Sartre is Dead

In place of our usual editorial, in this issue we publish differing responses to Sartre's death by two members of the Editorial Collective.

Sartre's productive career was at a close some time ago. Death formally completed what had always been a career of incompleteness - unpublished works, projects announced but never undertaken, radical reassessments of previous work. Nevertheless, the occasion has given critics the opportunity for definitive valedictories. An appropriately Sartrean irony this, since it is in death that the individual's life is finally and irrevocably subsumed under le regard of the Other. Often, the first person plural insinuates in such tributes. Sartre is adopted as the philosopher of 'our' century, 'we' can forgive him his excesses, he who has taught 'us' so much. With no other philosopher, perhaps, did such an unashamedly individualistic project of self-expression command such familial sentiments. Sartre's work, it is felt, was and remains the testimony of a shared world of experience. Yet for no-one else was the description 'lifework' so apposite, if only because its two composite terms remained inseparable. That infamous outpouring of words was, from beginning to end, the textual sacralisation of one unique and irreducible life experience.

This paradox defined the work itself, for its essence lay in the stubborn pursuit of the 'singular universal'. Sartre's impassioned, honest and rigorous interrogation of his own situation sought to yield the universal sense of all human situations. His would be the truth for and of n'importe qui.

Sartre called Kierkegaard the 'privileged witness' of subjectivity; but he himself sought to be the privileged witness of his own time, making sense of it by making sense of himself within it. It is this which inclines sympathetic critics to view Sartre as both the most unique and the most representative thinker of this century. However, it needs to be said that Sartre's work not only failed to efface the singularity of its origins, but also reproduced individuality in its profoundest sense. Practical solipsism, anarchistic individualism and philosophical isolation are the hallmarks of this work.

From the failure of Rassemblement Democratique Revolutionnaire to his opportunistic support of the French Marxists, Sartre's political career is both marginal and largely ineffectual. His greatest mistrust was always reserved for politics, and it was precisely the intelligibility of collective political action that his theory precluded. What political efficacy he had derived, ironically, from what he had most cause to resent and mistrust - his status as a celebrity. At worst his philosophy could cynically be described as inspired eclecticism and 'existentialism', in particular, as the popularising importation into France of German work. Merleau-Ponty remains the more acute, sophisticated and original interpreter of Heidegger and Husserl. The abstract appeal to literary commitment apart, Sartre's own novels and plays served no popular cause and, for the most part, belong to a classical literary tradition. In this respect, Sartre's somewhat clumsy appreciation of Brecht is not without significance.

Sartre's personal style was monologic and conjoined with both an express disdain for philosophical exchange and an abrupt dismissal of critics. At its best, this produced polemical prose of inspired proportions; at worst, it infuriated by its unrepentant isolationism. When Sartre admitted error, it was retrospective, on his own terms, and served implicitly to confirm the correctness of his current approach. Open debate, dialogue, fraternal cooperation and collective inquiry were all foreign to Sartre.

Significantly, 'Sartreans' seem united less by their common subscription to the letter of a theoretical text than indebtedness to the spirit of the author's project. That spirit was fundamentally moral. Despite the unpublished 'Ethics' and despite the assumed status of political thinker, Sartre always remained a moraliste who vainly sought a politics commensurate with his moral

standards. And what always fired his moral indignation was the ethics and ethos of a bourgeoisie who dominated the 'backward province' of France - from the insufferable conceit of the Bouville burghers in Nausea, through the anti-communist 'rats' of the 1950s, to the complacent cons who believed in elections in the 1970s. His was the spirit of non-conformist resistance to all forms of established authority - intellectual, social and political. That non-conformist spirit manifested itself in an unparalleled literary prodigality. Such were the bombs thrown against established order - his words.

The uncompromising articulation of his own situation gave Sartre's work its merits of sustained interrogation and obdurate, passionate search. However, such virtues cannot obscure the subjectivist foundations of such writing. Honest, dispassionate and critical self-expression is not alien to solipsism. It may well be its most distinguished characteristic.

David Archard

What has Sartre left us? Perhaps more than anything else his own problem: a life seen through its traces, an experience to be reconstituted and hung on its structural supports, but always eventually escaping us. It would be too easy, especially in the present climate on the intellectual left, to mistake the traces for the life. We could mark his death with an assessment of his theoretical contribution to Marxism and radical theory generally; catalogue his successes and mistakes; and then file him away to be rediscovered by some future generation of leftist academics establishing themselves against what has rapidly become a new orthodoxy.

This would be a mistake. His production was too great and it is simply too early to attempt any such assessment; and even if we confined ourselves to his philosophy, it would defy labelling. What we can find in his vast output, and what I think marks him off from other left philosophers of his generation, is a reflection of and the attempt to come to grips with the real conditions of existence of the 'petit-bourgeois intellectual' who is also a revolutionary - conditions which, with appropriate modifications for time and place, are our own.

Since the early 1940s, and I think implicitly throughout, his work and life was marked by the attempt to tread a very narrow line between two frequently contradictory goals. On the one hand, there is something which can best be called 'honesty': the pursuit of a philosophical and literary vision which was peculiarly his own, and the pursuit of a more personal honesty (although at least as far as their published work is concerned, Simone de Beauvoir far outdistanced him here). On the other hand there was the revolutionary commitment to effective political action. Few of us have our own visions, so perhaps we should substitute academic careers on one side, but we can find here something like our own situation. We are committed to a politics which goes beyond ideas, but also to interests and activities, not to mention privileges, which are all but irrelevant to most of those with whom we must engage politically, and which can separate us from them. This seems to remain the case however often we assert the necessity of revolutionary theory to revolutionary practice.

If we expect a solution, then Sartre's life and work must stand as a failure; if we can recognise that there is no solution, he can teach us something of what we have to live with. Directly, his tortuous relationship with the Parti Communiste Francais, his attempt to transform himself into a peoples' intellectual, his insistence on speaking out against threats, all these reflect, in a more dramatic and public form, our own problems. Whatever the relationship we adopt to the organised left, to mass movements as they arise, to local or national repressions, we can find them documented and explored in his work. Whatever their failings, we can still learn from Existentialism and Humanism, The Communists and Peace, A Plea for Intellectuals and the 1968 interviews.

But I think the indirect lessons are more important, drawn from the expanse of his work and his theoretical project itself, its intention rather than its content. In a range including novels, dramas, political theory and journalism, literary and art criticism, autobiography and biography, we can find the separations and fragmentations with which we all have to contend: not only the division between the personal, political and theoretical and, over his lifetime, fragmentations within each of these. The strand of unity is the project of totalisation, the rational, political and personal need to bring all these together. Yet in his traces they remain separate: already he is being remembered for his plays rather than his novels, his novels rather than his philosophy, his politics rather than anything else. Even in its explicit heart, the project denies itself, reveals its own impossibility: the useless passion of human existence, the collapse of the revolutionary group into manipulable seriality.

If Sartre is right in arguing that the intellectual is defined by the movement towards universality, and if that very project must reveal its own impossibility, then our personal and political conflicts are symptoms of an unavoidable dilemma. We cannot give up the project: that would be to deny reason itself, to give up hope. Nor can we confine ourselves to one fragment: there is no more hope in those who are only political militants than there is in those who are only philosophers. Yet we cannot succeed. Sartre has left us first an example: it is possible to continue, even when that means documenting our failure; and second some footholds, along different paths and at different intervals, to which our lives will force us to return whether we like it or not. That is why, finally, any attempt at a conclusive assessment of his work would be counterproductive.

Ian Craib