Sartre's Theater of Resistance: *Les Mouches* and the Deadlock of Collective Responsibility
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**Abstract:** Sartre's play *Les Mouches* (*The Flies*), first performed in 1943 under German occupation, has long been controversial. While intended to encourage resistance against the Nazis, its approval by the censor indicates that the regime did not recognize the play as a threat. Further, its apparently violent and solitary themes have been read as irresponsible or apolitical. For these reasons, the play has been characterized as ambiguous or worse. Sartre himself later saw it as overemphasizing individual autonomy, and in the view of one critic, it conveys an "existentialist fascism." In response to this reading, it is necessary to attend to the elements of the play that already emphasize duty to society. From this perspective, the play can be seen as anticipating the concern with collective responsibility usually associated with the later Sartre of the 1960s. More than this, the play's apparent "ambiguity" can be found to exemplify a didacticism that is much more complex than sometimes attributed to Sartre. It is not only an exhortation about ethical responsibility, but also a performance of the difficulties attendant to that duty.

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Jean-Paul Sartre, more than any other writer, took the responsibility to speak on behalf of Resistance. He himself declared that he owed a certain break in his thought, from the description of the anxiety of the individual to the consideration of the formation of community, to the experience of the occupation and its horrors.[1] As a result of his unique status as the engaged intellectual *par excellence*, what John Gerassi called the "hated conscience of his century," Sartre's own conduct under the Occupation has always been called into question.[2] An assessment of Sartre's value requires a close study of the relationship between his affirmation of individual liberty and responsibility – so vigorous it is sometimes suspected of nihilism – and his corresponding emphasis on the creation of community. It is my contention that study of Sartre's early play *Les Mouches* (*The Flies*) demonstrates a commitment to collective political action that is usually associated with the later, more Marxist Sartre.[3] Further, while close reading can demonstrate its engagement, the play also presents a more complex, mediated account of ethics and indeterminacy than commentators on his literary work sometimes allow.

**A Call to Resistance or Existentialist Fascism?**

The question of Sartre's own status as a resistant or as an opportunist has often tended towards his lightning rod of engaged literature, the play *Les Mouches*. Sartre's play re-writes Aeschylus's *Orestesia*, an inaugural narrative of the overcoming of vengeance by justice. Revisiting the internicine struggles of the house of Atreus, Sartre rewrites elements of the myth, taken primarily from the second part of the trilogy. *Les Mouches* portrays the vengeance taken by Orestes on his mother, Clytemnestra and her lover, Ægistheus; his relationship with his sister and accomplice, Electra; and the city's torment by the Furies, recast by Sartre as the titular flies. While in Aeschylus the Furies appear following Orestes's act to punish him for matricide,

Sartre's flies are omnipresent from the start, symbolizing the cult of guilt and remorse attendant to Pétain's France. Indeed, Sartre intended the play not as an exercise in neo-classicism, but as a panegyric to resistance to be performed in the midst of Nazi-occupied Paris.[4] In addition to a philosophical statement about absolute human freedom, outside ordinary legal limits, he expected to have a direct political effect: to represent and to justify the violence of Resistance fighters against the Vichy state.

As *Les Mouches* was necessarily allegorical and its message concealed, there has always been doubt as to whether it was really as subversive as its author intended. Allan Stoekl is the most recent of these accusers, in his 2003 article "What the Nazis Saw: *Les Mouches* in Occupied Paris."[5] As Stoekl sees it, Sartre's work is hardly unambiguously anti-fascist, but rather "a polyvalent work that could be read in different ways by different groups" (80). Stoekl argues that while, to be sure, Resistance members in the audience thought they recognized an anti-Nazi message, collaborators could have just as easily found in Sartre's play an "existentialist fascism" (80). In support of this argument, Stoekl appeals to a single German critic (alone in the collaborationist press, which denounced Sartre's play as incomprehensible avant-gardism) who indeed claimed that Sartre's hero, Orestes, was a Nazi superman (Stoekl 79). Jonathan Judaken, who defends Sartre from charges of opportunism or hypocrisy, nonetheless characterizes Sartre's play as "ambivalent both in its context and within the text itself" and as "ambiguous" (Judaken 94, 96).

Orestes, after all, achieves his concrete freedom, and liberates the city of Argos, through committing a horrifying crime – murdering his own mother in vengeance against her complicity in the slaughter of his father. Throughout the play, Sartre emphasizes the need to overcome evil through a willingness to commit crime, and heaps scorn on the thought of remorse. Could we not

see this politics of the deed, this fascination with violence and the rejection of ordinary morality, as the worst sort of fascist propaganda? Stoekl characterizes Orestes's act as "a purely solitary act – murderous – whose net effect is to allow the individual to break free not only from his past, but from all conventional morality," and "a scandalous, vengeful, destructive one that has no ultimate positive effects" (81). Stoekl feels comfortable inverting the signification of all of Sartre's symbols, arguing that we might easily read Sartre's omnipresent flies as Jews infesting the healthy body politic.

The accumulation of this argument is a revisionist variety of reader-response criticism: Readers of the present, blinded by Sartre's subsequent leftist credentials, take him at his word when he assures us that *Les Mouches* advocates resistance to authoritarianism. We fail to see that Sartre's audience of 1943 could, if they wished, have easily seen confirmation of their own Nazi-sympathizing preferences. Sartre's theme is a violent, individual affirmation of freedom, a notion applicable to the extreme right as much as it is to the left. From here, a number of disquieting aspersions are cast on Sartre's notorious later conduct as spokesman for anti-colonialism, socialism, and the 1960s new left.

**Censorship and Ambiguity**

As Stoekl suggests, *Les Mouches* must be read historically in determining its political agenda. First, we must consider that it was accepted by the Nazi censor, like two of Sartre's other classics from the period, *Being and Nothingness* and *No Exit*. In order to account for this at all, we are compelled to agree, to some small degree, with Stoekl's thesis. The censor alone suffices to prove that at least one Nazi saw Sartre's theme as apolitical, or in some sense pro-Nazi, or, at the very least, anodyne in its solidarity with Resistance. Moreover, it is this very misrecognition by at least one Nazi that is the very condition of possibility for the performance of *Les Mouches.*

Sartre could certainly have written a pro-Resistance play for the desk drawer, but in order to have it performed, and thereby to encourage the Resistance to which it appeals, its message is necessarily made to a degree obscure and clandestine.

It is this very fact of censorship that requires Sartre to veil his true theme, which is the problem of the responsibility of a Resistance militant to commit acts of violence. One might criticize Sartre for publishing at all, but this condemns his efforts to encourage resistance and endorses resignation, which hardly seems the proper response to political crisis. Further, it exonerates the many playwrights who chose apolitical themes, while denouncing Sartre for his willingness to approach the unavoidable but inflammatory themes of violence and guilt.[6] It is then, the condition of *Les Mouches* to carry with it an ambiguity of message, and in fact the most extreme and troubling of ambiguities: The question of insurrection and the devolution of the state's monopoly on violence to the individual. This problem is inscribed into *Les Mouches*, in the circumstance of its first performance in the Paris of 1943, and also in Sartre's very text. Sartre never tires of insisting on the lack of guarantee motivating a free political act, the constant danger of error and excess. In the third part of Aeschylus's trilogy, Orestes and Electra are vindicated for their murder of Clytemnestra by the gods, and the Furies cease their pursuit. Sartre's flies plague Orestes throughout the play, while the only God present, Jupiter, is a bullying tyrant who appears to stand in for Hitler.

Stoekl's reading strives to recreate the possible reception *Les Mouches* might have had by its censor and its most reactionary audience members, regardless of the intricacies of what Sartre actually wrote. Sartre's text itself counters the fascist reading in significant ways that Stoekl, and perhaps the Nazi-sympathizing audience whose perspective he reconstructs, chooses to ignore. Orestes's act – the killing of his stepfather Ægistheus and his mother Clytemnestra – is not the

purely isolated affirmation of individual freedom that Stoekl reads. Rather, Sartre's play is as much about the creation of fraternity through revolt, the necessary forging of community by a break with the inertia of shoddy individual soul-searching, as it is about the act of a free individual.[7]

**Individual and Community**

Orestes arrives from exile, a stranger who is not recognized as the heir to the throne, by himself or by his fellow citizens (F 50). Before his commitment, Orestes declares himself free; "I'm light as gossamer and walk on air" (F 59). Contrary to an individualist reading of the play, Orestes is in fact a "free individual" in the abstract sense long before earning his concrete freedom, which only appears in society. He speaks at great length about his estrangement from the community: "These folk are no concern of mine. I have not see one of their children come into the world, nor been present at their daughters' weddings; I don't share their remorse, I don't even know a single one of them by name" (F 61). Orestes's revolutionary act is then not one that founds an individual sovereignty, but rather one that gains "droit de cité" (TC 14). Abel translates this as "the freedom of the city;" while this is not entirely incorrect, it is important that Sartre's text emphasizes Orestes's goal as earning the right to community, not acquiring a purely libertarian freedom (F 61). Orestes speaks of his initial problem as alienation from his fellow citizens; his project is a crime, committed to acquire "their memories, their hopes and fears, and fill with these the void within me […]" (F 61). He later characterizes his deed as his only gift to the community, and as a heavy burden; he tells Electra that their abstract freedom made them too light, and that "now our feet sink into the soil" (F 120). Orestes's act negates the pure freedom of the individual, rather than affirming it. His crime – the murder of his stepfather and mother –

asserts this community of equality at the price of the hierarchical, traditional relationship of filiation.

It is Sartre himself who is partly responsible for the over-emphasis on individualism in the reading of this play. In 1969, Sartre reconsidered *Les Mouches* and found it overly committed to the problematic of individual heroism, which, from his new vantage point, was only "a myth" and "a false experience," to be superseded by the true experience of society (IT 34). While this interest in heroism was a necessary stage for his thought, it was one that he had now discarded, even to the point of writing a counter-play, *The Devil and the Good Lord* (IT 34). Sartre's self-criticism and revision were unnecessarily hyberbolic, however. Close attention to *Les Mouches* reveals that while it does emphasize individual action to a degree Sartre would later find inappropriate, there is already at this early date the glimmer of Sartre's later notion of freedom.[8] As Sartre will defines it in 1969, freedom is "the small movement which makes of a totally conditioned social being someone who does not render back completely what his conditioning has given him" (IT 35). While Orestes's act is extreme, reflecting the urgency of Resistance action during the occupation, there is in *Les Mouches* already the notion of an apparently free individual who inquires into his own place in the world and the environmental disorder that conditions him, with the goal of overcoming the determining force of that situation.

Further, while Sartre's play is very much a critique of the cult of remorse and guilt imposed by Vichy France, it does not at all advocate amnesia or refusal of responsibility. While Electra, Orestes's sister, initially encourages Orestes to accept the duty of commitment to his fellow citizens, she later comes to represent a guiltless, and hence sterile, political imagination. In Act II, scene one, Electra wears a white dress, incurring the wrath of Jupiter, who has required all the citizens of Argos to dress in black for their collective responsibility for the murder of

Agamemnon (F 79). While this is initially an act of rebellion, Electra's belief in her own personal purity leads her to repudiate Orestes's murder of their stepfather and mother. Electra speaks of Orestes's crime as tearing off her eyelids, forcing her to see the outcome of her commitment; a result that her insistence on her abstract virtue refuses (F 109). Judaken expresses some concern that Orestes leaves the city, rather than remaining to help rebuild (94). In context, it is clear from Orestes's final speech that his exit is not to be construed as abandonment. Rather, he refuses to become king, preferring to be "a king with out a kingdom;" addressing them as "my people," he tells the citizens of Argos to "reshape" their lives, and that "all must begin anew" (F 123). The purpose of this gesture is to implore the audience to take responsibility and freedom now that Orestes has provided the necessary space by eliminating oppression. If he were to stay behind to draft a new constitution, this would undercut Sartre's purpose. Orestes's people have been liberated to build a new life for themselves; as they are free, they should not rely on him, their "rightful" king, to establish a future on their behalf.

**The Individual and the Masses**

Orestes's commitment carries with it both a concern for community and a desire to realize freedom in the concrete. This engagement mirrors Sartre's own progress from an early concern with abstract individual freedom toward the realization of freedom in society, leading to his revolutionary commitments.[9] These found expression in the political works of the 1950s and early 1960s – *The Communists and Peace*, *Search for a Method*, and *The Critique of Dialectical Reason*. Sartre argues that a revolutionary subject requires knowledge of concrete alternative possibilities and on the recognition of oppression.[10] However, more than this, insurrectionary political action is impossible without the action of a free human being, "defined by his *going beyond* the situation in which he is placed" (SM 225). For Sartre, while masses are inert, classes

have agency, and more than this, "Classes don't just happen to exist, they are made."[11] He recognizes heroism in the capacity not just to posit and enact alternatives than the pre-existent situation, but in those who, like Orestes, orient this activity towards the liberation of others: "unlike the lonely rebel, the revolutionary understands himself only in his relationships of solidarity with his class" (CP 226).

This is in continuity with the entirety of Sartre's work; he will never consider existence to be sufficient to provide for human praxis. While he discovered that human beings tended to be far more heteronomonous than he had originally believed, he maintained the possibility of a marginal transformation, called freedom: the capacity by which individuals can produce a discrepancy with the social framework into which they are thrown. For this reason, Sartre promised to reveal history as a "*detotalized totality*" (SM 78). The Sartre of the *Critique of Dialectic Reason* argues that the essence of dialectics is the capacity to totalize, to construct a whole out of a multiplicity of isolated perspectives.[12] If dialectical laws can only be comprehensible from the perspective of totalisation, the critical question is whether there is "a region of being where totalisation is the very form of existence" (CDR 45). Sartre will proceed to argue that this region of being is that inhabited by an individual's life; an individual strives to account for the meaning of his existence in the entirety of the world (CDR 51). Sartre argues that this critique cannot be a contemplative one, but rather that "the critical investigation can and must be anyone's reflexive experience" (CDR 48). Sartre argues that for a historical totalisation to exist, all human lives must be moments in this totalisation, striving for reconciliation with the whole (CDR 50). It is the very uncanniness of being out of step with totality, the specifically human experiences of anxiety, nausea, and the guilt portrayed by the flies, that compel everyone "to re-examine his intellectual tools," thereby rejuvenating human development as a whole (CDR

50). It is this attempt to grasp a relation to the historical experience of the world in lived experience that comprises critique (CDR 51).

It is this place for individual experience that refutes the *a priori* schematism of history and confirms the true experience of historical events; so revolution can never be reduced to an inevitable consequence of class struggle and economic development (CDR 123). Rather, historical events can only be produced by individuals who are in possession of at least some small margin of free action: "we must expect to find the support of collective objects in the concrete activity of individuals" (CDR 77). It is this activity that continually criticizes and corrects dialectics. Sartre maintains throughout his work the possibility of freedom. The imperative to realize collective freedom and equality expressed by Marxism, and the historical process of overcoming scarcity that will allow for this victory,  is fought and won by individuals and groups. This revolution requires action that will only come into the world through concrete individuals and their praxes. For this period of Sartre's work, an individual finds him or herself embedded in a historical situation, but is capable of a movement of freedom within this horizon, and further, it is this freedom that is itself the movement towards historical progress, towards collective freedom and responsibility.

The responsibility to others emphasized in Sartrean commitment has an unexpected relationship to the emphasis on alterity in the work of Emmanuel Levinas.[13] Levinas himself recognized that whatever the controversy surrounding *Les Mouches*, it was in essence an attempt at ethical responsibility, rather than a bombastic assertion of individuality. In 1986, Levinas avowed that "although this will not please ingrates who permit themselves to judge [Sartre]," he had "admiration for his obvious genius, but also his vivacity, his presence, his acts of imprudence."[14]  Among these acts of imprudence, Levinas specifically defended *Les Mouches*,

expressing surprise that "Sartre is being reproached, for lack of anything else to fault him with, for having mounted a production during the occupation, an anti-German play amid the German presence in Paris" (43). It is worth considering the ways that *Les Mouches* demonstrates social responsibility, inviting Levinas's admiration.

**Collective Responsibility**

*Les Mouches*, an early work, already demonstrates Sartre's belief that we begin as implicated in a situation from the outset, and have the task incumbent upon ourselves of reconciling our individual experience and its attendant anxiety with the totalizing historical necessity of collective liberation. Far from a doctrine of individual self-sufficiency, Sartre's ontology throws us into the world essentially free, but also as the product of the injustice that feeds and clothes us. This theme is generally considered to be the innovation of the later Sartre. However, in *Les Mouches*, we can already read the "*objectively incriminating situation*," in addition to the failure of society to redress this situation, which Thomas Flynn identifies as the grounds for "*collective responsibility*."[15] As Flynn describes it, Sartre's implicit ethical maxim, formulated during the Algerian War, is to "Act as if you were each responsible for the assassinations carried out in the colony by your soldiers in your name. Only then will your consciousnesses be raised to move you to serious action against such atrocities" (202).

With a reading of *Les Mouches* that pays attention to Sartre's text, we find something much closer to the ethical maxim Flynn locates in Sartre's work and a complete repudiation of Stoekl's "existentialist fascism" claim. We do not see a frenzied call to extricate oneself from other people and their mediocrity, but the endorsement of political action to form a new and authentic community. We do not have a figure of heroic transgression, committing atrocities to prove his criminal freedom, but a character that comes to recognize his own responsibility for the

unjust situation in which he has been placed, and chooses to act to remedy the causes of that situation. Also, clearly, Orestes's act is one of revolution against established authority, rather than violence on behalf of that authority against its marginal societal components. If Orestes had dedicated himself to violence on behalf of Jupiter to exterminate the flies, we might see some complicity with the fascist project. This is not at all what takes place.

The allegorical nature of Sartre's play makes Orestes unusual in Sartre's work, not a psychological personage or a fantasy projection of Sartre himself, but a symbol. A symbol, it would appear, for the spirit of French Resistance fighters, of which Sartre had some acquaintance, even if his own participation was limited; in his words, "I only did a few errands" (IT 34). We find Sartre's immediate encomium to this Resistance in his epochal 1945 radio address, "La République du silence" ("The Republic of Silence.")[16] Like *Les Mouches*, the occasional and highly rhetorical nature of this piece makes "La République du silence" especially liable to misreading.

**Ontological Freedom and the Imperative of Resistance**

At worst, we can see in "The Republic of Silence" a certain opportunism in close proximity to the Gaullist myth of universal resistance, which Sartre would dedicate the rest of his career to combating.[17] Sartre begins with the striking assertion that "We were never more free than during the German Occupation" (RS 498). This single sentence is meant to encapsulate the basic paradox of oppression – the irreducible ontological freedom of all human beings is immediately interrupted by the concrete existence of social conditions that utterly confine that freedom. It is this contradiction that is the necessity and basis of political action, the project of implementing, in the material world, the ontological freedom that all humans possess.

Sartre goes on to make claims for all French, everyone who was a product of this situation of essential freedom and everyday oppression: "as workers, Jews, or political prisoners, we were deported EN MASSE" (RS 498). In this statement we might see premonitions of the Gaullist belief that all French were oppressed and all French were resistants, and no one was a collaborator. However, Sartre's "we" is identified with the workers, the Jews, and the political prisoners; that is to say, the "we" is not an empirical, descriptive statement of universal oppression by and resistance to the Nazis, but rather a normative statement that the genuine community that is coming into existence with the liberation is the heir and continuation to these oppressed groups. Sartre's "we," from the outset, excludes the Milice and the collaborators.

His "we" is, however, also not limited to specific individuals or Resistance heroes. Sartre speaks of "the choice that each of us made of his life, and of his being was an authentic choice because it was made face to face with death, because it could always have been expressed in these terms: 'Rather death than …'" (RS 498-499). That is to say, all Frenchmen worthy of the name, whether or not true heroes, are only proper citizens of what Sartre calls "the republic of silence" – that is, the true political community inaugurated by collective resistance to the Nazis – to the degree that their choices deviated from Nazi legality, and hence were performed at the risk of death. There is, on the whole, rather than glorious acts of heroism that purchase one's place as a free human and a member of the new community of resistants, more a margin of resistance or resistance by degree. It is the extent that one dedicated oneself to Resistance that one can lay claim to the "the austere virtues of that other Republic of Silence and of Night," established "in darkness and in blood" (RS 500). Paradoxically, Sartre speaks of the Resistance fighter as both completely alone and completely responsible for others: "in the depth of their solitude, it was the others that they were protecting, all the others, all their comrades in the Resistance." (RS 499)

Freedom is nothing other than the name for the tension between singular decision and societal accountability: "Total responsibility in total solitude – is this not the very definition of our liberty?" (ibid.). It is this possibility for Resistance, made in fear for one's individual life but on behalf of a potential fraternity, that is incarnated by Orestes.

This notion of free action as implying and committing a social whole leads Sartre to make arresting but puzzling claims; his statements about "everyone" sometimes appear to contradict each other. On the one hand, in "The Republic of Silence," Sartre will assert that "by choosing for himself in liberty, he chose the liberty of all" and that this committment applied to everyone equally (RS 500). On the other, Sartre will write – also in the mid-1940s, in his *Anti-Semite and Jew* – of "our involuntary complicity with the anti-Semites who have made hangmen of us all."[18] Even further: "In this situation there is not one of us who is not totally guilty and even criminal; the Jewish blood that the Nazis shed falls on all our heads" (AJ 136). The reader may want to ask Sartre: Are we all rotten and vicious for our continuing existence in a society of execution and oppression, or are we all heroes? As we have seen in the reading of *Les Mouches*, it is Sartre's tactic to assert, first, an undeniable and irreducible guilt that cannot evade through moralizing or subjective virtue. Second, he exhorts us to redress this guilt through a commitment that exceeds the social given that supports us. He describes how the boundaries of the possible are built on horrifying inequity, physical deprivation and unjust punishment, and demands of us that we enact and prove our freedom by rejecting the presuppositions that engender these social structures.

**The Necessary Indeterminacy of Political Action**

It is at this point that Sartre points the way to a deadlock of collective responsibility. He gives us a demonstration of how every individual is enmeshed in an objectively exploitative

situation; he asserts the ethical imperative to reject the justifications for this oppression and to concretely remedy it; and leaves us with the disquieting realization that the true overcoming of the legal and social framework of an oppressive situation will require an act that has no prior justification or ethical guarantee. That is to say, the ethical awareness of collective responsibility propels towards the realization of revolutionary transformation, but cannot legislate what actions might be justified or correct – anything legislated by the current order of things, after all, could only serve to be legitimated by, and hence to legitimate, the very order which must be denounced as oppressive.

This is why, while a reading of *Les Mouches* can rule out Stoekl's existentialist fascism, that very reading also demonstrates the disquieting paradox at the heart of political action. After all, as Jacques Derrida has continually insisted, any act that is truly political, and not merely managerial, can always be misrecognized or reappropriated.[19] The violent, revolutionary break with the situation runs the risk of being a violent act within the situation, a perpetuation of vengeance rather than the inauguration of justice. Sartre's Jupiter makes this clear when he suggests to Electra and Orestes that he is prepared to select them as the new king and queen of Argos at the price of their repudiation of their act and renewed fealty to him (TC 62, F 115). It is at this point that Sartre shows awareness of the danger that violence is never a guarantee of radicality, and that it can always be reinscribed into the traditional order of hierarchy and oppression.

Those of us who still read Sartre today, who do not find his problematic of freedom and responsibility to be relegated to the superseded fashion of existentialism, find in *Les Mouches* a narrative about politics, sovereignty and justice that clears away certainties about law and right. *Les Mouches* is a play about a state of exception, written and performed at the very heart of one

of the most violent and barbaric suspensions of civilized law in human history. While *Les Mouches* is not the hymn to individual power it is sometimes taken to be, it offers no reassurance to a reader who would strive to see the incertitude of praxis reduced to the alibi of knowledge. This might lead us to a different viewpoint with regard to some of Sartre's more literary critics. While Stoekl and Judaken express dissatisfaction with the apparent "ambiguity" of *Les Mouches*, Georges Bataille and Michel Leiris corresponded about whether Sartre had allowed himself to be too prescriptive. An examination of this disagreement will conclude this study of Sartre's theatrical exhortation to resistance.

**Bataille and Leiris: The Secrecy of the Literary**

Sartre has often been suspected of an overbearing didacticism in his approach to writing.[20] According to this line of thought, Sartre only wishes to demonstrate a philosophical thesis; he has no understanding of the ambiguity that is sometimes asserted as central to the truly literary. This objection was famously made by Georges Bataille in his 1953 *La littérature et le mal.*[21] In private correspondence, Bataille had already made this objection in a measured critique of *Les Mouches*.[22] In 1943, Michel Leiris and Georges Bataille discussed the merits of Sartre's subversive play. Ironically, while Stoekl sees the play as compromised by its polyvalency, Bataille and Leiris were concerned that Sartre's polemical intent had rendered his effort weakly univocal. Bataille criticized the play for lacking "je ne sais quoi de *secret*" ("a certain quality of *secrecy*"); essentially, he felt it traded poetry for didacticism.[23] Second, Bataille was suspicious of Sartre's Orestes and his capacity to do away with guilt entirely. Bataille reproached Sartre's play as "a fabrication: no struggle against the real strangle-hold of guilt" (C 155). Leiris responded that Sartre could be interpreted this way, that perhaps Sartre considered guilt to be

simply a debt imposed by the church (C 158). However, he defended Sartre as more sophisticated than this. In Leiris's view:

> The hardest thing to accept is, of course, this position of Orestes in relation to remorse: neither guilty nor innocent, he measures all the gravity of his action (without being crushed by it) but this action that knows to be just will nonetheless prevent him from being able to sleep. Is one to think that what Sartre wanted to take on, rather than the feeling of guilt itself, was the complacency in remorse? (C 158)

It is my contention that a contemporary reading of *Les Mouches* can endorse Leiris's perspective. For, if, as Stoekl demonstrates, the play runs the risk of being interpreted as an endorsement of the savage violence of fascism, rather the necessity of resistance against it by whatever means, it does in fact have some quality of the secret to it. Where Bataille believed he found a distastefully prescriptive tone, we might see that it is the indeterminacy at the heart of the play that gives its force. As Leiris suggests, the target of *Les Mouches* is to unsettle the compacency at the heart of the cult of remorse in which the French right indulged. Orestes's action is not one that extricates him from community and propels him into singular authenticity; rather, it is the uncertain attempt to create a new and free community out of the cruelty and limitations of the present.

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**Notes**

[1] Sartre, Jean-Paul. "Sartre par Sartre." *Situations, IX: Mélanges*, Paris: Gallimard, 1972, 99. Translated by John Mathews as "The Itinerary of a Thought," *Between Existentialism and Marxism*, New York: Pantheon, 1974. Cited subsequently as IT.

[2] Gerassi, John. *Jean-Paul Sartre: Hated Conscience of His Century*. Volume I. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989. The most vehement criticism of Sartre as an opportunist to

the point of collaboration is Gilbert Joseph's *Une si douce occupation: Simone de Beauvoir, Jean-Paul Sartre 1940-1944*, Paris: Albin Michel, 1991. Jonathan Judaken offers a thorough summary and measured defense in his *Jean-Paul Sartre and the Jewish Question: Anti-antisemitism and the Politics of the French Intellectual*, Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2006, 49-52.

[3] Sartre, Jean-Paul, *Les Mouches*, in *Théâtre complet*, ed. Michal Contat et. Al., Paris: Gallimard 2005, 1-70. Cited subsequently as TC. Translated by Stuart Gilbert as *The Flies*, in *No Exit and Three Other Plays*, New York: Vintage, 1989, 47-124. Cited subsequently as F. Gilbert's translation is rather loose.

[4] See Annie Cohen-Solal, *Jean-Paul Sartre: A Life*, trans. Anna Cancogni, ed. Norman Macafee, New York: The New Press, 2005, 182-185, Ronald Hayman, *Writing Against: A Biography of Sartre*, London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1986, 176-180, 197-198, and Judaken, 92-94, for accounts of the writing, performance, and initial reception of *Les Mouches*. Also see "Autour des « Mouches »," TC 72-87. Sartre later explained, "The drama I should have liked to write was that of the terrorist who, by ambushing Germans, becomes the instrument for the execution of fifty hostages." *Sartre on Theater*, New York: Pantheon Books, 1976, 188.

[5] Stoekl, Allan. "What the Nazis Saw: *Les Mouches* in Occupied Paris." *SubStance* issue 102, volume 32, number 3, Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2003, 78-91.

[6] For a reading of *Les Mouches* contrasting it to Albert Camus's slightly later play *Le Malentendu*, which demonstrates Sartre's emphasis on activity in contrast to a more limiting pessimism on Camus's part, see Benedict O'Donohoe, "Sartre and Camus: *Les Mouches* and *Le Malentendu*: Parallel Plays," *Sartre Studies International*, volume 13, issue 2, 2007: 113-125, particularly 115-119 and 124.

[7] Some of Sartre's early writings make clear that he was concerned with individual responsibility to the community, understood historically, and even with Marxism, much earlier than is commonly supposed. For example, Sartre writes of the need to overthrow Hitler and redistribute wealth, noting that what is necessary is to understand apparently impersonal economic forces as essentially products of a "human reality that historializes itself." Diary of 7 March 1940, Notebook 14, *War Diaries: Notebooks from a Phoney War: November 1939-March 1940*, translated by Quintin Hoare, London: Verso, 1984, 297.

[8] Sartre's comments in interviews on his transition to the social are not consistent. In "Self-Portrait at Seventy," six years after "The Itinerary of a Thought," Sartre indicates that the real break from individualism was the German invasion, and that as a result he "passed from the individualism [...] of before the war to the social and to socialism." *Life/Situations: Essays Written and Spoken*, translated by Paul Auster and Lydia Davis, New York: Pantheon, 1977, 48. He also comments to this effect in IT 99. This would indicate that *Les Mouches* was written from a perspective that had already begun to take society into account. For an account of the continuities and transformations in Sartre's ethical thought and his remarks on the subject, see David Detmer, *Freedom As a Value: A Critique of the Ethical Theory of Jean-Paul Sartre*, La Salle: Open Court, 1988, 93-102.

[9] On the movement between these two considerations of freedom, see Flynn, Thomas R. *Sartre and Marxist Existentialism: The Test Case of Collective Responsibility*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984, 5.

[10] Sartre, Jean-Paul. *Search for a Method*, translated by Hazel E. Barnes, New York: Vintage, 1968, 225. Cited subsequently as SM.

[11] Sartre, Jean-Paul. *The Communists and Peace with A Reply to Claude Lefort*. New York: George Braziller, 1968, 96. Cited subsequently as CP.

[12] Sartre, Jean-Paul, *Critique of Dialectical Reason: Volume 1: Theory of Practical Ensembles*, translated by Alan Sheridan-Smith, edited by Jonathan Rée, New York: Verso, 2004, 44. Subsequently cited as CDR.

[13] As Thomas Flynn writes, "so-called postmodernist ethics is primarily an ethics of responsibility, and its propelling of Emmanuel Levinas to center stage, I would suggest, renders implicit homage to the Sartrean ethics that haunts this discourse, waiting to be revived as the context becomes more secular." "Introduction: Sartre at One Hundred – A Man of the Nineteenth Century Addressing the Twenty-First?" *Sartre Studies International: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Existentialism and Contemporary Culture*, Volume 11, Issues 1 & 2, 2005, 12.

[14] Levinas, Emmanuel. Interview with François Poirié, 1986. *Is It Righteous To Be?: Interviews with Emmanuel Levinas*. Ed. Jill Robbins. Stanford: Stanford UP, 2001, 43.

[15] Flynn, Thomas R. *Sartre and Marxist Existentialism: The Test Case of Collective Responsibility*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984, 68.

[16] "La République du silence," *Situations III*, Paris: Gallimard, 1949, 11-14. Translated as Sartre, Jean-Paul. "The Republic of Silence," *The Republic of Silence*, edited by A.J. Liebling. New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1947, 498-500. Cited subsequently as RS.

[17] For a detailed historical account of various French responses to the collaboration and resistance during the period of Occupation and collusion, including the Gaullist idea that everyone could be seen as a resistant, see Henry Rousso, *Le syndrome de Vichy: De 1944 à nos jours*, Paris: Seuil, 1990, translated by Arthur Goldhammer as *The Vichy Syndrome: History and Memory in France since 1944*, Cambridge: Havard University Press, 1994. Judaken treats Sartre

in relation to this problem, characterizing him as conducting a "double strategy of forgetting" by overemphasizing French resistance and portraying collaboration as alien; Judaken, 106-111.

[18] *Anti-Semite and Jew*, translated by George J. Becker, New York: Schocken Books, 1948, 151. Cited subsequently as AJ.

[19] As Derrida writes, "Even if a decision seems to take only a second and not to be preceded by any deliberation, it is structured by this *experience and experiment of the undecidable*." *Limited Inc*., translated by Samuel Weber, Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1988, 116. While Derrida was initially very critical of Sartre, accusing him, among other things, of an intent to totalize, he later acknowledged "an immense debt." He particularly credited Sartre with the awareness of the aleatory nature of engagement, in which one is "passively thrown before any decision," relying on the "*undecidable* and in a space heterogeneous to all knowing." Derrida, Jacques, " 'Il courrait mort': Salut, salut. Notes pour un courrier aux *Temps modernes*," *Les Temps Modernes* 587 (March-April-May 1996), 44, 11, 12. Translated by Bruce Baugh. See Bruce Baugh, "Derrida and Sartre: Filiation/Parricide?," *French Hegel: From Surrealism to Postmodernism*, chapter 7, New York: Routledge, 2003, 140-144.

[20] For example, Marguerite Duras said that Sartre was not a writer, but merely a "launcher of ideas," in her interview with Bernard Pivot in 1984. See James S. Williams, "Introduction: Revisioning Duras," *Revisioning Duras: Film, Race, Sex*, ed. James S. Williams, Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2001, 17.

[21] *La littérature et le mal*, *Œuvres complètes IX*, Paris: Gallimard, 1979, 171-313.

[22] For a comparison of Bataille and Sartre on the question of literature and the nature of generosity, see Douglas Smith, "Between the Devil and the Good Lord: Sartre and the Gift," *Sartre Studies International*, volume 8, issue 1, 2002, 1-17. In Smith's view, *Le diable et le bon*

*dieu* represents an attempt to dialecticize the more indeterminate negativity of the earlier work; in my reading, this supports the possible connection between *Les Mouches* and a less rationally bounded conception of the literary which is closer to Bataille. For a reading of the proximity between Bataille and Sartre on the suppression of synthesis of the moment of negativity into a subsequent totality, see Baugh, "Bataille and the Unhappy Consciousness," *French Hegel*, chapter five, 91.

[23] 27 June 1943, Bataille, Georges, *Choix de lettres: 1917-1962*, édition établie, présentée et annoté par Michel Surya, Paris: Gallimard, 1997, 194. Bataille, Georges and Michel Leiris, *Correspondence*, ed. Louis Yvert, trans. Liz Heron, Calcutta: Seagull Books, 2008, 153. Cited subsequently as C.