

On Sartre's *Le Mur* and Other Stories, Albert Camus

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Jean-Paul Sartre, whose *La Nausée* was reviewed in this column, has just published a collection of short stories in which the strange and bitter themes of his first novel appear once more, in a different form. Men sentenced to death, a madman, a sexual pervert, a man suffering from impotence, and a homosexual make up the characters in these stories.

One might wonder at the bias of these choices. But already, in *La Nausée*, the author's aim was to turn an exceptional case into an everyday story. It is at the far boundaries of the heart and instinct that M. Sartre finds his inspiration.

But this needs further definition. One can prove that the most ordinary person is already a monster of perversity and that, for example, we all more or less wish for the death of those we love. At least, such is the aim of a certain kind of literature. It does not seem to me that this is M. Sartre's aim.

And, at the risk of being perhaps a shade oversubtle, I would say that his aim is to show that the most perverse of creatures acts, reacts, and describes himself in exactly the same way as the most ordinary. And if there were a criticism to be made, it would concern only the use the author makes of obscenity.

Obscenity in literature can attain a certain grandeur. It certainly contains an element of grandeur, if one thinks for instance of Shakespeare's. But at least obscenity must be called for by the work itself. And while this may be the case for "*Erostrate*" in *Le Mur*, I cannot say the same for *Intimité*, where the sexual descriptions often seem gratuitous.

M. Sartre has a certain taste for impotence, both in the larger meaning of the word and in its physiological sense, which leads him to choose characters who have arrived at the limits of their selves, stumbling over an absurdity they cannot overcome. The obstacle they come up against is their own lives, and I will go so far as to say that they do so through an excess of liberty.

These beings, with no attachments, no principles, no Ariadne's thread, are so free they disintegrate, deaf to the call of action or creation. A single problem preoccupies them, and they have not defined it. From this stems both the immense interest and the absolute mastery of M. Sartre's stories.

Whether one takes young Lucien, who begins with surrealism and ends in the *Action Française*; Eve, whose husband is insane and who wants at all costs to penetrate into the mad domain from which she is excluded; or the hero of "*Erostrate*"; everything these characters do, say, or feel is unexpected.

And from the moment they are introduced to us there is no clue as to what they will do in the next. M. Sartre's art lies in the detail with which he depicts his absurd creatures, the way he observes their monotonous behavior. He describes, suggesting very little but patiently following his characters and attributing importance only to their most futile actions.

It would not be surprising to learn that at the very moment he begins his story, the author himself is not sure where it will lead him. Yet the fascination such a story evokes is undeniable. One cannot put it down, and soon the reader too acquires that higher, absurd freedom which leads the characters to their own ends.

For his characters are, in fact, free. But their liberty is of no use to them. At least, this is what M. Sartre demonstrates. And doubtless this explains the often overwhelming emotional impact of these pages as well as their cruel pathos. For in this universe man is free of the shackles of his prejudices,

sometimes from his own nature, and, reduced to self- contemplation, becomes aware of his profound indifference to everything that is not himself. He is alone, enclosed in this liberty.

It is a liberty that exists only in time, for death inflicts on it a swift and dizzying denial. His condition is absurd. He will go no further, and the miracles of those mornings when life begins anew have lost all meaning for him.

How does one remain lucid confronted with such truths? It is normal for such beings, deprived of human recreations—the movies, love, or the Legion of Honor—to regress to an inhuman world where they will this time forge their own chains: madness, sexual mania, or crime. Eve wants to go mad. The protagonist of "Erostrate" wants to commit a crime, and Lulu wants to live with her impotent husband.

Those who escape these turnabouts or who do not complete them can always yearn for the self-annihilation they offer. And, in the best of these short stories, *La Chambre*, Eve watches her husband's delirium and tortures herself to discover the secret of this universe in which she would like to be absorbed, of this isolated room in which she would like to sleep with the door forever closed.

This intense and dramatic universe, this brilliant yet colorless depiction, are a good definition of M. Sartre's work and its appeal. And one can already speak of "the work" of an author who, in two books, has known how to get straight to the essential problem and bring it to life through his obsessive characters. A great writer always brings his own world and its message. M. Sartre's brings us to nothingness, but also to lucidity.

And the image he perpetuates through his characters, of a man seated amid the ruins of his life, is a good illustration of the greatness and truth of this work.

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