

Michael Royall

Docent: Bram Ieven

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**The Threat of Existence: Violence, Transgression and Existence in Sartre's *La Nausée*.**

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## 1. Introduction

How must we understand violence when it is presented to us? Shakespeare's only villain that does not eventually motivate his evil to the public is Iago of *Othello*. When questioned he merely answers: "Demand me nothing: what you know, you know: from this time forth I never will speak a word" (Scene II). When I Google searched 'Iago', the second entry that came up was the question "Why does Iago hate Othello?" Almost inevitably violence, or evil, demands the question: 'why?'

This is what makes violence such an interesting point of departure. The following thesis is a report on my attempt to answer a similar question that occurred to me when I was confronted with a certain passage in Jean-Paul Sartre's *La Nausée*. Antoine Roquentin, the protagonist of Sartre's story, is talking to the Self-Taught Man; a strange individual, who is trying to educate himself by reading the entire library, literally from A to Z. This discussion gives Roquentin an attack of Nausea, the sickly feeling he has been experiencing from the beginning of the story. In this attack, he suddenly gets the urge to pick up the dessert knife that lies before him, and stab the Self-Taught Man in the eye. Eventually, he does not do it; he cannot bring himself to do it as it seems so pointless, just like everything else around him seems so utterly pointless. Roquentin's violence does not seem to come from a place of 'evil'. He is by far an Iago. Yet I wondered: what was the significance of this small but violent non-event?

While working on this thesis, I began to read a piece by the Dutch essayist Bas Heijne, “Moeten wij van elkaar houden?: Populisme ontleed” (2011), which translates in “Should we love each other?: Populism dissected”. The shooting of a deer by the American Republican politician Sarah Palin on her reality TV show in 2010, is according to Heijne, an effect of a sociological development in which Kant’s “Dare to think!” has turned into the far more exciting motto of “Dare to feel!”. “Between man and nature stood the soft idealism of Enlightenment –and look what the elite did with it! . . . to re-find ourselves we must go back to nature where we must kill to survive—oh well, let’s be honest, kill to feel you are alive” (128 my translation). Modernity, Heijne concludes, is not only the modernity of Enlightenment, but also its counterparts: the hunger for community and the unleashing of emotion. “Perhaps we don’t need to love each other, or even like each other,” Heijn ponders, “to deny human nature is just as dangerous as wallowing in it. Between these two scornful extremes, one must choose a firm position” (130 my translation).

Heijn’s essay is not a plea to discharge the ideals of enlightenment, but to incorporate them into our daily lives, testing them on reality, so as to make sure we do not wander too far into either extreme of the opposition. I feel that the violence of Sarah Palin’s hunting trip, and the exceptionally mixed reception it received (indignation, applause), confronted Heijn with the same question I asked myself when reading *La Nausée*. The opposition he found to occupy our current society (and certainly all of the past), that of the Enlightenment and Counter-Enlightenment, is not the same as the one I found to be present in *La Nausée*. Yet it is the presence of violence in *La Nausée* that confirms for me the preoccupation culture and the human mind has with this ‘darker’ side. Even more so, because of my interest in violence and its position in our daily lives, its exact function in the novel surprised me. In *La Nausée* I

found that violence is part of a mechanism that allows the novel to communicate its, more philosophical, message on a level of emotion.

By studying Sartre's first work, *La Transcendance de l'Ego* (1936), I suspected that Sartre had brought himself to a philosophical insight that effected life in such a profound way it could only be communicated on the level of a narrative recounted in the first person. Within this line of thought I discovered that Roquentin's violence takes place in the framework of the novel that is defined by yet another opposition: consciousness, and absolutely everything else. At least, this is the interpretation that I wish to put forward for consideration.

This thesis has become, inevitably, a paper that is concerned with the minute details of the text, and thus does not reach as far into the general field of things as this introduction does. In the first part, I will discuss the Sartre's *Transcendance*, with the goal of distilling some of the consequences it had for Sartre's thought. I will conclude by observing, with the help of secondary literature, that the placement of the ego outside of Sartre's concept of consciousness led to the radical distinction between consciousness and non-consciousness. Also, *Transcendance* makes clear the relationship of interdependence that exists between consciousness and non-consciousness.

In the second part, I will discuss *La Nausée* as elaborately as is possible in an essay of this length. My analysis will show that the relationship of interdependence I mentioned above, is expressed by portraying existence as being hostile. By close reading Roquentin's paradoxal experience with the chestnut root in the park, I will show that the concept of transgression plays a significant part in this depiction, and this is where we will be able to situate Roquentin's moment of violence. Lastly, in doing this, I will discuss in some length

George Bataille's understanding of transgression, and the use of a comparative analysis between the transgression that takes place in *La Nausée* and in the work of Bataille.

## 2. *La Transcendance de l'Ego: Esquisse d'une description phénoménologique*

Sartre's *Transcendance de l'Ego* (1936) was his first published philosophical work. In their introduction to *Transcendance*, Forrest Williams and Robert Kirkpatrick argue that the essay was an crucial stage in Sartre's philosophy. The radical intentionality of consciousness that Sartre proposes in this text would lay the predicate for the concrete philosophy of Sartre's later existentialism. In *Transcendance*, Sartre argues against the idea that an ego resides within or behind consciousness constituting its content, as this would lead to solipsism. In reply to this Sartre would emphasize the intentionality of consciousness. This would lead to the removal of the ego from consciousness. Instead, the ego is a transcendent product of the reflection of consciousness upon its own direction on the world. Consciousness itself is nothing more than intentionality, its direction on the world, and is essentially empty. Consciousness *is* its direction towards objects, "it is what it produces and nothing else" (Sartre 79). Sartre's conception of the ego being transcendent and consciousness being empty would have multiple important consequences.

One of the biggest consequences would become Sartre creating a moral philosophy in which good and bad are turned into authentic and inauthentic (good faith and bad faith), as can be seen in *L'Être et le Néant* (1943) and his lecture *L'Existentialisme est un humanisme* (1946). The intentionality of consciousness creates a complete emptiness creating a form of absolute freedom. Authenticity designates to act in accordance with the inevitable freedom of the intentional being that one is. In the time of *L'Être et le Néant*, freedom becomes the intrinsic goal of Sartre's existentialism. The essential consequences of *Transcendance* for our

argument are the following. Firstly, *Transcendance* would lead to the radical distinction between consciousness and absolutely everything else (being in-itself and being for-itself). Secondly, it would lead to the concrete question of how to define yourself if your essence is consciousness.

## 2.1 Context

The essay took place within a discussion concerning phenomenology, the school of philosophy that studies consciousness. The school originated in the 1930's as a reaction to the anti-metaphysical, anti-philosophical sentiment being created by the radical empirists of the *Wiener Kreis* at the time<sup>1</sup>. Sartre disagreed with the place of the ego in the thought of Edmund Husserl, one of the main figures of the school. Husserl argued that things must be studied not as events happening to an individual person situated in the world, but as pure 'phenomena' appearing to the consciousness. These phenomena could be studied in their own right by the method of "reduction" (as a precaution always bracketed to distinguish it from actual empirical research). By temporarily switching off all existence outside that of consciousness this "reduction" of an object, to what it truly is to our consciousness, can be carried out. The idea that lies behind this is that consciousness is constitutive; consciousness generates form, matter and meaning (Williams and Kirkpatrick 16).

Yet this should not mean that we cannot escape our own world of experience. As Husserl argues in his *Ideen* (1913), consciousness itself is defined by its direction upon the world, its 'intentionality':

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<sup>1</sup> For more information on the *Wiener Kreis* and the scientification of philosophy in the 20th century see *Wetenschapsfilosofie voor geesteswetenschappen* by Leezenberg and De Vries.

Intentionality is what characterizes *consciousness* in the pregnant sense and which, at the same time, justifies designating the whole stream of mental processes as the stream of consciousness and as the unity of *one* consciousness. . . Under intentionality we understand the own peculiarity of mental processes “to be consciousness *of something*”(Husserl 199-200)”

In other words, consciousness cannot stand alone. One is always conscious ‘of something’, be it an object in the world, an imagined object or a thought. Consciousness gains the content that it constitutes (including the unity of this content) from the object it is directed at.

In his *Ideen*, Husserl had already reverted to a more classical position in which consciousness is unified by the presence of an ego (35 Sartre). Not only did Husserl argue that this transcendental ego was theoretically necessary, he also claimed that it could be found to accompany every act of consciousness after the act in question is subjected to “reduction”. Although the ego is not the ego of an actual individual in the world it is in a formal sense of a ‘subjective’ or ‘personal’ nature because the ego gives content to the object of consciousness (54 Sartre).

## 2.2 The Absence of the Ego

Yielding to the existence of a ‘personal’ ego inside or behind consciousness would lead to solipsism. Because according to Sartre Husserl’s transcendental ego constitutes content, it becomes a mysterious and impenetrable subject, that generates content out of its own interiority. Consequently, it creates the problem of solipsism, which would end the possibility of any scientific discussion concerning the world and thus sabotage the very purpose of phenomenology. Yet according to Sartre, there is no need to take refuge in the

transcendental ego to explain the unity or content of consciousness. Sartre's answer was to base his theory entirely on the radical intentionality of consciousness. In his answer to Husserl, he proves that consciousness is on the 'prereflective level' entirely empty and that the ego that Husserl finds to accompany every act of consciousness is in fact created when we reflect on this prereflective level of consciousness.

An example that is given is the experience of being 'immersed' in the reading of a book. When I am reading, I can say that 'I' am reading. But Sartre argues that this 'I' only appears when we are asked what we are doing and are forced to reflect. During the actual act of reading, there was consciousness of the book, consciousness of the characters in the novel, but there was no 'I' in this consciousness, there was merely consciousness of the book that is being read (Sartre 46). While the 'I' is necessary to create cohesion between the self and the act of reading in the grammatical sense of 'I am reading', it is not present in the actual act of consciousness (46).

The absence of an 'I' in the prereflective consciousness is no coincidence according to Sartre, but empirical proof that consciousness is empty and impersonal. It is not somehow hidden in the prereflective experience, or forgotten when we remember it. According to Sartre, the ego that we do perceive on the level of reflection is a transcendent synthesis of actions, states and qualities. This understanding of the ego is what Sartre calls the 'transcendent ego', not to be confused with Husserl's transcendental ego. While the transcendental ego is an undividable and formal subject in consciousness that creates content, the transcendent ego is an object *outside* of consciousness created by reflection (Sartre 48).

### 2.3 Nature of the ego



As Phyllis Sutton Morris has pointed out in her article "Sartre on the Transcendence of the Ego" (1985), Sartre uses the term 'transcendence' to designate three different meanings. Firstly, consciousness has the capacity to transcend that which is given, or 'facticity' as Sartre puts it, in order to desire, imagine, or pursue a goal that is not given (182 Sutton Morris). Yet objects themselves are also transcendent to consciousness. Sartre uses this term differently than Kant (Sutton Morris 183). For Kant, an object that is transcendent can never be an object of consciousness. For Sartre all objects are objects *for* consciousness. In other words, they lie outside of consciousness to be grasped by it. An example would be me perceiving a tree. The fact that I am conscious of it allows me to say that I can be certain I am not this tree. The awareness of the tree turns it into an object. The object that lies outside of consciousness allows itself to be susceptible to doubt. Certainty can only be reached insofar the object can be "reduced" to immediate experience via the method of "reduction".

A third meaning of transcendence for Sartre is related to the capacity of consciousness to transcend a given object. Objects do not always immediately disappear from consciousness when we stop perceiving them; they are 'transphenomenal' in the sense that they "temporarily exceed our present experience of them" (183 Sutton Morris). This is applicable to physical objects, but mathematical formulas or melodies are also a good example.

Sartre's transcendent ego is a transcendent object in both of the senses mentioned above. It is an object *for* consciousness that exceeds our present experience of it. As such, it forms a recognizable pattern comparable with a melody. The separate notes correspond to separate actions, states and qualities (the idea that lies behind this is that each is reducible

to a pure experience) which the individual exhibits as forming a pattern over a period of time (Sutton Morris 184).

#### 2.4 Consequences: Distinction between Consciousness and non-Consciousness

By placing the ego outside of consciousness Sartre argued that the "purely logical" subject-object duality could "definitively disappear from philosophical preoccupations": "Th[e] absolute consciousness, when it is purified of the *I*, no longer has anything of the *subject*. (Sartre 105-6)" Instead, the *me* is now aligned with the world of objects (the World). Both are interdependent by the virtue of being objects for "absolute, impersonal consciousness". This new arrangement in which this *me* ("indirectly and through the intermediary of states") draws all of its contents from the World and is "endangered" by it "is sufficient", according to Sartre, for a "philosophical foundation for an ethics and a politics which are absolutely positive" (Sartre 106). A sentence which already points forwards towards his later emphasis on action, carried out according to freedom. The latter is a issue which brings us to our next argument.

As I will argue, two different kind of problems for the individual become clear within this new arrangement, both arising from the understanding that "transcendental consciousness is an impersonal spontaneity" (Sartre 98). The first is the problem of freedom that arises from the realization that consciousness is empty. This problem is something that we will see fully developed in Sartre later work, but is already brought to attention here, at the end of *Transcendence*. Freedom occurs from consciousness being an absolute impersonal spontaneity ceaselessly creating existence from nothing; whether it is wanted or not. Indeed, the will itself is "an object which constitutes itself for and by this spontaneity" (98-9). Sartre already calls this freedom 'monstrous' in *Transcendence*. Yet his observation of

freedom remains one that explains different 'psychanastic ailments' and would not take its central position as inherent goal of a moral and existential philosophy until *L'Être et le Néant*. Within this context, freedom is both a blessing as a curse for the individual. It allows one to shape one's life in whatever way one wants, unbound by any god or authority. At the same time, absolute freedom creates the burden of responsibility for one's own actions.<sup>2</sup> It seems that in *Transcendance*, Sartre still emphasizes the ego, as we see in the sentence quoted in the previous paragraph: his belief is that the foundation for a positive ethics and politics lies within the position of the ego in the World, defined and 'endangered' by it as it is. Yet the foundation of intentionality on which Sartre bases his philosophy of the ego would later focus Sartre's concern not on the ego, but on the being of the individual as pure consciousness. This is the second important consequence of *Transcendance*, which can be divided into two parts. (A) Consciousness is continuously confronted with its essence as being consciousness, and the essence of objects as being not-consciousness. (B) The designation of consciousness as empty causes a radical opposition between consciousness and non-consciousness.

(A) Sartre, by expelling the last feature that could constitute contents within consciousness untouched by the World; the subject, had in fact made reduction in the sense of Husserl impossible; reduction as a privileged instrument for the philosopher to grasp the essence of a phenomenon. Reflection upon consciousness while suspending all affirmations outside of consciousness would imply reflection upon intentions which "no longer posit any existing objects in the world". Consciousness, in this case, would be annihilated, as it would revert into its own nothingness (Williams and Kirkpatrick 23-4). This would be contradictory

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<sup>2</sup> For Sartre's view on the practical consequences of absolute freedom, see his lecture *L'Existentialisme est un humanisme*.

to the principle of the intentionality of consciousness which Sartre upholds without reservation (Williams and Kirkpatrick 24).

Yet, even though “reduction” is now impossible, consciousness must still have a way in which it can grasp the essence of its object. If it would never be able to do this, Williams and Kirkpatrick show, this would imply that consciousness can never apprehend any type of being other than that of consciousness. This, however, is not possible for an entity defined by its intentionality. Consequently, Sartre must accept that the being of objects must be discovered in every single act of consciousness, or can never be discovered. Consciousness thus becomes a “continuously revealing intuition” (Williams and Kirkpatrick 24). It is never alone, and always surrounded by being, continuously confronted with its essence.

(B) What then is this essence that intuition reveals? Well, the designation of consciousness as purely intentional and the aligning of the ego as object ultimately means the radical distinction between consciousness and absolutely everything else, or, the intentional and the non-intentional (*or*, as Sartre would later call it, the being-in-itself and being-for-itself) (Williams and Kirkpatrick 24). Simply put, the ultimate apodictic certainty becomes that we know there is consciousness, and objects for consciousness.<sup>3</sup> Instead of each object having a specific essence, the essence of all objects becomes that they are not-consciousness; they are objects. The definition of consciousness becomes that it is not-an-object. A division is created. Yet both sides of this opposition together make up that which

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<sup>3</sup> A third player would later supplement this distinction in the guise of the Other. As the nature of consciousness is to objectify, the objectification of one’s own consciousness by the Other threatens to pacify that which is spontaneous: the self. This notion is elaborated in *L’Être et l’Néant*.

can be known; they are binaries. *Transcendance* sets the precedent for this binary opposition by placing the ego outside of consciousness. Consciousness becomes negative, objects become positive.

Humans, defined by their intentionality, are thus inherently different from the objects they perceive. This difference would lend Sartre the tools to create a positive philosophy of existence in a world that was perceived as being fundamentally absurd.<sup>4</sup> The beginning of Sartre's search for this positive answer took place in *La Nausée* (1938), the novel that followed *Transcendance*. What I will show in the next chapter, is not how this positive answer is formulated in *La Nausée*, nor how it relates to the explicit philosophy of *L'Être et le Néant*, as this is well documented.<sup>5</sup>

Instead, I will show that the opposition we have just discussed, the opposition between consciousness and non-consciousness, lies at the heart of the narrative of *La Nausée*. On one side, the consciousness of the protagonist, Antoine Roquentin. On the other side, the world of objects, which he calls 'existence'. This is the context in which my discussion of *Transcendance* will be of added value to the interpretation of *La Nausée*. As I will show, reading *La Nausée* through the opposition between consciousness and 'existence' will show that 'existence' plays the role of antagonist for Roquentin.

### 3. *La Nausée*: Moment of Violence

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<sup>4</sup> The idea that existence and the world is fundamentally absurd was of great importance to Sartre many writers at that time that were deemed a part of the existentialist movement. Our regular understanding of absurdity is relative; something is absurd within the context of normality. Fundamental absurdity on the other hand implies the absolute absurdity of existence; there is no normality to compare existence with, as existence is everything and it is absurd. Indeed, Sartre's effort to create a positive philosophy of existence must be seen in the context of his acceptance of this absurdity, yet unwillingness to decline into fatalism. The notion of fundamental absurdity originates from the Danish philosopher Kierkegaard. For more information, read " ". Another key work on absurdity is the myth of Sisyphus as adopted by Albert Camus.

<sup>5</sup> See Edith Kern.

I will begin my reading with the same quote that first drew my attention to the dynamics that occur between Roquentin and existence. When reading *La Nausée* we are confronted with a moment in which Roquentin tells us about an instance in which he feels capable of committing a violent act. Roquentin's feeling is provoked by a lengthy speech on humanism by the Self-Taught Man, one of the only people Roquentin still communicates with, which causes a heavy fit of Nausea with Roquentin. He feels as though he ". . . could do anything. For example, stab this cheese knife into the Self-Taught Man's eye" (Sartre 123). A sense of abandonment overcomes him, and he is not bothered by any possible consequences of such an action: "After that, all these people [in the café] would trample me and kick my teeth out" (123). Yet still he does not carry out the action: ". . . that isn't what stops me: a taste of blood in my mouth instead of this taste of cheese makes no difference to me.... There are quite enough things like that which exist already" (123). His thoughts of violence do not go further than an urge that overwhelms him. Even though he feels as though he could do "anything," Roquentin is arrested in apathy. Despite his frustration with the Self-Taught Man and the public of the café, the excess of existence is that which stops him.

The Nausea that causes Roquentin's contemplation of violence arises from disgust with the Self-Taught Man's humanism. For Roquentin, the Self-Taught Man's conviction in believing in "the Youth of Man, the Love of Man and Woman, the Human Voice" only increases the evidence of his fault, his 'bad faith' as Sartre would later describe similar misunderstandings in *L'Être et le Néant* (Sartre 120). None of these entities exist: "Neither Youth nor Maturity nor Old Age nor Death" (120). Roquentin's absolute juxtaposition with the views of the Self-Taught Man brings him to an epiphany concerning the nature of his Nausea. It is this Nausea that led him to start his diary on which we are made to believe the

novel is based: “So this is Nausea: this blinding evidence. . . Now I know: I exist—the world exists—and I know that the world exists. That’s all. . . It’s strange that everything makes so little difference to me: it frightens me” (122). After this sudden grasp of things, Roquentin describes how he feels that the Self-Taught Man and the patrons of the café are suddenly frightened by him: “They are not wrong to be afraid: I feel as though I could do anything, for example, stab this cheese knife into the Self-Taught Man’s eye” (123). Indeed Roquentin seems to embody something frightening, something that, we may be able to argue, is that which frightens himself: existence.

To bring this rather long paraphrase back into context; Roquentin mentions that he feels he “could do anything” (123). However, this feeling seems to be translated in an urge to stab the Self-Taught Man. As will become clear, this feeling of arbitrariness and freedom runs parallel to what Roquentin will claim to be the main characteristic of existence: its contingency. This brings us to wonder: Is the violence that Roquentin wishes to carry out related to this contingency of existence?

The initial questions that arise from this event are important. If the assumption is correct that Roquentin embodies existence in his violent thinking, we might ask ourselves what the nature and function of this violence could be in the larger framework of the novel. As I will show, this violence can be understood as an expression of the dynamics between consciousness and existence. Which, as will become clear, take a central position in the narrative of *La Nausée*.

### 3.1 Revelatory Moments

There are several moments in *La Nausée* that offer crucial insights into what Roquentin experiences as the truth concerning existence and his general being in the world. These

moments seem to be akin to the notion of the phenomenological “reduction” as I discussed above, in which the essence of an object is revealed. Yet certainly, these moments are not the consequence of scientific method as Husserl had proposed, but show a greater likeness to the “revealing intuition” that Williams and Kirkpatrick argued consciousness to have become in the wake of *Transcendence*. For Roquentin, these moments of insight take place as a result of his sudden feelings of undirected sickness, his Nausea. Consequently, they are of a nature that seems uncontrollable and sudden; quite the opposite of conditions in which a “reduction” takes place. Indeed, they seem more like what one would call a revelatory experience.<sup>6</sup>

In *Transcendence*, we are given a precedent to similar experiences. Sartre speaks of an instance in which it can happen that consciousness is wholly confronted with itself. Consciousness would be able to suddenly produce itself on the “pure reflective level” (101).<sup>7</sup> Not without the ego, but escaping the ego “. . . on all sides, as dominating the ego and maintaining the ego outside the consciousness by continued creation” (101). The level on which this would happen, would be without “distinction between the possible and the real, since the appearance is absolute” (101-2). As Sartre argues: “There [would be] no more barriers, no more limits, nothing to hide consciousness from itself” (101). It seems that Sartre implies the barriers and limits that the ego creates when it acts as a mechanism to hide consciousness from itself. Indeed, when there is nothing to hide consciousness from itself, it seems that what we are confronted with what is an *absolute appearance*. With this absolute appearance, Sartre implies the realization that there is nothing outside of

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<sup>6</sup> In her book *Existential thought and fictional technique: Kierkegaard, Sartre, Beckett* Edith Kern argues that the main power of *La Nausée* concerning the communication of a philosophical idea in contrast with a systematical philosophy is its ability to speak from the first-person point of view. Kern: “Truth comes to [Roquentin] not through reasoning but rather revelation, and revelations are strictly individual and personal experiences (91).

<sup>7</sup> The prereflective level becomes wholly apparent on the reflective level.



consciousness and the objects for consciousness. This is what we will see take place in a similar form in *La Nausée*.

The consequences of this state are the following according to Sartre: "Then consciousness, noting what could be called the fatality of its spontaneity, is suddenly anguished: it is this dread, absolute and without remedy, this fear of itself, which seems to us constitutive of pure consciousness. . ." (102). The spontaneous state of consciousness, in which "reduction" suddenly takes place and consciousness is confronted with itself, is ". . . an anxiety that is imposed on us and which we cannot avoid: it is both a pure event of transcendental origin and an ever possible accident of our daily life" (102). It is, according to Sartre, proof of the inefficiency of the ego to hide the true nature of consciousness. This dread of consciousness for itself is important, as its origin is found in the absolute freedom that an empty consciousness implies. This freedom is something Roquentin comes to understand on a personal level, along with the sense of dread described in *Transcendence*: "All is free, this park, this city and myself. When you realize that, it turns you heart upside down and everything begins to float. . ." (Sartre 131).

As I will show, in *La Nausée*, the dread of this freedom, the dread of the nature of pure consciousness, is translated into a threatening description of existence. Existence, as the opposite of consciousness, confronts Roquentin with the being, or rather non-being, of his own consciousness. One of the most lucid examples of a revelatory experience in *La Nausée* takes place during the scene in which Roquentin observes the root of a chestnut tree. It is within this experience that we can analyze the exact dynamics between his consciousness and the existence he is conscious of.

While he observes a root in the park, Roquentin realizes that words and concepts, the human tools to rationally organize and appropriate the world around him, start to fail his attempts to describe that which is before him. Yet for Roquentin the root escapes the nature of human concepts: “. . . I felt the word deflating, emptied of meaning with extraordinary rapidity . . . is it *more* than black, or *almost* black?” (130). Roquentin attempts to define the qualities that are specific to the phenomenon only, yet finds nothing specific to it, except that it exists.

Only at the end does Roquentin fully understand the exact nature of the other side of this opposition; consciousness: “There is knowledge of consciousness. It sees through itself, peaceful and empty between walls, freed from the man who inhabited it, monstrous because empty” (171 Sartre). The “I”, seems to have disappeared: “Now when I say “I,” it seems hollow to me”(170 Sartre). It is important to emphasize that Roquentin’s realization of the nature of his consciousness is a development. Intuition has been revealing this to Roquentin all along, yet it has taken this journey to understand what is being revealed. The essence of objects is that they exist, the essence of consciousness is that it is empty. Apparently, this becomes the main discovery of the revealing intuition: this distinction between the intentional and the non-intentional. Existence, as we will see, as the non-intentional counterpart of consciousness, functions as an antagonist. It does not so much propel the narrative in itself, yet it does express where this propulsion lies; in the nature of consciousness.

Essential for the non-intentional part of this opposition is its contingency. As Roquentin realizes during his experience of the root, “the essential thing [concerning existence] is contingency”(131). Contingency, as Roquentin argues, means “that one cannot

define existence as necessity. To exist is simply *to be there*; those who exist let themselves be encountered, but you can never deduce anything from them" (131). Contingency thus means the absence of necessity, and designates the coincidence and fundamental absurdity of existence. What follows from contingency of existence for Roquentin is the realization that "All is free, this park, this city and myself" (131). This freedom, observed in the contingency of existence, is the core insight of Roquentin's search for truth. It is from this freedom that he must invent a positive form of being.

As I will show, the violence that we observed in the scene with the Self-Taught Man, is closely related to *how* Roquentin comes to this insight. In other words: it is closely related to how the narrative proceeds. As we will see, the narrative progresses along the dynamics that take place between Roquentin's consciousness and existence. It is within this dynamic that existence is portrayed as violent.

### 3.2. The Paradoxal Relationship and Transgression

Exemplary of the complications within the relationship between existence and consciousness is, as I have mentioned, Roquentin's revelatory experience with the root of the chestnut tree. Kern refers to this moment as an instance of paradoxal oneness (Kern 96). What makes this passage so interesting is its detailed description of the dynamics between Roquentin's consciousness and its object, much like a phenomenological "reduction". All existence outside that of consciousness and the object of consciousness are temporarily absent. Roquentin is strictly conscious of the root he perceives. Yet within this deep sense of consciousness the prereflective level, which I have discussed above, becomes apparent on the reflective level. In other words, Roquentin becomes aware of the workings, even the nature, of his own consciousness. The opposition between consciousness and its object

becomes pungently clear. Similarly, the problematic relationship between these two oppositions becomes apparent. The passage deserves to be quoted in length, as reading it reminds one of its sheer explicitly:

How long will this fascination last? I was the root of the chestnut tree. Or rather I was entirely conscious of its existence. Still detached from it--since I was conscious of it--yet lost in it, nothing but it ... it was impossible for something to come *after* that moment. I would have liked to tear myself from that atrocious joy, but did not even imagine it would be possible; I was inside; the black stump did *not move*...I could neither accept nor refuse it. At what cost did I raise my eyes? Did I raise them? Rather did I not obliterate myself for an instant in order to be reborn the following instant with my head thrown back and my eyes raised upward?...Existence is not something which lets itself be thought from a distance: it must invade you suddenly, master you, weigh heavily on your heart like a great motionless beast—or else there is nothing more at all . (Sartre 131)

As we have seen, Sartre concludes at the end of *Transcendance* that consciousness is “liberated” and “purified” from all objects (Sartre 93). Yet here, existence literally surges *into* Roquentin’s consciousness. Roquentin *becomes* the root. This *becoming*, though, is ambiguous, for immediately after Roquentin writes “I was the root of the chestnut tree”, he distances himself from this statement, just like his being of the root distances himself from the root. Roquentin is detached from the root, “yet lost in it, nothing but it”. Herein lies the complexity; Roquentin’s oneness with the root is ‘paradoxal’. How then are we to interpret this ‘paradoxality’?

Edith Kern has offered an interesting analysis of Roquentin's encounter. As she argues, Roquentin's realization of the absurdity of the root is also his realization of the absurdity of existence: "his profoundest experience of fundamental absurdity is . . . also his most deeply felt consciousness of existence, of its fullness, its inescapability, and of his own partaking of it" (96). As she continues: "out of this oneness is born, paradoxically, Roquentin's awareness of himself as a part and yet a separate part of existence" (96).<sup>8</sup> Kern explains the occurrence as Roquentin having a momentary sensation of the prereflective consciousness (Kern 96).

This seems like a correct observation, as during our analysis of *Transcendance* we have seen that in the prereflective consciousness there is no "I"; only consciousness and the object of consciousness. Moreover, it correlates with consciousness as a revealing intuition showing existence at its most basic level. Yet Kern proceeds to explain Roquentin's being-part-of-existence in the opposition of body and consciousness. The paradox, according to Kern, lies in Roquentin being both existing body as non-existing consciousness. This is a valid analysis as it accounts for the emphasis of the physical quality of Nausea, which precedes Roquentin's mental understanding of the nature of existence and consciousness. Yet by focusing on this division between body and consciousness, Kern seems to take for granted the complicated nature of consciousness itself.

Indeed, as an existent, Roquentin's body is contingent to all other existents, and its relation to consciousness and importance to Roquentin's identity is part of what is being developed here.<sup>9</sup> But if it is correct that the momentary sensation of the prereflective

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<sup>8</sup> Kern focuses on the body. The difference between my interpretation and Kern's is that I focus on the nature of consciousness as intentional.

<sup>9</sup> Indeed, *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* also emphasizes that the "physical quality" of Nausea must not be overlooked. It is something that Sartre would later call 'the body for-itself'. Yet to elaborate this side

consciousness brings along this paradoxical oneness, as Kern argues, it would be more obvious to locate the core of this paradox within the complicated relation of consciousness to existence; rather than jumping ahead to the problematic being of the body, which seem more an effect of this relationship.

In Roquentin's moment of revelation, Roquentin is in a state of extreme awareness of the workings of his own consciousness. This is the heart of the paradox that takes place. Not within the opposition between Roquentin's consciousness and his body does the problem lie, but within the problem of his consciousness being nothing but a relation to this root, and thus, essentially empty.

Roquentin experiences what Sartre would call full positional awareness of the root, the term Sartre uses to imply a full direction of consciousness at its object. As his consciousness is fully directed at the root, it leaves nothing else in his consciousness except its object. At the same time, positional consciousness also implies a complete objectification of the root.<sup>10</sup> Which means, as Roquentin describes it, he was detached from the root *because* he was consciousness of it. Like the example in *Transcendance* when consciousness is confronted with itself, we might say that Roquentin suddenly experiences the prereflective state of consciousness on the reflective level. Consequently he is confronted with the *absolute appearance* that Sartre refers to. For Roquentin, the root *is* the world at that moment. He is completely alone with the root, and consciousness of it.

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here would take too long. For a detailed analysis of the body in *La Nausée*, see Kern, especially p.91-8. Even though Nausea is a bodily process, my preferred interpretation goes towards seeing consciousness and non-consciousness as the fundamental problem. Only in the chronology of Roquentin's discovery of the truth of existence does Nausea come before consciousness. In other words, the facticity of the body awakens Roquentin to the facticity of his consciousness. Without the distinction between consciousness and existence, the problem of the body would be of no importance.

<sup>10</sup> The example given in our discussion of *Transcendance* clarifies this movement. When I am fully conscious of a tree, this implies I am not that tree. That tree is an object of my consciousness.

The absolute character of Roquentin's experience becomes clear when we analyze what happens between the opposition of consciousness and existence. Two completely contradictory movements seem to take place within Roquentin's concrete experience of the root. On one side, the distinction between Roquentin and existence seems to be obliterated; Roquentin *is* the root. On the other side, exactly this obliteration intensifies the contrast between Roquentin and the root. Consciousness on one side, its object on the other are separated in their unification. When Roquentin becomes fully consciousness of the root, the root literally crosses the boundary between consciousness and existence.

This leads to an interesting question. In Roquentin's experience, is the distinction between the two manifested by the grace of existence transgressing the boundary of consciousness? In other words: does the boundary exist because it is broken? I realize this question might seem like solving a paradox with another paradox, and therefore slightly indulgent. Yet, as I will show, the answer to this question will teach us much about the function of this paradox on the level as a fictional tool. In other words, on what this paradox *does* in the text.

The fact that existence takes an almost complete hold of consciousness in Roquentin's experience might seem contradictory to Sartre's argument in *Transcendence* that consciousness is empty and all objects transcend consciousness. Part of Sartre's effort was to show the exact opposite of what seems to happen: that objects are never immanent in consciousness, always outside of it. Yet what happens to Roquentin is more understandable than it appears. As we have seen, the fundamental intentionality of consciousness defines it as a relation to existence. This relation is to its very core interdependent. To track back to *Transcendence* once again, Sartre's placement of the ego

outside of consciousness had made the opposition between subject and object obsolete. What remains is consciousness and its object. Yet the boundaries that separate consciousness from its object are of an inherently different nature than the boundaries that separate the classical subject from the object. Although consciousness is not its object (the object merely provides its content), we can imagine how the boundary that separates consciousness from its object can be experienced as paradoxal. Theoretically, consciousness being empty can be understood. But if there truly is no more 'subject', nothing immanent in one's own consciousness, one's own being; if one's own personality is merely an effect of its surroundings, then this must without doubt pose a problem for oneself. If only at the beginning of this realization. In the concrete reality of Roquentin's life, the emptiness of consciousness poses the problem of how to exist if consciousness is indeed empty; if the subject is dead.

Within Roquentin's experience the paradox of consciousness shows us that existence is portrayed as transgressing the boundary between consciousness and existence. And within this transgression, the boundaries that define consciousness and existence are at the same time defined. Here lies the twist that reaffirms the urgency that a fictional account, told in from the first-person point of view, can communicate. In *Transcendance*, the placing of the ego outside of consciousness had laid the precedent for a philosophy that could not escape the concrete situation of the individual as consciousness in and of the world. Consequently, one might say the theory makes the concrete rise above the theory itself in terms of access to knowledge of the *actual* situation. The transgression that takes place might seem more of a feeling that overcomes Roquentin. Yet its importance in the framework of the novel shows how the tangible experience of existence creates a sense of urgency that reveals the problematic situation of existence on an everyday level.



How then are we to understand this peculiar instance, in which the act of transgression creates the boundaries that it obliterates at the same time? It seems that we can place it within the context of *Transcendance* and consciousness as it is presented in *La Nausée*; as a synthesis of two (seemingly) contradictory notions: the fact that consciousness gains its contents from its object, and that consciousness of an object implies that it is *not* this object.

Before I continue and elaborate on the relation between the observations just made and existence as it is described in the larger framework of *La Nausée*, let us take a look at the concept of transgression and how the term has been used in a different context. This in order to dive into this concept of transgression just a little deeper, so we might understand more profoundly what this transgression in *La Nausée* implies.

The concept of transgression has been studied more thoroughly within the work of George Bataille. Bataille's *Erotisme* was published more than two decades after *La Nausée* in 1957. His work was of a major influence on many of the forbearers of post-structuralism such as Jacques Derrida and Michel Foucault. In the context of Bataille, transgression implies the breaking of taboos; sexual, spiritual and physical. Violence and sex are related to each other in the sense that they violate the integrity of limits; the limits of the body. Bataille's work focuses on the relation between the profane and the sacred, and how transgression of limits that are perceived as sacred is in fact integral to the creation of the sacred.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> In this paper, I was hoping to elaborate on the relation between Bataille's understanding of transgression and the transgression that I have found to be present in *La Nausée*. In my research, I have found that transgression for Bataille retains much of its original significance: as a move that exists between the opposition of the divine and the profane. Much like Prometheus' transgression against the Ancient Greek gods. For Bataille, the breaking of a sacred rule reinforces the sacred. How does this sacredness relate to the sacredness of the subject that is shattered in *La Nausée*? Sadly I was not able to incorporate this into this work, as it is too short. Moreover, both Sartre as Bataille's work is extremely rich and a proper comparative study would require

At the time that Sartre had evolved his existentialism into a practical philosophy based on dialectical materialism, he famously held Bataille in an extremely low regard.<sup>12</sup> He bitterly dismissed Bataille as “beautiful soul”, bored to death in its own pure interiority, accusing Bataille of being a mystic attempting to reinvent religion without God (Heimonet and Yang 68). Yet, as Jean-Michel Heimonet and Emoretta Yang show in their article “Bataille and Sartre: The Modernity of Mysticism”, the early work of Sartre, especially *La Nausée*, shows a greater affinity with Bataille’s work than Sartre might have wanted to admit. Sartre judges Bataille on his play with words, his focus on art as an intrinsic goal, and emphasis on time. All of which are major themes in *La Nausée*.

Although there is not enough space in this paper to elaborate on the actual legitimacy of applying Bataille on Sartre’s work, the effect of transgression that we see in Bataille does appear to shine a light on the function of transgression in the paradox we have just discussed. A comparative analysis thus seems justified. The similarities between the emphasis on inner experience as a key to knowledge in both Bataille and Sartre has been noticed by Heimonet and Yang (71). As we have also seen in our discussion of Roquentin’s experiences, the acquisition of knowledge through revelation plays a central part in *La Nausée* narrative. “Each crisis of nausea”, according to Heimonet and Yang, “begins with the gap between words and things . . . Reality surpasses lexicon . . . Sometimes things are endowed with a “funny little meaning that surpasses [things]” (Sartre 190); sometimes they remain just the opposite, “above all explanation” (Sartre 183). But these two extremes join

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a much more expansive research. I am thus forced to maintain a concept of transgression that signifies mainly what I am researching: the crossing of the boundary between consciousness and non-consciousness.

<sup>12</sup> For more information on Sartre’s evolution from the existentialism of *L’Être et l’Néant* to an existential philosophy of *engagement* on the left side of the political spectrum see Sartre’s *Critique de la raison dialectique* (1960). This work also shows how Sartre developed an explicit view on violence which would be interesting to compare with my interpretation of *La Nausée* in the future.

up again to circumscribe an ineffable space of meaning, resistant to intellection” (Heimonet and Yang 71).

The transgression that we have observed in Roquentin’s crucial encounter with the root can be interpreted as part of the expression of this “ineffable space of meaning, resistant to intellection”.<sup>13</sup> In other words, this seems to be its function on a the level of *La Nausée* as a work of fiction. It is also one of Roquentin’s central acquisitions of knowledge. For Bataille too, the ultimate inner experience implies transgression of boundaries to take place. Yet not the boundary between consciousness and existence, as for Roquentin, but the boundary that separates the religious from the taboo. The equilibrium that exists between the religious and the profane depends, according to Bataille in his *L’Érotisme* (1957), on the transgression of sacred prohibitions:

Knowing that this balance [between prohibitions and transgressions] exists is not in itself enough. Knowledge of eroticism or of religion demands an equal and contradictory personal experience of prohibitions and transgressions. . .

[transgression] suspends a taboo without suppressing it. (Bataille 35)

These two oppositions, the sacred and the profane, are thus intimately related. Just like in the experience of Roquentin, the interdependence of two oppositions is manifested in the act of transgression. The sense of the interdependence that transgression entails is clarified vividly by Michel Foucault in a vibrant metaphor, referring to Bataille in his “Preface to Transgression”:

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<sup>13</sup> For further reading on Bataille and transgression as the as the expression of the unknown (in the poststructuralist sense) see Suzanne Guerlac, “*Bataille in Theory: Afterimages.*”.

Transgression, then, is not related to the limit as black to white, the prohibited to the lawful, the outside to the inside, or as the open area of a building to its enclosed spaces. . . Perhaps it is like a flash of lightning in the night which, from the beginning of time, gives a dense and black intensity to the night it denies, which lights up to the night from the inside, from top to bottom, and yet owes to the dark the stark clarity of its manifestation, its harrowing and poised singularity; the flash loses itself in this space it marks with its sovereignty and becomes silent now that it has given a name to obscurity. ( Foucault 35)

Observing the concept of transgression as it is used in the context of Bataille thus gives us the tools to explicate more accurately the nature of the transgression that takes place in *La Nausée*. For Bataille, pure transgression, or ‘eroticism’ is a goal in itself.<sup>14</sup> Yet in *La Nausée* transgression seems to function as a mechanism that synthesizes the spaces that have become “resistant to intellection”. We might go further and argue that transgression is a movement that can create a space in which the paradox of a relation can be expressed, while lending to this space a sense of urgency.

What I wish to imply with the sense of urgency that transgression creates is its relation to sex and violence that is present, as I will show, in *La Nausée*. For Bataille, violence and sex imply transgression because both acts violate the limits of the body. The erotic and the violent are intertwined in their ability to create an experience close to death; an ultimate spiritual experience. Death, as the definitive continuity (and transgression), is understood by Bataille as the teleology of the discontinuous beings humans are (Bataille 11-25).<sup>15</sup> Likewise, the semantic connection between transgression in the metaphysical sense, as we see

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<sup>14</sup> For more information on ‘pure transgression’ see Foucault’s “Preface to Transgression”.

<sup>15</sup> For further reading on the opposition between continuity and discontinuity see Bataille’s introduction to *L’Érotisme*

happening in Roquentin's experience of the root, and transgression in the sense of violence and sex is apparent in the manner in which Roquentin describes existence in *La Nausée*. As we have seen, Roquentin, in his experience of the root, describes existence as "not something which lets itself be thought from a distance: it must invade you suddenly, master you, weigh heavily on your heart like a great motionless beast—or else there is nothing more at all" (131). Existence not only breaks the boundary between consciousness and existence, but does so with force, invading Roquentin's very being like a 'beast'.

Like Bataille sees transgression as ultimately (in death) reconciling the discontinuous with the continuous thus making all 'one' again, existence, for Roquentin, threatens to make all into a homogenous mass. One of the scenes in which sex, violence and the threat of homogeneity explicitly come together is when Roquentin has returned from his visit to Anny in Paris, the trip he took after his encounter with the root of his chestnut tree.

Roquentin stands on top of the hill that towers above Bouville, and watches the "grey shimmering of Bouville" at his feet (158). What he sees before him is a hopeless heap of superfluous existence contrasted with the safe and naïve lives he knows the inhabitants below live. Like the Self-Taught Man, they believe that the world "obeys fixed and unchangeable laws" (158). Yet Roquentin describes existence as a 'great vague nature'; lawless, unpredictable and outside of humanity's control (158). It is a time bomb waiting to exercise its force. Yet at the same time, it has already happened; it has already infiltrated everything. As Roquentin mentions earlier on in the narrative, this is the "great menace [that] weighs over the city" (80).

What Roquentin sees, or imagines, is the threat of this menace becoming concrete. Roquentin asks himself: "What if something were to happen?" (158) He sketches a scene in

which existence effortlessly flows into existence; the true superfluity of existence becoming reality. Superfluity, I might add, refers back to the loss of Roquentin's ability to describe existence in preset forms. The boundaries that conceptual thinking dictate are no longer there, existence merely *is*. Consequently, it is here also portrayed as boundless: Bodies morphing, eyes popping up where they are not supposed to, rags of "writhing flesh rolling in the gutter, spasmodically shooting out spurts of blood": "Men all alone, completely alone with horrible monstrosities", tongues becoming enormous, live centipedes, rubbing their legs together and scraping palates. "Birds will fly around these birch trees and pick at them. . . Sperm will flow slowly, gently, from these wounds, sperm mixed with blood, warm and glassy with little bubbles" (159). Or else, Roquentin concludes, "nothing like that will happen . . . but one morning people will open their blinds and be surprised by a sort of frightful sixth sense, brooding heavily over things and seeming to pause. Nothing more than that". When they, the inflicted Bouvillians, pass by, "I'll [Roquentin] shout: "What's the matter with your science? What have you done with your humanism? Where is your dignity?" I will not be afraid—or at least no more than now. . . Existence is what I am afraid of" (159).

In this apocalyptic prediction, the reality that Roquentin has discovered concerning existence is described in a manner in which, along with the boundaries of existence, the distinction between possibility and metaphor has disappeared. The transgressive aspect of existence has become a concrete reality. The allusion to sperm, wounds and flesh manifests the connection between the penetrative act of sex and integrity of the bodily limits. What frightens Roquentin is existence, because existence is the evidence of contingency, and thus, freedom being absolute. On this level then, it runs parallel with Sartre's description of the inherent anguish of consciousness that becomes apparent when it is confronted with the

*absolute appearance*; when the nature of consciousness becomes apparent for consciousness itself.

Yet the fright that existence causes Roquentin is different from the ecstasy that Bataille argues the near experience of absolute continuity (transgression) brings about. For Roquentin, the transgressive aspect of existence threatens his distinction from this very existence; a passive substance, a conglomeration of objects that contradicts the spontaneity of his consciousness. The sovereignty of his consciousness, that which separates him from the homogeneity of existence, is at stake. And as the ending of *La Nausée* implies, it is exactly the pursuit of the opposite of this contingent mass which holds the promise of a bearable life. The act of writing a novel, a fictional world, would allow Roquentin to remember his life “without repugnance” (178):

Another type of book. I don't quite know which kind—but you would have to guess, behind the printed words, behind the pages, at something which would not exist, which would be above existence. A story, for example, something that could never happen, an adventure. It would have to be beautiful and hard as steel and make people ashamed of their existence. (Sartre 178)

Indeed, what allows Roquentin to take hold of existence, or rather, we might argue, to conquer his antagonist, is the capacity of consciousness to transcend the given; to create meaning. The capacity which, as we have seen, is integral for Sartre's theory of consciousness in *Transcendence*. Roquentin places the emphasis on his planned work of fiction to save him in hindsight: “Perhaps one day, thinking precisely of this hour, of this gloomy hour. . . perhaps I shall feel my heart beat faster and say to myself: “That was the day, that was the hour, when it all started.” And I might succeed—in the past, nothing but

the past—in accepting myself” (178). It is only in the past that the novel will save Roquentin, as, in the present, the absolute spontaneity of his consciousness lies outside of his control.

An example Sartre gives in *Transcendence* clarifies this observation:

Consciousness is frightened by its own spontaneity because it senses this spontaneity as *beyond* freedom. This is clearly seen in an example from Janet. A young bride was in terror . . . of sitting at the window and summoning the passers-by like a prostitute. Nothing . . . could serve as an explanation of such a fear. It seems to us simply that a negligible circumstance (reading, conversation, etc.) had determined in her what one might call “a vertigo of possibility.” She found herself monstrously free, and this vertiginous freedom appeared to her *at the opportunity* for this action which she was afraid of doing. (Sartre 100)

Roquentin thus finds the answer to mastering this monstrous freedom, that Sartre describes, in the form of a project. A project that focuses on the future and controls the past by giving it meaning (This meaning, like the jazz music that inspires him, transcends existence, it is to be found “behind the pages”). Thereby, his answer is a synthesis of overcoming the problems of existence and accepting his situation as consciousness in and of the world. It is, thus, not the absolute submission to the contingency and homogeneity that existence threatens to pacify him with. Instead, by writing his novel, he reclaims his agency.

To return to Bataille and the notion of transgression: a union with existence is, for Roquentin, negative in the sense that it is part of the problem, not the solution. It is important to emphasize, however, that I make this comparison strictly in the sense that for Bataille, transgression has a religious connotation which makes it something to seek after.



For Roquentin, the near sense of 'continuity' that he experiences is not an intrinsic goal, but a means to an end. It provides knowledge that pushes him away from the from these threatening experience, to give him hope of solving his existential problems and living with this Nausea he is plagued by. The following quote makes us understand this. Roquentin shared the following with us before he proceeded to write down the experience he had with the root:

I can't say I feel relieved or satisfied; just the opposite, I am crushed. Only my goal is reached: I know what I wanted to know; I have understood all that has happened to me since January. The Nausea has not left me and I don't believe it will leave me so soon; but I no longer have to bear it, it is no longer an illness or a passing fit. It is I.  
(126)

How then are we to situate the observations we have just made? It seems that by investigating the paradoxal oneness that takes place within Roquentin's experience with the root, we have found that its paradox lies in the synthesis of two (seemingly) contradictory notions: the fact that consciousness gains its contents from its object, and that consciousness of an object implies that it is *not* this object.

The notion of transgression seems to play an essential part in the fictional expression of this paradox. In concrete terms, this means that existence is described in violent, threatening and sometimes sexual terms. When I say violent, I do not mean that existence is openly described as violent, yet that it is described in terms in terms of transgression. The field of meaning it is situated in, its semantic field, and the force with which it imposes itself on Roquentin is can be understood as being violent.

It is important to emphasize that the role which existence plays as antagonist is defined by its passivity. Existence is rarely described as 'doing' anything; it is made into a threat by the nature of consciousness. In the park scene, for example, Roquentin describes existence as a "great motionless beast" that must weigh heavily on your heart to be thought of. This description needs to be taken quite literally. Indeed, existence 'weighs' on Roquentin's consciousness. In order to 'weigh' something does not have to *do* anything, it merely needs to *be* there. The verb 'weighing' thus excellently evokes the nature of existence, threatening in its passivity. The root intrudes into his consciousness because of the emptiness of consciousness. Like water always flows to the lowest level, the passive presence of the root threatens to fill the empty activity of Roquentin's consciousness.

Indeed, the rape of little Lucienne is another example that seems to repeat the mantra of existence threatening to flow wherever it can; ungoverned by laws or abstract boundaries.<sup>16</sup> Rape is the ultimate marriage between sex and violence, two acts that rupture the integrity of their objects. Like the scene with the dessert knife, quoted at the beginning of this section on *La Nausée*, the reading about the rape of little Lucienne propels Roquentin into a state of Nausea. Consequently, Roquentin loses the sense of his ego, and gains the desire to rape: "Little Lucienne was raped. Strangled. Her body still exists, her flesh bleeding. She no longer exists. . . The criminal has fled, the violated body. She felt this other flesh pushing into her own. I . . . there I . . . Raped. A soft, criminal desire to rape catches me from behind . . . the red hair, it is red on my head, the wet grass, red grass, is it still I?" (100-1). Along with a deep consciousness of existence, the desire to transgress appears. Yet after he stabs a knife into his own hands, he notices: "Then what? What has

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<sup>16</sup> Similarly, the Self-Taught Man's pedophilia can be explained in this way.

changed?" The blood that drips out of his hands is still existence, and the penetration of the knife has made no difference.

The desire of Roquentin to stab the Self-Taught Man with a dessert knife can be understood within the context of all that we have discussed above. Within the context of the complicated relation between existence and consciousness that is expressed with an absolute paradox, within the context of this paradox being expressed by transgression, and within the context of existence consequently being described as violent.

What moves Roquentin into wanting to stab the Self-Taught man is his Nausea. As he says: "[The Nausea] had never been as strong as today" (123). Like Roquentin claimed he felt like he was the root during his attack of Nausea in the park, existence enters Roquentin less explicitly here. What takes place seems to be like a game of mirrors. The reason Roquentin is propelled into the strongest attack of Nausea he has felt up until then is the "bad faith" that the Self-Taught Man displays in their conversation. Like existence is evidence of its contingency (and in turn of Roquentin's freedom) in his experience with the root, the denial of this contingency by the Self-Taught Man triggers the same reaction: Nausea. Consequently, Roquentin frightens the Self-Taught Man and the patrons of the café merely by sitting there and experiencing this Nausea: "What's the matter with him? Why is he shrinking into his chair? Do I frighten people now? . . . They aren't completely wrong to be afraid. . . ." (123).

Why does Roquentin frighten these people? Perhaps because unknowingly for them, he is evidence of contingency in his violent thoughts. Indeed, we must recognize that these people too possess this revealing intuition. Or perhaps, Roquentin just looks like a madman; the passage is too brief to make this conclusion. But what can be said is that the central

image to this exchange is Roquentin's sudden urge to stab the Self-Taught Man. The small thought of Roquentin stabbing the Self-Taught man is followed by two extremely strong images that Roquentin conjures up, of men trampling him and kicking his teeth out, and of blood and cheese intermingling within his mouth. Indeed, while imagining all these events, Roquentin seems to have become frightening not only within his mind, but also in his appearance.

He seems to feel an intense urge to transcend into the homogeneity of existence, to mix himself into this mass of people, trampled, bloodied, and toothless. He feels as though he could do anything: "They are not wrong to be afraid: I feel as though I could do anything, for example, stab this cheese knife into the Self-Taught Man's eye" (123). It is no coincidence that this feeling of arbitrariness translates itself into an image of violence. Indeed, within the context of our analysis of existence as it is described in the novel, we can positively argue that Roquentin seems to acquire the same characteristics as existence.

Again, this makes the complexity of Roquentin's existence poignantly clear, as we have seen that consciousness itself is inextricable from existence. Yet for the intentional being that Roquentin is, assimilation with existence is semi-authenticity in the guise of fatalism. It is thus not the answer to the question of how to exist authentically as consciousness in the world.

Indeed, it is the same fatalism that stops him from carrying out his act of violence: "But that isn't what stops me: a taste of blood in my mouth instead of this taste of cheese makes no difference to me.... There are quite enough things like that which exist already" (Sartre 123). Like the stabbing of his own hand, these urges are always rewarded with a sense of futility. This points towards that which makes Roquentin inherently different from

existence; consciousness. Like his experience with the root, Roquentin's short lived oneness with existence when wanting to stab the Self-Taught Man is paradoxical. He *is* and *is not* existence.

As becomes clear, the motivation for Roquentin to stab the Self-Taught Man is a concrete experience of a philosophical problem. The problem of consciousness being defined by its intentionality. Again, in the experience, the distinction between reality, possibility and metaphor disappears. The contingency of existence becomes a thought that Roquentin feels on a bodily level, that of Nausea, while his Nausea translates into his appearance. Whether these exact observations are correct or not, what cannot be denied is the role transgression plays in the representation of existence.

#### 4. Conclusion

Our discussion of transgression in the representation of existence in *La Nausée* is a narrow answer to what seems to me a pattern that does not stand by itself. As Bataille mentions in a 1958 interview with Pierre Dumayet concerning his book *La Littérature et le Mal*: "Literature does not permit us to live without seeing human nature in its most violent aspect". Indeed, perhaps our approach to *La Nausée* was not how Bataille intended this statement. Yet the violence that we see in *La Nausée* is imbued in existence, the central antagonist in an opposition that goes to the very core of Roquentin's being: the opposition between consciousness and non-consciousness. Our reading of *La Nausée* through this opposition, allows us to link the text to a specific trend in literature and culture in a whole new way. The idea of breaking boundaries in order to transcend into a greater being is one of those trends that excites me to be able to link with *La Nausée*.

For example, in Friedrich Nietzsche's first published work: *Die Geburt der Tragödie aus dem Geiste der Musik* (1872), Nietzsche evokes what he calls the Dionysian, the impulse to break through the boundaries of the individual, the *principium individuationis*, in order to become one with the true truth of existence: the primordial unity. Nietzsche describes the violence of the ancient Dionysian rituals, in which women would go into the hills to tear apart living animals, sing, dance and drink. Transgression, for Nietzsche, finds its ultimate expression in art. But as also goes for Nietzsche, it is always balanced with its opposite. The ultimate work of art is therefore the Attic tragedy, which has its equilibrium in the dialogue, fragmented in language, and the chorus, transcending the story in music.

The idea of a greater whole, and its relation to transgression, thus seems to find a unique twist in *La Nausée*. It seems to have taken the concept of transgression as a certain pattern in culture, and reformed it into an instrument of fiction for its own purposes; the communication of the battle to reclaim agency in the wake of Sartre's distinct theory of consciousness. The 'whole' has gained a new significance, threatening the realization of Roquentin. Yet violence is retained, be it allocated in a different sense than Nietzsche's. Existence *is* transgressive, or is at least portrayed as such. It is not an end, but an antagonist that threatens the individual.

At the same time, *La Nausée* is a marriage of a method that focuses strictly on the knowable: phenomenology, with a fictional method that attempts to express that which cannot be known but only felt: the anguish that pure consciousness entails. Like the opposition between science and art, the protagonist Roquentin and antagonist existence must eventually attain a balance. Tragically, it is the very nature of the relation between consciousness and existence that they are interdependent

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