

CHRISTIAN MYTH METAMORPHOSES IN JEAN PAUL SARTRE'S WORKS

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Abstract: Jean-Paul Sartre employs the Christian myth of Nativity by moulding it in a myth of liberty as well as in a support for his existentialist philosophy. The essential conflict of Sartre's play „Bariona ou le Fils du Tonnerre” (“Bariona or the Son of Thunder”) is launched and unfolds itself within the existentialist frame of engaging the hero's conscience. In this occurrence, it embroils the very irreconcilable two terms of customary morality: the Evil and the Good. This profound manichaeism reigns over the text drawing an ampler structure which leans on pairs of opposing concepts. Thus, the Evil engenders: the angst, the despair, the revolt, the crime project (against the Messiah) or of collective suicide (in a word the religion of “nothingness”) whilst the Good drags in: the lucid acceptance of suffering, the responsibility, the fight, the faith, the hope, the joy.

Key words: the Christian myth vs Sartre's religion of nothingness; the being and non-being; mystification, demystification; l'en-soi & le pour-soi; spokesman for ideology.

J.-P.Sartre: an artisan of dramatic myths. There is an essential trait of the writers defending a cause (be it ethical, political, social) which may be encountered in the writings of Jean-Paul Sartre (1905-1980) more than in the case of any writer of the kind: Sartre's oeuvre has a permanent link to its own commentary. In the aftermath of World War Two, Sartre, this «directeur de consciences», or «intellectuel total», this «polygraphe de génie» (D'Ormesson, 1997: 301), has much to say in the development of theatre but also as a commentator of his own works. Michel Contat and Michel Rybalka have gathered Sartre's texts in two volumes, namely: *Les Écrits de Sartre* (1970) and *J.P.Sartre : Un théâtre de situations* (1973). These works are an excellent instrument of research for those who study in depth Sartre's writings.

Since Sartre is indeed a founder of the French existentialism, the rubric of 'existentialist' might mean for Sartre's reception something already there, beforehand. The critical inertia might have acted as a kind of 'fatality' in Sartre's case. But, again, it is the critical exegesis the very side that unanimously figured out in his drama the features of a theatre of ideas openly engaged in defending causes, hence a polemical one. Because Sartre's theatrical project aims a total de-mystification, an ideological de-mystification and an aesthetical demystification. Sartre even uses the words mystification and de-mystification as he would take into account the paradox on which the theatrical spectacle is based. Aware of this paradox, Sartre claims that all de-mystification should be, in a way, "mystifying", a kind of "countermystification": «Je crois, moi, profondément, que toute démystification doit être, en un sens, mystifiante. Ou plutôt que, devant une foule en partie mystifiée, on ne peut se confier aux seules

réactions critiques de cette foule. Il faut lui fournir une contre-mystification. Et pour cela, le théâtre ne doit se priver d'aucune des sorcelleries du théâtre». (J.P.Sartre, in: M. Contat & M. Rybalka, 1970 : 77).

According to Sartre, theatre should not be a philosophic vehicle since it is impossible for it to express philosophy as a totality. On the contrary, theatre needs a formula which allows it to remain theatrical, while it can reconcile the rapport of theater with ideology. This formula is no other than **the myth**. The myth is one of the cornerstones of Sartre's thinking on theatre. The text of a conference delivered by Sartre in New York is particularly revealing. It is entitled "Forging the myths". It defines a theatrical formula which must underpin itself with "myths that everyone can understand and feel deeply": «des mythes que chacun puisse comprendre et ressentir profondément». However, in order to have the quality of myth, a play must transgress the banality of contingency. It must project within the audience an enhanced and enriched image of their own suffering: «projeter au public une image agrandie et enrichie de ses propres souffrances». In order to illustrate what he means by saying "mythical play", Sartre takes as an example Camus' play "Misunderstanding", *Le Malentendu*.

Forging the myths (hence Sartre as a "forgeur" - an artisan - of dramatic myths) signifies not only contesting symbolic and symbolist theatre (qualified by Sartre as childish, «enfantillage») but also considering the theatre performance as a ritual ceremony, unique and irreplaceable. Sartre admitted that this thought would haunt him after his play unique of its kind, *Bariona ou le Fils du Tonnerre* (1940): «À cette occasion, comme je m'adressais à mes camarades par-dessus les feux de la rampe, leur parlant de leur condition de prisonniers, quand je les vis soudain si remarquablement silencieux et attentifs, je compris ce que le théâtre devrait être : un grand phénomène collectif et religieux». (J.P.Sartre, in : M. Contat & M. Rybalka, 1970 : 62).

But, forging the myths, in this circumstance, signifies finding a style of his own, able to banish all familiarity and to install a distance between the work and its public. The idea that the mythical form of the spectacle must appropriate an adequate style came to light in one of the primary texts by Sartre on theatre, namely *Le style dramatique*, dating from 1944. The ideal style is the one that can align or even ally the simplicity of everyday language with the distinction, the dignity of solemn language and tenderness, at the same time, of the great tragedies, where the word must not get out its magic, primitive and sacred role: «la dignité du langage sombre et tendu des grandes tragédies, où le **mot** en aucun cas ne doit sortir de son rôle magique, primitif et sacré». (J.P.Sartre, in: M. Contat & M. Rybalka, 1970: 34). Creating an austere theatre, moral, mythic and ritual seems to be, in sum, the fundamental exigency of Sartre's reflection on the theatre. He imposed this exigency even since his first theatrical experience, namely *Bariona ou le Fils du tonnerre* (*Bariona or the Son of Thunder*).

The myth of Nativity and the existentialist bias. In an interview collected by M.Contat & M.Rybalka (1970), Sartre asserted having written *Bariona* in 1940 when he was a prisoner of war, a in a stalag in Treves (Trier). His purpose was to enliven the resistance of his companions of captivity against the Germans. «Pour moi, l'important dans cette expérience était que, prisonnier, j'allais pouvoir m'adresser aux autres prisonniers et

évoquer nos problèmes communs. Le texte était plein d'allusions à la situation du moment, parfaitement claires pour chacun de nous. L'envoyé de Rome à Jérusalem, dans nos esprits, c'était l'Allemand. Nos gardiens y virent l'Anglais dans les colonies.» (J.P.Sartre, in : M. Contat & M. Rybalka, 1970 : 373 - 374).

The author states unequivocally the political pretext that has inspired him, but he reveals a new meaning, a philosophical one, that he wants to confer to the myth of the Incarnation. He said that others might have thought that he was going through a spiritual crisis, if he chose to write a mystery. It was not the case. Nativity was the subject able to unite Christians and non-believers, alike. Sartre expressed *existentialist* beliefs in denying Bariona the right to commit suicide and in designating him for the fight. «À me voir écrire *un mystère*, certains ont pu croire que je traversais une crise spirituelle. Non ! Un même refus du nazisme me liait aux prêtres prisonniers dans le camp. **La Nativité** m'avait paru le sujet capable de réaliser l'union la plus large des chrétiens et des incroyants. Mais j'exprimais des idées *existentialistes* en refusant à Bariona le droit de se suicider et en le décidant à combattre».(J.P.Sartre, 1973 : 221).

The first experience of Sartre as a dramatist borrows from the Christian myth the narrative model. This model is to be altered by the author who converses it in accordance with the message he wants to send. Thus the myth becomes the pre-text of a meta-text. The conflict invented by Sartre within the mythical fable and the oppositions caused by the conflict aim to illustrate the germs of a philosophical system which is to mature in the following years, once with the apparition of the work *L'Être et le Néant*, in 1943, where Sartre presents the doctrine of atheistic existentialism. This conflict is based on a series of oppositions. Thus Bariona is opposed to Balthasar, one of the Magi, preacher of the new religion of Christ. Bariona is opposed even to his own wife, Sarah, and even to the collective character represented by people of Béthaur. This conflict opposes Bariona to the social order represented by Lélius, the administrator of occupied Judea, the conflict opposes him to Herod, the infanticide king. Not in the last, the conflict is between Bariona and God.

But the basic conflict of the play engages and unfolds in terms of the consciousness of the hero. Here it entertains two of the irreconcilable terms of morality: The Good and the Evil. Or, it is particularly this opposition the one that governs in the text an ampler structure. It responds to a pair of opposing terms, as on the side of the Evil the following are aligned: the angst, the despair, the rebellion, the project of crime (against the Messiah), the collective suicide, the religion of nothingness. On the side of the Good the following are aligned: the lucid acceptance of suffering, the responsibility, the fight, the combat, the faith, the hope, the joy. This manichaeism opposes, at the end, the man of ancient Law, The son of Thunder that Bariona used to be, to the man of the new Law, the first disciple of Christ that Bariona will become. The Sartrean hero exceeds this fundamental opposition. He aligns himself on the side of the good, his freedom is supposed to be his supreme authority. It is because of this freedom that the hero succeeds in annihilating the Evil. He thus engages in action under the auspices of the Good. While he was on the side of the Evil, his freedom retained him into anguish, despair, solitude. **Bariona:** «Mes compagnons, refermez vos coeurs sur votre peine, serrez fort, serrez dur, car la dignité de l'homme est dans son désespoir !» (J.P.Sartre, in : M.Contat

& M. Rybalka, 1970: p. 580). Or : «Pour souffrir, pour mourir, on est toujours seul...» (p. 581). This is the way in which Bariona tries to persuade his villagers about the necessity of a collective suicide, as a sole act of protest possible against the authority of the Romans: **Bariona** :«Nous ne voulons plus perpétuer la vie, ni prolonger les souffrances de notre race. Nous n'engendrerons plus, nous consommerons notre vie dans la méditation du mal, de l'injustice, de la souffrance...» (p. 580). He finds an extraordinary occasion to preach a new religion, that of nothingness, of annihilation, of «néant».

Bariona: «Je souhaite que notre exemple soit publié partout en Judée et qu'il soit à l'origine d'une nouvelle religion, la religion du néant»». (p. 581). His rebellion, in the name of this freedom - on the side of the Evil - gets sometimes imprinted with satanic accents:

Bariona : «Faire un enfant c'est approuver la Création du fond du coeur» (p. 584). In existentialist terms, this infant (the very one that his wife, Sarah, is expecting, being pregnant) will be too much for the world. Just the same as „l'être-en-soi” would be too much for eternity(J.P.Sartre, 1943 : 34). **Bariona** : «Femme, cet enfant que tu veux faire naître c'est comme une nouvelle édition du monde (...) Tu vas recréer le monde, il va se former comme une croûte épaisse et noire autour d'une petite conscience scandalisée [„le pour-soi”- our note] qui demeurera là, prisonnière, au milieu de la croûte [„l'en-soi”]comme une larme”» (p.584). Similarly to another Roquentin, the protagonist of “The Nausea”, *La Nausée*, he will sense the immense hostility of the world: **Bariona** : «Le monde n'est qu'une chute interminable et molle» (p. 579) inspiring him a metaphysical horror: «L'existence est une lèpre affreuse qui nous ronge tous et nos parents ont été coupables...»(p. 585).

It is easy to recognize in this discourse a certain brutality, even cruelty, specific to Sartrean language in front of excessive contingencies of the world, before the opacity and the gratuity of *l'en-soi* which has engulfed conscience. Another character, Balthasar, one of the Magi, subscribes to this: **Balthasar** : «Tu vois cet homme-ci, tout alourdi par sa chair, enraciné sur la place par ses deux pieds et tu dis, étendant la main pour le toucher : Il est là !»(p.604).

Sartre wants his character to be fully responsible for his acts, regardless on whose side they are, be it of the Good or of the Evil. But, although free, he does not prove to be equal to himself, he becomes his own negation. **Bariona**:«Et si **je veux** être un homme de mauvaise volonté ? La mauvaise volonté ! Contre les dieux, contre les hommes, contre le monde ! J'ai cuirassé mon coeur d'une triple cuirasse”».(p. 599) But this rebellious, satanic hero («**Je veux** me dresser contre le ciel et je mourrai seul et irrécusable...») (p. 599)becomes a disciple of Christ. Thus the character allies himself with Hope and Joy, on the side of the Good. Even his atheism is only a quest for God because, although he seems to act as if God did not exist: «L'Éternel m'aurait-Il montré Sa face entre les nuages, et je refuserais encore de L'entendre»(p. 599), he still watches for every sign from Him. **Bariona** : «Alors qu'Il fasse un signe à son serviteur ! Mais qu'Il se hâte, qu'Il m'envoie ses anges avant l'aube ! Car mon cœur est las de L'attendre et l'on ne se déprend pas aisément du désespoir quand on y a goûté une fois !» (p. 586).

It seems that he searches in transcendence a certitude that the material world, the „l'en-soi”, by its opacity, is unable to offer him: **Bariona** :«Le monde n' est qu' une motte de terre qui n' en finit pas de tomber»(p. 579). Likewise : «Ma sagesse me dit : la vie est une défaite, personne n' est victorieux et tout le monde est vaincu !»(p. 580). Just like another Hamlet, face to face with existential nothingness, he despairs to grasp the being though non-being, *le non- être*, or as Sartre expressed it in *L' Être et le Néant* :«La réalité humaine surgit comme l' émergence de l' être dans *le non- être*» (J.P.Sartre, 1943 : 53).

After the transformations operated by the author in the statute of his character, the latter changes everything by remaining free, as he always keeps his freedom unaltered and he keeps responsibility for his choice, should he be located on one side or another. **Bariona** :«Car **je suis libre**, et contre un homme libre, Dieu lui- même ne peut rien... Il ne peut rien contre **la liberté** de l' homme !» (599). He is free at the beginning of the play when in his satanic project it wants to compete with God. He is free even when he is abandoned by everyone and ravaged by sadness, he stands alone« au seuil de leur joie comme un hibou qui cligne de l' oeil” (p. 623). He intercepts on this occasion the project of his freedom: «Je serai libre, libre..Libre contre Dieu et pour Dieu, contre moi- même et pour moi- mème... Ah, comme il est dur !» (p. 627).

He will be “free and light” at the end of the play when, before the Nativity scene, he receives a revelation : the birth of a child does not necessarily mean “an acceleration of the existential entropy“ . He passes on the side of the new religion, the side of the world that has found its beginning: “Raise our child” he says now to his wife, Sarah. «Je déborde de joie, comme une coupe trop pleine. Je suis libre, je tient mon destin entre mes mains. Je marche contre les soldats d' Hérode et Dieu marche à mon côté. Je suis léger, Sarah, ah, si tu savais comme je suis léger ! O, Joie, Joie ! Pleurs de joie !» (p. 632)

But this latter time Bariona is no longer alone, prey of an abstract freedom, because he assumed to give a sense to this freedom, he understood to fill it up by engaging in *an act*, in a social action. He has no other choice but to start a war against the Roman occupant. Bariona finds a way out of the conflict that took place in his conscience both defeated, as a man of the ancient Law, and winner, as a first disciple of Christ.

The new Bariona contests his previous revolt, which becomes, by this very negation, useless, meaningless, like a philosophical premise doomed to be denied. However, this negation proves its efficiency. It allows the hero to return among his villagers, to re-become their leader and to accomplish a mission that shall resonate in the eternity : to save the Holy Family against the soldiers of Herod.

Through this oscillation between two antagonistic attitudes (the satanic insurgence, the safe guarder of the Holy Family), the hero loses his consistence manifested in the beginning, even his authority and credibility. One of the villagers launches this reproach: «Tu étais le chef, alors... Aujourd' hui tu n' es plus rien... Laisse-moi, tu nous as trompés !» (p. 605).

It is Sartre, who, in his theatre project and philosophical project, used his characters to be the vehicle of his metaphysical ideas. He was thus compelled to empty the heroes of their message, to reduce them to a void so that he could refill them with a new message. Philosophically speaking, it is the negation of another negation. Bariona, among Sartre's

dramatic characters, is the first one to enact the very concepts of Sartre's philosophic system : le pour-soi. He is the character always in the quest of his essence : «*en avant, en arrière de soi, jamais soi*»», since we know that „*son existence précède l'essence.*» (J.P.Sartre, 1943 : 185).

A theatrical aesthetics in nuce. Bariona embodies the very condition of the Sartrean dramatic character, as it had been conceived in Sartre's writings on theatre. He is no longer a “character” of the predetermined conditions of traditional theatre. He is nothing else than a possibility of choice, he is in any moment what he has chosen to be. He updates, with his limits, the author's intention to present on the stage man in front of his acts. But he is also inauthentic as his acts do not at all happen on stage. He accomplishes neither his project in the service of the Evil (the collective suicide, murder, annihilation), nor his service on the side of the Good, as a soldier of Christ. He leaves us with the promise that his actions will extend beyond the stage, in myth and history.

There is an episodic character in the play, apparently an insignificant one, namely *Le Montreur d'images*. Just like Balthasar, but in another sense, he embodies the writer as his role is purely discursive, irrespectively to relate and to describe, without engaging for all that in the action. He makes comments on the images that constitute the décor of the play, this very fact being a new pretext to place the fable on mythical coordinates. He comments what is behind the scenes and accompanies his descriptions with an ironic commentary which prevents the lector or the spectator to be completely smitten by the fictitious drama. He undertakes many allusions to the contemporary world and the political situation of the moment. By its irony, he induces “the distance” (that Sartre had postulated in theory in his writings on theatre).

This distance insinuates between the work and the public due to the act of dispelling the theatrical illusion. It reminds us without respite that the world in the theatre is even more real than the real: «que l' on est au théâtre, alors que l'on aimerait se sentir transporter dans un autre monde, encore plus réel que le nôtre».(Pavis, P., 1987 : p. 397). This character is uninvolved in the action, therefore he also keeps himself at a distance from the dramatic action, as in the following example: **Le Montreur d' images** : «Vous pourrez regarder, pendant que je raconte, les images qui sont derrière moi : elles vous aideront à vous représenter les choses comme elles étaient...»(p. 565) Or:« Béthaur est un village de huit cents habitants, situé à vingt –cinq lieues de Bethléem... Celui qui sait lire pourra, rentré chez lui, le retrouver sur une carte....»(p. 567). He has the role of demystifying the drama through his demystifying intrusions.

But this role is twofold subversive, since the author has conferred to it not only an esthetic intention, but also an ideological mission, that of desecrating the Christian Myth. In this regard, the blindness is highly significant. From the very first moment it seems more than strange, even absurd for somebody whose role is *sine qua non* related to the visual sense to imply blindness. Allegorically, his blindness could be in reference to responding to God's incarnation. It could be an author's trick to convey in the text his atheism, his loss of Christian faith.

He even said at the beginning that he was blinded by accident and then he said that he is blind only to the images that are the icon of divine incarnation myth. Just like Balthasar - on

an ideological level - he represents the allegorical hypostasis of an atheist author, therefore blind to Christian faith. He does not involve his conscience. Through this alienation and through his ironic discourse, the character safeguards the degradation and the desecration of the Christian myth. This character also shows his refusal of supernatural in the fact that God is "this man" and his angel is identified with the devil.

Balthasar reinforces two contrary tendencies, an alternation of an objective discourse (abstract, metaphysical) and a subjective discourse (poetical, imaginary, metaphorical). **Balthasar** : «Christ est venu t' apprendre que tu es responsable envers toi-même de ta souffrance» (p. 625). On the other hand, the poet has his turn to the metaphorical use of language. **Balthasar** : «Mais il y a autour de toi cette belle nuit d'encre et il y a ces chants dans l'étable et il y a ce beau froid sec et dur, impitoyable comme une vertu et tout cela t'appartient. Elle t'attend, cette belle nuit gonflée de ténèbres et que des feux traversent comme des poissons fendant la mer. Elle t'attend au bord de la route, timidement et tendrement, car le Christ est venu pour te la donner»(p. 625).

One gets this way to see the gap between the Sartre's option for a free character who is being created in the every moment of the action, and the author's necessity to convey a clear ideological message, which leads to the character's "enslavement" for the author's ideological project. Sartre also reveals the creator struggling with his contradictions. On the one hand, he wants to "forge a myth", demystifying it. On the other hand, he wants to communicate an extra-literary message, and ideological and philosophical one. He attempts to reach the univocity of this type of ideological message by using poetical words, by their nature ambiguous and plural in meanings. In this approach, **the philosopher** works with **the poet** - the sensitive being who use the creative and magical power of the word that generally escape the thinker. Moreover, this fascination with the words, due to their elusive "mystery" remains a constant throughout Sartre's literary creation, since *Nausea* (1938) until the autobiographical work *The Words* (1964). In *Nausea*, for example, Sartre masterfully showed the impossibility of thinking to attach itself to words, impossibility which generates the wave, dizziness, and finally, the excruciating, existentialist nausea.

If in other plays by Sartre the poetry of language disappears in front of the idea, *Bariona* is certainly the most preferred as it makes the most of the great lyrical resources of the word. The text of this play valorizes the synesthetic force of the words, which makes us think of the *correspondences* of Baudelaire or of the lesson of Jean Giraudoux. **Le Passant** : «Je marchais dans le noir sur la route dure et stérile et je croyais traverser un jardin plein de fleurs énormes et chauffées par le soleil en fin d'après-midi, quand elles nous lâchent au nez tout leur parfum»(p.587). **Caïphe** : «Mes narines débordent d'une odeur énorme et suave, le parfum m'engloutit comme la mer. C'est un parfum qui palpète, qui frôle... une suavité géante qui fuse à travers ma peau jusqu'à mon cœur... J'étouffe, je suis noyé de parfum...»(p.592).

This efflorescence of poetic images, the landscapes associating unexpectedly spring to the Birth of Christ suggests symbolically the marriage of Heaven and Earth at the Advent of the Messiah, and the deep intuition of a mystery in nature resulting in the installation of Good in the middle of Evil.

Mythical and poetic at the same time, this theater also defends the rights of poetry and mythical fable coming from elsewhere to become fused, for it is to the poetry that myth - subjected to an invention and a perpetual invention - owes its quality and capacity to endure, and it is the myth to whom the theater of poetry owes its undeniable weight of universality.

There is a will constantly retraceable through all authors between the wars, interwar authors and to Sartre as well, namely that of modernizing the myths, of treating them with solemnity and without the troubles of anachronisms, and desecrating them on purpose. But the reanimations applied to myths arrive even at situating the mythical fable under paradoxical coordinates. Jean-Paul Sartre employs the Christian myth of Nativity by moulding it in a myth of liberty as well as in a support for his existentialist philosophy.

That is why Jean-Paul Sartre, "the last of the Mohicans" as D'Ormesson put it (:301) in contemporary critical consciousness remains "alive, accessible, attractive, being animated by a great ironic style that could be closer to that of Voltaire, but a Voltaire who would have also been able to write pages like Rousseau" (Jacques Lecarme, 2000: p. 719 translation mine). Right now, after 35 years since his death, Sartre continues to fascinate readers and researchers.

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