

of The Words
SARTRE'S CONFESSIONS, a review by Paul de Man, NY Review of Books 11/5/64

"raises controversial issues in a way that no truly autobiographical bk. can avoid"

"fails to arouse empathy 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, esp. in "Writing", the 2nd part of the bk., a much more ambivalent position 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 developed 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 characters" who summarize a sociological & ideological reality. The description of these 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.

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

"S's brisk narrative which artfully mixes reminiscence with reflection, contains in fact 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 his children's books to read lit. becomes for him an interminable daydream. "Some of the best passages in The Words retell the heroic romances 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")

(if it is as if he said to himself: They think childhood is a happy & harmonious period; I'll prove the opp. 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)

... Miles versus Buffalo Bill with himself...
... the final impression left by The words...
... the last analysis, we remain with an awareness of a...
... a man who 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 (dial. or the wise) that made many historically oriented minds forget their own idealist origins. S's waverings can be traced to this misconceived anti-romanticism." It is not that S has "forgotten" his idealist beginning. Quite the contrary. He has usually shaken 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 a man who, for a moment, came close to speaking for an entire generation."

Handwritten notes:
The Reviewer
has not
been
checked out
with the
reviewer

Handwritten notes:
Fendley's
about his reflections
in his conclusions?