

# Symbolic Survival: Beyond the Destruction of Language in Jean-Paul Sartre's *Nausea* and Patrick Süskind's *Perfume*

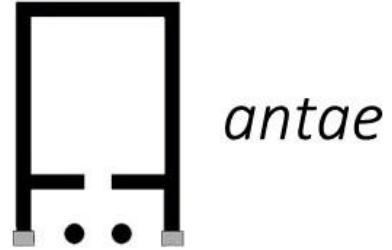
Declan Lloyd

*antae*, Vol. 5, No. 2 (Jun., 2018), 169-181

---

## Proposed Creative Commons Copyright Notices

Authors who publish with this journal agree to the following terms:



- a. Authors retain copyright and grant the journal right of first publication with the work simultaneously licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution License](#) that allows others to share the work with an acknowledgement of the work's authorship and initial publication in this journal.
- b. Authors are permitted and encouraged to post their work online (e.g., in institutional repositories or on their website) prior to and during the submission process, as it can lead to productive exchanges, as well as earlier and greater citation of published work (See [The Effect of Open Access](#)).

---

*antae* (ISSN 2523-2126) is an international refereed postgraduate journal aimed at exploring current issues and debates within English Studies, with a particular interest in literature, criticism and their various contemporary interfaces. Set up in 2013 by postgraduate students in the Department of English at the University of Malta, it welcomes submissions situated across the interdisciplinary spaces provided by diverse forms and expressions within narrative, poetry, theatre, literary theory, cultural criticism, media studies, digital cultures, philosophy and language studies. Creative writing and book reviews are also encouraged submissions.

## **Symbolic Survival: Beyond the Destruction of Language in Jean-Paul Sartre's *Nausea* and Patrick Süskind's *Perfume***

Declan Lloyd

*Lancaster University*

This essay explores survival beyond the “death” or destruction of language. This “destruction” can take on many forms, and can come about, for instance, by way of internalised narrative or metatextually: be it through the characters’ own experience of a loss or disintegration of language, or through the authorial manipulation of language to the point whereby language is exposed as being insufficient—or at some intersection of the two. In any form, survival beyond language provokes a fundamental shift within the text, and can often serve revelatory means, as with the two texts analysed here. Within both Jean-Paul Sartre’s existentialist classic *Nausea* and Patrick Süskind’s *Perfume: The Story of a Murderer*, there occurs such a destruction of language, and this destructive process is crucial in exposing or even demonstrating the underpinning philosophy of these texts. Indeed, when language fails, there is a paradoxical *opening* in terms of the potentiality for meaning within these texts. The inability of language to grasp sensuous experience is at the very core of both *Perfume* and *Nausea*, and it is perhaps only following such a catastrophic destruction of language, in some form or other, that there can be any chance of enlightenment. The function of language here, then, is essentially destabilisation, and one may see how the authors use this jeopardisation of language to breach the confines of the textual and instead veer into the experiential and the sensory. The position of language within these texts becomes an overt mediator between the rational, logical, totalising Symbolic order and the underlying traumatic and indeterminate Real which it conceals.

Given the centrality of language to his thought, the psychoanalytic theory of Jacques Lacan shall here provide a framework for an approach to these two texts, and it is first necessary to elucidate upon some of his key terms and ideas, a number of which have already been mentioned. Lacan’s psychoanalytic theory centers around three primary terms: the Real, the Imaginary and the Symbolic, all of which are fundamental in the psychodynamic formation of the subject.<sup>1</sup> The Symbolic is surface reality governed by laws and language, our means of rational and logical perception. Lacan expresses that the Symbolic order is ‘the pact which links.. [...] subjects together in one action. The human action par excellence is originally founded on the existence of the world of the symbol, namely on laws and contracts’.<sup>2</sup> The Real is reality prior to our entry into the Symbolic order of language, which for most is only experienced in the very earliest

---

<sup>1</sup> When terms such as “Imaginary”, “Real”, and “Symbolic” are used in the Lacanian sense, they will be capitalised in text for sake of clarity.

<sup>2</sup> Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan Book 1: Freud’s Papers on Technique*, ed. by Jacques-Alain Miller (New York, NY: Cambridge UP, 1975), p. 230.

stages of life. The Real is that which lies forever beyond and concealed by language, and to experience it after Symbolic constitution would be traumatic, provoking a delusional, psychotic state in the subject as a means of protection and rehabilitation (for Lacan, psychosis is above all a healing process, an attempt at self-cure). The Imaginary order is a transitional process which is most closely associated with the mirror stage in early childhood—'the imaginary is the scene of a desperate delusional attempt to be and to remain "what one is" by gathering oneself ever more instances of sameness, resemblance and self-replication; it is the birthplace of the narcissistic "ideal ego"'.<sup>3</sup> The Imaginary stage is the point at which the subject develops an identity through their visual assimilation of the graspable surrounding world and the "Other"; that is, other subjects outside of oneself, whose gaze is vital in grounding one's status as a perceivable subject, and enabling the subsequent formation of the ego.

Lacan's terminology may prove a particularly useful tool in reading Patrick Süskind's 1985 novel *Perfume*, and in describing the central character's altered perception of reality.<sup>4</sup> *Perfume* tells the story of Jean-Baptiste Grenouille, who is born into the dismal, festering underbelly of eighteenth century France with the most prodigious sense of smell ever gifted to man. Unlike his many other siblings birthed by his heartless fishmonger mother (only to be thrown straight back in the river like unsold stock), Grenouille shrieks so hellishly upon his arrival into the world that he is saved and his mother condemned to death for infanticide. Following such, he is taken in and soon rejected by various wet-nurses and friars, all of who believe him to be some devil incarnate, this primarily due to his incessant screeching, his insatiable appetite, and above all his curiously nonexistent bodily scent. Grenouille finally ends up in a grotty orphanage in which he spends every day of his young life avoiding death at the hands of his murderous young co-dwellers. Fortunately for Grenouille, however, 'he was as tough as a resistant bacterium and as content as a tick sitting quietly on a tree and living off a tiny drop of blood plundered years before' (*P*, 21). This lack of scent, which awakens a repugnance in almost all those Grenouille meets, is something with which all others are inadvertently allocated: thus, he is ultimately cursed with the ability to perceive that which no other can, and this is something he himself can never obtain. This form of self-absence could be seen to represent his own "lack", which is Lacan's term for a constitutional lack of being 'which causes desire to arise', and 'no matter how many signifiers one adds to the signifying chain, the chain is always incomplete; it always lacks the signifier that could complete it. This missing signifier is constitutive of the subject'.<sup>5</sup> The acceptance of this fundamental lack is a necessary stage in becoming properly initiated into the Symbolic order. Instead, Grenouille's rejection by the outside world, which pushes him deeper and deeper into himself, leads him into the narcissistic world of the psychotic. Indeed, Lacan claims psychosis is essentially nothing more than a language disorder, the maladaptation of a

<sup>3</sup> Malcolm Bowie, *Lacan* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991), p. 92.

<sup>4</sup> Patrick Süskind, *Perfume, The Story of a Murderer* (London: Penguin Books, 2010). Henceforth cited in text as (*P*, page number). To my knowledge, no other study has, so far, approached this novel through a Lacanian psychoanalytic approach.

<sup>5</sup> Dylan Evans, *An Introductory Dictionary of Lacanian Psychoanalysis* (New York, NY: Brunner-Routledge, 2001), pp. 95-96.

subject into the Symbolic whole in which all Others are ordinarily indicted in childhood by way of their Symbolic integration of the Name of the Father—that is, that which is considered the fundamental signifier, the signifier upon which all Symbolic law rests upon, and which is intimately tied up with castration anxiety in the Oedipus Complex.<sup>6</sup>

In *Perfume*, the crucial inadequacy of language is made apparent from very early on in the text, and is made most manifest by way of the impossibility of evoking scent: ‘everyday language would soon prove inadequate for designating all the olfactory notions that he had accumulated within himself’ (*P*, 26). What is imperative in making Grenouille such a menacing and perhaps even a unique literary figure is his total detachment from ordinary language; a sense of dread and dislocation comes about metatextually by way of Süskind’s archaic and poetic—or perhaps Romantic—use of language, one which seems utterly at odds with and unable to evoke this alien perspective of reality. Throughout much of the text, we are made aware of such by our being asked to imagine scents which are knowingly beyond our ability to comprehend, such as the unique scents of glass, stone and porcelain. In Tom Tykwer’s 2006 filmic adaptation of the novel, we see a similar fundamental inability to evoke scent, and instead are made to rely upon the extreme close-up shots of materials, plants, foods, and other scented objects, which are interspersed with extreme close up shots of the nose. This crucial insufficiency is therefore binaristic, and stands starkly opposite Grenouille’s own Symbolic structuralisation which revolves intrinsically *around* scent. We are told that in his youth he had no interest in verbs, adjectives and expletives except for ‘yes’ and ‘no’. Instead, he only used nouns for concrete objects, plants, animals and human beings, and then *only* if they ‘overcame him with their odour’ (*P*, 25). Süskind describes how Grenouille, ‘with words designating non-smelling objects, with abstract ideas and the like, especially those of an ethical or moral nature, [...] had the greatest difficulty [...]; justice, conscience, God, joy, responsibility, humility, gratitude [...] remained a mystery’ (*P*, 26). Most alarmingly of all, we are told that ‘[t]here [are] no real things [...] in Grenouille’s innermost universe, only their odours’ (*P*, 129).

At this point it becomes apparent how Lacan’s Symbolic order is best suited to describe Grenouille’s usage of scent as a form of perception. Grenouille’s Symbolic universe, his means of rationally comprehending his surroundings and forming logical deductions, is entirely structured by scent, and so scent enacts the very same function as language in an ordinary person with a working Symbolic order. As we are told, Grenouille’s grasp of ordinary language is rudimentary, unsuitable for abstract thought, and this inadequacy is reciprocated by way of Süskind’s own authorial inability to evoke these new scents and to demonstrate how such can be used to make deductions, to rationalise, and even to perceive entirely new dimensions to objects (for example, we are at one point told that Grenouille’s prodigious sense of smell can penetrate

---

<sup>6</sup> The concept of ‘The Name of the Father’, often referred to as the ‘fundamental signifier’, originates from Lacan’s third seminar, in which he states that it ‘represents an indeterminate support around which there is grouped and condensed a number, not even of meanings, but of series of meanings, which come and converge by means of and starting from the existence of this signifier’. Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book 3: The Psychoses, 1955-1956* (London: Routledge, 1993), p. 306.

through objects, trumping the very restricted sense of vision, thus meaning that objective reality for Grenouille is completely altered and abstracted from our own). Detached from the totalising subjective network of the Symbolic order—an order which is fundamentally visual and restricted to the physical world as perceived by the eye rather than the nose—Grenouille does not constitute an Other. This is why he is positioned in this place of trauma, on the level of the Lacanian Real, and so is greeted with fear and contempt by the majority of those he meets. The metatextual aspect to *Perfume*, therefore, is demonstrative: ordinarily, visually centered Symbolic language is inherently detached from (non-ocular) sensuous experience. As Sartre expresses in his 1948 essay *What is Literature?*, which also pinpoints one of the central aspects of his philosophical explorations within *Nausea*:

[W]e talk of the language of flowers. But if, after the agreement, white roses signify “fidelity” to me, the fact is that I have stopped viewing them as roses. My attention cuts through them to aim beyond them at this abstract virtue. I forget them. I no longer pay attention to their mossy abundance, *to their sweet stagnant odour*. I have not even perceived them.<sup>7</sup>

Thus, as Sartre attests, once transposed into the Symbolic realm of language, there is an essential dilution of the object into subcategories of abstracted meaning and symbolism; Grenouille, on the other hand, essentially sidesteps this abstraction.

Grenouille’s fight for survival thus goes far beyond his narrowly avoiding the maws of death throughout much of his childhood, and has more to do with his surviving his own situation outside of the ordinary realm of language. Clearly, on one level, this survival beyond language stems from the absence of his own initiation into the Symbolic order in childhood. But, on another level, there is also his survival beyond language following the Symbolic death: that being, as summarised by Jin Sook Kim, ‘the radical annihilation of the Symbolic order through which reality is constituted [...]. [Such a] death implies the obliteration of the signifying network itself’.<sup>8</sup> For Lacan, the term “death” has multiple meanings, and extends beyond the physical, biological death of an organism; in fact, ‘Lacan views physical death as a mere “symbolic construction”’.<sup>9</sup> This is because, after death, the “thing” (*das Ding*) represented in language both still exists in the Symbolic network and is still graspable and existent in an albeit altered form for the Other. Another “death” occurs at the originary point of entering the Symbolic order, which is the crucial point of destruction of the primordial Real; as Lacan states, ‘the function of [such] destructionism [is central] in the constitution of human reality’.<sup>10</sup>

The Symbolic death, however, is what we might consider the most extreme form of death, and yet this is not always necessarily received as a negative experience by the subject. Indeed, such a

<sup>7</sup> Jean Paul Sartre, *What is Literature?*, trans. Bernard Frechtman (New York, NY: Harper Colophon Books, 1965), p. 2. My emphasis.

<sup>8</sup> Jin Sook Kim, ‘Symbolic Death of the Subject in the Structure of Jacques Lacan’, in *Death Dying and Mysticism: The Ecstasy of the End* (New York, NY: Palgrave, 2015), pp. 103-17, p. 105.

<sup>9</sup> *ibid.*, p. 105.

<sup>10</sup> *Freud’s Papers*, p. 70.

cataclysmic shift in cognizance, brought about through this Symbolic Death, can lead to true enlightenment, and can be likened to a ‘mystical experience, in which the subject encounters the real, and the [very] structure of [his] subjectivity [...] this moment is a time of death, but paradoxically a time true awakening’.<sup>11</sup> Experiences of such a Symbolic Death often occur in religious spheres, and these Symbolic deaths can lead both to saintly rapture but also, at the negative end of the spectrum, to radicalisation.

Grenouille’s symbolic death does not occur until later, in his teenage years, following his first venture into the city. After his childhood years spent at the orphanage, detached from almost all communication other than with the cold-hearted matriarch Madame Gaillard, whose lack of a sense of smell means she is not so repulsed by Grenouille as most others, Grenouille is sold to a tanner for droning, backbreaking menial work stripping animal carcasses and hauling enormous casks of water over great distances. Nevertheless, it was, fortuitously enough for Grenouille, a job requiring little to no interaction with the outside world. ‘After one year of an existence more animal than human, he contracted anthrax, a disease feared by tanners and usually fatal’, and yet Grenouille miraculously survives, though he is left hideously ugly and disfigured with boil scars (*P*, 33). Some time into his employ, Grenouille accompanies his tanner master into the murky bowels of Paris, discovering a bustling cornucopia of new scents the likes of which he had never before experienced: ‘it was like living in Utopia [...] he dissected it analytically into its smallest and most remote parts and pieces’ (*P*, 34-5). Whilst dazedly exploring this seeming infinitude of new scents, Grenouille stumbles across a scent of such beauty that he is brought immediately to a state of rapture: this scent was ‘the key for ordering all odours, one could understand nothing about odours if one did not understand this one scent [...] he had to have it, not simply in order to possess it, but for his heart to be at peace’ (*P*, 40). It is a scent so magnificent it made all others ‘utterly meaningless [...]. [It was] the higher principle’; it was ‘inconceivable, indescribable, could not be categorised in any way—it really ought not to exist at all’ (*P*, 44, 42). Süskind’s language here veers into the metatextual by its stumbling inadequacy (‘inconceivable’; ‘indescribable’) and rather centers on this idea of some overarching, governing structure of language (‘the key for ordering’; the ‘higher principle’). This rarest of scents comes from a young, virginal Parisian girl whom he desperately and covertly pursues through the dingy backalleys of Paris. Once she is alone, Grenouille attempts to somehow imbibe her scent unseen from the shadows, but she notices him, and just as she is about to let out a shriek, he brutally strangles her to death. As the life ebbs from her, so too does her divine scent, which is within seconds lost forever. With this newfound knowledge of the existence of such a scent, Grenouille realises he must learn the art of perfumery in order to learn how to distil and more importantly preserve scent so that he can capture and recreate the most beautiful and sublime scent ever experienced by man.

---

<sup>11</sup> Sook Kim, p. 105.

Following his Symbolic death, his first murder, and the radical restructuring of his constitutional reality, Grenouille is driven by nothing more than his obsessional and murderous pursuit to capture and contain scent so that no such pure and inconceivable beauty could be lost so senselessly again. There undoubtedly seems to be a kind of hierarchisation to Grenouille's Symbolic universe, in that, in its radical restructuring, it is centered around this one specific scent. This is something perhaps only comparable to religious language, as when, for instance, religious doctrine dictates how one is able to use language, and especially certain words, without committing sin or defaming their beliefs in some way, thus again reinforcing this idea of the experience as Symbolic death. Slavoj Žižek reads this particular scent as the incarnation of the Lacanian *objet petit a*, that is, the point of subjective impossibility, a leftover of the Real upon entry into the Symbolic, the driving force of desire and a hole in reality which must be filled in with fantasy.<sup>12</sup> The crucial differentiator here has to do with the location of the *objet petit a* in a subject's Symbolic structuralisation. Ordinarily, this point of impossibility can fundamentally never become known—it is lost in the maelstrom of language—but with Grenouille's Symbolic, which, as has been noted earlier, is radically different from our own, and instead intrinsically interwoven with the sensuous Real, the *objet petit a* becomes not only perceivable, but recreatable and obtainable.

This idea of recreation within the art of perfumery, and moreover the process of distillation (or, more precisely, maceration—the process of heating an object in hot oil to absorb its scent), of taking some unseen essence of what an object is, or even the fundamental “thingness” of the thing, is metaphorically demonstrative of the division between the Real and the Symbolic orders. In *Perfume*, this binary is therefore represented by the object and the object's odour: an object's smell is so entirely detached from its hidden kernel object (*das Ding*), and so opposed to the visually-centered Symbolic order of language that it, more so than any other sense, demonstrates this fundamental detachment between language and the hidden object. With Grenouille, however, whose perception and Symbolic world is grounded upon scent, this recreation of a scent is identifiable with the recreation of an object under the Symbolic veil of a word, meaning he essentially has, subjectively, the god-like power to recreate all of his objective surrounds. Indeed, some way into the novel, at the point which we might consider to be his “rebirth” following his discovery of the divine scent, Süskind's narrative takes on an overtly Zarathustrian air. During a seven year seclusion from all humanity (and “seven” is telling in its astro-theological significance), a cleanse from any trace of human scent high up in the isolated Plomb du Cantal mountains, he transforms, in the manner of a foretelling, into the Prophetic and godly figure of Grenouille the Great:

Grenouille the Great commanded the rain to stop. And it was so. And he sent the gentle sun of his smile upon the land; whereupon to a bud, the hosts of blossoms unfolded their glory, from one end of his empire unto the other, creating a single rainbowed carpet woven from myriad precious capsules of fragrance (*P*, 131).

---

<sup>12</sup> See Slavoj Žižek, *Plague of Fantasies* (New York, NY: Verso, 1997), p. xvii.

Süskind's movement into the use of grandiose, biblical (or perhaps Nietzschean) language here holds pertinence in that up to this point Süskind's language has been utterly disjunctive with the inner world of Grenouille. At this point, however—the point of his being totally absorbed within his own inner world, the point of his messianic awakening perhaps—language now becomes pathologically indicative of Grenouille's inner landscape and his delusions of grandeur (although we find out, in the closing pages of the novel, that Grenouille does indeed possess the god-like power to manipulate the love of anyone on earth).

The end to this long seclusion from humanity is rather pertinently prompted by a dream, a dream in which he becomes enshrouded by a thick fog (highly reminiscent of the Nausea in Sartre's work) which represents his own scent, only this surrounding fog has no smell. He thus becomes aware of the nonexistence of his own scent, which for Grenouille is the equivalent of not existing at all. The Freudian implications of this truth becoming apparent in his dreams are noteworthy in that, when discussing the neuroses, Freud frequently highlighted civilised man's cultural 'diminution of olfactory stimuli [...] [and] the triumph of the eye over the nose', which he saw as stemming from the associations of smell with a primitive, animal past.<sup>13</sup> This is a view uncannily expressed by the priestly Father Terrier, the only explicitly philosophically educated man in the novel, who berates a wetnurse for believing that the infant Grenouille was a devil due to his total absence of any smell. As Terrier lauds:

[T]he devil would certainly never be stupid enough to let himself be unmasked by the wet nurse Jeanne Bussie. And with her nose no less! With the primitive organ of smell, the basest of the senses! [...] [which harks to] when people still lived like beasts, possessing no keenness of the eye [...]. How repulsive! (*P*, 15).

In one of his earliest and best known case studies, the case of the Rat-man, which we might indeed view as a primary influence for the character of Grenouille, Freud described how 'when he was a child he recognised everyone by their smell, like a dog [...]. [He had] come to recognise that a tendency to taking pleasure in smell, which has become extinct since childhood, may play a part in the genesis of neurosis'.<sup>14</sup> In his reification of Freudian thought, Lacan designates 'the structure of a neurosis is essentially a question', and it is indeed this essential question of selfhood, emanating from his very earliest experiences of being rejected by those around him, which drives Grenouille throughout the text.<sup>15</sup>

After discovering this traumatic self-absence, Grenouille heads to Grasse, renowned as one of the perfume capitals of the world, to learn how to distil and recreate the scent of any object, including that of human beings. It is from this point forward in the novel that he becomes less driven by a narcissistic self-obsession to obtain the divine scent for himself, but rather to act as a vessel for this scent, even to become it. As Grenouille hones his skill, he learns to recreate the

---

<sup>13</sup> Stacy Otto, 'Studying Visual Culture', in *Handbook of Research in the Social Foundations of Education*, ed. by Steven Tozer, Fernando P. Gallegos, et. al. (London: Routledge, 2011), pp. 534-48, p. 538.

<sup>14</sup> Sigmund Freud, *Three Case Histories* (New York, NY: Touchstone, 1996), p. 80.

<sup>15</sup> *The Psychoses*, p. 174.



aura of Otherness, engineering synthetic scents as a means to cover up his own nonexistent one, and begins to wear odours 'like clothes as the situation demanded and which permitted him to move undisturbed in the world of men and to keep his true nature from them' (*P*, 190). Thus, as with Symbolic language, crucial to being perceived as an Other, Grenouille's manipulation of scent enables him to feign Otherness.<sup>16</sup> But this is not enough for Grenouille; rather, he wants to become to the world what the divine-scented girl was to him, to become the very purest object of desire, the *objet petit a* in the eyes of the Other, and for this he needed 'those rare humans who inspire love. These were his victims' (*P*, 195).

In his first seminar Lacan gave a simplified theoretical description of what love is, expressing:

[L]ove is a phenomenon which takes place on the imaginary level, and which provokes a veritable seduction of the Symbolic, a sort of annihilation, of perturbation of the function of the ego-ideal. Love reopens the door - as Freud put it, not mincing his words - to perfection. The *ichideal*, the ego-ideal, is the other as speaking, the other in so far as he has a Symbolic relation to me, which, within the terms of our dynamic manipulation, is both similar to and different from the imaginary libido. Symbolic exchange is what links human beings to each other, that is, it is speech and it makes it possible to identify the subject... the *ichideal*, considered as speaking, can come to be placed in the world of objects on the level of... narcissistic captation... this attachment is fundamentally fatal. That's what love is. It's one's own ego that one loves in love, one's own ego made real on the imaginary level.<sup>17</sup>

It is in the climactic and orgiastic closing segment of the text, in which Grenouille is brought before the masses to face execution for his murderous crimes, that we see love as a psychoanalytic process made manifest. Grenouille smothers himself in his divine-scented concoction made up of the scents of all his victims, a concentrate made of the very essence of love itself, and the crowds are quickly brought to a state of rapturous desire, following which all Symbolic laws are instantly forgotten, and a city-wide madness ensues: every man and woman, no matter what their station, church representatives and all, are urged into an impassioned and animalistic mass orgy. In line with Lacan's definition, Süskind describes how Grenouille, smothered in the divine scent, appeared 'to men as their ideal image of themselves' (*P*, 247). There is ambiguity to this surreal climax to the novel. On the one hand, it could be read as imaginary, subjective, which is hinted at by Süskind's mention of the reappearance of 'Grenouille the Great' upon seducing the masses; the messianic delusion which emerges after Grenouille's extended seclusion in the alpine mountains. Viewed literally, in terms of the internalised narrative, this moment of Symbolic seduction signifies the final upsurge of the sensuous and its vast superiority over language. In the Lacanian sense of the term, love is

---

<sup>16</sup> Evans underlines Lacan's scope in the usage of the term "Other". In line with the discussion here, the definition best suited is summarised when Evans expresses how, 'in arguing that speech originates not in the ego, nor even in the subject, but in the Other, Lacan is stressing that speech and language are beyond one's conscious control; they come from another place, outside consciousness, and hence "the unconscious is the discourse of the Other" (*Ecrits*, p. 16). In conceiving of the Other as a place, Lacan alludes to Freud's concept of psychical locality'. Evans, p. 135.

<sup>17</sup> *Freud's Papers*, p. 142.

nothing more than a Symbolic manifestation of the ego, and so Grenouille's perfume embodies this falsity, this mere trick of the essence of the object, as something movable and tractable, and so he sees the love and seduction of the masses as tragic, pitiful, and eventually abhorrent. Grenouille survives, walking free from his intended execution, but now that he is aware that the sheer otherworldly beauty of his perfume is not in any way appreciated by the Other (here the blind masses) but merely acts as a depthless stimulant, something like a line of code which is input into a machine, he has nothing left to live for.

Despite the by and large disparate contexts of *Perfume* and Sartre's *Nausea*—historical and otherwise—the latter is yet another interesting example through which there is demonstrated such a fundamental destruction of language. *Nausea* is considered one of the seminal works of existentialism and takes the form of a diary written by Antoine Roquentin, a lonely historian who resides in the French sea town of Bouville (or “Mud Town” in English). Roquentin is frequently visited by waves of “nausea” whilst going about his mundane day to day life, which includes his ongoing research of a lesser-known historical politician. Roquentin has very little interaction with others but for his brief exchanges with the shadowy and strangely insubstantial regulars at the Cafe Mably, whom he mostly observes detachedly from afar. Two other key characters with whom Roquentin interacts are Ogier P., an autodidact whom he often ridicules for his love of human interaction and his pursuit of knowledge by way of reading through the town library, alphabetically by author (the personificatory figure of the strict, regimented Symbolic order which stands opposite the superfluity and erratic Roquentin who epitomises the Real), and Anny, his ex-lover with whom he attempts to rekindle a meaningful relationship. These infrequent waves of nausea steadily build in intensity until the final culminatory bout which occurs whilst observing the free-flowing roots of a great chestnut tree, which Arthur Danto reads as an incarnation of the tree of knowledge and the novel's primary symbol of language and truth:

[T]he tree is logically external to words as words, it refuses to be swallowed by words, and words, to continue the metaphor, choke in the attempt to ingest it [...]; nausea is the vivid pathological symbol of the utter externality between words and things.<sup>18</sup>

Roquentin describes these waves of nausea as being like a fog ‘which was coming out of the walls and pavements. A sort of insubstantiality of things’. He goes on: ‘Nothing looked real; I felt surrounded by cardboard scenery which could suddenly be removed. The world was waiting, holding its breath, making itself small—it was waiting for its attack, its Nausea’.<sup>19</sup> This metaphor of the cardboard scenery is no doubt befitting of the Symbolic order; the encompassing surface which struggles to contain the nauseating overhaul of “things” and the subsequent debilitating inability to explain and comprehend these things without the blinding tranquility that comes with veil of language. Nausea thus essentially signifies the death of the signifier, and with it the

---

<sup>18</sup> Arthur Danto, *Sartre* (London: Fontana Press, 1991), p. 7.

<sup>19</sup> Jean-Paul Sartre, *Nausea*, trans. by Robert Baldick (London: Penguin Classics, 2000), pp. 112-3. Henceforth cited in text as (*N*, page number).

absurd contingency of reality—'the essential thing is contingency', insists Roquentin—resulting in the upsurge of the traumatic Real which lies beneath (*N*, 188).

In the early stages of the novel, the frailty of the Symbolic is first realised through Roquentin's ponderance of memory, and the human inability to accurately reconstruct the past. Roquentin observes that when revisiting the past we only 'receive the scraps of images, remembered or invented', and more often than not there is 'nothing left but words' (*N*, 52). When retelling the past, Roquentin expresses himself by saying:

[S]ometimes I happen to pronounce some of those beautiful names you read in atlases [...] [and] they engender brand-new pictures in me [...] [but] I dream about words, that's all [...] for a hundred dead stories there remain[s only] one or two living ones. These I evoke cautiously, occasionally, not too often, for fear of wearing them out. I fish one out, I see once more the setting, the characters, the attitudes. All of a sudden I stop: I have felt a worn patch, I have seen a word poking through the web of sensations (*N*, 53).

Once more, we come across this theme of recreation, and moreover the inherent corruptibility of this recreation in the Symbolic order. This metaphor of a 'word poking through a web of sensations' exposes the survival beyond language at play within *Nausea*: Roquentin's perceives the Symbolic as a corruptive force which brings about falsifications, preconfigured and embedded meanings and images; it systematises or subdues sensation and steadily subsumes any residue of truthful experience in the subject. Indeed, Roquentin's inability to recall the past, and to recreate the past in the case of his biographical endeavours, exemplifies these limitations of language first hand. This sense of memory as being jeopardised by language leads Roquentin to write 'in the moment', so to speak, experientially; he writes in his diary: 'I must beware of literature. I must let my pen run on, without searching for words' (*N*, 85). Roquentin at one point reveals a vast cache of photographic images of his supposed past adventures, though none actually contain his image. This could be seen to be indicative of the images being representative of his adventures being imaginary, or on the other hand more powerfully imbued with the subjective experience of seeing what was once seen; Roquentin is able to see exactly what he saw in the past through the lens of the camera. In either case the photographs serve to demonstrate how the image is seen by Roquentin to be an empowered medium in evoking the past, vastly superior to the ever-weakening veneer of language which erodes true experience more and more as it is retold, resulting in little more than these aforementioned 'scraps of images'. Again, like *Perfume*, the dream metaphor proves apt—'I dream about words, that's all'—in that, in Freudian theory, there is similarly a total reliance upon language whilst the imagistic aspect of the dream is formed only secondarily.

Like Süskind's *Grenouille*, the inadequacy of language is best evoked by way of the limitations of Symbolic language in eliciting the experience of the senses. At one point, Roquentin expresses *Grenouille*-like access to thingness itself, beyond the sense of sight.

[C]olours, tastes, *smells* were never real, never simply themselves and nothing but themselves. The simplest, most irreducible quality had a superfluity in itself, in relation to itself, in its heart [...]; a smell for example, it melted into a smell of wet earth, of warm, moist wood, into a black smell spread like varnish over that sinewy wood, into a taste of sweet pulped fibre. I didn't see that black in a simple way: sight is an abstract invention, a cleaned up simplified idea, a human idea...that richness became confusion and finally ceased to be anything at all because it was too much (*N*, 187).<sup>20</sup>

This reference to sight as being an 'abstract invention' harks to the Lacanian notion of the Symbolic as being entirely limited to the visual domain. 'Abstract' here is used in the sense of it being totalising; a veneer which utterly subsumes every visually identifiable object with some means of rational comprehension. The synaesthesiac aspect of many of the other senses, on the other hand, is by comparison entirely beyond logic, and merely supplementary to the primary Symbolic order of sight.

Roquentin's famed encounter with the root is demonstrative of this abstraction by visually-centered language, and brings about the most intense wave of nausea in the novel. It is also the scene in which it becomes most apparent that language is at the centre of this dissolution of reality: Roquentin describes himself as follows:

I am in the midst of things, which cannot be given names. Alone, wordless, defenseless, they surround me [...]. [W]ords had disappeared, and with them the meaning of things [...]. The feeble landmarks which men have traced on their surface [...] Then I had this revelation [...]. [E]xistence had suddenly unveiled itself. [...]. It was the very stuff of things, that root was steeped in existence [...]. [T]he veneer had melted, leaving soft, monstrous masses, in disorder—naked, with a frightening, obscene nakedness (*N*, 180-3).

Exemplifying Sook Kim's designation of revelation following the Symbolic death, as the veneer of language falters, we see the upsurge of the Real made up of stuff, things, feeble landmarks, soft masses, cardboard cutouts, a nakedness; terms which serve to expose this fumbling inadequacy of language. What is crucial here is that the very process of readership is jeopardised—'I was thinking without words, *about* things, *with* things... I am struggling against words'—and in doing so we too are brought closer to the Real (*N*, 185). Indeed, it is only by way of this jeopardisation that we are able to come close to the essential limitations which language brings in exposing the heart of existentialist dogma, and with this we witness the many confluences in Sartrean and Lacanian philosophy, as also expressed in Süskind's *Perfume*.

This traumatic fluidity and superfluity of the Symbolic brings Roquentin to his final revelation at the very end of the text: he welcomes a cathartic release by way of writing something 'which was above existence. The sort of story, for example, which could never happen, an adventure. It would have to be beautiful and hard as steel and make people ashamed of their existence [...]. A book. A novel' (*N*, 252). This making-tangible of the text as being 'hard as steel' suggests it

---

<sup>20</sup> My emphasis.

being wholly immersed in the Symbolic order, with no tethers to sensuous reality. There is of course an ironic paradox here in Roquentin's view of the novel as the purest, most rigid, and infallible medium attainable opposite the inherently fragmentary and unwholesome aspect of the biography and epistolic form—after all, 'an existent can never justify the existence of another existent', proclaims Roquentin—which are seen to be confining of the subject (*N*, 252). The recreation of self through language is restricted within the novel form, it is absolute, and anything beyond that which is offered on the page is nothing more than a projection by the reader. In the end, then, it is *we* who are asked to accept Roquentin as a figure forever beyond our grasp, a motley amalgam of scraps of images, a subject made up of the feeble 'cardboard cutouts' that language provides.

To conclude, Süsskind and Sartre both explore how it is that the destruction of language—that is, the exposition of its crucial inadequacy or insufficiency—can provide a means of philosophical invigoration: a provocative means of stimulating the viewer into experiencing first-hand how it is that language comes to provide a Symbolic 'vener' which protects us from some lurking and traumatic Real. Lacan's psychoanalytic terminology thus appositely provides a means of navigating this authorial use of language, both narrativistically and metatextually.

## List of Works Cited

Bowie, Malcolm, *Lacan* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991)

Danto, Arthur, *Sartre* (London: Fontana Press, 1991)

Evans, Dylan, *An Introductory Dictionary of Lacanian Psychoanalysis* (New York, NY: Brunner-Routledge, 2001)

Freud, Sigmund, *Three Case Histories* (New York, NY: Touchstone, 1996)

Lacan, Jacques, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan Book 1: Freud's Papers on Technique*, ed. by Jacques-Alain Miller (New York, NY: Cambridge UP, 1975)

———, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book 3: The Psychoses, 1955-1956* (London: Routledge, 1993)

Otto, Stacy, 'Studying Visual Culture', in *Handbook of Research in the Social Foundations of Education*, ed. by Steven Tozer, Fernando P. Gallegos, et. al. (London: Routledge, 2011), pp. 534-48

Sartre, Jean-Paul, *Nausea*, trans. by Robert Baldick (London: Penguin Classics, 2000), pp. 112-3

———, *What is Literature?*, trans. Bernard Frechtman (New York, NY: Harper Colophon Books, 1965)

Sook Kim, Jin, 'Symbolic Death of the Subject in the Structure of Jacques Lacan', in *Death Dying and Mysticism: The Ecstasy of the End* (New York, NY: Palgrave, 2015), pp. 103-17

Süskind, Patrick, *Perfume, The Story of a Murderer* (London: Penguin Books, 2010)

Žižek, Slavoj, *Plague of Fantasies* (New York, NY: Verso, 1997)