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Surviving the Death of God: Existentialism, God, and Man at Post-WWII Yale

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SURVIVING THE DEATH OF GOD
EXISTENTIALISM, GOD AND MAN AT POST-WWII YALE

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Advised by Glenda Elizabeth Gilmore

*Submitted For Evaluation as
The Senior Thesis Towards the
Completion of the History Major*

For God

For Country

And for Yale

... in whichever order you choose

“Where has God gone?” he cried. “I shall tell you. We have killed him - you and I. We are his murderers ... Do we not hear anything yet of the noise of the gravediggers who are burying God? Do we not smell anything yet of God's decomposition? Gods too decompose. God is dead. God remains dead. And we have killed him. How shall we, murderers of all murderers, console ourselves? That which was the holiest and mightiest of all that the world has yet possessed has bled to death under our knives.”

-NIETZSCHE

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

When beginning a project of this scope, it is natural to think that the easiest part of it all will be the final closing of the envelope through acknowledging the contributions of others. Now that the sealing wax has been poured, I find it difficult to write my thanks, in fear of forgetting one of the many who have contributed to this endeavor with their kindness, ideas, and goodwill. I would like to start by thanking Yale University as an institution for taking a chance on a boy from Southwest Virginia exactly four years ago. I pray that I never took a single second of it for granted, from the instant I first stepped onto campus until the moment when I leave this place in only a few short weeks. I am changed forever. And for these Bright College Years, my greatest thanks are owed.

Specifically, I would like to thank the Yale history department and its wonderful faculty who have provided me with such gentle direction that I could barely even sense the ways they were guiding me, in this project and in my life. In addition, the library staff here proved immeasurably helpful throughout the entire process. All those at the Beinecke and Manuscripts and Archives were fantastic. Also, I could not have completed this venture before the most recent works on the topic became available; and Yale was fast to accommodate my research by adding *Henri Peyre: His Life in Letters*, *William Sloane Coffin Jr.: A Holy Impatience*, and *Buttercups, and So Forth* to their collection at my request.

I owe a special word of appreciation to both Jean Boorsch and Robert Greer Cohn, two brilliant professors who lived this history I have spent the last year trying to appreciate more fully. While interviewing both men, I began to feel moved and invigorated with each new anecdote and insight. Talking to Professor Boorsch and Professor Cohn brought about dazzling moments of epiphany and encouragement that dramatically impacted my research. In real life – as in the history they have created – these men have truly been inspirational to me.

My friends always give me more than I could ever ask; and their support for my work on this thesis has been wonderfully uplifting. Without them, I would have had neither the spirit nor the strength to follow through on this undertaking, wherein the true reward awaited long after the initial excitement had waned. Particularly after returning from being abroad at Oxford last spring, I have felt especially blessed this year to know how much my friendship means to all of those whom I hold as dear. Listing names seems futile, since I look at my life and I am in awe of how rich with friendship I truly am. Yet, at this time I want to express special gratitude to Aaron, Alexis, Maria, Paul, and Will. To each, thanks for just being you.

I would like to explain further the meaning of page *ii* by now dedicating this work to my belief in the profound love, understanding, and hope that can be discovered in religion. I owe this work to that faith which sustained me, that unique joy found in the incomprehensible beauty of forgiveness, and that trust in a Christianity which does not impose itself as obligation but offers itself to be chosen. I for one have learned much about man and his God by investigating the moment in time when many considered the latter dead while the former lived on.

Most men do not have the good fortune of being able to say what I can at age twenty-one: that I have always had *two* very important women in my life. My mother and my grandmother, both teachers, have forever emphasized the value of education. More importantly, they also taught me to dream big dreams, and then lovingly encouraged me to run after them. With their devotion never-ending, their love exceedingly abundant, and their wisdom deep and powerful, these two amazing women have always been tremendously special. They mean the world to me. Martha Lalka and Lottie Tice have taught in many classrooms over the years; and they have touched countless lives in the process. But these two magnificent teachers raised me, and I feel eternally blessed to know that I am the only one who can say that.

Glenda Gilmore is not just an advisor, not just a mentor, not just a friend. To me, she is all of this and more: Professor Gilmore is one of those few people you meet in life that immediately have an exceptional impact on you – one that you know will last forever. Over the past few years, she has been a true role model for me, and throughout the course of this project, her ceaseless curiosity has always pushed me to think about the topic in new ways. Her guidance is ever-comforting. Her imagination is utterly limitless. She has led me in a love of the pursuit of history and taught me the power held in studying and writing about it. For her help with this thesis, I owe her my thanks. For her impact on my life, I am indebted to her for ever and a day. May my future grant me the opportunity to influence another in the way that she has inspired me – although I know, even now, that it could never be with the wonderful, natural grace that is so distinctively hers.

And as I finish my work, I want to thank all of those amazing Yale graduates who have captivated me with their stories and taught me so much about myself. As a member of the Class of '48 told me, "Anyone who lived through those fascinating times will never forget them. If you can recapture it in your writing it will be a great service." As I now complete this thesis and prepare to leave this beautiful place myself, it is my hope that I have at least come close to doing just that. I feel honored to be able to present this work as a tribute to the remarkable times recorded herein – which I, too, shall never forget...

EASTER DAY 2005

R.T.L.

A BELIEF IN UNBELIEF

“This is our world to build, adorn, or destroy, not God's or anyone else's.”¹ These were the words of Hugh McClean, a Yale student both before and after the Second World War. When the war ended, McClean and thousands of his peers returned from duty in Europe and the Pacific to complete their education at colleges across the United States. They saw the world differently than they had before; they certainly viewed the world differently than their parents and grandparents. They had heard leaders of the world's warring nations invoke destiny to validate their warfare. Some of these teenagers had even been behind the unprecedented killing machines that decided whose destiny would prevail. And now with the invention of the atom bomb, new questions about the future emerged, as humankind found itself on the brink of annihilation. Even if the fate of the American cause proved true in WWII, uneasiness came with the onset of the Cold War. The middle of the twentieth century was a time for questions. Where was God through it all? Could Nietzsche have been correct? And, if so, could man survive the Death of God?

Many of the boys who had liberated Europe returned to the States asking these kinds of questions. “The war was a catastrophic event,” one of McClean's classmates recounted. “When you have catastrophic events, people think about whether the philosophies they had heretofore believed were true. It seemed to be unending because of the contest of beliefs between American and Russian ideas. And God Is Dead was a part of that.”² Even as they coped with the wartime deaths of friends and rejected the beliefs of their parents, most American youths nevertheless remained optimistic about their future. For those who had

¹ Hugh McClean, E-mail to author, 3 February 2005.

² William Swire, Telephone interview with author, 5 February 2005.

survived the war, there was beautiful opportunity in being able to question beliefs and seek novel solutions to contemporary problems. It was their world to build, adorn, or destroy.

For many of these former soldiers, religion became more important than ever before and the effort to know their parents' God, a living God, became an intensely individual quest. Yet, for others, coming of age meant abandoning an idea of the absolute while banishing the Everlasting from contemplation. This is not to say that these young men accepted atheism lightly. On the contrary, their entire maturation during the war had been marked with austerity – and this new conflict called for the same ascetic intrepidity in order to forge a self-determined destiny. And at the same time, from across the Atlantic came a new philosophy. *Existentialism*: peace between nations may have been reached, but the personal struggle had only begun. Yale French department chairman Henri Peyre described modern man's encounter with Existentialism: "he is anguished by the immensity of the task proposed to his responsible and free choice. He needs to muster all his courage because he has to bear his burden alone. There is no God to assist him."³ Postwar American college students wanted to extract purpose from religion and create a secular understanding of the world that would give their existences meaning. These newly distinguished heroes hoped to create their own salvation: the world could still be meaningful and exciting even if Providence could no longer be the standard rejoinder to the unanswerable.

Existentialism seemed to be a new idea formed in the vacuum left by the Second World War; but in fact, the originating term "Existenzphilosophie" traced back to 1929 (and the lineage of the idea went back even further), as mid-twentieth century philosophers

³ Henri Peyre, "Existentialism – a Literature of Despair?" *Yale French Studies* 1 (Spring-Summer 1948): 24. Henri Peyre's perspective on the postwar experience of Existentialism was astute, despite the sense of uncertainty and even crisis that developed all around him. See his article "Existentialism, a Literature of Despair?" in Peyre, "Existentialism – a Literature of Despair?" *Yale French Studies* 1 (Spring-Summer 1948): 21-32.

readily pointed out.⁴ This alluring belief cast out God and guilt and re-cast man as the God of his own self. It even had its own prophet, Jean-Paul Sartre. As his ideas became glamorized, Sartre received both immeasurable acclaim and emphatic disdain. In physical stature, he stood at only five feet two and a half inches, but for many Americans, including students, he loomed as a giant intellect from the other side of the Atlantic Ocean, as large as his Existentialist ideas that became their clarion call.⁵

Particularly at postwar Yale University, Existentialism flourished as a philosophy that renounced the idea of God and replaced it with individual freedom and self-determination. To some extent, the liberty and opportunity pronounced by Existentialism fit perfectly with the American character – but in other ways, the idea seemed foreign and threatening. Although Yale became the main American point of arrival for Existentialist ideas from Europe, accepting the philosophy was not always easy for Yale students. Yalies who made these beliefs their own struggled with their implications as contrasted against other values – distinctly American values imparted upon them by the nation once called a City on a Hill and a beacon for Christianity. All of this occurred at the same time that the university itself became caught in a similar transition between old and new, traditional and liberal.⁶ As Yale University reevaluated its role in American society, this generation of students who passed through its gates reconsidered the American Dream for themselves, while debating whether God could be a part of that dream any longer.

With Existentialism, notions of American destiny and traditional duty collided with American freedom and progressive individualism. This philosophy resounded with each postwar student differently; within this one idea laid the dichotomy that would define the

⁴ F.H. Heinemann, *Existentialism and the Modern Predicament*, (New York: Harper, 1958), 1.

⁵ Annie Cohen-Solal, *Sartre*, Translated by Anna Cancogni, (New York: Pantheon, 1987), 4.

⁶ Robert Greer Cohn, Telephone interview with author, 7 February 2005.

entire Cold War generation. Some would emerge from Yale endorsing the traditional ideas of their parents, but for others, the Death of God proved true. They wanted an innovative approach to life in order to redefine what it meant to be American, and to be human. With the boom of Existentialism came a new focus: not so much that God was Dead but that Free Will was Alive. This was how America's World War II heroes formed a new humanistic belief for themselves during their college years, turning the ultimate tragedy into limitless possibility. This was how at Yale, man survived the death of God.

A SUDDEN THRUST OF FREEDOM

Charles Seymour, Yale University's President from 1937 to 1950, rose to that position just as Europe spiraled into the chaos leading to war.⁷ Personally, Seymour had made a name for himself with his work in US foreign affairs. Following World War I, he served in Paris on the American Commission to Negotiate Peace as a consultant on Eastern European territorial claims.⁸ Once these agreements failed and the US entered into World War II, Seymour engaged the university in the fight for freedom and democracy, making Yale an active participant rather than a passive observer. After negotiating with the Yale Corporation's Committee on Educational Policy, Seymour received a declaration from one of its members, Henry Sloane Coffin, which expressed the Yale Corporation's endorsement

⁷ Brooks Mather Kelley, *Yale: a History*, (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1974), 393, 425; Charles Seymour, ed., *What Really Happened at Paris: The Story of the Peace Conference*, (New York: Simon, 2001), 7.

⁸ Kelley, *Yale: a History*, 393. Charles Seymour established his reputation quickly at Yale based upon his work at the Paris Peace Conference, using his political involvement to bolster his career first as a Sterling Professor and then as Provost. During this time, he wrote many works on US diplomacy during the Great War and what transpired thereafter at Versailles. Among other texts, see *American Diplomacy During the World War*, *Letters from the Paris Peace Conference*, *What Really Happened at Paris: The Story of the Peace Conference*, and *Woodrow Wilson and the World War*.

of taking all necessary means to support the war effort.⁹ This enabled Seymour to turn Yale into a military camp of over 7,000 men by 1943.¹⁰ During the war, not only did Yale train over 20,000 men, but the Sheffield Scientific School also contributed important research on both radar and the atomic bomb.¹¹ If World War II tested Yale's allegiance to the nation, the university proved its patriotic commitment by dutifully supporting the home front rather than questioning the government and resisting conflict.

After the war, President Seymour found himself heading a third kind of Yale. With the return of students from abroad as well as the advent of the GI Bill of Rights, Yale's student population almost doubled after the war, with nearly 9,000 undergraduates in attendance by the fall of 1946.¹² Under the GI Bill, Yale allowed most veterans who had received on campus training during wartime to return as full-fledged students after their discharge.¹³ This broke with tradition, rendering Yale unable to maintain the elitism of favoring alumni sons. As a graduate of the class of 1948 exulted, "It was very heart-warming ... so many men from families from which no one had gone to college – or even aspired to do so – opening up to Chaucer!"¹⁴ Being forced to break with the Old Yale tradition of legacy admissions broadened Yale's reach in US society, pushing the New Yale towards a more inclusive view of higher education.

With this in mind, President Seymour commissioned the Course of Study Committee and the Committee on Modern Foreign Languages in 1944-1945 to define what the modern educated man should know. In addition, he asked for them to "take account of the war

⁹ Ibid., 399-401.

¹⁰ Ibid., 399-401.

¹¹ Ibid., 403.

¹² Ibid., 405. As Brooks Mather Kelley explained, the Yale administration expected that it could handle a sixty percent increase in the undergraduate population in 1946, nearing the wartime enrollment of 8,000 men. The university, which had maintained a level of 5,000 students in the prewar era, had far exceeded its expectations (as well as its capacity), with almost 9,000 attending Yale that year. [Ibid., 405]

¹³ Ibid.; Oscar Gray, E-mail to author, 2 February 2005.

¹⁴ Gray, E-mail to author, 2 February 2005.

experience of the returning service men or their lack of academic experience,” which most colleges had failed to do after WWI.¹⁵ This adjustment proved easier said than done, particularly for those students who would have not otherwise attended college and faced the rigor of a Yale education. Murray Gerstenhaber, a man who was drafted and sent to Germany at the very end of the war, described postwar Yale in this manner: “The veterans who returned to be students had had the world in all its grisly reality thrust at them.”¹⁶ War was trauma, and for those who had never before considered attending college, stepping onto Yale’s campus surely seemed a daunting task. The university demanded that those on the GI Bill meet the same standards as their wealthy, preparatory school-educated peers. As a result, inclusiveness did not necessarily mean a better life for students at New Yale in comparison to the Old – and even if these veterans managed to adjust, doing so was never easy.

While many Yalies returned from war to rediscover the difficulties of academic life, freshmen entering in 1945 had to take on college for the first time. One such Yale student, George Spencer, was only sixteen and a half when he came to Yale that year. In addition to being young compared to freshmen classmates, his experience differed greatly from war veteran upperclassmen.¹⁷ As he described it, “I was a callow youth, and they were in their mid-twenties. That was the gap between the teenagers and the returning veterans. It was an

¹⁵ Seymour, “A Program of Collegiate Studies for Returning Service Men,” *Tomorrow* 3 (June 1944): 32-34, box 24, folder 205, Records of Charles Seymour as President of Yale University, 1917-1956 (inclusive), Sterling Memorial Library Manuscripts and Archives, Yale University (Collection hereafter cited as Seymour Records; Archive hereafter cited as MSSA). In the June 1944 edition of *Tomorrow*, Charles Seymour wrote that after the First World War, “The college, like President Harding, wanted to get back to ‘normalcy.’” [Ibid., 32] He called for a new approach to be taken in the current situation. The only way to help returning veterans recapture their education was for the administration to attend to the unique needs of Yale’s new student body, which he defined as “heterogeneous in the extreme.” [Ibid.] As sociologist E. Digby Baltzell later explained, “For the first time in their lives, members of the WASP upper class flew and fought and became close friends with Italians, Irish Catholics, and Jews. Actuality, in many instances, reality shattered stereotypes throughout the various theaters of war. And following the war, the G.I. Bill of Rights was the first really democratizing agent in the history of college and graduate education.” [E. Digby Baltzell, “The Protestant Establishment Revisited,” *American Scholar* 45 (Autumn 1976): 506]

¹⁶ Murray Gerstenhaber, E-mail to author, 1 February 2005.

¹⁷ George Spencer, E-mail to author, 2 February 2005.

age and developmental hiatus.”¹⁸ The postwar student faced these problems as well as their schoolwork. Yet, adapting to Yale life was also demanding for a wholly different reason.

There simply was not enough room. Due to overcrowding, students were packed into dorm rooms, sometimes as many as three to a suite previously intended for one person.¹⁹ Additionally, two hundred students lived with faculty and alumni throughout New Haven, while three hundred resided in Payne Whitney Gymnasium.²⁰ Sleeping in stacked bunk beds, students found their living conditions to be starkly different than what prewar Yalies had enjoyed. As Bill Swire recounted, “When the war was over, particularly around 1946, a flood of students returned to Yale ... My first residence was the visiting team locker room when I came back from the war.”²¹ In addition, a number of Yale upperclassmen were older than in previous years, and many had even started families before returning to the university. As a result, over one hundred men lived with their wives in barrack-like Quonset huts on the outskirts of campus.²²

Overall, life at Yale posed unprecedented challenges to the average student, ranging anywhere from readjustment after the war to finding a place to sleep. Still, what did it all mean for the spirit of postwar Yale? Swire summed it up by exclaiming that “People were thinking: ‘we’re free, we can do what we want’ – every football game was sold out and the parties were absolutely fantastic. There was this feeling of freedom, where you could do what you want. From a restricted life, many Yale students went into a free life.”²³ Despite being packed into overcrowded classrooms and dormitories with peers who comprised a class more diverse than ever previously seen at the university, the Yale student adapted and

¹⁸ Spencer, E-mail to author, 8 February 2005.

¹⁹ Kelley, *Yale: a History*, 405.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 406.

²¹ Swire, Telephone interview with author, 5 February 2005.

²² Kelley, *Yale: a History*, 406; Swire, Telephone interview with author, 5 February 2005.

²³ Swire, Telephone interview with author, 5 February 2005.

thrived with college life. And in his freedom, he rejoiced. To Murray Gerstenhaber, returning from the war brought about a sense of unity in this liberty by being “surrounded by many who had had to trust their lives to men of other colors and other faiths. They were now intent on making up for the time they had lost while serving the country. Most didn't care who sat or ate beside them. The old prejudices were now largely (but never completely) dissolved.”²⁴ To a degree, part of Old Yale had been left in the prewar period; and New Yale emerged in its place.

In lieu of being a traditional finishing school for wealthy boarding school boys, now Yale University began to take shape as a more egalitarian center for learning. While this change did not occur overnight, the Second World War had a markedly liberalizing impact on Yale.²⁵ With the return of servicemen catalyzing Yale's development from Old to New and conservative to liberal, this particular moment in US history indicated a dramatic transformation in the role of education in society. And as time passed and the idea of the university expanded, the makeup of the Yale student of the second half of the twentieth century changed considerably in comparison to those who preceded him, or her.²⁶

But before Yale opened its doors to women and minorities, the traditional view of the Yale man having a surname such as Hale or Taft had to change. Students at Yale on the GI Bill often relished in the adventure of being the first in their family to experience college life. And for all returning veterans, Yale days were a celebration of life itself. As Emerson

²⁴ Gerstenhaber, E-mail to author, 1 February 2005.

²⁵ It must be emphasized that Yale's movement towards being more of a meritocracy did not occur immediately; as Brooks Mather Kelley has explained, it would take decades for this transformation to transpire, with over thirty percent of the class of 1943 comprised of alumni sons. [Kelley, *Yale: a History*, 406] Yet, the impact of the GI Bill cannot be underestimated. For further reading on this topic, Geoffrey Kabaservice's book *The Guardians: Kingman Brewster, His Circle, and the Rise of the Liberal Establishment* also traced the trend of the liberalization of Yale University. Kabaservice's text relied less on statistics than Kelley's survey; rather, he provided case studies of the lives of a few Yale men who later impacted academia and politics over the second half of the twentieth century.

²⁶ Swire, Telephone interview with author, 5 February 2005.

Stone, who graduated in 1948, described it, “Many of my fellow undergraduates had seen war’s horrors, and were at Yale by virtue of the brand new GI Bill of Rights that paid their tuitions and costs. Almost by definition of being alive after such times, they have seen brightness ahead, too.”²⁷ Having known the darkness of war and the nearness of death, these Yale men of the 1940’s saw life then as precious and wonderful. For them, the Yale experience meant freedom in all of its glory, hope in all of its splendor. These truly were Bright College Years.

In addition to making arrangements for returning students, the Course of Study Committee redefined the education of the future Yale student based on Charles Seymour’s vision. A crucial part of this was to make the university more internationally-minded. One of Seymour’s first tasks before the war had been to bring in new leadership, such as in Romance Languages instruction. Almost immediately, the French department arose as a predominant concern. A professor of Romance Languages even wrote to Seymour about a March 1938 *Yale Daily News* editorial, which explained that Yale students “won’t accept approximate goodness,” and that they were “clamoring for ‘a Frenchman’” in the department.²⁸ Needing to bring new life to the study of French at Yale, Seymour found his Frenchman; he appointed Henri Peyre as Sterling Professor of French in May of 1938.²⁹

²⁷ Emerson Stone, E-mail to author, 3 February 2005.

²⁸ Joseph Seronde to Charles Seymour, 10 March 1938, box 72, folder 619, Seymour Records, MSSA, 1-2. Seymour took note of the editorial and this particular phrase stayed with him. Just before deciding to accept the position, Peyre received a letter from Seymour which stated that “I can assure that the undergraduates are clamoring for a Frenchman like yourself who will inspire them with a love of France, of French Literature, and civilization. I might add that I personally have been very keen to develop among the undergraduates an appreciation of French civilization and your presence here would assure rapid development along such lines.” [Charles Seymour to Henri Peyre, 12 April 1938, box 72, folder 619, Seymour Records, MSSA, 1-2]

²⁹ “Y.[ale] C.[ollege] Minutes,” 14 May 1938, box 72, folder 619, Seymour Records, MSSA, 1. With war imminent, Peyre’s appointment occurred just in time. As he later wrote to Seymour in February of 1947, after turning down a position at Columbia University (and receiving a \$2,000 raise upon doing so), “I have an especial debt of gratitude to you for calling me to Yale when you did almost as soon as you were elected President of the university and before the difficult times that I would probably otherwise have lived in Europe.” [John W. Kneller, ed., *Henri Peyre: His Life in Letters*, (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2004), 232] Charles Seymour ensured that Peyre would remain in the United States throughout the war; when news

Seymour agreed with his undergraduates about the importance of having native speakers in the foreign languages faculty. As the President wrote to Peyre when offering the position at Yale to him, “I might almost appeal to you on the grounds that it is a patriotic duty to France.”³⁰ Even with the onset of the Second World War, the French government encouraged Henri Peyre to leave the country for America. As Peyre wrote to Seymour when accepting the position of department chair, “I have no doubt, however, that the Paris authorities will feel, as I do, that I shall serve the cause of French culture and civilization even better by my presence at Yale.”³¹ By teaching in America, Peyre became more than just an instructor – he was a full-fledged ambassador of ideas. As a top educator in French language, literature, and culture to some of the brightest college students in America, Peyre immediately became a primary conduit of everything French to the United States, a representative of his nation’s values abroad.³²

Within a year of taking on his role as a cultural ambassador, Peyre had positioned Yale as one of the leading US centers for French studies. After sending his plans to both the French government and President Seymour, Peyre established a French Center at Yale with a grant from the French Embassy and the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs that totaled

reached Seymour that Peyre might be drafted, the President put in a special request to his friend F.L. Berlin with the Office of Strategic Services in Washington. Seymour explained that “It would be a waste of fine material if Dr. Peyre were drafted.” [Seymour to F. L. Berlin, 9 November 1942, box 72, folder 619, Seymour Records, MSSA, 1] At the same time, if Peyre had to leave Yale and enter the military, Seymour insisted that “If liaison work of any kind is needed, whether in this country or abroad, Dr. Peyre with his background and his attested integrity, would seem to me to have admirable qualifications ... In normal times we should never think of sparing him from University work. But he is much too good to be drafted and in my opinion if a man is needed to work with the anti-Vichy French here or abroad, or to work on special problems involving research, I could think of no one better.” [Ibid., 1-2]

³⁰ Charles Seymour to Henri Peyre, 12 April 1938, box 72, folder 619, Seymour Records, MSSA, 1.

³¹ Henri Peyre to Charles Seymour, 29 April 1938, box 72, folder 619, Seymour Records, MSSA, 1.

³² The French government always cherished Peyre’s contribution to foreign affairs; he was later awarded the Légion D’Honneur, the highest decoration given by the French government, for his patriotic service through teaching French language and culture to the Americans. Unlike Sartre, Peyre accepted his award. [Kneller, ed., *Henri Peyre: His Life in Letters*, 1084]

\$10,000 (a sum amounting to his entire yearly salary).³³ The express purpose of this center – and the reason the French government responded so graciously – was that it created a French cultural mainstay at Yale, a meeting place for students to converse in French and read periodicals in the language.³⁴ Like the Amerika Haus system employed by US foreign affairs agents to propagate American values in Germany after World War II, this center acted as a French cultural mission to the United States. As a bona fide cultural ambassador to the USA, Henri Peyre took the lead in making Yale the seat of French studies in America.

The appointment of Peyre and subsequent improvements in his department were only the beginning. Soon, the President’s Committee on the Teaching of Modern Foreign Languages developed an intensive foreign language curriculum that made up three-fifths of a student’s first term at Yale.³⁵ Reflecting on their reasons for making foreign languages a centerpiece to the Yale education, the committee groused about “the disturbing decline of the study of foreign languages for any purpose in our American educational system.”³⁶

Attributing this degeneration to the United States’ interwar isolationist outlook, they then

³³ “Y.[ale] C.[ollege] Minutes,” 14 May 1938, box 72, folder 619, Seymour Records, MSSA, 1; R. de Saint-Quentin to Henri Peyre, 3 May 1940, box 72, folder 619, Seymour Records, MSSA, 1. “My suggestion,” Peyre wrote to Seymour, “was that France, even in the present difficult circumstances, grant a sum of \$10,000, once for all, to help the creation of that center, and then give us in the future books, periodicals, pictures, etc. The Ambassador has received the news that my suggestion, which he recommended warmly, had been approved.” [Henri Peyre to Charles Seymour, 15 May 1940, box 72, folder 619, Seymour Records, MSSA, 1] This approval came in a letter sent on the 3rd of May, 1940, which explained that “the Council President of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs added how happy he is to learn of the splendid effort made by Yale University in support of French culture.” [“M. le Président du Conseil, Ministre des Affaires Etrangères, ajoute qu’il est heureux de reconnaître ainsi le magnifique effort fait par l’Université de Yale en faveur de la culture française.”] [R. de Saint-Quentin to Henri Peyre, 3 May 1940, box 72, folder 619, Seymour Records, MSSA, 1] In reply, President Seymour thanked the French Embassy for their magnanimous support: “May I extend to you my deep appreciation. I am confident that, with this help and with the interest of the many friends of France in the Yale circle, ultimately we can develop the Centre into a focus of French cultural interests at Yale which will be of the greatest importance.” [Charles Seymour to R. de Saint-Quentin, 15 May 1940, box 72, folder 619, Seymour Records, MSSA, 1] The French Center needed the financial support of the French government; as Seymour informed Peyre in a letter from October of 1941, “it is clear that the University is not in a position to offer material assistance to the Institute either in the form of financial grants or in the time of professors.” [Charles Seymour to Henri Peyre, 22 October 1941, box 72, folder 619, Seymour Records, MSSA, 1]

³⁴ Kneller, ed., *Henri Peyre: His Life in Letters*, 106.

³⁵ Frederick A. Pottle, William C. Devane, et al., “Report of the President’s Committee on the Teaching of Modern Foreign Languages,” 15 May 1944, box 44, folder 436, Records of the Provost’s Office, Yale University, 1914-1964 (inclusive), MSSA (Collection hereafter cited as Provost Records), 3-5.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 3.

warned that foreign language instruction had declined “to a dangerous point of provincialism.”³⁷ After World War II, isolationism became impossible and the study of foreign languages and cultures emerged as a paramount concern of the university. Predicting that this effect would last long into the second half of the century, the committee insisted that the future Yale curriculum could very well alter US foreign policy by providing students with an education that was international in scope.³⁸ Isolationism had failed the United States, the President’s Committee declared: “It is not likely that we can as a country slip back into the provincialism of the ‘twenties and ‘thirties again.”³⁹ And with Yale’s own ambassador of French culture, Henri Peyre, leading the department, such regression would be impossible.

Encouraging an intercontinental worldview in Yale students took more than just Henri Peyre, however. Other new members of the French faculty soon arrived at Yale,

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Ibid., 3-5. This report only vindicated Seymour’s own personal outlook, which favored an international perspective in the classroom. Seymour placed a particular emphasis on foreign studies at Yale; but even before WWII, these beliefs could be seen in his writings. In a book preface written on 12 November 1942, Seymour explained the university’s role in shaping tomorrow’s leaders and world affairs: “In these days when every individual and every institution is perforce called into the national war effort, it is all the more important that we should remember that the university’s ultimate service to the nation lies in the field of creative and critical scholarship. If that be forgotten, the University will have deserted its past and no matter how decisive the military victory, the civilization we fight to save will sink into arid mediocrity. Our people must not merely be free, they must also be instinct with aesthetic perception and intellectual vigor.” [Seymour, “Preface for *Essays in Honor of Albert Fenouillet*,” 12 November 1942, box 72, folder 620, Seymour Records, MSSA, 1] Seymour’s philosophy forever redefined the purpose of a Yale education; even after his tenure, Whitney Griswold continued this legacy throughout the 1950s and into the 1960s. During his first year as Yale President, Griswold published an article in *The Atlantic Monthly*, which graced its cover with his portrait. Griswold contended that defeating Communism would prove useless if America abandoned altogether the inquisitive mindset of the academic. His argument precisely echoed the philosophy of Charles Seymour when he lamented, “In the emergency, we talk of college education as a nonessential and an expendable. While we lavish our ingenuity and resources on the weapons of war, we neglect and even handicap the men who will use them. This is a high price to pay for survival. And what price survival if we become a headless monster?” [Whitney Griswold, “Survival Is Not Enough,” *The Atlantic Monthly* 188 (November 1951): 25]

³⁹ Pottle, Devane, et al., “Report of the President’s Committee on the Teaching of Modern Foreign Languages,” 15 May 1944, box 44, folder 436, Provost Records, MSSA, 3. Many Yalies of this era embraced Seymour’s global worldview. And after their days at Yale, some would choose to dedicate their lives to US foreign affairs. As McGeorge Bundy wrote in a letter to a friend in the same year Seymour composed the aforementioned preface, “I begin to think, in a fuzzy and indefinite way, that I know how I want to spend my life I want to make the world my oyster – in this sense – that no grasp of politics today is valid if it does not comprehend the whole world, and in the next forty odd years there will be no peace nor order that is not built along that strange new path.” [Kabaservice, *The Guardians: Kingman Brewster, His Circle, and the Rise of the Liberal Establishment*, 102.] For further reading on the lives of the many sons of Yale who would become the leaders of Cold War America, see Kabaservice’s *The Guardians: Kingman Brewster, His Circle, and the Rise of the Liberal Establishment*, particularly chapters two and three, which addressed their time at Yale College during the 1940s.

bolstering the department and improving its standing in the university. For instance, one of the first associate professorships granted during Peyre's first year went to a fellow Frenchman educated at the *École Normale Supérieure*, Jean Boorsch.⁴⁰ By expanding the French department and increasing its role in the Yale curriculum, Charles Seymour hoped to engage the university in a genuine bilateral exchange with Europe. And as with Henri Peyre, instructors like Jean Boorsch also became emissaries of French ideas and values. "Back then, teaching in America meant something," Boorsch recounted. "My role as a professor was a needed function for the [French] government, they expected us to remain outside the country."⁴¹ In order to garner respect from future American leaders, the French government made sure that professors like Peyre and Boorsch remained in the United States, even when war escalated in Europe. As Boorsch explained, "At the beginning of World War Two, I was called to define my military duties, and the French Embassy told me, 'don't budge, don't budge, don't budge,' so that I would stay as a kind of ambassador."⁴² By remaining in the USA, these Frenchmen became the cornerstone of Yale's French department – ensuring that Yale students would not consider all that was "foreign" to be synonymous with "alien."

As ambassadors, the Yale French faculty played a crucial role in the lives of those students returning from a war that left Europe in rubble. Murray Gerstenhaber took one of Peyre's classes, calling it, "one of the most inspirational courses I have ever taken" while explaining that "simply being in his presence gave one a feeling that I have not had with any of my other teachers."⁴³ Gerstenhaber knew that he was not alone in feeling enamored with Peyre's personality and teaching style; as he remembered, one public talk given by Henri

⁴⁰ Kneller, ed., *Henri Peyre: His Life in Letters*, 95; Jean Boorsch, Interview with author, 28 February 2005.

⁴¹ Boorsch, Interview with author, 28 February 2005.

⁴² Ibid. As Jean Boorsch also explained, the French government maintained its appreciation for his work as a cultural diplomat. To this day, Professor Boorsch still receives a pension from the French government due to his many years of teaching the French to American students.

⁴³ Gerstenhaber, E-mail to author, 1 February 2005.

Peyre “was the only lecture I ever attended where the speaker took curtain calls – in fact, three of them!”⁴⁴ If Yale’s French department had blossomed under the Presidency of Charles Seymour, the reason for such growth began with the dynamic personality and enterprising determination of Henri Peyre.⁴⁵

Peyre’s ambassadorship to the United States acted as a two-way street. In addition to educating Yale students and representing French values to them, Peyre also played a crucial role in helping his native country recover from the Second World War once peace had been reached. Most crucially, Peyre worked alongside his fellow Frenchman Jean Boorsch to spearhead a new initiative for America to reinvest in Europe. Together, they designed an innovative education program that taught French to US businessmen so that they could travel and work abroad.⁴⁶ Unlike most previous instructors, Boorsch centered the series not around written lessons but oral and aural training, yielding a quicker and more practical understanding of the language than had heretofore been possible.⁴⁷

⁴⁴ Ibid. Yale graduate students in the Romance Languages department joined the undergraduates in their effusive praise for the department chairman. For his part, Robert Greer Cohn, a graduate student under Peyre, even referred to the Frenchman as his surrogate father figure (with Peyre’s very name resembling the French for father, le père). Cohn explained in his memoirs that Peyre’s “impact on me was life-shaping. For the rest of my years I tried, in my own way, to live up to his intimidating standards ... [which] made me one of his many scared-running and deeply grateful spiritual heirs.” [Cohn, *Buttercups, and So Forth*, (Menlo Park, Calif.: Lantern, 1992), 118] Along with Cohn, other members of the French department held a similar reverence for Henri Peyre, mainly because he delegated important duties to those underneath him – especially in the formation of the curriculum. [Boorsch, Interview with author, 28 February 2005] For these reasons, in addition to Peyre’s genuine love of both his discipline and his colleagues, most who knew Peyre adored him. Cohn voiced the feelings of many in his circle when he proclaimed about Henri Peyre, “Quite honestly, I think I would have died for him.” [Cohn, *Buttercups, and So Forth*, 118]

⁴⁵ Elaborating on all of the documentation of the praise for Henri Peyre would take pages in order to do it justice. Perhaps the most telling example of Peyre’s influence on those around him can be seen at the moment when Yale almost lost Peyre to Columbia University. Almost two dozen letters poured into President Seymour’s office in a matter of two days, including one which stated that “Mr. Peyre’s resignation would cause – figuratively speaking – a sudden collapse of the very fine reputation of the French graduate school. Yale has at present, thanks to his efforts, one of the finest if not the best French department in the country.” [Kenneth Dryer to Charles Seymour, 16 December 1946, box 72, folder 620, Seymour Records, MSSA, 1]

⁴⁶ Boorsch, Interview with author, 28 February 2005; Kneller, ed., *Henri Peyre: His Life in Letters*, 208.

⁴⁷ Boorsch, Interview with author, 28 February 2005. Jean Boorsch became a true pioneer with his approach to teaching French, which directly influenced the emergence of globalization through the internationalization of businesses. Working with a colleague at Yale, Pierre Capretz, Boorsch helped develop a new curriculum called the Capretz Method, which employed oral and aural learning via audio-visual materials instead of relying solely on the reading and recitation of French. See Pierre J. Capretz, *French in Action: The Capretz Method*.

This program became such a resounding success that Boorsch even left Yale for one summer “to organize courses in the French language & in French literature for American soldiers & officers abroad (Great Britain & France, probably),” as Peyre wrote to Dean Edgar Furniss in May of 1945.⁴⁸ In the postwar environment, the Yale French department served a much higher purpose than simply educating American youth; it became a direct and active participant in foreign affairs. As Peyre explained to Furniss, “we take this to be a flattering offer both to him personally & to the manner which he has handled the language courses for officers & civilians at Yale.”⁴⁹ Peyre knew the magnitude of his work: programs like these extended far beyond Yale itself, causing shockwaves on an international scale. In the aftermath of the war, Peyre’s French department became crucial to the United States’ larger effort of assisting Europe. Henri Peyre led Yale to support Europe – and by so doing, the university became an active participant in the Marshall Plan.

The first postwar question pondered by both American politicians and their constituents involved how Europe might recover from such trauma and ruin. After saving Europe militarily, the United States vowed not to leave the continent in shambles. Optimistic about protecting democracy abroad from the threat of Communism, the American public, including its war veteran students, touted the deliverance of the European continent.⁵⁰ And with his background in international affairs and his desire to make the Yale education global in scope, President Charles Seymour came forward as a key advocate of

⁴⁸ Kneller, ed., *Henri Peyre: His Life in Letters*, 208.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

⁵⁰ William V. D’Antonio, Telephone interview with author, 6 February 2005. Of course, all students did not respond in the same way to the Marshall Plan. As with all generalities, this claim should be considered descriptive rather than prescriptive of college students’ views at the time. Another Yale student, Sam Mann, put it like this: “I wasn’t as concerned about the Marshall Plan as I was getting a hot meal – I figured Congress knew what they were doing, and so be it!” [Samuel Mann, Telephone interview with author, 6 February 2005]

continuing to sustain Europe economically.⁵¹ Together with a number of college presidents from across the nation, Seymour supported the plan by forming an advisory committee on the Marshall Plan.⁵² Reflecting that they shared their students' belief, these leaders released an open letter in the *New York Times* stating that the rebuilding of Europe stood as their sacred duty and their destined calling.⁵³

Moreover, this commission of university presidents, government officials, and business heads published a number of brochures and pamphlets, one of which was entitled "The Marshall Plan is up to you."⁵⁴ In this document, the commission told American citizens that "The first thing you can do is talk. Like atomic energy, conversation has a chain reaction. Tell a friend a juicy bit of gossip and see how fast it travels. Facts about the Marshall Plan can do the same."⁵⁵ Not only did this passage educate the American public about the program, but it also contained a subliminal message: the peculiar use of atomic energy evoked for readers the dangers of the spread of Communism. The Marshall Plan meant saving Europe from Communist influences as well as economic strife. In many ways, the propaganda aspect of the program, the so-called "Marshall Plan of Ideas," laid the

⁵¹ Seymour, "European Policy Speech," 12 March 1944, box 24, folder 205, Seymour Records, MSSA, 1-6. As WWII neared an end, Charles Seymour urged for those principles that would later emerge as hallmarks of the Marshall Plan. As he declared in a speech at Boston University early in 1944, "As regards American foreign policy in general and our European relationship in particular, I begin with the assumption that the United States has entered a new era; that conditions, not of a temporary sort, have developed which compel us, even after this war, to play a role of active co-operation with the other great states of the world. Henceforth we must think and we must act with the rest of the globe in our consciousness. This is not a revolution. It is an evolution that results from changing conditions, of which we rather stupidly became aware at a late hour, but of which we are now vividly aware." [Ibid., 1] Seymour further explained that "Without a hint of intervention we must use our influence, prestige, and economic power to help them [the European nations] settle their conflicts." [Ibid., 3-4] In closing, Seymour summed up the task ahead with this eloquent benediction: "Our eyes must be idealistic and our feet realistic. We must walk in the right direction but we must walk step by step. Our tasks are: to define what is desirable; to define what is possible...; to carry out what is possible in the spirit of what is desirable." [Ibid., 6]

⁵² "National Citizens Committee Formed Under the Chairmanship of Henry L. Stimson to Back Marshall Plan," 16 November 1947, box 102, folder 867, Seymour Records, MSSA, 1.

⁵³ "The Challenge to Americans," *The New York Times*, 17 November 1947, box 102, folder 867, Seymour Records, MSSA, 11.

⁵⁴ "The Marshall Plan is up to you," 27 January 1948, box 102, folder 867, Seymour Records, MSSA, 1.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 9.

foundations of the Cold War. Even so, the government's program, backed by many of the greatest leaders in business and academia, told of an attitude that was quintessentially American. As the pamphlet explained it, the United States' message to Europe, and to the world, was this: we have hope for you, we believe in you, and we will help you to the best of our ability.⁵⁶

After the US government began implementing the Marshall Plan, neither the economic dilemma facing Europe nor the threat of Communism disappeared. Using his status as both a Frenchman and a distinguished scholar, Henri Peyre nudged his way into this debate. Publishing his opinion in *The Commonwealth* in December of 1948, Peyre exclaimed that "The Marshall Plan is not enough to save Europe from Communism, the United States must offer the oppressed people a practical plan for better living conditions."⁵⁷ Standing up for his personal beliefs, Peyre called for a liberal approach to government. This "practical socialism" would offer "more freedom than Communism but also more justice and a fairer deal for the small man in Poland, as well as in Spain, in Korea as well as in Greece, [which] will ultimately replace the communist appeal."⁵⁸ To Peyre, the Marshall Plan meant the fight between democracy and Communism; and while most Americans had come to understand this conflict as the black and white of good-versus-evil, Peyre insisted, "We must not, however, overlook that communism is, to most people, a new religion, and that a religious or mystical faith can only be vanquished by a more powerful faith."⁵⁹ These words

⁵⁶ Ibid., 4-7. Another tract from the Committee for the Marshall Plan to Aid European Recovery gave other reasons for the program, professing that "The future of the greater part of our Western civilization, of our country, and of our economy are at stake Our whole way of life depends upon a prosperous Europe. At a small cost to each one of us each year for the next four years, we can help to assure restoration of European production and stable governments." ["20 Questions + Answers," 27 January 1948, box 102, folder 867, Seymour Records, MSSA, 8, 14]

⁵⁷ "Yale University News Bureau Release," 10 December 1948, box 72, folder 620, Seymour Records, MSSA, 1.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

would prove more prescient than even Peyre could imagine. This battle between faiths permeated the next half-century through the deafening silence of the Cold War.

Henri Peyre's solution of practical socialism, which he professed to be the "more powerful faith" that distinguished America as superior to the Soviets, sounded extreme. Peyre anticipated that his more conservative readers, those of the Old Yale mindset, would impulsively protest that America fought for the tradition of democracy, not some unfounded socialist progressivism. However, to Peyre, the argument between conservatives and liberals could not be defined in the terms of traditional versus progressive. As he explained, America's tradition *was* progressivism:

It is ridiculous to find America regarded (and regarding herself) as the bulwark of conservatism, while in truth, in industrial know-how, in her labor relations, in social welfare, in her GI Bill of Rights, in her school system, in her way of life, and in her way of thinking, America is far more revolutionary than the countries which call her such "names" as reactionary, imperialistic, capitalistic. Americans worship a few phrases like "rugged individualism" and "private enterprise" to the point of fetishism. These phrases embody a fine idea and sound well at Rotary Club meetings ... But we must see beyond them. In fact, long before the New Deal, and since, there has been far more socialism actually practiced in the United States than in three-fourths of Europe – to say the least.⁶⁰

Practical socialism had always been intertwined with the Idea of America, he concluded, writing that this revolutionary belief "is more real in the United States than in most European countries which use the word but lack the thing."⁶¹ By calling for a liberal political mindset, Peyre fought for what he envisioned as the answer to the ideological battle between the United States and Russia.

But the solution proved to be more complicated. As the United States first became entrenched in the Cold War, Henri Peyre – the Frenchman intimate with America, the outsider on the inside – had recognized the great debate that would play out over the

⁶⁰ Henri Peyre, "The Challenge to America," *The Commonweal* 49 (10 December 1948): 224, box 72, folder 620, Seymour Records, MSSA.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*

remainder of the twentieth century. Acting as an ideological Geiger counter, Peyre sensed the fault lines in American society as he defined the struggle: conservative versus liberal, traditionally-minded versus free-thinking, old versus new. Throughout the Cold War, the rift would widen, but signs of these cracks could be seen very early on. Most perceptibly for Henri Peyre and those in his department, evidence of this debate emerged some two years before he published his manifesto in *The Commonwealth*. The silhouette marking this divergence of beliefs appeared, however dimly, as an outline contrasted against the background of Existentialism. The great American ideological schism lasting the next sixty years visited the nation in human form – in the man Jean-Paul Sartre.

THE EXISTENTIALIST OFFENSIVE

What did America, and specifically Yale, get in exchange for the Marshall Plan? “We sent them businessmen who could now speak French so that they could continue to rebuild ... they sent us Jean-Paul Sartre and all of that excitement that came with him,” Jean Boorsch remarked facetiously.⁶² Yet, this statement was not far from the truth. The postwar environment in France had set the scene for a new philosophy that reflected both the tradition of European thought and the strife and searching of that particular moment in history. *Existentialism*.

News of Sartre and his beliefs appeared in the American media starting in December of 1944 – but at first, he would not even reference his philosophy. Instead, he only shared the ideas and events behind his convictions. In that month’s *The Atlantic Monthly*, Sartre told

⁶² Boorsch, Interview with author, 28 February 2005.

of his personal fight against the Germans during the war. With the liberation of Paris occurring less than four months before, Sartre gave his first-hand account of how “The more the Nazi venom crept into our thoughts the more each precise thought became a conquest. The more the omnipotent police tried to enforce our silence, the more each of our words became a precious declaration of principle.”⁶³ Sartre explained that being threatened with death meant that man became his own witness; only after being tortured for information could one truly understand the profound implications of the exercise of liberty in the choice to be silent.⁶⁴ Jean-Paul Sartre told of every soldier finding himself equally alone, equally naked, but equally resisting: “One single word would provoke ten or a hundred new arrests. This total responsibility in total solitude – was not this the final revelation of our liberty?”⁶⁵ Sartre depicted himself and his fellow Frenchmen in this way very deliberately – they were the newest champions of liberty.

Soon after his premiere in *The Atlantic Monthly*, Jean-Paul Sartre received a letter from Henri Peyre, which invited the writer to visit Yale and give a lecture in the spring of 1945. Sartre’s response arrived in New Haven on the 13th of April; he explained that he had not replied sooner because he had lost Peyre’s original letter (and in fact, the US Postal Service marked the envelope coming from France as having a deficiency in address – although the letter fortunately arrived in Peyre’s hands in time).⁶⁶ Sartre’s writing clearly indicated that Peyre had begun the correspondence, as he told Peyre, “I am very grateful that you have thought of me to give a lecture at Yale and I accept your suggestion with the greatest

⁶³ Ann Fulton, *Apostles of Sartre*, (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 1999), 1; Jean-Paul Sartre, “Paris Alive: The Republic of Silence,” *The Atlantic Monthly* 174 (December 1944): 39.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 40.

⁶⁶ Jean-Paul Sartre to Henri Peyre, 13 April 1945, box 1, folder 21, Henri Peyre Letters, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University, New Haven, Conn. (Collection hereafter cited as Peyre Letters; Archive hereafter cited as Beinecke), 1.

delight.”⁶⁷ Even though both Peyre and Sartre attended the École Normale Supérieure, Peyre had graduated from the school as soon as Jean-Paul Sartre entered it.⁶⁸ However, Jean Boorsch knew Sartre personally, as the two had lived in adjoining rooms while studying there. They lived side-by-side, but Boorsch and Sartre were never close. As Boorsch recounted, “I met [Sartre] in the fall of ’26, and from this time forward, I always noticed his ego. It certainly didn’t bring him any friends! There was no personal closeness with Jean-Paul Sartre.”⁶⁹ Possibly for this reason, Peyre, not Boorsch, orchestrated Sartre’s visit to Yale in April of 1945, hosting his guest on campus at Timothy Dwight College.⁷⁰ Knowing that others would be eager to meet Sartre, Boorsch explained that when the writer arrived on campus, “I did not attach myself to him and essentially entrusted him to colleagues who wanted to make his acquaintance.”⁷¹

⁶⁷ Ibid. The quotation given is my translation; the excerpt from Sartre’s letter follows verbatim: “Je vous suis très reconnaissant d’avoir pensé à moi pour une conférence à Yale et j’accepte avec la plus grande joie votre proposition.” [Ibid.]

⁶⁸ Fulton, *Apostles of Sartre*, 23.

⁶⁹ Boorsch, Interview with author, 28 February 2005. As an elite institution for the best French students, the École Normale Supérieure produced many close friendships, but the community also became segregated among many various groups. As Boorsch wrote in one letter, to understand his relationship with Sartre, “You have to know the École Normale Supérieure (Normale Sup!) ... There is a strong bond – totally egalitarian – among ex-students. Sartre was a student (interim) of the class of 1925 or 24. I was class of 1926.” [Boorsch, Letter to author, 24 February 2005] Boorsch further explained that “there were clans there, and I didn’t belong to his clan. Who was in his clan? His clan was Simone [de Beauvoir]!” [Boorsch, Interview with author, 28 February 2005] Sartre’s memories of the school validated Boorsch’s impressions of him. As the novelist explained to his biographer John Gerassi, “When I was at the École Normale, there were people who swore allegiance to different groups, those brats ... That was one thing that became quite evident to me.” [“Quand j’étais à l’École Normale il y avait des gens, des gosses, qui faisaient partie de groupes ... ça me paraissait complètement.”] [John Gerassi Interviews with Jean-Paul Sartre, 4 December 1970, box 1, folder 3, John Gerassi Collection of Jean-Paul Sartre, Beinecke (Collection hereafter cited as Gerassi Collection), 126] Sartre tried to set himself above such groups, for he had previously experienced such cliquishness during his youth, much to his dismay: “One would belong to a group, you could say a gang, which was one of the school’s gangs; and there would be other gangs, they were all little hooligans that just joined together.” [“On appartenait à un groupe, c’est à dire à un gang, si vous voulez, qui était le gang du lycée, et puis il y avait d’autres gangs, les gangs des petits voyous, des voyous, c’était simplement des gosses qui sont venus ensuite.”] [John Gerassi Interviews with Jean-Paul Sartre, 2 November 1970, box 1, folder 1, Gerassi Collection, Beinecke, 1]

⁷⁰ Boorsch, Interview with author, 28 February 2005; Jean-Paul Sartre to Henri Peyre, 13 April 1945, box 1, folder 21, Peyre Letters, Beinecke, 1.

⁷¹ Boorsch, Letter to author, 8 February 2005.

Jean-Paul Sartre had never before visited America, but a special US government program near the end of the war – a precursor to the Marshall Plan – allowed him to do so.⁷² As Sartre remembered, “It was a means of propaganda they [the U.S. government] had invented. While I was there, they could say ‘He is so happy to see America.’”⁷³ Since the United States financed his trip, Sartre spent his time observing New Deal Era advancements, with the US showing off the strength of its WWII home front. He later recalled, “I wrote articles on the Tennessee Valley Administration ... I disinterestedly copied from the positive messages outlined in leaflets they had there.”⁷⁴ Now, thanks to Henri Peyre, a visit to Yale’s prestigious French department became a part of Sartre’s voyage. While the government hoped that inviting Jean-Paul Sartre to write about the United States would serve as a public relations move à la Alexis de Tocqueville, funding this visit also unwittingly bought them a Pandora’s Box that would be opened a year later. By going to Yale, Sartre realized that he could subsidize a trip to the United States by giving esoteric speeches, rather than copying out of pamphlets as a cog in the US government propaganda machine. During 1945, the US media did not see Sartre’s visit as a newsworthy phenomenon. A year later, journalists flocked to the Frenchman, buzzing about his lectures on Existentialism.⁷⁵

⁷² “The Talk of the Town: Existentialist,” *The New Yorker* 22 (16 March 1946): 25.

⁷³ John Gerassi Interviews with Jean-Paul Sartre, 4 December 1970, box 1, folder 3, Gerassi Collection, Beinecke, 146. As Sartre explained to John Gerassi about the trip, “I went to America in ’44-45 because the Americans periodically invited journalists to come and see the American war effort. It was a means of propaganda they had invented. While I was there, they could say ‘He is so happy to see America.’ And at that time, America was a country that was close to helping France win the war, after they had come to our aid.” [“J’étais justement en Amérique en ’44-45 parce que les Américains invitaient successivement des journalistes de chacun de leurs allies pour faire voir l’effort de guerre américain. C’était la propagande qu’ils avaient inventée. Alors pendant que je faisais ça, elle se disait ‘il est si content de voir l’Amérique.’ Pour nous a ce moment-la l’Amérique c’était un pays qui était en train de gagner la guerre, qui était venu a notre secours.”]

⁷⁴ John Gerassi Interviews with Jean-Paul Sartre, 31 December 1971, box 1, folder 18, Gerassi Collection, Beinecke, 792-793. My translation, the original wording from the interviews is as follows: “j’ai fait des articles sur la Tennessee Valley Administration ... J’avais copie passivement les dépliants bon eh bien il y avait ça.”

⁷⁵ It was not until the philosopher returned this second time in 1946 that *The New Yorker* picked up on how the last moments of the war had brought about Sartre’s earlier voyage to America: “He first arrived in January, 1945, with a party of French journalists brought over by the O.W.I. [the Office of War Information] to view and write about the American war effort... [he] quickly concluded that he would like the country immensely if he were not under the constant necessity of visiting war factories.” [“The Talk of the Town: Existentialist,” *The*

During Sartre's first trip to the US, he acted as a government agent, spending his time in factories and stopping as a guest lecturer at Yale only to witness to his experiences and get away from his work. When he returned a year later, lecturing became the focus of his voyage to America. Sartre was not entirely unknown to the American public in early 1945, but most of his works would not be translated into English until at least a year or two later.⁷⁶ At this point, any association with the Frenchman would have been as a hero of the Resistance and a lover of liberty; only French-speaking intellectuals who had read *L'Être et le néant* knew about the shocking claims of Sartre's Existentialism.⁷⁷ In fact, the address at Yale went unnoticed by the media except for the university's student paper, which was then

New Yorker 22 (16 March 1946): 26] Then, in the characteristic *New Yorker* style, the author added, "He does not like factories," later following this with a quotation in which Sartre snickered that "I have liked lectures better than factories." [Ibid.]

⁷⁶ Cohen-Solal, *Sartre*, 274.

⁷⁷ Fulton, *Apostles of Sartre*, 26. In 1999, Ann Fulton looked into the circumstances surrounding Sartre's first lecture at Yale in her book *Apostles of Sartre*. Other than a few paragraphs in Annie Cohen-Solal's seminal biography of the philosopher, Fulton's work provided the only major discussion of the topic of Sartre at Yale. She recounted that Peyre first contacted Sartre about a lecture "when he learned that the philosopher would be one of seven French journalists brought over by the Office of War Information to report on the national war effort ... Sartre delivered two lectures at Yale in April 1945; the first dealt with philosophy, and the second with literature. Cohn, Douglas, and Peyre were the main carriers of Sartrean thought at Yale." [Ibid., 23] Based on the historical record, Fulton's claims about the subjects of the lectures cannot be upheld; and while the last statement about Cohn, Douglas, and Peyre is indeed true, a clarification must be made about it, also. Addressing the second issue first, Cohn cannot be considered a part of the same group as Douglas and Peyre in regard to Sartre's visits. Although he played an important role in encouraging Existentialism at Yale, Cohn did not have the same first-hand exposure to Jean-Paul Sartre as other members of the Yale French department. Two teachers whom Fulton mentioned, Peyre and Douglas (who was hired at the beginning of January 1945), as well as those whom she overlooked, such as Boorsch (who would not leave for Europe until that summer with the aforementioned Marshall Plan language education program), made the key contributions towards making this first visit happen. [Henri Peyre to William C. DeVane, 3 January 1945, box 72, folder 720, Seymour Records, MSSA, 1; Kneller, ed., *Henri Peyre: His Life in Letters*, 201, 208] The claim that Robert Greer Cohn was involved with the lectures cannot be supported by the facts. In his memoirs, Cohn wrote that "In March [of 1946], at Grand Central Station, I took a train headed north and got off in New Haven. Yale was the first major university in that direction; if Harvard had been closer, I would have, in my ignorance of such matters, gone there ... I immediately signed up for graduate work, on the GI bill." [Cohn, *Buttercups, and So Forth*, 116] In fact, Cohn would never meet Jean-Paul Sartre at Yale; even when the Frenchman visited the following year, Cohn just missed seeing him. Correspondence with Mr. Cohn confirmed that "Sartre visited Yale just before I got there in '46. I met Simone de Beauvoir later." [Cohn, Letter to author, 1 February 2005] Moving on to the problem of what topics Sartre discussed in 1945, Fulton has simply confused the single lecture presented in April of 1945 with the two speeches given in January of 1946. As the *Yale News Digest* of January 18, 1946, verified, Sartre gave two lectures during his *second* visit to Yale, with the early address concerning literature and the latter dealing with philosophy. ["Jean-Paul Sartre, French Novelist, To Speak Here," *Yale News Digest* (New Haven, Conn.), 18 January 1946, 1] When he came to New Haven the first time, on April 23, 1945, Sartre only gave one lecture, which involved the participation of the youth in the French Resistance during WWII. ["Jean-Paul Sartre Lectures Monday On French Spirit," *Yale News Digest*, 20 April 1945, 1] Making this distinction is crucial to understand fully the boom of Existentialism and the way in which Sartre created his own image.

known as the *Yale News Digest* and not its more well-recognized appellation, the *Yale Daily News*.⁷⁸ As the newspaper announced, “The subject of Mr. Sartre’s lecture will be ‘L’Etat d’Esprit nouveau de la jeunesse française résistante’ [The state of the youth movement in the French Resistance]. The lecture, which will be delivered in French, is open to the public.”⁷⁹

When Sartre spoke at Yale in April 1945, he used the same tone as when he wrote to his readers in *The Atlantic Monthly*. Recounting his experiences without using the buzzword “Existentialism,” Sartre broke through to an American audience not by confronting them with his philosophy but by telling of the circumstances that formed his way of thinking. This belief in freedom would run through all of Sartre’s drama, his stories, and his philosophy. Yet, before riveting Americans with philosophic treatises and eye-opening plays, Sartre came to them as a hero in the name of liberty, lauding the French Resistance as freedom-loving loyalists who dreamed the same dream to which so many American patriots had hearkened before them. When introducing himself to the American public, Jean-Paul Sartre cast himself as the newest Nathan Hale, the Patrick Henry of the Second World War.

⁷⁸ The *Yale Daily News* of September 12, 1946, described why the name of the paper had changed: “The *News* suspended operations on May 8, 1943[,] because of increased demands on the students by the accelerated wartime schedule, and because of limiting financial conditions.” [“Daily News’ Back After Three Years,” *Yale Daily News*, 12 September 1946, 1] With the beginning of the 1946 fall term, The Oldest College Daily began living up to its name again, gracing its front page with a special welcome from President Seymour that declared, “There is no event which could more effectively stimulate the sense that we are well started on the road back to normal life at Yale.” [“President Seymour Welcomes ‘News,’” *Yale Daily News*, 12 September 1946, 1]

⁷⁹ “Jean-Paul Sartre Lectures Monday On French Spirit,” *Yale News Digest*, 20 April 1945, 1. The state of the youth movement in the French Resistance had not been the original focus of Sartre’s lecture, but Peyre made adjustments in order to accommodate the novelist so that he could discuss underground forces during the German occupation of France. In his initial letter, Peyre had requested that Sartre give a first-hand account of the liberation of Paris; but Sartre complained that he had lectured on the topic too much of late. Instead, the author hoped to discuss the state of French literature and theater during Nazi occupation; but he added that if Peyre preferred, he would be glad to discuss the spirit of the French youth, a topic which he expected to be well-received by Yale students. [Jean-Paul Sartre to Henri Peyre, 13 April 1945, box 1, folder 21, Henri Peyre Letters, Beinecke, 1-2] In the week between Sartre’s letter arriving in New Haven on Friday the 13th of April and the publishing of the *Yale News Digest* on the 20th, three days before Sartre’s Monday lecture, Peyre had agreed with Sartre that this would be the best subject to be covered by the address. [Ibid.; “Jean-Paul Sartre Lectures Monday On French Spirit,” *Yale News Digest*, 20 April 1945, 1] As an eyewitness to the war whose only concern was liberty, Jean-Paul Sartre stood before the Yale audience as a distinguished representative of liberated France, who visited the US because of the generosity of his liberator, the American government.

But soon, Existentialism would explode – and with it, so would Sartre’s celebrity and his infamy. During the first visit to Yale, “Sartre was a famous man who was inventing himself,” Jean Boorsch recalled, explaining that even the Sartre plays performed at the École Normale Supérieure showed that the man had a natural talent for production.⁸⁰ By the end of that year, he had begun to make the drama *himself*, on a worldwide level. As Boorsch insisted, “He thought he was founding a philosophy, but his real skill was drama.”⁸¹ The curtain began to open in the autumn of 1945, and Jean-Paul Sartre’s premiere on the world’s stage revealed this: the drama had only just begun.

“So that, without having planned it, what we launched early that fall turned out to be an ‘Existentialist offensive,’” Simone de Beauvoir wrote, attributing the uproar over Existentialism in late 1945 to the publication her novel *The Age of Reason* and the first presentation of the lecture “Is Existentialism a Humanism?” by Jean-Paul Sartre, as well as the first edition of *Les Temps Modernes* in October of that year.⁸² “We were astonished by the furor we caused,” she explained. “Suddenly, in much the same way as one sees the picture in certain films breaking out of its frame and spreading to fill a wider screen, my life overflowed its boundaries ... Sartre was hurled brutally into the arena of celebrity, and my name was associated with his.”⁸³ The French media became ignited by Existentialism, Sartre’s companion remembered, “A week never passed without the newspapers discussing us ... Gossip about us and about our books appeared everywhere. In the streets, photographers fired away at us, and strangers rushed up to speak to us.”⁸⁴ For a couple who

⁸⁰ Boorsch, Interview with author, 28 February 2005.

⁸¹ Ibid.

⁸² Simone de Beauvoir, *Force of Circumstance*, Translated by Richard Howard, (New York: Putnam, 1964), 46.

⁸³ Ibid.

⁸⁴ Ibid.

had previously only sparked the passions of rebel thinkers on the margins of society, this new attention felt overwhelming.

Only months earlier, Sartre had been employed by the US government when he spoke to Yale students about the Resistance. With the final months of 1945, Existentialism consumed his life, drastically changing the nature of all future lectures. From that point forward, a speech was no longer a speech – it was a performance. “When Sartre gave his lecture,” Simone de Beauvoir explained, “so many people turned up that they couldn’t all get into the lecture hall; there was a frenzied crush and some women fainted.”⁸⁵ In France, the outsiders and their Existentialism had become exalted. Soon, America would catch the fever, bestowing Sartre with the voice of prophecy for his generation, his entire nation. The Existentialist Offensive had begun. Yet so too had the reaction – violent and out of control.

A romanticized vision of the origins of Existentialism emerged: this shocking conception of the world had been concocted like magic from the smoky, candlelit Parisian cafés. Many American intellectual publications – *The Atlantic Monthly*, *The New Yorker*, *Vogue*, *Time*, *Harper’s Bazaar*, and more – became enraptured by this new idea; they loved the very word that represented it all.⁸⁶ *Existentialism*. It emerged as a kind of religionless new religion, a philosophy of the absence of God and the solitude of life – but also of the liberty that man gained when he beheld this as true. As *Time* noted in January of 1946, “since liberation, Existentialism has called forth more words and more ink than any intellectual movement since Dadaism ushered in Europe’s ‘lost generation’ after World War I.”⁸⁷

Throughout 1946, this European fad quickly came to occupy a unique place in the American

⁸⁵ Ibid.

⁸⁶ George Cotkin, “French Existentialism and American Popular Culture, 1945-1948,” *The Historian* 61 (Winter 1999): 332. Of the limited work on the reception of Existentialism by the American media, George Cotkin’s research stands as the most preeminent study in the field. In studying a topic previously overlooked, Cotkin’s essay “French Existentialism and American Popular Culture, 1945-1948” has provided scholars with a quite useful survey of the reaction of high- and middle-brow media to the writings of Jean-Paul Sartre.

⁸⁷ “Foreign News: Existentialism,” *Time* 47 (28 January 1946): 28.

imagination that no other storyline on contemporary thought could fill. As French as he could be, Sartre became the stuff of rumors, a name to be tossed around at cocktail parties. The American fascination with Existentialism occupied a deep-seeded, precious segment of the US psyche reserved only for those who had been saved by the boys at Normandy and whose salvation continued to depend on American ingenuity through the Marshall Plan. We had saved Europe from itself. They sent us Jean-Paul Sartre and all of that excitement that came with him. Powerfully captivated by the French and their culture, the nation buzzed about Sartre, and Existentialism became an American vogue.

“*Women swooned,*” the caption read.⁸⁸ Above it appeared the portrait of a cross-eyed man wearing large, dark-rimmed oval glasses and an expression that was close to being, but not quite, a scowl. Why would women swoon for this unexceptional individual, distinguished only with the words “PHILOSOPHER SARTRE” that ran below his photo?⁸⁹ Even in the article itself, which appeared in *Time* magazine, the author described Sartre as “a little (5 ft.) youngish (40) bespectacled, homely, eloquent son of a French naval officer.”⁹⁰ The reason women had fainted could not be because of this bizarre little man’s appearance. Rather, the sub-headings of the article told the story of the Sartre craze: “Words & Ink,” “Preaching & Parties,” “God & Man,” “Degradation & Dignity.”⁹¹ He was weird. He was controversial. But somewhere in the midst of this preposterous storm of riotous decadence and the terrible questioning of the unquestionable, Existentialism had become fashionable. And Jean-Paul Sartre had been made into a celebrity.

The *Time* article introduced Sartre as “the literary lion of Paris,” who would be going to Yale, Harvard, and Princeton after he “bounced into Manhattan last week for a brief

⁸⁸ Ibid.

⁸⁹ Ibid.

⁹⁰ Ibid.

⁹¹ Ibid., 28-29.

lecture tour,” so the public could witness firsthand the madness of Existentialism.⁹² Now that “the word has filtered down to everyman’s and everywoman’s level,” *Time* portrayed this tour as more than just a chance to hear Sartre’s ideas; it became an experience, the chance to be a spectator of the Existentialist extravaganza.⁹³ Being in the audience of one of Sartre’s lectures in the mid-forties seemed analogous to attending an early rock and roll concert: “At one of Prophet Sartre’s recent lectures, an overflow mob of 2,000 was turned away, a small riot occurred, and women swooned.”⁹⁴ Sartre was the ugly philosopher who, a decade early, had the effect of Elvis. As Jean Boorsch simply put it, “Existentialism was the idea; Sartre was the event.”⁹⁵ And what made Sartre so interesting was his deformity – his shrunken figure and his wall-eye supplemented by his enormous ego – all this turned him into a *spectacle*.⁹⁶

The second lecture at Yale seemed nothing like the first to Boorsch. Sartre now focused on Existentialism, and this time, “It was striking, it was not an ordinary lecture – but a bit more like a circus.”⁹⁷ Boorsch was astonished at the magnitude of this journalistic event. And to him, Sartre had nothing to do with the momentum of *God Is Dead*. As he saw it, the philosopher that made women swoon “was not necessarily leading this, even if no one saw that. Rather, he exploited it.”⁹⁸ Everyone watched, but no one saw what was

⁹² Ibid., 28.

⁹³ Ibid.

⁹⁴ Ibid. This effect only increased with the passing of time; and the media continued to relish in stories of such madness. As a *Time* story from later that year reported, “Sartre enjoyed the perfect Parisian tribute at the Paris opening of his plays, *Death without Burial* and *The Respectful Prostitute* (a double feature). Members of the audience fell out among themselves, shouted at the plays, shouted at each other, and some of them even walked out. (Dramatist Sartre almost missed the fun: he forgot to issue himself a pass and had considerable trouble getting in.)” [“People: Movers & Shakers,” *Time* 48 (18 November 1946), 47-48]

⁹⁵ Boorsch, Interview with author, 28 February 2005.

⁹⁶ Ibid.

⁹⁷ Ibid.

⁹⁸ Ibid. Some deemed Sartre’s actions to be an abuse of philosophic inquiry; the Catholic Church even went so far as to ban all of its members from reading Sartre’s books. The Vatican justified this mandate by claiming that Sartre used scandal in order to gain attention. As *The New York Times* reported, “It was recalled that in November, 1946, the St. Thomas Aquinas Institute of Philosophy met in Rome to examine existentialism in

happening. Even *The New Yorker*, whose writers usually superseded veneration with cynicism, joined in the hero-worship: “The last we saw of M. Sartre, he had spotted a taxi a hundred feet away and was cleaving the night to get to it, and *he was he and he was there*, and there was no doubt about it.”⁹⁹ Jean-Paul Sartre had achieved his goal. This philosopher never was the untamed literary lion that everyone took him to be; he was the main attraction of the circus that he had himself created. The spotlight had been put into focus. And the audience looked on, mesmerized.

And so it would be with the students at Yale, too. Sartre returned to New Haven a second time under the auspices of the George Woodward Foundation, a fund “for occasional lectures by distinguished foreigners,” which had also financed his first trip to the university.¹⁰⁰ The lecture was delivered at 4:00 P.M. in the Art Gallery Lecture Hall, with Sartre speaking on “Les Romanciers français d’aujourd’hui et le roman américain” [Today’s French novelist and the American novel].¹⁰¹ Yet, in addition to the Woodward lecture, the

the light of Catholic doctrine. It drew a sharp line between existentialism, according to the ideas of its founder, Soren Kierkegaard, in the nineteenth century and the Sartre [sic] brand of Existentialism. M. Sartre was held to have distorted and debased existentialism in his quest for popularity.” [“All Sartre’s Works Banned by Vatican,” *New York Times*, 31 October 1948, 12] This move also indicated the same religious conservatism reflected in the viewpoint of Old Yale and the American Christian conservatives of that era. The church believed that saving a man’s eternal soul was worth more than saving his freedom to experiment in godlessness and to drift from falsity to falsity. The Vatican hoped that banning such godless works would keep Catholics from going astray, explaining, “We have no intention of dealing fully with existentialism. But we ask: has philosophy any road open to it except despair if it does not find its solution in God, in personal eternity and immortality?” [Ibid.]

⁹⁹ “The Talk of the Town: Existentialist,” *The New Yorker* 22 (16 March 1946): 25.

¹⁰⁰ “Jean-Paul Sartre Lectures Monday On French Spirit,” *Yale News Digest*, 20 April 1945, 1; “Jean-Paul Sartre, French Novelist, To Speak Here,” *Yale News Digest*, 18 January 1946, 1.

¹⁰¹ “Jean-Paul Sartre, French Novelist, To Speak Here,” *Yale News Digest*, 18 January 1946, 1. In the August 1946 edition of *The Atlantic Monthly*, Sartre published a five page discussion of this same topic, “American Novelists in French Eyes,” which was based on the lecture he gave at Yale. [Jean-Paul Sartre, “American Novelists in French Eyes,” *The Atlantic Monthly* 178 (August 1946): 114-118] In *A Critical Bibliography of Existentialism (The Paris School)*, Kenneth Douglas confirmed this connection between the two by annotating the appearance of *The Atlantic* article with “based on a lecture given at Yale University.” [Kenneth Douglas, *A Critical Biography of Existentialism (The Paris School)*, (New Haven, Conn.: Perry & Lane Printers, 1950), 16 (Entry 352)] In this piece, Sartre declared that “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* in the Metro.” [Sartre, “American Novelists in French Eyes,” *The Atlantic Monthly* 178 (August 1946): 115] He further explained that “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

Yale News Digest announced that Sartre would give another public speech later that day in front of the Romance Languages Research Club on the topic of “L’Existentialisme dans la littérature française contemporaine” [Existentialism in modern French literature] to be held in Room 211 of the Hall of Graduate Studies.¹⁰² As the eight o’clock hour approached, a tremendous crowd convened near the conference room, which generally had space for less than a hundred people.¹⁰³ An estimated audience over thrice the room’s capacity attended Sartre’s discussion of Existentialism – all for a speech given in a foreign language.¹⁰⁴ Jean Boorsch described the circus of the evening’s lecture with the following: “I was struck by the intensity of the attention of the crowd – even though the tone was disparaging, they were all caught up in it. I was the only with any detachment in the whole room! By the end, people couldn’t decide what he had talked about ... Everybody reacted by saying ‘Okay, well what of it?’”¹⁰⁵ As the crowd of students, professors, and local residents walked outside the Hall of Graduate Studies into the freezing rain of that New Haven night, they could not even grasp the message preached by the short, inelegant Frenchman who had held their attention for the past hour.¹⁰⁶ The Existentialist fever had spread to Yale.

their creators ... Soon the first French novels written during the occupation will appear in the United States. We shall give back to you the techniques which you have lent us. We shall return them digested, intellectualized, less effective, and less brutal – consciously adapted to French taste.” [Ibid., 118] By professing such reverence for the American novel, Sartre attempted to attract an American audience to his Existentialist ideas. By this point, Sartre’s every maneuver was based on self-promotion. His speeches became propaganda for his philosophy and his articles acted as advertisements for the Sartre spectacle.

¹⁰²“Jean-Paul Sartre, French Novelist, To Speak Here,” *Yale News Digest*, 18 January 1946, 1.

¹⁰³ Ibid.; Barbara Withington, Interview with author, 14 March 2005.

¹⁰⁴ Cohen-Solal, *Sartre*, 275. Annie Cohen-Solal derived this total from her conversations with Henri Peyre during May of 1982; even while Peyre’s recollection should not be doubted, 250 people in attendance in Room 211 would have presented great difficulty. As the current Hall of Graduate Studies Policy and Procedure for Reserving Rooms explained about the facility, “Room 211 – Holds 75 Maximum ... Standard set up is lecture style.” [Withington, Interview with author, 14 March 2005] Numbers aside, they key point remains: this particular public address resembled all of the other lectures that Sartre gave during this time. The room was most certainly overcrowded that evening, with all in attendance eager to hear the Existentialist’s message.

¹⁰⁵ Boorsch, Interview with author, 28 February 2005.

¹⁰⁶ “Another Cold Spell To Strike City With Low Of Six Above Due Tonight,” *New Haven Register* (New Haven, Conn.), 25 January 1946, 1.

Some people made sense of Jean-Paul Sartre's ideas, however. Actually, the fact that each individual interpreted Sartre's philosophy differently became a major reason *why* such commotion occurred over Existentialism. When people heard about Sartrean thought, they passed judgments on it, not necessarily leading to the philosophy as Sartre had explained it but rather individual distortions of his ideas, which were construed to have an entirely new meaning. Instead of comprehending Sartre's message first and then evaluating its implications later, many reacted almost viscerally against Existentialism on moral grounds. As one sociologist later commented about the public reception of *L'Être et le néant*, "It was criticized as a doctrine of despair and disenchantment, as a revolt against intellectualism and the world of ideas, and, by the layperson, as a work of atheism. In America it was even fantastically considered by some to be a work of pornography."¹⁰⁷ With each new Existentialist motto launched by Sartre, anti-Existentialist slogans soon countered one by one. In lieu of listening to Existentialism and then dismissing it as unbecoming, many became repulsed by it, calling for a witch hunt to expunge the idea from society.

At Yale, some passed this same judgment, considering Peyre's invitation to the Prophet of Existentialism to preach his ideas as tantamount to ordering a plague on the university. This dismay reared itself in an ugly way for Henri Peyre. As he explained, "Hearing that Sartre was coming to Yale, a businessman complained to the president of the university and the chairman of the French department: he was afraid that Sartre would end up demoralizing the whole university."¹⁰⁸ Peyre calmed the gentleman down by allaying the man's fears with reason: "I talked to him myself and tried to explain to him, a businessman,

¹⁰⁷ Gila J. Hayim, *Existentialism and Sociology*, (New Brunswick, N.J.: University of Massachusetts Press, 1996), xxxii.

¹⁰⁸ Cohen-Solal, *Sartre*, 273.

how and why existentialism was a perfectly moral philosophy.”¹⁰⁹ Fortunately for Peyre, this businessman’s protest did not incite further complaints and the media did not pick up on the incident. However, as this made clear, moral crisis remained in the wake of Existentialism wherever it went.¹¹⁰

But at Yale, many members of the faculty and student body heard a message of freedom and self-empowerment. Making Yale the first US university to institutionalize Existentialism into the curriculum, Henri Peyre built his department into the preeminent American point of entry for the idea and a haven for teaching Sartrean thought on the continent.¹¹¹ After Sartre left Yale the second time, Peyre formally began to establish Existentialism at the university. Jean Boorsch remembered this about Sartre’s lecture on Existentialism in modern French literature: “The thing which struck me most at the time was

¹⁰⁹ Ibid.

¹¹⁰ In the post-WWII environment, the motives behind such an instinctual disgust for Existentialism owed to the recent menace of Fascism and the rising fear of Communism. For instance, even though *The New Yorker* prefaced its synopsis of Existentialism by saying that “we shall not try to explain it here,” the author quickly levied the following judgment: “One French interpreter of the system says it is the first French philosophy of international class since Descartes, and another inquirers, ‘May it not be, in truth, the hieroglyphic for a Fascism which dares not avow itself?’” [“The Talk of the Town: Existentialist,” *The New Yorker* 22 (16 March 1946): 25] Having just witnessed the horrors of the Nazi regime, Americans became hypersensitive to any ideas that questioned their ethical perspective. For many, Hitler’s self-deification and the Existentialist’s cult of the individual became synonymous as anti-Christian, anti-righteousness, and anti-American. At the same time, Existentialism also carried with it echoes of the threat of Communism for many Americans. Contemporaneously with Sartre’s lecture at Yale in January of 1946, American Communism had emerged as a very real danger to the democratic principles of US society. In fact, the *New Haven Register* of January 24, 1946, reported that on the same day that Sartre spoke at Yale, the strike epidemic sweeping the nation had reached a new peak. [“Strike Epidemic Had Counterpart in 1919 After First World War,” *New Haven Register*, 24 January 1946, 1] As the paper explained, “By itself the CIO Steelworkers’ strike, directly involving some 750,000 men, is one of the biggest in the history of American labor. If it continues longer than a few weeks, it could produce an industrial paralysis such as the country has never known.” [“Map Shows Where And How Steel Strike Affects The Nation,” *New Haven Register*, 24 January 1946, 32] This strike had come in addition to 193,000 meat plant employees refusing to work during the previous week, with the factories being operated by the federal government during that time. [“Meat Plants Seized, CIO Workers Out,” *New Haven Register*, 26 January 1946, 1] The Communist threat had covered the newspapers and occupied the minds of postwar New Haveners; two days before Sartre’s visit, the *Register* ran a headline declaring, “U.S. Communists Seen Backing Strike Wave,” in which the Communist Party had claimed an emphatic victory in the work stoppages. [“U.S. Communists Seen Backing Strike Wave,” *New Haven Register*, 22 January 1946, 24] With tensions about Communism on the rise, Sartre stood as a menace to the American way, regardless of his political affiliation. Americans responded violently towards Sartre, because in Existentialism, they heard the Communist message: God Is Dead and man must respond. Whether due to the lingering fears of Fascism or the escalating sense of alarm about Communism, the American public felt wary of any questioning of their beliefs, which certainly included the challenge presented by Existentialism.

¹¹¹ Fulton, *Apostles of Sartre*, 22.

that J.P.S. was very satisfied with the way we had taught existentialism (he kept repeating: ‘your students ask the right questions.’ Ils posent les bonnes questions.)”¹¹² Due to the efforts of Henri Peyre and his department, the right questions about Existentialism would be asked at Yale for many years. And the answers that students discovered would be emblematic of the divided beliefs held by their entire generation.

EXISTENTIALISM INSTITUTIONALIZED

“French 155a *Literary Aspects of French Existentialism* Mr. Douglas,” the course catalogue publicized.¹¹³ The thrill of Existentialism, nurtured by Sartre’s visit, came into full blossom as the leaves fell in the autumn of 1947. The students had spoken, Henri Peyre had listened, and Kenneth Douglas had come through with his promise to teach a graduate course on Existentialism.¹¹⁴ Robert Greer Cohn, a graduate student that campaigned to have this course taught, remembered that his instructor “spoke to us of the new ideas with overwhelming brilliance and speed, his bald head like a bullet which he penetrated you with.”¹¹⁵ Peyre, too, bragged about Douglas, telling of the following qualities: “a very sharp mind, a powerful intellectual grasp, [and] a wide scholarship.”¹¹⁶ The syllabus focused around *L’Être et le néant*, accompanied by works from Sartre, Camus, and other Existentialist

¹¹² Boorsch, Letter to author, 8 February 2005.

¹¹³ *Yale University Undergraduate Schools Course of Study for 1947-48*, (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1947), 241.

¹¹⁴ Robert Greer Cohn led the drive for a graduate course on Existentialism, even though he had just arrived at Yale one term earlier. As Cohn recounted in his memoirs, “I formed a group of rebels to get the somewhat traditional Department to allow him [Kenneth Douglas] to teach a graduate course on Existentialism, which he did. Because a rather fustian prof got criticized at the meeting, I was blamed for that and acquired a reputation as a trouble-maker. I guess I was.” [Cohn, *Buttercups, and So Forth*, 127]

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁶ Kneller, ed., *Henri Peyre: His Life in Letters*, 328.

writers of the Paris School like Maurice Merleau-Ponty.¹¹⁷ Never before had a course been offered on Existentialism in an American university. That fall at Yale, the process had begun towards institutionalizing the Existentialists as legitimate members of the French literary canon.¹¹⁸

During the following spring, Cohn further mobilized the department by starting an academic journal called *Yale French Studies*. Henri Peyre described the magazine's creation in this way to a colleague at Harvard, "It is a modest venture for which we have no money, so that the students are paying for it themselves, but it will be, I believe, serious and very much worthwhile."¹¹⁹ Since Existentialism had been such a hot topic recently, particularly at Yale, it became the natural choice for the subject of the first edition. In order to bolster his students' efforts and give immediate attention to their work, Peyre did his part by contacting Sartre and asking for a contribution. "I have just written to Jean-Paul Sartre to ask him for an article for the first number, which will probably be devoted to Existentialism, a subject that we have been bold enough to treat here in a graduate course, following your boldness in *Finnegans Wake* in a Harvard Seminar," Peyre wrote to his friend.¹²⁰ By making Existentialism the sole subject of the premiere edition of their scholarly journal, these Yale graduate students made a daring move – and an even more daring declaration about the

¹¹⁷ Cohn, Telephone interview with author, 7 February 2005.

¹¹⁸ "Yale University News Bureau Release," 11 May 1948, box 72, folder 620, Seymour Records, MSSA, 1; *Yale University Undergraduate Schools Course of Study for 1947-48*, 241.

¹¹⁹ Kneller, ed., *Henri Peyre: His Life in Letters*, 241.

¹²⁰ *Ibid.* It should be mentioned that Sartre lectured at other Ivy League institutions, such as Harvard and Princeton, during this second tour. In addition, Sartre's companion Simone de Beauvoir visited New England colleges on a lecture tour of her own. For instance, the April 18, 1947, edition of *Harvard Crimson* announced that de Beauvoir would be speaking that afternoon. ["French Novelist Lectures," *Harvard Crimson* (Cambridge, Mass.), 18 April 1947] Later, the Harvard French Club's debauchery one Friday night in October of 1948 was laughed at with the headline, "French Existentialist Erotics Find Outlets in Champagne and Chanel." ["French Existentialists Erotics Find Outlets in Champagne and Chanel," 16 October 1948] Despite this excitement about Existentialism on other college campuses, Sartre's work became institutionalized into American academia only due to Henri Peyre's boldness to offer this first course on such a controversial topic and his subsequent support for further Existentialist studies at Yale. Both in and out of the classroom, Peyre's department at Yale pioneered the way towards institutionalizing Existentialism; all of these other institutions simply followed on the path he had forged.

importance of Existentialism. But at the same time, Cohn and his colleagues simply followed the lead of Henri Peyre, who had already showed his willingness to risk the reputation of the department on a seminar devoted to the topic.

As a news release dated May 11, 1948, said of *Yale French Studies*, “The first edition, to be published before the end of May, is devoted entirely to the new philosophy of Existentialism and gives a pre-production glimpse of the play ‘Les Mains Sales’ by Jean-Paul Sartre, one of the movement’s founders. Sartre, now writing in Paris, extended permission to the Yale students to print portions of his new play which will be produced in New York next year.”¹²¹ The news release went on to explain that Douglas supervised the publication of the first issue, due to the fact that he had become an expert on the topic after having taught the first course on Existentialism.¹²² In addition to Sartre, Peyre, Boorsch, and Cohn, scholars such as Wallace Fowlie from the University of Chicago and Herbert Dieckmann at Washington University also contributed to the magazine.¹²³ While Peyre’s students hoped to use the Yale name to give their publication credibility in academic circles, the choice of the scandalous topic of Existentialism as the first issue’s focus might seem questionable. But once it came off the presses, *Yale French Studies* exceeded everyone’s wildest dreams.

“They sold like hotcakes,” Robert Cohn remembered about the release of the magazine.¹²⁴ “I lugged a heavy suitcase full of the fresh copies to a Modern Language Association convention in New York and set up a display on a random table. At a dollar a copy, which seemed expensive then, I sold the lot. We signed up hundreds of subscribers.”¹²⁵ The collection of essays, supplemented with Sartre’s latest work, seemed

¹²¹ “Yale University News Bureau Release,” 11 May 1948, box 72, folder 620, Seymour Records, MSSA, 1.

¹²² Ibid.

¹²³ “Existentialism,” *Yale French Studies* 1 (Spring-Summer 1948): 1-127.

¹²⁴ Cohn, Telephone interview with author, 7 February 2005.

¹²⁵ Cohn, *Buttercups, and So Forth*, 123.

irresistible to the public. But what did the first *Yale French Studies* achieve? As its articles revealed, the academic journal pursued three aims: it traced Existentialism's roots and grounded it in already recognized philosophies; it juxtaposed Existentialism to other contemporary works in order to reveal its merits; and it proved philosophically that Existentialism was a self-consistent and valuable perspective that could benefit the intellectual community.¹²⁶

And they continued to sell like hotcakes. Almost a year after its release, Henri Peyre received a request from John Kneller in Paris for 2,000 additional copies of the first edition of *Yale French Studies*. As a business proposition, he wanted to release the journal in France.¹²⁷ Peyre wrote to Kneller that “This is a success. I believe you will not only help the prestige of the magazine & of our Department, but score a financial success also. It will take some advertising to sell the new 2000 copies, but it is worth the effort & I am pretty sure they will be disposed of, over the years.”¹²⁸ The first edition of *Yale French Studies* rocketed the magazine to the forefront of all of the nation's French reviews; as Peyre boasted to Dean William DeVane, “our journal, *Yale French Studies*, is said by many to be the best in our field in the country.”¹²⁹ Henri Peyre had bolstered the standing of his already impressive French department by representing the vanguard of Existentialism while showing off his department

¹²⁶ Starting a tradition that would be maintained in all future editions of the magazine, every article appeared in English – excepting Sartre's contribution, which was a preamble to the critical analysis. Although the first edition of *Yale French Studies* sought to achieve a variety of goals, the following articles revealed the aforementioned motives of the publication: “French Existentialism Before Sartre” by Herbert Dieckmann, which traced the origins of Existentialist thought, “Existentialism and the American Novel” by Jean Bruneau, which placed Sartrean thought in its literary context by following up on the topic that Sartre himself addressed while at Yale, and “Existentialism – a Literature of Despair?” by Henri Peyre, which approached the topic in the same way that Peyre dealt with the concerns of the businessman who complained about Sartre's visit to Yale. [Herbert Dieckmann, “French Existentialism Before Sartre,” *Yale French Studies* 1 (Spring-Summer 1948): 33-41; Jean Bruneau, “Existentialism and the American Novel,” *Yale French Studies* 1 (Spring-Summer 1948): 66-72; Henri Peyre, “Existentialism – a Literature of Despair?” *Yale French Studies* 1 (Spring-Summer 1948): 21-32]

¹²⁷ Kneller, ed., *Henri Peyre: His Life in Letters*, 277-278.

¹²⁸ *Ibid.*, 278. Peyre continued the correspondence in a letter from August of that year with the following: “Thank you for your last letter & detailed statement on the *Y[ale] Fr[ench] Studies*. It is beautifully clear & on the whole comforting ... As it is Y. F. St. have been a splendid achievement.” [*Ibid.*, 281]

¹²⁹ *Ibid.*, 327.

with their contributions to the magazine. As the zeal for Existentialism intensified, so too did the strength of Yale's French department.

With this symbiotic relationship increasingly fortified as the 1940s gave way to the 1950s, Peyre and his faculty continued to turn to Existentialism as a precious source of new knowledge. Kenneth Douglas' course from the fall of 1947 reappeared as French 155b in the spring of 1950 and then again as French 162a that fall.¹³⁰ During that year, Douglas remained active outside of the classroom, publishing the first major overview of Existentialist literature, *A Critical Bibliography of Existentialism (The Paris School)*. Listing 442 books, plays, essays, and speeches by Simone de Beauvoir, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, and Jean-Paul Sartre, Douglas' bibliography not only told when these works were published and if they were translated into English, but he also gave a short biography of each writer. Underneath each reference, Douglas made brief comments about the work, referring the reader to outside sources that offered other illuminating perspectives.¹³¹

For a genre that was considered by many to be disruptive and unproven, Douglas' bibliography uncovered a rich variety of works in the field, in addition to the critical thought they educated. In doing so, he presented Existentialism in a manner that was easy to absorb, encouraging genuine, intelligent discussion of the topics at hand. Douglas' bibliography gave enduring legitimacy to the study of Existentialism, perhaps even more so than the successful first edition of *Yale French Studies*, which inherently stood as a one-time victory for Existentialist thinkers. *A Critical Bibliography of Existentialism (The Paris School)* charted the progress of Existentialism for all to follow, providing direction to the conversation about the philosophy. In doing so, Douglas led fellow scholars away from their prior intellectual

¹³⁰ *Yale University Graduate Schools Catalogue for 1949-50* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University, 1949), 194; *Yale University Graduate Schools Catalogue for 1950-51* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University, 1950), 193.

¹³¹ Douglas, *A Critical Biography of Existentialism (The Paris School)*, 1.

disposition towards Sartre, which he regretfully documented by explaining that “No author of his years has been so liberally discussed – nor so illiberally, nor so crassly, nor so variously misinterpreted.”¹³² And, in doing so, Douglas drastically improved the standing of Existentialism in the academic world. While encouraging real, engaged dialogue rather than cursory impressions, Douglas legitimized Existentialism as a force in the philosophy, drama, and literature of the time.

During the 1951-1952 academic year, Kenneth Douglas went on leave with a traveling fellowship, during which time Existentialism was not taught at Yale.¹³³ Douglas received a new title when he returned, becoming the first instructor in French and Comparative Literature.¹³⁴ The following year, this special focus granted Douglas a new course listed as “French and Comparative Literature 154b, *Existentialist Views on Literary Criticism and Aesthetics in Denmark, Germany, and France*.”¹³⁵ Being the first professor with this specialty empowered Douglas to explore further his interest in God Is Dead, taking on “*Nietzsche and Nietzscheism in France*” with French and Comparative Literature 153a in the fall of 1954.¹³⁶ As a result of Kenneth Douglas’ success on the graduate level, Henri Peyre brought Existentialism into the undergraduate classroom.¹³⁷

¹³² Ibid., 9 (entry 300).

¹³³ *Yale University Graduate Schools Catalogue for 1951-52* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University, 1951), 188. From the summer of 1951 until the autumn of 1952, Douglas temporarily left the university for a fellowship that allowed him to travel throughout Europe, which further explained why he would be suited for the newly established role as an instructor in French and Comparative Literature upon his return. [Kneller, ed., *Henri Peyre: His Life in Letters*, 341]

¹³⁴ *Yale University Graduate Schools Catalogue for 1952-53*, (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University, 1952), 202.

¹³⁵ *Yale University Graduate Schools Catalogue for 1953-54*, (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University, 1953), 223.

¹³⁶ *Yale University Graduate Schools Catalogue for 1955-56*, (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University, 1955), 194.

¹³⁷ Douglas would teach two more courses pertaining to Existentialism during the remainder of his time at Yale. In 1958-1959, he led a graduate seminar listed as French 161b. By this time the department chose to list all of the course titles in French, with Douglas’ course entitled “*L’Existentialisme français: Sartre et ses prédécesseurs*” [“*French Existentialism: Sartre and his Predecessors*”]. [*Yale University Graduate Schools Catalogue for 1958-59*, (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1958), 207] During the fall of 1961, he taught French 165a, a course exclusively on Jean-Paul Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir, “*Les romans et la critique de J.-P. Sartre et de Simone de Beauvoir*” [“*The Novels and Criticism of J.-P. Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir*”]. [*Yale University Graduate Schools Catalogue for 1961-62*, (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University, 1961), 215]

By the 1956-1957 academic year, Douglas had taught four classes on Sartrean thought in addition to his course on Nietzsche; and Peyre decided to take on Existentialism at the undergraduate level with French 56, which was entitled “*Modern Tendencies in French Literature*.”¹³⁸ Over the course of the next five years, French 56 repeatedly appeared in Yale College’s course offerings as the only class listed as a Group C offering in French literature, meaning that it was specifically “given in English and open to students without previous study in French.”¹³⁹ One decade after Sartre first shocked the world with the Existentialist Offensive, Peyre embedded the philosophy into Yale’s introductory course on French culture and literature. By adding Existentialism to the syllabus of this survey of French studies, Peyre declared Existentialism to be necessary for a comprehensive education about twentieth-century French thought. Existentialism continued to influence the department throughout the decade, as Peyre taught the year-long French 56 continuously over each of the next five years.¹⁴⁰ Moreover, other professors soon complemented Peyre’s course with other undergraduate-level offerings in Existentialism. For example, Victor Brombert’s

Douglas went on a leave of absence during the spring of 1963; and by the following fall term, he was no longer listed as a member of Yale’s French department faculty [*Yale University Graduate Schools Catalogue for 1963-64*, (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University, 1963), 112; *Yale University Graduate Schools Catalogue for 1964-65*, (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University, 1964), 125] In his memoirs, Robert Cohn described the sad story behind this piece of information, explaining that “I chose Ken, who had become a bosom pal, to succeed me as Editor of YFS. He had divorced his quiet wife and taken up with Edith Kern ... Edith went on to the top of her profession; Ken lapsed into a sort of isolation and was killed brutally by an object – a curtainrod – falling from a tall building in Manhattan.” [Cohn, *Buttercups, and So Forth*, 127] For his part, Jean Boorsch described Douglas’ death in this way: “There was something very dramatic about Kenneth Douglas. His death was almost expected, because that was how his life went – everything was theatrical like that. He was a very inquisitive, brilliant fellow. Very promising.” [Boorsch, Interview with author, 28 February 2005]

¹³⁸ *Yale University Undergraduate Schools Course of Study for 1956-57*, (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1956), 100. In the course description, Peyre described the class as dealing with “the main currents of twentieth-century thought, fiction, and drama in France. Symbolism, Bergonism, Surrealism, Existentialism. The influence of Nietzsche, Dostoevski, Kafka, and the American novel. Gide, Proust, Mauriac, Malraux, Girardoux, Cocteau, Sartre, Camus, Simone de Beauvoir, Anouill, younger writers.” [Ibid., 100-101]

¹³⁹ Ibid., 100.

¹⁴⁰ *Yale University Undergraduate Schools Course of Study for 1957-58*, (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University, 1957), 107; *Yale University Undergraduate Schools Course of Study for 1958-59*, (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University, 1958), 105; *Yale University Undergraduate Schools Course of Study for 1959-60* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University, 1959), 109; *Yale University Undergraduate Schools Course of Study for 1960-61*, (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University, 1960), 112; *Yale University Undergraduate Schools Course of Study for 1961-62*, (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University, 1961), 114.

French 58, “*The Art of the Novel in France*,” had students learning the French canon alongside of “Sartre and current trends.”¹⁴¹ This course, too, would become a mainstay of the department, lasting for six straight years.¹⁴²

Even while the French instructors at Yale changed with time, students came and went, and Sartrean thought increasingly found a home at other universities across the country, Existentialism remained at Yale. Academia had evolved greatly in its attitudes towards the philosophy since Douglas first pioneered a course in it; over two decades later, the instructor of a Yale spring seminar entitled “*Sartre’s Novels and Dramatic Works*” was a *Miss* Flescher.¹⁴³ Having a female professor teach an undergraduate course about Sartre was a far cry from the reaction of Sartre being smut from twenty two years earlier. But before Yale could get to this point, the university and the nation first had to confront the issues that would define this divided generation. And, looking back, such divergence could first be seen in the discord over an issue like Existentialism when the subject was first introduced to Yale.

AN IDEA APPROPRIATED

When Yale students in the 1940s learned about Existentialism, the idea resounded with some of them as a philosophy of despair, with others as a message of freedom. And, for many, it had no resonance at all. As George Spencer explained about his thoughts on

¹⁴¹ *Yale University Undergraduate Schools Course of Study for 1959-60*, 109.

¹⁴² *Ibid.*; *Yale University Undergraduate Schools Course of Study for 1962-63*, (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University, 1962), 119; *Yale University Undergraduate Schools Course of Study for 1963-64*, (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University, 1963), 117; *Yale University Undergraduate Schools Course of Study for 1964-65*, (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University, 1964), 132-3; *Yale University Undergraduate Schools Course of Study for 1965-66*, (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University, 1965), 128; *Yale University Undergraduate Schools Course of Study for 1966-67*, (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University, 1966), 131.

¹⁴³ *Yale University Undergraduate Schools Course of Study for 1968-69*, (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University, 1968), 153.

Sartrean philosophy, “I can’t say much about Sartre or Existentialism; I doubt I could spell those words.”¹⁴⁴ Yet, many Yalies’ ideas on this issue illuminated the dichotomy between conservatives and liberals, as well as the struggle of those who attempted to find their place somewhere between the two extremes. As coat-and-tie Yale started on the path towards becoming the liberal university that it is today, those student-veterans of the ‘40s decided whether the beliefs of their parents would be their own as they experienced Existentialism in classrooms and libraries, lecture halls and dining halls. And their reaction would be emblematic of the great ideological rift that marked their entire generation.

“Existentialism was popular,” Robert Greer Cohn explained, “because it combined a godless deep-seriousness with the glowing rationalism of the age. After leaving behind their parents’ godliness, Yale students wanted a belief of their own.”¹⁴⁵ For many, that belief meant disowning the collective superstition of religion that had been disproved with the Enlightenment. It meant replacing the guilt and self-flagellation of puritanical religious beliefs with a self-empowered freedom of action accompanied by abundant optimism about the world around. And it meant no longer being a Sinner in the Hands of an Angry God and not needing to constantly repent for choices made. Many Yale men found it easy to identify with the liberation of Existentialism; it was the freedom that they sought by forming their own unique worldview while in college. Existentialism stood for the same liberty they enjoyed everyday in the unrestricted life of post-WWII Yale. The apologetic who wandered the desert in self-denial, searching for the Promised Land, had been replaced by the Existentialist; and he decided to pitch his tent in the desert, based on the optimism that, alone, he could create Paradise.¹⁴⁶

¹⁴⁴ Spencer, Telephone interview with author, 8 February 2005.

¹⁴⁵ Cohn, Telephone interview with author, 7 February 2005.

¹⁴⁶ Helmet Kuhn, *Encounter with Nothingness*, (Hinsdale, Ill., October House, 1949), xvii.

George Kearns, a member of the Class of 1948, explained that one of the most influential books he ever read taught him just this. “It was simply titled *Existentialism*,” he remembered, “and the author was Sartre. It seemed to speak clearly and importantly to the teen-age brain.”¹⁴⁷ The text, published by the Philosophical Library in 1947, was translated from the French by Bernard Frechtman, who anticipated in his introduction that “The vogue in America of Jean-Paul Sartre and his philosophy of existentialism is one of those curious phenomena which might, if properly examined, illuminate some peculiarities of culture in America.”¹⁴⁸ Frechtman did not know how prescient this statement would become. Existentialism elucidated the most important ideological divide in America during the second half of the twentieth century. And it began with epiphanies like the one experienced by George Kearns.

“What I got out of it (not necessarily what was in it) was a message of freedom,” explained Kearns. Even while some Americans rejected Existentialism outright because of their beliefs, this particular Yale student first took in the philosophy, then appropriated the idea as a message of freedom. For him, Existentialism meant “that no matter how determined the conditions of life may be, there remains some part (maybe very small) that is available to our choice. And that part – small or large – not the pre-determined part – was all that mattered.”¹⁴⁹ This realization revealed the implications of Sartre’s saying that “Existentialism is a humanism.” Instead of despairing due to the absence of God, man rejoiced in his newfound freedom. It did not matter if Existentialism was a philosophy of despair, as some claimed. That was not the significance that George Kearns, and many like him, derived from it. For them, with the imperious restrictiveness of God now gone,

¹⁴⁷ George Kearns, E-mail to author, 3 February 2005.

¹⁴⁸ Sartre, *Existentialism*, Translated by Bernard Frechtman, (New York: Philosophical Library, 1947), 1.

¹⁴⁹ Kearns, E-mail to author, 3 February 2005.

humankind could build his own world without fear of reprimand for having overstepped his bounds. Now, the possibilities were infinite. And at Yale, a new generation became invigorated by such limitless life.

Bernard Frechtman foresaw this revelation when he observed that Sartre's philosophy made man only accountable to himself, with no external values to determine his life and no duties to fulfill.¹⁵⁰ As Frechtman (and Kearns) understood Sartre,

this need not lead to quietism or despair. On the contrary, this awareness illuminates the needless burden that man carries and tries to force him to recognize that he is actively varying it, rather than is passively impelled by it, that he may choose different values and may choose to be a different person. It tries to make man acutely aware of his freedom. And since freedom is an ambiguous state, both sought and feared, this philosophy is both frightening and liberating.¹⁵¹

Sartrean thought meant the dual thrill and terror of facing the world while believing in utter freedom. And it conveyed perfectly the attitudes of those Yale students entering into adulthood after the end of World War II. By coming of age at that time, the Yale man also came to terms with himself and his own beliefs, as well as his ability to impact anew the world he inherited. And he both rejoiced and trembled when he saw that pathway extend into the distance before him.

One such Yale student was William Sloane Coffin, Jr. Based on his exposure to Existentialism in Henri Peyre's classroom, Coffin became convinced that Sartre and Camus "were asking all the right questions."¹⁵² Unsatisfied with Yale simply as a finishing school that presented him only with what he already knew, Coffin explored Existentialism, thinking all the while that "these atheists were a little romantic in their stoicism: 'We suffer more than

¹⁵⁰ Sartre, *Existentialism*, 3-4.

¹⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 4.

¹⁵² Warren Goldstein, *William Sloane Coffin Jr.: A Holy Impatience*, (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2004), 65.

others because we don't have the comfort of a loving God."¹⁵³ Existentialism appeared as an intimidating yet exciting proposition in contrast to his religious background; for Coffin, much could be gained by being open to the God Is Dead mentality. As Robert Greer Cohn remembered about *Yale French Studies* during its first few weeks, "Bill Coffin read the issue on Existentialism and was certainly influenced by it. He looked me up, and we became friends ... He was very involved in the new thinking, and I believe it was meaningful to him."¹⁵⁴ As Coffin himself explained, the war had provided "an opportunity to collect your thoughts, to figure out what you really thought and felt and believed ... Many people changed their ways, and a lot of people decided that they didn't want to do what they had been expected to do before the war."¹⁵⁵ And for Bill Coffin, one of the most exciting new approaches was Existentialism.

Unlike many other Christians, Coffin ignored the immediate impulse to reject Existentialism from the start, knowing that such fundamentalism would lead to answers that were much too easy and result in what he saw as a saccharine-coated attitude of superiority towards those who held different beliefs.¹⁵⁶ In lieu, Coffin hoped to find a more liberal understanding of Christianity that would be open to the challenge presented by outside beliefs. Specifically, Coffin explored Existentialism by coming to terms with its redefinition of morality before he finally evaluated it. After taking one of Henri Peyre's courses, this Yale student came to his conclusion about Existentialism: "My head was with the atheists; my heart was with the religious people."¹⁵⁷

¹⁵³ Ibid., 65.

¹⁵⁴ Cohn, Telephone interview with author, 7 February 2005.

¹⁵⁵ Kabaservice, *The Guardians: Kingman Brewster, His Circle, and the Rise of the Liberal Establishment*, 99.

¹⁵⁶ Goldstein, *William Sloane Coffin Jr.: A Holy Impatience*, 66.

¹⁵⁷ Ibid., 65.

As Robert Greer Cohn related, “I can remember that Henri Peyre gave a party and his wife was there. She trotted out Bill Coffin. I was still neo-Marxist at that time, and like most of my generation, I was just pulling out of it. Coffin came and was making fun of my leftism, my Soviet attitude.”¹⁵⁸ Within a few years, Bill Coffin would do more than make fun of the Soviets; leaving Divinity School to become a genuine Cold Warrior himself, Coffin worked for six years as a CIA representative who recruited Russians to infiltrate the Soviet Union for the Americans.¹⁵⁹ Coffin fought for liberalism and against Communism during his youth, which would confuse many when he later chose to oppose US involvement in Vietnam. For Bill Coffin, he was fighting for his beliefs all along.

After returning to Yale and becoming the University Chaplain, Coffin argued for minority rights throughout the 1960s, particularly once he was appointed by the US Commission on Civil Rights to the Connecticut Advisory Committee. During one speech, he explained that “It’s about one minute to midnight in our country on the issue of Civil rights we are, as Jews and Christians, or just as Americans, obliged to take our deepest convictions into the streets and by-ways of life – and stand for them.”¹⁶⁰ With Civil Rights, Coffin took action on his belief in social justice Christianity. This resulted in his mailbox being filled with letters of both appreciation and hate; yet through it all, he continued to receive the utmost support from the university, which became increasingly liberal regarding the opinions expressed by faculty members. The Vietnam War would test the Yale Administration’s tolerance.

¹⁵⁸ Cohn, Telephone interview with author, 7 February 2005.

¹⁵⁹ Goldstein, *William Sloane Coffin Jr.: A Holy Impatience*, 78.

¹⁶⁰ William Sloane Coffin, Jr., “Connecticut Commission on Civil Rights, Suburbia – No Hiding Place: Excerpts from Talk by Rev. William Sloane Coffin, Jr., Chaplain, Yale University at Avon High School,” Speech from 5 December 1963, Published July 1964, box 28, folder 218, William Sloane Coffin, Jr., Papers, MSSA (Collection hereafter cited as Coffin Papers), 6.

To express his discontent with US involvement in Vietnam, Bill Coffin publicly stood out against the war, while also encouraging his students to engage in civil disobedience. This marked a sign of the times for the university, considering that less than twenty five years earlier, Coffin's uncle had ushered in the transformation of the school into a temporary military training camp by approving Yale's full support of World War II.¹⁶¹ Even when indicted by the Justice Department for prompting Yale students to turn in their draft-cards, Yale did not oust Coffin from his role as University Chaplain, showing the true level of intellectual permissiveness that had been reached by the New Yale.

Here, too, with his continued open-mindedness, Bill Coffin's attitude towards Existentialism could be seen. "Man's visceral reaction is against disorder, and not against injustice," Coffin declared, but he personally pushed himself to explore disorder in the name of justice by seeking fully-developed answers rather than settling for easy substitutes.¹⁶² Underneath a newspaper headline, "Chaplain Praises Lawbreakers," Coffin explained, "Most of the great heroes of the Bible were lawbreakers ... each generation must engage in evolutionary or revolutionary correction."¹⁶³ For Coffin, Sartre's message meant that every man was entitled to seek his own will, while also having the duty to attack any unjust institution that placed restrictions on him and then asked him to compromise that right. After experiencing Yale in the 1940s and taking from Existentialism what he found apt, Bill Coffin stood on one end of the spectrum: liberal, progressive, and free-thinking.

And Coffin's classmate, William F. Buckley, Jr., held his place at the other end. Buckley's idea of an effective college education entailed returning the university to its

¹⁶¹ Kelley, *Yale: a History*, 399.

¹⁶² Coffin, "The Draft and the Issue of Conscience," *Yale Alumni Magazine* 30 (December 1967): 43-52, box 28, folder 230, Coffin Papers, MSSA.

¹⁶³ "Chaplain Praises Lawbreakers," *Hudson Dispatch News*, (Bergen County, N.J.), 8 November 1968, box 28, folder 232, Coffin Papers, MSSA.

traditions of being a Christ-based institution that regarded Christian truth as absolute. As a result, Jesus Christ's claims were the object of all learning and the only truths to be taught in the classroom. To Buckley, liberal, secular education meant nothing, since only those philosophies that kept with Christian tradition had value. Continuing down this path towards secularism and relativism would ruin the university, Buckley explained in his widely-acclaimed *God and Man at Yale*.¹⁶⁴ Written shortly after his graduation from the university, Buckley called for Yale to return to its roots as a theologically-minded institution. As it currently stood, the liberalizing of the university had corrupted it. Buckley wanted to save the university from depravity, asserting that “we saw in eighteenth-century Yale a thesis in education. Two hundred and fifty years later we see the antithesis.”¹⁶⁵

Bill Swire, one of Bill Buckley's classmates, remembered that “Buckley was a throw-back to the Old Yale; the old, traditional Yale, which was very conservative minded, and which mainly came from good boarding schools, while leading a very narrow life with their friends and generally maintaining a very sheltered life.”¹⁶⁶ In Buckley's mind, however, keeping this insular worldview and ensuring a limited scope of learning seemed only rational. Since nothing could be gained by wasting one's time with faulty philosophies, he reasoned that education should presuppose a Supreme Being and center around proven, traditional thought. The modern university's so-called “academic freedom” only brought about a superstition of independence, the apparition of education wherein no truth could ever be found.¹⁶⁷ As Buckley explained, Yale already subscribed to an orthodoxy with its quest for

¹⁶⁴ William F. Buckley, Jr., *God and Man at Yale: The Superstitions of 'Academic Freedom,'* (Chicago: Regnery, 1986), 227.

¹⁶⁵ Buckley, *God and Man at Yale: The Superstitions of 'Academic Freedom,'* 227.

¹⁶⁶ Swire, Telephone interview with author, 5 February 2005.

¹⁶⁷ Buckley, *God and Man at Yale: The Superstitions of 'Academic Freedom,'* 140-141.

Light and Truth that had lasted a quarter of a millennium; as he saw it, his task was “not so much to argue that limits should be *imposed*, but that existing limits should be *narrowed*.”¹⁶⁸

In *God and Man at Yale*, Buckley specifically cited the first edition of *Yale French Studies*, which only damaged the standing of the university by further institutionalizing Existentialism. Bemoaning the current state of affairs at Yale, Buckley protested that “this is the university which serves as the headquarters of a magazine devoted exclusively to metaphysics and another concerned entirely with an analysis of French existentialism The problem is a real one, and somebody must resolve it.”¹⁶⁹ For Buckley, Existentialism was the philosophy of extremists and decadents. If man considered God dead, then he had committed the greatest sacrilege of all. Furthermore, studying Existentialism, a godless philosophy, would only lead to godless minds. This was Buckley’s message in brief: Biblical teachings could purify the mind and soul. Sartre would only poison them.

Yale had failed in its mission by teaching depraved Existentialism, which proved how secularization had led the university to chase after false answers.¹⁷⁰ Buckley viewed this philosophy as atheist, degenerate, and sinful, much in the way that others’ moral bias led them to disdain Existentialist works as pornographic. Not only was Sartrean thought immoral, but it was also un-American, which Buckley emphasized by only referring to the philosophy as “*French* existentialism.”¹⁷¹ Existentialism stood as the full manifestation of the misdirection of moral relativism; and its institutionalization represented a curse on the university and a plague on young minds. By removing God from the equation, nothing redemptive remained in Existentialist philosophy.¹⁷²

¹⁶⁸ Ibid., 151. Italics in original.

¹⁶⁹ Ibid., 224.

¹⁷⁰ Ibid.

¹⁷¹ Ibid. Italics added for emphasis.

¹⁷² Ibid. This debate reached a boiling point immediately after the publication of *God and Man at Yale* in 1951. McGeorge Bundy denounced Buckley in *The Atlantic Monthly*’s November 1951 edition, writing that “As a

As these two camps disagreed over Existentialism, ideologies split apart from each other, revealing the stark dichotomy that would become characteristic of the entire Cold War generation. While one side argued that the purpose of a university was to educate young minds by engaging them in an open-minded, anything goes discourse, the other complained that this would lead to relativism and a loss of focus on traditional religious truth.

Conservative Christians espoused strict religious values while restricting its followers to walk the straight-and-narrow path in order to create virtuous order in otherwise chaotic lives. In response, liberal believers held that individual interpretation should stand as paramount, with religious teachings becoming spiritually freeing, not controlling and guilt-inducing.

Even in US politics the divide soon became apparent, with the liberal front calling for a holistic, global perspective in foreign relations while taking a progressive attitude in the domestic sphere by reassessing national priorities and providing equal rights for all.

believer in God, a Republican, and a Yale graduate, I find that the book is dishonest in its use of facts, false in its theory, and a discredit to its author.” [McGeorge Bundy, “The Attack on Yale,” *The Atlantic Monthly* 188 (November 1951): 50] Bundy explained that “*God and Man at Yale* has the somewhat larger significance that it is clearly an attempt to start an assault on the freedom of one of America’s greatest and most conservative universities. In this sense it is in some degree a sign of the times. It is reported that Mr. Buckley’s father is sending a copy to every Yale alumnus, and in a few angry circles it may get a hearing it does not deserve. Certainly it will put the Yale authorities to an absurd amount of trouble in making answers to questions on a set of charges that ought to be beneath contempt.” [Ibid., 52] Bundy summed up his criticism by explaining that “I can imagine no more certain way of discrediting both religion and individualism than the acceptance of Mr. Buckley’s guidance.” [Ibid.] Yet, Bundy’s challenge met colossal opposition. In that very same publication, an advertisement for the book touted Buckley as “an eloquent spokesman for the new generation of conservatives – the ‘new radicals’ on the university scene.” [Ibid., 96] To defend his stance, Bill Buckley wrote an article refuting Bundy’s claims in the next edition of *The Atlantic Monthly*. After comparing Bundy’s complaints to the actual text of the book, Buckley mocked the reviewer by explaining, “Mr. Bundy does not confine himself to misrepresenting the material in the book: ‘It is reported Mr. Buckley’s father is sending a copy to every Yale alumnus’ (43,000). The best refutation of this (my father purchased 75) would come out of Mr. Bundy’s effort, as an alumnus, to get a free copy. But then, on the other hand, he may be deluged with free copies, from people who have read his review and simply refuse to believe that he has read the book.” [Buckley, “The Changes at Yale,” *The Atlantic Monthly* 188 (December 1951): 80] This ad hominem argument undermined both Bundy’s ferocity and his legitimacy. In closing, Buckley prophesied the following: “My ‘crusade’ will most probably come to naught, and precisely because the United States is peopled with thinkers like Mr. Bundy, and it is too late to re-educate them. The ascendancy of ‘academic freedom’ cherished by these haughty totalitarians who refuse to permit the American people to supervise their own destiny, is as certain as the inexorable advance of this country towards collectivism. And I am un-Christian enough to confess to some solace the knowledge that Mr. Bundy will probably live, alongside of me and others of our generation, to suffer its ravages.” [Ibid., 82] And so the conflict between the two ideologies intensified, as it would continue to do throughout the lives of McGeorge Bundy, William F. Buckley, Jr., and indeed all of those of their generation.

Simultaneously, conservatives propagated their beliefs by professing an aggressive foreign policy while advocating a traditional domestic agenda in which activism was unnecessary so long as the government ensured that the letter of the law was always upheld. And while Yale University became increasingly liberalized and secularized due to the inclusion of topics like Existentialism, the nation as a whole gradually separated along these ideological lines. Eventually, this would result in a rift in public opinion so severe that with the new millennium it would seem as if the dichotomy had become irreconcilable. By then, to understand the magnitude of this split one would only have to look at a map of the United States to see the Red of the Republicans and the Blue of the Democrats painted across America: one nation, divisible, with liberty and justice in dispute.

But then again, this could all be seen decades before with the reaction by post-WWII Yale students to the new philosophy of Existentialism. The great ideological divide of the Cold War generation appeared even while they were still in their early twenties, with each individual looking at Existentialism in his own way and then appropriating the idea in order to take from it what he wished. Although the institutionalization of Existentialism at Yale had few actual effects on the university as a whole and even fewer effects outside of academia, the presence of Jean-Paul Sartre in the immediate postwar environment became a defining moment in the history of Yale and in the lives of its students. This was not at all due to any great historical trends that were triggered by the introduction of Existentialism. Rather, the true importance of postwar Yale students surviving the Death of God was in how their experience illustrated the ideological dichotomy that would define the next half-century. Existentialism became appropriated as an idea in ways that epitomized the conflicting values of an entire generation, which meant much more to American society than even the temporary craze it created.

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BIBLIOGRAPHICAL ESSAY

This project originated in the spring of 2004 while I was studying abroad at St. Edmund Hall, Oxford University. My tutorials there focused on the history of European politics, culture, and society from 1914-1945. The British approach to learning provided a strong complement to my liberal arts background; I particularly became interested in the cultural trends of the interwar period and the way that the public looked to artists and writers for direction during the Lost Generation, which impacted my thoughts about the effects of the Second World War as well. At the same time, conversations with my new friends at Teddy Hall had the most significant influence on the ideas that would lead to this thesis. They talked about God Is Dead as if it were a fact.

And I was amazed. Being born and raised in the South, in the middle of the Bible Belt and less than an hour's drive from Jerry Falwell's Thomas Road Baptist Church in Lynchburg, Virginia, I was astonished to hear my peers in the United Kingdom talking quite casually about a "Post-God society." I realized that the religious background I had shared with my peers in Virginia – and even a number of my classmates at Yale – differed greatly from the environment in which my British friends had been raised. I had no clue what they were talking about when they mentioned Marmite. And they did not believe me when I talked about Sunday School lessons that abided all week and Sunday lunches that lasted all afternoon. I knew that when the idea of God Is Dead collided with American society, something different occurred there than across the Atlantic.

After one particular meeting with my tutor, Julian Wright, I contacted two other members of the history faculty: Phillip Waller of Merton College and Ruth Harris of New College. These discussions resulted in two impressions: yes, of course the US reacted

differently to *God Is Dead* and Existentialism than what transpired in Europe, and no, as far as they knew, there had not been that much conclusive research on why this was the case.

Upon returning to Yale in August of 2004, I started checking out every book I could find from the 1940s and 1950s that was written about Existentialism. My original idea was to compare the way in which the American North and South reacted differently to Existentialism by contrasting the response from academia and the high-brow media against those magazines that acted as liaisons between high and low culture. With this vague conception of a topic, the first texts that caught my eye were Guido de Ruggiero's *Existentialism* from 1946, David E. Robert's *Existentialism and Religious Belief* from 1959, and Norberto Bobbio's *The Philosophy of Decadentism: A Study in Existentialism* from 1948. These works and others helped me to understand the general reaction to Existentialism by intellectuals while also providing a sense of the timing of the trends I hoped to study.

At the same time, these texts mentioned everyone from Camus to Heidegger, presenting the problem of who was most responsible for introducing Existentialism to America. Moreover, the reaction to Existentialism seemed intensely predisposed towards each writer's own agenda. In many ways, this abstract philosophy was being either attacked or supported (although mostly the former) based on what the given author wanted to prove. In addition, the response to Existentialism seemed to be gradual, without any specific events to anchor this history. By the end of September, I was simply floating in ideas and trends.

As a result, I started searching databases for certain phrases that I thought might ground my research in more event-based history. "Death of God," "Is God Dead," and even "Alienation" yielded some valuable results. *Time*, the *New Yorker* and the *New York Times* gave me the most guidance, as they helped me to zero in on Jean-Paul Sartre as the key representative to the American public of the Existentialist idea. Then, turning to a few of

Yale's online database searches, I found a number of articles to guide my research. The American History & Life Database proved a godsend, as it pointed me to Walter Kaufmann's "The Reception of Existentialism in the United States" and Ann Fulton's essay "Apostles of Sartre: Advocates of Early Sartreanism in American Philosophy," which then led me to her book on the same topic. As for Kaufmann's piece, whose title yelled to me that I had unearthed the treasure I was seeking, I ended up disappointed in what I actually found. Kaufmann's approach remained on the "big idea" level, where I had been lingering for too long already. Only real stories and actual events would give my research substance.

Ann Fulton's scholarship gave me just that. Alighting new paths to follow, Fulton's book *Apostles of Sartre* from 1999 opened up to me the world of Henri Peyre, Robert Greer Cohn, and Kenneth Douglas. Discovering her research gave me exactly what I needed, despite the fact that she only dedicated seven paragraphs to Sartre's visits to the university (and although several of her claims were incomplete or even untrue, as I would soon come to find). Still, I knew that if I could dig deeper into the details of what had occurred when Sartre came to Yale, I might be able to understand individuals' reactions to Existentialism.

In addition to Fulton's work, I also came across George Cotkin's essay "French Existentialism and American Popular Culture: 1945-1948" at about this same time. Cotkin's work provided a wonderful survey of the media coverage of Sartre; and from here, I learned about how Existentialism was a buzzword and Sartre had become a vogue during that era. By following up on Cotkin's work, I was able to find not only the articles which he had chosen but also other pieces from those magazines and similar publications. Most crucially, this survey allowed me to see the ways in which American intellectuals responded to Sartre and I started to understand why such a craze might have occurred at this particular moment in American history. I began to think about the end of World War II, the Marshall Plan, the

fear of Communism, and the onset of the Cold War. And by looking into secondary texts which dealt with what was happening in regards to those larger ideas, I began to understand what the Existentialist fever really meant to American society.

Soon thereafter, I spotted Annie Cohen-Solal's mention of Sartre's visit to Yale, which took up only two paragraphs in her 524 page biography of Sartre. Along with Fulton's explanation, this description helped to paint a more discernable picture of what had happened, but I needed more facts in order to understand the significance of the relationship between Yale and Sartre. I continued to explore newspapers and magazines from the period. In addition to the articles mentioned in George Cotkin's article, I found Sartre's first American publication in *The Atlantic Monthly*, which led to valuable insights about how the author introduced himself to the American public as a hero for freedom.

At the same time, the references in the works by Fulton and Cohen-Solal contained the only descriptions previously done about Sartre's visit to Yale. In order to break new ground, I turned to Yale's archives to discover what I could about Sartre and the Yale French department. Reading through almost two thousand pages of interview transcripts in The John Gerassi Collection of Jean-Paul Sartre at the Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, I found no reference to Yale; however, through this I learned much about Sartre's personality and life that no biography could have given me. Knowing that neither Cohen-Solal nor Gerassi had focused on Sartre's lectures at Yale was certainly not heartening, but I knew that this was simply an untold history. After learning that Yale had been the major hub of Existentialist thought during the 1940s, I kept searching. Crucially, my Beinecke research provided a key find when I looked through the Henri Peyre Letters and discovered Sartre's letter regarding the first lecture given at Yale. After having this piece of evidence, I knew that there was surely a story to tell that had not yet been told.

Around then, Howard Bloch generously referred me to a number of his colleagues, including Douglas Collins at the University of Washington and Vincent Giroud at Vassar College. My e-mail correspondence with these two scholars helped me to realize two essential facts: that I had not missed anything in the secondary literature and the course I was on was indeed largely uncharted, but at the same time I was heading in the right direction by all indications. By the beginning of December, I looked to the Charles Seymour Papers in the Yale Library's Manuscripts and Archives in order to learn more about what life was like for those Yale men returning from the service. What I learned there proved invaluable for me in terms of how I thought about postwar Yale. Still, I needed stories.

To find them, I sought out personal accounts from Yale alumni by contacting the Association of Yale Alumni and acquiring e-mail addresses for alumni from the late 1940s. I drafted a letter and sent it out, receiving response after response marked, "Returned mail: see transcript for details." Soon, I received my first real reply. It was from an alumna named Wayne Compton who wrote that "I dropped French after one day. Sorry I can't help." Luckily, I received quite a number of people who had taken French, or who at least were willing to discuss their memories of life at Yale in the postwar era. In addition, my inquiry was posted by one graduate on the list-serv of his graduating class, which yielded numerous responses. With time, e-mail correspondences became phone conversations; and ideas began to come together into what would be my thesis in its earliest form.

During this period, I began to understand how Existentialism as an idea was being appropriated based upon an individual's predetermined perspective. Instead of looking at Existentialism without a bias, it seemed like everyone to whom I talked, or about whom I read in the magazine articles, saw their own beliefs in contrast to the challenge presented by the philosophy. My conversations with the Yale alumni also guided me towards the Bill

Buckley versus Bill Coffin dichotomy; for quite a few graduates from this time period, these two public figures represented the diverging Old Yale and New Yale that they had witnessed firsthand. Looking back over the documents I had found in the Charles Seymour Files, I rediscovered Henri Peyre's essay in *The Commonweal*, and I began to connect the dots and understand the way in which Existentialism could be seen as indicative of a much larger divide that was taking place both at Yale and more generally across America.

While learning more about post-WWII Yale from those who knew it best, I also continued to search for primary documents. At this point, I found the *Yale News Digest* articles from April 20, 1945, and January 18, 1946, which announced Sartre's lectures. Even though I was disappointed that the *Digest* did not provide any reaction to the addresses, these documents still helped me to understand the specifics of the events in addition to the overall chronology involved in Sartre's visits to the university. This led me to Simone de Beauvoir's discussion of the Existentialist Offensive, which separated the two lectures and gave me a new understanding of the craze and the scandal that surrounded the second lecture.

Moreover, around this time, I began to understand exactly how Existentialism became institutionalized at Yale. By going through every undergraduate and graduate course catalog from 1940 until 1970, I was able to follow the French department's year-to-year course offerings on Existentialism. I cannot underestimate the impact that these findings had on my overall understanding of my subject matter; during this period, my thesis underwent the greatest development as I began to learn how much of an influence Sartre's ideas had on Yale's French department. Subsequently, the Yale University Library delivered to me copies of Robert Greer Cohn's memoirs as well as the newly printed *Henri Peyre: His Life in Letters*. The details and stories held between the covers of both of these books would give both shape and texture to my essay. Soon thereafter, I finally came in contact with

Robert Greer Cohn. After I wrote to the Stanford University French department, Cohn sent me a postcard explaining that he had not been at Yale to hear Sartre lecture. At his invitation, I gave him a telephone call, and our conversation both thrilled and informed me.

What brought together my many ideas on the topic the most, however, was my interview with Jean Boorsch. Professor Boorsch, now ninety nine years old, kindly responded to my first letter, which I had written him after retrieving his contact information from the Yale French department. After sending him another letter, I also started an e-mail correspondence with his daughter Suzanne, who is a curator at the Yale University Art Gallery. Mrs. Boorsch and I arranged for an interview over dinner at Mr. Boorsch's home in North Haven, Connecticut. The Boorsch family was exceptionally kind to me and helpful in answering all of my questions; and Mr. Boorsch's memory and his wit remained extremely sharp, even after these many years. The conversation that evening is one that I will never forget; it was filled with great stories and beautiful memories, like that "Sartre was fairly ugly, which always confused me because people said all the time that he was a ladies' man," and that "Simone de Beauvoir was very brilliant, *but* she was attracted to him." During that evening, Mr. Boorsch's recollections made me feel as if I had actually been a Yale student during the time period I had researched for so long – and not sixty years thereafter.

From that point forward, the rest of my research entailed filling any of the gaps that remained. Because of those who had so kindly given me a window into their cherished memories about post-WWII Yale, this process was uncomplicated and effortless. The remainder of my work involved organizing the many accounts that I now had at my disposal, while also beginning the painful process of choosing the stories that I would include in my finished thesis. Admittedly, deciding among them proved problematic, but since they had previously been overlooked almost entirely by historians, it was a delightful problem to have.

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