The Singular Universal in Jean-Paul Sartre

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I

The range and extent of Jean-Paul Sartre's writings, as everyone knows, is remarkable. Philosophy, novels, plays, essays, biographies, literary and art criticism, autobiography, diaries and interviews, political, cultural and social commentary: his writings in these many fields constitute an immense output, much of it of high quality, and very little without interest. Of course, there is dispute about his standing as a thinker; but, even in the long period of eclipse since his death in 1980, there is no denying the significance of his major publications. However, for all the impressive diversity of these writings and the fame attached to them, it is also true that Sartre enjoys a reputation as one who *failed* to write certain things. This specific notoriety is connected with his failure to complete a number of major projects for which he had given a specific undertaking.

Famously, Sartre concluded *Being and Nothingness* (published in 1943) with the promise to devote a future work to the ethical implications of his ontology. In the following years he compiled extensive preliminary notes on ethical questions, but the project was finally abandoned before the end of the decade and the notes remained unpublished until after his death.[1] No less famously, he failed to complete the promised second volume of the *Critique of Dialectical Reason* (the first volume of which was published in 1960); in this case too there was a lengthy manuscript which, again, was eventually published only after his death.[2] The publication of the *Critique* also gave rise to further attempts to deal with ethical themes, in the form of notes for lectures in the mid-1960s; but these writings (so far) remain unpublished. Finally, among the major non-publications, Sartre did not complete the promised study of *Madame Bovary*, which had long been projected as the necessary conclusion to his massively long work on Flaubert, *The Idiot of the Family*, three volumes of which were published in the early 1970s.

These unfulfilled promises—and others such as his breaking off the series of novels *The Roads to Freedom* or the failure to complete

his autobiography *Words* as originally intended—are often commented on in the retrospective interviews which Sartre gave in the 1970s. His general response was that the situation did not bother him at all because, as he said, 'all works remain unfinished: no-one who undertakes a work of literature or philosophy ever finishes. What can I say—time never stops!'[3] With reference to the work on Flaubert in particular, he took the convenient view that he had said the important things in the first three volumes and that 'someone else could write the fourth on the basis of the three I have written'.[4] But it is also clear that, in this case especially, unfinished business did bother him, since he added immediately that he felt a kind of remorse about the unfinished Flaubert; and, if he supposed that it could be written readily by someone else, he also acknowledged that it was, for him, the most difficult part of the work.

We know about Sartre's unfinished work largely because he was so open about his projects; with more guarded writers, the question why they did not write something or other might not arise. In accounting for the situation as a whole, one can refer, of course, to the standard considerations that Sartre took up projects and set them aside, if need be, in response to conditions set by a changing world; that he had many interests and embraced too many tasks; that, like many writers and philosophers, he was divided between the theoretical and the practical life; that he held work back from publication when he was unhappy with it; and that his health failed as he grew older (a factor which particularly affected the work on Flaubert and finally made its completion impossible). But there is a deeper significance, both real and symbolic, in the three major instances of Sartre's unfinished work. This is related to the character of his original ontology in which the human being is conceived as engaged fundamentally in the obviously incompletable task of becoming God; against this standard, the individual is a whole which is forever incomplete, a detotalized totality. But the problem of incompleteness is related even more significantly to the task of giving a comprehensive account of social relations which he set for himself in his later social theory, to be achieved on the basis of the fundamental method of inquiry which he sought to apply both in the *Critique of Dialectical Reason* and in the study of Flaubert, *The Family Idiot*.

The method of inquiry, which is proposed as a method for understanding both individual and social reality, and indeed history as a whole, is set out in the relatively short text *Search for Method* (first published in 1957). Sartre said of himself that he had 'a passion

for understanding human beings'. Characertistically for him, this meant understanding individuals, very particular individuals in fact, and above all writers. What he came to recognise, soon after the publication of *Being and Nothingness*, is that to understand particular individuals or events fully one must be able to give an account of the social order, the epoch, the history of the time; and this leads on to the need for an account of how one time fits with another and, subsequently, of the shape of history as a whole. What he sought to provide, then, is a comprehensive method by which one might hope to understand individual persons or particular events, on the one hand, and the whole of history on the other.

The path to this end was smoothed by the conviction that an individual is never just an individual: each person is shaped by, and is an expression, of universal history and their epoch; at the same time, each person contributes to the history of which they are part. From the early 1960s, Sartre came to express this idea in the phrase 'singular universal' and the reverse formulation 'universal singular'. The idea, in summary, is that individuals reflect the universal features of their time and, conversely, that the universals of an age are realised concretely and singularly by individuals. His first use of the term 'singular universal', so far as I can ascertain, is in the *Critique of Dialectical Reason*, though here the individual disappears from historical categories and is seen only as 'the methodological point of departure (whose) short life soon becomes diluted in the pluridimensional human ensemble'.[5]

There is a rather different emphasis in the prominent use of the phrase in his paper 'The Singular Universal', given at a UNESCO colloquium on Kierkegaard in 1964;[6] and this emphasis on the individual as a universal was taken up at considerably greater length in *The Family Idiot*. Sartre presents the Flaubert work as a sequel to *Search for a Method*, which was first published, as noted, in 1957 and then incorporated as the prelude to the *Critique of Dialectical Reason* in 1960. Sartre's basic question in *Search for a Method* is: 'Do we have today the means to constitute a structural, historical anthropology?' —in effect, the desired comprehensive theory of history, the expression of his passion for understanding human beings; and, with acknowledgement to Marx and Hegel, he announces that: 'if such a thing as Truth can exist in anthropology, it must be a truth that has *become*, and it must make itself a *totalization*.'[7] The more specific question which introduces the Flaubert study and constitutes its general subject is: 'what at this point in time, can we know about a man?'[8]

This question, it is suggested, could only be answered by studying a specific case. Such a study, he is aware, runs the risk of ending up as no more than a collection of different kinds of information about a life and a time, 'layers of heterogeneous and irreducible meanings'; the presupposition is that the great task, whether one is trying to make sense of an individual life or of history as a whole, is to discover (or perhaps to create) its unity or totality. Sartre's conviction is that his work will show that the irreducibility of meanings is only apparent, that the parts all fit together as a whole with profound homogeneity. To understand an individual is to grasp a whole period of history; to understand history is to grasp the specific forms in which it is realized in individual lives. The search for a structural, historical anthropology and the truth of history can be undertaken, in effect, through a properly constructed biography of a single individual. The fundamental argument is expressed as follows at the beginning of the work on Flaubert:

> For a man is never an individual; it would be more fitting to call him a *universal singular*. Summed up and for this reason universalized by his epoch, he in turn resumes it by reproducing himself in it as singularity. Universal by the singular universality of human history, singular by the universalizing singularity of his projects, he requires simultaneous examination from both ends.[9]

What is indicated, in short, is the twofold regressive-progressive method of inquiry originally set out in *Search for a Method* as the basis for a structural, historical anthropology in which existentialism was to be incorporated as a subsidiary element in the Marxist theory of history. But the projection towards the individual was already announced in that work in the observation that this is a method of continuous cross-reference, an examination from both ends in effect, which 'will progressively determine a biography (for example) by examining the period, and the period by studying the biography'.[10]

The power of a method of inquiry needs to be sought in its details, in the scope of its application and, obviously, in what it yields. But in general, the idea of a pattern of understanding, moving backwards and forwards between specific aspects of individuals or particular events and their general social and historical context, seems eminently sensible. This is irrespective of any larger theory to which the regressive-progressive practice might be attached, allowing that, in the case of Sartre, the desire for a comprehensive theory is never far away. The idea of the 'singular universal', in conjunction with the method which reveals it, is to be understood primarily in terms of the notion of *meaning,* specifically, meaning as applied to a lived process or totality

such as a life or a project or an action. For meaning in this sense, Sartre uses the term *sens* as distinct from *signification* which is normally reserved for the meaning of concepts or terms. The distinction was invoked originally in his thought in an aesthetic context in relation, for example, to the meaning of a painting or a piece of music. *Signification* is effected by signs, that is to say, bearers of meaning which direct our attention beyond themselves to whatever they signify; an object with *sens,* by contrast, is a primary focus of attention (and understanding):

> I would say that an object has a meaning (*sens*) when it is the incarnation of a reality which goes beyond it but which cannot be grasped apart from it and whose infinity does not allow expression in any system of signs; what is involved is always a case of totality: the totality of a person, a milieu, an epoch, the human condition.[11]

In the original aesthetic context, Sartre speaks for example of the Mona Lisa as capturing the spirit of the Renaissance; or he notes the way in which a Brandenburg concerto, a Scarlatti sonata or a work by Schumann or Ravel express in their different ways their respective epoch and its understanding of the world. But already there is the idea that a person, as a totality, embodies meaning along the same lines. It is precisely this idea which was taken up in the notion of the singular universal. This can be seen clearly in two key passages in which he introduces the term in his paper on Kierkegaard:

> To live original contingency is to surpass it. The human being, irremediable singularity, is the being through whom the universal comes into the world; once fundamental chance starts to be lived, it assumes the form of necessity. Lived experience [*le vécu*], we discover in Kierkegaard, is made up of non-significant accidents of being in so far as they are surpassed towards a significance [*vers un sens*] they did not possess at the beginning, and which I will call the singular universal.[12]
>
> The human being is that being who transforms his being into *meaning* [*sens*], and through whom *meaning* [*sens*] comes into the world. The singular universal is this meaning [*sens*].[13]

The general framework of the idea is as follows. We live within what Sartre, following Merleau-Ponty, calls *envelopment*, the wrapping of a world, especially a social, historical order, which shapes us and determines 'the limits within which real modifications are possible'. Thus, for example, 'Kierkegaard was a Dane, born at the beginning of the last century into a Danish family, and conditioned by Danish history and culture';[14] a particular religion produced him, a religion

from which he could not pretend to emancipate himself though others of his background did; and it is universally agreed that he was marked by a complex disposition of which the kernel was some sort of sexual anomaly.[15] Such observations are part of an analytic or regressive movement which help to place the individual, in this case Kierkegaard, in his universal setting. The point is expressed epigrammatically in the suggestion that 'a human being carries a whole epoch within him, just as a wave carries the whole of the sea'.

Within the framework of a universal envelopment, Sartre portrays the individual as an anchorage who turns 'this universality into a particular situation and this common necessity into an irreducible contingency';[16] furthermore, 'because of the necessity of anchorage, there can be no incarnation of the universal other than in the irreducible opacity of the singular'.[17] The emphasis on singularity and contingency in the account is set (supposedly at least) in contrast with the Hegelian conception of the individual as essentially a dialectical incarnation of the universal moment. The irreducible contingency lies originally in the singularity of the conditionings in which the individual comes to be within the general framework, especially the conditions of their particular childhood milieu. But then, the individual acts, and thereby surpasses contingency and makes a life characterised in one way or another by a unified meaning; in aesthetic terms, we each tell a story or create a work of art in living our lives; in this way, original contingency becomes necessity in the act which gives it a human meaning [*sens humain*] and which 'makes of it a singular relationship to the Whole, a singular embodiment of the ongoing totalization which envelops and produces it'.[18] To give meaning in this sense is to effect a synthetic totalization of scattered chance occurrences, to become a singular universal within the enveloping universal of the epoch and of history as a whole.

In Kierkegaard's case the meaning-giving process consisted centrally in the way in which he lived, and expressed in his writings, ideas about sin, dread, freedom, finitude, subjectivity, and passion. In a corresponding sense, for someone now to trace this development and to explore these ideas is to engage, by a process of reduplication or doubling, in a synthetic or progressive movement which will reveal the singular way in which he reproduced in his lived relationships the universal features of his epoch. 'What is Kierkegaard's body of work', Sartre asks, 'but himself in so far as he is a universal?' An answer to the question 'what can we know about a human being?' —about Kierkegaard or Flaubert for example—thus moves in a

regressive-progressive pattern from universal to singular and back to the universal. This pattern of understanding, Sartre suggests, may almost certainly be credited to Kierkegaard himself: 'Kierkegaard was perhaps the first to show that the universal enters History as a singular, in so far as the singular institutes itself in it as a universal'.[19]

In summary, Sartre's methodological proposal can be seen as an appropriate or even necessary framework for a biography or for social and historical inquiry generally. In the case of Kierkegaard, Sartre sets out the method and applies the twofold movement, albeit in a concentrated and incomplete way, in the space of 20 to 30 pages. In the case of Flaubert, the same pattern of inquiry was to run to over 3000 pages and was to remain incomplete even so, taken up to a considerable extent with the original task of placing Flaubert in his family relations and his time. The difference between the two studies could be treated as a matter of degree in the details of a life: not much detail in what, after all, was a conference paper on Kierkegaard, and a great deal about Flaubert in what was, in a sense, the work of a lifetime. What is at issue more sharply is the impossible Sartrean ambition which is tied to the otherwise sensible regressive-progressive method, viz., the conviction that everything can in principle be known about a life or a period of history, and that if one can provide a complete summation of the data, then one will have achieved a synthesis in which everything will finally be clear:

> The most important project in the *Flaubert* is to show that fundamentally everything can be communicated, that without being God, but simply as a man like any other, one can manage to understand another man perfectly, if one has access to all the necessary elements.[20]

The study of Flaubert, for all its interest, is a monument to the failure of this conviction and of the attempt to effect a comprehensive implementation of the method. The very same problems are apparent in the failure to complete the second volume of the *Critique of Dialectical Reason* and also, I think, the promised work on ethics. But to show this more clearly, it is necessary to consider the task as Sartre conceived it, the method of inquiry, and the application of its component elements in more detail. At the same time, the focus remains on the idea of the singular universal.

II

The task, as I have already emphasised, is comprehension or understanding, specifically in the sense of understanding a particular action, the life of a human being, an epoch, and finally history as a whole. For all his renowned pessimism, Sartre was surprisingly optimistic about the possibility of carrying out this task at its various levels of totalization. The first stage seems comparatively straight-forward. In *Search for a Method,* he suggests that our capacity to grasp the meaning of a piece of human conduct does not involve a particular talent or special faculty of intuition: 'this knowing is simply the dialectical movement which explains the act by its terminal signification in terms of its starting conditions'.[21] We grasp an action as a synthetic unity—that is, we grasp its *sens*—in terms of its goal and starting conditions, the familiar progressive and regressive movements respectively: as when we observe someone opening the window to let air into a crowded room, switching on the light to read when it is dark, drinking a glass of water to slake their thirst after coming in on a hot day. We are signifying beings, we live in a world of signs; we understand our own behaviour inasmuch as comprehension is 'simply the translucidity of *praxis* to itself';[22] and we understand others, again as 'a moment of our *praxis*, a way of living ... the concrete human relation which unites us to the other'.[23] This confidence is tempered by the recognition that an act may be understood at more and more complex levels and hence be expressed by a series of very different meanings. But again there is the conviction that the various meanings can be unified or totalized: 'what the totalization must discover ... is the multidimensional unity of the act'.[24]

In general terms, the same pattern of understanding, built up around regressive and progressive stages and aspiring to the goal of totalization in the grasp of a complex unified meaning, is reiterated at each successive level: the meaning of a project over time, its outcome (in a literary work or a musical composition, for example), the meaning expressed in the course of a life, the meaning of a social order, a culture, an epoch, history as a whole. In each case, the process is conceived in a spiralling, dialectical fashion in which each element is to be understood in relation to the others. In the work on Flaubert, Sartre even formulates what the philosopher T. R. Flynn calls the *'principle of totalization* in his philosophy of history'[25] in the claim that 'a man ... totalizes his age to the precise degree that he is totalized by it'.[26] The precision which is invoked in this principle is manifestly

spurious for it assumes, among other things, that totalization is complete in each case and that it can be grasped and measured as a whole. Even if this were true in some sense for the past, the basic assumption of an overall unified meaning is problematic. What is offered, at best, is a general framework of inter-relationship and understanding: on the one hand, the idea of the social, cultural order as a concrete universal which incarnates the objective spirit of an age in a great web of enveloping meanings which shape each part of the whole; on the other, the idea that the social order and its enveloping meanings is itself constituted by the specific meanings in which individuals, in their activities and in relation with one another, constitute general meaning in specific forms.

The general picture is one of a vast complex of mediations between the universal and the singular. Given our existence as signifying beings in a world of signs, it seems reasonable to suppose that we can gain a partial understanding of this dialectic; but the ultimate goal of comprehension to which Sartre aspires would require the complete and detailed application of the whole range of disciplines which bear on the mediations of individual and social life in both a structural and a dynamic (or diachronic) sense: one would need to bring into play all the social sciences, a comprehensive study of the major institutions, the forms of life and practices of an epoch, its art, literature and popular culture, together with historical studies, both specific and general, in considerable depth. In a sense, what is called for is an imaginative but true study of everything (Sartre said of the Flaubert work: 'I would like my study to be read as a novel ... [but] with the idea in mind that it is true, that it is a true novel').[27] How does one set out on such a breathtaking and sense-defying project?

Sartre's confidence was based in part on the idea that we have a general sense of what is required for total understanding: we have, one could say, the idea of a god's-eye view of history; furthermore, the general method of inquiry, with its regressive and progressive stages, is within our grasp; on this basis, his confidence grew out of the conviction that, just as we can hope to discover the multidimensional unity of a single act, so we can aspire to bring the plurality of meanings in a human life, in a culture, and eventually in history, into overall unity. Thus:

> the plurality of *the meanings* of History can be discovered and posited for itself only on the ground of a future totalization.... It is our theoretical and practical duty to bring this totalization closer every day. All is still obscure, and yet everything is in full light. To tackle

the theoretical aspect, we have the instruments; we can establish the method. Our historical task, at the heart of this polyvalent world, is to bring closer the moment when History will have *only one meaning,* when it will tend to be dissolved in the concrete human beings who will make it in common.[28]

Sartre carried this confidence into his ambitious study of social groups and history in the *Critique of Dialectical Reason* and his hardly less ambitious study of Flaubert. His failure to complete the works has to be seen fundamentally as a consequence of the impossible goal which he set for himself in the first place. The point of failure lies especially in the progressive or synthetic element of the project. Each of these large works combines regressive and progressive forms of inquiry; but in the published volumes, the regressive dimension, which could be judged to be relatively successful, is dominant. The insoluble problem arises, predictably, with the task of drawing the data together into an overall unified account of history, an epoch, or a human life. This is the task which Sartre set for himself, in regard to history in volume II of the *Critique,* and in regard to Flaubert and his time in the proposed fourth volume of *The Family Idiot.* His eventual decision not to publish these works is an acknowledgement that he had failed to carry out the project (which is not to say that the unpublished material is without interest or importance). His own comments on the unfulfilled promises (as noted early in the paper) have a disarming quality; but it seems that Sartre could not acknowledge the original flaw in the project of seeking the god-like status of total understanding.

Regressive inquiry consists essentially in an analytic procedure in which one begins with some agreed data and then works back to determine their formal and material conditions, their causes and explanation. So in volume I of the *Critique*, Sartre sets out to uncover and analyse the conditions which account for basic social phenomena, the formation and structure of groups, class identity and social conflict in particular; finally, after 800 pages, he concluded: 'So far, we have been trying to get back to the elementary formal structures, and, at the same time, we have located the dialectical foundations of a structural anthropology'.[29] In other words, the inquiry to this point has been essentially regressive in character; and the way is now open, he supposes, to take up at last 'the real problem of History'.

This project promised for volume II (to which he gave the sub-title *The Intelligibility of History*) would of course be a progressive inquiry, a synthetic undertaking which would gather up the vast plurality of meanings in history and uncover the overall unifying internal meaning

of social relations and the goal of their development. It would provide, in short, the final, universal level of understanding which begins with our grasp of the multi-dimensional unity of a single act. Not surprisingly, the project defeated him. The unfinished manuscript consists firstly of an imaginative portrayal of a boxing match as, in effect, a singular universal which 'incarnates' all boxing and, more generally, the violence of an exploitative society; in the terms of the now familiar image, 'a punch, like a dance, is indissolubly singular and universal'. The other major discussion concerns Stalin's disastrous attempt to achieve 'socialism in one country', which Sartre portrays as a singular realization of the universal 'dictatorial' society. The discussion carries a good deal of interest as far as it goes; but it could not possibly satisfy the impossible goal which Sartre set for himself in regard to 'the real problem of history'. Even in the end, he seemed unable, or unwilling, to recognise this. The explanation he provided for abandoning the project, while not untrue or irrelevant, is unconvincing: 'in the second part [of the *Critique*] it would be a question, to put it briefly, of explaining what history is: and I consider that I do not know enough history to undertake that'.[30] He might have known that in the beginning. But then he would probably not have written the rich, if excessively long, account of social theory which is found in volume I. In the event, he gave up the attempt to complete the *Critique* and turned to the study of Flaubert, a particular writer, whom he had thought about over a long period of time and who belonged to an epoch about which he was in fact generally well informed.

The Family Idiot, like the *Critique*, is constructed around regressive and progressive forms of inquiry, with the aim of providing an account which would explain everything about Flaubert, beginning with attention to the background conditions in which he became a writer, a writer of novels, and specifically the novel *Madame Bovary*; and going on to examine the way in which his life, as embodied in his writings, in *Madame Bovary* in particular, reflected the age of the Second Empire of which he was part. Once again, regressive inquiry plays a dominant role in the study, especially in the detailed investigation of Flaubert's early childhood and his relations to his parents and his older brother, conditions which, in conjunction with the age, are seen to lead to his neurosis and passivity and flight to the imaginary which, in turn, are seen as critical to his development as a writer of a particular sort in that environment. There is also a good deal of progressive argument in the study developed around what

Sartre now calls *personalization,* which is meant to express the way in which the individual responds to what is made of him by the sum of conditioning factors, an outcome which consists in Sartrean terms in the universalizing singularity effected through one's projects; he defines it as 'the surpassing and conserving ... at the heart of a totalizing project of what the world has made—and continues to make —of [the individual]'.[31] This relates, in Flaubert's case, to the way in which he constructed an imaginary world as a child and eventually became a writer of novels of a singular universal kind.

The study assembles, analyses and summarises an immense amount of detail relating to Flaubert and his time gathered around symbolic key events in his childhood and early adult life, especially his collapse at the feet of his brother near the Pont L'Évêque early in 1844. But once again there is an overwhelming gap created by the absence of the promised totalization of Flaubert as a singular universal within the overall totalization of the Second Empire. This was to be effected at each level through a close study of Madame Bovary, concerning which Flaubert had said *'Madame Bovary, c'est moi'.* The general ambition of writing the biography of a significant individual such as Flaubert, showing how he was shaped by his environment and how, in turn, he expressed that world in a singular way, is entirely feasible. But Sartre set for himself the impossible task of a supreme totalization, an account which would provide in effect a complete representation of Flaubert and the epoch in which he lived. In the end, one could say that the many interesting parts of the study are greater than the whole; in that light, the failure is far from from total. Again the paradox is that Sartre would probably not have attempted the feat at all if he had not tried to do what is impossible. In that case, the failures can be seen as illustrations of the characteristic Sartrean theme 'loser wins'.

The failure to complete the promised work on ethics can also be linked with the problem of totalization or unified meaning; but in this case, Sartre's own explanation in a late interview is considerably more feasible since it does not rest on the postulate of a grandiose goal of total understanding. Denying that he ever subscribed to an ethics of indifference (contrary to the familiar caricature of existentialism), Sartre says:

> I have never had an ethics of indifference. That is not what makes ethics difficult, but rather the concrete, political problems that have to be solved... society and knowledge [at present] are not such that we can rebuild an ethics that would have the same validity as the one we have gone beyond. For example, we are unable to formulate an ethics

on the Kantian level that would have the same validity as Kantian
ethics. It cannot be done because the moral categories depend essentially
on the structures of the society in which we live, and these structures
are neither simple enough nor complex enough for us to create moral
concepts.[32]

Sartre's point is that, in the contemporary fragmented social world,
the task of providing an adequate basis for ethics in common or
universal terms lies beyond us. In these circumstances he did not
succeed in working out an ethical theory which could meet this goal;
but he continued to acknowledge the theoretical and practical
importance of work on ethical themes and his writings reflect ethical
concern at many different levels.

At the end of the story of his childhood, Sartre presents himself as
shorn of illusions; and he concludes that what was then left was: 'A
whole man, made up of all men, worth all of them, and any one of
them worth him'.[33] This is an egalitarian but abstract image in which
one individual is portrayed as no different from any other. He made
particular use of the image of the individual as 'just anyone'—
'n'importe qui'—in his long and winding account of social relations
in the *Critique of Dialectical Reason*. But in his passion for
understanding human beings, Sartre was drawn to write about singular
individuals, especially writers or artists—Flaubert, Saint Genet,
Kierkegaard, Mallarmé, Tintoretto. He commented in the third volume
of the Flaubert study that 'the epoch *makes itself* as the totalization of
a society in opposing itself to itself through thousands of particular
incarnations which struggle among themselves for survival'.[34] In the
same breath, he observed that 'an epoch can come to completion in an
individual well before it comes to an end socially'. Perhaps we are all
singular universals in our particular way; but then there are singular
singular universals. Flaubert was such a singular universal in relation
to the Second Empire. We might equally take Jean-Paul Sartre (1905–
1980) as a singular universal of this kind in the troubled history of
France in the twentieth century.

Notes

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2   J.-P. Sartre, *Critique de la raison dialectique*, vol. II (inachevé),
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3   J.-P. Sartre, *Sartre in the Seventies*, trans. P. Aster and L. Davis, London,
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4   Sartre, *Sartre in the Seventies*, p.20.
5   J.-P. Sartre, *Critique of Dialectical Reason, vol*. I, trans. A. Sheridan-Smith, London, 1976, pp.51, 55.
6   J.-P. Sartre, *Between Existentialism and Marxism*, trans. John Mathews, New York, 1979.
7   J.-P. Sartre, *Search for a Method*, trans. Hazel Barnes, New York, 1968, p.xxxiv.
8   J.-P. Sartre, *The Family Idiot: Gustave Flaubert 1821–1857*, trans. C. Cosman, vol.I: 1981, vol.II: 1987, vol. III: 1989, Chicago, vol.I, p.ix.
9   Sartre, *The Family Idiot*, vol.I, p.ix.
10 Sartre, *Search for a Method*, p.135.
11 J.-P. Sartre, *Situations IV* , Paris, 1972, p.30.
12 Sartre, *Between Existentialism and Marxism*, p.158.
13 Sartre, *Between Existentialism and Marxism*, p.160.
14 Sartre, *Between Existentialism and Marxism*, p.155.
15 Sartre, *Between Existentialism and Marxism*, p.157.
16 Sartre, *Between Existentialism and Marxism*, p.29.
17 Sartre, *Between Existentialism and Marxism*, p.156.
18 Sartre, *Between Existentialism and Marxism*, p.158.
19 Sartre, *Between Existentialism and Marxism*, p.160.
20 Sartre, *Between Existentialism and Marxism*, p.163.
21 Sartre, *Sartre in the Seventies*, p.123.
22 Sartre, *Search for a Method*, p.153.
23 Sartre, *Critique of Dialectical Reason*. p.74.
24 Sartre, *Search for a Method*, p.156.
25 Sartre, *Search for a Method*, p.111.
26 T. A. Flynn, 'Sartre and the Poetics of History' in C. Howells, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Sartre*, Cambridge, 1992, p.234.
27 Sartre, *The Family Idiot*, vol. III, p.426.
28 Sartre, *Sartre in the Seventies*, p.112
29 Sartre, *Search for a Method*, p.90.
30 Sartre, *Critique of Dialectical Reason*, p.818.
31 F. Jeanson, *Sartre dans sa vie*, Paris, 1974, p.298.
32 Sartre, *The Family Idiot*, vol. III, p.657.
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34 J.-P. Sartre, *Words*, trans. I. Clephane, Harmondsworth, UK, 1967, p.158.
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