

Artistic Creation as an Act  
in Sartre's Nausea

In 1964, Jean-Paul Sartre won the Nobel Prize in Literature "for his work which, rich in ideas and filled with the spirit of freedom and the quest for truth, has exerted a far-reaching influence on our age."<sup>1</sup> He refused his prize, but seven years earlier Albert Camus accepted his. In his acceptance speech, Camus spoke about the nature of art in a manner not atypical of Sartre's thoughts upon the subject:

For myself, I cannot live without my art. But I have never placed it above everything. If, on the other hand, I need it, it is because it cannot be separated from my fellow men, and it allows me to live, such as I am, on one level with them....The artist forges himself to the others, midway between the beauty he cannot do without and the community he cannot tear himself away from.<sup>2</sup>

This remark epitomizes the conflict Camus' Jonas faces in The Artist at Work, and it is the same conflict that Sartre portrays in The Prisoner of Venice, his work on the life of Tintoretto: the need to forge oneself to one's fellow men through one's creations without letting others impede one's artistic acts. Yet this problem appears insignificant when Nausea is first examined; Sartre himself called Nausea "the literary culmination of the 'man alone' theory," although he acknowledges its limitations.<sup>3</sup> Indeed, when one first encounters Roquentin in bleak Bouville, he is writing a didactic historical study of the Marquise de Rollebon, carelessly dismissing his only real acquaintance, the auto-didact, and making cold love to the patronne of the

Café Mably. He seems to be a veritable misanthrope. This impression grows as he perceives the existence of animate and inanimate objects and is horrified by them. But when he has a bad encounter with his Nausea and asks the café waitress to play the song he likes, he appears to re-embrace humanity through the music.<sup>4</sup>

Roquentin describes his first experience with the song "Some of These Days" thus:

The vocal chorus will be along shortly; I like that part especially and the abrupt manner in which it throws itself forward, like a cliff against the sea. For the moment, the jazz is playing; there is no melody, only notes, a myriad of tiny jolts. They know no rest, an inflexible order gives birth to them and destroys them without even giving them time to recuperate and exist for themselves. They race, they press forward, they strike me a sharp blow in passing and are obliterated. . . .

I grow warm, I begin to feel happy. There is nothing extraordinary in this, it is a small happiness of Nausea: it spreads at the bottom of the viscous puddle, at the bottom of our time--the time of purple suspenders and broken chair seats; it is made of wide, soft instants, spreading at the edge, like an oil stain. No sooner than born, it is already old, it seems as though I have known it for twenty years. (Nausea, p.21)

Here he is depicting the fleeting aspect of the art form and his happiness relative to existents; yet he proceeds to mention the transpiercing quality of the music and to express surprise at "how strange it is, how moving, that this hardness should be so fragile. Nothing can interrupt it yet all can break it" (p. 21). After this awareness, he notes that his Nausea is gone, replaced by an empathetic response to the

rhythm of the melody, and he indulges in memories of certain past acts he once classified as "adventures" (pp. 22-23).

What has happened to Roquentin? He enters into a rapport with the music, he discovers that he can contemplate his existence less harshly and can recharacterize his "adventures" as existential acts without diminishing or overrating their significance. Analogously, Sartre relates what should ideally occur between a spectator and an art form in his essay on Tintoretto:

Everything in the work of art should aim to replace representation, forcing the spectator into mute participation in the spectacle. Through horror and pity men should be brought face to face with their simulacra, and if possible, thrown in their midst. Desire, consuming the fires of perspective, should discover this ersatz for divine ubiquity, the urgent presence of flesh. The logic of the eye should be respected, but at the same time, vanquished by the logic of the heart. It was the thing itself they [the Venetians] wanted shattering, larger than life, more immediate and more beautiful.<sup>5</sup>

In his preface to Leibowitz' L'Artiste et sa Conscience, Sartre again asks the artist to live the problems of his times intensely, freely, in totality, so that the work of art might reflect these problems in the same way to the spectators.<sup>6</sup> Thus, when Roquentin's arm glides "along the song of the Negress" and he is touched by the soulfulness of the music, it is because the singer's art form speaks to Roquentin of the nature of their mutual times (Nausea, p. 22). This speech is appropriated into him. Sartre characterizes this act of appropriation in Existential Psychoanalysis as one of possession: "The totality of my possessions reflects the totality of my being. I am what I have. It is myself which

I touch in this cup, in this trinket."<sup>7</sup> He links this possession of inanimate objects with the creative act that can only exist through continuous interaction between the object being created and the artist (Existential Psychoanalysis, p. 97). Roquentin can maintain this symbiosis between himself and the music while it is being played; but once it stops, however, the active relationship ceases. Correspondingly, his link with his work on Rollebon is an example of the lack of interrelationship between art form and artist. Roquentin does not want to commit himself personally to the writing; he wants to avoid facing his own existence by subordinating it to the fictive reality of Rollebon. The impossibility of creating an art form without this engagement of artist in the creative act becomes more apparent as Roquentin examines other art forms, including his own writing.

In his encounters with other art forms, Roquentin spends much time at the library reading and writing. Yet he cannot get interested in books such as Balzac's Eugénie Grandet or in his piece on Rollebon. He does not enter into that symbiotic relationship in either case, but the latter instance is not just an example of him abstracting himself from objects outside of himself. It is a case of his inability to define himself through action, creative or otherwise, since his act of writing is his only justification for his existence (Nausea, p. 70). Defining oneself through action, provided that one is not alienated from the objects acted upon, is the leitmotif of Sartre's philosophical essays. He explicitly calls writing an act in Existential Psychoanalysis (p. 97). In The Words, it is the act which he chooses to use to define himself.<sup>8</sup> And in Existential Psychoanalysis, he describes what takes place when he performs such an act: "I transfer myself to the object possessed; without it I am nothing save a nothingness which possesses, nothing other than pure and simple possession, an incompleteness, an insufficiency,

whose sufficiency and completeness are there in the object" (p. 98). This is exactly what Roquentin is unable to do: transfer himself to his character, Rollebon, while retaining a sense of self.

In The Words, Sartre recounts his childhood initiation into the act of writing and how he perceived reality through words, not the other way around (p. 142). Rollebon uses the same art form for the opposite reason: to hide from reality through Rollebon, an existent character with whom he has no real relationship. On the other hand, Sartre's works are extensions of himself and existents in themselves. He explains this simultaneity as a consequence of possession, for "the possessed object as possessed is a continuous creation; but still it remains there; it exists by itself; it is in-itself; if I turn away from it, it does not thereby cease to exist; if I go away, it represents me in my desk, in my room, in this place in this void" (Existential Psychoanalysis, p. 26). In Nausea, Roquentin's writing lacks this quality of existence in itself. After a visit to the museum of Bouville, he recognizes the void between himself and the words he writes about Rollebon; he sees his total alienation from his work; he perceives its nothingness while despising his own lack of definition; and he decides to cease writing the work (pp. 82-99). Why does he stop writing after he visits the museum? First, it is here that he confronts existents within the confines of painting when he gazes at the portrait of Jean Parrotin (p. 89). Then he stands in the center of the gallery, aware that the elite of Bouville portrayed here had their existence justified before they were born; he realizes that he cannot justify his existence through false acts or non-acts such as his incomplete book on Rollebon. He acknowledges that he cannot majorer himself like the artist. Bordurin does for Olivier Blévine: Bordurin re-positions all the objects surrounding Blévine to make him appear larger to the spectator. Roquentin knows that such illusion is a vain effort to justify one's

existence and realizes that his work with Rollebon is such an effort, so he dispenses with it (pp. 97-102). He is forced to recognize that Blévine's portrait by Bordurin is a feeble attempt on the part of Blévine to immortalize himself, when in fact it is a possession of the artist Bordurin and has nothing to do with past, present, or future except in a relative sense. Roquentin's inability to create Rollebon, signifying his inability to create himself, is poignantly expressed in the passage where he tries to perceive Rollebon through the words of another:

I made one last attempt; I repeated the words of Mme de Genlis by which I usually evoked the Marquise: "His small, wrinkled countenance, clean and sharp, all pitted with smallpox, in which there was a singular malice which struck the eye, no matter what effort he made to dissemble it."

His face appeared to me with docility, his pointed nose, his bluish cheeks, his smile. I could shape his features at will, perhaps with even greater ease than before. Only it was nothing more than an image in me, a fiction. I sighed, let myself lean back against the chair, with an intolerable sense of loss. (p. 97)

After letting go of Rollebon, he lucidly faces his own existence, then tries to flee from the knowledge. He enters the Bar de la Marne and the music he hears affects him thus:

The voice, deep and hoarse, suddenly appears and the world vanishes, the world of existence. A woman in the flesh had this voice, she sang in front of a record, in her finest get up, and they recorded her voice. The woman: bah! she existed like me, like Rollebon, I don't want to know her. But there it is.

You can't say it exists. The turning record exists, the air struck by the voice which vibrates, exists, . . . I who listen, I exist. All is full existence everywhere, dense, heavy and sweet. But, beyond all this sweetness, inaccessible, near and so far, young, merciless and serene, there is this...this rigour.  
(pp. 102-03. Emphasis mine.)

Roquentin rediscovers the existence of Rollebon after he has, in effect, destroyed him in fictive reality. He does not quite recapture, however, his own existence in terms of creative acts. He enters into an empathetic rapport with the melody and possesses it for a short while, defining himself through the act. But he cannot sustain the relationship in which the existence of the art form is presupposed by an existent creator or spectator, and thus his contemptuous, misanthropic reference to the singer.

Roquentin rails against existing for others, which is another requisite for possessing an art object. Sartre says, "Through possession, I recover an object-being identical with my being-for-others. Consequently, the other cannot surprise me, the being which he wishes to bring into the world which is myself-for-another--this being I already enjoy possessing. Thus possession is in addition a defense against others. What is mine is myself in a non-subjective form inasmuch as I am its free foundation (Existential Psychoanalysis, p. 99).

Roquentin cannot bear to contemplate his own subjective existence, let alone the reflection of that existence in a non-subjective art form! Neither can he endure the ideal and symbolic (e.g., subjective) character of his relationship with the art form, for he is too conscious of his denying his existence, that which presupposes the link between artist and art form. Yet the Nausea assaults him intermittently until he leaves for Paris to see his former mistress. For Roquentin, existence is a fullness which man can

never abandon, a concept he must accept before he can define himself; nonetheless, he still entertains the vague hope that Anny can save him from himself.

Anny was an artist, an actress, but she no longer acts. Neither does she continue to create "perfect moments," those epiphanies that resulted from transforming "privileged situations." She describes the chronology of such a situation: "First there are annunciatory signs. Then the privileged situation, slowly, majestically, comes into people's lives. Then the question whether you want to make a perfect moment out of it" (Nausea, p. 133). The similarity to Roquentin's musical encounters is blatant, and he comments to Anny that such transformations are "a sort of work of art" (p. 133). But such a classification seems simplistic to her, and she emphasizes the obligation one has to "transform privileged situations into perfect moments" (p. 148). Implicit in this obligation is the idea of the creative act as the transforming agent, the creative choice one makes when entering into the prescribed relationship with the privileged moment that one is to transform. Like Roquentin, however, Anny treats the occurrence of privileged situations as purely coincidental and does not acknowledge her ability as an artist and human being to strive to create a privileged situation. Although both of them have been confronted with their own existence, neither realizes that creativity cannot be restricted to acting on randomly occurring privileged situations. Anny says that she outlives herself and Roquentin can say nothing to comfort her. She stopped acting because it was meaningless for her to act in the theater without creating her characters. Sartre says of Tintoretto: "To work alone and for nothing is to die of fear" (Situations, p. 47) and it is this lack of engagement in her theatrical work that persuaded her to quit acting and stop defining herself through perfect moments. In a rough sense, Anny is dead: she cast away her only justification for existence and did not intend to replace her creation of perfect

moments with another mode of creative action. But Roquentin still struggles to make his existence more palatable without obviating it and he suggests to Anny that experiences interacting with art forms might be a way to start justifying one's existence. Anny does not even listen when he explains the joy he felt while hearing the "Railwayman's Rendezvous" ragtime tune, "Some of These Days." She insists on living in the past and attempting to hide from her existence. They part and Roquentin returns to Bouville for the last time, achingly aware of his own solitude and his contingent freedom (pp. 151-56).

Roquentin is prepared for his final encounter with "Some of These Days." The last vestiges of "bad faith" are stripped away as he indulges in a splenetic diatribe--reminiscent of Baudelaire--against humanity and himself. In this final reduction of self, Roquentin becomes uniquely human, no more and no less. Sartre is not the only one to claim that only artists have the courage to unveil everyone's bad faith. In fact, Friedrich Nietzsche predates Sartre by fifty years when he speaks of "the principle that every human being is a unique wonder" and says that artists "dare to show us the human being as he is, down to the last muscle, himself and himself alone--even more, that in this rigorous consistency of his uniqueness he is beautiful and worth contemplating, as novel and incredible as every work of nature, and by no means dull."<sup>9</sup> It is this unique human who represents man existing in the space between his desire to endure and his destiny to act that Camus evokes in The Myth of Sisyphus.<sup>10</sup> And it is this same uniqueness that allows Roquentin to forge his solitary existence with that of other men. This he does when he defends the Self-Taught Man from being beaten by a librarian for the latter's lewd behavior towards a high school student (Nausea, p. 168). Roquentin's actions are awkward, but they are acts which define him and inextricably link him to his fellow man. This human link sets in motion a chain of events

which lead Roquentin to decide to transform himself into an artist.

First, he continually thinks about other people and interacts with them in the Café Mably. He thinks that he does not want to do anything when he moves to Paris, for "to do something is to create existence--and there's quite enough existence as it is." Yet he cannot stop writing in his journal, ostensibly to stave off the Nausea that he fears will assault him if he stops; moreover, by writing he is acting, creating an art form. Then the waitress plays the recording of "Some of These Days." He irreverently discusses it when it begins, but when the saxophone's notes speak to him of suffering in rhythm, he listens and is briefly consoled (pp. 169-74). Sartre provides an explanation for this property of music in "The Artist and His Conscience": "If so many people find consolation in music, it seems to me that it is because it speaks to them of their sorrows in the same voice which they will use to speak of them when they are completed, and because it makes them see these sorrows with the eyes of a future day (Situations, p. 222). When Roquentin listens to the melody and tries to trace its existence in Nausea, he realizes that it simply is, and he wants simply to be. He wants to exist elsewhere:

. . . behind the canvas of paintings, with the doges of Tintoretto, with Gozzoli's Florentines, behind the pages of books, with Fabrizio del Dongo and Julien Sorel, behind the phonograph records, with the long dry laments of jazz. And then, after making a complete fool of himself, he understood, he opened his eyes, he saw that it was a misdeal; he was in a bistro, just in front of a glass of warm beer. He stayed overwhelmed on the bench; he thought: I am a fool. And at that very moment, on the other side of existence, in this other world which you can see in the distance, but without every approaching it, a little melody began to

sing and dance: "You must be like me; you must suffer in rhythm."

The voice sings:

Some of these days  
You'll miss me, honey. . . . (p. 175)

and Roquentin discovers the essence of the melody, which "stays the same, young and firm, like a pitiless witness" (p. 175). He also encounters the composer of the piece--the man--whom he tries to think about through the melody. Roquentin realizes that this composer exists in the same way he does but that the composer and the singer were saved from drowning in their own existence by acts of artistic creativity. He is curious about them; they move him and make him wish that he could move someone to regard him with tenderness (pp. 176-77). It then occurs to Roquentin that the singer and the composer have "washed themselves of the sin of existing. Not completely, of course, but as much as any man can" (p. 177). He regains the hope that he can justify his existence and decides to do so by writing a book:

But not a history book: history talks about what has existed--an existent can never justify the existence of another existent. My error, I wanted to resuscitate the Marquis de Rollebon. Another type of book. I don't quite know which kind--but you would have to guess, behind the printed words, behind the pages, at something which would not exist, which would be above existence. A story, for example, something that could never happen, an adventure. It would have to be beautiful and hard as steel and make people ashamed of their existence. (p. 177)

Here he has declared his intent to act; he acknowledges the tedium of creating it in the beginning, but hopes that the finished product will help him accept himself in relation to acts in the past

(p. 178). Nietzsche describes it thus:

Giving style to one's character--a great and rare art! It is exercised by those who see all the strengths and weaknesses of their own natures and then comprehend them in an artistic plan until everything appears as art and reason and even weakness delights the eye. . . . For one thing is needful: that a human being attain his satisfaction with himself--whether it be by this or by that poetry and art; only then is a human being at all tolerable to behold. <sup>11</sup>

This passage succinctly describes what Roquentin had chosen to do: justify his existence through an act of creation and render his existence tenable to himself and others. He wants to be regarded as an artist who shared some of himself with other people through his creative acts. Even though Roquentin's book is still in the form of an idea when Nausea ends, Roquentin has saved himself and he will create his own essence through the act of writing.

In 1859, Sören Kierkegaard wrote about "what it means to be a single individual man, neither more nor less--which surely even an author is too, neither more nor less."<sup>12</sup> Sartre ends his autobiography, The Words, in a similar vein: "never have I thought that I was the happy possessor of a 'talent'; my sole concern has been to save myself--nothing in my hands, nothing up my sleeve--by work and faith. As a result, my pure choice did not raise me above anyone. Without equipment, without tools, I set all of me to work in order to save all of me. If I relegate impossible Salvation to the proproom, what remains? A whole man, composed of all men and as good as all of them and no better than any" (p. 255. Emphasis mine).

Roquentin's salvation is Sartre's, for through creating Roquentin and the world of Nausea, he creates himself; he justifies his past actions up to

that moment of space-time. Sartre and Roquentin forge themselves to mankind in the manner that Camus attributes to the artist. Even if near the end of his life his vision impairment forced him to give up writing completely, almost to the last Sartre remained in public. He provided material for interviews and even tried to host a series of historical documentaries on French television. This is evidence of his firm commitment to self-definition as man and artist. The hope which he and Roquentin entertain for themselves in Nausea --that it is possible to justify one's existence by creating and possessing art forms--is a hope he entertains for all men. He says to Lebowitz in "The Artist and His Conscience":

You have demonstrated brilliantly how, in the course of a free yet rigorous evolution, music wrenched itself from its alienation and set about creating its own essence while freely providing its own laws. In its modest way, couldn't music thus influence the course of history by providing the working class with the image of a "total man," who also has wrenched himself from his alienation, from the myth of a human "nature" and who, through daily struggle, forges his own essence and values according to which he judges himself? (Situations, p. 207)

One cannot help but hope that Sartre is right regarding artists and existents alike. The act of creating this study would then be a self-defining artistic and existential act.

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Nobel Foundation, official commendation of Jean-Paul Sartre, in Literature: Nobel Lectures, Including Presentation Speeches and Laureates' Biographies, 1901-1967, ed. Horst Frenz (Amsterdam: Elsevier Publishing Company, 1969), p. 596.

<sup>2</sup> Albert Camus, acceptance speech for Nobel Prize in Literature, in Literature: Nobel Lectures, Including Speeches and Laureates' Biographies, 1901-1967, ed. Horst Frenz (Amsterdam: Elsevier Publishing Company, 1969), p. 524. Emphasis mine.

<sup>3</sup> Jean-Paul Sartre, Life/ Situations, tr. Paul Austin and Lydia Davis (New York: Pantheon Books, 1977), p. 45.

<sup>4</sup> Jean-Paul Sartre, Nausea, tr. Lloyd Alexander (New York: New Directions, 1974), pp. 6-20. All further references to this work appear in the text.

<sup>5</sup> Jean-Paul Sartre, "The Prisoner of Venice," in Situations, tr. Benita Eisler (New York: George Braziller, 1965), pp. 44-45. All further references to this work appear in the text.

<sup>6</sup> Jean-Paul Sartre, "The Artist and His Conscience," in Situations, tr. Benita Eisler (New York: George Braziller, 1965), p. 223. All further references to this work appear in the text.

<sup>7</sup> Jean-Paul Sartre, Existential Psychoanalysis, tr. Hazel E. Barnes (South Bend, Indiana: Gateway Editions, 1962), p. 96. All further references to

this work appear in the text.

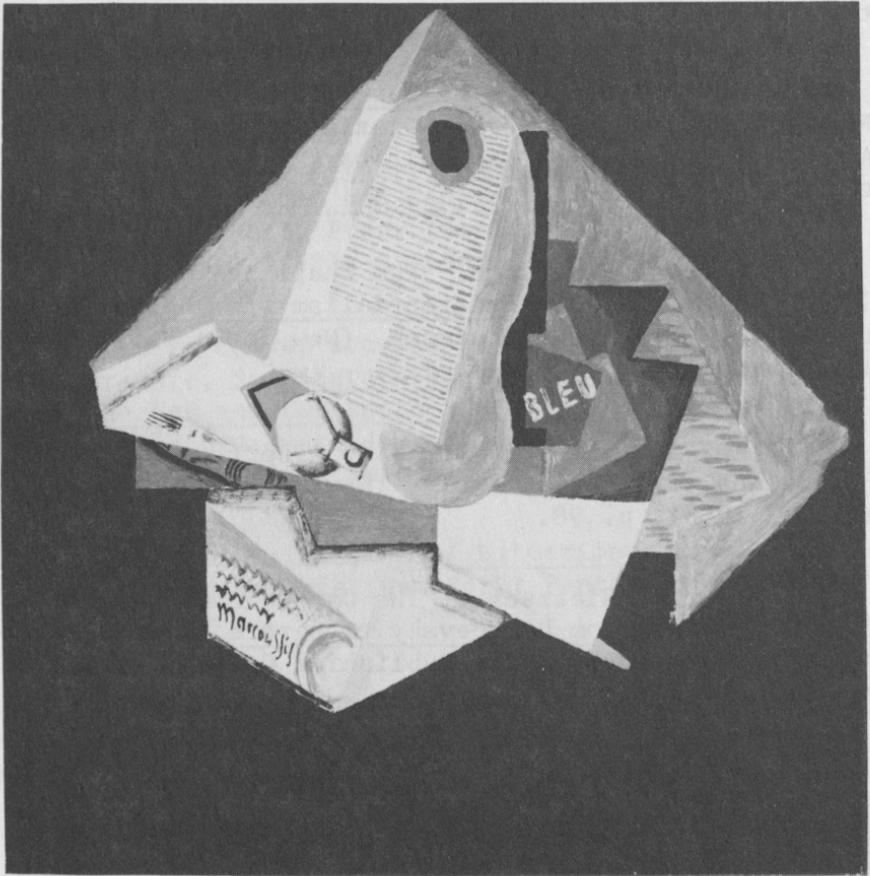
<sup>8</sup> Jean-Paul Sartre, The Words, tr. Bernard Frechtman (New York: George Braziller, 1964), p 255. All further references to this work appear in the text.

<sup>9</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, "The Challenge of Every Great Philosophy," in Existentialism from Dostoevsky to Sartre, tr. Walter Kaufmann (New York: World Publishing Company, 1972), p. 101.

<sup>10</sup> Jean-Paul Sartre, "Reply to Albert Camus," in Situations, tr. Benita Eisler (New York: George Braziller, 1965), p. 90.

<sup>11</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, "The Gay Science," in Existentialism from Dostoevsky to Sartre, tr. Walter Kaufmann (New York: World Publishing Company, 1972), p. 107.

<sup>12</sup> Søren Kierkegaard, "On his 'Mode of Existence,'" in Existentialism from Dostoevsky to Sartre, tr. Walter Kaufmann (New York: World Publishing Company, 1972), p. 87.



1967, pp. 4-5. All further references to this work are by the text.

1967, pp. 4-5. The artist and his work are discussed in *Art and the City* by George Beniger, 1967, p. 123. All further references to this work are by the text.

1967, pp. 4-5. The artist and his work are discussed in *Art and the City* by George Beniger, 1967, p. 123. All further references to this work are by the text.