

Cambridge University Press
 978-0-521-82640-2 - Sartre: A Philosophical Biography
 Thomas R. Flynn
 Excerpt
[More information](#)

I

The childhood of a genius

SARTRE WAS BORN in Paris on June 21, 1905, to Jean-Baptiste and Anne-Marie Sartre. His mother was née Schweitzer, from a prominent, liberal Alsatian family, and through her he was related to Nobel Peace laureate Albert Schweitzer, whom he once described as “my cousin Albert [who] was not bad at the organ.”¹ His father, an ensign in the French navy, was on duty overseas at the time of Sartre’s birth. On a previous posting he had contracted a fever, and a year after Sartre’s birth he died of it, at the age of 30. Rather unsympathetically, Sartre observed that his father had had the good manners to die early in his life, thus leaving him without a superego.² Sartre was raised by his mother in her parents’ home, for the first five years in the Parisian suburb of Meudon, and from 1911 in their Paris apartment near the Luxembourg Gardens. Except for what he depicts as a rather painful interlude in La Rochelle on the southwest coast of France, where he lived with his mother and her new husband, Joseph Mancy, from the fall of 1917 to the spring of 1920, Sartre was raised and educated in Paris, where he attended two

¹ Jean-Paul Sartre, “Self-Portrait at Seventy,” *Life/Situations: Essays Written and Spoken*, trans. Paul Auster and Lydia Davis (New York: Pantheon, 1977), 36; hereafter *L/S* with title of essay and page.

² Jean-Paul Sartre, *The Words (Les Mots)*, trans. Bernard Frechtman (New York: George Braziller, 1964), 11–12; hereafter *Words* and “F” for the French original (*Words-F* 19). If it is any consolation, Sartre is just as harsh on himself in this brilliant little autobiographical “novel,” which he insists is “true.” More on this later. It is commonly acknowledged that “Words” is a better rendition of “Les mots” than the published title, which retains the definite article. This work is the object of a detailed “genetic” critique by a team of experts under the direction of Michel Contat of the Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique, subsequently published as *Pourquoi et comment Sartre a écrit “les Mots,”* 2nd edn. (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1997); hereafter *PSM*.

prestigious *lycées* and the exclusive École Normale Supérieure (ENS).³ In 1915, while he was an extern at the Lycée Henri IV, he met Paul Nizan. Nizan would become one of his closest friends after Sartre's return to the lycée from La Rochelle in 1920, now as a boarder. After finishing their studies at Henri IV, Sartre and Nizan began the two-year course of study at the Lycée Louis-le-Grand (fall 1922–spring 1924) in preparation for the entrance exam to the ENS. Sartre counted his four years at the ENS as being among the happiest of his life. It was there that he befriended Raymond Aron and Maurice Merleau-Ponty, as well as Simone de Beauvoir, who was a student at the Sorbonne, and continued his association with Nizan. In fact, so close was his friendship with Nizan that their fellow Normaliens referred to the pair as “Nitre et Sarzan.” Upon his graduation in 1928, Sartre sat for the philosophical *agrégation*, a national exam that qualified candidates to teach in lycées throughout the country. To everyone's amazement, he failed the exam that year, but he emerged first (just ahead of Beauvoir) in the competition the following year. That fall he began an eighteen-month tour of military service as a meteorologist, which he completed in February of 1931. In the spring of 1931 he was appointed to the lycée in Le Havre where, except for a research fellowship in Berlin (1933–1934), he continued to teach until the spring of 1936. As “Bouville” (Mudville), Le Havre became the locus for Sartre's first novel, *Nausea*, which would make him an important figure on the French literary scene after its publication in 1938. In the meantime he taught in lycées in Laon (fall 1936) and in the Parisian suburb of Neuilly (fall 1937) till his call to active duty in September 1939. Such, in brief, is the chronicle of the years before Jean-Paul became “Sartre.”

“It all began in childhood”

Like Karl Marx, Sartre is sometimes criticized for treating his subjects as if they were born miniature adults. And yet his several existentialist “biographies,” chiefly of literary figures, devote considerable attention to

³ While living with his grandparents, he briefly attended the Lycée Montaigne, from which his grandfather withdrew him, then a public school in Arachon on the southwest coast (1914) and a semester at the Poupon Academy in Paris from which this time his mother quickly withdrew him. It seems that Poulou was not living up to their expectations. Much of this early schooling took place at home under the tutelage of his grandfather.

their subjects’ respective “choices” of the imaginary mode of existence; that is, their youthful opting for creative writing rather than for the banal world of practical concerns. Though Sartre was interested in psychology from the start, in his early works he paid scant attention to childhood development or to the process of what he would later call “personalization.” True, in July of 1938 he completed the short story “Childhood of a Leader” (“L’Enfance d’un chef”), which was published the following year. But this was more a study in the *embourgeoisement* of a youth – his coming to realize the “necessity of his existence” and his right to be in charge – themes that Sartre was to elaborate in the late 1940s and 1950s in remarks about bourgeois class consciousness.⁴ The philosophical foundation for what he would call “existential psychoanalysis,” as we shall see, was laid in his masterful *Being and Nothingness* (1943). After that, he did attend to the fundamental, self-defining projects of his subjects in his increasingly detailed biographies of Baudelaire, Mallarmé, Jean Genet and (at greatest length) Gustave Flaubert, regarding whom, he insists, “everything took place in childhood.”⁵

The first eleven years of Sartre’s life are recounted in several places, but mainly in his autobiography, *Words*. Although his mother once commented about this work that “Poulou,” his childhood nickname, “didn’t understand a thing about his childhood,”⁶ we get a curiously skewed picture of those early years, where the little boy ensconced in his grandfather’s library “plays the part” of the young genius that his mother and grandparents take him to be.⁷ He describes his behavior as play-acting – pretending to be a nascent writer and intellectual in order

⁴ In a letter to his friend and editor of the *Nouvelle Revue Française*, Jean Paulhan, who had criticized as simplistic his characterization of the French right-wing anti-Republican group, Action Française, in this story, Sartre admits the charge but explains that the point of his tale is simply to show the degree to which a young fellow who is a bit of an onlooker and a real jerk could discover this group in his search for salvation through social issues and alliance with the Right. In similar circumstances, Sartre adds, a more intelligent fellow might have joined the Communist Party. (See Jean-Paul Sartre, *Lettres au Castor et à quelques autres, 1926–1939*, ed. Simone de Beauvoir [Paris: Gallimard, 1983], 218); hereafter *LaC* with page number.

⁵ Jean-Paul Sartre, *Search for a Method*, trans. Hazel E. Barnes (New York: Vintage, 1968), 59–60; hereafter *SM*.

⁶ Annie Cohen-Solal, *Jean-Paul Sartre. A Life* trans. Anna Concogni (New York: New Press, 2005), 40; hereafter *Life*.

⁷ Actually, Sartre’s assessment of their view seems rather ambiguous. At times, they consider him a genius; at other times, his grandfather and occasionally his grandmother discover he is faking it (see *Words* 21 and 101).

to please his elders, especially his grandfather Schweitzer, whom he termed “God the Father,” because of his imperious manner and imposing beard. “Everything took place in my head,” he confesses, “imaginary child that I was, I defended myself with my imagination” (*Words* 71). That imagination, in both its creative and its critical functions, was to be Sartre’s constant companion throughout his life. His own biography, like that of the other literary figures he would analyze, culminates in his explicit choice of the imaginary that he had implicitly “chosen” long before.

Of course, we should be rather cautious about ascribing to this child the thoughts which Sartre attributes to himself forty-five years later.⁸ We shall see how easily they fit the existential psychoanalytic template of the life-orienting fundamental choice that he fashioned toward the end of *Being and Nothingness*. And Sartre would probably not disagree. We shall note his rather lax attitude toward the precise facts gathered in his account of a life-defining experience of the young Jean Genet.⁹ In that respect, Sartre seems to admit that the past is never recoverable in any literal sense or, at least, that it is not his aim to reproduce it.¹⁰ So we should be forewarned as we read his autobiography.

How then does *Words* differ from Sartre’s other existential biographies that seek to capture that decisive moment when their subject opted for the imaginary? Could he not have admitted – as he did of his multi-volume study of Flaubert – that *Words* too is “a novel which is true” (*un roman vrai*)? After all, Sartre’s erstwhile friend Raymond Aron had already introduced this phrase to characterize narrative history in general.¹¹ Indeed, Sartre does admit as much to Michel Contat when he remarks: “I think that *Words* is no truer than *Nausea* or *The Roads to Freedom*. Not that the facts I report are not true, but *Words* is a kind of

⁸ Sartre corrected the proofs for *Words* in April 1963 (Jacqueline Villani, *Leçon littéraire sur Les Mots de Sartre* [Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1996], 2).

⁹ See Jean-Paul Sartre, *Saint Genet: Actor and Martyr*, trans. Bernad Frechtman (New York: George Braziller, 1963), 17; hereafter *SG*.

¹⁰ For Sartre’s view of “truth” in history, see my *Sartre, Foucault and Historical Reason*, vol. 1, *Toward an Existentialist Theory of History*, and vol. 11, *A Poststructuralist Mapping of History* (University of Chicago Press, 1997 and 2005 respectively), 1:148 and 1:173–175; hereafter *SFHR* with volume and page.

¹¹ Raymond Aron, *Introduction to the Philosophy of History*, 2nd edn., rev. and trans. George J. Irwin (Boston, MA: Beacon, 1961), 509; see also *Magazine Littéraire*, no. 198 (September 1983): 37.

novel also – a novel that I believe in, but a novel nevertheless.”¹² So he seems to be inviting us to read his autobiography as “a novel which is true.”

But what does “true” mean in this context? The way it actually happened, to borrow Von Ranke’s famous phrase? Not likely, in view of Sartre’s rather cavalier dealing with the facts in Genet’s life. As we shall see, a likely story (as Aron and many recent historians would claim)? An effective means of reproducing an attitude or a way of “comprehending the comprehension” of the subject in question (as it seems to mean for the later Sartre in his *Critique of Dialectical Reason*)? These uses of “truth” are scarcely incompatible, especially in a life as complex and multifaceted as Sartre’s. We must keep this in mind, however, as we examine his account of his early years, culminating in his “choice” of the imaginary.¹³

Still, *Words* is an *autobiography*. Presumably, its author knows its subject better than anyone else. Or does he? The hermeneuticist has long insisted that the ideal of this method of textual interpretation is “to understand a writer better than he understood himself.”¹⁴ And, in the case of Sartre’s childhood, as his mother insisted, Sartre’s interpretation of this period of his life was a misreading.

Perhaps an appeal to the unconscious may resolve the paradox. Could it be that “Poulou” unconsciously grasped the meaning of his actions while remaining explicitly unaware of their significance? To employ a famous expression of the later Sartre, was the little fellow in “bad faith?” Or is it the autobiographer himself who is in bad faith, creating a story by selecting events that support his thesis and omitting contrary evidence? It has been pointed out, for example, that this patron of “transparency” has virtually eliminated any reference to his infantile sexuality

¹² “Self-Portrait at Seventy,” *L/S* 17.

¹³ Choice of the imaginary is a practical decision that the later Sartre takes for a kind of *conduite d’échec* (failure behavior) in the case of his Flaubert biography, *The Family Idiot*. But by that time, with the exception of his Flaubert “novel,” he has abandoned imaginative literature for concrete political activism. Sartre seems to have joined Flaubert in accepting the practical limits of the imaginary. This does not mean that he abandoned the imaginary altogether. My general thesis is that this would have required rejecting the political and the ethical imaginary, which Sartre never did. See *Words* 159; F 212 and below Chapter 15 and Conclusion.

¹⁴ This is Friedrich Schleiermacher’s ideal of the hermeneutic method (see Hans Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 2nd edn., rev. [London: Continuum, 2004], 191).

in this account.¹⁵ In that case, one might agree with Philippe Lejeune that “autobiography for Sartre is not ‘the story of my past’ but ‘the story of my future’; in other words the reconstruction of the *project*.”¹⁶

Regarding the first means of resolving the paradox of Poulou’s self-deception, Sartre is reputed to be a sharp foe of the Freudian unconscious, as we shall see. So, to the extent that the hermeneutic project relies on the superior perspective of Freudian psychoanalysis, Sartre would reject it. Yet there is the alternative of existential psychoanalysis and, though Sartre at the conclusion of *Being and Nothingness* admitted that it had yet to find its Freud, this is what Sartre himself is practicing in his biographies and, arguably, is employing in his autobiography as well. Its aim is to seek the fundamental, life-defining option that is exhibited by the words and deeds of the subject in question. So our second hypothesis reads *Words* as the simple application of the ancient metaphysical principle that “as a thing acts so it is” (*agere sicutur esse*).¹⁷ And one might argue – using Sartre’s distinction between knowledge (which is reflective and explicit) and comprehension (which is prereflective and implicit), and which will ground both existentialist psychoanalysis and its famous category of bad faith – that this distinction accompanies Sartre’s reconstruction of his own childhood experience and serves to validate his account. In other words, granted that the younger Sartre “understood” more than he or his elders knew, it was the older man who would bring this comprehension to reflective articulation. Sartre will place much significance on his claim that Flaubert “understood much more than he knew” (see below, Chapter 15). Until we deal with existential psychoanalysis in detail, let these options suffice.

Four accounts of Sartre’s childhood

Sartre describes his early years at greatest length in four published locations: the *War Diaries* (*Carnets*) that he kept during mobilization in

¹⁵ Serge Doubrovsky, “Sartre: retouches à un autoportrait (une autobiographie visqueuse),” *Lectures de Sartre*, ed. Claude Burgelin (Presses Universitaires de Lyon, 1986), 113; hereafter *Lectures* with essay title.

¹⁶ See Philippe Lejeune, *Le Pacte autobiographique* (Paris: Seuil, 1975), 237. Translated by Katherine Leary as *On Autobiography* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989), 102.

¹⁷ See Jacques Lecarme, “*Les Mots* de Sartre: un cas limité de l’autobiographie?” *Revue d’Histoire Littéraire de France* no. 6 (1975).

the “phoney war” of 1939–40; his autobiography, *Words*, published in 1964; the filmed conversation with Simone de Beauvoir and others (February–March 1972); and his interviews with Beauvoir (August–September 1974).¹⁸ Additional biographical information can be gleaned from his voluminous correspondence, especially with his life-long partner Beauvoir, and from Beauvoir’s own multivolume autobiography. If we take each of his accounts as a kind of transparency sheet to be superimposed, as for an overhead projector, what configuration of his early years emerges from this set? What does each account add to the others so as to achieve a more adequate picture of the subject? Minimizing inevitable repetitions in these four accounts, let us examine each version in search of the whole person.

The perspective of a conscript from the Front, 1939–40

While on duty as a meteorologist in Alsace during the “phoney war,” Sartre found time to fill fifteen notebooks with his reflections on military life and his relations with his friends back home, interspersed with reports on the progress he was making on his novel, *The Age of Reason*, and pages of insightful articulations of the metaphysical concepts that would form portions of *Being and Nothingness* after his return to civilian life. We must admit at the outset that this does not yield a complete picture. Only five of these notebooks are known to still exist. Further, they were written with eventual publication in mind, so they exhibit a certain self-censorship that is less guarded in his letters to Beauvoir, which accompanied nearly every day’s entry.¹⁹ Reading them in tandem enables us to compare the public with the private Sartre, though Beauvoir also did her own editing of the letters she received from Sartre prior to their publication.²⁰

¹⁸ For a full list of texts in addition to *Words* that are considered “autobiographical,” see the Pléiade critical edition of Sartre, *Les Mots et autres écrits autobiographiques* (Paris: Gallimard, 2010); hereafter *MAEA* with title of entry and page.

¹⁹ As Doubrovsky remarks, “Sartre’s references to his own sexuality in the *Carnets* are as remarkable by their absence as they will be in *Words*. And even Sartre’s references to his amorous affairs with other women in his letters to Beauvoir seem purged of any aspect that could occasion her jealousy” (*Lectures* 129).

²⁰ See *Bulletin du Groupe d’Études Sartriennes* 5 (June 1991) 46.

If Sartre viewed his childhood in Paris as play-acting in front of the audience of his mother and grandparents, then this interpretation was expanded and assigned quasi-ontological significance in his war diaries. In the entry for March 9, 1940 we find Henri de Montherlant's remark, concerning the Olympic Games, that "play is the only defensible form of action," and his citation of Schiller, "man is fully a man only when he plays," in support of this view. This elicits Sartre's objection: "Why does [Montherlant] have to add foolishly that this form of action is the only one that can be taken seriously? How can he fail to see that play, by its very nature, excludes the very idea of seriousness?" Anticipating his moral censure of the "spirit of seriousness" in *Being and Nothingness* as a basic form of bad faith, Sartre confesses:

If there is some unity in my life, that's because I've never wanted to live seriously. I've been able to put on a show – to know pathos, and anguish, and joy – but never, never have I known seriousness. My whole life has been just a game: sometimes long and tedious, sometimes in bad taste – but a game. And this war is just a game for me.

But lest one equate this with simple pretending, Sartre adds that in his dictionary, "game" . . . is the happy metamorphosis of the contingent into the gratuitous," an implicit reference to the central theme of *Nausea* published two years earlier. He promises to explain later "why the assumption of oneself is itself a game."²¹

Regarding his childhood, Sartre's diaries fill in some of the details of his "exile" in La Rochelle with his mother and stepfather. Indeed, it has been argued that his mother's "betrayal" of his exclusive love by her second marriage marked the first major turning point in his personal life.²² Sartre once observed that he was anti-bourgeois ever since he met

²¹ Jean-Paul Sartre, *Carnets de la drôle de guerre. Septembre 1939–Mars 1940*, new edition with previously unpublished notebook (Paris: Gallimard, 1995), 563; hereafter *CDG. The War Diaries of Jean-Paul Sartre, November 1939–March 1940*, trans. Quentin Hoare without the first notebook in the French edition (New York: Pantheon, 1984), 313–314; hereafter *WD*. We shall return to this topic in our discussion of the Flaubert material in Chapter 15, n. 57.

²² Indeed, Michel Contat considers her marriage more traumatic and life-changing than Sartre's experience of "society" in the army and subsequent Resistance, which he considers his first "conversion" experience. In fact, he claims that "Sartre's mother was the most important woman in his life: it's not Simone de Beauvoir, like people think – no, no, it was actually Mummy – he lived with Mummy, you know . . ." (Interview on BBC Radio 3 for *The Man with the Golden Brain*, broadcast May 22, 2005, cited by Benedict O'Donohoe, "Living

his future stepfather.²³ It is obvious that the challenge of adolescence and the need to “share” his mother’s love with another man, not to mention the demands of fitting into a provincial school with children of a rougher hue, many of whose fathers were away at war, caused him considerable unhappiness. He learned to fight and to join groups of ruffians in self-defense.

Three observations serve to summarize this page of the map of his youth: Sartre’s childhood play-acting carried a significance that extended beyond those years; he learned the meaning and exercise of violence while in La Rochelle; and he was left with a lasting hatred of the bourgeois model that his stepfather represented. We shall see how he mined this experience for several autobiographical short stories, including “The Childhood of a Leader.”

Sartre in his own Words, 1963

In *Words*, Sartre describes in considerable detail his life in the home of his patriarchal grandfather, grandmother and widowed mother, whom he considered more of an older sister – a feeling reinforced by the sense she communicated to the little boy that they were not in their own home. The atmosphere Sartre describes is one of middle-class comfort and values, infused with the Schweitzer nostalgia for the lost provinces of Alsace-Lorraine, which the child dreamt of regaining through his own heroic efforts. From the very start, he knew he would be famous. Above all, this was a world of books: the grandfather’s library of over a thousand volumes, the children’s story books that fed Sartre’s imagination, the deference shown by older students to his schoolteacher grandfather.²⁴

with Mother: Sartre and the Problem of Maternity,” *Sens [public]. International Web Journal*, www.sens-public.org.) After decades, Sartre still recalls his mother’s two slaps at his insolent response to his stepfather (*Sartre: un film*, produced by Alexandre Astruc and Michel Contat with participation from Simone de Beauvoir, Jacques-Laurent Bost, André Gorz and Jean Pouillon [Paris: Gallimard, 1977], 17; hereafter *Film*).

²³ His stepfather was a naval engineer and Sartre often cited engineers as a class of people who lacked a sense of playfulness, were imbued with what he called “the sprit of seriousness” and so were consequently strangers to authenticity. (For his detailed discussion of the contrast between the playful and the serious, see *CDG* 326–327.)

²⁴ After his retirement from the school system, Karl Schweitzer founded the Institute for Living Languages (L’Institute des Langues Vivantes) where he taught French as a foreign language, chiefly to German speakers. Among other things, he also wrote a German

“I began my life as I doubtless shall end it: amidst books” (*Words* 25). The boy was destined for a literary (a)vocation, but one grounded securely in a teacher’s life, if his grandfather had his way. In the old man’s eyes, the child would never be another Victor Hugo. Far better to set a life plan he could achieve conjoined to one that would pay the bills. “Teaching gave a man leisure” (*Words* 97). It was not until Pathé films offered him a contract in 1943 to write several scenarios for possible production and his second play *No Exit* was produced in 1944 that Sartre abandoned teaching to earn his living entirely by his pen.²⁵

If we are to believe the story which Sartre constructs from his memories, his grandfather’s opinion was decisive:

In short, [Karl] drove me into literature by the care he took to divert me from it: to such an extent that even now I sometimes wonder, when I’m in a bad mood, whether I have not consumed so many days and nights, covered so many pages with ink, thrown on the market so many books that nobody wanted, solely in the mad hope of pleasing my grandfather.

(*Words* 101)

The child advanced from pretending to actually reading and soon became the voracious reader that he would remain for the rest of his life. He accomplished this with the use of only one eye, his right eye having been rendered useless through an illness when he was 4 years old. His writing began with plagiarized versions of his favorite swashbucklers; this gave way to stories in which he figured in the third person, and finally to the removal of himself from the plot entirely. “I was being called upon to choose between Corneille and Pardaillan. I dismissed Pardaillan, whom I really and truly loved; out of humility,

grammar for the use of the direct method, which went through annual revised editions (*Words-F* 39).

²⁵ His first professional play, *The Flies* (*Les Mouches*), appeared on June 2, 1943 at the Théâtre de la Cité. It was directed by the well-known artist Charles Dullin, for whose School of Dramatic Art Sartre had taught a course on the history of theater, focusing on Greek dramaturgy. The name of the theater, originally the Sarah Bernhardt after the distinguished Jewish actress, had been changed by the Nazi occupiers. The censors had to permit the production of Sartre’s play. For a thorough exposition of all of Sartre’s plays along with the critical apparatus, see Jean-Paul Sartre, *Théâtre complet*, ed. Michel Contat et al., Bibliothèque de la Pléiade (Paris: Gallimard, 2005); hereafter *TC* with title of play.