The Mirror Image and the Politics of Writing: Reflections on 'the Jew' in Sartre's Early Thought

Jonathan Judaken

I was born from writing: before that, there was only a reflection in a mirror. From my first novel, I knew that a child had entered the palace of mirrors.

Jean-Paul Sartre, The Words

1 For his exceptional critical acumen and scrupulous reading of every draft of this paper, I am particularly indebted to Torbjörn Waadel. For helpful criticism and comments, I am also grateful to Mark Poster, David Carroll, David Schalk, Daniel Schnee and Peter Beck. I also wish to express thanks for the State Fellowship, which helped support the writing of this paper. An earlier and shorter version of this article appeared in the Proceedings of the Annual Meeting of the Western Society for French History 23 (1997), edited by Barry Rothaus.

Jonathan Judaken is an Assistant Professor of Modern French Cultural and Intellectual History at the University of Memphis.

©1999 HISTORICAL REFLECTIONS/REFLEXIONS HISTORIQUES, Vol. 25, No. 1
Following Jean-Paul Sartre's own declarations, and supported by Simone de Beauvoir's memoirs, intellectual historians and critics often claim that Sartre's work before the war was apolitical: that it was concerned only with aesthetics, ontology and the existential-phenomenological analysis of consciousness. According to this reading of Sartre's intellectual development, the political commitment of the writer emerged in his work during the German occupation and under Vichy and cohered around Sartre's experience with the French Resistance.

In this paper I reassess this intellectual history by highlighting Sartre's reflections on the politically charged question of "the Jews" in France during the 1930s. I analyze his reflections on the politics of writing by


5. See for example Adorno, Confrontation in Modern French Literature, p. 131: "It was the war and the occupation which brought about a deep change in his outlook," and Jay, Marxism and Totality, pp. 334-5: "The experience that seems to have moved Sartre out of the cut-de-sac of being and nothingness was the ability he felt as a member of the Resistance, which it was possible for the first time to historically commit." Notable exceptions to this would include Philip Thrush who writes of "The Childhood of a Leader" that it is "the most obvious political of all the less that Sartre published before World War II." Also see his comments on "the Jew" and "the Negro" in Sartre's Nonsense in Phillip Thoby, Sartre: A Biographical Introduction (London, 1971), pp. 47 and 45. See also Anne-Cohen Sobl, Sartre: A Life, trans. Anna Cancogni (New York, 1987), p. 122, who says of "The Childhood of a Leader" that "no contemporary text presents a sharper analysis of the French fascinative movement in the period between the two wars," which she takes as evidence of Sartre's "increasing interest in the historical problems of his day.

6. I use 'the Jew' to indicate that it is a constructed category and that to describe the 'Jew' also constructs the category as a marker of difference whether based on language, belief system, artistic tradition or gene pool. On this point in relation to 'race,' see Henry Louis Gates Jr., "Introduction: Writing Race" and the Difference It Makes" in Race, Writing and Difference, ed. by Henry Louis Gates Jr. (Chicago, 1995), p. 5.
focusing on how he represents the figures of the ‘the Jew’ in two of his early works of fiction—La Nausée, translated as Nausea, and L’Enfance d’un cheval, translated as “The Childhood of a Leader.” I contend that Sartre’s writing in the 1930s does indeed engage with the question of political commitment, and that the terms of this encounter, which show crucially concern his reflections on “the Jewish Question,” provide the basis for his theory of engagement which he develops in the immediate postwar period. I maintain that Sartre’s position is his own early position on the concept of the intellectual, and concomitantly on the politics of writing, through the opposed figures of Lucien Fleuret in “The Childhood of a Leader” and Antoloe Roquentin in Nausea, I show that the image of the ‘Jew’ is the official agon for delimiting the differences in the French intellectual tradition that each character represents.

**Intertextual interconnections**

The overlaps and parallels between Roquentin and Lucien are already evident in the publishing history of Nausea and “The Childhood of a Leader.” Nausea began as a “pamphlet on contingency” in the fall of 1931. A second version was completed during Sartre’s stay in Berlin and Freiburg in 1933.34 That Sartre wrote Nausea in the context of the Nazi seizure of power in Germany and amidst the rise of fascism in France the fascist riots on February 6 in 1934 sparked the Front Populaire movement that led to the election of France’s first Jewish and first socialist Premier, Leon Blum. The final manuscript of Nausea, named Meditations after Dürer’s engraving, was completed in 1936, only months before the beginning of the Spanish Civil War. The final title of the novel was changed by Gaston Gallimard to Nausea when the book was published in the spring of 1938.35


8. See Jay, Marxism and Totality, p. 336. “In Berlin and then Freiburg during 1933 and 1934, he studied Heidegger’s ideas very closely and attended a few of Heidegger’s lectures. Even though this was the year Heidegger served as Nazi-appointed rector of the University of Freiburg and delivered his notorious address on “The Self-Assertion of the German University,” Sartre, then twenty-fjve, seems to have ignored his politics and focused only on his philosophy.”

9. For a reading of Nausea as a translation of the themes of Melancholia, see George Howard Bauer, Sartre and the Artist (Chicago, 1969), pp. 13-44.

The date of publication of "The Childhood of a Leader" places the novella side-by-side with Nausea in Sartre's oeuvre. It was completed in July 1938 as part of a collection of short stories called Le Mur, translated as The Wall, published in 1939. The collection was Sartre's first major published work after Nausea.11

A comparison of the insert drawn up by Sartre at the time of publication elucidates the thematic proximity of both works while serving as a useful introduction to the texts. The préface d'auteur to the first edition of Nausea offers a conventional reading of the novel according to its plot.12 Sartre explains that Nausea is the diary of Antoine Roquentin, an intellectual who has traveled the world and now settled in Bouville ("mudtown"), the quintessential French provincial bourgeois locale. Each evening Roquentin visits the Railwayman's Cafe and listens to a record, "always the same one—"Some of These Days." During the day he visits the archives of the municipal library to write the history of an eighteenth-century adventurer, M. de Rolleboe. The diary documents how his hand and predictable existence undergoes a metamorphosis. Roquentin's memoirs record his internal reflections on his experience of Nausea: "Nausea is Existence revealing itself—and Existence is not pleasant to see." He experiences bouts of nausea as he reflects upon the meaning of Existence. He decides to abandon his ways of history because "the dead can never justify the living." In the last scene, "He is going to leave Bouville; he goes to the Railwayman's Cafe to listen one last time to 'Some of These Days,' and while the record is playing, he catches sight of a chance, a slim chance of accepting himself."13

The insert to The Wall indicates that the overarching theme of the volume, like Nausea, concerns the encounter with the contingency of existence and indicates the thematic proximity of Lucien's experience in "The Childhood of a Leader" to Roquentin's in Nausea.

No one wants to look Existence in the face. Here are five little failures—confronting it, five lies... Lucien Fleuriel is the closest...

11. Critical reception to the collection was dominated by responses to the title piece, "The Wall," except by Robert Brashears, who focused on La distance d'un chef of whose review was hostile.
12. For a critical reading of Sartre's reading of the novel contained in this insert, see LaCapra, A Passion in Sartre, p. 190.
13. Michel Contat and Michel Rybalka, The Writings of Jean-Paul Sartre, pp. 52-3, contains a complete copy of the préface d'auteur written by Sartre for the first edition of La Nausée.
14. Ibid.
to feeling he exists, but he doesn’’t want to; he evades himself and
takes refuge in thinking of his rights; for rights do not exist, they
ought to. In vain: All these efforts to escape are blocked by a Wall:
to the existence is still to exist. existence is a plenum man cannot
leave. 15

Susan Rubin Suleiman acutely summarizes “The Childhood of a
Leader” in the introduction to her argument that the novella is a parody
of the roman à thèse:

L’

d’enfance
d’un

chef

is the story, set in France in the 1920s, of a
young man in search of an identity, and who eventually finds one.
Lucien Fleutier, the only son of a provincial industrialist, tries to
escape from the uncertainties of adolescence—he wants “a
character and a destiny.” Discovering and rejecting in turn the self-
definitions offered him by surrealism and psychoanalysis, he finally
finds his “true self” as an anti-Semite and as a militant member of
the action française. Armed with his convictions, he acquires the
solidity of a rock. He becomes a “leader of men,” a “chef parmi les
Français.” 16

Like Roquentin’s diary, which documents the transformations of
consciousness experienced by Roquentin as he becomes more self-
conscious about existence, Lucien’s unfolding self-discovery progresses
through the interplay within his consciousness, both between himself and
himself and between himself and those he encounters.

While employing different narrative techniques and alternative
imageries in each story, the chronology of both Lucien’s and
Roquentin’s “story is based on a series of figures or leitmotifs which
constitute the various stages of the boy’s prise de conscience.” 17 In “The
Childhood of a Leader,” these moments begin with Lucien’s earliest
memories about his childhood and culminate with his final self-

15. Michel Cohn and Michel Rhyanka, The Writings of Jean-Paul Sartre, p. 63, contains
a complete copy of the préface d’inspiration written by Sartre for Le Mur.


17. Betty Rubin makes this point in Lucien auvers, the From Sartre to the New Novel
determination as an antisemite," as a member of the ruling class who is convinced he has the right to rule." As the assertions accompanying the tests indicate, for both Lucien and Roquefort existence is without meaning and at the same time a plethora of meaning. In this absurd predicament, each character must choose how he responds to the situation.

The 1930s in France are often described as a time of crisis—not only a social, political and economic crisis, but a cultural, psychological and moral crisis. Eugen Weber, for example, maintains that "the crisis of the 1930s was as much economic as diplomatic, as much institutional as economic, as much about public morality, confidence, and self-confidence, as it was about economic interests, employment, or the balance of payments." Cultural pessimism was heightened with the Great Depression, which engendered further political and social polarization; and increased class conflict. In addition, immigration continued to rise, especially of Jews after the Nazi assumption of power. As Paula Hyman, David Weinberg, Robert Paxton and Michael Marrus have shown, xenophobia and antisemitism were widespread in France in the 1930s; the image of "the Jew" often represented everything that had gone wrong in France and in civilization more generally. Robert Soucy has demonstrated how themes of national decline, demographic deterioration and particularly decadence became increasingly entangled in the culture and politics of the period. As fascist regimes assumed...

18. Following Shmuel Alonzo, I do not hypothesize antisemitism because "If you use the 'hypenated form you consider the words 'Semitic,' 'Semite,' 'Semitic' as meaningful. They supposedly convey an image of a real subsistence, of a real group of people—the Semites, who are said to be a race. This is a misnomer; firstly, because 'semitic' or 'semites' were originally language groups, not people; secondly because in antisemitic contexts, 'Semites' really speaks for Jews, just that... And today you Jews are not a race at all... So the hyphen or rather its omission conveys a message: If you hyphenate your 'anti-Semitic,' you attach some credence to the very foundation on which the whole thing was. Strike out the hyphen and you will treat antisemitism for what it really is—a generic name for modern Jew-hatred." See Shmuel Alonzo, "What is a Hyphen?" In Stew Report: The Transcript of The Israel Senate International Study of Antisemitism 1 (1989): 5, 12.


power across Europe and Hitler began to undermine the provisions of Versailles, France slipped into a state of internal conflict.

The Mirror Image

Nausea systematically represses any reference to this larger cultural and political context, even as it inscribes itself in a specific situation—the provincial town of Bouville in the early 1930s. Although Roussaint's diary is explicitly dated from the beginning of January to the end of February 1932, there is no discussion of the political incidents, economic conditions or cultural concerns of the time. Thus, while Sartre is careful to locate the book and its protagonist in a specific time and place, the text simultaneously and methodologically avoids reference to a larger historical context. As Robert Denoon Cuming suggests, the text performs a kind of phenomenological reduction in order to focus on the'=>$\text{Philosophy of Jean-Paul Sartre,}$ p. 107


3. The structure of the story Nausea reproduces the reflective aspiration of consciousness in Sartre's philosophy. Nausea is a novel (at the higher reflective level) about the pre-reflective experiences that led up to the writing of the novel. Proust's novel has a comparable structure. But in Proust (as in Roussaint) experience is encapsulated in its necessary structure by the reflective movement within transnarih experience. Thus Proust's narrative is successfully completed in his terminal volume, Le Temps retrouve. But Sartre had his everyday protagonist in Nausea. Roussaint, tell the story to show that one cannot in fact "catch time by the tail." Furthermore, the true protagonist, nausea itself, is (one of its manifestations) the reflective experience of the discrepancy between the necessary structure of the story as told (as a work of art) and the sense of contingency—of the indeterminacy of the future—which is the experience of the sloppiness of being one's life that one seeks to alter by telling the story-out-it. This discrepancy, which self-consciousness (as well as Proust and the literary tradition) obscures by its inappropriacy, is present in Nausea. The novel is not completed with the novel, which ends with Roussaint's epiphany to regain his past experience by writing the novel, but his actual future left dangling.
After the... the amnistie, papa read the papers aloud every evening. Everybody was talking about the Russians and the German government and reparations and papa showed Lucien the countries on the map: Lucien liked it better when the war was still going on; now everybody looked lost and the light you saw in Mme. Coffin's eyes went out.

Lucien's identity is shaped in important ways by the effects of World War I. The Russian Revolution and the French demand for reparations are everyday topics of conversation. The opening passages of the novella concern the earliest childhood fantasies of Lucien: "Sometimes he answered he'd be a great general like Joan of Arc and he'd take back Alsace-Lorraine from the Germans." 26 Léon Blum, leader of the Front Populaire, is a condensed image in the novella of Lucien's political prejudices. When Lucien 'thought of Léon Blum,' it was at the one who "got money from Germany and hated the French." 27 Blum is one of a series of onomymic images that map the interwar historical context within the novella—from Lucien's father's involvement in World War I to reparation payments, from Joan of Arc to Alsace-Lorraine, from economic collapse to Blum's election.

"The Childhood of a Leader" also invokes the intellectual currents of the interwar years, specifically surrealism and psychoanalysis. 28 While taking the preparatory course for the École Centrale, Lucien meets Berlitz, who 'scandalizes the whole class' with his want-garde appearance and his poems created by the new surrealist technique of 'automatic writing,' and by imitating the style of Lautréamont and


27. Sartre, Childhood, p. 140.

Rimbaud. In the course of their friendship Beckett also introduces Lucien to Freud and psychoanalysis.

Sartre’s references to the political and cultural events of the 1920s and 1930s in “The Childhood of a Leader,” coupled with his insistence on dating Roquentin’s diary, clearly places the protagonist of each work in the interwar context. Through an extended focus on the thematic connections between the two texts, Sartre’s response to the cultural context of his writing becomes more clear.

The Absurdity of Identity

In both Nozze and “The Childhood of a Leader,” the protagonists face a crisis of identity. Each text depicts how the central character experiences Sartre’s dictum that existence precedes essence. Each story delineates a process of self-discovery: a growing consciousness about the meaning of existence. Each text vacillates between the internal experience of each character’s consciousness and the experience of others. Lucien and Roquentin each search for an absolute ground to identity—some foundation to justify the contingency and absurdity of human existence.

Nozze is Sartre’s attempt to represent the unrepresentable. It should be recalled the novel began as a philosophical pamphlet to explicate a philosophical theory of contingency. Thus, in Nozze Sartre has Roquentin make several general statements concerning his conception of human existence.

The essential thing is contingency. I mean that one cannot define existence as necessity. To exist is simply to be there; those who exist let themselves be encountered, but you can never deduce anything from them. I believe there are people who have understood this. Only they tried to overcome this contingency by inventing a necessary, causal being.19

The attempt to assert an ‘essence to existence, to define “existence as necessity,” denies the radical freedom “rooted”18 in the experience of the


30. A long history of scholarship discusses Sartre’s catechism of the rights of the chemical tree in Nozze as the quintessential example of his conception of contingency and the absurdity of existence. See for example, Arthur Denz, Sartre (Glasgow, 1975), p. 34; Chastenot, Jean-Paul Sartre, pp. 15–16; LaCops, A Preface to Sartre, pp. 110–111.
absurdity of existence. Sartre maintains that humans want to be like God—to have logical self-certainty, to establish existence as essence—but the contingency of existence makes this impossible.

Sartre uses a series of terms and images to describe his concept of the absurdity of existence:

"Absurdity was not an idea in my head, or the sound of a voice, only this long serpent dead at my feet, this wooden serpent. Serpent or claw or root or vulture's talon, what difference does it make. And without formulating anything clearly, I understood that I had found the key to Existence, the key to my Nausea, to my own life. In fact, all that I could grasp beyond that returns to this fundamental absurdity. Absurdity: another word; I struggle against words; down there I touched the thing."

Contingency has many names, most significantly, Existence, Absurdity and Nausea. Nausea is the sensation of contingency, the physical manifestation of the contingency of existence. Ronald Aronson identifies three different tropic structures Sartre uses to represent the absurdity of existence: shapelessness, purposelessness, and contingency. Existence, however, exceeds functional explanation; it must remain formless, meaningless, superfluous. If it is to remain absurd, absurdity resists definition.

Roquentin experiences the absurdity of existence as a crisis of his own identity. He gradually discovers that life is meaningless because the meaning and function of things in the world are not directed by a divine or natural order. Roquentin discovers there is no external organization to his experience. He finds himself in a word within meaning, condemned to the freedom of having to create himself. Sartre elaborates: "contingency is not a delusion, a probability which can be dissipated; it is the absolute, consequently, the perfect free gift. All is free."

Paradoxically, the absurdity of human existence is that humans are condemned to be free.

The internalization of this absurd freedom forces a self-questioning at the limits of identity. Sartre metonymically depicts this crisis when the 'I' itself is reflected upon by Roquentin in the conclusion of the novel:

32. Sartre, Nausea, p. 131.
Now when I say ‘I,’ it seems hollow to me. I can’t manage to feel myself very well, I am so forgotten. The only real thing left in me is existence which feels it exists... And just what is Antoine Roquentin? An abstraction. A pale reflection of myself wavers in my consciousness. Antoine Roquentin... and suddenly the ‘I’ pales, pales and fades out.33

The centered ‘I’ of identity is ‘hollow’ and ‘forgotten.’ Existence makes the ‘I’ meaningless, superfluous, formless. As Dominick LaCapra argues, the centered ‘I’ of Roquentin’s cogito ‘threatens to be decapitated or castrated as [Roquentin] loses hold of his ‘I.’... The thinking ‘I’ becomes free-floating. And consciousness seems to pass into things... individually itself... is undermined.'34 The experience of the absurd radially questions a stable identity, as individuality itself begins to break down, to lose form and purpose.

The experience of the contingency and absurdity connects Lucien’s and Roquentin’s crises of identity. Lucien, like Roquentin, confronts the contingency of his identity, and this encounter is experienced as a crisis of ‘I’-dentity. Lucien, as a young man about to enter adulthood, reflects in anguish about his future:

“But what will I be?” A moment passed... “What am I, I, I...?” There was this fog rolling back on itself, indefinite, ‘I!’ He looked in the distance; the were [I] rang in his head and then perhaps it was possible to make out something, like the top of a pyramid whose side vanished far off, into the fog. Lucien shuddered and his hands trembled. “Now I have it!” he thought, “now I have it! I was sure of it! I don’t exist!”35

This is the central crisis that animates the "The Childhood of a Leader." Lucien is caught in a process of self-reflection: “What are I, I...?” The stable ‘I’ is put into question in the text: it is doubled and results in nothing but questions. The ‘I’ is ‘indefinite.’ The “I” is a command, a declaration, a demand for stability and unity. But an essential, stable, grounded and unproblematic ‘I’ does not exist. Not for Lucien and not for any of us, according to Sartre’s early existential analysis. The similarity of Lucien’s ‘I’-dentity crisis to Roquentin’s

33. Ibid., p. 170.
34. LaCapra, A Preface to Sartre, p. 105.
encounter with absurdity becomes clearer in Lucien's contemplation of the possibility of his own nothing: "I don't exist." He closed his eyes and let himself drift: 'existence is an illusion because I know I don't exist, all I have to do is plug my ears and not think about anything and I'll become nothingness.' Lucien's reflections on his nothingness parallel and echo Roquentin's experience.

The Mirror Image

A key motif in both texts is the protagonist's experience of gaing at himself in the mirror. This encounter with the mirror image stages the crisis of self-reflection: subjectivity is inherently divided—the subjective experience of self is objectified. The mirror image challenges a representational theory of consciousness because the representation of self in the mirror is just another object of consciousness. In the encounter consciousness 'finds what is outside itself. Therefore the image of self is always outside itself, the self is only another object in the world. Camus' has connected the mirror image to Sartre's early critique of the "reflective structure of consciousness in the French philosophical tradition... from Descartes' cogito to Bergson's most prolix." The mirror image dramatizes the drive for self-consciousness as inherently unrealizable. The mirror image is thus a figure which consolidates within it both Roquentin's and Lucien's identity crisis. In two pivotal moments in Nausea and "The Childhood of a Leader," Lucien and Roquentin witness their own crisis. Each is a scene where the protagonist views himself in the mirror, and where regarding the self submerges the character's identity into what Alain Buisson terms "an abyssal space." Roquentin's first glimpse of insight into the contingency of his identity occurs when he sees his reflection. From the outset the mirror poses a threat for Roquentin: "There is a white hole in the wall, a mirror. It is a trap. I know that I am going to let myself be caught in it. I have..." The mirror is the "trap" of the I, the trap of believing that I-identity can be reified and objectified into an image, an echo, an essence. In a paradigmatic statement of the conception of bad faith or self-deception

36. Sartre, Childhood, p. 100.
37. For an analysis of the mirror image in Sartre's work, see Alain Buisson, L'éducateur de Sartre (Gall, 1980), pp. 95-104.
40. Sartre, Nausea, p. 16.
(maison de foi) that Sartre would later develop in *Being and Nothingness*, Roquentin says that "[P]eople who live in society have learned how to see themselves in mirrors as they appear to their friends." 41 Roquentin castigates seeing one-self as others see you, accepting their objectification by internalizing their reflection—absorbing as your identity the gaze of the other. 42

The reflection mirrors the identity problem of the text. There is an inherent indeterminacy and indeterminacy to Roquentin’s identity that the mirror image exposes, while threatening at the same time to reify and objectify his identity. The mirror image blurs stages the inherent tension between authenticity and bad faith. Roquentin considers the reflection of his face:

Often in these lost days I study it. I can understand nothing of this face. The faces of others have some sense, some direction [Croz des autres ont un sens]. Not mine. I cannot even decide whether it is handsome or ugly. I think it is ugly because I have been told so. 43

Roquentin mimics the bad faith of which he accuses others—he accepts himself as ugly because he was “told so.” With continued reflection on his image in the mirror, however, Roquentin begins to experience his physical being as a transcendence—he comes to understand what his Aunt Bigeots told him: “If you look at yourself too long in the mirror, you’ll see a monkey.” 44 The mirror image divides the self, doubling it, making the self into an object alienated from itself.


43. Sartre, *Nausea*, p. 16.

44. Ibid., p. 17.
In Roquentin's encounter with the mirror, the reflection is the false resolution of bad faith—the acceptance of the self as object. At the same time, however, the identity of the mirror is the origin of the crisis of identity itself—the dramatization of the lack of an essence to the self. The mirror image in Nausea that exposes the crisis of identity, while at the same time portraying the mirror image as the resolution of the crisis, stages the tension between authenticity and bad faith.

In Lucien's case, the scene of his self-examination in the mirror rearticulates the crisis of identity exposed in Nausea and subsequently re-explored in “Childhood of a Leader.” Here the mirror image occurs not only at the beginning of the crisis but at its conclusion. The final paragraph consolidates the crisis of identity that Lucien undergoes throughout the novella. In the last image of the work, Lucien gazes into the mirror. The concluding paragraph, condenses the ambiguities and complexities of Lucien's search for a stable identity that unfolds throughout the text.

A clock struck noon, Lucien rose. The metamorphosis was complete: a graceful, uncertain adolescent had entered this café one hour earlier, now a man left a leader among Frenchmen. Lucien took a few sips of the glorious light of the French morning. At the corner of the Rue des Écoles and the Boulevard Saint-Michel he went towards a stationery shop and looked at himself in the mirror: he would have liked to find on his own face the imperceptible look he admired in Leonardo's. But the mirror only reflected a pretty, headache little face that was not yet terrible. "I'll grow a mustache," he decided.

In this final moment, it appears that Lucien has escaped his crisis of identity—he is, "now a man," a reader among Frenchmen who walks into the proverbial French dawn. However, he gazes at himself in the

45. ibid.
46. Sartre, Childhood, p. 144.
mirror and is disappointed because he does not find in his own face the desired "impenetrable look."

As was the case with Nazaire, the mirror image is the moment in the text where the interminable confrontation with bad faith is enacted. Lucien's desire is to have his image reflect Lemordant's "impenetrable look"—to internalize as his own identity the look of Lemordant. The latter is the paragon of the chef in the novel's title: the leader of the Camelots du Roi, the shock troops for the Action Française in the Latin Quarter in the 1930s. Lemordant characterizes the ideal of a stable identity formed in the natural order and preserved in the cultural order. He represents the plenitude of national identity, someone who "did not seem to have acquired that maturity... he was an adult by birth." Lemordant depicts the possibility of an identity identical to itself—he emerges in the world fully formed. He represents a French identity materialized in the soil of rural France and the memory of its dead. In the novella Lemordant offers Lucien a resolution of his crisis through Lucien reclaiming his social and cultural heritage by rooting his identity in a mystical, nationalist, organic vision of France. In seeing in the mirror that he is not Lemordant, Lucien recognizes that his identity crisis remains unresolved, and that a disturbing disjunction persists between a stable and unproblematic image of himself and the reflected image.

Lucien's desire to grow a mustache is a fiercely ironic twist in Sartre's text, revealing at once the image of a grounded, stable and ordered identity and the self-deception that accepting that identity entails. The mustache is a sign in Lucien's earliest memories of a fixed identity. In Lucien's first twain incarnates the mustache represents a rigid gender identity: "What would happen if they took off mamac's dress and she put on papa's pants? Maybe right away she'd grow a black mustache." Lemordant reinforces the gendered significance of the mustache, while adding an extreme, right-nationalist element to its meaning. Lemordant is introduced in the text with the following line: "He was even bigger than Lucien, and with his black mustache, already looked like a man." The significance that Sartre places on the mustache in "The Childhood of a Leader," given the context of the book's production and the theories with

47. Ibid., p. 126.


49. Sartre, Childhood, p. 126.
which it deals, perhaps also suggests an allusion to Adolf Hitler and the rigid, fixed identity of national socialism.

In an extraordinary moment of intertextuality, both Nausée and "The Childhood of a Leader" begin to respond to and collapse into one another through the sign of the mustache. After Roquentin abandons the history of Rollebon, Nausée's previously rational discourse begins to move toward a certain chaos and contingency as the crisis of his identity increases. Roquentin writes: "how happy one must be to be nothing more than a Legion of Honor and a mustache and to one sees the rest, he sees the two pointed ends of his mustache on both sides of the nose, I do not think therefore I am a mustache."\(^5\)

Roquentin punctuates this turbulent critique of the mustache with a line echoed at the conclusion of "The Childhood of a Leader": "He has the Legion of Honor, the bastards have the right to exist: 'I exist because it is my right, I have the right to exist, therefore I have the right not to think: the finger is raised.'\(^6\) The conclusion of the novella responds to Roquentin's seemingly mad ranting. Before examining himself in the mirror, Lucien believes that he has solved his crisis of identity:

Lucien was just that: an enormous bouquet of responsibilities and rights. He had believed that he existed by chance for a long time, but it was due to a lack of sufficient thought. His place in the sun was marked in Pérolles long before his birth. They were waiting for him long before his father's marriage: if he had come into the world it was to occupy that place: "I exist," he thought, "because I have the right to exist."\(^7\)

The unproblematic and stable identity that Lucien desires, symbolized by the mustache and the Legion of Honor, is undermined avant la lettre by Roquentin, who experiences his existence prior to any stable identity. For Roquentin, identity is always uncertain and contingent. Lucien's final reflection in the last line of the novella, "I'll grow a mustache,"\(^8\) as he witnesses himself in the mirror, thus ironically mirrors the crisis that figures in the mirror image at the beginning of Roquentin's crisis of identity.

---

51. Ibid.
52. Sartre, Childhood, p. 143.
The Mirror Image and the Politics of Writing

This mirroring of themes concerning the crisis of identity—the mirror image and the problem of self-reflexivity it enacts—reflects Sartre's own developing conception of the role of the writer in the 1930s. Sartre connects the mirror image to the politics of writing in an article entitled "John Dos Passos and '1919.'" Published in La Nouvelle Revue française in August 1938, it appeared only one month after Sartre wrote "The Childhood of a Leader."

The opening line reflects the relation Sartre establishes between texts like Dos Passos' '1919, Nausera or "The Childhood of a Leader" and the mirror image:

A novel is a mirror. So everyone says. But what is meant by reading a novel? It means, I think, jumping into the mirror. You suddenly find yourself on the other side of the glass, among people and objects that have a familiar look. But they merely look familiar. We have never really seen them. The things of our world have in turn, become outside reflections. You close the book, step over the edge of the mirror and return to this honest-to-goodness world . . . The mirror that closed behind you reflects them peacefully and now you would swear that art is a reflection. There are clever people who go so far as to talk of distorting mirrors.54

The text as mirror is supposed to engender the reader's crisis of identity. The novel places the reader "on the other side of the glass," on the other side of themselves, in a position to reflect on themselves. Sartre says "the intuition, like the method," of Dos Passos' writing "is clear upon reflection: But you must close the book and reflect."55 The book is not a predetermined reflection offering a solution to the dilemmas the characters face, but rather the occasion for the reader to reflect upon his or her choices and the contingency of identity more generally. Sartre contends that writing that facilitates the reader's reflection on his/her own

55. Ibid., p. 91.
identity, writing that makes a reader confront the text as a mirror, "sickens a man for good and throws a mechanism out of gear."

Sartre’s understanding of the text as mirror critiques a conception of the art of writing as representational—of art as an accurate description of reality or a reflection of an author’s intentions—where the act of reading is a process of identification. The text, according to Sartre, is a mirror where the life of the reader is the object reflected upon—where the very reflection of life is also a reflection on life. Readers are placed outside of themselves—made to see themselves from behind the mirror—made to reflect upon how meaning is made in the world of the novel and in turn in their lives. At the same time, the reader is trapped in the gaze of the author who creates the mirror-text for the reader’s reflection. When the reader steps back from the mirror and closes the book, the gaze of the author returns with him or her. In Sartre’s notion of the text as a mirror image, the reader sees-the-self-seeing-the-self-being-seen.

The axiom that the text is a mirror thus implies something about the role of the writer. If the text is a mirror, then the role of the writer is to fashion a text that enables readers to reflect upon themselves; the task of the intellectual is to hold a mirror up to society. Writing that produces this self-reflection of the reader is radical or revolutionary. Sartre writes:

Dos Passos very consciously uses this absurd and insistent illusion to impel us to revolt. He had done everything possible to make his novel seem a mere reflection. . . . He wants to show us this world, our own—to show it only, without explanation or comment.

Dos Passos’ writing reflects the absurdity of the era because his characters’ destinies are never resolved in advance—there is neither ontological nor psychological necessity that determines their freedom.

Sartre indicates the political significance of writing that forces the self-reflection of the reader when he argues that it necessarily involves commitment: “we feel like smashing our destinies. We have become rebels; he [the writer] has achieved his purpose . . . We [readers] are rebels behind the looking-glass.” To smash your destiny, to shatter any sense that your identity is determined—by God, psychology or social conditions—is, thus, the threshold of commitment, a pivotal condition of the possibility of engagement.

56. Ibid., p. 88.
57. Ibid., emphasis added.
58. Ibid., p. 98.
To be a rebel "behind the looking glass" aims at a different level of political commitment than that of the political revolutionary. The politics of writing that Sartre affirms in his conception of the novel as a mirror concerns the consciousness and self-consciousness of the reader. Sartre says that self-consciousness "is not what the rebels of this world want to change. He wants to transform Man's present condition, the one that develops day by day." However, writing like Dos Passos', where the text is a mirror, involves engagement: "[I]f it involves commitment. But for whom? For the affect consciousness of 'everyman,' for what Heidegger calls 'das Mann.' But still, where does it spring from? Who is its representative as I read? I am." Dos Passos' form of writing necessitates commitment of the reader's consciousness:

I [the reader] have to play the role of the obliging chorus. This consciousness exists only through me; without me there would be nothing but black spots on white paper. But even while I am this collective consciousness, I want to wrench away from it, to see it from the judge's point of view, that is to get free of myself. \[57\]

At the same time the reader forges the meaning of the text, he desires to negate this world. In fact, the very act of imagining the world requires for Sartre that the reader transcode the world of the text created by the author—to judge the world free from the judgments of the author. Sartre maintains that Dos Passos fills the reader with "shame" and "uneasiness," and as such the reader is "creating and rejecting social taboos." \[58\] The mirror-text is thus a condensed image of the struggle of human intersubjectivity that Sartre fully explicates in Being and Nothingness and which does not achieve resolution in his thought until What is Literature? For Sartre, the text as mirror—the text which forces the reader to self-reflection and to questioning the stability of his or her identity—has radical potential for revolutionizing the whole social sphere. He says that the text as mirror encourages the reader to become "a revolutionary again," even if only "an unwilling one." Through the technique of writers like Dos Passos, and of course Sartre himself,

life crystallizes into the Social, and the problem of the transition to the typical—stumbling block of the social novel—is thereby

56. Ibid., pp. 52, 94.
57. Ibid.
58. Ibid.
resolved. There is no further need to present a working man type, to comprise (as Praz does in *Antoine Blake*) an existence which represents the exact average of thousands of existences. Each character is unique; what happens to him could happen to no one else. What does it matter since society has marked him more deeply than could any special circumstance, since he is society? Thus we get a glimpse of an order beyond the accidents of fate or the contingency of detail, an order more supple than Zola's physiological necessity or Proust's psychological mechanism.\(^{61}\)

Sartre's conception of the text as a mirror is thus intended to move beyond Zola and Proust. The text must enable the reader to enter the consciousness of the characters, whose choices are never determined in advance, whose futures remain contingent. Dos Passos' characters live on the border between interior and exterior, between the singular and the universal:

Dos Passos' man is a hybrid creature, an interior-exterior being. We go on living with him and within him, with his vacillating, individual consciousness, when suddenly it wavers, weakens, and is diluted in the collective consciousness. We follow it up to that point and suddenly, before we notice, we are on the outside. The man behind the looking-glass is a strange, contemptible, fascinating creature.\(^{62}\)

The text, Sartre is claiming, positions the reader as a stranger to himself, a "man behind the looking-glass" a "contemptible" and "fascinating creature." As such, it positions him on the limit of "interior-exterior being." Being at once inside and outside the text forces the reader to look at himself as an individual, as a distinct and unique identity, but at the same time, through identity with the character, to become "everyman," "das Man," thus threatening the individuality of the reader's identity. To enter the text is to enter a palace of distorting mirrors.

The paradigmatic example that Sartre offers for how writing is supposed to effect this process of self-reflection is a scene in Dos Passos' 1919. Joe, a character in the novel, sees the person who kills him in the mirror and thereby witnesses his own death:

\(^{62}\) Ibid., p. 94-95.
\(^{63}\) Ibid., p. 91.
Joe laid out a couple of frog legs and was backing off towards the door, when he saw in the mirror that a big guy in the blouse was bringing down a bottle on his head held with both hands. He tried to swing around but he didn't have time. The bottle crashed in his skull and he was out.  

The scene stages for Sartre the crisis of identity—the crisis of inside and outside at the same time. In this passage from Dos Passos the reader passes from the interior reflections of the protagonist to the exterior facts of the events presented by the author. As such, a structural necessity of the writing is to inhabit the limit of identity. Through the author's reflections the reader passes into the mirror of the text, into the consciousness of the characters, and into the reflection in the mirror in a multiplying mise-en-abîme. The effect is to destabilise identity.

Sartre wants all readers, "ewyman," to go through this crisis because it expresses the conditions of his epoch. Thus, Dos Passos is named amongst Faulkner, Kafka and Stendhal as the "greatest writer of our time." To write texts in a way that produces a crisis of self-reflection in the reader makes the text itself bear witness to the age. The reader becomes aware of the instability of identity in the encounter with the mirror-text. Simultaneously, the text as mirror-image stages the scene of Sartre's existential analytics of consciousness. The reader is opened to the possibility of self-consciousness by the gaze of the author. It is in the mirror of the text that the look of the Other is reflected and where you first see yourself. The text as mirror holds up an image of a world that serves as the site from which the reader must judge his or her own world even while the author of the text simultaneously judges the reader. Sartre thus suggests that in the mirror image of the text, the writer stages the crisis of identity that his existential analytics of consciousness describes: the reader sees-the self-seeing-the self-being-seen.

The Image of 'the Jew'

In both Nausea and "The Childhood of a Leader" the instability of identity the texts mirror and that Roquentin and Lucien experience is stabilised through respective images of 'the Jew'. This image becomes the foil where the indiscernibility of identity is paradoxically resolved. Furthermore, it is precisely in terms of their respective reflections on 'the

64. Ibid.
65. Ibid., p. 96.
Jay! that Roquentin’s and Lacoué’s paths of engagement follow inverse directions.

The possibility of transcending the confravigy of existence that Nausea documents occurs in the final scene of Roquentin’s diary. Roquentin boards a train leaving for Paris in “three-quarters of an hour.” He has no intention of writing in the world in any determined war: “I don’t want to do anything; to do something is to create existence—and there’s quite enough existence as it is.” As he writes, Roquentin makes a crucial realization: that writing somehow rescues him, even if only temporarily, from the absurdity of existence. “The truth is that I can’t put down my pen. I think I’m going to have Nausea and feel as though I’m delaying it while writing.”*7 Madeleine, who works in the café where Roquentin sits, asks whether he wants to hear his favorite jazz album one last time.

Listening to “Somn of these Dats” while writing, Roquentin glimpses the redemptive possibility of literature. He suggests that the music goes through everyone that hears it, and like Dos Passos’ writing, slams the hearer. Roquentin writes: “I am ashamed. A glorious little suffering has just been born, an exemplary suffering. Four notes on the saxophone. They come and go, they seem to say: You must be like us, suffer in rhythm.”37 The anguish of this collective suffering and the possibility of giving it meaning is what humanity shares in common. The record, like the text, holds up a mirror to existence:

it spins gall, completely self-absorbed; like a scythe it has cut through the drab intimacy of the world and now it spins and all of us, Madeleine, the thick-set man, the patronne, myself, the tables, benches, the stained mirror, the glasses, all of us abandon ourselves to existence, because we were among ourselves... it has taken us unaware, in the disorder, the day-to-day drift: I am ashamed for myself and for what exists in front of it.38

To create a text that shames the reader, that makes the reader refuse a stable identity and abandon herself to existence is to create a work of art that turns the absurdity of existence into a cultural mirror, to be like “the canvas of paintings... behind the pages of books... behind the phonograph records, with the long dry harnets of jazz.”39

67. Ibid., p. 174.
68. Ibid., pp. 174-15, emphasis added.
69. Ibid., p. 175.
The world of the jazz singer comes to Roquentin's mind. It is at this precise moment in the text that Roquentin seizes on the redemptive logic of writing. He imagines that the creator of the song is a "Jew with black eyebrows":

That's the way it happened. That way or another way, it makes little difference. That is how it was born. It is the worn-out body of this Jew with black eyebrows which it chose to create it. ... And why not it?"70

The song resonates through Roquentin and suggests to him that he might also write a song of suffering. Roquentin asks Madeleine to replay the record and thinks that he would like more information about the Negro who sings "Some of These Days" and the "Jew with black eyebrows" who wrote it.

Roquentin asserts that having found their voices through the medium of art, both "the Jew" and "the Negro" are redeemed: "She sings. So two of them are saved: the Jew and the Negro. Saved. Maybe they thought they were lost irrevocably, drowned in existence." Roquentin suggests that the production of art can rescue the writer from the absurdity of existence: "The Negro sings. Can you justify your existence then? Just a little?"71 "The Negro's singer is a figure of salvation; he is an elegiac figure, who redeems because she sings the song of suffering, which paradoxically is the freedom from suffering.

Precisely the moment when he reflects upon the redemptive possibility of writing, Roquentin imagines 'the Jew' as a sign for the possibility of this redemption. 'The Jew' is the figure that writes the song. 'The Jew' offers the possibility of redemption for 'the Negro' by writing the story of her suffering in music. Writing must make the reader suffer the anxieties of identity, 'The Jew' is a sign for the one who writes the suffering of mankind, and his identity is associated with that suffering. 'The Jew' suffers to write the suffering of another. Sartre imagines the "clean-shaven" Jew (signifying his assimilation perhaps) "suffocating in the heat, on the twenty-first floor of a New York skyscraper." In this rather curiously/sort of the Jew, Sartre inscribes 'the Jew' as the witness of human suffering. 'The Jew' is a mirror of the human condition, a martyr-witness to human experience.

70. Ibid., p. 176.
71. Ibid., p. 177.
72. Ibid., p. 176.
Sartre attributes political efficacy to writing, thus providing an opening to the politics of literature, through this image of the Jew: "The Jew" is revealed as the witness who reflects the anxiety of the external world while refracting that anxiety. The logic of Roquentin’s realization is that the writer who writes the scene of the Jewish songwriter in New York is himself saved by telling the story of the Jew, telling the story of the Negress. Roquentin can, therefore, redeem his own existence by becoming a writer. Roquentin writes so that the three of them are saved: the writer, the Jew, the Negress. Likewise, Sartre, who writes the story of Roquentin, is redeemed. The reader of Roquentin’s diary also offers this possibility tosofar as the text is a mirror. Through the creation of texts as cultural mirrors, Roquentin paradoxically solves his crisis of identity by turning his crisis into a mirror, where readers can gaze at their own identity in an endless multiplicity, mise-en-abîme of meaning.

Having seized upon this logic, Roquentin then decides that when he gets to Paris he will write: "It would have to be a book: I don’t know how to do anything else. But not a history book: history talks only about what has existed." It is here that Roquentin decides that literature, unlike history, offers the possibility of bearing witness. Literature enables one to write in a way that makes people "assassins of their existence." 73 Like the record and the mirror, "the Jew" and the text are a site for self-reflexive questioning.

Moreover, "the Jew" that Sartre imagines as the writer of "Some of these Days" is a mirror image of the reality of the song’s historical origins. "Some of These Days" was, in fact, written by a black man, Shelton Brooks, and sung by Sophie Tucker, a Jewish woman of eastern European descent—a direct inversion of what Sartre describes as its origins in Nazaré. In "The Childhood of a Leader," Sartre refers to Sophie Tucker, suggesting his knowledge of the song’s actual origins.

In direct opposition to Roquentin in "The Childhood of a Leader," Lucien hears Sophie Tucker at the beginning of his crisis, not at the moment of its resolution. Lucien’s difficulty begins when he arrives in Paris, starts school and finds there is not a single classmate he "could make a friend of." 74 In January a new student called Berliac, a Jew who "scandalized the whole class," arrives. He was known as a child of an assimilated Jew, smoked English cigarettes, played phonograph records and Lucien heard the voice

73. Ibid., p. 178.
74. Sartre, Childhood, p. 112.
of Sophie Tucker and Al Jolson. "Shortly thereafter, Berlitz introduces Lucien to the foreign and Jewish thought of Freud and psychoanalysis, which is where Lucien’s prise de conscience begins to unfold. In Lucien’s memories his encounters with Berlitz, Freud, Sophie Tucker and Al Jolson give rise to his crisis, and he comes to hate Berlitz. Eventually, Lucien characterizes him in subhuman terms, using animal imagery: “Berlitz is a monkey... Did you know his maternal grandmother was a Jewess? That explains a lot of things.” 16 For Lucien, (Berlitz) ‘the Jew’ is the origin of the threat of disorder and the beginning of his degeneracy. ‘The Jew’ is a free-floating signifier that represents contingency.

Lucien’s image of ‘the Jew’ is not only the origin of his problem, but also the site for its solution. Lemordant—the symbol of the solidity and maturity of a stable and fixed (national) identity—introduces Lucien to the violence and power of anti-Semitism as a solution to his existential crisis. Lucien first meets Lemordant when the latter ‘bumped a Jew named Loewy in the bathroom.’ He castigates ‘the Jew’: “Back to Poland! To Poland you dirty louse and don’t come clapping around here with us...” He finished up by slapping him and little Loewy apologized: the affair ended there.”17 A few days later Lucien is approached by Lemordant to take political action—the political action of the intellectual—signing a manifesto:

Lemordant came up to Lucien; he held a paper. “You want to sign?” he asked. “What is it?” “Because of the kikes at the Normale Sup, they sent the Octave a petition against compulsory military training with 200 signatures. So we’re protesting; we need a thousand names at least: we’re going to get the curards, the rotards, the agros, the S’s and the whole works.” Lucien was flattered. “Is it going to be printed?” “Surely in Action. Maybe in Echo de Paris besides.”18

Lucien looks for the statement in Action Française. It appears with the headline, “YOUTH OF FRANCE SCORES IN TEETH OF INTERNATIONAL JEWRY.” Lucien sees his signature on the manifesto against the Jews as grounding his French national identity: “His name was there, compressed, definitive, not far from Lemordant’s... ‘Lucien Bézier,’ he thought, ‘a

75. Ibid., pp. 103, 109.
76. Ibid., p. 127.
77. Ibid., p. 130.
peasant name, a real French name." 78 Le Nenardant introduces him to Barres' work and Maurras' Camelots du Roi, who become his comrades. Lucien's individual identity becomes progressively intertwined with the identity of the Camelots, and he assumes a more consciously antisemitic position in the process: "Lucien threw out severe titling reflections about the Jews and spoke of Berthac who was so mildly." Lucien, in fact, becomes recognized amongst the group for his antisemitic sentiments. His friends say: "Fleurier, tell us a good one about the kikes... Lucien told the Jewish jokes he learned from his father." In time, he becomes the group's expert on the identification of Jews: "There was no one like Lucien for recognizing a Jew from the nose." 79 An incident in which ten members of the Camelots (including Lucien) best up a man suspected of being Jewish consecrates a rigid community amongst the boys. Lucien's antisemitism reaches its apex when his hatred extends to the point of physical revulsion for the Jewish body. Lucien says: "I can't stand them—it's physical." 80 Lucien, reflecting on himself, says that antisemitism enables him to appear "respectable in his own eyes" because he had finally pierced his envelope of flesh, of likes and dislikes, habits and humors... "Where I sought myself," he thought, "I could not find myself." In good faith he took a detailed counting of all he was.

"But if I could only be what I am and I wouldn't be worth any more than that little kike." What could one discover searching in this murky intimacy: if not the sorrow of flesh, the ignoble tie of equality and disorder? "First maxim," Lucien said, "not to try and see inside yourself: there is no mistake more dangerous." 81

To stop the inherently differential structure of identity—the crisis of identity reflected in the mirror image—Lucien breaks the *mise-en-abyme* by attacking the embodiment of this difference, 'the Jew.' 'The Jew' thus figures in Lucien's Weltanschauung—Lucien, who is the portrait of the antisemite for Sartre—as both the origin and solution to the absurdity of existence.

78. Ibid.
79. Ibid., pp. 34-135.
80. Ibid., p. 140.
81. Ibid., p. 142.
The analysis of Antoine Roquentin and Lucien Fлеurier as mirror images of one another representing two inverse models of the intellectual in France before World War II shows that Sartre was deeply engaged in working out the political role of the intellectual in the 1930s. I have explicated the mirroring in Nosseer and "The Childhood of a Leader" through a discussion of the historical production of the texts, the historical context conceived in each book, and their relation to the parallel cases of identity experienced by Roquentin and Lucien. Roquentin's and Lucien's experiences of their mirror images exemplify the crisis of identity central to Sartre's existentialist analysis. The trope of the mirror was pivotal to defining Sartre's developing conception of the politics of writing. Lucien and Roquentin each enact crucial elements of the role the intellectual played in Sartre's developing notion of engagement.

The instability of identity that the texts mirror and that Roquentin and Lucien experience is stabilized through their respective images of 'the Jew' at the conclusion of each text. Roquentin's and Lucien's encounters with 'the Jew' are the very point at which the intellectual becomes political in Sartre's (early) writing. It is critical to recognize that both Lucien and Roquentin define their intellectual positions in relation to their images of 'the Jew.' For both, the image of 'the Jew' is the foil that fashions the shift from passive reflection to active commitment, from embourgeoisement to engagement, from exis to praxis, from the témoin to témoignage. The ambivalences and overlaps between Lucien and Roquentin establish the links between the engagement of the leftist intellectual and the cultural image of 'the Jew' which were constitutive of Sartre's porous concept of the engaged intellectual.

In conclusion, the conception of engagement that Sartre was developing in the 1930s was structured in terms of a debate concerning 'the Jew,' the notion of identity and the struggle over French cultural values. Lucien and Roquentin represent competing versions of how intellectuals and the nation could respond to the crisis of the 1930s. In crucial ways, for both Sartre and France, this response depended upon differing representations of Jews and Judaism.
