

AFFECTIVE CONSCIOUSNESS IN *LA NAUSEE**

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There was one aspect, among others, of Professor Bédé's Saturday morning lectures at Columbia which every week renewed our expectation: his unfolding of the historical, social and philosophical background of nineteenth-century French literature. In this, like his classmates Sartre and Nizan, in the tradition of the *Ecole Normale Supérieure*, Bédé was not confining himself to a narrow concept of the literary endeavor.

Because of this broad approach, Bédé was able to recognize very early in Sartre's development that his writing, both literary and philosophical, would grow into an «edifice».(1) Indeed, Sartre has become what he had chosen to be. In the terms of Herbert Marcuse, he has become, against his will, «an institution ... of radical contradiction», (2) that is, of authenticity,. *La Nausée* has remained the decisive moment in Sartre's evolution. And it is possible today, in the light of his now available adolescent writings and his recent critical-anthropological works and autobiography, to gain a new perspective on this key «diary.»

As its title indicates (3) it is not so much an account of an intellectual comprehension but of a pre-conceptual feeling that precipitates Antoine Roquentin's acute crisis lasting some five weeks and more. He can no longer conceive of just anything as he used to do. Nausea has set a gulf between himself and things, and between himself and the others, and most disturbing, is undermining the image he has of himself. Nausea has thus the same effect as Descartes' systematic doubt and as Husserl's reduction, inasmuch as Roquentin lives through a suspension of judgment and inasmuch as it leads him to a radically new frame of reference. The originality of Sartre's break with tradition lies in the primacy given to experience in the lived world. (4) «There is only intuitive knowledge. Deductive and (logical) discourse,

improperly called knowledge, are only instruments leading to intuition.»(5)

Nausea is nausea of something,(6) just as in Sartre's later writings anxiety (Kierkegaard's fear without object) and vertigo reveal to us our freedom, the gaze in shame or pride reveals the other, and *praxis* reveals the inert around us. Knowledge is reflection on the lived world. The progression of Roquentin in *La Nausée* is just such a rendering conscious of an obscure pre-knowledge.

One can now easily follow Sartre's evolution preceding the writing of the novel, thanks to *Les Ecrits de Sartre*,(7) an unusual annotated bibliography which contains his early and other little known writings. Two short pieces, a short story and the fragment of a novel (of 1923), express an overriding disgust with people who live in bad faith, which he will later call the spirit of seriousness.(8) In letters of 1925 appears the first mention of contingency and of consciousness as a nothingness in being. The *Légende de la vérité* (1929) represents an attempt to find a form that is both literary and philosophical in a kind of anthropological *conte*. Also two monographs on the levels of consciousness were written by 1936, when *Melancholia* was completed after five years of work on this «factum on contingency.» Contingency and the spirit of seriousness--his earliest writings thus manifest the two concerns which will reappear in *La Nausée*.

The originality of Sartre's novel lies, first of all, in the fact that he can ground the spirit of seriousness in an ontology.(9) Furthermore, the author brackets out conventional perception with its time-honored concepts. His protagonist reaches cognitive consciousness only after a series of elemental experiences which he registers in what one should call «affective consciousness.»

Roquentin's very perception of things is radically affected. Things begin to assert themselves and begin to «exist» in his hands by nausea. The first sign of a crisis occurred when he held up a pebble and felt sudden disgust because it was wet and muddy on one side.(10) Another time he finds himself unable to pick up, as he was wont to, a muddy bit of paper from the ground. In a Bachelardian psychoanalysis of things(11) one would say that these «disgusting» things express his fear of entrapment. Throughout the book references to the muddy, the oozing, the viscous and the flabby abound, and «Bouville,» altogether, becomes a place of both ontological and social entrapment. Firm

objects (his pipe, the door-knob) do not inspire the same aversion in him, but they too will eventually overwhelm him by their sheer presence. Consciousness, the for-itself, fears the thing, the in-itself, either because the thing may engulf the mind, or through its massive inertness lead it to entrapment.

In a mirror Roquentin looks at his face for a long time, unable to make any sense of this thing, as he can do of those of others. In Sartre's ontology, to others he is an essence--a redhead, a historian, a loner. But he cannot in good faith classify himself since his consciousness is elusive, forever at a distance from his being, and since he feels by this very fact forever free to change his course, erasing his former essence. Later on Roquentin recognizes this dichotomy of consciousness and body: «I feel my hand. I am these two beasts struggling at the end of my arms ... It becomes intolerable.» His own hand has suddenly appeared to him as an alien object: though he plunges a penknife into it and the blood which escapes ceases to be him, he cannot rid himself of the body's thingness. «The body lives by itself once it has begun. But thought--I am the one who continues it, unrolls it» (*N*, p. 99). His consciousness (the for-itself) cannot but «exist» his body (the in-itself), while being at a distance from it. Roquentin is overwhelmed by this dichotomy when learning of the death of little Lucienne, «her body still exists ... *She* no longer exists» (*N*, p. 100), and breaks into a stream-of-consciousness monologue in which he abruptly begins to refer to himself in both the first and third person simultaneously.(12)

His perception of others, and of things related to them, is equally upset. Even in a café, formerly a refuge against his solitude, he feels nausea (*N*, pp. 18-23). He perceives «a reddish flash covered with hair,» conceptualized with effort as a hand which puts a card on the table; there are other arms moving about. The café owner's cousin, Adolphe, has suspenders whose color oscillates between violet and blue, appearing to be a vapid mauve, vapid as he himself is. His glass of beer is yellow, amorphous, disgusting. Roquentin's deepening distraction eventually leads to a total bracketing out of human significance in the perception of things. During a bus ride, for instance, he can no longer call a bench a bench--it appears to him as the belly of a donkey. The appellation refuses to adhere to the thing, a de-nomination takes place.

Eventually an unexpected emotional awareness surges up

in Roquentin; it takes place during the well-known encounter with the chestnut tree (*N*, pp. 126-35). «I did not simply see this black: sight is an abstract invention, a simplified idea, one of man's ideas. That black, amorphous presence, far surpassed sight, smell and taste.» It is an affective consciousness leading to an «absolute,» unrelated to human significance: «Contingency ... that is the absolute.» And he is overwhelmed by facticity, the proliferation of things, utterly «too much» precisely because they are without any reason for existence. Why, then, do they exist?(13) But exist they do; their raw facticity imposes itself on all sides.

Upon looking back on the scene of this horrible ecstasy in the Public Gardens Roquentin recalls: «the garden smiled at me.» This should probably be taken as a sign of understanding projected by Roquentin on things which have explained his malaise to him and revealed, he says, all he will ever get to know about existence. He has met the «irreducible,» the self-evidence of contingency and facticity.

Roquentin had had frightening visions à la Bosch also of Bouville (*N*, pp. 124-26) and they will recur (*N*, pp. 158-60). Since there is facticity without necessity, everything could be other than it is, and anything could happen. Hence his distress over the unaccountable failure of M. Fasquelle, the café owner, to appear behind his counter (*N*, pp. 6, 70-78, 81). Hence also Roquentin's dizzying realization during lunch with the Auto-didacte of the freedom of his actions--«They aren't completely wrong to be afraid: I feel as though I could do anything» (*N*, p. 123).

However, through the awareness that has welled up in him he can begin to free himself from the entrapment into the in-itself of things and into the «inert,»(14) the conventional thoughts and attitudes of people around him, which has been frightening him from the start. From this point on in the book, one can notice a certain hardening of outlines, at least in his relations with people--the normal tenor of his conversation with Anny, the change of comportment towards the Autodidacte--and in his final break with Bouville.

Even before Roquentin's fundamental insight into the meaning of his nausea, he had felt strong revulsion against people who, in their bad faith, insist upon having a reason for being: against himself as the biographer of Rollebon, against

the «notables» of Bouville, against the Autodidacte, among many others.

Research on M. de Rollebon had led Roquentin to Bouville's library three years earlier. The information he gathers on this diplomatic adventurer is contradictory. There can be no human «science.» Roquentin comes to realize that he has lent his life to Rollebon as a justification for his own existence and he abandons his project (*N*, pp. 12-18, 94-98). «What am I going to do with my life?»(15)

Sunday, after mass, Roquentin watches the recognition ceremony carried out on the rue Tournebride by the high society, and especially by the nouveaux riches (*N*, pp. 40-46). This social satire of the officials is deepened during a visit to the portrait gallery of the Bouville Museum (*N*, pp. 82-94). These commissioned portraits display the image the Bouville élite has of itself. They are leaders, never troubled by the least doubt; they have «made» Bouville; they never died intestate or without the last sacraments. Looking down sternly at him from the wall, one of these pillars of society makes Roquentin aware that he, Roquentin, has no right to exist. What had started out as a bit of curiosity about a seemingly technical problem of proportions in a painting is quickly becoming a profound revelation for Roquentin. Social success in business and politics (a sign of predestination, as it were) has come to represent for such men and those who admire them a justification for existence. The spirit of seriousness is thus finally recognized as an evasion of contingency. But as Roquentin looks fixedly at one of the portraits, whose stare is particularly «sparkling with righteousness,» its assurance vanishes under Roquentin's gaze. Their strength is thus all pretense: hollow bad faith. «Farewell beautiful lilies, our pride and reason for existing, good-bye you bastards!»(16)

In another series of episodes, Sartre has the Autodidacte, in a parody of learning for learning's sake, pursue his quest for knowledge by reading books in the Bouville library in alphabetical order. Roquentin accepts reluctantly, in a show of sympathy, an invitation to lunch with him (*N*, pp. 103-23). The Autodidacte plies his quest with food and questions and forces Roquentin, embarrassed and finally angered by the earnest commonplaces uttered, to formulate his answers to this would-be humanist. The Autodidacte is full of good will towards the everyday people in the restaurant. But Roquentin points out how they are all playing

roles, all feeling themselves indispensable. Roquentin strips all of their pretense, including the Autodidacte himself with the un-integrated knowledge(17) that goes to make up his *sottisier*, his collection of foolish sayings. Roquentin, in a mood of defiance denies being a humanist, but he refrains, as he puts it, from stupidly considering himself «anti-humanist.» Roquentin scores his abstract humanism as a cloak for loneliness, and as such an attitude in bad faith Altogether, humanism with its Enlightenment idea of progress, of the perfectibility of man, and its reliance on science, has become problematical: «What is the matter with your science? What have you done with your humanism? Where is your dignity?» (N, p. 160).

For the first time, in the scene of the lunch with the Autodidacte, one of Roquentin's nauseas is clearly set off by a person rather than a thing and it is one of his worst (N, pp. 123-26). This is the crucial juncture by Sartre of the two themes of contingency and its reverse corollary, the spirit of seriousness. The hollowness of his companion's words suddenly gives him the key to his previous nauseas: he recognizes them as the evidence of existence which is inherently superfluous. Nausea as a way to «exist our contingency» (EN, p. 404), at first an affective awareness of facticity and contingency, now has become a revulsion against people who hide their contingency from themselves through actions in bad faith.

In this diary, grim even when ironic, there is, however, one kind of event which throughout its course returns Roquentin to «sanity,» people to their «right» places, which makes Adolphe's head, for instance, «evident,» his suspenders blue, the beer «dense» and «indispensable,» cardplay «meaningful.» Roquentin undergoes this bracing experience when he hears an old rag-time tune, «Some of these days/You'll miss me honey» (N, pp. 20-23, 173-78). In the rigorous progression of the notes he finds form that is essence. The necessity of being, and the coherence of consciousness and being (Sartre's in-itself-for-itself, the ultimate and unattainable aim of man) which Roquentin has failed to see in life, now appears in imagination. The work of art has an order that is outside of human temporality, which so preoccupies Roquentin, where existence is in the present and constitutes its essence in the past. «There is another happiness: outside there is this band of steel, the narrow duration of the music which traverses our time through and through, rejecting it, tearing

at it with its dry little points; there is another time» (*N*, p. 21).

The one person to whom Roquentin had been very much attached, Anny, an actress, had been trying for many years to make, if not of her life, at least of some privileged situations in her life, perfect moments, like works of art. But only in imagination, such as in a musical progression, can we find a realization of this profound aspiration, as we have just noted. Anny, now meeting Roquentin again (*N*, pp. 172-96) after a separation of four (*N*, p. 174) or of five (*N*, p. 81) years, has to admit her utter failure in having ever succeeded in her play-acting just as Roquentin now knows that adventures that would be dense and necessary, which he was seeking all along, exist only in stories and books, all imaginary. Anny has given up acting altogether, she now travels, «there is a man who is keeping me ... I outlive myself.» By a different road she has reached the same conclusion as Roquentin. Both Anny, who had asked for the meeting, and Roquentin, who had come with such expectation, now abandon the last shred of hope each still represented for the other. «I have the terrible feeling that we have nothing any more to say to one another.» He looks at «an old woman's face, absolutely frightful.» When he sees her leaving Paris by train while imagining the restaurant to which they used to go in London, «everything went blank.»

The final episode, after Roquentin has returned to Bouville to wind up his affairs, concerns the Autodidacte once again. Roquentin has failed to rescue him from the guard who has bloodied him because of a slight homosexual gesture toward a boy in the library. Roquentin acts very late to disengage the Autodidacte and lead him away from the guard and some outraged readers. «Had these lazy years in Bouville rotted me?» (*N*, p. 168). One must recall that one of Roquentin's ontological crises becomes the most distressing one, the only one expressed in a stream of consciousness (*N*, pp. 100-102), when he gets news of the death of a child, Lucienne, whom he probably had met some days earlier. His intervention, which could have saved her from rape and death («her fingers clawing at the mud») was only indecisive (*N*, pp. 75, 77, 79-80). His failure to become deliberately involved weighs on him: «I am a rotten person» (*N*, p. 145).

The tentative character of what may be called the epilogue to *La Nausée* (pp. 169-78) lies in Sartre's difficulty in fully grounding his concept of commitment in ontology.⁽¹⁸⁾ It is an *Engführung*,

a playing together of contradictory themes--contingency and facticity--but without a resolution.

The rag-time melody is an antidote to nausea because it transports Roquentin, at least in imagination, to a realm of necessity and of coherence. Could he not, like the composer and singer of the melody, justify a little his existence by creating a work of art?(19) It would have to be a book, by which people would understand their existence, and it would be a book to unmask the bastards. «It would have ... to make people ashamed of their existence.» It is true that «an existant can never justify the existence of another existant» (N, p. 178), but this appeal to people's authenticity, unlike the response to contingency in bad faith, might do for his readers what the melody had done for Roquentin. At the end of the crisis of his original project, after «everything went blank,» we find Roquentin «alone and free» (N, p. 157), on the brink of commitment in literature, a radically new choice of himself intimated all along in his attitude towards people: negative but far from indifferent.

It seems that only in 1940 did Sartre become conscious of commitment as a concept (*Ecrits*, p. 28). He has wrestled with it all through his work.(20) But it would appear that a normative ethics is a contradiction in terms for existentialism. The projected second volume of *Being and Nothingness*, an ethics, as well as the concluding volume of *The Roads to Freedom*, which was to show the conditions of commitment, have never been written. And, having questioned the validity of humanism, what would be the criteria for the direction of involvement? Sartre proposed a Pascalian wager which continually invents its imperatives and remains without promise: «We had to do our work as men in face of the incomprehensible and the insupportable, to wager, to conjecture without proof, to undertake despite uncertainty and to persevere without hope.»(21) Sartre's own direction of commitment can be understood as an endeavor to minimize the utilitarian relationships prevailing in society.

Roquentin leaves Bouville for Paris. Even Beckett, after *Endgame*, keeps writing. It would seem that sheer facticity and the diasporic character of consciousness are a necessary cause, if not a sufficient one, for commitment.

La Nausée, «the century's most influential novel in France,»(22) has many aspects other than those touched upon in the present article. It presents nothing less than a Weltan-

schauung, a world view.(23) And in it «the correspondences between the literary expression and the detailed philosophical theory are far more elaborate than one might at first suppose.»(24) But *La Nausée* remains the account of an experience not relative to a thought process, its premises, its logical discourse and verification. «Those who exist let themselves be encountered, but you can never deduce anything from them» (*N*, p. 131).

Nor do contingency and facticity, the spirit of seriousness and commitment derive from language as a structure imposing a view of the world on the speaker, as now claimed so widely.(25) Very much to the contrary: pre-linguistic fascination and horror have sought expression in *La Nausée* and Roquentin mistrusts language in his moments of illumination.(26)

It is a novel where affective consciousness breaks the ground for new concepts, a book genuinely literary in its intuition of philosophy. In the lived world of *Nausea* a radical conversion takes place away from age-old essentialism and determinism to existence and authenticity.

NOTES

* This article was to be a chapter in a *Festschrift* to honor the late Jean-Albert Bédé. But it has not appeared.

1. See «Sartre, Jean-Paul,» *Columbia Dictionary of Modern European Literature* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1947), pp. 722-23.

2. «Existentialismus: Bemerkungen zu Jean-Paul Sartres *L'Être et le Néant*,» *Kultur und Gesellschaft* 2 (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1965), p. 84.

3. Sartre himself had at first chosen «Melancholia.» Interestingly, Gaston Gallimard, the «other,» with a keener understanding than the author of the crux of the book, persuaded him to change to the less spiritual title. See Michel Contat and Michel Rybalka, *Les Ecrits de Sartre* (Paris: Gallimard, 1970), p. 63 (henceforth: *Ecrits*).

4. Sartre's «lived world» is a further development of Husserl's «*Lebenswelt*,» which represented the pre-scientific experience of the world made possible by a bracketing out of scientific knowledge of one's perception. For Sartre, not perception alone, but the entire pre-reflexive experience of the world is involved: «The lived world presents itself as irrepressible spontaneity» (*L'Idiot de la famille* [Paris: Gallimard, 1971], I, 142).

5. *L'Être et le Néant*. (Paris: Gallimard, 1943), p. 220 (Henceforth: *EN*).

6. «This term «nausea» should be taken as anything but a metaphor drawn from our physiological disgust; on the contrary, it serves as the basis (as a «coenesthetic affectivity ... a pure apprehension of oneself as factual existence»)

from which emerge all concrete and empirical nauseas» (EN, p. 404).

7. See *Ecrits*, especially pp. 23-26.

8. Already Nietzsche was put out by «Philisterernt.» The philistine is so concerned with income, business and habits that trivial, everyday life becomes «divine.» («Unzeitgemässige Betrachtungen,» *Werke*, 1. Band, München: Carl Hauser, 1960 (1873), p. 146). And the term «Spiessbürger» had been applied by German students to townspeople with middleclass attitudes since the seventeenth century.

9. See also EN, Chapter II, «Bad Faith,» and p. 721.

10. *Nausea*, translated by Lloyd Alexander (New York: New Directions, 1964 [1939]), p. 2 (henceforth: N).

11. See EN, pp. 690-94, for Sartre's understanding of its relation to his ontology.

12. In spite of such a dramatization of the dichotomy for-itself/in-itself, Alain Robbe-Grillet accuses Sartre as well as Camus of a «fatal complicity,» a solidarity with nature in taking a tragic view of the distance separating man from it (see p. 70 of his «Nature, humanisme, tragédie,» in *Pour un nouveau roman*, Idées (Paris: Gallimard, 1963 (1958), pp. 55-84). He does, however correctly make a distinction between the vision of the two authors have of nature--between Sartre's primarily phenomenological concern for touch and color, and Camus's anthropomorphic metaphors and smiles more in line with the traditional humanist oneness with nature. One ought to add that this difference in descriptive approach is one of seeing either a prior significance or none whatsoever in an all-pervading thingness, of spiritualizing it or of simply reflecting it as does Sartre. Robbe-Grillet's own deliberate distance from objects goes further yet in its willed impassibility.

13. This is the question Heidegger also raised with such insistence as «die ursprünglichste Frage»--the most fundamental question: «Warum ist überhaupt Seiendes und nicht vielmehr nichts?»--Altogether, why is there being, and not rather nothingness? *Einführung in die Metaphysik* (Tübingen: Max Niemeyer, 1958 [1935]), pp. 1-7.

14. An extension, as it were, of the concept of the in-itself into the social sphere. which Sartre makes in the *Critique de la raison dialectique* (see especially Livre I on the «pratico-inert ensemble» which is society [Paris: Gallimard, 1960]).

15. «In *Nausea* we do not know where experience is leading us and experience does not know where it is going» (Maurice Blanchot, «Les Romans de Sartre,» *La Part du feu* (Paris: Gallimard, 1949)), p. 200).

16. All the sarcasm heaped on the Bouville élite does not placate Geneviève Idt: «The two series of oppositions (leaders vs. soldiers, bastards vs. authentic persons) on which *Nausea* rests have nothing to do with the class struggle» (*La Nausée, Analyse critique* [Paris: Hatier, 1971], p. 13). Professor Idt who approached the novel aprioristically from a pseudo-marxist, structuralist point of view, seems unaware that Sartre treats primarily the ontological, the human problem (facticity and contingency), which, while interacting with the social (the spirit of seriousness) remains fundamental. «Aristocrats, élite, and professional groups had melted into the warm crowd. Only scattered men were left who were not representative» (N, p. 51).

17. Knowledge for Sartre must be related to the life people lead, since *praxis*--their action in the social arena--is disclosure of knowledge. Sartre has explained that all his life he tried «to provide a philosophical foundation for realism (which relates pure reflection to *praxis*), ... to give man both his autonomy and his reality

among real objects, avoiding idealism without lapsing into mechanistic materialism («Itinerary of a Thought,» Interview, *New Left Review*, No. 58 (November-December 1969), pp. 18 and 45).

18. «All the child's traits remain present in the fifty-year old. ... Grisélidis not dead. Pardillan still lives in me. And Strogoff. (Characters in children's books, with miraculous powers to save others.) I depend on them, they depend only on God, and I do not believe in God. Try to understand that» (*Les Mots*, p. 212).

19. Sartre's attitude is not one of art for art's sake--art must lead to lucidity. Merleau-Ponty had already pointed out that when Sartre had chosen the rag-time melody he «thus did away from the start with the religion of art and its consolations» (*Sens et Non-Sens*, [Paris: Nagel, 1965], p. 80). See also Simone de Beauvoir, *La Force de l'âge* (Paris: Gallimard, 1960) p. 145, for the commitment-leitmotif aspect of this melody.

20. See «commitment» in my *Jean-Paul Sartre: The Philosopher as a Literary Critic* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1970), especially pp. 258-64.

21. *Qu'est-ce que la littérature?*, *Situations, II* (Paris: Gallimard, 1948) p. 254.

22. Henri Peyre, *Jean-Paul Sartre* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1968), p. 25.

23. Madeleine Morris can thus justifiably treat of «Faust à Bouville» (*Revue de Littérature Comparée*, October-December 1968, pp. 534-48).

24. Rhiannon Goldthorpe, «The Representation of Consciousness in Sartre's *La Nausée* and its Theoretical Basis: Reflection and Facticity,» *French Studies*, (April 1968), p. 116. In this article (pp. 114-33) and its sequel «Transcendence and Intentionality» (*French Studies*, January 1971, pp. 32-46), these correspondences are thoroughly established.

25. Sartre rejects this structuralist contention--«man is the being through whom meanings appear in the world» (*Situations*) Paris: Gallimard, 1947 (1943), p. 186). And he stated expressly: «I reject also structuralism. ... There is nothing before man ... except man making himself.» «L'Ecrivain et sa langue» in *Situations, IX* (Paris: Gallimard, 1972 [1965]), p. 52.

26. «The word absurdity is coming to life under my pen; a little while ago, in the garden, I couldn't find it, but neither was I looking for it, I didn't need it ... And without formulating anything clearly, I understood ... Absurdity: another word; I struggle against words; down there I touched the thing ... Oh, how can I put it in words?» (*N* p. 129). In later works Sartre will not continue to use the term absurdity since it is related to rationalism.