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Studi Sartriani: 2022 Call for Papers
**SARTRE AND PSYCHOLOGICAL BIOGRAPHIES:
THE WRITING OF EXISTENCE**

Jean-Paul Sartre devoted a substantial part of his philosophical career to biographical writing. After having enunciated the principles of existential psychoanalysis in *Being and Nothingness*, he first applied them to Charles Baudelaire in 1947. This was followed by the Jean Genet “case,” with the preface to his complete works (dated 1952), and finally the monumental masterpiece dedicated to Gustave Flaubert (which was published in three volumes between 1971 and 1972 – a fourth volume, written in 1974, has never seen the light of day). There are also other lesser known – but no less important – biographical works which were published posthumously and dedicated to Mallarmé and Tintoretto. The latter in particular deserve more critical attention: not only so that their contents can be rediscovered, but because they offer a new perspective from which to consider the style and themes of Sartre's other biographies. Although these studies were neglected by Sartre during his lifetime, their presence attests to his need to develop a method that is capable of revealing the person behind the artist: a method for understanding a subject who, starting from an alienated condition, finds a way to freely exercise their *praxis*. In this sense, the screenplay on Freud is also fundamental: composed for director John Huston between 1958 and 1960, Sartre intends here to show the human – rather than intellectual – path that led the father of psychoanalysis to formulate his theories. It is with this retrospective gaze that Sartre also turns (in 1964) to his own childhood, giving us his autobiography, *The Words*. Here Sartre intends to give a precise account of his plan to become a writer in order to understand himself as a man who has made a choice which was influenced by his family and his socio-cultural environment.

This issue of *Studi Sartriani* aims to shed new light on these texts, which have not always been adequately appreciated by critics. Their centrality in the evolution of Sartre's reflections on the human being as a subject who projects himself or herself toward the future is, in fact, indisputable. In an

interview in 1971 (“On *The Idiot of the Family*”), Sartre himself maintains that one can “arrive at a perfect understanding of a man, if we have the necessary elements.” The work of the biographer is to collect the basic data of a human life; e.g. the class to which one belongs, the names and occupations of one’s parents, one’s place of birth, their era, their dominant culture, and so on. However, Sartre does not limit himself to these notions alone: the ‘necessary elements’ for understanding a person concern the personal way in which they *relate* to these data. Sartre assigns particular importance to a person’s relationship with their parents, to the values they transmitted, and to the way these values were used: these are the dimensions that his biographies are most of all concerned with. Every existence is nothing other than its own writing; its own shaping – always in progress, never given; never really finished. The originality of a human existence lies in the small deviations that the individual makes from their original context: these are what Sartre devotes his attention with a profound, meticulous, and surgical manner.

Naο Sawada has rightly pointed out how Sartre presents existence “as a series of metamorphoses” in his biographies (*Biographe malgré lui*. *L’Idiot de la famille dans le miroir des Mots*). For Jean-François Louette, this is because Sartre wanted to construct his biographical writing using a dialectical methodology which operates in the form of a spiral (like history in *The Critique of Dialectical Reason*) in order to be able to account for the incessant movement – never synthesized and finite – that presides over the existence of a person (*La dialectique dans la biographie*). Louette also shows another fundamental aspect of Sartre’s biographies, which concerns the possibility of investigating the existential choices of writers; or rather, of individuals who “turn to the imaginary” to overcome their condition of original alienation within the family (“Introduction,” in J.-P. SARTRE, *Les Mots et autres écrits autobiographiques*). Thus, if the dimension of the future is a keystone of Sartre’s biographical writing (since it refers to individual projecting toward the future), then the literary imaginary presents itself as the most proper sphere of the processes of liberation from alienation experienced in childhood. Sartre thus places the impulse of the individual both in the desire to actualize a free future and in the possibility to take refuge in an imagined world. Both of these choices are symptomatic not only of the struggle for one’s own liberation from parental constraints, but also (and above all) of the intrinsic freedom that every act of conscience represents; whether that consists in projecting toward the future or imagining. The task of biography is thus to trace these symptoms back to the initial moment in which biography is set in motion, understood as the writing of one’s own existence. Sartre calls such a moment as the ‘primary scene’ (*The Idiot of*

the Family: *Gustave Flaubert from 1821 to 1857*). This backward movement typically invites the risk of falling into an ‘easy psychologism’,’ as Vincent De Coorebyter puts it in *Le miroir aux origines*. However, it is Sartre himself who suggests a positive method. Indeed, in the aforementioned 1971 interview on *The Idiot of the Family*, he argues that “to understand a man, the necessary attitude is empathy” – i.e. the biographer must not interpret his existence, but must ‘understand’; that is, “study his conduct from his ends and consider them as responses to lived situations” (*The Idiot of the Family*). In other words, a biography must never be the result of a judgement, nor a mere description of the way in which certain events have been linked together: rather, it must be the result of an existential investigation into a person and their possibilities.

In *Being and Nothingness*, we read that the aim of existential psychoanalysis is to “discover a choice, not a state”; i.e., to reveal the process by which an individual has been able to overcome a situation in view of their own ends. Similarly, biography is also able to keep alive the critic’s interest in the family sphere, which is understood as “the point at which man intersects with his class,” that is, as “mediation between the universal class and the individual” (*The Search for Method*). Accordingly, this sphere is the original context in which every possible choice could be determined. It is only at this level of complexity that biography (taken in the Sartrean sense) can find its meaning and function.

Taking all of this into consideration, all essays that intend to propose an original reflection based upon these suggestions are of interest to this issue. Articles can also develop the theme in question using one or more of the following research suggestions:

- the study, investigation, and debate surrounding the biographies dedicated to Mallarmé and Tintoretto;
- the relationship between Sartre’s biographies and his autobiography, especially in relation to the themes and structures they share;
- the origin, development, and theoretical aims of biographical writing in Sartrean thought; its positioning in the literary and cultural context of the 20th century; the history and discussion of philosophical and literary criticism surrounding Sartrean biographies;
- differences and points of contact between Sartrean biographies; in particular, differences in their methodology, themes, and aesthetic qualities;
- the moral implications of Sartrean biographies as well as the ethics of freedom that they propose;
- the characterization of the psychological biographies in a register that intends to situate them in relation to Sartre's production and, in general, in

relation to contemporary philosophy and literature (and not only of French origin).

Contributions should be sent no later than on June 15th, 2022 to russo.maria@hsr.it. All articles will be subject to double-blind peer review. Notification of acceptance or non-acceptance of your article will be sent by July 31st, 2022 and may include suggestions for major or minor changes. Submissions will then be published by the end of 2022.

The maximum length of each article is 50,000 characters (including spaces and notes).

Contributions in Italian, English, and French will be accepted.

Two files must be sent:

- a .doc file with the essay in an anonymous format. The text must be preceded by an abstract in English of at most 300 words. It should also include five keywords, and a translation of the title in English;

- a second .doc file with the author's data: name, surname, academic affiliation, and email address (preferably institutional).