JEAN-PAUL SARTRE

THE WORDS

TRANSLATED FROM THE FRENCH

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To Madame Z

Part 1 READING

Around 1850, in Alsace, a schoolteacher with more children than he could afford was willing to become a grocer. This unfrocked clerk wanted compensation. Since he was giving up the schooling of minds, one of his sons would school souls. There would be a minister in the family; it would be Charles. Charles stole away; he preferred to take to the road in quest of a circus rider. His portrait was turned to the wall, and the family was forbidden to mention his name. Whose turn was it? Auguste hastened to imitate the paternal sacrifice. He went into business and did well for himself. There remained Louis, who had no particular bent. The father took this quiet boy in hand and in less than no

time made a minister of him. Later, Louis carried obedience to the point of likewise begetting a minister, Albert Schweitzer, whose career is public knowledge. Meanwhile, Charles had not found his circus rider. His father's noble gesture had left its mark on him: all his life he retained a passion for the sublime and put his heart and soul into manufacturing great circumstances out of little events. He did not dream, as can be seen, of eluding the family vocation. He wished to devote himself to an attenuated form of spirituality, to a priesthood that would allow him circus riders. Teaching filled the bill: Charles chose to teach German. He defended a thesis on Hans Sachs, adopted the direct method, of which he later called himself the inventor, published, in collaboration with M. Simonnot, a highly esteemed *Deutsches Lesebuch,* and was rapidly promoted: Mâcon, Lyons, Paris. In Paris, he delivered a speech on Prize Day that had the honor of being printed separately: "Mr. Minister of Education, Ladies and Gentlemen, my dear children, you would never guess what I am going to speak about today! About music!" He excelled in occasional verse. He was in the habit of saying at family gatherings: "Louis is the most pious, Auguste the richest, and I the most intelligent." The brothers would laugh; the sisters-in-law would purse their lips. In Mâcon, Charles Schweitzer had married Louise Guillemin, daugh-

ter of a Catholic lawyer. She hated her wedding trip. He had carried her off before the end of the meal and rushed her into the train. At the age of seventy, Louise was still talking about the leek salad they had been served at a railway snack-bar: "He took all the white and left me the green." They spent two weeks in Alsace without leaving the table. The brothers told each other scatological jokes in the provincial dialect; from time to time, the pastor would turn to Louise and translate them for her, out of Christian charity. It was not long before an obliging doctor provided her with a certificate exempting her from conjugal intercourse and entitling her to a separate bedroom. She spoke of her headaches, got into the habit of lying down and began to hate noise, passion, enthusiasm, the whole rough, theatrical life of the Schweitzers. That lively and shrewd but cold woman thought straight but inaccurately, because her husband thought accurately but amiss. Because he was credulous and a liar, she doubted everything: "They claim the earth goes round. What do they know about it?" Surrounded by virtuous play-actors, she conceived an aversion for play-acting and virtue. That subtle realist who had strayed into a family of coarse spiritualists became Voltairian out of defiance, without having read Voltaire. Dainty and pudgy, cynical, sprightly, she became a pure negation. With a raising of eyebrows, with an