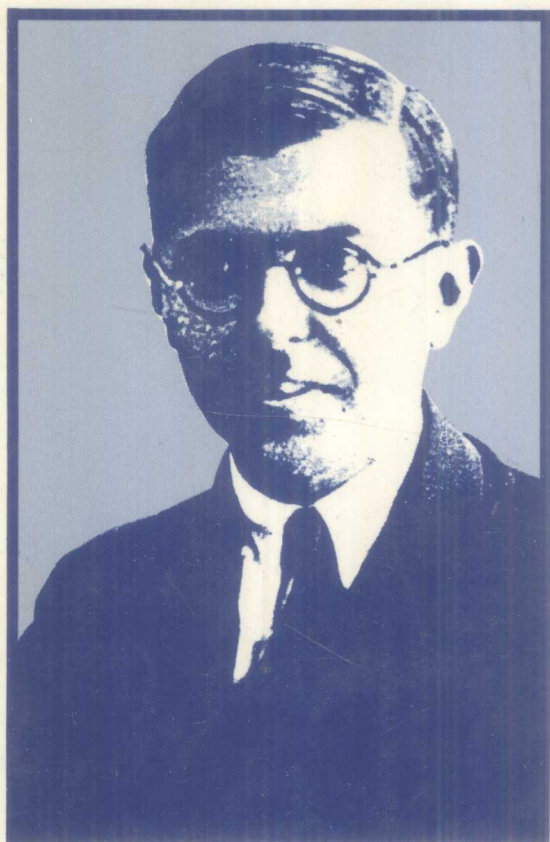


Unwin Critical Library

LA NAUSÉE

Rhiannon Goldthorpe



General Editor
CLAUDE RAWSON

LA NAUSÉE

Rhiannon Goldthorpe



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GENERAL EDITOR'S PREFACE

Each volume in this series is devoted to a single major text. It is intended for serious students and teachers of literature, and for knowledgeable non-academic readers. It aims to provide a scholarly introduction and a stimulus to critical thought and discussion.

Individual volumes will naturally differ from one another in arrangement and emphasis, but each will normally begin with information on a work's literary and intellectual background, and other guidance designed to help the reader to an informed understanding. This is followed by an extended critical discussion of the work itself, and each contributor in the series has been encouraged to present in these sections his own reading of the work, whether or not this is controversial, rather than to attempt a mere consensus. Some volumes, including those on *Paradise Lost* and *Ulysses*, vary somewhat from the more usual pattern by entering into substantive critical discussion at the outset, and allowing the necessary background material to emerge at the points where it is felt to arise from the argument in the most useful and relevant way. Each volume also contains a historical survey of the work's critical reputation, including an account of the principal lines of approach and areas of controversy, and a selective (but detailed) bibliography.

The hope is that the volumes in this series will be among those which a university teacher would normally recommend for any serious study of a particular text, and that they will also be among the essential secondary texts to be consulted in some scholarly investigations. But the experienced and informed non-academic reader has also been in our minds, and one of our aims has been to provide him with reliable and stimulating works of reference and guidance, embodying the present state of knowledge and opinion in a conveniently accessible form.

C.J.R.
University of Warwick,
December 1979

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TEXTS AND ABBREVIATIONS

Page-references to *La Nausée* indicate the *Œuvres romanesques* edition (see below) and the Penguin Modern Classics translation, *Nausea*, by Robert Baldick (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1965). In quotations, an asterisk indicates a modified translation. References are given in the text without an abbreviated title. Translations from other works are my own. Other references, also given in the text, indicate the following editions with titles abbreviated as below:

Ast	Alexandre Astruc and Michel Contat, <i>Sartre: un film</i> (Paris: Gallimard, 1977)
Car	Jean-Paul Sartre, <i>Les Carnets de la drôle de guerre</i> (Paris: Gallimard, 1983)
Cér	Simone de Beauvoir, <i>La Cérémonie des adieux, suivi de Entretiens avec Jean-Paul Sartre</i> (Paris: Gallimard, 1981)
Écrits	Michel Contat and Michel Rybalka (eds), <i>Les Écrits de Sartre</i> (Paris: Gallimard, 1970)
EH	Jean-Paul Sartre, <i>L'Existentialisme est un humanisme</i> (Paris: Nagel, 1946)
EN	Jean-Paul Sartre, <i>L'Être et le néant: essai d'ontologie phénoménologique</i> (Paris: Gallimard, 1943)
ETE	Jean-Paul Sartre, <i>Esquisse d'une théorie des émotions</i> (Paris: Hermann, 1965)
FA	Simone de Beauvoir, <i>La Force de l'âge</i> (Paris: Gallimard, 1960)
IF	Jean-Paul Sartre, <i>L'Idiot de la famille</i> , 3 vols (Paris: Gallimard, 1971-2)
Im	Jean-Paul Sartre, <i>L'Imagination</i> (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1936)
Ire	Jean-Paul Sartre, <i>L'Imaginaire: psychologie phénoménologique de l'imagination</i> (Paris: Gallimard, 1940)
LC I	Jean-Paul Sartre, <i>Lettres au Castor et à quelques autres</i> , ed. Simone de Beauvoir, Vol. 1, 1926-1939 (Paris: Gallimard, 1983)
M	Jean-Paul Sartre, <i>Les Mots</i> (Paris: Gallimard, 1964)
O	<i>Obliques</i> , no. 18-19 (mai 1979)

- OR Jean-Paul Sartre, *Œuvres romanesques*, édition établie par Michel Contat et Michel Rybalka avec la collaboration de Geneviève Idt et de George H. Bauer (Paris: Gallimard, Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, 1981)
- SG Jean-Paul Sartre, *Saint Genet, comédien et martyr* (Paris: Gallimard, 1952)
- S I-X Jean-Paul Sartre, *Situations I-X* (Paris: Gallimard, 1947-76)
- TE Jean-Paul Sartre, *La Transcendance de l'Ego: esquisse d'une description phénoménologique*, ed. Sylvie Le Bon (Paris: Vrin, 1965)

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INTRODUCTION

The editors of Sartre's *Œuvres romanesques* observe that since the publication of his first novel in 1938 the word 'nausée' has undergone a semantic shift (OR, p. 1668). It now requires only a capital N in order to signify existential *Angst* rather than physical queasiness. One of the strengths of *La Nausée* lies, no doubt, in its power to evoke both, but it is worth remembering that its familiar title was not chosen by Sartre himself. It was suggested by his publisher, and accepted reluctantly, as Sartre feared that it might indicate a debt to Naturalism. His original title, 'Melancholia', was the one he preferred. It echoes the title of a poem by Théophile Gautier, and both refer to a favourite engraving of Sartre's, Albrecht Dürer's 'Melencolia I' – a provenance which suggests that in *La Nausée* the theme of art is as central as the humour of black bile. The engraving's shadowy presence in the subtext of the novel indicates the persistence and the transformation of an equally shadowy tradition. Dürer's brooding angel undergoes a nineteenth-century *transposition d'art* to symbolize in Gautier's writing the spleen of a mind which has unlocked the secrets of nature and plumbed the depths of human knowledge, only to sense that further unfathomable mysteries lie beyond.¹ In the work of Gautier's contemporary, Michelet, Dürer's angel speaks of what was to become an eminently Sartrean symbol – the now misshapen stone which it can no longer carve: it has shattered nature without creating art ('Qu'ai-je fait? Sans arriver à l'art, j'ai brisé la nature').² It is in the self-same *Histoire de France* of Michelet that Anny, the lover of Sartre's protagonist, Roquentin, finds a model for her efforts to transform life into art, and Roquentin's consciousness, too, is torn between art and nature. However, the engraving and its subsequent interpretations do not explain or illustrate the novel: each defies definitive analysis. Baudelaire's *caveat* concerning the interpretation of 'Melencolia I' in his essay on 'L'Art philosophique' (which Sartre had almost certainly read) applies equally to *La Nausée* and to its readers. Baudelaire argued that the interpretation of a philosophical work of art requires minute care, for its setting, its décor, its furniture,

its utensils and accessories form an allusive allegory; they are so many hieroglyphs and riddles. The interpreter may find himself inventing the underlying intention.³ It is perhaps fitting that within Sartre's 'art philosophique' the engraving simply leaves an enigmatic trace, just as the suggestive décor of his novel leaves much to the reader's imagination. But apart from the significance of its complex iconography, and in addition to its pervasive mood, 'Melencolia I' dramatizes, for its modern 'reader' and the reader of *La Nausée*, the relationship between visual art and writing, between illusion and convention, and between art and time. It also represents the ambiguities to which our concepts of space and time may be subject in representation. The cherub scribbles purposefully as the angel sits dejected; both turn their back on the forgotten hour-glass. The title, which would now conventionally be part of the 'frame' of text or picture, is inscribed within the frame itself, on the wings of a bat which flies through an indeterminate space, either out across or in from the sea. The engraving carries its own cultural history with it: the tradition of the *transposition d'art* in which it has become absorbed tempts and betrays Roquentin when he 'rewrites' the portraits of a provincial picture-gallery and finds, at first with satirical glee and later with panic, that neither art nor writing can confer immortality. Roquentin, too, experiences the power of music, which Michelet prescribes as the balm for the angel's 'broken world'.⁴

Together with the text of the novel itself Sartre's titles, whether provisional or definitive, bear an interesting relationship to his original label for *La Nausée*.⁵ From the time of his first project for the novel, seven years before its eventual publication in 1938, it was known to him and to Simone de Beauvoir as the 'factum sur la Contingence'. This summary is more complex than it looks. 'Contingency' may provisionally be taken in the accepted sense: the contingent is without reason, without cause and without necessity. The word 'factum', however, has two senses which seem to pull against each other. In legal terminology it is a setting-out of the facts of the case, something stated or presented as certain. But it also signifies a polemical or even scurrilous pamphlet. *La Nausée* may indeed be thought to satisfy part (or, depending on the reader's ideological viewpoint, all) of the second definition. In its black and robust mockery of those who conceal from themselves

and others the facts and implications of contingency (for Sartre and Roquentin they are largely, but not exclusively, members of the bourgeoisie) it recalls the satirical *conte philosophique* of the eighteenth century and its Voltairean attacks on those who refused, through obscurantism or vested interest, to acknowledge the evidence of the senses or the 'facts' of a case. But an empiricist theory of knowledge is also one of *La Nausée*'s targets in its implicit but sweeping critique of existing philosophical systems. In the novel, however, Sartre not only makes a case for contingency but also dramatizes the movement of consciousness in its acts of perceiving, imagining, analysing, recollecting, anticipating, fearing, desiring, and – to a lesser degree – interacting with others. Roquentin, to the extent that he reflects upon his acts of consciousness, is, as we shall see, a phenomenologist – but an uneasy phenomenologist. The range of *La Nausée* as we know it therefore goes well beyond Sartre's original intention, particularly if we bear in mind Simone de Beauvoir's description of the 'factum' as a long and abstract meditation on contingency (FA, p. 111). But much of the context of this description suggests that even at this early stage of his thinking 'abstraction' was not Sartre's motive, nor his aim. Existential intuition pre-empted analysis. The label 'existentialist' was not attached to Sartre until after the war, but his earlier concern with contingency was already existential in that it was not so much a matter of theory and of reflection as of experience, of mood and of apparently trivial impression.⁶ In 1931 he wrote to Simone de Beauvoir from Le Havre (the model for the town of Bouville in *La Nausée*) to describe the district near the railway station which he particularly liked, and which he proposed to represent in the 'factum sur la Contingence'. For there, against all meteorological probability, even the sky was contingent (LC I, pp. 45–6). Then Simone de Beauvoir herself evoked, in a serio-comic mode which echoed the *grotesque triste* of the novel, Sartre's earlier fits of 'contingency-sickness' and the distancing psychodramas which were contrived in order to dispel them. He would imitate a disconsolate, mutely supplicating, yawning sea-elephant seen digesting its pail of fish at the zoo – a premonition, for the reader, of Sartre's tendency to associate contingency with surfeit, ennui and melancholia (FA, p. 23). The sea-elephant reappears in the last pages of *La Nausée*, among the novel's many images of metamorphosis, when Roquentin

contrasts his own fleshy, baggy suffering with the pitiless purity of a jazz tune.

The convergence of mood, theory and fiction is confirmed by Sartre's assertion that *La Nausée* was the literary outcome of his theory of the 'solitary man' – itself a rationalization of the extreme individualism to which he had subscribed during his student days (S X, p. 177). He defined this attitude later in a conversation with Simone de Beauvoir, contrasting it with the universalizing emphasis of scientific thought, and with the 'generalizing' tendency of philosophical and bourgeois thinking. (*La Nausée*, as we shall see, was to attack the inadequacies of scientific explanation, philosophical idealism and bourgeois 'humanism'.) The young Sartre himself aspired to the role of the 'homme seul', who owes his thoughts only to himself and yet enlightens his fellow-men through his own capacity for feeling (*Cér*, p. 198). Hence the polemical emphasis, in *La Nausée*, on the lived experience of a singular (in more than one sense) individual in a context which exploits, questions and transcends the banalities and complacencies of provincial bourgeois life. Roquentin's solitude, which, for some critics, undermines the novel's philosophical import, was, for Sartre, a primary qualification. At the same time, he was convinced of the interdependence of philosophy and literature. *La Nausée*, he later maintained, was the representation of a philosophical idea. The novel form was to develop that idea, which was itself not yet ripe for expression in a philosophical treatise (OR, pp. 1699–70). At the same time, it was philosophy which gave him the necessary framework for the creation of the story (*Cér*, p. 202). In other words, *La Nausée* is *par excellence* a heuristic fiction – an imaginative thought-experiment, or the creation of a fictional imaginary world, which promotes the elaboration, exploration and, possibly, resolution of a problem. In this perspective we shall see that Sartre's novel, while maintaining its autonomy as a work of fiction, dramatizes and develops the problems set out in parallel philosophical works which are not exclusively concerned with a theory of contingency, but also with issues of more general psychological and aesthetic interest: a theory of the self, the nature of emotion, the activity of the imagination. Furthermore, *La Nausée* anticipates in more concrete and often highly specific ways the relatively abstract analyses of the later *L'Être et le néant*. It is not, therefore, a question of explaining the novel in terms of the

philosophical writing, but of seeing them in terms of a mutual illumination.

For Sartre, then, literary and philosophical writing were closely interdependent. In this perspective, and given the importance which Sartre, in the mid-seventies, was to ascribe to the role of literature in his life, it is ironic that his two most successful literary works – *La Nausée* and the account of his childhood in *Les Mots* – should be concerned with the exposure of the illusion that language can circumscribe contingency, or that art and writing can transform contingency into necessity. However, the exposure is highly ambiguous, and the ambiguity is implicit in the inception of the ‘factum sur la Contingence’, in the first page of *La Nausée* (the ‘foreword’ of the fictional editors), and in the first page of Roquentin’s writing. When he wrote to Simone de Beauvoir in 1931 about his ‘factum’ and about the contingent sky above the railway station in Le Havre, Sartre went on to describe twenty minutes spent in the contemplation of a tree in a garden square, and to give a tongue-in-cheek account of his attempts, precisely, to describe it.⁷ A supplementary sketch was necessary. The tree proved to be a chestnut-tree, and it was to reappear in one of the climactic scenes of *La Nausée*, in a much more negative and anguished mode. In 1931, Sartre went to study it ‘light-heartedly’, found it ‘very beautiful’, and declared, with an eye on his future biographers, that he had now understood the nature of a tree. After twenty minutes he had exhausted ‘l’arsenal de comparaisons destinées à faire de cet arbre, comme dirait Mme Woolf, autre chose que ce qu’il est’ (*LC* I, p. 47) (‘the arsenal of comparisons intended to transform this tree, as Mrs Woolf would say, into something other than what it is’). Having done so, he was able to move on, ‘with a clear conscience’, to the public library.

The allusion to Virginia Woolf reminds us of Sartre’s familiarity with ‘modernist’ writing and with one of its major themes: the question of how far the work of art may transmute apparently formless reality through aesthetic vision and formal patterns, or whether art can, or should, approximate as far as possible to the formlessness of ‘what is’.⁸ The question’s attendant paradoxes are familiar: they are already implicit in the half-chiselled stone abandoned by Dürer’s angel and in Michelet’s Romantic comment upon it: how do we transform, represent or transcribe what eludes or resists transformation, representation or transcription, and how

do we represent our failures? *La Nausée* radically rephrases the questions traditionally asked about the nature of 'what is', about our various modes of being conscious of it, and about how we attempt to represent it. The form of the novel itself represents these questions: Roquentin's diary, like Dürer's misshapen stone, is a halfway house between 'raw' material and accomplished art. Thematically, it allusively displays and questions earlier answers. When a lighthouse shines out across the darkening sea one Sunday evening in Bouville it inspires wonder in a small boy, and in Roquentin a rare intuition of pattern and finality. But his sense of fulfilment is savagely undercut in his diary-entry for the following day, and Sunday's Woolfean illumination is extinguished soon after in the negative 'epiphany' inspired by his contemplation of a chestnut-tree root in the park. But such apparently conclusive symmetry is misleading. *La Nausée*'s own answers are themselves provisional and far from unambiguous. Roquentin himself seems to reduce the import of his experience and reflection to an unequivocal 'message':

L'essentiel c'est la contingence. Je veux dire que, par définition, l'existence n'est pas la nécessité. Exister, c'est *être là*, simplement; les existants apparaissent, se laissent *rencontrer*, mais on ne peut jamais les *déduire*. Il y a des gens, je crois, qui ont compris ça. Seulement ils ont essayé de surmonter cette contingence en inventant un être nécessaire et cause de soi. Or aucun être nécessaire ne peut expliquer l'existence: la contingence n'est pas un faux-semblant, une apparence qu'on peut dissiper; c'est l'absolu, par conséquent la gratuité parfaite. Tout est gratuit, ce jardin, cette ville et moi-même. (p. 155)

(The essential thing is contingency. I mean that, by definition, existence is not necessity. To exist is simply *to be there*; what exists appears, lets itself be *encountered*, but you can never *deduce* it. There are people, I believe, who have understood that. Only they have tried to overcome this contingency by inventing a necessary being which is its own cause. But no necessary being can explain existence: contingency is not an illusion, an appearance which can be dissipated; it is the absolute, and consequently perfect gratuitousness. Everything is gratuitous, this park, this town and myself. [p. 188*])

However, we shall see that the very act of writing, which is also the object of explicit reflection and implicit questioning in Roquentin's diary, unsettles such certainties. Language's power of abstraction is at issue in *La Nausée*. The relationship of language to things already preoccupies Sartre in his letter to Simone de Beauvoir about the chestnut-tree, and it will continue to do so. Does the 'arsenal de comparaisons' succeed in transforming the object into what it is not – into an essence or into an ideal form? Or would Sartre, in exhausting those comparisons (if that were possible), move closer to the object 'as it is'? Or is the object 'as it is' beneath the purchase of language? Perhaps both metaphorical expression and conceptual language – the language of Roquentin's definition of contingency – are suspect. Sartre's letter and his novel are equally inconclusive, even though Roquentin can 'name' the tree which Sartre could not.

The theory of literary language most readily ascribed to Sartre was not in fact formulated until the publication of his polemical essay 'Qu'est-ce que la littérature?' in 1947. The essay itself is considered to be a watershed in his development. It marks a discontinuity between the early individualist Sartre, vaguely left-wing but preserving his freedom by remaining aloof from the turmoil of prewar politics, and the committed intellectual who believed that writers should campaign not only for personal freedom, but also for the socialist revolution (*S II*, p. 298). The change was a fundamental and long-lasting one, although Sartre's theory of committed writing was to become much more complex in later years. However, one of his auxiliary arguments in 'Qu'est-ce que la littérature?' was to prove to be both misunderstood and short-lived. This argument was based upon a stark distinction between the functions of prose and poetry, in which he maintained that the former alone could serve as the medium of committed writing. Such was the notoriety of this view that it came to be regarded too frequently as a definitive statement. (In fact, in 1948, Sartre was already asserting the possibility of committed poetry in an essay on the work of Black African and Caribbean poets.) More will need to be said later about Sartre's reflections on poetic language in particular, as they are implicated both in his theories of imagination and art and in his practice in *La Nausée*, but the 1947 essay provides some relevant formulas. There he argues that the language of prose is the transparent medium of meaning

defined as the *signification* which the writer seeks to convey: in other words, the *mot-signe*, the word as sign, is the referential and directly transitive bearer of a unitary meaning, and the function of prose is that of simple designation. Prose is an instrument which, in revealing the world, is necessary to our action within it and upon it, and it is therefore the natural vehicle for the committed writer. Poets, on the other hand, substitute the *mot-chose*, the word as thing, for the *mot-signe*: such words have the opacity of things rather than the transparency of signs, and therefore resist the purposes of commitment. Poetic language acts as the embodiment, rather than as the expression, of an emotion or of an affective atmosphere, and as the incarnation of an irreducible and inexhaustible *sens* rather than as the vehicle of a precise *signification*.⁹ As such, it has affinities with painting rather than with prose, and, as such, it is strictly speaking *not legible*. Sartre argues that the yellow gash which Tintoretto paints into the sky above Golgotha neither signifies anguish nor provokes it: it *is* at one and the same time anguish and yellow sky. It is anguish made thing ('une angoisse faite chose'), engulfed by the qualities, the impermeability, the exteriority and the blind permanence of things, and by the infinite relationships between them. It is 'un effort immense et vain', suspended between earth and sky, to express what the nature of things prevents them from expressing (S II, p. 61). Words, it is true, may be more ambiguous than painterly form and colour in that, even for the poet, they retain vestiges of *signification*. However, the poetic image does not *express* that *signification*. It represents it in a mode which absorbs the original emotion experienced by the poet, transforms it beyond recognition and alienates it from him:

L'émotion est devenue chose, elle a maintenant l'opacité des choses; elle est brouillée par les propriétés ambiguës des vocables où on l'a enfermée. Et surtout il y a beaucoup plus, dans chaque phrase, dans chaque vers, comme il y a dans 'ce ciel jaune au-dessus du Golgotha plus qu'une simple angoisse. Le mot, la phrase-chose, inépuisables comme des choses, débordent de partout le sentiment qui les a suscités. (S II, p. 69)

(Emotion has become a thing, it is now as opaque as things, it is clouded by the ambiguous properties of the words which have enclosed it. And, above all, there is much more in each

sentence, in each line, just as there is more than simple anguish in that yellow sky above Golgotha. The word, the sentence-thing, inexhaustible as things, everywhere overflow the feeling which produced them.)

Whatever the virtues of Sartre's view of committed writing, the distinction which it leads him to establish between the languages of prose and of poetry is retrograde in relation to *La Nausée*. There, the revealing power of prose (the necessary instrument of reflection) and the inexhaustible opacity of poetry (the necessary embodiment of overflowing, proliferating things) richly complement each other, while the central problem of meaning is explored and dramatized far more subtly than in the later essay. Furthermore, language, with its power to alienate, distort, abstract, illuminate, transform, obfuscate or deceive, is not simply a medium, but one of the novel's major protagonists. It is also the author's only means of manipulating his reader's own identification with or detachment from his characters' experience.

Sartre's views concerning the desirability and the potential effects of distancing techniques are most clearly expressed in his writings on the theatre. This is scarcely surprising, since the theatre offers the additional devices of gesture, décor, tempo and intonation; even so, these later views are far from irrelevant to Sartre's earlier fiction. His subsequent interest in Brechtian alienation effects is stimulated by his conviction that the spectator (or the reader) should be shaken out of his belief in the inevitability and the naturalness of the *status quo*: he should be persuaded that what he had previously taken for granted in its stability and familiarity is relative and open to question. The reader of *La Nausée* is constantly exposed to such persuasion. Sartre, however, does not seek the radical alienation which he attributes to Brecht. This, as much as the techniques of the traditional 'participation' theatre, might simply manoeuvre the reader into the acceptance of a morally pre-judged message. Sartre recommends, rather, a less consistent level of stylization than either: a disquieting oscillation between distance from the protagonists and empathy or complicity with them. The spectator might then be led through a critical appraisal of the situation represented, of the characters' reactions and of the issues raised, to an uneasy 'prise de conscience' of his own position in relation to them.