

NEW ATTACK ON THE IVORY TOWERS

(Written for "The Listener" by KAY)

HAVE you heard the new word? It is "existentialism," and sounds like another of those -isms added to a pile already mountainous: impressionism, dadaism, cubism, pointillism, symbolism, surrealism, and the rest of them. Note that most of them come from France.

This formidable word is now sweeping the capitals of Europe, and New York as well. No doubt, after many a month, it will eventually reach the literary circles out here—that is, if the movement which it represents has not died in the meantime. As we know, movements can spring and die so quickly that they are sometimes scarcely born before they are dead.

In Paris to-day the dominating figure in intellectual circles is Jean Paul Sartre and he is the exponent of this new philosophy of Existentialism. It has made such an impression on the French public that when Sartre recently gave a lecture on the subject the hall was mobbed by people, chiefly women, trying to get in.

What, then, is this new idea that all the fuss is about? Is it merely another new cult or does it presage something of real importance? It is impossible to predict at this early stage.

Existentialism, so I read (and in Paris it is more often termed Sartism, after its founder), involves the theory that man must create his own essence by throwing himself into world affairs, suffering and battling for what he believes. And it affirms that every man is free because he can always choose or reject his lot.

Above all, it is the theory that one cannot stand apart from life, but one must consciously take sides. To abstain from taking part in the stream of current events merely means, according to Sartre, that a man is refusing to take his responsibility or to exercise his liberty. (It really begins to look as if the Ivory Tower is now untenable).

An Opposition School

Twice within a week we meet this new word, this time in a most unlikely place. Who would hope to find news about it in a smart American fashion journal where we expect to see new hats, dresses, and coiffures, but hardly this new word expounding what is apparently a new approach to life. Two groups of photographs are shown—one of the poet W. H. Auden and Sartre who, according to the text, have been influenced by the Danish philosopher Kierkegaard. The other group shows photographs of Gerald Heard, Aldous Huxley, and Christopher Isherwood, and the caption runs: "a non-Existential school of 'To Be' represented by Heard, Huxley and Isherwood."

George Dangerfield, who supplies the information in his article "To Be Is News," also speaks of this new word which is now beginning to circulate in New York. "When I began to ask what the word meant," he writes, "the answers which I received and the literature to

which I was directed seemed to indicate that it was some kind of word game, the rules of which were vague and at which it was permissible to cheat. It was only when I narrowed the search down to really informed quarters that I began dimly to realise that Existentialism is a serious philosophy and that it deserves serious attention."

To elucidate a little further George Dangerfield goes on: "Existentialism is the philosophy of self-realisation in the sense that it propounds the eternally terrifying question, Why do I exist? And it is because it lays the burden of answering the question squarely upon the individual that it seems to have a peculiar relevance for to-day."

And later, on he says: "New philosophies rarely, perhaps never, emerge unless they reflect something of the passions, the urgencies, and the tensions of the contemporary scene. Because you have not heard of Existentialism does not mean that Existentialism has not heard of you."

This explains very little. A new word that may mean a new approach to life's problems has arrived here and probably its meaning will arrive later. At any rate it seems to be established that on the literary side Sartre is the example of the new vigour of France and of the determination of its people to shape their own destiny.

France is Awake

A new light on Sartre as an important dramatist is given by Alexandre Astruc in the 1945 *New Writing and Daylight*. Astruc devotes several pages to a criticism of Sartre's play *Huis Clos*, and ends by saying: "This play is underpinned by a dialogue wonderfully bare and effective, a dialogue that attains a pathos more direct and stark than any to be found on the stage of to-day, where facile versifying holds sway everywhere."

In the meantime a keen activity is showing itself in the creative life of France. In music, ballet, film, painting and literature a new life is springing. The film *Les Enfants du Paradis*, directed by Jean-Louis Barrault, is reputed to be one of the finest films to come out of France for the last five years. It has been bought by Arthur Rank and so may be shown in England and even in New Zealand.

According to Marguerite Higgins "the youthful spirit of the new *Ballet des Champs Elysees*, its thrilling innovations in choreography and décor have captured the imagination of Paris."

She goes on to say that Paris is richer in music to-day than any city in the world. "Paris can claim five long-established concert orchestras which, in contrast to American custom, are not philanthropic foundations but musicians' co-operatives."

In art we hear of the new group of Irrealists. Whether Irrealism is a step ahead of Surrealism, a step aside or a step back, it is a move of some sort. We out here cannot know or guess at this stage. Things are certainly moving in France.

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