

THE DEATH OF JEAN-PAUL SARTRE

of all people, he must have been
the least surprised by death.
i wasn't surprised by his death either,
not that i knew anything about his health,
but because i must, as part of my job,
have about fifteen minutes communicable knowledge
of current intellectual trends,
and so i am aware that existentialism
is a word only uttered today
by norman mailer, me, and a few retarded philosophy majors,
and i doubt either mr. mailer or the philosophy majors
are complimented by my inclusion of myself.

in college and graduate school, you see,
i basically got by with one term paper.
it was entitled: "the existentialism of ... "
you fill in the blank.
"the existentialism of sartre or camus or tennyson or
byron or kit smart or milton (yes, milton) or
chaucer (his retraction posed a problem), or beowulf
or caedmon or the venerable fucking bede."

i wasn't trying to put anybody on --
i'd read every word of sartre and his
commentators and his imitators,
and a lot of my professors hadn't,
and i sincerely believed that all great writers
must have been existentialists because,
like all true believers or true non-believers,
i was convinced that for a writer
not to have been an existentialist
would have disqualified him as great.
all of this no doubt was in reaction
to the catholic schools i had attended
where it was taught that all great writers
were, at the very least, latent or closet catholics.

my standard term paper
received about five hundred a-plusses,
while much more knowledgeable and ingenious students
received Incompletes for their herculean-himalayan
and perpetually unfinished papers on "iconography
in arnold as reflected in victorian furniture."

not only did i preach existentialism,
but i began to live
what i knew to be a distorted, popularized
edition of it.
i'm sure my series of marriages
(perhaps mailer's as well)

owe at least a little to sartre,
although they are neither that simply
explained nor regretted.
and some of my existentialism was,
and i hope still is,
the genuine article.
i lecture once a semester to every class
on sartre's "existentialism is a humanism."
i'd give you the lecture right now,
but, what with declining enrollments,
i'd better hope you'll sign up and pay your tuition.

so sartre is dead now,
along with his vocabulary-world,
and the moral certainties of religion
are alive again and inhabiting the uncrowded humanities
building
(along with structure, necessity, and remedial comp.),
there is also talk, of course, of faculty salaries,
student evaluations, and the inevitability of layoffs.
i am among the loudest of the talkers,
because if i were ever laid-off
i wouldn't be able to afford
to mope around the deux magots --
i doubt i could even afford the polly maggoo anymore --
and moping is becoming a lost art anyhow.

jean-paul, they have cremated your feet,
at which i only metaphorically sat.
strangely enough, however,
my current metaphysical problem remains
whether i am capable of the freedom, the alienation,
responsibility, and angst,

of the either/or

of a marriage/dissolution.

D-DAY, 1980

coming out of the movie, "yanks,"
my little boy asks me,
"did we do something good
in the second world war?"

he's ten years old
and all he's ever heard of our military history
is napalm and radiation, washita
and the little big horn, cuba and
chile, and that george washington