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**Bernard-Henri Lévy**, *Sartre: The Philosopher of the Twentieth-Century*. Translated by Andrew Brown. Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2003. v + 536 pp. Notes and Index. \$30.95 U.S. (cl). ISBN 0-7456-3009-X.

Review by Jonathan Judaken, University of Memphis.

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Jean-Paul-Charles-Eymard Sartre, born in Paris 21 June 1905, had his centenary fêted everywhere from the capitals of Europe to Rio de Janeiro this past year. On the airwaves and at academic conferences, in magazines, journals, and newspapers, the intellectual dexterity of Sartre, who—ironically enough—argued that he wrote for his own time, was often ceremoniously pitted against the philosophical and political challenges of the new century. If Michel Foucault once condemned him as a man of the nineteenth century and a slew of others derided him for his political errors over the course of the twentieth century, he was also repeatedly and justifiably celebrated this past year as a prophet of the problems that face us after 9/11, even when this did not entail the endorsement of his solutions.

This Sartrean revival actually began five years ago with the 20th anniversary of Sartre's death (15 April 1980), most propitiously with the publication of Bernard-Henri Lévy's *Le Siècle de Sartre*. Lévy's work was the most visible of a tide of new titles on Sartre in early 2000, with sales buoyed by headlines plastered on news kiosks all over Paris. The weekly periodical *Le Nouvel Observateur's* posters declared, "After 20 Years of Purgatory, Sartre returns," while *Le Point* cautioned, "Sartre: The Passion for Making Mistakes." The weeklies were followed by regular newspaper and magazine articles, often illustrated by those iconic photos of Sartre: his eyes that didn't trust each other, bespectacled, elegantly dressed and smoking if young; still damning the injustices of the system, passing out Maoist tracts outside Billancourt in an old sweater draped over his aging body in his last years. In contrast to this "whole man, made of all men, worth all of them, and any one of them worth him," as the famous last lines of Sartre's autobiography *Words* proclaimed, Lévy's book recalled him from purgatory in order to judge him *the* philosopher of the twentieth-century.

Lévy's reputation was established as the impresario of the "Nouveaux Philosophes," primarily post-'68 thinkers who rose to prominence in the mid-1970s by castigating Marxism.[1] Always a media-magnet with a cunning sense for what sells, debonair in his unbuttoned signature silk shirt and suit, his suave locks swaying to the staccato of his energetic embrace of Sartre, Lévy touted his significance in eighteen press interviews and seven lectures around France, on six TV talk shows, on the radio and in several public appearances just in early 2000.[2] His campaign continued across the Atlantic with this fine English translation of the book.

The work certainly merits reading for those who are knowledgeable enough about the French intellectual scene to know Lévy by his acronym (BHL), but who have never actually dipped into any of his ever-growing list of titles or his six volumes on the history of intellectuals. The book also has innumerable insights for Sartrelogues or scholars of twentieth-French intellectual history, since Lévy proves that he is an erudite and perceptive historian of ideas.

The English title does not convey as well as the French what Lévy aptly demonstrates, which is that all of twentieth-century cultural life can be revealed through the prism of Sartre. For Lévy, the twentieth-century is a kaleidoscope of images, events, debates and confrontations, both political and philosophical. Indeed what distinguishes it are ideologies at war: the Dreyfus Affair, competing nationalisms in World

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War I, democratic values against the totalitarian impulses of fascism and communism, decolonization in opposition to imperialism, Zionism confronted by pan-Arabism, revolutionary violence opposed to systemic exploitation. The primordial philosophical grounds of these conflicts are struggles about the nature of truth, subjectivity, morality, and history.

Sartre's oeuvre becomes the occasion for Lévy to riff on these issues, situating Sartre in the fray, drawing upon the resources in his corpus to respond to these challenges, delimiting where he goes astray, defining the Sartrean theorems that we need to call upon in our own time. Lévy's great gift is as an orator (something which does not translate to his now frequent appearances on American television), which is part of the reason he is so telegenic. The book's conversational but polemical style is absorbing because it is structured around a series of intellectual and political episodes in the drama of the twentieth-century. While inevitably a large tome--Sartre was a writing-machine who covered the gamut of genres in the forty thousand pages of philosophy, literature, theatre, published letters, journalism, political interventions, screen writing, biography, and autobiography that he produced--Lévy's volume is eminently readable because it is constructed as a series of vignettes and mini-essays that paint a distinctive portrait of Sartre. In the process, we are treated to interesting snapshots on Gide, Dos Passos, Joyce, Céline, Bergson, and Heidegger (among others), whose influence on Sartre and the cultural conflicts of the century are elaborated. In the background, Lévy sometimes offers wonderful depictions of little or never explored themes, for example an excursus on Sartre and his travel literature, or Lévy's portrayal of Sartre as a nomadic state roving the globe as an ambassador of the oppressed, presenting an alluring alternative to the Gaullist, official state of the French Republic.

Lévy's thesis is duplicitously simple: Sartre is Janus-faced, a Jekyll and Hyde schizo-character: the anti-humanist, libertarian, individualist, anti-metaphysical, dystopian, pessimistic Sartre and the humanist, communitarian, metaphysical, utopian, optimistic Sartre are two souls that share the same body of works. Sartre spoke of his split personality in *Words*: "I thought I had two voices of which one--which barely belonged to me and did not depend on my will--dictated its words to the other. I decided that I was double" (p. 353). Lévy puts it thus: "In short, these different aspects are mingled together. All tangled up. There wasn't the 'good', faultless Sartre on one side--and...the bad Sartre, the lost and damned Sartre, an entirely wretched Sartre who continually made mistakes and dragged his period along with him as he pursued his erroneous course...there was a fragile, mobile, perpetually shifting line that divided his life and also his work into two, call them the 'first' and the 'second' Sartre" (p. 347 and passim).

Lévy opens himself to critique when he treats the first Sartre as *the* Sartre. His preference is clearly for the existentialist Sartre, "that of 'the man alone', the Sartre of *Nausea*, of *The Childhood of a Leader*, of the *War Diaries* and *Being and Nothingness*, the Sartre we have seen discovering Husserl and Heidegger, devouring Nietzsche, detaching himself from Bergson," who "was one of the few minds of his generation not to have felt the need to pass through Marx" (p. 402). This Sartre comports perfectly with Lévy's own core values: his "anti-Marxism; the love of breaking off and interrupting; the sense for events; temporalities that are multiple, layered, hierarchized; the end of dialectic and the end of the end of history; the reactionary idea of progress; historical pessimism...the rejection of everything that could resemble a collective subject of history; the rejection of thoughts of the origin and the end; the rejection of eschatologies (even when they are democratic and liberal) and their replacement by Messianism (but the true version, that of Maimonides and the Maharal of Prague)...and, at the end of the day, inevitably, theoretical anti-humanism" (p. 186). This is Lévy the deconstructive thinker.

What he seeks to deconstruct is the second Sartre: Sartre the Marxist--historicist, progressive, revolutionary--all too enthralled with "the cult of youth, pietism, the worship of reality...a desire for purity," (p. 398) the Sartre enthused with the combustive mixture that led to the death of millions over

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the century. It is this second Sartre—the Communist and Stalinist, defender of Castro, who spoke of ‘genocide’ in connection with the bombardment of Vietnam, who wrote that the freedom to criticize was total in the USSR and said that an anti-Communist was a dog, Sartre the anti-American, the Sartre who touted the therapeutic value of revolutionary violence in order to establish the new Man, the humanist-all-too-humanist Sartre (p. 374 and *passim*)—that Lévy seeks to immunize with the first Sartre.

Lévy’s Sartre sparkles, however, when he reads him not as a good and a bad Sartre, but as a man at war with himself, as a “technician of self-disowning, this master of the art of infidelity, [who] had always made it the first imperative of any thought worthy of the name to force oneself to think against oneself, to break the bones in one’s head, to break, as much as possible the stone of one’s own ideas. He had spent his life, as you will remember, changing, denying himself, tearing up one section of his work, feverishly replacing it with another, breaking off again, disappointing people, taking back his words, contradicting himself” (p. 489). Reading Sartre this way demands attention to the contextual specifics, both philosophical and political, of Sartre’s most controversial positions and prevents the reduction of Sartre to sound bites, something which Lévy sometimes falls prey to.

Both Lévy’s astute and imperceptive readings of Sartre are the result of his style of interpretation. He is a generous reader (although less so to the army of scholars whose work he has absorbed but often does not bother to cite). But he is also a thin reader. He has skimmed the vast surface, but does not always read rigorously, preferring instead to dip into Sartre and the debates about him, to make an interesting point here and to engage in a skirmish there. Indeed, one imagines that Lévy reads in the manner he asserts about Sartre: “He could read as fast as he wanted to. He had, like all warrior philosophers, an infallible detector, attached to the end of his philosophical rifle, which immediately alerted him to his mortal enemy” (p. 205). The result is that his conclusions are almost always justified, but often by the force of his rhetoric more than a nuanced investigation of the texts and their contexts.

For example, a hot area of recent debate concerns Sartre in the Vichy period. There has been a long list of accusations piling up since the 1980s about Sartre’s *arrivisme* (i.e., the idea that his overriding priority during the war was the advancement of his career), and that this led to his willing accommodation to Vichy. After all, he became a star in 1943, the year he published *Being and Nothingness* with the German censor’s imprimatur and had his first play performed in an Aryanized theatre that advertised in the collaborationist press to which he contributed the occasional article. At the same time, however, he wrote for the underground press and very early tried to establish a resistance organization, the short-lived *Socialisme et liberté*. Lévy is certainly right in concluding about the period, “Neither in his published work, nor in his letters and notebooks, will you find a word expressing the least sympathy or affinity of ideas with Vichy. And of the texts he did publish, of his plays...of *Being and Nothingness*, there is nothing to be said—except that, for those who read them, heard their message, understood them, they could only reinforce the spirit of resistance” (p. 289). Sartre was unquestionably anti-Pétainist and totally opposed to Nazi ideology in all its variants. He rightly summed up the war years by saying that he was a “writer who resisted, rather than a resistor who wrote.” But what Sartre wrote, where it was published, what that meant, and how it was read at the time was ambiguous—like every aspect of culture under the German occupation—and requires more careful attention to the details than Lévy provides.[3]

The same is true of Sartre’s Marxism and its ongoing relevance in the age of globalization. While for Lévy, “the cause is an open and shut case. For us, the children of the century now ended, the witnesses or clerks of its bloody balance-sheet, for us who now have at our disposal all the pieces of that macabre account, the time of illusion is, fortunately, over. Stalin was already in Lenin. Lenin was already in Marx” (p. 360). The quote might come right out of *Barbarism with a Human Face* (1977). Much of Lévy’s itinerary since he achieved fame with that work has been to articulate a left-leaning, politically liberal

philosophy of rebellion (à la Camus) wedded to human rights. But in an age of economic neo-liberalism that has gutted the social welfare system in the interest of large corporations, Sartre's labor to forge an anti-Stalinist Marxism that could account for the geo-global structural forces of exploitation, while remaining faithful to his existential philosophy of freedom remains a goal to be recovered not rejected.[4]

Nonetheless, when Lévy is attentive to the tensions and contradictions within Sartre's life and work, when he appreciates that Sartre's insights are often inseparable from his blindnesses, when he comports with Sartre's own judgment about some of his political positions that "he was wrong, but he was right to be wrong," then Lévy is at his best. This is the case in his examination of the cultural influences that shaped Sartre's itinerary (Part I), his argument that "existentialism is an anti-humanism" (Part II, Chapter 1 and passim), his insistence that Sartre was an "anti-fascist from beginning to end" (Part II, Chapter 3), and who thus provided the theorems to countermand any flirtation with totalitarianism, and in his readings of *Bariona* (p. 272-77 and 389-95), *Anti-Semite and Jew* (p. 301-06), "Black Orpheus" (p. 408-09), *Words* (Part III, Chapter 5), and *Hope Now* (Epilogue).

Ultimately, Lévy's Sartre is compelling because his thesis shuttles the academic debates about Sartre. Says Lévy, "There are two ways, at least, of reading a philosopher. There's the academic's way. Respecting what the philosopher said, faithful to the true body of his doctrine, logical, attentive, above all, to correctly discovering the order of his reasons and his system. And then there is the philosophers' way, in other words the writers' way, invoking another's thought only because they don't yet have the means (but will they ever?) of daring to affirm their own, to raise their voice, assume it, think in their own name. A wild reading then. The reading of a pillager and, once again, of a warrior. Reading the thought of an older figure so as to find in it one's thought in gestation" (p. 100). Lévy's "wild reading" of *Sartre* has the virtue of re-examining him anew in the twenty-first century, but it would be even more compelling if Lévy had a few more of the vices of an academic.

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## NOTES

[1] On the Nouveaux Philosophes, see the excellent chapter in Michael Scott Christofferson, *French Intellectuals Against the Left: The Antitotalitarian Moment of the 1970s* (New York and Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2004). See also Jonathan Judaken, "Alain Finkielkraut and the Nouveaux Philosophes: French-Jewish Intellectuals, the Afterlives of May '68 and the Rebirth of the National Icon," *Historical Reflections/Réflexions Historiques* 32.1 (2006): 193-223.

[2] For the statistics on Lévy's promotion and also for her sharp criticism of the work, see Elizabeth Bowman, "Thanks to BHL, France Rediscovered her Hated Sartre," *Sartre Studies International* 8.2 (December 2002): 68-93.

[3] The turning point in the historiography of Sartre's actions under the German occupation was a posthumously published interview by Vladimir Jankélévitch in which he accused Sartre of developing his theory of political *engagement* as a "compensation" for actions not taken during the Vichy period; see "Jankélévitch, le mal de la bivalence," *Libération* (Monday 10 June 1980): 34-35. Until that interview, Sartre was almost universally represented as a key figure of the intellectual resistance to the Nazis, a distinction that helped to underpin his intellectual and cultural capital in the postwar period. Gilbert Joseph, a former resistor, sought to turn this tradition on his head when he penned the scandalous assault on Sartre's choices during the war years; see *Une si douce Occupation* (Paris: Albin Michel, 1991). While not as polemical as Joseph, Francine de Martinoir alleges that Sartre "only cared about his

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career” and questions why he “pretended to be someone who resisted”; see *La Littérature occupée: Les années de guerre, 1939-1945* (Paris: Hatier, 1995), p. 143. Likewise, Tony Judt, whose *Past Imperfect* was published first in French, takes Jankélévitch’s line when he questions whether Sartre was “Making up for lost time? Feelings of guilt assuaged through a commitment they had been unable to make when it mattered?”; see *Past Imperfect: French Intellectuals, 1944-1956* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1992), p. 56. Jean-François Sirinelli attempts to take a more balanced approach, arguing that while Sartre certainly was no great resistor he did not deserve the opprobrium cast upon him by Joseph. He uses Philippe Burrin’s notion of a “constrained accommodation” to define his judgment about Sartre’s choices; see Sirinelli, *Sartre et Aron: Deux intellectuels dans le siècle* (Paris: Fayard, 1995), p. 188. Nonetheless, for Sirinelli’s version of Jankélévitch’s argument, see 198. For my own effort to undertake the kind of nuanced examination of Sartre choices during the dark years that I call for here, see chapter two of *Jean-Paul Sartre and the Jewish Question: Anti-Antisemitism and the Politics of the French Intellectual* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, forthcoming November 2006).

[4] For a more sensitive reading of Sartre’s anti-Stalinist leftism, see Ian Birchall’s *Sartre Against Stalinism* (New York: Berghahn, 2004).

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