"La Nausée": A Lover's Quarrel with Husserl

THOMAS W. BUSCH
Villanova University

"At the age of thirty, I executed the masterstroke of writing in *Nausea*—quite sincerely, believe me—about the bitter unjustified existence of my fellowman and of exonerating my own." Thus Sartre wrote, in his slim volume of autobiography, *The Words*¹ about what one commentator has called "the novel which first brought Sartre the promise of fame and lasting misunderstanding of his purposes."² Without doubt the autobiography illuminates for us certain aspects of *Nausea*, but we must be cautious. Sartre wrote his autobiography "disillusioned." His purpose was a purifying one, consisting of a self-application of his existential psychoanalysis. *The Words* actually treats of his life up to the age of ten or eleven. That was sufficient for this purposes, for he had discovered, as he tells us in *Search for a Method*,³ the weight of childhood which "we never wholly surpass." So repulsed is he by his childhood, so charmed at being hoodwinked by his environment, that he tends to be overly cynical about his first novel. As a consequence he himself can be a new source of misunderstanding of that work. For instance, the novel concerns itself with *unjustified* existence and with *exonerating* existence, two distinct questions, one bearing on contingency or absurdity, the other on salvation. The cynicism of the autobiography is directed toward the position he took on the latter question, with reference to which we must understand his terse statement, "I have changed." Existence remains as unjustified and bitter as ever. By no means has Sartre changed his mind about much of what he said, so well, in *Nausea*. It is noteworthy that, from a later perspective, in a recent interview, Sartre has counterbalanced his earlier negativism
about *Nausea* by telling us that “from a literary point of view, I think it’s the best thing I have done.”

Because *Nausea* was the focal point for so many of the ideas that were emerging from this brilliant young man, it is important to find the key that will put the novel in proper perspective. Contat and Rybalka offer as the novel’s major ingredients Sartre’s years of teaching at Le Havre, his intellectual encounter with phenomenology and Kafka, and his experiences with mescaline. The thesis proposed here is that it was above all Sartre’s encounter with and his appropriation of phenomenology that shaped “Sartrean” thought and enables us to make sense of *Nausea*. This is not to propose that Sartre’s genius derived from phenomenology. Rather, it is to point out that Sartre was unable to say anything in an interesting and developed way until his encounter with phenomenology. Simone de Beauvoir has mentioned in her autobiography that, prior to his encounter with phenomenology, Sartre’s thought lacked “a coherent organization.” Sartre himself, in a recent discussion of the important influences on his work, answered the question “Was the real discovery, in terms of importance to you, Husserl?,” with “Yes... you’re quite right; it was Husserl.” Of course Sartre did not simply translate ready-made ideas into phenomenological language. The very development of his thought became bound to, or came to fulfillment in, its mode of expression. In the interchange, phenomenology shaped Sartre and he shaped phenomenology. Sartre, of course, did not study under Husserl. He read on his own, while on a year’s grant in Berlin. His reading of Husserl was quite limited, as he admitted in a recent interview. In answer to the question, “And, in what order did you read Husserl, first the *Ideen*, or did you start with *Logische Untersuchungen*,?” he replied: “*Ideen*, and nothing but *Ideen*. For me, you know, who doesn’t read very fast, a year was just about right for reading his *Ideen*.?” He went on to say that he was in those days also writing *Nausea*. He would read *Ideen* in the morning and write in the evening. I think that it is possible to show that Sartre’s reading of *Ideen* was a decisive influence on the writing of *Nausea*—to the extent even that one can call *Nausea* a phenomenological novel. I will try to show this by examining the novel’s two major themes, contingency and salvation, within a phenomenological perspective.

**CONTINGENCY**

Husserl always insisted that the phenomenological reduction was the