

**Living or Being Lived – Literary Illustrations of Early Modernist
Existentialist Turmoil**

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Abstract:

Existentialism sees man in a permanent activity of self defining. Man cannot but act. While acting, he defies time, the flow of existence, and gives meaning to his life, living instead of being lived. But getting from the state of existing to that of actually living is not as easy as exposing the concept. Traps of life, deceiving paths, swindling facts are met at every step. Characters as those portrayed by Jean Paul Sartre, André Gide, Mircea Eliade and other modern writers concerned with how man relates to the others, to the surrounding social environment, to his own place in history and in the world, render some of the psychological aspects that constitute the human being's correlation with the outer world. The inner response to the outer stimuli, the way of perceiving, interpreting the world and the manner of trying to direct this environment, to impose ourselves and become the decision makers in our destinies are masterly illustrated in the literary works of these modern writers. The apparent freedom to choose, the illusive reality, the need to fight, to defeat commonplace and go beyond the mundane by taking a sort of action, from the deeply desperate unexplainable deeds, to the conscious acts of will that could be historically remarkable, are to the same degree attempts to make time surrender, to draw some achievements that would give a meaning to life.

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From philosophy to literature

The existentialist turmoil considers that "man, understood as subject, i.e. in terms of conscience and liberty, is not predetermined by what could be called his essence. On the contrary, as an individual entirely free, even 'sentenced to freedom', he chooses in each circumstance and, from a choice to another he picks and chooses himself,

randomly, it is true, but responsibly, he moulds his destiny himself".¹

This problem of choosing had occurred with Gide too, who confessed: "the necessity of an option has always been intolerable for me, to choose meant waiving all the rest for good and the enormous quantity of this rest would remain preferable to any other unit".²

Some of the basic ideas of Sartre's existentialist philosophy include: the relationship of existence – essence, anguish and despair. In philosophical terms, any object has its essence (the constant ensemble of its features) and existence (a certain effective presence in the world). With a certain type of objects, the essence precedes existence, as in the case of a house or a chair. Objects like these form in the human brain an image concordant with the ensemble of the characteristics known and then, by their construction, we achieve their presence in the real world, their existence. Following the principle according to which an object only exists corresponding to its essence, the extrapolation to man has developed, speaking of what is called 'human nature', essence common to all humans. Existentialism, on the other hand, claims that in the case of man – and not only – existence precedes essence. This means that man first *is* and only then is in a way or another. In other words, man creates his own essence (he cannot do anything else) throwing himself in the world, suffering and fighting to define himself little by little and the definition remains always open: it cannot be defined what a man is until his death, nor what mankind is until it vanishes. Existentialism refuses to give man a nature established for good.

In Sartre's existentialism man is considered in a permanent activity of self defining. Man cannot but act, his thoughts are projects and engagements, his feelings are directions in the sense that his life is the entirety of his behaviour. If a man does not resume to 'existing' but instead creates that existence and is permanently being shaped by it, assuming the responsibility of the entire species, if there is no value, no morals given a priori, if each situation is for us to decide by ourselves, with no support and guidance and yet for all of us, "sentenced to be free", is it possible for us not to feel the frights of such a destiny? To this can be added the tragic conscience of the fact that we only survive by our own effort (be it only that of breathing or that of earning our living).

Each of our deeds activates the sense of the world and our place

¹ Toader Saulea, *Cronologie comentată* (Commented Chronology) in Jean Paul Sartre, *Cuvintele. Greuța* (Words. Nausea), Bucharest, RAO, 1997, p. 20.

² Vladimir Streinu, *Studii de literatură universală* (Studies in Universal Literature), Bucharest, Univers, 1973, p. 323.

in the universe; by each of our actions, even the lack of it, we constitute a value scale, with corresponding responsibilities. The anguish, far from being an obstacle in the way of our action, is the very condition of its existence. It becomes one with the sense of this remarkable responsibility of each before everybody.

It is true that man has the right to hope, but hope is, in fact, the greatest hindrance to action. While hoping, we have nothing else to do but wait with arms crossed. Man cannot wish this once he has understood there is nobody he can count on except himself, he is left alone in the middle of his countless responsibilities, helpless and without any possible rescue, with no other goal but the one he himself shall project, with no other destiny but the one he himself can create. This intuitive conscience of his position is what the existentialists call despair: the dry and lucid awareness of the human condition. Inasmuch as anguish cannot distinguish itself from the sense of responsibility, despair becomes one with the wish to act. Despair induces real optimism, the optimism of the man who expects nothing, who knows he has no rights and no debts, and who thus enjoys counting on himself only, still acting at the same time for the entire humankind.

As for the literary existentialist program, the fundamental idea is the author's responsibility towards the society he belongs to. The remote goal would be to relieve the writer from the complex of artistic futility and, indirectly, to relieve mankind from the despair felt in front of its fate. A total man is required, "totally committed and totally free", so that, in any circumstance, he could choose life, commitment, responsibility.

Sartre hesitated between the artistic and the philosophic knowledge, and this hesitation led to a distinct manner of artistic approach, a conscientious and maximally cognized one, the text itself constituting an existentialist philosophic approach, the theme of salvation through art making its way through: "to reject the existence inside me, to empty the moments from their facts, to rinse and dry them off, to purify myself, to become tough, so that I could eventually render the net and precise sound of a saxophone note".¹

The author analyses everything and self-analyses himself finding «une sorte de contrainte intérieure», an inner constraint that is not the effect of his own conscience but imposes itself upon his acts like a 'dimension of duty' exceeding the reality of the individual. Sartre suggests the interpretation «autrui – en – moi», "the other's voice inside

¹ Jean Paul Sartre, *Cuvintele. Greșita*, p. 376.

me”, reminding that “I do not live alone in this world and my action intermingles with the future of the other, who acts in his turn”.¹ Thus, Sartre’s work revealed “the destructive effects of the concept of reason reduced to *l’esprit d’analyse*”.²

The character’s consciousness

Silvian Iosifescu holds the opinion that in the literature of the moment there is no literary character in the classic sense any more. In the new form, the character has adopted a certain independence from the author, in the sense that it will be able to evolve, at a certain point, opposite way from the prototype the writer initially imagined. Moreover, it is built taking into account its unity, its logic, without being at the author’s discretion, its actions being motivated and steady.³ The modern attitude of the author can be expressed as “introducing the novelist in the novel”, when the former “waives the rather school like privilege of being the commentator, the glossator of his characters, the teacher that explains them, the psychologist that exhausts all its significances”.⁴

Not limited by norms, the character that is a reflection of the modern writer’s freed conscience wakes up in a world with no clear cut landmarks and starts wondering and striving concerning existence: “If I exist, that is because I am horrified to exist. I, I am the one that pulls me out of the nothingness I long for: hate, disgust of existing are nevertheless ways to make me exist, to deepen into existence”,⁵ as Antoine Roquentin, the Sartrean character in *Nausea* exclaimed.

The antihero, the common character

As an extrapolation of the general demythization that overwhelmed modern thinking, or rather as the consequence of its ‘return’ to the world, to the mundane and authentic, and as an effect of the

¹ Manfred Frank, *Două secole de critică a raționalității și supralicitarea ei „postmodernă”* (Two Centuries of Rationality Critique and Its “Postmodern” Outbidding), in *Postmodernismul. Deschideri filosofice* (Postmodernism. Philosophical Openings), Cluj-Napoca, Dacia, 1995, p. 23.

² Jean Paul Sartre, *Situations*, vol. 2, Paris, 1948, p. 16, see *Ibid.*, p. 22.

³ See Silvian Iosifescu, *Construcție și lectură* (Construction and Reading), Bucharest, Univers, 1970, pp. 150, 155.

⁴ R. M. Albérès, *Istoria romanului modern* (The History of the Modern Novel), Bucharest, ELU, 1999, p. 170.

⁵ Jean Paul Sartre, *Cuvintele. Greața*, p. 293.

universal descent of all human spiritually constitutive plans returning to their 'human' normality, the modern character will appear empty of illusions and moods, natural, discharged of 'heroism' or of sensational, becoming a man as such and presenting his condition equally natural or blank: "the hero is no longer a super man fighting against the 'inner fatality', he will become a man among other men".¹

Much in the same way, the character will no longer be that traditional hero but it will remain important, even more important, because "without this patient, there is no novel"; it is the one that "fulfils the narrative functions"² and, against some critical views, "we cannot talk of the vanishing of the character" but of "the occurrence of a new type of hero, adapted to distinct social circumstances". The non-hero represents, thus, "the crystallisation of a new sort of character"³.

Gide's way of outlining characters, for instance, belongs to the register of the anti-callophillic style: "there isn't any more a destiny brought onto the stage by the narrator, but an emotional disorder of a life where everything starts, nothing ends... the characters in the *Counterfeiters* intermingle, meet, but do not bound between one another"⁴.

From the perspective of André Gide's work, Irina Eliade noticed a paradigm shift in what the modern character is regarded, in relation with the traditional one, concerning the implication of fatality in their play on the novelistic stage. The starting point is that fatality, which sometimes pushes the actors in this novel on alongside paths, is an interior one, belonging to the intrinsic psychology of each of them. It is the same with the heroes of Camil Petrescu, for whom their decisions correspond to their inner structure, a structure associable with their dominant character feature. The external fatality is not given such a great importance, as it is being associated with the idea of accident⁵.

"*Nausea* by Jean Paul Sartre ... does not describe only the boredom of a blasé intellectual in a province town, but also the drama of this man who would like to 'exist', to be a thing and a conscience at the same time, to defeat that impossibility of being that so much torments the

¹ Irina Eliade, *Prefață* (Preface) to André Gide, *Tezeu. Din file de toamnă* (Theseus. Autumn Leaves), Bucharest, Univers, 1971, p. 9.

² Dumitru Tiutiua, *Teora literară*, (Literary theory), Iași, European Institute, 2002, p. 266-267.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 237.

⁴ R.M. Albérès, *Istoria romanului modern*, p. 157.

⁵ See Irina Eliade, *Prefață*, p. 5-7.

straight forward people"¹.

Thus, "Sartre himself pleads against the 'characters', the men-essences, even against an eternal immovable, unhistorical human nature; he opposes existence to essence, the hero becoming a being in a given situation; hence, the uniqueness of the novel"².

Eliade's characters generally have intellectual concerns and are tormented by the revelation of the true significance of their existence. They are placed in the flow of certain events, preoccupied with discovering profound senses, inaccessible to ordinary people; they will be initiated by the agency of some signs that open their way to the comprehension of significances, to a revelation.

Thus, there are three types of characters: the initiated ones (scholars who have studied mystics, religions, and whose erudition ensures them to proceed to another plan of reality, as for instance professor Suren Bose in *Nights at Serampore*, or Zerlendi in *The Secret of Doctor Honigberger*), the mediocre ones (these will not cope with the extraordinary events, as Gavrilescu in *With the Gipsy Girls*, unable to pass the initiating tests) and, respectively, the mirror characters of the author (establishing the connection between the two extremes, characters trying to reveal to the reader a part of the mystery, to guide him through the labyrinth of miraculous events).

Gide's influence on Mircea Eliade has often been mentioned in the literature, and the problem has been much debated, counter arguing that, as the writer himself stated, at the moment of the production of the so called GGidian writings, Eliade had not read Gide yet. As a matter of fact, this aspect interests less, as it is not the influence of an author upon another that presents relevance to our study but the similitude in their methods, the more interesting and valuable as they appeared individually, with no influence, being just the fruits of a similar modern sensitiveness. Eliade's characters remind of Gide's ones, being sprung from a spiritual state and an existential philosophy much alike: "If we are to establish a more profound correspondence between Mircea Eliade's epic and Gide's novels, then this must be sought for in the moral nature of the characters. The cohesive force of the narrations of both novelists is embodied by one or more problematic characters, restless spirits, inquisitive, and open to all

¹ R.M. Albérès, *Istoria romanului modern*, chapter *Romanul destinului și al condiției umane* (The novel of destiny and human condition), p. 247.

² Paul Georgescu, *De la o noapte la alta*, (From one night to the other), in *Camil Petrescu interpretat de...* (Camil Petrescu interpreted by...), Bucharest, Eminescu, 1984, p. 192.

existentialist experiences. Any act of these is an act of knowledge. Any experience, on any plan, engages them ontologically"¹.

The Eliadian pulsation towards something higher, superior, gives a distinctive note to his characters, even in *The Hooligans*, his writing closest to Gide or Sartre in the manner of character construction.. Eliade's antiheroes have something more, an aspiration and impulse for freedom, an intellect manifest and assertive, lofty at present, even if eventually fruitless. This is in opposition with Antoine Roquentin's reluctance and almost permanent pessimistic crisis and acerb feeling of futility, adding up to the ordinary, the immoral simplicity and naturalness common to any adolescent spirit coating Gide's characters. Even the definition given by the writer indicates the distinct typology of this type of an anti-hero: "there is a fertile debut in life: the hooligan experience. To not respect a thing, to believe in nothing else but yourself, your youth, your biology, if you please... He who does not begin this way, to himself or the world, will create nothing. To be able to forget the truths, to have so much life inside you that the truth falls unable to penetrate or intimidate – that's the vocation of a hooligan"².

Salvatore Battaglia considers obvious the cause that determined the new approach to the character, in a world which minimises the role of the individual and promotes the fetishes of things instead (economy, money, power, political influence etc.). "Society's structure itself, its morals, customs, traditions and prejudices, even the very feelings, now schematised and sterilised, are the ones not allowing man to release by himself an existence of his own, a personal destiny, and an individual voice. Reality stops being a way of acceding to life"³.

It could be said, following the opinions of the same theoretician, that the psychological, the experiences, and human existence are also envisaged by the artist and the changes occurred in the society will never pass unnoticed and unuttered by art. As Liviu Petrescu noted, the novel, belonging to art, and, what is more, constituting one of the most at hand and enjoyed forms of the latter, will have this duty, this mission. Battaglia argued that now "the relationship is reversed between the individual and the world, which constitutes the eternal dialectic of existence and the art that perpetuates it in symbolic forms. Even in the so called 'new novel'

¹ Dumitru Micu, *Introduction to Mircea Eliade, Maitreyi. Nuntă în cer* (Maitreyi. Wedding in Heaven), Bucharest, EPL, 1969, p. XVIII-XIX.

² Mircea Eliade, *Huliganii* (The Hooligans), Bucharest, Rum-Irina, 1992, p. 182.

³ Salvatore Battaglia, *Mitografia personajului* (The mythography of the character), Bucharest, Univers, 1976, p. 374.

and the 'antinovel' the existential problem is still effective in the nucleus of the narrative interest, though hidden in the most mysterious anonymity of things and objects", and the novel, "like any other artistic phenomena, expresses in the first place a formal value and that is why it is linked and at the same time guaranteed by the conscience and the wish to penetrate the significances of the experience and to intuitively understand the people's destiny and to authenticate it in the historical and individual conscience"¹.

The gratuitous action

André Gide has proved an adversary of ideologies and limitations that falsify man and prevent him from plenary manifesting his personality, an adversary of the rigid scientific discourse. He released "the human behaviour from under the authority of a determinist model (in which everything would be inscribed in the scheme of a reason-deed type relationship), in order to associate it with a model of the random, of the accidental (characterised by an emphasised evasiveness of behavioural motivations), instead, by promoting some perfectly unmotivated actions, named by the writer as gratuitous actions"².

Gide explained: "By gratuitous action I understand an action whose reasoning is not explicit and that presents the characteristic of disinterest"³. The problem raised by Dostoievski in *Crime and Punishment*, the gratuitous action, is transposed into comic with Gide, but the things are different as long as the given action is previously thought and analysed, the character meditating on the gesture and its consequences. This thing confers a programmatic valence and by this some analysts state that it loses its gratuity and considers the phenomenon to be just an "amazing slogan launched by Gide-ism."⁴.

The author, through Julius's voice, the author-character in *The Caves of Vatican*, explains: "When I say disinterested I think of gratuitous. I also think that the evil, namely what we call evil, can be as

¹ Ibid., p. 445.

² Liviu Petrescu, *Poetica postmodernismului* (The poetics of postmodernism), Pitești, Paralela 45, 1998, p. 44.

³ See Vladimir Colin, *Prefață* (Preface) to André Gide, *Paludes. Prometeu rău înlănțuit* (Paludes. Prometheus misbound), Bucharest, ELU, 1969, p. 9.

⁴ Cf. Toma Pavel, *Prefață* (Preface) to André Gide, *Fructele pământului. Noile fructe* (Fruits of the earth. New fruits of the earth), Bucharest, EPL, 1968, p. X.

much gratuitous as the good..."¹ and indeed he presents his intention of writing in his novel about a gratuitous murder exactly as the one described in the frame story: "I do not want to justify the murder, it is enough to justify the murderer. Yes, I want to make him commit the murder groundlessly, to long for a totally unfounded murder"².

Liviu Petrescu noticed that the rejection of determinism will lead to gratuitous actions and Gide somehow makes an apology of these, the character by the name of Lafcadio being one that lives not only a banal existence but, maybe for that very reason, led by groundless actions, explains: "Nothing hinders me so much as the need, I never grudged unless for useless things"³.

Little Boris in *The Counterfeiters*, is himself the victim of a gratuitous action, committing suicide practically as a consequence of a fake drawing lots. The gratuitous action is present also in Mircea Eliade's early novels. As Iulian Băicuș noticed, such inexplicable actions, that with Gide would have been used with a view to boost the core layers of the narration, to impose a more alert rhythm, acting as "veritable textual engines", are in fact present everywhere, the notes of gratuity being now combined with immorality, in a mixture of Gidian influences with "pathetic notes of Dostoievskianism and the Russian novel": "many of the epical situations of these texts contain such nuclei of objective hazard, whether we refer to the suicide of Pavel Anicet in *Return from Paradise*, the prototype being the very suicide of Boris, the character in *The Counterfeiters*, or we regard the spiritual suicide of the heroines Isabel or Maitreyi, who choose a relation with an inferior man"⁴.

Băicuș exemplifies this narration by how the doctor in *Isabel and the Devil's Waters* exposes proudly and wilfully the young body nicely shaped, in front of the physically disabled persons, then performing a theatrical dive into the pool and splashing them all. And the examples can go on: "Petru Anicet in *The Hooligans* would rather have made his way in the rich world by the agency of a woman or a theft" (denying the tradition of the realist novel, the fortune hunting of the characters and that *deus ex*

¹ André Gide, *Pivnițele Vaticanului* (The caves of the Vatican, translated into English as *Lafcadio's Adventures*), Bucharest, Vivaldi, 1993, p. 184.

² Ibid., p. 209.

³ Ibid., p. 97.

⁴ Iulian Băicuș, *Dublul Narcis* (Double Narcissus), chapter 4, *Mircea Eliade – Șantierul romancierului miop* (Mircea Eliade – the working place of the short-sighted novel writer), Bucharest, Universității, 2003, internet source: <http://www.unibuc.ro/eBooks/filologie/Baicus/narciscontranarcis.htm>.

machina of the fortunes inherited just out of the blue) while at the Leccas place, where he enters as a piano instructor, on seducing Miss Anișoara, he makes her steal the family jewels, after he first had indulged himself in being a leech, living from the earnings of a poor prostitute, a situation as if taken from a Slav novel"¹.

With Jean Paul Sartre, the "gratuity" stands for the natural, it is understood straight-forward, already intrinsic to the being, to free existence: "Sartre's heroes do not justify their deeds or abstinences", "liberty, subjective and absolutely autonomous" is defined by an answer, by "saying no"².

The existentialist struggle

Experience determines man. To what extent? It depends on the way he perceives, understands, filters through his own conscience, attributes value to this "living" or submits to it.

While for Camil Petrescu "experience" is a vague term and is replaced by "living" which has to be genuine and not an abandon, because, if so, then "you do not live any more but are lived arbitrarily", Mircea Eliade distances himself from this in his explanations of difference: "I believe that the whole mystery of experience boils down to this perfect coincidence with the term exterior (an event or a state of heart) and at the same time a transgression of that, a relief from it"³.

Nothing can bound or limit that liberty beyond morals, that interior freedom of Eliade's characters, who do not consent to be constrained, to obey some exterior rules, to indulge in the girdle of social norms, staying rebel and free and hence their existential fight, reminding of Sartre: "No label intimidates me, no blackmail. I am and will be the way I want. I can break any law, except that of my own being, which is a prerogative of mine alone [...] but no blackmail can have any power upon me. I won't let myself blackmailed either for pity, friendship, morals, or for the word given"⁴. This is how Eliade's character Alexandru Pleșa, in the *The Hooligans*, justifies himself.

Another feature of Eliade's characters is the need to escape from the terror of history, the need to escape from the time of daily existence.

¹ Ibid.

² Dumitru Ghișe, *Existențialismul francez și problemele eticii* (French existentialism and the problems of ethics), Cluj-Napoca, Dacia, 1970, p. 102.

³ Nicolae Manolescu, *Arca lui Noe* (Noah's Arc), vol. 2, Bucharest, Minerva, 1981, chapter *Jocurile Maitreyiei* (Maitreyi's games), p. 196.

⁴ Mircea Eliade, *Huliganii*, p. 304.

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way to achieve this goal is present in some short stories, but mostly in the novel *The Forbidden Forest*, where an actor is presented as being one of the few that can live more lives during the same existence (those of the characters interpreted).

Sartre's character is the most edifying sample of the existentialist hero, under the yoke of various constraints, from internal, psychological ones to those deriving from the oppressing quotidian, but which get to be felt organically, physiologically. "Sartre's characters manifest an active existentialism, apparent at the level of the reflex conscience, while in the New Novel it stays at the level of perceptive conscience. With Sartre's characters, 'the primordial existential feelings' (that of the absurd, the nausea, the dereliction etc.) end in revealing themselves to the lucid conscience, leading to choice and action, to the others"¹.

One of the favourite Sartrean themes is that of the really special relation – permanently oscillating between mutual teasing and an admiration spiced, every now and then, with notes of sensuality –, between *the I* and the others. The uninterrupted association with the other and the self is, in Sartre's vision, the revelatory dimension of authenticity itself and the only method of correctly defining it. The implications deriving from the positioning of the individual in the social context, among the others, are seriously turning the tables on the internal organization of the individual, seemingly breaking him apart, giving him turmoils, which are physiologically sensed, almost at the limit of the pathological: "Sartre was especially concerned by the question of the seen being. He suggests a change of attitudes in this matter. We always think of the Other, says Sartre, as of the one that we can see. Still, he is also one who sees us. I see the other as an object, but at the same time I am seen by the Other, by the subject whose watching turns me into an object. Under that sight I become not just an object, but an owned object. Penetrated by that view, my universe suddenly disintegrates [...]. It is the look that 'fixes' and 'off-centres', sweeps away the world of the character "².

Employing a sort of archaic psychoanalysis (concerting psychology and man's way of perception in the first years of life), the

¹ Irina Mavrodin, *Romanul poetic* (The poetic novel), Bucharest, Univers, 1977, p. 186.

² Ibid., p. 201.

reasoning is applied accordingly and, extrapolated at a universal scale, the phenomenon will have traumatising dimensions: the unseen things do not exist, if we cannot see a person, that person cannot see us either, but then, vice versa, the reciprocal applies to the same extreme coordinates, this being the traumatising thing – in a frightening paroxystic sensation of being analysed and dissected in thin slices, in each molecule of the being, by the watching eyes. This disintegration, doubled by the awareness of belonging to another conscience, is enough to thoroughly feel the powerlessness, the exposure – lack of defence and of intimacy, the insignificance of the being, the waste and dissolution of *the I* in and by the presence of the social factor, "the other" representing indeed the "hell" of existence.

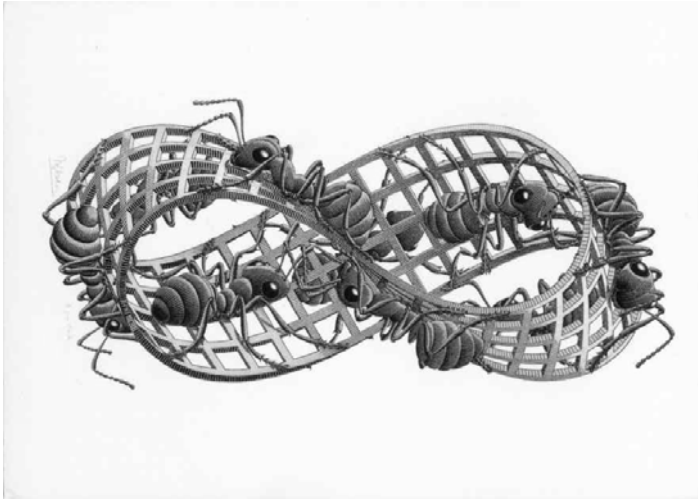
The Nausea is an unusual novel, in which the depth of the characters' consciences is scanned and interpreted by the novelist, from the perspective of existentialist psychoanalysis. For Sartre, any existent object occurs without a reason and dies arbitrarily. Much in the same way, Antoine Roquentin, the main character, will initially be inhibited by a state of nausea, by a terror of being, of impassibly exerting an existence perceived as a duty. Its relation to the outside world, the way of perceiving things and of assimilating external information are uncommon and even odd. "My hands, for instance, have something really new, a particular way of grabbing the pipe or the fork. Or maybe the fork has now a peculiar way of being grabbed, I do not know"¹.

His intense lucidity will create a discrepancy, an incompatibility between his world and that of everyday reality, received as amorphous and seemingly disintegrated, through the prism of his exacerbated pragmatism. Passing through a stage of stabilisation and anchoring in the real by 'naming the things', thus being elevated above the others and a conquest of existence, he will evolve towards a state of reflexivity, in which he will find a meaning in the projection of a significant future, that will be able to reach, in its turn, the state of being accepted and acceptable only at the moment when it becomes a finalised concrete, i.e. a 'past'.

Antoine Roquentin refuses a destiny in which existence precedes essence, in which option is virtual and the freedom to choose is unreal due to a disguised imprisonment, to a confinement in an illusively infinite space, as a Moebius strip²:

¹ Jean Paul Sartre, *Cuvintele. Greata*, p. 184.

² *Moebius strip*, Escher, <http://www.worldofescher.com/gallery>.



From this limitation, in which the confinement lacking any horizon is perceived as nausea, there are few chances of a more or less authentic escape: apathy, suicide or centrifugal impulse – the undertaking of a role. Thus, "the redemption", the salvation from the uselessness of life, could come from this undertaking, i.e. from renouncing at a consciousness "in-itself", which hyperbolises the nothingness and the imperfection of existence and adopting a consciousness "for-itself", materialised in active participation and the orientation towards a goal.

The character Antoine Roquentin, alleged writer, exposes both his inner and existential torment to an equal degree and in tight interdependence from each other. He perceives the usefulness of his own existence only through the prism of its functionality, of its role of creation, of giving birth to certain characters. The historic novel, which he permanently prepares to write, but for various reasons – perhaps due to a subconscious control – always postpones to begin writing, overwhelms him. The character of this novel infiltrates in his own environment, and thus the writer would be completely lost and dried of existence at the moment when he decided or understood he could not write the history any more: "Mr. de Rollebon was my associate: he needed me in order to exist and I needed him to stop sensing that I exist. I supplied the raw material,

this material of which I had enough, which I did not know what to do with; the existence, my existence. His role was to represent. He was staying in front of me borrowing my own life in order to render me his. I could no longer sense that I existed, I did no longer exist in myself, but in him; I could not see my hand drawing letters on paper any longer, not even the sentence I had just written – but beyond the paper, behind it, I could see the marquis, who had asked for that gesture, whose existence that gesture would prolong, would strengthen. I was just a device for keeping him alive; he was the very reason of my existence, relieving me of myself. What was I supposed to do now?"¹.

The same limitation, the same strive tormented Sartre as well, the way it did to his character, the latter being thus obviously perceived as having appeared straight from this inner, existential struggle of its writer. Twenty five years after *The Nausea*, Sartre wrote: "to write meant for me to demand Death, Religion, under disguise, to grab my life from the incidence of hazard. I belonged to a Church. Militant, I wanted to save myself through works; mystique, I tried to reveal the silence of the being through a contradicting muttering of words and especially, I took things for their names: that meant to trust. I was light-blinded. As long as it lasted I thought of myself as saved. I managed this maestro strike at the age of thirty: to write in *The Nausea* the unfounded, blank existence of my peers, placing mine out of question. Disguised to the bones and mystified, I joyfully wrote of our miserable condition. Dogmatic, I doubted all except the fact that I am the one chosen to doubt; I built with a hand what I destroyed with the other and I saw in the unrest the guarantee of my own peace; I was happy"².

Is this just one proof of the catharsis – "I was happy", "I was writing joyfully", "I considered myself saved", "I could see the frontier of my own peace" – or, on the contrary, an evidence of the awareness of the programmed act of creation, clearly looked for and intentionally not acknowledged – "mystified", "disguised to the bones"? Or, maybe, this is all about a fortunate mixture – "I confused things with their names" – a blessed confusion with an outstanding function: knowledge by art, as long as even contingency derives from the "sensorial field, non-conceptualised, open to both ways of achieving knowledge: through concept (philosophical) or through metaphor (poetic)", the poetic one

¹ Jean Paul Sartre, *Cuvintele. Greută*, p. 291.

² Ibid., p. 171-172.

particularised by the fact that "things are confused with their names"¹.

The problem can be deepened, achieving unimagined profoundness: "by the procession that is represented by the production of the text" we pass from the state of existing to that "of writing/ of being". "The state of existential evidence is of an analogous nature with that of poetical evidence in which the referent (the real in its physicality) is perceived differently, deformed, by metamorphosing, in relation to the abstract perception that is usually our perception, i.e. deformed by that concrete perception which is the artistic one"². Thus, the progression from the non-text to the text is, in this case, the progression from the automatic perception of existence to this "poetical evidence", *The Nausea*.

The reflection of society

Even if it is too classic a method, too traditional an approach, the social context of modern novel plots appears now as an explanatory background for emphasizing the individual's drama and incentive for his need to flee.

As for Jean Paul Sartre, it is enough to remind of the authentic socio-political crisis, which the writer had experienced, to justify the existential turmoil, the inner restlessness: "To have established a philosophical system only to later give it up completely in favour of another, disused and with no perspectives of renewal, to thus muffle its reply, in certainties, in an inevitable historic optimism, eventually entails the gravest relinquishment a present-day philosopher allowed to himself"³.

The fact that the work is written with the purpose of promoting a philosophic thesis might be too much an assumption, but, no doubt, in this work we will frequently be able to find certain concepts and opinions, or even debates of theoretical ideas.

With Sartre, entire pages in *The Nausea* are designed for debating certain philosophical ideas; for instance, he sophistically argues, pro and con, on the love for the human being. At a certain point, Sartre presents in his novel, through the voice of Antoine Roquentin, all his tribulations on humanism: "The so called 'leftist' humanist has as his main concern to preserve all human values; he does not belong to a party as he does not want to betray the human, but his sympathy is headed

¹ Irina Mavrodin, *Modernii – precursori ai clasicilor* (The moderns – forerunners of the classics), Cluj- Napoca, Dacia, 1981, p. 113.

² Ibid., p. 119.

³ Monica Lovinescu, *Unde scurte* (Short waves), Bucharest, Humanitas, 1990, p. 215.

towards the humble; it is to the humble that he directs his nice classical culture [...]. He loves both the cat and the dog, all the superior manifestations. The communist writer loves people beginning with the second five-year plan; he punishes because he loves [...]. The catholic humanist talks about people illuminated by his gift. What a wonderful fairytale [...] is the humblest of lives, that of a London wharfinger, of a boot sewing woman [...]. These are the first relevant roles. But there are also others, plenty of them: the humanist philosopher that listens to his fellows like an elder brother with a high sense of responsibility; the humanist that loves people and the way they are, the one that loves them as they should be, the one that wants to save them on request and the one that wishes to save them even against their will, the one that wants to create new myths and the one that will do with the old ones, the one that loves death inside man, the one that loves life inside man, the merry humanist, always with a ready joke on his lips, the sombre humanist you particularly meet at wakes. They all hate one another: as individuals, of course, not as people. But the Self-taught does not know: he locked them inside him as cats in a bag and they tear one another there, out of his notice"¹.

Sartre's mirror character, Antoine Roquentin, doubled by the Self-taught, engages himself in a contradictory discussion with the latter, resulting in a genuine thesis on socialist humanism. The two characters appear here as two voices of the same ego of the author, an angel and a devil, trying to win his soul. All the doubts and the existential uncertainties of the author himself are put forward, balanced by elevated feelings, with all that means love for people. A pessimist existentialist and a humanist optimist confront each other in the pages of the book, reflecting in fact an intrinsic struggle of Sartre's oxymoronic self: "I know what lies under this tricky effort of conciliation. He does not request too much of a thing, but to accept a label, and still that is a trap: if I consent, the Self-taught triumphs as humanism takes and melts together all the human attitudes. If you openly oppose him, you dance to his tune; he lives from his own contradictions [...] has digested anti-intellectualism, Manichaeism, mysticism, pessimism, anarchism, egotism: these are nothing but stages, incomplete ideas that cannot find any ground unless in him. The misanthrope also has his place in this concert: he is nothing else but a dissonance necessary for the harmony of the whole. The misanthrope is a man: hence, the humanist has to be, at a certain extent, a

¹ Jean Paul Sartre, *Cuvintele. Greșita*, p. 312-313.

misanthrope. But he is a scientific misanthrope, who first hates people only to love them more afterwards [...] I wouldn't consider myself 'anti-humanist'. It is just that I am not a humanist, that's all.

- [...] we cannot hate people the same way as we cannot love them either.
- We have to love them [...]
- You yourself [...] do not love them [...]. What could you love about them?
- [...] the youth in them, among other things [...].
- You don't love them [...] they are just some symbols for you, it is not them that are now the cause of your soft-heartedness. Your heart softens at the man's Youth, at the Love of man and woman, at the human Voice.
- All people have a right to be admired by us [...] it is very hard to be a man.
- [...] then I'm not sure I am one: it has never seemed something too difficult to me [...] you only have to let things go by themselves"¹.

Monica Lovinescu summarises the Sartrean character, explaining how Sartre uses his culture and intelligence, his intellect and knowledge, manipulating these attributes of the intellectual and handling words so that they would constitute a shield between him and the surrounding world, insulating him from reality, but ending in producing a series of intellectual confusions that will eventually lead to a new direction, casting him away from his goal².

André Gide touches to a certain extent on the social theme in *The Counterfeiters*, rendering a picture of his contemporary society, of a time of mentality alteration. This picture comprises youth in search, with distinct intellectual concerns, open to adventure and the new, ingenious, willing to accomplish something great, to be their own masters, to become famous or to travel and widen their horizons, to escape from the oppressions of the previous generation, their parents. Their concepts are in deep contradiction with the modern era, which outlines itself and imposes itself rapidly and in which their children grow up. They have an old fashioned mentality, stuck in various norms: moral, religious or social, that choked their initiatives and dreams and corseted them in an exemplary life – apparently correct – whose rules though they cannot ultimately obey, some gliding towards dishonesty and infidelity, as their children themselves are to regretfully find out, others falling into catalepsy and indulgence or fixation – extreme psychological conditions,

¹ Ibid., p. 314-317.

² Vezi Monica Lovinescu, *Unde scurte*, p. 216-217.

barring any communication with the wide views of the young generation. When the punishments or the attempts to discipline pass certain barriers, contrasting flagrantly with free spirit, revolt occurs. In spite of the strong family bounds, acquired in time, the young generation develops a nonconformist behaviour: they run away from home, seek spiritual leaders, idols to understand them and guide them towards their long hankered horizons, they try to associate in groups with common concerns and to build their life according to the orientations of the new age.