

of The Words
SARTRE'S CONFESSIONS, a review by Paul de Man, NY Review of Books 11/5/54

"raises controversial issues in a way that no truly autobiographical bk. can ever do"
"fails to arouse sympathy of this sort (like Rousseau's Confessions, etc.) but it does propose a thesis. The Words is thus not the kind of book it pretends to be."

"It is a combination of 2 not altogether compatible texts, written several yrs. apart... Since 1954, however, Sartre's concept of pol. action became a great deal less one-sided, esp. in "Writing", the 2nd part of the bk., a much more ambivalent position begins to emerge."

re 1st part: "an autobiog. in name only. It constitutes in fact another pamphlet."
" " " : "extraordinary tightness & rigor of composition, qualities that seem oddly incompatible with the autobiog. genre."
Rousseau & other autobiog "possess the quality of authenticity" missing here.

"None of these events is narrated as it might have appeared to a child who witnessed them; we are instead plunged directly into a highly developed social & ideol. world... The portrait is well composed & subtle; it is conveyed with great economy of words, every detail significant—entirely different from Rousseau's random & subj. impressions..."

love & intellectualism "a sinister comedy." He creates types "composite characters" who summarize a sociological & ideological reality. The description of the types seems valid enough, the indictment quite convincing. What is misleading however (and leading in a very bourgeois, idealistic way) is to present such a type AS IF IT WERE an actual experience, to present a composite, org'd., symbolical entity AS IF IT WERE part of own childhood.

robs characters of their individuality. "short-circuiting" by a formal literary trick the whole complex dialectic that leads from the particular to the typical (if should have said: from the singular to the general.)

"S's brisk narrative which artfully mixes reminiscence with reflection, contains in fact a full-fledged clinical essay on the experience of alienation."
***** (if use instead: deceptively simple. THEN: shock of narrowness of vision.)

the day his mother gives his children's books to read lit. becomes for him an interminable daydream. "Some of the best passages in The Words retell the heroic romances in which Jean-Paul is allowed to master all the situations with which he is unable to cope in reality." "The case history is so neat that the conclusion forces itself upon the reader: S chose the autobiog. form for a book that is, to a large extent, an ideological essay."

Is ambivalent mean? Or is it a proof?
NB NB ("the resistance having been a privileged way of reconciling ideology & action")
(if it is as if he said to himself: They think childhood is a happy & harmonious period; I'll prove the opp. They think nature is that happy stance; I'll show its absence. They consider isolation & solitude symbols of superiority; I'll show it is but another aspect of reality. They think lit. is creation itself; I'll demonstrate its sweat & tears or plainly absurd as in child's imagination)

