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## Unveiling the Nietzschean Origins of Sartre's *Nausea*

*Nausea*, Jean-Paul Sartre's first novel (1938), is a landmark of 20<sup>th</sup> century French literature. Sartre's literary works have always served as a vehicle for his philosophical thought. Indeed, it is not uncommon to analyze these works in order to understand Sartre's Hegelian, Heideggerian, and phenomenological influences. It is, however, rather unusual to trace Sartre's Nietzschean filiation, and the aim of this paper is to do so. This paper thereby wishes to suggest the complexity of the Nietzschean reception in 20<sup>th</sup> century thought and literature. Studies in the French Nietzschean reception have notably omitted to speak of Sartre's possible reading of Nietzsche. For instance, Pierre Boudot, in his essay *Nietzsche et les écrivains français* (1970), says nothing of Sartre although he studies the period ranging precisely between 1930 and 1960; and Jacques Le Rider, in a recent and otherwise thorough study of Nietzsche's reception in France, skims the issue of Sartre's interest for Nietzsche<sup>1</sup>. A more recent essay by Christine Daigle, *Le nihilisme est-il un humanisme?* (2005), has opened a door by presenting a systematic study of the connections between Sartre and Nietzsche pertaining to a humanist existentialist ethic. This study shows a similarity and compatibility between both ethics, but it does not suggest Sartre may have had, at some point, a Nietzschean project. This is why I propose to look back on Sartre's possible Nietzschean origins. I wish to do so by engaging in a parallel reading of Sartre's first literary work and that of Nietzsche's first philosophical essay, *The Birth of Tragedy* (1872). In this way, I hope to suggest the importance of engaging in a philosophical and historical enquiry on the possible influence of Nietzsche on Sartre<sup>2</sup>. More specifically, I wish to demonstrate that *Nausea*, arguably Sartre's most important novel, is, in fact, a Nietzschean novel<sup>3</sup>. It is important to study *Nausea* since it is a literary prefiguration of

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<sup>1</sup> See J. Le Rider, *Nietzsche en France*, pages 136 to 138.

<sup>2</sup> Jacques Le Rider opened this perspective by recalling Sartre's early literary project of writing a Nietzschean novel. The manuscript for this project, entitled *Une défaite* (*A Defeat*), would date back to 1927. Sartre would have had the idea for such a novel after reading Charles Andler's monumental three-volume biographical essay on Nietzsche, and after having presented a talk on Nietzsche as a non-philosopher, at the École normale supérieure in Paris. See Le Rider, p. 136.

<sup>3</sup> Jean-François Louette, in *Sartre contra Nietzsche* (1996), proposed a study of the relationship between Sartre and Nietzsche by a close reading of Sartre's literary works, but he turned to two plays (*The Flies*, 1943, and *No exit*, 1944) and to Sartre's autobiographical account (*The Words*, 1964) and did not speak of *Nausea*.

the philosophical theses which Sartre later developed in his 1943 magnum opus, *Being and Nothingness*<sup>4</sup>. I will argue that a close reading of *Nausea* reveals that Sartre is a consistent Nietzschean, despite the theoretical divergences between him and Nietzsche.

In this first novel, Sartre sees the individual's relationship to truth and creation in Nietzschean terms. This paper will thus seek to uncover the Nietzschean foundation of *Nausea*; this, in turn, will permit us to equate the *stages* of Sartrean nihilistic consciousness with those of Nietzschean Dionysian ecstasy. In order to unveil Sartre's Nietzscheanism, I will demonstrate that Roquentin's existential process is Nietzschean, that the truth he uncovers is Nietzschean, and that the very way by which Sartre's main character is transformed by his existential experience is also Nietzschean. My demonstration will be twofold: I will first present the stages of the Dionysian process described by Nietzsche in *The Birth of Tragedy*; I shall then show that this process underlies the existential experience described in Sartre's novel.

## 1. Of Differences and Similarities

It is important to underline some fundamental differences that separate Nietzsche and Sartre. If they both understand truth (absurdity) and the discovery of truth (the process of the "nihilistic" consciousness) in a common way, they however do not depict a common determination of being: for Sartre, being, or the "being-in-itself", is *existence*; whereas for Nietzsche, it is *life* or *nature*, understood as the "Primordial Unity" (for the early Nietzsche) or the "will to power" (for the later Nietzsche). These different determinations of Being also lead them to divergent anthropologies. For Sartre, what is initially given or present is the human being in his indetermination and freedom; whereas for Nietzsche, it is rather original chaos that expresses itself in humans through an eternal process of destruction and creation.

The Nietzschean individual is essentially related to nature: nature's impulses are always at play within him, because human life itself, in *all* of its dimensions, is but a struggle between organic impulses. On the contrary, the Sartrean individual is eternally alone: his freedom is a sign of his indetermination and only the person himself can orient his life in a particular direction, by a decision to *be* a certain person by way of embarking on a particular project. Sartre would not be prepared to say that the individual is but the result of the play and struggle of life's impulses and instincts. "Being," what really *is*, according to Sartre, is pure and empty existence, whereas for Nietzsche, it is the Primordial Unity, "a single living being," "the eternally creative original mother," "the will in its omnipotence" of which we are but incarnations and of which we inevitably reproduce the schemes.<sup>5</sup> Perhaps the most evident distinction to be made between early Nietzsche and Sartre is that the former postulates that life or nature or will precedes human existence and gives it *all* of its impulses, whereas for the latter, there is nothing more to human existence than—existence. If the Nietzschean individual partakes with Being understood as life, the Sartrean individual partakes with something purely human: existence. Consequently Sartre and Nietzsche would not agree on the question of necessity and contingency, nor on that of determinism and freedom.

Despite these differences, there are profound similarities between Nietzsche and Sartre. This paper seeks to underline them, through the parallel reading of *Nausea* and *The*

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<sup>4</sup> See Alain Renaut, *Sartre, le dernier philosophe*, p. 204.

<sup>5</sup> *The Birth of Tragedy*, § 17, p. 91 and § 16, p. 90. *The Birth of Tragedy* is hereafter referred to as "BT."

*Birth of Tragedy*. Sartre wrote *Nausea* as the personal diary of Antoine Roquentin, the novel's main character, who almost daily writes down the steps and development of his existential experience. The novel describes the process by which an individual uncovers the inner truth of human existence and is deeply transformed by this discovery.<sup>6</sup> In fact, Roquentin lives a quasi-mystical experience: beyond the conceptual and rational sphere of thought, he discovers the sphere of *existence* as he ecstatically partakes with being, what Sartre here calls "the very paste of things."<sup>7</sup> It is this experience, and the gradually conscious comprehension of this communion, that Sartre describes via the term "nausea"<sup>8</sup>: as Roquentin uncovers the irrational foundation of life, he is overtaken by nausea, a true sea-sickness, while his reference scheme break down. I shall argue that, in so doing, Sartre presents the process of the conscious uncovering of truth that Nietzsche described in the early 1870s. Young Sartre and young Nietzsche therefore agree on what truth is—at least according to a *negative* definition: namely, the absence of a transcendent rationality—and on the process through which truth is uncovered by a human being.

The Dionysian process by which an individual uncovers truth, described by Nietzsche in the early 1870s, is a prefiguration of the course of the nihilistic consciousness that he described in his 1880s notes.<sup>9</sup> In his early works, however, Nietzsche does not yet make use of the term "nihilism" to describe the psychological state that follows from the discovery of the truth of human existence. Young Nietzsche rather qualifies the encounter with being as a "Dionysian ecstasy," which is a crucial moment in the aesthetic process of artistic creation. To follow the inner development of the Nietzschean description of the nihilistic consciousness would certainly shed light on Nietzsche's conception of the relationship between human beings and truth. But as for the common ground between Sartre and Nietzsche, one must examine the exhaustive 1872 published work rather than the 1880s unfinished and unpublished notes. As I will show, the philosophical descriptions of *The Birth of Tragedy* pave the way to the literary *mise en situation* of *Nausea*.

## 2. A Nietzschean Uncovering of Truth

In *The Birth of Tragedy*, Nietzsche goes beyond the historical and philological question concerning the origin of tragedy in ancient Greece.<sup>10</sup> Nietzsche's first essay essentially puts forth an aesthetic interpretation of life: it offers a description of the process at the origin of tragedy as being the result of the Dionysian and Apollonian impulses through which nature expresses herself. Nietzsche thus describes the general process of life essentially as an aesthetic process of creation and destruction. For the individual, the comprehension of this aesthetic process of life amounts to the discovery of truth. This profound human experience takes place in three stages. The first stage is characterized

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<sup>6</sup> Jacques Marchand, in a recent book (2005) on Sartre's moral philosophy, describes Roquentin's adventure as a "metaphysical experience" (see *Introduction à la lecture de Jean-Paul Sartre*, p. 79).

<sup>7</sup> *Nausea*, p. 171.

<sup>8</sup> Sartre's use of "nausea" is not metaphoric, for the terms coins a *concrete* and fundamental human experience.

<sup>9</sup> See the 1887-1888 fragments and notes, and also those of 1883-1885, the years during which Nietzsche was working on his *Zarathustra*.

<sup>10</sup> Joachim Latacz has published a revealing study (1994) of *The Birth of Tragedy* in the context of the state of the researches on the origins of Greek tragedy in 19<sup>th</sup> century Germany. His aim was to evaluate Nietzsche's originality in this domain. See Latacz, "Fruchtbares Ärgernis: Nietzsches *Geburt der Tragödie* und die gräzistische Tragödienforschung."

by the destruction of the principle of individuation and the fear that accompanies this destruction, as one uncovers the terrifying truth of existence. The second stage is that of the Dionysian emotion and excitement, characterized by the joy of the ecstatic unity it entails. Finally, the third stage is that of the Apollonian reconciliation with the sphere of forms and appearance, and of the artistic creation it allows. In order to uncover this three-part process which forms the philosophical background of Sartre's *Nausea*, it is necessary to describe each one of these stages and the state in which it leaves the person.

During the first stage of the Nietzschean aesthetic process, the person is delivered from the individuation principle: this is a release from the conceptual and rational sphere of thought. In many of his essays throughout the 1870s and 1880s, Nietzsche states that concepts prevent us from having access to the core of things and even of life itself. Following Schopenhauer,<sup>11</sup> Nietzsche in his early works described and criticized the constructed and arbitrary dimension of language and thus of thought itself—even in its philosophical and scientific incarnations.<sup>12</sup> Because there is no direct relationship between reality and language, words can never render an accurate expression of truth: “with words it is never a question of truth, never a question of adequate expression,” wrote Nietzsche in an early, private essay, “On Truth and Lies in a Nonmoral Sense”<sup>13</sup> (1873). According to Nietzsche's view of language, concepts are founded upon the fundamental oblivion of that which differentiates a thing from another: “Every concept arises from the equation of unequal things.”<sup>14</sup> Nature knows no forms or general attributes: all concepts are thus founded on a pure anthropomorphism and a word is but “a copy in sound of a nerve stimulus.”<sup>15</sup>

Nietzsche asserts that the breakdown of the conceptual sphere permits the individual to intuitively comprehend the essence of human existence. This is the sole phenomenon that opens a direct access to what Nietzsche calls “the innermost core of things,”<sup>16</sup> or “that which truly exists,” “the original Unity with its eternal suffering and contradiction.”<sup>17</sup> Hence, according to the early Nietzsche, the only way for human beings to have a link with being or truth is through music—because music is a “reflection of original suffering [...], devoid of image and concept.”<sup>18</sup> Nietzsche thereby follows Schopenhauer, his early intellectual “educator,” in asserting, some fifty years after him, the “intimate relation between music and the true essence of things.”<sup>19</sup>

This deliverance from the conceptual and rational sphere of thought marks the first step of the destruction of the individuation principle. It opens a gap in the principle of reason

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<sup>11</sup> Schopenhauer distinguishes intuition and abstraction, and writes that concepts and ideas are but partial representations of intuitions. See for instance *The World as Will and Representation* (1818), Addition to the Third Book, Chapter 31.

<sup>12</sup> This thesis can be found in the works of the 1870s (*The Birth of Tragedy*, 1872; “On Truth and Lies in a Nonmoral Sense,” 1873; *Human, All Too Human*, 1878; *The Wanderer and his Shadow*, 1879), and of the early 1880s (*Daybreak*, 1880; *The Gay Science*, 1882 and 1887).

<sup>13</sup> § 1, p. 82.

<sup>14</sup> § 1, p. 83.

<sup>15</sup> § 1, p. 81. Also see § 1, p. 85: “the illusion which is involved in the artistic transference of a nerve stimulus into images is, if not the mother, than the grandmother of every single concept.”

<sup>16</sup> BT, § 16, p. 87 and 89.

<sup>17</sup> BT, § 4, p. 30.

<sup>18</sup> BT, § 5, p. 35.

<sup>19</sup> BT, § 16, p. 88. In paragraph 16 of *The Birth of Tragedy* Nietzsche comments on a long excerpt from Schopenhauer's *The World as Will and Representation*.

whereby “we are forced to peer into the terrors of individual existence,”<sup>20</sup> in order to see that which lies beneath all conceptual (and thus arbitrary) human distinctions and designations. During this second step, “the Dionysian substratum of the world”<sup>21</sup> penetrates human consciousness: it is through this experience that human beings can understand the profound truth of life, of nature, and of human existence. But this truth is a burden for humans, for it reveals the exact opposite of the basis of human life, especially social and political life: the Dionysian truth shows that life is senseless, that no project can find an ultimate foundation, and that there is no rationality in nature. The world, and human life with it, is absurd and irrational. That is why Nietzsche writes that this uncovering of truth is characterized by fear and loathing: after Schopenhauer, Nietzsche describes the “the tremendous *horror* which grips man when he suddenly loses his way among the cognitive forms of the phenomenal world, as the principle of reason in any of its form appears to break down.”<sup>22</sup>

This horrible truth entails a terrifying tragic wisdom that Nietzsche defines as the Greek folk or popular wisdom, which believes that human beings are nothing but the children of contingency, the result of uncertain coincidences. There lies the proper Dionysian wisdom, that of Silenus, Dionysus’ companion, who tells mankind: “The very best of all things is completely beyond your reach: not to have been born, not to *be*, to be *nothing*. But the second best thing for you is—to meet an early death.”<sup>23</sup> This tragic wisdom is the result of a double revelation: on the one hand, the discovery of the arbitrary character of the conceptual and rational sphere of thought, which is but a construction that has no ontological link with reality; and on the other hand, the comprehension of the absurd and fleeting aspect of human life, whose sole certain destiny is death. Nietzsche writes: “Conscious of the truth once glimpsed, man now sees all around him only the horrific or the absurd aspects of existence, now he understands the symbolic aspect of Ophelia’s fate, now he recognizes the wisdom of the forest god Silenus: it disgusts him.”<sup>24</sup> That is what brought Stanley Rosen to write that “Nietzsche tells us quite candidly that nihilism is the proper response to a sound understanding of the truth.”<sup>25</sup>

Such loathing is nevertheless but a first step in the three-part Nietzschean aesthetic experience of truth. The double Dionysian breakdown of the principle of reason and of the principle of individuation causes everything subjective “to dwindle to complete self-

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<sup>20</sup> BT, § 17, p. 91.

<sup>21</sup> BT, § 25, p. 130.

<sup>22</sup> BT, § 1, p. 22. Nietzsche’s later writings also comment on the horror provoked by the discovery of truth. See for example the fragments and notes dating from November 1887 to March 1888: an excerpt entitled “Diary of a Nihilist...” (“*Tagebuch des Nihilisten...*”) starts by recording the “shiver provoked by the discovery of the ‘falseness’ of things” (“*der Schauer über die entdeckte ‘Falschheit’*,” in Nietzsche’s *Nachlaß 1887-1889*, 11[327], p. 139, my translation). A parallel could be drawn between this Nietzschean “Nihilist’s Diary” and Roquentin’s own diary, although Sartre’s novel is not the diary of a pure nihilist, but rather that of a person going through the phases leading to nihilistic consciousness, and finally exiting this existential crisis through artistic creation.

<sup>23</sup> BT, § 3, p. 27. Nietzsche writes that the Greeks “knew and felt the terrors and horrors of existence” (BT, § 3, p. 28). He believes that the ancient Greeks lived their lives through this tragic wisdom. But in order to render life *possible*, they had to invent a sense to life—thus they had to create *gods* and *myths*, before all rational philosophical constructions that started with Plato. Through the Greek artistic creation of a meaning to life are in fact at work Nature’s own Dionysian and Apollonian impulses.

<sup>24</sup> BT, § 7, p. 46.

<sup>25</sup> Rosen, “Remarks on Nietzsche’s ‘Platonism,’” p. 145.

oblivion.”<sup>26</sup> This enables the person to be united with the Primordial Unity or the heart of things, which, Nietzsche writes, reaches “our innermost being, the substratum common to us all.”<sup>27</sup> This stage that follows the abolition of individuality paves the way to a real *unity* with being, thus leading to “a higher communal nature”<sup>28</sup> which is made possible by Dionysian rapture and ecstasy. This “communion” entails bliss and profound pleasure, as “each man feels himself not only reunified, reconciled, reincorporated, and merged with his neighbor, but genuinely one.”<sup>29</sup> This second stage is that of the Dionysian “blissful rapture which rises up from the innermost depths of man, even of nature, as a result of the very same collapse of the *principium individuationis*.”<sup>30</sup>

The Dionysian ecstasy, and the reconciliation with being that it gives rise to, brings forth a “metaphysical consolation”<sup>31</sup> which consists in the pleasure one finds in the unity with being. Nietzsche describes this metaphysical comfort: “For a few short moments we really are the original essence itself and feel the unbridled craving for existence and joy in existence; [...] we are the fortunate living beings, not as individuals, but as a *single* living being, with whose joy in creation we are fused.”<sup>32</sup> But this unity, and the bliss it triggers, nevertheless have an underside: the Dionysian leads to the complete annihilation of individuality, as “an overpowering feeling of unity” with being and with our neighbors “leads back to the heart of nature.”<sup>33</sup> This “orgiastic self-annihilation”<sup>34</sup> which characterizes the uncovering of truth is, therefore, a threat to human individual life and will. The Dionysian states thus result in “an ascetic mood which negates the will”: human beings are thereafter loath to act.<sup>35</sup> Nietzsche sums up this danger in a clear and concise fashion: “Knowledge kills action.”<sup>36</sup>

However, the aesthetic experience of truth does not necessarily stop at this negative or “nihilistic” stage. The person in such a Dionysian turmoil goes through a profound transformation that results in the third phase: that of the Apollonian reconciliation with the sphere of forms and of appearance. The *complete* aesthetic experience is attained when the Apollonian impulse rests as a veil on the Dionysian ecstasy. The complete process by which a human being uncovers the profound truth of human existence thereby results in artistic creation. Art saves the individual from the danger of continued Dionysian states that may lead to complete asceticism; art gives human beings the possibility of acting in this world; and finally, art is the only true metaphysical comfort, because “only she can reshape *that disgust at the thought of the horrific or absurd aspects of life* into notions with which it is possible to live.”<sup>37</sup> This goes to show that

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<sup>26</sup> BT, § 1, p. 22.

<sup>27</sup> BT, § 1, p. 21.

<sup>28</sup> BT, § 1, p. 23.

<sup>29</sup> BT, § 1, p. 23.

<sup>30</sup> BT, § 1, p. 22.

<sup>31</sup> BT, § 17, p. 95.

<sup>32</sup> BT, § 17, p. 91.

<sup>33</sup> BT, § 7, p. 45.

<sup>34</sup> BT, § 21, p. 115.

<sup>35</sup> BT, § 7, p. 46.

<sup>36</sup> BT, § 7, p. 46.

<sup>37</sup> BT, § 7, p. 46, emphasis added. It is noteworthy that the early English Nietzsche translations in the 1910s Foulis edition translated the German word “*Ekel*” by “nausea” and its derived adjectives, whereas the more recent translations rather render “*Ekel*” by “disgust.” That is the case as well in *The Birth of Tragedy* (see for example p. 46 or 62 of the 1910 Foulis edition) and in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (see for example p. 261 of the 1909 Foulis edition).

according to Nietzsche, human life can in no way escape its essentially creative aspect, since life as a whole is an aesthetic process of creation and destruction.

### 3. *Nausea*, a Nietzschean Novel

In *The Birth of Tragedy*, Nietzsche describes the process, through which a person uncovers the truth of existence, as an aesthetic experience, following which the person is transformed by and through artistic creation. I wish to stress that this process forms the philosophical background for Sartre's *Nausea*: the 1938 novel depicts a complete staging of the way in which an individual goes through this process. The phases of Roquentin's nausea are equivalent to the three stages that characterize the early Nietzschean description of the unveiling of truth and of artistic creation.

Sartre uses the word "nausea" to describe the feeling that takes hold of Roquentin as he loses his landmarks while discovering the profound truth of existence. Sartre exemplifies this existential discovery by the physical sickness that takes hold of Roquentin who experiences horror and pleasure at once. It is moreover revealing to note that nausea, through the German word *Ekel*, was used by Nietzsche himself in regards to truth in the 1880s. For instance, in the third part of his *Zarathustra*, the prophet implores his disciples to break the old tables of values, and he tells them that he thereby sent man on the "high seas": "And only now does there come to it the great terror, the great looking-about, the great sickness, the great disgust [*Ekel*], the great seasickness."<sup>38</sup> Throughout *Zarathustra*, the "sea" serves as a metaphor for truth, for that which really *is*, and for human being's journey towards the creation or discovery of a new order of things. The person embarked on such a journey on the high seas feels nauseated while realizing that what once were held as truths and certainties are nothing but illusions or lies—"[f]alse coasts and false securities," says Zarathustra.<sup>39</sup> One can also find the idea of nausea in Nietzsche's *Beyond Good and Evil* (1886)<sup>40</sup>: although it is, admittedly, used in a different manner than in *Zarathustra*, it is applied in such a way that it echoes in Sartre's novel. Nietzsche writes that the superior individual can die of nausea when forced to live in a common or plebeian world or time. This description recalls Roquentin's situation in small-town Bouville, where he, as an intellectual, has difficulty socializing with the other inhabitants—when he does not simply feel blank disgust towards them.<sup>41</sup> The idea of "nausea" is also found in Nietzsche's 1872 essay on tragedy, where he describes the "disgust at the thought of the horrific or absurd aspect of life" entailed by the Dionysian consciousness of truth.<sup>42</sup>

Sartre uses "nausea" to describe Roquentin's state after the latter has stared into the gulf of existence, as though he were peering into the abyss of a high sea in storm. If Roquentin can do so, it is because for him "[t]hings are divorced from their names."<sup>43</sup> Following Nietzsche, Sartre asserts that "the world of explanations and reasons is not the world of existence."<sup>44</sup> Once it is separated from concepts and from the principle of

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<sup>38</sup> *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (1883-1885), 3<sup>rd</sup> Part, Chapter 12 ("On Old and New Tablets"), § 28, p. 186.

<sup>39</sup> *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, 3<sup>rd</sup> Part, Chapter 12, § 28, p. 186.

<sup>40</sup> Section IX, § 282.

<sup>41</sup> When Roquentin lives his "Dionysian ecstasy" phase, it is not with his neighbors that he unites, but rather with things (e.g. a tree) or with music—music which according to Nietzsche is in intimate relation with the true essence of things (see BT, § 16, p. 88).

<sup>42</sup> BT § 7, p. 46.

<sup>43</sup> *Nausea*, p. 169. Hereafter referred to as "N."

<sup>44</sup> N, p. 174.

reason, human existence is left naked: it is unveiled as being nothing but existence. Nausea as the pure feeling of existence is thus the result of the destruction of the individuation principle: that is what Sartre indicates through the descriptions Roquentin daily notes in his diary—for example when he writes: “In vain I tried to *count* the chestnut trees, to *locate* them by their relationship to the Velleda, to compare their height with the height of the plane trees: each of them escaped the relationship in which I tried to enclose it, isolated itself, and overflowed. Of these relations (*which I insisted on maintaining in order to delay the crumbling of the human world, measures, quantities, and directions*)—I felt myself to be the arbitrator; they no longer had their teeth into things.”<sup>45</sup> Concepts and words build artificial and false frontiers. But Roquentin becomes conscious of this phenomenon: “I murmur: ‘It’s a seat,’ a little like an exorcism. But the word stays on my lips: it refuses to go and put itself on the thing. It stays what it is.”<sup>46</sup> Roquentin comes to understand the fact that things cannot be fully expressed by the concepts that define them nor by the words that name them, and this comprehension participates in his pure feeling of existence. Nausea takes hold of him at the very moment at which the principle of reason disintegrates. Roquentin then notices that things no longer have names or concepts permitting him to define or even to use them. That is why he writes: “I am in the midst of things, nameless things. Alone, without words, defenceless.”<sup>47</sup> Everything pitches<sup>48</sup> for Roquentin, as if he were on a boat lost at high sea, living each day with a permanent seasickness, a poignant nausea. He feels dizzy and lost precisely because his conceptual references have disappeared: he is unable to decipher the frontier that separates things—and even the very frontier that until then separated him from surrounding objects. He cannot measure anymore, since all standards or compasses have disappeared: for Roquentin, there is nothing but existence.

Through these descriptions, Sartre shows the arbitrariness and absurdity of all relations, concepts, and measures: they are but “veneers”<sup>49</sup> laid on things in order to conceal truth. Undoubtedly, Sartre stages a Nietzschean conception of truth in his novel that affirms the arbitrary relation of language and rationality to reality and truth. Once he is detached or separated from the individuation principle and the sphere of concepts, Roquentin is able to see an essential dimension of existence that is not governed by the principle of reason. This discovery is a source of fear: in the very first pages of his diary, Roquentin admits being terrified of existence: “If I am not mistaken, if all the signs which have been amassed are precursors of a new overthrow in my life, well then I am terrified.”<sup>50</sup> Sartre thus describes the horror that follows the revelation or uncovering of truth: a

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<sup>45</sup> N, p. 173, emphasis added.

<sup>46</sup> N, p. 169.

<sup>47</sup> N, p. 169.

<sup>48</sup> This choice of word is not arbitrary: aquatic metaphors are abundant in *Nausea*. Sartre uses them to describe the feeling of contingency that takes hold of Roquentin. He uses a rich and diversified nautical and aquatic vocabulary (sea, diving, rain, tears, lymph, float, bath, boat, etc.) to describe that which takes part in existence—while everything “hard” and “solid” serves to describe that which is part of the “all too human” world of concepts and reasons. One must furthermore note that Sartre has placed his character in a small seaside-town, Bouville (“Mud-City”), thereby suggesting that the city itself is flabby, uncertain, almost liquid. It would be interesting to further examine the parallel between Nietzsche and Sartre pertaining to the use of sea or water metaphors, especially using Nietzsche’s *Zarathustra*, in which the sea symbolizes truth, the profound being of things and the necessity that the prophet unveils (see for instance 2<sup>nd</sup> Part, Chapter 18, “On Great Events,” p. 113: “To fathom this mystery I voyaged across the sea: and I saw the truth naked, verily! barefoot up to the neck.”)

<sup>49</sup> N, p. 171.

<sup>50</sup> N, p. 13.

Nietzschean truth which stresses that individuality—not only the individuality of things but also human individuality *as such*—is but an appearance. Roquentin lives in fear as he faces the obliteration of the frontiers of subjectivity, and the collapse of the human world of concepts and reasons.

At the heart of his novel, Sartre depicts a Dionysian horror. He has put in literature the process that Nietzsche described in his first philosophical essay. The truth that Roquentin uncovers regarding the arbitrariness of concepts and reasons and the absurdity of human existence causes him to live this experience through nausea. Roquentin comes to understand that “no necessary being can explain existence.” He writes in his diary: “contingency is not a delusion, a probability which can be dissipated; it is the absolute, consequently, the perfect free gift. All is free.”<sup>51</sup> Sartre thus repeats Nietzsche’s late 1880s inquiry: “the question remains to be asked whether we *could* really see the ‘sense’ and the ‘purpose,’ whether the question of absurdity or its reverse is insolvable for us.”<sup>52</sup> But Sartre’s protagonist is not condemned to stay at this initial stage of fear and despondency. Roquentin then experiences the second Nietzschean stage, that of joy in the unity with being. Once the “crumbling of the human world” has happened, Sartre’s character realizes that “existence [has] suddenly unveiled itself,” and that this existence is “the very paste of things.”<sup>53</sup> Hence, Roquentin is nothing more than “existence which feels it exists.”<sup>54</sup> A joyful rapture then takes hold of him—thus repeating the Dionysian ecstasy described by Nietzsche in 1872: Roquentin’s fear gives way to a profound bliss as he feels his unity with being, with what essentially *is*, namely (for Sartre) existence. He writes in his diary: “All has stopped; my life has stopped: this wide window, this heavy air, blue as water, this fleshy white plant at the bottom of the water, and I myself, we form a complete and static whole.” This mystical experience of communion with being beyond the sphere of concepts leads Roquentin to simply and candidly conclude: “I am happy.”<sup>55</sup> Roquentin encounters the Nietzschean “metaphysical comfort,” and even speaks of the “atrocious joy”<sup>56</sup> that he feels—and such a choice of words clearly paraphrases the Nietzschean descriptions that at once speak of the “horror” and the “blissful rapture which rises up from the innermost depths of man [...] as a result of the very same collapse of the *principium individuationis*.”<sup>57</sup> Through his communion with the plant, and with everything else surrounding him, Roquentin feels horror and pleasure one after the other, as the effect of his direct apprehension of being-in-itself.

After he has depicted the second Nietzschean stage, that of bliss and unity, Sartre also describes the third and final stage, that of the danger which this ecstasy entails. The destruction of the individuation principle causes Roquentin to see that everywhere there is *nothing but* existence. He writes in his diary: “I’m suffocating: existence penetrates me everywhere, through the eyes, the nose, the mouth...”<sup>58</sup> Because he feels continually

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<sup>51</sup> N, p. 176.

<sup>52</sup> *Nachlaß 1887-1889*, fragment 11[97] dating between November 1887 and March 1888, p. 45-46, my translation (“*es bliebe übrig zu fragen, ob wir den ‘Sinn’ und ‘Zweck’ überhaupt sehen könnten, ob nicht die Frage der Sinnlosigkeit oder ihres Gegentheils für uns unlösbar ist.*—”)

<sup>53</sup> The last three quotations are taken from N, p. 173 and 171.

<sup>54</sup> N, p. 227.

<sup>55</sup> N, p. 78.

<sup>56</sup> N, p. 177.

<sup>57</sup> BT, § 1, p. 22.

<sup>58</sup> N, p. 170.

that there is “too much” existence (everything is “de trop,” “in the way”)<sup>59</sup> Roquentin becomes unable to *feel himself*. He notices: “Now when I say ‘I,’ it seems hollow to me. I can’t manage to feel myself very well, I am so forgotten.”<sup>60</sup> In this fashion, he faces the danger of the will’s annihilation, a danger, says Nietzsche, that necessarily follows from the destruction of individuation. When he writes: “I was *in the way* for eternity,” and when he affirms his aspiration to “be nothing but coldness,”<sup>61</sup> Roquentin confirms that he is living through the stage of the ascetic “Buddhist negation of the will”<sup>62</sup> described by Nietzsche. It is the same “nihilism” that takes hold of him when he testifies of the uselessness of all action: “I know very well that I don’t want to do anything: to do something is to create existence—and there’s quite enough existence as it is.”<sup>63</sup> As he becomes aware of the inner truth of existence, Roquentin freezes: in him, knowledge comes to kill action.

But Sartre goes beyond the simple identification and description of this stage which following the later Nietzsche one could call “passive” or “negative” nihilism. And that is precisely why Sartre, with his novel *Nausea*, is a consistent Nietzschean: nihilism is for him but a *transitory* stage—and furthermore, Roquentin does not overcome nihilism through an escape-route.<sup>64</sup> Sartre does not force his character to jump over nihilism: Roquentin finds no refuge in a merely illusory metaphysical dogma, nor in some faith,<sup>65</sup> and neither does he turn to suicide. Roquentin knows that only he himself can provide a justification for his existence—and the very end of his diary shows that he will attempt such a justification, through creation<sup>66</sup>. Roquentin will write a book—that is the existential decision upon which *Nausea* closes. The novel’s ending thus presents the very last stage in the three-part Nietzschean process. Sartre’s main character has lived through a process whereby he saw the inner truth of human existence—which has revealed itself as being absurd and irrational, as well as “nothing but” existence; he experienced the fear and loathing provoked by this discovery, but also the profound ecstatic joy in the unity with being as pure existence; and finally he overcame in a

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<sup>59</sup> See for example N, p. 173. This very idea that there is “too much” existence is also found in Nietzsche’s 1872 essay, as he describes the Dionysian ecstasy as “the *excess of countless forms of existence* which crowd and push their way into life” (BT, § 17, p. 91, emphasis added).

<sup>60</sup> N, p. 227.

<sup>61</sup> N, p. 173 and 40.

<sup>62</sup> BT, § 7, p. 46.

<sup>63</sup> N, p. 231.

<sup>64</sup> As for the *transitory* aspect of nihilism, one can refer to Nietzsche’s notes and fragments dating back to fall 1887: “Nihilism represents a pathological *intermediary condition* (the vast generalization, the conclusion that *there is absolutely no purpose* is pathological)” (“*Der nihilism stellt einen pathologischen Zwischenzustand dar (pathologisch ist die ungeheure Verallgemeinerung, der Schluß auf gar keinen Sinn)*,” in the *Nachlaß 1885-1887*, 9[35], p. 351, my translation). On the critique of escape-routes from nihilism, see the notes and fragments dating from November 1887 to March 1888, 11[99] (“*Kritik des Nihilism*”), in the *Nachlaß 1887-1889*, p. 46-49; and also *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, 4<sup>th</sup> Part, Chapter 9 (“The Shadow”).

<sup>65</sup> Faith as an escape-route has been denounced by Nietzsche in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, in a section that suggests the same process as the one described in *The Birth of Tragedy*. Zarathustra’s shadow claims that because “[t]oo much has become clear to [him]: now nothing matters to [him] any more.” This complaint leads Zarathustra to warn his shadow of the danger that he may lose his independence and true freedom to a new faith: “Beware that some narrow belief, a harsh, severe illusion, does not catch you in the end!” (4<sup>th</sup> Part, Chapter 9: “The Shadow”, p. 239-240). On escape-routes to nihilism in general, see Albert Camus’ *The Myth of Sisyphus*: the author shows that Dostoevsky’s characters overcome nihilism by escape-routes such as suicide.

<sup>66</sup> Christine Daigle in her recent book shows that the answer provided by *Nausea* is precisely this “justification of existence through art” (see *Le nihilisme est-il un humanisme?*, p. 168).

Nietzschean manner the danger of Dionysian ecstasies by avoiding the negation of the self and of the will and by engaging in an aesthetic project. Hence creation as the end-point of the Nietzschean aesthetic process of discovering the truth of existence is also the end-point of Roquentin's fundamental existential experience.

#### 4. Conclusion

This parallel reading of *The Birth of Tragedy* and of *Nausea* demonstrates that Sartre's *Nausea* is truly a Nietzschean novel: this French 1930s novel follows or exemplifies a philosophical process theorized by Nietzsche in the 1870s. This study does not, however, permit us to conclude that Sartre was consciously or willingly influenced by Nietzsche, as Sartre's published and posthumous works give no information or account of such an influence. This study wished to show that the echoes of Nietzsche's early thought (on language, on nihilism, and on creation) in Sartre's first novel are such that the topics of Sartre's Nietzscheanism, of a Sartrean reception of Nietzsche, or of the common ground between both philosophers, could open a fruitful path in continental philosophy studies.

The gap that separates both philosophers (for example, on the question of human freedom) does not stop them from agreeing on a same process of the nihilistic consciousness. For both Sartre and Nietzsche human life is intimately related to creation. Nietzsche believes that art can save the individual: "Rescued by art, he is rescued, for its own purpose, by—life."<sup>67</sup> For both, truth is a burden for humans and the consciousness of truth can be destructive for the individual as well as for social life as such. But the individual can overcome this consciousness of truth and the nihilism which it entails—whether it be by (Sartrean) lucidity or by way of a (Nietzschean) instinct of survival dictated by nature's own impulses within us. Both Sartre and Nietzsche show that such a person will go through horror and fear, then through ecstatic joy and metaphysical comfort, and will finally come to face the necessary resoluteness of the wise person who has understood that humans are essentially creators, who must also and always destroy in order to build anew.<sup>68</sup>

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<sup>67</sup> BT, § 7, p. 46.

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## Abstract

This paper proposes a parallel reading of Nietzsche’s first essay, *The Birth of Tragedy*, and of Sartre’s first novel, *Nausea*. It underlines some important similarities between both authors, but more specifically, it demonstrates that *Nausea* is a Nietzschean novel. In this novel, Sartre sees the individual’s relationship to truth and creation in Nietzschean terms. *Nausea*’s main character, Roquentin, experiences an existential process that is Nietzschean, the truth he uncovers is Nietzschean, and the very way by which he is transformed by his existential experience is Nietzschean. The demonstration followed in this paper is twofold: it first presents the stages of the Dionysian process described by Nietzsche in his 1872 essay; it then shows that this process underlies the existential experience described in Sartre’s novel. This shows that young Sartre and young Nietzsche agree on what truth is—at least according to a *negative* definition: namely, the absence of a transcendent rationality—and on the process through which truth is uncovered by a human being. This study concludes that the echoes of Nietzsche’s early thought in Sartre’s first novel are such that the topics of Sartre’s possible Nietzscheanism, or of a Sartrean reception of Nietzsche, could open a fruitful path in continental philosophy studies.