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NOTES
TO
LITERATURE

Volume Two

THEODOR W. ADORNO

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"Commitment"



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Commitment

Since Sartre's essay *What is Literature?* there has been less theoretical debate about committed and autonomous literature. But the controversy remains as urgent as only something that concerns spirit and not the immediate survival of human beings can be today. Sartre was moved to write his manifesto because he—and he was certainly not the first to do so—saw works of art lying in state next to one another in a pantheon of elective culture, decaying into cultural commodities. Works of art violate one another through their coexistence. Each one, without the author necessarily having willed it, strives for the utmost, and none really tolerates its neighbor next to it. This kind of salutary intolerance characterizes not only individual works but also types of art, like the different approaches the half-forgotten controversy about committed and autonomous art was concerned with. These are two "attitudes to objectivity," and they are at war with one another even when intellectual life exhibits them in a false peace. The committed work of art debunks the work that wants nothing but to exist; it considers it a fetish, the idle pastime of those who would be happy to sleep through the deluge that threatens us—an apolitical stance that is in fact highly political. In this view, such a work distracts from the clash of real interests. The conflict between the two great power blocs no longer spares anyone. The possibility of spirit itself is so dependent on that conflict that only blindness would insist on rights that can be smashed to bits tomorrow. For autonomous works of art, however, such considerations, and the conception of art that underlines them, are themselves already the catastrophe of which committed works warn spirit. If spirit renounces the freedom and the

duty to objectify itself in pure form, it has abdicated. Any works that are still created are busy conforming to the naked existence they are opposed to, as ephemeral as committed works consider autonomous works, which from the day they are created belong in the academic seminar where they will inevitably end. The sharp point of this antithesis is a reminder of just how problematic matters are with art today. Each of the two alternatives negates itself along with the other: committed art, which as art is necessarily detached from reality, because it negates its difference from reality; *l'art pour l'art* because through its absolutization it denies even the indissoluble connection to reality that is contained in art's autonomy as its polemical a priori. The tension in which art has had its life up to the most recent period vanishes between these two poles. In the meantime, contemporary literature itself raises doubts about the omnipotence of these alternatives. Contemporary literature is not so completely subjugated to the way of the world that it is suited to the formation of political fronts. The Sartrean goats and the Valéryan sheep cannot be separated. Commitment as such, even if politically intended, remains politically ambiguous as long as it does not reduce itself to propaganda, the obliging shape of which mocks any commitment on the part of the subject. The opposite, however, what the Soviet catalogue of sins calls formalism, is opposed not only by the officials over there and not only by libertarian existentialism: the so-called abstract texts are easily reproached with a lack of scandalousness, a lack of societal aggressiveness, even by avant-gardists. On the other hand, Sartre has the highest praise for Picasso's *Guernica*; he could easily be accused of formalist sympathies in music and painting. He reserves his concept of commitment for literature on account of its conceptual nature: "The writer deals with meanings."¹ Certainly, but not only with meanings. Although no word that enters into a work of literature divests itself fully of the meanings it possesses in communicative speech, still, in no work, not even the traditional novel, does this meaning remain untransformed; it is not the same meaning the word had outside the work. Even the simple "was" in an account of something that did not exist acquires a new formal quality by virtue of the fact that it "was" not. This continues in the higher levels of meaning in a literary work, up to what was once thought of as its Idea. The special status Sartre accords literature must also be questioned by anyone who does not immediately subsume the genres of art under the general overarching concept of art. The residues in literary works of meanings from outside those works are the indispensable non-

artistic element in art. The work's formal law cannot be inferred from those meanings but only from the dialectic of the two moments. That law governs what the meanings are transformed into. The distinction between writers and literati is a shallow one, but the subject matter of a philosophy of art, such as even Sartre intends it, is not its journalistic aspect. Still less is it that for which German offers the term "Aussage" [message]. That term vibrates intolerably between what an artist wants from his product and the demand for a metaphysical meaning that expresses itself objectively. Here in Germany that is generally an uncommonly serviceable Being. The social function of talk about committed art has become somewhat confused. The person who demands, in a spirit of cultural conservatism, that the work of art say something allies himself with the political counterposition in opposing the afunctional hermetic work of art. Those who sing the praises of binding ties will be more likely to find Sartre's *No Exit* profound than to listen patiently to a text in which language rattles the cage of meaning and through its distance from meaning rebels from the outset against a positive assumption of meaning. For Sartre, the atheist, on the other hand, the conceptual meaning of the literary work remains the precondition for commitment. Works that the bailiff takes action against in the East may be denounced demagogically by guardians of the genuine message because they allegedly say something they do not say at all. Hatred of what the National Socialists were already calling cultural bolshevism during the Weimar Republic has outlived the age of Hitler, when it was institutionalized. Today it flares up about works of the same kind as forty years ago, including some whose origins go back a long way and whose link with tradition is unmistakable. In the newspapers and periodicals of the radical right there is, as always, a contrived outrage about what is said to be unnatural, overly intellectual, unhealthy, and decadent; they know who they are writing for. This is in accord with the insights of social psychology into the authoritarian character. Among the existentialia of that character are conventionalism, respect for the rigid facade of opinion and society, defense against impulses that cause confusion about that facade or strike something personal in the unconscious, something that cannot be admitted at any cost. Literary realism of any provenance whatsoever, even if it calls itself critical or socialist, is more compatible with this antagonistic attitude toward everything strange or upsetting than are works that through their very approach, without swearing by political slogans, put the rigid coordinate system of the authoritarian character

out of action, a coordinate system which such people then hold to all the more stubbornly the less they are capable of spontaneously experiencing something not already officially approved. The desire to take Brecht out of the repertory [in West Germany] should be attributed to a relatively superficial layer of political consciousness; and it was probably not very strong or it would have taken a much crasser form after August 13 [i.e., when the Berlin Wall was put up]. When, on the other hand, the social contract with reality is canceled, in that literary works no longer speak as though they were talking about something real, one's hair stands on end. Not the least of the weaknesses in the debate about committed art is that the debate did not reflect on the effect exerted by works whose formal law disregards matters of effect. As long as what is communicated in the shock of the unintelligible is not understood, the whole debate resembles shadow-boxing. Confusions in evaluating an issue do not, of course, change anything in the issue itself, but they do necessitate a rethinking of the alternatives.

In terms of theory, commitment should be distinguished from tendentiousness, or advocacy of a particular partisan position. Committed art in the strict sense is not intended to lead to specific measures, legislative acts, or institutional arrangements, as in older ideological pieces directed against syphilis, the duel, the abortion laws, or the reform schools. Instead, it works toward an attitude: Sartre, for instance, aims at choice as the possibility of existence, as opposed to a spectatorlike neutrality. The very thing that gives committed art an artistic advantage over the tendentious piece, however, makes the content to which the author is committed ambiguous. In Sartre the category of decision, originally Kierkegaardian, takes on the legacy of the Christian "He who is not for me is against me," but without the concrete theological content. All that is left of that is the abstract authority of the choice enjoined, without regard for the fact that the very possibility of choice is dependent on what is to be chosen. The prescribed form of the alternatives through which Sartre wants to prove that freedom can be lost negates freedom. Within a situation predetermined in reality, it fails and becomes empty assertion. Herbert Marcuse provided the correct label for the philosophical idea that one can accept or reject torture inwardly: nonsense. It is precisely this, however, that is supposed to leap out at us from Sartre's dramatic situations. The reason they are so ill suited to serve as models for Sartre's own existentialism is that—and here we must credit Sartre's truthfulness—they contain within themselves the whole administered world that

existentialism ignores; it is unfreedom that can be learned from them. Sartre's theater of ideas sabotages the very thing for which he thought up the categories. But this is not an individual failing on the part of his plays. Art is not a matter of pointing up alternatives but rather of resisting, solely through artistic form, the course of the world, which continues to hold a pistol to the heads of human beings. When, however, committed works of art present decisions to be made and make those decisions their criteria, the choices become interchangeable. As a consequence of that ambiguity, Sartre has stated very openly that he does not expect any real change in the world to be accomplished through literature; his skepticism bears witness to historical changes both in society and in the practical function of literature since Voltaire. The locus of commitment shifts to the writer's views, in accordance with the extreme subjectivism of Sartre's philosophy, which for all its materialist undertones resounds with German speculative philosophy. For Sartre the work of art becomes an appeal to the subject because the work is nothing but the subject's decision or non-decision. He will not grant that even in its initial steps every work of art confronts the writer, however free he may be, with objective requirements regarding its construction. Confronted with these demands, the writer's intention becomes only a moment in the process. Sartre's question, "Why write?" and his derivation of writing from a "deeper choice" are unconvincing because the author's motivations are irrelevant to the written work, the literary product. Sartre comes close to acknowledging this when he remarks that, as Hegel was well aware, works increase in stature the less they remain bound up with the empirical person who produces them. When, using Durkheimian terminology, Sartre calls the work a "fait social," a social fact, he is involuntarily citing the idea of a deeply collective objectivity that cannot be penetrated by the mere subjective intentions of the author. This is why he wants to link commitment not to the writer's intention but to the fact that the writer is a human being.² But 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, *dans le présent*; but since the writer cannot escape the present in any case, no program can be inferred from this. The obligation the writer takes on is far more precise: it is not one of choice but one of substance. When Sartre talks about dialectics, his subjectivism pays so little heed to the particular Other which the subject becomes in divesting itself of itself and through which it becomes subject in the first place that

for him any and all literary objectification becomes suspect as rigidity. But because the pure immediacy and spontaneity that he hopes to salvage are not defined by anything they confront, they degenerate to a second-order reification. To move the drama and the novel beyond mere expression—for Sartre the prototype would be the cry of the person being tortured—he has to have recourse to a flat objectivity, removed from the dialectic of work and expression: the communication of his own philosophy. That philosophy appoints itself the substance of literature as only in Schiller. But by the criterion of the literary work what is communicated, however sublime it might be, is hardly more than material. 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. The theses illustrated, or sometimes expressly stated, however, misuse the impulses whose expression is the motivation for Sartre's dramaturgy by providing examples, and in doing so they disavow themselves. The sentence "Hell is other people," which concludes one of Sartre's most famous plays,³ sounds like a quotation from *Being and Nothingness*; moreover, it could just as well read, "Hell is we ourselves." The conjunction of readily graspable plots and equally graspable and distillable ideas has brought Sartre great success and made him, certainly against his own intentions, acceptable to the culture industry. The high level of abstraction of his *pièces à thèse* misled him into setting some of his best works, the film *Les jeux sont faits* and the drama *Dirty Hands*, among the political leaders and not in obscurity among the victims. Similarly, the current ideology that Sartre hates confuses the deeds and the sufferings of paper-doll leaders with the objective course of history. Sartre participates in weaving the veil of personalization, the idea that those who are in charge, and not an anonymous machinery, make the decisions, and that there is still life on the heights of the social command posts; Beckett's characters, who are in the process of kicking the bucket, know the score on that one. Sartre's approach prevents him from recognizing the hell he is rebelling against. Many of his phrases could be echoed by his mortal enemies. The idea that it is a matter of choice in and of itself would even coincide with the Nazi slogan, "Only sacrifice makes us free"; in Fascist Italy, absolute dynamism made similar philosophical pronouncements. The weakness in Sartre's conception of commitment strikes at the cause to which Sartre is committed.

Brecht too, who glorifies the party directly in many of his plays, like the dramatization of Gorki's *The Mother* or *The Measures Taken*, occasionally wanted, at least according to his theoretical writings, primarily to educate spectators to a detached, thoughtful, experimental attitude, the opposite of the illusionary stance of empathy and identification. Since *St. Joan*, his dramaturgy has surpassed Sartre's considerably in its tendency to abstractness. Except that Brecht, more consistent than Sartre and the greater artist, has raised abstraction itself to a formal principle, that of a didactic *poésie* that excludes the traditional concept of the dramatic character. Brecht understood that the surface of social life, the sphere of consumption, of which the psychologically motivated actions of individuals are also to be considered a part, conceals the essence of society. As the law of exchange, that essence is itself abstract. Brecht distrusts aesthetic individuation as an ideology. This is why he wants to turn the gruesomeness of society into a theatrical phenomenon by dragging it out into the open. The people on his stage visibly shrivel up into the agents of social processes and functions that they are, indirectly and without realizing it, in empirical reality. Unlike Sartre, Brecht no longer postulates an identity between living individuals and the social essence, nor the absolute sovereignty of the subject. But the process of aesthetic reduction he undertakes for the sake of political truth works against political truth. That truth requires countless mediations, which Brecht disdains. What has artistic legitimacy as an alienating infantilism—Brecht's first plays kept company with Dada—becomes infantility when it claims theoretical and social validity. Brecht wanted to capture the inherent nature of capitalism in an image; to this extent his intention was in fact what he disguised it from the Stalinist terror as being—realistic. He would have refused to cite that essence, imageless and blind, as it were, through its manifestations in the damaged life, removed from meaning. But this burdened him with an obligation to theoretical accuracy in what he unequivocally intended. His art disdains the quid pro quo in which what presents itself as doctrine is simultaneously exempted, by virtue of its aesthetic form, from the requirement that what it teaches be cogent. Critique of Brecht cannot gloss over the fact that—for objective reasons that go beyond the adequacy of his work—he did not satisfy the norm that he established for himself as though it were a means of salvation. *St. Joan* was the central work of his dialectical theater; even the *Good Woman of Szechuan* varied it through reversal: just as Joan aids the bad through spontaneous goodness, so the person who wills the good must

make herself bad. *St. Joan* is set in a Chicago that is a middle ground between economic data and a Wild West fairy tale of capitalism from *Mahagonny*. The more intimately Brecht involves himself with the former and the less he aims at imagery, the more he misses the essence of capitalism the parable is about. Events in the sphere of circulation, where competitors are cutting one another's throats, take the place of appropriation of surplus value in the sphere of production, but in comparison with the latter, the cattle dealers' brawls over loot are epiphenomena that could not possibly bring about the great crisis on their own; and the economic events that appear as the machinations of the rapacious dealers are not only childish, as Brecht no doubt wanted them to be, but also unintelligible by any economic logic, no matter how primitive. The reverse side of this is a political naiveté that could only bring a grin to the faces of Brecht's opponents, a grin that says they have nothing to fear from such silly enemies; they can be as satisfied with Brecht as they are with the dying Joan in the very impressive final scene of his drama. The idea that the leadership of a strike backed by the party would entrust a crucial task to someone who did not belong to the organization is, with the most generous allowance for poetic credibility, just as unthinkable as the idea that the failure of that one individual could cause the strike to fall through.

Brecht's comedy about the resistible rise of the great dictator Arturo Ui throws a harsh and accurate light on what is subjectively empty and illusory in the fascistic leader. The dismantling of leaders, however, like that of the individual generally in Brecht, is extended into the construction of the social and economic contexts in which the dictator acts. In place of a conspiracy of the highly placed and powerful we have a silly gangster organization, the cauliflower trust. The true horror of fascism is conjured away; fascism is no longer the product of the concentration of social power but rather an accident, like misfortunes and crimes. The goals of political agitation decree this; the opponent must be scaled down, and that promotes false politics, in literature as in the political praxis of the period before 1933. Contrary to all dialectics, the ridiculousness to which Ui is consigned takes the teeth out of fascism, a fascism Jack London had accurately prophesied decades earlier. The anti-ideological writer paves the way for the degradation of his own doctrine to ideology. The tacitly accepted affirmation that one part of the world is no longer antagonistic is complemented by jokes about everything that belies the theodicy of the current situation. Not that respect for world-

historical greatness would prohibit laughter about housepainters, although the use of the word "housepainter" against Hitler speculates awkwardly on bourgeois class consciousness. And the group that staged the seizure of power was most certainly a gang. This kind of elective affinity, however, is not extraterritorial but rooted in society itself. This is why the comic quality in fascism, which Chaplin's film [*The Great Dictator*] also captured, is also its most extreme horror. If that is suppressed, if paltry exploiters of greengrocers are made fun of when it is really a question of key economic positions, then the attack fails. *The Great Dictator* also loses its satirical force and becomes offensive in the scene in which a Jewish girl hits one storm trooper after another on the head with a pan without being torn to pieces. Political reality is sold short for the sake of political commitment; that decreases the political impact as well. Sartre's candid doubt about whether *Guernica* had "won a single person to the Spanish cause" certainly holds true for Brecht's didactic drama as well. Hardly anyone needs to be taught the *fabula docet* that can be derived from it: that the world does not operate justly. The dialectical theory to which Brecht summarily declared allegiance has left few traces there. The demeanor of the didactic drama recalls the American expression "preaching to the saved." In actuality the primacy of doctrine over pure form that Brecht intended becomes a moment of form itself. When suspended, form turns against its own illusory character. Its self-criticism is akin to functionalism in the sphere of the applied visual arts. The heteronomously determined correction of form, the eradication of the ornamental for the sake of function, increases the autonomy of form. That is the substance of Brecht's literary work: the didactic drama as an artistic principle. Brecht's medium, the alienation of immediately occurring events, is more a medium of the constitution of form than a contribution to the work's practical efficacy. To be sure, Brecht did not talk as skeptically about effect as Sartre did, but the shrewd and sophisticated Brecht was hardly fully convinced about it; he once wrote sovereignly that if he were fully honest with himself the theater was ultimately more important to him than the alteration of the world it was supposed to serve. The artistic principle of simplification not only purifies the real political dynamics of the illusory differentiations they take on in the subjective reflection of social objectivity; at the same time, the very objectivity whose distillation the didactic play strives for is falsified. If one takes Brecht at his word and makes politics the criterion of his committed theater, then his theater proves false by that criterion. Hegel's *Logic*

taught that essence must appear. But in that case a representation of essence that fails to take into account its relationship to appearance is inherently as false as the substitution of the lumpenproletariat for those behind fascism. Brecht's technique of reduction would be legitimate only in the domain of *l'art pour l'art*, which his version of commitment condemns as he condemns Lucullus.

Contemporary literary Germany likes to distinguish between Brecht the writer and Brecht the politician. People want to rescue this important figure for the West and if possible set him on a pedestal as a pan-German writer and thereby neutralize him, put him *au-dessus de la mêlée*. It is certainly true that Brecht's literary power, like his cunning and indomitable intelligence, shot out beyond the official credo and the prescribed aesthetics of the People's Democracies. For all that, Brecht should be defended against this kind of defense. His work, with its obvious weaknesses, would not have such power if it were not thoroughly permeated with politics; even in its most questionable products, like *The Measures Taken*, this produces an awareness that something extremely serious is at stake. To this extent Brecht has fulfilled his claim to provoke thought through the theater. It is useless to distinguish the existing or fictitious beauties of his works from their political intention. Immanent criticism, which is the only dialectical criticism, should, however, synthesize the question of the validity of his work with that of his politics. In Sartre's chapter "Why Write?" he says, quite correctly, "Nobody can suppose for a moment that it is possible to write a good novel in praise of anti-Semitism."⁴ Nor in praise of the Moscow Trials, even if the praise was bestowed before Stalin had Zinoviev and Bukharin murdered. The political untruth defiles the aesthetic form. Where the social problematic is artificially straightened out for the sake of the *thema probandum* that Brecht discusses in the epic theater, the drama crumbles within its own framework. *Mother Courage* is an illustrated primer that tries to reduce to absurdity Montecuccoli's dictum that war feeds war. The camp follower who uses war to pull her children through is supposed to become responsible for their downfall by doing so. But in the play this guilt does not follow logically either from the war or from the behavior of the little canteen operator; if she had not been absent at precisely the critical moment, the disaster would not have occurred, and the fact that she has to be absent to earn something has no specific relationship to what happens. The pictorial technique that Brecht has to use to make his thesis graphic interferes with its proof. A political-social analysis such as Marx and

Engels outlined for Lassalle's drama about Franz von Sickingen would show that the simplistic equation of the Thirty Years War with a modern war omits precisely what decides Mother Courage's actions and fate in the Grimmelshausen prototype. Because the society of the Thirty Years War is not the functional society of modern war, no closed functional totality in which the life and death of a private individual could be directly linked with economic laws can be stipulated, even poetically, for the former. Brecht needed those wild old-fashioned times nonetheless, as an image of the present day, for he himself well knew that the society of his own time could no longer be grasped directly in terms of human beings and things. Thus the construction of society leads him astray, first to a false construction of society and then to events that are not dramatically motivated. Political flaws become artistic flaws, and vice versa. But the less works have to proclaim something they cannot fully believe themselves, the more internally consistent they become, and the less they need a surplus of what they say over what they are. Furthermore, the truly interested parties in all camps still no doubt survive war quite well, even today.

Such aporias are reproduced even in the literary fiber, the Brechtian tone. However little doubt there is about the tone and its unmistakable quality—things on which the mature Brecht may have placed little value—the tone is poisoned by the falseness of its politics. Because the cause he championed is not, as he long believed, merely an imperfect socialism but a tyranny in which the blind irrationality of social forces returns, with Brecht's assistance as a eulogist of complicity, his lyrical voice has to make itself gravelly to do the job better, and it grates. The rough-and-tumble adolescent masculinity of the young Brecht already betrays the false courage of the intellectual who, out of despair about violence, shortsightedly goes over to a violent praxis of which he has every reason to be afraid. The wild roaring of *The Measures Taken* outshouts the disaster that occurred, a disaster it feverishly tries to depict as salvation. Even the best part of Brecht is infected by the deceptive aspect of his commitment. The language bears witness to the extent of the divergence between the poetic subject and what it proclaims. In order to bridge the gap, Brecht's language affects the speech of the oppressed. But the doctrine it champions requires the language of the intellectual. Its unpretentiousness and simplicity are a fiction. The fiction is revealed as much by the marks of exaggeration as by the stylized recourse to outmoded or provincial forms of expression. Not infrequently it is

overly familiar; ears that have preserved their sensitivity cannot help hearing that someone is trying to talk them into something. It is arrogant and almost contemptuous toward the victims to talk like them, as though one were one of them. One may play at anything, but not at being a member of the proletariat. What weighs heaviest against commitment in art is that even good intentions sound a false note when they are noticeable; they do so all the more when they disguise themselves because of that. There is some of this even in the later Brecht, in the linguistic gesture of wisdom, the fiction of the old peasant saturated with epic experience as the poetic subject. No one in any country of the world has this kind of down-to-earth, south German "muzhik" experience any more. The ponderous tone becomes a propaganda technique that is designed to make it seem that life is lived properly once the Red Army takes over. Because there is truly nothing in which that humanity, which is palmed off as having already been realized, can be demonstrated, Brecht's tone makes itself an echo of archaic social relationships that are irrevocably in the past. The late Brecht was not all so far from the officially approved version of humanness. A Western journalist might well praise the *Caucasian Chalk Circle* as a *Song of Songs* about motherliness, and who is not moved when the splendid young woman is held up as an example to the lady who is plagued by migraines. Baudelaire, who dedicated his work to the person who formulated the phrase *l'art pour l'art*, was less suited for such a catharsis. Even ambitious and virtuosic poems like "The Legend of the Origin of the Book Tao Te Ching" are marred by the theatrics of utter simplicity. Those whom Brecht considers classics denounced the idiocy of rural life, the stunted consciousness of those who are oppressed and in poverty. For him, as for the existential ontologist, this idiocy becomes ancient truth. His whole oeuvre is a Sisyphean endeavor to somehow reconcile his highly cultivated and differentiated taste with the boorish heteronomous demands he took on in desperation.

I do not want to soften my statement that it is barbaric to continue to write poetry after Auschwitz; it expresses, negatively, the impulse that animates committed literature. The question one of the characters in Sartre's *Morts sans sépulture* [*The Dead Without Tombs*] asks, "Does living have any meaning when men exist who beat you until your bones break?" is also the question whether art as such should still exist at all; whether spiritual regression in the concept of committed literature is not enjoined by the regression of society itself. But Hans Magnus Enzensberger's

rejoinder also remains true, namely that literature must resist precisely this verdict, that is, be such that it does not surrender to cynicism merely by existing after Auschwitz. It is the situation of literature itself and not simply one's relation to it that is paradoxical. The abundance of real suffering permits no forgetting; Pascal's theological "On ne doit plus dormir" ["Sleeping is no longer permitted"] should be secularized. But that suffering—what Hegel called the awareness of affliction—also demands the continued existence of the very art it forbids; hardly anywhere else does suffering still find its own voice, a consolation that does not immediately betray it. The most significant artists of the period have followed this course. The uncompromising radicalism of their works, the very moments denounced as formalist, endows them with a frightening power that impotent poems about the victims lack. But even Schönberg's *Survivors of Warsaw* remains caught in the aporia in which it has involved itself as an autonomous artistic construction of heteronomy intensified to the point where it becomes Hell. There is something awkward and embarrassing in Schönberg's composition—and it is not the aspect that irritates people in Germany because it does not allow them to repress what they want at all costs to repress. When it is turned into an image, however, for all its harshness and discordance it is as though the embarrassment one feels before the victims were being violated. The victims are turned into works of art, tossed out to be gobbled up by the world that did them in. The so-called artistic rendering of the naked physical pain of those who were beaten down with rifle butts contains, however distantly, the possibility that pleasure can be squeezed from it. The morality that forbids art to forget this for a second slides off into the abyss of its opposite. The aesthetic stylistic principle, and even the chorus' solemn prayer, make the unthinkable appear to have had some meaning; it becomes transfigured, something of its horror removed. By this alone an injustice is done the victims, yet no art that avoided the victims could stand up to the demands of justice. Even the sound of desperation pays tribute to a heinous affirmation. Then works of lesser stature than the highest are also readily accepted, part of the process of "working through the past." When even genocide becomes cultural property in committed literature, it becomes easier to continue complying with the culture that gave rise to the murder. One characteristic of such literature is virtually ever-present: it shows us humanity blossoming in so-called extreme situations, and in fact precisely there, and at times this becomes a dreary metaphysics that affirms the horror, which

has been justified as a "boundary situation," by virtue of the notion that the authenticity of the human being is manifested there. In this cozy existential atmosphere the distinction between victim and executioner becomes blurred, since after all both are equally vulnerable to the possibility of nothingness, something generally, of course, more bearable for the executioners.

The adherents of that metaphysics, which has in the meantime degenerated to an idle sport of opinions, inveigh as they did before 1933 against the brutalization, distortion, and artistic perversion of life, as though the authors were responsible for what they protest against because what they write reflects the horror. A story about Picasso provides a good illustration of this mode of thinking, which continues to flourish beneath the silent surface of Germany. When an occupying German officer visited him in his studio and asked, standing before the *Guernica*, "Did you make that?" Picasso is said to have responded, "No, you did." Even autonomous works of art like the *Guernica* are determinate negations of empirical reality; they destroy what destroys, what merely exists and as mere existence recapitulates the guilt endlessly. It was none other than Sartre who recognized the connection between the autonomy of the work and a will that is not inserted into the work but rather the work's own gesture toward reality: "The work of art," he wrote, "does not *have an end*; there we agree with Kant. But the reason is that it *is* an end. The Kantian formula does not account for the appeal which issues from every painting, every statue, every book."⁵ It need only be added that this appeal does not stand in any direct relationship to the thematic commitment of the literary work. The unqualified autonomy of works that refrain from adaptation to the market involuntarily becomes an attack. That attack, however, is not an abstract one, not an invariant stance taken by all works of art toward a world that does not forgive them for not completely fitting in. Rather, the work of art's detachment from empirical reality is at the same time mediated by that reality. The artist's imagination is not a *creatio ex nihilo*; only dilettantes and sensitive types conceive it as such. By opposing empirical reality, works of art obey its forces, which repulse the spiritual construction, as it were, throwing it back upon itself. There is no content, no formal category of the literary work that does not, however transformed and however unwarily, derive from the empirical reality from which it has escaped. It is through this relationship, and through the process of regrouping its moments in terms of its formal law, that literature relates to reality. Even the avant-

garde abstractness to which the philistine objects and which has nothing to do with the abstractness of concepts and ideas is a reflection of the abstractness of the objective law governing society. One can see this in the works of Beckett. They enjoy the only fame now worthy of the name: everyone shrinks from them in horror, and yet none can deny that these eccentric novels and plays are about things everyone knows and no one wants to talk about. Philosophical apologists may find it convenient to view Beckett's oeuvre as an anthropological sketch, but in fact it deals with an extremely concrete historical state of affairs: the dismantling of the subject. Beckett's *ecce homo* is what has become of human beings. They look mutely out from his sentences as though with eyes whose tears have dried up. The spell they cast and under which they stand is broken by being reflected in them. The minimal promise of happiness which they contain, which refuses to be traded for any consolation, was to be had only at the price of a thoroughgoing articulation, to the point of worldlessness. All commitment to the world has to be canceled if the idea of the committed work of art is to be fulfilled, the polemical alienation that Brecht the theoretician had in mind, and that he practiced less and less the more he devoted himself sociably to the human. This paradox, which may sound too clever, does not require much support from philosophy. It is based on an extremely simple experience: Kafka's prose and Beckett's plays and his genuinely colossal novel *The Unnamable* 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. Anyone over whom Kafka's wheels have passed has lost both his sense of being at peace with the world and the possibility of being satisfied with the judgment that the course of the world is bad: the moment of confirmation inherent in a resigned acknowledgment of the superior power of evil has been eaten away. The more ambitious the work, of course, the greater its chance of foundering and failure. The loss of tension that can be observed in works of painting and music that move away from representation and intelligible meaning has in many respects infected the literature referred to, in an abominable expression, as texts. Such works approach irrelevance and inconspicuously degenerate into handicrafts—into the kind of repetitive formulaic play that has been debunked in other species of art, decorative patterns.

This often gives legitimacy to the crude demand for commitment. Works that challenge a mendacious positivity of meaning easily verge on meaninglessness of a different kind, positivist formal arrangements, idle play with elements. In doing so they succumb to the sphere they began by differentiating themselves from; an extreme case is a literature that undialectically confuses itself with science and vainly equates itself with cybernetics. The extremes meet: what cuts off the last act of communication becomes the prey of communication theory. There is no firm criterion for distinguishing between the determinate negation of meaning and the mere positivity of a meaninglessness that diligently grinds along on its own accord. Least of all can an appeal to humanity and a cursing of mechanization serve to draw such a line. Those works that through their very existence become the advocates of the victims of a nature-dominating rationality are in their protest by their very nature also always interwoven with the process of rationalization. To deny that process would be to be disempowered, both aesthetically and socially: a higher-order native soil. The organizing principle in every work of art, the principle that creates its unity, is derived from the same rationality that its claim to totality would like to put a stop to.

Historically, the question of commitment has taken different forms in French and German consciousness. Aesthetically, the principle of *l'art pour l'art* has been dominant in France, overtly or covertly, and has been allied with academic and reactionary tendencies. This explains the rebellion against it.⁶ In France there is a touch of the pleasant and the decorative even in works of the extreme avant-garde. This is why the appeal to existence and commitment sounded revolutionary there. The reverse is true in Germany. For a tradition extending deep into German Idealism—its first famous document, canonized in the intellectual history of the schoolmasters, was Schiller's treatise on the theater as a moral institution—art's freedom from purposefulness, which was however, first elevated theoretically to a pure and incorruptible moment of the judgment of taste by a German, Kant, was suspect. Not so much, however, on account of the absolutization of spirit coupled with it; that is precisely what had its fling in German philosophy—to the point of hubris. Rather, on account of the fact the purposeless work of art turns toward society. It calls to mind the sensuous pleasure in which even the most extreme dissonance, and precisely that dissonance, participates, in sublimated form and through negation. German speculative philosophy saw the moment of transcendence contained within the work of art itself—

that its own inherent essence is always more than its existence—and inferred from it evidence of its morality. In terms of this latent tradition, the work of art is to be nothing for itself, because otherwise—and Plato's design for state socialism already stigmatized it in this way—it inspires effeminacy and discourages action for the sake of action, the German version of original sin. Antagonism to happiness, asceticism, the sort of ethos that always invokes names like Luther and Bismarck, have no use for aesthetic autonomy; and there is certainly an undercurrent of servile heteronomy beneath the pathos of the categorical imperative, which on the one hand is supposed to be reason itself but on the other hand is merely something given, something to be blindly obeyed. Fifty years ago there was the same kind of opposition to Stefan George and his school as to French aestheticism. Today that stink, which the bombs did not get rid of, is in league with the outrage over the alleged unintelligibility of contemporary art. A petit-bourgeois hatred of sex is at work there; Western ethical philosophers and the ideologues of socialist realism are in agreement on that. No moral terrorism can control the fact that the face the work of art turns toward the viewer gives him pleasure, even if it is only the formal fact of temporary liberation from the compulsion of practical ends. Thomas Mann expressed that in his phrase about art as "higher-order farce," something intolerable to those with good morals. Even Brecht, who was not free of ascetic traits—they return, transformed, in the resistance of great autonomous art to consumption—while rightly denouncing the culinary work of art, was much too shrewd not to realize that the pleasurable aspect of the work's effect cannot be completely disregarded no matter how implacable the work is. But consumption, and with it complicity in the bad sense, are not smuggled in on the side through the primacy of the aesthetic object as an object of pure construction. For while the moment of pleasure always recurs in the work's effect even if it has been extirpated from it, the principle that governs autonomous works of art is not effect but their inherent structure. They are knowledge in the form of a nonconceptual object. In this lies their dignity. They do not need to persuade human beings of it because it has been given to them. This is why it is now timely to speak in favor of autonomous rather than committed works in Germany. The latter can all too readily claim all the noble values for themselves and do with them as they please. There was no foul deed committed even under fascism that did not clothe itself in a moral justification. Those who are bragging about their ethics and their humanity

today are only waiting to persecute those they condemn by their criteria and to carry out in practice the same inhumanity of which they accuse contemporary art in theory. In Germany commitment in art amounts primarily to parroting what everybody is saying, or at least what everybody would like to hear. Hidden in the notion of a "message," of art's manifesto, even if it is politically radical, is a moment of accommodation to the world; the gesture of addressing the listener contains a secret complicity with those being addressed, who can, however, be released from their illusions only if that complicity is rescinded.

Literature that exists for the human being, like committed literature but also like the kind of literature the moral philistine wants, betrays the human being by betraying what could help him only if it did not act as though it were doing so. But anything that made itself absolute in response, existing only for its own sake, would degenerate into ideology. Art cannot jump over the shadow of irrationality: the fact that art, which is a moment in society even in opposing it, must close its eyes and ears to society. But when art itself appeals to this and arbitrarily restricts thought in accordance with art's contingent nature, making this its *raison d'être*, it fraudulently turns the curse it labors under into its theodicy. An "it shall be different" is hidden in even the most sublimated work of art. If art is merely identical with itself, a purely scientized construction, it has already gone bad and is literally preartistic. The moment of intention is mediated solely through the form of the work, which crystallizes into a likeness of an Other that ought to exist. As pure artifacts, products, works of art, even literary ones, are instructions for the praxis they refrain from: the production of life lived as it ought to be. Such mediation is not something in between commitment and autonomy, not some mixture of advanced formal elements and a spiritual content that aims at a real or ostensible progressive politics. The substance of works is not the spirit that was pumped into them; if anything, it is the opposite. The emphasis on the autonomous work, however, is itself sociopolitical in nature. The current deformation of politics, the rigidification of circumstances that are not starting to thaw anywhere, forces spirit to move to places where it does not need to become part of the rabble. At present everything cultural, even autonomous works, is in danger of suffocating in cultural twaddle; at the same time the work of art is charged with wordlessly maintaining what politics has no access to. Sartre himself expressed that in a passage that does credit to his honesty.⁷ This is not the time for political works of art; rather, politics has migrated into the

autonomous work of art, and it has penetrated most deeply into works that present themselves as politically dead, as in Kafka's parable about the children's guns, where the idea of nonviolence is fused with the dawning awareness of an emerging political paralysis. Paul Klee too should figure in the discussion about committed and autonomous art, because his work, *écriture* par excellence, had literary roots and would not exist if it had not devoured them. During the First World War or shortly thereafter, Klee drew caricatures showing Kaiser Wilhelm as an inhuman iron-eater. Out of these came, in 1920—one could no doubt trace the development in detail—the *Angelus novus*, the machine angel, which no longer bears any overt marks of caricature or commitment but far surpasses both. With enigmatic eyes, the machine angel forces the viewer to ask whether it proclaims complete disaster or the rescue hidden within it. It is, however, to use the words of Walter Benjamin, who owned the picture, an angel that does not give but takes instead.



Presuppositions
On the Occasion of a Reading by
Hans G. Helms

I cannot claim here that I will facilitate the understanding of the text *FA: M'AHNIESGWOW* by interpreting it. Others, members of Helms' circle of friends in Cologne, would be far more qualified for such interpretation, which would require a long period of immersion, than I; Gottfried Michael König has written an introduction to the work on the basis of intimate contact with it. Furthermore, the concept of *Verstehen*, interpretive understanding, cannot be applied without further ado to a hermetic text. Essential to such a text is the shock with which it forcibly interrupts communication. The harsh light of unintelligibility that such a work turns toward the reader renders the usual intelligibility suspect as being shallow, habitual, reified—in short, preartistic. To translate what appears alien in qualitatively modern works into current concepts and contexts is something of a betrayal of the works themselves. The more objective such works are, the less they concern themselves with what people expect from them or even with what the aesthetic subject projects into them, the more problematic intelligibility becomes. The less the matter itself accommodates to sedimented subjective modes of response, the more it lays itself open to the universal objection of subjective arbitrariness. Interpretive understanding presupposes a closed context of meaning that can be reconstructed through something like empathy on the part of the recipient. Not the least of the motives that gives rise to works like *FA: M'AHNIESGWOW*, however, is that of doing away with the fiction of such a context. As soon as reflection on works of art casts doubt upon the positive metaphysical meaning that crystallizes and discharges itself in the work, it also has to reject the