# BOOKS *and the* ARTS

## FRENCH EXISTENTIALISM

BY HANNAH ARENDT

A LECTURE on philosophy provokes a riot, with hundreds crowding in and thousands turned away. Books on philosophical problems preaching no cheap creed and offering no panacea but, on the contrary, so difficult as to require actual thinking sell like detective stories. Plays in which the action is a matter of words, not of plot, and which offer a dialogue of reflections and ideas run for months and are attended by enthusiastic crowds. Analyses of the situation of man in the world, of the fundaments of human relationship, of Being and the Void not only give rise to a new literary movement but also figure as possible guides for a fresh political orientation. Philosophers become newspapermen, playwrights, novelists. They are not members of university faculties but "bohemians" who stay at hotels and live in the cafe—leading a public life to the point of renouncing privacy. And not even success, or so it seems, can turn them into respectable bores.

This is what is happening, from all reports, in Paris. If the Resistance has not achieved the European revolution, it seems to have brought about, at least in France, a genuine rebellion of the intellectuals, whose docility in relation to modern society was one of the saddest aspects of the sad spectacle of Europe between wars. And the French people, for the time being, appear to consider the arguments of their philosophers more important than the talk and the quarrels of their politicians. This may reflect, of course, a desire to escape from political action into some theory which merely talks about action, that is, into activism; but it may also signify that in the face of the spiritual bankruptcy of the left and the sterility of the old revolutionary élite—which have led to the desperate efforts at restoration of all political parties—more people than we might imagine have a feeling that the responsibility for political action is too heavy to assume until new foundations, ethical as well as political, are laid down, and that the old tradition of philosophy which is deeply imbedded even in the least philosophical individual is actually an impediment to new political thought.

The name of the new movement is "Existentialism," and its chief exponents are Jean-Paul Sartre and Albert Camus, but the term Existentialism has given rise to so many misunderstandings that Camus has already publicly stated why he is "not an Existentialist." The term comes from the modern German philosophy which had a revival immediately after the First World War and has strongly influenced French thought for more than a decade; but it would be irrelevant to trace and define the sources of Existentialism in national terms for the simple reason that both the German and the French manifestations came out of an identical period and a more or less identical cultural heritage.

The French Existentialists, though they differ widely among themselves, are united on two main lines of rebellion: first, the rigorous repudiation of what they call the *esprit sérieux*; and, second, the angry refusal to accept the world as it is as the natural, predestined milieu of man.

*L'esprit sérieux*, which is the original sin according to the new philosophy, may be equated with respectability. The "serious" man is one who thinks of himself *as* president of his business, *as* a member of the Legion of Honor, *as* a member of the faculty, but also *as* father, *as* husband, or as any other half-natural, half-social function. For by so doing he agrees to the identification of himself with an arbitrary function which society has bestowed. *L'esprit sérieux* is the very negation of freedom, because it leads man to agree to and accept the necessary deformation which every human being must undergo when he is fitted into society. Since everyone knows well enough in his own heart that he is not identical with his function, *l'esprit sérieux* indicates also bad faith in the sense of pretending. Kafka has already shown, in "Amerika," how ridiculous and dangerous is the hollow dignity which grows out of identifying oneself with one's function: In that book the most dignified person in the hotel, upon whose word the hero's job and daily bread depend, rules out the possibility that he can make an error by invoking the argument of the "serious" man: "How could I go on being the head porter if I mistook one person for another?"

This matter of *l'esprit sérieux* was first touched upon in Sartre's novel "La Nausée," in a delightful description of a gallery of portraits of the town's respectable citizens, *les salauds*. It then became the central topic of Camus's novel "L'Etranger." The hero of the book, the stranger, is an average man who simply refuses to submit to the serious-mindedness of society, who refuses to live as any of his allotted functions. He does not behave as a son at his mother's funeral—he does not weep; he does not behave as a husband—he declines to take marriage seriously even at the moment of his engagement. Because he does not pretend, he is a stranger whom no one understands, and he pays with his life for his affront to society. Since he refuses to play the game, he is isolated from his fellow-men to the point of incomprehensibility and isolated from himself to the point of becoming inarticulate. Only in a last scene, immediately before his death, does the hero arrive at some kind of explanation which conveys the impression that for him life itself was such a mystery and in its terrible way so beautiful that he did not see any necessity for "improving" upon it with the trimmings of good behavior and hollow pretensions.

Sartre's brilliant play "Huis Clos" belongs to the same category. The play opens in hell, appropriately furnished in the style of the Second Empire. The three persons gathered in the room—"Hell is the Others"—set the diabolical tor-

ture in motion by trying to pretend. Since, however, their lives are closed and since "you are your life and nothing else," pretense no longer works, and we see what would go on behind closed doors if people actually were stripped of the sheltering cover of functions derived from society.

Both Sartre's play and Camus's novel deny the possibility of a genuine fellowship between men, of any relationship which would be direct, innocent, free of pretense. Love in Sartre's philosophy is the will to be loved, the need for a supreme confirmation of one's own existence. For Camus love is a somewhat awkward and hopeless attempt to break through the isolation of the individual.

The way out of pretense and serious-mindedness is to play at being what one really is. Again Kafka indicated in the last chapter of "Amerika" a new possibility of authentic life. The great "Nature Theater" where everyone is welcome and where everybody's unhappiness is resolved is not by accident a theater. Here everybody is invited to choose his role, to play at what he is or would like to be. The chosen role is the solution of the conflict between mere functioning and mere being, as well as between mere ambition and mere reality.

The new "ideal" becomes, in this context, the actor whose very profession is pretending, who constantly changes his role, and thus can never take any of his roles seriously. By playing at what one is, one guards one's freedom as a human being from the pretenses of one's functions; moreover, only by playing at what he really is, is man able to affirm that he is never identical with himself as a thing is identical with itself. An inkpot is always an inkpot. Man is his life and his actions, which are never finished until the very moment of his death. He *is* his existence.

The second common element of French Existentialism, the insistence upon the basic homelessness of man in the world, is the topic of Camus's "Le Mythe de Sisyphe; essay sur l'absurde," and of Sartre's "La Nausée." For Camus man is essentially the stranger because the world in general and man as man are not fitted for each other; that they are together in existence makes the human condition an absurdity. Man is the only "thing" in the world which obviously does not belong in it, for only man does not exist simply as a man among men in the way animals exist among animals and trees among trees—all of which necessarily exist, so to speak, in the plural. Man is basically alone with his "revolt" and his "clairvoyance," that is, with his reasoning, which makes him ridiculous because the gift of reason was bestowed upon him in a world "where everything is given and nothing ever explained."

Sartre's notion of the absurdity, the contingency, of existence is best represented in the chapter of "La Nausée" which appears in the current issue of the *Partisan Review* under the title The Root of the Chestnut Tree. Whatever exists, so far as we can see, has not the slightest reason for its existence. It is simply *de trop,* superfluous. The fact that I can't even imagine a world in which, instead of many too many things, there would be nothing only shows the hopelessness and senselessness of man's being eternally entangled in existence.

Here Sartre and Camus part company, if we may judge from the few works of theirs which have reached this country. The absurdity of existence and the repudiation of *l'esprit sérieux* are only points of departure for each. Camus seems to have gone on to a philosophy of absurdity, whereas Sartre seems to be working toward some new positive philosophy and even a new humanism.

Camus has probably protested against being called an Existentialist because for him the absurdity does not lie in man as such or in the world as such but only in their being thrown together. Since man's life, being laid in the world, is absurd, it must be lived as absurdity—lived, that is, in a kind of proud defiance which insists on reason despite the experience of reason's failure to explain anything; insists on despair since man's pride will not allow him the hope of discovering a sense he cannot figure out by means of reason; insists, finally, that reason and human dignity, in spite of their senselessness, remain the supreme values. The absurd life then consists in constantly rebelling against all its conditions and in constantly refusing consolations. "This revolt is the price of life. Spread over the whole of an existence, it restores its grandeur." All that remains, all that one can say yes to, is chance itself, the *hazard roi* which has apparently played at putting man and world together. " 'I judge that everything is well,' said Oedipus, and this word is sacred. It resounds in the ferocious universe which is the limit of man. . . . It makes of destiny an affair of men which should be settled among men." This is precisely the point where Camus, without giving much explanation, leaves behind all modernistic attitudes and comes to insights which are genuinely modern, the insight, for instance, that the moment may have arrived "when creation is no longer taken tragically; it is only taken seriously."

For Sartre, absurdity is of the essence of things as well as of man. Anything that exists is absurd simply because it exists. The salient difference between the things of the world and the human being is that things are unequivocally identical with themselves, whereas man—because he sees and knows that he sees, believes and knows that he believes—bears within his consciousness a negation which makes it impossible for him ever to become one with himself. In this single respect—in respect of his consciousness, which has the germ of negation in it—man is a creator. For this is of man's own making and not merely given, as the world and his existence are given. If man becomes aware of his own consciousness and its tremendous creative possibilities, and renounces the longing to be identical with himself as a thing is, he realizes that he depends upon nothing and nobody outside himself and that he can be free, the master of his own destiny. This seems to be the essential meaning of Sartre's novel "Les Mouches" ("The Flies"), in which Orestes, by taking upon himself the responsibility for the necessary killing of which the town is afraid, liberates the town and takes the Flies —the Erinyes of bad conscience and of the dark fear of revenge—with him. He himself is immune because he does not feel guilty and regrets nothing.

It would be a cheap error to mistake this new trend in philosophy and literature for just another fashion of the day because its exponents refuse the respectability of institutions and do not even pretend to that seriousness which regards every achievement as a step in a career. Nor should we be put off by the loud journalistic success with which their work has been accompanied. This success, equivocal as it may

be in itself, is nevertheless due to the quality of the work. It is also due to a definite modernity of attitude which does not try to hide the depth of the break in Western tradition. Camus especially has the courage not even to look for connections, for predecessors and the like. The good thing about Sartre and Camus is that they apparently suffer no longer from nostalgia for the good old days, even though they may know that in an abstract sense those days were actually better than ours. They do not believe in the magic of the old, and they are honest in that they make no compromises whatever.

Yet if the revolutionary élan of these writers is not broken by success, if, symbolically speaking, they stick to their hotel rooms and their cafes, the time may come when it will be necessary to point out "seriously" those aspects of their philosophy which indicate that they are still dangerously involved in old concepts. The nihilistic elements, which are obvious in spite of all protests to the contrary, are not the consequences of new insights but of some very old ideas.

# THREE POEMS

BY ROBERT LOWELL

## Rebellion

There was rebellion, Father, when the mock
French windows slammed and you hove backwards, rammed
Into your heirlooms, screens, a glass-cased clock,
The highboy quaking to its toes, and damned
My arm that cast your house upon your head
And broke its flintlock on your skull. The dead
Caught at my knees and fell:
And it was well
With me, my Father. Then
Behemoth and Leviathan
Devoured our mighty merchants. None could arm
Or put to sea. O Father, on my farm
I added field to field
And I have sealed
An everlasting pact
With Dives to contract
The world that spreads in pain;
My bondsmen, having had their fill,
No longer line the ditch at Bunker Hill
Where the clubbed muskets broke the redcoat's brain.

## The North Sea Undertaker's Complaint

Now south and south and south the mallard heads,
His green-blue bony hood echoes the green
Shutters of Gray Rock, and the mussel beds
Are sluggish where the webbed feet spanked the lean
Eel grass to tinder in the take-off. South
Is what I think of. It seems yesterday
I slid my hearse across the river mouth
And pitched the first iced mouse into the hay.
Thirty below, it is. I hear the dumb
Club-footed orphan ring the Angelus
And clank the bell-chain for St. Gertrude's choir
To wail with the dead bell the martyrdom
Of two more parish priests, the phosphorous
Shriveled to glory when they babbled *fire.*

## Where the Rainbow Ends

I saw the sky descending, black and white
Not blue, on Boston where the winters wore
The skulls to jack o'lanterns on the slates
And Hunger's skin-and-bone retrievers tore
The chickadee and shrike. The thorn tree waits
Its victim and tonight
The worms will eat the deadwood to the foot
Of Ararat: the scythers, Time and Death,
Helmed locusts, move upon the tree of breath;
The wild ingrafted olive and the root

Are withered, and a winter drifts to where
The Pepperpot, ironic rainbow, spans
Charles River and its scales of scorched-earth miles,
The tree-dabbed suburb where construction mans
The wrath of God. About the Chapel, piles
Of dead leaves char the air
And I am a red arrow on this graph
Of revelations Every dove is sold,
The Chapel's sharp-shinned eagle shifts its hold
On Serpent-Time, the Rainbow's epitaph.

In Boston serpents whistle at the cold.
The victim climbs the altar steps and sings:
"Hosannah to the lion, lamb and beast
Who fans the furnace fire of Is with wings:
I breathe the ether of my marriage feast."
At the high altar, gold
And a fair cloth. I kneel and the wings beat
My cheek. What can the Dove of Jesus give
You now but wisdom, exile? Stand and live,
The dove has brought an olive branch to eat.

# THOMAS PAINE, Rationalist

BY PERRY MILLER

TODAY it is unnecessary to defend Tom Paine against Theodore Roosevelt's accusation, "filthy little atheist." Historians and biographers have at last impressed upon our generation the long-forgotten fact that "The Age of Reason," from which Paine's fame as an "infidel" sprang, was actually the work of a pious deist. Yet it remains a significant commentary on Paine's career that for a century after his death Americans charged him with infidelity on the strength of a book he wrote in the pathetic hope of arresting the progress of atheism in France of the Terror His simple confidence that mere rational persuasion could curb the unleashed furies of the Revolution was roundly refuted by the Jacobins who condemned him to prison. The irony of his subsequent reputation shows how Paine was victimized by his place in history, he had the misfortune to be the most fervent of rationalists at the very moment when rationalism of the eighteenth-century variety was going down before the rush of an entirely new kind of fervor.

Undoubtedly it was his reputed infidelity that caused nineteenth-century America to forget his services in the War of Independence. When he returned to America in 1802, political machinations were again to challenge his faith in the