

**How Sartre, Philosopher, Misreads Sartre, Novelist:  
*Nausea* and the Adventures of the Narrative Self  
Ben Roth<sup>1</sup>**

Besides, art is fun and for fun, it has innumerable intentions and charms. Literature interests us on different levels in different fashions. It is full of tricks and magic and deliberate mystification. Literature entertains, it does many things, and philosophy does one thing.

Iris Murdoch (1997, p. 4)

If there is something comforting—religious, if you want—about paranoia, there is still also anti-paranoia, where nothing is connected to anything, a condition not many of us can bear for long.

Thomas Pynchon, *Gravity's Rainbow* (p. 434)

Both those who write in favor of and against the notion of the narrative self cite Sartre and his novel *Nausea* as exemplary opponents of it. Alasdair MacIntyre, a central proponent of the narrative self, writes: “Sartre makes Antoine Roquentin argue not just [...] that narrative is very different from life, but that to present human life in the form of a narrative is always to falsify it” (1984, p. 214). Galen Strawson, a critic of narrativity, writes that “Sartre sees the narrative, story-telling impulse as a defect, regrettable. [...] He thinks human Narrativity is essentially a matter of bad faith, of radical (and typically irremediable) inauthenticity” (2004, p. 435). I think that this type of interpretation of *Nausea* is blindered and bad and relies on an impoverished approach to reading fiction typical of philosophers: of taking one character at one moment as mouthpiece for both a novel as a whole and author behind it. Beginning as it does in description, the novel challenges these conceptual orders rather than taking one side or the other; it thus invites us to rethink the terrain of narrativity. Here, I sketch a more holistic reading of *Nausea* and its notion of “adventures,” one which undercuts the claim that it opposes a narrative conception of the self. I suggest as well that this leaves us with a robust notion of why the novel as a form has a certain kind of philosophical importance, an importance exactly passed over by the sort of approaches that allow, for example, *Nausea* to be reduced to an argument.

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## I. MacIntyre and Strawson on Sartre/Roquentin

MacIntyre, in his comments on *Nausea*, makes no distinction between the standpoint of Roquentin, as character, and Sartre, as author of the novel specifically or philosopher and literary figure in general. Rather, he distinguishes between Sartre/Roquentin, Sartre/Heidegger, and Sartre/Marx and claims that Sartre/Roquentin believes that living and storytelling are mutually exclusive: “There are not and there cannot be any true stories. Human life is composed of discrete actions which lead nowhere, which have no order; the story-teller imposes on human events retrospectively an order which they did not have while they were lived” (p. 214). Strawson is initially more careful in distinguishing Sartre and Roquentin, ascribing such a view to the character alone (p. 429), but he quickly conflates them as well, thus doing away with the interpretative problems with which Sartre for better or worse burdens us when he chooses a form other than the treatise and doesn't speak in his own voice.<sup>2</sup> Strawson ascribes to Sartre and Roquentin the view that we impose narrative form on our lives, but doing so is falsifying and so we shouldn't: “the storytelling impulse” is “regrettable” and “inauthentic,” though natural and nearly unavoidable (p. 435). This is, I think it is safe to say, the orthodox reading of *Nausea*, among philosophers and most especially with respect to narrativity.<sup>3</sup>

The key moment to support this reading occurs early in the novel. Roquentin muses on the possibility of what he calls “adventures”:

for the most banal even to become an adventure, you must (and this is enough) begin to recount it. This is what fools people: a man is always a teller of tales, he lives surrounded by his stories and the stories of others, he sees everything that happens to him through them; and he tries to live his own life as if he were telling a story. (1964, p. 39)

All this falls under Strawson's descriptive “psychological Narrativity thesis,” which he differentiates from the normative “ethical Narrativity thesis” (p. 428). Roquentin continues, however, making his own normative claim:

But you have to choose: live or tell. [...] Nothing happens while you live. [...] But everything changes when

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<sup>2</sup> A popular anthology of Sartre's work includes passages from *Nausea* alongside ones from his treatises under the title *The Philosophy of Jean-Paul Sartre* (2003, Cumming, ed.).

<sup>3</sup> See too Abbott 2008, pp. 22, 135-6; Brooks 1984, p. 22.

you tell people about life; it's a change no one notices: the proof is that people talk about true stories. As if there could possibly be true stories. [...] I wanted the moments of my life to follow and order themselves like those of a life remembered. You might as well try and catch time by the tail. (pp. 39-40)

A fuller reading of the novel along these lines would suggest that here, early on, Roquentin realizes the inauthenticity of narrativity. What follows is then a dramatization of his struggle to give up viewing his life as a story and tarry instead with raw, unstructured existence, nauseating as it is—a brave decision philosophically, a foolish one practically, within the frame of the novel. And if this were all the novel had to say on the matter, then MacIntyre and Strawson might be right to identify Roquentin as an opponent of the narrative self (though even then extending such a claim to the novel and Sartre would require further moves). Formally, *Nausea* becomes a rather odd novel by this reading, with its key moment occurring so close to its beginning, less than a fourth of the way into the novel. Indeed, this moment begs to be considered in conjunction with at least two other scenes: when Roquentin goes to see Anny in Paris and the close of the novel. Doing so undercuts the claim that Roquentin, the novel as a whole, and Sartre finally sanction the choice: “live or tell.”

Despite its fractured beginnings and diary form, *Nausea* evolves into a fairly traditional novel. It begins with such formal contrivances as an “editor's note,” which, in a Kierkegaardian manner, describes what follows as “found among the papers of Antoine Roquentin” and “published without alteration” (p. 1), as well as a number of undated pages whose gaps and illegible sections are highlighted by supposedly editorial footnotes (pp. 1-3). Only two more footnotes follow (pp. 4, 12), and then the device is abandoned. Roquentin's entries become longer and more straightforward, lengthy stretches of action related naturalistically with less and less commentary. They lose their diary-like character, becoming instead a typical first-person narrative. As Frank Kermode writes, “Sartre began *La Nausée* as an episodic work, and Roquentin's practice reflects this; but the need for structure grew imperious” (2000, p. 146). All this is to say that *Nausea* gradually becomes just the sort of story that MacIntyre and Strawson claim Sartre/Roquentin opposes, with a clear arc from a motivating crisis, through various rejected possibilities for restoration, to a final epiphany. Roquentin has been beset by the titular nausea, a feeling

of unknown cause and meaning that comes over him repeatedly during the course of the novel when he is in close observation of various objects around him. Simultaneously, he has been thrown into what we familiarly call (in large part due to *Nausea*) an existential crisis. He gives up his writing and is plagued by the thought that he “hadn't the right to exist” (p. 84). Figuring out how exactly these two problems are related—or whether they are really just one problem—requires interpretive work, but they motivate everything that follows. In the middle of the novel, Roquentin is presented with traditional solutions to at least his existential purposelessness: the self-taught man offers him humanism and socialism as reasons for living (pp. 103ff), and Bouville offers him images of the life of society.<sup>4</sup> Rejecting all of these options, Roquentin is left fully abject: “there is absolutely no more reason for living, all the ones I have tried have given way and I can't imagine any more of them. [...] My life is ending” (pp. 156-7). About to leave for Paris to retire from life at his young age, Roquentin comes, in the novel's final scene, to his great realization while listening to the jazz record. This traditional epiphanic structure is obscured because the novel cuts off just after Roquentin's realization without dramatizing its consequences. It is there nonetheless and set up by Roquentin's musings about “adventures.” Before moving forward with my reading of the novel, I want to compare its notion of “adventures” to Georg Simmel's concept of the same name.

## II. Simmel and Sartre on Adventures

Simmel's essay “Philosophie des Abenteuers” appeared in the newspaper *Der Tag* in Berlin in June of 1910. It was reprinted as “Das Abenteuer” in Simmel's *Philosophische Kultur* in 1911, with a second edition following in 1919. It begins from the claim that every experience is twofold: it can be taken immediately, by itself, or it can be taken as “a segment of a course of a life” (1959, p. 243). The difference is not in the content of the events themselves, but rather in how they are taken, the “form of experiencing” (p. 253). The first manner of taking an experience—as immediate, detached from the

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<sup>4</sup> This latter is represented by Roquentin's Sunday walk down the Rue Tournebride (pp. 40ff) and visit to the Bouville Museum to look at the portraits of the city's past luminaries (pp. 82ff). Hayden Carruth makes a similar point in his introduction to the novel (pp. xi-xii).

course of life—Simmel names “adventure.” Given two experiences that “are not particularly different in substance,” it could be that only one is “perceived as an 'adventure' and the other not,” because everything hangs on us, not the events (p. 243). This line of thought is mirrored in Roquentin's first, fumbling attempts to explain the nausea and the change that has come over him. “I think I'm the one who has changed,” he writes (p. 4). And later: “This feeling of adventure definitely does not come from events: I have proved it. It's rather the way in which the moments are linked together” (p. 56).

“[T]he most general form of adventure,” Simmel writes, “is its dropping out of the continuity of life” (p. 243). Its events are actually continuous with what comes before and after them in the course of a life, but “an adventure stands in contrast to that interlocking of life-links,” and “in its deeper meaning, it occurs outside the usual continuity of life” (p. 243). In what would seem to be a paradox, an adventure, while marginal to the course of life, “is distinct from all that is accidental and alien”; it is ultimately “connected with the center” (p. 243). It should thus not be confused with “the merely accidental episode” (p. 252). In an early encounter, Roquentin is “astonished” when the self-taught man introduces the concept of adventures, on which Roquentin himself has been privately musing, into their conversation. And the self-taught man's definition echos Simmel's: “an event out of the ordinary without being necessarily extraordinary” (p. 36).

Afterward, in memory, an adventure takes on a dreamlike quality, Simmel claims. And “What we designate as 'dreamlike' is nothing but a memory which is bound to the unified, consistent life-process by fewer threads than are ordinary experiences” (p. 244). Indeed, an adventure can appear so detached from the normal course of one's life as to be thought of as someone else's experience: “we might well feel that we could appropriately assign to the adventure a subject other than the ego” (p. 244). Roquentin moved to Bouville after traveling for a number of years, and it is these experiences abroad that provide the initial template for adventures in the novel: “in the old days, in London, Meknes, Tokyo, I have known great moments, I have had adventures” (p. 37). He describes the end of this stretch of his life as like waking “from a six-year slumber” (p. 5; see too p. 98). Thinking about his time in Meknes, he becomes unsure

“whether they are memories or just fiction” (p. 32). And, again recalling Simmel, he writes that “There’s a person who does this, does that, but it isn’t I, I have nothing in common with him.”<sup>5</sup> He takes this back mere pages later, writing with double emphasis “Well you can call that by any name you like, in any case, it was an event which *happened to ME*” (p. 37). Yet he is unsure, at least at this point, “what the word [adventure] means” (p. 36), leaning momentarily toward the conclusion that, in fact, he has “never had adventures” and “It isn’t a question of words” (p. 37).

Simmel writes further that “We ascribe to an adventure a beginning and an end much sharper than those to be discovered in the other forms of our experiences” (p. 244). Being disconnected from the larger course of life, an adventure’s beginning is not dependent on prior events’ endings, and its own ending does not necessarily give way to subsequent events’ beginnings.<sup>6</sup> Roquentin seems again to take up Simmel’s language. Sitting in a cafe, he thinks: “I marvel at these young people: drinking their coffee, they tell clear, plausible stories. [...] If I were in their place, I’d fall over myself” (p. 7). Why? Because he sees now that “you plunge into stories without beginning or end” (p. 7). But this is true of non-adventurous experience in the normal course of life. Of his adventures abroad, Roquentin claims “I could tell stories, tell them too well (as far as anecdotes are concerned, I can stand up to anyone except ship’s officers and professional people)” (p. 33). Even as he comes to doubt whether these really were adventures and whether there can be adventures at all, Roquentin still appears to employ Simmel’s vocabulary: “The beginnings would have had to be real beginnings. Alas! Now I see so clearly what I wanted. Real beginnings are like a fanfare of trumpets, like the first notes of a jazz tune, cutting short tedium, making for continuity” (p. 37). In turn, endings are emphasized as well: “Something is beginning in order to end: an adventure does not let itself be drawn out.” (p. 37). An adventure forms a self-standing whole.

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<sup>5</sup> p. 33. A line that, given a longer treatment, Strawson would surely emphasize.

<sup>6</sup> Compare this claim to Aristotle’s in the *Poetics*: “By ‘beginning’ I mean that which does not have a necessary connection with a preceding event, but which can itself give rise naturally to some further fact or occurrence. An ‘end’, by contrast, is something which naturally occurs after a preceding event, whether by necessity or as a general rule, but need not be followed by anything else” (1987, p. 39).

Simmel draws a connection between the adventurer and the artist: “For the essence of a work of art is, after all, that it cuts out a piece of the endlessly continuous sequences of perceived experience, detaching it from all connections with one side or the other, giving it a self-sufficient form as though defined and held together by an inner core” (p. 245). Roquentin puts the storyteller in the place of Simmel's artist. Coming back now to the key passage, one has to choose, “live or tell,” because “nothing happens when you live. The scenery changes, people come in and go out, that's all. There are no beginnings. Days are tacked on to days without rhyme or reason, an interminable, monotonous addition” (p. 39). Telling organizes an experience by way of a beginning and an ending, making it akin to an adventure. “Everything changes when you tell about life [...] You seem to start at the beginning [...], but] in reality you have started at the end,” because “the end is there, transforming everything” (p. 40). Such is impossible of lived rather than recalled experience, though we all too easily “forget that the future [is] not yet there” (p. 40).

This emphasis on beginnings and endings, which are said to be absent from the normal course of life, leads Roquentin to a further comment on adventures: whereas life is merely one thing after another, in an adventure the exact chronology matters. There is a “rigorous succession of circumstances” (p. 23). He thus equates the “feeling of adventure” with the “irreversibility of time” (p. 57). Recalling his adventures abroad, Roquentin writes that “never was I able to turn back, any more than a record can be reversed.”<sup>7</sup> Such a feeling is in contrast to the random, happenstance quality of Roquentin's everyday life in Bouville, where he can take a walk, visit a cafe, work in the library, and so forth in any order he pleases. While experiencing the feeling of adventure, Roquentin says he “cannot even conceive of anything around [him] being other than what it is” (p. 54). Everything is determined and has its exact place. In contrast, normally everything is contingent: “*Anything* can happen, *anything*” (p. 77).

Roquentin's larger fate seems to hang not on whether adventures as such are possible or not,

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<sup>7</sup> p. 23. The novel frequently draws an analogy between life and melody. It never remarks explicitly that a melody, like a narrative, can only be experienced in time, though it comes close in Roquentin's description of the jazz singer's voice: “it is the event for which so many notes have been preparing, from so far away, dying that it might be born” (p. 22).

despite his sometimes putting it this way. Even after declaring it impossible to have an adventure—and experience it as such in the moment instead of just telling it that way after the fact—he still has momentary feelings of adventure.<sup>8</sup> Rather, Roquentin's problem is perhaps that such moments are not enough: he wants his entire life to be an adventure. “I wanted the moments of my life to follow and order themselves like those of a life remembered,” he writes (p. 40). Simmel argues that this is in fact possible: “Life as a whole may be perceived as an adventure” (p. 247). As noted, the seeming paradox of adventures is that, while detached from the wider course of a life, they seem to bear on, or represent more forcefully, the meaning of an entire life. “[I]t connects with the most recondite instincts and some ultimate intention of life as a whole,” Simmel writes (p. 252). And again: “an action is completely torn out of the inclusive context of life and [...] simultaneously the whole strength and intensity of life stream into it” (p. 254). But if an adventure somehow distills or compacts a life's larger meaning into one episode, how can life as a whole be experienced as an adventure? “To have such a remarkable attitude toward life,” Simmel writes, “one must sense above its totality a higher unity, a super-life as it were, whose relation to life parallels the relation of the immediate life itself to those particular experiences which we call adventures” (p. 247). He goes on:

Perhaps we belong to a metaphysical order, perhaps the soul lives a transcendent existence, such that our earthly, conscious life is only an isolated fragment compared to the unnamable context of an existence running its course in it. [...] Whoever senses through all actual life a secret, timeless existence of the soul, which is connected with the realities of life only from a distance, will perceive life in its given and limited wholeness as an adventure when compared to that transcendent and self-consistent fate. (pp. 247-8)

As his lengthy conversation with the self-taught man demonstrates, however, Roquentin rejects any principle of order or meaning beyond himself such as humanism or socialism, to say nothing of religion (pp. 112ff). At the same time, he rejects the idea that he himself can bequeath a meaning to his life. The self-taught man offers such an alternative as well: “Life has a meaning if we choose to give it one. One must first act, throw one's self into some enterprise. Then, if one reflects, the die is already cast, one is

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<sup>8</sup> In one moment, he recalls “I felt my heart swell with a great feeling of adventure,” but there is no sense that the retrospective narration is creating this feeling. He goes on to report his real-time feelings while writing in the diary: “I am as happy the hero of a novel” (p. 54). In another entry he writes again in the present tense (p. 135).

pledged” (p. 112). Sartre is frequently taken to sanction something like this view in his doctrines of radical freedom and a life project. Here, however, Roquentin at least rejects it: “I think that that is precisely the sort of lie that [the others in the cafe] tell themselves” (p. 112). At least one way of reading the novel is that Roquentin used to have such a goal or principle guiding his life and that it is its loss that initiates his crisis. Having lost any sense of what he's doing with himself, Roquentin can no longer experience adventures which speak to a larger meaning. At best he can experience brief flashes of dramatic, heightened feeling. But these are now taken as mere feelings, an illusion to be seen through.

If the normal course of life is “continuous” and “whole,” according to Simmel, with a “consistent process run[ning] through the individual components” (p. 243), but it is only adventures that have real beginnings and endings ordering and shaping their meanings, where is narrativity to be found? As I began by noting, *Nausea* is frequently taken as a venue for disputing narrativity, or even an argument against it. But is a rejection of adventures a rejection of narrativity, or is their identification too quick? Roquentin writes, in one moment, “at last an adventure happens to me and when I question myself I see that it happens *that I am myself and that I am here; I am the one who splits the night*” (p. 54). To the extent that adventures are associated with such “absolute presentness” (Simmel, p. 254), it would seem that a rejection of their possibility is exactly *not* a rejection of narrativity. Rather it is the normal course of a life which is said to consist of one thing linked to and following another, seemingly a quality of narrative. A great strength of *Nausea* as a novel is that its descriptions elude didactic subjection to our more straightforward conceptual orders. It doesn't dramatize preexisting philosophical theses—it describes the (or a) world. Against the thought that it is merely or at the very least first and foremost a piece of pedantic philosophical pedagogy, it seems to me that *Nausea* begins from a set of familiar experiences in all their inarticulateness and apparent contradictions and honestly describes the crisis they bring forth. A narrativist reading of *Nausea* should take it not as an argument, but an invitation to new and further distinctions, an invitation to the thought that the current vocabulary of narrativity fails to get at experience as we actually have it.

Is narrative best characterized by temporal succession, by beginnings and endings, by meaningfulness, by unity? I've argued elsewhere<sup>9</sup> for a particular characterization, and one can't extract an attack or defense of narrativity from *Nausea* absent such touchstones. My baseline characterization of narrative focuses on two core features. First, narrative concerns temporal objects. All discourse is temporal in a formal sense, as words are said in a certain order, not all at once. Narrative discourse is distinctive in that its content, the objects which it is about, are temporal. A landscape isn't narratable. Put someone in that landscape, doing things in time, and everything changes. Thus the second core feature: narrative concerns humans—or at least anthropomorphizable—agents. A description of a chemical reaction, though temporal, isn't yet a narrative. Described in a peculiar way, such that the reagents are (falsely) imagined to have perspectives and experiences, are sufficiently human-like that we can project ourselves into them, and again everything changes. Following my characterization, in which unity, retrospection, and actual beginnings and endings are less important than temporal succession, there is no clear link between adventures and narrativity.

The notion of adventures invoked in *Nausea* is so similar to that in Simmel's essay that it is hard for me to think other than that Sartre knew of it. So far as I can tell, no scholar has made this connection before, and there is perhaps no way of proving it, as Sartre hardly ever refers to Simmel in his work, and never to “Das Abenteuer.”<sup>10</sup>

### **III. A More Holistic Reading of *Nausea***

Let us return now to my larger reading of *Nausea*. Visiting his ex-girlfriend Anny, Roquentin realizes that she too appears to have come to the realization that adventures are impossible, only she has a different vocabulary. She says she has realized that “there are no more perfect moments” (p. 144). As a child seeing the few pictures included in a history book (“three pictures for the whole sixteenth century”) she came to believe that there were “privileged situations,” “which had a rare and precious quality,

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<sup>9</sup> “The (Re)Presentation of Temporal Human Meanings,” Chapter 3 in Roth 2014.

<sup>10</sup> In a diary entry from March 7, 1940, he refers to “historical relativism of the Simmel type” (1999, pp. 298, 300).

style.”<sup>11</sup> It is left to people who find themselves in privileged situations to make them into perfect moments. Roquentin, carried away, fills in the explanation for her: “In each one of these privileged situations there are certain acts which have to be done, certain attitudes to be taken, words which must be said—and other attitudes, other words are strictly prohibited. [...] In fact, then, the situation is the material: it demands exploitation” (p. 148, see too p. 62). Notice that, despite the similarity, there's at least one decisive difference between adventures and privileged situations. An adventure is only an adventure after the fact, in telling. But one is aware, in the moment, that one is in a privileged situation—thus the ability and responsibility one has to make use of it, to realize a perfect moment. Roquentin suggests that a perfect moment is like an artwork and thus, perhaps, that the normative weight here is aesthetic, but Anny cuts him off and says this is wrong, that making a perfect moment of a privileged situation was rather a duty, even a moral duty. And Anny disagrees further when Roquentin explains to her his realization about adventures. She says:

Well, you're not thinking like me at all. You complain because things don't arrange themselves around you like a bouquet of flowers, without your taking the slightest trouble to do anything. But I have never asked as much: I wanted action. You know, when we played adventurer and adventuress: you were the one who had adventures, I was the one who made them happen. I said: I am a man of action. Remember? Well, now I simply say: one can't be a man of action. (pp. 150-1)

It's not at all clear that Roquentin agrees with this and even less clear that the novel as a whole could be said to endorse it. Roquentin has, as Anny suggests, been asking the question of whether life *is* an adventure. But their conversation holds other tensions. Roquentin used to think that adventures naturally befell him. Here Anny reveals that she made them happen, both for herself and him. He's never asked whether one can *make* one's life an adventure. We've witnessed him wander around Bouville, thinking and telling himself stories, but never even attempt to really *do* anything. Thus we have the beginnings of a distinction between one's life as a narrative and the narrativizing impulse—the *action* of making one's life a narrative or of *taking* it as such. And in the move from the vocabulary of adventures to that of

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<sup>11</sup> p. 147. The novel highlights the similarity: Roquentin uses the phrase “a rare and precious quality” (*une qualité rare et précieuse*) early on to describe adventures (p. 37). Anny, unprompted, uses the same phrase (*une qualité tout à fait rare et précieuse*) here to describe privileged situations (p. 147).

privileged situations and perfect moments, the manner of this taking is no longer limited to retrospective storytelling—it is available in the present. I'll come back to this, but here we should notice that Roquentin hasn't clearly rejected the possibility of action, as Anny has. In fact, immediately following her monologue, Roquentin reports: "I couldn't have looked convinced" (p. 151).

The conversation turns to the question of what to do, given all this. Anny says she "outlives" herself. She seems to mean that her life is already over and she's now just filling time meaninglessly until death. "Outliving oneself" is contrasted to acting: describing a painter, Anny says that he "isn't like us—not yet. He acts, he spends himself" (p. 153). By contrast, we're told that she travels widely and lives off a man who "keeps" her (p. 151). But now Roquentin is lost in thought about the possibilities of art. From the impetus of the "strange happiness" the jazz record gives him each time he hears it, he says: "I was wondering if, in that direction one couldn't find or look for..." and trails off before making explicit the thought that art might offer some sort of happiness, consolation, or salvation (pp. 151-2). He rejects the possibilities of painting and sculpture, saying that they "can't be used" because "they're lovely *facing*" him.<sup>12</sup> He needs something he can embody, not something given to him from outside, again suggesting the distinction between observing one's past life as a narrative and living or experiencing it as such in the present. Elsewhere Sartre writes: "An event: that's to say, a temporal flow that *happened to me*—that wasn't *in front of* me, like a picture or piece of music, but that was made around my life and in my life, with my time" (1999, p. 283). Roquentin rejects theater as too tied to its audience. Finally he says that he "tried to write a book..." but is interrupted (p. 152). The scene quickly moves to an end, but it has now set up the novel's finale.

MacIntyre notes as evidence for his interpretation that Roquentin gives up writing his historical biography of Rollebon: "either he will write what is true or he will write an intelligible history, but the one possibility excludes the other" (p. 214). Astonishingly, though, MacIntyre says nothing about the fact

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<sup>12</sup> p. 152. Earlier, he rejects ceramics as well, saying "baked objects [...] do not amuse [him]" (p. 82).

that *Nausea* ends with Roquentin *deciding to write a novel*.<sup>13</sup> This despite the fact that he holds it against Sartre that “in order to show that there are no narratives, he himself writes a narrative” (p. 214). So MacIntyre would seem to have us believe that Sartre’s use of narrative is evidence of its importance, but Roquentin’s use of narrative doesn’t suggest anything parallel in his (fictional) or Sartre’s (real) thinking. How does Roquentin get to this point? At the beginning of the novel he says “you plunge into stories without beginning or end” (p. 7). Now, though, he views his previous life as ended and decides to make a new beginning: “I am still fairly young. I still have enough strength to start again. But do I have to start again?”<sup>14</sup> Here he hasn’t quite yet resolved to do so, instead taking up Anny’s notion of outliving oneself: “My whole life is behind me [...] I am going to outlive myself. Eat, sleep, sleep, eat. Exist slowly, softly, like these trees, like a puddle of water, like the red bench in the streetcar” (p. 157). By the closing scene of the novel, however, Roquentin has gathered new resolve. He goes back to the Railwaymen’s Rendezvous one last time, and the waitress puts the jazz song on for him. In the length of two plays (he asks her to repeat it) he is again captivated, transported from the dismissive thought that “there are idiots who get consolation from the fine arts” to the resolution that he will become an artist himself (p. 174). He thinks about the singer and songwriter: “They are a little like dead people for me, a little like the heroes of a novel; they have washed themselves of the sin of existing” (p. 177). And he thinks he could do the same:

Can you justify your existence then? Just a little? [...] Couldn’t I try... Naturally, it wouldn’t be a question of a tune ... but couldn’t I, in another medium? ... It would have to be a book: I don’t know how to do anything else. But not a history book: history talks about what has existed—an existant can never justify the existence of another existant. [...] 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 would never happen, an adventure. It would have to be beautiful and as hard as steel and make people ashamed of their existence. (p. 178)

There’s much to remark upon here. One can’t justify the existence of another person or thing but can, at

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<sup>13</sup> This move is foreshadowed earlier, when Roquentin lets his imagination of Rollebon’s situation run rampant only to conclude that, taking this tack, he’d be better off writing a novel about him instead of a biography (p. 58). Even earlier, he writes “I have the feeling of doing a work of pure imagination” (p. 13).

<sup>14</sup> p. 156. Interestingly, he seems to take this language over from the young couple whom he overheard (and mocked in his thoughts) in the cafe while talking to the self-taught man (p. 110).

least in part, justify one's own. And Roquentin proposes to do this exactly by producing a story.<sup>15</sup> That story itself couldn't happen in life, but the telling of it will justify his life. And it seems important to him that he be understood as a novelist, that he lives *that* story, in which he is identified with a typical role and character. "A novel," he writes, "And there would be people who would read this book and say: 'Antoine Roquentin wrote it, a red-headed man who hung around cafes,' and they would think about my life as I think about the Negress's [the jazz singer]: as something precious and almost legendary."<sup>16</sup>

There seems to me no irony in any of this—either on Roquentin's or the novel's part.<sup>17</sup> That is, this way of revitalizing himself really is proposed as a solution to his crisis. The novel, against the standard reading of it, doesn't finally dismiss the notion of the narrative self, I think. MacIntyre and Strawson have to hold that Roquentin falls back into inauthenticity at the end of the novel. By this reading, the full arc of the story is this: the novel opens with Roquentin's first experiences of the nausea and his initial failures to articulate its meaning. By the time he poses the choice "live or tell," a quarter of the way into the novel, he has grasped its core, though he will nuance his explanation in later scenes. The main part of the novel then dramatizes Roquentin's attempts, with various backslidings, to live without the consolations of narrativity. Its climax is then his failure, his return to inauthenticity, buttressed now with false rationalizations of narrative in the guise of narrative art. I am skeptical of such a reading most of all because I see nothing in the final pages to undercut Roquentin's epiphany and turn to art. The idea that one's life—especially one's entire life—literally *is* a narrative remains dubious, but Roquentin will aim to justify his existence through producing narrative, and exactly doing so will allow him to understand himself (and have others understand him) within a certain narrative, that of the cafe-frequenting novelist. Narrative is not inherently falsifying, either, sanctioned by a merely practical rubric: it is both justifying

<sup>15</sup> Hazel Barnes claims that the novel Roquentin will produce is *Nausea* itself (1959, p. 203). This is possible, but she offers no argument for this claim, and I see no evidence for it.

<sup>16</sup> p. 178. Again, this is set up early in the novel. He writes "I am so happy when a Negress sings: what summits would I not reach if *my own life* made the subject of the melody" (p. 38).

<sup>17</sup> Against Fredric Jameson, for example, who writes that "it is characteristic of Sartre's way of dealing with such literary problems that he should tell an anecdote to demonstrate the impossibility of anecdotes, that he should possess the means to make this lived time spring drearily from the page at the same time that he is demonstrating how irreducible it is to language" (1961, p. 25). I'll return to this point in my discussion of Kermode's reading of the novel below.

and a legitimate form of understanding. Roquentin's "live or tell" motivates the events of the novel; it is not a solution to them. Once we diagnose the nature of Roquentin's crisis, we have to see this and everything else he says not as epigraphs or philosophical theses, but instead claims made from inside a particular and likely problematic mood and mindset. Thus let me sketch how I interpret both the nausea and Roquentin's larger existential crisis, as well as the relation between them.

First, then, Roquentin's existential crisis. Though it is thematized only in the later portions of the novel, after various episodes of the nausea, it seems to me that Roquentin's crisis of purpose is actually more important, and indeed at least a condition of the possibility, if not the cause, of the nausea. Roquentin has isolated himself in Bouville to write a biography of Rollebon. He has no family, no friends, and his only personal interactions are with the proprietress of the Railwaymen's Rendezvous, with whom he occasionally has sex (p. 6), and with the self-taught man, whom he mocks mercilessly in his diary. Indeed his isolation is perhaps best exemplified by his agreeing to spend time with the self-taught man, despite loathing him, apparently in order to have something, anything, to do outside of his writing. Roquentin declares that "Rollebon now represents the only justification for my existence" (p. 70). Midway through the novel, though, he abandons writing the biography, leaving himself with no such justification. This, in and of itself, is unremarkable, however. Roquentin seems to think that practically no one else's existence is justified either. He speaks of the young couple in the cafe, for example, as needing to "find something else to veil the enormous absurdity of their existence" (p. 111). What is remarkable is only that Roquentin, unlike everyone else, notices this lack of justification. At times, not noticing seems equated (though perhaps only sardonically) with having a justification—reducing it to a subjective psychological fact ("it was psychology, the kind they write about in books"; p. 84). Roquentin looks, for a long time, at a portrait of one of the city's past luminaries, saying of the man: "The slightest doubt had never crossed those magnificent grey eyes," and "He had never looked any further into himself: he was a leader," and thus he, like the other leaders portrayed, "had a right to everything: to life, to work,

to wealth, to command, to respect, and, finally, to immortality.’<sup>18</sup> It might seem, then, that Roquentin's existential crisis is really a subjective matter: it's not that various people's existences are or aren't objectively justified, but rather that he's lost his ability to interpret his life, as, having given up writing the biography of Rollebon, he no longer has any goal or purpose. This is to suggest, despite MacIntyre's seeing Sartre as an opponent, that the novel is actually in line with the wider analysis in *After Virtue*:

When someone complains—as do some of those who attempt or commit suicide—that his or her life is meaningless, he or she is often and perhaps characteristically complaining that the narrative of their life has become unintelligible to them, that it lacks any point, any movement towards a climax or a *telos*. Hence the point of doing any one thing rather than another at crucial junctures in their lives seems to such persons to have been lost. (p. 217)

*Nausea*, as novels do, arrives at this point by way of plot and psychological description, not argument and analysis, however. In fact, the argument nested within the novel—“live or tell”—is a red herring, seen as inadequate when understood within the larger dramatic framing of the story.

Roquentin denies his problem has anything to do with purpose, however. He tells the self-taught man that “there is nothing, nothing, absolutely no reason for existing.” The self-taught man interprets this claim as one might: “you undoubtedly mean, Monsieur, that life is without a goal?” But Roquentin thinks to himself that this is wrong: “Certainly not, that is not the question I am asking myself” (p. 112).

Instead, he comes to equate the realization that one is not justified in one's existence with the very realization *that* one exists. Other people, “they don't know they exist” (p. 122). They can, by Roquentin's way of seeing things, therefore delude themselves into thinking their lives have meaning. Previously, he had thought this way as well: “Never, until these last few days, had I understood the meaning of 'existence.' I was like the others [...] I said, like them, 'The ocean *is* green; that white speck up there *is* a seagull,' but I didn't feel that it existed or that the seagull was an 'existing seagull'; usually existence hides itself” (p. 127, see too p. 124). Now, though, he realizes: “I hadn't the right to exist. I had appeared by chance, I existed like a stone, a plant or a microbe” (p. 84). “Every existing thing is born without reason, prolongs itself out of weakness and dies by chance,” he declares (p. 133). The nausea is equated with this

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<sup>18</sup> pp. 83-4. See too Sartre's story “The Childhood of a Leader” (1975, pp. 84-144).

realization. “So this is Nausea,” he concludes, “I exist—the world exists—and I know that the world exists. That's all” (p. 122).

From Roquentin's own perspective, then, the nausea comes first. He realizes, due to the heightened experiences of the pebble at the shore, the waiter's suspenders, and so forth, that objects exist—that is, that they exist contingently and without purpose. He then extends this thinking to himself, bringing about an existential crisis. From our perspective as readers, however, it seems to me we should think the order is in fact the opposite: he has lost the ability to interpret the ongoing course of his life, which leaves him in crisis. Roquentin is an unreliable narrator in the banal sense that we all are inasmuch as we are not necessarily best located to interpret the meaning of our own experiences. While Roquentin's own stated reason for starting his diary is to understand the changes that first befell him while holding the pebble on the shore, and only later does he think he has lost his life's purpose, anyone else can see that already at the beginning of the novel his ennui is being displaced onto innocent objects. It is from within this particular mood that Roquentin makes the strange mistake of extending the category of justification to material objects. This allows him to reinterpret his own crisis as a weighty philosophical discovery. But asking after the “justification” of material objects is just a category mistake. And when Roquentin has a real epiphany in the novel's final scene of the value of art, he regains the possibility of assigning himself goals and interpreting his actions in relation to them.

To read the novel in this manner is to suggest that many of Roquentin's philosophical “realizations” aren't that because they are false. It is thus perhaps to downplay a certain kind of philosophical worth the novel is sometimes thought to have and to play up its psychological insight into the rather ordinary phenomenon of a hermeneutic crisis. That's not to say that it lacks philosophical insight—it's just to suggest that its insight is not of the most abstract, metaphysical sort, into the arbitrariness of being, but anchored instead always in our particularly human way of being-in-the-world.<sup>19</sup>

<sup>19</sup> Elsewhere, I use this interpretation of *Nausea* as a springboard to a Heideggerian conception of the narrative self, and in fact I think the novel owes more to Heidegger's *Being and Time* than to Sartre's later *Being and Nothingness*. See “Reading Being: A Narrativist Interpretation of Heideggerian Everydayness,” Part II in Roth 2014.

#### IV. Reframing the Narrative Self

*Nausea*, in the particular ways that it evades the contemporary conceptual apparatus of narrativity, should lead us to rethink the common conception of the narrative self. Philosophical debates have often been preoccupied with the question of whether our lives and selves, treated as objects, are narrative in form. And so we see MacIntyre face the objection, for example, that real lives don't have beginnings and ends, and his overly glib response: "one is tempted to reply, 'But have you never heard of death?'"<sup>20</sup> MacIntyre and Strawson are right that Roquentin, Sartre, and *Nausea* all reject this notion of the narrative self. Here they can marshal their evidence of Roquentin musing on the lack of objective beginnings and ends, the perverting shaping of telling, and so forth. And *this* criticism—of the notion that our lives just *are* stories—is right, I think. The idea that most of our lives literally enact a plot diagram, say, of exposition, rising action, complication, climax, and resolution is almost farcical. MacIntyre's reliance on the nearly archaic word "quest" is telling (pp. 219ff). Some of our lives may indeed involve a fairly reliable search for happiness or wealth or knowledge, but most of our activities aren't as dramatic as *that*, but instead usually banal, repetitive, and irrelevant to the larger course or meaning of our lives.<sup>21</sup> Any epoch defined by people on quests has long since passed. Probably the notion that there ever really was such an epoch is empty nostalgia.

I take it as evidence that all of this seems to miss the point, however. Are our lives narratives? This seems the wrong question. Rather: do we take them as narratives? Do we interpret our lives in the same way we interpret narratives? Such would be the idea not that our lives are, divorced from any viewpoint, narrative in form, but that we necessarily understand or take them that way, that our manner of being sorts the world out according to narrative threads. This would allow us to admit that under one

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<sup>20</sup> p. 212. MacIntyre's rhetorical frame (that this response is merely "tempting") here covers over the fact that he does respond this way and doesn't obviously have any more substantial response.

<sup>21</sup> I would suggest, as a better alternative to "quest," the concept of "the search" from Walker Percy's novel *The Moviegoer*. MacIntyre might respond that "search" is not open-ended enough. We quest after the holy grail, something whose appearance and perhaps even existence we're unsure of (p. 219). We search for our car keys or a missing hiker. Invoking "the," rather than "a" search, as Percy's novel does, perhaps overcomes this objection; the definite article inflates the term's importance and abstraction.

(vaguely scientific) description our lives are contingent, formless, and usually undramatic, while at the same time admitting, when we're not abstracting to a more distanced and objective perspective on ourselves, that our lives seem to have shape and intelligibility. If it is we who are narrativizing rather than our lives that are narratives, then our attention and concerns act as the filter which emphasizes moments of importance while passing over the routine and banal.

David Carr, in his *Time, Narrative, and History* (which is woefully ignored in the recent literature), reframes the questions of narrativity exceptionally well along these lines. The relation between narrative and the "real world" is miscast and misunderstood, he writes, "By stressing the discontinuity between 'art' and 'life'" and taking narrative as a form of representation (p. 16):

In discussing the "representational" character of narrative, theorists such as [Louis] Mink and Hayden White are sometimes unclear on exactly what it is in their view that narrative tries, but is constitutionally unable, to represent. "The world," "real events" are terms they often use. But this way of speaking introduces a very misleading equivocation. Narratives, whether historical or fictional, are typically about, and thus purport to represent, not the world as such, reality as a whole, but specifically *human* reality. But when the term "reality" is left unqualified, we are tempted by the strong naturalist prejudice that what counts as reality must be physical reality. What this suggests is either the random activity and collision of blind forces, devoid of order and significance, or, alternatively, a reality totally ordered along rigorous causal lines without a flaw or gap in its mechanism. These two notions are of course incompatible with each other, but what they have in common is the idea that in either case "reality" is utterly indifferent to human concerns. Things simply happen, one after the other, randomly or according to their own laws. Any significance, meaning, or value ascribed to events is projected onto them by *our* concerns, prejudices, and interests, and in no way attaches to the events themselves. [...]

All this confuses the issue because, as these theorists very well know, what stories and histories represent or depict is not purely physical events but human experiences, actions, and sufferings, including the human activity of projecting meaning onto or finding meaning in physical and other events. (pp. 19-20)

The right question to ask is not whether the events of our lives, under an objectifying description, have the shape of artistically wrought stories. The right question to ask is whether, from the perspective of lived experience, we see and organize our lives in such a manner. Whether, to put it even more strongly, our notion of what we are as people, and how people differ from other entities in the world, is ultimately grounded in such a way of organizing experience. Above, I made the initial distinction between the notion that our lives are narratives and the notion that we make or take them as such. Carr writes: "the narrative character or structure of our experience and action is not something that simply *va de soi*. Life can be regarded as a constant *effort*, even a struggle, to maintain or restore narrative coherence in the face

of an ever-threatening, impending chaos at all levels” (p. 91). Working from Husserl's account of temporality and time-consciousness, Carr criticizes the tempting analogy between isolated events and sense datums or, better, criticizes the notion of isolated events in the same way that others have criticized the notion of sense datums. They are abstractions, not building blocks (pp. 24, 66). Heidegger, following Husserl, offers a well known set of examples:

We never really first perceive a throng of sensations, e.g., tones and noises, in the appearance of things—as this thing-concept alleges; rather we hear the storm whistling in the chimney, we hear the three-motored plane, we hear the Mercedes in immediate distinction from the Volkswagen. Much closer to us than all sensations are the things themselves. We hear the door shut in the house and never hear acoustical sensations or even mere sounds. In order to hear a bare sound we have to listen away from things, divert our ear from them, i.e., listen abstractly. (1971, pp. 25-6)

The novelist Don DeLillo offers an even richer example:

She was in town, driving down a hilly street of frame houses, and saw a man sitting on his porch, ahead of her, through trees and shrubs, arms spread, a broad-faced blondish man, lounging. She felt in that small point in time, a flyspeck quarter second or so, that she saw him complete. His life flew open to her passing glance. A lazy and manipulative man, in real estate, in fairview condos by a mosquito lake. She knew him. She saw into him. He was there, divorced and drink-haunted, emotionally distant from his kids, his sons, two sons, in school blazers, in the barest blink.

A voice recited the news on the radio.

When the car moved past the house, in the pull of the full second, she understood that she was not looking at a seated man but at a paint can placed on a board that was balanced between two chairs. The white and yellow can was his face, the board his arms and the mind and heart of the man were in the air somewhere, already lost in the voice of the news reader on the radio. (2001, p. 72)

We don't merely hear a car rather than a set of sounds; Heidegger's example is still abstracted from any wider context in which we might actually hear a car. Nor do we merely mistake a pile of junk for a person. Rather, we ascribe character and story to that gestalt, experience it most immediately in a richly meaningful form. In ordinary experience, we don't witness isolated events, one after another, then put them together: “The bedrock of human events, then, is not sequence but configured sequence” (Carr, p. 44).

Reframed in this way, it's not clear that narrativizing is falsifying. Bad faith, in Sartre's terminology, occurs most often when being-for-itself takes itself as being-in-itself. This can happen, as in his famous scenarios, when we slip entirely into social roles, behaving in a certain way because that is how one in that situation—one playing that role—typically acts. Thereby we avoid taking responsibility

for our behavior (1969, pp. 55-67). But simply to understand one's self and one's situation in narrative terms isn't necessarily to fall into bad faith. This happens only if reifies one's self into a thing—a thing rigidly defined, a thing that *is*—instead of understanding, much more provisionally, that one is always projecting an understanding of oneself and where one is going.

This suggests, then, that the appropriate master equation or analogy is not that a life is or is like a story, but that living is or is like reading. Narrative is of philosophical and phenomenological interest not because we think back on our pasts like we think back on a novel that we've just finished reading. MacIntyre writes: "Stories are lived before they are told—except in fiction" (p. 212). But isn't it part of our character as self-conscious beings that we don't live, then tell, and keep these acts isolated from one another, but see the larger, emerging structure of our lives even as we live them? Don't we sometimes act *for* narrative reasons?<sup>22</sup> Considering the sweep and architecture of a novel as a whole exactly *doesn't* seem to say anything about the meaning of our lives. Instead it leads us into more formal concerns unrelated to the structure of living. But the process of actually reading a novel (reading rather than having read), of finding oneself in the midst of a hermeneutic situation, projecting the future plot, receiving new information, entering into and abstracting beyond characters' perspectives—this tells us much about our own situations and the fact that our self-understanding is always located, projecting, fragmented, and progressive, not retrospective and whole. Perhaps, then, we need to shift away from talk of lives as wholes to a consideration of our grasp of the narrative contours of particular moments. Only in exceptional circumstances (near-death experiences, the writing of autobiography, truly off-putting self-indulgence) do most of us probably cast an eye over the shape of our entire lives. But our understanding of individual situations and our motivations for acting within them are ridden through by narrative and intertextual concerns.

## **V. Against Didacticism**

I have yet to say much about how Sartre himself understood *Nausea*, despite the title of the essay.

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<sup>22</sup> See Velleman 2005. I develop this claim through a reading of Rousseau's *Confessions* in Roth 2012.

I admit that I don't much care about the answer to this question, and I'm not sure that one can substantiate the claim that Sartre viewed all narrative as a manifestation of bad faith. Instead, I think Sartre's misreading of his own work is more categorical, that his theory of literary interpretation is flawed. It's clear, though, that Sartre himself did care about this sort of question. In his autobiography *The Words*, he identifies Roquentin with himself completely and suggests how he understood the novel's larger meaning, while ironically belying some embarrassment<sup>23</sup> looking back:

At the age of thirty, I executed the masterstroke of writing in *Nausea*—quite sincerely, believe me—about the bitter unjustified existence of my fellowmen and of exonerating my own. I was Roquentin. I used him to show, without complacency, the texture of my life. I was *I*, the elect, chronicler of Hell [...] I was impossible myself and differed from the others only by the mandate to give expression to that impossibility [...] I was a prisoner of that obvious contradiction, but I did not see it, I saw the world through it.<sup>24</sup>

In his *War Diaries*, Sartre discusses *Nausea* as if it were a treatise: “In *La Nausée*, I assert that the past is not...”; “I appeared to be saying, in *La Nausée*, that [adventure] didn't exist. But that's wrong...”; “I'd already explained all that in *La Nausée*” (1999, pp. 209, 198, 283).

More importantly, in his “What Is Literature?,” written some two decades before, say, Roland Barthes's “Death of the Author,” Sartre emphatically endorses authorial intentionality. He begins by making a strong distinction between poetry and prose. Poets treat words as things in themselves, not as signs, and so they don't traffic in meaning at all, since their words don't refer to anything beyond themselves. “Poets refuse to *utilize* language,” Sartre writes (1998, p. 29). Prose is then *just* a utilization of language and *only* about something beyond itself. This leads Sartre to the conclusion that a prose writer is always communicating something and his affirmation of authorial intentionality as the locus of meaning for a text:

And if prose is never anything but the privileged instrument of a certain undertaking, if it is only the poet's business to contemplate words in a disinterested fashion, then one has the right to ask the prose-writer from the very start, “What is your aim in writing?” (p. 36)

Even more strongly, he goes on to argue that a prose writer always knows the meaning of his or her texts

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<sup>23</sup> That's how I take the interjection in the first sentence. Elsewhere, however, Sartre names the novel first when asked how he wanted people to remember him (Charlesworth 1976, p. 154).

<sup>24</sup> 1964, pp. 251-2. In his *War Diaries* as well, Sartre identifies Roquentin (as well as Mathieu from the *The Age of Reason*) with himself (1999, p. 338).

in advance and never discovers anything in them: “he knows them [his words] before writing them down [...] Thus the writer meets everywhere only *his* knowledge, *his* will, *his* plans, in short, himself” (pp. 50-51). Here is the philosopher’s way of reading fiction at its worst: a novel has a meaning that exists behind it, perhaps even before it, and its purpose is merely to dramatize that meaning. Once it is extracted, it’s unclear that the novel has any remaining value. Often even the complexities of dramatization are ignored, as in MacIntyre’s and Strawson’s readings of *Nausea* when a character is understood to simply speak the meaning of the novel.<sup>25</sup> One might call this the disquotational theory of literary meaning: find the most epigraphic line of dialogue in the novel and remove the quotation marks. Indeed it may be worse than this. The novel may only be a bad, imperfect instantiation of the meaning it points back to, a meaning which might be better—more purely—presented in treatise form. Cynically, then, the novel might have value only inasmuch as one can find more readers for novels than treatises.

Affirming these basic hermeneutic practices, Kermode takes a reading of *Nausea* as far as one can in his *The Sense of an Ending*. He too starts from the claim that Sartre distrusts fictions. “The absurd dishonesty of all prefabricated patterns is cardinal to his beliefs,” Kermode writes (2000, p. 133). And so he argues that *Nausea* represents the struggle between the ideal and real, fiction and contingency. But since he starts from Sartre’s philosophy, he can’t but conclude that philosophy is true and fiction only useful inasmuch as it gets the philosophy right, out-and-out wrong inasmuch as it misrepresents it: “Insofar as it [*Nausea*] gives structure and form to the metaphysical beliefs expressed in the treatise [*Being and Nothingness*], it both represents and belies them.”<sup>26</sup> The interpretive path remains one-way:

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<sup>25</sup> This way of reading might be traced back to Aristotle’s claim in chapter six of *The Poetics* that the “thought” of a tragedy consists in the actual statements and arguments uttered by the characters. Stephen Halliwell insists that one shouldn’t confuse the thought internal to a tragedy with the poet’s own guiding thought, however, and thinks Aristotle might not embrace any concept at all of the latter (Aristotle, pp. 38, 96, 171-3). By contrast, Paul Ricoeur writes that “‘Thought,’ in this narrative context, may assume various meanings. It may characterize, for instance, following Aristotle’s *Poetics*, the ‘theme’ (*dianoia*) that accompanies the ‘fable’ or ‘plot’ (*mythos*) of a tragedy” (p. 175 in Mitchell 1981). We might even reach all the way back to Plato here. Recall the opening of Book III of the *Republic*, for example, where Socrates reads off countless lines of poetry as the sorts of things that need to be barred from the city, seemingly taking mere inclusion of a statement in a poetic work to suggest sanction. Of course Plato’s own dramatic maneuverings complicate this situation.

<sup>26</sup> p. 137. Kermode (and Murdoch, whom I’ll discuss momentarily) straightforwardly takes the novel to present the philosophical thinking of *Being and Nothingness*, despite the fact they were written in the opposite order, with some time in between.

“In all these ways, then, the novel falsifies the philosophy” (p. 139). Never is there any talk of the treatise falsifying the novel, and indeed that seems a strange thought, but perhaps it is a thought we should have.<sup>27</sup> Kermode’s reading remains penetrating in that it sees these interpretive issues as themselves integral parts of the workings of the novel. They are not a mere failure on Sartre’s or the novel’s part, then, but structural: “it [*Nausea*] reflects a philosophy it must, in so far as it possesses novel form, belie” (pp. 144-5). Finally his reading is unnecessarily limited by the assumptions of authorial intentionality and unidirectionality in the relationship between philosophy and literature. “The novel, then, provides a reduction of the world different from that of the treatise. It has to lie. Words, thoughts, patterns of word and thought, are enemies of truth,” he writes (p. 140). And so he agrees with Strawson that Sartre views fiction as “distrusted” yet “humanly indispensable” (Kermode, p. 150).

Playing the role of a critic of his own novels, it's clear that Sartre agrees. “I'm perfectly well aware that in a novel it's necessary to lie in order to be true,” he writes (1999, p. 158). Giving up authorial intentionality, it seems to me that Sartre’s novels don’t distrust themselves in these ways, however. As mentioned, *Nausea* becomes a more traditional novel as it progresses, its diary form quickly becoming a forgettable bit of artifice as it gets caught up in longer and longer stretches of naturalistic narration. Most of Sartre’s other fictions display no ironies at all about their status. To the extent that Sartre’s philosophy and fiction are in tension, I’d suggest we conclude not that the fiction is falsifying, but instead that he’s a better novelist than his own theories and most specifically his theory of prose allow. Once one makes such a move, his own stated interpretation of the novel and identification of Roquentin with himself become mere anecdotes from literary history, curiosities that we'd be better off ignoring. *Nausea* seems to me a somewhat embarrassing novel if about the horror of contingency, but a very good one if about a man in hermeneutic crisis. Having lost his sense of where his own life is going, Roquentin starts to view the justification of everything's existence as unmoored—even mere physical objects, to

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<sup>27</sup> Milan Kundera writes, in a discussion of Sartre, “This is still the old ineradicable error, the belief that the relation between philosophy and literature goes only one way, that insofar as 'professionals of narration' are obliged to have ideas, they can only borrow them from 'professionals of thought'” (2006, p. 63).

which applying the concept of justification seems in fact merely confused. Similarly, Camus's *The Stranger* seems to me somewhat tedious if taken as a polemic about the absurdity of existence but very good if taken as a black comedy about an inarticulate man. Only if we view characters strictly as puppets manipulated by authors for polemical purposes (as Sartre himself seems to) need we conclude that existentialist novels are about existentialism, or any novel about its novelist's beliefs.<sup>28</sup> Instead, we might view characters not as objects, but instead structures of sensibility—indeed ways of being, of existing—that we can work to inhabit.<sup>29</sup> And so even if one is finally unsympathetic to Sartre's or Camus's philosophical program, one might think that they had real talents as fiction writers, and exactly part of what constitutes such talent is putting more or other on the page than one conceptually intends. Indeed, Sartre dramatizes a moment in *Nausea* which speaks exactly against his own later theory, in which Roquentin writes a sentence only to have its meaning escape him:

I had thought out this sentence, at first it had been a small part of myself. Now it was inscribed on the paper, it took sides against me. I didn't recognize it any more. I couldn't conceive it again. It was there, in front of me; in vain for me to trace some sign of its origin. Anyone could have written it. But *I* ... I wasn't sure I wrote it. (p. 95)

According to Sartre's theory of prose, the meaning of a sentence can't "takes sides against" its author—it just means what the author wants it to. Elsewhere, Sartre describes "the writer who does not want to be responsible" for what he or she writes as a "schizophrenic dreamer," and that such is the "inverted and inauthentic dream of freedom."<sup>30</sup> But when he actually writes fictional prose, he dramatizes his alter-ego's realization that things are more complicated.

The overarching idea that philosophy's truths are truer than fiction's truths is wrongheaded, I would suggest. One of the great attractions of the existentialist philosopher/novelists was the apparent

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<sup>28</sup> I'm reminded here of Curtis White's lament that his friends, when asked about *Saving Private Ryan*, seemed unable to think of the characters as anything but real people, that is, to also think of them as part of a structure of meaning manipulated by Stephen Spielberg (2003, p. 42). One thinks that we're in rather bad shape if, at the other extreme, we can *only* think about characters as such puppets.

<sup>29</sup> And so what I'm defending here is a certain kind of psychologically realist novel, though "psychology" is not a broad enough category. Better: what Murdoch (following French critics, she says) calls "the phenomenological novel" (1997, p. 101). See too Farrell in Gibson 2007, pp. 254-6. There are other arguments to be made for the philosophical importance of other versions of the novel.

<sup>30</sup> 1992, note p. 46. See too p. 53.

thought that the novel might be a better venue for thinking than the straightforward treatise if our thinking (and living) in fact isn't itself straightforward. Iris Murdoch, herself a philosopher/novelist and a great promoter for existentialism, seemed to give in to these parochial notions in her early encounters with existentialism, writing that "Sartre's novels and plays have a strictly didactic purpose."<sup>31</sup> A decade later, however, Murdoch criticized Sartre's theory of prose and argued that literature might help us recover from the reductions modern thought has performed on our lives. "We have been left with far too shallow and flimsy an idea of human personality," she writes in "Against Dryness."<sup>32</sup> And so now "We need more concepts than our philosophies have furnished us with [...] We need more concepts in terms of which to picture the substance of our being" (p. 293). But if it is a categorical, formal difference in approach between philosophy and literature that has allowed the former to impoverish us and that gives the latter hope, surely it is not further concepts that we need at all. Better: "It is here that literature is so important, especially since it has taken over some of the tasks formerly performed by philosophy. Through literature we can re-discover a sense of the density of our lives" (p. 294). Sense, not concepts: that is, literature has an ability philosophy lacks, to imply or perform or produce thoughts rather than literally inscribing them onto the page. To show rather than tell. The mistake that MacIntyre and Strawson make in reading *Nausea*, and that philosophers all too frequently make in reading fiction generally, is to think that the meaning of a fiction must be right there on the page and not require any critical work greater than quotation for extraction. Philosophers are well accustomed now, both personally and professionally, to the charge that they have no real expertise or that their field has no use at all. In turn, though, they have a bad habit of leveling the same charge against criticism and the study of literature. Brian Leiter, for example, in an influential if controversial statement, writes with hubris: "Whatever the limitations of 'analytic' philosophy, it is clearly far preferable to what has befallen humanistic fields like English, which

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<sup>31</sup> Iris Murdoch, "The Novelist as Metaphysician," in 1997, p. 103. I steal "encounters" from editor Peter Conradi's section heading. The later section heading is telling as well: "Can Literature Help Cure the Ills of Philosophy?"

<sup>32</sup> 1997, p. 287. See too Kundera's "The Depreciated Legacy of Cervantes": "If it is true that philosophy and science have forgotten about man's being, it emerges all the more plainly that with Cervantes a great European art took shape that is nothing other than the investigation of this forgotten being" (1990, pp. 4-5).

have largely collapsed as serious disciplines while becoming the repository for all the world's bad philosophy, bad social science, and bad history” (2011). It’s possible to think that we can do without the talents of literary critics and that one can read the meaning of a novel right off the page only if one thinks that literature’s functioning is no more complicated rhetorically than philosophy’s. Such a view often seems to take the phenomenology of reading to consist of nothing but the reception of acts of communication and in no need of closer formal and critical attention. If we’re interested not in the self as an object with a narrative shape, but instead the manner of our being inasmuch as we understand ourselves through narrativizing, then it is perhaps literature with its rhetorical complications and not philosophy which will allow us to explore this phenomenology. And so the quotation from Murdoch I’ve placed atop this essay: “Literature entertains, it does many things, and philosophy does one thing” (1997, p. 4).

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