

"PEGASUS AT THE PLOUGH" OR "SORRY, THIS WRITING IS ENGAGED"

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It does not matter what it was she read
(some phony modern poem that was said
In English Lit to be a document
'Engazhay and compelling' – what this meant
Nobody cared)

V. Nabokov, *Pale Fire*, 11. 375-9

Certain expressions, often used, resemble the words schoolchildren wrote or doodled on a page or on the back of a square of blotting paper – when there was such a thing as blotting paper: once they have been stared at long enough, they look increasingly bizarre and unknown the longer the eye dwells upon them, until, sometimes, they generate a feeling of absolute strangeness. "Committed writing", for example.

The vulgate has it that once upon a time the art of writing was a *principio* bent to the conscious purpose of explicitly exposing a view of the world dictated by whatever ideology prevailed. According to this view, the writer, born a cleric, based on the conviction that words refer to things a practice that was necessarily related to defense and illustration, however plural they could afford to be. When Aristotle or Plato, Horace or Longinus adorned their rhetoric with a poetics, or wrapped the scrolls of the pleasant around the columns of the useful, they still held that writing, as an instrumental activity, had to be made subservient to the Idea; far from being in a position where they could adhere to the

"The text is (should be) the free and easy person that shows its behind to the Political Father."

Roland Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text*.

as yet unborn notion of an "erotics" of writing, they could hardly envisage that the latter might be able to adopt other attitudes than such as I would like to call "missionary" positions.

Sartre came. He recapitulated, in *Situations I*, then *Situations II*, then again in *What Is Literature?* the evolution of the writer's status, and that of his role. From 12th-century clerics to the days following World War II, he traced a curve that linked a "moralizing" 17th century to the ideological crisis of confidence of an 18th century populated with objectively and subjectively degraded writers who promoted the image of a universal man from the pinnacle of which they could still be receivably critical, and to a 19th century dominated by utilitarianism on the one hand and romanticism on the other, in turn tempted by the promotion of progressive ideas and the satisfactory conviction that they were writing against all readers.

This vast panorama does allow us to delineate what the "committed writer" is supposed to be like, but it makes no allowance for a number of "aberrations"

which happened to give birth to the modern novel (Cervantes, Rabelais, Sterne or the Diderot who wrote *Jacques le Fataliste*). These would have made it possible to insert the problems of writing itself in a generic portrait of the writer where only the poet appeared as a possible and relative exception. Granted, Sartre came at a time when it seemed legitimate to link the pertinence of literature with the necessity, for the species as a whole and its values, to survive. But misfortune would have it that, according to a model that a bizarrely pragmatic reading of Derrida presents us with today in the United States, such a definition of "commitment", arrived at by philosophical roads, should have been sociologized to death and reduced, first by Sartre himself, then by a gaggle of individual and institutional epigons, to much vaguer and more restrictive notions: taking sides, suggesting or imposing ideas, didacticism, preaching for one's parish.

Sartre, as time went by, made use of the very diversified semantic palette the word "commitment" makes available, hiding in turn a certain number of available nuances behind the canvas he had chosen. A fideist overtone ("belief by means of [the reader's] commitment") thus appeared next to the more general concept of an "engagement in the universe of language" before a tardy definition chosen to plait into a single rope divers threads twisted around the ideas of liberty, lucidity and mastery: "I will say that a writer is committed when he endeavors to become conscious, as lucidly and as entirely as possible, that he is embarked –Sartre is using Pascal's terminology here–, that is, when he shifts commitment (his and that of others) from being spontaneous to being deliberate." But such "commitment" already opposes two meanings. For Jean-Pierre Faye,

in the beginning, 'commitment' hardly meant more than the hemming in, the framing of human testimony by point of view; in a novel, according to *Situations I*, there is no room for a privileged observer, there cannot be, anywhere, "divine omniscience and omnipotence." And an observer [...], *Situations II* makes it clearer still, is a sector of imprevisibility that is carved out of the social field. But such a carving out, if one wants to be precise, will itself be

historically and politically marked: "committed" in a second sense, precisely the one we kept.

Rather than the "natural" commitment (as necessarily "cultural" as it must actually be) that Sartre detects in past practices, he proposes, in a period that does not as yet officially belong to "the era of suspicion," to resort to a scouring lucidity thanks to which the "unveiling" operated by writing will be defined as action. To see and to speak the world is already and act of commitment, because it transforms it by dint of a new mode of apprehension. If such perspectives may indeed dissimulate a certain measure of adherence to illusionism and a faith in the dominance of the referential function of writing, it also appears that nothing, in the philosophical substratum of the concept of "commitment", necessarily or exclusively leads to an obligation to "choose sides" in any way other than by the affirmation of one's liberty.

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This being said, since Sartre, the semantics of "commitment" has ossified, favoring a rather stale acception (advocating or taking a critical stand toward ideas) over a "formalism" that was therefore declared to be ideologically fraudulent and an "aestheticism" that was reputed vain. No conceptual revision has accompanied the critical and epistemological evolutions of the last decades, for all the "isms" that have been strewn in their wake. Today, any reference to writing as "committed" still presupposes a set of loud and clear moral and intellectual choices, triggers discourse of truth, still invites utilitarian modes of literary consumption and tends to propagate the dubious odors of a well-seasoned Realist mode, Socialist or other, emanating from the ghosts of Jdanov or Plekhanov in one version, from the farcical historical stutter of "political correctness" in another. The word "commitment" drags the ball and chain of the conflicts that had presided over the times of its birth and proposes appallingly mechanical "social readings" of texts thus changed into social documents or propagandistic rags. These days, the plague of "relevance" efficiently drives all interest in the art of writing away from classrooms of which, officially, literature is supposed to be the subject. In such a context, Henri Meschonnic could note that "the

opposition between art for art's sake and commitment" constitutes "an unworkable couple for literary theory and practice."

Whence my desire to provoke, to worry a concept that has been unduly naturalized by time and by use.

It seems to me that we may either take the expression "committed writing" in the larger sense – in which case it becomes perfectly redundant, pleonastic; or that we may use it in the limited sense that it now has, in which case I see it as an oxymoron, a contradiction in terms.

It is redundant in the first hypothesis because one then describes a merely objective situation; the creator, just like the intellectual, "is never disengaged from the world, however extreme the formalism of his research." Moreover, the received, vague simplicity of the term in fact dissimulates in its loose folds rather crucial theoretical problems. To speak of a "committed writer" equals stressing the conditions under which enunciation takes place but ignoring most of what might be related to what is enunciated; it is tantamount to drawing attention to a conception of roles and triggering sociological more than literary reactions. To speak of "committed writing," then, according to the case, either means that one places the emphasis on the quality of a particular writing or that one will endeavor to isolate a particular set of ideas. The latter choice, in fact, hides at least another one, which has to do with the type of narrative contract, since it may well invite deliberate confusion between character and mouthpiece for the author's ideas. Everything seems to invite the reader to get a "message" out of the text, a core of thought that could, hypothetically, be reformulated at no major inconvenience, would, that is, be absolutely alien to the specificity of a given writing. But I obviously believe with Kundera –and of course Paul Valéry well before him– that if the meaning of a novel could thus survive its re-writing, there would be more than ample proof of the work's mediocrity. Any text whose "commitment" could be reduced to the ideas it "contains" could then be qualified as a mono-semantic product in the presence of which no freedom could exert itself on the reader's part; it would thus contradict a fundamental law of Sartrian

commitment. Deprived of all slack and play, univocal, it would renounce its own existence as text, thus demonstrating the oxymoronic status of the expression. On the contrary, if it is pluri- or polyvocal, the text is no longer a direct function of the ideas it "commits" itself to, it resists all didactic use; in which case any such text can be said to be "committed" in the larger Sartrian sense; the very notion of "committed writing," can then, only be considered as pleonastic.

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Writing, in the sense I would like it to retain here, that of *écriture*, is first and foremost a disengagement from a strictly communicational linguistic economy, the imposition of the logics of a new voice, an incessant and systematic dallying with the transgression of linguistic rules. In the terms of Gilles Deleuze, "to create is not to communicate, but to resist." Perhaps a parenthesis should open here, in order to factorize a principle or two. I take it for granted that this discussion takes place in a literary context that literariness defines the limits of the mode of writing, of the corpus and of the canon under consideration. I wish, therefore, for practical purposes, to stick by the definition proposed by René Wellek, even if internal distinctions have to be introduced further on: "It seems best to consider as literature only works in which the aesthetic function is dominant."

And, if I may call a group of other witnesses to the stand, I wish to make the frame of the coming remarks even clearer:

Literary genius is "geometry catching fire." It is the novelty of the banal. And genius is achieved by means of syntactic errors. Style is based on syntactic error. It presupposes that one know all the resources of one's language inside out, that one know exactly how far one may go toward inventing it, how much of it can be made one's own, how roughly use may be bullied.

Writing begins with style. But then this style is used to praise a new value, writing [*l'écriture*], and writing is a going beyond, a carrying away of style towards other regions of language and of the subject, far from a classified literary code (the

obsolete of an obsolete class). Style, in other words, is somehow the beginning of writing: even shyly, in high jeopardy of being recuperated, it ushers in the reign of the signifier.

Unless it be writing in this sense, the text renounces all means of real commitment and condemns itself to getting caught in the meshes devised by others rather than defining and devising its own net; whenever it remains mimetic and utilitarian, it falls victim to a "structural agreement between contesting forms and contested forms;" and such is the case even if one ignores Henri Meschonnic's broader argument: "Anti-instrumental writing is only possible because everywhere else there prevails a degraded but useful vehicular mode, known as communication." In a diametrically opposed way, "the fictitious world obtained by means of writing opposes its own structure to that of our world – and thus calls it into question. Literature is that which asks the world "Are you that which you pretend to be?" In spite of such obvious facts, one keeps hearing about the ideas of the committed writer, even though whoever is keenest on the notion may admit that discovering one's relationship to the world is the very function of writing and that no object can possibly precede its writing out: "Having something to say does not mean possessing an object that one would take along in a satchel before spreading it out on the table and looking for the words apt to describe it. "Committed writing" becomes an oxymoron as soon as, insisting on the ideas it is a vehicle for, one forgets that there is no "already-here" of thought that would be looking for a simple "mode" of expression. Here lie all the causes and import of Julien Gracq's revolt:

[My irritation] is not directed against the literature "that thinks" (this, indeed, would be somewhat naïve), not even against the literature that commits itself, but most exactly against a certain metaphysics of the pulpit which, injected in cold blood into literature seems to me to generate indigestible precipitates. When I say that literature, for several years, has fallen victim to a formidable maneuver of intimidation on the part of the non-literary, and of the most aggressive version of the non-literary, I only mean to reaffirm that an irrevocable commitment of thought through form gives breath, day after

day, to literature: in the realm of the senses, such commitment is the very condition of poetry, in the realm of ideas, it is called tone: as surely as Nietzsche belongs to literature, Kant does not. Because we forgot this somewhat too lightly, we find ourselves, today, threatened by an unthinkable phenomenon: a literature of magisters.

Writing is never judged on the basis of the quality of the ideas that "commit" it. One cares little that Balzac was in favor of the "Restoration," Drieu la Rochelle a fascist or Aragon a stalinist. Because Céline writes the way he does, his ideological blunders are not the thing that matters. We can only notice that the quality of these authors' writings stands most often in reverse proportion to the explicit injection of their ideas into the text. If their writing retains its high quality, it is, in this regard, in spite of their political views. This is because this mode of commitment places one on the side of the non-literary, the literary being defined, as will be seen, as quite another modality of commitment or engagement. For the writer, Barthes says, "to write is an intransitive verb." Nabokov's irony then becomes perfectly understandable:

England where poets flew the highest, now
Wants them to plod and Pegasus to plough;
Now the prose-mongers of the grubby group,
The Message Man, the owlish Nincompoop
And all the Social Novels of our age
Leave but a pinch of coal dust on the page.

The writer who chooses to commit himself through the expression of his ideas necessarily disengages his writing to satisfy the requirements of simple communication, keeps his powder wet and all channels open. A commitment to writing, a commitment of writing do not necessarily make the writer a "committed writer" in the naturalized, or fossilized sense of the term. One could thus oppose the writing of William Gass, Guy Davenport, Stanley Elkin or Alexander Theroux, where the poeticity of language prevails, to the recent work of Saul Bellow or William Styron, dominated by the dramatization of ideas, and most of occasionally interesting "ethnic writing" as soon as it plows along well-plowed grooves and foregrounds its ethnicity rather than its art. Robert Coover certainly

can be said to be committed, but this he achieves by staging the glittering contradictions that illustrate the impossibilities and quandaries of History rather than by selecting Richard Nixon as his narrator or the Rosenbergs for his subject matter. The forms – and even the genres – chosen constitute in themselves a commitment that the exposition of ideas denies by the subtraction it makes the very notion of writing undergo. “Engagement,” in the ordinary, trivial sense of the term, then veers off in the direction of a rhetoric of persuasion, demands transitivity, whereas writing, sparked by desire is in pursuit of an eternally receding object – language or the subject – and abandons the conative in favor of the poetic. If Sartre believes – as, oddly, does Croce, his ideological opponent – that it is possible to detach poetry from prose (the latter being, in this view, necessarily utilitarian whereas “poets are men who refuse to utilize language”), an identical idealism seems to bring these two men together by allowing them to deport to the unified ghetto of poetry a poeticity that also characterized the novel long before Modernism and what came in its wake, or “after the wake” to quote Christopher Butler’s lovely title. The type of “committed writing” whose first term steals its constitutive poeticity from the second, by dint of a “wanting-to-say”, constitutes a blatant oxymoron. William Gass writes that “words are properties of thoughts and thoughts cannot be thought without them.” Of such authors as he, Ricardou writes that, for them,

the essentials are not outside of language; language itself is the essentials. Writing, for them is not such or such a will to communicate some pre-established information, but the very project to explore language, understood as a particular space. [In opposition to information and informers], I propose, along with Barthes, to call such people writers – and their writings literature.

In any engagement through ideas, Gass sees a submission to the established linguistic order and the sterilization of all genuine commitment through writing; he thus proposes to conceive of a rich language as a form of “commitment,” a manifestation of hostility towards whatever brings about the degradation of the disinherited whose language has been mutilated:

I am firmly of the opinion that people who can’t speak have nothing to say. It’s one more thing that we do to the poor, the deprived: cut out their tongues allow them a language as lousy as their lives.

Any writing practice that protests and fights such amputations would thus constitute a commitment through its attempt at increasing competence, at strengthening the potential of individual speech. A commitment through ideas, on the other hand, compromises writing by its concern for transitivity, constantly threatens to “xilofy” it, if I may thus adapt the concept of petrification to what is known as “the wooden tongue.” Committed writing, in the received sense of the term, closes itself over the referential, and even, at times, strictly phatic, dimensions of language, closes itself, in other words, to the very poeticity that defines it. To commit writing by means of ideas is somewhat akin to entrusting Count Dracula with the management of a blood bank. And it does not make any sense to drag to the witness stand the authors of would-be “committed poetry.” Because then, hauntingly, a handful of images return: final ones such as that of Maiakovski “grinding his heel over the throat of his song,” or that of Vachel Lindsay killing himself for getting trapped between ideas and writing; or those resulting from even more mundane insertions into the secular, such as the several collapses of Drieu la Rochelle, Ezra Pound or Louis Aragon; because then, hauntingly, there returns the metaphorical hiccup of Pablo Neruda, conscious that, in front of the irremediable, “the blood of children” can only flow “like the blood of children.” Mao was political revolutionary who wrote like a mandarin; Proust or Flaubert, politically “reactionary” as they may have been, revolutionized writing. The efficiency of commitment through ideas, in literature, can be measured by the yardstick of recurring realizations. Auden: “No poem ever saved a single Jew from the ovens.” Sartre, in a similar register: “How about Guernica, this masterpiece? Does anyone believe it won one single heart over to the Republican cause?” Upton Sinclair: “I aimed at the public’s heart, and by accident, I hit it in the stomach.”

Ideas and convictions can only generate committed discourse, because writing is to a large extent

negativity, whereas discourse tends to the positive, leans toward affirmation. So much so that Kinneavy, following Jakobson, distinguishes literature from discourses aiming at persuasion, expression or referentiality. The crucial point is that "literature and politics are distinct and different ways of organizing and making sense of human experience." A pragmatic view of discourses is equivalent, Kinneavy writes, to "the reduction of literature to a sugar-coated informative pill or a more subtle and surreptitious rhetoric." Whence the incessant contradictions of whoever wants to defend committed writing. For Sartre, first, who makes clear his understanding of the necessary poeiticity of writing while composing "Florence" after having stated that one's duty lies with strict "representation." Second, in the proletarian novel which, in spite of a proclaimed desire to change things where openness is implicitly assumed to be of the utmost value, functions rhetorically and didactically on the principle of closure. Committed by its ideas, writing ossifies, is indeed "committed" but as to a separate place, constrained, teleologized, deadened, becomes more evocative of an expression such as "this seat is engaged" than of the indispensable affirmation of freedom. Marxist criticism often and openly pondered this contradiction. Whether Gramsci states that, in a realist perspective, the political, solidly rooted in a history that "is a continuous process of liberation and self-consciousness" must always stand in judgement over the artistic, which only represents a particular moment, and consider it to be obsolete and uninteresting for its own ends, or whether Raymond Williams points out the contradiction that pits social radicalism and the forms of naturalist drama, the debate remains the same and keeps stumbling over the status of the familiar. Grounded in the real and guided by the idea, writing can only be engaged, pawned, hocked: under the weight of what is always-already past, undermined by the recognizable and the comforting, translatable according to another scale of values, it can be said to be engirdled, engaged and aged rather than engaged.

Reducible to an elsewhere that it is only supposed to "translate," the literature of ideas monumentalizes itself as fast as sclerosis hardens and stiffens its main conduits. Writing is never about anything but itself when it is great. "A work of art, so far as

it is a work of art, cannot—whatever the artist's personal intentions—advocate anything at all. The greatest artists attain a sublime neutrality. Think of Homer and Shakespeare, from whom generations of scholars and critics have vainly labored to extract particular 'views' about human nature, morality and society." Susan Sontag here, Gilbert Sorrentino, William Gass or Vladimir Nabokov elsewhere thus fiercely refuse the notion that writing is instrumental, transitive, points to an elsewhere, that its main goal is to make itself as inconspicuous as possible. As if hearing Sartre declare that "it is in and by language conceived as a sort of instrument that the search for truth takes place," they reply that such a discovery can only take place by investigating the politics of language and of the sign, as Barthes, Chomsky or Meschonnic diversely proclaim, even if none of them necessarily denounces as violently as Huysmans, "the Orleanists of truth, the half-sugar half-salt sweets of Vichy literature."

The aporia inherent to committed writing, in its rusty acception, lies in the fact that Sartrian commitment presupposes the liberty of a subject while writing is in fact a ceaseless process of constitution and modification of the subject.

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One could also, even more willingly, detect redundancy in the fact that all writing is *de facto* committed. All writing has ideological consequences: whether because, as underlies Sartrian views, it effects a macrostructuring which invites Maurice Nadeau to assert that "it is on the basis of a world that has suddenly become legible that consciousness can be born, that revolutions can begin," or because it operates a microstructuring by modifying what Barthes called "the logosphere". One remembers Jean Starobinski's admirable demonstration when, in "The Invention of Liberty," he showed the power exerted by the nomination of new feelings over 18th-century ideology. One remembers Barthes explaining how language, in our society, "makes everything implacably sticky, giving form to a doxa, to a kind of unconscious; in other words, to ideology in its essence." And one could therefore easily draw the irrefragable conclusions that would situate the destabilizing power of genuine poetics well upstream of explicit "commitments." In simple terms, Jacques

Roubaud explains this to a "twelve-year old poet":

The poet, you see, is just like an earthworm
he plows words, which are like a big field
were men harvest linguistic goods;
but the earth exhausts itself under such an effort!
without the earthworm-poet and the air he
[brings it
the world would choke under the weight of
[dead words.

Poetic writing, this upsurge of speech, scours time-hallowed representations of the world, fights the imprisonment of meaning at the hands of what Hans Magnus Enzensberger calls "The Consciousness Industry." The "ostraniene", the "making strange," the "defamiliarization" and the "disautomatization" dear to Russian Formalists inhere in all writing worth the name; their fundamental merit is no other than staving off the fixity of ideas, fighting off all the "big words, floppy as Dali's watches" Barthes talks about, giving back to the subject, by means of quasi idiolectal use, a space for freedom and affirmation; the suffix of "writ-ing," bespeaks in English better than in French or Spanish such activism and explains why defamiliarization through writing, for Guy Davenport, can be opposed to "narcosis."

Moreover, the writing of any fiction makes all the more manifest the linguistic nature of other fictions, politics or history, and exposes the share of artifact and reconstruction that also enters them. Even Orwell, as "committed" a writer as they come, perceived, under an angle of his own, the militancy that adheres to any use of language, and a fortiori, of writing. Forster says he thought that

if prose degrades itself, then so does thought
[...] Freedom, he said, is linked to the quality
of language, and the bureaucrats who want to
destroy freedom all tend to write and speak
badly, to use pompous or confused expressions,
clichés that hide or obliterate meaning.

However naïve or positivistic such a vision (were we to abide by it, there would be one meaning, veiled or revealed according to specific handlings), it is a comfort to find under such a pen the idea

that there are other commitments than those resulting from the mere exposition of ideas by the text.

It is no less clear that today the investigation of "female writing," for example, should be in a position to do without an examination of novelistic themes or socio-political arguments. To speak, with Edwin Ardener, of the "wild zone" submitted to the exploration of a repressed writing, is equivalent to positing that the subversion of masculine structures of representation and of the text according to Aristotle, is no less a "commitment" of writing; and there is no need, then, to invoke explicit refusals and choices. Commitment is most of all the insertion of a personal voice and any such act can be read as engagement. That of the writer as such may come in addition – or next – to that of writing itself, which is incontrovertible. But, too often, the commitment of the first stands in relation to that of the second as pornography stands in relation to eroticism: an assassination of desire by mere chatter, the lethal stabilization of a permanent insurrection, a chromo resulting from the arrested network of defunct tensions. One can never, with impunity, pull the adjective "utter" from the heart of the word "utterance."

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Perhaps, as far as writing is concerned, it might be worth our while semantically to relocate the qualifications of "right" and "left." When analyzing a text, any linguist knows full well what its structure owes to contextual pointers. Anaphora and cataphora throw writing into imbalance, either forward, by opening it to the possibilities of becoming, or backward, by exposing it to the potential dictates of the past that nourishes the text to come. Various types of markings, multiple determinations, frame the area of liberty where "the fictitious gets produced." The orders thus summoned or destroyed may well generate the various kinds of "commitment" of which writing is capable. Whatever the case, the proportions that define the relationship between the dictation of a real merely seen as liable to be described or modified and the demands of a "practice of the subject as history in language" is central in the determination of the nature of an "engagement" that really takes place only in its

place of origin. "It's not the word made flesh we want in writing, in poetry and fiction, but the flesh made word." In contemporary German, "Wortkunst" is "writing."

Sartre knew well enough this is the way it works to emit in 1964 a series of remarks whose succession betrays a modicum of embarrassment. Here are, by way of conclusion, the three quasi aphoristic shortcuts he was to incorporate, that year, to his remarks on "what literature can do":

Finally, the self-reflexivity of language is purely and simply rhetoric. All the rules of rhetoric, or of persuasion, which are neither logical nor dialectical, are rules language gives itself for its own use. It is language giving itself, in its very materiality, its own rules.

Sculpture is at stake each time one makes a statue. The internal criticism of literature however, should not prevent us from considering the object in question.

Committed literature is not a literature for militants.

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Another emblematic figure of Saint-Germain-des-Près, Boris Vian, once wrote that, when it came to literature, adding to the prevailing confusion was indeed an excellent thing. I hope enough contradictions were pointed to, and enough contradictions generated in these few pages to allow all readers to (choose one) argue their engagement or engage their argument.