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IMPORTED FROM FRANCE:
AMERICAN ADAPTATIONS OF EXISTENTIALIST IDEAS AND LITERATURE

by

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A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty in English
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
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Abstract

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by

Holly J. Hutton

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This dissertation is a cultural-historical study of the exchange of ideas between America and France that coincided with the rise and decline of French existentialism. In the 1930s and 1940s, American novels and film became popular in France, among writers and throughout the society. Convinced that the analytical novel with which all in France were familiar did not fulfill the psychological needs of the time, Sartre was drawn to certain American novelists, whose methods seemed uniquely suited to the modern era. Drawing on the techniques of these writers, Sartre and Camus created philosophies that tended to exalt unreflecting action. For a time after the Liberation of France, French existentialism was, in turn, popularly received in the United States, where it was typically associated—implicitly or explicitly—with World War II, the Resistance, and the Holocaust. In intellectual journals and mainstream publications, existentialist ideas were widely debated and subjected to diverse explanations. A number of American writers were drawn to the philosophy, which they modified and adapted to the crises and controversies of their own time.

This exchange of ideas has been examined in a number of books and articles, especially during the 1960s and 1970s. Rather than being an influence study that

assesses the particularly *existential* qualities of postwar American literature, this dissertation approaches the reception of existentialism as a historical phenomenon, seeking to determine how the literature manifests the era in which it was written. It considers the prewar French response to American culture, as well as the postwar reception of existentialism in the United States, examining at length the work of Richard Wright, Norman Mailer, and John Updike. To address the pervasive questions of the Cold War era, these authors turned not only to the work of twentieth-century French intellectuals propelled to popularity by their association with the Resistance, but also to the nineteenth-century critiques of rationalism undertaken by Nietzsche and Kierkegaard. Wright, Mailer, and Updike adapt existentialism for different purposes, but they share a common interest in examining the motives for human behavior, especially those underlying cruelty and violence, by reconsidering the nature of the human condition.

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Contents

Introduction

Human Revelations

This study examines a cultural exchange which began with the popularity of American fiction in France in the 1930s, led to the development of French existentialist literature and philosophy in the late thirties and early forties, and concluded, more or less, when existentialist ideas were received in the U.S., at the end of World War II, and employed by a number of writers and intellectuals. Primarily, it addresses American writers who express the controversies of their time in the mode of Sartre and Camus, whose methods, developed before the war and refined as it was taking place, were considered the intellectual tools of the Resistance.

At the time that existentialist literature became popular in academic circles, there were two major influence studies written which traced the cross-influence of ideas and methods between France and America: Sidney Finkelstein's *Existentialism & Alienation in American Literature* (1965), and Richard Lehan's *A Dangerous Crossing: French Literary Existentialism and the Modern American Novel* (1973). This dissertation is not a standard influence study like those of Finkelstein and Lehan. Instead, it reassesses the transmission of ideas between the two nations in cultural-historical terms, attempting to discover something new about what happened. In recent years, two new studies have been written which explore the transatlantic creation of existentialism in its philosophical and historical context. Ann Fulton's book *Apostles of Sartre* looks at the effects of Sartre's ideas on American philosophers, and George Cotkin's history *Existential America* examines the reception of Sartre, Camus, and Beauvoir by writers and

intellectuals, and at the popular level. This study differs from Cotkin's and Fulton's in examining the literary effects of the existentialist movement at greater length, and in considering the influence of modern American literature on Sartre and Camus. Cotkin's book emphasizes the work of Sartre, Camus, Beauvoir, and Kierkegaard, one of existentialism's nineteenth-century predecessors, but it does not investigate the influence of Hegel and Nietzsche. This dissertation looks at the nineteenth-century background of existentialism more broadly, considering the effects of Hegel's rationalism and, especially, Nietzsche's anti-rationalism.

In both France and America, the new ideas from across the ocean arrived at critical historical moments. Readers in France became intrigued with writers like Hemingway, Faulkner, and Dos Passos, along with American detective fiction by authors such as James Cain, in the years just preceding a war and occupation that would transform the nation. After France was liberated, existentialism arrived in the United States. If the Cold War in the U.S. was a subdued version of World War II imported from overseas, then existentialism was one of the guises in which the conflict came dressed.

The trading of ideas between nations was also, inevitably, a trading of forms. The images of gangsters, cops, wanderers, hoodlums, and femme fatales in U.S. literature and film of the thirties signaled to the French that the American imagination had taken a subtler, more sinister, more morally equivocal, and hence more intriguing turn. The characters presented seemed mysterious and strangely empty. They appeared to lack a psychology, and their motives were often unclear. To understand them, one could only speculate on the basis of their actions. This was a task that the French, who tended to

view intellectual analysis as a national duty, did not mind performing. Speculation was their business.

The French altered the American forms to suit their own purposes. So, when existentialism came back to the U.S., it was regarded as unusual, but was just recognizable enough to cause a disturbance. For all Sartre's reservations about American morality, he himself frequently created characters according to moral type, which he almost invariably construed in relation to class. Inarticulate worker types represent the moral antithesis of talkative bourgeois hypocrites. One's actual profession, however, only really matters when it involves illicit activity. Prostitutes, assassins, and everyday killers are defined by what they do, but their moral character is likely to be ambiguous or irrelevant. Amorality, nonetheless, does carry moral implications. A character that seems to dispense with ethics altogether is likely to be the moral center of the story.

This indeterminacy of character sometimes produced suspicion in both France and America; but fixation on predetermined identity missed the point. It is not one's history that matters in the French literature, but, rather (reflecting the American influence), one's present actions. A person is not determined by his or her environment or by a psychic condition carried over from the past. One determines oneself in response to a desperate situation. This emphasis on actions carried out under dire conditions was what made existentialism one of the vessels that brought the war to the American continent.

Although a multitude of images and accounts had served to translate events abroad into the motivating principles needed to support the war effort at home, when the fighting finally ended, the realities of what had happened had yet to be sorted out in the U.S. The depictions of communism and fascism, totalitarianism and political freedom,

resistance and collaboration that had been presented in posters, news media, and publicity campaigns gradually settled into explanations that would be put to use in peacetime. American culture in the postwar years produced a legion of *types*. Writers made strategic use of the new yet subtly familiar forms imported from Europe. And existentialist concepts, regarded as intellectual products of the war abroad, were employed, on all sides, to fight a war of ideas at home.

There was a strong retrospective desire to explain the war, in the U.S. as well as in countries that had experienced the conflict at close range. Some uncertainties were relatively simple and factual; others were more abstract. Why had the world gone to war again? What human motives lay behind the politics? What had happened in the concentration camps? What sort of person had joined the Resistance? What had motivated the Nazi? In 1945, this last question, which now borders on cliché, was one of the puzzles to which the ostensibly amoral philosophy of existentialism was considered a possible key. Camus, in fact, addressed the question in a number of ways. And once he had done so, his own position was no longer regarded as amoral.

In 1946, an article in *Commentary* by Martin Greenberg called "The Common Man of the Nazis" took up the dilemma as well. The failure to address the personality of the Nazi, says Greenberg, was evidenced in literature, from the 1930s onward, that was described as antifascist but tended to represent Nazism impersonally: "One thinks of no literary work that successfully portrays a Nazi *person*. In almost every case he is reduced to some absolute of inhumanity and functions in the story as a mechanical and abstract figure of speech" (502). In a historical sense, Greenberg says, the masses of people are nothing; in ancient times they were merely a part of nature. A historical revolt requires

an idea to challenge the prevailing idea around which a society is structured. Whereas socialism had offered the mass a theory with which to transcend itself, Nazi dogma had simply confirmed the mass as a mass. Seeking historical change but unwilling to submit to a real revolution, Germany had used revolutionary rhetoric and a method of "political plebianism" to conduct an artificial revolution that was directed outward rather than inward. "Who better than Hitler," asks Greenberg, "represents the passionate nothingness that is the political plebeian?" (504-05).

The mystery of the Nazi was a template for what became a more general conundrum encompassing humanity as a whole. After the war was over, the question of why seemingly ordinary people had apparently dispensed with everyday moral values and participated without objection in plainly inhumane acts was extended to its most general implications, and the question became: What is a human being? The motives for human behavior were thrown into question, and the notion of human nature took on a sinister cast. If, as Greenberg says, an earlier generation of writers had failed to effectively address the prevailing moral dilemma of their time, postwar writers were determined not to make the mistake again. The three American writers addressed in this dissertation each, in his own way, wrestles with the moral problems presented by Greenberg and uses existentialism—the philosophy of the war—in his attempt to sort it out.

As it happens, the mystery of humanity was another problem that was taken up by *Commentary* in 1945, in a series of articles called "The Crisis of the Individual" which addressed, in a variety of contexts, the enigma of being a living person. In "Terror's Atomization of Man," Leo Lowenthal describes terror as not an aberration of modern

civilization but an inherent element of it which causes the breakdown of memory, personality, and conscience (the super-ego is replaced by a machine-like "Hitler-ego"), transforming a person into a "unit of atomized reactions" limited to the most basic, "natural" responses. When the terror succeeds, the victim assimilates to the terrorists (2-5).

If the dissolution of synthetic human personalities into malleable instruments of atomistic, natural responses was the great danger posed by modernity and terror, then what was the solution? Lowenthal's Marxian account submits that it was to counter with reason (8). After the Liberation of France, Sartre himself tried to reconcile his ideas with those of Marx, but these later views did not reflect the principles that most people associated with existentialism. According to existentialism, as it was generally understood, the answer to modernity's mechanizing effects did not lie in rationalizing or historicizing theories. Rationality and history, particularly after the war, were regarded as destructible rather than permanent features of human life. The way to resist the attack on one's psychic faculties was through unreasoning revolt. This, in any case, was the answer reached by Camus in *The Rebel*, which was much closer in spirit to his and Sartre's early writings than the later, modified Marxism of Sartre.

It was also the answer reached by Norman Mailer, who conceived his existentialist theory as a form of revolt that used irrationality and emotion to combat mechanization. Mailer, however, was aware that his own ideas digressed significantly from those of the French. One of the great differences lay in his concern with the interaction between the body and the psyche. Sartre and Camus were interested in the way the mind was affected by action, but their interest did not match that of Mailer, who

saw human existence as an expression of the inseparable forces of sex and war. The mind that was not involved in some assertion of sex and/or war was dying. This involvement, as he framed it, inherently manifested a search for God.

As Richard Wright conceived of existential action, it did not entail a search for God but, rather, a search for humanity. Wright believed that in a secular age the pursuit of God could only be carried out at the expense of human beings. In keeping with the precepts expressed in Sartre's "Existentialism Is a Humanism" (a speech which subsequently became a book) and in Camus's "The Human Crisis" (a speech which presented the essential principles expressed in Camus's postwar writings), Wright wanted to reveal the fundamentally human qualities of existence, and in doing so he wanted to reveal the godless world that Western society had created, but which it refused to *see*.

Like the other two American writers examined at length in this study, John Updike was interested in exploring irrational thought in an attempt to reveal what could not be seen. Like Mailer, he portrays a search for God, thereby simultaneously depicting a search for the essence of human life. Wright, Mailer, and Updike all undertake this investigation, and they all draw on the anti-rationalist tenets of existentialism to carry it out. The conflict between an irrational understanding of what is felt but not revealed, and rational knowledge which is apprehended by the senses, is central to Updike's thought, and it fostered his interest in Emerson. Emerson's Transcendentalism has a unique connection to the subject of existentialism and American writers, in that Emerson, too, drew on European philosophy—primarily the ideas of Kant—and applied it to American life. And, like Updike, Wright, and Mailer, he did so in an attempt to reveal what was imperceptible to the senses.

This use of European philosophy parallels the uses made of existentialism, in that it was perceived as a tool with which to reveal what could not be readily apprehended. But despite the advanced secularism of the age in which they wrote, what existentialist writers hoped to disclose was really no more perceptible than the supernatural realm that the Romantics had tried to reveal. Whether the time and place is religious or secular, or transitionally positioned in between, the basic dilemma suggests an inescapable cycle. If God is a timeless object of human desire—or an abstract conceptualization of desire itself—then where does the desire originate? And why does the motivation to fulfill it compel people to abandon knowledge produced by other, more verifiable methods? In short, what is this obsession with apprehending what does not perceptibly exist?

In the nineteenth century, Kierkegaard was the first to address the search for God from an existentialist, altogether subjective point of view. And, since his own faith was so psychologically prepossessing, it was an investigation to which he was suited. In the mid-twentieth century, such questions of transcendence were virtually impossible to separate from questions of worldly power. The era consequently produced theologians such as Paul Tillich and Martin Buber, who adopted existentialist concepts in their explorations of faith, which they were compelled to reconcile with contemporary events. But Kierkegaard had not been indifferent to the relationship between faith and power. His representation of the "aesthetic" stage of existence, which has corollaries in later discussions of the impulse to control that is intrinsic to artistic endeavor, thoroughly analyzes the potential dangers of faith which fails to progress to the ethical stage. The "knight of faith," as Kierkegaard conceived him, is someone who moves beyond ethics to the religious stage. According to Kierkegaard, the knight of faith is exceedingly rare.

The idea arouses controversy, because it proposes a unique psychic state which oversteps ethics. In Kierkegaard's psychological reformulation of Hegel's historical theory, the absolute is apprehended when the knight of faith, having surpassed the ethical considerations of the temporal realm, unites the sensible and the supersensible, the natural and the supernatural, by reaching for eternity with no earthly confirmation that it is there to be seized. His extraordinarily refined faith receives its mysterious signal, and he is off.

Off to where? The destination is revealed to his de-fragmented consciousness. Sartre and Camus, both atheists, rejected this way of thinking in principle, but that did not prevent their fascination with the *idea* of an absolutized psyche that receives transmissions from an unknowable source. For them, it was a question of accepting the psychological condition of faith and letting go of the desire to know what causes it. In Camus, this project is described in terms of either "absurdity" or "revolt," and is presented as an end in itself. It is sufficient, he determines, to let the matter rest here. In Sartre, the problem is subjected to more erratic transformations. It is replaced with a more concrete, worldly project; its existence is denied altogether; it is rejected as a dangerous fantasy; or it is made to conform to the structure of a socialist revolution. What is clear is that Sartre can never stop thinking about it entirely. The notion of an undifferentiated consciousness is opposed to the philosophy of Descartes. In theory, as *Being and Nothingness* makes clear, Sartre accepts the idea of the fragmented consciousness. At the same time, its very existence seems to compel speculation to the contrary, and this compulsion in Sartre's writing is no less potent than the Cartesianism itself.

When it is kept separate from morality, the question of the desiring human condition is relatively uncontroversial, but after World War II its moral implications were unavoidable, and Sartre and Camus duly confronted them. Kierkegaard had seen the condition of faith as good, but he acknowledged its potential abuses. Nietzsche not only recognized the desiring condition and determined it to be the definitive quality of human life, he enthusiastically exalted it, presenting it as good in itself but not *morally* good, and going further than Kierkegaard to clarify its relationship to power. After World War II, this sort of thinking was controversial, but it was not entirely rejected. It was debatable. This dissertation was written in the hopes of clarifying some of the ways in which American writers addressed the postwar controversy of the human condition.

Chapter One

Existentialists and America

In September 1939, after Germany invaded Poland, Jean-Paul Sartre was summoned for reserve duty in the French Army and served in the meteorological corps during the uneventful period of World War II that would become known as the "phony war." In June 1940, he was captured by the Germans and spent nine months as a war prisoner—from June to September in cramped barracks in Lorraine, France and the remainder of the time in a camp atop Germany's Mount Kemmel. The distress of captivity was hard to bear for some of his fellow prisoners, but Sartre, writes his biographer Annie Cohen-Solal, was generally happy in prison. In close quarters, dressed alike, deprived of their usual social standing, and sharing a mutual dislike of their captors, the prisoners developed a spirit of camaraderie, occasionally manifested in their collective tormenting of the German authorities. The usually individualistic Sartre reveled in the sense of being "part of a mass." For a time, he managed to secure a place for himself in the artists' barracks, where he wrote plays and performed (148-151).

Sartre's work in the meteorological corps in Alsace before his capture was not difficult. His primary duty was to release balloons into the sky and then follow their progress using binoculars. This left a lot of time for reading, writing, and thinking. One day in February 1940, while ruminating on the subject of feelings and ideas, he recorded in his diary the image of an American. The figure he described was a hypothetical man of action who responded freely to his own feelings, unhindered by vain introspection. "The truth is," Sartre wrote, "I treat my feelings as ideas: with an idea, one pushes it till it

cracks—or finally becomes 'what it really was.' But if the psychologist has a right to proceed in this way with feelings, the *man* calls for mercy: he'd like sometimes to have reactions he couldn't name." The man capable of such reactions, writes Sartre,

> [would] have been handsome, hesitant, obscure, slow and upright in his thoughts; who'd not have had any acquired grace, but only a silent, spontaneous kind: I saw him, for some reason, as a worker and hobo in the Eastern USA. How I should have liked to feel uncertain ideas slowly, patiently forming within me! How I should have liked to boil with great, obscure rages; faint from great, motiveless outpourings of tenderness! My American worker (who resembled Gary Cooper) could do and feel all that. I pictured him sitting on a railway embankment, tired and dusty; he'd be waiting for the cattle-truck, into which he'd jump unseen—and I should have liked to be *him*. I even invented, together with the Beaver [Beauvoir], a charming (to my mind) character called Little Head-high [*Petit Crâne*], who thought little, spoke little, and always did the right thing. (*War Diaries* 273-74)

The imaginary American *Petit Crâne* was not created in the precise image of any real person but was, as Sartre says, a character. In fact, he was a collection of characters. Thoroughly acquainted with modern American literature, Sartre had culled from fiction, film, newspapers, magazines, and his own imagination a prototype to suit his somewhat idealized vision of virtue through action. Coming from someone so famously associated with the precept that existence precedes essence, the image of a man who "thought little, spoke little, and always did the right thing" seems a sanguine view of human nature. But

it is not simply nature that makes *Petit Crâne* do the right thing. His morality is constructed, a consequence of action, and therefore consistent with Sartre's premise that a person creates himself through experience—that one *is* what one does. It is an indication of Sartre's rather fantastical view of America at the time, however, that the goodness of his imaginary "worker and hobo" is achieved in this almost mystical manner, through a "silent, spontaneous" release from self-awareness. American literature and culture had played an important role in shaping the ideas of those thinkers in France who would later be called existentialists. In the coming years, Sartre would continue to shape and alter those ideas, and existentialism would come to mean many things. At times it would be accused of meaning nothing at all. At the moment that Sartre serenely recorded the image of an innocent American hobo in his journal, at the outset of a war that had yet to disrupt French life in any serious way, he could have had little inkling of the events that would change his view of himself, France, and the rest of Europe. Eventually, after his visits to the United States at the end of the war, his view of America would change as well.

A trait that Sartre particularly admires in his hypothetical American *Petit Crâne* is "grace." The notion of grace is depicted elsewhere in his work, receiving a detailed description in *Being and Nothingness*, where it is opposed to "obscenity." In grace, says Sartre, the body is perceived as identical to the action it performs; that is, it does not draw attention to itself as an object but, in effect, recedes "in situation" from the awareness of observers, who take in only what it does. In obscenity, by contrast, the body is perceived as a thing, and the subjectivity of the person to whom it belongs is disregarded. Somewhere between the self-conscious refinement of the bourgeois Frenchman—a

virtual archetype in Sartre's work—and the wholesome primitiveness of the noble savage lies the semi-civilized grace of *Petit Crâne*. An American in theory, he is in fact a synthesis of human qualities Sartre had found in Wright, Faulkner, Dos Passos, Hemingway (whose novel *A Farewell to Arms* was made into a 1932 film starring Gary Cooper), and other incarnations of American culture.

Another American influence is Herman Melville. Sartre credits Melville with the capacity for apprehending the Hegelian absolute at a level equaled only by Hegel himself. The absolute is everywhere, writes Sartre, "if we only cast aside the multicolored veils with which we've covered it."

> We haunt the absolute; but no one, to my knowledge, no one except Melville, has attempted this extraordinary undertaking of retaining the indefinable taste of a pure quality—the purest quality, whiteness—and seeking in that taste itself the absolute which goes beyond it. If this is one of the directions in which contemporary literature is trying in a groping way to go, then Melville is the most "modern" writer. (*LPE* 138-39)

When reading Melville, Sartre writes, it is wrong to find symbolism in things. Melville does not begin with an idea and then create a symbol to convey it. Rather, he explores "the depths of things" and thereby arrives at ideas. The idea manifested in the whale hunt, says Sartre, was not preconceived, but spontaneously realized. Melville "saw 'in a white heat' that strange tie between man and animal, the *hunt*. A relationship of dizziness and death. And it is this relationship that is revealed abruptly at the end of the first hundred pages. Hatred" (*LPE* 139). Melville, then, was capable of the experience Sartre had longed for and expressed in his diary when he wrote, "How I should have

liked to feel uncertain ideas slowly, patiently forming within me! How I should have liked to boil with great, obscure rages; faint from great, motiveless outpourings of tenderness!" As Sartre conceives of such experiences, it is not the quality, but the intensity of the spontaneous emotion that matters. The feelings he cites here, rage and tenderness, are apparent opposites, but they are alike in their pre-intellectual abandon. Similarly, the hatred in the whale hunt in Melville contrasts with the emotion that Sartre cites in his diary after he describes *Petit Crâne*. Referring to his good friend Jacques-Laurent Bost ("Little Bost"), he writes, "What's certain is that, in the midst of friendship, I've always envisaged love as an opportunity to lose my head and finally act without knowing what I was doing."

For Sartre, in other words, the ideal genesis of an idea goes something like this: Rather than treating a feeling as if it were a concept and intellectually dissecting it "till it cracks" and generates an insight (Sartre's method), a person is carried along on a wave of spontaneous feeling and acts without knowing—loses his head—and this inspired moment gives birth to an idea and ideally produces the morally "right" results (the American method). An illustration of this kind of action is found in *Moby-Dick* when a greenhorn is swept overboard and Queequeg leaps into the water and saves him. Ishmael asks, "Was there ever such unconsciousness?" (61). On the other hand, not only is Sartre himself incapable of these impassioned moments of inspiration, they seem to run counter to his precept that individual freedom is defined by conscious choice and implies total responsibility for one's own existence. Sartre's objection to the Freudian unconscious is made on the grounds that the concept of an "unconscious idea" is self-contradictory, a paradox. Thought is by definition conscious. People who profess unawareness of what

they do, and try to believe what they profess, are attempting to lie to themselves; but they cannot do so successfully, because deep down they know that they are lying.

So why attribute to Americans an experience about which Sartre himself could only fantasize? "The greatest literary development in France between 1929 and 1939," Sartre writes in the *Atlantic Monthly* in 1946, "was the discovery of Faulkner, Dos Passos, Hemingway, Caldwell, Steinbeck." However, he notes in this article, called "American Novelists in French Eyes," the effects of an influence are not always immediate, and it was not until the Germans occupied France that the "American Style" became widespread among French writers (114). Among those influenced were Camus, whose novel *The Stranger* drew on the tone and style of Hemingway, and Beauvoir, whose representation of time was influenced by Faulkner. But it was not just these techniques themselves that intrigued the French writers who adopted them; it was the state of mind they evoked. Sartre proposes that the analytical novel, with which all in France were familiar, did not fulfill the psychological needs of the time:

> All around us clouds were gathering. There was war in Spain: the concentration camps were multiplying in Germany, in Austria, in Czechoslovakia. War was menacing everywhere. Nevertheless analysis—analysis à la Proust, à la James—remained our only literary method, our favorite procedure. But could it take into account a Jew in Auschwitz, the bombardment of Madrid by the planes of Franco? Here a new literature presented its characters to us synthetically. It made them perform before our eyes acts which were complete in themselves,

> impossible to analyze, acts which it was necessary to grasp completely with all the obscure power of our souls. (117)

The times demanded a response to the unthinkable. They could not be apprehended within a framework of abstract analysis. A doctrine of "complete" acts which defy contemplation—the ethic of *Petit Crâne*—was the tool that France required to make sense of and react to its situation. Sartre finds the ethic embodied in characters in Caldwell and Hemingway. It is not true, he writes, that the heroes portrayed by these authors are at the whims of destiny, as some would claim. "On the contrary, each of their spontaneous reactions is completely what it would be in real life—something that lives and does not contemplate itself" ("American Novelists" 117).

This is very close to the ethic that Camus (who objected to being called an existentialist) outlines in *The Myth of Sisyphus*. Camus's Sisyphus can be usefully compared to Sartre's Melville. According to Sartre, Melville's advance toward the absolute combines an exploration of "the depths of things" with the realization of an insight. In *The Myth of Sisyphus*, Camus observes that "to understand is, above all, to unify"; but where human existence is concerned, the desired unity, and the desired understanding, cannot be achieved:

> That nostalgia for unity, that appetite for the absolute illustrates the essential impulse of the human drama. But the fact of that nostalgia's existence does not imply that it is to be immediately satisfied. For if, bridging the gulf that separates desire from conquest, we assert with Parmenides the reality of the One (whatever it may be), we fall into the ridiculous contradiction of a mind that asserts total unity and proves by its

very assertion its own difference and the diversity it claimed to resolve. (17-18)

A consciousness is irreconcilably alienated from its surroundings. Its existence in the world is purely incidental and therefore contains no inherent purpose. However, says Camus in his Sisyphus metaphor, though human existence is clearly absurd, a person can still commit himself to absurd action, and there is happiness (a kind of meaning) to be found in doing so. Despite the pointlessness of pushing his rock uphill, Sisyphus is totally engrossed in the effort. To invoke Sartre's conceptualization, his is a complete act which defies analysis. According to both Camus and Sartre, that is, complete knowledge, the omniscient God's-eye perspective, is unachievable. It is the *act* carried out in defiance of its own absurdity which is complete. And when Sisyphus reaches the top of the hill and has a moment to reflect before beginning his absurd task anew, his action yields insight. As in Sartre, an initial negation of the consciousness ends in illumination.

This final achievement of insight, writes Richard Lehan in a 1972 study of existentialism and the American novel, is what distinguishes the "innocence" of *The Stranger*'s Meursault from that of his prototypes in Hemingway. The innocents in Hemingway, Melville, and James Cain appealed to Camus because of their symbolic value, says Lehan, "but the 'innocent' victim represented a point of departure and not an ideal conclusion for him. Camus believed that the responsible man employed both his senses and his reason, was both able to interpret as well as immediately react to stimuli" (65-66). This configuration finds the sense of futility which was so often attributed to existentialism originating with its American precursors. The victims in the American novels are not permitted to change their circumstances. In an essay on time in *The Sound*

and the Fury, Sartre draws a similar conclusion about the fiction of Faulkner. Discussing temporal movement in language that echoes his description of *Petit Crâne*, he calls the present in Faulkner "unspeakable." The emotional order of time is "opposite of voluntary and intellectual order that is chronological but lacking in reality." It is reminiscent, he says, of time in Proust. But whereas the past in Proust needs to be recaptured, the past in Faulkner is always encroaching on the present. In another image of head removal, Sartre describes time in Faulkner and Proust as "decapitated." Time's future, "its dimension of deeds and freedom," is negated. (In *The Sound and the Fury*, this is accomplished through the foreknowledge of Quentin Compson's suicide.) Did Proust, then, possess that definitively American capacity for acting without knowing? Not entirely. Says Sartre on Proust: "The French lose themselves only a little at a time and always manage to find themselves again." The loss of the self in Faulkner is different, and it has none of the excitement suggested in the "obscure rages" of *Petit Crâne* or in Sartre's vision of himself out of his mind in love. Faulkner, he concludes, "is able to make a man a sum total without a future." Faulkner's view of existence, in other words, is essentially the opposite of Sartre's own belief that a person is defined psychologically by her "project," the entire purpose toward which all her actions are directed. "We are living in a time of impossible revolutions," he writes, "and Faulkner uses his extraordinary art to describe our suffocation and a world dying of old age. I like his art, but I do not believe in his metaphysics. A closed future is still a future" (*LPE* 93). Sartre's assessment seems to fall into the category of criticism that Richard Adams, in his discussion of motion in Faulkner, describes as flawed, in that it finds in Faulkner's depiction of stasis an expression of despair rather than an affirmation of motion and change. Characters such

as Quentin Compson, according to this type of assessment, are negative moral examples; they are defeated because they resist motion, which is life. Sartre himself held the belief that life is action, but he did not see Faulkner as sharing this view. Faulkner, in his view, conceives of a person as something that is already complete.

In "American Novelists in French Eyes," Sartre observes that the American public seems to respond to American novelists differently than the French do. During his first trip to the U.S., he had been somewhat disappointed to find that the reputations of certain authors admired in France had faded in America. Faulkner's work had been out of print until that year, 1946, when *The Portable Faulkner* was published. Recalling a woman in America who had asked him what American writers he preferred, Sartre writes: "When I mentioned Faulkner the other people present started to laugh. The lady, gently amused, said, 'Good heavens—that *old* Faulkner!'" (115). Subsequently, Sartre met an author of historical novels whom he describes as "a young, liberal writer." When he told the man that his own publishers had asked him to contact the literary agents of some of France's favorite American authors, he was asked the names of the writers. "When I mentioned Caldwell," Sartre says, "his friendly smile vanished suddenly; at the name of Steinbeck he raised his eyebrows; and at the mention of Faulkner he cried indignantly, 'You French! Can't you ever like anything but filth?'" (115).

Not only had Sartre, Camus, and Beauvoir adopted the techniques of American writers, they had also, to a certain extent, imported a mood. Criticism of existentialist writings in America after the war echoes some of the early complaints that had been made against the work of Faulkner, who, like Sartre, had been called nihilistic and accused of depicting gratuitous horrors with no virtue presented to oppose them. These

were not coincidental similarities. Beginning in the 1930s, Sartre, Camus, and Beauvoir were all impressed by Faulkner's sense of tragedy, though their interpretations of it varied somewhat. Camus believed that Faulkner had successfully adapted the elements of classical tragedy to modern life. Discussing his adaptation of *Requiem for a Nun* to the stage, Camus says that Faulkner's work makes it possible to bring the tragedy of 20th-century history to contemporary theater: "His characters belong to our own day, and yet they confront the same destiny which crushed Electra or Orestes. Only a great artist could thus attempt to introduce the great language of pain and humiliation into our apartments." To write modern tragedy, Camus says, one must use language that people recognize as their own, but which is lofty enough for tragic subjects. Camus was convinced that Faulkner had perfected this language. Beauvoir and Sartre were similarly struck by the sense of tragedy they found in Faulkner's writing, which they assessed in moral as well as aesthetic terms. Beauvoir was fascinated by Faulkner's representation of time and once said that only after reading Faulkner was she able to develop a love for Proust (qtd. in Bair: 126); but she also found it difficult at times to reconcile the techniques of Faulkner with her own philosophical outlook. Faulkner's technique, she once said, was "designed for a novel constructed on a fatalistic basis, whereas I was concerned with free and unpredictable decisions'" (qtd. in Bair: 229).

When William Barrett wrote his 1958 study of existentialism, *Irrational Man*, he described the prospect of a closed future as one of things that gave contemporary relevance still to existentialism, whose heyday of popular appeal by that time had faded. Describing existentialism as "the philosophy of the atomic age," Barrett echoes the humanist tenets that flourished in the postwar era, saying that in an age of ever-increasing

mechanization which poses the threat of atomic annihilation, a philosophy that attempts to understand humanity in its completeness, including its most disturbing and irrational impulses, is more useful than theories founded in human reason. *The Sound and the Fury*, says Barrett, is helpful reading for anyone who wants to understand the concrete feel of the world envisioned by existential philosophy, a world that is fixed, unyielding, and irrational, and in which timeless eternity is no longer a possibility.

The principle of absurd action that Camus describes in *The Myth of Sisyphus* bears a certain resemblance to the odyssey of the Bundren family in Faulkner's novel *As I Lay Dying*. Camus's ethic of action for its own sake is reminiscent of Anse Bundren's single-minded determination to fulfill his promise to his wife, Addie, and transport her body to the city of Jefferson for burial. Anse and the other Bundrens are committed to the Sisyphean task of hauling Addie to her burial place, despite the immense obstacles that stand in their way, and despite Anse's conviction that God intended human beings to remain stationary rather than move. The discrepancy between the absurd universe of Sisyphus and the universe in which Anse believes, which is designed by God, reflects a similar difference between Camus' perspective and Faulkner's. Faulkner once said in relation to the French writers who admired him that it was wrong to lose all faith in God. On the other hand, his tribute to Camus, upon hearing of his untimely death, suggests certain similarities in the two men's perspectives. Both emphasized action in defiance of death. Faulkner wrote of Camus:

> People will say, He was too young; he did not have time to finish. . . . But it is not *How long*, it is not *How much*; it is simply *What*. When the door shut for him, he had already written on this side of it that which every

> artist who also carries through life with him that one same foreknowledge and hatred of death, is hoping to do: *I was here*. He was doing that, and perhaps in that bright second he even knew he had succeeded. What more could he want? (qtd. in Blotner: 1756-57)

For all their philosophical differences, Faulkner appears sensitive to Camus's view of existence, which draws on Kierkegaard's depiction of faith as a leap that ultimately reconciles a person with an absurd world. In September 1939, exemplifying his sense of life as a leap of faith in defiance of death, Camus wrote in his journal:

> In Italian museums, you see little painted screens that the priest used to hold before the prisoner's face to hide the scaffold from him.
>
> The existential leap is one of the little screens. (148)

Faulkner's influence on Sartre, Camus, and Beauvoir, was considerable, but, for Sartre, an even greater influence was John Dos Passos. In a 1938 essay on the novel *1919*, Sartre says that Dos Passos represents time non-chronologically in a way that resembles memory, or historical time. Facts are given, but the author "never thinks them." "One step further would give us the famous idiot's monologue in *The Sound and the Fury*," Sartre writes. "But that would still involve intellectualizing, suggesting an explanation in terms of the irrational, suggesting a Freudian order beneath this disorder" (*LPS* 96). In Dos Passos, he says, images of action and experience conveyed with little overt authorial analysis suggest (as in Melville) freedom from rational order. Each event is a spontaneously emerging, irreducible "*thing*." This is similar to Sartre's description (derived from Heidegger) of human consciousness. In the work of his favorite American authors there is a seemingly fluid border between thoughts and events, or action. In their

unanalyzed experiences, Dos Passos's characters resemble *Petit Crâne*: "Acts, emotions, and ideas suddenly settle within a character, make themselves at home and then disappear without his having much to say in the matter. You cannot say he submits to them. He experiences them. There seems to be no law governing their appearance" (*LPS* 97).

Sartre is particularly enthusiastic about the way Dos Passos portrays an individual "interior" perspective dissolving into the collective "exterior" perspective that surrounds it. For example, when Joe Williams dies, there is a subtle shift between his viewpoint as he fights and the "exterior" perspective that concludes "he was out" (*LPS* 103). In real life, human freedom, the solitude of the consciousness, prohibits this merging of individual and collective. Unlike the struggle between self and other described in *Being and Nothingness*, wherein one consciousness can theoretically transcend another (by making an object of it) but cannot blend with it, the meeting between inner and outer in *1919* ends in synthesis. "We exist either entirely *within* or entirely *without*," says Sartre, but "Dos Passos' man is a hybrid creature, an interior-exterior being" (*LPS* 102). What is more, this effect in American writing is accomplished not by analysis, but by technique: "All one need do is use American journalistic technique in telling the story of a life, and . . . a life crystallizes into the Social, and the problem of the transition to the typical—stumbling block of the social novel—is thereby resolved" (*LPS* 101).

Another context in which this sort of technique was employed was crime fiction, which had gained popularity among the French, who named it *la littérature noire*. Observing the similarities in plot and characterization between *The Stranger* (which helped shape the *film noir* genre) and Cain's *The Postman Always Rings Twice*, Lehan describes the heroes in both novels as outsiders who passively react to their surroundings

and are (like Dos Passos's characters) revealed to the reader through their actions (62). The hobo life of *Petit Crâne*, whom Sartre imagines waiting to jump aboard a cattle truck, resembles the vagabond existence of Frank Chambers, the hero of Cain's novel, especially at the beginning, when he reveals: "They threw me off the hay truck about noon. I had swung on the night before, down at the border, and as soon as I got up there under the canvas, I went to sleep" (3). Camus, in a similar vein, employed the swift narration of detective fiction and created Meursault on the model of the macho crime novel hero who seems to lack interiority and whose behavior, says Lehan, "embodied the very indifference of nature itself." For Camus, who had been diagnosed with tuberculosis, there is heroism in confronting the truth without illusions. In a world that does not offer supernatural or eternal consolations, absurdity is the truth, and living with this truth is heroic. As he was conceiving *The Myth of Sisyphus* and *The Stranger*, in December 1938, Camus wrote in his journal, under the heading "*On the Absurd?*":

> There is only one case in which despair is pure: that of the man sentenced to death. (May I be allowed a short illustration?) A man driven to despair by love might be asked if he wanted to be guillotined on the following day and would refuse. Because of the horror of the punishment? Yes. But here, the horror springs from the complete certainty of what is going to happen—or rather, from the mathematical element which creates this certainty. Here, the Absurd is perfectly clear. It is the opposite of irrationality. It is the plain and simple truth. What is and would be

> irrational is the fleeting hope, itself already near to death, that it is all going to stop and that this death can be avoided. (*Notebooks* 116)[1]

In *The Stranger*, Camus depicts a world devoid of values, in which "the plain and simple truth" is absurdity. Both Meursault and Sisyphus confront a world in which action is without purpose or meaning. "I am seeking reasons for my revolt which nothing has so far justified," Camus wrote in his journal in September 1939, as the war was beginning (*Notebooks* 138). In *The Plague* and *The Rebel*, he would go beyond the subject of solitary, absurd action and examine the social motivations for revolt and resistance. In these later works, Camus sought, like Sartre and other thinkers of the time, to provide his ideas with a clearer social foundation.

The ethic that Sartre developed in response to the war and Occupation is briefly outlined in an essay on the French Resistance called "The Republic of Silence," which was published in *The Atlantic Monthly* in December 1944, just a month before his first trip to the U.S. A footnote identifies him as a "dramatist and poet who distinguished himself as one of the military leaders of the FFI through the long years of German domination." "Military leader" is an inflated description. Sartre helped to organize a Resistance group and resisted the Occupation in his writing. In 1943, after the French Communist Party's partisan approach to Resistance activities became relatively open, Sartre became involved with the Party's *Comité national des écrivains*. The PCF had previously circulated a pamphlet in Southern France that denounced Sartre for the

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[1] The parallel between Meursault and *Native Son*'s Bigger Thomas, who assumes a similar posture in confronting execution, is striking. Camus was describing this attitude in his journals, and writing *The Stranger* in the late 1930s, at the same time that Wright was composing *Native Son*. Philip Thody, who translated and edited Camus's journals in English, refers to Camus's discussion of Dostoyevsky's Kirilov in *The Myth of Sisyphus*. The similarity between Meursault and Bigger seems to reflect the strong influence of Dostoyevsky on both Camus and Wright.

influence of Heidegger (who infamously joined the Nazi party) on his work. These differences were resolved (Sartre was assured that he would not be further maligned), and he began contributing anonymously to the underground journal *Les Lettres françaises* (Cohen-Solal 194). In "The Republic of Silence," which he wrote after the liberation of France, Sartre envisions the highly unusual experience of the active Resistance fighter (a role which had been enacted in a multitude of ways and for widely diverse reasons) symbolically as the universal experience of all French people who withstood the "Nazi venom" and for whom "each precise thought became a conquest." He writes:

> Every moment we lived in the fullest sense of that trite tag, "Man is mortal," and the choice that each one made of his life and of himself was authentic; for the more it was made in the presence of death, the more it could always be explained in the formula of "Rather Death Than. . . ." And I do not speak here of our elite who were the true Resisters, but of all Frenchmen who, at every hour of the day or night, during four years, have said NO. (39)

Prevented from speaking openly, says Sartre, the French affirmed their freedom through independent thought and through the words and actions they chose when death was a possible consequence. Negation was a form of resistance. Akin to the silent, morally upright experience of *Petit Crâne*, life in occupied France had created a situation in which every word and action constituted a moral stance. "Thus indeed was the question of liberty brought to the very edge of the profoundest comprehension that man can have of himself." Through his allegiance to others who share his situation, man arrives at a deeper understanding of his own humanity:

> For the secret of a man is not in his Oedipus or inferiority complex; it is in his power to resist suffering up to the point of death. To those who led clandestine lives, the conditions of their fight brought a new experience. They did not fight in the daylight, like soldiers; in every circumstance they were alone; they were pursued and arrested in their solitude. And it was in their loneliness, in their completest nakedness, that they resisted torture, alone and stripped before their well-shaved, well-fed, and well-dressed executioners, who mocked their pitiful flesh and whose complacent consciences and incredible social power gave every evidence of being in the right. (40).

In resisting suffering and believing that he was right despite the powerful forces that suggested otherwise, the ordinary citizen of occupied France manifested the qualities of the clandestine Resisters Sartre describes here.

Like many other French people inside and outside of France, Sartre emerged from the Occupation with a heightened sense of social responsibility. His broad definition of resisting (everyone who said *no*) is intended to foster good will within a divided nation, but it is fraught with problems. Resistance, particularly in the early stages of the occupation, had been conceived by the stunned nation in a variety of ways. One form of mini-rebellion, for example, was to lie to Germans who asked for directions. Another was to jostle with them in the street.[2] In "American Novelists in French Eyes," discussing the significance of American literature in occupied France, Sartre himself

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[2] These small revolts could be hazardous. Historian Julian Jackson writes that "[t] he first victim of the Germans in Paris was Jacques Bonsergent, a 28-year-old engineer, who was in a group which jostled some German soldiers. In the ensuing argument, Bonsergent raised his fist against a German. He was arrested and shot on 23 December 1940. German posters announcing this event were posted throughout the city, and they became little shrines at which people laid flowers" (275).

describes the extent to which "resistance" was extended to include the most innocuous of acts:

> Snobbishness played its part during the period when the underground was unorganized and not yet hazardous and when amateurs thought they could save France by scratching V on the walls.[3] The reading of novels by Faulkner and Hemingway became for some a symbol of resistance. Stenographers believed they could demonstrate against the Germans by reading *Gone with the Wind* in the Métro (115).

Initially, as historian Peter Davies writes, respect for Pétain's heroism during World War I, widespread anti-British sentiment, resentment toward the policies of the Third Republic (felt by Pétain himself and reflected in his National Revolution), along with a host of other factors, caused a large segment of the French population to back the Vichy regime. The desire to believe in Pétain was so great that he was at times accorded a godlike status or characterized as France's Christ-like savior. The tendency is exemplified in this adaptation of the Lord's Prayer that was created during the war:

> Our Father,
>
> Who art our leader,
>
> Hallowed be thy name.
>
> Thy kingdom come.
>
> Thy will be done
>
> On earth, so we may live.

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[3] Jackson writes of this phenomenon: "In March 1941, the BBC called for people to draw Vs for victory on walls. This idea caught on and the prefecture of Paris counted 1,000 Vs on 7 April 1941. In Montpelier the prefect complained that the extent of such defacement had become 'disagreeable to the eye'. To undermine this campaign, the Germans started putting up their own V posters in Paris. This 'battle of the Vs' was significant enough to be noted by several diarists of the period" (287-88).

> Give us each day our daily bread.
>
> Give France back her life.
>
> Let us not fall back into vain dreams and falsehoods.
>
> But deliver us from evil,
>
> O Marshal! (Davies 28)

Public sentiment would change, especially after Germany took control of the unoccupied, Southern region in 1942. The shifting loyalties, uncertainty, and guilt that plagued France during four years of occupation culminated in mayhem in December 1944, when the nation was liberated. Sartre describes the ruthlessness and haphazardness with which suspected collaborators were punished, and presents it as evidence that, as far as social injustice is concerned, France can claim no moral authority over America:

> In December, 1944, at the same time that the Aubert Palace movie theater in Paris was showing an old movie by Fritz Lang, *Fury*, which depicted a Chicago lynching, Frenchmen in the Midi were hanging and shooting, without much discrimination, such members of the 'militia' and collaborationists as they were able to capture. They were shaving the heads of women in our provinces. Thus, when we saw on the screen the adventures of Spencer Tracy, we did not think about your lynchings, but of ours—we took the lesson to ourselves. Your authors, like your producers, always appeared to us as critics of your society, moralists who report on humanity. What we looked for above all else in the American novel was something quite different from its crudities and its violence. ("American Novelists" 116)

In some ways, Sartre appears discerning and honest when he documents the anger, guilt, hypocrisy, and violence along with the happiness, relief, and genuine heroism that characterized France at the moment of liberation. Within a population whose experience of the Occupation had varied greatly—from real misery and deprivation, to great courage and sacrifice, to relative ease and comfort, to cowardice and opportunism—the variety of response is immeasurable. Historical documentation of the period, as outlined by Julian Jackson, has proceeded through several stages. In the forties and fifties, there was a "heroic reinterpretation" which sought (with De Gaulle's approval) to effectively "erase" the occupation years from French history and attribute most of its oppressive activities to German influence alone. The intensity of the desire to crystallize such a complex and confused period into an acceptable national myth is prefigured in the purges of suspected collaborators that spread through France before and just after the Liberation. A French committee established in the fifties to study the history of the war determined that approximately nine thousand people were killed by unofficial means. In addition, writes Jackson, seven hundred sixty-seven of the death sentences pronounced by the Courts of Justice and seven hundred seventy executions pronounced by military tribunals were carried out (577). The "heroic myth" that De Gaulle and the Resistance represented the "real" France peaked in the sixties, during De Gaulle's presidency. The student movement of 1968 ushered in a mood of rebellion, and the myth began to be questioned. One manifestation of this spirit was Marcel Ophuls's documentary of 1971, *The Sorrow and the Pity*. The film includes interviews with an array of major and minor players including Vichy officials, German soldiers, Jews targeted by the Vichy regime, and Resisters from the renowned but still mysterious

Maquis. Among its other achievements, Ophuls's documentary vividly demonstrates the ways in which people can (self-consciously or not) adapt their sense of the past to accommodate their own wishes and beliefs. In the seventies, several movies and books examined the popularity of Pétain and the Vichy regime. In 1972, the American historian Robert Paxton produced a landmark study entitled *Vichy France: Old Guard and New Order, 1940-1944*, which was translated into French the following year and caused some fervor in France. Among other things, Paxton investigates collaboration between Vichy and Germany, Vichy's plan for the "regeneration" of France, and its culpability for French anti-Semitic policy during the war. The book inaugurated a period of intense study of the Vichy era among French historians, which continues to the present time. At the end of the seventies, historians turned from the history of the Vichy Regime to the history of French society during the occupation. The eighties produced a wave of studies on the Jews in occupied France, due in part to the work of the French historian Serge Klarsfeld, who compiled the names of the country's Holocaust victims. In the nineties, a renewed interest in the Resistance emerged, which has produced memoirs and, more recently, social analyses which attempt to examine the movement in its full diversity, paying attention to political loyalties as well as the participation of populations such as women and immigrants.[4]

In light of all the historical reassessing of the era, some of Sartre's own misconceptions are revealed. In an article he was asked to write on U.S.-Soviet differences, "The Chances of Peace," which was published in The *Nation* in 1950, Sartre writes of Europe's position in the Cold War:

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[4] Most of this summary of occupation history draws on the introduction ("Historians and the Occupation") to Julian Jackson's *France: The Dark Years, 1940-1944*.

> In view of the cleavages among the Atlantic Pact nations, European mobilization is extremely doubtful, especially if one remembers that it would take place under the threat of twenty-five fully armed Russian divisions stationed in Germany. Later, if we should be occupied, an organized resistance would accomplish little against the Russians. At the time of the German occupation 90 per cent of the population was for the Resistance or, at worst, was neutral. But if new American landings were attempted, the resistance of the European Communists might prove very effective. (697-98)

The historical record produced since 1950 suggests that Vichy had far greater support than Sartre, reflecting public opinion of the time, implies. Conventional knowledge in this case suits Sartre's polemical purpose; but to some degree he participates in the "heroic myth" of a largely resistant France succumbing to German demands only out of necessity. Historians have subsequently portrayed Vichy as, in certain ways, exceeding the harshness of German policy. (Pierre Laval, whose willingness to collaborate has never really been in doubt, is described as having been particularly eager to secure his position in the "New Europe" by impressing the Germans, particularly in the early years of the Occupation.) In 1942, according to Jackson, 41,951 Jews, most of whom were foreign, were deported from France. After the war, some people defended these deportations on the grounds that to save French Jews, it had been necessary to deport foreign ones. Jackson refutes this tenuous claim, observing that some of the roundups did include French Jews and that the Germans, in any case, simply would not have been able

to gather significant numbers of Jews, French or foreign, without the participation of thousands of French police (218).

An example of the nostalgic, postwar sense of principled heroism in France is provided in an essay by Jacques Guicharnaud, "Those Years: Existentialism 1943-1945," which was published in *Yale French Studies* in the mid-1950s. In a self-consciously subjective description of his initiation into existentialism during the war years in his "petit-bourgeois" youth, Guicharnaud evokes the image of Resisters (whose organization and effectiveness had increased in the years referred to in the essay) who managed, amid their struggle, to uphold French culture. Guicharnaud recalls men who read Montaigne in the forest, "taught La Fontaine's fables and the secrets of Latin composition to the Jewish and other children they were trying to save," and "were hastily disarmed at war's end for fear they might force their purity on the new peace when compromise again offered the easy way out" (44). Acknowledging that the unity of the Resistance was a myth, he characterizes Resisters as maintaining humanist ideals: "The humanism in whose name they killed and were killed had not, in so many words, demanded that they take up arms and become apprentice murderers—perhaps because those who organized and represented it could not conceive that in an era of universal Democracy men would seek to enslave men, as Nazi Germany had set about doing" (45). For Guicharnaud, the beauty of existentialism lay in its assisting students at the Sorbonne such as himself, "who had not *really* suffered," in coming to terms, morally and intellectually, with the real horrors of the era. He tells of a Jewish classmate who had been made to wear a yellow star and had disappeared, after reportedly joining a Resistance group, eventually resurfacing from an Italian prison after the Liberation. Although they were relatively

sheltered at the Sorbonne, students were nevertheless confronted with the "absurd order that beset the world." Says Guicharnaud: "No immediately apparent relationship existed between the technique of the *explication de texte* and the disappearance of my friend Levy" (47).

Guicharnaud's paean to existentialism evokes the experience of Jews during the Occupation, but some recent critiques have questioned Sartre's failure to directly address this subject. A special issue of the journal *October*, from 1999, is devoted to "rereading" Sartre's *Anti-Semite and Jew*, a book which proposes a plan for freeing French Jews from oppression and scapegoating without compelling their total assimilation. Central to the debate presented in *October* is Sartre's reference to Jews in "The Republic of Silence," which initially appeared on the front page of *Les Lettres Francaises* at the time of the Liberation, in September 1944 (it was the first free edition of the journal). The article was then widely reprinted. The first paragraph, as it appeared in the *Atlantic Monthly*, read:

> Never were we freer than under the German occupation. We had lost all our rights, and first of all our right to speak. They insulted us to our faces every day—and we had to hold our tongues. They deported us *en masse*—as workers, as Jews, as political prisoners. Everywhere,—upon the walls, in the press, on the screen,—we found that filthy and insipid image of ourselves which the oppressor wished to present us. And because of all this, we were free. (39)

In *Anti-Semite and Jew*, originally published in French in 1946 as *Réflexions sur la Question Juive*, Sartre says that since the appearance of "The Republic of Silence"

several Jews have expressed appreciation: "How completely must they have felt themselves abandoned, to think of thanking an author for merely having written the word 'Jew' in an article!" (In one section of *Anti-Semite and Jew*, the sentence "Today those Jews whom the Germans did not deport or murder are coming back to their homes" is accompanied by the footnote "Written in October 1944" [72].) The debate over Sartre's regard for Jews during the Occupation founders on the dilemma of protest versus silence. Silence, as Jackson writes, held a variety of meanings during the Occupation. (A commonly noted example of the silence ethic is the covertly published Resistance novel *Le Silence de la mer*, which finds heroism in the refusal of a young girl and her uncle to speak to a German officer who takes up temporary residence in their home.) In "The Republic of Silence," Sartre finds the ultimate expression of freedom in the courage that one summons when confronted alone by a more powerful enemy: "One single word would provoke ten or a hundred new arrests. This total responsibility in total solitude—was not this the final revelation of our liberty?" (40). This responsibility made the Resistance "a true democracy: for the solider, as for his superior, the same danger, the same loneliness, the same responsibility, the same absolute freedom within the discipline" (40). Under such conditions, silence could be heroic, but so could protest. "The more the omnipotent police tried to enforce our silence," Sartre writes, "the more each of our words became a precious declaration of principle" (39).

Contextualized within an ethical debate regarding the fate of Jews in France, the choice between silence and protest is an essential and difficult problem. And as *Anti-Semite and Jew* reveals, it was not solved by the Liberation. As Sartre writes, many among the French supported Pétain's government, which was unambiguously anti-

Semitic. Sartre depicts these supporters as attempting to delude themselves with regard to their own compliance and complicity: "The 'Pétainists' did not protest. They felt extremely ill at ease, but what was to be done? If France could be saved at the cost of a few sacrifices, was it not better to close one's eyes? Certainly these people were not anti-Semites; they even spoke to the Jews whom they met with commiseration and politeness" (70). In October 1944 (according to the date footnoted in *Anti-Semite and Jew*) Sartre objects to continuing this silence, though he observes that among French Jews there are some who would just as soon keep a low profile, maintaining the position "The less we are noticed, the better." A problem that emerges in a contemporary reading of *Anti-Semite and Jew* is Sartre's use of "we" to describe French people who are not Jewish. In "The Republic of Silence," on the other hand, "we" had applied to Jews as well. A desire for solidarity that places the "we" subject above the "I" is essential to the Marxist ethic Sartre has acquired during the war. Confronting the Jewish question in postwar France, as he sees it, demands collective self-awareness and accountability:

> Today those Jews whom the Germans did not deport or murder are coming back to their homes. Many were among the first members of the Resistance; others had sons or cousins in Leclerc's army. Now all France rejoices and fraternizes in the streets; social conflict seems temporarily forgotten; the newspapers devote whole columns to stories of prisoners of war and deportees. Do we say anything about the Jews? Do we give a thought to those who died in the gas chambers at Lublin? Not a word. Not a line in the newspapers. That is because we must not irritate the anti-Semites; more than ever, we need unity. Well-meaning journalists will

> tell you: "In the interest of the Jews themselves, it would not do to talk too much about them just now." For four years French society has lived without them; it is just as well not to emphasize too vigorously the fact that they have reappeared. (71)

Sartre seems honest and candid in calling attention, amid social chaos, to a problem that would not be subjected to full-scale historical study for many years. The question that inevitably arises in recent readings of *Anti-Semite and Jew*, however, is whether this appeal to speak out is not awfully belated and atypical. Suleiman, who says that she once idolized Sartre, now finds herself offended by his use of an all-inclusive "we." "The inclusion of the Jews in this particular context seemed too easy," she writes, "especially since it is the only time Sartre writes the word 'Juif' in any of his essays on the Occupation. It is as though he had reserved all of his thoughts on the Jews for *Anti-Semite and Jew*, except for this once" (135).

Suleiman makes an interesting addition to her argument by including a statement from Bianca Lamblin, whom she describes as "a very young woman who had been initiated sexually by both Sartre and Beauvoir." (Lamblin's account of this relationship, *Mémoires d'une jeune fille derange*, had been published in 1993 and translated into English, as *A Disgraceful Affair*, in 1996.) Conceding that she does not know whether Lamblin's opinion of "The Republic of Silence" originated upon her initial reading of the article or later on, Suleiman provides this statement (which she has translated) from Lamblin:

> Obviously, I found these formulations sickening. My grandfather and my aunt (Georges Perec's mother) had perished at Auschwitz. . . . As for me,

> I had spent the war hiding in various ways to escape deportation. . . . The most revolting thing in Sartre's text is the use of "we": . . . this *we* from the pen of someone who was not in the Resistance, who was not Jewish, and who thought of nothing else than publishing and the success of his plays is positively abusive, revolting. (137)

On the whole, Lamblin's memoir is bitter. Born in Poland to a family that immigrated to France when she was very young, she writes that for her "the status of being Jewish had only an external, almost foreign significance" (84). The anti-Semitism of the Vichy regime caught her off guard. When her sexual relationship with Sartre and Beauvoir ended in 1940, she says, the couple showed little concern for her situation: "Sartre cast me out of his life because I had lost most of the value I had had in his eyes. Then the Beaver herself got ready to break with me, at the moment I needed her most" (86). The discussion of her contained in Sartre and Beauvoir's letters (which were not published until later) are the main source of her resentment. Lamblin eventually resumed a relatively cool friendship with Beauvoir. She recounts a meeting between the two of them many years later at which she brought up a recent terrorist attack on a Jewish restaurant. Having been out of town at the time of the event, Lamblin mistakenly referred to a bombing (the weapons had been machine guns), at which point Beauvoir angrily accused her of having no sense of solidarity with other Jews. Lamblin portrays both Beauvoir and Sartre as given to unwarranted self-righteousness, but in the end the worst of her criticism is reserved for Sartre, who is presented as boorish, domineering, selfish, and disagreeable in bed. On the good side, he apparently lived up to his own

idealized sense of action by eloquently transcending his physical appearance when he spoke.

Along with stirring up the issue of Sartre's motives for writing little (if anything) about the Jews until the moment of Liberation, *Anti-Semite and Jew*, when examined together with "The Republic of Silence," raises questions about the direction of his political perspective. In *October*, Denis Hollier offers a compelling analysis of the book as Sartre's first attempt to use a totalizing theory of history (which employs a philosophical, rather than political, definition of "totalitarian" as an expression of solidarity) to confront the problem of oppression. *Anti-Semite and Jew* concludes controversially by proposing an assimilation which is chosen (rather than imposed) by the "authentic" Jew on her own terms only after anti-Semitism has been eliminated at the social level. "The totalitarian moment doesn't induce assimilation," Hollier writes. "It suppresses anti-Semitism, clearing the space for a possible, voluntary, acceptable type of assimilation" (155). Referring to Sartre's claim that the authentic Jew "is not opposed to assimilation any more than the class-conscious worker is opposed to the liquidation of classes," Hollier says that Sartre's model does not propose a Marxist "end of history" but submits an introduction of Jewish difference into recorded history: "Centuries of Jewish withdrawal from history are ending. And this he calls assimilation" (155). One problem with Sartre's theory is the jargon it contains. Besides its use of "totalitarian," the discussion of Jewish experience in terms of "authenticity" and "inauthenticity" seems to draw on the language of nationalism. In using such essentializing terms to define a person as a group member, rather than as a discrete individual (as in Heidegger), Sartre is clearly breaking with the tenets of his own existential philosophy. Also, in what seems

like a guilty overreaction to his former individualism, he is insistent that his hypothetical Jew be adequately Jewish. Addressing this problem (and heeding Hollier's request that she examine Sartre's syntax for general meaning rather than emphasizing its specific details) Suleiman writes:

> Although Sartre rejects racial determinism (in principle, if not always in "detail"), he substitutes for it a determinism of situation that allows him to make statements ranging from the offensive to the merely absurd, and sometimes occupying both positions at once: "The anti-Semites are right in saying that the Jew eats, drinks, reads, sleeps, and dies like a Jew. What else could he do?" (132).

The distrust of individualism Sartre expresses seems in certain respects an abrupt change from the position he assumes in "The Republic of Silence," which was published just weeks before the date he footnotes in *Anti-Semite and Jew*. In that article, he had hailed the Resistance as "a true democracy," but in *Anti-Semite and Jew* he characterizes "the democrat" as a friend to the Jews who is, unfortunately, a "feeble protector." Sartre assesses the democrat as an analytical product of the eighteenth century who asserts equal rights but "has no eyes for the concrete syntheses with which history confronts him. He recognizes neither Jew nor Arab, nor Negro, nor bourgeois, nor worker, but only man—man always the same at all times and places. He resolves all collectivities into individual elements" (55). The democrat refutes the claims of the anti-Semite by submitting examples of particular Jews. But the anti-Semite thinks in terms not of individuals, but of a "synthetic whole" (56). (That Sartre himself is moving toward this type of holistic view, and trying at the same time to free the Jews from what he sees as an inherently

rationalist mindset, makes his theory seem convoluted at times.) The perspective of the democrat, Sartre argues, permits the Jew freedom at the expense of his Jewish identity:

> This is what, in the United States, is called the policy of assimilation; immigration laws have registered the failure of this policy and, on the whole, the failure of the democratic point of view. How could it be otherwise? For a Jew, conscious and proud of being Jewish, asserting his claim to be a member of the Jewish community, there may not be so much difference between the anti-Semite and the democrat. The former wishes to destroy him as a man and leave nothing in him but the Jew, the pariah, the untouchable; the latter wishes to destroy him as a Jew and leave nothing in him but the man, the abstract and universal subject of the rights of man and the rights of the citizen. (57)

Theoretically, the policy of assimilation was not supposed to supersede civil liberties, such as the freedom of religion. In the name of helping the marginalized to survive, Sartre throws out assimilation *and* those rights which derive from an atomistic, individualistic conception of human life. His objection to emphasizing the essential humanity of the Jews is problematic, considering the humanistic view proposed in his famous lecture "Existentialism Is a Humanism," which was delivered in 1945 and published in 1946, the same year as *Anti-Semite and Jew*. 1946 was also the date of publication for "American Novelists in French Eyes," an article in which Sartre depicts Vichy newspapers as unable to dishearten the French by criticizing the Allied Forces: "They provoked on the contrary among most of us a profound respect for Anglo-Saxon democracy and bitter regret for our own. 'Such people,' we told ourselves, 'have

confidence in their rights'" (116). Sartre's work from the early postwar years, when he was writing and publishing profusely, reveals the variability in his ideas that was produced by his growing interest in Marx. (The interest did little to endear him to Marxists, who resolutely denounced him.) He also likely adapted his message somewhat to whatever audience he was addressing; and due to his sudden fame he was addressing a lot of audiences.

In another article, "Americans and their Myths," which appeared in The *Nation* in 1947, Sartre continues to target America in his postwar testimonials against bigotry. In the U.S., he observes, "[t]here is the myth of equality—and there is the myth of segregation, with those big beach-front hotels that post signs reading 'Jews and dogs not allowed,' and those lakes in Connecticut where Jews may not bathe, and that racial *tchin*, in which the lowest degree is assigned to the Slavs, the highest to the Dutch immigrants of 1680" (402-03). Like many American writers and intellectuals of the time, Sartre sees fascism skulking its way through American institutions and life. The "myth of equality" he diagnoses is clear. At times, however, his critique of the U.S., which draws on his wartime experience, looks like a displacement of national culpability, as when he writes, "Perhaps nowhere else will you find such a discrepancy between people and myth, between life and the representation of life" (403). In 1947 was this discrepancy really greater than in France? In a description of France during the Occupation, Cohen-Solal writes: "Huge recruiting posters are glued all over the city along with the sign: 'Jews are forbidden to stop in front of this poster'" (182). In "American Novelists in French Eyes," Sartre says to his American readers, "no matter what the evils your writers denounced, we have the same evils in our own country" (116). But the examples of French evil that

he proposes in that article do not include the oppression of Jews. This seems a little odd given the interest in the problem, at a time when most of France was yet to confront it directly, that he reveals in *Anti-Semite and Jew* and subsequently continues to assume.

Sartre would always decline to join the French Communist Party, but his political stance as a non-Communist leftist and anti-anti-Communist would subject him to scrutiny during the Cold War. As Mark Poster has observed, postwar Marxist critiques of the existentialism presented in *Being and Nothingness* tended to assess Sartre's philosophy as bourgeois idealism. In "The Republic of Silence," the Cartesian separation often noted in Sartre's early thought (the difference between interior and exterior which he sees, in his essay of 1938, dissolving in Dos Passos) is clearly deemphasized in favor of the ethic he has developed during the war, which draws a parallel between individual action and social commitment. F. W. Dupee alludes to this turn when he writes, in a 1946 *Partisan Review* article on the American novel in France, that "certain of the younger French writers are today preoccupied with what they regard as an irreconcilable tension between the claims of the personal and the social." A desire to resolve this tension underlay much of the postwar writing of both Camus and Sartre. It is perhaps most clearly expressed in "Existentialism is a Humanism," the lecture he had delivered in 1945, which was translated and published in America in 1947 as *Existentialism*. In it, Sartre begins by listing the various charges brought against existentialism. Among them: that it suggests all action is meaningless and is therefore a despairing, bourgeois, contemplative philosophy; that it emphasizes the depraved aspects of human existence rather than the good; and that it is fixated on solitude rather than collective human experience. This last complaint had come from Communists, who, according to Sartre, saw the problem

stemming from a Cartesian foundation of pure subjectivity "from which it is impossible to regain solidarity with other men who exist outside of the self. The *ego* cannot reach them through the *cogito*" (287).

But this was an issue he was already beginning to address. Sartre and Beauvoir's individualist stance during the 1930s encompassed not only a skeptical view of bourgeois values, religion, and other social institutions, but an opposition to the mingling of literature and politics as well (Appignanesi 49). In the forties, when this former posture took on a greater semblance of irresponsibility, Sartre began to rearticulate his ideas. "Existentialism Is a Humanism" is one of the consequences. Widely read in America as well as France, it proved to be of particular interest to writers. Existentialism, says Sartre, proclaims human dignity by asserting that a person is what he makes of himself. It thereby "places the entire responsibility for his existence squarely upon his own shoulders" (291). But while it is individuals who confront this responsibility, the implications of their doing so are social. "When we say that man chooses himself, we do mean that every one of us must choose himself; but by that we also mean that in choosing for himself he chooses for all men" (291). Thus existential anguish is more than mere futile suffering; it is an unavoidable consequence of social responsibility. All of this added up to a dramatic turn toward committed action, but the French Communist Party continued to insist that existentialism was anti-historical, bourgeois idealism (a complaint Sartre clearly intended to challenge when he wrote *Anti-Semite and Jew*). Throughout 1944 the PCF's position toward Sartre vacillated between rebuke and partial acceptance. Political engagement and the uniting of theory with action were points of compatibility between Marxism and existentialism, but Sartre's popularity among many of the Party's

younger members threatened, at the same time, to whittle away at its membership (Poster 110-12). In 1948, when Sartre helped found the anti-Stalinist, anti-capitalist organization *Le Rassemblement Démocratique Révolutionnaire*, some of the Communists' fears materialized. The humanist turn that affected Sartre's philosophy also had an impact on the way people read Marx. The *1844 Manuscripts* were translated into French in 1937, and after 1945 the theory of alienation became popular among various intellectuals inclined to understand Marx in a humanistic light. "To the same extent that the French reading public was fascinated by existentialism," writes Poster, "Marx's ideas triumphantly paraded through Paris to enthusiastic approval. To the chagrin of CP theorists, petty bourgeois intellectuals had successfully advertised Marxism as a philosophy of alienation" (50).

As Sartre's existentialism was advancing into new territory in his own mind and work, it was also being considered in broader terms by scholars seeking to situate it historically. There was little question regarding the substantial influence of Heidegger's *Being and Time*, which is reflected in the vocabulary of *Being and Nothingness*, or the influence of Husserl, which is reflected in the book's phenomenological method.[5] The nineteenth-century influences—Kierkegaard and Nietzsche in particular—were assessed retrospectively by readers of French existentialism,[6] but they were not extremely difficult to detect. In 1945, Jean Wahl gave a lecture in Paris called "A Short History of

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[5] The uses of this method had been addressed in Sartre's article of 1936 "The Transcendence of the Ego: A Sketch for Phenomenological Description."

[6] In a sociological history of world philosophy, Randall Collins places existentialism within an intellectual tradition of "literary-academic hybrids": "Sartre and Camus were key formulators of the canon, and themselves archetypes of the career overlap between academic networks and the writers' market. The phenomenon of existentialism in the 1940s and 1950s added another layer to this overlap. Sartre was the first philosopher in history to be heavily publicized by the popular mass media. And existentialism was a new kind of movement in the publishing industry at just the time when cheap paperback editions were first being marketed" (764-65).

Existentialism." The talk and the responses of the six other philosophers present were published in 1949, the same year the English translation appeared. Discussing the nineteenth-century roots of existentialism, Wahl says, "To understand anything that happens in our inner life we must go to the totality which is our self, thence to the larger totality which is the human species, and finally to the totality which is the absolute Idea. This is the conception which Kierkegaard, whom we may call the founder of the philosophy of existence, came forward to contradict" (3). Camus discusses Kierkegaard (who conceived the term "existential") in a section of *The Myth of Sisyphus* called "Absurd Freedom." He clearly draws on Kierkegaard's portrayal of the "Knight of Faith," who, after apprehending eternity, is reconciled with the temporal world despite its absurdity. Kierkegaard's Christian faith is founded on belief that cannot be confirmed by reason. Camus removes the religious element, depicting Sisyphus's absurd faith as founded on nothing at all. The "extreme danger," says Camus, does not lie in the leap to faith itself. "The danger, on the contrary, lies in the subtle instant that precedes the leap. Being able to remain on that dizzying crest—that is integrity and the rest is subterfuge" (50).

French existentialism's debt to Nietzsche was a bit less obvious, though similarly founded in a distrust of Hegelian reason. Sartre developed an interest in Nietzsche as a student at the École Normale Supérieure. Recalling those days in his diary in 1939, he writes that, in keeping with the "neo-realist pluralism" of his group of peers, he assumed a morality of "salvation through art." Unofficially, however, he was not a thoroughgoing realist, since he possessed a strong sense of the absolute in his own free consciousness. During that time and the years that immediately followed, as Sartre describes them, he

was thinking on several philosophical levels at once. But the practical effects on his behavior, he reveals, were not always very complex:

> thanks to the Protestant austerity of a lover of justice, I'd adopted a harsh and trenchant thought, which distanced me from the absolute that I was myself and confined me in a rough pedantry that delighted in its own harshness. The harshness went hand in hand with the violence I unleashed upon my schoolfellows. All this drew me toward a violent enjoyment of a garish, colourful world in complete contradiction with the one I'd given myself through my theory of contingency. And I went so far as to preach a Nietzschean morality of joy, whereas in other respects all joy and all harshness were shown to be impossible in the contingent, nauseous world I'd discovered. (*War Diaries* 87)

After the "happy disorder" of those years spent unleashing harshness upon his classmates, Sartre recollects a relatively dismal period during which he felt it imperative to justify human existence. In theory, his opposition to humanism peaked at this time; however, he confides, he was "surreptitiously seeking compromises" (87). The theory he later presents in "Existentialism Is a Humanism" resolves the overt philosophical dilemma (how to justify the existence of a particular individual) with the "surreptitious," humanistic one (how to explain existence in general) by synthesizing them. Human existence in general is defined according to a purpose which justifies the existence of a given individual. Existence as an idea is defined by a "project" which is specific to a particular person and situation. *Petit Crâne*, the product of Sartre's earlier fantasies, approximates this ideal; he typifies action which contributes to the social good while still

fulfilling internal motivations. As with Queequeg when he leaps overboard to save a shipmate, it is not manifestly clear what, exactly, motivates *Petit Crâne*'s apparently spontaneous behavior; but the pursuit of his unique goal produces socially useful effects. His secret, inward motive meets with the external world and generates a moral outcome, an irreducible consequence which is greater than the sum of its parts.

Sartre's concern during his college years with whether the absolute was to be found in things or in subjective consciousness reveals the extent to which the systematic philosophy of Hegel was presupposed by him and his peers.[7] His later philosophical position, as delineated in *Nausea*, emphasizes the contingency of human existence and implicitly refutes the idea that history is born out of an all-embracing spirit. As a result of the war years, reflecting the pervasive sense that any ethical formulation must rest on a historical foundation, he modified this radically individualistic stance (conceived during the bleak years during which he taught at a *lycée* in Le Havre) and pursued, via Marx, a method by which to situate his ideas historically. At the end of *Anti-Semite and Jew*, he proposes that anti-Semitism would not exist in a classless society and that the authentic Jew "is not opposed to assimilation any more than the class-conscious worker is opposed to the liquidation of classes":

> On the contrary, it is an access of consciousness that will hasten the suppression of both the class struggle and racism. The authentic Jew simply renounces *for himself* an assimilation that is today impossible; he awaits the radical liquidation of anti-Semitism for his sons. The Jew of

[7] Apparently, however, Sartre had not read Hegel at great length at this time. In a 1971 interview published in *Le Monde*, he says: "I found in about 1939 that I had assimilated many things from Hegel, though I didn't know his work well. I did not really come into contact with Hegel until after the war, with Hippolyte's translation and commentary" (*Life/Situations* 127).

> today is in full war. What is there to say except that the socialist revolution is necessary to and sufficient for the suppression of the anti-Semite? It is for the Jews *also* that we shall make the revolution. (151)

In making such an elaborate argument for Jewish authenticity only to finally submit that the end to anti-Semitism will coincide with the socialist revolution, Sartre lures his reader into an ideological offensive. Clearing a path for his teleological argument, he oddly twists the widely debated end-justifies-means question with the observation: "All too often people discuss means when they are still uncertain of their goal." Ultimately, the argument he makes is historicist and materialist but anti-rational.[8] It is in favor of "concrete liberalism" but opposed to abstract humanism and atomistic individualism. The absolute is achieved, basically, when "authenticity" yields "solidarity." Sartre found a use for Hegel.

But Camus did not, and this essentially proved to be the basis of his much-publicized split with Sartre in 1952, which lasted until Camus's sudden death in 1960. In *The Rebel*, published in 1951, Camus had dismissed Marxism as a utopian philosophy that sanctions immediate human suffering in the name of ultimate human salvation. Implicitly denouncing Stalinism, Camus writes of the practical effects of revolutionary politics: "The revolution compels itself to construct, at a great expenditure in human

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[8] As Poster depicts it, the Marxists' attack on Sartre as a bourgeois idealist undermined their own interests by failing to recognize that his phenomenological critique of consciousness could provide the ideas they needed to inspire the self-consciousness of a revolutionary class. Poster writes: "The inhibitions and blocks of this self-consciousness were central to the problems of Marxism and in this area the existentialists had stolen the Marxist thunder. The problem of the consciousness of the proletariat had arisen and existentialists were developing a method to study consciousness while Marxists languished in the study of external social structures. It was necessary to present clearly the human side of historical becoming—precisely how man was to change himself in the process of liberation. A modified Sartreanism might grasp the structures of man's self-negation, when viewed as part of the revolution" (119-20). Sartre's description of the inauthentic Jew provides an example of self-negation which is to be overcome by the self-consciousness of "authenticity"—i.e., "choosing oneself *as Jew*" rather than creating oneself in the shadow of the anti-Semitic idea, which leads to false consciousness.

lives, the industrial and capitalist intermediary that its own system demands. Revenue is replaced by human labor. Slavery then becomes the general condition, and the gates of heaven remain locked" (219). Camus rebukes Hegel and Marx together on the basis that each espouses a nihilistic vision of unity, a privileging of history which ultimately sanctions the destruction of life even when it intends in principle to affirm it. Although *The Rebel* received accolades in some circles and was praised by such philosophers as Hannah Arendt, it was predictably denounced in Sartre's journal *Les Temps Modernes* when it was reviewed by the critic Francis Jeanson. Camus responded with a long letter to the journal addressed to "*Monsieur le Directeur*," and Sartre then printed his own response, which accuses Camus of a high-minded, aloof morality that places principles above historical engagement. But the really thorny point of contention is Stalinism. Camus finds Jeanson's unwillingness to discuss the Soviet gulags suspicious. Sartre mocks Camus's suspicions:

> We are now on the Quai des Orfèvres, the cop walks by and his shoes creak, just like the movies. "I tell you, we know everything. It is your silence which makes you suspect. Go on, say it, you are an accomplice. You know about these camps. Well, admit it, and the jury will take your confession into account." My God, Camus! How *serious* you are, and, to use one of your own words, how frivolous! And suppose you are wrong? Suppose your book simply attested to your philosophic ignorance? Suppose it were to consist of hastily assembled and second-hand knowledge? Suppose it only served to give a clear conscience to the

> privileged? As witnessed by the critic who wrote, only the other day: "With M. Camus, revolt changes camps." (*Situations* 81)

The quarrel between Sartre and Camus encapsulates the broader debate over Stalinism which divided leftist ranks in France and beyond. Although Sartre and Camus had both been committed to the notion of a "third" path that would skirt the ideological poles represented by the U.S. and the U.S.S.R., Camus's moral refusal to compromise with the French Communist Party (which officially supported Soviet leadership) for the sake of practical, political ends was judged untenable by Sartre. In the long run, however, Sartre would distance himself from the Party on the same grounds, after the violent containment of Hungary's uprising against Soviet authority, in 1956. In his response to Camus, Sartre points out several articles that *Les Temps Modernes* had in fact published on the Soviet camps, but he hedges his argument: "Yes, Camus, like you, I find these camps inadmissible, but equally inadmissible is the use which the so-called bourgeois press makes of them every day" (*Situations* 85).

Camus's argument in *The Rebel* was not really the reversal of position that some of the responses to it suggest. He had explicitly condemned the Soviet political position as early as 1939 when, as the editor of a small Algerian journal called *Le Soir Républicain*, he wrote, "today the USSR can be classed among the countries that prey on others" (qtd. in Todd: 90). The view of revolt that he presents in *The Rebel* had been outlined in various earlier works. An article called "Remarks on Revolt" appeared in the French magazine *L'Existence* in1945. "Neither Victims Nor Executioners" was initially published in *Combat* in 1946, and a translation by Dwight McDonald was published in *Politics* in 1947. A fictionalized portrait of revolt is found in *The Plague*, which was

published in 1946. And a speech on the subject entitled "The Human Crisis" was delivered at Columbia University in the spring of 1946, during Camus's first and only trip to the United States, and then published in English in *Twice a Year*. "The idea of revolt," writes Camus's biographer Olivier Todd, "had obsessed Camus since at least 1943" (300). Central to Camus's polemic, in whatever form it was delivered, is the belief that no theoretical explanation of history can transcend the significance of real human experiences. Totalizing theories of history in any form, which Camus perceived as advancing dangerously abstract definitions of human life, must be resisted by people who say *no*. Camus, consequently, had no tolerance for Hegel's depiction of history, to which he tended to portray Marx as a footnote.[9] Reproaching this historicizing tendency, Camus writes, in "Neither Victims Nor Executioners":

> We live in terror because persuasion is no longer possible; because man has been wholly submerged in History; because he can no longer tap that part of his nature, as real as the historical part, which he recaptures in contemplating the beauty of nature and of human faces; because we live in a world of abstractions, of bureaus and machines, of absolute ideas and of crude messianism. We suffocate among people who think they are absolutely right, whether in their machines or in their ideas. And for all who can live only in an atmosphere of human dialogue and sociability, this silence is the end of the world. (141)

[9] In his response to Camus's letter to *Les Temps Modernes*, Sartre complains, "I have at least this in common with Hegel. You have not read either of us" (88). He also takes the opportunity to improve Camus's understanding of Marx, asserting that "Marx never said that History would have an objective. How could he? One might as well say that one day man would be without goals" (104).

Camus's reproof of Hegel and Marx (as indicated in the references to "absolute ideas" and "crude messianism") is virtually inseparable from his conception of history, which is usually construed negatively as that which denies legitimacy to human experience. The principle that the end justifies the means, he says, assumes that the validity of an action depends on an absolute conclusion, "as in nihilistic ideologies (anything goes, success is the only thing worth talking about), or in those philosophies which make History an absolute end (Hegel, followed by Marx: the end being a classless society, everything is good that leads to it)" (142). Obviously, "nihilistic ideologies" includes National Socialism, which was inseparable from postwar debates about responsibility, morality, and "absolutes." In his reply to Camus, Sartre refers to *Letters to a German Friend* (a collection of Resistance essays published as a book in 1944), in which Camus says to a hypothetical Nazi soldier: "For years now, you have tried to make me enter History." Sartre treats the sentence as a revelation of Camus's complacency, comparing him to a little girl who tests the water she is about to enter: "you dabble a toe which you pull out very quickly, and you ask, 'Has it a meaning?'" (*Situations* 102).

Camus's confirmed opposition to Stalinism eventually affected the way he was perceived, in contrast to Sartre, in the United States after the war. In the long run, both his and Sartre's ideas about America would be substantially modified. The American, Sartre observes in an essay called "Individualism and Conformism in the United States," finds "freedom in conformism." Intending, possibly, to suggest a difference between the French and American Revolutions (between an internal struggle against an immediately present regime and a largely idea-driven struggle against an absent, colonial one) he says that although the French associate individualism with a struggle against the state,

Americans do not: "It is 'their' State, the expression of 'their' nation; they have both a profound respect for it and a proprietary love" (*LPE* 109-10). Americans, he determines, are passionate believers in reason who are free to pursue success only after they raise themselves, through social conformity, to the "impersonality of the Universal." Sartre's interpretation of conformism in the U.S. prefigures the criticisms of American assimilation that he later makes in *Anti-Semite and Jew*. "Like everyone else," he writes, "I had heard of the American 'melting pot' that transforms, at different temperatures, Poles, Italians and Finns into United States Citizens. But I did not quite know what the term really meant" (*LPE* 104). During his travels in the U.S., Sartre meets a Frenchman but fails at first to recognize his origins, complimenting him on his fluency in French. He likens the man's strange mélange of French and American mannerisms to an "Ovidian metamorphosis." When the freakish hybrid brings up the subject of women in New Orleans, Sartre senses that he is trying to conform to the American image of a Frenchman: "'Pretty girls,' he said with a forced laugh; I felt Puritanism just round the corner, and a chill ran through me" (*LPE* 105).

Sartre's reception in the U.S. was friendly at first, but it quickly cooled. The resistance he encountered is not surprising, considering the political position he established when he wrote *Anti-Semite and Jew*, which explicitly denounces American principles. Although his polemic against anti-Semitism was generally applauded by reviewers in the U.S., the book revealed a new stance for Sartre which plainly opposed not only postwar American policy, but the essential foundation of American democracy, as well. The perceived crisis in values had thrown human motives, and human beings themselves, into question. For Sartre, in France, questioning the premises of

individualism did not seem an unreasonable thing to do. It seemed a necessity. The enemy had been expelled. The need to adhere to individual beliefs in the face of internal evil—to maintain the ethic described in "The Republic of Silence"—no longer existed. The principles expressed in "The Republic of Silence" and "Existentialism Is a Humanism" were insufficient. But in America, where the enemy lingered within and without, adherence to independent thought in the face of evil made sense, whether the enemy was perceived to be the Communists or the anti-Communists. In the U.S., it was not the individual who was held responsible for the decline in values. It was the mob, which threatened to seduce the vulnerable individual into mindless group-think, that was to be feared. The belief that existentialism had been used in France to fight an internal, occupying enemy was one of the things that made it attractive to Americans after the war. The U.S. was occupied by an enemy armed with ideas, and it required the strength to maintain its principles. In France, this was no longer so. The perceived need was now to devise new ideas and methods with which to reestablish unity.

These differences underlie the ambivalent attitude toward existentialism in the U.S. Many American writers embraced the principles that Sartre expressed in "Existentialism Is a Humanism," but by the time they did so, Sartre himself had officially abandoned them. There was, therefore, a discrepancy between the existentialism that reached its zenith at the moment of the Liberation and the person who was thought to embody it. The ideas made sense, but Sartre himself no longer did. His ideas, furthermore, continued to be inconsistent. When he wrote *Nausea*, the existentialist novel that rejects humanism, he was, as he says, "surreptitiously seeking compromises." The same was true when he wrote *Anti-Semite and Jew*, the treatise on the Jewish

question that rejects individualism. The most acceptable compromise for Sartre was probably the one articulated in "Existentialism is a Humanism," the statement he delivered after France was liberated and continued to return to in later years. At heart, Sartre was an individualist. That is what drew him to the heroes in James Cain and Ernest Hemingway. He may have perceived America to be the new enemy—at least the new threat—after the war, but the solitary bravado that he associated with its cultural heroes was never rejected entirely.

Chapter Two

"I'm Here." America and Existentialism

In December 1944 "The Republic of Silence," the article in which Sartre discusses life in occupied France, appeared in the *Atlantic Monthly*. That year, due to the lack of accessible information about France during the four years it was occupied, and the important role that the U.S. played in its liberation, the American press focused intently on French politics and culture. Newspapers, magazines, and scholarly journals alike published stories on events before, during, and after the Liberation. A story in *Life* from January, 1945 called "The Future of Liberated France" describes a nation in great distress. That France had been overtaken so quickly is difficult enough to accept, but the duplicity of the Vichy regime is even more disturbing and "has sadly shaken the French ego."

> The French people want the traitors put to death, the minor collaborationists severely punished, and they want the fortunes of the profiteers confiscated for the benefit of those who suffered four years of individual and collective shame. The crimes have been committed and someone will have to swing for them if the confidence of the French nation in its own integrity is ever to be restored. (82)

One of those in danger of swinging was, of course, Pétain himself, whose trial before the High Court set up to judge the cases of Vichy leaders (it included three presiding magistrates and twenty-four jurors) began on July 23, 1945. In August, *Life* published an article on this story as well, "The State V. Pétain," in which Pétain, at eighty-nine, is

portrayed as too old and ineffectual fully to understand the proceedings. When former French President Albert Lebrun was asked about Pétain's intentions of betraying the country, the author writes, he demurred, saying that treason is difficult define. What he did know regarding the offenses of the regime, however, was that "the Marshal never got up to say, 'No! I cannot do that.' Or else, 'I quit.'" Pétain, the author says, "heard these words and smirked, but it is doubtful if he understood them. It is doubtful if his mind was ever broad enough to comprehend the enormity of the crime with which he is charged" (24). The trial is further described as raucous, particularly when the prosecutor, André Mornet, after being booed by a group of lawyers, makes a statement that causes "a general uproar."

> Whether he said, "There are too many Germans (*trop d'Allemands*) in this courtroom" or "Some pro-Germans (*des pro-Allemands*)" cannot be said with certainty, but the crowd thought he said "too many Germans." For the next five minutes, Mornet and all three defense lawyers were talking all at once, while the crowd in the corner yelled and booed and Judge Mongibeaux shouted for guards to clear the court. (24)

The news reports in the U.S. extended beyond politics to French culture and fashion. Magazines such as *Vogue* basically picked up where they had left off when the Occupation disrupted the life of French couture. For a time, the curiosity was reciprocated in France, where American literature, theater, and film drew large audiences. A February 1946 story in *Collier's* magazine on "France's Number One actress," Edwige Feuillère, reports that *Arsenic and Old Lace*, in French, is drawing overflow crowds in Paris. Feuillère, it says, would like American producers to come to Paris and work. She

would also like to meet more American actors. "Intellectual Parisians, including Edwige," says the author, "are thoroughly familiar with modern American writers. She can quote passages from the works of Hemingway, Steinbeck, Caldwell and Faulkner, in the manner of a schoolboy reciting 'To be or not to be'" (Calvosa 17). In Paris there was also a thriving interest in American music, particularly in the neighborhood of Saint-Germain-des-Prés among the young, self-styled "existentialists" who shared some of Sartre's habits, beliefs, and predilections but, Sartre insisted, had nothing to do with him directly. African-American music was one of the diversions they had in common. The cellars of Saint-Germain-des-Prés—"*caves existentialistes*"—featured jazz and bebop. The neighborhood and the crowd it attracted were associated with bohemianism, free love, and the rejection of traditional values, and consequently received considerable attention from the French press (Cohen-Solal 266-67). Within a short time, the neighborhood's appeal had become limited to the fashionable French youth and to tourists. A short item in the *New York Times Magazine* from 1949 entitled "Existentialist Be-bop" offers four illustrations of the Left Bank scene by Albert Dubout, the "Gallic Dean Swift of the drawing pen." One depiction shows a crowd of trendy, long-haired *existentialistes* dancing heedlessly as various hapless men are trampled underfoot. The caption reads: "Man's struggle in vain—the new fatalism in action." Another illustration shows a similar crowd running from the Tabou bar as angry tenants on the upper floors pour water on them from their windows. The caption says: "The new philosophers and the bitter world." The article describes "fanatical disciples" of Sartre who "sit on café terraces and watch, with superior detachment, the bourgeois world pass by." The "caves," it says, were once medieval torture chambers. "Now, as their current patrons

writhe to Be-bop music, successor to *le swing* and *le jazz ' ot*, they might be so again." At the Tabou, the article says, "long-suffering" residents have lately been dousing the existentialists with dirty water.

Various types of American music could be heard live in Paris after the war, but Sartre himself had listened only to jazz recordings before visiting the U.S. Eventually, as the title of his essay "I Discovered Jazz in America" attests, he determined these versions to be weak imitations of the real thing. Excited by the sense of spontaneity the music evokes, Sartre says, "Jazz is like bananas—it must be consumed on the spot" (48). It is not surprising that he enjoyed this American "national pastime," since the playing and hearing of it, as described in his 1947 *Saturday Review* article, contains all the qualities of "complete" experience, as he conceives it—action, feeling, altered consciousness:

> The trombone sweats, you sweat, the trumpet sweats, you sweat more, and then you feel that something has happened on the bandstand; the musicians don't look the same: they speed ahead, they infect each other with this haste, they look mad, taut, they seem to be searching for something, something like sexual pleasure. And you too begin to shout; you have to shout; the orchestra has become an immense spinning top: if you stop, the top stops and falls over. You shout, they shriek, they whistle, they are possessed, you are possessed, you cry out like a woman in childbirth. The trumpet player touches the pianist and transmits his obsession in a kind of Mesmerism. You go on shouting. The whole crowd shouts in time, you can't even hear the jazz, you watch some men

> on a bandstand sweating in time, you'd like to spin around, to howl at death, to slap the face of the girl next to you.
>
> And then, suddenly, the jazz stops, the bull has received the sword thrust, the oldest of the fighting cocks is dead. It's all over. (49)

Free as a possessed bird from the constraints of rationalized order, Sartre here has adopted the simple journalistic techniques that he believes allow for the impression of slipping easily from one consciousness to another. The American style he draws on is intimated not only in the Hemingway bull image with which he denotes the cessation of the music, but also in the "exterior" pronouncement, à la Dos Passos, of its death: "It's all over." The jazz, transcendent psychological state, violent and sexual impulses, and youthfulness ("if you are hard, young, and fresh") that Sartre evokes in this article prefigure the ideas expressed in Norman Mailer's existentialist essay of 1957, "The White Negro."

When stories on French existentialism began to appear in American newspapers and magazines, they typically highlighted Sartre. Camus remained in the background until his visit to the U.S. in March of 1946. Sartre traveled to America for the first time in January 1945, when he and seven journalists were flown in at the invitation of the U.S. State Department for a two-month stay, during which they were to report on the American war effort. He and the other writers, says Annie Cohen-Solal, arrived in a ragged condition that attested to the hardship and deprivation still felt in France during the final months of the war. They were greeted by their hosts from the Office of War Information, fed, and taken on a Fifth Avenue shopping trip, during which Sartre happily donned a pinstriped suit. The political affiliations of the journalists and the publications

for which they wrote were noted, and the group's activities were monitored closely by the F.B.I. (223-26). Sartre arrived by ship for his second visit the following December, having arranged a lecture tour on behalf of the French Government's Service of Cultural Relations. Camus traveled to the U.S. in 1946, for three months of speaking engagements, at the urging of his American publisher, Alfred Knopf. The trip coincided with the U.S. publication, in April, of *L 'Etranger* in English. Upon arriving, Camus was detained aboard ship by an Immigration agent for refusing to say whether he had acquaintances who were Communists. Eventually, a French diplomatic official came and arranged for his release. Beauvoir flew into New York in January of 1947 for her first U.S. visit. Her trip, documented in *America Day by Day*, would extend to May and include speaking engagements as well as extensive travel throughout the U.S. and Canada. Sartre, who was expressly interested in exporting his ideas to America, received the greatest amount of publicity of the three. As in France, it was his name that became bound to the word "existentialism."

The American travels of Camus, Beauvoir, and Sartre all began in New York, and they all published articles on the city. Camus's essay "The Rains of New York" was published in France in 1947. Characteristically somber and reflective, it presents New York as a city that assumes a variety of guises ("prison by day and funeral pyre by night" [183]) and suggests many possibilities, none of which Camus can confirm with any certitude. "In short," writes Camus,

> I am out of my depth when I think of New York. I wrestle with the morning fruit juices, the national Scotch and soda and its relationship to romance, the girls in taxis and their secret, fleeting acts of love, the

> excessive luxury and bad taste reflected even in the stupefying neckties, the anti-Semitism and the love of animals . . . the subway that reminds you of Sing Sing prison, ads filled with clouds of smiles proclaiming from every wall that life is not tragic. . . . (184-85)

While in New York Camus met with Nicola Chiaromonte, a friend he had assisted in escaping from France to Morocco in 1941. Chiaromonte then proceeded to the U.S., where he became a writer for *Partisan Review*. During his travels, Camus was intrigued by various perceived oddities, such as American funeral parlors. "In my opinion," he wrote in his travel diary, "Chiaromonte talks about America like nobody else. I point out to him the 'funeral homes.' He tells me how they function. One way to know a country is to know how people die there. Here, everything is anticipated. 'You die and we do the rest,' say the advertisements'" (*AJ* 34). Camus also liked going to the Bowery and was particularly drawn to a bar, known as Sammy's Follies, where crowds were amused by the singing and dancing of "fat old actresses" in ostentatious outfits ("Rains" 186). "The less ugly ones are not popular," he writes in his journal. "Either you have to be *very beautiful* or *very ugly*. Even in ugliness there's such a thing as mediocrity" (*AJ* 44). Camus is intrigued but at times overwhelmed by New York, a place that does not quite make sense to him. "I am learning," he says, "that there are cities, like certain women, who annoy you, overwhelm you, and lay bare your soul, and whose scorching contact, scandalous and delightful at the same time, clings to every pore of your body" ("Rains" 185).

Simone de Beauvoir arrived in New York at night, eager for new experiences and taking in details like an anthropologist. The search for a parking spot on the way to

dinner is described as "an obligatory rite," the dinner itself is "a meal of initiation," and the lobster and martini she consumes "taste of the sacred" (*ADD* 7). On various occasions, New York stimulates philosophical reflection. Walking about the city the first night, she contemplates her seemingly arbitrary presence there: "This strange world where I've landed by surprise was not waiting for me. It was full without me; it *is* full without me. It is a world where I am not: I grasp it in my perfect absence. . . . Will I manage to reincarnate myself?" (7). New York strikes her as ruggedly wild, a "landscape of skyscrapers" enveloped in an untamable "mountain sky" (9). In "Individualism and Conformism in the United States," Sartre describes machines in the U.S. as signifying belonging, observing that "when the American puts a nickel into the slot in the tram or in the underground, he feels just like everyone else" (109). These initiatory machines have not yet accepted Beauvoir, who spends ten minutes putting nickels in the quarter slot of a public telephone that rejects them. "I want to give up," she says. "I hate this malicious instrument. But in the end I can't just stay wrapped in my solitude." When a Western Union operator finally comes on the line, she finds herself with nothing to communicate except, "I'm here" (11).

On several occasions Beauvoir echoes Sartre's feeling that the American conception of individualism presupposes a certain degree of conformism. After seeing a sign in a drugstore that reads "Not to grin is a sin" and becoming annoyed by the ubiquitous advertisements that direct people to be happy, she concludes that optimism is "necessary for the country's social peace and economic prosperity" (23). At the same time, she is impressed by the friendliness of people employed in service jobs. "It may be commercial," she writes, "but the cordiality of salespeople, employees, waiters, and

porters is never servile. They are not bitter or stiff, and though it is encouraged by self-interest, their kindness is no less real." The social directive to cheerfulness leads her to contemplate the nature of freedom:

> We've held German soldiers responsible for the way they carried out orders of extreme cruelty—and, in fact, man is never passive. In obeying he commits his freedom, and submitting to evil is a way of reclaiming it for himself. Most of the time he reclaims it through inventions and initiatives that make his responsibility apparent. Likewise, the American citizen does not submit passively to the propaganda of the smile: on a foundation of obligatory optimism, it is really he who freely presents himself as cordial, trusting, and generous. His kindness is less suspect the less interested he is in the success of the system—he is more duped than duping. (24)

Anxious to overcome the feeling that she is not quite penetrating the surface of American life, Beauvoir is glad to find that being a foreigner in New York is "neither a defect nor an eccentricity." Keen on breaking "the glass wall" that resists her attempts to apprehend the environment, she resolutely drinks her scotch: "I don't like the taste of whiskey; I only like these glass sticks you stir it with. Yet until three o'clock in the morning, I drink scotch docilely because scotch is one of the keys to America" (15).

Beauvoir explores New York by foot, intent on seeing the city in its entirety. Having been cautioned not to walk through Harlem, she proceeds to do so and determines the dire warnings unfounded. In a neighborhood where there is hunger, an affluent bourgeois is naturally fearful, she writes: "he's strolling in a universe that rejects his and

will one day defeat it. But Harlem is a whole society, with its bourgeois and its proletariat, its rich and its poor, who are not bound together in revolutionary action. They want to become part of America—they have no interest in destroying it" (36). Beauvoir goes to the Savoy with Richard and Ellen Wright and finds it intriguing, though she feels that her presence there is "equivocal." "I listen to the jazz, watch the dancing, and drink whiskey," she writes; "I am beginning to like whiskey. I feel good." Her description of her own happiness recalls Sartre's description of *Petit Crâne*, the character they co-invented, and also his sense that Melville is able to find the absolute in a pure quality: "Here I'm touching something that leads to nothing but itself; I've come out of the cave. From time to time in New York I've known this fullness that allows the surrendered soul to contemplate a pure Idea. That is the greatest miracle of this journey, and it was never more dazzling than today" (39). Like Camus, Beauvoir visits the Bowery and observes the tramps and beggars who sleep and drink on benches and in the street. Also like Camus, she visits Sammy's Follies, the cabaret featuring aging performers in black dresses, big hats, loud makeup, and feathers: "Mae Wests with more than a touch of cellulite" (60). The entertainer who steals the show is an undulating woman in her eighties with a "doll-like face, embedded in a formless mass of flesh" who retains a glimmer of her former beauty and receives enthusiastic cheers when she reveals her ruffled knickers. Beauvoir determines that the Bowery is "the underside of Wall Street" (61).

While in New York, Beauvoir attends a party of various magazine editors, assembled together for her benefit. An "insolent young man" who doubts the validity of her philosophical views on the basis that she has not read the Hindu philosophers,

Confucius, and Jakob Böhme introduces her to someone he describes as "the most intelligent man in America," and she abruptly finds herself surrounded by a group of writers from *Partisan Review* (40).[10] The representatives of this journal "that calls itself 'left-wing' and 'avant-garde,'" Beauvoir reports, startle her with their aggressiveness. Like Dwight Macdonald (whom she has already met), they disapprove of the American writers (Faulkner excepted) that France has selected as its favorites. Beauvoir is hampered by limited English skills and the effects of alcohol, but the heated exchange with the group perseveres into the night:

> Around nine o'clock in the evening I find myself in the company of "the most intelligent man in America" in a restaurant below street level, where they serve magnificent steaks. But the feverish discussion dampens my appetite. . . . They hate Stalinism with a passion that makes me realize they are old Stalinists. I think alcohol is making us choose our words unwisely; it seems my statements are worthy of a Soviet agent. (41)

The next day Beauvoir is, for the moment, a bit less captivated by New York. She observes that in the United States "even the appearance of democracy itself is fading from day to day, and from day to day despotism breaks out with increasing impudence" (42). She finds the prevailing attitude toward postwar Europe condescending. "The arrogance of Americans is not the will to power," she would later decide; "it's the will to impose Good" (66).

Sartre describes New York in an article called "New York, the Colonial City," which appeared in *Town and Country* in 1946. Beauvoir's sense that in New York one is

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[10] Beauvoir's description does not identify the writers. While in the U.S., she met several writers associated with *PR*, including Macdonald, Arendt, William Phillips, and Mary McCarthy.

never entirely removed from the wilderness is shared by Sartre. "Nature weighs so heavily on New York that this most modern of cities is also the dirtiest," he says (*LPE* 129). At every turn one is brutally accosted by the elements. "New York is no protection against Nature's violence. It is an open-skied city. Storms flood its wide streets that take so long to cross when it rains. Hurricanes shake the brick houses and rock the skyscrapers. They are announced formally over the radio, like declarations of war" (129). Wintertime might see the city submerged in water, like a suburb of Paris which has been flooded by the Seine, "but in America, it is only melting snow." The warmer months bring no refuge. "From the first of May," he writes, "the heat crashes down on the city like an atomic bomb. The heat is evil. People go up to one another and say. 'It's murder!'" (129). The pace of the city, furthermore, propels Sartre helplessly into a confrontation with his free and contingent existence. He is adrift in a sea of commercial franchises:

> You do not go for walks in New York; you fly through it; it is a city in motion. I feel at ease if I walk quickly; if I stop, I get flustered and wonder, "Why am I in this street rather than in one of hundreds of others like it?" Why am I standing in front of this drug-store, or this Schrafft's or Woolworth branch, rather than in front of any other of these thousands of identical ones? (129)

Despite his perpetually raging thirst, the elevators that nauseate him, "the hostility and cruelty of Nature," the "immense and malevolent space," "the anguish of solitude," and the cockroaches that skitter around his kitchen, Sartre finally accepts New York, which, for all its natural brutality, he calls "the most prodigious monument man has ever erected

to himself" (130). The city is just embarking on a history, he writes, but its skyscrapers have already become relics: "I cannot think of them without a certain sadness; they tell of an age in which we thought the very last war had just ended and when we believed in peace. They are already a bit rundown; tomorrow, perhaps they will be torn down, their construction required a faith we no longer have" (132).

Sartre's conviction that human existence never rests long enough to congeal into an absolute is extended to his view of the urban American landscape in general, which he describes in "American Cities," an article published in *Le Figaro* in 1945. After visiting Fontana, Tennessee, an emerging town in which many of the homes are prefabricated structures assembled several hundred miles away and brought in on trucks, he decides that impermanence is the ordinary condition of American cities. Even cities which have surpassed the condition of transience in actuality continue to possess the transient quality metaphysically: "Detroit and Minneapolis, Knoxville and Memphis were *born temporary* and have stayed that way. They will never, of course, take to the road again on the back of a truck. But they remain at the meeting point; they have never reached an internal temperature of solidification" (*LPE* 116). Sartre tended to associate motion with survival and stasis with death (his dread of being sucked into the inanimate world of *things* through inactivity was all but pathological); so one might expect that a land of perpetual unsettledness would be his proper element, a milieu into which he might drop like a hobo off a hay truck and instinctively persevere. It turned out, however, that he was more like a nickel dropping into a quarter slot. He never quite fit.

It was not for lack of trying, however, on either end. The mainstream American press wished to exploit Sartre's apparent novelty and extended him a cordial reception.

Despite the common belief that existentialism was a pessimistic philosophy based on a conviction that life is meaningless, popular magazines such as *Time*, *Life*, *Newsweek*, and the *New Yorker* tended at first to emphasize Sartre's energy and good humor. They also liked to throw in the fact that he was short. In January 1946, *Time* magazine wrote: "The literary lion of Paris bounced into Manhattan last week for a brief lecture tour (stops at Harvard, Yale, Princeton)." Sartre is described as "a little (5 ft.) youngish (40) bespectacled, homely, eloquent son of a French naval officer." (Sartre's biological father, Jean-Baptiste, had died when his son was 15 months old.) The *Time* article includes the following anecdote, which was related again several months later in *Life*:

> Sartre's temperament is Gallicly gay. Once at a bibulous party the irrepressible prophet began boxing a dressmaker's dummy. Nearby, on an old-fashioned bed topped by a canopy, sat bravoing Authoress de Beauvoir. Suddenly Sartre landed a haymaker. The dummy hit the bed, shook loose the canopy on De Beauvoir's brunette head. Wags said that Sartre had crowned her Queen of Existentialism. (29)

The lecture tour mentioned in *Time* included a Carnegie Hall engagement which was covered in March by the *New Yorker*. In that story, Wolcott Gibbs describes Sartre as "a very short, very cheerful Parisian," "a rumpled little man who wears tortoise-shell glasses with very large lenses." Citing the controversy and derision that Sartre's public appearances sometimes elicited among outspoken skeptics in France, Gibbs reports that Sartre has taken to New York wholeheartedly, especially since none of its restaurants are patronized exclusively by intellectuals. Consequently, as Sartre explains, "it is easy to

keep out of fights." The article further relates Sartre's endorsement of New York hotels and their policy of throwing people out after a few nights' stay:

> "If one take the precaution of leaving no forwarding address, it is impossible for anybody interested in literature to find one. So one never risks being bored. One is free to promenade oneself in the streets but relieved of the necessity of conversation. That is, if one has taken the precaution not to learn spoken English. I have guarded myself well from it, although I read. Two phrases are necessary for a whole evening of English conversation, I have found: 'Scotch-and-soda?' and 'Why not?' By alternating them, it is impossible to make a mistake." We mumbled M. Sartre's first phrase, he answered with the second, and we went to the nearest bar and continued our conversation, in French. (24-25)

At a time when analytic philosophy was the pervasive standard at American universities, Sartre's concepts sounded a little odd and high-flown to many Americans, who had not lived through the European crises that gave rise to them. In fact, they sounded that way to a lot of French people, too. In the U.S. at this time, however, existentialism did not hold the sort of political implications it held for the unruly French detractors cited, here and elsewhere, in American feature stories. In postwar France the distinction between existentialist philosophy and political ideology had become blurred because, to many, philosophers seemed better equipped than politicians to shape the country's future. The desire to assign, or evade, culpability for conditions in France had made it impossible to separate politics from ethics. Sartre's position, which was prone to attack from all sides—from the revitalized Communist Party, the new Christian Democratic Party, and

the Catholic Church itself—was a lightning rod for heated critique. His humanism, his interest in a modified Marxism, his newly adopted, self-consciously political stance on committed literature, and the perceived solipsism of his earlier work all added spark to the controversy. Gibbs, for his part, resolves not to delve into the specifics of existentialist doctrine, but he offers this passage from *Nausea* as a sample:

> Nothing has changed but everything exists differently. I can't describe it; it is like Nausea but it is just the antithesis: finally adventure comes to me and when I ask myself about it, I see that *it has come about that I am I and that I am here*; it is I who cleave the night, I am as happy as the hero of a novel. (25)

Gibbs's tongue-in-cheek follow-up to the passage is fairly representative of the way existentialism was portrayed in popular magazines: "The last we saw of M. Sartre, he had spotted a taxi a hundred feet away and was cleaving the night to get to it, and *he was he and he was there*, and there was no doubt about it" (25).

In June 1946 *Life* ran a long story that presented existentialism as the most complex among a variety of ethical systems cultivated amid the uncertainties of postwar France. The author, Bernard Frizell, describes it as a loosely defined set of ideas expressed in "all-but-impenetrable dialectical jargon." Existentialism, he says, dismisses the values submitted by previous philosophies and explains human life as a process of individual self-definition in the face of adversity.

> What existentialism means few Frenchmen know, but its handful of proponents has made all of France aware of their ruminations. Monthlies, weeklies and dailies devote interminable columns to reporting, analyzing,

> attacking and, in rare cases, defending existentialism. Not since surrealism and Dadaism has so much ink been spilled over a similar topic. (59)

The wariness toward political ideology that characterized the postwar era was evidenced in Paris by the excitement surrounding public discussions of existentialism, which, as Frizell suggests, were dramatically different from debates taking place in official government circles: "On the Right Bank leading personalities, ambassadors and government ministers give lectures on the most critical political problems of the day in halls where half the seats are empty" (60).

Time's story on Sartre had appeared in January, and *Life* reiterates much of what its affiliate has already provided: "Gallicly gay" Sartre, "a short, ugly, wall-eyed 40-year-old individual," proponent of a philosophy derived from Kierkegaard, frequents Left Bank cafés, where he is flocked by youthful devotees and sightseers; in 1940 he spent nine months in a German war prison, after which time he was involved with the "Communist-dominated" *Front National* in support of the French Resistance; and crowned "Queen of Existentialism" Simone de Beauvoir is his most important disciple. In *Life*, however, she receives a fuller description and more kudos as "an intellectual heavyweight" in her own right, distinguished from the younger, "merely pretty, decorative creatures on the literary fringe" who also constitute Sartre's circle. Also receiving fuller explanation are Sartre's work, his ideas, and their reception in France. Despite some recent attempts to articulate existentialism in nonliterary forms, Frizell says, Sartre sees existentialism as suited to written expression, not to music or painting. George Patrix, a painter whose work is on exhibit in Paris, is mentioned. A photograph

shows him standing next to a cartoonish painting of a man, shown from the shoulders up, in a conical hat wearing an expression reminiscent of the Mona Lisa. The caption reads: "SARTRE PUPIL, Georges Patrix, regards his painting of a clown as existentialist in mood and conception" (64). In briefly discussing the response to existentialism within the Catholic Church and among French Communists, the *Life* article prefigures the controversy that would strip Sartre of his charm in Cold War America. In France in 1946 his ideas were regarded as dangerous by the Catholic Church and adversarial by the Communist Party. In the U.S., eventually, his connection to Communism and his atheism, generally depicted as twin deficiencies, would help make him the subject of derision in publications like *Time*.

The religious and political import of Sartre's ideas in France is addressed in greater detail in a later, lengthy article which appeared in the *New York Times Magazine* in February 1947. The author, John L.Brown, tells of conservative Christians in France who condemn existentialism's rejection of transcendent principles and its focus upon moral depravity and perversion. Religious assessments of Sartre's ideas sometimes interpreted as materialist the tenet that a person's essence is not determined prior to her physical existence. This story, echoing the *Life* article, reports that some clerics find a strain of materialism in Sartre's doctrine, whereas certain Communists, on the other hand, see existentialism as "the expression of a decadent bourgeois culture, the philosophy of a hopeless, unhealthy world." Brown thoroughly examines Sartre's thinking as a process—as action, essentially. In a description resembling the Sartrean conception of individual existence, he writes that "Sartre's thought, however representative it may be of

shattered, post-war Europe, by no means constitutes a closed and finished whole. It is in constant development and consequently full of contradictions."

The contradictions to which Brown refers were no doubt all the more confusing in America, where Sartre's early work was published in English at roughly the same time as or later than his postwar writings. *Nausea*, for example, was not published in America until 1949, eleven years after it appeared in French. By this time the American press was growing increasingly skeptical of Sartre's leftist sympathies. The CIA-sponsored Congress for Cultural Freedom, whose ostensible purpose was to support and promote cultural endeavors overseas and whose unstated goal was to induce Western artists and intellectuals to identify with America's Cold War posture, would be founded the following year. Its development well underway by 1949, it would eventually subject to great scrutiny Sartre's political neutralism as manifested in the platform of the short-lived *R.D.R.* In 1951, its office in Paris would launch *Preuves* to compete for the political sympathies of *Les Temps Modernes* readers. As Frances Stonor Saunders presents the case in her history of the CCF, Sartre and Beauvoir were sometimes viewed as the very embodiment of what the organization was fighting (101). Whereas Marxists were a lost cause, indeterminate non-Communist leftists were a political wildcard, especially those like Beauvoir and Sartre who rejected the legitimacy of government as an arbiter of morals. A principal funder of the CCF's operations was *Time-Life*'s owner and editor, Henry Luce.

Against the backdrop of the burgeoning Cold War, American reviews of *Nausea* were affected but not altogether circumscribed by Sartre's politics. Reviewers found plenty else to object to, though the overall reaction was mixed. Several complaints were

made against the general grimness of the novel and its hero, and Sartre himself. The *New York Herald Tribune* determines that its publication in English eleven years after the French version can only be explained by Sartre's status as the "panjandrum of existentialism." The reviewer determines the book's "life-despising, self-hating" sentiment unbearable, though conceding that the mood is clearly a reflection of 1930s France, "the France that became, under the Nazi thrust, a study in impotence" (Rugoff 20). *Nausea* was published at about the same time as Sartre's *What is Literature?*, and the essays in that book are occasionally cited as an aid to understanding the novel. The *Herald Tribune* likens Roquentin's perpetual uncertainty ("And then what?") to T. S. Eliot's Prufrock, while the *Saturday Review* finds a resemblance to Eliot in Sartre's claim in *What is Literature?* that poetry treats words as things rather than signs. The *Saturday Review* article emphasizes the Marxist tenor of *What is Literature?* and describes *Nausea* as an original work with "frequent flashes of something that looks like genius"; but, it asks, "is Sartre's individualized Socialism profound?" (9). The magazine's usual biographical supplement on the author is provided. It begins, "No man content merely to rend his worsteds in despair over a godless universe, French philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre is now in 'total engagement' against the inert, purposeless life he so despises." Sartre's part in organizing the *R.D.R.* is mentioned.

A review of *Nausea* by A. J. Liebling in the *New Yorker* is less fixated on politics and generally friendlier, describing the book as Sartre's most pleasurable, and observing the parallel between Roquentin's life in the fictional town of Bouville and Sartre's experience teaching at a *lycée* in Le Havre. However, the "Existentialist reveries" through which Roquentin apprehends the contingency of his existence, says Liebling,

"are, on the whole, dull, and it is not surprising that little-magazine editors the world over have seized upon them as the most important features of the book" (104). *Time*, similarly, expresses impatience with Sartre's metaphysics, concluding that, compared to *Nausea*, the essays in *What is Literature?* are "distinguished for their sanity." The encounters with things in themselves, outside the categories of the mind, that are described in *Nausea* as repulsive and excessive in their incomprehensibility are subjected to great ridicule in *Time*. Roquentin's description of his own hand ("It is lying on its back. It shows me its fat belly. It looks like an animal turned upside down.") is cited in the review and also evoked in the caption that accompanies a photograph of Sartre. The caption reads: "EXISTENTIALIST SARTRE *His hand has a fat belly.*" The photograph is particularly unflattering, with Sartre looking directly into the camera and wearing a startled expression. *Time*'s 1946 feature had included a photograph of Sartre looking unruffled (in his pinstriped suit) with his head turned to the left, making his walleye, on the right, less conspicuous. Alluding, presumably, to the women who had fainted in the hot, crowded hall in which Sartre delivered "Existentialism is a Humanism," the caption to that photograph had read: "PHILOSOPHER SARTRE *Women Swooned.*" In three years, *Time*'s presentation of Sartre had changed.

The concern with reconciling Sartre's work with his philosophy had not changed much, however. It had pervaded the reviews of *No Exit* when it appeared on Broadway in 1946. The denizens of Sartre's hell in that production were played by a popular French actor named Claude Dauphin (as Garcin, the collaborator), an actress named Ruth Ford (as Estelle, the baby-killing adulteress), and an actress known simply as Annabella (as Inez, the lesbian). The acting is good, writes Wolcott Gibbs in the *New Yorker*, but

Paul Bowles's translation, "which occasionally provides its French characters with such baffling Americanisms as 'two-beer whore,'" is regrettable (69-70). Dismissing the issue of whether or not it illustrates existentialist principles, Gibbs assesses the play as "a one-act drama of unusual monotony and often quite remarkable foolishness." This he attributes to its European origins, "since it has often been observed that small, doomed experiments flourish best on European soil" (69). Gibbs's approval of the acting was echoed in other reviews. Reviews of *No Exit* inevitably described the play as a product of existentialism, sometimes asserting that no prior knowledge of Sartre's ideas was necessary for it to be understood. Its moral implications were emphasized along with its ties to World War II Europe. *Time* magazine says that the gloomy play is "pretty much a showcase for Existentialism" and the characters "like arch-symbols of the disordered age from which so stark a philosophy emerged" (83). *Newsweek* calls it "weird and fascinating" even to those who possess no understanding of existentialism. A moralist at the *New Republic* determines, "It should be seen whether you like it or not" (764). A review in the *Nation* praises the production for the chilling atmosphere it presents, but says that once the point of the play is grasped, there is little else left to sustain interest. The reviewer further complains that the play combines "the disadvantages of religious faith with those of nihilistic atheism. It seems, in other words, to assert moral responsibility while at the same time insisting that virtue has no reward." The *Nation* attributes *No Exit*'s popularity in Paris to the unique postwar mood in France. *Vogue* included a nearly full-page photo of the production in its "Theatre queue" in December. The three actors, says the blurb on the play, are all typically film actors. "Now they are found stuck and buzzing like bluebottle flies in the glue of an Existentialist hell" (200).

While the U.S. reception of Sartre's work was colored somewhat by the publicity that preceded its publication in English, things were slightly different for Camus, who was introduced to the majority of Americans in 1946 along with his novel *The Stranger*. Features and reviews, such as an April article in *Newsweek*, sometimes borrowed from the descriptions that had been applied in recent months to Sartre. *Newsweek* offers the image of outbursts provoked by philosophical lectures in Paris and characterizes Camus as one of the Left Bank's "most popular long-haired prophets." But reports also distinguished him from Sartre, and his refusal of the label "existentialist" was regularly observed, as it is in *Newsweek*:

> Famous in France as one of the most brilliant of the young Resistance writers, Camus at 32 is said to wield more influence over the younger generation than even his friend and mentor, the philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre, whose creed of "Existentialism" has all Paris agog. Camus's philosophy, incidentally, is at odds with "Existentialism."

Other de rigueur information on Camus included in this story is his role as a writer for the Resistance, his work for *Combat*, his Algerian background, and the ethic outlined in *The Myth of Sisyphus*, which is said to underlie his fiction. *Newsweek* calls *The Stranger* unorthodox, and praises its artistry and morality. A notable exception to the book's positive reviews appeared in *Time* in May. "The latest highbrow buzz-fuzz is something called 'existentialism,'" writes the reviewer, and though Camus does not identify with this "French literary cult," he is connected to it, and "'existential' pessimism underlines every cold, gross, irrational detail" of the novel (92). Meursault's indifference and lack of visible remorse for murdering the Arab lead the reviewer to conclude: "It is quite a

trick to write of life as death, as Camus does, in terms of an almost total social and moral vacuum. He may get philosophical satisfaction from it. Most readers will call it philosophical doodling" ("Man in a Vacuum" 93).

Doodling or not, *The Stranger* was generally admired, with much analysis devoted to Meursault's indifference and Camus's moral outlook. A perceptive response in the *Saturday Review* seems to put the cart before the horse when it admires the development of Meursault's "animal instincts" and says that the description of the murder "would almost serve as a model to many American writers of the tough school" (Plant 10). It was the work of that school which had provided a model for Camus. As if he were not receiving enough adulation in print, Camus made a visit to the offices of *Vogue* and was likened by women who worked there to a young Humphrey Bogart. Chiaromonte wrote an article on Camus for the *New Republic* which begins with a summary of the "Human Crisis" (or "The Crisis of Man," as it is called here), the speech that Camus had given at Columbia University. Camus's generation, as he himself described it, had been born after World War I, experienced the Depression during adolescence, and confronted the reign of Hitler at the age of 20. These circumstances had left it without a foundation of values with which to confront evil. Hitler was now gone, but his influence lives on, says Chiaromonte: "It is still there, in all of us. Anyone who speaks of human life in terms of power, of efficiency, of 'historical tasks,' is like Hitler: he is a murderer" (630). Under such conditions, skepticism toward untested ideas suggested integrity whereas beliefs unsubstantiated by experience were suspect. The world of action appeared less dangerous than that of thought. With no values to oppose Hitler's "negation," Camus's generation could only trust in its own negative integrity and

counter injustice with justice (say *no*). Chiaromonte finds this attitude manifested in Meursault, observing that while the narration of *The Stranger* may sound like Hemingway or Caldwell, the ethical aspect of *The Stranger*, the inclusion of the "I," goes a step beyond the work of the American authors. A condensed version of "The Crisis of Man" was also printed in *Vogue* in 1946. An editor's note says that "Albert Camus at thirty-two looks even younger" and describes him as tall and "bone-thin" with a "taut face" (87). *Vogue* never warmed up to Sartre the way it did to Camus.

American fiction had presented Camus and Sartre with techniques from which they derived a philosophy. The role of the ethical "I" referred to by Chiaromonte was to give voice to experience. Sartre suggests a similar idea in "American Novelists in French Eyes" when he writes, of Hemingway's characters: "It is from their conduct that we must, as in life, reconstruct their thought" (117). Beneath the accumulated weight of tradition, Sartre says in this essay, French novelists were bound to the methods of the past. American novelists, in their "unconscious spontaneity" and freedom from tradition, created tools that the French subjected to analysis. Sartre surmises that the banning of American books in occupied France led to an unprecedented number of French writers adopting the "American style." "It seemed as if, cut off from their habitual dose of American novels, the French began to write some themselves in order to have something to read" (114). Sartre reports that a black market for American books developed, that reading Faulkner and Hemingway was sometimes regarded as "a symbol of resistance," and that attempts to use the work of "pessimistic" authors such as Steinbeck as anti-American propaganda backfired because the very existence of such writings seemed to evidence Americans' faith in their civil rights. His argument is intended to convince

patriotic Americans that social criticism by writers such as Steinbeck, Faulkner, and Caldwell did not reflect badly on the nation as a whole. He was swimming against a powerful tide, though. As Frances Stonor Saunders writes, the Congress for Cultural Freedom's American Committee would eventually take organized opposition to these very authors and any attempts to make film productions of their work. In light of the Cold War, their books were regarded as severe, potentially harmful critiques of American life. Work by certain Southern writers was considered particularly unseemly. Sales of Faulkner, Steinbeck, Caldwell, and Wright went down (292).

Although American depictions of Southern poverty, lynching, and worker exploitation fell out of favor, Sartre's take on Southern justice in *La Putain respectueuse* met with considerable success when it was produced in America in 1948 as *The Respectful Prostitute*. Unlike *No Exit* two years earlier, the play was not seen as primarily a vehicle for expressing Sartre's existentialism. In fact, though they are not altogether eclipsed, philosophical concerns are overshadowed by the play's racial content. A play about a black Southerner falsely suspected of raping a white prostitute was more provocative to Americans than a play about three French people consigned to hell to annoy each other for eternity. The controversial subject matter was reflected in the diversity of responses to the production. Some saw it as a successful indictment of the South; others described it as a sensationalistic composite of clichés and caricature. A review in the *Nation* says the play's African-American character is more convincing than those generally depicted by American authors, who find it difficult to avoid "specializing" black characters rather than making them fully human. The play therefore has a French feel with "a large French protrusion in the character of the prostitute and

particularly in her talk about sex" (257). A review in the *Saturday Review*, on the other hand, finds the play "no more than a cartoon luridly and effectively drawn with greasepaint," suggesting that the play lacks legitimacy because Sartre is French and consequently uninformed about the material he seeks to present.

> There was a play, a fine indignant play, written once upon a time by John Wexly about the Scottsboro case. It was called "They Shall Not Die." . . . But it was written by an American, not a foreigner, and not written merely as a spine-twister. It was the real thing instead of a synthetic product. It did not have that inescapably bogus air about it, which, for example, "Till the Day I Die" possessed, when Clifford Odets as an American tried to write about the Nazis. Its concern was truth rather than contrivance. Its feeling was inside U.S.A., not outside. It belonged to life no less than to the theatre, whereas M. Sartre's playlet is almost entirely undiluted theatre. ("Guignol à la Sartre")

Despite his overblown vexation at Sartre's attempt to meddle in American race relations, the reviewer has a point when he objects to the play's "synthetic" quality. Sartre's distrust of American morality, and his attempt to differentiate social groups in the U.S. according to a French conception of class, makes the characters in his play a little stilted. The Senator and his son, Fred, are aristocratic and puritanical. The prostitute, Lizzie, speaks coarsely but possesses a practical, unreflecting moral sense (Richard Wright, as it happens, found this aspect of the play intriguing and original). After having sex with Fred, Lizzie runs an irritatingly loud vacuum cleaner, and, since she's cleaning, Fred directs her to cover the unmade bed—"It smells of sin" (*NE* 253). The New York

performance received a mixed review in *Newsweek*, which notes a "brittle cynicism" but admires the acting as well as Sartre's playwriting ("Sartre on Broadway" 82). *Time* responded similarly, finding the plot "so charged with sex and suspense that it titillates rather than terrifies." Although it is effective as melodrama, the reviewer says, it fails as social protest ("New Play" 46). The previous year, amid a discussion of the representation of the U.S. in European culture, *Time* had brought up the performance of the play in France. In that story, *Time* had disdainfully expressed offense:

> By far the most startling view of Americans is contained in Existentialist prophet [Jean-Paul] Sartre's new play, *La ------ Respecteuse*; the blank in the title on Paris billboards, which watch their language more carefully than Parisian playwrights, stands for *putain* (whore). As a picture of how Americans live, *The Respectful Whore* contains a few hard chunks of truth, adrift in a sea of slanderous poppycock. ("Lizzie and the Harvard Man" 28)

Shortly after the production of *The Respectful Prostitute*, another, longer play by Sartre, *Les Mains sales*, was produced in Boston, then New York as *Red Gloves*. Subsequently referred to in English as *Dirty Hands*, the play is set in a hypothetical East European country called Illyria, during World War II. The plot revolves around a man of bourgeois background, Hugo, who renounces his origins (parallels to Sartre's life are observable) and commits himself to the country's leftist revolutionary party. Hugo has been useful to the party as a writer, but he is eager to prove himself as an assassin, and is given the opportunity to kill a party leader who is determined to form an alliance with rival parties. At one end of the political spectrum, as a party operative explains, is the

party itself, "fighting for democracy, for liberty, for a classless society"; at the other end is the fascist party, which has joined with the Axis powers; and in the middle is "the Pentagon," which is described as "a clandestine rallying-point for the bourgeois liberals and nationalists" (*NE* 148). Despite his desire to kill for the party, Hugo is constantly hampered by an inability to divorce himself from principles, emotion, and self-conscious egoism. Evoking an image reminiscent of *Petit Crâne*, Hugo characterizes another man in the party, whom he envies for his unreflecting simplicity, as having a peanut for a brain: "He's a real whale. The peanut up above sends out signals of fear and rage, but they're lost in all that mass. It tickles him, that's all" (202). Hugo wants to overcome the obstacles that prevent him from killing. He wants to be unreflecting and spontaneous, like *Petit Crâne* with a gun. After serving a prison sentence for his crime, Hugo reports feeling detached from the act, a condition which indicates to the party that he is still "salvageable." The murder, he says, is hardly real to him: "it has no weight, I don't feel that it's there. It's not around my neck, nor on my shoulders, nor in my heart. It has become my destiny, do you understand?" (242). The play probably influenced Richard Wright's novel *The Outsider*, which is also about overcoming principles and conscience in order to kill without regret. The description of the murder and its effect on the killer are reminiscent of both *The Stranger* and *Native Son*, but, as in Camus and Wright, it is Dostoyevsky whose influence appears most significant. Hugo's alias is Raskolnikov. The production of *Red Gloves* in the U.S. caused a stir because there were alterations, besides translation, made to the original version. The December 6, 1948 edition of *Time* describes Sartre as "brooding" about these changes: "It had been corrupted, he grumbled from Paris, into a 'vulgar, common melodrama with an anti-Communist bias,' and he

wanted to see and approve a copy of the script before the show officially opened." Producer Jean Dalrymple refused ("Troubled Times" 41). The following week *Time* reported on the Broadway production, citing Sartre's disapproval, but concluding that the play is "wooden" and therefore "pretty typical Sartre." *Time* is more generous to Sartre than usual, however:

> Generally speaking, *Red Gloves* lacks bias—and takes on a certain breadth—by dealing with political types rather than political tenets, and suggesting that it takes a good many kinds of people to make up even a Communist world. The essential struggle between idealist and realist, absolutist and compromiser, is indeed common to all movements; what might be considered 'anti-communist' about the play is its picturing a lack of charity that begins at home. ("New Play" 69)

The Saturday Review delivers a harsher pronouncement, although (like *Time*) it applauds the acting of John Boyer, who plays the party leader, Hoerderer. After having indignantly denounced *The Respectful Prostitute*, *The Saturday Review* declares that *Red Gloves* is even worse:

> Although [*The Respectful Prostitute*] relied on more melodramatic tricks than Sardou ever knew, and was both cheap and tawdry as a serious writer's handling of a tragic situation, behind the footlights it was without question spine-twisting. In spite of falling back on some of these same devices, and once again employing a loaded revolver as a means of playing "Button, button, who's got the button?" with the audience, "Red

> Gloves" leaves the vertebrae undisturbed even as, for the most part, it leaves the mind untouched. ("Boudoir" 25)

Reviewers disagree over whether the changes made to the script are the real problem with *Red Gloves*. *Newsweek* sees the controversy as baseless, submitting that the real question may now be, "Just what is the existentialist playwright trying to prove?" ("Boyer Gloves" 84). The *Nation*, however, describes the changes as "equivalent, in so far as [Sartre's] dramatic reputation is concerned, with assault and battery on his person," though maintaining that Sartre was mistaken in characterizing the altered version of the play as an instrument for red-baiting (Sauvage 19). A week earlier the magazine had published a review by Joseph Wood Krutch, who describes the play as failing on a dramatic level and diverges from more mainstream publications by concluding that the play is, in fact, anti-Communist. *The New Republic*, similarly, says that the production shows no understanding of Sartre's intention and says that it presents "a B-picture plot with emphatic but irrelevant anti-Communist implications—too shriveled and dry even for a Hollywood scenario" ("Red Faces" 29).

In several reviews, Hugo's indecisiveness is compared to that of Hamlet. The *New York Times Magazine* ran a group of photographs of the production, along with a short description that makes the comparison to Shakespeare and observes, further: "Abroad, critics have said that while the play sheds little light on existentialism, it is an acid comment on communism and on an intellectual seeking to be a man of action" (20). In a review for the *New Yorker*, Wolcott Gibbs reports an appreciation for the play's "unconscious humor." As an example, he refers to a conversation between Hugo and his

wife, Johanna (Jessica in the French version), whom Gibbs describes as "a professional firebrand, a sort of blond Marxist torpedo":

> "Do you remember," she says, playfully tugging at the buttons on his shirt and employing a tone that a less socially conscious woman might reserve for her memories of the speakeasy era, "the night you joined the Party up at my old place?" This kind of inadvertent comedy, the sudden, lunatic blending of the accents of Karl Marx and Mae West, is to be found all through "Red Gloves," and though I went to the theatre in a respectful, attentive, and vaguely Existentialist spirit, I'm sorry to say that I left it with a strong feeling that a lot of usually intelligent people had just been terribly silly. (57)

The line referred to by Gibbs seems to be added to Sartre's text. The juxtaposing of ideology and salaciousness noted by Gibbs is also mentioned in a *Saturday Review* article ("The Boudoir vs. the Kremlin"), which observes, "Only a Frenchman, it seems safe to say, would have such a boudoir approach to Karl Marx" (25-26). Gibbs sees the party leader in the play, Hoederer, as paraphrasing the theory of expediency that the end justifies the means, as submitted in Arthur Koestler's *Darkness at Noon*, which, says Gibbs, "remains the most coherent and dramatic statement of the case, possibly because it involves no blondes" (57). In the role of Hoederer, Boyer looks "not unlike Mussolini out of uniform," Gibbs observes, "but he gives an extremely strong and intelligent performance, often making his speeches sound like much more than the rehash of stale ideas and labored analogies that they most certainly are" (58).

Sartre's objections to the American production apparently stemmed in part from Boyer's portrayal of Hoederer. A 1954 review of the film version, now entitled *Dirty Hands*, in *Newsweek*, recalls Sartre's earlier complaint that the play had shifted the focus from Hugo to Hoederer. In the original play, according to Sartre, Hoederer is "vulgar, brutal, human," but in the American production he is "distinguished, good, tender." The American production, that is, had transformed Hoederer into a bourgeois. The review of the movie refers to Sartre's own, subsequent "pro-Communist" leanings and describes the *R.D.R* as a political party (it was simply an organization) with nebulous aims which quickly dissolved:

> Later, impelled by an Existentialist's need for "involvement" in which to fulfill himself, Sartre drifted leftward. He had drifted far enough in late 1952 to appear at the Communist-sponsored World Peace Conference in Vienna, just as a local acting company was preparing to play the original, anti-Communist version of "Les Mains Sales." On that occasion Sartre, the political thinker, fearing that his work might embarrass Sartre, the playwright, tried to stop the production. ("Red Kid Gloves" 94)

Newsweek praises the film as a depiction of disillusioned idealism and sees one of Hugo's lines, "I don't have any place to go in the world," as suited to Sartre's own situation (94). In December 1952, *Time* had reported that Sartre "slapped down" the attempt to produce the play during the conference. The article cites these lines from the play: "Well, I have dirty hands. Right up to the elbow. I've plunged them in filth and blood." The author goes on to say:

> When Jean-Paul Sartre wrote his play about the cynical, power-minded Communist boss who makes a deal with the Fascists because it will serve the ultimate ends of the party, he was an anti-Communist. But when his own left-wing party fell apart, Sartre, the philosopher of the existential, was left in the position of his hero, Hugo: pure but ineffectual. Apparently Sartre still yearned to be a man of action. Last week in Vienna, Philosopher Sartre was up to his elbows in the filth if not the blood of Communist politics. ("Dirty Hands" 20)

The article is accompanied by a photograph of Sartre looking earnest and intent, his eyes lifted slightly upward. The caption reads: "PHILOSOPHER SARTRE *Pure but ineffectual.*"

This was precisely the complaint that Sartre had made about Camus that same year in *Les Temps Modernes*. But in the American press Camus received much gentler treatment than Sartre, who was maligned for his Marxist leanings, however hesitant and non-doctrinaire they were. By 1948, among mainstream magazines, Sartre had become little more than a source of ridicule, but when *The Plague* was published the same year, the middlebrow publications extolled it avidly. *The Stranger*, *Newsweek* recalls, "appeared when the cult of existentialism was at its wordiest height." But, for Camus, there had been "no need for any cultist prop." *Newsweek* describes Camus as heading a new movement of French classicism ("Camus the Classicist" 77). The sense that *The Plague* was an allegory of occupied France led various magazines, including *Newsweek*, *Time*, *The New Republic*, and *The Saturday Review* to provide information about Camus's role as a Resistance writer, and the novel's setting spurred discussion of his Algerian background. *The Saturday Review*'s biographical sidebar on the author says

that Camus's atheistic humanism distinguishes him from existentialists, reporting that, "although tubercular, Camus was body and pen in the Resistance" (McLaughlin 10). *Time* describes the novel as one of the few important works of art to come from Europe since the end of the war, but warns that some readers may disagree with its unyielding pacifism and occasionally "murky" philosophical statements ("Community of Death" 96). A review in *The New Yorker* by A. J. Liebling, though generally positive, similarly questions Camus's philosophy, writing: "Here is an example of what this reviewer has termed *absurdisme*—the philosophy that holds an effort to be ennobled by the knowledge that it is useless. It is hard to distinguish from the old-fashioned concept of honor—and, indeed, Camus, like his friend Sartre, is a great storyteller rather than an original philosopher" (68-69). Liebling observes Camus's talent for "economical description of the macabre" and insightfully notes the attention paid to funerals and burial in the *The Plague*, which includes descriptions of corpses incinerated en masse, and stacked and taken to garbage-disposal plants. It was the same preoccupation (no doubt affected by the reports of the concentration camps) that had provoked Camus's curiosity about funeral parlors in the U.S. In his speech before an audience of 1,200 people at Columbia, Camus had submitted various disturbing incidents from the war as evidence of a "crisis in human consciousness" (21). One of them described deported women passing through Switzerland who burst into hysterical laughter at the sight of a funeral, remarking: "So that is how the dead are treated *here*" (21).

The concern with values that Camus's speech demonstrated was manifested in a variety of ways in America, one of which was a widespread, renewed dedication to religious practice. In France, existentialism was viewed uneasily by the Catholic Church

and prompted a certain amount of debate in religious circles. The religious view of existentialism in the U.S. was just as wary, perhaps more so, and was discussed in both middle- and highbrow publications. *Existentialism* was reviewed in *The Saturday Review* by a Yale Divinity student, Oliver Barres, who expresses skepticism about Sartre's claim to be a humanist. In response, Barres invokes the image of the philosophy's Christian forebear, Kierkegaard:

> Despised and rejected by his own generation, this spindly-legged man with a mission dutifully prepared his time bombs. Now in this latter day the wretchedness of war has been setting them off in European centers of thought, and their reverberations are felt on distant shores, even in a country weaned on Emerson's "Self-Reliance."
>
> For no matter how Jean-Paul Sartre tries to wriggle out of the accusation, his existentialism is a philosophy of despair. (14)

Conceding that Sartre is on the side of Christian existentialists in defining humans as emotional beings whose conscious lives cannot be attributed to reason alone, Barres laments Sartre's ethic of subjective freedom and his inability to loosen his grip on the ego, which Kierkegaard believed must be "shattered by despair" before the truth about existence could be apprehended: "He has lost Kierkegaard's 'pregnant moment' in which eternity touches time and necessitates a destiny decision, and now has nothing to offer but cardboard figures."

Barres's view of Sartre's atheism was not unusual; but religion-centered responses to existentialism did not always dismiss Sartre's ethics so readily. A 1948 discussion of *Fear and Trembling* in *Commentary*, called "Existentialism and Father

Abraham," rejects the "teleological suspension of the ethical" with which Kierkegaard explains the biblical story of Abraham and Isaac. The author, a rabbi named Joseph Gumbiner, argues that in saying Abraham's decision to sacrifice Isaac is justified by the religious faith it manifests, Kierkegaard ignores the historical purpose of the story, which is to show that God would never demand that a child be sacrificed. Kierkegaard submits that in clinging (albeit fearfully) to his faith, Abraham transcends the ethical stage of life and moves into the highest, religious stage; but Gumbiner questions the idea that the passionate state in which the choice is made is more significant than the principle to which the choice appeals. Kierkegaard says that the completeness of the personality in faith justifies a suspension of the ethical, and he submits in *Either/Or* that in such a case, when choice is the only option, one will choose what is right; Gumbiner objects to Kierkegaard's designating the individual will as the site of ethical choice. Unlike Oliver Barres, Gumbiner seems to prefer Sartre's ethics to Kierkegaard's:

> It is thus the form, the manner of choosing, which is of greatest import in ethical decision. What effect the choice will have, what the consequences will be, is of minor significance to Kierkegaard. (It is of interest to note, on the other hand, that in the atheistic Existentialist thought of Jean-Paul Sartre, ethical consequence occupies a position of prominence.) (145)

Barres mistrusts the way Sartre "binds himself to the earth," but Gumbiner is more suspicious of the inwardness of Kierkegaardian faith. Amid the postwar wariness of extremism, Kierkegaard's "teleological suspension of the ethical," a justification of the means in terms of the goal, appeared even more unsettling than it had already. Was it religious devotion or reckless indifference to moral, human obligations?

Among highbrow journals, the preeminent authority on existentialism was *Partisan Review*, which published a variety of selections from Camus and Sartre immediately after the war. The sore point of Stalinism precluded several *Partisan Review* and *Commentary* writers from expressing too much enthusiasm for existentialism, at least as far as Sartre was concerned. A critique of *Nausea* that appeared in *Commentary* in 1949, for instance, dismissed the novel by remarking: "this book—it is charity to call it a 'novel'—finds everyday life rotten" (Krim 202). The *Partisan Review* writer who expressed the greatest interest in existentialism was William Barrett, whose 1958 treatise *Irrational Man* had been preceded by a pamphlet, in 1947, called *What is Existentialism?* as well as an article in *Commentary*, in 1951 (well after the philosophy's popular appeal had faded), called "What Existentialism Offers Modern Man." Dwight Macdonald was impressed by the work of Camus and translated his essay "Neither Victim Nor Executioner" for *Politics* in 1947.[11] In 1945, Camus, along with Chiaromonte, had begun the motions of founding an American activist organization envisioned as part of a larger, international network (Berghahn 140). It was an idea that Camus had submitted in some of his writings. Apparently, however, the project was foiled by Camus's lack of commitment. In 1956 Chiaromonte became editor of The Congress for Cultural Freedom's Italian organ, *Tempo Presente*.

Along with the guides by Barrett and Jean Wahl that were available in America, an introduction by Marjorie Grene, *Dreadful Freedom: A Critique of Existentialism*, was published in 1948. Like Barrett's *Irrational Man*, which depicts existentialism as a philosophy of crisis, Grene's book seeks to explain the theoretical tenets of existentialism

[11] The article was in an issue of *Politics* called "French Political Writing" which also included articles by Sartre ("Materialism and Revolution") and Beauvoir ("Eye for Eye").

in relation to political realties, "in situation." Examining existentialist ideas in relation to Kierkegaard, Hegel, and Heidegger, Grene emphasizes dread—and the concealment of it—in the face of historical freedom. The philosophy did not begin with the Resistance, she says, but it was the Resistance that made it popular and compelling. The life of the underground had brought to light "what the inner self-torment of a Kierkegaard had revealed a century earlier: the utter loneliness of each of us in moral crisis and the essential union, almost the identity, of that loneliness and the freedom that we find in it. Man makes himself, but only in secrecy and solitude—publicity is betrayal or illusion" (96).

In Spring, 1945, *Partisan Review* published an article on the political situation in liberated France called "French Expectations." The author, Victor Serge, refers to the Occupation as a time of duplicity, likening it to Russia in the late twenties. An absolute refusal to collaborate would have meant suicide, Serge writes; but some collaborators were more willing and sincere than others. Accountability is difficult, if not impossible, to assess. Under extreme circumstances new, sometimes uneasy, alliances formed, formerly stable coalitions were dissolved or weakened, and traditional associations were revived. In opposition to the unquestionable dominance of the Communist Party, Serge reports, leftists opposed to Stalinist totalitarianism are forming necessary alliances with moderate and conservative groups, and the French government is seeking to address "the worst evils" with which it is confronted. In general, "one feels the need for a social transformation, for a revolution, which one hopes to achieve at the lowest cost, since the idea of a civil war remains very unpopular" (239).

The anxiety over questions of actions and political responsibility which Serge presents is approached from a different angle in Sartre's article "The Case for Responsible Literature," which appeared in the following issue of *Partisan Review*. A precursor to *What is Literature*? (which would be published in 1948 and translated into English the following year), the essay addresses what Sartre describes as a "crisis in language" precipitated by World War I. As a result of this crisis, writers had been unprepared for World War II, accepting the role of mere "nightingales" and, in some cases, accepting work from the Germans. Now that those irresponsible writers who aided the German project are being called to task for their activities, says Sartre, they sometimes respond with shock: "'Why,' they say, 'is one responsible for what one writes?'" (305). The writer's role, as Sartre now defines it (in scolding the "nightingales," he implicitly reproaches himself for his own, formerly aloof stance), is to draw useful conclusions from historical facts while applying oneself to the events of one's time (307). The writer who strives for immortality effectively relinquishes her own life: "We write for our contemporaries, we do not wish to view our world with the eyes of the future—for that would be the surest method of destroying it—but with our fleshy eyes, with our real mortal eyes" (308). This ethic was embraced by American writers such as Norman Mailer. In France, however, as H. J. Kaplan writes in a "Paris Letter" from the same issue of *Partisan Review*, "anti-existentialists" accuse Sartre of disregarding history. While *Huis-Clos* is a great hit in Paris, a "polemic on existentialism" rages at the same time which pits Sartre and Camus against anti-existentialist disbelievers: "Sartre, they say, with his theory of self-determined and lonely being, and Camus, who posits the essential absurdity of all values, are removing man

from history and sapping the basic impulsions of action. (Note that the two leading exponents of this new quietism are both politically very active)" (365). Kaplan describes existentialism as the most important literary movement in France and says that the philosophy was significantly influenced by the American novel and American Pragmatism. In *Le Mur*, *La Nausée* (which had already acquired readers in the U.S.), and *L'Etranger*, Sartre and Camus have rendered the style of American novelists in terms of ideas, and those ideas have been translated to images. "They have intellectualized, for example, the loneliness of the American hero, the brutality or cold hostility of his world. And this is in accordance with a training and a tradition wherein the 'cult of experience' does not exclude the experience of ideas" (366-67). That Kaplan's description of the American influence so closely resembles the description Sartre gives in "American Novelists in French Eyes" suggests that this style-to-ideas conception of the cultural exchange was a widely disseminated explanation which did not necessarily begin with Sartre himself.

In Fall, 1945, with the war over and Pétain sentenced to exile, Kaplan reports that "the bad conscience of so many Frenchmen has been whisked away to the fortress of Portalet" (473). Few are happy, however. The Communists object to Pétain's escaping execution, the "exasperating people" who supported his reign are outraged at his treatment by the press, and the Socialists are distressed by the entire state of affairs. Although most of the French had resented Pétain, they could not quite accept the idea of executing him. In addition, France is agitated by its diminished significance in world affairs. In the upcoming election in October, Kaplan writes, "most voters will probably be voting for or against the preponderant influence of Stalinist Russia, for or against the

leadership of the United States" (475). Existentialism is so pervasive as to be "rather an element of the Parisian air than a clearcut doctrine" (476). Julian Benda, who has published an attack on anti-intellectualism among French writers, has dismissed existentialism as the product of German philosophers Husserl and Heidegger and concluded that the philosophy of Nietzsche is "worldwide." Benda, however, "does not go on to say, as Stalinoid critics are prone, that Heidegger was a Nazi and therefore Sartre is a Trotskyite-bukharino-hitlerite, ripe for the stake" (477). Kaplan's remarks reveal the prevailing sense in France that existentialist concepts are inherently political. Heidegger's existentialism, as he sees it, is "painfully gratuitous" but it reveals a "worthwhile ideology" at the moment that the *Dasein* "falls" into inauthenticity, which is escapable only through anguish.

In 1946, *Partisan Review* published a number of articles on existentialism along with various writings by Sartre and Camus. The German philosophers that Kaplan had described as influences were discussed (and differentiated from Sartre and Camus) in Hannah Arendt's "What is Existenz Philosophy?" Barrett reviewed *L'Etre et Le Neant* and *L'Age de Raison* in "Talent and Career of Jean-Paul Sartre." A review of *Le Mythe de Sisyphe* along with some of Camus's short plays appeared, and also a review of *L'Etranger*. Two excerpts from *Nausea*, one from *The Myth of Sisyphus* and one from *Anti-Semite and Jew*, were also published, along with Camus's essay "Hope and the Absurd in the Work of Franz Kafka." In "French Literature Since 1940," Claude-Edmonde Magny observes that because existentialism has become inseparable from atheism, it is surprising to recall that before the war the term "Existential philosophy" was used primarily to describe Christian philosophers. Magny describes this as an

"evolution in thought." "It seems as though Sartre, Camus, and the rest had wanted to deprive religion of its basis, wanted to secularize it and organize a kind of anti-clerical revivalism opposed to contemporary religious revivalism" (147-48). Magny determines (correctly, according to Sartre's diaries) that Sartre had gone through a phase of anti-humanism, as evidenced in the mocking references to humanist thought in *Nausea*. In writing his earlier works, Magny says, Sartre was "disburdened" of his hatred of the human and could now, consequently, "rediscover an authentic humanism." Magny describes the process by which self-hatred is abandoned for self-reconciliation as "probably the most severe crisis undergone by the irrepressible anthropomorphism of our species." It is, she says, a necessary emotional response "to inflated conceptions of the powers of man" and a necessary intellectual response to the "recognition of the insecurity of values" (149-50). In the first two years after the liberation of France, *Partisan Review* writers had examined existentialism from virtually any angle—political, philosophical, psychological—that they could think of; but, although they were intrigued, they were not enamored. The existentialists' interest in American popular culture was difficult to condone for the writers of the journal, which went out of its way to distinguish itself from American middlebrow culture. Given the neutral political stance that Sartre asserted in the platform of the *R.D.R*, and the drift of a number of *Partisan Review* writers toward the anti-communism that would lead them, in 1951, to assist in the establishment of the American committee of the Congress for Cultural Freedom, the group's general disenchantment with existentialism was to be expected. Referring to *Les Temps Modernes* and Sartre's preeminence in the French literary world, Kaplan writes in the "Paris Letter" of Summer 1946:

> Sartre's seizure of power has not been without incidence upon his own work and especially upon his new review, which seems to have contracted a number of unholy alliances. (The *immediate* result of this new united front is that Sartre, who had been attacked by the Communists and the Catholics for the so-called nihilism of his philosophy, has proclaimed a daring new doctrine of "engagement," which appears to be nothing more nor less than the Comintern's late and unlamented "socialist realism.") (73)

Literary responses to existentialism at this time appeared in other venues, as well. *Poetry* magazine published an article in 1946 by Paul Bordry on *L'Existentialisme est un Humanisme* (the publication). Bordry places the opposition on Sartre into two categories: that which comes from philosophers who reject existentialist principles and that which comes from "laymen" who question the aesthetic quality of Sartre's writing. "Sartre replies to the first on the level pure dialectic, with a great deal of courtesy. The second he usually ignores" (154). Marxists attack existentialism for its individualism and pessimism, and Sartre counters by attacking Marxism for its utopianism. Noting a public aversion to the "unsavory" characters Sartre often portrays, Bordry argues that in fact Sartre is being a moralist when he does this, and that the tendency is not new among moralists. The problem really lies in the naturalistic style in which the moralism appears. "[T]here is no getting around it, frankness has resulted in ugliness" (157). Bordry sees the characters in Sartre as possessing symbolic value which dictates their behavior. Rather than being governed by instinct they are abstractions, in keeping with the general trend in French literature (158).

A further attempt to situate existentialist themes historically was presented the same year in *The Nation* in an article called "Hamlet: The Existential Madness." The author, Wylie Sypher, sees Hamlet passing through an aberrant "existential phase" from which he eventually recovers. Shakespeare, says Sypher, opposes Hamlet's absurd state of mind to the reactions of other characters, such as Laertes and Horatio, and thereby provides "a frame of reference apparently lacking in current existential fictions" (750). Sypher's analysis draws on the relation that Heidegger establishes between inauthenticity and "care," which compels choice: "the existent bears his uneasiness or 'care' at not-being-at-home within the incalculable alien world of actualities. To live subjectively he must establish his identity by some desperate, paradoxical egoism such as suicide" (750). This capacity for making "absurd" choices which are, as Sypher writes, unintelligible to the generalizations of reason, is also taken up by Albert Guérard, in 1946, in *Harper's*. Guérard's article, "French and American Pessimism," examines the import of American "primitivism" in French literature. Citing the numerous articles in France on "The American Novel," Guérard finds an overemphasis on "violence and intensity," observing that the articles seem, really, to be commenting on qualities that are absent in French fiction. Guérard provides this quote from Claude-Edmond Magny, whom he calls one of the shrewdest of the "Americanophiles": "From James Cain to Erskine Caldwell, we admire the American novelists for having been able to convey so well the brief spasm of a violent action: for having been able to make each of their books, in its quasi entirety, a continued climax" (269). The French like Hemingway and Steinbeck because they are different from the French, says Guérard, but they like Dos Passos and Faulkner because they are similar, because they express Sartre's ideas in fictional form. To show

existentialism's compatibility with Faulkner, Guérard lists several descriptive qualities of existentialism, emphasizing the aspects of absurdity (he uses this word from Camus to describe Sartre), meaninglessness, and incompatibility between "our true isolated Self, and the Self which others see" (270).

Another way in which Americans were introduced to Camus and Sartre was through magazine photographs. Some of the photos, like those of Sartre in *Time*, were little concerned with flattery, but others were presented as self-conscious portraiture. In June 1946, *Vogue* ran a group of photographs and sketches entitled "Portraits of Paris." The pictures are introduced by a slightly sentimental meditation on the effects of the Occupation. "What one had not realized was how thoroughly France had been invaded, not only by Germans, but by hate itself—a hate which corroded and divided. One knew people were spent and sad, but one did not expect such lack of faith in each other or in any future" (156). The serene portraits of writers and artists include shots of Sartre and Camus. Camus is the only subject who receives a full-page close-up. He gazes upward and to the right. Sartre's photograph shares a page with three others. Although he is a writer, the photo is suggestive of abstract painting. He stands against a background on which a sweeping brushstroke is painted; open books are placed upon a table. Sartre is sideways, in profile, leaning against a wall with his arms crossed. The blurb that accompanies Camus's portrait describes Camus as "far from despair" (157). Sartre is characterized as "owl-like, dogmatic" (163). In January 1947, the "Paris Quick Notes" section in *Vogue* describes a "curious trinity" of American writers which "everyone in the knowledgeable world talks about": Hemingway, Faulkner, and Horace McCoy, author of *They Shoot Horses, Don't They?* and *No Pockets in a Shroud* (Talmey 92). The article

says that Sartre is still a "powerful influence," and it describes a talk that he gave to a group of thin, tired-looking boys from the Sorbonne who "looked like extras for a movie about the Maquis" (144). Two months later, *Vogue* published a short, feminist essay by Beauvoir. The headline reads "'Femininity, the trap'. . . a French view," and the essay assesses various "irritating" suppositions upon which femininity is constructed and the ways in which women facilitate them. Beauvoir writes that "what man actually means when he speaks of the sensitivity of woman is lack of intelligence, foolishness when he says charm, treachery when he says caprice. Let us not be dupes" (171). An editor's note describes Beauvoir as a "slender, handsome, thirty-eight-year-old Frenchwoman, with a strong-boned face": "A woman who thinks like a man, she plans a book on the new rôle of women in France, which will contain some of the ideas expressed in this article" (234).

In *Time*, meanwhile, Sartrean existentialism was become a standing target for jokes. In March 1946, the magazine ran a story on "dolorism," a new French "cult of sorrow and misery" which has stolen attention "even from Sartre's Existentialists" ("Dolorism" 32).

> High Priest of the inconsolable Dolorists was chalk-faced Julien Teppe, who believes that only those who suffer cosmic misery can see reality clearly. In his 43-page *Manifesto of Dolorism* he discovered that "even a vulgar intestinal disturbance when analyzed, interpreted, ruminated, and properly meditated, is capable of lifting us to a high universal comprehension . . . engulfing, containing all possible experience." (32)

Teppe, who was "constantly ill and morose" as a child, wears black, eats bread crusts and boiled vegetables, lives in an apartment without heat, and shuns society. He is "aggressively campaigning to stimulate public interest in despondency" and enlightens his followers with such proclamations as "every conversation is a lie" and "enthusiasm is our enemy" (32). In August 1947, *Time* reported on "another Parisian intellectual pretension" known as "intimatism." The "high priest" of this movement is a "dynamic" 34-year-old man named René Sébille, who came up with his idea after meeting a girl at an existentialist bar and suggesting that they become acquainted "more intimately," to which she responded, "Of course. I'm an intimatist" ("Intimatism" 32). Sébille has held many jobs, including stints in Venice and Brussels as a gigolo. He is interested in individual harmony, which can only be achieved through love, "two by two." The article offers this poem by Sébille, called "The Bikini Yodel":

> Crac . . . pchcht . . . bong . . .
>
> Bong . . . pchcht . . . crac . . .
>
> The universe is oblong. (32)

Another existentialism-inspired article in *Time*, in December 1946, describes a French waiter named Pascal who is described as "indignant" that the glory of the existentialists has faded and that critics are calling them "excrementalists": "From bourgeois critics that could be shrugged off; it hurt worse to hear it said, by true-blue bohemians, that the Existentialists themselves were going bourgeois" ("Pursuit of Wisdom" 31). The same article reports the establishment of two new "upstart cults" known as Lettrism, which sees poetry as "rhythmic architecture," and Sensorialism, which considers sense experience to be the only valid experience. Sex, the most intense

sense experience, is the most valid. The idol of the Sensorialists is the Marquis de Sade (31). In July 1948, *Time*, rather than limiting itself to ridicule formulated in America, reported on satirical representations of existentialism in the British journal *The Spectator*. One of them was called "Resistentialism." The philosophy, as described by satirist Paul Jennings, reverses the trend of pre-atomic philosophies, which are concerned with "what men think about Things." "The Resistentialist ideal is to free man from his tragic destiny of Thing-hauntedness by refusing to enter into relation with Things." An experiment (which involved dropping toast with marmalade on pieces of carpet to determine which side they landed on) has confirmed the statistical likelihood that things always win anyway ("Marmalade Hypothesis" 22).

In July 1947, *Time* reviewed Sartre's novel *The Age of Reason*, which it dismissed as "dolorous" and "idea-clotted." The article, which describes Sartre as "stubby," says that to understand existentialism, one should refer to Popeye, whose catchphrase, "I am what I am," sums up the philosophy "stripped of its dialectical jargon" ("Existentialist Purgatory" 94). *Time* laments that existentialists "have not explained why it is necessary to expound their doctrine solely from a worm's view of life" (96) and observes that Pope Pius XII has called existentialism a "philosophy of disaster." A photograph is included of Sartre holding a book in his hand and a cigarette in his mouth, with a caption that evokes a line from *The Age of Reason*: JEAN-PAUL SARTRE *A smell of dust and violets*. In April the same year *Time* had mentioned, under the heading "Existentialist Saint," "a course of studies on existentialism under the auspices of the Vatican's St. Thomas Aquinas." Philosopher Jacques Maritain, *Time* says, had described Saint Thomas as an existentialist, while "the great Thomist professor Etienne Gibson" saw existentialism as

signifying "a philosophical decadence" ("Existentialist Saint" 61). Photos of Maritain, Sartre (looking particularly silly), and a painting of St. Thomas are provided, with the caption: "PHILOSOPHERS MARITAIN, SARTRE, AQUINAS *In the shadows, decadence.*"

The dismissive attitude of mainstream publications was not entirely reflected in academic journals, where the response to existentialism was less immediate. In the Summer of 1948, *Yale French Studies* published its premier issue, which was devoted entirely to a discussion of existentialism and contained an excerpt from *Les Mains Sales.* More conservative highbrow journals, on the other hand, were beginning to discuss existentialism in a mocking tone not unlike that expressed in *Time.* In an essay called "Does Existentialism Still Exist?" that appeared in *Partisan Review* in 1948, Delmore Schwartz proposes that the meaning of existentialism is possibly becoming watered down, which is a dangerous situation that can lead to misunderstanding and misinterpretation. Philosophical idealism, for example, was once in fashion, but now it is simply applied to the impractical ideals of ineffectual people. Drawing on Heidegger's principle that no one else can die for you, Schwartz has reduced the meaning of existentialism to a similar concept: "*Existentialism means that no one else can take a bath for you*" (1361). Dying is a topic that people tend to avoid. "A bath, however, is a daily affair, at least in America." So why not think about the meaning of existentialism while taking a bath? writes Schwartz: "I know of one American (formerly an existentialist, by the way) who avoids taking frequent baths because he feels that the taking of a bath is an *extreme situation.* (He is not averse to using existentialist arguments when it suits his purpose, though in company he attacks existentialism)" (1362).

By the turn of the decade, the mystery of existentialism had deflated to little more than a big word that suggested faddishness. In the eyes of anti-communist intellectuals, Sartre's politics were precisely opposed to the sort of ideas that had always obsessed him philosophically, such as freedom, fluidity, and action. In 1951, in *Partisan Review*, Joseph Frank depicts Sartre's neutralism as a condition of stasis that also afflicts his followers: "Torn between a blind faith in the historical process and the absolute existence of the man in freedom—not being able to have both, except in the bewildering sleight-of-hand of their dialectic—they choose neither in concrete political terms" (456). This, however, was not the sense of existentialism that influenced American writers. An encapsulation of what interested the Americans can be found in a note that Camus made in his journal in March of 1941, where he wrote: "The Absurd and Power—develop (cf. Hitler)" (*Notebooks* III; 190). Mailer, Wright, and Updike were all motivated by a fairly common question of their time: Where does evil come from? More importantly, though, they were taken with the notion of absolutism as psychic state, and they wanted to show how this state of mind translates into action.

Chapter Three

Only Human: Nietzschean Amorality in Richard Wright

On March 1, 1940, a couple of days after the evening on which Sartre recorded the image of *Petit Crâne* in his diary, Richard Wright's novel *Native Son* was published in America. Though living under quite different circumstances in France and the United States, Sartre and Wright were forming remarkably similar ideas. Assessing the difficulty he had experienced in seeking to convey emotion in objective terms, Wright says, in "How Bigger Was Born": "There are meanings in my book of which I was not aware until they literally spilled out upon the paper" (506). Using simple, naturalistic techniques, he produced an affecting and often disturbing novel. Elusive emotions found their way onto the page not through intellectual scrutiny, but as a consequence of the writing process itself. Wright's account is similar to Sartre's description of "acting without knowing," but Wright himself bore little resemblance to the American hobo imagined by Sartre and Beauvoir. The resemblance to *Petit Crâne* lies in the fictional protagonist he was creating, Bigger Thomas, but with a notable difference. Unlike the virtuous character described by Sartre, Bigger does not always do the right thing. Usually, he does just the opposite, as when he provokes a fight early in the novel. Afterward, he is aware that he has done this out of fear, but he does not conceptualize events in fully concrete terms:

> Like a man staring regretfully but hopelessly at the stump of a cut-off arm or leg, he knew that the fear of robbing a white man had had hold of him when he started that fight with Gus; but he knew it in a way that kept it

> from coming to his mind in the form of a hard and sharp idea. His confused emotions had made him feel instinctively that it would be better to fight Gus and spoil the plan of the robbery than to confront a white man with a gun. But he kept this knowledge of his fear thrust firmly down in him; his courage to live depended upon how successfully his fear was hidden from his consciousness. He had fought Gus because Gus was late; that was the reason his emotions accepted and he did not try to justify himself in his own eyes, or in the eyes of the gang. (47)

Like Sartre and Camus, Wright envisions a process wherein action spurred by emotion produces ideas, but in this instance there is a discrepancy between his view and those of his French contemporaries. When Sartre envies the inspired vision he has conferred upon *Petit Crâne*, he says, "How I should have liked to feel uncertain ideas slowly, patiently forming within me!" He finds a similar capacity for spontaneous insight in the writing of Melville. And Camus illustrates a comparable effect when he describes a laboring Sisyphus pausing atop his hill: "It is during that return, that pause, that Sisyphus interests me. . . . The hour like a breathing-space that returns as surely as his suffering, that is the hour of consciousness" (121). In these three examples, action and feeling yield insight. A similar series of effects seems to be underway in Bigger's fight with Gus, but the process is derailed from the start. Rather than loosing his feelings and losing his head, Bigger attempts to conceal his primary emotion, fear, from his own consciousness. (Sartre would classify this attempt at self-deception as bad faith; Wright assesses it as flawed logic stemming from feeling—"the reason his emotions accepted.") Bigger's understanding of the event takes shape not as a "hard and sharp idea," but as a

weak rationalization: "He had fought Gus because Gus was late." The fight is not one of those acts in American literature that Sartre calls "complete in themselves, impossible to analyze." In keeping with the restricted quality of Bigger's life as a whole, the experience is incomplete. Suppressing fear, as Wright depicts it, is a survival skill for African Americans; and while the violence that displaces Bigger's fear is out of the ordinary, Wright suggests that it is an increasingly likely response to racism in the U.S.

Native Son and *The Outsider*, the "existential" novel Wright published in the 1950s, are each stories in which the protagonist defines himself through violence and thereby gains a greater level of self-awareness. Like the postwar writings of Sartre and Camus, both novels examine the function of negation in acts of self-assertion. The crucial difference between *Native Son* and *The Outsider* lies in the *way* the protagonists ultimately define themselves. Whereas Bigger dies satisfied in the knowledge that in killing he has determined what he *is*, Cross Damon dies seeking to "make a bridge" between himself and others—to translate the knowledge he has gained from his own experience into a meaning that is social by, to begin with, attempting to fulfill a promise to someone he has deceived earlier. The distinction between the two books is an important one. *The Outsider* was written at a time when America's international prominence was expanding dramatically. Incidentally or not, Wright was simultaneously seeking to extend the scope of his own work, to endow the views he had expressed in *Native Son* and *Black Boy* with universal meaning. One way to measure the difference between America's prewar and postwar image abroad is through the observations made by Sartre during each period. The impression of inspired simplicity that infuses his essays of the 1930s on American literature and his 1940 portrait of *Petit Crâne* was

complicated by his trips to America in 1945 and 1946, and by the time his 1947 article "Americans and Their Myths" appeared in the *Nation*, he had discovered a lurking "*malaise*" beneath the American exterior:

> when a careful arrangement of those melting-pot notions—puritanism, realism, optimism, and so on—which we have been told are the keys to the American character is presented to us in Europe, we experience a certain intellectual satisfaction and think that, in effect, it must be so. But when we walk about New York, on Third Avenue, or Sixth Avenue, or Tenth Avenue, at that evening hour which, for Da Vinci, lends softness to the faces of men, we see the most pathetic visages in the world, uncertain, searching, intent, full of astonished good faith, with appealing eyes, and we know that the most beautiful generalizations are of very little service: they permit us to understand the system but not the people. (402)

The simplicity that Sartre associated with America, it seems, had evolved into something more dreary than intriguing, and from here on his view would only become grimmer.

This impression is considerably different from the view Sartre had held in the 1930s and during the war, when he tended to envision the U.S. as an essentially modern nation tinged with an unaffected and spontaneous primitivism. The lapse of self-awareness that Sartre attributes to *Petit Crâne* and to characters in Dos Passos and Faulkner, and the "white heat" through which he sees Melville spontaneously apprehending the idea of the whale hunt, can also be observed when Bigger acts under pressure. In this sense, Bigger fits Sartre's model of "complete" experience; but in the disturbing consequences of his actions, he also seems to parody it. The harmless

primitivism of *Petit Crâne* resembles the meekness that was popularly ascribed to blacks in America. It is because the Daltons perceive Bigger in these terms that they are initially skeptical of the idea that he has harmed Mary. The complement to this innocuous primitivism was the aggressive variety conceived most pointedly in the image of the would-be black rapist. Invoking this threat in *Native Son*, Wright attempts to relocate the basis of white fear—from African Americans to racism itself—by implying that the more a person's experience is impeded by racial oppression, the greater the likelihood that his actions will veer down violent paths, as when Bigger's fear propels him irrationally into a fight with Gus. This was a political strategy for combating racism by turning it back on itself, and it was also what Wright believed. Having greater faith than Sartre in the theories of Freud, he was taken with the idea that civilizations are built upon repressed sexual/aggressive instincts. The depictions of violence in *Native Son* therefore constantly evoke, and implicitly threaten, the sexual proscriptions that underpin American race relations.

Like Sartre, Camus, and Kierkegaard, Wright was examining the ways in which the lesser details of human lives—such as actions, emotion, and thought—shaped collectively held views, thereby altering history. But unlike the existentialists, his concern in doing so was not to oppose Hegel. Institutionalized racism, as he construed it, was not a product of rationalistic thinking, it was just the opposite. Wright found irrational behavior both irritating and fascinating and was keenly aware of its stubborn refusal to be eliminated from human life. Bigger Thomas acts in defiance of reason, but, as Ralph Ellison famously observed, Bigger and Wright were not much alike. Like Sartre and Camus, Wright was intrigued by the idea of "immediate" thinking and its

consequences, but his own thought (again like Sartre's) was highly mediated. He was self-conscious. His irritation with irrationality made him sympathetic to the rigorous rationalism of Hegel. His fascination with it drew him to Freud, Nietzsche, and Kierkegaard.

Kierkegaard's objections to Hegel arose from religious faith, which, as he construed it, could not be reconciled with reason. His emphasis on faith was in keeping with his Lutheran religious background, though he ultimately split with the official church, which he determined to be insufficiently serious regarding this matter. In *Philosophical Fragments*, amid a discussion of immediacy (equated with reality), language (conceived as ideality), and consciousness (the mediation between the real and ideal), Kierkegaard observes, in a footnote: "It would really be interesting to see how Hegel would formulate the transition from consciousness to self-consciousness, from self-consciousness to reason [*Fornuft*]. When the transition consists merely of a heading, it is easy enough" (*EK* 135). In a later representation of the problem, in *The Concept of Anxiety*, he writes:

> The system is supposed to have such marvelous transparency and inner vision that in the manner of the *omphalopsychoi* [navel souls] it would gaze immovably at the central nothing until at last everything would explain itself and its whole content would come into being by itself. Such introverted openness to the public was to characterize the system. Nevertheless, this is not the case, because systematic thought seems to pay homage to secretiveness with respect to its innermost movements.

> Negation, transition, mediation are three disguised, suspicious, and secret agents (*agentia* [main springs]) that bring about all movements. (*EK* 147)

Kierkegaard's skepticism is shared by Nietzsche as well as Camus, whose philosophy—construed in terms of either absurdity or revolt—sees Hegel's totalizing conception of history as construing history in nonhuman terms, as a product of the system itself, and therefore inherently threatening to human existence. Camus saw unreasoning resistance as the only effective response to such systems (although in both Camus and Sartre, the idea that the negation of a negating system leads to an affirmation of the human is drawn from the logic of the system itself). In the view of Sartre and Camus, wholeness was not to be found in the ends toward which human experience was directed. It was in experience itself that people came nearest to achieving this condition.

In *Philosophical Fragments*, Kierkegaard's persona, Johannes Climacus, distinguishes between reflection and consciousness by saying that reflection involves two positions within the mind (e.g., ideality and reality), whereas in consciousness a third view emerges that reconciles the struggle between the former two. Reflection is disinterested, consciousness is interested and makes doubt possible. Kierkegaard evokes a similar configuration—of movement between divergent poles, mediated from a third position—in *The Concept of Anxiety*, when he discusses the biblical story of the Fall. Man, he says, is a synthesis of psyche and body sustained by spirit, and sexuality is the difference that precedes the synthesis.

> First in sexuality is the synthesis posited as a contradiction, but like every contradiction it is also a task, the history of which begins at the same moment. This is the actuality that is preceded by freedom's possibility.

> However, freedom's possibility is not the ability to choose the good or the evil. Such thoughtlessness is no more in the interest of scriptures than in the interest of thought. The possibility is to *be able*. In a logical system, it is convenient to say that possibility passes over into actuality. However, in actuality it is not so convenient, and an intermediate term is required. The intermediate term is anxiety, but it no more explains the qualitative leap than it can justify it ethically. Anxiety is neither a category of necessity nor a category of freedom; it is entangled freedom, where freedom is not free in itself but tangled, not by necessity but in itself. (*EK* 144-45)

The leap from the possible to the actual involves a subjective choice which is not logically determined, but compelled by anxiety, or "entangled freedom." The movement from innocence to guilt embodied in the Fall is a qualitative leap from one ethical position to another, or (in adherence to Kierkegaard's schema of life stages) from one mode of existence to another. Through sexuality, spirit becomes actual, and a synthesis between body and mind—human life—is achieved.

By the time these ideas had found their way into 20th-century existentialism, the religious motives of Kierkegaard had been mostly subsumed by more secular notions regarding psychology and metaphysical "being." Although Wright probably had not begun reading Kierkegaard by the time he wrote *Native Son*, in certain key ways the novel expresses Kierkegaardian ideas: that moments of self-defining free choice are accompanied by anxiety and dread; that such transitions are characterized by negation, lapse of consciousness, or loss of self; and that these moments of choice, action, and

transition hearken back to a symbolic and psychological origin in sexuality—the primary mode of the non-rational and, as Kierkegaard says, both a contradiction and a "task." In Wright, of course, the idea that sexual desire propelled other human activities had been influenced by Freud. In keeping with the views of American literature depicted by Sartre, Wright felt he was trying to give expression to feelings and ideas that did not lend themselves easily to the written or spoken word. He addresses this difficulty in "How Bigger Was Born":

> There was still another level of Bigger's life that I felt bound to account for and render, a level as elusive to discuss as it was to grasp in writing. Here again, I had to fall back upon my own feelings as a guide, for Bigger did not offer in his life any articulate verbal explanations. There seems to hover in that dark part of all our lives, in some more than in others, an objectless, timeless, spaceless element of timeless fear and dread, stemming, perhaps, from our birth (depending upon whether one's outlook upon personality is Freudian or non-Freudian!), a fear and dread which exercises an impelling influence upon our lives all out of proportion to its obscurity. And, accompanying this *first fear*, is, for the want of a better name, a reflex urge toward ecstasy, complete submission, and trust. The springs of religion are here, and also the origins of rebellion. (528)

Existentialism developed in opposition to the Hegelian system, and Kierkegaard, Sartre, and Camus all confront Hegel in his own terms, describing human existence as a condition of tense freedom and alienation that seeks to resolve itself through an ideal reconciliation. Wright expresses a similar principle here when he describes the dread that

characterizes Bigger's life and the "reflex urge toward ecstasy" that goes along with that dread. Kierkegaard evokes a similar idea when he envisions the overcoming of anxiety through a "qualitative leap" that reconciles the real and the ideal. When Camus says that even though it is human to desire the absolute, the very assertion of the condition of wholeness presents the mind with a contradiction, he echoes Kierkegaard's belief that consciousness (unlike simple immediacy) gives rise to difference and doubt. In Sartre, the "in-itself-for-itself" is conceived, essentially, as a reconciling of the subjective and objective selves, and is likened to the unachievable ideal of becoming God. As with Camus, Sartre's configuration seems to reflect ideas expressed by Kierkegaard, who says that anxiety ("freedom's possibility") can only be transcended through the anticipation of infinity that characterizes faith. Kierkegaard's Christianity does not guarantee this infinity, but simply posits that the faithful expectation of it is the highest stage of existence (*EK* 155). Sartre's existentialism, as described in *Being and Nothingness*, goes further and denies the possibility altogether. The anxiety that arises from contradiction and its implicit task (to draw on the vocabulary with which Kierkegaard explains the fall) is simply the essence of human life. There is really no getting over it, even though people try. Sartre's description of *Petit Crâne*, on the other hand, envisions a realized, if temporary, transcendence of the self. The same may be said of his representation of Melville's writing process.

As the portrait of *Petit Crâne* illustrates, action is the medium through which these attempts at unity take place. Kierkegaard suggests this when he praises the German philosopher Friedrich Trendelenburg, in *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, for interpreting movement as "the inexplicable presupposition" that unites thinking and being

(*EK* 196-97). In *Native Son*, such transitional moments of action are often sexually evocative and (in keeping with Sartre's notions about Americans losing their heads) connote a displacement of the self. The effect is suggested in the euphemism "I'm gone" which Bigger invokes when he and Jack masturbate in the theater. The desire for negation in one form or another is an ever-present aspect of Bigger's existence. When it is not imagined as self-nullification, it is portrayed as a desire to counter-negate—a wish to blot out things that impede and negate Bigger's own, potentially meaningful experience. Counter-negation, in this sense, is a response and a method of resistance (like counterpunching). It is similar to the idea of negation that Camus presents in the 1956 lecture "The Human Crisis," when he describes his generation in France, who were "nourished on shame and learned to rebel" (20). In response to "the civilization of death" awaiting them, Camus says, his generation could take an affirmative stance only (paradoxically) by saying no. These ideas are expanded in *The Rebel*, which lays a slightly greater emphasis on collaboration. As in the "The Human Crisis," Camus asserts in *The Rebel* that although rebellion produces nothing, it is nonetheless a positive act which brings to light "the part of man which must always be defended" (19). Rebellion fashions values around this aspect of human life and creates a sense of unity in the feeling that one's own suffering is endured in the company of others who suffer as well. "In our daily trials rebellion plays the same role as does the '*cogito*' in the realm of thought: it is the first piece of evidence. But this evidence lures the individual from his solitude. It founds its first value on the whole human race. I rebel—therefore we exist" (22).

Camus's claim in *The Rebel* that the spirit of revolt arises only where equality exists in theory but is absent in reality accords with the view of Abdul R. Janmohamed,

who examines the struggle between potentiality and actuality in *Black Boy*. As a result of his Southern upbringing, says Janmohamed, Wright is "an embodied negation constructed around abstract potentiality," and his fiction represents a dialectical conquest, through writing, of the social forces that seek to restrict the lives of African Americans (299-300). In *Native Son*, Bigger experiences a sense of his own negation at times when he feels at a distance from his body. This is the case when Jan and Mary attempt to befriend him: "He felt he had no physical existence at all right then; he was something he hated, the badge of shame which he knew was attached to a black skin" (76). Confined by American definitions of race to an ineffectual immobility, Bigger is, as Janmohamed's configuration suggests, simultaneously an "embodied negation" and a potentiality that cannot become what it would be under more favorable circumstances. Unable to act according to his desires, Bigger does what Camus's generation in France does—he affirms the aspect of himself he finds worthy of defending by negating what he feels negates him. One such negating force is the "white blur" which assumes a variety of forms throughout the novel. When Bigger murders Mary, it is embodied in the person of Mrs. Dalton:

> Mrs. Dalton was moving slowly toward him and he grew tight and full, as though about to explode. Mary's fingernails tore at this hands and he caught the pillow and covered her entire face with it, firmly. Mary's body surged upward and he pushed downward upon the pillow with all of his weight, determined that she must not move or make any sound that would betray him. His eyes were filled with the white blur moving toward him in the shadows of the room. Again Mary's body heaved and he held the

> pillow in a grip that took all of his strength. For a long time he felt the sharp pain of her fingernails biting into his wrists. The white blur was still. (97-98)

Through his struggle with Mary, Bigger holds back the advance of the threatening white blur, implicitly extinguishing one by means of the other. The events described here, in ambiguously sexual terms, are in some ways reminiscent of Sartre's model of American action: Bigger is consumed by emotion and compelled, immediately and unreflectingly, to act. As in the fight with Gus, however, violence displaces his fear. Sartre's schema is derailed when Bigger does the wrong thing (as Mary appears to be dead) rather than the right thing. The scenario is almost the precise opposite of the one in *Moby-Dick* in which Queequeg leaps overboard and saves the life of a shipmate. Bigger and Queequeg embody antithetical forms of primitivism. Each responds to his situation in a seemingly immediate manner, but the ethical consequences are very different.

In acting freely under anxious circumstances in opposition to the social conditions that aim to restrict his autonomy, Bigger defines himself against what he is not. This vision of existence is one of the factors that make Wright the contemporary of writers like Camus and Sartre, as well as the heir of Kierkegaard. As in Kierkegaard, increased consciousness arises in the *exercising* of choice. It is not the consequences of the decision itself, but the either/or proposition involved in committing oneself to a decision at all that precipitates a heightened level of awareness (the movement, for example, in Kierkegaard from the esthetic to the ethical stage of life). Sartre's ideas about emotion combining with action to produce insight and completeness is experienced firsthand by Bigger at the height of his crime spree: "There was something he *knew* and something he

felt; something the *world* gave him and something he *himself* had; something spread out in *front* of him and something spread out in *back*; and never in all his life, with this black skin of his, had the two worlds, thought and feeling, will and mind, aspiration and satisfaction, been together; never had he felt a sense of wholeness" (277-78). Bigger's elation is caused not by the murders per se, but by his recognition that these actions (and thus virtually any others) fall within his own scope of possibility. This he realizes shortly after killing Bessie: "He had committed murder twice and created a new world for himself" (279). But by the end of the "Flight" section of *Native Son*, when Bigger's mobility is gradually restricted by the advancing police search and he is at last cornered atop a snowy roof, the sense of completeness and definition he has achieved through unrestricted action appears to be receding to its fragmented state, with the result that he understands his own relationship to the world more clearly. The "hard and sharp idea" formerly suppressed by fear—an emotion he seems to have transcended—is allowed to take shape:

> He was surprised that he was not afraid. Under it all some part of his mind was beginning to stand aside; he was going behind his curtain, his wall, looking out with sullen stares of contempt. He was outside himself now, looking on; he lay under a winter sky lit with tall gleams of whirling light, hearing thirsty screams and hungry shouts, defiant, unafraid. (310)

This scene on the rooftop is foreshadowed earlier, just after Bigger drops Bessie down the airshaft:

> Blind anger had come often and he had either gone behind his curtain or wall, or he had quarreled and fought. And yet, whether in running away

> or in fighting, he had felt the need of the clean satisfaction of facing this thing in all its fulness, of fighting it out in the wind and sunlight, in front of those whose hate for him was so unfathomably deep that, after they had shunted him off into a corner of the city to rot and die, they could turn to him, as Mary had that night in the car, and say: "I'd like to know how your people live." (277)

The way black Americans live, the passage from the rooftop scene suggests, is in a state of fear and immobility, bounded by hostile forces that have it in for them. Camus says in *The Rebel* that "awareness develops from every act of rebellion" (14) and that one *becomes* one's resistance by exceeding the bounds delineated by an antagonist (17). The description is strikingly reminiscent of *Native Son*. To a lesser extent, Wright himself was exceeding proscribed boundaries when he wrote the book. If his awareness increased in the process, the change did little to reconcile him to his surroundings. Not long afterward, he left the U.S. for good.

At the time that he moved to Paris, in 1947, Wright had begun working on *The Outsider* and was hoping that the change of scenery would help stimulate the writing process. As it turned out, the novel would not be published until 1953. In some ways, his slow pace is understandable. The scope of *The Outsider* is ambitious. Wright's introduction to the work of Camus, Sartre, Beauvoir, Kierkegaard, and others typically classified under the heading "existentialist" had been recent. But the ideas of Nietzsche—a less direct precursor to existentialism than Kierkegaard—were not new to him. He had met with them early in life by way of Mencken. *The Outsider* harnesses Wright's philosophical interests together with his interests in psychology, sociology, and

other fields. Armed with this broad array of resources, though, he nonetheless returns to basic problems that had always preoccupied him: the distortion of human values, the possible meaning to be derived from suffering, and the psychology of violence. What makes the violent protagonist of *The Outsider* unique is his tendency toward self-conscious reflection. Unlike Bigger, Cross Damon does not suffer from inarticulateness. Rather than employing a lawyer or other witness as a mouthpiece through which to explain Cross's psychological condition, Wright allows him to assess his behavior in his own terms. He does this early in the novel, for example, after Cross discovers that his pregnant girlfriend is a minor. The girl and a friend of hers combine forces against him in an attempt to trigger his sense of guilt, with the friend admonishing him for his irresponsibility while the girlfriend lies in her bed looking helpless. Cross facetiously confirms the indictment against him: "Yeah, I know. I'm just a big, bad, black brute. Pushing little girls around. Taking advantage of the helpless. Spoiling innocent children. I've no feelings. I'm just having a damn good time and making others suffer" (53). The description is oversimplified but also foretelling. Cross does turn out to be something of a brute. But he is not "just" a brute. Reflecting an era in which tyranny and violence were increasingly complex threats, he is a complex bully.

By his own account, Wright discovered a new perspective on Cold War politics at both the international and national, American level when he went to France. Upon arriving in Paris, he met with a city still recovering from war and occupation. He had come to France with a variety of expectations. Some were relatively straightforward. He wanted, for example, to escape American racism. According to Wright's public remarks on the subject (political motives for shaming the U.S. notwithstanding), the wish was

generally satisfied. Other expectations, which Michel Fabre has summarized in detail, were more complicated:

> He also went to Paris as an American intellectual of the left-wing persuasion, attracted by the philosophy of existentialism as represented by Sartre, Camus, and De Beauvoir. He believed they could provide answers to the societal questions which plagued the chaotic, postwar world and which the United States was incapable of even formulating. He was also confident that so-called "old" Europe could find a way of rejecting both the materialism of capitalist America and the totalitarianism of Stalinist Soviet Union. He came looking for an expression of the humanism which the Enlightenment had given the West in order to adapt it to the needs of the world. ("Richard Wright's Paris" 108)

Wright had already met France's three most prominent existentialists (a label Camus rejected) during their respective visits to America. He and his wife Ellen became acquainted with Beauvoir while she was in New York during her visit to the U.S. in 1947. After their move to Paris the same year, she became a closer friend, particularly to Ellen, who eventually became her literary agent. Wright also developed ties with Sartre and Camus. He shared with Sartre an interest in negotiating a path between the political positions of America and the Soviet Union. As Fabre suggests, Wright was immersed in the humanist tenets that had acquired renewed cachet in Europe during the war, and he envisioned their leading to an alternative, third doctrine which would transcend polarized Cold War ideologies and provide a humanizing bulwark against increasing American materialism. Eventually, he would support *Le Rassemblement Démocratique*

Révolutionnaire, the anti-Stalinist, anti-capitalist organization that Sartre helped establish in 1948. Wright retained his long-held belief that collective values derived from religion had outlived their usefulness and needed to be replaced with something new. And though his disaffection with Communism had altered the theoretical premises of his ideas, the essential ideas were expanded rather than discarded. In 1938, as a Communist and a John Reed Club member encouraging African-American writers to produce politically committed literature, he had written that the waning moral authority of the church and increasing uncertainty among leaders in black communities presented the African-American writer with new responsibilities: "He is being called upon to do no less than create values by which his race is to struggle, live and die" ("Blueprint" 102). By 1946, after his initial visit to France, an international spin had been given to his belief that race relations in America provided a reference point from which to reassess values. Declaring that "the Negro is intrinsically a colonial subject," he now said that "what happens between whites and blacks in America foreshadows what will happen between the colored billions of Asia and the industrial whites of the West. Indeed, the world's fate is symbolically prefigured today in the race relations in America" (347).

This statement appeared in "A World View of the American Negro," a letter that was translated and published in the French journal *Les Nouvelles Epitres*, and then published in English in *Twice a Year* (of which Wright was an editor). It is printed there along with two other pieces by Wright under the heading "Discrimination in America." One of the other articles is a sociological essay on juvenile delinquency in Harlem. Drawing examples from court records to demonstrate how conditions in Harlem produce

the area's high delinquency rate, Wright describes the lives of three boys—boys A, B, and C. Of the third, he writes:

> Boy C lives with a mother whose husband has left her. Her husband, a migrant from the southern plantations, was a bundle of undisciplined impulses, a man who was kind one moment and cruel the next. Whenever he took a dislike to something, he merely tossed it aside and turned to something else. To him *right* was what he wanted at a given moment, and *wrong* to him was what kept him from getting what he wanted. So when he grew tired of his wife and child, he simply walked away. He felt no guilt in leaving them. (344)

The sense of right and wrong ascribed to Boy C's father ("what he wanted" vs. "what kept him from getting what he wanted") reflects the explanation of ancient morality in Nietzsche, which attributes a comparable sense of good (as oneself) and bad (as others) to slave masters in relation to their subjects. Nietzsche writes that "it was 'the good' themselves, that is to say, the noble, powerful, high-stationed and high-minded, who felt and established themselves and their actions as good, that is, of the first rank, in contradistinction to all the low, low-minded, common and plebeian. It is out of this *pathos of distance* that they first seized the right to create values and to coin names for values: what had they to do with utility!" (25-26). To comprehend the impulse to exercise control freely, over other people, rather than internalizing it, Nietzsche attempts to adopt the attitude of the nobles he describes and thereby realize for himself all the elation of their unrepentant cruelty. In *The Outsider*, Wright does something similar; and, of course, it is not the first time that he does so. In "How Bigger Was Born,"

describing the various "Biggers" who inspired him to write *Native Son*, Wright says of the original (a boy from his childhood): "At all times he *took* his way, right or wrong, and those who contradicted him had to fight. And never was he happier than when he had someone cornered and at his mercy; it seemed that the deepest meaning of his squalid life was in him at such times" (507). Perhaps at some level, Wright says, he wanted to be like this boy but did not dare. The nobles in Nietzsche, who create values and define themselves through action, bear some resemblance (despite the obvious difference in social status) to the Bigger from Wright's childhood, who "*took* his way, right or wrong." And Nietzsche's belief that, through the "pathos of distance," this self-defining action may assume the form of cruelty is echoed in Wright's description of the original Bigger's bullying: "it seemed that the deepest meaning of his squalid life was in him at such times." In *Native Son*, he presents the idea even more directly, when Bigger asserts, "But what I killed for, I *am*!" (501).

The emphasis on action in Nietzsche had had an important influence on French existentialists, who were then drawn to similar qualities in American literature (including Wright). Asked once about the influence of American fiction on French literature, Wright cited the work of Sartre and Camus, saying that French writers had found in writers like Hemingway, Caldwell, and Lewis a way to depict action in a "raw, rapid, sure form" (Wright, *Conversations* 137). Given that Sartre and Camus had read Wright before he read them, Wright might have included himself on this list. Michel Fabre, observing the complaints of American critics who find a lack of motivation in *The Outsider*, has noted that the novel's seemingly gratuitous murders appear less exceptional when looked at in light of French existentialist literature, where such acts are common. It

was, of course, the depiction of apparently unmotivated action that drew Sartre and Camus to American writers such as Hemingway, Faulkner, and Dos Passos, and to American detective fiction. Wright himself read the genre, as well as the real-life accounts described in *True Detective* magazine. Essentially, *The Outsider* is a crime novel in which motive does not so much help *determine* the murderer's identity as supersede it. The mystery becomes not whodunit but (as in *The Stranger*) why he dunit. This problem, in turn, is transcended by the mystery of what the murderer *is*, a question which ostensibly defies commonly accepted ideas about personality. Houston, the district attorney who investigates the crime, finally determines Cross's guilt by ruminating on philosophical questions and finding out what he reads (philosophy, plus Dostoyevsky). Houston solves the crime not because he figures out a clear *reason* for it, but because he is, fortuitously, the murderer's alter ego: a hunchbacked outsider who, rather than undermining the legal system, works on its behalf. He understands that Cross is the murderer but does not have the evidence to convict him. The mystery boils down to the question, What makes Cross tick? The reader's job is to draw clues from the ideas presented—and the clues are abundant—and determine what Cross really is. The unique difficulties that will plague the investigation are intimated by the question posed as he leaves the scene of the crime: "Now what motive on earth could he have had for killing the two of them? Let them figure that out . . ." (306).

In the postwar era, the question of action and motivation was a compelling one, and Wright's was just one of many minds that were dwelling on it. The same edition of *Twice a Year* that contained Wright's three articles on discrimination included the English translation of Camus's lecture "The Human Crisis." At the time, both writers

were absorbed by the subject of values and modernity, and Camus's lecture consequently contains some notable parallels to the Wright pieces. In it Camus testifies to the existence of a crisis by describing several incidents that had taken place during the war. The accounts tell of people who respond to suffering and tragedy in unsettling or seemingly inexplicable ways. In one story, a captive man is being led to an interrogation, his now bandaged ears mutilated from another examination that has already taken place. One of the men who abused him earlier asks attentively, "How are your ears now?" In another of the situations Camus describes, the concierge of an apartment rented by the Gestapo discovers two men, bound and bleeding, who have just endured a night of questioning. The concierge, Camus says, "proceeds to set the place in order, her heart light, for she has no doubt breakfasted. Reproached by one of the tortured men, she replies indignantly, 'I never mix in the affairs of my tenants.'" (21). Likening German officers and S.S. to "a mathematical theorem which nothing can impede or deflect," Camus objects to the "cult of efficiency and abstraction" which leads people to behave mechanically, without feeling. The men of his generation in France, he says, were 20 when Hitler came to power. The circumstances of their upbringing had left them with no beliefs with which to oppose evil.

> For if one believes in nothing, if nothing makes sense and we are unable to find value in anything, then everything is permitted and nothing is important. Then there is neither good nor evil and Hitler was neither wrong nor right. One can conduct millions of innocents to the crematorium or devote oneself to caring for the sick. One can tear a man's ears with one hand to soothe them with the other. (24)

It is a problem of motive: If values are not to provide the impetus for human action, then what is? In Europe, Camus determines, the demise of shared values has relegated the individual to solitude. "And since he is no longer protected by a respect for man based on the values of man, the only alternative henceforth open to him is to be the victim or the executioner" (24).

The qualities Camus attributes to a Gestapo official who treats his prisoner mercilessly during a formal interrogation but shows solicitous concern at a later, informal moment, are like those that Wright, in his study of Harlem delinquency, ascribes to the father of Boy C: "kind one moment and cruel the next." And as in the example submitted by Camus, this is more than an isolated case of one man's moral inconsistency. Rather, it is part of a widespread crisis of distorted principles. Wright suggests this in his study when he describes whites in the U.S.: "The average white American has been taught to regard Negroes as sub-humans, therefore to reject the humanity of Negroes is considered right, to accept it is considered wrong, which is a reversal of civilized values" (345). Both writers were concerned with oppositional positions of power ("the victim or the executioner") and the conditions under which the distinction between compassion and cruelty is dissolved, resulting in moral indifference. With the publication of *Native Son* six years earlier, Wright had become something of an expert on this sort of thing. The parallels between the social conditions he depicts in that novel and those present in Europe in the 1930s and 1940s had long been of interest to him. The personality of *Native Son*'s Bigger Thomas, he writes, was not a phenomenon restricted to the United States, but could be found elsewhere in a world where modernity had caused a deterioration of established beliefs, "a world that existed on a plane of animal sensation

alone" ("How Bigger was Born" 521). Bigger's "tensity" is different from that existing in Germany only insofar as it is embryonic and unarticulated due to the restricted educational opportunities available to African Americans (522). The similarities between Wright's "Discrimination in America" essays and Camus's "Human Crisis" lecture are not surprising in light of the corresponding focus on seemingly irrational violence that exists both in Wright's novels and in *The Stranger*. Both writers were convinced that the times had radically altered the way people treated each other. Sympathy engendered by shared beliefs was dissolving, the idea of human life being reduced to abstraction, and civilization degenerating to a struggle of unfettered brute power.

In postwar France, these sorts of ideas proliferated. Sartre submitted his take on the humanist debate in 1945 in his "Existentialism is a Humanism" lecture, which was received enthusiastically by Wright when it was published in English in 1947. By stressing the social implications of individual choice and action, the talk gave a humanist turn to Sartre's existentialism. In September 1947, Wright wrote of Sartre in his journal:

> Sartre is quite of my opinion regarding the possibility of action today, that it is up to the individual to do what he can to uphold the concept of what it means to be human. The great danger, I told him, in the world today is the very feeling and conception of what is human might well be lost. He agreed. I feel very close to Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir.[12]

For Sartre, the problem of "what it means to be human" had assumed key significance during the war. For Wright, who was the product of a culture that sought to deny his humanity, it was essentially a preoccupation that spanned a lifetime. To the extent that his experience constituted a revolt against the definition assigned to him in the segregated

[12] Qtd. in "Richard Wright, French Existentialism, and *The Outsider*": 186.

South, it was the question to which his own life was the answer. What did it mean to be human?

It is occasionally observed that of all the fictional protagonists Wright created, *The Outsider*'s Cross Damon resembles him most. Days before leaving Chicago for New York in 1937, Wright was offered a permanent job as a clerk at the Post Office. He had been laid off from his temporary position and had been attempting for some time to secure a permanent job to alleviate his financial struggles (Rowley 123). Cross is employed in the position that Wright rejected when he moved to New York. Among other parallels, his reading tastes, which are heavy on German philosophy, resemble Wright's. Whereas Bigger Thomas's angst is "nascent" and "not yet articulate," the hero of *The Outsider* is expressive and given to detailed philosophical explanations of the psychological condition of Western humanity. As his name suggests, Cross Damon embodies a synthesis of good and evil. As such, he resembles Boy C's father: "a bundle of undisciplined impulses" who exhibits cruelty and kindness unpredictably and abandons his family.

Cross is reborn under the name Lionel Lane and receives the opportunity to fake his own death after a subway accident in which the body of a dead man is taken to be his. The opportunity comes about because Cross leaves behind his identification after battering the dead man's face beyond recognition with a gun to extricate his own trapped leg. Such juxtapositions of death and freedom are familiar devices in Wright's work. His move to France had elicited a similar image. Describing his relief at escaping the tensions of American life, he told journalist William Garner Smith that leaving the U.S. was like feeling a corpse slip off his back (Campbell 247). In an interview after his first

visit to France, Wright said that he had not met with "one iota of racial feeling" there. The French rarely bothered to speak about freedom, he said, as it was not in short supply in their country (Wright, *Conversations*123). Wright's envisioning the burden of American injustice as a corpse attached to his own body is evocative in light of the name he gave to the protagonist he was creating at the time, Cross. To illustrate freedom with the image of a cross removed from the back of a man would be Christian. Reversing the image and envisioning a man (in the role of the cross) unburdened of a body highlights the dual nature of the Christian icon. The cross is, literally and figuratively, an intersection—both the symbol of suffering and the instrument that causes it. *The Outsider*'s Cross not only suffers (willingly, he says), he also imposes suffering on others. He is not the "the victim or the executioner," he is both.

Like *Native Son*, *The Outsider* examines the psychology of violence, but there are important differences between the two novels. Whereas *Native Son* portrays "the ache for violent action" in a form that Wright describes as undeveloped and inarticulate, *The Outsider* shows the development of violent tendencies in someone who is acutely self-aware and reflective. Most importantly, Wright's purpose is not to portray a man determined by social forces, but a man who is his own self-determining force. Consequently, in this novel, the subject of race per se is deemphasized. Publicly, Wright suggested that Cross's race had little significance. Asked about the theme of his new novel in a 1953 interview, he answered, "Man without a home, without rest, without peace, in an industrial culture. The main character is a Negro, but he, in contrast to Bigger Thomas in *Native Son*, does not react as a colored person in a dominating white world, but as a human victim in social circumstances" (Wright, *Conversations* 158).

Discussing the book in October 1952, on the other hand, he had said in a letter to Ralph Ellison, "I've waded right out into the question of the Negro's relationship to the Western world" (qtd. in Rowley: 407). As the letter suggests, though African-American experience may not be crucial to the characterization of Cross Damon, it is still of special concern in *The Outsider* in that it is envisioned as a basis for debate about racial and colonial subordination worldwide. This issue is addressed at length by Paul Gilroy, who says that Wright's depiction of African-American life on the whole is more than just *representative* of racial oppression on an international scale. Wright's work, says Gilroy, "presents an elaborate body of philosophically informed reflection on the character of western civilization and the place of racism within it" (154). Wright once described European colonialists by speaking of the "thwarted instincts" of "advanced individualists" (Fabre, *RWBW* 224), an assessment which applies to the hero of *The Outsider*. The novel attempts to retrace, in the way of Nietzsche, the psychological development of Western civilization. *Native Son*, Carla Cappetti has observed, demonstrates the theory of sociologist Louis Wirth (with whom Wright worked in Chicago) that the history of an individual encapsulates the important qualities of a society (267). In *The Outsider*, Wright employs this theory in broad terms. The suggested "society" is the Western world, and the hero is an "advanced individualist" whose instincts are suppressed, unleashed, and finally brought under his control, though never completely mastered.

Cross embarks on this course after the subway accident that offers him a chance to create a new identity and thereby evade responsibility for his debts, pregnant girlfriend, angry wife, and two children; but his scheme is quickly hampered when his

friend Joe unexpectedly discovers him alive at a hotel patronized by prostitutes. After killing Joe with a whiskey bottle and returning to Jenny, a prostitute, he recalls the murder and has to remind himself that he was the one who carried it out. After having sex with Jenny, rather than kill her and risk attention from the police, he falsely promises to take her with him when he leaves town. In this first murder and the events surrounding it, Cross's impulsive reactions are motivated by fear and desire for self-preservation. On a train to New York, he muses over events: "He had thought he was free. But was he? He was free from everything but himself. Loneliness had driven him to confess to Jenny, and fear could have made him kill her as he killed Joe" (147). His sense of dread, he concludes, "was from within himself, within the vast and mysterious world that was his and his alone, and yet not really known to him, a world that was his own and yet unknown. And it was into this strange and familiar world that he was now plunging" (148).

Wright's study of juvenile delinquency had painted a similar portrait of a school bully, Boy B. Boy B's parents are described as "emotionally starved" people who seek to satisfy their impulses quickly. Feeling as though protecting others will ensure his own protection, Boy B forms a gang and extorts a daily penny from each member.

> He haunts the corridors of the school, demanding tribute. "A penny a day and I'll protect you; if you don't pay me, you'll get hurt," he says, flashing a knife. If a boy refuses, violence and bloodshed follow.
>
> Naturally, he is driven from school. His teachers cannot understand how any boy can act like that. They do not know that this boy, having no

> respect for adults and fearing other children, has stepped in between the world of adults and children and has organized a world of his own. (343)

Boy B goes a step beyond his parents. Not only does he gratify his impulses, he constructs a system through which to do so efficiently and profitably, and the "in between" world he creates is one of organized violence.

Cross, too, constructs his "strange and familiar" world through violent action. However, his is not a world of *organized* violence, a discrepancy that reflects the anti-ideological bent of Wright's postwar politics. In a vivid demonstration of the principle that fascism and Communism are not ideologically opposed but equally totalitarian, Cross encounters a brutal fight between a Communist ideologue and a racist landlord who refuses to rent to blacks and is characterized a fascist, and, rather than play favorites, kills them both. Cross assesses each ideology as a "system of sensualization of the concept of power," also to be found in art, religion, and "the so-called capitalist bourgeois world" (270). In truth, this was the world that was chiefly at issue. The "fascist" in *The Outsider* is an American, and the tactics of the Communists who spy on Cross and interrogate him about his beliefs and activities are indistinguishable from those associated with redbaiting. It was not European totalitarianism that was the immediate source of Wright's annoyance but, rather, the increasing homogeneity of political opinion in America. Ultimately, he was convinced that not only were Communists in America fundamentally akin to their supposed adversaries on the right, they were literally identical. Speculating about Communism in African-American communities at a 1960 lecture at the American Church in Paris, he surmised that most of it was government-sponsored (qtd. in Fabre, *WRW*: 185). Wright's irritation was reciprocated by the U.S.

government. As it was considered unseemly to air complaints abroad about American racism, Wright's outspokenness on the subject in France subjected him to surveillance and placed his passport at risk, and it also affected his reputation as a writer. Because the American committee of the Congress for Cultural Freedom took exception to the social protest contained in Wright's work and that of various other Southern authors, sales of these writers' work fell in the 1950s (Saunders 292). Since non-Communist leftists were the principal targets of the CCF's operations, Wright's association with Sartre and Beauvoir (who were like living embodiments of the purported third way) was particularly suspect (Saunders 101, 69). "I'm not a Communist," Wright said, "the government can take no political objection to me; but they burn up at the idea of an independent Negro living in a foreign country and saying whatever he likes. One has got loose! I'm probably just about the only uncontrolled black man alive today and I pay for that" (qtd. in Webb: 375-76). The position in which Wright envisions himself is much like Cross's. He was a "loose" disbeliever, beyond left and right, and thus outside the range of recognized thought. Like his protagonist, he evokes suspicion but can be found guilty of no specific offense.

Though he does not accept their ideologies, Cross shares certain important qualities with Blount the Communist and Herndon the fascist. Like the various nobles described in Nietzsche, all three men exercise the will to power actively. They also share a willingness to exert control over other people. In an introduction to St. Claire Drake and Horace Cayton's 1945 sociological treatise on African Americans in Chicago, *Black Metropolis*, Wright discusses the influence that ideology can have on someone who inhabits a society where freedom is promised but not delivered. An example, warns

Wright, would be the sort of frustrated German who pinned his wishes on the vision of Hitler. In such cases, when one is convinced of the hopelessness of his situation, "he will embrace Communism or Fascism, or whatever other ideological rejection is offered" (xxvi). Wright makes a comparable point in "How Bigger Was Born" when he says, "I've even heard Negroes say that maybe Hitler and Mussolini are all right; that maybe Stalin is all right. They did not say this out of any intellectual comprehension of the forces at work in the world, but because they felt that these men 'did things,' a phrase which is charged with more meaning than the mere words imply" (514). Like Bigger, Cross assumes a degree of power that is not, officially or unofficially, allotted him by others. Ultimately, both characters *do* things.

All three of the possible ideological "rejections" that Wright warns of—Communism, fascism, and "other"—are in play in the violent double murder scenario presented in *The Outsider*. In the spirit of Nietzsche's denunciation of systems, it is Cross's position as a philosophical outsider that prompts his actions. He decides spontaneously that the fascist/Communist binary must be shattered, and that he is the person to do it:

> Suddenly a fullness of knowledge declared itself within Cross and he knew what he wanted to do. He was acting before he knew it. He reached down and seized hold of the heavy oaken leg of the table and turned and lifted it high in the air, feeling the solid weight of the wood in his hand, and then he sent it flying squarely into the bloody forehead of Herndon. (303)

The description of Gil's murder mirrors that of Herndon's, with Cross grasping the table leg and raising his arm above his head. Then, Wright says, "Cross let go with the table leg, smashing it into the left side of Gil's head." The descriptions contain echoes of the scene on the train, when Cross is described as having "lifted the gun by the barrel and brought down the butt" (95), and the scene of Joe's murder, when the bottle is lifted "high in the air" and lowered "with a crashing blow on Joe's head" (136). Joe's body is described as an "inert form," and Herndon and Blount's bodies are, similarly, "two inert forms" (304). Reflecting Wright's claim in his introduction to *Black Metropolis* that industrialization has reduced men to "appendages to machines" (xxiii), the scenes of violence and its aftermath repeatedly emphasize the mechanical efficiency of Cross's actions and carefully describe the moment of contact between his hand and the instrument with which he exacts violence.

Over time, Cross's sense of anxiety at exercising violence decreases. At first he copes with the magnitude of his crime by psychologically distancing himself from it, but over time his need for detachment diminishes. After killing Joe, he has to remind himself that he is the murderer. After killing Blount and Herndon, this is no longer the case at all: "He knew exactly what he had done; he had done it deliberately, even though he had not planned it" (304). The modification of his feelings and responses resembles similar developments attributed by Camus to "the cult of efficiency and abstraction." Wright shared Camus's belief that modernity leads to the objectification of human life and that the process is abetted by instruments that enhance the ease and detachment with which life can be taken. Rather than furthering civilization, history was returning the West to the sort of barbarism depicted in Nietzsche's master-slave scenario. The transition from a

humane vision of life (which Wright sometimes associated with humanist and agrarian traditions) to an indifferent and objectifying vision (which he associated with industrialism) is evoked by the descriptions of the dead man's body on the train. At first the images repeatedly include the word "man"—"the man's head," "the man's face," "the man's parted lips," "the man's chest." After the first blow to the man's face, however, the descriptions refer only to the body—"the bloody face," "the head," "the mangled face," "the flesh" (95-96). Wright's fear that, on a global scale, human beings were being objectified (in idea) and battered (in reality) into mere "inert forms" has origins in his beliefs about American race relations. As he says in his study of delinquency, for whites, rejecting the humanity of blacks is acceptable. "It is, then, the exceptional white American who can purge himself of the popular morality of the nation and look simply upon the humanity of the Negro" (345). In *The Outsider*, Wright universalizes this idea, suggesting that people's lives are out of sync with the values they profess. The "myth-world" brought into being by religion has been unveiled. The real world is revealed, but most choose not to see it, continuing instead to live by the beliefs that suited the old world.

But a select few recognize the reality behind the veil. Wright often associates bullies with clarity of vision. In his introduction to *Black Metropolis*, in fact, he locates this trait in Adolf Hitler, saying, "Hitler saw and cynically exploited the weak spots in our society perhaps more clearly than any politician of modern times. History will no doubt dub the Hitlerites as the most devastating critics of our disorganized industrial order, not even excepting the Bolsheviks of 1917!" (xxiv). Capitalists, Wright says, hate Hitler not only because he is a murderer, but also because he reminds them of their

"sundered consciousness." Looking beyond the myth-world (that is, disregarding socially contingent moral values and pursuing power simply for its own sake) enabled Hitler to create armies of men "whose reality the Western world could not see" (xxv). The psychic wholeness—the overcoming of the split consciousness—with which Wright credits Hitler, and the clarity of vision that attends this condition, also characterize Herndon and Blount, the fascist and the Communist in *The Outsider*, and Cross as well. In Cross's opinion, fascists and Communists, like himself, foresee the impending demise of capitalism:

> In his weighing of ideas, Fascism possessed the same vitally negative merit of Communism in sensing the imminent end of a system of economic domination in the Western World, but what revulsed him in the fascist doctrine was its boast that it needed no ideological justification for its desire to rule. Life was denuded of all meaning when a Hitler could kill millions of men by an efficiently scientific method of mass industrial extermination simply because he did not like the color of their skins or the shape of their nostrils. (197)

Having stripped away the meaning of the myth-world, totalitarian ideologies made it possible for people to act without basing their decisions on any particular principle of "what it means to be human." One could simply act to justify what one was and to negate what one was not. Wright's existentialist conception of action in *The Outsider* is thus very similar to the illustration of action in *Native Son*. What he borrowed from Sartre and Camus was not really philosophy per se, but a model for extending his ideas about individual freedom to a broader, global arena. In fact, though, the ideas developed

in *Native Son* were already more social in nature than those taken up in the early works of Sartre and Camus.

The feeling of revulsion with which Cross responds to fascist ideology also surfaces when he interrogates at gunpoint a Party leader named Hilton, who is responsible for expelling a train porter from Trinidad named Bob:

> "Bob?" Hilton blinked. What the hell do you care?"
>
> Hilton's eyes were round with surprise. "Was he your brother or something?"
>
> "No. You sent Bob to Trinidad, to his death—"
>
> "So what? There are a million Bob Hunters. What do they mean? They don't count . . ."
>
> Cross smiled bitterly. How those quiet words riled him! He had to deal with this man in a way that would make him feel what he felt. (399)

As Fabre has observed, the heads of the Communist Party in *The Outsider* exhibit the characteristic that Camus, in "The Human Crisis," attributes to S.S.: They are "like an instinct elevated to the height of an idea or theory" (*WRW* 165). Hilton, in his casual dismissal of "a million Bob Hunters" reveals that he partakes in the "cult of efficiency and abstraction." Totalitarian ideology as Cross diagnoses it (a "system of sensualization of the concept of power") is essentially the psychology of bullying abstracted, systematized, and threatening to unleash organized violence: the world of Boy B operating on a grand scale. Hilton (a name that merges "Hitler" and "Stalin") is the supreme incarnation of this psychology. "What the hell is there so important about men dying?" he asks Cross. Hilton differentiates Cross and himself from the people he

classifies as bourgeois: "We don't make deals in shoes, cotton, iron, and wool . . . We make deals in human lives. Those are the good deals, the important deals, the history-making deals when they are made in a big way" (402). The era's debate over how to conceptualize history was an important aspect of the trend in humanism. In "The Human Crisis," Camus declares that Hegel's idea that human life is subordinate to history is "detestable" (25). The model of history formulated in *The Outsider*, on the other hand, echoes the principle in Nietzsche that envisions a gradual process of human psychological development, wherein the instinct to cruelty becomes internalized as conscience and the impulse to master others becomes internalized as self-mastery.

Wright shows Cross's capacity for conscience and love by depicting his relationship to Eva, who eventually kills herself at the news that Cross has murdered her husband, Communist Gil Blount. Good, kind, and gentle nearly beyond plausibility, her resemblance to the Eva of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* establishes her as a martyr to the amoral struggles for power at play in a world of Blounts, Herndons, and Damons. She inhabits the myth-world, they inhabit the underlying world in which life is "denuded" of meaning, and in the end Eva seems to be hung up on Cross in more ways than one. A thematic thread that is sustained throughout the novel revolves around the subject of promises. The noble figure who possesses a conscience, the "Sovereign Individual," gives his word, says Nietzsche, because he is strong enough to keep it:

> The proud awareness of the extraordinary privilege of *responsibility*, the consciousness of this rare freedom, the power over oneself and over fate, has in his case penetrated to the profoundest depths and become instinct, the dominating instinct. What will he call this dominating instinct,

> supposing he feels the need to give it a name? The answer is beyond doubt: this sovereign man calls it his *conscience*. (60)

Cross's instinct to responsibility does not appear to be particularly strong until after Eva's death, when he at last determines to make and fulfill his promise to one of the people he has earlier deceived, Hattie. Throughout much of the novel, in fact, he is less like a Sovereign Individual than like the "feeble windbags" who, according to Nietzsche, have no right to make promises but do so anyway. (Sovereign Individuals disgusted by these windbags may kick them with Nietzsche's approval.) Whereas Bigger's killing of a white woman brings a release of tension described in vaguely sexual terms, Cross's "killing" of Eva brings only remorse; Wright, in fact, depicts no trace of sexual desire in Cross's feelings for her. Killing Mary validates Bigger in his own mind, but Eva's death stirs a desire for redemption in Cross. Like Nietzsche, Wright employs Christian patterns and symbolism in his quarrel with Christian values, with no irony apparently intended; which brings up the question of whether Wright, though he questioned religious values and eventually rejected Marxism, retained a vision that was essentially eschatological. Or did he, along with Sartre and Camus, abandon belief that meaning and completeness were to be occasioned by a climactic end?

In *The Outsider*, the latter seems to be the case. Like Camus, Wright ultimately seeks to fashion values around shared experience and commitment while defining life in terms of flux, as expressed in the pronouncement, "Man is a promise that he must never break" (585). Like Nietzsche, Wright (in this novel) envisions the pursuing of ideals, and not the ideals in themselves, as meaningful. The internalizing of dangerous impulses—Wright's Nietzschean view of history—is one such unachievable ideal. In murdering Joe,

Cross reacts impulsively to fear. His murder of Herndon and Blount is, as he says, deliberate but unplanned. But his murder of Hilton is contemplated; there are ideas behind the act. Hilton's undoing comes about when he reveals his indifference to the suffering of others, to which Cross responds: "You might argue that you could snatch out a life, blot out a consciousness and get away with it because you're strong and free enough to do it; but why turn a consciousness into a flame of suffering and let it lie, squirming . . . ? No!" (403). Exhibiting the negation of negation described by Camus as the only weapon of people who lack beliefs with which to counter evil, Cross tries to make something out of nothing and derive meaning from the prevention of meaningless suffering. As Camus writes, "In a world without values, in that desert of the heart in which we lived, what did our revolt really signify? It made of us men who said *NO*. But we were at the same time men who said *Yes*. We said *No* to this world, to its essential absurdity, to the abstractions that threatened us, to the civilization of death that was being prepared for us" (27). Sartre had envisioned negation in similar terms in an article that appeared in the *Atlantic Monthly* in December 1944. During the Occupation of France, he writes, "the choice that each one made of himself was authentic" because it was made with death as a possible consequence: "And I do not speak here of the elite who were the true Resisters, but of all Frenchman who, at every hour of the day or night, during four years, have said NO" (39).

Cross answers negation with negation to prevent suffering, but he does not prevent Hilton's suffering. In fact, he drags it out. The principle to which he adheres does not fully override his impulse to be cruel. On the one hand, he assassinates a presumably powerful political leader who has (as Cross says of fascists) "no ideological

justification" for his demonstrated willingness to dispense with human lives, an act for which any system-defying, wartime Resistance fighter might have been deemed heroic. On the other hand, he can only negate suffering by inflicting suffering. The good he tries to effect is complicit with evil. Like Cross himself, the act cannot be assigned reassuringly to one sphere or the other. At the Second American Writers Conference—a 1937 event organized by the Communist Party and attended by Wright—Ernest Hemingway, back from his activities as a war correspondent in Spain, had inveighed against fascism by telling an audience, "There is only one way to quell a bully, and that is to thrash him" (qtd. in Rowley: 126). In *The Outsider*, Wright's protagonist enacts this morally ambiguous principle. The disquieting ambiguity and uncertainness of his actions suggest an answer to the question, What is Cross? He is nothing but a bundle of impulses with the freedom to make of himself what he chooses, unique only in his awareness of this freedom and his determination (for good, bad, or otherwise) to exercise it. A similarly existentialist answer is thus suggested to the larger question, What does it mean to be human? It means nothing but what people choose for it to mean. The existentialists, the humanists, and the existential humanists Wright encountered in France generally shared his belief that the meaning of being human was to be found in concrete experience, not in a rationalist theory of history that did not account for human indeterminacy and unpredictability. To trust in abstract principles was dangerous.

Wright was attracted to the ideas of Nietzsche not because he wished to glorify irrationality and denounce the leveling effects of egalitarian political systems founded in reason, but because he was convinced by Nietzsche's argument that religious values had arisen in opposition to primal human instincts. Conventional morality demanded that

natural impulses be held in submission. But in a secular age, moral rules had lost their foundation in reality. Those who recognized their contingent nature might continue to uphold them anyway. Or they might discard them entirely. They might choose to pursue personal power for its own sake, simply for the irrational gratification of exercising it. Wright considered Western morality to be unstable without a religious foundation. Continuing to accept it without accepting the convictions on which it was formed blinded people to reality and prevented them from recognizing evil, even when it was right in front of them. To Hegel's assertion that a rational system might be sustained with the participation of rational and conscientious members, Nietzsche had submitted that neither rationality nor conscience could be depended upon. These qualities were not a given; they were a gradually constructed aberration of human tendencies. On this point, Wright and Nietzsche were in agreement.

Chapter Four

"Ecstasy and Violence": Norman Mailer's Philosophy of Confrontation

In her tribute to Jean-Paul Sartre after his death in 1980, *Adieux*, Simone de Beauvoir documents several conversations she had with him in 1974. In one of them, he says of individual freedom, "I thought that the free man was the one who took sides for man as he is against those who wish to replace him by an image they have made, either the image of fascist man or even that of socialist man. As I saw it, the free man set himself against these systematic representations" (353). Sartre's autobiography, *The Words*, provides insight into how this view grew out of his childhood experience. At a certain point in his early life, he revolted against what he calls the "play-acting" of his family. Above all, he identified this tendency with his grandfather, Charles Schweitzer, who showered him with attention early in his life. Schweitzer, Sartre says, was a man who "slightly overdid the sublime":

> This handsome man with the flowing beard who was always waiting for the next opportunity to show off, as the alcoholic is always waiting for the next drink, was the victim of two recently discovered techniques: the art of photography and the art of being a grandfather.[13] He had the good and bad fortune to be photogenic. The house was filled with photos of him. Since snapshots were not practiced, he had acquired a taste for poses and *tableaux vivants*. Everything was a pretext for him to suspend his

[13] Sartre refers to Victor Hugo's *The Art of Being a Grandfather* to mock Schweitzer's thinking, which he saw as being shaped by Romanticism : "He was a man of the nineteenth century who took himself for Victor Hugo, as did so many others, including Victor Hugo himself" (*The Words* 24).

> gestures, to strike an attitude, to turn to stone. He doted upon those brief moments of eternity in which he became his own statue. (24)

An only child with few playmates, Sartre was an apt pretender himself. Movies fascinated him. "Though impervious to the sacred," he writes, "I loved magic" (123). Sometimes, while his mother played the piano in a room lit by candles, he would mutely enact the adventures of a swashbuckler like those he had seen represented in silent films. He also played the villain, and the rest of the characters. After stabbing his adversary with his sword, he would turn around and collapse on the floor. Eventually, though, he came to disdain the sort of self-conscious posturing practiced by his grandfather. The writing of the adult Sartre is pervaded by this attitude. In the work of American writers like Hemingway he found characters whose actions seemed to embody the opposite quality, unreflecting immediacy. As his description of *Petit Crâne* suggests, Sartre placed great value on this type of action. In his mind, it was almost magical.

Although his ideas are different in many ways from Sartre's, Norman Mailer shares this enthusiasm for engrossing action, and for him the influence of Hemingway is particularly critical. Mailer, too, attributes magical qualities to this type of experience, envisioning it as the path to transcendence. Like Sartre, he tends to associate action of this sort with an earlier, pre-World War II America. But by the time he undertook his own writing career, America had undergone dramatic changes. In Mailer's opinion, postwar America was no longer characterized by action. It had become a nation plagued by stasis. In his essay on John F. Kennedy, "Superman Comes to the Supermarket," Mailer says that since the First World War American history has proceeded along "two rivers." The routine, everyday history of politics has flowed above ground, while

America's collective dream life, a "concentration of ecstasy and violence," has flowed underground (*Presidential Papers* 38). Mailer associates the twentieth century with a general loss of personality, a "fall from individual man to mass man." The emergence of mass man is particularly evident in the United States, he says, where heroism was once the hallmark of historical tradition. But genuine American heroes faded away with the Western frontier, and ersatz celebrity replicas sprang up in their place, sustained by the unarticulated dream life underground. During World War II, the submerged river resurfaced for a time, and the course of events again changed. Dream and reality reconvened. Human time and historical time converged:

> the speed with which one's own events occurred seemed as rapid as the history of the battlefields, and for the mass of people in America a forced march into a new jungle of emotion was the result. The surprises, the failures, and the dangers of that life must have terrified some nerve of awareness in the power and the mass, for, as if stricken by the orgiastic vistas the myth had carried up from underground, the retreat to a more conservative existence was disorderly, the fear of communism spread like an irrational hail of boils. To anyone who could see, the excessive hysteria of the Red wave was no preparation to face an enemy, but rather a terror of the national self: free-loving, lust-looting, atheistic, implacable—absurdity beyond absurdity to label communism so, for the moral products of Stalinism had been Victorian sex and a ponderous machine of material theology. (40)

The "orgiastic vistas" that Mailer sees churning beneath the ground of ordinary American life are the shaping force in his work. In much of his thinking—here, for example—they figure as the complement, the ineradicable shadow, of anticommunism. Mailer is forever taken up with the idea of coaxing this source back to the surface.

The fantasy is regularly enacted in his writing. Disturbing impulses assume a form and find expression, overthrowing the forces that normally suppress them. The transition from formlessness to form is intriguing to Mailer, Richard Poirier wrote in the 1970s, because "Mailer's genius is excited by those very elements in him and in the nation which prevent the solidification of either one" (155). But it is not simply the form-suppressing elements in themselves that excite him; it is the act in which they engage. Form, Mailer once observed in a mock interview with himself, is a record of war—"whatever is alive, or intent, or obsessed, must wage an active war: it creates the possibility for form in its environment by its every attempt to shape the environment. Wherever the environment resists, the result is a form. When the soul is mighty and the environment resists mightily, the form is exceptional or extraordinary." In driftwood, for example, one can see which parts of the wood have resisted decay and which have not. Driftwood is therefore an exemplary form which manifests "the record of a siege" (*Cannibals and Christians* 369-71).

Essential to Mailer's thinking is a perceived battle between technology and sexuality, loosely speaking. The development of this perspective, and the tendency to characterize it as an existential conflict, originated in 1947, when Mailer went to Paris with his first wife, Bea, to study at the Sorbonne on the G.I. Bill. Bea was one of the few Americans who finished the course, but Mailer soon stopped attending and took to

spending his time at the Café des Deux Magots, where American students gathered and kept their eyes peeled for Sartre and Beauvoir, who were known to patronize the nearby Café de Flore. While in Paris, Mailer met Jean Malaquais, a Frenchman originally from Poland, who impressed him with his anti-Stalinist, revolutionary Socialism. As a result of many long, involved discussions with Malaquais, Mailer's former, relatively apolitical views were transformed. (Mills 94-97). The Frenchman's Trotskyite influence can be seen in Mailer's fascination with perpetual conflict which compels action (construed in sexual terms), in opposition to the mechanization of life that he associates with industrialization and "liberal totalitarianism." Orgasm is the culmination of a battle between opposites whose difference is not total. Mailer sees technology as a mollifying force which attempts to induce an unnatural order on human life, draining it of a vitality which derives from disorder and conflict. Despite the political difference manifested in the Cold War, he sees this as an affliction that the East and West share. As Poirier writes, the view reflects his obsession with dialectical difference. "Locating in opponents the similarities that secretly attract them to one another and in allies the differences that guarantee the salt of their relationship, is one of Mailer's tactics for achieving some measure of always active coherence in his writing—and it is a tactic, too, for proposing a possible political life for the Republic" (98). This relation can be found in Mailer's view of French existentialism as well, a philosophy that he sees as distinctly different from, yet still in alliance with, his own thought. His dialectical vision of action and revolution is presented in "The White Negro." The essay elicited skepticism from Malaquais, as evidenced in the response from him that Mailer includes in *Advertisements for Myself.*

He saw Mailer as attributing a falsely messianic significance to the Negro, and he described the notion of "Hip" as a reformulation of "*le prolétariat*" (359).

The notion of the strong spirit who confronts an unyielding environment and produces an extraordinary form—a motif that Mailer's social-political theory shares with his conception of art—is also to be found in Nietzsche's conception of the *Übermensch.* And Mailer's view of resistance as a creative force is reminiscent of the ideas Camus proposes in *The Myth of Sisyphus* and elaborates in *The Rebel.* But with Mailer it is slightly inaccurate to speak in terms of neatly transmitted philosophical influences, particularly because the model for his existentialist self-fashioning is not solely literary. Having himself participated in the war that secured international prominence for existential philosophy by compelling Sartre and Camus to apply their theories about action to an actual, historical crisis, he conceived his philosophical vision on the principles of resistance. Asked about influences in a 1961 interview with *The Paris Review*, Mailer said that existentialism had initially come to him as an experience, brought on from smoking marijuana, which made him acutely aware of nothingness. At such a moment, he says,

> one becomes aware of the war between each of us, how the nothingness in each of us seeks to attack the being of others, how our being in turn is attacked by the nothingness of others. I'm not speaking now of the active conflict between one being and another. That still belongs to drama. But the war between being and nothingness is the underlying illness of the twentieth century. Boredom slays more of existence than war. (*Cannibals and Christians* 214)

This account of the conflict that arises between separate consciousnesses closely parallels Sartre's description of the encounter with the "other" in *Being and Nothingness*. Mailer says in this interview that since having these marijuana-induced insights, he has read some of the writings of Heidegger and Sartre, and that the two of them have only begun to address existentialism's full implications. The distinction he draws here between outward human conflict and internal struggle—between phenomenal human existence and consciousness—is similar to his "two rivers" metaphor for history. In Mailer, as in Wright, psychological struggles are implicit in outward actions and conflicts; but in the early works of Sartre, it is the internal, not the external struggle which is onstage. American writers, Sartre says in "American Novelists in French Eyes," created techniques which the French converted to philosophy. Sartre admired those authors' depictions of action because they *suggested* a state of mind to him. But in Wright and Mailer, the action and the state of mind are not so easily severed. In this, they are closer to Camus in *The Myth of Sisyphus* and, in turn, to Nietzsche, who famously characterized the tendency to separate a subject from its actions as an unfortunate development of moralistic modern thought. Implicitly denouncing Descartes for this error, Nietzsche writes:

> For just as the popular mind separates the lightning from its flash and takes the latter for an *action*, for the operation of a subject called lightning, so popular morality also separates strength from expressions of strength, as if there were a neutral substratum behind the strong man, which was *free* to express strength or not to do so. But there is no such substratum;

> there is no *being* behind doing, effecting, becoming; "the doer" is merely a fiction added to the deed—the deed is everything. (*Genealogy* 45)

But to Sartre, if not to Nietzsche, psychology and action were discrete modes of experience. It was only after France was forced into a war—a real one—that Sartre began to cast the philosophical struggle examined in *Being and Nothingness* in light of its social and dramatic implications. As his description of *Petit Crâne* indicates, Sartre could not quite apprehend feeling and action as integrated, because his essential cast of mind was compulsively analytical, a condition that once led Beauvoir to remark that he was "not psychological." This observation, says Sartre, "doesn't so much mean I don't have the same psychological reactions as other people, but rather that, in me, they at once appear like dried plants in a herbarium" (*War Diaries* 272). Mailer and Wright, on the other hand, frequently represent psychology and action concurrently, in terms that evoke both sexuality and violence. When he describes the psychopathic tendencies of the hipster in "The White Negro," Mailer suggests that the moment of absolute congruence between consciousness and action, "good orgasm," is the ideal finale to every existential situation. "At bottom," he writes, "the drama of the psychopath is that he seeks love. Not love as the search for a mate, but love as the search for an orgasm more apocalyptic than the one which preceded it. Orgasm is his therapy—he knows at the seed of his being that good orgasm opens his possibilities and bad orgasm imprisons him" (321).

The hipster participates in a drama: He is perpetually seeking an orgasm more world-shattering than the last. In Mailer's dialectical scheme of things, every force is inherently self-contradictory. The hipster's pursuit of "love," therefore, is simultaneously a pursuit of war. They are the same pursuit, the hipster's action, his dramatic conflict.

The forces that motivate him, his internal conflict, are America's conflicts. He embodies, as Mailer says, "the extreme contradictions of the society which formed his character" (321). In this sense, he is a bit like Mailer himself, whose own existential project is revealed in the first sentences of *Advertisements for Myself*:

> *Like many another vain, empty, and bullying body of our time, I have been running for President these last ten years in the privacy of my mind, and it occurs to me that I am less close now than when I began. Defeat has left my nature divided, my sense of timing is eccentric, and I contain within myself the bitter exhaustions of an old man, and the cocky arguments of a bright boy. So I am everything but my proper age of thirty-six, and anger has brought me to the edge of the brutal. In sitting down to write a sermon for this collection, I find arrogance in much of my mood. It cannot be helped. The sour truth is that I am imprisoned with a perception which will settle for nothing less than making a revolution in the consciousness of our time.* (15)

Mailer has a contradiction within himself: He is both an old man and a boy. Like the hipster he describes in "The White Negro," he is a living, warring opposition, existing at "the edge of the brutal," which is also the edge of the sexual, and he feels compelled to make a revolution in the consciousness of his time. Since *Advertisements for Myself* is Mailer's existentialist manifesto, this state of dialectical contradiction is the natural place for him to begin.

When Sartre and Camus responded to the Hegelian historical model, they arrived at positions that reflected their atheistic views: There was no absolute, because there was

no God. Contradictions within history did not advance toward freedom and reveal a universal mind, as Hegel had suggested. Historical change was occasioned by many minds making choices and thereby collectively effecting history. Hegel's dialectic manifested neither reason nor historical necessity. It was really a psychological phenomenon, and the absolute was simply a wish-fulfilling human fantasy wherein a person transcended the contingency of her existence in the world. The desire to reconcile the interior self with the exterior environment could never be entirely fulfilled. There was no closure in this pursuit, only a continually vanishing horizon of possibilities.[14]

Unlike Sartre and Camus, though, Mailer is not an atheist. As Mailer imagines the hipster's drama, each pursuit of "an orgasm more apocalyptic than the one which preceded it" is a cycle. Good orgasm is a beginning, a vital force which creates possibilities, and bad orgasm is a deathly force which "imprisons." The pursuit of good orgasm involves one in a series of gains and setbacks. As Mailer says in an interview in *Advertisements for Myself*, "Every moment of one's existence one is growing into more or retreating into less" (385). In Mailer's dialectical view, unity is achieved when, in a moment of simultaneous completion and dissolution, the whole is overtaken by the contradiction within itself. But Mailer's project is existential; unlike Hegel, he does not seek to account for historical time on a grand scale. His concern is with human time. The link between human time and universal time is sex. Mailer objects to contraception, which he sees as a technological infringement on the natural course of time and the

[14] The dispute between Sartre and Camus after the publication of *The Rebel*, which associates the dialectic with nihilism and terror, reveals the extent to which their opinions on this question ultimately differed. Sartre believed that Camus was abdicating historical responsibility in favor of an abstract moralism. For a fuller discussion of the subject, see Debarati Sanyal, "Broken Engagements."

perpetuation of life in the grand scheme of things. Sex is the creation of form. It is a necessary war.

The conversations with Sartre that Beauvoir documents in *Adieux* suggest that his view of sex was considerably different from Mailer's. "I think that when I was a child," he says, "I very early conceived of my body as a center of action, neglecting the aspects of sensation and passivity." The sexual act holds no great thrill for him. "I preferred being in contact with the whole body," he says, "caressing the body—being busy with my hands and legs, touching the other—to the act of love strictly so called" (314). With some urging by Beauvoir to discuss the topic of surrendering to the body, Sartre reveals: "Oh yes! Even when I was very young I loathed letting go" (315). The conversation then turns to the subject of contingency:

> DE BEAUVOIR: A contingency from which one could free oneself only by activity.
>
> SARTRE: And in the end for me activity was the fact of being human. A man or a woman is an active being. Man therefore always tends toward the future, whereas surrender, abandon, letting go is present, or tends toward the past. And because of this contradiction I preferred activity, that is, the future, to the past. (316)

Sartre offers little praise for sensations that evoke his sense of contingency. "Just a little pleasure at the end," he says of sexual intercourse, "but pretty feeble." This indifference appears vastly different from Mailer's conviction that good orgasm is the avenue to God which unleashes human potential and possibility. And yet, the two arrive at their seemingly disparate perspectives through a similar inclination to associate sex with

danger. The things that Sartre eschews because they evoke contingency are the very things that attract Mailer (unpredictable situations, he says, provide him with writing material). In the end, Sartre's sense that action allows one to break away from the "slime" of contingency is not too different from Mailer's belief that conflict creates form out of formlessness. To Mailer, existential situations occur when one immerses oneself in the chaos of formlessness, not knowing whether the confrontation will generate form and open a window to the future ("good orgasm") or induce a loss within oneself which casts a shadow on the future ("bad orgasm"). As Sartre sees it, existential action is what one undertakes to *avoid* this formlessness. Confronted with chaos, Mailer says fight, but Sartre favors flight.

Underlying this difference are two other, interrelated subjects on which Sartre and Mailer differ: nature and God. Mailer is a naturalist in the sense that Nietzsche is a naturalist: He defines human nature in terms of instincts and sees history as an evolution of personality achieved by an ongoing war between human impulses and the environment in and against which they express themselves. In his 1961 interview with *The Paris Review*, Mailer describes the war that creates form in distinctly Nietzschean terms:

> Sometimes I feel as if there's a vast guerilla war going on for the mind of man, communist against communist, capitalist against capitalist, artist against artist. And the stakes are huge. Will we spoil the best secrets of life or will we help to free a new kind of man? It's intoxicating to think of that. There's something rich waiting if one of us is brave enough and good enough to get there. (*CC* 221)

The "mind of man" Mailer conceives of can only find its expression through action that is motivated, ultimately, by biological impulses. When inanimate objects and technology—"plastic"— substitute for human action, the war for the mind of man is being lost and "the best secrets of life" are being squandered. Things, such as contraception, that impede or replicate human functions are "plastic." When Mailer designed the city of Lego blocks that appeared on the cover of *Cannibals and Christians*, he enlisted his brother-in-law and another friend to carry out the construction, refusing to do it himself because, as he reportedly said, the plastic blocks made "an obscene noise when clicked together" (*Manso* 418).

The distinction between synthetic and natural objects was a source of unease for Sartre as well, but, once again, his anxiety takes the opposite form from Mailer's. To Sartre, nature—like many of the things he found unsettling—suggests contingency. Certain foods, such as crustaceans and shellfish, disgust him, and he avoids them. Crustaceans, he says, are disturbingly like insects:

> Insects live in air and not in water, but they have that same degree of life and doubtful consciousness that I find so irksome, and above all, in our everyday existence, they have a look of being entirely absent—almost entirely absent—from our world, which sets them totally apart. When I eat a crustacean I am eating something that belongs to another world. That white flesh is not made for us; it is stolen from another universe. (*Adieux* 332)

Sartre also avoids eating fruit. If he wants something sweet, he opts for a snack constructed by human hands. With a cake or a tart, he says, "the appearance, the putting

together and even the taste have been thought out by man and made on purpose. Whereas the taste of fruit is a matter of chance" (333). Beneath their differing attitudes regarding the forms and forces of nature, there lies a further difference between Mailer and Sartre in their views of the supernatural world. In "The White Negro," Mailer himself observes the distinction between his thinking and Sartre's, and describes it as a matter of faith:

> To be an existentialist (Sartre admittedly to the contrary) one must be religious, one must have one's sense of the "purpose"—whatever the purpose may be—but a life that is directed by one's faith in the necessity of action is a life committed to the notion that the substratum of existence is the search, the end meaningful but mysterious; it is impossible to live such a life unless one's emotions provide their profound conviction. Only the French, alienated beyond alienation from their unconscious could welcome an existential philosophy without ever feeling it at all. (341)

Mailer, the believer, exalts the "secrets of life," but Sartre, the atheist, is unsettled by the inexplicable, the things "stolen from another universe." Mailer's observations correspond to Sartre's view of himself as he records it in his diary when he describes *Petit Crâne*: "How I should have liked to boil with great, obscure rages; faint from great, motiveless outpourings of tenderness!" His tendency to subject his every feeling to intellectual scrutiny leads him to conclude that something "inexpressible" is missing in him. "It was nothing at all," he writes, "except a certain way of dwelling in oneself: of being an integral part of oneself" (*War Diaries* 272). Mailer construes action as driven by primal, sexual forces and constituting a "religious" search for ultimate meaning. As

Louis Menand writes, Mailer represented sex as existential conflict by adopting Wilhelm Reich's idea that unrestrained sexual instinct threatens the modern state (*American Studies* 148). It is unlikely that this idea would have been recognizably "existential" to Sartre, who is skeptical of attempts to attribute human behavior to unconscious motives. The "way of dwelling in oneself" that Sartre sees himself lacking happens to be an aspect of experience with which Mailer is obsessed. He recognized that it was absent from Sartre's philosophy and decided to put it in.

The achievement of self-identity and unity through action, which Sartre associates with Americans, is roughly similar to the religious feeling described as "oceanic" by Freud (who seems to have identified with it even less than Sartre). As Mailer conceives of the experience, it is roughly the psychological equivalent of space travel—a new frontier for America's modern condition of arrested movement. In a critique of Mailer, Gore Vidal has observed a faith among certain contemporary writers in "one central idea."

> One of the sad results of the collapse of the Judeo-Christian ethical and religious systems has been the displacement of those who are absolutists by temperament and would in earlier times have been rabbis, priests, systematic philosophers. As the old Establishment of the West crumbles, the absolutists have turned to literature and the arts, and one by one the arts in the twentieth century have become hieratic. Serious literature has become religion, as Matthew Arnold foresaw. (13)

But the displacement of absolutism onto literature and the arts did not substitute for religion and systematic philosophy *only*; it also provided a counterforce to the other

social realm that had absorbed this absolutism—the political arena. Like Nietzsche, Mailer responds to the departure of God from everyday life; but he also, like Nietzsche, revolts against the prevailing moral climate of his time in essentially the same mode and language his antagonists use.[15] The religious quality of his ideas is formed in reaction to politics which exhibited an equally fervent religiosity. Mailer enacts his own personal war against the doctrine of the F.B.I., an institution he likens to an organized religion, a "church of the mediocre." Joining an organized religion, Mailer says, is a way of fleeing from insanity (*Presidential Papers* 128-29). As a counter-doctrine, he proposes a disorganized religion of pathology and a "Mecca" to be achieved through "apocalyptic orgasm" (*Advertisements* 323). Mailer positions himself as a contradiction, an internal counterforce, within the body of Cold War America in the hopes of compelling the underground dream life to resurface like a geyser and generate true heroism.

In *The Presidential Papers* Mailer envisions Kennedy as a possible hero. Kennedy's potential lies in his formlessness. He has a face, but "he embodies nothing." His basic motives are as yet undefined. He is "neither religious nor irreligious, he is not provocative nor predictably dull, he is not entertaining, he is always potentially of interest." Formlessness awaiting form, existence awaiting essence, Kennedy might yet develop into an existential hero. He is, after all, a war hero, and he has also undergone high-risk back surgery, a decision which had the potential to either "kill him or restore him to power" (44). Kennedy has confronted death. But like driftwood he requires a

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[15] For a discussion of Beat writers who attempt to oppose the standards of Cold War normalcy, as represented by Hoover, by assuming identities construed as alien, see Jonathan Paul Eburne, "Trafficking in the Void: Burroughs, Kerouac, and the Consumption of Otherness." Eburne argues that "[b]y casting the 'self' –as the privileged signifier of narrative and cultural identity—into serious contention, [*Naked Lunch* and *The Subterraneans*] attempt to drain identity of its fixity as a locus of coercive standards," a strategy which ultimately fails (54-55).

force against which to form himself. This force is the F.B.I. As Mailer describes it, the F.B.I. has an essence and represents an idea but possesses no historical "face," because it is led by a director without a personality. "And because it is faceless, it is insidious, plague-like, an evil force" (6). It is the force that could make a hero of Kennedy, who might demonstrate his existential resolve by finding someone with a "salient personality" to replace J. Edgar Hoover.

To conceive of reality in existential terms, Mailer says, one should grasp that "the disease of the state is intensified when large historic ideas come to power without men to personify them or dramatize their qualities" (5). To emphasize the point that the F.B.I. under Hoover represented everything that was ailing America, Mailer characterizes it as a plague. Wielding political influence but possessing no historical face, the F.B.I. is to be classified among those diseases which are called "slack": the "featureless, symptomless diseases like virus and colds and the ubiquitous cancer" (7). The opposite type is "acute" diseases, which "are like political forces personified by heroes":

> Politics is like a body of organs. When the body is sick, it is usually because one or another organ has become too weak or too powerful in its function. If the disproportion is acute, a war goes on in the body, an inflammatory sickness, a fever, a crisis. The war decided, the organ subsides, different in size, stronger or weaker, it returns to its part of the body's function. Acute disease is cure. It is the war which initiates a restoration of balance. (7)

Having left behind his urge to run for president himself, Mailer assumes the role of presidential advisor, or (perhaps more accurately) presidential cleric. Kennedy will be

the existential hero, the "face" that vanquishes J. Edgar Hoover. Mailer is content to supply the heroic doctrine, the acute disease that will liberate the American body from the slack "disease of the state."

To alter America's form and bring about a revolution of its consciousness by wrestling with the F.B.I., Mailer, clearly the underdog, must adapt to the established methods of the state. His existentialist jargon, consequently, is often reminiscent of the anticommunist catchphrases of the day—the language of Hoover himself. World War II and the concentration camps, Mailer writes in "The White Negro," "presented a mirror to the human condition." One could not confront the great dilemmas of the time without first assuming some responsibility for them, because "no matter how crippled and perverted an image of man was the society he had created, it was nonetheless his creation (at least his collective creation from the past) and if society was so murderous, then who could ignore the most hideous of questions about his own nature?" (312). Mailer assesses the unpleasant qualities of his time by first seeking their reflection within himself and other Americans. In "The White Negro" he suggests that the thinking that motivates American policy is mirrored in the psychopath, who "may indeed be the perverted and dangerous front-runner of a new kind of personality which could become the central expression of human nature before the twentieth century is over" (318). When a mirror is held up to the policies of the state, the criminal rebellion of the existential hipster is reflected. The Cold War begets the criminal.

In the moral philosophy of J. Edgar Hoover, the development of forms proceeded in the opposite direction. Hoover's war against crime began before his war against communism, and his conception of the communist threat consequently evolved out of his

portrayal of the criminal. Skillful at synthesizing seemingly disparate subjects, Hoover liked to create the impression of a logical connection between incidentally related matters. In an early, 1938 speech before the Association of Life Insurance Presidents, for example, he introduces recent advances in crime-solving, such as fingerprinting and nationwide crime statistics, by relating these developments to the insurance business. Insurance professionals no doubt understand the significance of facts and figures, says Hoover, so it might surprise the audience to learn that crime statistics "are still in a rather lamentable state" ("Combatting Lawlessness" 269). Murder is an obvious practical concern for businesses that fund life insurance policies, and to reinforce the connection Hoover describes the tendency to kill as a disease "as malignant as any cancer" and "as distinct a subject of health as tuberculosis" (270). He also notes that imprisonment encourages the spread of disease and can cause prisoners who are mentally unstable to share quarters with those who are not. Prisoners guilty of sex crimes may be placed in an environment where they can "spread their degeneracy to others and thus increase their menace." This degeneracy itself, furthermore, is traceable to "mental or physical" disease and is associated with a variety of other criminal acts. Like many deadly forces which are indiscernible to the naked eye, crime is often difficult to detect, Hoover tells his audience: "By proper law enforcement, the public may survive; without it, you may be sure that you will pay more insurance and indemnities" (270). From here, the oration turns to juvenile delinquency, one of Hoover's special concerns. Youths who commit crimes have not learned their disrespect for the law in public institutions, he says.

> They learned it from parents who took pride in the exploits of rats like Dillinger or "Pretty Boy" Floyd, and who exulted in the freeing of a

> murderer because this murderer happened to have an attorney more shrewd than the state prosecutor. They gained their disrespect from parents who in many instances were themselves addicted to petty or greater violations of the law (271).

There is a war on against lawlessness, Hoover concludes, "which is one of America's most dangerous, most subversive and most destructive diseases. May we fight it to the absolute limit!" (272).

Inserting the familiar phenomenon of organized crime into the American home, linking it to the threat of juvenile delinquency and street crime, and presenting it as a dangerous and morally debasing addiction or plague proliferating at an alarming speed (the general pattern of his anti-crime speeches), this talk is a precursor to Hoover's postwar addresses on communism. The figures that embody the crime threat here will eventually embody the communist threat as well. The forms Hoover invents are complementary to those later created by Mailer. Ultimately, the two of them fight in the same war, in which the contested territory is the collective American consciousness. Hoover's "cancer" is the threat of crime and communism. Mailer's "cancer" is the "stench of fear" and "collective failure of nerve" that he sees resulting from the war against communism (312). To conquer the threat of death that plagues the U.S., says Mailer, good Americans should confront the danger head-on by encouraging the psychopath within, however criminal it may turn out to be (313). In Hoover's opinion, however, the duty of Americans is to suppress internal threats, including the mentally ill, whom he describes as disproportionately disposed to criminal acts and proposes

quarantining. In a characteristic conflation of the criminal and communist perils, he tells a mechanics' organization, in 1959:

> Our nation is faced today with a dual menace—the communist conspiracy attacking from within and from abroad, and a criminal conspiracy made up of the lowest dregs of the lawless who are attacking our statutory and constitutional safeguards. Only by re-evaluating and assuming the full obligations of citizenship can we hope to achieve the maximum protection for our Nation from these threats which crime and communism represent. ("Citizenship" 656)

Hoover's call to reevaluate citizenship implicitly points not to the importance of "constitutional safeguards," but to their insufficiency. If America was to be protected from evil, it was necessary to appeal to a higher power. Whereas the God Mailer praises is "not the God of the churches but the unachievable whisper of mystery within the sex" ("White Negro" 324-25), God to Hoover is not only housed in an institutional edifice, His religion is hard to distinguish from the doctrine of the federal government. Going to great lengths in general to blur the distinction between church and state, Hoover says in a 1957 address delivered at the Freedoms Foundations Annual Awards at Valley Forge:

> Without its religious sanction and inspiration, the American ideal would pale and wither to extinction. It is the American precept that men shall live as equals under a government by law, which is embodied in the greatest of all laws:
>
> > ". . .Whatsoever ye would that men should do to you, do ye even so to them: for this is the law and the prophets."

> From those bleak days in Valley Forge, men have fought and died for the American Ideal. We know ideals can be preserved only through eternal vigilance. Our own ideal of freedom and our way of life are under ceaseless attack both from within and without. We fail in achieving our ideal every time an American home fails by producing a juvenile delinquent. ("The American Ideal" 327)

Hoover and Mailer both envision a battle, "within and without," between good and evil. And while the demons Hoover wishes to exorcise are the very heroes Mailer attempts to summon, the two of them incant in the same basic vocabulary. According to Hoover's moral creed, the delinquent is a manifestation of evil. According to Mailer's, he is a prophet. Mailer endorses the language of "Hip," but he is an American of his time and speaks the language of the F.B.I.

If the forms produced by Hoover's war are a bit less nuanced than those of Mailer, they are at least equal in abundance and variety. In broad terms, the world that Hoover's war creates looks something like this: America is a nation "born in the spirit of humble prayer, undaunted courage and self-sacrifice." It is dedicated to the principles of liberty, freedom, and tolerance. But its "vaunted tolerance for all peoples" has proved to be its "Achilles heel" in that it has allowed subversive internal forces to bore from within like "termites." America's enemies gather on "two fronts," the criminal front and the communist front. The "ravaging desperadoes" on the criminal front are a social menace—"leeches" who suck the nation's "life blood." Their "tentacles" have penetrated "every legitimate business and industry in the land. Even the most impregnable forces of government have not been immune."

Increasing the magnitude of the crime problem is the policy of paroling criminals, some of whom have already been convicted of multiple crimes. Parole, says Hoover, is a "smoke-screen" designed to protect "murderers, thieves, thugs, brigands, desperadoes and outlaws." It is held in place by parole boards made up of "sob-sisters" who wish to delude the American people. Parole advocates are illogical "nitwits and porous-brained sentimentalists," squirmy, whimsical, "gushing," "mawkish" "professional regenerators" and "self-styled know-it-alls" who contribute to lawlessness, the virulent disease that "gnaws at the vitals" of the social order.

Things are equally treacherous on the communist front, which is peopled by double-crossing, double-talking "destructionists." Like fascists, communists are godless, materialistic vermin with "ensnaring tentacles" who exploit youth, cause slowdowns in industry, and do not deserve the freedom they are given in America: "They have the fruits without contributing to the labor for its production." The American Communist Party is a "Trojan horse of disloyalty," a "serpent" that has slithered into America's heart, a "small, odorous animal" that has yet to lose its white stripe. Although the Party is opposed by justice, which is "character in action," that justice is impeded by "crooked lawyers, renegades in public office, hide-out owners, money changers, undercover doctors and others who aid crime by assisting its minions." For justice to win out against "Red facism," ordinary patriotic Americans must join with the brave and determined "soldiers at heart" within America's police agencies, they must draw on the invaluable technology of the F.B.I., and they must ignore the protests of the "pseudo-liberals" who consider themselves internationalists and view patriotism as decadent. The "charlatan," the "fakir," the "quack," the "bleeding heart," and the "weak-kneed Casper Milquetoast"

are hardly more reliable than the "sympathizers," the "dupes," the "shyster lawyers," and the evil forces of "Old Man Corrupt Politics." "The tragic consequences of inaction and indecision," says Hoover, must be avoided.

Hoover depicts communism as an anonymous, subversive threat which must be unearthed, and his speeches and interviews fulfill this objective by providing numerous forms to animate the ideology of communism, the people and organizations associated with it, the "dupes" who support its progress, and some of the forces which oppose it; but aside from occasional references to "white-coated scientists" and other faintly delineated servants of justice, the F.B.I. itself is nowhere to be found. The universe Hoover envisions is shaped by the logic that allowed the federal government to adopt the tactics of the communists themselves, who were presumed to be operating outside the rules of law and morality—how else to defeat them? Reflecting Mailer's complaint that the Bureau has no face, anonymity in the world Hoover sketches belongs not to the communists but to his own organization. As Mailer's description of it suggests, it is an idea that lacks form. Rather than give it a face, Hoover tends to emphasize the F.B.I.'s capabilities, what it can do. The drama he portrays has a diverse and interesting cast, and it effectively exploits the widespread apprehension, incited by the events of World War II, toward ignoring a potentially dangerous, totalitarian threat. But the heroes and villains Hoover depicts are like those produced in Hollywood: They exist as ideas before they assume form. In the combat of an actual war, living bodies are thrown into action in which they must invent themselves or die—war heroes exist physically before they define themselves as soldiers. In the Cold War, however, ideas often preceded their forms. Death in a hot war, according to Mailer, is preferable to the psychic death that plagues the

U.S. during the Cold War, the slow death and stifling of instincts caused by conformity to an idea ("White Negro" 339). "Movement," says Mailer, "is always to be preferred to inaction" (350). Hoover and Mailer both sense death in inaction, whereas power, vitality, and definition, as in Nietzsche, belong to those who are in motion.

Arguments like Mailer's were sometimes made by anticommunists. In a 1952 essay in *Commentary*, Irving Kristol describes communism as "an Idea that has ceased to have any intellectual status but has become incarnate in the Soviet Union and the official Communist parties, to whose infallible directives unflinching devotion is owed." It is the essence of communism to conspiratorially undermine whatever social order it does not control, but the personality of any given communist does not reveal this intent. "No doubt," says Kristol, "there are some present members of the Communist party who would, in a showdown, break free of the Idea and rally to the democratic cause. Unfortunately, we have no way of knowing who they are" ("Civil Liberties" 235). Communism, by this definition, is an idea that holds an action (subversion) within itself; but the Party members who embody the idea are passively indistinct. Under embattled circumstances, they might "break away," act, and generate form, but in practical terms it is the idea they embody, not their actions, which defines them. Their form is concealed. Kristol speaks of communists in the way that Sartre speaks of his feelings when he writes in his diary, "I treat my feelings as ideas: with an idea, one pushes it till it cracks—or finally becomes 'what it really was.'" In each case, anxiety is produced by something too amorphous to be assessed in absolute terms. To make it absolute would be to arrest its freedom and effectively destroy it. Like Mailer, Kristol is suspicious of "large historic ideas" that ascend to power in abstract rather than personified form. Despite their

ideological differences, the two are alike in their desire to absolutize (and eliminate) abstract threats, and in their belief that action is required for form to be disclosed. But they differ on which amorphous "idea" poses the great danger: the subversive ideology or the covert government agency. The question is reminiscent of the conflict in Wright's *The Outsider* between the lawbreaker and the law enforcer. Where is the line drawn between the insider and his counterpart, the outsider? Like Wright, Mailer envisions frustrated and marginalized Americans developing into a potentially new personality type for the twentieth century. He welcomes this development with less ambivalence than Wright does.

Mailer's call for Americans to encourage the psychopath within sets "The White Negro" apart a bit from other postwar expositions on personality types thought to be on the periphery of U.S. culture. In 1948, several years before Mailer wrote "The White Negro," Anatole Broyard's essay "A Portrait of the Hipster" was published in *Partisan Review*. The hipster Broyard describes, like Mailer's hipster, begins his revolt as a juvenile delinquent. Broyard, however, depicts this delinquency (which is inevitably opposed by the law) as a spiritual dead end. It is only "a negative expression" of the hipster's real craving for self-definition and authority which would allow him to transcend his condition of "nowhereness." Moving beyond the stage of delinquency, Broyard's hipster proceeds to "formalize" his resentment by expressing it symbolically. He produces "a philosophy of *somewhereness* called *jive*, from *jibe*: to agree or harmonize" (721). The philosophy is manifested in a "polemical" language, a set of words which simultaneously describe and evaluate: "These evaluations were absolute; the hipster banished all comparatives, qualifiers, and other syntactical uncertainties" (722).

The hipster goes from powerlessness to a sense of authority by drawing on a vocabulary that assesses the world in absolute terms. "The a priori assumption," writes Broyard, "was a short cut to somewhereness" (722). Somewhereness is a different destination from the "meaningful but mysterious" end which concludes the search undertaken by Mailer's hipster. Although "good orgasm" promises absoluteness and transcendence of human time, the path leading to it is one that Broyard's hipster is unwilling to follow. Rather than immersing himself in the chaotic present and indefinitely delaying the revelation of some enigmatic end, he demands to "know the score" immediately. Seeking to dominate the variables of everyday life, not submit to them, he would likely identify with Sartre's aversion to "letting go." The precision of the brim of the hipster's hat, writes Broyard, "was a symbol of his control, his domination of contingency" (723).

The urge to possess something by stabilizing its form is taken up by Camus in a section of *The Rebel* which was excerpted in English in *Partisan Review*, in 1952, under the title "Art and Revolt." Camus discusses the creation of form through resistance in a way that closely resembles Mailer's depiction of form and conflict. Art, says Camus, "realizes, without apparent effort, the reconciliation of the unique and the universal of which Hegel dreamed" (*Rebel* 257). The artist who revolts against reality expresses an affirmation which may be compared to a spontaneous rebellion undertaken by an oppressed people. According to Camus, the mistaken tendency to attribute a novelistic unity to other people's lives can produce envy. In a similar sense, he sees the desire to possess a lover as a yearning to impart an impossible coherence to human life. It is at once a longing to endure and to destroy:

> Those who have not insisted, at least once, on the absolute virginity of human beings and of the world, who have not trembled with longing and impotence at the fact that it is impossible, and then not been destroyed by trying to love halfheartedly, perpetually forced back upon their longing for the absolute, cannot understand the realities of rebellion and its ravening desire for destruction. But the lives of other things always escape us, and we escape them too; they have no firm outline. Life from this point of view is without style. It is only an impulse that endlessly pursues its form without ever finding it. Man, tortured by this, tries in vain to find the form that will impose certain limits between which he can be king. (*Rebel* 262)

This desire for purity, the "longing for the absolute," is analogous to the condition that Broyard calls "somewhereness." The hipster's pursuit of a fixed form assures his eventual disintegration. According to Broyard, the admiration of the "intellectuals *manqués*," to whom the hipster represented "the great instinctual man," ultimately fixed him in the form that effected his demise. Like those whom Camus describes as misled in the presumptions of their envy, these admirers accept the hipster's pretensions to coherent form. They believe him when he purports to be "somewhere."

Insofar as he lives his own history, however, he cannot achieve this condition. The coherence he pursues requires reflection. In Mailer's view, it is the tendency to reflection that plagues the U.S. Conforming to an idea demands that one decide what one is *before* becoming it. Psychopaths, by Mailer's definition, do not have this problem—they simply act and let the ideas fall out as they will. A confrontation with the formless unknown through an appeal to "the psychopath in oneself," Mailer believes, might

compel Americans to *live* their own history impromptu, in all its immediate uncertainty, rather than partaking in a bad-faith attempt to embody an idea. In "The White Negro," he conceives of "Negro" as a representative type in basically the same sense that Sartre and Camus had constructed a representative "American" from what they knew of U.S. culture. What was conceived, on each side of the Atlantic, was a form defined paradoxically by its formlessness. Mailer's existentialism rests upon the same basic principle as the French versions, which maintain that one cannot, in good faith, escape the structurelessness of the present moment. One can only create oneself and create history by confronting chaos as it unfolds. In Hegel, the "free" flux of historical events is distinguished from the concrete conceptualization of history viewed in retrospect. Like the French existentialists, Mailer reduces this dualism to the level of human existence: to the time a person *lives* and the time *in* which he lives. Unlike the French existentialists, though, Mailer does not reject the idea, asserted by Hegel, of an eternal force that precedes and encompasses history, a spirit *through* which history is formed. Hegel asserts that the historical spirit is absolute, both subject and object. "It is the nature of the spirit," he says, "to have itself as its object." Sartre and Camus address this principle at the level of individual existence, as a condition that one strives for but can never achieve; but in Mailer's metaphysics, the condition finds its human expression in good orgasm.

Another way to conceptualize the spirit of history is to envision it as Nietzsche did—as will to power inhering in all human life; one way or another, something must be done with it. This is essentially how Mailer conceives of history in *The Naked and the Dead.* Nigel Leigh has noted that General Cummings and Sergeant Croft were added to the second draft of the novel to represent the postwar fear in America (raised in the 1948

presidential campaign of Henry Wallace) that the U.S. was in danger of becoming a fascist state. Lieutenant Hearn, says Leigh, struggles against Cummings's and Croft's authority through a "resistance to scientific control mechanisms, the alteration of states of mind on a societal scale" (13). Although Hearn's liberal ideology envisions power in negative terms, as repressive, Leigh finds the novel ultimately suggesting an "extreme naturalistic, pro-power interpretation of Hearn's death" (21). Hearn is killed, that is, by natural rather than mechanistic power. This is a difference Mailer would elaborate in his later writings. Faced with the problem of worldviews that envision power negatively (Hearn's liberalism) and therefore inhibit its use against forces that wield it tyrannically (the "fascism" of Cummings and Croft), Mailer portrays power dialectically in terms of repression and liberation, force and counterforce, bad power and good power. Mechanistic power (which is alienated from the senses) is bad; vital power (which inspires boxing matches, popular resistance to F.B.I. policy, and vigorous sexual encounters) is good. The important thing is to keep a human face on power by restricting it to "natural" uses. Cummings's face, as Hearn views it, is an empty form:

> His expression when he smiled was very close to the ruddy, complacent and hard appearance of any number of American senators and businessmen, but the tough good-guy aura never quite remained. There was a certain vacancy in his face, like the vacancy of actors who play American congressmen. There was the appearance and yet it was not there. Hearn always felt as if the smiling face were numb. (81)

In Europe a variety of faces had given form to fascism, but in America it was faceless. America's government policy, as Mailer portrays it, lacks a face to about the same extent

that its culture lacks heroes. In *The Presidential Papers*, Mailer defines a hero as someone who embodies a nation's fantasies:

> Roosevelt was such a hero, and Churchill, and Lenin and De Gaulle; even Hitler, to take the most odious example of this thesis, was a hero, the hero-as-monster, embodying what had become the monstrous fantasy of a people, but the horror upon which the radical mind and liberal temperament foundered was that he gave outlet to the energies of the Germans and so presented the twentieth century with an index of how horrible had become the secret heart of its desire (42).

Hitler's "monstrous" form eventually helped to defeat the idea it was perceived to embody. In Mailer's opinion, it did this by mirroring the "secret heart" of the era. Modern humanity recoiled at the sight of its own ghastly reflection. But fascism in America had no distinguishing traits to stabilize it and reflect the image of the nation. It remained an active threat. It was precisely the same sort of threat that Hoover delineates when he discusses communism in a 1951 interview with the *U.S. News and World Report*:

> **Q** *Are there any distinguishing characteristics—or is there any way you can spot a Communist?*
>
> **A** By their actions.
>
> **Q** *They don't look different?*
>
> **A** No.
>
> . . .

> **Q** *What would you say to the charge often made that we are engaging in the practice of "thought control" with our constant watching of Communists?*
>
> **A** The FBI is concerned not with what Communists think but with what they do—their actions, just as in every other field of its investigative activity. There is no scintilla of evidence to substantiate the charge that the FBI is engaged in "thought control" activities. (35-36)

The FBI's power depended on its invisibility. Like the communism it battled, it was all action and no form. Mailer's desire to give it a "face" was thwarted by Hoover, whom Mailer took to be as vacant a figure as General Cummings. Lieutenant Hearn sees Cummings as a man who assumes many appearances. The General might be, as a newspaper reporter describes him, either "a college professor or a statesman." In Hearn's mind, he is potentially a General, a philosopher, or a variety of other embodiments, each one "a baffling mixture of the genuine and the sham, as if the General instinctively assumed the one that pleased him at the moment, but beyond that was driven on, was handed a personality garment by the unique urges that drove him" (81). According to Mailer's definition, though, Cummings is also an existentialist. The form he takes at any given moment is determined by his urges, not by self-reflection. In itself, this is not something to which Mailer would have objected. The totalitarianism he fears is not rooted simply in American right wing ideology; its extremism draws on the liberal tradition as well. As Menand writes, "Mailer thought that American totalitarianism would emerge under the guise of what he called, in *The Naked and the Dead*, 'conservative liberalism,' meaning that regimentation would be accomplished by

subjecting dissidents to therapy rather than sending them to Siberia or having them shot" (147). Psychoanalysis, as Mailer saw it, imprisoned rather than liberated. In it one was caught up in self-reflection that looked to the past rather than in action that projects one into the future. This historicizing attempt to make sense of the present in terms of the past was just the sort of conformity to existing ideas that already hindered the nation. What American needed was not psychotherapy but some sort of *action* therapy. The possibility of action to free the burdened spirit would become a ubiquitous theme in Mailer's writing.

The F.B.I., the communists, and the fascists in postwar America all seemed to be eschewing fixed ideas and creating their own scripts as they went along. Why, then, should ordinary citizens play the dupes and concede power by forming themselves identifiably around predetermined ideas? As Camus writes in *The Rebel*, "the prison, the nation behind barbed wire, the concentration camps, the empire of free slaves—all illustrate, after their own fashion, the same need for coherence and unity" (270). Autocratic power was achieved by arresting the movement and draining the vital power of people classified according to form. This was the conviction of Camus and Mailer, and Hoover as well. "The world," says Hoover in a 1939 speech, "is never static or stagnant—it is molten and fluid, ever seeking new molds, ever receptive to new ideas." But the swift changes that constantly threaten us also summon us. Our greatest changes invariably present our finest opportunities" ("Fifty Years of Crime" 506). Later the same year, before a gathering of Chiefs of Police, he says, "The way to cure a plague is by quarantine, by ferreting out the carriers of disease and either eradicating them, or placing them where they cannot infect the populace. The same realistic approach to crime

prevention must be made" ("Problems of Law Enforcement" 56). Change is a "fluid" force and precipitates "new molds" and "new ideas" that pose opportunities as well as threats. Hoover's role as F.B.I. chief is to extract the badly molded forms from the mix and either eradicate or quarantine them so that they do not "infect the populace." Taken together, the two speeches highlight Hoover's preoccupation with monitoring the movement of ideas by diagnosing the forms they take. The terms in which he discusses crime also leave little mystery as to why Mailer and others came to associate him with creeping American fascism.

Mailer and Hoover expressed similar but opposed attitudes on other subjects as well, one of which was movies and television. Expressing a view that calls to mind some of the ideas of Camus, Hoover says in a 1960 address before the American Legion's National convention, "Many seriously concerned authorities feel that brutality and violence are becoming accepted as normal behavior by young impressionable minds." Hoover calls on citizens troubled by this development to share their discontent with local TV stations. He also denounces the movie industry for not making their products appropriate for family viewing, telling his audience, "When adultery, abnormality and adulation of criminals compose such a substantial segment of today's film offerings, the society mirrored on the screen is dangerously close to national disaster" ("America—Freedom's Champion" 200). Mailer's perspective is roughly the opposite. For him, it is not excess of realism that invites disaster, but lack of it. To some extent his ambivalence toward TV and movies seems to stem from their mixing art with technology. The faces of actors who play congressmen, Hearn observes in *The Naked and the Dead*, are vacant, like that of the fascist Cummings. Hollywood heroes, as Mailer describes them in *The*

Presidential Papers, are pseudo-heroes. In an age in which spontaneity is a restrained captive to conformity, their action substitutes for real experience. In an essay on *Last Tango in Paris*, Mailer envisions the realism of the movie's sex scenes as an artistic breakthrough. Whereas hardcore porn eventually "puts the brain to sleep," *Last Tango in Paris*, had it included explicit shots of Marlon Brando and Maria Schneider, "would have brought the history of film one huge march closer to the ultimate experience it has promised since its inception (which is to re-embody life)" (*Pieces and Pontifications* 117-18). The pursuit of pleasure by a man and a woman who meet anonymously in an empty apartment for sex, according to Mailer, represents "the existential confrontation of the century." The encounter with danger is psychic: "Two people are going to fuck in a room until they arrive at a transcendent recognition or some death in themselves" (119). The scenario is a little like Sartre's *No Exit*, without the imposed entrapment or the tormenting gaze of Inez, the lesbian. Mailer is particularly captivated by Brando's improvisation in the film. Like the graphically depicted sex that he wishes had been included in a movie he finds dramatically stirring, Brando's spontaneously obscene soliloquies offer the audience a peek at something vital in the actor. He transcends the symbolic heroism of the Hollywood performer and animates the American dream life existentially. Brando has the special insight, says Mailer, "to recognize that the real interest of audiences is not having him portray the tender passages and murderous storms of an unruly passion between a man and a woman, it is rather to be given a glimpse of his kinks" (126).

The importance that Mailer attributes to the sex act results from his conviction that it is the action through which the mortal world dialectically passes over into the

eternal, in essentially the same way that history is embodied by spirit in Hegel. Pornography, which abstracts sex from real life, is therefore bad. Its ultimate effect is more stultifying than stimulating. In "The Man Who Studied Yoga," Sam Slovoda, after watching a pornographic movie with his wife and two other couples, feels not transcendent, not even aroused, just "alive to the limits" of himself and his friends, who satiate their frustrated desire by overindulging on *hors-d'oeuvres* and subjecting the film to intellectual analysis. "As intelligent people," Mailer writes, "they must dominate it" (*Advertisements* 176). Later, after having unremarkable sex while the film projector runs, Sam analyzes his performance and psychoanalyzes himself. Lying awake in bed he considers how he will arrange the novel he intends to write: "What form to give it? It is so complex. Too loose, thinks Sam, too scattered." The narrator, who possesses the omniscience of God, sends a message to Sam: "Destroy time, and chaos may be ordered" (185). But Sam does not listen. He is too busy trying to lull himself to sleep.

Sam has every opportunity to create form, but he is unwilling to delve into the unknown. Like Broyard's hipster, he cannot overcome the desire to dominate it. The deadening effects of psychoanalysis, which cause Sam to obsess over what he is rather than blindly immerse himself in what he will become, are subjected to similar scrutiny by Mailer in "The Time of Her Time." When Sergius O'Shaughnessy is told by an acquaintance named Denise that he is a "phallic narcissist," he accepts the diagnosis with the intuitiveness and candor that characterizes the hipster of "The White Negro": "Well, I was phallic enough, a Village stickman who could muster enough of the divine It on the head of his will to call forth more than one becoming out of the womb of feminine Time, yes a good deal more than one from my fifty new girls a year, and when I failed before

various prisons of frigidity, it mattered little" (*Advertisements* 496). As he is about to have sex with Denise, who has revealed that she is exploring Jewish self-hatred with a "really integrated" Jewish analyst, Sergius complains, "she drained the best half of my desire in conversation because she was being psychoanalyzed." Psychoanalytic jargon, he believes, possesses "the totalitarian force of all vocabularies of mechanism," and Denise wields this vocabulary "with all the smug gusto of a female commissar" (488-89). The boxer Sergius envisions sex between the two of them as a bout between club fighters. The earth-shattering moment for Denise occurs when Sergius calls her a "dirty little Jew" and consequently sets her "loose in the water for the first time in her life" (502). But her loss of control, and form, is also her defeat. When Denise resents him in the morning for knocking her out with a slanderous remark, Sergius claims to have told her what she "needed to hear." In an existential situation, when one relinquishes one's form, anything can happen, and for a moment it does. Good dissolves into evil, God mingles with the devil, and one communes with her most reprehensible (and most wonderful) self. In a thesis that calls to mind Sartre's "Existential Psychoanalysis," the story suggests that action-based therapy has led to greater psychological breakthroughs in one evening than could be achieved in a lifetime of reflective brain-picking in the company of a psychoanalyst. Sergius's therapeutic method is founded in the premise Mailer offers in his critique of *Last Tango in Paris*: "Two people are going to fuck in a room until they arrive at a transcendent recognition or some death in themselves." Sergius wins the battle and creates a form. But Denise delivers the final, form-giving strike that wins the war when she tells him that she and her analyst have assessed him as a homosexual. Having

been made to confront in himself the thing he dreads, he respectfully concludes that she is fit to be his hero.

A comparable scenario is depicted, and a similar effect achieved, in Mailer's 1965 novel *An American Dream*. After murdering his wife and promptly commencing in an energetic sexual bout with her German maid, Rojack calls the maid, Ruta, a Nazi. "*Ja*," says Ruta, and like Denise, she is set loose—"loose and free, very loose and very free, as if this were finally her natural act" (44). Meanwhile, confronted with an existential choice between vaginal and anal destinations wherein to complete his act, Rojack is caught up in a feverish to-and-fro of dueling orifices:

> So that was how I finally made love to her, a minute for one, a minute for the other, a raid on the Devil and a trip back to the Lord, I was like a hound who has broken free of the pack and is going to get that fox himself, I was drunk with my choice, she was becoming mine as no woman ever had, she wanted no more than to be a part of my will, her face, was loose and independent of her now, swimming through expressions, a greedy mate with the taste of power in her eyes and her mouth, that woman's look that the world is theirs, and then I was traveling up again that crucial few centimeters of distance from the end to the beginning, I was again in the place where the child is made, and a little look of woe was on her face, a puckered fearful little nine-year-old afraid of her punishment, wishing to be good. (45)

When one collapses into formlessness during an existential confrontation, she assumes the momentous risk of emerging in the form that she perceives to be (as Ruta says of anal

sex) *verboten*. When she regains control, her form is in some way altered. This Kierkegaardian element of danger underlies Mailer's fascination with good and evil. Ruta and Denise both reach an end point at which their fear spills over into desire and the thing that they ought never to become is suddenly the thing that they revel in being. Rojack has bent Ruta to his will, but he, too, is subjected to the forces unleashed in her capitulation. Who can know what ideas are embodied in the series of expressions that passes over her face? After his bout with Ruta, Rojack feels an urge to kick his dead wife's body, crush her nose with his heel, and "kill her again," desires he feels have been "sent" to him from the German maid.

Mailer's philosophical vision operates on the premise that every human being embodies a bout between God and the devil, the outcome of which is determined by the individual's actions. It is not, critically, the other way around. The internal struggle *influences* a person's actions just as the people one knows and interacts with influence his behavior; but it does not *determine* his actions—he does. Perhaps the clearest delineation of the war between God and the devil which compels the emergence of human form lies in Mailer's version of the life of Jesus Christ, *The Gospel According to the Son*. As Mailer depicts him, Jesus is not a man driven to create absolute values that will last for eternity. To do so would be a disservice to human life, and addressing the unique hardships of human life in his own time is his supreme motive. Creating absolute values would preclude new forms of moral behavior from arising in the event that the conditions under which the original values were conceived have spilled over into conditions under which their effects are altered or reversed. It is only later, under the possession of men living in a different time, that Jesus's convictions become concretized (somewhat

inaccurately, the novel suggests) as doctrine. Yet, even in his own time, his convictions sometimes prove to be wrong. After learning that John the Baptist has been slain at Machaerus, Jesus reveals: "For so long as I had known of John's imprisonment I had believed that God would set him free. Now I knew that the firmest of my beliefs could be in error—I was like a man whose foot has slipped on the edge of a cliff" (107). Jesus's experience is pervaded by Kierkegaardian dread. Like any existentialist who embraces the precarious present and makes up the script as he goes along, he knows that the war between God and the devil rages within him. God speaks through him, and enables him to perform miracles, but he cannot know in what form God's words and acts emerge, or whether they come from God or from the devil, or who is winning the war between God and the devil at any given moment. Having been told that he is the son of God, Jesus knows that he is special, but he also knows that he is fallible. Nothing is proved, and he can only become himself by relinquishing control of the present and improvising, trusting his senses and intuition, but not his emotions. As he concludes: "Never would men's sentiments reveal the presence of the Lord. He would only appear in their deeds" (119). Mailer's Jesus is certain that the force that moves him *is* him. God is in his actions, but God does not simply act *through* him. Like the lightning Nietzsche describes, his existence inheres, above all, in its immediacy. He is a flash, not a reflection. A key possibility the story evokes is that this Jesus might be *anyone* who possesses an unshakable faith that he has come from God, and that God is within him.

In *The Genealogy of Morals*, Nietzsche submits that the original impulse in assessing value is to classify things as good and bad. It is only through frustrated reaction and *ressentiment* that people classified as bad (the slaves) come to identify

people with the power to render such judgments (the masters) as abstractly evil. Out of this conception of good and evil rises religion. In its preoccupation with action and form, Mailer's existentialism bids America to return to a life that shapes values through experience rather than allowing experience to be shaped by predetermined values. However, Mailer's desire to alter the thinking of his time springs from different motives from Nietzsche's. Whereas Nietzsche perceived the rise of abstract values to be a *leveling* of the social order, Mailer sees abstract values as the tool of the "power structure." The slave revolt described by Nietzsche envisioned the weak wresting power from the strong through a "clever" reversal of good and bad that gave rise to moral values. But in Mailer's world this revolt has reached an end point at which the values that were once the weapon of the embattled "herd" have spilled over into a world in which they are manipulated by the strong to keep the herd from running amok—or even from running at all. This is where Mailer's revolution of consciousness comes in. He opposes the F.B.I.'s quasi-religious mission to defeat evil with his own quasi-religious mission, which is to resurrect embodiments of good and bad and flush out invisible demons by waging a war that produces form. It is the same program that Hoover follows, except that the values of good an evil are reversed. This kind of confrontation, as he described it later, in an interview in 1981, is a tactic for inducing social change:

> What we recognize is that if you have a society, then you need people who are working to destroy that society. Out of the war comes a metamorphosis, which ideally will be more adaptive to the nature of a changing historical reality than more totalitarian, monolithic states. So—

> as I say—one natural, normal, healthy function of people is to fight society. (*Pontifications* 125)

Dissatisfied with the atheistic existentialism of Sartre, Mailer adds to it the religious pursuit of a "meaningful but mysterious" goal. In doing so, he submits a psychic dimension that Sartre, as his description of *Petit Crâne* reveals, could not entirely grasp. It is as if Mailer had responded to the *Saturday Review* article in which Oliver Barres laments that Sartre "has lost Kierkegaard's 'pregnant moment' in which eternity touches time and necessitates a destiny decision, and now has nothing to offer but cardboard figures." In Mailer's existentialism, this moment—and all the implications regarding good, evil, nature, and God that it suggests—is put back in. The element he adds, which neither Sartre nor Kierkegaard had fully explored, is conflict. As a result of World War II, and the conception of revolutionary action that he had acquired through his friendship with Jean Malaquais, he came to define life in terms of battle. Change occurs when opposed forces exhaust themselves in a war, the outcome of which cannot be revealed until the moment it arrives. Mailer's ultimate interest in the battle between God and the devil is not to stake out universal values for *all* time, but to allow everyday individuals—independent of state and religious institutions—to participate in staking out values for their own time.

Chapter Five

Reckless Faith: The Ethics of Kierkegaard in *Rabbit, Run*

The postwar crisis of values was conceived as a global problem that was somehow implicated in bringing about World War II. It evoked widespread concern and was addressed in a variety of forums. The second issue of *Commentary*, from December 1945, introduced a series of articles under the heading "The Crisis of the Individual" which discussed the dilemma of being human in a variety of contexts. The first contribution was from Reinhold Niebuhr, whose career as a popular icon of theology in America was just taking off. Writings on the human crisis by John Dewey, Hannah Arendt, Martin Buber, and several others would appear in the following months. In his article, "Will Civilization Survive Technics?," Neibuhr addresses the relationship between human society and "the modern machine." In a discussion of theology, he draws a distinction between "natural monism," which seeks to explain human existence by considering the relation between people and nature, and religious supernaturalism, which divides the world into two layers, natural and supernatural, physical and spiritual. Both conceptions, says Neibuhr, are mistaken. Nature is an important aspect of human life, but it does not fully address the human personality:

> It is by man's freedom over natural process and limitation that he is able to make history. But the same freedom which lies at the basis of man's historic creativity is also the root of human evil. Thus man, whose nature it is to be realized beyond himself in the life of his fellows, is also able to corrupt his community and make it the tool of his interests. The

> possibilities of evil as well as of good are much greater than modern culture assumed. (6)

Formulations of human life that sought to untangle the intricacies of good and evil, nature and technology, history and freedom, and the individual and the community were common products of the crisis in values. They were attempts to reconcile the prevailing historical crises of the war and postwar era with the ethics of everyday life.

The values debate could never be entirely resolved; but those conclusions that were drawn were colored by the dilemmas of the Cold War. The renewed interest in religious practice that emerged in America after the war both manifested the crisis in values and helped sustain it. The turn to religion was a relatively self-conscious one. To reassert its position among other, secular human activities, faith was called upon to justify itself. One of the cultural products this battle between faith and skepticism created was John Updike's novel of 1960, *Rabbit, Run*. The separation, cited by Neibuhr, between humanistic, world-bound belief and supernatural belief in an otherworldly god was one of Updike's principal preoccupations. In his novel he portrays these two conceptions of faith at war. In doing so, in certain ways, he hearkens back to the forties.

In 1999 the annual *Best American Short Stories* collection published a centennial anthology, edited by Updike, which drew on the stories the series has published since its origin in 1915. As documented in the foreword, by co-editor Katrina Kenison, the series underwent a transition in 1941, when its original editor was killed in the bombing of London and replaced by the writer Martha Foley. To some, the compiling of fictional stories during such a tumultuous moment in history might have seemed frivolous.

Foley's foreword to the 1942 collection, consequently, begins on a somewhat defensive note. She writes:

> Against the tragic backdrop of world events today a collection of short stories may appear very unimportant. Nevertheless, since the short story always has been America's own typical form of literary expression, from Washington Irving and Edgar Allan Poe onward, since America is defending today what is her own, the short story has a right to be considered as among the cultural institutions the country now is fighting to save. (ix)

In *The Best American Short Stories 1942*, Foley makes an observation that Updike, referring to the forties as a whole, would reiterate fifty-seven years later in his introduction to *The Best American Short Stories of the Century*. Most of the writings in the collection, she says, are not war stories. It is not the plots that constitute the collection's most remarkable feature. Convinced that the American short story is in transition, Foley reports that "dishonest" stories that rely on happy or "trick" endings are becoming a thing of the past (xi). What is special about these stories is that they contain "a new recognition of certain fundamental principles without which no nation can survive as a civilized state." The genre has taken a philosophical turn. History is not necessarily illustrated in events; it sometimes emerges less spectacularly, as a moral dilemma. "In its short stories, America can hear something being said that can be heard even above the crashing of bombs and the march of Panzer divisions. That is the fact that America is aware of human values as never before, posed as they are against a Nazi conception of a world dead to such values" (ix).

Updike's view of the forties in 1999 is naturally more remote. The short story's popularity has waned. It can no longer be called a typical American literary form. But the change of consciousness that Foley perceives during wartime continues to register with Updike, whose sense of the forties is informed by memory rather than immediacy. "With the 1940s," he writes, "the times become my own, and the short story takes an inward turn, away from states of society toward states of mind. To an elusive but felt extent, facts become more enigmatic. It is no longer always clear what the author wants us to feel" (xviii). This is a telling observation, for as Foley's remarks suggest, it no longer *was* quite as clear how one was to feel and respond under any given set of practical and ethical considerations. Morality had been destabilized, ideals eroded. For this reason, perhaps, Updike perceives a reflective turn in the stories of the era and notes (with greater surprise than Foley) that few of them directly address "that all-consuming paroxysm," the war itself:

> Perhaps it takes time for great events to sift into art; however, I remember the magazines of the forties as being full of stories from the camps and the fronts—many of them no doubt too sentimental and jocular for our taste, but functioning as bulletins to the home front. . . . In the end only Martha Gellhorn's account of an unsatisfactory flirtation, "Miami—New York," conveyed to me the feeling of wartime America—the pervasive dislocation that included erotic opportunity, constant weariness, and contagious recklessness. (xix)

Some of the disparity between Foley's sense of the national mood in 1942 (a concern with human values) and Updike's impression of the forties at the turn of the

century (a sense of dislocation accompanied by "erotic opportunity," weariness, and recklessness) can be attributed to age. In 1942 Updike turned ten. His 1940s coincided with adolescence. But if the impression of the forties that Updike recollects from his youth does not exactly encompass the sober moral quandary identified by Foley, the situations portrayed in his fiction do. Updike's rendering of postwar America is full of scenarios in which youthful recklessness and domestically disruptive erotic aspirations undermine the socially defined *good.* In Updike's world, the war era has faded to a mere clash of prevailing moods. Nostalgic restlessness battles moral rectitude.

The hero of the *Rabbit* novels, Harry "Rabbit" Angstrom, experiences perpetual frustration at the realization that the heroism he achieved in the 1940s, as the star of his high school basketball team, has vanished, along with his sense of purpose. Like an old soldier who finds that civilian life never quite measures up in significance to war, he reminisces about a time when his actions synthesized harmoniously with a purpose that was blissfully absolute. Basketball was a good war, and he had played to win. There was no ambiguity. Whereas Sartre's *Petit Crâne* possesses a magical quality that blends philosophical idealism with a romanticized conception of primitive action, Harry's increasingly rare moments of athletic prowess possess a magical quality that combines religious elation with nostalgia for a simpler time of life. At such moments, it is as if an unseen force directs his actions. There is no need to look for it. It just emerges.

Although Updike's protagonist bears a striking similarity to *Petit Crâne*, there is, (as with many of the heroes in Wright and Mailer) a moral difference: he is not known for doing the right thing. Sartre's model envisions spontaneous goodness, and the morally neutral formula embodied in Camus's Sisyphus simply envisions spontaneity.

The impulse toward wholeness that motivates Sisyphus is found throughout Updike's fiction. It is the longing described by Camus when he says:

> That nostalgia for unity, that appetite for the absolute illustrates the essential impulse of the human drama. But the fact of that nostalgia's existence does not imply that it is to be immediately satisfied. For if, bridging the gulf that separates desire from conquest, we assert with Parmenides the reality of the One (whatever it may be), we fall into the ridiculous contradiction of a mind that asserts total unity and proves by its very assertion its own difference and the diversity it claimed to resolve. (17-18)

Harry's pursuit of unity repeatedly demonstrates the "ridiculous contradiction" observed by Camus. The reconciliation with the infinite cannot be achieved, and in asserting it, Harry further reveals his finite separation; God cannot be reached. Furthermore, his nostalgic desire to fill in the gaps of a fragmented universe has no real social meaning. Like Sisyphus, he perpetually attempts to ascend to grace, but unlike the morally neutral figure described by Camus, he subsequently confronts social consequences. Increasingly, the transcendent moment fails to crystallize as he would like, and, invariably, he returns to less exhilarating pursuits, such as selling a kitchen appliance called the MagiPeel peeler and living with a sullen and inebriated wife. Modern life does not accommodate his temperament.

This theme may have been on Updike's mind when he wrote *Rabbit, Run* because he had lately been reading Kierkegaard, whose argument with Enlightenment reason and reputation as an eccentric social outsider attracted a moderate degree of attention in the

post-World War II era. Updike's introduction to the *Rabbit Angstrom* tetralogy, published in 1995, suggests that he had been thinking about misfits. He writes: "I was much taken with Kierkegaard, as a creature of fear and trembling; but perhaps my college exposure to Dostoyevsky was more central. Rabbit is, like the Underground Man, *incorrigible*; from first to last he bridles at good advice, taking direction only from his personal, also incorrigible God" (xx). Updike had been reading, along with Kierkegaard, the theology of Paul Tillich, which draws on existentialist ideas. A German Lutheran who wrote in response to the rise of National Socialism in the 1930s and 1940s, Tillich sought to understand the ways in which faith was culturally manifested. He described faith as a state of "ultimate concern" which compels complete surrender to its content; but the concern need not be with the supernatural:

> Every concern is tyrannical and wants our whole heart and our whole mind and our whole strength. Every concern tries to become our ultimate concern, our god. The concern about our work often succeeds in becoming our god, as does the concern about another human being, or about pleasure. The concern about science has succeeded in becoming the god of a whole era in history, the concern about money has become an even more important god, and the concern about the nation the most important god of all. But these concerns are finite, they conflict with each other, they burden our consciences because we cannot do justice to all of them. (37)

Without content, according to Tillich, faith is impossible. In the absurd and purposeless act of Camus's Sisyphus, this content is lacking. It is also lacking in Sartre's depiction of

Petit Crâne. In Sartre's humanist philosophy, the content of ultimate concern is the "project." The content of Harry Angstrom's ultimate concern lies somewhere between that of Sisyphus (which is nothing) and that described by Tillich (which is something particular, whether finite or infinite). Harry, like Updike himself (who has described the character as an alter ego), is a man of faith, but it is an undirected faith, the content of which is unfixed. Like an infinite god, it is formless and indefinite, and many of the finite gods referred to by Tillich—money, pleasure, nation—vie for Harry's ultimate concern during the historical period represented in the *Rabbit* novels. The presence of the ultimate concern is signaled only through a sensation (akin to the happiness that Camus attributes to Sisyphus) which accompanies flawlessly executed physical acts. Harry experiences the feeling on the golf course for the first time after being angered by the criticism he receives from an Episcopalian minister. Ceasing to focus on the quality of his game, he takes a simple and effortless swing. The ball "is hung way out" and travels in a straight line. "It hesitates, and Rabbit thinks it will die, but he's fooled, for the ball makes its hesitation the ground of a final leap: with a kind of visible sob takes a last bite of space before vanishing in falling. 'That's *it!*' he cries" (116). Tillich maintains that the symbolic language of religion can only be understood within a community which creates it (27), a principle that inheres, somewhat by default, in Harry's case. His religious impulses (reflecting Updike's reading of Kierkegaard) are his own internal mystery. Like the actions of *Petit Crâne*, Harry's inspired acts defy language. They are, to use Sartre's expression, "reactions he couldn't name." There is no social language to define them. Even the minister Eccles does not comprehend *it*. "What *is* it?" he asks. "Is it hard or soft? Harry. Is it blue? Is it red? Does it have polka

dots?" (115). Providentially, the feeling reveals itself; but Harry has no vocabulary, aside from "it," with which to describe the ineffable sensation. He only knows that he likes it.

Eccles's opinions are sometimes dismissed by critics who see the character as embodying the sort of lightweight, liberal theology that Updike finds unconvincing; but the question he asks is more than rhetorical. What is *it*? And why is Harry so enthralled with it? And to what lengths would he go in his pursuit of it? Eccles, as Harry disappointedly realizes, really wants to know. His reserved view of Harry's vague longings for transcendence resembles that of other religious humanists of the time (such as Tillich). The moral quandary depicted in *Rabbit, Run* compels a choice between conflicting forms of goodness, one of which is ethical (domestic responsibility), the other of which is vaguely spiritual (the pursuit of *it*). Discussing the representation of good and evil in his writing, Updike once said in an interview:

> My books are all meant to be moral debates with the reader, and if they seem pointless—I'm speaking hopefully—it's because the reader has not been engaged in the debate. The question is usually, "What is a good man?" or "What is goodness?" and in all the books an issue is examined. Take Harry Angstrom in *Rabbit, Run*: there is a case to be made for running away from your wife. In the late Fifties beatniks were preaching transcontinental traveling as the answer to man's disquiet. And as I was just trying to say: "Yes, there is certainly that, but then there are all these other people who seem to get hurt." That qualification is meant to frame a moral dilemma. (*PUP* 502)

According to Updike, if flight from responsibility pacifies "man's disquiet," then "there is a case to be made for running away from your wife." For Harry, then, the moral good (staying with his family) is qualified by something bad (enduring disquiet) whereas the spiritual good (pursuing the "something" that wants him to find it) is qualified by something evil (harming his family). Neither is an absolute good, which is precisely the problem. Critiquing the beatnik's fantasy, the novel asks: Which good?

It is consequently not surprising that Updike reports being "much taken with Kierkegaard, as a creature of fear and trembling" while he was writing *Rabbit, Run*, because choosing between finite and infinite imperatives (the dilemma created by God's demand that Abraham sacrifice his son, Isaac) is precisely what Kierkegaard's *Fear and Trembling* is about. As Kierkegaard represents it, the sacrifice of Isaac constitutes a "teleological suspension" of ethical obligations belonging to the finite, temporal world. At such a moment, subjective faith supersedes social responsibility. Abraham makes a choice which appeals to the unique criteria of religious faith alone. There is no worldly justification for the decision, and on the surface it looks like (and may be) cruelty. Having renounced the finite realm, Abraham regains it when Isaac emerges from the episode unharmed. As Johannes de Silentio (Kierkegaard's persona in *Fear and Trembling*) puts it: "The movement of faith must continually be made by virtue of the absurd, but yet in such a way, please note, that one does not lose the finite but gains it whole and intact" (*EK* 95). The movement of faith is made without recourse to any rational foundation. It makes no sense in the finite world and may even violate that world's ethical precepts. In *The Myth of Sisyphus* Camus retains Kierkegaard's formula but omits the first step, the renunciation of the temporal realm. Whereas absurd action in

Kierkegaard is justified by the unique criteria of faith, in Camus it is justified by no criteria at all—it is simply absurd. Kierkegaard's sanctioning of unreason appeals to reason insofar as it represents faith as a higher, albeit unverifiable, reality. Camus appeals to no reality beyond the absurd action itself. He simply proposes that it can make a person happy. The difference between Kierkegaard's radically autonomous Christian belief and Camus's autonomous atheism lies in this discrepancy, a negligible difference. Kierkegaard appeals to faith; Camus appeals to happiness. Faith and happiness, in this case, are both inward, subjective conditions rather than outward relations. And like Sisyphus, Kierkegaard's knight of faith is sublimely content—his faith leads to happiness.

Because the movement to faith in Kierkegaard is an inward choice that cannot be confirmed outwardly or through appeal to reason, it is represented as a leap. In his memoirs, Updike presents his own faith as stemming from choice as well. "Early in my adolescence," he writes, "trapped within the airtight case for atheism, I made this logical formulation:

1. If God does not exist, the world is a horror-show.
2. The world is not a horror-show.
3. Therefore, God exists" (*Self-Consciousness* 229-30).

Updike goes on to question the second premise, observing that at times the world does, after all, resemble a horror show. However, he says, it is the expectation that life will be good which compels the telling of the horror. "The world is good, our intuition is, confirming its Creator's appraisal as reported in the first chapter of Genesis" (230). In his reflections on faith in his youth, Updike further observed that among Christians there

seemed to be few true believers, even within the clergy: "Though signs of belief (churches, public prayers, mottos on coins) existed everywhere, when you moved toward Christianity it disappeared, as fog solidly opaque in the distance thins to transparency when you walk into it. I decided I nevertheless *would* believe" (230). Kierkegaard, Updike says, was one of a handful of authors he discovered who aided him in his belief. For Updike, then, religion was not just something bestowed upon him externally by family or community. He possesses a conviction that was taken hold of early in life through conscious choice. Apparently, this choice made in the absence of any logical reason has been sustained over time, whereas the attempt to justify God's existence with a logical proof was less convincing. The impulse that propels Harry to faith coincides, in this sense, with Updike's own experience; but the troublemaking tendency of that impulse does not. Updike, in fact, reveals a certain aversion to defying systems of authority. His own tendency to rebel, he says, is more often manifested as a defense of authority when it is being attacked (as in his defense of the Johnson administration during the Vietnam War). Harry's impulse to flee responsibility seems to reflect the behavior of an elementary school classmate Updike describes in his memoirs. The boy, he says, would excuse himself from class to use the lavatory and then seize the opportunity to run from school. As a result, the teacher began asking other children to accompany the incorrigible boy to the bathroom. When Updike was called upon to be the delinquent's chaperone, the boy convinced him to wait for him at the top of a staircase. "While I trustfully did so," Updike writes, "he vanished from the basement lavatory. I heard the door slam and raced to the edge of the playground in just enough time to see his figure

flying up the alley" (15-16). The boy's impulse to flee was mystifying to Updike, a good student who considered the school system an utterly harmless institution.

And yet, in his way, Updike clearly does identify with the classical American motif of the spirit which cannot be tamed or domesticated. His own restlessness, as he portrays it, is an inward condition, an impulsive resistance to all efforts to civilize faith by subordinating it to rationality. This primitive faith occasionally stirs up trouble, as it did when it met with the more refined beliefs of his first wife, Mary, and her family. Mary's father, as Updike writes in his memoirs, was a Unitarian minister who had been raised a Quaker. Initially, he says, he found Unitarians, who "still breathed the spirit and quoted the words of Emerson, Channing, and Parker," to be "as exotic as Bantus":

> Though my gentle father-in-law and I had some tense early arguments, in which I, blushing and stammering, insisted that an object of faith must have some concrete attributes, and he suggested that our human need for transcendence should be met with minimal embarrassments to reason, at bottom I loved him and Unitarianism, too; it lacked the greasy heaviness of Lutheranism, the gloom of its linoleum-floored Sunday-school basements and the sickly milky tints of its stained-glass windows, the thick yellow sheen of its varnished pews and altar furniture. Unitarianism seemed, instead, all air and light and good humor. It was classy, and friendly. My in-laws crackled around me like straws in a dry nest. Whether God's number be three or one or zero, human kindness and decency are clear enough, the twinkle in their pale-blue eyes seemed to reassure me. (*Self-Consciousness* 133)

Updike sees Unitarianism as not just a faith but an "ethos." This ethos, he says, included "those Harvard people, from my wife's circle of friends, whose minds and spirits had been washed clean" (133). Updike provides no definite explanation as to why he is compelled to reject a faith so clean, classy, and enlightened in order to pursue an "incorrigible" god, and he does not exactly renounce the Unitarian ethos either. "It was and is still my fate," he writes, "to like the settings and the personalities that Enlightenment creates without wanting, myself, to be thoroughly enlightened" (133). The idea that "human kindness and decency are clear enough" *is* reassuring, but it is not, according to Updike's sense of truth, quite accurate. Goodness is ambiguous. It defies rational explanation, and the standards for determining it are never quite settled. A god who embodies the eternal good must be beyond reason as well.

This problem, represented in Updike's memoirs as a difference between Lutheranism and Unitarianism, lies at the heart of the *Rabbit* novels, and it is never quite resolved. Updike is sympathetic to Kierkegaard's belief in an uncertain, vaguely defined deity and also to his denial that all human decisions, including faith itself, should or can appeal to reason. Kierkegaard submits that God's greatness lies in mercy which cannot be found by attempting to ascend to human greatness. It is, paradoxically, in the downward movement of a repentant heart into worship that one approaches grace (*EK* 329). In a similar vein, Updike suggests that God cannot be apprehended through reference to human qualities and is (as in Mailer) morally ambiguous. In an introduction he wrote to a book of essays on Satanism, published in 1972, Updike seeks to account for a god who would allow the creation of a wholly evil adversary. He cites a passage from Karl Barth (another theologian whose ideas are important to *Rabbit, Run*) in which evil is

equated with nothingness, and good is equated with that which God wills. Evil is the negation of God's grace, says Barth, and any living creature has the potential to "fall away" from God. Otherwise, the creature would be God himself. Updike supports this assessment by painting a dark portrait of human nature, asking: "Is not destructiveness within us as a positive lust, an active hatred? Who does not exult in fires, collapses, the ruin and death of friends? Who has seen a baby sleeping in a crib and not wanted, for an instant of wrath that rises in the throat like vomit, to puncture such innocence?" (*PUP* 89). It is possible, he submits, that nature itself embodies the "Satanic nothingness" described by Barth (90).

In *Rabbit, Run*, nature embodies this negation at times when Harry seeks the elusive thing that wants him to find it. His flights toward grace typically begin with his plunging into the abyss of a malevolent nature. When he flees Mt. Judge early in the novel, for example, he eventually reaches a place where the pavement ends and the road narrows into an entrapping "web of wilderness" (a manifestation of the "net" motif that runs through the novel); but he drives on blindly, praying that the road will not end. Suddenly caught in the path of an oncoming car, his mind, like the transcendent golf ball, is catapulted into a realm of uncertainty:

> The prayer's answer is blinding. The trees at a far bend leap like flame and a car comes around and flies at him with its beams tilted high. Rabbit slithers over close to the ditch and, faceless as death, the bright car rips by at a speed twice his own. For more than a minute Rabbit drives through the bastard's insulting dust. Yet the good news makes him meek, the news that this road goes two ways. (32)

In his introduction to the Satanism collection, Updike reveals his feeling that "wherever a church spire is raised, though dismal slums surround it and a single dazed widow kneels under it, this Hell is opposed by a rumor of good news, by an irrational plenitude we feel is our birthright. The instinct that life is good is where natural theology begins" (*PUP* 91). The essence of Updike's Christianity is not a confirmation that the world is good, but that there will always be hope and goodness with which to oppose nihilism and evil—the "good news" that "the road goes two ways" is a kind of armor with which the faithful may face terror. According to Kierkegaard, though, to truly apprehend faith, one must first confront this terror. "The road of dread" down which Harry's blind excursion takes him turns out to be a lover's lane. Subsequently, he confronts a choice between two roads. He trembles, a clock in his head beats "monstrously slow"; his map becomes "a net he is somewhere caught in"; he fumes at the farmer at the gas station who had offered the un-Kierkegaardian advice "figure out where you're going before you get there"; and finally, compelled into motion by the car behind him, "he turns instinctively right, north," and returns home (33-34).

In returning, Harry makes an impulsive choice, metaphorically enacting the ethical principle presented in the second part of *Either/Or*, where Kierkegaard writes:

> What, then, is it that I separate in my Either/Or? Is it good and evil? No, I only want to bring you to the point where this choice truly has meaning for you. It is on this that everything turns. As soon as a person can be brought to stand at the crossroads in such a way that there is no way out for him except to choose, he will choose the right thing. (*EK* 74)

That Harry's flight into grace eventually leads him back to where he came from accords with the leap envisioned by Kierkegaard, who proposes in *Fear and Trembling* that after choosing the infinite, the knight of faith is returned, like Abraham, to the temporal realm. The knight of faith accepts the finite world despite the clear absurdity of doing so. Harry, however, is not comfortably reconciled with this world. He has not leapt into infinity. It is not even clear that he has made an ethical leap. As the entire series of *Rabbit* novels documents, the finite world, and his sense of himself within it, is a source of endless agitation. The novel seems to refute the optimistic claim in *Either/Or* that at the crossroads of ethical choice, one will do the right thing. Harry goes right and returns home, but he does not return to Janice. The sacrifice of a child presented in *Rabbit, Run*, furthermore, is not a purposeful act of faith but an accident; and unlike Abraham, whose surrender to infinity ends with the restoration of the finite world, absurd but intact (and represented in Isaac himself), Harry returns to find the world inalterably damaged—the child is not recovered. At home after the accident, he drains the bathtub in which the baby has drowned, the simple act which could have saved her life. "He thinks how easy it was, yet in all His strength God did nothing. Just that little rubber stopper to lift" (237). God intervened to save Isaac, but he does not bother to save Rebecca.

In one sense Harry's return to the life he left behind is made astonishingly easy. His family immediately welcomes him back in the hope that his erratic impulses have been tamed. In the long term, however, his adjustment is no simple matter. As Updike says in the introduction to the *Rabbit Angstrom* tetralogy, "Expatiation of the baby's death is the couple's joint quest throughout the series; Harry keeps looking for a daughter, and Janice strives for competence, for a redeemed opinion of herself. Nelson

remains the wounded, helplessly indignant witness" (xiv). In this sense, the advice that Harry receives later from Eccles, the Episcopalian—which privileges the liberal doctrine of works to the Lutherans' exhortations to faith—seems to apply: "We must work for forgiveness; we must *earn* the right to see that thing behind everything" (241). It is not at all clear, then, which good in the novel is the right good. Rabbit's movements to grace neither confirm nor overturn the example presented by Kierkegaard, whose delineation of the aesthetic, ethical, and religious stages is not intended as an unambiguous roadmap to God, but as a method of demonstrating that faith, and other methods through which human beings seek meaning, depend not simply on reason but on inward, subjective choice as well.[16] The distorted rendition of the "teleological suspension of the ethical" that Updike presents in the drowning of the baby emphasizes how finite objects of faith like those referred to by Tillich (money, pleasure, nation) can lead to catastrophe when they are given priority over ethical considerations in an attempt to pacify "man's disquiet." Harry "suspends" the ethical to pursue "it," but his desire finds only finite rewards.

In the examination of the aesthetic/ethical dialectic in *Either/Or*, the crossroads principle (that one who has no way out but to choose "will choose the right thing") is expressed by B, an unknown judge named William. B's arguments are presented as the ethical counterpart to the aesthetic perspective of A, the persona who speaks in part one (nothing is known of A's identity). The preface explains that the papers of A and B have

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[16] The problems with the term "stages" is addressed, for example, by Merold Westphal, who says that "neither developmentally (psychologically) nor dialectically (logically) is there any inevitability to the progression of stages. The transition from one to another is a leap, which means that human reason can neither explain it in terms of causal necessity, nor justify it in terms of conceptual necessity. For this reason, the leap, which is neither blind nor restricted to the religious sphere, exhibits human freedom (as the intersection of risk and responsibility) in an especially powerful way. Conceptual undecidability requires personal decision" (129).

been organized by the editor, Victor Eremita, who has happened upon them in a concealed compartment of an old desk which he has purchased secondhand. (It was not long after the initial publication of *Either/Or*, in 1843, that Kierkegaard was revealed to be the author of the entire work.) The ethical, as it is described in part two by B, involves an inward process of becoming, whereby "the *I* chooses itself or, more correctly, receives itself" (*EK* 76). The aesthetic, on the other hand, expresses itself outwardly. According to B's assessment:

> The poetic ideal is always an untrue ideal, for the true ideal is always the actual. So when the spirit is not allowed to rise into the eternal world of spirit, it remains in transit and delights in the pictures reflected in the clouds and weeps over their transitoriness. Therefore, a poet-existence as such is an unhappy existence; it is higher than the finite and yet is not the infinite. The poet sees the ideals, but he must run away from the world in order to delight in them. (77)

Kierkegaard's critique of Hegel rejects the idea that the dialectic is resolved through its own difference. His reformulation posits a stage of "infinite resignation" which compels a renunciation of the finite world. This is the final stage before the movement to faith. "This movement I make all by myself," says B, "and what I gain thereby is my eternal consciousness in blessed harmony with my love for the eternal being."

> By faith I do not renounce anything; on the contrary, by faith I receive everything exactly in the sense in which it is said that one who has faith like a mustard seed can move mountains. It takes a purely human courage to renounce the whole temporal realm in order to gain eternity, but this I

> do gain and in all eternity can never renounce—it is a self-contradiction. But it takes a paradoxical and humble courage to grasp the whole temporal realm now by virtue of the absurd, and this is the courage of faith. (78)

The aesthete's perspective, reminiscent of Hegel's, fills in the gaps of an imperfect, external reality and thereby apprehends perfection without confronting a choice. "The poet sees the ideals," says Kierkegaard, in a description that applies to Harry Angstrom, "but he must run away from the world in order to delight in them." He is caught between the finite and infinite worlds; his "poetic ideal" is not the *actual* ideal. Contrary to Hegel's contention, then, the absolute cannot be apprehended historically, and contrary to the aesthetic idealism of Schelling, it cannot be apprehended aesthetically. The encounter with infinity inheres only in the movement to faith, the ultimate manifestation of ethical decision—the choice between good and evil (Löwith 150). Through this subjective choice—the fragmented "either/or" with which Kierkegaard refutes Hegel's unified absolute—the eternal is inwardly preserved. The ethical subject accepts the temporal world with all its shortcomings. The real challenge of faith, according to Kierkegaard, lies in this paradoxical reconciliation with the temporal realm after the eternal has rendered it absurd.

In the 1950s, though, the more pressing problem was not whether the faithful could accept the finite realm, but whether that realm could accept the faithful. In 1950 *Partisan Review* conducted a symposium which sought to assess the recent turn toward religion among writers and intellectuals. The inward nature of faith and the outward pursuit of false absolutes were subjects brought up by some of the participants (Tillich

was one of them). Responding to a question that asked about the causes of religion's newfound "credibility," Alfred Kazin wrote:

> Religion is not more "credible" than it was, and not less; it has always been credible. Tolstoy said it: "God is the name of my desire." He exists for many gifted intellectuals, for reasons which are inherently their own. The religious faculty is like any other, in at least this respect: some people have it not at all, and cannot understand why others should have it. Many are devoured by it; many more are saved. Whatever churches or synagogues may say, the authentic believers *prove* that religion is intrinsically a private matter. How can I presume to say whether what they believe is "valid" or not when a) it is not they but the "advanced" and "progressive" people who have defended the most terrible crimes in the name of "reason" and "science" b) when everything I know about the history of sincerely religious persons shows that faith is not based on deduction and "proof," but on the vagaries of personal experience? (233)

Kazin refers to several key philosophical questions circulating—in America, France, and elsewhere—during the postwar period: What is the relationship between desire (or will to power) and religious feeling? What are the good and bad effects of the "religious faculty"? What degree of reconciliation can or should be achieved between inward, human desires and external, public life? How have science, reason, religion, and politics shaped the web of social factors that gave rise to concentration camps, gulags, and other means of effecting mass suffering and death? So far as religion is concerned, Kazin finds "credibility" irrelevant. For other symposium participants, however, the issue was not to

be dismissed so readily. William Barrett, detecting a problem of authenticity in the rise of religious interest among certain writers and theorists, argued that the trend did not manifest the sort of faith which exists, as if naturally, in a society that shares a religion and takes its precepts for granted—where, as Tillich says, there exists a symbolic language for explaining religious meaning. It was simply, said Barrett, "the efforts of a few contemporary intellectuals to think themselves back into religion" (456-57).

But in an ideologically polarized world, undoubtedly, the religious turn also revealed a widespread desire to take an informed moral stand—to *know* what was right—and avoid having to choose without recourse to evidence and reason (the very predicament that Kierkegaard had devoted his life to examining). Despite what B says, a person at a crossroads compelled into a decision will sometimes choose the *wrong*, socially unethical thing, a matter that had been subjected to considerable scrutiny during the war era. The desire to think "back into religion" cited by Barrett suggests a moral interest in reestablishing a stable value system (a guide to choosing the right thing) more than a fascination with the supernatural world. This issue was discussed by Robert Graves, who addressed a question about religion as a response to totalitarianism by writing:

> Totalitarianism is not the antonym of Christianity, as the questionnaire suggests—the Spain of Philip II was both totalitarian and Catholic; and so is General Franco's Spain (which is where I live), though commendably courteous to free-thinking foreigners. It so happens, however, that the English-speaking peoples have long enjoyed a two-party government in religion: the mystical Catholics and the moralistic Puritans. This well-

> balanced opposition keeps either party from dominating the other and so permits liberty to every sort of individual opinion. Whether these two parties can unite in a gentleman's agreement to keep the totalitarian atheist out of power, while regretfully continuing to regard each other as damned, is the political problem of the Holy Year of 1950. (134)

Graves says that the supernatural is "a disease of religion" attributable to the pluralistic Christian tradition. "True religion is of natural origin," he writes, "and linked practically with seasons, though it implies occasional states of abnormal ecstasy which can be celebrated only in the language of myth" (136-37).

Graves's convictions underscore that the character of the religious revival was not predominately spiritual. Mysticism, in fact, insofar as it was likely to be equated with ideological extremism, was morally suspicious. The morality that rules Harry's world hinders rather than encourages his religious feelings, which are not manifestly moral. The divide between mysticism and morality that Graves posits between Catholics and Puritans is reminiscent of the dilemma in *Rabbit, Run*. But in depicting a web of social resistance to Harry's pursuit of the elusive *it* Updike does not intend to dismiss moral considerations. When yearnings for freedom generate flight from responsibilities, as he soberly observes, people "seem to get hurt." The passion of subjective choice, which Kierkegaard posited in response to the rationalist methodology of Hegel, is precisely opposed to the postwar mood that sought to restructure and solidify destabilized values and thereby take some of the guesswork out of being a good person. Like Wright's Cross Damon, Updike's Rabbit is a sort of morally ambiguous messenger put on earth to embody the *Zeitgeist* and live through its compelling conflict. If the ruminations on

Hegel contained in Kierkegaard's journals are any indication, Kierkegaard would have approved of this inward approach to historical crises. Kierkegaard writes of Hegel's historical method:

> In ancient days one would have smiled at a method which can explain all of world-history absolutely but cannot explain a single person even mediocrely; for in ancient days the wise man did not begin this way and did not go beyond in this way so that he never came to understand or he ceased to understand what the simple man understands. In ancient times existence [*Tilværelsen*] was thought to be epitomized in such a way that anyone who understood a single human being would be in a position to explain history, if he had the requisite knowledge, because the task of reckoning remained essentially the same. Of course, in ancient days there was no wise man who had invented the absolute method. The malpractice in Hegel is easily pointed out. The absolute method explains all world-history; the science which is to explain the single human being is ethics. (219)

In a 1968 interview with the *Paris Review*, Updike echoes the idea that history can be derived from the particulars of individual lives. Responding to an assertion that there is little American history to be found in his writing, he says, "My fiction about the daily doings of ordinary people has more history in it than history books, just as there is more breathing history in archeology than in a list of declared wars and changes in government" (Updike, *Conversations* 37).

The crisis of values in America was a slightly subdued version of the one that had confronted France in discussions of occupation, resistance, and collaboration, and like its French equivalent it located the general in the specific by turning to the subject of individual conscience. This subject figured heavily in the French conception of Resistance fighters, whose heroism was exalted in France and elsewhere. In "The Republic of Silence," Sartre draws on the actions of French Resisters to characterize the nation as a whole, extending the idea of resistance to "all Frenchmen who, at every hour of the day or night, during four years, have said NO" (39). To guide the nation through the post-occupation era, he offers the image of a solitary, heroic resister:

> To those who led clandestine lives, the conditions of their fight brought a new experience. They did not fight in the daylight, like soldiers; in every circumstance they were alone; they were pursued and arrested in their solitude. And it was in their loneliness, in their completest nakedness, that they resisted torture, alone and stripped before their well-shaved, well-fed, and well-dressed executioners, who mocked their pitiful flesh and whose complacent consciences and incredible social power gave every evidence of being in the right. (40)

The spirit of resistance was to stand alone against evil. The essence of heroism was to *know* what was right even in the midst of those who advocated doing wrong. Uncertainty was for the faint of heart.

In this sense, the idealized resister resembles Harry's nostalgic image of himself as a high school basketball star. In his memory, his actions on the court did not exactly depend on choice, really, but on inspiration of a vaguely religious nature. The spirit of

the game was in him. Like *Petit Crâne*, as described by Sartre, Rabbit "thought little, spoke little, and always did the right thing." In his heroic days, as he relives them, the divide that prevents him from leaping to another realm of consciousness in his current, mundane life is no obstacle. He cannot be restrained:

> He has broken through the barrier of fatigue and come into a calm flat world where nothing matters much. The last quarter of a basketball game used to carry him into this world; you ran not as the crowd thought for the sake of the score but for yourself, in a kind of idleness. There was you and sometimes the ball and then the hole, the high perfect hole with its pretty skirt of net. It was you, just you and that fringed ring, and sometimes it came down right to your lips it seemed and sometimes it stayed away, hard and remote and small. It seemed silly for the crowd to applaud or groan over what you had already felt in your fingers or even in your arms as you braced to shoot or for that matter in your eyes: when he was hot he could see the separate threads wound into the strings looping the hoop. (34)

This is an appealing ideal, but for most people the right path is not typically so clear, vivid, and *known*. It was sometimes, as in Kierkegaard, a crossroads that compelled anguish, as it no doubt was for many in the Resistance. The average person would prefer not to have to make ethical decisions in a social vacuum. The ideal of the Resister, whom Sartre depicts as possessing great conviction in the absence of external confirmation (that is, as confronting a Kierkegaardian choice) was itself a socially conceived ethical model to which the uncertain could turn for inspiration. In its tendency

to smooth over details, nostalgia may disregard much of the conflict and angst of the hero's decision-making process. But as Updike sees it, this element should not be passed over too quickly. It is risky to conduct one's life according to intuition alone, as Harry, in his memory, once played basketball; but that is exactly what he longs to do. As he explains to Eccles, it is a question of being first-rate rather than second-rate. In 1977, while living in Georgetown, Massachusetts, Updike did an interview with the newspaper of a local high school in which he observes that indecision is sometimes a desirable condition:

> I'm not sure that decisiveness is itself an admirable quality—Hitler was very decisive, for example. But the world is full of people who are willing to make decisions for us, men who are all too decisive. This kind (indecisive) of man interests me more because he holds within himself all the possibilities and some of the contradictions. In a sense ambivalent, torn, he kind of dithers in a situation, without being able to control or channel it. (Updike, *Conversations* 108-09)

Uncertainty compels anxiety, but excessive certitude can wreak moral havoc. And yet, as the article suggests, decisions ultimately must be made. Not to choose, as Sartre says, is still to choose.

This ambivalent aspect of Updike's writing is examined in an account of the *Rabbit* tetralogy by Marshall Boswell, who argues that Harry seems to defy a morality that would judge him according to his actions, and that Updike therefore differs from existentialists such as Sartre and "remains true to his Lutheran roots." Reflecting his Lutheran background, he is unconvinced by a liberal theology of "works" and views faith

as the only means of salvation (47-48). Boswell sees the *Rabbit* novels reflecting Updike's reading of Iris Murdoch, who, drawing on the principles of Descartes, believed that morality could be expressed inwardly, and that the mind itself was an agent of action. The frequently noted epigraph to *Rabbit, Run* by Blaise Pascal ("The motions of Grace, the hardness of the heart; external circumstances") is itself suggestive of the internal "motions" which are manifested as flight in *Rabbit, Run.* The theme also emerges elsewhere in Updike, such as in an essay he wrote on Emerson. Updike says of Emerson's essays: "all were sermons of a sort in behalf of the Emersonian religion: the free and generous action of a mind open to the inspirations and evidences of the Universal Soul" (*Odd Jobs* 158). In *Rabbit, Run*, it is this sort of inward action of the mind that inspires Harry's drive from Mt. Judge to West Virginia and back. According to Boswell, Harry's flight and eventual return constitute a turning point in the novel, an embrace of the angst-producing unknown that Kierkegaard calls "freedom's possibility" and the inevitable guilt which accompanies it. It is like the guilt of Adam, who, Kierkegaard says, recognizes that he has the freedom to do what God forbids and acts upon it. Harry's decision to return home, says Boswell, is a demonstration of faith which casts a "celestial gleam" upon the finite world (41); and the faith itself reveals a heroism—the Knight of Faith's affirmation of the world—which is felt by Updike's readers (47). But Boswell also finds a variation from Kierkegaard in the novel. Citing Updike's characterization of *Rabbit, Run* as a "zig-zag," he concludes, "Whereas in Kierkegaard the movement of the dialectic is always progressive, inching the reader closer and closer to religious inwardness, in Updike the corresponding movement is always back and forth" (10).

As Boswell says, Harry oscillates between ethical responsibilities and a wayward pursuit of beauty and pleasure. But as Updike suggests in the introduction to *Rabbit Angstrom*, it is not merely inwardness and faith that enable Harry and Janice to come to terms with Becky's death; an outward effort and engagement with the world is required. Whatever Updike's distrust of the religious morality of "works," the novels eventually make clear that ethical acts are required for Becky's parents, especially Harry, to atone in some sense for her death. Updike has noted the separation between faith and works in Lutheranism. "Lutherans believe doctrine—faith—is important, but not deeds, because we are all mired in sin," he said in the 1968 interview with the *Paris Review* (Updike, *Conversations* 20). In other interviews, he has also made subtle connections between his sense of the sacred and his sense of work, which, he has revealed, was greatly influenced by his father. In a 1978 interview with his Japanese translator, Iwao Iwamoto, he said, "One of the phenomena that I've noticed in my lifetime has been a loss of the sense of urgency of work. My father felt it was very important that he work, otherwise he would starve and his children would starve, and so work had a kind of sacred importance. It was bread" (Updike, *Conversations* 122). In another, somewhat but not entirely arbitrary correlation between work and faith, Updike said in a 1975 radio interview, while discussing *Couples* and the hero of *A Month of Sundays*, Reverend Marshfield:

> I went to church on Easter—I hadn't been for a while—and I remembered suddenly what I liked about it. What I like about church is that the sermon gives me time to think about something else. I used to plan my whole week's work in church. *Couples* was written a week at a time, and these little inspirations would always come. I mean, in some way my mind was

> open to receive a certain energy. Marshfield's trouble, in a way, is that he *is* a believer, and to believe exposes us to all kinds of hopefulness. Hopefulness breeds energy, energy breeds mischief, mischief breeds, in his case, being sent away to a desert retreat to cool off. (76)

This sort of optimistic hopefulness which stirs up trouble is what Eccles finds both intriguing and frustrating about Harry.

In *Rabbit, Run*, reconciling the directive to faith (associated with Lutheranism) with more liberal and social aims (associated with Episcopalianism) is an unavoidable necessity, depicted as a generational difference between Eccles and his father, whose conservatism was formed in response to *his* father, who was relatively liberal. A similar back-and-forth between generations is borne out in *A Month of Sundays*; Marshfield is a more conservative minister than his liberal father had been. The effect of the father's opinions can never be cast off entirely. As Eccles says while he and Harry are playing golf, "You know how it is with fathers, you never escape the idea that maybe after all they're *right*" (109). Updike's grandfather was a Lutheran minister, and he apparently senses a roughly similar progression of religious feeling among generations in his own family. In the 1975 radio interview, he speculated that his father suffered from a "not untypical minister's child syndrome of being put off by church and knowing it too well." His father wore mismatched clothing to church, chewed gum and talked during the sermon. Updike recalls feeling that his father at church seemed "much too much at home" (Updike, *Conversations* 75-76). This idea that faith varies in intensity from one generation to the next tempers his skepticism toward liberal theology. In *Rabbit, Run*, the

exalting of passionate faith in an unknowable god is inevitably restrained by the author's sense of the dangers of pursuing intangible ideals.

This sense is manifested more directly in Updike's essay on Emerson, which expresses a distrust of inwardness that manifests solipsism. In "Experience" Emerson writes: "A sympathetic person is placed in the dilemma of a swimmer among drowning men, who all catch at him, and if he gives so much as a leg or a finger, they will drown him." Updike responds to this passage: "The practical ethics of Idealism, then, turn out to be seclusion and stoicism." He asks: "Is there possibly in this most amiable of philosophers, a preparation for the notorious loneliness and callousness and violence of American life which is mixed in with its many authentic and, indeed, unprecedented charms?" (162). Whatever his misgivings toward liberal Christian theology, Updike clearly sees the focus on practical consequences and the social good as the necessary counterpart to the more conservative Lutheran theology that characterizes *Rabbit, Run*'s Reverend Kruppenbach, whose exhortations to prayer would not have prevented Becky's death. Eccles's recommendations, had Harry listened to them, could have. The back-and-forth that Boswell observes in *Rabbit, Run* between the aesthetic and ethical—conditions which Kierkegaard essentially sees as progressive "stages" to faith but principally represents as a dialectic analogous to Hegel's dialectic of matter and spirit—plays itself out in the novel as a bounding between aesthetic pleasure and ethical responsibility, two forms of the *good* which hold their opposites within. *Rabbit, Run*'s zigzag form is Updike's answer to the idealized flight portrayed in *On the Road*, which is not a zigzag but, so to speak, a straight line, of which Harry's flight to West Virginia and return is like a miniature version. This discrepancy in form reflects Updike's concern

with the consequences of pursuing absolutes. The phenomenon that Kierkegaard calls "freedom's possibility" is essentially the same unknown that Norman Mailer envisions when he represents existential situations as conditions that unite desire with fear. It is entirely up to Adam, as Kierkegaard portrays him, whether he will conquer his fear, act upon his desire, and consequently acquire the guilt that freedom confers. The same is true for Harry. And as Boswell's discussion of inwardly expressed morality suggests, it was not a question to which Updike proposed to have a definite answer.

Updike was construing Kierkegaard's nineteenth-century vision of eternity in relation to twentieth-century problems. In his essay on Emerson, he undertook a similar task in relation to a different sort of thinker. While contemporary readers are likely to find Emerson's idealism unpersuasive, says Updike, "a hundred and fifty years ago the men and women of Christendom were imbued with notions of an all-determining, circumambient invisible Power around them" (*Odd Jobs* 152-53). In its suggestion that a unified set of laws is steering the universe, he says, Emerson's Idealism is modern and scientific. Referring to Emerson's claim, in "The American Scholar," that "nature is the opposite of the soul" and that its laws are those of the human mind, Updike asks:

> Can this, we wonder now, and his audience then must have wondered, be true? In what sense can nature, that implacable *other* which our egos oppose, whose unheeding processes make resistance to our every effort of construction and husbandry, and whose diseases and earthquakes and oceans extinguish us with a shrug, be termed identical with our own souls? Is not a world of suffering scandalously excluded from such an equation? (154)

The questions Updike asks about Emerson's idealism revisit some of the issues in his discussion of Barth, where he examines the indifference of nature ("what of those shrugs, those earthquakes and floods and mudslides, whereby the earth demonstrates her utter indifference to her little scum of life?") and suggests that nature itself may be the "Satanic nothingness" that has fallen away from God (90). The identification of nature with human souls in Emerson's address to The Harvard Divinity School signals the creation of a new religion, Updike says. It is "a deliberate affront to our common assumptions, as is Jesus's that the meek shall inherit the earth, or Luther's that men are saved by faith alone, or Buddha's that the craving for existence and rebirth is the source of pain" (155).

Although Emerson did not read Hegel until later in life, the philosophical influences from which he and Hegel drew overlapped (though their interpretations of them were different), and Emerson's premise that each individual soul is a reflection of the Over-soul resembles Hegel's delineation of Spirit. The post-World War II critique of Hegelian teleology (along with Kierkegaard's nineteenth-century critique) clearly lives on in Updike's evaluation of Emerson in 1983. "Self-Reliance," he says, advances a "doctrine of righteous selfishness" ("The Biblical injunction 'Love thy neighbor as thyself' is conveniently shortened to 'Love thyself'"), and there is a reckless dismissal of suffering underlying its optimism (160-61). But at the time they were delivered, he adds, Emerson's optimistic directives to trust nature were not absurd, but "urgently useful," coming as they did at a moment when religious faith was in decline. "The famous American pragmatism and 'can do' optimism were given their most ardent and elegant expression by Emerson" (161). As in Hegel, there is an unyielding absolutism to be

found in Emerson's idealism. Updike traces this quality, noting that people who met or knew Emerson sometimes found him aloof, and that Melville's Mark Winsome, the satirized Emerson of "The Confidence Man," is described as "coldly radiant as a prism" (160). Then there are Emerson's own frank admissions. "The life of truth is cold and so far mournful," he writes in "Experience"; "but it is not the slave of tears, contritions, and perturbations." In Emerson's writing and life—as in the life of Rabbit—affable generosity and unsympathetic coldness coexist. On the subject of Emerson's influence on Nietzsche, Updike returns to the theme of the minister's son who replaces his father's theology with his own: "Both men were ministers' sons exultant in the liberation that came with the 'death' of the Christian God; both were poets and rhapsodists tagged with the name of philosopher." Noting Nietzsche's apparent use of Emerson's philosophical vocabulary, he writes:

> From the "Over-soul" to the "*Übermensch*" to the Supermen of Hitler's Master Race is a dreadful progression for which neither Emerson nor Nietzsche should be blamed; but Emerson's coldness and disengagement and distrust of altruism do become, in Nietzsche, a rapturous celebration of power and domination and the "'boldness' of noble races," and an exhilarated scorn of what the German called "slave morality." (163)

Updike concludes that death camps and modern science preclude contemporary Americans from identifying too easily with Emerson's optimism. Yet he does find an element of truth in Emerson's sense, as expressed in "The Over-Soul," that "a thread runs through all things." "It was Emerson's revelation," he writes, "that God and the self are of the same substance. He may have been wrong, too blithe in Mankind's behalf, to think

that nature—which he called the "*other me*"—is possessed of optimism and always answers to our soul; but he was immensely right in suggesting that the prime *me*, the ego, is perforce optimistic" (168).

Likable in his optimism and morally offensive in his unrelenting idealism, Harry seems to reflect Updike's reading of Emerson. Like Kierkegaard, and others who criticized Hegel, Updike is disturbed by idealism at the point where people become subordinate to the ideal. A less ambivalent portrayal of Emerson by Updike appeared in the *New Yorker* recently, in August 2003, which discusses some books published upon the event of Emerson's two-hundredth birthday. Much current scholarship, Updike laments, has subjected Emerson to the pursuit of political correctness and rendered him "captive to the contentious, incestuous circles of academe" (79). Updike emphasizes in this essay that Emerson's idealism was not intended to be remotely abstracted from real life, but, rather, to adapt Americans to the world in which they found themselves. "He pitched his palace of the Ideal on the particularities and rationale of what existed" (80). Of Emerson's claim for the absoluteness of individual subjectivity and his declaring the self the equal counterpart of the physical universe, Updike writes:

> In a New World so bare and barren, and faced with an overweening Nature such as the species has not encountered since prehistoric migrations, what does a person have? A self. And that is plenty, Emerson assures us. "In all my lectures," he stated in his journals, "I have taught one doctrine, the infinitude of the private man." Possessing his own infinity, a man has nothing to fear, not even (though Emerson treads light on the thin ice of personal immortality) death itself. (80)

This representation of the New World seems to disregard that it was already inhabited when the Europeans arrived (which is a little odd, under the circumstances). In Emerson's time, Updike says, Americans confronted a vast wilderness and needed the sort of individual strength and self-reliance that Emerson advocates. Updike concludes: "Our spiritual essence, it may be, is selfishness; certainly our art, from Whitman to the Abstract Expressionists, flaunts the naked self with a boldness rarely seen in other national cultures" (81). Updike's two essays on Emerson, and his multifaceted responses to Emersonian idealism, provide an illuminating background against which to view the competing types of good represented in *Rabbit, Run.* He presents the pursuit of ideals as Emerson's method of reconciling the general with the particular in a nation which (as Updike says in the later essay) "needs strong selves" but also evidences (as he says in the earlier essay) "notorious loneliness and callousness and violence." The issue that Updike concedes in the later essay inheres throughout the *Rabbit* novels: "Whether American self-assertiveness fits into today's crammed and touchy world can be debated" (81). *Rabbit, Run*, and the moral dilemma it presents, is just such a debate. Is the selfishness that Updike submits as America's "spiritual essence" suited to the present age? Or is it a lingering primitivism, an unreflecting decisiveness useful in the wilderness but unsuited to today's "crammed and touchy" world?

Updike's feeling that the love of open spaces underlies the American sensibility is touched upon elsewhere in interviews and writings. America's notions of virtues, he says in the 1975 interview, "are all countryside notions" (Updike, *Conversations* 78). And in a description of Rabbit's animal nature, in 1971, he points out that in *Rabbit, Run* Harry was content "brainlessly working in Mrs. Smith's garden" (Updike, *Conversations 63*).

Harry, in this sense, is an Adamic hero, seeking to break out of the "crammed" world and redeem himself in a return to nature. His fallen status is suggested in the disappointed dismissal of his father, who responds to Harry's flight from responsibility with the pronouncement that his son is lost to them: "He's too far gone. He'll just slide deeper and deeper now until we might as well forget him" (142). Possessing none of Abraham's faith in his son's return, Earl Angstrom simply responds to the finite evil—not the infinite good—manifested in Harry's leap. Harry is not altogether lost, however. As Boswell observes, he ricochets back and forth; but his perpetual attempts to ascend to grace are viewed by others, including as his father, as retreats away from goodness rather than toward it. Boswell discusses how Updike uses Kierkegaard's concept of "mastered irony," influenced by the Socratic method, of maintaining a balance between both sides of a paradox without revealing his own conclusions so that, in the case of a written text, the reader is compelled to find meaning. The trick for the writer, then, is to "master" the irony by maintaining a dialectic through which meaning is apprehended. For Kierkegaard, however, the "truth" does not simply emerge through the resolution of the dialectic itself; it requires a subjective choice (4-6). As Boswell observes, Updike's own description of his writing as presenting his reader with a moral dilemma bears out this use of Kierkegaardian irony. But Boswell finds Updike finally rejecting a liberal theology of works, concluding that that "Rabbit's belief in his inner life, which is posited as the book's overarching affirmation, does not serve as the solution to this battle of opposites but is itself an irresolvable paradox—that is, the paradox of faith" (9).

Other readings of the novel, however, have been less resolved that Rabbit's inward desire constitutes ethical ground which is affirmed against the aesthetic (which

Boswell finds represented in the theology of Eccles). John Neary, in a work that compares Updike's use of the something-and-nothingness duality to that of John Fowles, goes slightly further, describing *Rabbit, Run* as "existential romanticism." Drawing on Camus's depiction of the Marquis de Sade in *The Rebel*, Neary sees the sadistic pursuit of power, expressed most vividly as a desire to reduce women to objects, as the counterpart of Harry's Romantic idealism. Referring to Kierkegaard's description of repetition as an expression of eternity which reconciles the real and the ideal, Neary says that the "real" Janice is the one Harry remembers nostalgically from the days before their marriage and that, in light of the subsequent *Rabbit* novels, *Rabbit, Run* is "a novel about marriage as repetition" (77). Through Harry's consistent returns to his wife, he says, the novels manifest "that absurd repetition of the ordinary that Kierkegaard sees as the form of redemption itself" (78). The objectifying side of Harry, which Neary calls "Rabbit the Destroyer," closely resembles the detached coolness that Updike identifies in Emerson's idealism and links remotely to the "rapturous celebration of power and domination" in Nietzsche; and the similarity is no coincidence. If God, as Barth submits, cannot exist without simultaneously causing the emergence of that which opposes him, then the pursuit of the ideal is fraught with the possibility of missing its mark and thereby unleashing the evil that God makes possible. This evil, Updike suggests, may exist in nature, and in the "positive lust" and "active hatred" that can arise instantaneously in human impulses; but it is God, after all, who is responsible for nature. Updike once said in an interview, in relation to his novel *Couples*, "I've never really understood theologies which would absolve God of earthquakes and typhoons, of children starving. A god who is not God the Creator is not very real to me, so that, yes, it certainly *is* God who throws

the lightning bolt, and this God is above the nice god, above the god we can worship and empathize with" (Updike, *Conversations* 33). Updike plainly reveals his own faith in a wholly other, supernatural God; but in writing about a powerful faith that reaches for an ideal, he does not exclude the potential for evil that exists in its shadow. Emerson's inattention to the dark side of idealism was perhaps compatible with the era in which he lived, but for a writer of Updike's time this aspect is more difficult to ignore, and the hero of the *Rabbit* books does not altogether escape it.

For all the difficulties that arise from his explanation of the plight of Abraham, Kierkegaard was not indifferent to the potential for evil that lurks around unverifiable faith. This potential is, in fact, implied in the difficulty of Abraham's choice, and in Kierkegaard's unwillingness to express the movement to faith in Hegelian terms, as a mediation of difference which is accomplished through the difference itself. Withdrawing (like Emerson) from religious institutions, maintaining the absolute inwardness of faith, and insisting that the dialectic between mind and spirit can only be overcome through the subjective participation and choice of a mediating individual, Kierkegaard places the responsibility for pursuing ideals in human hands. But he does not thereby resolve the problem of evil. In the hands of anyone other than a "knight of faith" (a type so rare that B doubts he has ever met one), the "teleological suspension of the ethical" can go awry, as it does for Harry. The knight of faith internalizes and transcends both the aesthetic and the ethical. Harry, as Boswell suggests, has not reached this point; he oscillates between the two poles. When Rabbit envisions Ruth as merely an objective nothingness—"the blankness that is his freedom," as Neary puts it (53)—he is thoroughly immersed in the aesthetic realm. Kierkegaard represents truth as subjectivity

and faith as the pursuit of inward truth. *Rabbit, Run* depicts Harry's attempts to reconcile his subjective truth with the world around him, but the effects are sometimes devastating. At Becky's funeral, as Eccles prays that the mourners may find divine assistance to relieve their burden, Harry feels "a strange strength." A bit of light seems to open before him. "Janice's face, dumb with grief, blocks the light. 'Don't look at *me*,' he says. 'I didn't kill her'" (253). Suddenly finding himself the object of everyone's horror, Harry's emotional state shifts. "Forgiveness had been big in his heart and now it's hate. He hates his wife's face. She doesn't *see*. She had a chance to join him in truth, just the simplest factual truth, and she turned away" (253). Harry thinks that in sharing the truth as he sees it he can bring the group into harmony and absolution. But his subjective truth is not theirs.

Another thinker whose work Updike had been reading when he wrote *Rabbit, Run* was Martin Buber. A Jewish theologian who, like Tillich, addressed existential issues in a religious context, Buber explains relations between oneself and others by differentiating between the subject positions "I-You" and "I-It." In the I-It, experience is established; in the I-You, relation is established. Buber locates the absolute in the I-You relation, which, he says, transcends particulars and encompasses the eternal: "in every You we address the eternal You" (57). Differing in this regard from Sartre, whose description of self-other relations uses the term "transcendence" to connote the unavoidable objectification and overcoming between oneself and another (the self transcends the other, the other transcends the self—there is no breaking out of the objectifying relation), Buber says that the inevitable boundary in the I-It experience dissolves in the I-You relation. Buber's theory accommodates the mystical impulse without privileging it to human relations,

though it recognizes that the I-It experience between people ("I-He" and "I-She") is unavoidable: "without It a human being cannot live. But whoever lives only with that is not human" (85). The problem that Buber seeks to resolve is the fundamental dilemma in *Rabbit, Run*. How does Harry pacify his longing for the thing which wants him to find it without abandoning ethics?

The I-It experience represented in Buber is explained in Kierkegaard as aesthetic experience. The aesthete who rejects ethical claims entirely can be seductive but also a bit of a monster. Kierkegaard provides an example of this type in "The Seducer's Diary," the last section of the first part of *Either/Or*. "The Seducer's Diary" is included in the papers of A, who claims to be its editor only. This elicits the skepticism of Victor Eremitus, for understandable reasons. A's foreword to the diary contains great feeling and insight regarding its contents. The author, Johannes, describes how he seduces a young girl named Cordelia, strategically eliciting her complete faith in him only to withdraw his affections. A's description of Johannes is vivid:

> One sees from the diary that what he at times desired was something totally arbitrary, a greeting, for example, and would accept no more at any price, because that was the most beautiful thing about the other person. With the help of his intellectual gifts, he knew how to tempt a girl, how to attract her without caring to possess her in the stricter sense. I can picture him as knowing how to bring a girl to the high point where he was sure that she would offer everything. When the affair had gone so far, he broke off, without the least overture having been made on his part, without a word about love having been said, to say nothing of a declaration, a

> promise. And yet it had happened, and for the unhappy one the consciousness of it was doubly bitter because she did not have the least thing to appeal to, because she was finally agitated in a dreadful witches' dance of the most varied moods as she alternately reproached herself, forgave him, and in turn reproached him. And now, since the relationship had possessed actuality only figuratively, she had to battle continually the doubt whether the whole affair was not a fantasy. She could not confide in anyone, because she did not really have anything to confide. (8-9)

Johannes is taken with Cordelia's beauty and charm, but what he wants is not love but poetry. "He did not belong to the world of actuality," says A, because that world was not stimulating enough for him. "He did not overstrain himself on actuality, he was not too weak to bear it; no, he was too strong, but this strength was a sickness. As soon as actuality had lost its significance as stimulation, he was disarmed, and the evil in him lay in this. He was conscious of this at the very moment of stimulation, and the evil lay in this consciousness" (7-8). The "sickness" of strength that Johannes possesses is like the "strange strength" that Harry feels at times when his inward pursuit of an ideal is manifested as ethical indifference. Johannes knowingly manipulates Cordelia's faith in him because he is enthralled by the sensuousness and power of, so to speak, writing her into his tragedy.

In a 1997 foreword he wrote the Seducer's Diary, Updike observes that the story reflects Kierkegaard's decision, shortly before writing *Either/Or*, to break his engagement to his fiancée Regine Olsen. In various ways, the event figures throughout Kierkegaard's writings as the great sacrifice and inward "secret" that shaped the author's

life and thought. Citing a passage in Kierkegaard's journals in which the break is attributed to a "thorn in the flesh" which prohibits him from marrying, Updike expresses uncertainty as to whether this "thorn" refers to something physical or simply to Kierkegaard's melancholia (xi). The story, Updike says, is Kierkegaard's attempt to make up for his behavior toward Regine. "As he came to frame the matter, 'The Seducer's Diary' was part of his campaign to portray himself as a scoundrel and thus make their break easier for her. His journal of 1849 claims that he wrote it 'for her sake, to clarify her out of the relationship'" (xii). If so, then Kierkegaard's reproduction of the breakup presents the roles of the principal players loosely. In "The Seducer's Diary," the objectless desire incurred through loss (which replicates Kierkegaard's inward and unverifiable religious faith) belongs to Cordelia. It does not afflict Johannes, Kierkegaard's persona. Updike sees the story as embodying the Romantic interest in the psychology of love. Kierkegaard was preoccupied with Mozart's *Don Govanni* (which A examines extensively in Part One of *Either/Or*) and, Updike says, "breathed the same dandyish intellectual atmosphere" that inspired Byron and Stendhal (xiv).

Johannes is drawn to Cordelia's external form and can only fulfill his poetic ideal by transforming her within, drawing on an understanding acquired through his association with other girls. Devising his meticulous plan, he reflects: "What am I doing, then? I am shaping for myself a heart like unto hers. An artist paints his beloved; that is now his joy; a sculptor shapes her. This I, too, am doing, but in an intellectual sense. She does not know that I possess this image and therein really lies my falsification" (122). The science that explains the individual is ethics, says Kierkegaard in his journals. But Johannes possesses no conscience and is devoid of ethics. By seducing Cordelia into

a love that is unreciprocated and fraudulently conceived, thereby bringing the internal into aesthetic harmony with the external ideal, Johannes effects an absolute which is founded on nothing but the difference it reconciles. The seduction is purely systematic. The ethical is suspended, a leap of faith is undertaken on an aesthetic foundation alone, and the consequences for Cordelia are devastating. She thought her faith justified, but finds herself in possession of nothing but her own dissatisfied desire. The ideal is empty. Johannes has reconciled the internal with the external and achieved his Romantic absolute—the beautiful woman in the rapture of love—but Cordelia is a casualty of his scheme. Real people cannot be perfected.

It is in this skepticism toward finite ideals that Updike's view of faith coincides with Kierkegaard's. An ambiguous divide separates objective (aesthetic) understanding from subjective (ethical) understanding. A similar divide separates the internal, subjective consciousness that determines one's behavior from the external world where that behavior produces effects. These divides can only be overcome through the subjective decisions one makes. Like Kierkegaard, Updike recognizes but does not resolve this problem and therefore concludes that it is not *what* one decides that matters most, but the position *from* which one decides. To leap, like Johannes, from a position of predetermined, objective understanding alone (to engage in what Buber calls I-It experience) can have severe consequences if the object in question is not just an object but a living subject as well. However, Kierkegaard maintains, in leaping from an ethical, subjective position when there is no way out but to choose, one will choose the right thing. Johannes's ethical transgression lies in the premeditated, objectifying nature of his actions. His position toward Cordelia is not, to use Buber's terms, a *relation to* but an

experience of another person. In *Rabbit at Rest* Harry finally accomplishes the expatiation of his daughter's drowning when, in the midst of a heart attack, he saves his granddaughter, Judy, from drowning after their sailboat overturns in the Gulf of Mexico. It is not in pursuit that his faith finds confirmation, but in necessity, when he is compelled to act with his instincts as his only guide: "Once Rabbit told someone, a prying clergyman, *somewhere behind all this there's something that wants me to find it.* Whatever it is, it now has found *him*, and is working him over" (1172). Harry is placed in the position described by Emerson in "Experience": "A sympathetic person is placed in the dilemma of a swimmer among drowning men, who all catch at him, and if he gives so much as a leg or a finger, they will drown him." Unable to locate Judy after the boat topples, he realizes that she must be under the sail. When he contacts her arm, she panics and claws at him as he gasps for air. Updike's response to Emerson's characterization of sympathy in "Experience" is skeptical: "The practical ethics of Idealism, then, turn out to be seclusion and stoicism." When Harry finally makes amends for Rebecca's death by saving Judy, he rejects these ethics. In fact, his entire purpose is to the girl's life, even if at the expense of his own. His intuitive actions enact the subjective ethics of Kierkegaard. Finding himself at a crossroads, he does the right thing. He locates *it* not through experience founded on solitary withdrawal but in action motivated by sympathy.

Conclusion

"Play-acting robbed me of the world and of human beings," Sartre wrote in his autobiography of 1964, describing the sense of falseness he felt in his childhood home (53). In his eyes, his family was given to postures that had nothing to do with the larger reality that was somehow present but not taken hold of. As an adult, Sartre longed to recover the reality he felt had been denied him as a child. In American literature and film, this missing truth seemed accessible, but it was not apprehended merely through intellect. The characters in Dos Passos, Hemingway, Faulkner, and Cain unreflectingly performed *real* acts, arrived at through feeling, and culminating in intuition. During an emotional experience, Sartre wrote in 1948, "the affected subject and the affective object are bound in an indissoluble synthesis. Emotion is a certain way of apprehending the world" (*Emotions* 52). American literature, as he initially perceived it, showed how reality could be apprehended. The fiction was authentic. It presented an answer to an inauthentic reality.

The disappointment is discernible, consequently, when he writes, in 1946, after visiting the U.S.: "Perhaps nowhere else will you find such a discrepancy between people and myth, between life and the representation of life." Whatever the merits of its literature, America itself had not done away with falseness; it had compounded it. Postwar American writers frequently came to similar conclusions, and a handful of them drew on the work of Sartre and Camus to address the problem. It was in occupied France, they felt, that real life had been revealed through action. It was under the threat of an immediate, dangerous enemy that the definitive qualities of human life had been

revealed. This may be so, but the Occupation had not cured the dissemblers of their play-acting; more likely, it had revealed that dissembling is one of the definitive qualities of human life.

Existentialism, as understood in France and America, progressed through many changes, but it was consistently viewed as a philosophy that addressed human life in general by revealing its mysteries in the particular. The truth lay in the actions of the individual who confronts a crisis. Sartre, who was basically an incurable individualist, held a conflicted view of the human psyche. He accepted the theory of a divided, Cartesian consciousness (and clearly possessed one himself), but he longed for experience that would allow him to transcend this condition through action. Events in France during the war years and afterward compounded the conflicts. Intuition told him that individuals alone created themselves; social conditions and history told him otherwise. In addition, the aspects of American culture that he had once found most intriguing he now felt ethically compelled to reject. And among fellow leftists he met with the inevitable conflicts provoked by Stalinism. The variety of opinions he consequently expressed elicited skepticism among American journalists and intellectuals, who began to wonder, finally, whether he had a point to make at all. But the principal source of their ill will was his openness to Marxism, a subject with which he himself never fully came to terms.

Since he never ceased to define vitality in relation to conflict, the controversies he stirred up must have thrilled him, in a way. And, for the postwar American writers who were drawn to existentialism, conflict and vitality were precisely the point. Wright, Mailer, and Updike all drew on existentialist ideas to represent a war, but it was a war of

beliefs and ideas. Having bitterly abandoned Communism, Wright nevertheless continued to fight political battles. But, like Sartre, Camus, and Beauvoir, he ceased to identify with either the left or the right, and began looking for a third way. Rejecting the dominant ideologies of his time, he turned to purportedly amoral philosophies, hoping that they might supersede the moral values which, he believed, blinded people to social and political truths. He thought that the ideas of Nietzsche would assist him in formulating a worldview that coincided with the times.

In Mailer's view, the principal flaw of existentialism was that it did not sufficiently address emotion. It did, however, seem to offer a method with which to combat dissemblers, who were all around. In certain ways, Mailer was one himself. Existentialism presented a philosophy of conflict with which to peel away the layers of disguise in which the dissemblers had cloaked themselves, revealing the essential human emotions and impulses that lay stifled beneath the whole, repressive masquerade. Mailer could only reach the bottom of all the falseness by plunging into it himself. He did not cast off the language or methods or forms of his adversaries; but he was interested in casting off the ideas from which the language, methods, and forms had sprung. Like Sartre and Camus, Mailer is a firm believer in the restorative powers of action. The wellspring of human life was being smothered by Western civilization and could only be liberated through some physical or psychic expression of sex and war. From his friend Jean Malaquais, Mailer had inherited a Trotskyite ethic of permanent revolution which was compatible with the existentialist ethic of creating oneself in a crisis.

John Updike saw his faith, derived from a Lutheran upbringing, as incompatible with the prevailing ideas of his own time but similar in spirit to the ideas of Kierkegaard.

As a man of his time, Updike did not entirely reject liberal doctrine which seeks to accommodate reason and promote a theology of salvation through "works." He chose, rather, to write a novel set in the present with a hero whose spiritual longings hearken to the past, and he draws on the ideas and techniques of Kierkegaard to sort through the conflict. And like Kierkegaard's exploration of faith, Updike's does not fail to address the potential for evil that arises alongside the desire to apprehend an unknowable God. As in Wright and Mailer, in Updike, the conflict addressed is fraught with inevitable disasters, dead-ends, and compromises. The importation of European ideas by these American writers did not, finally, solve the riddle to which it was applied. It did not conclusively reveal the essence of human life and its relation to desire, any more than nineteenth-century Transcendentalism had conclusively revealed the essence of God and his relation to human life. It provided real people with a method of addressing actual problems. It gave them a way to act out an answer, even if the answer, as they lived it, could not be entirely apprehended by the intellect and the senses.

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