

## LOOKING AT SARTRE

Engaged Life, Ambiguous Afterlife

**T**he late French philosopher is squatting in the corridor. He is gazing, with his one good eye, through a keyhole out at the world. Perched forward, squinting, he is aware solely of the aperture and what he sees through it; he is simply his own acts. Suddenly, footsteps. Many footsteps. They are looking at him. His biographers. His commentators. Reviewers of his biographers and commentators. Shall Jean-Paul Sartre's specter be shamed?

In the "keyhole" passage of *Being and Nothingness*, perhaps the most renowned in this existential tome, Sartre sought to describe how we are "constituted" by the consciousness of an "Other." A *voyeur*, suddenly aware that he may be observed peering through his peephole in a hallway, becomes, in Sartre's example, an object in the world for someone else. As a consequence of "the Look of the Other," he finds his self-grounding and freedom escaping him, for he is no longer simply his own acts. And in this situation he feels shame "in the *recognition* of the fact that I *am* indeed the object which the Other is looking at and judging."

Hence the problem as a torrent of new literature on Sartre<sup>1</sup> flows from the presses: How shall these Others constitute him and his accomplishment—a massive corpus of philosophical texts, essays, plays, interviews, novels, short stories, biographies, and autobiography that continues to expand with posthumously published materials? At the beginning of *The Family Idiot*, the unfinished multivolume study of Flaubert that was his last great project, Sartre commented that "a corpse is open to all comers." The issue, it would seem, is the

relation between Sartre's corpse and his corpus.

No, the issue is also that of his ghost and afterlife, especially since many French intellectuals nowadays seek to fashion a new Gallic liberalism. How, eight years after Sartre's death, shall we regard this most powerful of postwar Parisian intellectuals, one who was resolutely *engagé* and not a *voyeur*, one whom a French head of state—the state Sartre wanted to overthrow—declined to arrest on the grounds that you do not seize Voltaire? Indeed, it is to a Voltaire or a Victor Hugo that one must look to find a figure whose dominance of the French intellectual world rivaled that of Sartre, as Anna Boschetti remarks in her recent *Sartre et "Les Temps modernes."* He remains a singular presence, but also an absence, even as French eyes are increasingly cast back toward Tocqueville and Guizot.

In point of fact, Sartre's greatest impact in France was in the decade and a half after the liberation of Paris, and it was in the 1960s that his philosophical influence began to wane. As fads, "structuralist," "poststructuralist," and "postmodernist," began to clutter stage center in the Latin Quarter (they have since gone trans-Atlantic) and as Sartre became blind and physically infirm in the 1970s, what remained was less his ideas than his shadow, which, though cast far beyond his diminutive physical stature, was a shadow nonetheless. The aftermath of 1968, with the Fifth Republic's restabilization and the eventual disintegration of the New Left, only facilitated this. French thought became increasingly disparate; no center held.

It was no longer the moment of the radical,

humanist man of letters engaged in worldly affairs, but of what has been called anti-philosophers who tended to doubt the efficacy of human knowledge and action and to dismiss “humanism” as a naive conceit of modern times. Human beings were reinvented by them as flailers in an ocean of “texts,” the task being to “deconstruct” the waters rather than swim in them. In a more directly political vein, the 1970s saw the emergence of the so-called “New Philosophers,” of whom Bernard Henri-Lévy is perhaps the most famous. From them came an array of anti-Marxist diatribes that were, more than anything else, exorcisms either of infantile leftist pasts or of previous failures to notice that something was not quite right with Stalin. “Coming clean” earned them superstar status, although one inversely proportionate to the substance of their writing . . . or its novelty.

Compound these trends with the Socialist party’s disappointing tenure in office in the early 1980s, and it is easy to see how the role of the Anti-Sartre was awarded to Raymond Aron (and to Aron’s ghost following his death, shortly after that of Sartre). Actually, contraposing Sartre and Aron has been a staple of the French intellectual world for decades. Their personal histories invite comparison. Both began as students together at the elite *Ecole normale supérieure*, with both intrigued by contemporary German philosophy. The story is now legendary of how Aron introduced Sartre, then obsessed with the questions of freedom and contingency, to phenomenology in a café by suggesting that through it one could even philosophize about the apricot cocktail before them.<sup>2</sup> They remained friends until politics drove them far apart in the post-World War II era, Sartre embracing an ever more leftist posture, Aron a liberal one.

Aron was the calm liberal thinker, Sartre an intellectual hand grenade. This is how Etienne Barilier would have it in *Les Petits Camarades: Essai sur Jean-Paul Sartre et Raymond Aron*, and he is far from alone in this characterization. Quoting Simone de Beauvoir’s statement that “Sartre lived only to write,” Barilier tells us that Aron “lived only to think.” It is striking that Annie Cohen-Solal makes virtually the same point in her overwhelmingly sympathetic

biography of Sartre. He was “the mad inventor,” she tells us, while Aron was “methodical, rational and prudent.” For Barilier, the dividing line was already present when the two were schoolmates in the 1920s: “The madness for writing, and the passion of reflecting, the madness to create and the passion of understanding. At this age, already, the distance between the creator and the critic, the distance between he who lives for an idea (or for a vision) and he who lives for ideas is revealed. In Sartre the power of intuition takes the place of reason; Aron, always, wants to safeguard reason.” If you had radical sympathies in the 1960s, you are obviously supposed to draw some sober conclusions.

Aron was, after all, the champion of a French version of the “end of ideology” thesis. In contrasts between his “ideas” and Sartre’s “idea” we can see this thesis reinvented for a political conjuncture in which an increasingly chaste Socialist party, having failed to transform France, was compelled to rule in “cohabitation” with the neo-Gaullist right. It also expresses a post-1960s quest for a neoliberal/anticommunist consensus that might be an alternative to all radicalisms and their diverse assumptions, and a corresponding intellectual drift, following the decline of Marxism, structuralism, and existentialism, toward doubting the coherence or efficacy of generalized theory.

**Y**et fifty thousand people showed up at Sartre’s funeral in 1980, and now we’ve a flood of Sartre literature whose inspiration is surely not solely scholastic. Again: why the power of his presence and absence, even for those who have legitimate problems with his philosophy? This is what one would have most liked to discern from the new studies of him, particularly the biographical ones.

A Sartre biography must grapple with an intellectual whose writings, both fictional and nonfictional, endlessly asked what he might know of others’ lives and his own. Sartre was especially concerned with an individual’s early years. In his autobiography, *The Words*, he states that “the big event” of his life, which “gave me freedom,” was the death of his father

not long after his birth. "I have no superego." Consequently he mischievously tells us that he had "a most incomplete" Oedipus complex with nobody to challenge possession of his young mother, with whom he had, in fact, a loving, almost incestuous relationship. Indeed, throughout his adult life she was the sole person who did not address him simply as "Sartre." Even de Beauvoir did not call him "Jean-Paul." And the man whose play *No Exit* declares that "Hell is other people," was addressed always by the formal "vous" in French and never the intimate "tu."

"I have no superego." The comment is only partly ironic. *Being and Nothingness* severely criticized Freudianism as a form of "Bad Faith," a self-deception we know to be a self-deception. Psychoanalysis, Sartre insisted, uses the idea of the unconscious to avoid questions of human freedom and responsibility. He speaks, in *The Words*, of his youthful persona in these terms: "I keep creating myself; I am the giver and the gift. If my father were alive, I would know my rights and my duties. He is dead and I am unaware of them." But he did have problems with his overpowering grandfather—"He so resembled God the father that he was often taken for Him"—and, later, his stepfather.

It is hardly surprising that Sartre's writings are obsessed with the ideas of freedom, self-creation, and contingency on one hand and the genesis of the individual on the other. His early short story "The Childhood of a Leader" probes the youth of a future fascist; in his play *The Flies* the stepfather and mother are murdered; his *Baudelaire* describes the relation between the poet, his mother, and his stepfather in terms that sound strikingly like Sartre's own, and then pursues an existential essay into Baudelaire's life choices; Sartre's *Saint Genet* is about an orphan who chooses his homosexuality and identity as a thief after Others see him as such.

Sartre had definite ideas when it came to biographical writing, and he knew well that what one knows of a man or a woman depends on what questions one raises. Flaubert "is objectified in his books," Sartre writes in *The Family Idiot*. He queries: "What then is the relationship of the man to his work?" He insists

that it is essential "to set out with a problem" when seeking to know an individual. He quotes a letter in which Flaubert states, "It is by the sheer force of work that I am able to silence my innate melancholy. But the old nature often reappears, the old nature that no one knows, the deep, always hidden wound." Sartre, author of a novel named *Melancholia*—renamed *Nausea* by his publisher—asks what this means: "Can a wound be innate? . . . What we must try to understand is the origin of the wound. . . ."

**W**hy be interested in the wounded origins of a fellow from Rouen named Gustave? Not only because he wrote *Madame Bovary*. Sartre declared *The Family Idiot* to be the sequel to, and to have the same subject matter as, *Search for a Method*. The latter text was his introduction to the theoretical synthesis of Marxism and existentialism that he pursued in the late 1950s and that eventually became the *Critique of Dialectical Reason*. At its center was the claim that Marxism *needed* existentialism in order to return the human dimension to itself. All too often, he complained, Marxism was ensnared in a reductionism that "situates but no longer ever discovers anything." Its adherents, for example, were undoubtedly right to say that Paul Valéry was a petit bourgeois intellectual. But not every petit bourgeois intellectual becomes Paul Valéry. Thus, in his Flaubert study, Sartre insists with a Hegelian echo that

a man is never an individual; it would be more fitting to call him a *universal singular*. Summed up and for this reason universalized by his epoch, he in turn resumes it by reproducing himself in it as singularity. Universal by the singular universality of human history, singular by the universalizing singularity of his projects, he requires simultaneous examination from both ends.

*From both ends.* This, surely, is what any biographer of someone so apparently singular as Sartre, should have learned from Sartre himself. And this is where Cohen-Solal's overwritten book fails. Not that this author hasn't done exhaustive research; not that she doesn't add many new and interesting facts to

our knowledge of Sartre. What her *Sartre: A Life* lacks is an integrated—indeed, fully digested—sense of Sartre the thinker.

This is most evident in her inability to decide quite where philosophy and literature fit into Sartre's life. In one place she informs us that for him "philosophy will always be a convenient, principal tool and a means of access to fiction"; then she tells us three hundred pages later that "philosophy had always occupied first place in the hierarchy of Sartrean values." She characterizes *Being and Nothingness* as "a key to Sartre's entire life and works"; yet her reader will find only a fleeting few paragraphs about it, which is more than she gives to some of Sartre's other seminal works, like *What Is Literature?*

One does not expect a biographer to supply a detailed discourse on Sartre's philosophy. But without an adequate perspective on the content of his thought, one can't really know Sartre the man. The Sartre we are left with is, first and foremost, Sartre the star. Ronald Hayman's *Sartre: A Biography*, which appeared almost simultaneously with the English version of Cohen-Solal, at least tries to give a comprehensive picture of its subject. Unfortunately, it is a rather pedestrian account with some excruciating prose, and it is significantly dependent on the earlier French edition of Cohen-Solal.

**S**artre's original existential project was a reverse Christianity. Rather than God becoming man, Sartre's man is a "useless passion" ever striving and failing to be God. Where Hegel's Absolute Spirit found its highest expression in philosophy, art, and religion, the atheist Sartre was to objectify himself in philosophy, literature, and, later, politics. Anna Boschetti's study is especially concerned with how Sartre's "polyphonic virtuosity" established his intellectual preeminence. The insights she provides—some quite penetrating—emerge despite a rather unsatisfactory methodological apparatus adopted from sociologist Pierre Bourdieu. Briefly, for her, Sartre's "enterprise" flourished because he successfully deployed his intellectual "capital" in various "fields"—each of the latter being a "system of social relations which functions according to a

logic of its own" and is thus characterized by a "symbolic economy."

If we put this terminology aside (together with the theoretical implications of presenting Sartre as something akin to a capitalist entrepreneur), what we find is that as of the 1930s French cultural life presumed an unbridgeable opposition between "imaginative," "creative" writers and professors of philosophy. Zola declared that "anyone who has bathed in the air of the *Ecole normale*"—the most prestigious educational institution for aspiring philosophers—"is impregnated with it for life. The brain maintains the stale and mouldy odor of the professoriat. . . . If you sow professors you will never reap creators. . . ." Sartre, however, was both creator and professor, novelist-playwright and *normalien*, author of *No Exit* and *Being and Nothingness*. And then, in the late 1940s, he becomes editor of *Les Temps modernes* and apostle of freedom and "commitment" in a France remaking itself after the Nazi occupation. He was, as is often noted, the total intellectual, a "field" unto himself.

Although Cohen-Solal declares Sartre's philosophy to be a means of access to fiction, Boschetti is much more to the point when she characterizes *Nausea* as a "spontaneously Husserlian novel"; she quotes Sartre's thanks to the critic E. Jaloux for analyzing it "as a phenomenological experiment, a work of fiction which gives insight into essence." Sartre's generation, which matured in the 1930s, has been called that of the "Three Hs" in French philosophy—Hegel, Husserl, and Heidegger. His thought is suffused with the distinctive, often tortuous, categories and language of these German thinkers (who became the philosophical rage in Paris at this time due to an influx of foreign academics, many in flight from Hitler or Stalin). Hence, *Being and Nothingness*, which in one way or another is essential to understanding all of Sartre's works, bears the subtitle "An Essay on Phenomenological Ontology." Daunting as these words may seem, a sense of what they implied is elemental to a coherent grasp of Sartre's projects and view of the world.

Phenomenology, as formulated by Edmund Husserl, had a preoccupation very close to that

of dialectical thinking: the relation between subjectivity and objectivity. It represented a response to the identity crisis central European philosophy underwent in the latter half of the nineteenth century. After the dramatic scientific advances of that era, speculative philosophy—generally identified with Hegelianism—seemed . . . well, very speculative. Consequently, an often simplistic notion of “objectivity” seated itself on the epistemological throne and subjugated questions of human consciousness to its imperium. In the first decades of the twentieth century in France, this tendency was manifested particularly in various experimental, behaviorist, and gestalt theories of psychology, all of which seemed to challenge the place of philosophy. Young Sartre devoted much effort to criticizing them along with the dominant trends of contemporary French academic philosophy—Henri Bergson’s “vitalism,” Léon Brunschwig’s neo-Kantianism, and the ever-present positivism that sought in natural science the model for all forms of inquiry. Phenomenology seemed to provide an alternative to all of them.

Briefly, Husserl sought to go beyond the traditional separation of “subject” and “object” by insisting that consciousness was “intentional,” that is, always *of* something. Philosophy could become a “rigorous science” by providing a method to describe the essences of “phenomena” (that is, of the objects of our consciousness). Rather than debating (yet again!) whether or not objects “exist” independently of our consciousness of them, Husserl “bracketed” this issue—he “bracketed existence”—and proposed instead that the task was to describe those features without which an object perceived would not be that object. These “essences,” he claimed, are “seen” or “intuited” by the phenomenologist.

Sartre, a physically unattractive man who was blind in one eye, was ever obsessed with “seeing.” In *The Words* he tells us that his grandfather once declared that “it’s not enough to have eyes. You must learn to use them.” The old man then recounted how Flaubert placed young Maupassant before a tree and gave him two hours to describe it. “I therefore learned to see,” is Sartre’s comment. As existentialist, “the Look of the Other” was to

be philosophically crucial to him; and Antoine Roquentin, in *Nausea*’s most famous passage, confronts “contingency” and “existence” as he looks at a chestnut tree. Phenomenology was a descriptive method, and description is a vital link between Sartre’s differing modes of cultural production. Although he later sharply distinguished “literary” from “philosophical” prose, no reader of *Being and Nothingness* or his fiction can fail to notice the centrality of description in his work, or his remarkable descriptive powers.

But unlike Husserl, Sartre refused to “bracket existence,” because it was what Antoine Roquentin called “the very paste of things.” “Existence” was paramount to Sartre’s pursuits, in part because his phenomenology was transformed by reading Martin Heidegger’s *Being and Time*. Heidegger’s preoccupation was ontology, that is, the philosophy of “Being.” He was, as George Steiner has noted, “literally overcome by the notion of ‘is’ . . . , a man inexhaustively astonished by the fact of existence, and haunted by the reality of the *other* possibility, which is nothingness. . . .” Sartre, using Hegelian terminology for his own purposes, will make this issue his own by juxtaposing two realms of existence: “Being-in-Itself” and “Being-for-Itself.”

As a phenomenologist he saw his task as describing, not defining or deducing, “Being.” Being-in-Itself simply is; it is opaque matter. Consciousness—Being-for-Itself—is pure activity, “nothingness,” always directed toward something else. It is “presuppositionless” and “translucent” like water—otherwise it would impose on the revelation of the intended object. Consequently, it can have no identity with itself because it *is always of something*. (Thus it is that Sartre’s *voyeur* is conscious of what he sees through the keyhole until he perceives himself observed by the Other; it is then that consciousness becomes “reflective” and the self becomes an object for one’s own consciousness as well.) What first is revealed to consciousness, for Sartre, are “brute” existences, which are acted on, are “negated” (i.e., changed from what they are) by the For-Itself. Sartre’s language easily throws the reader who doesn’t grasp that for him “nothingness” and

“negation” have what, in common parlance, would be positive connotations.<sup>3</sup>

In this context Sartre’s radical notion of freedom as a primordial category of human being becomes intelligible. Since Being-for-Itself is his defining characteristic, man is never one with himself. He has no “essence preceding his existence.” He creates himself, freely surging toward a future in the projects he chooses, whether he admits to choosing or not. In the celebrated phrase of *Being and Nothingness*, we are “condemned to be free,” we always make choices in any given situation, and are always responsible for our acts. The question for Sartre was whether or not we choose “authentically” or in “bad faith,” and it was a double-edged philosophical sword. On one hand, the notions of authentic free choice, responsibility, and bad faith were his reply to the Freudian theory of the unconscious. On the other, his stress on consciousness aimed to reject crude materialism and positivism while not ignoring “brute existence.”

**S**artre’s arguments were, of course, open to diverse criticisms. Early on de Beauvoir, his closest philosophical and personal comrade, asked him what exactly Sartrean freedom meant for a woman in a harem. Herbert Marcuse, in a 1948 review of *Being and Nothingness*, chastised existentialism for hypostatizing “specific historical conditions of human existence into ontological and metaphysical characteristics.” Noting that Sartre’s treatise, with its emphasis on freedom, could appear in France under German occupation, Marcuse commented that

the essential freedom of man, as Sartre sees it, remains the same before and during and after the totalitarian enslavement of man. For freedom is the very structure of human being and cannot be annihilated even by the most adverse conditions: man is free even in the hands of the executioner. Is this not Luther’s comforting message of Christian liberty?

Marcuse’s comment is at once quite potent, and not entirely fair. Although ahistoricity fundamentally flaws Sartre’s early existentialism, he did always speak of freedom enacted

“in situation.” On the other hand, Sartre’s recognition of the cogency of criticism from the left would be one factor bringing him to an existential Marxism in his *Critique of Dialectical Reason*, a decade and a half after *Being and Nothingness*. Parallel developments can be seen in his literary endeavors: from the phenomenological and existential pursuits of *Nausea* (1938), he turned to his famous theory of committed literature in the late 1940s, and by 1961 declared, “I have served a slow apprenticeship . . . I have seen children die of hunger. In front of a dying child, *Nausea* has no weight.”

The *Critique* focuses on scarcity as the historical root of human conflict, and sees not just nature as thwarting human purposes, but the realm of the “practico-inert,” that is, the products of human labor turned against their makers. Sartre reinvents in Marxist form the opposition between Being-for-Itself and Being-in-Itself as that between “praxis” and the “practico-inert,” the “domination of man by worked matter.” “History has two principles,” he states in the awkward prose of the unfinished second volume of the *Critique*, “one is the action of men, which is all and nothing at once and which, without the inertia of things, would be immediately expunged [*s’effacerait*] like a volatile spirit; the other is inert matter, within the agents themselves and outside of them, which sustains and deviates the whole practical edifice having, moreover, given rise to it at the same time [*qui soutient et dévie tout l’édifice pratique en même temps, d’ailleurs, qu’elle en a suscité la construction . . .*].”

Although Sartre’s sympathies had always been vaguely leftist, the war, he later recounted, taught him the impossibility of non-commitment. This, and the enormous strength of the French Communist party (PCF) after the war, were what initially compelled him to grapple with Marxism seriously. And his enormous import forced the Communists to grapple with him too: although his ideas may have been expressed most elaborately in a dense tome that is not easily approached—*Being and Nothingness*—he also presented his existentialism in virtually every creative form available to a writer, with the exception of

poetry. Moreover, Sartre was a public figure with an influential journal, *Les Temps modernes* (founded in October 1945), at his disposal. In it he expounded the necessities of political engagement and making political choices.

In the immediate postwar period, Sartre's relation with the PCF was tense, beginning with the slander campaign it waged against the memory of the writer Paul Nizan. Sartre rose in defense of his friend, who had broken ranks with the Communists after the Stalin-Hitler pact, died at Dunkerque and was now branded "a filthy dog in the pay of the Ministry of the Interior" by PCF leader Maurice Thorez. More important, Sartre played a very visible role in founding a potential rival to the PCF, the short-lived *Rassemblement démocratique révolutionnaire*. The RDR presented itself as a political movement seeking a "Third Way" that would be socialist but not Stalinist or reformist.

Maintaining Thorez's high level of discourse, PCF intellectuals called Sartre "a hyena with a fountain pen" and the author of "the metaphysics of shit." (These remarks are equaled only by the right-wing vulgarities of Céline, who responded to *Anti-Semite and Jew* by inquiring of Sartre's appearance, "those bulbous eyes . . . that hook . . . that slobbery sucker: is it a cestode?") Sartre's philosophical emphasis on the For-Itself was clearly inimicable to the crude materialism that underlay official Stalinist ideology, a point made especially clear by Sartre's 1946 essay "Materialism and Revolution." ("The materialist thinks that by denying his subjectivity he has made it disappear. . . .")

When Sartre made a procommunist volte-face in 1952, he startled many friends and engendered bitter public acrimony with the likes of Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Albert Camus, and Claude Lefort, among others. The result was his isolation from the independent French left. "Sartre was neither a Marxist nor a communist when most intellectuals of 1945 were either one or the other," Cohen-Solal observes, "This was the first missed rendezvous. He moved toward the party in 1952, precisely at the moment when the very same generation of intellectuals was beginning to

move away from it. This was the second missed rendezvous."

He always insisted that one *must* choose. Following the collapse of the effort to build a "Third Way" through the RDR, in the McCarthyistic environment of the Cold War, he did just that. The immediate impetus was the French government's ruthless repression of the PCF during and after the anti-Ridgeway demonstrations of 1952. In the simplicity of his response, however, one might say that his theory of engagement backfired: Sartre apparently concluded that there were only two political options.

Sartre's literary and philosophical treatments of Marxism generally display an intelligence that proved woefully wanting in his tortured dealings with French Communists and the USSR. For example, he once banned production of his play *Dirty Hands*, which poses some of the most astute and difficult questions to communists, on the grounds that it was too useful to anticommunists. Ironically Hoerderer, the tough but humanist Communist leader in the play, is one of the few truly attractive and politically compelling characters in Sartre's theater—though he could never be mistaken for Maurice Thorez or Jacques Duclos.

**T**o turn away from a Western anticommunist hysteria is one thing; to embrace the east of Stalin—whose very filthy hands were still very busy in 1952—is quite another. That these were not, in fact, the only possibilities before him is proved quite simply by his own angry break with the PCF in 1956 after the invasion of Hungary. "It is not, nor will it ever be possible to resume any connection with the PCF," he declared. "Each sentence they utter, each action they take is the culmination of lies and sclerosis. . . ." Sartre then took to his own path, attempting his synthesis of Marxism and existentialism in the *Critique*. "The *Critique* is a Marxist work written against the Communists," he declared in a 1975 interview; "I felt that true Marxism had been completely twisted and falsified by the Communists." He added, interestingly enough, that he no longer thought "exactly the same thing." In fact, the *Critique* tended to see the evolution of the

USSR in terms of possibly reparable deviations from the socialist project. It was only after the invasion of Czechoslovakia that Sartre cast off “reformist illusions about this type of regime. The machine cannot be repaired; the peoples of Eastern Europe must seize hold of it and destroy it.” Still, in the 1975 interview he reiterated his belief that during the Cold War “the Communists were right. The USSR—despite all the mistakes we know it made—was nevertheless being persecuted.”

Those who would exorcise Sartre’s intellectual specter find in his fellow-travelling—he never joined the party—an obvious means of discrediting him. He provided them with ample ammunition. It is noteworthy, however, that the same standards of (continuous) historical blame are not maintained when it comes to the bedfellows of French imperialism, and particularly the murderous campaign in Algeria, which Sartre fervently opposed. One suspects that the real issue is Sartre’s refusal to renounce radicalism. Had he ’fessed up (as all good “New Philosophers” and neoconservatives do) he would be praised for his “honesty.”

Aron, interestingly enough, was more sophisticated than his contemporary epigoni. For all his criticisms of Sartre—which were plentiful—he was still able to state in his *Marxism and the Existentialists* that had he been writing in America, he “would probably devote more time to denouncing the anti-Communist obsession than . . . to dispelling the illusions of ‘liberals’ attracted by Marxism.” Ironically, one of Sartre’s last public appearances, in June 1979, was with Aron in behalf of the Vietnamese boat people.

**I**t was during the Algerian war, when he was the very embodiment of the engaged intellectual and was writing the *Critique*, that Parisian intellectual trends began moving against Sartre. “Structuralism” had come on the horizon; its dominance would consolidate as France settled into the post-Algerian Gaullist stability of the Fifth Republic. Its presuppositions—even when taking Marxist guise in PCF philosopher Louis Althusser—were fundamentally at odds with those of Sartre, and its “scientific” pretensions

probably reminded him of all he had revolted against in the 1930s.

Structuralism’s popularity was propelled, perhaps more than anything, by the publication, in 1955, of Claude Lévi-Strauss’s remarkable quasimemoir *Tristes tropiques*. The renowned anthropologist in fact had an established relation with *Les Temps modernes*. (The interaction between Sartre’s journal and professional anthropology is largely the focus of Howard Davies’s *Sartre and “Les Temps modernes,”* a valuable study written, unfortunately, with specialists alone in mind.) If Lévi-Strauss—later a fierce critic of Sartre’s *Critique*—provided an immediate impetus for structuralism’s rise, it was linguistics that provided its philosophical foundations, particularly the work of Ferdinand de Saussure. His renowned *Course in General Linguistics* (1916) rejected the “diachronic” (historical, evolutionary) approach to the study of language for a “synchronic one,” that is, one that looked at language as a structured systemic whole. The focus was on *la langue*, language as a meaningful system of signs, rather than on historically placed expressions of it in acts of speech (*la parole*, the spoken word). Similarly, Lévi-Strauss looked at cultural phenomena as meaningful systems of signs; myths, for example, were studied and compared by him as languages might be on the structural level of codes. On this basis, he postulated universal structures of the unconscious.

Due to such modes of thought, structuralism was identified as a “theoretical anti-humanism,” a rejection of any emphasis on the development and unfolding of humanity’s potentialities, accomplishments, and miseries as an organizing principle in the analysis of history and social life. For a theoretical antihumanism it is the structural system that counts, and men and women at best play roles in it. The key is synchrony, not genesis, *la langue*, not *la parole*, the code, not the message.

We see parallel preoccupations in the work of the rising intellectual stars of the 1960s such as Michel Foucault, Louis Althusser, and Jacques Lacan (although they often declined the “structuralist” appellation). Foucault’s *Les Mots et les choses* (literally, “Words and



Things,” though translated into English as *The Order of Things*) argued that “the fundamental codes of a culture—those governing its language, its schemes of perception, its exchanges, its techniques, its values, the hierarchy of practices—establish for every man . . . the empirical orders with which he will be dealing and within which he will be at home.” Foucault focused on how the study of language, wealth, and nature in the “Classical Age” (seventeenth and eighteenth centuries) was encoded in an *epistēmē*, a “grid” conditioning the conceptual possibilities of knowledge, which differed from those of the Renaissance and the modern periods.

Althusser assaulted the “subjectivism” of “humanist” and Hegelian versions of Marxism that had gained increasing currency in France due to theorists like Henri Lefebvre, Roger Garaudy, Lucien Goldmann, and, of course, Sartre himself. More than anything else, Althusser’s target was the idea that Marxism saw in history the story of humanity’s self-development. On the contrary, insisted Althusser, history was to be seen in terms of structures, without “man” or “humanity” as its center. “Man” was derided as a nebulous notion transcended by Marx when he formulated a true “science” of social formation and history. Men play roles and have various functions within different structures (the relations of production, for instance), and it is with these that a science of history must concern itself, not “man”—just as Saussure turned to *la langue* rather than *la parole* and Lévi-Strauss to the code rather than the message. Goldmann once complained that Althusser asserted “the existence of structures within history without relation to human activity.”

Which, of course, makes for great difficulties in explaining historical change. Who or what does it? Herein was what immediately set Sartre apart from structuralism; indeed it was the same type of issue that alienated him from deterministic types of Marxism some two decades earlier. For Sartre the question was how to grasp history as “totalization without a totalizer,” that is, as a process in which the individualized, antagonistic actions of human beings compose an intelligible whole.

The third rendezvous was missed. If, in the

mid-1940s, French intellectuals moved toward Marxism and communism when Sartre did not; if the next decade saw them moving from while he moved toward Marxism and communism; then once French intellectuals turned more and more to structuralism and synchronic analysis in the 1960s, relegating “the question of the subject”—that is, of human agency—to an increasingly functional explanation, Sartre was moving toward history with a vengeance, albeit a vision of history conditioned by his own—remolded—notions of the subject and freedom. At the moment when linguistic analysis began to provide the point of departure for so many French intellectuals, Sartre was completing a decade of study of the French revolution and nineteenth century France for his *Critique* and the Flaubert project.

**T**he structuralist overemphasis on synchrony could not but be at odds with Marxism’s focus on history and historical action and certainly with a Sartrean Marxism. His notion of freedom—even a freedom now within *historical* “situation”—cannot easily make peace with an antihumanist theoretical paradigm. More difficult to reconcile is Sartre’s notion of “translucent” consciousness—an outward-directed “nothingness” intending its object—with the limits structuralists placed on human comprehension because of its structuring by the medium of language.

The question of Freud highlights these issues vividly. In the 1960s Freud’s stature grew in France as never before, especially because of the impact of Jacques Lacan. The latter’s peculiar Freudianism was indebted to structuralism in its fundamental assertion that the unconscious is structured like a language. Sartre had a love-hate relation with Freud throughout his life. He was forever preoccupied with issues central to those of psychoanalysis—especially the individual’s early development—but *Being and Nothingness* argued forcefully for an existential approach that saw Freudian recourse to the unconscious as a type of Bad Faith rooted in a flight from individual responsibility for choices freely made. For structuralists, as for Freudians, neither language nor consciousness is translucent, and

what encodes them is not to be explained first and foremost by historical methodology. If such were to be the Left Bank vagues, Sartre had to be on the outs.

In a fundamental way, his questions were not theirs. Take the issue of language itself. Sartre's 1944 essay "Departure and Return" is contemptuous of those who would treat language as something anonymous: ". . . words are thrown on the table, killed and cooked like dead fish." In Sartre's mind, "for there to be a problem of language, the Other must first be assumed." In the over eight hundred pages of book one of the *Critique*, language gets all of two pages. Here he avers that words "carry the project of the Other into me and carry my own projects into the Other." As such, Sartre would have to reject a paradigm in which words carry the project not of the Other or myself, but of language itself, as in structuralism. The question of the subject is not there; hence there can be no dialectic, no history.

For Sartre, on the other hand, "language as the practical relation of one man to another is *praxis*. . . ." He would have agreed with Trotsky, who, echoing a famous passage in Goethe's *Faust*, once criticized the Russian Formalists by declaring, "They believe that 'In the beginning was the Word.' But we believe that in the beginning was the deed." What interested Sartre in language paralleled what interested him in freedom: How does a living speaker in a situation use language? How does a human being in a given situation make choices? His response to those who approached language primarily as an autonomous structure imprisoning human discourse was, as Peter Caws has pointed out, to insist that it was precisely here that the challenge to the writer and his style was located.<sup>4</sup>

The historical and political preoccupations of *The Critique of Dialectical Reason* can be seen, at least in part, as an extension of this perspective. They, too, illustrate what distinguished Sartre from his philosophical competitors in the 1960s. The *Critique's* first volume sought to demonstrate how the "dialectic of history" rested on the dialectical praxes of individuals. This took particularly acute form in a description of how a "series" of individuals, each isolated, self-contained, and

potentially a rival for the Others (and all of whom may be playing various roles in a given structure), becomes a "Group-in-Fusion" through "the unity of common *praxis*," the sharing of a common project enabling them to transcend their initial situation through action in history. Sartre's most potent example is the storming of the Bastille.

**B**y July 1789, the people of Paris had suffered considerably, he says, but they lived as resigned individuals. Despite occasional outbursts, theirs was, in Sartre's words, a "serial behavior falsely presenting itself as individual virtue." But under the pressures of that famous summer—the threats from the king, his encircling army, and the militias—an apocalyptic moment arrived in which individuals no longer simply needed weapons to protect themselves. Instead, individual praxes, the For-Itselfs, were synthesized in a moment of freedom and reciprocity in which each Other's project became their own. The people of Paris revolted against the king and were transformed from powerless seriality into a Group-in-Fusion; the famous arsenal was stormed. It is precisely this type of historical moment that grid-bound structuralism, even Marxist structuralism, couldn't explain. The same might be said about that Group-in-Fusion known as the May Movement of 1968—a movement Sartre championed.

In *The Savage Mind*, published two years after the *Critique*, Lévi-Strauss accused Sartre of turning history into a myth. He argued that "whatever its value (which is indisputable) historical knowledge has no claim to be opposed to other forms of knowledge as a supremely privileged one." But whatever the value of Lévi-Strauss's structural methodology, its inability to account for historical transformation and historical concreteness is surely its fundamental flaw. It is instructive, in this regard, to contrast Lévi-Strauss's passing, though revealing, comments on the novelist and revolutionary Victor Serge in *Tristes tropiques* with Sartre's on Valéry and Flaubert.

Lévi-Strauss recounts how, while escaping from Marseilles at the outbreak of World War II, he found himself aboard the same ship as

Serge. He perceived the latter as something akin to an asexual “prim and elderly spinster” whose “cultural type” was as suitable to a Burmese Buddhist monk as to a comrade of Lenin. The refugee standing before Lévi-Strauss became a stimulus to look beyond what was manifest—a particular, historically placed man—to the “more subtle correspondences between individuals and *the parts they play*” (my emphasis).

Now, it may be possible and even worthwhile to correlate “cultural types” in one way or another. But consider: Serge was a revolutionary and a writer. He was, at various times, an anarchist, a quasi-Bolshevik, and an anti-Stalinist, antitotalitarian libertarian socialist; his very engaged life took him from the barricades of the Barcelona syndicalist uprising in 1917 and besieged Petrograd during the Russian civil war two years later to persecution by Stalin and flight from fascism. No familiarity with his endlessly eventful, colorful, tragic, and turbulent story—i.e., with the historical Serge—could allow that he was of a “type” with a spinster or a monk. If he appeared stoic when his path crossed that of Lévi-Strauss, it was certainly because Serge was then a political man in defeat.

Lévi-Strauss’s characterization of Serge is, in short, reductionist. Which is just what Sartre attacked Marxists for—although in their case the target was economic determinism—when he declared in *Search for a Method* that to say that Paul Valéry was a petit bourgeois intellectual is uninteresting. What is interesting is how a petit bourgeois intellectual becomes Paul Valéry. The structuralist Lévi-Strauss’s Victor Serge is the reductionist Marxist’s Paul Valéry. Hence, Sartre’s claim that *The Family Idiot* was the sequel to *Search for a Method*. And hence the importance of Sartre’s declared program—whether achieved or not—for his Flaubert study: to see the author as a universal particular.

**I**n his 1927 polemic *The Treason of the Intellectuals*, the French critic Julien Benda chastised the European intelligentsia for its engagement with politics, especially nationalism, to the detriment of an appropriately

disinterested role. In his 1965 “Plea for Intellectuals,” Sartre referred to an “intellectual” as “someone who meddles in what is not his business.” He pointed out that it was the anti-Dreyfusards who first made pejorative use of the term; the fate of the hapless Jewish captain, they claimed, was within the purview of military tribunals, not that of writers.

Sartre was partly wrong. The Voltaires, Zolas, and Sartres are exceptions. The historical rule has more often than not approximated Benda’s ideal, and not only in France. Moreover, engaged intellectuals have by no means always been of the left. Indeed, the post-1960s period seems to have yielded an intellectual world in which “revolutions” take place in the realm of “litcrit” alone; the practitioners of such “revolutions,” on both sides of the Atlantic, are so lost in their texts that they have departed this world. Sartre, consciously, went from literature to politics, and now it seems that it is the reverse that is done, sometimes without noticing and often by creating a superstructure of buzzwords, which, in the end, don’t even tell us much about literature. As Irving Howe has noted, the point appears to be to change not the world, but English (or French) departments.

Toward the end of *The Words* Sartre declared, “I don’t mind if my fellowmen forget about me the day after I’m buried. As long as they’re alive, I’ll haunt them, unnamed, imperceptible, present in every one of them just as the billions of dead who are unknown to me and whom I preserve from annihilation are present in me.” He has not been forgotten, and intellectuals who imagine themselves on the left ought always to be unsettled by Sartre’s insistence on—as well as his practice of—political engagement. In this vein, it is perhaps one of Sartre’s more teasing ontological notions in *Being and Nothingness* that can provide a clue to his afterlife. He spoke there of a *négalité*, a word difficult to translate—“concrete nothing” perhaps conveys its meaning—and grasped best through his own description (which I shall amend slightly).

A young writer goes into a Parisian café to find someone; let’s call the latter Jean-Paul. Jean-Paul is absent but the café *is* there before the young writer in its fullness: customers

## Looking At Sartre

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drinking, waiters serving the tables, an aroma of smoke and coffee in the air. Jean-Paul, however, is not there; if he were, he would stand out against the background of the café, for the young writer came looking for him, and the café itself is not his concern. Since he expected Jean-Paul's presence, not that of Raymond Aron, Paul Valéry or anyone else, the young writer has brought something to the café: Jean-Paul's absence.

Now it seems that a good many people are looking for Jean-Paul, even though many of them don't much like his philosophy, for reasons good and bad. They haven't found him in the café, that famed office (and stage) of Parisian intellectuals. Instead, they've discovered him in the hallway. Sartre, one might say, is both the *négalité* and the Other of contemporary French—and not only French—intellectual life. □

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### Notes

<sup>1</sup> See, for example, Etienne Barilier, *Les Petits Camarades: Essai sur Jean-Paul Sartre et Raymond Aron* (Paris: Julliard/L'Âge d'Homme, 1987), 75 FF; Anna Boschetti, *Sartre et "Les Temps Modernes"* (Paris: Minuit, 1985) 89 FF [Now in English as *The Intellectual Enterprise: Sartre and Les Temps Modernes* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1988) \$32.95]; Annie Cohen-Solal, *Sartre: A Life* (New York: Pantheon, 1987) \$24.95; Howard Davies, *Sartre and Les Temps Modernes* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987); Ronald Hayman, *Sartre: A Biography* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1987) \$22.95.

Also, volume 2 of Sartre's *The Family Idiot* has recently been translated by the University of Chicago Press.

<sup>2</sup> According to Simone de Beauvoir. Aron claimed later it was a beer. It is a dispute of relevance only to phenomenologists.

<sup>3</sup> Consequently, the comedian who announced upon Sartre's death that the philosopher had gone "from being into nothingness" got it precisely backward.

<sup>4</sup> For a valuable discussion of Sartre on linguistic concerns, see Peter Caws's *Sartre* (London and Boston: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1984), pp. 20–30.