

of The Words  
SARTRE'S CONFESSIONS, a review by Paul De Man, NY Review of Books, 1/5/54

"raises controversial issues in a way that no truly autobiographical bk can...  
fails to arouse sympathy of this sort" (like Rousseau's Confessions, etc.) but it  
does propose a thesis. The Words is thus not the kind of book it pretends to be."

"It is a combination of 2 not altogether compatible texts, written several yrs. apart  
...Since 1954, however, Sartre's concept of pol. action became a great deal less  
one-sided, desp. in "Writing", the 2nd part of the bk., a much more ambivalent posi-  
tion begins to emerge."

re 1st part: "an autobiog. in name only. It constitutes in fact another pamphlet."  
" " " ; "extraordinary tightness & rigor of composition, qualities that seem  
oddly incompatible with the autobiog-genre."  
Rousseau & other autobiog "possess the quality of authenticity" missing here.

"None of these events is narrated as it might have appeared  
to a child who witnessed them; we are instead plunged directly into a highly de-  
veloped social & ideol. world...The portrait is well composed & subtle; it is  
conveyed with great economy of words, every detail significant—entirely different  
from Rousseau's random & subj. impressions..."

love & intellectualism "a sinister comedy." He creates types "composite character  
who summarize a sociological & ideological reality. The description of the types seems  
valid enough, the indictment quite convincing. What is misleading however (and  
leading in a very bourgeois, idealistic way) is to present such a type AS IF IT  
WERE an actual experience, to present a composite, org'd., symbolical entity AS  
IF IT WERE part of own childhood."

*Philosophical Unknown*

robs characters of their individuality. "short-circuiting by a formal literary  
trick the whole complex dialectic that leads from the particular to the typical"  
\*\*\*\*\* (ff should have said: from the singular to the general)

"S's brisk narrative which artfully mixes reminiscence with reflection, contains  
in effect a full-fledged clinical essay on the experience of alienation."  
\*\*\*\*\* If use instead: deceptively simple. Then: shock of narrowness of vision."

the day his mother gives him children's books to read lit. becomes for him an  
interminable daydream. "Some of the best passages in The Words retell the heroic ro-  
mances in which Jean-Paul is allowed to master all the situations with which he is  
unable to cope in reality." "The case history is so neat that the conclusion  
forces itself upon the reader: S chose the autobiog. form for a book that is, to a  
large extent, an ideological essay..."

NB NB ("the resistance having been a  
privileged way of reconciling ideology &  
action")

(ff It is as if he said to himself: They think childhood is a happy & harmonious  
per.; I'll prove the ppp. They think nature is that happy stance; I'll show its  
absence. They consider isolation & solitude symbols of superiority; I'll show  
it is but another aspect of reality. They think lit. is creation itself; I'll  
demonstrate its sweat & tears or plainly absurd as in child's imagination!)

JS and his Meek  
Pr. J. W. in a P. H.

...and Miller Verne, who are Bill with himself.  
With all the coolness of the final impression left by The World  
War, and the last analysis, we remain with an awareness of a  
man who "now has recourse to ideology (as he formerly did to  
his own neurosis—and not too successfully at that)."

The reviewer here however goes all awry by bldg. still another thesis, to the effect that the romantic his. consciousness declined into the materialism (dia). otherwise that made many historically oriented minds forget their own idealist origins! S's wavering can be traced to this misconceived anti-romanticism." It isn't that S has "forgotten" his idealist beginning. Quite the contrary. He never really shakes them off; with or without materialism they are the marrow of his bones.

"an inconclusive book, partly ideological, partly psychological in a narrow sense, anti-literary at times, but inconsistently so... No effort is made to recapture the quality of an inner crisis... The Words is not yet the work that gives us back those who, for a moment, came close to speaking for an entire generation."

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