

Word Vomit:
A Heideggerian Analysis of Semiotic in Sartre's *Nausea*

"Tuesday:
Nothing. Existed."
- *Nausea*, Jean-Paul Sartre¹

"But poetry that thinks is in truth
the topology of Being.

This topology tells Being the
whereabouts of its actual
presence."
- *The Thinker as Poet*, Martin Heidegger²

1. Introduction

A professor of mine once said, "Sartre believed that 'being' and 'nothingness' are the same. How can we trust someone like that?" Certainly, the epigraph seems to bear the possibility of being interpreted in support of such an equivocation, but it seems hasty to make this judgment, as my professor did, on the basis of a book title.³ Such is the paranoia that Sartre and his existentialism produce in certain readers. It seems that, for the sake of intellectual integrity, a more penetrating and, indeed, violent look must be taken to get to the truth of the matter.

This prejudging fear is not limited to Sartre alone, however. Martin Heidegger is another of the many continental philosophers who often find themselves in the predicament of being prejudged. In Heidegger's case, his association with the Nazis is the subject of critique.⁴ This looks bad on its face. And yet, the story is not so simple—nor damning—as his critics would like for us to believe.

¹ Sartre, Jean-Paul, *Nausea*, trans. Alexander, (New York: New Directions, 2007), pg. 103.

² Heidegger, Martin, *The Thinker as Poet*, in *Poetry, Language, Thought*, trans. Hofstadter, (New York: Perennial Classics, 2001), pg. 12.

³ That is, Sartre's *Being and Nothingness*, which I will not be discussing in this paper.

⁴ See, for instance, the controversial *Heidegger and Nazism* by Victor Farías.

Saying, however, that we cannot hold prejudices as reasonable facts does not necessarily make them untrue. As I said above, we must inspect every case before casting judgment. Thus, we must ask of Sartre, “What have you said about ‘being’?” Here I will deal only with the question of Sartre’s thought to a small extent by examining one of the many fronts on which he is attacked—that is, by examining his views on language and signs. My project, therefore, will be to journey through certain key passages of *Nausea* using the analytic tools provided by Martin Heidegger. This paper will thereby show that words and other signs, for Sartre, are representations that create disclosable realities—without them, being is concealed in its unconcealment.

2. The Tools of the Trade: An Apprenticeship

It seems acceptable to say that all theorizing must start in some place, at some time, with some matter, and with some tools. My place and time as a writer are simple enough to deduce from biographical information, and the matter with which I am working is Sartre’s *Nausea*. But what of the tools? You might ask, quite fairly, why I should be at all preoccupied with Heidegger’s concepts when seeking to discuss Sartre’s views. Why *Heidegger’s* hammer? Why not utilize one of Sartre’s own screwdrivers or saws? To answer, I must address, however briefly, why we should prefer an interpreter distinct from the text in general, and why we should give Heidegger this preference in our particular case.

From my place and time as a writer I take the following principle: the text is not closed, but requires a reader in order to become meaning-laden. This has a wide array of implications. Firstly, the author is only one among a number of possible interpreters, and, therefore, cannot necessarily be said to provide any more normative of an interpretation than other readers. To put it another way, the author is not privileged as an interpreter. She is only one among many, and

she is most likely to vainly impute to her work a meaning that is not really there. Secondly—and of greatest importance to my point—we cannot expect the text to somehow interpret itself. No text is a conscious, living subject with the capacity to do any interpretation. Even if it were, the self is often blindest to itself due to a kind of self-loving dishonesty. The so-called “voice of the text”, if it were even possible for such a thing to exist, would be a deceiver, both to itself and to readers who would ask it about itself.

What is there to do in this case? The same thing that is always done—ask some other to look and see what the self cannot. This move should be intuitive to most people. For instance, I often have difficulty recognizing my character flaws, so I ask a mentor to scrutinize them. If I cannot see my back, I ask my wife to look at it for me. Even if I should find myself alone and desiring to see my back, I am not at a loss. I can use a tool, such as a mirror, to aid my sight. (Of course, the quality of the mirror—whether it is cracked, dirty, etc.—will affect the interpretation of my back with which I am presented.) This is no longer an asking, but a using of something ready-to-hand. Concepts are such ready-to-hand objects, and they are the tools with which we must work when interpreting a text.

2.1. Doing Philosophy with Heidegger’s Hammer

For the purpose of this paper, I have chosen to use Heidegger’s hammer—not Heidegger himself, of course—in order to disassemble Sartre’s *Nausea*. Why this specific tool in this specific case? My choice is motivated, primarily, by that place and time in which Sartre wrote. Heidegger’s *Being and Time* was published eleven years prior to *Nausea*, and in that span of time it had already gained a great deal of influence upon the philosophical climate of Europe. This made it part of the practico-inert—that is, “everything we encounter as ready-to-hand, as *there* waiting for us, at our disposal, that has been devised and put in place by the praxis of our

fellows and predecessors”⁵—in terms of which Sartre operated. It is known, also, that Sartre was formally exposed to Heidegger’s thought while studying at the French Institute in Berlin, after which he grapples with Heidegger quite directly.⁶ *Nausea* was written and published during this latter period. All of this gives us some reason to regard Heidegger’s hammer as one of the tools used in constructing *Nausea*, thus suiting it to the novel’s dismantling.

Let me now take up the hammer, name it, and describe its use. Heidegger called this hammer *aletheia*, and we know it as truth. He does not describe the phenomenon of truth as correspondence, like we might expect, but as uncoveredness (from *a-* “not” + *lethe* “concealment”) or disclosedness of a thing in its being:

To say that a statement is *true* means that it discovers the beings in themselves. It asserts, it shows, it lets beings “be seen” (*apophansis*) in their discoveredness. The *being true* (*truth*) of the statement must be understood as *discovering*. Thus, truth by no means has the structure of an agreement between knowing and the object in the sense of a correspondence of one being (subject) to another (object).⁷

Further, Heidegger says, “Truth (discoveredness) must always first be wrested from beings. Beings are torn from concealment.”⁸ We must ask, of course—how is this wresting accomplished? It is probably more gentle than these passages in *Being and Time* suggest. Elsewhere, Heidegger describes true language as “calling forth” its subject matter, thus

⁵ Caws, Peter, *Sartrean Structuralism*, in *The Cambridge Companion to Sartre*, ed. Howells, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), pgs. 309-10.

⁶ Flynn, Thomas, *Jean-Paul Sartre*, in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (Fall 2008 Edition)*, ed. Zalta, URL = < <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2008/entries/sartre/>>, accessed October 11, 2008.

⁷ Heidegger, Martin, *Being and Time*, trans. Stambaugh, (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1999), Pt. 1, Div. 1, Ch. 6, 44, pg. 201.

⁸ *Ibid.*, pg. 204.

disclosing it in its presence.⁹ Language brings things near, but it also “tells Being the / whereabouts of its actual / presence.”¹⁰ As far as I can tell, Heidegger means to say that words give being a topology—that is, a shape. This is Heidegger’s hammer. Now, we have only to start swinging.

3. The Visible and the Invisible, or Swinging Blindly

Sartre’s hero, Roquentin, has been avoiding the being of the world, as well as his own being-in-the-world, quite earnestly for more than half of the book when, finally, it robs him of concealment and exposes itself to him. He writes:

And then all of a sudden, there it was, clear as day: existence had suddenly unveiled itself. It had lost the harmless look of an abstract category: it was the very paste of things, this root was kneaded into existence. Or rather the root, the park gates, the bench, the sparse grass, all that had vanished: the diversity of things, their individuality, were only an appearance, a veneer. This veneer had melted, leaving soft, monstrous masses, all in disorder—naked, in a frightful, obscene nakedness.¹¹

If we apply Heidegger’s hammer to this passage, being’s sickening indecency—its unveiling—reveals nothing. That is, nothing is revealed insofar as all being is indistinct. Roquentin no longer recognizes the distinctions between things as actual, but rather as a “veneer” that can be tossed aside like a garment. Under this garment, beneath the assumed appearance of distinctions, being is homogenous.

Of course, this homogenous and indistinct character renders being confusing, ambiguous, and, frankly, incomprehensible. It is, as he says while relating the episode quoted above,

⁹ Heidegger, Martin, *Language*, in *Language, Poetry, Language, Thought*, trans. Hofstadter, (New York: Perennial Classics, 2001), pgs. 196-200.

¹⁰ Heidegger, Martin, *The Thinker as Poet*, in *Poetry, Language, Thought*, trans. Hofstadter, (New York: Perennial Classics, 2001), pg. 12.

¹¹ Sartre, Jean-Paul, *Nausea*, trans. Alexander, (New York: New Directions, 2007), pg. 127.

“absurd”.¹² Roquentin tries to name things, but reports that he “felt the word deflating, emptied of meaning with extraordinary rapidity.”¹³ He is “in the midst of things, nameless things.”¹⁴ Names do not name things, but neither do things allow themselves to be definite. They resist the mind’s determinations. Roquentin simply “thought without words, *on* things, *with* things.”¹⁵ And yet this was of no avail—all he learns is, as he says, “I exist—the world exists—and I know that the world exists. That is all.”¹⁶ It becomes clear from this whole episode that existence is not meaning-laden in *Nausea*. It only *is*. There is no natural foothold for the mind, and so everything collapses into disorder. The very unconcealment of being, its naked visibility, renders it far more invisible than its original concealment ever could have.

In *Nausea*, the disclosing action of Heidegger’s hammer simply destroys the structures of being, rather than working being into shape. This is no failing of Heidegger’s hammer, of course, since Sartre has borrowed it for his own purposes. Thus, employment of the hammer in this case only tells us that, for Sartre, there is nothing to reveal—at least, there is nothing intelligible—beneath appearing beings. Should we rob being of its façades, it will rob us of our orientations. It is advisable, therefore, to address ourselves only to the masquerade.

¹² Ibid., pg. 129.

¹³ Ibid., pg. 130.

¹⁴ Ibid., pg. 125.

¹⁵ Ibid., pg. 129.

¹⁶ Ibid., pg. 122.

4. “. . . *sound and fury, / Signifying nothing.*”¹⁷

If there is nothing beneath the appearances of things, what good is semiosis? Signs, it seems, can't do anything—at least, they can do nothing worthwhile. However, this is only true of Sartre's view if semiosis is the sign's action of referring to or bringing out the being of a thing. Rather than signifying something, signs would then only bring their viewers to the same confused homogeneity that Roquentin experiences in the passages cited above. All would be empty. All would be meaningless.

Yet, if this were the case, we would expect a self-destructive nihilism to prevail at the end of *Nausea*. The primary question would be that posed by Camus—why live?¹⁸ This question, however, does not seem to occur to Roquentin. Although he does seem to carry a certain melancholy about him, his goal is still to live. He even plans to be productive—to write a novel.¹⁹ But a novel is made up of language, something that—if we still assume the view of semiosis mentioned in the last paragraph—could only remind people of “the sin of existing.”²⁰ However, Roquentin says that “the heroes of a novel . . . have washed themselves of the sin of existing.”²¹ This is highly significant as *Nausea*'s conclusion. If this is true—if the contents of a

¹⁷ Shakespeare, *Macbeth*, in *Four Tragedies*, (New York: Penguin Books, 1994), 5.5.27-8.

¹⁸ Camus, Albert, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, in *The Myth of Sisyphus and Other Essays*, trans. O'Brien, (New York: Vintage Books, 1991), pg. 3.

¹⁹ Sartre, Jean-Paul, *Nausea*, trans. Alexander, (New York: New Directions, 2007), pg. 178.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, pg. 177.

²¹ *Ibid.*

complex, significant work²² are freed from the ugly nothingness of existence—then signs must be of a nature that they are possessed of or produce some meaningful content.

4.1. *A Call to Nothing—Answered*

We are at an impasse. The disclosing-of-being work of Heidegger's hammer does not seem to produce that which Sartre had in mind when relating language to being in *Nausea*. But doesn't every hammer have two sides—one for prying and the other for striking? Is it possible that, all of this time, we have been relying only on the prying side? It would seem so, since we have been determined, all of this time, to pull being from its hiding places.

As we adjust the hammer in our hands so that we might begin to strike, let us keep in mind the use of this side of the hammer. Heidegger tells us that it provides a “topology” for being, telling “Being the / whereabouts of its actual / presence.”²³ In this capacity, then, the word provides a shape and definition, calling being into itself like a garment. Being can then be present in its nearness while maintaining the distance of concealment.

The use Sartre makes of this side of Heidegger's hammer in *Nausea* is clear, and, to understand that use, we need only reinterpret the passages cited above in its light. Since this side of the hammer is the opposite of the first, our interpretation must move in a direction opposite to that of the first. Rather than destroying, we must create. One particular instance should suffice to demonstrate the direction of this reinterpretation.

We recall, therefore, the indecency of exposed being that Roquentin relates as he sits on the park bench. Relating that episode, he says:

²² I say that a novel is a “complex, significant work”, meaning to denote the easily recognizable fact that a novel is essentially a collection of words set in meaningful relation to each other. It is, in other words, a complex of signs.

²³ Heidegger, Martin, *The Thinker as Poet*, in *Poetry, Language, Thought*, trans. Hofstadter, (New York: Perennial Classics, 2001), pg. 12.

And then all of a sudden, there it was, clear as day: existence had suddenly unveiled itself. It had lost the harmless look of an abstract category: it was the very paste of things, this root was kneaded into existence. Or rather the root, the park gates, the bench, the sparse grass, all that had vanished: the diversity of things, their individuality, were only an appearance, a veneer. This veneer had melted, leaving soft, monstrous masses, all in disorder—naked, in a frightful, obscene nakedness.²⁴

This is the prying work of Heidegger's hammer—the retreat of words, of signs. Roquentin says as much: “I thought without words, *on* things, *with* things.”²⁵ If the prying work is to remove words and signs from things—thereby rendering things homogenous, absurd, indistinct, and, most of all, un-think-able—then we must conclude that the opposite action is to strike being into the shapes of words and signs. This “veneer” of words and signs renders being as distinct, meaningful, and think-able things. Being flows freely beneath this veneer, filling it and giving it subsistence much as air fills a balloon. Without the balloon, the air disperses and is formless. Language and signs, thus, are structures into which being is called.

5. Conclusion

This is probably only one interpretation of many available interpretations, not only of Sartre's *Nausea* but also of Heidegger's hammer. I say that it is only one interpretation, despite talk of reinterpretation in the section just prior to this, because those views appearing here are integral to each other. They are two sides of the same coin, as it were. The reinterpretation presented is a definite negation of that said explicitly in the text, yet it is simply the other side of the first interpretation. It is the rebuilding of that which was at first destroyed.

By traversing and re-traversing the landscape of *Nausea*, I have sought to bring into view the unique topological features of Sartre's view of being. This tour has shown that, without

²⁴ Sartre, Jean-Paul, *Nausea*, trans. Alexander, (New York: New Directions, 2007), pg. 127.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, pg. 129.

language and signs, this topology disappears beyond its unconcealment, but being is made disclosable by the representations of words and signs. As is true of all journeys, proper equipment was indispensable to successful navigation of the landscape. The choice of Heidegger's hammer proved itself to be an apt one, therefore, because it got us where we were going despite, at the outset, a certain ignorance of the nature of the destination.

Has this ignorance been quelled? What have we learned? Knowledge of Sartre's view of language and signs gives us access to a number of correlates in Sartre's thought, among which are free will and self-determination, literary theory, etc. We have also learned that, in Sartre's hands, being is a kind of empty and contentless nothingness without being nonexistent *per se*. This journey has also added an interesting species of structuralism to our awareness, one that might be named by the modifiers "creative anti-realist". Despite the negative connotations of the term "creative anti-realist structuralism", Sartre's semiotic has shown us how so-called surface appearances can be valuable and meaning-laden, even if what lies beneath them is not worthwhile. Put another way, he has shown us how the journey of interpretation can teach us more about the destination than the disclosure of the destination in itself.