

explorations



Explorations: A Journal of Language and Literature

REVIEW

Sarah Bakewell. 2016. *At the Existentialist Café: Freedom, Being and Apricot Cocktails*. London: Chatto & Windus.

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DOI: 10.25167/EXP13.17.5.10

With her most recent book, Sarah Bakewell presents us with a comprehensive and wonderfully readable cultural biography of existentialism, which has much to offer to both the familiarized and the unfamiliarized with the oeuvres of Sartre, Beauvoir, Heidegger and a host of other think-alikes. The handful of information distributed through fourteen chapters paints an insightful picture of a philosophical movement which left an everlasting stamp on the human perception of the eponymous ideas of freedom and being, and whose relevance, as strongly held by Bakewell, protrudes well into the twenty-first century. The author offers a journey from the beginnings of classical Husserlian phenomenology and the emergence of Heidegger and Jaspers, through the heyday of Sartre-Beauvoir collective, up to reinvigorations of the existentialist philosophy by American, British and Czechoslovakian thinkers in the 1960s and onwards. Bakewell displays a masterful command over the facts, figures and contexts that constitute the subject matter of her study, just as when she swiftly shifts from investigating into Richard Wright's Parisian existence to the discussion of the 1960s reception of Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* (280–281). What also deserves merit is the language and form of her study. Shaping much of her book as a guide to existentialism, she succeeds in explicating major concepts and terms with great clarity as done with the often impenetrable thought of Heidegger. It is frequently made clear to the reader that the discussed philosophies inform her own craft. Bakewell's paraphrase of Heidegger's phenomenological reductions might well constitute *modus operandi* of the book: "disregard intellectual clutter, pay attention to things and let them reveal themselves to you" (3). In the same vein, the heterogeneous style of Bakewell's study, simultaneously critical and anecdotal, (auto)biographical and affective, appears to have been marked by a truly Sartrean imperative of choice and freedom in writing, as evident in *Existentialism and Humanism* or *Being and Nothingness*.

Forging one's philosophy, Bakewell seems to suggest, can be likened to preparing a dish or mixing the eponymous cocktail. The author finds the brilliance of Sartre above all in his ability "to turn phenomenology into philosophy of apricot cocktails ... of

Explorations: A Journal of Language and Literature, 5 (2017), pp. 90-93

expectation, tiredness, apprehensiveness, excitement, a walk up a hill, the passion for a desired lover, the revulsion from an unwanted one, Parisian gardens, the cold autumn sea at Le Havre” (5). It is also the tactics of the her book; Bakewell prefers to have “the masterworks chopped in shards and mixed up like a chocolate chips in the cookie” rather than to handle them “by the whole bar” (32). The discussed existentialists’ oeuvres are thus presented as self-penetrating rather than resonating in isolation. Each theoretical voice, Bakewell observes, is always at the intersections of other voices, just like in the eponymous café, where “there are so many conversations to overhear” (33) and retell. Accordingly, apart from handling the legendary reciprocity in the philosophical and personal partnership of Sartre and Beauvoir, the author illuminates on *Nausea* and its theme of oppressive, entrapping being as influenced by Heidegger’s “What is Metaphysics?” and Levinas’s “On Escape” (105). She also supports her reading of *The Second Sex* with Husserl’s idea of “the encrusted theories which accumulate on the phenomena” (210) and Sartre’s concept of “bad faith” (215). Perhaps more than any other intellectual milieu, existentialists attest to philosophy being a domain of particles, constantly colliding and incorporating each other’s energies.

Even if frequently divergent in their philosophical standpoints (as evident from chapter 14), all of the existentialists, as underscored by Bakewell throughout the entire book, lived by the rule of “inhibited philosophy,” a concept of the English philosopher and writer Iris Murdoch which denotes the ways in which one’s life experience attests to certain philosophical ideas and the ways in which philosophy inhabits life. All the theoretical disparities cease to exist, Bakewell seems to suggest, when looking at existentialism as stemming from childhood experiences and never venturing beyond the influence of everyday life. Thus, Heidegger’s home town of Messkirch, a world of rustic crafts, shapes him forever “as a humble Swabian peasant, whittling and chopping at his work” (53). As believed by the author, living among woodcutters and coopers made it impossible for the German philosopher to turn away from the world where “[p]ractical care and concern are more primordial than reflection. Usefulness comes before contemplation, the ready-to-hand before the present-at-hand, Being-in-the-world and Being-with-others before Being-alone” (65). Levinas’s turn to the Other echoes a particular prison camp memory of an affectionate stray dog, owing to which the philosopher and his fellow prisoners “were reminded each day of what it meant to be acknowledged by another being” (196). Likewise, as claimed by Bakewell, Jaspers’s serious heart condition and emphysema made him focus on border situations (82), Sartre’s being bullied at school engendered “his [later] desire for extremism in all things” (275), and the most fortunate survival of Husserl’s late manuscripts is “a reminder of the role contingency plays in even the most well-managed human affairs” (133). As claimed by Bakewell, the thinker whose life proved to be the greatest demonstration of “inhabited philosophy” was Simone Weil, who, in the act of radical commitment and out of her own will, was capable of making ultimate sacrifices (for instance, she deprived herself food on encountering those who lacked it), thus displaying “a near-infinite degree of duty and obligation to the other” (198). Given all of the above, philosophers’ life experience may be well considered as preceding the essence of their bodies of work, Bakewell successfully demonstrates.

However, as concurrently proved, existentialists did not evade living their philosophies far too much than was sensible. This was the case of Sartre and his 1948 visit to Germany, when his radical axiom to act regardless of the surrounding conditions

did not stand confrontation with the disastrous condition of the country and its citizens after the end of the war. As might be predicted, Bakewell allots most space in this respect to Heidegger and his ties with Nazism, a matter given new life after the 2014 release of his *Black Notebooks*, journal entries written between 1931 and 1941. Scrutiny offered to the German philosopher constitutes the most critical parts of Bakewell's venture and offers many insights. Most interestingly, being more than sure that the concepts presented in *Being and Time* were deliberately envisioned as political, the author wonders whether Heidegger's philosophical apparatus could have been interpreted in a different way. Bakewell holds that his "ideas of resoluteness and the acceptance of mortality could have formed a framework for courageous *resistance* to the regime" (88). Much as the author of *Being and Time* firmly believed in the "demands history was making upon Germany, with its distinctive Being an destiny" (87), notions such as Dasein, seen by Bakewell as a call from one's true unideologized self, should have been read in defiance of totalitarianism and Heideggerian *das Man*. Thus, ambiguity, a key feature of both Heidegger's personality and his philosophy, offers clear proof that the most stimulating concepts can also happen to be the most dangerous ones just as "the passages [from *Being and Time*] calling us to authenticity and answerability" (91).

In the final parts of her book, Bakewell searches for and identifies existentialist tropes in plenty of global concerns of the most modern times. The oeuvres of Sartre, Beauvoir, Merleau-Ponty and their like, as she observes, vastly informed and laid the cornerstone for the post-war liberation struggles, such as decolonization, civil rights, women's rights, and gay rights movements. Existentialism also affected post-war psychotherapy and psychiatry as evident by the then-emerging trends of existential psychotherapy, Daseinanalysis, anti-psychiatry, logotherapy, all helping to find "more personal forms of liberation" (282) and channeling "a more general desire for meaning and self-realisation among the young" (282). As firmly believed by Bakewell, it is also today that existentialist body of thought is relevant, perhaps more than ever. In the wake of, on the one hand, exponential discoveries and advances in neuroscience, biotechnology and genetic engineering, and, on the other, the massively increasing state of surveillance, where "basic ideas about freedom ... [are] assailed and disputed in radical ways" (318), a return to existentialism with its concerns over human status and agency offers "a certain refreshment of perspective" (28). Bakewell indicates particular existentialist concepts worth reconsidering; she reminds us of the need to be engaged and constantly think against ourselves (Sartre), to reflect on ecological and technological matters (Heidegger), to embrace ambiguity in our lives (Merleau-Ponty), or simply to exercise an appetite for living (Beauvoir). The most significant message to the reader, however, aligns with the philosophy behind the book and advocates addressing two problems: "'*what are we?*' and '*what should we do?*'" (30), questions to be asked to oneself anywhere and anytime.

REFERENCES

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