



Jean-Paul Sartre: *La Nausée* [Nausea]

(1938)

- Eddis Miller (Pace University)

Genre: Novel. Country: France.

Nausea, Jean-Paul Sartre's first novel, was published in 1938. It is widely considered to be his best (he would later publish three novels in his unfinished tetralogy, *The Roads to Freedom*). Along with Albert Camus' *The Stranger* (1942), it is arguably the quintessential existentialist novel, and, like Camus' novel, it is often read as the literary counterpart to philosophical views expressed non-fictionally elsewhere. *Nausea* is frequently read in relation to Sartre's philosophical chef-d'œuvre, *Being and Nothingness* (1943). Though it won no literary prizes and was hardly a best seller—it took until 1950 to sell 50,000 copies (Deguy 25)—*Nausea* was well reviewed by critics who recognized in Sartre an important new literary voice. (Many of these reviews are collected in the volume of Sartre's *Œuvres romanesques* in the *Bibliothèque de la Pléiade*.) It certainly played no small part in earning Sartre the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1964, an honor he would famously refuse.

Genesis and Publication

Sartre began working on this novel, which he referred to as his “factum on contingency”, in the Fall of 1931, when he was 26 years old. “Factum” may refer to a statement of the facts in a trial, or a diatribe launched against an opponent. Both definitions are suitable here; as we will see, *Nausea* aims both to unveil a certain truth about the nature of existence—its “contingency”, which will be discussed in detail below—and to attack those who systematically evade this truth. Contat and Rybalka (whose account of the genesis and publication of *Nausea* I am following here) note that Sartre undertook this project at a transitional moment in his life. His student days and military service behind him, and separated from his companion Simone de Beauvoir, who had taken a position at a *lycée* in Marseilles, Sartre found himself alone teaching philosophy in Le Havre, a port city in Normandy that is the model for the “Bouville” of *Nausea*. His first philosophical work, *The Legend of Truth*, written during his military service, had been rejected by a publisher. Sartre saw his arrival at Le Havre as a (new) beginning in his career as a writer.

It took Sartre two years to complete a first version, and de Beauvoir, likely the only one to have read it, played an important role in its development, reading it as it was produced. He worked on a second version in 1933-1934 while in Berlin and studying the work of German philosopher Edmund Husserl. Upon returning to Le Havre, he undertook a careful revision of the manuscript. Into this third version, completed in 1936, Sartre incorporated some new elements, most significantly some images which obsessed him in the wake of an experiment with mescaline in 1935. It is this third draft that was submitted to the publisher Gallimard in the Spring of 1936, under the title *Melancholia*. Sartre took this title from Dürer's engraving of the same name, a favorite of his and his first girlfriend Simone Jollivet's, the model for the character of Anny. The work was rejected, but

recommended anew to Gaston Gallimard in the Fall of 1936; this time, it was accepted, and an editor named Brice Parain was charged with seeing it through to publication. Parain asked Sartre to remove a number of passages (some rather risqué), reducing the manuscript by about 50 pages. (These excised passages can be found in the Pléiade edition.) Sartre grudgingly agreed to these excisions. In addition, the title *Melancholia* was found wanting, and it was Gaston Gallimard himself who proposed *Nausea* for the book's title. Sartre was initially nonplussed by the suggestion, and feared that it would lead to a naturalist reading of his book—as though what was at stake in Roquentin's experience of “nausea” could be cleared up with a glass of flat ginger ale. But as Contat and Rybalka note, “the word nausea has in a way taken on a new meaning thanks to Sartre's novel: today one only has to capitalize the word for it to evoke no longer physical illness or vomiting, but existential anguish” (1668, my translation).

Content and Analysis

The novel can be summarized rather succinctly, as the characters are few and the action minimal, though perhaps not quite as succinctly as Vladimir Nabokov did in his icy review of Lloyd Alexander's English translation:

The book is supposed to be the diary (“Saturday morning”, “11 P.M.”—that sort of dismal thing) of a certain Roquentin, who, after some quite implausible travels, has settled in a town in Normandy to conclude a piece of historical research. Roquentin shuttles between café and public library, runs into a voluble homosexual, meditates, writes his diary, and finally has a long and tedious talk with his former wife, who is now kept by a sun-tanned cosmopolitan.

Nabokov's sinister dismissal at least has the inadvertent courtesy not to spoil for the reader anything of true interest in the novel. As Nabokov notes, *Nausea* is a diary novel, a *journal intime*. (*Nausea*'s strongest literary influence, by Sartre's own admission, was another work of this genre, Rainer Maria Rilke's *The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge*.) There are several undated pages placed before the diary proper, which covers a period of about four and a half weeks. All of this is preceded by a brief “Editor's Note” informing the reader that “these notebooks were found among the papers of Antoine Roquentin” and “published without alteration”. The editor speculates that the undated pages were written several weeks before the diary itself begins, therefore around the beginning of January 1932. Finally, the editor notes that at that time, after having travelled extensively, Roquentin settled in Bouville for three years to finish his historical research on the Marquis de Rollebon.

As we learn in the “undated pages”, Roquentin begins to keep a diary in order to make sense of a change that has taken place within him, and indeed to ensure himself of his sanity. One Saturday, as children are skimming stones in the sea, Roquentin picks one up to do the same. He sees something—was it the stone, or the sea?—which disgusts him, and he stops, drops the stone, and leaves, the children laughing at his bizarre behavior. The stone, Roquentin notes, was dry on one side, wet and muddy on the other, and he held it by the edges to avoid soiling his fingers, a sort of premonition of the wet and dirty underside of reality that Roquentin will later name “existence”. He is certain that what he experienced was “fear” or some feeling of that sort, but he cannot identify precisely what he was afraid of. But, writing later that evening, Roquentin concludes the undated pages by dismissing this “passing moment of madness” as ridiculous, and feeling reassured—“what is there to fear in such a regular world?”—he decides to give up writing “his daily impressions, like a little girl in her nice new notebook” (3). Another unsettling experience, however, prompts Roquentin to begin his diary anew and produce the four-and-a-half weeks of dated entries.

These entries can perhaps best be divided into pre-garden scene and post-garden scene. The troubling

experiences of Nausea that begin with the stone reach their climax in this garden scene, and in the same entry where it is recounted, Roquentin explains what he takes to be the meaning of these experiences. Since we will analyze this entry in some detail below, a few words will suffice about the several bouts of Nausea that precede it.

Like the initiatory encounter with the stone, Roquentin's experiences all involve objects of some sort: a glass of beer (8), a muddy piece of paper (10), a barman's purple suspenders (19). He feels as though he is somehow being touched by objects: "Objects should not *touch* because they are not alive. You use them, put them back in place, you live among them. They are useful, nothing more. But they touch me, it is unbearable. I am afraid of being in contact with them, as though they were living beasts" (10). And while Nausea certainly suggests some kind of inner experience, a state of or within the body, centralized in the gut, Roquentin feels this Nausea to belong somehow to the objects themselves; reflecting on the stone, he concludes that his strange feeling "passed from the stone to my hand. Yes, that's it, that's just it—a sort of nausea in the hands" (11). Similarly, about his encounter with the suspenders, Roquentin writes: "The Nausea is not inside me: I feel it *out there* in the wall, in the suspenders, everywhere around me. It makes itself one with the café, I am the one who is within *it*" (19-20). And yet, despite the odd displacement of nausea in these reflections, the garden scene will reinforce why "nausea" is such an apt term for what afflicts Roquentin: it captures the transformed relation to objects, which have a newfound power to provoke disgust; the enhanced tactile and olfactory sensitivity; and the panicked apprehension of existence as a ballast to which one is irremediably chained.

In these pre-garden entries, Roquentin does indeed spend a good bit of time relating his shuffling back and forth between his room, the library, and the café. We are privy to his struggles and ultimate failure to write his book, an historical study of the (fictional) Marquis de Rollebon, a late-18th/early-19th century man of intrigue; documents pertaining to his time in France are held in the municipal library of Bouville, which is the reason why Roquentin is there in the first place. His personal interactions are few; he claims never to speak to anyone, aside from a man identified by Roquentin only as "the Autodidact" (Nabokov's "voluble homosexual"), and Françoise, the woman who runs one of his cafés of predilection, and with whom he has sex regularly in the room she rents upstairs. But the Autodidact "doesn't count", and Roquentin isn't sure that he really talks to Françoise all (6).

The Autodidact ("the Self-Taught Man" in Alexander's translation)—a lonely man of cringing intellectual humility and a fawning reverence for Roquentin the "writer"—is in fact a more important figure for Roquentin than his dismissive words suggest. Roquentin makes his acquaintance at the Bouville library, where he spends his non-working hours making his way alphabetically through all of the authors lining the shelves of the reading room, a years-long project at the end of which he hopes to join a group of students and professors on a cruise to the Near East and find "adventure" (35). During a visit to see some of Roquentin's travel photos (pp. 33-36), the Autodidact asks Roquentin whether he has had many adventures, and Roquentin, "generally proud of having had so many adventures", says "a few". But no sooner does he respond than he is seized by the realization that this is a lie; the several pages which follow (37-40) show Roquentin engaged in a sort of deconstruction of the value attached to his own sense of past adventure. Later, over a lunch to which Roquentin reluctantly agrees (103-123), the Autodidact shares his humanist and socialist convictions with Roquentin, expecting to make common cause, only to be disappointed. In the pages recounting this lunch—which ultimately triggers a bout of Nausea and ends with Roquentin leaving the café abruptly—Roquentin rails against the emptiness and abstraction of the humanist conception of man.

Thus the Autodidact provokes for Roquentin some key moments of reflection in which certain values are shown to be ultimately hollow, in preparation, as it were, for the intuition of a contingent, valueless existence to come in the climactic scene. Similarly, Roquentin's account of his visit to the Museum of Bouville (82-94) contains a biting and humorous denunciation of bourgeois values, another key moment in the "purificatory process" in which Roquentin frees himself from all values linked to the past (Contat and Rybalka 1672). We follow Roquentin as he moves through the hall of portraits in which the elite of Bouville's past are enshrined, admiring

one in spite of himself at first, then feeling judged (“his judgment went through me like a sword and questioned my very right to exist”, 84), but ultimately seeing through their self-assurance, their entitlement, their sense of having “a right to everything: to life, to work, to wealth, to command, to respect, and finally, to immortality” (83). Having made the tour of the gallery and taken the air out of their bourgeois pretense, Roquentin turns back for a parting shot: “Farewell, beautiful lilies, elegant in your painted little sanctuaries, good-bye, lovely lilies, our pride and reason for existing, good-bye, Bastards!” (94).

The diary entry in which Roquentin recounts and interprets his experience in the municipal garden of Bouville (126-135) constitutes the climax of the novel, for it is here that he finally solves the mystery of the Nausea that has been plaguing him, even if his newfound understanding of his Nausea does not free him its grips. Roquentin looks at the root of a chestnut tree under the bench upon which he is seated, and he no longer perceives the root as a root, as the familiar, namable, comprehensible object that he has no doubt seen thousands of times in his life without the slightest disturbance; it has become unfamiliar, detached from its name, function, and meaning, and is now only a frightening, black, knotty mass. In its brute and inescapable existence, the root repulses and transfixes him: “the black stump did *not move*, it stayed there, in my eyes, as a lump of food sticks in the windpipe. I could neither accept it nor refuse it” (131).

In his attempt to explain this encounter with the root, Roquentin makes a terminological distinction between the verbs “to exist” (*exister*) and “to be” (*être*). *Être* is linked, above all, with abstract, rational thought; it allows us to predicate, and therefore to name, classify, and categorize (“I was like the others, like the ones walking along the seashore, all dressed in their spring finery. I said, like them: ‘The ocean *is* green; that white speck up there *is* a seagull,’” 127). Existence, on the other hand, is anything but abstract; it is what is concretely there. And severed from their names, concepts, and functions, things undergo for Roquentin a sort of de-individuation, melting into each other: “The root, the park gates, the bench, the sparse grass, all that had vanished: the diversity of things, their individuality, were only an appearance, a veneer. This veneer had melted, leaving soft, monstrous masses, all in disorder—naked, in a frightful, obscene nakedness” (127). Roquentin tries to situate the various objects of the garden in relation to each other “in order to delay the crumbling of the human world, measures, quantities, and directions”, to reestablish order, to compel the objects in the garden “to exist less strongly, more dryly, in a more abstract way, with more reserve” (127). But these attempts are in vain.

One might be tempted to call Roquentin’s experience a sort of mystical vision, except that this vision is not of something transcending the world, but immanent to it; concerning the root, he writes: “it was the very paste of things, this root was kneaded in existence” (127). Moreover, it is hardly vision that predominates in these pages. In his attempt to describe the blackness of the root, he comments: “I did not simply *see* this black: sight is an abstract invention, a simplified idea, one of man’s ideas” (131). Rather, it is the tactile and the olfactory which plays the more powerful role; existence is wet, soft, sticky, swollen, thick like a jelly, a “vile marmalade” (134, translation modified); Roquentin’s nostrils are filled with a “green, putrid odour” (128), and rot, secretion, and digestion abound. Nevertheless, like the mystic, Roquentin struggles to put words to an experience of existence which resists language, conceptualization, and explanation; and indeed, out of the garden and back in his hotel room, he even offers a sort of philosophical thesis concerning the nature of existence: “The essential thing is contingency” (131).

What does Roquentin mean? Contingency is opposed to necessity. Existent things exist, but they do not *have to* exist; it is possible for them not to exist, and therein lies their contingency. But Roquentin means something a bit more; for it does not require an experience like the one he has undergone to perceive the contingency of things. For every contingent thing, it is possible to ask why it exists; after all, if it does not have to exist, there must be a reason for its existence. Many philosophers have sought to explain the existence of the contingent by appealing to a necessary being, God, who is the ultimate explanation for the existence of every contingent thing; and since God is a necessary being—that is, it being impossible for God not to exist—we do not need to ask a further “why?” God exists because he cannot do otherwise. Roquentin’s experience, however, is of an existence that has

no ground in a necessary being; as such, it has no ultimate explanation or reason. “To exist is simply *to be there*; the existent things appear, let themselves be encountered, but they can never be deduced” (131, translation modified). With no reason for being there, all things, including Roquentin himself, are experienced as absurd, superfluous, “too much” [*de trop*]: “We were a pile of awkward existences, embarrassed by ourselves, we didn’t have the least reason to be there, none of us, each existing thing, confused, vaguely worried, felt itself to be too much in relation to the others”, 128, translation modified). The experience of contingency puts the finishing touches on the destruction of the bourgeois pretense that began in the museum scene; for contingency gives the lie to the sense of right and entitlement. Nausea is precisely “what the Bastards [...] try to hide from themselves with their idea of right. But what a poor lie: no one has any right, they are entirely gratuitous, like other men, the cannot succeed in not feeling themselves to be too much. And in themselves, secretly, they *are too much*, that is amorphous and vague, sad” (131, translation modified).

The key post-garden event that Roquentin recounts is his visit with Anny (135-154), an ex-girlfriend who left him four years earlier, and who was obsessed with creating “perfect moments” for which Roquentin was never quite good enough. Early in the diary he claims not to think about her anymore (7), but when a letter arrives asking him to come see her in Paris (63-64), it becomes clear to Roquentin that he is hoping that she will take him back; he even says that his impending visit is, “for the moment, my sole reason for living” (103). The hoped-for reconciliation does not take place; Anny’s departure from Paris with the “sun-tanned continental” to whom Nabokov refers constitutes Roquentin’s definitive break with his past (“My past is dead”, 156) and provokes a decidedly bleak sense of his own freedom (a freedom which is “rather like a death”, 157). *Nausea* ends with Roquentin saying his final goodbyes to Bouville. He has decided to move to Paris, and while listening one last time in the café to a song that captivates him and has been discussed at several points in the diary—“Some of these days”, presumably in Ethel Waters’ rendition—he is suddenly seized by the idea that artistic creation might provide a path to salvation. He imagines that the writer and singer of the song “have washed themselves of the sin of existing. Not completely, of course, but as much as anyone can” (177). Roquentin vacillates, unsure whether he is up to the task, but ends the diary with the hopeful fantasy that his own work, while not freeing him from Nausea, will nevertheless enable him to “remember his life without repugnance”, such that he “might succeed—in the past, nothing but the past—in accepting myself” (178).

Notes on Further Reading

There are two English translations of *Nausea*, those of Alexander and Baldick, only the first of which, unfortunately, is distributed in the United States. Despite its inadequacy and because of its ubiquity, references above are to the Alexander translation, which I have frequently modified in the quotations. For students of *Nausea* who read French, the volume of Sartre’s *Œuvres romanesques* in the *Bibliothèque de la Pléiade* is a crucial resource. The text is extensively annotated, the passages of Sartre’s manuscript that were excised for the published version are restored in the notes, and there is a wealth of supplementary material relevant to *Nausea*’s genesis and reception; the essay (“Notice”) and bibliography of Contat and Rybalka are invaluable as well. Deguy is another useful resource for those who read French, providing extensive textual analysis, insight into the genesis and reception of the novel, and a selection of supplementary documents.

Sartre’s *Nausea* is obviously of both philosophical and literary interest, and the immense body of secondary literature it has generated can be found in both of these domains. I will only single out a few works of particular interest to students of literature: Doubrovsky’s fascinating and insightful reading emphasizes the psycho-sexual dimension of Sartre’s text; Raoul provides a useful analysis of the diary novel genre of *Nausea*; and Rolls and Rechinewski’s collection of essays emphasizes the literary dimensions and contexts of *Nausea* as well.

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