

## Sartre's restorative conception of the narrative

Bianca Spohr\*

University of São Paulo, Institute of Psychology, São Paulo, SP, Brazil

**Abstract:** The need for transmission imposes itself in every generation. However, the issue of the narrative remains and is renewed at every dawn: the borders between genres, the documentary limits, the narrative choices, the narrators, the readers. Such theme might seem odd to Sartre, but not only do I situate it in the heart of his thinking, but also claim its restorative potential as a an instrument of current knowledge. This work seeks to follow the traces of this Sartre, inventor of narrative forms, showing that, since *La Nausée*, he did not hesitate to put into brackets the genres to propose new forms, more consistent with his experiences and reflections. Alongside the *Carnets de la drôle de guerre*, *Les Mots* and *L'Idiot de la famille*, the effort made in *La Nausée* shows that, from the fundamental intertwining of life and work, leaps a restorative conception of narrative as mediator of existential transformation.

**Keywords:** narrative, Sartre, philosophy, life, existential metamorphosis.

### Introduction

The interest in linking texts so different and distant in time of each other seems obvious. But perhaps the effort of this work is precisely showing the *why*. *La Nausée*, the *Carnets*, *Les Mots* and *Flaubert*<sup>1</sup> represent, it is possible to say, *all* of Sartre, ranging from themes, forms, problems, and outputs. And above all because they are unique regarding form, they are innovative regarding the way they present themselves: a novel that is not only a novel, an intimate diary that is public in character, an autobiography that cheats chronology, a biography that is philosophy, novel and method.

I propose, then, to displace the reflection regarding form (method) that seems to initially set in the massive biographic (*Baudelaire*, *Mallarmé*, *Saint Genet*<sup>2</sup> and *Flaubert*), for these four texts, named for now rather bluntly: a novel, an intimate diary, an autobiography and a biography. This displacement confronts us with different genres (forms) and provides us with texts written in several and crucial periods of Sartre's life. Without crossing life with work, such as Sartre himself intended, perhaps it might not be possible to find the point at which the living movement of man-writer relates with the text-form that results from this. And, in the case that concerns us, each of these books contains within it a deep and complex sample of that which was Sartre's effort as a writer.

What this reflective effort is and which narrative conception results therein is what we will try to show.

\* Corresponding address: biancaspoehr@gmail.com

1 The titles, as follows, translated to English alongside publication year: *Nausea* (1938); the complete title in French is *Carnets de la drôle de guerre* and was translated as *Quiet moments in a War* (1981); *The Words* (1964); in the original *L'Idiot de la famille* translated as *The Family Idiot* (1971-2).

2 *Baudelaire* (1947), *Mallarmé: or the poet of nothingness* (1986), and *Saint Genet: actor and martyr* (1952).

### Between adventures and misadventures

Sartre used to say that the first period of his life as a young adult had been a phase of optimism, the time when he was "a thousand Socrates" (Sartre, 2010b, p. 355). Those were the years of the *École*<sup>3</sup>, from 1921 to 1929, when at last he had his *camarades* with whom he could share, and when he thought of nothing but writing: "I wanted to write, that was never in question" (Sartre, 2010b, p. 354). He believed that this confidence came from his childhood, from the idea that working well would be enough to reach the glory that was reserved to be his: "my grandfather raised me in the retrospective illusion" (Sartre, 2010a, p. 108). In 1929, however, he left the *École*, a friendly and pleasant environment to live in the solitude of a provincial professor, "suddenly I became a Socrates" (Sartre, 2010a, p. 358).

It is the beginning of a crisis that would last years, this passage to adulthood, "at 32 years old, I felt old as the world. How far it was, this great man's life that I had promised myself" (Sartre, 2010b, p. 358). And if the "morality of salvation by art" (Sartre, 2010b, p. 360) still guided his footsteps, he was left to doubt this supposed salvation and that which might be defined as the art. Gradually and belatedly, he would come to discover that "life was unique" and that "we turn to ourselves, we find that we are responsible for what we live and that it is irredeemable" (Sartre, 2010b, p. 358). Here are the first glimpses of the notion of contingency he would extensively develop in the following period.

Sartre already knew that "a life [was] soft and pasty, unjustifiable and contingent" (Sartre, 2010b, p. 361), but he felt that the events of his life followed the course of a story with an already known ending: he would be a big man. It was so in his biography, he judged: "it was this disappointment I expressed regarding the purpose of the adventure

3 *École Normale Supérieure* (ENS), where he studied philosophy.

in *La Nausée*” (Sartre, 2010b, p. 363). This idea of “a great life” or “biography” that Sartre brought from his childhood resembled the career idea as something you do for yourself, you needed only put it into practice, since fate was already set in stone. And the curious thing is that “all this, I said, was never really put into question”, that is, “the façade remained” (Sartre, 2010b, p. 362), because “I was sunk to the bowels of that which I called biographical illusion, which consisted in believing that a life lived may seem like a life narrated” (Sartre, 2010b, p. 363).

The drama of *La Nausée* would certainly not be badly summed up with this little story, with Sartre himself saying that “it was Roquentin” that “showed it in him, without condescension, the plot of [his] life” (Sartre, 2010a, p. 137). Now, *La Nausée* was Sartre’s first novel, published only in 1938, after a gestation period of about ten years. The book is, actually, the diary of Roquentin, kept during his stay in Bouville, a provincial town where he conducts a research for the biography he is writing about the Marquis de Rollebon. Sartre worked since 1926 in his *factum sur la contingence*<sup>4</sup> and reflected on his theory of “man alone” (Cohen-Solal, 1985). Though, it would be in 1933 that he would find his former colleague Raymond Aron coming from Berlin, excited with his recent philosophical discoveries: Husserl’s phenomenology. It is the famous meeting of the *abricot* cocktail! (Cohen-Solal, 1985). At once, Sartre found himself fascinated, and in the following year went to Germany for a period of study that, even when returning to Paris, lasted a few years.

The 1930s are the “philosophical years” and also the “year of his *factum sur la contingence*”. Sartre would study Husserl, write philosophy (*La transcendance de l’Ego, L’imagination, La Psyché, L’imaginaire*<sup>5</sup>) and will not tire of rewriting his novel. This philosopher-writer Sartre, unable to choose or abandon any of these fields, is the Sartre that will remain. The effort not to separate literature and philosophy and all works around this issue will make of him, from this point on, an inventor of forms.

*La Nausée*, at the time of its publication, was welcomed unanimously as “a literary event of the first importance”, and was compared to Kafka’s novels. It is among the most studied contemporary texts and among the most widely read by the general public. Its original character would be both in content and in form, since it brought new life to the French novel (Contat and Rybalka, 1981). Sartre himself continued preferring *La Nausée* to other texts, he used to say that therein, he put the deepest part of himself, at the same time that he revealed “an insurmountable truth about the condition of man” (Contat and Rybalka, 1981, p.1669); i.e., for him, the contingency was “an experience situated in the border of concept and feeling” (Contat and Rybalka, 1981, p.1658) and means to express this truth needed to be forged. Since tradition seemed

unable to support this novelty, he would invent it. Thus, it is like *La Nausée* operated a “passage to concrete” since Sartre inscribed the philosophical idea of contingency into the historical context of his own lived experience (Contat and Rybalka, 1981). The transformation of the *factum*<sup>6</sup> in a novel then opens a “new genre”, a “mix of novel and philosophical mediation” or “the input of novel-like enigma with a philosophical problem” (Contat and Rybalka, 1981).

The theme of the adventure portrayed in *La Nausée* resends the idea nurtured by Sartre in childhood of “wanting to live like in a novel”. In books, life would always be more interesting and have a happier ending. And, even when the hero suffers a variety of misfortunes, he would always be rewarded with a beautiful maiden who would scare the bitterness away and bring fortune back. From a childhood stuffed with books, the little Poulou<sup>7</sup> gladly cultivated his loneliness, imagining himself a hero of such tasty adventures. The novels offered the lonely boy a “role model”, a set of certainties, as opposed “to the infinite dispersion of the living” (Sartre, 1981, p. 1761). So will Roquentin realize, at the end of his journey, that narrate life itself is a trap, because there are no “true stories”! “The events follow one direction and we narrate in reverse” (Sartre, 1981, p. 49).

Therefore, with *La Nausée*, Sartre seems to report the biographical illusion (Sartre, 2010b, p. 363), the old “confusion between life lived and life narrated” (Macé, 2007, p. 89): want to live life as if narrating it would be like wanting to live it as a mode of adventure, of the novel, of the story that has a known ending (without fail, a happy one), in other words, a mystification. Thus, life and narrative would be condemned to deal with an impossible distance to cross. For Roquentin, there would be “a fundamental estrangement between life and narrative” (Macé, 2007, p. 88):

so that the most banal of events becomes an adventure, it is necessary and sufficient that we narrate it. That is what eludes people: a man is always a storyteller, he lives surrounded by his stories and the stories of others, sees everything that happens to him through them; and tries to live his life as if narrating it. But one must choose: live or narrate. (Sartre, 1981, p. 48)

Roquentin is soaked by the generosity of the recently discovered existence and seems to keep a diary in an attempt to return to his life a certain stability that would precisely come from the narrative continuity found in adventure novels. The loss of the apparent order of their existence leads to the anguish of scattering the life lived and the rescue of a necessary chain for what happens to him. Until this point, “the being of things and of subject were an

4 Pamphlet about contingency (free translation); also see note 7.

5 *The Transcendence of the Ego* (1936); *The Imagination* (1936); in English *Sketch for a Theory of the Emotions* (1939); *The Imaginary* (1940).

6 *factum* (*factum* about contingency, in the case of *La Nausée*) was the name used by Sartre and his friend Nizan for the literary works that they were starting and about which they reflecting the forms they could take (Contat and Rybalka, 1981).

7 Sartre’s pet name at home.

absolute guarantee, to the point that it could even dispense with thinking about it" (Leopoldo e Silva, 2004 p. 86). But then he realizes that both participate in the existence and that the way of being of the consciousness requires going beyond pure contemplation. Roquentin realizes he will have to live this *confrontation* with existence, that he cannot escape it, though he resists it, because not even the narrative could redeem him. Perhaps the artwork reflects, perhaps it could justify him. So, while the contestation of the "serious men" of Bouville is presented in a radical way, the aesthetic illusion that the artwork could ensure a metaphysical salvation remains on Roquentin's horizon, an issue that questions, also, the role of literature.

## An odd experience of war

The experience of war would come then to "divide [his] life in two" (Sartre, 1976a, p. 180). When, one fine day in September 1939, he received "a call-in sheet", he realized that he would be obliged to go where he did not want to go with people he did not know, "that is what brought the social into my head; I realized suddenly that I was a social being" (Sartre, 1976a, p. 179). So, it was the war which operated the true "transition from youth to adulthood" and "revealed certain aspects of myself and the world"; it was during this period that "I went from individualism and the pure individual from before the war to the social, to socialism". Or, in other words, "before, that which led me to a book like *La Nausée*, where the relationship with society was metaphysical, and then led me slowly to the *Critique de la raison dialectique*" (Sartre, 1976a, p. 180).

From this intense period of change, perhaps the most radical of his life, resulted a novelty in the Sartrean literary field: writing a personal diary. Until then, Sartre had never thought about this genre and had not written a single line in this direction. He thought the genre to be problematic and meaningless. However, during the nine months he remained as a soldier, from September 1930 to March 1940, Sartre wrote. He devoted an average of twelve hours a day to writing, which resulted in about fifteen notebooks, of which only six remained. And, interestingly, during these "absurd and useless months", Sartre is faced with "a first labor forcing him back on himself"; a sort of "decoding". The notebooks will be where Sartre "will tell himself of his own life to fathom it and understand it" (Cohen-Solal, 1985, pp. 260-261).

Of the six notebooks now published (I, III, V, XI, XII, XIV), there are over 500 pages, which would give us an idea of this writing movement. These notebooks, however, were far from an intimate diary in the conventional sense, since Sartre communicated them constantly (to Simone and other friends) in a sort of "public living": unlike a letter (not addressed to anyone in particular), unlike a diary, because it was not about his intimacy; as if his thoughts unfolded in front of a selected audience and could even, in the future, come to serve a wider audience (Lejeune, 1986).

Despite "a certain censorship", since Sartre wanted to publish them, the spontaneity and freedom of his tone surprise in *Carnets* (Lejeune, 1986): "whole gratuitousness of this notebook, as thinking in general. I will write tomorrow about Paris. But why? Without reason, because it amuses me. And nothing here is right; everything is a game. Above all, I do not ever force my mind" (Sartre, 2010b, p. 514). And it would be precisely this *tone* – carrying a fluidity of language, a free writing, with no revisions – which would result in an incredibly unpredictable and coherent text:

unpredictable because nothing is excluded *a priori*, the writing assumes everything that is presented, nothing to register, but to digest, to put him in communication with all the rest. Coherence results from the fact that everything is organized according to two grands axes: the development of a new philosophical system, where the concept of *néant*, progressively developed, plays an essential role, and a systematic self-portrait. A back-and-forth is established between the philosophical preparation and introspection, as if Sartre's life was his "laboratory". (Lejeune, 1986, p. 130)

Such manner of conducting the text would create, then, an authenticity effect, as if there were no more "difference between writing and life", where the writing would be the expression of freedom as it headed for the future. There would be no rereading or an attempt to review the past, but a movement, an "act of research" that would be important to the detriment of its outcome. This is how the self-portrait and the autobiography come to present Sartre as "media", "practical exercises" and not as goals in themselves, "the more *Carnets* advances, the more Sartre launches to reflect about the biographical method itself and works to shape the image of what he believed to be its original project" (Lejeune, 1986, p. 133). For Sartre, we have seen, it is not about writing his intimacy, but "treat myself – not due to interest in me, but because I am my immediate object – successively and simultaneously by the various and latest research methods. . . to see what we can concretely take from these methods". (Sartre, 2010b, p. 191)

Bringing the forms closer, we can compare the *Carnets* and *La Nausée* regarding the satirical use of a personal diary: both for Roquentin and for Sartre, it is actually the "narrative of an existential metamorphosis (to be placed again into question, search for a new moral) achieved in a back-and-forth between everyday living and reflection. However, for the rest, everything is different, is opposed (and completes?)" in these texts, since Roquentin will remain in the stagnation of *Some of These Days*, while Sartre would happily go to *L'Être et le néant* (Lejeune, 1986, p. 133). Since, in the *Carnets*, "everything is simultaneously and inseparably philosophy and autobiography" (Simont, 2010, p. 1373), the dilemma of Roquentin, inherent to the "man alone", loses meaning and gives way to another way of thinking and of practicing the narrative.

Perhaps, the experience of *Carnets* supplants definitely any “reticence regarding the narrative” that might still remain. The war brought “another feeling of time, another idea of the event or of the future that carries with it and another way of referring to the past” (Macé, 2007, p. 89). However, Sartre would still live a while longer “immersed in an ideal of a man’s great life” (Sartre, 2010b, p. 363), a life that had the sole purpose of “indefinitely produce works of art” in a kind of “salvation through art” (Sartre, 2010b, p. 360) à la Roquentin. Therefore, the *Carnets* seem to witness the weakening of this ideal, making the “narrative moment”, a kind of “mediation” (Macé, 2007, p. 90). But this process will have to wait for *Les Mots* to be formally demystified. The long process that began in 1939, with the war, will last at least until 1956, with the final break with the Communists. The two major crises experienced in the ten-year period will require of Sartre ten more years to be transformed into the written form (a narrative), capable of annihilating once and for all, the *realism*<sup>8</sup>, settled into the idea of posthumous fame, characteristic of the lives of great men: “I saw then that the pursuit of salvation [for writing] was the pursuit of an access road to the absolute” (Sartre, 2010b, p. 365).

The novelty regarding the mode of understanding and of practicing the life narrative would begin thus with *Carnets*. Gradually, that which hitherto Sartre had “denounced as biographical illusion is regarded as an existential engine, as if a life lived should indeed seem like a life narrated” (Macé, 2007, p. 90). As if the very act of writing, a kind of “back-and-forth between everyday life and reflection” was an instrument to “think against himself”, as if a diary could be “the narrative of an existential metamorphosis” (Lejeune, 1986, p. 133).

### When *Jean* gains back his land

The passage of *Carnets* to *Les Mots* as an autobiographical work is especially interesting. More than twenty years between them resulted in two absolutely heterogeneous texts: the first worked as a “diary of authentic research” directed toward the future and the second constituted a “well-crafted narrative” in light of an already acquired truth (Lejeune, 1986, p. 134); that is, while *Les Mots* is “a structured autobiographical narrative dialectically structured, the *Carnets* articulated every genre within the diary form” (Lejeune, 1986, p. 135).

In *Carnets*, we have Sartre the philosopher preparing his system, the novelist outlining the life of his soldier friends, the biographer who, busy with the portrait of Guillaume II, weaves the fundamentals of his method, the autobiographer that gathers his childhood memories, seeks

relationships between their current behavior and follows up with the metamorphosis of his project, the critic and theorist who comments his readings (Lejeune, 1986), among other roles that this multiple Sartre begins to incarnate for not being able to undress himself any longer. In *Les Mots*, we have a mature Sartre dressed up as a boy Sartre to tell *in one go* his childhood until 1916.

The project of an autobiography began in the mid-1950s to be completed only in the early 1960s. The interruptions that resulted in different versions of this text seem especially significant. When, in 1963, Sartre decides to resume his *Jean sans terre* (first version of *Les Mots*) to transfigure it into the version we now know, he already had a whole theoretical and methodological set of tools able to make this text an aesthetic and critical phenomenon. Between 1954 and 1963, the comings and goings of the philosopher were not few. Between approach and rupture with the Communist Party, he wrote *Questions de méthode* and the *Critique de la raison dialectique*, founding works, be it from past experiences, be it from future efforts. The radical change *Les Mots* suffered is felt precisely from such philosophical and personal endeavors. He no longer believed in action as a magical output, nor in writing as salvation. Neither politics, nor literature, this is the story the little Poulou should narrate without fear in *Les Mots*. It was as if he needed to show why, despite the empty pockets, he continued to write.

In 1964, the public received a structured narrative, an unparalleled text, probably “the most all-encompassing work of Sartre” (Lejeune, 1996, p. 241), even though “not totalizing [strictly speaking] because it deals only with the first eleven or twelve years of Sartre’s life”. The text is a kind of “hypercritical look of a mature man about the monstrous child prodigy he once was” (Simont, 2010 pp. 1373-4), and ended up becoming, in fact, in the *form* Sartre sought to develop and becoming a renewal of the autobiography (and of biography!) field, since it established a new anthropology (Lejeune, 1996, p. 243).

The Sartre of *Mots* is one that struggles to free himself and says has lost *all literary illusions*, “that literature has an absolute value, that it can save a man or simply change men” (Sartre, 1972a). And he would say, later:

if I did not publish this autobiography before and in its most radical form, it is because I judged it excessive. . . by the way, in the midst of this, I realized that the action also has its difficulties and that it can be driven by a neurosis. (p. 38)

Now, “there is no salvation anywhere. The idea of salvation implies the idea of an absolute. For forty years I have been mobilized for an absolute: neurosis. The absolute broke. Tasks remain, countless, among which literature is not at all privileged” (Sartre, 2010c, p. 1255). Therefore,

after ten years, I am a man who wakes up cured after a long, bitter and sweet madness. After all, I

8 Sartre used to say: “I was a realist at the time”, wanting to show that, to him, until that point in time, the reality was limited to that which he could see, nothing beyond, in a kind of world given, immutable, with no transcendence (Sartre, 2010b, pp. 363-365).

9 Sartre named the first version of *Les Mots* as *Jean sans terre* (John with no land).

never believed myself to be the happy owner of a “talent”: my only task was saving myself – nothing in my hands, nothing in my pockets – for the work and for the faith. (Sartre, 2010a, p. 138)

From that, we have “a complex structure, both chronological, thematic and dialectic” (Lejeune, 1980, p. 180). And, maybe we can say that for Sartre, the “autobiography holds no interest if it is not an invention in a way, if it is not literature”, if it is not a work of style. The style is “a way of saying three or four things at once” or “giving each phrase multiple and overlapping meanings”; it is also “a literary way to expose an idea or a reality, which necessarily requires corrections”. In “literature, which has always, in a way, to do with the *vécu*, nothing I say is fully expressed by what I say, the same reality can be expressed by a number of practically infinite ways” (Sartre, 1976a pp. 136-138). This means, then, that “we do not write to tell what we know, but to bring us the closer we can get to that which we do not know ourselves, to explore the contradictions that constitute us, to manifest in a complex language construction, the truth as the absence that founds us”, since “a beautiful autobiographical text that is not one that brings me knowledge of another, but one that provokes in me the desire to give a shape to my own life and that suggests to me the means to do it” (Lejeune, 1980, pp. 174 -175).

*Les Mots* seems then to consolidate this unique genre that mixes philosophy and life, in a kind of “life achievement” and “conceptual invention” (Simont, 2010, p. 1375). It highlights that “the return to yourself” intends always a kind of detachment to achieve a critical look over oneself. This “decision making” leads the Sartrean self-portrait to reveal what the portrayed “is no more”, which brings the *néant* to the center, not only as a philosophical premise, but as the way you related to yourself (Simont, 2010). It is as if this achievement of *néant* in all its complexity occurred during the strange war and through the *Carnets* took Sartre, first, to the development of a philosophical system (which *L'Être et le néant* is its concretion) and, second, a way of thinking and of practicing autobiography and, consequently, the biography, what would lead him to write these great monuments: *Les Mots* and *Flaubert*.

Of course, like all long-haul projects, these texts are also seen as part of a process in the midst of which we have the many biographies written in the 1940s and 1950s. First *Baudelaire*, then *Mallarmé* and followed by *Saint Genet* that seem to operate in a dual perspective: telling the story of these writers and dealing with certain topics such as, for example, how someone becomes a writer, how a child abandoned by his mother survives, how time affects the task of writing; and applying certain philosophical notions developed in theoretical works such as, for example, the notions of freedom and of project, since such reflections seem to have found “a privileged place of expression in biographies” (Cabestan, 2013). What, after all, are the answers offered by biographies? To some extent, the narrative of

life as much as the autobiographical practice seems handy with the effort to develop a kind of “restorative conception of narrative”, to which Sartre launches himself since *La Nausée* and *against himself* (Macé, 2007, p. 88). Many scholars agree with the idea of reading the biography as an autobiography<sup>10</sup> in the work of Sartre, since this would take an autobiographical streak, adding itself to the effort of the *philosopher* that wished to see his notions applied and the *man* who, through the story of others, attempts to trace the birth scene of a writer or what leads a man to write.

## He wants to talk about the imaginary

Sartre used to say that May 1968 arrived a bit late for him. Perhaps he was already an old man: he was 63 and would live to be 75. At first, he understood nothing of what was happening in France during that period. He went to Sorbonne and spoke to the students, but without understanding nor making himself understood: the so-called dialogue of the deaf. Shortly after, when the distances were undertaken, he realized the size of the problem: in short, it was to abolish a certain kind of intellectual who would be a *super consciousness* of his time and that would have a *super powerful word* regarding the events. From then on, *everyone* wanted to talk, *everyone* knew things, they no longer needed spokespersons, but new values. Once more, the privileges fell and it occurred within the academy's core, at the core of the production of knowledge. The teachers and intellectuals authority was definitely in check. And Sartre, who was considered until then an *intellectuel classique*, got placed against the wall, or, in other words, launched himself to break the last of the *absolutes*.

The years already weighed upon him and he was in poor health. He had his work on Gustave Flaubert and no other project. He also had a controversial image in the different spheres of the French society and less young people seemed interested in his work. Surely, he asked himself the sense of writing a book about Flaubert at that point, a book like that. So did his new friends *maos* who considered this project without purpose (*On a raison de se révolter*, 1974). However, he already had at least fourteen years of work behind him and believed it no longer possible to abandon it, on the contrary, he felt that he “needed to finish it” (Sartre, 1976a, p. 151); it was more than setting aside something that had already been started some time ago, it was something to propose an *ultimate meaning* to the task of a lifetime.

It would be possible to ask, then, if *Flaubert* would, to some extent, be a part of the autobiographical project of Sartre. Of course, speaking of “autobiographical project” here means to suppose, like Lejeune (1986), that the Sartrean production in this regard ended up bringing together a series of texts forming a kind of “workshop”. Among the texts that would form this “construction site” would be: a letter written in 1926 to Simone de Jolivet,

<sup>10</sup> Cabestan (2013); Chabot (2012); Clément (2013); Contat e Rybalka (1981); Flynn (2013); Macé, (2007); Pacaly, (1980).

the *Carnets*, *Les Mots*, the film *Sartre par lui-même* and several interviews with different interlocutors since 1973. It would also be necessary to keep the relevant caveats regarding the status of each text (letter, novel, diary, audio-visual interview, transcribed interview) and what the author himself stated, recognizing only in *Les Mots* a genuine autobiographical work.

Both *Flaubert* and *Les Mots* sought to “answer the same question: how a man becomes someone who writes, someone who wants to talk about the imaginary?” (Sartre, 1972b, pp. 133-134); and since “the writing. . . is a moment of truth because it is practical” (Sartre, 1988, p. 1608), such man is someone who operates on different planes, be it imaginary, be it real, for such is required by his activity. Of the difficulties of thinking “such a man who chooses to speak of the imaginary” and that would require, therefore, “a certain amount of fiction”, Sartre ended up designing his study on Gustave Flaubert as a novel: “I would really like people to say that is a true romance. I try in this book to reach a certain level of understanding of Flaubert from some assumptions. . . my assumptions lead me then to partly invent my character” (Sartre, 1972b, p. 123). For him it was “the truth of Flaubert” and he tried to reach it with his imagination and his reason, mainly because he thought that “imagination is the provider of truths at the structural level” (Sicard, 1989, p. 149). For Sartre, the labor of “restoring the life of a man” assumed “a particular relationship with philosophy”: only exposing theories “to the extent that they could be useful for understanding this man” (Sicard, 1989, p. 152). Thus, should his study be read as a *novel*, it would gain in complexity:

I would like. . . it to be read as though the truth, as if a true novel. Overall, this book is the Flaubert just as I imagine him to be, but with methods that seem strict to me, I think it is Flaubert such as he is, such as he was. In this study, I needed my imagination at all times. (Sartre, 1976b, p.94)

It is, in short, a recovery of the imaginary notion or perhaps a kind of “liberation of the imaginary”, which would be, after all, an effort to bring to light “a truth that exists in the imaginary itself”. So, his imagination developed as long as he had texts and “plenty numerous reflexions to give the imaginary a value of truth”. “This imaginary that has function of truth” (Sicard, 1989, p. 148) seems to be at the very heart of Sartre’s methodology.

The *Flaubert case* is, therefore, singular as a biographical work, since it brings together the peak of theoretical work with the work on itself. If we consider that the *narrative* takes on the status of *mediation*, skips the need for the novel. Thus, “*Flaubert* can be read as the restitution of this belief in the convergence of the life lived and the life narrated” (Macé, 2007, p. 91). And, if we consider “the elements of a life as. . . a matter of sense, of recurrent interpretation, of permanent totalization” (Macé, 2007, p. 80), then we are left with

the problem of fact “integration”, the relationship between required incarnation of events and generality that works to digest them, while it is, at every moment, potentially outdated by what Sartre calls “opacity” of the individual and the ‘truth’ of these events. (Macé, 2007, p. 81)

The methodological issue brought in by *Flaubert* is of the “conflict between the meaning and the succession” (Macé, 2007, p. 87). If a life “cannot be helped but be lived imaginatively” (Macé, 2007, p. 91) and the “totalization is the imaginary norm” (Sartre, 1988, p. 971), we are facing the “novelistic, at the same time in its falsity and its significance force” (Macé, 2007, p. 91). The “novelistic so desired in *Flaubert*, will be the narrative reconciled with. . . the significance” (Macé, 2007, p. 91). In short, “the scripture of *Flaubert* qualified as a *true novel* talks perhaps. . . of this polarity between life/narrative, incarnation/integration that *La Nausée* treated as tragic; the massive biographical index is also the most successful example of a Sartre that is a writer, a prose writer ‘in style’ and with no supervision, affiliated without any form of embarrassment to novels literature, in what is has of most projective” (Macé, 2007, p. 91).

## The problem with narrating

Rethinking the *problem of narrating* in general based in Sartre’s effort throughout his life and work, demands also that we retreat. To apprehend and articulate the different texts here presented regarding their relationships to the problem of the narrative, it is necessary not only to glimpse the question “how to narrate an existence that is *néant*?”, but also to make its consequences clear.

Now, if existence is *néant*, the for-itself is this being that always faces a *lack of being* constitutive, it is this being that is always at a distance from itself, as it might have been (past) and as not yet being (future). It *projects itself* in an attempt to “cover” the distance that separates it from itself in order to accomplish itself. A task doomed to failure, since the *self* of the for-itself is always to be done, it is perpetually unfinished. This scenario leads us to relocate the problem of temporality.

From a syntactic perspective, time should be understood as temporality, that is, the different temporal dimensions properly articulated in a multi-dimensional way. In other words, “it only has a past, a being whose being its past being is in question, also it only has a future, a being who can only prove itself to itself as a project, as that which it is not yet being” (Leopoldo e Silva 2004, p. 116). And, since the *past* is an outdated factuality, the *future* is the lack and the *present* is the escape process from itself, the for-itself will permanently be this run toward what it is not. And “this future that I am not sure to be, already gives meaning to my present, since, as I am always ahead of myself, it is my future being that gives density to the present in itself fleeting

and ephemeral” (Leopoldo e Silva, 2004, p. 117). We have then a paradox:

the meaning of what I am is my freedom because my being consists of transcending myself to being; . . . because between what I am and what I will be, lays the constitutive nothing of my consciousness from which I will choose what I am to be. (Leopoldo e Silva, 2004, p. 117)

From the *diaspora* to the contradiction between dispersal and cohesion, we have temporality as being both “solvent power” and “unifying act”. We can then ask: “is it possible to submit this evanescent multiplicity to a totalizing procedure? In other words, is it possible to *tell a story*?” (Leopoldo e Silva, 2004, p. 121).

Strictly speaking, “the whole narration itself is attached to this failure”, which is that of the man who cannot ever coincide with himself, i.e., to say that “the for-itself is temporalized” is to say also that “its totality is elusive”. But, how then could we speak in the summation of a story, a life? Here is what Sartre tirelessly dedicated himself to, proposing an intense and lasting reflection on the narrative forms and the consequent invention of new forms of writing. For him, “the theme of novelistic prose is that elusive totality”, since the novel would make of this “impossibility the constitution of its possibility” (Leopoldo e Silva, 2004, pp. 121-122). Sartre starts from the idea that the conception of man embedded in the traditional narratives needed to be reviewed before even thinking about ways of narrating. One would have to resign “the narrative to one temporal dimension” to face “the multi-dimensional temporality, the one in which the totalization is impossible, but for which one gets an indirect revelation, that is more totalizing than the one-dimensional realism” (Leopoldo e Silva, 2004, p.122).

Thus, when taking into account the temporal multidimensionality, the narrative should articulate the various levels of temporality that are lived in inseparable ways. This diversity and this inseparability indicate

the impossibility of totalization, *from which, however, the novel is born as a totalizing procedure*. For temporality means a totalization process that is never complete, for the reason that none of the temporal dimensions of existence can receive the status of *being*. (Leopoldo e Silva, 2004, p.123)

It can be said, then, that the purpose of the novel is to novelistic accomplish this unfinished totality like the existence accomplishes itself as an unrealized totality. Or even, “it is as impossible to *tell a story*, as it is *from this impossibility* that the novelistic narrative is built” (Leopoldo e Silva, 2004, p. 124).

Once the continuous line that links the events is renounced, the narrative takes shape

by oscillations and deviations as it passes through the temporal levels of meaning; is lost in the evanescence of the past, making it impossible to establish the exact boundary between light and darkness; it protrudes in the uncertainty of the future, which is not to an extension of being, but the desire and expectation engendered by the lack in me that is part of me in the present. (Leopoldo e Silva, 2004, p.124)

Thus, a deep methodological reflection on how to *tell a story* would necessarily imply on a new anthropology or a certain way of thinking about human reality.

Since then, the various efforts undertaken by Sartre since *La Nausée* and to *Flaubert* unite in one movement. While he practiced different genres, he also put them into question the moment he wrote them. As if the very act of writing created the question, its way of being, its form, without it being possible to separate the one that writes from what is written. Far from claiming to give account of an entire life, as suggested by some critics of *Flaubert*, Sartre proposed, via a *true novel*, to bear witness to the synthetic conception of existence; he expressed through it not only the function of literature but the drama itself for itself. This is the paradox to which his account intends to be faithful: restore the “the mix of the absolute (freedom) and of the relative (situation) in which reality (human) presents itself” (Leopoldo e Silva, 2004, p. 124).

There is more: “the past was lived following the rhythm of the possibilities offered and taken, but the future of the present opens a possibility that interrupts this rhythm” (Leopoldo e Silva, 2004, p. 128). Here is the rupture that opens the field of possibilities, since it sets out a sphere not undertaken of what was experienced. It is our chance to relearn the past, “although already hopelessly lived” (Leopoldo e Silva, 2004, p. 128). And this that we failed to learn

is the freedom lived as a limit, this limit that, reached in all its significance, interrupts, disrupts the continuity of personal stories, and *moves* us to a possibility that we did not know or wanted to consider. It is this limit that brings the monopoly of the future that looms and casts its shadow on the present and especially on the past. (Leopoldo e Silva, 2004, p. 128)

This is the means by which man can regain its past, shake its crystallization and reopen its meaning. Thus,

having to exercise freedom and learn about yourself in this process is then the only possible

objectivity. The *human order* clutters any 'scientific' claim to address it, because no act by which the existence hinges has the sufficiency needed to establish itself as *truth*, towards a stable agreement of being with oneself. (Leopoldo e Silva, 2004, p.130)

*Flaubert* as the last moment of such reflections, Sartre jumped since *La Nausée*, but especially in *Carnets* and *Les Mots*, into developing and exercising a way of narrating compatible with the philosophical apparatus that he was elaborating. The key, perhaps, lay in the overlap between life and philosophy, since their autobiographies are presented as *the place* of application of this new method

or this new way of telling a story. The first biographies and the last about Gustave Flaubert, autobiographies and many crucial philosophical essays, were all instruments to the biographical-novel work of *L'Idiot*.

The question *how to tell a story?* is then answered by Sartre the *writer*. It is through the novel that he finally makes the bridge between the *life lived* and the *life narrated*, that which would connect the truth of one to the other. The problem of narrative in *Flaubert* is the same as in *Mots* (Sartre, 1976b, p.104), inventing a new form (Lejeune, 1996, p.200) able to reconcile philosophy and literature, able to combine one's experience to the existence as *néant* and the effort of thinking it. For life and narrative are not, cannot be contemporary. But *saying* life is as essential as *living* it.

### A concepção restauradora da narrativa em Sartre

**Resumo:** A necessidade da transmissão se impõe a cada geração. Entretanto, o problema do narrar permanece e se renova a cada alvorecer: a fronteira entre os gêneros, os limites documentais, as escolhas narrativas, os narradores, os leitores. Tal temática poderia parecer estranha a Sartre, mas não só a situou no coração de seu pensamento, como reivindicou seu potencial restaurador como instrumento atual de conhecimento. Este trabalho procura seguir os traços desse Sartre inventor de formas narrativas, mostrando que, desde *La Nausée*, não hesitou em colocar entre parênteses os gêneros para propor formas novas, mais coerentes com suas experiências e reflexões. Junto com os *Carnets de la drôle de guerre*, *Les Mots* e *L'Idiot de la famille*, o esforço empreendido em *La Nausée* mostra que do entrelaçamento fundamental entre vida e obra salta uma concepção restauradora da narrativa como mediadora do processo de transformação existencial.

**Palavras-chave:** narrativa, Sartre, filosofia, vida, metamorfose existencial.

### La conception restauratrice du récit chez Sartre

**Résumé:** La nécessité de la transmission s'impose à chaque génération. Pourtant, le problème de la narration demeure en se renouvelant toujours: la frontière entre les genres, les limites d'informations, les choix narratifs, les narrateurs, les lecteurs. Ce sujet pourrait sembler étrange à Sartre, mais je le situe non seulement dans le cœur de sa pensée mais aussi je réclame son potentiel restaurateur comme instrument actuel de connaissance. Ce travail suit les pas de ce Sartre inventeur de formes narratives, en montrant qu'il n'a pas hésité à mettre entre parenthèses les genres pour proposer des formes nouvelles, en cohérence avec ses expériences et réflexions. Avec les *Carnets de la drôle de guerre*, *Les Mots* et *L'Idiot de la famille*, l'effort présenté dans *La Nausée* montre que du lien fondamental entre vie et oeuvre est née une conception restauratrice de la narration en tant que médiatrice du procès de métamorphose existentielle.

**Mots-clés:** récit, Sartre, philosophie, vie, métamorphose existentielle.

### La concepción restauradora de la narrativa en Sartre

**Resumen:** La necesidad de la transmisión se impone a cada generación. Sin embargo, el problema del narrar permanece y se renueva a cada amanecer: la frontera entre los géneros, los límites documentales, las elecciones narrativas, los narradores, los lectores. Tal temática podría parecer extraña a Sartre, pero no solamente la situó en el corazón de su pensamiento como reivindicó su potencial restaurador como instrumento actual de conocimiento. Este trabajo busca seguir los trazos de este Sartre inventor de formas narrativas, mostrando que desde *La Nausée*, no titubeó en colocar entre paréntesis los géneros para proponer formas nuevas, más coherentes con sus experiencias y reflexiones. Junto con los *Carnets de la drôle de guerre*, *Les Mots* y *L'Idiot de la famille*, el esfuerzo emprendido en *La Nausée* muestra que del entrelazamiento fundamental entre vida y obra salta una concepción restauradora de la narrativa como mediadora del proceso de transformación existencial.

**Palabras clave:** narrativa, Sartre, filosofía, vida, metamorfosis existencial.

## References

- Cabestan, P. (2013, junho). Les biographies existentielles. In *Nuit Sartre* [Documento sonoro]. Paris, França: École Normale Supérieure. Recuperado de <http://savoirs.ens.fr/expose.php?id=1317>
- Chabot, A. (2012). *Sartre et le Père*. Paris, França: Champion.
- Clément, B. (2013, junho). Les biographies existentielles. In *Nuit Sartre* [Documento sonoro]. Paris, França: École Normale Supérieure. Recuperado de <http://savoirs.ens.fr/expose.php?id=1317>
- Cohen-Solal, A. (1985). *Sartre 1905-1980*. Paris, França: Gallimard.
- Contat, M., & Rybalka, M. (1981). Notice la Nausée, 1978. In J. P. Sartre, *Oeuvres Romanesques* (pp. 1657-1678). Bibliothèque de la Pléiade. Paris, França Gallimard.
- Flynn, T. (2013, junho). Les biographies existentielles. In *Nuit Sartre* [Documento sonoro]. Paris, França: École Normale Supérieure. Recuperado de <http://savoirs.ens.fr/expose.php?id=1317>
- Lejeune, P. (1980). *Je est un autre: l'autobiographie, de la littérature aux médias*. Paris, França: Seuil.
- Lejeune, P. (1986). *Moi aussi*. Paris, França: Seuil.
- Lejeune, P. (1996). *Le pacte autobiographique*. Paris, França: Seuil.
- Leopoldo e Silva, F. (2004). Existência e contingência (comentário de A Náusea). In F. Leopoldo e Silva, F. *Ética e literatura em Sartre: ensaios introdutórios* (pp. 81-112). São Paulo, SP: UNESP.
- Leopoldo e Silva, F. (2004). Temporalidade e romance. In Leopoldo e Silva, F. *Ética e literatura em Sartre: ensaios introdutórios* (pp. 113-134). São Paulo, SP: UNESP.
- Macé, M. (2007). Penser par cas: pratiques de l'exemple et narration dans L'Idiot de la famille. *Recherches & Travaux*, 71, 79-91.
- Pacaly, J. (1980). *Sartre au miroir*. Paris, França: Librairie Klincksieck.
- Sartre, J. P. (1972a). Les écrivains en personne. In Sartre, J. P. *Situations, IX* (pp. 9-39). Paris, França: Gallimard.
- Sartre, J. P. (1972b). Sartre par Sartre. In Sartre, J. P. *Situations, IX* (pp. 99-134). Paris: Gallimard.
- Sartre, J. P. (1976a). Autoportrait a soixante-dix ans. In Sartre, J. P. *Situations, X* (pp. 133-226). Paris, França: Gallimard.
- Sartre, J. P. (1976b). Sur L'Idiot de la famille. In Sartre, J.P. *Situations, X* (pp. 91-115). Paris, França: Gallimard.
- Sartre, J. P. (1981). La Nausée. In Sartre, J. P. *Oeuvres Romanesques* (pp. 3-210). Bibliothèque de la Pléiade. Paris, França: Gallimard.
- Sartre, J. P. (1988). *L'Idiot de la famille* (Vol. 3). Paris, França: Gallimard.
- Sartre, J. P. (2010a). Carnets de la drôle de guerre. In Sartre, J. P. *Les Mots et autres écrits autobiographiques* (pp. 145-651). Bibliothèque de la Pléiade. Paris, França: Gallimard.
- Sartre, J. P. (2010b). Les Mots. In Sartre, J. P. *Les Mots et autres écrits autobiographiques* (pp. 3-139). Bibliothèque de la Pléiade. Paris, França: Gallimard.
- Sartre, J. P. (2010c). Jean-Paul Sartre s'explique sur *Les Mots*. In Sartre, J. P. *Les Mots et autres écrits autobiographiques* (pp. 1253-1258). Bibliothèque de la Pléiade. Paris, França: Gallimard.
- Sicard, M. (1989). *Essais sur Sartre: Entretiens avec Sartre (1975-1979)*. Paris, França: Galilée.
- Simont, J. (2010). Notice Carnets de la drôle de guerre. In: Sartre, J. P. *Les Mots et autres écrits autobiographiques* (1363-1390). Bibliothèque de la Pléiade. Paris, França: Gallimard.

Received: March 17, 2015

Accepted: June 16, 2015