

INTRODUCTION

It may verge upon paradox to suggest that a writer as voluminous as Sartre is a master of ellipsis. But his explicit recognition of the power of ellipsis in expression and his own recourse, whether conscious or unconscious, to the unsaid or to the unwritten mean that the task of the reader is often one of unfolding the highly implicit. The essays which follow, although written over a number of years, share a common preoccupation. They aim primarily to explore the not always overt relationships between Sartre's theoretical and literary writing. The first term is taken broadly. It refers mainly to his philosophical and psychological works, but also includes aspects of his dramatic theory and his theory of commitment. Although the opening section of each essay tends to be expository, my discussion of theoretical issues does not claim to be systematic or exhaustive, and it later becomes more allusively interwoven with an analysis of a specific literary work, whether fictional, dramatic or critical. The literary texts themselves are not primarily discussed as illustrations or examples of a philosophical position. They may be seen to anticipate, confirm or question the authority of theoretical discourse. Each mode implicates the other. Indeed, there are times when the form of the literary writing itself crystallises theoretical issues which are thematically dispersed throughout Sartre's works and which are not of necessity those which may at first sight appear to be dominant in a given literary text. Thus, *La Nausée*, which powerfully dramatises the relationships between consciousness and the world explicitly analysed later in *L'Être et le Néant*, also dramatises the philosophical problems involved in thinking and writing about such relationships – problems which are the subject of theoretical discussion (or sometimes, more accurately, of allusion) in a wide range of earlier, contemporary and later works.

But although, in Sartre, theoretical and literary writing may implicate each other, they do not necessarily validate each other.

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There are frequent episodes of tension, questioning and subversion between the two. A flaw in traditional dramatic effect may highlight problems or inconsistencies within aspects of Sartre's theory of emotion and reflection (*Les Mouches*). The rhetoric of a theory of dramatic style may run counter to a more strictly philosophical theory of language and action, and both theories may be called into question by the play which most overtly enacts them (*Les Mains sales*). Another play, exemplifying a theory of theatrical distance and a parodic relationship to a literary tradition, may be seen to subvert not so much Sartre's philosophy itself, as a formulaic version of that philosophy (*Huis clos*). The confrontation of an evolving theory of commitment, superficially assertive but potentially self-questioning, with a recently discovered critical essay on Mallarmé, reveals a reorientation in Sartre's thinking which disturbs existing views of his intellectual development.

Despite these indications of disruption and discontinuity, the essays will also explore continuities in Sartre's thought and writing. Certain themes recur with variations. I shall discuss his theory of reflection, which is central to his early work, with different emphases in different contexts. His theory of imagination, which links the theme of transcendence and the practice of writing in *La Nausée*, is also seen to be fundamental to the problems of historical responsibility represented in *Les Séquestrés d'Altona*, and to its dramatic effects. My discussion of emotion in *Les Mouches* complements that of a more generalised affectivity in *La Nausée*. Sartre's notion of the magical is recurrently relevant, as is his closely related and even more dominant theory of poetry. The latter is implicated in the language attributed to Roquentin in *La Nausée*, in the over-categorical definitions of *Qu'est-ce que la littérature?*, to which I shall allude in different essays, and in Sartre's reflections on subversive and critical poetry in 'Orphée noir' and *L'Engagement de Mallarmé*. More generally, three of the longer essays trace a progression. *La Nausée*, as I have indicated, enacts the relationship not only between consciousness and world but between writer and writing; *Les Mains sales* dramatises the relationship between agent and act and between speaker and speech, while Sartre's essays on commitment explore the relationship between writing and action.

This last preoccupation suggests that style is functional in the work of Sartre. The metaphors and metamorphoses of *La Nausée*, the more ritualised rhetoric of *Les Mouches* and the distancing stylisation of *Huis clos* are all integral to their investigation of

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philosophical problems. But at the same time, the literary quality of their language is underlined by its insistent and wide-ranging allusions to other literary texts and styles. *Les Mains sales* is no exception, although, perhaps more than any other work of Sartre's, it is a play written in and about 'ordinary language'. For this reason, the essay in which it is discussed refers briefly to theories other than those of Sartre. An excursion into speech-act theory may be justified by those aspects of Sartre's philosophy which are concerned with language as a mode of action, and by J. L. Austin's description of his own analyses as a form of 'linguistic phenomenology'.¹

Otherwise, I shall consider the interplay of theory and literature purely in terms of Sartre's own work. But, as I have said, this should not be taken to imply a closed circuit of mutual confirmation. Sartre's philosophy rejects stability and closure. His literary writing prises apart forms that on the surface may seem traditional. The interaction of literature and theory generates new questions which are themselves open-ended.

1

LA NAUSÉE

La Nausée may be read at two levels. First, it can be taken to be an expression ‘sous une forme littéraire des vérités et des sentiments métaphysiques’.¹ In such a reading, the novel would be construed as a fictional transposition, exploration or anticipation of the theories which were being elaborated by Sartre during its period of composition and which were to find their fullest conceptual exposition in *L’Être et le Néant* in 1943.² A second level of reading would concentrate upon the problems of writing explored in Roquentin’s diary, upon the extent to which they promote or frustrate the production of meaning and the possibility of paraphrase, and upon the question of whether they thereby confirm, correct or subvert the novel’s ostensible arguments and concerns. The two levels might therefore be complementary, but their complementarity might generate tensions and ambiguities not only within each level, but between them.

The essay which follows attempts a reading at both levels. Since Sartre’s thinking at either level operates through intricate textual and intertextual relationships,³ I have chosen to look at its arguments and at its strategies in the three passages of the novel which seem to dramatise most acutely the problems of enacting, in writing, a theory of consciousness and of existence.

Reflection and facticity

The complex structure of *La Nausée* is paradoxically designed to demonstrate the inadequacy of the structures which men seek to impose upon the external world. Roquentin discovers, as he contemplates a tram-seat, that words no longer seem to confer identity upon the object designated; the fragile control of language over the world of things is undermined. He also realises that the existence of particular objects can no longer be explained in terms of the functions which we expect them to perform. He sees, as he walks

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one Sunday in Bouville, that social conventions are arbitrary and absurd impositions upon the world of human reality. Finally, Roquentin discovers that there is indeed no inherent structure or necessity in the external world itself. From this point of view, the revelation of contingency which assails Roquentin as he sits in the public park can be taken – and usually is taken – to be the climax of the novel. It is certainly vital, in that it presents exhaustively, but allusively and organically, an intuition of the nature of non-conscious being – the *en-soi* – and of its contingency, which obviously completes and clarifies Roquentin's earlier experiences in the episodes of the pebble, the beer-glass and the tram-seat. It also dislocates still further the linguistic, functional, even perceptual patterns which consciousness seeks to impose upon the world of the *en-soi* in order to create a human world within it. Its status as a climax is reinforced by the fact that it is relatively accessible; the revelation which it conveys is structured through recollection, and the implications of the revelation seem to be followed through in a highly ordered and detailed sequence.

Yet this passage by no means summarises the import of *La Nausée*. In the novel, as in his theoretical work, Sartre is as pre-occupied with the nature and activity of the *pour-soi* – human consciousness – as with the world of the *en-soi*.⁴ The revelation of the nature of consciousness is experienced acutely at two particular points. The first follows the visit to the picture gallery and Roquentin's discovery that he can no longer write his biography of the marquis de Rolleston (pp. 113–22); the second, briefer, but if anything more complete, follows the parting with Anny and the disgrace of the Autodidacte (pp. 199–202). The former episode follows the annihilation of a project, the latter the breakdown of human relationships. It is significant, too, that these passages flank the *Jardin public* episode, which is so often regarded as being, dramatically, the climax of the work, and, philosophically, the crucial passage in the elucidation of the nature of existence. For the point would seem to be that the preceding and succeeding passages complete the experience and the analysis by presenting the nature of human consciousness – of the *pour-soi* – in a purer form as an essential complement to the discussion of the *en-soi*. The three passages are, therefore, inseparable, and convey three essential aspects of Sartre's thought. The sequence could be summarised thus: the first passage is concerned chiefly with the presentation of human consciousness devoid of a project, and gradually overwhelmed by the contingency and facticity which are

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sustained within it by its own bodily, material, 'factual' situation.⁵ Secondly, in the public-park episode, the absolute and universal contingency of the external world is revealed to consciousness. Then finally, in the third passage, Sartre tries to show how the absolute freedom of consciousness is related to its extreme, pure, depersonalised transparency as 'intentionality', devoid of identity but nevertheless aware of itself through the constant secondary awareness of the 'pre-reflective cogito' – 'conscience, hélas! de la conscience' (*O.r.*, p. 202). Or, even more briefly, the first passage emphasises the contingency of the *pour-soi*, revealed through its awareness of its physical existence, the second presents the impact of the contingency of external objects upon the consciousness, and the third underlines man's inability to escape the self-perpetuating 'freedom' of consciousness and its constant ambiguity.

The presentation of such a range of human consciousness must obviously involve considerable technical difficulty, particularly in the first and third passages, in which consciousness appears to be disintegrating, reduced to a formless flicker, to a stream of undifferentiated, involuntary responses. Sartre takes up the challenge of expressing what must remain on the very limits of the possibility of expression, of giving form in order to create an impression of formlessness. He must in addition convey a sense of immediacy, of present-ness, unmediated by the retrospective journal form in which much of the novel is cast – the form responsible for the sense of structure apparent in the *Jardin public* episode, but impossible to sustain in a 'stream of consciousness' context. He must therefore lead us to accept what is in effect an arbitrary suspension of the journal form, sacrificed in the interests of apparently immediate transcription. The impression of a lowered, unstructured consciousness must furthermore be conveyed to the reader with a sense of urgency, as an organic experience, yet it must at the same time allow for the possibility of evaluation on the part of the reader. The range of Sartre's techniques in formulating and dramatising such intractable material commands first a fascinated response, followed by a curious interest in the actual techniques employed, and, perhaps, by a suspicion that, in the first passage at least, Sartre has over-compensated for the otherwise possibly colourless and abstract nature of his material in the apparently gratuitous obscenity of Roquentin's responses to the account of the child's death. However, further investigation suggests that the modulations of Sartre's presentation of consciousness in these passages are not only functional in the sense that they vary and heighten otherwise refractory material;

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they, and indeed the images in which they are conveyed, are functional also in that they illustrate allusively, but with considerable range and rigour, the analyses of the nature of consciousness set out in Sartre's theoretical work. They have, in the first place, to be seen against the background of Sartre's more general pronouncements. These for the present purpose must be taken as axiomatic: the 'intentional' nature of consciousness (i.e. the fact that it is directed towards an object or referent), its freedom, the definition of consciousness as a 'lack', the fact that consciousness, being conscious of 'what it is not', is radically separated from the material world, and yet, being incarnate, participates in the material world through the body. These ideas are present by implication in all three passages, but analysis will show that the correspondences between the literary expression and the detailed philosophical theory are far more elaborate than one might at first suppose.

The passage which immediately follows the abandonment of the Rollebbon project (*O.r.*, pp. 113–22) embraces several levels of consciousness. There is, first, the experience of existence through direct awareness of the body, followed by an attempt to end the reflection which is implied by that awareness: 'si seulement je pouvais m'arrêter de penser' (p. 118). Then, an effort to return to a deliberately heightened purely physical awareness is represented by the self-inflicted wound. Finally, the attempt at distraction through buying the newspaper is frustrated as Roquentin reads of the rape and murder of a little girl; he is again invaded by a sense of physical existence as his consciousness subsides into an increasingly hysterical whirl of desire, shame, fear, disgust, pain, fear, fainting. The sequence is presented in the novel in terms of an intense individual experience; each modulation in fact illustrates a fundamental and universal tension between consciousness and its facticity (the contingent situation over which the individual has no control, which limits the freedom of consciousness; the 'given' basis beyond which consciousness must choose to project itself). The sequence moves from the abandoned project to 'coen-aesthetic' awareness of the body; thence to the relationship between reflection, affectivity and the body; finally, it has as its climax an intuition of the self as pure flesh, involving a growing 'objectifying' of consciousness in a parody of being-for-others. The modulations will often be conveyed in imagery, befitting the intuitive nature of the experience, but we shall see that, viewed in a theoretical perspective, the imagery often lends itself to a quite literal interpretation.

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The revelation of facticity through awareness of the body is, in *La Nausée* as in Sartre's theoretical work, closely related to the breakdown of a project. We normally transcend our situation by projecting ourselves beyond the 'given' contingency of our material situation towards our possibilities; we freely commit ourselves to a certain course of action in order to realise our possibilities, but we are free to continue or to suspend such a project. Normally, in our everyday acts, we are not explicitly aware that our freedom of choice and responsibility are involved, for we do not even posit our possibilities and the acts which are intended to fulfil them as specific spheres for evaluation and decision. 'Je puis aussi me trouver engagé dans des actes qui me révèlent mes possibilités dans l'instant même où ils les réalisent' (*EN*, p. 73). 'Nous saisissons nos possibles comme tels dans et par la réalisation active de ces possibles' (p. 73). Consciousness engaged in action in this way is essentially non-reflective consciousness, and it implies a particular relationship both with the world and with the body. In his theoretical work, Sartre elaborates these relationships with reference to the act of writing – an illustration which reinforces a comparison of these arguments with the breakdown of Roquentin's project as the biographer of Rollebon. In the action of writing, the world presents itself as a series of objects organised as instruments within the sphere of my project: 'Dans le cadre même de l'acte, un complexe indicatif d'ustensiles se révèle et s'organise (plume- encre- papier- lignes- marge etc.) [. . .] Ainsi, dans la quasi-généralité des actes quotidiens, je suis engagé, j'ai parié et je découvre mes possibles en les réalisant et dans l'acte même de les réaliser comme des exigences, des urgences, des ustensilités' (p. 74).

Elsewhere, Sartre also analyses the place of the body among these 'rapports complexes d'ustensilité', again with reference to the act of writing, and again with relevance to this passage of *La Nausée*. For the body is evidently closely involved in the world of tools, of instruments, of things requiring to be acted upon ('exigences passives'). The body is firstly a *condition* of consciousness and of its powers of transcendence and project. But it is not *known* as such in action, nor is it known as an instrument in the series 'paper, pen, hand', in writing. Our relationship to the body *pour-moi* is existential, not cognitive; our consciousness (of) the body is pre-reflective:⁶

Je ne suis pas, par rapport à ma main, dans la même attitude utilisante que par rapport au porte-plume; je *suis* ma main. [. . .] En ce sens elle est à la fois le terme inconnaissable et inutilisable qu'indique l'instrument dernier de la série 'livre à écrire – caractères à tracer sur le papier – porte-plume', et, à la

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fois, l'orientation de la série tout entière [. . .]. Mais je ne puis la saisir – en tant qu'elle agit du moins – que comme le perpétuel renvoi évanescant de toute la série. (p. 387)

This is one of the characteristics of the body *pour-moi*, the body as I live it. Normally, 'la conscience (du) corps est latérale et rétrospective; le corps est le *négligé*, le "*passé sous silence*"' (p. 395). But the body has another characteristic: 'Ou bien il est le centre de référence indiqué à vide par les objets-ustensiles du monde, ou bien il est *la contingence que le pour-soi existe*' (p. 405). This contingency is also 'passed over' in our day-to-day activities: 'Cette contingence, nous ne pouvons jamais la saisir comme telle, en tant que notre corps est *pour nous*' (p. 393).

But there is another dimension of the body – that of the body *pour-autrui* – in which the contingency of the body, and hence the facticity of the self, is fully revealed, bringing about a dreaded 'objectifying' of consciousness in which the *pour-soi* and its freedom are petrified and engulfed by the *en-soi*, as we become objects for the consciousness of others. Moreover, between the contingency 'passed over' in our experience of the body *pour-nous* and the fully revealed contingent facticity of our *être-pour-autrui*, there are several intermediary stages, exemplified allusively, but with surprising rigour, in Roquentin's experience.

For Roquentin, Rollebon, the subject of his biography, had existed as a 'structure d'exigence' of the world, constituting, for the realisation of the task, a whole 'complexe indicatif d'ustensiles'. Roquentin defines this past situation in what might be a paraphrase of the extracts of *L'Être et le Néant* already quoted: 'chacun de mes mouvements avait son sens au-dehors, là, juste en face de moi, en lui; je ne voyais plus ma main qui traçait les lettres sur le papier, ni même la phrase que j'avais écrite – mais, derrière, au-delà du papier, je voyais le marquis, qui avait réclamé ce geste' (*O.r.*, p. 117). But the calling into question and the rejection of the Rollebon project now sets in motion a sequence of experiences explicable, even predictable, in terms of Sartre's analyses in *L'Être et le Néant*. There, Sartre defines such a situation in terms of the experience of freedom as anguish. The *mise en question* of a project is seen to leave us face to face with our liberty to continue or end the project, the liberty, in fact, to destroy the self which had previously existed as 'voulant écrire ce livre'. 'L'angoisse [. . .] se constitue lorsque la conscience se voit coupée de son essence par le néant ou séparée du futur par sa liberté même' (*EN*, p. 73). This is illustrated by Roquentin's distress when he experiences an

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inexplicable and apparently involuntary discontinuity of the self. He remembers with foreboding his change of heart in Mercier's office in Hanoi, his curiously passive decision not to go to Bengal; his successive projects have the consistency of dreams, compared with the weight of pure existence which threatens to follow their breakdown. This sense of discontinuity and the experience of liberty have another corollary: 'la liberté qui se manifeste par l'angoisse se caractérise par une obligation perpétuellement renouvelée de refaire le *Moi* qui désigne l'être libre' (p. 72). For Sartre, the freedom of the *pour-soi* involves the total responsibility of the *pour-soi* in recreating and sustaining its own possibilities. Hence the vocabulary of guilt, self-disgust and dehumanisation, suggesting an anguished need for moral self-justification and self-recreation, with which Roquentin registers the breakdown of his project and its effects. At this point, it should be noted, Roquentin does not postulate his freedom openly and consciously; this stage will be reached only later in the evolution of his self-awareness, following the break with Anny, in the passage which, as already suggested, seems to constitute the third climax of the novel. At this earlier point the intuition of liberty and disengagement is implied quite obliquely, and is transferred, thus emphasising Roquentin's passivity, to existence itself. The sense of existence is given a positive, animistic consistency and autonomy: 'La Chose, qui attendait, s'est alertée, elle a fondu sur moi, elle se coule en moi, j'en suis plein. – Ce n'est rien: la Chose, c'est moi. L'existence, libérée, dégagée, reflue sur moi' (*O.r.*, p. 117). At the same time, in the imagery of fullness and nothingness – 'j'en suis plein. – Ce n'est rien, [. . .] c'est moi' – Roquentin illustrates the oscillation between the *en-soi* density of existence, which consciousness recognises as its own facticity, and the 'nihilating' effect of consciousness seeking to tear itself away from this facticity. Theoretically, Sartre expresses this oscillation thus: 'Cette néantisation de l'En-soi par le Pour-soi et le ressaisissement du Pour-soi par l'En-soi qui alimente cette néantisation même' (*EN*, p. 399).⁷

The oblique awareness of freedom is accompanied by a change in Roquentin's awareness of the body, a transition from awareness of the body as 'le centre de référence indiqué à vide par les objets-ustensiles du monde' (p. 405) to awareness of the body as '*la contingence que le pour-soi existe*' (p. 405). This contingency, moreover, is no longer 'surpassed'⁸ ('dépassé') as it is in action. The oblique, non-reflective consciousness of the body *pour-moi* gives way to awareness of the body as an independent *en-soi*. Roquentin's