

Preface

This collection of twenty-one articles by thirteen American, six British, and two Canadian scholars is divided into four sections: Sartre and Philosophy; Sartre and Psychology; Sartre: (Auto)biography, Theater, and Cinema; and, finally, Sartre and Politics. The great diversity of approaches and commentaries is a tribute to the stature of Sartre, whose writings continue to have an impact on the English-speaking world and farther afield. Sartre was the embodiment of the modern intellectual who in his own words “constantly meddled in matters that others considered to be none of [his] business.”¹ Therefore, it is not surprising that, to paraphrase Bernard-Henri Lévy, “the twentieth century belonged to Sartre,”² while on the other hand, John Gerassi saw him as the (most) “hated conscience of the age.”³ Then again, the right-wing reviewer Algis Valiunas does not hesitate to proclaim that “for Sartre, his passionate temperament issued in a disfiguring taste for revolutionary violence, while his ambition to explain the world as nobody had adequately explained it before issued in encyclopedic fatuity. Sartre knew everything, and everything he knew was wrong.”⁴ Of course, right-wingers would love to see Sartre definitively sidelined because of his four years as a fellow-traveler of the communists, but would Sartre have minded such diverse opinions of him and his work? Not at all. In *Being and Nothingness* Sartre proclaimed that “[t]o be dead is to be a prey for the living,” but he adds that even though one is now “reduced to the single dimension of exteriority, [i]n this capacity [one] will pursue [one’s] history in the human world ... [and death will] confer a meaning from the outside on everything which [one] live[d] in subjectivity.”⁵ And in his preface to *The Family Idiot*, Sartre announced laconically: “Now we must begin. How, and by what means? It doesn’t matter: [a dead person] is open to all comers. The essential thing is to set out with a problem.... What we must try and understand is the origin of [what] is always hidden.”⁶

In view of Sartre’s prodigious output, it cannot be said that a lot has remained hidden, especially since his heir, Arlette Elkaïm-Sartre, has continued to publish posthumously an enormous amount of his work. In addition, his

various writings seem to have covered every angle of his existence and thought in multiple forms and genres. His novels, stories, and biography are as much works of fiction as they are direct or indirect personal revelations. In addition, Simone de Beauvoir made sure that her memoirs include as many of Sartre's activities as they do of hers. Then there are the correspondence, the interviews on tape and on film, and, of course, other people's memoirs, autobiographies, and official and unofficial biographies.

In fact, one could view Sartre's entire oeuvre as a series of sometimes concentric and sometimes overlapping circles within which certain crucial events and themes occur and reoccur, often receiving similar and, then again, totally different interpretations. As a result of the crisscrossing of these various writings, one can gain the impression that all aspects of Sartre's life have already been dealt with and a seamless web has been woven.

But much remains to be said about Sartre and his work. He raised many essential questions in different realms: for example, the matters of freedom, responsibility, and commitment are as relevant today as they were in his lifetime. While he may have raised the notions of the absurd and contingency first in 1938 in his novel *Nausea*, when Roquentin proclaims that "just now I experienced the absolute or the absurd" and that "the essential is contingency,"⁷ these notions continue to reverberate because our rulers have made sure that in our natural existence and in all aspects of our lives arbitrariness is now the watchword. In his plays and scenarios, Sartre, the atheist, exploits the *unreal* world of the stage and screen in order to deal with the afterlife and with past and present historical situations and themes in order to inject new life into such contemporary questions as the nature of our interpersonal relations. And when in *No Exit* Garcin concludes that "Hell is other people,"⁸ we may well ask whether this was Sartre's final word on human relations. Then we realize that it derives its specific meaning from the play's context and the wartime situation in which the play was written. Sartre wanted a theater concerned not with development of character but with the interaction of people within certain extreme situations so that he could speak to his own time. By framing the action in that way, he raised questions about torture, cowardice, commitment, and man's quest for freedom—questions that remain as relevant today as they were some fifty to sixty years ago.

Sartre also became very much involved in the burning political questions of his age. As Michel Rybalka has remarked, his life can be divided into three periods corresponding to the motto of the French Republic and to his main preoccupations at the time, i.e., Liberty, Equality, and Fraternity.

Once again one can view Sartre's political forays in terms of sometimes concentric and sometimes overlapping circles. *Nausea* and the short stories in *The Wall* appear to focus largely on provincial-minded France. Yet the story "The Wall," one of his masterpieces, takes us abroad to the horrific world of the Spanish civil war and the anguish of those condemned to death, while "The Childhood of a Leader" is a penetrating description of the ominous threat of fascism in France. From 1939 to 1941, Sartre became a meteorologist in the French army, participated in the "Phony War" against Germany, and was taken

prisoner and spent time in a stalag. For the first time he encountered, and on a huge scale, the Other as the ultimate antagonist.

This experience colors his first philosophical masterpiece *Being and Nothingness*. It also colors his plays of the time and, more specifically, his trilogy *The Roads to Freedom*. Mathieu's life seems pervaded by gloom and his inability to act until he finally lets loose in hyper-dramatic fashion. These novels are also full-sized historical canvases of the late 1930s and early 1940s when the free world's fate hung in the balance and politicians of every stripe showed their callous willingness to sacrifice the lives of the defenseless on the altar of political expediency. Few novels show better the interaction between micro- and macro-historical events than the second volume *The Reprieve*, while *Iron in the Soul* gives a sardonic and satirical account of the disaster that was the grotesque defeat and the pathetic surrender of France. No wonder that, as a consequence, Sartre decided to become politically engaged. He had seen the enemy face to face in the form of the Nazis and their French henchmen and had become aware of the role that the French ruling class had played in the betrayal of the people.

In this sense Sartre's decision in the early 1950s to become a "critical fellow-traveler" of the Communist Party was not an aberration. His distaste of his own class—the French bourgeoisie—and his innate sympathy for the underdog and the social outcast translated into a strongly positive attitude toward the working classes, but it also most made him sadly incurious about the inner workings of the French Communist Party and seriously blinkered his awareness of the cynical twists and turns of Moscow's policies—even though his play *Dirty Hands* was an excellent illustration of precisely that phenomenon! However, Sartre soon stretched his interests further afield and became involved in the anti-colonial struggle. The Third World is still very much with us, but it has changed faces, and Sartre was certainly one of the spokesmen responsible for the transformation of the colonial nightmare into the post-colonial world, in which many people can now speak with a voice of their own. Racism, economic exploitation, (American) imperialist expansionism, and dictatorships remain burning issues, but Sartre helped our understanding of all these matters and gave us some of the basic tools to deal with them. Hence, Sartre's concerns opened up ever-widening questions until he became important to people the world over. As Thomas Flynn puts it in the introduction to this volume, Sartre turned into a "singular universal."

The Family Idiot, Sartre's final magnum opus, tries to go full circle and explain the individual while reinserting him into his time, thus taking us back to Sartre's roots. *Nausea* begins as the story of a biographer writing about a fictitious eighteenth-century political figure, scoundrel, and adventurer named Rollebon. When he discovers that he is re-creating Rollebon in his own image, he abandons the biography. Sartre's *Flaubert* is meant to be a biography and a "fiction that is true." Clearly, then, the relationship of an author's work to his life fascinated Sartre and remains important for biographers and readers. Of course, Sartre wished to go beyond banal psychologisms, which would see in the author's works a simple reflection of the author's life. He wanted to lay bare

the “original project” and uncover why and how the child becomes the author who gives imaginative shape to his deepest conflicts.

Let us conclude with Sartre’s perennial concern with ethics and start with the (in)famous interviews with Benny Lévy, published in English as *Hope Now: The 1980 Interviews*. In these interviews, Sartre has now moved to the question of fraternity. There is an obvious link with previous writings, even if we cannot speak of an unbroken chain, because, as is the case for everyone, Sartre was a product of the age he helped shape, and certain ideas, but not others, predominate in certain periods. As he said in *Hope Now* about beliefs he held in the late 1930s and the 1940s, “I talked about [them] because other people were talking about [them].”⁹ And already in *What Is Literature?* he had emphasized the importance of the communicative role of writing. It does not exist in a vacuum. The author writes with a specific readership in mind, and his intent is not just to create a thing of beauty but to have an impact on his readers and steer them in a certain direction. In other words, writing is a pact that involves commitment on the part of the author but also involvement on the part of the reader. When the latter refuses that involvement, he stops reading and being guided by the author.¹⁰ When in August 1952 Sartre attacked Camus harshly in his reply to Camus’ letter to the editor published in *Les Temps modernes*, he did not hesitate to criticize Camus’ “haughty stance,”¹¹ revealed in his personal attitude and writing, as exemplifying his unwillingness to become involved in history. Clearly, he did not separate aesthetic and moral considerations when dealing with authors, and this holds true for his political convictions. Neither did he distinguish between the means and the end, as Elizabeth Bowman and Robert Stone illustrate in their discussion of the 1964 Rome lecture.

Finally then, Sartre’s life and work was very much a tour de force. Not only did he reach out farther and farther in his quest to understand himself, others, and his age, but he was ready to take on all comers and compete with the great thinkers of past and present in order to have his views prevail. He started by denouncing the suffocating atmosphere of France’s provincial life in *Nausea* and the proto-fascist threats that were becoming prevalent in the 1930s, but he continued to assume bigger tasks and to vanquish greater obstacles. *Being and Nothingness* takes issue with all of modern philosophy from Descartes on. His plays and novels embrace mythology, the afterlife, and Europe’s and France’s recent history. Sartre, the postwar public persona, broadened his political and social scope with *Les Temps modernes* and, in spite of his worldwide travels and multifarious activities, did not lose sight of certain goals. En route, he abandoned his *Notebooks for an Ethics* and the *Critique of Dialectical Reason*, but the concerns stayed with him, as did his fascination with Flaubert. As a consequence, the works published in his lifetime and those published posthumously continue to reverberate and have an ever-widening impact.

— Adrian van den Hoven

Notes

1. “Portrait croisé: Jean-Paul Sartre et Simone de Beauvoir,” interview with Madeleine Gobeil and Claude Lanzmann, Radio Canada, 1967.
2. Bernard-Henri Lévy, *Le Siècle de Sartre* (Paris: Grasset, 2000).
3. John Gerassi, *Jean-Paul Sartre: Hated Conscience of His Century* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989).
4. Algis Valiunas, “Sartre vs. Camus,” *Commentary*, January 2005, 62.
5. Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, trans. Hazel E. Barnes (New York: The Philosophical Library, 1956), 544.
6. Jean-Paul Sartre, *The Family Idiot: Gustave Flaubert, 1821–1857*, trans. Carol Cosman (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), x.
7. Jean-Paul Sartre, *Nausea*, trans. Lloyd Alexander (New York: New Directions, 1964), 129, 131 (trans. changed).
8. Jean-Paul Sartre, *No Exit and Three Other Plays: Dirty Hands, The Flies, The Respectful Prostitute* (New York: Vintage Books, 1956), 47.
9. Jean-Paul Sartre and Benny Lévy, *Hope Now: The 1980 Interviews*, translated by Adrian van den Hoven, with an introduction by Ronald Aronson (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 54–55.
10. Jean-Paul Sartre, “For Whom Does One Write?” in *“What Is Literature?” and Other Essays*, introduction by Steven Ungar (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988), 70–140.
11. David A. Sprintzen and Adrian van den Hoven, eds. and trans., *Jean-Paul Sartre and Albert Camus: A Historic Confrontation* (New York: Humanity Books, 2004), 131–161.