

Writing Emotion in Sartre's *Nausea*

This paper concerns the relationships between ideas about human emotion in two works published the late 1930s by Jean-Paul Sartre, the essay "A Sketch for a Theory of Emotions" (1939) and the novel *Nausea* (1938). In its first part, it examines how the literary text illustrates or expands on the philosophical text and vice versa. Secondly, it will concentrate on how the form of *Nausea*, a personal journal, provides a fruitful opportunity for Sartre to elaborate on his theory of emotions, as well as how this literary form limits his ability to express his theory. I will attempt to correct a tendency in Sartre criticism, particularly in the wave of works published in the years leading up to his centenary in 2005, of treating his early works as precursors not only to his later literary and philosophical writings, but also to his political writings after World War II.¹ I will argue that since *Being and Nothingness*, begun during Sartre's wartime imprisonment, marks the beginning of his strong political engagement, his work on emotion in the 1930s we see how before he was mobilized his intellectual concerns lay elsewhere.²

Before I begin my analysis, let me situate the two texts in question. The "Theory of Emotions" is an essay Sartre published in a journal called *Actualités scientifiques et industrielles : Essais philosophiques* which published mainly technical articles about scientific research. Sartre adopts a technical tone in his article, beginning with a long review of current psychological literature on emotion before presenting his view, which blends psychology and philosophy, particularly phenomenology, to form his own

¹ This is not to say that critics take it as a given uniformly that Sartre was as politically engaged before the war as afterward. In his Introduction to *Jean-Paul Sartre: Basic Writings*, Stephen Preist puts Sartre's political position before the war succinctly: "Before the war, Sartre was an individualist in theory and in practice. His philosophy and literature treated human subjects as atomic agents... Despite the anti-Fascist sentiments of 'The Wall' and 'Childhood of a Leader,' and despite his mocking cynicism towards the middle classes in *Nausea*, his own life remained that of an essentially apolitical writer of growing reputation." Stephen Preist, *Jean-Paul Sartre: Basic Writings*, London: Routledge, 2001.

² An exemplary misunderstanding can be found in Paul Desalmand's *Sartre, s'est-il toujours trompé?* where Desalmand claims that the way the main character of *Nausea* criticizes men in power indicates some political motivation, on the part of both the character and the author: "...dans *La Nausée*, il dénonce les bourgeois de Bouville, les *salauds*, bien installés dans une fonction qu'on leur a assignée et dont ils ne remittent pas en cause le bien-fondé. Au moment où il dénonce le confort consistant à se percevoir comme mandaté, Sartre est lui-même bien installé dans la mission qu'il s'est donné." Paul Desalmand's *Sartre, s'est-il toujours trompé? ou l'Impromptu de Vénissieux*. Sainte-Étienne: le passe du vent, 2005.

phenomenological psychology. The prominent place Sartre gives to Freudian psychology at this stage is striking in the light of his work after World War II, in which he becomes highly critical of Freudian psychoanalysis. After all, a conscious rejection of Freud is a linchpin of the methodology Sartre uses in the many literary biographies he publishes after the war, mainly on 19th-century literary figures like Baudelaire and Flaubert.³ In 1943's *Being and Nothingness*, and again in the 1948 critical work of literary criticism *What is Literature?* Sartre claims that bad faith can only ever be conscious, never a deception of some hidden part of the mind, and that thus there is no such thing as a Freudian unconscious.^{4,5} This approach to the workings of the mind goes hand-in-hand with his rejection of the mind-body divide and idealist notions of the essences of objects. In 1938, the Freudian unconscious still exists for Sartre, and it still plays an important role in the psychological approach Sartre presents in his Theory of Emotions. The theory itself is the following: Sartre claims that human emotion is not merely a reaction of the individual to particular stimuli. Instead, he says, the individual catalyzes emotion that precedes his existence in the world. In emotion, a "magical" transformation of the world occurs that the subject experiences as exterior to him, although he contributes to its manifesting itself in reality. Sartre takes the idea in Husserl that there are essences perceptible by the mind while rejecting the idea that a transcendental ego constitutes these essences, as well as the idea in Heidegger that being, which Sartre reads as consciousness, is only understandable in the context of a person's being-in-the-world. For Sartre, the essence of emotion precedes and intervenes in the individual's developing essence, but that essence can only develop in a particular person in a particular world.

³ *Saint Genet, comédien et martyr* (1952) *Baudelaire* (1946), *L'idiot de la famille : Gustave Flaubert de 1821-1857* (1971) etc.

⁴ "Psychoanalysis has not gained anything for us since in order to overcome bad faith, it has established between the unconscious and conscious an autonomous consciousness in bad faith... The very essence of the reflexive idea of hiding something from oneself implies the unity of one and the same psychic mechanism and consequently a double activity in the heart of the unity, tending on one hand to maintain and locate the thing to be concealed and on the other hand to repress and disguise it." Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Time*. New York: Washington Square Press, 1956. Original edition Gallimard, 1943. 94

⁵ Sartre is particularly unimpressed with Surrealist claims to unreality: "Any means were good for escaping consciousness of self and consequently of one's situation in the world. He adopted psycho-analysis because it presented consciousness as being invaded by parasitical outgrowths whose origin is elsewhere... It was a matter of exploding the world, and as dynamite was not enough... the *real* destruction of all that exists was impossible, because it would simply cause everything to pass from one real state to another real state..." Jean-Paul Sartre, *What Is Literature?* Bristol: J.W. Arrowsmith, 1967.

The novel *Nausea* is considered one of the great works of Existentialist literature, and Sartre thought of it as one of his most accomplished pieces of writing. It is about a young man named Antoine Roquetin who has something of a mental breakdown while writing his Ph.D. thesis in French History. After being isolated doing research in a small town called Bouville (literally “Mudville”) for many years, individual objects begin to fascinate and sometimes terrorize Antoine, in a way that demonstrates Sartre’s existential and phenomenological views without ever stating them explicitly. Looking at emotion in *Nausea* allows us to examine Sartre’s thought as it stood in 1938, between an as yet unpoliticized existentialism and a phenomenology that still takes the insights of Freudian psychology seriously. I will show this first by discussing how the texts treat certain key emotions, then by looking at Antoine’s relationship to objects, then by talking about the role of the journal form in how Antoine talks about the emotions he experiences.

Let us begin with anger, how it functions in *Nausea* and the “Theory of Emotions” and how it does not. The emotion of anger has a central role in both works, showing itself to have significant transformative qualities. Antoine is most often angry during his interactions with a man known only as the Autodidact, an irritating Bouville local he sees nearly every day at the municipal library. The man has taken up the project of reading a section of the library from A to Z, a parody of learning that Antoine finds at turns appalling and fascinating.⁶ At one moment, the man sends Antoine into a rage. The rage is partly due to the fact that Antoine is no longer able to write his thesis, but also because he feels powerless to correct the Autodidact’s strange, unreasonable awe of him for being a doctoral student. Antoine describes the feeling of anger at the Autodidact as “going through” him, saying: “The anger went through me like a vortex (“en tourbillonnant”), something like a shudder, an effort on the part of my consciousness to create some reaction, of fighting against the lowering of the temperature.”⁷ Anger, then, comes in phases to Antoine’s consciousness: there is the initial arrival of the feeling (“like a vortex”), then a bodily reaction to that feeling (“a shudder”), then a reaction of the consciousness to both the feeling and the body’s reaction (interpretation of lowered

⁶ The issue is somewhat outside the scope of my argument, but there is a great deal of commentary on the fact that the Autodidact identifies himself as a Humanist, while Antoine refuses to consider himself one.

⁷ All translations from the French are my own. Jean-Paul Sartre, *La Nausée*. Paris : Gallimard, 1938. 165

temperature). We see these same three steps in Sartre's discussion of anger in the "Theory of Emotions."

The description of anger we find in "Theory of Emotions," is at odds with how the main character of *Nausea* understands it on a number of counts, in the sense that Antoine is in control of his emotions early in the novel and in the sense that they control him later in the novel. This brings us back to the problematic idea of the unconscious in Sartre. For Sartre the philosopher, anger has a physical base without being a part of human instinct, and is a part of consciousness without being a choice. Physical and psychological manifestations of emotion are reactions to that emotion, not its cause, and neither can fully explain what emotion *is*. The wave of emotion Antoine feels with the Autodidact corresponds to this conception of anger in that Antoine's thoughts have little to do with the onset of his feelings: mild irritation simply erupts into rage.

In another of Sartre's works of the late 1930s, "L'enfance d'un chef," published in 1939, we see anger in a much more destructive role, when a young man becomes active in a right-wing group that attacks Jews on the street in retaliation for what they consider the conspiracy of Leon Blum's presidency. In his autobiography *Sartre*, Denis Bertholet says that Sartre considered this story an "anti-autobiography" in the sense that the protagonist, Lucien Fleurier, comes to his position of deep political conservatism under the influence of his father, whereas Sartre came to his leftist position in part because he was raised without a father.⁸ If we consider that Antoine's life and surroundings based on Sartre's own isolated conditions while writing his own doctoral thesis, we can how two models of anger emerged in his writing of the 1930s. One is loosely biographical, in which anger has no social dimension and operates only in relation to the self, and the other is loosely anti-autobiographical, in which anger is a social emotion motivating random acts of violence. In both cases, Sartre concentrates an anger refracted in the self: he even claims that anger has a positive function, allowing us to solve problems unsolvable by conscious reasoning.

⁸ Bertholet reads the character as Sartre's nightmare scenario of the sort of angry young *salaud* he might have become if his father had not died when he was an infant: "Nous retrouvons ici un thème ancien. Sartre a doté Fleurier d'un père. Occasion de se traiter comme l'aurait fait le père imaginaire qu'il porte en lui. En Fleurier, il se déteste et se condamne : il devient pour lui-même le salaud que tout père est censé être pour son fils. » Denis Bertholet, *Sartre*. Paris: Plon, 2000.

In the “Theory of Emotions” Sartre calls this function of anger as “cutting the daily knot,” a phrase that evokes Alexander the Great and the Gordian knot. At one moment, he opposes cutting a knot in a state of emotion to “reasonable calculation:” “Certainly, anger is neither an instinct nor a habit, nor a reasonable calculation. It is a brusque solution to a conflict, a way to cut the daily knot.”⁹ We do not choose anger, but when anger comes upon us, we may benefit from it. He continues: “Thus anger seems like an evasion: the angry subject resembles a man who, instead of being able to untie the knots that bind him, twists in all directions.”¹⁰ Thus, Sartre distinguishes two degrees of anger: one form leads to simple ineffectual twisting, the kind that motivates Lucien to attack people based on blind prejudice. At another level, however, emotion may make it possible to cut the ties that bind and come to a solution that one could not have come to otherwise. To be in the grip of an emotion is to distance oneself from a reasoned solution to a problem, but a socially engaged form is dangerous rather than progressive. Sartre distinguishes the function of emotion from its experience: Antoine, for one, is only a catalyst for the severing of his knots. By the end of the novel, when he is able to make conscious changes to his life, he is not aware that his episodes of emotion have enabled this state of choice. The metaphor of the knot is evocative in this passage as an alternative to reason. Anger as an extra-personal force provides this possibility, but it is only productive when restrained to the role of an internal process.

The most recognizable emotion of the novel, Nausea itself, is not so much of an explosion of emotion as an implosion.¹¹ Under the influence of external stimuli that would appear to be only innocuous everyday objects, Antoine enters into states of immense suffering and confusion. Sartre based Antoine’s experiences of Nausea on his experiment with Mescaline, which had a profound impact on his sensibility, as Denis Bertholet describes it in *Sartre*.¹² The passages where the character has a strong attack of

⁹ Jean-Paul Sartre, « Une Esquisse d’une théorie des émotions. » Paris : Paris : Hermann & Cie, 1939. *Actualités scientifiques et industrielles : Essais philosophiques* #838. 45

¹⁰ Sartre, « Une Esquisse d’une théorie des émotions » 22-23

¹¹ The emotion of Nausea in *Nausea* is always spelled with a capital N, to distinguish it from the mere physical feeling, so I will maintain the same distinction. When Sartre talks about emotion, we must keep in mind that the usual physiological feeling described by the names of emotions often differ greatly from how he thinks they behave within human consciousness. For Sartre, every emotion has a storming quality.

¹² “L’expérience a lieu au matin de février 1935. C’est une catastrophe. Sartre implose... Dira-t-on qu’il devient fou ? Non, sans doute. Il conserve l’usage de ses facultés. Mais il entre le territoire de la folie. Il se déplace au milieu d’un monde qui se métamorphose, dont la forme et la consistance se transforment au gré

Nausea turn into fragmentary, incoherent sentences that use the language of an altered state to illustrate an existential and phenomenological crisis.

A sense of distance between the reasoning individual and the force of emotion he catalyses is not obvious to the protagonist of *Nausea*. It is clear that Antoine does not know what Sartre does about emotion, even though his actions demonstrate Sartre's ideas. Antoine expresses bewilderment with his feelings and a lack of knowledge of psychology, and says he is beginning a journal to try to understand himself better.¹³ Antoine never does manage to pin down Nausea in writing. In fact, his assumptions about himself are sometimes the very ideas Sartre the philosopher attacks in his philosophical work. Although these works are complete unto themselves, reading them in tandem has its advantages; with the novel, we enter the world of the person who experiences emotions; with the theory, we get Sartre's account of their structure.

Sartre says in the "Theory of Emotions" that the subject can do little when in the grip of an emotion besides regulate how that emotion manifests itself in the world. His fictional characters do not know they have even this power. On the contrary, Antoine and Lucien experience emotions as attacks. Antoine describes emotion using the metaphor of an aggressive illness: "Something happened to me, no doubt about it. It came like a sickness, like an ordinary certitude, not as a piece of evidence."¹⁴ Sartre would not agree with Antoine's diagnosis of himself, because for him emotion is nothing like a sickness. In the "Theory of Emotions," he criticizes psychologists for trying to explain emotion through simple physical facts about people in emotional states, saying that they delay the production of knowledge in saying that they need "more facts."¹⁵ Not only do Antoine's emotions not have a source internal to his body. They may originate in his physical environment, but they would never manifest themselves without him. For Sartre,

de quelque volonté maligne." Bertholet *Sartre* 162

¹³ « Je ne pense pas que le métier d'historien dispose à l'analyse psychologique. Dans notre partie, nous n'avons affaire d'à des sentiments entiers sur lesquels on met des noms génériques comme Ambition, Intérêt. Pourtant si j'avais une ombre de connaissance de moi-même, c'est maintenant qu'il faudrait m'en servir. » *La Nausée* 17

¹⁴ Sartre *La Nausée* 17

¹⁵ He criticizes psychologists who concentrate on facts in the following way: « Attendre le fait, c'est, par définition, attendre l'isolé, c'est préférer, par positivisme, l'accident à l'essentiel, le contingent au nécessaire, le désordre à l'ordre ; c'est rejeter, par principe, l'essentiel dans l'avenir : 'c'est pour plus tard, quand nous aurons assez de faits.' » Sartre « Une Esquisse d'une théorie des émotions » 5

emotions have a well-defined internal structure that one does not need infinite testing to prove, because he conceives of this structure philosophically rather than scientifically.

Sartre says that people gripped by emotion benefit from these emotions in ways that they probably do not expect. Emotion may not always solve problems in such a clearly desirable way as the way anger cuts knots, but it can nevertheless have a positive function. Sartre writes: “We can conceive that emotional behavior is in no way a disorder: it is an organized system of means aiming for an end. The system is called upon for masking, replacing, repelling a behavior one does cannot or does not want to perform.”¹⁶ Emotion, even painful emotion, has a constructive function in Sartre, but we must note that this function is felt only at the level of the individual. We are far from the Sartre of *What is Literature?*, in which he will condemn poetry as a genre for involving only the self and not a community of politically engaged readers the way the novel can.¹⁷ It is in this light that I would like to return to the emotion of Nausea in the novel, examining specific episodes where we see it play out.

Antoine thinks of emotion as a disease because he takes physical symptoms for emotions, which is logical considering that his emotions and *real* moments of physical disgust happen simultaneously. At some moments he refers to these attacks as “Nausea,” at others as “disgust,” and at still others as “dirtiness:” He has both physical and emotional terms for the same feeling. When Antoine has an attack of Nausea, he often says that he feels dirty: “I have it, the dirtiness, Nausea. And this time, it’s new: it overtook me in a café.”¹⁸ Sartre explains in his theory how a feeling encompassing both physical and emotional disgust can be triggered by banal surroundings. He says in the “Theory of Emotions” that strong emotions have an absolute quality disconnected from daily life and habitual impressions, even if they exist in no reality but the common one: “Suddenly the emotion is removed from itself, it transcends itself, it is no longer a banal episode of daily life, it is an intuition of the absolute.”¹⁹ Such an absolute will not appear in the Sartre of *Being and Nothingness* onwards, because he will argue that all

¹⁶ Sartre « Une Esquisse d’une théorie des émotions » 20

¹⁷ Sartre claims the poet cannot use words with the force of a prose writer: “Not knowing how to use (words) as a *sign* of an aspect of the world, (the poet) sees in the word the *image* of one of these aspects.” Sartre *What Is Literature?* 6

¹⁸ Jean-Paul Sartre, *La Nausée*. Paris : Gallimard, 1947. 36

¹⁹ Sartre « Une Esquisse d’une théorie des émotions » 44

phenomena as grounded in physical reality: after the 1930s, in his thinking there is no such thing as an absolute apart from the form in which we perceive it.

In talking on daily life, then, Sartre is closer to his roots as phenomenological thinker than he will be a decade later, after *Being and Nothingness* and at the apex of Existentialism. His allowing for a kind of transcendence of daily life also has political implications: In the speech “Existentialism is a Humanism” in 1948 Sartre will insist that since there is nothing outside the present moment, there can be no escape from the simultaneous burden and freedom of total responsibility.²⁰ In addition, in the “Theory of Emotions,” emotions have the power to catch the subject unawares, to allow him to intuit something he does not understand, while in the later Sartre this will be synonymous with bad faith. Moments where Antoine reacts to everyday life with Nausea are often read as part of his emerging existential relationship to the world, realizing that his existence precedes his essence. I am trying to show how the kinds of relationships Antoine develops with the world, particularly with objects, are instead part of a phenomenological, far less political way of thinking we do not see in post-war Sartre.

Antoine often has attacks of Nausea while looking at objects that have no innate disgusting quality. A dress shirt elicits the feeling: “His blue cotton shirt detaches itself from the chocolate wall. That creates Nausea... Or rather, it is Nausea. The Nausea is in me...”²¹ The shirt incarnates this meaning only for a moment. Later, a yellow light produces a similar sensation. The light itself contains the feeling, and Antoine sees his feeling as exterior to himself: “The Nausea stayed there, in the yellow light. I’m happy: this cold is so pure, so pure is this night; aren’t I myself a gust of frozen wind?”²² Antoine’s emotion in this second example blends into this “frozen wind.”

However, we see this role for an object a number of times in *Nausea*. We see it repeatedly in Antoine’s itinerant nostalgia for his years of traveling in Africa when he was younger. He no longer distinguishes the scent of the beard of the friend who invited him to travel, the odor and the act of leaving itself have become so entwined: “...in front of me, set there with a sort of indolence, there was a voluminous, dreary idea. I don’t

²⁰ « ...La première démarche de l’Existentialisme est de mettre tout homme en possession de ce qu’il est et de faire reposer sur lui la responsabilité de son existence. » Jean-Paul Sartre, *L’existentialisme est un humanisme*. Paris : Gallimard, 1948.

²¹ Sartre *La Nausée* 38

²² Sartre *La Nausée* 47

really know what it was, but I couldn't look at it, it disgusted me so much. All of this was mixed up with the perfume of Mercier's beard."²³ The object of disgust can be a human body just as easily as an inanimate object. Antoine is so alienated from the social world that human bodies often appear to him as objects. He is particularly disgusted by a shallow humanism that takes all of humanity admirable simply for its being human: "Men. You have to admire men. Men are admirable. I want to vomit—and then all of a sudden there it is: Nausea... an hour ago I watched it come."²⁴ But the odor of the beard alone also disgusts him, and he can give no form but this smell to this feeling of disgust.

The sarcastic idea that "you have to admire men" is part of a current in *Nausea* that questions social authority and the objects used to communicate that authority. The passages where Antoine looks at the portraits of Bouville's founding fathers, and his resulting mocking attitude toward them, are often read as representative of some rebellious tendency that is probably exaggerated. He certainly mocks them, as we can see in the following moment: "I passed through the full length of the Bordurin-Renaudas room. I turned back. Adieu, beautiful lily in all your finesse in all your painted sanctuaries, adieu, beautiful lily, our pride and our *raison d'être*, adieu, bastards."²⁵ It is tempting to take this attitude for a somewhat political sentiment. John C. Carney, for one, claims in *Rethinking Sartre* that the seeds of Sartre's later sense of politicized intersubjectivity can be found in early Sartre, in the form of an implied ideological critique like we see in the hall of portraits.²⁶ However, as Dominick LaCapra shows in his article "La Nausée: Une Autre Espèce de Livre," the behavior of a character like Antoine is less a rebellion than the resentment of someone disenfranchised from his own status rightful status as bourgeois: "But Antoine is not all that different from the hated bourgeois 'other.' He sees through the bad faith of others at the price of remaining blind to his own bad faith, or he sees a freedom that is uninvolved and uncommitted in the

²³ Sartre *La Nausée* 19

²⁴ Sartre *La Nausée* 175

²⁵ Sartre *La Nausée* 138

²⁶ Carney puts it in terms of socialization: "Our point here has been to stress the political implications of Sartre's Realism, its relationship to Intentionality, of course, and the fact, finally, that, if read this way, Sartre's philosophy contains a powerful but often latent critique of all aspects of the socialization process. *Ipsa facto* that critique is present in his earliest writings as well as his later ones." John C. Carney, *Rethinking Sartre: A Political Reading*. Lanham, Maryland: University Press of America, 2007.

world.”²⁷ Antoine feels no emotion toward the portraits because they are not everyday objects and because his resentment of Bouville’s founders is not a true politicization.

The relationship between objects and emotions that we see in scenes where Antoine experiences Nausea corresponds, again, to what Sartre says about emotions and objects in his “Theory of Emotions.” He writes that emotion comes into the world through human consciousness, while Sartre would say that that emotion already exists in the world. I quote: “We have seen that in emotion, consciousness degrades itself and quickly transforms the world where we live into a magic world. But there is also a reciprocal effect: the world sometimes that reveals itself to the consciousness as magic rather than the way one expected it to be determined.”²⁸ The idea that emotions come to us *by way of objects* is striking in comparison to the later Sartre.

Even in these moments where the world reveals itself, Antoine feels cut off from emotion as something for which his own body is a conduit. As he makes some progress understanding what Nausea is, he begins to lose his basic physical identity. Nausea turns his body itself into a collection of objects. For example, in a well-known moment Antoine realizes the “truth” of his existence while standing in front of a chestnut tree, where he quite literally himself for a root, in a physical and metaphysical sense: “I was the root of a chestnut tree. Or rather I was completely the consciousness of its existence.”²⁹ In a moment of extreme duress, the two kinds of consciousness of being-in-the-world that concern Sartre, an awareness of the world and an awareness of the self, coalesce into one. At another moment, Antoine’s hand appears to him as a tool. He says: “In my hand, for example, there is something new, a certain way of getting my pipe or fork. Or even it’s the fork that has, now, a certain way of getting itself taken.”³⁰ Antoine no longer sees the origins of this change in his hand because it is no longer his hand—his hand has become something alien and strange, a holder for his fork.

Most dramatically, Antoine also begins to see his face as an object. He looks at himself in a mirror and thinks: “The eyes, the nose, and the mouth have disappeared: there is nothing human left... a silky bit of down runs on the great slopes of the cheeks...

²⁷ Dominick LaCapra, “La Nausée: Une Autre Espèce de Livre.” Howells, Christina, ed. *Sartre*. London and New York: Longman, 1995.

²⁸ Sartre, « Une Esquisse d’une théorie des émotions » 45

²⁹ Sartre *La Nausée* 187

³⁰ Sartre *La Nausée* 17

it's a geological map in relief.”³¹ Antoine's face loses its power to make an emotional impact on him or signify anything. This sort of reversal of the mirror stage ends in his standing in front of his reflection and noticing that he no longer has any sense of self: “At present, when I say ‘I,’ that seems like a trough (“creux”). I can no longer feel myself, I forget myself so much. All that rests of the real in me is the existence that feels itself existing.”³² Antoine projects onto the image of a “trough,” talking about himself in object terms after losing a sense of the meaning of his body. His inability to comprehend the word “I” further substantiates this process. A man like a trough cannot lose his responsibility, and in a certain way the portrait given by Nausea is of what a reasonable man becomes when he has an attack of emotion from which he cannot escape. And yet somewhat paradoxically, it is the fact of there being no escape that gives him his real freedom, a freedom that is radically different from what we see in the later Sartre. He is not responsible for his emotions, and they may resolve or mask his troubles in a way that conscious reasoning could not. At the same time, however, Sartre makes some suggestion in his essay that those struck by emotion in the way Antoine is may not be fully absolved of responsibility for their emotional states.

The “Theory of Emotions” generally accepts of the idea that choice is not always conscious, although it does have some intimations of Sartre's later, more restricted ideas about personal responsibility and bad faith. In his book *Sartre: de la nausée à l'engagement*, Alfredo Gomez-Muller explains the transition between the radical contingency of Sartre's pre-war period and the more social form of the post-war period as hinging on the Heideggerian idea of authenticity. Before he acquires this idea of authenticity, Gomez-Muller shows, Sartre thinks of morality as contingent.³³ Thus the idea of an inhibited ability to act politically has no moral valence in the following passage from the “Theory of Emotions:” “The emotional crisis is the abandonment of responsibility. There is a magic exaggeration of the world's difficulties. This conserves the differentiated structure, but it would appear unjust and hostile, because it asked too

³¹ Sartre *La Nausée* 34-35

³² Sartre *La Nausée* 239

³³ « Pour Sartre, à cette époque, l'être de l'homme, de même l'être en général, est frappé d'une contingence radicale. Cela équivaut à dire que l'existence est injustifiée et injustifiable, irrémisiblement dépourvue de sens ou de raison d'être. » Alfredo Gonzalez-Muller, *Sartre : de la Nausée à l'engagement*. Paris : Éditions de Félin, 2004.

much of us, that is to say it is not humanly possible to give to him.”³⁴ There is a note of sarcasm in this “asked too much.” For Sartre in this period, a man does not retain all of his intellectual capacities while suffering, but there is some intimation that he is complicit in this loss. This is perhaps because in the pre-war Sartre, “loss” does not have the philosophical weight it will have after the war. Antoine’s behavior illustrates this tension.

For most of *Nausea*, Sartre treats Antoine as a character caught in the winds of emotions he cannot control. Antoine’s only defense against emotion is the knowledge that these attacks generally end, or have so far in his experience. For example, once he sits in a café and finds relief from Nausea hearing his favorite jazz song, “Some of These Days,” after which he says: “What just happened is that the Nausea disappeared.”³⁵ The one thing that he is still afraid of is that eventually an emotion will not pass, and that it will blot out the rest of the future. Sartre says in the “Theory of Emotions” that the real terror is that which puts the future at risk: “The horrible thing is not just the current state of the thing, it’s how it threatens the future, it extends itself over the future and obscures it, revealing the sense of the world.”³⁶ Antoine is most afraid of the emotion to come that he does not know, that will create an effect of magic after which he will never return to reality. Sartre in this period understands consciousness as determined by what it encounters over time, both in the world and in the encounter with the self, although as we have just seen he treats emotions as objects external to the subject at some moments and as events catalyzed by the subject at others. What changes is not his sense of intentionality—he will always reject the idea that the subject constitutes his reality in any way through thought—but how much freedom the subject has in the necessary encounter with the object. Even in *Nausea*, this freedom is limited, as we can see in episodes where Antoine confronts the emotion of fear.

In episodes of fear, we see that the conscious mind can do little to control emotion. Part of the pathos of Antoine’s character is that he does not understand this, as we see in his attitude toward knowledge of the self at the beginning of the novel: “In the end it is certain that I was afraid or had some such feelings. If I had only known what I feared, that would have been a big step.”³⁷ This is not the logic of the novel, however, and nor is

³⁴ Sartre, « Une Esquisse d’une théorie des émotions » 37

³⁵ Sartre *La Nausée* 41

³⁶ Sartre, « Une Esquisse d’une théorie des émotions » 44

³⁷ Sartre *La Nausée* 14

it true of the “Theory of Emotions:” one can come to understand fear, but only imperfectly. Antoine tries to avoid his fear by avoiding what he fears, and this works no better because once again he misunderstands his relationship to objects in the world as Sartre understands it. Philippe Petit’s *La cause de Sartre* gives a good summary of Sartre’s sense of how being takes precedence over knowing.³⁸ Thus, when Antoine does not look at a glass of beer because he does not want to be confronted by it as an object of fear, he fools himself into thinking he can control the emotion he experiences in looking at it. Naturally, however, the fear remains, as he sees when he looks up again and into the beer: “There: I slide gently to the bottom of the water, toward the fear.”³⁹

Antoine knows that he is afraid of touching objects because he is afraid they will hurt him: “I’m afraid to enter into contact with them as if they were living beasts.”⁴⁰ Antoine manages to define the source of his fear, but he does not know how to overcome it. In fact, the only time Antoine expresses any hope of overcoming something by way of emotion is in his hope for winning back a woman he has loved, Anny, who once believed in “perfect moments” in love that transcended the everyday. In a rare moment of optimism, Antoine anticipates a meeting with her after a long separation by writing that he wants to get back together with her and perhaps lead a different sort of life: “After, it won’t be the same; I would no longer be afraid.” Anny is, in the end, too practically minded to provide such a transformation: she, like the novel itself, has no belief in personal transcendence. Antoine’s idea that Anny’s love will cure him gives us a still stronger sense of how little Antoine understands about emotion.

Reflection is rarely a productive approach to emotion in *Nausea*, perhaps because Sartre’s double perspective on emotion, as either an object or an unconscious strategy, does not allow the subject access to its workings. There are moments where Antoine is able to think about his powerful emotions, but even after having thought quite a bit he is not able to define their sources. Emotions often come as a “fog” against which he can do nothing. He writes: “I looked around me for a solid support, a defense against my thoughts. There was not one: little by little, the fog tore itself away, but something

³⁸ « ...chez Sartre le rapport à soi, l’affection primaire d’un être en tant qu’il est affecté de lui-même inclut le rapport à l’objet, c’est pourquoi il parle il parle d’absolu non substantiel, absolu d’existence et non de connaissance. » Philippe Petit, *La cause de Sartre*. Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2004. 54

³⁹ Sartre *La Nausée* 23

⁴⁰ Sartre *La Nausée* 26

troubling continued to loiter in the street. Maybe not a real menace: it was erased, transparent. But it is exactly that which in the end creates fear.”⁴¹ If objects of fear cannot be defined, he cannot do anything to fight them. However, here we see a new fear in the character that comes across in the writing: Antoine is afraid of himself and his thoughts.

Sartre does say in the “Theory of Emotions” that it is possible to develop an understanding of emotion that allows one to control it, but says that such a consciousness is quite unusual: “In emotion, one consciousness can always direct itself. In this case, emotion appears as a structure of consciousness... But this reflection is rare and necessitates unusual motivations.”⁴² Antoine is motivated, even keeping a journal an attempt at understanding it, but the journal form simply functions as textual proof of how this attempt fails. This can be demonstrated if we look at a few examples of writing in the novel to see how this sort of consciousness represents an effort on to gain some understanding of his emotions, however insufficient.

Antoine’s emotional state careens from one extreme to another from entry to entry, and he does not manage to draw an explanatory line between the past and present. His emotional state is so volatile that we have the sense that rarely reaches any real understanding of his emotions. Antoine has the occasional inexplicable contented moment, like in the following passage where he describes a state of vague contentment at being alive: “I exist. It’s soft, so soft, so heavy. And light: it could be said that it takes to the air all by itself.”⁴³ However, just two pages later we have a deluge of negative emotion about his existence based on similar reflections on his material existence: “It’s me, it’s *me* that pulls me into this nothing I aspire to: hate, the disgust of existing, these are the materials that make me exist, that bury me in existence.”⁴⁴ Antoine’s despair deepens after he realizes he cannot escape from himself. He even goes so far as to try to detach from himself syntactically, calling himself “it” rather than “I.” “It leaves, it is afraid, very afraid, ignoble individual, desire like a fog, disgust...”⁴⁵

It might seem bizarre that Antoine has such different feelings about his existence in passages just a few pages from one another, and that this change is so dramatic that

⁴¹ Sartre *La Nausée* 112

⁴² Sartre, « Une Esquisse d’une théorie des émotions » 49

⁴³ Sartre *La Nausée* 143

⁴⁴ Sartre *La Nausée* 145

⁴⁵ Sartre *La Nausée* 148

Sartre has him change from the first to the third person. Antoine is simply too bound up in the rise and fall of his emotions to be able to comment on them coherently, and sometimes reveals himself in a troubling way. For example, he describes how he does nothing when he sees a man about to hit a little girl: “I could have prevented that. It would have sufficed to push the grate. But I was fascinated by the little girl’s face. She had features drawn out with fear, and her heart must have been beating horribly...”⁴⁶ It is impossible to say whether Antoine is lying or not in claiming that he wanted to help the girl: it seems unlikely that he was incapable of pushing the gate. Antoine lies about his motivations, although he is sometimes honest enough to admit that he has lied.

Having a somewhat unreliable narrator only makes our ability to judge his understanding of his emotions within the structure of Sartre’s thought more complex. Since Sartre does not yet have the idea of bad faith that he will have after World War II, we do not know how to judge Antoine’s lies, whether they are just a matter of his hiding his thoughts from his readers or if he is really hiding his thoughts from himself. Warnings and apologies about lying come up from the beginning of the novel. At the beginning of *Nausea*, Antoine warns the reader that she should not believe what he writes completely, precisely because of the fact that he is using a journal: “I think that’s danger when you keep a journal: you exaggerate everything...”⁴⁷ There is certainly exaggeration in *Nausea*, and Antoine also sometimes admits after the fact that he has not said everything he had to say. After one long entry, for example he tells the reader that he has not been honest: “It’s curious: I just filled ten pages without telling the truth.”⁴⁸ Antoine thinks he has a self that can be lost, while Sartre thinks of the self as always on its way into existence by way of its being-in-the-world, even if he has yet to develop what his sense of the political implications of this condition. When Antoine writes about his thoughts in his journal, it becomes clear that he is his own worst enemy. He confronts himself, and that very self becomes an inescapable object of fear.

Antoine’s turn from terror at emotion to terror at his own existence comes during a 30-page delirium for which Sartre borrowed imagery from his drug experience. In this section of *Nausea*, Antoine loses himself so much that he begins to feel he is entering

⁴⁶ Sartre *La Nausée* 118

⁴⁷ Sartre *La Nausée* 13

⁴⁸ Sartre *La Nausée* 24

into the emotions of everyone around him, including a child rapist after having seen an article about a murdered child: “A soft bloody desire to rape took me from behind, all soft, behind the ears, the ears leave behind me, the red hair, it is red on my head, a wet plant, a red plant, is it still me? And the journal, is it me? Keep the journal...”⁴⁹ Antoine wants to be honest with himself, but it is difficult, perhaps even impossible, to confront himself completely: the above episode with the journal is told in fragments and he does not speak about it again afterwards. This repression shows Sartre in a period of transition in his understanding of psychology: the fact that Antoine never speaks of the episode suggests some kind of repression and Freudian unconscious, but Antoine taking on these violent emotions through his contact with objects—newspapers and so on—suggests a more phenomenological understanding of emotion.

What Antoine states he is hiding from the reader is a seemingly unimportant habit: that he likes to look for small objects on the ground, especially pieces of paper, and touch them or put them in his mouth: “I love to gather chestnuts, old rags, especially papers. It’s nice to take them, to close my hand on them; for a little while I held them in my mouth, like children do.”⁵⁰ The standard reading of Antoine’s fixation on objects is that he has come to realize his own contingency in the world, but I think it can also tell us something about emotion. If so many of the things Antoine encounters contain some terrifying emotion, all of the other objects come to stand for a neutral state, a lack of emotion in the everyday that he would like to attain. Thus, his secret is not only that he touches these random objects; it is that he has assigned them a role as kinds of talismans, believing that with them he can keep strong emotions at bay.

We can read Antoine’s dishonesty, then, as some reticence on his part to admit his dependence on objects for bringing about moments of emotional neutrality. Sartre is much more forgiving of this kind of suggestibility in this phase than he will be later in his career. According to the Sartre of 1938, one passes through a number of forms, and it is not possible to be aware of consciousness at every moment. In the “Theory of Emotions,” every emotion is real at the moment one feels or expresses it. For Sartre, the subject is not responsible for a complete understanding of his emotion, and it is in no way suspect to only go so far as Antoine in understanding one’s state: “Real emotion... is accompanied

⁴⁹ Sartre *La Nausée* 147

⁵⁰ Sartre *La Nausée* 25

by belief. Intentional qualities of objects are felt as real.”⁵¹ By Sartre’s reasoning, if a writer believes in what he is writing in the moment he writes it, he does all he can. That is not to say, however, that this identification, or even writing about this identification, ever completely stabilizes the process.

Sartre says that since ideas come faster than the hand can write, some are always excluded from a written document. He is fascinated by the act of writing, saying in the “Theory of Emotions” that the author must concentrate so that the words that emerge from many unformed words appear in a logical order. He explains that you have to make an effort to maintain a clear written discourse: “Writing is taking an active consciousness of *words* while they are born under your pen (“ma plume.”)”⁵² The moment of writing a death of some words and the birth of others, and Sartre emphasizes the radical contingency of this act: “they are all probably as real future beings, but certain ones as potentials in the world.”⁵³ That is to say, there are words that remain potential forever, in the same way that emotions remain forever potential.

Sartre pushes this idea of the writer as receptor even further by saying that words keep the writer out of the text in a certain way. He says in the “Theory of Emotions” that words: “appear as potentialities before *being realized*. Not being realized *by me*. The self does not appear here. I simply sense the traction that (the words) exert.”⁵⁴ That tells us that by Sartre’s logic, Antoine is mistaken in saying that he has hidden something from his journal, and on two counts. First of all, it is the nature of writing that he can never say everything. Secondly, even if he had written what struck him as the most important thing, he would have lied to himself, because under the influence of the “traction” of words the writer has only an incomplete control over deciding what words will become. He has told a partial story because a partial story is all he can tell. It is perhaps for this reason that Sartre chose a journal form for the novel: we read a different Antoine every time he starts to write even more than we would if the text were presented as the completed novel Antoine envisions writing.

In general, Antoine’s writing divides his character into parts that either do or do not come into existence properly. His passions of the past might as well not have existed,

⁵¹ Sartre, « Une Esquisse d’une théorie des émotions » 40

⁵² Sartre, « Une Esquisse d’une théorie des émotions » 31

⁵³ Sartre, « Une Esquisse d’une théorie des émotions » 31

⁵⁴ Sartre, « Une Esquisse d’une théorie des émotions » 32

even when he is confronted by evidence of these passions in his own handwriting. The emotion he feels *while writing* changes the quality of that writing as well. He may criticize the man that he “was” during the writing of his most recent entry, but is unaware of the emotion guiding his writing in the present moment. For example, when he feels diminished by life, his textual representation is diminished as well, as when he writes an entry with only the two words “Nothing. Existed.”⁵⁵ The more distant past, during his travels and with Anny, has no more weight for him. He writes about these periods as if they had happened to someone else. Even the more recent past, when he first moved to Bouville and began his dissertation, seems to have been lived by someone else.

Antoine has been writing his dissertation for many years, and has lost most of his enthusiasm for it. His ardor has waned to the point that he only enjoys getting pages written, not making any progress on its content: “Wrote four pages. Afterward, a long moment of happiness. Don’t think too much about the value of History.”⁵⁶ He is writing about an 18th-century marquis named the Marquis de Rollebon. Since the Marquis was so much more successful than he is, Antoine begins by admiring him and ends by identifying with him strongly. Antoine narrates this turn by recounting a night early in his research where he first read a certain important letter of the marquis’s as if it had been a letter he wrote himself:

“How I loved M. de Rollebon that year! I remember a night—a Tuesday night: I was working all day at the Mazarine; I had just figured out, according to the correspondence of 1789-90, how he had tricked Nerciat. It was nighttime, I was walking down the avenue de Maine and, at the corner of the rue de Gaîté, I bought some chestnuts. How I was happy!”⁵⁷

greatest joy Antoine has experienced in Bouville has been secondhand. The fact that he notices his writing has changed suggests that the person who wrote these words and the emotions he experiences during the period have disappeared in the present. Antoine begins to imitate Rollebon without deciding to, even changing his way of writing.

When Antoine looks at his notes from the period where he began his project, he notices that he wrote differently: “I’m glad to have found these notes. It has been ten years since I last re-read them. My writing has changed, it seems to me: I wrote in a more

⁵⁵ Sartre *La Nausée* 149

⁵⁶ Sartre *La Nausée* 106

⁵⁷ Sartre *La Nausée* 29

restrained way then.”⁵⁸ Antoine’s writing has become more similar the Marquis’s, and up until the beginning of *Nausea*, he has not minded. He says of himself, “I didn’t perceive that I existed, I didn’t exist anymore in myself, but in him.”⁵⁹ This “in him” is a clear fallacy—Antoine has had no encounter with the Marquis. Instead, he has spent so many years poring over documents that he has picked up emotion from them. What Antoine takes to be the emotion of the man himself is really emotion as it always passes in *Nausea*, through objects that Antoine encounters in the world.

In the beginning, Antoine had a passion of his own, not just one assimilated from his research materials, and this passion is preserved in his original notes. At some point, however, this native enthusiasm waned and a secondary emotion overtook it. Antoine talks about how his own hand begins to appear to him as belonging to the dead marquis: “I no longer saw my hand that traced the letters on the paper, I saw the marquis, who had taken over this gesture, whom this gesture prolonged, consolidated the existence.”⁶⁰ This moment brings together the alienated relationship between Antoine and his body that we have seen at other moments in the text and the meditations on the writing hand in the “Theory of Emotion.” Antoine thinks of the marquis’s face when he writes, taking on the other man’s identity during an act that he supposedly thinks of as constitutive of an independent subjectivity. Thus, Antoine loses himself both in terms of no longer feeling a personal passion for his work and because his remaining energy seems to come from an unhealthy identification with the subject of his research. If this happens in a moment of professional writing, we must ask what possibilities it leaves for personal writing and the project of self-understanding Antoine has taken up in his journal.

If we apply the “Theory of Emotions” to the question of writing, we see that keeping a journal only gives Antoine a slight relief from this double bind. It provides the possibility of expressing emotion that feels like it is his own, always seems mediated by his surroundings. Writing gives Antoine the impression of reviving his passions, but the reader is left to come to her own conclusions. Antoine writes: “The truth is that I could not put down my pen: I believe that I am going to have the Nausea and I have the impression that I put it off by writing. Thus, I write whatever comes to mind.”⁶¹ Writing

⁵⁸ Sartre *La Nausée* 29

⁵⁹ Sartre *La Nausée* 143

⁶⁰ Sartre *La Nausée* 143

⁶¹ Sartre *La Nausée* 243

is a way for Antoine to fight his Nausea, because emotion does not attack while he is writing, something of a *dues ex machina* on Sartre's part. Sartre always lets Antoine express everything that has happened to him since his last entry, giving journal-keeping degree of control over emotion that we do not see in the contents of that writing.

Writing itself may be a form of protection from emotion in the novel, but it is by no means a portal to great understanding of how emotion works. One must falsify oneself writing about emotion, because for Sartre knowledge of emotion is always partial. Sartre says in the "Theory of Emotions," in fact, that emotion is always based in the experience that is not conscious of its own position: "Emotional consciousness is first of all not consciously chosen and, in the same vein, it can never be conscious of itself in a non-positional mode. Emotional consciousness is first and foremost consciousness *of the world.*"⁶² To escape destructive emotions, Antoine thinks that a person has to retreat from the world to reflect and write. However, even when he manages to understand them on some level, emotions continue to arrive by way of the body and objects in the world, and nothing is necessarily accomplished. In writing one tries to isolate emotion in the conscious self, to transcribe it. Sartre shows in *Nausea* that one can create a credible character who tries to capture his emotions, but because of the nature of emotion as Sartre understands it, the writer only gets so far. The great difference between Sartre's thoughts on emotion before and after World War II is the following: before the war, the structure of emotion is primarily at fault for the subject's inability to escape it, whereas after the war this fault will lie in decisions of the feeling, particularly writing, subject.

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⁶² Sartre *La Nausée* 29

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