

TWO FRENCHMEN OF THE MOMENT

THE names of the two contemporary Frenchmen who figure below in extracts from "The New Yorker" should already be familiar to a good many of our readers. Vercors (or, to give him his real name, Jean Bruller) is the author of "The Silence of the Sea," which won a great deal of favourable comment when it was produced as a radio play by the NBS recently. Jean-Paul Sartre is the prophet of a new philosophy known as Existentialism, which has already divided France into two camps and is also beginning to cause intellectuals in other countries to trip over the party lines. It was the subject of a recent "Listener" contribution. But here "The New Yorker" gives an impression of the men themselves, in interviews secured during visits they have just made to the U.S.A.

Sartre Resartus

JEAN-PAUL SARTRE, a very short, very cheerful Parisian, lectured at the Carnegie Chamber Music Hall, New York, recently, without provoking a riot or a single refined cry of "Salaud!" or "Fumiste!", the latter, and milder, of which terms means "faker." For M. Sartre, who is at once the foremost French dramatist of the war years and the father of a new and frequently discussed way of looking at the world, known as Existentialism, the decorum of intellectual life here is one of the charms of New York. In Paris his public appearances, even unofficial ones in literary cafés, often precipitate free-for-alls.

The lecture, which we attended (continues *The New Yorker*), was about new tendencies in the French theatre and was delivered under the auspices of *View*, a local intellectual review edited by a young man named Charles Henri Ford.

Man of Few Words

M. Sartre, a rumpled little man who wears tortoise-shell glasses with very large lenses, wound a shepherd's-check scarf about his neck as soon as he stepped down from the lecture platform. He told us at once that he approves of New York without qualification. "Here there are no restaurants of an exclusively intellectual clientèle," he said, "So it's easy to keep out of fights. Also the hotels have the very good custom of throwing out the guests after a sojourn of three or five days. I prefer three. If one takes the precaution of leaving no forwarding address, it is impossible for anybody interested in literature to find one. So one never risks being bored. One is free to promenade oneself in the streets, but relieved of the necessity of conversion. That is, if one has taken the precaution not to learn spoken English. I have guarded myself well from it, although I read. Two phrases only are necessary for a whole evening of English conversation, I have found: 'Scotch and Soda?' and 'Why not?' By alternating them, it is impossible to make a mistake." We mumbled M. Sartre's first phrase, he answered with the second, and we went to the nearest bar and continued our conversation, in French.

M. Sartre believes in economy of words inside the theatre as well as out. "The trouble with most plays," he says, "may be expressed in the simple phrase 'What a lot of words!' In the French theatre before the war there were too many words, too many characters, too many scenes. The war has perhaps not sufficiently affected the American theatre." A local producer named Oliver Smith, who has taken over the American rights to Sartre's Paris hit *Huis Clos*, tentatively translated as *No Exit*, may

have difficulty finding enough words in it to satisfy an American audience. It runs barely an hour and a-half. That, M. Sartre feels, is M. Smith's problem.

Sartre has made two trips to the United States since the liberation of France. He had never been here before. He first arrived in January, 1945, with a party of French journalists brought over by the O.W.I. to view and write about the American war effort. "I am not a journalist," he explained, "but I had always wanted to see America." He stayed four months that time, travelling all over the place, and quickly concluded that he would like the country immensely if he were not under the constant necessity of visiting war factories. He does not like factories. Besides, since he was travelling with an escorted official party, he could be found without much trouble and was continually annoyed by literary people. This time he came on a mission for the Service of Cultural Relations of the French Government.

As for Existentialism, a doctrine, which he first adumbrated in the seven hundred pages of *L'Être et le Néant* ("Being and Nothingness") and which has been commented upon in several million words since then, most of them angry, we shall not try to explain it here. One French interpreter of the system says it is the first French philosophy of international class since Descartes, and another inquires, "May it not be, in truth, the hieroglyphic for a Fascism which dares not avow itself?" Sartre would seem to be immune from the charge of Fascism, since he was a member of the National Council of the Resistance in France during the occupation. But just to give you an idea of what Existentialism is like, this is a quote from his novel *La Nausée* ("Nausea"), written in 1938:

Nothing has changed but everything exists differently. I can't describe it; it is like nausea but it is just the antithesis: finally adventure comes to me and when I ask myself about it, I see that it has come about that I am I and that I am here; it is I who cleave the night, I am as happy as the hero of a novel.

The last we saw of M. Sartre, he had spotted a taxi a hundred feet away and was cleaving the night to get to it, and he was he and he was there, and there was no doubt about it.

A Man of Parts

JEAN BRULLER, a French artist who was known before the war for drawings with such subjects as frustrated people walking down lonely streets pursued by a little yellow devil is in the United States now, and we had a talk with him a few days ago at the Coffee House Club, New York, just before he started on a tour of the interior. He lectures as and is known as Vercors, a name he made famous by his writings during the German occupation of France—a peculiar case of a second artistic identity swallowing a fairly well-established first. Bruller, or Vercors (he has, or had, also a third name, since he lived through the occupation as Jean Desvignes), is a slight, bright-eyed man with delicate features and hands, dark hair, and a look of being about ten years younger than he really is.

He was born on February 26, 1902, the centenary of Victor Hugo's birthday, a detail he considers significant. He became the best-known unknown writer of France after publishing, in February, 1942, the fifteen-thousand-word novella *Le Silence de la Mer*, for which he used the Vercors signature for the first time. It was the first book to appear in France without the knowledge of the occupants, and most critics, in and out of France, considered it a remarkably good one.

What Frightens Him Most

Before Bruller was a painter, he was an electrical engineer. His lectures are not about the Resistance in France, which for him is just something that happened, but about the danger of the

atomic bomb. A feature of the contemporary world that particularly frightens him is the progressive indifference of human beings to the concept of death. "When I was a boy in Paris," he told us, "my mother talked for years about the tragic end of two balloonists who had fallen into a city street. She remembered all the details. It had happened before I was born, but when I was ten years old she was still talking about it. I will never forget it. And now what newspapers would give more than a couple of lines to such a small accident? We are so inured to the terrible that the deaths of five million Jews in Poland hardly interest us. The danger of the bomb lies in this collapse of the overburdened imagination."

Bruller, who was just too young for the other war, performed his military service as a lieutenant in Tunisia in the early 'twenties. Like most young intellectuals of his time, he was a pacifist and in pre-Nazi days favoured a Franco-German *rapprochement*. He believes that there is no hope of such friendship now. After the 1940 armistice (he had, of course, been called back to the Army in 1939), he was so disgusted with the world that he felt he never wanted to draw again. So he hired out as a journeyman carpenter in a country town near the place where he was demobilised, which was in the Vercors region.

He got drawn into the nascent Resistance. First he passed messages and that sort of thing for the French branch of the British Intelligence Service. Then, in the fall of 1941, while on a visit to Paris, he met a friend who knew a patriotic editor who was planning a clandestine intellectual review. The friend asked Bruller for a manuscript, and Bruller started to write one. It turned out to be *Le Silence de la Mer*. By the time he had finished it, the editor had been arrested and executed. So Bruller, on top of his other troubles, suffered the torment of an author with a manuscript and no way to utter it. He decided to get it printed and distributed as a book, and he actually did so. In fact, he founded a clandestine publishing house, Aux Editions de Minuit, which functioned throughout the occupation and printed forty-odd books, including a translation of John Steinbeck's *The Moon is Down*.

The secret of Bruller's identity was so well kept during the occupation that even his wife didn't know he was Vercors. He got a lot of work done—another novella and a flock of short stories, articles, and poems, which were published, and about a third of a full-length novel. No publishers' cocktail parties, no lectures, no literary controversies, nothing to distract him from his work except the Gestapo.



"You don't have an aspirin, do you?"