

Nausea

J-P. Sartre

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This is supposedly a philosophical novel, but is it really philosophical? Philosophy as an objective inquiry or as a psychological state are two different things, the latter being more in the nature of a syndrome (not necessarily identified and spelled out by a suitable acronym). The central thesis of the novel is existence as an absurdity. This is something that strikes most people during their adolescence, and as such it is less a momentous discovery than a phase. And in fact the central character treats it more as a passing inconvenience, often associated with disgust, than an insight. Related to this is the heightened sensitivity to the phenomenon of consciousness, as the consciousness of consciousness. I recall vividly my own experiences in my teens of being alive, of really existing, of really becoming aware of my awareness of existence and my own personal identity. It was very painful, in fact scary, and the intensity of the emotion was such that it could only be maintained for a very short time. The experience is private and quintessentially subjective.

Much is made of the novel exploring the consequences of a random meaningless existence, one in which there is no God. Consequently commentators have emphasized the paramount importance of individual choice, which is the hallmark of the philosophy of existentialism, this faddish movement of the immediate period of post-war, which claims among others Kierkegaard among its precursors. And no doubt Sartre himself would condone such a reading. But to me, the overwhelming impression that is conveyed is the absurdity of existence as such, its very superfluity. 'Why are there so many trees?' the narrator asks himself. What business has this and that to exist. Ultimately one may ask oneself: 'Why is there something rather than nothing?'. A query not only formulated by philosophers from Leibniz to Heidegger, but also sooner or later phrased by every inquisitive child.

Another take on his condition, likewise a common teenage experience, is the vision of solipsism. That existence is an illusion, that what appears to you are just figments of your imagination. And if you want to carry it even further, you may be your own invention, a figment of the same. This realization if taken seriously produces a profound sense of estrangement, and the psychological meaning is not really that the world does not exist, but that you are barred from it. Every other human being may be an invention of yours, but obviously they do not know it, or at least they are not at all bothered by it. Thus the paradox arises that while your imagined world goes on, you are strangely excluded from it. Thus the supreme insight is one of total loneliness. This is, as noted, a psychological one, not a philosophical one.

Commentators often describe the condition of the narrator as pathological, definitely on the border of insanity, if not actually insane. And of course very depressed. When I read it now it does not strike me so. On the contrary almost. Here we have a young man, with time on his hands, able to pursue a writing project that obviously excites him,

even if he ultimately becomes disenchanted with it. As noted he has the leisure of an artist, of being able to savor the essence of existence, be it that he at times overdoes it and overdoses. He does not even suffer from sexual abstinence but seems to have a regular sexual outlet. An ideal in fact, with no complications due to romantic involvement, thus more reliable not to say prophylactic in character. And besides he does not even have to pay for it, but can pride himself of giving as much pleasure (if not more) as he receives.

Reading it as an adult I cannot be moved by it. My interest is more historical than individual. Maybe, if I had read it as an impressionable youth, still in existential anguish, it might have resonated with me.

The style of the novel is marked by an obsessive attention to prosaic detail, thus hoping to achieve a sense of super-realism. A realism in which every object, every fact, is endowed with its singular existence. The setting is 'Mudtown' (Bouville) apparently modeled on Le Havre, where Sartre himself spent some time during his youth. The alter ego is very much like Sartre, or so one assumes, involved in the writing of a book, a biography of an 18th century French diplomat. This imposes on his dreary life a most welcome routine. There is the library, where he briefly befriends the Autodidact, there is the cafe where he has his meals and regularly sleeps with the *patronne*, and there is his small hotel room. He walks around in the city, observes its bourgeois of which he is obviously superior, no matter how much he deplors his own existence and superfluity. Towards the Autodidact he feels a certain tenderness, sending him to be a kindred soul at least in the sense of being alone, an outsider. But of course he is far too superior to him for any real friendship to develop. The poor man is clearly a simpleton, he reads in order to better himself, out of an ideal humanism, and not only that, he reads the books in alphabetical order. But once when the Autodidact is chased out of the library as a pedophile, he takes pity on him, tries to defend him, catches up with him, only to be rebuffed. One of the few touching scenes in the whole book.

His life seems to have been more exciting once. There are references to exotic and wide-ranging travel, even to an old girlfriend. With the latter he has a brief rendez-vous, she begs him to come and meet her in Paris after a hiatus of some six years. He obeys, only to be rebuffed. She has out-lived herself, she explains theatrically, and moves on, now to London with a new lover. He will probably never see her again in his life.

Then of course a substantial part of it is taken up by interior monologue, related of course to the philosophical issues. A sample may be illustrative:

I jump to my feet: if only I could stop thinking , that would be something of an improvement. Thoughts are the dullest things on earth. Even duller than flesh. They stretch out endlessly and they leave a funny taste in the mouth.

Not surprisingly the narrator wonders whether once can stop thinking. Yet another query that even very young children may ask themselves. And as to the palpability of existence.

Existence is not something which allows itself to be thought of from a distance; it has to invade you suddenly, pounce upon you, weigh heavily on your heart like a huge motionless animal - or else there is nothing at all.

The novel comes to a resolution. He decides to give up his project. Not being able to recall and recreate his own past, how could he expect to create that of a stranger, someone

who has been dead for more than a century? Instead he will leave the town and move back to Paris, and his life will after all assume some kind of meaning. What is not so clear. 'Tomorrow it will rain over Bouville' are the last words of the novel.

The book was published in 1938 when Sartre was still in his early thirties, but was probably composed a few years earlier, most likely during Sartre's extended sojourn in Le Havre in the early thirties. It is tempting to see it as the result of a conjunction of the innocent sincerity of a young man's metaphysical broodings and an older man's jaded rejection of the same. Thus a put-on sincerity, hiding behind a few layers of irony. Irony is as much an expression of cowardice as one of sophistication, in fact the one is impossible without the other.

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