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978-0-521-06824-6 - Scrutiny: A Quarterly Review, XIV - 1946-47

Edited by D. W. Harding, F. R. Leavis, L. C. Knights and W. H. Mellers

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SCRUTINY

A Quarterly Review

Edited by

D. W. HARDING

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W. H. MELLERS

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LES CHEMINS DE LA LIBERTÉ¹

⁶ IT is proof of no untoward pessimism to suppose that the English reader may, if he has not already, soon have abundant cause to feel a like irritation as soon as the fashion-purveyors get to work on Existentialism'.

The fashionable craze has now lasted two years in France and M. Sartre himself has recently confirmed the account given in *Scrutiny*, Vol. xiii, No. 2. 'Qu'est-ce qu'on appelle existentialisme? La plupart des gens qui utilisent ce mot seraient bien embarrassés pour le justifier, puisqu'aujourd'hui que c'est devenu une mode, on déclare volontiers qu'un musicien ou qu'un peintre est existentialiste. Un échetier de *Clartés* signe *l'Existentialiste*; et au fond le mot a pris aujourd'hui une telle largeur et une telle extension qu'il ne signifie plus rien du tout. Il semble que, faute de doctrine d'avant-garde analogue au surréalisme, les gens avides de scandale et de mouvement s'adressent à cette philosophie, qui ne peut d'ailleurs rien leur apporter dans ce domaine; en réalité c'est la doctrine la moins scandaleuse, la plus austère; elle est strictement destinée aux techniciens et aux philosophes'.² *L'être et le néant* is by all accounts a long and difficult work: its rôle in the fashionable world seems analogous to that played by *Das Kapital* when Marxism was a literary fashion. And, to extend the parallel a little further, M. Sartre may be said to have published his *Manifest* in the book from which I have just quoted. He recently saw fit to tour Switzerland with a lecture expounding his central doctrines in popular form. And now that translations are available in the U.S.A. and in England, we shall soon be in a position to judge whether the fashion is going to sweep the English-speaking world with the same *furor* it has excited in the French-speaking world.

The works of M. Sartre would therefore seem to call for a sociological as well as a philosophical examination.³ Not being in a position to undertake either of these tasks, I am constrained to stand by the position taken up in the article referred to. Indeed,

¹*L'âge de raison*, by Jean-Paul Sartre, Gallimard, Paris, 125 frs.

Le Sursis, by Jean-Paul Sartre, Gallimard, Paris, 130 frs.

Huis Clos, by Jean-Paul Sartre, *Horizon*, London, 12/6.

²*L'Existentialisme est un Humanisme*, by J.-P. Sartre, Les Editions Nagel, Paris.

³The reader may care to refer to two articles by Mr. A. J. Ayer published in *Horizon*, Vol. xii, Nos. 67 and 68. In his concluding paragraph he says, 'These analyses of human behaviour seem to be of considerable psychological interest, but, to my mind, they are open to the serious objection that they do not correspond empirically to the way that most people actually behave'.

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further reflection and the opportunity to examine the more recent publications have only confirmed the propriety of the approach made there, which was that M. Sartre's literary works must be criticized in literary terms; the 'philosophical' matter must be weighed and evaluated on its own merits as a functional part of a literary whole; the critic's task is to examine the author's standards as exhibited in the novel or play and not to imitate current practice, which consists in picking out the philosophical ideas and relating them to the expositions given in the philosophical works.

In a sense, however, the critic might be thought to be passing a philosophical verdict similar to the one given by Mr. Ayer. If it is true that the existentialist position is based on psychology, on the claim that every man has certain thoughts and feelings hitherto ignored or unrecognized for what they really were, then the difficulty experienced by the critic may be simply that the presentation of these *données* strikes him as unconvincing because he does not recognize them as elements of common experience. Thus, in criticizing *Les Mouches*, I pronounced the crisis a ludicrous pantomime, since such behaviour—the way the dawning of the consciousness of liberty was there presented—struck me as an arbitrary philosophical paradigm. I experience the same difficulty with the works under review, in which M. Sartre further explores the nature of human existence and in particular the notion of liberty and *l'acte libre*.

The problem is similar to the one the reader of *Four Quartets* has to face. The novel concepts are rendered credible by the context, they function as poetry. Mr. Eliot's views (or supposed views) are not there as something to be singled out from the poem and commented on. It is a positive disadvantage to approach the poems with the expectation that they will confirm orthodox beliefs. Just so, sympathy with or hostility towards M. Sartre's central tenets can easily distract the critic.

In this review I propose to discuss the way the notion of liberty crops up in the novels, not because it is one of the central notions of the existentialist philosophy, of which I know next to nothing, but because it seems to me to be the axis on which the novels turn. (*L'âge de raison* and *Le Sursis* are the first two novels of a trilogy entitled *Les Chemins de la Liberté*). The criticism I wish to justify is not that the idea of liberty could not be credibly presented in a philosophical treatise, but that in these novels it nowhere arises inevitably from the context and so appears credible, that, on the contrary, it is imposed from outside. So that even the existentialist who is convinced of the internal coherence of the system should feel unhappy about the internal coherence of the novels.

In *L'âge de raison* we find that M. Sartre has dropped one of the more unsatisfactory features of *Les Mouches*, the hocus pocus with the gods, and has placed the scene in contemporary Paris (June, 1938) instead of in the mythical past. He has, however, retained the atmosphere of Argos, the sweltering summer day, the

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climate (for M. Sartre) of sudden disaster, of far reaching despair, of rottenness. The rottenness extends to man as well as to nature. The Orestes of the novel is Mathieu Delarue, a teacher of philosophy in a Parisian lycée, who comes to see that 'il y avait quelque chose de pourri dans sa vie, dans cet été'.

Mathieu's crisis—the main theme of the book—has a mundane aspect which it may be as well to dispose of at once. It is the crisis of a man in the middle thirties who, disliking the thought of growing up and assuming the responsibilities of maturity, is forced by circumstances to recognize that he is no longer young. *L'âge de raison* ends with Mathieu's reflection: 'il avait fini sa journée, il en avait fini avec sa jeunesse . . . c'est vrai, c'est tout de même vrai: j'ai l'âge de raison'. Secondly, according to M. Sartre, 'entre trente et quarante ans, les gens jouent leur dernière chance'. As *La Dernière Chance* is the title of the last novel of the trilogy, we may suppose that the decisions taken or refused by Mathieu during this crisis will determine his fate finally.

At the same time Mathieu thinks of himself and is thought of by his friends as a man with a passion for liberty (*être libre . . . c'était ce qui lui tenait le plus à coeur*). Mathieu indeed claims that there is nothing peculiar in experiencing this feeling, other people have it, too, 'seulement ils ne s'en rendent pas compte'. The notion, it seems, did not arise as a result of reading Heidegger, but, in a primitive form, was present at the dawn of conscious self-reflection. At the age of seven, he says, 'il crouissait dans une chaleur provinciale qui sentait la mouche' and accomplished his first *acte libre* by smashing an old Chinese jar. 'Il avait pensé: "C'est moi qui ait fait ça!" et il s'était senti tout fier, libéré du monde et sans attaches, sans famille, sans origines, un petit surgissement têtue qui avait crevé la croûte terrestre'. Once when he was sixteen 'il avait l'impression d'être une petite explosion en suspens dans les airs, ronde, abrupte, inexplicable. Il s'était dit: "Je serai libre", ou plutôt il ne s'était rien dit du tout, mais c'était ce qu'il voulait dire et c'était un pari; il avait parié que sa vie entière ressemblerait à ce moment exceptionnel'. He repeated this *pari* at intervals later. 'Il n'était rien d'autre que ce pari'.

On looking back at the age of thirty-four, the only result of this vision had been the resolve to remain honest with himself, to examine his motives scrupulously and to refuse the appeal of all beliefs and causes which could not claim his entire loyalty. 'Son unique soin avait été de se garder disponible. Pour un acte. Un acte libre et réfléchi qui engagerait toute sa vie et qui serait au commencement d'une existence nouvelle'. In the past various temptations had presented themselves. 'Il avait songé à partir pour la Russie, à laisser tomber ses études, à apprendre un métier manuel. Mais ce qui l'avait retenu, chaque fois, au bord de ces ruptures violentes, c'est qu'il manquait de *raisons* pour le faire'. So that when the novel opens Mathieu finds himself in the position of one of Henry James' heroes: he doubts whether anything will ever happen. (*A présent je n'attends plus rien*).

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The point is rather crudely rammed home by an incident which appears to have been inserted *ad hoc*. Mathieu had long ago decided that Communism was incompatible with true liberty. However, when his best friend invites him to join the Party, the refusal costs him a pang. 'Tu es libre', says the Communist, 'mais à quoi ça sert-il, la liberté, si ce n'est pas pour s'engager? Tu as mis trente-cinq ans à te nettoyer et le résultat c'est du vide'. Mathieu regards the Communist as 'real' and 'a man', yet he cannot find in himself 'assez de raisons pour ça'. 'Ma liberté? Elle me pèse: voilà des années que je suis libre pour rien. Je crève d'envie de la troquer un bon coup contre une certitude. Je ne demanderais pas mieux que de travailler avec vous, ça me changerait de moi-même, j'ai besoin de m'oublier un peu. Et puis je pense comme toi qu'on n'est pas un homme tant qu'on n'a pas trouvé quelque chose pour quoi on accepterait de mourir'. His refusal heightens his feelings of self-disgust and he decides: 'je suis un type foutu'. Later this feeling crystallizes in a sort of vision: '... toutes ses pensées étaient contaminées dès leur naissance. Soudain, Marthieu s'ouvrit mollement comme une blessure; il se vit tout entier, béant: pensée, pensée sur des pensées, pensées sur des pensées de pensées, il était transparent jusqu'à l'infini et pourri jusqu'à l'infini'.

Mathieu is faced with a similar decision in his private life. He has had a seven years' liaison with a woman, whom, by the time the novel opens, he has ceased to love. She discovers that she is pregnant and wishes to have a child. Mathieu assumes without questioning her that she prefers an abortion and a great deal of the 'business' of the novel is taken up with attempts to raise the money to pay for the operation. When Mathieu eventually discovers that his mistress wants the child, he feels obliged to marry her and to settle down to married life. But *la liberté* apparently orders him to remain outside the ordinary round of social obligations. 'Et soudain il lui sembla qu'il voyait sa liberté. Elle était hors d'attente, cruelle, jeune et capricieuse comme la grâce: elle lui commandait tout uniquement de plaquer Marcelle. Ce ne fut qu'un instant; cette inexplicable liberté, qui prenait les apparences du crime, il ne fit que l'entrevoir: elle lui faisait peur et puis elle était si loin'. This, however, turns out not to be the final truth. He sees later that he is not a mere automaton. His liberty consists in making a responsible decision. 'Il pourrait faire ce qu'il voulait, personne n'avait le droit de le conseiller, il n'y aurait pour lui de Bien ni de Mal que s'il les inventait'. From this responsibility there is no escape. But when he finally decides not to marry Marcelle, he does not feel that he has achieved his liberty. 'Moi, tout ce que je fais, je le fais *pour rien*; on dirait qu'on me vole les suites de mes actes; tout se passe comme si je pouvais toujours reprendre mes coups. Je ne sais pas ce que je donnerais pour faire un acte irrémédiable'.

A number of characters in the novel seem to have been introduced to illustrate the theme of growing old. This is particularly

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true of a couple of young Russian *émigrés* who are afraid of growing up. (' . . . ils ont peur. Peur de la mort, de la maladie, de la vieillesse'). Unfortunately for the reader, Mathieu and, apparently, the author find these 'martyrs de la jeunesse' 'fascinants tout de même'. Mathieu is in love with the girl, Ivich, without knowing it, until an *acte libre* occurs in a taxi. 'Une seconde encore il lui sembla qu'il resta en suspens dans le vide avec une intolérable impression de liberté et puis, brusquement, il étendit le bras, pris Ivich par les épaules et l'attira contre lui'. A similar moment occurs when Ivich gets drunk in a night club and splits her hand open with a knife to shock a woman at a neighbouring table. Mathieu jabs the knife into his own palm and they have to get their hands bandaged up by an attendant, but not before the lovers have clasped their bleeding palms. This extravagance is the immediate consequence of an experience of liberty.

'Elle sourit et dit d'un air d'extase :

—Ca brille comme un petit diamant.

—Qu'est-ce qui brille comme un petit diamant.

—Ce moment-ci. Il est tout rond, il est suspendu dans le vide comme un petit diamant, je suis éternelle'.⁴

This is, I believe, a fair selection comprehending most of what M. Sartre says about liberty in this novel. It is also fair in a way in which, as it were, it ought *not* to be. That is, these extracts lose practically nothing by being taken from their contexts, because they were never really embedded in those contexts. Consequently their credibility rests on their face value which, I submit, is not high. But even if it were as high as one could wish, the objection still remains that the novel is engineered to 'place' these remarks. M. Sartre does not seem to have been primarily interested in writing a novel. (He occasionally allows the plot to degenerate into farce).

Thus we are led to make a twofold criticism: the author knew too well what he was doing and at the same time was uncertain of his purpose. For M. Sartre seems to have been unable to make up his mind about his principle characters. To say this is not to demand that they should be presented in sharper tones of black or white, but that a coherent attitude on the part of the author should underlie and hold together the various ways in which the characters are presented.

Mr. Turnell recently described the work of M. Sartre as 'largely a clinical study . . .'. In a sense, this is true. The persons moving in Mathieu's circle are shown in an unflattering light, one that shows up all blemishes, but not in an *impartial* light. The critical point is to determine whether in choosing the particular

⁴A curious parallel to this scene may be found on page 293 of *L'Invitée*, by Simone de Beauvoir, Paris, 1943. A similarly perverse young girl with whom the hero is on similar terms burns a hole in her palm with a cigarette while watching a dance in a similar night club.

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focus with its strong highlights on what is nauseating (Marcelle's vomit, etc.), M. Sartre persuades us that the positives are, as it were, negatively present, whether there is a tension so created, a liberation of energy.

M. Sartre has protested that 'L'existentialisme n'est pas une délectation morose'. Yet when we force ourselves to review the disgusting details so lovingly exposed, we discover, not that some *moral* depravity is being laid bare, nor yet that the author is enjoying himself in the free delight expressed by 'wallowing', but rather that he is punishing himself by sternly thrusting his own nose into what he finds unbearably nauseating. As a result, there is a kind of sombre energy at work. The scenes, for example, where Daniel, a homosexual who is in revolt against his own perversion, tries to punish himself, vibrate, are 'there' in a way little else in the novel is. Yet one is brought up with a shock when Daniel's state of mind is compared to hell. ('C'était comme ça qu'il imaginait l'enfer: un regard qui percerait tout, on verrait jusqu'au bout du monde—jusqu'au fond de soi').

M. Sartre carries this idea further in his one-act play, *Huis Clos*, where he exploits to the full a notion that runs through the novel, namely, that you can only suffer through the thought that others are condemning you. ('L'enfer, c'est les Autres'). In this limited sense, Existentialism can claim to be a kind of humanism, for it makes man the judge and executioner of man. The characters seem to suffer just as much whether they are condemned justly or unjustly. The question as to what is just condemnation is not raised. Conversely, they seem to be comforted by unjustified approval.

The uncertainty left by these considerations is deepened when we turn to the hero Mathieu, and inquire what is intended by the word *pourri* which he so frequently applies. For here it seems that the uncertainty lies in the first place in the author's conception. On the one hand, Mathieu is represented as an intellectual, a man who is too aware of himself. Yet he displays remarkable obtuseness in his dealings with other people and in his judgments about his own feelings.

A critic in the *New Statesman* (I think) felt that in this apparently representative picture of the preoccupations of a Parisian intellectual, actual preoccupation with things of the mind had been arbitrarily left out. Certainly Mathieu is a philosopher only in term time.

His philosophy is never brought to bear on his personal problems. One wonders: had he never heard of Heidegger? And if so, should not his experiences have affected him as a striking confirmation of the main arguments of the existentialist school?

The difficulty seems to be that M. Sartre has chosen to be 'objective' about someone in a position we may suppose very similar in important respects to his own. In his anxiety not to give himself, as it were, a too flattering part he has tended to humiliate the character at every turn and in so doing has finally

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presented us with a man whose scope is very much narrower than his own. (Whereas part of the feeling of exhilaration given by a *La Nausée* came from the impression that the hero was intellectually on a level with the author's own best self).

If the feeling of self-loathing does not arise from excessive cerebration, we must seek elsewhere. The feeling seems to be a more primitive, immediate reaction. Self-loathing amounting to a loathing of life itself does cover a great deal in the book. In making this judgment neither praise nor condemnation is involved. Feelings of self-disgust may be used to create successful art. If we compare, say, the attitude of the hero in Shakespeare's *Hamlet* and that of the 'I' in Hopkins' sonnets, we recognize something like an obsession sentimentally indulged on the one hand and a tense equipose on the other. I should place M. Sartre towards the *Hamlet* end of this rough-and-ready scale—dangerously near the region of Faulkner and Céline.

The search for a 'statement of positives' which would give backbone to the novel has left us only with the decent refusal to present the intellectual's shortcomings in an indulgent light. There remains a kind of positive which exercises a damning qualification of the degree of seriousness we may attribute to the self-criticism. I refer to the sentimentality and equivocal nature of the author's approach to the young girl, Ivich. Not only does the philosopher in his depressed state treat her with abject deference—the author here has limited the range of Mathieu's irony to occasional flashes—but M. Sartre himself uses words like 'noble' and 'tragique' to describe a woman whom at times he seems to have 'placed' in his own mind as essentially petty, if not perverse. This streak of sentimentality, which also marred *La Nausée*, is not, as far as I am aware, forced on the author by his philosophical system. It is the complement of the austerity, which thus appears not as clinical astringency but as the disillusion arising from failure to achieve a belief in the possibility of spiritual health.

M. Sartre might well have entitled the second volume of his trilogy *La Condition Humaine*, if M. Malraux had not already used the title. The scene of *L'âge de raison* had been almost exclusively Parisian, and confined to a section of Paris. *Le Sursis* embraces the whole of France and parts of Europe. The handful of characters of the first part are almost lost on the crowded canvas presented in the second. Yet, as I hope to show, the essence of the sequel is the further evolution of the notion of liberty in the mind of the hero, Mathieu, under the impact of public events. For *Le Sursis* covers the last week of September, 1938, days of false alarms and phoney peace.

After the break with Marcelle, who is married off very conveniently to Daniel, Mathieu is free to pursue his troubled relations with Ivich. She, however, is spending the long vacation in the provinces and Mathieu is sunbathing in the south of France, and incidentally taking an interest in his sister-in-law. The approach of war makes him more than ever apathetic, reduces his stature, drains

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his capacity to feel. He sees no point in his existence. Even the news of the mobilisation fails to awake his interest. (Ca ne l'ennuyait pas; ça ou autre chose . . . Ca ne l'amuse pas non plus . . .). But he declares that his whole past has been wiped out. 'Il pensa: ils m'ont débarrassé de ma vie'. This train of thought deserves more detailed scrutiny for here if anywhere is an instance of the 'philosophy' gaining the upper hand at the expense of probability, since the passage rests on the supposition that the hero never once foresaw that the years 1918-1938 were going to be *l'entre deux guerres*. (His disciple, Boris, *knew* 'depuis le temps qu'on me répète qu'il va y avoir la guerre' and his whole way of life had been based on this knowledge).

'C'est la guerre. Quelque chose qui ne tenait plus à lui que par un fil se détacha, se tassa et retomba en arrière. C'était sa vie; elle était morte. Morte. Il se retourna, il la regarda . . . L'avenir de Mathieu était là, à découvert, fixe et vitreux, hors de jeu. Mathieu était assis à une table de café, il buvait, il était par delà son avenir, il le regardait et il pensait: "La paix . . ." Mathieu pensa "J'ai eu un avenir pacifique". Un avenir pacifique: il avait aimé, haï, souffert et l'avenir était là, autour de lui, au-dessus de sa tête, partout, comme un océan et chacune de ses rages, chacun de ses malheurs, chacun de ses rires s'alimentait à cet avenir invisible et présent. Un sourire, un simple sourire, c'était une hypothèque sur la paix de lendemain, de l'année suivante, du siècle; sinon je n'aurais jamais osé sourire. Des années et des années de paix future s'étaient déposées par avance sur les choses et les avaient mûries, dorées; prendre sa montre, la poignée d'une porte, une main de femme, c'était prendre la paix entre ses mains. L'après-guerre était un commencement. Le commencement de la paix. On la vivait sans se presser, comme on vit un matin. Le jazz était un commencement, et le cinéma, que j'ai tant aimé, était un commencement. Et le surréalisme. Et le communisme. J'hésitais, je choisisais longuement, j'avais le temps. Le temps, la paix, c'était la même chose. A présent cet avenir est là, à mes pieds, mort. C'était un faux avenir, une imposture. Il regardait ces vingt années qu'il avait vécues étalées, ensoleillées, une plaine marine et il voyait à présent comme elles avaient été: un nombre fini de journées comprimées entre deux hauts murs sans espoir, une période cataloguée, avec un début et une fin, qui figurerait dans les manuels d'histoire sous le nom d'Entre-deux-guerres. Vingt ans: 1918-1938. Seulement vingt ans! Hier ça semblait à la fois plus court et plus long: de toute façon on n'aurait pas eu l'idée de compter, puisque ça n'était pas terminé. A présent, c'est terminé. C'était un faux avenir. Tout ce qu'on a vécu depuis vingt ans, on l'a vécu à faux. Nous étions appliqués et sérieux, nous essayions de comprendre et voilà: ces belles journées avaient un avenir secret et noir, elles nous trompaient, la guerre d'aujourd'hui, la nouvelle Grande Guerre nous les volait par en

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dessous. Nous étions cocus sans le savoir. A présent la guerre est là, ma vie est morte; c'était ça, ma vie : il faut tout reprendre du début. Il chercha un souvenir, n'importe lequel, celui qui renaîtrait le premier, cette soirée qu'il avait passée à Prouse, assis sur la terrasse, mangeant une granite à l'abricot et regardant au loin, dans la poussière, la calme colline d'Assise. Eh! bien, c'était la guerre qu'il aurait fallu lire dans le rougeoiement du couchant. Si j'avais pu, dans les lueurs rousses qui doraiement la table et le parapet, soupçonner une promesse d'orage et de sang, elles m'appartiendraient à présent, du moins aurais-je sauvé ça. Mais j'étais sans méfiance, la glace fondait sur ma langue, je pensais: "Vieux ors, amour, gloire mystique". Et j'ai tout perdu . . .

. . . Il se sentait sinistre et léger: il était nu, on lui avait tout volé. Je n'ai plus rien à moi, pas même mon passé. Mais c'était un faux passé et je ne le regrette pas. Il pensa: ils m'ont débarrassé de ma vie. C'était une vie minable et ratée, Marcelle, Ivich, Daniel, une sale vie, mais ça m'est égal à présent, puisqu'elle est morte. A partir de ce matin, depuis qu'ils ont collé ces affiches blanches sur les murs, toutes les vies sont ratées, toutes les vies sont mortes. Si j'avais fait ce que je voulais, si j'avais pu, une fois, une seule fois, être libre, eh bien ça serait tout de même une sale duperie, puisque j'aurais été libre pour la paix, dans cette paix trompeuse et qu'à présent je serais tout de même ici, face à la mer, appuyé à cette balustrade, avec toutes les affiches blanches derrière mon dos; toutes ces affiches qui parlent de moi, sur tous les murs de France, et qui disent que ma vie est morte et qu'il n'y a jamais eu de paix: ça n'était pas la peine de me donner tant de mal, pas la peine d'avoir tant de remords . . .

This lengthy quotation may serve to make another point. Although French critics, even when hostile to the author's intentions, have praised the style of these novels, there are pages and pages of this kind of thing which strikes me as both wordy and forced. M. Sartre, however, has a talent for reproducing the various styles of slang spoken by the different sections of the nation. Since I have ventured on what should be forbidden ground for the ignorant foreigner, I should add that M. Sartre writes in a style suited to the matter in hand. It does not call attention to itself. But I suspect that a competent critic could make most of the points I have tried to establish through a discussion of the matter, much more effectively by an examination of the language.

But to return to Mathieu. Although the news produces such catastrophic upheavals in his past, the question of the rights and wrongs of the coming war does not arise for him. 'Je pars parce que je ne peux pas faire autrement. Après ça, que cette guerre soit juste ou injuste, pour moi, c'est très secondaire'. He even goes so far as to say, 'Je n'ai jamais pu arriver à me faire une opinion sur ce genre de questions'. He thinks of the war as 'la