

## 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*."<sup>1</sup> As evidence he cites the importance of the "singulae" in Sartre's application of the singular universal in *The Family Idiot*<sup>2</sup>, but also mentions in passing "a brief essay" of 1971 "concerning .... a political trial (in Spain) of Basque separatists."<sup>3</sup> 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 Halimi<sup>4</sup>, 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-Senghor<sup>5</sup> in 1948.

When Sartre wrote "Black Orpheus" he had recently published

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

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

<sup>3</sup> McBride, *Sartre's Political Theory*, p. 192.

<sup>4</sup> 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.

<sup>5</sup> 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

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, 139) 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

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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