

# *Cats and the Existential Struggle of French Philosophy*

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*The New French Philosophy*, by Ian James, Wiley.

*The Technique of Thought: Nancy, Laruelle, Malabou, and Stiegler after Naturalism*, by Ian James, The University of Minnesota Press.

*Facing Gaia: Eight Lectures on the New Climatic Regime*, by Bruno Latour, trans. Catherine Porter, Wiley.

ONE DAY in the spring of 1961, Claude Lévi-Strauss and Roman Jakobson met in Paris to extinguish poetry. Or at least to eliminate a certain overly mythified conception of *poiēsis*. If one were going to do that anywhere, it really ought to be Paris. This was, after all, the city of Victor Hugo, of Rimbaud and Verlaine, and, specifically, the privileged location of the *flâneur*. It was here that Charles Baudelaire had encountered the heartbreaking woman passerby celebrated in “À une passante,” borne witness to a decomposing corpse (which reminded him of his lover), and watched a fugitive swan gliding through the gutters. It presided over the *Tableaux parisiens*, the central section of his outlawed but now classic collection, *Les fleurs du mal*. In particular, Lévi-Strauss and Jakobson wanted to take down (as one might do in wrestling, for example) Baudelaire’s cats, the ones contained in his sonnet, “Les chats.”

But what was poetry anyway? Insofar as anyone had any real clue, we were fairly certain that poetry belonged somewhere toward the creative end of the linguistic spectrum. Perhaps God was dead by the mid-twentieth century (perhaps by the mid-nineteenth century), but so long as poetry existed then at least the soul, *pneuma*, would persist: it would have an outlet, it would have a form, a song, breath. Poetry was there to give expression to a stubborn, vestigial

subjectivity. Call it eccentricity or idiosyncrasy or even a verbal DNA, but it went almost without saying that poetry was the realm par excellence of what was left of the individual in the age of mass production. It was a form of egomania, bearing a distinctive signature. It was, until that day in 1961, the last refuge of what would become known (rather colorlessly) in the human sciences as the “subject.”

Lévi-Strauss and Jakobson were bound to take aim at this all-too-vulnerable, puffed-up target. According to Emmanuelle Loyer in her magisterial biography of Lévi-Strauss, he used the word *structure* for the first time in a letter dating from 1943. In the middle of the Second World War, he and Jakobson were in exile together in New York. Lévi-Strauss absorbed the idea of structures from Jakobson and applied the linguistic model to his researches in anthropology. Both men were trying to nudge the human sciences closer to the example of the physical sciences. The largely implicit popular conception of the poem as the natural habitat of the tormented soul was altogether too sublime and theological for their taste. Neither cats nor poets by their nature seemed susceptible to incorporation in a soulless system. But all that was about to change.

Here is “Les chats” by Charles Baudelaire:

Les amoureux fervents et les savants austères  
 Aiment également, dans leur mûre saison,  
 Les chats puissants et doux, orgueil de la maison,  
 Qui comme eux sont frileux et comme eux sédentaires.

Amis de la science et de la volupté  
 Ils cherchent le silence et l'horreur des ténèbres;  
 L'Érèbe les eût pris pour ses coursiers funèbres,  
 S'ils pouvaient au servage incliner leur fierté.

Ils prennent en songeant les nobles attitudes  
 Des grands sphinx allongés au fond des solitudes,  
 Qui semblent s'endormir dans un rêve sans fin;

Leurs reins féconds sont pleins d'étincelles magiques,  
 Et des parcelles d'or, ainsi qu'un sable fin,  
 Etoilent vaguement leurs prunelles mystiques.

(Both ardent lovers and austere scholars  
 Love in their mature years  
 The strong and gentle cats, pride of the house,  
 Who like them are sedentary and sensitive to cold.

Friends of learning and sensual pleasure,  
 They seek the silence and the horror of darkness;  
 Erebus would have used them as his gloomy steeds:  
 If their pride could let them stoop to bondage.

When they dream, they assume the noble attitudes  
 Of the mighty sphinxes stretched out in solitude,  
 Who seem to fall into a sleep of endless dreams;

Their fertile loins are full of magic sparks,  
 And particles of gold, like fine grains of sand,  
 Spangle dimly their mystic eyes.

—trans. William Aggeler)

Lévi-Strauss kicked off their assault on a myth with an initial morphology of the sonnet. Jakobson, then at Harvard, responded with further analysis. Their meeting in Paris sealed the fate of the poet. The structuralist reverse engineering of “Les chats” would appear in 1962, in Jakobson’s collection published in the United States, *Poetry of Grammar and Grammar of Poetry*, and simultaneously in France in *L’Homme*. It was virtually a postmortem to poetry, an epitaph.

The poem, in this perspective, had nothing to do with experience, feelings, odd yearnings, love, angst, or anomie. It was not an exercise in “absurdity” (as Camus, who had died in 1960, might have suggested), nor was it romantic emotion recollected in tranquility. It had nothing of the “mystique” that Baudelaire attributes to cats in his last line (in fact the last word, in adjectival form). It was nothing but one possible permutation of the rigorous application of a set of rules, or of several different sets of “rules,” grammatical, lexical, metrical, and phonetic. There is nothing in the least subversive or soulful here. Baudelaire may have dyed his hair green, dedicated himself to dandyism, cultivated a taste for death and putrefaction and hashish and opium, he could even have taken a lobster for a walk if he felt like it

(as was maintained of Gérard de Nerval), but the fact is that what he had written remained entirely obedient to the laws of French versification, as laid down in the classic manual by Maurice Grammont, *Petit traité de versification française*. In the hands of Lévi-Strauss and Jakobson, he became a sort of alexandrine-producing robot.

But what is the poem *about*? How do cats get into it exactly? What does Baudelaire really think about cats? The radical gesture accomplished by Lévi-Strauss and Jakobson was not to ask the “about” question, or at the very least to postpone it, or to make it seem insignificant in any case. Mere semantics, the meaning(s) of cats, would come up for consideration (if at all) right at the far end of their ruminations on phonetics and syntax and the way they interlock with the rhyme scheme, demonstrating that you can have well-structured, law-abiding sentences that also conform with the strict requirements of the French sonnet. If you thought the only rule was that you had to have fourteen lines, think again. It’s rules through and through, rules on top of more rules, as in some complicated, multilayered motorway intersection.

Fourteen lines, twelve syllables each, twin hemistichs hinged on a caesura, attracting an essay that is, depending on the edition, around twenty pages long (including footnotes). The impression given is that Lévi-Strauss and Jakobson were intent on overwhelming and crushing the fragile *fleur* (whether evil or not) by the sheer weight and mass of their scholarly apparatus. The cats—and poets likewise—were finally being herded, corralled, contained. The analysts speak of resolving, in an androgynous way, the opposition between masculine and feminine rhymes, or the antinomy of “the metaphorical and metonymical procedures.” But more than half a century later, I think we can understand what Jakobson and Lévi-Strauss were doing: they were writing an algorithm, a code capable of generating the poem that is “Les chats.” In other words, they were turning the poem into sheer information (“Following the classical pattern, the so-called feminine rhymes always end in a mute syllable and the masculine rhymes in a fully sounded syllable”), digitizing the soul of the sonnet. They were, by the same token, erasing the poet from the poem. The poet has

become mere foam floating on top of poetic structures. Or (to put it in more electronic terms) a node in the network. Foucault was paying homage to this effect when he wrote at the end of *The Order of Things* (published in 1966), “man would be erased, like a face drawn in sand at the edge of the sea.” When Jakobson and Lévi-Strauss pronounce the poem to be “an absolute object” or a “system,” they imply that it really has no need of an author. The primal text has finally floated free of its putative point of origin.

Something similar might, therefore, have been written (similarly shorn of its authors and their hypothetical motivations) about any text. So why pick on Charles Baudelaire in particular? His post-obscenity-trial canonical status might have constituted enough of a provocation. But one further reason must have been that Jean-Paul Sartre had already dedicated a book-length essay to Baudelaire, one of his “existential psychoanalyses” (Jean Genet would be given the same treatment, rather more admiring, and Flaubert a later, more Marxian version). So by reformulating Baudelaire, eliciting a resolutely linguistic logic from the sonnet, the two structuralists were at the same time stamping down on existentialism. Lévi-Strauss’s aversion to the Sartrean swerve is set out, passionately, in *Tristes tropiques*, and may be summarized in the sentence, “The self is not only loathsome [*hâïssable*]: there is no space for it between us and nothing.”

Sartre’s *Baudelaire* was published in 1947. The Lévi-Strauss/Jakobson alliance was formed in part to overturn Sartre (still, at this time, the dominant force in French philosophy). But for anyone reading Sartre’s essay on Baudelaire now it must seem—anachronistically enough (unless we allow that Sartre was alert to those preliminary rumblings from 1943)—like a farsighted critique of structuralism. Sartre, in his prophetic way, seems already to have registered the Jakobsonian/Lévi-Straussian linguistic/anthropological perspective. Partly, no doubt, because it was in fact nothing new. And one precursor could be found in the poetry of Baudelaire. To Sartre’s way of thinking, Baudelaire was already too much of a structuralist, overly preoccupied by the sheer mass of information that was Paris. Paradoxically, in Sartre’s take, Baudelaire was not enough of a poet. That is to say, he

had the technical equipment to be a poet, he knew (as Lévi-Strauss and Jakobson would stress) all the rules, but he was deficient in attitude. Jean Genet, on this reckoning a rule breaker par excellence, was far more of a poet by virtue of not being one (hence “Saint Genet” in Sartre’s account). As was Rimbaud, who is given respect for his quintessentially existentialist slogan, “I is another.”

So what was Baudelaire’s problem? In Sartre’s reading, he suffered from “bad faith.” In *Being and Nothingness*, a waiter is found guilty of bad faith as a result of being too much of a waiter, overdoing the attire and the gestures, “playing at being a waiter.” He is, in effect, objectifying himself, denying his human potential *not* to be a waiter, to be something other. He acts like an automaton, as if he were *en-soi* (the unambiguous “in-itself”) rather than *pour-soi* (the indecipherable “for-itself”). Something similar applies to Baudelaire, argues Sartre. He has a habit of seeing himself as a victim, pinned beneath the weight of Paris or his parentage or his lingering sense of guilt (Sartre reckons that he secretly wanted to be found guilty at his 1857 trial for obscenity). Narcissist, masochist, fetishist, voyeur, his default position is to think of human beings as things (consider “La chevelure,” for example, where an individual—man or woman?—is reduced to a head of hair, which is then metaphorically linked to strictly nonhuman phenomena: sheep, tar, oases). And when he thinks of himself, it is in terms of “the passiveness and unconsciousness of a utensil” (just not a very useful one), another object, a bell, a broken bell moreover, split from too much clanging. In the final stanza of that sonnet (“La cloche fêlée”), Baudelaire compares himself (anticipating the Lévi-Strauss death knell of the self) to a soldier, slowly dying, paralyzed and asphyxiating, beside a lake of blood, buried beneath piles of other dead soldiers.

Sartre’s brilliant insight is to recognize the preeminence in Baudelaire of the theme of containment. The whole of *Les fleurs du mal* is like a Houdini-style experiment that goes wrong. This is the poetry of phials, flasks, jugs, retorts, suitcases, coffins. Everyone is locked up, chained up in boxes, and nobody gets out. Every box is contained within another box. If you get out of one, you find yourself

inside another. The dominant preposition of the collection is *dans* (in). It occurs twice, for example, in “Les chats.”

In an exemplary move, while there is a riot going on outside, the poet shuts himself away inside his imaginary palace and closes the doors and the shutters (“Paysage”). If he isn’t already contained (by Paris, by society, by history), Baudelaire reinforces his own sense of containment. Like the waiter who is nothing but a waiter, the poet has reified himself, and is therefore no longer a poet, who should be a model of self-assertiveness, or “freedom.” If he is not dominated and overwhelmed by the giantess of “La géante,” he is dreaming of living beneath a vast architecture (“La vie antérieure”). No wonder he is so rule bound. He can never escape form (“this large, frigid, silent, motionless form. . . like a block of ice,” says Sartre), the caesura that balances the two perfect hemistichs of the alexandrine. To Sartre’s way of thinking, Baudelaire is always on the verge of expiring, exhausted, beside the lake of blood: a symbolic suicide. He is depleted, reduced in his own mind to nothing but the sheer mass of data that Lévi-Strauss and Jakobson zero in on, subordinated to the overwhelming *en-soi* (“like a peaceful hamlet at the foot of a mountain,” as Baudelaire says in “La géante”).

Sartre’s neat—perhaps too neat—way of summing it up is to say that Baudelaire (and here there is no distinction between the man and his works) has “being” but lacks “existence.” Or rather it is not that he is entirely without existence (how could it be otherwise?), but only that he doesn’t acknowledge it fully. As in his “Rêve parisien,” which banishes “le végétal irrégulier” from an architecture composed of crystal, ice, and metal, he seeks to contain or freeze existence inside a form. But what does existence have that mere being is missing out on? The amorphous, animating force that Baudelaire (in Sartre’s estimation) is lacking is something close to Aristotle’s concept of *energeia*. Aristotle associates *energeia* with all living entities, notably God, not just humans: *enerGaia*, as Bruno Latour might call it. But in Greek the word has an associated verb, *energeō*, which operates in different ways, but could be translated as “I am energy.” Energy, in the sense in which I am using it, is more verb than noun; it is never just

formless potentiality, but manifests itself through doing, enactment, performance, actualization. Information, in contrast, which I take as a variant on Sartre's "being," and Lévi-Strauss/Jakobson's "rules," contains form, but is also contained by form and cannot exist without some material and technical manifestation. Energy is not reducible to information:  $E \neq i$ . Sartre, in his amped-up way, salutes energy and suggests that Baudelaire, overly structuralist, somehow betrayed it or put it back in a bottle. But this sense of a raw, unlimited, undirected *energeō* at work, capable of generating or transforming information, "an energetics of thought" (as Ian James calls it), seems to me to weave in and out of modern French philosophy.

In the 1960s, Jacques Derrida (in this respect like Lévi-Strauss) was bound to revolt against the symbolic capital that had accrued to Sartre. But oddly enough, the Sartrean critique of Baudelaire's alexandrine or proto-structuralist mentality has a clear affinity with Derridean "logocentrism." If not for the fact that Derrida never ceased to denounce Sartre, to deny him the enigmatic status of philosopher (subordinating him to Husserlian phenomenology in *Speech and Phenomena*), it would be reasonable to say that logocentrism is a form of bad faith: a way of treating language as if it were a thing, encodable and decodable, reducible to pure information. And, by the same token, treating animals, cats or humans, as things or machines. Sartre says, "I am not what I am and am what I am not." The same principle of affirmative self-negation, applied to propositions, recurs in deconstruction, which is the art of finding difference in the same, but also perhaps the sameness in difference.

Deconstruction resists Baudelairean containment, the enclosure of language within the boundaries of meaning. The great engine of *différance*, in *Writing and Difference* (1966), works to undo simplistic interpretations of any statement. All the efforts of structuralism, exemplified by Lévi-Strauss and Foucault, to contain language within a system—just as Vladimir Propp did in *Morphology of the Folktale*—are doomed to failure, because language will always force its way out of whatever box you put it in. Language, irreducible to its apparent purpose of purveying information (such is the substance of mimesis or



Wittgenstein's "picture theory"), is inherently dysfunctional. Derrida has different ways at different times of talking about this effect of resistance—notably "aporia" (or "knottiness"), but also "madness." He takes on the "structure historique" (the quotation marks are Derrida's) of Foucault's *Madness and Civilization* and accuses it of making the same mistake it analyzes, of separating out reason, over here, from madness over there. Foucault reinterprets Descartes to say, "I think, therefore I cannot be mad," or, "I am reason." Derrida reinterprets Descartes, in effect, to say: "Whether I am mad or not, cogito, sum."

Madness is not peculiar to Descartes or to philosophers but an inherent feature of language itself, since its precarious architecture (or "archaeology" as Foucault has it) of meaning—"le projet objectiviste de la raison classique"—is always liable to meltdown. Rationality is itself unhinged, "already divided against itself from the dawn of its Greek origin." Meaning is not what it is and is what it is not. Madness, here, is adjacent to what I am calling energy, the deconstructive force that animates Sartre's "existence" (perhaps it is not so surprising if continental and especially French philosophy is often seen as tantamount to theoretical delirium, more like nonphilosophy).

But there is a more general, more overarching, resistance—verging on rage—built into what would become known as "post-structuralism." All these minor differences and disputes among philosophers can seem nugatory when set against the irresistible rise of information technology, formerly known as cybernetics. Just as Wittgenstein once attacked Turing (and took a poker to Popper, according to legend), so too Derrida, in all his writing, is aiming one way or another at reevaluating (and downgrading) binary logic, whether ancient (text and pretext) or modern (bits and bytes, "electronic card-indexes and reading machines"). Lévi-Strauss and Jakobson, more informationally minded, are particularly drawn to the "binary principle" that underpins classical French versification (notably, the alternation between masculine and feminine rhymes) and the cat sonnet. When Derrida accuses Lévi-Strauss of replicating Rousseau among the Nambikwara, when he insists on the doubleness of the *pharmakon* (both medicine

and poison), when he introduces the notion of an *archi-écriture* that transcends the oral and the written, Derrida is implicitly resisting the digital orthodoxy of technology. In post-structuralism, as in existentialism, the human (and, ultimately, the nonhuman too) stands in opposition to the electronic gateways of yes-no and on-off. Raw, unfocused energy will always overflow (and interrupt the flow of) information. The energy that Sartre located in the existential self (even if relatively depleted in Baudelaire) is relocated in the more collectivist but highly disorderly, conflicted operations of the linguistic unconscious, shorn of reason and intentionality.

At the heart of Sartre's complaint about the waiter and the poet and his argument that we are not what we are is a strong sense that all humans are perpetually transitioning, and it is only the rules of language and taxonomy (and thereby the entire culture) that hold us back—as if we had been involuntarily plugged into an artificial matrix. Appropriately enough, the authors of the *Matrix* series, known at the time as the Wachowski brothers, are now sisters (Lana and Lily). At the risk of pop-sententiousness, it is tempting to say: we are all post-*Matrix* existentialists now (even if, as Sartre would say, “on the mode of not being”). More precisely: the definition of existentialism is its refusal of definition. Sartre allowed that there was an ill-defined “situation” (or “situations” plural) that we would have to transcend. In *The Second Sex*, Simone de Beauvoir developed the argument further and saw that cultural stereotypes and even biology were more pliable than Sartre imagined. There was no reason for the old patriarchal hierarchy to persist, nor for rigid gender relationships, nor even for fixed genders. Everything was potentially fluid. Judith Butler's notion, in *Gender Trouble*, that gender is a performance, that categories of gender are a structure that is put up and can be taken down, is an extrapolation of deconstructive existentialism.

But then is energy defined by a refusal to succumb to the inert forms of information (just as those Baudelairean cats decline to “stoop to bondage”)? Is philosophy guilty of ignoring the matrix? According to the late Bernard Stiegler it is—and always has been. Stiegler has several claims to our attention. He was a student of Derrida's, was

convicted of armed robbery and duly imprisoned, and when he came out he broke with his old master (just as Derrida had with Foucault). As Ian James makes clear in *The New French Philosophy* (2012), Stiegler's trilogy, *Technics and Time*, provides a significant twist on the tradition. Stiegler's argument is that technology (*tekhnē* or "technics" in a very broad sense, inclusive of information technology) is what has been silenced or repressed by philosophy. He hypothesizes that the very origin of philosophy in the West was driven by some notion, barely expressed, of annihilating *tekhnē*, or at least of turning a blind eye toward it, in favor of the more glorious and godlike *epistēmē*. Every major philosopher, from Plato to Derrida, argues Stiegler, is animated by a "forgetting" or, more explicitly, a semiautomatic refusal to address the question of the machine, even though humanity is indissociable from *tekhnē*, or as he puts it, "the invention of the human is technics."

Stiegler's argument is a compelling one. We can't think of time, for example, without "artificial memory supports" (memoirs, photographs, gravestones, as well as clocks). In this sense language itself is a form of "prosthetics." But we can now see that Stiegler's suspicion of philosophy for repressing technics and averting its gaze from the rise of information technology runs up against philosophers' own explicit ambivalence toward technoscientific innovation. Derrida could reasonably reply that he was not ignoring technics and was, in fact, writing about nothing else. It is not so much that French philosophers have a particular aversion to telephones or computers or television (least of all the printing press and clay tablets). Jean Baudrillard, for one, rogue sociologist and guiding light of the *Matrix* films, had a roomful of televisions (according to legend) and was certainly a disciple of Marshall McLuhan. But Derrida's (and Sartre's) critique of structuralism implies a resistance, not to technology per se but to the "technization of thought" (in Husserl's phrase). Their work tries to undo (or at least draw attention to) the knots that get us tied up inside our own tyrannical terminology, which cannot help but be hierarchical. Stiegler himself, in a similar vein, speaks of the "disorientation" and "malaise" associated with the "computational model" and "algorithmic governmentality."

If the human is technical, it's also true that the technical is human and therefore, inescapably, anthropocentric. Sartre once gave a lecture (which he regretted) arguing that “existentialism is a humanism.” But there is also a strong case for saying it is, potentially, a transhumanism. In terms of epistemology, it is clear that information casually overrides or ignores the fragile distinction between truth and non-truth (the “Turing test” was designed to demonstrate the point). But in terms of ontology, energy/energeō massively overrides the distinction between human and nonhuman. Ian James's more recent book, *The Technique of Thought* (2019), explores the later work of Stiegler and other recent French thinkers such as Jean-Luc Nancy, François Laruelle, and Catherine Malabou (with side glances at Deleuze and Guattari, Blanchot, and Bataille—not to mention hardcore cosmologists like Lee Smolin), and tentatively detects a convergence between freewheeling continental philosophy and the Anglo-Saxon preoccupation with science.

This semiconsensual “speculative naturalism” is exemplified by Bruno Latour's *Facing Gaia: Eight Lectures on the New Climatic Regime* (2017), in which he takes up the Gaia theory of British scientist James Lovelock. Latour sees Lovelock as the Galileo of our day, overthrowing some of our simplistic ideas about the way the world is stuck together and showing how interwoven everything is. Maybe the classic retort of Galileo to the Pope, “And yet it moves”—referring to Earth going around the sun rather than the other way around—can provide a common denominator here. Certain things move, or are moved, irrespective of human wishes. We have a huge impact on the planet, whether intentional or not. We *anthropoi* of the anthropocene now have a quasi-geological force. Within our local biosphere, we are like a rock or an asteroid hitting it at immense speed.

All of which suggests we need a different way of thinking about ourselves and the everything that is not ourselves. While also toning down the “selves” part of that last sentence. Philosophy, from the pre-Socratics on, has always tried to think of the totality (“Everything is water,” for example). But it has also specialized in drawing up frontiers, in segregating and differentiating. Descartes,

in particular—exemplifying the tendency of Western philosophy—strove to split us apart. I am mind, not body. I am not you. I am not this kitchen table (for example). The thinking self (and the hypothetical “subject” loathed by Foucault and Lévi-Strauss) exists in supreme isolation—a state of alienation—from the rest of the world. There are probably good evolutionary reasons why we might think that way: the notion of self-preservation probably kept us alive longer, for one thing. Now it could equally well kill us. As Ian James puts it, “to ignore the demands of the real is to risk destruction and annihilation.”

“Technics” is only ever *our* technics. The point about energy is that we do not produce it. It produces us. It runs through us. We are energy (*energoumen*). But the world beyond us is energy too. The kind of libidinal energy (or “desire”) that pulsates through the work of Freud and Lacan, in search of multiplication or repression or sublimation, is only one rather narrow form. But energy, since it is governed by the law of conservation, is essentially (to use Milton’s neologism) unlibidinous.

Latour/Lovelock are bound to dispute the very concept of a “thing” (and therefore Sartre’s *en-soi*). Given our investment in fossil fuels we are more than ever conscious of the “hyperobject” (a concept I owe to Timothy Morton). Consider oil, for example. Is that an object, a thing? Sort of. But I am wearing oil products (my “vegan” boots, for example, are largely made out of it), I am driving oil, I am breathing oil (whether I like it or not). Oil is under my feet, on my feet, and in the air around me. I can’t exactly point to it or kick it like a football. It’s highly distributed, pervasive, more like a kind of gas (which of course is exactly what it is, in one of its many forms). By the same token, what about carbon or water or nature? Or Earth? It’s not like a house. I don’t just live in it or on it. I *am* it, it is me. *It* (or she or they) in the case of Gaia is a totality of living beings, us included. We are more than involved, we’re committed. We don’t have an out (not yet anyway).

It follows that language itself has to evolve. As Wittgenstein said, the limits of my language are the limits of my world. Then language, suggests Latour, needs to get more Gaian. Albert Camus never

finished reading Sartre's *Being and Nothingness* (he left a copy with marginalia suggesting he gave up around page 170). If he had gotten as far as page 641, he would have come across a passage about skiing, summarizing the whole of Sartre's philosophy, in which he argues that skiing is, in effect, the skier versus the mountain, that the skier (rather like Baudelaire's preference for the "peaceful hamlet") would like to be like the mountain, in the sense of being a timeless archetype, but never quite can be. In a rather Cartesian way, the skier is held to belong to the realm of consciousness (for-itself), while the mountain is rock solid, nothing but the in-itself. But then again Sartre suggests that we have something in common with snow, in that all our absurd self-images will melt away. Which might explain why Sartre finally seems to reject skiing in favor of surfing, since "the ideal of sliding is therefore a sliding that does not leave any trace: that is, sliding on water." The surfer relies on technics (in the shape of a board) but is drawing on the energy of the planet.

In *Nausea*, Sartre's narrator hero, Roquentin, has an existential crisis when confronted by a chestnut tree in the Jardin public. Perhaps Camus summed up the experience in a single sentence in his notebooks: "I am the tree." Sartre, like Baudelaire a native of Paris, always preferred the city to the country. Even New York was not urban enough for him and put him in mind of an encampment in the wilderness. When he looked out at the sea he was anxious about what lay beneath the surface and had nightmares about being pursued by giant lobsters. Camus—and this is the core of the quarrel between them—fully identified with light, smoke, ocean, and trees. He even has one of his characters (Meursault) trying to be like a stone.

Apprehensive though he was of the biosphere, even Sartre once gave a cat to his American lover, Sally Swing, as a surrogate philosopher, to remind her of him in his absence. Derrida, we know, kept a cat of his own. In his beguiling *The Animal That Therefore I Am*, he admits that he doesn't like to be seen naked in the bathroom by his cat. He is embarrassed. He feels shame, but also the shame of feeling ashamed. And, since clothing is a form of technics, "we have to think shame and technicity together." The more significant split in

Descartes is not between reason and madness but between humans and animals, which are construed as soulless, mindless machines, bereft of language skills, victims of “anthropo-theomorphic reappropriation” and, as a result, “industrial, mechanical, chemical, hormonal and genetic violence.” For Derrida, the realm of the nonhuman is the ultimate in alterity, but cats (and other animals) may give us a way back toward our lost animality.

Schrödinger’s cat—the imaginary, quantum cat who is placed in a box together with a stray, decaying uranium atom and a poison-gas delivery system—is invoked by some scientifically minded French philosophers in terms of being (until you open the box and the wave function collapses) indeterminately, simultaneously, both dead and alive. But Derrida also gives us a clue to the question that, so far as I know, has not really been asked about Schrödinger: why did he choose a cat for this thought experiment? Why not a dog or a hamster? Derrida insists that his cat is a real cat, not a thought experiment. “What we have here,” he writes, striking a rather Sartrean note, “is an existence that refuses to be conceptualized.” Mysterious in the way that a particle is. He wonders, with Montaigne, if he is not more of a thought experiment in the cat’s mind: “When I play with my cat, who knows if I am not a pastime to her more than she is to me.” The cat could easily be a quantum physicist, if she could be bothered.

If entropy is the dissipation of energy, tending toward the heat death of the universe, then “negentropy” is its natural counterpoint and the underlying principle of stars, entities, and cultural artifacts. Stiegler posits a “neganthropocene” to oppose the brutality and extinctions entailed by technoscientific anthropocentrism. Derrida and Latour would both argue that we shouldn’t be conducting experiments on cats. But we can’t escape thinking about them. Philosophy, particularly in France, is cosmic, mythological, neganthropocentric, and feline. Technics have given us the all-conquering cat video, and iconic cat YouTube stars (or brands). But the Baudelairean cats live on inside the box of poetry. Poets, as well as philosophers, are as well-placed as quantum physicists to draw attention to the “entanglement” of our particles.

In “Les chats” Baudelaire says that cats are beloved of “fervent lovers and austere scholars.” Sartre says that Baudelaire wanted to “lead the easy-going, sensual, perverse life of a cat.” Perhaps he was right. In other cat poems oddly ignored by Lévi-Strauss and Jakobson, the poet ponders the affinity between the cat and his own lover, and he concludes that when his gaze is drawn toward his beloved cat he is looking into himself: “To utter the longest sentences, / She has no need of words.”

Georges Perec offered two tributes to Baudelaire, one without words (the classic photograph of writer-with-cat), one with (but without the letter *e*, included in his novel, *La disparition*):

*Nos chats*

Amants brûlants d’amour, Savants aux poulx glaciaux  
 Nous aimons tout autant dans nos saisons du jour  
 Nos chats puissants mais doux, honorant nos tripots  
 Qui, sans nous, ont trop froid, nonobstant nos amours.

Ami du Gai Savoir, ami du doux plaisir  
 Un chat va sans un bruit dans un coin tout obscur  
 Oh Styx, tu l’aurais pris pour ton poulain futur  
 Si tu avais, Pluton, aux Selavons pu l’offrir!

Il a, tout vacillant, la station d’un hautain  
 Mais grand sphinx somnolant au fond du Sahara  
 Qui paraît s’assoupir dans un oubli sans fin:

Son dos frôlant produit un influx angora  
 Ainsi qu’un gros diamant pur, l’or surgit, scintillant  
 Dans son voir nictitant divin, puis triomphant.





Georges Perec with feline companion,  
in a photo-portrait by Anne de Brunhoff.  
Reproduced courtesy of the artist.