

Reading Nausea Through Either/ Or: An Aesthetic and Ethical Perspective

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The great difficulty of *Nausea* by Jean-Paul Sartre, as noted by his contemporary Albert Camus, is that the philosophy can often become lost in the complex, beautiful, rich, and descriptive accounts of *Nausea* that Sartre provides throughout the text. In light of this critique, which I find to hold some truth, I will remedy Camus' frustrations by bringing *Nausea* into conversation with some harder, more systematic philosophy of Kierkegaard's *Either/Or*. This comparison sheds light on issues that are perhaps too hard to see when reading the text in isolation. The areas of comparison are 1) Roquentin's character, specifically how he relates to the world of phenomena and others, as well as his use of language; 2) the dynamic between Roquentin and the Self-Taught Man as analogous to that of author A and author B in *Either/Or*; and finally 3) through this reading of the text from the Kierkegaardian framework, I will argue that the conclusion of *Nausea* is in fact positive, despite the ending's ambiguity.

The main area of comparison will be between the two main characters, Roquentin and the Self-Taught Man, and their Kierkegaardian analogues, the aesthete, author A, and Judge Wilhelm, author B. I do not argue that these are perfectly analogous figures, merely that a comparative analysis will prove useful in better understanding Sartre's characters and the dynamic between them. Underpinning this discussion, particularly that between Roquentin and the aesthete, is the theme of language and writing, and how

these characters relate to the world of life, phenomena, and objects; this dynamic expresses itself in their struggle against the inadequacy of words to describe their experience. For this discussion I will also be employing the work of Hegel as he is a common interlocutor for both Sartre and Kierkegaard.

Before we can do the work of comparing the aesthete, author A to Roquentin, a thorough understanding of the aesthetic stage is necessary. The word, “aesthetic” has several connotations, the typical, as referring to art, beauty, and faculties of judgment, and the etymological. The etymological sense of the word comes from aisthesis meaning sense-perception—Keirkegaard begins from this sense as it relates to immediacy and the immediate:

It is common to equate immediate experience with direct experience, experience as it is simply given and simply had before the onset of reflection. Sensation and feeling are immediate as opposed to thought; first impressions are immediate as opposed to second guesses; life as it is before it doubles back on itself in the “mediation” of self-consciousness is “immediate existence.

The immediate, or the world of direct, sense experience, unmediated and unreflected by thought, is the domain of the aesthete. The aesthete is formulated thus: “The aesthetic in a man is that by which he immediately is what he is.” The aesthete’s project, however, is not so simple. The immediate cannot be had so easily. The instant it is held it becomes thought and reflection; the aesthete cannot be immediately the immediate. So rather than attempt to pursue this failing project—although as author B will argue the entire aesthetic project is a failure—the aesthete turns to art, hence the double meaning of the word:

A finds immediacy immediately presented, the content of immediacy interfusing and interfused by immediate form. In this exquisite alchemy art (reflection) is nature (the immediate)...The internal nexus joining “aesthetic” in its etymological sense to “aesthetic” in its traditional connotation is hereby exposed: art is the transfiguration of nature by self-consciousness.

Through art the aesthete gains access to the immediate. This conception of art, reminiscent of Kant’s notion of aesthetic ideas,

allows the aesthete to have his immediacy without the tainting power of reflection. Art, in this aesthetics (traditional meaning), serves as a conduit and medium for immediacy.

We are then brought to one of the aesthete's signature modes of existing in the world, through possibility. Through art, since it is able to possess an infinite number of possible interpretations, the aesthete maintains his pursuit of the immediate, without the traps of a concrete and definitive result. The aesthete's aesthetics (theory of art) goes on to influence his engagement with the world. The way in which the aesthete exists in the world becomes the way in which art is infinitely interpretable. The aesthete, therefore, embraces possibility and renounces choice:

The poet, who represents man's attempt to live his immediacy, is like immediacy itself eternally presupposed but never present. He is the flickering shadowgraph of human possibilities, the everlasting equivocator who wears an infinite number of masks but never appears in propria persona. He has no proper person, for he is himself only the possibility of manhood, imaginatively entertained and intellectually contemplated, but not yet consolidated in an actual personality.

This is author A's method. Since to engage directly with immediacy leads to reflection, and therefore not immediacy, he chooses instead to live as if he were himself immediate. He will not allow himself to be determined, so he does not choose, lives no serious public life, and has no self. In his quest for immediacy, he becomes detached from the world, "His pact is with the aesthetic, and that involves, as the case of A has already shown, detachment and arbitrariness in relation to actual persons and events." Now, with these points in mind we can turn to Roquentin as a possible incarnation of the aesthetic method.

Finding the words used to describe Roquentin is an extremely difficult task. To a large degree, like the aesthete, he has no definitive self. We can track his movements clearly, cite the folks he speaks with, the places he goes to, and his general activities, but what about his character? Certainly he is sick, but sickness is not part of one's chosen essence. Roquentin exists very much like the aesthete,

detached. Roquentin's accounts are that of a voyeur, he watches, contemplates, and judges, but rarely do we see him engage with others, save the ordering of a meal or requesting a song on the phonograph. He makes his stance quite clear, "I don't want to do anything: to do something is to create existence—and there's quite enough existence as it is." Now, to be clear, the analogy to the aesthete is not perfect and we will discuss its shortcomings later. Nevertheless, the affinity is there and useful.

In addition to Roquentin's general detachment and reliance on possibility are his generally aesthetic inclinations toward life and actions. During his conversations with Anny, Roquentin's concerns are largely of an aesthetic nature: "I could never find the words she expected, the words which went with her dress, with the weather, with the last words we had spoken the night before." His default reaction toward seeing a long lost lover has nothing to do with any sentimental or moral duty toward her and their relationship. Rather, his concern is to find the right words, to be a good dialectician, and for his participation in the event to be of a good aesthetic quality. This theme continues with their discussion of 'perfect moments' where Anny states clearly that it is a moral duty, while Roquentin again defaults to an aesthetic position: "In fact, it was a sort of work of art." To which she replies: "You've already said that" she says with irritation. "No: it was . . . a duty. You had to transform privileged situations into perfect moments. It was a moral question." Roquentin fails, as author A does in the eyes of author B, to see that life is more than what is aesthetically pleasing.

In addition to prizing the aesthetic over the ethical, Roquentin's valuing of not only situations, but people takes on an aesthetic quality. In his obsession over the song *Some of These Days*, Roquentin creates a fantasy of the life of the creators of the song—albeit whose identities he gets wrong; "They are a little like dead people for me, a little like the heroes of a novel; they have washed themselves of the sin of existing." Unlike actual people, who are perhaps sinful and ugly because of their real existence in the world, characters are not. Characters, like those of the story of the song, have a clarity and an aesthetically attractive quality to

Roquentin. It is this quality that he wants to emulate with his own life when he contemplates writing a novel, not unlike *Nausea*. In the closing passage, Roquentin contemplates writing an autobiographical account of his experiences. He hopes that by writing this text, "a little of its clarity might fall over [his] past." He desires, like the aesthete, to make his life itself art. This theme of writing as a remedy or *pharmakon* continues throughout; "The truth is that I can't put down my pen: I think I'm going to have the *Nausea* and I feel as though I'm delaying it while writing." Roquentin's constant journaling becomes a coping mechanism by which he may process or see his experiences in a mode that makes them real, but in a detached, aesthetic sense away from the actual world of experiences which is often the source of the *Nausea*.

Returning to the aesthetic method of author A, habit takes on a surprising character. Take, for example, psychologist William James' positive conception of habit contrasted to the negative portrayal in both *Nausea* and *Either/Or*. For James, habit is seen as a faculty of delegation by which we assign certain tasks so that we may direct our conscious minds toward more complex, delicate tasks. In *Nausea* and *Either/Or*, however, habit is not looked on so fondly:

Only when I think back over those careful little actions, I cannot understand how I was able to make them: they are so vain. Habit, no doubt, made them for me. They aren't dead, they keep on busying themselves, gently, insidiously weaving their webs, they wash me, dry me, dress me, like nurses.

The image here paints habits as though they were mere caretakers in a hospital or nursing home, necessary, but there is something depressing about having to delegate bodily maintenance to either others, or in this case, unconscious and automatic faculties. Roquentin's disdain for habit is also in accord with author A's fight against habit. In order to maximize pleasures without them becoming stale, author A advocates for a method known as The Rotation Method; "My method does not consist in change of field, but resembles the true rotation method in changing the crop and the mode of cultivation." Rather than simply returning to the same source for enjoyment, which will eventually become stale, author A

advocates for a highly attentive and active process of changing the sources and methods of receiving pleasure. Roquentin, however, notoriously returns to the same song for pleasure and relief from Nausea. In Kierkegaardian terms, this can be seen as an unskillful attempt at the aesthetic life.

I would like now to briefly attend to possible counter arguments toward the affinity between Roquentin and author A, the aesthete. The best argument against this affinity is that Roquentin's aesthetic inclinations are more reflexive than they are intentional. To be an aesthete is a highly intentional and attentive process. Author A is extremely explicit in his method, motivation, and approach toward the aesthetic life. Roquentin, however, does not have this quality. He is sick and due to this sickness, resorts to an aesthetic lifestyle. In this way, we can see Roquentin as modeling a sort of aesthetic coping whereby he uses the tools of the aesthete, without the overarching theory and conscious motivations behind it. His desire for a cure comes out of intense, forceful confrontations with immediacy. In response to these experiences he endeavours to deal with them by the aesthetic means of detachment, possibility, and art. This intentionality, I argue, is not essential given that the rest of the behaviors associated with the aesthete are exhibited by Roquentin. Despite his lack of highly-intentional and theoretically backed approach to the aesthetic life, many useful comparisons can still be drawn.

Following the pages of author A are those of author B, also known as Judge Wilhelm. B's work in these pages is a response to the writings of A. B represents the ethical, the next stage of life. Ethics for B are entangled with choice and public life: "Ethical choice takes the form of vow or public contract; it is decisive because it decides a man's character for the future, it defines him in advance. Only that man has a self whose personality is continuous through time, and this requires that he be willing to put his future in trust by means of his choices." As we can already see, this approach to life is directly antithetical to the aesthetic who has no continuous self, strays away from choice and embraces possibilities, and lives detached from the world and public life: "For the aesthete, a possibility is an

ever-present opportunity for enjoyment; for the ethical man, it is the now-or-never demand for decision.” The ethical person creates himself with every decision and every contractual engagement, “The ethical man. . . whose choice is a choice of himself in all his temporal concretion, unites his past (repentance) and his future (duty) in the instant of resolution.” The ethicist lives in the world. He ties himself to others through contractual arrangements, joins political parties, and makes himself through his choices. These are of course, not the attributes of Roquentin, but are in part those that describe his interlocutor, the Self-Taught Man.

Just as Roquentin can be seen as analogous to author A, so too can his predominant interlocutor, the Self-Taught Man, be seen as analogous to author B, the Judge. And just as we searched in vain for descriptions of Roquentin, when we make the same search for the Self-Taught Man, we find that our job is not nearly as difficult. The Self-Taught Man is, of course, disciplined, as any good autodidact must be to read through an entire library in alphabetical order. Even more grossly, however, he is a humanist. The Self-Taught Man explicitly aligns himself, not only with an ethical stance, but also a political one, something entirely foreign to Roquentin as well as the aesthete.

The dialectic, then, between Roquentin and the Self-Taught Man can be read as a confrontation between the aesthetic and the ethical life. This is everclear during the characters’ discussion of humanism. The Self-Taught Man, after having declared himself a humanist, learns the sad truth about his interlocutor, that he is not a man of ethics and will not even communicate on the same terms, “I don’t want to be integrated, I don’t want my good red blood to go and fatten this lymphatic beast: I will not be a fool enough to call myself “anti-humanist.” I am not a humanist, that’s all there is to it.” Rather than engaging with the ethical dialogue, Roquentin circumvents it and manages to negate ethical qualifications of his stance while still establishing himself as not-humanist, nevertheless in an apolitical and amoral way. Roquentin senses that the gap between himself and the Self-Taught Man is completely unbridgeable and hopeless to try and find a synthesis with, “something has died between us.”

One of the most fascinating dynamics in *Nausea* is the relationship between words and objects or words and phenomena. Roquentin's fight against words to describe objects correctly and fully, his acknowledgment of their inadequacy, and yet his constant return to them is one of the finest portrayals of this struggle:

The word absurdity is coming to life under my pen; a little while ago, in the garden, I couldn't find it, but neither was I looking for it, I didn't need it: I thought without words, on things, with things. Absurdity was not an idea in my head, or the sound of a voice, only this long serpent dead at my feet, this wooden serpent. Serpent or claw or root or vulture's talon, what difference does it make. And without formulating anything clearly, I understood that I had found the key to Existence, the key to my *Nauseas*, to my own life. In fact, all that I could grasp beyond that returns to this fundamental absurdity. Absurdity: another word; I struggled against words; down there I touched the thing.

Through his sickness, the *Nausea*, Roquentin continually has experiences of extreme immediacy that often go so far that they may be classified as hallucinations or psychedelic. These experiences in turn allow him to confront things as they are, without reflection, without thought, in their purity before representation—immediately. The oscillation between the inadequacy of words to describe the ineffable experiences that Roquentin has and yet the fact that he is still inclined at the very end of the book to write, just as he does after one of the most intense, hallucinatory moments in the novel, "I could not understand it, even if I could have stayed leaning against the gate for a century; I had learned all I could know about existence. I left, I went back to the hotel and I wrote;" is a dynamic played out in similar fashion by the Kierkegaardian aesthete, namely author A: "His medium is not words, but himself: he is the living poiesis, the root and branch of which all merely verbal making is but the flower." And despite that, it is written! Even for author A, the ideal aesthete who lives in possibility, remains nameless, and has no definitive self still writes, despite its inadequacy to reach the immediate.

Roquentin's struggle against words to touch the thing has its roots in the work of Hegel—a common interlocutor for both

Kierkegaard and Sartre. Hegel defines the particular thing first as something that is a composite of separate parts or properties:

It is (a) an indifferent, passive universality, the Also of many properties or rather 'matters'...The sensuous universality, or the immediate unity of being and the negative, is thus a property only when the One and the pure universality are developed from it and differentiated from each other, and when the sensuous universality unites them ; it is this relation of the universality to the pure essential moments which at last completes the Thing.

The separate properties that make up the thing belong to universality, the particular thing, however, does not. Moving now to language and descriptions of the particular thing is where Hegel, as well as Roquentin, find the difficulty:

The sensuous This that is meant cannot be reached by language, which belongs to consciousness, i.e. to that which is inherently universal. In the actual attempt to say it, it would therefore crumble away ; those who started to describe it would not be able to complete the description, but would be compelled to leave it to others, who would themselves finally have to admit to speaking about something which is not.

The This that Hegel refers to here is the particular thing—for example Roquentin's root, or absurdity itself. What is the sensuous universality in the thing are the universal properties that make up the thing. These properties are able to be reached by language. The particular thing, however, which is not a universal cannot be reached by language. And, as Hegel points out, when we do attempt to do so, as we often do, we soon realize that we are using language toward an impossible end.

Roquentin finds the level of relating to the root, to absurdity, where words cease to have any use, "The function explained nothing: it allowed you to understand generally that it was a root, but not that one at all. This root, with its colour, shape, its congealed movement, was . . . below all explanation." And yet despite this knowledge, he continues to struggle against the words. He continues to desire to write down his experiences for the sake of clarity. The illusion here that causes him so much suffering and confusion is his fight against

the terms of understanding that may serve well for explanation in terms of function and form, but only serve to create confusion when applied toward the thing itself; Sartre discusses this dynamic explicitly here:

I would say that an object has a meaning (sens) when it is the incarnation of a reality which goes beyond it but which cannot be grasped apart from it and whose infinity does not allow expression in any system of signs; what is involved is always a case of totality: the totality of a person, a milieu, an epoch, the human condition.

When working with the totality of a thing, we cannot resort to systems of signs to convey them, we must forgo this inclination and instead engage directly, immediately, with the thing as it is, without reflection or representation in language or thought.

The final page of the novel leaves the reader with a strange feeling of confusion and dissatisfaction. It seems to fold back on itself and does anything but resolve the issues of the novel clearly. The novel concludes as a kind of farewell for Roquentin to the city of Bouville, following his final day of round-making through the city. These final rounds are the last of those we see in a book whose summary can simply be described as a collection of these walks. He will leave tomorrow and yet it is still hard to distinguish what marks the end of Roquentin's arc in *Nausea* given its circuitous structure. However, by reading the novel's end in the terms of our discussion, we may see that it does in fact display a kind of progression. Roquentin starts again, from the position of the aesthetic. He stays within possibility, "I must leave, I am vacillating. I dare not make a decision." For fear of what choosing might lead to, Roquentin prefers to stay in safety, within possibility; remember from *Either/Or* the advice of author A, "Pleasure disappoints; possibility does not." This remains Roquentin's method of coping, despite knowing that the decision, for all intents and purposes, has already been made. He will leave Bouville tomorrow and has chosen this future, not necessarily the act of a pure aesthete. I argue that in these final pages, Roquentin does in fact make progress away from the aesthetic, toward the ethical; though of course, he does not make it all the way to ethical, but instead stops short at irony. Roquentin does this by

choosing; in choosing a new life for himself, he begins to step away from the aesthetic and closer to the ethical. Roquentin is on the precipice of creating his actuality. By choosing to write and gain clarity of his past he acknowledges his actuality or facticity. Tomorrow he will leave, and he must make himself in this new life, embrace his transcendence and potentiality, rather than run from it by living as the aesthete does in indecision:

In this case choice performs at one and the same time the two dialectical movements: that which is chosen does not exist and comes into existence with the choice; that which is chosen exists, otherwise there would not be a choice. For in case what I chose did not exist absolutely came into existence with the choice, I would not be choosing, I would be creating; but I do not create myself, I choose myself. Therefore, while nature is created out of nothing, while I myself as an immediate personality am created out of nothing, as a free spirit I am born of the principle of contradiction (either/or), or born by the fact that I choose myself.

This passage from *Either/Or* illustrates the extremes of this type of choosing, a version of choice that Roquentin is still far from achieving. Nevertheless, in choosing to write consciously about his own life, and to create a new life in a new place, he is regaining and creating his identity. In this sense, the end of the book might even be read as somewhat hopeful. He does, however, have far to go as his inclinations are still somewhat aesthetic: "And there would be people who would read this book and say: "Antoine Roquentin wrote it, a red-headed man who hung around caf[e]s," and they would think about my life as I think about the Negress's: as something precious and almost legendary." This type of autobiographical writing does, however, have much in common with the ethical life. The ethicist acknowledges his past or actuality, facticity in Sartrean terms, but also his future and possibilities, or transcendence:

However, as long as one is only conscious of oneself, the entire self remains potential. For the self to be actualized, and hence for the process of individuation to be carried further, freedom must be exercised. The self must freely accept the structure of its

being—its actuality (the past), its possibility (the future), and the freedom to realize possibilities (the present).

Roquentin, for large segments of the novel, spends time in pure acknowledgment of his existence without acting. Now, after having gone through his cogito and process of gaining self-consciousness, he chooses and acts in the world. His return to look at the past is necessary if he is to look toward the future, “Naturally, at first it would only be a troublesome, tiring work, it wouldn’t stop me from existing or feeling that I exist. But a time would come when the book would be written, when it would be behind me, and I think that a little of its clarity might fall over my past. Then, perhaps, because of it, I could remember my life without repugnance.” Writing helps him gain a sense of actuality over his past, to grasp it as real and tangible rather than it existing in pure possibility and ambiguity.

Now, as I have said, Roquentin does not become an ethicist; but he cannot be considered a pure aesthete any longer. Fortunately, there is an intermediate stage, irony: “Socrates stood at the border between the aesthetic and the ethical stages; his standpoint was irony.” To be clear, there are many senses of the ironic and the ironist, here specifically we are working with Socratic irony, not the religious irony that Kierkegaard discusses with regard to Abraham and the religious stage. With this type of irony, the ironist stands on the edge of actuality, he is potentiality rather than pure possibility, “this intermediate stage, which is not the new principle and yet is that (potentia non actu [potentially, not actually]), is precisely irony.” And this is where we leave Roquentin, a potentia non actu, he is on the precipice of actuality, the decision has been made, all that is left is for him to live it and become himself in actuality.

By entering into the ironic in the final pages, Roquentin has begun his transition from aesthete to ethicist. The ending of *Nausea* is not as ambiguous as it may initially seem. Roquentin does make progress throughout the novel and the ending marks his final departure from the aesthetic, through the ironic, toward the ethical—a positive movement.

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