

INTERPRETATION

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SARTRE AND THE DECADENTS

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At the turn of the century in France there was a group of writers who called themselves Decadents and whose locus classicus was Joris-Karl Huysmans' *A Rebours*, or *Against Nature*, although this paper refers to the work of other members of the group. Their lives and work were characterized by a disgust for the modern world and an immersion in art. They espoused a vague religiosity rather than faith; that is, they adored the ritual and artifacts of the Church. They viewed love as impossible and human relations as perverse and brutal. Violence, sadism, and satanism fascinated them. Moral judgment gave way to aesthetic judgment: things were good in proportion as they excited the senses.* As a result of their pessimism about human nature and social progress, and especially their thirst for sensation, they were attracted to extremist politics. What might be called their aesthetic view of life surrounded the strong man with a halo of glamour and their senses were piqued by violent methods and aims. These were a welcome means of surmounting the boredom of bourgeois routine and the capitalist mercantile orientation of the Republic. Virtually all the Decadents were integral nationalists, that is, Catholic, monarchist, and corporatist not out of conviction but merely because these were traditionally French. Their chief spokesman was Charles Maurras, leader of the ultra-right Action Française. The thing to be stressed about the Action Française, however, is not that it was "right wing" but that it was totalitarian and extreme, and indeed the distinction between the extremes of "left" and "right" is moot.

It has been said that Decadence died at the beginning of the twentieth century, but I think it can be shown that the aesthetics of *ennui* had, paradoxically, so much vitality that it has left its mark on French intellectual life to this day.

Jean-Paul Sartre alone among French Existentialists has used Decadent images to illustrate his philosophical categories, and he alone has transposed these into a considerable body of fiction. Moreover, he alone has advocated political positions consistent with Decadence, and acquired a reputation as something of a political sage.

It might seem paradoxical to call Sartre Decadent, and certainly he is not entirely described by that label. But once you look at his philo-

* This is the substance of Nietzsche's attack on Wagner as decadent. See *Contra Wagner*.

sophical and literary strategies (in this case strategies is the word), elements of Decadence become obvious. His literature is a dramatization of his philosophy, and also an expression of frustration in his various attempts at political activism.

Near the end of his first novel, *La Nausée*, Sartre (Roquentin) discovers that the nausea from which he has been suffering is not a metaphysical condition, nor has it ever been a physiological one. It is consciousness itself, the condition of being-in-the-world: "it is me."

This revelation comes to Roquentin as he contemplates the repulsive gnarled roots of a chestnut tree, an "être-en-soi," apart from any meaning or utility. All appearances melt, "leaving soft, monstrous masses, in disorder—naked, with a frightening, obscene nakedness."¹ Existence has a given superabundance about it; anything that exists has to "exist to that extent," to the point of "mildew, blisters, obscenity."² Obviously one need not view existence in this light. Where some centuries ago, a poet like Spenser saw in nature's profusion a hint of God's love, as though he knew so many wonderful things to create he couldn't stop, Sartre sees a pointless redundancy, like the efforts of an insect fallen on its back to right itself: "generosity, far from it. It (existence) was dismal, sickly, encumbered by itself."³ The only connection that Roquentin can find among separate existents is superfluity. Everything is superfluous, unnecessary, including himself. This too is a condition of being. "I dreamed vaguely of killing myself, to destroy at least one of these superfluous existences. But my death itself would have been superfluous. Superfluous, my corpse, my blood on these pebbles. . . . And the decomposed flesh would have been superfluous in the earth which would have received it, and my bones, finally, cleaned, stripped, neat and clean as teeth, would also have been superfluous; I was superfluous for all time."⁴ This morbid reflection demonstrates that reasons, explanations, causes have nothing to do with the world of existence. That world is absurd. Any given being-in-itself, by which Sartre means the world of phenomena or matter, is inexplicable, absurd, *visqueux*, a word that is usually translated as *viscous*, but in Sartre's ontology is something close to slimy. In *Being and Nothingness* there is an entire section devoted to the slimy. The root as well as each of its qualities flowed, "half-solidified," eluded one's hands if one grasped at it and could not be shaken off if one seized it. It was resistant, with a passive aggression amounting to hostility. The blackness of the root seemed black but also seemed like "a bruise or again a secretion, a yoll. . . ." Qualities are sticky, oozy wounds, an "ignoble jelly" that Roquentin hates, that makes him furious, that he cannot shake off.

Superfluity and contingency are absolute. The awareness of this fundamental fact about being in the world is nausea: "it turns your stomach

over." This is what the "Bastards" (Sartre's word for the bourgeoisie, equivalent to Barrès' *barbares*) try to hide beneath their self-complacency and their sense of their rights, and this deception is what Sartre elsewhere calls "bad faith." They have no rights, these being purely contingent, and the bourgeois perfectly superfluous like everyone else.

After giving up all hope of "transcendence" through love over the horror and absurdity of being, or through writing biography (the record of an existence), Roquentin resigns himself to the "deep, deep boredom, the deep heart of existence, the very matter I am made of,"⁵ the Decadent ennui. Then follows a long reflection on the Bastards, the idiots, *them*: the bourgeoisie and their smug conviction that the world is governed by gravity, timetables, and other reliable laws. But

What if something were to happen? What if all of a sudden it (being or nature) started palpitating? That may happen at any time, straightaway perhaps: the omens are there. For example, the father of a family may go for a walk, and he will see a red rag coming towards him across the street, as if the wind were blowing it. And when the rag gets close to him he will see that it is a quarter of rotten meat, covered with dust, crawling and hopping along, a piece of tortured flesh rolling in the gutters and spasmodically shooting out jets of blood. Or else a mother may look at her child's cheek and ask him: "What's that—a pimple?" And she will see the flesh puff up slightly, crack and split open, and at the bottom of the split a third eye, a laughing eye, will appear. Or else they will feel something gently brushing against their bodies, like the caresses reeds give swimmers in a river. And they will realize that their clothes have become living things. And somebody else will feel something scratching inside his mouth. And he will go to a mirror, open his mouth: and his tongue will have become a huge living centipede, rubbing its legs together and scraping its palate. He will try to spit it out, but the centipede will be part of himself and he will have to tear it out with his hands.⁶

We know from Simone de Beauvoir's memoirs⁷ that Roquentin is here expressing Sartre's own sense of the radical contingency of phenomena; as though Hume's proposition that causal laws have no demonstrable necessity were illustrated by some of the more gruesome visions of medieval Last Judgments or the nightmare suspensions of normative nature depicted by Huysmans' favorite *fin de siècle* painters, Félicien Rops or Odilon Redon. In both Huysman and Sartre we find the "deep, deep boredom" at the heart of existence compensated, avenged, by an obsessive ecstatic concentration upon physical horror. In Sartre's case it is placed at the service of his ontological constructions. But an insistent question arises: is this a genuine ontological intuition? If so, why are the terms *salauds*, bastards, reserved exclusively for the bourgeois? Certainly the contingency

and absurdity of existence, the sheer horror of being, cannot be posited as descriptive of all life and at the same time the property of the middle class alone. Sartre would reply that they are more guilty of Bad Faith, of shielding themselves from the truth about the human condition, than any other class. But surely his excursions into psychoanalysis have taught him enough about the human psyche to know that his reply would itself be an act of Bad Faith. The habit of referring our concepts of the world to the world in which we live *because* we live in it in a certain way is not a class phenomenon. Roquentin himself, intellectual and writer, violent hater of all things bourgeois, stands aloof and rejects this habit only after sustaining the experiential trauma symbolized by the root. But Sartre ascribes to the bourgeoisie every possible philosophical error despite his insistence that nausea is a human and not a bourgeois affliction, and this is where his Marxist and later more extreme views creep in and taint and largely vitiate his philosophy. What his shocking meditation suggests is that his gruesome images are projections of his own psychic states onto the world, elevated to ontological categories, then saturated with his politics.

Art as an escape from the brutalities of living is, as we have seen, not a new idea in French literature. Not surprisingly, both Huysmans and Sartre fulminate against the "Americanization" of French art and society. Huysmans in many of his works equates "American" with vulgar, commercial, bourgeois, democratic; Sartre's anti-American sentiments are as virulent though more specifically political. "Opposition to the Atlantic Pact ought to be the chief criterion of a politics of the Left," he said in 1966, and "The world is not dominated by two great powers but by one, the United States."⁸ He stood mute before Stalinist outrages because to protest would be to serve the ends of American imperialism. It is only in 1976, in an age of détente, that he can protest against injustice in the Soviet Union. How to escape this Americanization, this *embourgeoisement*? Huysmans retreats into the historical past of French art; and after Roquentin accepts the full burden of the anguish of being, after he gives up all hope of transcendence through commitment to another person, he decides to write a novel. Predictably, this decision is based on a concrete experience (hearing a recording) and then cast into philosophical categories. He goes to a cafe where he often hears a favorite record of a Negress singing "Some of These Days." On this last occasion he realizes that the record is worn, but the *song* is intact and can never be worn.

. . . behind the existence which falls from one present to the next, without a past, without a future, behind these sounds which decompose from day to day, peel away and slip toward death, the melody stays the same, young and firm, like a pitiless witness.⁹

Sartre records in his autobiography that at the age of nine or so “When I took up a book, I could see that though I opened it and shut it twenty times, it did not deteriorate. Gliding over that incorruptible substance, the *text*, my gaze was merely a tiny, surface accident.”¹⁰ So art alone is not contingent, not superfluous: it alone enjoys an ontological status beyond existence, above reality. It promises salvation, like Wagner’s music. It is true that in *What is Literature?*¹¹ Sartre argues that the writer must be engagé; but he never disavowed the redemptive vision of art in the final pages of *La Nausée*, so that either the contradiction does not trouble him, or he distinguishes two kinds of art: imaginative art which occupies a privileged realm of reality, and art as utility, as descriptive of the reality we live as transient existences.

She sings. That makes two people who are saved: the Jew
(the songwriter) and the Negress. Saved.

One wonders whether Sartre realizes that his aesthetic vision has its affinities, at least in part, with the *fin-de-siècle* Decadents who share his confidence in salvation through art. And though they all use the language of theology, they all mean escape by means of art from the horror and banality of bourgeois existence into a more congenial and enclosed world, not art as the Way back to God. Roquentin is going to write a novel: “Then, perhaps because of it, I could remember my life without repugnance.” These words cannot fail to call up the pathetic plea of Huysmans’ hyperaesthetic hero: “Lord, give me the strength to contemplate my life without disgust.” In earlier sections of *La Nausée* Sartre has anticipated in idealist terms the vision of deliverance through art:

In another world, circles and melodies kept their pure and rigid lines. But existence is a curve.

A circle is not absurd, it is clearly explicable by the rotation of a segment of a straight line around one of its extremities. But a circle doesn’t exist, either. That root, on the other hand .

. melodies alone can proudly carry their own death within them like an internal necessity; only they don’t exist. Every existent is born without reason. prolongs itself out of weakness and dies by chance.¹²

“This is hell, nor am I ever out of it,” says Mephistopheles; but his description is confined to the corrupted will as distinct from any physical space, and implies the alternative—grace. Sartre takes social being itself

as the condition of being-in-hell, and predicates it for all persons inevitably: "L'enfer, c'est les autres;" it is thus also every social space. This most famous of Sartre's lines from his play *No Exit* is a dramatization of Part III of *Being and Nothingness*; there it is clear that he means not merely that some people hurt or inhibit each other, but that all human relations, as Barrès had argued, are necessarily antagonistic and that the most ordinary bonds such as love, friendship, associations of people bound by mutual goals and inspiration, are illusions. (If Hell is *all* other people, the homosexual theme of *No Exit* would seem to be mere Decadent flourish.)

Part of being is being-for-others (*être-pour-autrui*); I acquire consciousness of self only when I achieve an awareness of existing for others, of being an object for *their* consciousness. Shame, jealousy, envy, gratitude, magnanimity, and a host of other states imply by their very nature that I am a structure of the Other's consciousness and he of mine. Furthermore, the mere presence of another person in a space in which I had been the center, in that all objects in that space had the meaning with which I endowed them, causes these to flee from me. The world hemorrhages. I must recognize that the Other endows these objects with meanings to which I can have no access. The Other is an encroachment, and I can reclaim my space only by reducing him to an object like the benches and trees in the park.*

But I must also recognize that this is impossible because he is not an object but a conscious being whose consciousness is busily trying to annihilate me and reduce me to an object. So we are hopelessly deadlocked, hostile and alien. This violent solipsism provides the basis for Sartre's psychology and his sociology. Given the impossibility of a shared space through endowment of common meanings upon objects, it is a wonder that Sartre can have a sociology at all. But he does, though one must ask again whether his view of human relations is a genuinely ontological intuition or a projection of his pessimism and morbidity onto the social world. His sociology is a restatement in his peculiar philosophic jargon of the dramatic point of *No Exit*: "Hell is other people."¹³

The sense that one exists as an object for an Other, Sartre illustrates with the famous example of the voyeur peeking through a keyhole. He is not conscious of himself but only of what he spies upon. But a footfall behind him causes him to become aware of himself as the object of the

* It is interesting to note that the Decadents were anti-Kantian because the notion of a moral law applicable to all offended their elitism, their sense of the uniqueness of the French "race." Sartre rejects Kant because of his claim that maturity has something to do with accepting others as equal agents in the Kingdom of Ends.

Other's perception that he is engaged in a shameful act: "I have my foundation outside myself; I am for myself only as I am an object for the Other." Curiously the term *shame* has no moral connotations here, only metaphysical implications. Shame arises because the voyeur has coalesced into an object: "I have acquired an identity I did not choose for myself,"¹⁴ and one that is wholly dependent on the Other. This entails a loss of freedom, in that the voyeur is no longer the agent or "foundation" of his own freedom, but has unknowingly transferred this foundation to the freedom of the perceiving Other. The denegration is not that of a moral being but of a metaphysical category. What strike one further is that the same metaphysical point can be inferred from any perceivable act, such as watering the plants or contributing to the Cancer Fund. But the Sartrian world rarely includes morally neutral or good concrete situations. It is typically a morbid and a lurid world. However, the most disturbing thing about this bit of psychology-cum-metaphysics is that it makes no difference what I do: I might be seen doing something admirable; the fact that I am perceived *at all* induces shame, a diminution of being (like Barbey's horror of being seen). This is doubtless untrue in the experience of anyone who has not totally assimilated Sartre's metaphysical formulations. His hopeless and depressing view of human relations would seriously constrict the emotional and psychic repertoire with which most of us live; yet if we claimed to be feeling cooperative or loving or secure, Sartre would accuse us of delusion and apply to us his nasty label "Bad Faith."

"Conflict is the original meaning of being-for-others."¹⁵ "While I attempt to free myself from the hold of the Other, the Other is trying to free himself from mine; while I seek to enslave the Other, the Other seeks to enslave me." Nowhere is this paradigm better illustrated than in the case of love. Each tries to capture the other's freedom, but in succeeding each fails because each one, in being deprived of his freedom by the other, has (by identity) become enslaved by the other. The result is perpetual, hopeless, foredoomed disillusion. Love can only resolve into masochism or sadism. The masochist seeks to become an object in his own consciousness, which is ultimately futile because it is an effort to alienate a freedom that must be present in the continuous choosing of masochism. On the subject of sadism, Sartre enlarges. If the lover succeeds in reducing the beloved to an object, his success must entail the free choice of the beloved and hence is not enslavement. But if the lover can make the other's freedom perfectly coextensive with his (or her) body, then the lover is "master of the situation"—and here Sartre gives the cliché a sinister tone. Through pain, through torture, the Other becomes nothing but "facticity," consciousness is then *nothing but* consciousness as body, over which the torturer has complete control. (For the Decadents, also,

sadistic “mastery” over the flesh of another was a source of fascination.) For Sartre, obscenity arises in the sadistic relation because obscenity is the loss of free control over one’s physical movements, which are now controlled from without and mechanically. The nude body of a dancer, in contrast, is not obscene but grace incarnate because its movements are willed from within and the flesh becomes invisible, indeed spiritualized. (This notion was anticipated by another modern Decadent, Céline.) Flesh can answer to lust only when it becomes “inert,” its movements wholly subject to external stimuli like Barrès’ Object. Obscenity then is the reduction of the body to a mere utilitarian commodity in the sadistic relation. But sadism is doomed because again the sadist requires that the victim freely choose to annihilate his own freedom, a paradox that renders sadism as futile as masochism. Like Barbey, Sartre feels that love is impossible, even its distortions are impossible. It is in this spirit, in the awareness that there is *no exit* from all the brutalities of love—“there are no privileged situations”¹⁶—that Roquentin and Anny give each other up. Roquentin, passing the time while waiting for Anny, leafs through a book about sadism called *The Doctor and His Whip*.

Sartre’s last novel, *Roads to Freedom*, is about numbers of people all casting desperately about, in the throes of perverse love, pointless sadism, or hate, or fanatic devotion to causes, or fastidiously detached, but all finally in quest of authenticity, of a self-awareness that accepts the anguish of full responsibility and full freedom in choosing how to be. Moreover the whole Decadent cast of characters is here. There is the androgynous Ivich, attracted to her brother’s mistress as well as to her brother himself; there is Daniel, a sadistic homosexual so guilty about his squalid behavior that he is constantly looking for ingenious means of mortifying himself and who finally marries a woman he abominates who is pregnant by Mathieu. Boris, Ivich’s brother, is trying to disengage himself from his clinging aging mistress so that he can go off to war to die gloriously and young. Mathieu, the only one who seems to achieve freedom, does so by climbing atop a church tower in a little village as the Germans occupy it, and killing them until he himself is shot. Now as a French soldier Mathieu is doing exactly as he should do—resisting the invaders. What is striking is that the killing is not merely killing; it is Wagner’s “something more.” It is a mysterious and solemn rite of passage by which Mathieu becomes a man and free. But the real emphasis of the trilogy is that human relations of every kind are like that root (a root that strangles rather than nourishes); sticky when one tries to disencumber oneself, elusive as liquid when one wants to hold on, messy. Sartre is a nihilist in that the person, finding himself alienated in the real, can begin to be human only through violent action.

Le projet is Sartre's term for the means by which a person creates himself in his actions. But here Sartre not only contradicts his earlier statements about the unique ontological status of art, he confuses aesthetic and political judgment. He reveres Flaubert but censures Baudelaire, though his *projet* was at least equally remarkable. As writers Sartre prefers George Sand and Victor Hugo to Baudelaire, because they were "progressive." His discriminations are political in that Sartre stresses that while Flaubert exposed the inanity and corruption of the bourgeoisie, so that he conforms in some respects to the paradigm of the Marxian reformer, Baudelaire accepted and judged himself by bourgeois Christian values. Sartre had by now undergone (and begun to advocate) a radical conversion to the committed life, to Socialism. And revolution is for Sartre the most important thing about Socialism.

One of his own more dubious *projets* is his attempted fusion of Marxism and Existentialism. In 1947 Sartre tried to form an organization that was meant to mediate between Communism, which offended freedom of mind, and bourgeois socialism, which was too insipid for revolutionaries. This project failed but it brought Sartre closer to the Communist party.¹⁷ In *Being and Nothingness* he examines the implications of the human condition largely from the subjective point of view: the pursuit of being, individual freedom, and the problem of the Other. In *La Nausée* and in his plays, the emphasis invariably falls upon the personal dilemma of the alienated individual. Whether it be the dialectic about violence and moral purity that takes place between Hugo and Hoederer in *Soiled Hands*, or the ironic predicament of Jean, the revolutionary leader in *In the Mesh*, or Frantz' being left behind by history and forced to live in a fictional construct in *The Condemned of Altona*, or Goetz' discovery of the identity of good and evil in *The Devil and the Good Lord*, Sartre's concern is with the implications of political choice and action for the isolated "chosen" man. (Again one must conclude that the incest in *The Condemned of Altona*, or Goetz' sadism, are gratuitous. They add nothing to the dramatic or philosophical point.) Yet given the lure of Marxism, he promised at the end of *Being and Nothingness* to explain the "radical conversion" by which individual *projet* could merge with group action. His *Critique de la raison dialectique*¹⁸ (1958) is his attempt to be true to his word.

First, he gives an additional reason for the mutual antagonism in human relations. It is not merely inherent in the human condition, but is the result of scarcity as well. The world is hostile because it is defined by scarcity, and human invention designed to overcome scarcity has been uninformed and inadequate, indeed has aggravated the condition. Thus in any group, each person exists for every other person as someone who deprives him of an object he needs; each of the others is seen as the

material annihilation (consumption) of a basic necessity.¹⁹ This mutual hostility based on the insufficiency of material goods means that society, in Sartre's striking phrase, "discreetly chooses its dead"; its basic structures determine who shall be fed and who are expendable. The number of consumers may be reduced through birth control or through the passive neglect (what Sartre calls "inert choice") of an oppressed class. Even where the latter is the case, however, society may determine the number of expendables but not the precise individuals. Each person in the class is simultaneously a possible survivor and dispensable. So the class does not consolidate against the exploiter, and the condition of reciprocal animosity prevails.²⁰ Given scarcity, each person is objectively dangerous for the others, hence the human is the most violent and destructive species in all nature. His very intelligence means that in a time of satiation he can imagine future need, so that each group constitutes its members as famine doing away with the other in the form of a human *praxis* or undertaking. Whether by killing, torture, enslavement, or mere deceit, each person's goal is to suppress an alien freedom as a hostile force capable of removing that person from the practical field and rendering him superfluous, expendable.²¹ Violence then characterizes all human relations, between individuals within a class and between groups.

The social aggregate as "a plurality of solitudes" is lived as the negation of mutual relations with the Other. Solitude is a social status, that is, it realizes itself in the practical field of the Other, inasmuch as we observe common conventions of dress, behavior, etc., as well as more complex social patterns.²² For Sartre, the most common social aggregate is precisely this *series*: here he uses his often-quoted example of a bus queue. The people share a common space and a common goal, even a common *praxis*: to wait, to stop the bus, enter it, pay the fare, and sit down. They are identical in that each person remains an Other for everyone else. And since the number of seats is not unlimited, the serial order prevents conflict and implies that all accept the impossibility of deciding from purely exterior data who is expendable.

Sartre argues that since the means of production including workers are the undefined property of *Others*, seriality is the original structure of the proletariat. But the antagonism between this class and the owners can be made to produce an internal unity, a new freedom in the choice of a *praxis* based on the real needs of the group (defending itself against the bourgeoisie). Then each person behaves in a new way, neither as individual (*pour-soi*) nor as Other, but as expression of the newly formed common person. This is reciprocity internalized.²³ From this moment something occurs that Sartre, quoting Malraux's *L'Espoir*, calls the Apocalypse, that is, the transformation through social cataclysm of the

series into the group in fusion. In the Apocalypse, while seriality may remain as a dissolving vestige, and may reappear at any time, the synthetic unity of the group is always *here*. After a rather mystifying passage of theoretical speculation, Sartre illustrates with the example of the storming of the Bastille:

The Bastille . . . in the context of scarcity, reveals the basic requirement of common freedom: to defend the district against the militia, weapons are needed; there are none in the district but there are weapons in the Bastille. The Bastille becomes the shared interest because it can and must be disarmed, be a source of weapons, and even be turned against the enemy. . . . Urgency comes, then, from the scarcity of time. . . . The operation defines itself for each person as the urgent discovery of a terrible new freedom. . . .²⁴

This sudden new freedom is the essential thing about the group in fusion, and is brought into being by a historically new situation, the risk of death, and violence.²⁵ Thus Sartre's attitude to violence is ambiguous. Whether an inherent part of the human condition or the result of scarcity, it is inevitable, and true brotherhood is a dream. At the same time it is only in violent action that men (like Mathieu or Goetz) escape solitude. Sartre rejects intermediary situations; he is rigidly dualistic.²⁶ In order to maintain the totalization of the group once its immediate objectives have been gained, it must "posit itself for itself," becoming its own immediate objective and developing a new structure, which is group consciousness. This is expressed in the oath (*serment*), whether implicit in the common *praxis* or explicit, as in a formal oath of allegiance. This is not a social contract (which under certain conditions might be abrogated) but a means of translating the group from possible dissolution to a state of permanence.²⁷ However, the group can never have the ontological status that it claims to have. Of the two threats to the group, the individual *praxis* and seriality, the first constitutes a *suspect*, whose allegiance to his oath, i.e., the group *praxis*, must be reinforced by terror, by the purge, either through expulsion or execution. Terror is the sole means of governing. "It arises out of opposition to seriality, not freedom. . . . Indeed it is freedom, liquidating through the use of violence the indefinite flight of the Other."²⁸ And again, "Terror is *never* a mechanism established by a minority . . . but a fundamental relation of the group as reciprocal human relationship."

The fundamental change consists in the complete transfer of the *shared being of the group*—regulative freedom and the impossible ontological unity—to the *praxis* of the group itself. The group *praxis* alone creates unity, and the group claims ontological reality all the more strongly as the re-emergent seriality

threatens dissolution. Thus each person's reciprocal work consists in projecting ontological unity onto the practical unity: the praxis is the group's being and its essence; it will produce in its members the inorganic tools it needs for its evolution. This new structure of the group is at once Terror and a defense against Terror. . . . Each person is seen by the Other . . . as the inorganic tool through which action is accomplished: each person constitutes action as freedom itself, in the form of terror-imperative.²⁹

This freedom endows its tools with a bit of borrowed freedom, a splinter of the common freedom in each organic object (the person/tool), not the practical freedom of a human actor who might undertake an individual *praxis* which would threaten group unity.

The most important type of group is the state, which comes into being when leaders emerge and institutions are founded. The state is to have a sovereign authorized to exercise Terror in order to avoid conflict in or dissolution of the group. For Sartre the only answer to a violent, capitalist, bourgeois society is violence, the violence of an organized movement of liberation. Such violence is another meaning of Terror, so that it is in all respects productive: It maintains the group in fusion, and it is the means by which the revolution is to be accomplished and the bourgeoisie overthrown.

Sartre broke with the Communist Party and with Camus as well over the issue of violence. He felt that the Party was in some respects too acquiescent to the bourgeoisie, while he was an avowed extremist. When Terror in the form of forced labor camps in the Soviet Union was proved beyond doubt, he refused to join with Camus in protest, arguing that this would serve the aims of the American Cold War. (Actually he was less than honest, because Cold War or not, he had already accepted Terror as a value.) Camus replied with *L'Homme révolté*, in which he classed all fanatical ideologies together: Robespierre, Romanticism, Marx, and fascism. He deplored the substitution of ideology for humanity. Sartre attacked. He called Camus quietist and reactionary, argued that the only hope for society lay in revolution, and any postponement of the revolution was "betrayal." It was as though he and Camus had implicitly taken the oath, so that any threat to group aims, any dissent, was indeed betrayal. Sartre's failure to reconcile Marxism and Existentialism may in part be due to his lack of interest in social or economic theories or events. He was really trying to reconcile a philosophy of personal destiny with a philosophy of collective economic salvation, and succeeded in throwing them both into question.

Sartre's political attitudes are partially anticipated in Sorel's *Reflections on Violence*³⁰ and in the other polemicists of the turn of the century

who were persuaded that liberal democracy was doomed and that only a total renewal could improve society. Both Sorel and Sartre believe in political separatism, not simply an isolation imposed upon a revolutionary group by society itself, but a willed isolation which places the group beyond the moral obligations of bourgeois capitalism and on a Nietzschean promontory from which it could conduct its attack. Both are apocalyptic: social evils cannot be corrected but must be wiped out "in a catastrophe that involves the whole."³¹ Or again, "The more the policy of social reforms becomes preponderant, the more will Socialists feel the need of placing against the picture of progress which it is the aim of this policy to bring about, this other picture of complete catastrophe furnished so perfectly by the general strike."³² And Sartre furnishes a kind of retrospective explanation, equally apocalyptic: "Europe is done for. A truth which it is not pleasant to state, but of which we are all convinced, are we not, fellow Europeans?—in the marrow of our bones."³³ Because for both men Marxism is "social poetry" or "myth" in that although it needs some adjustments it can still move men, there is in some of Sorel's statements the blurring of political and metaphoric language characteristic of Sartre's discussions of freedom and *le projet*. Out of Bergson's conception of *la durée* Sorel developed the following notion:

To say that we are acting, implies that we are creating an imaginary world placed ahead of the present world and composed of movements which depend entirely on us. In this way our freedom becomes perfectly intelligible.³⁴

Sorel saw his own theory of proletarian violence as a completion of Marx, just as Sartre does.³⁵ Sorel was opposed to parliamentary Socialism and any form of ameliorism, which should be met with acts of violence:

But these acts can have historical value only if they are the clear and brutal expression of the class war; the middle classes must not be allowed to imagine that, aided by cleverness, social science, or high-flown sentiments, they might find a better welcome at the hands of the proletariat.³⁶

These words anticipate Sartre's attack upon Camus. Violence has become an essential part of Socialism and should be most pronounced when parliamentarians attempt to woo the workers through ameliorative legislation.

Sorel advocates proletarian violence only in the service of the class war. He does not defend violence, much less Terror, as a means of maintaining working-class solidarity, which he does not discuss because he simply takes for granted that given class awareness fraternal relations will

prevail. He deplors the fact that “revolutionaries plead ‘reasons of State’ as soon as they get into power, that they then employ police methods and look upon justice as a weapon which they may use against their enemies.”³⁷ Being no fool, he makes no predictions about how the Syndicalist revolutionaries will avoid this excess. Sartre, however, is much more violent than the apostle of violence and insists, as we have seen, that Terror is the sole means by which the revolutionary group’s institutions can be maintained. Sorel’s attitude toward violence is more moderate. It is a means of achieving social change, after which it is to be abandoned. “It may be questioned whether there is not a little stupidity in the admiration of our contemporaries for gentle methods.”³⁸ He sees in Syndicalism resemblances to the “noble side” of war, i.e., “the idea that the profession of arms cannot compare to any other profession” and that it puts the warrior in a class superior to any other; that it fosters “the sentiment of glory” as well as “the ardent desire to try one’s strength in great battles.” Indeed this is one reason for the deliberate self-isolation of the revolutionary group, “separating itself distinctly from the other parts of the nation, and regarding itself as the great motive power of history, all other considerations being subordinate to that of combat; it is very clearly conscious of the glory which will be attached to its historical role and of the heroism of its militant attitude; it longs for the final contest in which it will give proof of the whole measure of its valour.”³⁹ These rhapsodies about the heroic mystical vocation of the few, the happy few, paved the way for Sartre’s consecration of violence whose initiates will enthrone Terror as absolute sovereign. In fact Sartre complicates the mystical component; violence is a masculine rite:

When his rage explodes, (the Arab) rediscovers his lost innocence and he comes to know himself in that he himself creates himself. . . . The rebel’s weapon is proof of his humanity . . . to shoot down a European is to kill two birds with one stone, to destroy an oppressor and the man he oppresses at the same time: there remains a dead man and a free man.

It is through their “hatred, blind hatred” that the rebels “have become men.”⁴⁰ Hatred and killing, even random killing, *produce* the conscious being, actually endow a person with a reality status he had not had before. This is Sartre’s grandiose appeal for a politics of hatred, which Sorel specifically disavows,⁴¹ and for a program of terrorism. For both men, Socialism means revolution, but for Sorel the Syndicalist strike and the class war are “the myth in which Socialism is wholly comprised.”⁴² Sartre however has utterly lost faith in the proletariat, who in the United States especially but also in Western Europe, have become *embourgeoisés*. And

he is not a man to be left with an empty category on his hands. So he began to look elsewhere for a class of people who were oppressed and embittered enough to be revolutionized, to be fused into a group that could enact the politics of hatred. He found in the Third World (and in such groups as Baader-Meinhof)* people whose anger was already fanatical enough to put them on the threshold of manhood, to revolutionize them.⁴³

While the ancestry of Sartre's apocalyptic politics is Sorelian he has transmuted Sorel's ethical concerns into pure ideology. His insistence on the oath and the sovereign wielding terror without which people will remain hostile to each other makes it difficult to imagine a state more conformable to Sartre's demands than the Inquisition or the SS.

For both men, politics consists in the struggles of a self-isolated group living in the midst of ever-deepening crisis leading to a dramatic and cataclysmic confrontation in which everything is brought down and then renewed. The group is passionately dedicated to this remote aim. Both share a hatred for bourgeois institutions and reject utterly any notion that society can be redeemed except through the catastrophic transformative battle. Sorel was unable to believe in legitimate authority and therefore conclude that only violence or subterfuge could fuse individuals into a group, after which they simply occupy the workshops left vacant by the overthrown capitalist structure. Sartre's addition to this millenarian blueprint is his claim that violence and terror must be perpetuated if the group is not to regress to "seriality." Terror legitimates authority. He is closer to the more extreme authoritarian antihumanist phase of Sorel's career, in which Sorel found support among the members of the ultra right-wing Action Française and coedited *L'Indépendance* with Paul Bourget and Maurice Barrès.⁴⁴ Sorel in his chauvinist phase expressed ideas that Sartre shares: the refusal to compromise with bourgeois institutions, the destruction of the whole parliamentary structure of compromise, the doomsday vision of society redeemed by an isolated group of disciplined, totally committed, anointed warriors.

Sartre's writings are everywhere saturated with the language of theology. He speaks of grace, redemption, salvation, damnation, Saint Genet. Good and Evil are bandied about freely in nearly all the plays. *La Nausée* culminates in a vision of personal salvation and *No Exit* examines damnation. But God is absent so that one casts about for the equivalent terms for Sartre's secular, indeed pessimistic faith. All this lends a feverish quality to his talk of personal conversion and social cataclysm. His misanthropy itself reads like a search for grace and in his autobiography, *Words*, he

* Sartre visited Baader in jail in November 1974, and referred to the group as "the last desperate hope of the proletarian revolution." (*Der Spiegel*, December 9, 1974).

says that had his religious background not been so confused, so empty of any compelling or stable authority, he might have found God. "Mysticism suits displaced persons and superfluous children."

The Holy Ghost was observing me. It so happened that he had just reached a decision to return to Heaven and abandon human beings. . . ⁴⁵

Sartre's career is perhaps the best modern example of the quest for the *Deus absconditus*, the God who if he is not dead is mute of malice. And this personal dilemma cannot be solved by revolution. So while right-wing Catholics of the turn of the century found in the Church a social authoritarian symbol in which they could escape from the barbarities of bourgeois society, Sartre has found his authoritarian antidote to the bourgeoisie, like the political rightists of the earlier period, in a "totalized" society, armed with terror.

Sartre's *Reflections on the Jewish Question* makes it perfectly plain that he is no anti-Semite, and that, on the contrary, it was courageous of him to publish this book in 1944, at a time when such discussion was unwelcome. However, even here, there are unsavory bits. First, Sartre maintains, like the rabid anti-Semites of the turn of the century who confused nation and history, among them Barrès, that the Jews have no history. The only difference is that Sartre generously invites them all to become French. Second, as Harold Rosenberg has pointed out,⁴⁶ for Sartre the Jew is entirely a being-for-others; his whole being lies in the scrutiny of the anti-Semite. Given that for Sartre this being-for-others always entails a loss of ontological status, Sartre thus denies full being to the Jew. Our genial humanitarian is thus caught in his own mesh, driven to conclusions he no doubt abhors.

Sartre himself now stands mute, after having produced an enormous body of work, most of it humane and much of it brilliant. However, there are certain elements in it that place him squarely among the Decadents: his acceptance and approval of violence, his insistence that love is impossible and that all human relations devolve into sadism or masochism, his hatred of all things bourgeois, including parliaments, his notion of killing as a near-mystical vocation, his inclusion of gratuitous sadistic or lurid details, the need to forge a self (like Barrès), even the loose unstructured quality of *Roads to Freedom*, and so on. He says he will write no more, perhaps because his contradictions are so numerous and complicated that he is boxed in, no exit. Apart from his sometimes infuriating verbal paradoxes—"a man is what he is not"—which translates into a rather simple statement, he may be totally transfixed by the contradiction between freedom and Terror; between radical individualism and group *praxis*; between total free

will and historical determinism; between introspection and political action; inviolable creative privacy and being-in-the-world; the art-for-art's-sake view of art as a priestly vocation and the notion of the committed artist, corresponding to the contradiction between the lonely but chosen political hero of the plays and the notion of class war. It is possible that like the Decadents Sartre made of his life an artifact to conform to his ontology, paradoxical, deeply disturbing, not what it is, *visqueux*. "Subjectivity," the basic premise of Decadent art, "is the starting point" Sartre says in *Existentialism*.¹⁷ His own subjectivity is both origin and object of his art and his phenomenology; another way to put this is to say that his philosophy is the working out of his literary life and his political choices, just as his art is a dramatization of his philosophical and political categories. Thus there is in fact no exit, other than silence.

¹ *La Nausée* (Paris, Gallimard, 1938), p. 180. I am deeply indebted to Arthur Danto's brilliant study, *Jean-Paul Sartre* (New York: Viking Press, 1975).

² *Ibid.*, p. 181.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 188.

⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 181-82.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 220.

⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 222-23.

⁷ *La Force de l'âge* (Paris: Gallimard, 1960), pp. 141-42, et passim.

⁸ Maurice Cranston, *The Quintessence of Sartrism* (New York: Harper and Row, 1969), pp. 58-59.

⁹ *Op. cit.*, pp. 245-46.

¹⁰ *Les Mots* (Paris: Gallimard, 1964), p. 155.

¹¹ "Qu'est-ce-que la littérature?", *Situations, II* (Paris: Gallimard, 1948).

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 181; p. 183; p. 188.

¹³ *L'Être et le néant*, (Paris: Gallimard, 1943), "Le regard," pp. 310 ff.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 318.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 431.

¹⁶ *La Nausée*, *op. cit.*, p. 211.

¹⁷ Raymond Aron, *Marxism and the Existentialists* (New York: Harper and Row, 1969). p. 7.

¹⁸ (Paris: Gallimard, 1958)

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 204-05.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 205-06.

²¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 208-09.

²² *Ibid.*, pp. 308-10.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 391.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 394.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 425.

²⁶ Aron, *op. cit.*, p. 9.

²⁷ *Critique de la raison dialectique*, *op. cit.*, p. 439.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 579.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 580.

³⁰ Georges Sorel, *Reflexions sur la violence* (Paris: Marcel Rivière, 1946).

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 18.

³² *Ibid.*, p. 195.

³³ Frantz Fanon, *Les Damnés de la terre* (Paris: F. Maspero, 1961), p. 10.

³⁴ Sorel, *op. cit.*, p. 43.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 48.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 118.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 56-57.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 270.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 246-48.

⁴⁰ Fanon, *op. cit.*, p. 20.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 160-61.

⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 182, and throughout the section titled "La grève politique."

⁴³ *Midstream*, August 1969, pp. 37-48.

⁴⁴ *The French Right: from de Maistre to Maurras*, ed. J. S. McClelland (New York: Harper and Row, 1970), p. 117. Michael Curtis, *op. cit.*, throughout.

⁴⁵ *Les Mots*, pp. 156-57.

⁴⁶ "Sartre's Jewish Morality Play," in *Discovering the Present* (University of Chicago Press, 1973), pp. 270 ff.

⁴⁷ *L'Existentialisme est un humanisme* (Paris: Nagel, 1970), p. 10.