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“Painting the Void”: A Reflection on French
Existentialist Philosophers, and their Fiction Writing



While studying abroad in Paris last semester, I lived with a host family on the Left Bank of the Seine in the Latin Quarter, the neighborhood of the Sorbonne, the Panthéon, Place de la Contrescarpe and La Rue Mouffetard. I lived a few blocks away from Hemingway's old apartment on Cardinal Lemoine. Every day on my way to class, I passed the old Sorbonne, where Sartre and Beauvoir were once students attending lectures by the philosophers who came before them. Close by in the Saint-Germain neighborhood, I checked out the Hotel Madison, where Albert Camus lived his first lonely year in Paris. I was surrounded by history; every time I walked out my door, and no matter where I went in Paris, I couldn't help thinking about all of the remarkable people who had haunted this city before me, and I liked contemplating the similarities and differences between their Paris and mine.

In fact, I think the biggest draw for me when deciding to study abroad in Paris was the romanticized version of the city I had taken in from reading about the lives of the philosophers Albert Camus, Jean-Paul Sartre, and Simone de Beauvoir, all the time they'd spent in Paris both working alone and collaborating with the myriad artists and intellectuals who gravitated there. My vision of Paris was inextricably tied up with them, and this influenced the way I experienced the city. In many ways, my romanticized idea of the city came true, simply because I wanted it to, and I was often consciously choosing to see things the way my existentialist idols would have. On the other hand, there were plenty of moments of disillusion and of humor – for example, when I tried to spend some pensive reflection time at my philosophers' favorite cafés (reining in my enthusiasm with difficulty as I walked in the door) and realized that it was pretty obviously the case that Café de Flore and Les Deux Magots both had long since transformed into overpriced tourist venues. The atmosphere wasn't what I expected, the waiters were kind of unfriendly, and I felt too embarrassed to take out my notebook or laptop to write anything. At Café de Flore, I heard people talking in American Southern accents both to my left and to my right. One of those couples I made friends with and found out that we'd both come there out of admiration for Sartre and Beauvoir, and we talked about how we'd read that Sartre and Beauvoir often sat at separate tables when they were working, and how we thought their unusual relationship was a beautiful partnership, and we agreed that this little homage was worth it, anyways.

Later I made a visit to La Palette, another of Sartre and Beauvoir's favorites, and Café de la Mairie, where Sartre and Camus met for the last time in 1951. These places were a little better than the two more popular ones, but I think I really found what I was looking for when I started frequenting a small, technically boring café in my neighborhood called Chez Renée. I spent lots of time there reading and writing in its one-room, high-ceilinged space with tall, full bookshelves lining all four walls. It was cheaper than any of the cool cafés on the boulevards, and the atmosphere alternated between restful quiet and the occasional flux of chatty French students. As far as I could tell, there was only one woman who worked there, and I found out she was the owner. She accepted my accent without derision, and we had good conversations about living in Paris. This turned out to be my personal version of café philosophizing, and it will always remain as important to me as Café de Flore was to Sartre and Beauvoir.

During my sophomore year of college, I took a seminar on existentialist philosophy; at that point, Camus' *Le Mythe de Sisyphe* became the most important text in my life. It seemed to confirm everything I'd ever felt but wasn't sure it was valid to feel. Camus writes about the absurdity of the human condition, the contemplation and rejection of suicide, and the struggle to define oneself and one's guidelines for living in the absence of belief in a higher power. He defines the absurd as what results from the tragic discrepancy between what we as human beings can't help but want from life, and the inadequacy it actually offers us, because it's finite, and because there is no transcendent meaning to be found. The absurdity also results from the contradiction between the questions we want to ask about life, and the impossibility of ever having an absolute, definite answer to those questions. Philosophy, I think, is about asking the questions and answering them even when we know the answers will never be certain.

Born in Algeria in 1913, Albert Camus moved to Paris in 1940. Having been rejected due to medical reasons from enlisting in the war, he took a job at the magazine *Paris-Soir*, meanwhile working on writing *Le Mythe de Sisyphe* and *L'Étranger*. He married his second wife that December and they moved back to Algeria; but he was quickly unhappy and wanted to return to Paris, which he wasn't able to do until the very end of 1942, after publishing *L'Étranger* earlier that year. Back in Paris, he started working at the publisher Gallimard reading manuscripts. At the time he was working on *La Peste* (*The Plague*). He became friends with Sartre and

Beauvoir, but they were never very close, despite the similarities in their writing and ideology. Camus was involved in a resistance newspaper called *Combat*, and was greatly affected philosophically by the war; *La Peste* is a study of the varying reactions of human beings to crisis and death. The narrator of the novel concludes at the end that, despite all that has happened, “there is more to admire in man than to despise.”

In January, I went to a production of Camus’ play *Les Justes* put on by La Compagnie Memento Mori. *Les Justes* is a short play about a true story, the assassination of the Grand Duke Sergei Alexandrovich in the Soviet Union in 1905. It follows the mental workings of the group of revolutionaries who carried out the assassination. Camus also uses the situation to reflect on compassion and the question of the existentialist man’s responsibility to others. In the play, the central conflict is when the characters agonize and argue over whether it is justifiable to assassinate the duke even though there are innocent children, his niece and nephew, present with him in the carriage, and they will be killed as well. The most morally anguished of the characters follows his instincts and does not go through with the act, which leads to the argument over ends and means within the group. The group eventually decides that the end justifies the means, but several characters disagree.

Out of all the existentialists, Beauvoir is the one who for me speaks best about empathy. It seems like it would be easy for an existentialist to feel detached from other people, or apathetic, but that is never the case for Beauvoir. For her, living in an existentialist mindset only reinforces the compassion and responsibility she feels for others. In *Pyrrhus et Cinéas*, she asserts that it is up to us to define the extent of our empathy for others. It’s a familiar inner turmoil that makes us ask ourselves: am I silly if I cry for a stranger? Am I cruel if I don’t? Beauvoir concludes that we each must set the limits of our personal sphere of empathy, through our actions, and through our feelings of compassion. We cannot force ourselves to care about what happens to someone far away, but often we do care. She describes a young boy’s parents telling him to stop crying over a stranger, and the boy replies, “But if I cry over him, he is no longer a stranger to me. My tears decide.”

Beauvoir emphasizes the individual’s responsibility to others and the importance of relationships more than Camus does. Camus tends to focus more on the isolation of the individual, which is evident in his fiction including *L’Étranger*, *The Fall*, and *La Peste*. Camus lived a more isolated life in Paris, experiencing difficulties in his romantic relationships and never completely throwing off the feeling of being a foreigner there. I visited his grave in the Provence region of France, in the town of Lourmarin where he lived with his wife Francine for the last two years of his life, before being killed in a car accident in January of 1960. Leaving the noise and excitement of Paris to visit this small town in the South, I could understand why Camus chose to leave the city. On the Camus Society website, I read some of Camus’ journal entries from the last few years of his life, in which he describes his feelings of anxiety and depression. He felt increased anxiety and overwhelming pressure after winning the Nobel Prize in 1957; it seemed to discourage rather than encourage him, being recognized in that way. Sartre would later reject the prize when it was offered to him in 1964. Beauvoir was nominated but never received the prize, unfortunately.

In April, I went to see *Huis Clos (No Exit)* by Sartre. I’d read it in English in high school and then in French in college, but it was a much different experience to see it staged. There were parts when I was surprised by how the actors interpreted the lines, but it added a new perspective. I’d like to go *Huis Clos* again to experience different interpretations of it.

Before leaving Paris, I paid my respects at Sartre and Beauvoir’s joint grave in La Cimetière Montparnasse. Then I took a trip to the Normandy region and visited Le Havre, the coastal city on which Sartre based the soul-sapping town of Bouville in *La Nausée*. The city of Le Havre has changed a lot since Sartre lived there. It was severely damaged during World War II and is now a UNESCO World Heritage site. I liked Le Havre - I definitely wouldn’t call it soul-sapping - but I could understand why it was the perfect setting for *Nausea*. It seemed like an average midsized city, the kind of place that immediately feels kind of familiar and indifferent because you’ve been to so many places that are similar to it. Its aura of normalcy actually sometimes reminded me a bit of my hometown in Indiana, but I was also often enchanted by the street scenes and the atmosphere of the port.

Sartre advocated using fiction as a means to illustrate the philosophical texts he was writing at the same time, and *La Nausée* was his first novel. While it is a fairly depressing read, I like *Nausea* because it illustrates existential angst better than anything else I’ve ever read. Even though it’s been criticized (by critics including Vladimir Nabokov) for its stagnant plot, I believe it achieves its purpose this way. It illustrates how man feels

when he fully confronts the fact of his existence, and the suffering that evokes. The narrator wallows around the town of Bouville (which translates to “mud town” by the way) trying to work on the research project he’s supposed to be writing, but his depression is inescapable, his disillusionment is intensifying, and paralyzing him. He goes through a lot of existentialist suffering, but the end is optimistic: he listens to a song in a café, and it makes him inexplicably overjoyed. Even though he believes that nothing really matters, he can’t help feeling like the music matters, at least for him right now. It’s a miracle that this can break through for him. He feels like he can accept his existence now that he’s fully conscious of its futility. He decides to write the novel he wants to write. After suffering through his existential angst and accepting it, he’s able to enjoy things like music and art again, and this makes all the difference.

This project deepened my understanding of the philosophers I admire by allowing me to better understand and appreciate the environments in which they lived and philosophized, before I even existed, developing their ideas which would reach me as far away as Williams College in Massachusetts so many decades later. The opportunity to travel and spend time in the places where they lived and worked strengthened my sense of connection to them.

Camus says of the mythical Sisyphus rolling the rock up the hill again and again: “One must imagine Sisyphus happy.” Even though our fate is like that of Sisyphus, we can choose to be happy, and we can also choose to continue to try to answer life’s questions, even though we know we’ll never have any definite answers or transcendent solutions.

All three of the writers I studied were artists in addition to philosophers, writing fiction in addition to their philosophical work. Camus muses about the desire to write: “Explanation is useless but the sensation remains and, with it, the constant attractions of a universe inexhaustible in quantity.” He asserts that the existentialist artist/writer should choose to enjoy life and create art out of it, and even though he might sometimes still suffer the way they do in *La Peste*, *La Nausée*, and *L’Étranger*, it is up to the individual to make life beautiful: “he must give the void its colors.”

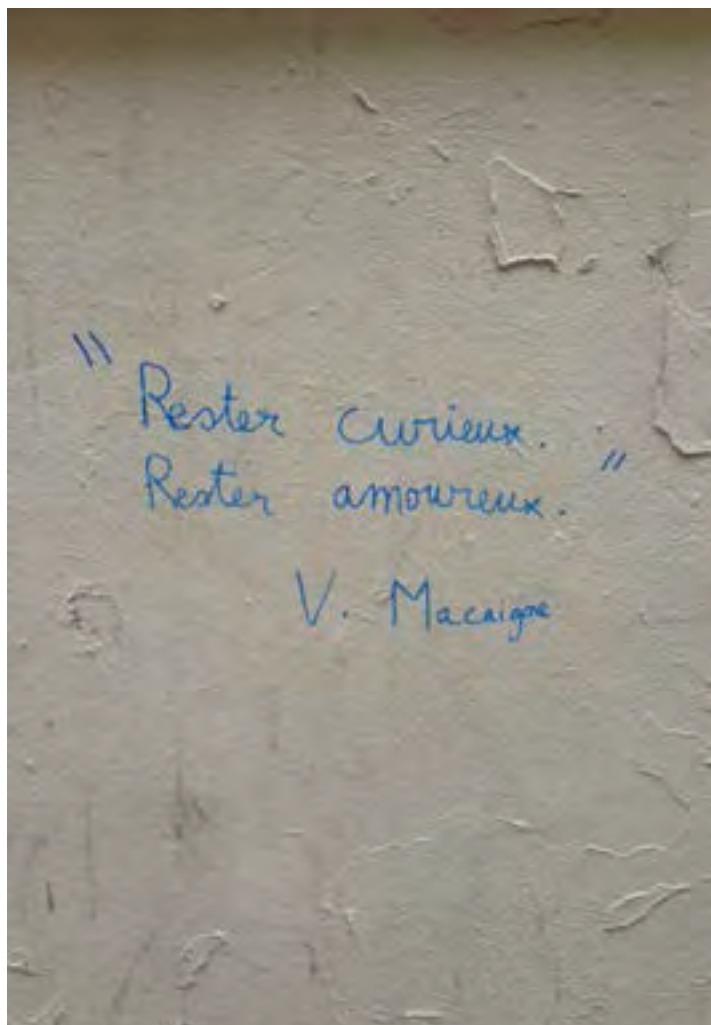
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-on a wall in my neighborhood near the Sorbonne

