Jean-Paul Sartre and the Post-1968 Ethic of Anti-Representationalism

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Abstract

In this article, I examine Jean-Paul Sartre's later thought in relation to the advent of post-structuralism, and, in particular, the avowed refusal of representational practices by its proponents. I argue that this refusal, most persuasively presented as the principle or ethic of anti-representationalism by Todd May, is, in fact, reflected in Sartre's move from committed writing and active social engagement to manifestly apolitical concerns. Reading Sartre's later work in light of this principle permits seeing these apparently purely intellectual concerns as part of an effort to come to terms with the ethical problematics of representation.

Around the time of the publication of his autobiography *The Words* in 1963, Jean-Paul Sartre began to withdraw from his well-known doctrine of committed literature as an effective means to social change and, more broadly, to view intellectual activity as politically irrelevant. His growing disillusionment regarding the effect of his own writing has been seen by many commentators, as well as by his own admission, as having led him temporarily to a more direct (and insistently practical as opposed to "intellectual") engagement in political activity. My interest here is to examine Sartre's struggles with the impact and significance of intellectual work—and writing specifically—in light of the advent of post-structuralism and post-structuralist politics. Although the abandonment of the idea of committed literature as a medium joining "man to man" in favour of the opposing extreme of viewing intellectual activity as an impediment to the realization of change has been criticized as part of his retreat to purely personal and private considerations, it also echoes some arguments central to post-structuralism. The core question I seek to ask here is why Sartre after 1968 increasingly took the stand of denying the intellectual the position of a (re)presenter and (re)describer addressing social and political controversies. The answer to this question is, in my opinion, to be found by linking Sartre's focus on his unfinished study of Gustave Flaubert to reassessments of the implications of a post-structuralist ethic of anti-representationalism. From this

point of view, it is possible to conceive of Sartre's various turns as part of an overall attempt to harmonize practices of social responsibility with the problematics of understanding and meaning. Following this reading, Sartre's views of representation arguably anticipate many of the ideas defending the claim that, far from leading to a pluralism of values, post-structuralism allows for an ethics (and perhaps more importantly, also *the practice*) of intervention and dissent.

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In this context, the notion of "dissent" operates on a number of levels. First, I rehearse what I argue is both a post-structuralist and an existentialist theory of dissent: a breaking with the ideology of representation and representational violence combined with a formulation of an oppositional politics based on undecidability and choice. I see this as a "politics of dissent." After clarifying this, I will attempt to provide brief accounts of the core philosophical obstacles to social action faced by both existentialism and post-structuralism. I will also look at some of the different routes to intellectual and political dissent that Sartre attempted in order to resolve his personal desire for social engagement. Finally, I attempt to offer a dissenting reinterpretation of Sartre's intellectual trajectory and the role in it of his biography of Flaubert, *The Family Idiot* (1971–72). Here, I would like to argue that this text is Sartre's attempt to answer the problem of how representational violence could be overcome in writing.

Identifying an Ethics of Anti-Representationalism

Assuming a general acquaintance with the thought of Sartre, I will begin by explaining the less familiar and perhaps even rather cryptic "ethic of anti-representationalism" that defines the title. This is particularly important since I have been persuaded into taking on a somewhat specific definition of these terms by what I see as a most convincing and useful reading of post-structuralism, that presented by the American political philosopher Todd May in his books *The Political Philosophy of Poststructuralist Anarchism* (1994) and *The Moral Theory of Poststructuralism* (1995). As the titles of May's books already reveal, his interest is in providing an (at least somewhat) overarching reading of post-structuralism as a philosophy, or as a cohesive moral, ethical and political attitude. Granted, definitions of post-structuralism are difficult—even with respect to agreeing on its central figures. However, from the point of view of an intellectual history or a political philosophy, this attempt is necessary. Here, I will not qualify the label of post-structuralism excessively, but will mostly follow the lead of May, who sees it as exemplified especially in the thinking of Michel Foucault, Jean-François Lyotard, and Gilles Deleuze; I will additionally, however, make some reference to Jacques Derrida, whose views to me better explain the motivation for resisting both reductive representation and prescriptive rules.

In attempting to show an ethical foundation for post-structuralism, May is understandably hesitant. He cautions that his interpretation is an imposition in that post-structuralist thinkers themselves often shy away from explicit moral reflection. At the same time, as he says, "the lack of a moral grounding for poststructuralist claims [has been seen] to be one of the most problematic areas of its

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thought" (May 1995, 6). As numerous critics have pointed out, the post-structuralist emphasis on radical difference, what has sometimes also been described as a "universalization of difference" (see e.g. Haber 1994), can be interpreted as leading to the inability to justify political critique since, in its affirmation of the equal value of all and any opinions, it consists of a rejection of established and abiding moral principles. According to this critique, and "[b]y precluding all binding universal values, Foucault and Lyotard also preclude assessment of any discourse or practice as oppressive or dominating" (May 1995, 9).

Even though such dismissals on the grounds of the notorious "anything goes" thesis are common among critics of post-structuralism, post-structuralists themselves are generally reluctant to offer any corrective. According to the most vociferous critics, they in fact categorically fail to provide useful responses and simply reiterate that their stand places them beyond traditional forms of argument. In a more favourable reading, one could reject this characterization of the post-structuralist position as facile and instead direct such critics to reconsider Derrida's critique of the metaphysics of presence and his existential emphasis on undecidability and choice as a route to responsibility: to act "ethically," one has to first recognize that there are no rules that can ensure this and no entailments to be found in the way things are, and then, in the awareness of this fundamental undecidability, choose to act in a particular way for considered reasons (or in Sartrean lexicon: *in situation*). For my purposes here, as much as for the purpose of defining a dynamics of dissent, this overall view is taken as the more philosophically convincing.[1] As Derrida explains the issue of responsibility:

> A decision can only come into being in a space that exceeds the calculable program that would destroy all responsibility by transforming it into a programmable effect of determinate causes. There can be no moral or political responsibility without this trial and this passage by way of the undecidable. Even if a

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[1]   For an example of how the two sides fail to engage each other as well as for a good overview of some of the core issues, see the exchange between John Searle (1977) and Derrida (e.g. 1988, especially the "Afterword"). For elaborations of how a Derridean viewpoint can be developed into a more practical politics of dissent, see, e.g., Mouffe (2013) and Rancière (2010).

decision seems to take only a second and not to be preceded by any deliberation, it is structured by this experience and experiment of the undecidable. (Derrida 1988, 116)

May's particular affirmation of the presence of morality in post-structuralist thinking is undoubtedly related to these ideas of undecidability and choice, but his prime interest is to provide some principles for action, and in this fundamental

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respect his view conflicts with a forcefully Derridean reading. (Hence, I assume, his focus on Foucault, Lyotard, and Deleuze.) His approach offers, however, a strong defence of post-structuralism against the kinds of dismissive arguments that it has from time to time provoked—especially in North American debates—trying, as it were, to meet them on their chosen grounds of argumentation. Further, although one could read a philosophical conflict into existence here, his historical contextualization of the motivations for the post-structuralist ethic *is* illuminating. May's view of the presence of an ethic or a moral principle is founded on what he calls the "central lesson" of the events of May 1968. His thesis is that the 1968 uprisings brought about the realization that "people needed to speak publicly in the name of their own ... inevitably diverse ... interests." He further argues that this realization "became a cornerstone of French post-structuralist theory," presenting it in the form of what he calls *the principle of anti-representationalism*: namely, that "representing others to themselves—either in who they are or in what they want—ought, as much as possible, to be avoided" (May 1995, 13; see also May 1994). Now, while he also makes a point of distinguishing his position from Richard Rorty's—quite correctly noting that his employment of the term "anti-representationalism" is distinct from Rorty's epistemologically focused use of the word—May's argument for the avoidance of representation here certainly parallels Rorty's ethical (and arguably post-structuralist) position, according to which redescribing others to themselves constitutes the ultimate form of cruelty.[2]

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2   As May emphasizes: "The antirepresentationalism in question is moral and has nothing to do with issues of semantic antirepresentationalism associated with philosophers such as Richard Rorty" (May 1995, 48). It needs to be noted, however, that Rorty's "postmodern pragmatism" or "neopragmatism" is not as far from post-structuralism as is sometimes claimed in these debates; for a discussion of the affinities between these positions, see, e.g. Mouffe 1996. For an excellent and accessible introduction to Rorty's thinking, see the selected essays in Rorty 1999. Sartre's position on anti-representationalism of a semantic kind, the problem of truthful representation, as it were, is an equally interesting issue, but goes well beyond the scope of my discussion here.

Born in the context of 1968, post-structuralism is in May's reading historically committed to this kind of anti-representationalism, the refusal to represent others (as much as possible). Yet, importantly for his account, this "principle of antirepresentationalism, although informing the work of these thinkers, was, because of their rejection of moral discourse, never set forth and defended as such." This contributed to a confusion that has "subverted a moral defence of their position" (May 1995, 13). Put bluntly, May sees the move made by post-structuralists from the principle of anti-representationalism to a wholesale rejection of moral discourse as a mistake

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based on conflating morals founded in social practice with transcendent values. Stated differently, the "slippage" from the refusal to misuse power in telling people "*who* they are" to a more sweeping refusal of "practices of prescription" caused this rejection of moral discourse (May 1995, 14). If one were to follow Derrida's view more closely, this refusal could not, of course, be presented simply as a mistake or a slippage, since representation and moral prescription are part-and-parcel of the kind of violence that Derrida thinks should be resisted.[3] Instead of seeing the post-structuralist universalization of difference as preventing the judgement of some particular position as "oppressive and dominating," as May has it, one could, from this perspective, simply judge all of them to be so.

Still, the central point of May's argument is to demonstrate that although post-structuralism is often viewed as a nihilistic defence of extreme relativism, especially by many Anglo-American critics, it also involves a moral dimension through its commitment to anti-representationalism. If we were to decide to accept the principle as well as the distinctions it makes between the spheres of doing and being, we could then legitimately discuss what people should *do*, but would still not attempt to offer limiting definitions of who they *are*. Clearly, distinguishing in this way between "what others *ought* to [do] and what we would like them to be" (May 1995, 17) is important in the justification of the possibility of any prospective politics—perhaps especially those of dissent. Without it, we would be unable to say anything about people's actions without also stepping on the toes of their self-identifications. Then, without the right to judge something as being either "good" or "bad," we would have no means of privileging those behaviours and social practices that attempt to reduce oppression.

Some potential problems have to be admitted here, however. Importantly, the central distinction between holding moral principles and making practical judgements is easy to miss in this domestication of post-structuralist politics. Strictly speaking,

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3   For an excellent summary of the overall representational problematic in relation to Derrida's explication of violence, see Jenkins (2009), "'Nobody does it better,'" 255 ff.; cf. Derrida (1988).

there is never justification for making general pronouncements or valuations that extend beyond some particular practical situation. This is something that May (like many others in the Anglo-American debates) seems quite readily to ignore and underplay. Furthermore, the distinction between representing others in what they do and who they are is never clear-cut. Of course, May himself also notes some of these difficulties and acknowledges that moral values cannot be formulated without to an extent violating the principle of anti-representationalism. Yet,

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even where May's argument necessarily simplifies the philosophical problematics, this kind of shorthand for post-structuralism as a movement appears to be expedient for setting out its political drive and core strategy. In an approximation of a coherent post-structuralist political position, May argues that: "Roughly, the claim is that the consequences of what we might call representationalist practices are morally suspect, and thus that those practices ought to be abandoned" (May 1995, 57). He further brings to this the (quite pragmatic) caveat that there may be good reasons for engaging in representation. For example, post-structuralist analyses of power relations (like Foucault's) intend to reveal oppressive practices. Thus the representations of victims in these cases are important and justified "as tools to be used ... in overcoming that oppression" (May 1994, 96).[4]

On this fundamental level, the post-structuralist effort decidedly resembles the Sartrean one: its main intention is to base ethical thinking in daily life—or, to reiterate the Sartrean terminology, in the individual's situation—rather than to construct it through appeals to transcendent values (cf. May 1995, 10). Suffice it to say that what thus in fact makes anti-representationalism an ethic is its recognition that even while we should, theoretically, be free to think of ourselves as we will, we do, *in practice* and as *situated* beings, have interactions with and even obligations to other people that can—and indeed must—be subject to some form of evaluation.[5] This realization marks, in my view, a crucial break between theory and practice in both post-structuralism and existentialism. It boils down to the issue of choice. With reference to Derrida, again, but also to Sartre's definitions of existentialism: we can only ever make choices and decisions responsibly after first acknowledging the reality of undecidability. Theories (or values, rules, standards or principles) cannot justify ignoring that moment of aporia. In that spirit, and even when we agree that in theory representation is problematic and

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4   In conversation with Foucault, Deleuze has famously remarked that Foucault was "the first ... to teach us something absolutely fundamental: the indignity of speaking for others" (Deleuze 1977, 209; see also May 1994, 97).

5   This sentiment is echoed in Richard Rorty's firm separation of private and public spheres. For more on this question in both Rorty and Sartre, see Pihlainen 2001.

should be avoided, there are situations in which sitting back, resorting to silence or focusing on difference and dissensus alone is not enough and in which engaging in representation becomes the only (responsible) choice.

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Obstacles to Playing Well with Others

At the heart of the post-structuralist dilemma concerning representation as well as (an at least somehow unified and principled) oppositional politics and action is the relation of language to reality—particularly the post-structuralists' rejection of the old problematic of deriving values and guidance from "objective" reality. For Shadia B. Drury (1994, 204), the political alternatives provided by post-structuralism (or, for her, "postmodernism") consist of either a project of "reinvesting the meaningless world with meaning" or "a playful resignation" through which all actions become meaningless. As I understand this, the former encompasses efforts towards political commitment of the sort exemplified, for instance, by Rorty's pragmatic liberalism or even Foucault's questioning of power, whereas the latter lines up with a decidedly American, "Yale School" or "deconstructivist" reading of post-structuralism as a free play of meaning.[6] In Drury's (1994, 205) interpretation, this suggests that "we can regard postmodern politics as a dispute between the right- and left-wing disciples of Nietzsche. The Right Nietzscheans are eager to construct the imaginary edifices that account for order and dominion, while the Left Nietzscheans are eager to defy, transgress, and unmask these fictitious edifices of power."

That division seems too easy, however. To me, it is based on an unjustified assumption that theory and practice or action should necessarily go hand-in-hand. Thinking, instead, in terms of a "resignation" regarding the capacity of theory to prescribe and the simultaneous *practical* decision to *construct* and *impose* meaning regardless would, I think, leave us better equipped to pursue an oppositional politics. Indeed, this appears to be something that Drury also partly settles on, albeit less explicitly. For her "Right Nietzscheans" at least,

> the fact that political reality is an arbitrary construction of power is no reason to embark on a deconstructive project of genealogical unmasking. This could only lead to rabble-rousing, mayhem, and barbarism. Instead, philosophy must use all the rhetorical powers at its disposal in order to restore the fragile fabric of myths and illusions on which political order depends. (Drury 1994, 207)

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6   Cf. Derrida's criticism of this latter attitude in Derrida (1988, 115 ff.).

Rorty's often-criticized efforts to separate the private creativity of his so-called strong poets from the public morality of the liberal utopia he envisions would thus seem to be the perfect example of this "Right Nietzschean" attitude. And it might go some way toward defining what the situations are in which the principle of

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anti-representationalism can justifiably be transgressed; if, that is, one subscribes to his professed liberal politics. But the dynamics offered by Drury here do not convincingly cover the thinking of those that she posits as "Left Nietzscheans." Rather, attempts to construct political order "from above" in this way run counter to the idea of any universal subjective assumption of responsibility and undermine the importance of choosing, on which any properly *oppositional* politics would inevitably need to rest. In this, there seems to be a deep-seated fear of a democratic or universal scepticism (a scepticism or recognition of undecidability for everyone, as it were) on the "Right," in distinction to the kind of advocacy of it that one might attribute to those on the "Left."

This same overall problem of the uncertainty of language and interpretations *vis-à-vis* reality is present in Sartre's thought, albeit at first on a much more immediate and personal level. In his *Critique of Dialectical Reason* (orig. 1960), Sartre presents the idea that "[w]ords are matter .... They carry the projects of the Other into me and they carry my own projects into the Other" (Sartre 1991, 98). In other words, the processes of oppression and colonization that take place in the representation of others as historical or oppositional political groups, for example, also appear on this immediate intersubjective level. Sartre views the alienation produced by the relation of this "worked matter" to the human beings who work it as pervading all human actions to the extent that, as he revealingly says, "the meanings of the very words in my mouth are changed by others" (Sartre 1991, 98).[7]

While this view of language is much more involved than many of Sartre's earlier positions (and particularly so in relation to the idea of engagement in *What is Literature?*), it is continuous with his negative view of intersubjective relations. At its most basic, Sartre's thinking is that identity—or what he presents in its extreme form as a (self-)totalization realized through becoming "in-itself-for-itself"—is, for human beings, always an unattainable goal. The other's capacity to envision ends independent of my existence is what constitutes him or her as a subject, and that free subjectivity presents a threat to my freedom. To summarize this general existential plight: we are

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7   As Cary Wolfe (1991, 79) notes, language is, for Sartre at this later stage of his thinking, "the supreme example of those institutions, norms, and conventions which are the 'congealed' praxis of others and which mitigate against the subject's own freedom and praxis." Wolfe also offers a useful discussion of the contradictions in Sartre's conceptualization of language here.

aware that we cannot achieve any permanent self-representation while also being afraid that others will be the ones to define us. On this view, human existence is based on the need to find recognition of

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one's *no*-thingness, or, in Sartrean terms, of oneself as a for-itself (roughly, as a free subject) rather than an in-itself (a thing).[8]

Following up on the formulations in Sartre's *Being and Nothingness* (orig. 1943), Drury argues that, in accordance with this vision, the only way to achieve some experience of freedom is "to reduce the other to a thing before one is reduced to a thing by the other." In this spirit: "To live as a thing, to live for another and as the other expects is to live unauthentically [sic] or in *bad faith*" (Drury 1994, 26). In such a basic Kojèvean formulation of the Sartrean "look" or "gaze", the other becomes merely a means for gaining recognition and power.[9] This mutual hostility that Sartre seems to perceive as a necessary element of human interaction need not, however, be seen as defining all of his political or even representational commitments; the idea of objectifying others in

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8   This fundamental dynamic is an interesting correlative to Foucault's example of prisons that May (1995, 6-7) uses in his argument. The penal system has, according to Foucault, the effect of transforming a "doer of wrong" into a "criminal personality." Following Sartre's argument, this type of objectification can be seen as both unavoidable and detrimental to the freedom and authenticity of the subject. There is also a parallel limit to any "freeplay" in post-structuralism, even if it is sometimes ignored. As Honi Fern Haber explains with respect to Rorty: "The poststructural description of language along with its insistence on the play of signification informs Rorty's perspectivism. He sees the self as always being open to redescription and so as being a work of art. With this in mind he describes the best functioning human being as one who constructs her or his life out of her or his own narratives. But here Rorty has ignored a fundamental tenet of post-structuralism, i.e., that the tools of self-construction are always culturally inscribed—vocabularies are mirrors as well as tools—and that therefore, the self is never its own construction if by such a construction one has in mind the Romantic notion of the idiosyncratic genius whose creation is freed from the exigencies of the everyday. Such a view of artworks overlooks a fundamental political fact, a fact consistent with the demands of post-structuralism: insofar as it is a carrier of cultural signification (and is itself a cultural signifier) artworks [sic] always have a political component, though the political signification of an artwork may be more or less immediate and important" (Haber 1994, 74).

9   The Kojèvean "desire for recognition" that Drury elaborates on here also leads to attempts to dominate others whose conceptions one becomes dependent on. In desiring to become a "true" subject, one again, in effect, simply becomes an object for the valuation of the other.

order to satisfy one's desire for recognition certainly conflicts with Sartre's practical attempts to formulate a revolutionary politics for the oppressed. As is commonly argued, that specific political content was, however, to appear in Sartre's thinking and actions only after the Second World War.

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Although the view of conflict between individuals is perhaps at its most extreme in *Being and Nothingness*, it is present in some form in most of Sartre's writing—as indeed in the example from the *Critique of Dialectical Reason* already given—and is often the point of view that is assumed in examinations of all aspects of his thought. Later on in life, however, Sartre also attempted to give different interpretations of the problem. Thus, in the *Critique*, for example, his emphasis is on how "[w]e are united by the fact that we all live in a world which is determined by scarcity." (Sartre 1991, 136) And, crucially, this scarcity can lead to collective efforts at overcoming it. Indeed, Sartre even goes so far as to argue that, through collective (political) action, a world where the intersubjective struggle is no longer necessary could in fact be achievable. Where transcending scarcity is, here, then, "man's fundamental project"—and, important to note, a project that Sartre at times suggests may even lead to the formulation of a more generally sustainable ethics, an *ontological* ethics—there still remains, for Sartre as for so many of his contemporaries, an innate conflict between an individual's aspiration to transcendent freedom and his or her having a tolerant attitude toward the other.[10]

Sartre's Conversion to Politics: Literature as a Means to Liberation

As David Detmer has argued in his *Freedom as a Value* (1988), the centrality of ontological freedom in Sartre's philosophical worldview ultimately suggests the question of political liberation as relevant too. For Sartre, ontological freedom is a result of engagement with the world. And, as he argues, the subject becomes conscious of his or her subjectivity only through negating the in-itself. (In order to bring this closer to the post-

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10   To give some background to the operation of scarcity: still in the context of Sartre's argument for freedom, the use of the Hegelian master-slave dialectic is quite understandable since, for a human being to become "truly" human, he or she must meet the given conditions and, through an active negation, *win* or *produce* his or her freedom. In the *Critique,* Sartre introduces the fact of *scarcity* as an explanation for the historical development of this conflict. As long as scarcity exists, not everyone has the possibility of realizing their freedom. Put crudely, those who become "slaves" are those who are totally immersed in the struggle for making a living and cannot afford the luxury of fashioning a life. If the condition itself could be overcome, then and only then, could the conflict be left behind—and this possibility is what introduces the need for politics.

structuralist terms discussed above, this can also be presented as the inevitable need for people to impose meanings onto a meaningless world.) In this sense consciousness can, in Sartre's words (1976, 90; cf. also

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Aronson 1980, 73), "exist only as engaged in this being which surrounds it on all sides and which paralyses it with its phantom presence." Because this "being" otherwise paralyses consciousness, its negation is the only route to self-creation and freedom. Extending this same dynamic to the level of the intersubjective, it is easy to see where the political impulse comes in: since all humans are intrinsically free, they should have the opportunities for realizing that freedom in practice.

Sartre's indifference to social and political questions, as displayed by the almost exclusive focus on the ontological in his early work, has commonly been read as marking a broad disinterest in public issues in the period before the Second World War (e.g. Dobson 1993, 17). In contrast to this early apolitical and purely philosophical stance, biographical accounts often posit that a change took place during the war. According to this view, after 1941, and arguably influenced by his experiences of collectivity as a prisoner of war, Sartre's quest became one of integrating the socio-political to his earlier obsession with the experience of the individual. As a result, for Andrew Dobson, Sartre—the "apolitical litterateur"—now became, for the first time, properly involved in a political project. Or, similarly, in the words of Sartre's biographer Annie Cohen-Solal, he finally "started looking at the world as though he were an actor in it." (Cohen-Solal 1987, 125; cf. Dobson 1993, 18) Looking back on his life in 1977, Sartre also himself admitted to having been overly saturated by "bourgeois individualism" before the war. In his own words: "I was completely wrong … not to have become more closely involved in political matters, I mean involved on a practical level, but it was difficult." (Dobson 1993, 18)

Ronald Aronson (1980, 111) compellingly describes this newfound attitude in terms of action and engagement; according to him, "Sartre was determined to act." Against this overall background, Sartre's turn to questions of "history, 'reciprocity', and emancipation" (Dobson 1993, 20) can quite confidently be read as politically motivated. In this move to become more politically involved, Sartre first formulated his well-known (if highly contested) conceptions of committed literature and *engagement* in *What is Literature?* (originally published in 1948). It can quite usefully, I think, be said that the idea of commitment here represents a move from an interest in "mere" consciousness to *conscience*, insofar as in this political formulation the "authenticity"

of the writer can exist only through an engagement with a world that he or she feels needs to be transformed.[11]

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Sartre's core idea in employing literature in this political move rests on his conception of the relationship of the writer to the reader. The relationship between them is, in his argument, ideal in that it cannot sustain objectification. As a given, the reader must approach a literary work with an attitude of "free, self-determining creativity" (Aronson 1980, 149; for more on this, see also Pihlainen 2015). At the same time, there must be a generic commitment from the author to respect this freedom since the work cannot be re-created in the mind of the reader except in an atmosphere of mutual respect and equality. Recall here Sartre's observation that the words that a subject utters are beyond his or her control once they are heard by another. For them to have significance, the other must be free to attribute this significance to them. In this sense writing is, as he puts it, "by its very nature an act of confidence in the freedom of men" (Sartre 1949, 67). Hence, in committing themselves to the printed word, writers inevitably acknowledge the freedom of their readers.

A Second Conversion: The Ineffectual Intellectual

Sartre is often portrayed as having gradually become disillusioned by his political project of committed writing. Accordingly, he no longer in the 1960s viewed literature as a medium "that joins man to man," but instead saw it as an impediment to the practical realization of change. Indeed, by the time of his Japanese lectures in 1966, he is seen to have completely given up on the earlier "conception of prose as a practical instrument" (Aronson 1980, 310–311). Aronson, in fact, claims that these lectures indicate conclusively that now "[p]olitics and writing were becoming separate activities for Sartre" (Aronson 1980, 310). According to this interpretation, Sartre (again: "finally") gives up on the idea that literature can effect change. Consequently, he dismisses literature and finds commitment and any attempts to promote change to be viable only through direct political involvement. In light of the ties of his views as set out in *What is Literature?* to the long-term literary theory and representationalist aspects of his thinking, it would seem, however, that much of Sartre's life-work is unnecessarily undermined by conceiving of these changes in so simplistic a way.

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11   This notion of *cōnscientia* is interesting here since it brings together various aspects of "truth" and knowledge—indeed implying the quite common idea that there is some kind of continuum or entailment from factual knowing (and proceeding though feeling and consciousness) to an ethical awareness of right and wrong.

Indeed, it seems to me that the post-structuralist insistence, as Eve Tavor Bannet (1993, 4) phrases it, that "'writerly texts' can be used to change the discursive and social texts we are reproducing and to fashion a 'new politics of truth'" is based on reasoning quite similar to that employed by Sartre. On this point, the crucial difference between Sartre's view and that of the post-structuralists would seem to be mostly in the extent to which they allow for political commitment in literary texts. Sartre's committed literature is, after all, easily seen as tending toward

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propaganda—despite his explicit refusal of that position. In this quite idealistic view, there would at least be no room for the wrong kind of propaganda: "It would be inconceivable that this unleashing of generosity provoked by the writer could be used to authorize an injustice, and that the reader could enjoy his freedom while reading a work which approves or accepts or simply abstains from condemning the subjection of man by man" (Sartre 1949, 67).

Although this is something that needs to be examined further, I would venture to claim that overt political commitments as demanded by Sartre at this stage of *engagement* would preclude the "writerliness" of texts for many post-structuralists at least, especially so since their defence or "universalization" of difference is often seen as leading to an incapacity to defend particular political positions over others. In this understanding, the core of a "writerly" or "worklike" text can arguably be seen to rest in its refusal to offer up meaning, instead leaving room for the reader to impose it as part of an experiential reading process.[12] In this scenario, overt political intentions (indeed all authorial intentions) are left out of the textual equation.

Sartre's Flaubert as a Retreat from Political Involvement

The interpretation of Sartre's move from the intellectual's stance of committed writing to direct political activity is most forcefully presented by Aronson, who sees Sartre as advocating an anti-intellectualism of intellectuals, in which the only benefit of being an intellectual is to be found in the political "clout" that such a social position affords. Indeed, Aronson (1980, 321) portrays Sartre as arguing that "[o]ur ideas are irrelevant to political action; we must seek to create situations in which the masses can experience *their own* ideas." If this isn't the principle of anti-representationalism translated into practice, then what is?

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12   For an especially illuminating examination of this kind of text as envisioned by Foucault in the early part of his career, see Timothy O'Leary's *Foucault and Fiction* (2009).

Alongside this effort to avoid describing the masses on their behalf, which seems to align so well with the general political demands emerging at the time, Sartre's work on the enormous study of Gustave Flaubert (*The Family Idiot*, or more familiarly, "The Flaubert," which was published in 1971 and 1972) has often been explained as, at least to an extent, a counter-tendency, a withdrawal once again to the private deliberations of the intellectual. Indeed, in later interviews, Sartre gives support to this interpretation. Commenting on the Flaubert, Aronson

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(1980, 303; also see de Beauvoir 1985, 5–7) further notes that it was in fact "a significant departure from the main line of Sartre's life's work. In it, he no longer took his pen for a sword. He sought not to move or to change his audience, but only to understand a single human being, Gustave Flaubert." Flaubert being—it should be noted—like Sartre, a *petit bourgeois* intellectual.

This portrayal of a new anti-intellectual Sartre, who, after May 1968, "plunges" into a "'serve-the-people' activism" (Aronson 1980, 323–324) but simultaneously continued to pursue a private, apolitical autobiographical project (which incidentally came to represent a full quarter of his collected works) has been questioned by, among others, Dobson, who claims that the Flaubert was a necessary, and a very significant, continuation of Sartre's developing theory of history (Dobson 1993; cf. Flynn 1997). While that may be so, my interest here is not in revealing such a theory of history, but in arguing instead for an evolving theory of representation in tune with the anti-representationalist ethic. Dobson, to me quite correctly, argues that the Flaubert represents an extension of Sartre's attempts at discovering a method for writing history, and, at the same time, a more detailed investigation of the dialectical workings in the relationship between individuals and their situation—one obvious concern also being to illustrate the "encounter" between individual traits and "given" conditions. What I think he does not emphasize enough, however, is the importance of the Flaubert as an attempt to understand another human being (albeit a dead one) as somehow an authentic subject, without, in other words, submitting them to the usual violence of representation.

In terms of both a theory of history (or more properly a *philosophy of history*, a view of history as movement) and the problematics of representation, it is useful to note that Sartre follows Hegel in attempting to reconcile the universal with the individual through the movement of the dialectic. For Sartre, however, this unfolding of the dialectic is not conceived of in terms of any Spirit but of human agency. Thus he sees all individual and creative efforts as necessarily pitted against the already "worked matter" of social, cultural, and material conditions, being integrated into them, and ultimately also becoming similarly resistant to an individual's agency or desires. The totalization of history that Sartre proposes is thus the effect of human actions, free ac-

tions carried out in the confines of the *practico-inert*: in other words, within the conditions for history itself. While he does not manage to demonstrate how this totalization can result in a single history or history as some kind of movement, as he seems to propose in the *Critique,* the emphasis on actions in situation can be understood in relation to his take on the idea of "the end of history." According to Drury (1994, 76), Sartre's conception of the dialectic

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crucially differs from the Hegelianism of Kojéve in that it refuses to admit that history is capable of ending; Sartre instead sees the struggle as unwinnable and the satisfaction of need as a never-ending quest.

This difference regarding the significance of the historical dimension marks the change in Sartre's thinking that many commentators attribute to his taking up the Marxist cause (see e.g. Dobson 1993). Drury (1994, 76), however, explains this in another way. She goes on to say that "Sartre chose to become a Marxist for the sake of the revolutionary struggle itself. He had absolutely no hope that the revolution would succeed in attaining its goals." Her argument aims at making the more general point that "it is the fight or the struggle itself that makes us human." Thus: "Every human encounter is an attempt by one party to reduce the other to an object or thing and the one who is so reduced must struggle to be *other* than what he is defined to be." Hers is, however, a very Kojèvean reading of Sartre to the extent that it focuses on the conflict as such and neglects the reality of scarcity that Sartre sees at its origin. If we were to agree to this reading of the master-slave dialectic as a defining constant of the human condition and, as such, a dynamic of history writ large, it might be difficult to see Sartre as primarily focused on an ethics of anti-representationalism. If, however, we keep in mind his interest in *writing* and his emphasis on situated actions, the issue of representation seems to remain his core problematic.

Or, the Flaubert as an Attempt to Overcome Objectification in Representation

In light of both the epistemological and ethical issues that the principle of anti-representationalism and, indeed, the overall critique of representation in contemporary continental philosophy seek to address, it would seem safe to say that an individual's life cannot be depicted "authentically" (and I intend this "authenticity" in two senses: that is, with regard to both *truthfulness* and *subjectness*).

Epistemologically, such an attempt is always destined to fail. The narrative practice of the filling in of blanks not covered by the evidence, the questions of beginning and end points, the use of explanatory modes, tropes or emplotments, and indeed, in general, the questions raised by the attempt to transform documentary evidence into

a coherent and motivated narrative are hurdles that no "objective" view of representation can clear. Yet, and despite the fundamental nature of this problematic, Simone de Beauvoir tells us that Sartre wrote his biography of Flaubert with the express intention of proving "that any man is perfectly knowable so long as one uses the right method and possesses the necessary documents" (de Beauvoir 1985, 6; cf. Golomb 1995, 157). To grant this claim any credibility, the meaning of "knowability" needs to be extended to include the issue of the subject's

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subjectivity or "authenticity" somehow, but the problematic is almost the same: reducing a person, and hence an intentional life, to a description appears to entail objectification and (representational) violence in the extreme.

Jacob Golomb (1005, 18) formulates the mixed problematic for representations that might be expected to encourage and promote particular values and actions in the following way:

> Arguing for authenticity is self-defeating in that it presupposes the authority of rationality and objectivity, which is called into question by this ideal. Since one cannot argue rationally for adopting authentic life, one must be satisfied with the subtle enticement of the reader. But how can someone be enticed into authenticity? Through descriptions of authentic lives? But how can an authentic subject or self be depicted?

What then are Sartre's strategies in the Flaubert? Looking at the 2800 close-printed pages of the uncompleted Flaubert, one is tempted to say that the key is that Sartre certainly did not aim at any reduction of his subject. Instead, his approach of historical, "psychological" or biographical investigation can indeed be read as an attempt to cover all aspects relevant to the subject in the fullness of the particular situation. In this way, the impact of reductive violence at least might conceivably be softened. But he also claimed that he was involved in "showing a method," and, according to de Beauvoir, it seems that this "method" was firmly based in the empirical: "His basic idea was that at no matter what point in history and whatever the social and political context, it was still essential to understand people and that his study of Flaubert might be of use to that end" (de Beauvoir 1985, 7).

At the same time, along with this process of detailed description, it is evident to a reader of *The Family Idiot* that Sartre examines Flaubert in a way quite similar to that utilized by a writer of fiction who has the advantage of being permitted to describe the

hidden workings of the character's mind.[13] The adoption of this strategy makes sense: such a vantage point would seem to be the only available one in the attempt to represent an authentic subject as subject. Some idea of inner workings is needed for a presentation of subjectivity. However, with reference to the fictionalization that such liberal use of the imagination necessarily introduces, it should be noted that what is in question is thus, strictly speaking, no longer a representation or re-construction but simply a *construction—perhaps* useful in relating to the historical past in various ways, but in no way definitive.

Before concluding, I want to tentatively raise the question of whether the consideration of truthfulness should be introduced into the representation of

"authenticity" at all. Perhaps such representation should rather be assessed purely in the realm of the aesthetic. Much like Rorty, May, for instance, speaks of an "aesthetics of living" that can be separated from issues of public accountability. According to this view, there are endless aspects of living and choices of lifestyle that do not require or even admit definition or moral assessments. Certainly, the question of a subject's authenticity in the sense of his or her being "for-itself" or holding to some "fundamental project" is not a matter to be evaluated by reference to abstract moral criteria. What is more, since such authenticity is always in situation, it should, if we are to read Sartre as consequent on this, perhaps ultimately not be represented as something merely existing but rather as a continuous becoming. That is to say that, since the subject affirms his or her authenticity in each action, the representation of an authentic subject cannot be undertaken as a whole but should instead unfold in the presentation of each action in and reaction to the world. The strategies by which this can be done in writing are limited, however, because the imposition of some comprehensive "meaning" is so commonly expected by readers. Complex and confusing texts that take "writerliness" to such extremes are the exception—even if their complexity is realized primarily through detail and volume, as in the Flaubert.

While Sartre does attempt to describe the fragmentary elements making up the life of Flaubert as constituting—or rather, being brought together by—a single "life project," his effort to understand Flaubert is also based on the attempt to find the sense of Flaubert's self-understanding. The subject should thus (hypothetically in this particular case) be able to identify with a successful representation. Here, the question of "writerly" or experiential texts certainly comes into its own, whether with respect to the "subject" of the representation or to readers more generally: the kind of imaginative identification and engagement of subjective processes of meaning-construction

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13   For more on fictionality and other representational strategies utilized in *The Family Idiot*, see Aronson (1980, 337 ff.) and Pihlainen (2005).

that experiential texts can facilitate is crucial to keeping representations from over-stepping their boundaries with regard to objectification and presumptuous appropri-ations.

Conclusion

Comparisons between Sartre and the post-structuralists have been attempted before. Yet Dobson for one has firmly denied any similarities and instead argues that Sartre "stands firmly opposed to the post-structuralist tendencies that were emerging as he entered the final phases of his productive life" (Dobson 1993, 184–185; for other read-ings of the relation between Sartre and post-structuralism, see e.g. Howells 1988 and Fox 2003). Despite this popular view, I hope to have demonstrated that—like the post-structuralists—Sartre at the very least had "learned

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the lesson" of representation, what May characterizes as the lesson of 1968.[14] The ef-fects of this lesson seem to be clearly visible in Sartre's political trajectory, and partic-ularly in his disappointment with and opposition to representational practices already during the second half of the 1960s. In seeing these practices as oppressive, or at least in many situations redundant, he too denied himself—and intellectuals in general—the right to speak for others.

By examining the various strategies that Sartre adopted in his work to tackle the problems of social responsibility and representation, it can readily be seen that an avowed refusal to represent others does not always effectively lead to change; a cynic might even say that such a refusal can be viewed more as a private choice made to soothe one's conscience. Interpreted more positively, however, even Sartre's long-time "bourgeois" preoccupation with Flaubert, or at least the textual and interpretive strat-egies of *The Family Idiot*, can be viewed in terms of the overall challenge presented by representation: dissatisfied with simply casting off the role of the committed intellec-tual and immersing himself in political action, Sartre may be interpreted as having con-tinued to search for an alternative means for tackling problems of oppressive and in-adequate (textual) representation. Admittedly going further than many post-structur-alist thinkers in meeting the problem, he attempted, on this view, to transcend the dif-

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14 It also seems to me that—in popular readings—attention to structures and re-lations is too readily opposed to Sartre's existentialist emphasis on freedom (Sartre's focus on the importance of the "practico-inert" later on is largely ig-nored) and, similarly, that the post-structuralists' self-made claims to radically differ from their predecessors on views of subjectivity is taken on faith.

ficulty of representation in his Flaubert—Sartre's final effort to demonstrate that humans can, even in terms of their intentional lives, be responsibly knowable and communicable to and by others.

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