

EXISTENTIALISM IN SARTRE'S *NAUSEA*

Sartre's novel *Nausea*¹ was published in 1938. He has since described himself as having been an 'anarchistic individualist' until 1939,² and there is certainly a more 'individualist' cast to the existentialism of *Nausea* than can be found in any of his other major writings. In *Nausea*, the strong attitude of *resentment* that pervades his later outlook, although unmistakably present, is still largely latent; moreover, as never again, he is preoccupied with the problem of the meaning of life, tending to prefer not only individualism to collectivism, but also theory to practice, ideality to materiality, art to politics, and stoicism to revolt. What follows here is by no means an exhaustive interpretation of *Nausea*, but rather an attempt to highlight the novel's existentialist message through interpretative illumination of its key themes and figures.

The opening 'Undated Sheet' (9-11/11-14), which falls apart into two equal, contrastingly related halves, symbolizes a basic metaphysical cleft that obsesses Roquentin throughout the novel. In terms familiar from Sartre's later *Being and Nothingness* (1943), there are hints at a split between nothingness and being and, correspondingly, between anxiety and bad faith; but there are also suggestions of a split between things and words, flux and stability, existence and essence, object and subject—or, in short, between materiality and ideality. Aside from this concise introductory symbolism, the most important thing about the 'Undated Sheet' is the unfinished closing sentence: 'There's only one case in which it might be interesting to keep a diary: that would be f...' (11/14). What was Roquentin going to say here?

At first, the initial words of the diary proper, namely, 'Something has happened to me : I can 't doubt that anymore' (13/15), appear to answer this question, i. e., that it might be interesting to keep a diary if he were *not* really cured, and if something momentous had, in fact, happened to him. However, as he has just explicitly assumed that he *is* cured, and thus does not need to keep a diary, this apparent answer is not very persuasive. Instead, he was probably entertaining the possibility that keeping a diary might enable him to transform his life into what becomes known in the novel as an 'adventure', i. e., a unified series of experiences and actions whose end imparts an overarching quality of meaningfulness to the period of time it unfolds in. Perhaps, he was probably thinking, his attempt to have an ersatz adventure by writing the history of the Marquis de Rollebon (8/9) was misguided, and perhaps he should try making a history of his *own* life by keeping a diary. More about all this will emerge later, so, for the moment, the point need not be elaborated.

The diary proper begins by resuming themes from the 'Undated Sheet', but soon phases into problems of meaningfulness and of the relation between the self and others. Roquentin recalls how his earlier pursuit of adventure in Indo-China had suddenly become meaningless, leaving him 'empty' and confronted by 'a voluminous, insipid idea' that sickened him (15/17). He wonders whether his research project on the Marquis could also suddenly become meaningless, leaving him 'exhausted, disappointed, in the midst of fresh ruins' (15/18). Then he introduces the familiar existentialist theme of mass-man inauthenticity, describing the customers in the Cafe Mably as those who 'have to join with others' in order to exist (16/19), and who find it important 'to think the same things all together' (19/21). In contrast, he sees himself as one who lives alone (16/19), although sometimes still tempted to 'take refuge' in the midst of others (18/21),

and as one whose detachment from society draws him increasingly towards experiencing reality as an unsettlingly amorphous flux of immediacy and concreteness (17, 19/19-20, 21). In other words he is caught between irreversible disillusionment with the everyday nonsensicalities of social convention and increasing apprehension at the unstructured senselessness of non-social existence. Yet improbable and significant things occasionally come his way, one of which he describes in the diary.

This is the accidental collision between the Negro and the little woman (18/20), which takes place in a 'station yard', under a 'fierycoloured sky', beneath a lantern, and alongside a fence that smells of 'wet wood'. The Negro is dressed in 'a cream-coloured raincoat, with yellow shoes and a green hat', while the woman is 'blonde' and wears a 'sky-blue' coat. Symbolically construed, this scene seems to represent a fleetingly meaningful coalescence, at the human level, of the realms of materiality (the Negro and his 'earthly' coloured skin and garb) and ideality (the woman and her 'transcendently' coloured hair and coat). This symbolism is echoed, at the more basic, non-human level by the contrasts between the (earthily organic) wooden fence and the (transcendently light-casting) lantern, and, similarly, between the station yard and the fiery sky. Both the Negro and the woman are merry (whistling or laughing) before the collision and besides making Roquentin feel like laughing, their encounter strikes him as having a significance that was 'strong and even fierce, but pure'. Towards the end of the entry containing the description of this encounter, he reveals that he had always been fond of picking up discarded scraps of paper, but that he had recently been unable to pick one up, even though he had *wanted* to touch 'this fresh and tender pulp which would roll into grey balls' in his fingers (22/24). Bending down, he had read the words 'Dictation : The White Owl' on the paper, then had straightened up without having touched it, reflecting that he was no

longer free to do what he wanted. For the moment, it suffices to note that the imagery here suggests a transition from life to death and that the 'White Owl' relates to the 'voluminous, insipid, idea' that he was left with at the end of his attempted adventure in Indo-China (15/17).

Next, he records some observations about Lucie, the charwoman at the hotel (22-24/ 24-24) who seems to symbolize mass-man *suffering*, or miserable futility of most people's attempts to find meaning and security by merging themselves with others. Her husband is a good-looking, tubercular drunk whom she bought herself and with whom she lives in a condition of anguished frustration that she constantly, but unsuccessfully, tries to deny or to overcome. More about her will come up shortly.

In the subsequent entry, Roquentin realizes that the Marquis de Rollebon, as a *person*, is beginning to bore him, whereas the project of writing the *book* on the Marquis is becoming an ever-increasing compulsion. Correspondingly, he begins to conclude that the facts of the Marquis's life 'adapt themselves at a pinch to the order I wish to give them, but it remains outside of them'; and begins to suspect that his historical work is one of 'pure imagination', even though characters in a novel would be more realistic or amusing (26/28). All this suggests a cleft between the (increasingly uninteresting) material reality of the Marquis and the (increasingly interesting, ideal reality of the written history of his life. In the following entry, this cleft is widened when Roquentin researches *himself* in the mirror, watching helplessly as his whole human semblance dissolves into something 'far below the monkey, on the edge of the vegetable world, at the polyp level' (31/32). Just as the actual, material self of the Marquis disappears (upwards) into the imagined, ideal self of Roquentin's historical research, so Roquentin's actual, material face disappears (downwards) into a nauseously amorphous flux of sensory immediacy

That night, the Nausea attacks Roquentin for the first time in a cafe, which used to serve him as a place of refuge because of being 'full of people and well lighted' (32-33/34). Amidst the Nausea-suffused surroundings of the cafe, he asks the waitress to play a recording of old jazz song 'Some of These Days', and his description of what happens as the song plays is one of the most important parts of the novel (36-40/38-41). In a way, the song takes hold of the slippery, formlessly oozing flow of *time*, shaping it into a meaningfully unfolding pattern that is both in time and yet timeless. Every note prepares the way for something and, in dying away, gives birth to something, with the whole succession of notes creating something strong and necessary, yet also fragile and transparent. As the song comes to its conclusion with an intensity that Roquentin calls almost painfully hard and bright, something happens the Nausea disappears.

Afterwards, he leaves the cafe, and ventures into the boulevard Noir, or the 'black' boulevard, which seems to symbolize the essential core to the *universe* (41-44/42-45). Symbols of Christianity appear in the guise of the three saw-works of the Soleil Brothers (three suggesting the Trinity, the saw-work suggesting Christ the carpenter, and the words 'Soleil', or 'sun' and 'Brothers' suggesting Christian hope and the brotherhood of the faithful), but these saw-works face *away* from the boulevard Noir, turning windowless backs upon it. Symbols of Hell also appear, first in the smoke and fire of the old station, then in the flickeringly lit cafes (particularly the Rendezvous des Chiminots, or 'Meetingplace of the Railway Workers'), and finally in a poster on a fence showing a satanic male head, images of blood, and a word suggesting 'pure fireplace' (*puratre*). Beyond these symbols lies the 'black hole', i. e., the unlit depths of the boulevard Noir, where an icy wind blows, where there is nothing but stones and earth, which are hard and unmoving, and where,

except for the ringing of the wind, all is dark and silent. This is the universe as 'being-in-itself', and Roquentin plunges into it.

There he almost succeeds in merging with the impersonal coldness of the boulevard Noir, but as he walks, two shadows move towards him, which prove to be a man and a little woman quarrelling. The man tells the woman to shut her trap, pushes her away, and then disappears leaving her pleading for him to return and suffering the agonies of the abandoned. Coming closer, Roquentin recognizes her as Lucie, the charwoman, and thinks to himself: I dare not offer her my support, but she, must be able to demand it if need be' (44/46). As they pass he looks at her, and she stares in his direction, but apparently without *seeing* him. She has, in fact, become a petrified icon of pure suffering, all but fused with 'being-in-itself' at the very bottom of the black 'well' of the universe. Roquentin, having earlier judged her 'too set in her ways' to be capable of real despair (24/25), concludes that she is drawing her present strength from the boulevard Noir, and that her sufferings will revert to their usual level once she returns to the world of people and bright lights.

This part of the novel warrants fairly extended commentary. Although the chance encounter between Roquentin and Lucie obviously parallels the earlier encounter symbolized a happy, meaningful coalescence of the realms of materiality and ideality whereas the present encounter symbolizes precisely the reverse. In terms from *Being and Nothingness*, Roquentin represents the nothingness of pure consciousness, or the 'being-for-itself' side of reality, and the boulevard Noir represents pure objectness, or the 'being-in-itself' side of reality, while Lucie represents the inauthentic struggle between these two sides of reality that is the lot of normal humankind. Roquentin, then, is the authentically despairing 'existentialist' who is slowly learning to face

up to his own nothingness, while Lucie is the inauthentic average person who remains trapped in a futile pursuit of being in order to flee her basic nothingness (and vice versa). Common to both of them is the fate of *suffering*, but Roquentin's suffering takes the negative form of emptiness and meaninglessness, while Lucie's takes the positive form of repeatedly frustrated desires, strivings and hopes. Again, it seems clear that Roquentin represents the Sartrean 'Look', while Lucie and the man, Charles, represent the Sartrean sadism-masochism opposition, with Charles's attitude being largely sadistic, and Lucie's largely masochistic. Roquentin looks at Lucie, thereby turning her into an object, and even though she stares back at him, she does not even seem to see him which leaves her a mere object, incapable of countering Roquentin's Look with a Look of her own. Simultaneously, the words that she calls after Charles — 'Charles, please, you know what I told you? Charles, come back, I've had enough, I'm too miserable! (44/45) — reflect a desperate masochistic attempt to make herself the repentantly compliant object that she thinks Charles wants her to be. At the moment of her near-fusion with the realm of 'being-in-itself', then, Lucie is impaled at the 'object' end of a Look-relation (to Roquentin) and a sadism-masochism relation (to Charles), and is thus doubly entrapped in objectness. Finally, it is worth asking why Roquentin, although prepared to give Lucie support if she *asked* for it, did not dare to *offer* her any. Her plight seems to symbolize the all-too-frequent situations in life where helpful intervention seems called for yet where all possible forms of intervention would only make the situation worse. Probably, Roquentin thought it best to leave Lucie alone with the two last vestiges of human freedom that remained to her, namely, freedom to choose for herself whether she needed to be helped and freedom to demonstrate precisely by bearing up under

her suffering, that she could not be turned into a complete object. In the end, then, the boulevard Noir scene conveys a well-known existentialist message: at the very heart of the universe, installed more deeply than earthly or religious hells, at the bottom of a well in the stony realm of being itself one finds the intractable reality of suffering.

After the boulevard Noir scene, the novel settles down into a succession of observations and reflections whose main theme is the problem of *adventures*, which haunts Roquentin because his life is tottering closer and closer to collapse into total meaninglessness. His thoughts on adventures are partly occasioned by the Autodidact, or self-taught man, who is engaged in reading through all the great books in alphabetical order of their authors' name (48-49/50), and who plays a centrally important symbolical role in this novel. Roquentin admires the Autodidact's *will-power* in doggedly pursuing a plan of such scale, but is clearly contemptuous of the superficial, merely external structure of the plan, which reflects no internal principle according to which the accumulated items of knowledge could be meaningfully inter-related. Just before the Autodidact visits him, Roquentin ruminates on his own past, concluding that his memories are uncertain and empty, or (like the pieces of paper he was fond of picking up at random) mere 'scraps' that are difficult to 'retrieve' (52/53), that he is no longer the same person who experienced the past, and that he is abandoned to an airy present, unable to rejoin his past or to escape from himself. During the Autodidact's visit, he is forced to admit to himself that he has never had any adventures, and that he does not 'even know what the word means anymore'. Overcome by the same feeling of discouragement that he felt after his attempted adventure in Indo-China, he finds himself confronted anew by the 'idea', or 'big white mass' that disgusted him then (57,58).

Later on, he realizes that it was not simply adventures that he longed for so much, but rather a certain way of happening of an adventure—a way that bestowed a ‘rare and precious quality’ upon certain moments, that somehow depended upon the presence of ‘order’, and that was intimated to him at times when he listened to music in cafes (58/59). Then he decides that this special way of happening of an adventure can only occur in *books*, not in real life. A proper adventure must have a definite beginning, and come to a definite end (like a ‘death’, which, he notes, may also be his own), and the end must be already implicit in the beginning, so as to hover over the whole unfolding process of adventure as a meaningful, organizing principle. When such an adventure is over, the beginning and end fuse into a ‘golden spot’ that fades into timelessness. All of this recalls Roquentin’s earlier comments on how the song ‘Some of These Days’ dispelled his Nausea, and he refers now to that song, saying ‘What summits would I not reach if my *own life* were the subject of the melody’. Then the ‘Idea’ rebukes him with the blunt observation that he has not only never had a real adventure, but that he will also never have one (59-60/60-61).

In the next entry, he continues thinking about adventures, concluding that anything can become an adventure if only one begins recounting it, but that there is an irreconcilable opposition between *living* and *recounting* (again, between materiality and ideality), and that one must choose between the two (by implication, between a real life that is not meaningful and a meaningful life that is not real). Further, he concludes that there are no *true* stories, since in the very act of recounting something, the recounted series of events is made significant by the implicit presence of the *end* throughout the whole story, whereas this implicit presence does not exist in real-life events, which are just a jumbled, continuous flow, with no clear

beginnings or endings (61–61/ 62–64). At this point, there is a long, boring entry for Sunday, in which mass-man is observed engaging in various rituals through which he pretends that life, or at least Sunday life, is an adventure; and at the end of the day, Roquentin himself falls victim to the illusion that he is having an adventure. The next day, he regrets his foolishness, and returns to thinking about adventures. Now he decides that the feeling of adventure comes not from events, but rather from the way that moments are linked together, or from the feeling of the irreversibility of time. He recalls that his former companion Anny, who left him long ago, was an expert at managing time. Once, when they had only twenty-four hours together, she spent the first twenty-three quarrelling with him, then organized the last sixty minutes into an unforgettable adventure at a cinema. The adventure ended with the projection of a completely *white picture* on the screen (86/86).

Turning again to his historical research, he notes that he is developing an increasing sense of irritation and ill-will towards the Marquis de Rollebon; he even conjectures that he should, perhaps, be writing a *novel* about the Marquis rather than an historical work (88/88). Then he describes two recent dreams of his, in which sadistic-masochistic imagery predominates, and after which he receives a letter from Anny (88-90/ 89-90). The main literary purpose of dreams is to invite reflection on the sadistic-masochistic opposition regarding Roquentin's relation to both the Marquis and Anny. In modelling himself on the Marquis, and in pursuing the largely passive attempt to conform his research to the facts of the Marquis's life, he was, in a sense, adopting the masochistic strategy of making himself what the Marquis wanted him to be. On the other hand, in calling the Marquis a 'lying little fop' (87/87), and in toying with the idea of writing an imaginatively-based novel about him-

he was, in a sense, adopting the sadistic strategy of making the the Marquis become what he wanted him to be. Similarly, his recollections of Anny, after receiving her letter, show that he had taken an equally ambivalent attitude towards her constant attempts to make him become what she wanted him to be (90-94/90-94).

Receipt of Anny's letter leads his thoughts back to the problem of the relation between past and present. When he and Anny were together, they somehow managed to keep all the aspects of their common past alive and integrated with their present; but when they separated, all of these aspects 'collapsed into the past', leaving Roquentin 'empty' amidst a renewed 'flowing' of time (95/95). A bit later, he reflects on Doctor Roge, who symbolizes the self-confident, conventionally successful type of mass-man who imagines that he can 'keep and use his past' by distilling it into progressively increasing 'experience' and 'wisdom'. Just as Roge is a 'professional' in experience, most people are at least 'amateurs' in playing a similar role, pretending that their past isn't wasted, that their memories have been condensed and gently transformed into Wisdom' (100-102/99-102). In reality, however, this belief in experience and wisdom is just a defensive reaction to the foreknowledge of death, whose presence Roquentin notes in Roge's decaying features (103-104/102-103.) As is shown by the brief Wednesday entry— '*I must not be frightened* (104/104) — and the long episode about Monsieur Fasquelle's possible death (108-115/108-114), Roquentin himself is still not immune to dread of death.

Throughout the novel so far, Roquentin has repeatedly returned to problems of meaningfulness, time, and death in a way that strongly suggests the influence of Heidegger's thought on the Sartre of *Nausea*. Further, if Roquentin increasingly doubts the possibility that a human life could be lived as a meaningful

whole that is meaningfully concluded by death, he is still somewhat ambivalent about this. On the one hand, there is that mysterious thing that he calls the 'Idea', or the big white mass that had rolled up in front of him and denied the possibility of his ever having an adventure (57, 60/58, 61). This symbolizes death in its meaning-threatening role, as the final blankness that puts an absurd end to all the concrete colours of which life is composed. On the other hand, there is the fact that Anny had organized a kind of adventure one night at the cinema, which had come to a completely *white* picture on the screen (86/86). This white picture symbolizes death in its meaning-favouring role, as providing the possibility for a culminating end to a unified life-adventure. All of this is foreshadowed early in the novel when Roquentin finds that he cannot pick up the scrap of paper with words 'Dictation : The White Owl' on it (22/24). Is life's (or the owl's) final wisdom the blank nothingness of death, and is life itself fated to be nothing but a meaningless succession of picking up random scraps of illusionary adventures?

Still in the grip of his panic about Monsier Fasquelle's possible death, Roquentin decides to try reading something at the library. On the way, he comes across a scene in the park between an adult male exhibitionist and a little girl with a rat-like face, who were 'riveted to each other by the obscure power of their desires' (117/116). In the library, he reads for a while, but keeps falling out of the world of the novel into the world of reality. At closing time, the Corsican librarian sends him, along with other readers who seem reluctant to leave, out of the library and into the night (117-119 / 116-118). As will emerge shortly, both the scene in the park and the Corsican librarian are symbolically important.

Next, there is a long entry recording Roquentin's reactions to a visit to the Bouville Museum, where he muses disrespectfully on all the solid citizens from Bouville's past whose portraits hang there. He considers them nothing but over-privileged fools or rascals whose lives have been dishonestly glorified in the portraits, and comments cynically that 'the power of art is truly remarkable' (136/134). Just as he previously mocked the notion that individuals might live meaningfully by condensing their personal pasts into experience or wisdom, he now mocks the notion that societies might condense their pasts into meaningful tradition. In the process, he touches on the leader-phenomenon and its associated charismatic power, implying that leaders effectively dominate and manipulate the wills of the masses in a way that makes socio-political existence inevitably inauthentic (127/125).

Not surprisingly, Roquentin next becomes irrevocably disillusioned with his historical research on the Marquis de Rollebon. He abandons the project completely, asks what he is now to do with his life, and proclaims not only that the past does not exist, but also that the present, which does exist, is nothing *more* than mere existence (138-140/135-137). Before long, he is overcome by an attack, not of Nausea, but of existence; he describes this attack in chaotically surrealistic terms, including mention of a 'permanent pool of whitish water in his mouth (143/141), which symbolizes the permanent imminence of death that people carry round in themselves. The images of existence that stream through his mind give rise to hatred and disgust, and his act of stabbing his own hand with a knife (145/143) seems to suggest some deep sadistic-masochistic cruelty at the heart of existence. Then he goes outside, grabs a newspaper, and reads the sensational report that little Lucienne's body has been found, raped and strangled. As these increasingly nauseous ima-

ges of existence blend in his mind with feelings of cruelty and anxiety, he goes into the unsavoury Bar de la Marine, where he hears a song that affects him in the same way that he was earlier affected by the song 'Some of These Days'. He notes that *he* cannot but exist, whereas the *song* somehow transcends existence, fascinating him with its youth, mercilessness, serenity, and rigour (146-149 / 143-147).

This part of the novel, culminating in the sensational re-murder of little Lucienne and then closing suddenly with a song about 'when the yellow moon begins to beam' and about 'dreaming one's little dream', needs fairly detailed commentary. First, the murdered child's name, Lucienne, establishes a symbolic link between her and Lucie the charwoman, whom Roquentin encountered in the boulevard Noir. Second, Lucienne's fate represents a radicalization of the same fate represented earlier by Lucie. The Look has become intensified a thousand-fold as swarms of sensation-hungry readers scan the newspaper report of the murder; and the sadistic-masochistic relation between Lucienne and her murderer could hardly be more obvious or more extreme. Third, Lucienne's fate is symbolically linked to the earlier scene when Roquentin, roaming the streets in distraction because of his fear of death, came upon the exhibitionist and the little girl in the park; perhaps the exhibitionist was even the murderer of little Lucienne. Fourth, in addition to linking all these scenes together, Lucienne's fate is intended to foreshadow the catastrophe that befalls the Autodidact at the close of the novel. Finally, Lucienne's fate provides a realistic, if gruesome, comment on the nature of the human situation that should still re-echo in the reader's mind when the Autodidact begins espousing his starry-eye, empty-headed humanism to Roquentin in the restaurant scene.

This scene, one of the key parts of the whole novel, begins with an admission by the Autodidact that he is having some sort of trouble with the Corsican librarian; but he quickly brushes aside this unpleasant topic (154/151). Eventually, when the subject of art and aesthetic pleasure comes up, the Autodidact says that, although he possesses a certain amount of knowledge, he has never experienced aesthetic pleasure. Further, this bothers him not so much because he misses the pleasure as because works of art have been made by human beings, yet he, a human being himself, cannot understand the aesthetic dimension of human activity (157/154). Then he reads out something he has written in his notebook : ' Nobody believes any longer what the eighteenth century considered to be true. Why should we be expected to go on taking pleasure in the works which it considered to be beautiful ?'. When Roquentin recollects that Renan had written something similar, the Autodidact is overjoyed to think that he has managed to have the same thought as Renan (158-159/155-156). Ironically, he fails to notice that Renan had the thought back in the nineteenth century, so by the standards of the maxim itself, the thought should be no longer true in the Autodidact's twentieth century.

Now, there is reason to assume that the Autodidact is intended to be a symbolical representative of the *modern intelligentsia*, or of that kind of person who all too often controls modern intellectual life in general, and modern universities in particular. These people, as implied by the name ' Autodidact ', are self-taught in roughly the same sense that the modern new-rich of the business and professional world are called self-made. With the rapid expansion and bureaucratization of the educational and cultural spheres in modern society, large numbers of people with no real cultural understanding at all, but with a over-practical respect for mathematical efficiency, utilitarian morality, and socio-political Darwinism, have been installed in positions

of educational and cultural authority. Like the Autodidact, they have read in books that culture is an important part of being human, so they have made an effort to teach themselves what culture is. But, like him, they are completely lacking in *aesthetic* sensitivity, without which they can never really understand culture; consequently, the most that they glean from their attempts to learn about culture is a vague sense that the cultured are supposed to be concerned about human *suffering*, and that there is some sort of link between culture and morality. On top of their metallic, technologico-bureaucratic mentalities, they therefore paint an organic, woody coloured veneer of moral concern for suffering. This concern is typically quite as shallow as the Autodidact's humanism, and it rests on a barbarically sentimental conception of suffering as a bothersome practical problem, existing mainly at the material level of reality, and being quite *correctable*, i. e., by scientific-technological engineering of material progress or poetical-technological engineering of social progress (or, more recently, by both at once). Earlier, Roquentin had discovered the Autodidact's ridiculously external plan for mastering the great books of the world, and had found nothing to admire in this but the Autodidact's will-power. This symbolizes the modern intellectual's barbaric elevation of the will to primacy over knowledge and reason, as well as the modern intellectual's barbarically piecemeal pursuit of knowledge as an amorphous accumulation of more and more facts for facts' sake. Again, the Autodidact earlier confessed himself to be utterly incapable of aesthetic pleasure, and presented himself in unnoticed self-contradiction on the question of the historical relativity of truth and taste. This symbolizes two of the most central absurdities in the outlook of the modern intelligentsia: first, they claim to love humanity and to have a great concern for its welfare, but they cannot even understand one of humanity's most universal pursuits, namely, art; and second, they

constantly claim that all truth is merely relative, yet they continually contradict themselves on this point by assuming the objective truth of everything they say to support that claim.

The next thing that the Autodidact comes up with is the opinion that pessimism about life is not very respectable, and that what is needed is deliberate optimism (of the 'Life is worth Living' sort), in which the aim is to immerse oneself in this or that concrete activity without worrying about whether it is meaningful or not. Roquentin comments to himself that this is 'precisely the sort of lie that the commercial traveller, the two young people, and the white-haired gentleman keep on telling themselves'. Then the Autodidact announces that there is a goal to life, namely: 'There are people' (162/ 159-160). When Roquentin counters that the Autodidact does not seem to worry too much about people, but is always alone with his nose in a book, the Autodidact seizes the opportunity to tell how he became a Socialist as a result of being squeezed into a wooden shed with two hundred others while in a war-time internment camp. After that, he tells of his fondness for going to Mass on Sundays although not a believer, because the real mystery of the Mass, is the 'communion of souls' (164-166/ 161-163).

Meanwhile, something ambiguous happens to Roquentin. He feels within him a terrible rage, which he thinks must be a sick man's rage, whose cause seems to be both the coldness of his chicken and the coldness of his soul. He also thinks that the rage might be an effort by his conscience to overcome that coldness. But it is unclear whether he would like to be angry at the Autodidact's collectivism, at his own lack of sympathy for that collectivism, or at the absurdity of the whole situation he is in at the restaurant. Apparently, he does not really care about collectivism or anti-collectivism, but would like to be able to express real anger at the hypocrisy behind the Autodidact's

views and behind his own consent to dine with the Autodidact (165-166/ 162-163). In any case, when the Autodidact proclaims that he is proud and happy to be a Socialist, and to have arranged his life in such a perfect way, Roquentin describes the Autodidact's bodily posture in almost exactly the same way he described the suffering Lucie's posture in the boulevard Noir scene, namely, looking as if he were about to receive the stigmata' (167/164). This suggests that, for Roquentin, there is the same inauthentic, object-like suffering behind the Autodidact's Socialist illusions as there was behind Lucie's marital illusions. In his mind, he runs through all of the stereotyped varieties of humanism that he is familiar with, and concludes: 'They all hate one another: as *individuals*, of course, not as men. But the Autodidact doesn't know it: he has locked them up inside him like cats in a leather bag and 'they are tearing one another to pieces without his noticing it' (168-169/ 165-166). From this point on, his lack of sympathy for collectivist humanism becomes increasingly explicit, and his conversation with the Autodidact draws to a close in an atmosphere of mutual misunderstanding and irritation. Throughout the whole episode, Sartre has made the point that the Autodidact's Socialism is psychologically inauthentic and philosophically unrealistic, i.e., that the Autodidact, like the modern intelligentsia he symbolizes, is grossly deceived about his own motives and about the nature of reality, including human nature in particular.

When the Autodidact's claim that people are admirable and that people must be loved finally evokes a powerful attack of Nausea in Roquentin (175-176/ 172), he loves the restaurant to embark upon another strange, surrealistic series of experiences in which he becomes aware of the true nature of existence, or of the being of the world as it really is beneath the surfaces of everyday appearance. From a philosophical viewpoint, one of the most important passages here is: 'Things have broken free from

their names. They are there, grotesque stubborn, gigantic, and it seems ridiculous to ... say anything at all about them: I am in the midst of Things, which cannot be given names' (180/177). Another philosophically important passage (strongly reminiscent of the way Heidegger discusses Being) is: 'Never ... had I suspected what it meant to "exist". ... I used to say : "The sea *is* green; that white up there *is* a seagull"', but I didn't feel that it existed...; usually existence hides itself' (182/179). Again, there is a passage in which it seems that there are *two worlds* : 'The world of explanations and reasons is not that of existence, A circle is not absurd, it is clearly explicable by the rotation of a segment of a straight line around one of its extremities. But a circle doesn't exist either. That root...existed in so far that I could not explain it' (185-186 / 182). Finally, it seems that existence is pervaded by the quality of superfluosity—there is no reason for it, it is all somehow 'left over', it could all be totally otherwise—in short, existence is absurd (184-185/181). However, at the end of all these experiences in the park, something interesting happens. The park *smiles* at Roquentin, hinting at the presence of some implicit meaning in the realm of existence, which seems like a half-forgotten or half-articulated *thought* that things are trying to have of themselves, but that Roquentin feels he will never be able to *understand* (193/190). Once again, there seems to be both a potential meaningful connection and an actual absurd severance between the realms of materiality and ideality.

Not surprisingly, the long scene between Anny and Roquentin forms the climax of the novel (which, up to that point, has revolved round the problem of meaninglessness, both of human relations and of existence itself). In general, the scene presents two former lovers, who had come to find their relationship meaningless, now meeting each other once again, discovering

that they have since come to find existence itself meaningless, and discussing things relevant to this unfortunate fate. The two characters are doubtless intended to be symbolic, and in a largely *contrasting* way, although the contrasts are anchored in some basic similarities. Both, for example, represent an unusual, and potentially more authentic, kind of person than was represented by Lucie (in contrast to Roquentin) in the boulevard Noir scene. Further, the phenomena of *history* and *art* have played an obvious role in the way that both have searched for meaning in their lives. Again, both tend to hold the other responsible for the breakdown of their previous relationship, although this applies more strongly to Anny than to Roquentin. On the whole, however, the two are symbolically opposed, since Anny represents *practical* man, allied to sadism, passion, action, and optimism; while Roquentin represents *theoretical* man allied to masochism, intellect, contemplation, and pessimism.

Now, of the two, Anny is in the more hopeless position, and is thus presented as being existentially dead. She appears in a black dress (194/191), confesses that she is outliving herself (216/212), mentions that she has changed down to the whites of her eyes (white being a symbol of death in this novel) (205/201), and discloses the face of an 'old woman', pale, drawn, and horrible (219/215). In fact it seems that the meeting with Roquentin, which *she* caused to come about, just as it was *she* who left Roquentin, and not vice versa (17/19), is a last attempt on her part to organize a 'little tragedy' (204/200), namely, a kind of *funeral* for her own existential death. She may continue to play at transforming her memories into 'spiritual exercises', in what she admits is an unsatisfying way (219/215), but for the most part, she seems intent on giving herself over to the only form of meaning left for a mere body, namely, the pursuit of sensual pleasure in the form of sex, travel, and luxury (218-221/214-217). But what was the cause of her existential death?

Early in the scene, it becomes clear that Anny had a basically *practical* strategy for trying to make life meaningful. Everywhere she went, she took along a huge collection of personal bric-a-brac, with which she tried to transform her hotel room into something with the 'personality' that she wanted it to have (195/192). If the hotel room can symbolize existence in general Anny's basic strategy was to make existence meaningful by forcing it to be what she wanted it to be, i.e., by acting to change existence in accordance with her wishes. Roquentin was clearly quite accustomed to having Anny practise this strategy on him; he recalls that he could never find the words that she expected, and he asks himself uneasily now: 'What does she want? I can't guess' (196/193; see also 90, 93-94/90, 93-94).

Next, Anny and Roquentin begin discussing whether either of them has changed, and this aspect of the scene is important but confusing. On the surface, both seem to have changed and to have remained the same; but closer examination reveals that Roquentin has remained largely the same on the outside, yet changed quite a bit on the inside, while Anny has changed quite a bit on the outside, yet remained (almost) the same on the inside (see 90/90). In a relevant comment, Roquentin observes: 'he has kept all her old opinions, prejudices, and spites fully alive. For me, on the contrary, everything is steeped in a vague poetic atmosphere; I am prepared to make any sort of concessions' (199/195). Further, although Anny has changed in *one* important respect on the inside. that one change—namely, her realization that 'one can't be a man of action' (215/211) — has sufficed to kill her existentially. Behind the life-orientation of the practical man, then, in the inner sphere of the mind, there is an unchanging rigidity, or an attempt to imagine oneself as a fixed, stable thing; while the opposite is the case with the theoretical man, who is open to the poetic ambience of reality

and is always ready to change his mind and self, or as Roquentin puts it, 'to make concessions' to what things show themselves to be.

Anny soon divulges that she has completely abandoned her life-long quest for 'perfect moments', which corresponds roughly to Roquentin's quest for adventures, and that she has lost the ability to feel passion anymore (204, 207/200-201, 203). She blames Roquentin for never having understood her attempts to organize perfect moments (see 93-94/93-94), but he points out that she had never bothered to explain to him what perfect moments were all about, even though he had asked her to explain a hundred times. She retorts that he had only 'condescended to inquire' in a 'kindly, absent-minded way', and that he may well be the person that she has *hated* most in her life (208/204). This at least suggests practical man's typical hatred of theoretical man, and betrays the anxiety that underlies that hatred, i. e., an anxiety that clear, theoretical inquiry into practical man's assumptions, aims, and passions may reveal them to be foolish and illusory.

When Anny at last tries to explain what she meant by privileged situations and perfect moments, she succeeds only vaguely. She cannot say, for example, whether they depended on some subjective passion in her or on some objectively meaningful quality in the situation, although she suspects it was both together (211/207). Still, she tells of how she formed an idea of privileged situations from certain pictures in a work on French history that, as a child, she was fond of reading in the attic (higher level of reality) of her house. Interestingly enough, these pictures impressed her by their harmony and strict unity, which are things usually regarded as characteristic virtues of *art works*: however, her inspirations for *history*, unlike Roquentin's admiration for the Marquis de Rollebon, were based not on great

personalities or characters, but on elevated sorts of practical life-situation (209-211/205-207). In other words, as practical man, Anny is sure that her *self* is inspiring enough as it already is, but that what needs to have its deficiencies remedied through inspiring models is external reality, or existence. Finally, she suggests that the trouble with privileged situations in real life was that they always depended on other people, who spoiled them by not acting in the required way (211, 214 / 207, 210). Again, this betrays a typical tendency of self-satisfied practical man to blame others for the failures he encounters in his unrealistic attempts to force reality to be what he wants it to be.

Still, at one point in the discussion, Anny's and Roquentin's minds slip into a momentary meaningful coalescence (similar to the earlier-noted accidental collision between the Negro and the blonde woman). This happens when she has managed to convey some idea of the meaning of perfect moments, which he then summarizes as follows: "In each privileged situation, there are certain acts which have to be performed, certain attitudes which have to be assumed, certain words which have to be said—and other attitudes, other words are strictly prohibited". Then he utters the most important sentence in the novel, namely, 'In other words, the situation is the raw material: it has to be treated'. She agrees, and adds: 'First you had to be plunged into something exceptional and feel you were putting it in order'. He then says: 'In fact, it was a sort of work of art'; and she replies: 'No: it was... a duty. You *had* to transform privileged situations into perfect moments. It was a moral question. You can laugh if you like: a moral question'. Roquentin notes in the diary, with pointed terseness, that he was not laughing at all (211-212 / 207-208).

At this stage, Roquentin becomes almost hopefully enthused, spontaneously declaring that he never really understood her, and implying that the two of them are perhaps *closer* than they realize. But she immediately extinguishes his incipient enthusiasm by going on to explain why she now no longer believes in perfect moments. She admits that she had never tried to explain them to him earlier, and that there was always something that rang false about potential perfect moments in life. Although this had confused her, she thought that she had always done everything possible to help the perfect moments to come about. She gives some examples dealing with the theme of *suffering*, and these suggest that being moral often involves a refusal to complain about, or even to feel, one's own suffering in the interests of realizing the requirements of some particular situation. However, the fatal problem with perfect moments was not so much that other people always failed to play their parts properly— although this was a serious flaw that she would have had to resign herself to— but that there *are* no privileged situations in the first place. They would only be possible if things like hate, love, or death could really exist, and descend on one in a way that lifted existence up above itself; but she sees now that such things are just illusory aspects of the *self*, which she describes as really but a mass of monotonous dough. In view of this, she wonders how people ever got the idea of inventing *names* and making *distinctions* (212–214/ 208–210).

This last thought obviously echoes Roquentin's experience of the nature of existence, and he now observes that the two of them have arrived at the same point from different directions: or, symbolically construed, that Nausea and meaninglessness are the ultimate facts for both the honest practical man and the honest theoretical man. Anny at first denies that they have come to the same point, maintaining that *he* expects reality to arrange itself meaningfully around him without his having to *do* anything, whereas

gardens. Alone and free. But this freedom is rather like death'. Regarding his past life, he finds little to say about it except that 'It's a lost game, that's all'; furthermore, he has learnt 'that you always lose', and he thus resolves to 'outlive' himself, like Anny (223/219). As theoretical man, he also feels himself alone on a 'hill', belonging to another species from that of the people in the town below (224-225/220). Still, he cannot totally shake off a longing for the company of someone else who sees things as he does: 'Is there nowhere another Cassandra on the top of a hill, looking down at a town engulfed in the depths of Nature? But what does it matter to me? What could I possibly tell her?' (227/223).

The final major episode, based on the Autodidact's misadventure in the library, is quite important symbolically. As suggested earlier, the Autodidact symbolizes the modern intelligentsia, well-meaning in a sense, but incapable of understanding art or knowledge, and holding to a doctrinaire, 'humanistic' collectivism that is both inauthentic and naive. But in this final episode, the point is taken a bit further, namely, the modern intelligentsia is exposed as a perverted lover of mankind, and particularly of future mankind in the form of youth.

For one thing, the library scene seems intended to evoke the fact that, at the beginning of the Western intellectual tradition, Socrates was put to death by mass-man for allegedly corrupting the youth with his *philosophy*; and to suggest that now, at the end of the Western intellectual tradition, a lot of autodidactic intellectual perverts really *are* corrupting the youth with their *anti-philosophy*; but that they, too, will ultimately meet death at the hands of a new, more terrible form of mass-man. This new form of mass-man is symbolized by the bureaucratic, brutally authoritarian Corsican, whose more concrete symbolical identity Roquentin hints at when he notes that the bloodstain on the

library threshold was shaped like a star — in other words, a red star (239/235). Further, the library scene suggests that the blame for the modern corruption of youth lies not only with the Autodidact's perversion, but also with the youth themselves, or with human nature. The two boys were obviously ambivalently *fascinated* by the prospect of baiting the Autodidact (232–234/228–230), just as the little girl in the scene with the exhibitionist in the park was ambivalently fascinated by what was going on before her eyes (116–117/115–116). In both cases, the fascination exists as fear and aversion combined with vulgar curiosity and excitement (just as can be found beneath the modern fascination for anti-heroics and self-destructive revolutionizing).

At a more general level, however, the library scene appears to symbolize mass-man's existential fear of anyone who is not *normal*, regardless of whether that abnormality is something pathological or something superior. Choosing a pathological individual, the Autodidact, as the object of mass-man persecution here seems intended to point up the fact that individualism, as a *social* philosophy, is by no means free of defects and dangers. Given the fact that human nature is irredeemably flawed, caught between mass-man inauthenticity and the sadistic-masochistic circle of suffering symbolized by Lucie, characters like the Autodidact will be around no matter what; however, they will be much more in *evidence* in an individualistic society than in a collectivist one (where anyone suspected of being 'abnormal' will be expeditiously removed from the scene). In short, there is something necessarily unsatisfactory about both individualism and collectivism as social philosophies, but for the existentialist, individualism is clearly the lesser of the two evils.

As the novel draws to a close, Ruquentin has been disillusioned with the Marquis de Rollebon, the Bouville city fathers, Anny, and the Autodidact; which means, symbolically construed,

with great historical individuals, with social tradition, with practical activism, and with the modern intelligentsia, as well as with love and friendship. He muses that nobody on earth is likely to be thinking of him, and yet he exists. But his self has become pale and abstract, and at one moment even seems to go out like a candle-flame. He seems left, then, with a self as pure, empty consciousness (240-241/236-237). In fact, however, his consciousness is not really empty, since thoughts and images keep rushing through it. He thinks of the smashed and tormented Autodidact, suffering as he roams the streets; then he thinks of fat old Anny, suffering through the boredom of outliving herself; and finally he thinks of the song 'Some of These Days', in which *pure* suffering occurs, forgotten yet not forgetting itself, with 'nobody there to suffer and wring his hands and take pity on himself' (243/238). In a sense, this song, to whose idea his thoughts have ascended from the level of the Autodidact's suffering through the level of Anny's suffering, is the real hero of the novel.

Basically, the novel takes place against the implicit backdrop of Platonic view of reality, which is also largely the view taken by Western philosophy from Plato to Hegel. According to this view, reality is both material and ideal, and human existence stands with one foot in each of these two realms. Further, the material realm is chaotic and meaningless in itself, but becomes orderly and meaningful to the extent that it can be pulled up out of itself in the direction of the ideal realm, which consists of 'essences' that the mind can grasp in thought and can name and communicate in words. On this traditional view, there was no real problem of meaning in life, since life had the obvious goal of knowing as clearly as possible the realm of ideal essences and of guiding itself in the material world both by and towards that knowledge. To have attained adequately full knowledge of

ideal reality by the time of one's death was to have realized oneself as a single, unified life-adventure. In *Nausea*, however, several crises have occurred regarding that traditional world-view. First, severe doubt has arisen about the very *reality* of the ideal realm, with the material realm asserting itself ever more strongly as the only reality. Accordingly, a kind of metaphysical collapse has begun, in which material reality breaks free from the ties to the ideal realm that previously pulled it up out of itself, and starts sinking into its own nauseous, arbitrary, radically 'concrete' absurdity. Second, insofar as this severe doubt has not yet become total—as it still has not in Roquentin's case—, severe uncertainty has arisen about the possibility of *uniting* the material and ideal realms in a meaningful way within any individual person's existence. Not only is there usually a totally unbridgeable gap between materiality and ideality at any time in one's life, but also, even if the two occasionally come together, such conjunctions are meaningful only as long as they last, and cannot impart meaningfulness to the entire course of a life that keeps shedding its past towards an ever-emptied present that one day ends in death. Throughout the novel then, Roquentin is besieged by experiences that seem to confirm the notion that reality is solely material, that the ideal realm is a 'subjective' invention of the human mind, and that the true nature of a 'self' is the nothingness of pure consciousness. Unlike Anny, however, who has utterly capitulated under a similar siege, he remains open to the possibility of somehow uniting the material and the ideal within his existence. As a result of his experiences with the song 'Some of These Days', he begins to see *art* as offering the possible solution to his problem. (Behind all this, Sartre seems to be reflecting on Nietzsche's claim that it is only as an *aesthetic* phenomenon that life is justified, as well as orienting himself on Heidegger's notion of a personal life-project that

culminates meaningfully in death and Hegel's notion of materiality as something that remains fleetingly unreal until it has been transformed by human thought into intelligible ideality.)

Thus, at the close of the novel, Roquentin considers the possibility of writing a book. But it will not be a *history* book, because 'history talks about what has existed — an existent can never justify the existence of another existent' (252/247). That remark applies not only to his experience with the Marquis but also to that with Anny, since the main mistake that he and Anny made was trying to justify each other through each other. Here it is worth noting how the atmosphere of their last meeting changes, with conflict and tension phasing into a friendly harmony, as soon as they stop concentrating on each other and start pursuing the problem of just what 'perfect moments' might be. If they had stopped looking for meaning in each other, and started looking for meaning together, as Roquentin seemed willing to try, there might even have been some hope for them. But as practical man, Anny could not avoid the mistake of continually trying to force the ideal realm directly onto the realm of existence. Here, Roquentin sees more deeply into the inevitable gulf between the two realms, and realizes that any workable unification has to enable the gulf to remain somehow, yet to be bridged somehow. Anny, on the other hand, sees more deeply than he that existence is 'raw material' that needs to be 'treated' in some way. His characteristic mistake, in contrast to Anny's, is to assume existence will somehow bring forth the ideal of itself, without any appropriative effort on his part. So his story ends with the possibility that he will try writing a *novel*, in which he will actively 'treat' the raw material of his existence in an aesthetic way, just as the Jew and the Negress treated the miserable raw material of their existence in order to produce self-transcendence in to meaningful ideality through

the song 'Some of These Days' (251/246). Concretely, what he envisages is: 'Another kind of book... — you would have to guess, behind the printed words, behind the pages, something which didn't exist, which was above existence. The sort of story, for example, that could never happen, an adventure. It would have to be beautiful and hard as steel and make people ashamed of their existence' (252/247).

Unfortunately, Sartre never wrote such a novel. Not long after publishing *Nausea*, and in circumstances ironically like those in which the Autodidact became a Socialist (164–165/161–162), his war-time experiences taught him 'the societal',³ and he turned back towards what he had earlier diagnosed as the existential dead-ends represented by Anny and the Autodidact. But insofar as existentialism is to be understood in the spirit of Nietzsche, Heidegger, Ortega y Gasset, and the late Camus, the Sartre of *Nausea* was more profoundly existentialist than he was ever to be again. Although hardly a great book, *Nausea* deserves to be numbered among the true classics of existentialism achieving a provocative disparagement of many fond illusions and a memorable poeticization of many right questions.

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NOTES

1. Page references to this work are given doubly (in parentheses) in the following text, first to Robert Baldick's translation of *Nausea* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1965), and second to the original *La nausée* (Paris: Editions Gallimard, 1938).
2. Leo Fretz, 'An Interview with Jean-Paul Sartre', in: H. J. Silverman and F. A. Ellison (eds.), *Jean-Paul Sartre: Contemporary Approaches to his Philosophy* (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1980), p. 239.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 239.

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