The war according to Sartre

by Roger Kimball

A review of The War Diaries of Jean-Paul Sartre, November 1939-March 1940 by Jean-Paul Sartre

BOOKS IN THIS ARTICLE

Jean-Paul Sartre
The War Diaries of Jean-Paul Sartre, November 1939-March 1940
Pantheon, 366 pages, $10.95
Jean-Paul Sartre was thirty-four years old when Germany attacked Poland on September 1, 1939. By that time, he had already published important philosophical works, including The Transcendence of the Ego, and was beginning to develop a reputation for his fiction: La Nausée, which many consider his finest novel, had been published by NRF the previous year, followed by Le Mur and a collection of critical essays. Having done his military service a decade before in the meteorological corps, Sartre suddenly found himself torn away from his self-possessed life as a teacher and writer, and was engaged once again as an army weatherman. “I was quite comfortably ensconced in my situation as an individualist, anti-bourgeois writer,” he recalled later in “Self-Portrait at Seventy.”

What exploded all that was the fact that one fine day in September 1939 I received a call-up paper, and was obliged to go off to the barracks at Nancy to meet fellows I didn’t know who’d been called up like me. That’s what introduced the social into my life ... Up till then I believed myself sovereign; I had to encounter the negation of my own freedom— through being mobilized—in order to become aware of the weight of the world ....

But as his first response to life was always to write about it, Sartre did not abandon literary activities in his new situation; the world had not become that weighty. Immediately after he was called up, he conceived the idea of keeping a journal. “Reflecting upon the world of war and its nature,” he wrote to Simone de Beauvoir, “I hatched the project of writing a journal. Please include in your parcel a stout black notebook — thick but not too tall or wide, cross-ruled of course.”

How consoling would be the thought that war becomes what it
In fact, Sartre discovered that his new routine afforded him even more time to write than he had had in civilian life. The change of scene and the portentous atmosphere of the times seemed to act as a tonic to his imagination. Stationed just behind the front in a succession of small towns near Strasbourg, Sartre had the sense of being close to great happenings but endured very few actual distractions. His duties, which consisted mostly of taking weather readings, were neither taxing nor time-consuming, and he was usually left to his own devices.

Still, however propitious the situation, Sartre’s productivity in the five months that he was writing these notebooks was staggering. To begin with, he managed to fill fourteen notebooks and begin a fifteenth. Of these, it appears that only the five that are translated here—numbers III, V, XI, XII, and XIV—have survived. Arlette Elkaim-Sartre, the philosopher’s mistress in the late Fifties and later his adopted daughter and heir, hints in her foreword that other volumes may exist but have yet to resurface. In any case, in addition to the fourteen notebooks —the equivalent of over a thousand printed pages—he wrote hundreds of letters, most of his novel, *The Age of Reason*, and tinkered with several other literary projects. In his translator’s introduction to *The War Diaries*, Quentin Hoare estimates that Sartre wrote a total of some one million words during this period.

Simply to have written a million words in five months is a remarkable feat; and it is all the more so in light of the generally high quality of Sartre’s writing here and the complexity of the ideas with which he was dealing. The whole episode reminds us that sheer abundant energy is one of the marks of genius. Admonished by a colleague that he was working too hard, spending sixteen hours a day reading and writing, Sartre confesses to his notebook that he is flattered by the thought but scrupulously calculates that his true average was considerably less—a mere ten or eleven hours a day. And unlike his infamous spasm of productivity in 1958, when he almost killed himself writing *Critique of Dialectical Reason*, Sartre’s accomplishments in 1939-40 would seem to have been unaided by ever-increasing doses of amphetamines.

As the original title of this book indicates (*Les Carnets de la drôle de guerre: Novembre 1939-Mars 1940*), what we have here are not really “war diaries” but notebooks of the “phoney war,” that strange interregnum after France declared war on Germany in which French and German troops sat ensconced in their respective positions along the Alsatian border, eyeing each other with hostility but not fighting. Sartre never saw combat, and while his notebooks occasionally discuss the phenomenon of war, his reflections on the subject tend to be saturated with the kind of abstract,
Hegelian logic that dissolves the exigencies of lived experience into a battle of purely conceptual antagonists. “War, when all’s said and done,” Sartre mused in one typical passage, “is a concrete idea that contains within itself its own destruction and that accomplishes this by an equally concrete dialectic .... The essence of war will be realized concretely the day war becomes impossible.” How consoling would be the thought that war becomes what it really is only when it becomes impossible—if only the unfolding of its “concrete dialectic” weren’t such a messy affair.

One instance of such messiness occurred in May, 1940, when the Germans abruptly put an end to the phoney war; they outflanked the “impregnable” Maginot Line and, in a matter of weeks, had occupied France. Sartre, incidentally, was taken prisoner in June as his company retreated before the German onslaught. He used his time in captivity to study Heidegger and to compose a good portion of what would become his major philosophical work, *Being and Nothingness* (1943). He was released the following year and returned to Paris, where he continued writing and was involved—tangentially, it seems—in the Resistance.

Mr. Hoare enthusiastically introduces these notebooks as a “masterpiece”—“without question ... a marvellously successful work.” But despite their great historical interest and the many memorable passages they contain, I’m afraid that a reading of the notebooks forces us to conclude that there is indeed some question about their success as a “work.” For the whole is simply too desultory, sketchy, and uneven to merit Mr. Hoare’s praise. Yet they surely are an extraordinary set of documents. And it is worth noting, too, that Sartre always assumed that they would be published one day. “I am giving myself short shrift in my little black notebook,” he wrote to Simone de Beauvoir. “Whoever reads it after my death—for you will publish it only posthumously—will think I was a dreadful character, unless you accompany it with explanatory annotations of a kindly sort.” De Beauvoir did not, alas, provide the requisite annotations—fascinating though they would have been—but a glance through the present volume enables one to appreciate the point of Sartre’s veiled request.

Osensibly the testimony of an “average” soldier caught up in the moment, these notebooks are in fact no more average than was Jean-Paul Sartre himself. Though they include something of an abridged chronicle of Sartre’s life at this time—his observations on daily events, relations with his new-found army colleagues, his sundry amours—their chief interest is as a diary of his prodigious intellectual obsessions and the motivating sensibility that occasioned them.

In this respect, they offer us a glimpse into the mental workshop of one of the most fertile and influential philosophical minds of the century as it labored at the threshold of intellectual maturity. We see Sartre discovering, elaborating, reformulating themes that we have come to identify as distinctively Sartrean. Anyone familiar with the basic tenets of his particularly austere brand of existentialism will at once recognize that these notebooks exhibit the entire range of its defining preoccupations: the agonized struggle for authenticity, the insistence on absolute freedom and responsibility, rejection of any transcendent measure for values or morals, minute analyses of one’s relations with other people, an ill-defined but powerful anti-conventional, anti-
bourgeois stance (“You’re all bourgeois,” Sartre snaps at his colleagues near the beginning of the volume, “I wouldn’t put myself out for bourgeois people”)—in short, as Mr. Hoare rightly observes, they “both prefigure and map out the virtual entirety of the author’s subsequent oeuvre.”

Especially noteworthy from a philosophical point of view are the many passages that rehearse material that would come to occupy a central place in the argument of Being and Nothingness. For example, the notebooks contain lengthy and often quite technical discussions of the concept of Nothingness, the nature of the will, the problem of authenticity, the structure of consciousness, and other equally specialized matters. Some of these discussions recur almost verbatim in Being and Nothingness; often, though, we follow as Sartre gropes his way to a preliminary understanding and expression of his ideas. Given the level of abstraction at which Being and Nothingness proceeds, such drafts are welcome interpretive aids: their very hesitations and digressions often help to elucidate Sartre’s more finished—and more intricate—argument in Being and Nothingness.

Also of philosophical interest is Sartre’s account of his debt to Husserl and Heidegger. Sartre had studied Husserl when he was in Berlin in 1931-33, and philosophically he is in many ways closer to Husserl’s phenomenology, with its obvious roots in the Cartesian tradition, than he is to Heidegger. But temperamentally, as it were, Sartre has much more in common with Heidegger, who can probably be regarded as his major philosophical inspiration. He did not read Heidegger’s major work, Being and Time, until a German soldier provided him with a copy when he was a prisoner of war. But by September, 1939, he was acquainted with What is Metaphysics? and other of Heidegger’s works, and the existential twist that characterizes Heidegger’s philosophy had already begun to exert a deep influence on his thinking.

In addition to indulging in such philosophical reflections, Sartre uses his notebooks to keep a running dialogue with his reading, quoting from and reflecting copiously on whatever he happens to be engaged with at the moment. Gide, Saint-Exupéry, Kierkegaard, Stendhal, Flaubert, Koestler, and Emil Ludwig’s biography of Kaiser Wilhelm II figure prominently in these pages, as do a host of lesser characters. Gide and Stendhal already emerge as among Sartre’s heroes, but Flaubert is severely criticized for inexact writing and stylistic poverty. “How clumsy and disagreeable it is,” Sartre writes of L’Education sentimentale. “How silly that constant hesitation between stylization and realism in the dialogues and portrayals.” He then devotes several pages to a detailed criticism of what he considers Flaubert’s ineffective and cliché-ridden use of verbs.
Sartre regarded this period of his life as a time of transition—at one point he compares himself to a
snake that has sloughed off its old skin—and his notebooks abound in the kind of autobiographical
recollections and self-analyses that such moments are wont to elicit. (Autobiography, of course,
became a speciality of Sartre’s: *The Words*, his much admired exercise in the genre, won him the
Nobel Prize in 1964—which, characteristically, he refused.) We learn, for example, that from an
eyear early age Sartre was convinced he would become a great writer, dowered with a “great writer’s
life, as it appears from books.” And “as for the content of that life,” he writes,

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.

Various memoirs, especially those written by his friends, are at pains to declare Sartre’s modesty
and unpretentiousness; no doubt he was possessed of these virtues, though it clearly cannot be
said that he lacked self-confidence.

Sartre’s political enthusiasms, which later bulked so large in his work and personality, show
themselves in these notebooks only obliquely. He cites a contemporary critic, one Emile Bouvier,
who was dubious about the likelihood of Sartre’s becoming “a great novelist.” “It is to be feared,”
Bouvier wrote, “lest ... he may leave literature for philosophy, mysticism or social preaching.”
Sartre responded that he was “flabbergasted” by Bouvier’s remark: “I’d never have believed that
anyone would consign me to mysticism like that. And as for social preaching, M. Bouvier can set
his mind at ease.”

Sartre was of course correct about mysticism; but as for philosophy and social preaching—well,
here Bouvier would seem to have been closer to the mark. Concerning the latter, for example, one
thinks of Sartre’s vigorous—indeed, preachy—denunciations of the United States after the war, his
support of Soviet Russia during the last years of Stalin’s reign, or the steady stream of political
manifestos, pamphlets, and pronouncements that he issued in the Sixties and Seventies. Simone
de Beauvoir’s memoir of Sartre’s last years is replete with instances of his efforts in this direction.
Typical is a quotation she took from a preface Sartre wrote in 1972 for a book about Maoism in
France: “With their anti-authoritarian praxis the Maoists show themselves as the only
revolutionary force capable of adapting itself to the new forms of class war in the period of
organized capitalism.” Such passages are depressing not least because they reveal Sartre
descending to the level of a callow street-corner polemicist.

The subject of Sartre’s politics is a complicated one, fraught with heated verbiage and ideological
posturing. Any sustained consideration of his views must feature *Critique of Dialectical Reason*, in
which Sartre took issue with the extreme individualism of *Being and Nothingness* and his other earlier works. But what always seemed to matter above all to Sartre was maintaining his position as spokesman for whatever group was recognized as being to the left of the entrenched, institutionalized power structure, whether it be democratic, socialist, or Communist. This is an aspect of his social thought that did not change with *Critique of Dialectical Reason*. And in the end, it is difficult to disagree with Leszek Kolakowski’s observation, in *Main Currents of Marxism*, that Sartre’s “whole political activity was vitiated by a fear of being in the typical situation of an intellectual condemning events that he has no power to influence; in short, his ideology was that of a politician manqué, cherishing unfulfilled ambitions to be on the ‘inside.’”

The subject of Sartre’s politics is a complicated one, fraught with heated verbiage and ideological posturing.

Perhaps the most telling contribution to our understanding of Sartre that these notebooks make is in the spectacle they provide of him transforming the fabric of his everyday life into material for philosophical reflection. For Sartre, life was essentially an agenda for reflection. No feeling, no sensitivity, no impression is left unencumbered by interpretation; no interpretation is left undisciplined by further scrutiny. Not even the humble struggle against corpulence is exempt from elaborate speculative embroidery. “Every four or five months,” Sartre writes, “I look at my stomach and get unhappy.” Yet having then resolved to abstain from bread and wine, he finds himself tempted by a carafe of wine one day at lunch:

But, precisely, if Nothingness is introduced into the world through man, anguish at Nothingness is simply anguish at freedom, or if you prefer, freedom’s anguish at itself. If, for example, I experienced a slight anguish yesterday before the wine which I could but should not drink, it’s because the “I shouldn’t” was already in the past... and nothing could prevent me from drinking. It was before that particular nothing I was so anguished; that nothingness of my past’s means of acting on my present... [N]othing allows me to foresee what I shall do and, even if I were able to foresee it, nothing could prevent me from doing it. So anguish is indeed the experience of Nothingness, hence it isn’t a psychological phenomenon. It’s an existential structure of human reality, it’s simply freedom becoming conscious of itself as being its own nothingness.

Sartre’s notebooks are full of such meditations. Taken together, they reveal a mind that does not so much practice philosophy as exude it; anything and everything, the whole range of his experience, is immediately taken up and digested by reflection. The smallest detail of his or his colleagues’ behavior, the most trivial news report: for Sartre they are “understood” only when translated out of their native element and subjected to systematic philosophical probing. In one revealing passage, Sartre wrote that “The truth is, I treat my feelings as ideas: with an idea, one pushes it till
Sartre's tremendous appetite for abstraction and his suspicion of the life of feeling is particularly evident in his uncompromising, absolutist approach to the cardinal existentialist virtues of authenticity and freedom. In *Being and Nothingness*, for example, Sartre defines freedom as a spontaneous "upsurge" that is "beyond causes, motives, ends." Sartre's discussion of freedom, both in the notebooks and in *Being and Nothingness*, is elusive to say the least; but it is worth noting that without "causes, motives, or ends" the idea of freedom must remain empty. For if it is to be more than mere accident or spontaneity, if it is not to be arbitrary, then freedom must be limited by particular choices that are based on intelligible criteria—criteria that are in some sense given, not (as Sartre would have it) "freely produced." In default of such criteria, freedom can be little more than an invigorating slogan. Nevertheless, while he values it above all else, freedom for Sartre is more man's fate and burden than choice; ineradicable, it is yet too absolute to be fully grasped or realized; hence one is not so much privileged as "condemned to be free."

And while anything like a definition of authenticity is hard to come by in Sartre's work, it is clear that (at least through *Being and Nothingness*) he understood it to be characterized chiefly by the individual's defiant assertion of unqualified freedom in the face of an essentially absurd reality. And since unqualified freedom entails unqualified responsibility, authenticity, as Sartre insisted in the notebooks, meant being "totally responsible for one's life." "In short," he wrote, "I was seeking the absolute, I wanted to be an absolute, and that's what I called morality."

Of course the problem is that the absolute, by nature completely abstract, is too empty to serve as a criterion for morals or a cue for authenticity. But as a rhetorical trope, allegiance to the absolute can exert a powerful appeal. And Sartre's understanding of authenticity, tinged as it is with such Romantic longing, exploits that appeal to the hilt: "In relation to Gauguin, Van Gogh and Rimbaud," he noted in an early notebook entry, "I have a distinct inferiority complex because they managed to destroy themselves .... I am more and more convinced that, in order to achieve authenticity, something has to snap."

It follows that, in Sartre's view, authenticity flourishes best in extreme situations. After a brief leave in Paris, for example, he remarked that "it's much easier to live decently and authentically in wartime than in peacetime." But like so much in Sartre's notebooks—indeed, like so much in his work generally—this statement is at once arresting yet open to serious question. What gives it an air of plausibility is the truth that exceptional situations can call forth exceptional virtues. Plunged into crisis, men and women often experience moments of moral clarity that are rare in everyday life. And they sometimes respond to such situations with uncommon selflessness and valor.

But does this mean that it is easier to live "decently and authentically" during war than in peace? On the contrary, hasn't war time and again been the occasion of profound moral degradation and anarchy? The notion that it is somehow easier to live "authentically" in war than in the "bourgeois" stability of peace will suggest itself seriously only to someone who discounts the importance of ordinary social life in forming our ideas of authenticity, someone for whom "the
authentic” is paradigmatically a lonely battle of an aloof and isolated self. “I rather think I was authentic before my leave,” Sartre wrote. “Probably,” he explained, “because I was alone.”

Just how aloof and isolated Sartre conceives the self to be is exemplified in his contention that “the first value and first object of will is: to be its own foundation.” Or, as he put it—somewhat more bluntly—in Being and Nothingness, “the best way to conceive the fundamental project of human reality is to say that man is the being whose project is to be God.” This is not of course to suggest that Sartre believes that God exists. On the contrary, he tells us in the notebooks that he has been an atheist since the age of twelve. And he proceeds, in a later passage, to describe God as an “impossible synthesis of in-itself and for-itself, of total opacity and total freedom, the causa sui ...” (my emphasis). Yet according to Sartre, the idea of God, though self-contradictory, functions as the ineluctable (if usually unacknowledged) ideal to which we all aspire. Mankind, he writes in Being and Nothingness, is “perpetually haunted by a totality . . . without being able to be it.”

The thought that man’s “fundamental project” is to be his own foundation—that is, to be God—stands at the center of Sartre’s philosophy. And this is also to say that Sartre’s philosophy is saturated with what the tradition called pride. “For what is pride,” asked Augustine, “except a perverse kind of exaltation? For it is a perverse kind of exaltation to abandon the basis on which the mind should be firmly fixed, and to become, as it were, based on itself.” It underlies, for example, the famous—and deeply Schopenhauerean—conclusion to the main text of Being and Nothingness, that “man is a useless passion”—”useless” because his every action is haunted by a desire that for a mortal, finite creature is essentially self-contradictory: the desire to be completely sovereign, autonomous, self-sufficient, the desire to be God. And it provides the philosophical conviction that justifies Sartre’s constitutional uneasiness with anything that threatens to compromise his sense of mastery and control. “I am nothing but pride and lucidity,” he confesses at one point in the notebooks; and whatever impinges on that pride or obscures that lucidity will be a source of anguish.

The situation that Sartre outlines takes on tragic dimensions when one realizes that the catalogue of threats to man’s pride basically includes the whole of existence: anything organic, mutable, uncertain, anything real that exists independently of man’s will and thought is immediately suspect. “The essential thing,” Sartre’s Antoine Roquentin explains in Nausea, “is contingency. I mean that one cannot define existence as necessity.” Hence the “horrible ecstasy” that Roquentin experiences in the face of the roots of a chestnut tree:

The chestnut tree pressed itself against my eyes. Green rust covered it half-way up; the bark, black and swollen, looked like boiled leather .... I realized that there was no halfway house between non-existence and this flaunting abundance. If you existed, you had to exist all the way, as far as mouldiness, bloatedness, obscenity were concerned. In another world, circles, bars of music keep their pure and rigid lines. But existence is a yielding ....

Like Sartre himself, Roquentin finds the organic world—unwieldy and subject as it is to change and decay—a frightening and vertiginous affront to pride. What Roquentin craves is a pristine,
necessary world of pure abstraction, a world where everything is subject to the dictates of thought; his “circles and bars of music,” rather like the stable inherent “beauty of figures” of “something straight or round” that Plato praises in the *Philebus*, answer to this desire: completely comprehensible, they do not challenge his demand for mastery and control.

Even language is a source of anguish. Roquentin dreams of a language that can “catch the secret smiles of things seen absolutely without men,” that can articulate “a discreet, tenacious meaning—very precise, but escaping from the words for ever.” But this means that he seeks a language without words, a language that would be fully commensurate with what it describes, a language beyond any merely human language, which never captures things just as they are; what he seeks, in short, is the language of God.

---

Plunged into crisis, men and women often experience moments of moral clarity that are rare in everyday life.

Sartre’s understanding of man’s fundamental project also has profound implications for his view of relations with other people. If one desires to be God, then the very existence of others will be felt as a threatening infringement of one’s sovereignty. Because man’s pride demands complete self-sufficiency, relations with other people are from the beginning cast into the essentially antagonistic mold of power relations, the mold of a Hobbesian “bellum omnium contra omnes.” It follows that, as Sartre wrote in *Being and Nothingness*, “conflict is the original meaning of being-for-others.” Indeed, from this point of view, as Garcin exclaimed near the end of *No Exit*, “L’Enfer, c’est les Autres”: (Hell is other people.) Not without reason is this line so widely identified with the Sartrean philosophy. Sartre’s basic view of “Concrete Relations with Others,” as he put it in the title of one of the most influential chapters of *Being and Nothingness*, is evident in his rhetoric. He speaks throughout his work—even in the more or less private pages of his notebooks—not of “other people” or “human relations” but always of “the Other,” as if this strangely impersonal, dehumanizing locution named our most common experiences of other people.

Not surprisingly, sexuality, which continually reminds man of his lack of self-sufficiency and fundamental neediness, is especially problematic for Sartre. It offers an unparalleled field for the exercise of power but at the same time it constitutes a tremendous threat to autonomy. Hence Sartre’s notorious description of female sexuality in *Being and Nothingness*:
The obscenity of the feminine sex is that of everything which “gapes open.” It is an appeal to being as all holes are. In herself woman appeals to a strange flesh which is to transform her into a fullness of being by penetration and dissolution .... Beyond any doubt her sex is a mouth and a voracious mouth which devours the penis—a fact which can easily lead to the idea of castration.

Similar passages abound in the notebooks: “. . . the hole is often resistance. It must be forced, in order to pass through. Thereby it is already feminine. It is resistance by Nothingness, in other words modesty. This is obviously why it attracts sexuality (will to power, rape, etc.).”

“Obviously”? Sartre offers these observations as rigorous descriptions of “one of the most fundamental tendencies of human reality—the tendency to fill.” But are they really anything more than symptoms of Sartre’s own psychopathology, based in the end on his obsession with autonomy and dressed up in the language of philosophy? Whatever insight into sexuality and human relations such meditations may provide, they surely give weight to Iris Murdoch’s description of Sartre as “a connoisseur of the abnormal.”

Sartre’s existentialist rhetoric bristles with condemnations of “reification” and treating people as objects—as “means” rather than “ends.” But as these notebooks abundantly reveal, both his temperament and underlying view of man incline him to do just that. “Nothing is dearer to me than the freedom of those I love,” Sartre writes in a passage in which he discusses seduction, “but the fact is this freedom is dear to me provided I don’t respect it at all. It’s a question not of suppressing it, but of actually violating it ... . that’s what the desire to be loved means: to hit the Other in the Other’s absolute freedom.” He goes on to note the “impossibility ... of conceiving a happy love after the seduction. Once the woman had been conquered, I no longer had any idea what to do with her.” Sartre admits that this view of love is “utterly inauthentic,” but at the same time he insists that it is “the commonest and strongest form of love” and he fails, either in the notebooks or in Being and Nothingness, to provide a convincing description of what a more “authentic” version of love would look like.

Indeed, without the erotic charge that allows for seduction, Sartre finds that he is basically uninterested in people. Friendship “bores” him, he tells us, and his relations with men tend to be tenuous and superficial. “In short, there’s one half of humanity that hardly exists for me.” The ideal of self-sufficiency renders the pleasures of ordinary friendship superfluous. “I think I have no need of friends,” Sartre writes, “because, basically, I don’t need anybody .... I prefer to derive everything from myself.”

It is, I think, fair to describe Sartre’s view of human relations as somber. But interestingly, Sartre himself would have rejected the characterization. “Seriousness,” in fact, was his great enemy. Thus in the concluding pages of Being and Nothingness, in a section entitled “Existentialist Ethics,” Sartre attacks “the spirit of seriousness,” primarily because it compromises freedom by affirming values that are in some sense “transcendent”—that is, given independently of human subjectivity. And near the end of the notebooks Sartre reflects that he has “never wanted to live seriously. I’ve been able to put on a show-to know pathos, and anguish, and joy. But never, never have I known
seriousness. My whole life has been just a game: sometimes long and tedious, sometimes in bad
taste— but a game. And this war is just a game for me.” Sartre defines “game” as “the happy
metamorphosis of the contingent into the gratuitous,” and alludes for support to Schiller’s
celebrated contention that “Man plays only when he is in the full sense of the word a man, and
he is only wholly Man when he is playing.” But it is important to note that Sartre ignores the caveat
with which Schiller immediately precedes this passage: “Man shall only play with Beauty, and he
shall play only with Beauty.” Though man is “serious with the agreeable, the good, the perfect,”
writes Schiller, “with Beauty he plays.” Schiller’s task here is not to subvert “seriousness” tout court,
but to insure that the realm of beauty and aesthetics remains free from the intrusion of moralistic
imperatives. Sartre, however, refuses such distinctions. Instead, he embraces a deep, self-centered
aestheticism that would regard the whole of existence—even his lovers, even war—as an
untoward eruption of contingency that can be disarmed only by being mastered and transformed
into a game of his own device.

1. For a lucid introduction to the intricacies of Sartre’s argument, especially in Being and
Nothingness, I refer the reader to Arthur C. Danto’s Jean-Paul Sartre (The Viking Press, 1975).

Roger Kimball is Editor and Publisher of The New Criterion and President and Publisher of
Encounter Books. His latest books include The Fortunes of Permanence: Culture and Anarchy in an
Age of Amnesia (St. Augustine’s Press) and Who Rules? Sovereignty, Nationalism, and the Fate of
Freedom in the Twenty-first Century (Encounter Books).

This article originally appeared in The New Criterion, Volume 4 Number 1 , on page 73
Copyright © 2021 The New Criterion | www.newcriterion.com
https://newcriterion.com/issues/1985/9/the-war-according-to-sartre