

Mouthing Basic Existentialism

THE BLOOD OF OTHERS. By Simone de Beauvoir. New York: Alfred A. Knopf. 1948. 292 pp. \$3.

Reviewed by RICHARD McLAUGHLIN

THE austere, clear-cut prose of Simone de Beauvoir's "The Blood of Others" reads like a catechism by a novice whose purity and singlemindedness leave no room for boudoir dalliance or sundry high jinks. Less diffuse, if less sensational, than Sartre, Mme. de Beauvoir reveals herself to be "la plus Existentialiste des Existentialistes."

In Sartre's novels there is far more irony, since he deals with characters who have yet to become existentialists; and because he would like to show us how they founder in their own rationalizations, he allows them to talk on and on, revealing how they have lost the will to act as a result of an excess of principles. Simone de Beauvoir's characters are practising existentialists, literally mouthpieces for the basic tenets of the philosophy. It would seem that she has succeeded where Sartre has failed. She violates some of our conceptions of good narrative writing, true; but she has written the real thesis novel in an economical, sometimes flat style which conceals a remarkably sustained note of suspense and mounting excitement due to the sheer vitality and force of her ideas. This is perhaps the way a novel of ideas should be presented, not loosely sprawling all over the place, trying to appeal to three or four levels at the same time.

Of course what we seem to forget in comparing Simone de Beauvoir to Sartre is that each one, aside from having his or her own distinctive method of approach to the existential doctrine is, in this specific instance, writing about two different periods in the political and social life of France. Sartre writes of France in 1938, when the most humane, well-intentioned Frenchman was locked in a paralytic vise of indecision, and artist and artisan wished to shift his own responsibility to his neighbor, or actually do nothing about opposing Hitler or aiding the Spanish loyalists for fear of becoming himself involved in danger. Mme. de Beauvoir's novel deals with the tense days before the fall of France, and the period of trial and error and final glorified action that followed with the Resistance. It illustrates vividly and in a most succinct fashion that existentialism is not a philosophy of complete despair but a philosophical movement which, in mirroring shattered postwar Europe,

is in continual development and consequently apt to be at times contradictory in principle.

At the heart of existentialist thought is the concept of man at liberty, man responsible for his own acts, with no deterministic values or excuses for his existence, free to create himself and his own values as he wills. Yet one is forced to doubt the ultimate achievement of this liberty, since if the existentialists insist on total responsibility they also urge total involvement.

In this novel of the French Resistance we get a grim but somehow heroic picture of the existential philosophy inspiring men and women to positive action. The people in the book represent intellectuals of the Parisian working class as well as the bourgeoisie; and though one feels they are a sturdier, more partisan group altogether than Sartre's muddled esthetes, students, teachers, prostitutes, pederasts, taxi drivers, Communists, bar-men, and bums, one recognizes sisters and brothers under the skin. We ask ourselves if these people, joined together in the underground, living together briefly or meeting death before a Nazi firing squad, but at least existing, even acting with a purpose for the first time, are not the desperate playmates in Sartre's bizarre gallery now grown up according to existentialist standards?

"The Blood of Others" may be read as a love story of our day by those who are not particularly interested in its philosophical message. But even here existentialism shapes the destiny



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of Mme. de Beauvoir's tragic lovers; so much so that we begin to feel that love is an obstacle to existentialist aims. Jean and Hélène certainly have a wretched time of it from the start. Their tortured love affair is never quite resolved. On one hand we have Hélène forever in pursuit of her quarry, whether it be a bicycle she has set her heart on and sends her lover to steal, or a husband, or death in the shape of Nazi steel in her lung. On the other there is Jean, pursued by the Erinyes of his bourgeois conscience, the rationalizations of a proper middle-class upbringing, and the bourgeois luxury and burden of a wife in Hélène. The more persevering reader is sure to be curious to know the outcome of this merry chase. And Mme. de Beauvoir, anticipating just that, decides that death will solve all; if not for both lovers, then for our lovely heroine—but not before she has joined the underground movement and has reaped the double reward of knowing that dying is a positive action both against Fascism, and against a world that would be intolerable without Jean, who has cast her aside. Everything to this point seems to follow the cold, uncompromising party line of existentialism. It is then we discover to our great amazement that Mme. de Beauvoir's heart has melted and she believes that the death of a beautiful woman is every bit the artistic production Poe claimed it was. Not only that, but Jean has terrible pangs of remorse, and it looks as though Hélène may live to be reconciled with her conscience-stricken lover. But we may rest assured that Mme. de Beauvoir regains her balance and Hélène expires, an existentialist to the last. Only Jean knows what her death means. He knows that he is responsible for it, just as he is responsible for the others in the Resistance who risk death at his bidding. There will always be that sense of guilt casting a shadow over his very will to act—"the blood of others" has been shed for him. But Jean, the existentialist, can at least gain some comfort in the knowledge that the guilt of the war lies as much with "sparing blood as in sharing it." The existentialist who is aware of the unity of all life can come up with that still more ironic reminder: "Other people's blood is the same as one's own."

Here, then, is the doctrinaire novel which Sartre has never succeeded in giving us. Indeed, it is quite likely that "The Blood of Others" is the fictional primer on existentialism we have all been anxiously awaiting. Certainly a great many more readers are going to have a clearer picture of existentialism in action than ever before.

Rimbaud: From Poet to Gun-Runner

SAVAGE PRODIGAL. By Konrad Bercovici. New York: Beechhurst Press. 1948. 255 pp. \$3.

Reviewed by EDWIN SEAVER

MR. BERCOVICI has here attempted to write a biographical novel about Arthur Rimbaud, and for this he should at least be credited with courage, although folly is perhaps the more precise word. The biographical novel is at best an unsatisfactory form. It is neither fish nor fowl; the better it is as biography the poorer it is likely to be as fiction, and vice versa. When, on top of this, an author chooses as his hero the most enigmatic figure in the entire span of modern literature, things are apt to get rather complicated.

As Enid Starkie says in her authoritative and brilliant biography of the French poet:

All those who study Rimbaud soon reach a gulf of mystery which their inspiration and intuition seem unable to bridge. There are two major problems: firstly, can a correct picture of the poet be painted from the incalculable contradictions and complexities with which the critic is confronted, a picture which will make him recognizable as a human being and not merely a collection of abstractions loosely strung together? And, secondly, can a satisfactory explanation be found for his abandonment of literature at the height of his power, when he was not yet twenty?

According to the French critic Jean Cassou, to attempt to reconcile all the contradictions in Rimbaud and to fuse them into a coherent whole is profitless, and so perhaps Mr. Bercovici can be excused for not even trying. As a matter of fact, he has not satisfactorily presented, much less solved, either of the two major problems stated by Dr. Starkie. His Rimbaud emerges from "Savage Prodigal" neither as a realizable poet nor as a realizable man, but as a kind of monster who somehow managed to write some remarkable poems in the first half of his life, and then, in the second half, became a hard-driving businessman operating in Abyssinia and on the Somali coast. In this latter connection, incidentally, the author describes at some length Rimbaud's gun-running activities, but fails to mention that he was also implicated in the traffic of slaves.

Since Mr. Bercovici does not trouble to name the source of any of his material, it is difficult to know just where he got some of his information about the poet's life. Thus, to take only one instance—although this one

instance was probably the most significant event in Rimbaud's early life—there was the matter of his first initiation into sex. The point is not that Dr. Starkie places this event in Paris at the time of the Commune, when the poet was sixteen and "still looked like a girl, with his small stature, his fresh complexion, and his reddish-gold wavy hair," whereas Mr. Bercovici places it in Charleville after Rimbaud's return from Paris. The point is that it was a disastrous experience, "the source of his later maladjustment and distress," and that after it "he was never the same again." But Mr. Bercovici pictures the whole thing as a kind of youthful Casanova episode with the tobacconist's daughter, with no particular relevance to his subsequent development as a poet or as a man.

Mr. Bercovici apparently has no use for subtlety or shading. It is true that Rimbaud had a streak of sadism in him and that, in his calamitous affair

with Paul Verlaine, he was often cruel the way a man might be with a woman who is still infatuated with him but whom he no longer loves and wants to be rid of. Yet there was also an enormous tenderness and gentleness in Rimbaud, elements quite omitted from the present portrait. The demon and the angel in him were evenly matched, too evenly for the peace of his soul.

But my chief objection to "Savage Prodigal" is that it helps us in no way to understand Rimbaud's genius. Rimbaud was no child wonder; he was a highly conscious artist and it is necessary to understand his studies in occult philosophy, magic, and the Cabala, his Faustian struggle to penetrate to the heart of the mystery, his esthetic doctrine, his disgust with his own achievements, if we are to comprehend what was going on inside him.

The best things in Mr. Bercovici's book are those he has Rimbaud say. Since most of these are culled from the poet's own writings, they have a toughness and vigor and vividness of imagery that are always refreshing.

Two Ladies of the Theatre

MADEMOISELLE LAVALLIERE. By Edward F. Murphy. New York: Doubleday & Co. 1948. 273 pp. \$3.

MIRABELLE. By Ellen Caren. New York: Greenberg, Publisher. 1948. 283 pp. \$3.

Reviewed by PAMELA TAYLOR

THAT Mary Magdelene, patroness of weak and penitent women, loses none of her legendary appeal in modern dress is amply proven by Father Murphy's fictionalized biography "Mademoiselle Lavalliere." The well-known popular Catholic author of "The Scarlet Lily" has quite obviously lost his heart to his heroine, and, basing his book on several studies of her life in French and English, has given us a loving record of this great French actress who turned aside from worldly success to search for peace in the service of God.

Eugenie Pascaline Feneglio's life began in the slums of Toulon, where the thin, half-starving child with big, expressive eyes tried to keep out of the way of her drunken, unpredictable parents, the calm face of the loving nun who instructed her for her first communion the only benign memory she was to carry out of her childhood. When the nun died suddenly little Eugenie bitterly turned her face from God, telling herself that she hated Him. The family moved to

Perpignan and even worse degradation; when suicide and murder made Eugenie an orphan and sent her brother off into the underworld on whose fringes he had always lived and from which he was never to emerge again, she still clung fiercely to her own belief in herself and her ability to get on without the help of the Heavenly Father she denied.

Eugenie was tough, gifted, and after a few years of work in a Perpignan dressmaking establishment managed to get herself to Paris, by not entirely circumspect means. Here she eventually had her chance to break into the theatre, which had been her goal ever since she could remember. Once begun her rise was spectacular. There followed years of the obvious life of a sought-after Parisian actress, professional ups and downs, at last an established place at the glittering apex of France's theatrical world, with all its attendant heady notoriety, extravagant spending, casual lovers, and giddy living.

Refusing to recognize that the dissatisfaction which gnawed constantly at her might be connected with spiritual hunger Lavalliere went, shortly after the beginning of the First World War, into the country, with the intention of buying a peaceful, rural retreat. The transaction brought her into contact with a deeply spiritual priest whose simple words "You be-