Kari Palonen

THE LATEST RETURN OF SARTRE

Arriving in Paris in February 2000, I was surprised by a boom of Sartre books, published in anticipation of the twentieth anniversary of his death on 15 April, 1980. Although considering myself more as a former Sartre scholar, I could not resist the temptation to go through the main contributions to the latest French Sartre boom.

In terms of academic Sartre scholarship, two crucial points should be noted. First of all, there are hardly any "sartrians" left. Instead there are a number of "sartrologists" scattered around the world who meet regularly at conferences and who now have their own publications, such *Sartre Studies International* and *Etudes sartriennes*. All this has improved the quality of Sartre scholarship, although it contains the dangers of hagiography and academic minimalism. Secondly, the country in which the academization of Sartre scholarship has proved to be most difficult is France. This is not the case with Sartre's literary work, and a remarkable distance from his life is increasingly allowing the examination of his philosophy in a new light. When, however, Sartre's political thought and political activity is in question, it seems that it is only beyond the borders of the *Hexagon* that we can find fresh and unconventional approaches, which do not worry so much about the conventional public image of Sartre.

Biography is, understandably, a field in which novel projects have been taken up following Sartre's death and after the publication of some of his uncompleted works. Three major works, Annie Cohen-Solal's, *Sartre. Une vie* (1985), Ronald Hayman's *Writing Against. Sartre. A Biography* (1987) and John Gerassi's *Sartre. The Hated Conscience of a Century* (1991), are indispensable for Sartre scholars. Each of them have clearly distinct aims, each with its own advantages and dead ends

Cohen-Solal's biography, in typical anglophone style, has invested a great deal of time in basic research in interviewing, looking through archives, etc., thus enabling us to correct some factual mistakes in the self-interpretations of Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir. Sartre's thinking, however, hardly appears at all in the book. Hayman's biography, rather, concentrates on Sartre's work and should be read in the light of a specific thesis, indicated in the title. He presents a kind of coherent perspective, but tends to absolutize his own interpretation. Gerassi is the son of old friends of Sartre and Beauvoir, and he offers a personal perspective to his work. In addition, he presents material from unpublished interviews with Sartre in the early seventies. Unlike the two others, politics is the primary subject in Gerassi's work, spanning, however, only to 1939. But just this closeness to the object, as well as the tendency to write about himself prevent him from obtaining a distance to the received view on Sartre.

As the first full-length French *post mortem* biography, Denis Bertholet's *Sartre* (Paris: Plon 2000, 594 p.) is, of course, a welcome addition to the works on Sartre. In comparison with the three previous biographies, Bertholet's style is closest to Cohen- Solal, concentrating on the life rather than the works of Sartre. Unlike Cohen-Solal, Bertholet does not present anything new in his use of the primary sources, although he does make use of some newly published literature, such as Beauvoir's *Letters to Nelson Algren*. Thus, I cannot find much new factual insights in this book, beyond information such as the loss of some of Sartre's important unpublished manuscripts in 1962 attentat on his *rue Bonaparte* apartment (p. 441).

In general, I have difficulty locating a point of novelty, a moment of *Umschreibung* of history in the Koselleckian sense, in Bertholet's book. I have not the slightest interest in "proof" of Sartre's bourgeois anchoring of life or in his shifting relations with young women,

around which Bertholet's story is largely written. The book does, however, almost make me envious of the enormous amount of travelling that Sartre did – although I wonder why he never did the Transsiberian? The author, however, never interrupts the tales of his voyages by asking what Sartre's and Beauvoir's *project* of travelling was. He all too easily subsumes, for example, his trips in the Soviet Union and other Communist countries to the figure of a "fellow-traveller" of the worst kind. Why does he not consider the possibility that paying lip-service to the Communist authorities was considered to be a means of enabling them to see strange ways of life and visit places, such as Lithuania, which normal tourists were forbidden from entering at that time

Bertholet probably assumes that regardless of their aims, Beauvoir and Sartre were "objectively" fellow-travellers. Such a description, however, already signifies a commitment to an anachronistic interpretation of the most obvious variant, mixing the project and its *ex post* historical significance. In this respect Bertholet's perspective is arch-Hegelian, resembling the critique of Bucharin as an"objective traitor" in the Moscow processes, as analyzed by Merleau-Ponty in *Humanisme et terror*, and parodied by Sartre in *Les mains sales* and elsewhere.

Many French scholars are hopeless when facing Sartre's *Critique de la raison dialectique*. Bertholet is perhaps the most extreme case, making the *Critique* into a work of legitimating Marxism and Communism as well as of a pathos of the future of the worst kind. For Sartre the work was, on the contrary, a radical critique of Communism and futurism, and in an interview from 1975 (published in the Sartre volume of Schilpp's *Library of Living Philosophers* and now in the Sartre issue of *Magazine littéraire*, February 2000) he strongly insists that he wrongly characterized it as a Marxist work. For closer readers of the *Critique* it has always been clear that Marxism must be bracketed in order to understand the character of the work. Bertholet's lecture of the *Critique* is based on conventional commentators, such as Raymond Aron. For example, Sartre never saw the *groupe-en-fusion* as a political ideal, but viewed it analytically as a conceptual turning point, fragile and passing, but indispensable for the constitution of the "group praxis".

To take just one point in the few pages that Bertholet dedicates to the discussion of the *Critique*, he claims that Sartre "poursuivit le rêve d'un monde plein, dont toute la contingence serait bannie. … Mais c'est une chimère et il le sait" (p. 410). Of course, he knows that a world without contingency is a "chimera", but he insists that this is clearly an argument against the utopian tendencies in Marxism and Communism. Sartre himself plays with the liberating possibilities of contingency, included in such 'negative' figures as *l'échec*, *contre-finalité* and *rareté*. In this sense, he takes a stand for politics against the philosophy of history and favours a kind of negativistic dialectics of playing (cf. my *Politik als Vereitelung*, Münster, Westfälisches Dampfboot 1992).

Bernard-Henry Lévy's (not to be confused with Sartre's last secretary Benny Lévy) is best known as a "New Philosopher" of the late seventies. His *Le siècle de Sartre* (Paris: Grasset 2000, 663 p.) is the most propagated of the new Sartre books. It is written in the French essayist style. It is sometimes difficult to judge, even more so than in the case of Gerassi, whether the author's own life and former views are the main subject and Sartre merely a background of their profiling. The title indicates an ambitious perspective of French and European intellectual history, and the book contains long *Auseinandersetzungen* with all kinds of thinkers, especially with Spinoza, Gide and Heidegger. Still, Lévy's book is, in part at least, worth a close reading to Sartre scholars, too.

In strictly philosophical matters Lévy remains an Althusserian, a "Materialist" with a capital M, and a programmatic Anti-Humanist, who attempts to include Sartre in this camp. What is so unconventional about this attempt is that it is the early Sartre, especially that of L*a nausée,* who is best suited to this project of inclusion, that of the *Critique* is regarded with suspicion.

Perhaps most sympathetic to me is Lévy's discussion of the Sartrean "philosophy of life", which is by no means unrelated to his "philosophy proper". He has aptly detected the Sophistic and especially the Nietzschean elements in Sartre's thought, militantly denied by some Sartre fans and scholars. Lévy emphasizes Sartre as a "*philosophe urbain*" (p. 330), who denies the values of nature, childhood, family and other instances of nostalgia and community in favour of a playful and subversive attitude. Although some aspects in this Sartrean

revolt, such as his denial of vegetarian food, appears quite naive, Lévy makes an excellent point with his accentuation of Sartre's self-exclusion from the world of those who were in search of a good order. In this respect I find Lévy's book superior to the numerous volumes on "Sartre and morals", which almost without exception tend to ultimately "save" Sartre and regard him as a defendant of consensus and all the other "good" things of the moralists. In the latest Sartre boom, the study done by the Swiss scholar Yvan Salzmann, *Sartre et l'autenticité* (Genève, Labor et fides 2000, 346 p.) once again repeats this salvation story.

Sartre scholars have rightly emphasized a tension in his temporal orientations: Sartre emphatically advocates both the primacy of the present over the future as well as the opposite. This ambivalence has deep philosophical and political grounds and requires a more nuanced discussion of time and temporality in Sartre's work. For Lévy, the questions are far more simple: he takes a stand for the Sartre who after the war wrote the the programmatic present-oriented article *Ecrice pour son époche* . Although this, roughly speaking, corresponds to my own critique of Sartre's "progressist" tendencies, I think Lévy is entirely mistaken to interpret the *Critique* as a futurist apology of progress. For Sartre, the futurist temptation was stronger in the late forties, in the uncompleted morals of *Cahiers pour un morale* and in such writings as *Qu'est-ce que la littérature*. In *Saint Genet* , written in the early fifties, Sartre renounces the attempt to found morals, and does not return to it either in the *Critique* or in the as yet only fragmentarily published writings on morals of the mid-sixties. In them, rather, morals are dealt with from a kind of rhetorical point of view (most explicitly in the "election study" *Kennedy and West Virginia*, published in the volume *Sartre alive*, 1991).

For Levy, too, the denunciation of the *Critique* as a futurist and communitarian work serves to characterize Sartre as a fellow- traveller of the Communists, and later of the extreme left, "*un Kojève gauchiste*" (p. 579ff). Lévy misses the point that Sartre always uses the concepts in a specified and singularized sense. What Sartre claims, for example, to be a "truth" in an historical situation does not at all mean that he himself subscribes to the view in question, but rather he treats "truth" as a strong facticity for the agents in the situation, which must first be accepted in order to be overcome. Without un-

derstanding this point, the Sartrean an¿alysis of the Soviet Union under Stalin in the second volume of the *Critique* does not make sense. Sartre's dialectical variant of "methodological individualism" is noted in passing by Lévy (p. 574-575) but explained away, despite the fact that it should be regarded as a decisive element in Sartre's continuous resistance towards all kinds of progressivism and "communitarianism".

The lack of a historical sense and of the knowledge of the conditions of practical politics is an obvious source of Lévy's misunderstandings. In particular, it renders him to be unable to comprehend the purely instrumental character of common action as a condition of effective changes in the world. When Sartre took this as given, he only took seriously some conditions of the political action of his own time, sometimes using extreme, such as *fraternité-terreur*, to describe these conditions, as well as the radical fragility of the common action in all its forms. Today we do not accept these conditions as given, we are suspicious of mass movements as such, etc. A book that appeared in the year of Sartre's death, 1980, and was written in the Sartrean spirit, signalled the chances of conditions of politics. I am referring, of course, to André Gorz' *Adieux au prolétariat*.

Another biographical work of a more personal kind is Claudine Monteil's *Les amants* de *la liberté. L'aventure de Jean-Paul Sartre et Simone de Beauvoir dans le siècle*. (Paris Edition 1, 1999, 323 p). The point of the work is to discuss paralell lives of Sartre and Beauvoir. The author, a feminist historian, stresses, rightly in my opinion, the mutual dependency of Sartre and Beauvoir with regard to intellectual discussions and the critical process of the completion of their works. A personal point is brought by the author's own memoirs from the early days days of the neo-feminist movement, of the participation of Beauvoir in it, and on the quarrel between the feminists and Sartre's then Maoist secretary Pierre Victor-Benny Lévy. What I expected by the title, namely a discussion of the concept of the liberty in the work and life of Beauvoir and Sartre is, however, not taken up at all. The key Sartrean idea that human beings are condemned to freedom, and that Sartre and Beauvoir are people who realized this in their own lives better than many others, seems to guide Monteil's book, but a more specified discussion of the modes of actualizing

freedom (amidst the lack of it) is unfortunately missing from the book.

A further volume which closely juxtaposes life and work, although not from a strictly biographical perspective, is Olivier Wickers' *Trois aventures extraordinaires de Jean-Paul Sartre* (Paris: Gallimard 2000, 241 p). The author aims at discussing Sartre's life-project based on three texts: the war-diaries of 1939-1940, the childhood "autobiography" *Les mots* (1964), and *L'idiot de la famille* (1971-1972). The author is especially intrigued by Sartre's mania of constantly writing everywhere he went. He manages to illustrate the strangeness of this life-style, as well as the fact that it, at least in its Sartrean form, is no longer possible. I would, however, have liked to see some discussion as to what kinds of losses are involved with the vanishing possibilities of such a life-style.

Philippe Petit's *La cause de Sartre* (Paris: PUF 2000, 249 p.) is slightly more academic than the aforementioned works. Unlike Wickers, he utilizes Sartre's biographic program in the understanding of his work. The book is partly a commentary of Sartre's monumental Flaubert-biography, *L'idiot de la famille*, but at the same time the Flaubert-study is turned into an understanding of Sartre's "cause" (cf. esp. p. 107). This cause is characterized by a famous formula, used by Sartre in the early seventies in his Flaubert volumes, *un roman vrai*, implying an overcoming of the novels by critical and historical studies making use of imagination.

As opposed to Bertholet and Lévy, Petit clearly understands the value of "dialectics" for Sartre, as something which relativizes the standpoints and facilitates sudden turns, reversions and totalisations *en cours*. In a sense, his book is a Sartrean defence of the ideal of the "total intellectual", mixing the genres of philosophy, literature, politics, as well as life and work with each other, against the current fashion of the denial of this possibility. Sartre's *L'idiot* is an interesting book in this respect, although, as some critics have said, perhaps not in terms of the series of specialist studies on Flaubert, but on many other things, including French politics in the nineteenth century.

Philosophically, Petit's point of departure is Sartre's radicalization of Husserl's "egology" in his early work. Especially the key idea of *La transcendence de l'ego*, the overcoming of a philosophy of subject by the philosophy of consciousness through the denaturalization and

desubstantivation of the idea of consciousness, is, according to Petit, "la base né vrotique de son programme de vie" (48). This is also the starting point of Sartre's "biographies", especially of his work on Flaubert, which lasted over decades.

Petit's interpretation of Sartre's intellectual project through his Flaubert study remains all too implicit. Especially against books such as Lévy's and Bertholet's, a closer discussion of the political significance by means of analyzing, how the "engaged" twentieth century intellectual Sartre studied the "unengaged" nineteenth century writer Flaubert, would have been highly valuable. However, if all intellectuals are specialists now, can such a study ever be written?

Sartre: Trois lectures. Philosophie, linguistique, littérature, sous la direction de Geneviève Idt (Université Paris X, Recherches Interdisciplinaires sur les Textes Modernes, 18, Paris 1999, 203 p.) is the seventh volume of *Etudes Sartriennes*. It illustrates the academic sartrologists' perspectives and differs, thus, in style and ambition from the works discussed above. Concentrating on the philosophical section of the volume, I appreciate the professionalism which is marked by the analysis of the specific content of the Sartrean concepts in their important nuances.

The authors present a detailed criticism of other interpreters for failing to understand the point of Sartrean concepts. This is by no means an apology, but is rather an attempt to explicate the strangeness of the Sartrean conceptual world. For example, Juliette Simont's article *La conception sartrienne du néant est-elle "classique"* contains an interesting comparison between Sartre's and Kant's concepts of "nothingness", illustrating that in a certain sense, Kant has already overcome the "classical" concept and and that Sartre's "internal negation" signifies a "relativization of simultaneity", which manifests freedom against an inclusion into the totality (p. 47-49).

Another Belgian sartrologist, Vincent de Coorebyter, critically discusses the fashionable "psycholecture de Sartre". Without denying the value of such types of studies – a category to which Bertholet and Wickers also must be included – he rightly insists on the complementary character of these kinds of studies in the understanding of the conceptual mutations in Sartre's philosophy. He claims that these types of studies have reached a dead end. This could also be expressed differently. There are few people in the twentieth century

whose lives are as well-known as Sartre's. However, his apparatus still remains strange and only superficially explicated, and its personal colour remains clearly underrated.

* * *

Can we thus speak of a "return" or "renaissance" of Sartre in the French intellectual and political debate? I think these figures are too closely bound to the academic fashions and the media culture: on the academic level, Sartre is "doing well" in the sense of the institutionalization of the study of a "modern classic" of philosophy, literature and even political thought in a manner appropriate to it. In several respects, however, the world of today is already so different from that of Sartre's life-time that it is better to treat him as a historical figure of his own time than try to "apply" his work to contemporary questions.

Still, the massive and monstrous work of Sartre is one which contains insights that are also worth being taken up today, for other purposes and in other forms than those which he himself intended. I will accentuate the possibility of re-contextualizing just one idea of Sartre, namely his distinction between *concepts* and *notions*. What is currently done in the history of concepts corresponds in certain important respects to Sartre's insistence on the temporal and historical character of *notions*. I think that for those of us who are interested in the analysis of conceptual changes, a fresh look at some writings, such as the third volume of the *L'idiot de la famille*, could illustrate a specific Sartrean variant of the study of the changes in political concepts.