

# The New Criterion

Books September 2004

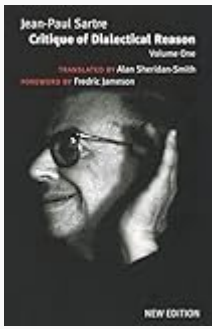
## Shorter notices

by Roger Kimball

A review of *Critique of Dialectical Reason, Volume One* by Jean-Paul Sartre

*On a new printing of Sartre's Critique of Dialectical Reason.*

### BOOKS IN THIS ARTICLE



*Jean-Paul Sartre*

*Critique of Dialectical Reason, Volume One*

Verso, 864 pages, \$44.95

*Jean-Paul Sartre*

Critique of Dialectical Reason,  
translated by Alan Sheridan-Smith,  
Forward by Frederic Jameson.

Verso, 836 pages, \$25 (paper)

By one of those coincidences that reinforces one's faith in Providence, this new edition of Sartre's most unreadable book appeared on my desk the same day that *Multitude* arrived. Sartre wrote his Marxist apologia at breakneck speed in the late 1950s under the influence of amphetamines. The effort almost killed him. Many readers will rue the adverb.

Sartre's self-appointed task is to explain History from the standpoint of "historical materialism," i.e., what Fredric Jameson rightly describes in his foreword as "orthodox Marxism." Seen from the appropriate perspective, this 836-page Leviathan— Volume One, please note!—is a comic masterpiece—inadvertent, to be sure, and a masterpiece that remains funny only when contemplated from afar, but comic nonetheless. Professor Jameson (like Hardt, a Marxist who teaches at Duke) acknowledges the stylistic "difficulty" of Sartre's book but nevertheless compares it to "late Bach." Here's a bit from Sartre's peroration about "the real problem of History." Judge for yourself:

To comprehend, in an immediate sense, is to grasp the *praxis* of the Other, through its ends and means, as a simple, objective, transcendent (*transcendante*) temporalisation. To comprehend in struggle is to grasp the *praxis* of the Other in immanence, through its own objectivity and in a practical transcendence. I now comprehend the enemy *through myself* and myself *through the enemy*. His *praxis* does not appear as a pure transcendent (*transcendante*) temporalisation which I reproduce without participating in it; urgency forces me to discover my objectivity and adopt it in every detail; it forces me to penetrate, as far as concrete circumstances permit, the activity of the enemy. Comprehension is an immediate fact of reciprocity.

But is it—is comprehension—even an issue when it comes to writing like this? "Late Bach"? Thanks, Professor, but I will stick to "The Art of the Fugue."

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This article originally appeared in *The New Criterion*, Volume 23 Number 1 , on page 76

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