

American Novelists in French Eyes

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by Jean-Paul Sartre

French novelist, playwright, philosopher, and editor, Jean-Paul Sartre here describes the impact of those American novelists — Hemingway, Steinbeck, Faulkner, and Dos Passos — who have had a formative influence upon the young French authors. The essay was translated for us by Miss Evelyn de Solis.

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There is one American literature for Americans and another for the French. In France the general reader knows *Babbitt* and *Gone With the Wind*, but these books have had no influence on French literature. The greatest literary development in France between 1919 and 1939 was the discovery of Faulkner, Dos Passos, Hemingway, Caldwell, Steinbeck. The choice of these authors, many people have told me, was due to Professor Maurice Coindreau of Princeton, who sent us their works in translation with excellent prefaces.

But a selection by any one man is effective only if he foresees the demands of the collective group to which he addresses himself. With Coindreau as intermediary, the French public selected the works it needed. It is true that these authors have not had in France a popular success comparable to that of Sinclair Lewis. Their influence was far more restricted, but infinitely more profound. We needed them and not your famous Dreiser. To writers of my generation, the publication of *The 42nd Parallel*, *Light in August*, *A Farewell to Arms*, evoked a revolution similar to the one produced fifteen years earlier in Europe by the *Ulysses* of James Joyce. Their reception was prepared for by the excellent *Bridge of San Luis Rey* of Thornton Wilder.

It seemed to us suddenly that we had just learned something and that our literature was about to pull itself out of its old ruts. At once, for thousands of young intellectuals, the American novel took its place, together with jazz and the movies, among the best of the importations from the United States. America became for us the country of Faulkner and Dos Passos, just as it had already been the home of Louis Armstrong, King Vidor, the Blues. The large frescoes of Vidor joined with the passion and violence of *The Sound and the Fury* and *Sanctuary* to compose for us the face of the United States — a face tragic, cruel, and sublime. Malraux wrote in a famous preface, "The novels of Faulkner are eruptions of Greek tragedy in the detective story."

What fascinated us all really — petty bourgeois that we were, sons of peasants securely attached to the earth of our farms, intellectuals entrenched in Paris for life — was the constant flow of men across a whole continent, the exodus of an entire village to the orchards of California, the hopeless wanderings of the hero in *Light in August*, and of the uprooted people who drifted along at the mercy of the storms in *The 42nd Parallel*, the dark murderous fury which sometimes swept through an entire city, the blind and criminal love in the novels of James Cain.

It takes some time for an influence to produce its effect, and it was during the German occupation, when the Germans forbade all printing and reprinting of American books, that we began to see in France the greatest number of works inspired by this new manner of writing. It seemed as if, cut off from their habitual dose of American novels, the French began to write some themselves in order to have something to read.

The French novel which caused the greatest furor between 1949 and 1945, *The Stranger*, by Albert Camus, a young writer who was then director of the clandestine newspaper, *Combat*, deliberately borrowed the technique of *The Sun Also Rises*. In *Un Homme Marche dans la Ville*, the only and posthumous book of Jean Janson, a very young man who was killed by the Germans in 1944, you might be reading Hemingway — the same short, brutal sentences, the same lack of psychological analysis, the same heroes. *Les Mendicants*, by Desforêts, and *Gerbebaude*, by Magnane, used the technique of Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying* without changing anything. They took from Faulkner the method of reflecting different aspects of the same event, through the monologues of different sensitivities.

The technique of Simone de Beauvoir, also, was inspired by Faulkner. Without him she never would have conceived the idea, used in *Le Sang des Autres*, of cutting the chronological order of the story and substituting instead a more subtle order, half logical, half intuitive. And as for me, it was after reading a book by Dos Passos that I thought for the first time of weaving a novel out of various, simultaneous lives, with characters who pass each other by without ever knowing one another and who all contribute to the atmosphere of a moment or of a historical period.

These attempts provoked others. Moulouji, the young son of an Arabian workman, found himself suddenly, at thirteen, adopted by French writers and actors who made him read Faulkner and Steinbeck long before he even heard of Racine or Voltaire. His culture is entirely surrealist and American. Not very long ago, when he was nearly twenty, he spoke to me enthusiastically about a book he had just read, which related events "in such a new and such an original manner." It was *The Three Musketeers* of Alexandre Dumas *Père*! Moulouji writes "American" as naturally as one breathes, and with the same innocence. His first book, *Enrico*, which won the Prix de la Pléiade – is not inferior in its violence, its naive perversity, realism, and poetry, to *Tobacco Road* or *Tragic Ground*¹.

Today two thirds of the manuscripts which young writers submit to the review which I direct are written à la Caldwell, à la Hemingway, à la Dos Passos. A student named Guicharnand even showed me short stories so profoundly inspired by Saroyan that, not content with using "the American technique" (we speak today in France of "the American technique" in literature as if it referred to dental surgery or a taste for champagne, as we said a while back about a pianist that he had "the American touch"), he locates all his stories in the United States – a United States filled with speak-easies, gangsters, motorcycle cops, all of which derive from novels and films at least twenty years old.

These stories bring to mind that other America of fantasy which Kafka described in *Amerika*. Guicharnand, like Kafka, had never set foot in the United States. He achieved his ideal the day he attempted to retell, in the Saroyan manner, while listening to Duke Ellington's music, an American pre-war film, *Only Angels Have Wings*², which he had seen the day before. You can imagine that, in spite of these new works, we missed American books during the occupation.

A black market for American books was established. The headquarters was the Café de Flore, where poor students resold at a profit books which they found in the bookstalls along the Seine. Snobbishness played its part during the period when the underground was unorganized and not yet hazardous and when amateurs thought they could save France by scratching V signs on the walls. The reading of novels by Faulkner and Hemingway became for some a symbol of resistance. Stenographers believed they could demonstrate against the Germans by reading *Gone With the Wind*³ in the Métro. In 1944, Marc Barbezat, director of the luxurious review *L'Arbalète*, which he published himself with a hand press at Lyons, prepared secretly one number consisting of extracts from American books which had not yet been translated. He intended to publish them without submitting them to the censor, right in the midst of the occupation. The work took longer than he anticipated, however. This number of the review appeared shortly after the liberation. It was eagerly read.

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It is easy to understand my eagerness to see the country of these great writers when I was flying to America in January, 1945. I must confess that in one respect I was disappointed. First, it was impossible to meet any of these men. They were in France, in England, in the Orient – everywhere, indeed, except in the United States. Also, the majority of the cultivated Americans whom I met did not share my enthusiasm for them. An American lady who knew Europe very well asked me one day what American writers I preferred. When I mentioned Faulkner, the other people present started to laugh. The lady, gently amused, said, "Good heavens – that *old* Faulkner!"

Later I met a young liberal writer – the author of some very good historical novels. I told him I had been asked by my publishers to get in touch with literary agents of several writers who were particularly admired in France. He asked me the names of these writers. When I mentioned Caldwell, his friendly senile vanished suddenly; at the name of Steinbeck he raised his eyebrows; and at the mention of Faulkner he cried indignantly, "You French! Can't you ever like anything but filth?" At this same time a New York editor refused to allow the *Nouvelle Revue Française* to publish a particular novel – very amusing, and hardly malicious at all – about the American publishing world, because, he

¹ beide von Erskine Caldwell (A.B.)

² 1939 von Howard Hawks mit Cary Grant und Rita Hayworth (A.B.)

³ von Margaret Mitchell (A.B.)

said, "the book is anti-American." I discussed Faulkner with students in the universities of the East. These young people, who often knew the works of obscure eighteenth-century writers, had, in some cases, never heard his name.

Because of these experiences I concluded that the American public does not react to its writers in the same way as the French public. This discovery dulled my enthusiasm. Everywhere people told me, "You like Faulkner because you have never read any other novel about the South. We have hundreds of them. Read Dreiser, read Henry James. These are our great writers."

I have also concluded that at the moment there is a very strong reaction against the "pessimistic" literature of the period between the two wars. I must admit that we have the same reaction in France against writers of that period. And finally I observed among many American intellectuals a lively concern about the success in France of certain writers who could not fit into American life. "Between France and us," they told me, "there are today misunderstandings which are inevitable but momentary. We do not attach much importance to them, of course. But is this the time – when all countries must combine their efforts to understand one other better — to present the French with an unjust and black picture of our civilization?"

This is why I feel it necessary to explain to the American readers of this article two essential points. I should like to show them that these unflattering books do not make bad propaganda for the United States. I should also like to make them understand why the French have chosen precisely these books from so many excellent works.

It is true that the Germans tried to use the "pessimistic" works of your authors for propaganda purposes – particularly Steinbeck, because Steinbeck was the most severe critic of the capitalistic form of production in the United States. They permitted the publication of *In Dubious Battle*, although they had previously forbidden all translation of American authors. I recall the care with which the proprietor of the collaborationist bookshop "Rive Gauche" in the heart of the Boulevard Saint-Michel had arranged his anti-American window. He exhibited side by side *The Disunited States* of Vladimir Pozner and the works of Steinbeck and, above and below, photographs of Negro lynchings and of policemen battling with strikers. The result was quite different from what he expected. Few people stopped in front of the shop. Then a week later all the windows of the bookshop were smashed with rocks. From that day on, it was necessary for two French policemen to stand on melancholy guard before the display.

Later these same German propagandists tried again by offering Gallimard permission to publish *The Grapes of Wrath*⁴. Gallimard suspected something and refused. This work was later translated and published by a Belgian collaborationist editor, and the offices of the Franco-Germanic Institute were preparing to flood the French market with *The Grapes of Wrath* when the Americans broke through the Nazi line in Normandy. But at the same time, the clandestine Éditions de Minuit which had published *Le Silence de la Mer*⁵, began to circulate *The Moon Is Down* by the same Steinbeck – which seemed to us all like a message from fighting America to the European underground. Thus the most rebellious, perhaps, of your writers held the ambiguous position of being acclaimed of the same time by the collaborationists and by the underground.

In another instance the friends of the Germans miscalculated. When the Vichy newspapers published an extract from the American or English press severely criticizing some Allied military operation, or loyally recognizing some Allied defeat, they thought they would discourage us. They provoked on the contrary among most of us a profound respect for Anglo-Saxon democracy and bitter regret for our own. "Such people," we told ourselves, "have confidence in their rights. They must be both disciplined and stout-hearted to withstand without flinching the announcement of a defeat."

The harsh criticism that your writers made against your social regime we took in the same way. It never disgusted us with America – on the contrary, we saw in it a manifestation of your liberty. We knew that in Germany such a book as *The Grapes of Wrath* could never have been published. Then, need I add, no matter what evils your writers denounced, we have the same faults in our own country. Yes, the Negroes of Chicago are housed in hovels. That is neither just nor democratic. But many of our white workmen live in hovels that are even more miserable.

⁴ von Steinbeck (A.B.)

⁵ von Vercors (Jean Bruller) (A.B.)

These injustices have never seemed to us a defect of American society but rather a sign of the imperfections of our time. In December, 1944, at the same time that the Aubert Palace movie theater in Paris was showing an old movie by Fritz Lang, *Fury*, which depicted a Chicago lynching, Frenchmen in the Midi were hanging and shooting, without much discrimination, such members of the "militia" and collaborationists as they were able to capture. They were shaving the heads of women in our provinces. Thus, when we saw on the screen the adventures of Spencer Tracy, we did not think about your lynchings, but of ours – we took the lesson to ourselves. Your authors, like your producers, always appeared to us as critics of your society, moralists who report on humanity. What we looked for above all else in the American novel was something quite different from its crudities and its violence.

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This brings me to the other point which I want to make. I was asked, "What do you see in Faulkner? Why don't you admire rather our Henry James, our Dreiser?" I answered that we do admire them both, but coldly.

It is entirely natural that the American public, weary of direct and brutal novels which attempt to paint groups or sociological developments, should return to novels of analysis. But analytical novels flood our country. We created the genre, and the best of the analysts, Benjamin Constant and Marcel Proust, are French. Henry James can please us, charm us, but he teaches us nothing – nor does Dreiser. The techniques Dreiser uses to depict his Americans he borrowed directly or indirectly from French realists – from Flaubert, from Maupassant, from Zola. How can we get excited over methods which originated with us, which we learned in school, and which, when we are already weary of them, are shipped back to us from America?

What has aroused our enthusiasm among the recent novelists whom I have mentioned, is a veritable revolution in the art of telling a story. The intellectual analysis which, for more than a century, had been the accepted method of developing character in fiction was no longer anything but an old mechanism badly adapted to the needs of the time. It was opposed to a psychology of synthesis which taught us that a psychological fact is an indivisible whole. It could not be used to depict a group of facts which present themselves as the ephemeral or permanent unity of a great number of perceptions.

All around us clouds were gathering. There was war in Spain; the concentration camps were multiplying in Germany, in Austria, in Czechoslovakia. War was menacing everywhere. Nevertheless analysis – analysis à la Proust, à la James – remained our only literary method, our favorite procedure. But could it take into account the brutal death of a Jew in Auschwitz, the bombardment of Madrid by the planes of Franco? Here a new literature presented its characters to us synthetically. It made them perform before our eyes acts which were complete in themselves, impossible to analyze, acts which it was necessary to grasp completely with all the obscure power of our souls.

The heroes of Hemingway and Caldwell never explain themselves – do not allow themselves to be dissected. They act only. Some have said they were blind and deaf, that they allowed themselves to be buffeted about by destiny. This is false and unjust. On the contrary, each of their spontaneous reactions is complete, what it would be in real life – something that lives and that does not contemplate itself. We learned from Hemingway to depict, without commentaries, without explanations, without moral judgments, the actions of our characters. The reader understands them because he sees them born and formed in a situation which has been made understandable to him. They live because they spurt suddenly as from a deep well. To analyze them would be to kill them. When Camus shows us his hero, Meursault, emptying his revolver at an Arab, he takes care not to explain. But he describes the pitiless heat of the day, the merciless horror of the sun. He encircles his hero with a criminal aura. After this, the act is born of itself; it is obvious to us without any analysis.

For a long time we have been using certain techniques to mark our readers understand what was going on in the souls of our characters. We wrote bravely: "He told himself, 'It is warm. How shall I ever climb the hill?' " Or else we used the "indirect" style which Flaubert, according to Thibaudet. – La Fontaine according to others, – introduced into our literature: "Paul walked with difficulty. It was warm. Good Lord, how would he have the strength to climb the hill?" Or still another technique recently taken from England and imitating Joyce: "One, two, one two, atrocious heat and I – the hill – how shall I ever...?" These different artifices, equally true or equally false, allowed us to reveal only what the character said consciously to himself. They omitted necessarily the whole obscure zone where feelings and intentions seethe, those feelings and intentions which are not expressed in words.

The American writers freed us from these obsolete techniques. Hemingway never enters inside his characters (except in *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, the least impressive of his books, and one which has not yet appeared in France). He describes him always from the outside. He is only the witness of their conduct. It is from their conduct that we must, as in life, reconstruct their thought. He does not admit that the writer has the power to lift the tops of their skulls as the Club-footed Devil raised the roofs of houses to see what went on inside. We have to wait with him – page after page – to understand the actors in the drama. We are, as he pretends to be, reduced to conjectures.

Faulkner also elects to present his heroes from the outside, when their consciousness is complete, and then to show us, suddenly, the depths of their souls – when there is no longer anything there. Thus he gives the illusion that everything which impels them to act lies somewhere below the level of clear consciousness. Dos Passos, in order to make us feel more keenly the intrusion of the group thinking in the most secret thoughts of his characters, invented a social voice, commonplace and sententious, which chatters incessantly round about them, without our ever knowing whether it is a chorus of conformist mediocrity or a monologue which the characters themselves keep locked in their hearts.

All these procedures were new to us in 1930, and they were what first attracted us. There is something more: just as Riemann and Lobachevsky showed the way which permitted Russell and others to reveal the postulates which are the bases of Euclidian geometry, so these American authors have taught us that what we thought were immutable laws in the art of the novel were only a group of postulates which one might shift about without danger. Faulkner has taught us that the necessity of relating a story in chronological order was only a postulate and that one may use any order in telling the story as long as that order allows an author to evaluate the situations, the atmosphere, and the characters.

Dos Passos has revealed the falsity of the unity of action. He has shown that one might describe a collective event by juxtaposing twenty individual and unrelated Stories. These revelations permitted us to conceive and to write novels which are to the classic works of Flaubert and Zola what the non-Euclidian geometry is to the old geometry of Euclid. In other words, the influence of American novels has produced a *technical* revolution among us. They have placed in our hands new and supple instruments, which allow us to approach subjects which heretofore we had no means of treating: the unconscious; sociological events; the true relation of the individual to society, present or past.

We have not sought with morose delight stories of murder and rape, but lessons in a renewal of the art of writing. We were weighted down, without being aware of it, by our traditions and our culture. These American novelists, without such traditions, without help, have forged, with barbaric brutality, tools of inestimable value. We collected these tools but we lack the naïveté of their creators. We thought about them, we took them apart and put them together again, we theorized about them, and we attempted to absorb them into our great traditions of the novel. We have treated consciously and intellectually what was the fruit of a talented and unconscious spontaneity.

When Hemingway writes his short, disjointed sentences, he is only obeying his temperament. He writes what he sees. But when Camus uses Hemingway's technique, he is conscious and deliberate, because it seems to him upon reflection the best way to express his philosophical experience of the absurdity of the world. If Faulkner breaks the chronological order of his story, it is because he cannot do otherwise. He sees time jumping about in disordered leaps. But when Simone de Beauvoir borrows his methods of mixing periods of time, she does so deliberately, and because she sees a possibility of placing her characters and action in better relief. In this way your American novelists have enriched French writers with new techniques, and French writers have absorbed these and have used them in a different manner.

Soon the first French novels written during the occupation will appear in the United States. We shall give back to you these techniques which you have lent us. We shall return them digested, intellectualized, less effective, and less brutal – consciously adapted to French taste. Because of this incessant exchange which makes nations rediscover in other nations what they have invented first and then rejected, perhaps you will rediscover in these foreign books the eternal youth of that "old" Faulkner.