

# CHOOSING EMOTIONS: THE LATE SARTRE AND THE EARLY FLAUBERT

"Sartre on the emotions" is usually taken to refer to the early Sartre, whose exercise on emotion as a category in phenomenological psychology, part of a larger but aborted project on *The Psyche*, was published as *Sketch of a Theory of the Emotions* in 1939. *The Psyche* was intended, it seems, as the theoretical counterpart to *Nausea*; in an interview with Claudine Chomez in the same year Sartre gives evidence of having recognized early on the tendency of every project of writing to generate a corresponding philosophical project, which had to be tackled independently and thus worked out of the system. The trouble, he suggests there, is that technical matters can't be expressed in the beautiful form of works of literary art: "so I saw that I was obliged to pair up, so to speak, each novel with an essay. Thus at the same time as *Nausea* I was writing *The Psyche*" (ES 65)

This relationship between two kinds of writing persisted, as we know, throughout Sartre's life, and was expressed in a later interview (with Madeleine Chapsal) as the eruption of philosophical hernias under literary pressure (S IX: 10-11). Some of the projects thus generated became central to his main philosophical work; for example the *Critique of Dialectical Reason* emerged from the Flaubert project, stimulated by the commission that led to *Questions of Method*. But some didn't, and my sense is that the project on the psyche was one of these. The fact that it was not published, at least in its original form, suggests some reserve about its importance in the Sartrean scheme of things.

As to the part that was published in the form of the *Sketch*, the claim that it belongs with *Nausea* is, as we shall see, not particularly sustained by the place of emotions in the latter work. Everything points to a deeper connection between *Nausea* and *Being and Nothingness* instead, given that the former began as a "factum on contingency" in the early 1930's and that the latter is said by Sartre's bibliographers to be "the outcome of philosophical researches undertaken by

Sartre since 1933" (ES 85). (But then some of the material of *The Psyche* was in fact incorporated in *Being and Nothingness*.) The questions I want to raise in this paper are two: why does Sartre not make more use of emotion as a category after the *Sketch*? and do the emotions, and the idea advanced there that we choose them, survive in some other form in the later work?

One of the philosophical questions that is implicitly posed by *Nausea* is, to give it a Kantian twist, "How is Roquentin possible?"—that is, given that the world appears to him as it does, what attitude, what project, what modality must he have adopted or been subjected to in order to live it in just that way? The novel begins with Roquentin's reflection that something has changed—either the world has changed, or he has. "Am I the one who has changed? If not, then it is this room, this city, and this nature; I *must choose*" (N 4, emphasis added). Roquentin chooses to consider that the change is in him rather than in the world; this, as he remarks, is the simplest, though at the same time the most unpleasant, solution.

What sort of change has come over Roquentin? One isn't tempted, right off, to say that it's an *emotional* change. In the "undated pages" at the beginning of the novel Roquentin does, it is true, speak of emotions—disgust, and fear "or some other feeling of that sort" (N 2). But that stage passes; those feelings were attached to objects, whereas the change with which the narrative proper begins is abstract, "without object" (N 4). This looks like a problem for any phenomenological account, since the basic doctrine is that consciousness is always consciousness of something. It turns out not to be a terribly difficult problem, though, since a simple solution is at hand—the change doesn't have *particular* objects, it's global, the whole world is its object. Such a general modality *is*, for Sartre, characteristic of emotions.

If what Roquentin experiences is an emotion, however, it's not one for which we have a name ready. Sartre calls it nausea, but nausea isn't an emotion (or is it?—according to the James-Lange theory it's just the sort of thing that might be one: a physiological condition with existential consequences). Nor is it clear why Roquentin should have this emotion, if it is none. Plenty of us get something like it—and remember that Sartre originally called the book *Melancholia*, a commoner if less striking complaint—but like Roquentin we often don't quite know why; it's not that anything in particular is happening *to* us, but something is certainly happening, perhaps *in* us.

Here lies the main problematic of the emotions, not so much of their nature as of their aetiology. Something moves us, is moving, which is a shade more intense than our simply being touched by it, though both expressions suggest real contact or influence. But the "motion" of emotion: is the mover without or within? Motion there surely is, of some sort. English gets "emotion" in its emotional sense through French, where the prefix *é-* is not, according to French philologists, from Latin *ex*, though there is Latin *emoveo* with the sense of moving physically, people out of marketplaces or walls from their foundations as in earthquakes. (Archaic English "emotion" has this sense: the emotions of the Turks cited in the OED meant their migrations.) *é-*, says Robert, signifies tendency or passage toward, or reinforcement; psychological moving and shaking having taken over from physical, the question is what tends to produce it.

The difficulty is that we can't always tell whether the moving and shaking are things we *do* (or even *are*), or whether they are done *to* us, by others, by circumstances. A message arrives; the paper flutters from the recipient's hand, she sinks to the floor in a dead faint. Obviously the message had some causal relation to the fainting—but did it make her faint, or did she make herself faint as a way of refusing to accept it? In the *Sketch* Sartre opts for the second account: emotions are intentional mechanisms that fix an unacceptable world for us magically, rendering it totally unreal if necessary. But that isn't quite Roquentin's situation—on the contrary, part of his problem seems to be that he isn't emotional *enough*: the world isn't unacceptable, it's just a bit strange. This reminds us of that other case of what psychiatrists would call "flat affect," Meursault in Camus's *The Stranger*. Your average post-war French anti-hero isn't the emotional type.

Nor of course was Sartre. He has this in common with Roquentin, that they are both writers; their project of salvation, if they find one, will be through words. Emotion can't be the end of anything, it will at most be a stage on the way to something else, accompanied and in the end occluded by other existential factors. At the end of the *Sketch* Sartre says that

the psychological theory of the emotions assumes a prior description of affectivity, to the extent that this constitutes the being of human reality, that is to the extent that it is constitutive of *our* human reality to be an affective human reality. In this case, instead of beginning from a study of emotions or of inclinations that would point to a human reality as yet not elucidated as the ultimate goal of all research, an ideal goal

moreover and probably out of the reach of anyone who begins from the empirical, the description of affect would be carried out *on the basis* of the human reality described and fixed by an *a priori* intuition (ETE 66).

In other words there's really not much mileage in the emotions as such, so Sartre may as well go back to the *a priori* intuitions about human reality that are already his stock in trade. That is the answer to my first question.

Among these intuitions one stands out in Sartre from beginning to end. Not merely an intuition: it is a rooted conviction on his part that human beings are conscious and intentional beings once and for all, and that the only thing that can subvert a conscious intention is another conscious intention, albeit one that may be dissembled, even to oneself (the act of dissembling, of course, requiring yet another conscious intention, possibly dissembled in its turn—and so on). It is characteristic of him, and of Roquentin as an element of his autobiography, that his conscious intention should be reflexive. Roquentin thinks about the way he feels, and writes obsessively about it, and as Sartre says somewhere else the event, written down, is no longer the same. Yet the writing is part of his human reality, part of his project.

"Nous sommes *projet*, c'est-à-dire *dépassement du subi*," says Sartre—"we are *project*, that is to say *transcendence of the undergone*." This lapidary formulation occurs in *The Family Idiot*, well into it, near the beginning of the second volume in French, on page 1294 in fact. It provokes two reflections: first that the late Sartre is still faithful to some at least of the categories of the early one, and second—particularly in view of the emphasis in the passage, which is reflected throughout the *Idiot*, *subi* being almost invariably italicized—that the issue of activity versus passivity, contingency versus choice, is still central to his concerns. *Subir*, "to undergo," is a key verb for Sartre, and focuses what is probably the most constant preoccupation of his work. For everything in human life looks as if it just *happened* to us, but it is essential that everything should feel as if we were *doing* it.

This imperative of feeling is just what Sartre in the passage from the *Sketch* cited above means by an *a priori* intuition, and it is what convinces him that, in the end, emotions are chosen. But the nagging question remains, as it probably always must (given that it embodies one of the fundamental antinomies of reason), whether the feeling corresponds to any assertible reality. The early Sartre was prepared unhesitatingly to claim complete intentional dominance of the free subject over its project, but as time went on reality—in particular

political reality—asserted *itself* and compelled him to change his mind. The later view is far more modest: freedom is reduced to "the small movement which makes a totally conditioned social being someone who does not render back completely what his conditioning has given him" (DEM 35).

This last formulation comes from an interview, "The Itinerary of a Thought," in which the interviewer refers to Sartre's "forthcoming study of Flaubert," parts of which had been published in *Les Temps Modernes*, and says of it that "one is struck by the sudden re-emergence of the characteristic idiom of the early work—thetic consciousness, ego, nihilation, being, nothingness" (BEM 33). It seems to me that not only the characteristic idiom is recaptured but also, in certain very important respects, characteristic convictions. In spite of what Sartre learned after the war, which by his own account changed everything, he still cannot get away from a stubborn insistence that we make our own lives, that we make them *as significance*, and that Flaubert made his in this way. Given his conditioning, the Hotel-Dieu at Rouen, the July Monarchy and the rest, still at some level Flaubert *chose* to be Flaubert, chose the passivity and the hebetude and the gigantism and the laughter.

Chose, also, his emotions—that goes, in context, without saying. But to say that is not to say anything nearly as interesting or informative as the more specific, and still very partial, characterization given at the end of the last paragraph. Also the relations between those other traits and the emotions become very complex. Passivity and hebetude look like ways of *not* having emotions (to be immobile is precisely to resist motion of any kind). And if emotions are ways of escaping an unacceptable reality, there can also be active ways of escaping unacceptable emotions, for example role-playing, in which Flaubert indulged from an early age, or writing, an intellectualizing defense he shares with Sartre. We can get some idea of what has happened to the concept of emotion in Sartre by looking to see where it surfaces in the work on Flaubert.

It would be hazardous for me to assert, on this basis of a motivated but hurried re-reading of those 2800 pages (like *War and Peace*, it's a world one can get happily lost in again and again), that I've caught everything Sartre has to say on the subject. But my impression—and it confirms the view stated above as to the importance of the concept—is that it is very little. This is not because Sartre *rejects* the emotions, it's just that they aren't of focal theoretical interest for him, he has other ways of dealing with what they represent. Once or twice

there are direct allusions, once near the beginning of the work to a novel aspect of the question:

. . . *active* emotions—above all when it's a question of masculine characters—are abundantly described in our literature; hardly any room is made, on the other hand, for grief, for panic, for rage: they happen nevertheless, cutting out our legs from under us, paralyzing our tongues, relaxing our sphincters; pushed to the extreme we lose our sense, and fall in a heap at the feet of the sworn enemy we would have wished to murder (IF I:45).

This, as I have pointed out elsewhere (Sa 194), is a clear anticipation of the Fall, the crisis at Pont-l'Évêque in 1844 during which Flaubert collapsed while driving his brother Achille in a cabriolet from Deauville to Rouen. Sartre devotes several hundred pages to a direct analysis of this event, and it recurs repeatedly as a kind of *obligato* accompaniment throughout the work.

One might expect, given the comment about the short shrift accorded in literature to the passive emotions, that Sartre would conduct much of the analysis in their terms, but he does not. The language of emotion creeps in occasionally: Flaubert suffered from a "permanent hyperemotivity" (IF II:1792), he is "*constituted* by emotional discharges" (IF II:1814). But the attempt to explain the Fall as provoked by the emotional shock of a near-collision with a heavy wagon in the darkness, which immediately preceded Flaubert's collapse, is rejected by Sartre as inadequate (IF II:1835). Emotion, it seems, is too vague a category for such a real and really decisive event. The whole inquiry proceeds on a more concrete level.

The problematic of the emotions as suffered or chosen is not lost, it is subsumed under the larger project. There is a hint near the beginning of volume II of the *Idiot* of the relegation of emotions as such to an unreal domain when Sartre quotes as significant Flaubert's early text *Bibliomanie* and the character Giacomo who "reserved all his emotions for his books" (IF II:1147). Sartre's project is to give an account of the reality of Flaubert's life, to write a *true* novel about him. This drive to reality undercuts emotions, which have an irrealizing, a magically unrealizing, effect, whereas Sartre says that he wanted from the beginning to "provide a philosophical foundation for realism. . . . In other words . . . to give man both his autonomy and his reality among real objects, avoiding idealism without lapsing into mechanical materialism," and still believed this possible at the time of the publication of the Flaubert (BEM 36-37).

The reality is Flaubert's own project, which is a totalization of his own experience under the form of art. The concept of totalization is of course Sartre's, but he attributes it to the young Flaubert in the person of his creation Djalioh, in the very early work *Quidquid volueris*. Djalioh is an ape-man who is at one with nature; in him we find, says Sartre, reciprocity between immanence and transcendence. The passage is worth quoting:

... one may say, depending on circumstances, that he [Djalioh] dissolves himself in nature or that it wholly enters into him: although it seems that these involve opposite behaviors, *they are the same*, differently accented; sometimes the soul is formed as an infinite lacuna and the world is swallowed up there and sometimes it is a finite mode of substance; imprisoned in the limits of its determination, it annihilates itself in order to flow beyond its frontiers and *realize* its belonging to the Whole without parts in the very movement that dissolves its particularity. What counts is that the fundamental intention does not change: what is aimed for in both cases is totalization. A reciprocal totalization of the microcosm by the macrocosm and of the latter by the former. This double and simultaneous belonging of the soul to the world, of the world to the soul, Flaubert calls, when it is the object of a concrete and lived experience, simply Poetry. One might equally well give it, when it actualizes itself in gathering up the whole of being and the whole man in an intentional synthesis which operates on the basis of a negation of every analytic determination, the name *metaphysical attitude* (IF I:33).

We have here a characteristically Sartrian formulation of the paradox adumbrated in the *Sketch*, along with an equally characteristic proposal for its solution. It is a question of choosing, but of choosing one's own contingency—having emotions, to be sure, but of appropriating them as part of one's own project. It is this impossible and yet necessary self-creation, the free insistence on the inevitable (the echo of Hegel is certainly not accidental, given the source of the early Sartrian categories *en-soi* and *pour-soi*), that is the trademark of Sartre's form of human being. He thinks that Flaubert sometimes achieves it. Flaubert writes to Alfred Le Poittevin: "I certainly have deep serenity though everything troubles me on the surface," "I am really very well since I've agreed always to be ill," and Sartre comments: "Gustave cannot write these ambiguous lines without having known the strange states in which *doing* and *undergoing* are indiscernible, in which one cannot decide where *endurance* ends and *complacency* begins" (IF II:1794).

So we choose our lives and their significance, and it follows from this, to revert to the subject of this discourse, that we choose our emotions. Or:

emotions are what we choose. Or: what we do with our emotions: *that's what choosing is*. Or: choose your emotions—but choose the ones you have! To put it differently, but in Sartre's own words—the vocabulary of the early Sartre, utilized by the late Sartre and thus encapsulating the continuity of his work in spite of all appearances to the contrary (but even the appearances, if one looks closely enough, aren't to the contrary): "Take original contingency as the final goal of constructive rigor." The passage from which this citation comes is worth quoting *in extenso* and may serve as closure for this paper. Sartre is speaking, early in the first volume of the *Idiot*, of the hazards of birth and upbringing, the determination of the child by the mother and yet its need to make itself, and shifts to the analogy of the work of art and a reference to Mallarmé's "Un coup de dés":

Thus the work is chance and construction at the same time and is the more fortuitous the more carefully built it is: Nicolas de Stael committed suicide, among other reasons, because of having understood this inevitable curse of the artist, and that the artist can neither refuse contingency nor accept it. A solution: take original contingency as the final goal of constructive rigor. Few creators bring themselves to this resolve (IF 1:60).

And then a footnote: "Flaubert, as we shall see, is among their number; it makes the grandeur of his work."

For Sartre, as we know, the writer is the paradigm of what the human can be. The work whose grandeur he commends in Flaubert is literary, to be sure, but the passage follows a discussion of what any mother might do to any child, what any ontology might be. The work might be a life, might be our life. We can choose whether or not to live it, how to live it, with what "metaphysical attitude" to live it, indeed we can't help doing this (though whether we understand how we choose is another story). Our emotions are part of the package, whether leading or following we can also choose. But we don't have to choose them as a primary vehicle for our reflection, and Sartre, as far as I can see, did not do so.

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## References:

**BEM** = *Between Existentialism & Marxism* (in English).

**ES** = Contat & Rybalka, *Les Ecrits de Sartre* (in French).

**ETE** = *Esquisse d'une theorie des emotions* (in French).

**IF** = *L'Idiot de la famille* (in French).

**N** = *Nausea* (in English).

**S** = *Situations* (in French).

**Sa** = Caws, *Sartre*.