

right and his admiration for Mussolini. In any case, the 20th-century writers he cited with the greatest esteem were for the most part of a younger generation and more respectable from the standpoint of social science.

Among sociologists there was Max Weber, among anthropologists Claude Lévi-Strauss, and along with them a distinguished roster of French historians including Georges Lefebvre, Marc Bloch, and Fernand Braudel. Such were the contemporary students of human society in whose work Sartre found anticipations or reflections of his own concerns. But his references to them were confined to a passing comment or an unnecessarily lengthy paraphrase; they failed to establish any intrinsic connection between 20th century social science as its most perceptive practitioners had understood it and the venture on which Sartre himself was embarked. These bows to contemporary scholarship figured as highly un-Sartrean endeavors to legitimize his *Critique*—to prove that it had an impeccable pedigree. At their worst, they were simply dragged in; at their best, they indicated that Sartre was participating in the generalized French experience of catching up with social study abroad (and with the progress of historical writing in France itself). But Sartre never satisfactorily integrated the new material with his personal synthesis of Marx and Descartes.

Even this latter was tenuous in the extreme. Sartre's marriage of Marxism to his earlier philosophy entailed a number of sacrifices. As Wilfred Desan has pointed out, it meant tacitly abandoning his former distinction between the for-itself and being-in-itself; it implied a denigration of the contemplative life in favor of revolutionary action; and it made impossible the writing of the work on ethics he had earlier announced—since the claims of *praxis* now overrode everything else. If Frenchmen of the generation preceding Sartre's had lived with too good a conscience to question their own values, in his case the process had been the reverse: he had become so obsessed with the concept of "bad faith," he had delivered himself over so totally to his conviction that he, like every other bourgeois intellectual, was ultimately at fault, that in the end he found no norm to live by beyond a desperate commitment to the cause of the oppressed—a commitment which left little scope for intellectual nuances. And by the same emotional imperative Sartre had been driven to compose a whole bulky treatise to rationalize his choice.

IN THE END the *Critique* boiled down to what George Lichtheim has called a "complicated way of talking about phenomena with which historians and sociologists" were "perfectly familiar." It was neither Marxism nor social science—nor did it offer the prolegomena to a new understanding of man. Both amateurish

and old-fashioned, it closed rather than inaugurated a major phase in French intellectual history.

If this is the case—if Sartre's greatest ideological effort can be written off as a pretentious failure—it may seem pointless to spend so much time on him. Such is the conclusion of most Anglo-American commentators, who are quite ready to dismiss Sartre with a few patronizing references to a confused mind. But to do so is to miss the point entirely—at least to the historian of ideas. For Sartre has in no sense a second-rate intellect. His interests are as wide as those of any man of his era; he has written successfully in at least four different genres—the novel, the drama, the essay, and formal philosophy; with a different temperament he could have become a French Goethe. The point, rather, is to ask what there was in his emotional constitution and his relationship to society that made a man of such extraordinary gifts take the road he did.

At the start one needs to insist—again with Anglo-American detractors in mind—that there was nothing base or self-interested about Sartre's alignment with communism. It brought him little credit and much abuse. The only tangible benefit he derived from it was the pleasure of being royally entertained in Moscow or Havana or Peking. In return he received an unending stream of calumny, sarcasm, and distortion of his thought—not all of which came from the political right. When the 1950's opened and Sartre set out on his ideological adventures, he was just entering middle life and his fame was securely established; his subsequent forays abroad only damaged the reputation he had already won.

The conclusion seems inescapable: Sartre's relation to communism and revolution was inspired by an inner need for atonement—a need to take upon himself the sins of the French bourgeoisie. Whether one chooses to call this attitude heroic or masochistic is immaterial: the evidence of self-punishment remains. The agonies he underwent in composing his *Critique of Dialectical Reason* may stand for all the rest. And even when he was not writing "against himself," Sartre behaved as a man driven by an inner compulsion towards words: he wryly admitted that he went on working at a furious pace decades after he had lost all conscious sense that anyone was ordering him to do so. If Sartre attacked so savagely the crypto-Puritanism of the traditional French bourgeois, it was certainly in part because he knew (and detested) the tyranny of such sentiments in his own heart.

Eventually the words themselves became vehicles of his moral asceticism. In the mid-1950's, Sartre's literary efforts bifurcated. After a struggle with his conscience which the recollections of his associates leave obscure, he evidently determined that literature—in the sense of style

and composition—was no longer so important as he had once thought. In effect, he chose to sacrifice his position as a writer to what he regarded as his role in history. Hence the careless, utilitarian cast of his later writings; hence the crabbed style of his *Critique*. But at the same time—and most fortunately for posterity—he kept intact a corner of his literary pasture, which he tended rather more carefully than he had before. If he now devoted the bulk of his writing to polemical ends, he preserved a smaller segment of it as the domain of that “pure” literature which had originally started him on his way. It was to the second category that his autobiography of childhood, *The Words*, belonged—in the sense of craftsmanship as fine a work as he had ever composed.

This little book, published just four years after the *Critique*, seemed to take back or refute much that his Marxian treatise had asserted. After speaking with bemused irony of his “idealist” phase as a “long, bitter-sweet madness” from which he had recovered a decade before, Sartre went on to question the ideological commitment that had succeeded it. His pen, he now recognized, was not really a sword; he was well aware that intellectuals like himself were powerless; he no longer quite knew what to do with his life. But he was resolved to go on writing. It was, after all, his *métier*: there was no other way in which he was equipped to live.

IT IS POSSIBLY UNFAIR to judge an author by the moment of self-abandonment in which he delivers himself over to the mercy of his readers. But in Sartre’s case, as in that of so many others, we have no more direct evidence available. Perhaps we can put the matter most charitably by suggesting that the whole ideological phase of Sartre’s life—the *Critique* and all the rest—was based on a fundamental skepticism to which the autobiography finally gave expression. As a young man Sartre had thought in terms of the absolute: that had vanished with his idealist style of thinking, and no corresponding imperative had taken its place. There had come instead a more particularist and down-to-earth conviction that even in the absence of any fixed ethical norm, “innumerable tasks” remained to be performed. Alternatively—this time in terms of Sartre’s self-definition—he had once thought of himself as a very special kind of person: a mandarin by hereditary right.

Now he was cured of that illusion: he was ready to take his place in the ranks of mankind along with other men. But the only way in which he could serve his fellows was by writing in their behalf; and so he would continue to write—and in the fashion that had become habitual to him, in the tone of a peremptory summons to duty.

Thus as Sartre’s younger friend Francis Jeanson said,

absolutist thinking went out by the door and came in again through the window. The result, while illogical, had an undeniable dignity and even charm. Sartre meant quite literally what he had said in his lecture on existentialist ethics two decades before—that he (in common with everyone else) bore a responsibility for all his fellow men. However suspect the emotional origins of so cosmic a sense of responsibility—however it might lend itself to the urbane mockery of his educated countrymen—this sense was the legitimate heir of that aspiration to universal values that had long been the characteristic mark of the French intellectual. In expressing it Sartre aligned himself with the tradition of the great *moralistes*; he took his place in the lineage of French classicism. Yet he did so with a difference which to him was capital: Sartre thought of the universalism he espoused as something quite new, as an articulation of the longings of the non-European world, only very lately released from the domination of Westerners like himself.

Herein lay the pathos of Sartre’s position. For all the generosity of his gestures to the world overseas, he himself remained incorrigibly Cartesian-French. The very manner in which he espoused the cause of the oppressed in Asia or Africa or Latin America betrayed him to be an old-style European intellectual, perhaps the last truly great one that the 20th century was to see. At bottom he belonged with the ideologists of the previous century—although he angrily rejected the identification—pronouncing as an amateur on the variegated subjects his restless mind encountered. In the later phases of his intellectual endeavors, Sartre succeeded in illuminating no significant facet of human society; his “search for a method” ran into the sands. Sartre’s striving toward universalism had the opposite of the effect he had desired: his impassioned revolutionary rhetoric, far from opening up new vistas, cut him off from the main stream of contemporary social thought.

Sartre’s analysis of ethical ambiguity had liberated a whole intellectual generation from facile moralizing. Yet after the mid-1950’s Sartre “brutalized” his own thought to the point of caricature. He turned it to ends that were far removed from disinterested inquiry. The fact that the most powerful and original among the French thinkers of the mid-century chose to pursue so eccentric a course could not fail to retard the efforts of his countrymen to break out of their self-imposed confinement.

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