Jean-Paul Sartre was born to a solidly bourgeois family in Thiviers, France, in June 1905, a little over a year after his parents were married. His father, Jean-Baptiste, was an officer in the French navy and had been educated at the École Polytechnique; his mother, Anne-Marie Schweitzer (cousin of the great doctor and humanitarian, Albert), came from an old and well-to-do Alsatian family. Jean-Baptiste died in 1906, when Jean-Paul was fifteen months old, and Anne-Marie soon took her infant son to live with her father Charles Schweitzer, whom Sartre evokes in largely affectionate terms in The Words, the much-admired autobiography of his early years. Though Sartre claims to have “loathed” his childhood, he remembers his time in the Schweitzer household as years of coddled freedom and happiness when he was the clever center of everyone’s world.

The center was displaced in 1917 when his mother married Joseph Mancy, a former schoolmate of the unfortunate Jean-Baptiste, and moved with him to La Rochelle. Sartre remembers his
stepfather—when he bothers to recall him at all—with a mixture of contempt and bitterness; not
that Mancy was cruel or worthy of contempt, but he had committed the unpardonable sins of
disrupting Sartre’s world and dividing his mother’s attentions.

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From the beginning, Sartre enjoyed the privileged education of his class. Early on, his grandfather
Schweitzer encouraged his curiosity and interest in reading. Sartre was precocious, adept at music,
acting, and languages, though indifferent at best in mathematics. At the prestigious École Normale
Supérieure, he studied philosophy, taking first place in his agrégation in 1929. (A fellow philosophy
student he met that year, Simone de Beauvoir, took a close second.) But, as Annie Cohen-Solal
shows in her newly translated biography,[1] if Sartre was a brilliant student, he was hardly a
model one. She remarks that at school Sartre was the “fearsome instigator of all the revues, all the
jokes, all the scandals”—“scandals,” it seems, that were hardly confined to the harmless
expression of youthful high spirits. Once, for example, Sartre took it upon himself to send a letter
to the police accusing a fellow student of having murdered a woman, the wife of a diplomat,
whose body had recently been found; another of his “pranks” resulted in the principal of the
school resigning. As Miss Cohen-Solal notes, “this image of a provoking, disrespectful, subversive
Sartre recurs again and again, like a leitmotif, throughout his life.”

Indeed, reading Sartre, one gathers that coming to terms with the philosopher turned out to be far
more difficult than Miss Cohen-Solal had reckoned. The book opens at an auction in Paris in 1984
when several manuscripts by Sartre were up for sale. Miss Cohen-Solal confesses her displeasure
at the spectacle, noting that “it’s not pleasant to see our most cherished symbolic values brutally
priced, exhibited, sold, and bundled off by anonymous gentlemen in gray suits.” But as the
biography unfolds, the author of those “most cherished symbolic values” emerges as a deeply
troubling—not to say downright distasteful—character.

Having already written a well-received biography of Sartre’s friend, the French Communist
writer Paul Nizan, Miss Cohen-Solal would seem to be well placed for the task of telling
the story of Sartre’s life. She is thoroughly steeped in the ethos of post-World-War-II French
intellectual culture—Sartre’s culture—and anyone interested in the characters and passions that
determined Sartre’s life and times will consult her book with profit. She candidly recounts the
highlights of Sartre’s long career, outlining the circumstances and reception of his chief works and
pausing to detail the various intrigues and political battles that absorbed so large a part of his life.

Considered as an intellectual biography, however, Sartre has its share of weaknesses. For one
thing, it provides scant discussion of Sartre’s explicitly philosophical work. Miss Cohen-Solal is surely right that *Being and Nothingness* is “a key to Sartre’s entire life and works,” but her biography does little to illuminate the main themes of that central text. Then, too, Miss Cohen-Solal’s narrative gifts are not large. Her book displays a formidable amount of research and an intimate acquaintance with Sartre’s oeuvre, especially his literary and political writings and his correspondence, but she has not succeeded in weaving this wealth of material into a coherent narrative. What we get is a series of more or less imperfectly related episodes, not a continuous story, and this makes it sometimes difficult to follow the chronology and changing *dramatis personae* of Sartre’s life.

Miss Cohen-Solal also has a penchant for overwriting of the puffy, book-blurb variety, which tends to compromise one’s faith in her critical judgment. About *The Words*, for example, which won Sartre the Nobel Prize in 1964, she proclaims that “it is a powerful, seductive book that seizes the reader with contrasting strategies, excites him, ravishes him, and then, finally, abandons him, traumatized, defenseless, in a state of shock.” Well, *The Words* is certainly a good book; some consider it Sartre’s single most accomplished work. But really: “ravishes,” “abandons,” “traumatized,” “shock”! Is a litany fit for the fate of the Sabine women appropriate to describe Sartre’s often rather lugubrious story of his first twelve years?

Furthermore, *Sartre* is marred by some unfortunate ideological tics. Miss Cohen-Solal can be quite critical of Sartre’s political and personal follies, but throughout the book she indulges in what one might call reflex feminism and a species of anti-bourgeois animus akin to Sartre’s own sentiments about the class that spawned him. Describing some remarks made at Jean-Baptiste and Anne-Marie’s traditional wedding ceremony, for example, she pauses to assure us that “at a time when the division of roles between man and woman—his, the mind; hers, the heart—was still quite rigid, this speech did not shock the audience.” And commenting on Sartre’s teaching abilities, she notes that “thanks to him, his students acquired keen critical minds, a strong sense of responsibility, clear perceptions of class struggle and of racism, and an acceptance of otherness; they had demystified madness and other taboos, as well as marriage, private property, and the other symbols of bourgeois life. In short, they had truly confronted otherness to the detriment of all fictitious hierarchies, all useless conventions.”

Given such clichés, which recur throughout the book, one is not surprised that Miss Cohen-Solal should wax ecstatic over Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir’s famous “open” relationship. “For several generations, this couple would become a model to emulate, a dream of lasting complicity, an extraordinary success since, apparently, it managed to reconcile the unreconcilable: the two partners remained free, equal, and honest with each other.” One has to wonder, though, how happy—and, indeed, how honest—that relationship really was. Yes, Sartre told Beauvoir right off that his credo was “travel, polygamy, transparency.” But what does “transparency” mean here? Is it more than an excuse for self-indulgence, a form of selfishness masquerading as ruthless honesty? And was Beauvoir pleased with her consort’s “open unlimited harem”? Did she savor
his letters graphically describing his sex life with other women? Was she really as free from jealousy and the bourgeois vice of “possessiveness” as she sometimes liked to pretend? Several passages in this book suggest otherwise.

But there is no doubt Miss Cohen-Solal regards Simone de Beauvoir as an ideal woman. In fact, in many ways, the real hero of these pages is not Jean-Paul Sartre but Simone de Beauvoir. Describing her as Sartre’s “convinced yet autonomous disciple, a feminist” (“autonomous” and “feminist,” especially when they occur together, are Miss Cohen-Solal’s highest words of praise), she is at pains to portray Beauvoir as the patient mistress of every situation, generous but uncompromising, a stabilizing influence on her erratic and self-destructive partner.

Nor is there any doubt that Sartre needed such a steadying hand. *Sartre* is full of descriptions of its subject’s excesses. In one typical passage, Miss Cohen-Solal tells us that

Sartre’s life had been more or less equally divided between, on the one hand, intense socializing—trips, rich meals, heavy drinking, drugs, and tobacco—and, on the other, the monastic austerity of a rigid work schedule. Work till noon at Rue Bonaparte. Twelve-thirty: one hour of appointments, scheduled by his secretary. One-thirty: back at Rue Bonaparte, with Beauvoir, Michelle, or some other woman . . . . Two hours over a heavy meal, washed down with a quart of red wine. Punctually, at three-thirty, he would stop in mid-sentence, push away the table, get up, and run back to his desk at Rue Bonaparte . . . . When he felt really sick, and the doctor prescribed rest, he would opt for a compromise: less tobacco and fewer drugs for a week . . . . His diet, over a period of twenty-four hours included two packs of cigarettes and several pipes stuffed with black tobacco, more than a quart of alcohol—wine, beer, vodka, whisky, and so on—two hundred milligrams of amphetamines, fifteen grams of aspirin, several grams of barbiturates, plus coffee, tea, rich meals.

Such a routine is of course a prescription for disaster, and one is surprised only that it wasn’t until 1954 that Sartre suffered his first collapse, the result of acute arterial hypertension. A few years later, he reportedly almost killed himself by taking ever-increasing doses of the then-fashionable stimulant corydrane to help him finish the *Critique of Dialectical Reason*. And by the time that Sartre died in 1980, at the age of seventy-five, he had already been leading something of a posthumous existence for several years. Since childhood, writing had been Sartre’s obsession, his raison d’être, his life. Yet after 1973 he was almost totally blind and could neither read nor write. In short order, a series of strokes and a battery of other ailments reduced him to the pathetic, devastated creature that Simone de Beauvoir describes in such excruciating detail in *Adieux: A Farewell to Sartre*, her memoir of the philosopher’s last years.

In the spate of memoirs, interviews, and recollections about Sartre that have appeared since his death—of which Beauvoir’s *Adieux* is only the best known—Sartre’s friends are at pains to proclaim his generosity and kindness. There is no doubt that he could be both kind and generous, especially to the female members of what Miss Cohen-Solal calls his “family.” But he was also capable of what can only be called wanton viciousness. As extraordinary as Sartre’s circle of
friends and acquaintances was, even more extraordinary is the catalogue of people with whom he quarreled and broke. From Raymond Aron and Alberto Giacometti to Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Albert Camus, Sartre seems to have delighted in the drama of breaking friendships. Perhaps the most notorious rift came in 1952 when Sartre ran an exceedingly hostile review of Camus’s *The Rebel* in *Les Temps modernes*. Camus, understandably upset by the review, wrote his old friend a chilly letter that opened with the formal salutation: “Monsieur le Directeur.” Instead of responding to Camus privately, Sartre published an open letter in the magazine, a letter that Miss Cohen-Solal is surely correct in describing as one of the “most cruel and violent texts he had ever written.” “My dear Camus,” Sartre began, “our friendship was not easy, but I will miss it. If you end it today, that doubtless means it had to end.”

Your combination of dreary conceit and vulnerability always discouraged people from telling you unvarnished truths .... Tell me, Camus, for what mysterious reasons may your works not be discussed without taking away humanity’s reasons for living? . . . How serious you are, and yet, to use one of your old words, how frivolous! And suppose you are wrong? Suppose your book simply attested to your ignorance of philosophy? Suppose it consisted of hastily assembled and secondhand knowledge? . . . Are you so afraid of being challenged? . . . But I don’t dare advise you to consult *Being and Nothingness*. Reading it would seem needlessly arduous to you: you detest the difficulties of thought.

None of this, however, prevented Sartre from penning a fulsome eulogy when Camus died in 1960: apparently, his friends remained enemies only so long as they were capable of being rivals.

From an early age, Sartre was convinced he would become a great writer, enjoying a “great writer’s life, as it appears from books.” And “as for the content of that life,” Sartre wrote in his notebook in 1939,

> it can be easily imagined: there were solitude and despair, passions, great undertakings, a long period of painful obscurity (though I slyly shortened it in my dreams, in order not to be too old when it ended), and then glory, with its retinue of admiration and love . . . . In a word, I’d have liked to be sure of becoming a great man later on, so as to be able to live my youth as a great man’s youth . . . . [T]hough I couldn’t be sure, I behaved as if I must become one—and was extremely conscious of being the young Sartre, in the same way that people speak of the young Berlioz or the young Goethe.

Yet despite his conviction of potential greatness, Sartre’s success was not immediate. The early Thirties proved to be a fallow and frustrating period. Sartre’s ambition was boundless, but his life was very definitely bounded; except for a year spent in Berlin in 1933 to study the philosophy of Edmund Husserl, he was confined to teaching in the provinces and to suffering the rejection of his literary efforts.

His literary career began to blossom only in 1938 when *Nausea*—which many consider his best and most original novel—and *The Wall* were published by the *Nouvelle Revue Française*. As Miss Cohen-Solal informs us, it was Sartre’s publisher, the legendary Gaston Gallimard, who came up with the
title Nausea. The book was published to great critical acclaim, and had an extraordinary influence, helping to inaugurate that dour literary-philosophical amalgam that came to be called “existentialism.” The title “Nausea” is perfect, of course, for no other word sums up so graphically the hero Roquentin’s generalized disgust at existence; and one cannot help wondering if the book’s—and Sartre’s—career would have been different had he published it under any of the titles he adopted when working on the manuscript: Factum on Contingency, Essay: On the Loneliness of the Mind, Melancholia, or finally—when asked for a more descriptive title—The Extraordinary Adventures of Antoine Roquentin. Somehow, none has the makings of a literary vogue.

Of course, Sartre’s budding career was upset in September, 1939, when Germany invaded Poland.

Of course, Sartre’s budding career was upset in September, 1939, when Germany invaded Poland. Sartre was mobilized and served as an army meteorologist in a succession of small towns near Strasbourg. His duties were far from arduous, however, and Sartre found that he had more time than ever for reading and writing.[2] His relative tranquility was interrupted briefly when the Germans overran the fabled Maginot Line in May, 1940. Sartre was captured in June as his company retreated in the face of the German onslaught and was a prisoner of war until the following spring. Miss Cohen-Solal titles her chapter dealing with Sartre’s experience as a prisoner of war “A Lofty Captivity,” and one needn’t read far into the chapter to discover why. Sartre apparently spent most of his time reading and talking about philosophy—he first encountered Heidegger’s major work, Being and Time, in prison camp, for example—and even began writing plays. No doubt there were austerities and humiliations to be borne in Stalag xii d. But Sartre seems to have regarded the very extremity of the situation as an inducement to authenticity and the exercise of freedom. Typical is his later comment that “in the Stalag I rediscovered a form of collective life I had not experienced since the École Normale—in other words, I was happy.” Indeed, Sartre’s whole reaction to his months as a prisoner says a great deal about his notions of freedom, authenticity, and the merits of the “collective life” he dreamed of. About the latter, for example, he enthusiastically touts the lack of doors on the toilets because in the face of such a lack of privacy “the notion of an elite disappears.”
Nevertheless, one cannot forbear noting that Sartre’s “happiness” at the “collective life” in prison camp did not prevent him from feigning illness in order to get into the infirmary among the privileged, from lying about his occupation to get moved to the artists’ barracks, or from escaping from the camp with false papers at the first opportunity in March, 1941. Yet it is part of the Sartrean hauteur that we should find him explaining to Beauvoir years later that he “did not really want to” leave the camp but felt he had to “just to prove a point.”

What are we to make of such comments? What do they tell us about Sartre’s character, about his understanding of freedom, of “collective life”? Miss Cohen-Solal suggests Sartre remembers his war experiences “with the tenderness of the fetishist.” Perhaps so. Certainly, his recollections say something about the depth of his anti-bourgeois sentiments. And it is perfectly in keeping with his posture as the Disaffected Writer that when he returns to Paris he should write, disappointedly, that he had “rejoined bourgeois society, where I would have to learn to live once again ‘at a respectful distance.’” This sudden agoraphobia betrayed my vague feeling of regret for the collective life from which I had been forever severed.” How much more attractive were those toilets without doors! Eventually, Sartre was able to transform his “vague feeling of regret” into open nostalgia, writing after the Liberation that “We were never as free as under the German Occupation” because the very fact of oppression made every “just thought” a “real conquest.”

There is something not only bizarre but almost obscene about Sartre’s haughty descriptions of his happy days as a prisoner of war. Yet they effectively epitomize his extreme view of freedom and authenticity as a kind of campaign by the individual against the strictures of society. As Iris Murdoch put it in her early, exceptionally lucid, book on the philosopher, for Sartre “the simple virtues of human intercourse become forms of insincerity. Only reflection and freedom are desired as ends and yet these turn out to be without content.”

Despite—or perhaps because of—the disruption of the war, the early Forties were among Sartre’s most productive years, in quality if not quantity. He published Being and Nothingness and The Flies in 1943, No Exit in 1944, started Les Temps modernes in 1945, delivered his famous lecture “Existentialism is a Humanism” in 1946, and on and on. It was at this time that Sartre emerged as a world figure, becoming by the late Forties the prolific bellwether of intellectual fashion. The Forties also marked the beginning of Sartre’s emergence as a radical political spokesman. As Miss Cohen-Solal observes, Sartre’s political activity in the late Forties “shows us a Sartre and company intoxicated like all revolutionary leaders who read, in the increasing number of their supporters, the nearly sacred sanction of reality.” Raymond Aron generously characterized Sartre’s politics as a species of “revolutionary romanticism.” But Sartre’s hardened political confrères put it more bluntly when they speak of his “prattle.” As one fellow radical remarked, “despite his lucidity, [Sartre] lived in a world that was totally isolated from reality . . . . He was very much involved in the play and movement of ideas, but not so much in events . . . . No, he was never terribly interested in the world.”
Sartre is often described as a Communist. In fact, though, his politics were anything but systematic or coherent. Despite the friendly visits to Mao, to Khrushchev, to Castro, to Tito, to Ché Guevara, despite his declaration after returning from Russia in 1954 that “there is a total freedom of criticism in the USSR,” despite his endless pamphleteering and proselytizing for Communist causes, Sartre was motivated primarily not by a commitment to the Party but by what Beauvoir proudly described as “anti-bourgeois anarchism.” As Sartre himself assured his readers in the Fifties, “I swore to the bourgeoisie a hatred that would die only with me.” Indeed, as Leszek Kolakowski observes in *Main Currents of Marxism*, Sartre oscillated between identification with the Communists and violent hostility towards them . . . . At every stage, however, he endeavored to preserve his own reputation as a “Leftist,” and even to represent himself and his philosophy as the embodiment of “Leftism” *par excellence*. Consequently, even when attacking the Communists and reviled by them he made a point of directing far more vehement attacks against the forces of reaction, the bourgeoisie, or the United States Government . . . . His whole political activity was vitiated by fear of being in the typical situation of an intellectual condemning events that he has no power to influence; in short, his was that of a politician *manqué*, cherishing unfulfilled ambitions to be on the “inside.”

By the Sixties, being “inside” politically meant proclaiming solidarity with the Third World, and it was then that Sartre became widely identified with “Third World” causes from Mao’s China to Latin America. But here, too, it is important to recognize that his commitment to the causes he championed was largely a matter of posturing and rhetoric. He had no trouble writing a glowing preface for Frantz Fanon’s *The Wretched of the Earth*, a book that the historian Paul Johnson has called “the most influential of all terrorist handbooks,” or blithely declaring “I believe in illegality” in *La Cause de peuple*, a self-described “revolutionary, proletarian, communist paper.” In 1973, he even admitted his deep interest in the Baader-Meinhof Group: “a real revolutionary group,” he exclaimed, though one that had “started a little too soon.” But what did all Sartre’s sympathy for the dispossessed amount to? As the French writer Pascal Bruckner observes in *The Tears of the White Man*, his brilliant study of Western attitudes toward the Third World, some of Sartre’s political activism—most notably, his opposition to the French government during the Algerian conflict—demanded real courage; but for the most part, Sartre’s “solidarity” with the Third World was hardly more than an impotent, and self-congratulatory, moralism. “Sartre’s attitude toward the Third World was a strange mixture of masochism and indifference,” Bruckner writes.

Sartre declared that the West was rotten, but after this beginning, was concerned only with the West. He
made peace with his conscience after paying a little tithe of guilt. . . . He wasted a great part of his talent in the esthetics of violence and Stalinism, and with regard to the Third World, ended up showing himself to be not only dogmatic, but inconsequential. The hard-liner was in reality a deserter. Let us remember that he came close to justification of the massacre of Israeli athletes by members of the plo in 1972. He gave way before revolutionary regimes, just as he gave way to the Maoists, giving his name to ideas and actions that went against his innermost convictions. But, deep down, he did not take them seriously. This follower of the Third World did not accept it unless it fulfilled the familiar role of the victim from whom he had nothing to learn. This preacher of universal involvement, this maniacal devotee of petitions, had no real affection for anyone but members of his own tribe.

The real key to Sartre’s character—the key that Miss Cohen-Solal occasionally glimpses but fails to make adequate use of—is his intellectualizing aestheticism, his tendency to dissolve reality in a play of abstract philosophical or political categories. It is in this sense, for example, that we must understand his admission that he tended to regard words as “the quintessence of things.” “The truth is,” Sartre wrote in a revealing passage from The War Diaries, “I treat my feelings as ideas: with an idea, one pushes it till it cracks—or finally becomes ‘what it really was.’” And in fact, Sartre could be quite ruthless about exposing his own failings and selfish motives. But there is pretense even here, for as he noted in The Words, “I am always ready to criticize myself, provided I’m not forced to.” The game of self-examination—for it was never more than a game—is merely part of the cynical, anti-bourgeois charade. Again, The Words offers sterling examples of the procedure:

At the age of thirty, I executed the masterstroke of writing in Nausea—quite sincerely, believe me—about the bitter unjustified existence of my fellowmen and exonerating my own. I was Roquentin; I used him to show, without complacency, the texture of my life . . . . Later, I gaily demonstrated that man is impossible; I was impossible myself and differed from the others only by the mandate to give expression to that impossibility, which was thereby transfigured and became my most personal possibility, the object of my mission, the springboard of my glory. I was a prisoner of that obvious contradiction, but I did not see it, I saw the world through it. Fake to the marrow of my bones and hoodwinked, I joyfully wrote about our unhappy state. Dogmatic though I was, I doubted everything except that I was the elect of doubt. I built with one hand what I destroyed with the other, and I regarded anxiety as the guarantee of my security; I was happy.

As Miss Cohen-Solal’s biography makes clear, Sartre regarded such confessional exercises as a form of exoneration, as if cleverly analyzing one’s failings somehow absolved one of their consequences. There is no doubt Jean-Paul Sartre was one of the most gifted writers of his generation; Miss Cohen-Solal reminds us that he was also one of its greatest monsters.

2. For a discussion of the voluminous notebooks Sartre kept at the beginning of the war, see my review of the War Diaries in The New Criterion, September 1985, pages 73-81. Go back to the text.
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