

## JEAN-PAUL SARTRE: 'A LITTLE BALL OF FUR AND INK'

After World War II, Jean-Paul Sartre enjoyed a popular fame usually reserved for film stars, not philosophers. He was a best-selling author. He was a guru to intellectuals and the young the world over; his "existentialism" became a password in universities, theatres, cafes. What has been the legacy of all the stir that Sartre created? Paul Johnson offers some answers.

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*by Paul Johnson*

Jean-Paul Sartre was a professional philosopher who also sought to preach to a mass audience. For a time at least it looked as though he had succeeded. Certainly no philosopher this century has had so direct an impact on the minds and attitudes of so many human beings, especially young people, all over the world. Existentialism was the popular philosophy of the late 1940s and 1950s. His plays were hits. His books sold in enormous quantities, some of them over two million copies in France alone. He offered a way of life. He presided over a secular church, if a nebulous one. Yet in the end, what did it all amount to?

Like most leading intellectuals, Sartre was a supreme egoist. He was the classic case of a spoiled only child. His family was of the provincial upper middle class, his father a naval officer, his mother a well-to-do Schweitzer from Alsace. The father was, by all accounts, an insignificant fellow who died when Sartre was only 15 months old.

The mother, Anne-Marie, married again to Joseph Mancy, boss of the Delaunay-Belleville plant in La Rochelle. Sartre, born June 21, 1905, inherited his father's height (5 feet, 2½ inches), brains and books. But in his autobiography, *Les Mots (The Words)*, Sartre went out of his way to dismiss his father from his life. "If he had lived," he wrote, "my father would have laid down on me and crushed me. Fortunately he died young."

The grandfather, who crushed his own sons, doted on Jean-Paul and gave him the run of his large library. The mother was a doormat, the little boy her most precious possession. She kept him in frocks and long hair until he was nearly eight, when the grandfather decreed a massacre of the curls. Sartre called his childhood "paradise"; his mother was "this virgin, who lived with us, watched and dominated by everyone, was there to wait on me." She called him Poulou. He was told he was

beautiful "and I believed it." He said "precocious things" and they were "remembered and repeated to me." So "I learned to make up others."

As Sartre had little respect for the truth it is difficult to say how much credence should be placed on his description of his youth. His mother, when she read *Les Mots*, was upset. "Poulou understood nothing about his childhood" was her comment. What shocked her were his heartless comments about members of the family.

There is no doubt that he was spoiled. But when he was four, a catastrophe occurred: Following a bout of influenza, a sty developed in his right eye, and he was never able to use it again. He invariably wore thick glasses, and in his 60s he went progressively blind. When Sartre finally got to school he found his mother had lied to him about his looks and that he was ugly. Though short, he was well-built: broad, barrel-chested, powerful. But his face was plain and the faulty eye almost made him grotesque. Being ugly, he was beaten up. He retaliated with wit, scorn, and jokes and became that bitter-sweet character, the school jester. Later he was to pursue women, as he put it, "to get rid of the burden of my ugliness."

Sartre had one of the best educations available to a man of his generation: a good lycée in La Rochelle, two years as a boarder in the Lycée Henri Quatre in Paris, at the time probably the best high school in France; then the École Normale Supérieure, where France's leading academics took their degrees. He had some very able contemporaries: Paul Nizan, Raymond Aron, Simone de Beauvoir. He boxed and wrestled. He played the piano, by no means badly, sang well in a powerful voice and contributed satirical sketches to the école's theater reviews. He wrote poems, novels, plays, songs, short stories, and philosophi-



cal essays. He was again the jester, but with a much wider range of tricks. He formed, and for many years maintained, the habit of reading about 300 books a year. The range was very wide; American novels were his passion. He also acquired his first mistress. Sartre failed his first degree exam, then passed it the next year, finishing at the top of his class; de Beauvoir, three years his junior, was second. It was now June 1929, and like most clever young men at that time, Sartre became a schoolmaster.

The thirties were a lost decade for Sartre. He spent most of it as a teacher in Le Havre, the epitome of provincial dowdiness. There were trips to Berlin where, at Aron's suggestion, he studied Husserl, Heidegger, and Phenomenology, then the most original philosophy in Central Europe. But mostly it was teaching drudgery. He hated the bourgeoisie. Indeed he was very class-conscious. But he was not a Marxist. In fact he never read Marx, except perhaps in extracts. He was certainly a rebel, but a rebel without a cause. He joined no party. He took no interest in the rise of Hitler. Spain left him unmoved. Whatever he later

claimed, the record suggests he held no strong political views before the war.

Normally he wore a sports jacket with an open-necked shirt, refusing to put on a tie. He let his pupils do more or less what they wanted. The boys could take off their jackets and smoke in class. They need not take notes or present essays. He never marked the roster or inflicted punishment or gave them marks. Away from the classroom, he wrote a lot but his early fiction could not find a publisher. In 1936 he at last brought out a book, on his German studies, *Récherches philosophiques*. It attracted little attention. But he was beginning to see what he wanted to do.

The idea of projecting a philosophical system through fiction and drama had become firm in his mind by the late 1930s. He argued that existing novelists—he was thinking of Dos Passos, Virginia Woolf, Faulkner, Joyce, Aldous Huxley, Gide, and Thomas Mann—reflected ancient ideas mostly derived, directly or indirectly, from Descartes and Hume. It would be much more interesting, he wrote to Jean Paulhan, “to make a novel of Heidegger’s time, which is what I want to do.” His problem was that during the 1930s he was working quite separately on fiction and on philosophy. But a philosophical novel of a kind was slowly emerging. He wanted to call it *Mélancholie*. His publishers changed it to *La Nausée (Nausea)*, a more arresting title, and finally brought it out in 1938. Again, there was little response at first.

What made Sartre was World War II. For France it was a disaster. For others it brought danger and disgrace. But Sartre had a good war. He was conscripted into the meteorological section at Army Group Artillery headquarters, where he tossed balloons of hot air into the atmosphere to test which ways the wind was blowing. His comrades laughed at him. His corporal, a math professor, remarked: “From the start we knew he would be no use to us in a military sense.” Sartre was notorious for

never taking a bath and being disgustingly dirty. What he did was write. Every day he produced five pages of a novel, eventually to become *Les Chemins de la Liberté*, four pages of his *War Diary*, and innumerable letters, all to women.

When the Germans invaded, the front collapsed and Sartre was taken prisoner, still scribbling (June 21, 1940). In the POW camp near Trèves he was in effect politicized by the German guards who despised their French prisoners. As at school, he survived by jesting and writing camp entertainments. He also worked hard at his own novels and plays, until he was released, classified “partially blind,” in March 1941.

Sartre made a beeline for Paris. He got a job teaching philosophy at the famous Lycée Condorcet, where most of the staff were in exile, underground, or in the camps. Despite his methods, perhaps because of them, the school inspectors reported his teaching “excellent.” He found wartime Paris exhilarating. He later wrote: “Will people understand me if I say that the horror was intolerable but it suited us well . . . We have never been as free as we were under the German occupation.” But that depended on who you were. Sartre was lucky. Having taken no part in pre-war politics, he did not appear on any Nazi records or lists. So far as they were concerned he was “clean.” He had no difficulty in getting his work published and his plays presented. As André Malraux put it, “I was facing the Gestapo while Sartre in Paris had his plays produced with the authorization of the German censors.”

In a vague way Sartre yearned to contribute to the Resistance. Fortunately for him his efforts came to nothing. There is a curious irony here. Sartre’s personal philosophy, what was soon to be called existentialism, was already shaping his mind. In essence it was a philosophy of action, arguing that man’s character and significance are determined by his actions, not his views, by his deeds, not words. The Nazi occupation aroused all Sartre’s anti-

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authoritarian instincts. He wanted to fight it. If he had followed his philosophical maxims, he would have done so by blowing up troop trains or shooting members of the SS.

But that is not in fact what he did. He talked. He wrote. He was Resistance-minded in theory, mind and spirit, but not in fact. He helped to form a clandestine group, Socialism and Freedom, which held meetings and debated. One member, Jean Pouillon, put it thus: "We were not an organized Resistance group, just a bunch of friends who had decided to be anti-Nazis together and to communicate our convictions to others." Others, non-members, were more critical. George Chazelas, who opted for the Communist Party, said: "They struck me from the very beginning as fairly childish: they were never aware, for instance, of the extent that their prattle jeopardized the work of others."

Sartre, then, did nothing of consequence for the Resistance. He did not lift a finger, or write a word, to save the Jews. He concentrated relentlessly on promoting his own career. He wrote furiously, plays, philosophy, and novels, mainly in cafés.

His association with St.-Germain-des-Prés, soon to become world-famous, was in origin quite fortuitous. His major philosophy text, *L'Être et le Néant (Being and Nothingness)*, which sets out the principles of Sartrean activism most comprehensively, was composed mainly in the winter of 1942-43, which was very cold. Monsieur Boubal, proprietor of the Café Flore on the Boulevard St. Germain, was unusually resourceful at obtaining coal for heating and tobacco for smoking. So Sartre wrote there, every day, sitting in an ugly, ill-fitting but warm artificial fur coat, colored bright orange, which he had somehow obtained. He would drink down a glass of milky tea, set out his inkpot and pen, then scribble relentlessly for four hours, scarcely lifting his eyes from the paper, "a little ball of fur and ink." Simone de Beauvoir, who described him thus, noted that he was enslaving the tract, which was eventually 722 pages, with "spicy passages." One "concerns holes in general and the other focuses on the anus and love-making Italian style." It was published in June 1943, Its success was slow in coming but it was sure and cumulative.

It was through the theater, however, that Sartre established himself as a major figure. His play *Les Mouches (The Flies)* opened the same month *L'Être* came out and at first sold comparatively few tickets. But it attracted attention and consolidated Sartre's rising reputation. He was soon in demand for screenplays for Pathé, writing three of them (including *Les Jeux sont faits [The Chips Are Down]*) and making, for the first time, a good deal of money.

On May 27, 1944, just a few days before the Allied D-Day landing in Normandy, his play *Huis-clos (No Exit)* opened at the Vieux Colombier. This brilliant work, in which three people meet in a drawing room which turns out to be an ante-chamber to hell, operated at two levels. At one level it was a comment on character, with the message "Hell is other people." At another it was a popular presentation of *L'Être et le Néant*, given a flashy Gallic gloss and a contemporary relevance and presenting a message of activism and concealed defiance. It was the kind of thing at which the French have always been outstandingly gifted—taking a German idea and making it fashionable with superb timing. The play was a huge success both with the critics and the public, and has been well described as "the cultural event which inaugurated the golden age of St.-Germain-des-Prés."

*Huis-clos* made Sartre famous. But, oddly enough, it was through the old-fashioned form of the public lecture that Sartre became world-famous, indeed notorious, a *monstre sacré*. Within a year of the play's opening, France was at peace. Everyone, especially youth, was catching up greedily on the lost cultural years and searching for the post-war elixir of truth. The Communists and the new-born Catholic Social Democrats (MRP) were fighting a battle for supremacy on the campus. Sartre used his new philosophy to offer an alternative: not a church or a party but a challenging doctrine of individualism in which each human being is seen as absolute master of his soul if he chooses to follow the path of action and courage. It was a message of liberty after the totalitarian nightmare.

Sartre had already established his drawing power as a lecturer by a successful se-

ries on "The Social Techniques of the Novel" which he had given in the rue St. Jacques in Autumn 1944. Then he had merely hinted at some of his notions. A year later, with France free and agog with intellectual stimulation, he announced a public lecture in the Salle des Centraux for October 29, 1945. The word "existentialism" was not his. It seems to have been invented by the press. The previous August, when asked to define the term, Sartre had replied: "Existentialism? I don't know what it is. My philosophy is a philosophy of existence." Now he decided to embrace what the media had coined, and entitled his lecture: "Existentialism is a Humanism."

Nothing is so powerful, Victor Hugo had laid down, as an idea whose time has come. Sartre's time had come in two distinct ways. He was preaching freedom to people who were hungry and waiting for it. But it was not an easy freedom.

"Existentialism," said Sartre, "defines man by his actions.... It tells him that hope lies only in action, and that the only thing that allows man to live is action." So, "Man commits himself to his life, and thereby draws his image, beyond which there is nothing." The new European of 1945, Sartre said, was the new, existentialist individual—"alone, without excuses. This is what I mean when I say we are condemned to be free." So Sartre's new, existentialist freedom was immensely attractive to a disillusioned generation: lonely, austere, noble, slightly aggressive, not to say violent, and anti-elitist, popular—no one was excluded. Anyone, but especially the young, could be an existentialist.

Secondly, Sartre was presiding over one of those great, periodic revolutions in intellectual fashion. Between the wars, sickened by the doctrinaire excesses of the long battle over Dreyfus and the Flanders carnage, the French intelligentsia had cultivated the virtues of detachment. The tone had been set by Julien Benda, whose immensely successful book *La Trahison des clercs* (*The Treason of the Intellectuals*) (1927) had exhorted intellectuals to avoid "commitment" to creed and party and cause, to concentrate on abstract principles and keep out of the political arena. One of the many who had heeded Benda had been precisely Sartre himself. Up to 1941 nobody

could have been less committed. But now, just as he had tested the atmosphere with his hot air balloons, he sniffed a different breeze. He and his friends had put together a new review, *Les Temps modernes* (*Modern Times*), with Sartre as editor-in-chief. The first issue, containing his editorial manifesto, had appeared in September. It was an imperious demand that writers become committed again.

Even though the lecture had not been widely advertised, the word-of-mouth build-up was evidently tremendous. When Sartre arrived near the hall at 8:30 the mob in the street outside was so big he feared it was an organized CP demonstration. It was in fact people frantically trying to get in, and as the hall was already packed, only celebrities were allowed to pass through. His friends had to force an entrance for Sartre himself. Inside, women fainted, chairs were smashed. The proceedings began an hour late. What Sartre had to say was in all essentials a technical academic philosophy lecture. But in the circumstances it became the first great post-war media event.

Sartre's press coverage was astounding. Many newspapers produced thousands of words of Sartre's text, despite the paper shortage. Both what he had to say, and the way he said it, were passionately denounced. The Catholic daily *La Croix* called existentialism "a graver danger than 18th-century rationalism or 19th-century positivism," and joined hands with the Communist *L'Humanité* in calling Sartre an enemy of society. In due course Sartre's entire works were placed upon the Vatican Index of Prohibited Books, and Stalin's cultural commissar, Alexander Fadayev, called him "a jackal with a typewriter, a hyena with a fountain-pen." All these attacks merely accelerated Sartre's juggernaut. He was by now, like so many leading intellectuals before him, an expert in the art of self-promotion. What he would not do himself his followers did for him. *Samedi Soir* (*Saturday Evening*) commented sourly: "We have not seen such a promotional triumph since the days of Barnum."

Existentialism was not just a philosophy to be read, it was a craze to be enjoyed. An *Existentialist Catechism* insisted: "Existentialism, like faith, cannot be explained: it

can only be lived." Sartre was a convivial soul, fond of whiskey, jazz, girls, and cabaret. When not seen at the Flore or at the Deux Magots, a block away, or eating at the Brasserie Lipp across the road, he was in the new cellar nightclubs or *caves* which now abruptly opened in the bowels of the Quartier Latin. At 42 rue Bonaparte, Sartre lived in a flat which overlooked the church of St. Germain-des-Prés itself and the Deux Magots. (His mother lived there too and continued to do his laundry.) The movement even had its daily house organ, the newspaper *Combat*, edited by Albert Camus, whose best-selling novels were widely hailed as existentialist. Sartre worked all day, scribbling hard, but at night he played, and by the end of the evening he was usually drunk and often aggressive.

But if Sartre were king, who was queen? And if he was the young people's spiritual leader, where was he leading them?

These are two separate, though linked, questions, which need to be examined in turn. By the winter of 1945-46, when he became a European celebrity, he had been associated with Simone de Beauvoir for nearly two decades. De Beauvoir was a Montparnasse girl actually born in an apartment over the famous Café de la Rotonde. She had a difficult childhood, coming from a family ruined by a disgraceful bankruptcy. She took refuge in schoolwork, becoming a bluestocking, though a remarkably elegant one. At the University of Paris she was an outstanding philosophy student and was taken up by Sartre and his circle: "From now on," he told her, "I'm going to take you under my wing." That remained in a sense true, though for her their relationship was a mixed blessing. She was an inch taller than Sartre, three years younger and, in strictly academic matters, abler. She, like Sartre, was also a compulsive writer and in many respects a finer one. Her major novel, *Les Mandarins* (*The Mandarins*), which describes the French post-war literary world and won her the Prix Goncourt, is far better than any of Sartre's fiction. In addition, she had none of Sartre's personal weaknesses, except lying.

Yet this brilliant and strong-minded woman became Sartre's slave from almost their first meeting and remained such for all her adult life until he died. She served

him as mistress, surrogate wife, cook and manager, female bodyguard and nurse, without at any time acquiring legal or financial status in his life. In the annals of literature, there are few worse cases of a man exploiting a woman. This was all the more extraordinary because de Beauvoir was a lifelong feminist. In 1949 she produced the first modern manifesto of feminism, *La Deuxième sexe* (*The Second Sex*), which sold widely all over the world. Its opening words, "One is not born a woman, one becomes one," are a conscious echo of the opening of Rousseau's *Social Contract*. De Beauvoir, in fact, was the progenitor of the feminist movement and ought, by rights, to be its patron saint. But in her own life she betrayed everything it stood for.

How Sartre established and maintained such a dominance over de Beauvoir is not clear. She could not make herself write honestly about their relationship. He never troubled to write anything about it. When they first met he was much better read than she was and able to distill his reading into conversational monologues she found irresistible. His control over her was plainly of an intellectual kind. It cannot have been sexual. She was his mistress for much of the 1930s but at some stage ceased to be so; from the 1940s she was there for him when no one better was available.

Sartre was the archetype of what in the 1960s became known as a male chauvinist. His aim was to recreate for himself in adult life the "paradise" of his early childhood in which he was the center of a perfumed bower of adoring womanhood.

When Sartre first seduced de Beauvoir he outlined to her his sexual philosophy. He was frank about his desire to sleep with many women. He said his credo was "Travel, polygamy, transparency." At university, a friend had noted that de Beauvoir's name was like the English word "beaver," which in French is *castor*. To Sartre, she was always *Castor* or *vous*, never *tu*. There are times when one feels he saw her as a superior trained animal. Of his policy of "asserting" his "freedom against women," he wrote: "The Castor accepted this freedom and kept it." He told her there were two kinds of sexuality: "necessary love" and "contingent love." The latter was

not important. Those on whom it was bestowed were "peripherals," holding his regard on no more than "a two-year lease." The love he had for her was of the permanent, "necessary" kind; she was a "central," not a "peripheral." Of course she was entirely free to pursue the same policy. She could have her peripherals so long as Sartre remained her central, necessary love. But both must display "transparency," which was just another word for sexual "openness."

The policy of transparency, as might have been expected, merely led in the end to additional and more squalid layers of concealment. De Beauvoir tried to practice it but the indifference with which Sartre greeted news of her affairs, most of which seem to have been tentative or half-hearted, clearly gave her pain.

Sartre also practiced transparency, but only up to a point. In letters he kept her informed about his new girls. Thus: "This is the first time I've slept with a brunette . . . full of smells, oddly hairy, with some black fur in the small of her back and a white body . . . A tongue like a kazoo, endlessly uncurling, reaching all the way down to my tonsils." No woman, however "central," can have wished to read such things about one of her rivals.

That the life they led went against the grain for her is clear. She was never able to bring herself to accept Sartre's mistresses with equanimity. She resented Marie Ville. She resented still more the next one, Olga Kosakiewicz. Olga was one of two sisters (the other, Wanda, also became a mistress of Sartre) and, to envenom matters, one of de Beauvoir's pupils. De Beauvoir disliked



*Sartre in the offices of the banned Maoist newspaper La Cause du Peuple, with film director Jean-Luc Godard (left) and Simone de Beauvoir in June, 1970. Sartre and other celebrities protested the arrest of its editors, but failed to gain their release.*

the affair with Olga so much that she put her into her novel, *L'Invitée* (*She Came to Stay*), and murdered her in it.

During the war de Beauvoir came closest to being Sartre's real wife: cooking, sewing, washing for him, looking after his money. But with the end of the war he suddenly found himself rich and surrounded by women, who were after his intellectual glamor as much as his money. The year 1946 was his best for sexual conquests and it marked the virtual end of his sexual relationship with de Beauvoir. "At a relatively early stage" as John Weightman has put it, "she tacitly accepted the role of senior, sexually-retired, pseudo-wife on the fringe of his fluctuating seraglio."

One reason de Beauvoir disliked Sartre's many young women was that she believed they encouraged him to lead a life of excess—not just sexual excesses but drink and drugs too. Between 1945 and 1955 Sartre got through a phenomenal amount of writing and other work, and to do this he steadily increased his intake of both alcohol and barbiturates. His biographer Annie Cohen-Solal says that he often drank a quart of wine over two-hour lunches at Lipp, the Coupole, Balzar or the other favorite haunts, and she calculates that his daily intake of stimulants at this time included two packets of cigarettes, several pipes of tobacco, a quart of alcohol (chiefly wine, vodka, whiskey, and beer), 200 milligrams of amphetamines, 15 grams of aspirin, several grams of barbiturates, plus coffee and tea. In fact de Beauvoir did not do the young mistresses justice. They all tried to reform Sartre, and Arlette, the youngest, tried hardest, even extracting a written promise from him that he would never again touch Corydrane, tobacco, or alcohol—a promise he promptly broke.

Thus surrounded by adoring, though often fractious, women, Sartre had little time for men in his life. He had a succession of male secretaries, some, like Jean Cau, of great ability. He was always surrounded by a crowd of young male intellectuals. But all these were dependent on him for wages, charity, or patronage. What he could never stomach for long were male intellectual equals, of his own age and seniority, who were liable at any moment to deflate his own often loose arguments. Nizan was

killed before a break could come, but he quarreled with all the rest: Raymond Aron (1947), Arthur Koestler (1948), Merleau-Ponty (1951), Camus (1952), to mention only the more prominent.

The quarrel with Camus was as bitter as Rousseau's rows with Diderot, or Tolstoy's with Turgenev—and, unlike the latter, there was no reconciliation. Sartre seems to have been jealous of Camus' good looks, which made him immensely attractive to women, and his sheer power and originality as a novelist: *La Peste* (*The Plague*), published in June 1947, had a mesmeric effect on the young and rapidly sold 350,000 copies. This was made the object of some ideological criticism in *Les Temps modernes* but the friendship continued in an uneasy fashion.

As Sartre moved towards the left, however, Camus became more of an independent. In a sense he occupied the same position as George Orwell in Britain: He set himself against all authoritarian systems and came to see Stalin as an evil man on the same plane as Hitler. Like Orwell and unlike Sartre, he consistently held that people were more important than ideas. De Beauvoir reports that in 1946 he confided to her: "What we have in common, you and I, is that individuals count most of all for us. We prefer the concrete to the abstract, people to doctrines. We place friendship above politics." In her heart of hearts de Beauvoir may have agreed with him, but when the final break came, over Camus' book *L'Homme révolté* (*The Rebel*) in 1951–52, she of course sided with Sartre's camp.

Sartre's inability to maintain a friendship with any man of his own intellectual stature helps to explain the inconsistency, incoherence, and, at times, sheer frivolity of his political views. The truth is he was not by nature a political animal. He really held no views of consequence before he was 40. Once he had parted with men like Koestler and Aron, both of whom had matured by the late 1940s into political heavyweights, he was capable of supporting anyone or anything. In 1946–47, very conscious of his immense prestige among the young, he dithered about which, if any, party to back. It seems to have been a belief of his that an intellectual had a kind of



moral duty to back "the workers." The trouble with Sartre is that he did not know, and made no effort to meet, any workers. Must one not, then, back the party most workers support? In France during the 1940s that meant the Communists. But Sartre was not a Marxist; indeed Marxism was almost the exact opposite of the individualistic philosophy he preached. All the same, even during the late 1940s he could not bring himself to condemn the Communist Party or Stalinism—one reason why he quarreled with Aron and Koestler.

Sartre's only positive move was to help organize an anti-Cold War movement of the non-conformist left, called the Rassemblement Démocratique Révolutionnaire, in February 1948. It aimed to recruit world intellectuals—he called it "The International of the Mind"—and its theme was continental unity. "European youth, unite!" proclaimed Sartre in a speech in June 1948. "Shape your own destiny! . . . By creating Europe, this new generation will create democracy." In fact, if Sartre had really wanted to play the European card and make history, he might have given support to Jean Monnet, who was then laying the foundations of the movement which would create the European Community ten years later. But that would have meant a great deal of attention to economic and administrative detail, something Sartre found impossible. François Mauriac, the great novelist and sardonic Catholic independent, gave Sartre some sensible public advice about this time, echoing the sneering words of Rousseau's dissatisfied girlfriend: "Our philosopher must listen to reason—give up politics, Zanetto, *e studia la mathematica!*"

Instead, Sartre took up the case of the homosexual thief Jean Genet, a cunning fraud who appealed strongly to the credulous side of Sartre's nature—the side which wanted some substitute for religious faith. He wrote an enormous and absurd book about Genet, nearly 700 pages long, which was really a celebration of antinomianism, anarchy, and sexual incoherence. This was the point, in the opinion of his more sensible friends, when Sartre ceased to be a serious, systematic thinker and became an intellectual sensationalist.

In 1952 Sartre resolved his dilemma

about the Communist Party and decided to back it. This was an emotional not a rational judgment, reached via involvement in two Communist Party agitprop campaigns: "L'affaire Henri Martin" (Martin was a naval rating who went to prison for refusing to participate in the Indo-China War), and the brutal suppression of riots organized by the Communist Party against the American NATO commander, General Matthew Ridgeway.

Some of the things Sartre did and said during the four years when he consistently backed the Communist Party line almost defy belief. In July 1954, after a visit to Russia, he gave a two-hour interview to a reporter from the fellow-travelling *Libération*. It ranks as the most grovelling account of the Soviet state by a major Western intellectual since the notorious expedition by George Bernard Shaw during the early 1930s. He said that Soviet citizens did not travel not because they were prevented but because they had no desire to leave their marvelous country. "The Soviet citizens," he insisted, "criticize their government much more and more effectively than we do." Indeed, he maintained, "There is total freedom of criticism in the USSR." Many years later he admitted his mendacity.

By the latter date Sartre's public reputation, both in France and in the wider world, was very low, and he could not avoid perceiving it. He fell upon the Soviet invasion of Hungary with relief as a reason, or at any rate an excuse, for breaking with Moscow and the Communist Party. Equally, he took up the burgeoning Algerian War—especially after de Gaulle's return to power in 1958 supplied a convenient hate-figure—as a reputable good cause to win back his prestige among the independent left and especially the young. To some extent this maneuver was genuine. To a limited degree it succeeded. Sartre had a "good" Algerian War, as he had had a "good" Second World War.

Much of Sartre's time in the 1960s was spent travelling in China and the Third World, a term invented by the geographer Alfred Sauvy in 1952 but which Sartre popularized. He and de Beauvoir became familiar figures, photographed chatting with various Afro-Asian dictators—he in his First World suits and shirts, she in her school-

marm cardigans enlivened by "ethnic" skirts and scarves. What Sartre said about the regimes which invited him made not much more sense than his accolades for Stalin's Russia, but it was more acceptable. Of Castro: "The country which has emerged out of the Cuban revolution is a direct democracy." Of Tito's Yugoslavia: "It is the realization of my philosophy."

Nevertheless, there was a more sinister side to the advice Sartre proffered to his admirers in the Third World. Though not a man of action himself—it was one of Camus's more hurtful gibes that Sartre "tried to make history from his armchair"—he was always encouraging action in others, and action usually meant violence. He became a patron of Frantz Fanon, the African ideologue who might be called the founder of modern black African racism, and wrote a preface to his Bible of violence, *Les Damnés de la terre* (*The Wretched of the Earth*) (1961), which is even more blood-thirsty than the text itself. It was Sartre who invented the verbal technique (culled from German philosophy) of identifying the existing order as "violent" (e.g., "institutionalized violence"), thus justifying killing to overthrow it. Since Sartre's writings were very widely disseminated, especially among the young, he became the academic godfather to many terrorist movements which began to oppress society from the late 1960s onwards.

His influence on South-East Asia, where the Vietnam War was drawing to a close, was even more baneful. The hideous crimes committed in Cambodia from April 1975 onwards, which involved the deaths of between a fifth and a third of the population, were organized by Pol Pot's group of Francophone middle-class intellectuals known as the Angka Leu ("the Higher Organization"). Of its eight leaders, five were teachers, one a university professor, one a civil servant, and one an economist. All had studied in France during the 1950s, where they had not only belonged to the Communist Party but had absorbed Sartre's doctrines of philosophical activism and "necessary violence." These mass murderers were his ideological children.

Sartre's own actions, in the last 15 years of his life, did not add up to much. In 1968 he took the side of the students, as he had

done from his first days as a teacher. In an interview on Radio Luxembourg he saluted the student barricades: "Violence is the only thing remaining to the students who have not yet entered into their fathers' system . . . . For the moment the only anti-Establishment force in our flabby Western Countries is represented by the students . . . it is up to the students to decide what form their fight should assume. We can't even presume to advise them on this matter." This was an odd statement from a man who had spent 30 years advising young people what to do.

But Sartre's heart was not in these antics of 1968. It was his young courtiers who pushed him into taking an active role. When he appeared on 20 May in the amphitheater of the Sorbonne to address the students, he seemed an old man, confused by the bright lights and smoke and being called "Jean-Paul," something his acolytes had never dared to do. His remarks did not make much sense, ending: "I'm going to leave you now. I'm tired. If I don't go now, I'll end by saying a lot of idiotic things." At his last appearance before the students, February 10, 1969, he was disconcerted to be handed, just before he began to orate, a rude note from the student leadership which read: "Sartre, be clear, be brief. We have a lot of regulations we need to discuss and adopt." That was not advice he had ever been accustomed to receive, or was capable of following.

Sartre's interest in student revolution lasted less than a year. It was succeeded by an equally brief, but more bizarre attempt to identify himself with "the workers," those mysterious but idealized beings about whom he wrote so much but who had eluded him throughout his life.

For the man who failed in action, who had indeed never been an activist in any real sense, there were always "the words." It was appropriate that he called his slice of autobiography by this title. He gave as his motto *Nulla dies sine linea*, "Not a day without writing." That was one pledge he kept. He produced up to 10,000 words a day; a lot of it was of poor quality, high-sounding but lacking in muscular content. But as he admitted to de Beauvoir, "I have almost always considered quantity a virtue."

He also talked, at times interminably. This verbal diarrhea eventually destroyed his magic as a lecturer. When his disastrous book on dialectic appeared, Jean Wahl nonetheless invited him to give a lecture on it at the Collège de Philosophie. Sartre started at six P.M., reading from a manuscript taken from a huge folder, in a mechanical, hurried tone of voice. He never raised his eyes from the text. He appeared to be completely absorbed in his own writing. After an hour, the audience was restless. The hall was packed and some had to stand. After an hour and three quarters, the audience was exhausted and some were lying on the floor. Sartre appeared to have forgotten they were there. In the end Wahl had to signal to Sartre to stop. Sartre picked up his papers and walked out without a word.

But there was always the court to listen to him. Gradually, as Sartre got older, there were fewer courtiers. In the late 1940s and early 1950s he made prodigious sums of money. But he spent it just as quickly. He had always been careless about money. As a boy, whenever he wanted any, he simply took it from his mother's purse. As a schoolteacher he and de Beauvoir borrowed (and lent) freely: "We borrowed from everybody," she admitted. He said: "Money has a sort of perishability that I like. I love to see it slip through my fingers and vanish." This carelessness had its agreeable side. Unlike many intellectuals, and especially famous ones, Sartre was genuinely generous about money. As a result he ran up huge debts with his publishers and faced horrifying income-tax demands for back payments. His mother secretly paid his taxes but her resources were not limitless and by the end of the 1950s Sartre was in deep financial trouble, from which

he never really extricated himself.

In the 1970s Sartre was an increasingly pathetic figure, prematurely aged, virtually blind, often drunk, worried about money, uncertain about his views. His last years were described by de Beauvoir in her little book, *Adieux: A Farewell to Sartre*: his incontinence, his drunkenness, made possible by girls slipping him bottles of whiskey, the struggle for power over what was left of his mind. It must have been a relief to them all when he died, in Broussais Hospital, on April 15, 1980. In 1965 he had secretly adopted Arlette Elkaim, one of his last girlfriends, as his daughter. So she inherited everything, including his literary property, and presided over the posthumous publication of his manuscripts. For de Beauvoir it was the final betrayal: the "center" eclipsed by one of the "peripheries." She survived him five years, a Queen Mother of the French intellectual left. But there were no children, no heirs.

Indeed no body of doctrine survived Sartre. In the end he stood for nothing more than a vague desire to belong to the left and the camp of youth. The intellectual decline of Sartre, who after all at one time did seem to be identified with a striking, if confused, philosophy of life, was particularly spectacular. But there is always a large section of the educated public which demands intellectual leaders, however unsatisfactory. Fittingly, he was given a magnificent funeral by intellectual Paris. Over 50,000 people, most of them young, followed his body into Montparnasse Cemetery. To get a better view, some climbed into the trees. One of them came crashing down into the coffin itself. To what cause had they come to do honor? What faith, what luminous truth about humanity, were they asserting by their mass presence? We may well ask.

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