

BOOKS

Two French Moralists

THERESE. By *François Mauriac*. Eyre and Spottiswoode.

THE REPRIEVE. By *Jean-Paul Sartre*. Hamish Hamilton.

THE main difference between a tall cascade tumbling down a cliff and a mountain torrent sprawling down, now between great boulders, now through deep craggy gorges or over wide shingle flats, is one of pattern. Both are volumes of water reaching the same point by much the same means. Both exhibit an unstayable power, pure, inevitable, a force of nature. But the one has a definite and satisfying shape, creating an effect almost of a languid stillness, while the other, noisily energetic, distressingly dissolute and unseizable, can only be seen as something clearly defined from a great height or a great distance.

May I apply this parable of falling water to these two translated novels? Mauriac, whose chief interest in writing is the struggle between good and evil, here makes a study of an evil woman (who is, after all, somewhat good) which is clear, finished, graceful, and concentrated. Sartre, full of doctrinaire ambition, attempts the study of an epoch, the whole of French society at the moment of a bitter crisis. Such an attempt was almost certain to fail, by the artistic standards we are used to, but it achieves a precarious and untidy success by overturning those very standards, by reminding us, in fact, with force and gusto, that standards of criticism are deduced from how people write and have only a limited validity as programmes for how they may choose to write in the future.

It is only occasionally in the history of a people that political events seriously impinge on private events. France has had more than her share of such happenings—the Revolution, the two Napoleons, 1870, and at last Munich and its end-result, the Occupation. The British Commonwealth shared Munich, its shame and false hopes, with the French, but it did not share the Occupation. It is those four years of agony that give retrospective bitterness to France's Munich. A serious weakness of *The Reprieve* is its implicit wisdom after-the-event. It is not a portrait of the French people during that memorable week, September 23 to 30, 1938, so much as a conjuring up of how the French might have behaved gifted tacitly with a premonition of doom. When M. Birnenschatz, the diamond merchant, at the news of the pact lays down his spectacles and folds his newspaper with meticulous care, it is not he but Sartre who says, "I feel ashamed." The political intention of the book is not deeply enough buried in its artistic purpose. None the less we must hand it to Sartre for the skill with which he has used a political event, against all the auguries, as the unifying principle in this sprawling great novel.

THE ordinary reader, even if he has read *The Age of Reason* (*The Reprieve* is the second novel in a trilogy), will be seriously teased by the abrupt changes of scene. Even in the same sentence we switch from the world of

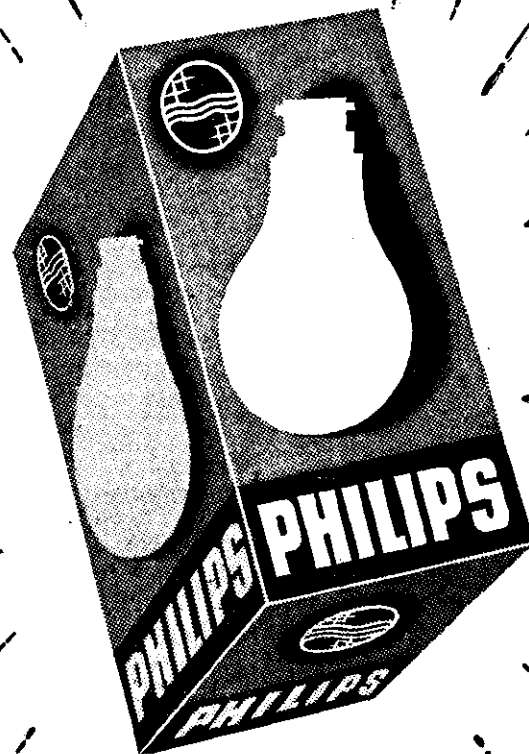
one group of characters into the world of an entirely different group. No doubt it is fair to portray an epoch which was so like a bad dream by the arbitrary transitions of a dream. Once this initial demand on the attention has been conceded him, Sartre's characters, young, old, clever, stupid, wavering, firm, impose on us their own passionate self-absorption. Sartre has the eye for significant detail which is the main ingredient in literary power. True, he is an existentialist who elsewhere can deafen you with the clamour of his theory; here this is forgotten and appears only in the fact that his detail is so often squalid. The invalids being evacuated complete with bedpans and their rich though warped emotional life are a typical existentialist fantasy. We may complain of some characters that they do not live widely enough, that we do not see their birth certificates, know their entire family histories, and follow them from childhood to the grave. But we know the moral and social predicament of each in September, 1938, the men nearly all called up, the women watching them go. The real hero-heroine of the book is France, the French people, and if there are villains, it is the *munichois*, the potential rich collaborators, or the politicians, Daladier (poor Daladier, Sartre never allows him to light up a fresh cigarette; he always has the smoked-out dead butt hanging from his lip) or Chamberlain, who makes some grotesque appearances. But this brilliant and complex novel does not altogether lend itself to such simplifications. Too great an emphasis on its political background may do its skill in complicated and ingenious narrative serious injustice.

THERESE DESQUEYREUX did not poison a nation. She only tried to do that humble office for a husband, was found out, tried, and acquitted. Bernard was eminently the sort of husband who is better dead, Thérèse's intellectual inferior, dominated by love of property and respect for his dull and predatory family. (One wonders whether the Frenchman's exaggerated deference to his family does not flow, like that of the Chinese to his, from the comparative anarchy and disunity of his politics.) Thérèse is *morally* innocent, we feel, though technically guilty. She holds our sympathy throughout the first novel, more sinned against than sinning. In the two short stories about her and in the final novel (all collected in this one volume), her bravado, the corrupt and aimless life she has led once she has repudiated respectability, tend to alienate the reader's regard. People who are reputed bad have a way of becoming bad.

Both novels in this volume are clear, serious, and definitely aimed. Mauriac does not bite off more than he can chew. He has a gift for concentration, for finding high tragedy in the intense scrutiny of the soul of one woman.

Sartre and Mauriac have little in common as artists: as men much—they are both moralists, both too powerful to be facile, both obsessed by the essential strangeness and mystery of every human being.

—David Hall



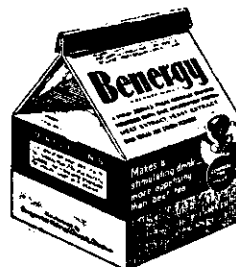
PHILIPS ELECTRICAL INDUSTRIES OF NEW ZEALAND LIMITED.

PL 5



ADD
BENERGY

TO SOUPS, GRAVIES, STEWS



Here's a different, appetising way to make ordinary stew dishes taste exciting — fit for a king — add BENERGY. More than just a flavouring, BENERGY has high, quickly absorbed, food value. A wholesome combination of vegetable, yeast and meat extracts to add body and nourishment to soups, gravies and vegetable dishes.

From all chemists and grocers—new type 8oz. carton, 2/1½

B.2.10