Sartre and Postmodernism:
The Singular Universal

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Human relationships in *Being and Nothingness* are notoriously conflict-ual. In the chapter "Concrete Relations with Others," we see a "hellish circle" of relationships—possessive love, masochism, indifference, sexual domination, sadism—which spiral about subject/object role-playing. This particular chapter is the twin of an earlier chapter, "Bad Faith," where Sartre portrays how an individual subject plays various games of denial within itself. "Concrete Relations with Others" shows how various games of denial can be played out in the presence of others. Both chapters end their discussions of "bad faith" behavior with footnotes advising the read-er that these relationships do not exhaust possibilities of relationships with self and others.[1] In fact, Sartre, on several occasions in *Being and Nothingness*, warns the reader of the limited scope of that very large book. His interest there is to track down various forms of bad faith, iso-late their motivation (the desire to eliminate contingency), and suggest a cure (existential psychoanalysis). Sartre ends with a promise to address the issue of what human existence might look like following a successful cure.

Dominant strains of modernity are present in *Being and Nothingness* in the influences of Descartes and Husserl, the *cogito* tradition, but Sartre manages to turn them in a postmodern direction with his notion of *néant* (difference). Both consciousness' "presence" to the world and to itself are enabled by differentiation, precluding any fusion of self and alterity. Human existence is a perpetual "detotalized totality." It is the dream of overcoming differentiation and achieving totality that is the motive for bad faith behavior, thus indicating that any authentic behavior must be based on an acceptance of differentiation. Subsequent to *Being and Nothingness*, however, when Sartre began to articulate an authentic ethics and politics, modernity, in the form of universalization, captured his thinking.

What Is Literature? marks an important step in the direction of Sartre's ethics and politics, introducing the vocabulary of "reciprocity," "recognition," "generosity," "gift," and "appeal," in place of the earlier discourse of conflict in depicting human relationships. Literature, as a form of communication, requires the joint effort of writer and reader, each implicitly recognizing the freedom of the other—for literature, involving aesthetic objects, in Sartre's view requires imagination. In writing the writer "addresses" and "appeals" to the reader, who in turn,

in picking up the work, implies a certain "confidence" in the writer. The "essence" of literature is seen to imply a "community" of writers and readers in a joint venture of revealing and evaluating the meaning of the human condition. As such, the "appeal" of a literary work is universal: "There doesn't seem to be any doubt: one writes for the universal reader, and we have seen, in effect, that the exigency of the writer is, as a rule, addressed to *all* men."[2]

This "ideal" of literature is then contrasted by Sartre to the "situation" of literature in its historical reality, where one finds particularity. Sartre offers an analysis of the state of literature in the twelfth, seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth centuries to show how the essence of literature was alienated in those eras. For example, in the twelfth century writing was in the hands of a class of "clerks," literate functionaries dedicated to "preserving and transmitting Christian ideology." The writing of clerks for clerks excluded the mass of illiterate people by co-opting the universal (form of communication) for the particular. Similarly, in the seventeenth century writing was co-opted by the class of nobles and the authors dependent upon their patronage, whose literary role was to offer flattering and self-justifiying pictures of the life of nobility. At the conclusion of his historical examples, he sums up:

> The examples we have chosen have served to *situate* the freedom
> of the writer in different ages, to illuminate by the limits of the
> demands made upon him the limits of his appeal, to show by the
> idea of his role which the public fashions for itself the necessary
> boundaries of the idea which it invents of literature. And if it is
> true that the essence of the literary work is freedom totally
> disclosing itself and willing itself as appeal to the freedom of other
> men, it is also true that different forms of oppression, by hiding
> from men the act that they were free, have screened all or part of
> this essence from authors (*WIL*, 133).

The "essence" of literature implies a "virtual" or "universal" audience, while Sartre's historical examples show an "actual," particular audience, caught up in class differentiations. Sartre likens the community implied in the essence of literature to Kant's City of Ends:

> Let us bear in mind that the man who reads strips himself in some
> way of his empirical personality and escapes from his resentments,
> his fears, and his lusts in order to put himself at the peak of his
> freedom. This freedom takes the literary work and, through it,
> mankind, for absolute ends. It sets itself up as an unconditioned
> exigence in relationship to itself, to the author, and to possible

readers. It can therefore be identified with Kantian *good will* which, in every circumstance, treats man as an end and not as a means. Thus, by his very exigence, the reader attains that chorus of good wills which Kant has called the City of Ends, which thousands of readers all over the world who do not know each other are, at every moment, helping to maintain (*WIL*, 218).

The achievement of the City of Ends is the goal of morality and politics, for only in "the coming of the City of Ends" do we find "the presentiment of Justice which permits us to be shocked by particular injustices, that is, to put it precisely, to regard them as injustices" (*WIL*, 235). The moral and political task is to reshape society in order to realize the City of Ends: "If the City of Ends remains a feeble abstraction, it is because it is not realizable without an objective modification of the historical situation" (*WIL*,221). Kant must be supplemented by Marx, since literature can achieve its essence only in a classless, democratic society, involving "suppression of classes, abolition of all dictatorship, constant renewal of frameworks, and the continuous overthrowing of order once it tends to congeal. In short, literature is in essence the subjectivity of a society in permanent revolution" (*WIL*, 139). Authentic political life requires the achievement of the universal by negating the particular.

In *Black Orpheus* (1949), Sartre retains the universal/particular opposition for political purposes but, in dealing with "negritude," modifies it, according a positive role for particularity. Written as an introduction to an anthology of black, revolutionary poetry, *Black Orpheus* offers an analysis of writing as a revolutionary act. Colonial France, in an attempt to dominate its colonial possessions, imposed the French language with the aim of forming a French identity in its colonial people. Sartre sees the black poets whose work is included in the anthology as engaged in an attempt to "de-Frenchify" the French language, employing it creatively to express a way of being in the world ("negritude") quite other than the way of being in the world that underpinned the development of the French language: "Since the oppressor is present in the very language that they speak, they will speak the language in order to destroy it."[3] This black poetry refuses assimilation to the oppressor and creates a raised consciousness, a "black subjectivity" necessary for emancipatory struggle:

> The unity which will come eventually, bringing all oppressed
> peoples together in the same struggle, must be preceded in the
> colonies by what I shall call the moment of separation or nega-
> tivity: this antiracist racism is the only road that will lead to the
> abolition of racial differences (BO, 296).

Sartre sees this colonial struggle to be part of a struggle of "all oppressed peoples" toward a "unity" that lies ahead. The particularism of "negritude," a necessary moment in the project of emancipation, must eventually give way to universalism:

> It is when negritude renounces itself that it finds itself; it is when it accepts losing that it has won: the colored man—and he alone —can be asked to renounce the pride of his color. He is the one who is walking on this ridge between past particularism—which he has just climbed—and future universalism, which will be the twilight of his negritude; he is the one who looks to the end of particularism in order to find the dawn of the universal (BO, 238–9).

The ideal City of Ends can be seen as the implicit goal of struggles against oppression, which itself can be seen to form around particularities that must be surpassed to end oppression. However, in a small, little-known essay on the Basques written in 1971 Sartre abruptly changes course, reevaluating his attitude toward the universal/particular relationship. He begins by discussing the origin of national states, the centralization of economic and military powers begun under monarchy and continued by the bourgeoisie. Particular identities gave way to abstract and formal identity, but Sartre insists, "behind that unity which is such a source of pride to the great powers is oppression of ethnic groups and the hidden or open use of repressive violence."[4] Using the situation of the Basques as an example, Sartre argues that the same destructive tactics used by Western nation-states to colonize foreign peoples are apparent in the efforts of nation-states to form and preserve their identities in the face of local particularities: "Thus in spite of the extensive industrialization of the [Basque] region, we find two essential components of classical colonization: pillage—financial or other—of the colonized country and overexploitation" (BT, 145). Then there is the cultural issue:

> The forcible suppression of the Basque language is an act of true cultural genocide.... But what the Spaniard wants to do away with is the Basque personality. In Biscay, to *make oneself Basque* is in effect to speak Euzkara. Not only does a person thereby recapture a past that belongs only to him, but even when he is alone he is addressing the community of people who speak Basque (BT, 149).

So far, Sartre's analysis follows what he said about colonial exploitation in *Black Orpheus*, the use of particularity to contest assimilation. But in the concluding pages of his essay he writes:

> This is how things stand: we, the French, who are still in some sense the descendants of the Jacobins even if we do not want to be, have been given a glimpse of *another* kind of socialism by a heroic people led by a revolutionary party. The socialism of the E.T.A. [the Independence Party] is decentralistic in concept; such is the singular universality that the Basques and the E.T.A. justly oppose to the abstract centralism of the oppressors (BT, 160).

This new socialism will not be a universalism that surpasses particularities, but one that can "come about only through a cultural revolution which creates the socialist man on the basis of his land, his language, and even his re-emergent customs" (BT, 160). Former negation of particularities yields to their affirmation.

> What the E.T.A. reveals to us is the need of *all* men, even centralists, to reaffirm their particularities against abstract universality. To listen to the voices of the Basques, the Bretons, the Occitanians, and to struggle beside them so that they may affirm their concrete singularity, is to fight for ourselves as well—to fight as Frenchmen and for the true independence of France, which was the first victim of its own centralism (BT, 161).

This change in attitude, I believe, follows upon the development by Sartre of the notion of the "singular universal," a notion that cuts across the modern/postmodern divide. Sartre's early work privileged the individual subject, but after World War II his attention turned to factors of situatedness such as language, institutions, and history that are "universal" in the sense of mediating individual lives. In *Search for a Method*,[5] Sartre declares that Kierkegaard (the singular) and Hegel (the universal) both have right on their side. In order to give room and intelligibility to both, in subsequent works such as "Kierkegaard: The Singular Universal,"[6] "A Plea for Intellectuals,"[7] and *The Family Idiot*,[8] Sartre honed the notion of the singular universal. The singular universal appears in the process of exchange (internalization and externalization) between the subject and its environment. Subject and environment are actually abstractions, since their "reality" lies only in their exchange. For example, the relation between "lived experience" and "language": "We are at once natural culture and cultivated nature.... What is fully lived is never untouched by words.... The reality of man is created from moment

to moment by the mingling of these two orders..." (*FI*, 28). Language is, for Sartre, the mediation that breaks off the silence ("non-knowledge") of lived experience so that it enters into meaning and "universality." But the "universality" attained by language is not a "pure" universality, for all languages are themselves particular. Sartre hammers at this point in "A Plea for Intellectuals," a sort of rewriting of *What Is Literature?* Instead of words as windowpanes, pure and transparent signifiers melting into the intentionality of the writer (as was the case in *What Is Literature?*), the word takes on a weight and thickness of its own:

> One might say that the *word* tends to point vaguely in the dir-
> ection of the signified, and to impose itself as a *presence*, drawing
> the reader's attention to its own density. This is why it is possible
> for people to say that to name something means both to *present*
> the signified and to kill or bury it in the mass of the word (PI,
> 270).

Writing, then, becomes indirect and allusive in its attempt to communicate through a mediation replete with misinformation. The writer, in attempting to express and communicate, to "externalize" (and thus to universalize), is herself caught up in a particular language, having already "internalized" it. Literature "must constitute itself as a self-disclosure of the world through the mediation of a singular part produced by it, such that the universal is everywhere presented as the generator of singularity, and singularity as the enveloping curve and invisible limit of universality" (PI, 282). The important result for literature is that "an objective universal will never be attained by a work of literature: but it remains the horizon of an effort of universalization which is born from singularity and preserves it while negating it" (PI, 283).

The political lesson of this revised view of literature is the one apparent in Sartre's reflections on the Basques, namely, Sartre's "communitarian socialism." While Sartre still maintains the City of Ends (democracy, socialism, fraternity) as a goal, he is now not quite so utopian as he was about this goal in *What Is Literature?* There can be no "symbiosis" that would surpass differentiations and particularities. As William McBride so well points out: "Sartre's socialist vision has now been refined and tempered by his realization that any socialist society would also have to be a singular universal, not an absolute."[9]

Modernism haunts Sartre insofar as he still is committed to the view that expression and communication aspire to the universal: "The task of the writer is to remain on the plane of lived experience while suggesting *universalization* as the affirmation of life on its *horizon*" (PI, 284). Fraternity, socialism, and democracy are moral and political ideals (obliga-

tions) that have reality only in their anchorage in the contingent. Otherwise, Sartre realizes, one will not avoid the disaster of confusing the particular with the (abstract) universal. Sartre's thought intertwines with postmodernism to the extent that there is an irreducible contingency in the singular that resists the universal as such, while being caught up in the dialectical process of internalization and externalization. There is something ironic in this regard since Sartre, who has an infamous reputation for being a dualist, sets himself apart, with his notion of the singular universal, from dualistic tendencies in existentialism and postmodernism brought on by adopting versions of nominalism that oppose the singular to the universal.[10]

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Notes

1. "If it is indifferent whether one is in good or in bad faith, because good faith slides to the very origin of the project of good faith, that does not mean that we can not radically escape bad faith. But it supposes a self-recovery of being which was previously corrupted. This self-recovery we shall call authenticity, the description of which has no place here." Also: "These considerations do not exclude the possibility of an ethics of deliverance and salvation. But this can be achieved only after a radical conversion which we can not discuss here." Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, trans. Hazel Barnes (New York: Philosophical Library, 1956), 70, 412.

2. Sartre, "What Is Literature?," trans. Bernard Frechtman, in *What Is Literature? And Other Essays* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press), 70. Hereafter cited internally as *WIL*.

3. Sartre, "Black Orpheus," trans. S. W. Allen, in *What Is Literature? And Other Essays*, 203. Hereafter cited internally as BO.

4. Sartre, "The Burgos Trial," in *Life/Situations: Essays Written and Spoken*, trans. Paul Auster and Lydia Davis (New York: Pantheon Books, 1977), 137. Hereafter cited internally as BT.

5. Sartre, *Search For A Method*, trans. Hazel Barnes (New York: Random House, 1958).

6. Sartre, "Kierkegaard: The Singular Universal," in *Between Existentialism and Marxism*, trans. John Mathew (New York: William Morrow, 1975).

7. Sartre, "A Plea for Intellectuals," in *Between Existentialism and Marxism*, trans. John Mathews (New York: William Morrow and Co., 1974). Hereafter cited internally as PI.

8. Sartre, *The Family Idiot, vol. I*, trans. Carol Cosman (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981) Hereafter cited internally as *FI*.

9. William McBride, *Sartre's Political Theory* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991), 207.

10. Two recent books address the issue of Sartre and postmodernism. Nik Farrell Fox concludes in his *The New Sartre* (London: Continuum, 2003) that modern and postmodern strains exist side by side in Sartre's work, without any intelligible synthesis: "In Deleuzian style I have presented Sartre as a *schizophrenic* thinker whose consciousness is split between the modern and the postmodern." Sonia Kruks, in *Retrieving Experience: Subjectivity and Recognition in Feminist Politics* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2001), evaluates Sartre in terms of her project of discerning "a difference-sensitive yet general emancipatory politics," and finds him (the later Sartre) helpful in terms of his emphasis on mediations, his development of a praxis-based epistemology, and as well in his decentering of the individual toward group praxis. Ultimately, however, Kruks finds that Sartre must be left behind as she explores non-cognitive (affective) bonds in building solidarity. I think that if the singular universal is emphasized Fox's charge of schizophrenia can be seen to be exaggerated. I think that Kruks might find useful the way that Sartre employs the singular universal in discussing how literature is an indirect way of communicating "non-knowledge," something he calls in various places "affectivity." In any case, I highly recommend both books.