HOPE NOW:
A SYMPOSIUM

Introduction

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As the North American team of *Sartre Studies International* was preparing the following symposium on *Hope Now: The 1980 Interviews*, our British colleagues surprised us by publishing Shlomit Schuster's "Revisiting *Hope Now* with Benny Lévy: A Note on the 1996 English Edition of *Hope Now*" in *Sartre Studies International* 4:1. Based on a 1996 interview with Lévy, the article functions in some sense as Lévy's own review of "Sartre's Last Words?" – my introduction to the English version of *Hope Now*.

In writing this introduction I confronted the problem faced by any reader of the 1991 edition of *Espoir maintenant*, the first book-length version of the interviews: they are prefaced by and followed by Lévy's "Presentation" and "The Final Word." These give us Sartre's last words through Lévy's concerns of the 1990s, and not Sartre's of 1980. I sought to introduce *Hope Now* to the reader by focusing on the question of how to understand Sartre at this moment in his life. My goal was, as far as possible, to give the reader space to consider what Sartre might have intended in the interviews. This meant discussing the varying ways of viewing the aging Sartre and, inevitably, distancing the reader not only from Beauvoir's versions of Sartre but also from the framing Lévy texts.

In her article Schuster criticizes me, among other things, for siding with Beauvoir's "official" version of his relationship with Sartre; she restates Lévy's view of the intention of *Hope Now*; and she summarizes her interview with Lévy on "(i) Sartre's intellectual fitness during the last years of his life, (ii), the Sartre-Lévy relationship, and (iii) Lévy himself." Three points I developed at length in "Sartre's Last Words?" deserve restatement in the face of Schuster's comments. First, influenced by Jean-Pierre Boulé's critique of Beauvoir's construction of "the final Sartre" in *Sartre médiatique*, I rejected Beauvoir's interpretation of the dialogues no less than Lévy's – and Boulé's – as well as Cohen-Solal's. Below, in an interesting and sensitive discussion, Boulé responds to my criticism that *Sartre médiatique*

was too enthusiastic and uncritical about the Sartre/Lévy interviews. He agreed with Lévy that they represented a wholly new departure in form and content, rather than the last words of a dependent and aging, however insightful and still-combative old man. The old man was, as John Gerassi understood, still in command of the situation and still able to act on his own behalf, with originality and freshness. But – and this is the second point (which Schuster criticizes me for stressing but then agrees with) – Sartre was also acting weakly, a declining person. If he was neither helpless nor manipulated, he was also incapable of launching a powerful new rethinking that “would have been” completed if he had not died. Rather, I speculated, Sartre’s knowing he was in decline and weak may well have been the very precondition for undertaking a new direction: his “ideological interest” could not be threatened by his new thoughts because there was little prospect of the new direction bearing fruit or being completed. Third (Schuster criticizes me for saying this and then winds up agreeing with it as well), I stressed the continuity of Sartre’s purposes: finding a direction for the Left in light of the collapse of Marxist politics. Sartre remained a revolutionary to the very end.

Schuster’s presentation of Lévy, and her/their misreading of my skepticism towards *both* Lévy’s *and* Beauvoir’s version of the final Sartre, echo the most obvious meaning of the title Lévy chose for his afterward to *Hope Now*: he is trying to have *the final word* on Sartre. As Adrian van den Hoven painstakingly shows below, whatever the argument may be about the interviews themselves, a strong case may be made that Lévy is distorting Sartre in his efforts to frame the philosopher’s last words.

Nevertheless, the broad conclusion to be drawn about *Hope Now* is presented in Ronald Santoni’s spirited defense (and also suggested by Boulé): Lévy should be taken seriously and appreciated, for he has played an important role both in presenting Sartre’s final thoughts and in giving them their focus. Lévy helped Sartre to think against himself, and to speak his mind on familiar Sartrean themes.

Moreover, it is worth noting that every one of the participants in this symposium, myself included, have met with Benny Lévy to discuss his relationship with Sartre and *Hope Now*. We all acknowledge not only his intelligence and forthrightness, but above all his generosity. We appreciate that he has freely given of his time and, as I say at the end of “Sartre’s Last Words?” that he has given so much of his effort to preserving Sartre’s final thoughts. However we may agree or disagree with him on his interpretation of them, Lévy’s kindness of spirit speaks for itself.