Depression and Expression: Life Begins on the Other Side of Despair

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This paper has two parts. In Part I, it consists of a letter written by the subject of the ‘case study’ that forms the basis of Part II. Part I demonstrates how the writer Aliki Pavlou discovered that, in attempting to help a friend face uncomfortable truths in relation to his perception of his mother, she inadvertently was able to voice her own dilemma in relation to her mother that hitherto had been elusive.

This paper forms a part of a larger project being researched by Aliki Pavlou, Justin Clemens and me. The study, to be entitled, “In the Heart of Hell: Depression and its Expression,” is one that contends that Literature expresses the ineffable nature of depression in its symbolic mode; that, indeed, literary texts reveal in their concealment. The work therefore argues that ‘depression’ is expressible.

Part II of this paper analyses the response of a depressive to Jean-Paul Sartre’s novel *Nausea* (1964). Beginning with a brief discussion of the role of the ‘mother’ as psychologically pivotal in some depressives’ struggle towards well-being, this section analyses a reading of *Nausea* by a depressive. The objective of this study was to ascertain the extent to which the condition of nausea, as represented in Sartre’s novel, expresses the experience of depression.

I. Letter: Mother as Other

Context

The following letter was written by K to a fellow depressive. When she discovered that F had spoken what is usually seen as the unsayable, "My mother purports to love me but in fact all her behaviour towards me is destructive," she decided to argue a case that had come from her own experience and suffering. The person she has written this letter to had fled the country rather than attempt to be adult when all former attempts had led to failure, illness and self-destruction. She responds here to his letter in which he, for the first time in his life, had given voice to what before had been too painful to entertain as a truth.

The Letter

Dear F,

For weeks now I have needed to cry. My emotional state has been ambiguously tortured, contained only by my bloody-mindedness not to "fall apart" again. You gave me my tears. I cried when I read your letter because I was reading "myself." Every single word. Without exception.

Your pain is insufferable. I know it and feel it daily—even when I am having a "good day." The realisation you have come to about your mother is nothing short of grievous. I was brought up by the same woman. She never allowed me my own persona, drew me so close to her under the guise of love and made me a pure extension of herself. For so many years I grappled with my overwhelming feelings of love for her and my total inability to feel free within our bond.

I have no doubt that your letter is no revelation to you. One part of your being has always been aware of her destructiveness. And you, you finally allowed that part of you to have a voice. The power that these women have over us is entirely alien to anyone who have never endured it. Please remember this—in any and all exchanges you have with the "fortunate ones" who weren't brought up by our mothers. They cannot understand our evidence of their cruelty, our connections with these women. Be glad they don't understand. It only means they never experienced what we did. And that can only be a good thing. One glance, a handful of chosen words by these women are enough to bring us to our knees. My mother has taken me from "stable" to migraine in the space of a five-minute phone call. She has splintered me in ways I still cannot fathom. Only she, and no-one else, can find me whole and deliver me into fragments.

I want to cut your journey short. I want to pick you up and take you from where you are now to my current...
The first time was after my admission as a "suicide watch" to a psychiatric ward. Like you, I had given the truth a voice. I engaged in a series of exchanges with my mother to make her understand her role in my pain. I was so consumed with this pain, it had become truly malignant. When the voice finally rose up, I took the natural path in such a dysfunctional relationship. I engaged her in what I thought would be the road to my healing. Why wouldn't I? I was incomplete without her. I had to include her, so I thought, in my journey towards myself—because I was little more than her appendage. How could the plot change without its author? So there were phone calls, gentle at first, where I tried to make her see that she had contributed to my diagnosed depression. Back then, these "gentle allegations" were surprisingly not received with fury or retaliation. I simply was not being received at all. But in being "gentle," I had designed a way to suggest her role in my pain—to soften the blow, as it were—("you weren't to know, I was a hypersensitive child"). I didn't have any other language then. I could only use the words she had given me as I grew up beneath her. As time went by, Mum happily continued in her controlling role and I continued to feel unadulterated pain. And that pain grew like a tumour. However, I still wanted her to know the pain she had caused me without her having to feel any pain HERSELF. I couldn't bear the guilt of making her feel responsible for something so terrible. And so responsible was I for her happiness, that the idea that I could bestow guilt on her was unthinkable.

So a pretence emerged that I was "inexplicably sick" and mum was "helping me through it"!!

But the demon grew. I became increasingly desperate for her to pen freedom and healing into the story she wrote for me. It didn't take long for my expression to change. I so longed to die. I spent entire days on the internet researching the best, most fail-proof methods of suicide. It seemed death would be my deliverance. Eventually I summoned the courage to send her an email pointing out in the clearest of ways, her contribution to my agony. The day I entered the Clinic was the day I received her response. She took each point I made and crushed them with feeble anecdotes of my childhood which portrayed me as happy, loved, and most of all "unoppressed." Her concluding words in that email were: "If anyone had told me you would DO THIS TO ME I would never have believed it." I remember standing in my study, having read those words, still up on the screen and I just screamed from my gut. Until then I thought I'd felt pain at its worst. But I hadn't. I ran out into the garden and tried to hang myself. There was no more life when she accused me of hurting her. In my frantic state, my attempted suicide was poorly executed. M (my partner) arrived a short time later and got me to hospital.

Whilst in the psyche ward I asked M to ensure Mum did not call me. Whilst in hospital I was displaced and grieving something—probably Mum. My mind state is impossible to describe. Needless to say, some days into my stay, Mum called. Why? To tell me she knew of the ban on phone calls? To tell me she couldn't bear my suffering? Or that she loved me? No. To ask me if she should iron the sheets! The effect on me of this phone call to the "layman" would seem extreme and disproportionate. But I suspect you understand.

By the time of my discharge Mum and M had had a terrible and he walked me back into my house, broken and aching, where my two children were sitting wide-eyed, wondering what kind of Mummy was returning to them. Mum left immediately. I followed her to the front door and saw it slam shut before me. No words of love or consolation or caring. Just the usual self-obsession at being "insulted" by M in their argument. Where was I in this picture? Nowhere. She can't see beyond herself. And her leaving me with a door slam represented my whole life with her. Mum was displeased. And I had to pay.

Our mothers are incapable of loving. Yes. Even us. Their children. We, on the other hand, must love THEM until we are turned inside out. It must be displayed in all manner of ways. We must forsake our friends, be attentive to their needs from a young age, don't "go out" and engage in the world, disclose everything that happens in our presence to them, privately, we help them from the dishes to their most intimate problems. The itinerary is much too subtle to really list. What I do know is that we are receptacles for their needs, the corollary being that we are denied an essence. Denied a truth. I find that I cannot access true anger towards her from the time I was little. Does that sound familiar?

So F, all this led to my choice to disconnect myself from her. Knowing that she would never understand why. For five months I refused to answer her calls, emails and letters. I had to survive—for my boys. But the guilt was overwhelming. What kind of a daughter did this to her own mother? I thought of her EVERY DAY. Didn't miss her at all, but the hole left behind by my refusal to do my duty: to belong to her and take my place in her centre was torture.

After some four months leave without pay from work, I staggered back into the world. Those four months of the breakdown were oriented by the degree of guilt I was feeling for ousting her from my world. They were spent mostly silent and still. I couldn't shower, eat, leave my home. I couldn't look at my children. I couldn't answer the phone and at one stage I discovered I couldn't read. I was terrified. I was guilty.

In my desperation during those four months I finally found a fantastic psychologist to help me. Most of our sessions were about Mum. He seemed to come to know her from the inside. He also understood what had happened to me at her hands. I always grappled with her defence—"I do not KNOWINGLY do anything to harm you"... (therefore continue loving me on my terms. I am not to blame, I am the VICTIM here because you have wrongfully rejected me). My psyche's answer to this was that "no mother is permitted such gross ignorance." The penny dropped for me at that moment. If her so called "defence" were true, it was still no defence at all. And in her obsession with pleasing her defence she was electing NOT to do something else.
Speak my pain with me.

My psyche then in a later session put an end to my obsession with trying to make her understand and hopefully care about the suffering I was enduring. One day, silent for as long as he needed to be, he said to me, "But K love. She DARE NOT... she DARE NOT EVER admit to herself or anyone else that she caused you harm. Her life depends on NEVER making that concession." It was then that I understood. Her whole life had been about my loving her, sustaining her image of herself through me—controlling me so I would never stray from my duty. I was hand-made for the unknowing man I ultimately married. I was a shell with no essence, kept alive only to supply her with her own. To make her as full as possible. Like yours, she was never wrong. Never made a concession. She could tell me she loved me easily enough, but she could never say "I'm sorry." She "forgave" me my adolescent and early adult attempts to "fight" her. And again, I was duly contained. In her "forgiveness," I was again, guilty.

About four months later, I received a letter from my mother saying that she had arranged for her, my sister (who had also rejected her) and myself to attend counselling to get ourselves back on track. We were told who to call, where to go. Also enclosed with the letter was a copy of my mother's new Will and Testament. She had written sister) and me out. It was a threat if we didn't do as we were told. The threat only made me angry. After much to-ing and fro-ing, we decided to meet at my home and try again to re-establish our relationship.

But around October, I began to have regressions. First in my sleep and then from consciousness. I would become a six-year-old child and speak UNSPEAKABLE scenarios about my father and his "treatment" of me. Some were graphic, I'm told. One regression was even caught on tape. It involved sexual abuse in all kinds of forms from him. I need say no more about the details. It's bad enough that the people who bore witness to this, have this in their heads at all. I never remember the regressions, and I certainly have no conscious memory of anything like that happening between my father and myself. To this day I still loathe even hinting at the allegation, because my memory won't corroborate it.

In any event, I recall that one "meeting" opened with Mum saying, "you were NEVER abused by your father." I don't think it was long after that that I fell into another regression. When I emerged from it, Mum took to being the mother I remembered so well from my childhood, cradling me, soothing me. It was THAT part of the mother that so confused me with the "other" mother that she was. The evening ended, I thought, with Mum having some insight into where I was at. However, I soon learned that her only real response to this new insight was that it totally absoved her of any "responsibility" for my depression and suffering. It was all Dad. I told her never to confront Dad with it. That was a matter for me and I had long ago elected never to do that. At the time he was in an elderly care unit, with Alzheimer's. No clear response was really obtained from Dad, and I didn't want it anyway. She visited me again shortly after the regression, this time alone, and in the course of our visit, pulled me onto her knee (like a child) and began rocking me and singing a lullaby that she sang to me as a small child. I knew then that she was trying to trigger another regression. I knew then that she loved the SICK child. The broken child that needed help and her soothing because it created her. She was trying to re-start a regression for HERSELF.

How it ultimately ended, doesn't really matter. We fought and I knew on that day that she was to be purged from me forever. And so it ended. And since that time, the decision has held.

Perhaps, though, I am wrong in something that I have said. But what I will say is that if you ARE to be the author of your own life and take that power back that she so fears you will retrieve, this world is yours, and the path must be determined by you (and me), not the geography of our mothers' whereabouts. Your realisation and insight into your relationship with her tells you this is YOUR universe, YOUR planet, YOUR life and you will DESIGN it by LIVING and LOVING and DOING ANYTHING YOU FUCKING WELL CHOOSE. Look at all those qualities that have survived in you and me despite our pain? They are telling. We are lovable. And God knows we can love. I simply refuse to call what exists between her and me, love. I refuse to give her the lion's share of me and the pittance that remains to the ones I truly love.

My mother will die some day? Can I live with my decision? Yes. I have grieved her already. And I will probably always grieve her. Losing her now, and never having her when I was little. But I have said my good-byes.

The ousting is not a cure-all by ANY stretch. Some days still almost hurt. But not quite. I know that what I am doing is right for me. I am choosing life. She can't hurt me now. That's all the disconnection is about. My guess is you will find that, un- fettered, your being is one to be reckoned with. And slowly we begin to feel. Other things. New things. Not horror/guilt/responsibility, but moments of happiness, hideous pain but a kind of pain that lets you know you are alive and kicking-arse. We get one miserable go at it, my friend. I don't know about you, but I'm going MY OWN WAY. And I'll continue to love my mother from a distance. And start loving others close.

I am so thinking of you and your path. You CAN heal. I PROMISE you that.

K

II.

Roland Barthes writes in his treatise on photography of the place of the mother. The ‘mother’ he notes is the known site, it is “somewhere where we all know is a place we have been” (Barthes, 1980: 40) He, though, speaks of ‘the mother’ in the spirit of celebration, as a source of well-being, as evidence of being in the world. The letter that you have just heard relates to the archetypal disturbing mother, the unimaginable source for many people and yet one that assumes a ‘sacredness,’ a space in which iconoclasts fear to tread. The system of the disturbing mother is not inclined to reflecting her or her deep pain. He or she though
Consequently, the analysis of depression involves bringing to the fore "the realisation that the complaint against oneself is a hatred for the other" (Kristeva, 1989: 11). The identification with the loved-hated other, "through the incorporation, the introduction and the projection, leads the victim to imbue in herself its sublime component, which becomes her necessary, tyrannical judge, as well as its subject component, which demeans her and of which she desires to rid herself" (1989: 11). The love/hate of other and self co-join, and is expressed in a terrible depression 'a noncommunicable grief', a disinterest in words, actions and life itself. Kristeva's questions have a universal impact on those that have known this condition. She asks, "Where does this black sun come from? Out of what eerie galaxy do its invisible, lethargic rays reach me, pinning me down to the ground, to my bed, compelling me to silence, to renunciation?" (1989: 3).

Karina, the 'case-study', speaks of it as 'the one aspect' - one's own interior within the world.

She speaks:

In a depressive episode your interior becomes your exterior. You therefore take a position in the world that is different from before. There is no mind/body any more. You become an entirely different species; from Homo sapien to a psychological invertebrate. Perhaps that is why pleasures of the flesh are almost instantaneously ruled out - sex, eating or, as well meaning friends suggest, a 'nice' massage. You are only your psyche and it needs massaging badly - but it becomes so suspended in the darkness that there is no access to it.

The first question of this research has been: Is it really the case that depression is inexpressible? Is it unable to be uttered? Questions that follow concern the best possible ways of knowing the condition, treating it, learning from it, taking it to its counterpart of affirmation, naming its suffering and seeing value in that pain. Present psychiatric treatment seems to be somewhere suspended between two supposedly oppositional paradigms. On one hand, we have the Freudian/Jungian/Kleinian model which advocates returning to the source of pain in order to live with the present. On the other, we have the cognitive behaviouralist model which seeks to remove the aberrant symptoms, adjust behaviour in order to make living bearable and practical. It is our contention that, as practitioners continually test these hypotheses, they ignore the Kuhnian paradigm shift. Thus what is lost sight of are new possibilities. Is there a third hypothesis—one that accesses the intensity, the passion present in its absence, the creativity of its knowing and experience? Can we, in the sense Félix Guattari expounds, produce a new subjectivity? Guattari rejects the Freudian conscious-unconscious dualism in favour of 'a multiple strata of subjectionation', relating more to the actual practice of being and removed from finding answers only in early family stories. He is comfortable with the idea that his 'schizoanalytic cartographies' are not scientific, preferring, instead, to experiment with new ways of accessing the process of 'subjectionation.' He understands and affirms that his approach partakes in 'existential registers' and that this moves his exploration into an area of aesthetics—that creating new values is an aesthetic process as much as it might be a flight from obsolete moral or scientific ones. He writes: "We are faced with an important ethical choice: either we objectify, reify, "scientise" subjectivity, or, on the contrary, we try to grasp it in the dimension of its processual creativity" (1995: 13).

In a search for a new 'model' one is not condemned to rejecting insights pertaining to the old. There is knowledge we gain about ourselves from prevailing models. Nevertheless, recognising the fabricated nature and the historically bound nature of psychological theories creates a freedom to move towards establishing a new hypothesis. This paper suggests that the depressive experience one can create 'aesthetically' psychological and philosophical states of being and be, in the process, perhaps juxtapose and participant in the production of a subjectivity. I am reminded of Friedrich Nietzsche who, in determining that all the old ideals were fabrications, proclaimed the need to let the old idols learn what it means to have legs of clay" (1992: 4) and to give present reality the possibility of new values, meanings and veracity. Can the depressive escape the shackles of name-calling which has existed since the dark ages of 'malingering,' 'the bad,' 'the lazy,' 'the impossible one' and the 'scorned one'? Can the depressive find in aesthetic creations expression of a knowledge that warrants disclosure to a larger world? Kristeva speaks of how her depression gives her a 'metaphysical lucidity'; she notes: "On the frontiers of life and death, occasionally I have the arrogant feeling of being witness to the meaninglessness of Being, of revealing the absurdity of bonds and beings" (1989: 4).
The question of this paper is whether Sartre, when representing ‘nausea,’ is also in a state of mourning for former meaning and that his expressed states of being are emotional and, in fact, reveal in their concealing ‘abstractions,’ a knowledge known to the depressive.

My experience of knowing or reading the writings of depressed people is that these people know and/or feel something that I do not. Like Nietzsche’s Silenus they might prefer to be the satyr rather than the moralist, and partake in a raw Dionysian insight that it is better “not to have been born, not to be, to be nothing” (1993: 22). However, within the depressives’ trauma and isolation, there is no Nietzschean ‘veil of Maya,’ no Apollonian form to make this insight bearable. Theirs is the experience of the unutterable and yet the intensity of their experience is part of being and the source of a greater realisation of self that the dictates of everyday life encourage one to suppress or deny or otherwise be deemed unacceptable and sick. What, therefore, are we not learning by sideling or rejecting these insights?

Is terrible desolation and woe without expression or is it not the case that literature, art, dance, music and theatre have given us the words and apprehensions of its meaning. It is common knowledge that writers/artists who are depressives speak of how they have been saved by their art. This is not to argue that because they were depressed, and ‘found themselves in the dark wood’ that this then made them great artists. I am not suggesting a cause and effect here. Nevertheless, great artists (to mention but a few) from the lament of Job, the choruses of Sophocles and Aeschylus, verses of Emily Dickinson, and the prose of Dostoyevsky, Edgar Allen Poe, Albert Camus, Virginia Woolf, the engravings of Albrecht Durer and the paintings of Vincent van Gogh, to the extraordinary scenes in Haruki Murakami’s contemporary novels—where his characters sit at the bottoms of darkened wells—have given expression to the condition of Melancholia. Depression, let me insist, is not simply sadness, it is not ‘being a bit down,’ it is being swallowed up by a void and made voiceless. What is this place known to so many? What is its value to our lives?

It was in this state of inquiry that I sat with Katrina and read Jean Paul Sartre’s Nausea (1964). For me, until recently, this was an existential text, the work of a phenomenologist. I had given less attention to Sartre’s ‘subjectivity’ from a psychological perspective. His view on consciousness, or perhaps more significantly, his understanding of self-consciousness when applied to a project and containing an essential freedom, was not apprehended in a full context. Roquentin, the protagonist of Nausea, when he withdraws from researching a biography of Marquis de Rollebon, is represented by Sartre as coming to the end of his subjectivity:

Now when I say “I,” it seems hollow to me. I can’t manage to feel myself very well, I am so forgotten. The only real thing left in me is existence which feels it exists. I yawn, lengthily. No one. Antoine Roquentin exists for no one. That amuses me. And just what is Antoine Roquentin? An abstraction. A pale reflection of myself wavers in my consciousness. Antoine Roquentin . . . and suddenly the “I” pales, pales, and fades out (1964: 170).

Sartre’s phenomenological approach is often contrasted with Camus’ experiential philosophy. Unlike Albert Camus, Sartre is often categorised as following a Cartesian logic. His work is understood to deal with the concept of existence of ‘en-soi’ (in-itself: all physical facts independent of consciousness) and ‘pour-soi’ (for-itself: aspects of human life which involve consciousness); that is, conceptually he looks at the question of ‘being’ as an abstraction. He explores the role of imagination in consciousness and self-consciousness. Camus, alternatively is heralded as having no interest in the phenomenological explication of existence as an abstraction of life or of the consciousness that attempts to take hold of it; he dealt with experiential existence itself. He is interested in the ‘how’ instead of the ‘what’ that explains the ‘how’; his is an existentialism of action and applied choice. Kierkegaard expressed this need for action pre-empting Nietzsche and Camus in his journal:

What I really need is to get clear about what I must do, not what I must know, except in so far as knowledge must precede every act. What matters is to find a purpose..., the crucial thing is to find a truth which is truth for me, to find the idea for which I am willing to live and die (Kierkegaard, quoted in Ava, 2002: 29).

Sartre’s interest in ‘knowing’ should not preclude from our understanding of his work his ability to write and encapsulate, in symbolic form, the experiential moment of knowing. This paper in analysing Nausea attempts to show how Sartre’s representations of experiencing ‘nausea,’ despite all its phenomenological concerns, succeed in rendering ‘anxiety,’ an act of consciousness towards freedom, and that these representations succeed in communicating the experience of being depressed.

Sartre’s Nausea, as a text testifying to an abstraction, is understood to represent the protagonist, preoccupied with the writing of a biography on Rollebon, becoming increasingly overwhelmed with a ‘nausea’ as he begins to strip away at appearance to find...
Sartre’s ‘words’ in Nausea reveal, as they conceal, the experience of the deepest of anguish that is known to the depressive. Sartre in Being and Nothingness distinguishes the experience of ‘anguish’ from other emotions. He sees ‘anguish’ as a reflective emotion: “Anguish is distinguished from fear in that fear is fear of beings in the world whereas anguish is anguish before myself” (Sartre, 1957: 29). Joseph Fell argues that ‘Anguish’ assumes for Sartre “special importance as revelatory of freedom” and follows Heidegger’s view that there are certain moods that “have the function of “disclosing” to man the nature of his “being-in-the-world”” (1963: 60-61). My reading of Sartre’s Nausea tests the extent to which the expression of nausea is in fact an expression of what depressives know when in anguish and that it holds within it the core of our choice to either live or not live in this world. This reading takes account of Nik Fox’s insight that “Sartre’s idea of a contingent, non-essential subject (which he argues for consistently throughout his work) has much in common with, and indeed prefigures the decrented subject theorized by post-structuralists and postmodernists” (2003: 7). Rather than Sartre’s ‘subjectivity’ being seen as working primarily with the Cartesian tradition of modern philosophy, it can be shown that his work as a whole, as Howells argued (1992: 2), pre-empted themes considered the inventions of Lacan, Foucault, Lévi-Strauss and Derrida, in his treatment of

The decencted subject, the rejection of a metaphysics of presence, the critique of bourgeois humanism and individualism, the concept of the reader as producer of the text’s multiple meanings, the recognition of language and thought structures as masters rather than mastered in most acts of discourse and thinking, (and) a materialist philosophy of history as detotalised and fragmented (Howells, 1992: 2).

Despite the importance here of emphasising that Sartre’s work is not obsolete and that his ‘modernist’ views of the world are relevant to the twenty-first century, my focus is on his understanding of ‘anguish’ as a crucial moment that expresses the de-centring of the subject; the “I” is something always in the process of becoming, and ‘exists’ when it is seen by others. If one creates oneself within a context where there is no identifiable or known self, no blue-print of self to deliver any kind of conformity, a choice made towards living and being in the material world is one of huge responsibility which is inevitably accompanied by an anguish. It is an anguish that testifies not only to easy reconciliation in ‘bad faith’ (that is, making the safe choice that will be readily ratified by a conforming society), but also the more difficult experience of living intellectually and materially (mind and body in a co-dependent relation). It is what Kristeva in Black Sun notes about her experience of depression; she felt she was dealing with an integral aspect of being a philosopher She writes: “On the frontiers of life and death, occasionally I have the arrogant feeling of being witness to the meaningless of Being, of revealing the absurdity of bonds and beings” (1989: 4). Roquentin in Nausea in his quest for ‘meaning’ is riddled by anxiety, by the condition that debilitates, that takes a person outside the realm of understanding by others who watch—a condition known intensely, felt in both the body and the mind inter-dependently by the depressive.

My deal with Karina was: ‘As we read, tell me when this is familiar, when the story enacted touches the heart of being depressed.’ This was not to be a matter of my interpretation, my experience, only her’s. I was curious to see whether I could observe this kind of reading in its experiential moment.

As we read the text, Karina pounced on representation of ‘anxiety’; each experience contributed to ever-increasing, mounting descriptions that ended in states of nausea in varying intensities throughout the novel. I watched a face become animated with recognition—almost joyous, as if the fact that her experience was known by another, indeed, given aesthetic form, was some how wondrous. The episode with the hands when Roquentin feels alienated from his own body and the time he looks askance at his own
reflection had particular significance. The depressive—bound emotionally, intellectually and physically by a state in which choices are sought, but strike in the first instance as despair—becomes overwhelmed by a knowledge of ‘nothingness’ and a confusion with the material world that renders up objects, forms, fluidities, and experiences that have no meaning.

Karina speaks

*This state of being depressed strangely (or perhaps not so strangely) brings with it an acute hypersensitivity to your surroundings and the choreography of your own movements. Sartre brings this out immediately when Roquentin is puzzled about his hands. They are new and the hand of another a 'fat white worm' (4)*

She continues

*With your interior so exposed and your form obliterated, things take on a new experience. I recall looking in the mirror for a very long time and my face, once familiar and mine, was strange. A stranger's. My features were all there - but it seemed they were in the wrong order.*

For Roquentin this seems to be the genesis of his suspicion that something is wrong. He is experiencing the world in a new way - a way he can neither fathom nor control. And it tells him that things are askew. This remains the position for the duration of any of my depressive episodes.

The onset of depression is insidious. By the time you have walked the plank marking the journey into the abyss, you are already in the water and drowning before you realize you are in the midst of something ferocious. Only when you look backwards do you see its subtle beginnings. (With relapses you see the signs early and they are terrifying because you know it heralds another attack.) Note Roquentin’s sudden departure from Indo-China with Mercier. Mercier had asked him to accompany him to Bengal—somewhere Roquentin has always wanted to go. Staring at an object (a statue), he found it boring and not only refused the invitation, but said he was to go home. It was at that moment, confronted with something that ought to have inspired his usual passion but failed, that he realized that he was experiencing something debilitating.

The object somehow precipitated the realization and refusal of the otherwise tempting invitation. He found the statue stupid and, in so doing, it alerted him, quite fiercely, to his own boredom. Objects, the inanimate, change our relationship with ourselves. In many an episode, where I have still been at the stage of being mobile, I have walked through a newsagancy looking for a magazine to read (light reading is the only possible thing) and have become madly irritated at their shiny covers and promises of answers and entertainment. A warfare begins between me and the magazine on the shelves; they are temptresses and I almost fix them with a consciousness of their own and they willingly test my patience, the result of which is usually me walking out empty-handed and disgusted. Roquentin was annoyed at the statuette and it woke him to his general malaise.

But the relationship with objects/the rest of the world isn’t only fixed with disharmony. I’ve envied highlighters pens for not feeling what I am feeling. Sometimes it just makes you an astute spectator—like Roquentin on Sunday. We experience that entire day through his psychology. There’s the bowing, waving, handshaking, dialogue, prattle, luncheon ritual. He sees, in his Sunday, class structure with all its features: love, religion, human ritual, and he hears snippets of gossip. In my own experience of depression, I have experienced everything in this way, as a spectator. My senses are elevated such that any experience is augmented, enhanced. Maybe that’s why I can’t bear to be out of my own room, staring at my own ceiling, being perfectly still. It’s almost as if my senses have become over-stimulated, bruising my mind—leading to the state of depression. Perhaps the only way to recuperate is to be still. Not to hear, taste, tell, listen and do. After all, characteristic of all depressives is their inability to move, to take the paces necessary to sustain daily life.

Karina and my journey through this text after seven sessions each of four hours duration is just beginning. The thesis is still raw. Our discussions get riveted in bits of Sartrean prose, for example:

*In matters pertaining to the flow of time, of people experiencing life only in order to tell it, the pebbles and chestnut tree that exhale beyond and within their surface a nauseous 'nothingness', the jealousy of another's clearly known and expressed pain, the need only for sleep, people floating past like phantoms, the recognition that old memories and their associated joys have no meaning any more, things that are not themselves though essentially themselves, senses interacting-black wood oozing secretion, melting, smelling, the amorphous, vague, sad state of being yet with it sometimes an icy ecstasy.*

Allow me to give you some direct quotes that brought the most intense response from Karina. I will allow them to speak for themselves:
* Then the nausea seized me. I dropped to a seat. I no longer knew where I was. I saw the colours spin slowly around me. I wanted to vomit. And since that time, the Nausea has not left me (19)

* An hour later the lantern was lit, the wind blew, the sky was black; nothing at all was left... (8)

* I can’t explain what I see. To anyone. There. I am quietly slipping into the water’s depth, towards fear (8)

* The sun and blue sky were only a snare. This is the hundredth time I’ve let myself be caught. My memories are like coins in the devil’s purse, when you open it you find only dead leaves (32)

* The nausea has stayed down there, in the yellow light. I am happy; this cold is so pure, this night so pure: Am I myself not a wave of icy air? With neither blood, nor lymph, nor flesh. Flowing down this long canal towards the pallor down there. To be nothing but coldness (26)

* A wall without opening, without doors, without windows, a well which stops 200 yards further on, against a house. I have passed out of range of the lamp-post; I enter the black hole...I have the impression of passing into icy water... (25)

* cities have only one day at their disposal and every morning it comes back exactly the same (92)

* Nothing. Existed (103)

Existentialists queried the meaning of life in which death, without belief in God, became meaningless. Depressives ask: What is it that I am, that has not self, meaning, or relevance, that is dark, with no help? They in their void experience the Dionysian insight that it is better not to have been born as anguish. When not locked motionless in their rooms, they push through the fog of days in pain, fear and isolation. Lights can sear into their souls, loved ones become irrelevant, the body sometimes willing, the mind choosing oblivion. This is being at its darkest; this is part of our human condition; it is our suffering and known to Buddhism and Nietzschean insight as that which must be named. We cannot go on or transform it if we do not affirm the fact of this particular form of human suffering. Interface between philosophical axiom (in its creative Sartrean delivery) and psychological experience occurs. The ‘thing’ finds expression. People recover from depression. It is conquerable. It is argued that it is inexplicable, that we must see it as a ‘black bile’ and feel comfortable with the drugs that placate its demons or analysis that names its causes. Sartre’s Nausea demonstrates the way in which one can hear its essence which is its ‘nothingness.’ For the existentialist ‘en soi’ (that is, nothingness equals being), it is from this ‘being’ that man and woman create their ‘essence,’ or as Nietzsche has argued can be transformed by art and the art of living. This choice ‘to be,’ argues Sartre, is fraught with anxiety; it entails the mind and the body equally. Literature and the arts express the ineffable, a knowledge that creates a courage ‘to be,’ if we can accept, in a positive sense, Sartre’s proclamation that ‘Life begins on the other side of despair.’

REFERENCES


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