

JEAN-PAUL SARTRE'S *LES MOTS* AND THE *NOUVELLES*
AUTOBIOGRAPHIES OF ALAIN ROBBE-GRILLET,
NATHALIE SARRAUTE, AND MARGUERITE DURAS: A COMPARISON

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by
Julie Driessen
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M.A., Louisiana State University, 1999
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Abstract

Jean-Paul Sartre's autobiography *Les Mots* (1964) is shown to be a departure from the Sartrean oeuvre because it represents an abandonment of *littérature engagée*. In *Les Mots* Sartre not only abandons *littérature engagée*, but also embraces a view of literature which he formerly opposed--*l'art pour l'art*. Sartre defines his views of literature--*littérature engagée*--in *Qu'est-ce que la littérature?* (1948) Robbe-Grillet defines *l'art pour l'art* in *Pour un nouveau roman* (1963). In *Les Mots* Sartre embraces Robbe-Grillet's *l'art pour l'art* and abandons his own *littérature engagée*. Since these two views of literature are theoretically opposed, it is interesting to find that Sartre makes this one-hundred-and-eighty-degree turn. Sartre's shifted view of literature, as represented in *Les Mots*, is further supported by a comparison of it to the autobiographies of a selection of *Nouveaux Romanciers*: Alain Robbe-Grillet's *Le Miroir qui revient* (1984), Nathalie Sarraute's *L'Enfance* (1983), and Marguerite Duras's *L'Amant* (1984). The autobiographies of the *Nouveaux Romanciers* are used as illustrations of Robbe-Grillet's notion of *l'art pour l'art*. Although Sarraute and Duras do not claim allegiance to Robbe-Grillet's view of literature, nor to the name "Nouveau Romancier," their autobiographies are similar enough to Robbe-Grillet's that they seem to be part of his school of thought. The relationship between Sartre and Robbe-Grillet adds to the irony of Sartre's shifted view of literature. Sartre rejects practitioners of *l'art pour l'art* in *Qu'est-ce que la littérature?* and Robbe-Grillet specifically rejects Sartre and his *littérature engagée* in *Pour un nouveau roman*.

Introduction

Jean-Paul Sartre advocates *littérature engagée* in *Qu'est-ce que la littérature?* (1948) His answer to the question “What is literature?” is that literature should be used to address and change contemporary problems in society: this is literary “engagement.” According to Sartre there should be a dialogue between the text and the world: the text is “engagé” in the world. The “écrivain engagé,” says Sartre, should use literature to inspire action in the readers, specifically actions which would help to change society for the better. In this sense, Sartre says that literature functions as a tool, “un outil,” in society.

Contrary to Sartre’s notion of literature, Alain Robbe-Grillet in *Pour un nouveau roman* (1963) says that literature should exist for its own sake: a view of literature known as *l’art pour l’art*. According to Robbe-Grillet there should be no dialogue between the text and the world: the text exists for its own sake. Unlike Sartre who declares that the *écrivain* should be *engagé* in contemporary problems, Robbe-Grillet says that writers should only be concerned with their craft, and not with anything which is “extérieur” to the text. Sartre’s *littérature engagée* and Robbe-Grillet’s *l’art pour l’art* are two views of literature which exist in opposition to one another.

The oppositional relationship between these two writers is underscored by their mutual rejections of each other. In *Qu'est-ce que la littérature?* Sartre rejects those authors who “avait inventé une nouvelle manière de parler pour ne rien dire.” In other words, he rejects those writers who use art for itself as a medium of creation (*l’art pour l’art*) rather than as tool of *engagement*. While communicating a message of *engagement* is of utmost importance in *littérature engagée*, those writers whom Sartre criticizes use literature “pour ne rien dire.” Robbe-Grillet counters in *Pour un nouveau roman* saying that writers can only write “pour rien.” The artist, he says, “ne met rien au-dessus de son travail, et il s’aperçoit vite qu’il ne peut créer que *pour rien*” (author’s emphasis). The section of *Pour un nouveau roman* from which these quotations come is entitled

“L’engagement.” The title refers to Sartre’s literary *engagement* which Robbe-Grillet rejects, as seen above. Indeed, Robbe-Grillet clarifies his definition of *l’art pour l’art* in terms of a rejection of Sartre’s *engagement*.

Given Sartre’s advocacy of *littérature engagée* and rejection of *l’art pour l’art*, one would not expect Sartre to produce any writings which could be considered *l’art pour l’art*. However, in this dissertation it will be argued that Sartre, in his autobiography *Les Mots* (1964), abandons *littérature engagée* and embraces *l’art pour l’art*. Sartre’s definition of *littérature engagée* in *Qu’est-ce que la littérature?* and Robbe-Grillet’s definition of *l’art pour l’art* in *Pour un nouveau roman* will serve as theoretical guideposts for this argument. To illustrate that *Les Mots* represents an abandonment of *littérature engagée* and an embracing of *l’art pour l’art*, *Les Mots* will be compared to a selection of autobiographies which exemplify Robbe-Grillet’s definition of *l’art pour l’art*: Robbe-Grillet’s *Le Miroir qui revient* (1984), Marguerite Duras’s *L’Amant* (1984), and Nathalie Sarraute’s *L’Enfance* (1983).

In this dissertation *Les Mots* is considered a departure from Sartre’s *littérature engagée*. In chapter one, *Les Mots* is shown to also be a departure from the Sartrean oeuvre. Sartre’s writings may be divided into three categories: 1) the early theoretical writings, including *L’Être et le néant* and his first novel *La Nausée* 2) *littérature engagée*, including the unfinished tetralogy of novels *Les Chemins de la liberté*, all of his plays, and *Théâtre de situations* in which Sartre advocates *engagement* in theater 3)(auto)biographical writings, such as *Baudelaire*, *L’Idiot de la famille*, *I-III*, *Saint Genet: comédien et martyr*, and *Les Mots*. While *Les Mots* does fit into the third category, it is also a departure from it in that it is an autobiography rather than a biography. The particular issues involved in the genre of autobiography lend to *Les Mots*’ unique role in this third category. Chapter two establishes the contribution of this dissertation to existing criticism of *Les Mots*. Although many have suggested that *Les*

Mots represents a departure from Sartre's other writings for various reasons, the topic has not been elaborated in detail as it will be here.

The oppositional relationship of Sartre's *littérature engagée* and Robbe-Grillet's *l'art pour l'art* is a central issue; therefore, in chapter three, these two opposing views of literature will be discussed in detail. As noted above, the two theoretical texts which provide the basis for this discussion are Sartre's *Qu'est-ce que la littérature?* and Robbe-Grillet's *Pour un nouveau roman*. Sartre's changed view of literature in *Les Mots* seems drastic, a sudden one-hundred-eighty-degree turn. However, traces of Sartre's changed view of literature--from *littérature engagée* to *l'art pour l'art*--are evident in writings other than *Les Mots*, in particular his biographies, as will be shown in chapter four. Although writing in a traditionally referential genre--the biography--Sartre refers to the non-referential nature of these texts. The biographies, like *Les Mots* and the *nouvelles autobiographies* discussed in this dissertation, are likened to works of fiction. For example, Sartre calls *L'Idiot de la famille* "un roman vrai." It is not a biography, but a novel, which may or may not be "vrai." As works of fiction, they are self-referential texts; the dialogue with the world advocated in Sartre's *littérature engagée* no longer exists in these texts. Instead, they exemplify Robbe-Grillet's *l'art pour l'art* in which the text does not refer to anything "extérieur."

In order to provide further evidence that *Les Mots* is indeed an example of *l'art pour l'art*, it is compared to other autobiographies which exemplify *l'art pour l'art*: the "nouvelles autobiographies" of Robbe-Grillet, Marguerite Duras, and Nathalie Sarraute. Before getting into a discussion of *nouvelles autobiographies*, old autobiographies--traditional autobiographies--and traditional notions of the genre are scrutinized in chapter five. In order to understand what is new about these *nouvelles autobiographies* and about *Les Mots*, it is necessary to examine the traditions of the autobiographical genre.

Subsequently, similarities between *Les Mots* and the *nouvelles autobiographies* are illustrated in chapters six, seven, and eight. Whereas traditional notions of the genre

support its referential nature, non-traditional notions, such as that exemplified in the *nouvelles autobiographies* and *Les Mots*, question and problematize the same. In *Les Mots* and the *nouvelles autobiographies*, the text/world dialogue of the traditional autobiography becomes a text/text dialogue. Sartre abandons the dialogue between the text and the world, which is associated with *littérature engagée* and embraces a text/text dialogue, which is associated with Robbe-Grillet's *l'art pour l'art*. As suggested in the title *Les Mots*, Sartre's autobiography illustrates his realization that a text is just words, just text, without a connection to anything "extérieur." The line that distinguishes the traditionally referential genre of autobiography and of fiction is blurred, if not erased. In chapter six the various, yet similar ways in which Sartre, Robbe-Grillet, Duras, and Sarraute problematize the referential nature of their autobiographies is illustrated. Then, in chapter seven, the self-referential nature of their autobiographies is further explored as it relates to the possibility or impossibility of an autobiography, or any text, being referential. Sartre's abandonment of *littérature engagée* may be understood as a realization of this view of the literature. The idea that a text can *only* be self-referential is reflected in Robbe-Grillet's *l'art pour l'art*. On the other hand, it invalidates Sartre's *littérature engagée*. In chapter eight, *Les Mots* and these *nouvelles autobiographies* are shown to be self-contradicting in nature. The autobiographers present the texts as autobiographies and contradict their autobiographical nature. On one level, the text seems to be an exercise in playing with an art form, here the genre of autobiography. This notion aligns the texts with Robbe-Grillet's suggestion that the writer should only be concerned with exploring the limits of his medium. Likewise, it aligns the texts with Robbe-Grillet's *l'art pour l'art*. Sartre has effectively made a one-hundred-and-eighty-degree turn in *Les Mots*. The author who formerly preached the necessity of *littérature engagée*, a literature which must be in dialogue with the world, has written an autobiography in which this dialogue is abandoned. In *Les Mots* he replaces his *littérature engagée* with a view of literature that he formerly opposed--*l'art pour l'art*.

What does *Les Mots* mean for Sartre, his life, and his writings after its publication? Does he abandon *engagement* all together after 1964? Or does he only abandon literary *engagement*? These questions are addressed in chapter nine. Indeed, Sartre continues to be *engagé* in the problems of society and continues to support literary *engagement*. So can *Les Mots* really be considered a departure? In this final chapter, the apparent contradiction between the abandonment of *littérature engagée* in *Les Mots* and Sartre's continued support of *engagement*, both literary and otherwise, will be discussed.

Chapter 1: *Les Mots* in the Sartrean Oeuvre

In this chapter Jean-Paul Sartre's autobiography *Les Mots* (1964) will be discussed within the context of his oeuvre to support the argument advanced in this dissertation: *Les Mots* represents an abandonment of *littérature engagée* and an embracing of *l'art pour l'art*. While subsequent chapters elaborate the second part of the above argument: that Sartre embraces *l'art pour l'art* in *Les Mots*, the present chapter will concentrate on the first part: that Sartre abandons *littérature engagée* in *Les Mots*. As will be shown in this chapter, it is the break from *littérature engagée* and its text/world dialogue that makes it possible for Sartre to then embrace *l'art pour l'art*: a text/text dialogue. First Sartre's theories of *littérature engagée* as defined in his *Qu'est-ce que la littérature?* (1948) will be explained in order to understand what is being abandoned in *Les Mots*. Second, *Les Mots*' abandonment of *littérature engagée* will be illustrated. A defining characteristic of *littérature engagée* is a dialogue between the text and the world. A defining characteristic of Sartre's other writings is also a dialogue between the text and the world. Therefore, thirdly, it will be argued that *Les Mots*' abandonment of *littérature engagée* also represents a departure from the Sartrean oeuvre. Sartre's writings are divided here into three categories: theoretical, *littérature engagée*, and (auto)biographical. Each type of writing is shown to be characterized by a text/world dialogue. Because of its departure from a text/world dialogue, *Les Mots* does not fit into any of the categories. The significance of *Les Mots*' abandonment of *littérature engagée* is underscored in this chapter by its relevance to the entirety of Sartre's work. This cultural icon of the twentieth century, whose work is defined by a dialogue between the text and the world, whose persona is largely defined by his political *engagement*, suddenly abandons this dialogue in *Les Mots*. This writer and theorist, known for his advocacy of *littérature engagée*, suddenly abandons his previous view of literature in *Les Mots*.

The view of literature advocated by Sartre in *Qu'est-ce que la littérature?* (1948) necessitates a dialogue between the text and the world. Sartre tells the world what literature should be--*littérature engagée*. Literature should be *engagé* in contemporary problems. The *écrivain engagé*, says Sartre has “abandonné le rêve impossible de faire une peinture impartiale de la Société et de la condition humaine.”¹ Sartre wants writers to use literature to comment on society and the human condition, not to “faire une peinture impartiale.” Rather than ignoring the problems around them, writers should use literature to inspire action. The “parole” is “action.” In other words, literature should translate into action, specifically action which will lead to changes and improvements in society. Literature, for Sartre, should be used as a tool, “un outil” to effect changes and improvements in society.

But Sartre abandons this lofty view of literature--*littérature engagée* in his autobiography *Les Mots*. He concludes the text saying, “Longtemps j’ai pris ma plume pour une épée, à présent je connais notre impuissance.”² He no longer believes in the heroic powers of the pen; he no longer believes that he can save the world via literature. In *Les Mots*, the text/world dialogue required in *littérature engagée* ceases to exist.

This claim seems counterintuitive in that an autobiography, traditionally speaking, is defined by a dialogue between the text and the world. Philippe Lejeune offers a traditional definition of the autobiography, calling it a retrospective narrative in prose “qu’une personne réelle fait de sa propre existence.”³ The autobiographer is a real person who portrays his or her own life in the text. The text is, therefore, a link to the world, the facts and events of the autobiographer’s life. In accordance with Lejeune’s definition, *Les Mots* should be a dialogue between the text (the autobiography) and the world. If

¹ Jean-Paul Sartre, *Qu'est-ce que la littérature?* (Paris: Gallimard, 1948) 73.

² Sartre, *Les Mots* (Paris: Gallimard, 1964) 205.

³ Philippe Lejeune, *Le Pacte autobiographique* (Paris: Seuil, 1975) 14.

Sartre produced such an autobiography, he would retain the link between the text and the world that he advocated in *littérature engagée*.

But *Les Mots* is not a traditional autobiography. It is, like the *nouvelles autobiographies* discussed in later chapters, an autobiography in which the dialogue between the text and the world is dissolved. These autobiographies reflect Roland Barthes's assertion that in the field of the subject "il n'y a pas de référent."⁴ There are various reasons why the autobiographer is a problematic referent. For instance, the autobiographer, as both writing subject and object of the writing, cannot be a reliable point of reference in the way that verifiable facts and events could be. The autobiographer can only deliver an interpretation, a subjective version, of the meaning of such facts and events. Such an interpretation is not verifiable. Yet, the autobiographer is the only legitimate source of the autobiography. In light of such problems, Lejeune's traditional notion of the autobiography is inadequate.

In *Les Mots* Sartre constantly draws attention to the problematic notion of the autobiography's referentiality. In doing so, he dissolves the genre's traditional link between the text and the world. Sartre uses a variety of tactics to put the referential nature of *Les Mots* into question: he announces that his autobiography is false; he draws attention to characteristic problems of the genre, as regards referentiality: the problem of sincerity and memory and the elusive nature of the self. He also weaves themes of imposture, false faith, and insanity. These tactics are elaborated in detail in chapters six, seven, and eight in which it is shown that the same tactics are used in the *nouvelles autobiographies* of Robbe-Grillet, Duras, and Sarraute. They, like Sartre, dissolve the text/world dialogue in their autobiographies. Here, Sartre's announcement that his autobiography is false, a work of fiction, will be scrutinized as it relates to his

⁴ Roland Barthes, *Roland Barthes par Roland Barthes* (Paris: Éditions de Minuit, 1974) 7.

abandonment of the text/world dialogue and, consequently, to his abandonment of *littérature engagée*.

Sartre's abandonment of the link between the text and the world in *Les Mots* is clearly announced in the following statement: "Ce que je viens d'écrire est faux. Vrai. Ni vrai ni faux comme tout ce qu'on écrit sur les fous, sur les hommes."⁵ After fifty pages of autobiographical narrative, Sartre announces that what he has written is false. Is the text a fiction? How can an autobiography be a work of fiction? An autobiography may be considered a work of fiction in that it can only be an interpretation of a life. It is a text "sur les hommes." The text is not a representation of "les hommes"; rather, it is about, "sur," man. In other words, the text is an interpretation. An interpretation can not be considered true in that it is no more true than another interpretation. As an interpretation the autobiography is not true, so it is instead false, a work of fiction. If *Les Mots* is a work of fiction, then the text is no longer in dialogue with the world.

But Sartre does not simply call his autobiography (and everything written about man) false; he says it is false, true, and neither false nor true. The idea that his autobiography is false was addressed above. What about the idea that *Les Mots* is true and neither true nor false? An autobiography may be true in the sense that the autobiographer's interpretation of his or her life is as true as any other interpretation of the autobiographer's life. Indeed, autobiographers' interpretations of their lives must be the best possible "true" interpretation available since they have the closest connection to their own life. Yet an interpretation can not really be considered true in any absolute sense; an interpretation is subjective and, therefore, not in the realm of truth. Thus, an autobiography can not really be called true; but it also can not so easily be called false because the autobiographer's interpretation is the closest thing to a true version available.

⁵ Sartre, *Mots* 59.

In this way, *Les Mots*, and anything written about man, is true, false, and neither true nor false.

Sartre says that everything written about man is false. If everything written about man is false, then all autobiographies, not just his own, are false. Biographies must also be included, as well as historical texts, since they are also about man. Any text “tout ce qu’on écrit” which claims to be about man, then, is false. Because Sartre makes such a sweeping statement, it seems that he has come to a conclusion about the very possibility of a text/world dialogue. It seems that such a link between the text and the world is no longer possible in Sartre’s view. If this link is not possible, then *littérature engagée* is no longer a valid view of literature. *Littérature engagée* is to be *engagé* in contemporary problems in the world: the text is to be in dialogue with the world. In *Les Mots* Sartre abandons the possibility of such a relationship between the text and the world.

While an autobiography is traditionally understood to involve a dialogue between the text and the world, *Les Mots* is a text in which the author dissolves this link. This is a significant change in Sartre’s view of literature because with *littérature engagée*, there should necessarily be a link between the text and the world: the text should be *engagé* in contemporary problems that exist in society (i.e., in the world). Ironically, Sartre abandons the view that literature must be in dialogue with the world in the genre of autobiography, a genre traditionally defined by a text/world dialogue. In doing so, he also abandons a fundamental characteristic of *littérature engagée*.

Like Sartre’s *littérature engagée*, his theoretical and biographical writings are also characterized by a text/world dialogue. In the following paragraphs, it will be argued that *Les Mots* does not fit into any of the three categories of writings--theoretical, *littérature engagée*, or (auto)biographical. This is because all of these writings are characterized by a link between the text and the world. Since *Les Mots* represents an abandonment of this link, it also represents a departure from Sartre’s other writings.

Theoretical Writings

The theoretical writings have as their center Sartre's early philosophical magnum opus *L'Être et le néant* (1943) in which he outlines his version of existentialism. This philosophical work is characterized by a text/world dialogue in that Sartre's theories are about man's existence, man's experience in the world. Existentialism deals with existence, rather than with the metaphysical realm of essence. *Les Mots* does not fit into this group of writings because, as illustrated earlier, it is a text in which Sartre abandons the link between the text and the world.

Notions which pervade his literary and non-literary works are developed in *L'Être et le néant*, such as *liberté* and *mauvaise foi*. For Sartre man is, by definition, *libre*: "la liberté humaine précède de l'essence de l'homme."⁶ Because man is defined by his *liberté*, he is at all times free to choose his actions; therefore, man is at all times *responsable* for his choices and actions. There is no escape from one's *liberté*. In addition, man, via his *liberté*, defines himself, creates his own essence: "l'essence de l'être humain est en suspens dans sa liberté."⁷ Man's essence is created by man; it is not pre-determined. Man is *libre* to choose his actions, and, in doing so, he chooses his essence. The burden of the ever-present responsibility of *liberté* is a subject in many of Sartre's literary texts. *Liberté* cannot be escaped: "nous sommes condamnés à la liberté."⁸ Characters often attempt to escape their *liberté* because of the burden, but ultimately they cannot escape it because they are defined by *liberté*. As Sartre says, "la liberté humaine précède de l'essence de l'homme." Man is, in his essence *libre*.

Attempting to escape one's *liberté* is called *mauvaise foi*. It is, says Sartre, a "mensonge à soi."⁹ When man tries to pretend that he is not *libre*, he is lying to himself. *Mauvaise foi* is, in the context of Sartre's definition of *liberté*, to attempt to exist in a way

⁶ Sartre, *L'Être et le néant* (Paris: Gallimard, 1943) 61.

⁷ Sartre, *L'Être* 61.

⁸ Sartre, *L'Être* 530.

⁹ Sartre, *L'Être* 83.

that defies one's own essence: to attempt to live as if one were not *libre*. Although Sartrean characters attempt to escape their *liberté* in order to rid themselves of its burden, they find themselves to be equally burdened by their *mauvaise foi*. The lesson that Sartre seems to teach through these characters is that man may as well accept the burden of *liberté* because there is no escape.

Sartre applies his existential theories to literature in *La Nausée* (1938), his first major novel, and *Le Mur* (1939), his collection of short stories. These literary writings, like *L'Être et le néant*, are also characterized by a text/world dialogue because they are a literary manifestation of the text/world dialogue of his existential theories.

Through the protagonist Antoine Roquentin in *La Nausée*, Sartre illustrates his existential theories of man, such as the notions of *liberté* and *mauvaise foi*. At first Roquentin does not understand that he is defined by his *liberté*. The novel is largely about his journey to this understanding. Recall that existential man must create his essence via his *liberté*: "l'essence de l'être humain est en suspens dans sa liberté." His life has no pre-determined, essential meaning. Rather, he creates his essence through his (free) choices and actions. The realization that his life has no essential meaning causes Roquentin to feel that he is "de trop": that his existence is superfluous. He needs to do something meaningful in order not to feel like he is just taking up space.

Roquentin does not feel *de trop* when he is involved in a project. The character Roquentin is writing a biography about an eighteenth-century figure, the Marquis de Rollebon: this is his project. The notion of "project" has an important role in Sartre's existential theories. In the chapter on existential psychoanalysis in *L'Être et le néant*, Sartre defines the existential project as that which allows the biographer to understand his subject: "nous découvrirons la personne dans le projet initial qui la constitue."¹⁰ Thus, man's identity, his *être*, is defined by this *projet initial*. *The projet* is discovered, not by

¹⁰ Sartre, *L'Être* 608.

the sum of actions and choices made by the subject, but by assessing “une signification qui la transcende.”¹¹ In other words, the biographer must find a meaning which goes beyond the parts and can thematically unify the whole. Roquentin, while involved in the project of writing about the Marquis de Rollebon, is involved in the process of creating his *être*.

Sartre also illustrates *mauvaise foi* via Roquentin. However, a single *projet* is temporary and does not define one’s essence. It does not relieve man of the responsibility of continuing, at every moment, to choose his *être*. Roquentin tries to cling to the project even though he realizes that it is no longer meaningful to him: “l’homme commence à m’ennuyer.” It is no longer the man that interests him, he says, but the book itself: “C’est au livre que je m’attache...”¹² In writing a book, any book, he feels that he justifies his life. But when this project no longer has meaning for him, it becomes a way of avoiding his *liberté*: at this point, he lives in *mauvaise foi*. Roquentin concludes in the final pages of the novel that Rollebon (or rather the projet of writing about Rollebon) could not justify his existence: “jamais un existant ne peut justifier l’existence d’un autre existant.”¹³ After this temporary project is over, Roquentin must again face the fact that his life has no essential meaning. His essence is still “en suspens dans sa liberté.” The *projet* of one’s *être* is not complete until death.

On one level, *Les Mots* is consistent with the theoretical writings in that Sartre’s notions of existentialism are present in the text. Like Antoine Roquentin in *La Nausée*, young Sartre experiences the existential *prise de conscience*: the realization that his life has no essential meaning: “je découvrais tout à coup que je comptais pour du beurre et j’avais honte de ma présence insolite dans ce monde en ordre.”¹⁴ This realization, the *prise de conscience*, is the point at which the Sartrean character begins to understand his

¹¹ Sartre, *L’Être* 609.

¹² Sartre, *La Nausée* (Paris: Gallimard, 1938) 29.

¹³ Sartre, *Nausée* 249.

¹⁴ Sartre, *Mots* 73.

liberté. He, like Roquentin, discovers that he must continually create his *être* through his choices. Also like Roquentin, Sartre finds a (temporary) escape from his feelings of superfluity (being *de trop*) in the project of writing-- *Les Mots*. Sartre also reaches a point when his *projet* no longer has meaning for him. It is time to move on to another project. In *Les Mots* young Sartre assigns himself the project of protecting the human race via the pen, a project which gives his life some meaning. By the end of *Les Mots*, he abandons this project: "Longtemps j'ai pris ma plume pour une épée, à présent je connais notre impuissance."¹⁵

La Nausée, like *L'Être et le néant*, is in dialogue with the world. Roquentin experiences the world in terms of Sartre's theories. Sartre's theories are existential: they describe the way that man experiences his existence in the world. Therefore, both texts maintain a link with the world. *Les Mots*, on the other hand, is a systematic dissolution of this link.

Sartre also illustrates his existential theories in his short stories collected under the title *Le Mur* (1939): "Le Mur," "La Chambre," "L'Érostrate," "L'Intimité," "L'Enfance d'un chef." In "Le Mur" Sartre uses the protagonist Pablo Ibbieta to illustrate man's essential *liberté*. Even in an extreme situation, such as being a prisoner of war, man is still *libre* and *responsible* for his choices. "Situation" is also a key Sartrean idea in *L'Être et le néant*. The world, in which man exercises his *liberté*, is his *situation*. Man "est immédiatement 'en situation'"; we does not appear "*d'abord* pour être jetés *ensuite* dans des entreprises."¹⁶ Man is necessarily "en situation" in the same way that he is necessarily *libre*. He cannot exist outside of a set of circumstances, outside of *situation*. Indeed, according to Sartre, it is *situation* which enables *liberté* to function. The situation provides "résistances" which "peuvent rendre la fin projetée irréalisable." If there were no obstacles to deal with, existential *liberté* would have no place. If all were

¹⁵ Sartre, *Mots* 205.

¹⁶ Sartre, *L'Être* 74.

determined in advance, there would be no place for *liberté* because man would have no say in “la fin projetée.” *Situation* and *liberté* necessarily coexist in the Sartrean schema: “L’homme ne rencontre d’obstacle que dans le champs de sa liberté.”¹⁷

Pablo Ibbieta’s *situation* is described here. He is a prisoner during the Spanish Revolution. He expects to be shot to death by his captors. When asked where the revolutionary Ramon Gris is hiding, Ibbieta lies: he says that Ramon is hiding in a cemetery, when he actually believes that he is hiding at his cousin’s home. Ibbieta chooses to protect Ramon by lying to his captors. There is no choice that is clearly right or wrong. If there were, then *liberté* would cease to function. A clear choice is like a pre-determined choice. There are no pre-determined choices in Sartre’s world. There is no higher authority, such as God, that tells man what to do. Ibbieta must make a choice within the context of his *situation*. He is condemned to his *liberté*; he can not rely on someone else to make his choices for him. At the same time, the *situation* provides the necessary “résistances” for the functioning of his *liberté*. The notion of *situation* is appropriately existential in that it is about man’s existence (in the world). Like Sartre’s existential theories in general, his notion of *situation* is in dialogue with the world.

Ibbieta ponders whether it right to risk his own life (by lying to his captors) for this acquaintance Ramon instead of trying to save himself? After all, he has loved ones hoping for his safe return. Just before Ibbieta is to be shot, his captors say that he will be spared since he told them the truth about Ramon: they found him in the cemetery. Apparently, Ramon had changed hiding places: he actually was in the cemetery, which makes Pablo’s lie (accidentally) the truth. This scene illustrates that even though there is no clear right or wrong choice and the choice may not lead to the desired result, Ibbieta is still *libre* and *responsable* for his choice. Even extreme *situations* do not pardon man

¹⁷ Sartre, *L’Être* 533.

from his essential *liberté*. Rather, they provide the field in which man exercises his *liberté*.

Sartre illustrates *mauvaise foi* through the fictional characters in his short stories. In "La Chambre," Sartre's second short story in the *Mur* collection, the characters choose to live in rooms "chambres" rather than in the world. These characters illustrate, in Sartrean terms, man's desire to avoid the responsibility of his *liberté*. In attempting to avoid their *liberté*, these characters live in *mauvaise foi*. Madame Darbédat has an unknown illness and is bedridden. Her husband comes into the room to wait on her daily. Instead of wishing that she would get well, Madame Darbédat seems to actually prefer living in the room. She enjoys being waited on, taking medicines, and reading in bed. Her preference for the room comes from her desire not to have to choose and act in the world: the desire to avoid the responsibility of her *liberté*.

Their daughter Ève also lives in *mauvaise foi*, attempting, like the mother, to escape her *liberté*. She also lives only in a room, never going out into the world. Her husband Pierre has some type of degenerative disease. He no longer even knows Ève's name. Although she knows that he will only get worse and worse, she refuses to put him in a home. Monsieur Darbédat pleads with her regularly to no avail. It seems that, like her mother, she prefers a life in which she is bound to a room/a "chambre": in her mother's case because of her illness, in her case because of her husband Pierre's illness. The choice to try to avoid one's *liberté* /to live in *mauvaise foi* is still a choice. Thus, these characters have not succeeded in avoiding their *liberté* by locking themselves up away from the world. As Sartre says in *L'Être et le néant*, *liberté* precedes the essence of man; there is no escape.

Lucien Fleurier, in "L'Enfance d'un chef," is also used to illustrate *mauvaise foi*. At a party he is introduced to a boy who he knows is Jewish. He feels rage that his friends invited a Jewish boy and that they insisted upon introducing them when they know how he feels about Jewish people. He says that he cannot help that he feels hatred

toward the Jewish boy: “c’est plus fort que moi, je ne peux pas les toucher, c’est physique, j’ai l’impression qu’ils ont des écailles sur les mains.”¹⁸ This is an illustration of *mauvaise foi* because Lucien tries to blame his hatred on uncontrollable forces “c’est plus fort que moi,” “c’est physique.” As illustrated through the prisoner of war Pablo Ibbieta (“Le Mur”) existential man is always responsible and cannot pretend that forces beyond his control direct his choices and actions. In avoiding his free choice to *not* hate the Jewish boy, Lucien avoids his *liberté*: this is *mauvaise foi*. In *L’Être et le néant* Sartre rejects the idea that man is not responsible when he is carried away, so to speak, by his emotions or influenced by something “beyond his control.” In the section entitled “La Psychanalyse existentielle,” he rejects the psychoanalytical notion that man is defined (and controlled) by “l’intersection de lois abstraites et universelles.”¹⁹ The idea that man is defined and controlled by some essential qualities opposes Sartre’s idea that man is defined by his essential *liberté*. Man is not *libre* if he is defined and controlled by forces beyond his control. Instead, his essence “est en suspens dans sa liberté.” It is through his *liberté* that his essence is formed.

In each of these literary texts, Sartre applies his existential theories to his characters. Because the theories are about man’s existence in the world, the text/world dialogue is maintained. Regardless of the fact that the characters are fictional--do not actually exist in the world--they still illustrate man in the world. Therefore, *Les Mots* cannot be considered consistent with these writings. *Les Mots* is, instead, an abandonment of a text/world dialogue.

Included in this category of writings are other theoretical works which are closely related to *L’Être et le néant*. *La Transcendance de l’ego* (1936) is a prequel to *L’Être et le néant* and *L’Imagination* (1936) and *L’Imaginaire: psychologie phénoménologique de l’imagination* (1940) are philosophical texts in which Sartre addresses the role of the

¹⁸ Sartre, “L’Enfance d’un chef,” *Le Mur*, (Paris: Gallimard, 1939) 239.

¹⁹ Sartre, *L’Être* 603

imagination as it relates to *liberté* and *mauvaise foi*. Imagination can serve either *mauvaise foi*/bad faith or good faith. It is used in bad faith when it is a way to avoid the world, when it is an avoidance of one's existential *liberté*. The world that one escapes to is called the "antiworld" where existential freedom does not exist.²⁰ Imagination may also be used in good faith when it is simply a way to deal with reality, an exercise of one's *liberté*. (The role of the imagination will be discussed in more detail in the following chapter as it relates to *Les Mots* and the biographies.)

L'Être et le néant, the literary applications of *L'Être et le néant*, and the related theoretical writings' center is Sartre's existentialism. Existentialism is about existence: man's experience in the world. Thus, these writings are linked to the world: they are in dialogue with the world.

Littérature engagée

The writings associated with *littérature engagée* are theoretically defined in *Qu'est-ce que la littérature?* (1948). As explained earlier in this chapter, *littérature engagée* is literature which is involved (*engagé*) in contemporary problems in the world. The text/world dialogue of *littérature engagée* is evident in this definition. In *Les Mots* Sartre systematically dissolves the link between his autobiography and the world. This topic is elaborated in detail in subsequent chapters and has been illustrated briefly in this chapter. In this section, the writings--both literary and theoretical--which exemplify Sartre's *littérature engagée* are discussed. A close link between the text and the world defines these writings.

Sartre produces *littérature engagée* in his collection of novels entitled *Les Chemins de la liberté* (1945-1949): *L'Âge de raison* (1945) *Le Sursis* (1945) *La Mort dans l'âme* (1949) and an unfinished fourth volume called *La Dernière Chance*. (A section of this volume is published as "Drôle d'amitié.") *L'Âge de raison* is the least

²⁰ Sartre, *L'Imaginaire: psychologie phénoménologique de l'imagination* (Paris: Gallimard, 1940) 175.

clearly *engagé* volume of the tetralogy. The latter three texts revolve around World War II. But the characters in *L'Âge de raison* illustrate the importance of *engagement* and link *engagement* to Sartre's existential theories. The protagonist Mathieu Delarue is a philosophy professor. He is a man of ideas, not action. Delarue is contrasted to Brunet, who, on the other hand, is a man of action. He is in the Communist Party. The character of Brunet is *engagé* in the world, while Mathieu is not. Brunet unsuccessfully tries to convince Mathieu to join the Communist Party. Brunet explains to Mathieu what Sartrean *liberté* is: "la liberté c'est s'engager."²¹ The title "L'Âge de raison" indicates a "coming of age," which in Sartrean terms means that Mathieu matures intellectually to the point that he understands *liberté*.

Through the characters Brunet and Mathieu, Sartre connects his existential theories--founded upon man's essential *liberté*--to *engagement*. To embrace one's *liberté* is to "s'engager" in contemporary problems in society. Sartre's *littérature engagée* is consistent with, and a continuation of, his existential theories as defined in *L'Être et le néant*. The relation between *liberté* and *engagement* is also established by Sartre in *Qu'est-ce que la littérature?* He says, "l'écrivain, l'homme libre s'adressant à des hommes libres, n'a qu'un seul sujet: la liberté."²² The subject of *littérature engagée* is *liberté* in that *engagement* is an exercise of one's existential *liberté*. Both the writer, *l'écrivain engagé*, and the reader, *l'homme libre* are called upon to embrace their *liberté* vis-à-vis *littérature engagée*. Sartre's *littérature engagée* and existential theories are also related in that they both involve a link between the text and the world. Indeed, as stated at the beginning of this chapter, all of Sartre's writings are related in that they are characterized by a text/world dialogue. The second novel in the tetralogy is a clearer example of literary *engagement*.

²¹ Sartre, *L'Âge de raison*, 1945, in *Oeuvres romanesques* (Paris: Pléiade, 1981) 521.

²² Sartre, *Qu'est-ce que* 112.

Le Sursis takes place in 1938 in the midst of Hitler's war threats and the temporary delay effected by Chamberlain's offer to give him parts of Czechoslovakia. The text is *engagé* in a contemporary situation in the world. The story opens right in the midst of a major historical moment, surely fresh in readers' minds. (It is published in 1945, just after the end of World War II.):

Seize heures trente à Berlin, quinze heures trente à Londres. L'hôtel s'ennuyait sur sa colline, désert et solennel, avec un vieillard dedans. À Angoulême, à Marseille, à Gand, à Pouvres, ils pensaient: 'Que fait-il? Il est plus de trois heures, pourquoi ne descend-il pas?'²³

The world is waiting for the news as to whether or not there will be a war. Hitler and Chamberlain are discussing the fate of the world in the hotel. Someone in the street yells "Vive Hitler!"

In the third volume *La Mort dans l'âme*, World War II is in progress. In the fourth, unfinished volume published as "Drôle d'amitié," the Germans occupy France. In each case the text is linked to a contemporary issue in the world, in this case the phases of World War II. As examples of *littérature engagée*, the novels are *engagé* in the world for a purpose: to serve as a mirror of contemporary issues for the readers, in the hopes of inspiring action.

Unlike these examples of *littérature engagée*, *Les Mots* is not *engagé* in a contemporary issue in the world. Compared to *littérature engagée*, *Les Mots* would seem a rather narcissistic enterprise. As autobiographer Sartre is only worried about himself and his own issues, not problems in the world. Yet, it is not accurate to say that *Les Mots* is really about Sartre at all since he tells the reader that the text is "faux."

Sartre also applies his theories of literary *engagement* to his plays, including *Les Mouches* (1943), *Huis clos* (1944), *Morts sans Sépulture* (1946), and *Les Séquestrés d'Altona* (1959), to name a few. Sartre outlines *littérature engagée* in *Qu'est-ce que la*

²³ Sartre, *Le Sursis*, 1945, in *Oeuvres romanesques* 733

littérature?; he outlines his theater *engage* in *Un Théâtre de situations* (1947). In *Un Théâtre de situations* Sartre says the following: "C'est à travers les situations dans son théâtre que chaque époque saisit la situation humaine et les énigmes que la liberté humaine doit affronter."²⁴ Like *littérature engagée* Sartre's theater *de situations* is to be involved in contemporary issues, "la situation humaine" of "chaque époque." Like *littérature engagée* theater is to serve as a mirror of contemporary issues in order to inspire action, in order to help man confront the problems "les énigmes" of his time. The link between the text and the world of *littérature engagée* is continued in his theater.

Les Mouches (1943) is an example of Sartre's engaged theater. It was produced in Paris during the German occupation, Sartre addresses contemporary issues in France during this time. Although Sartre bases the play on a Greek myth (the legend of Orestes) in order to evade German censorship, the audience is surely aware that the play addresses their present situation--the German occupation. The Vichy government had told the French that the defeat of 1940 was a just punishment for their immoral ways of life during the inter-war years. The Vichy regime's propaganda of guilt was an attempt to retain power over the French. Likewise, in the *Les Mouches*, King Égisthe and Queen Clytemnèstre lie to the people of Argos, telling them that they are guilty of not preventing the murder of the previous king. Because the people believe the lies of the King and Queen, they are paralyzed by guilt and do nothing to change their miserable situation under the current authorities. The people of Argos are not *engagé*. They do nothing. The audience should understand that they must not be paralyzed by their guilt. They must also be *engagé* in their *situation*, like the people of Argos, and reject the Vichy government. They must deal with the problems that their "liberté humaine" confronts. The message of Sartre's literature and plays is to encourage the readers to embrace their *liberté*.

²⁴ Sartre, *Un Théâtre de situations* (Paris: Gallimard, 1973) 4.

Morts sans sépulture (1946) provides another example of Sartre's use of theater to engage in contemporary issues in the world. The protagonist Frantz is fighting a war and faces problems that the soldiers of World War II certainly faced as well. Frantz tries to avoid the responsibility of the crime of torturing an innocent by pleading that he was just following orders: "Nous avons obéi aux ordres...Où est la faute?...Je n'ai fait qu'obéir...Je suis innocent! Innocent! Innocent!"²⁵ He killed civilians and burnt their village. But because he was following orders, he wants to place the responsibility of his actions upon his superiors. For Sartre, there is never a time when man is not *responsable* for his actions; this is because, as discussed earlier, man is always *libre* and, therefore, always *responsable*. Even in an extreme case, like being ordered to torture innocent civilians during a war, man is still *libre* and *responsable*. In this play Sartre reiterates the message illustrated through Pablo Ibbieta in "Le Mur." Even though Ibbieta was a prison of war, he was still *libre* and *responsable*. By engaging the play in a dialogue with the world, Sartre reflects the audience's contemporary issues, their "situation humaine" to them. In doing so, he encourages them to be *engagé* in these issues. Thus, Sartre's notion of *engagement* continues to be present in his plays. Consequently, the dialogue between the text and the world also continues to be present.

In this second category of Sartre's writings, centered around his literary *engagement*, the text, be it novel or play, is linked to (*engagé* in) contemporary issues in the world. Thus, *Les Mots* does not fit into this category either: *Les Mots* is a departure from the text/world dialogue characteristic of the Sartrean oeuvre.

Sartre's literary criticisms collected in *Critiques littéraires* (1947) reflect his theories for *littérature engagée*. For that reason, they are considered part of this category. Sartre applies his *littérature engagée* to literary criticism when, for example, he criticizes François Mauriac for playing the role of judge without engaging himself in

²⁵ Sartre, *Théâtre* 190.

the events and characters of his novel *La Fin de la Nuit*: "Le roman est action, et le romancier n'a pas le droit d'abandonner le terrain de la bataille et de s'installer commodément sur un tertre pour juger."²⁶ Mauriac, in playing the judge, places himself outside of the terrain of action, "le terrain de la bataille," thus excusing himself from *engagement*. The *écrivain engagé*, on the other hand, places himself or herself in the battlefield by being involved in contemporary problems via the pen.

Sartre also advocates literary *engagement* in a preface to *L'Anthologie de la nouvelle poésie nègre et malgache de la langue française* entitled "Orphée noir" (1948) and in a preface to Frantz Fanon's *Les Damnés de la terre* (1961). In "Orphée noir" Sartre calls the oppressed Caribbeans' and Africans' use of poetry to express their plight "la seule grande poésie révolutionnaire" of the times.²⁷ These poets are *écrivains engagés* in that they use literature to address contemporary issues, namely their oppression at the hands of the French.

In other non-literary writings, Sartre continues to advocate *engagement*: "Réflexions sur la question juive" (1946), "L'Ésquisse d'une théorie des émotions" (1943), and *On a raison de se révolter* (1974). Since Sartre uses the above-mentioned texts to promote *engagement*, as he does in *Qu'est-ce que la littérature*, they are included in this category. The difference is that in these particular texts Sartre does not promote literary *engagement*, but rather *engagement* in the world: action. In "Réflexions sur la question juive" Sartre addresses the contemporary problem of anti-semitism, which was made an unavoidable issue by World War II. Continuing the project of the *écrivain engagé*, Sartre is involved, via the pen, in the problems in society. Sartre suggests that even in a society without Jews, people would find someone to hate. Philip Thody explains that the reason for this is rooted in the characteristics of Sartre's existential man:

²⁶ Sartre, *Situations, I* (Paris: Gallimard, 1947) 41.

²⁷ Sartre, "Orphée noir" Preface. *L'Anthologie de la nouvelle poésie nègre et malgache de langue française* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1969) xi-xii.

man, as *pour-soi*, is in a state of constant change and can never coincide with himself. This “inconsistance profonde” causes him discomfort, even fear. This fear is intensified, Thody explains, to the point of hatred when the Jewish people, or any other group, or even any significant historical event, causes man to reflect on himself.²⁸

The problem of anti-semitism is also addressed in “L’Ésquisse d’une théorie des émotions” (1943). Sartre argues that anger, for example in anti-Semitism, is an emotional reaction. He argues that man resorts to emotional reactions, such as anger, when he does not know how to rationally solve a problem. Regardless of the reason for the anger, for Sartre, man is always *libre* and *responsable* for his choices and actions. Again, in this essay, Sartre involves his writing in contemporary issues in the world.

Finally, in *On a raison de se révolter* (a published set of interviews) Sartre discusses the necessity of revolution. This idea is directly related to *littérature engagée*. Literary *engagement* is intended to lead to action, specifically actions which would effect needed changes in society. Actions intended to effect changes in society are revolutionary. Although a non-literary text, *On a raison* is a continuation of Sartre’s ideas in *Qu’est-ce que la littérature?* in that it is an advocacy of *engagement* via the pen. *Les Mots*, on the contrary, is a renunciation of *engagement* via the pen.

(Auto)biographical Writings

The third category of Sartre’s oeuvre is composed of his (auto)biographical writings. Like the previous two categories, this category of writings includes a theoretical work around which literary texts are produced. Sartre’s (auto)biographical works are defined by his theories for a biographical method in *Critique de la raison dialectique, I* (1960), *II* (1985), and *Question de la méthode* (introduction to *Critique, I*, 1960). He produces literary texts--biographies--which reflect his theories: *Baudelaire* (1946), *Saint Genet: comédien et martyr* (1952), and *L’Idiot de la famille, I-III* (1970-

²⁸ Philip Thody, *Jean-Paul Sartre* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1992) 33.

1974). Sartre applies his biographical method also to his autobiographical works: *Les Mots* and *Carnets de la drôle de guerre* (1939-1941), an autobiographical journal. It would seem that *Les Mots* fits best into this category since autobiography is a genre closely related to biography. But the text/world dialogue that defines the biography and the traditional autobiography is not applicable to *Les Mots*. *Les Mots* is a rejection of the link between the text and the world.

Additional discussion of Sartre's biographical method will take place in the following chapter in which *Les Mots* is compared in more detail to Sartre's biographies. Here, an overview of Sartre's biographical method and its application to the biographies and the autobiographies will be presented. In both theory and application, the biographical writings maintain the text/world dialogue characteristic of the Sartrean oeuvre. The argument advanced in this dissertation--that *Les Mots* is an abandonment of the text/world dialogue advocated with *littérature engagée*--is further supported by contrasting *Les Mots* to Sartre's biographical writings. As is the case in the two previous categories, *Les Mots* is a departure from Sartre's biographical writings because they are also characterized by a text/world dialogue.

In *Critique de la raison dialectique, I, Question de la méthode, and Critique de la raison dialectique, II* Sartre outlines his biographical method. His outline begins with the introduction to volume one of *Critique: Question de la méthode*. In this text, Sartre addresses the question of a viable biographical method. He concludes that it is a mersion of a collective Marxist view of man and his own individuated existential view of man. Douglas Collins in *Sartre as Biographer* (1980) explains that Sartre found the Marxist view of the subject problematic and sought a solution to its deficiencies. The Marxist view of man is that he is understood via a comprehension of his place in history. For Sartre this view does not recognize man's individual *liberté*: his ability to make choices

outside of the influences of history.²⁹ So Sartre injects existential *liberté* into the equation. In order to understand man, Sartre thinks that he must be considered in both ways: as a collective subject, limited by his position in history, and as an individual subject, defined by existential *liberté*. In other words, man is both limited by and free to transcend his limitations. According to Sartre, to understand the subject of a biography, the biographer must understand both facets of the subject's life.

In *Critique de la raison dialectique, I* the way that the subject chooses to deal with his or her historical circumstances is key to the understanding of the subject, according to Sartre. Sartre calls this early choice “le choix originel.” He first explains his view of the subject in Part IV: Chapter II: Section I “La psychanalyse existentielle” in *L'Être et le néant*. According to Sartre, when trying to assess the subject's *choix originel*, “Il s'agit...de retrouver, sous des aspects partiels et incomplets du sujet, la véritable concrétion qui ne peut être que la totalité de son élan vers l'être...”³⁰ The *choix originel* is found by finding a common theme which unites the various aspects of the subject into a *totalité*. It is the project of the “être du pour-soi” says Sartre.³¹ The project of the *pour-soi* is the formation of the *être* via a lifetime of choices and actions. Sartre's notion of a *choix originel* is simply a unifying description of these various choices and actions. The understanding of the subject results from assessing the theme which unites the summation of his or her choices and actions. Sartre describes the motion of one's life as follows: “Une vie se déroule en spirales; elle repasse toujours par les mêmes points mais à des niveaux différents d'intégration et de complexité.”³² A life is not understood by the summation of one's actions, but by an examination of the “mêmes points” which one passes again and again. This repetition of points reveals a thematic unity. Regardless of the details of Sartre's biographical method, a text/world dialogue is

²⁹ Douglas Collins, *Sartre as Biographer* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1980) 5.

³⁰ Sartre, *L'Être* 608.

³¹ Sartre, *L'Être* 610.

³² Sartre, *Critique de la raison dialectique, I* (Paris: Gallimard, 1960) 71.

involved. The theories are linked to the world: in this case, the historical facts of a man's life. Sartre does not suggest that the biographer create a fictional work, but rather that he or she rely on events which actually took place (in the world).

According to Sartre's biographical method, as well as to traditional notions of the biography, the portrait of the subject is grounded in the actual, historical circumstances of the subject. The text is connected to the world--to the historical rather than the fictional. Sartre's evaluation of the subject's *choix originel* also does not come from the imagination of the biographer; rather, it is grounded in the historical circumstances of the subject. The *choix originel* is discovered through an understanding of the subject's choice as to how to deal with his or her historical circumstances. In *Baudelaire*, for example, Sartre examines defining moments in Baudelaire's childhood: rejection by his mother, rejection by his stepfather, and isolation from being sent off to boarding school. Sartre says that Baudelaire chooses to deal with these early, painful experiences by becoming the source of his own rejection, thus displacing the power of his mother and stepfather to reject him: this is his *choix originel*. The "poète maudit" that Baudelaire is known as is understood in terms of his *choix originel* and early events in his life. The resulting text--the biography--retains a text/world dialogue. The text is connected to the world of Baudelaire's life, not to the imagination of the biographer. The same text/world dialogue is retained in the other biographies as Sartre reveals what he calls the subject's *choix originel*. Sartre describes Jean Genet's *choix originel* in *Saint Genet: comédien et martyr* as being the result of an early experience in which his caretakers labeled him a thief. Like Baudelaire, Genet chooses to deal with this early, defining moment by displacing the power of the adults to hurt him: he chooses to label himself a thief by becoming a thief. Gustave Flaubert deals with the early, painful experience of rejection by his parents by turning to the world of the imaginary, according to Sartre in *L'Idiot de la famille, I-III*. In each case Sartre, as biographer, connects the text to actual, historical

events in the world, thus retaining the text/world dialogue characteristic of his other writings.

Sartre applies his biographical method also to *Les Mots*; however, *Les Mots* does not fit into this third category because of its rejection of a text/world dialogue. Sartre's *choix originel* in *Les Mots* is the choice to become a writer. It must be understood within the context of his particular historical circumstances. For example, his grandfather is the main influence on young Sartre. He is a strong advocate of reading the classics and learning about culture. As a result of the influence of his grandfather, Sartre chooses to pursue a literary career. Young Sartre is surrounded by doting adults. As a result, young Sartre views himself as a performer for their applause and craves an audience. In childhood, as well as in adulthood, Sartre would show off his literary abilities for applause. Sartre chose to become a heroic writer, a writer who would save the world. The desire to be a hero can be traced in *Les Mots* to his desire for praise and his admiration of the heroes in cloak-and-dagger stories. Like the hero who saves the damsel in distress, Sartre wants to perform heroic deeds in order to attain glory. The choice to become a hero/writer who would save man is evident in his *littérature engagée*. The role of *écrivain engagé* embodies his desire for applause by showing off his literary abilities, and for glory by playing the role of hero.

However, the choice to become an *écrivain engagé* is abandoned in *Les Mots*. So what becomes of his *choix originel*? For the *pour-soi* change is at every moment a possibility. In trying to find a subject's *choix originel*, Sartre reminds psychoanalysts and biographers that they must never lose sight of the fact that "le choix est vivant et, par suite, peut toujours être révoqué par le sujet étudié."³³ The comprehension of the *choix originel*, he says, must allow for these changes. So is his *choix originel* to become an *écrivain engagé* still applicable if one were to write a biography about Sartre? Yes and

³³ Sartre, *L'Être* 618.

no. Yes, in that Sartre continues to be *engagé* via the pen after *Les Mots*. No, in that in *Les Mots* Sartre abandons the notion that he can save man via the pen. How can this (if only temporary) change indicated by *Les Mots* be assimilated into an overall thematic unity: Sartre's *totalité*? The attempt to answer this question is, in part, the task of this dissertation: to attempt to understand the significance of Sartre's abandonment of *littérature engagée* in *Les Mots* in terms of the Sartrean oeuvre both before and after the publication of *Les Mots*. In the final chapter possible ways to absorb Sartre's changed view of literature in *Les Mots* will be offered in relation to engaged writings published after *Les Mots* and to the identity of Sartre as *écrivain engagé*. As seen in the above paragraphs, *Les Mots* may be discussed as another application of Sartre's biographical method. Nonetheless, *Les Mots* does not retain the text/world dialogue of Sartre's biographical theories and his biographies. Therefore, it does not fit into this category either.

Sartre, in his other autobiographical text, *Carnets de la drôle de guerre* (1983), does maintain the traditional connection between his autobiography and the world. He wrote this text in journal form between 1939 and 1941 while serving in the military during World War II. The text/world dialogue is retained in the sense that Sartre does not systematically dissolve the traditional link between an autobiography and the world as he does in *Les Mots*. Theorists like Roland Barthes would disagree that any autobiography can really be considered a dialogue between the text and the world. As mentioned earlier, he believes that in the field of the subject "il n'y a pas de référent." When an author is writing about himself or herself, the notion of a text/world dialogue is, for Barthes, not possible.

The three categories of Sartre's writings discussed in this chapter--theoretical, *littérature engagée*, and (auto)biographical--share in common a link between the text and the world. The theoretical writings are Sartre's existential theories from *L'Être et le néant*, which address man's existence (i.e., his experience in the world). The application

of these theories to *La Nausée* and the short stories of “Le Mur” continue the text/world link inherent in existentialism. Sartre’s *littérature engagée* in *Qu’est-ce que la littérature?* is defined as a text/world dialogue in that the text must be *engagé* in contemporary issues in the world. The literary applications of *littérature engagée* reflect the theories’ insistence upon a relation between the text and the world. The (auto)biographical category would seem the most logical category to accommodate *Les Mots* since the biography and the autobiography are closely related genres. Both genres, traditionally speaking, involve a text/world dialogue in that the text is linked to the life of a real subject. Yet *Les Mots* does not fit into any of the three categories because the three categories of Sartre’s writings are defined by a text/world dialogue; *Les Mots* is an abandonment of the link between the text and the world.

In the next chapter existing criticism about *Les Mots* will be examined in order to show that the central argument of this dissertation has not been previously developed.

Chapter 2: *Qu'est-ce que 'Les Mots'?* Summary and Criticism

Summary

In *Les Mots* Sartre (1905-1980) tells the story of his early childhood from the ages of four to eleven. His belief in literature's ability to save man is grounded in the experiences of these early years. His maternal grandfather Charles Schweitzer, with whom he and his widowed mother Anne-Marie Sartre live, instills in young Sartre a reverence for culture, specifically the classics of literature. For Sartre, this reverence for literature leads to what he calls his *délire*.

His *délire*, Sartre reveals, results not only from his reverence for literature, but also from his inability to separate fiction from reality. He confuses reality with the fictional reality he finds in books; young Sartre experiences the world through books:

C'est dans les livres que j'ai rencontré l'univers: assimilé, classé, étiqueté, pensé, redoutable encore; et j'ai confondu le désordre de mes expériences livresques avec le cours hasardeux des événements réels. De là vint cet idéalisme dont j'ai mis trente ans à me défaire.³⁴

The confusion of the well-ordered universe that he finds in books and the random events of reality combined with his reverence for literature contributes to an idealistic view of literature. This idealism, he says, is also what led to the mistaken view that he could save man via the pen. As suggested in the above quotation, Sartre considers this idealism an error, a problem that he has "mis trente ans à [s]e défaire."

Sartre's description of his role as writer in *Qu'est-ce que la littérature?* parallels his childhood description in *Les Mots*. In *Qu'est-ce que la littérature?* he describes the project of the *écrivain engagé*: "L'écrivain 'engagé' sait que la parole est action; il sait que dévoiler c'est changer et qu'on ne peut dévoiler qu'en projetant de changer."³⁵ The writer's role is to use literature to engender action. By revealing the world to their readers, writers can inspire actions which lead to change. In other words, the writer is

³⁴ Sartre, *Mots* 44.

³⁵ Sartre, *Qu'est-ce que* 73.

able to influence (and even create) reality with literature. This notion is already present in young Sartre who believes that literature and reality are one and the same. If this is true, then he, as writer, can write (create) reality with literature. The belief in this possibility, to be able to “prendre les choses, vivantes, au piège des phrases,” he says, is his most persistent illusion.³⁶ At the age of eight, he has already seen this project as his destiny: “je me lançai dans une opération simple et démente qui dévia le cours de ma vie: je refilai à l’écrivain les pouvoirs sacrés du héros.”³⁷ For young Sartre the hero/writer saves the world via literature; for the adult Sartre it is the *écrivain engagé* who does this.

Les Mots is both the presentation of the roots of *littérature engagée* and the denunciation of the idealistic project. Thus, *Les Mots* is, on one level, an apology for Sartre’s idealistic view of literature. The text allows an illustration of the paths that led to his mistaken beliefs in literature, which, as quoted above (De là vint cet idéalisme dont j’ai mis trente ans à me défaire) it took him thirty years to get rid of. The denunciation of *littérature engagée* is most clear in the concluding pages: “Longtemps j’ai pris ma plume pour une épée, à présent je connais notre impuissance.”³⁸ The Sartre that advocated *littérature engagée* believed that he could, like the heroes in the cloak-and-dagger novels that he loved, save the world with his metaphorical sword (his pen). Like St. Augustine’s *Confessions*, *Les Mots* is Sartre’s confession, written from the vantage point of the adult who now understands the errors of his past. St. Augustine presents and denounces his sinful ways as a young adult: Sartre presents and denounces his idealistic view of literature.

Young Sartre (nicknamed Poulou) not only confuses reality and fiction as regards literature; he also confuses reality and fiction as regards his familial role. He spends so much time “playing at” being a grandson and a son that he eventually can no longer

³⁶ Sartre, *Mots* 149.

³⁷ Sartre, *Mots* 137.

³⁸ Sartre, *Mots* 205.

separate his *cabotinage* from reality. Sartre characterizes himself as an impostor, an actor. He says that as a child he was always playing roles to impress the adults: “[u]n seul mandat: plaire; tout pour la montre.”³⁹ The everyday routines of a young child and his caretakers--having his shoes put on, being dressed and undressed, brushed and washed--were, for Sartre, opportunities to play his role as the darling grandson and son. As he says, “je ne connais rien de plus amusant que de jouer à être sage.”⁴⁰ He also enjoys playing his role as young writer-to-be. He pretends to read a text called *Le Chinois en Chine* before he knows the alphabet. He pretends to have been reading Corneille when he hears the adults coming to admire him: “le jeu continuait.”⁴¹

His desire for praise maintains his desire to continue acting, to continue playing his role in the “comédie familiale.” But, his immersion in his imagination has its cost: the constant play-acting leads him so far into his imaginary world that he loses touch with reality: “Comment pourrais-je fixer--après tant d’années surtout--l’insaisissable et mouvante frontière qui sépare la possession du cabotinage.”⁴² Like his confusion of reality and fiction regarding literature, his confusion of reality and fiction in his familial role is a symptom of the illness he calls his *délire*.

His “illness” supports his idealistic view of literature, embodied in *littérature engagée*. So when Sartre concludes that he is finally cured of his illness, “guéri d’une longue, amère et douce folie,” he is also saying that he is finally cured of his idealistic view of literature: “Longtemps j’ai pris ma plume pour une épée, à présent je connais notre impuissance.”⁴³ Whether or not Sartre is truly cured of his idealism is debatable; this issue will be addressed later. Nonetheless, Sartre tells the story of his “délire” as a sort of explanation (or apology) for his past errors, of which he is now cured.

³⁹ Sartre, *Mots* 29.

⁴⁰ Sartre, *Mots* 24.

⁴¹ Sartre, *Mots* 60.

⁴² Sartre, *Mots* 59.

⁴³ Sartre, *Mots* 205.

On another level *Les Mots* is an autobiographical illustration of Sartre's existential theories. Like Roquentin in *La Nausée*, the child Sartre experiences life in existential terms. At first he unknowingly lives in the existential state of *mauvaise foi* because he does not take full responsibility for his own choices and actions. He lives for the approval of others, the adults: "Ma vérité, mon caractère et mon nom étaient aux mains des adultes."⁴⁴ Young Sartre then experiences the existential *prise de conscience*: "je découvrais tout à coup que je comptais pour du beurre et j'avais honte de ma présence insolite dans ce monde en ordre."⁴⁵ In Sartrean terms, the *prise de conscience* is the realization that one is *de trop*; Sartre's existence, he realizes, is superfluous. This realization makes him feel ashamed of his existence--the existential *nausée*: "j'avais honte de ma présence insolite."

According to Sartrean existentialism, man is always *de trop* because he is always essentially *libre*. Man must give meaning to his existence by accepting his *liberté* which allows him to choose to embark upon meaningful projects in order to create his *être*. The writing vocation becomes this meaningful project for Sartre. It allows him to feel necessary, rather than superfluous. Or, as he says, "l'entreprise folle d'écrire" allows him to "[s]e faire pardonner [s]on existence."⁴⁶ So, it would seem, in choosing to become a writer, Sartre has found a remedy to his superfluity. Recall that the meaningful projects are only temporary remedies. Man's existential *liberté* is an ever-present burden: a feeling that Sartre calls *angoisse*.

The burden of existential *liberté* inspires the desire to exist as an object, an *en-soi*. The *en-soi* does not have the burdensome responsibility of constantly creating the *être* through every choice and action. Thus, in *Les Mots* Sartre desires to become a book. He imagines that his birth was a necessary evil to allow his transfiguration into a book. By

⁴⁴ Sartre, *Mots* 70.

⁴⁵ Sartre, *Mots* 73.

⁴⁶ Sartre, *Mots* 157.

writing, he imagines that he changes his body into a book: “Mes os sont de cuir et de carton, ma chair parcheminée sent la colle et le champignon.”⁴⁷

To reiterate the problem, according to Sartre’s theories, man can not reach the state of the *en-soi* until death. Hence, the desire to be unburdened of existential *liberté* also translates into a desire for death. Sartre also attempts this escape. He tries to live as if he were already dead: “je choisis pour avenir un passé de grand mort et j’essayai de vivre à l’envers.”⁴⁸ He thinks that if he chooses death first and then lives backwards, he is safe from the ever-present burden of his *liberté*. Of course, this attempt to escape his essential *liberté* also fails. In the concluding pages, after he gives up the project of being a writer who will save man, Sartre realizes that he is still *de trop*: “Je suis redevenu le voyageur sans billet.”⁴⁹ Reusing an earlier textual metaphor for his superfluity, the traveler without a ticket, he says that he again feels unnecessary. He can not escape his essential *liberté*. Although *Les Mots* does contain illustrations of existentialism, it is much more than that in the context of the Sartrean oeuvre, as argued in the previous chapter. It represents an abandonment of *littérature engagée* and a move toward *l’art pour l’art*.

Criticism

The argument of this dissertation is that *Les Mots* represents a departure from *littérature engagée* and a move toward *l’art pour l’art*. In the present chapter, existing criticism of *Les Mots* is compared and contrasted to the arguments set forth in this dissertation. First, the often-cited idea that *Les Mots* is a parody is shown to support the idea that Sartre has abandoned *littérature engagée*. (The polemic between *littérature engagée* and *l’art pour l’art* is clarified in chapter two.) Secondly, the self-contradictory (parodic) nature of *Les Mots*, or as Sartre calls it “un objet qui se conteste soi-même,” is

⁴⁷ Sartre, *Mots* 158.

⁴⁸ Sartre, *Mots* 162.

⁴⁹ Sartre, *Mots* 205.

shown to support the notion that it is a deconstructing text as argued in chapter five. Like its parodic nature, *Les Mots*' deconstructing nature is also inconsistent with the characteristics of *littérature engagée*. Then, the notion that *Les Mots* is Sartre's "adieu to literature" is considered. In this dissertation, his "adieu to literature" is a farewell to *littérature engagée*. Then the untraditional nature of Sartre's autobiography, noted by critics, is shown as further evidence of Sartre's interest in *l'art pour l'art*. Like the *Nouveaux Romanciers*, he experiments with a literary genre to create a new form of art, rather than simply to communicate a message. Finally, interpretations of *Les Mots* as a structuralist text are considered. As structuralist text *Les Mots* becomes a text/text dialogue--characteristic of *l'art pour l'art* instead of the text/world dialogue of *littérature engagée*. Generally speaking, existing criticism is not inconsistent with the notion that *Les Mots* represents a departure from *littérature engagée* toward *l'art pour l'art*. However, while this notion is suggested, it is never foregrounded and developed. The task of the present dissertation is to do just that: to illustrate that *Les Mots* embodies a changed view of literature for Sartre--from *littérature engagée* to *l'art pour l'art*.

Les Mots as Parody

Jacques Lecarme calls *Les Mots* an "autoparodie" because of what he sees as systematic irony in the text.⁵⁰ The text is a parody of itself, an "auto" parody. For example, on the one hand, Lecarme says, it is the story of a writer's vocation; on the other hand, it is a mockery of the writer's vocation. As parody, the text is a complication of meaning; it is a text which raises questions about itself. On the contrary, Sartre's *littérature engagée* is to communicate: "la fin du langage est de communiquer."⁵¹ Literature that is intended to communicate--*littérature engagée*--is inconsistent with a text like *Les Mots* in which Sartre complicates meaning via parody.

⁵⁰ Jacques Lecarme, "Les Mots de Sartre: un cas limite de l'autobiographie?" *Revue d'histoire littéraire de la France* LXXV (1975) 1058.

⁵¹ Sartre, *Qu'est-ce que* 72.

Denis Boak finds that *Les Mots* is filled with paradox and ambiguity: “Paradox and ambivalence--which can be redefined as self-contradiction--pervade every page.”⁵² In writing a parodic autobiography, Sartre questions and undermines the story at the same time that he tells it. The result is ambiguity, not communication. Effective communication is logically associated with clarity, not ambiguity.

Dominick LaCapra also sees *Les Mots* as parodic in nature. The function of parody in the text, he says, is contradictory in nature. On the one hand, it serves as an “instrument of ‘totalizing’ mastery” and, on the other hand, lends to a “playful self-questioning” that does not end in self-mastery.⁵³ Again, the parody serves to create contradictions and ambiguity. In LaCapra’s reading the project of mastery is questioned and undermined by the “playful self-questioning.” Like Lecarme’s examples of self-contradiction, LaCapra’s illustrate the undoing of communication: each assertion is contradicted leaving no clear message.

According to Sartre in *Qu’est-ce que la littérature?* prose is preferred to poetry because prose lends itself to communication. On the other hand, poetry is used to create an object of art: the poet is concerned whether or not the words “plaisent ou déplaisent en eux-mêmes.”⁵⁴ If the poet is concerned about aesthetics, then the “prosateur” is concerned whether or not the words “indiquent correctement une certaine chose du monde ou une certaine notion.”⁵⁵ While the “prosateur” uses language to communicate, the poet refuses, says Sartre, to use language as an instrument of communication. The poet, according to Sartre, considers words to be “choses” and not “signes.” Words as signs are connected to reality; words as objects (“mots-choses”) are not.⁵⁶ Like painting

⁵² Denis Boak, *Sartre: Les Mots* (London: Grant and Cutler Ltd., 1987) 75.

⁵³ Dominick La Capra, *A Preface to Sartre* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1978) 184.

⁵⁴ Sartre, *Qu’est-ce que?* 70.

⁵⁵ Sartre, *Qu’est-ce que?* 70.

⁵⁶ Sartre, *Qu’est-ce que?* 64.

and music, poetry, for Sartre, is not connected to anything exterior to itself. Therefore, prose is the preferred medium for his *littérature engagée*.

In relation to Sartre's discussion of prose and poetry, *Les Mots* seems more closely aligned with poetry. As parody, language in *Les Mots* is used to create internal contradictions, ambiguities, questions. Like poetry, as described by Sartre, the words in *Les Mots* are connected to each other rather than to anything exterior. Another way of saying that *Les Mots* is a more poetic use of literature (than *littérature engagée*) is to say that it is a more literary text: literariness being an aesthetic quality. When asked what makes a work more "literary" than another, Sartre says:

Par exemple, le style, on peut y travailler davantage; *Les Mots* sont très travaillés, ce sont parmi les phrases les plus travaillées que j'aie écrites. [...] Et j'y mettais du temps. Je voulais qu'il y ait des sous-entendus dans chaque phrase, un ou deux sous-entendus, par conséquent que ça frappe les gens à un niveau ou à un autre. Et puis je voulais présenter les choses, les gens, chacun d'une certaine manière. C'est très travaillé, *Les Mots*. [...] C'était plein de trucs, d'astuces, d'art d'écrire, presque de jeux de mots.⁵⁷

Thus, in Sartre's own words, *Les Mots* is full of internal relations and ambiguities: "sous-entendus," "trucs," "astuces," "art d'écrire," and "jeux de mots." The poetic or literary quality of *Les Mots* is inconsistent with *littérature engagée*, in which language should primarily serve to communicate certain things or notions in the world.

While the above critics' readings of the parodic nature of *Les Mots* support the theory of Sartre's abandonment of *littérature engagée*, other critics' readings, like Felicia Gordon's, do not. She suggests that Sartre's parodic strategy is a manifestation of his existential theories in *L'Être et le néant*. Referring to Sartre's theories in *L'Être et le néant*, she explains that *Les Mots* is parodic because for Sartre there are no *a priori* or essential structures regarding human nature or moral imperatives. There are, likewise, no literary forms that are justified or validated as essential forms. Therefore, Gordon says, any imitation of a form or genre is, in Sartrean terms, parodic. The imitation is done with

⁵⁷ Sartre, *La Cérémonie des adieux suivi de 'Entretiens avec Jean-Paul Sartre* (Paris: Gallimard, 1981) 276.

an awareness of the “provisional and inessential nature” of any given genre.⁵⁸ Parody in *Les Mots*, for Gordon, is only a continuation of Sartre’s existential writings, not a departure.

Like Gordon, Geneviève Idt reads the parody in *Les Mots* as an illustration of his existential theories. However, unlike Gordon, Idt does note the resulting ambiguity of parody. She refers to Sartre’s description of the text when he says “Je voulais que ce soit agaçant, ce livre....” Idt suggests that the reason that it is so irritating, in her words, so “fuyant, brillant, contradictoire,” is because Sartre’s notion of the subject is that of an “être en fuite.”⁵⁹ The Sartrean subject, the *pour-soi* of *L’Être et le néant*, is a subject that is never consistent with itself; it is always changing and fleeing from itself. Like the text, she says, the Sartrean subject is irritating because it is difficult to pin down. Thus, for Idt, the parodic nature and resulting ambiguity of *Les Mots* is consistent with the Sartrean *oeuvre*, not evidence of a departure as suggested in this dissertation.

Marjorie Grene would dispute that *Les Mots* is ambiguous at all. She suggests that in *Les Mots* Sartre writes as the philosopher, seeking to clarify, not to relish in ambiguity or lack of clarity. His relation to writing, she says, is always “reflective and philosophical” as evidenced in the superior and distanced position that he adopts vis-à-vis the world.⁶⁰ She notes as evidence the scene where Sartre is looking down from the sixth floor in Paris at the passersby and in scenes where Poulou is isolated from the other kids, always the detached observer. Grene’s reading, as well as Gordon’s and Idt’s, would place Sartre back on the side of engaged literature, or at least remove him from the side of pure art (*l’art pour l’art*). For Grene, *Les Mots* is characterized by clarity not ambiguity. Recall that clarity of message is characteristic of *littérature engagée*, not *l’art*

⁵⁸ Felicia Gordon, “A Parodic Strategy—Sartre’s *Les Mots*” 1984. in *Sartre*. Ed. Christina Howells. (New York: Longman, 1995) 169.

⁵⁹ Geneviève Idt, *Les Mots: une autocritique ‘en bel écrit’* (Paris: Belin, 2001) 8.

⁶⁰ Marjorie Grene, *Sartre*. 1971. (New York: New Viewpoints, 1973) 18.

pour l'art. For Gordon and Idt, the parodic and ambiguous nature of *Les Mots* is explained by Sartre's existential theories, not by a departure from *littérature engagée*.

As illustrated above, an argument can be made that *Les Mots* is not a departure from Sartre's past writings. *Les Mots*, according to many critics, illustrates Sartrean theories, as did his previous works of literature. But this assertion does not negate the argument that *Les Mots* is an abandonment of *littérature engagée*. It is not argued in this dissertation that Sartre has abandoned his existential theories. Indeed, as shown in the summary, his existential theories are clearly present in the text. In his autobiography Sartre managed to both be consistent with his past, (i.e., his existential theories) and depart from his past by creating a text which parallels the *l'art pour l'art* view of literature found in the autobiographies of the *Nouveaux Romanciers*. In effect Sartre has both remained consistent with his past and made a one-hundred-eighty-degree turn at the same time.

A Deconstructing Text: "Un objet qui se conteste soi-même"

Les Mots, as parody, is a text which deconstructs itself. A parody is double in nature: one side of the text is an imitation of the autobiographical project, the other side is a deconstruction (or parody) of the same; one side of the text is the story of Sartre's early childhood, the other side is a deconstruction (or parody) of the same. The parodic nature of *Les Mots*, as discussed above, also supports the argument in this dissertation that Sartre wrote a deconstructing text like the autobiographies of the *Nouveaux Romanciers*, who will be discussed in this dissertation. It is a text which, as Sartre says, "se conteste soi-même": "Le sens du style dans *Les Mots*, c'est que le livre est un adieu à la littérature: un objet qui se conteste soi-même doit être écrit le mieux possible."⁶¹

Although the deconstructing nature of *Les Mots* and the autobiographies of the *Nouveaux Romanciers* will be undertaken in chapter eight, this topic is discussed here in

⁶¹ Sartre, "Sur l'Idiot de la famille" in *Situations*, X (Paris: Gallimard, 1971) 94.

the context of existing criticism. Georges May calls *Les Mots* an “anti-autobiographie” for the same reasons that, May says, Sartre calls Nathalie Sarraute’s *Portrait d’un inconnu* an “anti-roman” in his preface to her novel.⁶² Essentially, May says that *Les Mots* is an autobiography which both presents itself as autobiography by following the conventions of the genre and at the same time questions itself as autobiography by simultaneously rejecting the conventions of the autobiography. The argument surrounding the parodic nature of *Les Mots* is similar to that surrounding the deconstructing nature of *Les Mots*. *Les Mots*, as parody, is a text which is filled with ambiguity and self-contradiction: *Les Mots* as deconstructing text, is also a text filled with ambiguity and self-contradiction. In both cases, the clarity needed for the communication of an important social message to change society is missing. *Les Mots* does not follow the guidelines for *littérature engagée*. Instead, the constant creation of ambiguity and self-contradiction, as stated by Sartre himself, helps to create a “literary” text. The overriding objective of *littérature engagée* is to use literature (specifically prose) for communication, not simply for artistic endeavors--not to create things, *mots-choses*.

May finds common ground between *Les Mots* and Sarraute’s writing. But he does not go beyond brief mention of it. In this dissertation, the common ground between *Les Mots* and the writings of such *Nouveaux Romanciers* as Sarraute is not simply mentioned, but elaborated with theoretical and textual analyses. The focus in this dissertation is on her autobiography *L’Enfance* rather than her novels; however, textual comparisons between *Les Mots* and her novels would also be worth pursuing under the same assumptions set forth in this work.

Another critic whose reading supports the notion that *Les Mots* is a deconstructing text is William C. Spengemann. In his bibliographical essay he calls *Les Mots* an

⁶² Georges May, *L’Autobiographie* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1979) 172.

autobiography which “calls attention to the problematic character of its own logical status.”⁶³ In other words, like May, Spengemann finds that *Les Mots* is a text which questions and deconstructs itself at the same time that it presents itself. But also, like May, he does not go beyond this comment.

In chapter eight in this dissertation, on the deconstructing nature of *Les Mots*, examples of Sartre’s pervasive use of self-contradiction are presented. W. D. Redfern in “Applying the tourniquet: Sartre and punning” (1985) also finds such examples, though he calls them “puns”: Sartre’s name for his grandparents “Karlémami” (“Charles” combined with “Mami,” the grandmother) suggests that the couple is unified, yet in the text they are anything but; Sartre’s use of the expression “les grandes personnes” instead of “adultes” suggests a profound respect for them, yet Sartre mocks them throughout; the adults in the text are equated to children--his mother is like a child, his grandfather is in his second childhood, and his grandmother acts like an *enfant terrible*.⁶⁴ Each of these examples illustrates what Redfern calls puns. The same types of examples are found in chapter eight, but are considered examples of Sartre’s pervasive use of self-contradiction. Redfern says that these puns create a pervasive sense of ambivalence. In chapter eight it is suggested that these self-contradictions create not only ambivalence, but a deconstructing text, a text which “se conteste soi-même.” Furthermore, in chapter five it is shown that the *Nouveaux Romanciers* use the same tactic--pervasive self-contradiction--also creating deconstructing autobiographies. *Les Mots* and the autobiographies of the *Nouveaux Romanciers* are then more like Sartre’s notion of poetry and contrary to Sartre’s notion of prose.

⁶³ William C. Spengemann, *The Forms of Autobiography: Episodes in the History of a Literary Genre* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1980) 186.

⁶⁴ W. D. Redfern, “Applying the Tourniquet: Sartre and Punning” 1985. in *Sartre*. Ed. Christina Howells. (New York: Longman, 1995) 160-62.

The “Adieu à la littérature”

Les Mots is known as Sartre’s “adieu to literature” after his own description of the text:

Je voulais que ce soit agaçant, ce livre, je voulais que ça soit un adieu à la littérature qui se fasse en bel écrit. C’est-à-dire, je voulais que les gens qui lisent ça se trouvent entraînés dans une espèce de contestation de la littérature par elle-même, voilà.⁶⁵

In this dissertation Sartre’s adieu to literature is read as a farewell to a specific type of literature—*littérature engagée*. When Sartre says (above) that he wants people to find themselves led into a sort of contestation of literature by (literature) itself, it appears, since he does not specify which type of literature he is referring to, that *Les Mots* is a contestation of all types of literature. However, *Les Mots* suggests otherwise, as this dissertation seeks to demonstrate. In *Les Mots* Sartre embraces a particular type of literature—*l’art pour l’art* and contests a particular type of literature--engaged literature.

Contrary to the argument that Sartre’s adieu is a farewell to *littérature engagée* (and a move toward pure art) Bernard-Henri Lévy sees *Les Mots* as another rejection of pure art.⁶⁶ Lévy supports his claim by pointing out that Sartre does not actually bid farewell to literature; instead, argues Lévy, Sartre continues his crusade against pure art in *L’Idiot de la famille* (1972). He calls *L’Idiot* and *Les Mots* a continuation of Sartre’s “war” against pure art started in *Qu’est-ce que la littérature?*⁶⁷ Thus, Sartre’s adieu, for Lévy, is a farewell to a specific type of literature--*l’art pour l’art*. As Lévy says, “*Words* is an attack on the very exercise of a literature identified with a distraction.”⁶⁸

Felicia Gordon (“A Parodic Strategy”) lends support to Lévy’s position. She also sees *Les Mots* as another rejection of *l’art pour l’art* because, Gordon says, after *Les*

⁶⁵ Sartre, *Un Film réalisé par Alexandre Astruc et Michel Contat* (Paris: Gallimard, 1977) 112.

⁶⁶ Bernard-Henri Lévy, *Sartre: the Philosopher of the Twentieth Century*. 2000. (Cambridge, England: Polity Press, 2003) 456.

⁶⁷ Lévy 468-69.

⁶⁸ Lévy 456.

Mots Sartre's *L'Idiot de la famille* is written against style (literary writing). As further evidence of her position, she says that he was also involved in many other non-literary forms after *Les Mots*: interviews, films, television scenarios. Thus, according to Gordon, Sartre continues to work against *l'art pour l'art* by rejecting literary writing. Lévy and Gordon show that a case can be made for a counterargument to this dissertation: that *Les Mots* does not represent a departure from *littérature engagée* and a move toward pure art, but a continued "war" against pure art. Even if *Les Mots* is only a temporary, isolated, or rhetorical move toward pure art, it is still significant and unique in terms of the Sartrean oeuvre.

Like Lévy and Gordon, Boak in *Les Mots: Sartre* finds the adieu to be purely rhetorical, but for different reasons. Boak suggests that Sartre uses his rhetorical adieu to purely literary writing to demonstrate his ability with the pen. Boak's position is clarified by the following passage in which Sartre describes *Les Mots*. Here, Sartre explains why *Les Mots* is more literary than his other works:

J'ai voulu [que ce livre] soit plus littéraire que les autres, parce que j'estimais que c'était en quelque sorte dire adieu à une certaine littérature et qu'il fallait à la fois la réaliser, l'expliquer, prendre congé d'elle. J'ai voulu être littéraire pour montrer l'erreur d'être littéraire.⁶⁹

Boak does not take Sartre's words at face value. He says that even if Sartre claims to have lost interest in purely literary writing, he wants to show in *Les Mots* that he can still produce it. There is, for Boak, an element of self-justification. It is as if Sartre manages to both continue to reject pure art (as he did in *Qu'est-ce que?*) and to embrace pure art at the same time. In rejecting pure art, he remains consistent with his views of literature outlined in *Qu'est-ce que la littérature?* In embracing pure art in *Les Mots*, he is able to self-justify: he shows that he can write literary texts if he wants to. Regardless of Sartre's rhetoric, regardless of what Sartre writes before and after *Les Mots*, *Les Mots* itself, taken

⁶⁹ Sartre, *La Cérémonie* 275.

in isolation, represents an abandonment of *littérature engagée* and an embracing of *l'art pour l'art*.

An Untraditional Autobiography

While *littérature engagée* is about communicating messages about society, pure art is about experimenting with literary genres for the sake of artistic expression, with no exterior purpose other than art itself. In *Les Mots* Sartre imposes his own artistic vision upon the genre of autobiography as do the *Nouveaux Romanciers* (discussed in chapters six through eight) and as does any artist who chooses not to simply replicate traditional literary forms, but instead to create something new. *Les Mots* is an untraditional autobiography in that the author seeks to dissolve the traditional link between the text and the world. (The traditional aspects of *Les Mots* are discussed in chapter four.) *Les Mots* is an untraditional autobiography for Philippe Lejeune in “L’Ordre du récit dans ‘Les Mots’ de Sartre” (1975). Lejeune says that the innovative aspect of Sartre’s autobiography is the narrative order, which he calls an “ordre dialectique.” Instead of the traditional chronological order, notes Lejeune, Sartre creates a dialogue between the past and the present. The events of his early childhood are intimately linked to, in dialogue with, the events of his adulthood and career as writer.

Geneviève Idt (*Les Mots: une autocritique ‘en bel écrit’*) in chapter three entitled “Un ‘Nouveau Roman,’” sees a parallel between Sartre’s *Les Mots* and the work of the *Nouveaux Romanciers* in that they represent a departure from the traditional linearity of the novel’s narrative. Instead of a linear narrative, Idt says, these authors use repetitions and variations of themes, sequences, or formulas to make their texts progress. Sartre, she illustrates, uses the theme of death repeatedly as a structuring element in *Les Mots*.⁷⁰ Incidentally, she also notes that *Les Mots* was being conceived and edited (the first version was completed in 1953) at the same time that the *nouveau roman* was

⁷⁰ Idt 45.

developing: Nathalie Sarraute's *Portrait d'un inconnu* (1948) which Sartre prefaced, Alain Robbe-Grillet's *Les Gommages* (1953), Michel Butor's *L'Emploi du temps* (1956), and Robbe-Grillet's *Pour un nouveau roman* (1963). While the *Nouveaux Romanciers* are identified with literary experimentation, Sartre is identified with (in addition to his existential theories) the communication of social messages--*littérature engagée*. Yet, in *Les Mots* Sartre, like the *Nouveaux Romanciers*, experiments with traditional literary forms and imposes his own vision. Lejeune and Idt find untraditional elements in *Les Mots*, but they do not view Sartre's experimentation with literary tradition as significant in terms of Sartre's previous views of literature. Nowhere in *Qu'est-ce que la littérature?* does Sartre advocate experimenting with form. Indeed, he rejects authors who "avait inventé une nouvelle manière de parler pour rien dire."⁷¹

Les Mots as Structuralist Text

In agreement with this dissertation, Hugh J. Silverman and Felicia Gordon see *Les Mots* as a departure from Sartre's previous work. They regard the autobiography as Sartre's discovery of a structuralist view of language. This is significant in the context of this dissertation because it further aligns *Les Mots* with the writings of the *Nouveaux Romanciers*, whose texts have also been characterized by structuralism. It is also significant because the structuralist view of language is incompatible with the text/world dialogue of *littérature engagée*. In *Jean-Paul Sartre: Contemporary Approaches to His Philosophy* (1980) Silverman says that *Les Mots* is the phase in Sartre's thought in which he embraces most completely the idea that the self is created through language. Language becomes a verbal construction of the self in his autobiography. In earlier periods of Sartre's thought, Silverman says, Sartre excluded language from the determination of the self. If, as Silverman says, Sartre embraces the structuralist notion that language is (or can be) used to construct the self in *Les Mots*, then the text loses its

⁷¹ Sartre, *Qu'est-ce que?* 79.

link to the world, at least as conceived for *littérature engagée*. While language in *littérature engagée* is to be *engagé* in the contemporary problems of society--in other words, in dialogue with the world--language in a structuralist text is an internal system of relations, a text/text dialogue.

Gordon also calls *Les Mots* Sartre's discovery of a structuralist view of language. She says that Sartre discovers that words are not things, that the relationship between words and things or language and reality is arbitrary. She notes that *Les Mots* finally undermines the assumptions of language as a force for change, for action in the world as suggested in *Qu'est-ce que la littérature?* Clearly, she agrees with the argument that *Les Mots* represents a departure from *littérature engagée*. Yet, although the notion that *Les Mots* is a structuralist text has significant implications vis-à-vis Sartre's view of literature, neither Silverman nor Gordon pursue this line of thought to the extent that is done in this dissertation. Nonetheless their criticism, which places *Les Mots* within the realm of structuralism, supports and points toward the argument that *Les Mots* represents an abandonment of *littérature engagée* and a move toward pure art.

The notion that *Les Mots* is a structuralist text also has specific implications for the genre of autobiography. If language is only a construct rather than a reflection of reality, then the autobiographical text is only a construction of the mind of the author. In other words, it is a fabrication, a fictional text. The text/world dialogue of the traditional autobiography disappears along with the text/world dialogue of *littérature engagée*. The structuralist view of language would push the autobiography over the line into the realm of fiction. Indeed, Paul John Eakin views the autobiography, including *Les Mots*, as a work of fiction. Eakin reads *Les Mots* as illustrative of his idea that the "self that is the center of all autobiographical narrative is necessarily a fictive structure."⁷² According to Eakin, the act of narrating the self requires that the author impose his artistic will upon

⁷² Paul John Eakin, *Fiction in Autobiography: Studies in the Art of Self-Invention* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1985) 3.

the events. Since life does not unfold as a comprehensible narrative, he says, the author creates a narrative which allows self-discovery and self-creation. He suggests that the autobiography as a genre necessarily involves invention, fiction, fabrication. He says that the “plot of the narrative mirrors the autobiographical act that creates it.”⁷³ For example, when Sartre says things like “Everything took place in my head. Imaginary child that I was, I defended myself with my imagination...” and “My sole recourse, at the age of seven, was within myself, who did not yet exist,” says Eakin, the text mirrors the notion that his self does not yet exist; instead, it is created by his imagination. If, as Eakin says, the autobiography is a construction of the self (rather than a representation of the self) then the text loses its connection to reality. It is no longer a text/world dialogue. Read as a structuralist text, *Les Mots* is a text/text dialogue; this notion supports the argument of this dissertation: that *littérature engage* is abandoned and *l’art pour l’art* is embraced.

⁷³ Eakin 127.

Chapter 3: *Littérature Engagée* Versus *L'Art pour L'Art*

Sartre's *littérature engagée* is a view of literature that opposes *l'art pour l'art*. Sartre views literature as having a utilitarian function: it should lead to changes in society. This view of literature embodies a necessary link between the text and the world. Conversely, advocates of *l'art pour l'art*, like Alain Robbe-Grillet (a major figure associated with the *Nouveaux Romanciers*) view literature in purely aesthetic terms: *l'art pour l'art*. With Art for Art's sake, there is no necessary link between the text and the world. The text exists for its own sake, as a work of art. Given this opposition, it is interesting that in Sartre's autobiography--*Les Mots*--he seems to change sides: he abandons his *littérature engagée* and ventures into the realm of *l'art pour l'art*. In this chapter these opposing views of literature will be examined in order to appreciate the significance of Sartre's deviation from the past in *Les Mots*. Sartre finds opposition to his committed literature in other writers such as Nathalie Sarraute and Georges Bataille and, theoretically, in any writer who advocates *l'art pour l'art*. However, this work is concerned to discuss Sartre's alignment with the *Nouveaux Romanciers*. Since Robbe-Grillet (in *Pour un nouveau roman*, 1963) is a *Nouveau Romancier* who specifically describes his view of literature in terms of *l'art pour l'art* and specifically rejects Sartre's *littérature engagée*, he will serve as the central theorist representing *l'art pour l'art* in this discussion. The first objective in this chapter is to understand the two writers' opposing views of literature, using both their theoretical and literary writings. Sartre outlines his view of *littérature engagée* in *Qu'est-ce que la littérature?* (1948) and Robbe-Grillet outlines his *l'art pour l'art* in *Pour un nouveau roman*. The literary writings to be considered include both authors' novels, as well as Sartre's short stories and plays. The second objective of this chapter is to argue that in *Les Mots* Sartre abandons his view of literature (i.e., *littérature engagée*).

Sartre's *Littérature Engagée* Versus Robbe-Grillet's *l'Art pour l'Art*

Sartre outlines his view of literature in *Qu'est-ce que la littérature?* (1948). In chapter one, "Qu'est-ce qu'écrire?" Sartre says that literature should be "engagé" in current problems in the world. The *prosateur* must "dévoile la situation par [s]on projet même de la changer."⁷⁴ The objective of the *prosateur*, according to Sartre, is to reveal (*dévoile*) problems in society in order that they be changed. Literature should inspire action; action should lead to change.

According to Sartre's vision of literature, the political/social message is most important: "la fin est de communiquer." He rejects writers who, he says, "avait inventé une nouvelle manière de parler pour ne rien dire."⁷⁵ In other words, he rejects writers, like advocates of *l'art pour l'art*, who are more concerned with finding new ways to write than with communicating a message.

Alain Robbe-Grillet, a major proponent of the *nouveau roman*, defines his vision of literature in opposition to Sartre's *littérature engagée*. *Littérature engagée* is rejected as part of the past by Robbe-Grillet in *Pour un nouveau roman*. In the chapter "Sur quelques notions périmées," in the section entitled "L'engagement," Robbe-Grillet responds to Sartre's rejection of writers who write "pour rien dire," saying that the writer can only write "pour rien": "...l'artiste ne met rien au-dessus de son travail, et il s'aperçoit vite qu'il ne peut créer que *pour rien*."⁷⁶ Rejecting Sartre's notion that literature is to be an "outil" to effect change in society, Robbe-Grillet advocates, instead, literature for its own sake, *l'art pour l'art*: "dès qu'apparaît le souci de signifier quelque chose (quelque chose d'extérieur à l'art) la littérature commence à reculer, à disparaître."⁷⁷ While Sartre sees prose as an "outil" to awaken the reader's political and social conscience and inspire action, Robbe-Grillet says that literature should not be concerned with signifying anything

⁷⁴ Sartre, *Qu'est-ce que?* 73.

⁷⁵ Sartre, *Qu'est-ce que?* 79.

⁷⁶ Alain Robbe-Grillet, *Pour un nouveau roman* (Paris: Éditions de Minuit, 1963) 35.

⁷⁷ Robbe-Grillet, *Pour un* 39.

“extérieur à l’art.” As soon as literature concerns itself with “quelque chose d’extérieur à l’art”--political messages for example--it begins to “disparaître.” Thus, for Robbe-Grillet, Sartre’s use of literature as a tool to combat the ills of society is a misuse of an art form. Using literature for anything “extérieur” causes it to disappear.

For advocates of *l’art pour l’art* like Robbe-Grillet, art exists for its own sake. Writers, indicates Robbe-Grillet, should not be concerned with anything other than art: “l’instant de la création ne peut que le ramener aux seuls problèmes de son art.”⁷⁸ Whereas Sartre says the writer should be *engagé* in his situation in the world, Robbe-Grillet says he should only be engaged in “des problèmes actuels de son propre langage.”⁷⁹ The writer should only be concerned with his art: resolving the problems “de son propre langage.” Robbe-Grillet says that the writer is first and foremost an artist who seeks to find his own “manière d’écrire.” To say that the message is more important than the “manière d’écrire” is, says Robbe-Grillet, to negate “la liberté” (another allusion to Sartre) of the writer.⁸⁰

Sartre proposes a theory as to why *l’art pour l’art* became the only recourse for writers between 1848 and 1914. He suggests that they disengaged their writing from society, turned their backs on the world around them, because they did not like their audience: the bourgeoisie. The bourgeois readers only wanted writers to reflect their ideas back to them, such that literature became “des inventaires de la propriété bourgeoise.”⁸¹ Since the ideas of the bourgeois were largely utilitarian, the way to reject the bourgeois reader was to write useless literature. Uselessness became, according to Sartre, beauty for these writers: “La perfection dans l’inutile...c’est la beauté.”⁸² Sartre wants writers to be engaged in society, but he does not want them to write simply to please their readers.

⁷⁸ Robbe-Grillet, *Pour un* 35.

⁷⁹ Robbe-Grillet, *Pour un* 39.

⁸⁰ Robbe-Grillet, *Pour un* 44.

⁸¹ Sartre, *Qu’est-ce que?* 161.

⁸² Sartre, *Qu’est-ce que?* 170.

Another difference between Sartre's *littérature engagée* and Robbe-Grillet's *l'art pour l'art* is, according to Sartre, that the former is the work of the *prosateur* and the latter is the work of *poètes*. Sartre places literature used as an *outil* on the side of prose: "je définirais volontiers le prosateur comme un homme qui se sert des mots"⁸³ and literature used for art's sake on the side of poetry: "Les poètes sont des hommes qui refusent d'utiliser le langage."⁸⁴ *Prosateurs* use language, "se sert des mots," to inspire action, which should effect changes in society. Poets, says Sartre, refuse to "utiliser" language as a tool; they are not *engagé* in contemporary problems via literature.

Why should there be such a division? Why can poets not be *engagé* like prose writers? In fact, Sartre later acknowledges that poets can be *engagé* when he praises *L'Anthologie de la nouvelle poésie nègre et malgache de la langue française* (1948) for what he calls "la seule grande poésie révolutionnaire." But in *Qu'est-ce que la littérature?* Sartre assigns literary engagement exclusively to prose. "La prose est utilitaire par essence," he says. Prose lends itself to being used as an *outil*. Poetry, on the other hand, lends itself to art for art's sake: creating "things" of beauty, "mots-choses," that do not attempt to communicate. When confronted with poetry, says Sartre, one is concerned with the words themselves, "s'ils plaisent ou déplaisent en eux-mêmes." With prose, one is concerned with the message of the words, "s'ils indiquent correctement une certaine chose du monde ou une certaine notion."⁸⁵ Prose is used to communicate; poetry is used, like painting, music, or sculpture for its own sake. Robbe-Grillet does not relegate *l'art pour l'art* exclusively to poetry. In *Pour un nouveau roman*, he talks specifically about the novel: prose. He clearly thinks that prose can be used for *l'art pour l'art*.

⁸³ Sartre, *Qu'est-ce que?* 70.

⁸⁴ Sartre, *Qu'est-ce que?* 63.

⁸⁵ Sartre, *Qu'est-ce que?* 70.

This division between prose and poetry has special bearing on the argument of this dissertation. It is argued that *Les Mots* represents an abandonment of *littérature engagée* and a move toward *l'art pour l'art*. According to Sartre's notion of the division between prose and poetry, prose is appropriate for *littérature engage*, while poetry is appropriate for *l'art pour l'art*. Prose is for communication; poetry is for creating objects of art. Thus, when he abandons *littérature engagée* and embraces *l'art pour l'art* in *Les Mots*, he also implies an abandonment of prose and an embracing of poetry. If *Les Mots* is an example of *l'art pour l'art*, then (according to Sartre's division of prose and poetry) it is poetry. Clearly *Les Mots* is not a work of poetry *stricto sensu*; it is not written in verse, but rather in prose. But, according to Sartre's division between the two, *Les Mots* falls on the side of poetry since it is, as argued in this dissertation, an example of *l'art pour l'art*.

Who is right about what literature should be? Should it only be concerned with communicating messages about society or should it only be concerned with art itself? That is a question not worth addressing except to facilitate discussion. The notion of what literature "should be" is relative; it changes throughout the history. It varies from one writer to another. It is not a question of essence. Furthermore, Sartre is not the first writer to view literature as a tool, "un outil," to convey lessons about the world. His *littérature engagée* is not the first example of didactic literature.

Realist literature is also didactic in nature. Leo Bersani says that the realist text is rigidly organized in order to contribute to "une idéologie culturelle dominante" which serves the "ordre social établi."⁸⁶ Thus, the message, or lesson, to the reader seems to be to maintain the status quo. The status quo may be threatened in the realist text, but it is restored in the end. Characters that threaten the "ordre établi" are punished.⁸⁷

Autobiographies may also have a didactic function, such as Benjamin Franklin's *Autobiography* in which his admirable traits and good deeds should be imitated by the

⁸⁶ Leo Bersani, "Le Réalisme et la peur du désir" in *Littérature et réalité* (Paris: Seuil, 1982) 54.

⁸⁷ Bersani, *Littérature et réalité* 66-67.

readers, or in St. Augustine's *Confessions* in which the reader should learn from the author's past mistakes.

Sartre is not the first to advocate didactic literature. Likewise, Robbe-Grillet is not the first author to advocate *l'art pour l'art*. The principles of *l'art pour l'art* are embodied in Edgar Allan Poe's: "There neither exists nor can exist any work more thoroughly dignified...than the poem which is a poem and nothing more--the poem written solely for the poem's sake."⁸⁸

Sartre's First Novel: *La Nausée*

Sartre's first novel *La Nausée* (1938) predates his theories for *littérature engagée* in *Qu'est-ce que la littérature?* by ten years. However, even this early work was didactic in nature. It is considered an example of a "roman-à-thèse," also called an ideological novel in Susan Rubin Suleiman's *Authoritarian Fictions: The Ideological Novel As a Literary Genre* (1983). She defines the ideological novel as a novel whose aim is to persuade readers of the "correct" way to interpret the world. Not surprisingly, Sartre's version of the "correct" way to interpret the world is founded in his existential philosophies, as outlined in *L'Être et le néant* (1943).

La Nausée is a text/world dialogue in a different way than later texts. It is illustrative of his existential theories, later outlined in *L'Être et le néant*. His existential theories address the way man exists in the world. It is about existence as opposed to essence. It is about phenomenon as opposed to metaphysics.

Through the protagonist, Antoine Roquentin, Sartre illustrates his version of the existential man. We, the reader, are to learn the lessons that Antoine learns. He realizes that his life has no meaning; therefore, he begins to feel that he is "de trop": that his existence is superfluous. This feeling is his existential *nausée/nausea*. He has a certain nauseous feeling, an "écoeuement douceâtre," in relation to the memory of a stone that

⁸⁸ Edgar Allan Poe, *The Poetic Principle* (19) 7.

he had picked up. For days he has been wondering why the stone made him feel strange. He is finally able to put it into words: “Oui, c’est cela, c’est bien cela: une sorte de nausée dans les mains.”⁸⁹ The stone conjures up in him the uncomfortable feeling that his existence, like the stone’s, has no essential meaning. This uncomfortable feeling is Sartre’s existential nausea. The reason that Antoine is suffering from this *nausée* is because he has no purpose in life.

At first, it seems that he does have a purpose because he is writing a biography about an eighteenth-century figure, the Marquis de Rollebon. However, he realizes that his project is no longer meaningful to him: “l’homme commence à m’ennuyer.” It is no longer the man that interests him, he says, but the book itself: “C’est au livre que je m’attache.”⁹⁰ In writing a book, any book, he at least feels that he has a purpose in life. Once he abandons the project, he no longer has his *raison d’être*. He concludes in the final pages that writing about a historical figure does not justify his existence: “jamais un existant ne peut justifier l’existence d’un autre existant.”⁹¹ He cannot justify Rollebon’s existence by writing about him. Likewise, Rollebon, in providing a subject for his biography, cannot justify Antoine’s existence, as Antoine had previously believed. The readers should understand that in order to stave off (at least temporarily) this existential *nausée*, they must have a purpose in life. But this purpose must involve them in the contemporary world, not in the past.

It is not until the end of the novel that Antoine figures out what he can do to feel necessary, as opposed to “de trop,” in the world. He decides that he will write a book which will make man ashamed of his existence. This book should be “au-dessus de l’existence.”⁹² Perhaps this book was *L’Être et le néant*. It is there that he elaborates in detail his existential theories, which explain man’s tendency to live in *mauvaise foi*.

⁸⁹ Sartre, *Nausée* 26.

⁹⁰ Sartre, *Nausée* 29.

⁹¹ Sartre, *Nausée* 249.

⁹² Sartre, *Nausée* 249.

L'Être et le néant is “au-dessus de l’existence” in that it is theoretical. It describes existence; it is a metatext of existence.

Robbe-Grillet’s First Novel: *Les Gommes*

Robbe-Grillet does not link his first novel *Les Gommes* (1953) to a situation in the world; instead, he creates a fictional, self-contained world in which the reader gets to play detective. *Les Gommes* is similar to a detective novel/*roman policier*. (*Les gommes* in French means eraser literally, but is also slang reference to policemen. *Une gomme* is a “gum shoe”--a policeman.) In the beginning the reader finds out that Daniel Dupont has been murdered. Special agent/protagonist Wallas is in town to conduct detective work. The twists and turns of the novel lead the readers on a rather challenging adventure: they must piece together clues despite Robbe-Grillet’s efforts to throw them off the trail. Who committed the murder? One would immediately suspect Garinati, the assassin hired to kill Dupont. However, the police chief thinks it was a suicide. The newspaper reports that it was Albert, not Daniel Dupont, who was murdered. One bullet is missing from detective Wallas’s gun and he was in the hotel at the time of the murder; perhaps he murdered Dupont. One bullet is missing from Daniel Dupont’s gun, which suggests that perhaps the police chief’s theory is right--suicide. Later the police chief has another theory: that Dupont’s illegitimate son did it. There is also an unnamed man who is described by witnesses; he is also a suspect. The clues are misleading and contradictory. Piecing together the clues is a challenge, a game for the reader.

Unlike *La Nausée*, *Les Gommes* is not designed to teach. If *La Nausée* is like an instructional tool for Sartre, then *Les Gommes* is like a game for his readers’ enjoyment. In *Les Gommes* there is no exterior purpose, “rien d’extérieur,” to quote Robbe-Grillet’s description of his art. The only purpose is the interpretation of the text. Or, as described above, the fun of playing the game.

Sartre's Short Stories: *Le Mur* (1939) Versus Robbe-Grillet's Novels

Sartre's short stories are collected in *Le Mur*. The collection includes "Le Mur," "La chambre," "Érostrate," "Intimité," and "L'enfance d'un chef." This collection of short stories appears before Sartre's existential treatise (*L'Être et le néant*, 1943). However, like *La Nausée*, they already contain evidence of the theories that he would later outline in *L'Être et le néant*.

Like *La Nausée* "Le Mur" is a text that is both illustrative of Sartre's existential theories and is *engagé* in the world. The protagonist Pablo Ibbieta illustrates the *absurdité* (meaninglessness) of existence, particularly during war. He is a prisoner during the Spanish Revolution. He expects to be shot to death by his captors. When asked where the revolutionary Ramon Gris is hiding, Pablo lies: he says that he is hiding in a cemetery, when he actually believes that he is hiding at his cousin's home. While Pablo awaits his own death, he thinks about the *absurdité* of his situation. Why is he willing to die for Ramon? How is Ramon's life more valuable than his own? He does not love Ramon; he no longer loves anyone, not even life. So, why be shot for him? He laughs at the absurdity of his choice, guessing that perhaps it is stubbornness that explains his choice. Just before Pablo is to be shot, his captors say that he will be spared since he told them the truth about Ramon: they found him in the cemetery. Apparently, Ramon had changed hiding places: he actually was in the cemetery, which makes Pablo's lie (accidentally) the truth.

At this point, Pablo is delirious with the absurdity of his situation. The novella ends with Pablo's delirium: "Tout se mit à tourner et je me retrouvai assis par terre: je riais si fort que les larmes me vinrent aux yeux."⁹³ There is no choice that is clearly right in Pablo's case. Is it right for him to give up his life for this acquaintance Ramon instead of sparing his own life? In war, perhaps, this is the right thing to do. But it still seems

⁹³ Sartre, "Le Mur" in *Le Mur* (Paris: Gallimard, 1939) 37.

absurd to Pablo. Furthermore, even when he makes the “right” choice (not giving up Ramon’s hiding place) exterior circumstances render his choice wrong: he actually causes Ramon to be captured. In this novella, Sartre illustrates that there is not always a choice that is clearly right, particularly in times of war. Yet, as difficult and absurd as the situation may be, Pablo is still responsible for his choices, according to Sartre’s existential theories.

The story of Pablo leads to the issue of the evolution of Sartre’s theory of existential *liberté*/freedom. When the purity of his theories is tested in reality, the correct mode of action is not always clear: there is not always a clear right or wrong choice. For Sartre man is, by definition, *libre*/free: “la liberté humaine précède de l’essence de l’homme et la rend possible, l’essence de l’être humain est en suspens dans sa liberté.”⁹⁴ Sartre’s “liberté humaine” is man’s freedom to choose his actions. Man is essentially *libre*. His essence is suspended in his *liberté* because his free choices and actions define him. Like *La Nausée*, *Le Mur* is an illustration of Sartre’s existential theories. Like *La Nausée* it is a text intended to teach man the “correct way” to act in the world.

In contrast, Robbe-Grillet creates a game “for its own sake.” He does not try to teach man the proper way to act in the world. Again, in his second novel *Le Voyeur* (1955), Robbe-Grillet creates an adventure for the readers in which they must play detective. Mathias, the protagonist, is on an island to sell watches. He rides a rented bike around the island trying to make sales. It is later revealed that a rape/murder has taken place. Mathias is suspected because at the point in the text when he was near the scene of the crime, the text goes blank: page eighty-eight is literally a blank page. Suspicion accumulates around Mathias as he becomes increasingly agitated while trying to fill in the blank page with his lies and contradictions. His agitation reaches comic proportions in the following passage:

⁹⁴ Sartre, *L’Être* 61.

Mathias fut saisi de panique et passa outre, redoutant trop les explications. Il se mit à parler à une telle cadence que les objections--ou le regret de ses propres mots--devenaient tout à fait impossible. Afin de combler les vides, il répétait souvent plusieurs fois la même phrase. Il se surprit même à réciter la table de multiplication.⁹⁵

In trying to “comblent les vides” he resorts to repeating the same sentence several times and even to reciting the multiplication table. As opposed to *Les Gammes* in which there are multiple suspects, in *Le Voyeur* there is only one central suspect--Mathias. The game is to try to put together what happened on that blank page, while listening to Mathias’s lies and contradictions.

The hidden part of the text, that which is to be discovered, or interpreted, is not a political, social, nor philosophical lesson about the world as in Sartre’s texts. *Le Voyeur* is not a social commentary on rape or murder. The text is about the game of unravelling Mathias’s lies. Or, on another level, it is about Robbe-Grillet’s creative version of the detective novel.

In Robbe-Grillet’s third novel *La Jalousie* (1957) readers find a similar type of game: they must try to piece together a credible version of the story despite the fact that they experience the text through the eyes of the jealous husband. Because he is in a state of jealousy throughout, he is not a reliable narrator. Is his narration based on reality or imagination? Distinguishing one from the other is the game that the reader plays. The narrator/jealous husband suspects that his wife “A” is cheating on him with the neighbor Franck. At times, it is certain that he is narrating from imagination or clearly reporting scenes objectively. At other times, it is difficult to decide if the scene is credible or not. In the face of these complications, the reader has to try to piece together what really happened.

In “La Chambre,” Sartre’s second short story in the *Mur* collection, the characters choose to live in rooms “chambres” rather than in the world. These characters illustrate,

⁹⁵ Robbe-Grillet, *Le Voyeur* (Paris: Éditions de Minuit, 1955) 216.

in Sartrean terms, man's desire to avoid the responsibility of his *liberté*. Madame Darbédats has an unknown illness and is bedridden. Her husband comes into the room to wait on her daily. Instead of wishing that she would get well, Madame Darbédats seems to actually prefer living in the room. She enjoys being waited on, taking medicines, and reading historical works. Her preference for the room is the desire not to have to choose and act in the world. Her preference for historical works is a refusal to be, in any way, involved in the contemporary world. Recall from *La Nausée* (and *Qu'est-ce que la littérature?*) that to exercise one's *liberté*, one has to be *engagé* in the contemporary world.

Monsieur Darbédats in the beginning seems to accept his *liberté*. Unlike his wife, he is always lively and enjoys going out into the world and seeing people every day. His "vitalité" irritates his wife, as does, one can assume, the thought of going out into the world. However, his interactions with his daughter Ève indicate that he does not understand Sartrean *liberté*. She also lives only in a room, never going out into the world. Her husband Pierre has some type of degenerative disease. He no longer even knows Ève's name: he calls her Agathe. Although she knows that he will only get worse and worse, she refuses to put him in a home. Monsieur Darbédats pleads with her regularly to no avail. It seems that, like her mother, she prefers a life in which she is bound to a room: in her mother's case because of her illness, in her case because of her husband Pierre's illness.

In the following passage, it seems that only Monsieur Darbédats understands the need to go out into the world. Feeling angry after a particular visit with Ève, he verbalizes his frustration: "On n'a pas le droit de se refuser aux hommes."⁹⁶ In choosing to stay in a room, Ève also chooses not to act in the world, not to engage in contemporary situations. After her father's departure, she is furious: "Je voudrais qu'il meure."⁹⁷ She

⁹⁶ Sartre, "La Chambre" in *Le Mur* 58.

⁹⁷ Sartre, "La Chambre" 60.

would like to be left alone: “Est-ce qu’on ne pourra donc jamais nous oublier?”⁹⁸ Her father is trying to pull her out of her safe room. She would then have to make choices and act in the world, (i.e., accept her *liberté*).

As illustrated in the previous paragraph, it seems that Monsieur Darbédat is the only character who accepts his *liberté*. However, is he really different than his wife or his daughter? He also lives in rooms. He goes from one room (his wife’s) to another room (his daughter’s). He does not act in the world outside of these two rooms. Furthermore, while pleading again that she put Pierre in a home, he tells her that she should come and live with him and help take care of her mother. In other words, he wants her to exchange one room for another. He does not really understand that she needs to be *engagé* in the world: he does not really understand *liberté*. These characters illustrate the reader the right (Sartrean) way to exist in the world by acting the wrong way.

Sartre’s Novels: *Les Chemins de la liberté*

Sartre illustrates his theories for *littérature engagée* in *Les Chemins de la liberté*: *L’Âge de raison* (1945), *Le Sursis* (1945), *La Mort dans l’âme* (1947), and “Drôle d’amitié”--a fragment of the unfinished fourth volume *La dernière chance*.

In *L’Âge de raison* the protagonist Mathieu Delarue tries to avoid accepting the responsibility of his *liberté*. Marcelle, his girlfriend, is pregnant and they are trying to decide if she should have an abortion. He really does not want a child; but, he also does not want to make the choice of having an abortion. He wants her to decide. Mathieu also has trouble choosing which woman to commit to. He also has affections for Marcelle’s friend, Ivich.

Unlike Robbe-Grillet who creates difficulty for the reader, Sartre intends to lead the reader specifically towards the message--*la liberté*. While Sartre’s writing is limited

⁹⁸ Sartre, “La Chambre” 61.

to conveying a specific message--*la liberté*--Robbe-Grillet's writing is only limited by the boundaries of his creativity. One can claim that his writing is also limited by the intended meaning of his text. But that meaning is not pre-defined. There is not a defining doctrine which is "extérieur" to the text. Nor is it necessary that his text be *engagé* in his contemporary situation.

Mathieu's distaste for making choices keeps him from choosing to be *engagé* in some project that would help to change society. He is a philosophy professor. He is a man of ideas, not action. Brunet, on the other hand, is a man of action. He is in the Communist Party. Mathieu claims that he wants to be free, but he does not really understand what it is to be free. In other words, he does not understand Sartrean *liberté*. Brunet unsuccessfully tries to convince Mathieu to join the Communist Party. Brunet explains to Mathieu what Sartrean *liberté* is: "la liberté c'est s'engager."⁹⁹ The title indicates a "coming of age," which in Sartrean terms means that Mathieu eventually understands *liberté*. At the end, he begins to understand that it is his fault that he does not feel free: "Personne n'a entravé ma liberté, c'est ma vie qui l'a bue."¹⁰⁰ Before, he felt that he did not feel free because of the people in his life, like his pregnant girlfriend Marcelle. At the end, he understands that no one (but him) "n'a entravé [s]a liberté." He is not *engagé* like Brunet. That is why he does not feel *libre*.

Le Sursis takes place in 1938 in the midst of Hitler's war threats and the temporary delay effected by Chamberlain's offer to give him parts of Czechoslovakia. The text is *engagé* in a contemporary situation in the world. The story opens right in the midst of a major historical moment, surely fresh on readers' minds (it is published in 1945, just after the end of World War II):

Seize heures trente à Berlin, quinze heures trente à Londres. L'hôtel s'ennuyait sur sa colline, désert et solennel, avec un vieillard dedans. À

⁹⁹ Sartre, *L'Âge de raison* in *Oeuvres romanesques* (Paris: Pléiade, 1981) 521.

¹⁰⁰ Sartre, *L'Âge* 729.

Angoulême, à Marseille, à Gand, à Pouvres, ils pensaient: ‘Que fait-il? Il est plus de trois heures, pourquoi ne descend-il pas?’¹⁰¹

The world is waiting for the news as to whether or not there will be a war. Hitler and Chamberlain are discussing the fate of the world in the hotel. Someone in the street yells “Vive Hitler!” In *La Mort dans l’âme* World War II is in progress.

In Robbe-Grillet’s *Dans le labyrinthe* (1959) the story opens with a narrator/author is sitting in a hotel room. Unlike Sartre’s situations, this one is fictional. Robbe-Grillet is not engagé in the contemporary world; he is engaged in the creative process. He begins the novel with a series of possible beginnings:

Dehors il pleut, dehors on marche en courbant la tête...dehors...le vent souffle dans les feuilles, entraînant les rameaux entiers dans un balancement, balancement, qui projette son ombre sur le crepi blanc des murs. Dehors il y a du soleil, il n’y a pas un arbre, ni un arbuste, pour donner de l’ombre.¹⁰²

In this passage the narrator/author’s process of creation is part of the text. First he decides that “dehors il pleut.” Then, he changes his mind: “dehors il y a du soleil.” First there are trees providing shade: “le vent souffle dans les feuilles.” Then, he changes his mind: “il n’y a pas un arbre, ni un arbuste pour donner de l’ombre.” He draws attention to the process of creation, making creation, or writing, a subject of the text.

Whereas Sartre is present largely as an authority telling the reader how he should understand his relationship with the world, Robbe-Grillet is present as an artist, experimenting with his medium.

Sartre’s *Un Théâtre de situation*

Sartre writes a series of plays which he describes as “théâtre de situation.” Robbe-Grillet writes a selection of novels intended to also take the form of films--*ciné-romans*. Sartre’s plays are an extension of his novels in that they are *engagé* and illustrate Sartrean existentialism. Likewise, Robbe-Grillet’s *ciné-romans* are an

¹⁰¹ Sartre, *Le Sursis* in *Oeuvres romanesques* 733.

¹⁰² Robbe-Grillet, *Dans le labyrinthe* (Paris: Éditions de Minuit, 1959) 9.

extension of his previous novels in that they are consistent with his *l'art pour l'art* view of literature.

Sartre says that modern plays should not be concerned with the past, but should be applicable to the present situation: “C’est à travers les situations dans son théâtre que chaque époque saisit la situation humaine et les énigmes que la liberté humaine doit affronter.”¹⁰³ This view is present in his *Qu’est-ce que la littérature?* as well. Man’s “situation” is his situation in the world. In his plays Sartre addresses “situations”: contemporary problems and issues in the world. He calls this type of theater “un théâtre de situations.”

His plays, like his novels, are illustrative of his *littérature engagée*. *Les Mouches* (1943), a play produced in Paris during the German Occupation, addresses the situation in France during this time. Although Sartre bases the play on a Greek myth (the legend of Orestes) in order to evade German censorship, the audience is well aware that the play addresses their present situation. The Vichy government had told the French that the defeat of 1940 was a just punishment for their immoral ways of life during the inter-war years. The Vichy regime’s propaganda of guilt was an attempt to retain power over the French. Likewise, in the *Les Mouches*, King Égisthe and Queen Clytemnèstre lie to the people of Argos, telling them that they are guilty of not preventing the murder of the previous king. Because the people believe the lies of the king and queen, they are paralyzed with guilt and do nothing to change their miserable situation under the current authorities. The people of Argos are not *engagé*. They do nothing because they are paralyzed by their guilt. The audience should understand that they must not be paralyzed by their guilt. They must also be *engagé* in their situation, like the people of Argos, and reject the Vichy government.

¹⁰³ Sartre, *Un Théâtre* 4.

Through his *théâtre de situations*, Sartre teaches his audience the value of existential *liberté*. In *Huis Clos* (1945, presented in 1944) for example, he illustrates the negative consequences of *not* embracing one's *liberté*. The three characters--Garcin, Estelle, and Inès--have arrived in hell. Garcin and Estelle pretend that they do not understand why they are in hell. However, as their conversations progress, it is revealed that Garcin bears the responsibility of his wife's death and Estelle killed her child and bears the responsibility of her lover's death. While Garcin and Estelle continue to reject the idea that they are really responsible for their crimes, Inès acknowledge the responsibility for hers: she drove her friend to suicide and murder. Because she accepts that she is *responsable*, (i.e., *libre*) she is empowered. She is not afraid of the other two characters and forces them to admit their crimes as well. She makes them face the fact that they were *libre* to act in a way that would have prevented their tragedies.

With *Huis clos* Sartre teaches the audience that *not* accepting the responsibility of one's existential *liberté* can lead to a hell on earth. The hell, in reality, is in living with one's mistakes. We cannot escape our crimes, nor can we erase them. Furthermore, we cannot escape our *liberté*. Like the characters (who are dead) we have to live with the mistakes that we make. Therefore, one must be very careful in choosing one's actions. One must take very seriously the responsibility of *liberté*. This play was also produced during the German occupation. Thus, the French audience understood the importance of freedom in a very real way. Sartre engages his play in a real situation in the world. It is, like his novels and short stories, a text/world dialogue.

Sartre illustrates the fact that man is *libre* even in the most extreme situations, such as in the face of torture in *Morts sans sépulture* (1946). In act one, scene one, François tries to avoid the responsibility of his crime and his *liberté* by pleading that he was just following orders: "Nous avons obéi aux ordres...Où est la faute?...Je n'ai fait

qu'obéir...Je suis innocent! Innocent! Innocent!"¹⁰⁴ He killed civilians and burnt their village. But because he was following orders, he wants to place the responsibility of his actions upon his superiors. For Sartre, there is never a time when man is not responsible for his actions.

In the course of his theatrical writings, his notion of *liberté* seems to change. While *liberté* in theory is clear and pure, *liberté en situation* is wrought with complications and limitations. In *Les Séquestrés d'Altona* (1959) Sartre presents a world without hope. All the characters choose to live in *mauvaise foi*. Unlike previous plays, there is not a point of enlightenment when a character realizes that he must accept his *liberté*. Man seems hopeless. Frantz von Gerlach, the main character, is a Nazi war criminal. He is traumatized by his guilt after the war. At the time of the play, he has been living in the room that he had locked himself up in thirteen years ago. He has cut off all contact with the world and with his family, with the exception of his sister Léni. He kills himself in the end. The guilt that he feels over his actions during the war is too much to live with. Before killing himself, Frantz records this message on a cassette tape: "le siècle eût été bon si l'homme n'eût été guetté par son ennemi cruel, immémorial, par l'espèce carnassière qui avait juré sa perte, par la bête sans poil et maligne, par l'homme."¹⁰⁵ Man's worst enemy, "son ennemi cruel," "immémorial," is himself. If it were not for man, the century would have been good, "le siècle eût été bon." Frantz represents a hopeless attitude towards man: a feeling that surely many people could identify with after the war. Frantz's extreme guilt paralyzes him, as is the case with the characters in *Les Mouches*. For Sartre, Frantz's isolation--*séquestration*--is an example of *mauvaise foi*. Frantz's decision to cease to make choices, to cease to act in the world, is unacceptable according to Sartre. There is never an excuse to reject one's existential *liberté*. Not only does Sartre address the post-war guilt that many surely felt; he also

¹⁰⁴ Sartre, *Théâtre* 190.

¹⁰⁵ Sartre, *Théâtre* 375.

addresses France's decision to become involved in another war--in Algeria--after all the atrocities and devastation of World War II. A portion of the French population must also have felt hopelessness, finding their country in another war so soon.

Sartre Abandons *Littérature Engagée* in *Les Mots*

As a child Sartre lived to please his grandfather and absorbs his views of culture. The utilitarian and didactic use of literature is evidenced in Sartre's view that literature should function as a tool (*un outil*) in society, to effect changes in society. The humanist belief in progress also appears in Sartre's *littérature engagée*. Literature is, according to Sartre, capable of improving the condition of man. It has a didactic role in society. For Robbe-Grillet literature is purely aesthetic, with no exterior purpose.

The calling to teach goes hand in hand with the calling to judge man. He that teaches is in a position to know what is right and wrong. Sartre describes his role in society as *écrivain engagé*: "j'écrivais joyeusement sur notre malheureuse condition. Dogmatique je doutais de tout sauf d'être l' élu du doute."¹⁰⁶ He believes he is the elected "l' élu" judge of "notre malheureuse condition." Feeling superior is a major aspect of his character in *Les Mots*. It is rooted in a childhood in which he was excessively praised by the adults. Thus, the position of judge suits him well; he enjoys looking down upon man from his superior position, "j'écrivais joyeusement sur notre malheureuse condition."

The desire to be a hero/writer, the *écrivain engagé*, is also rooted in his childhood. Sartre conjoins his love for the heroes in cloak-and-dagger novels with his destiny to become a writer. He would not just be a writer, he would be a hero/writer. At the age of eight Sartre is about to give up on feeling necessary in the world. Suddenly, amidst a reverie in which he is the hero trying to save a damsel in distress, his destiny becomes clear to him: "j'eus un violent sursaut; pour sauver cette petite morte, je me lançai dans une opération simple et démente qui dévia le cours de ma vie: je refilai à l' écrivain les

¹⁰⁶ Sartre, *Mots* 204.

pouvoirs sacrés du héros.”¹⁰⁷ He realizes that as a writer he would also be able to become a hero, giving the writer “les pouvoirs sacrés du héros.” The plan becomes more clear when he realizes that the famous writers are the ones who tackle problems of humanity:

“pour être si follement acclamés, il fallait, me dis-je, que les hommes de lettres affrontassent les pires dangers et rendissent à l’humanité les services les plus éminents.”¹⁰⁸ To be a famous hero/writer, he would need to confront the worst dangers and serve humanity.

His reverie then moves to a memory in which a crowd of Frenchmen are applauding soldiers during a parade. The soldiers are necessary, he realizes: “C’est donc vrai! me dis-je. On a besoin d’eux!”¹⁰⁹ He too wants to be applauded and necessary. His admiration for real soldiers (and desire for applause) is recombined with his destiny to become a writer and *voilà*--he has figured out how to continue to gain applause. He blends a famous writer, for example Corneille, with the heroic soldier: “...ce fut un jeu de me changer en Corneille et de me donner ce mandat: protéger l’espèce.” He will be a famous writer, like Corneille, and he will protect the species, like a heroic soldier. Therein lie the origins of his *écrivain engagé*.

But as a famous writer Sartre becomes the judge judged. He is aware of his own judges, who saw before he did the problems with his *littérature engagée*. He foreshadows the criticism of his peers, the judges who reject him, in *Les Mots*. As a child he did not have any friends. His only judges were the adults, who only praised and adored him. At one point he is put into school. The other children become his judges: “j’avais rencontré mes vrais juges, mes contemporains, mes pairs, et leur indifférence me condamnait.”¹¹⁰ These children who condemn him are paralleled in his adult peers who

¹⁰⁷ Sartre, *Mots* 137.

¹⁰⁸ Sartre, *Mots* 138.

¹⁰⁹ Sartre, *Mots* 139.

¹¹⁰ Sartre, *Mots* 111.

condemn his *littérature engagée*. At the end of the day, he returns to his superior position: “Au crépuscule, je retrouvais mon perchoir, les hauts lieux où soufflait l’esprit, mes songes.”¹¹¹ Again in the realm of the adoring adults, he is praised and accepted. He deals with the rejection by returning to his fantasy world, the world of fiction, imagining himself a hero again: “...je me vengeais de mes déconvenues par six mots d’enfant et le massacre de cent reîtres.”¹¹² He imagines that he massacres a hundred henchmen and then concentrates on his great destiny--to become a heroic writer.

Sartre explains that his erroneous views of literature also stem from a childhood confusion of fiction and reality: “on m’avait tant parlé de la vérité des oeuvres romanesques que je pensais dire le vrai à travers mes fables, d’une manière qui m’échappait encore mais qui sauterait aux yeux de mes futurs lecteurs.”¹¹³ He felt that he was telling the truth when he wrote fiction. For him, “oeuvres romanesques” were true. He thought that in writing his “fables” he was telling the truth, that he was creating reality by writing fiction. Although he does not understand the error of his views, his “futurs lecteurs” do. Authors, like Robbe-Grillet, reject his views of literature and see his *littérature engagée* as a failed project from the start. Sartre’s critics understand that Sartre’s novels, short stories, and plays do not produce reality. Writing fiction is not enough to change society. Words do not necessarily translate into action.

He continues to describe his faith in the power of language as being rooted in his childhood experiences. As a child Sartre thought that he could control the world with language:

...pour avoir découvert le monde à travers le langage, je pris longtemps le langage pour le monde. ...ce fut ma plus tenace illusion--prendre les choses, vivantes, au piège des phrases: si je combinais les mots ingénieusement, l’objet s’empêtrait dans les signes, je le tenais.¹¹⁴

¹¹¹ Sartre, *Mots* 112.

¹¹² Sartre, *Mots* 112.

¹¹³ Sartre, *Mots* 174.

¹¹⁴ Sartre, *Mots* 149.

Because he discovered the world through language, he took language for the world. He believed that he could create the world through language, “si je combinais les mots ingénieusement, l’objet s’empêtrait dans les signes.” If the words were combined in just the right way, the world “l’objet” would become tangled up in “les signes,” and he would have a hold on the world (*je le tenais*).

Although Sartre wanted to be a writer who would save man, his inability to distinguish fiction from reality precipitate his failure. He alludes to this failure in *Les Mots* by showing his reactions as a child to the war. World War I is in the background. He writes a story about the war, thinking that through fiction, he will be able to effect a change in the situation. He realizes that this is not true: “Or, en ce mois d’octobre malencontreux, j’assistai, impuissant, au télescopage de la fiction et de la réalité.”¹¹⁵ Sartre writes a story in which there was a cease fire and peace returned. However, he keeps hearing from the adults that war was declared and was going to last for awhile. At this point, Sartre says, he discovered imagination. In other words, he begins to understand the difference between fiction and reality. He is embarrassed: “Le rouge au front.” “C’était moi, moi qui m’étais complu à ces fantasmes puérils?”¹¹⁶ His embarrassment as a child over his confusion of fiction and reality is paralleled by his embarrassment as an adult who thought he could change society with his *littérature engagée*.

At the time that Sartre writes *Les Mots*, he has obviously already understood the error of his ways and is retracing the roots of his disillusion. In the conclusion, the confessional nature of the text is most clear. After having painted the portrait of his childhood and the roots of his views of literature, he tells the reader that he is now healed: “depuis à peu près dix ans je suis un homme qui s’éveille, guéri d’une longue, amère et douce folie et qui n’en revient pas et qui ne peut se rappeler sans rire ses anciens

¹¹⁵ Sartre, *Mots* 174.

¹¹⁶ Sartre, *Mots* 175.

errements.”¹¹⁷ His “longue, amère et douce folie” is the belief, since childhood, that culture (and literature) were capable of saving man. He laughs at himself still for his old ways, “ses anciens errements.” Since he now understands the “folie” of his desire to be a hero/writer who would save man, he again feels unnecessary: “Je suis redevenu le voyageur sans billet que j’étais à sept ans.” Since he has, his whole life, identified himself as a writer, he will just keep writing: “J’ai désinvesti mais je n’ai pas défroqué: j’écris toujours. Que faire d’autre?”¹¹⁸ He has given up his former project (*littérature engagée*): “J’ai désinvesti.” But he has not removed his writing uniform: “je n’ai pas défroqué.” In his fifties, what else is he going to do now: “Que faire d’autre?” He says, “C’est mon habitude et puis c’est mon métier.”¹¹⁹

Sartre’s renouncement of *littérature engagée* is poignant in the following sentence: “Longtemps j’ai pris ma plume pour une épée, à présent je connais notre impuissance.”¹²⁰ The idea that his pen is like the sword of the cloak-and-dagger heroes is no longer valid: “à présent je connais notre impuissance.” As opposed to the idealistic views he acquired in childhood, he no longer believes that culture (and literature) can save man: “La culture ne sauve rien ni personne, elle ne justifie pas.”¹²¹

But he does not completely renounce literature’s value. He just changes his views. Instead of being “une épée” to combat the problems of society, he now sees it as a reflection of man: “...c’est un produit de l’homme: il s’y projette, s’y reconnaît; seul, ce miroir critique lui offre son image.”¹²² Reviving one of the terms he uses in *Qu’est-ce que la littérature?* to describe literature-- “un miroir”--Sartre reminds the reader of one aspect of his former views, (i.e., that literature serves as a critical mirror for man) enabling him to self-criticize. If Sartre views his autobiography as a “miroir,” then it

¹¹⁷ Sartre, *Mots* 204-5.

¹¹⁸ Sartre, *Mots* 205.

¹¹⁹ Sartre, *Mots* 205.

¹²⁰ Sartre, *Mots* 205.

¹²¹ Sartre, *Mots* 205.

¹²² Sartre, *Mots* 205.

serves as a type of salvation: it enables him to self-criticize and to better himself. *Les Mots* certainly seems to have been such a mirror for Sartre. He appears to understand himself and the errors of his past; he manages to cure himself of his life long “folie.”

In addition to being an abandonment of *littérature engagée*, *Les Mots* is also the text in which Sartre is most closely aligned with the *Nouveaux Romanciers*. It is an autobiography, like those of the *Nouveaux Romanciers*, in which the text/world dialogue is undermined. The dialogue with the world is dissolved because the authors undermine the reader’s confidence in the text’s authenticity. If the text is not authentic, then it must be a fabrication, a fiction. In the following chapters Sartre will be presented as a contemporary of the *Nouveaux Romanciers*.

Chapter 4: *Les Mots* and the Traditional Autobiography

In order to dissolve the traditions of the autobiography, Sartre first had to imitate them. The objectives of the chapter are as follows: to examine the traditional aspects of *Les Mots* as autobiography in order to better appreciate Sartre's dissolution of the genre's traditions and to examine the issues in the genre of autobiography that make its text/world dialogue problematic. These same issues are attacked by Sartre and the *Nouveaux Romanciers* in their autobiographies in order to dissolve the traditional text/world link of the genre. First, *Les Mots* will be measured against Philippe Lejeune's (traditional) definition of the autobiography as defined in *Le Pacte autobiographique* (1975) and to related genres such as the biography, the memoir, and the diary. Second, *Les Mots* will be discussed in terms of issues that make the genre's text/world dialogue problematic, such as the notion of truth, the criterion of authenticity, and the possibility of mastery. Third, *Les Mots* will be compared and contrasted to the following autobiographies each of which allow a discussion of various modes of the autobiographical genre: St. Augustine's *Confessions* (397 A. D.), a confessional autobiography and the paradigm of the genre of autobiography; Jean-Jacques Rousseau's *Les Confessions* (1782-1789), a philosophical autobiography; and René de Chateaubriand's *Mémoires d'outre-tombe* (1849-1850), a Romantic autobiography. Fourth, various motives for writing an autobiography will be examined in an effort to understand possible motives for *Les Mots*.

I. *Les Mots* Versus Philippe Lejeune's Definition of the Traditional Autobiography

The autobiography is understood to be referential in nature. It refers to a real person and actual, historical events. Philippe Lejeune offers his definition of autobiography: "un récit rétrospectif en prose qu'une personne réelle fait de sa propre existence, lorsqu'elle met l'accent sur sa vie individuelle, en particulier sur l'histoire de

sa personnalité.”¹²³ It is by a real person, “une personne réelle,” about his/her “sa propre existence.” *Les Mots* fits this part of Lejeune’s definition. It is by a real person, Jean-Paul Sartre (1905-1980). It is about his own life, “sa propre existence.” If it were by Sartre, but about an other “personne réelle,” it would be a biography.

The criterion of referentiality--that the account must refer to a real (historical) person, “une personne réelle”--distinguishes the autobiography from fiction. However, there are cases such as Marcel Proust’s *À la Recherche du temps perdu* (1913-1927) and James Joyce’s *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1916) that are classified as novels, but are autobiographical. Some theorists and writers view fiction and autobiography as overlapping genres; they believe that fiction contains autobiographical elements and that autobiography contains fictional elements. André Gide in his autobiography *Si le grain ne meurt* (1928) goes as far as to suggest that the truth of someone’s autobiography is more likely to exist in a fictional work: “Les Mémoires ne sont jamais qu’à demi sincères, si grand que soit le souci de vérité: tout est toujours plus compliqué qu’on ne le dit. Peut-être même approche-t-on de plus près de la vérité dans le roman.”¹²⁴ Like Gide, Sartre appears to partake of the school of thought that fiction and autobiography overlap. In *Les Mots* Sartre admits that the protagonist of his novel *La Nausée* is really him: “J’étais Roquentin.” He locates the autobiographical in his novel.

A more radical notion as to what may constitute the autobiographical is the idea that all writing is autobiographical. In other words, any type of writing, from philosophy to poetry, is autobiographical. E. Stuart Bates in *Inside Out: An Introduction to Autobiography* (1937) suggests that anything from travel journals to essays to John Audobon’s writings about birds is autobiographical.

Sartre further complies with Lejeune’s definition of the autobiography in that he emphasizes “sa vie individuelle.” He devotes the largest part of his account specifically

¹²³ Philippe Lejeune, *Le Pacte autobiographique* (Paris: Seuil, 1975) 14.

¹²⁴ André Gide, *Si le grain ne meurt* (Paris: Gallimard, 1928) 282.

to his individual life, in contrast to a related genre--the memoir. In the memoir a larger emphasis is placed on the historical events surrounding the author's life. However, for Georg Misch the distinction between the personal aspect of autobiographical writing and the historical aspect of a memoir is erased. In his study, any written document, regardless of its intention, is a source of autobiographical information. He calls all written documents possible "instrument of knowledge."¹²⁵ An impersonal document such as an inscription on a monument or a merchant's business records becomes, for Misch, autobiographical.

Chateaubriand also blurs the separation between a historical document and personal writing. He acknowledges the historical element in his account *Mémoires d'outre-tombe*: "je représenterais dans ma personne, représententée dans mes mémoires, les principes, les idées, les événements, les catastrophes, l'épopée de mon temps."¹²⁶ Chateaubriand understands that his account is not only that of an individual's experience, but also like an epic/*épopée* of his time.

Although Sartre does not emphasize the historical in *Les Mots*, he does follow the autobiographical convention of grounding his story in history. The inclusion of one's prehistory, for example, places the autobiographical subject in time and space. This lends credibility to the referential nature of the text. Sartre begins the text with genealogical information, starting with his maternal great grandfather Schweitzer: "En Alsace, aux environs de 1850, un instituteur accablé d'enfants consentit à se faire épicier."¹²⁷ He lists the begotten, leading up to the marriage of his parents and his birth five pages later: "En 1904, à Cherbourg, officier de marine (his father Jean-Baptiste Sartre)...fit la connaissance d'Anne-Marie Schweitzer...l'épousa, lui fit un enfant au galop, moi, et tenta

¹²⁵ Georg Misch, *A History of Autobiographies in Antiquity*. Trans. 1907. (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1981) 10.

¹²⁶ René de Chateaubriand, *Mémoires d'outre tombe*. 1849-1850 (Paris: Pléiade, 1951-1962) 1046.

¹²⁷ Sartre, *Mots* 11.

de se réfugier dans la mort.”¹²⁸ The revelation of the author’s origins reassures the reader that the text is indeed about “une personne réelle” with real ancestors. The inclusion of dates, “En 1904” and geographical locations, “à Cherbourg,” ground the text in time and space, providing reassurance that the text refers to a historical person. The beginning of any traditional autobiography is likely to parallel the above example from *Les Mots*. The following is another example of the convention of beginning with one’s prehistory, from Rousseau’s *Les Confessions*: “Je suis né à Genève en 1712, d’Isaac Rousseau, citoyen, et de Suzanne Bernard, citoyenne.”¹²⁹

According to Lejeune’s definition, the autobiographer tells the (hi)story of his personality, “l’histoire de sa personnalité.” In other words, he/she recounts the events, personal experiences, and relationships which have influenced and shaped their personality. In this way, the autobiographers and the reader understand who they are and how they became who they are. Sartre tells the reader how he became a writer by retracing his intellectual development back to his childhood. There is certainly a precedence for reviewing one’s childhood in order to understand the adult author. Rousseau in *Les Confessions* begins with his childhood in order to rediscover his “natural self,” the self in its natural state before it was corrupted by society. William Wordsworth in *The Prelude* (1850) reviews his life since childhood in order to gain self-knowledge. Thomas de Quincey in *Confessions of an English Opium Eater* (1821) begins his examination of the path that led to his opium addiction by looking back to his childhood. André Malraux reviews his childhood in *Antimémoires* (1967). Reviewing one’s childhood plays a role in many autobiographies, as these titles indicate: Julien Benda’s *La Jeunesse d’un clerc* (1936), Marcel Pagnol’s *Souvenirs d’enfance* (1957-1977), Julien Green’s *Jeunesse* (1974), Ernest Renan’s *Souvenirs d’enfance et de jeunesse* (1883).

¹²⁸ Sartre, *Mots* 16.

¹²⁹ Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Les Confessions*. 1782-1789 (Paris: Gallimard, 1959) 2.

An autobiography, according to Lejeune, is a text about the past, “un récit rétrospectif.” Sartre writes *Les Mots* from 1954 to 1963, but it is about his childhood (ages four to eleven) from 1909 to 1916. The past in the autobiography is a specific kind of past. It is not the past in its primary sense, but the past seen through the eyes of the present: one might call it the “autobiographical past.” In other words, the past is relived and retold by the author, with new perspectives that he/she did not have the first time around. Michel de Montaigne’s autobiography *Essais* is illustrative of the present’s effect on the past. With each successive book (four total) he makes corrections and modifications to preceding books. The author keeps finding himself in a new present, with new knowledge of the past. So the past that is contained in one book is reevaluated and modified in the next book. He says the following of his project: “Je ne peints pas l’estre: je peints le passage...Il faut accommoder mon histoire à l’heure. Je pourray tantost changer, non de fortune seulement, mais aussi d’intention.”¹³⁰ Because of the unstoppable force--time--Montaigne cannot capture the self, “l’estre,” he can only portray the self as it exists in time, “le passage.” Likewise, in *Les Mots*, the reader is aware of the “autobiographical past” in terms of a self in the ongoing passage of time. Sartre uses the language of a man who has reevaluated his past, speaking from the present: “J’ai changé,” “Je vois clair, je suis désabusé,” and “je suis un homme qui s’éveille, guéri.”¹³¹ Logically, the reader knows that this “present self” will soon be a past self which will, in turn, have to be reevaluated, and so on and so forth, like Montaigne’s “l’estre” who is portrayed in terms of “le passage” (of time).

The topic of the “autobiographical past” lends to a discussion of the distinction between the genre of autobiography and a related genre--the diary or the *journal intime*. In the autobiography, the author looks back over a large span of time and evaluates it from a single (roughly) point in time. In contrast, in the diary, each entry represents an

¹³⁰ Michel de Montaigne, *Essais*. 1580-1595 (Paris: Bordas, 1985) 37.

¹³¹ Sartre, *Mots* 204-5.

evaluation of a short(er) time frame. And it is written on (or roughly on) a daily, weekly, or even monthly basis. Furthermore, the autobiography is an evaluation of a (more) distant past, while the diary allows an evaluation of a recent past: the same day, the day before, the week before, etc.

The autobiography is traditionally prose, not verse. Sartre does not break this tradition. However, Thomas Tusser, an Englishman of the sixteenth century, wrote an autobiography in verse as an addition to his book *Five Hundreth Pointes to Good Husbandrie* (1573) in which he describes his farming experiences. Also breaking the traditional use of prose, William Wordsworth writes his autobiography *The Prelude* (1850) as a thirteen-book poem.

Another characteristic of the traditional autobiography is the use of the first person “je.” Sartre follows this convention as well. However, other early autobiographies do not. For example, Henry Adams writes *The Education of Henry Adams* (1906) in the third person. Julius Caesar uses the third person in *Commentaries on the Gallic War* (c58-44B.C.). Later autobiographers also break this tradition such as Claude Roy who uses the third person in *Nous* (1972). Roland Barthes in *Roland Barthes par Roland Barthes* (1975) alternates between the first person and the third person, using the former to designate the self of the present and the latter to designate the self of the past. Michel Butor uses the second person “tu” in *La Modification*. Theorists and writers have questioned and experimented with the traditions of the autobiography. Sartre is not the first. But Sartre’s questioning and experimentation of the autobiography’s text/world dialogue is significant because he simultaneously abandons the text/world dialogue of his *littérature engagée*.

II. Truth, Authenticity, and Sincerity

As noted earlier in this chapter, autobiography is traditionally distinguished from the novel in that the first is (based on) fact and the second is fiction. The opposition of fact and fiction seems a good place to draw a line between the two genres. To qualify as

an autobiography, then, the answer must be “yes” to the question: Is the account “true,” (i.e., factual?) But, who, (other than God) could really answer this question? What may be true to the autobiographer may not be true to someone else. “Truth” is then necessarily relative in the autobiography, and thereby not really truth, in its strictest sense. The author, in order to create a personal portrait of himself or herself, must choose specific events that were meaningful and influential to him/her. Therefore, certain events are left out, while others are emphasized. The story which the author tells can only be a subjective account, not an objective “truth.” It is exactly the author’s personal experiences within the context of the factual/historical events of his/her life that are of interest to the reader of an autobiography. But can “relative truth” and “subjective truth” really be called “truth” at all? Truth is not relative nor subjective, but absolute.

The issue of “truth” in the autobiography for Georges May is a false problem: “Bref l’impuissance à exprimer la vérité doit être tôt ou tard reconnue par tout autobiographe.”¹³² Even the most traditional of autobiographers, says May, are aware that the autobiography inevitably includes subjective interpretation and can not be defined in terms of “truth.” For example, (Johann Wolfgang von) Goethe calls the subtitle to his autobiography (*Souvenirs de ma vie*, 1811-1822) “Poésie et vérité.” He refers to both the subjective element--“poésie” and the objective element--“vérité” of his account. Later autobiographers like Simone de Beauvoir also makes reference to the inevitable mixture of the subjective and the objective: “Cette belle histoire qui était ma vie, elle devenait fausse à mesure que je me la racontais.”¹³³

Given the problematic and impractical measure of “truth” in the autobiography, it is facilitative to replace “truth” with a more attainable criterion--that of authenticity. An authentic account is one that is not fabricated. Admissions of the mixture of fact and fiction, like the ones mentioned above, actually serve to affirm, rather than detract from,

¹³² May, *L'Autobiographie* 88.

¹³³ Simone de Beauvoir, *Mémoires d'une jeune fille rangée* (Paris: Gallimard, 1958) 442.

the text's authenticity. This is because the author's sincerity is intimately bound to the reader's confidence in the text's authenticity. When the autobiographer makes truth claims, he seems less sincere than an autobiographer who admits the impossibility of absolute truth in his endeavor. Critic Saul K. Padover doubts the possibility of "truth" claimed by Edward Gibbon in his autobiographical account *Memoirs of my Life* (1796): "Truth, naked and unblushing truth...must be the sole recommendation of this personal narrative."¹³⁴ Padover is incredulous and suggests that only a genius or someone who has been successfully psychoanalyzed could know enough about himself to be able to tell the "truth." He prefers the sincerity of an autobiographer like Anthony Trollope (*Autobiography*, 1883) who admits that no one can (nor is willing to) tell the "truth": "That I, or any man, should tell everything of himself, I hold to be impossible. Who would endure to own the doing of a mean thing? Who is there who has done none?"¹³⁵ The author's willingness to admit that the account is not the "truth" reassures the reader that the author is sincere. The author's sincerity, in turn, engenders confidence in the authenticity of the text. At least the author has made a sincere effort to give an account that is not intentionally fabricated. Sartre and the *Nouveaux Romanciers* in this dissertation systematically question and erode the criterion of authenticity in their autobiographies. In dissolving the authenticity of their self-portraits, they dissolve the text/world dialogue.

Georges Gusdorf gives his version of the function of truth and falsity, fact and fiction, the objective and the subjective. He says that the literary and artistic functions of an autobiography are more important than the historical and objective. However, there must be a conscience in search of its own "personal truth" primary to the literary and

¹³⁴ Saul K. Padover, *Confessions and Self-Portraits: 4600 Years of Autobiography* (New York: John Day Company, 1957) 1.

¹³⁵ Anthony Trollope, *Autobiography*. 1883 (London: Oxford UP, 1950) 1.

artistic functions.¹³⁶ The “truth” discussed by Gusdorf is not “truth” in its absolute sense since it is personal and subjective. But the search for one’s “personal truth” is a sincere effort to deliver an authentic self-portrait. As described above, the autobiography is necessarily a mixture of the objective (historical) and the subjective (literary/artistic). Replacing the criterion of truth with that of authenticity seems to resolve the impasses associated with “truth.” The requirement of authenticity accommodates the notion of “subjective truth.” Or, as Gusdorf calls it, “personal truth.”

Sartre’s version of “personal truth” is founded in his biographical method. He calls it the search for a *choix originel*. In order to arrive at his personal truth in *Les Mots*, he applies his biographical method. The following is a brief discussion of Sartre’s biographical writing and biographical method. Douglas Collins in *Sartre as Biographer* (1980) points out that Sartre devotes more pages to the genre of biography than to any other genre after World War II. While biography is usually viewed as a peripheral genre in Sartre’s *oeuvre*, it is evident that he was very interested in this form of writing. His biographies include *L’Idiot de la famille, I-III*, (1970-1974), *Saint Genet: comédien et martyr* (1952), and *Baudelaire* (1946). He develops his method in *Critique de la raison dialectique, I-II* (1960, 1985). The method is to find the defining moment(s) in the life of the subject which explains the context in which they arrive at their *choix originel*. Their life is then understood in relation to this primary choice, a sort of “personal truth” which explains his life. Sartre says in *Les Mots* that these defining moments take place in childhood: “Tout homme a son lieu naturel; ni l’orgueil ni la valeur n’en fixent l’altitude: l’enfance décide.”¹³⁷

Sartre analyzes the *choix originel* in his biographies. In *L’Idiot de la famille* Sartre analyzes Gustave Flaubert’s *choix originel* in the context of his childhood.

¹³⁶ Georges Gusdorf, “Conditions et limites de l’autobiographie” in *Formen der Selbstdarstellung* (Berlin, 1956)

¹³⁷ Sartre, *Mots* 51.

Flaubert's parents told him that he was without value. He lived his life in the shadow of his older brother who was the "good child." According to Sartre, Flaubert's original choice is the way in which he chooses to deal with this childhood trauma. He uses literature as an escape, creating an imaginary world for which he is the creator.

Baudelaire in *Baudelaire* also experiences a trauma in early childhood when his mother marries and later sends him off to school. His original choice is defined by the way in which he chooses to deal with this rejection. Baudelaire reclaims his power by viewing himself as the source of his rejection and isolation. He chooses to be a marginal character--the "bad poet"--he rejects himself from society, he isolates himself. But, in internalizing the will of his parents, Baudelaire loses part of the power of his own will. Because of this, according to Sartre, his life is a failure, a constant reliving of the moment when he felt he was a bad (rejected) child. The *choix originel* is like his personal truth; his life is understood in terms of this primary choice. Genet's *choix originel* is similar to that of Baudelaire and Flaubert in that his primary caretakers gave him the message that he was bad. His original choice is the way that he chooses to deal with this trauma. He was orphaned and given to the care of peasants who later accuse him of being a thief. Like Baudelaire, he chooses to try to displace the power that the adults had on him by internalizing their will. He labels himself a thief, thus displacing the original traumatic event by one in which he plays the role of the adult. In displacing his own will with that of the adults, he is not able to heal the wound of the original trauma--being labeled a thief by his caretakers. He is not able to act freely outside of this trauma. Instead, he only replicates it.

In each case the subject of the biography surrenders his existential freedom to the will of the adult. According to Sartre's existential philosophy, man is always free to choose his own path. Flaubert could have chosen to live in the real world, Baudelaire could have chosen to not be the rejected, isolated, "bad," poet, Genet did not have to become a thief simply because the authority figure said that he was a thief.

As is the case in his biographical studies, Sartre sheds light on his own *choix originel* in the context of his early childhood experiences. Having lost his father in early childhood, Sartre and his mother move in with her family. As an isolated child living amongst a world of adults, his sense of self-worth comes from their praise. His paternal grandfather Charles admires literature, particularly the classics. Sartre's original choice is to embrace what he calls "play-acting" in the *comédie familiale* in order to retain the praise of the adults. He gets applause for playing the role of a future writer. This early choice, to seek praise for his literary abilities, is his personal truth: it explains his adult career as hero/writer.

III. The Possibility of Mastery

The idea that one can find a personal truth, be it religious or philosophical, or a *choix originel* to explain one's life leads to the idea that mastery over one's life is possible: the possibility of a total understanding, total self-knowledge. While Sartre's biographical method, employed in *Les Mots*, appears to support the idea that mastery is possible, other writers and theorists dispute this possibility. For example, Roland Barthes does not believe that such totalizing knowledge is possible. He writes his own autobiography, *Roland Barthes par Roland Barthes* (1974), as a collection of fragmented mini-chapters that do not lead to a cohesive total understanding. His autobiography reflects his suggestion for biographical studies--that the "biografiend" be replaced with "biographemes." In *Sade/Fourier/Loyola* (1976), he defines "biographemes" as bits of biographical information and observations that do not lend to totalizing knowledge, but rather to the text's aesthetic value. (The "biografiend" is the biographer who pretends to assemble a cohesive, total picture of the subject.) Michel Leiris also rejects the possibility of mastery. His autobiographical project is the failure to find the unifying personal truth, or as he calls it, "la règle du jeu" in *La Règle du jeu*, I-IV (1948-1976). According to psychoanalysis, one does not have access to all levels of the self, so total

knowledge is impossible, as Anna Burr says in *The Autobiography: A Critical and Comparative Study* (1909).

IV. *Les Mots* Versus Three Modes of Autobiography: Confessional, Philosophical, and Romantic

A. Confessional Autobiography: *Les Mots* and the Paradigm of St. Augustine's *Confessions*

“I wish to act in truth, making my confession both in my heart before you and in this book before the many who will read it.”¹³⁸ These words of St. Augustine in his *Confessions* are illustrative of two functions of the confessional autobiography: 1) to cleanse oneself before God 2) to cleanse oneself before the public. The apology is closely related to the confession; the former is a non-religious act, the latter is a religious act. In both cases (the apology and the confession) someone recounts past errors in order to be forgiven: be it by God, by one's readers/the public, and/or by oneself. In the confessional autobiography, reviewing one's past errors leads to self-knowledge. Ideally, by reviewing the past, autobiographers will attain the wisdom that will enable them to do better in the future.

Traditional aspects of *Les Mots* are further illuminated when it is compared to William C. Spengemann's reading of St. Augustine's *Les Confessions* in *The Forms of Autobiography: Episodes in the History of a Literary Genre* (1980). It appears that *Les Mots* is in many ways an imitation of the thirteen-volume confessional mode first established by St. Augustine in 397 A.D. Like St. Augustine, Sartre tells of his journey to the wisdom of his salvation via a review of the mistakes of his past. St. Augustine reviews his life of sin and concludes that his salvation lies in religious faith. Sartre reviews his idealistic views of literature and concludes that his faith in literature's power to save man was erroneous. In a sense, then, one might say that *Les Mots* is the reverse of *Confessions* because St. Augustine's journey leads to embracing faith, while Sartre's

¹³⁸ St. Augustine, *Confessions*. 397 A. D. Trans. R. S. Pine-Coffin (Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1961) 207.

journey leads to the rejection of faith, albeit in literature rather than in religion.

Nonetheless, Sartre imitates the overall structure of St. Augustine's confessional model in that they are both journeys to knowledge about salvation via a review of the past.

Another parallel between *Les Mots* and *Les Confessions* is found in the position of the narrator vis-à-vis the protagonist. Spengemann notes that St. Augustine creates a clear division between the wise narrator of the present and the yet unwise protagonist of the past in Books I-IX. The narrator, Spengemann says, has a knowledge of the past that is "God-like."¹³⁹ St. Augustine, in writing about the lost young man that he once was, already understands the error of the protagonist's ways: "I knew nothing of this at the time. I was quite unconscious of it, quite blind to it, although it stared me in the face."¹⁴⁰ The "I" in this passage is the "I" of the protagonist, the one who does not know, who is "quite unconscious," "quite blind." The implied "I" who knows the errors of the past is the author/narrator. The juxtaposition of the present knowledge of the narrator with the past ignorance of the protagonist creates a division between the two, as if there were two men present in the text. Sartre imitates St. Augustine's model: "j'ai confondu le désordre de mes expériences livresques avec le cours hasardeux des événements réels. De là vint cet idéalisme dont j'ai mis trente ans à me défaire."¹⁴¹ Sartre the narrator already knows that this idealism needs to be dispelled. And, like God, he understands the past and knows the future--that it will take him thirty years to rid himself of his idealism.

Another parallel that can be derived from Spengemann's discussion of *Confessions* is that both texts can be read in three parts: each part invalidating, or at least qualifying the preceding one. He says that the first part consists of Books I-IX in which St. Augustine reviews the sinful life of his past before his conversion to a life led by faith. Part two consists of Books X-XII, which contain a meditation on memory, time, and the

¹³⁹ Spengemann, *The Forms of Autobiography* 8.

¹⁴⁰ St. Augustine, *Confessions* 64.

¹⁴¹ Sartre, *Mots* 44.

Creation. Part three consists of Book XIII, which contains a continuation of his meditation on the Creation and a realization that salvation lies in faith alone, which is timeless and universal. The young, reckless, and lost St. Augustine of part one who says “I went to Carthage, where I found myself in the midst of a hissing cauldron of lust” and “I had no liking for the safe path without pitfalls” is invalidated (or qualified) by the St. Augustine of part two.¹⁴² This new St. Augustine is wiser, calmer, and more reflective. He meditates on memory, time, and Creation. The St. Augustine of part two who is reflecting on memory, time, and Creation is, in turn, invalidated by the St. Augustine of part three who has reached new conclusions: that salvation lies in faith alone, which is timeless and universal.

Like *Confessions*, *Les Mots* may be read as a text in three parts, each of which invalidates the one that precedes. The difference is that the three parts of *Les Mots* are not clear, successive “books” as in *Confessions*, but are rather overlapping and interspersed elements of the text. The first part is that which represents his past beliefs: that culture (in his case, literature) is capable of saving man. His mission in life becomes to save man with the pen: “je me lançai dans une opération simple et démente qui dévia le cours de ma vie: je refilai à l’écrivain les pouvoirs sacrés du héros.”¹⁴³ The second part invalidates (or qualifies) this belief: “Longtemps j’ai pris ma plume pour une épée, à présent je connais notre impuissance.”¹⁴⁴ It is the realization that his idealistic views of literature are incorrect: “La culture ne sauve rien ni personne.”¹⁴⁵ Therefore, his mission to save man with the pen shall be abandoned. However, the third part invalidates the idea that he will abandon writing, as suggested in part two. Instead (in part three) he decides that he will continue to write. Not because he has a new mission, but because he does not

¹⁴² St. Augustine, *Confessions* 55.

¹⁴³ Sartre, *Mots* 137.

¹⁴⁴ Sartre, *Mots* 205.

¹⁴⁵ Sartre, *Mots* 205.

know what else to do: “j’écris toujours. Que faire d’autre?”¹⁴⁶ Thus, whereas in part two writing is associated with a grand, heroic mission which is abandoned, in part three writing is just something to do and is not abandoned. His former path in life is a dead end--the mission of saving man with his pen. At the end of *Les Mots*, the path of his future is undefined, without mission or conviction, without faith in something new. On the contrary, St. Augustine reaches conclusions and defines his future path--the path of faith: “At last my mind was free from the gnawing anxieties of ambition and gain, from wallowing in filth and scratching the itching sore of lust. I began to talk to you freely, O Lord my God, my Light, my Wealth, and my Salvation.”¹⁴⁷

St. Augustine’s paradigmatic text, a text whose parts invalidate each other provides a convenient model for Sartre’s autobiography. The process of invalidating, or negating, that takes place in *Confessions* resembles the process of *néantisation* described by Sartre in his existential theories. According to Sartre’s theories in *L’Être et le néant* (1943), man exists as a dialectic between that which he is, “l’être” and that which he is not, “le néant.” He is able to transcend (or invalidate/qualify) his *être* by entering into the realm of what he is not (yet), *le néant*. Man does this by exercising his *liberté*/freedom to choose and to act. Drawing from the (theoretically) infinite choices available in the realm of the *néant*, man is able to constantly redefine (invalidate/qualify) who he is, his *être*. As Sartre says, the process of *néantisation* is the “néantisation d’être.” It is “la liaison originelle entre l’être du pour-soi et l’être de l’en-soi.”¹⁴⁸ Further understanding of Sartre’s theory of *néantisation* is facilitated by an understanding of the liaison between the *en-soi* and the *pour-soi*.

The *en-soi* and the *pour-soi* are two manifestations of the *être*. The *être-en-soi* is “being-in-itself”: a stable, unchanging state. The *être-pour-soi* is “being-for-itself”: a

¹⁴⁶ Sartre, *Mots* 205.

¹⁴⁷ St. Augustine, *Confessions* 181.

¹⁴⁸ Sartre, *L’Être* 121.

constantly changing state. Because man is *libre*/free at all times to choose and to act, he is--as *pour-soi*--able to change constantly. A table, on the contrary, is an *en-soi*, a stable, unchanging being. Man is not an *en-soi* until death, when he is no longer able to change. The *être-pour-soi* ventures into the realm of the *néant*, and recreates (invalidates/qualifies) the *être-en-soi* with each new choice and action.

While Sartre's *néantisation* is a process which does not end until death, St. Augustine's process of invalidation (or qualification) in *Confessions* ends with the wisdom of faith. Sartre's theories of existence deny an omniscient wisdom, such as that offered by the Christian God. Therefore, man can not follow a path defined by someone other than himself, as can the man of faith. Man is by his essence *libre* and must create his own path in life with no aid from above, and is solely responsible for all of his choices and actions. It makes sense, then, that *Les Mots* should be an open-ended text. It is inconclusive in the sense that Sartre does not define his future life path. Since there is no end to the process of *néantisation* until death, Sartre (and the existential man's) life path can not be defined until death.

Also imitating St. Augustine's model, Thomas De Quincey, in his thirteen-volume *Confessions of an English Opium Eater* (1821) creates a text which can be divided into three parts, each of which invalidates/qualifies the preceding one. Laying bare his past and his opium addiction, he first examines the erroneous path which led to his addiction. In the second part he writes his confessions which lead to an eradication of his addiction. The third part appears a year after publication when he adds an appendix which invalidates the recovery of part two--he has relapsed. Parallel to St. Augustine's *Les Confessions* and *Les Mots*, De Quincey's text reflects the changes inherent in man's temporal existence. Each part of his life is different than the one before. Like Sartre's *pour-soi*, the subjects of their autobiographies are always in a state of becoming something else. They can not exist in a fixed state, like an inanimate object--Sartre's *en-soi*--until death.

On the one hand, one might say that St. Augustine's and Sartre's accounts represent a positive aspect of time's effect on existence--progress, while De Quincey's represents a negative aspect of time's effect on existence--failure. St. Augustine succeeds in finding the path to faith. Sartre succeeds in understanding that he can not save man with the pen. De Quincey, however, regresses into addiction. De Quincey is only not an addict as long as he continues to choose that path in each present moment. Although the same applies to St. Augustine and Sartre, De Quincey faces particular difficulty as an ex-addict; each present moment represents a possible relapse. Time becomes his enemy because his recovery does not last.

On the other hand, one might say that Sartre's journey is a failure, like De Quincey's, in that *Les Mots* is the story of the failure (and abandonment) of *littérature engage*. At the end of his autobiography, Sartre does not tell the reader that he has found a new path, a new project that will make him feel necessary. He is a man who "ne sait plus que faire de sa vie." Instead, he will just keep writing, without purpose, mission, or faith: "j'écris toujours. Que faire d'autre?"¹⁴⁹

Although credit is due to him given that he wrote what many consider to be the first autobiography, it is hard to imagine that his autobiography could (logically) be other than what it is. His *Confessions* are a review of the past, a convention (re)affirmed by Lejeune's definition, "un récit rétrospectif." What else would an autobiography be? The story of one's future? That could only be speculation, fiction. The confession of errors--any sincere account of one's past would logically reveal one's errors. After all, humans are creatures of error. The wise author discussing the naive protagonist--logically, it could not be the reverse situation: the naive protagonist telling the story of the wise author. In order to attain self-knowledge, authors review the course of their own personality/life (Lejeune's "histoire de sa personnalité") as opposed to someone else's.

¹⁴⁹ Sartre, *Mots* 205.

Dividing the story of one's life into parts each of which invalidate/qualify that which precedes seems logical as well since human life is temporal and thus, constantly subject to change. Although Sartre imitates this traditional, even paradigmatic, autobiography in which the text/world dialogue is maintained, he also rejects the very text/world link that defines the traditional autobiography.

B. Philosophical Autobiography

While St. Augustine's autobiographical journey is defined by religious faith, Rousseau's is defined by his philosophy: he sets out to discover his "Natural soul." He believes that his natural soul was corrupted by society; thus, he returns to his childhood to rediscover his natural state of goodness.

Les Mots may also be described as a philosophical autobiography. It can be read, in part, as an illustration of Sartre's existential philosophies. In Philippe Lejeune's analysis of *Les Mots* in "L'Ordre du récit dans *les Mots* de Sartre" (in *Le Pacte autobiographique*), it is clear that he reads the text (at least in part) as an illustration of Sartre's existential theories. While Sartre divides his autobiography into two parts: *Lire* and *Écrire*, Lejeune redivides the text into five acts. Located within these acts are various aspects of Sartre's existential theories. For example, act one he calls "Situation et liberté"; act three: "La Prise de conscience du vide" which includes scenes of "l'ennui," "l'angoisse," and "la nausée." Each of these terms is derived from Sartre's *L'Être et le néant*. Furthermore, the main focus of his analysis is an evaluation of the narrative order of *Les Mots* which is also based on Sartre's existential theories. He calls the narrative order an "ordre dialectique" based on Sartre's notion of the dialectic relationship between the "être" and the "néant" from *L'Être et le néant*. As Lejeune's discussion illustrates, *Les Mots* contains a network of references to Sartre's existential theories: "un exil orgueilleux qui tournait vite à l'angoisse," "j'avais honte de ma présence insolite dans ce monde en ordre," "Je me sentais de trop," and "plus absurde est la vie." Sartre uses the language of his existentialism in *Les Mots*.

Les Mots may also be read as a contradiction of Sartre's existential theories, which are founded largely on the notion of *liberté*/freedom. In *Les Mots* he claims that childhood is the time in one's life when the rest of one's life is decided: "l'enfance décide."¹⁵⁰ This notion directly opposes what he calls man's essential *liberté* in *L'Être et le néant*. Sartre consistently inserts his existential philosophies into his writings. This aspect of *Les Mots* does not distinguish it from the rest of his works. What does distinguish it from the Sartrean oeuvre, as well as from the traditional autobiography, is his systematic dissolution of the genre's text/world link.

The discussion of "modes" of autobiography is facilitative; but, as is the case with many attempts to categorize literary works, the works themselves defy strict categories. Each autobiography contains aspects of other modes. For example, Rousseau's autobiography is also confessional, as the title states. Sartre's autobiography is discussed in terms of each of the three modes used in this discussion. Indeed, other modes may be added such as a "didactic mode." St. Augustine's autobiography may be called didactic in the sense that he uses his life to illustrate the need for religious faith. (The notion of the didactic will be discussed in the last part of this chapter in the section on motives.)

C. Romantic Autobiographies

The autobiography, as genre, reflects the Romantics' emphasis on the individual's experience. Therefore, any autobiography may also be categorized as Romantic. But the autobiography written in a Romantic mode might be distinguished from other modes in that the author's subjective experience is revealed poetically, emphasizing the text's subjective nature. It is a mode in which subjective interpretation overshadows objective fact. This mode is illustrated in René de Chateaubriand's four-volume autobiography *Mémoires d'outre-tombe* (1849-1850). In the following passage he emphasizes the poetic and subjective aspect of his account over the historical and objective: "quand je me

¹⁵⁰ Sartre, *Mots* 51.

sentirai las de tracer les tristes vérités de l’histoire des hommes, je me reposerai en écrivant l’histoire de mes songes.”¹⁵¹ He takes pleasure in telling the story of his dreams in his autobiography. Tracing the “sad truths” of history leave him weary. For Chateaubriand his dreams are as important, if not more important, than facts in his autobiography. Again, the problem of “truth” versus subjective interpretation arises. If the subjective nature of the autobiography makes it less “true,” then the Romantic autobiography must be closer to the boundary of fiction than other modes.

Chateaubriand does not hide the fact that he takes poetic license in portraying women in his account: “Je me composai donc une femme de toutes les femmes que j’avais vues...je lui donnai les yeux de telle jeune fille du village, la fraîcheur de telle autre.”¹⁵² In an autobiography, the characters and events are to be, as closely as possible, representative of fact. Yet, Chateaubriand tells the reader that he has created a woman, composed of other women. The woman, then, is not based on an actual (historical) woman; she is, instead, a creation of Chateaubriand.

Sartre also tells the reader that his autobiography contains falsified (created) elements: “Ce que je viens d’écrire est faux. Vrai. Ni vrai ni faux...”¹⁵³ Indeed, this particular statement is symptomatic of his efforts to confuse fact and fiction throughout *Les Mots*.

Autobiographers who emphasize the subjective and poetic nature of the project push the genre further towards the boundary between it and fiction. As mentioned before, many theorists and writers see the two genres as overlapping. Another such theorist, James Olney views the autobiographical project as one of self-invention. According to Olney, the autobiographer creates a metaphor (not a representation) of the self. It is the result of “the vital impulse to create” which “in the end, determines both the

¹⁵¹ Chateaubriand, *Mémoires* 2.

¹⁵² Chateaubriand, *Mémoires* 93.

¹⁵³ Sartre, *Mots* 59.

nature and the form of what he creates.”¹⁵⁴ The “metaphorical self” reflects the author’s own personal cosmology, according to Olney’s view.

V. Motives: Why Does One Write an Autobiography? Why Does Sartre Write *Les Mots*?

May categorizes possible reasons for writing an autobiography in the chapter entitled “Pourquoi?” He says there is ultimately a mixture of rational and emotive reasons driving motives ranging from the apology to the “témoignage” (*histoire personnelle*), to sentiments about the passage of time, discovering the meaning of one’s life, and trying to escape death.¹⁵⁵ It is difficult to assign a single motive to an autobiography. One may describe Rousseau’s *Les Confessions* (1764) as an apology--a public justification of one’s actions. But, Rousseau’s text is also a self-glorification and an opportunity to seek revenge upon those who wronged him, a sentimental journey through his past, and a search for the meaning of his life. *Les Mots* could be seen as Sartre’s apology for having chosen to be an *écrivain engagé* instead of being more politically active. It may also be described as an attempt to escape death, or a sentimental journey through the past.

Another motive for writing an autobiography is to serve a didactic function for one’s readers. Benjamin Franklin writes his *Autobiography* (1793) to serve as a model of a good citizen for his children and for his contemporaries. J. F. Marmontel *Mémoires d’un père pour servir d’instruction à ses enfants* (1804-1806) serves the didactic function stated in the title. In his *Essais* Montaigne also makes use of the genre for his didactic objectives: he proclaims his views on education in the first book (chapter XXVI). He believes that students should be taught to think, “former le jugement,” not simply be required to memorize masses of information. He is against corporal punishment of students as a means to enhance learning. In addition, he advocates travel as a way to

¹⁵⁴ James Olney, *Metaphors of the Self: The Meaning of Autobiography* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1972) 3.

¹⁵⁵ May, *L’Autobiographie* 40-1.

complete one's education. In abandoning his *littérature engagée* in *Les Mots*, Sartre teaches his readers that the world can not be saved by the pen.

Another possible motive for writing *Les Mots*, one that is born of the premise of this paper, is that Sartre wanted to “stay in the game,” to not be part of the past, as Robbe-Grillet suggests in a section entitled “L’Engagement.” He rejects Sartre for using literature for purposes other than art itself (i.e., *engagement*): “dès qu’apparaît le souci de signifier quelque chose (quelque chose d’extérieur à l’art) la littérature commence à reculer, à disparaître.”¹⁵⁶ But, if Sartre writes an autobiography that embraces a *l’art pour l’art* view of literature, then he can not be dismissed as part of the past because of his (failed) *littérature engagée*. Ironically, *Les Mots* is first published in 1963 (in *Les Temps modernes*) the same year as Robbe-Grillet’s rejection of Sartre is published in *Pour un nouveau roman*.

The possible motive of wanting to “stay in the game” is akin to another motive for writing--the desire for immortality. The author may seek immortality in the text: he/she lives on via the text. Sartre seems to share in this desire. He sees himself as ephemeral, while books are permanent: “Moi...éphémère...traversé par les feux d’un phare...invisible dans les ténèbres...” And: “je dresserais des cathédrales de paroles...Je bâtirais pour des millénaires...dans les bibliothèques en ruine, ils survivraient à l’homme.”¹⁵⁷ The books, like cathedrals, will survive. While he changes with the passage of time (since he is mortal), books do not change: “Quand je prenais un livre, j’avais beau l’ouvrir et le fermer vingt fois, je voyais bien qu’il ne s’altérait pas.” A book escapes time (since it is immortal). A book “ne s’altérait pas.”¹⁵⁸ Chateaubriand also wants to survive through his books: “Vous qui aimez la gloire, soignez votre tombeau.”¹⁵⁹ The *tombeau*/tomb is the book: the final resting place of the author.

¹⁵⁶ Robbe-Grillet, *Pour un* 39.

¹⁵⁷ Sartre, *Mots* 150.

¹⁵⁸ Sartre, *Mots* 150.

¹⁵⁹ Chateaubriand, *Mémoires* 14.

An existential motive for Sartre is the desire to feel necessary, rather than “de trop.” Roquentin realizes that writing the biography on Rollebon is a way of feeling necessary. It is a salve to his existential nausea. “M. de Rollebon...il avait besoin de moi pour être et j’avais besoin de lui pour ne pas sentir mon être...il était ma raison d’être, il m’avait délivré de moi.”¹⁶⁰ Having a purpose in life relieves Roquentin’s feeling of being “de trop” or superfluous in the world. It gives his life meaning. Sartre says the same thing in *Les Mots*: writing makes him feel necessary and relieves the feeling that he is superfluous: “j’avais gardé le sentiment qu’on naît superflu à moins d’être mis au monde spécialement pour combler une attente.”¹⁶¹ He finds his calling in trying to save man with his pen: “je me lançai dans une opération simple et démente qui dévia le cours de ma vie: je refilai à l’écrivain les pouvoirs sacrés du héros.”¹⁶² But, at the end, this mission is abandoned. He is again “superflu.” Or, as he describes it: “le voyageur sans billet.”¹⁶³ Thus, the project of writing his autobiography is a new project which serves the same purpose as Roquentin’s biographical project: to make him feel necessary (i.e., not *de trop*).

Regardless of Sartre’s apparent adherence to traditions of the autobiography, it will be illustrated in subsequent chapters that he actually undermines the traditional notions of autobiography, specifically the genre’s traditional text-world link. A traditionally text/world dialogue--the autobiography--becomes a text/text dialogue. In *Les Mots*, Sartre abandons the text/world dialogue of his *littérature engagée*. Before proceeding to a discussion of the parallels between Sartre and the *Nouveaux Romanciers*, Sartre’s biographies will be compared and contrasted to *Les Mots* in chapter five.

¹⁶⁰ Sartre, *Nausée* 143.

¹⁶¹ Sartre, *Mots* 136.

¹⁶² Sartre, *Mots* 137.

¹⁶³ Sartre, *Mots* 205.

Chapter 5: *Les Mots* and Sartre's Biographies

This chapter is a continuation of chapter one in which the argument of this dissertation--that *Les Mots* is an abandonment of *littérature engagée* and its text/world dialogue--is developed in relation to the Sartrean oeuvre. In chapter one it was argued that *Les Mots* is not only an abandonment of *littérature engagée*, but also of the Sartrean oeuvre. This is because the Sartrean oeuvre is characterized by a text/world dialogue. An entire chapter is here dedicated to the third category of Sartre's writings--the biographical works: *Baudelaire* (1946), *Saint Genet: comédien et martyr* (1952), and *L'Idiot de la famille, I, II, III* (1970, 1972, 1974), *Question de la méthode* (1960), and *Critique de la raison dialectique, I,II* (1960, 1985). As mentioned in chapter one, this category is of particular interest because the biography and the autobiography are such closely related genres and because Sartre applies his biographical method also to *Les Mots*. Like the first two categories of Sartre's writings--the theoretical writings and *littérature engagée*--Sartre's biographical writings are characterized by a text/world dialogue; however, there are elements of the biographical writings which link them to *Les Mots*' abandonment of the text/world dialogue. The first objective of this chapter is to show similarities between *Les Mots* and the biographies. The second objective is to argue that while these similarities seem to indicate that *Les Mots* fits well into this category, it is incompatible with the biographical writings because of their characteristic text/world dialogue. The third objective is to show that traces of *Les Mots*' abandonment of the text/world dialogue exist in the biographical writings.

Sartre's biographical method is developed in *Critique de la raison dialectique, I-II* and in *Question de la méthode*. But as early as 1943 in *L'Être et le néant* Sartre begins theorizing a method for understanding the human subject. Indeed, his existentialism is his philosophical understanding of man: man is the subject of his existential theories. As explained in chapter one of this dissertation, Sartre suggests in *L'Être et le néant* that in order to understand the human subject, one must search for the subject's *choix originel*.

This is an early choice made by a child as to how to deal with his/her particular circumstances. The biography, the text which would result from the biographer's discovery of the subject's *choix originel*, is connected to the world--the historical events and circumstances of the subject. Like Sartre's theoretical writings and his *littérature engagée*, his biographical writings are characterized by a text/world dialogue. The *choix originel* is not based on the imagination of the biographer, but on the actual (historical) circumstances, events, and choices of the subject.

In developing his biographical method, Sartre combines the Marxist notion that man's choices and actions are affected by external, historical circumstances and his existential notion that man is essentially *libre*.

Le donné que nous dépassons à chaque instant, par le simple fait de vivre, ne se réduit pas aux conditions matérielles de notre existence, il faut y faire entrer, je l'ai dit, votre propre enfance. Celle-ci, qui fut à la fois une appréhension obscure de notre classe, de notre conditionnement social à travers le groupe familial et un dépassement aveugle, un effort maladroit pour nous en arracher, finit par s'inscrire en nous sous forme de *caractère*...Dépasser tout cela, c'est aussi le conserver: nous penserons *avec* ces déviations originelles, nous agirons *avec* ces gestes appris et que nous voulons refuser.¹⁶⁴

Man is not simply one or the other--conditioned or *libre*--but a combination of both. The back-and-forth motion of man's being both conditioned and *libre*, both limited and able to go beyond his limitations, is part of Sartre's method of understanding the subject which he calls the "progressive-regressive" method in *Question de la méthode*.

In the chapter "La Psychanalyse existentielle" in *L'Être et le néant*, Sartre connects the notion of the *choix originel* to what he calls the "projet originel." He uses Flaubert as a potential subject while explaining his proposed method for understanding man: "L'unification irréductible que nous devons rencontrer, qui *est* Flaubert et que nous demandons aux biographes de nous révéler, c'est donc l'unification d'un projet originel."¹⁶⁵ In order to understand a subject, Sartre suggests that the biographer must try

¹⁶⁴ Sartre, *Question de la méthode* (Paris: Gallimard, 1960) 141.

¹⁶⁵ Sartre, *L'Être* 606.

to find the “projet originel.” This project, as Sartre says, “est Flaubert”; Flaubert’s identity is revealed through his *projet originel*. The *projet originel* is a “unification irréductible” in the sense that all of the details of Flaubert’s life would be condensed into a unified understanding of who Flaubert is. Once his *projet originel* is understood, Flaubert can be understood as a “totalité” rather than an assembly of unrelated facts for the biographer.¹⁶⁶

The *choix originel* defines the subject’s *projet originel*. This primary choice, says Sartre, defines the way in which the subject deals with his or her life. Sartre applies his search for the *choix originel* and the *projet originel* to his biographies and to *Les Mots*. Although *Les Mots* shares this common biographical method with the biographical writings, it is not involved in a text/world dialogue in the way that the biographies are, as will be argued presently. Before reiterating *Les Mots*’ abandonment of the text/world dialogue, Sartre’s search for the *choix originel* and the *projet originel* will be illustrated as it appears in *Baudelaire*, *Saint Genet*, *L’Idiot de la famille*, and *Les Mots*.

What are the *choix originels* and *projets originels* of Baudelaire, Genet, Flaubert, and Sartre? The subjects share in common that they each chose to become writers. Sartre tells his readers that he wrote his autobiography for the same reasons that he wrote his biographies:

J’ai écrit *Les Mots* c’est pour répondre à la même question que dans mes études sur Genet et sur Flaubert: comment un homme devient-il quelqu’un qui écrit, quelqu’un qui veut parler de l’imaginaire? [...] Ce qui est intéressant c’est la naissance de la décision d’écrire.¹⁶⁷

Each of the subjects chose the writer’s vocation, but what is interesting, tells Sartre, is the birth of this decision. The particular circumstances out of which arises this decision is different for each subject.

¹⁶⁶ Sartre, *L’Être* 608-9.

¹⁶⁷ Sartre, *Situations*, IX (Paris: Gallimard, 19) 133-4.

In *Baudelaire* (1946) Sartre discovers young Baudelaire's *choix originel* by examining a few defining moments of his childhood. The *choix originel* translates into his *projet originel*, which encapsulates the subject that is Baudelaire: "Le choix libre que l'homme fait de soi-même s'identifie absolument avec ce qu'on appelle sa destiné."¹⁶⁸ Baudelaire becomes his *choix libres*. The significant moments are those in which the child Baudelaire feels rejected by his mother: she marries and sends him off to school. Baudelaire feels rejected and isolated. His *choix originel* is the way in which he chooses to deal with these early defining moments. He chooses to become the source of his rejection and isolation. In doing so, he takes away the power of his mother (and stepfather) to hurt him; he, instead, hurts himself. The "poète maudit" that Baudelaire comes to be known as is grounded in these early choices. As an adult Baudelaire assures and authors his own rejection, this time by society instead of by his parents. He assures and authors his own rejection by embracing the persona of the "poète maudit" who is rejected for his marginality. Thus, his early *choix originel* to replace the power of his parents, to become the source of his own rejection, becomes his *projet originel*. This project defines Baudelaire.

Sartre reveals Jean Genet's *choix originel* in *Saint Genet: comédien et martyr* (1952). Young Genet was orphaned and given to peasants. While in their care, he was accused of being a thief. The peasants saw what they thought was Genet stealing something from a drawer. In order to deal with the pain of being labeled a thief by his caretakers, young Genet chooses to take away the power of his caretakers. He does this by displacing them as the source of the label "thief"; he, instead, labels himself a thief. Like Baudelaire, Genet displaces the power of the adults. This is Genet's *choix originel*. And hence, his life as a thief begins. He continues to consider himself a thief into

¹⁶⁸ Sartre, *Baudelaire* (Paris: Gallimard, 1947) 245.

adulthood. Sartre draws largely upon Genet's *Journal du voleur* (1982) in his study of Genet.

Gustave Flaubert's *choix originel* is the subject of three volumes entitled *L'Idiot de la famille, I, II, III* (1971, 1972, 1974). Flaubert's particular circumstances were that his parents rejected him and favored his older brother. They told him that they wished he had been a girl and that he was a failure. Young Flaubert's *choix originel* in the face of these circumstances is to turn to the world of the imaginary: he becomes a writer of fiction.

Sartre reveals his *choix originel* in *Les Mots* (1964). His father died when Sartre was four, so he and his mother moved in with her parents. Sartre's grandfather Charles becomes the only paternal figure in his life. Desiring his grandfather's love and approval, young Sartre emulates his grandfather's reverence for culture. Grandfather Charles, as well as the other adults, would admire Sartre every time he picked up a book or pronounced a few words about literature. Sartre's explanation in *Les Mots* of his early choice to become a writer is, then, no mystery. Sartre's *projet originel*--to become an *écrivain engagé*--grows out of his early *choix originel*. Young Sartre absorbed his grandfather's idealistic view of the powers of art to save man. Sartre believed that he could save man via literature.

Sartre's biographical writings are characterized by a text/world dialogue for two reasons. The obvious reason being that the text (the biography) is about a given subject's actual, historical experiences and circumstances. The second reason is that the biographical writings continue to illustrate Sartre's existential theories, which are about man's existence in the world. The biographical text is linked to the world on two levels: as genre defined by a text/world dialogue and as illustrations of a text/world philosophy--existentialism.

Sartre's biographical writings continue to illustrate his existential notions of *liberté* and *mauvaise foi*. According to Sartre's existential theories, to hand over one's

liberté to someone else is to exist in *mauvaise foi*. The subjects of the biographies and Sartre in *Les Mots* are all guilty of this type of *mauvaise foi*. Sartre says that his truth, his character are in the hands of the adults: “Ma vérité, mon caractère et mon nom étaient aux mains des adultes.” He says “j’avais appris à me voir par leurs yeux” and “[a]bsents, ils laissaient derrière eux leur regard...je courais, je sautais à travers ce regard qui me conservait ma nature.”¹⁶⁹ The adults continue to control him even in their absence because young Sartre has internalized their will. He has replaced his own will with that of the adults, which means he exists in *mauvaise foi*.

Like young Sartre, the subjects of the biographies internalize the will of the adults, which is to say that they also live in *mauvaise foi*. Sartre refers to Flaubert as an “être agi.”¹⁷⁰ Rather than exercising his *liberté*, Flaubert is “acted upon” by the adults. Douglas Collins in *Sartre as Biographer* notes the influence of Henri Bergson in Sartre’s ideas, specifically in his use of the term “être agi.” Bergson first used the term in his *Essai sur les données immédiates de la conscience* (1908). Instead of choosing to act outside of the will of the adults, instead of exercising his existential *liberté*, Flaubert, Sartre writes, continues to be controlled by their will. Flaubert, Sartre tells, “n’a cessé ni ne cessera jamais d’être pour lui-même cet enfant qu’on a tué.”¹⁷¹ His parents’ lack of love and acceptance “kill” young Flaubert. Since Flaubert never succeeds in displacing the will of the adults with his own will, he never ceases to be this “murdered” child. He continues to live in *mauvaise foi*.

As explained earlier, both Baudelaire and Genet also internalize the will of the adults who hurt them: Baudelaire becomes the source of his rejection and isolation; Genet becomes the source of the label “thief” by being a thief. Baudelaire and Genet internalize the will of those that hurt them as children. They repeat their early painful circumstances

¹⁶⁹ Sartre, *Mots* 70.

¹⁷⁰ Sartre, *L’Idiot de la famille, I* (Paris: Gallimard, 1970) 29.

¹⁷¹ Sartre, *L’Idiot, I* 29.

over and over, rather than exercising their *liberté* to change and grow. Neglecting to use one's *liberté* is to exist in *mauvaise foi*. Like Sartre and Flaubert, Baudelaire and Genet give away their *liberté* by internalizing the will of the adults.

The existential condemnation of the young subjects' inability to exercise their *liberté* seems somewhat harsh. They were hardly equipped as young children to figure out a better way to deal with their circumstances. In fact, Sartre's view of *liberté* was modified, softened one might say, after and probably because of World War II. In a 1969 interview Sartre tells that he no longer sees man as exercising an absolute, unlimited *liberté*; rather he saw man's *liberté* as being conditioned and limited by "la force des choses."¹⁷² In other words, Sartre realizes that circumstances limit and condition one's existential *liberté*. The notion that one's *liberté* is limited is present in his theories for a biographical method. As discussed earlier, the *choix originel* and the *projet originel* are understood in terms of the limits of one's particular historical circumstances. But Sartre does not forget about man's existential *liberté*: his ability to transcend these limitations.

Sartre illustrates the combination of the two: limitations to one's *liberté* and the transcending power of *liberté* in *Les Mots*. Young Sartre does the opposite of what his grandfather wants when he goes to movies with his mother. His grandfather abhors "low culture," which includes films. In addition, young Sartre reads cloak-and-dagger novels and detective stories against the will of his grandfather who only approves of "high literature." Existential man is both limited and conditioned by external forces and is still able to exercise his *liberté* within his particular circumstances. With his biographical method, Sartre connects his notion of *liberté* even closer to the world in which it is exercised by man. *Liberté* is now not just theoretical, but directly affected, limited, by its connection to the world: man's particular, historical circumstances. Thus, the biographical writings do not depart from, but rather emphasize the characteristic

¹⁷² Sartre, *Between Existentialism and Marxism*. (New York: Morrow, 1974) 33.

text/world dialogue of Sartre's oeuvre. In the second half of this chapter, however, it will be argued that Sartre's biographical writings contain traces of an abandonment of such a connection between the text and the world: an abandonment which takes place in *Les Mots*.

As discussed in chapter one, Sartre's writings may be divided into three categories--theoretical writings, *littérature engagée*, and (auto)biographical writings. The texts in each of the categories are involved in a dialogue between the text and the world. The theoretical writings are existential, meaning that they are about man's existence in the world. *Littérature engagée* is defined by a textual link to the world; the text is to be *engagé* in contemporary problems in the world. Likewise, the biographical writings are text/world dialogues: the text is a written account of historical events of a person's life (i.e., events in the world). *Les Mots* does not fit neatly into any of these categories because of its abandonment of *littérature engagée* and its text/world dialogue. In the following paragraphs, traces of *Les Mots*' abandonment of the text/world dialogue will be found in Sartre's biographies.

In *Saint Genet: comédien et martyr* (1952), for example, Sartre says that he tries to “reconstruire soigneusement, à travers les représentations mythiques [que Genet] nous en donne, l'événement originel à quoi il se réfère sans cesse et qu'il reproduit dans ses cérémonies secrètes.”¹⁷³ In this reference to the search for Genet's *choix originel*: “l'événement originel à quoi il se réfère sans cesse,” Sartre tells the reader that he is trying to reconstruct--as opposed to represent--the defining moments for Genet. He does not propose that his reconstruction is the “truth.” Furthermore, the results (the discovery of his *choix originel*) will be based upon myths that Genet makes of himself rather than a collection of facts. Because the text is a reconstruction rather than a representation and based on myths rather than facts, the text's connection to the world begins to blur. To

¹⁷³ Sartre, *Saint Genet: comédien et martyr* (Paris: Gallimard, 1952) 12.

say that the text is in dialogue with the world, in this dissertation, is to say that the text is in dialogue with actual, historical events, which occurred in the world, as opposed to in the imagination.

In the study of Flaubert, Sartre problematizes the text/world dialogue when he says that he does not care if this is exactly how it happened: “Cela s’est passé ainsi ou autrement.” It does not matter to Sartre whether or not he is portraying fact or fiction: historical events or imagined events. The biography’s link to the world is then uncertain. *L’Idiot* may also be considered a fiction in the sense that it is only Sartre’s (subjective) interpretation; it is not more true than another serious biographer’s interpretation. Sartre continues, “Je l’avoue: c’est une fable. Rien ne prouve qu’il en soit ainsi.”¹⁷⁴ He is clearly not concerned with asserting that his version of Flaubert is factual. He calls it a fable and tells us that nothing proves that his version is accurate (factual).

In light of the above quotations, Sartre’s abandonment of the text/world dialogue of *littérature engagée* in *Les Mots* does not appear so drastic. Recall from chapter one Sartre’s words in *Les Mots*: “Ce que je viens d’écrire est faux. Vrai. Ni vrai ni faux comme tout ce qu’on écrit sur les fous, sur les hommes.”¹⁷⁵ When Sartre says that his autobiography is false, he questions the text/world dialogue. When he says that *Saint Genet* is a reconstruction, based on myths, he questions the text/world dialogue. When he says that *L’Idiot* is a fable, he questions the text/world dialogue. Given these examples, *Les Mots* seems to fit rather well into the category of Sartre’s biographical writings. The difference between *Les Mots* and the biographical writings is a question of the degree to which Sartre questions the text/world dialogue. In *Les Mots* Sartre systematically, incessantly chips away at the possibility of such a link between the text and the world. In the biographies Sartre focuses on the application of his biographical method, rather than on abandoning his text/world dialogue.

¹⁷⁴ Sartre, *L’Idiot*, I 139.

¹⁷⁵ Sartre, *Mots* 59.

Another difference between *Les Mots* and the biographical writings is that in the first case, the author and the subject are the same, while in the second case, the author and the subject are two different people. This difference makes the text/world dialogue of the autobiography more problematic than that of the biography if one subscribes to Barthes's idea that in the field of the subject, "il n'y a pas de référent." Autobiographers, according to Barthes, can not write about themselves because the referent ceases to exist. The result can only be a subjective interpretation. Sartre seems to agree with this notion when he says in *Les Mots* that "tout ce qu'on écrit...sur les hommes" is false. But Sartre indicates biographies as well as autobiographies in his assessment; "tout ce qu'on écrit" about man includes both genres. Before delving further into a discussion of what makes the text/world dialogue of the autobiography more problematic than that of the biography, it should be noted that Sartre also questions the link between the text and the world in biographies in his first novel *La Nausée*.

Sartre first problematizes the text/world dialogue of the genre of biography as early as 1938 in *La Nausée*. The protagonist Antoine Roquentin is writing a biography about an eighteenth-century historical figure, the Marquis de Rollebon. Roquentin questions whether his project is a matter of historical fact or subjective interpretation:

je commence à croire qu'on ne peut jamais rien prouver. Ce sont des hypothèses honnêtes et qui rendent compte des faits: mais je sens si bien qu'elles viennent de moi, qu'elles sont tout simplement une manière d'unifier mes connaissances.¹⁷⁶

Similar to Sartre's words in *L'Idiot* "rien ne prouve qu'il en soit ainsi," Roquentin feels that his biography may not be factual. Rather, Roquentin's project is derived from "hypothèses honnêtes." He is at least making a well-intentioned effort to give an accurate portrait of Rollebon. But like Sartre, Roquentin acknowledges that the portrait is an interpretation. The honest hypotheses are still interpretations: "je sens si bien qu'elles viennent de moi." They are not necessarily factual, but rather Roquentin's own

¹⁷⁶ Sartre, *Nausée* 30.

interpretation of an assembly of facts: “qu’elles sont tout simplement une manière d’unifier mes connaissances.” With these realizations Roquentin says “J’ai l’impression de faire un travail de pure imagination.”¹⁷⁷ The dialogue between the text and the world is blurred. His portrait of Rollebon may be fictional, simply an interpretation. Thus, Sartre recognizes the problematic nature of a text/world dialogue early in his writing career. Yet, he still becomes an advocate of *littérature engagée*, which includes a text/world dialogue. His idealistic view of literature from childhood prevails, until *Les Mots*.

In *Qu’est-ce que la littérature?* Sartre says that prose is disposed to literary *engagement*, while poetry is disposed to *l’art pour l’art*. Prose, he says, “est utilitaire par essence”; it lends itself to being used as an *outil* to effect changes in society. Poetry is not *engagé* in the world, but in itself as art; the poet is concerned whether the words “plaisent ou déplaisent en eux-mêmes,” not with contemporary problems in the world.¹⁷⁸ If biographies and autobiographies, indeed “tout ce qu’on écrit sur...les hommes,” are false, if their textual link to the world is not certain, then are they not unfit for *littérature engagée* as is poetry, according to Sartre? If the texts can not be part of the realm of engaged prose, which involves a text/world dialogue, then they must fall into the realm of poetry. Viewed in this way, Sartre, in writing biographies or his autobiography, is no longer a *prosateur engagé*, but a poet: a practitioner of *l’art pour l’art*.

It is ironic that Sartre previously criticized Flaubert for not being an *écrivain engagé* (in *Critiques littéraires*). It is ironic because in *Les Mots* Sartre abandons *littérature engagée* and takes the role of the poet: *Les Mots* (and to a lesser degree his biographies) is not *engagé* in the world. Sartre becomes, like Flaubert, a practitioner of *l’art pour l’art*, instead of an *écrivain engagé*.

¹⁷⁷ Sartre, *Nausée* 30.

¹⁷⁸ Sartre, *Qu’est-ce que?* 70.

The question of whether or not any text can really be said to be in dialogue with the world will be revisited in chapter seven. In other words, it is possible that all texts are only interpretations (i.e. text/text dialogues), that all texts can only be poetry. According to the way in which Sartre describes his biographies and his autobiography and the fact that he abandons his *littérature engagée*, it seems likely that Sartre would agree that no text can really be in dialogue with the world. Embracing this notion is a move toward Robbe-Grillet's *l'art pour l'art* view of literature in which the text ceases to be in dialogue with anything "extérieur" to itself. In the next chapter, the notion that *Les Mots* is an example of *l'art pour l'art* is argued. It is compared to the autobiographies of Robbe-Grillet, Nathalie Sarraute, and Marguerite Duras. Their autobiographies are used because they exemplify Robbe-Grillet's notion of *l'art pour l'art*.

Chapter 6: *Les Mots* as *Nouvelle Autobiographie*

The “nouvelle autobiographie” is “new” in that it contests the traditional referential definition of the genre offered by Philippe Lejeune. Roger-Michel Allemand and Christian Milat define the “nouvelle autobiographie” as an enterprise that combines the referential and the imaginary (*Le “Nouveau Roman” en question 5: une “Nouvelle Autobiographie”?* 2004). They credit Alain Robbe-Grillet with the term, as does Robbe-Grillet himself (in interview with Allemand). Other critics of autobiography, Allemand and Milat report, have used various terms to describe the genre’s mixture of the referential and the imaginary: Serge Doubrovsky’s “autofiction”; Paul De Man’s “autobiographie-masquerade”; Michel Rybalka’s “autobiographie postmoderne.” Raylene Ramsay has also contributed the term “art of the impossible.” The “nouvelles autobiographies” discussed in Allemand and Milat’s book include those which are compared to *Les Mots* in this dissertation: Nathalie Sarraute’s *L’Enfance* (1983), Marguerite Duras’s *L’Amant* (1984), Alain Robbe-Grillet’s *Le Miroir qui revient* (1984). Sarraute’s, Duras’s, and Robbe-Grillet’s “nouvelles autobiographies” will be compared to Sartre’s *Les Mots* in order to argue that Sartre also wrote a “nouvelle autobiographie.”

George May calls *Les Mots* an “anti-autobiographie.”¹⁷⁹ Regarding Sartre’s preface of *Portrait d’un inconnu* (1958) by Nathalie Sarraute in which Sartre calls her novel an “anti-roman,” May says that one could replace “roman” and “Nathalie Sarraute” with “autobiographie” and “Jean-Paul Sartre” to describe *Les Mots*. Sartre’s description of Sarraute’s *nouveau roman* is as follows:

Un des traits les plus singuliers de notre époque littéraire c’est l’apparition, ça et là, d’œuvres vivaces et toutes négatives qu’on pourrait appeler des anti-romans. [...] Les anti-romans conservent l’apparence et les contours du roman [...] Mais c’est pour mieux décevoir: il s’agit de contester le roman par lui-même, de le détruire sous nos yeux dans le temps qu’on semble l’édifier, d’écrire le roman

¹⁷⁹ May 172.

d'un roman qui ne se fait pas, qui ne peut pas se faire [...] Tel est le livre de Nathalie Sarraute...¹⁸⁰

It is noteworthy, since the aim of this chapter is illustrate the similarities between Sartre and the *Nouveaux Romanciers*, that Sartre obviously had an interest in the *nouveau roman*: he wrote the above description of Sarraute's novel. Furthermore, Sarraute published her articles about the evolution of the novel--from the traditional to the "new novel"--in Sartre's journal *Les Temps modernes* ("De Dostoievski à Kafka," 1947; "L'Ère du soupçon," 1950). Like Sarraute with her "anti-romans," Sartre adheres to many traditions of the genre of autobiography, conserving "l'apparence et les contours de l'autobiographie." Like Sarraute, he also contests the genre's traditions, destroying it "sous nos yeux dans le temps qu'(il) semble l'édifier." Traditionally, autobiographers seek to assure the reader of the author's authenticity. Sartre, on the contrary, leads the reader to doubt it. *Nouveaux Romanciers* such as Robbe-Grillet, Nathalie Sarraute, and Marguerite Duras also write autobiographies in which, like Sartre, they inspire doubt as to the authenticity of the text. In doing so, these authors undermine a (traditional) foundation of the genre--that the author has (at least sincerely tried) to deliver an authentic self-portrait. Effectively, they simultaneously imitate the genre and write against it: they write "anti-autobiographies."

Another way to view these "anti-autobiographies" are as more realistic portraits of the self than the traditional autobiography. These autobiographies reflect the impossibility of portraying a complete portrait of the self and, thus, the impossibility of the project in its traditional form (as a representation of the self). This is the view that Raylene L. Ramsay takes when she calls the project of portraying the self in autobiography the "art of the impossible."¹⁸¹ The autobiographies of the above authors, she says, are a *mise en scène* of this impossible task. Some of the obstacles to

¹⁸⁰ May 172 (quotation from *Le Portrait d'un inconnu*, Nathalie Sarraute).

¹⁸¹ Raylene Ramsay, *The French New Autobiographies: Sarraute, Duras, and Robbe-Grillet* (Pensacola: UP of Florida, 1996) 26-47.

representing the self mentioned by Ramsay are the otherness of language used to render the self in writing (including the idea that language is a collection of ready-mades that can not accurately represent the self); the fact that the self to be portrayed is a self of the past, lost to the present self; and that the self can not know itself in its entirety and, therefore, the self-portrait can only be incomplete. An examination of these kinds of obstacles, as they appear in the works in question, will be the substance of this chapter.

It is the objective of this chapter to argue that in the genre of autobiography Sartre is an ally, rather than an adversary of the *Nouveaux Romanciers*--Alain Robbe-Grillet (*Le miroir qui revient*, 1984), Nathalie Sarraute (*L'Enfance*, 1983), and Marguerite Duras (*L'Amant*, 1984). Through a variety of themes which erode one's confidence in the author's sincerity--imposture, false faith, insanity, the problem of memory, rejection of authority, and the elusive self--these writers undermine the genre's criterion of authenticity. In doing so, the text/world dialogue, traditionally associated with the autobiography, is also undermined. Their autobiographies are instead text/text dialogues, and so aligned with Robbe-Grillet's notion of *l'art pour l'art*: that the text should not be concerned with anything which is "extérieur" to the text itself rather than with Sartre's notion of literature: that the text should be in dialogue with the world—*littérature engagée*.

Imposture

Sartre's existential definition of authenticity, *authenticité*, is different from the notion of authenticity as it is understood in the genre of autobiography. As discussed above, authenticity for an autobiographer is the sincere effort to tell his or her story without intentional fabrication. The concept of authenticity is intimately bound to the notion of sincerity in the autobiography. Of course, the notion of sincerity is also problematic because the reader can not reasonably be assured of an author's sincerity. The author may claim to be sincere and appear to be sincere, but there is no guarantee of sincerity. So perhaps it is more accurate to say that the appearance of sincerity assures

the appearance of authenticity. Sartre's version of *authenticité*, in *L'Être et le néant*, is intimately bound to his notions of *responsabilité* and *liberté*. Philip Wood explains in *Understanding Jean-Paul Sartre* (1990) that Sartre's *authenticité* is the opposite of his *mauvaise foi*. (Sartre only briefly mentions *authenticité* in a footnote.) It is not impossible to avoid *mauvaise foi*, Sartre says, "Mais cela suppose une reprise de l'être pourri par lui-même, que nous nommerons authenticité."¹⁸² To live in *mauvaise foi* is to avoid one's existential *responsabilité* and *liberté*; to live in a state of *authenticité* is to accept one's existential *responsabilité* and *liberté*. Authenticity is possible in Sartre's existential schema according to the above quotation.

However, when Sartre's existential notion of sincerity is added to the equation, authenticity in *Les Mots* is no longer possible. Authenticity in the autobiography is assured by the author's sincerity. For Sartre (existential) sincerity is impossible. He says that the objective of sincerity is to "faire que je m'avoue ce que je suis pour qu'enfin je coïncide avec mon être; en un mot, faire que je soi sur le mode de l'en-soi."¹⁸³ To be sincere, man should coincide with himself. He should not pretend to be someone else. But since Sartre's existential man exists as a constantly changing *pour-soi*, he can never coincide with a central, stable self: he can never exist in the mode of the unchanging *en-soi*. If sincerity is impossible, as Sartre says, then Sartre, as autobiographer, author of *Les Mots*, can not deliver an authentic self-portrait. Without sincerity, authenticity in the autobiography is no longer possible. Sartre's existential notion of sincerity (its impossibility) is then consistent with the way that he writes *Les Mots*. Sartre systematically renders authenticity an impossibility in *Les Mots*.

As suggested in the introduction to this chapter, Sartre, like other *Nouveaux Romanciers*, chips away at the autobiographical notion of authenticity via a pervasive theme of insincerity. Recall that the reader is assured of the text's authenticity by the

¹⁸² Sartre, *L'Être* 106.

¹⁸³ Sartre, *L'Être* 101.

author's sincerity. According to Sartre, one of the dominant traits of his personality as a child is imposture. Sartre's insistence on his talent for pretending and faking serves to erode the reader's confidence in his sincerity as an autobiographer. He discusses his taste for play-acting throughout *Les Mots*. This trait, he claims, is hereditary: he gets his theatrical tendencies from his grandfather Charles, whom he mocks:

À la vérité, il forçait un peu sur le sublime: c'était un homme du XIXe siècle qui se prenait, comme tant d'autres, comme Victor Hugo lui-même, pour Victor Hugo. Je tiens ce bel homme à barbe de fleuve, toujours entre deux coups de théâtre, comme l'alcoolique entre deux vins, pour la victime de deux techniques récemment découvertes: l'art du photographe et l'art d'être grand-père.¹⁸⁴

According to Sartre, his grandfather was "toujours entre deux coups de théâtre," pretending to be Victor Hugo, pretending to pose for photographs even when no one had a camera. Like an alcoholic he could not help himself, "la victime" of "l'art du photographe et l'art d'être grand-père." He was not content to just be a grandfather; he wanted to dramatize the affair, to play at being one.

The child Sartre inherits a taste for acting. He was his grandfather's pride and joy. In order to please his grandfather, Sartre learned to strike poses as well, as if posing for a photograph. While his grandfather was playing the perfect Victor Hugo-like figure, Sartre was playing the perfect grandson. The following scene is illustrative of their games. Sartre and his mother are waiting for the grandfather and spot him from afar: "Du plus loin qu'il nous voyait, il se 'plaçait', pour obéir aux injonctions d'un photographe invisible: la barbe au vent, le corps droit, les pieds en équerre, la poitrine bombée, les bras largement ouverts." Sartre knows his role:

À ce signal je m'immobilisais, je me penchais en avant, j'étais le coureur qui prend le départ, le petit oiseau qui va sortir de l'appareil; nous restions quelques instants face à face, un joli groupe de Saxe, puis je m'élançais, chargé de fruits et de fleurs, du bonheur de mon grand-père...¹⁸⁵

¹⁸⁴ Sartre, *Mots* 23.

¹⁸⁵ Sartre, *Mots* 23.

Sartre says that his childhood was resplendent with this type of play-acting, which he criticizes throughout the text. He likens himself to a clown, a poodle, a monkey, a goose, ridiculing himself for his willingness to play along in this “comédie familiale.” Sartre’s mockery of his family and of himself contribute to Jacques Lecarme’s conclusion that *Les Mots* is an “auto-parodie.”¹⁸⁶ Similar to May’s term for *Les Mots*: “anti-autobiographie,” Lecarme’s “auto-parodie” suggests that the text both imitates an autobiography and undermines it at the same time. In the above examples, Sartre specifically undermines his own sincerity. Since sincerity “assures” authenticity, the lack of sincerity nullifies authenticity. If the text is not authentic, then the text/world dialogue dissolves.

Why does Sartre make his childhood insincerity (manifested in his play-acting) a cause for scorn in *Les Mots*? According to his existential theories, insincerity would not be cause for scorn. Instead, *sincerity* merits scorn since it is a form of *mauvaise foi*. He says in *L’Être et le néant* that sincerity is an impossibility. This is because, as explained above, existential man can never coincide with himself. He can never be sincere in the sense that he can never be consistent with himself: there is no fixed self to be consistent with. But this impossibility--to be sincere in the sense of coinciding with oneself--Sartre says, causes man to feel a constant aggravation. He wants to coincide with himself. It appears that Sartre’s mockery of his own play-acting in *Les Mots* is simply an illustration (or expression) of his own existential aggravation at not being able to be sincere/to coincide with himself.

Regardless of Sartre’s existential view of sincerity, in the genre of autobiography the issue of sincerity has a particular effect: when autobiographers appear insincere, the authenticity of their story becomes suspect. When Robbe-Grillet is asked to define “nouvelle autobiographie,” he says that it is not a “contrat of sincérité” nor a concern

¹⁸⁶ Lecarme 1058.

with truth and falsity.¹⁸⁷ In his autobiography *Le Miroir qui revient* (1984), he, like Sartre, problematizes sincerity. He also introduces the theme of imposture; but he asserts that it is part of being an author. Unlike Sartre, he views imposture as an attribute rather than a flaw. For Robbe-Grillet it is linked to artistic freedom. Roland Barthes, Robbe-Grillet tells, was haunted in the last part of his life by the idea that he was nothing more than an impostor. But Robbe-Grillet retorts “bien sûr, il était un imposteur, parce que justement il était un véritable écrivain.”¹⁸⁸ The author, according to Robbe-Grillet is necessarily an impostor whose truth, if it exists at all, can only reside in the accumulation and contradiction of his necessary lies. The other option is to be a writer, which, he explains, is different from an author in that he seeks to tell the truth. And, for Robbe-Grillet, seeking to tell the “truth” is the equivalent of trying to limit freedom: “La vérité, en fin de compte, n’a jamais servi qu’à l’oppression.”¹⁸⁹ One can assume, then, that Robbe-Grillet is an author, (i.e., one who tells necessary lies) and not a writer. While the reader probably does not oppose Robbe-Grillet’s promotion of artistic freedom (or even freedom in general), he/she must question Robbe-Grillet’s sincerity as an autobiographer. He basically tells the reader that he lies because that is what an author must do.

In Sartre’s story imposture is tied not only to writing, but to his everyday life. Sartre’s doting mother, like his grandfather, encourages his play-acting. Even their daily routine is an opportunity for Sartre to act his part, here as the perfect son:

Je permets gentiment qu’on me mette mes souliers, des gouttes dans le nez, qu’on me brosse et qu’on me lave, qu’on m’habille et qu’on me déshabille, qu’on me bichonne et qu’on me bouchonne; je ne connais rien de plus amusant que de jouer à être sage.¹⁹⁰

¹⁸⁷ Robbe-Grillet, interview “La ‘Nouvelle Autobiographie’: Entretien d’Alain Robbe-Grillet avec Roger-Michel Allemand” 214-15.

¹⁸⁸ Robbe-Grillet, *Le Miroir qui revient* (Paris: Éditions de Minuit, 1984) 62-3.

¹⁸⁹ Robbe-Grillet, *Miroir* 65.

¹⁹⁰ Sartre, *Mots* 24.

He is not just being a good boy, he is *playing* at being good, “jouer à être sage.” And like his grandfather, he enjoys such play-acting, “je ne connais rien de plus amusant.”

The adults applaud his roles, encouraging him to continue playing them. He goes to great lengths for their applause. In church he would kneel like a statue to impress them. In order to increase his sense of merit during his performance, he would maintain his pose even to the point of physical pain: “il ne faut pas même remuer l’orteil; je regarde droit devant moi, sans ciller, jusqu’à ce que les larmes roulent sur mes joues.”¹⁹¹ But even the pain was false. He only pretended to himself to be in pain in order to feel more worthy of praise: “Mais je me mens; je feins d’être en péril pour accroître ma gloire: pas un instant les tentations ne furent vertigineuses...”¹⁹²

The play-acting extends to his knowledge of culture as well. Calling himself “un caniche d’avenir,” he foreshadows his desire to show off later in life as a hero/writer. As a child he would charm the adults with remarks wise beyond his years. But, he admits, it was all fake. He just put some words together that he had borrowed from the adults and repeated them without understanding what they meant.

He would pretend to read a book entitled *Le Chinois en Chine* before he even knew the alphabet. When he did learn to read, he continued faking his knowledge of culture for applause. “Le jeu continuait,” Sartre says. The adults would peer in to admire him while he was “reading the classics.” Since he was actually reading something else, he would jump up when he heard them coming, grab Corneille, and assume a reading pose. After a similar scene, the adults proclaim to have seen him devouring encyclopedias: “Ce petit a la soif de s’instruire; il dévore le Larousse!”¹⁹³ While the adults believed that he was devouring encyclopedias to gain cultural knowledge, he was

¹⁹¹ Sartre, *Mots* 25.

¹⁹² Sartre, *Mots* 25.

¹⁹³ Sartre, *Mots* 60.

actually reading plot summaries of novels and plays, which he had found in the dictionary, and then reciting them for applause.

Sartre says he had been faking for so long, he began to lose touch with reality: “Sincèrement? Qu’est-ce que cela veut dire? Comment pourrais-je fixer--après tant d’années surtout--l’insaisissable et mouvante frontière qui sépare la possession du cabotinage?”¹⁹⁴ He no longer knew when he was faking and when he was sincere: “Sincèrement? Qu’est-ce que cela veut dire?” He does not even know what sincerity means. He even play-acts when no one is around, “Jusque dans la solitude j’étais en représentation...,” imagining that he has an audience even when no one is there.¹⁹⁵ Casting doubt on his sincerity as a child gives the reader reason to question his sincerity as an adult. This is particularly true given that, as mentioned before, in an autobiography, the author’s sincerity assures the text’s authenticity.

Eventually, he becomes aware of his play-acting and this troubles him: “...une transparente certitude gâchait tout: j’étais un imposteur.” He is not able to understand his imposture fully nor to stop being an imposter. He turns to the adults for reassurance: “Je me tournais vers les grandes personnes, je leur demandais de garantir mes mérites: c’était m’enfoncer dans l’imposture.”¹⁹⁶ In trying to console himself, he looks to the adults, but this is only a repetition of his past tendencies and he sinks further into imposture: “...c’était m’enfoncer dans l’imposture.” He feels disconnected from the world and from man, having spent all of his time trying to seduce, but not really taking people seriously. This disconnected feeling brings him anguish: “...une rampe de feu me séparait d’elle, me rejetait dans un exil orgueilleux qui tournait vite à l’angoisse.” Another reference to the theater, “une rampe de feu,” footlights, separates him from reality. He feels exiled, then anguished. To make matters worse, he also realizes that the adults have been faking all

¹⁹⁴ Sartre, *Mots* 60-1.

¹⁹⁵ Sartre, *Mots* 60.

¹⁹⁶ Sartre, *Mots* 70.

along as well: “Le pis, c’est que je soupçonnais les adultes de cabotinage. Les mots qu’ils m’adressaient, c’étaient des bonbons...”¹⁹⁷ They did not take him seriously either; they were just throwing him “bonbons” as if to say “Good little performing monkey.”

In part two “Écrire,” Sartre, at seven years of age, begins to write poetry and novels. But he is still an imposter, playing at being a writer: “Par moments, j’arrêtais ma main, je feignais d’hésiter pour me sentir, front sourcilleux, regard halluciné, *un écrivain*.”¹⁹⁸ He would copy parts from books that he had read: “J’adorais le plagiat, d’ailleurs, par snobisme et je le poussais délibérément à l’extrême comme on va voir.”¹⁹⁹ Not only does he plagiarize in his novels, but he pushes plagiarism to the extreme. His entire life becomes for him a heroic novel in which he is the hero.

Sartre makes the reader wonder if he, the autobiographer, is not still play-acting for the readers of this autobiography. He recalls reading *L’Enfance des hommes illustres*, seeing himself in the children who would become great men. While reading he begins to fantasize, mixing his own life with those of the characters. Suddenly, he feels that he has fallen into the text and becomes aware of being read. Feeling self-conscious, he says he fakes for the reader: “je fabriquai des mots à double sens que je lâchais en public.”²⁰⁰ It is questionable, then, that as an autobiographer Sartre does not also feel self-conscious for being “looked at” and does not choose to fabricate words with double meanings for the sake of his public.

This notion that Sartre may indeed be fabricating parts of *Les Mots* is reinforced by his admissions in the concluding pages of the text that he is still an impostor: “mon imposture, c’est aussi mon caractère: on se défait d’une névrose, on ne se guérit pas de soi.”²⁰¹ While he has cured himself of his delusions in the sense that he now understands

¹⁹⁷ Sartre, *Mots* 71.

¹⁹⁸ Sartre, *Mots* 118.

¹⁹⁹ Sartre, *Mots* 118.

²⁰⁰ Sartre, *Mots* 167.

²⁰¹ Sartre, *Mots* 205.

them to be delusions, “...on se défait d’une névrose,” he can not cure himself of himself: “...on ne se guérit pas de soi.” His imposture, “mon imposture,” is still his character, “c’est aussi mon caractère.” In other words, he has not really changed and may very well be “faking” now.

He even suggests that all of his admissions of his imposture--in other words the whole text--may be another effort to gain applause: “je me demande parfois si je ne joue pas à qui perd gagne et ne m’applique à piétiner mes espoirs d’autrefois pour que tout me soit rendu au centuple.”²⁰² He likens himself to another heroic figure, Philoctète, saying that like him, he gave up everything, but is secretly waiting for his reward: “pour que tout me soit rendu au centuple.” In giving up everything, he pretends to lose, but in expecting to be rewarded a hundredfold, he hopes to win: this is his game of “qui perd gagne” in *Les Mots*.

He says his need to play-act is usually dormant, but as soon as he suffers from inattention, it rears its ugly head again. He says of his childhood traits, (i.e., his imposture) that “La plupart du temps ils s’aplatissent dans l’ombre,” but “au premier instant d’inattention, ils relèvent la tête.”²⁰³ He does not want to lose his audience, so he must make another effort; his need to play-act rears its ugly head again. It seems that his follow-up performance after his failed *littérature engagée* is *Les Mots*. He is looking for more applause by writing his autobiography. Interestingly, he does receive great applause--he is offered the Nobel Prize for Literature for *Les Mots*. But he refuses it.

He ends the text with what seems to be a tongue-in-cheek, final performance. He recalls his maternal grandmother Mamie’s words: “Glissez, mortels, n’appuyez pas.” “Gently, be discreet,” she advises. Sartre then, discreetly, continues his quest for

²⁰² Sartre, *Mots* 206.

²⁰³ Sartre, *Mots* 205.

applause: “Si je range l’impossible Salut au magasin des accessoires, que reste-t-il? Tout un homme, fait de tous les hommes et qui les vaut tous et que vaut n’importe qui.”²⁰⁴

He again makes reference to the theater, “magasin des accessoires,” the prop room. As if he were an actor who was changing his mind as to how he might present himself on stage, he throws the impossible salvation in the prop room; it is not working for him anymore. What is left then, “que reste-t-il?” after he is laid bare, flaws and all? A man who has made some errors in life. In other words, he is just like everyone else. An often used rhetorical device in order to gain the favor of one’s reader, Sartre likens himself to Everyman: “Tout un homme, fait de tous les hommes.” In presenting himself humbly as no better and no worse than any other man, “qui les vaut tous et que vaut n’importe qui,” is he not play-acting again for applause?

Sartre returns to the theme of imposture throughout the text. Furthermore, he says that his taste for pretending as a child extends into his adult life as well; it is his character; he is an impostor. Given the pervasiveness of the theme of imposture, the reader is led to suspect Sartre’s ability (or desire) to deliver an authentic self-portrait.

False Faith: Insincerity and Religion

Religion is a theme (albeit a minor one) of insincerity. The authors mock their own and their family members’ insincere efforts to participate in religion. Sartre describes his grandparents as being opposites of one another. This applies to their religious affiliations as well: Grandfather Charles is a Protestant; Grandmother Louise is an atheist. But neither of them has strong convictions about their faith. This is shown in the way that they decide which religion they should raise their children to be: “Par indifférence ou par respect, il [Charles] avait permis qu’on les élevât dans la religion catholique. Incroyante, Louise les fit croyants par dégoût du protestantisme.”²⁰⁵

²⁰⁴ Sartre, *Mots* 206.

²⁰⁵ Sartre, *Mots* 14.

Charles does not have strong enough feelings about his protestant faith to insist that the children be raised protestant. Furthermore, the basis for his concession to Catholicism is either “indifférence” or “respect” for Louise; it has nothing to do with the religion itself. Louise is an atheist. The only basis for her decision is “dégôût” of Protestantism. Their decision to marry also reflects Charles’ less than serious feelings towards his religion. If he were a devout Protestant, it seems unlikely that he would marry and have children with an atheist.

Insincerity is revealed via the theme of religion in Sarraute’s *L’Enfance* as well. She accompanies her stepmother to church and mimics her religious gestures: dipping her hand in holy water, making the sign of the cross, and genuflecting in front of the altar. Nonetheless, Sarraute says that she could not see any trace of spirituality in her stepmother. Her religious gestures and regular church attendance seemed to Sarraute more like efforts to be polite and proper than evidence of sincere spirituality. Sarraute admits her own insincerity as well. For her, religion was more like superstition; she performed religious gestures in order to ward off bad luck and in the hopes of getting what she wanted. Her grandmother’s sincerity is also questioned. Sarraute is not sure that her grandmother really has religious faith and speculates that she goes to church only in order to feel connected to her mother country Russia. Although insincerity in religion is only a minor theme in both texts, it nonetheless adds to their efforts to undermine their accounts’ authenticity.

Insanity

Another theme that problematizes the authenticity of the account is that of insanity. While the theme of imposture evokes doubt as to the author’s desire to be sincere, the theme of insanity evokes doubt as to the author’s ability to be sincere. Sartre compares himself to a mental patient at Saint Anne’s Psychiatric Clinic who believes

himself to be a prince: “Je suis prince! Qu’on mette le Grand-Duc aux arrêts.”²⁰⁶ The patient is actually a cobbler. Sartre says that he is like this patient; he is both prince and cobbler. Although Sartre is referring to the duality of his self-image as a child--that of a future great writer and that of a silly child--he is also raising the question of his sanity in this comparison. As mentioned earlier, because he lives his life as a faker, an impostor, he loses touch with reality. Insanity is, at least in some of its manifestations, the loss of touch with reality. The possibility of Sartre’s insanity further erodes the reader’s confidence in the text’s authenticity.

The theme of insanity in *Les Mots* might also be read in relation to Sartre’s existential theories. He speaks of insanity as an escape route from one’s existential *liberté*. But the escape of insanity, for Sartre, is a choice, not an inevitable condition. He says that “la maladie mentale” is like an exit that “le libre organisme invente pour pouvoir vivre une situation invivable.”²⁰⁷ Sartre suggests ways for understanding a subject, based on his existential psychoanalysis in *L’Être et le néant*, as mentioned in previous chapters. The basis for Sartre’s method is to understand a subject’s “choix originel.” Even insanity, then, can be understood, and treated, via a search for this original choice. If the theme of insanity is read in relation to Sartrean existential theories, then *Les Mots* seems to be simply a continuation of the Sartrean oeuvre: another application of his philosophies. However, if the theme of insanity is read as a tactic for further eroding the authenticity of the text, then *Les Mots* seems to be aligned with the autobiographies of the *Nouveaux Romanciers*. Robbe-Grillet and Duras also use the theme of insanity to erode authenticity.

Robbe-Grillet suggests that his father may be insane and that it may have been passed on to him. In the evenings, after his coffee, his father pretends to translate plays

²⁰⁶ Sartre, *Mots* 169.

²⁰⁷ Sartre. Foreword. R.D. Laing and David Cooper, *Reason and Violence: A Decade of Sartre’s Philosophy, 1950-1960* (New York: Humanities, 1964) 7.

of Schiller. But, he actually does not know a word of German. Perhaps this bizarre behavior is a result of trauma from his participation in World War II. Later, Robbe-Grillet says that the reason that his father supported his change of career--from biologist to writer--is because he is mad: “c’était un *bon* père, parce qu’il était *fou*” (Robbe-Grillet’s italics).²⁰⁸ His mother also thinks that he (the father) is insane. She says that he has “quelque chose d’un peu dérangé dans la tête, et même sans doute des troubles mentaux caractérisés.”²⁰⁹ She believes that the insanity has manifested itself as genius in Alain, but tells him not to have children. After she reads *Le Voyeur*, however, Robbe-Grillet says, she has fears about his psychic and sexual health. (Many of his novels, including *Le Voyeur* contain violent sexual images.) Robbe-Grillet confirms his mother’s fears, perhaps in jest, perhaps seriously, that he is a sexual deviant. He says that while he has no interest in having babies anyway because little boys do not interest him, but “quant aux petites filles...” (Robbe-Grillet’s ellipsis).²¹⁰ The rest of his sentence, silenced by the ellipsis, is of concern not only to his mother, but also to the reader. If he is deranged like his father, then his ability (or desire) to write an authentic self-portrait is suspect.

Duras also makes insanity a theme which, albeit a minor one, contributes to the undermining of her account’s authenticity. She says that toward the end of her mother’s life, she realizes that her mother is insane: “à la fin des choses de cette famille, c’est là que je vois clairement la folie pour la première fois. Je vois que ma mère est clairement folle.” She clarifies that it is not an insanity that arrived in old age: “Elle l’était. De naissance. Dans le sang.”²¹¹ Making sure the reader understands that the insanity is “[d]ans le sang,” Duras implies that she may have inherited it.

²⁰⁸ Robbe-Grillet, *Miroir* 80.

²⁰⁹ Robbe-Grillet, *Miroir* 80.

²¹⁰ Robbe-Grillet, *Miroir* 80.

²¹¹ Marguerite Duras, *L’Amant* (Paris: Éditions de Minuit, 1984) 40.

Problem of Memory

Another way to cast doubt on the text's authenticity is to draw the reader's attention to the problem of memory. At first Sartre says that he has "rapporté les faits avec autant d'exactitude que ma mémoire le permettait."²¹² This statement reminds the reader that much time has passed since the events of Sartre's childhood took place. There is distance between the events themselves and the telling of the events. The only connection that the author has with his past life is the memory. But memory is limited and Sartre can only do his best to tell the events with as much exactitude as his memory permits. The reader is reminded of the limitations of memory and, thereby, of the fact that some of the narration is probably fabricated to fill in the inevitable gaps of memory. Sartre refers to his childhood as "l'enfance reniée, oubliée, perdue."²¹³ If his childhood is forgotten and lost, "oubliée, perdue," then what is the source of the text? Can Sartre's portrait of himself be authentic if he can not remember his childhood? After all, the whole text is about his childhood, Sartre from ages four to eleven.

The problem of memory is an inherent problem for all autobiographers, even in the most traditional autobiographies. The author is writing about the past, often the distant past, (i.e., childhood). Since autobiographers do not have infallible memories, one may assume that some portions of the account must be fabricated. Autobiographers have, in the past, made reference to the limits of memory, but only in order to appear more sincere: to reassure the reader of the text's authenticity. Sartre's comments, taken in the context of the pervasive theme of insincerity, lead the reader to further doubt the authenticity of the account.

Robbe-Grillet also emphasizes the problem of memory. Contesting the tradition of starting with one's family history, he begins with a non-relative named Henri de Corinthe. One might conclude from this choice that Henri de Corinthe must be someone

²¹² Sartre, *Mots* 61.

²¹³ Sartre, *Mots* 191.

who had a memorable influence on him. But this does not seem to be the case. Robbe-Grillet says that he hardly knew him: “Qui était Henri de Corinthe? Je pense--ai-je déjà dit--ne l’avoir jamais rencontré moi-même, sauf, peut-être, lorsque j’étais encore un tout petit enfant.”²¹⁴ It seems unlikely that the author’s account of someone he barely knew would contribute to the text’s authenticity. Robbe-Grillet goes on to say that the memories that he has could very well be invented: “Mais les souvenirs personnels...ont très bien pu avoir été forgés après coup par ma mémoire--mensongère et travailleuse.”²¹⁵ Robbe-Grillet’s memory, he says, is “mensongère” and “travailleuse.” In other words, his account is, at least partially, fabricated.

Sarraute presents her memories as partial, incomplete, approximate. She remembers that she used to take walks with her father when he came to visit her in Paris. But, she adds, she does not remember how their meeting was arranged. She fills in what must have happened: “...quelqu’un a dû me déposer à son hôtel ou bien à un endroit convenu...”²¹⁶ She recalls a conversation with her mother apropos of her stepmother (her “other mother”) which ended with the admonition that she only has one mother in the world. Then, she is not sure if these were the words: “Je ne sais pas si elle a prononcé ces phrases...”²¹⁷ She is only sure that after her mother’s words, she felt petrified. Other memories are paired with phrases like “je ne sais plus, probablement...”²¹⁸ She is so often uncertain of the accuracy of her memories, “...probablement celui d’une villa aux environs de Paris, est-ce Clamart ou Meudon?” that the reader is constantly reminded of the limits of her memory.²¹⁹ On the one hand, her admissions of the approximate nature of her memories lend to her sincerity, and thus, the authenticity of the text. At least she is being honest about the limits of her memory. The frequency of her admissions of the

²¹⁴ Robbe-Grillet, *Miroir* 7.

²¹⁵ Robbe-Grillet, *Miroir* 8.

²¹⁶ Nathalie Sarraute, *L’Enfance* (Paris: Gallimard, 1983) 56.

²¹⁷ Sarraute, *Enfance* 101.

²¹⁸ Sarraute, *Enfance* 108.

²¹⁹ Sarraute, *Enfance* 151.

approximate nature of her memories distinguishes her efforts from those of an autobiographer who is trying to be viewed as sincere. She, instead, creates a self-portrait that is full of holes and uncertainty.

Marguerite Duras in *L'Amant* (1984) also draws the reader's attention to the problem of memory:

Je n'ai plus dans ma tête le parfum de sa peau ni dans mes yeux la couleur de ses yeux [...] Le rire, je ne l'entends plus, ni le rire, ni les cris. C'est fini, je ne me souviens plus. C'est pourquoi j'en écris si facile d'elle maintenant, si long, si étiré, elle est devenue écriture courante.²²⁰

Whereas the problem of memory is usually considered a hindrance to the autobiographer, Duras says that the limitations of her memory actually facilitate her ability to write: "C'est pourquoi j'en écris si facile d'elle maintenant." She is not even worried that she can not remember. Instead, it has given her freedom to write more easily. While this may be reassuring to Duras as a writer, it does not reassure the reader that her account is authentic. Again, if the autobiography is not based on memory, then what is it based on? Readers are led to doubt the authenticity of her account. They must guess which parts are authentic and which parts are not. The other option for the reader is to not be concerned about which parts are authentic and which parts are not. But at that point the criterion of authenticity loses its relevance, or at best must be redefined.

Rejection of Authority

Another method by which these authors arouse doubt as to the authenticity of their account is by rejecting the voice of authority. Their proclaimed freedom from the law, taken in the context of the rest of the text, erodes the confidence that the reader has in the author's accountability. Sartre's accountability is suspicious in light of his claims that he has no superego. The internal voice of authority that would monitor his behavior is absent. This is, he says, because he has no father: "En vérité, la promptre retraite de

²²⁰ Duras 38.

mon père m'avait gratifié d'un 'Oedipe' fort incomplet: pas de Sur-moi..."²²¹ Dominick LaCapra identifies Sartre's claim to have no superego with Sartre's notion of existential freedom in its "pure and total form": that the absence of a paternal figure meant that he was completely free and, therefore, completely responsible.²²² LaCapra says that this pure and total freedom meant that Sartre was forced to become his own genitor.

In the context of this dissertation, LaCapra's analysis is important in that the pure and total freedom of Sartre the man also applies to Sartre the autobiographer: an autobiographer who is constantly putting his credibility into question. If he is free from the restrictions of authority, which he implies in this passage: "Contre qui, contre quoi me serais-je révolté: jamais le caprice d'un autre ne s'était prétendu ma loi," then the reader may suspect that he does not feel accountable as an autobiographer.²²³ In other words, that he does not feel the need to follow the "rules" of the genre, namely to give an authentic account. Like the existential man Sartre who is free and responsible for creating his *être*, Sartre the autobiographer is free and responsible for creating the autobiographical Sartre: the autobiographical *être*. Sartre's claim that he has no superego based on the absence of his father is problematic for two reasons. One: a paternal figure does not necessarily have to be the father; the authority figure may as well be female. Two: everyone has a superego (according to psychoanalysis). Nonetheless, his claims contribute further to the undermining of his autobiography.

Sarraute rejects the voice of authority's efforts to impose laws upon her. Experimenting with the traditional single first person narrative voice, she instead uses two narrative voices: one, her own voice (her ego) and two, a voice of authority that monitors her as she writes her autobiography (her superego). In the following passage, the voice of her superego cautions her about writing an autobiography:

²²¹ Sartre, *Mots* 24.

²²² LaCapra 187.

²²³ Sartre, *Mots* 24.

Alors, tu vas vraiment faire ça? 'Évoquer tes souvenirs d'enfance'...Comme ces mots te gênent, tu ne les aimes pas. Mais reconnais que ce sont les seuls mots qui conviennent. Tu veux 'évoquer tes souvenirs'...il n'y a pas à tortiller, c'est bien ça.²²⁴

Nathalie responds: "Oui, je n'y peux rien, ça me tente, je ne sais pas pourquoi..." Her superego cautions her that in writing her autobiography she will only be able to "évoquer (s)es souvenirs d'enfance," as opposed to recounting them truthfully. Even though Nathalie, as autobiographer, may not want to hear these words, "comme ces mots te gênent, tu ne les aime pas," it is, nonetheless, the nature of the project, "ce sont les seuls mots qui conviennent." Regardless, Nathalie rejects the restrictive warnings and embraces the project: "je n'y peux rien, ça me tente..."

In *L'Amant* Duras's rejection of authority revolves around her problematic relationship with her mother. Among other things, her mother discourages her desire to write, a desire which Marguerite has made clear to her: "ce que je voulais avant toute autre chose c'était écrire, rien d'autre que ça, rien."²²⁵ She wants Marguerite to study math. Marguerite's writing, then, becomes an assertion of her own will and a rejection of her mother's. Getting rid of even the memory of her mother, for Marguerite, facilitates her writing. She tells about how she no longer has any memory of her mother, not of the smell of her skin, nor the color of her eyes, nor the sound of her laughs or cries. Because, she claims, she has not retained memories of her, she is able to write more freely: "C'est pourquoi j'en écris si facile d'elle maintenant, si long, si étiré, elle est devenue écriture courante."²²⁶ On the one hand, one could interpret this to mean that her account of her mother is facilitated by the lack of memories: since the memories are gone, she is free to write them as she wishes without concern with accuracy. On the other hand, one could interpret this to mean that because her memories of her mother are gone, she is free from her as authority figure: she is free to write more easily without the restraints on her

²²⁴ Sarraute, *Enfance* 9.

²²⁵ Duras 31.

²²⁶ Duras 38.

writing that her mother represents. Both interpretations encompasses the notion that an authority--the restrictive laws of autobiography which dictate that the author be accurate or the restrictive law of her mother who does not want her to write--has to be rejected in order to free her to write. Indeed, even after claiming to have no memory of her mother, she takes the liberty of continuing to write about her. Whether or not her accounts of her mother are authentic is dubious.

She also rejects the authority of her older brother, who becomes an extension of her mother's authority. He dominates Marguerite and his younger brother: "Je voulais tuer, mon frère aîné, je voulais le tuer, arriver à avoir raison de lui une fois..." But her rejection of him and "cette loi représentée par lui" is linked to her rejection of her mother. By hurting him, she can hurt her mother. After expressing her desire to kill him, she adds "C'était pour enlever de devant ma mère l'objet de son amour, ce fils, la punir de l'aimer si fort..."²²⁷ She can punish her mother for loving him so much (and not loving Marguerite enough).

Unlike Sartre who claims to have no father figure and, therefore, no superego, Robbe-Grillet embraces the father figure. He tells the reader that he has no impulses of the murderous rivalry that the son is (according to psychoanalytic theory) supposed to feel toward the father. In fact, he says, his feelings toward his father are quite the opposite (of murderous rivalry). However, like Sartre, he implies that he is operating (at least in writing his autobiography) without an internalized self-monitor: "j'éprouve comme une aisance toute neuve, une légèreté, un état joyeux de narrateur irresponsable."²²⁸

Robbe-Grillet's more explicit rejection of authority is the very system, (i.e., psychoanalysis) that insists on a universal type of father/son relationship. Indeed, he

²²⁷ Duras 13.

²²⁸ Robbe-Grillet, *Miroir* 13.

rejects any totalizing system, any “système clos,” that does not allow for any deviance.²²⁹ Thus, it is not surprising that in *Le Miroir*, he rejects Sartre’s work for the same reason-- because it is an attempt to create a “système clos.” He not only rejects, but also inverts, Sartre’s attempt to create a totalizing system of theories, be it through his novels, his criticism, or his philosophy proper. He says that, fortunately, Sartre’s *liberté* undermines the possibility of a totalizing system. In Robbe-Grillet’s description of the failure of Sartre’s theories he seems to assert that one can not be both enclosed/imprisoned in a system of theories and experience *liberté* at the same time. This rejection of Sartre echoes Robbe-Grillet’s earlier rejection of him in *Pour un nouveau roman*. In both cases Robbe-Grillet advocates artistic freedom and discusses Sartre’s theories as an attempt to limit, in particular the writer’s, freedom.

Further rejecting limitations and rules (i.e., authority), Robbe-Grillet exercises his artistic freedom in choosing to write an autobiography. This decision goes against his previous rejection of writing about the self and one’s interior. He knows that he will be criticized for contradicting himself, but chooses to reject his own system of rules as well. However, he will not be following the “rules” of autobiography either. He does not even believe that autobiography is possible. Given Robbe-Grillet’s aversion to any rules that limit the writer and rejection of the possibility of self-portraiture, it seems unlikely that he will conform to the criterion of authenticity.

The Elusive Self

Autobiographers like Sartre and the *Nouveaux Romanciers* further undermine authenticity by highlighting the difficulty of self-portraiture. Contradicting his project of mastery, Sartre presents himself as divided. As an impostor, there is an authentic self and a false self. But he is so often dissembling that eventually he does not know when he is faking and when he is sincere. The reader can not be sure that Sartre the autobiographer

²²⁹ Robbe-Grillet, *Miroir* 78-9.

knows the real self from the fake self. Who is writing the autobiography? The real Sartre or the false Sartre?

Likewise, Sarraute complicates the identity of the self. Her use of multiple, unidentified voices makes one wonder if there are indeed voices other than Sarraute's narrating her story. The multiple voices seem to reflect a Freudian model of the mind as multi-layered. There seem to be dialogues between her ego, her superego, and her subconscious mind/id. Each voice has its own version of her childhood memories. For example, the voice of her ego asserts that she used to ask her father if he loved her just to be mischievous because she knew that these words made him uncomfortable. The voice of her superego does not think that that is an accurate version of this particular memory. It doubts that she was aware of such things at that age. Her ego disagrees with the superego, saying that children are more aware of such things than adults. As is the case with *Les Mots*, the reader can not be sure which one of author's selves to believe.

Leah D. Hewitt also distinguishes three voices in *L'Enfance*. But she asserts that the censoring voice, the superego above, is a male voice. The fact that one voice is masculine, she says, is only apparent in the opening passage "Oui, ça te rend grandiloquent. Je dirai même outreuidant." The two adjectives are in the masculine form. Hewitt tells that Sarraute's use of a male voice reflects her rejection of the notion of feminine writing. Sarraute also used a male voice in *L'Ère du soupçon*, says Hewitt, to avoid having her theories labeled as specifically "feminine."²³⁰ Regardless of Sarraute's reasons, the effect of including a male voice to narrate her "self" further complicates, renders more elusive, the self of *L'Enfance*. Sarraute effectively makes a problem of the genre--the difficulty of portraying the self--a field of experimentation for alternative ways of narrating.

²³⁰ Leah D. Hewitt, *Autobiographical Tightropes* (Lincoln: U of Nebraska, 1990) 62-74.

Martin Crowley says that the very act of writing an autobiography “inevitably splits the self it presents” into the writing self and the self written.²³¹ Crowley sees evidence of the inevitable split in Duras’s *L’Amant* when, for example, the writing self looks at the aged face of the self written: “J’ai un visage détruit.” The self that has the ruined face is being scrutinized by the writing self. Philippe Lejeune in *Le Pacte autobiographique* also thinks that the act of writing an autobiography results in a splitting of the self. But instead of two, he names three resultant selves: the author, the narrator, and the character. In accordance with Crowley’s and Lejeune’s thoughts on the inevitable splitting of the self, Sartre, Sarraute, Duras, and Robbe-Grillet simply illustrate an inherent characteristic of the genre of autobiography in portraying the self as elusive and fragmentary.

Sarraute does not attempt to create a totalizing portrait. Rather, she seems to accept the fragmented nature of the self and reflects this in her autobiography. The succession of seventy mini-chapters eludes a cohesive narrative. While these memories could serve as the pieces which would lead to a (total) understanding of her childhood, they are, instead, a collection of loosely related memories that do not add up to a conclusion. In the last paragraphs, she answers the voice who asks why she has chosen to stop writing at this particular moment: “je n’en ai plus envie...je voudrais aller ailleurs...”²³² She then offers that the reason might be that this is where she feels that her childhood ended, but does not elaborate any further. Sarraute’s conclusion is an anti-conclusion, as the text is an “anti-autobiographie.” She does not offer the reader any conclusive interpretations of her life. We might conclude that she does not believe in the possibility of a totalizing knowledge of the self.

²³¹ Martin Crowley, *Duras, Writing, and the Ethical: Making the Broken Whole* (New York: Oxford UP, 2000) 257.

²³² Sarraute, *Enfance* 257.

Sartre presents himself as elusive in saying that he is constantly changing, constantly shedding his skin: “je ne cessais de faire peau neuve et j’entendais mes vieilles peaux retomber les unes sur les autres.”²³³ This description is consistent with Sartre’s theory of existential man: the “être pour-soi” who is always changing, always in the process of creating his “être” until death. The project of mastery seen in *Les Mots* seems to contradict his existential theories. A self that is constantly changing is not able to be “mastered,” (i.e., made comprehensible) until death, until the project of the *pour-soi* is complete. Thus, it would be impossible for Sartre (still alive) to master his own life; he is still a working project. Only a biographer, after Sartre’s death, could attempt a project of mastery over Sartre’s life.

In *L’Amant* Duras highlights the problem of portraying the self:

L’histoire de ma vie n’existe pas. Ça n’existe pas. Il n’y a jamais de centre. Pas de chemin, pas de ligne. Il y a de vastes endroits où l’on fait croire qu’il y avait quelqu’un, ce n’est pas vrai il n’y avait personne.²³⁴

She suggests that the self in her autobiography does not exist: “on fait croire qu’il y avait quelqu’un,” but “il n’y avait personne.” She does not claim to have captured the self; the self of her autobiography does not exist. The story that is her autobiography does not even exist: “L’histoire de ma vie n’existe pas.” If the self and the story that would constitute her autobiography do not exist, then what are the origins of the text? The criterion of authenticity can not be met under these conditions.

In what seems to be a reference to Sartre’s search for the *choix originel* in his biographies, Robbe-Grillet says in *Le Miroir*, “Si encore je pouvais entretenir l’espoir de retrouver sous ma plume (par quel miracle?) quelques-uns des instants principaux dont je suis fait.”²³⁵ Remember that Sartre’s method is to find the defining moments (here “instants principaux”) which explain the subject. While Sartre believes that a subject’s

²³³ Sartre, *Mots* 196.

²³⁴ Duras 14.

²³⁵ Robbe-Grillet, *Miroir* 56.

life may be made comprehensible via a few important moments, Robbe-Grillet says that the discovery of these defining moments would be a miracle (i.e., not an achievable project).

According to Robbe-Grillet, the self is an enigma. Any attempt to portray the self would necessarily be “double,” “contradictoire,” “fuyant” in nature.²³⁶ Thus, it seems that for Robbe-Grillet an authentic self-portrait would have to reflect the elusiveness of the self, its incomprehensibility.

Anti-autobiography as “New Autobiography”

Using the methods discussed above, Sartre and the *Nouveaux Romanciers* participate in a project of undermining their own autobiographies. Is this because they do not believe that the autobiography is a worthwhile project? Or that the genre itself is no longer valid? It seems more likely since they took the time to write their autobiographies that their writings lead to a renewal of a genre in existence at least since 397 A. D. (St. Augustine’s *Confessions*). Like the *Nouveaux Romanciers* who, Robbe-Grillet says, are “tous ceux qui cherchent de nouvelles formes romanesques,” the writers discussed here find new ways to write autobiographies.²³⁷ Thus, the death of the old (traditional) autobiography becomes the birth of the new (anti-traditional) autobiography. Sarraute suggests that the novel has become stale from excessive repetitions of the past. But instead of dying, she says, the novel, like an organism, defends itself against death by changing. She says that in order not to be destroyed, the novelist must change what he or she is and remember Flaubert’s words: that the deepest obligation of the novelist is “découvrir de la nouveauté” and to abstain from the worst crime which is “répéter les découvertes de ses prédécesseurs.”²³⁸

²³⁶ Robbe-Grillet, *Miroir* 40-1.

²³⁷ Robbe-Grillet, *Pour un* 9.

²³⁸ Nathalie Sarraute, *L’Ère du soupçon*. Ed. 1956 (Paris: Gallimard, 1983) 77.

Does Sartre not succeed in writing his “nouveau roman” with the publication of *Les Mots*? If the experiments with the novel are called “new novels” or *nouveaux romans*, then the experiments in the genre of autobiography by these same authors are “new autobiographies.” As Robbe-Grillet says, each time an author finds a new way to write a novel, he has written a *nouveau roman*. Likewise, then, each time an author finds a new way to write an autobiography, he/she has written a “new autobiography.” If, as claimed here, Sartre has written his “nouveau roman” in 1964 with the publication of *Les Mots*, then Robbe-Grillet’s rejection of him as part of the past in *Pour un nouveau roman* (1963) is invalid.

Sartre embraces Robbe-Grillet’s notion of *liberté* in *Les Mots*. Previously Sartre’s notion of *liberté* was derived from his existential theories. In his existential theories outlined in *L’Être et le néant*, in his theories for *littérature engagée* defined in *Qu’est-ce que la littérature?*, and in his literary works, *liberté* plays a central role. In contrast, Robbe-Grillet defines *liberté* in terms of artistic freedom: “Ce qui fait la force du romancier, c’est justement qu’il invente, qu’il invente en toute liberté.”²³⁹ As discussed in this chapter, in *Les Mots* Sartre finds a new way to write the autobiography. He exercises his artistic *liberté* not only in experimenting with the traditions of the genre, but also in breaking with his past (*littérature engagée*).

In 1984 Robbe-Grillet continues to view Sartre as an author who represents an affront to the *liberté* of the artist. In his autobiography he again refers to Sartre as a writer who limits *liberté*. Referring to Sartre’s *Les Chemins de la liberté*, Robbe-Grillet says that Sartre, in using the past historical tense, presents his characters as already dead, determined--without freedom. He says that the past historic tense is like a tomb for the characters. Mathieu, the protagonist of the first volume of *Les Chemins*, has no *liberté* according to Robbe-Grillet: “Sa liberté...n’est ainsi qu’une fatalité de plus, une essence

²³⁹ Robbe-Grillet, *Pour un* 30.

maudite, qui se fige aussitôt dans ses veines, parce qu'elle a été comme décidée par un dieu extérieur au texte: la narration traditionnelle."²⁴⁰ However, for Sartre, his characters always illustrate man's essential *liberté*--either by showing what happens when one does not accept one's *liberté* or, in the case of Mathieu, by showing a character who wants to be free, but does not yet understand Sartrean existential *liberté*.

In *Le Miroir* Robbe-Grillet further promotes the *nouveau roman* and its rejection of traditions. Instead of presenting a coherent world, he says that the *nouveau roman* presents the impossibility of creating an ordered, understandable world. Likewise, in his autobiography, Robbe-Grillet reflects the impossibility of painting a coherent self-portrait: "Placé devant cette entreprise dérisoire, ou bien académique, et de toute façon inutile, de dire qui était mon grand-père, je me sens tel Roquentin devant les restes dispersés et inertes du marquis de Rollebon."²⁴¹ He makes another reference to Sartre, here to Antoin Roquentin in *La Nausée*, who realizes the futility of trying to create a coherent biographical portrait of the deceased Rollebon. Robbe-Grillet, like Roquentin, does not believe that it is possible to create a coherent portrait of one's subject. Therefore, his autobiography, like his *nouveaux romans* will reflect this impossibility.

But, is this not what Sartre does in *Les Mots*? He creates a self-portrait which questions itself as an accurate (authentic) self-portrait. William Spengemann calls *Les Mots* an autobiography which draws attention to the "problematic nature of its own logical status."²⁴² In other words, it is a text in which the author emphasizes the difficulty, or even impossibility, of the project of self-portraiture. *Les Mots* coincides with Robbe-Grillet's description of *Le Miroir* as an "entreprise désirsoire." Furthermore, when Robbe-Grillet says in *Le Miroir* that the *nouveau roman* is a narrative which is in search of its own coherence and "l'impossible mise en ordre de fragments dépareillés,"

²⁴⁰ Robbe-Grillet, *Miroir* 29.

²⁴¹ Robbe-Grillet, *Miroir* 30.

²⁴² Spengemann 189.

does he not describe not only his own autobiography, but also Sartre's?²⁴³ As argued above, *Les Mots* is also a project which is "l'impossible mise en ordre de fragments dépareillés": *Les Mots* is a *nouveau roman*, according to Robbe-Grillet's above-quoted description. Robbe-Grillet's rejections of Sartre are invalid.

Sartre, Robbe-Grillet, Sarraute, and Duras write autobiographies in which they dissolve the traditional text/world dialogue of the genre. They do so by making authenticity doubtful, if not impossible. Sartre's text/world dialogue in *littérature engagée* ceases to exist in *Les Mots*. If the autobiographies discussed above are text/text dialogues, then are they to be viewed as works of fiction? In the following chapter, this question will be addressed.

²⁴³ Robbe-Grillet, *Miroir* 29.

Chapter 7: *Les Mots*: Just Words?

Sartre, Robbe-Grillet, Duras, and Sarraute systematically undermine the authenticity of their autobiographies to the extent that one must question whether or not the accounts can really be considered autobiographies. If not, then it would seem more (or just as) accurate to call their accounts works of fiction. Determining with any certainty whether autobiographical self-portraits are authentic or invented is, according to Paul John Eakin, beyond our knowledge. He determines that “knowledge of the self is inseparable from the practice of language.”²⁴⁴ Michael Sprinker takes a more extreme position saying essentially that because the referential nature of autobiography is a fallacy, it is an unclassifiable genre. Therefore, he proclaims it “dead.”²⁴⁵ Sartre, Robbe-Grillet, Sarraute, and Duras make the uncertainty of their accounts’ referentiality part of the text. These authors, through various tactics, suggest that their autobiographies are fictional. Sartre portrays himself as someone whose ability to distinguish between fact and fiction, fantasy and reality, is questionable. He calls this problem his “*délire*.” Sarraute’s pervasive use of ellipses lends itself to the idea that she is not telling the “whole story”: that she purposely hides facts. The credibility of Duras’s account is suspect because she tells her story through a screen of hatred for her mother and older brother. Like Sartre, Robbe-Grillet suggests that he confuses fact and fiction in his autobiography. It seems that he allows himself the liberty of mixing the two because of his view of the autobiographical project: he says that it is impossible. Furthermore, these authors declare or imply that parts (or all) of their autobiographies are plagiarized. If these autobiographies are works of fiction, then Sartre has written a text (ironically an autobiography) which is no longer in dialogue with the world as were his earlier literary writings (*littérature engagée*).

²⁴⁴ Eakin 287.

²⁴⁵ Michael Sprinker “Fictions of the Self: The End of Autobiography” 1980. in *Autobiography: Essays Theoretical and Critical*. Ed. James Olney. (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1980) 321-42.

Sartre's "Délire"

Throughout *Les Mots* Sartre describes his inability to distinguish fantasy from reality, fact from fiction, his "délire." He is like the Flaubert and Baudelaire of his biographies who use fantasy to escape reality. He spends so much time in the fantasy world of his books that he begins to confuse it with the reality outside the books: "j'ai confondu le désordre de mes expériences livresques avec le cours hasardeux des événements réels."²⁴⁶ If Sartre is unable to distinguish his experiences with books from his experiences of reality, then it is possible that he has confused his fantasy world from his reality (outside the books) in writing *Les Mots*. Indeed, Sartre admits at the end of *Les Mots* that he is still like the child described in his autobiography: "ce vieux bâtiment ruineux, mon imposture, c'est aussi mon caractère: on se défait d'une névrose, on ne se guérit pas de soi."²⁴⁷

His confusion of his fantasy world and the real world is illustrated in the following example in which the child Sartre views himself as a character in a book. He recalls going to a china shop with his grandmother at the age of ten. His grandmother needs a missing piece to her china set and discusses the patterns with the shopkeeper. The desired pattern is no longer made, so the shopkeeper suggests a newer pattern which is similar. Bored, sitting in the corner, Sartre begins to fantasize that he is a fictional character in a fictional scene: "Or malgré les apparences, je suis un faux personnage secondaire."²⁴⁸ He feels that in being forced to wait in a corner, he has been misplaced in the story; he is usually a principal character at home. He reflects on the placement of characters in a novel: "...certains auteurs poussent des 'utilités' sur le devant de la scène et présentent leur héros fugitivement en profil perdu."²⁴⁹ In the china shop he has been

²⁴⁶ Sartre, *Mots* 44.

²⁴⁷ Sartre, *Mots* 205.

²⁴⁸ Sartre, *Mots* 197.

²⁴⁹ Sartre, *Mots* 197.

placed, like the heroes of certain authors, “fugitivement,” in the background, while utility characters like his grandmother and the shopkeeper are “sur le devant de la scène.”

Continuing the equation of himself with a character in a novel, he says that he imagines the unfolding of his life to be like turning pages of a novel: “...le jeune homme pâle, contre la cheminée, a trois cent cinquante pages dans le ventre.”²⁵⁰ Being only ten, Sartre still has many pages to go. He has, of course, center stage in his story: “J’étais le héros d’une longue histoire qui finissait bien.” Like the heroes of the cloak-and-dagger stories that he so often reads, he sees himself as a hero in a story with a happy ending. Knowing the cloak-and-dagger stories so well, he understands that the hero prevails. His own story will be no different. Alas, he stops telling it to himself: “Cette histoire, j’avais cessé de me la raconter: à quoi bon?”²⁵¹ He already knows the ending, why keep telling it?

It is not surprising that a child who confuses his own reality with that of books also believes that he creates reality when writing his own fictions. When, as a child, he writes his own novels, he equates the fictional world (made of his words) with reality. Words are indistinguishable from the things they signify: “...je tenais les mots pour la quintessence des choses.”²⁵² Because of this equation, it disturbs him to see his words as dull matter on the page: “Rien ne me troublait plus que de voir mes pattes de mouche échanger peu à peu leur luisance de feux follets contre la terne consistance de la matière...”²⁵³ When words are equated with things, they glow with their “luisance de feux follets.” When they are on the page, they lose their glow and are like dull matter, “la terne consistance de la matière,” betraying his belief in their power. This passage foreshadows his abandonment of *littérature engagée* in the conclusion of *Les Mots*:

²⁵⁰ Sartre, *Mots* 197.

²⁵¹ Sartre, *Mots* 197.

²⁵² Sartre, *Mots* 117.

²⁵³ Sartre, *Mots* 117.

“Longtemps j’ai pris ma plume pour une épée, à présent je connais notre impuissance.”²⁵⁴

According to Sartre’s theories for *littérature engagée*, words would have the power to create reality in the sense that *écrivains engagés*/committed writers would be able to inspire action and effect change in the world via their words. In *Les Mots* Sartre portrays his belief in the power of his words to create reality as a symptom of his “délire.” As mentioned before, *Les Mots* is on one level an apology of his idealistic views of literature, which in turn led him to his ideas for *littérature engagée*. At the same time that Sartre abandons the notion that his *littérature engagée* was really in dialogue with the world, he also problematizes the notion that his autobiography is in dialogue with the world. In this sense *Les Mots* is not so different from a work of fiction.

Christina Howells in *Sartre: The Necessity of Freedom* (1988) says that Sartre’s version of the truth lends itself to the notion that fact and fiction are not distinct. Howells tells us that Sartre discusses truth in terms of the truth of the human subject. In his biographical studies, he attempts to arrive at a truth (though he never concludes that truth is attainable) via his biographical method. This method involves a study of the subject as a *universel-singulier*, a term Sartre coins in *Critique de la raison dialectique, I*. As *universel-singulier*, the truth of a subject is understood to be both an embodiment of the history in which he/she lives (*universel*) and the particular elements of an individual’s life (*singulier*). Howells explains that philosophy is the domain of universals, while literature (including fiction) is the domain of particulars. Facts are, in Howells analysis, equated to the domain of the universal and fiction is equated with the domain of the particular. Sartre, in combining the universal and the particular in his theory for approaching truth--the *universel-singulier*--has, in effect, blurred the distinction between fact and fiction. Both fact and fiction lead to the truth of the human subject. According to Howell, Sartre must consider both fact and fiction/philosophy and literature to be routes to the truth of

²⁵⁴ Sartre, *Mots* 205.

the human subject. In *Les Mots*, then, one would expect to find both elements. Indeed, as discussed in previous chapters, the element of philosophy is present in his autobiography. He recounts his childhood in existential terms. At the same time, he also includes that which is particular to his experience--his familial situation, the books that he liked and disliked, his *choix originel*. But to recall the topic of this chapter, the mixing of fact and fiction in the genre of autobiography has a particular effect on the question of authenticity. Suggesting that one's autobiography is also a fiction further erodes the reader's confidence in the text's authenticity.

Like Sartre, Robbe-Grillet admits that he confuses fiction and reality. When he rereads his words, he can no longer discern if they stem from reality or invention. In writing his autobiography, he tries to remember things about his old room. As he searches his mind for a clear picture of it, detailed visions begin to surface--flaking paint, exact positions, colors, materials. But, he says, when he sees in his mind a few millimeters of veneer missing, he wonders if he is making it up. Then, he admits that he would not be sure if he were inventing it or not: "je me dis que peut-être j'invente, mais...je comprends de moins en moins où résiderait la différence."²⁵⁵ Perhaps because he has made a career by inventing, as a novelist, he has lost the ability to tell the difference between invention and reality. He suggests as much in the following statement: "Et même, quelquefois, je ne suis pas loin de penser que le plus réel est précisément ce que j'ai construit de toute pièce."²⁵⁶ What he creates seems more real to him than what is real. Therefore, it is not unlikely that he confuses invention and reality in *Le Miroir*.

Supporting the notion that Robbe-Grillet blends fact and fiction in *Le Miroir*, Roch C. Smith characterizes Robbe-Grillet's autobiographical work as "autofictional."²⁵⁷

²⁵⁵ Robbe-Grillet, *Miroir* 172.

²⁵⁶ Robbe-Grillet, *Miroir* 172.

²⁵⁷ Roch C. Smith, *Understanding Robbe-Grillet* (Columbia: U of South Carolina P, 2000) 127.

Borrowing the term “autofiction” used by Serge Doubrovsky (“Autobiographie/Vérité/Psychanalyse,” *L’Esprit Créateur* 20, no. 3, Fall 1980, 96) to designate autobiographical writing that blurs the line between confession and invention, Smith says that Robbe-Grillet makes it difficult, and often impossible to distinguish between fact and fiction in *Le Miroir*. Smith illustrates in chapter twelve that the same is true of the second and third parts of Robbe-Grillet’s autobiographical trilogy: *Angélique ou l’enchantement* (1988) and *Les Derniers Jours de Corinthe* (1994). (*Le Miroir* is part one of this trilogy). Smith points out that Robbe-Grillet names the trilogy “Romanesques,” a title which further erodes the distinction between fact and fiction in his autobiographies. Likening the works to *romans*, Robbe-Grillet alerts the reader that the texts are not simply autobiographies, but also fictions.

These authors do not seem concerned with answering definitively whether their accounts are factual or fictional, authentic or invented. They freely blend the two contradictory elements. Sprinker would probably see their texts as further evidence of the “end of autobiography” as genre. But one might also view the uncertain nature of their accounts as reflective of the uncertain nature of experience. We do not always (or perhaps ever) understand ourselves or our experiences with certainty. Paul John Eakin does not abandon the genre as futile even after establishing that it is beyond our knowledge whether the autobiographical self is authentic or invented. Instead, he continues the discussion in 1999 asking what, then, can an autobiography tell us about the self? He decides to approach the genre, as he says, in the “spirit of a cultural anthropologist.”²⁵⁸ He uses recent research in neurology, cognitive science, memory studies, developmental psychology, and other related fields to try to understand--not whether the accounts are fact or fiction--but what autobiographies reveal about notions of the self in different cultures. Eakin’s study, like Sartre’s, Robbe-Grillet’s, Sarraute’s, and

²⁵⁸ Paul John Eakin, *How Our Lives Become Stories: Making Selves* (1999) 4.

Duras's autobiographies, reveals the possibility of reviving Sprinker's "dead" genre by moving beyond the question of referentiality.

Duras makes the blending of fact and fiction part of *L'Amant* by including elements of previous "fictional" works in her autobiography and elements of fact (events from her life) in her fictions. Leah D. Hewitt notes that *L'Amant* contains much of the same material from an earlier novel *Un Barrage contre le Pacifique* (1950) and from a short story "Des Journées entières dans les arbres" (1954). She also notes that nearly all of Duras's writings are characterized by this type of overlapping. The reader does not know, unless he/she does some extensive research, which elements of Duras's work are fiction and which are fact. Hewitt says that even though *L'Amant* is Duras's autobiography, the reader can not assume that it is the "foundational text of truth."²⁵⁹ It is, instead, another mixture of fact and fiction like her other writings.

While Sartre's childhood attempts to conjoin fiction with reality were a failure, as were his attempts to create realities via his *littérature engagée*, his fantasies of becoming a great writer were successful. His childhood delusions of grandeur translated into reality. Beginning in early childhood, Sartre fantasizes about his future glory. He imagines meetings between himself and the Holy Ghost in which he is proclaimed the "chosen one": "J'étais élu, marqué," "l'auteur de chefs-d'oeuvre futurs."²⁶⁰ His whole life will be a journey toward this future greatness: "je n'étais fidèle à rien sauf à l'engagement royal qui me conduisait à la gloire."²⁶¹ As will be seen in what follows, the notion that Sartre already knows the end of his story contributes to the suspicion that *Les Mots* is a fabrication.

Again equating himself with the heroes of cloak-and-dagger novels, Sartre imagines that he must meet with hardship in order to earn his future glory. One possible

²⁵⁹ Hewitt 97.

²⁶⁰ Sartre, *Mots* 152.

²⁶¹ Sartre, *Mots* 152-3.

hardship would be the pains of love. He considers various plots for his hardships. He does not like the plot of the anguished lover like Cyrano de Bergerac who has his heart broken and, Sartre says, talks nonsense to women. Another option would be to become a widower living in pain. Or to have a young wife killed in an accident. But no, “ce malheur ne suffirait pas à m’élire: il était à la fois fortuit et trop commun.”²⁶² In order to attain his future greatness, he could suffer as had other glorified writers; he could be scorned during his lifetime and glorified after his death: “moqués, battus, certains auteurs avaient jusqu’au dernier soupir croupi dans l’opprobre et la nuit, la gloire n’avait couronné que leurs cadavres...” This seems to him a good way to imagine his future: “...voilà ce que je serais.”²⁶³ In reality Sartre attains his glory well before death; this aspect of his fantasy does not come to fruition. But, the more important aspect of the fantasy--the attainment of glory as a writer--does. Fantasy becomes reality. One can assume that this merging of his fantasies and his reality further aggravate his *délire*.

As an adult, Sartre implies that he continues to use fantasy to escape reality. He admits that he has already seen his glory days, but continues to hope for more challenges: “En un mot je m’arrange: désabusé, je me truque pour ressentir encore, malgré la vieillissement qui me délabre, la jeune ivresse de l’alpiniste.”²⁶⁴ He fools himself, “je me truque,” in order to feel “la jeune ivresse de l’alpiniste” despite the fact that old age is creeping up on him. He still wants to climb more mountains, to be “l’alpiniste,” facing more challenges which would deliver more glory. In a sense this fantasy becomes a reality as well if writing an autobiography is a new mountain to climb and being offered the Nobel Prize for literature is more glory.

Sartre says that even reality is not always clearly fact or fiction: “Les actes eux-mêmes ne serviront pas d’étalon à moins qu’on ait prouvé qu’ils ne sont pas des gestes,

²⁶² Sartre, *Mots* 153.

²⁶³ Sartre, *Mots* 153.

²⁶⁴ Sartre, *Mots* 196.

ce qui n'est pas toujours facile."²⁶⁵ Actions themselves, though observable, are not necessarily sufficient evidence of what is "vrai" and what is "faux": "Les actes eux-mêmes ne serviront pas d'étalon." Even actions can be falsified; they can be faked (actions may only be gestures). Proving whether they are actions or gestures "n'est pas toujours facile." Sartre says that he is not even sure himself when his actions are sincere and when they are gestures:

Mais jusqu'à quel point croyais-je à mon délire? C'est la question fondamentale et pourtant je n'en décide pas. J'ai vu par la suite qu'on pouvait tout connaître de nos affections hormis leur force, c'est-à-dire leur sincérité.²⁶⁶

Given that he spent so much time play-acting, he eventually could no longer distinguish between play-acting, "gestes," and sincere actions. Whether or not he believes in his own delirium, which envelops and describes his childhood, is a fundamental question: "C'est la question fondamentale..." It is also a fundamental question as an autobiographer writing his account. If Sartre, as autobiographer, questions whether or not he believes in this important aspect of his childhood, how can the reader believe in it? The reader is not assured that Sartre is capable of painting an authentic portrait of his life when he can not discern sincerity from insincerity, actions from gestures.

Sartre suggests that we all suffer from the delirium which results from this inability to distinguish sincerity from insincerity, what is real from what is false. As he says, "on pouvait tout connaître de nos affections hormis leur force, c'est-à-dire leur sincérité." Using the all-inclusive "on," Sartre suggests that we all suffer from an inability to distinguish sincerity from insincerity, reality from fantasy. Thus, Sartre not only inspires doubt as to the author's ability (or desire) to give an authentic account, he also inspires doubt about the reader's ability to determine whether or not *Les Mots* is or is not a fabrication.

²⁶⁵ Sartre, *Mots* 59.

²⁶⁶ Sartre, *Mots* 59.

Robbe-Grillet also draws attention to the difficulty, which we all confront as readers, of distinguishing fact from fiction. He refers to other forms of writing which, like the autobiography, are theoretically authentic: the historical text, a news report, and the biography. In each case the reader is reminded that these texts are a mixture of fact and fiction. Using World War II as an example, he refers to history as a multiplicity of versions. The “true version” is not known and is replaced by the “official version.” But the official version is inevitably tainted by the reigning authorities’ personal agenda. In other words, it is an interpretation. Secondly, he tells of his experiences with journalists who, he says, “place donc sans hésiter dans ma bouche...un récit totalement différent...” in the interest of creating a more dramatic version.²⁶⁷ Thus, he reminds the reader that news reports are also not simply fact. Thirdly, he refers to the mixture of fact and fiction in the biography. He says of his own attempts to write the story of Henri de Corinthe: “Je renoue inlassablement des fils interrompus sur une tapisserie qui en même temps se défait, si bien qu’on n’en voit plus guère le dessin.”²⁶⁸ While the biography is understood to be an authentic portrait, Robbe-Grillet suggests that such writing is instead a false construction that falls apart like the broken threads of a tapestry. The biography of Henri, which he inserts into his autobiography, is an account which is surrounded by uncertainty, such that attempts to create a portrait of him could only be a fabrication. Robbe-Grillet’s references to the problem of distinguishing fact from fiction in the historical text, the news report, and the biography remind the reader that he/she faces the same problem in reading *Le Miroir* (or any autobiography).

Sartre also tells the reader that his autobiographical project inevitably includes elements of fiction: “Ce que je viens d’écrire est faux. Vrai. Ni vrai ni faux comme tout ce qu’on écrit sur les fous, sur les hommes.”²⁶⁹ When the autobiographer himself admits

²⁶⁷ Robbe-Grillet, *Miroir* 154.

²⁶⁸ Robbe-Grillet, *Miroir* 219.

²⁶⁹ Sartre, *Mots* 59.

that everything he has just written is “faux,” or both “vrai” and “faux,” the reader is aware that the account is both authentic (*vrai*) and fabricated (*faux*). This statement alludes to an inherent problem of the genre: there are elements of fiction in any autobiography. It is fictional in the sense that (as mentioned before) it is a personal interpretation of one’s life.

The account is necessarily a subjective interpretation; therefore, it is not objective or factual. The author’s interpretations of the facts of his/her life form the account. In interpreting these facts, the author ultimately introduces an element of fiction. Everything written, “tout ce qu’on écrit,” “sur” (about) men is *vrai* and *faux*. *Les Mots* is a text “sur” Sartre. It is not an objective representation of Sartre. In the case of the autobiography, one may claim that the writer has a privileged position as interpreter of the subject of the text. However, it is still just an interpretation “sur” Sartre. Because the autobiography is a personal interpretation, it is necessarily a mixture of fact and fiction, as Sartre says of *Les Mots*: “Ni vrai ni faux.” The intimate, personal aspect of the genre certainly intrigues the reader in a way that a list of pure facts would not. At the same time, if the account is (or is suspected to be) a fabrication, the intrigue of the account, as an autobiography, either disappears or becomes something else--the intrigue of a fictional work.

Sarraute’s Ellipses

In *L’Enfance* Sarraute uses ellipses in nearly every paragraph. Since the ellipsis is used to omit (for one reason or another) pieces of a text, the reader is aware that Sarraute is not telling the “whole story.” The reasons for her omissions might be interpreted as a lack of clear memories or a desire to repress her darker thoughts and feelings. Or, as Michael Sheringham says, the ellipses may be read as a “device” used to reflect the fragmentary nature of one’s knowledge of the self.²⁷⁰ To use Sheringham’s terms, the

²⁷⁰ Michael Sheringham, *French Autobiography: Devices and Desires* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993) 157.

ellipses are Sarraute's "device" and her "desire" is to create a fragmentary autobiography. Regardless of her reasons, the pervasive use of ellipses is a constant reminder to the reader that the author has omitted much of her account. Is the fragmentary nature of her autobiography an authentic portrayal of her view of the self? Or is she hiding parts of her story, picking and choosing only certain elements? In fact, in any autobiography, this is exactly what an author is doing--picking and choosing. Thus, one might say that the author never delivers a "complete" self-portrait. In constantly using ellipses to omit parts, Sarraute draws the reader's attention to her hand in manipulating the text. The author is always revealing and hiding, picking and choosing, exerting her authorial and artistic will on the facts. In the end, the account can only be an interpretation and authenticity is compromised.

The ellipses can be read as holes in her memory. As she says throughout, her memories are often unclear. She admits that she is not one of those people "qui ont le don de conserver des souvenirs remontant très loin."²⁷¹ Given that the whole account is about long-ago memories, it is understandable that her account would be incomplete. In trying to remember her German teacher/nanny, she is able to recall German reprimands: "Nein, das tust du nicht" (No, you will not do that). But, she does not have a clear memory of the teacher herself: "ces paroles viennent d'une forme que le temps a presque effacée...il ne reste qu'une présence..." (Sarraute's ellipses).²⁷² What she does remember of the nanny, she "la distingue mal."²⁷³ Thus, her ellipses represent what is missing from her memory. She can only tell pieces of her past. Her memory of a childhood physician, Doctor Kervilly, is similarly conjured up, not by her memories of the doctor himself, but by a phrase. He used to tell her how to chew her food properly. Sarraute comments "C'est curieux que son nom te revienne aussitôt, quand tant d'autres, tu as beau les

²⁷¹ Sarraute, *Enfance* 42-3.

²⁷² Sarraute, *Enfance* 12.

²⁷³ Sarraute, *Enfance* 12.

chercher...” (Sarraute’s ellipsis).²⁷⁴ The ellipsis represents what is forgotten, here all the names that she can no longer recall. Her grandmother and uncle are also sketchy memories at best. She says the following of her grandmother: “...elle ne vient jamais, elle est si loin...je ne me souviens pas du tout d’elle...” (Sarraute’s ellipsis).²⁷⁵ Again, the ellipsis represents that which is missing from her memory. The memory of her uncle is also incomplete: “Du visage de mon oncle ne m’est restée qu’une impression de finesse, de douceur un peu triste...” (Sarraute’s ellipsis).²⁷⁶

Using ellipses throughout *L’Enfance*, Sarraute makes the fragmentary nature of her memories a defining characteristic of the text. This draws the reader’s attention not only to the problem that Sarraute herself faces as an autobiographer, but to the problem that all autobiographers face when trying to accurately recount their childhood. Memories are incomplete, particularly memories of the distant past, such as those of childhood. Thus, even the memories that she appears to have access to (i.e., the ones that appear in her account) are suspect. The reader may become, like her superego, suspicious of the accuracy of her memories. The superego, from the beginning, plays the role of monitoring (and questioning) the authenticity of her account. In one instance, Sarraute is recounting a day at the park with the maid. The superego asks her what she did next. Sarraute knows that the superego is suspicious, constantly censoring the authenticity of her words. She does not let herself fall into the superego’s trap: “Ah, n’essaie pas de me tendre un piège...”²⁷⁷ Sarraute then says that what she did next was just, you know, what all the children did at the park--play, run, push their boats, etc. By generalizing what she probably did based on what other children usually did, Sarraute is admitting that she does not really remember exactly what she did. The superego continues, asking for more specific details: “Peut-être le faisais-tu plus que d’autres, peut-

²⁷⁴ Sarraute, *Enfance* 16.

²⁷⁵ Sarraute, *Enfance* 26.

²⁷⁶ Sarraute, *Enfance* 35.

²⁷⁷ Sarraute, *Enfance* 24.

être autrement...”²⁷⁸ Sarraute is unable to give specific details as to how she played: “je le faisais comme le font beaucoup d’enfants.” Finally, she admits that the details elude her: “en tout cas rien ne m’en est resté.” And she admonishes the superego, of all people, for trying to force her to plaster over the gaps in her memory; in other words, for trying to force her to fabricate in order to avoid gaps in the account. Plastering over the gaps in her memory would lead to a less authentic account than using ellipses where her memory fails. Thus, one might say that the ellipses actually lend to the criterion of authenticity rather than detract from it. Yet, on a broader scale, these ellipses serve to undermine the possibility that *any* autobiography is authentic.

Another way to interpret the ellipses is as closed doors behind which she hides her dark thoughts and feelings. Therefore, the readers do not know what she really thinks or feels. They only know what she chooses to reveal. The ellipses often appear when she describes her caretakers: her mother, the maid, her father. Her strongest emotions are tied to them and need the most censoring. She contrasts her life with her mother, which is more relaxed, with her life with father, which is more structured. Not wanting to say, exactly, that her mother is neglectful, she stops short of expressing anything unflattering: “dès le retour chez ma mère...tout a repris cet air d’insouciance...” (Sarraute’s ellipses). She does not go further than to say that life with her mother has an air of insouciance. “Oui, elle, toujours un peu enfantine, légère...”²⁷⁹ Again, she does not allow herself to delve into her deeper feelings about her mother’s “insouciance.” As a reader, one assumes that she must have more thoughts and feelings on the matter because she is a child of a broken home. She has an insouciant mother who sends her to live with her father while she carries on her life with a new love interest, a father who can not express affection, and a stepmother who only tolerates her presence. When she inserts the ellipses after describing her mother as insouciant, “un peu enfantine,” and “légère,” one

²⁷⁸ Sarraute, *Enfance* 25.

²⁷⁹ Sarraute, *Enfance* 20.

can easily imagine that more severe descriptions of her mother lurk deeper in her mind. Another example in which Sarraute hides her feelings about her mother's insouciance occurs when she describes how her mother reads to her when she is sick:

Maman me lit de sa voix grave, sans mettre le ton...les mots sortent drus et nets...par moments j'ai l'impression qu'elle ne pense pas beaucoup à ce qu'elle lit...quand je lui dis que j'ai sommeil ou que je suis fatiguée, elle referme le livre très vite, il me semble qu'elle est contente de s'arrêter... (Sarraute's ellipses).²⁸⁰

She reads "sans mettre le ton" instead of making an effort to enliven the story in order to make it more entertaining for her sick daughter. At times, Nathalie has the impression that she is not even aware of what she is reading. And, when Nathalie says that she is tired, her mother closes the book "très vite" (a little too quickly) such that it makes Nathalie feel that her mother does not really want to read to her while she is sick. The "insouciance" with which Sarraute characterizes her mother seems to be only the mildest expression of her painful childhood memories. Sarraute does not say that her mother is neglectful or uncaring. But those kinds of feelings seem to lurk behind the ellipses.

Trista Selous offers another way to read an author's use of ellipses. She analyzes Duras's use of ellipses and "blanks" in her novels, but finds that they do not represent an effort to repress or omit memories.²⁸¹ Rather, she sees in Duras's "blanks" an expression of language's inability to express experience. One might interpret Sarraute's ellipses likewise.

Sarraute describes her mother's maid with the same type of self-censorship. The maid's hair emits an offensive odor because she saturates it in vinegar as a remedy for headaches. Nathalie describes the way that she deals with the offensive odor: "Je devance la bonne pour avoir le temps d'emplir mes poumons, ce qui me permettra de ne pas respirer l'atroce odeur...elle me donne aussitôt la nausée..." (Sarraute's ellipses).²⁸²

²⁸⁰ Sarraute, *Enfance* 39.

²⁸¹ Trista Selous "The Blanks" 1988. in *Critical Essays of Marguerite Duras* (New York: G.K. Hall, 1998) 48-87.

²⁸² Sarraute, *Enfance* 23.

Nathalie is clearly disgusted by the “atroce odeur,” which gives her nausea. But, she does not want to go too far with her description of the maid. As she says after the above quotation, the maid was a nice woman and she could not help it if she got headaches. Likewise, Sarraute says, she could not help being offended by the odor. As her ellipses suggest, Sarraute does not want to criticize the maid too severely. She censors any thoughts or feelings which might be too severe or hurtful.

In describing her father, she also uses ellipses to avoid revealing her darker thoughts. While her mother is insouciant, her father is unable to express the affection that she so desperately wants. She tries to evoke affection by asking him if he loves her. She has to ask the question as if she were only joking because she knows that “il déteste trop ce genre de mots, et dans la bouche d’un enfant...” (Sarraute’s ellipsis).²⁸³ Instead of expressing how his lack of affection hurts her or makes her angry, she avoids mentioning these more painful feelings and simply says that her father does not like these types of words, especially from a child. His distaste for “these kinds of words” from a child probably intensifies her pain. It would seem to imply that a child’s emotions are not worthy of verbal expression. Whatever she may be thinking or feeling is hidden from the reader. In the following example, he does show emotions, but, like Sarraute, quickly represses them. Meeting by chance an old friend whom he shared with his ex-wife, he becomes emotional and, perhaps, nostalgic. He remarks how much Nathalie looks like her mother: “C’est étonnant comme par moments Natacha peut ressembler à sa mère...” (Sarraute’s ellipsis).²⁸⁴ He ceases to talk about the past and avoids any further expression of his feelings (which Sarraute omits for him with the three periods). Nathalie clings to this brief display of her father’s emotions: “je craignais de le faire disparaître...” (Sarraute’s ellipsis).²⁸⁵ Alluding to his lack of affection and emotion, she says that she

²⁸³ Sarraute, *Enfance* 56.

²⁸⁴ Sarraute, *Enfance* 125.

²⁸⁵ Sarraute, *Enfance* 125.

fears making this uncharacteristic display of emotion disappear. She does not, however, allow herself to delve into the pain that this behavior causes her. Instead, she omits this from the text.

As a child of a broken home, Nathalie also confronts the negative feelings that exist between her divorced parents. Evidence of their distaste for each other causes her distress. In order to avoid this stress, she says the following: “Je parle le moins possible de maman...Chez mon père tout ce qui peut l'évoquer risque de faire monter et se montrer au-dehors...” (Sarraute's ellipses).²⁸⁶ She avoids describing what happens when her father is reminded of his ex-wife. But she does not want to risk revealing what she does not want to name. One can assume that what she does not want to describe is her father's (perhaps intense) distaste for his ex-wife. When her superego suggests that her father's feelings might be called “contempt,” she says that she does not give her father's feelings a name. It is as if verbalizing his hatred would make it even more painful, more real.

It is difficult not to see the psychological and psychoanalytical elements in an autobiography by Sarraute: one because the multiple voices appear to represent various modes of the Freudian model of consciousness; two because her oeuvre is characterized by her examination of microscopic evidence of our psychology starting with her first novel *Tropisms* (1939). If we apply Diane Bjorklund's view of autobiographies, Sarraute's inclusion of psychological and psychoanalytical elements is a voicing of twentieth century culture (*Interpreting the Self: Two Hundred Years of American Autobiography*, 1998). Bjorklund studies one hundred and ten American autobiographies published since 1800 to see how concepts of the self are affected by culture and history. According to Bjorklund's study, Sarraute's concept of the self would not be merely a personal portrait, but also a portrait of the culture in which she lives. Freud's early twentieth-century model of the consciousness along with an infinite number of

²⁸⁶ Sarraute, *Enfance* 123.

discoveries and studies since Freud create a culture that is, to some extent, obsessed with understanding the human mind. Sarraute gives voice to these predominant cultural factors in her work.

As discussed earlier, the idea that culture affects the formation of the self is part of Sartre's biographical method. Sartre's "self" is a combination of external forces, like culture, and the individual's particular way of dealing with such forces. Following Sartre's biographical model, Sarraute's "self" is a combination of external cultural forces like psychology and psychoanalysis and her individual way of dealing with these forces: in Sarraute's case, she makes such forces a part of her art in her own Sarrautian style.

The idea that the autobiography refers to, or voices, culture and history problematizes the notion of referentiality in its autobiographical application. According to Lejeune's traditional definition, the autobiography refers to the history of the personality of the subject. If instead, the autobiography refers to culture and history, can the account still be considered referential? Sartre's biographical method seems to resolve this seeming dilemma in that he views the "self" as a combination of both the particularities of the individual and external forces like culture and history. If the self is necessarily both, then the (auto)biographical account should refer to both.

Duras's Resentment

If a distanced, objective tone is used when recounting facts, then Duras's intense feelings of resentment, even hatred, in *L'Amant* must recount something other than facts. The intensely subjective nature of her autobiography is, on the one hand, appropriate because it is a personal account. On the other hand, her intense negative feelings make one intensely aware that such feelings make an objective, factual account unlikely, if not impossible. Duras's account of her family, particularly of her mother, is suspect because it is told through the screen of her proclaimed hatred of her. Early in the text she says that she wanted to kill her older brother in front of her mother in order to hurt her for loving him so much. The older brother is favored by the mother at the expense of

Marguerite. Even Marguerite's proclamation of her most cherished desire--to become a writer--is not enough to rally some motherly support. She describes her mother's reaction: "Jalouse elle est. Pas de réponse, un regard bref aussitôt détourné, le petit haussement d'épaules, inoubliable."²⁸⁷ "Inoubliable"--Marguerite will not forget this painful memory of her mother's dismissive attitude towards her dreams. In addition to the dismissive brief look and shrug of the shoulders, her mother follows up with the suggestion that she study mathematics. When a teacher reports to her mother that Marguerite is first in class in French, the response is again dismissive: "Ma mère ne dit rien, rien, pas contente parce que c'est pas ses fils qui sont les premiers en français..." Marguerite cannot wait to leave her mother's home: "Je serai la première à partir. Il faudra attendre encore quelques années pour qu'elle me perde..." She does leave as soon as possible and has little contact with her family thereafter.

Marguerite obviously becomes a writer despite her mother's lack of support and possibly finds some bittersweet revenge by painting a negative picture of her mother in *L'Amant*. Because the reader knows of Marguerite's love/hate relationship with her mother, the authenticity of the mother's portrait is suspect. Was her mother really as bad as she suggests or is revenge flowing through Marguerite's pen? Given that Marguerite says that the reason she writes so easily of her mother now is because she has forgotten everything about her, it is certainly not unlikely that the parts about her mother are fabricated. So, when Duras tells of how her mother lived her last years in a chateau in Loir-et-Cher with six hundred baby chickens, which died because she failed to feed them, and had four to six sheep in her bedroom when it was freezing outside, one has to wonder if this really happened or if Duras is deforming or exaggerating the portrait of her mother.

To further complicate matters, Karen Kaivola in "Marguerite Duras and the Subversion of Power" (1991) questions whether it is really her mother that is portrayed in

²⁸⁷ Duras 31.

L'Amant (in *Critical Essays on Marguerite Duras*). Kaivola sees in the portrait of the mother characteristics of a personage from one of Duras's novels: the beggar woman in *Le Vice-Consul* (1965). If Kaivola is correct, then the factual, autobiographical aspect of the mother's portrait is instead (at least partially) fictional. The portrait of the mother, then, is not so different from a character in a novel who happens to be based upon an actual person.

Marguerite concludes that her mother is insane: "Je vois que ma mère est clairement folle...De naissance. Dans le sang."²⁸⁸ But it is uncertain whether this is her resentment talking or an authentic portrait of her mother. When she reports that her older brother still lived with their mother at the age of fifty, gambled away the woods given to him by his mother, and still did not know how to earn a living, is she seeking revenge upon her brother through slanderous fictions? A definitive answer to these questions is not available in the text. But her hatred for her mother and older brother, coupled with the statement that she writes so easily now because her memories are gone, certainly casts doubt on her account. *L'Amant* is possibly the story of her hatred rather than an account of herself and her family. Is this not the case in any autobiography? The author's feelings are necessarily involved; therefore, a distanced, objective, factual account is impossible.

Duras, according to Michael Bishop in "The Poetry of Marguerite Duras," was not herself concerned with knowing (in *Critical Essays on Marguerite Duras*). Bishop says that her work is characterized by her lack of knowing and lack of emphasis upon the necessity of knowing. He observes that phrases like "I don't know," "I no longer know," "I forget," and "Perhaps, I'm not sure" are scattered throughout her writings. Even her comments on writing, Bishop points out, reflect her de-emphasis upon knowing. She says in *La Vie matérielle* for example that she does not know what writing is and of the

²⁸⁸ Duras 40.

character Lol V. Stein in *Le Ravissement de Lol V. Stein* (1964) that nobody, even Duras herself, can know her. Her lack of concern for knowing the subjects of her writings, or even knowing what writing is, further problematizes the factual nature of her autobiography. When Duras says in *L'Amant* "C'est fini, je ne me souviens plus. C'est pourquoi j'en écris si facile d'elle maintenant, si long, si étiré, elle est devenue écriture courante," she lets the reader know that it does not bother her that she no longer remembers--or knows--the story of her mother.²⁸⁹ The not knowing not only does not bother her, it allows to write more easily. For Bishop an aesthetics of not knowing or the unknowable is a poetic quality in Duras's oeuvre. For the reader of an autobiography, the author's aesthetics of not knowing may indeed be poetic, but it also lends to the uncertainty of the factual or fictional nature of the text.

Robbe-Grillet's Disbelief

Robbe-Grillet's attitude toward the genre of autobiography begins as dismissive and disinterested. He says that he began *Le Miroir* around 1976. It is now 1983 and the project has barely advanced, having been "abandonné sans cesse au profit de tâches ...plus urgentes."²⁹⁰ The more urgent projects are, apparently, his fictional works--two novels and a film--which he says were published between 1976 and 1983. The initial dismissive attitude toward the project evolves into a disbelief in the possibility of the project, as illustrated in the following passage. Robbe-Grillet draws attention to the presence of fiction in his autobiography, planting more seeds of doubt vis-à-vis authenticity. In *Le Miroir* he begins with a warning to the reader:

Je ne suis pas homme de vérité, ai-je dit, ni non plus de mensonge, ce qui reviendrait au même. Je suis une sorte d'explorateur, résolu, mal armé, imprudent, qui ne croit pas à l'existence antérieure ni durable du pays où il trace, jour après jour, un chemin possible. Je ne suis pas maître à penser, mais un compagnon de route, d'invention, d'aléatoire recherche.²⁹¹

²⁸⁹ Duras 38.

²⁹⁰ Robbe-Grillet, *Miroir* 7.

²⁹¹ Robbe-Grillet, *Miroir* 13.

Like Sartre's warning "ce que je viens d'écrire est faux. Vrai. Ni vrai ni faux comme tout ce qu'on écrit...", Robbe-Grillet refers to the mixture of fact and fiction in his account: "Je ne suis pas homme de vérité...ni non plus de mensonge." He does not tell the truth, "vérité," nor lies, "mensonge." He does not even believe that the factual past, which he should recount, exists. He does not believe "à l'existence antérieure ni durable du pays où il trace." Since his past no longer exists, all he can do is create "un chemin possible," based on what he can (re)create of his past. As autobiographer, he is only an "explorateur" "mal armé" because he does not have access to facts.

Sarraute alludes to the fictional aspects of her account. The voice of her superego questions the possibility of authenticity in a particularly poetic childhood memory: "Ne te fâche pas, mais ne crois-tu pas que là, avec ces roucoulements, ces pépiements, tu n'as pas pu t'empêcher de placer un petit morceau de préfabriqué...C'est si tentant..."²⁹² Has Sarraute not allowed a little of the "préfabriqué" in her interpretations with these "roucoulements," these "pépiements"? Nathalie admits that perhaps she has fabricated a bit: "Oui, je me suis peut-être un peu laissée aller..." The admission that she fabricated this particular memory alerts the reader to the possibility that any given passage could also be fabricated.

Plagiarism

Further doubt as to whether or not these autobiographies are really about the authors is developed through the theme of plagiarism. If the texts are not really about the authors, then they can not be accurately described as autobiographies. As mentioned before, Sartre enjoys plagiarizing texts as a child. He fills his notebook with plagiarized stories: "L'argument, les personnages, le détail des aventures, le titre même, j'avais tout emprunté à un récit en images paru le trimestre précédent." If he enjoys plagiarism so much, perhaps he has plagiarized parts of *Les Mots*.

²⁹² Sarraute, *Enfance* 21.

Sarraute also admits to having plagiarized in her childhood, specifically an autobiographical essay. She says that she had no interest in telling of her own experience. Like Sartre she is reassured of the quality of her own writing via the quality of the original text. Thus, authenticity was of no concern. She is interested in putting together a model of sorrow, the best looking version, the one that is the most “présentable,” the most “séduisant.”²⁹³ This admission suggests to the reader that the adult Sarraute may also feel such temptations.

Sartre further erodes the reader’s confidence in his ability to distinguish fantasy from reality by saying that he still considers himself an original author even when he plagiarizes: “Me tenais-je pour un copiste? Non. Mais pour un auteur originel...”²⁹⁴ He confuses the original author’s publication with his own. He does not consider it plagiarism at the time, since he retouches this, enlivens that, and changes the names of the characters: “Ces légères altérations m’autorisaient à confondre la mémoire et l’imagination.”²⁹⁵ Since Sartre repeatedly confesses that his essential character has remained the same even as an adult, the reader must wonder if he does not still confuse memory with imagination and fact with fiction. If, indeed, he still suffers from this *délire*, then the reader cannot feel confident that *Les Mots* is based on reality rather than imagination.

He subsequently leads the reader to suspect that he may have plagiarized parts of a text called *L’Enfance des hommes illustres*, a biography about the childhood of future great men, “hommes illustres.” In the passage where he discusses his experience with this text, there are implications that he confuses himself with the personages in the text. Their lives are so parallel as future great men: “...l’enfance de Jean-Paul ressemblait à celles de Jean-Jacques et de Jean-Sébastien,” that Sartre imagines himself as part of the

²⁹³ Sarraute, *Enfance* 196.

²⁹⁴ Sartre, *Mots* 118.

²⁹⁵ Sartre, *Mots* 118.

story when he falls into the text: “...puis tout basculait: je me retrouvais de l’autre côté de la page, *dans le livre*.”²⁹⁶ Their names are similar--Jean-Paul, Jean-Jacques, Jean-Sébastien--and their childhood stories are parallel in that they will all grow up to be great men. Even after he stops reading, he still feels that he is a character in the book: “Je ne pus sortir du livre: j’en avais depuis longtemps terminé la lecture mais j’en restais un personnage.”²⁹⁷ His confusion is such that he later feels a stranger to himself; part of him is missing, still in the text. It is not unlikely that an admitted plagiarizer who confuses his own reality with that of characters in a book to the extent that he gets stuck in the book might have “transposed” parts of *L’Enfance des hommes illustres* into his autobiography.

Robbe-Grillet admits that in two of his novels--*Instantanés* and *Un régicide*--he may have transposed a nightmarish seaside scene from a short story by Rudyard Kipling called “The Best Story in the World.” Furthermore, he suggests, this aquatic scene stolen from Kipling is now part of his own nightmares as well as part of his autobiography. In addition, he says that the (possibly fictional) character in *Le Miroir*, Henri de Corinthe, may have been borrowed, at least partially, from Sartre’s Marquis de Rollebbon in *La Nausée* or from a character named Stavrogin in a Dostoevsky novel.

Sartre further arouses suspicion that he plagiarized *L’Enfance* when he equates the way his life unfolds with the way that the lives of the “hommes illustres” unfold. The lives of the “hommes illustres” start with the end; everything that occurs during their lives leads to their future greatness: “Ces enfants vivaient dans l’erreur: ils croyaient agir et parler au hasard quand leurs moindres propos avaient pour but réel d’annoncer leur Destin.”²⁹⁸ Everything that happens in their young lives is not “au hasard,” but premonitory of their destinies. Like these future great men, Sartre says of his own life that he lived as if the end were already written: “je choisis pour avenir un passé de grand

²⁹⁶ Sartre, *Mots* 166.

²⁹⁷ Sartre, *Mots* 167.

²⁹⁸ Sartre, *Mots* 166.

mort et j’essayai de vivre à l’envers. Entre neuf et dix ans, je devins tout à fait posthume.”²⁹⁹ Like the predestined personages of *L’Enfance*, Sartre’s end is already known. The rest of his life/his story is presented “tout à fait posthume,” as if its author were already dead. He continues the conviction that he is living his life backwards as an adult. While his friends had earthly concerns like women and cars, he was only on earth to fulfill his destiny: “j’allais doucement vers ma fin, n’ayant d’espoirs et de désirs que ce qu’il en fallait pour remplir mes livres...” He is freed from any concern other than writing books. While others worried about death, he found immortality in his preconceived end: “...je m’étais tué d’avance parce que les défunts sont seuls à jouir de l’immortalité.”³⁰⁰ Unlike the Sartre who authors the theory of existential “liberté,” in which man is condemned to be free (and responsible) at every moment, this younger Sartre is a determinist: “...je m’étais persuadé que tout était écrit d’avance, mieux encore, révolu.”³⁰¹ Is *Les Mots* about Sartre or about one of the men from *L’Enfance*?

Given Sartre’s admitted weakness for plagiarism and desire for glory, the reader can not feel certain that Sartre has not invented his own childhood sense of predestination in order to create parallels between his story and those of the “hommes illustres.” While the future “hommes illustres” are not aware that the “moindres propos” of their childhood foreshadow their future greatness, Sartre does understand this while reading *L’Enfance*: “L’auteur et moi nous échangeons des sourires attendris par-dessus leurs têtes; je lisais la vie de ces faux médiocres comme Dieu l’avait conçue: en commençant par la fin.” Sartre identifies with the characters, “c’étaient mes frères,” and he desires the same type of story for himself, “leur gloire serait la mienne.” The story that is “leur gloire” will be his. He imagines his story being read in the same way, starting from the end: “Moi, j’étais vu, de la mort à la naissance...”³⁰² Given that the autobiographer Sartre already

²⁹⁹ Sartre, *Mots* 162.

³⁰⁰ Sartre, *Mots* 161.

³⁰¹ Sartre, *Mots* 162.

³⁰² Sartre, *Mots* 166.

knows the end of his story--his future glory--he is in a position to have invented a childhood which would benefit the end. Furthermore, he has at his disposal a set of model stories for the childhood of a future great man--*L'Enfance des hommes illustres*. Since he has admitted that his memory is faulty, perhaps he resorts to these models to compensate. The implication that *Les Mots* may be plagiarized from *L'Enfance des hommes illustres* further erodes the reader's confidence that *Les Mots* is about Sartre.

Robbe-Grillet also uses another text entitled "The Ghost in the mirror" to inspire the content of his autobiography. One finds out in the end of *Le Miroir* that Henri de Corinthe is the protagonist in a story called "The Ghost in the mirror." Since Robbe-Grillet's autobiography is entitled *Le Miroir qui revient*, translated as *Ghosts in the Mirror*, one has to wonder if Robbe-Grillet's autobiography is actually plagiarized from the story about Henri de Corinthe.

Again, through various, often similar tactics, these authors have eroded the authenticity of their texts to the extent that it seems likely that the texts are fabrications (works of fiction). Thus, in writing *Les Mots* Sartre has relinquished his view that literature must be *engagé*/in dialogue with the world. Ironically, or perhaps poignantly, he creates a text/text dialogue in a genre traditionally in dialogue with the world--the autobiography. The focus of the next chapter is the contradictory nature of these "anti-autobiographies" and the effect of contradiction upon the criterion of authenticity.

Chapter 8: *Les Mots: Anti-Autobiographie*

The autobiographies of Sartre, Robbe-Grillet, Sarraute, and Duras are contradictory in nature because, on the one hand, the authors pretend to write an authentic account and, on the other hand, seek to undermine the account's authenticity. As May says of *Les Mots*, these texts are, in effect, "anti-autobiographies." The contradictory nature of these authors' autobiographies has already been illustrated in chapters six and seven. The present chapter continues to develop the idea that these texts are "anti-autobiographies." Sartre makes the notion of self-contradiction a major theme throughout *Les Mots*. Similarly, Robbe-Grillet, Sarraute, and Duras make statements which contribute to the construction of their self-portraits, but then second-guess these same statements. When their claims are so often contradicted by the denial of their facticity, what can the reader believe? The overall objective of this work is to argue that Sartre has aligned his view of literature with that of the *Nouveaux Romanciers* in writing *Les Mots*. In service of this objective the following questions will be addressed: Why does writing an anti-autobiography like *Les Mots* support the argument that Sartre has abandoned his previous notions of literature (i.e., *littérature engagée*) and illustrate an allegiance to a *l'art pour l'art* view of literature?

Creating an Anti-self-portrait

It is worth noting that Sartre describes his autobiography as being a text which contradicts itself: "Le sens du style dans *Les Mots*, c'est que le livre est un adieu à la littérature: un objet qui se conteste soi-même doit être écrit le mieux possible."³⁰³ Since *Les Mots* is intended to be his "adieu" to literature, it seems that he has created a text which disappears through self-contradiction just as Sartre disappears (more or less) from the literary scene. Sartre's use of contradiction serves to erase his story at the same time that he tells it. In order to create a network of oppositions, which are the building blocks

³⁰³ Sartre, *Situations, X* (Paris: Gallimard, 19) 94.

of his story, the text must be written “le mieux possible.” In other words, he carefully contradicts his own claims, creating a text which “se conteste soi-même.” Denis Boak notes the deconstructing nature of *Les Mots* in *Sartre: Les Mots* (1987). Although he does not go far beyond mentioning this as an aspect of the text, he does give an example. He notes that the text deconstructs Sartre’s idea of existential choice because in *Les Mots* Sartre claims that his thirty years of “folie” are a product of his family and his environment. This directly contradicts existential choice which, as discussed earlier in this dissertation, is defined by man’s essential *liberté*.

Les Mots is largely the story of a child destined to greatness. However, Sartre scatters contradictions to this notion throughout. While at home, young Sartre was taught to believe that he was exceptionally talented and intelligent: “J’étais le premier, l’incomparable dans mon île aérienne.” His is first, “le premier,” in the isolated “île” that is his home. At school, however, he loses his superiority: “... je tombai au dernier rang quand on me soumit aux règles communes.”³⁰⁴ At home the doting adults idolize and praise him; he is considered a superior child. But when he is measured by the “règles communes” outside his isolated “île,” he is at the bottom of the totem pole, “au dernier rang.” This would seem to imply that his qualities may have only been in the minds of his adoring family and not a reality. While his family believed him to be a dispenser of culture and a child prodigy destined to become an “homme des Belles-Lettres,” his experiences at school reveal his scholastic inferiority.

The school alerts Grandfather Charles that his grandson needs to be in a much lower grade than Charles believed. Upset by the news, which contradicts his image of his grandson, he removes Sartre from the school and opts for a home tutor. But again, an outside judge, the tutor, finds Sartre to be less than exceptional, as Sartre admits: “... je crois qu’il me prenait non sans raison pour un enfant retardé.” Again, Sartre’s superiority

³⁰⁴ Sartre, *Mots* 65.

is contradicted; he is considered a slow child. Sartre's self-image depended upon the praise of the adults. Since the tutor does not coddle him, he inspires Sartre's hatred: "Je le détestais parce qu'il oubliait de me choyer..." The tutor disappears, "peut-être s'était-il ouvert à quelqu'un de son opinion sur moi," says Sartre.³⁰⁵ Dissenting opinion is probably not acceptable to Grandfather Charles.

Later, enrolled again in school, his report cards reveal his mediocrity and lack of special talents: "enfant d'intelligence moyenne...peu doué pour les sciences exactes, imaginaire sans excès...normalité parfaite..."³⁰⁶ He is of average intelligence, not gifted for the exact sciences, and not excessively imaginative: perfectly normal. These descriptions hardly affirm Sartre's self-image as a child destined for greatness. His writing skills were sub-par: "À la première composition, je fus dernier." Other students were smarter and quicker than he: "...il se trouvait toujours quelqu'un pour répondre mieux ou plus vite que moi." But despite evidence to the contrary, Sartre continues to nourish his beliefs in his future glory: "J'étais trop aimé pour me remettre en question...j'aurais mon tour."³⁰⁷ His persistent belief in himself is certainly admirable. But the revelations of mediocrity contradict the idea that he was an exceptional child.

Sartre portrays himself as someone who lives for his ultimate glory. Achieving this glory is more important than anything else. Yet, when he finally has friends, all he wants is to blend in: "...je n'avais qu'une passion: m'intégrer."³⁰⁸ Is his sole passion his future glory or the desire to be part of the crowd? Further contradicting his self-image of superiority, he says that he wanted to be subordinate, even obedient to them: "loin de vouloir briller, je riais en écho, je répétais les mots d'ordre et les bons mots, je me taisais,

³⁰⁵ Sartre, *Mots* 66.

³⁰⁶ Sartre, *Mots* 170.

³⁰⁷ Sartre, *Mots* 179.

³⁰⁸ Sartre, *Mots* 180-1.

j'obéissais..."³⁰⁹ He does not want to shine, "briller," he wants to fit in, "riais en écho," and even obeys them.

The notion that young Sartre is a future great writer, a dispenser of culture, is contradicted by the fact that he actually prefers "low" literature. His mother and he would stop at a kiosk to get colorful magazines and books containing adventure stories and fairy tales, rather than the classics. This preference, says Sartre, is still applicable. He still prefers detective novels and thrillers in a series called "Série Noire," to the "high" literature of Ludwig Wittgenstein.³¹⁰

While *Les Mots* is the story of a person who sees himself as superior, in the conclusion Sartre asserts the opposite--that he is just like everyone else. In the last paragraph he says that he is no better and no worse than any other man: "Tout un homme, fait de tous les hommes et qui les vaut tous et que vaut n'importe qui."³¹¹ A man who has made mistakes in his life, he is just like everyone else, "Tout un homme, fait de tous les hommes." Throughout *Les Mots* Sartre refers to himself as a king, a prince, a gift from heaven, the chosen. Now, in the conclusion, he says that he never saw himself as elite. He says he was not concerned to be a part of the elite, but only to save himself, "ma seule affaire était de me sauver." Further humbling himself, he says that he never even saw himself as having talent: "... jamais je ne me suis cru l'heureux propriétaire d'un 'talent'..."³¹² His success was earned, like the average joe's, by hard work and faith, "par le travail et la foi." Is he the "chosen one" or the average, hard-working guy?

On one level Sartre's exposure of his self-contradictions could be viewed as a sincere effort to present himself, flaws and all. Self-contradiction is familiar to everyone, so he is just like everyone else. But on a textual level, Sartre's pervasive use of contradiction serves to create a text which "se conteste soi-même." Sartre was an

³⁰⁹ Sartre, *Mots* 180.

³¹⁰ Sartre, *Mots* 65.

³¹¹ Sartre, *Mots* 206.

³¹² Sartre, *Mots* 206.

exceptional child destined to greatness; Sartre was a mediocre child deluded by his family. The reader can not feel confident in the authenticity of Sartre's story when he says one thing and then the opposite. The one idea contradicts the other such that the reader is left with nothing certain.

Robbe-Grillet creates an anti-self-portrait by first making assertions and then second-guessing them. For example, after relating a childhood memory of his mother watching him go to sleep, he adds: "Quand je relis des phrases du genre 'Ma mère veillait sur mon difficile sommeil' ... je suis pris d'une grande envie de rire, comme si j'étais en train de falsifier mon existence passée..."³¹³ Like Sartre, he simultaneously creates and destroys his account. Did his mother used to watch him go to sleep or not? Following another passage in which he remembers lying in bed hearing sounds in the house and his father pacing, he says "Le passage qui précède doit être entièrement inventé."³¹⁴ Remembering a quaint house in Brest that he and his sister used to visit, he adds "...si du moins je ne confonds pas tout..."³¹⁵ Does he really visit a house in Brest or not? Is the reader to discard that passage, like so many others, in which Robbe-Grillet questions its authenticity? Is this part of his self-portrait or not? As soon as the reader begins to form an impression of Robbe-Grillet based on the memories that he recounts, he erases the validity of that memory.

Sarraute, in similar fashion, contradicts her self-portrait by second-guessing and questioning herself throughout *L'Enfance*. She uses multiple voices to narrate her autobiography. Using Freudian terms, it appears that Sarraute's ego is second-guessed by her other selves: her superego and her subconscious/id. For example, the ego recounts a memory in which her mother and her mother's boyfriend were play-fighting. When little Nathalie tries to join in, her mother pushed her away, telling her to let go because

³¹³ Robbe-Grillet, *Miroir* 17.

³¹⁴ Robbe-Grillet, *Miroir* 24.

³¹⁵ Robbe-Grillet, *Miroir* 85.

husband and wife are on the same side. The ego says that her reaction was mild, while her id/her subconscious mind sees it as a violent rejection on the part of the mother and questions the ego's version: "Crois-tu vraiment?"³¹⁶ In this particular dispute between the two selves, the subconscious's version is finally accepted. In another conversation the superego questions the accuracy of the ego's words: "Mais est-ce invraisemblable chez un enfant de onze, presque de douze ans..."³¹⁷ When more than one self is given voice in *L'Enfance*, there are ultimately contradictory versions of her childhood. When, as is the case in *Les Mots*, assertions are so often contradicted, it becomes increasingly difficult for the reader to be certain of any version of the author's self-portrait. Which self gives the authentic version? Which self is being portrayed?

Self-contradiction is a trait which Sartre appears to have inherited from his progenitors. At the beginning of *Les Mots*, Sartre presents his grandparents Charles Schweitzer and his wife Louise Schweitzer, as a couple marked by contradiction. One is the antithesis of the other. He is theatrical; she detests noise, passion, and enthusiasm. She thinks straight but inaccurately because he thinks amiss but accurately. He is a liar and is credulous; she doubts everything. He and his brothers are virtuous play-actors; she hates virtue and play-acting. Grandmother Louise is described in a single sentence with two sets of contradictions: "mignonne" and "replète," "cynique" and "enjouée." She became, Sartre says, "la négation pure."³¹⁸ She raises her children to be believers, but she is a non-believer. They are to be catholic, not because she is, but as a negation of Protestantism. He and his family like crude words; she likes understatement. He likes light; she likes dark. He reads the classics; she reads spicy novels. As a couple, they embody contradiction.

³¹⁶ Sarraute, *Enfance* 72.

³¹⁷ Sarraute, *Enfance* 196.

³¹⁸ Sartre, *Mots* 13.

The concluding pages of the text, usually a summing up and reaffirmation of all that came before, are instead filled with more contradictions, negating previous notions. While *Les Mots* is on one level a confession, a purging of past errors, it is also (via the conclusion) a reclaiming of these past errors. For example, in the past, the author believed that he could combine the hero and the writer into one calling. Now, he says that he has given up the idea that he could be both hero and writer: “Longtemps j’ai pris ma plume pour une épée, à présent je connais notre impuissance.”³¹⁹ He no longer believes in this calling.

Contradicting his abandonment of his calling, he reclaims both his desire to be a hero and says he intends to keep writing. Rekindling his earlier fantasies of heroism as a writer, he regrets that he can not be the author who dies “inconnu,” so he opts for another heroic possibility--the author “méconnu.”³²⁰ Sartre declared earlier that he believed infamy to be a sure route to glory. Instead of giving up his identification with the heroes of his childhood, he says that they are still a part of him: “Grisélidis pas morte. Pardaillan m’habite encore.” He likens himself to another hero, Philoctète, who gives up all in order to be rewarded. Sartre wonders if, like Philoctète, he is not playing at “qui perd gagne.” In writing his confessions and renouncing his past errors (the losing), does he want to be rewarded (the winning)? Further solidifying his past desire to be heroic, he says he only answers to his heroes: “Je ne relève que d’eux qui ne relèvent que de Dieu et je ne crois pas en Dieu.”³²¹ In other words, these heroes are his god; he answers only to them. When he claims in these concluding pages, “J’ai changé,” does he mean it or not?

Les Mots is supposed to be his “adieu” to literature. Having given up the calling of hero/writer (*écrivain engagé*), he no longer feels that he has a purpose: “Je suis redevenu le voyageur sans billet que j’étais à sept ans...”³²² The reader may logically

³¹⁹ Sartre, *Mots* 205.

³²⁰ Sartre, *Mots* 206.

³²¹ Sartre, *Mots* 206.

³²² Sartre, *Mots* 205.

conclude that he has given up writing. But he follows up by saying that he will keep writing: "...j'écris toujours. Que faire d'autre? *Nulla dies sine linea.*" First he says he no longer has a calling (writing); then he repeats his credo "*Nulla dies sine linea.*"

He negates his long-held belief that culture can save man: "La culture ne sauve rien ni personne, elle ne justifie pas." Then in the next breath, he recuperates its value: "Mais c'est un produit de l'homme: il s'y projette, s'y reconnaît..." Now it does have value, "...seul, ce miroir critique lui offre son image."³²³ First culture has no value, "elle ne justifie pas," then it does; it is the *only* method for man to see his image: "seul, ce miroir critique lui offre son image."

Another error from his past that he both renounces and reclaims is his imposture, his play-acting for applause. Since Sartre examines and ridicules this behavior repeatedly, one may conclude that he has purged himself of it. The change is confirmed in the final pages when he says that he has woken up from his "folie": "...depuis à peu près dix ans je suis un homme qui s'éveille, guéri d'une longue, amère et douce folie..." At the same time, he implies that he still does the same thing. While his childhood traits are usually hidden: "au premier instant d'inattention, ils relèvent la tête et pénètrent dans le plein jour sous un déguisement..."³²⁴ As soon as he loses the desired attention, "au premier instant d'inattention," his old traits come back in a "déguisement." On the one hand, he says that he is "guéri"; on the other hand, he implies that he is not cured since one cannot be cured of oneself: "on ne se guérit pas de soi." He has at the same time changed, "J'ai changé" and is the same: "tous les traits de l'enfant sont restés chez le quinquagénaire."³²⁵ Sartre's self-contradictions in *Les Mots*, a text which "se conteste soi-même," contribute to suspicions of the text's authenticity. The reader can not draw a certain conclusion.

³²³ Sartre, *Mots* 205.

³²⁴ Sartre, *Mots* 205.

³²⁵ Sartre, *Mots* 205.

The reader faces the same problem with Robbe-Grillet's and Sarraute's accounts. The abundance of self-contradiction erases and confuses the self-portrait. Robbe-Grillet tells that Henri de Corinthe lost his mistress Marie-Ange van de Reeves during a vacation with Henri in Uruguay. Then, he second-guesses the accuracy of his statement: "Mais quelquefois, j'ai l'impression de confondre la blonde Marie-Ange avec une autre jolie fille, Angélica von Salomon, qui a aussi été très liée au jeune comte."³²⁶ This Henri de Corinthe that Robbe-Grillet describes throughout is never linked to Robbe-Grillet's life. It is not immediately clear why Robbe-Grillet ever mentions him at all. As he says on the first two pages, he is not really sure that he knew Henri, and if he did it was when he was a very young child. It is uncertain, even doubtful, that Henri ever actually existed. He seems more like a character from a legend. Furthermore, the information that Robbe-Grillet does give about Henri is so often second-guessed that even if he did actually exist, Robbe-Grillet's descriptions of him are uncertain. As mentioned in chapter seven, Robbe-Grillet says that sometimes he suspects that he may have confused Henri de Corinthe with one of Sartre's characters, the Marquise de Rollebon (*La Nausée*), or with one of Dostoyevsky's characters.

Conclusions about Sarraute's self-portrait are also frustrated by constant contradictions. She recalls that her mother told her "Si tu touches à un poteau comme celui-là, tu meurs..." Her superego second-guesses her: "Peut-être ne l'avait-elle dit exactement dans ces termes..." (Sarraute's ellipses).³²⁷ Or, when she recounts how her mother seemed uncaring when she was sick: how when she was lying in bed sick, her mother would be writing or reading (instead of tending to her sick daughter). The superego, again, second-guesses the accuracy of the ego's words: "Sois juste, il lui est arrivé pendant cette maladie de venir s'asseoir près de ton lit avec un livre."³²⁸ In

³²⁶ Robbe-Grillet, *Miroir* 103.

³²⁷ Sarraute, *Enfance* 28.

³²⁸ Sarraute, *Enfance* 39.

another example, she recalls an image from her favorite book *Max et Moritz*. The superego questions her accuracy: “Est-il certain que cette image se trouve dans Max et Moritz? Ne vaudrait-il pas mieux le vérifier?”³²⁹

Contradiction is also part of Duras’s self-portrait, as the following passage shows:

L’histoire de ma vie n’existe pas. Ça n’existe pas. Il n’y a jamais de centre. Pas de chemin, pas de ligne. Il y a de vastes endroits où l’on fait croire qu’il y avait quelqu’un, ce n’est pas vrai il n’y avait personne.³³⁰

If her story does not exist, if there is no one to be found in the “vastes endroits,” then what is her autobiography based on? She is writing an autobiography, which is to be based on her life, but she tells the reader that the origins of her story do not exist. She undermines and contradicts the very (autobiographical) project that, one assumes, is *L’Amant*. This passage also reveals the self-contradictory nature of her project:

Je n’ai plus dans ma tête le parfum de sa peau ni dans mes yeux la couleur de ses yeux. Je ne me souviens plus de sa voix...Le rire, je ne l’entends plus...C’est fini, je ne me souviens plus. C’est pourquoi j’en écris si facile d’elle maintenant...³³¹

If she no longer has memories of her mother, as she says, then what is the origin of the many passages about her relationship with her mother? The autobiographical project, at least traditionally speaking, is inherently tied to the author’s memories of the past. Duras contradicts this very basic element of the project. Imagine if biographers said that they never actually did any research about the subject of their biography, nor do they know them personally. Self-contradiction undermines the very self-portrait that one expects to see in the autobiography. The self-portrait that is delivered is fragmented and uncertain. The reader can not see a clear unified portrait. It is possible that the self-contradicting discourse of their autobiographies is the only accurate (authentic) way for these authors to portray themselves. If they are fragmented selves, then their autobiographies should reflect their fragmentation. But in the context of their systematic questioning of

³²⁹ Sarraute, *Enfance* 47-8.

³³⁰ Duras 14.

³³¹ Duras 38.

authenticity, the effort to self-contradict becomes part of the overall effort to undermine the text/world dialogue.

Anti-self-portraits

Duras's self is fragmented by desire. Sarraute's self is a multi-layered psyche. Robbe-Grillet's self is fragmented by the impossibility of self-portraiture. Sartre's self is at least dual; his descriptions of his imposture imply at least two selves.

In painting her self-portrait largely through a discourse of desire, Duras reveals a self that is fragmented. As a desiring subject, she is always essentially incomplete. The very nature of desire is the quest to fill a void that can not be filled. From the first paragraph she identifies herself in terms of desire. A man comes up to her and tells her that she is even more beautiful now than she was when she was young. He prefers her face as it is now, "dévasté."³³² The description of herself as a woman "dévasté" reminds her of an earlier image of herself. It is the image of herself at eighteen years of age. It is the image that she says she prefers, the one that she most identifies with, the one that pleases her most. It is the image of a young girl who is already aged: "À dix-huit ans j'ai vieilli."³³³ By the age of twelve, she was already aware of being desired by men: "J'ai déjà l'habitude qu'on me regarde."³³⁴ The male friends of her mother were already inviting her over for tea, while their wives were out. By fifteen she already has a lover. By eighteen she has already experienced enough to look like a woman aged. Her self-image is largely defined by a discourse of desire.

Given that Duras entitles her autobiography *L'Amant* and begins by painting an image of herself as a desired woman (at the age of fifteen), one would expect her devastation to be a result of her relationship with her lover. However, she does not love her lover and does not describe their relationship as a source of pain. Instead, the image

³³² Duras 9.

³³³ Duras 10.

³³⁴ Duras 25.

of a self “dévasté” seems to be a result of her frustrated desire for the love of her mother. In the following passage, she attributes the aging that occurred at eighteen years of age, not to pain associated with her lover, but to the desire to kill her brother in order to make her mother suffer:

il est arrivé quelque chose lorsque j’ai eu dix-huit ans qui a fait que ce visage a eu lieu. Ça devait se passer la nuit. J’avais peur de moi, j’avais peur de Dieu. Quand c’était le jour, j’avais moins peur et moins grave apparaissait la mort...Je voulais tuer...³³⁵

Feelings and thoughts of killing her brother and punishing her mother scare her at night. They are feelings so intense and painful that she is changed. It is during this night that she says her face is aged. The next day she is not so scared and death does not seem so grave; she still wants to kill. Duras says that she wants to remove the object of her mother’s love in front of her in order to “la punir de l’aimer si fort.”³³⁶ The pain of not feeling love from her mother is apparently so strong that Marguerite’s feelings turn to hatred and the desire to kill. In her state of mind, killing her brother--the object of the mother’s love--is a last-resort solution. Perhaps, if she gets rid of him, her mother will finally show her the love that she desires.

Duras implies that she carried on the relationship with her lover--an older, wealthy, Chinese man--in order to please her mother. In other words, the relationship is another attempt to gain the love of her mother. Since Marguerite, her mother, and two brothers were living in poverty in Indochina, having lost their father/husband, Marguerite implies that she becomes a sort of prostitute to help the family financially. Duras tells that her mother indirectly encourages this behavior in her. Her mother allows her to wear gawdy, provocative clothing--a low-cut, sleeveless, almost transparent silk dress, a large belt, high-heeled gold lamé shoes, a large man’s hat and allows her to wear make-up--dark cherry red lipstick to school when she is twelve. Duras says that her mother is

³³⁵ Duras 13.

³³⁶ Duras 13.

pleased by the way her daughter looks. The man's hat, in particular, pleases her mother. It seems to represent the possibility of income that a male member of the family should make a reality: "Le lien avec la misère est là aussi dans le chapeau d'homme car il faudra bien que l'argent arrive dans la maison, d'une façon ou d'une autre il le faudra."³³⁷ However, the father is dead and the two brothers have not proven to be capable of filling this role. Marguerite will have to become a source of income:

Reste cette petite-là qui grandit et qui, elle [the mother], saura peut-être un jour comment on fait venir l'argent dans cette maison. C'est pour cette raison, elle ne le sait pas, que la mère permet à son enfant de sortir dans cette tenue d'enfant prostituée. Et c'est pour cela aussi que l'enfant sait bien y faire déjà, pour détourner l'attention qu'on lui porte à elle vers celle que, elle, elle porte à l'argent. Ça fait sourire la mère.³³⁸

Marguerite has a chance to make her mother smile, to gain her love, by earning money as a prostitute. She can turn the desire that men have for her, "détourner l'attention qu'on lui porte à elle," into the object of her mother's desire--money--and thereby to the object of her own desire--her mother's love. She does prostitute herself. She tells her lover that the reason she is with him is because her family has no money. He agrees to give her money.

Since Marguerite has offered her body (as prostitute) for her mother's approval and love, one might assume that her desire will be satisfied. However, Duras's self-portrait is formed through the discourse of desire, which means that it is ultimately a portrait of lack. Her desire for her mother's love is not satisfied. In fact, Marguerite's prostitution only leads to scorn from her mother. When her mother realizes that Marguerite is now "ruined" and will never get married, and thus, will not be able to bring more money into the family, she begins to periodically lock Marguerite in a room and attack her physically and verbally. Not only does she not receive love in exchange for

³³⁷ Duras 33.

³³⁸ Duras 33.

the money that she has procured for her mother, she is also further rejected for making the effort--she is told that she is "ruined."

Although the center of Duras's desire is the desire for her mother's love, other aspects of her life are also defined in terms of frustrated desire. The one person that she loves dearly is the younger brother, but he dies. She says that she loves him so much as to want to die when he dies. She loses the paternal male figure in her life: her father dies during her early adolescence. He leaves a void that is not filled by another paternal figure. When she goes to boarding school, she is isolated; her only close relationship is with her lover, whom she does not love. She can not marry him, even if she wanted to, because he is from a wealthy Chinese family who would not accept her. Toward the end of the text, Duras thinks that she may love him after all, but then finds out that he is married. Her desire is again frustrated. She is left unwhole.

Duras's own desire and lack are mirrored in other characters as well. As desiring beings they also suffer the pain of lack. Her Chinese lover loves her and suffers because she does love him. He later marries a Chinese woman, but he still loves Marguerite. Thus, his desire is left unsatisfied because he is married to a woman whom he does not love; the Chinese woman's desire is frustrated because she is married to a man that loves another woman. Duras's mother's desire is unfilled; she loses her husband to disease. Their desire, as a French family, to become rich in French Indochina is unsatisfied. The father having died, they live in poverty. Her brothers desire their mother's love, but she is often unable to give it because of her mental condition. The older brother lives with his mother even as an adult in his fifties. He apparently has the strongest desire for her, choosing to live with her, rather than a wife. But the law of incest prevents his mother from playing the role of wife that he seems to have cast her in.

Because Duras paints her self-portrait in terms of desire, she, at the same time, paints a self-portrait defined by lack. It makes sense, then, that she repeatedly refers to an image of herself as the image that is not: the image that does not exist. On the first

page, she says that she often thinks of a particular image of herself. It is an image that only she can see; it was never photographed. It is an image of which she has never spoken; it has never been painted with words. She says that this image is always there, nonetheless, in silence. Yet, it is the only image in which she recognizes herself. This image which is not is, according to Duras, is the most accurate image of her. On a superficial level, the image does not exist because, as she says, it was never photographed, nor described verbally. One may assume that she is going to fill in the image via her autobiography. However, her “completed” self-portrait (*L’Amant*) is still an image defined by what is not. The image that she paints of herself is an image defined by lack.

Sarraute’s self is fragmented because she portrays herself as a multi-layered psyche. She replicates the Freudian notion of the ego, the superego, and the id via three narrative voices. The reader is aware that there are multiples selves telling the story because the layers of her psyche/the narrative voices do not agree with each other. From the first page, it is clear that the account will be told with more than one voice: one tells the story, using “I”; the other cautions the first, and uses “you.” The first voice to speak is the voice that cautions, the superego: “Alors, tu vas vraiment faire ça? ‘Évoquer tes souvenirs d’enfance’ ...Comme ces mots te gênent, tu ne les aimes pas.”³³⁹ The superego cautions the ego about undertaking this project of evoking her childhood memories. The ego responds: “Oui, je n’y peux rien, ça me tente, je ne sais pas pourquoi...” (Sarraute’s ellipsis) Throughout, the superego serves to correct, second-guess, question, and caution the account of the ego, for example when the superego reminds the ego to use “oncle” in reference to a Russian man because in Russia, one does not refer to men as “Monsieur,” but as “oncle.”³⁴⁰

³³⁹ Sarraute, *Enfance* 9.

³⁴⁰ Sarraute, *Enfance* 82.

In other cases, the voice of the superego seems to be replaced by the id. In the following example, the ego is trying to be diplomatic in describing the “insouciance” of the mother, not wanting to say too much. Then, the id jumps in and says what the ego does not want to say. Nathalie has just returned from her father’s home to her mother’s: “Et tout s’est effacé, dès le retour à Paris chez ma mère...tout a repris cet air d’insouciance...”(Sarraute’s ellipses) This insouciance is something that has caused Nathalie pain, but she does not want to say too much, as the ellipses indicate. The id does not repress or self-censor: “C’est elle qui le répandait.”³⁴¹ Instead of repressing the fact that the “air d’insouciance” is really the mother’s insouciance, the id just says what it thinks: insouciance emanates from her. In other words, the mother is very insouciant. In another instance, Sarraute describes a time when her mother and her boyfriend Koyla were wrestling and Nathalie tries to participate. She is rejected from the game by her mother: “Laisse donc...femme et mari sont un même parti.” The ego hesitates to say that she was too upset by this scene: “je me suis écartée.” But the id does not hesitate: “Aussi vite que si elle t’avait repoussée violemment...” (Sarraute’s ellipsis).³⁴² The id expresses the pain related to the scene that the ego represses. It is as if there were three selves being portrayed; there is not a single, unified self, but rather a self fragmented into three layers.

Robbe-Grillet’s fragmented self-portrait in *Le Miroir qui revient* appears to be due to the limitations of the project itself. He does not believe that language is capable of representing the world nor what is inside his head. Language is a pre-existing structure that imposes itself upon consciousness; he can not accurately portray himself within the constraints of these structures. He says that because of the limits of language, he has two ways to approach his autobiography, neither of which will result in an accurate self-portrait: one, he can pretend to believe in language’s ability to represent, in which case

³⁴¹ Sarraute, *Enfance* 20.

³⁴² Sarraute, *Enfance* 72.

the result will be a “ready-made” life story; two, he can replace the biographical elements of his story with “opérateurs,” (working constructs), in which case the result will be a fictional work.³⁴³ He opts for the second choice: using *opérateurs* to construct the story as if he were writing a novel. Although Robbe-Grillet justifies the contradictory nature of the project with the impossibility of the project, he still creates a text, like the other authors in question, which undermines itself. His autobiographical project becomes one of *not* portraying himself. As he says, he can not paint a self-portrait because it is not possible. Effectively, *Le Miroir* is not an autobiography then; it is an anti-autobiography.

Robbe-Grillet’s project itself is a contradiction of his past writing in which he chose not to write about the mystery of depth (*les mythes de la profondeur*) preferring to describe surfaces. Now in *Le Miroir* he is attempting to look into his depths. Like Sartre who says that he is constantly shedding his skin, constantly becoming something else, Robbe-Grillet says that he must constantly change his ideas in order that they maintain their shock value, their revolutionary quality. He says that as soon as an idea becomes commonplace, it loses its value for him. This is how he justifies his decision to write an autobiography. It is not that he is interested in self-portraiture, but in doing something that is revolutionary. In this sense, the Robbe-Grillet in *Le Miroir* is the undoing (the contradiction) of the Robbe-Grillet that his readers know.

Sartre is, if not multi-layered like Sarraute, at least dual in nature. His imposture is that of a self divided. In chapter six Sartre’s imposture is discussed in detail. He describes himself as a faker, an actor, always pretending to be someone that he is not in order to retain the praise and adoration of the adults: he pretends to read before he knows the alphabet; he throws down his adventure story and picks up Corneille when he hears the adults approaching to admire him; he pretends to write books, but actually plagiarizes them; he pretends to have read the classics, but has only read plot summaries; he pretends

³⁴³ Robbe-Grillet, *Miroir* 18-19.

to be a lover of high culture, but actually prefers low culture--cloak-and-dagger stories and movies; he pretends to be the perfect son and grandson, but is only acting a role for praise. He lives in a dual state: the authentic Sartre and the actor Sartre. But, as noted in chapter six, he spends so much time in the role of actor/faker that he begins to lose touch with reality: “Sincèrement? Qu’est-ce que cela veut dire? Comment pourrais-je fixer--après tant d’années surtout--l’insaisissable et mouvante frontière qui sépare la possession du cabotinage?...Jusque dans la solitude j’étais en représentation...”³⁴⁴ Now, even when he is alone he acts. He no longer knows where the dividing line is between his acting “cabotinage” and his authentic self “la possession.” His inability to distinguish acting from reality feeds into what he calls his “délire.” As he continues to devour books, his ability to distinguish between the reality he finds in books and his own reality also becomes problematic. He is still a self divided between two realities. But, perhaps this is not really delirium, but just the way that man experiences reality:

Mais jusqu’à quel point croyais-je à mon délire? C’est la question fondamentale et pourtant je n’en décide pas. J’ai vu par la suite qu’on pouvait tout connaître de nos affections hormis leur force, c’est-à-dire leur sincérité.³⁴⁵

He is now not sure to what extent he believed in his “délire.” He says that he has realized that one can not know the force (the sincerity) of one’s attachments. Did he envelope himself in literature only for show, or did he have a sincere love for literature? Can anyone really be sure of the sincerity of one’s actions or of the actions of others? Here Sartre suggests that “délire” is part of everyone’s reality. One can not be sure what is reality/sincere versus what is imaginary/insincere. If this is the way the Sartre views, not only himself, but man in general, then it makes sense that his self-portrait should reflect a self that is divided.

Sartre’s contradictory self reflects his notion of existential man who exists in a dialectic of what he is (*l’être*) and what he is not (*le néant*). As discussed in chapter four,

³⁴⁴ Sartre, *Mots* 59-60.

³⁴⁵ Sartre, *Mots* 59.

Sartre's *l'être* is always in a position to be contradicted (or qualified) by a choice or action in the domain of *le néant*.

It makes sense that these autobiographers would contradict their self-portraits. If they see themselves as fragmented, then their autobiographical portrait should reflect their disunity. This would be a sincere and authentic way to portray themselves. Yet the contradiction of their self-portraits also serves another end; to undermine their own self-portraits, to create anti-autobiographies. It is possible that none of these authors is really interested in self-portraiture, but rather in playing with the genre of autobiography. In doing so, their texts become a sort of game for the reader like the novels/detective stories like Robbe-Grillet's *Les Gommages*, *Le Voyeur*, and *La Jalousie*. The reader plays detective trying to reach some conclusion in the face of contradictory information in the text.

Umberto Eco describes a polarity between two types of texts which he calls the "open text" and the "closed text." Closed texts try to limit possible interpretations. They "obsessively aim at arousing a precise response."³⁴⁶ Open texts, while not intended to allow any (infinite) number of interpretations, exploit the interpretive and generative process for poetic purposes. While the closed text tries to limit the number of possible interpretations, the open text encourages multiple possible interpretations. *Les Mots* and the other anti-biographies in question seem to fit more closely with Eco's "open text." Using the tactics discussed in this dissertation, they frustrate and complicate the interpretive process. By constantly undermining and contradicting their claims, they invite multiple interpretations of their self-portraits. In other words, they "open" their texts. In order to qualify as closed texts--ones that aim "obsessively at arousing a precise response"--the authors would have to concentrate on unifying and re-enforcing the claims that they make. They would have to lead the reader down a well-marked path toward the

³⁴⁶ Umberto Eco, *The Role of the Reader: Explorations in the Semiotics of Texts* (London: Hutchinson and Co., 1979) 8.

desired interpretation. Sartre and the *Nouveaux Romanciers* create autobiographies which, at least de-emphasize, if not ignore, the objective of self-portraiture (text/world dialogue). Instead they create a complex game of interpretation for the reader, turning the text inward (text/text dialogue).

Chapter 9: After *Les Mots*

It is argued in this dissertation that Sartre abandons *littérature engagée* in *Les Mots*: “Longtemps j’ai pris ma plume pour une épée, à présent je connais notre impuissance.” Yet Sartre continues to use his pen as a sword after the publication of *Les Mots* in a non-literary work: *Plaidoyer pour les intellectuels* (1972). A literary example of *engagement* also appears after *Les Mots* in 1966 with Sartre’s play *Les Troyennes*; it is an indictment of war (and an adaptation of a play by Euripides, 415 B.C.). Sartre also continues to be *engagé* via interviews, such as those collected and published in *On a raison de se révolter* (1974). As the title suggests, Sartre advocates the necessity of revolution in these interviews. Furthermore, in a multitude of interviews, he reveals his opinion on contemporary issues, continuing his *engagement*. One such interview occurred in 1968 when he condemned the United States’ involvement in the Vietnam War.³⁴⁷ The objective of this chapter is to address the following question: How can these publications post-*Les Mots*--*Plaidoyer*, *Les Troyennes*, and *On a raison*--be assimilated into the argument of this dissertation: that Sartre abandons *littérature engagée* in *Les Mots* (1964)?

It is asserted in this dissertation that in *Les Mots* Sartre abandons the notion that he can save the world with his pen/sword. It would seem that the above-mentioned works negate this assertion since they are published after *Les Mots* and Sartre continues his *engagement* in these publications. However, the collection of interviews in *On a raison de se révolter* and the multitude of interviews in which he voices his opinions, although published after 1964, do not negate Sartre’s abandonment of the pen as sword. He does not use his pen; he uses his voice to continue his *engagement*.

Besides *Plaidoyer*, *On a raison*, and *Les Troyennes*, a few other works appeared after *Les Mots*. These include two more biographical works: *L’Idiot de la famille, I-III*

³⁴⁷ Sartre interview “On Genocide” *Ramparts* 35-42.

(1970-74) and “Mallarmé: la lucidité et sa face d’ombre” (1986). His other autobiographical work *Carnets de la drôle de guerre* is published in 1983, although it was actually written during World War II. However, none of these are examples of *engagement*; these works do not contradict the argument of this dissertation.

But what about *Plaidoyer* and the play *Les Troyennes*? They are both examples of *engagement* using the pen. Yet *Plaidoyer*, like *Les Mots*, may also be seen as an abandonment of the pen as sword in that Sartre is calling other intellectuals, including writers, to action: not to literary action as he did in *Qu’est-ce que?* Action is preferred to the pen in *Plaidoyer*. Since Sartre has not given up his *engagement* in contemporary issues, one can assume that he has not abandoned *engagement* altogether, just *engagement* as he previously conceived it—via the pen. His call to action, instead of the pen, in *Plaidoyer* supports this notion. His 1966 play *Les Troyennes* still poses a problem. Why does it appear after his abandonment of literary *engagement* in *Les Mots*? In it Sartre indicts war. He is still using his pen as a sword. The play is, then, an anomaly in the context of this dissertation, as *Les Mots* is in the context of the Sartrean oeuvre. The question of why Sartre publishes *Les Troyennes* after *Les Mots* can only be answered speculatively. Perhaps it is a way to create more self-contradiction in *Les Mots*. Since his autobiography is an abandonment of *littérature engagée*, writing another example of *littérature engagée* afterward contradicts *Les Mots*. Recall that Sartre said he wants *Les Mots* to be a text which “se conteste soi-même.”

Conclusion

It has been argued in this dissertation that Sartre abandons *littérature engagée* in *Les Mots* and embraces instead *l'art pour l'art*. Sartre, the writer associated with literary *engagement*, the theorist who preached the necessity of *littérature engagée* in *Qu'est-ce que la littérature?* makes a one-hundred-eighty-degree turn in his autobiography: he abandons literary *engagement* for a view of literature that he formerly rejected--*l'art pour l'art*. In embracing *l'art pour l'art*, Sartre no longer represents the antithesis of Robbe-Grillet's theories for literature in *Pour un nouveau roman*. The former "enemies" are now in the same camp. Ironically, Sartre's changed view of literature appears the same year that Robbe-Grillet rejects Sartre and his *littérature engagée*: 1963 is the initial publication date of *Les Mots* in *Les Temps modernes* as well as the publication date of *Pour un nouveau roman*. With the publication of *Les Mots*, Sartre has written his *nouveau roman* thus invalidating Robbe-Grillet's rejection of him as part of the past.

Les Mots is shown to be an illustration of *l'art pour l'art* via comparisons to the *nouvelles autobiographies* of Robbe-Grillet, Duras, and Sarraute. Each of the authors blurs, and even destroys, the text/world dialogue that characterizes traditional notions of the autobiography. The distinction between fact and fiction is blurred to the extent that the reader cannot be certain that any part of the autobiography is referential. The text may be read as a fiction since its referential nature is at best unstable. In *Les Mots* Sartre seems to have realized that ultimately the text is just text. The idea that a text is just text problematizes, if not invalidates, the text/world dialogue advocated in *littérature engagée*. *Les Mots* exemplifies Robbe-Grillet's notion of *l'art pour l'art* in which the text is not concerned with anything which is "extérieur" to the text.

Finally, the position of *Les Mots* is examined in terms of Sartre's life and work after 1964. Although *Les Mots* itself represents an abandonment of *littérature engagée* in favor of *l'art pour l'art*, Sartre does not abandon the notion of *engagement* altogether. In fact, he continues to support *engagement*, just not with the pen with the exception of *Les*

Troyennes (1966), a play in which Sartre expresses disdain for war. He does become more politically *engagé* than before, choosing action over literature. Although he was not actually involved in physical battles, such as the soldiers fighting in the Vietnam War, he placed himself amidst contemporary problems by speaking out in interviews. Through interviews, he continues his *engagement*: he protests the United States' involvement in the Vietnam War for example. One might consider Sartre's abandonment of *littérature engagée* in *Les Mots* as a sort of radical *engagement* in that he subsequently puts down his pen to go further toward the front lines of battle. He comes out from behind the safety of his writing desk and becomes more politically active, as he encourages other intellectuals to do in *Plaidoyer pour les intellectuels*. In *Qu'est-ce que la littérature? la parole* is action. Now, *l'action* is action. While Sartre abandons *littérature engagée* in *Les Mots*, he does not abandon the importance of *engagement* altogether, as his writings and life after 1964 illustrate.

In this dissertation *Les Mots* is not just an abandonment of *littérature engagée*, but it is also Sartre's *nouveau roman*. It is a text in which Sartre embraces the *l'art pour l'art* view of literature described by Robbe-Grillet for the *nouveau roman*. *Les Mots* might be viewed as an effort to "stay in the game," to not be part of the past, as Robbe-Grillet suggests in *Pour un nouveau roman*. After all, Sartre admits at the end of *Les Mots* that he is not really so different from the play-acting child who craved applause: "tous les traits de l'enfant sont restés chez le quinquagénaire." In writing *Les Mots* Sartre manages to get more applause. Usually, these traits are dormant, he says, but at the first moment of inattention, they rear their head again under another guise. If, as Robbe-Grillet says, Sartre has become part of the past, then the moment of inattention has occurred, causing the traits of young Sartre to rear their head again. Sartre must do something to regain his audience: he writes *Les Mots*. If the first guise was as *écrivain engagé*, then the new guise might be as *Nouveau Romancier*, author of the *nouvelle autobiographie Les Mots*.

Artists who want to retain an audience must be able to reinvent themselves. Sartre manages to do that with *Les Mots*.

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Vita

Julie Driessen chose to pursue a career as a professor of French language and literature while living and studying in the Cajun French region of Lafayette, Louisiana. Her own Belgian heritage personally connects her to *le monde francophone*. The French-speaking world is one that she has lived and studied in—France and Belgium. While French is her specialization, she is also conversant in Italian, Spanish, and Danish. Two years in Copenhagen, Denmark, provided the rather rare opportunity to learn Danish and experience the Danish culture.

When asked “Why did you choose French literature?” she responds that her choice is a result of a combination of interests: literature, languages, and cultural differences. Choosing French rather than another language was, she says, probably due to the fact that she was surrounded by the French culture in Louisiana, the language is so beautiful, and the literary history so rich. She currently lives and works as a professor in New Orleans, Louisiana.