

Peter H. Thomas

JEAN-PAUL SARTRE: A PORTRAIT

IT WAS IN THE FALL OF 1955 when I saw Sartre for the first time. He was to give at the University of Paris a public lecture on some philosophical aspect of the problem of Time. The event was to begin at eight in the evening. I had arrived at a quarter to eight and found several halls and staircases packed with hundreds of people waiting to be admitted to the lecture room. When the waiting crowd continued to increase, a university official came to announce that the lecture was to be held in another, larger auditorium, which happened to be in a different part of the building. Everybody rushed there with much energy and excitement and formed another queue in front of the newly indicated door.

During the next fifteen minutes the pressure of the crowd behind me increased with their number and impatience, and some people began to find it difficult to breathe. The shorter ones, wedged in the throng, started to wince and to moan, but at last the *Amphithéâtre Richelieu* was opened and what had now become an aggressive mob surged through the bottlenecks of the doors with all outward signs of riot and violence. I remember a kind little South American lady, with whom I had exchanged a few friendly words some minutes earlier, breaking out in hysterical screams over the loss of her black velvet hat, which had disappeared in the shuffle and was soon trampled by hundreds of feet. All the available seats of the spacious wood-panelled auditorium were occupied in a few minutes, except those reserved by gallant blades to be offered to prospective female acquaintances whom they succeeded in recruiting on this occasion. People were now standing everywhere in the aisles. The audience consisted mostly of students, some people of the middle class, and an impressive number of members of the working class. None displayed the noisy signs of impatience which can be so readily heard in waiting crowds in France, although they had to exercise patience for an additional forty-five minutes.

Monsieur Sartre appeared as late as ten minutes after nine, stepped on the platform, was greeted by a brief but vigorous round of applause, and began to speak in the tone of voice which has always been remarkable to me insofar as it never left me the smallest souvenir of pitch, rhythm, or of other qualities in tone and pronunciation. He did not offer a single word of excuse as to his delay of more than an hour, only stating that he intended to keep strictly to the subject matter he had given himself and encouraging those who expected spectacular revelations, political or other, to leave and make their seats available to those standing. Nobody left, and Sartre began one of those scrupulously detailed philosophical investigations in the style of language which in the years to come was to become familiar to me through the study of his works. At the end there was much enthusiastic applause and some questions and answers. The entire event was significant because it showed French intellectual life with a display of intensity which would be hard to match in Anglo-Saxon realms, and with passionate interest on the part of a large and diversified public.

During his investigation into Time, Sartre had used his own existentialist philosophy and method. Existentialism is nothing excessively modern. Its beginnings as a reaction against classical and traditional philosophy can be traced back to the writings of nineteenth-century romanticists in Germany and are based on the discovery that the "great beliefs"—such as those in religion and in rationalism—are failing man, who subsequently finds himself in a "dilemma" or a "predicament" which has to be faced and dealt with. The ensuing sensation of absurdity in human existence is an element which can be found in most varieties of existentialism. It appears in Sartre's first important novel, *La Nausée*, in which the principal character remarks while contemplating the knotty roots of a tree:

Absurdity was not an idea in my head nor the sound of a voice, it was this long, dead, wooden snake curled up at my feet, snake or claw or talon or root, it was all the same. Without formulating anything, I knew that I had found the clue to my existence, to my nausea, to my life. And indeed, everything I have ever grasped since that moment comes back to this fundamental absurdity.¹

The significance of this nausea lies in man's intuitive discovery that his conception of his world—which he was accustomed to imagine on the basis of *a priori* values—is an error. Taking this fundamental absurdity of reality as a starting point, Sartre asks "How is man to live significantly in a world which is senseless to him?", adopts what he calls a "consequent agnosticism", and argues somewhat like this: suppose the engineers of a company are to bring out an industrial product. They design it first and prepare for production after-

wards. In a similar fashion divinity (as conceived by Plato, the Scholastic philosophers, and Descartes) or other predestinating forces (as contained in Kantian and Hegelian thought) determine *beforehand* (*a priori*) the sort of being that a man, as a given individual, is going to be created. To this essentialistic view Sartre opposes his own existentialistic one by maintaining that man "creates himself" and becomes what he is going to be by living. In the first view the essence of man precedes his existence; in the second his existence precedes his essence because he defines himself by his choice and his actions. He is thus simply the realization of himself, and his worth lies solely in his accomplishments.

Thus Sartre neglects intentionally the impact of social, moral, economic, and psychological influences on man and puts a particular stress on individual responsibility. Man is responsible for his strength or weakness because he has *chosen* to be strong or weak; if he is a hero or a coward he has *chosen* his condition. And a coward can always choose not to be one any longer, very much like the hero who can always decide to cease to be heroic: man, says Sartre, is thus condemned to be free, totally free.

Another cardinal point of Sartre's existentialism is Descartes' maxim *I think, therefore I am*: by thought (as preparation and definition of decisive action) the responsible individual creates his essence, chooses himself, and is consciously alive. He is not the only one thinking, however, and his thoughts are confronted with those of people around him. His own becoming aware of himself and of his responsibility would be meaningless if it were not a function of the others' awareness of themselves, their responsibilities, and, of course, of him. Thus all truth he reaches, all values he attains, will be established through his conscientiousness and that of the others. And his action affects not only him, but also the others, since by choosing he assumes responsibility, not only for himself, but for all the others who are directly or indirectly affected by his choice.

Sartre's concept is illustrated by the following example: if a Frenchman of World War II chose to aid the German occupant, was not this much more than the expression of a personal sympathy or of a political attitude? Did it not really mean that he wished *all* Frenchmen to think and to act like him? Or take a United States citizen who joins a pressure group which fights racial desegregation: his choice expresses not only a personal dislike, but rather the desire that all white people should want all coloured people to be barred from their human and civic rights. Thus an individual chooses not only for him-

self, but for a great number of other individuals: he chooses the human image with and for them.

This explains the somewhat grandiloquent expressions, such as *anxiety*, *anguish*, and *despair*, that are so often associated with existentialist thought. They express the pangs of conscience of an individual facing distressing questions such as *What would happen if everybody chose as I do? Who am I to impose my choice on others?* Beyond such "emotional disposition", existentialist anguish does correspond rather well to situations which, even to a dispassionate observer, are particularly apt to give rise to anxiety. The following passage, taken from Sartre's article "The Republic of Silence", describes such a situation:

We were never more free than during the German occupation. We had lost all our rights, beginning with the right to talk. Every day we were insulted to our faces and had to take it in silence. Under one pretext or another, as workers, Jews or political prisoners, we were deported *en masse*. Everywhere, on billboards, in the newspapers, on the screen, we encountered the revolting and insipid picture of ourselves that our suppressors wanted us to accept. And because of all this we were free. Because the Nazi venom seeped into our thoughts, every accurate thought was a conquest. Because an all-powerful police tried to force us to hold our tongues, every word took on the value of a declaration of principles. Because we were hunted down, every one of our gestures had the weight of a solemn commitment. The circumstances, atrocious as they often were, finally made it possible for us to live the hectic and impossible existence that is known as the lot of man.

Exile, captivity, and especially death . . . became for us the habitual objects of our concern. We learnt that they were neither inevitable accidents, nor even constant and inevitable dangers, but that they must be considered as our lot itself, our destiny, the profound source of our reality as men. At every instant we lived up to the full sense of this commonplace little phrase: "Man is mortal!" And the choice that each of us made of his life was an authentic choice because it was made face to face with death, because it could always have been expressed in these terms: "Rather death than . . ." ²

Thus the basic question of liberty was posed, and we were brought to the verge of the deepest knowledge that man can have of himself. ³

The people who applauded Sartre on that memorable evening of 1955 admire not only the creator of existentialist philosophy, to which more attention will be given later on, but also the writer of fiction and the political thinker. His novels, plays, and political thoughts appear strongly marked by an almost innate opposition to a certain sort of authority. Nothing could be more exasperating to him than the behaviour of the German occupation force during

World War II, that of a South American dictator, or the rigid self-righteousness of a General de Gaulle, no matter how much these may differ from each other in other respects.

Another inveterate enemy of Sartre is the smug, self-satisfied and hypocritical individual whose life, seen by middle-class standards, is irreproachable, but whose opportunistic attitudes bring him discredit. The intellectual and emotional ingredients of Sartrean thought are in outspoken opposition to middle-class morality. This hostility can be found in his earliest writings. In a nutshell he blames the bourgeoisie, since the French Revolution, for living without a philosophy and making material profit the guiding element of their lives. His sympathy goes directly down to the underdogs, particularly if they rebel against their oppressors. And Sartre's language follows the trend of his likes: it is either highly intellectual or strongly popular—the author is a master of the vernacular and created most of his own philosophical vocabulary—but it is decidedly outside the idiom that is typical for the French middle class.

Thus he calls the authoritarians and the smug hypocrites *salauds*, a term of invective expressing moral opprobrium which cannot be satisfactorily translated into English. It would be a mistake, however to reduce the conflict between *salauds* and the rebelling underdogs to a simple class struggle between capitalists and proletarians, even though there are elements which would permit such an interpretation. The oppressors and opportunists are most certainly always *salauds*, but those of the tormented underdogs who, by improbity or weakness, betray their friends or their social group, have also a right to this appellation. Sartre's own hierarchy of values can help us to judge the moral dimensions of his characters: his protagonists keep themselves available for a significant action which may commit their lives and which could be the beginning of a more meaningful existence. His fiction shows how his protagonists succeed or fail. Some are too weak for their undertaking; they remain nonentities or even become *salauds*. Others, a very few, succeed and become heroes.⁴

It is evident that such an act must be of importance: the freedom or the lives of other people may depend on it. The situations of Sartre's fiction are therefore crucial, desperate, such as in the passage quoted earlier about the French underground struggle; in a popular uprising in *The Chips are Down*—a novel in dialogue form; in the revolt of Orestes against his tyrant and his god in the play *The Flies*; in the lynching of Negroes pictured by the

play *The Respectable Prostitute*; in the episode of the Spanish Civil War described in the short story *The Wall*—and so forth.

Sartre's political attitudes remind us of some of those we encountered in his fiction: his hostility to tyrannical authority, his contempt for the opportunist who comes to terms with the tyrant in order to be able to take advantage of the underdog more efficiently, his sympathy for this underdog if he musters enough courage to rebel against the conditions imposed on him. During World War II Sartre, as can be seen in the passage quoted, was of course hostile to Hitler and his various French Quislings. "Then things were clear and it was easy to decide to which side one belonged", Thomas Mann somewhere remarks almost regretfully of those years, suggesting that after the war the question as to whom to give one's loyalties was more difficult to answer. Two upheavals of the last decade, the struggles of Algeria and Cuba, permitted Sartre to be very specific about his political opinion. The parallels between them are numerous in his mind. In each an important power, France and the United States (read: "the oppressor"), attempts to control—economically, militarily, politically, morally—people who resent such guardianship and who are willing to risk their skins for their liberty (read: "the underdogs"). Having lived in France during much of the Algerian conflict, I can assure the reader that its importance for the moral attitude of every reasoning Frenchman was tremendous: he *had* to take sides for or against Algerian independence; to remain aloof was indeed impossible since the issue concerned not only the destiny of an Arabic nation but also and above all the image of France in the heart of every Frenchman. I venture to say that such a situation must have filled Sartre's heart with joy, since it imposed upon everybody in France a state of *Sartrian responsibility*. And Sartre himself was the last person to remain aloof. During the seven years of the North African conflict he gave active support to the struggle for Algerian independence, campaigned in newspapers, weeklies, and public meetings, was nearly arrested at the time of the *Manifesto of the 121*—a document in which prominent French intellectuals appealed to the Government in favour of direct peace negotiations with the Arabic National Front of Liberation—and had a narrow escape when right-wing extremists released a bomb in his apartment.

With reference to Cuba, Sartre argued that this island is a testing ground which shows the great powers' attitude towards underdeveloped nations; that while the Munroe Doctrine once meant "America for the Americans", it means today "South America for the North Americans"; that North American economic domination of South American countries is basically the same coloni-

alism as that which the French practised in Algeria, the only difference being in the methods which are used for essentially the same purpose. Sartre's writings on Cuba were published in the United States and met there with the usual accusation that the French philosopher was a friend of the Russians. His detractors had unfortunately forgotten that in earlier years Sartre had never hidden his hostility towards Stalin, and that during the Budapest uprising of 1956 he had been as outspokenly anti-Russian as he was anti-American during the ill-fated invasion attempt of the Bay of Pigs and later Cuban "crises".⁵

In an attempt to evaluate Sartre's political attitude, it must not be forgotten that man, as an individual, stands at the focal point of his philosophical and political thought: both areas are indeed closely related to each other. He tends therefore to take up declining attitudes toward all developments designed to deteriorate the significance of human relationships. Thus he does not think in political terms of blocs, camps, and zones of interest, but rather in terms of the meaning the human community is to give to an as yet largely meaningless world. Sartre wrote two major volumes of philosophy, the first of which, *Being and Nothingness*, is a systematic development of his existentialism. His second volume, *The Critique of Dialectic Reason*, is largely concerned with political issues.

In unison with orthodox Marxist thinkers, Sartre maintains that traditional philosophy has degenerated and that its place is about to be taken by *savoir* ("knowledge"), which is "Marxism becoming world" undoubtedly in the sense of "changing the world". But far from being a complete philosophy, as is pretended by orthodox Marxists, Marx's thought can be considered only as a basis on which an entire system is still to be built. Sartre proposes to do some of this building and belongs thus in the ranks of men such as Shaw, Sorel, Bernstein, and Veblen, who attempted to make the doctrine harmonious and invulnerable while acting as mentors and new converts. Sartre's *Critique of Dialectic Reason* is simultaneously a fierce attack against the inflexibly dogmatic habit of *a priori* reasoning on the part of orthodox Marxists, and an attempt at correcting and completing Marx's thought. In doing so he relegates his own brand of existentialism to the role of a sort of marginal appendix destined to differentiate and to humanize a doctrine which in his eyes is as rigid as it is incomplete.

In the spring of 1958, the writer had the opportunity of meeting Sartre at the time — so eventful for the history of modern France — which marks the beginnings of De Gaulle's second era. It was late in the evening, and the philosopher had just left a meeting organized by opponents of the General.

The person in whose company I happened to be introduced me, and we conversed for a while in a small group. If I have just said, therefore, that I have "met" Sartre, this is not a very meaningful statement: I have also "met" and "conversed" with Pope Pius XII during a special audience, with Benedetto Croce in Naples, with Thomas Mann in Pacific Palisades, and with Hermann Hesse in a Swiss mountain village. I doubt that these men, if hypothetically restored to life, would remember anything beyond a young man who seemed to be looking up at them observantly. Such brief encounters, however, do offer the advantage of an intuitive evaluation of the contemporary figure concerned, of that first impression which, superficial as it might be, is so often found to be the right one in our dealings with people, and they offer the advantage of a certain "feeling" which adds a new dimension to whatever we might know or learn about them.

Incidentally, the words "looking up" were perhaps ill-chosen with respect to Sartre: he is a short man, and everybody seemed to be looking *down* at him. The philosopher, despite his small size, appeared physically strong, muscular, and solid. Seeing him in the company of two tall and tough-looking young men, one couldn't help thinking of Mickey Rooney, the Boss, operating with his bodyguards in a crime thriller. The particular impression of a dominating force emanating from him was undoubtedly due to a certain curtness of language: each successive subject brought up in our conversation was given a well-calculated amount of concentrated attention, but not more. It was as if Sartre implied from time to time, through his silences, that the issue had been sized up, given justice, and that we could proceed to something else. This impatience vanished if a subject succeeded in captivating him. It was then immediately and scrupulously inspected from several angles, and the expression on his face, which during the "vacant" moments had shown sullen and tense impatience, became entirely changed. Under the round, rimmed glasses the eyes acquired that quick-moving but nevertheless inwardly directed expression of a man who thinks with intensity and speed: "He never stops thinking", says Simone de Beauvoir of him in the first volume of her memoirs. Sartre's facial expression of intellectual preoccupation makes the observer entirely forget the unshapeliness of his somewhat bulging, fleshy face and the asymmetry of the eyes which can be so readily noticed in his photographs. There is indeed a remarkable difference between his "uneasy" rest—when his tense mouth and his discontentedly frowning forehead appear to emphasize the uncomeliness of his entire appearance, when the features themselves seem

to become disagreeably aware of their lack of grace—and the keen clarity of his face and his lucid kindness, which appear so quickly when his mind is at work.

The intellectual activity of Sartre is nothing short of phenomenal. On the French book market there are at present close to forty of his works, many of them dealing with difficult theoretical subjects. Several have been translated into foreign languages. The articles published since the end of World War II in France and abroad would be difficult to count, particularly those of *Les Temps Modernes*, an influential literary and cultural monthly of which he is the director. It may be surmised that one day the publication of his complete works will be a gigantic enterprise.

In almost everything Sartre writes one remarks, as when one watches his facial expression, a true concentration of intellect. In fiction his power of expression is considerable; his plays in particular, produced many times in France and abroad, are good literature and have almost always been successful. In his philosophical writing his relationship with the reader recalls that of a gifted professor with his student, but unlike the professor—who usually knows where he is “going”—Sartre seems to develop his ideas in the very act of writing. Beginning with a number of basic observations or truths, say A, B, C, he reaches the conclusion D, and from the basic elements E, F, G, and H he concludes as to I. Then, for his own clarification and for the memory of his reader, he briefly recapitulates D and I, places them opposite each other, and “draws” a new synthesis which we might call J. It is soon confronted with new basic elements, historical facts, and intermediate conclusions; the procedure is repeated on several echelons, until a sort of final result is reached. When one reads one of Sartre’s volumes of philosophy one is caught in a grinding and seemingly endless reasoning process: at the end of the volume, one “awakes” amazed at the author’s power of thought and at one’s own power of endurance.

A particularity of Sartre’s reasoning lies in the abundance of basic observations which consider the problem from every possible point of view and recall a pack of hunting dogs or press photographers circling in on their prey. In his writing there is indeed so fierce an effort of “seizing” and “grasping” that the aggressive quality of this comparison is perfectly justified. This ruthless and indefatigable energy is maintained on all echelons of the investigation and is only interrupted by the before-mentioned recapitulations, which resemble rest periods of an army going temporarily into quarters in order to prepare for a new attack.

It is, of course, not easy to evaluate a literary production of such wealth and variety. In his philosophy the belief in the absurdity of existence is very subjective; one might disapprove of his attempt to deduce from the contemplation of a root—as it were immediately and without any sort of application of logic—the very essence of reality. The same “reasoning process” has been used by a number of other modern philosophers, particularly existentialists: absurdity is indeed something much rather perceived intuitively than something conceived through systematic thought.

It is not very difficult to criticize Sartre's ideas on freedom, choice, and individual responsibility: since we are subjected to many psychological and physiological influences, we are really not quite as free as Sartre wants us to be. We might therefore not agree with him when he maintains that a French resistance fighter tortured by the Nazis, or an Algerian nationalist tortured by the French, is *free* to give away or to withhold his information. We might even amuse ourselves at the thought that, according to Sartre, a young man who prefers blondes and strawberry ice cream “imposes his choice on mankind” and creates by this choice the image of a blonde-loving and strawberry-loving humanity. This somewhat egocentric over-evaluation of individual choice could be explained by what psychologists call “latent anguish”, originally caused by an emotional trauma during childhood, and tending to “cling to” any suitable opportunity for expression, to any choice with which the individual might be faced. It can also be assumed that beyond such “emotional disposition”, existentialist anguish does correspond rather well to situations which—even to an objective and dispassionate observer—are particularly apt to give rise to anxiety, such as the situation described in the passage quoted earlier from the author's *Republic of Silence*. And if we consider important professional, political, moral, and even certain personal decisions, we see that Sartre's ideas on liberty, choice, and responsibility are of a definite value: mankind might be better off if everybody chose with the same painstaking scrupulousness.

Sartre's ideas on total liberty are particularly perplexing: if a man refuses traditional, borrowed, or thoughtlessly assumed moral limits, if he rejects the judgment of any of our “moral authorities” (that is, if he refuses any *a priori* essence imposed on him), he is left with an enormous responsibility on his shoulders since nobody can tell him how to decide and what to do. His liberty is indeed total, and before him arises the towering task as to what content to give to his life (that is, what authentic essence to give to his existence). The passage from the *Republic of Silence* shows that the historical context within

which a man's life is situated can be helpful in making the choice. But even if such a context is given to life—by commitment, as Sartre calls it, which is essentially a *subjectively* conceived decision—his *objective* dealings with reality might prove his effort to be a success or a failure. Man has to remain therefore without illusions, since the world and things in it are ambiguous. This ambiguity and the above-mentioned impossibility to accept ready-made moral values—says Sartre—render null and void the age-old distinction between good and evil which plays such an important part in the history of Western philosophy. Sartre distinguishes only between the man of bad faith—who has refused to accept his freedom and lives with unauthentic values (*i.e.* the *salaud*)—and the man of good faith (*i.e.*, the potential existentialist hero) who is willing to choose on the basis of a full realization of his freedom and of the sense of responsibility which arises from it.

Sartre's political beliefs put him in a precarious situation. Orthodox Marxists repudiate his effort of correcting and completing Marx's teaching as a variety of *petit-bourgeois* idealism (which is the true *summum* in their hierarchy of insults) while non-Marxists brand him as a Communist. This crude over-simplification is one of the effects of the Cold War. It is known that orthodox Marxists think their philosophy infallible while their adversaries believe it to be a dangerous pseudo-science. It might be interesting to remember in this context that Freudianism—another "gospel" for "man's salvation"—has gone through a similar development: its disciples remained faithful to the basic principles but modified considerably the entire system of thought; its adherents, interpreting these principles in different manners, opposed each other violently; its opponents criticized and fought it impetuously, and after many decades it came to be accepted as a "vision of man" and a cure for his troubles by some people in some parts of the globe. Freudianism, however, unlike Marxism, never became the touchstone of an "ideological" struggle whose fierceness resembles that of the Reformation and Counter Reformation over issues such as transubstantiation and communion in one or both kinds. How much spirit it needs to take a political stand such as Sartre's can be appreciated if we remember that the majority of today's thinking people are, naturally, either confirmed non-Marxists or confirmed Marxists, and that both have their own good reasons to be hostile to Sartre who thus has to face a double ostracism emanating from each of the opposing sides.

Sartre's supposedly corruptive power on the post-war generation has been undoubtedly exaggerated: in spite of his precise and often succinct language, his reasoning can be grasped, adopted, or refuted only by educated

people and these are, as we know, still a small minority in our day. Self-culture is not uncommon in France, and the working-class people that I observed in the audience of Sartre's lecture were undoubtedly self-taught. Sartre's influence on trained intellectuals has been considerable, and even many of his adversaries have been marked by him, unknowingly and, so to speak, in spite of themselves. In France and in French Canada it is indeed almost impossible to read or to listen to articles and TV programmes of the "intellectual" kind—say on the novel, the theatre, sociology, or on higher gardening—without encountering, piecemeal, some of Sartre's figures of thought and speech. I believe that he has helped to shape some of the important elements of the cast of the modern French mind; even his most fierce detractors cannot deny that today, in his sixtieth year, Sartre's importance for French literature and European thought is far beyond the reach of any challenge, even though his influence on young people seems to be diminishing. How long his works and his influence will last is, of course, not for us to determine.

NOTES

1. Translated in F. H. Heinemann, *Existentialism and the Modern Predicament* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1958), pp. 115-116.
2. Read "Rather death than an immoral, despicable or treacherous choice."
3. Translated in F. H. Heinemann, *op. cit.*, pp. 113-114.
4. It once happened that the author himself lost his wind while his protagonist, after endless hesitation, seemed to reach the end of his strength. Sartre wrote three volumes of his novel *The Ways of Liberty*; the announced fourth volume, which was to contain the final and decisive act of liberation, never appeared.
5. Most of Sartre's articles on Cuba appeared in the Parisian publication *Express*. It is interesting to recall that this liberal weekly announced the Cuban invasion attempt as imminent five days before it was launched and at least a week before the final disaster of the Bay of Pigs.