

ideological system he had chosen, but it would be more useful were Lilla to read *back* and to tell us that it was clear, in the 1920s, that Benjamin would be making the wrong *political* choice – that he should have seen clearly that it was the wrong choice. The most he can tell us is that Benjamin worked against his inner light by moving left. Scholem himself sensed this at the time and warned Benjamin against a ‘materialism’ that went against the grain of Benjamin’s religious temperament. Scholem’s warning went unheeded, and today we endure the boredom of the laboured Arcades project that issued from Benjamin’s turn to Marxism.

What Lilla sees in these thinkers is a failure of lucidity, a failure to see political reality or the dangers represented by their own political or philosophical fervours. Elsewhere, in remarking on the reaction of American conservatives to the 1960s and of American progressives to the Reagan ‘revolution,’ he may give some indication of where his own political heart lies: with a ‘beleaguered liberal tradition’ that, since the time of Constant, Staël, and, especially, Tocqueville, is marked by ‘its lucidity in the face of the modern and antimodern political passions arising out of revolution, and its commitment to meliorist politics in a less than ideal age’ (‘A Tale of Two Reactions,’ 4). Lucidity is an act of perception, and Lilla is right to think it often lacking in the philotyranical intellectual. He is right, too, in thinking that it is displaced by the ‘passions’ of the intellectual. When this occurs what the philotyran ‘sees’ are marvellous hands, or a historical world in which ‘plays of difference’ (or some other notion) that efface centuries of political concepts are as compelling as in seminars or journal articles.

One’s major reservation about Lilla’s famous-names approach is, however, that it may lead us to think this is a failing of world-historical intellectuals with world-historical passions. Not so. Since the great revolutions of the twentieth century, philotyranical intellectuals have flourished at all levels of talent. Every day in North America, just as in the 1930s, they come downstairs for breakfast, discuss with their spouses (or ‘partners’) the cost of repairing the roof, the needs of the garden, the results of some medical test, etc. Then, as they drive to the campus, a strange delirium begins slowly to form. By the time they arrive at the parking lot, it is approaching high tide. With dozens of real choices available to offer their students as examples of ‘fascist’ or ‘totalitarian’ tyranny, they offer, instead, America, Canada, France, the UK, Japan, etc. In short, they enter a world that Jean-Paul Sartre, sixty-five years ago, understood as suffering from ‘essential poverty’: the world of the imaginary.

A great deal could be said about the patient art of establishing excuses for oneself ...

The War Diaries of Jean-Paul Sartre

Of the various figures mentioned in Lilla’s and Wolin’s books, no one (on the left) remotely approaches the recklessness of mind that characterized Sartre after 1952. Lévy insists that after that date there came into existence a ‘Sartre II,’ who had begun to make himself known as early as 1940 in a German prisoner of war camp. In the 1950s he came into his own. Today, in unconscious *hommage* to existentialism, entertainment journalists might say he had ‘reinvented’ himself. For the next thirty years he seems to have had as his private motto, ‘Never be outflanked to the left.’ It is Lévy’s view that Sartre II was a disaster, and the second half of this immense book tries to account for how the first Sartre, the one Lévy admires virtually without reservation, permitted himself to be hijacked by another version of himself. If it is ‘immense,’ it is also a brilliantly conceived book; indeed, for its boldness and comprehensiveness, one might almost call it ‘Sartrean.’

Of course, the last thing that Sartre (or Sartreans still alive in Paris) might have expected was a book written by a ‘new philosopher’ (and former student of Louis Althusser) that would identify the twentieth century as ‘*le siècle de Sartre*’ (the award he confers is French). What about Lévi-Strauss, Foucault, Gide, Bergson, Camus, or some post-1968 *maître*? Most of them insufficiently wide-ranging, Lévy believes. Some, too narrowly ‘academic’ philosophers. Some, like Gide and Camus, insufficiently philosophical. Some, like Derrida or Bergson, *merely* philosophical and lacking Sartre’s ability to move effortlessly from *The Transcendence of the Ego* (his 1936 essay on Husserl) to *Nausea* to a book on the imagination to *Being and Nothingness* to *No Exit* and *The Flies* to *Saint Genet* to *What Is Literature?* to essays on politics, art, literature, etc – just to stop at 1952! For Lévy, Sartre had no real competitors for this title, unless, perhaps, it was Gide, whose oedipal influence on Sartre I was matched only by that of Bergson. As he puts it, the only Frenchman of the century who approached Sartre’s international prestige was Charles de Gaulle.

Today, Sartre I is almost a forgotten figure, effaced by the memories we all have of the fellow-traveller who celebrated the USSR, Cuba, and China, of the Protector of Maoists (hawking their papers on the streets of Paris), of the apologist for the terrorists who murdered Israeli athletes at the Munich Olympic games, and of the visitor to the Baader-Meinhof gang in their German prison.⁸ Postcolonial critics still read his preface to Fanon’s *The Wretched of the Earth*, where he manages to set a standard for Western self-hatred that, to my knowledge, has yet to be surpassed. In fact, for Lévy, one of the causes of the birth of Sartre II is Sartre I’s ‘*haine de soi*,’ of the bourgeois self and the writer self.

⁸ Sartre was careful not to commit himself to support for any crimes the group was alleged to have committed.