

On the Death of Jean-Paul Sartre

Robert S. Griffin

www.robertsgriffin.com

Jean-Paul Sartre, 1905-1980, was a French philosopher, novelist, playwright, and political activist. He was one of the leading intellectuals of the twentieth century. An earlier thought on this site deals with his novel *Nausea*. The material below was taken from *Adieux: A Farewell to Sartre*, written by Sartre's lifelong companion, Simone de Beauvoir.

The first alarm was the attack of high blood pressure. The doctors told me Sartre's arteries were too narrow.

When Sylvie and I went to fetch him for lunch, he bumped into furniture at every step. He was staggering. When we were in Rome, he legs gave out when he stepped out of the car. The doctor said that the lack of balance might be caused by trouble in the inner ear or in the brain.

Doctors detected grave disturbances in the circulation in the left hemisphere of his brain and a narrowing of the blood vessels.

When he woke up it seemed to him that his right arm was so heavy and numb he could scarcely move it. His legs were giving way under him, he spoke indistinctly, and his mouth was a little twisted. Obviously he had had a slight stroke during the night.

His cigarette kept dropping from his lips. Sylvie would pick it up and hand it to him; he would take it and it would slip out of his grasp.

The doctor examined Sartre for an hour and reassured me; the underlying perception was unaffected, the mind was unharmed, and the stammer came from the twist to his mouth.

His right hand was still weak. It was hard for him to play the piano, and it was hard for him to write.

Sartre began to suffer cruelly from his tongue. He could neither eat nor speak without pain.

His mouth became more twisted, pronunciation was difficult, and his arm was insensitive to heat and cold.

His face was swollen—one of his teeth was abscessed.

Sartre complained of losing his memory.

He began to talk nonsense and staggered as he went up to bed.

He often had abscesses and they gave him much pain. He ate only soft things.

The evening before, he had had another stroke. His face was twisted. He was sitting in front of the television and asked, “Where’s the telly?” His brain was not good. He wandered in his speech. Liliane told me he did not recognize her—sometimes he took her for Arlette, sometimes for me. The doctor told me that Sartre had had an attack of asphyxia of the brain.

I put on records, among them Verdi’s *Requiem*, which Sartre was very fond of. He only murmured, chilling Sylvie and me through and through.

He read an excellent book, *Les Kapetanos*, but I do not think he retained anything.

The ophthalmologist discovered a thrombosis in a triple hemorrhage at the back of the eye. There was also the beginning of glaucoma. He lost four-tenths of his vision—almost half. And he only had one eye that worked at all. Even with the magnifying glass he could not manage to read everything.

The doctor gave me a letter in which he stated that Sartre was suffering from cerebral arteriopathy, high blood pressure, and was pre-diabetic.

The ophthalmologist told him that there was no hope for a cure. The hemorrhage was healing over, but it had left

ineradicable scars in the middle of he retina, which was now dead tissue. A special apparatus might allow him to read perhaps an hour a day using lateral vision. The optician lent us the apparatus, but it was useless to Sartre. The words came so slowly that he preferred hearing them read aloud.

I read aloud to Sartre—works on Flaubert, and an issue of *Les Temps Modernes*.

Sartre had diabetes.

Slow waves had been detected in his brain, and these might explain his states of drowsiness.

We tried to play draughts, but he could no longer see well enough and we had to give up.

One morning I wiped saliva off his shirt. He said, “Yes, I dribble.”

Sometimes he would utter very strange words.

He found it hard to concentrate.

“Shall I never get my eyes back?”

He had urinary incontinence and lost control of his bowels. He fouled his clothes and his pajamas at night.

Kidney stones were making him writhe in pain.

From time to time he would try to write. This amounted to making illegible marks on paper.

The artist Rebeyrolle showed us his latest canvases. Sartre observed sadly, “I cannot see them.”

He often lost his bearings in time and space.

He found it really hard to speak; the corner of his mouth and the tip of his tongue were almost paralyzed.

Sartre was told inflammation of the walls of his arteries might lead to the amputation of his legs.

He complained that in the morning his mouth and throat were half paralyzed.

He had pains in his left leg--calf, thigh, ankle, and foot. The doctor said he had sciatica. His walking grew worse and worse.

Melina telephoned me in a panic. Sartre's legs had given way, neighbors had carried him to the elevator. He was deathly pale, sweating, and out of breath. The next day Arlette called me to say that Sartre had fallen several times.

Sartre was to stop walking; otherwise there was the danger of a heart attack or a stroke.

The summary was disturbing—only a 30 percent circulation in the legs.

One morning as he was getting up his right foot hurt him so much that he said, "I can see why they cut your feet off." Aspirin soothed his pain a little. Fresh injections took it away altogether for a time. But it was still very hard for him to walk.

It is to Sartre that one can apply Rilke's words: "Every man bears his death within himself."

He was very sorry that he couldn't see faces.

Finally, Sartre could no longer read at all.

He was laid on a kind of wheeled stretcher that was rolled down a long corridor; he was breathing oxygen from a mask that a doctor held over his head. The doctor said he had a pulmonary edema caused by a lack of irrigation in the lungs.

"He's frail, very frail." Sylvie was horrified at his appearance.

He trailed a little plastic bag full of urine behind him. They used the word "uremia." I knew that uremia often brought hideous suffering.

The doctors told me that because his kidneys were no longer adequately supplied with blood they no longer functioned. Sartre still passed urine, but without eliminating urea. An operation would have been needed to save one kidney, but he had not the strength to bear it; and even if it could have been carried out, the inadequate circulation would then have been transferred to the brain.

The bedsores were horrifying to see—great purplish-blue and reddened patches. Since his blood did not circulate properly, gangrene had attacked his flesh.

With closed eyes, he took me by the wrist and said, “I love you very much.”

At nine in the evening, the telephone rang. Arlette said, “It’s over.”