Reassessing Sartre

By Sissela Bok

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Books Reviewed

Annie Cohen-Solal, *Sartre: A Life* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1987)

Ronald Hayman, *Writing Against: A Biography of Sartre* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1986)

Iris Murdoch, *Sartre, Romantic Rationalist* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1987)

"WHAT CAN I KNOW? WHAT OUGHT I TO DO? What may I hope?" Immanuel Kant's three questions, set forth in his *Critique of Pure Reason* as encompassing all the interests of his reason, were also those which Jean-Paul Sartre pursued throughout his life, however different he intended his answers to be from those of Kant. Few thinkers in our time have pressed these questions with Sartre's perseverance and imagination; but his subtle exploration of the first question contrasts with the shallowness of his various answers to the second and with his growing disposition to posit improbable political utopias in response to the third. By the time he published his last, unfinished work on philosophy, the *Critique of Dialectical Reason*, he knew that the all-encompassing synthesis for which he had labored was out of his reach.

Sartre entered into most major debates of his period with eloquent conviction, expressing himself as volubly in the press and at media events as in novels, plays, and philosophical texts. His Existentialist philosophy, with its stress on absolute human freedom, electrified post-war Europe; and his later struggles and dramatic shifts with respect to Marxism, Stalinism, and Maoism were conducted on the world stage. In making his activities so public, Sartre sought to accommodate both the "transparency" about human experience that he advocated and the control that he nevertheless wished to exercise over how others would perceive him. His autobiography, *The Words*, likewise aims explicitly both to peel away layer after layer of hypocrisy and self-deception and to shape his legend — all the while deriding his efforts to do so.

Anyone undertaking to write Sartre's biography therefore faces an unusual challenge. What new ground could one possibly break in studying a life so thoroughly documented by the subject himself? And how could one best get behind the facade that he had so laboriously constructed to outwit biographers? Two recent biographies by Annie Cohen-Solal and Ronald Hayman have taken on this challenge, each shedding light on different aspects of his life and work. And Iris Murdoch, in reissuing *Sartre: Romantic Rationalist*, provides a searching critical perspective on the latter.

Of the two biographies, Annie Cohen Solal's *Sartre: A Life* brings readers in more intimate contact with Sartre's hectic, self-generating but also self-

devouring personality. It provides, as well, a more thorough account of his family background and year-by-year activities. The translation, by Anna Cancogni, often succeeds in conveying Cohen-Solal's evocative, empathetic style; unfortunately, it leaves out portions of the book and alters the sense of certain passages — as in rendering "Sartre était perçu comme un modèle théorique" as "Sartre was perceived as a theoretical foundation."

Professor Cohen-Solal stresses Sartre's efforts to "cover his tracks, confuse his biographers, mislead his followers," and proceeds to supplement and modify the self-portrait Sartre offers in The Words, in his letters and essays, and in the innumerable interviews to which he submitted. Through a combination of painstaking research and empathetic imagination, she offers the reader one vignette after another that together convey a vivid, impressionistic portrait. She brings to life the father who died in 1906, when Sartre was a baby and whom he had wished to consign to oblivion: "Had my father lived, he would have lain on me at full length and crushed me. As luck had it, he died young." She writes luminously of Sartre's childhood as the spoiled precocious darling of his mother, living in his grandfather's house, and of his hatred of his mother's new husband, Joseph Mancy — the prototype, for life, of the "other" as rival, "always the person I wrote against. All my life." And she details Sartre's exploitative yet dependent relations with women, beginning with his mother, continuing through the decades with the writer Simone de Beauvoir, punctuated, at times with her as stage manager, by affairs with countless younger women, and ending with his adopting one of them — Arlette Elkaïm — as his daughter and literary heir.

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Sartre as Normalien, Sartre as prisoner of war, Sartre at the moment of France's liberation, Sartre embattled in political and artistic skirmishes, castigating his former allies each time he changed sides, — Cohen-Solal succeeds throughout in setting his passionate engagement in the events of his period against the larger canvas of French, European, and world history. She helps readers to understand the hunger for life that he expressed through reading, travel, friendships and liaisons. And she offers a fair-minded and moving account of his physical and intellectual decline in the decades before his death at 75 in 1980 — a period during which he grew increasingly debilitated by drugs, alcohol, and overwork. Having looked to him as a culture hero, many forgot about him altogether; others saw him as "a small old tramp carelessly wandering from the Closerie des Lilas to La Coupole, with 'nothing in his hands, nothing in his pockets.'"

Cohen-Solal's monumental effort at empathetic interpretation of Sartre's life may, however, have made it more difficult for her to achieve the critical distance needed to analyze and evaluate his works. True, the reader will learn a great deal about their publication history — what Sartre went through in writing them, which publishers accepted or refused them, how they were received by critics and by the public. But the contents of many of his books are largely skimmed over. Readers not already familiar with the ideas in *Being and Nothingness*, for instance, would not glean them from Cohen-Solal's brief account. And she says next to nothing about the complex arguments of the *Critique of Dialectical Reason*, except once again to convey Sartre's experiences while writing it — the drugs he took to keep going, his increasing confusion,

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his explanations for why he could not complete it. Surely Sartre's last effort to leave a major philosophical statement merits more thorough analysis.

Ronald Hayman does offer such analysis in his book *Writing Against: A Biography of Sartre.* He devotes careful attention to each of the major works, considering their roots in Sartre's reading, teaching, and reflection. Hayman stresses, as does Cohen-Solal, that Sartre was first and foremost a moralist; but he lays bare the problems of such a stance on the part of someone given to judgmental pronouncements about others yet unable to develop a consistent view of ethics on which to ground moral judgments. (On this score as on so many others, no one could be more clear-eyed than Sartre himself. Thus in his *War Diaries*, composed in 1939-40 but published posthumously, he criticizes his own tendency to vent his dislike for some of his fellow conscripts by preaching at them to the point of acting the "moralizing fool.")

Hayman details the changes in Sartre's view of freedom as he places increasing stress on violence, and shows how his shifting responses to psychoanalysis, Marxism, and Structuralism find expression both in his works and in his political and cultural activities. He concludes that "Sartre's life was less a pilgrimage towards the truth than a series of intellectual and political adventures in which he strenuously entangled himself in self-deception and angrily extricated himself." If he lives on for us, it is because he came so close, while living autobiographically, "to giving his experiences the quality of myth."

Hayman's criticisms of Sartre as a thinker and as a human being so pervade his book as to overwhelm his account of Sartre's life. In this sense the book's title *Writing Against* takes on, for the reader, the added meaning of "writing against Sartre." Hayman ends his Introduction, having characterized Sartre's life as one of ceaseless betrayals, by stating that Sartre "was consistent in nothing — not even in his love for freedom. But the full story of his divagations needs to be told chronologically."

After seeing the story of Sartre's life thus sternly reduced to that of his divagations, readers will not be surprised that an adversarial tone often enters into the account that follows. Although the book contains intriguing trains of thought and interpretation, it hammers in its judgments relentlessly: of Sartre's ever more destructive insecurity, immaturity, and self-hatred; of how he compromises his passionate belief in freedom and his early condemnations of mendacity and violence in the pursuit of his political goals; and throughout of his betraying everyone and everything — himself, his readers, literature itself, his friends and lovers, his beliefs — all while "the destruction fuels his self-aggrandizement."

IT IS CLEAR, FROM THE NUMBER OF BOOKS ON SARTRE'S life and work which have appeared in recent years, that the time has come for attempting a reassessment of his role and of his intellectual legacy. While biographies can contribute to such an effort, a perspective rooted, as was Sartre's, in both philosophy and literature is needed in addition. It is fortunate, therefore, that Iris Murdoch, in *Sartre: Romantic Rationalist*, approaches the task of reassessment from the point of view of one who is herself not only a philosopher but also a novelist, returning to reevaluate and sum up Sartre's contributions more than thirty-five years after first

writing about his early works. In addressing the full range but also the depth of the issues that he took up, her short book proves an especially lucid and persuasive guide.

The ten chapters which constitute the book's main part were first published in 1953. They bring together thoughtful, probing analyses of the works Sartre had written up to that period — especially of *Nausea*, *What is Literature?*, and *Being and Nothingness*. Murdoch's conclusion at the time was that Sartre "described very exactly the situation of a being who, deprived of general truths, is tormented by an absolute aspiration." It is a conclusion that fit Sartre to the end of his life, though the books yet to be published and his increasing political commitment and polemics would buttress it in ways that no one could have anticipated in 1953.

In an Introduction written for the 1987 reissue of the book, Murdoch takes Sartre's later writings into account as well. She sees him as having made two extraordinary efforts at a total philosophical synthesis to surpass the model of Hegel's *Phenomenology of Mind*. The first was in *Being and Nothingness*, in which freedom was to replace Hegel's Geist as prime value and motive force and in which all subsequent thought of value was to be incorporated. The second was to come in his work on Flaubert, left unfinished at his death after three vast volumes. There, Sartre had hoped to 'totalize" all that could be known about one human being and thereby render that life fully transparent to others. Such an effort was bound to fail, both because human beings can never be thus fully transparent and because any effort to write about them involves judgment, including moral judgment. Murdoch could not help wishing, she writes, that Sartre had devoted similar energy to writing, instead, a 4000 page novel about everybody and everything: "Long novels by geniuses are possibly the best totalizations available."

And yet such a novel might no longer have been possible for him. In his early works, Murdoch suggests, Sartre showed a "lively sense of the mystery and contingent variousness of individuals." But by the time he wrote *Saint Genet: Actor and Martyr*, in 1952, he had largely abandoned "the messy accidental world of the novel, so full of encounters and moral conflicts and love." Rather, Murdoch sees that book as a way for Sartre to divest himself publicly of any remnants of bourgeois morality, to indulge in his intellectual predilection for evil without seeming to understand what it does to victims and evildoers alike, and to politicize what could have been a subtle psychological study.

Murdoch may be one of the few readers to have persevered through the glutinous abstractions of the *Critique of Dialectical Reason*.* She is too charitable about its style, calling the book merely "less readable" than *Being and Nothingness*, but she gives no quarter when it comes to its substance. She challenges as naive Sartre's view that morality is worthless and inevitably corrupted so long as it is contaminated by oppression in our imperfect societies. And to the claim that freely developing praxis in some future post-revolutionary period will become the only ethical relation between men as they proceed to dominate not each other but nature, Murdoch counters, tartly, that the disenchanted, when presented with this version of "the old, old story... may feel inclined to say that anyone who believes this will believe anything."

*Another was Raymond Aron, who dissects it in his *Histoire et dialectique de la violence* (Paris: Gallimard, 1973). Taking issue with Sartre's systematic preference for revolution over reform, Aron criticizes Sartre's assumption that violence offers the only means capable of overcoming the "violence crystallized in a class-ridden society, as if reasoned deliberation about the respective promises of reform and revolution, the comparison between the respective merits of different regimes, did not merit the philosopher's interest." (p. 249)

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Sartre remained, for Murdoch, a traditional philosopher, giving his whole life to philosophy; but she suggests that it is in his role of "a spokesman for the indomitable human spirit" that he may be remembered, rather than for his theories or for his increasingly abstruse terminology. No matter what the fate of the theories, he lived his own time to the full, and "must survive as one of its most persistent and interesting critics."

But even if Sartre's reputation as a critic of his own time were to fade, he would be remembered for his probing of human lives and above all of his own; the more so as in a sense all his writings partook of self-portrayal. His work on the lives of Baudelaire, Genet, and Flaubert were as much about himself as about his subjects, and about the tensions inherent in the effort to capture human lives in biographical and autobiographical writings. Sartre alternates, in these works, between despair and hope about the possibility of setting forth a human life with the transparency and totality that he demanded. And his autobiography, *The Words*, rivals in brilliance and depth the self-portraits by Montaigne and Rousseau. Like them, he has mastered a style capable of conjuring forth any experience, but like them, he also aims to expose the power of words to falsify and manipulate.

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Curiously, none of the books here reviewed examines Sartre's place in the tradition of autobiographical and confessional writing. Murdoch mentions in passing Sartre's "elegant account of his childhood, *Les Mots*." And Cohen-Solal and Hayman, perhaps because their main concern is to delineate Sartre's life, focus primarily on the factual aspects of what he writes of himself and on how often he conceals or misconstrues events in his past. Yet his autobiography represents a remarkable feat of unmasking what he takes to be far more fundamental "truths" that he once thought gave meaning to his life. Ancestry, family, religion, community — with these he claims to have dispensed early, in order to define himself instead as purely one who wrote. Writing became his religion, literary fame his hope for salvation and immortality, until he exposed that religion, too, as false; and even then he continued to write. "I've given up the office but not the frock: I still write. What else can I do?"

With imagination, economy, and precision of language Sartre bears witness to the experience of a life devoid of most of the beliefs which give meaning to the lives of others. Yet even he cannot altogether give up his need to justify that life by some permanent attachment, some anchoring beyond himself. In the last passage of *The Words*, Sartre reaches for what he himself, if pressed, might regard as one more temporary yet in the end unlikely consolation, in a variation on Montaigne's "Each man bears the entire form of man's estate":

> "Without equipment, without tools, let me set all of me to work in order to save all of me. If I relegate impossible Salvation to the prop-room, what remains? A whole man, composed of all men and as good as all of them and no better than any." φ