

## Art and Existentialism

In this paper, I will use Martin Heidegger's *The Origin of the Work of Art* and Jean-Paul Sartre's *Being and Nothingness* to argue that for Sartre, human reality cannot continue having, being, and doing, without engaging with art. I will then demonstrate how literature can be understood as functioning in unison with Sartrean existentialism given Sartre's aesthetic in *What is Literature?* The production of art will be understood as providing respite from nausea, while the consumption of art will be understood as providing respite from bad faith. For Sartre, nausea is the experience of the facticity and contingency of existence. Bad faith is a vacillation between transcendence and facticity, which refuses to recognize either one for what it really is or to synthesize them. For Heidegger, the work of art lets an earth appear as earth, and lets a world come about it such that the earth and world strive against each other. Upon and in the earth, historical man grounds his dwelling in the world. The world of a work of art is a self-disclosing openness of the paths and decisions in the destiny of an historical people. By grounding one's dwelling in the world through the earth of a work of art, human reality will be understood as being able to provide respite from nausea because grounding dwelling amounts to not having to worry about the contingency of existence. By experiencing the world, or totality of possible present-at-hand things presented by a work of art, human reality will be understood as being able to provide respite from bad faith because facing a set up world against an earth means facing a synthesis of

facticity and transcendence in which the openness of the world necessitates recognizing them as such.

For Sartre, the principal condition for human reality is bad faith. Bad faith is figured as a threat to human consciousness because it “utilizes the double property of the human being, who is at once a facticity and a transcendence. These two aspects of human reality are and ought to be capable of a valid coordination. But bad faith does not wish either to coordinate them or to surmount them in a synthesis. Bad faith seeks to affirm their identity while preserving their differences. It must affirm facticity as *being* transcendence and transcendence as *being* facticity, in such a way that at the instant when a person apprehends the one, he can find himself abruptly faced with the other.” (Sartre 98) One of the effects of bad faith for the conduct of human reality is that “the subject deceives himself about the meaning of his conduct, he apprehends it in its concrete existence but not in its truth, simply because he cannot derive it from an original situation and from a psychic constitution which remain alien to him.” (Sartre 91) This is because, when not confronted with a totality such as a work of art, “bad faith does not hold the norms and criteria of truth as they are accepted by the critical thought of good faith. What it decides first, in fact, is the nature of truth. With bad faith a truth appears, a method of thinking, a type of being which is like that of objects; the ontological characteristic of the world of bad faith with which the subject suddenly surrounds himself is this: that here being is what it is not, and is not what it is. Consequently a peculiar type of evidence appears: *non-persuasive* evidence. Bad faith apprehends evidence but it is resigned in advance to not being fulfilled by this evidence, to not

being persuaded and transformed into good faith.” (Sartre 113) Good faith and sincerity, however, are both bound by bad faith in the sense that being-for-itself is always a nihilation of being-in-itself. What the consumption of art can do, thus, is to provide a respite from bad faith, since “good faith seeks to flee the inner disintegration of my being in the direction of the in-itself which it should be and is not. Bad faith seeks to flee the in-itself by means of the inner disintegration of my being. But it denies this very disintegration as it denies that it is itself bad faith. Bad faith seeks by means of “not-being-what-one-is” to escape from the in-itself which I am not in the mode of being what one is not. It denies itself as bad faith and aims at the in-itself which I am not in the mode of “not-being-what-one-is-not.” If bad faith is possible, it is because it is an immediate, permanent threat to every project of the human being; it is because consciousness conceals in its being a permanent risk of bad faith. The origin of this risk is the fact that the nature of consciousness simultaneously is to be what it is not and not to be what it is.” (Sartre 116) Another condition for the consciousness of human reality that the work of art can provide a respite from is consciousness of the body.

In addition to bad faith, a condition of the nihilating aspect of the For-itself is that the body appears to its consciousness, but ultimately cannot be nihilated, and so it is passed over and manifested as nausea, or a feeling of the facticity and contingency of the existence of human reality. The condition for this is that the body ultimately grounds the For-itself, and thus “non-positional consciousness is consciousness (of the) body as being that which it surmounts and nihilates by making itself consciousness—i.e., as being something which consciousness is

without having to be it and *which it passes over* in order to be what is had to be. In short, consciousness (of) the body is lateral and retrospective; the body is the *neglected*, the “*passed by in silence*.” And yet the body is what this consciousness *is*; it is not even anything except body.” (Sartre 434) For the body of the for-itself, “there exist therefore pure affective qualities which are surpassed and transcended by affective projects. ...This “coenesthesia” rarely appears without being surpassed toward the world by a transcendent project on the part of the For-itself.” (Sartre 436) Through this mode “a dull and inescapable nausea perpetually reveals my body to my consciousness. Sometimes we look for the pleasant or for the physical pain to free ourselves from this nausea; but as soon as the pain and the pleasure are existed by consciousness, they in turn manifest its facticity and its contingency; and it is on the ground of this nausea that they are revealed.” (Sartre 445) Because the For-itself has to have a relation to its possibilities, and nausea acts as an obstruction to intentions such as being, having, and doing, the production of a work of art can be understood as providing a respite from nausea.

Drawing on the pre-Socratics, Heidegger’s understanding of the work of art is that it sets up a world against an earth. The aspects that Heidegger describes as belonging to the work of art can be understood as parallel to those of Sartrean human reality, and providing respites for its nausea and bad faith. Heidegger writes of how “that into which the work sets itself back and which it causes to come forth in this setting back of itself we called the earth. Earth is that which comes forth and shelters. Earth, self-dependent, is effortless and untiring. Upon the earth and in it, historical man grounds his dwelling in the world. In setting up a world, the work

sets forth an earth. This setting forth must be thought here in the strict sense of the word. The work moves the earth itself into the Open of a world and keeps it there. The work lets the earth be an earth." (Heidegger 45) Given this construction, earth can be understood as parallel to facticity or the in-itself because historical man, or the for-itself having a past, grounds his dwelling or facticity in the world with it. Human reality affected by nausea needs a respite to a taste of its facticity and contingency; by producing a work of art and thus setting forth an earth to let it be an earth, human reality can occupy its body, and thus its contingency and facticity can be themselves without human reality having to have a taste for them. Because it is parallel to the in-itself, "earth... shatters every attempt to penetrate into it. It causes every merely calculating importunity upon it to turn into a destruction. This destruction may herald itself under the appearance of mastery and of progress in the form of the technical-scientific objectivation of nature, but this mastery nevertheless remains an impotence of will. The earth appears openly cleared as itself only when it is perceived and preserved as that which is by nature undisclosable, that which shrinks from every disclosure and constantly keeps itself closed up. All things of earth, and the earth itself as a whole, flow together into a reciprocal accord. But this confluence is not a blurring of their outlines. Here there flows the stream, restful within itself, of the setting of bounds, which delimits everything present within its presence. Thus in each of the self-secluding things there is the same not-knowing-of-one-another. The earth is essentially self-secluding. To set forth the earth means to bring it into the Open as the self-secluding." (Heidegger 45-46)

Because all things of the earth flow together in an accord, time can be understood as flowing over the earth. Because the earth is parallel to the in-itself and time flows over it, it can be understood as allowing the for-itself an opportunity to enter a subjective process of temporality. The for-itself's past is represented to it by the earth or in-itself because the earth is parallel to facticity; the present of the for-itself is coextensive with the work of art because in consuming it, it has nowhere to flee. The future that the for-itself projects itself to be is represented to it by the world of the work of art because in the work of art, "the world is the self-disclosing openness of the broad paths of the simple and essential decisions in the destiny of an historical people. The earth is the spontaneous forthcoming of that which is continually self-seducing and to that extent sheltering and concealing. World and earth are essentially different from one another and yet are never separated. The world grounds itself on the earth, and earth juts through the world. But the relation between world and earth does not wither away into the empty unity of opposites unconcerned with one another. The world, in resting upon the earth, strives to surmount it. As self-opening it cannot endure anything closed. The earth, however, as sheltering and concealing, tends always to draw the world into itself and keep it there." (Heidegger 47) The world as a representation of the decisions in the destiny of a people thus parallels the freedom of the for-itself, which must decide to choose itself. The world strives against an earth which time flows over. The work of art, in creating a striving between earth and world that parallels the strife between the transcendence and facticity for human reality, can provide a respite from bad faith if the for-itself consumes the work in the process of temporality. This is because, in

the work of art, one can recognize that “the opposition of world and earth is a striving. But we would surely all too easily falsify its nature if we were to confound striving with discord and dispute, and thus see it only as disorder and destruction. In essential striving, rather, the opponents raise each other into the self-assertion of their natures. Self-assertion of nature, however, is never a rigid insistence upon some contingent state, but surrender to the concealed originality of the source of one’s being.” (Heidegger 47-48) In the work of art human reality can recognize the earth and world as striving; earth and world parallel the aspects of facticity and transcendence belonging to the for-itself, so that in recognizing earth as earth, and world as world, human reality can recognize its facticity and transcendence as such. In paralleling the originality of the source of one’s being through self-assertion of nature, the work of art can thus provide a respite from bad faith for the for-itself such that the for-itself can choose its own being.

Consumption of a work of art can provide a respite from bad faith because bad faith, while apprehending concrete existence, is eschews truth, whereas the work of art is a concrete existence in which truth is established, thus allowing for its acknowledgment. In acknowledging truth, and thus being able to choose its own being, the for-itself is also doubly provided a respite from nausea insofar as it cannot be reminded of its facticity as a lingering taste if it is actively choosing it and not passing it over. Heidegger writes of how “truth establishes itself in the work. Truth is present only as the conflict between lighting and concealing in the opposition of world and earth. Truth wills to be established in the work as this conflict of world and earth. The conflict is not to be resolved in a being brought forth for the purpose,

nor is it to be merely housed there; the conflict, on the contrary, is started by it. The being must therefore contain within itself the essential traits of the conflict. In the strife the unity of the world and earth is won. As a world opens itself, it submits to the decision of an historical humanity the question of victory and defeat, blessing and curse, mastery and slavery. The dawning world brings out what is as yet undecided and measureless, and thus discloses the hidden necessity of measure and decisiveness." (Heidegger 60-61) Consumption of the work of art by the for-itself can provide a respite from bad faith because bad faith does not follow the norms and criteria for truth as set by the critical thought of good faith, and is thus privy to non-persuasive evidence. In the time that it consumes the work of art, however, it must share in the norms and criteria of truth set by good faith because in the work of art, everything is intentional, else it would reproduce nausea. Instead, the work of art allows for the for-itself a respite from nausea because it can negate the feeling of its facticity and reproduce it in the earth of the work of art. This earth is parallel with its facticity, and being its real being, the evidence it provides is thus persuasive insofar as it allows a respite from bad faith. This function of the work of art, as evidence to counteract bad faith in the establishing of truth, "happens as preservation. Thus art is: the creative preserving of truth in the work. *Art then is the becoming and happening of truth.*" (Heidegger 69) Thus "whenever art happens—that is, whenever there is a beginning—a thrust enters history, history either begins or starts over again. History means here not a sequence in time of events of whatever sort, however important. History is the transporting of a people into its appointed task as entrance into that people's endowment." (Heidegger 74) The



production and consumption of works of art thus allows for a respite from bad faith and nausea such that the decisions of human reality can be coordinated with its historical destiny, sustained by how “the world is not simply the Open that corresponds to clearing, and the earth is not simply the Closed that corresponds to concealment. Rather, the world is the clearing of the paths of the essential guiding directions with which all decision complies. Every decision, however, bases itself on something not mastered, something concealed, confusing; else it would never be a decision.” (Heidegger 53) In this sense, art’s ability to provide a respite can be understood as being a function of the for-itself.

For Sartre, the in-itself is being over which time flows, yet the for-itself can never be this being and is always nihilating it. What is nihilated in the in-itself and what sustains the for-itself is temporality. Sartre writes, “the time of consciousness is human reality which temporalizes itself as the totality which is to itself its own incompleteness... there is never an instant at which we can assert that the for-itself *is*, precisely because the for-itself never is. Temporality, on the contrary, temporalizes itself entirely as the refusal of the instant.” (Sartre 211) Time flows over the earth of a work of art, and the world of a work of art holds this in an openness; time flows over the in-itself of the body of the for-itself such that, through temporality, it can never be even for an instant because its temporality refuses the instant. The world of the work of art, sustaining time in an openness against the earth, and the temporality of the for-itself, however, are coextensive such that all that the for-itself can negate, having its temporality encapsulated by the world, are its own lies. Because bad faith is the lying of the for-itself to itself through the process of

temporality, by which it can escape itself in refusing the instant, and because the openness of the world encapsulates temporality such that the instant can have its duration, consumption of the work of art can be said to provide the for-itself with a *respite* from bad faith, and conversely, the production of the work of art, from nausea. The *possibility* of a respite from bad faith and nausea for the for-itself is omnipresent insofar as human reality has a historical existence, because “the origin of the work of art—that is, the origin of both the creators and the preservers, which is to say of a people’s historical existence, is art. This is so because art is by nature an origin: a distinctive way in which truth comes into being, that is, becomes historical.” (Heidegger 75)

The work of art’s ability to function as a respite from bad faith and nausea can be exemplified in the form of literature under Sartre’s aesthetic in *What is Literature?* Heidegger writes that the origin of a people’s historical existence is art, and that “whenever art happens—that is, whenever there is a beginning—a thrust enters history, history either begins or starts over again. History means here not a sequence in time of events of whatever sort, however important. History is the transporting of a people into its appointed task as entrance into that people’s endowment.” (Heidegger 74) Sartre’s understanding of what literature is can be paralleled to Heidegger’s understanding of the origin of the work of art in that Sartre thinks of literature as an enterprise by which “the message is a soul which is made object,” or in other words, by which a work can set up an earth striving against a world. (Sartre 27) Sartre’s understanding of the reason for writing literature is that “whether he is an essayist, a pamphleteer, a satirist, or a novelist,

whether he speaks only of individual passions or whether he attacks the social order, the writer, a free man addressing free men, has only one subject—freedom.”

(Sartre 58) This is understood not as an ideal, but as a “concrete, everyday freedom, which must be protected by our taking sides in political and social struggles.”

(Sartre 59-60) The artist produces work for a public “understood... as the sum total of men living in a given society. If the writer’s public could ever be extended to the point of embracing this totality, the result would not be that he would necessarily have to limit the reverberations of his work to the present time, but rather he would oppose to the abstract eternity of glory which is an impossible and hollow dream of the absolute, a concrete and finite duration which he would determine by the very choice of his subjects, and which, far from uprooting him from history, would define his situation in social time.” (Sartre 149) In other words, the concrete universality is a public conceived of as the optimal totality of the for-itself’s historical endowment, or facticity. With this intention, the for-itself would seek to produce a totality that transcends its nausea and bad faith due to conflict with the other through the for-others by objectifying the itself, facticity, or the character of the Other in the production of a work; this work would seek to objectify the concrete totality so that the respite from nausea and bad faith for the for-itself in producing the work would be of optimal endurance and so that the reorientation of freedoms towards choosing facticity after consuming the work would be optimal as well—given the historical endowment of the people constituting the totality.

#### Works Cited

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