

# Stirrings Still

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# **Stirrings Still**

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# De/composing the Machine in Samuel Beckett's *The Lost Ones* and *Ping*

Katherine Weiss

I.

Interest in technological discourses has become the centre of many discussions concerning modernist and postmodernist literature.<sup>1</sup> However, few scholars have examined Samuel Beckett's "technotopias".<sup>2</sup> The scholarly work that does examine the Beckett canon and technology falls into three categories. The more traditional scholars read Beckett's protagonists as Cartesian emblems.<sup>3</sup> Other scholars turn to postmodern theories, reading his drama, with particular concentration on *Krapp's Last Tape* and *Film*, in relation to Gilles Deleuze's work on repetition and difference.<sup>4</sup> The most ambitious though not always successful writing on Beckett has begun to look at his prose in relation to Deleuze and Félix Guattari's abstract machine.<sup>5</sup> For the most part, these studies focus on Beckett's better known and less obscure works.

Next to no work has been done on Beckett's short prose fiction from the sixties. In each of these works, a disembodied voice describes a cylinder world while striving to manufacture a mechanical language free of human ambiguity and inaccuracies.

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<sup>1</sup> Tim Armstrong's book, *Modernism, technology and the Body* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1998) is a seminal work on the subject.

<sup>2</sup> By this term, I suggest that Beckett creates worlds saturated by a technological discourse in Beckett's cylinder works written in the 1960s.

<sup>3</sup> See, for example Edouard Morot-Sir, "Samuel Beckett and Cartesian Emblems", *Samuel Beckett and the Art of Rhetoric*, eds. Edouard Morot-Sir, Howard Harper and Dougald Macmillan. (Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 1976) 25-104.

<sup>4</sup> See, for example, Steven Connor, *Samuel Beckett: Repetition, Theory and Text* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1988) 127-29.

<sup>5</sup> See, for example, Garin Dowd, "The Abstract Literary Machine: Guattari, Deleuze and Beckett's *The Lost Ones*". Special Issue of *Forum for Modern Language Studies. Literature and Technology*. Ed. Tim Armstrong. 37.2 (2001): 204-17.

These “narrators” are, in part, successful in their efforts to construct “technotopias”, but even in this sterile discourse Beckett suggests that extracting the human presence from the production process is impossible. In their struggle to extract the human presence from their narratives, these narrators become consumed in an endless repetition of decomposing their narratives. In this process of fragmentation, these texts never complete the act of disintegrating the textual body. Instead, Beckett produces a language that while decomposing recomposes. The ambition to rid language of a human presence is, after all, a *human* enterprise.

This essay will focus on two of Beckett’s cylinder works, *The Lost Ones* and *Ping*. Although these texts appear to be strikingly different from one another, Beckett revealed that *Bing*, the original French text later translated as *Ping*, came out of early drafts of *Le Dépeupleur/The Lost Ones*.<sup>6</sup> It is difficult to determine whether *The Lost Ones* or *Ping* should be discussed as the precursor of the other since Beckett began *Le Dépeupleur* before *Bing* but completed *Bing* before *Le Dépeupleur* complicating the genesis of these works. My discussion will focus on the English translations of these texts and will begin with *The Lost Ones*. Examining *The Lost Ones* first, a text more conventional in its narrative construction, helps to prepare the way for the further pared down, seemingly personless narrative in *Ping*.

## II.

The world that occupies the textual space in *The Lost Ones* resembles a machine or factory as several scholars have noted (Porush 1986, 90; Brater 93-109; Brienza 158). David Porush, in his analysis of *The Lost Ones* as dismantling cybernetic literature, argues that the prose text is composed of a “machine language” which evokes “images of positive logic, technical efficiency, and computer-like order. The machine language is a code which does

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<sup>6</sup> Manuscript note about *Le Depeupleur* and *Bing*, MS 1536/1, Beckett International Foundation, Reading University Library.

not permit ambiguity” (1986, 94). He goes on to describe the text’s language as a “scientized” (91) language delivering data about the cylinder, and elsewhere, he writes that this language resembles “blueprint instructions” (1980, 95). While his arguments are at times instructive, Porush reduces Beckett’s narrative to an impersonal computer that falters because of the presence of an opposing language, a *language of flesh*.

This “language of flesh”, Porush tells his readers, “is heir to all the ills of flesh: softness, decay, inefficiency, irrational doubt, and inconsistency” (1986, 94). Although I agree with Porush in that the language of *The Lost Ones* contains most of the above aspects, his division of a “language of flesh” and “machine language” is problematic. By categorising two different languages in the work, Porush seems to create a hierarchical divide between a precise mechanical language and an imprecise human one. Surely machines have not constructed their own language separate from and in danger of being contaminated by a language of the body. Language is a human construct and the language used by machines is humanly constructed to allow a discourse about, with and between biological and non-biological entities. Beckett’s narrator composes a text that resembles a machine in order to maintain authority and ideas of precision, but instead his narrative is only a “near true ring” (1996, 100). In other words, the narrator of *The Lost Ones* does not have a computerised voice, as Porush argues, but a human one striving to replicate a machine in order to position himself as an authority. There is only one language used in the text, a human language that attempts to be mechanically precise. As the narrative progresses, this language reveals itself as imprecise. Even though the narrative seems an objective source of information, the narrator’s voice is one of flesh and bone and the narrative is a cylinder world in which “flesh and bone subsist” (203).

The narrator of *The Lost Ones* places himself in the role of author/ity, creating a technotopian fiction, or in his words, “a notion”, of life in a cylinder through a repetition of storytelling.

The use of the word “switch”, a recurring image throughout Beckett’s *œuvre*, appears once in *The Lost Ones*. The narrator reveals that the murmur filling the cylinder is “cut off as though by a switch” (214). Using this word as a simile, Beckett implies that the narrator’s voice is like an electrical current turning on and off the textual machine. His voice both deactivates the murmurs within the cylinder when he switches off, and when he switches on, he activates “life” within this machine.

Striving to order the murmuring bodies and the textual material, the narrator composes his cylinder world as a machine or factory. He explains that the area is divided into “a belt about one metre wide” (210) along the wall reserved for the carriers, “a second even narrower belt respected in its turn by the main body of searchers” (211) and an arena with the greatest number of bodies (210-11). The two belts move in “opposite directions about the teeming precinct” (211). These belts resemble conveyer belts, and the bodies, like workers in a factory, must abide codes when standing in queues, climbing and moving the ladders to keep the machine running.

Beckett’s factory-like enclosure parallels the machine underworld of Fritz Lang’s *Metropolis* in its images of the workers mindlessly slaving away at their allotted spaces and its theme of the search for the one — the saviour — that will offer a mythical escape from the monotony of mechanisation. As an avid film-goer in the late twenties and thirties, Beckett would almost certainly have seen *Metropolis*. In this film, the machine underworld helps to keep the city above running smoothly. While Beckett’s text does not reproduce Lang’s Marxist portrayal of the world, nevertheless it suggests that it and Lang’s film are machines of fiction, functioning to provide their audiences with a temporary mythical escape from the monotony of routine. Habit, for Beckett, “paralyses our attention, [and] drugs those handmaidens of perception” (1957, 9). This paralysis of attention and altered perception is brought about by modern technology and the ease of mechanical reproduction, according to Walter Benjamin. We lose

sight of how the image is created and are mechanised while viewing the image projected on screen (1969, 221-23). Although the image on the screen or on the page may appear to offer a temporary escape from a mechanical existence, ultimately, Beckett's text suggests that this escape is a myth because its production is mechanical and thus mirrors the habit-bound world: "From time immemorial *rumour* has it or better still the *notion* is abroad that their exists a way out" (206 emphasis mine).

In his endeavours to control his world, the narrator establishes himself as an author with access to the "indescribable" (202) and "unthinkable" (212). He states, for example, that "one must be in the secret of the gods" (207) to perceive that the notion of a way out through the tunnels has gained favour. By constructing himself as one who is in the favour of the gods' divine authority, he reveals the unperceivable to his listeners. Breathing life into Beckett's narrative, David Warrilow of the New York avant-garde theatre group Mabou Mines performed the company's adaptation of *The Lost Ones* in 1975 in which Warrilow moved tiny ladders and "German dolls about half an inch high" (Knowlson 1997, 555), reproducing the miniaturised cylinder world as he spoke the words. The image of Warrilow manipulating the small dolls and ladders has led to readings of the narrator as a puppeteer, manipulating these tiny marionettes. Indeed, James Knowlson, in his examination of Beckett and Kleist's essay "Über das Marionettentheater", explains that Beckett was interested in "the unity, harmony, symmetry and grace that characterizes the puppet" (1979, 279).

The marionette may not be a machine in the strictest sense; nonetheless, it has affinities with the automaton. Both the marionette and the automaton captivated artists and audiences of the nineteenth century. The automaton, like the marionette, became an emblem of harmony, grace and symmetry; it represented the perfect and precise human form, especially when in the mould of a woman. Yet in German Romanticism, there was also a distrust of mechanical and puppet "life" as E.T.A. Hoffmann's short story,

“Der Sandmann” (1817) demonstrates. Olimpia, the automaton in Hoffmann’s tale, has perfect measurements (we are told, for example, that she has a wasp-like waist) and her song is flawless. However, it is this perfection that obsesses the protagonist Nathanael and leads to his mental break-down. Like the nineteenth century preoccupation with mechanical life, in *The Lost Ones* the repetition of the phrase “for the sake of harmony” (202, 206) and the mathematical calculations reveal attempts to create a world that is not human — a world free of ambiguities and inaccuracies. However, despite the narrator’s efforts, the cylinder functions “without regard to harmony” (203). The fiction the narrator constructs seems to oppose the human world, offering an escape from “the advent of self-consciousness and loss of harmony in man” (Knowlson and Pilling 1979, 277), but, in effect, reproduces a self-conscious and inharmonious world.

Regardless of his struggle to manufacture a mechanically precise world, the narrator repeatedly creates a language that exposes the textual machine’s inaccuracies. Words that strongly suggest a lack of precision arise throughout the text, particularly in instances which involve numbers and calculations. The quincunxes, for example, are described as “roughly ten metres in diameter” (204). The qualifier “roughly” appears throughout the text, signifying an approximation and not as the following sentence states, “harmony”. We are also told that the “Temperature agitated [...] falls rapidly from a maximum of twenty-five degrees *approximately* to a minimum of *approximately* five whence a regular variation of five degrees per second” (205-06 emphasis mine). The repetition of “approximately” contradicts the assertion that the temperature fluctuates at a “regular variation”. What is, we wonder, the margin of error.

Moreover, the narrator miscalculates the total number of bodies in the cylinder. He states that there are “two hundred bodies in all round numbers” (204), but as has been repeatedly observed there are 205 bodies (Hansford 130-32; Brater 102); five bodies have not been counted. The narrator provides a rough number of

200, erasing five from his tale because 205 bodies would obscure his calculations. By omitting five bodies, James Hansford suggests the text devours itself; it is in “a progress towards absence” (132). The narrative continues to devour bodies until we are left with “a last body of all” (222). This act of de/composition is an attempt to complete the narrative, that is to end the production of storytelling. However, in getting the calculations wrong, the production never ceases.

It is interesting that in Beckett’s own meticulous calculations in the manuscripts of *The Lost Ones*, the English published translation contains a printing error. Beckett later acknowledged that the cylinder should be 16m high and not 18m high, but curiously he did not have the error corrected. Only the Grove Press edition of *The Collected Shorter Prose* features the corrected figures (Gontarski 99-100). Some scholars have mistakenly based their interpretations on this printing error. For example, Enoch Brater argues that “the narrator has not got his 50 x 18 quite right” (98). Like Brater, David Porush writes: “[...] the calculations are inaccurate: a cylinder with a base 50 metres in circumference and 18 high has a mural surface of 900, not 800, meters” (1986, 95). The accidental printing error, ironically, supports Beckett’s decomposing of authority. The error challenges Beckett’s text for its seeming precision and attacks critics and scholars for believing that they correctly analyse a text from its evidence and data. Through the approximations of numbers and the accidental printing error, Beckett, in effect, constructs a text based on a notion of “poetic (mis)calculation”.<sup>7</sup>

The narrator further decomposes his authority when he tells his readers to “Imagine then the silence of the steps” (203) but reveals that “The only sounds worthy of the name” are “the manipulation of the ladders or the thud of bodies striking against one another or one against itself as when in sudden fury it beats its

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<sup>7</sup> In an early manuscript of *Worstward Ho*, Beckett inserts “mis” into his note “poetic calculation” which appears to the right of some mathematical calculations. MS 2602/1, Beckett International Foundation, Reading University Library.

breast” (203). This paradox exposes the narrator’s lack of authority and calls on readers to reconstruct their understanding of these phrases. If the only sounds worth their signifier are the manipulations of the ladders and violence to the body, why are we asked to imagine the sound of silent footsteps? The reference to footsteps, even if silent, causes readers to hear them. Beckett uses language, here, as objects to trigger an automatic imagining in us, but that imagining does not equal the textual reference since to imagine footsteps requires an imagining of the sound and objects making the sound. Silence in Beckett is often recorded as a sound that announces itself as absent.

While the narrator continually fails to build a machine empty of uncertainty and error, the text’s repetitions keep it from collapsing in on itself. When we read, “So much roughly speaking for these bodies seen from a certain angle and for this notion and its consequences if it is maintained” (205), the narrator announces an end to a section of the text, but in the repetition of “So much [...] for” — appearing a total of seven times — he reveals his inability to conclude. The narrator is forever recomposing his decomposition.

“[R]oughly speaking” and “if this notion be maintained”, furthermore, are clichés and as such parallel the repetitive role of the storyteller in the modern technological age. The cliché “roughly speaking” confirms that what the narrator has said is rough, that is, “not quite accurate” (204, 206, 215). Brienza (154-55), like Porush, creates a divide between a precise mathematical discourse and a discourse of the flesh which she, in part, locates in Beckett’s use of clichés. These clichés destabilise the text’s mechanical discourse, and at the same time they represent efforts made to sharpen the image, as we see in the cliché “if this notion be maintained” which first appears as the awkwardly phrased, “for this notion and its consequences if it is maintained”.

A distinction between practice — a repetitive activity to get something right — and mechanical reproduction should be made. In *The Arcades Project* Walter Benjamin explains that practice

involves a repetition of difference; in contrast, mechanical reproduction involves a repetition of sameness: “Practice is eliminated from the productive process by machinery” (227). In Beckett, clichés function both as a repetition of difference and of sameness. The transformation of “for this notion and its consequences if it is maintained” to “if this notion be maintained” suggests that the disembodied voice *practices* his narrative to find the right phrase. Yet the use of clichés is also mechanical in that they are habits that paralyse expression. Moreover, the word “maintained” refers to both “holding still” and “practising habitually”. The conditional “if” questions whether the story is kept going or whether it is fixed through habit. The narrator attempts to regulate the narrative through a routinised mechanical language; however, despite clichés functioning as markers to keep discourse going, the ease of their reproduction results in the loss of dramatic significance.

Like the narrator who reverts to clichés, the bodies mechanically act out certain movements. When one of the climbers exceeds his allotted time on the ladder, another climber thumps the offender on his back: “This docility in the abuser shows clearly that the abuse is not deliberate but due to a temporary derangement of his *inner timepiece* easy to understand and therefore to forgive” (209 emphasis mine). These acts of violence come about unconsciously and uncontrollably triggered by an internal clock. This internalised object produces movements that have become unconscious habits. The bodies in *The Lost Ones* have internalised time, as perhaps Winnie has internalised the bell in *Happy Days* (Willie does not seem to hear it). By using the metaphor of a “timepiece”, a machine with strong connotation of habit and routine, Beckett’s narrator attempts to transform the body into a machine, regulated into regimented behaviour.

Even in abandonment, the bodies in the cylinder continue to act out of habit. The narrator describes the white-haired vanquished woman as “leaning against the wall with eyes closed in abandonment and *mechanically* clasping to her breast a mite who

strains away in an effort to turn its head and look behind” (211 emphasis mine). This embrace is a mechanical reaction, a habit, rather than an expression of affection or security. The contrast between this abandoned woman, who mindlessly and automatically embraces the child and the child’s straining to turn its head and look behind, signifies the relationship between the narrator, the text and the listener. She parallels the storyteller who has abandoned the tale but continues to hold on to her listener through conventions. The child, however, struggles against insignificant routines. He reacts against the dulled narrative mechanism and, like an active reader, attempts to look behind the text.<sup>8</sup>

The woman is also a mother, and although “such tiny ones are comparatively few” (211), her presence reveals that reproduction and birth are still possible in this machine. Sexual reproduction here, as seen in other Beckett texts, is “obscene” (220), grotesque and absurd. The narrator tells us that when the lost bodies are able to satisfy their reproductive needs, it amounts to a “more or less happy penetration in the nearest tube” (220). Although sexual reproduction in the cylinder is depersonalised and dehumanised, nevertheless the very persistence to penetrate is an act against a machine-like existence. In Beckett’s representation of sexual reproduction, the narrator inscribes within his work a subtle rebellion against his techno-textual production.

A close look at *All Strange Away* is necessary to drive the point home. In this text, Beckett, too, spotlights reproduction to examine the production of text: “Imagine him kissing, caressing, licking, sucking, fucking and bugging all this stuff, no sound” (171). The male body, perhaps because he is in a “lifelong habit” (170) of crawling as is the narrator in *How it is*, has become “unseeing glaring” (170). As a result of habit, his gaze no longer

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<sup>8</sup> Samuel Beckett, “German Letter of 1937”, *Disjecta: Miscellaneous Writings and a Dramatic Fragment*. Ed. Ruby Cohn (London: John Calder, 1983) 172. Beckett writes that the goal the contemporary writer should strive towards is “To bore one hole after another in it [language], until what lurks behind it — be it something or nothing — begins to seep through”.

sees. Despite his blind crawling, this figure attempts to commit reproduction acts with a female body, but their acts of copulation have grown into habit: “cold and no more feeling apparently” (175). John Pilling (1970, 139), Peter Murphy (86) and Graham Fraser (515-30) have used the term “pornographic” to describe *All Strange Away*. This prose text does not operate as a sexual stimulant but uses the repetition “kissing, caressing, licking, sucking, fucking and bugging” to suggest both that these acts are presently occurring and that they are continually in progress. The pornographic, then, is an image of a repetitive mechanical act of penetration which tries to *turn on* the act of fiction making. These productive processes, in spite of their mechanical monotony, keep the text going.

In *The Lost Ones*, the narrator describes the bodies’ love-making as frenzied and “prolonged in pain and hopelessness” which continues “long beyond what even the most gifted lovers can achieve in camera” (220). The bodies partake in the act of reproduction longer than talented lovers *in camera* — in their chambers or niches. Beckett’s use of the word “camera” is also a play on *on camera*. It is important to remember Beckett’s own interest in photographic technologies, and in particular film, as well as his interest in archaic language. Here, he merges the two in order to contrast frantic, unrestrained reproductive acts with those mechanised and reproduced *on screen*. Beckett, in effect, exploits the myth of precision, pointing out that it too is an illusion. Cameras capture calmly with a “cruel precision” (Beckett 1957, 15) the hopeless and frantic lovers and mechanises them into objects to be gazed upon.

The text moves from a general description of the cylinder, the niches and its inhabitants to a specific searcher and his decomposure. Recalling Lang’s *Metropolis*, we again find interesting parallels and points of departure. In both the film and the text the protagonists find salvation in a woman. In Lang’s film the protagonist Freder, awoken to the horrors of the working class’s mechanical existence, saves the world from the automaton

commissioned by his father the ruler of Metropolis to destroy the workers' unity. While similar, Beckett's narrative has no such climax. Instead, when the last body finds his saviour, a vanquished woman, and when he looks into the "calm wastes" of her eyes, he "finds at last his place and pose whereupon dark descends" (223). The image of "waste" stands opposed to calculations, data and evidence that keep searchers going. The image of waste further breaks down the machine metaphor. Although the reference to waste is not linked to a scatological reading as it is in Beckett's play *Krapp's Last Tape* and his *Trilogy*, it nonetheless fractures the machine-like order of his technotopia by signifying ruin, excess and consumption. Sitting against the wall as excess waste, the abandoned serve as reflectors. The narrator reveals that the vanquished woman's eyes reflect the wasteland of the mechanised lives in the cylinder as well as reflect the abandoned ones as ruined and as ruins. When the last searcher consumes his own reflection, the searcher resides into a calm. He becomes an abandoned ruin in his recognition of the mechanical world of production and reproduction as waste matter.

In its conclusion the text brings together the text's self-reflexivity and its de/composition:

So much roughly speaking for the last state of the cylinder and of this little people of searchers one first of whom if a man in some unthinkable past for the first time bowed his head if this notion is maintained. (223)

The repetition of the inconclusive "first" constructs this last body as an image of the first time this searcher bowed his head and as the first body to bow his head in abandonment in this immemorial past. If the searcher is the last one the text ends; it has come to its completion. However, if he is the first then the text reveals itself as beginning. Out of the uncertainty as to whether the text is

beginning or ending, a third reading arises; this text is an endless repetition — “Conclusion without end”.<sup>9</sup>

In its final description of an unmemorable and unrecordable past, another complication emerges. The narrator constructs himself as the exclusive imaginer, telling us what we cannot imagine, but in this very act, he brings the text alive in our minds. “Unthinkable” refers back to the “thinking being” searching for data to construct a conclusion; hence, the end is “unthinkable” in terms of mechanical precision. Although the narrative suggests that we cannot approach this text as a mechanical thinker, nevertheless the narrator treats the text mechanically in order to create his technotopia.

### III.

Unlike the narrative voice of *The Lost Ones*, in *Ping* the voice appears devoid of a human, emotional perspective and is no longer recognisable in conventional literary discourses. It is, as John Pilling rightly observes, “a strangely disembodied voice with none of the reassuringly familiar and substantial attributes one associates with first-person narrative generally” (1979, 137). The unrecognisability of the narrative voice and the strangeness of the pared down literary style raises problems in discussing this text. How does one write about a voice that is disembodied and impersonal? The peculiarity of the narrative voice has led, wrongly I think, to interpretations of *Ping* as a text producing a computerised discourse.<sup>10</sup> Instead, without providing an answer to what “ping” means, as David Lodge (87-8) and J.C.C. Mays (94) have tried to do, we can examine the word “ping” and the text’s repetitions in relation to photographic technology and its process

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<sup>9</sup> MS 1541/1, Beckett International Foundation, Reading University Library. In the *Imagination Dead Imagination* manuscript, the phrase “Conclusion without end” appears, furthering the notion that although these cylinder texts conclude they remain in perpetual motion, never closing the technotopian possibilities.

<sup>10</sup> See, for example, Li-ling Tseng, “A Syntactical Study of Samuel Beckett’s *Ping*”, *Fu Jen Studies* 20 (1987): 56.

of de/composition. In her recent article, Anna McMullan writes that in Beckett's stage plays one recognises Beckett's interest in the editing and scenario processes of film making (<http://www.ireland.com/newspaper/features/2001/0202/fea5.htm>). Here, we recognise Beckett's more general interest in photography. It would be wrong to assert that "ping" is a camera, but the text functions with "the cruel precision of a camera" (Beckett 1957, 15) and all the mechanisms that go into reproducing photographic images.

Walter Benjamin, in his analysis of the camera's ability to reproduce images in *The Arcades Project*, quotes Bertolt Brecht and Roland Villiers, both of whom describe photography's ability to de/compose images (686-87). Around the same time Brecht and Villiers were writing about the images' de/composition when captured on photographic or cinematic film, Beckett, in his analysis of "The Albertine Tragedy" in *Proust*, wrote about modern photography's ability at "decomposing the illusion of a solid object into its manifold component aspects" (34). Depicting the production of text in terms of this photographic process, Beckett suggests that the images we perceive only appear to be solid and fluid because of our habits of perception. Beckett breaks our habit, forcing us to see them as fragmented and recomposes them as such.

Functioning as a camera, *Ping* records an "Afar flash of *time*" (emphasis mine).<sup>11</sup> Like a camera that reproduces an image, this mechanism captures "traces" of the past. Interestingly, however, the "ping" machine cannot reproduce the exact memory traces; "that much memory" is not remembered, suggesting that the mechanism composing the images fails to illuminate them completely. The mechanical prosthetic eye of the camera exposes details of a body caught on film, details the human eye finds difficult to see and the human mind finds difficult to remember,

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<sup>11</sup> All quotes will be taken from Samuel Beckett, *The Complete Short Prose 1929-1989* (New York: Grove P, 1995) 193-96. Due to the text's heavily repetitious style and its brevity, no page numbers will be given.

but in the process it also illuminates the limitations of human sight and the gaps in human memory.

While photographs and diaries are used to attempt to remember the past precisely (as seen in Krapp's audio-diary in *Krapp's Last Tape*), memory in Beckett is always a reimagining of the event. Beckett composes the filling in of the body, the thing being constructed, with "Given rose only just" and "given blue light blue". The body barely visible, barely remembered, is recorded but "only just". This filling in of the body, on the one hand, is a re/construction of a fading image. There seems to be an invisible, mechanical or human hand in the process of drawing in the white page to provide a concrete memory of this technotopia.

*Ping*, at the same time, works as a camera flash, "Afar flash of time" (emphasis mine), that helps to illuminate the scene by making it "All known". The repetition of the words "white" (appearing 93 times) and "light" (appearing 34 times) in the text's mere three pages reveals a process of illumination. The mechanical "ping" sheds light, exposing the "traces" of a "bare white body fixed one yard" and attempts to represent the body in precise terms. Measurements such as "one yard", "one square yard" and "right angle", and words such as "fixed" (appearing 26 times) depict this mechanical eye not only as attempting to illuminate the body, but also as attempting to establish the exact geometric positioning of the body in order to fix the narrative in the present moment and space much like the narrators of *All Strange Away* and *Imagination Dead Imagine* do.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> The narrative voices of *All Strange Away* and *Imagination Dead Imagine* are calm and calculating in their preoccupation with mathematical calculations and geometrical dimensions and in categorising the images. The narrators use geometric dimensions, on the one hand, to provide the narratives with "fixities". "[M]athematically speaking" (176), the narrator of *All Strange Away* attempts to steady his narrative and tries to fix the image of a body lying on the ground. He notes: "[...] arse to knees say diagonal ac, feet say at d, head on left cheek at b" (172). Through an endeavour to precisely describe the body's location, the narrator establishes himself as an author/ity over the image he constructs. On the other hand, the narrator's authority is continually

Operating as a camera flash, the word “ping” erases the scene through both a process of overexposure and through the bright flash whitening the scene: “all white all over all”. Elisabeth Bregman Segrè posits: “Ultimately this black, like the blue and the rose, disappears completely; the traces are mentioned only in the context of being absent” (136). However, the body is not, as Segrè claims, absent. The text reads “ping flash white walls shining white no trace”, revealing that the machine whitens the body and as a result this “all white bare white body” becomes “white on white invisible”. The flash whitens out the image of the body in its brightness and blurs the scene for those looking at the flash, but the image of the body still remains.

The repetition of the word “blanc”, appearing 73 times in the original French text *Bing*, together with the repetition of the word “white” in the English suggest a play on white and blank. Beckett’s *Bing* manuscripts contain columns divided into three categories; under the second column, *Endroit*, Beckett wrote *blanc*.<sup>13</sup> *Endroit* translates into place, but *blanc* (white) refers to an absence of colour. The place can be read as photographic paper, or a page in a book which is simultaneously being filled in and erased. Photographic paper lacks colour and sometimes remains completely white when the photographic negative has been overexposed to light.<sup>14</sup> Beckett’s text, in essence, is over-exposed by the repetition of the word “white”, “light” and “ping”. Hence, *Ping* reveals that despite its narrators trying to keep the page blanc/k and blanc/k out the human body to create an image of absence, that absence is a textual impossibility because in constructing narratives one automatically fills in the blanc/k page. As Andrew

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undermined through his approximations. This use of calculations, geometry and categorisation functions to question the authorial control over text production.

<sup>13</sup> Appears in MSS 1535/3 and 1535/6, Beckett International Foundation, Reading University Library.

<sup>14</sup> David Watson briefly describes the fading of the image in *Ping* as an overexposure. See, David Watson, “The Fictional Body: *Le Depeupleur*, *Bing*, *Imagination morte imaginez*” (1991), *Samuel Beckett: Longman Critical Readers*, eds. Jennifer Birkett and Kate Inge (London: Longman, 2000) 178.

Renton explains: “[...] even the concept of ‘blank’-ness of something missing, presents itself as a word on the page; B.l.a.n.k.s.” (127). Life does appear geometrically fixed in his cylinder texts; if we “Hold a mirror to their lips” in *Imagination dead imagine*, “it mists” (184).

In attempting to erase the page, in *Ping* the narrative voice simultaneously composes a fragmented body. The body is reproduced through a series of phrases, exposing bits and pieces of it. We read, for example, “feet toes”, “Hands hanging palms front”, “Head haught eyes” and “long lashes”. Echoing Walter Benjamin, Li-ling Tseng observes:

These close-range descriptions prepare the way for the camera-like positioning which, [...] creates an advantage in focusing on very selected aspects of the imagined object, thus reducing any waywardness or distraction on the part of the “devouring” eye of imagination. (57)

*Ping* repeatedly exposes this image of the body as though the voice is enlarging different spaces of a photograph to recreate a narrative. The camera-like “ping” illuminates a series of body parts; however, the body remains disjointed. The pieces never come together to create an image of the whole. Rather, while the mechanism composing the text endeavours to create a body, its mechanical sound “ping” interrupts the process of bringing the image together. The closest we get to a complete body is the word “body”. This image, however, too is incomplete as it is “white” and “bare”, and therefore, suggestive of a phantom body.

In the last sentence, the imagined body begs for silence and completion: “Head haught eyes white fixed front old ping last murmur one second perhaps not alone eye unlustrous black and white half closed long lashes imploring ping silence ping over”. The word “imploring” appears once earlier in the text: “Ping perhaps not alone one second with image same time a little less

dim eye black and white half closed long lashes imploring that much memory almost never". The image of the beseeching lashes reveals a desire for the completion of memory; it attempts to compose and complete the "flash of time". Simultaneously, these lines are interrupted by the faulty memory bank of the body. The body cannot remember why it begs. In this inability to remember, the body gives itself colour in order to recreate itself through a filling in of the gaps. Despite the voice's assertion that the body is not living ("heart breath no sound") and as such free of human inconstancy, the body struggles to keep the text from becoming a machine by imploring the narrative voice to be silent and to be finished. Regrettably, however, the presence of this mechanical sound keeps the text from going silent: "almost never ping silence".

The word "ping" both interrupts the body's plea for an end and, at the same time, prompts the end. Theorising on photography, Roland Barthes (15, 44-7) and Susan Sontag (69-75) have noted that photographic images both capture a reproduction of the past as a dead moment and mask the death of the moment. As a reproduction of an image to be gazed upon, the photograph replaces the object, event or person and consequently death is never fully acknowledged. *Ping* is a case in point. The repeated word "over" replaced the earlier translation "finished".<sup>15</sup> "Over" is also the last word of the text. This change to "over" and its position in the text allows for a play on the word as finished and as repetition. In other words, "over" reads as *it is over* and *play it over*. Answering the call to *over-expose* and *over-reproduce* the textual body, "ping" appears more frequently in the later part of the text (three times in the last sentence) and appears closer within the narrator space (the last two are separated by only one word). The text ends with a body in the process of being reproduced and, as a result, *decomposed*. While the text struggles for silence, that is, the

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<sup>15</sup> Beckett's translation of *Bing*, MS 1542/1, BIF, RUL.

end of storytelling, it reproduces a narrative which is repeatedly played *over*.

#### IV.

The frequency at which technological images appear in Samuel Beckett's cylinder fictions constitute more than just a minor theme in these works. Their consistency reveals an overarching concern over authority as represented by these technologies. Beckett uses a technological discourse with particular emphasis on the breakdown of the machine to interrogate and expose the mechanisms behind authoritarian structures. The mechanisms reproducing this language break down because they, too, are human constructs and as such are inevitably imprecise. Yet it is the inaccuracy of this language that is provocative. In exposing the human hand in the act of composing a technological world, Beckett illuminates the process of biological de/composition. He reveals the impossibility of a pure technotopia by exposing the human voice in the production of such a world.

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# Existentialism and the Beats: A Renegotiation

*Erik Ronald Mortenson*

On a recent visit to Jack Kerouac's hometown of Lowell, Massachusetts I had the opportunity to take a guided tour of the town conducted by the National Park Service. One of the more famous landmarks was the gigantic clock that rises above City Hall. This clock finds its way into Doctor Sax and numerous other Kerouac works, always standing as an imposing symbol of "Time." But for a mill town such as Lowell, the City Hall Clock represented something much less abstract. The park ranger explained that the mill workers were in constant fear that the shop clock was off; that they were starting earlier and finishing later than was required. Thus the City Hall Clock was conceived—not only to alert the entire town to the exact time, but to ensure that mill-time, too, was kept honest. This clock has come to stand for many things. For a young Kerouac, it was an imposing feature of city life, while for an older Kerouac it was a symbol of life's continual passing. For the mill workers, it probably stood for both security as well as a reminder to what extent their lives revolved around a clock. For this scholar, it is a landmark; a piece of literature made real in stone. And towering above all these, figuratively and literally, the City Hall Clock remains rigidly itself, dispensing time across public space and private lives alike.

Lowell is an excellent place to begin thinking about Kerouac and the Beat revolution that he helped to inaugurate because what is at stake here is a question of control over space and time, a battle over who gets to determine where and when any given set of activities will occur. It is a fight over the moment. A National Park guidebook explains what life working for a Lowell mill was like:

The factory bells dominated daily life. They woke the

workers at 4:30 a.m. on summer mornings, called them into the mills at 4:50, rang them out for breakfast and back in, out and in for dinner, out again at 7 p.m. at the day's close. At 10 the bells rang the curfew. The mills had identical schedules and set their bells to ring in unison. (United States 51)

The mill owned time, and the activities that took place within it. Workers arose not when they were rested, but when a bell demanded it. Basic human activities such as eating were strictly regulated, leading to a system governed by the clock instead of the body. According to Richard Edwards in Contested Terrain, the mills owned space as well:

In the early shops the spinners and weavers needed to move around, to obtain materials or to dispose of finished goods . . . . But in the new power-driven mills all machines operated together, and the operative had neither any cause nor any right to move about the mill. Instead, the worker became nearly as much locked in place as the machine. (114)

As with time, the mills controlled space, telling workers where exactly they will be at any given moment in the day. The Lowell mills present a changing of the guard, a transition from an older tradition of individual craftsmanship and control over the product to a new industrial society highly controlled and rationalized.

Kerouac never worked in the mills, but as a resident of Lowell they were never far from his mind or his body. As much as he loved his hometown, Kerouac still wanted out. He knew that the mills were a dead end, and the life of the mill worker one of repetitious drudgery. Although he may not have had the Lowell mills specifically in mind, Kerouac recoiled from the rigid timetables and spatial itineraries that the mills demanded. The Beat rebellion that he helped to champion saw these temporal and spatial constraints as a fundamental barrier to discovering a truer, authentic version of oneself. Yet Kerouac could not escape simply by leaving Lowell. Mill work was representative of all the forces throughout 1950s society that sought to control and delimit—the

need to work, the assumption of marriage and household, or the fear of the atomic bomb. Wherever he went, Kerouac continued to meet with repressive notions of time and space. As difficult as it was to achieve, what the Beats were after was a return to a moment overflowing with personal freedom and spontaneous action. Time ruled not by the clock, but by desire and circumstance. Space governed not by boundaries, but by openness and mobility. The factory floor and the mindset associated with it jarred one out of the present, and the Beats felt it was imperative to get back to an authentic moment if life was to be lived to its fullest.

The Beats, however, were not alone in their struggle against spatial and temporal constraints. The tradition of Existentialism, which was popularized in the period of the Beat revolution, likewise sought to break free from the alienating aspects of society to achieve a more direct relationship with the world. According to Daniel Belgrad in The Culture of Spontaneity, “Existentialists struggled to live ‘authentically,’ open to the possibilities of existence, and to avoid enslavement to the dictates of conceptual structures and social norms” (107). Millwork may represent the most egregious affront to personal freedom, but society is littered with “conceptual structures” and “social norms” that keep the individual from achieving a true self. Overt temporal and spatial repression was replaced with a more insidious form of normalization that Existentialist thinkers labeled inauthentic. Thus Belgrad observes that “Existentialism encouraged defiance against the conformity of Cold War anti-Communism and the regimented work culture of corporate liberalism” (112). With their attention focused on either the deadly threat of communism abroad or the pleasures afforded by a consumer economy at home, the 1950s American was unable to fully engage with the actual, material situations that surrounded her. Beat writers and Existentialists, by contrast, were united in their belief that this authentic world was worth striving towards, and that common notions of patriotism, the work ethic, and the American dream were actually hindrances to achieving this truer relationship to the world.

Unfortunately, the connection between these two groups has become tangled. The Beat reception of Existentialism, and the critical understanding of that reception, is marred by misunderstanding, distrust, and suspicion. This study proposes an intervention. The goal here is not only to unearth the causes for the supposed animosity between these groups, but also to explore what the Beats and Existentialism have to teach us about the search for authenticity in the postwar period. The Beat relationship to Existentialism<sup>1</sup> can only be understood by disentangling Existentialist thought from its initial reception. According to David E. Cooper, Existentialism saw a postwar vogue in France, with “black-clad youths prowling between the *Tabou* and the *Pergola*” (12). The faddishness of such display leads to the belief that Existentialism was more style than substance. In *Irrational Man*, William Barrett explains that “French Existentialism was a kind of Bohemian ferment in Paris; it had, as a garnish for the philosophy, the cult its younger devotees had made of night-club hangouts, American jazz, special hairdos, and style of dress” (7-8). This “cult” eventually found its way to America after the occupation, further complicating American receptions of Existentialist thought proper. As Ann Fulton writes in her study *Apostles of Sartre*, “Sartre’s philosophy was popular among a small group of intellectuals and writers. Sometimes attracted as

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<sup>1</sup>This term is, of course, highly contested. The danger here is collapsing a disparate group of thinkers under one simple rubric. Unfortunately, such labels are necessary if larger trends are to be traced. Thus I follow Cooper in his assessment that what unites thinkers as diverse as Martin Heidegger, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, and Jean-Paul Sartre (and separates them from phenomenologists like Edmund Husserl) is their belief that “there is no prospect for examining ‘meaning’ and the ‘meaning’-making activities of conscious beings unless these latter are taken to be practically and bodily engaged with the real world” (5-6). Dismissing Husserl’s eidetic reduction, these philosophers believe that only through lived existence can we come to make sense of the world. Each philosopher has their own conception of authenticity. Heidegger conceives of it as an acknowledgement of death, Merleau-Ponty as an embodied existence in the world, and Sartre as a project freely chosen, but for all of these philosophers, what is most important is that the individual become fully aware of their existence within the present moment.

much to Sartre's identification with Parisian bohemian life as by his philosophical doctrines, these Americans reproduced Sartre's popularity in France on a smaller scale" (27). Rather than engaging the philosophical texts themselves, devotees often settled for Existentialism as a sort of lifestyle choice. Ironically, Existentialism came to signify what the term "Beatnik" would signify a decade later: a black-sweatered bohemian smoking a cigarette at a cafe table.

Such faddishness was anathema to a Beat movement struggling to free itself from the conformity of the postwar years. Why trade one set of social conventions for another? But Existentialism's popular appeal was not the only reason for the Beats' hesitancy to embrace the movement. Fulton mentions a number of reasons for American hostility to Existentialism in the postwar years, including the lack of translations, its occasional attack on religion, and Existentialism's "irrationality" in the face of an American philosophical tradition of positivist analytic philosophy. But a French Canadian like Kerouac would not have had a problem reading Jean-Paul Sartre in the original; the Beats were iconoclastic enough to accept a questioning of established religion; and they certainly were not committed to buttressing any academic position, let alone a scientific one like logical positivism. In fact, the treatment Existentialist thought received in the Academy is emblematic of just the type of outsider status the Beats embraced. Why, then, the supposed Beat hostility? One answer might be in the American characterization of Existentialism as "pessimistic." Cooper describes Parisian Existentialists as full of "feigned ennui and despair," (12) a characterization that magazines like Harper's and Life deployed when introducing Americans to this nascent movement. The titles Fulton relays say it all: "French and American Pessimism" and "Existentialism: Postwar Paris Enthrones a Bleak Philosophy of Pessimism" (29). Buoyed by a sense of triumph and economic success, postwar America relegated such pessimism to a war-torn Europe that was struggling to come to terms with a sense of guilt and disillusionment. As

Fulton remarks, it would not be until “the ideological strife of the Cold War intensified after 1947 and concerns about loss of individuality escalated” (34) that America would be ready for the sort of concerns Sartre and others were raising.

The Beats were not immune to such stereotypes, and both these charges of faddishness and pessimism combine when Existentialism is overtly addressed in their texts. Kerouac’s attacks on this movement coalesce around the New School for Social Research, which he attended from 1948 until 1949. Quoting the Yale philosopher Maurice Natanson, Fulton describes the New School during the late 40s as a “‘kind of Garden of Eden’ of people who understood existentialism and phenomenology” (49-50). Kerouac’s assessment is less kind. In a 1948 letter to Hal Chase, Kerouac talks of going to Paris with his friends in order to (as his friend “Burford” explains it) “show the existentialist drek the *real* meaning of anarchy” (Selected 169). As Kerouac would later put it in On The Road, his is the “wild yea-saying overburst of American joy” rather than the pessimistic “negative, nightmarish position of putting down society” with “tired bookish or political or psychoanalytic reasons” (10). Overly intellectualized ennui and despair ran counter to a Beat movement that insisted on the spontaneous ecstasy of lived life. Later that year, Kerouac sums up his feelings regarding the New School to his friend Ed White, explaining that “the New School with its ugly Jewesses and generally ugly intellectuals is making me sick . . . [it] is a battleground for European ideas-of-disintegration” (“Letters” 117-18). Here Kerouac echoes American ideas concerning Existentialism writ large—a depressing philosophy practiced by pseudo-intellectuals that is going nowhere.

Beat scholarship is quick to echo these dismissive sentiments, when Existentialism is discussed at all. In his 1990 study The Daybreak Boys, Gregory Stephenson claims that Existentialists “share a central mood of despair and futility, a sense of repugnance with the body, an atmosphere of tragic tedium, and an emphasis upon negation and emptiness. They also share an imagery of

confinement and constriction, of inertia and immobility” (11). By contrast, for Stephenson Beat work is characterized by “vigor and energy, by sensuality and by spiritual aspiration” (11). Over a decade later, John Lardas’ 2001 book The Bop Apocalypse provides a similar binary, arguing that “the Beats’ religious individualism, then, was not an existentialist opposition of the self versus society but one of self in service of society. Its focus was on somatic connection rather than intellectual exposition, apprehension and physical communion rather than abstract representations” (97). These contentions do possess some merit. Sartre, for instance, claims in Being and Nothingness that “conflict is the original meaning of being-for-others” (475), and Martin Heidegger struggles to come to terms with the Other in Being and Time. Death is a concern for all of these writers, as well as the angst associated with freedom of choice. But all of these issues are relevant for humankind in general, and furthermore are addressed throughout the Beat canon. Kerouac may respond with “wild yea-saying,” but the assertion that Existentialism responds with simple passivity is patently false. What these critics are relying on, then, is ready-made notions of Existentialism that are derived from cultural assumptions about a phenomenon divorced from the literature itself.

In fact, numerous references demonstrate that the Beats used Existentialism as a means to better understand their own postwar generation. Discussing his coining of the term in his essay “The Origins of the Beat Generation,” (1959) Kerouac describes a conversation with John Clellon Holmes where they both were “sitting around trying to think up the meaning of the Lost Generation and the subsequent Existentialism” (57). While Kerouac’s “Beat Generation” is not to be conflated with Existentialism, he nevertheless makes it clear that not only was Existentialism discussed among the Beats, it was used as a filter to help them better understand their own particular social situation. Kerouac makes this connection even more explicit in his “Aftermath: The Philosophy of the Beat Generation” (1958).

Here he draws a parallel between the Beat Generation and Existentialism, claiming that “The same thing was almost going on in the postwar France of Sartre and Genet and what’s more we knew about it” (47). Nor is Kerouac the only Beat to make such an assertion. In his Autobiography, Amiri Baraka claims that one of the trends he first picked up on when he arrived in New York City’s Greenwich Village in the late 1950s was “the contemporary bridge into our own day, existentialism” (182). These examples suggest that the written works of Existentialist authors were not simply dismissed by the Beats as scholars tend to claim. Kerouac may have been hostile to the fad of Existentialism or intellectuals who wanted to practice it, but the philosophical texts themselves were read and even respected. Despite his attacks on the New School, Kerouac retains his ultimate vitriol not for thinkers, but for the intellectuals—“The only trouble is that some of those guys there are bald-faced enough to deem they are privileged to re-interpret everything from the Bible to Melville and Sartre” (“Letters” 117). The Beats did not import Existentialism wholesale or accept all of its tenets. Existentialism, however, was important to the Beats as a means of defining themselves and their nascent postwar generation. In Kerouac’s novel The Town and the City the character of Francis is “amazed to think that a whole coherent language had sprung into being around this restless, intelligent, determined trend . . . they had words to name the key complaints and frame the major solutions” (115-16). Some of the “words” Francis is “amazed” to hear include “Kierkegaard,” “anxiety,” and “Heidegger” (116). What Kerouac’s quote suggests is that Existentialism was a current topic among the Beats that provided them with a vocabulary for “naming key complaints” and “framing major solutions.” The Beats may have gone beyond Existentialism for their answers, but Existentialism was an integral component of that search for meaning.

What makes Existentialism so relevant to the Beats is that both groups find themselves in a postwar social situation where systems building has irrevocably broken down. In The Age of

Doubt, William Graebner describes two variations of “contingency” in postwar America: “One was the contingency of existence . . . . The other, a moral and ethical contingency, was characterized by the growing sense that it was now more difficult than ever before to ground one’s conduct in a stable system of values” (19). Here is the beginning of the postmodern period, where the “grand narratives” of modernity are starting to fail.<sup>2</sup> Into this void created by a World War and an Atomic bomb come competing theories that attempt to make sense of an absurd postwar condition. The Beats, of course, reject the various isms offered to them as a means of making sense of their lives, instead opting for a more personalized, spiritual response that takes the form of artistic creation. Existentialism is not just another codified movement offered for their perusal, but an identical stance toward the world. Graebner claims that Existentialism “assumed the impossibility of reconciling contradictions . . . against this condition of continual uncertainty and doubt . . . one could assert only the primacy of the struggle, the value of waging the good fight” (147). Both the Beats and the Existentialists attempt to discover meaning in a supposedly meaningless world. According to John Clellon Holmes in his essay “This is the Beat Generation,” (1952) the Beat “lust for freedom, and the ability to live at a pace that kills (to which the war had adjusted them), led to black markets, bebop, narcotics, sexual promiscuity, hucksterism, and Jean-Paul Sartre” (224). For Holmes, the Beats are in a constant search for value in their lives, and will try anything if they think it will provide an answer. Norman Mailer, in his essay “The White Negro: Superficial Reflections on the Hipster,” (1957) shares the same view. Equating the “white Negro” with the “existential

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<sup>2</sup> If we can derive the postmodern from this condition, why bother with Existentialism at all? The importance of Existentialism here is that it provides a possible solution to this contingency. Theories of the postmodern are content to either describe this contingency, mirror it, or to revel in the resulting indeterminacy. Existentialism, like Beat texts, suggests that a meaningful stance towards the world is possible, without prescribing one final approach fit for everybody.

hipster,” Mailer writes that for this “American existentialist” life must have a purpose: “A life which is directed by one’s faith in the necessity of action is a life committed to the notion that the substratum of existence is the search, the end meaningful but mysterious” (587). What the Beats share with the Existentialists is the idea that there is meaning in the world, even if that meaning is difficult to attain and perhaps ultimately “mysterious.” In the end, meaning is contained in the search itself—a belief that through constant struggle the world will eventually be made to yield sense and understanding to the searcher.

The insistence on individual meaning-creation runs directly counter to the postwar demand for conformity to the social order. In Containment Culture, Alan Nadel argues for a notion of postwar America based on the Atomic bomb. This trope creates a set of narratives that run throughout the culture, ordering the ways in which events are understood and containing deviant action. Nadel writes that “it was a period, as many prominent studies have indicated, when ‘conformity’ became a positive value in and of itself. The virtue of conformity—to some idea of religion, to ‘middle-class’ values, to distinct gender roles and rigid courtship rituals—became a form of public knowledge” (4). Yet this conformity also produced anxiety for those unwilling or unable to live within its tenets, and the Beats were obviously one such group. In his poem “Howl,” for example, Ginsberg’s “best minds of my generation” (126) are those who have been pushed to the periphery by society’s dominant codes. Existentialist thought shares such disdain for ready-made modes of living. In The Culture of Spontaneity, Belgrad notes that “Existentialism and the aesthetic of spontaneity were most similar in their shared condemnation of the way fixed conceptual structures truncated and falsified reality” (107). Although Belgrad ultimately downplays the role of Existentialism in Beat thought, they nevertheless agree on the need to challenge existing social structures in order to attain a more primal engagement with the world. Cooper agrees, citing “*alienation* in its various forms” as that which “serves to motivate

and guide the whole existentialist enterprise” (8). Friedrich Nietzsche’s attack on the constrictive mentality of the “herd,” Heidegger’s critique of the inauthenticity produced by the “they,” and Albert Camus’s insistence on personal choice and freedom all demonstrate Existentialism’s animosity towards the conformity required by the masses. Existentialism has much to say about the inauthenticities that alienation produces, and these insights, when combined with Beat critiques, help reveal exactly how life is being covered up during the late 1940s and throughout the 1950s.

What the Beats are seeking is a spiritual revolution, but one which knows neither creed nor denomination. In his essay “The Philosophy of the Beat Generation,” (1958) Holmes explains, “To be beat is to be at the bottom of your personality, looking up; to be existential in the Kierkegaard, rather than the Jean-Paul Sartre, sense” (229). Beats like Holmes and Kerouac lamented the fact that their movement was often depicted as morally delinquent and godless, when in fact it was searching for an even deeper religiousness that would bring meaning back into people’s lives. Existentialism oftentimes suffered the same fate in the hands of the postwar media. But as Holmes makes clear, both are searching for spirituality free from the trappings of institutionalized church and state. Holmes’s reference to “Kierkegaard” rather than “Jean-Paul Sartre” is telling. Sartre is oftentimes relegated to the image of the godless, pessimistic, dystopian Existentialist that thrived during the period. Kierkegaard’s religious bent receives better press.<sup>3</sup> According to Gerald Nicosia, Kerouac passed the time on his freighter to Tangiers not just reading but “studying Kierkegaard’s Fear and Trembling” (544). Such an insistence on spirituality led Ginsberg in search of the Jewish philosopher and theologian

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<sup>3</sup> Mailer, in “The White Negro,” echoes Holmes’s denouncement of Sartre, claiming that “To be a real existentialist (Sartre admittedly to the contrary) one must be religious” (587). Sartre is invariably the lightning rod for such attacks on the spiritual bankruptcy of Existentialism. Kerouac concurs in his essay “What Am I Thinking About” (1969), citing Heidegger as the “Founder of Existentialism, never mind your Sartre” (188).

Martin Buber. In India, Allen Ginsberg singled out Buber as the first “holy man” he went to see. Buber suggested to Ginsberg that he should focus on human-to-human relationships, and two years later Ginsberg discovered, “He was right” (“Interview” 314). This “human-to-human” relationship that Buber preaches is not codified into sectarian doctrine, but instead speaks to a more essential connection that exists between human beings. Kerouac places such religiousness at the center of the Beat project in “Aftermath,” claiming that “even the Existentialists with all their intellectual overlays and pretenses of indifference, represent an even deeper religiousness . . . as if the visions of the cloistral saints of Chartres and Clairvaux were back with us again bursting like weeds through the sidewalks of stiffened civilization” (50). While the use of the qualifier “even” demonstrates Kerouac’s hesitancy to fully embrace Existentialism, he nevertheless includes this group as an ally in the Beat assault on a “stiffened civilization” which has forsaken any sort of “deeper religiousness.” It is conformist America that is lacking spirituality, not the Existentialists and certainly not the Beats.

The Beats share with the Existentialists a desire to escape the alienating conformity of the postwar era in order to arrive at a more authentic state of being. But what distinguishes these two groups are the methods used to convey this authenticity. In Search of Authenticity, by Jacob Golomb, discusses the form Existentialist writings take: “Almost half the writing of the most influential philosophers of authenticity take some form other than straight exposition” (18). Roughly half the corpus, then, is what we commonly think of as Philosophy—calculated reflection in tract form. The other half consists of various literary genres. Golomb explains that

Arguing for authenticity is self-defeating in that it presupposes the authority of rationality and objectivity, which is called into question by this ideal. Since one cannot argue rationally for adopting authentic life, one must be satisfied with the subtle enticement of the reader . . . . And

how is one to identify authentic patterns of living without appealing to normative criteria? Part of the solution lies in the use of literature as a medium for indirectly communicating about authenticity. (18)

Authenticity cannot be shown, only promised, according to Golomb. This “enticement” is “indirectly” communicated in the hope that readers will be moved to attain this state themselves. To advocate a specific avenue to authenticity is to negate the point of the entire Existentialist search—authenticity presupposes an individuated and idiosyncratic relationship to the world. The power of shifting such oblique representations to so many different registers is that it helps to avoid a systems building that is odious to the Existentialist project.

Although both groups have recourse to the literary, the Beats and the Existentialists use literature in entirely different ways. The schism here is between reflective and spontaneous forms of writing. Existentialists may try to “entice” their readers into authenticity with fictional accounts, but their use of the literary is almost always based on a concretization of abstract, reflective thought. Take, for example, the work of Camus. Very often his characters and plots are distillations of Existentialist thought, and his novels thus become a working through of philosophical ideas in another register. Thus The Plague is less about creating idiosyncratic characters than demonstrating the range of human response to the de-humanizing condition of disease and death. Likewise in Sartre’s work, where conflict between humans becomes the lesson of the play No Exit—hell is other people, not the fanciful creation of the poet’s mind. Compare this reflective strategy with the spontaneous approach of the Beats. The Beats seldom pause to reflect on their project. In “Essentials of Spontaneous Prose,” (1957) Kerouac advises writing “without consciousness in semi-trance . . . allowing subconscious to admit in own uninhibited interesting necessary and so ‘modern’ language

what conscious art would censor” (70).<sup>4</sup> Although they experimented with different genres, Beat writers generally placed themselves under the rubric of “poets,” no matter what format they happened to be working in at the time. This is why a writer like Kerouac claims that his fiction is “an endless one-line poem called prose” (“Statement” 76), and Ginsberg retains his particular style and manner even in his essays. The Beats felt that all of their writing was the result of personal exposition spontaneously composed on the page, and thus genre distinctions were superfluous. The Beats do not entice; they demonstrate. An ancillary goal is to get the reader to develop their own brand of authenticity, but their primary goal is to *present* the authenticity that they have achieved (or are trying to achieve) to the reader via the written word. The Beats provide concrete examples which, even if occurring some fifty years ago, are still closer to the America of our day than the literary and philosophical works of European Existentialist thinkers. But while this might provide a reader with a glimpse of authentic thought existing beyond a reified consciousness, it does little to explain the dynamics of the authentic state and how it is achieved. Here the work of Existentialist philosophers becomes particularly useful by providing the analytic tools necessary to critically engage this notion of authenticity. Between the Existentialists’ reflective forays and the Beats’ creative presentations lies the authenticity that it is the critic’s job to unearth.

This attempt to present experience necessarily embroils the Beats in questions of representation. What does it mean to capture experience on paper? How do you write authentically? For the Beats, these questions were at the heart of their project. There is no use trying to present authenticity if that very attempt renders the

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<sup>4</sup> The question of the unconscious in Beat writing is vexed. While Kerouac dismissed Freudian interpretation, he nevertheless dabbled in its application to himself and others. Ginsberg underwent psychoanalysis, and William S. Burroughs engaged in various forms of this practice as well. Despite Beat ambivalences towards the psychoanalytic method, the specter of Sigmund Freud loomed large over the 1950s.

text inauthentic. In their various journals, letters, and manifestoes these writers grapple with this issue, positing notions derived from energy fields, bodily intersubjectivity, and breath rhythms to theorize a poetic program that retains an authentic relationship to the reader. In “Improvised Poetics,” (1971) Ginsberg discusses the role of mantra in his poetry, claiming that “the . . . rhythmic . . . units . . . that I’d written down . . . were basically . . . breathing exercise forms . . . which if anybody else repeated . . . would catalyze in them the same *pranic* breathing . . . physiological spasm . . . that I was going through . . . and so would presumably catalyze in them the same *affects* or emotions” (33-36) [Ellipses in original]. The body itself is the site of authenticity for Ginsberg, and by getting back to his own body he is able to infuse his poetry with “affects and emotions” that become transferable to the reader. The Beat poet Michael McClure agrees, arguing that his poems become “extensions of myself as much as my hand or arm are extensions of me” (89). As with Ginsberg, the body creates a gestural meaning that gets communicated from the writer to the reader via the medium of the written text. Kerouac likewise has recourse to the simile of gesture, comparing his line to “a fist coming down on a table with complete utterance, bang!” (“Essentials” 69). What all of these examples indicate is that, for the Beats, authenticity is not simply a personal stance towards the world, but encompasses intersubjective relationships between humans. It is not enough for the Beats to challenge the status quo of society—they are writers as well, and want to communicate their achieved authenticity to their readers.

Critics have condemned Existentialists for their supposed solipsism and their embrace of negativity, but a closer inspection of their works reveals that these philosophers are just as concerned with intersubjective communication as the Beats. While it is true that Sartre bases his view of human relationships on the hostility of the gaze, he nevertheless repeatedly addresses questions of representation by appealing to language and writing in Being and Nothingness. Sartre, however, is by no means representative of

Existentialist thinking on intersubjectivity. In Being and Time, Heidegger argues that the concept of Dasein cannot be understood without coming to terms with intersubjective relationships. We are all part of the world, and since other people are also part of that same world, they are necessarily part of our being as well. Maurice Merleau-Ponty extends this thinking even further, claiming that “as the parts of my body together comprise a system, so my body and the other person’s are one whole, two sides of the same phenomenon” (354). Communication between two humans is not only possible, but the basic reality of life. Far from the isolationist philosophy that critics claim, Existentialism offers ways of thinking about language, bodies, and consciousness that challenge us to envision communication in novel ways. Placing Beat accounts of intersubjectivity alongside those of Existentialism demonstrates some of the options available for thinking about artistic representation and its limits.

What ultimately unites the Beats with the Existentialists is a desire to get back to the lived moment. Kerouac’s novel On The Road provides a nice summation of how alienation does its work across space, time, and bodies. Riding in a car with a tourist couple, Dean explains to Sal how authenticity is destroyed:

‘They have worries, they’re counting the miles, they’re thinking about where to sleep tonight, how much money for gas, the weather, how they’ll get there—and all the time they’ll get there anyway, you see. But they need to worry and betray time with urgencies false and otherwise, purely anxious and whiny, their souls really won’t be at peace unless they can latch on to an established and proven worry.’ (208)

The tourist couple needs “worries” like the millworkers need the City Hall Clock—it gives them a false sense of security in an otherwise meaningless world. Fretting about “money,” “gas,” and “weather” abstracts the couple out of the present moment, allowing them to live in an always-retreating future that never arrives since there will always be a new worry to replace it. As long as they are worrying, the couple is not truly living. Dean’s authenticity

resides in his knowledge that we will all “get there anyway” and therefore there is no necessity but to simply experience the moment as it unfolds. Because the couple is unable to abandon themselves to the immediacy of the present, they “betray time” and will never achieve the direct physical and mental relationship with the world that is the hallmark of authenticity.

Returning to an authentic moment is at the center of both the Beat and Existentialist projects. Ginsberg relates an anecdote about William S. Burroughs who, during a presidential campaign, quipped, “If an elephant had walked up in front of all those candidates in the middle of the speech and shat on the ground and walked away, the candidate would have ignored it. Consciousness wasn’t present there on the occasion when they were talking, consciousness was an abstract, theoretical state” (“New Consciousness” 71-72). The moment is the site where life is to be lived, where humans encounter one another and their environment in an immediate way. What Burroughs deplors is the covering up that existentialist philosophers like Heidegger examine, the reification of society that forces its citizens out of the present moment. Instead of the reality of “elephant” and “shit,” we get a covert denial, a consciousness removed from the lived reality of the situation. The Beats thus find themselves in a “vast American hallucination” constructed in the disembodied space of “airwaves and television and newspapers” (“New Consciousness” 71-72). The Beats formulated their “New Vision” in an attempt to combat this trend, to step outside the containment narratives employed in the housing tract and factory floor and into a real relationship with the world and its events as they occur in space and time. This emphasis on direct versus mediated experience intersects Existential attempts to recover an authenticity within the moment. As Merleau-Ponty claims in his preface to Phenomenology of Perception, this discipline “offers an account of space, time, and the world as we ‘live’ them” (vii). The Beats’ insistence on lived experience means that the questions of space and time are paramount for them as well. The moment is where these two

vectors intersect, and where the possibility of agentival change takes place. Comparing the Beat approach to alienation and authenticity with the account offered by Existentialist thought helps us to better understand both groups. Both are addressing the same concerns at roughly the same time, so it makes sense to compare their various strategies and reactions in order to shed light on the problem of living the moment authentically in a highly inauthentic postwar situation.

The Beats were not sitting in postwar libraries poring over every Existentialist text they could get their hands on. In fact, their anti-intellectualism was quite real, if a bit overstated. But that does not mean that the Beats were ignorant of the cultural and intellectual trends that were going on around them. The Beats did read the Existentialists, and they found something to admire. When it came to crafting their own myths and poetics, they downplayed the role of Existentialism in their projects. Yet for all these dismissals, Beat concerns about living life authentically in the moment closely mirror the work that Existentialists had conducted before them. This is not to say that the Beats copied the Existentialists—on the contrary, Beat formulations of authenticity are different from these philosophers and have a specifically American hue. Yet it does seem clear that Existentialism played a role in Beat thinking, both as a direct influence and as a cultural backdrop that helped to develop Beat thinking along certain lines. More important than influence is the fact that the Beats and the Existentialists are bringing their thought to bear on the problem of breaking through mediation and inauthenticity to encounter the world directly. These two groups share similarities, and it behooves Beat scholars to take a closer look at the formulations that Existentialists have to offer. Such an analysis not only yields a better understanding of Beat attempts to go beyond the falseness of the world into a truer realm of experience and representation, but it also provides a better sense of how Beat texts might be employed in our current situation to live life more fully in each passing moment.

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# From Farming Pigs to Fathering a Persian: Existentialist Patterns in Bellow's *Henderson the Rain King*

Philippe Codde

Where did he come from? He was an accident. We are all such accidents. We do not make up history and culture. We simply appear, not by our own choice. We make what we can of our condition with the means available. We must accept the mixture as we find it—the impurity of it, the tragedy of it, the hope of it.

Saul Bellow

Although Saul Bellow's early novels have often been dubbed "existentialist," "Sartrean," or "Camusian,"<sup>1</sup> an analysis of what specifically related these works to French existentialism was often completely left out, or was conducted in such vague and general terms that the analyses remained at best tentative and unconvincing.<sup>2</sup> Nevertheless, Bellow's flirtation with existentialism has become a critical cliché. Sidney Finkelstein and Richard Lehan even consider Bellow a full-blooded existentialist, dubbing him somewhat inappropriately "the self-appointed clown of the American existentialist movement" (Finkelstein 266).<sup>3</sup> While most critics have considered Bellow's first two novels as

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<sup>1</sup> Kazin: 21; Finkelstein: 262; Malin: 164; Lehan: 109; Glenday: 15; Atlas: 94.

<sup>2</sup> A fine example of such an over-generalizing approach is Von Renate's "Existentialism in Saul Bellow's Novel *Henderson the Rain King*."

<sup>3</sup> Finkelstein adds, significantly, that Bellow "is not, in his humor, satirizing the existentialist frame of mind because he has nothing to replace it with" (266)

belonging to the category of existentialist fiction, only very few<sup>4</sup> have noticed its influence on Bellow's later novels as well. Traditionally, these later novels have been considered rather adverse to existentialism, but this notion is primarily based on Bellow's—or rather Herzog's—diatribe in 1964 against “the Waste Land outlook, the cheap mental stimulants of Alienation” (81), and on a poor, restricted understanding of French existentialism.

By his remark about the Waste Land outlook, Bellow is really distancing himself from one form of existentialism only: the negative, nihilistic variant found in prewar France.<sup>5</sup> But after the Second World War, even Sartre and Camus rejected their earlier stance of indifference, and they finally arrived at a literature of commitment.<sup>6</sup> *Henderson the Rain King* (1959), I will argue, follows this postwar existentialist model. In fact, the evolution in Bellow's oeuvre, from the indifference of *Dangling Man* to the engaged literature of *Henderson*, dovetails with the transformation of French existentialism after the Second World War. Daniel Walden is therefore correct in his assertion that Bellow's oeuvre is characterized by a movement “from the existential disorder of his cultural perception to an assertion and reaffirmation of human values” (28), but it is important to note that this shift is already present in existentialism itself. Later in life, Bellow tried to downplay the influence of existentialism on his work, rather granting that he was influenced by authors such as Flaubert, Dostoevsky, and Dreiser. However, this propensity to distance himself from fads or philosophies once cherished seems a typical Bellovian move, as can be seen in his enthusiasm for and

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<sup>4</sup> See Finkelstein; Lehan, and Aharoni 1983 and 1992.

<sup>5</sup> In 1987, Bellow was still complaining that it “was a mistake to follow European models and European summations too closely” (192).

<sup>6</sup> The contrast is most notable if one compares Camus's prewar novel of indifference, *L'étranger* (*The Stranger*), with his postwar novel *La peste* (*The Plague*), which emphasizes the communal project. In his postwar philosophical essay *L'Homme révolté* (*The Rebel*), Camus explicitly distances himself from the indifferent position taken in his prewar essay *Le mythe de Sisyphe* (*The Myth of Sisyphus*).

subsequent fervent rejection of Reichianism as a mere youthful lapse.<sup>7</sup> Unfortunately, Bellow did not give a single interview during the 1940s, and only two brief ones in the 1950s. Only from 1963 on (after finishing *Herzog*), by the time he had distanced himself from prewar existentialism, did he begin granting interviews on a regular basis. But then he no longer felt like talking about his early novels (Harper 62). Hence, there is no record of his original stance towards one of the most popular philosophical movements ever. There is only his later rejection of the bleaker form of existentialism in the novels and interviews postdating 1963. In interviews in the 1980s, he did mention that he had “gone through existentialism” (Ignatieff 228), and called postwar French literature “damn influential stuff,” but he had decided that he “was not going to embrace European nihilism” (this is in reference to his 1956 novella *Seize the Day*; Gray 217-18).

As with Sartre and Camus, the second, affirmative variant of the model is not simply optimistic or unconditionally affirmative; it always starts from the rather pessimistic outlook of a universe devoid of meaning, wherein the protagonist attempts to create his individual pertinence. In other words, the negative experience remains in the background, it remains the foundation on which an affirmation is built. Hence, Bellow stated that “one would have to be optimistic to the point of imbecility to raise the standard of pure affirmation and cry ‘yea, yea’ shrilly against the deep background

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<sup>7</sup> “Bellow was a master of self-exculpation [...]. He could always find an explanation—one that revolved around the notion of himself as victim. It was important for Bellow to see his life this way: He lacked the reserves of self-esteem needed to engage in rigorous self-criticism. ‘I never gave psychoanalysis so much as a two-year lease,’ he testified, depicting himself as a reluctant participant in Rosenfeld’s Reichian experiments: ‘I enjoyed it as a game then being played.’ [...] By minimizing the significance of his therapy, he could deny that he’d ever had problems acute enough to require treatment.” (Atlas 165). Earlier, Bellow admitted, however, that he and Isaac Rosenfeld had been fond of “Reichianism which for a time had absorbed us both” (Bellow 1962: 14). Similarly, Bellow later declared about his first novel, *Dangling Man*—a novel steeped in existentialism—that he could not “read a page of it without feeling embarrassed. The ideas in it are the ideas of a very young man” (Cook 14).

of ‘nays’ (Clayton 14). *Henderson the Rain King*, then, follows the typical postwar existentialist pattern: the indifferent protagonist is leading a regular life of automatisms (which Sartre and Camus identify as the primary means to ward off existential angst),<sup>8</sup> until the bottom suddenly drops out by some unexpected event—often a confrontation with death—and he is thrown into a complete uncertainty, a true manifestation of the Camusian absurd.<sup>9</sup> This sudden confrontation with death prompts the erstwhile indifferent protagonist to go on a quest for some qualitative value that will give meaning to his life—a value which inevitably resides in human fellowship.

While most critics have noted the important shift in Bellow’s style and use of scenery in *Augie March*, only few have noticed the ideational transformation in Bellow’s oeuvre with the publication of *Henderson the Rain King*. For Max Schulz, Bellow’s “philosophy of life” reached maturity only in *Henderson* (122-23). Similarly, Marcus Klein notes that “it is with *Henderson* that the consummation [of one’s heart’s ultimate need] is first achieved and rendered, achieved by a Nietzschean notion of heroic self-transcendence based on freedom, a notion that has been hinted at in all the previous novels” (135). For David Galloway, Bellow has moved “from rather bleak statements of man’s spiritual condition in [his] early novels to a pointedly optimistic statement of man’s spiritual capacities in *Henderson*” (21). Bellow himself admitted that it was “liberating to write *Henderson*” (Simmons 162). Whereas Bellow’s previous protagonists are at best bungling questers of authenticity, Eugene Henderson, the “absurd seeker of high qualities” (qtd. in Steers 34) sets out on a quest that takes him away from the drudgery of his New England pig farm and into the African heart of darkness, where he indeed discovers his heart’s ultimate need.

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<sup>8</sup> See Sartre 64ff and Camus 1942: 29ff.

<sup>9</sup> This is the disjunction between human aspirations and an indifferent universe (see Camus 1942a: 39).

Eugene Henderson, an American millionaire who is running a pig farm for the sake of eccentricity, inherited a fortune while he was strolling through life “like a bum” (Bellow 3). Whatever he has so far achieved in life—his wealth, his wife, his MA from an Ivy League university—either directly results from his father’s influence (“If I hadn’t been a Henderson and my father’s son, they would have thrown me out”) or constitutes a meek attempt to find approval in his father’s eyes (“When it came time to marry I tried to please him and chose a girl of our own social class”; 4). His achievements, and even the people in his life, are mere commodities bought with daddy’s fortune. Unhappy with his marriage, Henderson finally fled this arrangement, like a true Bellovian character, by joining the army and heading for Europe.<sup>10</sup> When he returned from the war, he got a divorce, but not before cheating on his wife with Lily, his later wife. Caught cheating, Henderson remains utterly “indifferent” (11). Later, even Lily is treated at best “like a stranger [...] merely my wife” (6); at worst, she becomes the object of deliberate cruelty (getting constantly reminded of her father’s suicide). Meanwhile, Henderson, drunk most of the time, spends his days inanely shooting a gun at bottles, or visiting churches (“which I was not too drunk to see”) in France and Belgium, clearly bound to “waste the rest of [his] life” amongst pigs (12). Lily’s company only makes him feel like a “captive,” and when she dares to mention love, he yells at her to “shut up” (16). Unwilling or unable to turn his millions to good use, he is the center of his small solipsistic universe: “my parents, my wives, my girls, my children, my farm, my animals, my habits, my money, my music lessons, my drunkenness, my prejudices, my brutality, my teeth, my face, my soul!” (3). As such, the beginning of the novel presents us with a middle-aged, cantankerous flop, a grown-up but still irresponsible Augie March who has traveled all over Europe, only to get caught and bogged down at the age of

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<sup>10</sup> Augie March and Joseph in *Dangling Man* join the army for similar escapist motives.

fifty-five in the dung of his own pigs. Where *Henderson* begins, Bellow's previous novels would have ended.

Henderson, however, like Augie, sets out on a quest for a new pertinence, "dying of misery and boredom" (87), bent on altering his dead-end "condition" (3). Yet unlike Augie, whose trek across America was really occasioned by other people's plans,<sup>11</sup> Henderson is driven by an authentic—and selfish—desire for change; driven by an incessant voice that says "*I want, I want, I want, oh, I want*" (12, emphasis in original).<sup>12</sup> What he wants is finally to accomplish something by himself, without daddy's assistance. As such, Henderson's existentialist search for a new value is occasioned by a "despair" about the given (25). This despair urges the protagonist to undertake a spiritual quest, here—as in *Augie March*—translated in spatial terms. As Ellen Pifer points out: "Even when Bellow's characters light out, like Henderson, for new and exotic territory, their adventure takes the form of a journey into the interior—not so much the heart of a continent as the inmost recesses of the self" (27). He decides to leave for Africa after a mental breakdown, when he feels the bottom drop out from his life: "there comes a day, there always comes a day of tears and madness" (24). His "actual day of tears and madness" (38) takes place when he is confronted with the corpse of his elderly neighbor, a confrontation that—like Joseph's confrontation with the dead stranger in *Dangling Man*—brings home Henderson's own mortality: "You, too, will die of this pestilence. Death will annihilate you and nothing will remain, and there will be nothing left but junk. Because nothing will have been and so nothing will be left" (40). Shortly before, he had recalled a strange event in an aquarium, where he had experienced, upon staring in the eyes of an octopus, "a cosmic coldness in which I felt I was dying. [...] This is my last day. Death is giving me notice"

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<sup>11</sup> The Clem Tambow character is correct in assessing Augie's so-called actions as merely "pissing against the wind" (501).

<sup>12</sup> See Hassan 1961: "Henderson, unlike Augie, gives the impression of creating the very destiny he seeks" (319).

(19). The confrontation with this cosmic coldness, this “absolute Inhuman” (Clayton 173) parallels Roquentin’s brush with the chestnut’s *en-soi* in Sartre’s *La nausée* (*Nausea*), leaving the protagonist equally in a state of Angst and superfluity (the feeling of being *de trop*). As in so many existentialist texts<sup>13</sup>, the awareness of one’s own mortality leads to an awakening—Henderson literally wants to “burst the spirit’s sleep” (77)—and to a desire to make one’s brief existence meaningful. Suddenly confronted with the futility of the life he has led so far, he determines to “get out,” to find “a remedy for my situation” (40-41).

To this end, he follows an Albert Camus-like adventurer, Charlie Albert,<sup>14</sup> to Africa, but because his inner voice does not relent in Albert’s company, Henderson soon finds himself penetrating the heart of Africa accompanied only by a local interpreter. The object of Henderson’s “quest” (65) is hinted at as soon as Henderson enters the jungle: “I was still not ready for society. Society is what beats me. Alone I can be pretty good, but let me go among people and there’s the devil to pay” (49). His quest for a human community—an objective Henderson shares with all of Bellow’s protagonists—takes him to two African tribes, the Arnewi of queen Willatale and the Wariri of King Dahfu. His first contact with the Arnewi already betokens Henderson’s self-centeredness: prompted by his egocentrism, he beats the local champion in a wrestling match, knowing full-well that he has no cause to humiliate this Prince in front of his fellow tribesmen. In the past, Henderson would not even lose a game of checkers from his frustrated children, “even while their lips trembled with disappointment” (69).

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<sup>13</sup> See Sartre’s *Le mur* (*The Wall*), *La nausée* (*Nausea*), *Huis clos* (*No Exit*), *Morts sans sépulture* (*The Victors*), *Les jeux sont faits* (*The Chips are Down*), and Camus’s *La peste* (*The Plague*) and *Les justes* (*The Just Assassins*).

<sup>14</sup> This name-play on Albert Camus is repeated in *The Dean’s December’s* protagonist, Albert Corde.

These Arnewi are shiny, happy, peaceful people, arguably because, “bovine as their cattle” (Newman 78), they fail to address their problems. Queen Willatale is the striking emblem of this attitude. Because frogs have contaminated their water supply, the Arnewi are forbidden—by some religious or social strictures—to proffer the water to their emaciated, dying cattle. Unable or unwilling to tackle this urgent problem, Queen Willatale just indulges in ideal constructions of perfect happiness, inauthentically closing her eyes—one of which is blind anyway—to the ambient reality. Henderson envies this talent for self-delusion:

We can't allow ourselves to lie down and not do our share and imitate the greater entity. You see, this is our attitude. But now look at Willatale, the Bittah woman; she had given up such notions, there was no anxious care in her, and she was sustained. Why, nothing bad happened! On the contrary, it all *seemed* good! Look how happy she was, grinning with her flat nose and gap teeth, the mother-of-pearl eye and the good eye, and look at her white head. It comforted me just to see her, and I felt that I might learn to be sustained too if I followed her example. (79; my emphasis)

Willatale seems to represent the danger of Augie's axial lines taken to the extreme: all striving has indeed stopped, but the result is not a vigorous authenticity, but a purblind jelly. Later, Henderson will recall that he left his home, or “crash[ed] out of prison” as he calls it, precisely because he did not have “the mental constitution to live inside the nutshell and think myself the king of infinite space” (191)—a fine description of Queen Willatale's mindset.<sup>15</sup> Ironically, Henderson is convinced that this fat, self-delusional

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<sup>15</sup> In an earlier version of the novel, Henderson leaves the Arnewi precisely because of their inability to face reality: “You have to know the world” (Fuchs 106).

lady will be able to reveal who he is and what he *wants* from life; in short, he literally wills-a-tale from Willatale. Convinced that “everything depends on the values—the values” (87), Henderson wants to pose Willatale the central question of Bellow’s oeuvre: “So, in short, what’s the best way to live” (81).<sup>16</sup> Instead of determining his own values, he thus hopes to receive a conclusive answer from Willatale.<sup>17</sup> Clearly, Henderson believes in the kind of fairy tales where the wizened old woman reveals the Truth. Hence his rather childish plea: “tell me, tell me, Queen Willatale. I want the truth” (82). Previous experiences should have taught him, however, that truth does not derive from a fat lady; “truth come[s] in blows” (23). When Willatale hints at Henderson’s immaturity (“world is strange to a child. You not a child, sir?”), Henderson, bent on seeing her as an oracle, is elated and thinks her words “wonderful”: “True, all too true. I have never been at home in life. All my decay has taken place upon a child” (84). Needless to say, none of this was ever uttered or implied by Willatale; Henderson only provides an erratic—say, ridiculous—interpretation of her words.

This becomes even more extreme when Willatale finally grunts the pretty trite “Grun-tu-molani,” which gets translated as “Man want to live” (85). Henderson is ecstatic and is convinced that he has finally found the answer to his internal voice: “Yes, yes, yes! Molani. Me molani. She sees that? God will reward her, tell her, for saying it to me. I’ll reward her myself” (85). Willatale was just throwing the dog an obvious bone for his insistent plea to tell him what he wants, but Henderson thinks he has seen the light.<sup>18</sup> Ironically, having discovered that people want to live,

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<sup>16</sup> See Joseph’s “How should a good man live; what ought he to do?” in *Dangling Man* (39).

<sup>17</sup> Henderson blames his son, Edward, for the stupidity he himself indulges in with Willatale: “Edward wanted me to tell him what he should live for and this is what was wrong” (124).

<sup>18</sup> Strangely enough, most critics have taken Henderson’s words at face value and have gone along with his assessment of Willatale as an oracle (see e.g. Hassan 319; Opdahl 127-28; Clayton 173-77; Holm 100; Von Renate 34; Harap 109; Pifer 100).

Henderson takes away the Arnewi's only means for survival in the desert by blowing up their cistern in an attempt to get rid of the frogs. Though his intentions were laudable, Henderson is yet another Bellovian character to be faced with the absurdity of an existentialist universe. Like Pablo Ibieta after his brush with the absurd in Sartre's story "Le mur," Henderson comforts himself that "when all is said and done I had only good intentions" (115). Good intentions, however, only go so far, and Henderson is forced to leave the Arnewi community in shame. The incident is extremely relevant, though, as Henderson reveals for the first time an awareness of his own ultimate pertinence. "As soon as I come amongst people I screw something up—I goof," he complains (111). Cast from the Arnewi community, he whines "Why for once, just once!, couldn't I get my heart's desire" (111). Hence, he reveals, in a phrase strikingly similar to the concluding words of *Seize the Day*, that the ultimate goal of his quest lies in the heart's ultimate need—shared by all of Bellow's protagonists—for human community. As he told his son, Edward: "For Christ's sake, we should commune with people" (125).

From the peaceful, passive tribe of the Arnewi, Henderson moves to the Wariri, "tough and worldly savages" (115). He immediately envies their King, Dahfu, for being "in the bosom of your people" (157). Whereas Henderson—"employing the existentialist terminology of Sartre" (Atlas 273)—sees himself as "taken up with *becoming*" (160), other people are satisfied just with *being*—being in touch with the axial lines, one might add. Henderson is convinced that Willatale and Dahfu are such admirable Be-ers, but in both cases he is mistaken: Willatale's *being* is really self-delusion, and Dahfu is actually a *becomer*, as much as Henderson himself. For though he seems completely at ease as a king amongst his people, Dahfu is really at an intermediate stage: he will only be fully acknowledged as the king

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Only Judie Newman (78-79) also notices the more negative characteristics of Willatale.

if he manages to capture the lion that is believed to harbor his father's spirit. Thus, while Henderson confesses that "Becoming was beginning to come out of my ears" (160), Dahfu is still obsessed with it. His attempts to imitate the behavior of a lion—meanwhile forcing Henderson into some Reichian therapy—do suggest, however, that he too envies those who can simply *be*, for a lion "does not take issue with the inherent. Is one hundred per cent within the given" (263). In short, what Dahfu and Willatale really aspire to, is the being of the in-itself, of the inhuman, unconscious given, rather than a fully conscious for-itself interacting with reality.<sup>19</sup>

Ada Aharoni calls Dahfu "the existentialist African King" (44); for Von Renate, he reminds one "of J.-P. Sartre's existentialist protagonists" (35). Rather, Dahfu seems an emblem of existentialism taken to the absurd,<sup>20</sup> the way Willatale represents an overly extreme version of Augie's axial lines. But the fool and the phony in Bellow's fiction (think of Dr. Tamkin in *Seize the Day*) are usually "somewhere near the truth" (qtd. in Simmons 162). Dahfu, who was a student in Paris, does make Henderson understand some major existentialist insights about *facticité* and the means to transcend it:

The world of facts is real, all right, and not to be altered. The physical is all there, and it belongs to science. But then there is the noumenal department, and there we create and create and create. [...] I might have told him a lot, right then and there. What? Well, for instance, that chaos doesn't run the whole show. That this is not a sick and hasty ride, helpless, through

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<sup>19</sup> In an article that discusses *Henderson the Rain King* from a perspective similar to my own, Astrid Holm interestingly interprets the Arnewi and the Wariri tribes as representations of respectively masochistic and sadistic attitudes towards the Other (Holm 100).

<sup>20</sup>For John Clayton, Dahfu—"daffy"—is a mere "crackpot" (168).

a dream into oblivion. No sir! It can be arrested by a thing or two. By art, for instance. (167, 175)

The conclusion bears a striking parallel to Sartre's conclusion in *La nausée*, when Roquentin discovers art as a remedy for his feelings of nausea. But Dahfu seems to lose it when he expounds his theory about the transformation of human material. Whereas Sartre and Camus argue that human beings are what they turn themselves into by means of their actions, Dahfu takes this to the extreme and postulates that people create even their own physical appearance; everything originates in the brain, even a pimple or a fat nose: "as man is the prince of organisms he is the master of adaptations. He is the artist of suggestions. He himself is his principal work of art, in the body, working in the flesh [...] What Homo sapiens imagines, he may slowly convert himself to" (237, 271). As a result, man is "responsible" (238) for his full being, inside and out. Whereas Willatale believes one cannot change a single aspect of reality (except in one's mind), Dahfu is convinced that, through the mind, one can change all of reality. While Dahfu is clearly taking these existentialist tenets too far, their fundamental truth still stands.<sup>21</sup> Hence, he is quick to identify Henderson as "an avoider" (260), as a man who has always clung to bad faith when faced with existential Angst:

Fear is a ruler of mankind. It has the biggest dominion of all. [...] I believe when the fear has subsided you will be capable of admiring her beauty. I think that part of the beauty emotion does result from an overcoming of fear. When the fear yields, a beauty is disclosed in its place. This is also said of perfect love if I recollect, and it means that ego-emphasis is removed. (259)

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<sup>21</sup> Helen Weinberg notes that Dahfu's theory "shares a great deal with all current existentialist psychology" (96).

Whereas the same fear has been going round for thousands of generations, “any good man will try to break the cycle” (297). This is the way, then, how a good man should live. Thus Dahfu points Henderson the way to beauty and love, by overcoming one’s fear of living and abandoning one’s egocentricity. He urges him to “be noble” and to “form a new habit” (261-62).

When he arrived at the Wariri village, Henderson, “extremely contracted and self-recoiled” (264), clearly had not learned much from his encounter with the Arnewi. He takes part in a rain ceremony, which involves the displacement of a heavy goddess-statue, Mummah. He moves the statue and becomes the tribe’s rain king. When Henderson lifts Mummah (literally lifting the Wariri’s burden), “all the flies fled with a tearing noise into the heat” (192), like in Sartre’s play *Les Mouches* (*The Flies*), when Orestes lifts the burden of the people of Argos. Immediately, the rain comes pouring down.<sup>22</sup> However, even this seemingly altruistic action—much like his attack on the frogs—is dictated by purely solipsistic motives: “I still couldn’t pass up this opportunity to *do*, and to distinguish myself” (186). Earlier, he had humiliated the local wrestling champ; now he is glad that the local hero is unable to move Mummah: “I was glad that Turombo was so meek. I thought he’s better be meek. [...] She was mine! [...] I rejoiced at the guy’s failure” (186). Obviously, Henderson was still driven at that point by the voice that said *I want*. But after another confrontation with death—King Dahfu’s (mangled by the lion he was trying to catch)—Henderson experiences a genuine epiphany: “I had a voice that said, I want! *I want? I?* It should have told me *she* wants, *he* wants, *they* want. And moreover, it’s love that makes reality reality. The opposite makes the opposite” (286). This insight is taken directly from Camus’s *La peste*, where father Paneloux,

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<sup>22</sup> Henderson’s role as rain king is hinted at early in the novel: when he cheats on his first wife with Lily—getting as close to genuine community as he had ever been up to that point—he expresses his love for Lily, and his outcry is followed by “a burst of rain on the streets, trees, roofs, screens” (10).

shortly before his death, embraced the community by a similar shift of pronouns: he “no longer said ‘you’ but ‘we’” (202). Through his encounter with the two extreme demeanors of Willatale and Dahfu, Henderson is finally “willing to overcome my old self” and “to adopt some new standard”—to live for his newfound pertinence, that is (297). He has reached a stage “where I need human voices and intelligence. That’s all that’s left. Kindness and love” (316). “The personal African discovery,” Helen Weinberg points out, “is to be used toward some sense of communal value in America as in Africa” (89).

After its king’s death, the corrupt Wariri regime wants Henderson, as rain king, to take Dahfu’s place, but Henderson, who is “the inspirational, and not the systemic, type” (244), flees from the system that is about to absorb him. On his way back, he remembers his wife’s words that “one should live for this and not for that; not evil but good, not death but life” (329). His wife, in other words, had told him years earlier precisely that which he accepted from Willatale as visionary words, but which he had discarded from his wife as “her preaching” (329). But the altered Henderson is now “impatient to see my wife [...] now that the sleep is burst” (335). Once, he had heard a rumor that only two things can burst the spirit’s sleep: suffering and love. Henderson, convinced that “nobody in the world could suffer quite like me” (304) has had his share of the first, and he is fully prepared for the second. That is why, after bringing along a lion cub, he also takes care of a Persian orphan he meets on the plane home. While he had once forbidden his daughter to adopt a foundling, Henderson now has a lion cub and an orphan under his care, and he is registered in medical school. One could argue that he has attained at least the humble beginnings of Augie’s pipe dream of a foster home. By leaving for Africa, Henderson has paradoxically reached home, to cherish those values that have been waiting for him there all along (his daughter’s care for the weak, and his wife’s advice about the *grun-tu-molani*). The novel therefore suggests “not the endless disponibility of Augie’s life but a new idea of responsibility,

namely, that man can never commit himself too late” (Hassan 320). Henderson has achieved what Zima calls “the construction of a new sense and a new subjectivity” (88; my translation). Symbolically, Henderson’s plane stops for a refuel at Newfoundland, which is really his old country rediscovered. For this future doctor, holding the Persian orphan feels “like medicine applied,” and as daylight hits the white plains, he is “running—leaping, leaping, pounding, and tingling over the pure white lining of the gray Arctic silence” (341), fully liberated, finally in the bosom of his people.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> It is fairly remarkable that the first Bellovian character to reach the longed-for community is Henderson, also Bellow’s first Gentile protagonist. This makes sense, however, knowing that in the 1950s, the Bellow circle still considered the Jew—in Isaac Rosenfeld’s words—“a specialist in alienation” (Rosenfeld 69). Hence, it would have been problematic in those days to see an expert in alienation become part of a community.

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# A Quarrel between Friends: Towards the Union of Artist and Philosopher

*Anne Xu*

*Sartre and Camus: A Historic Confrontation. Edited and Translated by David A. Sprintzen and Adrian van den Hoven. New York: Humanity Books. 299pp.*

*Camus & Sartre: The Story of a Friendship and the Quarrel that Ended It. By Ronald Aronson. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press. 291pp.*

But if the revolution is the only positive value, it has a right to claim everything—even the denunciation and therefore the sacrifice of the friend. Henceforth, violence will be directed against one and all, in the service of an abstract idea. ...[In the end,] the revolution, in itself, was more important than the people it wanted to save, and that friendship, which until then had transformed defeats into the semblance of victories, must be sacrificed and postponed until the still invisible day of victory.  
--Camus, The Rebel, 161

Despite Albert Camus' persistent dissociation from, even denunciation of, the existentialists, it is impossible to talk about existentialism without considering Camus' work, especially in relation to his friend and later nemesis Jean-Paul Sartre. Both, by the end of 1930's and on their own, had discovered the absurd and used it as the basis of their philosophies, and had sympathized with each other's insight and talent before they came together in 1943. After the war, however, the two found themselves departing from each other politically, philosophically, and in their attitude towards literature, and felt the inevitable break of the thread that had initially brought them together. As Camus became the voice that led the criticism of the authoritarianism and violence of Stalinist Communism, Sartre saw Communism as the only weapon to break

through the decadence of the western world. As Camus refutes efficacy, refuses to forsake the present in the name of an uncertain future, and insists on the necessity of morality in all actions, Sartre nods his consent to the use of violence as a means to a beautiful end, when all mankind would enjoy freedom, justice, and equality. This confrontation took a visible form with the publication of Camus' philosophical essay *The Rebel, An Essay on Man in Revolt*, in 1951. In April 1952, Francis Jeanson published a scathing review of the book in the leading intellectual journal *Les Temps Moderne*, which was under the directorship of Sartre. Outraged and scandalized, Camus writes a self-righteous response, addressed, however, to the director Sartre, who in turn composes a brutally sarcastic and damaging letter to not only end the exchange of letters, but also their then ten-year-old friendship.

The debate, however, goes on and survives both of these great minds, even though history seems to have offered closure and, with the fall of the Soviet Union and the Berlin Wall, pronounced the victor. As ridiculous as it would have been to imagine a merge between Communism and Capitalism during the Cold War, today's world plays witness to Communist countries benefiting from market economy, a capitalist trait, and capitalism's evils ameliorated by democratization. The two polar opposites have unwillingly but conspiratorially come together, as one side's deficiencies could only find remedies in the other. Likewise, the confrontation between Camus and Sartre was never a clear case of either/or, but rather a dynamic whole, with each one complementing as well as challenging the other. Although the debate generates from different stands on the issues raised in *The Rebel*, it comes to resemble a perfect image of "man in revolt," as defined by Camus in the book. Therefore, it is particularly interesting when two recently published books, *Sartre and Camus: A Historic Confrontation*, and *Camus & Sartre: The Story of A Friendship and the Quarrel that Ended It*, have both chosen to focus on this complex event. In today's world, are there still debates like this that could symbolize a communal, national, or

even global, rebellious spirit that refuses to conform, escape, or simply be complacent? If not, how can we reactivate that spirit without endangering or postponing existing friendships, as was Camus' worry that had tragically turned into reality?

The first book, *Sartre and Camus*, is the result of the cooperation between several scholars, headed by David A. Sprintzen, whose aim is to introduce for the first time in English the whole series of letters involved in the debate (which forms the majority of the book), with suitable introduction of the background and comments from contemporary critics. Starting with a preface penned by himself, Sprintzen briefly sketches the political outline at the time and the two writers' basic philosophy and political agenda. A Camus scholar himself, Sprintzen delineates Camus' thoughts succinctly but comprehensively, tracing the development from an early insistence on an absurd world without redemption, to a revolt that refuses to deal with anything but this world and this life, and finally to the ultimate proclamation that rebellion without morality defeats the purpose of rebellion by betraying human dignity and respect. A much shorter summary of Sartre's basic terms such as the notion of the free individual and "bad faith," although helpful to understanding his philosophical beliefs, does not explain Sartre's 1950 alliance with the Communist party, or how these beliefs could have led to a fundamental break with Camus. A more detailed introduction, however, addresses these key issues. After the Second World War was over, the editors observe, with the use of atomic bombs, the discovery of Nazi concentration camps and Soviet Gulags, and with the implementation of the Marshall Plan, it was imperative for intellectual to choose sides on either side of the Iron Curtain. As a result, being the leading intellectuals of the postwar France, Sartre "was opting for ethical pragmatism," while Camus, "more radically, [was championing] the refusal of all violence, no matter what its origins and premises."<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Annie Cohen-Solal, *Sartre: A Life*, P333. Quoted in *Sartre and Camus*, P59.

The details of the confrontation are then laid out in the form of the four letters that were directly involved in the controversy, along with Camus' defense of his book, written at around the same time but never published until after his untimely death. The series of exchange begins with a critical review by Francis Jeanson on Camus' book *The Rebel*, followed by Camus' response, addressed to Sartre instead of his reviewer, to be concluded by a response from Sartre, as well as one from Jeanson. The central issue that had provoked the initial attack from the Sartrean camp, with Jeanson voicing its indignation, lies in Camus' condemnation of the inhumanity of the Soviet labor camps, whose crimes, according to the Communists and some Marxists alike, would all be forgiven with the final triumph of Communism. Quoting Lenin, Camus criticizes the unscrupulousness of the principle that "one must be prepared for every sacrifice, to use if necessary every stratagem, ruse, illegal method, to be determined to conceal the truth, for the sole purpose...of accomplishing, despite everything, the Communist task."<sup>2</sup> Denouncing Hegel's denunciation of transcendence and the crowning of history as the justification of everything, Camus warns that the rule of power not only does not guarantee a free and just future for everyone,<sup>3</sup> but corrupts the revolution into a power struggle. Hence, "every revolutionary ends by becoming either an oppressor or a heretic. In the purely historical universe that they have chosen, rebellion and revolution end in the same dilemma: either police rule or insanity."<sup>4</sup>

Sartre's refutation, caustic and brilliant in the same breath, is generally viewed as his victory speech over Camus' moral idealism. Facing the accusation that as a Marxist, he had been guilty of keeping silence about the Soviet camps, Sartre calmly offers Camus the numbers of the editorials he had devoted to the issue, and derisively invites Camus, since the latter deserves so

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<sup>2</sup> Camus, *The Rebel*, 226.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid, 231: "the end of this provisional condition cannot be foreseen and that, what is more, no one has ever presumed to promise that there will be an end."

<sup>4</sup> Ibid, 249.

much more the epithet of anti-communist, to consider the question why the Communists hates Sartre and not him.<sup>5</sup> Cynicism aside, however, Sartre seems to genuinely regret a quietism he detects in Camus “that refuses to make a distinction between the masters.”<sup>6</sup> For Sartre, despite the atrocities of the labor camps, the Communist party still, in the long run, speaks for the interests of the truly oppressed, whereas capitalism is only a synonym for eternal exploitation and endless, mindless oppression. Having experienced the miserable failure of the “third way” right after the war, Sartre had become a disillusioned revolutionary who believes that “our freedom today is nothing but the *free choice to fight in order to become free.*”<sup>7</sup> What is more, Sartre argues, in addressing the letter to him instead of Jeanson, Camus had violated the first principle he claims to support, which is to treat every human being as a human being. “Isn’t your real aim to transform your critic into an *object*, a dead man? You speak *of him* as though he were a soup tureen or a mandolin, but never *to him*. This means that you have placed him beyond the human realm.”<sup>8</sup> In both cases, whether it is Camus asserting his morality principle against violence and totalitarianism, or Sartre ridiculing a political naivety that could jeopardize the freedom of a just future, it is not difficult to sense the bitterness of an insulted vanity, personal and not necessarily political, which is indicative of the fact that to take a political stance is, while committing to the party line, invariably compromising to one’s personal principles. In the end, if one lets

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<sup>5</sup> Sprintzen, 142.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid, 144.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid, 146. The “third way” was an attempt by the French intellectuals in 1948 to break away from the two camps of the Cold War, and initiate a “new neutralist, socialist movement, the Rassemblement Democratique Revolutionnaire (RDR). Its function was to oppose both blocs and the pressure for war while carving out space for an independent and genuinely socialist France. Made up primarily of ex-Communists, former members of the left wing of the SFIO, Trotskyists, Christian leftists, and other independent socialists, the RDR grew rapidly, flourished briefly, and then split apart, overwhelmed by the pressures of the Cold War.” See Aronson, 103.

<sup>8</sup> Sprintzen, 137.

Sartre have the last word, then an engaged writer must to some degrees sacrifice his personal integrity, while a free-floating writer must renounce his scruples and take sides before he can earn the right to criticize.

*Sartre and Camus* is concluded by two essays written by contemporary critics and interestingly enough, one is a Sartre scholar, while the other is devoted to Camus' works. Even in today's world, when so much more has transpired and history seems to have put a definitive end to the controversy, one still witnesses the reluctance of either side to give in. The fuss of trying to be objective terminates itself when any statement is made at all. It is therefore illuminating to spend a reflective moment on the title of the book, which, like the majority of the commentary at the time of the debate, puts Sartre in front of Camus in quiescence to the former's superiority in the matter. In contrast, however, Ronald Aronson's book is self-consciously titled *Camus & Sartre*, and because of this deliberate choice the author already acknowledges his "biases" despite all intentions to be impartial. Divided into ten chapters that follow a chronological order, Aronson puts together beautifully a human drama that not only stages the friendship, the buildup of the controversy and the eruption of tension, but also the aftermaths of the tragic confrontation. The two great thinkers and writers come to life not only through their respective brilliance in creativity and philosophy, but also through their human flaws: tempers, vanity, passions, jealousy, even disloyalty.

Using primarily Camus' and Sartre's own writings published throughout their respective career (from the time when they began to comment on each other's writings in 1938, to Camus' last portrayal of Sartre in *The Fall*, published in 1956). Through his insightful analyses of Camus' early works such as *The Myth of Sisyphus* and *The Stranger*, and Sartre's writing of *Nausea* and *The Wall*, Aronson makes it clear that the friendship between these two kindred spirits was by no means incidental or trivial, since both had cherished the themes of "absurdity, a gritty humanism, the necessity of struggle, willingness to face extreme situations, refusal

of any escapism, rejection of heroic gestures, rejection of any scheme of understanding that did not center on human experience and action.”<sup>9</sup> During the resistance years, Aronson comments on Camus representative work *The Plague* which, when viewed side by side with Sartre’s *The Flies*, exposes the same absurdity of the human situation with one noticeable difference. While the heroes of *The Plague* offer a persistent yet rather resigned resistance, Orestes in *The Flies* takes the burden and responsibility of rebellion all on his own shoulders—he is Sartre’s first step towards commitment.<sup>10</sup> The two have already begun to drift apart in their attitudes towards resistance, which culminated, shortly before the outbreak over *The Rebel*, in *The Just Assassin* and *The Devil and the Good Lord*. While Camus’ protagonist insists on a moral boundary in terrorism, Sartre’s embraces revolutionary violence wholeheartedly. Ironically, Camus, who objects to being labeled as an existentialist, regards the individual as his ultimate starting point, while the existentialist Sartre, in this period at least, had chosen to place history over the individual.

In this perhaps minor clash between their personal philosophy and forced choice of politics, it becomes clear that even the “committed” Camus and Sartre were never wholly this or that, but always held nuanced opinions towards both Capitalism and Communism. In his analysis of their political career, therefore, Aronson takes care to point out the apparent and subtle contradictions in their action and writings, which does not detract from their personal integrity, but only adds to their courageousness and authenticity in making a choice irrespective of potentially disastrous consequences, politically, intellectually, and socially. If it is a political necessity to take sides, it is a more individual choice in deciding *which* side; and if one does not always make the “right” choice, the gesture itself, when informed, attests to a Sisyphian courage that dares to reinsert itself in the midst of a

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<sup>9</sup> Aronson, 55.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid*, 31.

humongous and endless struggle for balance. The early Sartre, in his 1943 *Being and Nothingness*, had already made his famous declaration that man is a useless passion—that the individual is condemned to be free yet plagued by bad faith to conform and behave. Yet in 1951, it was Camus who decried the clean conscience with which one made choices. A true rebel, Camus avers, “can never find peace. He knows what is good and, despite himself, does evil. The value that supports him is never given to him once and for all; he must fight to uphold it, unceasingly.”<sup>11</sup> Both knew and accepted the responsibilities that come with freedom; both worked to obtain it. But freedom, loyal to no one but itself, betrayed these friends when they could not agree on a price for it.

The conclusion, if any can be drawn at all from this controversy, is then somewhat ironic. It is simply impossible for outsiders (even from today’s “impartial” audience) to be either purely objective, or judge which side is right or wrong. Both approaches miss the point, since the action of taking sides is not the final arbiter of justice, and both Camus and Sartre, as Aronson points out, were “in bad faith about what turned out to be his key political theme, violence.”<sup>12</sup> While Sartre neglected the destructive effects of violence in support of its revolutionary side, Camus fails to denounce violence where the fate of his native Algeria is concerned. Moreover, on the issue of morality, while Camus’ moral humanism is dismissed as political naivety, Sartre would also acknowledge, later in his life, that morals must be upheld

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<sup>11</sup> Camus, 285. See also Camus’ “In Defense of *The Rebel*,” included in *Sartre and Camus*. Associating revolt with the individual and revolution with the mass, Camus refuses to take camp with either capitalist individualist or Communist revolutionary. “revolt without revolution ends logically in a delirium of destruction and that the rebel, if he does not rebel on behalf of everyone, ends up by reaching an extremity of solitude where everything seems permitted to him. Inversely...revolution deprived of the incessant control of the spirit of revolt, ends by falling into a nihilism of efficacy, resulting in terror.” 210.

<sup>12</sup> Aronson, 224.

unconditionally, and that the end does not justify the means.<sup>13</sup> Taking sides is rather a first step towards taking action. To take sides means a declaration of war against that which is solely selfish in oneself and authoritarian in the outside world, or in Camus' terms, to recognize that "freedom has its limits everywhere that a human being is to be found."<sup>14</sup> In this sense, the struggle between Camus and Sartre is an authentic portrait of the true rebel, each keeping a jealous but sharp eye over the faults of the other. Critical of themselves, they are even more so of each other on the issue of morality and violence, the present and the future, the individual and history. These polar opposites, however, cannot be mentioned without reference to each other. Hence, the confrontation itself comes to resemble what Camus views as an ideal artwork, when reality and reverie (Sartre's political realism and Camus' moral idealism) are engaged in a dialogue,<sup>15</sup> and when the artist Camus and the philosopher Sartre, each dominating in their own field of expertise, offer the yin and yang of the Tai-ji circle that forever resist and attract each other, and whose delicate balance is the secret to true happiness. By bringing back the debate that inspired and still inspire lively discussions, the authors of these books have not only shown the individual merits of these thinkers on their own and in relation to each other, but also grasped the gist of such debates, namely, that the purpose of the struggle is not for it to end, but for it to

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<sup>13</sup> In a 1973 discussion, Sartre made the confession that at the beginning of his engagement period, he had begun to "give way to the political realism of... Communists: all right, you do it because it works, and you check it out, you evaluate it according to its efficacy rather than some vague notions having to do with morality, which would only slow things down. But... that whole idea didn't sit too well with me, it upset me no end, despite the fact that—ignoring my own better judgment—I carried it through and finally arrived at a pure realism: what's real is true, and what's true is real. And when I had reached that point, what it meant was that I had blocked out all ideas of morality." Ibid, 182-3.

<sup>14</sup> Camus, 284.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid, 264-5.

continue, wherein lies the only redemption of the absurdity that is the human condition.

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# Let God Die

*Robert S. Oventile*

Altizer, Thomas J.J. *Godhead and the Nothing*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2003.

In the United States, many individuals seem to have little trouble speaking loudly and confidently about theological matters, or at least about Christ, Satan, Good, Evil, and the Apocalypse. Soon after 9/11, prominent American televangelists assured their viewers that the attacks occurred because, upset with homosexuals, abortion, and the American Civil Liberties Union, the Christian God had lifted His shield from America, allowing the attackers to strike (Cox). In the days after the attacks, President George W. Bush rushed to speak in overtly theological and even apocalyptic terms. On September 12, 2001, speaking from the White House about the “War on Terror,” President Bush declared, “This will be a monumental struggle of good versus evil” (“Text”). Speaking two days later at the National Cathedral to mark a National Day of Prayer and Remembrance, President Bush spoke, as he put it, “before God,” “the Lord of life,” and asked “almighty God to watch over” the United States as it undertook its historical mission: “to answer these attacks and rid the world of evil” (“President’s Remarks”). President Bush thinks of good and evil dualistically, as if, after evil’s obliteration, good will stand alone.

Of course, in the United States, evangelical and political elites in no way monopolize speech about God. Millions upon millions of Americans speak of God daily and expect the End of Days to arrive soon, and perhaps the sooner the better, if the massive popularity of the apocalyptic *Left Behind* novels is any indication. Americans turned *The Passion*, a graphic film

dramatizing Christ's crucifixion, into a mega-blockbuster. When Christ resurrects in *The Passion*, he dons the stoic but stern, utterly resolute expression Clint Eastwood made famous. In no other "first-world" nation does the Christian God seem so alive and militant. Apocalypse? Bring it on!

Inhabiting the religion-soaked United States, one need neither believe nor disbelieve in the Christian God or in any deity whatsoever to welcome Thomas J.J. Altizer's *Godhead and the Nothing* with some relief. One need merely believe that, in the twenty-first century, speech about God should confront aporia, be virtually impossible to utter, and resist quasi-totalitarian politics. Altizer's complexly dialectical argument that Christian faith now occurs only in accepting God's death hardly bolsters the urge for an American theocracy. But this urge may not be straight forwardly Christian.

For Altizer, Gnosticism permeates contemporary discourse. A prevalent American religious sensibility engages in a Gnostic abjection of existence in the name of a glorious beyond where God and select humans will reunite in eternal life. This sensibility flees the nothingness God's death discloses. In fleeing nothingness, prevailing religious thought slips into thinking of death and life; sin and grace; and evil and good as dualistic opposites polarized between this world and the next. In this discourse, as the gateway to an eternal world, apocalypse separates death from life, sin from grace, and evil from good, once and for all.

In *Godhead and the Nothing*, Altizer challenges this dualism. Altizer agrees with myriad American religionists that they confront an "apocalyptic crisis [...] fully embodied in a postmodern world" (13). But Altizer thinks this crisis through to a culmination that dismantles the dualistic logic fueling the more frightening versions of American apocalyptic politics. For Altizer, death and life; sin and grace; and evil and good only happen unified in mutual contradiction, a dizzying *coincidentia*

*oppositorum*. God's death, deity's nothingness, brings this dialectic's apocalypse.

In dismantling dualism, *Godhead and the Nothing* attempts an implicit but significant political gesture: to depoliticize apocalypse. Rather than a crisis involving whether United States Middle East policy assists or hinders the Beast's global conspiracy, apocalypse becomes the trial of the Christian in his or her anguished singularity. While undermining reactionary political efforts to draw lines between the damned and the saved, Altizer opens even the religiously aphasic reader to apocalypse's existential actuality. A reader may be overtly indifferent to religion yet find God's death apocalyptic because Occidental tradition's dominant tendency pervasively cultivates the belief that a transcendent being anchors existence. For both the Christian and the non-Christian, when God dies, an actual nothingness remains. This nothingness signals the dissolution of the anchor keeping theological opposites dualistically separate. This anchorage's utter loss releases the apocalyptic *coincidentia oppositorum* of death and life; sin and grace; and evil and good.

Clinging to a Supreme Being, theology, Altizer argues, has been unable to think nothingness. *Godhead and the Nothing* explores the specific nothingness or Nihil that God's death implies. Altizer attempts to think nothingness beyond its orthodox definitions as a lack or mirage and to detail the theological stakes that saying Yes to the Nihil entails. The Nihil that God's death divulges is actual as distinct from a privation of good or an absence of being in evil that will disappear when God triumphs over Satan. Rather than crushing nothingness into oblivion, apocalypse brings the Nihil to fruition. In accepting the Nihil, the faith willing to embrace God's death traverses nihilism's contemporary apotheosis to enter "an ultimate and final joy" (158). This joy breaks out in the dialectical crossing of death and resurrection.

In texts published over four decades, Altizer repudiates "the Christian dogma of the resurrection," arguing that God's

incarnation in Christ culminated in an irreversible death on the cross (*Gospel*, 120).<sup>1</sup> News of this death took about two millennia to arrive, in part due to the Church's recasting of God and Christ in terms of "Greek ontology" ("Theology," 102). In proclaiming God's death, Nietzsche refers first to the demise of the God of Platonic-Christian metaphysics, a God whose placeless and timeless being masks the death of the only Christian: "in truth, there was only *one* Christian, and he *died* on the cross" (*Antichrist*, 612). The "'evangel' *died* on the cross," but, argues Nietzsche, Christendom rapidly morphed the evangel into a nihilistic "*dysangel*" that denigrates the earth in the name of an afterlife (*Antichrist*, 612).

For Altizer, only in confronting the omnipotent, omnipresent, omniscient God's death does one access Christ's death. So there are two dialectically inseparable aspects of the Christian God's death that seem two deaths of God. One is God's death as any Supreme Being's dissolution. In nineteenth-century Europe, argues Altizer, Nietzsche recorded the "disappearance" of any "absolute or transcendent ground" to prophesize nihilism's flowering in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries with "the collapse of any meaning or reality lying beyond the newly discovered radical immanence of modern man" (*Gospel*, 22). Nietzsche sums this death up: "What does nihilism mean? *That the highest values devalue themselves*" (*Will*, 9). Belief in the God of metaphysics becomes possible only by fleeing nothingness and so reinforcing nihilism's reactive aspect. If a Supreme Being lives, the death of Christ was temporary and virtual rather than permanent and actual. Withdrawing the ground for any resurrection into a timeless, placeless afterlife, the demise of the Supreme Being opens the

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<sup>1</sup> For a very informative collection of essays by leading scholars that queries Altizer's work from a number of contemporary perspectives, see Lissa McCullough and Brian Schroeder, eds., *Thinking Through the Death of God: A Critical Companion to Thomas J.J. Altizer* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2004).

door to Christ's crucifixion, to the incarnation as a kenotic event through which God, out of love, underwent death as an irreparably mortal human existent. Access to Christ's redemptive death only comes through the death of metaphysics' God. Only in fully realizing this God's death does one join Christ in mortality. Being with Christ becomes an experience of radical finitude instead of survival into an unending afterlife.

In America, Christian survivalists hoard weapons, food, and water to ride out the hellish end times if the rapture does not first remove them instantaneously from earth. Again, for Altizer, such believers may actually be Gnostics. Altizer suggests that, in 2004, to believe in an eternal, all-powerful being living beyond the cosmos courts a neo-Gnosticism ready to welcome earthly life's annihilation as "transcendence." A dialectical razor's edge divides such a nihilistic consummation from embracing death with Christ to overcome nihilism. For Christians and non-Christians who abhor reactionary political appropriations of apocalypse, *Godhead and the Nothing* implicitly makes this wager: in thinking about apocalypse, one can take the full measure of that event without reinforcing obscurantist, anti-democratic discourse.

Christian faith, argues Altizer, now abides only as the faith that Christ died and that redemption occurs in joyfully accompanying Christ into mortality. *Godhead and the Nothing* urges readers to say "Yes" to "the Nihil," to respond affirmatively when "absolute death [...] evokes the deepest call": "if an opening to that death is an opening to the finality of death itself, that finality is an absolutely liberating finality, and it alone can truly be named as resurrection" (157). Only the "absolute death" that "absolute crucifixion" is "make[s] possible resurrection," so that "death is finally resurrection" (157). One can welcome death, undergo resurrection, and speak theologically, only in letting God die.

Let God die. In describing Altizer's theological statement, the title of this review unavoidably enacts that statement's

performative force. Altizer elaborates a theological description of the conditions, logic, and consequences of God's death, but Altizer also wants to speak so as to let that death actually, finally take place. God's death, argues Altizer, can best be understood as an "event" (Hamilton and Altizer x). Can speaking about God's death solicit that event's realization? *Godhead and the Nothing* refers to the very event it strives to let happen. Altizer's enunciation of God's death would both describe and perform that demise's conditions to let God die. Early critics referred to the death of God theologians, and specifically Altizer, as would-be "God-Killers" (Wright 33). Surely letting God die differs from attempting His murder. Perhaps in Altizer's work one ponders an assisted suicide rather than a murder. But if, as Altizer insists, God's death only happens by way of that event's theological enunciation, the boundary between killing God and letting God die wavers. As Altizer notes, "the proclamation of the death of God" is, "more deeply, the *willing* of the death of God" ("Theology," 98). In being willing to say Yes to God's death, one wills that death. That willing and the event it wills happen only through speech, the felicitous performative language of theology.

Since Altizer's first writings on God's death, Altizer has been adamant that any theology cannot separate its referent from its language. Altizer rejects the assumption that "theological language is the secondary expression of a prior and given faith, that language itself is subordinate to and the mere passive receptacle of an eternal meaning, and that faith transcends the actuality and the arena of its modes of expression" ("Significance," 242). If theological language were "secondary," the dispensable vehicle of an "eternal meaning," then we could separate theological language from the theologian's existential situation. In such a case, the existential situation would be irrelevant and even unthinkable. In questioning the representational notion of language (language merely presents again, re-presents, a prior presence uncontaminated by

language), Altizer questions the assumption that theology can be an a-temporal, a-historical activity somehow doable apart from “*Existenz*” (“Theology,” 95). Altizer understands theological language and *Existenz* to imbricate each other. In *Godhead in the Nothing*, Altizer again poses his perpetual and anguished question: Can theology speak today? Theological language speaks only existentially, yet existence sounds only in theological language. Disengaged from existence, theology fails to speak and existence becomes an unheard-of condition. In acceding fully to the existential situation, one overcomes “the impediments to the very act of speech” (“Significance,” 243). Theology happens as a speech act pronounceable only existentially, yet the existential situation only comes fully about through theological language’s performative force.

Altizer concentrates the performative aspect of *Godhead and the Nothing* in the word “Yes.” The willing of God’s death happens exclusively through the enunciation of “Yes.” Since his early writings, Altizer has been describing a theology of the word “Yes” in which “Yes-saying” happens in a *coincidentia oppositorum* with “No-saying.” *Godhead and the Nothing* elaborates the reversal of theology’s Yes-saying to the Supreme Being into a No-saying and theology’s No-saying to the Nihil into a Yes-saying. *Godhead and the Nothing* only details these reversals in the hope of felicitously performing the Yes to the Nihil. Only if this Yes sounds does theology speak. In *Godhead and the Nothing*’s final pages, Altizer himself says Yes: “Yes, the Nihil, and even an absolute Nihil, is finally not only inseparable but indistinguishable from an absolute Yes” (156). Altizer’s “Yes-saying” would say or let be the nothing from which Altizer’s “Yes-saying” is “indistinguishable.” Yes, let God die into the actual nothingness that the Yes is. If the Yes and the Nihil are one, nothing speaks. If Altizer says “Yes” felicitously, the Nihil speaks itself into existence.

Is this nothingness Altizer’s? Being an actual nothingness makes the Nihil distinct from any given being’s absence,

including the being Altizer is. If the nothingness that speaks in the Yes were simply Altizer's, the Nihil would fail to sound. But the Nihil, the Yes, only sounds through Altizer's language. If the nothingness were simply not Altizer's, the Yes, without a language, would find no utterance. The nothing must and must not be one's own. The Yes's felicity conditions are aporetic.

Siding with either pole of this aporia results in dualism and the denial of the nothing in reactive nihilism. The unthinking or reactive nihilism of denying God's death denies one's own existence in the name of an afterlife. For Altizer, this nihilism holds sway overwhelmingly in the contemporary world. In saying Yes to God's death, one says Yes to existence by embracing a thoughtful or active nihilism that may allow one to finally let nihilism go. But saying this Yes requires an impossible traversal of aporia, risking always to scramble reactive with active nihilism. Altizer risks this traversal, risks saying Yes.

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# Existentialism on Film: Woody Allen

*James Whitlark*

*Eighteen Woody Allen Films Analyzed: Anguish, God and Existentialism* by Sander H. Lee. Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland & Company, 2002.

In Woody Allen's movie *Crimes and Misdemeanors*, the character Halley (possibly thinking of Gödel's theorem) argues that all philosophical systems are incomplete. Appropriately, Sander Lee singles out Halley's remark and agrees with it. The appropriateness is that a sense of incompleteness is at the core of *Eighteen Woody Allen Films Analyzed*. Superficially, this fragmentariness comes from its being an abridgment of Lee's previous tome, *Woody Allen's Anx: Philosophical Commentaries on his Serious Films*, which analyzed the thirty movies Allen had created before its date of publication (1997). Even that study, though, could not be definitive about the growing oeuvre of a living artist.

By presenting the highlights of that volume, Lee has compiled a fine textbook, designed to teach undergraduates how to interweave plot summary with brief philosophical allusion. This conciseness, nonetheless, prevents the book from standing alone in a class on existentialism. Lee only reminds his readers of philosophies they need to have learned elsewhere—the case also with his previous tome.

Indeed, the incompleteness of the present volume lies less in the abridgement than in two premises it shares with its hardbound predecessor. The first of these is that despite often co-writing scripts and collaborating otherwise, Allen is an *auteur*, in control of his films, making him presumably the arbiter of their

philosophical meanings. To establish these, Lee sent Allen a series of questions. His answers form an appendix to the text.

In this afterward, however, Allen does not entirely confirm interpretations that Lee retains. *Crimes and Misdemeanors*, for instance, culminates, according to Lee, with an affirmation of the philosophy of Primo Levi and with the film's sinful protagonist suffering remorse. Allen denies he intended such a conventionally moral conclusion and adds that any allusion to Primo Levi was unconscious. For the most part, Lee's interpretations are sufficiently well supported by textual evidence so that he has reason to retain them. In the world of existential anxt he evokes, he perhaps could not really hope for anything so reassuring as full authorial endorsement, but the lack thereof complicates treatment of Allen's philosophical positions.

The second problematic premise of *Eighteen Woody Allen Films Analyzed* is that philosophy, merely one of the films' discourses, can be severed sufficiently from the others to serve as the focus for analysis. In response to this difficulty, Lee shifts for long periods away from philosophy to some other approach. For instance, he often traces Allen's cinematic lineage and even more frequently indulges in extensive plot précis (while such summary occupied a still-larger portion of the unabridged book). Thereby, Lee dilutes his main focus. When, however, he maintains a narrow range, he runs the opposite risk of undue brevity. In his introduction, for instance, he lumps together critics' charges that Allen is guilty of narcissism and of moral relativism. Because of the strong influence of psychology on Allen's works, critics talking about narcissism in Allen's films have often discussed it in terms of Sigmund Freud's and Heinz Kohut's definitions of it, neither of which has the inherent connection to moral relativism that narcissism has in some philosophies. Despite his challenging subject, Lee has achieved a neatness that will endear him to his intended audience (undergraduates), yet not to all others. Admittedly, philosophical

concerns and references to existential philosophers (especially Sartre) play prominent roles in Allen's films, but they appear in intricate contexts while his significance as philosophical artist is complicated by the collaborative nature of cinema and by Allen's own complex personality.

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