

Apropos of Nothing: A Defense of the Literary Existentialists

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All thanks to Karen Gover, without whom this project would not exist.

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Introduction

In the introduction to his book *Existentialism from Dostoevsky to Sartre*, Walter Kaufmann poses an open question:

Could it be that at least some part of what the existentialists attempt to do is best done in art and not philosophy? It is conceivable that Rilke and Kafka, Sartre and Camus have in their imaginative works reached heights of which the so-called existentialist philosophers, including Sartre, not to speak of Camus' essays, have for all their efforts fallen short, if they have not altogether missed their footing in their bold attempts to scale the peaks and fallen into frequent error and confusion. Whether this is so or not, that is a crucial question which no student of this movement can avoid. (49)

This paper, then, is an attempt by a student of this movement to answer Kaufmann's question in the affirmative. In order to do so, however, one must first gain an understanding of existentialism in general. For this I turn again to Kaufmann, who calls it “not a philosophy but a label for several different revolts against traditional philosophy” (11). Here he makes two important points, both hinting at existentialism's unique position not just as a philosophy, but as a larger, more encompassing school of thought: that it is both reactionary and made up of disparate elements, many of them literary. Existentialism is far from the unified philosophical systems of Kant or Hegel; rather, the list of thinkers to whom the title has been attributed ranges from forerunners Kierkegaard, Dostoevsky, and Nietzsche; to Kafka, Sartre, and Camus, several of whom never wrote a single philosophical essay and who would have agreed on rather little. Indeed, many were unaware of the others' existences entirely.

Though this sounds odd at first, it in fact becomes quite clear on second glance, for “the refusal to belong to any school of thought, the repudiation of the adequacy of any body of beliefs whatever, and especially of systems, and a marked dissatisfaction with traditional philosophy as

superficial, academic, and remote from life—that is the heart of existentialism” (Kaufmann 12). It should thus be seen a reactionary school of thought¹, one formed as a response to abstract and impractical philosophies which its proponents regarded as having no bearing on everyday life. As such, it embraces, rather than opposes, a certain level of nebulosity and ambiguity. It makes no aspirations toward absolute truths, but rather toward making sense of subjective experiences. If Kant and the categorical imperative can be understood in black and white terms, then existentialism undoubtedly exists in a less clearly-defined grey space that is all its own.

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Seen from this angle, it makes perfect sense that 19th-century Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard's ideas have led to him being regarded as the father of existentialism. If ever there was a philosopher who was hard to pin down, it was “That Individual²,” and any discussion of existentialism must be firmly rooted in an understanding of the mind to which any and all roads bearing any sign of the movement ultimately lead. Through a series of pseudonymous works aimed at the Self, dread, and his own relationship with faith and Christianity, Kierkegaard's oeuvre has proven nigh impossible to pigeonhole. Moreover, there is what Steven Earnshaw calls a “literary vein” (1) to works such as *Fear and Trembling*, something in keeping with what existentialism eventually became, and what this paper aims to discuss in depth. Existentialism's nebulosity is a wholly Kierkegaardian trait: by writing under pseudonyms and often playing devil's advocate in his own work, he refuses to give clear answers. Instead, he makes hints toward one conclusion or another, leaving it to us to decipher his true meaning. So it is with existentialism. This has been seen as both a strength and a weakness; that it does not provide a guide to all the answers, instead putting responsibility on each individual to find them, makes it

1 Here I take issue with Kaufmann on one point, for existentialism is indeed a school of thought.

2 Kierkegaard's own suggestion for his epitaph.

altogether different from the philosophies to which it is a direct response.

Explicating the precise nature of Kierkegaard's influence, Paul Roubiczek notes in *Existentialism For and Against* that “it was he [Kierkegaard] who coined the term existentialism” (55), as well as the following:

Kierkegaard insisted that philosophy should not be abstract, but based on personal experience, on the historical situation in which man finds himself, so that it could become the basis, not of speculation, but of each man's life. The only evidence to be accepted was that which both could be and had been tested by experience. (55)

Roubiczek also draws particular attention to Kierkegaard's *Fear and Trembling*, a work he rightfully notes “makes clear three of the main ideas of existentialism—the 'absolute paradox', the concept of dread (for which, to emphasize its special meaning, one often uses the German word 'Angst'³), and the idea of the 'jump into the abyss', the leap into the unknown” (56).

Though its foundations came about much earlier, it was not until the wake of World War II that existentialism fully formed itself. It was then that thinkers such as Sartre posited the idea that every individual must create a sense of purpose for his- or herself, given the failure of any externalities—God, whose existence was doubted; society, whose values had failed—to provide one. This notion is embodied in Sartre's concept that *existence precedes essence*: life is inherently devoid of meaning, and it is up to man to find it for himself. This has often been misinterpreted as gloomy and depressing by readers who do not understand that, for all intents and purposes, inherent meaninglessness equals open possibility, an idea of which Kierkegaard would almost certainly have approved. It implies that the only obstacles in man's quest for purpose and meaning are the ones he places on himself; once he rids himself of his self-imposed shackles, he is completely free. This revelation is best understood in light of the movements

³ Also translated as anxiety. I personally find dread to be the most appropriate term.

Kierkegaard describes in *Fear and Trembling*. Given the context out of which existentialism arose, it is all too clear why so many were struggling to find meaning. Of all the thinkers associated with the existentialism, Sartre was perhaps its most outspoken proponent, and among a chosen few who did not reject the title⁴.

The Sartrean notion that existence precedes essence and one must thus create their own meaning in life can be traced directly to Kierkegaard's *Either/Or*. Through the pseudonym of Wilhelm, he argues that owning one's actions and choices is of paramount importance to the formation of the personality, an idea that would later become a bedrock of existentialism. The work is structured as a series of letters between Wilhelm and a character known only as A. In describing the latter's stance on the issue of choice, Wilhelm imagines his counterpart saying in conversation, "Yes, I perceive perfectly that there are two possibilities, one can either do this or that. My sincere opinion and my friendly counsel is as follows: Do it, or don't do it—you will regret both" (Bretall 98). This attitude to which A ascribes is the embodiment of aesthetic choice, or the choice not to commit to anything. Such a refusal to own one's choices stunts the full development of the personality and will eventually lead to the state of despair.

Aesthetic choice is brought to mind when reading of Sartre's notion of bad faith, or denying one's total freedom. In *Essays in Existentialism*, he uses the example of a waiter who tries too hard to match the idea of what a waiter should be—rather than a person whose life extends beyond his job—in order to ignore his true responsibility of making choices and living life. It is understandable that the waiter, or anybody, fears this responsibility: freedom is terrifying. Admitting that it is solely up to oneself to figure out one's life and that there is no moral lawgiver or higher authority to simply appoint everybody an assigned task or purpose can

⁴ Martin Heidegger and Albert Camus, on the other hand, *did* reject the label. This, ironically, could be considered more in line with existentialism, since, as noted, one of the movement's most distinct characteristics is its rejection of nearly all absolutes.

lead to terrible anxiety, which Sartre displays most notably in his novel *Nausea*. Here, the terms nausea, despair, and dread are all closely related and imply a feeling of being weighed down by the awareness of one's responsibility to decide for oneself and create meaning in one's own life. Roquentin, the protagonist of *Nausea*, "staggered under the weight" of this burden, but the ultimate idea behind the book is that to do so is a necessity which must be embraced (Sartre 62). Returning to *Either/Or*, A's choice to live in a noncommittal fashion, to be, as Wilhelm calls him, a "nothing, an enigmatic figure on whose brow is inscribed, *Either—or*" reads as an attempt to deflect this responsibility, an attempt which Roquentin makes as well (Bretall 98).

"To this end you cultivate yourself, to this end you harden your temper; for you are willing to admit that you are good for nothing" (Bretall 100). Here Kierkegaard's word choice is characteristically multilayered, and one is wont to misunderstand the meaning of *good for nothing*. In this context, it should be understood as indicative of *tabula rasa*, of open possibility. In being good for *nothing*, or *no one thing*, one has the potential to be good for *anything*. Kierkegaard claims, in his *Diapsalmata*, that:

If I were to wish for anything, I should not wish for wealth and power, but for the passionate sense of the potential, for the eye which, ever young and ardent, sees the possible. Pleasure disappoints, possibility never. And what wine is so foaming, what so fragrant, what so intoxicating, as possibility! (35)

Possibility is, of course, a vital aspect of existentialism. In declaring it "the most intoxicating wine," Kierkegaard encapsulates the basic premise of the movement: One creates meaning through choice. It was Sartre's time as a prisoner of war that expounded his ideas regarding freedom. Later, he would describe man's condition as being *condemned to freedom*: One is *always* free, no matter their circumstances. One does not have rule over one's circumstances, but one can always choose how to deal with them. In Sartre's case, he could either choose to stay a

prisoner or try to escape, risking death: an unpleasant choice, certainly, but a choice nonetheless.

Sartre's experience as a meteorologist during the “phoney war”—the period of World War II lasting from September 1939 until May 1940 during which there was little military action—is crucial to a full understanding of the development of his ideas (Sartre vii). That so little was happening heightened Sartre's awareness of the absurdity of war, not just the one he was in; he was involved in the effort in a way that allowed him to reflect on it. Sartre writes, “we've recognized on both sides that it's quite useless *fighting* on a continuous front, since there are no wings to outflank or breakthrough to be achieved. So we no longer do anything at all” (226). One thing he did do, clearly, was think, and transfer his thoughts onto paper: One aspect of his wartime experience that amazed Quintin Hoarse, the translator of Sartre's war diaries, was “how much more time he [had] for writing than in civilian life;” it is estimated that, including his letters, notebooks, and *The Age of Reason*, a full-length novel, he produced, according to Quintin Hoare's introduction, “perhaps one million words” (ix). This act of creation, especially in the literary vein, is explored in great depth in *Nausea*.

To Sartre and many others, the war represented the dissolution and failure of western values: all of their cultural, intellectual, and technological achievements seemed to have resulted in little more than more impersonal, efficient means of killing one another. This led them to call into question the values on which they had based so much, with the ultimate conclusion being that they were flawed and could not in any satisfying way account for the larger issues of meaning and purpose. They, like Kierkegaard, felt that philosophy needed to be helpful in one's daily life, not just abstract thoughts in a dusty tome.

Sartre's experience in World War II did not birth these ideas; rather, it heightened them. Hoare writes of Sartre that “the prewar years seem in retrospect to have been but an

apprenticeship” (x); he also mentions a letter Sartre wrote on which he claimed “I’m on my way...to discovering myself” (xi). Sartre expounds on the personal effect the war had on him in the following quote, one which exemplifies the link between the war and his process of self-discovery, itself a vital existential concept:

It has taken the war, and also the assistance of several new disciplines (phenomenology, psychoanalysis, sociology)...to prompt me to draw up a full-length portrait of myself. Once launched upon this undertaking, I go at it with a will...I want to make it as complete a portrait as possible. (xii)

One must also look to Kierkegaard's conception of despair, traces of which can be found in Sartre's authorship. To understand it, one must first come to know his conception of the self, for one follows from the other: “a relation which relates to itself” is how he describes it, as well as “a synthesis of the infinite and the finite, of the temporal and the eternal, of freedom and necessity” (Kierkegaard, 43). Despair is thus an internal imbalance between these different, sometimes opposing relationships (45). He adds that “the *possibility*⁵ of this sickness is man's advantage over the beast...it is an infinite merit to be able to despair” (44-45). However, “not only is it the greatest misfortune and misery actually to be in despair; no, it is ruin” (45). The distinction being made is that, though despair itself is akin to a torturous, spiritual sickness, the ability to feel such an ailment is a testament to the enlightened nature of man. Actually suffering despair is the sickness unto death because it causes one “to be unable to die, yet not as though there were hope of life” (48).

Kierkegaard likens despair to a sort of universal, omnipresent specter by which anyone can be haunted, and, according to him, most are, whether they know it or not—an important note, because he claims that despair intensifies as one's awareness of it becomes heightened (72,

5 My italics.

79). Those who are ignorant of their despair, though still suffering the same condition as those who are aware, do not suffer to the same degree. The ignorant form of consciousness is also the most common (75). Kierkegaard divides conscious despair into the categories of “weak” despair and “defiance,” the latter of which is the most highly conscious, and, according to Kierkegaard, worst form. He defines the weak form of despair as that of “in despair not wanting to be oneself” (80), and defiance as “the despair of wanting in despair to be oneself” (98), as well as “despair viewed from the point of view of spirit” (98). Defiance, on the other hand, is the 'worst' form of despair because it leads to the demonic, or the desire to be fully in control of one's own destiny—an impossibility. One who suffers from this form of despair can eventually go into a sort of rage in which:

If it should now happen that God in heaven and all the angels were to offer to help him to be rid of this torment – no, he does not want that, now it is too late. Once he would gladly have given everything to be rid of this agony, but he was kept waiting, and now all that's past; he prefers to rage against everything and be the one whom the whole world, all existence, has wronged. (103)

When Climacus speaks of an “internal imbalance,” one is immediately reminded once again of Roquentin, whose anxiety manifests itself in a feeling of physical illness: the nausea for which the novel is named. The more Roquentin contemplates his existence, the more his Nausea takes hold of him. He is so overcome by the minutiae of everyday life that he finds himself barely able to function, worn down as he is from trying to understand and extract meaning from his existence. Here we see a point of divergence between Kierkegaard and Sartre; while the former argues that the only way to overcome despair is to actively combat it, Sartre demonstrates in *Nausea* that doing so only wears down an individual more. His point seems to be more one of accepting one's responsibility to own one's freedom and choices, a point with which Kierkegaard

would certainly have agreed, as it was his before it was Sartre's.

Kierkegaard's impact on the philosophers who have followed him is all the more remarkable, for, as Roubiczek rightly points out, “when Kierkegaard died, in 1855, it seemed highly improbable that his work would survive. His books were written in Danish, a language rarely known outside his own country, and he was completely unknown except in Denmark itself” (55).

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Such a lengthy discussion of the parallels between Kierkegaard and Sartre should in no way take away from the contributions of the myriad other thinkers considered part of the “family of minds” that is existentialism. Rather, the preceding has been an attempt to clearly and concisely lay out some of the movement's more important foundational concepts before moving on to its literary facet, the focus of this paper. It is Dostoevsky's *Notes from Underground* which must be mentioned first, given that it is not only the first existential novel but perhaps “the best overture for existentialism ever written” (Kaufmann 14). Of the three eminent forerunners—Kierkegaard and Nietzsche being the other two—Dostoevsky was the only novelist. He thus occupies a unique position in the movement, not least because, aside from Kierkegaard, he is one of very few overtly religious writers associated with the existentialists. That he was a contemporary of Kierkegaard's (*Notes* was released in 1864, less than a decade after Kierkegaard's passing) is evidence enough that existentialism's literary heritage is as old as its philosophical underpinnings.

If the *Notes* are anything, they are a reaction: One is unlikely to find a more thorough encapsulation of angst and spite than the eponymous Underground Man, and the parallels between the way he comes about and existentialism's true birth in post-war Europe are in fact

striking. Before the first sentence of the book, Dostoevsky attaches the following disclaimer in a footnote, making it immediately clear that the *Underground Man* is a product of his environment, much like the existentialists: “Both the author of the note and the *Notes* themselves are, of course, fictional, he tells us. “Nevertheless, such persons as the writer of such notes not only may but must exist in our society, taking into consideration the circumstances under which our society has generally been formed” (3). Not only a product, in fact, but a reaction: Richard Pevear rightly says in his foreword that “the man from underground refutes his opponents with the results of having carried their own ideas to an extreme in his life. The results are *himself*” (xix).

He tells his two-part story in a deliberately fractured way, asserting in a typically existential fashion that “I will not introduce any order or system. Whatever I recall, I will write down” (x). His reaction to the stifling objectivity of science and reason—of thinkers such as Kant—is to create a work that values the subjective above all else; the first section of the book, *Apropos of the White Snow*, is essentially a rant. “My God, but what do I care about the laws of nature and arithmetic if for some reason these laws and two times two is not to my liking?” (13) he asks, adding later that “two times two is four is no longer life, gentlemen, but the beginning of death” (33).

Even more striking, perhaps, are the ways in which his thoughts on the violence of his time could just as easily have been written by Sartre during World War II. His criticism, like venom, continues: “what is it that civilization softens in us?” he asks. “Civilization cultivates only a versatility of sensations in man, and...decidedly nothing else. And through the development of this versatility, man may even reach the point of finding pleasure in blood. Indeed, this has already happened to him” (23).

Have you noticed that the most refined blood-shedders have almost all been the most civilized gentlemen, to whom the various Attilas and Stenka Razins sometimes could not hold

a candle? And if they don't strike one as sharply as Attila or Stenka Razin, it is precisely because they occur too frequently, they are too ordinary, too familiar a sight. If man has not become bloodthirsty from civilization, at any rate he has certainly become bloodthirsty in a worse, a viler way than formerly. Formerly, he saw justice in bloodshed and with a quiet conscience exterminated whoever he had to; while now, though we do regard bloodshed as vile, we still occupy ourselves with this vileness, and even more than formerly. Which is worse? Decide for yourselves. (23)

This passage is nothing less than an indictment of his time; he is presenting a vision of his world as one in which blood-shedders who dwarf Attila the Hun are so commonplace that no one even notices them: in their repetition they've become unremarkable, banal. At least in older times, he says, it was done in a certain way, but now it has gotten out of control. And to think that this was *before* the trenches and extermination camps of the two World Wars. “To be overly conscious is a sickness,” the Underground Man says, “a real, thorough sickness” and one with which he—like all the existentialists—is most certainly afflicted (6).

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Underscoring existentialism's nebulous nature in a way befitting its Kierkegaardian roots is Kaufmann's idea that the label 'existentialism' itself should be abandoned. He wrote that “many writers of the past have frequently been hailed as members of this movement, and it is extremely doubtful whether they would have appreciated the company to which they are consigned.” Kierkegaard, for one, would not have considered himself an existentialist in the same way that Sartre did, because he predated the movement and because it did not yet exist as a fully formed philosophy. Kaufmann had it right when he claimed that “most of the living 'existentialists' have repudiated this label, and a bewildered outsider might well conclude that the only thing they have in common is a marked aversion for each other,” but he also missed an

underlying point: Kierkegaard certainly would not have agreed with Sartre's every point, but this does not take away from the movement. Rather, it highlights the fact that existentialism is a melting pot of sorts, an amalgam of ideas presented by its forerunners—not just Kierkegaard, but also Nietzsche and Dostoevsky—and the 20th century sensibilities of philosophers such as de Beauvoir or Buber.

The reason I mention this debate is for the simple reason that its very existence underscores existentialism's unique position in philosophy as a movement rife with paradox and seeming contradiction. That its label is such an issue of contention is thus only fitting, and one can almost imagine the incredibly elusive Kierkegaard, whose work one must actively work to decode and fully understand, smiling at the thought.

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It is no semantic accident that Kaufmann continues his introduction by attempting to tell “the story of existentialism” (12). The movement has its own narrative, cast of characters, and arc. This leads to the obvious questions of why fiction, why literature? I turn here to Camus, who answers thusly: “If the world were clear, art would not exist” (98). Philosophical treatises are perhaps the clearest means of laying out a philosophy such as utilitarianism, but essays alone are not enough for the “liveable philosophy” that is existentialism. In taking to creating fictional worlds in order to exhibit characters living through the concepts to which they'd already devoted essays, such thinkers as Sartre and Camus were demonstrating the livability of existentialism. It is a school of thought notable not only for its content, but also for the artistic forms in which it has manifested itself. Existentialism could not and cannot exist as a uniform system, as that is precisely what it rejects. Its short stories, plays, and novels therefore must be considered as important a component as its foundational essays; the different forms are dependent on one

another to create a whole that is more than the sum of its parts.

I thus situate myself on the side of the table opposite Charles Glicksberg, who argues that literary existentialism “presents a thorny critical problem” in that it “has thus far contributed practically nothing by way of innovation in aesthetic form” (McBride 2). Though the three essays that follow are rooted in an existential reading of each text, I aim to show how the works on which I have focused—*The Stranger*, *The Metamorphosis*, and *Nausea*—transcend their philosophical underpinnings. Are we to assume that the multitude of readers who have read these books without even a basic understanding of existentialism were unable to make sense of them? Certainly not. It is therefore no accident that I have chosen centered the following around works by Kafka, Sartre, and Camus. One predated the movement, another championed it, and the last distanced himself from it; their fiction forms a cross-section of thought that is both separate and a part of the philosophy. The following is an attempt to show the ways in which, though one is no more important than the other, existentialism would be a far cry from the unique movement it is without its literary component.

In the first of three essays, I attempt to take on the daunting task of unraveling Meursault, the “knight of the Absurd” at the center of *The Stranger* who has too often been seen as being a mere puppet for Camus's philosophy. Second, I look at *The Metamorphosis*, the title of which is perhaps misleading. Kafka's best-known work in fact tells the story of two transformations: not only Gregor Samsa's gruesome change into a vermin, but the growth and maturation of his sister Grete. As Kafka is perhaps the only writer associated with existentialism who rivals Kierkegaard's inaccessibility, I have chosen to put the work in the context of a Sartrean reading centered around bad faith. I then move on to a close reading of Sartre's *Nausea*, as it says the most about the form of fiction itself. Like Camus, Sartre attached the utmost significance to

literary creation; as I aim to show in the following, fiction is of such vital importance to existentialism because the act of writing it can easily be interpreted as the ultimate means of self-assertion.

The Problem of Meursault: *The Stranger*

The Stranger is a troubling novel. To detail the myriad reasons why this is so would be too ambitious for a single paper, but a look at the novel's protagonist, Meursault, will serve as a decent starting place. For such a complex character, it seems he's been given a light treatment by scholars: Meursault has been understood far too often as merely a puppet for Camus's distinct blend of existential, Absurd, and personal thought; critic WHO Abecassis, for instance, calls the novel a "story of a man with no story" (631). At first, this may seem a reasonable take on the book; Meursault does initially come across as something of a cipher, a Rorschach blot with no deeper significance. To accept this analysis, however, is to be taken in by the deceptively simple way Meursault relates his story, missing the subtle idiosyncrasies along the way that imbue him and his story with their latent meaning. As Louis Hudon has said, "almost everyone has approached Camus and *L'Etranger* bound by his own tradition, prejudices, or critical apparatus...many put their nickel in the philosophical slot, and existentialism comes out of everywhere" (59). This, too, makes sense at first glance, but only insofar as it is a reductive, catch-all interpretation that in fact misses the detail a true existential reading would not let slip by. It is the goal of this paper, then, to unravel the enigmatic Meursault in an attempt to better understand *The Stranger* as a whole in a way that aims not to *deny* the book's philosophical underpinnings, but rather to expand on them and demonstrate that the novel is far more than a fictional portrayal of Camus's philosophy.

First, to ask a question that seems to have been skirted over: Why does he do it? Why does Meursault shoot the Arab on the beach, not just once, but five times, four of which occur postmortem? It's something critics have been wont to overlook: Hudon calls the act a mere "muscular contraction which causes the revolver to fire is an involuntary act, most carefully presented as such, an accident. At worst, is is involuntary manslaughter, not murder" (61). Yet he

also says, shortly before, that “Camus is primarily a creative artist,” which raises the question: Would such an artist hinge an entire work on nothing more than a muscular contraction? It is nothing if not counterintuitive that there could somehow be nothing more behind the most significant event of the novel, no intentionality whatsoever driving Meursault to take another man's life.

I would thus like to propose the theory that Meursault kills the Arab in an attempt to somehow understand death, the only absolute truth he seems able to acknowledge, if not fully grasp. He says several times in the beginning of the novel that Maman's death doesn't seem real; this is because the only way something *can* seem real to him is through a direct sensory experience of it. Consider the main detail he gives when he describes killing the Arab: It's the *sound* of it, and what it signifies (of which more later). This inquiry takes Hudon's point that “the entire first part of *L'Etranger* exists in order to tell, from the inside of an individual personality, the simple details of an act which people are going to misinterpret because they will see it from the outside” (61) and thus attempts to view the murder from Meursault's point of view in a way that has yet to be done.

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One of *The Stranger's* most important foundational concepts is the meeting of the absolute and the relative—the objective and subjective—which John K. Simon says “represents the closed universe of absurdity” (111). This notion is the first step to gaining as complete an understanding of Meursault as such an elusive character will allow. As we see for the first time in his reaction to Maman's death at the beginning of the novel, nothing exists to Meursault until he has experienced it firsthand. His seeming indifference to the event, exhibited in his opening lines, is unequivocal: “Maman died today. Or yesterday maybe, I don't know. I got a telegram from the

Home: 'Mother deceased. Funeral tomorrow. Faithfully yours.' That doesn't mean anything. Maybe it was yesterday” (Camus 3).

Meursault is able to *acknowledge* death as the only absolute, but, having been so physically and emotionally distant from his mother at the time of her death, is unable to grasp it in any meaningful way. This extends beyond just death, however, as Meursault shows us at Maman's viewing: A group of people walk in silently, without him noticing, and even this relatively minor collision of realities—what exists and what Meursault directly experiences—is extremely disorienting for him. “I couldn't hear them, and it was hard for me to believe they really existed,” he tells us (15). This is expounded upon shortly thereafter, when Meursault relates the following: “I was looking at the countryside around me. Seeing the rows of cypress trees leading up to the hills next to the sky, and the houses standing out here and there against the red and green earth, I was able to understand Maman better” (15). Only now that he has stood on the same grass and looked at the same sky is he able to feel somehow connected to her, even if just barely. We know, at the end of the first chapter, that it hasn't quite sunk in yet: “It occurred to me that anyway one more Sunday was over, that Maman was buried now, that I was going back to work, and that, really, nothing had changed” (24).

The most important of Meursault's sensory experiences is present in all three of the novel's most significant events: Heat. At Maman's funeral, the murder of the Arab, and his own trial, Meursault goes on at length about how unbearably hot it is; the physical discomfort this elicits in him is almost tangible. First, during the funeral procession, we are told that “The sky was already filled with light. The sun was beginning to bear down on the earth and it was getting hotter by the minute. I don't know why we waited so long before getting under way. I was hot in my dark clothes” (15). This is the first of many instances in which Meursault's descriptions of the

heat come close to overpowering what's physically happening, despite the fact that, at first glance, the latter would appear to be of far greater consequence. But Meursault is not a character of whom first glances will suffice; quite the opposite. It could be the case that, in centering the novel around a figure who pays such close attention to the most minute of details, Camus is hinting that we should do the same.

Meursault continues on the next page: “I was surprised at how fast the sun was climbing in the sky...the sweat was pouring down my face. I wasn't wearing a hat, so I fanned myself with my handkerchief” (16) and, once more for good measure, “All around me there was still the same glowing countryside flooded with sunlight. The glare from the sky was unbearable. At one point, we went over a section of the road that had just been repaved. The tar had burst open in the sun” (17). This last description in particular could almost be called hellish.

The heat motif is reintroduced in the second half of the novel, which otherwise consists mostly of Meursault's trial. Sitting in wait, he says that he “knew as soon as the weather turned hot that something new was in store for me” (82). Here the heat is pointed to as a sort of bellwether—a fact that takes on special significance during the murder—and it seems safe to assume that Meursault sees the omen as more foreboding than benevolent. Again: “When the prosecutor returned to his seat, there was a rather long silence. My head was spinning with heat and astonishment” (102). Later asked of his motives, Meursault replies, “it was because of the heat” (103).

Finally, the murder: In the heat of the day, Meursault says of his nameless victim that “he was just a form shimmering before my eyes in the fiery air.” (58). At this point, the heat is more real to him the man lying on the beach; it is only in killing the Arab that Meursault is able to grasp him on anything other than a superficial level.

The sun was starting to burn my cheeks, and I could feel drops of sweat

gathering in my eyebrows. *The sun was the same as it had been the day I'd buried Maman*⁶, and like then, my forehead especially was hurting me, all the veins in it throbbing under the skin. It was this burning, which I couldn't stand anymore, that made me move forward. (58-59)

To make the point even clearer, Meursault continues. "At the same instant," he says, "the sweat in my eyebrows dripped down over my eyelids all at once and covered them with a warm, thick film. My eyes were blinded behind the curtain of tears and salt" (59). This far into the book, Meursault is still detached from the very concept of death, and so he acts. What's more, the detail on which he focuses the most is the *sound* the gun makes; whereas the group walking into his mother's viewing seemed unreal to him, his present situation is all too real.

I shook off the sweat and sun. I knew that I had shattered the harmony of the day, the exceptional silence of a beach where I'd been happy. Then I fired four more times at the motionless body where the bullets lodged without leaving a trace. And it was like knocking four quick times on the door of unhappiness. (59)

Consider, once more, the incident in which the group of people walks into Maman's viewing: "I couldn't hear them, and it was hard for me to believe they really existed." This episode, then, is the opposite side of the coin. Only now that he has felt the gun in his hand and heard the sound of the bullet can he focus on what he's done, rather than the elements bearing down on him; only now that he has directly involved himself in it is death real to him. I believe that this is the beginning of an answer to the troubling, and revealing, question of why Meursault does as he does.

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Here I would like to underscore Abecassis's point that "the first half [of the novel] is but

⁶ My italics.

the sun-drenched background whose chief function is to describe and, more importantly, to prepare and explain, the events which are about to unfold” (625), though we differ in our conclusions. Where Abecassis relegates *The Stranger's* first section to a mere prelude of what is to come—a sort of introductory paragraph to a treatise, perhaps—I consider it more in line with the first part of Dostoevsky's *Notes from Underground*. Both serve not simply to lead into the remainder of their respective stories, since, in both cases, the most significant events have already occurred by the time the second section begins⁷. Structurally, the placement of Meursault's crime at the conclusion of the first half acts as an exclamation mark to a story that has thus far been primarily internal. It also creates a doubling effect when the novel ends just before Meursault is to be executed. Death is the final note of each half, and in its place is naught but empty space and a chance for us to absorb what we've just read in a manner perhaps not unlike Meursault's.

For further insight, it is necessary to introduce the notion of “getting used to it.” The idea is first mentioned early on, when Meursault is describing his neighbor Salamano and his dog. (Later, it's made explicit when Meursault tells us that “it was one of Maman's ideas, and she often repeated it, that after a while you could get used to anything” [77]). Both are old, scabby, and apparently quite miserable with one another. Their relationship, built on “hatred” and “terror,” is exemplified in their daily walk, which is “the same thing every day” and “has been going on for eight years” (27). And yet, when the dog goes missing, old Salamano is in ruins. Worried that the dog might be at the pound, he pleads, “They're not going to take him away from me, are they, Monsieur Meursault? They'll give him back to me. Otherwise, what's going to happen to me?” (39) The only reason we are given for Salamano falling apart over an animal he

⁷ In the *Notes*, the Underground Man's rant in the first section takes place long after the plot-driven second half, which is told as a recollection.

apparently hates, and won't even consider getting a new one, is that “he was used to this one” (44). It's as simple as that: The dog is a significant part of his daily routine, and any interruption to that routine is tantamount to disaster.

Becoming dependent on such a feeling of everydayness, the familiarity of such ubiquitous aspects of one's life as a dog, job, or any other polestar to which one might tether oneself, is an idea present in not only *The Stranger* but also Kafka's *The Metamorphosis* and Sartre's *Nausea*. In all cases, it is treated as a danger, something to be avoided: Gregor Samsa's inability to break his routine and think of himself rather than his family is his fatal flaw, a trait largely responsible for his eventual death; so strong is Roquentin's reaction to the minutiae of his daily life that it makes him physically ill.

Salamano's purpose in *The Stranger* is to serve as a foil for Meursault, who, unlike his neighbor, is not content with merely getting used to the way things are. Meursault, whom we see drifting through day after day, could be said to be “used to” his way of life, so much so that he seems indifferent to a new job opportunity that would put him in Paris, as well as a marriage proposal from his girlfriend (41). (Furthermore, this ties in with the fact that neither of these things seems to matter to him, given how remote and ultimately pointless he considers them.) The moment on the beach in which he fires the gun, then, is his refusal to continue living this way; for what may be the first time in his life—and certainly in the book—he has acted. There are extenuating circumstances, yes, but it is ultimately, I believe, a conscious decision on the part of Meursault, which leads me to my next point.

To call Meursault a tragic hero in the same tradition as Oedipus is no doubt a stretch, but there are certain sensibilities the two share which are worth pointing out in order to gain a more comprehensive perspective of the former. In effect, Meursault's fate is sealed from his famous

first lines, which bear repeating: “Maman died today. Or yesterday maybe, I don't know. I got a telegram from the Home: 'Mother deceased. Funeral tomorrow. Faithfully yours.' That doesn't mean anything. Maybe it was yesterday” (3). The “chasm between customary behavior and inner feeling” (Abecassis 627) Meursault displays in his reaction (or lack thereof) to his mother's death makes himself an alien figure to everyone around him; at his trial, the fact that he has killed a man for no apparent reason is almost an afterthought: All anyone can talk about is his seeming indifference in the wake of his mother's death. Note this passage from the first chapter, when Meursault is at Maman's viewing, surrounded by other guests: “It was then that I realized they were all sitting across from me, nodding their heads, grouped around the caretaker. For a second I had the ridiculous feeling that they were there to judge me” (10). The irony, of course, is that they *are* there to judge him, or at least it's behavior at Maman's funeral for which Meursault is truly and ultimately put on trial. It could thus be argued that his inability to feel most emotions leads directly to his own demise. And why can't he feel anything? Because of the above-mentioned “despair of relativity” (Simon 111)—“everything is true and nothing is true!” (91)—that renders him unable to understand the importance of any of it. For Meursault, only death is real: first the idea of it, and then its actuality. “Everybody knows life isn't worth living” (114), he says, showing us how and why he is a man with no place in the world.

Chance, choice, and responsibility also figure prominently in an understanding of Meursault. No one forces him to pull the trigger, and it is not, as Hudon suggests, an involuntary action; he chooses to do it, and, though he doesn't feel remorse, he, like Oedipus before him, accepts his fate as a consequence of what he's done. Even Raymond, the character to whom Meursault seems closest, says that “being at the beach was just chance” (95). Once he's on the beach, however, Meursault realizes that “you could either shoot or not shoot” (56). Extenuating

circumstances or no, it is ultimately Meursault's own decision to pull the trigger, for reasons I have already attempted to explain. At no point does Meursault attempt to lie or talk himself out of his situation; he is entirely forthcoming in his testimony and behavior at the trial. He doesn't even try to save his own soul. We shouldn't envy or emulate the situation he hasn't gotten himself into, but it would be difficult to argue that his behavior in the second half of the novel is anything less than honorable. It is here that the Oedipal link becomes clear: each man brings about his own downfall in committing a murder, both are, in hindsight, doomed from the outset of their stories, and both meet their punishment all too willingly. (To point out that they both have complicated relationships with their mother goes without saying.)

A few final points. Abecassis rightly states that:

The second part of the novel is [not] without merit, but...it pales in comparison with the uncharted territory of the first part. While the first part of *L'Etranger*, in my judgment, has no rival in the history of letters, the second is a topos treated with great success by some of the very best authors, including Dostoevsky and Kafka. (639)

This passage ate once roots Camus in the tradition of literary existentialism from which *The Stranger* springs—even if, true to Camus's iconoclastic nature, it also deviates notably. Still, the similarities far outweigh the disparities: like most existential fiction, the novel draws more attention to *why* than *what*, and is a largely internal story more remarkable in its troubling central character than its plot.

“Blinded by the idea that Meursault is a rudimentary being,” Hudon says, “critics have paid little attention to Camus' consummate art” (63). All too true. It is unfortunate, then, that no satisfying portrait of him yet exists, for he is an exceptionally complex character, one whose inner landscape is in fact so deep that he believes, through simply recalling the minute details of

a single room over and over again, “a man who had lived only one day could easily live for a hundred years in prison” (79). What Meursault looks for all the more strongly once he's sentenced to death is “something the imagination could hold onto” (112), be it a memory, story, or simply an idea. This is the extent to which he lives in his own head, through his own experiences, and it's exactly why he is indeed a stranger to this world. As Hudon says, “any individual who threatens, by his mere existence, established power or accepted ideology must be quietly eliminated by any society” (61). And so it is for Meursault.

Mr. Samsa Must Not Exist: *The Metamorphosis*

“If the world were clear,” writes Camus, “art would not exist” (98). Interesting, then, that the body of work associated with existentialism is as hard to pin down as it is. Much of the oeuvre of the literary existentialists can be seen as a two-way mirror of art reflecting the confusion of life. This is perhaps truer of no one than Kafka. For this reason and others, the following is an attempt to give a Sartrean reading of *The Metamorphosis*. My intent is to anchor the nebulosity of Kafka's novella by putting its lead character, Gregor Samsa, in the context of bad faith: denying one's total freedom by means of imagined limitations on the self and thus living inauthentically. On the other side of the coin, however, is his sister Grete, around whom the story centers in many ways.

There are thus two transformations in *The Metamorphosis*: one for the worse, the other for the better. Gregor's, this paper aims to demonstrate, is not the beginning of his troubles but, rather, the inevitable conclusion of his inability to live for himself and not for his family. Rooted as Gregor is in his own facticity—which is to say, everything he cannot change about his life: when, where, and to whom he was born—and, just as important, his filial obligations, there is not a single reference in Kafka's best-known story to its protagonist ever doing anything for himself. As with *The Stranger* and *Nausea*, *The Metamorphosis* has at its center a problematic hero who seems to balk account. Tied to this, in an existential reading, is that Gregor has never defined who he is as a person in the world; it is perhaps not so surprising that one day he wakes up as just that: less than a person. “I must have showed some sign of it” (97), Gregor says hopelessly, more right than he knows.

Strangest of all perhaps, is that this lifestyle seems to come not from without, but within. Speaking of it, Gregor's mother says the following:

The boy thinks about nothing but his work. It makes me almost cross the

way he never goes out in the evenings; he's been here the last eight days and has stayed home every single evening. He just sits there quietly at the table reading a newspaper or looking through railway timetables. (96)

That it makes her cross is a clear indication that neither she nor her husband keep their son confined to the home; even after he's fulfilled his daily obligations, Gregor chooses this for himself. There is, quite simply, nothing in the whole tale to suggest that Gregor has taken even the first step toward living a fulfilling life for himself. Instead, he projects his misperceptions of responsibility onto his family. Though he may not know it, Gregor is in fact free to do whatever he chooses. The source of his despair is that, rather than acknowledge this fact and develop his own sense of self, he has deluded himself into believing that his mother, father, and sister are incapable of surviving on their own and, as a result of this, it is up to him to be a martyr and never think of himself. He uses his exaggerated notions of familial responsibility as a means of denying his own freedom, his own ability to fully exist in the world.

The one externality to which Gregor's attitude can be attributed, at least in part, is his employer. Visiting him on the morning of his change, Gregor's chief clerk says to Mrs. Samsa that "we men of business—fortunately or unfortunately—very often simply have to ignore any slight indisposition, since business must be attended to" (96). In other words, the show must go on, suck it up. He then goes on to admonish Gregor for "neglecting [his] business duties in an incredible fashion...I thought you were a quiet, dependable person, and now all at once you seem bent on making a disgraceful exhibition of yourself." (97) Certainly this overbearing attitude from his employers has made him self-abnegating in regards to his work, but what bearing does this have on how he chooses to spend his free time? This exchange becomes all the more interesting through an interesting semantic choice that ends the chief clerk's tirade. He tells Gregor that "a season of the year for doing no business at all, that does not exist, *Mr. Samsa,*

*must not exist*⁸ (97). A coincidence, perhaps, but revealing nonetheless: Mr. Samsa must not exist.

The chief clerk's statement is even more prescient than he means it to be. Consider, for a moment, what *The Metamorphosis* would be like if it were a film in the vein of *It's A Wonderful Life*. We would view Gregor's unsettling transformation not as an absurd, inexplicable occurrence, but rather as something with which the existentialists were so concerned: a chance, a possibility to look inward and thus change his life for the better, rather than using his family's plight as a means of living in bad faith. Gregor himself acknowledges his situation as such, at one point marveling at the fact that he now has “plenty of time to meditate at his leisure on how he was to arrange his life afresh” (106). In the uplifting film version of the tale, Gregor's revelation would cause him to wake from his “uneasy dream” and into a world of open possibility, a world he would now make the most of. Not so in the actual story. Despite the harrowing circumstances of his daily life, Gregor can still only think what a burden to his family he is, and how, even now, he should be taking care of them and not himself.

What makes the situation all the more pitiful and ironic is that even Gregor's work habits are more accelerated than need be, to say nothing of his nonexistent personal life. We discover, later in *The Metamorphosis*, that the Samsas are not doing so badly as their hardworking son believes.

In the course of that very first day Gregor's father explained the family's financial position and prospects to both his mother and his sister. Now and then he rose from the table to get some voucher or memorandum out of the small safe he had rescued from the collapse of his business five years earlier...[Gregor] had been of the opinion that nothing at all was left over from his father's business, at least his father had never said anything to the

8 My italics.

contrary, and of course he had not asked him directly. (110)

Had Gregor simply inquired as to the family's financial state of affairs—something that, as the principal breadwinner, he would have every right to do—he would find out that even his work habits have been, to an extent, in vain. We now see a clear picture emerging, one of a man whose limitations are self-imposed and whose transformation into a cockroach may be read as the fulfillment of his choice to live as a sort of existential infant.

Gregor's ultimate problem is himself. One would expect that such extreme circumstances would bring about some revelation, not to mention action, but it simply doesn't. Take, for instance, his first morning as the vermin. With a crowd of people outside of his room, inquiring as to his well-being, Gregor tries to defuse the situation. “More through the agitation caused by these reflections than through any act of will Gregor swung himself out of bed with all his strength” (95). This is not an isolated incident. We are told, when Gregor is hungry and hoping that Grete will bring him more food, that “if she did not do it of her own accord, he would rather starve than draw her attention to the fact, although he felt a wild impulse to dart out from under the sofa, throw himself at her feet, and beg her for something to eat” (107). A pitiful image, to be sure, and one made even more so given the fact that Gregor's lot is a direct result of his own choices. In working tirelessly to support his family, never once thinking of himself, Gregor becomes the burden he tried so long and hard to avoid being. It's a near-tragic irony.

Over and over we are presented with scenes in which Gregor fails to assert himself, even as a vermin. It is thus no surprise when “day by day things that were even a little way off were growing dimmer to his sight...he might have believed that his window gave on a desert waste where gray sky and gray land blended indistinguishably into each other” (113). This is the outer world to match Gregor's dreary internal landscape, one which is similarly cloud-covered more and more with each passing day. Rather than spur himself to action, he responds to his dire

situation by turning increasingly inward and exacerbating things further. Unlike Meursault of *The Stranger*, however, this turn inward entails no subjective truths in which he can immerse himself; it is simply a world of increasing despair. “Such were the thoughts, completely futile in his present condition, that went through his head” (111). Thoughts are only futile if they fail to inspire action on the part of the thinker. Unfortunately for Gregor, this is the case. And when he dies, it is not so much because he has lost his battle as it is because he never tried to fight it.

“Haunted by the idea that next time the door opened he would take the family's affairs in hand again just as he used to” (125). This is pages away from the story's end, and Gregor is still crippled by his own fears and anxieties; he has undergone no significant change—at least not for the better—and his fate is all but sealed at this point. No one helps him as much as he might have liked, “nor did anyone harass him; he was left entirely to himself” (134). This is, in an existential reading, not just true of Gregor, but of everyone.

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Where Gregor's change is from man to vermin, his sister Grete's transformation is more akin to that of a caterpillar turning into a butterfly. She is, in effect, the other side of the coin. Descriptions of her character are sparse and typically confined to a sentence or two at a time, making her initially appear insignificant. We do know, however, that she is quite dear to Gregor, given that he has carefully been planning to send her to the Conservatory to study violin; it is for her specifically that he feels most responsible. An early reference to Grete tells us that “she who was still a child of seventeen and whose life hitherto had been so pleasant, consisting as it did in dressing herself nicely, sleeping long, helping in the housekeeping, going out to a few modest entertainments, and above all playing the violin” (112). She comes off as meek, unassuming, and, above all else, quiet. (To be sure, she spends more time crying in the story than she does

speaking.) And yet it is she, not Gregor's mother or father⁹, who assumes the role of caretaker, a responsibility she “jealously guarded” (126). This despite the fact that we are not given much reason to trust in her abilities from the outset: “His sister, who was only a child despite the efforts she was making and had perhaps taken on so difficult a task merely out of childishness thoughtlessness” (114).

Grete grows more than any other character, and in some ways this is at Gregor's expense as well as her own. As his caretaker, it is she who feeds him and cleans his room, but it is also she who ultimately decides, for the good of herself and her family, that Gregor must be gotten rid of; it is here that we see “the self-confidence she had recently developed so unexpectedly and at such cost” (117) manifested most clearly. After Gregor comes out into the living room while the boarders are listening to Grete play the violin, we are told that “nothing had changed behind him except that his sister had risen to her feet” (135), an almost literal representation of her rise as the most proactive member of the family. The passage also serves to underscore the essentially static nature of Gregor's parents; that they change so little, if at all, further highlights the significance of Grete's development. Indeed, it is the case that “what really kept them from moving into another flat was rather their own complete hopelessness and the belief that they had been singled out for a misfortune as had never happened to any of their relationships or acquaintances” (124-125).

The tense atmosphere clears up almost immediately after Gregor's death and presumably ignominious burial, details of which Mr. Samsa doesn't allow the maid to divulge. Has he been thrown in the dumpster? Tossed in the alley? We are never told, though it's certainly not a serene final resting place. Regardless, we are told that “although it was so early in the morning a certain softness was perceptible in the soft air. After all, it was already the end of March” (137) and that

9 Underscoring their relative unimportance, neither of them are ever given first names.

“Mr. Samsa and the two women soon left the landing and as if a burden had been lifted from them went back into their apartment” (138).

What separates the two siblings, in the framework of absurdist literature, is that only Grete showcases the imperative that “this literature insists that man *confronts* the absurd” (Goodwin 833). Though noble of Gregor, it is almost with disappointment that we read, just before his death, that “he thought of his family with tenderness and love. The decision that he must disappear was one that he held to even more strongly than his sister” (135). Perhaps at this point there is no alternative, but Gregor's death was in no way inevitable. He and his sister are two sides of the coin, and, depressing as the story is at points, it is with hope that we see Grete “stretch her young body” (139) as the last image. Something good has at last come of Gregor's ordeal.

This Lunar World: *Nausea*

It has been said, not without reason, that Sartre was a better philosopher than novelist. He was, after all, perhaps the one thinker to whom existentialism's notoriety owed the most: Sartre championed the movement in a singular way, and was one of only a few self-avowed existentialists. And though his *Nausea's* underpinnings are clear enough, it is a mistake to think of the work as little more than a thinly-veiled philosophical treatise: Sartre was a writer in the truest sense of the word, one who understood that “human consciousness perceives the world, inevitably, through the shaping structures of language,” and the importance he attached to the act is rivaled by few (Biswas 46). One of the most fascinating ideas explored in *Nausea*—and one that has heretofore been glanced over—is what it says, both implicitly and explicitly, about the form of fiction itself. Roquentin's movement in the book is from writing history to writing fiction; in the larger sense, this is to be understood as going from living in the past to fully existing in the present. That Sartre makes this clear by having his protagonist come to understand the importance of novels is no accident: he was making a clear statement.

Nausea's protagonist, Antoine Roquentin, has for some time been devoting his life to a book on a (fictional) historical figure named the Marquis de Rollebon. His dedication to the project verges on the obsessive, and it has taken on the most meaningful part of his life. “It is for him, for this mannikin that I am here,” Roquentin remarks early on (12). His project—it might seem ironic at first—has been slowed down not by a lack of facts, but rather by an abundance of them. “I understand nothing more about his conduct. It is not the lack of documents: letters, fragments of memoirs, secret reports, police records. On the contrary I have almost too many of them” (13). In a novel written by a philosopher, a passage of this sort is vital. What Roquentin is inching toward saying is that facts and absolute truths are stifling; what invigorates us are the conclusions we reach by using these facts to create our own subjective truths. “For a long time,”

he goes on, “Rollebon the man has interested me more than the book to be written. But now, the man...the man begins to bore me. It is the book which attracts me. I feel more and more the need to write—in the same proportion as I grow old, you might say” (13). The more Roquentin sees of the world, the greater his need to create his own reality. This becomes even clearer when he says the following:

Slowly, lazy, sulky, the facts adapt themselves to the rigour of the order I wish to give them; but it remains outside of them. I have the feeling of doing a work of pure imagination. And I am certain that the characters in a novel would have a more genuine appearance, or, in any case, would be more agreeable. (13-14)

Compounding all this, of course, is the fact that Rollebon is not a real historical figure. Though Sartre could have easily chosen someone like Napoleon as the object of Roquentin's obsession, he opted to create one instead. Considering the extensive biographical detail we are given on de Rollebon, this was no doubt a conscious decision. In the world of *Nausea*, the Marquis is as real as Roquentin is, if not more so. He, as a reader of Rollebon, understands the character by whom he is so taken to be a fully realized individual, one worthy of years of time and effort; yet it is plain to readers of *Nausea* that Roquentin is a fragmented person, one who makes it nearly impossible for us to understand him fully, given that he doesn't understand himself: looking in the mirror, Roquentin sees his face as merely a series of parts cobbled together. Here Biswas chimes in: “when we contemplate a thing deeply enough to break away from routine patterns of observation,” he says, “the thing gets divorced from the fixed meaning we attach to it as a tool: it then appears as a petrified object or a living, evanescent thing in a nightmarish world” (46). In reducing himself thusly, Roquentin struggles to make sense of himself, an effect that expands outward to his readers.

Roquentin's thoughts on his book are unequivocal. So rooted in the world of the Marquis is he that he sees it as being mutually exclusive with the real world. "A man is always a teller of tales, he lives surrounded by his stories and the stories of others, he sees everything that happens to him through them; and he tries to live his own life as if he were telling a story. But you have to choose: live or tell" (39). That Roquentin sees the world through the lens of storytelling should be taken not as a postmodern, metafictional device, but as another layer to Sartre's underlying message. When, decades later, Joan Didion would write that "We tell ourselves stories in order to live," she echoed this message. More on what has driven Roquentin from the external world and into the internal:

I have had real adventures. I can recapture no detail but I perceive the rigorous succession of circumstances. I have crossed seas, left cities behind me, followed the course of rivers or plunged into forests, always making my way towards other cities. I have had women, I have fought with men; and never was I able to turn back, any more than a record can be reversed. And all that led me—*where?* (23)

If Roquentin leaves this question open, it's because the implicit answer is already present. Where "all that"—life, in short—has led him is deeper into his own mind, one working quite hard to create a world of its own. It is telling indeed that Roquentin is able to summarize his life story in less than a paragraph, yet he's devoted years of his life and, just as importantly, countless pages to Rollebon. But even this no longer satisfies him; the project has left him in a rut. Eventually, he figures out why. "I'd be better off writing a novel on the Marquis de Rollebon," he says (58). This discovery, it seems, reignites his passion for the project to the point where he thinks about it even during sex. "She pressed my head against her breast in a burst of passion: she thinks it is the right thing. I played distractedly with her sex under the cover; then my arm went to sleep. I

thought about de Rollebon: after all, why shouldn't I write a novel about his life?" (59)

Too, he is wont to reference that he feels like "the hero of a novel." Again, this should be taken less as a touch of metafiction than as another layer to Sartre's blending of craft and message, of philosophy and fiction. To have a protagonist who serves largely as a vehicle for Sartre's existential leanings be, on some level, aware of his fictional status is to show that the philosophical and the fictional are far from mutually exclusive. In making his point about fiction, Sartre goes so far as to excerpt a full three pages of Balzac's *Eugénie Grandet*, which Roquentin decides to pick up for no reason other than boredom. "It isn't that I get any great pleasure out of it: but I have to do something. I open the book at random" (47). The passage Roquentin reads aloud to us is of no great significance in terms of its own plot or how it relates to the events of *Nausea*; what matters is simply that it is a work of fiction. This is not Sartre at his most subtle, but his point is clear enough.

Roquentin's history-induced tedium vitae runs deep. "Nothing happens while you live. The scenery changes, people come in and go out, that's all. There are no beginnings. Days are tacked onto days without rhyme or reason, an interminable addition" (39). There are no beginnings he says, and neither are there any ends. Instead, he feels as though he's drifting through a perpetual middle, a limbo from which he sees no exit. Interesting, then, that his inability to see beyond his immediate surroundings is tied to his living in the past by devoting his life to Rollebon: it is only when he realizes he has been using the project as a "crutch to avoid existence" that he understands the present to be an opportunity instead of a burden (Earnshaw 91).

It is needless to say at this point that Roquentin lives more in his own head than in the outer world. Indeed, "it seems as though I have learned all I know of life in books" (64). This is a

shared trait among most existential heroes, including but not limited to the already-discussed Gregor Samsa and Meursault. For a literature so fixated on the near-catastrophic meeting of the subjective and objective worlds, it could be no other way. Roquentin seems to invoke Dostoevsky's Underground Man in saying that “I love alone, entirely alone. I never speak to anyone, never; I receive nothing, I give nothing” (6). In place of people, he lives through his own thoughts, struggling with his inability to express them through words, despite his best efforts: “Through the lack of attaching myself to words, my thoughts remain nebulous most of the time. They sketch vague, pleasant shapes and then are swallowed up: I forget them almost immediately” (7).

It is not until Roquentin abandons his project on de Rollebon that he fully acknowledges his own existence. More a realization of the past's meaninglessness—that what matters is the present—than of his need to create his own meaning rather than project it onto de Rollebon, the event is Roquentin's only real turning point in the novel. It comes rather suddenly: “As my eyes fell on the pad of white sheets, I was struck by its look and I stayed, pen raised, studying this dazzling paper: so hard and far seeing, so present. The letters I had just inscribed on it were not even dry yet and already they belonged to the past” (95). Moments later, he looks around himself and sees

the present, nothing but the present...the true nature of the present revealed itself: it was what exists, and all that was not present did not exist. The past did not exist. Not at all. Not in things, not even in my thoughts. It is true that I had realized a long time ago that mine had escaped me. But until then I simply believed that it had gone out of my range. For me the past was only a pensioning off: it was another way of existing, a state of vacation and inaction; each event, when it had played its part, put itself politely into a box

and became an honorary event: we have so much difficulty imagining nothingness. Now I knew: things are entirely what they appear to be—and behind them...there is nothing. (95-96)

For one of the most blatantly philosophical moments in the novel, this passage stands out as also being exceptionally well-written and lyrical: It is at moments such as this that Sartre proves his own point about fiction. To simply use this excerpt as a thesis statement in an essay might convey the same message, but instead Sartre shows us someone realize it organically. In so doing, he is staying true to existentialism's promise of being a livable philosophy, one applicable to daily life rather than remote from it. Iris Murdoch has remarked that “Roquentin's plight appears to be a philosopher's plight,” and in so saying, she touches on an important point: Sartre is, perhaps above all others, a master at fusing philosophy and fiction. The two are not mutually exclusive; one leads to the other: Roquentin's “discovery of the nature of existence leads him...into the disquieting Existentialist view of things and human life. The best way to understand the full significance of Roquentin's dilemma is by exploring Roquentin's experiences” (Biswas 45). If Roquentin's dilemma is a philosophical one, then it could be said that the best way to understand Sartre's philosophy is by reading his fiction, of which *Nausea* is the best-known and most fully realized example.

Not long afterward, Roquentin tests the longevity of this revelation by trying to conjure an image of de Rollebon once more and finds himself able to “shape his features at will, perhaps with even greater ease than before. Only it was nothing more than an image to me, a fiction. I sighed, let myself lean back against the chair, with an intolerable sense of loss” (97). Now that he has seen him more clearly than ever, he understands that de Rollebon is indeed a fiction of which he, Roquentin, is the author. Or, in his words, “M. de Rollebon was my partner; he needed me in order to exist and I needed him so as not to feel my existence...I no longer existed in myself, but

in him” (98). But now: “Rollebon is dead, Antoine Roquentin is not dead” (102).

Roquentin seems to waffle in this revelation, at least momentarily. He quickly transfers his projections from Rollebon to Anny, saying that “in four days, I shall see Anny again: for the moment, my sole reason for living” (103). At book's end, however, he has made his ultimate revelation: “I have scratched my head over it! I've written about it. Now I know: I exist—the world exists—and I know that the world exists. That's all” (122). Again, the connection between writing and being is at the forefront, as can also be seen when Roquentin says that “I, too, wanted to *be*. That is all I wanted; this is the last word” (175). It is no accident, then, that on the very last page of the book he understands that he still wants to write a book, though not one rooted in history:

History talks about what has existed—an existant can never justify the existence of another existant. My error, I wanted to resuscitate the Marquis de Rollebon. Another type of book. I don't know quite which kind—but you would have to guess, behind the printed words, behind the pages, at something which did not exist, which would be above existence. A story, for example, something that could never happen, an adventure...a book. A novel.

(178)

This is the moment when Roquentin completes his “journey from 'absurdity' towards 'freedom:” the awareness of his condition has led him not to despair, but to an understanding of his true place in the world (Biswas 41). He completed this movement by realizing what he calls the “error” of focusing on history rather than art, on the past instead of the present. In writing a biography, he would merely be adding to a time gone by; to create a novel, however, is to move forward.

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It may be seen as odd, in light of *Nausea's* fixation on fiction, that Roquentin is far from a typical protagonist. His transformation is abrupt rather than gradual and limited to “intellectual changes” (143). Anny, his one love interest, prefaces this statement by telling Roquentin that what she values in him is that he is like the polestar in how firmly rooted in himself he is; if he were to change drastically, she says, “I would have nothing fixed to orient myself. You are indispensable to me: I change, you naturally stay motionless and I measure my changes in relation to you” (143). But the literary existentialists have always created characters whose internal transformations are the basis for their actions; Gregor Samsa would never have turned into a vermin if it weren't for his mindset. Perhaps the better way to look at the novel, then, is as a story that is essentially complete once its protagonist has understood what he must do in order to affect an external change in his life.

Conclusion

It is indeed apropos of Nothing that this paper has been written. Though many have been quick to see nothingness as existentialism's bottom line, it is in fact the opposite: a starting point. To say that life is inherently meaningless is to picture it as a blank canvas onto which the individual is entirely free to create his or her own meaning. In that sense, the act of artistic creation—literary, in this case—may be seen as the ultimate means of self-assertion. And that is exactly why the literary component of existentialism has proven so vital: such works as *Notes from Underground* and *The Stranger* breathe life into a movement fixated on transcending the traditional limitations of philosophy. It is one thing to explicate an abstract concept by way of a logical series of premises, each one leading to the next; but to create a world consistent with the logic of these concepts, and of which a reader can imagine his- or herself a part, is a realm over which the literary existentialists have proven singularly successful.

There is a symbiotic relationship between existentialism's philosophical and literary components, and my aim has never been to undermine the former in favor of the latter. The content of existentialism remains the same whether it is viewed through the lens of Kierkegaard's knight of infinite resignation or Kafka's cockroach, and the preceding has simply been in attempt to show the ways in which the two facets add up to a whole that is more than the sum of its parts.

To say that there are similarities between the three works of fiction on which I have focused is an understatement. My main focus has been on the central character of each, and with good reason: existentialism starts with the individual and expands outward from there. To see the world through the eyes of Meursault or Roquentin is akin to understanding the importance of subjectivity within existentialism, and understanding why Gregor Samsa's metamorphosis takes place is to grasp, for a moment, such a nebulous idea as the Absurd: all this to say that existentialism cannot be properly understood from the outside in. It is above all a subjective

experience, and gaining a full understanding of its central—albeit fictional—characters, is an important first step toward entering that mindset. That step should not be taken lightly, however, as understanding these characters should not be confused with emulating them. Were Roquentin simply the encapsulation of all of existentialism's ideals—a roadmap to living as Sartre believes we should—we, too, would be in bad faith. No, one should not shoot a man on the beach, but rather acknowledge one's freedom and responsibility at all times.

To attach undue significance to the links between these works is a bit misleading in and of itself. Existentialism's unique status is not owed to the similarities of its contributing parts so much as its differences. For a school of thought centered around the rejection of all absolutes to be uniform in its composition is definitionally impossible, not to mention undesirable. It thus takes make perfect sense that it took so long for existentialism to even be regarded as a movement: for it to have come about in a more intentional, streamlined way would have been a contradiction of its core principles.

It is unsurprising that what sets existentialism apart from other areas of philosophy is exactly what has drawn it the most scorn. Because it exists beyond the textbook and seeks knowledge not for its own sake, but so that one might more fully live one's life, it has often been regarded as somehow inferior to more purely academic philosophies. But to judge existentialism by the same metric as other philosophies is a mistake, as Sartre and company simply weren't attempting to do the same thing as someone like Kant. Its success should instead be measured by the extent to which it follows its own rules

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And what place does existentialism have today? Rather little, it appears at first glance. But, again, existentialism always requires a second look. For context, I turn to Dostoevsky one

last time:

Both the author of the note and the *Notes* themselves are, of course, fictional. Nevertheless, such persons as the writer of such notes not only may but must exist in our society, taking into consideration the circumstances under which our society has generally been formed. (Dostoevsky, 3)

Both the *Notes* and the larger movement of existentialism as a whole were products of—and reactions to—the time and place out of which they arose, and perhaps could not have come out of any other. But both are still with us today, functioning not as mere time capsules, but rather as the starting point for ideas that are as relevant today as when they were first put down.

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