SARTRE'S VIOLENT MAN AS A GNOSTIC NIHILIST

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ABSTRACT. Sartre's description of violence from his often-neglected *Notebooks for an Ethics* can be analyzed from a psychological point of view in relationship with other negative "passions" like hatred, fury, pain and sufferance. Literary characters such as Seneca's Medea or Anouilh's Antigone seem to embody this fundamental characteristic of violence: the alliance with an ontological striving for destruction. In this paper we provide an interpretation of the Sartrean portrait of the violent man, analyzing its connections with his existential doctrine from *Being and Nothingness*, and its affinity with modern nihilism (Nietzsche and Cioran) and Gnostic dualism (Catharism and Manicheanism).

Keywords: destruction, freedom, transcendence, facticity, Gnosticism, nihilism, existentialism

The Destructive Constitution of Violence

One of the special forms of bad faith is, according to Sartre, violence. The French philosopher observes in his *Notebooks for an Ethics*: "The violent man is … a person of bad faith because, however far he carries his destructions, he counts on the richness of the world to support them and perpetually to provide new things to be destroyed."[2] This provisory definition gives us two key words: "the world" and "the thing". One must say that, in Sartre's analysis, the violent man refuses *In-der-Welt-Sein* because violence targets the destruction of the very world he lives in. Regarding the "thing" or the object, we note that the destruction of a tool can be seen as an attack against the tool's artisan. Moreover, violence is redefined in the

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[2] Jean-Paul Sartre, *Notebooks for an Ethics*, translated by David Pellauer, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1992, p. 175 (henceforth NE).

terms of the Hegelian theory of the look[3] from *Being and Nothingness* as a "refusal of being looked at": "The artisan, the engineer, the technician look at me across the tool that they made for me. Consequently, to destroy the tool is symbolically to destroy this gaze."[4] Violence has a particular "anti-creative" value, being unable only to produce the objects: "[V]iolence, being destructive, cannot produce an object. It can only remove the obstacles that conceal it."[5]

Hence, we can see the double intention of violence: on one hand it wants to "destroy everything", on the other it desires to find new material its destruction. If we wished to reconstruct the definition of violence, we would find in its composition not only anger, fear and desire to be esteemed (notions which Sartre does refer to[6]), but also hate, pain, resentment and dissatisfaction. The existential philosopher observes that violence "implies nihilism"[7]. We should probably understand nihilism as a psychological state, comprised of alienation, an impulse towards destruction and a deep ambivalence between revolt against the world and a "declaration of war" against the self.

From a psychological point of view, this dissatisfaction has three sources:

a) It is almost impossible to destroy the universe through individual means, therefore the process of destruction is infinite.

b) Each moment new objects and tools are being created. The violent man must keep up with the continuous cycle of production.

c) It is highly probable that the final goal of destruction is the very *Dasein* that created violence in the first place but the biological wisdom of the instinct of conservation projects the destructive impulse to other subjects and/or things.

According to André Glucksmann, the hatred that fuels violence is "a fundamental striving for destruction"[8]. The French philosopher extensively quotes from Seneca's

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[3] "I grasp the Other's look at the very center of my act as the solidification and alienation of my own possibilities. In fear or in anxious or prudent anticipation, I perceive that these possibilities which I am and which are the condition of my transcendence are given also to another, given as about to be transcended in turn by his own possibilities. The Other as a look is only that – my transcendence transcended" (Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, translated by Hazel E. Barnes, Methuen, London, 1958, p. 263) (henceforth BN).

[4] NE 176.

[5] NE 174.

[6] NE 189.

[7] NE 171.

[8] André Glucksmann, *Discursul urii* [*Discourse of Hatred*], translated by Ileana Cantuniari, Humanitas, Bucureşti, 2007, p. 41.

Medea to emphasize on one hand, the connection between violence, rage and hatred and on the other, the link between the explosive nihilism of certain dramatic characters and contemporary terrorism. Following Seneca's text, one remarks the interdependence between hatred, pain (or grief) and wrath: "Again my passion *[dolor]* waxes and my hatred *[odium]* boils; the old Erinys reaches for my unwilling hand. Where you lead, wrath *[ira],* I follow"[9].

Coming back to Sartre, one notices that in the construction of the concept of violence, we encounter, besides fear and fury, hatred (a "striving for destruction", which basically intends "[t]o hurt or demolish"[10]) and also pain and suffering *[dolor]:* "just as doubt is considered methodical when Descartes states that uncertain opinions are 'false', pain becomes methodical when it chooses itself as wholly radical"[11]). Moreover, following a hint from Robert Solomon, one finds that resentment is constitutive of violent wrath, taking into consideration that its intent is to "to destroy one's enemies, all of them, and to be in a position of indisputable and unmatched power and importance"[12] and that, according to Max Scheler, "[t]hirst for revenge is the most important source of *ressentiment*"[13].

All of the constituents of violence, from wrath *[ira]* to suffering *[dolor]* share a common thirst for destruction: from the universal one, which targets the *In-der-Welt-Sein*, to the particular one, often hidden, which targets the *Dasein*. "[V]iolence is a meditation on death. To have everything, right now, and without any compromise, by leaping over the order of the world, or to destroy myself taking the world along with me".[14]

Sartre quotes from Jean Anouilh's *Antigone*[15], but he could easily refer to Seneca's *Medea*: "I can be quiet only if I see everything overwhelmed along with my ruin. As you go down it is a satisfaction to drag others with you"[16]. The French writer continues to define violence in terms of destruction: "Violence [is] appropriation by destruction"[17] This definition of violence conceived as *appropriation* shows that

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[9] Lucius Annaeus Seneca, *Medea*, translated, with an introduction by Moses Hadas, The Bobbs-Merrill Company, Indianapolis, New York, 1956, p. 37.

[10] Robert C. Solomon, *The Passions*, Anchor Press/ Doubleday, Garden City, New York, 1976, pp. 325-327.

[11] André Glucksmann, *op. cit.*, p. 47.

[12] Robert C. Solomon, *op. cit.*, pp. 350-5.

[13] Max Scheler, *Ressentiment*, trans. William Holdheim, New York, Schocken Books, 1961, pp. 45-6.

[14] NE 174.

[15] Jean Anouilh, *Antigona, apud.* NE 173 n.: "I spit on your happiness! I spit on your idea of life".

[16] Lucius Annaeus Seneca, *op. cit.*, p. 23.

[17] NE 175.

through the destructive process, we also take the objects into our possession: before obliterating them, we put our own destructive stamp upon them. Hence, the violent man could be portrayed as an aesthete-owner, who both assumes and gives up possession through appropriation[18]. The absolute gratuitousness of his properties does not bother him: he is not interested in gathering capital, he wants to make it go away.

The Portrait of the Violent Man

One finds in Sartre an almost lyrical portrait of the violent man:

> I am at the origin of the nothingness of the world, I am the *Anticreator*, I dream of a *continuous destruction* … To put it another way, it is my *facticity* that I symbolically destroy by way of the world. I want to be pure *nonbeing*. But to be pure nonbeing is not to be. It is to be a pure nihilating power, pure freedom. Violence is unconditioned affirmation of *freedom*.[19]

The emphasized words deserve special consideration:

a) *Anticreator*. If Sartre had characterized the violent man through the Romantic notion of the "destroyer", his definition would be unambiguous. In this case, his expression refers to a combination of destruction and creation: the violent one creates while destroying. The image of the destroyer who appropriates the objects or the world in the moment of annihilation is reminiscent here. In addition, the Nietzschean notion of "unbuilding" *[zugrunde richten]* is relevant on this occasion[20]. At this point, we also remember Bakunin's description of "creative destruction"[21] and Nietzsche's percept ("only as creators can we destroy!"[22]). Therefore, violence

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[18] We remember here the "renunciation of the fruits of action" from Indian philosophy.

[19] NE 175 (italics mine).

[20] Ioan P. Couliano, *The Tree of Gnosis. Gnostic Mythology from Early Christianity to Modern Nihilism*, Harper Collins, New York, p. 250. See also Friedrich Nietzsche, KSA, 13, hrsg. von Colli/Montinari, Walter De Gruyter, Berlin, New York, 1999, pp. 59-60: „Der Nihilism ist nicht nur eine Betrachtsamkeit über das «Umsonst!», und nicht nur der Glaube, daß Alles werth ist, zu Grunde zu gehen: man legt Hand an, man richtet zu Grunde …".

[21] Sam Dolgoff (Ed.), *Bakunin on Anarchy*, Vintage Books, New York, 1971, p. 57.

[22] Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, ed. Bernard Williams, trans. Josefine Nauckhoff and Adrain del Caro, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2001, p. 70.

should probably be understood as counter-creation rather than basic destruction. One can say that an authentic nihilism always contains an anti-nihilistic teleology.

b) *Continuous destruction.* Cioranian nihilism proves eloquent in the portrayal of the numinous element of destruction: "Nobility is only in the negation of existence, in a smile that surveys annihilated landscapes"[23]. Romantic and Post-romantic poets such as Byron, Shelley, Jean Paul, Leopardi, Swinburne, Rollinat, and Lautréamont have examined this feeling of personal or collective apocalypse. In the Romanian literature and in a philosophical tradition consubstantial with Cioran, Mihai Eminescu provides the best descriptions of the "annihilated landscapes":

> May death expand its colossal wings upon the world:
> Only darkness is the coat of buried waste.
> A lingering star extinguishes its small spring.
> Deathlike time spreads its arms and becomes eternity.
> When nothing will persist on the barren landscape
> I will ask: What of your power, Man? – Nothing!"[24]

c) *Facticity:* Until now, Sartre has been using potent symbols of the nihilist discourse. Moving on, he connects the portrait of the violent man to his existentialist theory from *Being and Nothingness*: "Just as my nihilating freedom is apprehended in anguish, so the for-itself is conscious of its facticity. It has the feeling of its complete gratuity; it apprehends itself as being there for *nothing*, as being de trop."[25] Facticity can be briefly defined as "the resistance or adversity presented by the world that free action constantly strives to overcome"[26]. The *Dasein* can be characterized through a combination of facticity and transcendence. If the facticity of our existence were obliterated, only pure transcendence would remain; and this could be the intent of the violent man: to go beyond the objective, given conditions of the existence, obtaining an absolute freedom, not unlike the divine being.

"Without facticity consciousness could choose its attachments to the world in the same way as the souls in Plato's *Republic* choose their condition. I could determine myself to 'be born a worker' or to 'be born a bourgeois'."[27] From birth

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[23] E.M. Cioran, *A Short History of Decay*, trans. Richard Howard, Arcade Books, New York, 1972, p. 36.
[24] Mihai Eminescu, *Memento mori*, edited by Al. Piru, Editura Vlad&Vlad, Craiova, 1993, pp. 125-126, translation mine.
[25] BN 84.
[26] Gary Cox, *The Sartre Dictionary*, Continuum, London, New York, 2008, p. 77.
[27] BN 83.

onwards, facticity dictates its terms: I am born with certain physical features (tall or short, with dark or blonde hair, and so on), in certain spatial and temporal dimensions (Middle Ages, Asia), in a certain social class. If our conditions were controllable in the absence of facticity, our destiny would touch the divine identity of essence and existence. More exactly, without facticity the human being could be entirely programmed, without defects and congenital arbitrarity.

From the Platonic *Republic* to the dystopian paradigm of Huxley's *Brave New World* it is only a slight step. Without facticity, we could design a society of alpha men and women, with heightened intelligence, supreme health and exceptional physical qualities. The program of genetic enhancement, of mass producing *Übermenschen*, removes the accidental feature of facticity. From another perspective, such an absolute escape of facticity can be compared to what Sartre in another context calls *Cartesian freedom*:

> The God of Descartes is the freest of the gods that have been forged by human thought. He is the only creative God. He is subject neither to principles – not even to that of identity – nor to a sovereign Good of which He is only the executor. He had not only created existants in conformity with rules which have imposed themselves upon His will, but He has created both beings and their essences, the world and the laws of the world, individuals and first principles.[28]

Coming back to Sartre, the destruction of facticity intended by the violent person is a simultaneous affirmation of pure transcendence and freedom.

d) "Nonbeing", "freedom": Sartre claims that "nonbeing" is not "not to be". Nonbeing must be understood as an annihilation of being-in-itself, whose main traits are, according to the description from *The Nausea*, pure being, absurdity and contingence: "The essential thing is contingency. I mean that one cannot define existence as necessity. To exist is simply to be there; those who exist let themselves be encountered, but you can never deduce anything from them"[29]. Freedom, another negation of the being-in-itself, is the defining characteristic of the being-for-itself:

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[28] Jean-Paul Sartre, *Literary and Philosophical Essays*, translated from the French by Annette Michelson, Criterion Books, New York, 1955, p. 182. See also René Descartes, *Letter to Mersenne*, 15.04.1630, *apud.* Jean-Paul Sartre, *op. cit.*, id.: "The mathematical truths which you call eternal have been established by God and are entirely dependent upon Him, as are all other creatures. To say that these truths are independent of God is to speak of Him as one speaks of Jupiter or Saturn and to subject Him to the Styx and the fates … It is God Who has established these laws in nature, as a king establishes the laws of his kingdom …".

[29] Jean-Paul Sartre, *Nausea*, translated by Lloyd Allexander, New Directions Publications, 1964, p. 131.

> Human freedom precedes essence in man and makes it possible; the essence of the human being is suspended in his freedom. What we call freedom is impossible to distinguish from the *being* of "human reality." Man does not exist first in order to be free *subsequently;* there is no difference between the being of man and his *being-free*.[30]

Gnostic Violence

Sartre goes on to describe violence through two references from the history of religions. He claims that "violence is Manichean. It believes in an order of the world that is given yet concealed by bad wills. It suffices to destroy the obstacle for this order to appear… The violent man is a pure man. A Cathar"[31]. Considering that Catharism and Manicheism belong to the Gnostic nihilism, a movement comparable to existentialism according to Hans Jonas, we should further investigate this argumentative direction. "The whole of Cathar religious practice was directed toward releasing the soul from the body"[32] because, according to them, the body was conceived by a lower demiurge identified with Satan, only the soul being divine. Their key terms for Catharism are purity (a desire to escape the miserable prison of the being-in-the-world) and the rejection of the body (which, at Sartre, is the realm of facticity). The ascetic rejection of the "flesh" reminds us again of the modern Gnosticism of Cioran:

> The flesh spreads, further and further, like a gangrene upon the surface of the globe. It cannot impose limits upon itself, it continues to be rife despite its rebuffs, it takes its defeats for conquests, it has never learned anything. It belongs above all to the realm of the Creator, and it is indeed in the flesh that He has projected His maleficent instincts … Pregnant women will someday be stoned to death, the maternal instinct proscribed, sterility acclaimed. It is with good reason that in the sects which held fecundity in suspicion—the Bogomils, for instance, and the Cathari—marriage was condemned; that abominable institution which all societies have always protected, to the despair of those who do not yield to the common delirium. To procreate is to love the scourge—to seek to maintain and to augment it.[33]

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[30] BN 25.

[31] NE 174.

[32] Lindsay Jones (Ed.), *Encyclopedia of Religion*, Thomson Gale, 2005, vol. 3, p. 1457.

[33] E. M. Cioran, The New Gods, translated by Richard Howard, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 2003, pp. 10-11.

At the root of Manicheanism we find a **"**merciless analysis of the human condition, a pessimism largely common to all forms of gnosis and to Buddhism": human beings are **"**prey to evil, forgetful of their luminous nature as long as they remain asleep and dimmed by ignorance in the prison of matter" [34]. The desire to go beyond the realm of the Satanic world (of overcoming both the *Dasein* and the *In-der-Welt-Sein* – the intention of the violent man as well), can be found in a text from the Manichean doctrine:

> Liberate me from this deep nothingness, from this dark abyss of waste, which is naught but torture, wounds unto death, and where there is no rescuer, no friend.
> There can be no salvation here, ever!
> All is darkness… all is prisons, and there is no exit"**[35]**.

Couliano, in his *Tree of Gnosis*, clearly explains the connections between violence, nihilism and Gnosticism. While Nietzschean nihilism fights against the transcendence represented by the Bible and Christianity, Gnostic Manicheanism and Catharism want to escape the false transcendence[36] of this world (seen as an inferior production of an evil demiurge), and to destroy it in order to evolve to the realm of the real divinity. As we have seen, the Sartrean violent man (who is both existentialist and nihilist) "believes in an order of the world that is given yet concealed by bad wills"[37]. Therefore, he revolts against this world and the diabolical bad wills that conceal reality.

We see the same kind of impulse in the destructive violence of Gnosticism. This world, "a black iron prison" (as Philip K. Dick[38] has put it) and our bodies are regarded as inferior products which must be destroyed. Just as the violent man, the

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[34] Lindsay Jones (Ed.), *Encyclopedia of Religion*, Thomson Gale, 2005, vol. 8, p. 5652.

[35] *Parthian fragment T2d.178 apud.* Lindsay Jones (Ed.), *op. cit.*, *id*.

[36] Ioan P. Couliano, *op. cit.*, pp. 252-3.

[37] NE 174.

[38] See Richard Smoley, *Forbidden Faith. The Gnostic Legacy from the Gospels to the Da Vinci Code*, Harper Collins, New York, 2006, pp. 183-4: "1. Ignorance (Occlusion) keeps us unware of this & hence unresisting prisoners. 2. But the Savior (Valis) is here, discorporate; he restores our memory & gives us knowledge of our true situation (1) and nature (4). 3. Our real nature – forgotten but not lost – is that of being fallen or captured bits of the Godhead, whom the Savior restores to Godhead. His nature – the Savior's – and ours is identical; we are him and he is us.4. He breaks the power which this world of determinism & suffering has over us. 5. The Creator of this world is irrational & wars against the Savior who camouflages himself & his presence here. He is an invader."

Gnostic nihilist rebels against the *Dasein* and *In-der-Welt-Sein*. He wants some kind of purified *Über-Dasein* unstained from the misery of this world. The Heideggerian notion of *Verfallen* might be a fit description for this "fallen" and degraded world (an inconvenient truth concealed by the bad wills who designed this debased creation). One can arrive at this point, after seeing both the Gnostic and modern nihilist account of violence, at a suspicion regarding the idea of transcendence: is transcendence the real cloth of divinity or is it only a camouflage of the empire of the evil demiurge, a veil that conceals our condition of eternal prisoners? We might think that the goal of the violent person as a transgressive being is to destroy the idea of transcendence as such.