

EXISTENTIALISM, PHILOSOPHICAL AND LITERARY

Irrational Man: A Study in Existential Philosophy. By William Barrett. New York: Doubleday Anchor Books, 1962. 314 pp.

Jean-Paul Sartre. By Maurice Cranston. New York: Grove Press, 1962. 118 pp.

The Tragic Finale: An Essay on the Philosophy of Jean-Paul Sartre. By Wilfrid Desan. New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1960. xxv + 228 pp.

Existentialism and the Modern Predicament. By F. H. Heine-
mann. New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1958. xvi + 229 pp.

*An Existentialist Aesthetic: The Theories of Sartre and Merleau-
Ponty.* By Eugene F. Kaelin. Madison: University of Wisconsin
Press, 1962. xiv + 471 pp.

Existentialism from Dostoevsky to Sartre. Edited and introduced
by Walter Kaufmann. New York: Meridian Books, 1956. 321 pp.

Sartre: A Collection of Critical Essays. Edited by Edith Kern.
Englewood Cliffs, N. J.: Prentice-Hall Spectrum Books. viii +
179 pp.

Sartre: Romantic Rationalist. By Iris Murdoch. New Haven: Yale
University Press, 1959. x + 116 pp.

To Be and Not To Be: An Analysis of Jean-Paul Sartre's Ontology.
By Jacques Salvan. Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1962.
xlii + 155 pp.

We have always studied the influence of philosophy on literature, but we have seldom taken very seriously the influence of literature on philosophy. Such one-sidedness is no longer valid or useful — if it ever was. For the current influence of what is perhaps the most influential philosophy now current, existentialism, is due to the literary sources from which it partly springs as much as to the literary works in which it partly issues. With the growth during the last hundred years of a large reading public made up like Dryden's small one of "men who, though they are not scholars, are not ignorant," literature has become increasingly philosophical and philosophy increasingly literary, Heidegger's style not-

withstanding. Of the nine writers in Kaufmann's anthology, four — Dostoevsky, Rilke, Kafka, and Camus — are technically literary men; two — Jaspers and Heidegger — are technically philosophers; and three — Kierkegaard, Nietzsche and Sartre — are technically both.

The listing is suggestive. Sartre's unique dual role as major philosopher and successful novelist-playwright perhaps explains his uniquely pervasive influence on contemporary literature, and through it on the intellectual life of the postwar Western world; for notwithstanding the awe with which mystified philosophers listen to Heidegger's metaphysical resonances, it is Sartrean existentialism that novelists, playwrights, and poets find viable. Sartre's own recent abandonment of literature for political journalism, and of autonomous political thought for the Communist line, suggests a basic inconsistency which I think is due to his own Heideggerian strain.

For Heidegger is called an existentialist only through misunderstanding; he himself has repeatedly denied that he is any such thing, and his dishonorable rise and shameful speeches during the Nazi period were those of a pious essentialist — a proponent of Being, not of existence, of the Oversoul, not of the individual, of the Divine Daemonic, not of the human. It is natural for such a thinker, committed as he is to the undemonstrable and indefinable, to write obscurely, to be misunderstood, or — as Heinemann, who coined the term *Existenzphilosophie* and attached it to Heidegger, suggests — perhaps to require misunderstanding. For, conceiving thought as an instrument of power in the world, he rejects the whole Western tradition of disinterested conceptual clarity; he seeks the restoration of preconceptual thought, says Barrett, in which there is no distinction between figure and ground, nothing is seen to have any autonomous existence, and all beings are only parts of the totality of Being.

From this extreme and total anti-individualism Sartre developed the philosophy of individual freedom and responsibility that French intellectuals after World War II found such an invigorating though bitter tonic. But Heidegger's being-there, being-with, and being-in-the-world are susceptible of quite other interpretations than those Sartre has given them, and it seems to

me that this fact underlies Sartre's seemingly inconsistent behavior.

The key, I think, is Sartre's situationism. Within the situation in which I find myself, says Sartre, I am necessarily free: free to accept it, to struggle against it, or to transcend it. Whichever of these choices I make, I accordingly create my own essence, my own nature, my self. I am what I choose to be; and I make the choice by action, not in any other way. I am what I do: nothing more, nothing less. By choosing to be brave — by acting bravely — I create courage; by choosing to be a coward — by acting as a coward — I create cowardice. There are no *a priori* values; only the situation in which I exist is *a priori*; that situation also includes the existence of others, each as free as myself; so that my total and inescapable freedom involves not only total responsibility for what I become, but also — if I am to be an authentic human being and not a *salaud* — a responsibility to respect the subjectivity of others and to resist those who would use people as things. "Everyone is responsible to everyone for everything," Sartre has said.

This is the ground of the literature of engagement; as Sartre has rightly pointed out, it is a highly optimistic philosophy. But by a slight shift of emphasis, emphasizing the unavoidable givenness of the given and the ultimately inviolable freedom of the individual, it can also be the ground of something very like stoicism, the philosophy of despair — to which certain journals have in fact given quite a bit of attention lately — or can lead to a rough-and-ready use of whatever means are at hand, including the Communist Party, whose means must be rough indeed for a believer in individual autonomy.

There are dozens of books on existentialism; those here in review are representative of the chief kinds. Kaufmann's is an anthology of primary materials, edited for "the intelligent layman" with factual headnotes and an excellent critical introduction; his emphasis is philosophical. Miss Kern's is an anthology of critical studies, also with an excellent introduction and with a useful brief bibliography; her emphasis is literary. Miss Murdoch's is in the nature of a series of lectures on Sartre's literary works, by a writer who is herself both novelist and philosopher.

Barrett's, Desan's, Heinemann's, and Salvan's are well-written academic studies of the best kind — the kind that serves as a means of self-expression for the author, showing the live play of thought between his mind and that of his subject. Kaelin's is historical, biographical, and critical; its chief value is the recognition it gives to the fine original mind of Merleau-Ponty, who in most studies is treated only as a satellite of Sartre. Cranston's is one of those popular introductions the British do so well — simple but not irresponsible, modest but not abject, intended not to sum up the subject and hand it to the reader but to lead him painlessly into it. The pain and the joy of further exploration are up to him.

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