The Splenetic Utopian

Sartre: Ideologue of Our Time, by Thomas Molnar. *New York: Funk & Wagnalls, 1968. 143 pp. $5.95.*

PROFESSOR MOLNAR is so unobtrusively informative over such a wide field that one reaches the end of his book with the wish that it might have been longer—a most unusual experience for a reviewer. Short though it is, however, the book goes a long way toward explaining the curious seductiveness for post-1945 intellectuals of a writer so verbose and sometimes so tedious as Sartre, whose dense and rigid intellectuality is unlit by any gleam of practical and humane sagacity, and whose style Professor Molnar aptly describes as "at once recondite, categorical, and violent."

Sartre has nevertheless been one of the most influential propagators in the mid-twentieth century of that perennial heresy which has flourished with exceptional vigor throughout the last two centuries, the heresy of utopianism. The Sartrian version of it has probably had more appeal for radical humanists than those of any of his rival contemporary heresiarchs; though the theories of Lévi-Strauss, which Molnar ingeniously shows to be based on a peculiar and unusual version of the same heresy, appear now to be replacing those of Sartre as the fashionable intellectual pastime of French radicals.

Yet what a long run Sartre has had, and how remarkably his political evolution has corresponded, not to the objective facts, but to the psychological evolution of the alienated radical intelligentsia of his time. And what a lamentable evolution it has been! While preaching loyalty through

thick and thin to the official Communist leadership in Russia and its delegate, the Communist Party in France, he has seen France fall more and more completely under the sway of a virulently nationalistic bourgeois leader, who remained in power with the approval of Moscow, against token opposition disguising powerful tacit support (as was clearly seen in May 1968) from the French Communist Party. Small wonder that during the 1960s Sartre has moved away, as Molnar puts it, "from the rather disappointing course of the European and Russian communists and into the camp of the ultimate revolution, that is, of the Chinese, Cubans, Africans, Arabs. . . ." or that he has "philosophically justified their methods: terror, violence, guerrilla fighting, and the unleashing of dramatic emotions. . . ." Small wonder, too, that he has found nothing relevant to say to the revolutionaries on his own doorstep, the French students, towards whom the Communist Party is repressive in a subtler and more effective way than was de Gaulle.

But the scope of Professor Molnar's criticism is much broader than these merely political considerations might suggest. He sees Sartre as an outstanding modern exponent of the immanentist utopian philosophy. "Sartre's enterprise," he asserts, "is stamped with the characteristic features of the modern (and ancient) attempts to find salvation for the individual in the collective, and in a postulated terminal point of history or evolution." A man in whom the world around him inspires nausea, and little else, is likely to feel few scruples about sacrificing the present to an imaginary future; a man who lacks faith in individuals is likely to deify the collective; and a man who lacks all sense of the transcendental is almost certain to believe that some kind of emergent value is creating itself out of non-value, or in other words that matter can give rise to something better than itself—which is equivalent to believing that corrupt trees can bear good fruit and figs be gathered from thistles. This last belief is characteristic of nearly all immanentist utopians, but Sartre appears to possess the other two characteristics as well.

With a good conscience, therefore, the utopian can terrorize or sacrifice the real humanity which he knows and dislikes in the name of the ideal humanity which he foresees as the goal of evolution or revolution. But Professor Molnar makes only a restrained use of this kind of facile denunciation, though some of his quotations from Sartre would entirely justify it. For example, the Sartrian view of political terror: that it is the condition of solidarity, because it guarantees that "my neighbor will remain my brother." A strange conception of brotherhood! On the other hand, he takes into account that Sartre is not only a voluminous but also a superficially versatile and sometimes a brilliant writer, and that he is courageous, dedicated, and, according to his lights, sincere. He touches lightly upon the psychological aspect of Sartre's misanthropy (the "bastard" complex) and he concentrates mainly, as is fitting in a short study, upon the process by which Sartre adapted his existentialism, derived from Husserl and Heidegger, so as to fit it into the framework of Marxism, which he has come to regard as more than merely a philosophy. He calls it "the climate of our ideas, the milieu which feeds us; the true movement of what Hegel calls Objective Spirit." Professor Molnar succeeds in clarifying this process with grace, lucidity, and erudition, without the use of any exotic jargon and with no ostentatious display or scholastic "apparatus."

But the story he has to tell is a sad one. Utopianism is probably an ineradicable human weakness, but it is a shocking commentary on the twentieth century that it should have favored such a mean-spirited version of it, formulated by a philosopher whose basic mood is disgust and whose characteristic descriptions of the universe of nature employ adjectives so pathetically revealing, psychologically, as dull, tepid, sticky, viscous, nauseating, and obscene. A typical philosophy of decadence. Yet it is

linked, as Professor Molnar convincingly shows, with all those other utopianisms that reject the transcendental and take for granted a historical process automatically tending to turn man into God. To put it in the crudest and most elementary psychological terms, what Sartrian existentialism does is to deny the reality of good and evil and make freedom its supreme value; from which it follows that necessity takes the place of evil. And since it is impossible to abolish necessity, the only way out is to pretend that necessity is the same as freedom —which is what communism does, while reserving to itself the right to decide what is necessary. But the philosophical process by which Sartre evolved from existentialism to Marxism and attempted to reconcile the two is highly complex, and it would be unwise to condense any further the author's masterly summary of it.

We will not attempt to do so. But since one of the ways of combating decadence is to practice eternal vigilance against its incursions into one's own and everybody else's language, we will conclude this review with two quibbles (one of which has nothing to do with the author). First, is it already too late to save the distinction between the words "gratuity" and "gratuitousness?" In this book the word "gratuity," which properly means a money present or tip, is used as a synonym for "gratuitousness" (just as the word "disinterested," which means impartial or unbiased by self-interest, has already become, for many writers, a synonym for "uninterested"). Second, on page 2 we find the perfectly grammatical statement that "the importance of Sartre is evident for whoever wishes to go beyond . . . etc." This statement is quoted on the book's wrapper, having been "corrected" to read: ". . . . is evident for whomever wishes . . ."

To whoever wishes to preserve the English language, and to those for whom the rules of grammar are of interest, this little protest will probably have seemed worth making.

Reviewed by Sir Richard Rees