

Intimations of Absurdity

by PETER HARRIS VENNEMA

The Words. By Jean-Paul Sartre. New York: George Braziller, 1964. 255 pp. \$5.

IT IS SAD to see a sixty year old man hurling wet firecrackers at tradition. J.-P. Sartre, past master of secular existentialism, has written an autobiography. The author describes, with characteristic candor, roughly the first ten years of his life. Sartre's father, bequeathing "a few drops of sperm" went out of life as his son came into it; Jean-Paul was later grateful for his death because a father, out of inclination and principle, is a "pain in the ass to his sons." The child became the ward of his doting grandfather, Charles Schweitzer, half Victor Hugo *manqué*, half Dr. Skinner. Sartre's mother became "one of the children" who slept in his room and told him her troubles. The child knew no discipline, felt no revolt, was happy, flattered, served, admired, and took a priggish pride in himself and later in his bookishness. His philosophical background was at best secular and materialistic: "In winter, [my grandfather] had to break the ice in the water jug to wash. . . . [He] believes in Progress; so do I: Progress, that long, steep path which leads to me. . . . In our circle, in my family, faith was merely a high-sounding name for sweet French freedom."

Like Proust's *A la Recherche du temps perdu*, *The Words* is a chronicle of an author finding his vocation as well as an autobiography. Sartre describes his early attitude toward books as awed respect for sacred, mystical relics. His mother reads to him for the first time: "From that statue-like face came a plaster voice. . . . My mother had gone off. . . . And besides, I didn't recognize her speech. . . . A moment

later I realized: it was the book that was speaking. Frightening sentences emerged from it: they were real centipedes, they swarmed with syllables and letters. . . ." Soon the boy learned to decipher the mysteries of his grandfather's library by himself and promptly read himself into a corner: "It was in books that I encountered the universe: assimilated, classified, labeled, pondered . . . and 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 throw off." Sartre relates that his idealism was one in which reward depended on merit, but that he was often demoralized by examples in life of people who were "born condemned." He watched his grandfather swear over royalty checks and learned that publishers do not give "according to their ability to pay, to workers according to their merit"; Sartre's humor bounces between the Scylla of the pedagogue with whom we don't quite dare to laugh and the Charybdis of an iconoclast who has nothing left to break save pieces.

JEAN-PAUL's only goal was to gain the admiration of his family: "I sometimes wonder, when I am in a bad mood, whether I have not consumed so many days and nights, covered so many pages with ink . . . solely in the mad hope of pleasing my grandfather." He played at being the child prodigy, coddled his own imagination and cultivated a morbid sensitivity: "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. . . . Once we met it on the Quai Voltaire. It was an old lady, tall and mad, dressed in black. She muttered as I passed: 'I'll put that child in my pocket.'" Sartre claims to have felt as a child that his relationship with the family was play-acting, that he was useless and his life "absurd"; this philosophical complexity is so ill-befitting a child that one wonders if Sartre was an *enfant effreux* or is a *poseur*.

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His first literary attempts were madrigals for a little girl who didn't "give a damn about them," rhymed letters to his grandfather, and several attempts to spill La Fontaine's *Fables* into alexandrines. He next created a long series of first person episodes with heroic plots borrowed from silent movies. Gradually the heroism of these transcribed day dreams became heroic martyrdom, this the result of reading *Don Quixote*. Throughout his youth and early manhood Sartre suffered from the eternizing conceit, believing that he was fated to inscribe his being on paper for future generations: "... a larva would burst open, twenty-five folio butterflies would emerge from it, flapping all their pages, and would go and alight on a shelf of the National Library. Those butterflies would be none other than I. . . ." He created a quasi religion with no God, but a Holy Ghost; with no Heaven, but a literary after-life. He affirmed "the unjustified existence of [his] fellow man," but believed in "exonerating [his] own." In the last few pages of his book Sartre tells us that he realized later the invalidity of his rationalization, and he indicates that he will write a *Return of the Words*: "I shall speak later on about the acids that corroded the distorting transparencies which enveloped me . . . how I served my apprenticeship to violence and discovered my ugliness. . . ."

WE HAVE had much nonsense from M. Sartre in the past: coming from an atheist oracle, *ex cathedra* utterances such as *existence precedes essence, man must be completely free, the world is sordid, man has a responsibility towards humanity*¹ always seem a little silly; a voice in the audience cries out "Nuts!" and the whole structure crumbles, for how Olympian is the authority of a certain J.-P. Sartre, Esq.? In *The Words* Sartre tells us that his salvation is the freedom to become "a whole man, composed of all men and as good as all of them and no better than any." This vacuous, verbal shade of Gertrude Stein suggests an ideal albeit vague state of human perfectability, an elaboration of Sartre's earlier

concept of human nobility. Since, in the face of a meaningless universe, human nobility and the "whole man" are absurd, one wonders why Sartre bothers to create a system of value judgments at all. Sartre answers, quite unsatisfactorily: "It's a habit, and besides, it's my profession."

The "crisis of belief"² so characteristic of modern literature has elicited primarily two responses from the atheistic wing. The pure excrementalists place an equal or superior value on chaos and sordidness. The humanitarians attempt to establish a value structure on a secular, temporal foundation. Sartre accepts both the condition of the former school and the philosophy of the latter. While such a tenuous *raison d'être* may titillate the thinking of our Western literati, it is unlikely that "good for goodness sake" or "man for man's sake" will be of more lasting significance than the Parnassian self-justification of art was in the last century; if this is an absurd universe, virtue is *ipso facto* absurd. Sartre's Answer is revolutionary in the worst and most destructive sense of the word; it attacks the traditional value structure of Western civilization—faith—and attempts to replace it with a somewhat more vague, less tenable idealism.

Despite the jacket blurb which proclaims that *The Words* has "been accorded a place beside that other masterpiece of self analysis, Rousseau's *Confessions*," I deem it most unlikely that the book will maintain any such stature in the general annals of French literature or even within the works of Sartre. Occasionally there are stylistically fine passages in *The Words*, such as those quoted above on his mother reading, on meeting death, and on his butterfly books. But the preponderant majority of the pages are steeped in tedium and repetition. Sartre himself says: "I am not a gifted writer, I've been told so, I've been called labored. So I am; my books reek of sweat and effort; I grant that they stink in the nostrils of our aristocrats." And, although the book is valuable for the psychological understanding of the author, it does not deal with the most important period of his life, the era which gave rise to his adult philosophy.

1. J.-P. Sartre, *Les Jeux sont faits* (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1952), Introduction p. viii.

2. See Victor Strandberg, "The Crisis of Belief in Modern Literature," *The English Journal*. Vol. LIII (October 1964), 475-483.