs the risk of abdicating actual political solutions and dissolving into an all-caring aimlessness, an act of delegating all such visions *en bloc* to the province of a utopian ethics effectively depoliticizes something that is not always apolitical. Although the notion of exhausted literature remains ambiguous from the point of view of concrete politics because it offers no positively defined alternatives, this indeterminateness is not apolitical. Blanchot, Barthes, and Camus argue that it is exactly this indeterminateness that makes literature committed. In exhausted literature, the political is not in positing and counter-positing. The political here is in disordering the established hierarchy both in literature (the normative system of representation) and in reality (the current mode of being).

What comes with this disordering, as Jacques Rancière argues, is not a negation of everything, but a reconfiguration of the relationship between the visible, the sayable, and the thinkable.<sup>33</sup> Although exhausted literature undoes the hierarchy of representation while offering nothing concrete in its place, the political dimension of this literature lies exactly in this perceptual disturbance that resists signification—what Rancière calls a product of negotiation between "the readability of the message that threatens to destroy the sensible form of art" and "the radical uncanniness that threatens to destroy all political meaning."<sup>34</sup> The political and the ethical in this type of literature consist of suspending the act of positing and, ipso facto, in suspending act and action as such. Blanchot, Barthes, and Camus suggest that exhaustion interrupts linguistic instrumentality and, by revealing positing as a violent performative act, lays bare both the mediacy of language and—since language is what people share as their irrevocable bond as human beings—the mediacy of the

social. As in a general strike in which, as Werner Hamacher argues, the social is exposed *tout court*, in “the sheer mediacy of all social relations,” the abstention from work, action, and the dialectic of negation in exhausted literature introduces a history governed by principles other than positing, work, and action.<sup>35</sup>

## V

The destruction of oriented time, which Sartre sees as the effect of the capitalist industrialization of information on contemporary fiction, is not always reactionary. Even less so is it a sign of ideological compliance with the status quo by those who do not share Sartre’s view. Although the type of story envisioned by Blanchot, Barthes, and Camus—as well as others in that period, such as Marguerite Duras, for instance—undermines oriented time and carries the detail and intricacy of reality only weakly, this response to Sartre’s model of commitment is not a symptom of an apolitical turn to stylistic formalism with no critical distance from the politics of modernization and ahistorical timelessness that, as Kristin Ross has shown, dominated mainstream French culture in the 1950s.<sup>36</sup> Rather than a sign of withdrawal from politics, an indication of a naive belief in an ahistorical present, or, as Fredric Jameson insists, a correlate of society with the triumph of individualism, the notion of exhausted literature is an attempt to repel the forces of history and engage critically with both the past and the present.<sup>37</sup> Exhausted literature’s apparent disengagement is its distinctive form of engagement.

Formulated in reaction to postwar social and political reality, the literature of non-work and non-action is a prototype of narration that undermines the group-forming morality that accompanies narratives driven by verisimilitude, action, closure, and oriented time. Unlike stories that concede to these principles—hence moralizing the depicted reality, as Hayden White has demonstrated, even when presenting themselves as stories of factuality and historical objectivity—exhausted literature does not pose a single morality.<sup>38</sup> Blanchot, Barthes, and Camus deem the propositional discourse of representation questionable because it augments the impulse to judge the depicted events. As Camus stressed in his Nobel Prize speech in December 1957, writers are “obliged to understand rather than to judge.”<sup>39</sup> Blanchot echoed this statement four months later when he criticized writers who are “informed about everything and judge everything immediately,” and postulated a “new situation in which the writer” sees himself as “reduced to powerlessness

and simplicity.” According to Blanchot, “when the writer today becomes involved in politics, he is not yet involved with politics but only with this new, difficult-to-see relationship that literature and language want to awaken in contact with public presence.”<sup>40</sup>

Blanchot, Barthes, and Camus propose the literary exhaustion of representation, time, and the character as a deterrent to any single morality, because it prevents the audience from being drawn together as a group united by a common perspective on the described events. Exhausted literature does not foster collective identity founded on a unifying memory and common history. Instead, it promotes a purely negative form of commonality that resists both fusion and oppositional relational structures, and that commonality is based neither on positivity nor on difference, as nothing positively given, not even difference, can arise from exhaustion. The all-encompassing literary exhaustion—exhaustion of the signification of the text, referentiality of the objects in the world, as well as the subjectivity of the character, the writer, and the reader—introduces a relational mode that circumvents the image of subjectivity based on self-enclosure and appropriative relation to the outside. Exhausted literature shows that what takes place in the emptiness of language before the advent of meaning and in the blankness of subjectivity before the appearance of the self is a nonaggressive, nonappropriative, and nonfused type of interconnectivity. Drawing attention to this interconnectivity, according to Blanchot, Barthes, and Camus, is a precondition for any fundamental social and political change.

The underlying tenet of rethinking literary commitment and of the social role of literature in nineteen-fifties France was the questioning of the concept of life as *vita activa*. For Blanchot, Barthes, and Camus, Sartre’s concept of committed literature was part of the historical tendency of privileging work and action as organizing principles of social life, and a manifestation of the implementation of these principles in literature. Slowness, emptiness, and worklessness replaced Sartre’s rhetoric of projects, action, and the struggle for recognition. In order to resist the functionalization that befell literature and transformed it into a form of praxis anchored in work, these writers asked literature to destabilize the status of productive work and offer itself as a literature of expressive thinness, emasculated agency, and weak subjectivity. Indeed, this weakness, emptiness, and absorption in the present without the future was adamantly criticized by Sartre in favor of the active language of communication.

But unlike for Sartre, for the proponents of exhausted literature the futureless present does not imply an excess of presence, and thus nausea caused by its self-absorption and meaninglessness. Instead, it solicits a bare, plain, and minimal present in which the dissolved psychic energy allows for a new composition of relations.<sup>41</sup> Exhausted literature is not concerned with searching for political alternatives and producing coherent effects that would facilitate such a search. Similarly to Theodor Adorno, who in his own critique of Sartre defended a literature that educates the audience “to a new attitude, that would be distanced, thoughtful, experimental, the reverse of illusory empathy and identification,” exhausted literature is concerned with what it can do, not as a “socially useful labor,” but as literature.<sup>42</sup>

Blanchot, Barthes, and Camus devised exhausted literature as a symbolic representation of the relational regime of a de-interiorized selfhood that is interlaced with the world and with others. Positing withdrawal from work, action, and signification as literature’s way of generating this increased interconnectedness, these writers invent a literature that makes it impossible to personalize existence. Paradoxically, this was also Sartre’s goal. Although meant to strengthen subjectivity, Sartre’s concept of commitment promotes depersonalization as well. Presupposing consciousness that is always in the middle of action, and thus outside of itself, Sartre postulates personalization as a futile attempt to escape into the artificial shell of the self.

Since, in Sartre’s theory, as Denis Hollier notes, “nothing of man escapes commitment, but on condition that consciousness itself absolutely escapes the human,” the ego’s unavoidable engagement in the world allows for its deactivation, thereby making engagement indistinguishable from depersonalization.<sup>43</sup> It is this correlation to which the defenders of exhaustion draw attention. But Blanchot, Barthes, and Camus do not merely point out that the opposition between deactivation and commitment falls apart as consciousness dissipates into flimsiness and personalized self turns into subjective impersonality. They argue for a particular way of reaching the indivisibility of commitment and depersonalization. Against Sartre, their dictum of no self-enclosed intimacy proposes that worklessness becomes a form of engagement only when it suspends the self-involvement inherent in the social valuation of work and action.

1. See Theodor Adorno, "Was bedeutet: Aufarbeitung der Vergangenheit" (1959), *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 10, ed. Rolf Tiedemann (Frankfurt-on-Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1977), p. 555; and Theodor Adorno, *Minima Moralia: Reflections on a Damaged Life*, trans. E. F. N. Jephcott (London: Verso, 2005 [1951]), pp. 106–7, 144. Elsewhere Adorno argues that work plays a central role in cultivating the ideal of hardness as the correct type of personality, which he associates with fascism and the turning of people as self-determined beings into an inert material "willing to treat others as an amorphous mass," the most recent manifestation of which he finds in the obsession with progress and technology. "There is something exaggerated, irrational, pathogenic in the present-day relationship with technology," Adorno writes, because work, progress, and technology, as means to ends, become fetishized, and the end—"a life of human dignity"—"concealed and removed from the consciousness of people." Theodor Adorno, "Education After Auschwitz" (1966), in Theodor Adorno, *Can One Live After Auschwitz? A Philosophical Reader*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003), pp. 26, 29.
2. Werner Hamacher, "Working Through Working," *Modernism/Modernity* 3, no. 1 (1996): 25.
3. *What Is Literature?* Quoted in Jean-Paul Sartre, *Literature and Existentialism*, trans. Bernard Frechtman (Secaucus: Citadel Press, 1949 [1947]), p. 12 (italics in original); hereafter abbreviated *WL*.
4. Denis Hollier, *The Politics of Prose: Essay on Sartre*, trans. Jeffrey Mehlman (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986 [1982]), p. 83.
5. Jean-Paul Sartre, *Saint Genet: Actor and Martyr*, trans. Bernard Frechtman (New York: Pantheon Books, 1963 [1952]), p. 598.
6. Jean-Paul Sartre, "François Mauriac and Freedom," in *Literary and Philosophical Essays*, trans. Annette Michelson (London: Rider and Company, 1955), p. 23.
7. See Jean-Paul Sartre, "On *The Sound and the Fury*: Time in the Work of Faulkner" and "Camus's *The Outsider*," in Sartre, *Literary and Philosophical Essays*.
8. Jean-Paul Sartre, *The Transcendence of the Ego: An Existentialist Theory of Consciousness*, trans. Forrest Williams and Robert Kirkpatrick (New York: Noonday Press, 1957 [1936]), pp. 48–49.
9. Georg Lukács, *The Theory of the Novel*, trans. Anna Bostock (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1971 [1920]), pp. 132–43.
10. Kristin Ross, *The Emergence of Social Space: Rimbaud and the Paris Commune* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988), p. 54.
11. Maurice Blanchot, "Idle Speech" (1963), in *Friendship*, trans. Elizabeth Rottenberg (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997 [1971]), pp. 121–22.
12. Maurice Blanchot, "The Song of the Sirens" (1954), in *The Book to Come*, trans. Charlotte Mandell (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003 [1959]), p. 6.
13. Roland Barthes, *Writing Degree Zero*, trans. Annette Lavers and Colin Smith (New York: Hill and Wang, 1968 [1953]), p. 39; hereafter abbreviated *WDZ*.
14. Leo Bersani and Ulysse Dutoit, *Arts of Impoverishment: Beckett, Rothko, Resnais* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993).

15. Samuel Beckett, "German Letter" (1937), in *Disjecta: Miscellaneous Writings and a Dramatic Fragment*, ed. Ruby Cohn (London: Calder Publications, 1983), p. 52 (translation modified).
16. See Daniel Just, "The Politics of the Novel and Maurice Blanchot's Theory of the Récit, 1954–1964," *French Forum*, 33, no. 1–2 (2008); Daniel Just, "Against the Novel: Meaning and History in Roland Barthes's *Le degré zéro de l'écriture*," *New Literary History*, 38, no. 2 (2007).
17. Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht, *Production of Presence: What Meaning Cannot Convey* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004), p. 143.
18. Maurice Blanchot, "Forgetting, Unreason" (1961), in *The Infinite Conversation*, trans. Susan Hanson (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993 [1969]), p. 201.
19. Roland Barthes, "Dare to Be Lazy" (1979), in *The Grain of the Voice: Interviews 1962–1980*, trans. Linda Coverdale (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), p. 343; hereafter abbreviated *GV*.
20. See Leo Bersani, *The Freudian Body: Psychoanalysis and Art* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), pp. 114–15; Bersani and Dutoit, *Arts of Impoverishment*, pp. 6–7.
21. Maurice Blanchot, *The Space of Literature*, trans. Ann Smock (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1982 [1955]), pp. 27, 153.
22. Jacques Derrida, "Afterword: Toward an Ethic of Discussion," in *Limited Inc*, trans. Samuel Weber and Jeffrey Mehlman (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1988), pp. 121–22. In another text, Derrida describes speech acts as messianic and promissory types of performances: as soon as I speak, I am promising because "believe me" is immediately in play. Jacques Derrida, "Remarks on Deconstruction and Pragmatism" (1996), in Chantal Mouffe, ed., *Deconstruction and Pragmatism* (New York: Routledge, 1999), p. 82. In yet another text, Derrida argues that if this performative promising is not to be taken for an expression of authority (of promising) and conventions (contexts of legitimization of speech acts), it has to be driven by a "performative powerlessness." Jacques Derrida, "Performative Powerlessness: A Response to Simon Critchley," *Constellations* 7, no. 4 (2000): 467.
23. Maurice Blanchot, "The Relation of the Third Kind" (1962), in *The Infinite Conversation*, trans. Susan Hanson (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993 [1969]), p. 70.
24. Martha C. Nussbaum, *Love's Knowledge: Essays on Philosophy and Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), pp. 46–47.
25. Wayne C. Booth, *The Company We Keep: An Ethics of Fiction* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), pp. 287–88 (*italics in original*).
26. Jean-Paul Sartre, *Search for a Method*, trans. Hazel E. Barnes (New York: Vintage Books, 1968 [1957]), p. 150.
27. Sartre, *Search for a Method*, p. 90 (*italics in original*).
28. For a detailed discussion of this polemic, see Debarati Sanyal, "Broken Engagements," *Yale French Studies* 98 (2000).

29. Albert Camus, "Preface to Algerian Reports" (1958), in *Resistance, Rebellion, and Death: Essays*, trans. Justin O'Brian (New York: Vintage Books, 1995), p. 117.
30. Daniel Just, "From Guilt to Shame: Albert Camus and Literature's Ethical Response to Politics," *MLN: Modern Language Notes* 125, no. 4 (2010); Daniel Just, "Literature and Ethics: History, Memory, and Cultural Identity in Albert Camus's *Le Premier Homme*," *Modern Language Review* 105, no.1 (2010).
31. The incident has been widely commented upon. It happened in Stockholm on December 12, 1957, two days after Camus received the Nobel Prize—not, as some have claimed, in Uppsala, where, before delivering his lecture, "The Artist and His Time," Camus's talk with local students contained no political questions. In Stockholm, what was supposed to be a discussion with students about literature quickly turned into a heated argument over Algeria. A text of the exchange was published in *Le Monde* on December 14 and approved by Camus, with minor adjustments concerning a statement about freedom of the French press, in a December 17 letter to *Le Monde*. See Herbert R. Lottman, *Albert Camus: A Biography* (New York: George Braziller, 1980), pp. 618–19, 725n27.
32. Simon Critchley, *Infinitely Demanding: Ethics of Commitment, Politics of Resistance* (London: Verso, 2007), p. 13.
33. According to Rancière, literature's political role lies in its ability to recarve [*redécouper*] the relationship between the visible, the sayable, and the thinkable without immediately substituting new hierarchies for the old ones. See Jacques Rancière, *The Flesh of Words: The Politics of Writing*, trans. Charlotte Mandell (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004 [1998]), pp. 94–112.
34. Jacques Rancière, "The Janus-Face of Politicized Art," in *The Politics of Aesthetics*, trans. Gabriel Rockhill (London: Continuum, 2004), p. 63.
35. Werner Hamacher, "Afformative, Strike," *Cardozo Law Review* 13, no. 4 (1991): 1149.
36. Kristin Ross, *Fast Cars, Clean Bodies: Decolonization and the Reordering of French Culture* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1996), pp. 4–11.
37. Fredric Jameson, *The Prison-House of Language* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1972), p. 158.
38. Hayden White, "The Value of Narrativity in the Representation of Reality," *Critical Inquiry* 7, no. 1 (1980): 26.
39. Albert Camus, "Nobel Banquet Speech" (1957), in *Nobel Writers on Writing*, ed. Ottar G. Draugsvold (Jefferson: McFarland & Co., 2000), p. 92.
40. Maurice Blanchot, "The Power and the Glory" (1958), in *The Book to Come*, p. 248.
41. More recent works by Leo Bersani are instructive in this regard. They not only offer an important revision of Bersani's earlier emphasis on self-shattering *jouissance* and self-interested investment in the aesthetic domain. They also develop a model of nonsubjective interiority and nonantagonistic relational regime in conjunction with the art of ascetic expressiveness, representational unfixeness, and calm openness that, at least in some respects, resembles exhausted literature. See Leo Bersani and Ulysse Dutoit, *Forms of Being: Cinema, Aesthetics, Subjectivity* (London: British Film Institute, 2004); Leo

Bersani, "Psychoanalysis and the Aesthetic Subject," *Critical Inquiry* 32, no. 2 (2006); and Leo Bersani and Adam Phillips, *Intimacies* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008).

42. Theodor Adorno, "Commitment" (1962), *New Left Review* 87–88 (1974): 80. Elsewhere Adorno argues that "to the extent to which art makes a mockery of honest, socially useful labor, there is something to be said in its favor." Theodor Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, trans. C. Lenhardt (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1984 [1970]), p. 359.

43. Denis Hollier, *Absent without Leave: French Literature under the Threat of War*, trans. Catherine Porter (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997 [1993]), p. 156.