

Ideas. In the "Meaning of Treason" Rebecca West dissects the bewildered individual in our time—specifically, the traitor, whose bewilderment leads to an act of perverse negation. Sartre, equally concerned with the plight of the individual in the modern world, has in "The Age of Reason" and "The Reprieve" attempted to convey through fiction the existentialist's view of the world. To speak is to act (he writes in his article, p. 25); the word is action; and the written word is an instrument of change. What then is this existentialism about which so much nonsense has been written? It is a salute to a world where values are bedded in sand, where choice is blunted by complexity, and the way is dark. It is a challenge to man to act and to live, though he knows that he cannot know. And by living to give some shape to a shapeless world.

Most Mortal of Sins

THE MEANING OF TREASON. By Rebecca West. New York: The Viking Press. 1947. 307 pp. \$3.50.

Reviewed by STRUTHERS BURT

AS YOU read "The Meaning of Treason" it is exactly as if, sitting high in an amphitheatre, you were looking down upon the wailing, under a bright light, of a scalpel in the hand of an expert surgeon. On the table lies the pallid and sick body of treason. But the surgeon is a woman, and in sickness or sorrow or disgrace, to a woman, unless she is bi-sexual, the small seed is naked and alone and sorrowful beyond measure. Man is indeed master of his soul, and responsible, but there are so many who are masters of nothing, ghosts moving in a vacuum. And there are so many who come to the operating table, unaware of just how they came.

Miss West's protagonist, naturally, is that small, strange, truculent, fierce, and yet not unbeguiling figure, "Lord Haw-Haw," William Joyce; born an American, by descent an Irishman, and by death an Englishman—Wandsworth Prison, London, England, January 3, 1946, on the scaffold, a white cap hiding his scarred face. Only a short time ago, anywhere in the world, one had only to turn a dial at the appropriate hour and into anything one might be doing, fell, like the sound of a descending guillotine, that dreadful, that sneering voice, welcoming death for all those who spoke his tongue. And yet the man himself was tiny, and uncertain, and often bewildered. And had numerous virtues. He loved learning; and his family loved him, and so did his second wife.

Radio is a terrible thing. A genie of intrusion. A far more potent weapon for enlightenment, or ignorance, than the serpent, or the apple, of the Gar-

den of Eden. Who could escape the equally dreadful voice of Adolph Hitler? Innocence is no longer possible. But by the same token, knowledge should be everywhere. What sort of person is it who, having once heard the voice of William Joyce or Hitler, would not be warned for evermore of the evil that lies in man's desire to rule other men?

And it is just that question that Miss West answers. For the answer does not lie in the realms of reason or objective knowledge, but in the

subjective tortuousness of human behavior. The answer lies in the realms of psychology, as does the ultimate answer to everything. The clash of battle begins first in the minute caverns of the human mind. Think what a gain it would be to prospective and possible cures, and the writing of history, if instead of explanations based on the surface and upon results, not causes, historians and statesmen would start at the beginning with man and his curious ways.

All life is an illness, but it need not be if man will begin the wisdom of medicine and the hunger of the healer.

Miss West chooses William Joyce as her protagonist, just as English justice chose him, because he is the epitome of the simon-pure traitor; the perfect symbol of his particular sin. Upon his shoulders rested squarely the cloak of Judas Iscariot. Had he been a lesser man he would have been merely the perpetual grumbler and local marplot; had he been a greater man, he would have been a patriot. For the actual traitor is never a man of mean attainments and the difference between a great traitor and a great patriot is a narrow one. Treason, like patriotism, is vigor and imagination out of the ordinary, but, unlike loyalty, it is vigor and imagination undisciplined and unable ever to



THE AUTHOR: An early exposure to London's footlights inspired Ireland-born Cicily Isabel Fairfield to adopt the pseudonym Rebecca West—after Ibsen's heroine in "Rosmersholm." In 1911, an ardent, nineteen-year-old suffragette and defiant Bohemian, she joined the staff of *Freewoman*. Next year she started for the *Clarion* the political writings that have distinguished her career as an English novelist, essayist, and critic. Her views on politics and letters appeared frequently in the *Star*, *Daily News*, *New Statesman*, *American Book-*

man, and *New Republic*. Since 1931 she has reviewed books for London's *Daily Telegraph*. Her first book in 1916 evaluated Henry James. By 1938 she'd published six novels ("The Return of the Soldier," "The Judge," "Harriet Hume," "War Nurse," "The Harsh Voice," "The Thinking Reed") and four non-fiction works ("D. H. Lawrence: An Elegy," "Ending in Earnest," "St. Augustine," and "The Strange Necessity"). Notwithstanding some prior tart observations on marriage, in 1930 she became the happy wife of Henry Maxwell Andrews, a retired banker. A trip they made through Yugoslavia was incentive for her masterful "Black Lamb and Grey Falcon," and gave her authority to superintend BBC war broadcasts to that country. During the conflict her own voice was frequently on the air. She has also written the text for two of David Low's cartoon books and edited an English edition of Carl Sandburg's poems. The *New Yorker* assigned her to report the Nuremberg and British treason trials and, last June, the Greenville, S. C., lynching trial while here for the English Refugees Defense Committee. She lives on an eighteenth-century dairy farm "with tulips and tomatoes all over the place," near London, where her son is in radio. She has brilliant, dark eyes and a soft, vibrant voice, but frets about her weight, writes several hours daily, milks cows, and is handy with a pitchfork.—R. G.

forget self in greater love. Nor is the actual traitor ever venal. Judas Iscariot did not sell his Master for thirty pieces of silver. The thirty pieces of silver were an afterthought. He sold him because he could not sink his own personality in the greatness of another or a cause, and because he himself wished to be The Man. All crosses blossom with the sad fruit of man's inferiority-complex. Treachery is a failure of love and that is why it is the coldest of all sins. Nor does the traitor know that through loyalty and love and forgetfulness of self comes leadership when the time is ready.

Miss West to broaden her canvas and prove her thesis treats of the other Contemporary English traitors, but with the exception of John Amery she dismisses them with vignettes, acid but pitying. William Joyce, however, she pursues into all his retreats and throughout all his life with the devoutness of a Hound of Heaven. And the chase is as eerie, and as haunted, and as rewarding as that other chase. And, on a lower level, it is as exciting as a detective story. In the end he is there; small, odd, at war with his kind, pinned against a wall, perfectly outlined, breathless; and, in the large sense, heart breaking.

For Miss West's research brings us to the conclusion that force, human or otherwise, is, to begin with, force, neither good nor bad, but to be made good by our own efforts and will. And that it is here, inescapable and the power behind everything. And that especially until we learn to regard the particular force which is humanity as God in man, with the knowledge that God will not act until we bid him to, and that if we bid him wrong we have not God but his terrible antithesis, there will be neither peace nor satisfaction nor human brotherhood. Were we to expend upon human force, recognizing it as such, one-half the ingenuity and effort we expend upon the channeling of water, mankind might blossom beyond all expectations.

But "Lord Haw-Haw," outstanding traitor that he is, is merely a detail in "The Meaning of Treason's" larger scheme, and a proof. Treason, like all plagues, is world-wide and endemic, and, as with all plagues, there are certain times when the moon and the air and the earth are heavy and duly ripe for it, and it becomes an epidemic. Mankind should know by now that it cannot break down all loyalties without, and speedily, replacing them by better ones. Hell loves a vacuum. And this, our decade, has become an especial hunting-ground for treason.

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Private Dramas

THE REPRIEVE. By Jean-Paul Sartre. Translated by Eric Sutton. New York: Alfred A. Knopf. 1947. 445 pp. \$3.

Reviewed by RICHARD McLAUGHLIN

CONTRARY to the rumors whispered in the corridors of publishing houses and the shrill, even less-informed onslaught against Existentialism by the press, Existential literature is going to be with us for some time to come. At the very moment that Existentialism was receiving the most undignified publicity by a number of this country's drama critics, book reviewers, and columnists, who busily denounced it as "a post-war craze instigated by high priests Jean-Paul Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir," public demand for Sartre's novel "The Age of Reason" exhausted three printings. It also reached the best-seller list, which is certainly more than the most devoted of Sartre's admirers would have dared to predict.

All we have to go by is the fact that some of Existentialism's most violent enemies abroad at least concede that its literature "excites the imagination with the morbid curiosity of a thriller." Here, then, may be the explanation for Sartre's growing popularity as a novelist if not a dramatist. He appeals to his readers on several levels. To those who do not wish to embrace his philosophy wholeheartedly or in part, there are always the more sensational aspects of his novels to intrigue them. And when his sordid, often scatological, impressions of life begin to wear on us, there are the analytic, poetic, and psychological elements of his work left to challenge and stimulate the intellect.

If "The Age of Reason" was at all difficult to classify, then "The Reprieve" will defy categorizing altogether. It is very different from the first volume since it does not confine itself to describing any particular milieu; Mathieu, Marcelle, Daniel, Ivich, Boris, and Lola and the others appear, but they are only secondary characters in a vast *mis en scène*, into which a whole new crowd of people

are drawn from every walk of life.

This, more than anything, is a novel of protest and revolt, the tragic, ironic drama of lives swept along in a tide of hysteria and fear; its real protagonist being Europe mobilizing for war, its general theme that of the anguish of atheistic man who exists in an absurd universe surrounded by a total subjectivity of values since there is no supreme Being to guarantee them. Here we meet in the deliberate contrivance of scenes and moods, the calculated arrangement of tenses, the careful juxtaposition of lives running parallel toward the common destiny of war, Sartre, the writer of philosophical theses. But only a novelist of his persuasive and original talent could make us like them; for we find ourselves disagreeing almost instantly with the French critic who called this work "the thesis novel in all its horror."

What is so horrific about it? Surely not the technique. This attempt to present an over-all picture of Europe during those tense but shameful days of anxiety which ended with the Munich treaty in the last week of September 1938, would not have been half as successful if Sartre had not employed the "camera-eye" technique. And certainly this kaleidoscopic effect which we owe to the motion picture, to the newsreels particularly, is a familiar trick of Dos Passos and Faulkner, both of whom also employ symbolism, incidentally, like Sartre, to carry out the naturalistic design of their novels.

Nor is it the first time in our day that a French novelist has tried to depict on a broad canvas French society on the eve of war. Jules Romains, philosopher-novelist, dwelled with painstaking, sometimes tedious, detail, in his cycle "Men of Good Will," on the restless scene leading up to 1914. By comparison Sartre's present work seems all the more brilliant an achievement since so much is compressed into one volume and so many levels of consciousness are touched by his alert, penetrating, inquiring mind. Not only do we see his characters' idiotic behavior on the brink of war, but we are enabled to read their

