

## SARTRE'S RITE OF PASSAGE

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The idea of "birth trauma" is highly fantastic,  
Jean-Paul Sartre in *Being and Nothingness*

In February, 1935, the existentialist philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre entered Sainte-Anne's Hospital in Le Havre, France, and was given an injection of the psychedelic drug mescaline.\* His fame was still several years in the future; Sartre was then twenty-nine years old and employed as a college philosophy teacher. Unpublished and unknown, he lay waiting on a hospital bed in a dimly-lit room for the mescaline to take effect. He was writing a book on the imagination and hoped that the drug would induce hallucinations. It succeeded too well, reported Simone de Beauvoir, his lifelong companion and fellow philosopher. She phoned Sainte-Anne's that afternoon and heard *him* talking in a thick, blurred voice. He said that her phone call had rescued him from a desperate battle with octopuses. Ordinary objects seemed to change their shape grotesquely; Sartre told her: Umbrellas were deforming into vultures, shoes turned into skeletons and faces looked monstrous; while behind him, just past the corner of his eye, scrambled crabs, octopuses and grimacing things. For the rest of the evening he continued to see frightful apparitions-giant beetles, an orangutan's leering face pressed to the window and huge, fat flies (Sartre, 1978, p. 38). But he seemed to recover completely by the following day and referred to the experience with •cheerful detachment.' ,

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\*Except where noted otherwise, all biographical references to Sartre's mescaline session and its aftermath are from Beauvoir, 1976, pp. 168-78; and Jeanson, 1974, pp. 75-76.

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*unpleasant  
hallucinatory  
experiences*

Beauvoir later learned that, for several days after, Sartre suffered recurring attacks of anxiety. He was in a state of deep depression, "and the moods that came upon him recalled those that had been induced by the mescaline." A doctor prescribed twice-daily doses of belladonna, but according to Beauvoir (1982) Sartre did not follow the prescription and his problems continued. "His visual faculties became distorted," she said. "Houses had leering faces, all eyes and jaws," and every clockface that he passed seemed to turn into an owl. Especially persistent was the notion that a lobster was pursuing him; it haunted Sartre for many months. During this difficult period he spent more time than usual with friends, whose presence "protected him from crabs and similar monsters." To his closest friend, Beauvoir, Sartre confided: "I know what the matter with me is. I'm on the verge of a chronic hallucinatory psychosis." She strongly disagreed, but his anxieties continued until summer. Then he took a long vacation in the countryside of France. After several weeks of solitude, fresh air and exercise (Sartre liked hiking in the mountains), he abruptly announced that he was "tired of being crazy," Beauvoir reported. "Throughout the trip the lobsters had been trying to trail along behind him, and that evening he finally sent them packing."

Looking back on the episode many years later, Sartre (1978, pp. 37-38) blamed the psychiatrist who administered the mescaline for causing his initial bad reaction: "[Since! I had been experimenting with Lagache, who's rather saturnine and who said to me, 'What it does to you is terrible'],' I ended up having all sorts of unpleasant hallucinations." Concerning his fear of succumbing to a chronic hallucinatory psychosis, Sartre insisted that the drug was *not* primarily responsible. He termed its effect "incidental," as compared to the "profound" cause: A pervasive identity crisis resulting from his passage to adulthood.

*a pervasive  
identity  
crisis*

It's one thing to be one among many others, as I had been [in school] and in the service. It's quite another to be an individual, such as bourgeois society spawns, burdened with social responsibilities you never asked for, with non-intimate relationships on a social level, isolated completely yet expected to perform certain duties or functions. At that point such a person becomes alienated.

Another significant factor, Sartre added, was his research on the subject of perceptual anomalies for *L'Imaginaire* (1940), his book in progress: "I was forever rummaging around in my own consciousness looking for what I could

see, which made my head swim and didn't help matters at all." Beauvoir (1976, p. 170) agreed that his "hallucinatory patterns" were the "physical expressions of a deep emotional malaise: Sartre could not resign himself to going on to 'the age of reason,' to full manhood." Neither she nor Sartre, however, were suggesting that his fears had been brought up from the depths of his unconscious to the surface of awareness. Sartre specifically said he was rummaging around in his *consciousness*, not his unconscious, because he denied that the latter existed. A primary tenet of Sartre's philosophical theories is that consciousness only exists when it is conscious *of* something. It is "not entity but a process of attention," explains Hazel Barnes (1978), an expert on Sartre and his philosophy. "Since consciousness is thus only a constant relating, the assuming of a point of view, there is nothing *in* consciousness, certainly no unconscious and no reservoir of determining traits or tendencies" (p. 13). As for the frightening hallucinations Sartre saw in his mescaline session and afterward, Barnes maintains that these were products of his consciousness reflecting on its "residue of experience" (p. 253). Specifically, they were "vivid projections in symbolic form of Sartre's anxious sense of being engulfed in the trappings of the bourgeois world" (p. 231). In other words, the dominant theme of his hallucinations submarine creatures-represented Sartre's fear of being submerged in the ocean of bourgeois society.

*consciousness  
as a process  
of attention*

If we accept these explanations as complete, the significance of Sartre's mescaline session is little more than anecdotal. But we should not accept them, for several reasons. One is the fact that until he took the mescaline, Sartre was not troubled with spontaneous hallucinations. Afterward, the particular hallucinations invoked by the drug persisted for several months. Since the physiological effects of mescaline last only for several hours (Grinspoon & Bakalar, 1979, p. 21), it is clear that its affect on Sartre's psyche was profound, not "incidental." It is also clear that Sartre's hallucinations were not strictly symbols of his adult identity crisis: a similar confrontation with deep-dwelling monsters is recorded in *Les Mots (The Words)*, Sartre's 1964 autobiography of his childhood. Sartre (1964a) tells us that when he was eight years old, he discovered the power of creative writing and found that it "worried" him:

*deeper  
implications of  
drug experience*

I would push my little desk against the window. The anguish would come creeping in again.... Then *it* would come, a dizzying, invisible being that fascinated me. In order to be seen, it had to be described. I quickly finished off the adventure I was working on, took my characters to an entirely different part of

the globe, generally subterranean or underseas, and hastily exposed them to new dangers: as improvised geologists or deep sea divers, they would pick up the Being's trail, follow it, and suddenly encounter it. What flowed from my pen at the time-- an octopus with eyes of flame, a 20-ton crustacean, a giant spider that talked-- was myself, a child monster; it was my boredom with life, my fear of death, my dullness and my perversity. I did not recognize myself. No sooner was the foul creature born than it rose up against me, against my brave speleologists. I feared for their lives (p. 152).

Was this same "Being" incarnated during Sartre's mescaline session? If so, it would seem that he once again failed to recognize himself. We must admit this possibility, and therefore reject the analysis offered by Sartre, Beauvoir and Barnes. It may be accurate *so far as it goes*; but by denying the unconscious it does not go far enough.

*an analysis  
using  
Grof's  
theories*

An alternative analysis proceeds from the theories of Stanislav Grof, M.D., a pioneer researcher in the therapeutic use of LSD and other psychedelic substances. [Since the normal effective doses of LSD and mescaline produce similar physiological and psychological reactions (Grinspoon & Bakalar, 1979, p. 21; Grof, 1980, p. 262), we can consider the results of LSD research applicable to mescaline as well.] In his seminal book, *Realms of the Human Unconscious: Observations from LSD Research* Grof (1976), describes how his theories developed from his own clinical observation of several thousand psychedelic drug sessions between 1956 and about 1973. To explain how these drugs interact with the mind, he proposed what he refers to as a "useful model" that may or may not reflect the actual structure of the unconscious: "COEX systems" (systems of condensed experience). A COEX system (pp. 46-49) is defined as a "specific constellation of memories consisting of condensed experiences (and related fantasies) from different life periods of the individual. The memories belonging to a particular COEX system have a similar basic theme or contain similar elements and are associated with a strong emotional charge of the same quality." It may be described as a negative or a positive COEX, depending on whether the emotions attached to the memories condensed are pleasant or unpleasant. Psychedelic drugs can serve as a useful therapeutic tool, Grof concluded, because they seem to scan the unconscious like radar and lock onto COEX systems (p. 216). He first noticed this process when

*COEX  
systems*

*negative  
or  
positive*

identical or very similar clusters of visions, emotions, and physical symptoms occurred [to the same individual] in several consecutive LSD sessions. Patients often had the feeling that they were returning again and again to a specific experiential

area and each time could get deeper into it. After several sessions, such clusters would then converge into a complex reliving of traumatic memories. When these memories were relived and integrated, the previously recurring phenomena never reappeared in subsequent sessions and were replaced by others (p. 20).

The most important part of a COEX system is its core (Grof, 1976, pp, 70-73)-the first experience of a particular kind that was registered in the brain and that laid the foundation, or "memory matrix," for a particular COEX system. Typically, this core is a childhood trauma buried deep in the unconscious. Resolution of the COEX system therefore depends on working through its enveloping layers of accumulated memories and reliving the core experience. When a COEX system is engaged in the course of a psychedelic session but not worked through completely (p. 93), "the subject may remain under the influence of this system after the session in spite of the fact that the effect of the drug has already worn off," resulting in a precarious emotional balance. "This constitutes the mechanism of belated reoccurrences of LSD-like experiences, popularly referred to as 'flashbacks.' "

*the  
memory  
matrix*

*influence  
of a  
COEX  
system*

Applying Grof's theories to Sartre's case, we can speculate that: (1) The mescaline activated a powerful negative COEX system; (2) Sartre failed to achieve a resolution of this COEX before the end of his session; and (3) because the COEX was engaged but remained unresolved, it continued to affect his mood and perceptions for several months. But why was a negative COEX unleashed in the session, rather than a positive one? And what kind of memories did it contain? To discover the answers to these questions, we ourselves must take the role of Sartre's "brave speleologists" and track the original trauma to its lair in his unconscious.

*Sartre's  
unresolved  
COEX*

On the day that Sartre was battling with octopuses at Sainte-Anne's Hospital, an intern expressed his amazement at the reaction (Beauvoir, 1976, p. 169). The drug's effect on him had been totally different, the intern told Sartre; *he* had "gone romping through flowery meadows, full of exotic houris." Presumably, the mescaline administered to the intern was similar in quality and dosage to that which Sartre was given. Yet Sartre's hallucinations were unpleasant, while the intern's were enjoyable. Why?

We have already heard Sartre's explanation: The "saturnine" doctor who injected him with mescaline warned that his reaction might be "terrible," and so it was. We also

Sartre's  
social  
sensitivity

know the session was conducted in a dimly-lit hospital room, where Sartre might well have felt a little out of place. These are not insignificant factors. A number of researchers (e.g. Grinspoon & Bakalar, 1979, p. 106) have observed that psychedelic drugs enhance suggestibility; therefore, "set" (the psychological context, including expectations) and "setting" (the physical environment) can predispose the outcome of a psychedelic session. But probably more influential in Sartre's case was his social situation at the time he took the mescaline. For months, he had been feeling disenchanted with his job as a college philosophy teacher, depressed about his failure to achieve recognition as a writer (a first book had already been rejected and his second was unfinished), and "alienated" by the prospect of becoming an adult among bourgeois adults (Beauvoir, 1976, pp. 170-71). As Sartre himself concluded, the mescaline probably made him more sensitive to these emotional problems.

influence  
of  
childhood  
trauma

Grof would take it further; his theories suggest that instead of addressing *only* Sartre's then-current life situation, the drug would have scanned his unconscious in search of a COEX containing a similar charge of emotion (Grof, 1976, p. 215). In that case, it is likely that the texture and unpleasant tone of Sartre's mescaline reaction symbolized the theme of this negative COEX—the common emotional charge that united its memories—and not just his "anxious sense of being engulfed in the trappings of the bourgeois world." Since a negative COEX is typically rooted in childhood trauma, its theme must have been a more primitive fear—e.g., of sinking relentlessly down to the level of octopuses, lobsters and insects. Sartre acknowledged such a level in *The Words*, where he lamented that "things had a horrible underside. When one lost one's reason, one saw it. To die was to carry madness to an extreme and to sink into it" (Sartre, 1964a, p. 96). But what *exactly* did he fear? Madness? Death? Or something more general still, like absorption by natural forces?

early  
illness  
and  
childhood

We require more clues, and we find them in *The Words*. Sartre (1964a) relates that his father, at the age 000, died of "intestinal fever" less than two years after Sartre was born in 1905. At about the same time, Sartre contracted enteritis (an intestinal disease) and "sank into a chaotic world full of simple hallucinations." He almost died of this and of "resentment" at the fact that he was weaned prematurely during the illness; his mother's milk dried up when she exhausted herself over worrying about her husband's failing health (pp. 15-16). When Sartre recovered, he and his mother moved in with her parents, a proper bourgeois

couple who lived in the countryside. Sartre's grandfather chose to regard him as a "singular favor of fate, as a gratuitous and always revocable gift" (p. 23). And indeed, Sartre admitted; "[Nobody], beginning with me, knew why the hell I had been born" (p. 87). Nonetheless, he reported that he woke up every morning "dazed with joy at the unheard of luck of having been born into the most united family in the finest country in the world" (p. 34). The family was comfortable financially and Sartre was brought up, in the absence of brothers or sisters, as a pampered and exalted child. His role in the "family rite" was to charm the adults, so he was free to indulge his desires with little restraint. But the "insipid happiness" of those early years had a "funereal taste," since his freedom was obtained at the cost of his father's death (p. 29). As time went on, this taste grew stronger. He reported *seeing* death when he was five years old, in the guise of an "old woman, tall and mad, dressed in black." She muttered as she passed: "I'll put that child in my pocket" (p. 94). Sometime after, Sartre recalled:

*early  
experience  
with  
death*

I was visiting Mme. Dupont and her son Gabriel, the composer. I was playing in the garden of the cottage, frightened because I had been told that Gabriel was sick and was going to die. I played horse, half-heartedly, and capered around the house. Suddenly I saw a shadowy hole: the cellar had been opened. I do not quite know what manifestation of loneliness and horror blinded me; I turned around and, singing at the top of my voice, ran away (pp. 94-95).

In the following months, his grandmother died of an illness and the family moved from its pastoral setting to Paris. By the time he was seven years old, Sartre reported:

I met real Death, the Grim Reaper, everywhere, but it was never there, What was it? A person and a threat. The person was mad. As for the threat, it was this: shadowy mouths could open anywhere, in broad daylight, in the brightest sun, and snap me up.... I lived in a state of terror; it was a genuine neurosis. If I seek the reason for it, I find the following; as a spoiled child, a gift of providence, my profound uselessness was all the more manifest to me in that the family rite constantly seemed to me a trumped-up necessity. I felt superfluous; therefore, I had to disappear. I was an insipid blossoming constantly on the point of being nipped in the bud (Sartre, 19Ma, p. 96).

Of course, Sartre did not perceive his situation in such complex terms when he was seven years old. His superfluity was non-reflective, something he experienced. He looked in a mirror and discovered himself to be "horribly natural," a "jelly-fish . . . hitting against the glass of the aquarium"

(Sartre, 1964a, pp. 109-10). The shock of recognition made his role as a wonderful child seem ludicrous. When other children shunned him as a playmate, Sartre considered it a confirmation: "I had met my true judges, my contemporaries, my peers, and their indifference condemned me. I could not get over discovering myself through them: neither a wonder nor a jelly-fish. Just a little shrimp in whom no one was interested" (p. 134). Rejected and lonely, Sartre took to reading books and writing fiction. He invented fantastic adventures in which he played the role of a powerful hero or tyrant (pp. 146-48). But sometimes, he recalled:

I would let myself daydream; I would discover, in a state of anguish, ghastly possibilities, a monstrous universe that was only the underside of my omnipotence .... Tremulously, always on the point of tearing up the page, I would relate supernatural atrocities .... But the imagination was not involved. I did not invent those horrors; I found them, like everything else, in my memory (pp. 148-49).

What was it Sartre remembered? Something lurking in a "monstrous universe" on the "underside" of his omnipotence, a place that was occupied (according to the passage quoted earlier) by an octopus, a 20-ton crustacean and a giant spider. If this signifies the presence of the COEX that later emerged in Sartre's mescaline session, then the trauma which comprised its core must have occurred before he started writing fiction at about the age of eight. It even appears to precede his near-fatal bout with enteritis as an infant, when he "sank into a chaotic world full of simple hallucinations" that reminds us again of the COEX. Yet Sartre has acknowledged no earlier trauma. Are we therefore to assume that none occurred? Or if it did, that Sartre forgot it, was never aware of it, or withheld the information?

*possibility  
of  
reliving  
the trauma  
of  
birth*

There is another possibility. According to Grof (1976), many patients who undergo psychedelic therapy and work their way back through a negative COEX eventually seem to relive the original trauma of their birth. Grof's devotion to Freudian principles at first made him doubt that this was possible, since reliving birth trauma "lies beyond the realm of psychodynamics as usually understood in traditional psychotherapy" (p. 51). However, the phenomenon so frequently occurred that he was forced to reassess his position, and eventually concluded that negative COEX systems often do appear to be founded on "basic perinatal [memory] matrices" (BPMs) reflecting some phase of the patient's birth trauma (pp. 100-01). It remains to be determined whether BPMs are symbolic creations of the unconscious or

actual memories of the objective event, Grof cautions (p, 222). But repeatedly, subjects in LSD sessions have exhibited similar symptoms in four basic categories that seem to correspond to four stages of biological birth (pp. 104-49). These are:

*RPM I, Primal union with the mother.* Recalling the intrauterine state when the mother and child form one symbiotic unity, this stage often evokes pleasant feelings of serenity and bliss.

*four  
stage of  
birth  
experience*

*RPM II, Antagonism with the mother.* Related to the first clinical stage of delivery, when intrauterine contractions squeeze the fetus while the cervix still is closed, this BPM generates feelings of entrapment in a meaningless, claustrophobic world.

*RPM III, Synergism with the mother.* In the second clinical stage of delivery, the intrauterine contractions continue but the cervix is wide open and the difficult, agonizing process of propulsion through the birth canal begins. The goal of both mother and child at this point is to terminate their mutually painful condition. Subjects who relive this BPM almost always experience an "atmosphere of titanic struggle."

*RPM IV, Separation from the mother.* Corresponding to the third clinical stage of delivery, this BPM recalls a sequence of events in which propulsion through the birth canal ends with a crescendo of tension and suffering, followed by sudden relief and relaxation.

Grof (1976, pp. 149-50) emphasizes that these four stages of the birth experience never are relived in chronological sequence during a psychedelic session. Often, because they share some similar emotional content, experiential symptoms of BPM I overlap those of BPM IV, and the symptoms of BPM II tend to cluster with BPM III. It is also unusual for all four BPMs to be relived in the course of a single psychedelic session, and it usually takes more than one session to work through an especially strong BPM.

*overlapping  
of  
BPMs*

Although Grof, to my knowledge, has never alluded in print to Sartre's mescaline session, his description of the symptoms and psychodynamics of BPM II (Grof, 1976, pp, 115-23) makes its relevance to Sartre's case crystal clear. Under the powerful influence of BPM II, subjects perceive a strong link between the agony of birth and the agony of death. They often brood that they were thrown into this world

„existential  
crisis“

without any choice as to whether, where, when and to whom they would be born; and that having been born, they have no choice about the fact that they eventually must die. The impermanence of all things in general and human life in particular makes everything meaningless for them, resulting in what Grof terms an "existential crisis:"

For sophisticated individuals, this experience usually results in a fresh understanding and appreciation of existentialist philosophy and the works of such individuals as Martin Heidegger, Søren Kierkegaard, Albert Camus, and Jean-Paul Sartre. Sartre and the other existentialist philosophers seem to be especially tuned in to this experiential complex, without being able to find the only possible solution, which is transcendence. LSD subjects often refer to Sartre's play, *Huit Clos (No Exit)*, as a brilliant description of the feelings they experienced when they examined their lives and their interpersonal relationships under the influence of the "no exit" stencil of BPM II (p. 118).

feelings of  
cosmic  
engulfment

Other symptoms of this matrix are fears of pervading insanity and permanent psychosis (Grof, 1976, p. 119). Subjects typically feel as if they have gained "the ultimate insight into the absurdity of the universe and will never be able to return to the merciful self-deception that is a necessary prerequisite for sanity." Also common are feelings of "cosmic engulfment." This experience begins

with an overwhelming feeling of anxiety and an awareness of vital threat. The source of danger cannot be clearly identified, and the individual tends to interpret the immediate environment or the whole world in paranoid terms. An intensification of anxiety usually leads to the experience of being sucked into a gigantic whirlpool. A frequent symbolic variant of this phase of engulfment is being swallowed by a terrifying monster—a dragon, whale, tarantula, octopus or crocodile—or of descending into the underworld and encountering its threatening creatures. There is a clear parallel with eschatological visions of the gaping jaws of the gods of death, mouths of Hell, or the descent of heroes into the underworld (Grof & Grof, 1980, p. 26).

[Similarly, visions and experiences of wild adventures are often reported by those who relive the next sequential matrix, RPM III. An example Grof has mentioned (1976, p. 129) is "encounters of scuba divers with sharks, octopi, and other treacherous sea creatures."] "Agonizing feelings of separation, alienation, metaphysical loneliness, helplessness, hopelessness, inferiority and guilt are standard components of RPM II," Grof observes (1976, p. 118). It is the matrix that records "all unpleasant life situations in which an overwhelming destructive force imposes itself on the passive and helpless subject," especially those situations that threaten survival.

Armed with the conviction that the negative COEX system engaged during Sartre's mescaline session was founded on a BPM II memory matrix, and the knowledge that this COEX was manifest even in childhood, we can now reconstruct a brief chronology of his emotional life. The first traumatic memories that Sartre himself acknowledged were his brush with death and premature weaning (rejection) at the time that he contracted enteritis in infancy. These memories were filed in a pre-existing memory matrix-BPM II-s-that reflected the "no exit" stage of Sartre's birth trauma. Later, as a child growing up without siblings or playmates, his loneliness was filed with these memories and helped to build a COEX constellation, as well as his early encounters with death when he visited Gabriel's house, and when his grandmother died. At about the same time, Sartre's family moved from the countryside to Paris (separation). Once in Paris, he found that the other children spurned his company, confirming Sartre's own feeling that he was superfluous.

*Sartre's  
early  
traumatic  
experiences*

All these events and frustrations added fuel to the negative COEX, and the strength of its presence in Sartre's unconscious steadily grew. In time, its effect became manifest in Sartre's neurotic fear of death and madness. When he tried to escape his unhappiness by fantasizing wild adventures, he encountered the COEX more directly on the brink of his unconscious; it appeared to him symbolically as submarine and subterranean creatures from the realm beneath awareness. Sartre imagined himself in the role of a powerful hero and faced down the monsters.

At about the age of eight, Sartre (1964a) concluded that his role as a writer was equally heroic. When he died, Sartre daydreamed, he would surely be remembered and enshrined as a great writer. Thus death became his ally, since the prospect of postmortem fame charged his life with significance; Sartre lived his own biography (pp. 169-71). For several years, this sophisticated exercise alleviated Sartre's neurotic fears. But then, he reported:

[My] mandate became my character; my delirium left my head and flowed into my bones, ... Previously, I had depicted my life to myself by means of images: it was my death causing my birth, it was my birth driving me toward my death. As soon as I gave up *seeing* this reciprocity, I *became* it myself; I was strained to the breaking-point between those two extremes, being born and dying with each heartbeat (p. 230).

The tension reached unbearable proportions in February, 1935, a few months before Sartre's thirtieth birthday. His plan to rob death of its sting had been stalled by a big

complication: he couldn't get published. Instead of becoming a widely-read author, it looked like he might sink into obscurity among the bourgeoisie. In addition, Sartre must have recalled that his father was thirty years old when he died of intestinal fever—a timely reminder that Sartre, who almost died of a similar illness at about the same time, was not immortal. All these factors helped intensify the onus of his darkest fears. And then, with exquisite bad timing, Sartre took mescaline.

*resolving  
unconscious  
memories*

We know in a general way what happened next. The drug invoked the memories contained within Sartre's negative COEX. Their emotional charge overwhelmed his attention, rising up from his unconscious in the form of anxious feelings and unpleasant hallucinations. At the core of this phenomenon were memories of Sartre's own birth, attempting to emerge into consciousness and thus resolve the COEX. [Resolution occurs when the unconscious content is experienced consciously in its original form and full intensity (Grof, 1980, p, 157).]

*channeling  
memories  
into  
fiction*

The fact that he continued to suffer anxieties and hallucinations ("flashbacks") for several months would suggest that he failed to relive the COEX memories in their original form, or at least that he did not experience their full intensity. Another possibility is that he *did* relive the memories, perhaps with full intensity, but blocked a resolution by refusing to acknowledge their validity. We should not be confused by Beauvoir's claim that he recovered abruptly one night and "sent the lobsters packing;" this does not necessarily indicate a sudden resolution of the COEX. Sartre more likely came to terms with the particular experience—the mescaline session itself—and continued to resist the emerging unconscious material. That would explain why a lobster returned one year after his supposed recovery (Beauvoir, 1976, p. 219). Apparently, he found a way to integrate the session without actually conceding the existence of unconscious memories, by channeling those memories into a "fictional" novel he was writing and assimilating them through the experiences of a protagonist. Grof (1980, p. 159) hints that this is possible when he recommends that subjects should write a detailed account of their psychedelic sessions in order to "greatly facilitate" integration of the experience. Not only diaries and journals, but artistic forms of writing such as poems, plays and stories can contribute to a deeper understanding of the session.

Sartre's device was his famous first novel, *La Nausee* (*Nausea*), published in 1938. It is structured in the format of

a journal kept by Antoine Roquentin, an ostensibly fictional character. But Barnes (1978, p. 231) has pointed out that "[if] we look at *Nausea*, which Sartre had begun writing at the time he took the mescaline, we may discover several reminiscences of that event." Sartre himself, in the mid-1970s, declared: "I wasn't writing *Nausea* during the period I was ill" (Sartre 1978, p. 38). Also: "What I described in the novel is not something I actually experienced myself" (p. 41). But in *The Words*, he had earlier stated: "At the age of 30, I executed the masterstroke of writing in *Nausea*—quite sincerely, believe me—about the bitter unjustified existence of my fellowmen and of exonerating my own. I was Roquentin; I used him to show, without complacency, the texture of my life." (Sartre, 1964a, p. 251).

*Sartre's  
Nausea*

It is certainly true that the context of Roquentin's fictional life (Sartre, 1964b) parallels that of Sartre's actual life in 1935. He is depicted as 30 years old, an unpublished writer who is working on a scholarly book that represents the "only justification" for his existence (p. 70). Like Sartre, he is contemptuous of bourgeois society, feels himself getting older and is starting to fear that his life will be wasted. He is lonely, friendless and feeling unwanted. The monotony of daily life oppresses him. Early in the novel, Roquentin arranges a meeting with his former lover, Anny, whom he has not seen for several years. He hopes that the meeting will somehow provide him with a *raison d'être*. But before their reunion takes place, an event unfolds. It starts with what Roquentin calls "precursors of a new overthrow in my life" (p. 5). He is troubled by attacks of nausea (a common complaint during psychedelic sessions) and hallucinatory perceptions. A mirror becomes a "white hole in the wall," a "trap." Gazing into it, Roquentin is enthralled by the sight of his "feverish swelled lips," and of crevices, mole holes and silky white down covering the "great slopes" of his cheeks. He remembers that when he looked into a mirror as a child, he saw himself as something "at the level of jellyfish" (pp. 16-17). Later, his hand as it rests on a table appears to resemble a crab (pp. 98-99). At one point (pp. 78-79), Roquentin runs down the street in a panic, convinced that the houses are watching him with "mournful eyes." Doors especially frighten him; he fears that they will open by themselves. When he gets to the seashore, he imagines that a terrible presence is lurking underneath the waves. "A monster," he wonders. "A giant carapace, sunk in the mud? A dozen pairs of claws or fins laboring slowly in the slime." The monster rises, but Roquentin runs away before it surfaces.

*the  
fictional  
protagonist  
Roquentin*

classifications  
become  
superfluous

Finally, he winds up in a park and encounters a chestnut tree (Sartre, 1964b, pp. 126-35). At first, it is only a tree whose roots are sunk into the ground beneath the bench he is sitting on. But "suddenly, suddenly, the veil is torn away," declares Roquentin. "I have understood, I have seen." What he has seen, in a transport of "horrible ecstasy," is that the tree is not what people call a tree. It exists in a pure state of Being outside of its name, its characteristics or the functions by which it is classified. As such, it is essentially superfluous; the tree exists only to be.

existence  
as  
absurd

In *The Doors of Perception* (1954), Aldous Huxley reported a similar insight that came to him under the influence of mescaline. While gazing at some flowers that seemed to be shining with "their own inner light and all but quivering under the pressure of the significance with which they were charged," he concluded that what they "so intensely signified was nothing more, and nothing less, than what they were—a transience that was yet eternal life, a perpetual perishing that was at the same time pure Being" (Huxley 1954, pp. 17-18). For Roquentin, however, the existence represented by the chestnut tree has different implications. If a thing has no reason for being except that it is, he reasons, its existence is absurd, not intensely significant. Existence is a "universal burgeoning" of things that exist without reason, so Existence itself is absurd.

Sartre then expounds, through Roquentin, on what this portends for society, personal freedom and consciousness theory. He stresses, however, that such contemplations came *after* the fact. When Roquentin encounters the tree, he apprehends *experientially* "the key to Existence, the key ... to {his]own life." In Barnes' opinion (1978, pp. 232-33), this scene is of "obvious importance in the expression of Sartre's view of the world and of consciousness." She also believes that it "echoes rather specifically the mescaline experience," which implies that a connection can be traced between Sartre's drug-enhanced perceptions and his later philosophical theories. [Beauvoir (1976, p. 168) affirms that Sartre "crystallized the first key concepts of his philosophy" around the time of his mescaline session, though she does not acknowledge a possible connection.] Such a theme is worth exploring, but beyond the immediate scope of this article; readers who want to pursue it are referred to Barnes, 1978, pp. 226-56. For the present, we are less concerned with Sartre's philosophical theories than we are with his psychology. The question at hand is not, "What philosophical truths are conveyed by Roquentin's contemplation of the chestnut tree," but, "What did the tree represent, as a

personal symbol, for Sartre?" The answer must be that it symbolized the unresolved negative COEX. If *Nausea* was the device by which Sartre integrated deep traumatic memories stirred up in his mescaline session, then the key scene in the book is a logical place to expect him to deal with key psychological issues. There is evidence supporting this conclusion in *The Words*, where Sartre tells us he was "frozen with fear" as a child when he read this account in a newspaper:

One summer evening, a sick woman, alone on the first floor of a country house, is tossing about in bed. A chestnut tree pushes its branches into the room through the open window. On the ground floor, several persons are sitting and talking .... Suddenly someone points to the chestnut tree: "Look at that! Can it be windy?" They are surprised. They go out on the porch. Not a breath of air. Yet the leaves are shaking. At that moment, a cry! The sick woman's husband rushes upstairs and finds his wife sitting up in bed. She points to the tree and falls over dead. The tree is as quiet as ever. What did she see? A lunatic has escaped from the asylum. It must have been he, hidden in the tree, who showed his grinning face .... And yet ... how is it that no one saw him go up or down? How is it that the dogs didn't bark? ... The writer starts a new paragraph and concludes, casually: "According to the people of the village, it was Death that shook the branches of the chestnut tree." I threw the paper aside, stamped my foot, and cried aloud: "No! No!" My heart was bursting in my chest (Sartre, 1964a, pp. 150-51).

As Roquentin, Sartre again confronts this chestnut tree of Death. It is a difficult, almost heroic, mission, one that Roquentin approaches reluctantly. "I would so like to let myself go, forget myself, sleep," he admits when he enters the park. "But I can't, I'm suffocating; existence penetrates me everywhere, through the eyes, the nose, the mouth ... " He sits down on a bench and considers the root of a chestnut tree sunk in the ground. It has no meaning for him, suddenly; he cannot remember its name or its function. "I was sitting, stooping forward, head bowed, alone in front of this black, knotty mass, entirely beastly, which frightened me," Roquentin says. "Then I had this vision." He looks beyond apparent surfaces, and finds himself confronting the totality of pure Existence, a world of "soft, monstrous masses, all in disorder-naked, in a frightful, obscene nakedness." The tree root is the focus of this revelation. He regards it with "atrocious joy" but cannot come to terms with its existence. "[It] stayed there, in my eyes, as a lump of food sticks in the windpipe," he says. "I could neither accept nor refuse it."

*en visioning  
the totality  
of pure  
Existence*

*existence  
as  
pure  
Being*

Then a motion distracts his attention. Roquentin looks up at the tree top and sees that a wind is now stirring its branches. At first, he considers that "movements never quite exist, they are passages, intermediaries between two existences, moments of weakness. I expected to see them come out of nothingness, progressively ripen, blossom," he says. "I was finally going to surprise beings in the process of being born." Three seconds later, all his hopes are "swept aside." Roquentin suddenly perceives that even movements are beings, and either exist or do not at any given moment. If they do, they exist in a "no exit" state of pure Being. Like the tree root, the movements refuse to be born; they are *there*, and already exist at the point where the past meets the future. "I could not attribute the passage of time to the branches groping around like blind men," Roquentin concedes. "The idea of passage was still an invention of man. . . . My eyes only encountered completion."

With mounting distress, he sinks down on the park bench and contemplates beings more closely. Like Sartre as a child, they seem to be nothing but insipid blossomings, totally superfluous. And yet they are everywhere present.

[My] ears buzzed with existence [Roquentin complains], my very flesh throbbed and opened, abandoned itself to the universal burgeoning. But why, I thought, why so many existences, since they all look alike! What good are so many duplicates of trees? So many existences missed, obstinately begun again and again-like the awkward efforts of an insect fallen on its back.

*multiple  
forms of  
Being*

"I was one of *those* efforts," Roquentin admits. He tries closing his eyes to escape from the world of Being before it engulfs him. No good; mental images, another form of Being, "immediately leaped up and filled my closed eyes with existence," he reports. There is no place to hide, no retreat from Existence. At last, it is time to stop running from things as they are.

Roquentin shouts out loud. His eyes are open. Something is about to happen.

Had I dreamed of this enormous presence? [he asks] It was there, in the garden, toppled down into the trees, all soft, sticky, soiling everything, all thick, a jelly. And I was inside, I with the garden. I was frightened, furious, I thought it was so stupid, so out of place, I hated this ignoble mess. Mounting up, mounting up high as the sky. spilling over, filling up everything with its gelatinous slither, and I could see depths upon depths of it reaching far beyond the limits of *the* garden .... I knew it was the World, the naked World suddenly revealing itself, and I

choked with rage at this gross, absurd being... , I shouted "filth! what rotten filth!" and shook myself to get rid of this sticky filth, but it held fast and there was so much, tons and tons of existence, endless: I stifled at the depths of this immense weariness. And then suddenly the park emptied as through a great hole, the World disappeared as it had come, or else I woke up-in any case, I saw no more of it; nothing was left but the yellow earth around me, out of which dead branches rose upward.

Was this Sartre's account of his birth trauma? If so, it is clear that he experienced more than the "no exit" memories of BPM II. We also detect certain symptoms of BPM III, during which stage of clinical birth "the child can come into contact with various biological material, such as blood, mucus, urine and feces" (Grof, 1976, p. 124). Finally, what can it mean that the park "emptied [suddenly] as through a great hole," except that Roquentin experienced BPM IV (separation from the mother)? And therefore that Sartre, through his protagonist, completed a full "rite of passage" by reliving his birth from beginning to end? This proposition is supported by the fact that Sartre's mother, like Roquentin's former lover, was named Ann. Thus, when Roquentin leaves the park and has his rendezvous with Anny (Sartre, 1964b, pp. 135-54), she rebuffs his attempts to rekindle their old passion. He must now accept the situation: "There is nothing more which attaches her to me," writes Roquentin. Anny, like Sartre's Ann in real life, had "suddenly emptied herself" of him.

*Sartre's  
rite of  
passage*

The final question is a pragmatic one: What were the long-term net results of Sartre's mescaline session? We know that it inspired the events in *Nausea*, which launched his career as a writer in 1938. And we have heard that it might have contributed something to Sartre's philosophical theories. When these theories were published in *L'Être et le Néant (Being and Nothingness)* in 1943, his reputation was assured: So in one sense, at least indirectly, the mescaline session helped Sartre to achieve the acclaim he was longing for.

In another sense, however, it failed him. As Susan Sontag noticed (1981, pp. 97-98), Sartre's public fame belied a personal, implacable distress:

Sartre's work is not contemplative, but is moved by a great psychological urgency. His pre-war novel, *Nausea*, really supplies the key to all his work. Here is stated the fundamental problem of the assimilability of the world in its repulsive, slimy, vacuous, or obtrusively substantial thereness-the problem that

moves all of Sartre's writings. *Being and Nothingness* is an attempt to develop a language to cope with, to record the gestures of, a consciousness tormented by disgust. This disgust, this experience of the superfluity of things and of moral values, is simultaneously a psychological crisis and a metaphysical problem.

*need for  
transcendence*

According to Grof (1976, p. 118), the solution to Sartre's crisis was "transcendence." It eluded him. Compelled by his unconscious and its morbid COEX system, he could not transcend the thought of his mortality and blamed it on Existence. He was fixed on the perishing aspect of Being instead of its perpetual rebirth.

Viktor Frankl, the psychiatrist who founded logotherapy (a school of existential psychotherapy), describes in his 1959 book, *Man's Search for Meaning*, how a woman transcended despair by adopting a healthier attitude, ironically, toward the existence of a chestnut tree. He witnessed her death while both were imprisoned in a Nazi concentration camp. "There is little to tell and it may sound as if I had invented it," writes Frankl (1963, pp. 109-1G), "but to me it seems like a poem."

This young woman knew that she would die in the next few days. But when I talked to her she was cheerful in spite of this knowledge. "I am grateful that fate has hit me so hard," she told me. "In my former life I was spoiled and did not take spiritual accomplishments seriously." Pointing through the window of the hut, she said, "This tree here is the only friend I have in my loneliness." Through that window she could see just one branch of a chestnut tree, and on that branch were two blossoms. "I often talk to this tree," she said to me. I was startled and didn't know quite how to take her words. Was she delirious? Did she have occasional hallucinations? Anxiously, I asked her if the tree replied. "Yes." What did it say to her? She answered, "It said to me, 'I am here-I am here-I am life, eternal life.' "

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