

## Bypassing Edgar

THE FLIES, and IN CAMERA. By Jean-Paul Sartre. Hamish Hamilton.

SARTRE belongs to a school; perhaps I should say the school belongs to him, as he is its greatest writer. He adheres to the philosophy called existentialism. That word is a little more graceful in French, but in English it is so hideous that I ask your leave to substitute the code name "Edgar."

Edgar, elusive, austere in manners, is an adept at hiding from observation in a thicket of words. When you do run him to earth, you notice that he is wild-eyed and is apt to break out at any moment into peals of inconsequential laughter or make with his hand some embarrassingly lewd gesture, but this should not hide from you his intense seriousness and his capacity for courage, for stoicism. But even one of his admirers has called him "gratuitously paradoxical"; then some of his cleverest remarks seem on closer examination to boil down to something like this: "This thing is, therefore everything that is not this thing, is not it, and what is not, is

not." Could Edgar and I make ourselves clearer?

Edgar's way of life has been described as "to have both youthful libido and balanced dignity of personality, even though one knows that one's life work is going to fail. To be positive, harmonious, and extroverted in the midst of one's deepest introversion, pessimism, and neurosis, that is the dialectic *Existenz* and the mark of greatness." (R. Friedmann in *Horizon*, December, 1944.) Edgar then has guts. Don't let me give you the idea that Edgar is by way of being a bore, but to please is not his object.

AS to how Edgar's ideas translate themselves into literature, Sartre may speak for him. Sartre believes that literature should be responsible, should take sides in the social struggle, should accept the fact that the writer is born into a particular time. "We are convinced . . . that one cannot sneak away. Were we as dumb and immobile as stones, our very passivity would be an action . . . by becoming a part of the uniqueness of our time, we finally merge

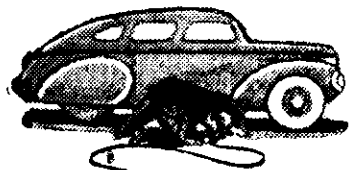
with the eternal and it is our task as writers to cast light on the eternal values which are involved in these social and political disputes."

In practice Edgar's own literary ventures constitute a form of realism, but the cynical courage which is the constant background of his thought will often lead him to make a stand for a moral idea. Edgar, whatever his eccentricities, is after all a moralist. It is the old gambit once again, the heresy of the totalitarian state (whether Fascist or Communist): "literature must make itself useful, must serve the cause." It is a strange thing that so many have been so blind for so long, that such irrelevancies as the gods' persecution of Ulysses, the amours of Clerk Saunders, the passion of Lear, and the misconduct of Moll Flanders should have pre-occupied the minds of writers through so many centuries. It is Edgar himself whom I find irrelevant. The palaver is finished.

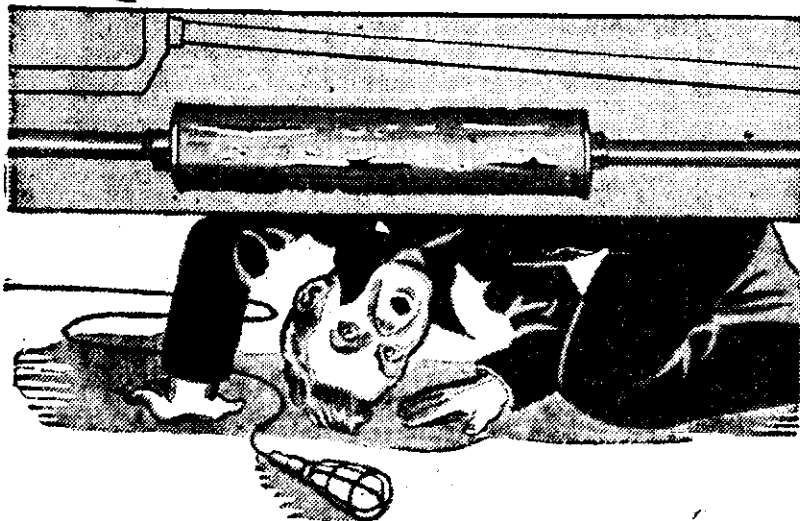
SARTRE can stand alone. His work does not need the support of a theory. It is understandable that he should be so ready to put himself in a posture to take the whole weight of the world's woes on his shoulders, when we remember the agony of the German occupation of France. Sartre wrote for the resistance movement, for the clandestine presses which never gave up. But

his plays were produced openly. In *The Flies* there is much to be plucked out to keep warm in a French bosom the cherished hatred of France's enemies, but what could be "safer" than a play whose theme is drawn from the drama of ancient Greece? Who could possibly identify Zeus with Hitler or Aegistheus with a more virile Pétain? But this play is not allegory or parable. It is the moral strength of Orestes, his unswerving courage, or the defiance of Electra, which interprets the French resistance. It is the noisome atmosphere of Argos with the nastiness of its guilt-obsessed population which interprets the France which collaborated.

I suspect that it will not be many years before the political background of *The Flies* will be as little remembered or understood as the political allusions in Shakespeare, that is, temporarily, until an examination has been passed. *The Flies* is a supreme work of art. It brings to mind these words of William Butler Yeats, written when he was recovering from an illness: " . . . life returned as an impression of the uncontrollable energy and daring of the great creators; it seemed that but for journalism and criticism, all that evasion and explanation, the world would be torn to pieces." Even though they should be cursed with the sinister power of preventing the dismemberment of the



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