

SARTRE, UN HOMME POSTMODERNE?

Toward the end of his fine book, *Sartre's Political Theory*, William McBride suggests that "the Sartre of the last active years is in many respects *un homme postmoderne*."¹ As evidence he cites the importance of the "singulae" in Sartre's application of the singular universal in *The Family Idiot*², but also mentions in passing "a brief essay" of 1971 "concerning a political trial (in Spain) of Basque separatists."³ I agree that there is a strain of the postmortem in the later Sartre and in this regard he can be seen to contest certain of his earlier, modernist, convictions. What Sartre's later views are on the modern/postmodern quarrel regarding the universal are apparent, I believe, in the contrast between Sartre's essay on the Basques, "The Burgos Trial," which was written as a preface for a book on a trial of Basque separatists, *Proces de Burgos*, by Gisele Halimi⁴, and a previous preface, "Black Orpheus," written for a collection of black African revolutionary poetry, *Anthologie de la nouvelle poesie negre et malgache de langue française*, edited by Leopold Sedar-Senghor⁵ in 1948.

When Sartre wrote "Black Orpheus" he had recently published

¹ William J. McBride, *Sartre's Political Theory* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991), p. 192.

² Jean-Paul Sartre, *The Family Idiot*, 5 vols., trans. Carol Cosman (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981-93).

³ McBride, *Sartre's Political Theory*, p. 192.

⁴ Gisele Halimi, *Proces de Burgos* (Paris: Gallimard, 1971); Jean-Paul Sartre, "The Burgos Trial," in *Life/Situations: Essays Written and Spoken*, trans. Paul Auster and Lydia Davis (New York: Pantheon, 1977), pp. 135-161; hereafter BT.

⁵ Leopold Sedar-Senghor, *Anthologie de la nouvelle poesie negre et malgache de langue française*

(Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1948); Jean-Paul Sartre, "Black Orpheus," trans. John McCombie in *What Is Literature? and Other Essays* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1988); hereafter BO

"What Is Literature?"⁶, an under appreciated work in which he attempts to sketch out an authentic ethics and politics as alternatives to the bad faith relationships discussed at length in *Being and Nothingness*⁷. *Sartre's analysis centers on the communicative function of language, a function he sees at work in prose, but not in poetry. In prose, the writer uses words to designate things. In their designative functioning, according to Sartre, words are "transparent," disappearing into their designative role, whereas poets employ words as "things," drawing attention to their feel, look, and sound. Poets use words as objects to induce images, whereas prose writers use words to reveal the world, raising our experience of the world to the thematic level where it is presented to others for their evaluation and response.*

Literature presupposes a communicative life which is a dialectic between writer and reader, wherein each recognizes the freedom of the other (affording a glimpse into a positive reciprocity in human relationships which was lacking in Being and Nothingness). Communicative life, expressed in literature, implies an ideal community, a collaborative use of freedoms in co-creating the literary work (aesthetic object). Writing is an "appeal" or "address" and reading is a "response" of one freedom to another. Sartre refers this ideal community to Kant's "City of Ends," "that chorus of good wills which Kant has called the City of Ends, which thousands of readers all over the world who do not know each other are, at every moment, helping to maintain." (WIL, 218-19)

Sartre goes on to contrast the ideal community implicated in the communicative life of literature with the actual, historical, circumstances of literature, by distinguishing between its actual and virtual audience. The virtual audience is composed of all who can possibly read and respond to the work, while the actual audience consists of those who, under specific historical conditions, know how to read, have access to books, etc.. Much of "What Is Literature?" is spent in showing the impact of class structure on the actual life of literature, how certain people were excluded from participating in the

⁶ Jean-Paul Sartre, "What Is Literature?," trans. Bernard Frechtman, in *@! Is Literature? and Other Essays*, pp. 24-23 8; hereafter WIL.

⁷ Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, trans. Hazel Barnes (New York: Philosophical Library, 1943), Part three, chapter three.

communicative life of literature, and of how, in Sartre's eyes, this constitutes a distortion of the essence of literary communication. Using examples taken from the practices of writing in the twelfth, seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth centuries, he attempts to display the contradiction between the ideal (and universal reach) of literature and its historical particularity and alienation. There is only one way, for Sartre, to bring actual societal life into conformity with the demands of the essence of literature: "In essence, *actual* literature can only realize its full *essence* in a classless society." (WIL, 189) The realization of Kant's City of Ends calls for a Marxist revolution.

Only in a classless society will literature realize its universal essence, free of particular distortions. It is the very tension and opposition between particular and universal that affords Sartre the critical leverage required for indicting oppressive situations. Yet his commitment to universality has a distinctively modernist, even Habermasian flavor, in its utopian ideality of undistorted communication in "the reign of human freedom. To be sure, this is utopian. It is possible to conceive this society, but we have no practical means at our disposal of realizing it. It has allowed us to perceive the conditions under which literature might manifest itself in its fullness and purity." (WIL, 140) "What Is Literature?" is a work which embraces utopian universalism in its call for a "total freedom," which is "the freedom of changing everything..." (WIL, 13 9) Commitment to total freedom justified extensive violence in Sartre's eyes because any lack of transparency was, from his point of view, due to bad will. This directly issues from his view of language as a transparency, of how language is a tool constituted and controlled by each consciousness, of how meaning is an affair of consciousness and its intentions.

Shortly after the publication of "What Is Literature?", Sartre modified his position that poetry could only be apolitical because of its narcissistic relationship to language. In "Black Orpheus" Sartre proclaims that "black poetry in the French language is, in our time, the only great revolutionary poetry." (BO, 295) The French colonizer has set itself up in the minds of the colonized through teaching them the French language. "And since words are ideas, when the Negro declares in French that he rejects French culture, he accepts with one hand what he rejects with the other." (BO, 301) The French language, according to Sartre, reflects an historical collectivity forged over time to respond to contingent needs and circumstances, and is "unsuitable" to furnish the

Negro "with the means of speaking about himself, his own anxieties, his own hopes." (BO, 301) A straightforward use of words by the Negro who would speak prose would constitute a failure to speak the Negro's experience. Poetry allows for a speaking of experience that simultaneously performs an "autodestruction of language." Poetry offers opportunity for 'The black herald ... to *deFrenchify* [words]; he will crush them, break their usual associations, he will violently couple them...." (BO, 303) The poet will use words to "evoke" and "suggest" and "incant" a "silence" beyond the words, the silence of the experience of colonized negritude. This revelatory silence functions as did prose in "What Is Literature?", as a presentation of the world for purposes of evaluation and change.

One sees in "Black Orpheus" that Sartre displays a sensitivity toward language's being, its thickness, historical contingency, and the specificity of its meanings (all of which have the effect of decentering the individual speaker's or writer's intentional control) as opposed to its "transparency," which results in his changed views on the prose/poetry distinction as elaborated in "What Is Literature?". At the same time he appears to suggest that this deference to the particular and the contingent is only a dialectically transient moment, one which will be succeeded by the triumph of the universal over the particular. The black herald's stubborn protestation of his or her particular experience is seen to be only a temporal phase to be surpassed into a future universal synthesis.

It is when negritude renounces itself that it finds itself, it is when it accepts losing that it has won: the colored man-and he alone-can be asked to renounce the pride of his color. He is the one who is walking on this ridge between past particularism which he has just climbed-and future universalism, which will be the twilight of his his negritude; he is the one who looks to the end of particularism in order to find the dawn of the universal. (BO, 328-29)

Sartre views the black poets' works in terms of the modernist understanding of the universal in "What Is Literature?". As works of art these revolutionary poems are "a call to the spectator's liberty and absolute generosity" (BO, 313) and thus implicate the ideal City of Ends and a universal freedom. Their works, with all their specificity,

are "grafted," Sartre tells us, "onto another branch of the universal Revolution" (BO,313) to produce the classless person who would be the incarnation of "universal man."

While in "Black Orpheus" one finds an understanding of a dialectic in which the particular is surpassed into the universal ("It is the dialectical law of successive transformations which lead the Negro to coincidence with himself in negritude," only under the proviso that "negritude is for destroying itself; it is a 'crossing to' and not an 'arrival at', a means and not an end" (BO, 307; 327)), in "The Burgos Trial" one finds a different, nonreductive, relationship of universal and particular.

"The Burgos Trial" concerns the issue of Basque separatism, which Sartre uses to attack the "abstract universalism" of left and right.

The Spanish exploit the Basques *because they are Basques*. Without ever admitting it officially, they are convinced that the Basques are *other*, both ethically and culturally. (147) In this sense, Basque culture today must be first of all a counterculture. It is created by destroying Spanish culture, by rejecting the universalist humanism of the central powers, by making a constant and mighty effort to reclaim Basque reality. (BT, (147; 150)

In the "Burgos Trial" Sartre comes to see that "universal humanism" is based upon a type of abstract man" which is oppressively utilized to reduce what is different under the guise of unity: "Behind the unity which is such a source of pride to the great powers is oppression of ethnic groups and the hidden or open use of repression." (BT, 137) Sartre sees in the Basques "a glimpse of *another* kind of socialism," one which reflects his understanding of the "singular universal," in which the political is inseparable from the contingent, social, and historical:

What the ETA [Independence Party] reveals to us is the need of all men, even centralists to affirm their particularities against their universality. To listen to the voices of the Basques, the Bretons, the Occitanians, and to struggle beside them so that they may affirm their concrete singularity, is to fight for ourselves as

well.....(BT 161)

Here one finds no surpassing of the particular into the universal, but rather an attempt to reconceive the goals of an ideal City of Ends (freedom, reciprocity) in a way which recognizes the irreducible facticity, particularity of the concrete. The Basques, Sartre claims, provide a lesson to "the descendents of the Jabobins" (BT, 160), a lesson that today we recognize as postmodern. Whereas in "Black Orpheus" negritude would disappear with the "abolition of racial differences" and will destroy itself in "the synthesis or realization of the human being in a raceless society," in "The Burgos Trial," social revolution can come about "only through a cultural revolution which creates the socialist man *on the basis of* his land, his language, and even his re-emergent customs." (BT, 160, emphasis added) All social change occurs within a particular context with a contingency of its own which must be taken into account. Specificity and locality are, for Sartre, inevitably part of all thought and action. This by no means means that the universal disappears from Sartre's thought. It always remains an horizontal ideal (freedom, equality- socialism), but is realizable (and meaningful) only in its particular applications, which are inevitably adaptations. It is not a question of reducing either the universal or the particular, but of thinking them together.

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