

# The New York Review of Books

## Sartre at Seventy: An Interview

Jean-Paul Sartre and Michel Contat, translated by Paul Auster and Lydia Davis  
AUGUST 7, 1975 ISSUE

### I

Michel Contat: *For the past year there has been much concern over the rumors that have been circulating about the state of your health. You will be seventy years old this month. Tell us, Sartre, how are you feeling?*

Jean-Paul Sartre: It is difficult to say that I am feeling well, but I can't say that I'm feeling bad either. During the last two years, I've had several mishaps. My legs begin to hurt as soon as I walk more than one kilometer, and I've had serious problems with blood pressure, but recently, and quite suddenly, these have disappeared.

Worst of all, I had hemorrhages behind my left eye—the only one of my two eyes that can see, since I lost almost all vision in my right eye when I was three years old—and now I can still see forms vaguely, I can see light, colors, but I do not see objects or faces distinctly, and, as a consequence, I can neither read nor write. More exactly, I can write, that is to say, form the words with my hand, and I can do this more or less comfortably now, but I cannot see what I write. And reading is absolutely out of the question. I can see the lines, the spaces between the words, but I can no longer distinguish the words themselves. Without the ability to read or write, I no longer have even the slightest possibility of being actively engaged as a writer: my occupation as a writer is completely destroyed.

However, I can still speak. That is why, if television manages to find the money, my next work will be a series of broadcasts in which I will try to speak about the seventy-five years of this century. I am working on this with Simone de Beauvoir, Pierre Victor, and Philippe Gavi, who have their own ideas and will do the editing, which I am incapable of doing myself.

This is my situation at the moment. Apart from that, I am in fine shape. I sleep extremely well. My mind is probably just as sharp as it was ten years ago—no more sharp, but no less—and my sensibility has remained the same. Most of the time my memory is good, except for names, which I recall only with great effort and which sometimes escape me. I can use objects when I know where they are in advance. In the street, I can get along by myself without too much difficulty.

*Even so, not being able to write any more must be a considerable blow. You speak about it with serenity....*

In one sense, it robs me of all reason for existing; I was, and I am no longer, if you wish. I should feel very defeated, but for some unknown reason I feel quite good: I am never sad, nor do I have any moments of melancholy in thinking of what I have lost.

*No feelings of rebellion?*

Who, or what, should I be rebelling against? Don't take this for stoicism—although, as you know, I have always had sympathy for the Stoics. No, it's just that things are the way they are and there's nothing I can do about it, so there's no reason for me to be upset. I've had some trying times because things were more serious two years ago. I would have attacks of mild delirium. I remember walking around in Avignon, where I had gone with Simone de Beauvoir, and looking for a girl who had made an appointment to meet me somewhere on a bench. Naturally there was no appointment....

Now, all I can do is make the best of what I am, become accustomed to it, evaluate the possibilities and take advantage of them. It is the loss of vision, of course, which is most annoying, and according to the doctors I've consulted it is irremediable. This is bothersome, because I feel moved by enough things to want to write, not all the time, but now and then.

*You feel at loose ends?*

Yes. I walk a little, the newspapers are read to me, I listen to the radio, sometimes I catch a glimpse of what is happening on television, and in fact these are the things you do when you are at loose ends. I used to write down what I had been thinking about beforehand, but the essential moment was that of the writing itself. I still think, but because writing

has become impossible for me, the real activity of thought has in some way been suppressed.

What will no longer be accessible to me is something that many young people today are scornful of: style, let us say the literary manner of presenting an idea or a reality. This necessarily calls for revisions—revisions which sometimes have to be made five or six times. I can no longer correct my work even once, because I cannot read what I have written. Thus, what I write or what I say necessarily remains in the first version. Someone can read back to me what I have written or said and if worst comes to worst I can change a few details, but that would have nothing to do with the work of rewriting which I would do myself.

*Couldn't you use a tape recorder, dictate, listen to yourself, and listen to your revisions?*

I think there is an enormous difference between speaking and writing. One rereads what one rewrites. But one can read slowly or quickly: in other words, you do not know how long you will have to take deliberating over a sentence. It's possible that what is not right in the sentence will not be clear to you at the first reading: perhaps there is something inherently wrong with it, perhaps there is a poor connection between it and the preceding sentence or the following sentence or the paragraph as a whole or the chapter, etc.

All this assumes that you approach your text somewhat as if it were a magical puzzle, that you change words here and there one by one, and go back over these changes and then modify something farther along, and so on and so forth. If I listen to a tape recorder, the listening time is determined by the speed at which the tape turns and not by my own needs. Therefore I will always be either lagging behind or running ahead of the machine.

*Have you tried it?*

I will try it, I will give it a sincere try, but I am certain that it will not satisfy me. Everything in my past, in my training, everything that has been most essential in my activity up to now has made me above all a man who writes, and it is too late for that to change. If I had lost my sight at the age of forty, perhaps it would have been different.

Within myself, intellectual activity remains what it was, that is to say a guiding of reflection. Therefore on the reflexive level I can revise what I

am thinking, but this remains strictly subjective. Here again stylistic work as I understand it necessarily assumes the act of writing.

Many young people today do not concern themselves with style and think that what one says should be said simply and that is all. For me, style—which does not exclude simplicity, quite the opposite—is above all a way of saying three or four things in one. There is the simple sentence, with its immediate meaning, and then at the same time, below this immediate meaning, other meanings are organized. If one is not capable of giving language this plurality of meaning, then it is not worth the trouble to write.

What distinguishes literature from scientific communication, for example, is that it is not unambiguous; the artist of language arranges words in such a way that, depending on how he emphasizes or gives weight to them, they will have one meaning, and another, and yet another, each time at different levels.

*Your philosophical manuscripts are written in long hand, with almost no crossings out or erasures, while your literary manuscripts are very much worked over, perfected. Why is there this difference?*

The objectives are different: in philosophy, every sentence should have only one meaning. The work I did on *Les Mots*, for example, attempting to give multiple and superimposed meanings to each sentence, would be bad work in philosophy. If I have to explain, for example, the concepts of “for-itself” and “in-itself,” that can be difficult; I can use different comparisons, different demonstrations, to make it clear, but it is necessary to stay with ideas that are self-contained: it is not on this level that the complete meaning is found—which can and must be multiple so far as the complete work is concerned. I do not mean to say, in effect, that philosophy, like scientific communication, is unambiguous.

In literature, which in some way always has to do with what has been *lived*, nothing of what I say is totally expressed by what I say. The same reality can be expressed in a number of ways that is practically infinite. And it is the entire book that indicates the type of reading that each sentence requires, even the tone of voice that this reading in turn requires, whether one reads aloud or not. A purely objective kind of sentence, like those found frequently in Stendhal, necessarily leaves out many things, but this sentence contains within itself all the others and thus holds a totality of meanings that the author must have constantly in

mind for them all to emerge. As a consequence, stylistic work does not consist of sculpting a sentence, but of permanently keeping in mind the totality of the scene, the chapter, and beyond that the entire book. If this totality is present, you will write a good sentence. If it is not present, the sentence will jar and seem gratuitous.

For some authors this work takes longer and is more laborious than for others. But generally speaking, it is always more difficult to write four sentences in one, for example, than one in one, as in philosophy. A sentence like “I think, therefore I am” can have infinite repercussions in all directions, but as a sentence it has the meaning that Descartes gave it. While when Stendhal writes, “As long as he could see the clock tower of Verrières, Julien kept turning around,” in simply saying what his character does, he gives us what Julien feels, and at the same time what Mme de Renal feels, etc.

Obviously, therefore, it is much more difficult to find a sentence that counts for several sentences than to find a sentence like “I think, therefore I am,” I suppose Descartes found that sentence all at once, at the moment he thought it.

*Is the fact that you are no longer able to read a burdensome handicap for you?*

For the moment, I would say no. I can no longer find out on my own about recent books that might interest me. But people talk to me about them or read them to me, and I pretty much keep abreast of what is coming out. Simone de Beauvoir has read many books to me all the way through, works of every sort.

However, I used to be in the habit of going through the books and reviews I received, and it is a loss no longer to be able to do so. But for the work I am doing now on these historical broadcasts, if I have to learn about a book on sociology, for example, or history, it does not matter if I hear it read to me by Simone de Beauvoir or if I read it with my own eyes. On the other hand, if it is more than a question of assimilating information, if I have to criticize it, examine it to see whether or not it is coherent, whether or not it is consistent with its own principles, etc., then this would no longer be adequate. I would then have to ask Simone de Beauvoir to read it to me several times, and to stop, if not after every sentence, at least after every paragraph.

Simone de Beauvoir reads and speaks extremely fast. I let her go on at her usual speed, and I try to adapt myself to the rhythm of her reading. Naturally this requires a certain effort. And then we exchange ideas at the end of the chapter. The problem is that the element of reflexive criticism which is constantly present when one reads a book with one's own eyes is never clear when something is read out loud. The principal effort is to understand, quite simply. The critical element remains in the background and it is only at the moment that Simone de Beauvoir and I begin discussing our opinions that I feel that I draw out from my mind what had been hidden by the reading.

*Isn't it painful for you to be dependent upon others?*

Yes, although painful would be too strong a word, since as I said before nothing is painful to me now. In spite of everything, this dependence is hardly unpleasant. I was in the habit of writing alone, reading alone, and I still think today that real intellectual work demands solitude. I am not saying that some intellectual work—even books—cannot be undertaken by several people. But I do not see how two or three people can carry out a true intellectual undertaking, one that leads to both a *written* work and to philosophical reflections. At the present time, with our current methods of thought, the unveiling of a thought before an object implies solitude.

*Don't you think that this may be peculiar to you?*

I have had occasion to be involved in collective work, at the Ecole normale for example, or later at Le Havre with other professors, a project for reforming university instruction. I forget what we said, and it could not have been worth much. But all my books, except for *On a raison de se révolter* and *Entretiens sur la politique*, which I did with David Rousset and Gérard Rosenthal, were written entirely by myself.

*Does it bother you when I ask you about yourself?*

No. Why? I believe that everyone should be able to speak of his innermost being to an interviewer. I think that what spoils relations among people is that each keeps something hidden from the other, something secret, not necessarily from everyone, but from whomever he is speaking to at the moment.

I think transparency should always be substituted for what is secret, and I can quite well imagine the day when two men will no longer have secrets from each other, because no one will have any more secrets from anyone, because subjective life, as well as objective life, will be completely offered up, given. It is impossible to accept the fact that we would yield our bodies as we do and keep our thoughts hidden, since for me there is no basic difference between the body and the consciousness.

*Isn't it a fact that we only yield our thoughts totally to the people to whom we truly yield our bodies?*

We yield our bodies to everyone, even beyond the realm of sexual relations: by looking, by touching. You yield your body to me, I yield mine to you: we each exist for the other, as body. But we do not exist in this same way as consciousness, as ideas, even though ideas are modifications of the body.

If we truly wished to exist for the other, to exist as body, as body that can continually be laid bare—even if this never happens—ideas would appear to the other as coming from the body. Words are formed by a tongue in the mouth. All ideas would appear in this way, even the most vague, the most fleeting, the least tangible. There would no longer be this hiddenness, this secret which in certain centuries was identified with the honor of men and women, and which seems very foolish to me.

*What do you think is the chief obstacle to this transparency?*

First of all, Evil. By this I mean acts that are inspired by different principles and that can have results that I disapprove of. This Evil makes communicating all thoughts difficult, because I do not know to what extent the principles which the other uses to form his thoughts are the same as mine. To a certain extent, of course, these principles can be clarified, discussed, established; but it is not true that I can talk to anyone about anything. I can with you, but I cannot with my neighbor or with a passer-by crossing the street: in an extreme case, he would rather fight than have a totally frank discussion with me.

Thus, there is an as-for-myself (*quant-à-soi*), born of distrust, ignorance, and fear, which keeps me from being confidential with another, or not confidential enough. Personally, moreover, I do not express myself on all points with the people I meet, but I try to be as translucent as possible, because I feel that this dark region that we have within ourselves, which

is at once dark for us and dark for others, can only be illuminated for ourselves in trying to illuminate it for others.

*Didn't you look for this transparency first of all in writing?*

Not first, at the same time. If you like, it is in writing that I went the farthest. But there are also the day-by-day conversations, with Simone de Beauvoir, with others, with you, since we are together today, in which I try to be as clear and as truthful as possible, in such a way as to yield entirely, or to try to yield entirely, my subjectivity. Actually I am not giving it to you, I do not give it to anyone, because there are still things, even for me, which refuse to be said, which I can say to myself, but which resist my saying them to another. As with other people, there is a depth of darkness within me that does not allow itself to be said.

*The unconscious?*

Not at all. I am speaking of the things that I *know*. There is always a kind of small fringe that is not said, that does not want to be said, but that wants to be known, known by me. One can't say everything, you know that well. But I think that later, that is, after my death, and perhaps after yours, people will talk about themselves more and more and that this will produce a great change. Moreover, I think that this change is linked to a real revolution.

A man's existence must be entirely visible to his neighbor, whose own existence must in turn be entirely visible to him, in order for true social harmony to be established. This cannot be realized today, but I think that it will be once there has been a change in the economic, cultural, and affective relations among men, beginning with the eradication of material scarcity, which, as I showed in *Critique de la raison dialectique*, is for me the root of the antagonisms among men, past and present.

There will doubtless be other antagonisms then, which I cannot imagine now, which no one can imagine, but they will not be an obstacle to a form of sociality in which each person will give himself completely to someone else, who will also give himself completely. Such a society, of course, would have to be a world-wide society, for if there remained inequalities and privileges anywhere in the world, the conflicts produced by these inequalities would little by little take over the whole social body.



*Isn't writing born of secrecy and antagonism? In a harmonious society, perhaps there would no longer be any reason for it to exist....*

Writing is certainly born of secrecy, but we should not forget that either it tries to hide this secret and to lie—in which case it is without interest—or to give a glimpse of this secret, even to try to expose it by showing what one is in relation to others—and in this case it approaches the translucence that I want.

*You said to me once, around 1971: "It is time that I finally told the truth." You added: "But I could only tell it in a work of fiction." What was the reason for this?*

At that time I was thinking of writing a story in which I wanted to present in an indirect manner everything that I had been previously thinking of saying in a kind of political testament, which would have been the continuation of my autobiography and which I had decided not to do. The fictional element would have been minimal; I would have created a character about whom the reader would have been forced to say: "The man presented here is Sartre."

Which does not mean that for the reader there would have been an overlapping of the character and the author, but that the best way of understanding the character would have been to look for what came to him from me. That is what I would have wanted to write: a fiction that was not a fiction. This simply represents what it means to write today. We know ourselves very little, and we are still not able to give ourselves completely to each other. The truth of writing would be for me to say: "I take up the pen, my name is Sartre, this is what I think."

*Can't a truth be expressed independently of the person who expresses it?*

It is no longer interesting then. It removes the individual and the person from the world and goes no farther than objective truths. One can attain objective truths without thinking of one's own truth. But if it is a question of speaking of both one's objectivity and the subjectivity that is behind this objectivity, and which is just as much a part of the man as his objectivity, at this point it is necessary to write: "I, Sartre." And, as this is not possible at the present time, because we do not know each other well enough, the detour of fiction allows for a more effective approach to this objective-subjective totality.

*Would you say then that you have come closer to your own truth through *Roquentin* or *Mathieu* than in writing *Les Mots*?*

Probably, or rather, I think that *Les Mots* is no truer than *La Nausée* or *Les Chemins de la Liberté*. Not that the facts I report are not true, but *Les Mots* is a kind of novel also, a novel that I believe in, but that nevertheless remains a novel.

*When you said that the time had come for you to tell the truth at last, this statement could have been understood to mean that until now you had only lied.*

No, not lied, but said what is only half true, a quarter true.... For example, I have not spoken of the sexual and erotic relations in my life. Moreover, I do not see any reasons for doing so, except in another society in which everyone put his cards on the table.

*But are you sure that you know everything there is to know about yourself? Have you ever been tempted by psychoanalysis?*

Yes, but not at all in order to understand things about myself that I would not have understood otherwise. When I began writing *Les Mots* again, of which I had done a first version in 1954 and which I had returned to in 1963, I asked a psychoanalyst friend, Pontalis, if he wanted to analyze me, more out of intellectual curiosity concerning the psychoanalytic method itself than to understand myself better. He thought, quite rightly, that given our relations over the past twenty years, it would be impossible for him. It was just an idea I had had, a rather vague one, and I didn't think about it any more.

*Nevertheless, one can infer from a reading of your novels many things about the way you have experienced sexuality.*

Yes, and even from my philosophical works. But that only represents a phase in my sexual life. There is not enough detail or complexity for someone really to find me in these books. Then, you would say, why talk about it? And I would say: because a writer, as I see it, should talk about the whole world in talking about his whole self.

*Where is the specific character of writing, then? Doesn't it seem that it would be possible to speak of this totality orally?*

In principle it is possible, but in fact one never says as much in speaking as in writing. People are not accustomed to using oral language. The

deepest conversations there can be today are those between intellectuals. Not that they are necessarily closer to the truth than nonintellectuals, but, at the present time, they have knowledge, a mode of thought—psychoanalytic or sociological, for example—that allows them to reach a certain level of understanding of themselves and others that people who are not intellectuals do not usually reach. Dialogue proceeds in such a way that each person thinks that he has said everything and that the other person has said everything, while in fact the true problems begin at a point beyond what has been said.

*In the end, then, when you spoke of the truth that finally had to be told, it was not a matter of expressing certain things that you had suppressed, but things that you had not understood before?*

It was above all a question of putting myself in a certain position in which, necessarily, a kind of truth I had not known before would appear to me. By means of a true fiction—or a fictional truth—I would take up the actions and thoughts of my life in order to make a whole, all the while examining their apparent contradictions and their limits, to see if it was really true that they were limits, that I had not been forced to consider ideas contradictory that were not, that my actions of a given moment had been interpreted correctly....

*And perhaps it was also a way of allowing you to escape your own system?*

Yes, to the extent that my system could not include everything, I had to place myself outside it.

*From Simone de Beauvoir's memoirs, we know that since 1957 you have worked with a feeling of extreme urgency. Simone de Beauvoir says that you ran "an exhausting race against time, against death." It seems to me that if you have such a strong feeling of urgency you must feel that only you are capable of saying something that absolutely must be said. Is this true?*

In a sense, yes. It was then that I started writing *Critique de la raison dialectique*, and it was this that was gnawing at me, that took all my time. I worked on it ten hours a day, taking corydrane—in the end I was taking twenty pills a day—and I really felt that this book had to be finished. The amphetamines gave me a quickness of thought and writing that was at least three times my normal rhythm, and I wanted to go fast.

It was the period when I broke with the communists after Budapest. The rupture was not total, but the ties were broken. Before 1968 the communist movement seemed to represent the entire left, and to break with the party would have been to push oneself into a kind of exile. When one was cut off from the left, one either moved to the right, as did many who joined with the socialists, or one stayed in a kind of limbo, and the only thing left to do was to try to think to the very limit what the communists did not want you to think.

Writing the *Critique de la raison dialectique* represented for me a way of settling my accounts with my own thought outside of the Communist Party's sphere of influence over thought. The *Critique* is a Marxist work written against the communists. I felt that true Marxism had been completely twisted and falsified by the communists. Right now, I no longer think exactly the same thing.

*Didn't the feeling of urgency also come from the first effects of growing old?*

I was writing *Les Séquestrés d'Altona* and one day, during the winter of 1958, I began to feel very unsure of myself. I remember that day, at Simone Berriau's: I was drinking a glass of whiskey; I tried to set it down on a shelf and it fell over; it was not a question of clumsiness, but a problem with my equilibrium. Simone Berriau saw it right away and said to me: "Go see a doctor, it's very bad." And, in fact, several days later, still working on *Les Séquestrés*, I was scribbling illegibly rather than writing: I wrote sentences absolutely devoid of meaning, without any relation to the play, which frightened Simone de Beauvoir.

*Were you yourself afraid?*

No, but I saw that I was in bad shape. I was never afraid. But I stopped working: for two months I don't think I did anything. And then I got back to work. But this held up *Les Séquestrés* for a year.

*It seems to me that at this period you had a very strong feeling of responsibility toward your readers, yourself, and those "commandments that are sewn into your skin" that you spoke of in Les Mots: by and large, it was a question of write or die. When did you begin to let up, if you have ever let up?*

In the last few years, since I gave up the *Flaubert*. For this book also I did an enormous amount of work, using corydrane. I spent fifteen years on it, working on and off. I would write something else. Then I would return to Flaubert. Even so, I will never finish it. But this does not make me so unhappy, because I think I said the essentials of what I had to say in the first three volumes. Someone else could write the fourth on the basis of the three I have written.

Nevertheless, this unfinished Flaubert weighs on me with a kind of remorse. Well, perhaps “remorse” is too strong a word; after all, I had to give it up because of circumstances. I *wanted* to finish it. And, at the same time, this fourth volume was both the most difficult for me and the one that interested me the least: the study of the style of *Madame Bovary*. But I can say to you that the essentials are there, even if the work remains incomplete.

*Can this be said about your work as a whole? One could almost say that one of the principal characteristics of this work is its unfinished state.... Do you find that this....*

That this bothers me? Not at all. Because all works remain unfinished: no man who undertakes a work of literature or philosophy ever finishes. What can I say, time never stops!

*Today you no longer feel yourself pursued by time?*

No, because I have decided—I say it loud and clear: I have decided—that I have said everything I had to say. This decision implies that I will cut off all that I might still have said, and that I will not say it, because I consider what I have already written to be the essential. The rest, I tell myself, is not worth the trouble; they are merely temptations that one has, like writing a novel on this or that subject, and then abandoning the whole thing.

Actually, this is not completely so: if I put myself in the true state of necessity of a man who has some years before him and who is in good health, I would say that I am not finished, that I have not said all I have to say, far from it. But I do not want to say this to myself. If I last another ten years, that would be very good, that wouldn't be bad at all.

*And how do you plan to use these ten years?*

By doing projects like the broadcasts I am preparing, which I feel should be considered as part of my work. By doing a book of conversations that I have begun with Simone de Beauvoir, which is the continuation of *Les Mots*, but which will be arranged this time by themes, and which will not be done with the style of *Les Mots*, since I can no longer have any style.

*But you are involving yourself less in these projects.*

I am involving myself less because I *have* to. Because at seventy I can no longer hope that in the ten useful years remaining to me I will produce the novel or the philosophical work of my life. Everyone knows what the ten years between seventy and eighty are like....

*What we are talking about, then, is not so much your half-blindness as old age.*

I only feel old age through my half-blindness—which is an accident, I could have others—and through the nearness of death, which is absolutely undeniable. Not that I think about it, I never think about it; but I know that it is coming.

*You knew that before!*

Yes, but I didn't think about it, I really didn't. You know, there was a time when I believed I was immortal, until I was about thirty. But now I know that I am very mortal, without ever thinking of death. Simply, I know that I am in the last period of my life, and therefore certain works are not possible for me. Because of their size, not because of their difficulty, for I feel that I am just about at the same level of intelligence that I was ten years ago. The important thing for me is that what had to be done was done. For better or worse, it doesn't matter. In any case, I've given it a try. And then, there are ten years left.

*You remind me of Gide in Thésée: "I have done my work, I have lived...." He was seventy-five years old and he had this same serenity, this satisfaction of a finished task. You say the same thing?*

Exactly.

*In the same spirit?*

A few things would have to be added. I do not think of my readers in the same way that Gide did. I do not think of the action of a book as he did. I do not think of the future of society as he thought of it. But, to take

only the individual, yes, in a sense; very good, I have done what I had to do....

*You are happy with your life?*

Very. I think that if I had had more luck, I would have treated more things better.

*And also if you had taken a little better care of yourself. Because, in the end, you ruined your health as you were writing Critique de la raison dialectique.*

What is health for? It is better to write *Critique de la raison dialectique*—I say it without pride—it is better to write something that is long, precise, and important in itself than to be in excellent health.

## II

*Are you sorry that young intellectuals do not read you more, that they know you only through false ideas of you and your work?*

I would say that it is too bad for me.

*For you, or for them?*

To tell the truth, for them too. But I think it is just a passing stage.

*Basically you would agree with the prediction Roland Barthes made recently when he said that you will be rediscovered and that this will take place soon in a completely natural way?*

I hope so.

*And which of your works do you hope to see the new generation take up again?*

The *Situations*, *Saint-Genet*, the *Critique de la raison dialectique*, and *Le Diable et le Bon Dieu*. The *Situations*, if you like, is the nonphilosophical work which comes closest to philosophy: critical and political. I would very much like that to remain and for people to read it. And then *La Nausée* too. I think that from a purely literary point of view it is the best thing I have done.

*After May 1968 you said to me: “If one rereads all my books, one will realize that I have not changed profoundly, and that I have always remained an anarchist.”*

That is very true. And it will be evident in the television broadcasts I am preparing. Still, I have changed in the sense that I was an anarchist without knowing it when I wrote *La Nausée*: I did not realize that what I was writing there could have an anarchist interpretation; I saw only the relation with the metaphysical idea of “nausea,” the metaphysical idea of existence. Then, by way of philosophy, I discovered the anarchist being in me. But when I discovered it I did not call it that, because today’s anarchy no longer has anything to do with the anarchy of 1890.

*Actually, you never identified yourself with the so-called anarchist movement!*

Never. On the contrary, I was very far from it. But I have never accepted any power over me, and I have always thought that anarchy, which is to say a society without powers, must be brought about.

*You must acknowledge the fact, in spite of everything, that even though you reject all power, you have exercised power yourself?*

I have had a false power: the power of a professor. But the real power of a professor consists, for example, in forbidding smoking in class—I did not—or in failing students—I always gave passing grades. I was transmitting knowledge; as I see it, that is not a power, or rather it depends on how you teach. Ask Bost<sup>1</sup> if I thought I had power over my students, and if I did.

*You don’t think that celebrity gave you a certain power?*

I don’t think so. Perhaps a policeman will ask me for my papers more politely. But I don’t see how, outside of things like that, I have power. I do not believe I have any other power than the power of the truths which I tell.

*One of the surprising things about you: you never take the initiative in an encounter?*

Never. I am not curious about people.

*Yet you once wrote: “I have a passion for understanding men.”*



Yes. Once I am face to face with a man, I have a passion to understand him, but I will not go out of my way to see him.

*That is the attitude of a recluse.*

A recluse, yes. I should point out that I am surrounded by people, but they are women. There are several women in my life, Simone de Beauvoir being the only one, in a sense, but there are several.

*That must take up a considerable amount of time. And it took a great deal of time when all you really wanted to do was to write. You once said to me: "The only thing that I really like to do is to be at my table and write, preferably philosophy."*

Yes, that is what I really loved. And I was always held back at a small distance from my table: I had to break things in order to return to it.

*But you do not like to be alone when you are not working?*

In certain cases I like to be alone very much. Before the war, on certain evenings when Castor [i.e., de Beauvoir] was not free, I liked very much to go eat alone at the "Balzar," for example: I felt my solitude.

*That has not happened to you very often since the end of the war....*

I remember that three or four years ago I had an evening to spend all alone, and I was very happy about it. This was at the home of a friend who was not there. I drank. I was dead drunk. I walked home and Puig, my secretary, who had come to see if everything was all right, was following me at a distance. And then I fell down, he picked me up, supported me, and took me home. That is what I did with my solitude. Also, when I tell Simone de Beauvoir that I like being alone but that people keep me from being alone, she always says: "You make me laugh."

*How do you live these days?*

My life has become very simple, since I cannot get around much. I rise at eight-thirty in the morning. Often I sleep at Simone de Beauvoir's house and have breakfast in a café on the way home, often in the one I like best, "La Liberté," which is really a suitable name for me, on the corner of the Rue de la Gaité and the Boulevard Edgar-Quinet, two hundred yards from where I live. I feel at home in Montparnasse. I have

some acquaintance with the people of the neighborhood, the waiters in the cafés, the woman who sells newspapers, a few shopkeepers.

I always organized my life around my working hours: from half-past nine or so to half-past one and from five or six PM to nine in the evening. At the moment these hours are a bit empty, but I still keep to them. I go and have lunch in a local brasserie, and then return home at about half-past four.

Usually Simone de Beauvoir is there and we chat for a bit and then she reads to me, either some book or other or *Le Monde* or *Liberation*, or other newspapers. That takes us to about half-past eight or nine PM, and then most of the time we go back together to her flat and I spend the evening with her, almost always listening to music, or sometimes she continues reading to me, and I always go to bed at about the same time, about half-past twelve.

*Music occupies a large place in your life. Not many people know that....*

Music has meant a lot to me, both as a distraction and as an important element of culture. Everyone in my family was a musician: my grandfather played the piano and the organ, my grandmother played the piano quite well, my mother played it well and sang. My two uncles—particularly my uncle Georges, whose wife was also very musical—were excellent pianists, and you know that cousin Albert [Schweitzer] was not bad at the organ either.... In short, everyone at the Schweitzer house played, and throughout my childhood I lived in a musical atmosphere.

At the age of eight or nine I was given piano lessons. Then I had nothing more to do with it until I was twelve, at La Rochelle. There, in the house where I lived with my mother and stepfather, there was a large drawing room which no one entered except for receptions and where a grand piano sat in state. There I relearned by myself, first playing scores of operettas, and then pieces for four hands, which I played with my mother, Mendelssohn for example. And little by little, more difficult things, Beethoven, Schumann, later Bach, with fingering that was hardly correct but finally managing to play more or less up to tempo, not really precisely, but generally respecting the measure.

I succeeded at last in playing quite difficult things, like Chopin or the Beethoven sonatas, except for the very late ones, which are extremely

difficult; I would play only a part of those. And I played Schumann, Mozart, and also melodies from operas or operettas which I would sing.... I even gave piano lessons when I was twenty-two years old, at the Ecole normale.

In the end it had become important for me to play. For example, in the afternoon at 42 rue Bonaparte, Simone de Beauvoir would come to work at my house and she would begin reading or writing before I did, and I would go sit down at the piano, often for two hours.

*Have you ever played for friends?*

No, no one has ever asked me. Later I played with my adopted daughter Arlette: she would sing or play the flute and I would accompany her. We did that for several years and then, oh dear, now I obviously cannot play any more. So now I listen to more music than before. I can say that I have a good knowledge of music, from Baroque to atonality.

*You have never done any composing?*

Yes, I even composed a sonata, which is written out. I think Castor still has it. It must be a little like Debussy, I don't remember very well any more. I like Debussy very much, Ravel too.

Having said this, it is strange that I have not spoken of music in my books. I think it is because I did not have anything much to say about it that people wouldn't already know. Of course there is that preface which I wrote a long time ago for the book by René Leibowitz—one of the few musicians I knew personally—but there I spoke less of music than of the problem of meaning in music, and it is certainly not one of my better texts.

### III

*Admiration: is that a feeling you are familiar with?*

No. I don't admire anyone, and I would not want anyone to admire me. There is no reason for men to be admired: they are all alike, all equal. What is important is what they do.

*Yet one day you told me you admired Victor Hugo....*

Oh, not very much. I cannot give you any exact feeling for Victor Hugo. There are many things to criticize in him, and other things that are really

very beautiful. It is confused and mixed up, and so I got out of it by saying that I admired him. But the truth is that I don't admire him any more than anyone else. No, admiration is a feeling that assumes that one is inferior to the person he admires. However, as you know, as I see it, all men are equal and admiration has no place among men. Esteem—that is the true feeling one man could be expected to show for another.

*More than loving?*

No, loving and esteeming are two aspects of one and the same reality, it is one and the same relation with the other. Which does not mean that esteem is absolutely necessary to love, nor love to esteem. But when both are present together, one has the true attitude of one man toward another. We haven't arrived at that point. We will be there when the subjective has been completely uncovered.

*But how do you explain to yourself the fact that you are fickle in friendship and constant in your love relationships?*

I am not fickle in friendship. Let us say, if you like, that my friendships have not counted as much as my love relationships. Why do you say that I am fickle?

*I am thinking of Camus, for example.*

But I was never against Camus. I was against the paper he sent to *Les Temps Modernes* calling me “*Monsieur le directeur*” and developing crazy ideas about Francis Jeanson's article.<sup>2</sup> He could have responded to Jeanson, but not the way he did: it was his article that made me angry.

*And the break that followed it did not affect you?*

No, not really. We had already been seeing much less of each other and during the last few years every time we met he would blow up at me: I had done this, I had said that, I had written something he did not like and he would blow up at me. It had not yet come to a falling-out, but it had become less pleasant. He had changed a good deal, Camus had. In the beginning, he did not yet know that he was a great writer, he was a funny guy and we had good times together: his language was very racy, so was mine for that matter, we told filthy stories one after another and his wife and Simone de Beauvoir pretended to be shocked. For two or three years I had really good relations with him. We could not go far on the intellectual level because he got alarmed quickly; in fact, there was a

side of him that smacked of the little Algerian tough guy, very much a hooligan, very funny. He was probably the last good friend I had.

*Let's get back to the women....*

My relations with women have always been the best because sexual relations, properly speaking, allow for the objective and the subjective to be given together more easily. Relations with a woman, even if one is not sleeping with her—but if one has or if one could have—are richer. First of all, there is a language which is not speech, which is the language of hands, the language of faces. I am not talking about the language of sex properly speaking. As for language itself, it comes from the deepest place, it comes from sex, when a love relationship is involved. With a woman, the whole of what one is is present.

*What has also struck me since I have known you is that when you speak of your friends you are often caustic....*

Because I know what they are like! And what I am like! I could just as well be caustic about myself too.

*And if you were to be caustic about yourself, what would you say?*

In general, it always comes back to not having gone as far as possible in my radicalism. Naturally, in the course of my life I have made lots of mistakes, large and small, for one reason or another, but at the heart of it all, every time I made a mistake it was because I was not radical enough.

*What is astonishingly absent in you is guilt.*

I do not have any, it's true. Of any kind. I never feel guilty, and I am not guilty. In my family, right away, they filled me with the feeling that I was a valuable child. Yet at the same time there was the feeling of my contingency, which somewhat opposed the idea of value, because value is a whole whirlwind that presupposes ideologies, alienations, while contingency is a plain reality. But I discovered a dodge: to attribute value to myself because I felt contingency when the others did not feel it. So, I became the man who talked about contingency and, as a consequence, the man who had placed his value in searching for the sense and signification of it. All that is very clear.

*And you don't think that in the way you act with money, for example, one could read signs of guilt?*

I don't think so. The first thing to say is that I did not come from a family where the relation between money and work was clearly understood as something hard, painful.

My grandfather worked a great deal, but he worked with writing, and for me it was fun to do nothing but read and write. He wrote, he had fun, I had seen the proofs he was correcting, it amused me; and then, there were books in his work room, and then he talked to people, he gave them German lessons. And all that was earning him money. As you can see, the relation was not distinct.

Later, when I myself wrote, there was absolutely no relation between the money I received and the books I wrote: I did not understand it, since I believed that the value of a book was established over the course of centuries. As a consequence, the money that my books earned for me was itself a sort of contingent sign. If you like, the first relation between money and my life continued. It is a stupid relation.

There was my work, my way of living, my effort in which I took pleasure—I have always been happy writing—and, by the way, my position as professor, which was somewhat tied to all that, did not annoy me. I liked doing it. Under those circumstances, what need was there for anyone to give me money? And yet people gave it to me.

*As we were talking about guilt, I was thinking more of your way of giving away money.*

In order to give it away, I have to have it first. I could not give any away until I was eighteen or nineteen years old, when I was at the Ecole normale and gave lessons to private pupils, and was therefore given money. There, I had a little and I was able to give some of it away. But what exactly was I giving? The paper money that I received after doing work which satisfied me. I did not feel at first hand the value of the coin: I felt the paper bills which I gave away as I received them, for nothing.

*You might have wanted to buy things, possess things.*

That happened too. I did not give away everything I received, therefore I bought things for myself. But I never wanted to have my own house or apartment. Having said that, I don't think there is the slightest guilt in the way I give money. I gave it because I could and because those I was interested in needed it. I never gave money in order to rub out a mistake, or because money as such was a burden to me.

*One thing that struck me when I first knew you was that you often had fat bundles of bills on you. Why?*

It's true, I often had more than a million<sup>3</sup> in my pocket. People have scolded me many times for carrying too much money on me. Simone de Beauvoir, for example, found it ridiculous and it really is idiotic. But to tell the truth, if I do not do that any more now, it is not because I might lose it or someone might rob me but because of my eyesight: I confuse the bills and that can cause annoying situations. Even so, I like having my money on me, and I find it unpleasant that I can't do it any more. I must say this is the first time anyone has asked me why....

I know it makes me look like a big shot to pull out a fat bundle: I remember a hotel on the Côte d'Azur where we often went, Simone de Beauvoir and I; one day, the substitute for the manageress complained to Simone de Beauvoir that I had brought out too much money to pay her.... And yet, I am not a big shot. No, I think that if I like having a lot of money on me, this corresponds in a certain manner to the way I live with my furniture, the way I have my everyday clothes on, which are almost always the same, my glasses, my lighter, my cigarettes.

It is the idea of having on me as many things as possible that define me for my, whole life, everything that represents my daily life at any given moment. The idea, therefore, of being entirely what I am at the present moment and of not depending on anyone, of not needing to ask anyone for anything, of having all my possessions at my immediate disposal. That represents a kind of way of feeling superior to people, which is obviously false and I am perfectly well aware of it.

*You also frequently give tips that are clearly excessive.*

Always.

*That can be troubling to the people you give them to.*

There you exaggerate.

*It won't be from you that I learn how reciprocity must be possible for generosity to avoid being in some way humiliating.*

Reciprocity is not possible, but kindness is. The waiters in the café appreciate the fact that I give them big tips, and repay me in kindness. My idea is that if a man lives off tips, I want to give him as much as I

can, because I think that if I contribute to the livelihood of a man, he must live well.

*What still has real interest for you?*

Music, as I told you. Philosophy and politics.

*But does that excite you?*

No, there is not much that excites me any more. I put myself a little above....

*Is there anything you would like to add?*

Everything, in one sense, if you like, and in another sense, nothing. Everything, because in relation to what we have formulated, there is everything else, everything should be explored with care. But that cannot be given in an interview. That is what I feel every time I give an interview. In a way, interviews are frustrating; they are frustrating because there would actually be many things to say. The interview brings them to life, like their opposites, at the very moment that one answers. But having said this, I think that as a portrait of what I am at the age of seventy, this is what was needed.

*You will not conclude, as Simone de Beauvoir concluded, that you have been “had.”*

Oh no, I would not say that. Besides, she herself, you know, says rightly that she did not mean that she had been had by life but that she felt cheated in the circumstances in which she wrote that book,<sup>4</sup> that is, after the Algerian war, etc. But I would not say that; I have not been had by anything, I have not been disappointed by anything. I have seen people, good and bad—moreover, the bad are never bad except in relation to certain goals—I have written, I have lived, there is nothing to be sorry about.

*In short, so far life has been good to you?*

On the whole, yes. I don't see what I could reproach it with. It has given me what I wanted and at the same time it has made me recognize that it isn't much. But what can you do?

*(The interview ends in a fit of laughing brought on by the disillusioned tone of that last statement.)*



The laughter must be kept. You should put: “Accompanied by laughter.”

—*translated by Paul Auster and Lydia Davis*

Copyright © 1975 by Jean-Paul Sartre and Michel Contat.

---

1 Sartre’s old friend, Jacques-Laurent Bost, author of *Le Dernier des Metiers*. ↩

2 A review of *The Rebel*, which provoked a letter from Camus and a reply from Sartre. This polemic put an end to their friendship. ↩

3 I.e., one million old francs, or about \$2,500. ↩

4 *La Force des choses* (Gallimard, 1963), in English, *Force of Circumstance* (Putnam’s, 1965). ↩

© 1963-2020 NYREV, Inc. All rights reserved.