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SEDUCTION, PLEASURE AND A LAYING ON OF HANDS: A HANDS-ON READING OF SARTRE'S *NAUSEA*

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Apparently Arab scholars, when speaking of the text, use this admirable expression: the certain body. [...] Does the text have human form, is it a figure, an anagram of the body? Yes, but of our erotic body. The pleasure of the text is irreducible to physiological need.

Roland Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text*

As was mentioned in the introduction to this volume, there is a shift in position between the writing of the pre-War Jean-Paul Sartre and that of the more visibly existential texts, beginning, for example, with *Huis clos* in 1944.¹ This visible difference has to do with the Other; it does not, however, lie in his own visibility but in his capacity to make us truly, objectively visible. The famous mirror scene in *Nausea*, in which Roquentin's own face becomes other for him, is only revealed in its full potential when *Huis clos* is presented as a markedly, self-consciously mirror-less space. Hell becomes other people because man's only possible being-for-others is that which is frozen beyond his control by the Other's gaze. Roquentin appears to emerge at a period when Sartre's philosophical concerns hinge on contingency and the problem of the raw existence in situation of the being-for-itself. Roquentin sees others and realises their destructive potential; they, for their part, are as blind to him as they are to their own superfluity. Impétraz, the imposing bronze overlord, cannot see; the mirror shows Roquentin only as he sees himself; and sex, the most dangerous act from the perspective of the struggle for ontological survival, is reduced to the level of crypto-onanism. And yet the gaze of the other is present in *Nausea*, and it is via an analysis of the erotic body of the text that we are able to intertwine satisfactorily both its existential and novelistic mechanics. For it is not the case that concrete relations with others are problematized by Sartre only as early as *Being and Nothingness* (1943); they are crucial to an understanding of *Nausea*, and, ironically, the philosophy of the later treatise can be used not, as is so often the case, to overpower the novel of 1938 but, precisely, to expose its power as fiction.

If we follow Barthes' ideas of the pleasure of the text, the act of writing *Nausea* can be seen as the production of an erotic body; reading *Nausea*, by the same token, involves a sensual engagement with the text. The tension that lies at the interface of these two activities we shall label 'seduction'. As Barthes points out, to be seductive a text does not need to be ostensibly attractive or even an 'enjoyable read':

So, we arrive at this paradox: the texts, like those by Bataille – or by others – which are written against neurosis, from the centre of madness, contain within themselves, *if they want to be read*, that bit of neurosis

¹ Bernard-Henri Lévy, for example, traces the shift from Sartre-Roquentin to Sartre-Autodidact in the section of *Le Siècle de Sartre* entitled 'Devenir son propre Autodidacte' (Lévy, 2000: 508-13).

necessary to the seduction of their readers: these terrible texts are *all the same* flirtatious texts. (Barthes, 1975: 5-6)

Nausea is one of these terrible texts; it depends for its existence – and, for Sartre, the worst criminal act there could be is the production of an existent – upon the engagement of its reader. The reader is the Other, and it is s/he whom *Nausea* seeks to seduce.

Nowhere is an instance of a text desiring its reader more openly expressed than in the final lines of Toni Morrison's *Jazz*:

I envy them their public love. I myself have only known it in secret, shared it in secret and longed, aw longed to show it – to be able to say out loud what they have no need to say at all: *That I have loved only you, surrendered my whole self reckless to you and nobody else. That I want you to love me back and show it to me. That I love the way you hold me, how close you let me be to you. I like your fingers on and on, lifting, turning. I have watched your face for a long time now, and missed your eyes when you went away from me. Talking to you and hearing you answer - that's the kick.*

But I can't say that aloud; I can't tell anyone that I have been waiting for this all my life and that being chosen to wait is the reason I can. If I were able I'd say it. Say make me, remake me. You are free to do it and I am free to let you because look, look. Look where your hands are. Now. (Morrison, 1992: 264-65)

This quotation highlights three elements that help us to reconfigure the role of *Nausea* as novel within Sartre's philosophy of existence: firstly, the intensely sexual nature of the bond between the reader and the text, which will be shown to correspond exactly to the dynamics of the lover/beloved relationship that Sartre puts forward in *Being and Nothingness*; secondly, the role of hands, that with which we write, read (Morrison's narrator catches us in the act, shaming us both in our impertinence and our ignorance of who it is that we have been arousing and by whom we have been being aroused) and caress the other; and thirdly, the tension between authorial power and the empowerment of the reader.

In his article 'The Ending of Sartre's *La Nausée*' Terry Keefe resumes the various arguments as to whether or not *Nausea* is, is not, could or could not be the novel that Roquentin contemplates writing at the end of the text. What is clear to the reader of *Nausea* is that s/he is pitted against an authorial power in a joust for ownership of Roquentin's textuality. The role of Rollebon seems to be more clearly as fictional presence than as historical character; and, crucially, when Roquentin listens to *Some of These Days*, whilst he imagines the salvation of the piece's composer and performer, he is at the same time seducing his own reader, reminding him/her of the power that s/he has to mould his existence as protagonist. Keefe notes how Roquentin begins to think of the composer with sympathy. This can just as easily be reversed – the whole story of the song being built around a case of reversal (all mentions of history in *Nausea* and its claims to be a genuine diary being exposed as literary

tricks)² - and this composer be interpreted as the reader, Roquentin prostrating himself as the composed subject.

[And] in an undeveloped and even enigmatic form, the notions of looking at, or being aware of others, as well as being looked at *by* others are now right to the fore in the book, and are presented in a very complex way. (Keefe, 1976: 233)

Consciousness of gaze of the reader causes Roquentin to revel in his role as read subject, which in turn prompts us to reread his behaviour. So tightly linked are Roquentin's actions and the gaze of the reader that the act of looking at others, in which Roquentin engages at length, comes to signify 'being looked at'; similarly to read becomes 'to be read'. In *Being and Nothingness*, Sartre himself writes of the relationship between the Other and the truth of the self:

I am possessed by the Other; the Other's look fashions my body in its nakedness, causes it to be born, sculpts it, produces it as it *is*, sees it as I shall never see it. The Other holds a secret - the secret of what I am. He makes me be and thereby he possesses me. (Sartre, 1993: 364)

Roquentin, in the same way that he conjures up the singer and composer by listening to the song, is read into being by the reader of *Nausea*. But as the voice of *Jazz* reminds us, "being chosen to wait is the reason [s/he] can". The reader must be wary: what do we risk by summoning up Roquentin? Might we not lose this newly realised power in the climactic pleasure of the text? Whilst Sartre/Roquentin's motivations for seducing the reader are not clear to us, it is seduction itself that is the key, and not the expected result of this game. Understanding seduction carries the key to explaining the lack of textual climax, the *sotto voce* ending of the novel that has been so much discussed.

In *Being and Nothingness* Sartre explains that the crucial problem one faces in relation to the Other is to "make [oneself] be by acquiring the possibility of taking the Other's point of view on [oneself]" (Sartre, 1993: 365). In light of this, to write a diary is not enough: one would simply become one's own reader. Sartre/Roquentin needs to produce a novel that will be read by the Other; *Nausea* is such a novel, and it is for this reason that it is so markedly self-referential: "[In short,] in order to maintain before me the Other's freedom which is looking at me, I identify myself totally with my being-looked-at" (Sartre, 1993: 365).

An early example of a self-referential ploy in *Nausea* is the pebble scene. In 'Of Stones and Stories: Sartre's *La Nausée*' Christopher Prendergast reminds us of the literary heritage of stones and particularly of Socrates' pronouncement in Paul Valéry's *Eupalinos* that a stone cannot reflect the perfection of a work of art. He goes on to suggest that Sartre's desire is to produce the very opposite of art:

What Sartre has in mind is neither Ponge's ambiguous interlacing of the referential and self-reflexive, nor Valéry's rigorously classical insistence on the ordering power of imagination and convention. What Sartre envisages [...] is a novel that would resemble the stone in its pure

² For a more extensive analysis of the layers of inversion operating within *Nausea*, see Debra Hely's chapter in the present volume.

contingency, a novel so unselfconscious, so freed from artifice and convention, as to give us an unmediated image of the raw chaos of things, the world in its pure, meaningless 'being-there'. (Prendergast, 1983: 61)

We, on the other hand, should argue that Roquentin's act of picking up the pebble is, in fact, a direct appeal to the reader to 'look where [his/her] hands are now'. This is just one example of a carefully worked stream of self-referentiality. In the overall scenario of textual seduction, this represents an ensnaring of the reader, an act of foreplay. The caress here appears to be primarily visual, forcing the pebble to yield. And yet the act of holding it by the edges reflects the reader's holding of the book. The act of looking does, as Serge Doubrovsky's work on the homotext suggests, stand for 'being looked at' but it may be hypothesized that it is in fact the book looking back at the reader, not simply the boys on the beach looking at Roquentin.³ The book is paralleled by the shiny side of the pebble; it is one more mirror in which Roquentin is seen. The book, however, provides a mirror in which he is seen as the reader interprets him, not as he sees himself. Roquentin adds ironically: "But I'm not going to amuse myself by putting that down on paper" (10). This quip, taken together with the masturbatory edge to the scene (the fondling of the stone, which both masks and discreetly points to Roquentin's desire), indicates the importance of refusing catharsis, of continuously seducing the reader (and maintaining the reader in a continuous state of seduction) without ever reaching climax.

The passivity of 'being looked at' is then shifted onto the gesture of picking up objects. Later in the novel, Roquentin will struggle to pick up pieces of text from the ground. Things progressively happen to him as he cedes power of interpretation to the reader: "There is something new, for example, about my hands, a certain way of picking up my pipe or my fork. Or else it is the fork which now has a certain way of *getting itself picked up*" (13 – author's italics).

Such instances of self-referentiality, which act as a desire to seduce the writerly reader, are veiled in the text. Sartre/Roquentin masks them by juxtaposing cruder examples of 'being read'. On the following page, for example, the Autodidact offers the hand of the reader to Roquentin. This hand will often be made object over the course of the novel, just as will be the case for Roquentin's own hand. These are two hands of the same persona: the hand of the reader meets the hand of the writer in their caress. When Roquentin immediately drops the Autodidact's hand, this ostensible fear of homosexuality doubles as a fear of being read. In the eyes of the reader, the refusal of this other reader's advances can be interpreted as the removal of a rival for Roquentin's attentions. Roquentin cannot be read by the Autodidact for the precise reason that the latter, with his unreflecting reading practice and inability to conceive of an unauthorized interpretation of the text, is not free enough to fulfil that role. The lover wishes to become the whole world for the beloved. Roquentin needs to be read freely:

He wishes that the Other's freedom should no longer be free. He wishes that the Other's freedom should determine itself to become love [...] and at the same time he wants this freedom to be captured *by itself*, to turn back upon itself, as in madness, as in a dream, so as to will its own

³ For a synopsis, see Doubrovsky, S. (1993) 'L'Homotexte' in Jacques Deguy's 'La Nausée' de Jean-Paul Sartre, pp. 216-19.

facticity. [...] In love it is not a determinism of the passions which we desire in the Other nor a freedom beyond reach; it is a freedom *which plays the role of* a determinism of the passions and which is caught in its own role. (Sartre, 1993: 367)

Translated onto *Nausea*, this desire becomes Roquentin's wish for the reader, by careful interpretation, to exist him as being-in-the-text, whilst being aware that s/he is trapped in his/her role as reader. The reader must read the text and believe in Roquentin at the same time as being aware of the text as text. This plea for a post-modern approach explains not only the text's self-referentiality but also the allusions to slaying the father (the end of the Rollebon project, for example) and the replacement of an easily identifiable image in Roquentin's mirror by a metaphorical subject that must be written in by the reader rather than seen. As previously mentioned, our reading here, which is an attempt to steer the text away from the a priori judgements made on the philosophical treatise and towards a reading of *Nausea* as literature, is itself entwined in the philosophy of *Being and Nothingness*, the very retrospective philosophical guide from whose hegemony we are seeking to liberate the novel.

The core of a sensual reading of *Nausea* cannot lie in any one page for the simple reason that the entire text presents itself as erotic body (i.e. the text presents itself at every moment as text). We shall, however, limit our reading to an analysis of some of the key scenes involving hands.

Hands are a mid point; they not only function as an interface between the being for-itself and the world (hands as tools of discovery); they also stand for the caress between reader and writer. We may read with our eyes, just as the writer thinks with his cogito; the two intentional consciousnesses meet at that place where the writer physically pens the text and the reader handles the pages. This is why *Nausea*, as a text vitally aware of its being for-the-reader, whatever else it vehiculates, is fundamentally concerned with the translation of the philosophy of relating to other people into writing praxis.

The significance of hands in *Nausea* is made clear by Karen Gusto in her article, "“Making it Strange”: The Image of Hands in *La Nausée*". Gusto analyses Roquentin's descriptions of them from the perspective of disembodiment and alienation. Despite the relevance of such a thesis in terms of 'the problem of naming things', which is of prime concern to Roquentin in his understanding of the *Nausea*, this analysis is non-committal to the point of disingenuousness. Hands are, for example, the means by which Roquentin conceptualizes freedom. After his failure to pick up the pieces of paper, he announces: "I straightened up, empty-handed. I am no longer free, I can no longer do what I want" (22). Here Roquentin's inability to seize hold of an object is taken to be a sign that he is not free; he will, of course, realise that he is inescapably free, whatever he does. 'Having one's hands full' will prove to be a sign, not of freedom, but of a falsely reassuring means of validating one's actions: hands may, then, be read as indicators of bad faith. As chief bastard, Impétraz stands for authorial power in the text: "He holds his hat in his left hand and rests his right hand on a pile of folio volumes" (45-46). Not only does he hold the emblems of power, as Justice her scales, he crushes books (knowledge, power) "under his heavy hand" (46).

Roquentin mediates between Impétraz (the giver of the word) and the Autodidact (the blind receiver of the word, who refuses any free interpretation of it); he is between reader and writer, and as such will vacillate between hands-full and

empty-handed states. He rejects Impétra's authority but refuses equally to be loved blindly as by the Autodidact. As has been seen, he wishes to become the world in which the reader freely loses him/herself. For this reason, the reader of *Nausea* should be wary of the games that Roquentin plays with the Autodidact, as these are games in which s/he is implicated.

The apparent androgyny of the Autodidact reflects his status as Other: when Roquentin elects to defeat him by turning his back on him, he is portrayed as a plump little sycophant with a chicken neck; when, on the other hand, Roquentin seeks to capture his objective gaze through seduction, the Autodidact is suddenly adorned with "a woman's eyelashes" (49). The description of these seductive eyes is enough to force Roquentin to unhand him, leaving him "with arms dangling" (49). In terms of this analysis, such a rejection of the little man's advances is not an act of homophobia or a repression of homosexual desire; it is simply an existential defence mechanism.⁴ In the novel Roquentin opts for a solitary existence, adopting the armour of Impétra as a way of repelling the Other. In the following description his hands are full to the point of petrification: "I am holding my pipe in my right hand and my packet of tobacco in my left."⁵ And yet "[his] arms dangle" (49-50). Frozen out of reach of the Other, Roquentin cannot act. This 'ignorance-is-bliss' reaction is an unviable solution to the problem of the being-for-others; but it is not Roquentin's only reaction since he is not denying the Other altogether. For at all times, there is another whose full hands are vying with Roquentin for existing space in the text. Roquentin's indifference to the Other-in-the-text can be read as an attempt to seduce the Other-holding-the-text, to reveal himself as available for seduction. His freed hands invite our touch.

In the same way, the absence of satisfactory sexual relations in the text suggests a space for negotiation: the erotic body of the text beckons the reader to reciprocate Roquentin's love. *Roquentin enjoys caressing bits of paper; he likes to put them into his mouth.* Studies such as those by Andrew Leak and Peter Poiana's chapter in this volume attest to the viability of a Freudian reading of Sartrean texts, and it is clear that Roquentin's fascination with soiled paper may be legitimately interpreted in psychological terms (as an example of oral pleasure and infantile sexuality).⁶ It is often difficult, however, within the compass of this reading, to distinguish between a genuine slip of the tongue on Roquentin's part (a Freudian parapraxis, and, thus, expression of the unconscious) and a deliberately worked act of seduction (whereby words are left hanging in the air as an invitation to the beloved reader to respond). One thing is certain: we readers should not allow our guard to drop; Sartre's way of highlighting the depth of his message through off-hand statements certainly conceals more than at first meets the eye: "There's nothing much to say: I couldn't manage to pick up the piece of paper, that's all" (21). Roquentin wants to put words into his mouth. He cannot read himself objectively, only subjectively. He needs to empower the Other to read his pages, to put them into his/her own mouth and to make him exist as protagonist. Like so much of the text, meaning exists in reversal: if he could pick up the text and eat the words, he would

⁴ This is clearly not to deny a homoerotic reading of the interaction between Roquentin and the Autodidact. Indeed, Lawrence Schehr's chapter in the present volume attests to the strength of the sexual tension between these two characters.

⁵ Roquentin here fills his hands in the same way as Impétra; a cardboard cut-out chef has his hands equally full later in the novel, at a point where a young couple engage in a joint act of seduction and reading over a menu: "Outside, a young couple has stopped in front of the menu which a cardboard chef is holding out to them in his left hand (in his right he has a frying pan)" (154).

⁶ See Leak, A. (1989) 'Nausea and Desire in Sartre's *La Nausée*', *French Studies* 43 (1): 61-72 and (1989) *The Perverted Consciousness: Sexuality and Sartre*. New York: St. Martin's Press.

have something to say. This is a desire to be read. *Quod erat demonstrandum*. He then muddies his hands, and in a primitive form of language, leaves his mark: “then I wipe the muddy palms of my hands on a wall or a tree trunk” (21). This gesture has all the sexuality of the Surrealists, for whom the expression of the unconscious was to be expressed untrammelled by the formality of logical communication. In *Nausea*, Sartre will let his hands do the talking.

Whereas Karen Gusto dwells on the use of hand imagery in the novel as an indicator of strangeness, Georgiana Colvile, in her article ‘Éléments surréalistes dans *La Nausée*: Une Hypothèse de l’écriture’, goes beyond the divorce that hands and writing make apparent between things and their names, offering the writing act as a means of salvaging something from this loss of sense:

At this point, only monsters remain, including the indolent hand of the writer. Without words Roquentin’s thoughts are swallowed up [...] Language and writing are a lifejacket allowing a return to dry land. (Colvile, 1977: 26-27) (Author’s translation⁷)

We should note the ostensible difference between the value of the Other for the Existentialist and the Surrealist: for the former the relationship with other people is logically a battle of ‘overcome or be overcome’; for the latter, other people are, as Marie-Claire Bancquart notes throughout her work *Paris des Surréalistes*, a means to an end, consciousnesses by means of whose collective energy one can seek to achieve the ultimate synthesis of all binary oppositions. *Nausea* has its hands in both camps.

Colvile notes the fetishistic fragmentation of the body that marks Sartre’s description in the novel:

The breaking down of the body into separate parts or the metamorphosis of the monster evokes Bellmer’s mannequin, which he used to mutilate and reinvent as his fantasy took him. (Colvile, 1977: 25)⁸

Amongst the 161 references to the word *main* that she records in the text, Karen Gusto draws particular attention to those usages of the disembodied hand that can be interpreted synecdochically. In reference to the scene in which the Autodidact strokes the boy’s hand in the library, Gusto suggests that the passage “constitutes an extreme personification of the finger and also of other people’s hands, as the sexual act is reduced to an action that takes place between two hands” (Gusto, 1995: 41). This symbolic use of the fetish attests to the novelistic properties of *Nausea*, the philosophical intent of the existentialist text being to reduce the body, in parts or *in toto*, to the rank of unrecognisable and unnameable existent.

Noting the predilection of the Surrealists for images of the hand, Colvile mentions the famous street scene of Buñuel’s *Un Chien andalou*:

The Surrealists were fetishists and erotomaniacs with a predilection for the symbol of the hand. An obvious example is the hand in Buñuel and Dali’s *Un chien andalou* (1928), which an androgyne pushes with the

⁷ “À ce moment-là, il n’y a plus que des monstres, y compris la main inactive de l’écrivain. Sans mots, les pensées de Roquentin “s’engloutissent” [...] Le langage, l’écriture est une bouée de sauvetage pour regagner la terre ferme.”

⁸ “La désagrégation des parties du corps ou la métamorphose du monstre évoque la poupée de Bellmer, qu’il mutilait et réinventait au gré de sa fantaisie...”

end of a stick, and which captivates the crowd with a blend of horror and eroticism. Roquentin's nausea often resides in his hand. (Colville, 1977: 25)⁹

Colville is right to point to *Un chien andalou*; in addition to a reference to a "dead donkey" (180), the sex scene that pits Roquentin against the *patronne* reveals a strong intertextual link between *Nausea* and this famous film: over the *patronne*'s genitals, which suddenly turn into a garden, "ants were running about everywhere" (89). If there is a marked absence of passionate relations between the *patronne* and Roquentin, there is intense intercourse between these two texts. The *patronne*'s irrelevance and the supreme status of the text within the novel are intimately linked. From the point of view of concrete relations with the Other, sex scenes showcase not desire of this woman but desire itself. As formulated in *Being and Nothingness*, the caress is a way of enticing the Other to become body whilst keeping one's distance:

Not as much to push or to touch in the active sense but to place against. It seems that I lift my own arm as an inanimate object and that I *place* it against the flank of the desired woman, that my fingers which I run over her arm are inert at the end of my hand. [...] I make her enjoy my flesh through her flesh in order to compel her to feel herself flesh. (Sartre, 1993: 390-91)

Roquentin thinks of other things, losing sensation in his hand as he masturbates the *patronne*.¹⁰ This suppression of feeling is interesting in terms of Gusto's synecdochic interpretation: the hand does not stand in for Roquentin metonymically; rather its loss points to a central absence. This is a fetishization of the text, in which words simultaneously veil and symbolise that which is absent. In this case, it is sex itself that is effectively removed from the picture. Even the *patronne*'s defence mechanism involves a fetishisation of her own body: "If you don't mind, I'll keep my stockings on" (17). Whilst revealing herself as object of desire, she also fragments Roquentin's field of vision, forcing his view of her genitals to pass to a metaphorical level (the intertextual garden) and become suppressed as screen memory. In *Being and Nothingness*, Sartre himself points to the synecdochic value of body parts, which *Nausea* is generally considered to deny:

But what is the object of desire? Shall we say that desire is the desire of a *body*? In one sense this can not be denied [...] To be sure it is the body which disturbs us: an arm or a half-exposed breast or perhaps a leg. But we must realize at the start that we desire the arm or the uncovered breast only on the ground of the presence of the whole body as an organic totality. (Sartre, 1993: 385)

⁹ "Fétichistes et érotomanes, les surréalistes affectionnent le symbole de la main. On revoit celle d'*Un chien andalou* de Buñuel et de Dali (1928), que pousse du bout d'un bâton un être androgyne et qui exerce sur la foule cette fascination où l'horreur et l'érotisme se rencontrent. La nausée de Roquentin habite souvent sa main."

¹⁰ As was alluded to earlier, the seduction of the reader functions similarly to the erotics of writing as expounded by Barthes, and has little to do with stark representations of sex in the narrative. In fact, sex itself is significantly made absent in the text.

Were the novel to present its reader with a catharsis, a pleasurable release of desire, through a graphic representation of sexual relations, there would be an outcome (the *patronne* would certainly play the card of the *vagina dentata*). As it is, however, both players maintain their distance, with the result that desire remains integral, unblemished by climax:

Every subjectivist and immanentist theory will fail to explain how we desire a particular woman and not simply our sexual satisfaction. [...] Nevertheless it would be wholly inaccurate to say that desire is a desire for 'physical possession' of the desired object - if by 'possess' we mean here 'make love to'. Of course the sexual act for a moment frees us from desire, and in certain cases it can be posited explicitly as the hoped-for issue of the desire - when desire, for example, is painful and fatiguing. (Sartre, 1993: 384-85)

The post-coital departure of the *patronne* also displays a clever use of metaphor on Sartre's part. As Linda Williams points out in *Figures of Desire*, the departure of a train is common cinematic parlance for the sex act; in *Nausea* an opposite image is used, with the *patronne* announcing the end of the encounter as a result of the *arrival* of the train from Paris. This is an *anticlimax*, a metaphor for the maintenance of desire and a deepening of the erotic encounter between Sartre/Roquentin and the only Other to be present throughout the intercourse: the reader.

The use of manifest fetishism (leg fetishism in this instance) at once to point to and to veil a fetishistic writing strategy is repeated throughout the text. A woman wearing a black hat in the Café Mably, whose "hands were moving all the time", orders her partner to tie her shoe; he agrees and "lightly touched her foot under the table" (106). She seems to avoid his caress by disembodying and fetishizing herself. Later a hand moves down to scratch mud from the hem of her skirt, and it is not clear to whom the hand belongs. The couple, it is revealed, are actors; the gaps in the text are the precise focus through which Roquentin forces the reader's gaze, and through which s/he reads the absent image. Whilst we should agree with Nicholas Hewitt and Sylvie Vanbaelen that Anny's value in the text is as missing love object, she, too, is an actress in the text, the interpretation of whose role hinges on the active engagement of the key absent that is the reader. Indeed, Anny's explanation of perfect moments reminds the reader of the elaborate, and allegorical, courtship ceremony that is *la carte du Tendre*.¹¹ Hands are to the fore throughout the discussion in which Anny and Roquentin appear to have abandoned all attempts to gain the upper hand; Anny clasps her knee in her hand and then unclasps it before fading to grey:

We remain silent for a moment. Dusk is falling; I can scarcely make out the pale patch of her face. Her black dress merges into the shadows which have invaded the room. I automatically pick up my cup, which still has a little tea in it, and I raise it to my lips. The tea is cold. I should like to smoke but I don't dare. (217-18)

This urge to smoke could be read variously as a desire for a post-coital signpost, a means of picking up Roquentin's earlier display of infantile sexuality with the pieces

¹¹ It is interesting to note that Madeleine de Scudéry, who drew up *la carte du Tendre* in the seventeenth century, held court in her literary salon in Paris (where Roquentin meets Anny) but was born in Le Havre (usually considered to be the inspiration for Bouville).

of paper or, quite simply, as a way of occupying his hands.¹² Later Roquentin will hand the whip hand to Anny's companion, who has his post-coital cigarette in a blatantly imagined scene: "She is sleeping in a cabin, and on the deck the handsome sun-tanned fellow is smoking cigarettes" (222). It is no mere coincidence if there is a pointed lack of narrative distance between this wilfully oneiric scene and Roquentin's own meeting with Anny (i.e. both scenes have an equally imaginary status). Anny may well be more than an absent lover; she can be seen as being entirely absent, a construct written to seduce the Other who is present outside the text. Perfect moments are, after all, a defence of authorial power: Anny sets out rules for correct interpretation of the text whilst not revealing them to her actor/reader. Roquentin's attempts to play his role, to read his text, had relied on creativity, and it is this that necessarily comes to the forefront with the disappearance of Anny (and, following the removal of Rollebon – himself a self-referential literary device in the text – another death of the author).

Roquentin's attempts to draw the reader in with fetishistic images are repeated in the scene with the flasher. This functions as a *mise en abyme*, in which the gaze of the reader is forced to interpret a scene that is moved into position by Roquentin, and from which he removes his hand; the scene is a caress, disembodied through metonymy. The flasher is introduced by a synecdochic reference to "the cape" that here signifies to the reader "the man in the cape". The reader interprets Roquentin's gaze as he witnesses the flasher and the young girl contemplate each other. In an allegory of the author-reader relationship, the flasher exposes himself, waiting for her to interpret him; his is an attempt to capture her objective view of his reality, to see himself as he really is.

The power of the caress is also turned against Roquentin himself. In an attack of Nausea that is particularly focussed on his hand, the latter becomes so disembodied that it lays itself onto his thigh: "I withdraw my hand, I put it into my pocket. But straight away through the material, I feel the warmth of my thigh" (144). Immediately after this caress, he stabs his hand with a penknife. The blood spills onto the page, obscuring the lines he had written and "stop[s] being [him]" (146). His thoughts then tumble into freefall, prompting the reader to question whether Roquentin is confessing to the murder of little Lucienne. As a diary addressing its reader, the text offers a fairly standard transfer of responsibility but, in the light of this analysis of seduction, the lines read more as a liberation of the reader; Roquentin has finally extended the death of the author theme to his own hand, seducing the writerly reader with the white expanses of the page. The confession begins as follows:

I have the right to exist, therefore I have the right not to think: the finger is raised. Am I going to... caress in the splendour of white sheets the splendid white flesh... (147-48)

Struck down with Stockholm Syndrome, the reader wonders what crimes Roquentin may have committed; s/he responds to the caress, opening up all sorts of literary possibilities and making Roquentin exist.

At the end of the novel, *Nausea* has come full circle. The question of whether or not it is *the* novel that Roquentin was planning seems misplaced; it hinges on the

¹² Drinking tea and smoking also parallel the likely environment in which Sartre would have written his novel, cafés being synonymous with the existentialist writing experience of that period. Any means of recalling Roquentin's similarity to Sartre the author stands to reinforce Anny's status as self-consciously literary character in the text.

fine distinction between Sartre-author and Roquentin-author. *Nausea*'s last line is famous for its literary turn of phrase (it talks about the weather, offering everything that Sartre openly despised in the work of François Mauriac et al.) and its suggestion of future time, of a reading to come: "The yard of the New Station smells strongly of wood: tomorrow it will rain over Bouville" (253). Whether or not the reader does reopen the book at page one, the fact that s/he has got to this line assures Roquentin of his place in history: he has become the world for the reader. The 'leaving Bouville phase' self-consciously vacates the central reading space of the text, the library, closing the door on reading itself, whilst counting down the amount of time remaining until the train leaves and the book is shut.

When Roquentin first becomes aware of the difficulties posed by leaving the library and shutting the book, the reader watches (reads) on from an external perspective. Roquentin's gaze stands between the reader and the scene, offering a mirror in which the reading act is reflected:

'Gentlemen,' said the Corsican, 'it will be closing time soon.'

The young man gave a start and darted a swift glance at me. The young woman had turned towards the Corsican, then she picked up her book again and seemed to bury herself in it.

'Closing time,' said the Corsican five minutes later.

The old man shook his head with an uncertain air. The young woman pushed her book away, but without getting up.

The Corsican was at a loss what to do. [...]

'Do we have to leave?' the old man asked quietly.

(118)

At first this scene calls to mind the rather more famous example in *L'Étranger* where Albert Camus inserts himself into Meursault's trial as a young journalist in the gallery. Instead of the author, here it is the reader that appears in the story. And the overtones are more ominous: what would happen if the reader were to emulate his/her literary reflections?¹³ Just as the sustenance of Alice's dreams appears to depend on key dreamers placed into the stories (the Dormouse, Kitty or the Red King), all of a sudden it appears crucial that the reading go on in the library in order for Roquentin to continue to be existed in *Nausea* by the Other-holding-the-text. And ultimately it is in the library that the reader is finally seduced into writing the ending of the novel.

As has been mentioned, the reading room of the library empties to the rhythm of the emptying of the text; with a mere twenty pages to go before the famous last line, "the reading room was almost empty." Not only is this space the locus of reading and writing in the novel, it is at the epicentre of *Nausea*, safe in the eye of the storm: "it seemed to me that it scarcely existed and that the *Nausea* had spared it" (229). The scene that follows offers a pertinent *mise en abyme* for the dance of seduction that, were it not for Roquentin's retreat into the future (reread), would end in a pleasurable climax for reader and author alike.

Inasmuch as he has devoured a large portion of the library's text(s), the Autodidact represents the library, and the novel *Nausea*, itself. He has read blindly, making himself a living vessel for the consciousnesses of all the authors whose word he has never challenged. Before the two schoolboys, however, his reading becomes a

¹³ By including an old man and a young woman, Sartre has covered a wide demographic, multiplying the potential readers who will be able to recognise themselves in this scene.

pretext, his hand coming off his book and straying, disingenuously dehumanised, into a place where a caress will occur. The targeted boy is drawn in, seduced. The caress is a textbook example of the lover becoming the world for the beloved: the boy, his own pretext for being there notwithstanding, is in a library, and the Autodidact contains that world: "The boy seemed to be drinking in his words" (233). And as the boy drinks in the Autodidact's words, so we the reader drink in the text. Roquentin, who is also there under a pretext (he is feigning to read the local paper), contemplates intervening in the scene; he is in a dilemma, there is an ineluctable sequence in train, which is making the scene "hard as steel". If Roquentin can keep up the pretence then he will, indeed, make the moment an adventure. His success hinges on his own ability to seduce, through the caress of the pages, the one witness who is not there on a pretext: the reader, to whom all responsibility for the ending has been transferred.

Discouraged, I quickly turned my eyes away and returned to my paper to keep myself in countenance. Meanwhile the fat lady had pushed her book away and raised her head. She seemed fascinated. I could distinctly feel that the drama was going to begin; they all *wanted* it to begin. What could I do? I glanced at the Corsican: he wasn't looking out of the window any more, he had half-turned towards us. (234)

Does Roquentin want to prevent the scene, or does he, too, want to witness the drama unfold? This question is rhetorical as Roquentin's position is clearly perverse: he is (self-consciously) producing the text, and it is only through his mediation that the scene can occur. Whether the Corsican stands for master of reading ceremonies, Sartre the author or Napoleon himself, he is only playing a role; the fat lady is poised to sing but the act of pushing away her book cannot alter the situation. Only the reader of *Nausea* can close the library by closing the book and pushing it away. The whole scene is a set-up, a seductive trap set for us alone. Sartre's use of metaphor makes it clear that this is an example of how to seduce; like the waiter in *Being and Nothingness*, the characters are *too* self-conscious, *too* caricatured: the boy's hand "had the indolent nudity of a woman sunning herself on the beach" whilst that of the Autodidact "had all the grossness of a male organ" (234).

To capture his being for-others, to see himself as he really is, Roquentin must be loved freely. He must know that the reader wants the Autodidact to be caught. And if the reader has not yet realised that s/he is in control, is reading freely (writing *Nausea*), this final reminder leaves no doubt possible: Roquentin states that the Autodidact, the disenfranchised reader, has one last chance, i.e. "[to] put both his hands on the table, on either side of his book" (234). But, just as the boy gives himself freely to the Autodidact, Roquentin knows that the reader has become both seducer and seduced. In *Jazz* it is the narrator who has been "waiting for this all [her] life"; in *Nausea* it is the reader who finally realises that "being chosen [by him or her] to wait is the reason [Roquentin] can". S/he has been free to read/write *Nausea* and has chosen to follow the narrative to its end. Assured of the outcome, and knowing that it is one that has been accorded freely by the reader, Roquentin allows himself to remind the reader that s/he is about to make the finale ineluctable: "But I knew that he was going to miss his chance" (235).

As readers we have chosen the hegemony of authorial power because it is a power that, perversely, we alone can grant to the author by virtue of our reading of the text. Once the library scene is over and Roquentin has refused to punch the Corsican, thereby pulling the reader back from the brink of literary climax (one more example

of coitus interruptus), Roquentin walks; he tidies up the remaining themes: Anny is removed from the text, being given the orgasm that we shall never have: “She is having her orgasm and I am no more to her than if I had never met her; she has suddenly emptied herself of me and all the other consciousnesses in the world are also empty of me” (240). Indeed, all Others in the text have abandoned the battlefield. All except one. For Roquentin has managed to become novel, founding his own existence via the writerly interpretation of his reader. He has disembodied his entire self, laid himself in reach, and we have understood, reached out and stroked. It is we, as readers holding *Nausea*, who have stroked meaning into the pages of the novel. In an act of erotic reading, we have stroked the protagonist who has prostrated himself before us, and he, in turn, has relished the seduction: “I can no longer manage to feel myself. [...] I give a long, voluptuous yawn” (241).

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