

SARTRE'S LAST PHILOSOPHY:

A FEMINIST INTERPRETATION

Sartre's writing power - his ability to spawn several thousand words a day at a feverish pace, and to write books such as *The Family Idiot*, whose three published volumes number several thousand pages - is legendary. When a stroke left him in quasi-blindness in 1973, he became extremely despondent because of his inability to finish the fourth Flaubert volume. His colleagues at *Les Temps Modernes* saw this as the demise of his philosophizing.

Sartre's despondency was short-lived however: he soon found a new mode of expression, the dialogical format of the interview, which corresponded to, and helped express the ideas of what turned out to be one of the most creative periods of his life. Sartre's colleagues seem to have ignored the new ideas which Sartre formulated in the numerous interviews of that period, probably regarding them as innocuous because they did not conform to what they construed to be Sartrianism. This was the case with the eight-hundred-page text *Pouvoir et Liberté*, which was the result of six years of work, that is innumerable hours of dialogue between Sartre and Benny Lévy, which Sartre planned to publish in the fall of 1980. For, Sartre's *confrères* viewed Lévy as Sartre's hired reader - not his intellectual equal.

When, however, Sartre decided to publish passages of the *Pouvoir et Liberté* text - under the title of *Hope Now* - in *Le Nouvel Observateur*, in March 1980, and his colleagues took cognizance of the plan, they all went up in arms and tried unsuccessfully to stop its publication. They were first of all appalled by the extreme familiarity with which Lévy treated Sartre publicly, addressing him with the intimate *tu* (whereas they all, including Beauvoir herself, addressed him with the formal *vous*).

They also perceived the text to be unSartrian, and accused

Lévy of having manipulated Sartre to contradict himself - to reverse the two fundamental themes of *Being and Nothingness*, the desire to be and the basic conflict of consciousnesses through the look, to a fervent desire for society, and to an interdependence of consciousnesses. Moreover, Beauvoir accused Sartre of weakening what she called the strong notion of "fraternity" in the *Critique of Dialectical Reason*, to a "fraternity" without violence in *Hope Now*.¹

Beauvoir and the Sartrians were also very disturbed by what appeared to be the influence of Lévy's messianism on Sartre's thought and by Sartre's replacing his former philosophy of despair by a philosophy of hope. oddly enough, they did not say anything about the most important new notion which Sartre here calls the basis of "fraternity" - the suggestion that all "men" are born of one mother. This may have been because Lévy himself strongly objected to this notion.

1. The Text Itself.

Before I give an *aperçu* of the text, I need to say a few words about Lévy himself and his relationship to Sartre. He was certainly no ordinary secretary, for he was the former Maoist leader in France². Sartre had joined the ranks of the Maoists after their ascendancy following the May 1968 events, finding in their company the solidarity he had found neither with the communists nor with the Algerian rebels. In 1970, Lévy had asked him to edit his paper *La Cause du Peuple*. And in 1973, at the onset of his blindness and shortly before the dissolution of the Maoist group, Sartre had hired Lévy as a reader.

Hope is the theme of the first, as well as of the last

¹ J.P.Sartre and Benny Lévy. *Hope Now, the 1980 Interviews*, with an introduction by Ronald Aronson. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996. Trans. by Adrien van den Hoven. *J.P.Sartre: Entretiens avec Benny Lévy, L'Espoir Maintenant*. Le Nouvel Observateur, No. 800, 10, 17 & 24 mars 1980, thereafter HN. Annie Cohen-Solal. Sartre: A Life. New York: Pantheon Books, 1987. Trans. Anne Cancogni. *Sartre 1905-1980*. Paris: Gallimard, 1983, 652.

² As the Maoist leader, Lévy had taken, for a number of reasons, the "nom de guerrell Pierre Victor.

interview - in great contrast to the "hopeless passion" of "man" in *Being and Nothingness*. There, it was "man's" desire to be God and the fact that he could not achieve this which had led him to despair (HN 54). But Sartre now admits to Lévy that he himself never actually experienced despair! Sartre tells Lévy in the first interview, we do so in the hope lies in the fact whenever we undertake an action, we do so in the hope that it will be successful. And he insists in the last interview that although the growing chasm between the rich and the poor might well lead him to despair, he will die in hope, in a hope which is rooted in his vision of solidarity and a new humanity.

"Man's desire for society" is an essential aspect of this new vision and Sartre really believes that once "man" becomes conscious of his "fellowman", everything "will fall into place" (HN 61). This means that it is the establishing of human relations which makes us human, or "the striving to live beyond ourselves in the society of human beings" (HN 69). This is in complete opposition to *Being and Nothingness* where (as Sartre tells it now) consciousness had "no reciprocal - no other" and was therefore "too independent" from the other. Rather, he now sees each individual as dependent on everyone else. "Each consciousness is necessarily linked to and often engendered by the presence of another" (HN 71).

Moreover, in "Self-Portrait at Seventy", Sartre attributes "transparency" to this new future intersubjective consciousness. This implies a reciprocal self-gifting, without the withholding of any secret whatsoever³. Sartre tells his interviewer Michel Contat, that "transparency should be substituted for secrecy", so that each's subjective life is yielded to the other along with their objective life (HN 11), and he explains candidly to Constat that, at this point in time, it is distrust, ignorance and fear which keeps us from being "as translucent as possible" (HN 12); that he himself has difficulty yielding his subjectivity to him because there are still in him things which "refuse to be said", such as "the sexual and erotic relations in my life" (HN 13, 1).

And in lieu of *Being and Nothingness* Is state of

³ J.P.Sartre. "La Gauche et le Désespoir". Interview par Catherine Clément-. Le Matin, Nov. 1979

constant conflict resulting from the other's alienating look, Sartre now hopes that in the future all human beings will be "'brothers' bound to each other in feeling and action" (HN 91). In that state, there will be a complete commonality of goods so that everyone will say to each other: "what I have is yours, what you have is mine. If I am in need, you give it to me, and if you are in need, I give it to you" (HN 91). It is only then that "fraternity" will be a bond between human beings.

This ideal of "fraternity" implies that human beings have gone from the "fraternity" of original small groups (linked to family), which are prone to transgression and violence, to a unique relation among human beings, which excludes any violence. At this point, Lévy harasses Sartre at length about the violence he had preconized as the basis of brotherhood in his *Critique* and in his preface to Fanon's *Wretched of the Earth*. Lévy judiciously relates this stance to Poulouls (young Sartre) playing Pardaillon war games in his childhood while his mother played the piano in the next room, and Sartre answers him "Don't forget: Poulou was fighting for himself against the bad guys" (HN 94).

Sartre no longer sees a link between fraternity and violence. Rather, he finds the roots of fraternity "in the relationship of being born of the same mother" (HN 87) (The French call this *le matriciel* or *the mother as matrix*.) This makes for a motivation which is affective and for an action which is practical. Sartre calls this relationship a "gift", or a feeling which originally everyone had, but which must now be rediscovered⁴. He is here rejoining not only his *Notebooks for an Ethics* ideas on the gift, but his *Wretched of the Earth* preface in which he had insisted that the natives must rediscover their "lost transparency" and "the unity one possesses at birth"⁵.

Lévy does not approve of Sartre's looking for unity in a

⁴ For a fuller treatment of this theme,, cf. Guillermine de Lacoste "The Beauvoir and Lévy Interviews: Toward a Feminine Economy." *Feminist InterpretationB Of Jean-Paul Sartre*, ed. Julien Murphy (University Park:Penn State University, 1999).

⁵ Franz Fanon. *The wretched of the Earth*, preface by J.P.Sartre. Trans. by Constance Farrington. New York: Grove Press, 1968, 19

romantic interpretation of the past. According to his own messianism, it is in the future only, in another world, that "men" will love each other in true "fraternity" (HN 106). But Sartre believes that messianism - "the replacing of the present society" by a juster society in which human beings can have good relations with each other - "can be used by non-Jews for other purposes" (HN 107). This open link of Sartre to messianism scandalized Beauvoir and the Sartrians.

2. Sartre's Evolution from a Masculine to a Feminine Economy.

What made Sartre change so radically from *Being and Nothingness* to *Hope Now*? Was he really bamboozled by Lévy as the Sartrians liked to believe? And how viable is Sartre's new thought? These questions are difficult to answer - for Sartre wrote all kinds of works between 1943 and 1980, was politically involved in many ventures, and his itinerary is therefore perplexing to track and to understand - unless we have a compass and a guide to help us discover his direction and the final goal of his journey.

The distinction which H  l  ne Cixous makes between masculine and feminine economies gives us exactly the compass we need to comprehend and follow Sartre's itinerary. Her metaphorical presentation of the story of Eve and the apple enables us to comprehend concretely the first criteria she uses in her distinction. As she tells it, the story is simple: on one side there is the law "which is absolute, verbal and visible", and which is not. Facing it, there is "the apple, which is, is, is"⁶. It is a struggle between the absence, the negation, the abstraction of a masculine economy, and the presence, the affirmation, the concreteness of a feminine economy. One's path through life in one economy or the other, or partly in both, depends on one's relationship to the law and to pleasure.

Cixous's second set of criteria is/are the two attitudes one can have towards giving. The proprietary attitude within a

⁶ H  l  ne CIXOUB. "Extreme Fidelity", in H  l  ne Cixous Reader, ed. Susan Sellers. New York: Routledge, 1994, 133

masculine economy is rooted in "man's desire to be (at) the origin"⁷. It turns gifting into an appropriation of the other. But within the feminine economy, there is no calculation in gifting, which is for the pleasure of the other, with no attempt "to recover one's expenses", for it is rooted in the capacity to deappropriate or "de-self" oneself."⁸

When we apply these two sets of criteria to Sartre's writings, it becomes evident that his thought has evolved from a masculine to a feminine economy. But we also need a guide who is well acquainted with the terrain of the journey. The Beauvoir of the 1974 interviews is the perfect guide for this venture. Through her insightful questioning of Sartre, she clearly uncovers the reason why his itinerary began with a masculine economy. This turns out to be a neurosis which is the result of his fear of abandon to/by his mother.

The existence of this fear first surfaces when she is interrogating him about his "subjective relation to his body"⁹. He explains to her that he always hated "abandon", that is lolling on the beach or the grass, much preferring to sit on a hard, jagged stone. He always reacted to any possibility of abandon to his body by "a certain crispation". Later on, when she tries to help Sartre find the origin of this fear, he concedes to her that, as a child, he had a horror of his mother's abandon. we must therefore take seriously his mention in *Les Mots* of his desire to have incest with his sister - most obviously his mother/sister in whose room he slept for twelve years - as well as his comment fifty years later that "incest is the only family relation which still moves me"¹⁰. And is this not a perfect example of the confrontation between the law, the incest taboo which is invisible and negative - and the apple - Sartre's charming mother, whose presence is irresistible for Poulou?

From both the Beauvoir interviews and *Les Mots*, we

⁷ Éléne Cixous. "The Newly Born Woman". Co-authored with Catherine Clément. Trans. from "La Jeune Née", 1975, in *Hélène Cixous Reader*, op. cit. p. 39.

⁸ *Ibid.* p. 44.

⁹ Simone de Beauvoir. *La Cérémonie des Adieux, suivi de Entretiens avec Jean-Paul Sartre*. Paris: Gallimard, 1981. Trans. Patrick O'Brian. *Adieux: A Farewell to Sartre*. New York: Pantheon Books, 1984, 396.

¹⁰ J.P.Sartre. *Les MOTB*. Paris: Gallimard, 1964, 54.

learn that Poulou reacted to his fear of incest by making a ritual of playing at Pardaillon, the hero who killed the hundreds of enemies who attacked him. The stiffening of his body in mock battle protected him from his vulnerability to incest. But we may well ask how does this predicament compare to that of other boys who develop Oedipus complexes within a patriarchal society? First, they have fathers, not only to contend with, but to eventually emulate, but Poulou's father had died when Poulou, was an infant. Secondly, most boys join other boys in their aggressive games, but Poulou was never accepted by a single group of boys playing at Pardaillon in the Luxembourg gardens. This means that he was never able to experience the fraternity boys feel when fighting together.

Thirdly, boys search for symbolic freedom in the social world. This way was available to Poulou under the guise of writing which his grandfather Schweitzer helped him to discover at the age of eight. Nausea and *Being and Nothingness* can be looked at as essential to his search and to his attempt to repress the incestuous taboos of the masculine economy. Nausea is thus the allegory of Poulou and young Sartre's own struggle against his desire for abandon to his mother. For Roquentin, the sudden uncontrollable giving in of his body to passivity/abandon is a completely negative experience, accompanied by strong nausea. The abandon of "all things" which "gently, tenderly, were letting themselves drift into existence"¹¹, is a lure and a veneer, Roquentin thinks. When this veneer melts, what remains are "soft, monstrous masses, all in disorder - naked in a frightful, obscene nakedness"¹². Only the stiffening of his body, as for activity (like Poulou/Pardaillon stiffening against his enemies), makes nausea temporarily vanish for a short while¹³. In *Being and Nothingness*, Sartre's struggle against his fear of incest, and his attempt to be in control of himself and of reality, is at once more metaphysically couched than in *Nausea*, and closer to Cixous's basic metaphorical opposition between the apple and

¹¹ J.P. Sartre. *Nausea*. New York: New Directions, 1964. Trans. by Lloyd Alexander. La NaUBée. Paris: Gallimard, 1938, 172.

¹² Loc. cit.

¹³ Ibid. p. 38.

the law. Here Sartre expresses/represses his fear of self-abandon to the presence of the apple - his fear of receptivity, of jouissance, of openness to the (m)other - by the creation of two antagonistic categories, the in-itself which, like Cixous's apple, is , is , is,,¹⁴ , and the for-itself which, like Cixous's law, is abstract and is not.

Sartre attempted to leave behind his masculine economy in his late forties *Notebooks for an Ethics*. However, it was not until he had become aware of his "childhood socialization"¹⁵ and especially of the great importance of his neurosis, that he was able to really make an exit from it. As he says in "Itinerary of a Thought", neuroses are the result of wounds suffered in the process of living one's childhood, and although they are bandaged again and again by society, they go on bleeding until they are comprehended.¹⁶

My conjecture is that Sartre was able to come to a comprehension of his own neurosis by writing extensively about other neurotic persons who had been conditioned by their circumstances: Genet, Freud, Flaubert. In the process, he certainly learned that neuroses are shaped by each individual's experience, that, for example, whereas Flaubert's neurosis compelled him to give in to passivity and to forego activity, his own (Sartre's) neurosis compelled him, on the contrary, to fear abandon and to turn to frantic intellectual activity. Having comprehended all this and having also been accepted by the Maoists as one of them, he was ready for the *Hope Now* interviews with Benny Lévy.

¹⁴ Cf. "the in-itself is what it is", in J.P. Sartre *Being and Nothingness*. New York: New York Philosophical Library, 1956. Trans. Hazel Barnes. *L'Être et le Néant*. Paris: Gallimard, 1953, p. LXV.

¹⁵ Of course, as Margaret Simons has well shown, it was Beauvoir who initiated Sartre to the great influence of childhood socialization on a person's life and thought. Beauvoir's role here in getting Sartre to do the same thing for himself is vital. Cf. Margaret Simons "Beauvoir and Sartre: The Philosophical Relationship-". *Simone de Beauvoir: Witness to a Century*. Yale University French Studies, No. 72, 1986, pp. 173-178.

¹⁶ J.P. Sartre. "The Itinerary of a Thought", in *Between Existentialism and Marxism*. New York: Pantheon Books, 1974. Trans. John Mathews. *Situation VIII and Situation IX*. Paris: Gallimard, 1972, 39.

Here, instead of running away from his fear of abandon to his mother, he acknowledges it. There are no more fears to repress. There is no more need of Pardaillon games for Poulou/Sartre because there are no more "bad guys" (fear of abandon to the body and to feelings). There is therefore no need of violence to fight the "bad guys". Now "men" are "brothers" in action because of their relationship to a(n) (m)other. This enables Sartre to move away from the closed society of the patriarchy with its primarily rational order or the law and its acceptance of violence, and to go back to "the original primary relationship" with its emphasis on feeling and solidarity.

He has almost fulfilled his 1947 *Notebooks* ideal of "getting rid of one's ego", which coincides so well with Cixous's vision of de-selfing or de-egoisation. He has joined up with what Cixous terms "a universe without fear or remorse"¹⁷. And he wants to extend this feeling to all of "mankind". Thus he finds great similarities between Lévy's messianism which is about "the beginning of the existence of men who live for each other" (HN 110), and his own vision in which human beings will live more humanely in relation to each other.

3. Validity of Sartre's Vision.

One of Sartre's critics, Dominick Di Capra, looks at Sartre's last philosophy - especially his ideal of transparency - as an ill-conceived "visionary utopia". He sees the total transparency eulogized by Sartre as a "totally blind" approach, leading to the possibility of "total power and control", or to a society as "unlivably hellish as an opaquely closed society".¹⁸ Eléonor Kuykendall, on the other hand, looks at the notion of transparency most favorably. She contrasts it sharply with the controlling look in *Being and Nothingness*. For, she explains, transparency means abandon of reflective control. "In transparent interpersonal relationships, there is no question of

¹⁷ Héléne Cixous. "Extreme Fidelity". Op. cit. p. 135.

¹⁸ Dominick Di Capra. "Sartre and the Question of Biography", in *Sartre's Life, Times and Visions du Monde*, ed. by William McBride. New York: Garland, 1997, 178.

dominance, because there is no question of engaging in consciously controlled action toward another".¹⁹ This is certainly what Sartre has in mind.

But Kuykendall reserves her criticism for Sartre's *matriciel* with its gender-specific terminology and its advocacy of a non-reciprocal relationship between the mother and the brothers who depend on her for nurturance. She is certainly right about Sartre's sexist terminology. I have chosen not to address the problem in this paper - except by putting quotation marks around any gender-specific word - and to deal rather with the basic feminism implied in Sartre's thought.

His new emphasis on the mother's nurturance - or the lack of it - first in *The Family Idiot*, then in *Hope Now*, is the result of his gradual overcoming of his neurosis concerning his mother, and indicates a most desirable shift away from his masculine economy. There is no doubt in my mind that this shift is partially the result of the feeling of liberation that Sartre must have experienced when his mother died in 1969, only eleven years before his own death. Had he lived longer, he would probably have been able to evolve further psychologically toward the completely reciprocal mother-son relationship which, as Kuykendall indicates, is a sign of maturity.

Another critic, Stuart Charmé, also welcomes the change brought about by Sartre's new orientation, away from "a model of the self based on the male experience of separation from the original attachment to the mother"²⁰ towards "a relational model of the self" based on the *matriciel*, that is on a "fraternity" rooted in "the bond of tenderness" linking the 21 He suggests however, that this model infant to her mother.²¹ is close to that of the goddess mother rediscovered by advocates of a "postmodern spirituality". And here he definitely misses the mark.

¹⁹ "Eléonor Kuykendall. "Sartre on Violence and Fraternity", in *Sartre's Life, Times and Visions du Monde*, op. cit., 293.

²⁰ Stuart Charmé. *Vulgarity and Authenticity: Dimensions of Otherness in the world of Jean-Paul Sartre*. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1991, 237.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 236.

It is Sandra Lee Bartky who, in her article on Scheler's "Mitgefühl" or "fellow-feeling", in which she speaks of "the utopian vision... of a new heaven and a new earth", which is basic to the women's movement, best validates Sartre's final vision, as well as my suggestion that it belongs to a feminine economy.²² Her acceptance of the "emotional identification" with another's feelings - which Scheler rejects as inauthentic - certainly jibes not only with Nel Noddings's view on caring to which she refers, but to Sartre's view on transparency. For while according to Noddings, caring means receiving "the other into myself" and seeing and feeling with the other²³, for Sartre, transparency begins to take place when two persons in a deep conversation not only hold the same view, but "see into the depth of themselves from this point of view".²⁴

And Bartky's interpretation and approval of Scheler's genuine "Mitgefühl- as "a yearning for a more solidary world in which one might love others and be loved by them in return"²⁵, is certainly also very close to Sartre's yearning for "fraternity" with all members of humanity. But she wonders why our "Mitgefühl- is so often narrowed down to a few friends, our family and the occasional "beached whale".²⁶ And she ponders how we could learn to extend it to the "wretched of the earth"²⁷. She is obviously not willing to accept Bergson's verdict according to which our modern societies are „closed", for their members "hold together, caring nothing about the rest of humanity ; 2' and there is no possible passage to an "open society" embracing all of humanity²⁸, which is only "a dream dreamt".²⁹

²² Sandra Lee Bartky. "Sympathy and Solidarity: On a Tight Rope with Scheler", in *Feminists Rethink the Self*, ed. Diana Tietjens Meyers .Boulder: West View Press, 1997, 181.

²³ Nel Noddings. *Caring: A Feminine Approach to Ethics and Moral Education*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984, 30

²⁴ J.P.Sartre. "La Gauche et le Désespoir". Op. cit.

²⁵ Bartky. Op. cit., 187.

²⁶ Ibid., 193.

²⁷ Loc. cit.

²⁸ Henri Bergson. *The Two Sources of Morality and Religion*. New York:

Doubleday, 1935, 266.

²⁹ Ibid., 267.

But Bartky would surely be elated to learn that there is a way to widen the scope of one's love of friends and family (which is by nature quite proprietary and closed, and which bases its morality on abstract rational laws). As Cixous tells it, and as Sartre lived and wrote it, this way is long and arduous; it is the way of de-selfing or loss of ego, which leads to openness to the other and the possibility of authentic reciprocal sifting, at the core of Cixous's, Bartky's, as well as Sartre's visions. Sartre has not only evolved towards a vision similar to that of feminist economies, but he is well able to participate in the clarification of that vision.

GULLERMINE DE LACOSTE