

On Sartre
Robert S. Griffin
www.robertsgriffin.com

Philosopher, critic, novelist, and dramatist Jean-Paul Sartre has singular eminence in world letters. His earliest novel, *Nausea*, was published in 1938. It is made up of the diary entries of a French writer Antoine Roquentin (a stand-in for Sartre himself?) that depict Roquentin's struggle to come to grips with the meaning and direction of his life. Excerpts from this fictional diary:

I am alone in the midst of these happy, reasonable voices. All these creatures spend their time explaining, realizing happily that they agree with each other. In Heaven's name, why is it so important to think the same things all together.

I feel more and more need to write—in the same proportion as I grow old, you might say.

I would like to tell someone what is happening to me before it is too late.

Three o'clock is always too late or too early for anything you want to do.

It was wonderful two years ago: all I had to do was close my eyes and my head would start buzzing like a bee-hive; I could conjure faces, trees, houses, a Japanese girl in Kamaishiki washing herself naked in a wooden tub, a dead Russian, emptied of blood by a great gaping wound, all his blood in a pool beside him. I could recapture the taste of koukouss, the smell of olive oil that fills the streets of Burgos at noon, the scent of fennel floating through the Tetuan streets, the piping of Greek shepherds; I was touched. This joy was used up a long time ago. Will it be reborn today?

I build memories with my present self. I am cast out, forsaken in the present: I vainly try to rejoin the past: I cannot escape.

I have never had adventures. Things have happened to me, events, incidents, anything you like. But no adventures. It isn't a question of words; I am beginning to understand. There is something to which I clung more than all the rest—

without completely realizing it. It wasn't love. Heaven forbid, not glory, not money. . . . I had imagined that at certain times my life would take on a rare and precious quality.

The sky was pale blue: a few wisps of smoke, and from time to time a fleeting cloud passed in front of the sun. In the distance I could see the white cement balustrade that runs along the Jetty Promenade; the sea glittered through the interstices.

Nothing has changed and yet everything is different. At last an adventure happens to me. I see that I am myself and I am here. I am the one who splits the night. I am as happy as the hero of a novel.

I do not know whether the whole world has suddenly shrunk or whether I am the one who unifies all sounds and shapes. I cannot even conceive of anything around being other than what it is.

I am not writing my book on Rolleston any more; it's finished. What am I going to do with my life?

The thing that has been waiting was on alert, it has pounced on me, it flows through me, I am filled with it. It's nothing: I am the Thing. Existence, liberated, detached, floods over me.

I exist. It's sweet, so sweet, so slow. And light: you'd think it floated all by itself. It stirs. It brushes by me, melts, vanishes. Gently, gently. There is bubbling water in my mouth. I swallow. It slides down my throat, it caresses me—and now it comes up again into my mouth.

I see my hand spread out on the table. It lives—it is me. The fingers open and point.

Life has meaning if we choose to give it one. One must first act, throw one's self into some enterprise.

I have to eat my chicken, which by now must be cold.

The next instant may be the moment of your death. You know it and you can smile. Isn't that admirable?

In your most insignificant actions there is an enormous amount of heroism.

I was the root of the chestnut tree; or rather, I was entirely conscious of its existence. . . . Existence is not something that lets itself be thought of from a distance; it must invade you suddenly, master you, weigh heavily on your heart like a great motionless beast.

My whole life is behind me. I see it completely. I see its shape and slow movements that have brought me this far.

I am like a man completely frozen after a trek through the snow who suddenly comes into a warm room.

Perhaps one day, thinking precisely of this hour, I shall feel my heart beat faster and say to myself, "That was the day, that was the hour, when it all started—when I accepted myself."

Night falls. On the second floor of the Hotel Printania two windows have just lighted up. The building-yard of the New Station smells strongly of damp wood. Tomorrow it will rain in Bouville.