Article

Writing as Praxis: Quito and Sartre on Literature as Philosophy

Marella Ada Mancenido-Bolaños

Abstract: Emerita Quito's *Homage to Jean-Paul Sartre* was delivered during her inaugural and second lecture as Professorial Chair in Humanities in 1980 and 1981. These lectures focus on the, then, underexplored themes found in Sartre's writings—his thoughts on Marxism and literature. This short piece will focus on the second part of Quito's lecture on the relationship between philosophy and literature. Quito's discussion of Sartre on literature will be rehearsed, intertwined with a presentation of how Sartre's philosophical ideas are presented in some of his literary writings. Inspired by Quito's reading of Sartre, what this piece will demonstrate is the inextricable relationship between philosophy and literature—both are committed to writing as praxis or the praxis of writing about significant human experiences.

Keywords: Quito, Sartre, existentialism, philosophy and literature

Sartre's Philosophy in Literature

Quito's *Homage to Jean-Paul Sartre*, delivered during her inaugural and second lecture as Professorial Chair in Humanities on 5 December 1980 and 6 March 1981, is an important intervention. These lectures focus on the underexplored themes found in Sartre's philosophy, particularly his thoughts on Marxism and literature. The second part of lecture, titled "His Literature as Philosophy," explicates the philosophical dimension of Sartre's literature, the literary dimension of Sartre's philosophy, and the importance of writing as a form of commitment: through philosophy and literature, writing constitutes a synthetic unity for the material groundedness of our experience of freedom. Following Quito, Sartre's philosophy is literature and his literature is philosophy. She, moreover, states that until the twentieth century, "a clear though undrawn line had separated literature and

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philosophy."[1] The perception at that time was that philosophy is essentially argumentative and persuasive, while literature is essentially an art and an imitation of life.[2] Quoting Stephen Ross, "Art is art and it cannot be expected to serve a philosophic purpose."[3]

Against this prejudice of a disciplinary divide, Sartre's literature can be considered historical because the novels include portrayals of different epochs in history which serve to condition both mediate and immediate situations as their respective historical background—more often, situations which Sartre's protagonists must overcome. In fact, both Sartre's literature and philosophy are materially grounded in concrete history. For Quito, Sartre's literature introduces us to the

> … world of paradoxes and complexities wherein the characters seem to have only one aim: to assert their freedom by doing the opposite of what they want, and, in the process, they become sacrificial lambs on the altar of freedom.[4]

To understand his literature better, one must go back to his philosophy. And if one searches for practical examples of his philosophical ideas, one can turn to his literature, as themes in his literature are intertwined with his philosophy. Theories could be creatively narrated inasmuch as they could be abundantly insightful. On the one hand, the demand to think about a theory of freedom purely in ontological terms was first developed in *Being and Nothingness*. On the other hand, the desire to tell the story of freedom is seen as the major theme of his novels and plays. One may simply recall the people and characters who struggle with different experiences of freedom (or the lack of it)—Jean Genet, Estelle, Garcin, Inez, Frantz, and Antoine Roquentin. Take for example, *Nausea*—stylistically presented as a compilation of Roquentin's diary. Here, one finds his struggle as an individual search for the meaning of existence. Roquentin, being caught up with his past, and believing that he has already achieved so much, realizes later that he is still in search of something he cannot even specify. Interestingly, the French philosophy of the 1960s, which is often cited as the origin of the excesses of postmodernism, does not actually use the term. While Jean-François Lyotard and Jean Baudrillard draw direct parallels to postmodernism, their interpretations differ significantly from the widely

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[1] Emerita Quito, *Homage to Jean-Paul Sartre* (Manila: De La Salle University Press, 1981), 25.

[2] *Ibid*.

[3] *Ibid*.

[4] *Ibid*., 35.

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accepted contemporary understanding of the concept. Behind this is a theory of anthropology stemming from Claude Lévi-Strauss, called structuralism. Of course, it is 'textbook common sense' to accept poststructuralism, which emerged as a critique of structuralism, as another name for postmodernism. However, poststructuralism, sometimes interchange with deconstruction, is only a convenient term, and the designation is not found in France, the birthplace of this intellectual movement.

When Sartre speaks about freedom, he presents it as a *freedom to*. This implies that there is already a primordial assumption that each human being is gifted with freedom, and what is only left is to will oneself to practice one's freedom. For one to speak of action, one must also take into consideration the concept of intention.[5] Through intention, our very being is transformed from a mere pre-reflective state into fully becoming a being for-itself (*pour soi*). We may be capable of acting, but do we intend to act? In short, one may be capable of freedom, but will one intend to be free? Furthermore, Sartre claims:

> It is freedom which is the foundation of all essences since man reveals intra-mundane essences by surpassing the world toward his own possibilities …. My freedom is perpetually in question in my being; it is not a quality added on or a property of my nature. It is the very stuff of my being.[6]

The quotation above indicates how each human being (as *pour soi*) demonstrates an inherent freedom. It is the very essence of man, it is his very constitution, and yet, for fear of not being accountable for his own freedom, man chooses to submit his freedom to another being. In most cases, the weight of one's situational belongingness brings a discomfort within man's consciousness of his freedom, leading him astray from his genuine state or authentic existence, and even drives him further away from it. Not recognizing this freedom (as involving the intentionality warranted for responsibly owning one's actions) at the core of our very being reduces us back to the pre-reflective state, i.e., a being in-itself (*en soi*). Another key term in man's search for his authentic existence is the concept of projection. Projection happens when a being sees a possibility for itself. "The recognition

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[5] Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness: An Essay on Phenomenological Ontology*, trans. by Hazel Barnes (New York: Kensington Publishing Corp, 1956), 410.

[6] *Ibid*., 414–415.

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of one's freedom comes with anguish."[7] Quoting Sartre, John Duncan states that:

> Thus a person is most comprehensively understood in the terms of his or her particular, basic project. "My ultimate and initial project … is … always the outline of a solution of the problem of being. We are this solution 'as the project-for-itself of being in-itself.' Each human life is an attempted solution to the paradox of being a free project to become a completed and lack-less thing.[8]

Towards the end of *Nausea*, Roquentin experiences a re-awakening—perhaps his *true* awakening. This was the moment when he came face-to-face with the problem of existence and its meaning: his coming to terms with absurdity, and the awareness of his superfluity are already the symptoms of his anxiety. Sartre narrates an important insight from Ronquentin's re-awakening:

> Existence is not something which allows itself to be thought of from a distance; it has to invade you suddenly, pounce upon you, weigh heavily on your heart like a huge motionless animal—or else there is nothing left at all.[9]

This is Roquentin's experiences of emptiness and weariness. After meeting with Anny, he decides to abandon Bouville and permanently settle in Paris. If one interprets this specific plot, we can safely assume that it could be his desire to return to his in-itself, to once again try to overcome his anxiety and assert what he thought to be his freedom. For a time in Bouville, Roquentin felt trapped by his assumed obligation—that is, to finish writing about Monsieur de Rollebon. Finally, when he realizes that it was something he can no longer do, Roquentin goes back to asserting his freedom and simultaneously willing himself to project another becoming.

In another entry, Roquentin narrates and reflects about a scene in Café Mably, where other patrons were talking about their pasts. Roquentin reflects: "They would like us to make believe that their past isn't wasted, that their memories have been condensed and gently transformed into

[7] *Ibid*., xxvi.
[8] John Duncan, "Sartre's Pure Critical Theory," *Phaenex,* 4:2 (Fall/Winter 2009), 141.
[9] Jean-Paul Sartre, *Nausea* (New York: Penguin Books LTD, 1963), 189.

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Wisdom."[10] At this point, he is not criticizing the patrons; he was merely trying to relate their experiences with his, because for a moment Roquentin felt that his very own past and adventures have merited him some sense of wisdom only to realize later that his own claim to wisdom is hallow: "The truth suddenly dawns upon me: this man is going to die before long."[11] He was not pertaining to another person's death, but was merely speaking about his own fear to die and be forgotten by people. When a human being encounters fear, devising a defense mechanism may be a first reaction. In the case of Roquentin, he re-channels his fear by focusing on what he supposes would happen to the other patron.

> The doctor would like to believe in it, he would like to shut his eyes to the unbearable reality: that he is alone, without any attainment, without any past, with a mind which is growing duller, a body which is disintegrating.[12]

This reveals a fear for death. This particular projection, that he was speaking of his own anxiousness is further revealed in another of Roquentin's entries: "I must not be frightened."[13]

"An existent can never justify the existence of another existent,"[14] Roquentin claims in relation to the desire to anchor his life with that of Anny's. With his re-awakening comes his fervent understanding that he is solely responsible for himself, and that no one should be held liable for the consequences of his action, except himself, because he has the choice to stay with or abandon his situation. He may have failed in his endeavors, and he might have blamed Anny and the entire society for such failures, but his realization towards the end leads Roquentin to an understanding of his own cause and freedom. We find similar theoretical insights in *No Exit*, where we read the line "hell is other people." This could be explained as an inability to transcend the conditions and situations pre-determined by something external to our being: When one cannot break away from the modes of conduct prescribed by other people, or when one does not seek a way out

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[10] *Ibid*., 102.

[11] *Ibid*., 103.

[12] *Ibid*.

[13] *Ibid*., 104. David Weberman states that "Fear is not originally consciousness of being afraid, any more than the perception of this book is consciousness of perceiving the book. Emotional consciousness is, at first, unreflective, and on this plane it can be conscious of itself only on the non-positional mode. Emotional consciousness is, at first, consciousness of the world." See David Weberman, "Sartre, Emotions, and Wallowing," *Philosophical Quarterly*, 33:4 (October 1996), 393–407.

[14] Sartre, *Being and Nothingness,* 252.

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from the opinion of other people. The three characters (Inez, Garcin and Estelle) are already in hell even before they died because they have allowed themselves to be conditioned by the situations they were in.

Quito is correct to point out that the novels and plays written by one of France's most celebrated public intellectuals are indeed abundantly insightful for readers who are enticed by their philosophical curiosity, as evidenced in *Nausea* and *No Exit*. Sartre's literary style is effective in explicating his existential notion of freedom. What matters most is how Quito situates Sartre's literature as an explicit philosophical praxis, contrary to the presumption of an existing disciplinary divide between philosophy and literature. Quito's reading of Sartre invites us to rethink our position on the nature of a philosophical praxis, and to recover the almost-forgotten rootedness of both philosophy and literature in the humanities. In doing so, we realize that in both philosophy and literature are committed to writing as praxis and, more specifically, the praxis of writing significant human experiences, such as, freedom.

Sartre on Literature: Between Commitment and Separation

Writing is the expression of what is truly human: genuinely free and authentic and characterized by complexities and imperfections. In Sartre's book *Between Existentialism and Marxism,* he discussed the importance of writing and literature and their inherent components. He initially presents the struggles that writers encounter, and the brief moment of relief they experience once they are able to finish the work:

> When one is writing works which are non-philosophical, while still ruminating on philosophy—as I have been doing for most of my time over the last ten years—every page, every line, suffers from hernia.[15]

Sartre is probably referencing his own difficulties when he is writing. Sartre adds, "What is primary is what I haven't written—what I intend to write and what perhaps I will never write."[16] There is always a discomfort that warrants our understanding in each novel or work of literature encountered, more so when it involves our own writing. In his unfinished work on Flaubert,[17] Sartre wanted to analyze and show that literature is "a

[15] Jean-Paul Sartre, *Between Existentialism and Marxism* (New York: New Left Books, 1974), 10.

[16] *Ibid*.

[17] At least, during the time when this interview was done.

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pure art of 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."[18] Flaubert has always been Sartre's personal favorite, but his criticisms on Madame Bovary was not merely to show how good a writer Flaubert was. It must be understood that Sartre made use of literature to present its beauty and to somehow create an undertone of persistent issues that he wanted to discuss.[19]

> I think it would be more logical for people to accuse me of exaggerating its importance. 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: those who can't understand this-whatever may have said-have not attacked me in the name of art, but in the name of their particular commitment.[20]

Sartre was writing towards greater freedom, emphasizing that the object of each novel should always be the human object, because a novel becomes nothing without human significations. His works are conscious of his readership, while his audience is comprised of students, teachers and people who love reading. He finds it honorable when the reader freely allows himself to be influenced by what he is reading. Sartre wanted to pass on something that he himself felt, something that he has experienced and thought of. His work *Loser Wins*[21] is an actual representation of his experiences in the current state of French society, including the violence which stirred individuals during that time.

Furthermore, Sartre notes that "man lives in the midst of images. Literature offers him a critical image of himself."[22] Literature becomes a human being's critical reflection, representing to us the gap between the prestige of a form (e.g., an idea of an authentic existence) and the current shortcomings of concrete human reality. As a form of projection, the critically-reflective dimension of literature narrates the progression of *what is* towards *what could be*, or vice versa. It could even bridge this gap between them. To achieve this, it is necessary for the individual to come to terms with

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[18] *Ibid.*, 12.

[19] An example of this claim was when he wrote novels like *Nausea*, *The Wall*, and *Intimacy. Nausea* definitely has a very existential undertone, *The Wall* portrays man's struggle in the society, and *Intimacy* speaks of bad faith in a particular relationship that one encounters.

[20] *Ibid.*, 14.

[21] Referred to as *Les Séquestrés d'Altona* in French. See Jean-Paul Sartre, *Loser Wins*, trans. by David J. Gloyd (New York: Vintage, 1960).

[22] *Ibid.*, 25.

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the actual material social reality, i.e., to be involved with and committed to it. This is the very reason why Sartre has turned to literature, particularly the act of writing, to formulate what he considered to be a standard intellectual practice. For literature possesses an absolute value: It can *save an individual* or *simply transform one*. Literature can only be "absolute when it is preserved in other people's memories, when it is integrated into the objective spirit."[23] Every literature that is historically deemed as a classic is a proof of each their respective author's commitment to their species-being (i.e., the human), and reveals their concrete engagement with human experiences.

Meanwhile, as Quito pointed in her *Homage*, the critical component of Sartre's literature and the idea of commitment in writing should agree with his own philosophical enterprise, lest we find a theoretical deficit in Sartre's literature or a practical limitation in his philosophy. Sartre's literature should then give importance to that specific philosophical insight regarding separation as transcendental, i.e., being *pour soi*'s transcendence as becoming separate from the initial situation, from the pre-given determinations of the collective, and from the manifest self-externalizations or the fruits of one's own labor. One must further inquire: Does commitment involve a writer's conformity with the status quo? And can we even separate the writer from the written text? We may find in Sartre's philosophy an interesting (albeit nuanced) position.

Indeed, when Sartre was explicitly condemning the *Prague Manifesto* in the "Artist and his Conscience," he comments that we must be careful to treat the artist and their crafts differently: "The life of the musician may be exemplary" but such characteristic of a person remains to be *external* to his work, and that "the artist must not be the commentary on his work."[24] Here, readers see an insight first elaborated in *Being and Nothingness*, that being *pour soi*, in the desire to become (and remain) self-conscious but only acquires the knowledge of the *en soi*, further resists becoming its own reduction. Meaning to say, the transcendence of our being for-itself requires that we must not merely become our being in-itself. In the same way, the musician (i.e., a being *pour soi*) is not reducible to his music (i.e., his being *en soi*). The separation between the artist and his art must clearly be drawn in order to maintain the freedom of the artist from both the definitions of the art of music and the musical scores he composes as his own self-determinations. How then should we conceive of art as a manifestation of the artist's commitment to his being, his Other, and his social belongingness?

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[23] *Ibid*., 31.

[24] Jean-Paul Sartre, "The Artist and His Conscience," in *Situations*, trans. by Benita Eisler (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1965), 31. The essay originally was published in 1950 as a preface to René Leibowitz's *L'artiste et sa conscience: Equisse d'une dialectique de la conscience artistique* (Paris: L'Arche, 1950).

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This idea of separation seems to contradict Sartre's point about the commitment in/of writing, specifically the writer's commitment to the object of his works. Simply put, against any form of commitment, separation somehow severs the connection between human beings and their labor-fulfillment, between artists and their works of art, and more specifically, the authors and their written text. In "What is Writing?," Sartre, however, treats the poet and his words to be of the same categorization, since the otherwise would lead to the reduction of words into pure abstractions:

> … the writer should engage [himself] completely in [his] works, and not as an abject passivity by putting forward [his] vices, [his] misfortunes, and [his] weaknesses, but as a resolute will and as a choice, as this total enterprise of living that each one of us is.[25]

Furthermore, Sartre presents to us the distinction between the poet and the prose writer. On the one hand, poets are "men who refuse to utilize language,"[26] since they consider words as things and not signs. Poets are thought to be outside of language.[27] There is indeed a separation between the word and what is signifies, inasmuch as there is always more in a phrase and in a verse. On the other hand, Sartre distinguishes the prose writer as "a man who makes use of words."[28] In a prose, the word has a particular meaning at that particular moment—there is no meaning outside of it."[29] Sartre also talks about the engaged writer who knows that words are actions.[30] He is aware that to reveal "is to change and one can reveal only by planning change."[31] In a sense, the engaged prose-writer already has an intention to transform the material social conditions, including the very conditions of their writing. They write something that is "worth the trouble of being communicated."[32]

Since engagement is equivocal with commitment, Sartre was convinced that writers have to become the very words they invent as against

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[25] Jean-Paul Sartre, "What is Writing?," in *Literature and Existentialism*, trans. by Bernard Fretchman (New York: Citadel Press, 1969), 35.

[26] Jean-Paul Sartre, *Literature and Existentialism* (New York: Citadel Press, 1969), 12.

[27] *Ibid*., 13.

[28] *Ibid*., 19.

[29] *Ibid*., 20–21.

[30] *Ibid*. 23.

[31] *Ibid*.

[32] *Ibid*., 22.

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the creation of pure significations without a signifier.[33] The commitment of the writer is expressed in every poem and prose they would write. Sartre was arguing for the writers' commitments not only to the words invented, but also to their material-social belongingness. We do not become writers because we choose to put reality into words, but rather we become authorial subjects because we choose to say them "in a certain way"[34]—words transparent to our own being. But if we become committed, how can we still show separation as important in the realization of our subjectivity (as being for-itself)? In fact, how can we conceive of separation as authentic [act] in the face of commitment being our ultimate self-expression?

Perhaps the answer lies in mediation between separation and commitment: separation-*as*-commitment. Although this is something implicit to Sartre's work, the notion of separation-*as*-commitment provides a synthetic unification of the *pour soi* between being separated and being committed within ourselves. Such idea of separation-*as*-commitment is initially hinted in Sartre's description literature's criticality in the essay "The Purpose of Writing." Sartre claims that

> Art in its totality is in range in the activity of a single man, as he tests and pushes back its limits. But writing cannot be critical without calling everything into question: this is its contents. The adventures of writing undertaken by each writer challenges the whole of mankind. Both those who read and those who do not. Any string of words *whatsoever* (assuming the writer has talent)—even a sentence describing the virgin forest—calls everything we have done into question, and poses the issue of *legitimacy*.[35]

One should understand that to be separated neither means a fissure into our being nor the sense of psychological unity of self-consciousness diminished. Separation-*as*-commitment, in Sartre's jargon of authenticity, meant initially the ability to remain in the completeness of our *pour soi* on the level of our individuality. It does not mean that we must live a lonely existence as individuals, but rather to be able to fulfill this individuality despite our commitments to the material social conditions, whether they

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[33] Perhaps, here we Sartre showing his contempt against the structuralist movement of the 1950s.

[34] Sartre, *Literature and Existentialism*, 25.

[35] Jean-Paul Sartre, "The Purposes of Writing," in *Between Existentialism and Marxism*, trans. by John Matthews (London and New York: Verso, 2004), 26.

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would be the people, society in general, or historical events. This idea of separation-*as*-commitment is also present in Sartre's *Critique of Dialectical Reason*. Despite our praxis transforming us into becoming part of the collective or groups, it is necessary to freely effectuate this transformation as a decision of the individual—still aiming to discover our subjectivity in being separated while being committed.[36] We should never simply let external factors (such as the products of our labor, the workings of society, or the hell we find as other people) to fully determine our being for-itself. The case should be the opposite: our being for-itself should internalize them into determinations we *freely* choose to affect us, ultimately maintaining the wholeness of our becoming.

Finally, the notion of separation-*as*-commitment could be used as a framework for the possibilities of critique. It is possible for us to be in the contradictions of being separated while being committed as critics. In the dynamics of criticism (philosophical or literary), we may find our *pour soi* becoming separated against the backdrop of a certain organization of the social, the literary, and the aesthetic, while remaining to be committed in the material conditions of life and the valuations we bring into it. Meaning to say, a critic finds himself, discovers the fullness of his own being for-itself, in the act of separating himself (both ontologically and politically) by transcending from the totality and ultimately changing it towards further development—an act of commitment that marks our groundedness to where we belong. The critical importance of separation-*as*-commitment renders the possibility of engaging through the choices we make: between the acts of separating our authentic wholeness from the majority, and the acts of committing ourselves in affectively changing them.

Thus, in the essay "Why Write?," Sartre finally addresses the titular question by saying "to write is to disclose the world and to offer it as a task to the generosity of the reader."[37] The commitments of the writer lie in separation, by allowing the readers to recreate and keep alive what the writer discloses. Perhaps the real task of writing does not habituate in the attempt to imitate reality (e.g., reproduce the system) and narrate its totality into texts, but rather it is found in the attempt to recreate a reality better than the author's. This is only possible through the combined efforts of the author in committing to write, the readers to engage with the texts, and the texts themselves to intervene with concrete material social reality. Of course, Sartre notes that there is no gloomy literature, because no matter how dark the literature may be, it is only so "that free men may feel their freedom as they

[36] Jean-Paul Sartre, *Critique of Dialectical Reason, Volume I: Theory of Practical Ensembles*, trans. by Alan Sheridan-Smith, ed. by Jonathan Rée (London and New York: Verso, 2004), 24.

[37] Sartre, *Literature and Existentialism*, 60.

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face it."[38] Writing presupposes freedom on the part of the author and the reader. Once the work is done, the reader takes on the freedom of the author.

Going back to Quito's reading of Sartre, we find that it is difficult for one to distinguish the disciplinary borders between Sartre's literature and philosophy. Can we consider literary works with philosophical undertones to be philosophy? Sartre is an exemption, because the strong links between his literary and philosophical works are explicit. His discussions of freedom in his novels and plays correspond to how he discussed this notion in his philosophical *oeuvre*. Literature for Sartre is an instrument to stage and deliver concepts from his philosophical enterprise (ranging from purely ontological discussion of being to its practical engagements in politics), making them accessible to both philosophical and non-philosophical readership. This describes how he was able to present his views on politics and philosophy through literature, including his commitments. Quoting Quito:

> Jean-Paul Sartre is unique in the annals of Literature and Philosophy; he is not only a philosopher who dabbled in literature, nor only a man of letters who dabbled in philosophy. Sartre is pre-eminent in both, and it can be said that his philosophy is literature and his literature is philosophy.[39]

From what has been discussed, one comes to an understanding that Jean-Paul Sartre was committed to his responsibility as a writer and as a philosopher. He was able to inflict persistent issues of the society into the minds of people, encouraging them to be more critical about their society and their social belongingness. Sartre was able to live up to the standard that he raised—to be considered as a writer whose texts could *save an individual* or *simply transform one*. Quito herself was definitely one of those transformed by Sartre. Quito's *Homage* is but a radical intervention reflecting Sartre's implicit normative prescription *to be more political and to be more critical.* This is further supported by the fact that her forementioned lectures (which definitely involved a philosophical discussion on freedom) were delivered during the Martial Law era in the Philippines—a time when the genuine freedom of thought and speech experienced state policing. And of course, they were not the last time she would lecture on Sartre's literature and philosophy, and the interventions she made into UST's philosophical history is a concrete proof of how a reader could engage with an author's text and transforms the [philosophical] landscape that came afterwards. Sartre has lived for the

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[38] *Ibid*., 63.

[39] Quito, *Homage to Jean-Paul Sartre*, 42.

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freedom of others. The persistent themes of his novels only show us how devoted he was in making people realize that their freedom must not be limited to them alone, but must move with the circumstances of their historical and social belongingness.

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