

my death, men may choose to impose fascism, while others may be cowardly or distraught enough to let them get away with it. Fascism will then become humanity's truth, and so much the worse for us. In reality, things will be what men have chosen them to be. Does that mean that I must resort to quietism?¹⁶ No. First, I must commit myself, and then act according to the old adage "No hope is necessary to undertake anything." This does not mean that I cannot belong to a party, just that I should have no illusions and do whatever I can. For instance, if I were to ask myself "Will collectivization ever be a reality?," I have no idea. All I know is that I will do everything in my power to make it happen. Beyond that, I cannot count on anything.

[QUIETISM]

Quietism is the attitude of people who say "Others can do what I cannot do." The doctrine that I am presenting to you is precisely the opposite of quietism, since it declares that reality exists only in action. It ventures even further than that, since it adds: "Man is nothing other than his own project. He exists only to the extent that he realizes himself; therefore he is nothing more than the sum of his actions, nothing more than his life." In view of this, we can clearly understand why our doctrine horrifies many people. For they often have no other way of putting up with their misery than to think: "Circumstances have been against me; I deserve a much better life than the one I have. Admittedly, I have never experienced a great love or extraordinary friendship, but that is because I never met a man or woman worthy of it. If I have written no great books, it is because I never had the leisure to do so; if I have had no children to whom I could devote myself, it is because I did not find a man with whom I could share my life. So I have within me a host of untried but perfectly viable abilities, inclinations, and possibilities that endow me with worthiness not evident from any examination of my past actions." In reality, however, for existentialists there is no love other than the deeds of love; no potential for love other than that which is manifested in loving. There is no genius other than that which is expressed in works of art; the genius of Proust¹⁷ resides in the totality of his works; the genius of Racine¹⁸ is found in the series of his tragedies, outside of which there is nothing. Why should we attribute to Racine the ability to write yet another tragedy when that is precisely what he did not do? In life, a man commits himself and draws his own portrait, outside of which there is nothing.

No doubt this thought may seem harsh to someone who has not made a success of his life. But on the other hand, it helps people to understand that reality alone counts, and that dreams, expectations, and hopes only serve to define a man as a broken dream, aborted hopes, and futile expectations—in other words, they define him negatively, not positively. Nonetheless, saying "You are nothing but your life" does not imply that the artist will be judged solely by his works

¹⁶quietism: the attitude of being passive, of not getting involved. [D. C. ABEL]

¹⁷Marcel Proust (1871–1922) was a French novelist. [D. C. ABEL]

¹⁸Jean Racine (1639–1699) was a French dramatist. [D. C. ABEL]

of art, for a thousand other things also help to define him. What we mean to say is that a man is nothing but a series of enterprises, and that he is the sum, organization, and aggregate of the relations that constitute such enterprises.

[OPTIMISM]

In light of all this, what people reproach us for is not essentially our pessimism, but the sternness of our optimism. If people criticize our works of fiction, in which we describe characters who are spineless, weak, cowardly, and sometimes even frankly evil, it is not just because these characters are spineless, weak, cowardly, or evil. For if, like Zola,¹⁹ we were to blame their behavior on their heredity, environmental influences, their society, or factors of an organic or psychological nature, people would be reassured and would say: "That is the way we are. No one can do anything about it." But when an existentialist describes a coward, he says that the coward is responsible for his own cowardice. He is not the way he is because he has a cowardly heart, lung, or brain. He is not like that as the result of his physiological makeup; he is like that because he has made himself a coward through his actions. There is no such thing as a cowardly temperament; there are nervous temperaments, or "poor blood," as ordinary folks call it, or "rich temperaments," but just because a man has poor blood does not make him a coward, for what produces cowardice is the act of giving up, or giving in. A temperament is not an action; a coward is defined by the action he has taken. What people are obscurely feeling, and what horrifies them, is that the coward, as we present him, is guilty of his cowardice. People would prefer to be born a coward or be born a hero. . . .

[FREEDOM]

When I affirm that freedom, under any concrete circumstance, can have no other aim than itself, and that once a man realizes, in his state of abandonment, that it is he who imposes values, he can will but one thing: freedom as the foundation of all values. That does not mean that he wills it in the abstract; it simply means that the ultimate significance of the actions of men of good faith is the quest of freedom in itself. A man who joins a communist or revolutionary group wills certain concrete aims that imply an abstract will to freedom, yet that freedom must always be exercised in a concrete manner. We will freedom for freedom's sake through our individual circumstances. And in thus willing freedom, we discover that it depends entirely on the freedom of others, and that the freedom of others depends on our own. Of course, freedom as the definition of man does not depend on others, but as soon as there is commitment, I am obliged to will the freedom of others at the same time as I will my own. I cannot set my own freedom as a goal without also setting the freedom of others as a goal. Consequently, when, operating on the level of complete authenticity, I have acknowledged

¹⁹Emile Zola (1849–1902) was a French novelist. [D. C. ABEL]