

## **Words:** Reminiscences of a precocious childhood spent within the confines of French provincialism before the First World War Jean Paul Sartre

**Contents** (Childhood – Books – School – Writing)

### CHILDHOOD

*Childhood and autobiography.* Like many of the great autobiographers—Augustine, Castiglione, Goethe, Tolstoy, Henry Adams--Sartre opens his autobiography with his personal genealogy, which he recounts with a wry sharpness—snapshots of family crisis, rotten marriages, unnecessary inhibitions; a flow of generations, all transpiring from the mid nineteenth century to the outbreak of the First World War, and then, not much later, to the birth of Jean Paul himself (1905). His was a family of farmers, traders, eventually pastors—from which came the famed Albert Schweitzer, of African mission fame—and from its internecine jealousies, private ceremonies, interface with its own cultural setting—WWI seems in retrospect to have been a defining aura for the entire period—the stage was set for a complicated childhood, so complicated that few, even in the family, paid much attention to it.

*Sartre's Family.* Sartre's father died young, and left little mark on the youngster, who was in any case retiring, happy with private pleasures—hiding out in the family house, playing make believe games. The consequence was that the boy's grandfather, a showman-like pastor himself, played a dominant and shaping role in Sartre's 'formative years.' The elderly man was shallowly proud of Jean Paul, and displayed him volubly like an object of wonder, while Jean Paul's mother was a weak character, who did rather little to shape her son's temper. That temper, as a result of these factors, was retiring, self-interested and quiet; Sartre was always the good boy--for reasons the author deepens in the initial section of his autobiography. He was born just as his father died, an event which left Sartre in charge of the family's ceremonies and emotions, just where he wanted to be.

*Spoiled child syndrome.* Sartre's father, who might have provided him with the Jahveh father image, which would have generated a 'manly' Oedipal response, was cruel enough to his wife, but made little effort to grow close to his son, leaving Sartre himself free of any sense of guilt or revenge complex, of any desire for personal power, or for that matter of any interest in ordering or obeying at all. (Only his grandmother saw through his imperial control, for which he could hardly forgive her.) The freedom of Sartre's own mind, which underpins the continual stress of his later writings about freedom—the dominant topic of Sartre's existentialism-- was being generated in the lineage that created him. He was a free man but a free underground man.

*Sartre's Childhood Freedom.* As a free child, after his father's early death, Sartre found himself the darling of the family. Both his grandfather, and his mother, who was herself young and inexperienced in life, adulated the young survivor, with whom they lived in a blissful, but put on, atmosphere of harmony and love, which was in fact artificial. One of the elements in this atmosphere was the general adulation of young Jean Paul, who lapped it up, learning to be good, fake good, because that behavior aligned with the optimistic and positive attitude the family had decided to promote.

*Happy young emperor.* Young Sartre was happy and in sync with the family, so long as things went his way, as long as he was idolized. As he describes it, he had a well defined position within the family, not on the grandest level, where grandfather stood, but in a seemly location. 'I placed myself on a small marginal perch, not far away from them—the elders—and my radiance covered the ladder from head to foot.' 'A cleric's grandson, I was a cleric from childhood,' and in fact, had he later been a believer rather than an atheist, he might have been a happy member of the higher clergy.

## BOOKS

*Grandfather's Library as Temple.* Sartre's grandfather's library was the temple at which the young man worshipped, and he was never happier than watching grandfather consult his numerous texts, snatching from the shelves just the right texts and references, with unerring accuracy. The elderly patriarch had inherited the editorship of a German language *Lesebuch*, which imported into the family a constant concern with the process of reading, reference checking, and consultation of great literary works, to assure accuracy. Sartre was conspicuously fascinated by this family business. Sartre realized, even as an adolescent that his life, and his death too, would pass surrounded by books.

*Sartre views the future.* Sartre anticipated his future from the passionate relation he developed to the appearance of texts on the shelves of his grandfather's library, texts which the youngster occasionally touched, a no no, with reverential care, and which he viewed as proud dolmens standing courageously on the heath, protectors of mankind, or which more literally he took to be personal guardians, protectors of him since his childhood, and in fact the guarantors of his whole family's prosperity.

*Grandmother's reading.* Sartre's grandmother, too, was an avid reader; her monthly subscription, to a popular ladies' book service, refreshed her and some female friends on the latest trends of literary soap, material which grandmother's husband snorted at. For Sartre, these tales of romance were of little interest, compared to the sequence of teen ager adventure magazine tales he was soon to discover at his local kiosk. These 'thrillers' were to remain the greatest literary joy of his life; decades after he had become a renowned 'adult author.' 'Even today,' he wrote much later, 'I would rather read 'thrillers' than Wittgenstein.' The bottom line, perhaps, is the simple fact that reading was the dominant activity of the family.

*Inside Books* Sartre's autobiography is a history of the mind, and it is no surprise that Sartre's mind is filled with the volumes that filled his grandparents' house, or that for Sartre the library of that house is a temple, the temple at which he worships. We track Sartre, in the present text, from the most ethereal to the most material of relations to his grandfather's library. From the start of the text, he opens up to us the most adolescent stage of his relation to the letters and alphabet—the foundation mystery-codes of the huge leather bound books in the Library.

*Verbal symbols.* Sartre is fascinated by verbal symbols. Then he is fascinated by the people, book friends, he finds in books; the characters he imagines fully as alive, the authors—imagined as depicted on the covers of the books he is reading—'Corneille was a fat man with a gnarled red face'—and beyond the reality he ascribes to the transformed figures who constitute library texts, the entirety of a literary text seems to young Sartre, a few years older to be sure, a mirror of the world, in which the moving parts of the social whole, still a tale to the teen age Sartre, become a mirror of human existence. In a precocious fashion, by the seat of the pants in his own home, Sartre has found his way into the world of literature where mankind, as Terence observes to Sartre's delight, is one and single, and where 'humani nil a me alienum puto,' 'I consider nothing human foreign to me,' is the most common assertion of intelligence.

## SCHOOL

*Misfit.* Sartre has been concerned, to this point, with his first six (or so) years, but the artificial paradise in which he has been immersed, in the privileged, coddled, book-centered world ruled over by Grandfather Schweitzer, is soon to be overturned, and by the same grandfather who fostered the book artifice of Sartre's early years. As often, grandfather was too impulsive; he rushed to enroll his grandson, whom he introduced to all as a prodigy. In a series of small private schools. Unfortunately the school experiment went badly, for among other problems, Jean Paul was 'an infant prodigy who could not spell,' as well as a snob, who hardly mixed with his fellow students, and felt (even when unjustifiably), superior to them.

*Outsider.* Between the ages of six and ten Jean-Paul attended several small private schools, at which he had, for teachers, one old man, and two old maids, none of whom fitted closely to the personality of the youngster whose hothouse educational background hardly fitted him out for the first stages of formal

education. The universal experience of primary school shock was to teach Sartre just how deeply he was an outsider to the social world. 'I am an impostor,' he said, finding out that the imaginative book world, in which he had long figured as the second most potent figure, lodged on a lofty perch just short of Grandfather Schweitzer's altitude, was no longer the air he breathed. He was in the rude public world, and he began to feel that he had no 'sympathy' for it, that he was 'a stranger to the needs of the human race.'

*Note on development.* Sartre is a master of analyzing the rapid succession of self-images that characteristically mark the rapid development of the youngster during his/her first ten years. He goes for that universally human process of growth, which is the theme of the classic Bildungsroman (Hesse's Siddhartha; Fromentin's Dominique; Salinger's The Catcher in the Rye) as well as of many great autobiographies.

*Critic.* In the second half of his first decade, exposed to the world of school, Sartre is increasingly convinced that the adults in his school life were play acting with him, that in fact he was himself not real, but 'bogus,' like extra material that was left over from the making of a coat. This form of paranoia, not unjustified by the situation on the ground, made him envy such figures as his grandfather's partner M. Simonton, who when not present 'was always missed,' was noted as lacking. Sartre begins to note that he himself was never the one lacking, that in fact he was a non-person, the unnoticed one. This - awareness is most keenly felt when Sartre is excluded from games; not chosen to play on a team, and treated by the neighboring boys, as though he didn't exist. Sartre's mature existentialism will rely heavily on this insight into the potential non-existence of the self.

*Body as impediment.* Sartre, never a robust child, increasingly subject to illness, from childhood on considered himself ugly. He knew he was short (not quite a dwarf) while at the same time he felt he was viewed as girlish—a charge his grandfather loathed—with the result that he had no benefit of a benign visual self-image to fortify his sense that he was a full person. 'Breathing, digesting, defecating listlessly, I went on living because I had begun to live.' He had no appetite,

*Sartre's Summary.* Near the end of the discussions of the rude world of school, bullying boys, and the nightmares to which he became increasingly subject, Sartre expatiates on the dread of death, which from the age of five had assailed him in tangible and terrifying forms. (Sartre unflinchingly depicts the stages of the universal human condition, as he lived them, but he leaves his own stamp on the process, that of a unique young 'delicate child.') 'I felt superfluous, so I had to disappear. I was a sickly bloom under constant sentence of extinction.' It is in this period of this ten year old's self-examination, written of course by a midlife author, Sartre himself, that Sartre reaches the nadir of his dreams of adventure and his fascination with the mystery of books. He even admits to having had (passingly) serious need of both a father and a father god.

## WRITING

### Unity of text development

Part II of Sartre's autography is devoted to writing, as well as to the school environment of his teens—with of course many moments of preoccupation with his older self, from which he peers in and out onto his youth.

*Youthful writing.* It needs noting, from the start, that Sartre's earliest years phase directly into his teen age behavior and sensibility. The young man is deeply under the influence of grandfather Schweizer, fascinated by the world of books and seduced by the idea of writing at his small and precious writing desk, as well as by the profuse praises he received from this mother and grandfather for his early writing, games, and play novels. His grandfather has already discovered, on the youngster's skull, a 'literary bump,' which will indicate his professional inclination. It is no surprise, then, that writing turns out to be the central formative act of young Sartre's teen years.

**Plagiarism.** Sartre opens his analysis of his own writing by explaining his fascination with plagiarism. He frankly embraces the practice, as a means of enriching texts with accuracy and meatiness. 'I transcribed them—literary texts—and, before my very eyes, they acquired the solidity of texts.' If an inspired author is, deep down, something other than he is, I knew inspiration between the ages of seven and eight.'

**Mature authorship.** During the second Part of this book, Sartre moves in and out of the fantasy that he is already a fully acclaimed writer, sometimes as though his recent work had just provoked a scandal, sometimes as though he had come fortuitously onto headlines proclaiming his recent literary successes.

**The novels.** The novels he imagines himself creating, and—as is his habit—entering and belonging in—move through heaven and hell, fascinate themselves with Death and Evil, unfold elaborate dialogues between the main character and the Holy Ghost, and at the same time support Sartre's contention, familiar to us from Part I, that he is a worthless nobody, or, to the point of our theme in these inquiries, that he is one with all humanity in the humbleness with which he attempts to gain a foothold on simple life.

**Sense of mission** With increasing actual maturity, with exposure to the world outside his home, Sartre the teen age writer came increasingly, if only spasmodically, to think that he had a mission to write on behalf of mankind. If, as he says, he had the pleasure of seeing humans alive and enjoying their culture it was because from dusk to dawn a man working in his own study had struggled to write an immortal page which earned us this reprieve of a day. 'That man would start again at nightfall, that evening and next day, until he died of wear and tear.'

**Sartre as hero.** There, we learn, Sartre enters the picture, continues the work of literary salvation, and earns his laurels as a savior of mankind. How much more vividly could he restate that desire to be 'lacking,' the 'one needed,' which we introduced above in connection with Sartre's school days reflections? How much more confidence the Sartre of 'mission' feels, than the youth of Part I, whom no one chose for their team. By Part II Jean Paul is on many occasions one of the boys, though by now those boys include a wider variety of lone geniuses than would have neared Sartre's world in his adolescent days.

**Born of language.** Throughout Part II Sartre emphasizes his birth from language, or from the word. It is no surprise that Christian theology, which while rejecting Sartre uses as part of his firm armature of thought strategies, provides raw material for his original reflections on the word. Sartre's own family background was heavily Protestant (Lutheran), through his grandfather the pastor; Catholic (through his milieu and schooling), and he himself had no trouble seeing the beauty of Catholic architecture and music, as they covered the cultural landscapes of France. The Holy Ghost, a natural dialogue partner for Sartre, was the word incarnate, available to the mind of an imaginative teen ager like Sartre, who found in words the trapped energy of things.

**Sartre's autobiography and the human condition** Writers of autobiography are prone to care for language, and to prioritize the careful use of it—after all, they entrust the account of their lives to language. Sartre is remarkable, though, for the extent to which he not only uses language carefully, but concerns himself with language, the material of his autobiography.

**Sartre the 'linguist'** Sartre is a linguist in the literary sense, and is himself the object of his studies in language. Interestingly enough, as Sartre's future was to be in literature (as well as philosophy), we can see, throughout this childhood and teen age autobiography, the brilliance of imagination which was to mark the later fiction of Sartre the writer.

**Universal man.** Sartre more than once refers to himself as one more representative of universal man, the species with a tweak; as for the Roman poet Terence, whom Sartre sites, it seems that 'nothing human would be foreign' to Sartre, who came to birth from that power which sets man aside from the other animals, and which is the primal stamp of our humanity.