

Representations of Writers as Public Intellectuals
Jean-Paul Sartre, Nadine Gordimer, Gao Xingjian and Pablo Neruda

by

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ABSTRACT

This thesis takes as its subject the various public roles and representations of writers, using Said's 1993 Reith lectures on the subject of the intellectual as a starting point. The main questions raised are how writers, in various political and historical contexts, have functioned as public intellectuals, and how they have negotiated the tensions between their various private and public commitments and responsibilities, whether artistic, social, or political.

To gain insight into these issues, this thesis turns to the essays, memoirs and lectures of Jean-Paul Sartre, Nadine Gordimer, Pablo Neruda and Gao Xingjian. Chapter 1 is concerned with Sartre's attempt to systematize a conception of the writer as an intellectual through the writer's commitment in the work itself. Chapter 2 looks at the development of Gordimer's explorations of her own positioning in such a public role, as well as how these explorations point towards a transformative view of literature. Chapter 3 sets up a comparison between Neruda and Gao, who share an important conviction that literature provides an "alternative" historical record of human experience despite their opposed ideas regarding the writer's relationship to society.

As winners of the Nobel Prize for literature, these writers have been "officially" recognized as public intellectuals, and thus their emblematic position affords an important opportunity to examine how such writers deal with public pressures, clarify their commitments and attempt to construct a feasible identity within the matrices of art and politics. By looking at their nonfictional and often deeply autobiographical writings, this thesis hopes to locate these writers at their most candid, reflective and even contradictory moments, in which they attempt to delineate a certain credo that informs their public and private activities as writers.

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INTRODUCTION

When Gao Xingjian won the Nobel Prize for Literature in November 2000, China was stunned. After two decades of intense debate among Chinese intellectuals on the issue of why one of their writers had not yet won the prize, the Swedish Academy's announcement triggered rash, conflicting reactions from the Chinese government and media. The BBC gave the following account: "During the first hours after the award was announced, China's state media, clearly uncertain how to respond, reported the news in a factual manner. But by the next day the Chinese Writers' Association was denouncing the Nobel Committee's decision as politically motivated, and an interference in China's affairs. When Premier Zhu Rongji was quoted in the Hong Kong press a couple of days later as having reacted positively to the award, state media rushed to deny that he had ever discussed the issue. And since then, silence."¹ Granted, Gao Xingjian was now living in exile in Paris, and his works had been banned in China for over a decade for advocating "dissident" views against the regime. In fact, it was his situation as a political exile that had increased his profile in the international community, who viewed him symbolically as yet another persecuted writer whose individual voice managed to miraculously survive the Communist regime's numerous attempts to silence it. His political supporters were not, however, limited to the borders outside his native country. Shortly after the announcement of the prize, a group of forty dissident intellectuals sent a letter to the government calling for them to release the ban on his works and allow him to come back to China.²

Gao's response? He was equally wary of his political support as of the reaction of his detractors: "To some extent, I'm disappearing as a person and becoming a symbol. Of course this symbol is what a lot of Chinese people have been wishing for. People see it as an affirmation of Chinese writers or Chinese literature, or of the Chinese people...[But] this is not the role I've intended to take on."³ He criticized the tendency of the public to view him as a *political* figure simply because he happened to be a banned writer, a view he considered to be deeply misguided because it "subordinated" literature to politics. In his own view, literature represented the voice of the individual writer, independent of political and social demands. He expressed regret that the public recognition of the artistic merits of his work had inadvertently transformed him into an ambassador for human rights. In his Nobel Prize speech, Gao firmly insisted, "A writer is an ordinary person...A writer does not speak as the spokesperson of the people or as the embodiment of righteousness."⁴ What gives literature its legitimacy, he continued, is its *authenticity* as the medium through which the writer's voice speaks, rather than its potential for political appropriation, whatever the intentions of the writer. Judging from the fact that he used his new platform to speak out freely against the

¹ "China in Denial over Nobel Laureate," BBC News (Dec. 10, 2000), <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/asia-pacific/1064016.stm>.

² Ibid.

³ "Gao Xingjian: Life as a Literature Laureate," BBC World Service (Mar. 17, 2001), http://www.bbc.co.uk/worldservice/arts/highlights/010316_xingjian.shtml.

⁴ Gao Xingjian, "The Case for Literature" (Nobel lecture 2000), <http://www.nobel.se/literature/laureates/2000/gao-lecture-e.html>.

cultural policies of Maoism as well as against the consumer values of Western society, however, it seemed that Gao was himself ambivalent about his privileged position as a public figure.⁵

Gao's situation illustrates many of the issues in the current debates about the roles and representations of writers as public intellectuals. There have been numerous recent attempts to redefine the role of the intellectual and to re-position the intellectual in modern society. Many of these attempts start off on the premise that public, autonomous intellectuals are in serious decline. In the introduction to *The Public Intellectual*, Helen Small observes, "The increased power of the media and development of new information technologies; the expansion of higher education; greater state regulation of the universities and, simultaneously, their penetration by commercial and corporate interests; a widening gap between the fragmented and complexly interrelated nature of the public realms we inhabit and the simplified ways in which 'being a public' still tends to be thought of – all these appear to have contributed to a diminution in the perceived legitimacy and felt responsibility of those few writers and academics still willing to define themselves as intellectuals."⁶ However, Small continues, these narratives of decline also include a strong element of nostalgia for earlier generations of public writer-intellectuals such as Jean-Paul Sartre who spoke and wrote on cultural and social matters under "general moral authority."⁷ Such nostalgia tends to place pressure on those writers and academics who are *not* as willing to define themselves as intellectuals to assume positions of intellectual (and moral) leadership in society.

Edward Said's Lectures on the Public Intellectual

Riding on the wave of similar concerns in Britain, Edward Said was invited by the BBC in 1993 to give a series of lectures on his view of the role of public intellectuals in contemporary society. For both Small and Said, the word *public* attached to *intellectual* is not merely gratuitous, for it serves to "assert, in the face of perceived opposition, not just the continuing serviceability of the word "intellectual," but to protest...that those to whom it is applicable, including perhaps oneself, have a role to play in public life."⁸ The *public* intellectual, therefore, is distinguished from the "specific" intellectual of Michel Foucault and the "organic" intellectual of Antonio Gramsci, whose versions consign the intellectual to a specific, quotidian class and function. Said's particular vision is aimed at salvaging the image of intellectuals from the specialized technicians that they had become in recent decades and to bring them back into the public spotlight as leading advocates of universal humanism.

From the outset Said states firmly that he does not intend to *define* the intellectual, because "in the outpouring of studies about intellectuals there has been far too much defining...and not enough stock taken of the image, the signature, the actual intervention and performance, all of which taken together constitute the very lifeblood of every real intellectual."⁹ Although he deals with representations and not definitions (i.e. what intellectuals *are*), it is difficult to say, however, that he does not avoid definitions completely, as he upholds very

⁵ "Gao: China Almost Destroyed Its Literature," BBC World Service (Dec. 7, 2000), <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/asia-pacific/1060331.stm>.

⁶ Small, "Introduction" in *The Public Intellectual* (2002), 2.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 4.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 2.

specific ideas of what the intellectual *should do*. However, his use of the word "representation" is practical because it largely avoids reifying an abstracted figure of the intellectual. He uses the word "representation" in two ways: to refer to the intellectual's expression and articulation of causes or ideas, and to the intellectual himself as a representative, yet fully human, public figure.¹⁰ Intellectuals serve public vocations through the "art of representing, whether that is talking, writing, teaching, appearing on television" (and even, in the later example of Glenn Gould, playing the piano).¹¹ Intellectual action thus requires mastery of language as well as the commitment to use language to "advance human freedom and knowledge,"¹² which deeply implicates writers and other artists within the intellectual process.

Said's foils are Julien Benda, on one hand, and Foucault, Gramsci, and postmodernists such as Jean Lyotard on the other. More precisely, it is their particular representations (and definitions) of the intellectual that he begins with and later consciously refutes. Although Gramsci's analysis of the intellectual as "a person who fulfills a particular set of functions in the society" – namely, that of producing or distributing knowledge – is far more practical and applicable to late modernity than that of Benda's "philosopher-king," Said still admits that he is very attracted to Benda's "compelling" image of the "crusty, eloquent, fantastically courageous and angry individual for whom no worldly power is too big and imposing to be criticized and pointedly taken to task."¹³ More than the purely iconic appeal of such an image, however, is the fact that it places the intellectual within a charged public context, something that Said believes is missing from Gramsci's representation: "Intellectuals [are] no longer people who [address] a wide public; instead they [have] become ...specialized experts addressing other specialized experts in a *lingua franca* largely unintelligible to unspecialized people."¹⁴

So what, then, is Said's representation of the intellectual? Essentially, he characterizes the intellectual as an independent outsider who is nevertheless very much involved in worldly affairs: an exile, marginal, amateur, and author of a language who tries to speak truthfully against power.¹⁵ Said is very conscious of the structures of power that control and restrict intellectual freedom and activity, such as those detailed by Small above, and constructs his representation against these structures – thus his notion that the intellectual should have the attitude of an "outsider" amateur instead of a "insider" professional.¹⁶ This of course reflects Said's own experience as a professor of literature at Columbia University, and his feelings that "as a rank amateur I am spurred on by commitments that go well beyond my narrow professional career. Of course I make a conscious effort to acquire a new and wider audience for these views, which I never present inside a classroom."¹⁷ His main point, which he emphasizes repeatedly, is that whilst the professional claims objectivity and detachment from his work, saying that "it is only a

⁹ Said, *Representations of the Intellectual: The 1993 Reith Lectures* (1994), 14.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 13, 20.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 13, 73.

¹² *Ibid.*, 17.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 7-9.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 9.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, xvi.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 86-7.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 88.

job," the amateur "is moved neither by rewards nor by the fulfillment of an immediate career plan but by a committed engagement with ideas and values in the public sphere."¹⁸

Said acknowledges that no intellectual is *simply* a public figure (in the sense that he or she is merely an appropriated figurehead) because "there is always the personal inflection and the private sensibility, and those give meaning to what is being said or written."¹⁹ He highlights across these lectures what he calls the "interaction between universality and the local" in the role of the intellectual, who must find a balance between "trying to uphold a single standard for human behavior" based on elusive (and perhaps non-existent) universal standards of freedom and justice, and recognizing that his knowledge and experience are shaped and limited by "party affiliation, national background, and primeval loyalties."²⁰ Said's intellectual is inevitably *situated* within a particular set of linguistic, social, and historical loyalties but must be able to both utilize them in a social plan of action and transcend them in order to appeal to as wide a public as possible.

A very important point is to be made about the situating of intellectuals within public – that is, social and political – contexts. For Said, there is "no such thing as a private intellectual, since the moment you set down words and then publish them you have entered the public world."²¹ He specifically accuses those who shy away from the responsibilities of public life after having unwittingly made the first steps towards action, whether by publishing or speaking in a public forum. "The intellectual who claims to write only for him or herself, or for the sake of pure learning, or abstract science is not to be, and *must not* be, believed. As the great twentieth-century writer Jean Genet once said, the moment you publish...in a society you have entered political life; so if you want not to be political do not write...or speak out."²²

Issues in the Representation of Writers as Intellectuals

So how does Gao Xingjian's response to the public's reactions to his winning of the Nobel Prize resonate with Edward Said's challenge to intellectuals who, according to Said, are in denial? In other words, how should we perceive the relationship between the representation of writers and that of public intellectuals, especially when writers and other artists are increasingly called upon to assume positions of moral authority and engage in social critique? Perhaps in reply to this, Said quotes the American sociologist C. Wright Mills: "The independent artist and intellectual are among the few remaining personalities equipped to resist and to fight the stereotyping and consequent death of genuinely living things. Fresh perception now involves the capacity to continually unmask and to smash the stereotypes of vision and intellect with which modern communications swamp up. These worlds of mass-art and mass-thought are increasingly geared to the demands of politics. *That is why it is in politics that intellectual solidarity and effort must be centered* (italics added)."²³ This statement could be enormously controversial if it is insisting that artists and intellectuals today *must* be socially committed, and that regardless of

¹⁸ Ibid., 109.

¹⁹ Ibid., 12.

²⁰ Ibid., xxi, xxii.

²¹ Ibid., 12.

²² Ibid., 110.

the means, artists and intellectuals should be working towards the same goal – namely, the eradication of stereotypes, ideologies, and clichés.

Perhaps, however, Mills is not specifying a political agenda, but is rather pointing to artists as creative, intellectual forces who have the power to transform society through the medium of their work. In his wonderful essay "What Writers Do," John Gardner affirms this idea when he writes, "Imperfect, even childish human beings, writers raise themselves up by the techniques of fiction to something much better than even the best of writers are in everyday life: ordinary mortals transmuted for the moment into apostles."²⁴

Nevertheless, many writers seem to be wary of the label "intellectual" and its extra-literary, self-aggrandizing implications. In an interview with Bernard Henri-Levy, the writer Joyce Carol Oates says, "The term 'intellectual' is a very self-conscious one in the United States. To speak of oneself as an 'intellectual' is equivalent to arrogance and egotism."²⁵ Her statement echoes Gao's insistence on the writer's "ordinariness" as well as his keenness to distance himself as a writer from common representations of the public intellectual. Still, it is not so easy for the writer to avoid being slapped with this tag or, conversely, criticized for taking on these responsibilities. In reaction to Said's lectures, the historian Norman Stone retorted, "The multi-purpose intellectual is one of the great pains in the neck of the modern age. If ever you had a class of people who got things badly wrong, it was the writers."²⁶ While this is only one of many examples of the disparaging stereotypes of the intellectual, it is particularly revealing in its implication that *all* writers are (annoying and meddling) intellectuals.

Said himself makes the connection between writers and public intellectuals very clear, though obviously not in a negative sense, when he refers to Jean-Paul Sartre's work: "In his credo as an intellectual published in 1947, *What Is Literature?*, Sartre uses the word *writer* rather than intellectual, but it is clear that he is speaking about the role of the intellectual in society."²⁷ It is no coincidence that Said's questions for the intellectual (How does one speak the truth? What truth? For whom and where?) echo the questions Sartre had asked of the writer (What is writing? Why write? For whom does one write?). Is Said suggesting that the roles of writers and public intellectuals can be dealt with interchangeably? Even if he is merely suggesting that Sartre had intended this, it is worth examining why Said makes this assumption, and on what kind of representation of writers and intellectuals this connection is based. I will come back to the connection between Said's lectures and Sartre's own discussions on this topic, but first, I would like to look at a highly publicized case that has come to embody these issues today.

A Case Study: The Rushdie Affair

In February 1989, the declaration of the *fatwa* against Salman Rushdie and his publishers thrust to the surface of public consciousness the issues regarding the contested roles, responsibilities, and rights of writer-intellectuals. The extreme nature of the case virtually transformed the figure of Salman Rushdie into an icon overnight, and his

²³ Ibid., 21.

²⁴ Gardner, *On Writers and Writing* (1994), 227.

²⁵ Small, 1.

²⁶ Jennings and Kemp-Welch, "The Century of the Intellectual" in *Intellectuals in Politics: From the Dreyfus Affair to Salman Rushdie* (1997), 2.

situation came to be theorized as a site where fierce clashes between artistic freedom and fundamentalist constraints on that freedom took place. Further aggravating the issue was the fact that he had to look to his fellow writers in Britain as well as the wider international community for support when the profoundly anti-intellectual Thatcher administration declined to act immediately after the *fatwa* was issued.²⁸ That he was not "safe" or immediately protected by his location in a democratic Western power and that the threat on his life transgressed national, cultural, religious, and political (one could even say temporal) boundaries revealed what many believed to be a frightening de-mystification of the writer's true position in society. By "affirming its jurisdiction over the entire earth, without caring what laws are in force in non-Islamic lands,"²⁹ the *fatwa* threw the postmodern, democratic Western world off-guard, whose laws protected the citizen but not the dubious category of the secular writer-in-exile accused of religious apostasy. The South African writer Nadine Gordimer expressed fear that Rushdie's situation explicitly demonstrated what could potentially happen to *all* writers, regardless of context. "Even if he were a mediocre writer," she asked, "his situation is the terrible concern of every fellow writer for, apart from his personal plight, what implications, what new threat against the carrier of the word does it bring?"³⁰

Ironically, though not surprisingly, public debate over the event focused in part on questions of the accountability of writers and of the societies that host them, rarely centering on the literary qualities of *The Satanic Verses*. In an article published in *The Independent on Sunday* a year after his confinement, Rushdie expressed amazement that most of the people who were hotly debating over the issues of freedom of speech, religious taboos, and the limits of international law had not even bothered to read his book. In defense, he centered his article on the literary work itself, declaring that it is to be treated differently from the "work of bad history" or "anti-religious pamphlet," and that his responsibility as a writer rests in "awakening" and "troubling" the reader through the fictional work that attempts "what the word *novel* seems to insist upon: to see the world anew."³¹ Lefort's comments on Rushdie's unique self-representations as a writer are worth repeating in full:

One could not state any better than he does that the novel, and literature in general, does not designate a fixed mode of expression, set at a distance from other modes of expression, knowledge, and action. It is clear that the writer does not have to serve a cause, be it a political, religious, or anti-religious one, that his speech does not refer to anything that might have taken place or that should have taken place, that it eludes the categories of the true and the false, and that it is self-sustaining. And at the same time it is clear that the writer is in quest of a meaning, even though this meaning might not be delivered in words, that his speech has a power to express that which cannot be expressed otherwise but is given in experiencing the world of life.³²

²⁷ Said, 74.

²⁸ Jennings and Kemp-Welch, 4. Evidence of this widespread support can be found in *The Rushdie Letters: Freedom to Speak, Freedom to Write* (ed. Steve MacDonogh, 1993), a collection of letters written to Rushdie by writers across the world, compiled in defense of Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

²⁹ Lefort, "Humanism and Anti-Humanism: Homage to Salman Rushdie" in *Writing: The Political Test* (2000), 23.

³⁰ Gordimer, "Writing and Being" in *Living in Hope and History: Notes from Our Century* (1999), 205.

³¹ Lefort, 26.

³² Ibid.

Issues of Artistic and Political Engagement

The Rushdie case has contributed tremendously to the foregrounding of questions regarding the relations between writers, public intellectuals, politics and society.³³ Representations of public intellectuals have not been able to avoid the connection to politics in terms of social engagement; the connection between writers and politics, however, has not been so straightforward.³⁴ Writers often claim, at one point or another in their career, to write "only" for themselves, maintaining that the act of writing involves a certain degree of alienation from society, whether this isolated condition is imposed externally or self-imposed. Echoing the motto "art for art's sake," works of literature can aspire to be ends in themselves, rather than tools appropriated to convey meanings beyond the text. However, this tendency towards a complete separation of art and politics can be seen as "an apolitical stance that is in fact highly political,"³⁵ as Theodor Adorno once remarked in an observation of the debate between "committed" and "autonomous" art. Many writers living under totalitarian regimes have distanced their works from any association with political ideologies for obvious reasons, but public perceptions of writers as intellectuals who represent the voice of marginalized and persecuted elements of society and criticize the constraints of power are invariably heightened in contexts of restricted freedoms.³⁶ Thus, a writer such as Gao Xingjian can be seen simultaneously as a dissident and a defender of human rights – both politically loaded identities – by virtue of his very insistence to continue writing despite the restrictions on his freedom to do so.

Of course, there are much more assertive, self-determining ways in which the writer can take on the responsibilities of the public intellectual. Marxist literary theories have advocated the alignment of aesthetics with social consciousness, although this alignment can take more oblique forms as Bertolt Brecht's avant-garde breed of modernist theater, aimed to "shock" the public into recognition of the senselessness of their everyday lives through

³³ "Uncompromising freedom of opinion and expression is the secular intellectual's main bastion... That is why the defense of Salman Rushdie's *Satanic Verses* has been so absolutely central an issue, both for its own sake and for the sake of every other infringement against the right to expression of journalists, novelists, essayists, poets, historians" (Said, 89).

³⁴ The following is a useful commentary on the complex nature of the relationship between literature and politics: "The question of whether or in what sense literature can be "political" is often discussed. No doubt there are relevant senses in which it can: literary works may have a political setting, may tell us things about politics, or may contain political ideas. But discussions here are often tempered by a sense that limits apply to the convergence of the literary and the political... although they invoke different forms of commitment, literature and politics compete at the same time for acknowledgment across the same field of experience and judgment. Thus, the contrast between the literary and the political involves not just a tendency to be concerned about different things but rather a consistent tendency to be concerned about the same things differently" (Buckler, "Literature and Politics as Vocations: The Case of the Spanish Civil War" [1998], <http://www.psa.ac.uk/cps/1998/buckler.pdf>).

³⁵ Adorno, "Commitment" in *Notes to Literature* (1991), 76.

³⁶ Of course, the figure of the lone, independent writer struggling against censorship and persecution against all odds is a romantic image sustained in the public consciousness and perhaps even internalized to some extent by writers themselves. In his collection of essays in *The Spirit of Prague* (1994), the Czech writer Ivan Klíma satirizes the opinion of foreign reporters who interview him that his work would lose all its significance under the trivializing effects of democratization. He argues that this understanding of "significance" is an extra-literary, sociological evaluation that has little to do with the actual themes and artistic value of his work. At the same time, however, Klíma admits that "the dichotomy, I on the one side and the world on the other, is the way in which not only writers but all of us are tempted to perceive things" (59).

the alienating medium of his work.³⁷ Also, in so-called "free" societies such as the United States, adversarial identities can *emerge* as political issues and enter into public discourse through the medium of literature.³⁸ Indeed, there is a growing critical assessment of the "re-emergence of the 'public' intellectual, and specifically the black public intellectual" in the U.S. (1993 Nobel-winning author Toni Morrison being a key figure in this movement).³⁹ In relation to this, an increasingly visible production and circulation of literature from writers identified with marginalized social groups have lent tremendous weight to critical theories dealing with "identity politics," including (but not limited to) those that deal extensively with issues of gender, race, and post-colonialism. Their powerful presence in the American and British academy has given rise to a bitter but extremely fruitful and engaging debate between those supporting these various agendas and the views of the New Right, whose adherents hold that the humanities should not be "tainted" by politics and the social sciences. Whatever the point of view, there is no question that the relationship between literature and politics poses questions whose answers would have far-reaching consequences beyond the boundaries of either field.

Outline and Aims of Thesis

This thesis will examine the complex relationship between literature and politics at the level of the individual writer who, whether by context or by intent, functions as a public intellectual in society. Many common critiques of the intellectual today (they're irrelevant, they're disappearing, they're too tied to structures of power, they're slaves of the government/media/university, their so-called "universal" values are really Western bourgeois values) can be challenged by the mere presence of those writers across the globe who engage in social and political issues while fiercely defending their artistic autonomy. Writers may take on the role of public intellectuals by addressing these issues in and through the medium of their work, or they may maintain a distinction between their artistic and their social or political roles, as with the Czech playwright and former state president Vaclav Havel. Of course, the representations of writers and public intellectuals are by no means limited to these situations. In fact, the very heterogeneity of commitments, goals, frustrations, and ideals of these writers only serves to expand the boundaries of the public intellectual's representation.

Among the various writers who have turned a critical eye on the representations of the writer as public intellectual, very few have grappled with the issue as intimately and extensively as Jean-Paul Sartre, Nadine

³⁷ Adorno, 82.

³⁸ The very first gay and lesbian reading held at the Nuyorican Poets Café in New York City in 1991 was, in the words of the poet Adrienne Rich, a dynamic venue for aspiring urban poets to "[sing] back to the city furious, satiric, and livid visions from an unextinguished underground soul." Rich celebrates the cultural diversity of the poets who attended, including "Korean-born, white-adopted Mi Ok Bruining, Black Latino Bruce L. Burgos, African-Americans Cheryl Clarke, Dorothy Randall Gray, and Donald Woods...Italian-American Rachel Guido de Vries, Catholic Charles Frederick, Portuguese-American David Trinidad, Jewish-Americans Margaret Randall and Susan Sherman." Despite their differing agendas, what these poets shared in common "above and beyond poetry itself, or sexuality itself, was each one's stance of claiming a foothold, a platform, a voice among all the voices purporting to speak or sing of North American existence....Wide as the social, political, aesthetic differences were among the poets and among us, their hearers, a community arose in that undertaking; under harsh lights, with a sometimes wayward mike, poetry lived, pulling us toward each other" (*What Is Found There* [1993], 38-9).

³⁹ Jennings and Kemp-Welch, 15.

Gordimer, Pablo Neruda and Gao Xingjian in their essays and lectures. Based on these writers' sustained examinations of the connections and tensions between their public representations and their private commitments, this thesis considers that any discussion of such representations requires an examination of how the notions of "art" and "politics" are perceived by writers and their public. In particular, what will be investigated is how these writers' consciousness of their public roles function in their perceptions on artistic and creative integrity.

As the theoretical basis for this thesis, **Chapter 1** will look at Sartre's Tokyo/Kyoto lectures on the intellectual, along with a few of the responses to his ideas, including Adorno's essay "On Commitment." In these lectures Sartre engages in a rigorous systematic and philosophical treatment of the situation of both the modern intellectual and the modern writer. How he makes an explicit connection between the writer and the intellectual through his explanation of the dialectic relationship of the "universal" and the "particular" will be the main focus of this chapter as well as the starting point for the following chapters.

Chapter 2 will look at Nadine Gordimer, who throughout her entire career has critically evaluated the complexities involved in her roles as a writer and as a public intellectual in South Africa. For Gordimer, the act of writing is implicated in the writer's own relentless exploration of the tensions inherent in his or her obligations to art and to society. Gordimer positively identifies herself as an intellectual in the adversarial, independent sense as expressed in Said and Sartre, and in her essays she presents an intimate and subjective exploration of these themes, using her own experience as a starting-point for this investigation.

Chapter 3. Is the writer an ordinary figure, unworthy of (or not even aspiring to) his or her often elevated and heroic status? Or is the writer rightly a prophet of and for the public? Placing Gao Xingjian and Pablo Neruda together – one of whom has been assigned the role of public intellectual against his will, the other of whom has committed himself extremely self-consciously to such a role – I hope to open up a critical dialogue between their comments. Closely bound up with these questions are the writers' differing relationships to their nationality: how productive is it to associate Neruda's optimistic vision of his role as the "people's poet" to his fierce commitment to the politics of Chile? To what extent may we think of Gao's view of the writer as highly private and individualistic as conditioned by his situation as an exiled Chinese dissident in France? These and related questions will be addressed at length in this chapter.

The fact that Sartre, Gordimer, Gao and Neruda have all been awarded the Nobel Prize indicates that they have been publicly recognized as intellectual representatives of their particular communities and, regardless of whether they recognize themselves as such, they are nevertheless fully aware of their positioning in these public roles.⁴⁰ The Nobel Prize criteria recognize the prize-winning author as a public intellectual with "universal" resonance ("to those who...shall have conferred the greatest benefit on mankind"), as well as an artist of the highest

⁴⁰ In a later essay entitled "The Public Role of Writers and Intellectuals," Said writes that the easiest way to identify writers who fill the roles of public intellectuals is "to list the names of...recent Nobel Prize winners, then to allow each name to trigger in the mind an emblemized region, which in turn can be seen as a sort of platform or jumping-off point for that writer's subsequent activity as an intervention in debates taking place very far from the world of literature" (in *The Public Intellectual*, 25). Of course, in this usage, for a writer to be a "public intellectual" implies an engagement in activities outside those typically held to be "literary," but in the following chapters the question will be raised as to whether such a distinction needs to be maintained between "intellectual" and "literary" activity.

caliber ("to the person who shall have produced...the most outstanding work").⁴¹ In the second and third chapters I will be looking primarily at the writers' Nobel lectures as their artistic and intellectual credos, and will supplement these readings with other prose writings when necessary.

The purpose of this thesis is not to define or delimit the role of writers, but rather to look at the ways in which certain writers are perceived and perceive themselves in relation to the public. The very adaptability of the public roles of writers in different societies signals that a serious reconsideration is required of what it means for writers and their work to be "socially engaged."

Finally, are there any amendments that can or should be made to Said's or Sartre's representations of the writer-intellectual? As suggested above, it can be too easy to stereotype, disparage, or romanticize the "intellectual" as a hero, prophet, dissident, exile, elitist, etc. Said's intellectual does not completely escape this tendency,⁴² nor do many writers' adamant assertions that they are "not intellectuals." Perhaps in order to restore legitimacy and relevance to the category "intellectual" in terms of its application to writers, it would be wise to keep in mind the following cautionary advice offered by Stefan Collini: "Many of the statements about intellectuals one hears from scholars and writers...seem to me to be over-heated and self-dramatizing; many of the views one encounters in the press and society more generally fall, on the other hand, into being too easily hostile and dismissive. Identifying and diagnosing these patterns may be one useful step towards accurately representing the diverse, ordinary activities of intellectuals in the here and now, and thus a way of resisting the related urges to glamourize and to disdain."⁴³

⁴¹ Allen, "Topping Shakespeare? Aspects of the Nobel Prize for Literature" (1997), <http://www.nobel.se/literature/articles/sture/index.html>.

⁴² "It is a spirit in opposition, rather than in accommodation, that grips me because the romance, the interest, the challenge of intellectual life is to be found in dissent against the status quo at a time when the struggle seems so unfairly weighted against them" (Said, xvii).

⁴³ Collini, "'Every Fruit-juice Drinker, Nudist, Sandal-wearer...': Intellectuals as Other People" in *The Public Intellectual*, 206.

Jean-Paul Sartre: The Writer and Intellectual Commitment

"Today's society still hems in and surrounds the writer, sometimes with prizes and rewards, often with denigration or ridiculing of intellectual work altogether...Sartre did say that the intellectual is never more an intellectual than when surrounded, cajoled, hemmed in, hectorated by society to be one thing or another, because only then and on that basis can intellectual work be constructed. When he refused the Nobel Prize in 1964 he was acting precisely according to his principles."⁴⁴

Following his controversial rejections of an appointment to the French Legion d'Honneur in 1945 and the Nobel Prize for literature in 1964 on the grounds that "a writer must refuse to allow himself to be classified as an institution,"⁴⁵ Jean-Paul Sartre gave a series of lectures in Japan in 1965 to clarify his position on the subject of the writer as intellectual. In these lectures he offered his most sustained and thorough philosophical treatment of this subject, though by no means his only attempt. Throughout most of his life, Sartre's often conflicting commitments to existentialism and Marxism as well as his vocations as philosopher and writer kept him closely engaged with the questions of the function of intellectuals, writers, and literature in society.

Sartre's early days as an existentialist philosopher were marked by a conspicuous absence of a political consciousness. He had an intense conviction that literature alone, and not political action, was capable of changing the world. His first novel, *Nausea*, was an explication of his philosophical ideas. But why a novel and not a philosophical treatise? One commentator puts it as follows: "As Simone de Beauvoir says, a philosopher who makes subjectivity, concrete human existence, central to his viewpoint is bound to become a literary artist, so as to convey the human condition in its full concrete reality."⁴⁶ This unshakeable vision of literature as concrete reality remained with him throughout his life.

Sartre began to have doubts about his philosophical commitments, however, especially insofar as the existentialist position signified the notions of angst, alienation and paralysis. Increasingly criticized by his Communist compatriots, he wrote *What Is Literature?* (1947) to question the notion of commitment in literature and to ask whether one could be politically aligned and still be an authentic writer. He raised the basic questions, "Why write?" and "For whom does one write?" and attempted to uncover the complexities that underlined the notion of committed art.

With his conversion to Marxism, Sartre's ideas about the role and function of the intellectual and the writer as intellectual acquired a more pragmatic hue, and in his Japanese lectures he explains that the "unhappy consciousness" of the intellectual "in no way represents a stasis but rather a *provisional halt* in the steady

⁴⁴ Said, *Representations of the Intellectual*, 74-5.

⁴⁵ Sartre, *What Is Literature?* (1966), 214.

⁴⁶ Lavigne, *From Socrates to Sartre: The Philosophic Quest* (1984), 342.

transformation of a technician of practical knowledge into a radicalized companion of the masses."⁴⁷ Sartre's representation of the intellectual in these lectures first examines the present "unhappy" situation of the intellectual (characterized by useless idealism and inefficiency) and then proposes a plan for action to overcome his situation. In addition, Sartre makes a crucial connection between the function of the writer in society and the function of the intellectual. In doing so, he maintains his earlier vision of literature as transformative while attempting to lay out a practical strategy through which this can be achieved. The ways in which Sartre links his representations of the intellectual and the writer to commitment and praxis will be considered at length below.

Historical Development of the Intellectual Consciousness

When Sartre is quoted as saying, "The intellectual is someone who concerns himself with what is none of his business," it is very easy, as Bruce Robbins points out, to dismiss the remark as self-contradictory, even facetious. By *making* something your business (and thus violating accepted boundaries of your field), you "*disqualify* that activity as the basis of your identity as intellectual" at the same time that you become fully engaged.⁴⁸ Obviously, Sartre does not intend by any means to dismiss the intellectual in this remark, but rather to point out that this contradiction is *central* to the intellectual's identity. In addition, this "true" identity is a conscious departure from the ordinary, socially recognized functions of his class – a class made up of technicians and specialists of knowledge.

To set up these issues, Sartre delves into a discussion of the historical development of the intellectual⁴⁹ in Western Europe. (Sartre had discussed this same historical development in *What Is Literature?* but had used the word "writer" in place of "intellectual.") Until the 14th century, the clerics were the sole proprietors of knowledge whose function it was to defend and transmit Christian ideology in order to reinforce the existing feudal hierarchy. After the Middle Ages, however, the development of the merchant class was accompanied by the growth of specialists in fields of practical knowledge, such as medicine and law. With the secularization of nearly every sphere of practical activity and the consequent demise of a unified theology, the bourgeoisie "felt a compelling need to affirm itself as a class with a global conception of the world, that is to say an ideology."⁵⁰ Thus, the philosophers who came from the group of specialists (Sartre names, among others, the writers Voltaire, Diderot and Rousseau) became the successors to the medieval clerics, called upon "to create a rational conception of the Universe which would embrace and justify the *action* and *demand*s of the bourgeoisie."⁵¹ Using scientific methods of reasoning and analysis, they critically applied their skills to historical and social problems and constructed a rational ideology of "universal humanism."

⁴⁷ Sartre, "A Plea for Intellectuals" in *Between Existentialism and Marxism: Sartre on Philosophy, Politics, Psychology, and the Arts* (1974), 228.

⁴⁸ Robbins, "Introduction: The Grounding of Intellectuals" in *Intellectuals: Aesthetics, Politics, Academics* (1990), xv.

⁴⁹ Always designated masculine in Sartre's writings, and therefore will be referred to as such in this chapter for the purposes of clarity and continuity when quoting.

⁵⁰ *PI*, 234.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

Were these philosophers the first intellectuals, especially since they knowingly and willingly used their skills for means other than their own ends? Yes and no, Sartre replies. Although they *were* criticized by the aristocrats for "meddling" in others' affairs, these philosophers nevertheless belonged to the bourgeoisie and developed and transmitted discourse which reinforced the consciousness of their own class. By claiming their ideals to be "universal" and "humanist," the philosophers were in effect attempting to clear away the ideologies of all other classes in society. These philosophers were "organic" intellectuals in the sense that Gramsci intended – that is, as members of a class taking upon themselves "the task of expressing the *objective spirit* of this class."⁵² Though their particular ideologies have lost their currency, the figure of the philosopher survives in the intellectuals of today, and Sartre next turns to the modern characteristics of the class of which these intellectuals constitute a part.

Sartre claims that intellectuals today, like the philosophers before them, still come from the category of technicians and specialists of practical knowledge, only this time they do not belong to the "ruling" class but rather to a class defined solely by its function, i.e., as a *job*. Their education is closely regulated by the ruling class, which is a crucial point for Sartre. Through this education, Sartre argues, technicians and specialists are indoctrinated to use their learned skills and privileged positions as teachers and researchers to circulate received ideologies (this, of course, is in keeping with Marxist theories of hegemony). The difference between this situation and that of the philosophers is that these technicians and specialists are *compelled* to focus their activities towards others' ends – they are merely "middle men, middling men, middle-class men."⁵³

Here Sartre introduces the contradictions that lead to the development of the intellectual consciousness. The first conflict arises when the technician, who has been taught that "all men are equal," realizes that in fact, all men are *not* equal, and that he is living proof as the possessor of privilege – that is, of education and specialized knowledge – that pits him above most members of the working class. Furthermore, he recognizes that he is alienated not only from the working class by his privilege, but also from the ruling class in whose ideology he has been indoctrinated but which he cannot accept as his own. His skills, which ideally would be put to use for "universal good," are in reality only used to advance the goals of the ruling class (Sartre gives the all-too-familiar example of doctors who discover vital cures that, in the end, only benefit the small minority who can actually afford the prohibitive price of medication).⁵⁴

These conflicts contribute to profound feelings of disillusionment and alienation, which transform the technician's activity into what Sartre calls the "ceaseless reciprocal contestation between the universal and the particular," an endless enterprise forever provoking the suspicion of the authorities, and one that can only be resolved if the technician either submits to the dominant ideology or "becomes a monster, that is to say an intellectual; *someone who attends to what concerns him...* and whom others refer to as a *man who interferes in what does not concern him*."⁵⁵ The distinction between the technicians and the technicians-turned-intellectuals, then, is the difference between the scientists who work on atomic fission in order to develop nuclear weaponry, and those who, "terrified by the destructive power of the devices they have helped to create, join forces and sign a manifesto alerting

⁵² Ibid., 236.

⁵³ Ibid., 239.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 242.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 244.

public opinion to the dangers of the atomic bomb."⁵⁶ This troubled dynamic between the "universal" and the "particular" – concepts which will be clarified later – forms the crux of his discussion when he formulates the connection between the intellectual and the writer.

The Intellectual Contradiction

The tone with which Sartre introduces the appearance of the intellectual is at once grave and accusing. In his analysis, the contradictions which have paved the development (and estrangement) of the intellectual consciousness "is nothing other than an unmasking of the fundamental contradictions of the society...In this sense no society can complain of its intellectuals without accusing itself, for it has the intellectuals it makes."⁵⁷ However, he quickly turns to the question of the intellectual's newfound commitment to a struggle for *true* universalization, which he poses against exploitation, oppression, alienation, ideology, and inequality.⁵⁸

At all levels in his investigation, the intellectual must confront and attempt to overcome the contradictions within himself and within society. He is an outsider because he has ostracized himself from the ruling class by taking on what he believes to be the cause of the oppressed. But in spite of his distanced position, he, unlike the philosophers before him, cannot claim that his ideas are universally applicable, because he realizes that he himself is still firmly "situated in the social universe" – both in the class he comes from and the particular (though liminal) situation in which he finds himself now – and that he needs to first recognize and root out pervasive ideologies in his own thinking before he can persuade others to do the same.⁵⁹

Sartre soundly defends the intellectual from the attack that he is shut off from the world, only moving about in the realm of pure, abstract ideas. The intellectual is "an agent of practical knowledge, *first and foremost*."⁶⁰ This "practicality" is deeply informed by his class-consciousness, and it in turn informs the technique that he employs in his investigations. In addition, the intellectual typically does not contend with ideology (such as racism) at an abstract level, but rather as manifested in real, historical and social events. Sartre refers to both events and intellectuals as "singular universals," by which he means that "the universality of the idea is limited by the singularity of the fact, a *dated and localized* event that *takes place* at a certain point in history."⁶¹ In order to enact any sort of social change, the intellectual must be prepared to deal with ideology at the level of the concrete, i.e. using practical skills and means within lived experience.

Sartre's intellectual is both plagued and driven by his conflicts: "The nature of his contradiction obliges him to *commit himself* in every one of the conflicts of our time, because all of them – class, national, and racial conflicts – are particular effects of the oppression of the under-privileged and because, in each of these conflicts, he finds himself, as a man conscious of his own oppression, on the side of the oppressed."⁶² The restless pursuit of truth

⁵⁶ Ibid., 230.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 246.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 259.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 247.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 250.

⁶¹ Ibid., 251-2.

⁶² Ibid., 254.

through the ceaseless questioning and dismantling of ideology, the dynamic relationship between self-analysis and social criticism, the embodiment of the dialectic between the universal and the particular, the commitment to the struggle for justice – these are the complex and compelling images that Sartre offers us in the figure of the intellectual. In the next section, he investigates the connection between this figure and that of the writer.

The Writer as Intellectual

Is the writer's vocation the same as the intellectual's? It's difficult to tell at first glance, Sartre replies. Unlike the intellectual, not every writer seems to have the intention of conveying practical knowledge or universal themes.⁶³ Many important works have drawn from "particularist" nationalist traditions or from a drive towards complete psychological subjectivity. In addition, there is a strong argument against "using" literature as a mere vehicle for ideas (of which Sartre himself had been accused of in his own plays and novels).⁶⁴ Sartre acknowledges that many critics have argued that the more obvious an author's intentions appear, the less "beautiful" the work tends to be judged.⁶⁵ Sartre himself had already pointed out in *What Is Literature?* that the experience of aesthetic pleasure is a crucial form of collusion between the writer and his reader, and that "this feeling, when it appears, is a sign that *the work is achieved*"⁶⁶ (italics added). Judging from these few examples, it would appear that the writer's task is quite different from that of the intellectual.

But what about writers who *are* committed to the struggle for universalization (or at least appear to be) in their work? "Commitment" and "engagement," used interchangeably, are problematic terms for Sartre: "Writing is a certain way of wanting freedom; once you have begun, you are engaged, willy-nilly. But engaged in what? Defending freedom? That's easy to say. Is it a matter of acting as guardian of ideal values like Benda's clerk before the betrayal, or is it concrete, everyday freedom which must be protected by our taking sides in political and social struggles?"⁶⁷ (In relation to this, *must* commitment manifest itself in literature in the form of political, social, or idealistic themes? It seems that Sartre wants a more subtle approach that doesn't resemble propaganda, especially since he has already raised the issue of aesthetics.) Finally, are certain writers committed because of their historical and social circumstances, or is commitment simply a property inherent in *all* writers' activity? These are several key questions that Sartre addresses at length in the rest of the lectures.

The type of writer that Sartre examines here is the writer of prose. He had already made a very clear distinction between the prose-writer and the poet in *What Is Literature?* ("Poetry is on the side of painting,

⁶³ Ibid., 267.

⁶⁴ "Sartre's plays are vehicles for what the author wants to say; they have failed to keep pace with the evolution of aesthetic forms. They operate with traditional plots and exalt them with an unshaken faith in meanings that are to be transferred from art to reality" (Adorno, 81).

⁶⁵ cf. "The artist is the creator of beautiful things. To reveal art and conceal the artist is art's aim... There is no such thing as a moral or an immoral book. Books are well written, or badly written. That is all... No artist has ethical sympathies. An ethical sympathy in an artist is an unpardonable mannerism of style... All art is quite useless" (Oscar Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* [1991], 3-4).

⁶⁶ *WIL*, 37.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 42. The reference to "Benda's clerk" is an allusion to Julien Benda's seminal work on intellectuals, *Les Trahisons des Clerks* (1928), alternately translated into English as *The Treason or Betrayal of the Intellectuals*.

sculpture, and music...Poets are men who refuse to *utilize* language," "Prose is, in essence, utilitarian."⁶⁸) Thus, if prose-writers "utilize" language for certain purposes, then it is perfectly appropriate to ask them, "Why are you writing this?" (Poets, it is implied, have already separated themselves completely from their work, which have been reified into objects of art.)

However, the prose-writer is not *merely* transmitting information. Sartre clarifies this idea by referring to Roland Barthes's distinction between the "literal writer" and the "literary writer," in which the literal writer restricts himself to the use of technical language in order to transmit information, whereas the literary writer (whether or prose or poetry) is "an artisan who produces a certain verbal object by working on the materiality of words"⁶⁹ and takes advantage of the rich ambiguities of ordinary, everyday language. According to Sartre, ordinary language contains a "maximum of *misinformation*"⁷⁰ and is distinguishable from technical language, which is constructed to be as semantically precise as possible. Thus the writer's craft lies partly in his ability to exploit the possibilities of ordinary language, to charge words with unusual meanings, and to draw attention to the dense "materiality" of language.⁷¹

However, when the writer "plays" with language in such a manner, he inevitably ends up using it "in such a way as to make his work virtually incommunicable to all but his compatriots, accentuating its national particularity at the very moment that he suggests universal meanings."⁷² Perhaps this statement can be rendered more clearly by an observation made in *What Is Literature?* When confronted with the question, "For whom do you write?" the writer will usually reply, "Anyone," but "whether he wants to or not, and even if he has his eyes on eternal laurels, the writer is speaking to his contemporaries and brothers of his class and race."⁷³ What Sartre is trying to demonstrate at this point is that the writer makes "his *being-in-language* the expression of his *being-in-the-world*"⁷⁴ – i.e., in his work he attempts to signify elements that correspond to the world, but this signification is conditioned by the writer's cultural language and by the individual hallmark of his style. Thus, in his work the writer represents the "singular universal," intrinsically linking his task to that of the intellectual.

The "singular universal" dialectic is not captured statically in the work itself, however. It is drawn into motion through the dynamic interaction between the writer, reader and work. Sartre is quite conscious of contemporary theories that have shifted emphasis from the writer to the reader, and he incorporates these ideas into his analysis of the dialectic. In the act of reading, the reader is immersed in a particular viewpoint of the world that is offered by the writer's work. In turn, the work "addresses itself to the creative freedom of the reader and solicits him to recompose the work by reading it (for reading, too, is creation)."⁷⁵ Through the creative act of interpretation,

⁶⁸ Ibid., 4, 11.

⁶⁹ *PI*, 272.

⁷⁰ Ibid., 269.

⁷¹ Sartre believes that when the writer "plays" with language, his creative experiments should not be word games created solely for the sake of aesthetic pleasure, but stylistic devices to be used in shaping the underlying "universal" meaning of the work (280). In this comment Sartre comes closest in these lectures to articulating a distinction between commitment and "pure" aesthetics.

⁷² *PI*, 280.

⁷³ *WIL*, 43.

⁷⁴ *PI*, 280.

⁷⁵ Ibid., 278.

the reader is invited to construct his own viewpoint and thus "freely to grasp his own being-in-the-world."⁷⁶ Sartre suggests that by simply bringing the reader to recognize his creative freedom as well as his own situatedness in the world, the literary work is functionally illuminating, transformative, and socially committed.

At this point, Sartre brings his lectures to a close with his conclusion that the writer's task is intrinsically the same as the task of the intellectual:

*In his professional capacity itself, the writer is necessarily always at grips with the contradiction between the particular and the universal. Whereas other intellectuals see their function arise from a contradiction between the universalist demands of their profession and the particularist demands of the dominant class, the inner task of the writer is to remain on the plane of lived experience while suggesting universalization as the affirmation of life on its horizon. In this sense, the writer is not an intellectual accidentally, like others, but essentially.*⁷⁷

For Sartre, the nature of intellectual commitment is inherent to the writer's task because to be committed is "to communicate the incommunicable (being-in-the-world as lived experience) by exploiting the misinformation contained in ordinary language, and maintaining the tension between the whole and the part, totality and totalization, the world and being-in-the-world, as the *significance* of his work."⁷⁸

These are convenient conclusions, considering that Sartre evades the issue of having to define more precisely the concept of "commitment" by declaring it to be *inherent* to writing, suggesting that no further analysis is necessary. As conclusive as this may appear to be in these lectures, however, in other writings Sartre engages in a distinction between writers who are "consciously" committed and those who are not.⁷⁹ This distinction poses a problem because it implies that even if commitment is inherent to the writer's task, there are writers who are "more committed" than others, who are unaware of their commitment. The next section will look at this problem in further detail.

Conceptions of Intellectual Commitment

To clarify the function of the writer-intellectual in Sartre's thinking, it is necessary to examine more closely Sartre's concept of commitment. In the broadest sense that he uses it, commitment is merely the author's intention in a work,

⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁷⁷ Ibid., 284.

⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁷⁹ Madeleine Chapsal: "In *What Is Literature?* you said that, in your opinion, prose was no more than an instrument, an extension of one's arm or hand. Yet the writers who interest you are Flaubert, Genet, Mallarmé – all of whom seemed to regard writing as an end in itself. How do you reconcile this contradiction?"

Sartre: "As far as Flaubert is concerned, I use him to show that literature, understood as a pure art deriving all its rules from its own essence, conceals its author's commitment and his fiery opinions on every sort of subject – including social and political questions.... On the other hand, I am in complete sympathy with Mallarmé and Genet – they are both conscious of their commitment." ("The Purposes of Writing" in *Between Existentialism and Marxism*, 12-13.)

a simple answer to the question, "Why are you writing this?" In an interview, Madeleine Chapsal asks Sartre if he believes that literature is always committed, to which he replies, "If literature is not everything, it is worth nothing. This is what I mean by 'commitment.' It wilts if it is reduced to innocence, or to songs. If a written sentence does not reverberate at every level of man and society, then it makes no sense."⁸⁰

From these remarks, it can be inferred that commitment is "everything" literature should aspire to, but it does not refer to just "any" kind of literature. In other words, all writers should strive towards encompassing all of existence within their works, which means not evading questions of politics in favor of aesthetics. Indeed, in the interview Sartre offers a concept of beauty that is more in line with his idea of commitment: "The beauty of literature lies in its desire to be everything - and not in a sterile quest for beauty. Only a *whole* can be beautiful."⁸¹ And what is his response to "moral philistines" who advocate art-for-art's-sake? "Those who can't understand this - whatever they may have said - have not attacked me in the name of art, but in the name of their particular commitment."⁸² Though this statement suggests that even these writers are committed (albeit to the "sterile quest for beauty"), it is now clear that Sartre is distinguishing qualitatively between these various, *particular* commitments and the kind of commitment that he calls *universal*.

Adorno's essay "On Commitment" is written in response to Sartre's ideas on commitment in *What Is Literature?*, but Adorno already notes the conceptual vagueness that would become prevalent in Sartre's lectures on the intellectual. When Sartre makes commitment an inherent fact of the writer's task, "this definition is so general that any distinction between commitment and human works or behavior of any kind is lost. It is a question of the writer engaging himself in the present...but since the writer cannot escape the present in any case, no program can be inferred from this."⁸³ In any case, Adorno is unconvinced that Sartre's concept of commitment is as benign as it appears to be.

Adorno's main point of contention is that such a strict "either-or" separation between "committed" and "autonomous" literature does not in fact exist. (Of course, he recognizes that this division is expressed in such a manner by Sartre's followers rather than by the man himself. However, it is Adorno's main purpose in this essay to clarify what "commitment" actually entails, and thus to raise the overall level of the debate.) Even highly political works of literature are politically ambiguous if they are not intended to be purely read as propaganda. Also, because literary language can take on quite different resonances from language used in everyday speech, the original intentions of the writer can easily be misconstrued or at least interpreted in different ways, including those different from what the writer may have intended.⁸⁴ In addition, it is impossible that the writer's intentions inform every moment during the construction of the work, as there are obviously other literary demands (such as style and structure) that the writer must also attend to.⁸⁵

So what is Adorno's idea of commitment? Similar to Sartre's distinction between universal and particular commitment, Adorno distinguishes commitment from "tendentiousness," or the "advocacy of a particular partisan

⁸⁰ Ibid., 13-14.

⁸¹ Ibid., 14.

⁸² Ibid.

⁸³ Adorno, "On Commitment" in *Notes to Literature*, 80.

⁸⁴ Ibid., 77.

position."⁸⁶ "Tendentious" art is too obvious; it aims at getting specific laws and measures passed, while committed art merely "works toward an attitude."⁸⁷ Although this view of commitment could also be considered vague, Adorno is not interested in defining the concept, but rather in clarifying what it is *not*. In fact, in pointing out the ambiguities of the term itself, he is attempting to demonstrate that there is no way of defining committed literature, and that the only unambiguous form of literature is "tendentious," which, truth be told, is simply *bad art*.

There is another possible way of thinking about commitment, however. Instead of focusing on what goes *into* a work (i.e. the author's intentions), perhaps it would be more feasible to gauge what comes *out* of it (its effects). The question to be raised, then, is whether committed literature can create change external to the work which is different from what "tendentious" literature wants to achieve. Adorno suggests that art, solely through its form, should challenge the crude, "either-or" choices that are presented in ideology ("you are either with us or against us"). However, if art begins to present its own clear-cut choices to be made and becomes less ambiguous, then it undermines its own freedom.⁸⁸ As Adorno has already stated, *real* art is filled with ambiguities from which it derives its rich, complex meanings. Consequently this type of work, no matter what the author's intentions, has a genuinely powerful impact on the reader: "Kafka's prose and Beckett's plays...have an effect in comparison to which official works of committed art look like children's games – they arouse the anxiety that existentialism only talks about. In dismantling illusion they explode art from the inside, whereas proclaimed commitment only subjugates art from the outside, hence only illusorily. Their implacability compels the change in attitude that committed works only demand."⁸⁹ Adorno's comments resonate well with Sartre's assertion that "[t]he real work of the committed writer is, as I said before, to reveal, demonstrate, demystify, and dissolve myths and fetishes in a critical acid bath. With a bit of luck, other people will utilize him to create new myths; or else...the purest or most flamboyant style can become the equivalent of political action."⁹⁰ By bringing together Adorno's and Sartre's comments, it can be gathered that commitment is not to be measured by the clarity of the author's intentions, nor by the work's capability to transmit information. Instead, commitment is evaluated by the work's potential to change and enlarge the reader's consciousness of the varieties of human experience.

Conclusion

To summarize briefly, in his lectures Sartre has given his representations of the intellectual and of the writer as intellectual. In the Sartrean sense, there are two possibilities for the writer as intellectual. If the writer steps out of the boundaries of his vocation and speaks out in a public forum for a cause or an idea, he is an intellectual like any other who has "concerned himself with what is not strictly his business." On the other hand, the writer can function as intellectual simply through his work. Sartre does not *define* the intellectual or the writer per se, but rather offers them as potential identities whose effectiveness can be judged by the ramifications of their activities in society. The

⁸⁵ Ibid., 80.

⁸⁶ Ibid., 79.

⁸⁷ Ibid.

⁸⁸ Ibid., 80.

⁸⁹ Ibid., 90.

writer especially is capable of communicating ideas through his work that are not abstract but *situated* in his particular worldview, while at the same time enabling his reading public to recognize their own situation in the world as well as their own creative freedom. Of course, as potential identities that are forever on the road towards realization, Sartre's writer and intellectual must be prepared for the fact that they may not accomplish their goals, and that oftentimes they may be persecuted for pursuing them. To them, Sartre offers these words of encouragement: "Established power, whatever its complexion, typically seeks to make use of intellectuals as instruments of its propaganda, but it distrusts them and always makes them the first victims of a purge. No matter: as long as he can write and speak, the intellectual must defend the popular classes against the hegemony of the dominant class."⁹¹

⁹⁰ *PW*, 29.

⁹¹ *PI*, 266.

Nadine Gordimer: Negotiating Commitment in Politically Difficult Times

"Intellectual representations are the activity itself, dependent on a kind of consciousness that is skeptical, engaged, unremittingly devoted to rational investigation and moral judgment; and this puts the individual on record and on the line. Knowing how to use language well and knowing when to intervene in language are two essential features of intellectual action.

"...Intellectuals are of their time, herded along by the mass politics of representations embodied by the information or media industry, capable of resisting...by providing what Mills calls unmaskings or alternative versions in which to the best of one's ability the intellectual tries to tell the truth.

"This is far from an easy task: the intellectual always stands between loneliness and alignment."⁹²

The previous chapter discussed Sartre's philosophical account of writers and intellectuals, whereby writers fulfilled the intellectual function inherently through their work by conveying the existential experience of being-in-the-world. Of course, this does not preclude writers from "knowing when to intervene in language" and stepping out from the ordinary functions of their vocation onto the platform as public figures. This latter representation of intellectual action is directly tied to the demands of society, in which writers are called upon to use their literary gifts in order to perform duties as politicians, as spokespersons against civil abuses, or as cultural architects of nationalist expressions. Of course, occupying several roles at once is not an impossible task, though the risk remains that writers may abandon writing in favor of their public responsibilities (this does not include writers whose creative expression is rendered silent by political edict). Less obvious, though potentially more sinister, is the possibility that half-examined political cant would slowly become the driving force behind one's literature, and writers would abandon the "skeptical" and "engaged" consciousness that is so critical in resisting what Said labels "the mass politics of representations."⁹³ However, to what extent, if at all, are these representations of writer-intellectuals incompatible? Is it possible to take on the role of the public intellectual say, for example, in a particularly repressive society while still having artistic "freedom" in one's own creative work? Furthermore, if what Sartre had surmised is something to be achieved (rather than something that is inherent), how can writers realistically fulfill the intellectual function *within* their work?

The South African writer Nadine Gordimer – described in the 1991 Nobel Prize press release as "the doyenne of South African letters" due to her "continual involvement on behalf of literature and free speech in a police state" despite her aspiration "to live as a private individual outside the public eye"⁹⁴ – has wrestled intimately in her own life and work with the contradictions presented by these representations. In the essay "Living in the Interregnum" Gordimer writes, "I have to offer you myself as my most closely observed specimen from the

⁹² Said, *Representations of the Intellectual*, 20, 21-22.

⁹³ Ibid.

⁹⁴ <http://www.nobel.se/literature/laureates/1991/press.html>

interregnum; yet I remain a writer, not a public speaker: nothing I say here will be as true as my fiction."⁹⁵ The three main concerns in this statement reappear over and over again as themes in her nonfiction.

What Gordimer "offers" is not merely herself as an object of study, but her position in society *as mediated by* her own subjective interpretations. She views her own position as artist-observer as being "privileged," both in a class sense and also subjectively, from an "outsider" vantage point by which she is able to critically assess her society. Gordimer does not by any means claim that her experience is representative of South Africans or of South African writers in general; in fact, an important reason why she chooses to "destroy [her] privilege of privacy" is to avoid making such distorted claims, which exhibit "the arrogance of interpreting my country through the private life that, as Theodor Adorno puts it, 'drags on only as an appendage of the social process' in a time and place of which I am a part."⁹⁶ However, in this particular essay, which was originally given as a lecture at the New York Institute of the Humanities, Gordimer makes it clear that her "confessions" are not simply autobiographical acts, but a direct invitation for her audience to examine themselves in the light of her self-scrutiny: "The particular segment of South African society to which I belong, by the colour of my skin, whether I like it or not, represents a crisis that has a particular connection with the Western world, to which you in this audience belong."⁹⁷ It is very interesting how Gordimer handles this constant movement back and forth between public and private experience, especially in the way this negotiation reflects and perhaps even validates Sartre's description of the writer-intellectual's situation as a perpetually restless condition of "being-in-the-world." This chapter will look at some of the ways in which Gordimer weaves autobiographical impressions (herself as "specimen") through her nonfiction in order to glean insights into the truth of a possible "universal" condition of writer-intellectuals.

Gordimer's assertion that she is a "writer, not a public speaker" is another strong thread that runs through her convictions, namely that writers should not be propagandists, blindly subject to any idea. Writers in politically difficult times, she says, should be socially recognized in their own right, not in the sense of writers-as-politicians, but writers-as-writers.⁹⁸ However, the identity "writer" is no doubt a problematic one for Gordimer, raising similar issues as the "intellectual" does for Said. As Stephen Clingman writes in his introduction to Gordimer's essays in *The Essential Gesture*, "There is always the tension Gordimer posits for the writer between 'standing apart and being fully involved.' Again, however, in South Africa the pattern takes on especial emphasis. For in a country suffering under apartheid, where one's social and political commitments are fundamental, a central question remains: how is one to fulfill those commitments as a writer?...What – in essence – is the relationship between creativity and responsibility?"⁹⁹ Clingman's questions are pertinent, because Gordimer brings commonly raised questions of the writer-intellectual's role into sharp relief within her own particular situation in South Africa in her many discussions on the subject of writing. Moreover, as mentioned above, Gordimer then projects these issues, clarified through an examination of their relation to her own experience, onto a more general conception of the writer-intellectual's role in contemporary society.

⁹⁵ Gordimer, "Living in the Interregnum" (1982) in *The Essential Gesture: Writing, Politics and Places*, 221.

⁹⁶ Ibid.

⁹⁷ Ibid.

⁹⁸ Gordimer, "The Status of the Writer in the World Today: Which World? Whose World?" (1997) in *Living in Hope and History: Notes from Our Century*, 22.

The tension of polarities drives her discussions on writing – solitude and social engagement, creativity and responsibility, art and politics, fact and fiction. The last of these is addressed by her remark, repeated in many of her other nonfiction essays and in her Nobel lecture, that "nothing I say here will be as true as my fiction." The distinction Gordimer makes between her factual and fictional works is an interesting one, in which the greater value of truth is assigned to her fiction. One of the issues raised by this distinction is Gordimer's understanding of truth. While Gordimer's notion of truth-value seems to be dependent on a level of subjectivity which she considers to be lacking in a factual account, the question will later be raised whether her factual accounts are wholly objective and thus undeserving of being considered as "truthful" in the subjective and imaginative sense that Gordimer intends. This becomes an especially important issue when considering the validity of yet another distinction Gordimer makes between her intellectual endeavors as a writer and as a socially-conscious citizen, as well as the very authority of the ideas presented in her nonfiction work.

Both Kathrin Wagner and Stephen Clingman note how Gordimer proposes that truth can be revealed in the work of a writer who writes as honestly as he or she can. But whereas Wagner criticizes Gordimer for conceiving truth to be "both ideologically neutral and accessible,"¹⁰⁰ Clingman points out the significance of such a conception in that it "means that in each [of her novels] Gordimer has set out to investigate as honestly as she believes possible the implications of history for her world."¹⁰¹

Borrowing Clingman's perspective on Gordimer's fiction, this chapter considers a focus on the critical exploration in her nonfiction which engages the never-ending process of sifting through ideas that are falsely presented as ends in themselves. Of course, Gordimer declares certain unwavering convictions, chief among these that racism in any form is unequivocally "evil," but these convictions are to be considered as guideposts – ideological in the Althusserian sense, perhaps, but nevertheless still part of the tools used in the clearing-away process. Clingman's helpful comment that Gordimer's fiction and nonfiction "are best thought of not as two separate entities, but as two different modes revolving around a single process"¹⁰² does not quite clarify this "single process" in terms of Gordimer's notion of truth, but for the purposes here his comment can be used to demonstrate how Gordimer's "fiction" (her creative work) and "nonfiction" (her social commitments) revolve around the "single process" of her intellectual activity. This separation between her creative work and social commitments may not be absolute, but nevertheless it serves as a useful heuristic.

Gordimer's Nobel lecture, "Writing and Being,"¹⁰³ can be seen as a précis of the ideas in her various credos as a writer-intellectual, a view that Gordimer herself invites. The issues raised in this lecture will be examined in relation to passages in her other nonfiction essays and interviews which deal with similar topics. The first section below will deal with the autobiographical and the subjective in Gordimer's nonfiction, in which she examines her own status and development as a writer-intellectual in South African society during the years of apartheid. This will tie in with her more general ideas on the intellectual roles and functions of writers, and then more specifically on the

⁹⁹ Clingman, "Introduction" in *TEG*, 6.

¹⁰⁰ Wagner, *Rereading Nadine Gordimer* (1994), 31.

¹⁰¹ Clingman, *The Novels of Nadine Gordimer: History from the Inside* (1986), 12.

¹⁰² Clingman, "Introduction" in *TEG*, 10.

¹⁰³ Gordimer, "Writing and Being" (1991 Nobel lecture) in *LHH*.

situation of the writers in politically difficult times. Finally, this chapter will look at Gordimer's appeal to the writer's freedom and to the writer's commitment to truth, as well as what these freedoms and commitments signify in different social and political circumstances.

Charting Gordimer's "Double Development" as a Writer

How does the writer become one, having been given the word?

...The life, the opinions, are not the work, for it is in the tension between standing apart and being involved that the imagination transforms both. Let me give some minimal account of myself.¹⁰⁴

This brief passage from "Writing and Being" features many of the complex thematic tensions that typically mark Gordimer's comments on writing. To begin with, despite her persistent claims that her life and opinions should be given less weight than her work, nevertheless the autobiographical act creeps in time and time again – "I have to offer you myself as my most closely observed specimen," "Let me give some minimal account of myself" – which invites the notion that any critical discussion of her work is inconceivable without engaging the personal. It can be argued that with Gordimer's incorporation of the personal and the autobiographical into her nonfiction, a subjective dimension is introduced, moving the work away from being "merely" factual in nature. Paul de Man has proposed that "autobiography is not a genre at all but 'a figure of reading or understanding' that is in operation not only within autobiography but also across a range of texts," including the kind of personal criticism that Gordimer engages in in her nonfiction. De Man also adds that autobiographies "produce fictions or figures in place of the self-knowledge they seek."¹⁰⁵ His use of the word "fictions" within the context of autobiography is significant, as it challenges Gordimer's adamant distinction between her fiction and her nonfiction. In another study, Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson complicate the notion of truth within autobiographical acts by maintaining that they are intersubjective modes which "cannot be read solely as either factual truth or simple facts."¹⁰⁶ In light of these conclusions, it becomes possible to reevaluate Gordimer's nonfiction and to gain a greater sense of the subjective connections between her critical self-assessments as a writer and her writing as a whole.

To return to Gordimer's question, "How does the writer become one, having being given the word?" The "minimal account" of herself that is given in the Nobel lecture offers a glimpse of her early development as a "natural" writer who began to write "out of the joy of apprehending life through my senses...and which took form, found some enlightenment, solace, and delight, shaped in the written word."¹⁰⁷ Intertwined throughout the lecture are the Sartrean themes of "writing" and "being" – being a writer, and writing as an act of apprehending being-in-the-world. In the early stages this expression of being is solipsistic, addressed to the self through one's imagination. However, the next stage of development for the writer involves a burgeoning social consciousness, which Gordimer

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., 199-200.

¹⁰⁵ From de Man's essay "Autobiography as De-Facement" (1979) as quoted in Anderson, *Autobiography* (2001), 12-13.

¹⁰⁶ Smith and Watson, *Reading Autobiography: A Guide for Interpreting Life Narratives* (2001), 13.

¹⁰⁷ "Writing and Being," 200.

expresses as the simple need to "address oneself to others...to publish to anyone who would read what I wrote."¹⁰⁸ Through this initial extension of contact with "others" through her writing, Gordimer first introduces the tension between solitude and engagement that would become a theme she would return to again and again throughout her development as a writer.

When reading any autobiographical text, it is of course necessary to keep in mind that the narrative subject is situated within, and thus a product of, a particular milieu. However, oftentimes the subject may record a moment when he or she begins to question the cultural forms of the knowledge which is valued at that particular historical moment.¹⁰⁹ This questioning can bring with it life-changing consequences. For Gordimer, an "early consciousness of racism"¹¹⁰ led her to view increasingly critically her privileged position in society. Gordimer became beset by a sense of being *doubly* marginalized, both in the sociological sense of being a member of a white minority (compounded by her anti-apartheid attitude), and also as an intellectual, which as Clingman suggests is accompanied by a certain solitude in itself – "an existential loneliness."¹¹¹ Gordimer identifies the roots of her intellectual "loneliness" in the following quotation from her essay "Selecting My Stories": "Growing up in a gold-mining town in South Africa as a member of a white minority, I found that my particular solitude as an intellectual-by-inclination was so complete I did not even know I was one...Certainly there must have been other people who were intellectuals, but they no doubt accepted their isolation too philosophically to give a signal they scarcely hoped would be answered, let alone attract an acolyte."¹¹²

Due in part to this stance of "standing apart," however, Gordimer began to chart an interior development as a writer separate from her external experiences growing up in the small town of Springs. These early experiences helped shape her firm conviction that artistic creation *needs* the condition of solitude in order to thrive, a conviction neatly summarized in her assertion below:

"I believe – I *know* (there are not many things I should care to dogmatize about, on the subject of writing) that writers need solitude, and seek alienation of a kind every day of their working lives. (And remember, they are not even aware when and when not they are working...)
Powers of observation heightened beyond the normal imply extraordinary disinvolvement; or rather the double process, excessive preoccupation and identification with the lives of others, and at the same time a monstrous detachment. For identification brings the superficial loyalties (that is, to the self) of concealment and privacy, while detachment brings the harsher fidelities (to the truth about the self) of revealment and exposure."¹¹³

In an interview, Studs Terkel keenly observes of her early period, "There was a double development here: outside, and to some extent the people you met, the books you read; but in addition, and perhaps most important – because

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 201.

¹⁰⁹ Smith and Watson, 62, 177.

¹¹⁰ "Writing and Being," 201.

¹¹¹ Clingman, "Introduction" in *TEG*, 5.

¹¹² "Selecting My Stories" (1975) in *TEG*, 94.

you speak of the interior life often, deep inside you – was this particular restlessness...not quite contentment in accepting what was." Gordimer responds to this, "Yes, indeed, otherwise I might have stayed all my life accepting the conventions into which I had been born...I felt it was false. Something in me told me it was false, and things outside me, as I grew older, confirmed that it was false, and cruel, and absurd."¹¹⁴ Gordimer states that this conflictual awareness in her self-knowledge and in her knowledge of others became deeply embedded in her writing, manifested in a representation of the world which Clingman describes as "history from the inside," or as Dorothy Driver explains elsewhere, "history as experienced by individuals who are products of a contradictory and fraught social and political history rather than just actors in and observers of that history."¹¹⁵

However, the complex relationship between standing apart and being involved gave rise to yet another tension in Gordimer's writing – between a mere expression of being-in-the-world, and an impassioned desire to change the circumstances that she believed to be "false, cruel and absurd." This new tension signaled a shift in Gordimer's intellectual consciousness towards an attempt in her literary work to render transparent the ideological constructions of racism. Of course, this very attempt to dismantle their guise signals the inevitable formation of her own consciousness as shaped by these ideologies as well as by her horror at them, an acknowledgment she makes in interviews with Terkel ("I'm not really a very politically-minded person, but living perhaps not just in South Africa and that situation, but I think in the whole world today – you simply cannot be an aware person without being involved"¹¹⁶) and with Alan Ross ("I don't suppose, if I had lived elsewhere, my writing would have reflected politics much. If at all. As it is, I have come to the abstractions of politics through the flesh and blood of individual behavior. I didn't know what politics was about until I saw it all *happening to people*"¹¹⁷). Gordimer describes her own struggle as a writer as centering around the conflict between her political convictions and the creative freedom of her artistic uncertainties, which "in another country, another time...would present no conflict because they would operate in unrelated parts of existence."¹¹⁸

Gordimer's intensifying consciousness of the public for whom she is writing exposes another deep contradiction, however. Clingman remarks how Sartre had described a similar tension which came about for French writers after the French Revolution, who previously had few, if any, ideological conflicts with the aristocrats who commissioned their works. After the Revolution, however, these writers "experienced a rupture" when the strengthening bourgeois class began to present themselves as the writers' "virtual public," which Clingman interprets as "a kind of *listening* public, a self-projected gallery for the writer, waiting in implicit silent judgment on everything he wrote...against whose significance, cause and values the significance, cause and values of all writing now had to be measured."¹¹⁹ Clingman argues that Sartre's model is "perfectly" appropriate to Gordimer's case: "For the bourgeoisie of eighteenth-century France we need only substitute the oppressed black classes of twentieth-

¹¹³ Ibid., 95.

¹¹⁴ Interview with Studs Terkel (1962) in *Conversations with Nadine Gordimer*, 17.

¹¹⁵ Dorothy Driver, "Nadine Gordimer at 70" in *Southern African Review of Books* (Nov/Dec 1993).

¹¹⁶ Interview with Terkel, 27.

¹¹⁷ Interview with Alan Ross (1965) in *CNG*, 35.

¹¹⁸ "Living in the Interregnum," 231-2.

¹¹⁹ Clingman, *The Novels of Nadine Gordimer: History from the Inside*, 214.

century South Africa as her own 'virtual public.'¹²⁰ Unlike the French writers who were themselves part of the bourgeois class, however, Gordimer is alienated from her virtual public, in terms of historical, racial, and class-based experience. Faced with these seemingly insurmountable obstacles, how can Gordimer as a writer expect to bridge the existential divide between herself and her virtual public? Clingman offers hope, however, suggesting that even if "she cannot write directly *for* her virtual public, she can at least write *towards* it, addressing the question of its oppression, the justice of its cause and the eventuality of its triumph. Implicitly this is also an address to the future, for this represents the moment in which that triumph will be realized."¹²¹ Taking the opportunity offered by Clingman to consider literature in these projective terms, the next section will examine Gordimer's attempts to explore the social transformations that can be achieved through writing.

The Transformative Imagination of the Writer

[The word's] most significant transformation occurred for me and my kind long ago, when it was first scratched on a stone tablet...

It was both ontogenesis as the origin and development of an individual being, and the adaptation, in the nature of that individual, specifically to the exploration of ontogenesis, the origin and development of the individual being. For we writers are evolved for that task.

...we spend our lives attempting to interpret through the word the readings we take in the societies, the world of which we are part. It is in this sense, this inextricable, ineffable participation, that writing is always and at once an exploration of self and of the world; of individual and collective being.¹²²

When Gordimer describes her burgeoning self-awareness as a "natural" writer, she does not intend to make a distinction between those who are "born" with literary talents and those who must work towards developing them. In fact, Gordimer conceives the archetypal writer-intellectual as being endowed with an extraordinary nature, having "evolved" to play a significant role in society, that is, to uncover and to transform through imagination what she philosophically refers to as "the essence of things." The echoes of Sartre's "inherent intellectual nature of the writer" can be heard in her comment, "It is *in [the writer's] nature* to want to transform the world, as it is a *political decision* for those who are not artists to want to transform the world. The revolutionary sense, in artistic terms, is the sense of totality, the conception of a 'whole' world, where theory and action meet in the imagination."¹²³

Gordimer's insistence on the writer's transformative nature and exceptional gifts of insight has led Wagner to observe that her particular view of the writer logically carries within itself a mandate of social commitment "to act as society's moral guide and guardian."¹²⁴ Wagner's observation is backed by Gordimer's assertion in "The Essential Gesture" that South African writers, black or white, have the responsibility to develop their abilities in order to more

¹²⁰ Ibid.

¹²¹ Ibid.

¹²² "Writing and Being," 195, 196.

¹²³ "Relevance and Commitment" (1975) in *TEG*, 118.

¹²⁴ Wagner, 30.

faithfully render the voice of the underprivileged and the oppressed segments in society – for black writers, "the development of that ability is their responsibility towards those with whom they are united by this extrapolation of suffering and resistance," and for white writers, "their essential gesture can be fulfilled only in the integrity Chekhov demanded: 'to describe a situation so truthfully...that the reader can no longer evade it.'"¹²⁵ Elsewhere, Gordimer defends the position of intellectuals as the representative "voice" of the people: "Who, of any group, in any society, formulates the aspirations, makes coherent the inchoate resentments, speaks the dreams of the mass of people who cannot express these things for themselves? Who, anywhere in the world, translates the raw material of the human condition, which millions experience but for which millions have no words?...[I]n their work they express what all these people could never, would never say."¹²⁶ Like Edward Said, Gordimer remains unflinchingly dedicated to the dictum, "Art is on the side of the oppressed."¹²⁷

Of course, social commitment does not negate the writer's need for solitude, which, as shown above, Gordimer regards as "a common condition conducive to becoming a writer...the condition of creation."¹²⁸ According to Gordimer, the condition of solitude is not unique to a particular situation or limited by the psychological tendencies of the writer. "Everywhere in the world, [the writer] needs to be left alone and at the same time to have a vital connection with others; needs artistic freedom and knows it cannot exist without its wider context; feels the two presences within – self-absorption and conscionable awareness – and must resolve whether these are locked in death-struggle, or are really fetuses in a twinship of fecundity."¹²⁹ Here Gordimer once again makes a strong connection, on the one hand, between the tension between solitude and engagement and, on the other hand, the extraordinary faculties of observation which she attributes to the writer's nature. In her view, the tension between solitude and engagement in a writer's life is represented by the "double process" of an intimate involvement with the lives of others as well as the withdrawal into a deep and concentrated state of self-scrutiny. This tension can potentially fuel an enormous amount of creative energy which the writer can then put to use in shaping and ordering human experience. "Reality is constructed out of many elements and entities, seen and unseen, expressed and left unexpressed for breathing-space in the mind...[and] being is constantly pulled and shaped this way and that by circumstances and different levels of consciousness," she reminds us. "Perhaps there is no other way of reaching some understanding of being than through art?"¹³⁰ Thus, Gordimer appeals to the image of "twinship" rather than death in her hope that the tension between solitude and engagement could eventually be resolved in a "synthesis of revelation," a "dialectic" of the imagination,¹³¹ a dialectic expressed in her Nobel lecture as "an exploration of self and the world; of individual and collective being."¹³²

Her invocation of the dialectic in these terms hints at a connection between writers' nature and function through Sartre's dialectic of the singular-universal, in which writers engage in intellectual activity through the

¹²⁵ "The Essential Gesture," 250.

¹²⁶ "How Not to Know the African" (1966) in *LHH*, 116-7.

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*, 243.

¹²⁸ "Selecting My Stories," 94, 95.

¹²⁹ "The Essential Gesture" (1984) in *TEG*, 250.

¹³⁰ "Writing and Being," 198, 199.

¹³¹ "Selecting My Stories," 95.

¹³² "Writing and Being," 196.

situated perspective of their work. Though Gordimer often elevates what she believes to be the universal yet singular "nature" of writers to an almost metaphysical degree, she maintains a very grounded view of the writer's particular functions as wholly conditioned and directed by his or her social circumstances: "We spend our lives attempting to interpret through the word the readings we take *in the societies, the world of which we are part*" (italics added). As mentioned above, Gordimer acknowledges in her other essays and interviews the political coloring of her own consciousness as a result of being steeped in the South African "situation." Her understanding of the writer's commitment is directly tied to the notion of the writer's subject "being *the consciousness* of his own era." Thus, it can even be said that writers are chosen by their subjects rather than vice versa: "Many of [my] stories *could not have been written* later or earlier than they were...In a certain sense a writer is 'selected' by his subject."¹³³ Following upon this comment, Gordimer writes that the essence of commitment is how writers deal with the complexities of this era-bound consciousness, rather than trying to conform subjects to certain ideological and/or political beliefs.¹³⁴

Gordimer distinguishes between her expressions of commitment as a writer and as an "ordinary citizen," however, which directly relates to the contrast she makes between her fiction and nonfiction. In her essay wryly entitled "Three in a Bed: Fiction, Morals, and Politics," she writes:

As a citizen, a South African actively opposed to racism all my life, and a supporter and now member of the African National Congress, in my *conduct* and my *actions* I have submitted voluntarily and with self-respect to the discipline of the liberation movement. For my *fiction* I have claimed and practiced my integrity to the free transformation of reality, in whatever forms and modes of expression I need. There, my commitment has been and is to make sense of life as I know it and observe it and experience it. In my ventures into nonfiction, my occasional political essays, my political partisanship has no doubt shown bias, perhaps a selectivity of facts.¹³⁵

According to Gordimer, her nonfiction is far more likely to be colored polemically by her committed convictions as a socially conscious citizen, in which she is reasonably expected to carefully select, if not slant, the evidence to support her political arguments. However, we need to ask whether the intellectual imperatives of Gordimer-as-citizen and Gordimer-as-writer as widely divergent as Gordimer suggests. After all, Gordimer has noted in her essays and interviews that the political atmosphere of South Africa has penetrated to the most private level of lived experience. In addition, Gordimer has described the long-term political struggle as being seen as having constrained writers' "imaginative powers" by compelling them to sharpen their literature into a "weapon of struggle."¹³⁶

Gordimer's remarks here suggest that she is much more conscious than her categorical statements tend to indicate of

¹³³ "Selecting My Stories," 97.

¹³⁴ Ibid.

¹³⁵ "Three in a Bed: Fiction, Morals, and Politics" (1988) in *LHH*, 14.

¹³⁶ Ibid., 13-14. (This is also discussed in Wagner, 224.)

the blurring of boundaries between the "truthful" contradictions she values so highly in fiction and the coloring of selective bias she assigns to nonfiction.

In "The Essential Gesture," Gordimer testifies to the inexorable restraints encountered by the imagination at every corner: "The creative act is not pure. History evidences it. Ideology demands it. Society exacts it. The writer loses Eden, writes to be read, and comes to realize that he is answerable...he is 'held' before he begins by the claims of different concepts of morality – artistic, linguistic, ideological, national, political, religious – asserted upon him."¹³⁷ However, Gordimer also offers the following hope as a principle that motivates the work of *all* writers: "the imaginative transformations of fiction, in the words of the Swedish writer Per Wastberg, 'help people understand their own natures and know they are not powerless...Every work of art is liberating,' he asserts, speaking for all of us who write."¹³⁸ This is comparable to Sartre's view that the literary work "addresses itself to the creative freedom of the reader and solicits him to recompose the work by reading it (for reading, too, is creation)," inviting the reader to construct his own viewpoint and thus "freely to grasp his own being-in-the-world."¹³⁹

These comments made by Gordimer, Sartre and Wastberg strongly suggest that fiction does not necessarily need to instigate any discernable social changes in order to be deemed "transformative." Gordimer's own work has been assessed in these terms by Clingman, who views her novels as fulfilling such an expectation by containing a particular historical vision for South Africa beyond apartheid: "If we have not asked what her novels 'do,' in the sense of what political effect they might have, or might be intended to have, this is because there is really nothing for them *to* do except reflect on the situation from which they emerge and construct essentially meditational hypotheses towards its eventual transformation."¹⁴⁰ Moving away from these general comments on the social value of the writer's work, the next section will focus on Gordimer's comments on the position and function of writers in a situation where politics is shoved to the forefront, a particular situation with which she herself is well familiar.

The Writer's Commitment in Politically Difficult Times

[Camus] said that he likes individuals who take sides more than literatures that do...So Camus called for "Courage in one's life and talent in one's work." And García Marquez redefined tendenz fiction thus: "The best way a writer can serve a revolution is to write as well as he can."

I believe that these two statements might be the credo for all of us who write. They do not resolve the conflicts that have come, and will continue to come, to contemporary writers. But...they turn the face of the writer squarely to her and his existence, the reason to be, as a writer, and the reason to be, as a responsible human being..."¹⁴¹

¹³⁷ "The Essential Gesture," 239.

¹³⁸ "Three in a Bed," 15.

¹³⁹ Sartre, "A Plea for Intellectuals," 278.

¹⁴⁰ Clingman, *The Novels of Nadine Gordimer: History from the Inside*, 218.

¹⁴¹ "Writing and Being," 202-3.

Gordimer's selection of these quotations by Albert Camus and Gabriel García Márquez hints at a strained duality that is nevertheless held in check by their unifying theme of artistic and political commitment. Both quotations emphasize the primacy of artistic integrity; however, Camus appears to make a greater distinction between what Gordimer refers to as "the reason to be, as a writer, and the reason to be, as a responsible human being," while García Márquez successfully synthesizes the motivations into the single act of writing. What, if anything, can be inferred from the subtle juxtaposition of these two writers?

For this, we need to turn to Gordimer's comments on the relationship between art and politics. Gordimer has written that all writers, regardless of their historical epoch, have lived in times of social and political conflict – after all, the magnificent pleasure-seekers of the Golden Age of Jazz caroused against the emergent rumblings of depression and fascism in the background. Thus, argues Gordimer, even those writers who have chosen to deny the historicity of their artistic endeavors have still been bound in some respect to questions regarding the relationship between art and society: "When, overtly or implicitly, could writers evade politics? Even those writers who have seen fiction as the pure exploration of language, as music is the exploration of sound, the babbling of Dada and the page-shuffling of Burroughs have been in reaction to what each revolted against in the politically-imposed spirit of their respective times; theirs were literary movements that were an act – however far-out – of acknowledgment of a relationship between politics and fiction. It seems there is no getting away from the relationship."¹⁴²

Having thus acknowledged the inevitability of this relationship, Gordimer concerns herself with the question of how writers are meant to deal with socially imposed responsibilities and pressures. Should writers ever feel obliged to take on social roles other than that of being a writer? In order to work towards an answer to this problem, she carefully considers Camus's declaration that "It is from the moment when I shall no longer be more than a writer that I shall cease to write." She looks closely for both hidden and revealed meanings in the statement in order to understand the kind of situation which would prompt such a response by the writer: "It is not just that he has weighed within himself his existential value as a writer against that of other functions as a man among men, and found himself independently in favor of the man; the scale has been set up by a demand outside himself, by his world situation. He has, in fact, accepted its condition that the greater responsibility is to society and not to art."¹⁴³ Gordimer does not mean that Camus chooses to give up the act of writing entirely; rather it is that he values the act of writing in the name of a particular social purpose ("manifesto unfurled and arms crooked to link with the elbows of the people") over and above being "no more than a writer." But Gordimer questions the judgment implied in the statement that to be "no more than a writer" is tantamount to writing nothing worth anything at all. She continues later on:

Even 'only' to write may be to be 'more than a writer' for one such as Milan Kundera, who goes on writing what he sees and knows from within his situation...until a ban on publishing his books strips him of his 'essential gesture' of being a writer at all. Like one of his own characters, he must clean windows or sell tickets in a cinema booth for a living. That, ironically, is what being 'more

¹⁴² "Three in a Bed," 8.

¹⁴³ "The Essential Gesture," 242.

than a writer' would come to for him, if he were to have opted to stay on in his country -- something I don't think Camus quite visualized.¹⁴⁴

Gordimer's concerns for artistic integrity and freedom are undeniably relevant when applied to the situation of writers in politically difficult times, when even the most subjective creations of art cannot escape associations with politics and protest (as will be seen in the case of Gao Xingjian in the next chapter). Censorship, imprisonment, exile and death are only a few of the fates in store for writers who choose to resist dominant political ideologies through their work or their public activities. Speaking from her own experience writing in South Africa, Gordimer of course calls for the writer's freedom from the constraints of apartheid ideology, but just as firmly she asserts the writer's freedom from the attraction of struggle ideology. Gordimer admits that a writer's desire to become the "mouth-piece" of the opposition whose ideals he shares comes from the "very strength of the writer's opposition to repression of political freedom." However, she continues, as soon as the writer begins to craft his work to fit any set of ideological principles, no matter how noble, the very "freedom of his private view of life" is threatened to the extent that "his integrity as a writer goes the moment he begins to write what he is told he ought to write."¹⁴⁵ At first, this may seem to contradict her own activities as a public spokesperson and essayist against apartheid, as well as her own admission that she has been morally obligated by the constraints of her political climate to hone her literature into a "weapon" of struggle. However, even in her nonfiction Gordimer tries to uphold what she calls "my freedom as a writer to show human beings as they are, warts and all,"¹⁴⁶ a conviction which suggests that she may be as willing to criticize her close friends and fellow writers as those whose racist convictions she is fighting against. Clingman observes that her conviction to sustain as critically honest a perspective as possible, especially in her later essays, has achieved a particularly social significance through and beyond the text itself: "[O]ne of the key measures of Gordimer's commitment becomes a willingness to *criticize* black writers and assess them, to assume that she has a place in the formation of a common future. This is an act of assertion, the obligation of an equal among equals."¹⁴⁷

In the end, then, Gordimer herself does not uphold such a strict demarcation between her principles as a "responsible human being" and as a writer. Because she believes that "art is on the side of the oppressed," she invites and indeed urges writers to assume more public and politicized intellectual roles insofar as their "integrity as a human being demands the sacrifice of everything to the struggle put up on the side of free men."¹⁴⁸ However, the writer must also remain conscious of the possibilities of social and intellectual action through the *imaginative*

¹⁴⁴ Ibid., 244.

¹⁴⁵ "A Writer's Freedom" (1975) in *TEG*, 88-89. Ivan Klíma also addresses this issue when he attempts to analyze what he considers to be the "failure" of socialist literature: "The history of socialist literature and the fate of its writers must often feel, to anyone who thinks about it, like a tragic history. Many of the authors wrote what they wrote and believed what they believed because they longed for a better, more just society. Their faith blinded them and that had tragic consequences for their work, for the ideas they were trying to defend, and often for themselves." Klíma condemns these writers for committing the "greatest treason" by permitting their language to be taken away from them, a surrender which signifies a denial of "the precondition of all creation: the truthfulness [they] alone, in [their] conscience, can guarantee" ("On the Literature of Secular Faith" in *The Spirit of Prague* [1994], 144-5).

¹⁴⁶ Interview with Jill Fullerton-Smith (1988) in *CNG*, 299.

¹⁴⁷ Clingman, "Introduction" in *TEG*, 7.

transfiguration of experience in literature by "writing the *truth as he sees it*."¹⁴⁹ For, as Gordimer quotes from Philip Toynbee, "The writer's gift to the reader is not social zest or moral improvement or love of country, but an enlargement of the reader's apprehension."¹⁵⁰ Thus, by exploring the possibilities of language and experience and writing as "best" as they can, committed writers fulfill their essential gesture and their unique contribution to society. As Gordimer asserts, "In the end it is what you are going to be able to record and discover of the truth that is going to serve your society best."¹⁵¹

Conclusion

*The writer is of service to humankind only insofar as the writer uses the word even against his or her own loyalties, trusts the state of being, as it is revealed, to hold somewhere in its complexity filaments of the cord of truth, able to be bound together, here and there, in art...*¹⁵²

Said represented intellectuals as individuals with a specific public role in society who are endowed with a particular aptitude for using language to confront orthodoxy at all levels, and who, therefore, took the side of the oppressed. Sartre wrote that writers functioned as intellectuals through their work by situating and transforming readers' perceptions of the world. How do their representations of intellectuals and writers as intellectuals reflect Gordimer's articulations on the subject? In this chapter we have seen how Gordimer has invited a critical look into her own status and situation as a writer in South Africa in order to construct a representation of writers in general, who possess exceptional skills and an equally exceptional mandate to use those skills to the best of their ability in conveying a particular experience of the world. At the same time, Gordimer appeals to society to recognize the writer "with a status commensurate with respect for the primacy of the well-earned role of *writer-as-writer*."¹⁵³ Asserting the primary role of writers which, in the end, should override all other subsidiary public roles, Gordimer redefines the notion of engagement as "the writer's exploration of the particular meaning his or her being has taken on in this time and place," indissoluble from the range of creative imagination.¹⁵⁴ She suggests that the tensions which arise between artistic solitude and social engagement are potentially *creative energies*, which cannot and should not be stifled or directed by pressures external to the writer's own imperatives. The significance of Gordimer's representations of writers for society is not limited to writers' potential contributions in their literary work, however. Implicit throughout her ideas is her conviction that the standard of social and political freedom in a society is to be measured by the degree of *subjective* freedom given to writers to write the truth as they see it, and "to maintain and publish to the world a deep, intense, private view of the situation[s] in which [they find their]

¹⁴⁸ "A Writer's Freedom," 88-89.

¹⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 87.

¹⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 89.

¹⁵¹ Interview with Terry Gros (1989) in *CNG*, 311-12.

¹⁵² "Writing and Being," 206.

¹⁵³ "The Status of the Writer in the World Today: Which World? Whose World?," 22.

¹⁵⁴ "Turning the Page: African Writers and the Twenty-first Century" (1992) in *LHH*, 31.

society...whether they be the great public ones of wars and revolutions, or the individual and intimate ones of daily, ¹⁵⁵ personal life."

¹⁵⁵ "A Writer's Freedom," 87.

Pablo Neruda and Gao Xingjian: Literature's Imperative of Voice

"It is a spirit in opposition, rather than in accommodation, that grips me because the romance, the interest, the challenge of intellectual life is to be found in dissent against the status quo at a time when the struggle seems so unfairly weighted against them."¹⁵⁶

"...the intellectual appeals to (rather than excoriates) as wide as possible a public, who is his or her natural constituency."¹⁵⁷

Upon returning to Chile from Sweden after receiving the Nobel Prize for literature in 1971, Pablo Neruda addressed a massive, adoring crowd at the National Stadium in Santiago with passionate expressions of love, pride and gratitude for the Chilean public, humbly reasserting his position as the poet of his people, and rededicating his poetry to "this multitude of Chileans" with whom his poetry had become synonymous throughout the tumultuous years of his life. Speaking of the imminent civil war that would erupt a few weeks before his death, Neruda gravely intoned, "I have a duty as a poet, as a politician and patriot, to warn all of Chile of this danger. As writer and citizen, my role has always been to unify Chileans...If Chile, if the body of Chile, were wounded, my poetry would bleed."¹⁵⁸

In the year 2000 – ironically enough, a year that occasioned the hope-filled subject of an entire volume of Neruda's poetry – the winner of that year's Nobel Prize for literature, Gao Xingjian, faced a very different reaction from the national adulation which greeted Neruda's return to Chile. Barred from setting foot in the country of his birth because of his status as a political dissident, the nearest Gao came to mainland China was in a brief visit to the autonomous region of Hong Kong where he was received with heavily guarded excitement.¹⁵⁹ Despite the fact that he had been ensconced in France for the past two decades, however, Gao Xingjian was not spared the onslaught of media and public criticism from the country from which he had been exiled. Nearly every academic, writer, and politician from mainland China had an opinion about Gao Xingjian. Gao was variously accused of being a "Frenchman who happened to write in Chinese," a writer who had compromised his "pure" commitment to art by publicly defending himself against political attacks from the Chinese government, or, according to one professor who disliked the tone of Gao's Nobel acceptance speech, "too proud, not like [Joseph] Brodsky [the winner of the 1987 prize], who acknowledged the greatness of Russian literature that came before him."¹⁶⁰

¹⁵⁶ Said, *Representations of the Intellectual*, xvii.

¹⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, xxii.

¹⁵⁸ Neruda, "Oh Springtime, Let Me Be Again Among My People" in *Passions and Impressions* (1984), 381-390, 317.

¹⁵⁹ "HK Welcome for Exiled Nobel Laureate," BBC News (Jan. 30, 2001), <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/asia-pacific/1144658.stm>.

¹⁶⁰ Lovell, "Gao Xingjian, the Nobel Prize and Chinese Intellectuals: Notes on the Aftermath of the Nobel Prize 2000" (Fall 2002), 29.

Ironically, Gao Xingjian's bitterest critics were pro-Western, cosmopolitan writers who believed that the Nobel Committee had succumbed to political and cultural tokenism by choosing a writer who was "Chinese" (as no Chinese-language writer had won the prize before) and yet conveniently fell within Western anti-Communist sympathies. According to these critics, Gao was nowhere near the best that contemporary literature in Chinese had to offer. In addition, the Committee was accused of shady internal politics because Gao's translator and strongest advocate, Göran Malmqvist, was a member of the Swedish Academy.¹⁶¹ Despite their differing concerns, however, the common irony shared by these various attacks on Gao was their resulting politicization of a writer whose own position on literature had always been fiercely private, anti-political and anti-nationalistic.

The previous chapters have been concerned primarily with the exposition of the writer-intellectual's position and function in society in the writings of Sartre and Gordimer, who have compared and often even conflated the writer's activity with that of the socially concerned citizen. This chapter will be concerned with two writers with very different convictions about their public roles as well as the social relevance of their literary works. Even independently of the public reaction they have inspired, it is nevertheless still difficult to find two individuals who have expressed more opposed views on what they perceive to be the writer's relationship with his or her "natural constituency,"¹⁶² or the national culture to which the writer professes the closest ties. Neruda – the distinguished Chilean statesman and devoted Communist whose political and literary careers paralleled as well as nurtured each other's development – is a perfect example of Said's representation of the intellectual as a public figure who is committed to empowering oppressed groups in society. On the other end is Gao, who embodies Said's romantic notion of the solitary "spirit in opposition" both by circumstance and conviction. Both were, or continue to be, exiled at some point in their careers, but even the reasons behind their shared experience of exile are fundamentally different – Neruda's was politically motivated, as he was affiliated with the party that was currently out of power; Gao, on the other hand, *chose* exile because of the government's persistent attacks on the supposedly subversive content of his creative work.¹⁶³ These Nobel laureates, separated by nearly three decades, exemplify Nobel Committee's post-1970s shift away from selecting writers who have been politically engaged towards those who have been more "unaligned" and artistically independent.¹⁶⁴

However, the line dividing the two writers' positions is not as clear as one might think. Gao has not been as removed from the opportunities available to him to use his public platform as his individualist stance initially suggests, as evidenced by his increasingly vocal criticisms of China's oppressive cultural policies as well as of the Western market economy's insidious commercialization of literature. (One critic has even complained, "Originally, Gao stood for artistic creativity, but now he's changed, he's expressing opinions about the Mainland."¹⁶⁵) Neither had Neruda ever been comfortable with the idea of "politicized" poetry verging on the language of propaganda – a dire Orwellian threat. As Roland Bleiker points out, despite his conviction to write in the language of everyday life, Neruda was fully aware of the need for *artistic* innovation "to break through existing linguistic habits, for it is

¹⁶¹ Ibid., 30.

¹⁶² Said, xxii.

¹⁶³ Falcoff, "Literature and Politics in Latin America" in *Against the Grain: The New Criterion on Art and Intellect at the End of the Twentieth Century* (1995), 52.

¹⁶⁴ Lovell, 17.

through these very conventions, inaudible and seemingly harmless as they are, that practices of domination become objectified."¹⁶⁵

As in the previous chapter, this chapter will primarily examine the Nobel lectures of Pablo Neruda and Gao Xingjian and highlight their ideas on the relations between society and the writer, and society and literature (Neruda uses "poet" and "poetry" in place of "writer" and "literature"), particularly in relation to the function of language in both literature and politics. These two writers' stances on literature's social function as well as on the writer's responsibility to the public have been clearly shaped by their personal experiences as citizens and artists, and thus are different. However, Neruda and Gao share similar concerns regarding an "ethics" of literature, in which literature has an imperative to "give" a voice to those who are commonly sidelined in official narratives of history, whether they are illiterate peasants (for Neruda) or the censored individual writer (for Gao). More generally speaking, literature can claim to have an ethical dimension through the role it plays in opening a space for voices to heard outside the linguistically conditioned boundaries of political representation, in the space between experience and the interpretation of experience.¹⁶⁷ This chapter will be an attempt to show how their apparently conflicting ideas on literature's (and the writer's) relationship to society compel a reassessment of the relationship between literature and politics, as well as what it means for literature to have a "political" dimension, for which a reinterpretation of politics may be necessary.

Pablo Neruda – Poetry is the Bread of the People

After the death of Pablo Neruda, in a time of brutal political repression in Chile, during which the poet's house was trashed and sealed up by the military regime, all kinds of people came surreptitiously to write or scratch, [sic] graffiti on the boards of the fence: messages to the poet, words of resistance, brief phrases, names. Neruda died on the day that the military junta took power. Even more than in his life, he became a symbol of Chilean resistance. Both in his writings of and for and to his country, and in his country people's response to him, there was a dialogue reaching beyond death. He was internationally famous, of course; of the middle class; a male. It was not the poetry of a dark-skinned mestizo - still less, a mestiza - that so commanded love and respect. Yet he could have betrayed, and did not; could have escaped into the international literary elite, and did not. The fence below his locked and off-limits house became a place for people to continue voicing their hopes and angers, a collective page greater even than the poet's books, a page made possible because of his books, because of the hand that had once crawled over line after line, writing the poems.¹⁶⁸

Throughout his life, Pablo Neruda strove towards a poetic philosophy in which the poet and his poetry were constantly being reshaped by their immersion in the forces of nature, on one hand, and society, on the other. Through these "contributions from the earth and from the soul," Neruda hoped to suffuse his poetry with "equal

¹⁶⁵ Lovell, 29.

¹⁶⁶ Bleiker, "Pablo Neruda and the Struggle for Political Memory" (1999), 1139.

¹⁶⁷ Ibid., 1131.

¹⁶⁸ Rich, *What Is Found There: Notebooks on Poetry and Politics*, 34-5.

partners solitude and solidarity, emotion and action, the nearness to mankind and to the secret manifestations of nature."¹⁶⁹ Lifted nearly verbatim from the pages of his memoirs, the first half of Neruda's Nobel lecture is a harrowing account of his journey with several guides through the Andean mountains towards the Chilean border with Argentina that he would cross into freedom and exile in 1949. The narrative lends itself an almost primordial, mythical quality that serves to illustrate the experiential (rather than intellectual) origins of Neruda's poetry. Neruda believed strongly, however, that the poet cannot sustain himself solely in the condition of solitude, even when surrounded by the stark beauty of the Chilean landscape, nestled between the mountains and the sea. "I come from a dark region, from a land separated from all others by the steep contours of geography. I was the most forlorn of poets and my poetry was provincial, oppressed and rainy," he declared in his Nobel speech. "But always I had put my trust in man. I never lost hope. It is perhaps because of this that I have reached as far as I now have with my poetry and also with my banner."¹⁷⁰

This "hope" in humanity would become the most powerful motivating force behind Neruda's poetry. Particularly after the Spanish Civil War, which galvanized his Communist sympathies in the face of the brutal deaths of ordinary citizens as well as his fellow poets such as Federico García Lorca at the hands of the Fascists, Neruda's social and poetic commitments gradually shaded into each other to the extent that it was difficult to see where one ended and the other began. While his early volumes of poetry were marked by solipsistic retreats into depression and burning passion, Neruda related in his *Memoirs* the major turning point in his poetic consciousness brought about by the events of the Civil War: "My visit to Spain had given me added strength and maturity. The bitterness in my poetry had to end...Can poetry serve our fellow men? Can it find a place in man's struggles? I had already done enough tramping over the irrational and the negative. I had to pause and find the road to humanism, outlawed from contemporary literature but deeply rooted in the aspirations of mankind."¹⁷¹

Although Neruda had an illustrious diplomatic career that began with his appointment as honorary consul to Rangoon in 1927 and ended with his ambassadorship to France in the early 1970s (spanning brief stints as senator, presidential candidate, and Communist exile), it would be misleading to identify the "politics" in his poetry to be of the same nature as that contained in his political roles. The politics of his poetry had to do with looking beyond the individual towards the community and attempting to dismantle political discourse by examining the very language by which it was constructed. Neruda wrote from the standpoint of the working class and peasants whose voices were typically marginalized in society, leading Bleiker to observe that "his writings were all about heeding to whispers that risk drowning in the roaring engines of high politics."¹⁷² Neruda considered his most effective political tool to be language itself – ordinary language that would chronicle these voices authentically and reach the widest audience possible, but also language to be exploded from within to produce new visions and new ways of embodying the variegated experiences of Chileans – the coal miners of the nitrate pampas, the Araucanian Indians, the peasants of Isla Negra.

¹⁶⁹ Neruda, "Towards the Splendid City" (1971 Nobel lecture), <http://www.nobel.se/literature/laureates/1971/neruda-lecture.html>.

¹⁷⁰ Ibid.

¹⁷¹ Neruda, *Memoirs* (1978), 139.

¹⁷² Bleiker, 1129.

Neruda was very careful not to elevate his own status as a poet above the heads of "the people whose sword, whose handkerchief my humble poetry wants to be."¹⁷³ Neruda always maintained that the poet is not "a little god" (a subtle slight of his fellow Chilean poet Vicente Huidobro whom he quotes here, and whom Neruda frequently criticized for "bask[ing] in his own divine isolation"¹⁷⁴), but a baker who prepared the daily bread for his community. Sometimes Neruda offered his poetry as the weapon in the struggle for bread; other times his poetry was offered as the nourishing sustenance itself. Neruda also often insisted that he was "not an intellectual," and that his rich poetic images and ideas were not culled from literary theories but from his everyday flesh-and-blood experiences, elemental and often violently sensual, yet familiar and accessible to anyone who read his poetry. (However, despite his glib portrayal of himself and other poets of his generation as "children of nature" who rebelled against the decadent bourgeois literature of their times, Neruda was by no means "anti-book and anti-literature" – his lifelong passion consisted in amassing rare editions of literary works for his personal library, works which represented "universal fragments of knowledge captured in my voyage through the world" and "the subterranean labor of conscience that led me to the light."¹⁷⁵)

In keeping with his humble views of the poet's position in society, Neruda believed that poetry itself is an action set free the moment it is uttered or written, irreducible to a single "petrified" form intended by its creator. He explained in his lecture that he was often unsure whether the creative control rests in the poet or the poetry: "I do not know whether I experienced this or created it, I do not know whether it was truth or poetry, something passing or permanent, the poems I experienced in this hour, the experiences which I later put into verse."¹⁷⁶ In a related anecdote in his *Memoirs*, Neruda described an incident when he was asked what is meant by a certain image in a poem dedicated to the memory of García Lorca. In response, Neruda had chided the individual for failing to recognize that "poetry is not static matter but a flowing current that quite often escapes from the hands of the creator himself."¹⁷⁷ However, by giving poetry an autonomy separate from the intentions of the poet, Neruda's comments nevertheless had greater social and political implications than was evident on their surface. By loosening the ties between the individual poet and his poetry, Neruda thus placed poetry at the wider service of society: "Poetry will water the fields and give bread to the hungry. It will meander through the ripe wheat. Pilgrims will slake their thirst in it, and it will sing whenever men struggle and when they are at rest."¹⁷⁸

Claiming such total freedom for poetry provided Neruda with his best defense against his political detractors who accused him of being a "sectarian" poet. In the end, he stated firmly, the individual poet makes only a small contribution to the entire body of poetry existing throughout history and in the imagination. Thus, it is mistaken to expect one poet to write for all people, for "no poet has any considerable enemy other than his own incapacity to make himself understood."¹⁷⁹ Neruda did not evade the issue of his own particular political commitments, however. Early inroads of politics into his poetry were made during his student days in Santiago

¹⁷³ *Memoirs*, 149.

¹⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 296.

¹⁷⁵ "The Poet Is not a Rolling Stone" in *Passions and Impressions*, 334.

¹⁷⁶ "Towards the Splendid City."

¹⁷⁷ *Memoirs*, 123.

¹⁷⁸ "It Is Worthwhile to Have Lived, Because I Have Love" in *Passions and Impressions*, 335.

¹⁷⁹ "Towards the Splendid City."

when the workers' movement began to consolidate against the oppressive regime of President Arturo Palma, and Neruda's decision to commit himself to the Communist cause occurred, as mentioned above, during the Spanish Civil War, many years before he actually joined the party in Chile in 1945. As Said notes in his lectures, the intellectual has an imperative to take the side of the oppressed, a principle Neruda claimed as the driving force behind all his activities, political and poetic: "In the midst of the arena of America's struggles I saw that my human task was none other than to join the extensive forces of the organized masses of the people, to join with life and soul with suffering and hope, because it is only from this great popular stream that the necessary changes can arise for the authors and for the nations."¹⁸⁰ Neruda believed that the popular masses are the instigators of as well as the inspiration for social and artistic progress, which thus doubly implicates the writer as artist and citizen in their struggles:

[T]he truth is that I can find no other way for an author in our far-flung and cruel countries, if we want the darkness to blossom, if we are concerned that the millions of people who have learnt neither to read us nor to read at all, who still cannot write or write to us, are to feel at home in the area of dignity without which it is impossible for them to be complete human beings...[W]hat would have become of me if, for example, I had contributed in some way to the maintenance of the feudal past of the great American continent? How should I then have been able to raise my brow, illuminated by the honor which Sweden has conferred on me, if I had not been able to feel some pride in having taken part, even to a small extent, in the change which has now come over my country? It is necessary to look at the map of America, to place oneself before its splendid multiplicity, before the cosmic generosity of the wide places which surround us, in order to understand why many writers refuse to share the dishonor and plundering of the past, of all that which dark gods have taken away from the American peoples.¹⁸¹

The poet's duty falls between the poles of realism and the mythic, filling the "mighty void with beings of flesh and blood" while partaking of the task of "making fables and giving names."¹⁸² Thus on one hand, the poet is to function as a critical mirror of reality, cautious of romanticizing and thus falsely depicting the harsh realities of daily life for many people. For this, Neruda gave the example of his poetic rendering of the peasant woman who washed the villagers' laundry every night: "If I had been one of the poets of the past who loved beauty for beauty's sake, and art for art's, I would have celebrated that ritual washerwoman in the figure of a priestess presiding over her temple of foam, her vestments, and religious veils. But I, a poet of our times, saw in that washerwoman not a ritual but a sorrowful reality, the lives of millions of women of our enormous, forsaken America."¹⁸³ At the same time, however, the poet, in a long line of bards and storytellers of the past, is charged with the duty of creating new myths,

¹⁸⁰ Ibid.

¹⁸¹ Ibid.

¹⁸² Ibid.

¹⁸³ "The Nocturnal Washerwoman" in *Passions and Impressions*, 344.

"reawakening the old dreams which sleep in statues of stone in the ruined ancient monuments."¹⁸⁴ Neruda offered this credo for writers in the Americas in particular, whom he enjoined to participate in the reconstruction of the myths of the indigenous peoples that had disappeared under the narratives of colonial discourse.

Of course, treading the fine line between myth and reality requires a vigilant command of language, as well as a creative desire to manipulate language in order to transform the very means of representing experience. For Neruda, the very goals of poetry are connected to the expressive and communicative functions of language (an idea that will also be seen in a variant form in Gao Xingjian's thinking). Poetry aspires to guide the poet towards self-understanding (expression of the psyche), and to convey the varieties of human experience to others (social and communicative expression).¹⁸⁵ At the level of interaction between the poet, the poem and the reader, poetry creates social consciousness by enabling the reader to become aware of himself as part of a wider human community, whose experiences are conditioned, codified and valued to such a large degree through the mediation of language.

Without the poet, of course, there can be no poetry. Thus, the question of poetry's social ramifications is inseparable from the question of the writer's function in society. According to Neruda, a writer's fate is tied to "his people," and Neruda did not claim elevated status for the writer, only the freedom to write according to personal convictions. Of course, Neruda noted that in politically difficult times in which freedom of expression is severely restricted, the writer's choices are limited to taking the side either of those in power, or of those who are disenfranchised of their civil liberties. As expected, however, it is no question which choice Neruda advocated, and his demands for the treatment of writers and artists in his society were firmly tied to the aspirations of the Chilean people:

"We [artists and writers] do not expect preferential treatment. We do not contemplate a court of crowned thinkers, favored by dynamic intellectual power. But in full awareness of the contribution that artists and writers make to the development and the honor of our nation, we demand consideration of our lives and our problems, assurance that the young may continue their creative development without opposition. But we know – and that is why we are here – that, first and foremost, our people must be elevated to the life of human dignity they deserve."¹⁸⁶

Gao Xingjian – Literature is the Voice of the Individual

"The writer is not the conscience of society nor is literature the mirror of society. The writer flees to the margins of society: he is a non-participant, an observer who looks on dispassionately. There is no need for the writer to be the conscience of society, for there has long been a surplus of social conscience. The writer simply uses his own conscience and knowledge to write his own works. He has responsibility only to himself."¹⁸⁷

¹⁸⁴ "Towards the Splendid City."

¹⁸⁵ Ibid.

¹⁸⁶ "A Few Words among Friends" in *Passions and Impressions*, 325.

¹⁸⁷ From "Jottings from Paris" (1990), as quoted in Burckhardt's "The Voice of One in the Wilderness" (April 2000), 54-58.

Gao Xingjian's Nobel lecture is presented as a series of brief, aphoristic statements on literature, language, and the figure of the writer. In the first two hundred words of his speech, Gao sweeps aside God, nationalism, politics and history from the space he designates for literature. He puts forward a striking case for literature that, on the surface, opposes everything Neruda had wanted for his poetry. Whereas Neruda viewed poetry as a kind of prism mediated by the individual through which humankind can project itself, Gao shuns the idea of the universal completely in favor of the individual voice. For Gao, literature solely represents the voice of the individual writer; it is not subordinate to politics, does not serve "the people," and does not represent a national culture or the voice of the oppressed. The writer, moreover, is not to be seen as a spokesperson for any cause, or an "embodiment of righteousness" no matter what his personal views or his circumstances. Gao's views on literature in certain ways approximate those of Nadine Gordimer, who argues for unchecked artistic freedom in the conveying of human experience, but his views that the persona of the writer is totally private and subjective appear to contradict the notion (previously discussed in the other writers) that the writer somehow inherently contributes to society, whether through his social commitments or his creative work.

Gao's unwavering positions on the absolute autonomy and subjectivity of literature and the writer's position stem directly from his own personal experiences as a victim of the Cultural Revolution in China, during which he was forced to burn a suitcase full of unpublished manuscripts and eventually saw every one of his works banned from publication. After his refusal to renounce his "spiritually polluted" literary views that were seen as subverting the foundations of revolutionary realism, Gao disappeared into the forests and mountains of Sichuan Province, embarking on a solitary ten-month trek which inspired his novel *Soul Mountain* and precipitated his exile to France in 1987 as a political refugee. As a result of these experiences, Gao has taken a hardened view of ideology, or what he calls "isms," and all external pressures and constraints on the creative act, warning that they harbor the potential to destroy both literature and the individual's freedom.¹⁸⁸ At the same time, however, it was his experience of self-enforced silence during the period of his greatest persecution that gave rise to his clearest conviction about the function of literature: "During the years when Mao Zedong implemented total dictatorship even fleeing was not an option... To maintain one's intellectual autonomy one could only talk to oneself, and it had to be in utmost secrecy. I should mention that it was only in this period when it was utterly impossible for literature that I came to comprehend why it was so essential: literature allows a person to preserve a human consciousness."¹⁸⁹

For Gao, there are no idealistic prescriptives for what literature *should* be; the qualities he chooses to emphasize are what he considers to be inherently present in literature itself (though often he presents these qualities as innate potentials that are not necessarily universally realized). Because literature is "born" as an act of an individual writer, the act of writing signifies a form of self-realization, a material and existential proof that goes beyond a mere, ephemeral conversation with oneself. "From my experience in writing," Gao declares, "I can say that literature is inherently man's affirmation of the value of his own self and that this is validated during the writing,

¹⁸⁸ Gao, "The Case for Literature" (2000 Nobel lecture), <http://www.nobel.se/literature/laureates/2000/gao-lecture-e.html>.

¹⁸⁹ Ibid.

[and] literature is born primarily of the writer's need for self-fulfillment."¹⁹⁰ His own experiences give support to his conviction that literature represents a primal human need for self-affirmation: "I began writing my novel *Soul Mountain* to dispel my inner loneliness at the very time when works I had written with rigorous self-censorship had been banned. *Soul Mountain* was written for myself and without the hope that it would be published."¹⁹¹

Gao also believes that the written word is "magical," because "it allows communication between separate individuals, even if they are from different races and times. It is also in this way that the shared present time in the writing and reading of literature is connected to its eternal spiritual value."¹⁹² Thus, literature positively affirms the immediate, "eternal" present because of its relevance at the moment of meeting between one writer and one reader, a moment that can be repeated over and over again whenever the work is read. Despite its symbolic function as the spiritual meeting-ground between separate individuals, however, Gao remains firm that a work of literature's broader impact on society is an extra-literary effect, to be determined not by the writer's own intentions nor by any quality intrinsic to the literary work. He believes that since literature is an individual engagement in which the writer and the reader (if any) participate of their own will, the activity of literature cannot be said to have an essential "duty to the masses."¹⁹³

Like Neruda, Gao does not accord the writer a superior position in society. He notes gravely that the writer is usually among the first citizens to be sacrificed in any kind of "cultural revolution" in order to prevent the writer's spreading of potentially subversive and counterrevolutionary ideas. (This is particularly true in China, where writers have been discouraged from creative activity and largely limited to performing the functions of investigative reporters and social scientists.¹⁹⁴) However, because he dissociates literature from "the masses," Gao refuses to grant the writer a fundamentally social role or responsibility. In a subtle attack on those who support him for being a political dissident, Gao notes that it would be just as critical a mistake to lionize a victimized writer as to condemn or persecute him. In keeping with his anti-dogmatic stance, however, Gao is careful not to claim his conception of the writer to be absolute, but says only that a writer may have the freedom *not* to align himself with any predetermined partisan politics or theories. As a banned writer faced with literary suicide, Gao himself chose the condition of exile in order to continue to be able to express himself without any constraints.¹⁹⁵

Being a writer in exile may have divorced Gao Xingjian from a homeland, but it has only served to intensify his commitment to his native tongue. "When other factors no longer exist, you're left facing only your language," Gao writes in his essay "The Bearable Lightness of Exile." "I'd say a writer has a responsibility only to his language; he is not responsible for the 'motherland' or the 'people.'... When you're only responsible for language,

¹⁹⁰ Ibid.

¹⁹¹ Ibid.

¹⁹² Ibid.

¹⁹³ Ibid.

¹⁹⁴ Calhoun, "The Ideology of Intellectuals and the Chinese Student Protest Movement of 1989" in *Intellectuals and Politics: Social Theory in a Changing World* (1991), 130.

¹⁹⁵ Edward Said writes that the condition of exile – real or symbolic – represents the condition of intellectuals who are marginalized outside the comforts of centered privilege and power; however, he adds that the condition also "carries with it certain rewards and, yes, even privileges," including the broadening of the intellectual's vision through the "eccentric angles of vision that it can sometimes afford" (Said, 59-60). Gao bears out this analysis by

your demands on language are far more rigorous."¹⁹⁶ In his view, it is unnecessary for a contemporary writer to go out of his way to promote the preservation and propagation of a national culture by rehashing hackneyed cultural metaphors: "For a writer of the present to strive to emphasize a national culture is problematical. Because of where I was born and the language I use, the cultural traditions of China naturally reside within me."¹⁹⁷ Instead, the writer's creative task begins with the very exploration of language itself by looking carefully at "what has already been articulated in his language and address[ing] what has not been adequately articulated in that language."¹⁹⁸

Gao considers the communicative function of language to be secondary to its self-expressive function – that is, to speak one's thoughts to oneself first before conveying them to others. As with Neruda, however, Gao believes that the power of language ultimately rests in its connection of the individual subject with the world through his linguistic conception of human experience:

Language is the ultimate crystallization of human civilization. It is intricate, incisive and difficult to grasp yet it is pervasive, penetrates human perceptions and links man, the perceiving subject, to his own understanding of the world...As with a curse or a blessing language has the power to stir body and mind...Language is not merely concepts and the carrier of concepts, it simultaneously activates the feelings and the senses and this is why signs and signals cannot replace the language of living people.¹⁹⁹

Gao's arguments about language, literature and writing are not without flaws. Gao's vocalized convictions can be seen as contradicting his own stance, firstly by resolving his position into a set of principles regarding literature, and secondly by using his visible and prestigious position to launch his scathing criticisms of China's cultural policies as well as of the market commodification of literature. Most importantly, his strongly individualist and anti-political position has a tendency to marginalize his deeply held humanist convictions about literature. Despite his insistence to the contrary, Gao presents a vision in which the writer *does* make an important contribution to society by demonstrating through literature the primacy of the individual human voice. In support of this, he writes that the writer has an ethical imperative to tell the truth: "Truth when the pen is taken up at the same time implies that one is sincere after one puts down the pen. Here truth is not simply an evaluation of literature but at the same time has ethical connotations...For the writer truth in literature approximates ethics, it is the ultimate ethics of literature."²⁰⁰

In his ideas on ethics in literature, Gao goes one step beyond Neruda, who had called for writers to faithfully reflect human experience but without the imperative to "distort visions in order to challenge the entrenched forms of representations."²⁰¹ For Gao, however, the principle of distortion is a key component of the

his consideration that "being overseas isn't only nonrestricting, it's actually stimulating...I'd even say [exile] doesn't have much of a negative side" (Gao, "The Bearable Lightness of Exile" [2002], 105).

¹⁹⁶ "The Bearable Lightness of Exile," 105.

¹⁹⁷ "The Case for Literature."

¹⁹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰⁰ Ibid.

²⁰¹ Bleiker, 1140.

writer's task in the unmasking of reality: "In the hands of a writer with a serious attitude to writing...[I]terature does not simply make a replica of reality but penetrates the surface layers and reaches deep into the inner workings of reality; it removes false illusions, looks down from great heights at ordinary happenings, and with a broad perspective reveals happenings in their entirety."²⁰² Judging from these insights, what Gao is thus proposing is not a cleavage between literature and society, but a reshifting of emphasis from the writer to his work. Although, as mentioned above, he believes that the enduring value of a work is an extra-literary response that reflects historical and social conditions rather than the intentions of the writer; nevertheless the consequence of that work's endurance returns to the fundamental significance of literature: "The clamor of the writer and his actions may have vanished but as long as there are readers his voice in his writings continues to reverberate."²⁰³

Does Gao believe, then, that the literary work can bring about change in society? Gao's immediate answer is no, since the individual voice is nevertheless still too inconspicuous in comparison to the grand sweep of official history. He offers hope through the literary voice, however, as a kind of alternative history, similar to Neruda's notion that poetry embodies the voice of those who normally have no power to speak: "History is not all that humankind possesses, there is also the legacy of literature...When the great laws of history are not used to explain humankind it will be possible for people to leave behind their own voices" in literature.²⁰⁴ Gao humbly concludes his Nobel lecture with a graceful expression of gratitude towards the Swedish Academy "for awarding this Nobel Prize to literature, to literature that is unwavering in its independence, that avoids neither human suffering nor political oppression and that further more does not serve politics...[and] for allowing me to ascend this dais to speak before the eyes of the world."²⁰⁵

Conclusion

The aims of this chapter have been to compare the claims made by Gao Xingjian and Pablo Neruda regarding the relationship between writing and society. These writers respond differently to the question of whom literature is meant to serve: For Gao, it is the "frail" individual, for whom literature challenges the hegemony of the "unknowable laws" which manipulate human history,²⁰⁶ while Neruda believes that poetry is to be put to the service of "an honorable army...which moves forward unceasingly and struggles every day against the anachronism of the refractory and the impatience of the opinionated."²⁰⁷

Despite their differences, these writers share a very important concern regarding literature's imperative to give voice to those outside the strict boundaries of political and historical representation. However, an examination of the deeper similarity between their views requires a reconsideration of the relationship between literature and politics, as well as in what sense literature can be considered "political." Both literature and politics are linguistic engagements, or ways of representing human experience through language. Because the expressive and

²⁰² "The Case for Literature."

²⁰³ Ibid.

²⁰⁴ Ibid.

²⁰⁵ Ibid.

²⁰⁶ "The Case for Literature."

communicative components of language constitute ways in which the self perceives and organizes information about itself and others, both literature and politics "may be understood as discourses which formally articulate a concern with persons as linguistic beings, as selves thrown amongst other selves."²⁰⁸ In addition, since these discourses are concerned with the acknowledgment and valuation of selves, literature and politics can both be considered as *humanistic* engagements, which becomes an important link between the ideas of Gao and Neruda.²⁰⁹

In order to discover in what sense literature can be considered "political," it is necessary to distinguish politics "proper" from the more general sense of politics used above, the latter being a social and linguistic form of representation. By honing in on "the inevitable gap that opens up between an event and the way this event has been imbued with meaning and significance," literature can negotiate and transcend politics proper and thus become "political" in terms of the latter sense.²¹⁰ Bleiker goes so far as saying that literature (or poetry) is *intrinsically* political "because it resists being drawn into the narrow black-and-white debates that characterize politics [proper]. Instead of getting entangled in myopic purposes of agitation, poetry seeks to investigate the forces that have already circumscribed the functioning of politics, the ones that have silently predetermined what can be said and what not."²¹¹

Neruda and Gao both agree that the writer can accomplish this by using the existing structures of language to transform the ways of representation from within language itself – to articulate what has not yet been spoken, to "discover and develop the latent potential inherent in language," and to break down literary molds with new forms which arise from "the urgent renewal" of historical change.²¹² Through the innovation of ordinary, everyday language, literature can function as testimony with a certain measure of authenticity, whether in expressing the voice of the individual writer or in lending a voice to others.

Of course, it is difficult, if not impossible, to expect literature to flawlessly recreate the memories and experiences present in the individual or collective human consciousness. However, Gao reminds us that literature is not the same as a historical or political document, and thus the "truth" of literature takes on illuminated meaning:

Actually there are few facts in documented testimonies and the reasons and motives behind incidents are often concealed. However, when literature deals with the truth the whole process

²⁰⁷ "Towards the Splendid City."

²⁰⁸ Buckler, "Literature and Politics as Vocations: The Case of the Spanish Civil War," <http://www.psa.ac.uk/cps/1998/buckler.pdf>.

²⁰⁹ Ibid. In his essay "Writers in Politics," the Kenyan writer Ngugi wa Thiong'o also addresses the relationship between literature and politics in terms of their shared linguistic and humanistic engagements: "There is a dramatic poem of Léopold Sédar Senghor in which a white man is so overwhelmed by Chaka's power and mastery over language that he exclaims: 'my word, Chaka...you are a poet...a politician.' The poet and the politician have certainly many things in common. Both trade in words. Both are created by the same reality of the world around them. Their activity and concern have the same subject and object: human relationships. Imaginative literature, dealing with a people's consciousness, and politics, with the operation of power in society, are reflected in one another and they act on one another" (in *Writers in Politics: A Re-engagement with Issues of Literature and Society* [1997], 67).

²¹⁰ Bleiker, 1131.

²¹¹ Ibid., 1138.

²¹² "The Case for Literature," and Neruda's *Memoirs*, 196.

from a person's inner mind to the incident can be exposed without leaving anything out. This power is inherent in literature as long as the writer sets out to portray the true circumstances of human existence...In the hands of a writer with a serious attitude to writing even literary fabrications are premised on the portrayal of the truth of human life, and this has been the vital life force of works that have endured from ancient times to the present.²¹³

In addition to the distinction Gao makes between the ways in which literature and factual documents deal with truth, Bleiker comments that one of the most important activities of the poet-chronicler involves inscribing the inevitable silences within the narrative, and transfiguring their "terrifying void[s]" into hope.²¹⁴ At the conjunction of Neruda's "I see" and Gao's "I am" is literature's "I will remember," and it is this poetic rendering of events and memories which would otherwise be forgotten that ultimately imbues literature with its particular social ethics.

Thus, the writer's intellectual commitment need not be judged by his explicit participation in or rejection of political activity, which is irrelevant to his actual writing. By opening up a space for alternative voices to be heard, literature interrogates the meaning making of political discourse and thus itself performs a critical political function. In keeping with this, Bleiker argues that Neruda's *true* political and historical contribution must be evaluated in terms of his poetry: "One may or may not agree with the content of Neruda's politics, but one can hardly deny that his influential poetry fulfills the function of a historical memory...Neruda's poems hold on to faint voices and perspectives that may otherwise have vanished into the dark holes of historical narratives. For better or for worse, Neruda's poetic testimonies are part of today's collective consciousness. They have entered the canons of Western thought. This is why even those commentators who are hostile to his politics readily accept the central role Neruda has played as a poet and a poetic chronicler of our time."²¹⁵ Gao also reinforces this idea of the writer's primary function: "If the writer wants to challenge society *it must be through language*"²¹⁶ (italics added). His statement gestures firmly towards the meeting-point between literature and political commitment.

Gao and Neruda both warn that the process of writing is strewn with temptations and hurdles. According to Gao, the writer will unavoidably meet with the temptation to *use* literature as a vehicle for political ideas, but the writer must remember that literature is not a forum for "angry shouting," but the act of "man focusing his gaze on his self."²¹⁷ On his part, Neruda alludes to the moments of unbearable loneliness present in the process of writing. However, both offer a glimmer of hope through the possibility that literature will survive as part of humankind's historical legacy. Neruda writes, "Each and every one of my songs has endeavored to serve as a sign in space for a meeting between paths which cross one another, or as a piece of stone or wood on which someone, some others, those who follow after, will be able to carve the new signs."²¹⁸ By enlarging the record of human experience and bequeathing it to future generations, literature is thus able to draw a continuous line of human consciousness from

²¹² "The Case for Literature," and Neruda's *Memoirs*, 196.

²¹³ "The Case for Literature."

²¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 1134.

²¹⁵ Bleiker, 1130.

²¹⁶ "The Case for Literature."

²¹⁷ *Ibid.*

²¹⁸ "Towards the Splendid City."

the past towards the future. As Gao proclaims, "Literature is for the living and moreover affirms the present of the living. It is this eternal present and this confirmation of individual life that is the absolute reason why literature is literature."²¹⁹

²¹⁹ "The Case for Literature."

CONCLUSION

In his recent essay entitled "The Public Roles of Writers and Intellectuals,"²²⁰ Edward Said revises and expands the views he gave in his 1993 Reith lectures regarding the roles and representations of the intellectual. In this essay, he remarks that he felt compelled to reconsider his statements in light of major economic and political changes during the final decade of the twentieth century, a decade which brought about, first of all, an "infinite number of variations on the location or position, physical and metaphorical, of the writer, and second of all, [opened] up the possibility of divergent roles for him or her to play."²²¹ As can be noted in the preceding quotation as well as in the essay's title, Said has shifted his focus from a more general conception of the intellectual in his lectures to a more specific one of the writer as his primary intellectual figure, who "during the last years of the twentieth century...has taken on more and more of the intellectual's adversarial attributes in such activities as speaking the truth to power, being a witness to persecution and suffering, supplying a dissenting voice in conflicts with authority."²²²

Compared with the attempts made in his Reith lectures to pin down representations of the public intellectual, Said's more recent comments above are particularly significant for this thesis, whose aims have not been to fix a definition of the writer-intellectual, but rather to show how definitions function in different political and historical contexts. This thesis has looked at the ways in which Sartre, Gordimer, Neruda and Gao have confronted the tension between their private commitments and their public responsibilities, as well as how these writers have arrived at their particular conceptions of what it means for writers to be engaged with society.

Creative Freedom and Responsibility

Said, speaking in a post-Rushdie era, raises the question whether there can be any non-political or non-public intellectuals when "the realm of the political and public has expanded so much as to be virtually without borders."²²³ Though the question itself is not new, as suggested by Sartre's comments above, Said argues that it has acquired an unprecedented urgency with the advent of a "new public sphere dominated by globalization."²²⁴ Of course, Said does not mean that writers and other intellectuals today have been stripped of any private, interior consciousness. Rather, in raising this question, he intends to highlight the point that it has become more difficult for intellectuals to distance themselves from, or to deny any association with, a public sphere of global proportions.

How does this intermingling of the public and private in the writer's consciousness affect the writer's relation to the work? Speaking in 1965, Sartre remarked that the writer, who could not humanly avoid being affected by the pervading fatalistic mood of the Cold War, would be a "mere entertainer or charlatan" if he did not attempt to render even "a vague anguish drifting from page to page...to demonstrate the existence of the bomb."²²⁵

²²⁰ In Small, ed., *The Public Intellectual*, 19-39.

²²¹ *Ibid.*, 20.

²²² *Ibid.*, 25.

²²³ *Ibid.*, 20.

²²⁴ *Ibid.*, 26.

²²⁵ Sartre, "A Plea for Intellectuals" in *Between Existentialism and Marxism: Sartre on Philosophy, Politics, Psychology, and the Arts*, 284.

On her part, Gordimer argues that it has *always* been difficult for writers and other intellectuals to avoid political questions of their day, whether overtly or implicitly.²²⁶ Because the writer's subject is "*the consciousness* of his own era,"²²⁷ the act of writing itself reflects the penetration of the political into the private sphere insofar as political dictums affect human lives and relationships. In a strong Marxist vein, the Kenyan writer Ngugi wa Thiong'o reinforces Gordimer's ideas when he writes, "A writer's subject matter is history: the process of a people acting on nature, changing it, and in so doing, acting on and changing themselves. The changing relations of production including power relations is a whole territory of concern to a writer. Politics is hence part and parcel of this literary territory. The product of a writer's imaginative involvement – what Shakespeare called mirror unto nature – becomes a reflection of society."²²⁸

But different times may call for different tactics, and writers may also respond differently in similar situations. Thus, what entails "a reflection of society" in literature may take the form of Neruda's poetic voicing of Chilean peasants and war-weary Spanish civilians, Gordimer's critical depiction of the intrusion of the culture of apartheid into the private psyche, or Gao's surrealist representation of a self split by the pressures of profound loneliness wrought by Maoist repression.

For Sartre, history had converged at a moment when the "fundamental structures" of society were more oppressive than ever, unprecedented catastrophes were occurring on a universal scale, and a spiritual God no longer offered consolation: "From 1930 on, the world depression, the coming of Nazism, and the events in China opened our eyes. It seemed as if the ground were going to fall from under us [writers], and suddenly, *for us too*, the great historical juggling began....And our life as an individual which had seemed to depend upon our efforts, our virtues, and our faults...seemed governed down to its minutest details by obscure and collective forces, and its most private circumstances seemed to reflect the state of the whole world. All at once we felt ourselves abruptly *situated*."²²⁹ How were writers to deal with this crisis? Sartre's own response, an integration of his early existentialist and later Marxist views, was that writers are specially equipped with the abilities as well as the prerogative to confront such contemporary issues in their work: "[W]e must militate in our writings, in favor of the freedom of the person *and* the socialist revolution. It has often been claimed that they are not reconcilable. It is our job to show tirelessly that they imply each other."²³⁰

Neruda's views were similar to Sartre's, in that his artistic convictions were determined to a large extent by his deeply felt apprehension of the social inequalities that beset his native Chile, lingering residues of the epoch of colonialism: "By extending to these extreme consequences the poet's duty, in truth or in error, I determined that my posture within the community and before life should be that of in a humble way taking sides....In the midst of the arena of America's struggles I saw that my human task was none other than to join the extensive forces of the

²²⁶ Gordimer, "Three in a Bed: Fiction, Morals, and Politics," 8.

²²⁷ Gordimer, "Selecting My Stories," in *The Essential Gesture: Writing, Politics and Places*, 97.

²²⁸ Ngugi, "Writers in Politics" in *Writers in Politics: A Re-engagement with Issues of Literature and Society* (1997), 68.

²²⁹ Sartre, "Situation of the Writer in 1947" in *What Is Literature?*, 146-7.

²³⁰ *Ibid.*, 191.

organized masses of the people....And even if my attitude gave and still gives rise to bitter or friendly objections, the truth is that I can find no other way for an author in our far-flung and cruel countries.”²³¹

Gordimer, who has throughout her career committed her intellectual activities to the struggle against apartheid, nevertheless has emphatically maintained her freedom as a writer to portray human experience in her work as honestly and critically as possible, distanced from the pressures of struggle ideology. Rather than conceiving the tension between artistic and social engagement as an irreconcilable opposition, however, she argues that this tension is a potential source of tremendous creative force: “Engagement is not understood for what it really has been, in the hands of honest and talented writers: the writer's exploration of the particular meaning his or her being has taken on in this time and place. For real ‘engagement,’ for the writer, isn't something set apart from the range of the creative imagination. It isn't something dictated by brothers and sisters in the cause he or she shares with them. It comes from within the writer, his or her creative destiny, living in history. ‘Engagement’ doesn't preclude the beauty of language, the complexity of human emotions; on the contrary, such literature must be able to use all these in order to be truly engaged with life.”²³²

Gao has taken an even more independent stance than Gordimer, largely as a result of his lifelong persecution at the hands of the Communist regime in China. He argues that the writer does not have an essential duty to the public, because in even the slightest efforts to reach beyond the depiction of individual, subjective experience, the writer may fall to the temptation of ideological schematizations of human existence: “The writer writes what he wants without concern for recompense not only to affirm his self but also to challenge society...[but if] the writer wants to challenge society it must be through language and he must rely on the characters and incidents of his works, otherwise he can only harm literature. Literature is not angry shouting and furthermore cannot turn an individual's indignation into [social] accusations. It is only when the feelings of the writer as an individual are dispersed in a work that his feelings will withstand the ravages of time.”²³³

Despite their different conceptions of the writer's relationship to society, however, all of the writers above agree that in the end, the writer's artistic freedom takes precedence over any held prescription of what literature ought to be. Of course, such freedom is constantly being challenged on various fronts. Writers who uphold their freedom to express themselves creatively and honestly are often subject to persecution by governments and other institutions of power that consider them to be a direct threat to their authority, and may in some situations be accused by the opposition of elitism, of art for art's sake, and political irresponsibility. In addition, the line between commitment and ideological tendentiousness is not always clearly defined. Thus, any discussion of the relationship between the writer and commitment calls up the question of whether the writer is obliged to respond to public pressures to take on roles of intellectual and/or moral leadership in society. Whatever their perception of their own social responsibilities as citizens, however, all of these writers stress that as a *writer* one's primary "commitment" is to the imaginative explorations and transfigurations in one's literary work. Gordimer summarizes this conviction in

²³¹ Neruda, “Towards the Splendid City,” <http://www.nobel.se/literature/laureates/1971/neruda-lecture.html>.

²³² Gordimer, “Turning the Page: African Writers and the Twenty-first Century” in *Living in Hope and History*, 31.

²³³ Gao, “The Case for Literature,” <http://www.nobel.se/literature/laureates/2000/gao-lecture-e.html>.

the following quotation from Philip Toynbee: "The writer's gift [through the literary work] to the reader is not social zest or moral improvement or love of country, but an enlargement of the reader's apprehension."²³⁴

Language, Authenticity and Commitment

Following upon this affirmation of the writer's task is an acknowledgment of the obvious, and immensely complex, role of language in the writer's literary commitments. A return to Said's ideas leads usefully into this subject. Said warns that there is a danger in using "transparent, simple, clear prose" that has been consciously stripped of ambiguous cultural and linguistic references for the purpose of addressing a wider audience. By attempting to use a language that has been thus whittled down, the writer runs the risk of losing his or her critical edge and "perhaps too closely resembl[ing] the mind-set one is trying to expose and dismiss."²³⁵ Said, like Sartre before him, reminds writers that their material must be ordinary, everyday language, and that their task is to exploit the ambiguities present in ordinary language in order to recapture, reclaim, and reconnect their subjects to "tremendously complicated realities."²³⁶

Said's comments provide a key to understanding the link between writers' artistic and political commitments — "artistic" in the sense of creative innovation, "political" in the sense of investigating and challenging status quo representations of human experience. All of the writers discussed in this thesis have attempted to understand their tasks by evaluating the role of language in terms of this artistic and political nexus. Gao believes that the writer's task is an exploration of the uncharted possibilities in language, to look at "what has already been articulated in his language and address[ing] what has not been adequately articulated in that language."²³⁷ This point is well illustrated by the fact that Neruda's conviction to write in the language of everyday life did not preclude him from effecting profound artistic transformations within this language. Through artistic innovation, the writer takes on the role of the intellectual by challenging deadened discursive structures in language — a crucial task, for as Roland Bleiker has pointed out, "it is through these very conventions, inaudible and seemingly harmless as they are, that practices of domination become objectified."²³⁸

Related to this view of the critical, probing functions of literary language is the consideration of literature's role as an alternative, and more "authentic," record of human experience compared to official "factual" annals of history. This suggestion can be traced in Gordimer's statement that nothing factual she writes is as "truthful" as her fiction, Neruda's endeavors to write from the standpoint of marginalized groups, and Gao's claim that literature is the surviving record of the voice of the "frail" individual. Said discusses this important inscribing function of literature in terms of the intellectual's imperative to "present alternative narratives and other perspectives on history than those

²³³ Gao, "The Case for Literature," <http://www.nobel.se/literature/laureates/2000/gao-lecture-e.html>.

²³⁴ Gordimer, "A Writer's Freedom" in *The Essential Gesture: Writing, Politics and Places*, 89.

²³⁵ Said, 28.

²³⁶ *Ibid.*, 29.

²³⁷ "The Case for Literature," <http://www.nobel.se/literature/laureates/2000/gao-lecture-e.html>.

²³⁸ "Pablo Neruda and the Struggle for Political Memory," 1139.

provided by combatants on behalf of official memory and national identity, who tend to work in terms of falsified unities."²³⁹

Literature and Social Transformation

Having looked at literature's engagement with society in terms of the writer and the work, this discussion turns now to the reader. Any attempt to answer the question "why does literature matter?" cannot ignore the question from the reader's point-of-view, especially if one wishes to avoid taking a misleading view that literature must unilaterally effect social change if it is to be understood as properly "engaged." As mentioned above, Gordimer has emphasized that a crucial task of the writer is to "enlarge the reader's apprehension," a task indicated by Sartre as evidence of the writer's intellectual commitment, in which the work reveals a particular worldview which sheds light on the reader's own status of being-in-the-world. In his essay "How Can We Evaluate Art?" John Berger discusses this illuminative aspect in order to reformulate what it means for literature to be socially transformative:

Why should an artist's way of looking at the world have any meaning for us?...Because, I believe, it increases our awareness of our own potentiality. Not, of course, our awareness of our potentiality as artists ourselves. But a way of looking at the world implies a certain relationship with the world, and every relationship implies action....The important point is that a valid work of art promises in some way or another the possibility of an increase, an improvement. Nor need the work be optimistic to achieve this; indeed, its subject may be tragic. For it is not the subject that makes the promise, it is the artist's way of viewing his subject.²⁴⁰

Such a goal does not necessarily need to take the form of a conscious, driving intention behind a work. Gao has pointed out that literature is an autonomous activity, in which individuals (the writer and reader) participate of their own free will. For him, literature's function gestures towards the relativity of human experience, rather than the discovery or revelation of "universal" truths or values. One can interpret this valuation of "relativity" as a positive reinforcement of individual subjectivity, a view that the literary critic Harold Bloom and philosopher Richard Rorty have both taken in their respective assessments of Western literary traditions. Bloom writes, "The true use of Shakespeare or of Cervantes, of Homer or of Dante, of Chaucer or of Rabelais, is to augment one's own growing inner self. Reading deeply in the Canon will not make one a better or a worse person, a more useful or more harmful citizen. The mind's dialogue with itself is not primarily a social reality. All that the Western Canon can bring one is the proper use of one's own solitude, that solitude whose final form is one's confrontation with one's own morality."²⁴¹

Richard Rorty uses Bloom's ideas as a starting-point for his essay "The Decline of Redemptive Truth and the Rise of a Literary Culture," in which he states that where people have previously looked towards religion and

²³⁹ Said, 37.

²⁴⁰ In Feagin and Maynard, eds., *Aesthetics* (1997), 371-2.

philosophy, they now look to literature in order to satisfy “the need to fit everything – every thing, person, event, idea and poem – into a single context, a context which will somehow reveal itself as natural, destined and unique.”²⁴² Rorty argues that literature offers this “redemption” because through reading, one becomes acquainted with a great variety of alternative purposes and human lives, in touch with the limits of the human imagination “rather than merely the creation of one’s education or one’s environment.”²⁴³ However, he continues, though reading is essentially an individual, private activity, its goals are not to alienate human beings from each other. Rather, he argues, it produces the opposite effect, in that “the more books you read, the more ways of being human you have considered...the less tempted by dreams of an escape from time and chance, [and] the more convinced that we humans have nothing to rely on save one another.”²⁴⁴

Rorty’s ideas thus posit a symbiotic association between individual and collective “redemption” through literature, a link that is exemplified by Gao’s and Neruda’s views of literature as a record of the voice of individuals and of whole communities. This association also holds for the writer, who (to paraphrase Gordimer) derives a substantial amount of his or her creative energy from the ceaseless, back-and-forth movement between artistic solitude and social engagement. Thus, the particular social import of literature rests upon an ever-proliferation foundation of writers’ imaginative responses to human experience and readers’ individual ways of apprehending these responses.

Conclusion

We return for the last time to Said’s representation of the intellectual, a representation that is intentionally left open-ended by Said in order to allow for a myriad of imaginative responses from intellectuals who each hail from a unique, particular set of experiences and technical backgrounds. Above all, Said stresses that there is no “master-plan or blueprint or grand theory for what intellectuals can do, and the absence now of any utopian teleology toward which human history can be described as moving.”²⁴⁵ The absence of a “master-plan” opens up a multiplicity of ways in which intellectuals can go about achieving their goals and enables them to perform, and thus intellectuals are free to draw upon and innovate any material available to them, whether this be language, historical and social data, or artworks of the past. This thesis hopes to have presented an overview of a few of the writers who as intellectuals have performed “on many fronts, in many places, many styles that keep in play both the sense of opposition and the sense of engaged participation,”²⁴⁶ and who through their combined activities have pushed beyond the limits of the possible representations of writers as public intellectuals.

²⁴¹ Bloom, *The Western Canon: The Books and Schools of the Ages* (1995), 28.

²⁴² Rorty, “The Decline of Redemptive Truth and the Rise of a Literary Culture” (Nov. 2, 2000), <http://olincenter.uchicago.edu/pdf/rorty.pdf>, 2.

²⁴³ *Ibid.*, 3.

²⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 9-10.

²⁴⁵ Said, 36.

²⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

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