

Reflections on Sartre's *Réflexions*:  
From Political to Ethical *Engagement*

by

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Class of 2008

A thesis submitted to the  
faculty of Wesleyan University  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the  
Degree of Bachelor of Arts  
with Departmental Honors from the College of Letters  
and with Departmental Honors in French Studies



## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Preface .....	5
Introduction .....	9
Setting the Stage for Sartre's <i>Réflexions</i>	
Chapter I .....	33
Jean-Paul Sartre's <i>Réflexions sur la Question Juive</i>	
Chapter II .....	70
From Existentialism to Ethics	
Chapter III .....	83
L'Intellectuel Engagé	
Chapter IV .....	96
<i>L'Espoir Maintenant</i> : Sartre's Final Reflections on la Question Juive	
Conclusion .....	109
Acknowledgements.....	113
Bibliography and Notes.....	114

To my French Jewish Savta, whom I never knew, in the hope that her gaze would be loving.

“It were better that man had never been created, but, once created, let him be concerned with his moral life.”

Eruvin 13b<sup>1</sup>

“We are all guilty of all and for all men before all, and I more than the others... We are all responsible for all for all men before all, and I more than all the others.”

Fyodor Dostoevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*, as quoted by Emmanuel Levinas<sup>2</sup>

## PREFACE

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France has long considered itself the capital of universalism, embracing the idea that any individual can be French, all within a French republic that expresses the precious will of its people.<sup>1</sup> In French national mythology, the French language even stands as the universal tongue (heir to Latin).<sup>2</sup> It is a “classical country,” in the words of Rogers Brubaker, one that has become, since the *siècle des Lumières*, the “classic country of assimilation.”<sup>3</sup> Through France’s emphasis on universalist ideology, the figure of ‘the Jew’ has come to stand as the symbol of the particular—that which resists assimilation. Contemplating the ‘Jewish Question’ has thus been a French intellectual pursuit since the Enlightenment.

In its patronage of high-minded universalism, Revolution-era France granted the Jew full French citizenship in the important declaration of Jewish Emancipation. And so from 1791 to the present day, the French Jew has been before the law like any other French citizen—with the more than notable exception of the Vichy period. Under the haunting Vichy regime, not only was ‘French Jew’ a legal category, the category became a distinction of race. Worse yet, the ‘French Jew’—any Jew, in fact—was regarded as though part of a different species; the French Jew, according to French law, therefore no longer merited the abstract universal rights of man. France’s role in the decimation of its Jews during World War II can thus be seen as both the epitome and endpoint of Enlightenment universalism. The cataclysmic Shoah

revealed the grossly totalitarian aspect of universalism, in its finally murderous rejection of the particular.

The problem that ultimately became manifest in the death camps began with the foundational link between Jewish Emancipation and assimilation. Though liberating in theory, in practice Jewish Emancipation was no emancipation at all. Rather than granting true liberty or freedom of identity to the French Jews, Emancipation granted the permission, or even the choice not to be Jewish. By insisting that the concrete, particular Jew join abstract, universal French society through public assimilation in order to acquire human rights, “the French Revolution condemned the Jew to an excruciating double bind... the Jew *qua* Jew was held to belong to the category of the inassimilable.” But if the Jew’s only access to the universal was through assimilation, such assimilation was rendered impossible by anti-Semitism.

The philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre observed that it was anti-Semitism which provoked this drama of assimilation. In the aftermath of Vichy rule, Sartre took up the case of the Jew, with his *Réflexions sur la question juive*. Sartre, who developed the philosophy of existentialism in opposition to essentialism, began to see that universalism itself depended on a certain abstracted essentialism which maintained a shared human nature. Sartre found fault with universalism in this tendency towards abstraction, which excluded the real difference of the Jew. He sought instead a system of concretized universalism, which could grant the Jew true emancipation instead of blurring and naturalizing the Jew’s actual heterogeneity.<sup>4</sup>

Sartre perceived Vichy France's state-enforced anti-Semitism not as a break in an otherwise seamless model, but as an unbearable manifestation of a France that has long refused to normalize the Jew. The Revolutionary model of Jewish assimilation never worked, in Sartre's mind, not because of the Jew but because of the anti-Semite, who hinders even the most gradual forms of assimilation. In *Réflexions*, he figured the Jew into an existential situation, consequently reformulating the discourse on the Jewish Question by placing the Jew in a historical setting. His emphasis on the Jew's social reality shaped the majority of intellectual debate on the Jew in France for at least the following forty years.<sup>5</sup>

The Jew in France occupies a uniquely important position, as the ideologically prominent case of the particular in the 'capital' of the universal. A minority figure in a nation and a world that has yet to achieve the universal, the French Jew's struggle for true emancipation has been a historically Sisyphean quest. This pursuit, in the words of French Jewish philosopher Robert Misrahi, has made the French Jew a "witness to the human condition." He is a figure who inwardly reflects the outward world, one whose very condition gives testimony to the progress and liberalism of human society.<sup>6</sup> Sartre gave testimony to the French Jews' testimonial lives in his *Réflexions*, out of sympathy for the case of the particular.

When he rapidly penned *Réflexions*, Sartre was not particularly acquainted with the figure of the Jew—nor could he have been rightly called a philo-Semite. Yet by the time of his death, Sartre's experience with Jews and Judaism had pushed him towards an understanding of political responsibility, and ultimately towards ethics. For this serious philosopher of the twentieth century—a century weighed down and

characterized by its interrogations of oppression and alterity—the Jew served as a “lode-star” in treatments literary, philosophical, and finally political.<sup>7</sup> The evolution of Sartre’s thought in regard to the Jew proves an excellent lens through which to understand the Jew and his representation in postwar France, as well as Sartre’s own oeuvre and his conception of the intellectual.

## INTRODUCTION

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### SETTING THE STAGE FOR SARTRE'S *RÉFLEXIONS*

Widespread Jewish involvement in European Gentile society began during the Enlightenment, as Europeans came to define themselves in increasingly secular terms. Enlightenment-era Jews sought the formal granting of full, equal citizenship, and the abolition of explicitly anti-Jewish discriminatory laws. This goal of the opening of the ghetto walls was known as Jewish Emancipation.

France was the first country in Europe to 'emancipate' its Jews. However, Jewish Emancipation in France carried implications that many French Jews were not ready to accept: Emancipation would be granted on the condition that a Jew would assimilate, thereby upholding the ideal of French universalism, a legacy of the Enlightenment and the French Revolution. In requiring assimilation, such universalism demanded the renunciation of difference. Jews were free to be French, but only at the cost of relinquishing their Jewish identity. For Jews, though, freedom did not necessarily mean freedom from *being* Jewish. The particular binds of the French Jew pointed to a problematic in the French universal ideal and the question of the Jew became a thorn, a challenge, in the Enlightenment schema of universalism.

Anti-Semitism in France and all Europe besides reached its shocking apex in the Shoah, which denied the Jew even the attempt at assimilation as it denied him the category of humanity. Immediately following the Second World War, therefore, the twentieth-century philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre turned a wary, if not disapproving,

eye to the Enlightenment discussion of the Jewish question, with its “politics of emancipation.” He saw that ‘Jewish Emancipation,’ as implemented, had effectively shaped a gap between ‘Jewish’ and ‘emancipation’—one that in ways helped lead to the Nazi horror. In his *Réflexions sur la question juive*, written in the aftermath of the war, Sartre developed a portrait of the victimization of the Jew. The category of ‘Jewish’ was nothing unto itself, in Sartre’s conception; he held that the Jew’s identity was defined by the non-Jew. In intellectual historian Jonathan Judaken’s words, Sartre “figured ‘the Jew’ in terms of the gap—the negation, nihilation, and nothingness of *Being and Nothingness*.”

Sartre’s *Réflexions* “voiced the silence separating Jewish and emancipation.”<sup>1</sup> He tried to understand how one could be Jewish in a *truly* emancipated way, free from the derogatory implications placed upon the word ‘Jew.’ Sartre saw anti-Semitism not as the problem of the Jew but as the problem of the anti-Semite, to which the Jew was sadly doomed. Through his existential formulation, Sartre examined the “situation” of the French Jew. In so doing, the philosopher refigured the discourse of the ‘particular’ Jew within ‘universal’ modern French society. In a society that knew not what to make of Judaism, he sought a way for Judaism to be a near-benign characteristic: for the French Jew to be French, Jewish, and, most importantly, human.

The complexity of the Jewish Question in modern France, we learn from Sartre, cannot be understood separately from the history of anti-Semitism that produced it.

***The Jewish Question and the Problem of Universalism***

Enlightenment-era questions of nationalism and naturalization and universalism and particularism led to a puzzlement surrounding the Jews: Are the Jews a religious, racial, or national group—or something of all three? Can the Jews be treated equally, as citizens—or will Judaism get in the way of their civic loyalty? Is Judaism inherently allergic to modernity? Is it possible to be both a good Jew and a good, loyal national citizen? The German called this series of questions *die jüdische Frage*, and then *die Judenfrage*, which emerged as *la question juive* in France in the 1840s. This ‘Jewish Question’ fit into the larger Enlightenment debate about human nature, freewill, religion and tolerance.<sup>2</sup> The singularity of Jewish history, religion, and diaspora culture made the Jews “a key site of intellectual contestation, confusion and debate” for the age.<sup>3</sup>

“The particular disaster of the Jew,” wrote Arthur Hertzberg in his *The French Enlightenment and the Jews*, was that Enlightenment thinkers, supposedly “apostles of tolerance, [were] not entirely certain that [the Jew] could enter the heaven even after he was remade.”<sup>4</sup> The Enlightenment, which purported to ‘emancipate’ the Jews as it ushered in equality for all, instead brought secular anti-Semitism, veiled prejudice rooted in racist notions of ‘fixedness.’ As Hertzberg maintained, the Enlightenment “changed the bias toward the Jews from a religious base to a secular base.” Jews were considered not only foreign and inassimilable by nature of their religion, which rejected Jesus, but now by nature of their culture and biology as well.

In Enlightenment discussion of the Jewish Question, even those most associated with broad-minded rationality displayed perplexing irrationality when it came to the figure of the Jew. In Germany, this debate over the Jewish Question

developed most famously between Swiss physiognomist Johann Casper Lavater and German Jewish philosopher Moses Mendelssohn, the reputed founder of the German Haskalah (Jewish Enlightenment).<sup>5</sup> In France, often considered the center of the Enlightenment, the discussion reached its highest point in 1762, through the epistolary exchange between Isaac de Pinto, the Dutch Sephardic writer and patrician, and Voltaire, the canonical French philosopher.<sup>6</sup> The letters between these two thinkers highlight the severe tension between “eighteenth-century cultural exclusiveness and idealistic universalism.”<sup>7</sup> As evident in his exchange with de Pinto, Voltaire, the renowned reformer and crusader of toleration (of all things), proved especially hostile toward the Jews. In his 1771 “Letter of Memmius to Cicero,” Voltaire wrote: “They are, all of them, born with raging fanaticism in their hearts... I would not be in the least bit surprised if these people would not some day become deadly to the human race.” The next year, in the essay “One Must Take Sides,” Voltaire wrote of (or to) the Jews, “You have surpassed all nations in impertinent fables, in bad conduct and in barbarism. You deserve to be punished, for this is your destiny.”<sup>8</sup>

While Voltaire has often been considered a benign product of his time, he was culpable of far worse than rhetorical excess. Hertzberg argues that Voltaire in fact paved the way for racist anti-Semitism. In Hertzberg’s terms, Voltaire’s antipathy toward the Jews proves “the major link in Western intellectual history between the anti-Semitism of classic paganism and the modern age.”<sup>9</sup> During the Revolutionary era, Jacobins like Jean-François Rewbell quoted Voltaire in order to justify their anti-Semitic arguments. Pierre-Joseph Proudhon, a socialist political thinker of the next

generation, similarly defended his hatred against the Jews through Voltaire.

Generations of theorists — including many thinkers of the left—have turned to this ‘Enlightened’ philosopher to support their own arguments about Jewish wickedness.<sup>10</sup>

Voltaire is not the only Enlightenment *philosophe* who, while remembered as a champion of natural human rights, displayed a vicious streak of anti-Semitism. Mirabeau endeavored to show that Jews were loathed for intrinsic reasons, not because of their rejection of Christianity. Denis Diderot, the progressive *Encyclopédiste*, was himself a denigrator of Jews, maintaining that the Jews ought to be kept separate. He considered Judaism ignorant and illogical, spiritually bankrupt and in fact opposed to humanity. Paul Henri Thiry (Baron) d'Holbach found even Christianity tarnished because of the amount of Judaism that later religion contained. “Leave to the stupid Hebrews,” d’Holbach wrote, “those superstitions which are as vile as they are mad.” The exchange between Voltaire and the Jewish De Pinto demonstrated the “precariousness of Jewish identity at the threshold of secular modernity.” De Pinto’s “struggle to gain recognition as a *philosophe* in his own right underscores the exclusionary attitudes toward Jews that endured at the heart of Enlightenment culture.”<sup>11</sup> Even men less influential and harshly anti-Semitic than Voltaire had a hard time determining how to integrate the Jew into European civic society.

In 1784, Louis XVI’s *Lettres Patentes* explicitly defined the restrictions placed on the Jews in the northeastern region of Alsace. The measures focused on economic limitations, and while they eliminated the degrading tax on Jewish ‘bodies’ entering Strasbourg, the city—like most others in the region—remained closed to the

Jews. In fact, Louis XVI's letters insisted that only those Jews who could provide evidence of acceptance by local authorities were allowed to remain in Alsace, on threat of expulsion.<sup>12</sup> Following this decree, the Royal Society of Arts and Sciences of Metz ran an essay contest in 1787, asking "Are there means to make the Jews more useful and happier in France?" The clear implication was that the Jew posed a problem.<sup>13</sup>

Relative to the very small population of Jews in France (about forty thousand at the time of the Revolution, mostly in Alsace and Lorraine),<sup>14</sup> the Jew became an issue of major symbolic importance. *La Question Juive* became a cultural code through which to explore what it meant to be a citizen of France.<sup>15</sup> In short, as Hertzberg put it, "the treatment of the Jew was then (and indeed is now) a determinant in the measurement of man's progress and liberalism."<sup>16</sup>

The history of the French Revolution shows the same contradictory tendencies toward the Jew in France in the eighteenth century. The *ancien régime* had humiliated and bonded this Jew. The creation of the new French state, heralding *liberté égalité et fraternité*, purported to usher in a new age of universal human rights. The universalism of the French Revolution was founded upon an understanding of rational human nature as impervious to historical and cultural differences.<sup>17</sup> The monumental Declaration of Rights of Man and Citizen, a lofty declaration of this incarnation of universalism, was passed on August 26, 1789. After an Alsatian Jew in September asked to be protected from popular violence, the Constituent Assembly for the first time turned its thoughts to the issue of Jewish rights. The Jew's minority presence in France made him not only a scapegoat but a largely symbolic figure of particularity.

In a gesture thus perceived as an exaltation of universalism, the assembly effectively granted civil rights to the Jews, declaring them “under the safeguard of the law.” On September 27, 1791, the National Assembly conferred full French citizenship upon the Jew who swore the civic oath, a contract in which he specifically renounced the Jewish *status communautaire*. With this measure, the National Assembly forcibly dissolved the Jews’ autonomous semi-nationalistic communal grouping.

This ‘Emancipation’ of the Jews in France—the first in Europe— was vehemently opposed by many in the Assembly, a microcosm of the national duality of sympathies, between Enlightenment ideology and deep-rooted prejudices (about French citizenship and national belonging, the very issues explored in the debates between De Pinto and Voltaire). As the Count Stanislas de Clermont-Tonnerre famously announced in a meeting of the French National Assembly in December 1789,<sup>18</sup> “There cannot be one nation within another nation.” The Jews, therefore, “should be denied everything as a nation but granted everything as individuals.”

Following Clermont-Tonnerre’s recommendation, it was not the Jewish community to which universal rights were granted, but to the Jewish individual instead. Though Emancipation did allow the fully assimilationist Jew his right of passage into the world of French universal rationalism, this new sociopolitical contract pointed towards a “rapid abandonment of ‘particularistic’ Jewish peoplehood and culture.”<sup>19</sup> This political manifestation of philosophical universalism theoretically granted the Jew his right to become an ordinary Frenchman, *un bon citoyen français* of the Republic. Indeed, until the Vichy era, no ensuing French regime contested the right of a Jew to be a French citizen.<sup>20</sup> Still, as lofty legal

ideology must submit to quotidian reality, anti-Semitism prevented the Jew from true normalization.<sup>21</sup> The Jewish Question emerged and reemerged in each subsequent generation.

Napoleon Bonaparte, who rose to Emperor of France shortly after the Revolution, is remembered in national myth as a friend to the Jews. In ways, he was in fact their student; Napoleon convened an Assembly of Jewish Notables in 1806 to answer twelve questions about the Jewish religion, in order to determine whether anything innate to Judaism prevented integration. Some of Napoleon's questions were simple ones of religious doctrine or tradition (Can a Jew marry a Gentile, Can a Jew have more than one wife), while others showed the Emperor's desire to understand the possibilities of French-Jewish citizenship: Did a Jew born in France consider France his country? Did he feel obliged to defend it? The impetus for this Assembly of Jewish Notables was not Napoleon's curiosity, however, but rather a series of complaints Napoleon confronted about the Jews. (Since their ghetto gates had been released, campaigning Catholic intellectuals wondered, why did the Jews continue to act like a separate nation within the nation of France? The Emancipatory civic oath had dismissed the Jews' *status communautaire*, so why had Jewish economic and cultural tendencies altered so little?) By the same token, Napoleon's welcoming actions towards the Jews were mostly a political contrivance. The answers from the non-rabbinical Assembly of Jewish Notables, ratified by the Great Sanhedrin<sup>22</sup> in 1807, underlined Napoleon's staunchly assimilationist aim by making Jews first and foremost subservient to the French state.<sup>23</sup>

Through a series of decrees, Napoleon pushed to ensure that being Jewish in France meant engaging in acts rather than in beliefs; he effectively restricted the meaning of 'religion' when applied to the religion of the Jews. Napoleon required the Jews to fix family names, he commanded the documentation of synagogues, and he placed control over public expression of Judaism under a centralized Consistory. Worse, Napoleon's so-called "Infamous Decree" forced military participation, placed prejudiced restrictions on Jewish commerce and money-lending, and limited where Jews could reside, in a sense creating difference where there may not have been. Through such measures, the Napoleonic Empire reiterated the Revolution's demarcation separating particular Jew from universal Frenchman. Napoleon's calls for universality came, again, and again contradictorily, through anti-Jewish discriminatory procedures.

The final explicitly discriminatory law (the *More Judaïco* court oath) was eradicated in 1846, and in the mid-to-late nineteenth century, the Jewish community in France underwent rapid embourgeoisement. This modernization of the Jew in modernizing French society might have paved a road towards complete acculturation, but anti-Semitism again hindered normalization of the Jew. In fact, the rising prominence and visibility of Jews in each aspect of French life caused both right-wing and left-wing factions to lump their concerns about urbanization, industrialization, secularization, and modernization onto the Jews.

The conservative Catholic faction portrayed the Jews as destructive revolutionaries, a debasing force of modernity along with the republicans, Freemasons, and Protestants. The Jews, they said, were turning Paris into a "Babylon

of vice and decadence, criminality and incredulity, immigration and cosmopolitanism.”<sup>24</sup> Count Joseph Arthur de Gobineau, the father of intellectual racism in the nineteenth century, was a proponent of this reactionary worldview.<sup>25</sup>

The left-wing stream of anti-Judaism was a predominantly socialist critique, which perceived Jews as greedy capitalist plutocrats that deceitfully preyed off the masses. Utopian socialists like Charles Fourier and the aforementioned Pierre-Joseph Proudhon associated Jews with Satanic evil, with bloodsucking exploitation. For Proudhon, the Jews had to be exterminated, or at least sent “back to Asia.” To Fourier, the Jew was “the leprosy and the ruin of the body politic.” The industrialist Jew’s individuality and urbaneness made him the very antithesis of Fourier’s phalanstery. Karl Marx placed the Jews as a cause and problem of modern, commercial bourgeois society. His invective “On the Jewish Question,” written in 1843, closed, “The social emancipation of the Jew is the emancipation of society from Judaism.”<sup>26</sup> In 1845, Charles Fourier’s disciple Alphonse de Toussenel published *Les juifs, rois de l’époque* (The Jews, Kings of the Age). In this work, Toussenel attacked the Rothschilds as a repressive banking power seeking absolute control. The Jews, he argued, were symptomatic of the problems of modernity. Like Shakespeare’s Shylock (“The Jew”), they were ravenous miscreants, who viewed the world through the amoral lens of modern capitalism. If assimilating such a figure were even possible, according to this critique, it would be to the clear detriment of greater society.

### ***Racial Anti-Semitism and the Emergence of the Intellectual***

In 1894, the obscure French Jewish military captain Alfred Dreyfus was falsely accused of providing secret French military information to the German government. Despite Dreyfus's protestations, he was unanimously convicted of treason in a secret military court-martial, stripped of his military rank, and sentenced to life imprisonment on the Devil's Island penal colony. His supposed treason came to symbolize the treason of the Jews, in all their wickedness. The national affair that erupted over Dreyfus's case marked the fusion of xenophobic nationalism with anti-Semitism and the new political motions of the Right, whose strength was increasing at the turn of the century. Dreyfus became the "palimpsest over which this *guerre franco-française* was inscribed."<sup>27</sup>

The rampant anti-Semitism that dogged Alfred Dreyfus was a modern, distinctly French anti-Semitism, which had emerged in the aftermath of the Franco-Prussian war. Anti-Jewish antipathy from both left and right had merged and crystallized through the solid establishment of the Third Republic. The major military blow of 1870-1871 had birthed a fierce French nationalism, equipped with a politics of *revanche* that treated French roots as though French race. While theories of eugenics and social Darwinism came to the fore, this nationalism soon manifested into a near-indigenous hatred for the French Jew. Racially-based anti-Semitism erupted. Judaism became a physically marked aspect, revealing yet another problem with Jewish Emancipation; though it carried an exemplary message of universalism, the truly 'emancipated' was the abstract individual. The concrete, flesh-and-blood Jewish person was hardly set free. With the increasing prominence of racial anti-Semitism, it became increasingly difficult to see how the Jew—regarded as different

in his very *body*—could possibly be assimilated. The major newspaper *La Croix* revealed its racial anti-Semitism without reservation, making the Jewish race its enemy as it denied that a Jew could ever become a Frenchman. In 1890, *La Croix* boasted it was the “most anti-Jewish newspaper in all of France.”<sup>28</sup>

A pivotal moment in the conflation of anti-Semitism with that certain anti-modern nationalism came with the publication of *La France Juive* by the journalist Edouard Drumont. Released in the spring of 1886, *La France Juive* came to be the best-selling political work of the nineteenth century; the work easily set the stage for the Dreyfus Affair. Capitalizing upon Count Gobineau’s theories, German racial biology, British eugenics, and social Darwinism, Drumont became the most significant and virulent (‘new’) anti-Semite of fin de siècle France. In his potent and persuasive 1,200 pages, he developed a hysterical attack on the Jews, who he argued were plotting to dominate France.<sup>29</sup> With this fervent conspiracy theory, *La France Juive* set the tenor of twentieth century French anti-Semitism.<sup>30</sup>

Drumont began his tome by declaring that “the only one who benefited from the Revolution was the Jew.” The terror conveyed by Drumont found a convenient place among the anti-secular and antirevolutionary camps, who felt widespread nostalgia for the *ancien régime*, and considered the Jew an abased secular, republican modern. As Drumont wrote, “Nothing has changed in 1,800 years,” since Jesus was “humiliated, insulted, lacerated by thorns, crucified.” Drumont was hailed as a prophet, a “revealer of the Race,” the “greatest historian of the twentieth century.” *La France Juive* was so successful that from it Drumont founded his own anti-Semitic daily, heralding “*La France aux français*” (France for the French) in its masthead. *La*

*Libre Parole*, created in April 1892, proved a trailblazing publication, galvanizing the French into the formation of *ligues* such as the Union nationale (1893), the Jeunesse antisémite et nationaliste (1894), Jules Guérin's Ligue antisémitique française (1897).

Drumont joined with Maurice Barrès and Charles Maurras into the “trinity of founding fathers of the French extreme right.” The writer Barrès fiercely emphasized the politics of *revanche* in his revolutionary nationalism, which saw the true embodiment of France in French tradition, plus in “*la terre et les morts*” (the earth and the dead). Jews, to Barrès, were the prototypical outsiders, “barbarian” foreigners, and a hazard to the purity, stability, and honor of the French nation.

Through the Dreyfus Affair era, this virulent nationalistic anti-Semitism became a code and political tool for those who considered themselves the ‘true French.’ In *A La Recherche du Temps Perdu*, Marcel Proust explained that being French at the time meant possessing something ‘more’ than foreigners did. The historian Léon Poliakov noted that the category of ‘French-ness’ entailed “a certain property and propriety characterized by anti-Semitism, with *anti-Dreyfusism* as a password or symbol.”<sup>31</sup> In Proust’s words, “the Dreyfus case was [relegated] the Jews to the lowest rung of the social ladder.”<sup>32</sup>

In his coverage of the Dreyfus trial, the journalist Theodor Herzl remarked that Jews were regarded by the French public not as individuals, but only as members of a troubling, troublesome group. ‘Down with the Jews,’ the masses shrieked, rather than ‘Down with Dreyfus!’ While it was, in the words of historian Marcel Thomas, impossible “to determine to what extent the fact that Dreyfus was Jewish made the

scale tip to the wrong side,” the Dreyfus trial left French Jews thunderstruck and terrified.

Dreyfus’s case was largely forgotten until 1897, when the real traitor was identified in Major Walsin Esterhazy. Yet Esterhazy, a Gentile, was acquitted and his accuser, Colonel Picquart, arrested. The army stood firmly by its original action, unwilling to take back or admit wrongdoing in its anti-Semitic accusations. The point of interest, after all, was not the treason, but the Jew.

A transformative moment came on January 13, 1898, when Emile Zola’s open letter addressed to President Félix Faure appeared on the front page of French writer and statesman George Clemenceau’s newspaper *L’Aurore*. “J’accuse...!” the title proclaimed, and proceeded to indict the French military for a severe injustice against an innocent citizen. Zola, a highly successful writer of thirty-some novels, defended Dreyfus not as a Jew but as a legitimate Frenchman, in the name of truth, justice, and humanity. The letter is considered « la bombe de l’affaire Dreyfus ».

The day of the letter’s publication, a group of writers, scientists, and university professors published a “Manifesto of Intellectuals” supporting Zola. These figures—a group including Proust, André Gide, and Anatole France—rejected the notion that *la terre et les morts* made one a universal Frenchman. The particularity of the Jew, the intellectuals implied, did not make the Jew un-French; they embraced instead the universality of thought, a realm accessible at “all corners of the horizon.” On January 23, Clemenceau praised these intellectual *protestataires*, “grouped together by an idea,” as “resolute men who demand justice.” Their manifesto marked the first time the word ‘intellectual’ was used as a category; it “consecrated and

politicized' the noun and the social actor it designated." The intellectual was the figure who stood ready to intervene in the public political sphere for the sake of right—it is importantly this *action* of intervening that defined one as intellectual.<sup>33</sup> As the term was created upon a defense of the rights of Dreyfus, the discourse of the intellectual was from its birth interwoven with a discussion of the Jew. 'The Dreyfusard' intellectuals claimed their French-ness from ideas instead of from race or soil, these aspects that supposedly disqualified the Jew from access to 'true France.'

It was the intervention of the *intellectuels* that made the Dreyfus case into a veritable 'affair' for the French Third Republic. The anti-Dreyfusards saw the Dreyfusard intellectuals as pushing to raise "the writers, the savants, the professors, the philologues to the rank of supermen." The affair divided the French between *Dreyfusards* and *anti-Dreyfusards*: monarchists and Bonapartists against republicans, socialists and liberals against conservatives, secularists against clericalists.<sup>34</sup> The incendiary issue produced rioting and violence; the cold civil war threatened to turn into a red-hot *coup d'état*.

The aforementioned "trinity" of the French extreme right was, not surprisingly, fiercely anti-Dreyfusard. For Drumont, the affair hearkened back to questions of true national identity: "Why are the snob, the German, the Italian, the half-breed for Dreyfus?" Being pro-Dreyfus meant you were foreign, impure, morally infected: "anti-French," to the patriarch of *La France Juive*. For Maurras, anything claiming to be honorable must by definition be opposed to Dreyfus. Barrès wrote a February response to the intellectuals' manifesto, in which he presented intellectuals as uprooted, esoteric, decadent, avant-garde *marginiaux*: "pretenders," or

“half-cultured...poisoned spirits.” They were unwarranted in their efforts, and had no business commenting on such historical matters. Barrès denigrated the “foreign...antinational...exotic” Zola in particular: “by his roots, [he] is not French.” In simple terms, Barrès’s intellectual, too arrogant for the language or thought of the “simple French,” was like the Jew.

The invention of the intellectual was thus not only related to discussion over the Jew, but inextricably tethered to him; the intellectual and the Jew were analogous and even defined together. Inherent to the public intellectual’s role was a defiant defense “against the dominant voices of power on behalf of the oppressed, the downtrodden, the marginalized Other by announcing their truth and demanding justice for them.”<sup>35</sup> For those originally called ‘intellectual,’ the Jew was this Other; he was the man marginalized by the anti-Dreyfusard and the hateful conception of *la France Juive*. The Dreyfus Affair interrogated the “de jure status of French Jews as legitimate French citizens.” The affair hence reopened the Jewish Question, and affected this ongoing discussion through three major outcomes.<sup>36</sup>

The first, perhaps most direct outcome of *l’Affaire Dreyfus* was the triumph of anti-clericalism in the early 1900s, as the republicans on the Left consolidated their power in the early 1900s. France became an officially secular state in 1905, with the *Loi du 9 décembre 1905 concernant la séparation des Églises et de l’État*. French Jews felt vindicated by their faith in the Republic, and comforted by the power of the anticlerical movement. They returned to the fierce ‘super-patriotism’ they displayed throughout the period between 1871 and 1914, with greater interest in patriotic and military duty than in religious duty, and continued trust in the Revolution-era

Emancipation social contract. *L'Univers israélite* attributed to the Jews “a higher degree of love for the fatherland;” this might have been a psychological defense against detractors like Barrès and Maurras (who even gave certificates of good conduct to Jewish military men).<sup>37</sup>

The second result of the Dreyfus affair with direct repercussions for the Jewish Question was the emergence of *l'Action française*, a highly influential rightwing royalist party formed in 1899. The ideology of the extreme Right had crystallized through the Dreyfus Affair, which produced yet another wave of anti-Semitic activity. Led by Charles Maurras, *l'Action française* was defined by Maurras's “integral xenophobia,” Barrès's mystical and exclusionary nationalism, monarchism, clericalism, antic cosmopolitanism, traditionalism, and of course the incendiary anti-Semitism of Drumont. Léon Daudet, another leader of *l'Action française*, emphasized the French “race, our language, the blood of our blood” and wrote that Dreyfus's “crime has exalted us.”<sup>38</sup>

Third, the political movement of Zionism—at least in Israeli national narrative—emerged from the Dreyfus affair. Theodor Herzl, sent to Paris as a newspaper correspondent from Vienna's *Neue Freie Presse*, was horrified at the flagrant anti-Semitism he saw surrounding Dreyfus. Herzl understood the “extraordinary emotional appeal” of the trial as evidence of anti-Semitism's might. The Dreyfus affair, he wrote, “embodies the more than a judicial error; it embodies the vast majority of the French to condemn a Jew, and to condemn all Jews in this one Jew...Where? In France. In republican, modern, civilized France, a hundred years after the Declaration of the Rights of Man. The French people, or at any rate the

greater part of the French people, does not want to extend the rights of man to Jews. The edict of the great revolution had been revoked.”<sup>39</sup> As witness to the Dreyfus affair, Herzl came to believe that anti-Semitism was rooted so deep in the hearts of the French that the prejudice would be impossible to eradicate. French Jews, in Herzl’s mind, were no longer Jewish, nor were they French—they were a “useless” people, who could not be assimilated.<sup>40</sup>

On February 14, 1896, Herzl published *Der Judenstaat* (*The Jewish State*) in Vienna, with the subtitle *Attempt at a Modern Solution to the Jewish Question*.<sup>41</sup> The work proposed and passionately advocated for the creation of Jewish State as “a reserve against more evil days” like the Dreyfus era (Herzl said it was the Dreyfus affair that had made him a Zionist).<sup>42</sup> Through Herzl, “the first Jew who projected the Jewish question as an international problem,”<sup>43</sup> anti-Semitism in France has been mythologized as the original impetus for Zionism.<sup>44</sup>

Despite the declared aims of Jewish Emancipation, the Jews as a whole—as Herzl observed—had never been normalized into French society. Nevertheless, Jews had been granted full French citizenship since the Revolution. At the advent of World War II, however, everything changed. The Vichy regime explicitly rejected the possibility of Jewish incorporation into universal French society, marking a striking reproblematicization of French Jewish identity. Now regarded as different by dint of his very *body*, the Jew no longer could fit within the French. The Jew was barred access to universal French society, and to universal society besides. The tie between human rights and universalism no longer mattered, as the now racially-marked Jew was denied the category of humanness.

In the aftermath of the Dreyfus affair, the army and the church had felt strong anti-Semitic hostilities. While these tendencies were mostly kept in “storage” through mounting international tensions and the period of *union sacrée*, the fiery prejudice remained. Following World War I, conspiracy theories blamed the Jews for “threatening private property and the established order” through their influence on the Bolsheviks, Communists, Germans, and Americans. In 1920, Charles Maurras published a series of articles in *l’Action française* trying to prove that the Jews were the principal explanation for the major historical events of the past years (isn’t his hypothesis, he asked “confirmed by the magnificent successes and unheard of privileges obtained by the Jews?”)<sup>45</sup>

The 1930s in France, the era that proved so fertile for Adolf Hitler and his virulent Aryanization project, was a time of overwhelming distress. As French writer Paul Valéry said of the era in 1932, “Never has humanity joined so much power and so much disarray, so much anxiety and so many playthings, so much knowledge and so much uncertainty.” The uncomfortable transformations of the decade manifest in trepidation towards foreigners, in very much the same vein of *anti-Dreyfusism*. No immigrant group provoked more xenophobic anxiety than did Jews immigrating to France, escaping hardship in Eastern Europe and soon Nazism. The flood of immigrants had transformed the French Jewish community, actively challenging the synthesis of Franco-Judaism held by established assimilationist Jews in the nation. The immigrant Jews’ active expression of ethnic and political difference made them an easier target for anti-Semites. To many French people, it seemed that the naturalization procedure had allowed immigrants “to become French too easily.”<sup>46</sup>

The flood of Eastern European Jewish refugees provoked a new tide of anti-Semitism.<sup>47</sup>

On the eve of World War II, Paris was the third largest Jewish city in the world.<sup>48</sup> Of the 300,000 Jews in the country in 1939, approximately half were foreign, and of those who were French citizens, approximately half had one or more foreign parent. Purification efforts—attempts to ‘return France to the real French’—revoked the citizenship of 6,307 Jewish new Frenchmen. Maurras turned his drive to cleanse towards the “internal foreigners:” Protestants, Masons, and Jews. Of these three representatives of “anti-France,” the politically suspect Jews easily became chief scapegoat.<sup>49</sup>

The bases of French anti-Semitism were more national, cultural and economic than exclusively racial (it was racial anti-Semitism upon which the Nazi Final Solution hinged). Still, French anti-Semitism cannot be called much softer than the German counterpart. In fact, since the Franco-Prussian war—and the fusion of nationalism with racially-based anti-Semitism—the Jews had become the pawn of a push-pull relation between France and Germany. Callousness towards the Jew was very much a part of this international tug. The Nazis were rather easily able to capitalize upon the anti-Dreyfusard filaments—the desire for a “True France”—as made clear by the hostile Vichy laws of 1940 and 1941. Yet Vichy rule had enacted its own anti-Semitic tenor “before the German text appeared, and without direct German orders.”<sup>50</sup>

France declared war on Germany on September 3, 1939, following Germany’s attack on Poland. Germany launched an offensive in France on May 10, 1940. That

summer, the French Third Republic surrendered to Germany, and the Vichy state (*l'État français*, as opposed to *la République française*) was established, led by Marshal Philippe Pétain.<sup>51</sup> In October 1940, Germany sent 6,000 German Jews to France over serious objections from the French government. This move left the “indigenous French anti-Semitism [free] to express its own venom.”

In the same month, the French passed their own version of the Nuremberg Laws, with the *Statut des juifs*. Jews were excluded from elected bodies, from culturally-influential positions (such as teaching, newspaper reporting or editing, radio or television programming), and from positions of responsibility in civil, judiciary, or military services. The next day, a law mandated that foreign Jews could be interned in special camps or assigned to forced residence. French police were given the right to arrest any Jewish foreigner, and anti-Semitic propaganda was legalized, with the repeal a 1939 law that punished anti-Semitic excesses in the press. The government repealed another law, this one from 1871, that had extended French citizenship to Algerian Jews.

Up until the point of Admiral François Darlan’s fall from leadership in spring of 1942, in the words of historian Robert Paxton, “it seems arguable that the Vichy government wanted only to hasten the remigration of foreign Jews and the assimilation of long-established French Jewish families.”<sup>52</sup> But French ruthlessness certainly sharpened before 1942, as when French police agreed to cooperate with mass internments of foreign Jews around Paris in 1941. By the summer of 1942, 20,000 Jews had already been interned in French concentration camps.

On June 2, 1941, as part of an initiative to assert Vichy power over Germanization—to “wrest ‘Aryanization’ from German hands”—the Vichy regime set up a quota system that further expanded the list of professions forbidden to Jews. That July, Xavier Vallat forced a law that purported to “eliminate all Jewish influence in the national economy,” which enabled the forced sale of Jewish property, even in the unoccupied zone.<sup>53</sup> At the Wannsee Conference at the turning of 1941-1942, Hitler solidified his plans for the Final Solution and the extermination of the Jews. In April 1942, the intensely racial anti-Semite Louis Darquier de Pellepoix replaced Vallat as the commissioner for Jewish questions, which transformed the character of Vichy state anti-Semitism (*antisémitisme d'état*). On June 11, 1942, Himmler set the quotas for deportations to Auschwitz from the west: 100,000 from France, “including the Unoccupied Zone.”

The deportation of Jews from France began on March 27, 1942, mostly from the Drancy camp just outside Paris.<sup>54</sup> On July 16, the first mass deportations in France began at the Vélodrome d'Hiver in Paris, where nearly 13,000 Jews—4,000 of them children—were rounded up by 888 teams of French policemen and shipped east after a stop at Drancy or a similar camp. The majority of Frenchmen recognized that Germany's design on extermination had consumed the French program, and “while the French administration coordinated the whole inhuman operation, few French people doubted that the Germans were in charge.”<sup>55</sup> Still, there was no collective resistance to the mass roundups of the Jews. Public feeling to the Jews was indifferent if not antagonistic.

After November 1942, the German occupation of all France made the Jews absolutely vulnerable to the Nazis. All in all—though statistics of course remain shaky—nearly 65,000 Jews were deported from France, the majority of them foreigners who had trusted “traditional French hospitality.” Approximately 6,000 more were French citizens.<sup>56</sup> By 1944, Germany made little distinction between French Jews and foreign Jews.

Though they did not know the particular conditions of the Final Solution, after the resistance press was finally stirred in 1942, most French indeed knew that the Jews were being consigned to the Third Reich.<sup>57</sup> That year, after the total occupation of France was achieved, there no longer remained room for prior excuses (such as tactical motives or the hope of saving France from far worse). Conditions were as difficult for the French as they were in totally occupied nations in Western Europe. From a contemporary vantage point, according to Paxton, who echoes Hannah Arendt, complicity can only be understood—which is not to say accepted—out of the widespread “fear of social disorder as the highest evil.”<sup>58</sup>

By the end of the war, nearly eighty thousand Jews had died as part of the Nazi Final Solution in France, including those who perished by starvation or disease in camps. The Vichy government might not have planned a turn from prejudice to genocide, yet the ‘shield’ theory that the Vichy regime was a ‘lesser evil’ does not hold, if it in any measure excuses the system from the grave burden of accountability.<sup>59</sup> The French Jews had been stripped of their citizenship, and “deported qua Jews;” the promise of Emancipation had been abandoned.<sup>60</sup> As France emphatically and officially excluded the Jew from access to French society, the

Enlightenment universalism the country held so dear was revealed as ultimately tyrannical.<sup>61</sup>

## CHAPTER ONE

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### JEAN-PAUL SARTRE'S *RÉFLEXIONS SUR LA QUESTION JUIVE*

Immediately following the war, Jean-Paul Sartre wondered why discussions of postwar France failed to address the return of French Jews deported by the Nazis. Since the majority of Europeans were yet unaware of the sheer numbers who had perished in the Shoah, the problem was not a grim turn towards reality. Rather, the deliberate silence of both friends and enemies of the Jews—the same harmful silence of the pre-war French Jewry in the face of anti-Semitism—was indicative of a lack of concern, or at least a lack of understanding.

Raymond Aron later remembered discussing with Sartre, in 1945, the silence of the French community in response to the Jewish return to France. In *Le spectateur engagé*, he wrote, “The French settled down again in their France as if the Jews had never been cast out. I took this phenomenon as evidence of a determination to forget.”<sup>1</sup>

Sartre found himself concerned with this general amnesia. Bothered by the Frenchman’s strange silence, he set about writing a historically-placed critique of anti-Semitism. Sartre intended his *Réflexions sur la question juive* as an expression of solidarity with the Jews. An excerpt of the text, “The Portrait of the Anti-Semite,” was published in 1945 in *Les Temps modernes*, and the book was not published in full until 1946.<sup>2</sup>

**Placing Sartre vis-à-vis the Jews upon Publication of *Réflexions*:**

### *Sartre's Early Writings*

As the intellectual historian Jonathan Judaken wrote, “If the crisis of identity in the 1920s was expressed in relation to ‘the woman question,’ [then] the crisis of the 1930s was often constructed in relation to the Jewish Question.”<sup>3</sup> Sartre, born in Paris in 1905, began to publish his earliest works in this uneasy context of France in the 1930s.<sup>4</sup> Throughout the decade, Sartre published in literature and philosophy, with little explicit interest in politics. Yet his later interest in politics comes as no major surprise, considering his literary and philosophical interest in crises of identity, as well as his interest in the Jew, who for Sartre serves as “foil for the indiscernibility and uncertainty of identity.”<sup>5</sup> Throughout Sartre’s oeuvre, the Jew was linked to the notion of the necessity of the Other, and the need for the Other’s gaze in knowing the self.

In two of Sartre’s first fictional works—*La Nausée (Nausea)*, written from 1931 to 1936 and finally published in 1938, and “L’enfance d’un chef” (“The Childhood of a Leader”), completed in 1939 and published as part of a collection in 1939—the figure of the Jew appears as part of a crisis of identity related to, or even reflective of, the crisis the French nation. In *La Nausée*, the dates of the protagonist Roquentin’s diary indicate the context of France in the 1930s while “L’enfance d’un chef” explicitly invokes the cultural and political situation of the decade. In these works, Sartre began to develop his theory of *engagement* and the politics of writing, both tied to crises of identity, personal and national. Sartre’s concern with the mirror image and self-reflexivity often was expressed through the literary figure of the Jew, whom Sartre linked to the instability of human identity.

In “L’enfance d’un chef,” the character Lucien comes to terms with his identity by working to bridge the “uprooted” contingency of his present life through regaining mythic national tradition, a rather “Barrèsian vision of a lost France that must be recovered and renewed.”<sup>6</sup> *La Nauseé* deals more explicitly with the anti-Semite Barrès, when Roquentin notes his dream that he “gave Maurice Barrès a spanking.”<sup>7</sup> Towards the conclusions of these two works of fiction, the image of “the Jew” helps the protagonists in their encounter with Existence—though they utilize this figure in radically different ways. For Lucien, the figure of “the Jew” enables him to define himself, to emerge “respectable in his own eyes.” Lucien learns never to “try and see inside yourself; there is no mistake more dangerous.” Thus, anti-Semitism is the answer. By attacking that which is not the self, the other—the Jew—Lucien is able to define himself. He proclaims, “I am Lucien! Somebody who can’t stand Jews.”<sup>8</sup>

In *La Nausée*, Sartre illuminates Roquentin’s grasp of salvation through two figures of alterity—a ‘Negress’ and a Jew. In the very last scene, Roquentin is waiting for a train, at a café, seeking to be in the right world, somehow, to reach somewhere beyond, “to rid the passing moments of their fat, to twist them, dry them, purify myself, harden myself, to give back at last the sharp, precise sound of a saxophone note.” At this point, something just like that saxophone note comes—a wonderful jazz song, on a scratched, old record: the sound of a woman crooning “Some of these days.” Listening to this song, Roquentin imagines that the song he hears was written by a Jew, a New York Jew in a skyscraper, with “worn out body” and “black eyebrows,” who labored through the suffocating skyscraper heat to

accomplish this “miracle.”<sup>9</sup> In this final scene, Roquentin is moved by the “the Negress” who sings and the “suffering and sweat” of the Jew who wrote. From this song, Roquentin feels something he didn’t know he could feel: “a sort of joy.” “The Negress sings,” he writes, and poses the question: “Can you justify your existence then?”

The ‘Negress’ is one figure of alterity, she sings salvation, but the Jew has written salvation’s song. “So the two of them are saved: the Jew and the Negress.” Roquentin here takes hold of the possibility of writing. “This is the first time in years that a man has seemed moving to me,” this Jew, who toiled through heat for art. In these reflections on the Jew, Roquentin realizes that he can become a writer and in so doing valorize, redeem, his own existence. By writing, Roquentin can save himself, and the reader of this diary—of *La Nausée*, this is to say—can, too be saved, “insofar as the text is mirror.”<sup>10</sup>

In these two works of fiction, we see that the Jew may be regarded, as early as the 1930s, as a crucial trope for Sartre, a literary motif that would be interrogated and then used as a point from which to *s’engager*. Characters like Lucien cure their own crises of unstable identity—and of unstable national identity—through the Jew, more specifically through hatred of the Jew: anti-Semitism. For Roquentin, on the other hand, the imagined figure of the Jew is a catalyst for his realization of text as a point of reflection. Sartre here valorizes the transcendence enabled through writing, and in so doing makes the Jew analogous to himself, Sartre, the writer and intellectual. Lucien and Roquentin can be understood as mirror images (like text) themselves, “representing two inverse models of the intellectual in France before World War II.”

In August 1938, Sartre wrote an article on the writer John Dos Passos, in which he explored this notion of text as mirror. Reading a book, in Sartre's theory, involves reader reflection on the characters and their situation, which in turn forces self-reflection. Text, to Sartre, should not be mimesis but mirror, offering the reader occasion to see "the-self-seeing-the-self-being-seen." Here Sartre's conception of the *intellectuel engagé* emerges, with his understanding that text can revolutionize the social sphere. The Jew, as a site for self-reflexivity, informs this conception, as Sartre's characters' reflections on the Jew are where passive reflection became active commitment—where the 'merely' intellectual became political.<sup>11</sup>

### ***Sartre's Wartime Activity***

Sartre left for military duty from the Gare de l'est on September 2, 1939, the day after Germany attacked Poland. As an official clerk for the Army Weather Corps, Sartre was able to devote most of his time to writing. During this *drôle de guerre* (or "phony war," as the interlude between Germany's attack on Poland and on France is often called), Sartre produced approximately two thousand pages. In his pre-war writings, Sartre had already rejected the severe, anti-Semitic nationalism of Drumont, Maurras, and Barrès. During the war, however, Sartre's anti-anti-Semitism crystallized, and with this crystallization came a realization of the necessity of political involvement for the intellectual.

Sartre's work under Nazi-dominated France fell into a gray space beyond the dichotomy of active collaboration and active resistance; he was in the frontlines of neither the efforts for or against Vichy. Even during the war Sartre was a transcriber into the national psyche, through media of theatre, literature, and philosophy. He was

a witness, and a perceptive one at that. Yet—even if he in ways “reinscribed Jews within the body politic” in various wartime writings—he made little actual comment throughout the war on the Final Solution and the situation of the Jews and other persecuted groups. It remains troubling that Sartre stayed within the limitations circumscribed by anti-Semitism—even if his muted efforts were strategic. Sartre’s universalizing implication of Frenchmen as resisters or martyrs denies how widespread collaboration was, and that he himself might well have been swept up into it.<sup>12</sup> Sartre knowingly published works under Vichy censorship, and even published articles in *Comoedia*, a (at least partially) collaborationist journal. Still, even as he was publishing in *Comoedia*, Sartre was newly committed to political activism. His private and public writings, consciously and at times unconsciously, invoked questions on the Jews and the Jewish Question.

Sartre began to work out a set of questions he would develop after the war in *Réflexions*, the dialectic of authentic and inauthentic Jews (he used the German-Jewish writer Heinrich Heine as likely exemplar of ‘authentic’ Jew) and its relation to good faith, bad faith, and freedom of situation. In his *War Diaries* journals as well as in his *Lettres au Castor* (*Quiet Moments in a War: The Letters of Jean-Paul Sartre to Simone de Beauvoir, 1940-1963*), Sartre puzzled through Jewishness and its relation to national identity. As he came to understand that “rational Jews like Pieter [a shortening of Pieterkowski, an assimilated Jew with whom Sartre lived in the barracks] or Brunschwig were inauthentic in that they thought themselves men first and not Jews, the idea came to me, as a direct result, that I had to acknowledge myself

a Frenchman.”<sup>13</sup> Authenticity, for Sartre, involved acknowledging one’s own self and situation.

On June 21, 1940, Sartre was taken prisoner and soon transferred to a camp in Germany.<sup>14</sup> In his *Roads of Freedom* trilogy, Sartre examined the staggering defeat of the French, pursuing Roquentin’s understanding of “art as redemption from the contingency of history.” In *Le sursis (The Reprieve)*, the second novel of the three, the stereotypically Jewish diamond dealer M. Birnenschatz wonders why *he* should fight the Germans, as his employee Weiss has suggested, after their treatment of the Jews through the Munich crisis. “What’s all this—us Jews’ he asked. ‘Don’t know ‘em. I’m French myself. Do you feel like a Jew? ...But what is a Jew? It’s a man whom other men take for a Jew.’” Here, Sartre’s representation of being Jewish broadcasts the major thread of *Réflexions*: that a Jew is he defined as Jew by “other men.”<sup>15</sup>

From captivity in Stalag XIID in Treves, Sartre composed his first play, *Bariona ou le fils du tonnerre (Bariona, or the Son of Thunder)*. First staged during the Christmas holiday, this nativity play was a redramatization of Jesus’s Annunciation. Though the play had to be authorized by the camp’s German censors, Sartre still managed to draw analogies to rebellion. Through the literary figure of Bariona, a Jewish village with no choice but to accept his defeat, Sartre explored the notion of “hopeless hope.”<sup>16</sup>

In March 1941, Sartre was liberated from the camps and returned to Paris.<sup>17</sup> Paris was a changed city under German military domination, and the first mass arrest of Jews—a follow-up to the 1940 census—occurred soon after Sartre’s repatriation.

As Simone de Beauvoir recalled in her memoirs, Sartre felt a new commitment to political activism upon his return. In 1941, he grew involved with the intellectual resistance. Along with Maurice Merleau-Ponty, with whom he had attended the *École normale*, Sartre developed the short-lived, Marxist-leaning resistance group *Socialisme et liberté* (Socialism and Liberty). The group has been criticized for its lack of active political activity, and it is always true that intellectual resistance is largely symbolic. Still, the collection and dissemination of information and other resistance literature was of serious importance. Repercussions of intellectual resistance were indeed severe under the Nazi regime, and could include interrogation, jail, deportation, or death by hanging or firing squad.<sup>18</sup>

The word existentialism was introduced in 1943.<sup>19</sup> With the publication of both *L'Être et le néant* (*Being and Nothingness*, a philosophical chef-d'oeuvre) and *Les mouches* (*The Flies*, Sartre's first important theatrical production), 1943 marked the beginning of the 'Sartre phenomenon.' *Les Mouches* was a conversion of Aeschylus's "'tragedy of fate' into a 'tragedy of freedom'" in which Orestes liberates himself through an act of defiance. Sartre staged the production during the Aryanization procedure of French theater—in fact in the Sarah Bernhardt Theater, renamed *Théâtre de la cité*. The play had to pass the German censors, yet contained perceptibly subversive ideas. *Huis clos* (*No Exit*), first performed at the *Théâtre du Vieux-Colombier* in May 1944, might have been even more an allegory of resistance.<sup>20</sup> As with his efforts in *Socialisme et liberté*, Sartre made concessions to the German regime while attempting to communicate between his often ambiguous lines.

In great part thanks to his plays, Sartre became a chief figure in French intellectual life, especially in the intellectual resistance to Nazism and the Vichy regime. His fame, at the tail end of the war, “literally exploded.”<sup>21</sup> In February 1943, after having failed to join the Communists (a rejection due to suspicions regarding his escape from the POW camp), Sartre was invited to join the *Comité national des écrivains*. In January 1944, Sartre joined a resistance group of playwrights in the *Comité national du théâtre*.<sup>22</sup>

Following the June 6 landing of Allied troops in Normandy—the D-Day liberation—Sartre devoted his energies to the auto-liberation of Paris.<sup>23</sup> In 1944, Sartre met Jean Genet and wrote an account of the liberation of the city.<sup>24</sup> Sartre’s “role as memoirist of occupied France,” according to the writer Susan Suleiman, was connected to his “role as intellectual leader of a generation.” In September 1944, at the first legal meeting of the CNE, Sartre joined a group of sixty intellectuals who signed the “Manifesto of French Writers,” calling for the “just punishment of the imposters and traitors,” meaning those French who had collaborated. This manifesto was published on the front-page of the first free-circulating issue of the CNE’s Resistance journal *Les Lettres Françaises*, alongside Sartre’s article “La république du silence.” Sartre not only *joined* Resistance writers like Albert Camus, Louis Aragon, André Malraux, and François Mauriac, but *targeted* collaborationist writers specifically. He joined the *Comité d’épuration de l’édition* (Committee for Purging Publishers) in its efforts to bring to trial collaborationist publishers and writers, or blacklist their work. His position, importantly, considered writing as an *act* within historical circumstances. This avowal that writing is an *act* came at the heart of his

notion of *engagement*, a notion that came to fruition in his postwar writing, which “defined the role of the intellectual for his generation.”

Though Sartre stressed the responsibility of the intellectual, in his own “La république de silence” he did not take full and honest accountability for his actions during the war. Throughout this essay, Sartre’s “ode to a mythological unity,” his rhetoric echoes what Henry Rousso has explained as the after-Vichy Gaullist myth of the Resistance, which maintains that France during the war had been unified behind the struggle for liberation from the occupation. In “La république du silence,” Sartre continuously uses the pronoun “we” — we who “were deported en masse, as workers, as Jews, as political prisoners,” His does well to bear witness to the Shoah, and to the importance of the resistance. Yet when he says “never were we more free than under the German occupation,” he risks a lack of authenticity— *une mauvaise foi*—in regard to the actual behaviors of the vast majority of Frenchmen during the war, who chose to go on in their everyday lives, displaying symbolic resistance at best.

As “preeminent post-Dreyfusard public intellectual in twentieth-century France,” the trajectory of Sartre’s thought and understanding of the Jew is particularly telling (especially since the very concept of the ‘public intellectual’—which so interested Sartre—is “intrinsically enmeshed in the [Dreyfus-era] debate on the Jewish Question”). Despite a divide between Sartre’s concern for the Jews and a *mauvaise foi* regarding actual action taken, his concern with the Jewish Question proved always fruitful and always telling—especially in the links he drew between the Jew as a figure of reflection and the text as a point of reflection. Albeit vastly, perhaps irresponsibly, imperfect, Sartre’s exploration of Judaism would be of major

importance in intellectual imaginings of the Jew in post-war France.<sup>25</sup> His well-intentioned though somewhat misguided tendencies are evident in *Réflexions sur la question juive*, Sartre's postwar *témoignage* on the Jewish question.

### ***Réflexions sur la Question Juive***

France was liberated by the Allied troops in late summer 1944. For the 250,000 French Jews who had survived the Vichy regime and the Nazi occupation, this liberation of France was a staggeringly joyful occasion. On August 9, 1944, republican law was reestablished in France, legally re-emancipating the French Jews and restoring to them full civilian rights.

The Jews in France immediately set to 'returning to normalcy,' to rebuilding their lives. Though no longer within a state that overtly denied their equality and humanity, the French Jews faced a system that seemed unwilling to confront their situation. A 1945 article for the Jewish Telegraphic Agency reported a widespread "reluctance in official circles not only to do anything to remove the disabilities against the Jews, but even to discuss them." For some, the Jew remained the enemy of a happy France—only now he was joined by the traitor and the German. In fact, even just months after the Free French retook the nation, the Paris metro was filled with fresh anti-Semitic graffiti. From April to October, 1945, demonstrators took to the streets of Paris, sometimes calling for "France for the French," or even "Death to the Jews."

Sartre wrote *Réflexions sur la question juive* in the fall of 1944, after Paris was liberated though before the death camps had unlocked their gates.<sup>26</sup> His frustrated concern with France's widespread amnesia is evident in the work. Of his

compatriots, Sartre begged the question: “Do we say anything about the Jews? Do we give a thought to those who died in the gas chambers at Lublin? Not a word. Not a line in the newspapers.”<sup>27</sup>

His instant recognition of the plight of the Jews even right after the Shoah proves an admirable testimonial. To write this critique of anti-Semitism, Sartre did no research, and based his workings on anecdotes from and contact with the few Jews he did know, who were highly assimilated.<sup>28</sup> He had no connection with any ‘committed’ Jew. Rather than to provide a theologically-learned explication dealing with Jewish history and religion, Sartre’s intention was to be “life-saving, immediate, and strictly practical.”<sup>29</sup> It is therefore important to note that when Sartre swiftly composed *Réflexions*, it was true speculation; “he wrote what he thought.”<sup>30</sup>

Having grown up in a French culture permeated by anti-Semitism, Sartre had read the writings of Maurras and Barrès and had seen the prejudice in his schooling and family. On this understanding of anti-Semitism Sartre based his critique.<sup>31</sup> His work was specific to a time and place: to a certain Jew in a certain nation (France). Both the “occasion and subject of the critique were French” for, as Sartre the Frenchman wrote, “it is the problem of the French Jew that is *our* problem.”<sup>32</sup>

By stripping French Jews of their French citizenship, Vichy France had denied the French Jew the Franco-Jewish synthesis promised by Jewish Emancipation, making evident the impossible contradictions of this faulty ‘universalist’ doctrine. Sartre sought to address to this reproblematicization of French Jewish identity, to which no one was responding. The Jew’s unassimilability is exactly the subject of *Réflexions*. As literary theorist Naomi Schor put it, “Anti-Semitism is precisely that

ideology that renders the assimilation of the Jew impossible, trapping the French Jew in a wrenching bind: the imperative to assimilate and the impossibility to assimilate.”<sup>33</sup> Sartre’s short book transformed the discourse on the Jewish Question through his formulation of the issue in existential terms.

Sartre strove to understand the Jew through his new existential vocabulary, through the Jew’s “objective situation.”<sup>34</sup> He saw the Jew placed squarely versus the anti-Semite, through the anti-Semite’s regard of the Jew as the embodiment of the Other. *Réflexions* cannot be understood without regard to Sartre’s philosophical magnum opus of 1943, *L’Être et le néant* (*Being and Nothingness*), in which he developed his understanding of the philosophical Other. In a world in which the anti-Semite wields power, the Jew is defined by this anti-Semite, and in opposition to him. The anti-Semite objectifies the Jew by designating a Jewish essence to him before the fact of the Jew’s individual existence. The anti-Semite therefore delineates the Jew’s freedom.

### ***L’Être et le néant***

*Being and Nothingness* is Sartre’s “phenomenological essay on ontology.”<sup>35</sup> Starting from Edmund Husserl’s notion of intentionality in consciousness—consciousness must necessarily be consciousness *of* something—Sartre provides an existential analysis of consciousness. He sees consciousness as a mirror: itself without content, and given content through the external objects on which it reflects. Sartre would apply this understanding of consciousness to the condition Jew, whose definition by the anti-Semite gives the anti-Semite real content. Importantly, however, the anti-Semite’s objectifying gaze can hardly be seen as granting the Jew

real content; it is the Jew's nothingness, after all—before his content, before his being—that is being defined.

Sartre distinguishes between the object world—the in-itself (*être-en-soi*)—and the subject that perceives the object—the for-itself (*être-pour-soi*). There is no essence to the *pour-soi* for Sartre, and he points to the Diaspora Jew to elucidate this aspect. It follows that there is no essence to Jewishness; the Jew is defined by *le néant* (nothingness), the negation of the *être-en-soi*.<sup>36</sup>

In the second half of *L'Être et le néant*, Sartre develops the idea of being-for-others (*être-pour-autrui*). In elaborating this concept, Sartre points to the responsibility each man has for the choices he makes. Though we are intrinsically free, we share a world inhabited by others, making us exist as an object for others—the object of a gaze. As I judge the choices of the Other, and see him seeing me, I know that I will always exist as an object for the Other, who will judge me as I judge him. We are made into objects by the Other's gaze, and the only way to avoid subjectivity is to return the gaze and objectify the Other. Concrete interaction, then, is necessarily a struggle. We all, hubristic beings, seek to define our own essence. Yet we cannot; as Others gaze upon us (and we *know* that Others gaze upon us), we must necessarily be objectified. Indifference is impossible in this situation, where we are alienated from our own objectivity.<sup>37</sup> And in this *étant-pour-autrui* we have only two choices: “to make oneself the kind of object one would to be as” or “to desire the pure instrumental appropriation of the other.” Taken to their extremes, these two possible responses are masochism and sadism, respectively.

In exploring hatred, the severest manifestation of sadism, Sartre explains that hatred is doomed to failure. After all, hatred of the Other explicitly acknowledges that the Other *has* existed. Hatred is revealed as the desire to eliminate the Other's freedom. Understanding the inevitable failure of hatred is what brings the *être-pour-soi* to acknowledge the freedom of the Other.<sup>38</sup> By perceiving the human condition as within a shared world, and arguing that hatred, in this world— as we are not *en-soi-pour-soi* (the founders of our own objectivity)—is doomed to fail, Sartre's presentation of the human state implicitly opposed Vichy ideology (the rule under which *L'Être et le néant* was published).

In the final section of the work, Sartre turns explicitly to the rapport between the anti-Semitic gaze and the Jewish Other. For Sartre, the bad faith of the anti-Semite is manifest in his sadistic regard towards the Jew. The anti-Semite's is a violent hatred towards all alterity. The Jew is Sartre's classic example of the Other perceived as other, for in a sense the Other-ness of the Jew is doubled: "it is a question not only of the meaning of human existence but of what it means to be-a-Jew and how this shapes one's humanity."<sup>39</sup> Being Jewish is to be objectively limited and structured by one's (Jewish) situation, for Sartre. In this regard towards the Jew and his facticity (of being-a-Jew), he straddles a fine line between good and bad faith. Sartre maintains that fixing your identity even through the label given by another is an (irresponsible) denial of one's freedom and so humanity. Yet, in *L'Être et le néant*, he fails to fully address the question: if a Jew is defined by the other doubly, how might he authentically define himself?<sup>40</sup>

### ***Content of Réflexions***

In *L'Être et le néant*, Sartre had not sufficiently addressed the complexity of the Jewish situation. (Of course, he might not have been able to, pending the censors of the Vichy regime, which explicitly denied the worth of 'Others' such as communists, Freemasons, socialists, Roma, and Jews). *Réflexions* was thus Sartre's "first extended application of the existential analysis of the relation between Self and Other."<sup>41</sup> Writing *Réflexions* as an annex to *L'Être et le néant* was an attempt to grapple with a Europe in shambles, a society destroyed by prejudice, hate, and genocide.<sup>42</sup> The work was a theoretical analysis given in the context of historical particulars, thus an important early example of Sartre's attempts to place his philosophy into a political and social reality. In the four chapters of *Réflexions*, Sartre applies the existential framework of human freedom to the Jew, whose social condition in a sense is determined.

In his attempt to account for the etiology of hatred, Sartre braids together an understanding of anti-Semitism based on an economic depiction, cultural racism,<sup>43</sup> and Christian anti-Judaism, rooted in the myth of the Jews as Jesus's assassin.<sup>44</sup> In Sartre's postwar critique, anti-Semitism is a project of the *revanche*-era nationalism in which belonging stands as a cultural code, in which one is French through "the soil and the dead."<sup>45</sup> He portrays anti-Semitism as the anxiety-quelling result of a fear of the human condition, plus the freedom being human inexorably entails.

Sartre refuses to consider the Jews as a concrete national or religious historic community (instead the Jews are an "abstract historical community" without "historic past"), and furthermore problematizes the notion of a Jewish race. Yet without a shared Jewish land, faith, or fate, his critique begs, what can be particular about the

peculiar Jewish condition? What makes the Jew a Jew, Sartre critically replies, is his situation—the common bond of living in “a community which takes them for Jews.”<sup>46</sup> In *Réflexions*, Sartre interrogates anti-Semitism by examining the Jew’s position: the “ontological condition of the Jewish man in his objective [and objectified] situation.”<sup>47</sup> The work proved his monumental contribution to the unanswerable ‘Jewish Question’; with philo-Semitic intentions in tow, Sartre took on the perspective of the anti-Semite in order to make sense of the aggressor.

The scholar Michael Walzer suggests that *Réflexions* be read not as a work in social science or philosophy, but instead as a “Marxist/existentialist morality play” consisting of four actors: the anti-Semite, the democrat, the inauthentic Jew, and the authentic Jew. Though *Réflexions* is not written as a dialogue with properly named characters, indeed the work is an exploration of the “interplay of social forces and individual decisions” under duress. As in Sartre’s other plays, “each character creates the others and chooses himself.”<sup>48</sup>

Part I of *Réflexions* is Sartre’s portrait of the anti-Semite, not the heroic protagonist but in ways the main character. Anti-Semitism, the philosopher argues, is neither opinion nor idea. Rather, it is a passion, a mental disgust beyond the bodily. In Sartre’s assessment of an anti-Semite he knew at lycée, he writes, “To understand my classmate’s indignation we must recognize that he had adopted in advance a certain idea of the Jew, of his nature and of his role in society.” There was a predisposition to this prejudice, an a priori granted to “reasoning based on passion.” This classmate had experienced nothing that formed his idea of the Jew; rather, an essential idea of the Jew “explained” his alleged experience. Sartre finishes the

thought with an important declaration: “If the Jew did not exist, the anti-Semite would invent him.”<sup>49</sup>

For his own self-affirmation, therefore, the anti-Semite—without reason—must convince himself that Jewish character is inherent; as “no external factor can introduce anti-Semitism in the anti-Semite.” Anti-Semitism is a passion and conception of the world felt without provocation, made by “free and total choice of oneself.” It is indeed a peculiar choice to make, this impassioned hatred, so Sartre is “forced to conclude” that the choice was made because it is the “*state* of passion that [the anti-Semite] loves.” This hate is a faith, beyond the realm of “words and reasons.” And so, having made this choice, the anti-Semite feels superior, terrifying, and (terrifyingly) at ease.<sup>50</sup>

Sartre’s notion of anti-Semitism as the choice of hate over reason is demonstrated through the passion-driven self-formation of Lucien in “L’*enfance d’un chef*.” Lucien is the portrait of *the* Sartrean anti-Semite par excellence, for whom the Jew is “both the origin and solution to the absurdity of existence.”<sup>51</sup> Anti-Semitism signifies a search for “primitive” community, the collective grouping of yore that has been replaced by modern social organizational forms. For Lucien, there is a “*real* France” against the foreground of “an abstract France, official, Jew-ridden, against which it is proper to rebel” (along with the group, most naturally). In this character the binary opposition that the anti-Semite constructs is clear: “tradition versus modernity, the land as opposed to real estate, material riches as opposed to money, the soil versus the anonymous city, the national as opposed to the cosmopolitan, the particular versus the universal.”<sup>52</sup> The individual citizen Lucien fears the lack of

reference points in his modern world, and so defines himself by “demarcating himself from the Jew, the foreign bearer of all the values he detests.”

The anti-Semite becomes conscious of a code of belonging by maintaining that the Jew wants to steal France away. France *belongs* to the anti-Semite, it is a land ownership secured through a “veritable magical rapport, in which the thing possessed and its possessor are united by a bond of mystical participation.” The anti-Semite is the “poet of real property [whose] concrete possession of a particular object gives as if by magic the meaning of that object.” To the French anti-Semite, the French language itself is part of the inherited property of the true French. Sartre cites Maurras’s telling assertion that a Jew could never understand Racine: “Why? Because I possess Racine—Racine and my country and my soil.” Even if the Jew’s syntax, grammar, and style are more technically correct, the Jew’s grasp of the French language is merely acquired to the anti-Semite. The Jew can have all his intelligence and all his money, but he cannot have the French language ingrained in him like the pure Frenchman, “rooted in his province, in his country, borne along by a tradition twenty centuries old, benefiting from ancestral wisdom, guided by tried customs.” He is the negation of the values formed by birth, land, and death. The Jew’s forms of property are purely abstract. And so—despite his “purer” French speech—even the faults of the anti-Semite’s French are more “in conformity with the genius of the language.”<sup>53</sup>

The Jew adheres “passionately” to rationalism, as reasoning is the best route he knows towards the universal community of all men. Yet the anti-Semite holds steadfastly onto irrational values, *because* those values are precisely what the Jew

will forever be denied. The anti-Semite rejects as empty the modern possessions of the Jews. He chooses and embraces mediocrity to band together with other anti-Semites, forming an “elite of the ordinary.” “The phrase, ‘I hate the Jews,’” Sartre notes, echoing Theodor Herzl’s Dreyfus-era perception, “is one that is uttered in chorus.”<sup>54</sup>

As long as he has his vengeful anger against the Jews, the true Frenchmen will have no need for (Jewish) money or intelligence. He “possesses for himself alone France whole and indivisible.” This is the reactionary anti-Semitism of *l’Action française*, which fears modernity and deracination and so attaches to French community and tradition. By opposing himself to the Jew, the anti-Semite realizes he has rights. By opposing himself to the Jew, the anti-Semite makes himself part of something, and part of something particularly superior. And so the anti-Semite stands, “opposed to the Jew, just as sentiment is to intelligence, the particular to the universal, the past to the present, the concrete to the abstract, the owner of real property to the possessor of negotiable securities.”<sup>55</sup>

Anti-Semitism is thus seen as a variant of Manichaeism, an explanation of the world “by the struggle of the principle of Good with the principle of Evil.” Sartre sees this in the French writer Céline, who sees the universe, Jew-ridden, as catastrophic. Through this Manichaean lens, the anti-Semite has a task: to unmask, denounce, and destroy the Evil of the Jew, this savage, irredeemable untouchable who is “free to do evil, not good.” “Knight-errant of the Good, the anti-Semite is a holy man.”<sup>56</sup>

In the pursuit of justice, therefore, it turns out to be “*fun* to be an anti-Semite. One can beat and torture Jews without fear.” And yet, the anti-Semite finds himself “in the unhappy position of having a vital need for the very enemy he needs to destroy.” Sartre ends Part I by revealing the basic irony of the anti-Semite, who seeks the death of the Jew while needing the Jew in order to define himself. The anti-Semite is precisely the senseless sadist of *L'Être et le néant*, doomed to fail in “freely willing the unfreedom of the Other.”<sup>57</sup>

To Sartre, anti-Semitism is only a pretext for the anti-Semite’s bad faith. Anti-Semites are cowards who cannot admit cowardice, rebels who dare not rebel, entirely irresponsible symbolic murderers. They “are not *persons*,” Sartre writes, and anti-Semitic as a “justification for their existence.” The anti-Semite, in Sartre’s terms, is a man who wishes to be pitiless stone, a furious torrent, a devastating thunderbolt—anything except a man.”<sup>58</sup>

In Part II of *Réflexions*, Sartre develops his second social portrait: this time of the democrat. (By ‘democrat,’ Sartre, writing in the 1940s, means the upholder of Republican values.)<sup>59</sup> The democrat is the Jew’s “one friend,” with whom the anti-Semite carries on his tireless and pointless dialogue. And yet, the friendship between the democrat and the Jew is on fundamentally flawed terms, for the democrat’s defense of the Jew save him “as man and annihilates him as a Jew.” In failing to grasp the “particular case” of the Jew, even the most liberal democrat displays a “tinge of anti-Semitism.” While “the anti-Semite reproaches the Jew with *being* Jewish, the democrat reproaches him with willfully *considering* himself a Jew.” Sartre finally censures the democrat’s “politics of assimilation” solution.<sup>60</sup>

In Part III, Sartre discusses his dialectical understanding of the authentic and inauthentic Jew, which crystallized through *L'Être et le néant* and his wartime diary entries and letters to Simone de Beauvoir beforehand. He begins by explaining that the Jew, like all men, is first defined as “a being ‘in a situation.’” In the absence of human nature, a Jew—as any man—must choose himself in a situation.<sup>61</sup>

However, the case for the Jews is different (herein lies Sartre’s critique of the democrat: the Jew, Sartre argues, is not “a man like other men” as the democrat takes him to be). While there was once “a religious and national community that was called Israel,” there is no longer any “strictly Israelite national community” after the history of “dissolution over a period of twenty-five centuries.” Nor is Jewish religion anything more than symbolic, Sartre writes; the Jews “who surround us today have only a ceremonial and polite contact with their religion.” (He continues to say that Jews are atheists who conduct “their dialogue on the existence of God [against] the Christian religion... Priest, to all of them, means the vicar, not the rabbi.”) Sartre turns in particular to the case of the French Jew, for it is the Jew in France with which his fellow nationals must be directly concerned. He recalls the French Enlightenment model of Jewish Emancipation when he proclaims, “The Jew is perfectly assimilable by modern nations.” However, history has shown, the Jew “is to be defined as one whom these nations do not wish to assimilate.” The French Jew has been able to enjoy full rights of French citizenship so long as France has been in equilibrium. When French society has failed, as under the Vichy reign, the Jew has lost his rights.

As the chosen object of Gentile hate, the Jew has long been relegated to certain trades and venues, and has not been able to fully define himself. Therefore,

“we must ask not ‘What is a Jew?’ but “*What have you made of the Jews?*”” Sartre’s response to his own question explains why no single portrait can be drawn of the Jew, in this examination of the Jew’s status or condition: “The Jew is one whom other men consider a Jew...It is the anti-Semite who *makes* the Jew.” And so only the anti-Semite, the Jew’s aggressor, can be portrayed. After all, “It is no exaggeration to say that it is the Christians who have *created* the Jew in putting an abrupt stop to his assimilation.”<sup>62</sup>

The Jew “finds himself in a paradoxical situation,” wherein he can make his own reputation, like any other man, yet if he is honest, he can be not an honest man but an honest *Jew*. With or without a yellow star, the mark is stuck onto everything the Jew does: “Jew he is and must remain.”

Sartre developed his notion of the human gaze in *L’Être et le néant*, where he grants that all people are subject to the Other’s gaze. “But the Jew has a personality like the rest of us, and on top of that he is Jewish. It amounts in a sense to a doubling of the fundamental relationship with the Other. The Jew is over-determined.”

The French Jew can “go as far as he wants in understanding a work of art, a custom, a period, a style.” Yet in the gaze of the anti-Semite he will never be able to access the “*true* value of the object considered,” for that is “accessible only to Frenchmen of the ‘real’ France.” He will never be able to possess land the way a *real* Frenchman—“son or grandson of a peasant”—is able. No matter what he does, to the anti-Semite, the Jew is different—and even more different than the Self definitionally is to the Other.

“There is a French way and a Jewish way of confusing oats and wheat,” Sartre poetically declares. The French Jews are the “Frenchmen who have no part in the history of France. Their collective memory furnishes them only with obscure recollections of pogroms, of ghettos, of exoduses, of great monotonous sufferings, twenty centuries of repetition, not of evolution.” The Jew hence remains the “stranger, the intruder, the unassimilated at the very heart of our society.” No matter where Jewish roots are to be found, the Jew himself is uprooted.

And so “the anti-Semite wins on all counts: [the] Jew, an intruder into French society, is compelled to remain isolated.” He can constantly attempt to prove that he is French, but this obligation will only place the Jew “in a situation of guilt.” He is terribly unstable, vulnerable, found guilty at a trial where he can’t understand what he might be charged with—as Sartre points out, like the protagonist of *The Trial* by “the Jew, Kafka.”<sup>63</sup>

To be a Jew, Sartre asserts through Heideggerian terms, “is to be thrown into—to be *abandoned to*—the situation of a Jew.” Here he introduces—again in the parlance of the controversial Heidegger—his notion of the authentic and inauthentic Jew, authenticity being determined through choices made within the limits of a situation.

Part III delves further into a development of the authentic and inauthentic Jew. For a Jew, authenticity means living “to the full his condition as Jew; inauthenticity is to deny it or to attempt to escape from it.”<sup>64</sup> The Jew seeks to be assimilated, Sartre writes, and it is “because he is never accepted as *a* man, but always and everywhere as *the* Jew that the Jew is unassimilable.” Every Jew is possessed by the

“consciousness of being a Jew,” yet the inauthentic Jew attempts to “deny the traits ascribed to him... seeks and flees his coreligionists... makes himself an anti-Semite in order to break all his ties with the Jewish community.” Of course, however, he cannot.<sup>65</sup> To be authentic, then, the Jew must face the anti-Semite’s false image; he “abandons the myth of the universal man” and bravely acknowledges that he stands apart, if only because he has been considered apart. The authentic Jew accepts his situation and so defines and chooses himself *as Jew*. The French Jew must assume the double identity of ‘French Jew’ if his supposed difference is ever to be granted toleration. This is the way a Jew can rebel against the gravely inauthentic anti-Semite: it is a moral revolt, and the only way.<sup>66</sup>

Sartre’s plea for Jewish authenticity was an “appeal from within French culture to comprehend the sufferings of the Jews and to accord them the status of victims” at a crucial historical moment. Of course, asking the French to look upon the Jew as victim—a function of negativity—again falls prey to the dangers of essence-defining objectification. Still, Sartre’s exigency towards the Jews to recognize themselves as Jews—as men *treated* as Jews—was a valuable manner of exhorting the French into acknowledging the Jew.<sup>67</sup> (It was also a more realistic proposal than the solution Sartre offered for greater society: the classless society of the future socialist revolution.)<sup>68</sup>

After all, as Sartre wrote, echoing the author Richard Wright, “anti-Semitism is not a Jewish problem; it is *our* problem.” *Réflexions* was a handbook for a people plagued with a prejudice: “there is not one of us who is not totally guilty and even criminal; the Jewish blood that the Nazis shed falls on all our heads.”<sup>69</sup> Therefore,

Sartre beckoned the French to join against anti-Semitism: “It is not up to the Jews first of all to form a militant league against anti-Semitism; it is up to us.”<sup>70</sup>

Ultimately, Sartre concludes: “Not one Frenchman will be free so long as the Jews do not enjoy the fullness of their rights. Not one Frenchman will be secure so long as a single Jew—in France or *in the world at large*—can fear for his life.”<sup>71</sup>

### ***Significance of Réflexions***

Sartre expressed the terror of feeling the other’s gaze when he famously wrote in *Huis clos (No Exit)* that “Hell is other people.”<sup>72</sup> For Sartre, the Jew is the highest victim of the trap of the other’s gaze. The crux of the argument of *Réflexions*—the key to the book’s significance, in reception and response—is Sartre’s notion that the anti-Semite creates the Jew. To Sartre, the Jew is a blank figure of alterity, the veritable embodiment of the Other.

What makes a French Jew authentically a French Jew is not his Judaism but his *identité de situation*, formed by the anti-Semite. The Jew does not “exist juridically, nor does he exist as a self-willed presence; he is a ‘simulacrum,’ to use Baudrillard’s term for an image without content.” Not only is the Jew Other as all men are, the Jew is Other to the Gentile and also reflexively to himself. He “walks with a mask placed on him by the Other, which he can never rip off.”

The French Jew—if not all the Jews—to Sartre has no “uniqueness of identity, whether physiological, religious, or national.” He is the model for human subjectivity: created by the anti-Semite and defined by his purely negative condition—his nothingness.<sup>73</sup>

Through *Réflexions*, we see that “what Sartre has to say about the Jew is what he has to say about human beings in general.” He came to the Jew from his philosophical concern with oppression and alterity, and so Sartre’s fight against anti-Semitism is the “fight against forcing human beings into inauthentic roles.”<sup>74</sup> Labeled as monstrous, hideous, and evil incarnate, the Jew is the chief fatality of the human tendency to exclude *l’Autre*.

Sartre ends *Réflexions* by demonstrating that the French anti-Semite’s attempt to eliminate Jewish alterity is entirely fruitless. In fact, it winds up being a hatred of oneself, since the fate of the French Jews is indeed the fate of every French person.

The work is a rallying cry for the human to know—to experience, and so to act upon—his obligation to the Other. This obligation “is itself the condition of freedom and responsibility.”<sup>75</sup>

#### *Problems with Réflexions*

Sartre’s struggle with anti-Semitism used the tools he had at his disposal, which were those offered by the anti-Semites themselves (Maurras, Drumont, Barrès, and more). After all, Sartre’s formation had been infused with the anti-Semitic heritage of the Third Republic and the inter-war period.

He reversed the dichotomy of the anti-Semite, for example in disproving the anti-Semite’s allegation that Jews are not creative (by citing names of “Spinoza, Proust, Kafka, Darius Milhaud, Chagall, Einstein, Bergson—are they not Jews?”) or culturally blind (“Are we to believe that Bloch, Crémieux, Suarès, Schwob, Benda understand the great French masterpieces less well than a Christian grocer or a

Christian policeman?”). In so doing, Sartre ran the risk of perpetuating this harmful dichotomy.

Sartre borrowed the anti-Semitic cliché of the Jewish intellectual, using the images anti-Semites invented to refute their claims—which, of course, validates anti-Semitism as a logical belief system. In employing the premises of the anti-Semite to turn anti-Semitism on its head, Sartre maintained the lexicon and legitimacy of the anti-Semite.<sup>76</sup>

Therefore, Sartre as author of *Réflexions* is better called an anti-anti-Semite than a philo-Semite (as philo-Semitism connotes a love—and thus knowledge—of Jews and Judaism). Sartre wished to criticize and then sew up the gap between ‘Jewish’ and ‘Emancipation,’ revealing the danger of the flawed, exclusive notion of French universalism. Nonetheless, in ways he remained prisoner to a notion of “Judaism as a defect which Jews could overcome thanks to Enlightenment.”<sup>77</sup> In his relative ignorance of Judaism at the time of publication, Sartre’s “attempt reinforced the double binds limiting Jews and Judaism in France even as he sought to liberate them from the strictures of Jewish emancipation.”<sup>78</sup>

It is easy to find faults in Sartre’s *Réflexions*, as with his entire eight-decade corpus. Indeed there is much in Jewish religion and culture that Sartre did not see, just as he failed to recognize the extent of destruction in Hitler’s Final Solution. Still, it is clear that Sartre “tried honestly, though not always successfully or acceptably, to work his way out of the evils, confusions, and stupidities of our complex times.”<sup>79</sup>

Sartre explained that those Jews forced to wear the hateful yellow star were made objects even by the “virtuous liberals with an occasion for making a general

gesture, for uttering a manifesto.” By rejecting the possibility of positive Jewish qualities in *Réflexions*, Sartre himself objectified the Jewish people. Yet there seems no reason to believe that he was any less virtuous than these liberals.<sup>80</sup>

*Réflexions* left open holes in its representation of the Jew. Nevertheless, it appreciably and cathartically defined the terms with which these holes could be filled. Perhaps the most significant trajectory in postwar ruminations on the Jewish Question has been the push to move beyond, to work through, to pass over, the ‘double binds’ of *Réflexions*.

### **Reception and Response:**

#### ***An unfamiliarity with Judaism***

A critical assessment of *Réflexions* easily points to Sartre’s unfamiliarity with Judaism. The chief response to the work’s publication centered on Sartre’s definition of the Jew as the creation of the anti-Semite, and without distinctive content of his own.<sup>81</sup> Though a generalization clearly made out of sympathy, Sartre’s instrumentalization of the Jew as victim shows an obvious lack of understanding of Jewish people, philosophy, culture and collective identity.

Sartre makes simple factual errors about Judaism, as in explaining the original tensions between Jews and Christians as a conflict between Diaspora Jews and Jews from Palestine (of course forgetting that Jesus and many Apostles were themselves Palestinian Jews).<sup>82</sup> He reveals himself as ignorant of Jewish history as well as sociology, “claiming on the one hand that there are no Jewish workers and on the other hand that a Jewish worker in his foundry or in his mine will forget he’s

Jewish.”<sup>83</sup> Sartre also makes vast generalizations throughout, portraying Jews as overwhelmingly desirous of assimilation, or relegating Jews to “vocations of opinion.”

Sartre pleads for recognition of the Jewish human being not as an abstract universal but as a single individual; he seeks the benign regard of a Jewish individual towards another Jewish individual, of a “Jew with his Jewishness.” However, Sartre’s own phenomenology of the Jew troublingly vacillates between two “caricatural poles:” the anti-Semite’s uprooted Other and the crude racial stereotype of the Semite.<sup>84</sup>

The prized historian of Anti-Semitism Léon Poliakov praised *Réflexions* as a masterful work, yet did not fail to remark on Sartre’s insistence on this caricature of what he called the “pronounced Semitic type.” Sartre mocked this image in the work, by recounting his days in Berlin at the beginning of the Nazi regime. He described his experience observing children throw stones and yell “Jude” at his Corsican Catholic friend who “resembled a certain type of Eastern Jew who is most popular in the German stereotype.”<sup>85</sup> Still, the comfortable specificity with which Sartre categorizes a man on the Rue des Rosiers as a French Jew remains dangerously close to this stereotype central to Jewish persecution. Walking along one day, Sartre recognizes the figure “immediately as a Jew: he has a black and curly beard, a slightly hooked nose, protruding ears, steel-rimmed glasses, a derby pulled down over his eyes, black clothes, quick and nervous gestures, and a smile of strange and dolorous goodness.”<sup>86</sup> The use of Jewish stereotypes in *Réflexions* has been enough for some critics to consider Sartre himself an anti-Semite. Though the argument is made that

these stereotypes are inscribed within an essay aimed at tackling anti-Semitism—and so other factors must be taken into account—writers like Susan Suleiman interestingly consider Sartre an anti-Semite despite himself.<sup>87</sup>

In Sartre's ignorance of Judaism, he came to imagine the Jew as a human symbol. Through this symbolic representation of the (secularized) Jew, Sartre sought the possibility of escape from an abstract, disembodied essence. In *Réflexions*, he attributes to the Jews a "humanity cut in two; we must see that every Jewish sentiment has a different quality depending on whether it is addressed to a Christian or a Jew. In this manner, Sartre *does* give a sense of innate difference to the Jew—and he does avow the existence of a Jewish race. The Jew, Sartre explains, "has not yet emerged from society into the world. It is among men that he feels lonely; the racial problem limits his horizon."<sup>88</sup> From Sartre's depiction, it becomes clear that the Jew is being employed as an emblematic figure. This of course follows, according to the schematic logic through which he wrote the book: as an extension of his study of the relation between Self and Other in *L'Être et le néant*. The Jew's situation is the situation of one who has (Jewish) identity imposed upon him through oppression and objectification—who has been rendered irrevocably Other through another's dehumanizing gaze.

In casting the Jew as the personification of the Other, Sartre typifies him further as the personified sufferer. In Part IV of *Réflexions*, Sartre held that the anti-Semite, not the Jew, is the "true opponent of assimilation."<sup>89</sup> Yet if Sartre excludes the anti-Semitic hangman from authentic membership in universal French national community, it is the Jew who is "figuratively martyred—constituted as a negativity, a

ghost... [the Jew] bears witness to the necessity for French cultural unity.”<sup>90</sup> In Judaken’s terms, Sartre “attempts textually to purge the anti-Semite from the community of French culture while enabling Sartre to define himself as the conscience of the French nation.” The Jew of *Réflexions* exemplifies the martyrdom of the human condition, and in order to be authentic must agree to being humanity’s sacrificial lamb. The Jew, inscribed in Sartre’s closed dialectical logic, is a universal entity: a hero, indeed, but only in his negativity, where he becomes positive only as a “universalizing revolutionary.”<sup>91</sup>

Sartre’s habitually false and overly generalized portrayal of ‘the Jew’ can be attributed to a lack of research put into the hastily-produced oeuvre. Also at fault is Sartre’s tendency to render the Jew a tool or device; he made ‘the Jew’ the site for his study of the human’s cruelest gaze towards the Other. This tendency may be overlooked as an attempted expression of camaraderie and empathy with the Jew. Another oversight of *Réflexions* is less easily excused: many wonder how, in a work alleged to be an expression of sympathy with the Jews, Sartre could have made such little mention of the Final Solution.

### ***A blindness graver than unfamiliarity***

*Réflexions* was published in its entirety a year and a half after the liberation of the death camps. Sartre does include the *fact* of the mass murder: “Do we give a thought to those who died in the gas chambers at Lublin? Not a word.”<sup>92</sup> Yet as Enzo Traverso observes, “what is most striking [about reading Sartre’s work] is his almost total silence about Auschwitz.”<sup>93</sup> Insofar as *Réflexions* is a historically-located account of the French Jew’s situation at the already-too-late end of World War—

Sartre's failure to place the genocide at its core is indeed a severe deficiency. However, this "blindness," cannot be considered unusual, considering the lack of historical consciousness of the Shoah at the time of composition. As Bernard-Henri Levy rhetorically questions, "isn't this quite natural when the book was written at the end of 1944? and surely it's already a really good thing that he mentions the gas chambers of Majdanek?"<sup>94</sup> In fact Sartre later added a footnote to his text, explaining that when he wrote 'today,' he was referring specifically to October 1944—just after the Soviets had revealed the discovery of the gas chamber near Lublin.<sup>95</sup>

The invisibility of the Jewish extermination is clear, as Traverso remarks, just in the detail that, in 1947, "a witness such as Primo Levi encountered difficulties publishing *Se questo è un uomo (If this is a Man?)*." Europe was in such general ruin that the singularity of the Jewish catastrophe was near impossible to grasp. In fact, in this context, not even one French critic of *Réflexions* noted Sartre's significant omission.<sup>96</sup> It must be understood, therefore, that the anti-Semitism to which Sartre was responding was not the Hitlerian anti-Semitism of the Vichy reign and the death camps; it is rather the anti-Semitism of the anti-Dreyfusards. It is the Maurrassian anti-Semitism of *l'Action française*—the identical passionate prejudice with which Sartre dealt in his pre-war "L'enfance d'un chef." This is an anti-Semitism that uses pogroms to manifest its terrible hatred, that will stop once "it has massacred some Jews and burned a few synagogues." In *Réflexions*, Sartre was responding to a hatred intended towards "the destruction of certain men, not of institutions."<sup>97</sup> As the historian Pierre Vidal-Naquet notes, this is an important distinction "for the historian

and the sociologist...not all anti-Semites were committed to the extermination of the Jews.”<sup>98</sup>

The anti-Semitism of the Final Solution, of course, aimed towards a systematic elimination of peoples, religions, cultural foundations. The anti-Semitism with which Sartre was dealing—“anti-Semitism as a *passion*—cannot integrate Auschwitz.” It was an emotional anti-Semitism of *symbolic* murders and spontaneous bouts of homicide, but not of bureaucratic genocide as a triumph of modernity. Sartre’s phenomenology of anti-Semitism excludes Hannah Arendt’s notion of the ‘banality of evil,’ as he could not then perceive fascism as a properly French product, by and for his countrymen. In 1946, Sartre could not intuit Theodor Adorno’s perception of Auschwitz as the “self-destruction of reason,” nor Georges Bataille’s understanding that, after Auschwitz, “the image of man is henceforth inseparable from that of a gas chamber.”<sup>99</sup> These thinkers recognized in the Third Reich’s machinations the manifestation of Enlightenment universalism, taken to the most horrific—if most inevitable—extent. Sartre, however, did not then see the Aryanization system as a materialization of the Enlightenment’s conclusively closed-minded—even fascistic, totalitarian—regard towards universalism and universal reason humanity. In the end, the scope of the anti-Semitism and hatred to which Sartre had responded proved rather limited.

Still, the trepidation that led Sartre to write *Réflexions* was undeniably admirable; he was not among many to vocalize alarm.<sup>100</sup> Indeed, French Jews thanked him for his concern over the French public’s silence regarding their postwar plight. They thanked him for not having forgotten them. (In *Réflexions*, Sartre

reported that several Jews thanked him “in a most touching manner” for a brief mention of their suffering. “How completely must they have felt themselves abandoned, to think of thanking an author for merely having written the word ‘Jew’ in an article!”<sup>101</sup> All the same, Sartre was in no position even to fathom his own silence on another chilling question, that quietly posed by Gershom Scholem to Walter Benjamin in 1940: “What will become of Europe after the elimination of the Jews?”<sup>102</sup>

### ***“Reflections on the Jewish Question”***

In 1947, following the publication of *Réflexions*, Sartre was invited by the Alliance Israélite Universelle to give a lecture in Paris exclusively for members of this Jewish group. In his introduction to the lecture, the *israélite français* René Cassin did not harp on the essay’s oversights. Instead, Cassin celebrated Sartre’s interest in the tragic question of anti-Semitism: “This catastrophe that has resulted in the extermination of two-thirds of the Jewish population of Europe might provoke in the survivors two different attitudes: either the will to forget, which is so human, or the will not to forget, to inquire into the causes of the disaster—an option more fitting for humanity. Jean Paul Sartre chose the second attitude.”<sup>103</sup>

Sartre began his lecture with a modest apologia of the sort entirely lacking in *Réflexions*, a defense he notably recognized as necessary even so shortly after the book’s publication. “Clearly, it is only with great hesitation that one speaks of a condition one hasn’t shared and in which one hasn’t lived, in particular during the five years of the recent past,” he opens. Sartre speaks of himself quite surprisingly as a Christian, and as a man humble and deferential in his contentions, since he has been

of neither the persecuting nor the persecuted. Just the tone he uses in the address marks a clear shift away from in *Réflexions*; Sartre has grown critically aware of certain errors, lapses and deficiencies. He echoes his recent work throughout the essay, describing the same Manichean, Machiavellian, mystical-national framework of the anti-Semite. However, his understanding of the situation has markedly altered; now, Sartre portrays the anti-Semite as unassimilated in the French Republic. Due to his rejection of Revolution-era universalism, the French anti-Semite conceives of himself within a privileged, Maurassian ‘secret society’ of ‘real France.’

In his “Reflections on the Jewish Question” lecture, Sartre seems to address an anti-Semitism closer to the Vichy and Nazi model than to that of *l’Action française*. He describes the anti-Semite’s principle toward the Jews with language of explicit and not merely symbolic destruction: “just kill Jews and everything will be fine.” Most importantly, Sartre has come to recognize the existence of a Jewish culture plus, as the historian Pierre Birnbaum puts it, “of an Israelite fact as such.” The French Jew, Sartre maintains, can “reclaim his place in French society by declaring that he is Jewish, since being Jewish is neither belonging to a religion nor to a race but rather to a certain culture, to a history, to a religious proclivity or a series of persecutions.” In his lecture, Sartre has reduced the dramatis personae from four to three parts: the anti-Semite, the democrat, and the Jew. His sketch no longer includes a distinction between the “inauthentic” and “authentic” Jew. Moreover, it now deals with the “Israelite in France,” who is “quite often”—which is to say, not *always*—a nonbeliever or the son of nonbelievers.

Owing to the reception of *Réflexions* plus the rising tide of Zionism in the age, Sartre's understanding of Judaism had begun to evolve. It seems that Sartre had realized that, as a non-Jew himself (a point he strangely stresses in this lecture), he might not have been in a place to judge and define as authentic or inauthentic a man in a situation he did not—perhaps could not—fully understand. Sartre closed his June 1947 lecture with a call to arms not because “not one Frenchman will be free so long as the Jews do not enjoy the fullness of their rights,” but, in a new wording, because “there is no difference between the problem of Israel and the problem of man.” This discussion of Israel is considerably more grounded—more particular—than Sartre's previous discussion of the abstract, largely symbolic figure of ‘the Jew.’ Sartre's “Reflections on the Jewish Question” shows his movement past the wholly assimilationist ideal of the universalizing socialist class revolution. As he began to grasp Jewish actuality, Sartre began to shift from the abstract within literature and philosophy towards the concrete and the political. He was approaching a more nuanced synthetic vision of Jewish and greater reality, in which “one would reclaim the Jewish character.”<sup>104</sup>

## CHAPTER TWO

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### FROM EXISTENTIALISM TO ETHICS

Of all the responses to Sartre's *Réflexions*, the most useful in appreciating the work's importance while rejecting its perception of the Jew as a figure of pure negativity was that of Emmanuel Levinas, who partially formulated his philosophy as a corrective to Sartre's expression. Levinas would prove highly influential in Sartre's development; he helped Sartre comprehend the precise importance of moving from abstract universal to concrete situation, especially in the aftermath of a situation as detestably *real* as the Shoah.

Levinas was a Lithuanian Jewish thinker of Sartre's own generation, and happened to be not only present at Sartre's 1947 lecture at the Alliance Israélite Universelle, but the source of Sartre's invitation.<sup>1</sup> Like René Cassin, Levinas praised Sartre for breaking the strange silence on the Jewish fate. He welcomed Sartre's demystification of the anti-Semite, which revealed the struggle against anti-Semitism as an everyday combat against evil itself.<sup>2</sup> Sartre's existentialism, in Levinas's eyes, was not just fashionable but rooted "in the structure and anxiety of the modern world." The "existentialist arguments" Sartre had introduced were completely "new weapons" against anti-Semitism.

For Levinas, Sartre's testimony not only began to explore France's culpability, it demanded new reflections on the Jewish Question by interrogating the incongruities of Jewish 'emancipation.' Sartre's vision of society newly formulated the problem of Jewish Emancipation, which had always been considered through an analytical vision, a fusion of Judeo-Christian tradition and the Enlightenment

vocabulary.<sup>3</sup> Sartre's vision of society did not consider the human being "a mere object for thought," as all men had been in Enlightenment universalism. For Sartre, commitments were not mere thoughts, on the scale of knowledge. Rather, commitments were *real*, positioned just as each individual was positioned, not independently from his "historical, economical, and social situation." Sartre's philosophy was able to oppose anti-Semitism practically by relocating the Jewish problem to "true and troubling history of twentieth century." By interrogating the French Jew's case in the post-war moment—instead of the case of the abstract particular within a glorified universal—Sartre purported to critique a system that was—or had been—in place,

Levinas indeed believed that Sartre had reduced Jewish identity too far to an existence as a product of anti-Semite's gaze; he faulted Sartre for his lack of research or consultation of Jewish sources. Nevertheless, Levinas vitally appreciated Sartre's intervention at the moment when the legacy of French anti-Semitism most obviously needed to be addressed. In Levinas's words, Sartre's essay promised "a humanism that would assimilate the fundamental experiences of the modern world."<sup>4</sup> On the occasion granted by Sartre's presentation, and in the wake of the Shoah, Levinas came to seek a new understanding of Jewish identity. It was when pressed by Sartre's *Réflexions* that Levinas turned to the project of imagining a Jew who could combat the anti-Semite while preserving his dignity as a human, a Jew, and a national citizen (a Frenchman).

***From Jewish identity to ethics***

Sartre's existential presentation of Jewish identity was a portrait of the repressive relation between the Self and the Other. As the Self's quest for freedom comes in the face of the Other, it is manifest through the desire to negate the Other and so enforce the domination of the same (the Self). For Sartre, then, the relationship between Self and Other concludes in a stalemate, a sentence. Sartre perceives the Self—as well as the Other—as free in his individual human situation, and so free prior to the face-to-face encounter with the Other. Levinas, on the other hand, perceives genuine human freedom as a *product* of the encounter with the Other. For Levinas, the domination of the threatening Other—he who menaces the Self by putting freedom into question—comes just a moment after the Other has put the Self's freedom into question. Therefore, before any freedom or responsibility, there is the inter-personal relation, an encounter with something beyond the Self, someone who—like the Self—demands respect. In this relationship with the Other, the foundational point of human freedom, there must be an ethics.

Levinas's development of ethical philosophy was very much inspired by his own Judaism and biographical background. Levinas had studied philosophy in prewar France and Germany. He was a high-achieving student of Martin Heidegger, the German mastermind whose affiliation with the Nazi party cast a notorious shadow on his legacy. As a philosopher, Levinas was indebted to Heidegger but critically different from him; his philosophy came to bridge the “philosophical distance between ontology and ethics.” In light of Heidegger's *Being and Time*, which said that society precedes autonomy, Levinas sought to conceptualize human multiplicity, to “defend familiar conceptions of human dignity, and the morality flowing from

them.”<sup>5</sup> He believed that Heidegger had ignored the foundational encounter with the “infinity” of a human being, that part of existence which is beyond our recognition. In the interwar period, Levinas began his turn to inter-subjectivity from the challenge of Heidegger. Levinas sought to offer “another rendition in the tradition of Western philosophy of the theme of humanity’s godlike infinity,” rooted not in the self but in the human Other.<sup>6</sup> In Levinas’s harrowing own words, his philosophy—in fact his life—was singly “dominated by the presentiment and the memory of the Nazi horror.”<sup>7</sup> As Sartre’s work must be regarded as historically placed, the ethical direction of Levinas’s work should be understood as the product of his time.

At the outbreak of World War II, a recently naturalized Levinas enlisted in the French army.<sup>8</sup> He was captured by the Nazis in 1940, imprisoned in a labor camp for officers, and held captive for five years. While a prisoner of war in the stalag, Levinas began his *De l’existence à l’existant (From Existence to Existents)*, completed and published in 1947. The work centers on the anxiety and the utter horror of Being; it was surely influenced by his personal and historical situation, and his worries about the death of his family (his Lithuanian family was murdered, though his wife, Raïssa Levi, survived).<sup>9</sup>

Levinas wanted to offset Heidegger’s emphasis on being, in order to recover the importance of humanity. Sartre himself had moved past Heidegger in his presentation of ‘the body’ and ‘the gaze,’ in his interest in progress and freedom, and in his Cartesian understanding of Heidegger’s thought. Still, Sartre understood Heidegger as an ‘atheistic existentialist’ like him, and was less interested than was Levinas in pre-Heideggerian thought, theology, and matters of transcendence.<sup>10</sup> *De*

*l'existence* focused on the relation of the abstract human being to concrete, particular Being, and in so doing reopened the question of transcendence. Levinas endeavored always to keep in his philosophy the transcendent Other of theology without the dogmatic basis required by theology.<sup>11</sup>

In *De l'existence*, Levinas continued to develop his own counter-ontology through the theme of *human* alterity, in which the Other is recognized as transcendent through lived experience with one who is outside of the finite Self. Levinas updated the portrait of shadowy, horrific being he had made in *De L'Evasion (On Evasion*, 1935), offering a theory of the “*il y a*” (“there is”). Through a study of insomnia, Levinas explained that, even when it seems that the world disappears, something remains. As when a child puts an empty shell to the ear and the emptiness of the shell seems “full, as if the silence were a noise,” night, too, cannot be pure nothingness. Thus in a world with no pure, universal absence, Being is invaded with “a presence, an absolutely unavoidable presence.” “In the absolute emptiness that one can imagine before creation,” Levinas explained, “there is.”<sup>12</sup> The subjectless, horrific anonymity of Being is saved by this impersonal presence, the *il y a*. The *il y a* is escaped by a “deposition of sovereignty by the ego,” accomplished through the social relation with the Other.” In *De l'existence*, Levinas stressed *l'étant* (the existent) over the bare *être* (existence). He developed an understanding of inter-subjective responsibility developed through the face-to-face encounter, between Being and the Good, which is the trace of the infinite. Ultimately, in Levinas’s terms, the inescapable “responsibility for the Other, being-for-the-other, [stops] the anonymous and senseless rumbling of being.”

Levinas had assimilated Kierkegaard—who evoked an encountered ‘Other’ in God—to Heidegger, partially by fusing a notion of the divine into Heidegger’s “all-too-human thinking,” that emphatic secularization of philosophy, purged of theology. And though the flight from the *il y a* for Levinas comes through a “transcendence internalized to the asymmetrical relationship to the Other,”<sup>13</sup> the conception of *De l’existence* cannot yet be considered ethical. The sense of direction indicated by Levinas’s title *De l’existence à l’existant* rather “gropes toward what finally comes to signify the ethical, whereby the anonymity of the infinity is overcome” by the priority of being for another existent.<sup>14</sup> Ironically enough—considering the gap between Sartre’s and Levinas’s conceptions of the Self-Other relation—Levinas’s important understanding of ethics and identity, presented in his chef-d’oeuvre *Totalité et infini* (*Totality and Infinity*), was articulated as a partial performance of the flawed thesis of *Réflexions*.<sup>15</sup>

In 1947, Levinas expanded upon the difference in the relation to the Other—in particular, the Jewish other—between his philosophy and Sartre’s. The distinctions that Sartre drew, Levinas argued in “Être juif” (Being Jewish), were too narrow to sufficiently capture Jewish existence. Levinas, who saw religion best understood as a body of moral principles, sought to reinterpret and reinvent Judaism as an interpersonal system of ethics. “Being Jewish,” Levinas asserted, “is not only searching for a refuge in the world but feeling one’s place in the economy of being.” He held that Sartre failed in his incapacity to grasp the “taste of the sacred.” The world of which Levinas conceived begins with “the imperative and command and of

the law,” whereas for Sartre, the world was “simply present,” premised on the assumption of godlessness.

To Levinas, the Jew was “the impossibility of the world without religion.” This role was problematized in France by the tenet of Jewish Emancipation, which, in theory, would happily assimilate the Jew and reject Judaism “as useless among Christian and democratic peoples who have grown up.” While Levinas maintained that all human beings are created equal and in the image of God, he saw a *different* facticity in Jewish existence. For Levinas, being Jewish connotes a “nonnegotiable privilege and burden” (which should not entail, he warned, “pride or particularism”). Every Jew, regardless of religious expression, lives a certain “sacred history.”<sup>16</sup>

Levinas conceded that Sartre, in his *Réflexions*, was “perhaps correct to deny the Jew his own essence.” However, he asserted the particularity of Jewish existence against Sartre, who gave the Jew “a naked existence just like that of all other mortals and the [same] freedom to make an essence for himself.” Levinas was interested in the ontological status of the modern world, this “non-Jewish world toward which assimilation led.” In Christianity—and therefore in Christianized Western society, and in this society’s conception of freedom—he saw a presentist and temporalized system of being. The particularity of Jewish divine election, or chosenness, comes from the Jew “having been thrown into a world in which the past has a claim and the future a meaning.” In Christianity, responsibility is transferred: to “someone who bears existence for you, who suffers for your sin, and can pardon you.” Yet in Judaism, as Levinas explained in “Être juif,” responsibility is transferred to each individual. In order to create his ethics, Levinas would universalize this

understanding from its Jewish theological perspective. Any ethical formulation, after all, must hold for everyone (as philosophy and the philosopher must be universal).

Levinas had to fuse and reconcile his understanding of Jewish religion with Sartre's system of existentialism, so that *all* selfhood was at its core ethically obligated. This application of the Jewish 'way of life' to all human beings was an attempt to restate values rooted in theological premises into secular terms. Here was Levinas's alternative to Heidegger's philosophy of human finitude, a secular doctrine of human rights. And Judaism, then, was not exclusivist being but "at best exclusivist *knowledge* of the conditions of existence under which we all live."<sup>17</sup> Levinas defined the Jew's particular place within the universal in terms of his knowledge of human ethical responsibility. This was a positive content in the Jew that Sartre had not come close to envisioning.

In "Éthique et esprit," published in the journal *Évidences* in 1952, Levinas represented Judaism as "A Talmudic science [of] the continual unfolding of the ethical order, leading to the salvation of the individual soul."<sup>18</sup> In 1961, Levinas published *Totalité et infini*, his masterwork of ethics. Here Levinas fleshed out, beyond the contents of *De L'existent*, the belief that "transcendence is concretized in the ethical relation to the Other."<sup>19</sup> *Totalité* appropriated the theological inheritance of the interwar period through a *phenomenological*—importantly secular and philosophical—approach to interpersonal alterity. In relocating and internalizing theology in phenomenology, Levinas created an ethical philosophy that he insisted was "absolutely nontheological."<sup>20</sup> Levinas moved from phenomenology to ethics by "concretizing intentionality not as *Dasein* but as the primordial relation of

obligation.”<sup>21</sup> This interpersonal system asserted the ethical’s primacy even before God; for Levinas, “we find god in the mundanity of the human.”<sup>22</sup>

*Totalité et infini* is a historically-located text, an attempt to reread European philosophy through an internal critique of this Western tradition.<sup>23</sup> In the work, Levinas sets in opposition his conceptions of totality and infinity. For Levinas, totality comes at the core of most institutions of the Western tradition. This notion constitutes the universal code of universal reason; it is a system that seeks to unify and systematize both individual subjects and vast societies. Levinas therefore presents totality as the “tyranny of the same.” Infinity, on the other hand, is the opening to the Other.

In Levinas’s work, the totalizing tendency, in which all is hinged upon the ‘I,’ rests in formulas of ‘universal rights of man.’ However, it in fact stifles the possibility of morals—in Levinas’s words, “in Absolute Knowledge... in ‘truth’ Being is engulfed.” He goes on to explain that, as finite beings, humans could never achieve the task of complete, absolute truth. Still, “on the basis by which this task is attempted it consists in making the Other become the same.” Levinas here points to the problem of French Enlightenment ideals of Jewish Emancipation; this universal vision to classify the Other in reference to the same bars the possibility of benign difference within the desire for total assimilation. This is a notion that Sartre had proved unable to grasp, even as he problematized the issue of universalism: not only was assimilation problematic because the anti-Semite disallowed it, assimilation itself—in its advocacy of the universal—sought to erase heterogeneity. It was precisely the rational system of Enlightenment universalism that had permitted the

Nazi killing machines to run their course, by accepting the fascist, totalitarian political ideal of *one people, all the same*.

While his critique of totality in part echoes Heidegger's discussion of representation and of the limits of intellectualism (in this 'I'-centered model), Levinas moves beyond Heidegger, who left no space for an ethics in Levinas's eyes. In Heideggerian philosophy, the Cartesian subject is removed in favor of anonymous being, without recourse granted to alterity. Heideggerian ontology denies the possibility of primacy to both the 'I' and the Other, and so in Levinas's mind falls prey to totality by "neutralizing the existent in order to comprehend or grasp it. It is hence not a relation with the Other as such but the reduction of the Other to the Same."<sup>24</sup> Levinas recognizes the necessity of totality in society and its procedures, yet pushed philosophy to reimagine self-absorbed totality in relation to infinity. With infinity in mind, societal structures of organization of objectification can allow space for ethics.<sup>25</sup>

Infinity, implied by the natural elements, as by the "*il y a*," cannot be represented in our finite comprehension. Still, infinity is felt by us all in our anxiety and unease; it is the reason we construct totalizing institutions, in which we seek refuge from the face of exteriority. The question for Levinas is then not how we might have recourse to the unrepresentable infinite, but instead how we can recognize the infinite if it is beyond our capacity to recognize. His response is hedged in the philosophical cogito: infinity can be realized only through the intellectual act of reflection. Importantly, this Cartesian cogito is not all-powerful for Levinas; it can account for much on its own but needs the puncture of the outside, of the Other, to

grasp Infinity. For this reflective individual, with the capacity to grasp the relationship between the same and the Other, totality can be broken. Structured around the opposition interiority and exteriority—the solipsistic, separated self and the ‘face-to-face’ encounter with the Other—the work explains that the self must be separated and realized before it can eventually understand that it depends on another that came before. Importantly, it is not the ‘I’ who escapes totality. In *Totalité et infini*, Levinas writes, “It is not ‘I’ who resists the system, as Kierkegaard thought; it is the Other.”<sup>26</sup> In a philosophy that echoes Martin Buber’s *I and Thou*, Levinas’s Other is a “secularized appeal to the divine, a God in humanized form.”<sup>27</sup> Sartre, in his devout atheism, was wary of any such appeal. He considered life and freedom bare, arbitrary and spontaneous in a way Levinas did not.

For Levinas, the relationship with the Other produces meaningful freedom and infinity, that which we cannot express (and which some express as God).<sup>28</sup> There is an “infinity in the ethical exigency in that it is insatiable.”<sup>29</sup> And furthermore, as Levinas said in his conversations with Philippe Nemo, “the inter-subjective relation is a non-symmetrical relation. In this sense, I am responsible for the Other without waiting for reciprocity, were I to die for it. Reciprocity is *his* affair.” Levinas thus modifies universalism, in refusing to necessitate reciprocity. No matter what the Other maintains, responsibility for the Other is non-transferable, non-interchangeable, infinite: “the charge is a “supreme dignity of the unique.” It is a responsibility incumbent on the individual, it is what, “*humanly*,” one cannot refuse.<sup>30</sup>

Levinas’s was a philosophy of “radical difference;” in which the “difficult freedom” of being human is realized through the face of the Other (*Difficile liberté*

was the title of Levinas's 1963 collection of essays on Judaism). For Levinas the journey of self-discovery is not the *nostos*—the return home—but instead a “ceaseless venturing into exteriority,” meaning the other-than-self, the Other (the Levinassian journey is represented by Abraham's nomadic wanderings instead of Ulysses's circular voyage).<sup>31</sup>

While Levinas, as Georges Bataille noted after the war, “situated himself outside of ‘French existentialism,’” he did converge with Sartre on an “existentialist humanism.”<sup>32</sup> Both thinkers endeavored to place the human in the lived experience of history. Yet Sartre focused on the symmetry of the rapport between the Self and the Other, as seen in *L'Être et le néant* (and of course *Réflexions*, its application to anti-Semitism, the hatred of the Jewish Other). Levinas's philosophy moved beyond that of Sartre, in its understanding of the Other, who for Sartre—recall the phrase “Hell is other people,” delivered in *Huis Clos* as a prison sentence—is an obstacle to the ‘I.’ Levinas, in his concern with the freedom of the Other, refused to conceive of this Other as obstacle or object. Levinas has thus moved towards infinity beyond the plan of distinction-numbing totality, to which Sartre has fallen prey. As the intellectual historian Ethan Kleinberg has phrased it, quoting *Totalité*, Levinas “sees the limitations of personal freedom as the possibility for something more meaningful than freedom: ‘Morality begins when freedom, instead of being justified by itself, feels itself to be arbitrary and violent.’”<sup>33</sup>

For Sartre, the encounter with the Other endangered the freedom of the self. But Levinas cannot see freedom as a condemnation; rather, existence is “*invested as freedom.*”<sup>34</sup> Levinas's perception of human freedom as *derived* from the Other

fundamentally opposes Sartre's conception, who hardly sees joy in the face-to-face encounter. Levinas's philosophy of freedom was couched in Judaism, which he regarded as a *positive* anti-paganism insisting upon the limits to the world. To Levinas, Sartre revealed freedom's limitations but misinterpreted its source. Following the Holocaust, and following Sartre's *Réflexions*, Levinas developed his ethical theology of human others as a reclamation of ethical norms, before ontology, through alterity. Human freedom, for Levinas, appears *only* in relation to the Other.<sup>35</sup>

Aided by Sartre in what Levinas's associate Gabriel Marcel called a recovery of "the existential background of human dignity," Levinas's *Totalité et infini* offered "a foundation for human rights in intersubjective morality."<sup>36</sup> By the end of his life, the existentialist Sartre himself would make a decisive turn towards Levinas's system of ethics.

## CHAPTER THREE

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### L'INTELLECTUEL ENGAGÉ

The reception of *Réflexions* showed Sartre that he had misunderstood the reality of Judaism, of just what it means to be Jewish. A Jewish person, the public response vastly entreated, was not a blank philosophical figure but an individual, individually-located and with his own lived experience. *Réflexions* came at the moment when its author moved from the “apparently quietest position” of 1943’s *L’Etre et le néant* towards his leftist political activity, perhaps from a guilt from *not* having acted politically in the 1930s.<sup>1</sup> While he had existentially situated the Jew, and in so doing importantly altered the future discourse on the Jewish Question, Sartre had failed to account for the actual, empirical experience of the Jewish individual in the world. He stepped from literary and philosophical allegories on the plane of the metaphysical towards work that took into account history and physical, temporal reality. More precisely, Sartre turned to work that was *engagé*.

#### ***The post-war emergence of Sartre’s engagement***

Immediately following the war, Sartre solidified his theory of *engagement*, crystallizing his understanding of liberty as coterminous with responsibility and his notion of transcendence of an individual’s situation through the individual project. His “Présentation des *Temps Modernes*,” the introduction to his journal *Les Temps Modernes*, was a manifesto for the politics of *engagement*. Separate from *embrigadement*—subservience to a political or political party’s dogma—Sartre saw *engagement* as the concluding point of French intellectual politics. He constructed an

image of the *intellectuel engagé*, who tied the particular of historically-placed social and political conflicts to universal questions and the conditions of human freedom through a mediating “literature of involvement.”

Sartre’s politics of *engagement* necessitated the pronouncement of “the limits and possibilities of liberation for the Other.” Levinas’s perspective toward the Other necessitated not only a pronouncement of the Other’s need for freedom, but an obligation directly *to* the Other. In the relation to the Other, Levinas posited an ethics of commitment, which extended to the political realm.<sup>2</sup> For Levinas, politics were not to be a totalitarian “internal regulation of society.” Rather, he held, there ought to be a “higher regulation, of another nature, ethical, standing above politics.” He remarked to Philippe Nemo that politics “must be able in fact always to be checked and criticized starting from the ethical. [There is] a responsibility... from which one does not escape, and which, thus, is the principle of an absolute individuation.”<sup>3</sup> In the immediately postwar period, Sartre’s notion of *engagement* mirrored the role of the public intellectual defined in the Dreyfus-era; for Sartre, the obligation to the Other came through the intellectual’s exigency to respond.

Sartre identified himself in a line of thoughtful writers who made the choice to intervene in a crucial political situation—such as Zola, of course, with his accusatory letter to Félix Faure. Sartre considered himself a Resistance writer, an authentic prophet-martyr who bore witness to his time. Indeed, Sartre came to regard *Réflexions* as a paradigm of *littérature engagée*, an existential testimonial of the kind explored in “Existentialism is a Humanism.” In this famous 1945 lecture, Sartre declared, “When we say that a man is responsible for himself, we do not only mean

that he is responsible for his own individuality, but that he is responsible for all men.” *Réflexions* encapsulated this stance of intellectual *engagement*. By announcing the responsibility of all Frenchmen to the Jews, Sartre voiced the outlook of his nation’s oppressed—and in so doing revealed the truth of society as a whole.<sup>4</sup> Sartre, however, had not yet adopted Levinas’s framework of ethics in his understanding of inter-personal or political responsibility.

In ways, Sartre’s philosophy was a product of his own attempt to work out the terrible events of World War I vis-à-vis his education’s “optimistic view of progress and history embodied by French philosophy and the Third Republic.” Yet it was in the wake of World War II that his existential humanist thought made Sartre the principal figure of the intellectual left. By emphasizing choice and the human confrontation with freedom, Sartre offered the French populace a “language of responsibility that at the same time absolved the human being of all responsibility.” His presentation of the senselessness of the world and the absurdity of the human condition came as a strangely comforting message to the French, trying to make sense of French reality and of their own actions during the war. The attractiveness of Sartre’s thought in postwar France helps explain veritable apotheosis of this celebrity intellectual.<sup>5</sup>

Between the liberation of France and the end of the Algerian conflict in 1962, the author wrote little non-fiction on the Jewish Question. Nevertheless, he employed the same dichotomous lens articulated in *Réflexions* to confront colonial persecution and the racism intrinsic to imperialist policy. “Replace the Jew with the Black, the anti-Semite with the supporter of slavery, and there would be nothing essential to be

cut,” Sartre asserted in 1948.<sup>6</sup> The anti-Semite became the white European colonizer, who created the colonized black African man.

Sartre celebrated the *Négritude* movement with works such as “Présence noire” (Black Presence, 1947) and “Orphée noir” (Black Orpheus, 1948), in which he developed the role of intellectual as spokesperson for the exploited. His sensitivity as a Frenchman to the oxymoronic tendency of French colonialism should be appreciated. However, as in *Réflexions*, Sartre utilized harmful stereotypes to portray the (black African) victim and so problematically remained “on the level of myth or symbol rather than history.”

In 1952, Frantz Fanon made this same critique of Sartre’s simplified dialectic in *Peau noire, masques blancs* (*Black Skin, White Masks*). Fanon rebuked Sartre for his hackneyed and offensive portrayal in “Orphée noir” of the “wild and free” black man, “seething in the breast of nature,” “a simple manifestation of universal and eternal fecundity.”<sup>7</sup> Sartre’s portrayal of the black Other, as it had with the Jewish Other, failed in its vision of a revolution that would sacrifice the black and the Jew as martyrs, for a world of universalism, without particularity or cultural difference.

Through cultivation of his theory of *engagement*, Sartre’s emphasis moved from the political and ethical commands of writing to politics and polemics themselves. As he moved from existentialism towards Marxism, Sartre reconsidered the role of the intellectual in the political sphere, as becomes evident in his augmented concrete commitment to politics.

He grew directly involved in mass politics in the late 1940s when he joined the *Rassemblement démocratique révolutionnaire*, a group of nonaligned leftist

intellectuals working to find a path between the inequalities of capitalism and the tyranny of Stalinism. In 1952, Sartre came to the *Parti communiste français*. A firm advocate of colonized against the colonizer, Sartre became one of the earliest critics of the French war in Algeria. In his 1956 “Le colonialisme est un système,” Sartre argued that the colonial system had to be destroyed instead of reformed, because exploitation was inherent to colonial functioning. By the late 1950s, when the Franco-Algerian war had destabilized the Third Republic, Sartre pushed towards support for the *Front de libération nationale* instead of for a peaceful decolonization.

In 1960, Sartre published his *Critique de la raison dialectique* (*Critique of Dialectical Reason*), a fusion of existentialism with sociological analysis into existential Marxism. *Critique* was an intellectual defense of Marxism—which Sartre by now considered “the philosophy of our time”—though not without a corrective assessment. In his constant accent on the innate freedom of humankind, Sartre disagreed with Marx in the extent of teleological determinism foreseen. The *Critique* was an application of Sartrean Marxist philosophy to the concrete, empirical world, a study of individual human freedom within the (capitalist and imperialist) social structures that ruled the era.<sup>8</sup> It typified his turn from the philosophical dealings of *Réflexions* towards historical reality.

As Sartre was penning *Critique*, he was conterminously composing a screenplay on Sigmund Freud for American film director John Huston. Sartre saw a “brother-in-arms” in Freud, in their shared concern for the social mediators affecting play between individuals and collectivities. Sartre believed that Viennese anti-Semitism had been insufficiently considered in prior accounts of Freud’s life. (“It

seems to me that Freud was profoundly aggressive,” he said in an interview with Kenneth Tynan, “and that his aggression was determined by the anti-Semitism from which his family suffered.”) Anti-Semitism thus became a window in Sartre’s screenplay, through which he considered the relationship between individuals, society and history in Freud’s own life and thought. As in *Réflexions*, anti-Semitism was portrayed as a defining social code in *Le scénario Freud (The Freud Scenario)*. Sartre stressed the innate alienation between the father and the son, the physician and the patient, the anti-Semite and the Jew, and maintained that the “intersubjective aspects of these analytic dyad[s]”—including the dyad of the Jew and anti-Semite—creates “reciprocal attachments, mutual responsibility, emotional echoes, co-created meanings, and a shared sense of process, purpose, goal, and insight.” This interplay is weighed and mediated through psychoanalysis, and also serves as illustration for the non-alienating relationship that Sartre develops in his *Critique*.<sup>9</sup>

Just before he finished his *Critique*, Sartre composed his *Les séquestres d’Altona (The Condemned of Altona)*, a meditation not on the victims of the Shoah but on its perpetrators and collaborators. Sartre saw a politics of *engagement* performed in the play, an interrogation on the Jewish Question through an examination of the workings of the Final Solution. Though with a decided emphasis on perpetrators instead of victims, the steadfast focus of *Altona*—like of *Réflexions*—lies on the actions of the anti-Semite and his collaborator.

Sartre wrote *Altona* through his condemnation of French terror and torture tactics in the Franco-Algerian war. The drama centers on the wealthy industrialist von Gerlach family living in Altona (outside Hamburg), who do not support Nazi

ideology but cooperated with the Nazis for economic gain. The von Gerlach son, Franz, is wracked with guilt for his collaborative role as both a civilian and a military personnel. After he hears the Nuremberg trial proceedings, Franz isolates himself in the family's attic, traumatized by his responsibility while constantly reminding the family of their own perpetration.<sup>10</sup>

*Altona* is a study on collusion—on individual conformity within mass political systems that perpetrate violence. It highlights Sartre's Marxist notion of "serial alterity," developed in his *Critique*, in which a bourgeois family exists in a state of negative, antagonistic, mutual interdependence that only aggravates their alienation. The good intentions of the family system lead to a collapse of reciprocal recognition.

In a denouement that rings with eerie Christian symbolism, Franz proclaims his Oneness with his ailing Father, and seeks repentance for his sins by saving "the Jew." Franz acknowledges that he—and he alone—is finally responsible for his wartime crimes. The Father, too, admits his atrocious behavior in partially supporting a Nazi concentration camp. Franz and the Father choose double suicide together, an act that will redeem them through martyrdom. For Sartre, this act proves that they, as individuals, grasp the interconnectedness of their choices with the choices of all others. Franz and the Father took responsibility for their own situation, and so bore witness to universal emancipation, the kind Sartre discussed in his "Existentialism Is a Humanism." Their fateful choice has liberated all humanity.

"I'd like the audience to see that strange thing, our century, from the outside, as a witness," Sartre cautioned of the work. "There's something special about our era: we know we'll be judged."<sup>11</sup>

In his post-war writings, the Jew was as much a fertile ground as ever through which Sartre could interrogate his beliefs. The critique of anti-Semitism within *Réflexions* functioned as a template for Sartre's political confrontations with colonialism and racism. The struggle surrounding the state of Israel's establishment in 1948 critically combined Sartre's solidifying intellectual politics with his lifelong concern for the Jew and the Jewish Question.

***Israel: A new state as new schema***

The emergence of Sartre's politics of *engagement* in the post-war era served as the philosophical foundation for his interventions on Israel's behalf. Sartre's sensitivity to the predicament of the Jewish people helped him see the establishment of Israel as among the most significant events of his time. In "Situation de l'écrivain en 1947" (Situation of the Writer in 1947), Sartre asserted the political duty of the intellectual, and more specifically of the writer, who must "take sides against all injustices wherever they come from." It was through this lens of obligation that Sartre declared support for struggles of national liberation. He followed his explication of intellectual duty by explaining that "from this point of view we must denounce British politics in Palestine." Thus, the national liberation struggle for the state of Israel was among the first that Sartre endorsed.

As Sartre understood "the Jewish problem [as] a particularly agonizing expression of the contradictions which are tearing contemporary society apart," he—quite controversially—considered it the *obligation* of non-Jews "to help the Jews and the Palestinian [i.e., Zionist] cause." In a notice to the French League for a Free Palestine, Sartre pushed for the United Nations to help create "a Palestinian state, an

independent, free, and peaceful state” by arming the Yishuv (the Jewish settlements within Palestine). His unequivocal support for an autonomous state of Israel was clear when, of the creation of such a state, he declared that “for the Jews it is the crowning of their sufferings and their heroic struggle,” while “for all of us it marks a concrete step toward a human community in which man will be the future of man.”<sup>12</sup>

In his advocacy for Israel, Sartre endeavored not to trample the rights of the Arab world. (He once declared himself a partisan of “both positions.”) Sartre pushed for dialogue and reconciliation as a move towards a peace settlement. He disparaged those who conflated Zionism with racism, for they dangerously associated themselves with a notion of Jewish race and thus with the politics of racial anti-Semitism.

Sartre’s changing picture of the intellectual and of intellectual *engagement* coincided with his involvement in the Arab-Israeli conflict. In his 1966 “Plaidoyer pour les intellectuels” (A Plea for Intellectuals”) lectures, Sartre presented the intellectual as a self-reflexive figure who worked to communicate the incommunicable (the incommunicable being “the source of all violence”). Sartre sought an intellectual elucidation of what he called the “*différend judéo-arabe*”—the inherent clashes in legitimate conflict—when reconciliation seemed just impossible.

In his presentation of the *différend*, a concept Jacques Derrida would later take up, Sartre offered a schema in which both parties involved demanded legitimate respect and consideration. His emphasis on the need for dialogue in the thorny Arab-Israeli conflict was a move away from his earlier understanding of the relation with Other as a sentence. Perhaps, Sartre’s political work now implied, recognition was the only way the states could peacefully and freely coexist. Sartre’s sharpening

political ideology was approaching a moral attachment that had been missing from his political engagement. Sartre was learning the lesson of Emmanuel Levinas, that very morality requires vigorous engagement.

Moving towards a Levinassian approach towards alterity, Sartre asserted, “It is the affair of the militant intellectual that he will live in tension.”<sup>13</sup> In 1966 Sartre avowed, “We are living the Arab-Jewish struggle within ourselves.”<sup>14</sup> He himself certainly felt the strain of irreducible tensions in loyalty and belief in 1967, during his month-long trip to the Middle East (with Simone de Beauvoir and Arlette Elkaim, an Algerian Jewish girl Sartre met around 1957 and adopted in 1965).<sup>15</sup> Sartre evenly split his time between Egypt and Israel, and throughout reiterated his support for peace and engaged noncommitment. Sartre was particularly impressed by the contentious discussions he witnessed one evening in the home of Gershom Scholem, the Jewish philosopher and historian of Kabbalah. Sartre was bearing witness to the *différend* on this voyage; in his words he made this journey “to learn, not to teach.”

At a press conference in Israel just before he departed, Sartre maintained his staunch expression of impartiality amidst the manifold Arab-Israeli tensions. He expressed admiration for the “ensemble of contradictions... lived and surpassed in making the unity of the Jewish people,” describing a “real democracy [reigning] among Jewish Israelis,” a “veritable unity in their variety” of impassioned opinions. Sartre’s concluding remarks posited that “if the new Israeli people, the new Jewish Israeli is able to develop in peace and to seize all of these contradictions and make them his own and to surpass them in his action, they will be—they are already—one of the richest people that one might find in history.”

Shortly after his return to Paris, Sartre signed a manifesto of intellectuals, urging the public to acknowledge that Israel was the only state whose right to exist was constantly being interrogated. Days after this peace-oriented document appeared in *Le Monde* on June 1, 1967, the Six-Day War erupted. Sartre allied with neither side of this conflict, and adamantly rejected binary thought in his examination of the Middle East conflict. “It is our affair, as intellectuals, precisely because we write and speak, to condemn this Manichaeism,” Sartre held. “There is no total justice on one side or the other, but we have to understand both sides completely.” Sartre went on to examine the reciprocal nonrecognition of the clashing groups.

Sartre adopted leftist views similar to those of the *Comité Israël-Palestine*, defending the rights of the Palestinians, and expressing the radical stance that now the Palestinian problem is “the problem of everyone.” During the six year period of conflict between the Six-Day and the Yom Kippur Wars, Sartre reaffirmed his questioning neutrality in the Arab-Israeli conflict. While he criticized the Israeli government’s conservative and repressive policies, Sartre insisted that Yom Kippur War of 1973 was motivated by a fierce Arab aggression. He dubbed as “criminal” the Arab desire to demolish Israel.

From the aftermath of the Six-Day War emerged the perilous tendency to replace anti-Zionism with anti-Semitism. In the years following, Sartre lent increasing amounts of support to Jews and Judaism. He habitually protested the Israeli government, but forcefully refused anti-Zionist tenets. In 1974, Sartre joined Raymond Aron in a petition against UNESCO’s anti-Zionist positions. The next year, he rebuked the United Nations declaration that Zionism was racism.

Sartre's unbridled support for Israel, along with his support for the Palestinian struggle, was clear when he accepted an honorary doctorate from Hebrew University in 1976. Sartre had refused multiple significant honors— including, famously, the 1964 Nobel Prize<sup>16</sup> — yet he accepted the prize proudly. “My acceptance of this degree will no doubt be regarded as a political gesture, and it is one indeed. It expresses the friendship I feel for Israel since its birth and my wish to see this nation prosper in a climate of serenity and peace... For me, as you know, peace can only exist if the Israelis start talking with the Palestinians. For I am also concerned with the fate of the Palestinian people. In fact, the more I am pro-Israeli, the more pro-Palestinian I feel, and vice-versa.”<sup>17</sup>

Sartre's dream of peace in the Middle East was revitalized in late 1977, when Egyptian President Anwar El Sadat took the brave initiative to visit Jerusalem as a step towards peace. In response to this bold step, Sartre published a piece on the front page of *Le Monde* that was “at once an appeal and an ethical-political demand” to the Israeli people. He saw Sadat's gesture as a crucial recognition, a political form of Levinas's ‘face-to-face encounter.’ With Sadat's visit to Yad Vashem, “the Arab recognized the Jew, the Israeli.”

The last trip Sartre ever took out of France was his second voyage to Israel, made in 1978. He traveled with his ‘young Jewish entourage:’ Arlette and Benny Lévy, a prominent *soixante-huitard* Leftist who used the pseudonym Pierre Victoir until his important turn to Jewish thought.<sup>18</sup> In a hotel by the shore of the Dead Sea, the aging Sartre was educated about various strains of Jewish thought, such as that of

Maimonides, Kabbalah, or Jewish messianism. Sartre was especially taken by the “terrestrial hope” of the Jewish messianic vision.<sup>19</sup>

Through the decay of his health, Sartre continued to work for “Peace Today,” (the name of the March 1979 colloquium organized by Benny Lévy that met in Michel Foucault’s Parisian home). His hope until the end for mutual recognition ventured beyond recommendation into the realm of ethics. In “À mes amis israéliens,” published in *Le Monde*, Sartre explained that “this opening to the Jewish Other by [Sadat’s pivotal 1977 gesture] contained the ethical imperative of a reciprocal response by the Israelis to the Palestinian Other.” Jewish ethics, Sartre maintained, insisted upon the recognition of the Other; his final exigencies to Israel were hedged in the philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas.<sup>20</sup>

By the end of his life, Sartre’s writing about the Jew centered upon the concrete Israeli Jew, a specific Jew located in a real situation. Sartre’s admiration for Israel was rooted in his admiration for the Israeli as a successful, authentic individual who chooses, defines, and ‘makes’ himself—even faced with the singular situation of being Jewish. In Sartre’s thought on Israel, we see the merger of his interest in the Jew with his evolving philosophical and political viewpoints. Sartre’s intellectual interest in the Jew as a figure of alterity became a point of departure for an intellectual politics and a committed *engagement* to a people he rightly came to see as distinctive and substantive.

## CHAPTER FOUR

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### *L'ESPOIR MAINTENANT : SARTRE'S FINAL REFLECTIONS ON LA QUESTION JUIVE*

At the end of *L'Être et le néant*, published in 1943, Sartre pledged that he would move forward towards an ethics. In *L'espoir maintenant: les entretiens de 1980 (Hope Now: The 1980 Interviews)*, three dialogues with Benny Lévy published just weeks before his death, Sartre finally fulfilled this promise. The interview series was printed in March 1980 in *Le Nouvel Observateur*, one year after the “Peace Today” colloquium at the home of Michel Foucault. They mark the endpoint of Sartre’s development from existentialist Marxism to what Steven Schwarzschild calls Jewish ethicism. The dialogues demonstrate a dynamic change in Sartre’s thought, as he reexamined and reevaluated the role of the intellectual, of history, ethics, Judaism, and intellectual politics.<sup>1</sup>

The curve of Sartre’s oeuvre, in Schwarzschild’s words, came as he learned that ““being-a-Jew” is not, and never has been legitimately, an ineluctable, situational racial given but, though situationally prepared (like all other human existence), ultimately freely chosen or freely rejected as a historico-cultural identity.”<sup>2</sup> Sartre pronounced his intention in the interviews as the “reexamination of the political through the attempt to discover an ethical foundation for a New Left politics.”<sup>3</sup> His search for what he called “a true guiding principle for the left”<sup>4</sup> in ways began with *Réflexions*, in that the work, in its time and place, played such a role in his realization of the necessity of intellectual *engagement*. At the end of his renowned life, the Jew and Judaism again proved decisive for Sartre’s thinking. In this colloquy with his

intellectual heir and final associate, Sartre turned to Judaism to guide his vision of ethics.

### *L'espoir maintenant*

*L'espoir maintenant* itself, both in its genre and its content, is a study in mutual collaboration and cooperation. The text cannot be read if Sartre and Lévy are separated as distinct authors; the two think and make connections together. The braiding of ideas creates a hermeneutics of “plural thought,” in Sartre’s words, a modality of reflection “created by two people.”<sup>5</sup> Sartre directly addressed this problematization of the single author in the dialogue with Lévy:

“Don’t forget in spite of the way you are participating in this dialogue—keeping out of the spotlight and talking about me—we are working together...Originally, [in old age,] I had to enter into a dialogue because I couldn’t write anymore. And I proposed that position to you, but I realized immediately that you couldn’t be a secretary. That I would have to include you in my meditation—in other words, would have to accept our meditating together. And that fact has completely changed my mode of inquiry, for until now I have always worked alone... Whereas now we work out ideas together.”<sup>6</sup>

The format of the work thus echoes the Talmud—that text which has inspired Lévy’s Judaism—not only in its exploration of a Jewish ethics of reciprocity but also in its reciprocal authorial form. The ethics that Sartre and Lévy are investigating here rely “upon undermining precisely the autonomous conception of subjectivity that the search for the authors’ singular intentions implies.”

Throughout the interviews, it becomes clear that Sartre has been greatly influenced by Emmanuel Levinas. Sartre interrogates his own earlier theory of being-for-others (*être-pour-autrui*) by postulating an ethic that exists in obligation to and for the Other. ‘Obligation’ is not an ideal term for this “relationship of each to each,”

Sartre explains, and so specifies: “By obligation I mean that at every moment that I am conscious of anything or do anything, there exists a kind of requisition that goes beyond the real and results in the fact that the action I want to perform includes a kind of inner constraint, which is a dimension of my consciousness. Every consciousness must do what it does... because any objective that consciousness has presents itself as something in the nature of a requisition, and for me that is the beginning of ethics.” His theory of others in *L'Être et le néant* “left the individual too independent,” Sartre states, and develops a theory of ethical conscience which evidently echoes Levinas’s notion of the *il y a*, in its description of the something we sense even in nothing: “Since we are constantly in the presence of the other, even when we are going to bed or falling asleep...the other is always there.”<sup>7</sup> As Herbert Spiegelberg noted, Sartre no longer sees consciousness as sovereign; he maintains that “everything in consciousness is bound up with the presence and even the absence of the existence of others... Consciousness is essentially moral consciousness.”<sup>8</sup>

Sartre and Lévy position this moral consciousness necessary between people within a bond they call ‘fraternity.’ Kinship between human beings is defined “not so much in terms of biological characteristics as a certain relationship that obtains among us, the relationship of fraternity.” This fraternal rapport comes because humans “have a common origin and, in the future, a common end.” Once they realize this common, fraternal ‘Humanity,’ human beings will understand “that they are all bound to each other in feeling and in action.” For there to be an ethics, Sartre remarks, “You need to extend the idea of fraternity until it becomes the manifest, unique relationship among all human beings.”<sup>9</sup>

In the final section of *L'espoir maintenant*, "The Real Jew and The One," Sartre points to a model of this fraternal ethics in Jewish messianic thought. He posits the striking thesis of a "metaphysical" Jewish existence, a "profound Jewish reality" all its own. This "metaphysical character of the Jew" is rooted in a special monotheistic relationship with God, which has made the Jew "absolutely essential and autonomous."<sup>10</sup> Jewish messianic ideology has moved thus beyond the constraints of Marxism and humanism alike.<sup>11</sup> Sartre's rethinking of ethics must be seen as inextricably linked to his contemporaneous rethinking of the Jew and the Jewish religion.

In the last interview segment, Sartre reworked his understanding of history through the Jews, who did not fit into the Hegelian model of the history of states. Of course, Sartre's conception of history was especially important, for its dynamic implications in Sartrean theories of praxis and *engagement*. In saying there was no Jewish history in *Réflexions*, Sartre claimed he was "thinking of history in a certain well-defined sense—the history of France, the history of Germany, [the] history of a sovereign political entity that has its own territory and relations... One had to conceive of Jewish history not only as the history of the Jews' dispersion throughout the world but also the unity of this Diaspora, the unity of the dispersed Jews... The philosophy of history isn't the same if there's a Jewish history or if there isn't. But obviously there is a Jewish history."<sup>12</sup>

For Sartre, Jewish history is produced, in Schwarzschild's terms, "by commitment to the monotheistic God, whose 'word' creates a metaphysical life and

destiny.” The *telos* of this destiny is an ethical “new world,”<sup>13</sup> as Sartre calls it a “messianic kingdom of God on earth.”

Sartre had come to favor a this-worldly Jewish messianism over the Marxist notion of an ideal society, because the Marxist conception evolved from the past history, whereas in Jewish history the past is produced by a projected infinite future. The Jewish messianic end, he said, is “the beginning of the existence of men who live for each other. In other words... it is ethics. The Jew thinks that the end of the world, of this world, and the upsurge of the other will result in the appearance of the ethical existence of men who live for one another.” In this conception, messianic action can bring about the messianic goal—and this is action that even the non-Jew, in Sartre’s opinion, should use in his own “ultimate goal of revolution.”<sup>14</sup> Jewish messianism, to Sartre, crucially “tries to re-make the world ethically through permanent revolution.”<sup>15</sup>

Sartre’s ethical tenets brought him to a newfound appreciation of and admiration for the trans-historical Jew. By 1980, Sartre regarded the Jew now not only as positive, but as telling for all mankind. In *L’espoir maintenant*, Sartre’s image of the Jew is of anything but content-less; not only is the Jew more than a blank figure of alterity, in Sartre’s final perception, “the Jew embodies the most important truths of universal human existence.”<sup>16</sup> Sartre maintains that there is a “profound Jewish reality.” He says to Lévy, “I now think there is a Jewish reality beyond the ravages that anti-Semitism has inflicted on Jews... The Jew believes he has a destiny.”<sup>17</sup>

Even though Sartre made no full turn to Lévy's theology—in no technical sense was Sartre a convert—he surely was excited by the implications the double-thinking authors perceived within Orthodox Judaism for left-wing politics. Lévy had turned to the “ethical critique of injustice in prophetic Judaism and the traditional rabbinic rejection of the status quo and political power.” Sartre's Judaization followed in this vein, as part of what Ronald Aronson called his political “quest for human equality and social justice.”<sup>18</sup> Through the lens of this quest, Sartre's intellectual works contain a good deal more continuity, or even unity, than perhaps even he realized through the course of his “perfidious and checkered intellectual career.”<sup>19</sup>

Naturally, the emphasis Sartre placed on Jewish messianism scandalized many of Sartre's followers, who had known Sartre as a resolute atheist (which is not to mention Sartre's philosophical dissociation from several of his major works). There was thus serious debate over the validity of the interviews, fueled by Simone de Beauvoir in her *La cérémonie des adieux* (*Adieux: A Farewell to Sartre*, 1981).<sup>20</sup> And yet Sartre's adopted daughter Arlette Elkaïm (who had taken the name Elkaïm-Sartre), to whom Sartre bequeathed legal authority of his work, defended the legitimacy of the work and the lucidity of Sartre as interlocutor. As Emmanuel Levinas himself stated, “The interview that Sartre gave several weeks before his death are extremely significant. They bring to us an echo of his last thoughts. We have no reason to doubt the exactness of the text.”<sup>21</sup> Furthermore, in matters of authorial legitimacy, it seems that the author's intent should matter most. When the dialogues with Lévy

were read to Sartre, he approved their publication, in fact insisting they be published, in spite of de Beauvoir's hope to repress the work.<sup>22</sup>

### *A Corrective Lens*

While Sartre had a firm grasp of Jewish messianism in his last days, it must be said that he in ways egregiously misrepresented the Jews in *Réflexions sur la question juive*. In *L'espoir maintenant*, Sartre explains that "messianism was a meaningless idea" for him as he was writing *Réflexions*, and so "the reality of the Jew is lacking in the book." Now that he understands what Jewish messianism means to Lévy, "it has acquired a richer meaning." Sartre refuses to negate the correctness of what he calls his "superficial description" of the Jew as victim—and thus creation—of anti-Semitism. The Jew *is*, he maintains, the victim of the anti-Semite, yet Sartre now understands that to be Jewish is to be more than a victim. He concedes that he had confined the Jew's existence, and that there was a Jewish reality far deeper than this shallow layer.<sup>23</sup>

In an informal interview with Lévy conducted at the end of his final trip to Israel, soon before his death, Sartre addressed the intrinsic contradiction at the root of the Arab-Israeli conflict. When asked then about *Réflexions*, a good few decades years after publication, Sartre granted that he had based the text on the few integrated Jews he knew and on a few jokes. He explained that, though his text had not tackled the Shoah head-on, it was an "an obtuse way of speaking about that unspeakable horror." Still, Sartre admitted that he had failed to grasp "elements of the singularity of the Jewish experience." He went further, conceding that in his "*Réflexions* it was

myself that I was writing while believing that I wrote about the Jew, a type that was nothing, without ground, an intellectual.”<sup>24</sup>

In fact, Sartre could even be considered “willful and programmatic” in his ignorance of Judaism, in the years he composed *Réflexions*. Religion, after all, had “no place in the world to come as Sartre conceived it, after the liberation of France and the future liberation of humankind.”<sup>25</sup> Closer to the interviews with Lévy, Sartre admitted the faults of his essay in its understanding of Judaism. “I limited myself to a phenomenological description,” Sartre said in 1966. “If I were to rewrite my essay I would use a series of remarkable studies such as Poliakov’s *History of Anti-Semitism*, that appeared since it came out.”<sup>26</sup>

When he had written the essay, his model for the Jew was Sartre’s assimilation-seeking schoolmate Raymond Aron, who “defined himself as a de-Judaicized Jew.”<sup>27</sup> As Aron himself noted in *The Committed Observer*, Sartre believed that all Jews were like him, “totally unreligious, thoroughly French, [one] who largely ignored Jewish tradition, and thus, only Jewish because others called him Jewish.”<sup>28</sup> He informed the Sephardic writer Albert Memmi “why he believed that the Jew was almost uniquely a negativity: all his Jewish friends seemed Jewish in no other way.”<sup>29</sup> Years after its publication, Sartre explained that he wrote the text “‘in one go,’ in a great ignorance of the ‘destiny’ and the ‘secret’ of the people of the Bible, without any ‘research,’ without reading a single Jewish book.” “It was based on nothing,” he said, “just the anti-Semitism I wanted to combat.”<sup>30</sup> In *L’espoir maintenant*, Sartre echoes this articulation: *Réflexions* was “a declaration of war

against anti-Semites, nothing more.” He had not yet developed a full understanding of Jewish concerns.<sup>31</sup>

For all his errs and missteps, both politically and intellectually, Sartre was a man who consistently prided himself on his openness to change, his search for freedom, and his morality (“In the end what counts is always morality... I’ve never stopped being a moral philosopher,” he pleaded in the journal *Obliques*). His opening to Judaism falls straight into the path of a constantly questioning man who continuously sought moral right above all.<sup>32</sup>

### ***In Ways a Unified Oeuvre***

*Hope Now*, Sartre’s title beckons. This is not a turn to fatuous, metaphysical optimism, but rather an appeal hedged in the more realistic conception of Jewish messianism, a hope arising “not in despite of but because of historical despair”<sup>33</sup>—a difficult history every Jew has been forced to acknowledge. Sartre is “here proposing that one pursue the good the more for the invariable triumph of evil—thus, out of despair, because of one’s realistic expectation of failure.” And though this might be the first time Sartre explicitly connects this sentiment to Judaism, it is not the first time he has expressed it. “Human life begins on the other side of despair,” Sartre wrote in *Les Mouches* (*The Flies*). His play *Bariona*, written from a Stalag (as was Levinas’s *De l’existence*), was full of allusions to the Jewish situation, not least in its title character, the Jewish figure who fruitlessly and yet joyfully revolts.<sup>34</sup> It can be retroactively regarded as Sartre’s examination of the tenet of ‘hopeless hope,’ within Jewish messianism.<sup>35</sup>

Sartre had refigured Kant's categorical imperative with his existentialist maxim "In choosing myself I choose man,"—and, furthermore, in demanding the question, "What if all acted like that." In a more emphatic Kantian touch, Sartre's last interviews answered the question Kant posed in his *Critique of Practical Reason*: "What may I hope for?" In the title alone, Sartre points to his answer: *L'espoir maintenant*. He has come to see something he states he had not realized in 1945, that the "essential element of any action undertaken is hope. Hope means that I can't undertake an action without expecting that I am going to complete it." His final hope, expressed in the final line of these final interviews—"I still feel that hope is my conception of the future"—is an idea of humanity and ethics that completes his life's work.<sup>36</sup>

Sartre's notion of ethical consciousness as the foundation for political consciousness is no radical turn from his earlier thoughts of *engagement* and the political obligation contained within that theory. It is even possible to see the last line of *Réflexions* ("Not one Frenchman will be secure so long as a single Jew—in France or in the world at large—can fear for his life")<sup>37</sup> as hinting towards an axiom in which we are all bound to each other, and so joined. *L'espoir maintenant* only radicalizes this proposal by universalizing it.<sup>38</sup> In Sartre's search for universal principles, the Jew is neither a foreign example for nor merely a particular case study. Rather, Sartre has come to question universality in the interest of pluralism, and the Jew has proven, as always, a site of impressive fecundity for Sartre's political and philosophical ideas.<sup>39</sup>

Sartre's body of work is both fascinating and, in major part, cohesive, "with human freedom always at its live center and with the Jew always very near that center."<sup>40</sup> As Jonathan Judaken put it, "not unlike Sartre's conception of Jewish identity and his transformed understanding of history in light of it, his corpus is diasporatic but still unified in its differences within itself."<sup>41</sup> In the development of his own thought, Sartre saw a certain evolution, though no total break. "I've certainly made lots of mistakes," Sartre admitted, "But not errors of principle."<sup>42</sup> This is nowhere more evident than in his intellectual, philosophical, and personal relation with the Jew. He had written *Réflexions* as an expression of solidarity with Jews, but had yet to understand the uniqueness of the Jew beyond the situation of victimization created by the anti-Semite. Sartre had to work through the Jewish-imbued philosophy of the renewed Jew Emmanuel Levinas, who returned to the Jew "his quiddity, which is Judaism, not his situation."

Levinas, a figure "steeped in the Jewish tradition," finally taught philosophy "how to be moral." He defended human morality against Heidegger—this morality that flows from human dignity.<sup>43</sup> Through his novel understanding of Judaism, through his philosophical portrait of the face-to-face encounter, Levinas's work was an attempt "to use Heidegger's critique of the Western philosophical tradition to move beyond Heidegger and to construct a new type of ethics in the aftermath of World War II and the Shoah."<sup>44</sup>

Guided by Levinas and his universalizing of Jewish tenets, Sartre infused a notion of ethical responsibility into political and inter-personal interactions. Sartre's admiration for the Jewish messianic end shows a major reconceptualization of

politics, consciousness temporality, ethics, and ontology. He came to identify so strongly with Jews that he once told Lévy, speaking of the Jewish people, “I am more Jewish than they” (in that Jews live not in landscapes but—like an intellectual—in books).<sup>45</sup>

In *L'Être et le néant*, Sartre sought to demonstrate the futility of hatred, the absolute fruitlessness of the violent attempt to eradicate alterity. In this thought, he suggested—and then elaborated upon in *Réflexions*, still without managing to elucidate—the notion that obligation to the Other is itself the condition of responsibility and freedom; in brief, that an ethics precedes ontology. Sartre saw the Self's relation with Other as fraught with struggle for recognition, rather than the birth point and location of an ethical philosophy.<sup>46</sup> It was Emmanuel Levinas who articulated this ethical philosophy, through a reimagined Jewish identity that fulfilled Sartre's understanding of the Jew/Other by fusing it with a positive understanding of the Jew.

At the end, Sartre had moved towards a system of ethics, and an understanding of the Other as inherent to consciousness.<sup>47</sup> He had adopted this Levinassian model, a ‘secular theology’ of reciprocity, which had itself been developed partially in response to Sartre. Sartre's Jewish messianic thought suggests ethics that precede ontology, that ethics stand as ‘first philosophy.’<sup>48</sup>

While Sartre had turned to the Levinassian system, Levinas was responding no longer to Sartre but to younger figures like Jacques Derrida. Still, Levinas commended Sartre's final appreciation, along with Benny Lévy, of a “sacred history in the rapport of the Jewish people with monotheism, in the ethics of commitment to

the Other that it entailed and, with it, his discovery of a humanity beyond humanism.”<sup>49</sup> In his eulogy to Sartre, “Un langage pour nous familier” (“A Language Familiar to Us All”), Levinas acknowledged the philosophical closeness between the thinkers. Sartre, Levinas avows, had importantly never questioned the legitimacy of Israel, the Jewish State. Levinas’s tribute highlighted the importance Sartre’s ultimate testimony of sympathy to the Jews.<sup>50</sup> Finally, Sartre could be considered a proper philo-Semite.

By the close of his life, Sartre conceived of the Jew not as *une particularité sans détermination*, but instead as *une particularité avec détermination*.<sup>51</sup> What’s more, he conceived of himself, “with no little justification, if not as a Jew then as a ‘Judaicist.’”<sup>52</sup> From *Réflexions* to *L’espoir maintenant*, the Jew had been an important focus for Sartre, even a guiding light of his oeuvre. As Bernard-Henri Lévy remarked, “Sartre’s relationship with Judaism was, right up to the end, a relationship of extreme empathy.”<sup>53</sup>

## CONCLUSION

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A consequence of twentieth-century fascism, the Shoah proved the endpoint of a cold, hard line drawn from universalism to modernity. In France, the state-sanctioned destruction of the Jews exposed the ultimately totalizing penchant of the French Revolution, that “universal revolution par excellence.”<sup>1</sup>

A native of this *patrie* that cherished universalism as its most prized asset, but shaped through a period that revealed grave problems with universalist thought, Jean-Paul Sartre proved uniquely fit to develop the existential philosophy that rejected essentialisms like universalism. Sartre regarded universalism as actually unworkable in France, thanks to an exclusive system in which assimilation—granting access to the universal—was barred by a hatred of alterity.

Sartre was moved to produce *Réflexions sur la question juive* in the final moments of World War II. The work was a study of anti-Semitism, that despicably inauthentic hatred of Jewish alterity which had proven finally genocidal. In his existential portrait of the relation between the anti-Semite and the Jew, Sartre outstandingly refigured the discourse on the centuries-old Jewish Question. His appreciation of the particularity of the Jew, however, was rooted in a vision that had nothing to do with concrete Judaism; Sartre regarded the Jew as a human martyr whose identity was defined through the harsh gaze of the anti-Semite. Through the course of his work, Sartre came to see the problematic of understanding the Jew as a negativity. By the time of his death, Sartre had not only learned the positive content of the Jew, but had made a turn *towards* Judaism. Jewish messianism proved the source of Sartre’s ultimate philosophy. The Jew proved a sort of glittering beacon in

the development of Sartre's oeuvre, serving consistently as a fertile site for intellectual and political interrogation.

Sartre's *Réflexions* was powerfully liberating in the post-war instant. Still, Sartre's depiction of alterity—and his elucidation of the futility of the drive to *eliminate* alterity—was only able to hint at the ethical philosophy which he later adopted. It was Emmanuel Levinas, a Jewish thinker who survived the Holocaust, who was able to develop a conception of ethics preceding ontology.

Sartre had defined the Jew as the personified Other, shackled doubly by the binds restricting Judaism and Jews in France.<sup>2</sup> In his *Totalité et infinie*, the Jewish Levinas chose not to see the automatic threat to freedom that Sartre perceived in the Other's gaze. Levinas instead sought a space where otherness had no need to be relinquished. Levinas named the problem of Jewish Emancipation the problem of a totalizing system, one which allows no true ethical space for difference. He saw in triumphant French universalism the reduction of the other to the same.

Emmanuel Levinas's project was the reclamation of a basis for ethical norms in light of Martin Heidegger's challenge; he set on this reclamation through a philosophical incorporation and then secularization of theological premises. Levinas saw religion as the window for moral engagement. He worked to discover a convincing replacement for the original biblical and religious foundations of morality. Levinas eventually defined the sacredness of the Other through secular premises.<sup>3</sup> In Sartre's last interviews, with his Jewish colleague Benny Lévy, Sartre employed the ethical terminology and thought of Levinas in his perception of politics and intersubjectivity.

Levinas moved from Kantian morality to an ethics, hinged in the relation to the Other. Levinas's ethics must be granted in face-to-face particularity, explaining why his philosophy was necessarily inter-subjective. Levinas's portrait of consciousness in humanity required more than the individual cogito: to have an ethics, there must be an external Other—who might himself have his own, other ethics. In its crucial asymmetry, Levinas's ethics require space for the non-universal, and so have moved beyond the strictures of abstract universalism. The same, unfortunately, cannot be said for today's France.

In 1995, on the fifty-third anniversary of the first mass arrest of Jews in Paris at the *Vélodrome d'hiver*, French President Jacques Chirac importantly changed the tenor of his predecessors by recognizing France's responsibility in the Shoah. "These dark hours forever sully our history and are an insult to our past and our traditions," he said, and went on: "France, the homeland of the Enlightenment and of the rights of man, a land of welcome and asylum, on that day committed the irreparable." Acting directly against its beloved universalist tenets, the President said, the nation "handed those who were under its protection over to their executioners."<sup>4</sup>

Chirac did well to acknowledge, at long last, the support by the French people and state of the Nazi crime against humanity. Yet in a political landscape where the rifts created by *l'Affaire Dreyfus* maintain serious clout, Chirac ought to have called into question the accuracy—and further, the goodness—of France's commitment to Enlightenment universalism and universal rights.

In France today, it is no longer the Jew who stands alone as "paradigmatic stranger, the unassimilable Other;" this unfortunate role has been assigned to France's

community of immigrant Muslims. There has, however, been a notable resurgence of anti-Semitism in recent years, often a manifestation of radical anti-Zionism through a castigation of Israel as an oppressive colonizer.<sup>5</sup> These sad truths, along with many others, point to the perhaps sadder fact that assimilation and full acculturation continue to broach the rank of unattainable in France (certainly this is evident in the constant strife in the marginalized Parisian *banlieues*). Assimilation, as it operates in France, does not now seem—and historically has not been—able to “accommodate the copulas,” in the words of Naomi Schor. France has not managed to achieve “the alliance of a universal and particular identity”<sup>6</sup>

Therefore, the republican nation would do well to admit the problems of universalism—or at least in historical implementation of universalism—and move towards an authentic embrace of multi-cultural difference. Glorious, foundational France would be wise to follow Emmanuel Levinas, and to choose—over universalism—the philosophy of inter-subjective ethics.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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I am extremely grateful to Wesleyan University for the vast amount I have learned over four years in and out of Middletown. I am especially thankful for the College of Letters department, which has given me the tools through which I will engage ideas for the rest of my life. I would like to thank Kari Weil and Ethan Kleinberg for their support of this particular project, as well as my other generous professors, for their encouragement and insight. I must thank Eugenia Szady, of course, and the many people who have taught me so much outside of the classroom. I am indebted to my housemates and to my many extraordinary friends for their patience and support.

Most of all, I would like to thank my family: my dedicated mother and father, my brother Jeremy, my inspiring grandparents, my uncle and my cousins. You have made possible everything I am. I only ever hope to make you proud.

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**Chapter I: Jean Paul Sartre's *Réflexions sur la question juive***

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- 68 Throughout *Réflexions*, Sartre has developed a class theory, presenting anti-Semitism as a "bourgeois phenomenon" held by non-producer functionaries of the (lower) middle class, a "poor man's snobbery." By stating that there is "scarcely any anti-

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Semitism among workers,” Sartre has condensed the hateful passion to a class ideology (one that “leads straight to National Socialism”). In Part IV, Sartre simplistically proposes the Marxist solution as the sole path for French society to move beyond anti-Semitism. Sartre, *Anti-Semite and Jew* 150, Wolitz, "Imagining the Jew in France: From 1945 to the Present," 123.

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- 16 Rybalka, "Sartre: A Short Chronology," 132.
- 17 Schwarzschild, "J.-P. Sartre as Jew," 47, 68.
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  - 20 De Beauvoir did acknowledge that Sartre regarded Benny Lévy as his future, without which he would "already be dead." Schwarzschild, "J.-P. Sartre as Jew," 41.
  - 21 Schwarzschild, "J.-P. Sartre as Jew," 43.
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  - 25 Sartre, *Anti-Semite and Jew* vii.
  - 26 Vidal-Naquet, "Remembrances of a 1946 Reader," 20.
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  - 30 Lévy, Sartre: *The Philosopher of the Twentieth Century* 301-02.
  - 31 Lévy; and Sartre, *Hope Now: The 1980 Interviews* 101.
  - 32 Sartre called his habit of routine self-interrogation "décoller de soi,"—following Nietzsche's "thinking against oneself" and Benjamin's "thinking against the grain." He considered it part of his enriching self-development. Schwarzschild, "J.-P. Sartre as Jew," 57.
  - 33 Schwarzschild, "J.-P. Sartre as Jew," 43.
  - 34 Sartre explicitly acknowledged this linkage between Bariona and the Jews, one that helped him realize the power of art. In an interview in 1968, he explained that the repressive Romans in the work represented the Nazi Germans. "As I addressed my comrades across the footlights, speaking to them of their state as prisoners," Sartre said, "I realized what theater ought to be—a great collective, religious phenomenon." Judaken, *Jean-Paul Sartre and the Jewish Question: Anti-Antisemitism and the Politics of the French Intellectual* 70.
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  - 42 Schwarzschild, "J.-P. Sartre as Jew," 56-57.
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  - 47 Schwarzschild, "J.-P. Sartre as Jew," 60.
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53 Lévy, Sartre: The Philosopher of the Twentieth Century 306.

### ***Conclusion***

1 Schor, "The Crisis of French Universalism," 50.

2 Judaken, Jean-Paul Sartre and the Jewish Question: Anti-Antisemitism and the Politics of the French Intellectual 289.

3 Moyn, Origins of the Other: Emmanuel Levinas between Revelation and Ethics 7-14.

4 Marlise Simons, "Chirac Affirms France's Guilt in Fate of Jews," The New York Times July 17 1995.

5 Schor, "Anti-Semitism, Jews, and the Universal," 116.

6 Schor, "The Crisis of French Universalism," 54.