

On Jean-Paul Sartre's *La Nausee*, Albert Camus

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A novel is never anything but a philosophy expressed in images. And in a good novel the philosophy has disappeared into the images. But the philosophy need only spill over into the characters and action for it to stick out like a sore thumb, the plot to lose its authenticity, and the novel its life.

Nonetheless, a work that is to endure cannot do without profound ideas. And this secret fusion of experience and thought, of life and reflection on the meaning of life, is what makes the great novelist (as we see him in a work like *Man's Fate*, for example).

The novel in question today is one in which this balance has been broken, where the theories do damage to the life. Something that has happened rather often lately. But what is striking in *La Nausée* is that remarkable fictional gifts and the play of the toughest and most lucid mind axe at the same time both lavished and squandered.

Taken individually, each chapter of this extravagant meditation reaches a kind of perfection in bitterness and truth. The novel that takes shape a small port in the north of France, a bourgeoisie of shipowners who combine religious observance with the pleasures of the table, a restaurant where the exercise of eating reverts to the repugnant in the narrator's eyes—everything that concerns the mechanical side of existence, in short, is depicted with a sureness of touch whose lucidity leaves no room for hope.

Similarly, the reflections on time, represented in an old woman trotting aimlessly along a narrow street, are, taken in isolation, among the most telling illustrations of the philosophy of anguish as summarized in the thought of Kierkegaard, Chestov, Jaspers, or Heidegger. Both faces of the novel are equally convincing. But taken together, they don't add up to a work of art: the passage from one to the other is too rapid, too unmotivated, to evoke in the reader the deep conviction that makes art of the novel.

Indeed, the book itself seems less a novel than a monologue. A man judges his life, and in so doing judges himself. I mean that he analyzes his presence in the world, the fact that he moves his fingers and eats at regular hours—and what he finds at the bottom of the most elementary act is its fundamental absurdity.

In the best ordered of lives, there always comes a moment when the structures collapse. Why this and that, this woman, that job or appetite for the future? To put it all in a nutshell, why this eagerness to live in limbs that are destined to rot?

The feeling is common to all of us. For most men the approach of dinner, the arrival of a letter, or a smile from a passing girl are enough to help them get around it. But the man who likes to dig into ideas finds that being face to face with this particular one makes his life impossible. And to live with the feeling that life is pointless gives rise to anguish.

From sheer living against the stream, the whole of one's being can be overcome with disgust and revulsion, and this revolt of the body is what is called nausea.

A strange subject, certainly, and yet the most banal. M. Sartre carries it to its conclusions with a vigor and certainty that show how ordinary so seemingly subtle a form of disgust can be. It is here that the similarity between M. Sartre and another author, whom, unless I am mistaken, no one has mentioned in connection with *La Nausée*, is to be found. I mean Franz Kafka.

But the difference is that with M. Sartre's novel some indefinable obstacle prevents the reader from participating and holds him back when he is on the very

threshold of consent. I attribute this to the noticeable lack of balance between the ideas in the work and the images that express them. But it may be something else. For it is the failing of a certain literature to believe that life is tragic because it is wretched. Life can be magnificent and overwhelming—that is its whole tragedy.

Without beauty, love, or danger it would be almost easy to live. And M. Sartre's hero does not perhaps give us the real meaning of his anguish when he insists on those aspects of man he finds repugnant, instead of basing his reasons for despair on certain of man's signs of greatness. The realization that life is absurd cannot be an end, but only a beginning. This is a truth nearly all great minds have taken as their starting point. It is not this discovery that is interesting, but the consequences and rules for action that can be drawn from it.

At the end of his voyage to the frontiers of anxiety, M. Sartre does seem to authorize one hope: that of the creator who finds deliverance in writing. From the original doubt will come perhaps the cry "I write, therefore I am." And one can't help finding something rather comic in the disproportion between this final hope and the revolt that gave it birth. For, in the last resort, almost all writers know how trivial their work is when compared to certain moments of their life. M. Sartre's object was to describe these moments. Why didn't he go right through to the end? However that may be, this is the first novel by a writer from whom everything may be expected.

So natural a suppleness in staying on the far boundaries of conscious thought, so painful a lucidity, are indications of limitless gifts. These are grounds for welcoming *La Nausée* as the first summons of an original and vigorous mind whose lessons and works to come we are impatient to see.

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1 When Camus wrote this review of Sartre's first novel and the following one on the volume of short stories published in English under the title of *Intimacy*, the two men had never met. —P.T.

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