

Words to Describe His Feelings

SITUATIONS. By Jean-Paul Sartre. Translated by Benita Eisler from the French, "Situations IV." 371 pp. New York: George Braziller. \$5.95.

THE PHILOSOPHY OF JEAN-PAUL SARTRE. Edited by Robert Denoon Cumming. 491 pp. New York: Random House. \$7.95.

By WALTER KAUFMANN

AT 30, Sartre had not yet published a book and was unknown. At 40, in 1945, he had published 11 works that established him as one of the leading spirits of Europe—three novels, a book of five short stories, two plays, and five volumes of philosophy—and he founded a monthly review, *Les Temps Modernes*, now 20 years old. Within two more years he finished another novel, three more plays, a film script and several remarkable essays; his works began to appear in English translations; and his "existentialism" attracted attention all over the world.

These 12 years marked the high tide of Sartre's creativity. During the next dozen years his pace slackened: no more philosophic tomes, no novels, no

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short stories; but another film script, a fat volume on Genet and three more plays. Then, in 1960, when he almost seemed to have written himself out, he published another play and a bulky "Critique of Dialectical Reason" — the sole major work of which only parts have appeared in English so far. His reputation still rested on the work he had done in his thirties. In 1964, however, he published one of his very best books, "Les Mots" ("Words"—surely, "The Words," the title of the otherwise fine English version, is a solecism); he was awarded the Nobel Prize, which for years had gone, more often than not, to his inferiors, and he refused it.

Sartre neither needs nor wants honors, and he has a feeling for what Nietzsche called "parting from our cause when it triumphs." Jaspers and Heidegger, who are generally considered the two leading German "existentialists," repudiated that label as soon as Sartre adopted it in the forties, partly because they considered their differences with him and with each other far more significant than any similarities, partly because they spurn all "isms" — and Heidegger also because he is less concerned

with human existence than with "Being." Now Sartre, in his "Search for a Method" (the first portion of his "Critique"), calls existentialism "a parasitical system living on the margin of Knowledge, which at first it opposed but into which today it seeks to be integrated." He now considers Marxism the philosophy of our age, as according to him Hegelianism was the philosophy of the 19th century — "the humus of every particular thought and the horizon of all culture."

Sartre's conversion from existentialism to his own version of Marxism is not covered in the first volume of his autobiography, "Les Mots," which deals with his childhood; but "Situations" helps to fill that gap. He has been collecting some of his articles from time to time: in the forties he published three books of "Situations"; in 1964, "Situations IV," now made available in English by the American publisher of "The Words." The volume contains four prefaces to the books of others and six articles, five of them from *Les Temps Modernes*. These 10 pieces appeared between 1950 and 1961, during his lean years, and most of them have not been done into English before.

I admire Sartre in spite of these essays and wish many of these pages had remained unwritten. But anyone seriously interested in Sartre's mind and character should welcome the English versions. (They read well though they are marred by over a dozen grammatical howlers and by a couple of mistranslations: "conscience" where *conscience* plainly means "consciousness," and "fourteenth century" for *Quattrocento*.)

THE first essay, "The Prisoner of Venice" (58 pages) is a fragment of a work in progress and first appeared in 1957. It pictures Tintoretto as the greatest painter of his century: Titian is denigrated with more wit than insight; Leonardo is not mentioned; and what little is said about Michelangelo is fatuous. It is symptomatic, not only for *this* essay, that we are told: "At the Uffizi, the Prado, the National Gallery, the Louvre, Munich, Vienna, there are Raphaels, Titians, and a hundred others. All the great painters, or almost all, are represented, except for Tintoretto." In fact, there are at least 8 Tintoretto's in the Uffizi and 27 in Florence, 16 in the Prado, 4 in the National Gallery and 22 in London, 9 in the Louvre, and about two dozen each in Munich

and Vienna. The precise figures obviously do not matter. What is important is that Sartre offers us a stream of chatter, bright but not always responsible; he does not so much contribute to our understanding of what he writes about as he helps us to appreciate his own diffident appraisal of his life's work: *Words*—mere words.

The flow of words in Sartre's lengthy "Reply to Camus," who had protested a review of his book, "The Rebel," occasionally reveals Sartre's character; so does the brief obituary for Camus; even more so, the 100-page essay on Sartre's relationship to Merleau-Ponty, published after his death. Sartre appears admirably humane and generous. But he expects us to listen to every trifle, and what Nietzsche called "the economy of the great style" is utterly lacking. Sartre is not incapable of economy: "No Exit" is a marvel of brevity; his short stories are short; and few writers have equaled the pithiness and pathos of Sartre's comment on his mother, early in "Les Mots": "Fifty years later, when turning the pages of a family album, Anne Marie realized that she had been beautiful."

Sartre is one of the most remarkable writers of the century, and to get to know him

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better one gladly reads his *opuscula*, too. But those who approach Sartre by way of these attempts to place various people (that is part of the meaning of the French "Situations") should not judge his stature on this basis. And those who take his stature for granted should be warned against uncritical acceptance of his frequently irresponsible chatter. What he says "today we know" about the origin of the Korean War is on a par with his remarks about the absence of Tintoretto's from Europe's museums.

Sartre's stance has reached the opposite extreme from Nietzsche's, whose influence on Sartre's first play, "The Flies," was so marked. Nietzsche said: "One must be skilled in living on mountains — seeing the wretched ephemeral babble of politics . . . beneath oneself." One of Sartre's central charges against Camus is that he tried to stand outside history. Sartre has sought some authority to relieve the individual's utter solitude in a godless world, and what he calls "history" has become his surrogate for God.

At times he seems to have abandoned his earlier existentialism for a belief in the wave of the future; he writes as if

those who pit the voice of honesty and humanity against "history" merely wished to preserve their virtue. But Sartre believes that the ends of history are worthy: he is dedicated to freedom for all. Only about the means he would not have us be too fastidious; neither is he fastidious about facts or arguments.

His social conscience is more admirable than his intellectual conscience. One of his central confusions merits exposure. Once he remarks to Camus, quiet rightly: "L'Homme Révolté" would be neither better nor worse if you had not joined the Resistance." But a few pages later Sartre says: "You have acquired the *relative* right to speak of the Soviet concentration camps." And in another essay: "Russia is not comparable to other countries. It is only permissible to judge it when one has accepted its undertaking, and then only in the name of that undertaking."

He writes like those theologians who claim that only believers may evaluate their beliefs critically. Sartre's concern that "we didn't even have the right to call ourselves Marxists" similarly invites comparison with Kierkegaard's anxiety about his right to call himself

a Christian; philosophers generally do not fret about their "right" to call themselves Kantians or Platonists. It seems a pity that a writer who said proudly to Camus, "I have never spoken save in my own name," and who refused the Nobel prize partly because he did not want to be institutionalized and was intent on standing alone, should be so concerned about aligning himself with a party — any political party — and adopt a double standard, one for judging one country and another standard for other countries.

Robert Denoon Cumming's anthology draws on Sartre's works from 1936 to 1960 and includes over 60 pages of selections from the "Critique," but no index. The editor's 45-page introduction is informed but too difficult for those not familiar with Sartre's philosophical writings. It remains unclear for whom this volume is intended. There are snippets from 12 different pages of "The Flies," and three pages of similar excerpts from "No Exit." Anybody who seeks an approach to Sartre, or who wants to assign him to students, would certainly do better to turn to the two plays, complete. This also goes for Sartre's philosophical writings:



Jean-Paul Sartre.

at least one would want complete chapters and essays.

No single volume can give us the philosophy of Jean-Paul Sartre, and to speak of his "philosophies" would be mis-

leading, too. He is as restless as Kierkegaard and Nietzsche were; his Marxism is a quixotism; he is still an individualist to the core and an existentialist *malgré lui*.

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