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CONTENTS

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Remembrance of Things Past in the Future Tense

By RAYA DUNAYEVSKAYA

The shock of Jean-Paul Sartre's autobiographical The Words* is its seeming ambivalence on the author's famed concept of commitment. The easy flow of words, the deceptive simplicity of the autobiographical form, the superb economy of words both in the telling of the tale and in the exposition of any number of unheralded theses — sudden competitors for the attention of the reader — do nothing to prepare one for the writer's practiced "lucid blindness."

The reader is at a distinct disadvantage also when he wishes to question some facts since the authenticity or inauthenticity of a life is not a matter for debate by an outsider, especially when the author is himself as merciless in his exposé of the shallowness, hypocrisy and bourgeois values of the middle-class life into which he was born as well as of himself as child prodigy whom he dubs "the little monster." Far from considering Jean-Paul "the little monster," the reader follows the chronicler's description with sympathy:

> "I was allowed to browse in the library and I took man's wisdom by storm. That was what made me. I later heard anti-Semites reproach Jews any number of times with not knowing the lessons and silence of nature; I would answer: In that case, I'm more Jewish than they. In vain would I seek within me the prickly memories and sweet unreason of a country childhood. I never tilled the soil or hunted for nests. I did not gather herbs or throw stones at birds. But books were my birds and nests, my household pets, my barn and my countryside. The library was the world caught in a mirror." (p.49)

The reader's feeling of inauthenticity did not, however, arise from the fact that a child's life was summed up in in a title like The Words and its two telling sub-titles: "Reading"; "Writing." There have been other lives to whom words, oral and written, have been more real than life itself. The uneasy feeling persisted, rather, because the author has created a strange admixture of reminiscence and recollection that is more ideological essay than autobiography. Great sections seem to be written as if they were illustrating various existentialist theses.

Take the subject of death. We are plunged into a thesis on death and freedom at the very start of the book. We were no sooner introduced to the grandparents in the period of the 1850s, and quickly jumped to meet the mother, Anne Marie, a cousin of the famous Albert Schweitzer, and the father, Jean Baptiste, a naval officer who dies when Jean-Paul is only two, when we read:

> "The sleepless nights and the worry exhausted Anne Marie; her milk dried; I was put out to nurse not far away and I too applied myself to dying, of entirities and perhaps resentment . . . The death of Jean Baptiste was the big event of my life: it sent my mother to her chains and gave me freedom." (pp.16, 18) And again: "My luck was to belong to a dead man." (p.23) And once more: "I owed my freedom to a timely death, my importance to a very expected decease. But what of it! All the Pythia are dead creatures; everyone knows that. All children are mirrors of death." (pp.29-30)

Over and over again the theme resounds: "I saw death. When I was five, it lay in wait for me. In the evening, it would prowl on the balcony, press its nose against the window. I saw it, but I dared not say anything . . . In the period, I had an appointment with it every night in bed . . . During the day, I recognized it beneath the most varied disguises. . . . When I was seven years old, I met real death, the Grim Reaper, everywhere, but it was never there. . . . I lived in a state of terror; it was a genuine neurosis." (pp.94, 5, 6)

I lost count of all the times the subject reappears; there are very few pages that do not mention it so that, in the end, it looks all too neat, like a clinical case:

> "I had taken myself for a prince; my madness lay in my being one. A character neurosis, says an analyst friend of mine. He's right: between the summer of 1914 and the autumn of 1916, my mandate became my character; my delirium left my head and flowed into my bones. . . . I was strained to the breaking point between those two extremes, being born and dying with each heartbeat." (p.230)

The remembrance of things past is written not alone in the present, but in the future tense. A master wielder of the pen, Sartre so intersperses the next pro-jection into the retelling of the past that one isn't always sure which is actual experience and which analysis. This literary form is especially disconcerting when an individual turns out to be a composite character who is made to sum up an epoch. Take the most important character outside of the author himself, his grandfather, Karl Schweitzer, under whose aegis the child Jean-Paul roamed among books and made the decision to embark on writing as a veritable mission. Curiously enough, the mother, who is the only one who truly loved Jean-Paul and whom Jean-Paul loved in turn, and thought of as an older sister, is but a shadow of a person. It is otherwise with the grandfather who pretends great love for the grandson evidently only as part of the "art of grand-fatherhood": "The fact is, he slightly overdid the sublime. He was a man of the nineteenth century who took himself for Victor Hugo, as did so many others, including Victor Hugo himself. This handsome man with the flowing beard who was always wait-

*The Words by Jean-Paul Sartre, translated from the French by Bernard Frechtman, (George Braziller, New York, 1963) $5.

ing for the next opportunity to show off . . ."

Along with the show of loving grandfather, evidently, came patriotism, religion, love of classic literature — all are presented in the manner of writing a religious analysis of bourgeois life and thought. Sartre says of his grandfather: "He so resembled God the Father that he was often taken for Him . . . In September 1914, he appeared in a movie-house in Arcachon: my mother and I were in the balcony when he asked for light: other gentlemen were playing angel around him and crying 'Victory! Victory!' God got up on the stage and read the communiqué from the Marne." (p.22). Was that the way the child — Jean-Paul was then nine years old — saw him? Later on Sartre adds this to his portrait of his grandfather: Between the first Russian revolution and the first world war, fifteen years after Mallarmés' death, when Daniel de Fontanin was discovering Gide's Fruits of the Earth, a man of the nineteenth century was foisting upon his grandson ideas that had been current under Louis Phillippe . . . I started off with a handicap of eighty years." (p.63)

This kind of non-being which made the child restlessly search for an absolute in language, should make the reader hate bourgeois life. He certainly doesn't admire it, but the distaste simply fails to be as sharp as, say, when the bourgeois Proust describes the Parisian salons and you feel the oppressive air of decay and fear they are all inhabited by anti-Dreyfusards. Something seems to be missing artistically. It is not that here a child, and in Proust an adult, was the subject who experienced. It is that the descriptions are too "objective", too distant, as if not the child, but the adult philosopher of existence, was substituting a constructed existence for a lived one.

This reviewer believes that this is the cause of the ambivalence of the book as a whole, and the last section in particular. When the book first appeared in France the ambivalence made the reviewers sit up with a start. Sartre's statement, "I have changed," seemed to them to refer, not to the change from the bourgeois child to "Marxist", but from writer to one who values literature very nearly for its own sake. "For the last ten years or so," wrote Sartre, "I've been a man who's been waking up, cured of a long, bitter-sweet madness, and who can't get over the fact, a man who can't think of his old ways without laughing and who doesn't know what to do with himself. I've again become the traveler without a ticket that I was at the age of seven . . ." (p.253). When the reviewers implied that he had changed his position on commitment, Sartre felt impelled to grant an interview to Le Monde in which he not only restated his old position, but questioned the value of any literary creation "in a society that is hungry." Later, in refusing the Nobel prize, he once again restated his choice of sides between "socialism" and "capitalism."

Due weight must, of course, be given to both statements. Nevertheless, it is inconceivable that so great a master of language could not have expressed with precision and from the start exactly what he felt and thought. It is true that this reviewer did not agree with the other reviewers as to the change in Sartre, but she did, and does still see the ambivalence. The Words will have to stand on its own feet without any props or explanatory statement after the fact, that is, after the book (which took ten years between conception and completion) was written. D. H. Lawrence expressed most profoundly the problem we face here when he was confronted, in his Studies in Classic American Literature, with the contradiction between teller and tale: "An artist is usually a damned liar, but his art, if it be art, will tell you the truth of his day."

Sartre was born in 1905. The Words tells the story of the first twelve years of his life, but the book does not limit itself to these years. Various other years are brought in, generally quite suddenly, but not contingently. Each year beyond 1917 that is referred to has its special reason for being. One especially is brought in several times. Its purpose is to serve as a turning point of darkest life, the transition from a bourgeois, meaningless existence to one where the writer as artist goes beyond a situation, pro-jects himself, is witness to being uprooted. The year is 1935. The act of uprooting occurred when Sartre was thirty years old. It is first mentioned quite early in the book when he described how he came to ideas as a child when books were his only universe: "I confused the disorder of my bookish experiences with the random course of real events. From that came the idealism which it took me thirty years to shake off." (p.51). It is mentioned again when Sartre explains that he never used to speak of his childhood so that, "When I was thirty, friends were surprised: 'One would think you didn't have parents. Or a childhood.'" (p.239)

The crucial reason, for making a veritable philosophical category of the year was that it is the year Sartre wrote Nausea:

> "At the age of thirty, I executed the masterstroke of writing in Nausea — quite sincerely, believe me — about the bitter unjustified existence of my fellowmen and of exonerating my own. I was Roquentin; I used him to show, without complacency, the texture of my life. At the same time, I was I, the elect, chronicler of Hell, a glass and steel photomicroscope peering at my protoplasmic juices. Later I gaily demonstrated that man is impossible. . . . Dogmatic though I was, I doubted everything except that I was the elect of doubt." (pp.251-2)

Now this is the period also, al-

THE SON

He-who-came-forth was
it turned out
a man —

Moves among us from room to room of our life
in boots, in jeans, in a cloak of flame
pulled out of his pocket along with
old candywrappers, where it had lain
transferred from pants to pants,
folded small as a curl of dust,
from the beginning —

unfurled now,

The fine flame
almost unseen in common light.

Denise Levertov

though Sartre does not mention this, when he returned from his stay in Berlin. Just as he and Simone de Beauvoir had gone for vacation in Italy — and gone "without scruple" — because Mussolini had cut railway prices 70 per cent to attract tourists to the Fascist Exhibition, so he proceeded to Hitler Germany to study at the French Institute. It wasn't that he swmpathized in any way whatever with fascism. Quite the contrary. He considered himself of the Left and was saddened during his stay in Germany when Dollfuss crushed the Austrian socialist revolt. As Mme. de Beauvoir puts it quite frankly in her memoirs: "We would not set our own shoulders to the wheel of history, but we wanted to believe that it was turning in the right direction; otherwise we would have had too many problems to rethink." (The Prime of Life, p.146)

So, instead, Sartre "went on with the story of Roquentin" and the study of Husserl's philosophy in whose phenomenological style Sartre was then writing. "The Transcendence of the Ego." Evidently they were either unconcerned or unaware of the fact that the philosopher whom they so admired was barred from the library of his university since he was a Jew and thus was not permitted access by his most famous pupil, Martin Heidegger who was then Rector of the University and an active Nazi. Now, Sartre was surely not an anti-Semite; he was apolitical, totally so. The shaking off of what his grandfather imposed on him when he was a child — bourgeois idealism, writing at destiny's calling, which Sartre refers to as his "imposture," books as a substitute for life as well as the catharsis of literary creation that he experienced when he was on his own, which he felt first when he reached the age of thirty and wrote Nausea, all this and more made him famous as writer. But it is not this which established him as very nearly the spokesman for a generation. That only came with the Resistance and directly after liberation when he became "committed." This is the "conversion" that is crucial. It is true that that period is not within the province of The Words, but not a single marker is set up for it while many are set up for the year 1935. The Words does not give us the slightest sense of inner crisis; it doesn't give us that man, and this isn't because Sartre has changed again. Sartre makes no effort of any kind to give us the quality of that inner crisis because there was no "conversion." Sartre remains — Jean-Paul. The "I" that changed, the quality the critics saw as a reversal on the question of political action, is but a continuation of apolitical poltics. The resistance was broad enough in its composition and intense enough in its action, in its enforced sense of urgency that no philosophical clash of the various politician tendencies emerged. The minute the war was over, however, and the varied tendencies clashed, that minute Sartre's inherent evasiveness reappeared.

This evasion was not merely one about taking sides between "others", the varied tendencies within Marxism. The evasion, the flight from contradiction was a flight into his own existentialist philosophy and its concept of individual freedom as against the Marx's concept of humanity's freedom. Note, please, I said Marx's not Marxist; I did so because Sartre is often double-tongued on the question. A quick look at a major philosphical essay in the period after Liberation will show what I mean. The essay, Materialism and Revolution,** addresses itself to the youth, and it is easy to recognize Sartre among the youth who "remain on the threshold of communism without daring either to enter or to go away." (p.388) The essay was written in 1946, and translated into many languages. In the United States it was first printed in 1947 in Dwight MacDonald's famous Left magazine, Politics, in a special issue wholly devoted to French existentialism. In 1955 it was published as part of the book, Literary and Philosophical Essays. By now it has become part of a four-volume anthology, Philosophy in the Twentieth Century.

Devoted to exorcizing the materialist "myth" from the philosophy of revolution, Materialism and Revolution appears to argue against Communists and Trotskyists, but is, in fact, a direct attack on Karl Marx. Thus Sartre writes: "Let us make no mistake; there is no simultaneous transcendence of materialism and idealism here . . ." (p.401) In a footnote he refers to the fact that Marx thought otherwise, but, instead of quoting him, Sartre quotes Communist interpretations of Marx. Had he quoted Marx, Sartre could not, of course, have made the point that, without existentialism, the human element gets swallowed up in "dialectical materialism." Marx went to great length in his Economic-Philosophic Manuscripts, 1844, to show why he does not consider Communism "the goal of human development, the form of human society;" why he insists, instead, on designating his philosophy as a "thoroughgoing Naturalism or Humanism" which distinguishes itself from both Idealism and Materialism: "it is, at the same time, the truth uniting them both." Sartre's criticism of Communists, on the other hand, went hand in hand with his reiteration that the Communist Party was "the only revolutionary party." (p.429) Again: "We shall call revolutionary the party or the person in the party whose acts intentionally prepare such a revolution . . . In the same way, we cannot call the American Negroes revolutionaries, though their interests may coincide with those of the party which is working for the revolution." (p.406) Having been criticized for not having quoted Marx, Sartre appended the following

**The version used here is the one that appears in Philosophy in the Twentieth Century, edited by William Barrett and Henry D. Aiken (Random House, N.Y., 1962), Vol III, Part Four, "Phenomenology and Existentialism." Pages cited are in this volume.

"ET TU, IN TIME"

Old one
w/ young
& recording
EROTICA
Love-loched
w/o keys
& 33 1/3 rpm
Rhythm
Of
LUV.

Engineering masterpiece
Perfect reproduction
Rivaling reality
EROTICA
& old man
w/ grandaughter
& erection.

The goal
Of the poet
Is to perfect
Humanitas, old man,
Et Tu,
In time.

Nicholas P. Smith

note to the 1955 edition of Materialism and Revolution:

> "As I have been unfairly reproached with not quoting Marx in this article, I should like to point out that my criticisms are not directed against him, but against Marxist scholasticism of 1949. Or, if you prefer, against Marx through Neo-Stalinist Marxism." (p.387)

The truth, however, is that Sartre couldn't have referred to "Marxist scholasticism of 1949" since the essay was written in 1946. ("Materialisme et revolution" Les Temps Modernes, Vol. 1 9, 10, June, July 1946.) Nor could the article have been directed "through Neo-Stalinist Marxism" which was first born with Stalin's death in 1953. Indeed, in the article itself Sartre quotes Stalin as an authority on Marxism. Sartre was then such a millenium away from thinking about "Neo-Stalinist Marxism" that his chief target was — Frederick Engels! Thus: "It is, once again, Marx's point of view in 1844, that is, until the unfortunate meeting with Engels." (p.423n)

What should be obvious is that the contradiction in Sartre is not between philosophy and action. The gulf is between two opposing philosophies: Sartrean existentialism and its corollary, the myth invented by it of the Communist Party being "the only revolutionary party;*** and Marx's Humanism which sees no need for bourgeois or Communist idealism manifested in a party of the elite, "a party to lead."

My point in showing the discrepancies between what Sartre wrote in 1946 and how he explained it in 1955 was not to expose the factual errors. This reviewer does not indulge in what is so dear to the heart and thought of Sartre, the question of "bad faith." The problem is not that simple. Were the ambivalence of The Words due to "bad faith", it would be easy to tackle. There is no "bad faith in The Words. Its deficiency, as that of Materialism and Revolution, is a great deal more organic. What is characteristic of the autobiography, as of the other writings, is part of the very organism of Jean-Paul Sartre, child, adult, philosopher, novelist, dramatist, essayist, chronicler, editor. It has nothing whatever to do with the age of the subject he writes about, or of the historic period he analyzes. Sartre does, for instance, invoke other years than the 1905-1917 of his first twelve years. When he wishes to, he makes the years "incidental" to the story live as poignantly as any of the child's experiences, whether told as the child felt them, or as the litterateur wills to see them through ideological or other lenses. The results are what they are and are irrevocable.

We can, of course, continue to hope that, in future volumes Sartre will deal differently with the years he mentioned but just passed over in the autobiography, whether these are part of the period when fascism engulfed Europe, or those of Resistance and Liberation, and we would then be made witness to the inner crisis which transformed Sartre, made him the spokesman of the post-war generation, and not only in France. Everything is possible in life. But what is of the essence in what D. H. Lawrence calls "art speech" is the sense of inevitability of one ending and not another. Like fate in the great Greek tragedies, this feeling of inevitability, all consequences go hang, is the unifying force of the disparate elements and contingent events. It is this which is missing from The Words. The undercurrent of political and personal frustration has no counterpoint. The result is that the work seems unfinished. Precisely because it was not the action, or lack of it, but the underlying philosophy that was the divisive element, Sartre the master dramatist couldn't "complete" the autobiographical story. He thus robbed The Words of its would-have-been greatness.

***Jean Duvignaud has attempted to analyze "the intellectual class" in his country from the time of Diderot and Voltaire to the Communist fellow travelers today, stating that the French intelligentsia "never seemed to be very particular about the choice of its representatives! . . . Such delegation of power to a man or a group regarded as the incarnation of Reason pretty clearly exemplifies the 'enlightened-ruler complex' that afflicts the intelligentsia of this country." But the complex is not national, and our state capitalist age has, on a world scale, "produced" intellectuals who seem more adept at re-writing history, than at writing it. (See Revisionism, edited by Leopold Labedz, Praeger, N.Y., p.314)

LISTENING TO CARUSO RECORDS

The old wax goes round, and out of it
The old voice meanders, itself waxen,
Uncanny still, after a hundred listenings.
In the background the shaky Neapolitan
Eight-piece orchestra wines "I Pagliacci"
Down to the last archaic chord; and I nurse
My usual doubts, I have my fantasies:

Suppose Edison's recording horn, in 1909,
Had ignored the obvious music in the room
And, poking its muzzle skyward, had drunk in
Selected natural sounds: a falcon's cry,
Wind over dolomite, vicissitudes of rain—
Who would have been the wiser? It was
The legend they devoured, not the voice.

I prefer to think Caruso stayed indoors,
Fingered his trophies, sang sometimes, but never
Worked for Victor. Another thought I had
Was that any sly promoter, in those fabled
Days, could have engineered things so that
One of his cousins got preserved on wax
When the real tenor went sour in his tracks.

Allan Block