

RANDOM HOUSE  BOOKS



Sartre

Iris Murdoch

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About the Author

Iris Murdoch was born in Dublin in 1919 of Anglo-Irish parents. She went to Badminton School in Bristol, and read classics at Somerville College, Oxford. During the war she was an Assistant Principal at the Treasury, and then worked with UNRRA in London, Belgium and Austria. She held a studentship in philosophy at Newnham College, Cambridge, and then in 1948 she returned to Oxford where she became a Fellow of St Anne's College. Until her death in February 1999, she lived with her husband, the teacher and critic John Bayley, in Oxford. Awarded the CBE in 1976, Iris Murdoch was made a DBE in the 1987 New Year's Honours List. In the 1997 PEN Awards she received the Gold Pen for Distinguished Service to Literature.

Iris Murdoch made her writing debut in 1954 with *Under the Net*, and went on to write twenty-six novels, including the Booker prize-winning *The Sea, The Sea* (1978). Other literary awards include the James Tait Black Memorial Prize for *The Black Prince* (1973) and the Whitbread Prize (now the Costa Book Award) for *The Sacred and Profane Love Machine* (1974). Her works of philosophy include *Sartre: Romantic Rationalist*, *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals* (1992) and *Existentialists and Mystics* (1997) She wrote several plays including *The Italian Girl* (with James Saunders) and *The Black Prince*, adapted from her novels of the same name.

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SARTRE

Romantic Rationalist

Iris Murdoch

VINTAGE BOOKS
London

To

IRENE AND HUGHES MURDOCH

INTRODUCTION

Philosophers are not often popular idols, and works of philosophy rarely become guide-books living, during the philosopher's lifetime. In the twenty years after the war Sartre was probably the best-known metaphysician in Europe, best-known that is not just among professional thinkers (many of whom ignored him) but among young and youngish people who, for once, found in philosophy, his philosophy, the clear and inspiring explanation of the world which philosophers are generally supposed to provide. The fundamental and attractive idea was freedom. It had long been known that God was dead and that man was self-created. Sartre produced a fresh and apt picture of this self-chosen being. The metaphysical imagery of *L'Être et le Néant*, *Being and Nothingness*, was, for popular purposes, easily grasped. The *pour-soi*, for-itself, a spontaneous free consciousness, was contrasted with the *en-soi*, in itself, inert, fixed, unfree. The *en-soi* was the world experienced as alien, senselessly contingent or unreflectively deformed. The heroic consciousness, the individual self, inalienably and ineluctably free, challengingly confronted the 'given', in the form of existing society, history, tradition, other people. The war was over, Europe was in ruins, we had emerged from a long captivity, all was to be remade. Sartre's philosophy was an inspiration to many who felt that they must, and *could*, make out of all that misery and chaos a better world, for it had now been revealed that anything was possible. Existentialism was the new religion, the new salvation. This was the atmosphere in Brussels in 1945 where I first read *L'Être et le Néant* and where I briefly (and on the occasion only) met Sartre. His presence in the city was like that of a pop star. Chico Marx, who was there at about the same time, was less rapturously received. The only other occasion when I saw a philosopher being hailed as a prophet was in California in 1984 when I attended a lecture by Jacques Derrida (*Un autre temps, toujours la même France*).

One of the charms of the Sartrean philosophy at that moment was that it readily carried a political message. The enemy was the past, the old bourgeois world with its clumsy mechanism and its illusions and its fatal mistakes. It was and must be the end of an era. Fascism had been destroyed, left-wing governments would come to power everywhere, and in England one promptly did. It is interesting, and indeed touching, that so much optimism arose out of the vaguest understanding of Sartre's doctrine, which also carried the melancholy message that since the *pour-soi* can never be united with the *en-soi*, man is *une passion inutile*, a useless, futile, passion. The darker message of the doctrine was unnoticed, or became itself a source of energy, perhaps because, as in the case of other so-called pessimists such as Hume or Schopenhauer, the cordial and self-satisfied discourse of the thinker conveys a cheering vitality quite at odds with his theory. The *en-soi*, an alien object of fascination, of fear, even of hate, in Sartre's obsessive and hypnotic world picture, appears in his philosophical novel *La Nausée* as contingent matter, our surroundings, things, experienced as senseless and awful. In *L'Être et le Néant* and also in the novel sequence *Les Chemins de la Liberté* the *en-soi* appears, in contrast to free reflection, as inert conventional opinions, dead traditions, illusions. In the drama *Huis Clos*, which was received with enthusiasm and is still played, the alien being is another person, whose freedom contradicts one's own, and whose unassimilable Medusa gaze turns one's *pour-soi* into an *en-soi*. This imagery returns us to the realisation that the 'hero' of Sartre's early philosophy is, like the Cartesian subject, alone.

In his elegant account of his childhood, *Les Mots*, Sartre, brought up, he tells us, by two women and an old man, was early aware of himself as an actor, uncertainly enacting his role as a child prodigy unable to find and coincide with his real self. This, already, was expressive of the *inutile* metaphysical

passion which fills and inspires his work, longing to devour the world and make it his own, together with a tormenting and invigorating consciousness of the impossibility of success. The model which seems to prove that such a *total* philosophical synthesis can be, very nearly, achieved is Hegel's *Phenomenology of Mind*, and it has been the dream of more than one metaphysically minded thinker after and including Marx, to rewrite this book and get it right. Sartre attempted it twice. *L'Être et Néant* was a huge non-historical revision of the subject-object dialectic, in which the prime value, and motive force, replacing Hegel's *Geist*, was freedom (individual project), and wherein the insights of Heidegger (whose mythology Sartre secularised), Husserl, Freud and Marx were all to be accommodated. Sartre here portrayed the dialectic psychologically as the human soul; later he portrayed it socio-politically as human history. His later work remains, for all its obvious divergence and new tone, significantly close, his critics would say too close, to the first fine careless rapture of the early synthesis.

Sartre is, in himself, as philosopher, novelist, playwright, literary critic, biographer, essayist, journalist, a remarkable instance of the universal omnivorous writer. *La Nausée*, Sartre's celebration of the horror of the contingent, is one of the very few unadulterated and successful members of the genre 'philosophical novel'. It is unique in Sartre's work, and I think in literature generally, a young man's *tour de force*. The unfinished sequence *Les Chemins de la Liberté* are by contrast traditional novels, crammed with characters, events, story, various people, various moral judgements. Sartre evidently had, at this stage, no difficulty in telling a story, a feat which later on writers (and perhaps he) felt to be more difficult and problematic. These novels have a huge subject, passionately grasped and felt, the outbreak of war and the occupation of France, and they retain their power as works of literature. There are fairly inconspicuous moments of philosophical reflection, but these are not in any formidable or purposive sense 'existentialist novels', and their hero, Mathieu, is not a didactical existentialist hero. Indeed he appears, in comparison with more extreme and bizarre pictures of the human person conjured up elsewhere in Sartre's philosophical and literary writings, and in spite of being periodically exhausted by the futile vagueness of his thoughts, a pillar of sobriety and decency possessing quite ordinary qualities including a traditional moral sense. Short stories, in the collection *Le Mur*, explore a Sartrean existentialist idea, evident in Sartre's followers and indeed in late romantic literature generally, that authentic being is attained in extreme situations, and in revolt against society. Here the figures who fascinate Sartre are often violent, even criminal. Hatred of existing (Western) society, often identified as 'bourgeois society' and contrasted with some imagined alternative, has of course been a long-standing (and often fruitful) source of literary inspiration. Sartre later indulged and explained his admiration for stylish and talented criminals in his long book about Jean Genet. He continued his literary career not as a storyteller but as a, successful, writer of plays. The plays were propaganda as well as art, and could be seen as supplementary to the battling articles in *Tempo Modernes*. But perhaps in the long run the play satisfied the literary Sartre because of its compulsive formal brevity. The metaphysician who could not say anything unless he said everything was compelled in the theatre to give his message briefly; and as Sartre unfortunately could not do everything, as opposed to *thinking* everything, he found the theatre, where he had undoubted talent, a sympathetic place to drop into.

It often remains a mystery, in spite of hard work done on the subject by spectators including Sartre himself, why artists suddenly stop doing something they are good at and do nothing, or something else, which of course they may be good at too. Sartre might have gone on to write a huge novel full of thoughts and people. He did not, instead he wrote a book about Baudelaire, a long book about Jean Genet, and an extremely long book about Flaubert. These works come, strictly speaking, under the

head of existential psychoanalysis, a procedure outlined in *L'Être et le Néant*, not under that literary criticism. *Les Mots*, presumably an instance of existential self-analysis, is calm, even cold tone. The other books, more passionate, in attempting to show in detail how the persons in question came to choose themselves to be as they were, also reveal Sartre's own identification with, and sense of similarity to, his chosen subjects, and his intent desire to re-create himself inside them. On the other hand he appears, especially in the book on Flaubert, *L'Idiot de la Famille*, as a meticulous historian. The role of historian is one which he more positively assumes in his later philosophical synthesis. Of the book on Genet, it may be said that it expresses not only Sartre's particular hatred of society, but his hatred of religion, one might say his religious hatred of religion. He says in *Les Mots* that atheism is a cruel long-term business. *L'Être et le Néant* was attacked by critics who found it not only Godless but immoral, recognising no value except a Luciferian private will which in effect exalted unprincipled 'sincerity', bizarre originality, and irresponsible courage. The conclusion of *Humanism and Clos*, and one message of *L'Être et le Néant*, is that *l'enfer c'est les autres*, hell is other people, all men are enemies, an expression of desperate or insolent solipsism which left no place for love or duty or the complex network of ordinary morals. Such metaphysical simplification also, by a shift to a political perspective, made room for the sinister message that in an oppressive society only violence is honest.

Sartre pursued his demonic 'other' in his studies of Baudelaire, Genet, and Flaubert: Baudelaire, *poète maudit*, social rebel, feminine temperament, masochist, caught in his own master and slave dialectic of revolt and submission, Genet, foundling, criminal, artist, feminine homosexual, bold in taking his own will as his conscience while accepting the moral judgements of society, Flaubert, also poised between rebellion and obedience, atheism and faith, another feminine temperament who actually became a woman in the person of his famous heroine. Both Baudelaire and Flaubert have a bourgeois background from which they escape by a *déclassement symbolique*, by electing themselves as artists, into an imaginary elite academy or spiritual nobility; Genet is without, at least these illusions. *L'Être et le Néant* was published in 1943, the book on Baudelaire in 1946, the book on Genet in 1952, the *Critique de la Raison Dialectique*, Sartre's second synthesis, in 1960, *L'Idiot de la Famille*, three volumes on Flaubert, nearly 4000 pages, in 1971–72. The remarkable study of Genet, the 'diabolical saint', (*Saint Genet: Comédien et Martyr*) is an exercise in Sartre's own *déclassement*, his escape from 'bourgeois morality' and the benign Kantian perspectives of *Existentialism and Humanism*. It is thus a doorway into the later Marxist–Existentialist phase of his thought. He compares Genet with Bukharin, Genet is 'a bourgeois Bukharin'; Bukharin confesses his guilt, judging himself upon Marxist principles which, against himself, he humbly affirms, so committing 'moral suicide'. Genet also confesses, in accordance with the bourgeois values which brand him as wicked, as a murderer and a thief; but since, while doing so, he refuses to deny himself as a free self-willing subject whose will is his own rightness and justice, he is able to receive with proud satisfaction the judgement of society which makes of him an object, a criminal, a non-person, a prisoner without future. Thus Genet (almost) achieves the impossible, of being object and subject, *être et néant*, all at once. In the course of the book Sartre manages to transform a (simplified) psychological analysis into a (simplified) political message. He examines the various dialectical 'ploys' of the Genet personality. Genet's relations with others take (for instance) the form of wanting to *be* the other, but since he can only achieve this as fantasy, the other that he wills to be turns out to be a mere appearance; he finds there only 'empty shells, dead bodies, abandoned houses', and is returned to his, equally absent, self as an object, a solitary, beneath a relentless light (*lux perpetua?*), unable to escape the judgement of others, but unable to encounter them either. Sartre finally offers us Genet as personifying the futile

of the bourgeois subject who is condemned to maintain values which he (really) knows to be empty and vanishing. Genet is redeemed, is saint, martyr, edifying exemplar, and hero of our time, because he lives this condition with full awareness to both extremes, both as subject and object, accepting (like Saint Teresa as Sartre points out) all accusations against him as having some substance. But he is better than Saint Teresa because she is supported by 'general esteem' and he is not. (To put it more absurdly, in Kierkegaardian terms, Saint Teresa is a tragic hero while Genet is a true Knight of Faith.) Genet is worthy of our attention, Sartre argues, because he is sincerely and openly and extremely while we, bourgeois, are secretly, timidly and hypocritically. He suffers, while we evade suffering. Genet is also of course (and for some of us more obviously) redeemed by becoming an artist. He is, again like Baudelaire, a dandy, a feminine soul, he is 'metamorphosed into a lover, that is into a woman'. He becomes an aesthete, progresses to writing poetry, at last becomes a talented writer. Sartre said in the book on Baudelaire that he was not offering literary criticism. At the same time, most explicitly in the Flaubert book, he wishes to discover how just *this* man (so like many others in general respect) becomes *this* artist. But such a discovery, in so far as it can be made at all, should emerge from a critical study of the artist's work. Sartre even when he does talk about the work, is more concerned with expounding it as a continuous and unitary manifestation of Genet's psychology. In order to present Genet (ultimately) as political propaganda, Sartre oversimplifies his picture of the extraordinary man, obscuring another Genet who has developed other virtues, to some extent shared by the bourgeois, those of the good artist, industry, patience, humility, truthfulness. To suggest that partly through success, Genet may in later life have become, as we ordinarily say, 'a better man' would be alien to Sartre's purpose. At the end of the book, where Sartre attributes to his hero the virtue of generosity, he has to explain that this is simply an expression of freedom, and that in any case generosity is alienated by its context in bourgeois property relations. The original metaphysical distinction between *être et néant*, *mauvaise foi* and freedom, increasingly appears as the contrast between corrupt collapsing bourgeois society and some ideal, as yet unclarified, which under present conditions can only sincerely express itself as revolt. Indeed, if we are sincere, Sartre suggests, we have a choice between the humility of Bukharin, deliberate surrender of freedom and moral suicide, and the pride of Genet, who asserts the value of his own free will, while inconsistently recognising the values which condemn him. Our present age, Sartre tells us in an impressively pessimistic and eloquent passage, 'has a guilty conscience about history'. In the past, equally criminal societies did not care about posterity, while others made their history with a clear conscience, confident that they were creating a secure future, at ease with the succession of generations. But now, 'revolutions are impossible', we are threatened by annihilating war, propertied classes have no confidence in their rights, and the working class no confidence in its power. We are more aware of injustice, without the will and the power to remove it. The progress of science makes future centuries 'an obsessive presence'. The future is here, we feel judged by masked successors. Our age, which is already dead already a *thing*, though we still have to live through it, is alone in history. What way is open to us? Sartre asks, and replies that he can see one which he will discuss elsewhere. This way is presumably that of the marriage of existentialism and Marxism which he allows us to glimpse through the closing doors.

This book can serve as a picturesque link between the metaphysic of *L'Être et le Néant* and that of the *Critique de la Raison Dialectique*. As an 'analysis' of the contradictions of bourgeois society, the futility of the bourgeois subject, and the bankruptcy of bourgeois morality, it professes to open a space for the new morality of existentialist Marxism, with its combination of freedom and social change. Freedom is Genet's virtue, the free activity of his own particular will, freedom as unillusioned

sincerity, freedom as courage. The book is in effect a taking to extremes (I would say a *reductio ad absurdum*) of both the earlier and the later views. As a political tract it will fail to convince those who though they share Sartre's pessimistic fears, believe in traditional morality, and do not believe in magical transformation, effected by Marxism, or Marxism-Existentialism, into a far better and total different society. The book, though so radiant with intelligence, is equally unacceptable as a moral tract or adventure in moral-philosophical psychology. Sartre says at the beginning that when he was with Genet 'we talked only about him'. 'I have a passion for understanding people,' Sartre adds. Perhaps Sartre, touchingly romantic about his hero, was too ready to accept Genet's view of himself which, encouraged by his admirer, he elaborated, too anxious also to see in Genet just those interesting characteristics which he perceived earlier in Baudelaire, later in Flaubert. Sartre claims that Genet never changed, never compromised with society by becoming merely 'a famous writer'; his 'verbal victory' did not separate him from his old haunts and companions, and his work never ceased to express his original scream of protest. Such generalisations, which tend to cut off further discussion, probably do less than justice to the paradoxical mysteriousness of Sartre's idol. Genet certainly writes like an angel and *Notre Dame*, in the extraordinary mix of that outpouring, contains intense images of love and tenderness, together with an effective, not merely scandalous, use of religious imagery. The contradictions within the talent make both man and writer more interesting. Sartre says that Georges Bataille's meditation upon images of suffering is 'a fake', whereas Genet's sado-masochistic visions are not fakes. Well, art is a sort of faking, the artist is and is not detached from the man, the influence is mutual. Genet is (to stir things by speaking wildly) like Christopher Isherwood, who also wrote like an angel, and like T. E. Lawrence, who was accused of 'faking' and whose life broods uneasily over his work. (Sartre mentions the *Seven Pillars* when seeking models for a book which Genet might have written but did not.) He is also of course, in his subject matter, his passion, his message, his history, tremendously unlike. There are interesting paradoxes, largely unexplored, which Sartre's determination to see Genet as a great unitary edifying object leaves unexplored. One would like, in this book, to be told in more heterogeneous detail about how Genet's private life related, as time went by, to the didactic 'moralism' of his art. Sartre gives us a 'touching glimpse at the end of Genet 'surrounded by children', at the house of an ex-lover whose marriage he promoted and protects (dominates?). Sartre adds this interesting and ambiguous item, without further explanation, as an instance of Genet's generosity, and even remarks that homosexuals often develop 'artificial families' in middle age.

It is Genet the artist, the prose-master, the 'liberator' of the theatre, who will remain with us. His work poses the (very complex) problem of how far and how an artist's value judgements affect the worth of the work that expresses them. This used to be tamely discussed in relation to D. H. Lawrence. Sartre does not discuss it in the more striking case of Genet; and indeed cannot discuss it because he accepts Genet as an absolute and his literary work as something almost perfect. Be that as it may, Sartre's canonisation of Genet, in which the word 'evil' frequently occurs, seems devoid of any understanding of the reality of evil, the nature of cruelty, the harm done to its victims, the crippling (for instance the narrowing) of the evildoer's mind, the spreading ripples of misery and further evil which evil acts produce. The actual operation of morality, its *variety*, which is the most obvious and ubiquitous feature of human existence, is absent from the picture. Sartre as Cartesian solipsist seems especially here to exhibit a lack of any lively sense of the mystery and contingent variousness of individuals, even of the individuality of his subject whom he presents with such dramatic simplicity. By now the metaphysician has said his final farewell to the messy accidental world of the novel, full of encounters and moral conflicts and love.

The idea of 'existential psychoanalysis', first presented in *l'Être et le Néant*, underwent a lengthy development as Sartre made various attempts to apply it. Roughly, existential psychoanalysis differs from the Freudian variety in being less deterministic, and therein less scientific, in that it involves reference to the future as well as to the past. A philosophy of time belongs in a philosophy of man. Sartre never abandoned his original dictum that *l'homme se définit par son projet* which implies not only that man is free, but, more precisely, that a purposive conception of the future is always part of the present. The man of *l'Être et le Néant* possesses total freedom, there is no limit to his ability to leap out of his surroundings. As Sartre moved from this heady voluntarism toward Marxism he became more interested in the 'social conditioning' of the individual: a fairly obvious point of interest, one might say, to an observer of the human scene. Sartre ultimately became obsessed with this problem which he continually restated in its most abstract terms and then hastened to tackle in the utmost detail. The book on Flaubert is thus, as Sartre tells us in the preface, a sequel or appendix to the *Critique*, in particular to its long introduction *Questions de Méthode*. Its subject is: what can we know about a man today? Sartre will answer this question by studying a particular case, that of Flaubert. '*Cela revient à totaliser les informations dont nous disposons sur lui.*' The terrible verb 'totalise', only recently becoming current in English, must be understood here with its full Hegelian aura. So, Sartre is to answer his extremely abstract and ambiguous question by some *total* examination and synthesis of *all* the available information about Flaubert. He admits that this may not be possible: perhaps the truth about an individual is essentially plural, the informative data being heterogeneous and irreducible. Sartre's book is to show that the mooted irreducibility is merely apparent, each piece of information set in, its proper place will contribute to a whole, revealing its deep homogeneity with all the other items. Man is never really an individual, he is better described as a *universel singulier* totalised and universalised by his epoch, which he retotalises by reproducing himself within it as singularity. This picture of a man as totalisable, and totally intelligible to another man (albeit a very clever one) is a long way from the free solitary of the first synthesis, and smacks generally of determinism rather than freedom. Sartre is of course attempting the impossible, something he was often engaged in doing. The frailty of his operation is more frankly admitted in a later passage (139), where he has been explaining the passive and 'pathetic' character of Flaubert's sexual relationship by the fact that he was *mal aimé, bien soigné* by a mother who was conscientious but unloving. After many pages of details Sartre suddenly says, '*Je l'avoue: c'est unefable. Rien ne prouve qu'il en fut ainsi.*' 'I admit, it may be just a story. Nothing proves it was really like this.' The absence of the necessary details, the particular facts, necessitates recourse to generality. The account has reference to infants of a certain kind, not to Flaubert in particular. Never mind. Sartre has wanted to pursue his idea as thoroughly as possible because, even though the *real* explanation may be quite different, it would *have* to follow the same route as Sartre's and refute that of Sartre upon the same ground, which Sartre sums up as *le corps, l'amour*.

The Flaubert book is of course interesting as a very fully documented biography, but what Sartre is attempting to do with it cannot be done, partly for reasons which he mentions himself, the heterogeneous nature of the evidence, its dubious reliability, its lacunae, and also for more general reasons concerning the secret inaccessibility of other people and the fact that moral judgements are involved in assessing 'what they are'. The final judgement rests with common sense and moral sense: one cannot, however frenetically one tries, pluck out the heart of that mystery. I cannot help wishing that Sartre had devoted all that tremendous time-consuming energy to the writing of a 4000-page novel about everybody and everything. Long novels by geniuses are possibly the best totalisations available. However, the attempt has what he must have felt to be its ineluctable *raison d'être* in the

evolution of his politics. In the *Critique de la Raison Dialectique* Sartre observes, about another writer whose mystery intrigues him, 'Valéry is a petty-bourgeois intellectual, there is no doubt about that. But not every petty-bourgeois intellectual is a Valéry. The inadequacy of the heuristic method of contemporary Marxism is contained in those two sentences.' Sartre's corrective 'proof,' which in the context of its pretensions must appear as a *reductio ad absurdum*, was designed to discredit the abstract sociology of Marxism by a complete account of a man as a totality of social conditioning and personal *projet*. Sartre certainly satisfied an existentialist ideal in that he lived his epoch to the full. His conversion to Marxism and his adventures as a fellow-traveller dominated the second half of his life, and elicited the ambitious second synthesis, in which he attempts to revise or redeem Marxism with an infusion of existentialism, a doctrine argued to be, as compared with orthodox Marxism, closer to the ideas of the early Marx. Of this large work only the first volume was published, the promise of a second volume existing only as a fragment. The industry of its author is heroic, so is his sustained optimism, his lack of cynicism, and his faith in the role of philosophy. Marx thought that philosophical speculation would disappear in the good (communist) society. The young Hegelian Marx was a kind of philosopher, the later Marx more of a scientist. Orthodox western Marxism has abandoned philosophy in favour of scientific socialism. Sartre in both his incarnations remained a traditional philosopher, thus giving his whole life to philosophy, which remained fundamentally connected with all his other writings. His least 'philosophical' work is *Les Chemins*. In his second phase Sartre took it as self-evident, a view shared with many Western thinkers, that Marxism is the *philosophy* of the present-day world. Marxism is taken to be, a word often used by Sartre, *indépassable*. No other philosophy, it is argued, is universally relevant, and universally intelligible and popular, and thus effective. It might I think be suggested if one were searching for a global philosophy, that utilitarianism is a plausible candidate. Its tenets are however instinctively rather than theoretically popular, and it may indeed be claimed as effectively part of Marxism, to the outside probably the most attractive part. Since 1945 an attempt has been made, in various philosophical quarters, to revise Marxism, to rescue it from its degeneration into pragmatic dogma and pseudo-science, and make of it a genuine living moral philosophy; which involves jettisoning the large quantity of 'philosophical' nonsense about dialectical materialism written by Engels and Lenin, and tolerating, excusing, or rejecting the claim of the Soviet Union to be a Marxist society. In France the rescue operation began earlier, in Paris in the 1930s, when Sartre, Merleau-Ponty and Raymond Queneau were listening to Alexandre Kojève's lectures on Hegel. It may be from this time that Sartre derived the idea of the close relation between existentialism and the Hegelianism of the young Marx, and so later came to believe that what was now necessary was to create a fusion of existentialism with Marxism, which had always really been an existentialist philosophy.

The introduction to Sartre's *Critique*, called *Questions de Méthode*, which was also published separately in *Temps Modernes*, summarises the problem and the theory. Sartre states firmly that he accepts *sans réserves* the dictum of Engels, in a letter to Marx, that 'men make their history themselves, but within a milieu which conditions them'. He adds that this text is not altogether clear and is susceptible of many interpretations. How can man make history if history also makes man? Idealist Marxism, he goes on to say, has chosen the easiest interpretation: man, entirely determined by circumstances, in effect by economic conditions, is a passive product, a mere collection of conditioned reflexes. This puts the dilemma in its crudest and its clearest form. If Marxism is a science, a formulation of scientific law, it must appear as a kind of determinism, and this is how it is presented by Engels when he explains that the human dialectic is really the same as the dialectic operation of the whole of nature. On the other hand, if Marxism is an economic theory designed

remove the contradictions of capitalism and produce a society without scarcity it seems more like a technological hypothesis; and if it is declared to be a philosophy it opens itself to heterogeneous freedom for-all of speculation and admits of varying interpretations. In the last two forms, it lacks the absolute authority usually claimed for it by Marxists, and in the first form (as science) it is implausible and intolerable. How far Sartre remains from meeting these difficulties is suggested by the rather dreamlike conclusion of the first part of his Introduction (called *Marxism and Existentialism*). Marxism, we are told, is *indépassable*, we are told, so long as technical progress and changes in social relations have failed to free man from the burden of scarcity (*rareté*). Sartre refers us to Marx's reference to *cette époque lointaine*, that far-off time, when the reign of liberty will begin, when work is no longer imposed upon us by an external necessity and purpose. Then, Sartre says, 'when there will exist for everyone a margin of *real* freedom' (Sartre's italics) outside the mere production of material goods in order to support life, Marxism will have had its day, and a philosophy of freedom will take its place. 'But we have no means, no intellectual instrument, no concrete experience which enables us to conceive of this freedom and that philosophy.' This curious passage expresses the old Utopian Marxist confidence in the ability of Marxism to solve all human problems, postpones 'real freedom' (about which we can know nothing) until that *époque lointaine*, and proposes existentialist-Marxism, which reconciles determinism with an inferior kind of freedom, as *indépassable* for what must be seen as an interim period, during which our confidence in that philosophy, if it is still to be called Marxism, must depend on our belief in its practical success.

Marxism must be made to recognise the individual, the *aventure singulière* of human existence must be returned to the centre of the picture, history must be seen to be made by men. The individual life must be shown to be related to its historical surroundings, by a continuous to and fro *mediation* between various paths between the general and the particular, which would reveal the place and nature of freedom and choice. The possibility of such a showing was to be proved by the work on Flaubert. Methods of *mediation* are to be sought out in the confused area of 'human studies' (psychology, anthropology, sociology) whose confusion must be clarified by relation to a 'totalising' philosophical base, and by the use of Marxist concepts by which alone the whole of history can be seen as that of individual men. Marx's analysis of the revolution of 1848 is taken here to serve as another model to prove that what is desired is also possible. However for all the weight of historical fact and historical analysis which it carries, the philosophical psychology of the *Critique* bears a ghostly resemblance to that of *L'Être et le Néant*. Sartre has promised a new dialectic of subject and object, a return to Hegel, a reinstatement of human purpose and the union of theory and practice, ideas lost by the scientific materialism of the orthodox line. But he cannot get away from his original deep idea of the individual solitary and sovereign *consciousness*, his 'dialectic' pictures the ego confronting alien matter which it must dominate. Hegel's philosophy is after all a philosophy of consciousness, the *Phenomenology* can be read as the story of a single mind. Sartre attempts to see history as 'driven, not by scientific laws or by an abstract inhuman super-purpose, but by human willed purposes, so that its explanation and being lies in a study of conscious human activity'. Such a view could not please Marxists who wished to retain the old sense of historical inevitability, or non-Marxists who wished to do justice to contingency. In Sartre's theory the contingent makes an appearance as the *practico-inerte*, a practical inertia or inert practicability of blind social forces; while, capable of overcoming these, the large sweep of history is displayed as visibly influenceable by purposive groups of individuals. Such a view would leave Marxism in the position of a hypothesis, possibly productive of useful regulative concepts. Sartre criticises Marxists for emphasising the pressure of past experience and reality, by ignoring the influence of an imagined future, the purposive *projet* characteristic of consciousness. H

boldly existentialises a prime Marxist tool by appropriating the idea of *praxis*, a concept which received its Marxist definition in the *Theses on Feuerbach* (1845). *Praxis*, by origin a Greek word meaning doing, transaction, practical activity, has in German, and also in English, the general sense of practice as opposed to theory. Sir Philip Sidney, quoted in the *Oxford English Dictionary*, opposes it to *gnosis* agreeing with Aristotle that the fruit is praxis. Marx's theses, a set of eleven brief statements, explain the difference between Feuerbach's (and all other) materialism, and that of Marx. Feuerbach pictures human beings, no longer misled into religious or idealist 'other worlds', as individuals who are now free to contemplate the various objects which make up this world. Marx says that objective truth is not something waiting to be perceived by the static theoretical gaze of isolated persons, it is something which has to be made by the joint efforts of social beings, active not just in 'civil society' but in the new 'human society, or social humanity'. 'The philosophers have only *interpreted* the world in various ways; the point is to *change* it.' Marx's general point here may be seen as not only sound Hegelianism but sound sense. Theory is tested in practice. The relation of subject to object is not static but creative, dynamic (dialectical). Marx goes further, however, by defining his truth-seeking, or truth-making, as an exercise of power over the objective world which must ultimately take the form of 'revolutionary practice'. The word 'praxis' has by now become familiar in Marxist jargon meaning (roughly and often vaguely) revolutionary practical activity, a united theory-and-practice exerting a continual pressure upon historical events. Sartre complained that orthodox Marxism has now 'mechanised' this concept, meaning by it *de facto* work or *ad hoc* political action, whereas what it *ought* to mean was free, creative, inventive mind, the original spontaneous upsurge of the human consciousness which is continually creating the historical process. (Left-wing political discussion could profit from the removal of the word 'praxis', and the substitution in each case of an explanation in ordinary language.) Sartre's praxis-consciousness was, in the present scene, to appear as a group-purpose incarnate in the proletariat, the most alienated and rebellious section of society, and in the Communist Party as its fully conscious leader. Merleau-Ponty (in *Les Aventures de la Dialectique*) complained that Sartre had thus made of praxis a 'pure' activity, whose function was to produce a 'proletariat' which had no real existence, and was merely a figment representative of humanity in the thoughts of Sartre. '*Le je ne sais quoi Sartrien, la liberté radicale, prend possession de la praxis.*' Perhaps the invisible Spirit, mentioned in *Les Mots*, who was to save Sartre from chance, was never really exorcised after all.

It is impossible briefly to do justice to this huge ambitious book, full of very detailed exposition and excursions into anthropology and sociology as well as history, which was attacked by Marxist critics as abstract, idealist, Cartesian and a distraction from the realities of the political struggle. It is a less readable, and less felicitous or 'lucky' work than *L'Être et le Néant* whose spirit, I suggest, ineffectually animates it. The early book has a metaphysical unity and deeply felt and imaginative central theme which this one lacks. *L'Être et le Néant* appeared as something new and appealed to an audience who were ready for it. The voluminous data which Sartre assembles in the *Critique* do not cohere together, the main argument is not comfortable with its numerous proofs and evidences, and the central ideas lack imaginative synthetic power. As a revision of Marxism it seems to me to be on the wrong road; the gallant attempt to join Marxism and existentialism fails, a *passion inutile*. Sartre was also, in the post-war period, very active in *ad hoc* day-to-day politics, in his journal *Tempo Modernes* and in public political debate with critics such as Merleau-Ponty and Henri Lefebvre. He may not have been able to unite theory and practice, but he paid ardent attention to both. In spite of, because of, his belief in the importance of the (or an ideal) Communist Party as a super-consciousness, he was never on easy terms with the French Party. In the 'revolution' of 1968 Sartre

was once more surrounded by the young people whom he so much hoped to influence, but the moment passed, no radical changes followed, and the Marxist idea of the 'great transformation scene' was beginning to fade. A question which divided, and still divides, European communism was that of the leading political role of the USSR, regarded by some as sacrosanct, by others as a chief obstacle to rational Marxism. Sartre's ambivalent position on this matter caused bitter arguments. On the one hand, the remarkable, indeed extraordinary, success of Lenin's party in 1917 could be taken as a perfect example of purposive humans making history. On the other hand, the USSR was not a good society and other societies had not followed suit. Many Marxists hesitated to criticise the Soviet Union because to do so was to lend comfort to the bourgeois enemy. Sartre may also have been influenced by a kind of Hobbesian theoretical realism which appears in the *Critique* in his views about the effect of scarcity upon the nature of power. Violence is (p. 221) '*L'inhumanité constante des conduites humaines en tant que rareté interiorisée, bref ce qui fait que chacun voit en chacun l'Autre et le principe du Mal.*' Scarcity 'interiorised' leads every man to see his fellow as the Other, and as the principle of Evil. *Homo homini lupus, l'enfer c'est les autres.* Such a strongly expressed pessimism about human nature might promote a realistic tolerance of authoritarian government, in Russia, and, more plausibly, in China.

A general criticism of the *Critique de la Raison Dialectique*, and which applies to much Marxist writing, is that the factor of *morality* is, except in some extremely diminished and reduced forms, absent. Morality is after all the great central arena of human life and the abode of freedom. Almost all our thoughts and actions are concerned with the infinitely heterogeneous business of evaluation; almost all our language is value language. The destruction or denial of this open texture is and has been (as we know) the aim of many theorists and many tyrannies. Moral (that is human) activity can be controlled if it is conceptually simplified. The idea that we inevitably regard other people not only as a nuisance but as prime founts of evil is certainly a simplification; and perhaps from a tyrant's point of view not a very fruitful one, since a seed of individual will may be found within it. Sartre uses moral terminology in a vague way when, in his analyses, he speaks of 'oppression'; but the positive moral idea in the *Critique* is, *mutatis a few mutandis*, the same as in *L'Être et le Néant*, that of a world-dominating will. Marxists who attacked the Soviet Union because of its offences against human rights were angry with Sartre's ambivalence in this matter. Axiomatic ideas about human rights or natural rights are effective because they do not belong to any system. The Kantian idea of duty is individualised by conscience in particular contexts. General concepts such as Reason and Love are instantiated in the cognitive activities of infinitely various individuals. Morality is a very complicated matter. This complication is dangerous to the simplified unity and fascination of political metaphysics. Religion is, *a fortiori*, not mentioned by Sartre except as a sociological item. French anti-clericalism has always been fierce and pointed, as compared with the vague drift away from religion in other countries. Marxist theoretical morality has usually appeared to consist of (often reasonable) criticisms of bourgeois society, juxtaposed with Utopian pictures of a better society (without 'alienation', class division, division of labour etc.). Such a theory certainly has a moral content, but a controlled and restricted one. The 'moral' of the *Phenomenology of Mind* might be said to be 'diligently seek truth'. Scientific socialism sets limits upon this appeal to the individual soul to enlarge itself. Marxist practice has of course been inspired by ideas of justice and utilitarian considerations which are not the exclusive property of Marxism. Even institutional Christianity, under the flag of the 'new theology', has, in South America, made friends with Marxism. The making of such alliances is an opportunistic tactic, but may also show that, in the field, the moral limitations of Marxism are not impenetrable. Officially however Marxists, pointing to the miseries of the world,

which Marxism will cure, tend to suggest or imply that while this general state of affairs exists all so-called (bourgeois) morality is self-indulgence and illusion. This is certainly a recognisable state of mind. Bourgeois value (morality) is something to be contrasted with (good) praxis and with the free and blameless human relations which will exist in the *époque lointaine* when all contradictions are overcome and the burden of scarcity and necessary toil is laid down. Sartre offers his own theory of value along these lines in a footnote (p. 302) to the *Critique*. The ambiguity of all past and present morality is that it makes its appearance in a world of exploitation and oppression, a state of negation (of humanity) which morality then negates. Morality is thus a pseudo-positive, being a negation of negation. In an oppressive society freedom can only assert itself through values but thereby becomes alienated. Every system of values rests on exploitation and oppression and confirms these, even the systems created by the oppressed do so in so far as they are systems. Value systems may be effective against *this* or *that* particular piece of oppression. But at the moment of revolution they cease to be value systems and cease to be values, since their existence as such depended on structures which made them seem to be ultimate (*indépassable*) and which, being overthrown, reveal the values as otiose, as *significations dépassées*. Freely developing praxis, as free creative consciousness, is then discovered as the only ethical relation between men as they proceed to dominate not each other but nature. (Presented with this version of the old old story the disenchanted may feel inclined to say that anyone who believes this will believe anything.) Sartre adds that Marxists tend to confuse value with talk about value. Value is produced at the level of basic praxis (that is, in Sartrean Marxism, purposive consciousness); and it is praxis itself, as relation of man to man and to worked matter, which becomes alienated, or not, and must be distinguished from the superstructures of value language and the 'moralities' invented by intellectuals. Thus in the Soviet Union, moralistic talk, the utterance of values of moral generalities common to all, should not conceal or be confused with the collective praxis which is creating socialist society. This would seem to imply that the practice of, and inevitable talk about, bourgeois morality, that is ordinary morality, that is morality, is in some way false and contrasted with the silent real social relationships which are constitutive and creative of the good society. The notion that talk is false and only action is true (not unlike that of Wittgenstein in the *Tractatus*) can also be deduced from the psychology of *L'Être et le Néant*. Talk is *mauvaise foi*, choice reveals the man, and is the truth. This is of course another simplification. Moral activity involves the human activity of language-using, even of theorising. 'Moralism' exists in the Soviet Union because in spite of Marxism, ordinary morality exists there too, and would still do so even if the relations of production had been (which they have not been) radically altered and perfected.

Sartre's attempt to reform Marxism, and rid it of the naive deterministic dialectical materialism of Engels and Lenin, reads like a dream of history wherein scarcity, admitted to be a basis for unavoidable exploitation, disappears, and an enlightened proletariat leads mankind to a society where freedom itself will be the whole of value. Sartre retains, together with the familiar Marxist conceptual tools, the assumption that Marxism is (must be) a total systematic theory which explains and unifies everything. This quasi-religious claim, which has traditionally been made for Marxism, is tacitly and explicitly challenged now by many revisionists. Sartre had hoped to offer a synthesis which would not only explain the world (or explain how it could be explained), but would effect a revolution in Marxist thought which would gain popular support among intellectuals and activists. He hoped to influence *la jeunesse*. He enjoyed the excitement of 1968, though disappointed by the failure of the French Communist Party to take charge of it. But his great work is now largely unread and revisionists look for inspiration elsewhere. The book which rallied the young was not the long one by Sartre but the short one by Marcuse. When one moves from the obsessive and over-wrought atmosphere of Sartre

second synthesis to the heterogeneous and mutually dissonant writings of the Frankfurt School or feels (however much disagreeing) that there is more open space and fresh air, more moral concepts, more realistic reflection. Practically, Marxism is held together by *de facto* tyranny and because it enshrines a political hope (or illusion); theoretically it may now be in process of a disintegration wherein out of loyalty, or dislike of other labels, all sorts of thinkers call themselves Marxists, and to adopt the title is a symbolic gesture. Sartre, for all that he was a heretic, was an optimist who believed that Marxism, only, could save civilisation. The thoughts of Adorno, Horkheimer and Benjamin make a different impression, sometimes even one of despair. We are told to look for the truth, not in the literary work of Sartre and Brecht, but in that of Kafka and Beckett. Is this the desolation of the bourgeois individual, or the desolation of man? Against the reified determinism of orthodox Marxism Sartre summoned up a subject-object dialectic whose slogan was 'all power to the subject'. Hegelianism lives so long as serious philosophical discussion can use its concepts. Adorno preaches the primacy of the object. Traditional Marxism pictures the strife of man with man as succeeded by strife with nature, ultimately a domination of nature. Sartre's version pictures the world outside the *pour-soi* of pure praxis as an alien *en-soi* to be conquered by creative will. One may look back here to past *L'Être et le Néant*, to a *La Nausée*, whose hero looks out on a desert not unlike that conjured up by Beckett. Adorno's Hegelianism pictures knowledge as an attentive truthful patience with the contingent, where the latter is not a hostile Other to be overcome, but more like an ordinary world round-about-us. 'Approaching knowledge of the object is the act in which the subject rends the veil which is weaving around the object. It can do this only where, fearlessly passive, it entrusts itself to its own experience. In places where subjective reasons scents subjective contingency the primacy of the object is shimmering through – whatever in the object is not a subjective admixture. The subject is the object's agent, not its constituent; this fact has consequences for the relation of theory and practice. Yes, and one wonders if such a view is not destructive of a Marxist, or even Hegelian viewpoint. Adorno constantly denies the claim of any 'totality'. This picture of cognition which 'favours the object' also favours conceptions of truthfulness, of sacredness, of respect and duty and love which belong to ordinary traditional morality and might be more clearly expressed (as they are by Simone Weil) in ordinary-language reflections without the compulsory use of Hegelian-Marxist terminology. It suggests a philosophy better suited to a world in which respect for rights (human rights, rights of citizens, rights of blacks, rights of gays, rights of whales) has made innumerable places for the meeting of theory and practice.

Sartre rightly identified determinism as a prime enemy; and paradoxically out of the philosophical background which supplied Sartre with the 'structures' of his 'mediations', the new quasi-scientism known as structuralism (or deconstructionism), has arisen. Languages of science and technology 'deeper' than ordinary language, supply models for explanatory codes, easily simplified and popularised. Of course Derrida's structuralism exposes philosophical fallacies which were earlier the target of Wittgenstein, but its charms are those of determinism, pleasing to thinkers who exclude themselves from the fate of the codified. By contrast with a cosmos of *archiécriture* Sartre may appear as a spokesman for the indomitable human spirit. A philosophy cannot be a total system because the world is contingent and infinitely various, and systematic philosophy is often made more readable as well as more reasonable by the personal interests of the philosopher, by the way in which his analyses and examples stray toward particular matters which have amazed him or frightened him or pleased him; so that his book may have turned out to be more personal and accidental than he intended. This is true of *L'Être et le Néant* and even, to a lesser extent, of the *Critique*. Sartre, thinker and artist, so versatile, so committed, so serious, industrious, courageous, learned, talented, clever

certainly 'lived' his own time to the full, and, whatever the fate of his general theories, must survive as one of its most persistent and interesting critics.

*La Nausée*¹ was Sartre's first novel, and it contains all his main interests except the political ones. It is his most densely philosophical novel. It concerns itself with freedom and bad faith, the character of the bourgeoisie, the phenomenology of perception, the nature of thought, of memory, of art. These topics are all raised as consequent upon a certain discovery, of metaphysical interest, which is made by the hero, Antoine Roquentin. This discovery, put in philosophical jargon, is the discovery that the world is contingent, and that we are related to it discursively and not intuitively.

Roquentin is standing on the sea shore. He has picked up a pebble which he is about to throw into the sea. He looks at the pebble—and a curious sickly horror overcomes him. He drops it and goes away. There follow other experiences of the same sort. A fear of objects invades him—but he cannot decide whether it is he or they that have changed. Looking at a glass of beer, at the braces of the *capitron*, he is filled with a 'sweetish sort of disgust' (*une espèce d'écoeurement douceâtre*). He looks at his own face in a mirror, and suddenly it seems to him inhuman, fishlike. He subsequently makes the discovery: *there are no adventures*. Adventures are stories, and one does not *live* a story. One tells later, one can only see it from the outside. The meaning of an adventure comes from its conclusion. Future passions give colour to the events. But when one is inside an event, one is not thinking of it. One can live or tell; not both at once. When one is living, nothing happens. There are no real beginnings. The future is not already there. Things happen, but not in the way that Roquentin had liked to imagine when he believed in adventures. What he had wanted was the impossible: that the moments of his life should follow each other like those of a remembered life, or with the inevitability of the notes of a familiar tune. He thinks, too, of his own work: he is writing the life of the Marquis de Rollebon. Yet this story which Roquentin is unravelling from letters and documents is not the real life which Rollebon lived. If he cannot even retain his own past, thinks Roquentin, how can he save that of another? He sees it all in a flash: the past does not really exist at all. There are the traces, the appearances—and behind them nothing. Or rather, what there is is the present, his own present—and what is this? The 'I' that goes on existing is merely the ever-lengthening *stuff* of gluey sensations and vague fragmentary thoughts.

Roquentin visits the picture gallery, and looks at the self-satisfied faces of the bourgeoisie. These people never felt that their existences were stale and unjustified. They lived surrounded by institutions of state and family, and borne up by a consciousness of their own claims and virtues. Their faces are *éclatant de droit*—blazing with right. Their lives had a real *given* meaning, or so they imagined; and here they are, with all that added sense of necessity with which the painter's thought can endow them. Roquentin's own recent experience has given him a special sense of the bad faith of these attempts to clothe the nakedness of existence with such trimmings of meaning. *Salauds!* he thinks, as he returns to his own *nausée*.

This *malaise* now moves towards a climax, and its metaphysical character is made more clear. Roquentin is staring at a seat in a tramcar. 'I murmur: it's a seat, as a sort of exorcism. But the word remains on my lips: it refuses to go and rest upon the thing . . .' 'Things are delivered from their names. They are *there*, grotesque, stubborn, huge, and it seems crazy to call them seats or to say anything whatever about them.' He continues his reflections in the public park: though he has often said, for instance, 'seagull', he has never before felt that *that* which he named *existed*. Before he had thought in terms of classes and kinds; now what is before him is a particular existing thing. 'Existence

had lost the inoffensive air of an abstract category: it was the very stuff of things.' He fixes his eye upon the root of a chestnut tree. Then comes the final and fullest revelation. 'I understood that there was no middle way between non-existence and this swooning abundance. What exists at all must exist to this point: to the point of mouldering, of bulging, of obscenity. In another world, circles and melodies retain their pure and rigid contours. But existence is a degeneration.'

Roquentin, who has abandoned his book on Rollebon, decides to leave. He sits in the café and listens for the last time to his favourite gramophone record: a Negress singing *Some of these days*. Often before, while listening to this melody, he has been struck by its pure, untouched, rigorous necessity. The notes follow one another, inevitably, away in another world. Like the circle, they do not exist. They *are*. The melody says: you must be like me. You must suffer in rhythm. I too, I wanted to *be*, thinks Roquentin. He thinks of the Jew who wrote the song, the Negress who sings it. Then he has another revelation. These two are *saved*, washed of the sin of existing. Why should he not be saved too? He will create something, a novel perhaps, which shall be beautiful and hard as steel, and will make people ashamed of their superfluity. Writing it, that will be a stale day to day task. But once it is complete, behind him, he will be thought of by others as now he thinks of the Jew and the Negress. Some pure radiance from his work will fall then upon his own past—and he will be able to recall his past without disgust, and to accept it. With this resolution of Roquentin's the novel ends.

This peculiar book lives on many levels. It is a sort of palimpsest of metaphysical *aperçus*. It gives expression to a pure metaphysical doubt, and also analyses that doubt in terms of contemporary concepts. It is an epistemological essay on the phenomenology of thought; it is also an ethical essay on the nature of 'bad faith'. Its moral conclusions touch aesthetics and politics. Most of all, though, its power resides in its character as a philosophical myth, which shows to us in a memorable way the master-image of Sartre's thinking. Let us look at these aspects one by one.

The metaphysical doubt which seizes Roquentin is an old and familiar one. It is the doubt out of which the problem of particularity and the problem of induction arise. The doubter sees the world of everyday reality as a fallen and bedraggled place—fallen out of the realm of being into the realm of existence. The circle does not exist; but neither does what is named by 'black' or 'table' or 'cold'. The relation of these words to their context of application is shifting and arbitrary. What *does* exist is brute and nameless, it escapes from the scheme of relations in which we imagine it to be rigidly enclosed, it escapes from language and science, it is more than and other than our descriptions of it.

Roquentin experiences the full range of the doubt, and he experiences it in a characteristically up-to-date way. He feels doubts about induction (why not a centipede for a tongue?) and about classification (the seagull), distress at the particularity of things and the abstractness of names (the tramway seat, the tree root). He sees reality as fallen and existence as an imperfection. He yearns for logical necessity in the order of the world. He wishes that he could know things through and through and experience them as existing necessarily. He wishes that he himself existed necessarily. He feels the vanity of these wishes. What Roquentin has in common with Hume and with present-day empiricists is that he broods descriptively upon the doubt situation, instead of moving rapidly on to the task of providing a metaphysical solution. Roquentin does not feel so sure that rational knowledge and moral certainty *are* possible; he examines piecemeal the process of thinking, the commonplaces of morality, and accepts the nihilistic conclusions of his study. A further result of his brooding over the doubt is the neurotic distress about language which then assails him; in this respect too Roquentin is of his age. But what marks him out as an existentialist doubter is the fact that he himself is in the picture: what most distresses him is that his own individual being is invaded by the senseless flux, and what most interests him is his aspiration to *be* in a different way.

Roquentin's sensations are not in themselves so rare and peculiar. We all of us experience, for instance, that sense of emptiness and meaninglessness which we call *ennui*. In so far as Sartre exaggerates in Roquentin our ordinary feelings of boredom and loss of meaning this is in order to bring home to us a point which 'carelessness and inattention' usually obscure. What is a thought? asks Sartre, and attempts a reply which, like that of Professor Ryle, surprises us in proportion to its exactness. It is bodily feelings, it is words that surge up and vanish, it is a story I tell myself later. When we look at it closely, meaning vanishes—as when we repeat a word over and over, or stare at our faces in a mirror. If we consider our lives from moment to moment we observe, as Roquentin does, how much of the sense of what we are doing has to be put in afterwards. We observe the fabricated and shifting character of our memories. Meaning vanishes—yet we have to restore it.

In doing so, can we avoid lying? Roquentin asks himself. This is one of the central questions of the book. His acute feeling of the breakdown of meaning makes him look with clairvoyant amazement upon the bourgeoisie, past and present, of the town where he is living. He observes, with a fury which echoes the *belle haine* of his author, the pretentious trappings of the bourgeois Sunday. These trappings, these ideas of law and right, hide the nakedness of reality, of existence. But could one ever do without the trappings? To be outside society, to have lost one's human dignity, often appears to have for Sartre a positive value. Gauguin and Rimbaud are minor saints in the existentialist calendar for this reason. To have 'gone away', literally or spiritually, from the rest of humanity may be at least a step away from bad faith, towards sincerity. Roquentin, when he is enlightened, feels himself to have lost his role as a social human being. He might, he feels, do anything. It is important that Roquentin has no *être-pour-autrui*, no close connexion with other people and no concern about how they view him; it is partly this that enables him to be such a pure case. His only confidante is his former mistress, Anny, who is his *alter ego*. Roquentin's introspections have, as a result of his loneliness, a peculiar purity. His temptations to play-act are reduced to a minimum. The conclusions of his analysis, however, seem to be fairly negative ones. What he learns is this. We must live forwards, not backwards. Not only every generation but every moment, is 'equi-distant from eternity'. We are not to live with our eye on History or on our biographer—to do so involves us in *mauvaise foi* and destroys the freshness and sincerity of our projects. As language may solidify and kill our thoughts, so our values may be solidified if we do not subject them to a continual process of breaking down and rebuilding. This much is implicitly suggested by the analysis—but Sartre does not explain or examine it. *La Nausée* offers no clear answer to the ethical problems which it raises. It reads more like a corrective, a sort of hate poem—whose negative moral is: 'only the *salauds* think they win', and its positive moral: 'if you want to understand something you must face it naked.'

Yet Roquentin does finally resolve the doubt; or at any rate he finds a means of personal deliverance from the curse of existing. Roquentin is a Platonist by nature. His ideal mode of being, which he often recurs in thought, is that of a mathematical figure—pure, clear, necessary and non-existent. The little tune, in which the notes die willingly one after the other, also has a kind of necessity—and it is through the little tune that Roquentin finds his rather dubious salvation. He thinks of the Negress and the Jew who created it as having been somehow *saved* by the song. Their salvation does not lie, presumably, simply in their being thought about by others—if this were salvation the Herostratus is saved too. (Herostratus set fire to the temple of Diana at Ephesus in order to be remembered. Sartre studies a modern version of this character in *Le Mur*.) Nor are they saved because they have created a great work of art; Sartre chooses *Some of these days* as the vital song partly in doubt for this reason, that it is *not* a great achievement. What then is the salvation which Roquentin hopes for? We have to work this out from one or two obscure phrases at the very end. 'A momen

would come when the book would be written, would be behind me, and I think that a little of its radiance would fall upon my past. Then perhaps through it I could remember my life without disgust . . . I should be able, in the past, only in the past, to accept myself.'

Others have hoped for salvation through art: Virginia Woolf, who attempts 'to make of the moment something permanent' by finely embalming it; Joyce, who tries to change life itself into literature and give it the cohesion of a myth; Proust who seeks by reminiscence to bind up and catch in the present the stuff of his own past. What Roquentin here proposes to himself seems different from any of these. He does not imagine that while writing his novel he will experience any sense of justification or escape from absurdity. Nor does he think that he can rest upon having written it—*being* an author. To do this would be to fall into the very traps which he has himself exposed elsewhere—to attempt to catch time by the tail. It is rather that through the book he will be able to attain to a conception of his own life as having the purity, the clarity and the necessity which the work of art created by him will possess. This is what I take Sartre to mean by 'the radiance falling on the past'. Yet this is a very thin and unsatisfactory conclusion. A novel *may* be thought of as aspiring to the condition of a circle—though the comparison seems less suitable here than in the case of any other art. It certainly may be thought of as conferring upon an image of life and character a certain tense self-contained form, a sort of internally related necessity. But how is Roquentin, the creator, to transfer these yearned-for properties to, even, his own past? If no present thoughts of his own can confer necessary form upon his past, then neither can a partial image of that past, worked up into the wholeness of a work of art confer the necessity. Any such sense of necessity must be illusory, for reasons which Roquentin has been offering all through the book. The best which he could hope would be to achieve a momentary sense of justification by contemplating the formal beauty of his novel and saying to himself very rapidly: 'I did that'.

The interest of *La Nausée* does not lie in its conclusion, which is merely sketched in; Sartre has not developed it sufficiently for it even to pose as a solution to the problem. Its interest lies in the powerful image which dominates it, and in the descriptions which constitute the argument. The evocations of the viscous, the fluid, the paste-like sometimes achieve a kind of horrid poetry, calling up in the reader—as do so many passages in the work of Sartre—*une espèce d'écoeurement douceâtre*—the sweetish sort of disgust which is one form of *la nausée* itself. Yet the effect is not always unpleasant. Sartre is much concerned with the real nature of perception. He dwells on the interpenetration of sensible qualities and on the unlikeness of what we 'really see' to our dried-up concept of the visible world. We are invited to rediscover our vision. The things which surround us, usually quiet, domesticated and invisible, are seen suddenly as strange, seen as if for the first time. The result may be disconcerting and surrealistic, and it may be impressive too. 'The real sea is cold and black, full of creatures; it crawls beneath that thin green film that is made to cheat us.' The vision of the phenomenologist has something in common with that of the poet and the painter.

What kind of book is *La Nausée*? It seems more like a poem or an incantation than a novel. We find its hero interesting, but we do not find him particularly touching. Sartre says in *L'Être et le Néant* that pure introspection does not reveal character. Roquentin is depicted as so lacking in the normal vanities and interests of a human being as to be rather colourless. Even his sufferings do not move us, for he himself is not their dupe. The solidity and colour of *La Nausée* are as it were cast out of Roquentin's excessively transparent consciousness on to the things that surround him. The transparent hero in this absurd world reminds us of the work of Kafka. But *La Nausée* is not a metaphysical tale, like *The Castle*, nor is the absurdity of Sartre the absurdity of Kafka. Kafka's K. is not himself a metaphysician; his actions show forth, but his thoughts do not analyse, the absurdity of his world. The

hero of *La Nausée* is reflective and analytical; the book is not a metaphysical image so much as philosophical analysis which makes use of a metaphysical image. This, its consistently reflective self-consciously philosophical character, is what distinguishes it too from other novels which brood equally upon the senseless fragmentation of our experience or on the fabricated nature of its apparent sense: Virginia Woolf displaying the idle succession of moments, Proust telling us that what we receive in the presence of the beloved is a negative which we develop later, Joyce piling up detail until no story contour is visible any more.

Kafka's K. persists in believing that there is sense in the ordinary business of human communication. His world is full of pointers which the hero feels bound to attend to, and to which he attends forever hopefully, although it always seems that in the end they point nowhere. In all his activities he hopes for sense, without anywhere cornering it. Sartre's hero, after his enlightenment, no longer seeks for sense anywhere except in the one place where he *knows* it resides, that is in the intelligibility of melodies and mathematical figures. He is unmoved by the fact that these are man-made fictions; it is their pure form which rescues them from absurdity. Roquentin's plight appears to be a philosopher's plight, while K.'s is that of everyman. We do not in fact resign ourselves to finding the everyday world a senseless place—but in so far as we find it harder and harder to make sense of certain aspects of it, we recognise K.'s dilemma as our own.

Roquentin's problem is not the usual human problem. He is incurably metaphysical by temperament and lives totally without human relations. But nevertheless Sartre does, I think, intend to offer us here an image of the human situation in general. What he undoubtedly does succeed in displaying to us is the structure of his own thought. *La Nausée* is Sartre's philosophical myth. What asks Gabriel Marcel, does Sartre find the contingent over-abundance of the world nauseating rather than glorious? What is, for him, the fundamental symbol?

In *L'Être et le Néant* (the chapter called *Quality as Revealing Being*) Sartre discusses the fascination of the viscous. He describes it as 'an existential category, immediate and concrete'. It is one of the fundamental keys or images in terms of which we understand our whole mode of being, and its sexual character is merely one of its possible determinations. It fascinates us from the start because it serves as an image of our consciousness, of the very form of our appropriation of the world. The metaphors which compare the mind to gluey manifestations of the sensible are not mere figures of adult fancy, they represent categories which we have used from earliest childhood. Sticky substances alarm and fascinate us, and we enjoy discovering and filling cavities, not originally for the reasons the Freudians offer, but because we grasp these as even more general categories of being: the consciousness that seeks to rise freely towards completeness and stability is continually sucked back into its past and the messy stuff of its moment-to-moment experience.

Roquentin reveals the human situation in a simplified mythological way. His aspiration follows the schematic pattern which Sartre has analysed in *L'Être et le Néant* as the ground plan of all endeavour. It has not clothed itself in any form of normal human project, sexual, political, or religious. The aesthetic determination which is adopted at the very end is simply a sketch of a solution, the most abstract possible, which leaves the pattern unchanged. For Roquentin all *value* lies in the unattainable world of intelligible completeness which he represents to himself in simple intellectual terms; he is not (until the end) duped into imagining that *any* form of human endeavour is adequate to his yearning to rejoin that totality. 'Evil', says Sartre in *What is Literature?*, 'is the irreducibility of man and the world of Thought.' This indeed is Roquentin's evil, the only one which he recognises—as intelligible being is the only good which he recognises. *La Nausée* represents the naked pattern of human existence, illuminated by a degree of philosophical self-consciousness that reveals the fruitlessness

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