

Nature, Humanism and Tragedy

Tragedy is only a way of assembling human misfortune, of subsuming it, and thus of justifying it by putting it into the form of a necessity, of a kind of wisdom, or of a purification. To reject this regeneration and to seek the technical means of not succumbing perfidiously (nothing is more insidious than tragedy), is today a necessary undertaking.

Roland Barthes

It is now two years since, in an attempt to define the direction of a still hesitating research into the novel, I acknowledged as an established fact ‘the destitution of the old myths of profundity’. The very vivid and almost unanimous reactions of critics, the objections of many readers, apparently in good faith, and the reservations expressed by several sincere friends, showed me very clearly that I had been going too fast. Apart from a few people engaged in similar research—artistic, literary or philosophic—no one was willing to admit that such a statement did not necessarily entail the denial of man. Fidelity to the old myths, in fact, turned out to be somewhat tenacious.

That writers as different as François Mauriac and André Rousseaux, for instance, should join in denouncing the exclusive description of 'surfaces' as a gratuitous mutilation, the blind obsession of a young rebel, a kind of sterile despair leading to the destruction of art, was nevertheless only to be expected. More unexpected, more disturbing, was the position, in many ways identical, of certain materialists who judged what I had set out to do in terms of 'values' which barely differed from the traditional values of Christianity. It wasn't that there was any question of their having any religious allegiance, though. But in both cases a principle was made of the indefensible solidarity between our minds and the world, art was brought back to its 'natural', reassuring, rôle as a mediator, and I was condemned in the name of the 'human'.

And finally I was pretty naïve, so they said, to try and deny this profundity: the only interest of my books, the only way in which they became at all readable, lay in the extent—which extent was in any case controvertible—to which they were its unconscious expression.

It is quite obvious that there is only a fairly tenuous parallel between the three novels I have so far published and my theoretical views about a possible future novel. But no one will deny that it is natural for a book of two or three hundred pages to be more complex than an article of ten pages, nor that it is easier to indicate a new direction than to follow it, and that partial or even total failure is not definite, decisive proof that the direction itself was wrong.

Finally, it must be added that the characteristic of humanism, whether Christian or otherwise, is precisely to incorporate *everything*, including things that may be trying to limit it, or even totally reject it. This may even be said to be one of the most reliable mainsprings of its action.

There is no question of trying to justify myself at all costs—all I am trying to do is to see these matters more clearly. The various positions I have described above are of considerable use to me in doing so. What I am trying to do here is less to refute their arguments than to point out their implications, and at the same time to show precisely in what ways I differ from such points of view. It is always useless to start a controversy, but if there is any possibility of a real discussion, then, on the contrary, we should grasp it. And if such a discussion is impossible, it is important to know why. In any case, both sides are certainly sufficiently interested in these problems for it to be worth bringing them up again without beating about the bush.

In the first place, isn't there something fraudulent about the word *human* that is always being flung in our faces? If it isn't a meaningless word, what *is* its actual meaning?

It would appear that the people who never stop using it, who make it

their unique criterion for approving or disapproving of anything, are confusing—purposely, perhaps—precise (and limited) reflections on man, his situation in the world and the phenomena of his existence, with a certain anthropocentric atmosphere which may be vague but which nevertheless envelops everything and gives everything its own so-called *meaning*; which invests things, that is, from within, with a more or less invidious network of feelings and thoughts. To simplify the position of our new inquisitors, we can sum it up in a couple of sentences: if I say: 'The world is man,' I shall always obtain absolution, whereas if I say: 'Things are things, and man is only man,' I am immediately convicted of a crime against humanity.

The crime consists of stating that there is in existence in the world something that is not man, that takes no notice of him, and has nothing in common with him. The supreme crime, in their eyes, is to record this separation, this distance, without trying to do anything to sublimate it.

What could an 'inhuman' work of art be, otherwise? In particular, how could a novel that presents a man and follows his every step from page to page, describing only what he does, what he sees, or what he imagines, be accused of rejecting man? And let us immediately make it quite clear that it is not the character himself who is at issue in this judgement. Considered as a 'character', as an individual moved by torments and passions, no one will ever accuse him of being inhuman, even if he is a sadistic madman and a criminal. One would rather think the reverse would be the case.

But the time comes when this man's eye falls on certain things, positively and emphatically. He sees them, but he refuses to take possession of them, he refuses to entertain any questionable understanding or complicity with them. He asks nothing of them, he feels neither in harmony nor in disagreement with them. He may perhaps use them to reinforce his emotions, or as something to focus his eyes on. But his eyes are content just to measure them, and his emotion, too, alights on their surface, with no wish to penetrate them, since there is nothing inside them. It makes no pretence of appealing to them, for there would be no answer.

So to condemn, in the name of what is 'human', the novel that treats of such a man, is to adopt the *humanist* point of view, according to which it is not sufficient to show man as being where he is, but it must also be proclaimed that man is everywhere. On the pretext that man can only have a subjective knowledge of the world, humanism decides to pick on man as the justification for everything. The humanist viewpoint is like a bridge thrown between the soul of man and that of things—above all, a token of solidarity.

In the field of literature, the expression of this solidarity appears primarily as the systematic search for analogical relationships.

Metaphor, in fact, is never an innocent figure of speech. To say that the weather is 'capricious', or a mountain 'majestic', to speak of the 'heart' of the forest, of the 'merciless' sun, of a village 'crouching' in the hollow of a valley, is to some extent to describe the things themselves—their form, their dimensions, their situation, etc. But the choice of an analogical vocabulary, however simple it may be, in itself goes beyond the mere description of purely physical data, and this further content cannot simply be credited to the art of literature. The height of the mountain, whether one likes it or not, takes on a moral value; the heat of the sun becomes the result of someone's intention . . . In practically all our contemporary literature these anthropomorphic analogies are too insistently, too coherently, repeated, not to reveal a whole metaphysical system.

It can only be assumed that the writers who use such a terminology do so, more or less consciously, in order to establish a permanent relationship between the universe and the being who inhabits it. Thus man's feelings are made to appear to originate, one by one, from his contacts with the world, and to find their natural counterpart, if not their fulfilment, in this world.

Metaphor, which is supposed merely to express a straightforward comparison, in fact introduces a subterranean communication, a sympathetic (or antipathetic) modification, which is its real *raison d'être*. For, when used as a comparison, it is almost always a pointless comparison, which adds nothing new to the description. What would the village lose if it were simply 'situated' in the hollow of a valley? The word 'crouching' doesn't give us any extra information. It does, on the other hand, transport the reader (guided by the author) into the hypothetical soul of the village. If I accept the word 'crouching' I am no longer merely a spectator; I become the village for the duration of the phrase, and the hollow of the valley functions as a cavity into which I would like to disappear.

The defenders of the metaphor, relying on the likelihood of our feeling this solidarity with it, would answer that herein lies one of its advantages—that of making a previously insensitive element responsive. Having become the village—they say—the reader participates in its situation, and so understands it better. And the same with the mountain; I shall help people to see it better if I say it is majestic than if I measure the apparent angle by which I note its height . . . And this is sometimes true, but it always contains its more dangerous opposite: it is precisely this participation that is misleading, as it implies a hidden unity.

It must even be added that the gain in descriptive value is only an alibi in this context: the real devotees of metaphor are simply trying to impose the idea of communication on the reader. If they didn't have the verb 'to crouch' at their disposal they wouldn't even mention the position of the village. The height of the mountain would mean nothing to them if it didn't present the moral spectacle of 'majesty'.

Such a spectacle, for them, never remains entirely *external*. It always

more or less implies a gift received by man—the things that surround him are like the fairies in fairy stories, each one of whom brings the new-born child one of the traits of his future character as a present. Thus the mountain would perhaps have been the first to communicate the feeling of majesty to me—this is what they would have me believe. This feeling would then, they hope, develop in me, and in its turn breed others—magnificence, prestige, heroism, nobility, pride. And in my turn I would apply them to other objects, even to less important ones (I should speak of a proud oak tree, a vase with noble lines . . .) and the world would become the depository of all my grandiose aspirations, and at the same time be their image and their justification for all eternity.

The same would apply to every other feeling, and in these incessant exchanges, multiplied to infinity, I would no longer be able to discover the origin of anything. Would majesty first be *in* me, or in front of me? The very question would have lost its meaning. The only thing left would be a sublime communion between the world and myself.

Then, as I got used to it, it would be easy to go much farther. Once I had accepted the principle of this communion, I should talk of the sadness of a landscape, the indifference of a stone, and the fatuity of a coal scuttle. These new metaphors provide no appreciably new information about the objects I am examining, but the world of things will have become so thoroughly contaminated by my mind that from now on it will be capable of any and every emotion, of any and every trait of character. I shall forget that it is I, and I alone, who feel sad or lonely—these affective elements will soon be considered as the *profound reality* of the material universe, the only reality, supposedly, worthy of my attention.

So we are dealing with a question which is much more far-reaching than that of using things as the material for describing our human consciousness, as we might use tree trunks to make a log cabin. If I similarly confuse my own sadness with the sadness I attribute to a landscape, if I claim that this is no superficial relationship, I am thereby recognizing that my present life is to some extent predestined. The landscape existed *before* me; if it is really *it* that is sad, it was sad *before* I was, and the harmony I feel today between its form and my mood was waiting for me long before my birth; I have always been destined for this sadness . . .

It is clear how close the connection can be between the idea of a human *nature* and an analogical vocabulary. This nature, which is eternal and inalienable and common to all men, has no further need to base itself on the idea of a God. All I need to know is that Mont Blanc has been waiting for me in the heart of the Alps since the tertiary era, and with it all my ideas of grandeur and purity!

This nature, furthermore, doesn't only belong to man, since it constitutes the link between his spirit and things; it is in fact an essence

common to all 'creation' that we are being invited to believe in. The universe and I share a single soul, a single secret.

Belief in some sort of nature is thus shown to be the source of all humanism, in the usual sense of the word. And it isn't just coincidence if it is precisely Nature—animal, vegetable and mineral—that is the first to be tainted with our anthropomorphical vocabulary. This nature, whether mountain, sea, forest, desert or valley, is both our model and our heart. She is in us and in front of us at the same time. She is neither temporary nor contingent. She petrifies us, judges us, and assures our salvation.

To reject our alleged 'nature' and the vocabulary that perpetuates its myth, to treat objects as purely external and superficial, is not—as people have claimed—to deny man, but to refuse to accept the 'pananthropic' content of traditional, and probably every other, humanism. In the final analysis it is merely to carry my claim to personal liberty to its logical conclusion.

And so nothing must be overlooked in this cleansing operation. Looking at it more closely we see that it is not only anthropocentric analogies (mental or visceral ones) that must be called into question. *All* analogies are equally dangerous. Perhaps the most dangerous are the most insidious, the ones that don't even mention man.

Let us give a few random examples . . . To see the shape of a horse in the sky may still be nothing but simple description, and of no consequence. But to speak of a cloud 'galloping', or of its 'tousled mane', is already less innocent. For if a cloud (or a wave, or a hill) possesses a mane; if, further on, a stallion's mane starts 'shooting arrows'; if the arrow . . . etc, such imagery will take the reader out of the universe of forms and plunge him into a universe of meanings. He will be invited to conceive of a profound connection between the wave and the horse: passion, pride, power, violence . . . The idea of a nature inevitably leads to that of a nature common to all things, which means *superior*. The idea of interiority always leads to that of transcendence.

And the poison gradually spreads: from the bow to the horse, from the horse to the wave—and from the sea to love. A common nature, once again, can only be the eternal answer to the *only question* put by our Greco-Christian civilization: the Sphinx is there in front of me, she questions me, I don't even have to try to understand the terms of the riddle she asks me, for there is only one possible answer, one single answer to everything—man.

Well, this is not so.

There is more than one question, and more than one answer. Man is no more, from his point of view, than the only witness.

Man looks at the world, but the world doesn't look back at him. Man sees things and he notices, now, that he can escape the metaphysical pact that other men made for him in days gone by, and that by the same token he can escape slavery and fear. That he can . . . , that he *will be able to*, at least, one day.

But this doesn't mean that he refuses all contact with the world. On the contrary, he agrees to use it for material ends; a utensil, as such, never has depth, a utensil is entirely matter and form—and destination.

Man gets hold of his hammer (or a stone he has chosen) and hits a post he wants to drive into the ground. While he is using it to this end, the hammer (or the stone) is no more than form and matter—its weight, its striking surface, and its opposite extremity by which it can be held. Afterwards, man puts down the tool. If he has no further need of it the hammer is now no more than one thing among other things; it has no meaning apart from its use.

And the man of today (or of tomorrow . . .) feels no sense of deprivation or affliction at this absence of meaning. He no longer feels lost at the idea of such a vacuum. His heart no longer needs to take refuge in an abyss.

For if he rejects communion, he also rejects tragedy.

Tragedy may here be defined as an attempt to reclaim the distance that exists between man and things, and give it a new kind of value, so that in effect it becomes an ordeal where victory consists in being vanquished. Tragedy, then, figures as the ultimate invention of humanism in its attempt to allow nothing to escape it. Since the harmony between man and things has finally been denounced, the humanist saves his empire by immediately setting up a new form of solidarity, the divorce in itself becoming a major road to redemption.

It is still almost a communion, but it is *painful*, always just about to be dealt with, but always postponed, and its efficacy is in proportion to the inaccessibility of its character. It is a *reversal*, it is a trap—and it is a falsification.

It is easy to see, in fact, just how far this sort of union is perverted: instead of trying to discover something good, in this case it is concerned with hallowing something evil. Unhappiness, failure, solitude, guilt, madness, these are the hazards of our existence that they want us to welcome as the surest tokens of our salvation. To welcome, not to accept: we are supposed to nourish them at our expense, at the same time as we go on struggling against them. For tragedy contains neither true acceptance nor real refusal. It is the sublimation of a disparity.

Let us, as an example, recapitulate the functioning of 'solitude'. I call

No one answers me. Instead of concluding that there is no one there—which could be an observation, pure and simple, dated and placed, space and time—I decide to act as if someone were in fact there, and as if, for one reason or another, he were refusing to answer. From then on the silence that follows my appeal is no longer a *real* silence, it has become pregnant with content, with depth, with a soul—which immediately plunges me back into my own soul. The distance between my cry, as I hear it, and the mute (perhaps deaf) interlocutor to whom it is addressed, becomes a sort of anguish, my hope and my despair, a sense to my life. Henceforth nothing will count for me save this false vacuum and the problems it causes me. Should I go on calling? Should I call more loudly? Should I use other words? I try again . . . I very soon realize that no one is going to answer, but the invisible presence that I continue to create by my cry forces me to go on, for all eternity, sending out my unhappy cry into the silence. Its echo soon starts to deafen me.

As if spellbound, I call again . . . and again. My sick conscience finally considers my exacerbated solitude as a superior necessity, my assurance of redemption. And for this to be accomplished I am obliged, until the day I die, to go on crying in the wilderness.

What usually happens then is that my solitude ceases to be an accidental and temporary fact of my existence and becomes part of me, of the whole world, of all men; once again, it becomes our nature. It is a solitude for all time.

Wherever there is distance, separation, dichotomy, division, there is the possibility of feeling them as suffering, and then of elevating this suffering into a sublime necessity. This pseudo-necessity leads to a metaphysical beyond, but at the same time closes the door to any realistic future. Tragedy may console us today, but it prevents us making more worthwhile conquests tomorrow. Apparently in perpetual motion, its actual effect is to paralyse the universe in a kind of agitated malediction. When tragedy tries to make us love our misery, we forget all about trying to find a remedy for it.

We are here faced with an oblique attack on the part of contemporary humanism which may well take unfair advantage of us. As the attempted reclamation is no longer aimed at things themselves, we might at first sight think that the rupture between them and man has in any case been consummated. But we soon discover that this is not the case at all; that, whether we sign an agreement with things or with their absence, it's all one in the end; the 'spiritual bridge' between them and ourselves remains, and even comes out of the operation somewhat strengthened.

That is why tragic thought never aims at suppressing distances, but, on the contrary, wantonly multiplies them. The distance between man and other men, the distance between man and himself, between man and the world, between the world and itself—nothing is left intact. Everything is torn, fissured, split, displaced. A sort of secret distance appears

within the most homogeneous objects and the least ambiguous situations. But it is precisely an *inner distance*, a false distance, which is in reality an open road, which is, in other words, already a reconciliation.

Everything is contaminated. And yet it seems that the novel is tragedy's chosen field. From girls in love who become nuns, to policemen-gangsters, by way of all the tormented criminals, pure-souled prostitutes, just and upright men compelled by their consciences to act unjustly, loving sadists, and logical lunatics, a proper 'character' in a novel must above all be *double*. The more *ambiguous* the plot, the more 'human' it will be. Finally, the more contradictions the book as a whole contains, the more true to life it will be.

It is easy to make fun of this. It is less easy to free ourselves from the way our mental civilization conditions us to accept tragedy. We can even say that the refusal of the ideas of 'nature' and predestination leads us *first of all* to tragedy. There is no significant work of contemporary literature that does not contain both an affirmation of our freedom and the 'tragic' seed of its abandonment.

At least two great novels, in the last few decades, have presented us with two new forms of this fatal complicity—the absurd and the nauseating.

Albert Camus, as is well known, described as absurdity the unfathomable abyss that exists between man and the world, between the aspirations of the human spirit and the incapacity of the world to satisfy them. The absurdity, for him, lies neither in man nor in things, but in the impossibility of establishing any other relationship between them than that of *strangeness*.

Every reader has nevertheless noticed that the hero of *L'Etranger* (The Outsider) practised an obscure kind of complicity with the world, compounded of resentment and fascination. This man's relations with the objects around him are not in the least innocent; absurdity is constantly bringing about disappointment, withdrawal and rebellion. It is no exaggeration to say that it is really things that are finally responsible for pushing the man into crime: the sun, the sea, the dazzling sand, the shining knife, the spring between the rocks, the revolver . . . And of course the principal rôle, among all these things, is played by Nature.

Nor is the book written in as *purified* a language as the first few pages might lead one to suppose. In fact it is only those objects which are already loaded with flagrant human content which are carefully neutralized, and for moral reasons (such as the old mother's coffin, where we are given a description of its screws, their shape, and depth of penetration). Side by side with this we discover the most revealing of classical metaphors, which become more numerous as the moment of the murder approaches, and which either mention man or assume

his omnipotence: the country is 'gorged with sunlight', the evening is 'like a melancholy truce', the pot-holes in the road reveal the 'shining flesh' of the tar, the earth is 'the colour of blood', the sunlight is a 'blinding rain', its reflection on a shell is 'a sword of light', the day has 'cast anchor in an ocean of boiling metal'—to say nothing of the 'breathing' of the 'lazy' waves, the 'drowsy' headland, the 'panting' sea and the 'cymbals' of the sun . . .

The key scene of the novel gives us a perfect picture of a painful solidarity: the implacable sunlight is always 'the same', its reflection on the blade of the knife the Arab is holding 'wounds' the hero in the middle of the forehead and 'searches' his eyes, his hand tightens on the revolver, he tries to 'shake off' the sun, he fires again, four times. 'And,' he says, 'it was as if I had given four short knocks on the door of misfortune.'

The absurd, then, is indeed a form of tragic humanism. It is not a recognition of the separation between man and things. It is a lovers' quarrel, which leads to the crime of passion. The world is accused of being an accomplice to murder.

When Sartre writes (in *Situations I*) that *The Outsider* 'rejects anthropomorphism,' he is giving us, as the preceding quotations show, an incomplete view of the novel. Sartre must have noticed these passages but thought that Camus, 'was being unfaithful to his principles by being poetic'. Couldn't it rather be said, though, that it is precisely in these metaphors that the explanation of the book lies? Camus does not reject anthropomorphism, he uses it with economy and subtlety, to give it greater weight.

And this is all in order, for in the last analysis, as Sartre points out, the intention is to reveal to us, as Pascal put it, 'the natural misfortune of our condition'.

Now what does *La Nausée* (The Diary of Antoine Roquentin) offer us? It very obviously deals with strictly visceral relations with the world, rejects any effort at description (which is stated to be useless) and concentrates on a somewhat ambiguous intimacy, which in any case is shown as being illusory, but as something to which the narrator imagines he is forced to surrender. The most important thing, in his eyes, would even seem to be to surrender to it as completely as possible, so as to attain self-awareness.

It is significant that the first three perceptions recorded at the beginning of the book all come from the sense of touch, and not of sight. The three objects which bring about the revelation are, in fact, respectively, the pebble on the beach, the latch of a door and the self-educated Man's hand. Each time it is the physical contact with the narrator's hand that causes the shock. We all know that the sense of touch, in everyday life, produces a much more *intimate* feeling than the sense of sight: no one is afraid of catching a contagious disease merely by

looking at someone who is suffering from it. The sense of smell is already more suspect: it implies a penetration of the body by the unknown thing. Whereas with the sense of sight there are various degrees of perception: we can be more definite about a form, for instance, than about a colour, which changes with the lighting, the background, and the person looking at it.

So we are not surprised to notice that the eyes of the hero of *La Nausée*, Roquentin, are more attracted to colours—in particular to the less definite shades—than to lines. When it isn't the touch of something, it is almost always the sight of an ill-defined colour that brings on his fits of malaise. As for instance the importance that is assumed, right from the beginning of the book, by Cousin Adolphe's braces, which can hardly be distinguished against the blue of his shirt: they are 'mauve . . . they hide in the blue, but it's false humility . . . as if they had intended to become violet but had stopped half-way, without renouncing their claims. You want to tell them: "Go on, then, *become* violet and let's forget about it." But they don't, they stay as they are, in suspense, the failure of their efforts has made them obstinate. Sometimes the surrounding blue insinuates itself into a position on top of them and completely covers them, and for a moment I can't see them at all. But it's only a passing wave, and the blue soon becomes paler here and there, and I see the islets of hesitant mauve gradually getting bigger, reuniting and turning into braces again.' And the reader still doesn't know anything about their shape. Later on, in the park, all the absurdity, all the hypocrisy of the famous chestnut-tree root is finally concentrated in its blackness:

'Black? I felt the word becoming deflated, losing its meaning with extraordinary rapidity. Black? The root *was not* black, it wasn't blackness that was on that root . . . but something more like a confused attempt to imagine black by someone who had never seen it and who wouldn't know where to stop, who would have imagined an ambiguous being, beyond colour.' And Roquentin himself comments: 'The colours, the tastes, the smells, were never real, never just simply themselves and nothing but themselves.'

In fact, colours produce in him similar feelings—to those of touch: he experiences them as an appeal, immediately followed by a withdrawal, then again an appeal, etc. They constitute an ambiguous sort of contact accompanied by innumerable impressions; it demands, and at the same time refuses, his acceptance. Colour has the same effect on his eyes as the physical presence of something on the palm of his hand: in the first place it reveals an indiscreet 'personality' (which is also, of course, double) on the part of the object, a sort of shameful insistence compounded of self-pity, defiance and denial. 'Things . . . they touch me, it's unbearable. I'm as afraid of coming into contact with them as I would be if they were living animals.' Colour is susceptible of change, and is therefore *alive*. This is what Roquentin has discovered: things are alive, *as he is*.

Sounds seem to him to be equally adulterated (except melodies, which don't *exist*). There only remains the visual perception of lines; we feel

Roquentin avoids having anything to do with them. And yet he objects to this last refuge of self-coincidence: the only lines which exactly coincide are geometrical lines, the circle, for instance, 'but the circle doesn't exist either'.

Here again we are in a totally 'tragified' universe: there is the fascination with dissociation, the solidarity with things, *because* they carry their own negation within themselves, there is redemption (here understood as the accession to self-awareness) through the very impossibility of reaching any real harmony. There is, that is to say, the final reclamation of all distance, all failure, all solitude and all contradiction.

Thus analogy is the only method of description that Roquentin ever seriously envisages. When he looks at the cardboard box that belongs to his bottle of ink he comes to the conclusion that geometry is completely useless in that respect. To say that it is a parallelepiped is to say precisely nothing 'about it'. On the contrary, he talks about the *real* sea that 'crawls' about under a thin green film made to 'deceive' people, he compares the 'cold' light of the sun to a 'severe judgement', he observes the 'happy death-rattle' of a fountain, a tram seat becomes a 'dead donkey' floating at the mercy of the waves, its red plush covering is 'thousands of little insects' legs', the self-educated Man's hand is a 'fat white worm', etc. Every object could be mentioned, as they are all deliberately described in this manner. The most highly charged is, of course, the root of the chestnut-tree, which successively becomes a 'dirty fingernail', 'boiled leather', 'mildew', 'a dead snake', a 'vulture's talon', a 'fat foot', 'sealskin', etc, *ad nauseam*.

Without trying to limit the book to this particular (though important) point of view, we can say that *existence* is distinguished in it by interior distances, and that *nausea* is an unfortunate visceral penchant that man feels for these distances. The 'conspiratorial smile of things' ends in a distorted grin. 'All the objects around me were made of the same matter as I—a sort of hideous suffering.'

But isn't the author trying to make us elevate Roquentin's depressing celibacy into a superior necessity? His celibacy—and also his lost love, his 'wrecked life', the dismal and ridiculous fate of the self-educated Man, and all the malediction of the earthly world? Then where has freedom gone? Because those who will have none of this malediction are unequivocally threatened with the supreme moral judgement: they are 'swine'. It seems, then, as if Sartre—who can certainly not be accused of essentialism, though—had, at least in this book, carried the ideas of *nature* and *tragedy* to the limit. This is one more example of the struggle against these ideas having the initial effect of endowing them with new strength.

Drowned in the *depth* of things, in the end man doesn't even see them any more; his rôle is soon limited to feeling, in their name, entirely *humanized* impressions and desires. 'In short, it is less a question of observing the pebble than of getting into its heart and seeing the

world through its eyes,' Sartre wrote about Francis Ponge. He made Roquentin, in *La Nausée*, say: 'I was the chestnut-tree's root.' The two positions are not unconnected, in both cases it is a question of thinking 'with things' and not *about* them.

Ponge, in fact, doesn't worry either about describing things. He is certainly well aware that his texts would be no use to a future archaeologist trying to discover what a cigarette or a candle could have been in our lost civilization. Without the day-to-day experience we have of these objects, Ponge's phrases about them are no more than beautiful, hermetic poems.

On the other hand, we read that the hamper is 'bewildered at finding itself in an awkward position,' that the trees, in spring, 'flatter themselves that they are dupes' and 'release their green vomit', and that the butterfly 'avenges the long, amorphous humiliation it suffered as a caterpillar'.

Is this really being on the 'side' of things and showing them 'from their own point of view'? Ponge can obviously not have deluded himself to this extent. The most overt psychological and moral anthropomorphism in which he constantly indulges can only, on the contrary, be intended to establish a general and absolute human order. To say that he speaks *for* things, *with* them, in their *heart*, in these conditions amounts to denying their reality, their opaque presence; in this universe peopled with things, they are no more for man than mirrors endlessly reflecting his own image. Calm and tamed, they simply return man's own look.

Such a *reflection*, with Ponge, is naturally not gratuitous. This two-way movement between man and his doubles in nature is that of an active awareness, concerned with understanding and improving itself. All through his subtle pages, the most insignificant stone or bit of wood always has something to teach him, is his expression and at the same time his judge, shows him the way to progress. The contemplation of the world thus becomes man's permanent apprenticeship to life, to happiness, to wisdom and to death.

What we are here being offered, finally, is thus a definitive and smiling reconciliation. Once again we are confronted with the humanist affirmation: the world is man. But at what a cost! For if we abandon the moral standpoint of perfectionism, *le Parti pris des choses*—taking sides with things—is no longer the slightest help to us. And if, in particular, we prefer freedom to wisdom, we are obliged to break all the mirrors Francis Ponge arranges so artistically, and rediscover the hard, dry objects that lie behind them, intact, and as remote as before.

François Mauriac, who said that he read Francis Ponge's *Le Cageot* (The Hamper) some time ago on Jean Paulhan's recommendation, cannot have remembered very much of this text when he called the description of objects that I advocated in my own essays the *Technique*

du Cageot. Or else I had expressed myself extremely badly.

To describe things, in fact, is deliberately to place oneself outside them, facing them. It is not, any longer, to appropriate them to oneself nor to transfer anything to them. It must be established at the very beginning that they *are not man*, and they continue to be out of reach until in the end they are neither included in a natural alliance nor redeemed through suffering. To confine oneself to description is obviously to challenge every other way of approaching the object; to qualify the sympathetic approach as unrealistic, the tragic as alienating, and the understanding as the exclusive province of science.

Certainly the last point of view is not negligible. Science is the only honest means at man's disposal whereby he can make use of the world around him—but only material use. However disinterested science may be, it is only justified by the establishment, sooner or later, of utilitarian techniques. Literature has other goals. Only science, though, can claim to know the *inside* of things. The information about the inside of the pebble, the tree or the snail that Francis Ponge gives us, cares nothing for science, of course (and even less than Sartre seems to think). It in no way describes what really is *inside* these things, but merely that part of man's mind that he projects into them. Having observed, more or less carefully, the way certain things behave, these appearances suggest human analogies to him and Ponge starts talking about man, always about man, with a negligent hand placed on things for support. What does he care that the snail doesn't 'eat' earth, or that the function of chlorophyll is to absorb and not 'exhale' carbon dioxide; his eye is as casual as what he remembers about natural history. His sole criterion is the truth of the emotions expressed by means of these images—they are human emotions, obviously, for human nature is the nature of all things!

Mineralogy, botany and zoology, on the other hand, seek *knowledge* of textures (both internal and external), of their organization, functioning and genesis. But the only further use of these disciplines outside their own fields, is an abstract enrichment of our intelligence. The world around us once again becomes a smooth surface, with no meaning, no soul and no values, on which we have no further hold. Like the workman who has laid aside the hammer he no longer needs, we find ourselves once again *face to face* with things.

That is all that is involved, then, in describing this surface—to establish its exteriority and its independence. I probably have no more to say 'about' the box my ink bottle comes in than I have to say 'with' it; if I write that it is a parallelepiped I am not thereby claiming to extract any sort of essence from it, and I intend even less to hand it over to the reader so that his imagination can seize on it and embellish it with colours of many hues. I would prefer to prevent this.

The most common reproaches levelled at such geometrical information: 'It doesn't appeal to the spirit,' 'A photograph or a sketch to scale

would describe its form more accurately,' are rather odd; wouldn't I have been the first to think of them? And in any case, that isn't the point at all. Photographs and sketches are only trying to reproduce the object; the more capable they become of allowing of as many interpretations (and the same errors) as their model, the more successful they are. Formal description is the very opposite, it is primarily a limitation. When it says 'parallelepiped' it knows it has not reached any 'beyond', but at the same time makes it impossible to go on looking for one.

To record the distance between the object and me, and the object's own distances (its *exterior* distances, i.e. its measurements), and the distances between objects, and to insist once more on the fact that these are *only distances* (and not heartbreaking schisms), is tantamount to establishing the fact that things are there and that they are nothing but things, each one restricted to its own self. The problem is no longer that of choosing between a happy agreement and an unhappy solidarity. From now on *all* complicity is rejected.

In the first place we reject the vocabulary of analogy and of traditional humanism, at the same time rejecting the idea of tragedy, and any other idea that leads to the belief that men, or ideas, (or both), have a profound, and superior, nature, and finally we reject any pre-established order.

In such a perspective the sense of sight immediately stands out as the privileged sense, and particularly sight as applied to contours (more than to colours, lustre or transparencies). It is easier to use optical description to determine distances. A look, if it will only remain straightforward, will leave everything in its proper place.

But there are also risks attached. Falling unexpectedly on some detail, it isolates it, sees it out of context, wants to bring it into the foreground, finds that it can't, persists, doesn't succeed either in removing it altogether or in putting it back where it belongs . . . This is not far removed from the 'absurd'. Or else what happens is that contemplation becomes so intense that everything starts to vacillate, to move, to melt . . . and that is the beginning of 'fascination' and 'nausea'.

These are among the lesser risks, though, and Sartre himself has acknowledged the cleansing power of a look. Disturbed by some contact, by some questionable tactile impression, Roquentin lowers his eyes to his hand: 'The pebble was flat; dry on one side and damp and muddy on the other. I was holding it by the edges, with my fingers wide apart, trying not to dirty them.' He can no longer understand what had upset him; and in the same way, a little later, as he is about to go into his room: 'I stopped short, because I felt there was a cold object in my hand, an object that was forcing me to pay attention to it by means of a sort of personality. I opened my hand and looked: I was simply holding the door latch.' So then Roquentin starts blaming the colours, and the eye can no longer manage to exercise its cleansing function: 'The black tree stump *didn't pass by*, it stayed there in my eyes, like a piece of food that is too big, and that sticks in your throat. I could

neither accept it nor reject it.' There had previously been the 'mauve' of the braces and the 'ambiguous transparency' of the glass of beer.

We have to do the best we can with the means at our disposal. To be able to look at things is, after all, our best weapon, especially if we are content only to look at outlines. As to the 'subjectivity' of a look—the opposition's principal argument—how does that detract from its value? It can in any case quite obviously only be a question of the world as my *point of view* orientates it; I shall never know any other. The relative subjectivity of my look serves precisely to define *my situation in the world*. I simply avoid making common cause with those who turn this situation into a kind of slavery.

So though Roquentin may think that 'sight is an abstract invention, a cleansed and simplified idea, a man-made idea,' it nevertheless remains the most efficient process that can operate between the world and myself.

For it is efficiency that is here the point at issue. To measure the distances between things that are separated, without vain regrets, without hatred, without despair, should allow us to identify things that are not separated, things that *are one*, because it is not true that everything is double—not true, or at least only temporarily so. Temporarily so in so far as man is concerned, this is our hope. And already untrue so far as things are concerned, for once the dirt has been scraped off them they reflect nothing but themselves, they have no more crevices for us to creep into, they stand firm.

One question persists: is it possible to escape tragedy?

Today it reigns over all my feelings and all my thoughts, it conditions me from top to toe. My body may be satisfied, my heart contented, but my conscience is still troubled. I am sure that the cause of this trouble is *situated* in space and time, like all misfortune, like everything in this world. I am sure that man will one day free himself from it. But I have no proof of this future. It is a bet for me too. 'Man is a sick animal,' wrote Unamuno in *The Tragic Sense of Life*; the bet consists in thinking that he can be cured, and that if this is so it would be madness to lock him up in his unhappiness. I have nothing to lose. In any case, this is the only reasonable bet to make.

I said that I have no proof. It is easy for me to see, though, that the systematic *tragification* of the universe I live in is often brought about deliberately. This is enough to cast doubt on any proposition tending to take it for granted that tragedy is natural and definitive. And the moment such a doubt arises, I cannot do otherwise than try and look further.

People will say that this struggle is precisely the tragic illusion *par excellence*; to try and combat the idea of tragedy is already to have succumbed to it, and it is so natural to take refuge in objects . . . Maybe. But maybe not. And, in that case . . .