

exis - blog post by Jay Becker, Kiel, Germany

English translation by Norm Watt, Northfield, MN

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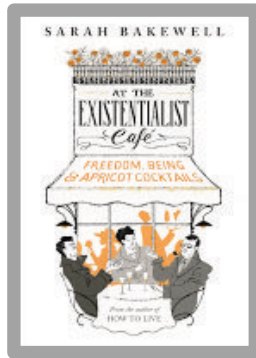
Back then almost everyone was an Exi; to qualify, you needed a black turtleneck pullover and a gray tweed jacket. Gray tweed jackets (if at all possible with a Harris Tweed label) were all the rage in the '50s. In Germany, these were preferably worn with a white shirt; it would never have occurred to the English to do this. In any case, your average German dressed this way didn't look as elegant as in this picture of Gabriele Ferzetti in Antonioni's film *L'Avventura*.



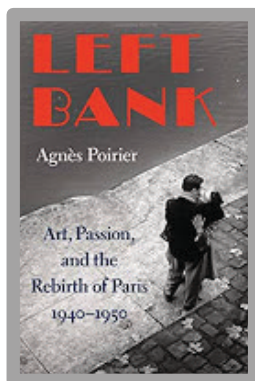
For us Exis, the tweed jacket couldn't be new; it had to have the look of an Irish Wolfhound whose hair had just been combed through. It was the look of Left Bank jazz cellars (such as the one photographed here by Hubertus Hierl) or the former jazz club and bar in Hamburg known as the Riverkasematten. Along with the dark-colored turtleneck and tweed jacket you also had to have a book by Camus or Sartre under your arm, of course. That was eye-catching, since Rowohlt, the publishing house, had chosen red dust covers for both these authors' books. In addition, you had to be nuts about Juliette Gréco (Sartre even wrote a *chanson* for her), as I definitely was. I've already written about this elsewhere in these blogs. And, *non, je ne regrette rien* ("I have no regrets"; song by Édith Piaf).



Gréco started a fashion for long, straight, existentialist hair—the 'drowning victim' look, as one journalist wrote—and for looking chic in thick sweaters and men's jackets with the sleeves rolled up. She said she first grew her hair long to keep warm in the war years; Beauvoir said the same thing about her own habit of wearing a turban. Existentialists wore cast-off shirts and raincoats; some of them sported what sounds like a proto-punk style. One youth went around with 'a completely shredded and tattered shirt on his back,' according to a journalist's report. They eventually adopted the most iconic existentialist garment of all: the black woolen turtleneck.



The above text is from Sarah Bakewell's excellent book *At the Existentialist Café: Freedom, Being, and Apricot Cocktails*. I've already written about this author, in my blog *Montaigne en allemand* ("Montaigne in German"); her brilliant introduction to existentialism has also been translated into German. *Sarah Bakewell recounts the story of existentialism with wit and intelligence, offering a fresh take on a discipline often deemed daft and pretentious*, as Andrew Hussey wrote in *The Guardian*.



And he adds to that: *It helps that she writes well, with a lightness of touch and a very Anglo-Saxon sense of humour*. This is something that Bakewell has mastered completely: how to explain difficult things simply. And it's also worth noting that Juliette Gréco's hair that kept her warm in the war years reached all the way down her back. This, at any rate, is what she says in her autobiography. Another book that has just appeared in German is Agnès Poirier's *Left Bank: Art, Passion, and the Rebirth of Paris, 1940-1950*. It's a bit superficial and not on Bakewell's level, but it is still a good portrayal of the customs and morals of the period.



The long hair of Juliette Gréco and Rita Renoir (the *tragédienne du strip-tease* [*tragédienne* = stage actress]), the black turtlenecks, the slightly slovenly appearance: those were external things. It was easy to imitate their style, since there were plenty of weekly news snapshots and photos of the Paris scene. We pictured a society outside of society that existed in bars and nightclubs, in a Paris that had originated in our notion of the darkness of American film noir and French poetic realism (as in *Le jour se lève* and *Le quai des brumes*) [two French films from the late 1930s]. This actually wasn't so far off the mark, since in the meantime there was a book with the title *Existentialism, Film Noir, and Hard-Boiled Fiction*.



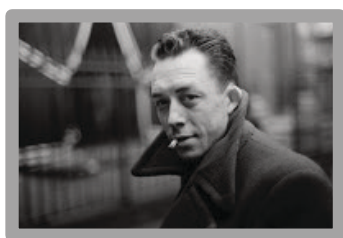
What we didn't know was that the great existentialists, even when they frequented bars and nightclubs, didn't look the way we did in our Exi outfits; they wore clothing that was quite ordinary and middle-class. And it wasn't long until we put these outfits away and became mods, as the English called their youth culture. When I heard Juliette Gréco in Berlin in 1962, I was wearing my good blue Charlie Hespén English suit.

The photos that Henri Cartier-Bresson took of Camus and Sartre quickly attained an iconic character. At that time philosophers in France were

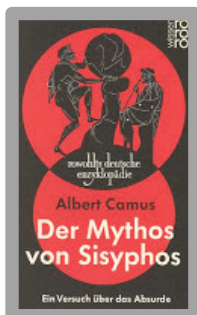


stage-managed like movie stars. Or like the two new kings of the fashion scene, Christian Dior and Jacques Fath. And French films, too, were often nothing more than existential philosophy on celluloid. In *À bout de souffle* (English title: *Breathless*), Jean-Paul Belmondo says *Suffering is completely idiotic. My choice is nothingness. That's not much*

better, of course, but suffering is a compromise. I want all or nothing. From this moment on, I know this definitively. This attitude is very close to existentialism.



Camus was one of the heroes of my youth; I wanted to be as cool as he was in Cartier-Bresson's photo. Camus always had good photographers. Another reason I liked him was that he was always well-dressed and had style; one of his school friends remembered that even as a teenager he wore gray flannel suits to class.



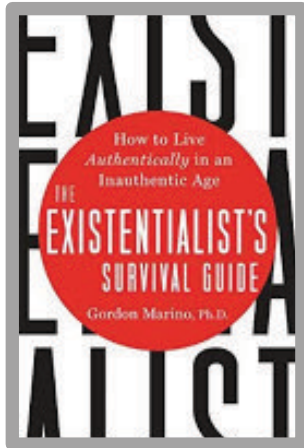
When he got married at age twenty-one, his rich mother-in-law paid for his elegant suits. Even though he acted the part of the bohemian, Camus didn't look as shabby in his photos as Heidegger, who always looked like a little gnome on his walks through the woods. In his well-documented, 920-page long biography, Olivier Todd described Camus as an elegant dandy and ladies' man—the philosopher of the absurd in the role of Don Juan. I had no idea about that at the time. When I read Camus

back then, I understand more about Camus than I did about women.



Although it was easy to imitate the Left-Bank French scene in its external appearance, and although it was easy to wear a black turtleneck with a raggedy tweed jacket, all these outer trappings were not the true driving force behind us little Exis at the time. To have been in Paris helped a great deal on our path to existentialism. To read the poems of Jacques Prévert (photographed by Robert Doisneau

above) in the original was one thing (I knew all his *chansons*, that Juliette sang by heart). To read Camus was the other. He created sentences that you could ponder. How miserable the philosophy classes in school were in comparison to his works! I read Camus, although there was a lot that I didn't understand. Or that I understood incorrectly. But when you're eighteen, there's a lot that you *do* understand, even if you don't understand it. You can't really live if life has no meaning.

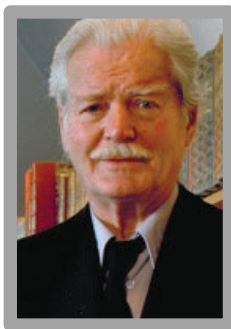


All that I've written here up to now has already appeared in one form or another in my blog, but when I conjure up the Paris of the post-war period once again and listen to a few CDs from the collection *Jazz in Paris* by Gitanes, it's because of the book pictured above. [Yogi](#) sent it to me from America after the author had given it to him. With a dedication, and now it's mine. I started in on it immediately, because it's a pleasure to read. The book was published by Harper Collins last year and has received justifiably good critical comments.

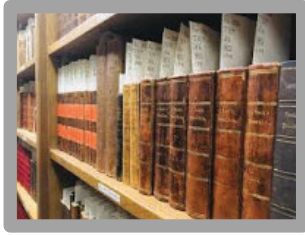


Other books by the author, Gordon Marino, are *Kierkegaard in the Present Age* and *The Quotable Kierkegaard*, and he is co-author of *The Cambridge Companion to Kierkegaard*. He is a Kierkegaard expert, and you wouldn't be able to tell by looking at him that he is also good at something else that is quite different. At one time he was a boxer and he is still a boxing trainer today. Philosophers aren't necessarily associated with that sport, although we of course should mention that Thomas Hobbes still played tennis in his old age.

When Sartre was still teaching in secondary school, he taught his pupils boxing, which he had learned himself as a university student. Whether Heidegger really said *I was left halfback with FC Messkirch*, I don't really know. But we do know that in his youth Albert Camus was goalkeeper with *Racing Universitaire d'Alger* (a multi-sports club founded in Algiers in 1927). Speaking of that time, he said *ultimately, all that I know most confidently about morality and human responsibility I owe to football*.



Gordon Marino is also director of the Kierkegaard Library at St. Olaf College in Northfield, Minnesota, and the fact that this small college possesses what is possibly the best Kierkegaard library in the world is owing to the professor pictured above. His name is Howard Hong, and although he himself does not have a Wikipedia article, the library that he established certainly does. This Internet lexicon apparently does not know what it is doing. For a description of his life, then, here is his obituary from the *Minneapolis Star Tribune*.



Having established the library that today bears his and Kierkegaard's name would in itself be reason enough for there to be a Wikipedia article about him. But there is much more in addition to this. Together with his wife Edna, Hong translated all of Kierkegaard's works into English; the seven volumes of his journals and papers were published by Indiana University Press, and the twenty-six volumes of Kierkegaard's major works by Princeton University Press. For the first volume, Edna and Howard Hong received the National Book Award. Many honors were to follow for Howard Hong, including the Order of the Dannebrog and an honorary doctorate in theology from the University of Copenhagen.



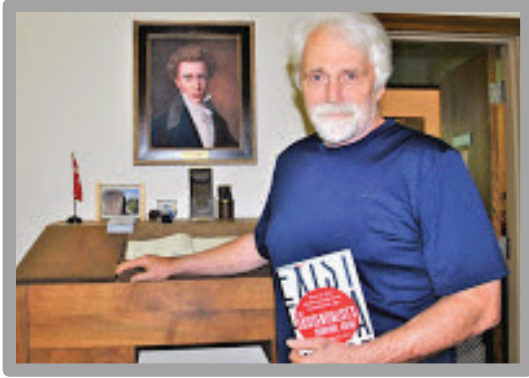
I discovered Kierkegaard on my own, as you can see from my reading list for the year 1962. Kierkegaard and Camus never appeared in my university philosophy courses. In the German universities of the late '60s, only second-class thinkers such as Marx and Hegel were represented. If I had not heard lectures by Gabriel Marcel (French philosopher and Christian existentialist), there would have been absolutely no highlights in the course of my university studies.

When I suggested Søren Kierkegaard ten years later as an examination topic for the doctorate, the lecturer in philosophy (whom I will not name here) rejected the topic outright. He was no philosopher, she said. At that point I knew that there was no point in my even bringing up the name



Arthur Schopenhauer. She suggested Hegel to me, and all I could think was: yuck! If you read the post on Hegel in my blog, you will see why. And I still hadn't even mentioned Jürgen Kuczynski's wonderful quote about *Hegel's horribly convoluted explanations*. We finally agreed on the topic of the social contract in Hobbes, Locke, Rousseau, and Kant. It's a nice topic, agreed, but

it's simply not Kierkegaard. One doesn't even need to study philosophy to read Kierkegaard, because he's among the philosophers like Schopenhauer (whose works he hadn't really examined until shortly before his death) whom one can read without outside help. Every reader will understand him differently, but he is a pleasure to read. Because he is actually a poet.



And since I'm on the topic of philosophers that one can read without having studied philosophy, let me come back to Gordon Marino's book again. Any one who can read can read *The Existentialist's Survival Guide*, with its excellent subtitle *How to Live Authentically in an Inauthentic Age*. *Sapere aude!* ("Dare to know.") The book isn't a self-help manual, no more than Claude Lelouch's film *Hommes, femmes: Mode d'emploi* is

an instruction booklet for living with a woman. Marino's *Existentialist's Survival Guide* is an introduction to the history of existentialism, which for English critics is frequently nothing more than a fashion, a spiritual expression of the pain of existence. Andrew Hussey formulated this in *The Guardian* with a nice touch of irony: *French philosophy, for all its flag-waving sexiness, is also mostly pretentious and daft. No philosophy has exemplified this more than existentialism, the movement that dominated cultural life in Paris after the second world war.*

The Internet is full of short films that offer brief introductions to philosophical topics. I liked the BBC film on Sartre narrated by Stephen Fry very much. One viewer wrote about an introduction to Kierkegaard on YouTube, *I so wish I had read some of Kierkegaard's works when I was a teenager, because if I had, a lot of my life would have been a whole lot clearer to me.* This is something that readers of Marino's book could also say. The author, who is always present as an imperfect human being, takes readers by the hand, as it were, and becomes their guide through a wilderness of thoughts. Edward F. Mooney writes the following in the *Los Angeles Review of Books*: *By steering through issues that bear on us personally, and revealing their disruption and augmentation of his life, Marino avoids purely abstract, academic exposition. Classes in existentialism and existential psychology are popular because, apart from vocational promises, they offer a personal relevance all too absent in lectures devoted solely to impersonal facts and techniques. While Marino's grasp of the literature is impeccable, his verve and wit as a writer stand out, and his self-revelations are not self-promotions.*

It's nice when philosophers say such things about their colleagues, rather than writing, for example: *Hegel, a trite, insipid, disgustingly repulsive, ignorant charlatan who scribbled away with incomparable gall, absurdity, and nonsense, which is trumpeted by his venal adherents as immortal wisdom and accepted as such by ignoramuses . . . has resulted in the intellectual ruin of an entire scholarly generation.* I would like to have said this to my philosophy lecturer back then, but I did want to pass my oral exams, after all. The above-quoted passage, incidentally, is by Arthur Schopenhauer.