

Existentialism
from

Dostoevsky
to
Sartre

The basic writings of Existentialism,
many never before translated,

selected and introduced by
WALTER KAUFMANN

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MERIDIAN BOOKS

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existentialism

FROM DOSTOEVSKY TO Sartre

Edited, with an introduction,
preface, and new translations

by WALTER KAUFMANN

AN ORIGINAL MERIDIAN BOOK

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There is a creature that is completely harmless for your eyes: you scarcely notice it and forget it immediately. But as soon as, invisibly, it somehow gets into your ear, it develops there and, as it were, finally comes out of its cocoon; and there have been cases in which it penetrated to the brain and there spread devastation, somewhat like the pneumococci of the dog which enter through the nose.

This creature is the neighbor.

Well, since I have started traveling around by myself I have had innumerable neighbors: above and below, right and left, and sometimes all four kinds at once. I could simply write the history of my neighbors, and that would be a life's work. To be sure, it would really be the case history of the symptoms they caused in me; but this they have in common with all such creatures: they can only be inferred from the disturbances they create in certain tissues.

I have had unpredictable neighbors and very regular ones. I have sat there trying to discover the law of the first kind, for it was obvious that they too had a law. And when the punctual ones would stay out late one night, I would picture to myself what might have happened to them, and I would keep on my light and worry like a young wife. I have had neighbors who were hating just then, and neighbors who loved violently; and I have even had the experience how the one feeling changed into the other in the middle of the night—and then, of course, there could be no question of sleep. And one could observe quite generally that sleep is by no means as frequent as is commonly supposed. My two neighbors in St. Petersburg, for example, did not care much for sleep. One of them would stand there playing the violin; and I am sure that he was looking across to the over-awake houses which did not cease being lit up even in the most unlikely August nights. Of the other neighbor, on the right, I know that he was lying down; indeed, in my time he did not get up at all any more. He even had his eyes closed; but one could not claim that he was sleeping. He lay there and recited long poems, poems by Pushkin and Nekrassov, in the tone of voice in which children recite poems when they are told to. And in spite of the music of my neighbor on the left, it was this man with his poems who spun himself into a cocoon in my head; and God knows what would have

come out if the student who visited him from time to time had not one day opened the wrong door. He told me the story of his friend, and it turned out to be relatively soothing. At least it was a literal and unequivocal story of which the worms of my conjectures perished.

This petty official next door had got the notion one Sunday that he wanted to solve a curious problem. He supposed that he still had a long time to live—let us say, another fifty years. His generosity toward himself put him into a buoyant frame of mind. But now he wanted to outdo himself. It occurred to him that these years could be changed into days, into hours, into minutes—indeed, if only one had the endurance, into seconds; and he figured and figured and attained a sum the like of which he had never seen. He felt dizzy. He had to steady himself. Time is precious, he had always heard; and now he was surprised that a man who possessed such a lot of time should not be watched. How easily he could be robbed! But then his good, almost gay, mood returned: he put on his fur coat to look a little broader and more impressive, and gave himself this whole fabulous capital as a present, addressing himself with some condescension:

“Nikolai Kuzmich,” he said benevolently and imagined that he was also sitting on the horsehair sofa, without a fur coat, thin and wretched; “I hope, Nikolai Kuzmich,” he said, “that your wealth won’t go to your head. Remember that this is not the most important thing: there are poor people who are entirely respectable; there are even impoverished noblemen and daughters of generals who try to sell things in the streets.” And the benefactor went on adducing several examples which were known all over the town.

The other Nikolai Kuzmich, the one on the horsehair sofa who was receiving the present, did not yet look overjoyed at all; it seemed likely that he would be reasonable. Indeed, he did not change anything in his modest and regular way of life, and he spent his Sundays trying to keep his accounts in order. But soon, after only a few weeks, he noticed that he was spending incredible amounts. I shall limit myself, he thought. He got up earlier, washed himself less elaborately, drank his tea standing up, ran to his office, and arrived far too early. He saved a little time everywhere. But on Sunday there were no savings to be found. Then he realized that he had been cheated. I should not have changed my capital,

he said to himself. How long a year is! But this wretched small change, that is spent, one doesn't know how. And the afternoon became disagreeable as he sat there in his sofa corner waiting for the man in the fur coat from whom he wanted to ask back his time. He wanted to bolt the door and not permit the man to leave until he had produced it. "In bills," he wanted to say, "perhaps ten years each." Four tens and one five, and the rest he could keep in the devil's name. Yes, he was prepared to give him the rest, just to avoid any difficulties. Irritated, he sat there on his horse-hair sofa and waited, but the man did not come. And he, Nikolai Kuzmich, who had been easily able a few weeks ago to picture himself sitting there—now that he was really sitting there, he could not picture the other Nikolai Kuzmich, the one in the fur coat, the generous one. Heaven knows what had become of him; probably his frauds had been noticed and by now he was in prison somewhere. No doubt, this man had not ruined him alone. Such swindlers always work on a large scale.

It occurred to him that there must be some state institute, a kind of time bank, where he would be able to change at least some part of his shabby seconds. After all, they were genuine. He had never heard of such an institution, but in the address book one would certainly find something of the sort—under *T*, or perhaps it was called "Bank for Time"; it was easy to check under *B* too. Possibly the letter *I* had to be considered too, for it would presumably be an Imperial Institute, in view of its importance.

Later, Nikolai Kuzmich always insisted that on this Sunday afternoon he did not drink anything, though he felt, of course, depressed. So he was completely sober when the following events occurred, insofar as it is at all possible to say what happened. Perhaps he had dozed off a little in his corner, that might well be. This little nap relieved him a great deal at first. I have allowed myself to become involved in figures, he said to himself. Well, I really don't know anything about figures. But it is obvious that they must not be conceded too much importance; after all, they are no more than an official device, to keep things orderly. Has anybody ever seen one, except on paper? At a party, for example, one could not possibly meet a Seven or a Twenty-five. There they simply did not exist. And then there had been this little mix-up, merely owing to absentmindedness: time and

money, as if those two could not be kept apart. Nikolai Kuzmich almost laughed. It was a good thing if one caught up with oneself like this, and in time, that was the important thing, in time. Now everything would become different. Time—that was a touchy affair, no doubt. But did it concern him alone? Did it not affect others in the same way which he had discovered, second by second, even if they did not know it?

Nikolai Kuzmich even felt some delight at the expense of the others: Let it—he just wanted to think, when something strange happened. He felt a draft past his face, past his ears, he felt it on his hands. He stood aghast. The window was shut tight. And as he was sitting there with wide open eyes in his dark room, he began to understand that what he felt now was time itself as it passed by. He literally recognized them, all these tiny seconds, one as tepid as the other, but fast, but fast. Heaven knows where they were rushing. That this had to happen to him of all people, when he considered any kind of wind a personal insult. Now he would be sitting there, and the draft would continue, his whole life long. He foresaw all the neuralgias he would get and was besides himself with rage. He jumped up, but his surprises were not over yet. Under his feet, too, there was something like a motion—not only one, several motions wavering in strange confusion. He froze with terror: could that be the earth? Certainly, this was the earth. After all, it moved. That had been mentioned in school, though it was passed over in a hurry, and later on they had tried to cover it up; it was not considered good taste to speak of it. But now that he had become sensitive, he could not help feeling this too. Whether other people felt it? Perhaps, but they did not show it. Probably, they did not mind it, these sailors. Nikolai Kuzmich, however, was unfortunately touchy precisely at this point: he even avoided trolley cars. He reeled around his room as if on deck, and had to hold on right and left. To make matters worse, he suddenly recalled something about the slanted axis of the earth. No, he could not stand all these motions. He felt wretched. Lie down and keep quiet, he had once read somewhere. And since then Nikolai Kuzmich had been lying.

He lay there with his eyes closed. And there were times, less stormy days, as it were, when things were quite tolerable. And then he had thought of the poems. You would

hardly believe how much that helped. If you recite such a poem, slowly, with an even stress on the rhymes at the end of the line, there is, so to say, something stable on which you can fix your eyes—figuratively speaking, of course. How lucky he was to know all these poems. But he had always been especially interested in literature. He did not complain about his condition, the student who had known him for a long time assured me. Only, as time went on, he had developed an exaggerated admiration for those who, like the student, walked around and could stand the motion of the earth.

I remember this story so exactly because it soothed me no end. I may well say that I have never had another neighbor who was as agreeable as this Nikolai Kuzmich who, no doubt, would have admired me too.

* * *

We discover that we do not know our role; we look for a mirror; we want to remove our make-up and take off what is false and be real. But somewhere a piece of disguise that we forgot still sticks to us. A trace of exaggeration remains in our eyebrows; we do not notice that the corners of our mouth are bent. And so we walk around, a mockery and a mere half: neither having achieved being nor actors.