



## Writing, experience, and literary experience in Montaigne's *Essays* and Sartre's *Nausea*

Escrita, experiência e experiência literária  
nos *Ensaíos*, de Montaigne, e em *A náusea*, de Sartre

Escritura, experiencia y experiencia literaria  
en los *Ensayos* de Montaigne y *La náusea* de Sartre

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### Abstract

This article begins with an analysis of the semantic, topological, and metaphysical associations of our modern concept of “experience,” which distinguish its form and contents from other opposing concepts. These not only include such general notions as Reason, Education, and Science, they also point to how “experience” has been thought, and lived, in opposition to the verbal and representational media of texts, printed books, and writing in general. Deconstruction (Derrida) and media theory (McLuhan) provide us with ways of understanding how the emergence of our concept of “experience” relied on, as much as it opposed, the media of writing and books, and their surrounding practices and institutions (like reading and schooling). “Experience” *per se* is perhaps unthinkable without such media and their institutionalized practices. More than modern theory, however, it is one of the major functions of modern literature to display this relation of conflict and dependence, and, even, to embody it in its very form in literary writing. Beyond the opposition of writing and “experience” is thus posed the question of the nature of the equivocal concept of “literary experience.” What would such a thing entail? This article explores this concept through two texts that attempt to bring “experience” into their very form: Montaigne’s *Essays* and Sartre’s *Nausea*.


**Keywords:** writing, experience, Montaigne, Sartre.

### Resumo

Este artigo inicia com uma análise das associações semânticas, topológicas e metafísicas do nosso moderno conceito de “experiência”, as quais distinguem esse conceito, na sua forma e no seu conteúdo, em relação a seus contrários. Esses, não apenas incluem as noções gerais, tais quais Razão, Educação e Ciência, mas também indicam de que modo a “experiência” tem sido pensada e vivida em oposição às mídias, verbais e representacionais, de textos, de livros impressos e da escrita em geral. A desconstrução (Derrida) e a teoria das mídias (McLuhan) oferecem-nos maneiras de entender de que modo a emergência de nosso conceito de “experiência” depende, na medida em que se opõe, das mídias escritas, dos livros e das práticas e instituições implicadas (como a leitura e a escola). “Experiência” *per se* é, talvez, impensável sem tais mídias e suas práticas institucionalizadas. Mais do que da teoria moderna, entretanto, é uma das funções maiores da literatura moderna a de ilustrar essa relação, de conflito e dependência, e, também, encarná-la em sua própria forma

### Resumen

Este artículo empieza con un análisis de las asociaciones semánticas, topológicas y metafísicas de nuestro moderno concepto de “experiencia”, las cuales distinguen ese concepto, en su forma y en su contenido, en relación a sus contrarios. Esos, no solamente incluyen las nociones generales como Razón, Educación y Ciencia, sino que también indican de que manera la “experiencia” ha sido pensada y vivida en oposición a los medios, verbales y representacionales, de textos, de libros impresos y de la escritura en general. La deconstrucción (Derrida) y la teoría de los medios (McLuhan) nos ofrecen maneras de entender como la emergencia de nuestro concepto de “experiencia” depende, en la medida en que se opone, de los medios escritos, de los libros y de las prácticas y instituciones implicadas (como la lectura y la escuela). “Experiencia” *per se* es, talvez, impensable sin esos medios y sus prácticas institucionalizadas. Más que la teoría moderna, sin embargo, es una función mayor de la

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enquanto escrita literária. Além da oposição entre escrita e “experiência”, coloca-se a questão a respeito da natureza do conceito equívoco de “experiência literária”. O que se deveria entender por isso? Dessa maneira, este artigo explora esse conceito através de dois textos que tentaram dar à “experiência” sua forma própria: os *Ensaio*s, de Montaigne, e *A náusea*, de Sartre.

**Palavras-chave:** escrita, experiência, Montaigne, Sartre.

literatura moderna la de ilustrar esa relación, de conflicto y dependencia, y, también, encarnada en su propia forma en tanto que escritura literaria. Mas allá de la oposición entre escritura y “experiencia”, se propone la cuestión respecto a la naturaleza del equívoco concepto de “experiencia literaria”. ¿Qué es lo que se debería entender por eso? Así, el artículo averigua ese concepto a través de dos textos que intentaron dar a la experiencia su forma propia: los *Ensayos* de Montaigne y *La Náusea* de Sartre.

**Palabras clave:** escritura, experiencia, Montaigne, Sartre.

*As a result, what was at first an abstraction now passes itself off as experience itself, rather than as a way of talking about experience. [...] Once the trespass becomes convention, experience itself is vulgarized, since theories about experience inevitably subvert experience, much as our experience corrects our theories.*

Leslie Farber

## Experience vs. writing – A conflictual modern paradigm

“Experience,” as it is commonly understood, is the most obvious, palpable and yet mysterious of things. It is something that we encounter, possess, and accumulate often without – perhaps explicitly without – thinking too hard about doing so. We want “experience”; desperately, even, we wish to acquire it. But we can’t simply grasp it with an eager hand, or purchase it at the market. “Experience” is more like the destination we didn’t entirely foresee in advance; it is the mind and the will’s brush with the contingency of “life”. And it builds up – and builds *us* up (develops our “character”, we say) – over time, like rust on a tool, the wear on the shoes, the scars by which the body bears witness to what it has done and where it has been. “Experience,” then, might be like breathing, something that cannot be directly taught or learned, an aspect of “life” (of bodily, *creaturely life*, in particular) that suffers, precisely, if we try to conceptually control or discipline it too much. “Experience” is getting to the right place at the right time – or being there by chance already – and then letting events unfold; a form of active passivity.

This is perhaps why “education,” seemingly so close to “experience” in our network of concepts, stands apart from it.<sup>1</sup> This ambiguity – the proximity in difference between the two – comes to the fore, crucially, in the *Dicionário Houaiss da Língua Portuguesa*’s entry for “experiência”. After the obligatory (and already mutually contrary) references to scientific method – “1. experimentação, experimento (método científico)” – and to one version of philosophical usage of the term – “2. qualquer conhecimento obtido por meio dos sentidos” –, we find, in usages 3 and 4, two rather *contradictory* definitions of “experiência,” the first of which is closer to “experience” proper – “3. forma de conhecimento abrangente, não organizado, ou de sabedoria, adquirida de maneira espontânea durante a vida; prática” – the second, to what we might call “education” – “4. forma conhecimento específico, ou de perícia, que, adquirida por meio de aprendizado sistemático, se aprimora com o correr do tempo; prática”.

<sup>1</sup> The entry “educação” in the *Dicionário Houaiss*, for example, displays the concept’s deep associations with pedagogy and “methodical” instruction, which sets it apart, we shall see, from “experience”.

The difference between usages 3 and 4 turns on the notion of *specificity*: a specific (*específico*) bit of skill (*perícia*) can be acquired through systematic (*sistemático*) effort and training. In this case, one sets determinate, pre-formulated goals, proceeds along well-defined paths, and expects clear, foreseen results – acting here much like the scientist (as in usage 1) who makes hypotheses and tests them out via experimentation. For acquiring a skill or learning something, there is, then, a beginning, a middle, and an end: the goal that calls for and organizes every moment. But a person skilled or learned in this way, even if he acquires much “practice,” “knowledge,” or “experience” in this one, specific domain – like the scientist who knows the answer to his specific questions – would never be called “experienced” in the general sense. For “experience” proper carries the ambiguous aura of what is voluntary yet unwilling, vague yet authoritative, of what is learned, but in the unbounded, spontaneous (*espontânea*), and non-organized (*não organizado*) perpetual movement of life (*a vida*), not in the linear, systematic logic of education.

Certainly this is what is so crucial, and enduring in our understandings of “experience,” about the reference to sense perception and the unique brand of knowledge it affords (as in usage 2): knowledge by means of the senses (“por meio dos sentidos”) implies the witnessing of worldly phenomenon, of what unfolds and shows itself in part of its own accord, somewhat spontaneously and without being wholly foreseen by the mind. In sense perception we are exposed to the occurrence of what occurs, the appearing of what appears. This notion – that of the *contingency* of sense perception and the sensorial world to which it allows access – is part of the semantic core of “experience” that marks it off from concepts both far (like “speculation,” “calculation,” or “reason”) and near (like “learning,” “schooling,” and “education”).

Contrary to “experience,” “education” is more teleological. It proceeds under close watch and tight controls on the part of the individual (and, indeed, parental) will; it is directed mostly at the “mind” rather than the “body”; it is typically mediated and disseminated by all the paraphernalia of modern learning: books, papers, laptops, images, teachers, websites, and so forth; and, especially in modernity, it takes place not only “indoors” but is imbricated within massive, complex regimes of ideological institutions, social, technological, economic, political, and so on. This is what Louis Althusser understood by the notion of “Ideological State Apparatus”, of which the School, for him, was the modern Western paradigm, replacing the ideological monopoly held for centuries by the Church (Althusser, 1995, p. 269-314). *Experience* sits uncomfortably both “indoors” and within such institutions and apparatuses. It is what more often is picked up, we think, in some sort of “outside” well “beyond” their doors, “off the grid”, as we say today, in the “world”. As the *Oxford English Dictionary* (OED) tells us, “experience” names: “The actual observation of facts or events, considered as a source of knowledge”.

This definition, which again encapsulates the semantic core of our concept of “experience”, is fascinating for the presence of what appears, in this scientific or lexicographic context, as an utterly unmotivated word: the term “actual” (“the *actual* observation...”). What is this little term doing here? While it may appear anodyne, it is in fact displaying, and inscribing, an age-old conflict: an agonistic, polemical term (connoting existential reality in contrast to what is *merely* hypothetical, possible, ideal, unreal, etc.), “actual” here marks a certain distance – even a certain disdain – *vis-à-vis* an unnamed yet everywhere palpable Other: that is, those who don’t “actually” observe (or “experience”) “facts and events” *in person* or *in the flesh*, as we say, but merely hear about them, read about them, learn them on TV, see them on social media, and speculate about them in the realm of ideas, imaginations, “detached” from “life” and its “facts”. The latter – “life” – is the arcane “source of knowledge” to which “experience” alone is privy.

Thus “experience” – and the person who “is experienced” – always has a feel of the quasi-occult, of a secret worldly wisdom and attractive, stylish authority. It derives this mystique from its ex-centric position: from standing, purportedly, in conflict or in detached indifference *vis-à-vis* the regularity and impersonality of the forms of abstract, institutionalized, and rote learning instilled and required on the part of our institutions, economy, and, Adorno would say, our generally “administered” social existence or “world” (Adorno, 2001, p. 201). One might here turn to Jimi Hendrix, to his 1967 album and song “Are you experienced?” for a clear example of our idea of the privileged and even hermetic knowledge possessed by those who

"are experienced". But already in his *Discourse on the Method* Descartes wrote in sly mockery of his Jesuit schooling of the silliness of learning in books when compared to the "grand book of life" (Descartes, 1637, p. 11-12). The latter alone is the textbook of "experience".

But Descartes's critique, like the agonistic term "actual" hiding in the *OED* definition of "experience," points to an insight that stands in conflict with all the connotations of the term that have been articulated in this essay thus far. Far from being immediate, natural, or raw, "experience," as it was thus – and arguably still is – conceived, enjoyed, or decried in modernity, would have been unthinkable without (at least) two technologies, one very old and one relatively new: writing and the printing press (today we may add to these all forms of technical and digital media, whether movies, Facebook, or Instagram, which we now lambast for having alienated us from real "life" or "experience"). "Experience," that is, depends on that to which it seems so opposed. Not only is its content defined in oppositional terms to the word of education, institutions, and book learning, but the form or image of the world beyond all books – the world of "experience" – is itself conceived as: "the book of life".

Yet this relation of opposition *and* dependency, if true, is a point one might not – or not only – make along the lines of Derrida's *Of Grammatology* (1967). For Derrida, it is (only) on the basis of the written sign – of writing or media in general – that the full *presence* of the voice, the world, the body, the referent, of Being, and of Nature itself, is *imagined*, and imagined in particular as *having been there*, as existing *there* and having *preceded* what, now, appears as a dead trace over *here* (Derrida, 1967, p. 7-137). The Derridean perspective might have us accord no existence at all to "experience". But another, mitigated view is available: instead of reducing one to the imaginary projection of the other, these two fields – life and death, "experience" and its corpse-like trace, sensory immediacy and detached mediation, between which a chasm of time and a rift in ontological consistency has opened – can be thought in slightly less Derridean and reductive terms as existing side by side as disjointed yet conflicting worlds – not *two* worlds: a *plurality* of them.

This perspective maintains aspects of the Derridean deconstruction of immediacy: for we would still say that "experience" is only thinkable in relation to that with respect to which it is ex-centric (books, institutions, laws, mental foresight, and so forth). But this view also accords the field of "experience" a certain ontological integrity and reality that deconstruction would deny it. The world of writing and of books would thus not *produce* "experience" as some sort of hallucination or phantasm, some sort of nostalgic object that never really was. Nonetheless, it would still be the *relation* between writing (or media) and experience that would force the latter, now seen as utterly inextricable from this relation, to take on its specific cultural connotations and meanings – affective and semantic – rehearsed at the opening of this essay: connotations and meanings like *presence, immediacy, worldliness, sensory plenitude, life*, and so forth.

It is something of this *conflictual relation* between worlds that media theorist Marshall McLuhan arguably encapsulates, I think, in his description of the "schizophrenia" that took on unprecedented proportions in the new world opened by the invention and dissemination of Gutenberg's printing press after the 15<sup>th</sup> century – the world McLuhan called the *Gutenberg Galaxy*. "Schizophrenia," McLuhan writes, "may be a necessary consequence of literacy". Writing "split[s] apart thought and action," producing the "detrribalized individual" in ancient Greece, prototype of modern, literate, that is, schizophrenic mind, torn between a realm of actuality and one of ideas (McLuhan, 2011, p. 26).

The Gutenberg Galaxy, constituted by networks of presses, printed books, and their readers (who are also, ideally, writers and commentators themselves), is a world of schizophrenia endowed with an underlying mechanical, technological reproducibility and hence spreading through the West *en masse*. Over the centuries, with improvements in printing press technology and with increasing levels of literacy, the situation – the potential for schizophrenia – would become only more extreme. Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* (1856) is the *Don Quixote* of the modern era of mass, mechanized literacy. And Emma's tragedy points already to Proust's aesthetic pessimism in the *Recherche* (1913-1927): Proust's narrator accords ontological precedence, *vis-à-vis* the world of "experience", to writing and representational media in general. Similarly,

Emma Bovary's disappointment with the "real" world is a product of her reading, a case of mediatic schizophrenia leading, ultimately, to an atrocious death.

Emma's tragedy – the tale of a heroic (feminine) disgust for the banality of life (and of men) – stands as an ambivalent warning, and celebration, concerning the risks of confusing what are supposed to be distinct domains, that of "life" and that of "books" – the risks, that is, of what we might call "literary experience" or "experience" as mediated through literacy and books. Such a concept is inherently ambiguous – it holds together what one might rather consider distinct – and, depending on how we use it, it can be fatal: "Experience," that is, "life" itself, refuses to line up with this literary (pseudo) "experience" – and those who think otherwise are punished for thinking so.<sup>2</sup> But the very possibility of incurring this punishment, and of committing this apparent error, is what is crucial – it entails a certain reversibility of sorts, the possibility, as in Proust, of mixing up what is apparently held apart, such that "literate" or "literary experience" might take on a certain coherence, authority, and beauty never enjoyed by "experience" and "life". Emma's death, read as heroic, offers us a riddle: that of the breakdown of the divide between apparently opposed domains, the potential for the precedence accorded to one to be given to the other. On this view, perhaps it is the "world" itself that is false, not books; perhaps it was just that Charles, Emma's husband, was really a dreary bore, not that Emma's expectations for life were overly idealist and romantic. But her death straightens things out, in one sense: she dies because such reversibility is an *error*. The "real world" takes its revenge.

While Emma Bovary offers a paradigmatic example of the ambiguities, and potential risks, entailed in the idea of "literate" or "literary experience," the feeling of schizophrenia or disjunction, grounded in the divide between the world of "experience" and literary media and their practices (reading, studying, writing), must have already been strong in the 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> centuries, especially with the new widespread availability of books of ancient, that is, "Pagan" philosophy and literature. For the Christian reader, a philosophy like Stoicism (to invoke a major, contentious example from the time), must have seemed either refreshingly or dangerously oblivious of *the* grand cataclysm that defined humanity and human "experience": the Fall of Man. The debate on human nature and its epistemic capacities, which raged in the age of the Reformation, the 17<sup>th</sup>-century developments in modern science and method, and during the Enlightenment, was in part shaped by the renewed vigor of ancient perspectives – mediated by printed texts – that seemed to set humans back before the corruption of Nature by sin.

With the development of the printed book and the educational, literary, and scholarly institutions surrounding it, the conflict between "experience" and literacy became constitutive of a certain "experience" of life and selfhood, one for which McLuhan's term "schizophrenia" serves as a useful heuristic. Two examples, one from the heyday of the Gutenberg Galaxy – Montaigne's *Essays* (1580-95) –, the other from the 20<sup>th</sup> century – Sartre's *Nausea* (1938) –, allow us to bring this conflict into view and to begin to suggest that it has tacitly shaped not only the form but the content of modern literature and philosophy. While both texts formulate this epochal conflict of contrary terms, the question of the possibility and actuality of "literary" or "literate experience" – something standing beyond the apparent duality of "experience" and books (and media in general) – is also at stake. This question is complex: it concerns not only whether "experience" mediated by reading and writing contributes to or has some purchase on "Experience" per se – this is Emma's question –, but also whether the very consideration and performance of this problem, *in writing*, does not itself also constitute forms of "experience". In other words, the question of "literate" or "literary experience" is not present only in terms of content – in terms of the explicit question of the relationship or conflict between texts and experience. The question is also present in terms of form: these *texts* thematize the relationship between texts and experience *and* take on non-conventional, and non-linear, forms of philosophical discussion

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Rancière's famous reading: "Why Emma Bovary Had to Be Killed" (2008, p. 233-48).

(Montaigne) and narrative (Sartre) that formally integrate the qualities they accord to “experience” and “existence”.

### Michel de Montaigne – Essaying “Experience”

There is a fifth usage of “experiência” listed in the *Dicionário Houaiss da Língua Portuguesa*: after the senses cited above – those of (1) science, (2) philosophy, (3) experience in general, and (4) specific skill or education – we read this: “5. tentativa, ensaio, prova”. This notion of trial or “ensaio” is important for understanding the texts of Montaigne, who conceived his short and often digressive pieces – his *Essays* – as “trials” or “tests”, *in writing*, of himself, his life, and of his judgment (Montaigne, 2014, p. 1079). This again points us to the equivocal realm of “literary experience” evoked before, the ambiguous place beyond the binary conflict of books and experience. While most of Montaigne’s *Essays* deal somewhat with this conflict, the most important for exploring all these concepts is likely “*De l’expérience*” (“On Experience”). The essay’s title itself, given its textual form, is intriguing: it is an “essay” (*ensaio*) – an “experience”, “trial”, or an “attempt” – “on” or “about”, or “drawn from” “experience” (“*De l’expérience*”). It is not only a text *about* experience, then; it is an *experience of experience*. We will see below how this doubling – *an experience of or about experience* – is crucial for grasping how Montaigne, distinct from Flaubert or Proust, helps us to understand the nature and potentialities of “literary experience”.

The culminating text of the *Essays* – which occupies the ambiguous position of being a climactic manifesto for the whole of Montaigne’s project *and* a text that, in itself, both performs and states the very instability of notions of wholeness, totality, or closure when applied to the *Essays* –, the essay “On Experience” singles out the major forms of epistemic, ethical, theoretical, and ultimately textual authority obtaining at Montaigne’s time (Law, Medicine or Science, Theology,<sup>3</sup> and Philosophy) and subjects them to critique on behalf of a judgment grounded, ultimately, in various forms of “experience”. Montaigne’s text offers a broad indictment of all abstractions, laws, rules, or general statements (propositions) thought to be extracted from, and intended to be applied to, the world. But such statements were of course not floating around in the air or in some immaterial, Platonic realm of ideas: they were, and are, inextricably tied to the materiality of writing and printed books.

Against such statements, and their textual media, what “experience” properly reveals is that the world (Nature) is made of utter singularities: things, events, and actions that are more dissimilar than they are similar (Montaigne, 2014, p. 1065). This is the *metaphysics of dissimilarity* – of the diverse, of difference – underlying Montaigne’s notion of “experience”: it is a metaphysics decreeing: (i) that every thing, event, or action is a case of its own kind (there are as many genera as there are things and actions, as many types as there are examples); and, hence, (ii) that every general conclusion we might wish to draw from, or impose on, the facts and events of the world, does violence to the difference forming the very substance of all things. This is a fundamentally nominalist position, one that dissociates the realms of concepts or words – and *a fortiori* of texts and books – from the plural, unbounded, and largely unknowable field of “experience”.

In contrast to this field and its metaphysics of dissimilarity, the whole realm of abstract judgments and propositions that is stored, mediated, and proliferated by writing and texts takes on one of its paradigmatic forms – in Montaigne’s essay – in positive law. No doubt it was in part during his own time training in law and acting as a judge that Montaigne developed some of his skepticism concerning the applicability of laws to individual, radically individual, “cases”. The metaphysics of dissimilarity, we see, forbids the possibility of an event or action ever totally matching another, of there every being *two* “cases” of the same type, that is, that would entirely fall under the same law.

In response to such diversity of conditions, facts, and intentions, jurists do the opposite of what, for Montaigne, they should. Instead of realizing the gap between law and “experience” and hence entrusting adjudication to punctual, individual, case-by-case acts of

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<sup>3</sup> Montaigne, likely wishing to avoid controversy, only touches in passing on theology (on Luther to be precise).

judgment – the best that humans could ever do –, jurists undertake to multiply laws, and to increase their clauses and complexity, in attempt to account for *all* circumstances, events, and eventualities (Montaigne, 2014, p. 1065-6). Not only does this proliferation of laws and their complexity foment disputes and conflicts of interpretation, Montaigne says: it is also *in essence* an absurd undertaking, destined to fail before it even begins. This becomes clear when he rails against the excrescence of laws in his native France:

For we have in France more laws than the rest of the world put together, more laws than would be needed to regulate all of Epicurus's worlds. [...] What did our legislators gain from choosing a hundred thousand different cases and specific facts, and joining to them a hundred thousand different laws? This number has no proportion with the infinite diversity of human actions. The multiplication of our inventions will never approach the variation of examples. Add to them a hundred times as many: still it will never happen that, from events to come, a single one is found that, among this huge number of thousands of events chosen and recorded, would fit with and resemble so perfectly another that there would not be some additional circumstance and difference still remaining, something that would require us to employ distinct consideration and judgment. There is little relation between our actions, which are in perpetual mutation, and laws, which are fixed and immobile (Montaigne, 2014, p. 1066).<sup>4</sup>

The strivings of French legislators offer a striking image of the vanity of human reason. Underlying such attempts stands the basic misguided projection of the qualities, and ontology, of an inherently finite collection of stable, and well-defined laws and concepts onto an unbounded field that is characterized by precisely the opposite characteristics: infinity, mutability, variability, and so forth. The absence of a common measure between the two realms, which Montaigne evokes in quantitative terms, bespeaks this ontological, metaphysical distinction. The very attempt to make sense and judge the world based on precedent is thus always doomed to miss the mark. The field and evidence of “experience” decries the impossibility – the inherent injustice and illegality – of law.<sup>5</sup>

To the reader, Montaigne's critique of lawmakers might conjure up the quasi-Biblical prospect of a colossal library of books of laws, each tome with indefinitely many pages, forming a labyrinthine code of rules, directives, and decrees: a monument of bureaucracy built through generations and generations of misguided mental labor. The library forever grows and grows, but it never approaches the totality and comprehension that its underlying intention seeks: for, between finitude and infinity there is, as Montaigne says, no proportion. And since every text or law, once produced, becomes an opaque object itself in need of commentary and interpretation – a text in need of more texts –, the library grows in cacophonous, Byzantine complexity. There is extreme diversity here, and there is indefinite proliferation of complexity, but it is only the ironic analogue or allegory of the true infinite diversity of nature and human actions (Montaigne, 2014, p. 1066-7). The Tower of Babel, which this image recasts, is the monstrous mausoleum of human intellect in its misguided attempts to comprehend nature and humanity.

Law thus provides the clearest image, I think, for the other sources of ultimately textual authority at stake in “On Experience”, like Medicine and ethical Philosophy. For not only does a given positive law attempt, in the form of writing, to capture a certain state of affairs – its descriptive ambition – but it also attempts to define the correct (juridical) procedure to follow when faced with these circumstances – its prescriptive ambition. If the first ambition is, on Montaigne's view, always bound to fail given the nature of Nature as disclosed in “experience,” and its recalcitrance to intellection, words, and texts, then the prescriptive ambitions of the law are, likewise, all too imperfectly realized. Medicine and Ethics, then, fit the model underlying the Law: each offers the illusion of total comprehension of their domain of objects and cases,

<sup>4</sup> Here, as everywhere, translations from the French are my own.

<sup>5</sup> One must follow the laws of one's community, Montaigne thinks, not because they are just per se, but because, simply, they are the obtaining laws. Their observation is the condition of both social stability and the maintenance of what one must desire to preserve: freedom (Montaigne, 2014, p. 1071-2).

and hence the comfort of authoritative prescription – the comfort, that is, for the reader or patient, of being told what to do and how to act. Both Medicine and Philosophy give rise to a multiplication of texts and commentaries (the very scholarly production that defined the Renaissance). Each easily falls victim, then, to the same critique as that exacted on law.

The question of Ethics and Medicine – since both more proximately concern subjectivity than does the Law – places us before a paradox in Montaigne's notion of "experience" (and "nature"). On the one hand, human subjectivity, corporeality, and actions, like nature's objects and events, are infinitely diverse, shifting, and unique, forbidding the derivation or induction of general rules or conclusions: "a relation derived from experience is always fallible and imperfect" (Montaigne, 2014, p. 1070). On the other hand, Montaigne wants to claim *positive* epistemic value for subjective "experience". "I study myself more than any other subject," he writes, "That's my metaphysics, my physics" (Montaigne, 2014, p. 1072). Self-observation, in other words, is a fertile field of *science* from which one should be able to derive all that is necessary for living well and for bodily health: "[the experience] that we have of ourselves... is certainly sufficient for teaching us what is necessary for us. [...] From the experience that I have of myself, I find what's necessary to become wise, as long as I'm a good student" (Montaigne, 2014, p. 1072-1073; see p. 1079-1780 and p. 1089, on medicine).

But a partial resolution to this paradox is already offered in self-"experience" as Montaigne sees it. Yes, there are stable aspects of one's *natural*, embodied existence – its habits and errors, its wants and its needs –, which are disclosed through "experience"; Montaigne details them with relish, and stresses their value for bodily health. But the general *epistemic* payoff of "experience" remains more or less *negative*, namely, it teaches us to generally suspect prescriptive and propositional notions, conclusions, and affirmative language. "Experience", that is, is critique and self-critique. It entails the reduction of the putatively certain to the probable and of the probable, finally, to the ephemeral: what seems likely now will no longer obtain with time. Crucially, this injection of temporality and flux into the field of concepts – the skeptical lesson of "experience" – is required also with regard to oneself and what seems like the certitudes concerning how one "is". The idea that we have grasped the *being* of something – even of ourselves – is a product of mediocrity and weakness, of mental laziness, says Montaigne:

It is only a certain weakness that makes us contented with what others or with what we ourselves have already found in this hunt for knowledge; someone more capable [*habile*] wouldn't settle for such things. [...] It is a sign of a limited mind, or of fatigue, when it is contented. No noble mind [*esprit généreux*] stops in itself [...] its pursuits are without end, and without form [...]. It is an irregular, perpetual movement, without master, and without goal or end (Montaigne, 2014, p. 1068).

The stability of ideas, and our faith in their transparent relation to reality, are contrary to "experience". The latter instead ordains that we doubt even about what we ourselves hold to be most certain, that we do not allow our minds to slouch and get comfortable with apparent certitudes, but keep its proper movement going. Here alone, in the "perpetual" and "irregular" motion of the mind, stopping for an instant only to go past itself, wandering and digressing without foresight, definite use or end – without social function and without teleology – can human existence approach something of the form or metaphysics of nature in its perpetual movement and infinite dissimilarity.

This description of the "noble" (*généreux*) movement of the mind – which consists, we see, not in mastery and concentration, not in linear logic of reasoning and deduction, but in a sort of *active passivity*, in the act of relinquishing control such that thoughts can take course of themselves, not systematically but digressively, without the censorship of the logic of contradiction – is, we recognize, also a description of the ideal movement of *the essay form* itself as Montaigne conceived and practiced it. "Literary experience", then, is most true when it not only discloses the skeptical lesson of "experience" – the metaphysics of the dissimilar or of the



Baroque *perpetuum mobile* – but also assumes its very form, the form and temporality of Nature, itself mirrored in the natural movement, and innate grandeur, of a free, uncensored mind.<sup>6</sup>

Since dissimilarity, difference, and flux constitute the field of experience *per se*, this field is not amenable to knowledge in the typical, positive and enduring sense – the sense of Science. Instead, “experience” takes place in or as the repeated *deception* of our assumptions of regularity or similarity across diverse moments or things. “Experience” is the discovery of difference where one might wish to see sameness. If this is true, then the conflict between philosophy (or science, or medicine, or law), on the one hand, and the world of singularities and the fluid moments of selfhood, on the other, would be an extreme, even paradigmatic form of “experience” *per se*: an extreme – because mediated and technologically-enhanced by writing and books – version of the basic, nominalist disjunction between idea and event, action, or object, which lies at the heart of “experience”.

Perhaps, in other words, it is the very proliferation of texts and books, of assertions and prescriptions, which brings into view the striking aspects of “experience”, that is, the nature of the dissimilar. Here we return to the question of dependence in opposition evoked at the outset of this essay. For we see how the very characteristics of “experience” rely on their distance from its various others or contraries: the dissimilar stands in opposition to our expectations, calculations, ratiocinations, texts, and institutions; the dissimilar is what departs from what we expect, assume, and already know. But we also see how the very act of writing about this all, in Montaigne, delineates two “literary” forms of “experience”: first, the very act of critiquing or showing the failings of textual and abstract authority constitutes, if not experience *per se*, then at least a lesson in experience and worldliness – a function performed by much literature. Second, in the case of Montaigne, the essay itself claims to the status of being, in writing, a, or the, form of experience: – an “experience” of the mind or self as it digresses beyond the limits of preparation, foresight, ends, and projects. The digressive, open-ended, and intensely subjective aspects of this form of writing serve to open up a space for the “experience” of the radically singular both on the part of the writer and the reader.

In both cases the lesson to be learned is inherently ambiguous: the lesson is that there is no *lesson* to be learned at all. In order for a coherent lesson to exist and be communicable, a degree of utter similarity across different events or actions would need to obtain. But Montaigne has excluded this possibility. From now on, the best stance one might have towards life is one of openness to the singularity of every action or event. That the mind and its notions are rudimentary and only grope imperfectly at the nature of reality means that we shouldn’t expect too much from what we think, know, or expect.

If we can achieve this skeptical, disabused attitude, the payoff is a less rigid and more dynamic way of living. This openness to the diversity of “life” thus has an affinity with the ethics Montaigne offers us in his essay, which embraces the pulsing diversity of desires and pleasures, the particularity of one’s embodied existence and the diverse sorts of satisfactions it affords. Against this more or less Epicurean attitude – reflected, again, in the metaphysics of “experience” –, philosophies that disdain earthly goods and pleasures in favor of less worldly things – like the contemplation of truth or the practice of virtue – would seem like cults of the dead: in the place of the variety of life, they worship schematic (and textual) images of things. Idealism is a form of death in life.

The lesson of Montaigne’s version of “literary experience”, then, is that all reading and learning discloses only schematic, vague ideas. The essay is a text that tells us to put down most if not all texts, an “experience” of reading that leaves us feeling that we’re reading too much. Shouldn’t we put down books for good and embrace, beyond the extant forms of culture, a form of life similar to what Walter Benjamin, in his 1933 text “Experience and Poverty”, would call a new, “positive” form of “barbarism”? (Benjamin, 1999, p. 732).<sup>7</sup> The paradigmatic function “literate” or “literary

<sup>6</sup> Cf. Jeanneret, 1997.

<sup>7</sup> To Benjamin’s essay, written in 1933 between the World Wars, one should compare Montaigne’s own discussion of “barbarism” in “Des cannibales” (Montaigne, 2014, p. 202-14).

experience" would thus be critical and skeptical: it depicts the conflict between our ideas (or texts) and the world or it takes on a form that is open-ended, unfinished, even openly self-contradictory, and so on: the text itself, like Montaigne's essay, becomes (an) "experience".

But the question again appears: is "experience," as something both extra- and intra-textual, thinkable on its own? Does it not rely on what it is not to be what it is? Without the abstract assertions of law, medicine, and philosophy – without the various sources and institutions of knowing and prescribing to which it can stand opposed – "experience" and the "essay" form – Nature herself, as Montaigne saw her – cannot exist. We need the filter of what "experience" is not in order to see it, to have it, as such.

### Jean-Paul Sartre – Existence, and *Nausea*, beyond the library

Montaigne was a learned (anti)Humanist working in a personal library of printed books, experimenting with a new style and form of writing that had – and maintained over the centuries – a privileged relationship to skepticism. Though separated by some 400 years from the *Essays*, Sartre's idiosyncratic major novel, *Nausea*, has at its center a striking affinity with Montaigne's situation: the crisis of a historian toiling in a library. Moreover, for this text Sartre chose the form of a fictional, incomplete, and opaque personal diary, a form that, like Montaigne's essay, makes some attempt to avoid the linear, orderly movement of narrative or treatise, and to instead focus on fragments of the protagonist's – Roquentin's – bizarre crisis. The conflict in Montaigne of "experience" (or Nature) and various sources of textual, intellectual, and verbal authority is here replayed as that between an inherently nameless, meaningless, and directionless flux – "existence" – and the language, texts, and other media that project onto it an imaginary, teleological logic.

Antoine Roquentin is a historian, a researcher occupied with writing the life of a certain Marquis de Rollebon. The library of Bouville, the locus of books, history and knowledge, is the backdrop of his epistemic drama, where the crisis his journal describes reaches its paroxysm in an unsettling discovery. Writing and print are the media by which the past comes to be, Roquentin discovers: the past does not generate or stand behind historical writing, language does not represent what really happened, but vice versa – language and writing produce the past as imaginary. Faced with the peculiar alienness of words written by his pen, Roquentin realizes that, no more than the mental act thought to be at the "origin" of these marks, the past does not *exist*, but is imagined by means of the signs written or printed on pages, which, alone, exist (Sartre, 1938, p. 139-141). The coherent order of temporality collapses, as only the present can lay claim to existence: "The true nature of the present was revealed: it was everything that exists, and everything that wasn't present didn't exist. The past didn't exist. Not at all" (Sartre, 1938, p. 139).

*Meaning* succumbs to the same fate as the past in the library, as written words are stripped of their "sense" (Sartre, 1938, p. 141). Roquentin comes face to face with the arbitrary nature of (written) signs – how, in themselves, they have no inherent sense, and no natural relationship to referents, and are nothing but meaningless matter to which we accord meaning. This disillusionment regarding the non-existence of both the past and given or natural meaning leads Roquentin to an existential revelation. From the meaninglessness of written signs, Roquentin proceeds to see that he, too – his very life, his body, and actions –, had been only "a means" or "medium" for the imaginary perpetuation of Rollebon's life:

M. de Rollebon was my associate: he needed me in order to be and I needed him so as to not feel my being. Me, I provided the raw matter, this matter of which I had so much to spare, with which I didn't know what to do: existence, my existence. He, his part, was to represent. He stood in front of me, and had usurped my life so as to represent to me his own. I no longer noticed that I existed, I didn't exist in myself, but in him; it was for him that I ate, for him that I breathed, each of my movements had its sense outside, there, right in front of me, in him; I no longer saw my hand that traced the letters on the paper, nor even the phrase that I had written – but, behind, beyond the paper, I saw the Marquis, who had demanded this gesture, this gesture which extended, consolidated his

existence. I was only a means for giving him life, he was my reason for being, he had saved me from myself. What am I going to do now? (Sartre, 1938, p. 143).

As Roquentin discovers it, his existence is like the meaningless mark on a page to which nothing, no meaning, is *intrinsically* given. In other words, *he becomes the prosopopoeia of the written sign itself*, now conscious of its perennial submission – which was also its bliss – to that which, not being present, never existed. The body, gestures, all of language: everything *through which* meaning is made now comes into focus, having been separated from its assumed “sense” or “reason for being”. This hyperawareness of the irreducible materiality of things and of the self – Roquentin now sees himself as “raw matter” for Rollebon’s “representation” –, is what Sartre calls *nausea*, the affective disclosure of “existence”. Having lost faith in writing, Roquentin plummets to the plane of contingency, of *existence*: the existential crisis, that is, is linked to a fundamental disillusionment with respect to language in general and texts in particular. In existence, the past has no ontological or causal weight, and the future goals or ends we project in front of us – like writing the life of an historical figure – are likewise seen to be imaginary. The present stands alone, inexplicably, arbitrarily, related to what came before, and what will come next.

A similar distinction to that between existence and the merely imaginary entities that we often allow to organize our lives comes to the fore in another famous part of Sartre’s novel. There, Roquentin distinguishes between “living” and “telling”. Here’s his description of the former:

When one is living, nothing happens. The setting changes, people enter and exit, that’s it. There are never any beginnings. Days add themselves to days without rhyme or reason, in an interminable, monotonous addition. [...] There is no end either: one never leaves a woman, a friend, a city all at once. And everything seems the same... At certain moments – rarely – one takes stock, one realizes that one has gotten stuck with a woman, involved a nasty story. But the realization lasts only an instant. After that, the march begins again, and we go back to adding up hours and days. Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday. April, May, June. 1924, 1925, 1926. That’s living (Sartre, 1938, p. 64-65).

Note the major characteristics or predicates of this description of “living”: blind, random addition is the only form of (dis)order of events, against, that is, any semblance of logical sequence or narrative order. There are “never any beginnings”: in other words, no events or “adventures,” as Sartre also calls them, ever take place at all. And there is no closure or definitive ends. There is a sense of radical contingency, of a lack of control, will, or foresight, which brings us close to Montaigne’s “experience”. And what *Nausea* terms “existence” is even closer to “experience” than “living”. The famous scene of the root, where Roquentin tries in vain to speak the qualities of the mysterious thing, seems to communicate the same metaphysics of infinite, unthinkable diversity or dissimilarity that Montaigne found in nature.

The contrary of “living” (*vivre*) is what Sartre terms “telling” or “narrating” (*raconter*), which clearly situates us in the realm of literature in general and narrative in particular. “Narrating” is an unfolding of language defined by a tendency to present an illusion of a necessary sequence or teleology:

But when one recounts life, everything changes; but it’s a change that no one notices: the proof is that we speak of true stories. As if there could ever be true stories; events occur in one way and we recount them in the opposite way. One seems to begin at the beginning... In truth it’s with the end that one begins. [...] And the tale proceeds backwards: the moments no longer pile up randomly on each other, they are snatched up by the end of the story, which attracts them all to it, as does each one the one that precedes it. [...] I wanted the moments of my life to follow one another and be ordered like those of a life that one remembers. One might as well try to catch time by its tail (Sartre, 1938, p. 65-66).

This inversion – even per-version, the reversal – of the flux of time in existence is what the journal form of Sartre’s novel, like Roquentin’s crisis, undoes. Like Montaigne’s essay, which seeks to avoid, in writing, the typical systematic, and non-contradictory development of ideas or concepts, Roquentin’s journal tries to recount events while not following a teleological order.

But these similarities aside, Roquentin's attitude towards "existence" is crucially distinct from Montaigne's relation to "experience". Whereas, with Montaigne, we are encouraged to openly embrace the diversity and instability of life and selfhood, as a rich source of events, phenomena, and pleasures not to be disdained or fled, Roquentin's relationship to this "experience" is somber: nausea – not wonder or delight – is the affective tone of existence. Indeed, while the crisis in the library reads almost like a profane revelation of an ultimate truth, as if writing and texts, with their imaginary entities and illusions of coherence, are now to be wholly avoided or at least treated with Montaignian skepticism, Roquentin in fact spends much of the novel trying to avoid the truth of contingency he has discovered. This attempt at evasion is carried out through an absorption in aesthetic objects, which, in Sartre's book, share with narrative or historical texts the illusion of a necessary unfolding, of an end that commands a particular narrative and a unique beginning: that is, which confer an illusion of Being, in lieu of existence.

In Roquentin's case, the aesthetic redemption or "justification" of existence, to cite Nietzsche (Nietzsche, 2000, p. 38), is most successful in the case of music. Sartre's novel contains several scenes of listening to Jazz songs played on the phonograph, which seems to temporarily cure Roquentin of his existential nausea. The acoustic's irresistible surround-effect, which envelops the listener like a warm blanket and whose rhythms pulse throughout his body, brings about a total change in affective atmospheric tone. But its real force lies in this music's organization of time: the seemingly perfect, inevitable, and necessary unfolding of a song – from beginning, middle, to end – stands in blatant contrast to the random accumulation of instants in existence for Roquentin. Its sequential development is rendered all the more stable and fixed, in the novel, by its underlying mechanism: the song, recorded on a disc played on a phonograph, unfolds with mechanical precision. But here again, we are led to wonder whether the predicates of "experience" (or "existence") are not in a secret inextricable relation of dependence with that to which "experience" or existence stands in opposition. That is, if it weren't for writing and aesthetic objects – if it weren't for the perfection of mechanically reproduced music – would "existence", as Sartre understood it, be thinkable as such?

On the background of the novel's crisis of writing and meaning, however, the pop-music remedy leads to a very ambiguous conclusion. At the end of the novel – for there is an *end* of this text, and it is closely related to the conclusion of Proust's *Recherche* – Roquentin decides to write the novel of his life. To cite Sartre's *The Imaginary* (1940), Roquentin chooses "*une évasion perpétuelle*" of existence, a flight back into the imaginary from which he had emerged (Sartre, 1986, pp. 260-261). Jazz music has negated an essential discovery; music has here performed the role that Adorno considered modern bourgeois music's most noxious effect: revolutionary discontent – the discovery of existence as such – is quelled (Kalinak, 2010, p. 25). Music, that is, has drugged Roquentin out of nausea; and now, fascinated by the force of aesthetic experience, he goes back to the act, and medium, with which he was occupied when he had his crisis: writing. The only difference, one might say, is his new awareness of the fictional quality of writing's contents: from writing a historical narrative Roquentin decides to write a literary one.

### **Conclusion – Experience or literary experience**

The sort of "literary experience" Sartre's novel offers is, then, extremely ambivalent. On the one hand, the textual form of the fictional journal contains some strikingly virtuosic exercises in phenomenological description, passages in which Sartre comes as close as possible to describing the flux of perception, sensation, and thought in "existence". Indeed, such passages might lead us to wonder about how much phenomenology *per se*, beginning with Husserl, relies on a tacitly pursued critique of textual authority and book learning, and on a metaphysics of "existence" that might find its older precedent, for example, in Montaigne's early modern "experience". On the other hand, in terms of the *content* of Sartre's book, and against this formal dimension, Roquentin appears to betray experience or "existence" – to willfully turn his back on what he has discovered – in favor of an older sort of aesthetic redemption. We might wish to ask, why? Is experience or existence, with its radical instability and lack of inherent order,

justification, or meaning, simply unbearable for us moderns? Is it too fleeting to be of any worth or weight? Is the radical diversity and qualitative complexity of both natural and everyday things – like roots and tramway seats – so divergent from what our ideas and words take them to be that, when we perceive or experience the discrepancy they become uncanny, terrifying monsters?

If read in light of Sartre's existentialist philosophy of *Being and Nothingness* (1943), Roquentin's decision becomes an example of "bad faith", the refusal to accept the fluid ontology of consciousness and existence (Sartre, 1976, pp. 81-106). Rather than authentic existence, he attempts to flee this instability into the illusions of Being provided by language and various representational media. As this was the decision also of Emma Bovary and of Proust's protagonist in the *Recherche*, one might be led to wonder if there is not a historical, sociological logic underlying the striking divergence in attitudes towards "experience" between Montaigne and these modern characters and authors. Is there, in other words, something about *capitalist society* that has impoverished "experience" to the extent that, in fact, it is not there, but rather in art or books, in the media imaginary, that we might find our sources of admiration, wonder, and pleasure? How was it possible, that is, that (1) Montaigne, in his time, could be so sure that books and essentially all affirmations on the part of human reason and intelligence were forms of impoverished and repressive "experience"? and that (2) Roquentin, in the 1930s, could think so diametrically otherwise?

In any case, after Montaigne – who made the inaugural, skeptical gesture in separating "experience" from its others –, it has been one of the most important functions of modern "literary experience" to illustrate, even embody, a certain conflict of worlds. Displaying the tendency for our ideas or experience to betray and deceive us, has remained essential to the sort of writing that takes us into that ambiguous – and possibly imaginary – field of life we call "experience".

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