



AFP

No Exit for Jean-Paul SARTRE

If you think philosophers are 17th-century characters whose unreadable work appears in dusty old volumes, then you can turn over a fresh page for Jean-Paul Sartre. Unconvinced? Wait—Sartre is, or was, a very *modern* philosopher. He doesn't ponder the essence of teacups and tables: he deals only in the hard stuff of terrorism, communism, freedom, colonialism—and, the big idea, existentialism.

And, dying only 21 years ago, he is within reach. Sartre—communist sympathiser, who felt freer under Nazi occupation than in liberated Paris; Sartre—subversive thinker who claimed he appreciated the merits of terrorism. You may not agree with all he had to say, but you can reach him, you can experience his defiant stance, his courage and his individualism.

On 19 April 1980 more than 50,000 mourners followed his funeral procession. Millions watched on television as the cortège shuffled toward Montparnasse cemetery. France was preparing to be deprived of the philosopher's opinions on subjects as yet unrealised. But the big question was, what message will he have for his maker?

"I am my liberty! You had scarcely created me when I stopped belonging to you! Nature jumped back but I felt quite alone in the middle of your well-meaning world, like a man who'd lost his shadow. There's nothing left in heaven, neither good nor evil, nor anyone to give me orders. For I am a man, and each man must find his own way. You can neither punish or reprimand me and that is why I make you so afraid!" This was the voice of Jean-Paul Sartre.

A good starting point for the Sartre trail is the Café de Flore on the boulevard St-Germain. Sartre loved the theatre of everyday life and the

nonchalance of the waiters here; and just as he studied the café waiters acting out their parts, so you too, today, can ponder the pseudo-intellectual crowd, sucking on cigarettes and looking pensive. Paris's cafés played an important rôle in his work; and Sartre and St-Germain-des-Prés are eternally linked, like Van Gogh and Arles.

After the city's liberation in August 1944, Sartre and his circle brought a new influence to these streets of the Left Bank. In an atmosphere of bohemianism and celebration, for a short but ideal time, he and his long-term partner, Simone de Beauvoir, would work at the tables of the Café de Flore. At the beginning they coped well with all the public attention, and could be found dining with Picasso in Le Catalan or bickering with Truman Capote (author of *Breakfast at Tiffany's*). The couple's 'open' relationship was also a part of their everyday lives, as Sartre would often take advantage of young women mesmerised by his mind, if not by his looks.

It was Capote who claimed to have discovered the *famille* Sartre. "Wall-eyed, pipe-sucking Sartre, and his spinsterish moll, De Beauvoir, were usually propped in a corner like an abandoned pair of ventriloquist's dolls." And by the autumn of 1945 abandonment was a favoured option for Sartre: as more people were coming to the area to pick him out, stardom was affecting his work. Withdrawal to the Hôtel Pont-Royal, on the rue Montalembert, was now a necessity.

Before his arrival on the Left Bank, Sartre had already established himself as one of the 20th century's greatest thinkers. His 1938 novel, *La Nausée* (*Nausea*), sets out his existentialist philosophy. The central character, Antoine Roquentin, is faced with a constant feeling of

sickness caused by his realisation that there is no God to justify the existence of the world, that there is too much of everything in the universe and too much in himself. "Everything which exists is born for no reason, carries on existing through weakness, and dies by accident."

In *La Nausée* Sartre puts complex philosophical ideas into everyday settings, and it is here that we see his liking for cafés. Roquentin spends much of his time in the local café, observing the waiter's behaviour. He finds temporary respite from his nausea by listening to the café's juke-box. "If you broke the record, or tore up the score, the song would still be there. It is not like a tree or a human being, the product of the accidental coming together of a number of physical circumstances." This, Sartre's best and most accessible novel, is the kernel of his work and thought, his claim to immortality.

In the 1960s and 1970s Sartre and De Beauvoir were still an active feature of Parisian street life. They made an odd sight, joining forces with dishevelled and clearly much younger people, all promoting various causes under the banner of freedom. And Sartre's writing continued to flourish, in works such as *Being and Nothingness*, and *The Age of Reason*. Here was a philosopher of magnitude, an immortal destined to be a talking-point for centuries. Even the establishment was now keen to show its appreciation, although it was an adoration that showed little understanding of the man: in 1964 Sartre refused the Nobel Prize for literature, claiming that the Nobel Prize was "the recognition of literary worth by an official establishment whose main concern was the maintenance of bourgeois values". The French tried to grant him the *Légion d'Honneur*—but in vain. Sartre was interested in self-renewal, not self-promotion. The Café de Flore period was now history. He and De Beauvoir, no longer ventriloquist's dolls, were punk-rock philosophers, eager to campaign, determined to challenge the *status quo*. It seemed that the older Sartre became the more radical were his views and actions. Sid Vicious in collar and tie, or Che Guevara with a pipe? Either way, Sartre was very much a hands-on philosopher.

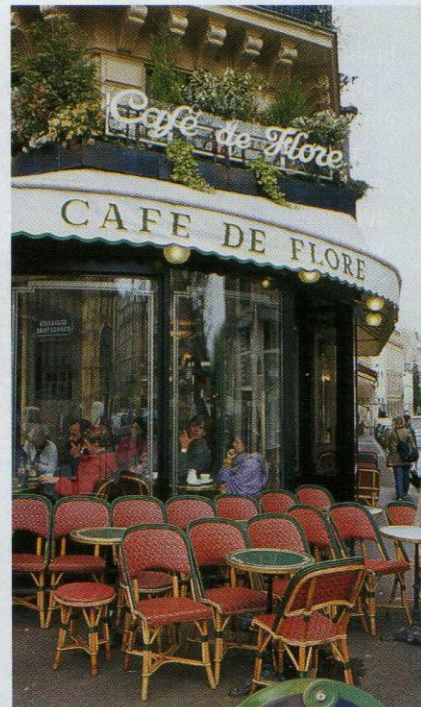
In 1961, his apartment was bombed twice after his declaration of support for Algeria's claim to independence from France. Sartre was undeterred. He put his name to a document denouncing the Communist Party for failing the Paris student rebellion of '68. And he was more than happy to endorse a pamphlet entitled *The Communists are Afraid of the Revolution*. Indeed, Sartre did not believe in revolutions as such: he considered that, in becoming institutionalised, they fail to recognise new problems. What he did believe in was perpetual revolt!

What finally brought Sartre face to face with the law was his distribution of the Maoist-

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inspired *La Cause du Peuple*. Although it was officially banned by the government in 1970, Sartre and De Beauvoir continued to hand out copies to the public. The couple were arrested several times, but never charged. The philosopher was too potent a symbol of freedom to punish harshly: as Charles de Gaulle commented: "One does not imprison Voltaire".

Sartre's most famous play *Huis Clos* (*In Camera* or *No Exit*) presents hell as an endless repetition of days spent in the same place with the same people, with no prospect of any change. It contains the unforgettable catch-phrase, "Hell is other people". And now, for Sartre, life was imitating art. In 1980, as he lay weak and nearly blind, he commented to De Beauvoir, "I have the feeling of perpetually living the same day over and over again. I see you, I see the doctor, and then it is all repeated."

When Sartre died at 74, of kidney failure, the news came as a shock to France and even to those who knew him well. The response was proof of widespread public respect. The most poignant tribute came from his most intimate admirer, Simone de Beauvoir. In *Adieux* she describes his death in hospital: "I lay down for a moment beside his dead body, knowing that we would never meet again." De Beauvoir was to be buried beside Sartre in Montparnasse cemetery six years later.

If, in his last days, as he lost his sight and his hope, Sartre shared the common human lot, his unique mind blessed him with immortality. He may even have pondered this himself—how he would be talked of and written about, and the puzzle he would for ever be, for admirers and detractors alike. For Jean-Paul Sartre there would be *No Exit!* ☞

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Above, left: Followers of Sartre still come to pay homage and to reflect at his graveside in Montparnasse cemetery.

Above: The famous Café de Flore on the boulevard St-Germain where Jean-Paul Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir spent long hours discussing the meaning of life.