

principle. And if their collaboration seems desirable to the Party, it accepted this alliance *in spite of* those differences. It seems to me today that the situation has changed, both for the Party and for us, in such a way that the Party must desire such alliances in part *because of* the differences.<sup>134</sup>

Sartre does not mean, of course, that it is useful to the communists to rally noncommunists to serve as a smoke screen for them: this would ~~not~~ create the new situation of which he is speaking. No, this time the communists should seek an agreement with the noncommunists because there really is a politics common to them which not only tolerates differences of principle but demands them. This perhaps announces a reciprocal recognition between communists and noncommunists beyond the equivocations that we have emphasized—and which therefore needed to be emphasized.

ONE SEES THAT what separates us from Sartre is not the description he gives of communism but rather the conclusions he draws from it. It is true that the divergence is all the more profound because it does not come from the facts but from the way they are taken, from the answer given to them, from the relationships that one establishes between the internal and the external. It is as personal and as general as possible; it is philosophical. When Sartre passed from a philosophy that ignored the problem of the other, because it freed consciousness from any individual inherence,<sup>135</sup> to a philosophy which, on the contrary, makes consciousnesses rivals, because each one is a world for itself and claims to be the only one—or when he passed from conflict between rival freedoms to a relationship of call and response between them—each time his previous views were at the same time preserved and destroyed by a new intuition that they put into contrast: the other was this impossibility that, nonetheless, the “I think” could not challenge; it was this enemy that, nonetheless, freedom fed with its own substance and from which it expected response and confirmation. In going from personal history or literature to history, Sartre does not for the time being believe that he is meeting a new phenomenon which demands

134. CP, p. 706; ET, p. 68.

135. This philosophy was expressed in the article “La Transcendance de l’Ego,” *Recherches philosophiques*, VI (1936–37), 85–123.

new categories. Undoubtedly he thinks that history, like language in his view, does not pose metaphysical questions which are not already present in the problem of the other: it is only a particular case to be thought through by the same means that serve to treat the other. The class "other" is so established a phenomenon that the individual other is always in competition with it. The proletarian class exists only by the pure will of a few, as language exists only as carried by a consciousness which constitutes it. Consciousness manages to make prose a transparent glass, whereas it never reads unambiguously in historical action. What is certainly new in history is that the resolution to bring into being at any cost a society which excludes no one entails a whole mythology, whereas, in prose, consciousness immediately shows itself to be universal. But this particularity of history and politics does not make them another type of being: it is only men's freedom, this time grappling with *things* that thwart it and passing beyond them. Politics and action stand out over and against everything, like appendages or extensions of personal life, and this at the very moment when it is proved that they are something else. We wonder whether action does not have both servitudes and virtues that are of an entirely different order and whether philosophy should not explore them instead of substituting itself for them. We see proof of this in the fact that Sartre does not end up with a theory of action, that he is obliged to divide the roles between a sympathy limited to pure principles and to certain aspects of action, and an action which itself is completely in the in-between. Sympathy has meaning only if others move to action. Is it not their action which is an experiment of history—their action or another, if decidedly one cannot be communist—but assuredly not the relationship of sympathy, which is at times too close, at times too remote, to be political? Is not action made up of relations, supported by categories, and carried on through a relationship with the world that the philosophy of the I and the Other does not express?

In truth, the question arose as soon as Sartre presented his conception of commitment, and it has accompanied his entire development of this idea. For, regardless of appearances, it is indeed a development at issue here, and Sartre in his present-day positions is not at all unfaithful to himself. Commitment was at first the determination to show oneself outside as one is inside, to confront behavior with its principle and each behavior with all the others, thus to say everything and to weigh everything anew,

to invent a total behavior in response to the whole of the world. *Les Temps modernes* demanded of its founders that they belong to no party or church, because one cannot rethink the whole if one is already bound by a conception of the whole. Commitment was the promise to succeed where the parties had failed; it therefore placed itself outside parties, and a preference or choice in favor of one of them made no sense at a moment when it was a question of recreating principles in contact with facts. Yet something already rendered this program null and void and announced the avatars of commitment: it was the manner in which Sartre understood the relation between action and freedom. Already at that moment he was writing that one is free to commit oneself and that *one commits oneself in order to be free*. The power of acting or not acting must be exercised if it is to be more than just a word, but it remains, in the choice or after the choice, exactly what it was before; and indeed there was choice only in order to attest a power of choosing or not choosing, which, without it, would have remained potential. We never choose something for what it is, but simply to have done it, to construct for ourselves a definable past. We never choose to become or to be this or that, but to have been this or that. We are faced with a situation, we think we examine it and deliberate, but we have already taken a stand, we have acted, we suddenly find ourselves stewards of a certain past. How it becomes ours is what no one understands; it is the fact of freedom. Freedom is thus in every action and in none, never compromised, never lost, never saved, always similar. And certainly the presence of the other strongly obliges us to distinguish between behaviors which liberate others and those which enslave others, to reject the second, to prefer the first, to propagate freedom around us, to embody it. But this second freedom proceeds entirely from the first, the order is irreversible, and the preferences it leads to are always in the end pure choice. All that can be known about history and men, this encyclopedia of situations, this universal inventory that *Les Temps modernes* undertook, could not diminish by an inch the distance between radical and savage freedom and its embodiments in the world, could not establish any measure between it and a given civilization, a given action, or a given historical enterprise. For one commits oneself only to get rid of the world. Freedom is not at work there, it makes continual, but only momentary, appearances; and except in fascism, which fights it on all levels, it always recognizes itself in some aspect of a political system, be it

on the level of intentions or on that of daily actions, and does not identify itself with any one system, for it has no means of summing up the total or the balance of an enterprise, a good not being able to redeem an evil or join with it in a comprehensive appraisal. One could thus denounce facts of oppression and speak of Blacks, Jews, Soviet camps, Moscow trials, women, and homosexuals; one could live all these situations in one's mind, make oneself personally responsible for them, and show how, in each one, freedom is flouted; but one would not find a political line for freedom, because it is embodied as much, or as little, in the diverse political actions which compete for the world, as much, or as little, in Soviet society as in American society. One can recognize in the principle of communism the most radical affirmation of freedom, for it is the decision to change the world; and one can also find unlimited good will in the heart of the American liberal, even though Puritan wickedness is never far away. This is why *Les Temps modernes* did not refuse the United States world leadership<sup>136</sup> at the very moment when it was attacking segregation and why, at the very moment when it was speaking of Soviet camps, it was preparing to make the U.S.S.R. the proletariat's only hope. One can confront freedom with individual acts or facts but not with regimes or large formations, for it always appears in them at some moments without ever being found in all of them. If "each person is responsible for everything before all others," that is to say, if one must take as one's own, in themselves and as if they were their own ends, each phase of an action, each detail of a regime, then actions and regimes are all alike and are worth nothing, for all of them have shameful secrets.

Commitment organizes for us a confrontation with situations the farthest removed from one another and from ourselves. This is exactly why it is so different from historical and political action, which does move within situations and facts, sacrifices this to obtain that, excuses the details in the name of the whole. As far as regimes and actions are concerned, commitment can only be indifference. If it attempts to become a politics, to invent its own solutions on the terrain of action, to impose its ubiquity, its immediate universal, on political life, it will only disguise as a double "yes" its double "no," proposing to correct democracy by

136. No. 11-12, p. 244. [The word leadership is in English in the original text.—Trans.]

revolution and revolution by democracy. It is then democracy and revolution which refuse to allow themselves to be united. What is to be done then? Should one continue the work of humanist criticism? It is good, indeed indispensable, that along with professional politicians there should be writers who, without mincing words, expose some of the scandals politics always hides, because it wraps them inside a whole. But as the situation becomes more tense and charged, commitment, even if it continues to be exercised according to its principles, becomes something else. Even though *Les Temps modernes* continued to distribute its criticism equitably, circumstances underlined some remarks, conjured away others, and gave the review an involuntary line. The study it published on the Prague trials was ignored, while what it said about the Indochinese war hit home every time. Sartre's essay on *The Communists and Peace* attests to this factual situation: since concrete freedom was not able to invent the solutions put forward there, or since these were not listened to, since circumstances have transformed his independent criticism into a political line and carried humanist commitment onto the terrain of action, Sartre accepts responsibility for a state of things which he neither wanted nor organized. When today he states a preference in principle for the U.S.S.R. and an agreement with the communists on particular points, he seems far from his initial conception of commitment; but it is not so much he that has changed as it is the world, and there is absolutely no inconsistency on his part. It remains true that freedom does not see its own image in any existing regime or political action. From communism it accepts only the internal principle of "changing the world," which is its own formula; and from communist action it accepts only some "aspects" or "particular points." No more today than yesterday is freedom made flesh, nor does it become historical action. Between freedom and what it does, the distance remains the same. Commitment is still the same brief contact with the world, it still does not take charge of it; it renders judgments only about very general principles or about facts and particular aspects of action. Quite simply, one today consents to make, if not a real balance sheet, at least an algebraic sum of these very general or very particular judgments, and one declares that it is more favorable to the U.S.S.R. Sympathy for communism and unity of action with it on certain particular points represent the maximum possible action in a conception of freedom that allows only for sudden interventions into the world,

for camera shots and flash bulbs. Today, as yesterday, commitment is action at a distance, politics by proxy, a way of putting ourselves right with the world rather than entering it; and, rather than an art of intervention, it is an art of circumscribing, of preventing, intervention. There is thus no change in Sartre in relation to himself, and today, in a different world, he draws new consequences from the same philosophical intuition. For Sartre, as for Descartes, the principle of changing oneself rather than the order of things is an intelligent way of remaining oneself over and against everything. The preference for communism without adherence to it, like yesterday's nonpartisan critique, is an attitude, not an action. Freedom projects its essential negation into communism and is linked to a few of its aspects; but it exempts from scrutiny, neither approving nor blaming communist action taken as a whole, the work which for thirty-five years has been eliciting concrete determinations from its principles. The paradox is only that he makes a contemplative attitude work for the benefit of communist action. We wonder whether, rather than ending up with this semblance of action in order to remain faithful to principles, this would not be, on the contrary, the time to reconsider them; whether, instead of reducing action to the proportions imposed by commitment, it would not be better to re-examine commitment as Sartre understands it; and whether, by so doing, we would not with a single stroke cure action of its paralysis and remove from philosophy its gag.

As first-rate philosophical experience, the development of Sartre's ideas, like any experience, needs to be interpreted. Sartre thinks that the difficulties of his position today come from the course that things have taken and leave his philosophical premises intact. We wonder whether these difficulties are not the uneasiness of a philosophy confronted with a type of relationship to the world—history, action—that it does not want to recognize. For commitment in Sartre's sense is the negation of the link between us and the world that it seems to assert; or rather Sartre tries to make a link out of a negation. When I awake to life, I find I am responsible for a variety of things I did not do but for which I take responsibility by living. In Sartre this *de facto* commitment is always for the worse; the existing world and history never call for anything but my indignation, and commitment in the active sense, which is my response to the original trap, consists then in building myself, in choosing myself, in erasing my congenital compromises, in redeeming them through what I de-

vise as their issue, in beginning myself again, and in again beginning history as well. The very way in which Sartre boorishly approaches communism, not through the history of the undertaking, but by taking it in the present, in this instant, according to the promises or menaces it offers to a consciousness that wants to redeem itself through the future, shows clearly enough that it is not so much a question of knowing where communist action is going, so as either to associate oneself with it or not, as it is of finding a meaning for this action in the Sartrean project. Of course we know that no history contains its entire meaning in itself; it is obscure and too full of meaning as long as I have not put it in perspective. But there are perspectives which take into account all preceding perspectives (particularly those of the actors of the drama), which take them seriously, which attempt to understand them even if it means putting them in their proper place and establishing a hierarchy among them, which owe to this contact with the perspectives of others—with their divergences, with their struggle, and with the sanction that events have brought to these struggles—if not a demonstrative value, at least a certain weight of experience. History itself does not give its meaning to the historian, but it does exclude certain readings into which the reader has obviously put too much of himself and which do not stick closely enough to the text; and it accredits others as probable. For Sartre this probability is the same as nothing. But in rejecting the probable, it is theoretical and practical contact with history that he rejects; he decides to look to history only for the illumination of a drama whose characters—the I and the Other—are defined *a priori* by means of reflection. By taking as his own the gaze that the least-favored casts on our society, by his willingness to see himself through these eyes, by extending an open credit of principle to the party and the regime that claim kinship with the least-favored, Sartre seems to have the greatest concern for the Other. But Sartre hides his reasons from the Other; it is not Sartre that is given to him, it is almost an official personage. The homage rendered to the principle of communism is not only accompanied by all sorts of reservations about the existing regime but is indeed itself a measure of opposition, since what Sartre honors in communism is “pure action,” which it cannot be every day. Thus, despite appearances, the Other is less accepted than neutralized by a general concession. The *cogito* empties like a container through the gap opened by the Other’s gaze; but since there is no meaning visible in

history, Sartre finds himself caught in no perspective other than his own, a perspective in which he would have to confront himself. For him, to be committed is not to interpret and criticize oneself in contact with history; rather it is to recreate one's own relationship with history as if one were in a position to remake oneself from top to bottom, it is to decide to hold as absolute the meaning one invents for one's personal history and for public history, it is to place oneself deliberately in the imaginary. The operation has no other principle than my independence of consciousness, no other result than its confirmation: for others and for history it substitutes the role I decide to let them play; it justifies in principle, but it also limits and terminates, their intervention in my life. It limits impingements, circumscribes evil, transforms the ravenous outside demands into a pact, concludes with history an accord of unity of action which is actually an accord of nonintervention. From the single fact that it is a question of committing *oneself*, that the prisoner is also his own jailer, it is clear that one will never have other bonds than those one currently gives oneself and that one never *will* be committed. Descartes said that one could not at the same time do and not do something, and this is undoubtedly how Sartre understands commitment: as the minimum of coherence and of perseverance, without which one would have had only an intention, one would have tried nothing, one would have learned nothing about the direction to follow. But in reality Descartes's formula states an endless task: when one begins to act, when will one be able to say that one has finished the endeavor? If it fails, it immediately leads us to another action; and the major proof that Sartre's thesis is not a thesis of action is that it is not susceptible of flat contradiction: the esteem in principle for pure action remains intact no matter what existing communism is like. Commitment is so strictly measured out that one cannot conceive of any circumstance that could validly undo it: it can cease only through weariness. Action is another commitment, both more demanding and more fragile: it obliges one always to bear more than what is promised or owed, and at the same time it is susceptible to failure because it addresses itself to others as they are, to the history we are making and they are making, and because it does not relate to principles and particular points but to an enterprise which we put ourselves into entirely, refusing it nothing, not even our criticism, which is part of the action and which is the proof of our commitment. In order for that kind of commitment



to be possible, I must not define my relationships with the outside by contract; I must stop considering my thoughts and the meaning I give to my life as the absolute authority, my criteria and my decisions must be relativized and committed to a trial which, as we have said, can never verify them in a crucial way but which can weaken them. This praxis is just the opposite of pragmatism, for it submits its principles to a continuous critique and tries, if not to be *true*, at least *not* to be *false*. Precisely because it agrees to commit itself to more than what it knows of a party and of history, it allows more to be learned, and its motto could be *Clarum per obscurius*. Choosing according to principles or incontestable details, but without ever seeing where his reticent action leads him, Sartre on the contrary practices *Obscurius per clarum*.

Behind these two commitments there are two meanings of freedom. One is the pure power of doing or not doing, of which Descartes speaks. Remaining the same over the entire course of an action, this power fragments freedom into so many instants, making it a continued creation and reducing it to an indefinite series of acts of positing which holds it at arm's length from annihilation. This type of freedom never becomes what it does. It is never a *doing*—one cannot even see what this word might mean for it. Its action is a magical fiat; and this fiat would not even know what it is applied to if what was to be done were not simultaneously represented as *end*. This freedom that never becomes flesh, never secures anything, and never compromises itself with power is in reality the freedom to judge, which even slaves in chains have. Its equally impalpable “yes” and “no” relate only to things seen. For the power of not doing the things that are done is null at the moment one is doing them, not only, as Descartes believed, because one thereby enters into the external domain where a gesture, a movement, or a word has to either be or not be, but also because this alternative is in force even in ourselves, because what we do occupies our field and renders us, perhaps not incapable of, but unconcerned with, the rest. The pure power of doing or not doing indeed exists, but it is the power of interrupting; and from the fact that defection is always possible, it does not follow that our life needs first to obliterate this “possible” or that it interposes between me who lives and what I live a distance that all actions would arbitrarily have to overcome. With this casing of nothingness, which is simultaneously the separation and the joining of freedom and its acts, both the fiat

and the representation of an *end* disappear. Life and history are there for me, in their own mode, neither *ponens* nor *tollens*: they continue and are continued even when they are transformed. My thoughts and the sense I give to my life are always caught in a swarm of meanings which have already established me in a certain position with regard to others and to events at the moment when I attempt to see clearly. And, of course, these infrastructures are not destiny; my life will transform them. But if I have a chance to go beyond them and become something other than this bundle of accidents, it is not by deciding to give my life this or that meaning; rather, it is by attempting simply to live what is offered me, without playing tricks with the logic of the enterprise, without enclosing it beforehand inside the limits of a premeditated meaning. The word "choice" here barely has a meaning, not because our acts are written in our initial situation, but because freedom does not *descend* from a power of choice to specifications which would be only an exercise, because it is not a pure source of projects which open up time toward the future, and because throughout my present, deciphered and understood as well as it can be as it starts becoming what I will be, freedom is diffused. The meaning of my future does not arise by decree; it is the truth of my experience, and I cannot communicate it other than by recounting the history that made me become this truth. How then shall I date my choices? They have innumerable precedents in my life, unless they are hollow decisions; but in that case they are compensations, and therefore they still have roots. The *end* is the imaginary object that I choose. The end is the dialectical unity of the means, Sartre said somewhere; and this would have happily corrected his abuse elsewhere of this notion, if he had not deprived himself, by rejecting dialectical thought, of the right of recourse to an open consciousness.<sup>137</sup> When did a communist start being a communist, and when did a renegade stop being one? Choice, like judgment, is much less a principle than a consequence, a balance sheet, a formulation which intervenes at certain moments of the internal monologue and of ac-

137. It is a misunderstanding to believe that for Sartre transcendence opens up consciousness. One might say that, for him, consciousness is nothing but an opening, since there is no opacity in it to hold it at a distance from things and since it meets them perfectly where they are, outside. But this is exactly why it does not open *onto* the world, which goes beyond its capacity of meaning; it is exactly coextensive with the world.

tion but whose meaning is formed day by day. Whether it is a question of action or even of thought, the fruitful modes of consciousness are those in which the object does not need to be posited, because consciousness inhabits it and is at work in it, because each response the outside gives to the initiatives of consciousness is immediately meaningful for it and gives rise to a new intervention on its part, and because it is in fact what it does, not only in the eyes of others but for itself. When Marx said, "I am not a Marxist," and Kierkegaard more or less said, "I am not a Christian," they meant that action is too present to the person acting to admit the ostentation of a declared choice. The declared choice is nearly the proof that there has been no choice. One certainly finds in Sartre something similar when he writes that freedom is not in the decision, that one's choices are dominated by a fundamental choice which is dateless and which is symbolized by the myth of the intelligible character. But everything takes place as if these thoughts do not intervene when it is a question for Sartre of taking a position in the present: then he returns to the ideology of choice and to "futurism."

Ultimately it is perhaps the notion of consciousness as a pure power of signifying, as a centrifugal movement without opacity or inertia, which casts history and the social outside, into the signified, reducing them to a series of instantaneous views, subordinating doing to seeing, and finally reducing action to "demonstration" or "sympathy"—reducing doing to showing or seeing done.<sup>138</sup> The surest way of finding action is to find it already present in seeing, which is very far from being the simple positing of something meant. A meaning, if it is posited by a consciousness whose whole essence is to know what it does, is necessarily closed. Consciousness leaves no corner of it unexplored. And if, on the contrary, one definitely admits of open, incomplete meanings, the subject must not be pure presence to itself and to the object. But neither at the level of the perceived, nor even at the level of the ideal, are we dealing with closed meanings. A perceived thing is rather a certain *variation* in relation to a norm or to a spatial, temporal, or colored level, it is a certain distortion, a certain "coherent deformation" of the permanent links which unite us to sensorial fields and to a world. And in the same way an idea is a certain excess in our view in regard to the

138. [In the French: "le faire au faire-voir ou au voir-faire."—Trans.]

available and closed meanings whose depository is language and their reordination around a virtual focus toward which they point but which they do not circumscribe. If this is so, the thought of thoughts, the *cogito*, the pure appearance of something to someone—and first of all of myself to myself—cannot be taken literally and as the testimony of a being whose whole essence is to know itself, that is to say, of a consciousness. It is always through the thickness of a field of existence that my presentation to myself takes place. The mind is always thinking, not because it is always in the process of constituting ideas but because it is always directly or indirectly tuned in on the world and in cycle with history. Like perceived things, my tasks are presented to me, not as objects or ends, but as reliefs and configurations, that is to say, in the landscape of praxis. And just as, when I bring an object closer or move it further away, when I turn it in my hands, I do not need to relate its appearances to a single scale to understand what I observe, in the same way action inhabits its field so fully that anything that appears there is immediately meaningful for it, without analysis or transposition, and calls for its response. If one takes into account a consciousness thus engaged, which is joined again with itself only across its historical and worldly field, which does not touch itself or coincide with itself but rather is divined and glimpsed in the present experience, of which it is the invisible steward, the relationships between consciousnesses take on a completely new aspect. For if the subject is not the sun from which the world radiates or the demiurge of my pure objects, if its signifying activity is rather the perception of a *difference* between two or several meanings—inconceivable, then, without the dimensions, levels, and perspectives which the world and history establish around me—then its action and all actions are possible only as they follow the course of the world, just as I can change the spectacle of the perceived world only by taking as my observation post one of the places revealed to me by perception. There is perception only because I am part of this world through my body, and I give a meaning to history only because I occupy a certain vantage point in it, because other possible vantage points have already been indicated to me by the historical landscape, and because all these perspectives already depend on a truth in which they would be integrated. At the very heart of my perspective, I realize that my private world is already being used, that there is “behavior” that concerns it, and that the other’s place in it is already prepared, because I find other histori-

cal situations to be occupiable by me. A consciousness that is truly engaged in a world and a history on which it has a hold but which go beyond it is not insular. Already in the thickness of the sensible and historical fabric it feels other presences moving, just as the group of men who dig a tunnel hear the work of another group coming toward them. Unlike the Sartrean consciousness, it is not visible only for the other: consciousness can see him, at least out of the corner of its eye. Between its perspective and that of the other there is a link and an established way of crossing over, and this for the single reason that each perspective claims to envelop the others. Neither in private nor in public history is the formula of these relationships "either him or me," the alternative of solipsism or pure abnegation, because these relationships are no longer the encounter of two For-Itselfs but are the meshing of two experiences which, without ever coinciding, belong to a single world.

The question is to know whether, as Sartre says, there are only *men* and *things* or whether there is also the interworld, which we call history, symbolism, truth-to-be-made. If one sticks to the dichotomy, men, as the place where all meaning arises, are condemned to an incredible tension. Each man, in literature as well as in politics, must assume all that happens instant by instant to all others; he must be immediately universal. If, on the contrary, one acknowledges a mediation of personal relationships through the world of human symbols, it is true that one renounces being instantly justified in the eyes of everyone and holding oneself responsible for all that is done at each moment. But since consciousness cannot in practice maintain its pretension of being God, since it is inevitably led to delegate responsibility—it is one abdication for another, and we prefer the one which leaves consciousness the means of knowing what it is doing. To feel responsible for everything in the eyes of everyone and present to all situations—if this leads to approving an action which, like any action, refuses to acknowledge these principles, then one must confess that one is imprisoned in words. If, on the contrary, one agrees that no action assumes as its own all that happens, that it does not reach the event itself, that all actions, even war, are always symbolic actions and count as much upon the effect they will have as a meaningful gesture and as the mark of an intention as upon the direct results of the event—if one thus renounces "pure action," which is a myth (and a myth of the spectator consciousness), perhaps it is then that one has the best

chance of changing the world. We do not say that this margin we give ourselves serves only our personal comfort, by endowing knowledge and literature with a good conscience that pure action refuses them. If truly all action is symbolic, then books are in their fashion actions and deserve to be written in accordance with the standards of the craft, without neglecting in any way the duty of unveiling. If politics is not immediate and total responsibility, if it consists in tracing a line in the obscurity of historical symbolism, then it too is a craft and has its technique. Politics and culture are reunited, not because they are completely congruent or because they both adhere to the event, but because the symbols of each order have echoes, correspondences, and effects of induction in the other. To recognize literature and politics as distinct activities is perhaps finally the only way to be as faithful to action as to literature; and, on the contrary, to propose unity of action to a party when one is a writer is perhaps to testify that one remains in the writer's world: for unity of action has a meaning between parties, each one bringing its own weight and thus maintaining the balance of the common action. But between him who handles signs and him who handles the masses there is no contact that is a political act—there is only a delegation of power from the former to the latter. In order to think otherwise, one must live in a universe where all is meaning, politics as well as literature: one must be a writer. Literature and politics are linked with each other and with the event, but in a different way, like two layers of a single symbolic life or history. And if the conditions of the times are such that this symbolic life is torn apart and one cannot at the same time be both a free writer and a communist, or a communist and an oppositionist, the Marxist dialectic which united these opposites will not be replaced by an exhausting oscillation between them; they will not be reconciled by force. One must then go back, attack obliquely what could not be changed frontally, and look for an action other than communist action.

# Epilogue

On that day, everything was possible . . . the future was present . . . that is to say, time was no more a lightning flash of eternity.

Michelet, *Histoire de la Révolution française*, IV, 1

The question today is less of revolutionizing than of establishing the revolutionary government.

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DIALECTIC IS NOT THE IDEA of a reciprocal action, nor that of the solidarity of opposites and of their sublation. Dialectic is not a development which starts itself again, nor the cross-growth of a quality that establishes as a new order a change which until then had been quantitative—these are consequences or aspects of the dialectic. But taken in themselves or as properties of being, these relationships are marvels, curiosities, or paradoxes. They enlighten only when one grasps them in our experience, at the junction of a subject, of being, and of other subjects: between *those* opposites, in *that* reciprocal action, in *that* relationship between an inside and an outside, between the elements of *that* constellation, in *that* becoming, which not only becomes but becomes for itself, there is room, without contradiction and without magic, for relationships with double meanings,

for reversals, for opposite and inseparable truths, for sublations, for a perpetual genesis, for a plurality of levels or orders. There is dialectic only in that type of being in which a junction of subjects occurs, being which is not only a spectacle that each subject presents to itself for its own benefit but which is rather their common residence, the place of their exchange and of their reciprocal interpretation. The dialectic does not, as Sartre claims, provide finality, that is to say, the presence of the whole in that which, by its nature, exists in separate parts; rather it provides the global and primordial cohesion of a field of experience wherein each element opens onto the others. It is always conceived as the expression or truth of an experience in which the commerce of subjects with one another and with being was previously instituted. It is a thought which does not constitute the whole but which is situated in it. It has a past and a future which are not its own simple negation; it is incomplete so long as it does not pass into other perspectives and into the perspectives of others. Nothing is more foreign to it than the Kantian conception of an ideality of the world which is the same in everyone, just as the number two or the triangle is the same in every mind, outside of meetings or exchanges: the natural and human world is unique, not because it is parallelly constituted in everyone or because the "I think" is indiscernible in myself and in the other, but because our difference opens onto that world, because we are imitable and participatable through each other in this relationship with it.

The adventures of the dialectic, the most recent of which we have retraced here, are errors through which it must pass, since it is in principle a thought with several centers and several points of entry, and because it needs time to explore them all. With the name "culture," Max Weber identified the primary coherence of all histories. Lukács believes it possible to enclose them all in a cycle which is closed when all meanings are found in a present reality, the proletariat. But this historical fact salvages universal history only because it was first "prepared" by philosophical consciousness and because it is the emblem of negativity. Thence comes the reproach of idealism that is made against Lukács; and the proletariat and revolutionary society as he conceives them are indeed ideas without historical equivalents. But what remains of the dialectic if one must give up reading history and deciphering in it the becoming-true of society? Nothing of it is left in Sartre. He holds as utopian this continued intuition which



was to be confirmed every day by the development of action and of revolutionary society and even by a true knowledge of past history. To dialectical philosophy, to the truth that is glimpsed behind irreconcilable choices, he opposes the demand of an intuitive philosophy which wants to see all meanings immediately and simultaneously. There is no longer any ordered passage from one perspective to another, no completion of others in me and of me in others, for this is possible only in time, and an intuitive philosophy poses everything in the instant: the Other thus can be present to the I only as its pure negation. And certainly one gives the Other his due, one even gives him the absolute right to affirm his perspective, the I consents to this in advance. But it only consents: how *could it accompany* the Other in his existence? In Sartre there is a plurality of subjects but no intersubjectivity. Looked at closely, the absolute right that the I accords to the other is rather a duty. They are not joined in action, in the relative and the probable, but only in principles and on condition that the other stick rigorously to them, that he does credit to his name and to the absolute negation that it promises. The world and history are no longer a system with several points of entry but a sheaf of irreconcilable perspectives which never coexist and which are held together only by the hopeless heroism of the I.

Is it then the conclusion of these adventures that the dialectic was a myth? The illusion was only to precipitate into a historical fact—the proletariat's birth and growth—history's total meaning, to believe that history itself organized its own recovery, that the proletariat's power would be its own suppression, the negation of the negation. It was to believe that the proletariat was in itself the dialectic and that the attempt to put the proletariat in power, temporarily exempted from any dialectical judgment, could put the dialectic in power. It was to play the double game of truth and authoritarian practice in which the will ultimately loses consciousness of its revolutionary task and truth ceases to control its realization. Today, as a hundred years ago and as thirty-eight years ago, it remains true that no one by himself is subject nor is he free, that freedoms interfere with and require one another, that history is the history of their dispute, which is inscribed and visible in institutions, in civilizations, and in the wake of important historical actions, and that there is a way to understand and situate them, if not in a system with an exact and definitive hierarchy and in the perspective of a *true*, homogeneous, ultimate society, at least as different episodes of a

single life, where each one is an experience of that life and can pass into those who follow. What then is obsolete is not the dialectic but the pretension of terminating it in an end of history, in a permanent revolution, or in a regime which, being the contestation of itself, would no longer need to be contested from the outside and, in fact, would no longer have anything outside it.

We have already said something about the concept of the end of history, which is not so much Marxist as Hegelian and—even if one construes it with A. Kojève<sup>1</sup> as the end of humanity and the return to the cyclical life of nature—is an idealization of death and could not possibly convey Hegel's core thought. If one completely eliminates the concept of the end of history, then the concept of revolution is relativized; such is the meaning of "permanent revolution." It means that there is no definitive regime, that revolution is the regime of creative imbalance,<sup>2</sup> that there will always be other oppositions to sublimate, that there must therefore always be an opposition within revolution. But how can one be sure that an internal opposition is not an opposition to revolution? We thus see the birth of a very singular institution: official criticism, a caricature of permanent revolution. One would be wrong to think that it is only a ruse, a mask, or an application of Machiavelli's famous prescription which teaches that one rules better through persuasion than through force and that the summit of tyranny is seduction. It is probable that true demands and true changes pass through this door. But it is also certain that they only serve to make the apparatus' grip stronger and that, when it has become an element of power, criticism must stop at the moment at which it becomes interesting, when it would evaluate, judge, and virtually contest the power in its totality. In principle, then, this power is unaware of its truth—the picture

1. [Alexander Kojève, the author of several noted philosophical works, including the *Introduction à la lecture de Hegel* (Paris, 1947). Selections from this work have been translated into English by James Nichols in *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel* (New York, 1969). Merleau-Ponty and Sartre were influenced by his lectures at the Ecole des Hautes Etudes during the latter part of the 1930s.—Trans.]

2. "For an indefinitely long time and in constant internal struggle, all social relations undergo transformation. Society keeps on changing its skin. . . . Revolutions in economy, technique, sciences, the family, morals, and everyday life develop in complex reciprocal action and do not allow society to achieve equilibrium" (Leon Trotsky, *The Permanent Revolution and Results and Prospects*, trans. J. Wright and B. Pearce [New York, 1969], p. 132).