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Subjectivity in Sartre's *L'Idiot de la famille*: Biography as a  
Space for the Development of Theory

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## Table of Contents

<b>Acknowledgements .....</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>Abstract.....</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>Extended abstract.....</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>Introduction.....</b>	<b>9</b>
I. Reading Sartre again .....	9
II. Sartrean Subjectivity.....	10
III. <i>L'Idiot de la famille</i> : Sartre in search of a method .....	12
IV. Situating <i>L'Idiot de la famille</i> .....	16
V. Literature review .....	19
V. 1. Quantitative overview .....	19
V. 2. Approaches to <i>L'Idiot de la famille</i> .....	20
VI. Approach and chapter overview .....	23
<b>Chapter 1: Project and Destiny: Subjectivity and alienation in <i>L'Idiot de la famille</i> .....</b>	<b>26</b>
Introduction .....	26
I. Constitution, programming and choice – the case of Gustave Flaubert.....	27
I.1. The constitution: Gustave in the family.....	27
I.2. Personalisation, project and choice.....	35
I. 3. 'Programmation': the subject in history .....	45
I. 4. The convergence of constitution, personalisation and programming: <i>universel singulier</i> and subjectivity .....	46
I. 5. Provisional concluding remarks on the subject in <i>L'Idiot</i> : Flaubert as extreme or negative case? .....	58
II. Life as 'Destin': the transformation of the project.....	61
II. 1. The project as <i>Destin</i> .....	64
II. 2. 'Destin' as (statistical) description of the situation .....	70
II. 3. Destiny and alienation.....	72
Conclusion .....	73
<b>Chapter 2: Collective Subjectivity in <i>L'Idiot de la famille</i>: A Re-examination of Social and Historical Processes .....</b>	<b>76</b>
Introduction .....	76
I. Sartre's social theory in the <i>Critique</i> : Group, seriality and mediations.....	77
I. 1. Group and seriality .....	78
I. 2. Collective consciousness vs. a theory of mediations .....	82
II. Intersubjectivity in <i>L'Idiot de la famille</i> .....	84
II. 1. Reciprocity .....	84
II. 2. Seriality reconsidered: laughter and the 'human persona'.....	88
III. Collective formations in <i>L'Idiot de la famille</i> .....	91
III. 1. The school system as producer of collective subjectivity .....	92
III. 2. Collective subjectivity as <i>habitus</i> : Bourdieu and Sartre.....	96
III. 3. The Rouen schoolboys: the failure of a generation in struggle.....	99
Conclusion .....	108
<b>Chapter 3: The Trajectory of <i>L'Enfant imaginaire</i> as an Exploration of the Relationship between the Real and the Imaginary .....</b>	<b>110</b>
Introduction .....	110
I. Gustave and the Impossibility of the Real.....	111
I. 1. The passive agent and spatio-temporal 'desituation' .....	111
I. 2. Gustave's isolated incredulity: belief and the impossibility of truth.....	114
I. 3. <i>Le moi indissoluble</i> : Gustave and the 'unknowability' and 'uncommunicability' of the self.....	120
I. 4. Preliminary conclusion: the real as activity, truth and communication.....	125

II. Subjectivity Imaginarised .....	126
II. 1. The ‘imagarisation’ of the subject: Gustave as <i>analogon</i> .....	127
II. 2. The result of imagarisation: the imaginary ego or subjectivity as role-playing .....	138
Conclusion .....	150
<b>Chapter 4 Scripta manent: Writing as Focal Point of the Imaginary and the Self.....</b>	<b>152</b>
Introduction .....	152
I. <i>L’Idiot de la famille</i> as a Phenomenology of Writing.....	153
I. 1. Writing as the overcoming of oral forms of expression.....	154
I. 2. Inspiration and <i>écriture automatique</i> : writing as passive activity.....	162
I. 3. Alienation as solution: The Flaubertian artist .....	167
I. 4. Preliminary conclusion: a phenomenology of passive types of writing .....	168
Part II. Writing and the Objectification of Subjectivity: The Written word, the Image and the Self...	173
II. 1. The objectification of imagarised subjectivity.....	174
II. 2. The Impossibility of self-knowledge.....	182
II. 3. Self-comprehension.....	184
II. 4. The imaginary ego: the creation of the self through writing.....	198
<b>Chapter 5 The Role of the Reader in <i>L’Idiot de la famille</i> .....</b>	<b>203</b>
Introduction .....	203
I. Flaubert as reader: the imaginary identification with the author.....	204
II. The Rouen schoolboys as readers: the imaginary identification with the character .....	209
III. Louis Bouilhet, the first reader of <i>Madame Bovary</i> .....	214
IV. The reader of <i>Madame Bovary</i> : the public during the Second Empire .....	218
IV. 1. Objective neurosis .....	218
IV. 2. A sociology of literature .....	220
IV. 3. ‘Lecture-névrose’ : oneiric reading as characterisation of the Second Empire .....	222
IV. 4. The responsibility of the reader .....	225
<b>Concluding remarks: Reading <i>L’Idiot de la famille</i> .....</b>	<b>228</b>
<b>Bibliography .....</b>	<b>231</b>

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*I would like to dedicate this work to my grandparents, Adolf and Elisabeth Höbel – Omi und Opa.*

## Abstract

### Subjectivity in Sartre's *L'Idiot de la famille*: Biography as a Space for the Development of Theory

In the context of a renascent interest in the thought of Jean-Paul Sartre, this thesis proposes a close examination of one of his less studied texts, the study of Gustave Flaubert, *L'Idiot de la famille* (1971-72). The analysis focuses on theoretical developments that emerge from Sartre's biographical enquiry, pursuing an interdisciplinary approach combining a consideration of literary theory and literary history with the perspective of Sartre's philosophy of subjectivity.

*L'Idiot* is situated amongst a wide variety of texts by Sartre, from *Qu'est-ce que la littérature?* (1948) to the *Critique de la raison dialectique* (1960), identifying theoretical innovations within Sartre's understanding of the subject (ch. 1), his social theory (ch. 2), his theory of the imaginary (ch. 3), of literary production (ch. 4) and of reading (ch. 5). Additionally, hitherto largely unexplored passages highlight Sartre's reflections on the situation of the late 1960s.

Previous analyses of the philosophical innovations presented in *L'Idiot* have often focused on the strictly theoretical passages in the biography. The present thesis also concentrates on the 'imagined' scenes presented throughout the text. Read as an integral part of Sartre's method, it is suggested that the dramatization facilitated by the biographical format is an integral part of the theoretical enquiry.

Despite the lack of explicit referencing provided by Sartre, the biography is explored in its open character, identifying a series of resonances and similarities with a diverse range of authors. The different chapters consider thinkers whose relationship with Sartre has received little or no attention (such as Pierre Bourdieu and Walter Benjamin), or whose work resonates with Sartre in ways that have so far gone unnoticed (Roland Barthes, Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Maurice Blanchot).

## Extended abstract

Despite a period in which the interest in Sartre's thought seemed to decline, his work remains a focus for students in French literature and philosophy and his theory has been the object of renewed attention from readers of different disciplines. This thesis explores Sartre's *L'Idiot de la famille* (1971-72) in a manner that relates to and fosters this resurgent interest. It situates Sartre's monumental biography of Flaubert in the context of the broader development of Sartrean theory and it extrapolates the interdisciplinary potential of the text. The thesis surveys Sartrean biography in its dimension as arena and catalyst for the development of theory. It further pursues the hypothesis that the idea of subjectivity, approached from diverse angles, undergoes significant innovation in *L'Idiot*. The aim is thus to contribute to the newly invigorated discussion about Sartre's work by demonstrating the theoretical importance of *L'Idiot* for a variety of disciplines and debates, stressing its open dimension, thereby also facilitating access to one of Sartre's lesser-known texts to a wider readership.

Due to the extensive nature of *L'Idiot*, and the manifold and at times diffuse strands of thought developed throughout its 3000 pages, few readers are able to engage closely with the text in its entirety. The thesis therefore provides a close reading of *L'Idiot*, and aims at synthesising its theoretical strands, supported by carefully selected passages used as evidence. Arguments made in the thesis are substantiated with examples taken from passages across the three volumes (and the incomplete fourth one). At the same time, the analysis is frequently centred on individual sections from Sartre's text. In doing so, the thesis focuses not only on theoretical elaborations inserted into the biographical narrative by Sartre, but is also attentive to 'imagined' scenes, part of the 'progressive' aspect of Sartre's 'progressive-regressive' method. Biography is therefore not only addressed as a space open for theoretical considerations, but as a dramatic medium into which theory is woven. As a result of this procedure, readers unfamiliar with the detail of *L'Idiot's* narrative are able to follow the discussion of individual chapters and to gain an impression of the text's atmosphere.

The close reading of *L'Idiot* is mobilised in order to demonstrate theoretical developments in the text and to situate these in relation to previous, often more widely known, works by Sartre. The approach adopted towards the relationship between *L'Idiot* and Sartre's other works is characterised by two elements: on the one hand, *L'Idiot* is seen as a text that develops theoretical strands articulated throughout Sartre's career. In particular, the thesis compares the theory of the self in *L'Idiot* to that presented in *La Transcendance de l'égo* (1936), it reads *L'Idiot's* presentation of the imaginary in the light of that outlined in *L'Imaginaire* (1940) and it approaches the theory of literature in *L'Idiot* through the lens of *Qu'est-ce que la littérature?* (1948). Sartre's work as a whole is thus viewed in its continuity, rather than as featuring a complete break between earlier and later texts. Nevertheless, *L'Idiot* is equally considered in relation to its immediate context. The notion of intersubjectivity extrapolated from *L'Idiot* is thus read against the social theory outlined in the *Critique de la raison dialectique* (1960). Selected texts from *Situations*, especially volumes 8-10, are consulted in order to point towards parallels between *L'Idiot* and Sartre's reflections on current events of the late 1960s. Additionally, chapter 4 reads *L'Idiot* in the perspective of a later work, namely the 1980 interviews with Benny Lévy, published as *L'Espoir maintenant* (1991).

In addition, a central focus of the thesis is the identification of dialogues and resonances between *L'Idiot* and other authors. The research pursued in this manner builds on the work of critics such as Christina Howells and Nik Farrell Fox, who have explored Sartre's thought in its openness even towards thinkers with whom he often had public disagreements. Since the perceived

opacity of *L'Idiot* is, amongst other factors, a result of the lack of explicit references provided by Sartre, the thesis uncovers some of these implicit conversations. Frequently, the focus is on comparisons with authors who are thought to occupy rather contrary positions or whose relationship to Sartrean theory has not yet been explored. The proximity of Sartre's theory of subjectivity and of collective conditioning to Bourdieusian themes is demonstrated, while the theorisation of the imaginary that can be identified in *L'Idiot* is interpreted as a *rapprochement* with Merleau-Ponty. Resonances with Roland Barthes are explored in particular in relation to literary theory, and several arguments about nineteenth-century history and aspects of the imaginary made in *L'Idiot* are compared to the framework developed by Walter Benjamin.

In this perspective, the thesis investigates the notion of subjectivity that emerges from *L'Idiot*. Chapter one and two examine subjectivity from the point of view of the individual and of collective formations. Based on the definition of subjectivity offered in Sartre's recently published lecture *Qu'est-ce que la subjectivité?*, chapter one analyses the categories that Sartre mobilises for the description of Flaubert's life. Comparing Sartre's framework to several other sociological, philosophical and psychoanalytical approaches, it pursues the hypothesis that the notion of 'subjectivity' makes possible the conceptualisation of the coincidence of seeming opposites such as alienation and choice. The complexity of Sartre's approach is demonstrated through a close reading of his recourse to the term 'destiny', a notion that has frequently puzzled commentators in the past. Building on Marielle Macé's comments on Sartre's openness towards 'destinal' forms of narrating life in the *Carnets de la drôle de guerre* of 1939-40, the chapter extends this discussion and elucidates a series of philosophical and narratological angles from which Sartrean destiny can be approached.

The second chapter examines intersubjectivity by considering different social configurations. It formulates the hypothesis that in comparison to the *Critique* the social theory advanced in *L'Idiot* reveals two significant developments: firstly, the innovative notions of group and seriality are developed further and rendered increasingly flexible. Secondly, the chapter investigates the extent to which *L'Idiot* allows the conclusion that there is a nascent theorisation of a collective and historicised form of subjectivity in *L'Idiot*. Engaging with Ronald Aronson's and other commentators' criticisms of the social theory expressed in *Critique*, the chapter suggests that the increased historicisation of categories in *L'Idiot* is a helpful addition to the earlier work.

Based on the conclusions drawn in the first two chapters, the second part of the thesis considers the imaginary and its different manifestations. Chapter three sets out by providing an analysis of the developments that Sartre's theory of the imaginary undergoes in *L'Idiot*. A close comparison with *L'Imaginaire* forms the basis for the suggestion that Sartre's framework increasingly accommodates the conceptualisation of social aspects of the imaginary and an intensification of the effects of the imaginary, termed 'imaginarisation'. Contrary to Thomas Flynn and others who stress imagining consciousness in its quality as a conceptual prefiguration of the freedom associated with consciousness as such, the chapter highlights the increasingly imprisoning role that the imaginary plays in *L'Idiot*.

These hypotheses are then further examined in the last two chapters which approach the imaginary from the angles of writing and reading, examining additional modifications to the functions attributed to the imaginary. Simultaneously, the processes of writing and reading described in *L'Idiot* are explored in their particular dimension as products of passive forms of activity. Through these analyses, the thesis makes an important contribution to our understanding of Sartre's theorisation of the relationship between the imaginary, the self and writing. In addition, the phenomenology of reading discussed in chapter five brings some of the complexities of *Qu'est-ce que la littérature?* to the fore, while resonances with sociological

approaches to literature are demonstrated. Throughout chapters four and five Sartre's notion of authorship is re-assessed and explored in its openness towards structuralist and post-structuralist questionings of an understanding of the writer as single and authoritative source of the text.

In addition, the thesis explores the biography on Flaubert as a mediated reflection on Sartre's own time. Chapter two discusses Sartre's presentation of a failed revolt by Flaubert's fellow school students in the early 1830s, highlighting the parallels between this chapter and Sartre's comments on the aftermath of the experience of May 1968 made elsewhere. It is suggested that some of the reflections made in *L'Idiot* not only relate to the debates of the 1960s and 1970s but also have the potential to be valuable contributions to contemporary conversations about the interpretation of the May events. Similarly, it is demonstrated that some of the features that Sartre attributes to Flaubert's public during the Second Empire reveal similarities with his understanding of consumer society in the twentieth century.

Finally, a brief section entitled 'Concluding Remarks' returns to the problem of the relatively small readership that *L'Idiot* has attracted, despite a recent growing interest in the text. To this end, it mobilises the research conducted previously on Sartre's conception of the social dimension of writing, applying it to Sartre's own textual production.

## Introduction

### I. Reading Sartre again

Sartre's name has been used in connection with a multitude of iconic and superlative qualifications: he is the 'last philosopher' for Alain Renaut;<sup>1</sup> and the 'hated conscience of his century' for Gerassi.<sup>2</sup> Others, too, have attributed ownership over one century or another to Sartre, not without a certain desire to leave Sartre behind in 'his' century. Thus Foucault declared the *Critique de la raison dialectique* (1960) to be the effort of a man of the nineteenth century trying to understand the twentieth.<sup>3</sup> A fresh look at Sartre's thought is now possible, without the encumbrance of his dominance on the French intellectual scene. Thinking *with* Sartre, going back to the texts in order to take them as a starting point and explore their contemporary relevance seems all the more possible now that the imperative to situate oneself in relation to the author-figure Sartre has lost its urgency.

Thomas Flynn compares Foucault's relationship with Sartre to a door that was closed and later reopened, suggesting that the lines of division between existentialism and its supposed rival disciplines of structuralism and post-structuralism are not as clear-cut as they may have seemed for a short time in the 1960s. Critics are thus increasingly led to explore the mutual influences between Sartre and those who are commonly assumed to inhabit opposed philosophical positions.<sup>4</sup> After Sartre's apparent falling-out-of-fashion during the highpoint of structuralist and post-structuralist thought, recent times seem to have brought about a renewed interest among scholars and the general public. The centenary of Sartre's birth in 2005 saw a particular flurry of journalistic and academic publications, as well as a series of public events in France such as a major exhibition at the BNF. More recent public events

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<sup>1</sup> Alain Renaut, *Sartre, le dernier philosophe* (Paris: Grasset, 1993).

<sup>2</sup> John Gerassi, *Jean-Paul Sartre: Hated Conscience of His Century* (Chicago; London: University of Chicago Press, 1989).

<sup>3</sup> Michel Foucault, *Dits et écrits (1954-1969)* (Paris: Gallimard, 2001), pp. 541–42.

<sup>4</sup> See for example: Christina Howells, *Derrida: Deconstruction from Phenomenology to Ethics* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1998); Nik Farrell Fox, *The New Sartre: Explorations in Postmodernism* (New York; London: Continuum, 2003).

such as the 'Nuit Sartre' at the ENS in June 2013, and continued academic engagement with Sartre seem to confirm the trend, with a growing interest amongst scholars outside of the 'typical' disciplines of literature and philosophy. Recent engagement with Sartre's thought has thus included interest in the fields of Medical Anthropology, cognitive science, as well as investigations that establish a link between Sartre's thought and recent trends in philosophical enquiry such as the concern with the post-human.<sup>5</sup>

## II. Sartrean Subjectivity

The renewed interest in categories such as authorship, subjectivity and experience,<sup>6</sup> once associated with the (supposedly) hyper-subjectivist existentialism of the post-war period, suggests that a return to the theoretical implications of Sartre's biographical project is a timely endeavour. Sartre's notion of subjectivity, which one might expect to be one-sidedly skewed towards freedom, choice and individuality, in fact encapsulates the complexity of Sartre's theory of human existence and is therefore a particularly useful angle from which to consider *L'Idiot de la famille* (1971-72). 'Subjectivity' bears little resemblance to the stereotypes attributed to Sartre by Pierre Bourdieu and others as a philosopher of 'ultrasubjectivism'<sup>7</sup> or as continued subscriber to a supposedly Cartesian, classical, unified subject.

Sartre's understanding of the subject and of subjectivity of course changes, as just a schematic glance at three moments in this theoretical evolution demonstrates. One of Sartre's earliest writings, *La Transcendance de l'égo* (1936), opposes a notion of the ego as transcendental force internal to the subject. Instead, Sartre insists that pre-reflexive consciousness is free from a unifying 'Je' and thus impersonal,<sup>8</sup> an object retrospectively created by reflexive consciousness.<sup>9</sup> The ego is not only separate from pre-reflexive consciousness but also

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<sup>5</sup> See Elisabeth Butterfield, *Sartre and Posthumanist Humanism* (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2012).

<sup>6</sup> Seán Burke, *The Death and Return of the Author: Criticism and Subjectivity in Barthes, Foucault and Derrida*, 3rd edn (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2008).

<sup>7</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, *Le Sens pratique* (Paris: Éditions de Minuit, 1980), p. 78.

<sup>8</sup> Jean-Paul Sartre, *La Transcendance de l'égo: esquisse d'une description phénoménologique* [1936] (Paris: Vrin, 1965), p. 32.

<sup>9</sup> Sartre, *La Transcendance de l'égo*, p. 37.

## Introduction

precarious in its knowability, since observing one's ego would require adopting a – necessarily false – external point of view.<sup>10</sup> Christina Howells concludes that the Sartrean subject is therefore from the outset precarious and split.<sup>11</sup> This perspective is confirmed by *L'Être et le néant* (1943), where the subject and the 'soi' never coincide; the 'pour-soi' stands to the 'soi' in a relationship of 'présence à soi', again expressing a 'split' within being: '[...] la présence à soi suppose qu'une fissure impalpable s'est glissée à l'être'. The subject, Sartre insists here, is separated from itself.<sup>12</sup> While *La Transcendance de l'égo* is largely unconcerned with the collective dimension of subjectivity, the subject in *L'Être et le néant* reflects Sartre's much quoted recognition of history and intersubjectivity, mediated by the impact of the war.<sup>13</sup> *L'Être et le néant* thus insists additionally on the crucial role played by the other in any realisation of one's subjectivity in its objective dimension: the 'knowability' of the self is always already mediated by the alienating gaze of the other.

The Sartrean subject, both split and constituted through intersubjectivity, is thus neither unified nor independent. In his 1961 Rome lecture "Marxisme et subjectivité", first made available in *Les Temps modernes* in 1993 and recently republished as *Qu'est-ce que la subjectivité?*,<sup>14</sup> Sartre uses the term 'subjectivity' more specifically, defining it as a constant movement of internalisation and exteriorisation, which is transformed into objectivity and therefore profoundly altered when it is revealed to the subject. In this definition, even the moment of subjectivity is already permeated by the reality external to the subject, demonstrating how far Sartre's understanding of subjectivity is from implying a 'pure' subject in radical contradistinction to the world.

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<sup>10</sup> Sartre, *La Transcendance de l'égo*, p. 68.

<sup>11</sup> Christina Howells, 'Sartre and the Deconstruction of the Subject', in *Cambridge Companion to Sartre*, ed. by Christina Howells (Cambridge: CUP, 1992), pp. 318–52 (p. 330).

<sup>12</sup> Jean-Paul Sartre, *L'Être et le néant: essai d'ontologie phénoménologique*, Collection TEL (Paris: Gallimard, 1943), p. 113.

<sup>13</sup> See for example: Simone de Beauvoir, *La Cérémonie des adieux*, Collection Folio (Paris: Gallimard, 2008), p. 234.

<sup>14</sup> Jean-Paul Sartre, *Qu'est-ce que la subjectivité?* [1961], ed. by Michel Kail and Raoul Kirchmayr (Paris: Prairies Ordinaires, 2013).

By 1969 Sartre's philosophy has evolved in such a way that he even questions the usefulness of the very terms subjectivity and objectivity: 'aujourd'hui, de toute manière, les notions de "subjectivité" et d'"objectivité" me paraissent totalement inutiles'.<sup>15</sup> If understood as a complete separation of the self and its surroundings, the terms are indeed of little use; if however conceived in terms of the Rome lecture, subjectivity appears, as Rainer Wannicke summarises, as a pole of constant movement rather than a 'locus of plenitude'.<sup>16</sup> It is this understanding of subjectivity that will serve as prism through which to view Sartre's analysis of Flaubert.

### III. *L'Idiot de la famille*: Sartre in search of a method

*L'Idiot de la famille* does not simply portray Flaubert's life, but, in Serge Doubrovsky's words, 'la dialectique de son existence'.<sup>17</sup> The contrast between Sartre's nearly 3000 pages of existential biography and more standard approaches is therefore unsurprisingly stark.<sup>18</sup> The first two volumes of *L'Idiot* follow the trajectory of Flaubert's life more closely, while the third volume inserts the findings of the previous two into a sociological analysis of the literary and historical situation of the nineteenth century. Sartre's main lines of enquiry will be discussed in chapter 1; at this point we shall therefore simply provide a brief introduction to the methodological framework of *L'Idiot*.

*L'Idiot* is very much a literary biography, in the sense that it relies heavily on close readings of Flaubert's juvenilia, as well as his correspondence. The strong link between life and text is therefore central to Sartre's procedure; this should however not be taken to imply a simplistic biographical reading of Flaubert's texts, since Sartre insists that his method relies on

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<sup>15</sup> Jean-Paul Sartre, 'Sartre par Sartre' [1970], in *Situations, IX* (Paris: Gallimard, 1972), pp. 99-136 (p. 102).

<sup>16</sup> 'Als ein Ort strukturschaffender Fülle'. Rainer Wannicke, *Sartres Flaubert. Zur Misanthropie der Einbildungskraft* (Berlin: Dietrich Reimer Verlag, 1990), p. 192.

<sup>17</sup> Serge Doubrovsky, 'Une étrange toupie', in *Les Critiques de notre temps et Sartre*, ed. by Jacques Lecarme, Critiques de notre temps; 15 (Paris: Garnier, 1973), pp. 119-24 (p. 120).

<sup>18</sup> Ronald Aronson, for instance, highlights the differences in approach between *L'Idiot* and Enid Starkie's *Flaubert*, while Alexis Chabot demonstrates the differences in outcome that distinguish Sartre's text from Herbert Lottman's. See Alexis Chabot, *Sartre et le père (Le scénario Freud, Les mots, L'Idiot de la famille)* (Paris: Honoré Champion, 2012), p. 28; Ronald Aronson, *Jean-Paul Sartre, Philosophy in the World* (London: NLB, 1980), p. 328.

## Introduction

an author's texts for the elucidation of his life, while the reverse would be an example of the crude biographical reading already castigated in *Qu'est-ce que la littérature?* (1947).<sup>19</sup> In fact, the *œuvre*, according to *Questions de méthode* (1954), is always more 'complete' than life, creating a 'hiatus' between the two.<sup>20</sup>

Famously, the preface to *L'Idiot* formulates the central question of the biography and its epistemological scope in the following way:

Que peut-on savoir d'un homme, aujourd'hui? Il m'a paru qu'on ne pouvait répondre à cette question que par l'étude d'un cas concret: que savons nous – par exemple – de Gustave Flaubert?<sup>21</sup>

Since the publication of the biography, a set of problems and debates have crystallised around it, which often revolve around the different propositions of this ambitious declaration. It is therefore a useful prism through which to introduce some of *L'Idiot's* methodological features. Firstly, if Sartre evokes the necessity of synthesising what can be *known* of a man, his understanding of 'savoir' by no means entails a simple accumulation of factual knowledge. Instead, he proposes a progressive-regressive method that comprises two moments: firstly, the 'regressive' component places the information collected from various sources in an analytical framework, combining a Freudian focus on the family with a Marxist perspective of the historical period. The 'progressive' moment then synthesises this information in an attempt to reconstitute the lived reality of the project that emerges from the situation previously analysed. For example, the first 48 pages of *L'Idiot* 'regressively' analyse some of the central themes of the biography, namely Gustave's problematic relationship with language, his lack of a capacity for analytical thinking and his passivity. Sartre arrives at this conclusion by consulting a range of texts, from Flaubert's early stories to the testimony of his niece,

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<sup>19</sup> Jean-Paul Sartre, *Qu'est-ce que la littérature?*, Collection Folio (Paris: Gallimard, 1947), p. 39. Abbreviated throughout this thesis as *QIL*.

<sup>20</sup> Jean-Paul Sartre, 'Questions de méthode' [1954], in *Critique de la raison dialectique* (Paris: Gallimard, 1960), pp. 90–91.

<sup>21</sup> Jean-Paul Sartre, *L'Idiot de la famille*, Nouvelle édition revue et complétée, 3 vols (Paris: Gallimard, 1988), I, p. 7. Throughout this thesis, references to the three volumes of *L'Idiot* will be given in the text and abbreviated as 'IF, I/II/III, p. x'.

Caroline de Commanville. The subsequent progressive analysis, which stretches over 130 pages, reconstitutes the first years of Gustave's childhood, starting with his 'proto-history', i.e. the history of the mother, father and brother, as well as Gustave's early childhood including the relationship with the mother. The aim, announced in *Questions de méthode*, is to attain the subject's 'profondeur du vécu' through the analytical 'va-et-vient'<sup>22</sup> and to develop a method that 'comprehends' existence.<sup>23</sup>

While the 'progressive-regressive' and the 'comprehending' aspects of Sartre's approach are spelled out in *Questions de méthode*, the degree of imagination deployed by Sartre in reconstituting Flaubert's lived reality seems an addition emerging only with the Flaubert study itself. Sartre often offers the reader scenes, relationships and emotions as they might have existed; the aforementioned passage introducing Flaubert's mother concludes with the much quoted formulation 'je l'avoue: c'est une fable' (*IF*, I, p. 138) and contains subjective openings such as 'j'imagine donc que [...]' (*IF*, I, p. 135). Passages such as these have attracted criticism from a number of commentators, for whom Sartre excessively abandons facts to the benefit of conjecture. Robert Champigny objects to Sartre's imagining what Flaubert might think,<sup>24</sup> while Ronald Aronson disapproves of what he views as conclusions being drawn from a mere chain of imagination.<sup>25</sup> The fictional aspect of *L'Idiot* is of course no accident but openly admitted by Sartre as part of its methodological outlook. As is often quoted, he calls the biography a 'roman *vrai*',<sup>26</sup> novel that is true, and elsewhere he even refers to it as a '*vrai roman*', a real novel, then explaining his recourse to fiction: 'j'utilise de la fiction – guidée, contrôlée, mais fiction quand même [...] Mes hypothèses me conduisent donc à inventer en

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<sup>22</sup> Sartre, 'Questions de méthode', in *Critique*, I, p. 92.

<sup>23</sup> Sartre's method of 'comprehension', first developed in the *Carnets de la drôle de guerre*, is strongly indebted to Wilhelm Dilthey's *Verstehen* tradition. See chapter 4.

<sup>24</sup> Robert Champigny, 'Trying to Understand L'Idiot', *Diacritics*, 2.2 (1972), 2–6.

<sup>25</sup> Ronald Aronson, 'L'Idiot de La Famille: The Ultimate Sartre?', in *Critical Essays on Jean-Paul Sartre*, ed. by Robert Wilcocks, *Critical Essays on World Literature* (Boston: G. K. Hall, 1988), pp. 119–36 (p. 122).

<sup>26</sup> Jean-Paul Sartre, 'Sur "L'Idiot de la famille"' [1971], in *Situations*, X (Paris: Gallimard, 1976), pp. 91–115 (p. 94).

partie mon personnage'.<sup>27</sup> This interplay of fiction and truth could therefore be seen as reflecting a desire to theoretically and practically integrate imaginary and real (see chapters 3-5).

If the word 'savoir' in the question 'what can we know of a Man today?' engages a series of problems and debates, the formulation 'de Gustave Flaubert – par exemple' has caused no less criticism. A number of scholars have remarked that the formulation suggests perhaps too great a contingency of the choice of Flaubert as example. David Caute, for example, asks why Sartre did not choose a figure like Jeanne d'Arc as subject matter,<sup>28</sup> and Leon Roudiez remarks insightfully that proportionately the words 'par exemple' have 'caused more trouble than any other two words in the 2800 pages of the study'.<sup>29</sup> Sartre's choice of subject matter is of course not accidental at all; *L'Être et le néant* already declares the intention to produce an existentialist biography on either Flaubert or Dostoyevsky.<sup>30</sup> Flaubert's importance for Sartre is visible in a range of texts,<sup>31</sup> and in his interviews Sartre discusses a variety of reasons for choosing Flaubert, such as the frankness of the writer's correspondence. Although the period between 1968 and 1970 saw an intense re-writing and editing of *L'Idiot*, the biography is clearly the product of a life-long fascination since the idea was first suggested to Sartre by Roger Garaudy.<sup>32</sup>

This intense relationship has caused large amounts of commentary, including insightful psychoanalytical readings such as Josette Pacaly's (see literature review). While investigations into the relationship between Sartre's reading of Flaubert and his own authorial persona are certainly fruitful, such an approach will be avoided in the following for two reasons (leaving aside the dangers of a method that might border on biographical interpretation): firstly, if

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<sup>27</sup> Sartre, 'Sartre par Sartre', p. 123.

<sup>28</sup> David Caute, 'The Refusal to Be Good', in *Collisions: Essays and Reviews* (London: Quartet Books, 1974), pp. 173–87 (pp. 174–5).

<sup>29</sup> Leon S. Roudiez, 'Flaubert, for Instance?', *The French Review*, 55.7 (1982), 68–78 (p. 171).

<sup>30</sup> Sartre, *L'Être et le néant*, p. 620.

<sup>31</sup> Such as the remarks on Poulou's reading of *Madame Bovary* in *Les Mots*.

<sup>32</sup> Sartre, 'Sur "L'Idiot de la famille"', p. 92.

## Introduction

*L'Idiot* can be seen as a Sartrean projection, one might contend that Sartre's biographical work is not necessarily *more* motivated by personal concerns than that of other writers, but simply more openly so. The undeniable mirror effect between Sartre and Flaubert, is perhaps *not only* such a productive field of research because Sartre has chosen an object of study so close to his heart, *but also* because Sartre himself, without shame, has already given us some of the clues.

Secondly, and this objection is more seriously grounded in methodological considerations, what might be bemoaned as excessively subjective in *L'Idiot* can also be seen as an analytical instrument. *Questions de méthode* explicitly insists on the fact that the 'questioner is part of the question',<sup>33</sup> in other words, that any historical or biographical enquiry is conducted from a subjective standpoint and can never claim absolute truth. Therefore, if Sartre asks 'que peut-on savoir d'un homme, aujourd'hui?', the word 'aujourd'hui' seems far from coincidental: it indicates a recognition of the situated character of the text and its author, making the reader aware of its limitations.

### IV. Situating *L'Idiot de la famille*

Of his existentialist biographies, *L'Idiot de la famille* is often perceived as the most obscure, and it is certainly the least studied. In 1972 Claude Burgelin estimated that no more than 200 readers in France had made it through the entire text and the sales figures for the first edition of *L'Idiot*, given by Annie-Cohen Solal in her biography of Sartre, are hardly reason for more optimism.<sup>34</sup> Similar to Burgelin, Anglophone critics have questioned the 'readability' of *L'Idiot* and complained about the lack of accessibility for the reader.<sup>35</sup> Against the background of this image of idiosyncrasy surrounding the Flaubert study, there is thus particular cause, when approaching this monumental text, to explore and highlight its *open* character, the space it

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<sup>33</sup> Sartre, 'Questions de méthode', in *Critique*, I, p. 107.

<sup>34</sup> Claude Burgelin, 'Lire *L'Idiot de La Famille*', *Littérature*, 111–20 (p. 111); Annie Cohen-Solal, *Sartre* (Paris: Gallimard, 1985), p. 595.

<sup>35</sup> For example Aronson, 'L'Idiot de La Famille: The Ultimate Sartre?'; Michael Scriven, *Sartre's Existential Biographies* (London: Macmillan, 1984).

## Introduction

provides for a continuation of Sartre's philosophical enquiry, and the often hidden dialogue it engages with its own present and with a range of interlocutors. At the same time, the text's inaccessibility to a broad readership, which indeed creates a particularly stark contrast with, for example, the continuing popularity of *Huis clos* (1944), but which also sets *L'Idiot* apart from other pieces of criticism and biographies, cannot be ignored; we shall bear this problem in mind and propose an evaluation of the relationship between *L'Idiot* and its readers in the concluding remarks.

In trying to assess *L'Idiot de la famille*, the first difficulty arises in defining the very genre of a text that could be categorised as biography, novel, autobiography and philosophical enquiry. It is most useful perhaps, to see *L'Idiot* as the invention of a new genre,<sup>36</sup> but in so far as we are dealing with a biography, it is certainly a self-conscious one, since it problematises the very definition of the terms 'life' and 'writing'. In this, *L'Idiot* is inscribed in a line of biographical enquiry within Sartre's work that begins with Roquentin, the protagonist-writer of *La Nausée* (1939) and his attempts at biography, leading to the recognition of the incompatibility of life and narration. Subsequently, Sartre's posthumously published *Carnets de la drôle de guerre* from 1939-40, return to the question of biography from a more methodological angle. Here, Sartre for the first time suggests a 'comprehensive' method that seeks to reconstitute the lived reality of an individual in its totality. From the outset, Sartre's biographical method is thus acutely distinguished from a simple accumulation of biographical facts and instead seeks to render the more profound unity of a life. In *L'Être et le néant* the psychoanalytical component of Sartre's biographical method is then shaped. The chapter "La psychanalyse existentielle" develops the defining features of existential psychoanalysis in the context of agreements and disagreements with the Freudian method, and crucially establishes the notion of the 'choix originel' as the founding moment in a person's life in which a fundamental project is chosen on the level of

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<sup>36</sup> See for example Jean Améry, 'Die Wörter Gustave Flauberts. Über Jean-Paul Sartres "L'Idiot de La Famille"', *Merkur*, 25 (1971), 1197–1210 (p. 1204); Ronald Aronson, 'The Ultimate Sartre', p. 123.

non-reflective consciousness. The biographical method is inseparable from the philosophy of human existence and Sartre's subsequent biographical writings on Baudelaire, Genet, Mallarmé, Tintoretto and Flaubert should be seen as integral parts of the evolution of Sartre's theory of the subject and not merely as its application (see in particular chapter 1).

In one sense, *L'Idiot* is therefore the culmination of Sartre's experimentation with existential biography. However, this lineage is not the only one in which the text can be positioned. Much like the genre-definition of *L'Idiot* is ambiguous, its position within Sartre's work has provoked varying interpretations. The opening line of the preface of *L'Idiot* introduces the text as a continuation of *Questions de Méthode*, while elsewhere Sartre identifies *L'Idiot* as a sequel to *L'Imaginaire* (1940), since it applies the philosophical principles of the image to an 'imaginary person'.<sup>37</sup> At the same time, *La Transcendance de l'égo* is referenced frequently in *L'Idiot*, and the Flaubert study has productively been read as a sequel to *Les Mots*, and, as Gary Cox suggests, it even has a methodological precursor in the structure of *Les Mains sales* (1948).<sup>38</sup> In so far as Sartre in 1971-72 draws on his entire conceptual apparatus, using the language of *L'Être et le néant* alongside that of the *Critique de la raison dialectique*, it seems justified to assume, in Serge Doubrovsky's words, that *L'Idiot*, 'c'est tout Sartre'.<sup>39</sup>

This position, although it may seem rather obvious, has an important consequence: if *L'Idiot* indeed represents a theoretical *summa* and re-elaboration of central themes of Sartre's thought, this makes the hypothesis of an 'epistemological break' between his earlier and later work, a position defended for example by Marjorie Greene, less convincing.<sup>40</sup> At the same time, it would of course be equally problematic to diminish the significant development, albeit not necessarily a linear one, that takes place in Sartre's philosophy. It has become a commonplace truth, often affirmed by Sartre himself, that the experience of the Second

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<sup>37</sup> Sartre, 'Sartre par Sartre', p. 118.

<sup>38</sup> Gary Cox, *Sartre and Fiction* (London: Continuum, 2009), pp. 150–1.

<sup>39</sup> Doubrovsky, 'Une étrange toupie', p. 123.

<sup>40</sup> Marjorie Greene, *Sartre*, New Viewpoints (New York: Franklin Watts, 1973).

## Introduction

World War was the catalyst for a greater recognition of the importance of society and history. Rather than as a breaking point, the early 1940s should however be seen as the beginning of a philosophical quest that seeks to integrate existentialist phenomenology, psychoanalysis, anthropology, literary criticism and Marxism. *L'Idiot de la famille*, praised by Claude Burgelin for its 'pluridisciplinarity',<sup>41</sup> is testament to Sartre's attempt to insert the phenomenology of the singular into a broader understanding of the formation of subjectivity on the collective level.

## V. Literature review

### V. 1. Quantitative overview

Academic studies of *L'Idiot de la famille* are relatively small in number, especially if compared to the immense scholarly field that has grown around Sartre's work as a whole. Unsurprisingly, the immediate period after its publication saw a relatively high number of shorter studies and academic reviews, both in France and abroad. A more in-depth assessment of *L'Idiot* begins with Adelheid Müller-Lissner's book on Sartre's biographical method in *L'Idiot*, published in 1977,<sup>42</sup> followed by the publication of Christina Howells's *Sartre's Theory of Literature* in 1979, of which a significant portion is dedicated to the Flaubert study.<sup>43</sup> Shortly afterwards, Hazel Barnes publishes the first (and so far only) monograph on *L'Idiot* in English, introducing Sartre's line of reasoning and providing a critical discussion of his arguments and methods.<sup>44</sup>

During the 1980s and early 1990s a particularly dynamic engagement with Sartre's Flaubert study took place in Germany, producing an important collection of articles,<sup>45</sup> as well as several monographs, which often focus on methodological questions and on Sartre's

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<sup>41</sup> Claude Burgelin, 'De Sartre à Flaubert ou la genèse d'un roman vrai', *Revue d'Histoire Littéraire de la France*, 81.4-5 (1981), 688-701 (p. 698).

<sup>42</sup> Adelheid Müller-Lissner, *Sartre als Biograph Flauberts: zu Zielen und Methoden von 'L'Idiot de la famille'* (Bonn: Bouvier, 1977).

<sup>43</sup> Christina Howells, *Sartre's Theory of Literature* (London: MHRA, 1979).

<sup>44</sup> Hazel Barnes, *Sartre & Flaubert* (Chicago: Chicago UP, 1982).

<sup>45</sup> *Sartres Flaubert lesen*, ed. by Traugott König (Hamburg: Rohwohlt, 1990).

Diltheyian heritage.<sup>46</sup> In France, the 1986 edition of *Études Sartriennes* is largely dedicated to *L'Idiot*. Anglophone authors frequently deal with the biography in significant chapters in books on Sartre's work as a whole,<sup>47</sup> or on his biographical project more specifically.<sup>48</sup> If towards the end of the 1990s, engagement with Sartre's work on Flaubert reaches a low point in quantitative terms, recent activities are reason for renewed optimism. Although there is still no monograph on *L'Idiot* in France, Julie Anselmini and Julie Aucagne's edited volume<sup>49</sup> and Alexis Chabot's detailed section on Flaubert in his recent *Sartre et le père*<sup>50</sup> suggest that a new generation of scholars from a diverse range of disciplines have begun to take a fresh look at the text.

### V. 2. Approaches to *L'Idiot de la famille*

In order to situate the present thesis within this relatively limited, yet rich, field of scholarship, it seems useful to present existing criticism in more qualitative terms by categorising some of the main approaches that have been adopted *vis-à-vis* the Flaubert study. These are of course not completely distinct, nor do they form an exclusive list. As a first approach one could identify those who treat *L'Idiot* as a piece of secondary criticism. Bruno Clément highlights the problem of ascertaining whether a work such as *L'Idiot* is in fact to be seen as a primary or as a secondary text.<sup>51</sup> Some of the criticism levelled against Sartre seems to originate in the assumption that it is the latter and that it should therefore offer more strictly factual insights.<sup>52</sup> Unsurprisingly, the attitude of evaluating *L'Idiot* as a piece of secondary criticism has been prominent among Flaubert scholars: Jean Bruneau thus attacks Sartre on the level of

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<sup>46</sup> See for example: Monika Schulten, *Jean-Paul Sartre 'L'Idiot de la famille'. Ein methodisches Modell der Dichterbiographie* (Frankfurt, Bern, New York, Paris: Peter Lang, 1991).

<sup>47</sup> For example: Aronson, *Jean-Paul Sartre, Philosophy in the World*.

<sup>48</sup> For example: Douglas Collins, *Sartre as Biographer* (Cambridge, Massachusetts, and London, England: Harvard University Press, 1980).

<sup>49</sup> Julie Anselmini and Julie Aucagne, *L'Idiot de la famille de Jean-Paul Sartre* (Traverses 19-21: Université Stendhal-Grenoble 3, 2007).

<sup>50</sup> Chabot, *Sartre et le père*.

<sup>51</sup> Bruno Clément, *Le Lecteur et son modèle: Voltaire, Pascal, Hugo, Shakespeare, Sartre, Flaubert* (Paris: PUF, 1999), p. 5.

<sup>52</sup> In particular initial commentators seemed to hesitate as to whether to treat *L'Idiot* as primary or as secondary text. See for example Harry Levin, 'A Literary Enormity: Sartre on Flaubert', *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 33.4 (1972), 643–49 (p. 644).

biographical detail, often without engaging with the wider implications of his position.<sup>53</sup> Although *L'Idiot* has still not received widespread attention from Flaubert experts, some commentators such as Jeanne Bem have engaged very closely with Sartre's analysis,<sup>54</sup> and critics such as Jonathan Culler have developed a reading of Flaubert that resonates with Sartre's interpretation of Flaubert as anti-Realist, highlighting the relevance of *L'Idiot* as literary criticism and not only as Sartrean philosophy.<sup>55</sup> The investigation in this thesis is going to treat *L'Idiot* largely as a primary text; or at least as, following Pierre de Boisdeffre's distinction between the rather passive 'critique consommateur' and a more ambitious and inventive 'critique créateur', as an exemplary representative of the latter category.<sup>56</sup> Since *L'Idiot* will be treated both as a decidedly Sartrean work, but also be taken seriously as a contribution to literary history and criticism, Flaubert scholars will be taken into account where relevant, as for example David Gross's contention that Sartre underestimates the progressive potential of Flaubert's politics (chapter 5).<sup>57</sup>

A second and very fruitful approach to *L'Idiot* has developed out of this question and could be summarised as biographical criticism. If some commentators have bemoaned the fact that there is 'too much Sartre' in *L'Idiot*, or even pointed towards rather tangential similarities between Flaubert and Sartre,<sup>58</sup> others have explored the proximity of the biographer and his subject matter in a very productive manner. Most recently, Nao Sawada has demonstrated the fecundity of a reading of *L'Idiot* against *Les Mots*; an avenue explored

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<sup>53</sup> Jean Bruneau, 'Jean-Paul Sartre biographe de Flaubert', in *Lectures de Sartre*, ed. by Claude Burgelin (Lyon: Presses Universitaires de Lyon, 1986), pp. 161–83.

<sup>54</sup> Jeanne Bem, 'La Production du sens chez Flaubert: la contribution de Sartre', in *Actes du Colloque de Cerisy*, ed. by Claudine Gothot-Mersch (Paris: UGE, 1975), pp. 155–74.

<sup>55</sup> Jonathan Culler, *Flaubert: The Uses of Uncertainty* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985).

<sup>56</sup> Pierre de Boisdeffre, *L'Œuvre aux livres: littérature et critique* (Paris: Seghers, 1980), pp. 9–10.

<sup>57</sup> David Gross, 'Sartre's (Mis-)Reading of Flaubert's Politics: An Unacknowledged Dialectic of Misanthropy and Utopian Desire', *Yale French Studies*, *Sartre after Sartre*, 68 (1985), 127–51.

<sup>58</sup> David Caute, for instance highlights the fact that neither Sartre nor Flaubert had any children. In 'The Refusal to Be Good', p. 183.

brilliantly by Alexis Chabot.<sup>59</sup> A reading of *L'Idiot* that contributes towards a biography of Sartre is certainly possible, and particularly fruitful if exploring the tension between autobiography and biography. For reasons outlined above, the present thesis will not read *L'Idiot* as hidden autobiography; but in so far as critics have highlighted the subjective character of Sartre's analysis, their arguments will be relevant to an assessment of the reception of *L'Idiot* (See conclusion). Josette Pacaly, one of the first to point towards the 'jeu de miroirs' taking place within Sartre's *œuvre*, commented that *L'Idiot* represents an extreme point of 'séquestration' close to a form of psychosis.<sup>60</sup> Even if one does not pursue a psychoanalytical approach such as Pacaly's, her assessment of *L'Idiot* as 'psychotic' is reminiscent of Sartre's own thoughts on 'neurosis literature' in the third volume of *L'Idiot*.

Finally, a third approach can be identified amongst scholars who have sought to read *L'Idiot* not simply as biography or as autobiography, but as a theoretical contribution in its own right. Amongst Anglophone scholars, an important contribution to this approach was made by Christina Howells, on whose analysis the present thesis will frequently build. The German-speaking context has produced particularly pronounced discussions of Sartre's moral attitude towards Flaubert and *art for art's sake*, often coloured by an appreciation of the relationship between Sartre and thinkers associated with the Frankfurt school such as Herbert Marcuse and Walter Benjamin. Our investigations into parallels between Benjamin and Sartre (touched upon in chapters 4 and 5) therefore have a twofold purpose: they are intended to initiate an important assessment of the relationship between Sartre and the Frankfurt School amongst Anglo- and Francophone scholars, but they are equally a contribution to an existing conversation amongst Germanophone commentators.

A range of analyses of *L'Idiot* and Sartre's work that have emerged from Francophone critics will further be consulted throughout this thesis. In particular more recent interventions,

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<sup>59</sup> Nao Sawada, 'Biographe malgré lui: "L'Idiot de la famille" dans le miroir des Mots', *Recherches & Travaux*, 2007, 65–76; Chabot, *Sartre et le père*.

<sup>60</sup> Josette Pacaly, *Sartre au miroir* (Paris: Klincksieck, 1980), p. 443.

## Introduction

such as those made in the 2007 issue of *Recherches & Travaux*, especially Jean Bourgault's emphasis on the imaginary as method, and Marielle Macé's contribution to Sartrean 'destiny' will be critical reference points. Additionally, our arguments about the theoretical development contained in *L'Idiot* will dialogue with the interpretations advanced by a range of critics, such as Thomas Flynn's and François Noudelmann's writings on the Sartrean imaginary, or Ronald Aronson's work on Sartre's social theory.

## VI. Approach and chapter overview

Because of the relatively limited body of scholarship on *L'Idiot* hitherto produced, it seems appropriate to return to a close reading of the text, whilst adopting several novel angles. Contrary to the view of *L'Idiot* as entirely detached, the present thesis seeks to explore three potential 'anchorings' of the text: firstly, the text will be treated as a philosophical enquiry into a series of problems discussed in previous texts by Sartre. Secondly, *L'Idiot* will be seen as opening up conversations with other thinkers, whose relationship with Sartre has received relatively little attention, especially Pierre Bourdieu and Walter Benjamin, or those, like Roland Barthes, whose connection to Sartre will be examined from new perspectives. Thirdly, *L'Idiot* will be seen as expressing, albeit in a mediated manner, a concern with its own time. Especially our discussion of Sartre's depiction of a revolt by Flaubert's schoolmates in the early 1830s will be situated within Sartre's comments on the question of age and generations in the context of 1968.

While some have criticised the passages in which Sartre 'progressively' imagines scenes as they may have happened, the present thesis is going to consider them as an integral part of Sartre's methodology and will in fact put particular emphasis on what could be seen as a 'staging' of subjectivity by Sartre: scenes such as the schoolboys' revolt (chapter 2) or their nocturnal reading practices (chapter 5) will be treated as essential contributions to Sartre's philosophical investigations, rather than mere illustrations or facts necessary for the

## Introduction

movement of the biographical plot. Instead, it will be suggested that many such passages can be read in an allegorical manner, and as pointing to a larger significance.

Our investigation will consist of two interdependent parts: the first two chapters are going to examine subjectivity in its individual and in its collective dimensions. The first chapter will trace the categories that Sartre develops in order to theorise Flaubert's subjectivity, highlighting the originality of Sartre's notion of subjectivity whilst demonstrating resonances with Bourdieu's writings of the early 1970s and Donald Winnicott. The chapter will conclude with a discussion of Sartre's recourse to the metaphor of 'destiny', a multi-layered term that will be mobilised for an argument in favour of the simultaneity of freedom and alienation in Sartre. The second chapter will then discuss the appearance of collectivity in *L'Idiot*, arguing that a conception of 'collective subjectivity' can be derived from the depiction of intersubjective configurations in *L'Idiot*, going beyond the categories of 'group' and 'seriality' in the *Critique de la raison dialectique*. The chapter will moreover present a reading of sections of *L'Idiot* as a mediated comment on the events of 1968.

The remaining three chapters will then investigate subjectivity in its relationship with the imaginary: chapter 3 will seek to demonstrate the broadening of Sartre's theory of the imaginary and its relationship with the real. *L'Idiot* will here be seen in its dimension of continuation of the discussion opened up in *L'Imaginaire*, resulting in a particular openness towards Merleau-Ponty's criticisms of Sartre's original theory of the imaginary. Chapter 4 and 5 will then assess Sartre's understanding of two important manifestations of the imaginary, namely writing and reading. Chapter 4 will firstly explore the 'phenomenology of writing' contained in *L'Idiot*, and secondly examine the interrelatedness of writing, the imaginary, subjectivity and self-comprehension. Finally, chapter 5 will turn towards the question of reading, suggesting, again, that a phenomenology of reading processes is presented in *L'Idiot*, producing significant but so far largely ignored developments of the themes outlined in *QL*.

## Introduction

Chapter 4 and 5 will in particular consider resonances between *L'Idiot* and aspects of Barthes's thought.

## Chapter 1: Project and Destiny: Subjectivity and alienation in *L'Idiot de la famille*

### Introduction

Sartre's famous question 'What can we know of a Man today?' engages, as we have seen, a series of methodological questions. While thus testing epistemological boundaries, Sartre necessarily also problematises the definition of 'Man' i.e. the human subject. The first part of this chapter will therefore set out by outlining the formation of the subject Gustave Flaubert, analysing the different moments of 'constitution', 'personalisation' and 'programmation' in *L'Idiot*. These components will be examined separately, to some extent following the structure of Sartre's text, but it will be argued that they are inextricably linked and that each of them refers to the others. It will therefore be suggested that, despite the seeming separation within Sartre's text, conditioning and freedom are in fact simultaneous in processes of subjectivity, i.e. of internalisation and exteriorisation. The similarities and differences between Sartre's theory of subjectivity and the frameworks developed by thinkers such as Donald Winnicott and Pierre Bourdieu will be considered in this part, which will conclude with a discussion of the role that Flaubert's case plays in Sartre's theory of the subject.

The second part of the chapter will then engage with the notion of 'destiny' and discuss how the appearance of this concept in *L'Idiot* can enrich our understanding of the Sartrean theory of the subject. It will be argued that the 'destin' is on the one hand an almost statistical notion designed to comprise all conditioning factors contributing to the formation of a person. In this sense it represents a concrete elaboration of the 'situation'. On the other hand, as the example of Flaubert will show, the 'destin' is also that into which a person turns his or her freedom. It is thus simultaneously project and the alienation of that project. We shall examine whether the notion of the 'destin', insofar as it describes the objective conditions which limit our possibilities, the project which we create, *and* the necessarily alienated form of

this project, could unite previously separated concepts: the project, the situation and alienation.

## I. Constitution, programming and choice – the case of Gustave Flaubert

The structure of *L'Idiot de la famille* divides the analysis of the formation of the subject into three different sections: The first part of the biography, 'La Constitution', dedicates 648 pages to the discussion of the conditioning factors of Gustave's childhood. Following on from this, 'La Personnalisation', which covers the remaining 1488 pages of the first two volumes, lays out the process of self-creation, or the 'gradual building up of an orientation which will culminate in Flaubert's neurotic crisis and his final choice of himself as a writer'.<sup>1</sup> Finally then, the last part of the third volume, after a general survey of post-Romantic art and its relationship to the historical situation, examines Gustave's 'programmation', a concept already introduced towards the end of the second volume, designating the profound relationship between the human subject and history. Our discussion of the formation of the subject in *L'Idiot* will set out by adopting Sartre's conceptual and structural distinction of constitution, personalisation and programmation, before addressing the question of a synthesis of these notions, and finally attempting to assess the role of the case of Gustave Flaubert in Sartre's theory of the subject. Where appropriate, references to Sartre's earlier biographies (primarily those of Baudelaire and Genet) will be included in order to highlight developments within the project of existential biography.

### I.1. The constitution: Gustave in the family

#### I.1.1. The Flaubert family

The part of *L'Idiot* entitled 'La Constitution' re-constitutes Flaubert's pre-history (the family situation into which he was born) and his proto-history (his early childhood), presenting the reader with a survey of the Flaubert family. The chapter on the mother, Caroline Fleuriot

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<sup>1</sup> Barnes, *Sartre & Flaubert*, p. 71.

Flaubert, which, as Hazel Barnes says, contains ‘some of Sartre’s finest writing’,<sup>2</sup> paints a picture of a woman, who, as a result of the family structure in which she herself grew up, is absolutely devoted to her husband and less focused on her children. The father, Achille-Cléophas, is portrayed as a man who, despite living in Rouen and practising medicine, assumes the role of the *pater familias* of a semi-feudal family. His adherence to the ideas of family honour and heredity creates an expectation to follow in the father’s footsteps. This expectation is completely fulfilled by the elder brother Achille who never transcends the total identification with the father, simultaneously barring that route for Gustave.

The emotionally absent mother, the commanding father, and the exemplary brother, in combination with the milieu of provincial France and the quasi-feudal family-structure contribute to Gustave’s passive constitution, or his conditioning as passive agent. Passivity is at the origin of Gustave’s troubled relationship with language, defined as a specific kind of activity: ‘il faut décomposer, [...] affirmer, nier, communiquer; ce qu’on doit lui enseigner ce n’est point seulement l’alphabet mais, [...] la *praxis* à laquelle *rien* ne l’a préparé: l’enfant pathétique aborde la *praxis* et découvre qu’il n’est pas fait pour elle’ (*IF*, I, p. 48). This passage demonstrates that, for Sartre, Gustave’s difficulties in learning to write are not merely one of many ways in which his passivity expresses itself (such as for instance Gustave’s moments of complete absence from his surroundings, his ‘hébétudes’), but *the* event which reveals this passivity to him, even though perhaps not on the level of reflected consciousness.

### 1.1.2. The development of existential psychoanalysis: theory and ‘fable’

In order to explain how precisely Gustave’s passive constitution was formed, Sartre develops further his method of existential psychoanalysis, already outlined in *L’Être et le néant*. In 1943 he summarised his main agreements and disagreements with Freudian psychoanalysis, particularly criticising the ideas of the unconscious and any form of psychic determinism; and

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<sup>2</sup> Barnes, *Sartre & Flaubert*, p. 25.

on the other hand concurring with Freud's method of recognising the (symbolic) significance of any event in a person's life.<sup>3</sup> *L'Idiot* reveals an increasing proximity to Freud: even though Sartre never agrees with the idea of an unconscious unavailable to the subject,<sup>4</sup> in *L'Idiot* he pays close attention to processes which, as he now says, *precede* experience: 'ainsi Gustave est *fait* mais non par une expérience consciente: par un ensemble de processus qui précèdent l'expérience et la conditionnent' (*IF*, II, p. 1516). These constituting processes centrally revolve around the relationship with the mother: the rupture ('sevrage') which prevents Gustave from developing an active relationship with reality and thereby becoming an active agent, stems from a lack of affection from the mother whose treatment of the child is cold and merely functional.

This passage is one of the earliest examples of the procedure of advancing elements of his theory of subjectivity in the context of scenes that are imagined by Sartre as they may have happened. Sartre's 'progressive' method here presents the reader with what the author of *L'Idiot* imagines to be the case, namely Caroline Flaubert's dedicated but unloving way of taking care of her child Gustave (*IF*, I, p. 135). Acknowledging that his narrative is a 'fable' (*IF*, I, p. 138), Sartre proceeds in a visibly stylised manner. His reasoning about Caroline's desire to give birth to a daughter is an illuminating example:

Neuf mois bien agités: elle dut tout envisager, la pauvre Caroline, espérer et désespérer, tantôt accueillant la fille future comme manne céleste et d'autres fois crachant aux cendres pour refuser le fils imminent (*IF*, I, p. 132).

This short passage demonstrates the ample use that Sartre makes of a variety of stylistic techniques: the empathetic adjective 'pauvre', repetition ('espérer et désespérer'), assonance ('fille future [...] refuser le fils'), and religious imagery ('manne céleste'). Sartre thus lays out the scene for the new-born's entrance onto the stage, which is narrated in the present tense: 'Gustave naît entre deux décès' (*IF*, I, p. 134). The relationship between the mother and the

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<sup>3</sup> Jean-Paul Sartre, *L'Être et le néant*, pp. 614ff.

<sup>4</sup> Jean-Paul Sartre, 'Sur "L'Idiot de la famille"', p. 111.

infant is then equally reported in the present tense: '[...] on lave, on allaite [...] mais sans complaisance inutile. Surtout la mère, timide et froide, ne sourit pas ou guère, ne babille pas' (*IF*, I, p. 136). *L'Idiot de la famille* thereby visibly dramatises the development of Gustave's subjectivity. However, Sartre does not simply produce a succession of 'fables', as has been contended;<sup>5</sup> instead he creates an interaction between imagined scenes and his theory of subjectivity. We shall now have a closer look at this theoretical elaboration, before returning to the question of its relationship with the imaginary aspects of the procedure.

In Sartre's theory of the constitution of the active subject, the mother-child relationship occupies a central role.<sup>6</sup> In the ideal case, the connection with the mother validates the child's feelings and makes an active subject-object relationship with the world possible. The child is given the 'mandat de vivre' it needs: 'une grâce d'amour l'invite à franchir la barrière de l'instant: on l'attend à l'instant qui suit, on l'y adore déjà [...] l'avenir lui apparaît [...] comme sa mission' (*IF*, I, p. 139). As Christina Howells points out, this sense of a mission is of course an illusion, an alienation that masks contingency. But it is a fortunate and necessary alienation which constitutes an 'essential element in the child's future transcendence of his alienation and contingency'.<sup>7</sup> Gustave, not having been sufficiently valorised by maternal affection, lacks this 'fortunate illusion'<sup>8</sup> and is constituted as passive.

In comparison to Sartre's other biographies, *L'Idiot* contains a much more refined psychoanalytical method: for the first time, the analysis of the formation of the subject takes into account the specific state of childhood. In contrast, Baudelaire's choice of non-commitment is portrayed as a reaction to a sudden change in the mother-son relationship, but

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<sup>5</sup> Aronson, 'L'Idiot de La Famille: The Ultimate Sartre?', p. 122.

<sup>6</sup> Even though not made explicit, the logic of the argument suggests that the role of the mother might just as well be fulfilled by the father or a person not biologically related to the child. Sartre's sole references to the mother might be explained by the context of the Flaubert family; a setting in which the view of gender and family relations would have exclusively attributed that role to the mother.

<sup>7</sup> Christina Howells, 'Flaubert's Blind Spot. The Fetishization of Subjectivity: Some Notes on the Constitution of Gustave in Sartre's "L'Idiot de La Famille"', in *Situating Sartre in Twentieth-Century Thought and Culture*, ed. by Jean-François Fournay and Charles Minahan (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1997), pp. 29–38 (p. 31).

<sup>8</sup> Our discussion of the 'destin' will return to this absence of a mission and argue that in its place Gustave artificially creates a vision of his life as destiny.

the description of his development largely neglects the specific situation of being a child. In *L'Idiot* on the other hand, there is an agreement with Freud about the impact of childhood. While Sartre's relationship with Freud (and Lacan) has been noted by several critics,<sup>9</sup> the insistence on the mother-child relationship in *L'Idiot* resonates particularly with approaches focusing on early childhood development such as Donald Winnicott's. His enquiry into transitional objects contains illuminating parallels with Sartre's comments on the young Flaubert.

In his essay 'Transitional Objects and Transitional Phenomena', originally published in 1953, Winnicott is concerned with the 'intermediate state between a baby's inability and his growing ability to recognize and accept reality'.<sup>10</sup> The infant's immediate experience of the world is populated by what Winnicott calls 'transitional phenomena', a relationship of possession between the child and a range of comforting objects, to some of which the child may develop a particular attachment, thus creating transitional objects, a favourite blanket or toy for example. The ideal mother whom Winnicott calls the 'good-enough mother'<sup>11</sup> plays an essential role by initially making adjustments in order to completely satisfy the child's needs, before adapting less completely to allow the infant to develop the capacity to cope with this failure.<sup>12</sup> The ensuing sense of security provides the child with an impression of 'omnipotence' necessary for the development of the capacity to manage frustration later on.

Winnicott and Sartre thus share a theoretical concern with the role of the infant-mother relationship in determining the child's future capacity to accept (Winnicott) and to act on (Sartre) reality. For Sartre, the ideal mother allows the child the impression of being a 'petit

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<sup>9</sup> Concerning Sartre's relationship with Freud see for example: Christina Howells, 'Sartre and Freud', in *French Studies* (1979) XXXIII(2), pp. 157-176, and Annette Lavers, 'Sartre and Freud', in *French Studies* (1987) XLI (3), pp. 298-317.

<sup>10</sup> Donald W. Winnicott, *Playing and Reality* [1953] (London: Routledge, 2010), p. 3.

<sup>11</sup> Winnicott adds that the mother does not necessarily need to be the child's biological mother. Compared to Sartre however, he seems closer to insisting on a *female* primary care giver (as is suggested by his frequent reference to the female body). At the same time, the functioning of Winnicott's argumentative construction does not seem to rely on sex or gender.

<sup>12</sup> Winnicott, p. 14.

privilégié' and 'impérieux', while Winnicott, in a similar manner, stresses the child's initial sense of omnipotence.<sup>13</sup> Both emphasise the illusory character of this impression: in Winnicott's conception, the mother initially provides the child with the illusion of complete possession of its objects of desire by affording him 'the illusion that her breast is part of the infant. It is, as it were, under the baby's magical control'.<sup>14</sup> After this first phase, the mother's increasingly incomplete adaptation to the child's needs initiates a gradual process of disillusionment in which the capacity to accommodate frustration is slowly acquired by the child. Similar to this process of 'illusion-disillusionment', the infant in the ideal case outlined by Sartre lives, as we have seen, through a phase of illusion, an 'aliénation heureuse', in which he (or she) has a sense of being mandated. This phase, too, is essential in preparing the agent for an ulterior moment of disillusionment in which the contingency of human existence is realised on the level of reflexivity: 'il faut se tromper d'abord, se croire mandaté [...] et puis ronger en soi ce faux bonheur [...]' (*IF*, I, p. 142). The loved child's illusion is a mistake without being false: it is an 'erreur vraie' (*IF*, I, p. 142), for it offers the child access to the realm of activity and therefore truth (see chapters 2 and 3).

Winnicott's understanding of the subjective and the objective cannot simply be mapped onto Sartre's: for Sartre objectivity is a much more fluid social creation, while Winnicott emphasises the clear distinction between what is 'objectively perceived' and what is 'subjectively conceived'. Nevertheless, for both thinkers the process of adaptation to the objective world is at stake: transitional phenomena represent a realm between what is 'subjectively conceived' and what is 'objectively perceived' by the child.<sup>15</sup> If the transitioning from the subjective perception of omnipotent possession of objects is disturbed, the individual excessively adheres to subjective beliefs, commonly diagnosed as pathological.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Winnicott, pp. 7, 15.

<sup>14</sup> Winnicott, p. 15.

<sup>15</sup> Winnicott, p. 15.

<sup>16</sup> Winnicott, p. 18.

This description is not unlike Sartre's depiction of the young Gustave, who is confined to subjectivity as a result of the 'not good-enough' (in Winnicott's words) mother-infant relationship.

Without necessarily being more complex than Sartre's, Winnicott's descriptions are often more richly determined; Winnicott for example is more nuanced in stressing the importance of small moments of frustration which enhance the child's overall capacity to deal with dissatisfaction. In a formulation that seems almost Sartrean, he adds that 'frustration renders reality real'. Sartre on the other hand, unconcerned with empirical accuracy, appears more schematic by comparison, establishing a stark opposition between the unloved child and the 'petit privilégié'.

Another crucial difference between Winnicott and Sartre merits our attention, since it highlights the specificity of Sartrean subjectivity. Winnicott insists that in psychological terms there is no real interchange between mother and infant, and that the idea of exchange is illusory: 'psychologically the infant takes from a breast that is part of the infant, and the mother gives milk to an infant that is part of herself. In psychology, the idea of interchange is based on an illusion in the psychologist'.<sup>17</sup> For Sartre on the other hand the interchange between child and mother is real and can be summarised as 'love'; in fact, where Winnicott confines his analysis to the mother's technical handling of the child, which accommodates the latter's needs to varying degrees, Sartre introduces a second level, namely that of emotional interchange. In terms of 'mechanical' care, Gustave experiences no lack and is even overprotected (he is 'précautionneusement manié', *IF*, II, p. 135); Winnicott's requirement that arrangements be made to satisfy the child's needs are thus met in some sense. Instead, Gustave suffers from lack of love, i.e. lack of reciprocity and connectedness which would

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<sup>17</sup> Winnicott, p. 16.

characterise the ideal mother-child relationship: ‘l’amour donne, attend, reçoit: il y a réciprocité de désignation’ (*IF*, I, p. 150).

This reciprocity between mother and child is a profound form of communication, since the child’s subjectivity as active agent is constituted by the internalisation of the perception of the self as object of love: ‘Si la mère l’aime, en d’autres mots, il découvre peu à peu son être-objet comme son être-aimé’ (*IF*, I, p. 135, note 1). While Sartre’s model thereby introduces an intersubjective milieu that renders the delimitation of the individual difficult, the absence of intersubjective exchange in Winnicott’s conception, on the other hand, seems to be connected to his conception of the self as possessing an *inner reality* that is separate from (although interconnected with) outer reality.<sup>18</sup> Andrew Leak’s reading of Winnicott and Sartre confirms the element of non-communication in Winnicott, whilst identifying similarities with this in *QL?* and *L’Être et le néant*.<sup>19</sup> If the present comparison between Winnicott and Sartre highlights the latter’s emphasis on communication and intersubjective exchange in the form of mother-love, this does not contradict Leak’s findings; rather, it points towards the significant transformation that Sartre’s thinking on collectivity has undergone since the 1940s. This growing emphasis on intersubjectivity as reciprocity in Sartre’s later works will be further examined in the following chapter; for now we should briefly return to the *imagined* character of the scenes between Gustave and Caroline portrayed here, before moving on to the dialectic of internalisation and exteriorisation, on which we have already implicitly touched.

With regard to the technique of including imagined scenes into his biographical enquiry, we can conclude that Sartre is far from simply moving from image to image. Instead, the ‘fable’ of Caroline Flaubert is integrated into the theoretical considerations that are developed

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<sup>18</sup> Winnicott, p. 3.

<sup>19</sup> Andrew Leak, ‘Creation as Non-Communication: Reflections on the Space of Creativity in Sartre and Winnicott’, *Sartre Studies International*, 14.1 (2008), 1–12.

from it.<sup>20</sup> Sartre's 'progressive' presentation of Gustave's lived experience can therefore be tested not only against biographical facts, but also against the theory of the subject in which it is embedded. He insists that an alternative explanation of the facts would nevertheless have to be developed under consideration of the psychoanalytical categories that Sartre mobilises. We might even read Sartre's interpretation of the happy child's illusion as 'erreur vraie' as echoing his description of *L'Idiot* as *roman vrai*. Just as the happy child's capacity to create a project is 'true' in the sense that it participates in an intersubjective realm of socially created truth, Sartre's 'fiction' in *L'Idiot* is equally 'true' through its insertion in the real. The integration of stylised dramatisation and theoretical elaboration certainly provides reason to question Sartre's comments, made in the interview "L'Écrivain et sa langue", in which he advocates a strict separation of style and philosophy.<sup>21</sup>

## 1.2. Personalisation, project and choice

### 1. 2. 1. The original choice in Sartrean biography

In order to ascertain Sartre's approach in *L'Idiot* to the problems of singularity, freedom and choice, we should begin by considering it in the context of the development of the theory of original choice throughout Sartre's biographical endeavour. The theoretical foundation of existential biography is laid in *L'Être et le néant*, where Sartre formulates the principle of such a method:

Il s'agit [...] de retrouver, sous des aspects partiels et incomplets du sujet, la véritable concrétisation qui ne peut être que [...] son rapport originel à soi, au monde et à l'autre, dans l'unité de relations *internes* et d'un projet fondamental.<sup>22</sup>

Any empirically observable attitude or behaviour of the subject is an expression of that choice, it *is* itself that choice.<sup>23</sup> In *Baudelaire* (1947) this method is put into practice for the first

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<sup>20</sup> Sartre's recourse to imagined episodes could fruitfully be compared to Roland Barthes's procedure of including 'fables' as evidence. In *L'Empire des signes* (Paris: Les Éditions du Seuil, 1970).

<sup>21</sup> Jean-Paul Sartre, 'L'Écrivain et sa langue [1965]', in *Situations, IX* (Paris: Gallimard, 1972), pp. 40–82 (56). On the question of examples and their literary dimension in Sartre's earlier work see Andrew Leak, 'The Significance of Context in Illustrative Examples', in *Reading Sartre: On Phenomenology and Existentialism*, ed. by Jonathan Webber (London and New York: Routledge, 2011), pp. 118–29.

<sup>22</sup> Sartre, *L'Être et le néant*, p. 608.

time. Here, the subject's original choice is clearly identified: it takes place when his widowed mother's second marriage confronts Charles, aged six, with a sudden sense of separation and alterity. Having to make a choice, Charles in a sense chooses not to choose, seeing himself as different and fundamentally separate from society. This choice, which Sartre identifies as an example of *mauvaise foi*, is then expressed throughout his life: in the attitude of *orgueil*, in his political non-commitment, his dedication to artistic creation rather than action on the world. Thus from the beginning, Sartre's biographical approach views the life of an individual as a unity. As Fredric Jameson says, it is symbolic rather than arbitrary as 'each series contains and reflects within itself all the others [...] Baudelaire's peculiar gait in walking ultimately [...] contains the secret of his psychology [...]'.<sup>24</sup> *Baudelaire* provides an example for a theory of original choice which posits a single moment in which a person relates to his or her freedom in a certain way. This moment then represents a unity of meaning throughout the life of the individual without undergoing major modification.

This conception is already significantly modified in *Saint Genet*. Here, the terminology of the original choice does not disappear, but it is enriched by the idea of a 'crise originelle',<sup>25</sup> the situation in which a choice has to be made thereby being increasingly emphasised. The defining crisis takes place when the young Genet, a destitute orphan in a surrounding defined by possession through heredity and primogeniture, is caught stealing. A hitherto undefined act is thereby named as theft, and simultaneously Genet is named 'thief'. To this experience of being named from the outside, which Sartre defines as alienation, Genet reacts by internalising and fully assuming the imposed definition: his choice is to radically embrace the only option open to him; a choice which, as it entails concrete action, earns him a far more generous judgement from Sartre than the one made on Baudelaire five years earlier. By radically

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<sup>23</sup> Sartre, *L'Être et le néant*, p. 607.

<sup>24</sup> Fredric Jameson, *Marxism and Form: Twentieth-Century Dialectical Theories of Literature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1971), pp. 224–25.

<sup>25</sup> Jean-Paul Sartre, *Saint Genet, comédien et martyr* (Paris: Gallimard, 1952), p. 95.

assuming his situation, Genet is in the end capable of reversing the situation in a process termed *Qui perd gagne* ('the loser wins').

It is impossible to provide here a full analysis of Sartre's theory of the subject in *Saint Genet*,<sup>26</sup> but for the discussion of Flaubert's project we should note that *Saint Genet* already modifies some aspects of the theory of original choice: Sartre retains the idea of a fundamental moment (crisis) from which the life of a person develops. However, the various phases and conversions Genet traverses in order to finally transform himself into the writer Jean Genet receive much closer attention. Additionally, the idea of the *Qui perd gagne* mechanism supersedes to a certain extent the clear-cut division of responsibility and bad faith, of committed and non-committed art, and along those lines, that of poetry and prose.

### 1. 2. 2. Choice and project in *L'Idiot de la famille*

In the case of Sartre's analysis of Gustave Flaubert, we can equally identify a form of fundamental project: having been constituted as a passive agent and at the same time being alienated by the powerful father-figure, he, like Genet, embraces his condition and chooses the imaginary. Sartre describes this 'choix fondamental de l'attitude imaginaire' as the 'décision de traiter la réalité en permanence comme l'*analogon* d'un univers irréel' (*IF*, II, p. 1193).<sup>27</sup> As Gustave turns himself into the writer Gustave Flaubert through a series of conversions, Sartre emphasises that this does not fundamentally modify his option for the imaginary. Therefore 'the vocation to be a comedian is a partial and momentary specification of his fundamental option and does not modify it as a whole' (*IF*, I, p. 792).<sup>28</sup> *L'Idiot* thus retains the idea of some form of unifying option or choice, now expressed in the 'personnalisation'.

In addition, we find in *L'Idiot* an echo of Sartre's earlier philosophy if we consider how precisely decisions are being made by the subject. Although Sartre's concepts have changed

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<sup>26</sup> For a detailed discussion of the theoretical underpinnings of *Saint Genet*, see for example Christina Howells, *Sartre's Theory of Literature*, chapter 4.

<sup>27</sup> Discussed in detail in chapter 3 of this thesis.

<sup>28</sup> All translations are my own, and all references to the French original.

since *L'Être et le néant*, and the notion of the 'vécu' has replaced that of consciousness (see below), various passages in *L'Idiot* correspond to the idea, outlined in 1943, that choice is not the product of pre-meditation, but is made on the level of pre-reflexive consciousness (*conscience irréfléchie*), before it can be realised on the level of reflexive consciousness (*conscience réfléchie*): 'quand je délibère, les jeux sont faits'.<sup>29</sup> Following the same logic, the summary of Flaubert's development which Sartre offers at the beginning of volume III asserts that Flaubert's artistic principles were not pre-meditated but merely *discovered* by reflection: '[...] les principes qu'il s'est donnés. Non certes par option délibérée mais parce qu'il les *trouve* en lui comme ayant été *déjà adoptés*' (*IF*, III, p. 19). Similarly, the choice of becoming an actor is simultaneously a discovery: 'L'*intention*, ici, ne fait qu'un avec la *découverte*' (*IF*, I, p. 862). Later, Sartre says that Gustave's choice of becoming a writer will only be clear to him after 1844 (*IF*, I, p. 933).

For the moment we can thus recapitulate that the theory of the formation of the subject in *L'Idiot* builds on earlier ideas of existential biography in that the notion of pre-conscious choice, which is constitutive of a life as a totality of meaning, is still at the centre of the project. However, it will be argued that *L'Idiot* represents a significant development of the theory of choice, particularly in comparison to *Baudelaire*. Our assumption is that the novelty of *L'Idiot* consists not so much in outlining an entirely new process of subject-formation, but rather in developing a method which is capable of accounting for *all* aspects of subjectivity, retaining and re-formulating assumptions about human freedom. In a sense, where *Baudelaire* posits the idea *that* choice happens, *L'Idiot* closely examines *how* it happens. This is precisely what is required of biography if it is to fulfil Sartre's aim, declared in an interview in 1971, of showing that every person can be known and that everything can be explained and communicated.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Sartre, *L'Être et le néant*, p. 495.

<sup>30</sup> Sartre, 'Sur "L'Idiot de la famille"', p. 106.

### 1. 2. 3. Personalisation as temporalisation: singular moments in a ‘vectorial’ logic

Firstly, we should note that, while *Baudelaire* identifies a single moment of choice from which everything ensues, the term ‘personalisation’ designates a process taking place over time and going through different phases. The idea of a ‘project’, which already figures in Sartre’s earlier writings, has become more adequate than the term ‘choice’, in that it renders precisely this diachronic aspect of the formation of the subject. Gustave’s choice of acting (when staging small plays together with his sister) is the ‘first moment of his personalisation’ (*IF*, I, p. 660). Throughout the text we find processes stretched out over time and slowly maturing, such as for instance the intention to fail (‘l’intention de déchoir’) which, once Gustave has been identified as inferior by the father, inscribes itself in him and in his body, and slowly intensifies: ‘[...] peu à peu, jour après jour, [...] l’intention se fera vertigineuse’ (*IF*, II, pp. 1145).

Sartre thus understands Flaubert’s choice in terms of its temporal organisation (‘la temporalisation interne d’un projet’). At the same time, the project still has a fundamental content or direction, the choice of the unreal (‘le choix de l’irréel’, *IF*, I, p. 660).<sup>31</sup> Accordingly, the different moments of Gustave’s development are internally linked, as his development over time is depicted as a spiral with several stages: acting, writing, the incarnation of the imaginary figure of the *Garçon* at school,<sup>32</sup> the poet, and finally the conversion to being the writer Gustave Flaubert. All these phases are attempts to solve a fundamental conflict and stand in a dialectical relationship with one another: ‘la nouvelle solution [l’écriture] enveloppe en elle-même la solution refusée [l’acteur]’ (*IF*, II, p. 908). In a passage on the *Garçon*, Sartre says for instance that impersonating this character represents a *higher* stage (‘stade plus élevé’)

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<sup>31</sup> Despite the more common translation of the French noun and adjective ‘irréel’ as ‘unreal’ and ‘unreality’, we shall adopt Jonathan Webber’s neologism ‘irreal’. This invention has the two-fold advantage of preserving the Husserlian origin (‘irreal’) and of referring more specifically to the relationship of imagination, while ‘unreal’ includes non-existing objects in a broader sense. See: ‘Translator’s Note’, in Jean-Paul Sartre, *The Imaginary: A Phenomenological Psychology of the Imagination*, trans. by Jonathan Webber (London: Routledge, 2004), p. xxviii.

<sup>32</sup> An imagined figure which the young Gustave invents collectively with his classmates and that they incarnate in turns. Despite its collective character, Sartre insists on the importance of Gustave’s part in the creation of the *Garçon* which Sartre interprets as a mechanism of de-realisation and making himself other.

in Gustave's de-realisation and a new spiral in the movement of personalisation (*IF*, II, p. 1233). The formulation 'stade plus élevé' suggests that the process of personalisation is characterised by an element of directedness, phrased by Sartre as 'indissoluble unité vectorielle', a neurotic strategy to overcome the constitution (*IF*, II, p. 1474).

Sartre's reading of this crisis as the culmination of a neurosis inscribes it in a far more protracted and rooted process than is the case in earlier biographies. There is thus a 'vectorial' logic at work, which is not driven by a process of steady and gradual progress, but by singular moments of crisis. For example, Gustave, after having discovered himself as actor, is confronted by the realisation that his family do not take his choice seriously as a possible profession for their youngest son. Incapable of determining his own life, he thus has to abandon what he saw as a possible solution: 'ainsi la tentative de donner un statut réel à sa déréalisation se trouve déréalisée' (*IF*, I, p. 875). The lack of esteem for his acting on the part of the father is what Sartre identifies as the origin of Gustave's conversion to writing, which first takes the form of editing plays. Sartre's portrayal of this shift offers some insights into his conception of personalisation. He insists in this context that Gustave's development is by no means a simple evolution and instead depends on external factors: 'il est impossible de considérer un tel changement comme le résultat d'une simple évolution [...] il faut une intervention extérieure' (*IF*, I, p. 873). By external intervention Sartre does not necessarily refer to a specific event or utterance made, but more generally Gustave's sense of the father's lack of esteem for his acting. In the same logic, Sartre refers to the problems caused for Gustave by the move from oral to written language as a contradiction into which he is thrown, a formulation suggesting interaction with exteriority. Similarly, Gustave's encounter with a different kind of social setting when entering school will initiate 'a new circuit of personalisation' (*IF*, I, p. 979). Later, the two years spent in Paris studying law (from 1842-44) are identified by Sartre as precipitating him into neurosis (*IF*, II, p. 1361, note 1). Hence, in

particular in comparison to *Baudelaire*, the subject-formation in *L'Idiot* takes place in a much more protracted way; and this process over time is driven by moments of crisis that result from interaction with the world.

The most outstanding crisis is of course the 'fall' (*chute*) of 1844; a moment which Sartre most explicitly associates with freedom: 'la nuit la plus noire et la plus longue de sa vie, en cet instant extraordinaire où la liberté naîtra enfin pour se choisir névrose et où la névrose, en le foudroyant, deviendra sa liberté' (*IF*, II, p. 1146, note 1). Sartre's interpretation of the 1844 crisis, which follows René Dumesnil's rejection of epilepsy as explanation,<sup>33</sup> has attracted criticism from Flaubert scholars. Jean Bruneau correctly points towards factual mistakes in Sartre's depiction of Flaubert's life,<sup>34</sup> without however addressing Sartre's interpretation of Flaubert's life as a whole. More recently, Young-Rae Il has once more assembled medical evidence against Sartre's psychosomatic interpretation.<sup>35</sup> The matter thus continues to be debated, and it would go beyond the scope of this thesis to evaluate the medical issues at stake. We should note, however, that Sartre's psychosomatic hypothesis not only relies on biographical evidence but is, as it were, simultaneously grounded in the larger theoretical construct of a correspondence between subjective and objective neurosis. Therefore, just as a refutation of Sartre's assumptions about Flaubert's early childhood cannot be isolated from psychoanalysis, an argument about the causes of Flaubert's crisis should take into account the broader theoretical construct into which Sartre's treatment of 1844 is woven. On a more superficial level, one might further remember that a strictly medical and factual approach to the question would itself have to rely on the insufficient and often subjective sources that were available to Sartre.

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<sup>33</sup> René Dumesnil, *Gustave Flaubert. L'homme et l'œuvre* (Paris: Desclée de Brouwer et Cie, 1932), esp. pp. 490ff.

<sup>34</sup> Jean Bruneau, 'Jean-Paul Sartre biographe de Flaubert', in *Lectures de Sartre* ed. by Claude Burgelin, pp. 161-183.

<sup>35</sup> Young-Rae Ji, 'La Reconstruction sartrienne de la vie de Flaubert', *Recherches & Travaux*, Traverses 19-21, 2007, 49-64, (pp. 54-55).

As a theory of neurosis, Sartre's description of the Pont-l'Évêque crisis resembles the kind of emotional processes that he had sketched out very broadly already in 1938 in his *Esquisse d'une théorie des émotions*. In this critique of traditional (behaviourist) psychology and of psychoanalysis, he stresses precisely the importance of finality or directedness of any human conduct including 'non-rational' behaviour: 'si nous réintroduisons ici la finalité, nous pouvons concevoir que la conduite émotionnelle n'est nullement un désordre: c'est un système organisé de moyens qui visent une fin'.<sup>36</sup> In the 1930s, emotion is seen as a 'chute brusque' of consciousness into 'le magique', thereby performing a magical transformation of the world when all other routes are barred.<sup>37</sup> For Gustave, a passive agent confronted with a professional life he cannot face, the neurosis represents the only solution that enables him not only to escape his 'bourgeois destiny' but also to produce *Madame Bovary*, the *chef-d'œuvre* of the Second Empire. In the *Esquisse*, Sartre insists that emotions belong to the realm of consciousness, arguing that emotional consciousness (*la conscience émotionnelle*) is always pre-reflexive.<sup>38</sup> The description of Flaubert's neurosis thus corresponds in principle to Sartre's very early theory of emotions. However, an analogy can be drawn between the development that his notion of emotional consciousness undergoes on the one hand, and on the other hand the changes to Sartre's theory of choice and project: just as the personalisation now portrays choice as a complex movement over time, the depiction of neurosis inserts emotional consciousness into a protracted process involving the environment and the body.

If we return for a moment to the question of Sartre's modified position on the existence of the unconscious, we can note in this context that his description of Gustave's neurosis is mainly based on an implicit rejection of the 'functional' aspect of the unconscious, i.e. of the idea of the unconscious as motor of human behaviour. The unifying movement of the

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<sup>36</sup> Jean-Paul Sartre, *Esquisse d'une théorie des émotions* [1938], Le Livre de Poche Références Philosophie (Paris: Hermann, 2008), p. 45.

<sup>37</sup> Sartre, *Esquisse*, p. 116.

<sup>38</sup> Sartre, *Esquisse*, p. 70.

neurosis is very clearly directional; it is a way of solving a problem in a situation which offers no alternative. The form of consciousness which performs the resulting radical transformation of the subject (and of the world), can of course no longer simply be designated as pre-reflexive consciousness, but rather as the *vécu* (see I.4), defined as a *conscient-inconscient*<sup>39</sup> which, it seems, may include aspects of the unconscious other than its functional role (namely a descriptive and a topical understanding).<sup>40</sup>

We can thus identify various important features of personalisation: rather than being defined as a single moment of choice at the outset of the subject's life, it is a spiral movement over time in which the different phases stand in relationship both with one another and with the constitution, whilst at the same time introducing distinctly new elements. The subject is repeatedly thrown into crises, as a result singular defining moments occur, of which Pont-l'Évêque stands out as a particularly important one. It is both an individual moment of crystallisation characterised by freedom, and it has been prepared over time. It seems that it can function as the unifying principle of an entire life only because it meets both of these criteria.

The 'sens' of Flaubert's life is described by Sartre by focusing on particular moments rather than linear biography. Sartre does not actually devote a chapter of its own to the period between 1844 and 1870. The second volume of *L'Idiot* ends in 1844 and the last part of the third volume picks up again in 1870. Of course, the intervening period is referred to frequently. But in volume III, where an extensive discussion covers Flaubert's relationship with the Second Empire, this happens from the perspective of the post-1870 period, like a flash-back that serves to illuminate the period actually at the centre of the discussion. The description of Flaubert's increasing identification with Napoleon III, his acceptance of the *Croix de la Légion d'Honneur* in 1866, his frequent presence at the *salon* hosted by the emperor's

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<sup>39</sup> Sartre, 'Sur "L'Idiot de la famille"', p. 110.

<sup>40</sup> See: Leo Fretz, 'Sartre et Freud', in *Lectures de Sartre*, ed. by Claude Burgelin, pp. 241–51.

cousin Mathilde etc. serves to underline the rupture that the end of the regime represents for him. This demonstrates that despite the diachronic element of the formation of the subject introduced with *L'Idiot*, we are by no means presented with a gradual progress which simply outlines a person's development over time, attributing more or less equal importance to all periods. On the contrary, *L'Idiot* completely leaves out events that the reader might traditionally expect to be considered important, such as the publication of *Madame Bovary*, or its trial in 1957.

The third volume of course offers an analysis of the Second Empire, while the notes for the fourth volume of *L'Idiot* reveal a biographical concern for the period of the early 1850s. There are nevertheless sizeable portions of Flaubert's life that Sartre's account largely leaves out. The selection is of course by no means coincidental: Sartre's concept of subject-formation identifies as particularly relevant those moments of crisis in which there is a conflict between the subject and the situation. The choice of periods included in *L'Idiot* further corresponds to Sartre's broader interpretation according to which *Madame Bovary* is both the objectivation of Flaubert's subjective neurosis and the literary counterpart of the objective neurosis of the Second Empire. *Madame Bovary* establishes Flaubert's position as a writer within society, and subsequent texts, such as for example *L'Éducation sentimentale*, clearly play a subordinate role in this reading. If however, Gustave's development is characterised by a set of events and crises (of which 1844 is the unifying moment), there is no reason why Sartre's framework could not accommodate a more nuanced development between the mid-1850s and the end of the Second Empire. *L'Idiot* seems to unnecessarily neglect the impact that later events may have had on Flaubert. In particular the trial and the success of *Madame Bovary*, could be seen as significant since they transformed Flaubert into a published writer who could expect to continue to be successful. In an interview given to Michel Sicard, Sartre himself

seems to acknowledge this, when he suggests that a fifth volume of *L'Idiot* could have synthesised his findings and developed later phases in Flaubert's life in more detail.<sup>41</sup>

### 1.3. 'Programmation': the subject in history

The personalisation is a process which takes place in interaction with and against the family, friends such as Alfred Le Poittevin (*IF*, I, p. 981) and of course school. This social environment is very clearly inserted into a broader historical context, in which the personalising movement takes place. If Gustave is constituted by the family, he is simultaneously constituted by history itself, of which the family, the school, etc. are mediations. The crisis of 1844 is precipitated by Gustave's incapacity to take up a profession and thereby assume his role as member of the bourgeoisie. Moreover, Pont-l'Évêque is seen as an anticipation of the political and social crisis of 1848 as experienced by the bourgeoisie. The account of Gustave's development as a writer is equally permeated by the historical situation in which he reads and attempts to write. The ideology of *Art for art's sake* and Flaubert's writings which Sartre defines as 'art-neurosis' are a response to the contradictions inherent in the demands put on Gustave and his generation: the *objective spirit* (the cultural aspect of the *pratico-inert*, of past human action), always functioning as an imperative, orders the young 'apprenti-auteur' in the 1830s to produce literature that rallies to a class project, in the tradition of both Enlightenment and Romantic writers. The new situation however makes such a form of writing impossible, since, after the catastrophe of 1848, the kind of literature required by the bourgeois public has to conceal their class project. Gustave's crisis is thus subjectively motivated, but also has an objective meaning:

Gustave, en 44, tombe, frappé [...] d'une crise dont les motifs sont subjectifs et dont le sens objectif – venant du conflit de deux générations bourgeoises et des exigences, saisies dans cette perspective, de l'Esprit objectif – est comme une réclamation prophétique de la société du Second Empire (*IF*, III, p. 659).

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<sup>41</sup> In 'Sartre parle de Flaubert', in Michel Sicard, *Essais sur Sartre* (Paris: Editions Galilée, 1989), pp. 145-46.

As we can see, Gustave and the Second Empire correspond to one another. Much of the third volume of *L'Idiot* is devoted to showing how Gustave's 'fall' prophetically pre-figures social developments. Gustave's 'programmation' is such that his life moves according to principles also inherent in historical developments but at a different speed. The logic of his life and that of his epoch thus form a unity. This is why, for Sartre, Flaubert could be *the* writer of the Second Empire, as his literature of nothingness corresponded exactly to the falseness of society: 'Flaubert a pu, séquestré [...] vivre sans danger dans l'imaginaire parce que les circonstances lui étaient favorables et surtout parce qu'il a choisi l'échec *au commencement*' (IF, III, p. 572). This is what Sartre now defines as Flaubert's 'programmation', the intimate connectedness of the path of his life and of his epoch. Flaubert's quite exceptional case demonstrates for Sartre that it is possible that 'the finitude of an individual or micro-organic temporalisation *can* incarnate the finitude of a macro-organic temporalisation, i.e. the finitude of a *historical period*' (IF, III, p. 432).

Because of the close link between individual and historical epoch, the 'internal limits' of the person are also those of the epoch (IF, III, p. 432-33). In Flaubert's case this means that the success of his project finds an end in 1870 with the end of the Second Empire, the society that had sustained it. A cycle, says Sartre, opened up in Pont-l'Évêque and closed at Sedan (IF, III, p. 595). Of course this does not mean that a person's attitude to history is seen by Sartre as pre-determined. In order to understand the relationship between choice and history more generally, it seems that we have to attempt to synthesise the three aspects of the formation of the subject which we have so far only examined separately.

#### 1. 4. The convergence of constitution, personalisation and programmation: *universel singulier* and subjectivity

The separation of constitution, personalisation and programmation into distinct parts of the biography has led some critics to assume a temporal division between the different processes. Pierre de Boisdeffre for example insists on the successive relationship between constitution

and personalisation,<sup>42</sup> while Hauke Brunkhorst seems equally close to presenting the two as separate steps.<sup>43</sup> Some of Sartre's own formulations might invite such a reading, as for example his definition of subjectivity as a 'gap' ('décalage') between internalisation and exteriorisation.<sup>44</sup>

In *Questions de Méthode*, in the lecture 'L'Universel singulier', and in his 1961 lecture 'Subjectivité et marxisme', Sartre describes the singularity of the human subject as the specific way in which what has been internalised is then exteriorised, but this does not mean that the first has to be complete before the latter can take place. The Rome lecture stresses the continuous character of subjectivity as 'intérieurisation et réorganisation perpétuelle'.<sup>45</sup> In *L'Idiot* the continuous interaction between internalisation and exteriorisation is also highlighted: 'la personnalisation n'est rien d'autre chez l'individu que le dépassement et la conservation [...] de ce que le monde a fait – *et continu de faire* – de lui' (*IF*, I, p. 657, emphasis added). Indeed, the factors of the constitution (such as the father) play a crucial role throughout the text and we find mechanisms of internalisation during the phase of personalisation (for example when internalising the logic of competition and interchangeability in school, *IF*, II, p. 1132).

Processes of internalisation do not only carry on throughout the personalisation, but conversely, the constitution also takes place in the presence of ('personalising') consciousness. Similarly, in Sartre's lecture 'L'Universel singulier', freedom appears as the co-occurrence of internalisation and exteriorisation, as Sartre says about Kierkegaard: 'il institue sa particularité par le choix libre d'être singulier, c'est-à-dire qu'il s'établit à ce moment ambigu où l'intériorisation, *grosse de l'extériorisation future*, se supprime pour que celle-ci puisse naître'

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<sup>42</sup> Pierre de Boisdeffre, *L'Île aux livres: littérature et critique* (Paris: Seghers, 1980), p. 58.

<sup>43</sup> Hauke Brunkhorst, 'Wie man sich zu dem macht, der man ist', in *Sartres Flaubert lesen: Essays zu 'Der Idiot der Familie'*, ed. by Traugott König (Hamburg: Rohwolt, 1980), pp. 27–43 (pp. 32–33).

<sup>44</sup> Sartre, 'Sartre par Sartre', p. 102.

<sup>45</sup> Sartre, *Qu'est-ce que la subjectivité?*, p. 53.

(emphasis added).<sup>46</sup> Internalisation itself already involves a certain degree of activity, and it contains the future moment of exteriorisation because it is necessarily already lived experience. Sartre makes the same point in *L'Idiot*: 'pour constituée qu'elle [l'activité passive] soit, il faut aussi qu'elle soit vécue et temporalisée, bref qu'elle *se* constitue dans le mouvement même de la vie. Subie, elle se charge d'intentions [...]' (*IF*, II, p. 1662). The introduction of the terms 'constitution' and 'personalisation' in *L'Idiot* then appears to be a clarification if used in conjunction with the notions of internalisation and externalisation. Rather than simply replacing the latter pair of concepts, they allow their insertion into the concrete study of a human subject. Finally, by adding the term 'programmation', *L'Idiot* conceptualises the movement between individual and society as *both* a constant exchange *and* as giving birth to a certain 'vectorial' logic. The component of 'directedness' of Sartrean subjectivity will be further considered below, in the discussion of 'destiny'.

Sartre's thought since the 1950s has produced several terms that aim to unify the different components of internalisation and exteriorisation, each of which seeks to emphasise different aspects of human reality. Firstly, the 'vécu', seems to be a conceptual attempt to summarise lived reality from the standpoint of experience in its conscious and non-conscious layers. Secondly, the notion of the 'universel singulier', introduced, as mentioned above, in Sartre's lecture on Kierkegaard, serves to replace what is commonly called the 'individual'. And thirdly, the notion 'subjectivity' emphasises the dynamic nature of the human subject. This wealth of complementary designations for the subject seems to express the complexity of Sartre's approach and his concern with the specificity of the context in which each respective notion is deployed. As a consequence, Sartre's notion of the subject is rather open in two ways: firstly, it can accommodate different historical specifications of subjectivity; this will be illuminated further in chapter 2. Secondly, and contrary to views of Sartre as adhering to a

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<sup>46</sup> Jean-Paul Sartre, 'L'Universel singulier' [1955], in *Situations, IX*, (Paris: Gallimard, 1972), 152-190, (pp. 183-84).

narrowly defined (and historically overcome) conception of a unified Cartesian subject, the variety of the vocabulary Sartre develops opens his thought up to interesting resonances and conversations with other thinkers and schools. We should look more closely at the theoretical implications of Sartre's emphasis on internalisation and exteriorisation, which for him form subjectivity, for it allows us to identify a surprising resonance between Sartre and Bourdieu.

#### 1. 4. 1. Internalisation-exteriorisation: Sartre and Bourdieu

Although in one interview Sartre declares the distinction between subjectivity and objectivity to be of little use,<sup>47</sup> he deploys the term 'subjectivity' not only in *L'Idiot* but throughout his work. It is succinctly summarised in the lecture 'Subjectivité et marxisme'. Referring to the individual's subjectivity, or rather that of the 'psychosomatic unit', Sartre there defines subjectivity as 'internal system' rather than consciousness of the self, as a continuing system of internalisation and exteriorisation, the individual's way of relating to the world, based on very specific circumstances and a particular historical conjuncture. Defining subjectivity as the movement of internalisation and exteriorisation, Sartre lays out several further characteristics: firstly, subjectivity is defined by 'non-connaissance de soi-même',<sup>48</sup> for as soon as we become aware of a habit or character trait, subjectivity is destroyed as a 'passage à l'objet' takes place.<sup>49</sup> Secondly, subjectivity can therefore only be apprehended if projected into the world. It is the response to a question posed by the world and becomes apparent in the 'décalage' between the projection of human praxis and what the situation requires objectively. Thirdly, it is characterised not only by projection, but also by a combination of repetition of what was previously interiorised and invention (because exteriorisation always happens in a new situation).<sup>50</sup> Although the philosophical substance of the Rome lecture mainly relies on previously developed assumptions, it clarifies the importance of the movement of

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<sup>47</sup> Sartre, 'Sartre par Sartre', p. 102. See also the introduction to this thesis.

<sup>48</sup> Sartre, *Qu'est-ce que la subjectivité?*, p. 39.

<sup>49</sup> Sartre, *Qu'est-ce que la subjectivité?*, pp. 41–42.

<sup>50</sup> Sartre, *Qu'est-ce que la subjectivité?*, p. 63.

internalisation and exteriorisation in *L'Idiot* and is a reminder of the dynamic nature of Sartre's conception of subjectivity.

Sartre's model of subjectivity resonates surprisingly with Pierre Bourdieu's *Esquisse pour une théorie de la pratique* (1972), parts of which were later incorporated into *Le Sens pratique* (1980). Bourdieu was of course very concerned to distance himself from Sartre and his disagreements are perhaps most famously articulated in the context of his analysis of Flaubert: in *Les Règles de l'art* (1992) he accuses Sartre of a method that sees the writer as uniquely defined by a 'choix original',<sup>51</sup> of ignoring the literary field,<sup>52</sup> and of incarnating an overcome position of an 'intellectuel total'.<sup>53</sup> This is by far not the only instance of Bourdieu's criticism of Sartre; in the *Esquisse d'une théorie de la pratique* itself he charges Sartre for ignoring the role of objectivity in human activity:

Si le monde de l'action n'est autre chose que cet univers imaginaire de possibles interchangeables dépendant entièrement des décrets de la conscience qui les crée, donc totalement dépourvu d'objectivité [...] les émotions ne sont que des jeux et des doubles jeux de la mauvaise foi [...]<sup>54</sup>

In the context of the above discussion of Flaubert's neurosis, it seems evident that it is unjustified to accuse Sartre of entertaining a conception of emotions as simple 'decrees of consciousness' and instances of bad faith.<sup>55</sup> Bourdieu's reading of Sartre as 'ultra-subjectivist' thus frequently appears to be rather superficial, quoting mainly from *L'Être et le néant*, and accusing Sartre of maintaining a dualism in which consciousness cannot be permeated by a socially formed *habitus* (see chapter 2).<sup>56</sup> It therefore seems appropriate when Arnaud Tomez, in *Les Temps modernes*, concludes that Bourdieu largely stages a false trial of Sartre whilst

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<sup>51</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, *Les Règles de l'art: genèse et structure du champ littéraire*, Points Essais, Nouv. éd., revue et corrigée (Paris: Éd. du Seuil, 2009 [1992]), pp. 308ff.

<sup>52</sup> Bourdieu, *Règles de l'art*, pp. 306–7. We shall return to this particular accusation in chapter 5.

<sup>53</sup> Bourdieu, *Règles de l'art*, p. 344.

<sup>54</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, *Esquisse d'une théorie de la pratique: précédé de trois études d'ethnologie kabyle*, points essais (Paris: Seuil, 2000), p. 266.

<sup>55</sup> Hervé Oulc'hén demonstrates that beyond these superficial formulations, more profound agreements can be identified between Sartre's and Bourdieu's approach to emotions. See Hervé Oulc'hén, 'L'émotion dans la pratique: de Sartre à Bourdieu', *Études Sartriennes*, 2014, 169–98.

<sup>56</sup> For example: Pierre Bourdieu, *Méditations pascaliennes* (Paris: Seuil, 1997), p. 36.

ignoring the materialism of the later Sartre with which he could have found more substantial agreements.<sup>57</sup>

Despite the undeniable differences and disagreements between their approaches, Bourdieu's *Esquisse* however reveals striking similarities with Sartre's emphasis on internalisation and exteriorisation. In this text, Bourdieu aims to overcome the double pitfalls of 'subjectivism' and 'objectivism', which he broadly attributes to phenomenology and to structuralism respectively. As a solution, he suggests that the interaction between individual and history should be viewed as a 'dialectique de l'intériorisation de l'extériorité et de l'extériorisation de l'intériorité', using precisely the term Sartre deploys in *L'Idiot*, the Rome lecture and elsewhere. Like Sartrean subjectivity, the Bourdieusian process of internalisation and exteriorisation is unknown to the subject, but not defined by the unconscious.<sup>58</sup>

The two thinkers' wider methodological frameworks equally bear resemblances: instead of the structuralist view that sees history as 'opus operatum', Bourdieu is keen to shift attention towards the 'modus operandi', i.e. towards the concrete ways in which generalised practises are (re-)produced.<sup>59</sup> These formulations are reminiscent of Sartre's declared project of inserting lived reality into Marxism, which has become ossified.<sup>60</sup> In light of Bourdieu's keenness to define his approach against Sartre, these similarities suggest that a closer reading of Bourdieu's work against the Sartrean framework would be a fruitful endeavour.<sup>61</sup> We shall return to Bourdieu's thought in a consideration of *habitus* in chapter 2, while chapter 3 will identify the imaginary as a significant difference between Sartre's and Bourdieu's approaches. While we have focused on Bourdieu's writings around the time of *L'Idiot*, we should bear in mind that his disagreements with Sartre, such as the latter's emphasis on the individual and

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<sup>57</sup> Arnaud Tomes, 'Pour une anthropologie concrète: Sartre contre Bourdieu', *Les Temps modernes*, 1997, 32–52.

<sup>58</sup> Bourdieu, *Esquisse*, pp. 304–307.

<sup>59</sup> Bourdieu, *Esquisse*, p. 256.

<sup>60</sup> Sartre, 'Questions de méthode', p. 62.

<sup>61</sup> These are largely unexplored, although Fabrice Thumerel has developed a comparative reading of the Sartrean and the Bourdieusian intellectual: Fabrice Thumerel, 'De Sartre à Bourdieu: la fin de l'intellectuel classique?', *Études Sartriennes*, Cahiers RITM, 2011, 131–63.

consciousness, of course remain significant and are perhaps more pronounced in later texts. The dialectical reversal in the trajectory of an individual that Sartre terms *Qui perd gagne* is certainly an element incompatible with Bourdieu's framework.

#### 1. 4. 2. 'Assuming' the situation: *Qui perd gagne*

If the process of self-creation is already contained in the constitution, and if conversely the constitution remains present throughout the personalisation, this implies further that the act of exteriorisation (or the process of personalisation) always relates to the constitution. We have already seen that in the case of Jean Genet a mechanism of *Qui perd gagne* takes place as a result of the future writer's acceptance and radicalisation of what was made of him. *L'Idiot* identifies a similar process in Flaubert's development, although we shall soon encounter a crucial difference. The act of exteriorisation begins with *living* what has been internalised, but it is also the case that, as Sartre says in 'L'Universel singulier', to live the being I was given is already to transform it: 'vivre la contingence originelle, c'est la dépasser'.<sup>62</sup>

Freedom hence lies in the paradox of continuing as an option something which was imposed from the outside ('subi'): 'mon être est option temporalisante donc subie mais le caractère de cet être-subie c'est d'être subie *en liberté* donc d'avoir à continuer l'option'.<sup>63</sup> We 'continue' something which we undergo after it has been imposed upon us; it becomes an option when it is accepted as such. Gustave meets precisely this definition of freedom: his apathy is 'subie' (*IF*, II, p. 1662), and can therefore also become an option. For Sartre, this reversal is possible because, in the terms of the Rome lecture, there is no repetition without invention. Bourdieu strongly disagrees with the view of a 'reactivation' of what has been internalised by the agent.<sup>64</sup> Chapter 3 will return to this difference, suggesting that Sartre's

<sup>62</sup> Sartre, 'L'Universel singulier', p. 175.

<sup>63</sup> Sartre, 'L'Universel singulier', p. 187.

<sup>64</sup> Bourdieu, *Esquisse*, p. 272.

emphasis on the involvement of the imaginary in processes of imitation crucially sets him apart from Bourdieu's framework.

Gustave assumes his passive constitution and turns himself into 'l'enfant imaginaire', thereby going beyond his original constitution. Throughout his process of personalisation, we see Gustave reacting to conditions imposed on him from the outside in a way that combines the principles of assumption and transcendence, or repetition and invention. In the context of Flaubert's realisation of his class-being, and the subsequent solution of being a writer, Sartre says: 'il faut qu'il *existe son être*, c'est-à-dire qu'il se produise à partir de ces coordonnées comme une existence assujettie à des prédéterminations et parfaitement incommensurable avec elles. S'il est donc une possibilité de combattre sa préfabrication originelle, c'est dans sa pure existence – ou néantisation de l'être – qu'il la trouvera' (*IF*, II, p. 1609). As in the case of Genet, radically assuming a certain situation becomes the key to transcending it.

Flaubert's religion of absolute art, says Sartre, conceals a commitment to losing for the sake of losing ('*perdre pour perdre*', *IF*, III, p. 507), on which, according to Sartre, Flaubert's entire attitude is built:

Quand, on entrant dans la vie, on n'a rien à soi qu'une défaite irréversible, quand on ne peut que mourir ou la valoriser en tant que telle, l'échec assumé devient la clé de l'être. Il faut construire alors une ontologie, une métaphysique de l'échec qui tentent de prendre sur tout ce qui est le point de vue du non-être (*IF*, II, p. 1183).

Embracing a failure that was initially imposed from the outside in the end allows both Genet and Flaubert to turn themselves into writers. In both cases the failure they have chosen, through its transformation on the level of the imaginary, becomes their success. Moving beyond the opposition between *mauvaise foi* and responsibility (or commitment and non-commitment) present in *Baudelaire*, both texts point towards a morality of 'assumption', of assuming a given situation. The kernel of this is already contained in Sartre's *Les Carnets de la drôle de guerre* from 1939-40, where he proposes the following: 'non pas *accepter* ce qui vous

arrive. C'est trop et pas assez. L'*assumer* [...] c'est-à-dire le reprendre à son compte *comme si* on se l'était donné [...] Ce "comme si" n'est pas du mensonge. Cela vient de l'intolérable condition humaine à la fois cause de soi et sans fondement [...].<sup>65</sup>

Baudelaire is then accused of not radically assuming his situation. However, because the precise analysis of the situation and therefore the concrete possibilities of the subject are less developed in the 1940s, Sartre is close to condemning the entire generation of post-Romantic writers for their political non-commitment. In *L'Idiot*, after the imperative of 'assumption' has been developed significantly further, Sartre now appreciates Flaubert's literary commitment as a way of fully assuming the world.<sup>66</sup> The interpretation of Flaubert's neurosis as a means to the end of escaping bourgeois life by becoming a writer, demonstrates further that Sartre's evaluation of a life has moved towards an emphasis on finality. Many passages in *L'Idiot* express an element of admiration or approval of Flaubert,<sup>67</sup> unthinkable in *Baudelaire*. In addition, from the 1950s onwards, Sartre inscribes the evaluation of any individual's trajectory within what *Questions de Méthode* calls a 'champ de possibles'. Sartre thus recognises the radical nature of Flaubert's assumption of his situation, which, one might argue, is accompanied by the additional approval resulting from the recognition of *Madame Bovary* as masterpiece. At the same time, we cannot simply infer unconditional moral approval of Flaubert: as chapter 5 will demonstrate, Flaubert's literary achievement is heavily relativised precisely by the novel's success, which is testament to the public's neurosis.

#### 1. 4. 3. 'Qui perd gagne' relativised

Close examination of the specific conditions in Flaubert's and Genet's case has thus led Sartre to consider the possibility that the radicalisation of failure could be the only project available.

Despite these similarities in evaluation between the biographies of Genet and Flaubert, the

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<sup>65</sup> Jean-Paul Sartre, *Les Carnets de la drôle de guerre: novembre 1939-mars 1940* (Paris: Gallimard, 1983), p. 122.

<sup>66</sup> Sartre, 'Sur "L'Idiot de la famille"', p. 112.

<sup>67</sup> For instance in the formulation 'on ne peut qu'applaudir à ce tour de passe-passe, prélude d'un renversement plus radical [...]' (*IF*, I, p. 915). Cf. also the discussion of Flaubert's auto-comprehension in the chapter on literature.

third volume of *L'Idiot* in particular clarifies a crucial difference. We have already seen that there is a relationship of correspondence between Flaubert's failure and that of the bourgeoisie, between the inner temporalising logic of his project and that of the Second Empire. His writing, a negation of human reality and action, therefore responds to the demand of the bourgeois public. This is Sartre's explanation for Flaubert's success, but is also identified as the reason for Flaubert's distress after the fall of the Second Empire. Flaubert's *Qui perd gagne* seems to go precisely this far: the radical assumption of failure and neurosis opened the way to literature and to being, under Napoléon III, as happy as was possible for Flaubert. The relationship of correspondence between history and individual is a fundamental development since the introduction of the *Qui perd gagne* mechanism in *Saint Genet*. This relationship also means that the effectiveness of the subject's project is limited by the epoch: 'ce qu'on fait, par son efficacité même, marque la finitude de l'entreprise, ce qui ne signifie pas la date de son achèvement mais bien plutôt le moment où l'époque cessera de la soutenir' (*IF*, III, p. 432).

Flaubert's commitment to the imaginary and to failure was sustained by a society which Sartre describes as false; the end of that society reveals the *relative* character of Flaubert's project: 'l'enfant imaginaire apprend, un demi-siècle après sa naissance, que le réel est une plénitude qu'on ne peut quitter' (*IF*, III, p. 576). *Qui perd gagne* is thus no longer simply considered as a result of the way in which the individual exteriorises what was imposed on him or her. It now also refers to the process of exteriorisation *in interaction with* changing historical circumstances. The concept of *Qui perd gagne* is thereby relativised: 'en [18]70, le "Qui perd gagne" s'éclipse et c'est l'auteur lui-même qui est damné, qui l'était avant de naître et que l'événement, surgi comme un voleur, prive de sa gloire, jette dans une oubliette de l'histoire' (*IF*, III, p. 610).<sup>68</sup>

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<sup>68</sup> The formulation 'oubliette de l'histoire' does of course not quite correspond to the continuing reception of Flaubert as one of the most important French novelists. The dramatic effect of this phrase perhaps aims at

#### I. 4. 4. The project as synthesis of a whole life

At this point in Sartre's analysis, the personalising movement, in reaction to historical events, touches upon the very foundation of the constitution: 'la défaite [de la France] a réinstallé le regard du Père en Gustave – ou plutôt elle l'a réactivé car il n'avait jamais cessé d'être – et le *personnage* de celui-ci s'effondre'. And further on: 'Gustave restera pour toujours un vieux garçon un peu demeuré, l'idiot de la famille' (*IF*, III, p. 592). We can here observe a return to the constitution, which consequently also calls into question the project created: 'on pourrait dire que Gustave, à mesure qu'il s'éloigne de ces années heureuses (pour lui) perd le sens initial de son projet' (*IF*, III, p. 636). This relativisation of the *Qui perd gagne* mechanism, which operates a return to constitution and personalisation, demonstrates that in *L'Idiot* the various elements of constitution, personalisation and programming function as a unity.

As a consequence, it would be difficult to clearly locate the choice, or the creation of the project in a specific moment in time. In contrast, both Baudelaire and Genet make a clearly identifiable fundamental choice in a specific situation. Flaubert's project on the other hand is founded on the original assumption of his passivity and the choice of the imaginary, but equally on the crucial moment in 1844 when the neurosis finally creates a moment of freedom, and lastly on the personalising movement which takes him to the Pont-l'Évêque crisis. The notion of the *vécu* expresses precisely this coincidence of the different elements of subjectivity.

The view of the individual as product of the triple movement of constitution, personalisation and programming seems to be a more nuanced way of clarifying the concept of the 'universel singulier', already introduced in *Questions de Méthode* and still present in the work on Flaubert. In the lecture on Kierkegaard, Sartre defines this notion in the following

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emulating Flaubert's own perception of the situation more than it tries to render its objective character. At the same time, the overall thrust of the statement is not just purely subjective, as Sartre does insist that objectively the special relationship between the author and his period has ended.

way: ‘Le vécu [...] ce sont les hasards non signifiants de l’être en tant qu’ils se dépassent vers un sens qu’ils n’avaient pas au départ et que je nommerai l’universel singulier’.<sup>69</sup> *L’Idiot* explains the individual precisely in those terms; as a universal singular, i.e. as ‘re-totalising his epoch by reproducing himself as a singularity within it’ (*IF*, I, p. 7). The idea of the programming of the individual does not contradict this conception of the subject but adds a diachronic dimension to the relationship between history and individual; it emphasises the idea of a life as a unity developing over time: ‘des facteurs biologiques, sociaux, métapsychologiques – universaux qui se font vivre par nous dans leur réalité singulière – sont pour chacun à l’origine d’un *programme de vie* qui naît des contradictions intériorisées et que freine ou accélère le mouvement général de la société’ (*IF*, III, p. 438).

It seems that the method in *L’Idiot*, as well as explaining particular moments within a person’s life, is capable of making sense of its entirety. In contrast, Baudelaire’s life before the original choice seems radically cut off from the project, which only emerges in the situation in which the choice is produced. In the 1972 interview with Contat and Rybalka printed in *Situations*, X, Sartre stresses that Flaubert was not totally conditioned to choose writing.<sup>70</sup> The same, we must assume, is true for Baudelaire. Yet, the 1943 study of the latter offers no indication as to why he chose poetry instead of any other form of art. Only the detailed study of Flaubert, which traces the movement of personalisation in its interaction with the constitution, intervening external factors and the historical period more generally, is capable of explaining the movement from the original commitment to the imaginary to the choice of becoming the writer Gustave Flaubert.

*L’Idiot* clarifies previously established concepts such as the *universel singulier* by demonstrating how precisely this universal singular is formed through a combination of interacting processes. Before moving on to the second part of this chapter, which will

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<sup>69</sup> Sartre, ‘L’Universel singulier’, p. 175.

<sup>70</sup> Sartre, ‘Sur “L’Idiot de la famille”’, p. 99.

examine the *destin* as a particular form in which subjectivity appears in *L'Idiot*, we shall provisionally conclude by discussing the role that the example of Gustave Flaubert plays in Sartre's theory of the subject. In other words, is the particular case of the passive agent a negative example which, by implication, illustrates the opposite (the active agent), or is it an extreme case within the realm of the 'normal' subject?

### 1. 5. Provisional concluding remarks on the subject in *L'Idiot*: Flaubert as extreme or negative case?

If the seemingly casual formulation 'Flaubert, par exemple' in Sartre's preface to *L'Idiot* has been the object of debate, the status of the example of Flaubert in Sartre's theory of the subject and subjectivity is rather ambiguous. Judith Butler concludes with regard to *Saint Genet* and *L'Idiot* that both texts present 'truths which characterize the human situation universally for Sartre'.<sup>71</sup> Marielle Macé's formal (rather than philosophical) analysis similarly emphasises the paradigmatic character of the examples used in *L'Idiot*.<sup>72</sup> Butler's remark to the effect that 'the loneliness of the unloved child reflects everyone's loneliness'<sup>73</sup> is certainly convincing, since Flaubert indeed experiences a contingency that is universal. However, we should remember that *L'Idiot*, despite the suggestion that Flaubert's condition is widespread (*IF*, I, p. 141), also provides the opposite example of the 'petit privilégié', whose 'illusion' grants access to a form of reality from which Gustave is excluded.

Sartre's own comments on *L'Idiot* in the interview "Sur 'L'Idiot de la famille'" are somewhat ambiguous. Asked by Contat and Rybalka whether the book on Flaubert is actually a *règlement de comptes* with Sartre's own family and the bourgeois family in general, he agrees that *L'Idiot* deals with all families to a certain extent and is a general attack on the bourgeoisie of the nineteenth century. But he also insists that the particular mother-son relationship

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<sup>71</sup> Judith Butler, 'Desire and Recognition in Sartre's *Saint Genet* and *The Family Idiot*, Vol. 1', *International Philosophical Quarterly*, 26.4 (1986), 359–74 (p. 364) <<http://dx.doi.org/10.5840/ipq198626433>>.

<sup>72</sup> Marielle Macé, 'Penser par cas: Pratiques de l'exemple et narration dans "L'Idiot de La Famille"', *Recherches & Travaux*, Traverses 19-21, 2007, 79–91 (p. 83).

<sup>73</sup> Butler, p. 364.

between Gustave and Caroline Flaubert (which, as seen above, is largely responsible for Gustave's passivity) is very different from his own relationship with his mother, presenting himself as the loved child in opposition to Flaubert.<sup>74</sup> However, in the same interview Sartre also asserts that Flaubert serves as an example for processes that take place in the constitution of any human being: 'je ne présente pas la constitution de la personne comme spécifique à Flaubert, il s'agit bien en vérité de nous tous'.<sup>75</sup> According to this passage, the processes described in *L'Idiot* are in some way representative of the human subject in general.

As we have seen earlier, the lack of valorization through the parents turns Gustave into a passive agent. The ensuing alienation makes it impossible for him to identify with his own ego, his perception of himself always involving a degree of otherness. The result is what Sartre identifies throughout Flaubert's writing as his fundamental characteristic: 'la qualité Flaubert: un estrangement continu et institué' (*IF*, II, p. 1195). However, as Howells points out, if we consult Sartre's earliest publication on the human subject, *La Transcendance de l'égo*, we discover that for Sartre complete identification with the ego is always impossible, as the ego is an imaginary construct rather than an actual inner self.<sup>76</sup> In Flaubert's case, the situation 'is both more disturbing and more complex', because the normal project of self-construction, involving a dialectical interaction of passivity and activity does not take place.<sup>77</sup> In a sense then, Flaubert could be seen as a test case for Sartre's theory of the otherwise relatively stable subject, as Howells summarises, the 'exception, perhaps, that proves the rule'.<sup>78</sup> Indeed, throughout *L'Idiot*, Sartre frequently points out that Flaubert's behaviour or attitude stands in opposition to what would be the case for the 'normal' subject. Sartre for instance presents us with a theory of language as activity, developed very much against Gustave's passive relationship with language (*IF*, I, pp. 35-40, p. 50).

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<sup>74</sup> Sartre, 'Sur "L'Idiot de la famille"', p. 97.

<sup>75</sup> Sartre, 'Sur "L'Idiot de la famille"', p. 100.

<sup>76</sup> Howells, 'Flaubert's Blind Spot', pp. 29-31.

<sup>77</sup> Howells, 'Flaubert's Blind Spot', p. 30.

<sup>78</sup> Howells, 'Flaubert's Blind Spot', p. 33.

Sartre further seems to argue constantly against Flaubert's vision of the human being. For instance, the aim attributed to Flaubert's writings (in this case the horse carriage scene in *Madame Bovary*) is the abolition of mankind: 'c'est la transcendance humaine que l'auteur veut écraser [...] c'est le projet humain qu'il veut abolir' (*IF*, II, p. 127). Very clearly, Flaubert's conception of humanity, as portrayed by Sartre, is the exact opposite of Sartre's life-long aim of identifying the role of the individual subject in history. As Sartre himself insists: 'je m'oppose absolument aux conceptions de Flaubert [...] je ne fais que les exposer'.<sup>79</sup>

In this context, Sartre's insistence on the existence of an element of choice and freedom even in Flaubert's constitution and personalisation appears as an argument against the view of humanity that the latter holds. As we have seen, the entire part of the book on personalisation aims to identify the moment of freedom which is left when Gustave's life is stripped of all determining factors. Generally, Sartre insists throughout the text that even the passivity of the passive agent can never be absolute: 'cette passivité [...] est active en ce sens qu'elle ne peut même exister sans se faire dépassement du donné' (*IF*, I, p. 865). This statement echoes our conclusion that exteriorisation is already inherent in internalisation. Similarly, the aforementioned passage about language as activity and Gustave's passive relationship with it makes an important qualification:

Il est, comme tous les hommes, dépassement, projet; il *peut* agir. Simplement il y a plus de difficultés que les autres, plus de dégoût aussi; et puis il ne se *reconnaît pas* quand il se force à devenir, par docilité, un *agent* (*IF*, I, p. 48).

Flaubert is thus both an extreme case that falls within the boundaries of Sartre's definition of the subject *and* an exception to that definition. The former is true with regard to Flaubert's passivity, or unfreedom: it is never complete, and even the passive agent is an agent. The analysis of Flaubert therefore becomes an argument for the persistence of human freedom even in the most difficult conditions, or 'la nécessité de la liberté', as Sartre phrases it

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<sup>79</sup> Sartre, 'Sur "L'Idiot de la famille"', p. 112.

elsewhere.<sup>80</sup> But the second element is also true. Flaubert is an exception to Sartre's theory of the subject in that he cannot himself perceive his freedom, or, as Sartre puts it in the quote above, he does not recognise himself as active agent. By thus defending the agency of the subject against the subject's own denial of that agency, we might ask whether Sartre really only has Flaubert in mind or whether, as frequent side blows against his structuralist contemporaries (despite many agreements) suggest,<sup>81</sup> his aim is to defend a vision of human subjectivity on a much larger scale.

These brief remarks on Flaubert's own vision of humanity however point us towards a new problem: the appearance of different visions of the human subject in *L'Idiot*. We encounter for example the image of Man as a romantic hero created by the schoolboys in Rouen as a result of their nocturnal readings (*IF*, II, p. 1385). More significantly, Sartre's crucial argument that *Madame Bovary* is a masterpiece and not perceived as a neurotic text because Flaubert's subjective neurosis corresponded to the objective one of the historical period (*IF*, III, p. 33), implies a recognition of the historical creation of a dominant image of the human subject.<sup>82</sup> In other words, this definition of neurosis as a relative (i.e. dependent on society) and not as an ontological state, invites us to enquire further into the *appearance* of the human subject in *L'Idiot*, and, as we shall see, into its alienated form.

## II. Life as 'Destin': the transformation of the project

The first part of this chapter illustrated that, even though Sartre's later theory situates the subject within a given situation which limits his or her options, Sartre continues to affirm the existence of some form of human freedom and project; be it, in the extreme case, the freedom to accept (and then to transform) what has been imposed from outside. However,

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<sup>80</sup> Sartre, 'Sur "L'Idiot de la famille"', p. 99.

<sup>81</sup> For instance his comments about language (*IF*, II, p. 1977) discussed in our chapter on literature. Geneviève Idt suggests that Sartre criticises Flaubert for being a 'structuraliste avant la lettre'. Geneviève Idt, 'Sartre "mythologue": du mythe au lieu commun', in *Autour de Jean-Paul Sartre*, ed. by Pierre Verstraeten (Paris: Gallimard, 1981), p. 131.

<sup>82</sup> This image, of course, is not the same as the subject itself.

we have also seen that Flaubert's own perception of his subjectivity is quite different from Sartre's analysis. Rather than recognising the kind of interaction between outside factors and freedom that Sartre has in mind, Gustave's passivity leads him to adopt an outlook which denies his own capability to act on the world.

The concept of destiny ('destin'), is a recurrent representation of this denial of agency in *L'Idiot*. Flaubert is said to be constantly trying to escape his destiny ('les forces nocturnes, à son destin de misanthrope', *IF*, I, p. 943). When describing the attributes of the comedian, Sartre says that the latter has to be predestined ('prédestiné, c'est-à-dire déjà risible...', *IF*, I, p. 828), and finally, Gustave's passivity is described as a reaction that demonstrates the supposed injustice of the destiny imposed on him (*IF*, I, p. 409). As these examples suggest, notions associated with destiny take on a variety of meanings and occur in very different contexts in *L'Idiot*.

Commonly, the word 'destin' has religious connotations, as the first definition in the *Robert* dictionary indicates: '1. Puissance qui, selon certaines croyances, fixerait de façon irrévocable le cours des événements'. The second entry of the *Robert* omits the religious aspect, but equally highlights the absence of human agency: '2. Ensemble des événements contingents (⇒hasard, fortune) ou non (fatalité) qui composent la vie d'un être humain, considérés comme résultant de causes distinctes de sa volonté'.<sup>83</sup> The term 'destinée', to which the entry for 'destin' refers, is defined firstly in a very similar manner to 'destin' in the sense of pre-determined fate ('1. Puissance souveraine considérée comme réglant d'avance tout ce qui doit être'). The second and third definitions of 'destinée' then categorise it as a particularisation of 'destin': '2. Destin particulier d'un être', and '3. Vie, existence'.<sup>84</sup> In *L'Idiot*, Sartre mainly uses the term 'destin', and sometimes his reference to 'destin' and 'destinée' seems interchangeable. Nevertheless, the subtle difference between 'destin' and 'destinée'

<sup>83</sup> *Le Nouveau Petit Robert, 2000* (Paris: Dictionnaires Le Robert, 2000), p. 698.

<sup>84</sup> *Petit Robert 2000*, p. 699.

should be kept in mind. Because English can only render both as ‘destiny’, we shall use or add the respective French word where necessary to avoid ambiguity which is absent in the original.

Two observations should be made with regard to these dictionary definitions of ‘destin’ and ‘destinée’. Firstly, almost all entries and subentries use markers of reported speech such as the conditional (‘fixerait’) or formulations like ‘considéré comme’, thereby eliminating any guarantee for the veracity of the idea presented by the article. Secondly, the third definition of ‘destinée’ stands apart from all other entries as it defines ‘destinée’ simply as the life of a human being. Moreover, some of the examples quoted here associate ‘destinée’ explicitly with human agency: ‘*Unir sa destinée à quelqu’un, l’épouser*’, and “‘Elle eut subitement la révélation que Jacques [...] choisissait sa destinée’” (Martin du Gard).<sup>85</sup>

The ambiguity inherent in the dictionary definitions of ‘destin’ and ‘destinée’ is fully reflected and – not surprisingly – even more pronounced in Sartre’s adoption of those terms. We might indeed speculate that one reason for his frequent usage of those terms is precisely the effect of estrangement it provokes and the high degree of complexity it allows. Usually, ‘destiny’ is not seen as a systematic notion of Sartrean philosophy at all. It does not have an entry in Cabestan and Tome’s *Le Vocabulaire de Sartre* (2001), nor, and more significantly because of this work’s much greater volume, in Noudelmann and Philippe’s *Dictionnaire Sartre* (2004). The reason for this may be that, as we shall see, Sartre’s understanding of ‘destin’ is highly complex and perhaps too variable for a concise dictionary definition. But because of its striking frequency it seems to deserve some attention.

In *L’Idiot*, Sartre employs the terminology of destiny in ways that roughly correspond to the ambiguity in the *Robert* definition. It is used both to describe Gustave’s image of himself *and* to define objective limitations on his freedom. The first meaning corresponds to our

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<sup>85</sup> *Petit Robert 2000*, p. 699.

observation that the dictionary definition of the ‘destin’ is not positively affirmed but reported as a belief. Likewise, Sartre depicts Gustave’s illusory representation of his own life as being guided by fate as a form of belief in destiny, to which he, Sartre, does not subscribe. Secondly, Sartre’s later philosophy also uses the word ‘destin’ to indicate that the opportunities open to an individual are limited. It is an objective description of the situation, which by no means necessarily excludes human agency. This second meaning of destiny in Sartre’s writings seems to be closer to the third dictionary definition of ‘destinée’ as life, or life as influenced by others.

In the following, we shall begin by examining Sartre’s depiction of Flaubert’s subjective belief in his life as destiny; subsequently we shall consider Sartre’s idea of human destiny as it is developed both in *L’Idiot* and other writings; before concluding by attempting to provide a synthesis of these seemingly conflicting ideas by introducing the concept of alienation.

## II. 1. The project as *Destin*

### II. 1. 1. Gustave’s creation of destiny

Sartre claims that around 1840 the young Flaubert, who is still grappling with the influence of Romanticism, develops an idea of failure as a sign of being chosen. And in this context, Sartre says that Flaubert associates destiny and the Romantic idea of failure: ‘un grand homme manqué, pour Gustave, ce n’est pas un petit homme. C’est un homme déjà grand que le Destin condamne à se manquer. Voilà le seul espoir pour Gustave’ (*IF*, II, p. 1628). This example is taken from passages describing the specific context of Gustave’s artistic quest at the age of around 20. But the ideas of destiny and prophecy are present throughout Sartre’s account of Flaubert’s life and cannot simply be reduced to the influence of Romanticism. For example, in a passage towards the end of the third volume, which deals with Flaubert’s life under the Second Empire, Sartre equally claims that the future appears to Flaubert as destiny and perpetual repetition (*IF*, III, p. 550). And again, when he is devastated by the military

defeat of France against Prussia in 1870, Flaubert is presented to us as rationalising this event as a stroke of fate: ‘les Prussiens [...] sont les agents du Destin [...]’ (*IF*, III, p. 592).<sup>86</sup>

Flaubert’s belief in destiny is present throughout *L’Idiot* because for Sartre it is a fundamental part of the person Gustave Flaubert: ‘c’est que l’Ego de Flaubert est triplement structuré: l’activité actuelle de l’écrivain est conditionnée par deux imaginaires: le sujet totalisant qui survole l’Univers et, par en dessous, le sujet prédestiné qui donne son sens à l’écriture’ (*IF*, II, pp. 1599/1600). Gustave’s constitution as passive agent, or his lack of capacity to act on the world, has thus engendered a worldview that attributes the power to modify the world to fate rather than to human beings. Sartre frequently expresses this as Flaubert’s tendency to see himself as an oracle prophesying events. He quotes for example Flaubert’s declaration to Louise Colet that he has a ‘pressentiment complet de la vie’ (*IF*, II, p. 1640).

This does not mean that for Sartre Flaubert positively affirms a belief (religious or other) according to which a specific entity controls human beings. On the contrary, as the previous quote suggests, his ego is structured both by the idea of the pre-destined subject and by the ironic *survol*. It is therefore no surprise that one of the most famous passages from *Madame Bovary*, Charles’s exclamation ‘c’est la faute de la fatalité’,<sup>87</sup> expresses *both* a sense of fatality *and* a stance of ironic distance – Charles makes this statement to Rodolphe who strongly contributed to the very situation that Charles bemoans. There is not necessarily a contradiction between on the one hand the idea of predestination and on the other hand a position of absolute ironic distance. Both can involve a view of human beings as powerless; this is certainly the case in Sartre’s portrait of Flaubert.

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<sup>86</sup> This instance of Flaubert having recourse to the idea of destiny occurs in the context of a military defeat which Sartre interprets as the victory of the real over the imaginary. This seems ironic, because, as we shall see (Chapter 1, II.1.3) the view of life as destiny is itself part of the transposition of life onto the imaginary.

<sup>87</sup> Gustave Flaubert, *Madame Bovary* (Paris: Gallimard, Editions folio plus classiques, 2004), p. 405.

## II. 1. 2. Destiny as project turned into *en-soi*

This view of life seems to be an active transformation of the project into its opposite, an alteration from something open and alive to something dead, or, to use the terminology of *L'Être et le néant*, a movement from *pour-soi* to *en-soi*. In *L'Être et le néant* Sartre quotes Malraux to the effect that death transforms life into a 'destin'. This means that death interrupts the interplay between *pour-soi* and *en-soi*:

Tant que le pour-soi est "en vie", il dépasse son passé vers son avenir et le passé est ce que le pour-soi a à être. Lorsque le pour-soi "cesse de vivre", ce passé ne s'abolit pas pour autant: la disparition de l'être néantisant ne le touche pas dans son être qui est du type de l'en-soi; il s'abîme dans l'en-soi. [...] le sens d'un phénomène quelconque de cette vie est fixé désormais [...]. [...] La caractéristique d'une vie morte, c'est que c'est une vie dont l'autre se fait le gardien.<sup>88</sup>

Taking up Malraux's formulation, Sartre thus associates 'destin' and the death of the *pour-soi*. Life turned into destiny is life without the creative power of negation, in other words, life without what fundamentally constitutes the project. In this sense the vision of life as 'destin' can be interpreted as a voluntary transformation of the project into rigid *en-soi*. And indeed, obsession with death and with seeing himself as dead (i.e. as an object for others) is a permanent feature of Sartre's account of Flaubert's life. Since his childhood, says Sartre, Gustave prophesies his death (*IF*, III, p. 661), and he remains faithful to his 'vie morte' (*IF*, III, p. 557).

By viewing events as predetermined, life becomes fixed in advance. It is then difficult to distinguish between the mode of being of the past, in *L'Être et le néant* identified as inert, or *en-soi*, and that of the present and the future, characterised for Sartre by the creative force of negating *pour-soi*. As a child for instance Gustave sees his own future in his brother's present; a future which is already fixed ('avenir institué', *IF*, II, p. 1119). In the earlier philosophy, the attempt to turn *pour-soi* into *en-soi* is precisely the denial of freedom that defines *mauvaise foi*. Of course, this does not mean that for Sartre consciousness can actually transform itself

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<sup>88</sup> Sartre, *L'Être et le néant*, pp. 585-86.

completely into inert being. Sartre makes this point throughout his texts repeatedly, even though it takes on a different form. Already in the *Cahiers de la drôle de guerre* he says: ‘c’est au passé seulement que la conscience peut exister sur le mode de l’en-soi et le passé n’est autre chose que l’existence du pour-soi sur le mode de l’en-soi’.<sup>89</sup> Objectively, in whatever ways consciousness tries to conceal its freedom and turn itself into *en-soi*, the procedure cannot be entirely successful. For Gustave this means that his desire to transform his project into destiny can never be completely fulfilled.

### II. 1. 3. Destiny as fictionalisation of life

Sartre makes it clear that the attitude which transforms life into destiny is essentially an imaginary one: ‘la prédestination [...] se révèle pour ce qu’elle est: une détermination de l’imaginaire’ (*IF*, II, p. 1588). But seeing life as destiny also means to see it as containing meaning provided by a beginning and an end. In other words, Flaubert seems to create the kind of narrative of his life *in advance* that Roquentin judges to be impossible in *La Nausée* (1939). In Sartre’s first novel, a complete opposition between life and its fictionalisation is established as the main character, Roquentin, discovers that his life does not consist of meaningful adventures but merely of singular events: ‘les aventures sont dans les livres’.<sup>90</sup> From the realisation that only the narrative transforms life into an adventure, but in doing so changes it, Roquentin draws the conclusion that the two are mutually exclusive: ‘mais il faut choisir: vivre ou raconter’.<sup>91</sup> For Roquentin the narrative falsely attributes meaning to events when that meaning is created precisely by the temporalisation of events operated by fictionalisation.<sup>92</sup> It seems that as a result, Roquentin’s conclusions establish such a stark opposition between narrative and life that the reader is left to wonder whether life can create meaning at all.

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<sup>89</sup> Sartre, *Carnets*, p. 262.

<sup>90</sup> Jean-Paul Sartre, *La Nausée* (Paris: Gallimard, 1938), p. 61.

<sup>91</sup> Sartre, *La Nausée*, p. 64.

<sup>92</sup> Sartre, *La Nausée*, p. 87.

In the *Carnets de la drôle de guerre*, Sartre makes some interesting comments on *La Nausée*, published in the previous year. He explains that as a child he himself used to be obsessed with the idea of life as a story known in advance: ‘j’ai voulu que chaque événement me survînt comme dans une biographie, c’est-à-dire comme lorsqu’on connaît déjà la fin de l’histoire. C’est cette déception que j’ai exprimée à propos de l’aventure dans *La Nausée*. Bref j’étais toujours hanté par l’idée de vie’.<sup>93</sup> However, the situation is more complicated, since Sartre’s retrospective account of his own attitude to life as narrative is less associated with an escape from the real and more with trust in the future. Thus, the confession ‘j’aurais voulu être sûr de devenir un grand homme plus tard, pour pouvoir vivre ma jeunesse comme une jeunesse de grand homme’ appears on the same page as a passage that describes the young Sartre’s ‘très jeune confiance dans l’avenir’.<sup>94</sup> On the previous page, Sartre mentions his ‘confiance magique’ which led him to trust that in order to have the life of a great writer one only had to be a great writer, and that in order to be a great writer one had to write, which is precisely the activity in which he engaged. According to the *Carnets* he was thus sure that fate (‘destin’) would not refuse him the ‘great life’ to which he was entitled, so long as he wrote well.<sup>95</sup> The term ‘destin’ appears frequently throughout these passages.<sup>96</sup> Here destiny is not simply the illusion of predetermined fate, or a fiction, but for the young Sartre it equally represents an enabling force that provides the confidence to project himself into the career of a ‘great writer’. Rather than remaining a narrative on the level of the imaginary, the idea of having a destiny is the starting point for activity in the real world. Rather as in *L’Idiot* mother love provides an ‘aliénation heureuse’, an illusionary and necessary sense of a mission, the ‘destin’ in the *Carnets* already seems to implicitly point at the dialectic of the double function of a necessary illusion.

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<sup>93</sup> Sartre, *Carnets*, p. 105.

<sup>94</sup> Sartre, *Carnets*, p. 97.

<sup>95</sup> Sartre, *Carnets*, p. 97

<sup>96</sup> Sartre aspiring to be the great man, ‘libre-pour-son-destin’, for example. Sartre, *Carnets*, p. 98

Marielle Macé's reading of the *Carnets de la drôle de guerre* goes so far as identifying a new attitude towards narrativisation and destiny that Sartre adopted as a result of the discovery of his own position in history:

Cette réticence à l'égard du récit [dans *La Nausée*], [...], n'a portant pas résisté à la découverte par Sartre de sa propre "historicité" [...]; avec la guerre ont surgi un autre sentiment du temps, une autre idée de l'événement ou de l'avenir qui le porte avec soi, et une autre façon de se rapporter au passé. Dans les *Carnets de la drôle de guerre* on voit la pensée de Sartre bifurquer vers la considération d'autres usages possibles de la narrativité. Une méditation permanente sur la "vie", entendue comme forme "motivée", c'est-à-dire destinale, arrache le Sartre soldat aux conclusions de Roquentin sur la distinction étanche entre le vécu et le raconté, entre la contingence et la configuration [...] comme s'il s'agissait de vivre selon la synthèse de l'aventure enseignée par le roman.<sup>97</sup>

Macé further identifies this openness towards life as narrative as a short parenthesis within Sartre's work which has ended by the time of *L'Être et le néant*. We have however seen that the *Carnets* also reiterate the impossibility of life as adventure, citing *La Nausée*, relativising Macé's interpretation of the *Carnets* as being completely favourable towards a view of life as destiny. Nevertheless, we can agree with her that there exists a partial openness to 'destiny' in the *Carnets* which is reflected in *L'Idiot*. Sartre's comments in the *Carnets* about the beneficial effect of his own belief in destiny point in this direction. Here, the association of adventure and destiny as applied to Sartre's own case suggests that belief in destiny can lead to activity in the real world.

In *Les Mots* references to Sartre's own 'destiny' re-appear throughout the text and are reminiscent of the *Carnets*.<sup>98</sup> We might hypothesise that the renewed concern with writing his own life leads Sartre to once more adopt this metaphor. John Gillespie highlights in particular the religious implications of the term 'destiny' in *Les Mots*.<sup>99</sup> The religious connotations of the term are of course undeniable; however, taking into account the different layers of meaning that 'destiny' acquires throughout Sartre's texts, and in particular its proximity to the 'project',

<sup>97</sup> Marielle Macé, "Penser Par Cas": Pratiques de l'exemple et narration dans "L'Idiot de la famille", *Recherches & Travaux*, Traverses 19-21, 2007, 79–91 (p. 89).

<sup>98</sup> Sartre, *Les Mots*, e.g. p. 43, p. 64, p. 110, p. 112.

<sup>99</sup> John Gillespie, "Les Mots". Sartre and the Language of Belief, *Sartre Studies International*, 11 (2005), 234–48.

one could equally view ‘destiny’ as a metaphor that is used due to its open character and that prefigures (in the *Carnets*) what will later be theorised as freedom and project. In fact, it could be argued that the recourse to the idea of the ‘destin’ in the *Carnets* is part of Sartre’s philosophical development that will lead to the concept of original choice.

## II. 2. ‘Destin’ as (statistical) description of the situation

While ‘destin’ as it appears in the *Carnets* seems to be a conceptual stepping stone on the way to formulating the idea of the project, the same term is used in Sartre’s later texts in order to express a modification of his earlier theory of choice, freedom and project, now seen as increasingly conditioned externally. In the interview on Flaubert published in *Situations, X*, Sartre tells the interviewers that Flaubert was doomed to failure (‘voué à l’échec’). When they express surprise at this idea, coming from the ‘philosopher of freedom’, he replies that history in some cases, and depending on the circumstances, condemns a human being in advance. A young Algerian born in 1935, Sartre argues, is destined (‘voué’) to fight in the war. Crucially, he then adds: ‘la prédestination, c’est ce qui remplace chez moi le déterminisme: je considère que nous ne sommes pas libres – tout au moins provisoirement, aujourd’hui – puisque nous sommes aliénés’.<sup>100</sup> ‘Predestination’ is thus an inevitable alienation, and yet not a determinism.

The *Critique de la raison dialectique* confirms this understanding of destiny as conditioning factors: ‘les pratiques matérialisées [...] imposent un destin commun à des hommes qui s’ignorent [...]’.<sup>101</sup> Similarly, in *L’Idiot*, Sartre uses the word ‘destin’ in order to designate the imposition of a certain situation from the outside. The situation into which a child is born is a ‘destin’: ‘le passé préhistorique revient sur l’enfant comme Destin’ (*IF*, 1, p. 55). Elsewhere in *L’Idiot*, in a comment similar to the remark about the Algerian being condemned in advance,<sup>102</sup> Sartre says that the schoolboys who stage a revolt in Rouen in 1831, because of

<sup>100</sup> Sartre, ‘Sur “L’Idiot de la famille”’, pp. 98-99.

<sup>101</sup> Sartre, *Critique, I*, p. 246.

<sup>102</sup> Exactly the same formulation is used here: ‘l’histoire condamne d’avance’.

their class position in a given historical context, are doomed to failure ('partaient perdants') from the beginning. Their horrible 'destin' is to suffocate the revolt of 1848 (*IF*, II, p. 1463).

*L'Idiot* thus reflects Sartre's adoption of the 'destin' as an almost statistical description of conditioning factors. Howells suggests that the reference to predestination in *Situations, X* needs to be taken seriously for two reasons: because predestination, contrary to determinism, is teleological rather than causal, and secondly because, when defended seriously in a theological context, predestination contains an element of responsibility on the part of the subject. For Howells, predestination is therefore closer to the project than to heredity.<sup>103</sup> The 'destin' for Sartre is hence not a static pronouncement made once and for all but a continuous process of interaction between individual and situation. It can therefore be re-negotiated and fought: at the age of 15, for example, Gustave is said to begin to fight the 'destin' created by the family, the bourgeois life intended for him (*IF*, III, p. 26). Destiny is subject to being modified and struggled over because it is an interhuman relationship. Gustave's bourgeois 'destin' is reserved for him by his father (*IF*, II, p. 1464), illustrating a mechanism summarised as 'Quand les pères ont des projets, des fils ont des destins' (*IF*, I, p. 107).

In the *Critique* Sartre theorises this view of 'destin' as a social relationship on a more complex level. There, he establishes an opposition between 'destin' and 'intérêt' in order to define the relationship between different social classes. Following Marx, Sartre assumes that the fundamental division between workers and bourgeoisie consists in the unequal distribution of the means of production. In the context of a discussion of industrialisation in France, Sartre says that the machine represents the worker's 'destin' and the employer's 'intérêt'. The relationship between those groups is mediated by matter (e.g. the machines), now called the *practico-inert*,<sup>104</sup> and it is subject to change via struggle over that matter, in this case the means of production. Workers can, says Sartre, re-appropriate their own class destiny

<sup>103</sup> Christina Howells, *The Necessity of Freedom* (Cambridge: CUP, 1988), p. 96.

<sup>104</sup> The *practico-inert* is a concept developed in Sartre's later philosophy which designates the realm of past human action. It is therefore akin to the *en-soi*, albeit more concretely related to individual and collective human activity.

(‘destin de classe’) through the socialisation of those means of production. This radical reversal of class relations would reveal their *destin* as *intérêt future*.<sup>105</sup>

### II. 3. Destiny and alienation

Douglas Collins suggests that Sartre, having started as the ‘philosopher of freedom’, then became the ‘philosopher of alienation’.<sup>106</sup> Collins is certainly right in pointing out that in the biographies human freedom is only visible through the alienation of the subject.<sup>107</sup> In *L’Être et le néant* alienation is introduced as a result of the existence of the freedom of the other which threatens my own freedom. Sartre’s later theory of alienation then focuses on the objectification of human action in the world. Any human act, by becoming part of the *practico-inert*, turns itself against its author and appears as other. But the *practico-inert*, which is at the heart of this alienation, is itself nothing but the product of the acts of all human beings.<sup>108</sup> This theory of alienation can therefore account both for collective processes, as they appear in the *Critique*, but also for Flaubert’s or Genet’s individual alienation (for instance to the father figure or to the definition of being a thief).

In *L’Idiot* one form that the alienation of the subject adopts is precisely the ‘destin’: ‘l’environnement m’annonce comme venant aussi à moi-même à travers les autres, c’est-à-dire comme aliénation et destin’ (*IF*, II, p. 1312). In the third volume Sartre says about Flaubert’s behaviour towards the end of his life:

Il ne fait [...] que renchéris sur la structure fondamentale de son “caractère” et de son destin: sa protohistoire l’a soumis à l’Autre diabolique, à son père et cette aliénation l’empêchera toute sa vie d’être pour soi le même, c’est-à-dire de s’approuver et de s’assumer; du coup, c’est dans le venin qu’il cherche le remède: il forcera sur l’aliénation [...] (*IF*, III, p. 559).

<sup>105</sup> Sartre, *Critique*, I, p. 271. The collective aspect of ‘destiny’ is developed in more detail in my ‘Flaubert’s Destiny: Freedom and Alienation in “L’Idiot de La Famille”’, *Sartre Studies International*, 20.2 (2014), 17–31.

<sup>106</sup> Collins, *Sartre as Biographer*, p. 7.

<sup>107</sup> For an overview of different theories of alienation, including Sartre’s, see for example Richard Schacht, *Alienation* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1970).

<sup>108</sup> It seems that Collins is therefore wrong when he states that for the alienation created by self-objectification ‘the fact that there are other men in the world has no bearing’. On the contrary, it would be difficult for Sartre to maintain that alienation can be overcome by human beings if they do not have some part in its creation – albeit via the mediation of matter. See Collins, *Sartre as Biographer*, p. 47.

Because Gustave is constituted as passive agent and lacks the ‘fortunate illusion’ of self-identity, he is equally defenceless against alienation and perhaps represents the extreme case of the alienated subject. His fundamental choice, identified in the first part of this chapter as the radical assumption of the imaginary, can thus also be described as a radicalisation of alienation. Flaubert’s relationship with art, described by Sartre as alienation, is one aspect of this radicalisation; the transformation of his life into an imaginary and pre-determined destiny is another.

As we have seen, destiny is a complex and polyvalent term throughout Sartre’s philosophy. But its various layers of meaning are not simply distinct; instead they overlap and influence one another. Gustave’s destiny – in the sense of an illusory predetermination – is therefore a reaction to an inescapable alienation which, to a greater or lesser extent, always tends to present life to the individual as destiny in the sense of historical conditioning. We now need to re-formulate our description of the creation of an imaginary destiny as a transformation of *pour-soi* into *en-soi*. Now that the *en-soi* has been enriched by the notion of the *practico-inert* which *always* alienates human action, we realise that in fact Gustave’s transformation of the project into destiny is by no means simply a voluntary and individual act. Moreover, because of the historical character of alienation in Sartre’s later writings, Flaubert’s alienation is part of a collective situation which, even though Sartre never fully explains how, may be modified.

## Conclusion

In the first part of this chapter our discussion demonstrated that *L’Idiot* is based on a nuanced theory of the subject, retaining in principle the idea of freedom, whilst illuminating concretely all factors that limit choice, from the conditioning in the family to the relationship with history identified as programming. We have seen that for Sartre in *L’Idiot* the meaning of a life does not emerge from one singular moment but is the result of a protracted process of

personalisation, involving change over time and specific moments of crisis. This interaction between interiority and exteriority perhaps provides the true answer to Roquentin's question about the possibility of meaningful life. Human adventure, Sartre suggests in *L'Idiot*, is possible, but because of the ubiquity of alienation the individual subject is never fully the creator of that adventure. We have identified Gustave as an extreme case of the passive, 'unfree' and alienated subject. His example thereby serves Sartre to demonstrate human unfreedom in general but also implicitly argues for the possibility of an active subject-object relationship with the world.

Because the human subject is (provisionally, at least, as Sartre claims) always alienated, the nature of the subject necessarily has to differ from the image of Man that is held by an individual or that is prevalent in a given society. In the case of Flaubert, as we have seen, this means that he internalises the destiny which has been prepared for him *objectively*, and radicalises it into a *subjective*, imaginary 'destin' which supposedly predetermines his life. While Sartre's earlier philosophy might have identified this procedure as *mauvaise foi*, as an attitude which conceals the subject's freedom, the polyvalence of the term 'destin' suggests otherwise: in *L'Idiot* all the different layers of meaning attributed to the 'destin' throughout Sartre's career resonate. Therefore the 'destin' is both freedom and alienation, the result of passivity and the possibility to construct a project out of a given situation. Genet, says Sartre, by accepting the situation imposed on him, unknowingly creates his own 'destin'.<sup>109</sup> Similarly, Flaubert creates the only project available to him, an imaginary one. The Sartrean subject in *L'Idiot*, as we have seen, is characterised by the interaction of internalisation and exteriorisation, constitution and personalisation, freedom and alienation, project and situation. Without replacing these concepts, their convergence in the notion of 'destiny' reveals their interdependence.

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<sup>109</sup> See Sartre, *Saint Genet*, p. 25.

This of course does not mean that Flaubert is acquitted of all responsibility. On the contrary, *L'Idiot* demonstrates consistently Gustave's own part in the creation of his unfreedom. The *Critique* affirms this as a defining feature of alienation in general: 'mais c'est lui [l'homme] qui a mis dans la chose sa propre *praxis*, son propre avenir [...]'.<sup>110</sup> Rather than simply blaming the subject for a state of alienation, the role of human activity in the creation of alienation also proves the existence of human freedom: 'Mais l'aliénation n'existe que si l'homme est d'abord action; c'est la liberté qui fonde la servitude [...]'.<sup>111</sup> *L'Idiot* does not provide the answer to the question whether all forms of alienation can be overcome. But paradoxically, by examining all factors limiting human freedom, and the element of agency involved even in alienation, it re-affirms the possibility of freedom.

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<sup>110</sup> Sartre, *Critique*, I, p. 248.

<sup>111</sup> Sartre, *Critique*, I, p. 248.

## Chapter 2: Collective Subjectivity in *L'Idiot de la famille*: A Re-examination of Social and Historical Processes

### Introduction

Throughout his writings and certainly since the Second World War, the problem of the social and the political is a central interest of Sartre's philosophy. It is the object of a theoretical quest which finds its most developed expression in 1960 with the *Critique de la raison dialectique*, where Sartre systematically investigates the problem of collective processes and their totalisation as History from a Marxist perspective, whilst never abandoning a conception of the primacy of individual experience. *L'Idiot de la famille*, although in parts already drafted during the 1950s and 1960s, was heavily edited and prepared for publication by Sartre in the late 1960s, particularly between 1968 and 1970. *L'Idiot* will therefore be treated in the following as a text that succeeds the *Critique*, and as a contribution in its own right to Sartre's social theory. It will be examined to what extent the theoretical assumptions of the *Critique*, especially the group-seriality dichotomy, are, without being abandoned, put under pressure by the concrete analyses of collectivities in *L'Idiot*. It will be suggested that the term 'collective subjectivity', although not deployed in a systematic manner by Sartre, is a useful formulation for Sartre's attempt to avoid the dual pitfalls of collective consciousness and social atomism. Further, it will be argued that this theoretical re-examination of a social ontology implicit in the presentation of collective processes in *L'Idiot* can be interpreted as a reflection on the historical experiences of the late 1960s.

After providing a preliminary discussion of collective subjectivity in the *Critique*, we shall begin our analysis of collectivities in *L'Idiot* by examining the theoretical implications of Sartre's emphasis on reciprocity and his representation of laughter. Having cast some light on the theoretical or formal implications of collective subjectivity in *L'Idiot*, the discussion will subsequently be concerned with the analysis of collective formations more concretely.

Consulting the passages of *L'Idiot* concerned with the Collège de Rouen in the early 1830s, we shall first enquire into the conditioning effects of the school system, suggesting that a notion of 'collective subjectivity' close to Bourdieu's *habitus* can be derived from these passages. Secondly, the Rouen schoolboys' revolt of 1831 will serve to elucidate Sartre's emphasis on inter-generational struggle. It will become clear that these passages are by no means restricted to the immediate object of their analysis, but that the 1968 student movement is equally present as an analogy.

### I. Sartre's social theory in the *Critique*: Group, seriality and mediations.

Sartre's social theory of course does not start with *Critique de la raison dialectique*, but is developed throughout his writings since the war, from the crucial role of the other in *L'Être et le néant*, the theoretical engagement with history in the *Cahiers pour une morale* (1947-48) and the exploration of the relationship between individual and history in the biographies.<sup>1</sup> It seems further that concrete interventions in current politics are often intimately linked to the theorisation of the social; this is the case for example in Sartre's theory of class and the resulting concept of the party expressed in *Les Communistes et la paix* (1952) and his relationship with the Communist Party in the 1950s. This is not to suggest, of course, that every single position Sartre took was a result of systematic theorisation. Despite this prolonged engagement, the following discussion will focus on the *Critique*, which is Sartre's most systematic attempt to theorise history and the most immediately relevant text for the phase of theoretical production of which *L'Idiot* is part. A brief overview of the conceptual apparatus of the *Critique*, particularly the notions of group, seriality and mediations, and an illumination of some criticisms of these concepts will therefore precede the analysis of their evolution in *L'Idiot de la famille*.

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<sup>1</sup> For the role of the political and the social in Sartre's earlier works, see for example Sam Coombes, *The Early Sartre and Marxism* (London: Peter Lang, 2007).

### I. 1. Group and seriality

The group-seriality dichotomy is perhaps one of the most influential and most-quoted theoretical innovations of the *Critique*. Sartre establishes a differentiation between two ways in which intersubjective relations can be structured: the serial relation of the ‘collectif’ on the one hand, and on the other hand the group, which is characterised by the common praxis of its members:

Le groupe se définit par son entreprise et par ce mouvement constant d'intégration qui vise à en faire une *praxis* pure en tentant de supprimer en lui toutes les formes de l'inertie; le collectif se définit *par son être*, c'est-à-dire en tant que toute *praxis* se constitue par lui comme simple *exis*; c'est un objet matériel et inorganique du champ pratico-inerte en tant qu'une multiplicité discrète se produit *en lui* sous le signe de l'Autre comme *unité réelle dans l'Être*, c'est-à-dire comme synthèse passive et en tant que l'objet constitué se pose comme essentiel et que son inertie pénètre *chaque praxis individuelle* comme sa détermination fondamentale par l'unité passive, c'est-à-dire par l'interpénétration *préalable et donnée* de tous en tant qu'Autres.<sup>2</sup>

This passage from Sartre's introduction to group and seriality in the *Critique* provides us with the central features of these concepts: the series is an ensemble characterised by inertia; it links its members externally, i.e. in their otherness or alienation. The group on the other hand, tending towards ‘pure praxis’, is a movement directed against seriality, and is constantly threatened by it. Sartre famously describes individuals forming a bus queue as a collective structured by seriality, a ‘plurality of solitudes’, for the role of each member is a number in a series (the order in which passengers will board the bus), externally defined by their dependence on the others and equally as other for the others.<sup>3</sup> Sartre's example of the serial relationship between individuals listening to the radio demonstrates that, similarly to the members of the bus queue, the individuals of the series are linked by an ‘activity’, or rather a state, characterised by the absence of praxis and real synthesis. The real link between the members of the series is passivity and impotence, as the audience of the radio is powerless in the face of the medium they are consuming, due to the absence of the possibility of truly

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<sup>2</sup> Sartre, *Critique*, I, pp. 307-08.

<sup>3</sup> Sartre, *Critique*, I, pp. 308-13.

collective action.<sup>4</sup> The phenomenon of seriality is however by no means limited to particular situations, but a fundamental structure of human reality, as it is part of the *practico-inert*, the ensemble of past human action absorbed by the passivity of materiality.<sup>5</sup> Any social field, for Sartre, is structured by elements of group and seriality and the dialectical movement between them.

Counter to seriality, the group is a combination of individuals engaged in genuine collective praxis which constitutes itself out of and against seriality. Without claiming that the (serial) collective precedes the group historically, Sartre maintains that seriality is logically anterior to the group which emerges as its negation.<sup>6</sup> The group thus constitutes itself out of the serial ‘collectif’ and in reaction to an external threat such as hunger; a process inscribed in the more universal relationship between Man and Nature characterised by ‘need’ (*besoin*) and ‘scarcity’ (*rareté*). The ‘événement-moteur’ which gives rise to the formation of the group is thus danger.<sup>7</sup> Using the example of the days of insurrection leading to the storming of the Bastille, the *Critique* describes the emergence of the group in terms of a situation in which an external act, the king’s troops encircling Paris on 12<sup>th</sup> July 1789, is first lived in seriality, then leads to the serial (even though in appearance common) activity of plundering the arms depots which propagates from one person to the next through imitation of the other.<sup>8</sup> As a consequence of the events, a militia constitutes itself as *fused group* (‘groupe en fusion’). Sartre then follows in detail the course of the Revolution, using the Tennis Court Oath as an example for the fortification of the group into a *pledged group* (‘groupe assermenté’). But just as

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<sup>4</sup> Sartre, *Critique*, I, pp. 320-23.

<sup>5</sup> See chapter 1 for an introduction to the term ‘practico-inerte’.

<sup>6</sup> Sartre, *Critique*, I, p. 384.

<sup>7</sup> Sartre, *Critique*, I, p. 384.

<sup>8</sup> Sartre, *Critique*, I, pp. 386-89.

the group emerges from and struggles against seriality, it is in all these processes always threatened by it and eventually begins to integrate elements of serial structure.<sup>9</sup>

The conception of seriality and group is certainly one of the most innovative aspects of the *Critique*. As Fredric Jameson points out, even though the seriality-group divide is reminiscent of Ferdinand Tönnies's distinction between 'Community' (*Gemeinschaft*) and 'Society' (*Gesellschaft*),<sup>10</sup> Sartre's analysis of the internal structure of each of those spheres is 'probably without precedent'.<sup>11</sup> Stathis Kouvelakis emphasises particularly the fruitfulness of the notion of seriality for an understanding of history,<sup>12</sup> and in a similar perspective Jairus Banaji has recently used the notion of seriality for his analyses of fascism.<sup>13</sup> At the same time, the theory has been subject to the criticism that it does not offer an explanation for the process that transforms the series into a group, attributing a *deus ex machina* behaviour to the group, which appears suddenly and can only be explained by external danger. This criticism has come from a range of commentators: Pierre Bourdieu notes the rather brusque passage between the states of seriality and group when he bemoans the 'raccourcis abrupts de la prise de conscience [...] et de l'état réifié du groupe aliéné à l'existence authentique de l'agent historique'.<sup>14</sup> Ronald Aronson contends that the group/seriality model does not fully explain the intelligibility of class struggle and that instead of revealing the contradictions of everyday life, struggle for Sartre becomes the sudden rupture in an overwhelmingly negative life.<sup>15</sup> Similarly, according to Alex Callinicos, Sartre, just as Walter Benjamin, has a messianic

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<sup>9</sup> For a comprehensive summary of the group/seriality theory, see for example: Thomas Flynn, *Sartre and Marxist Existentialism: The Test Case of Collective Responsibility* (Chicago; London: University of Chicago Press, 1984).

<sup>10</sup> A conceptual tool designed to theorise the opposition between small-scale direct interchange and large-scale, abstract social processes. The distinction rose to prominence in the first half of the twentieth century and was taken up by Max Weber in his *Economy and Society*. See Ferdinand Tönnies, *Community and Civil Society* [1887], ed. by José Harris, trans. by Margaret Hollis (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

<sup>11</sup> Fredric Jameson, 'Entre structure et événement', in *Sartre, Lukács, Althusser: des marxistes en philosophie*, ed. by Vincent Charbonnier and Stathis Kouvelakis (Paris: PUF, 2005), pp. 11–32 (p. 25).

<sup>12</sup> Stathis Kouvelakis, 'Sérialité, actualité, événement', in *Sartre, Lukács, Althusser: des marxistes en philosophie*, ed. by Vincent Charbonnier and Stathis Kouvelakis (Paris: PUF, 2005), pp. 47–61.

<sup>13</sup> Jairus Banaji, *Fascism: Essays on Europe and India* (New Delhi: Three Essays Collective, 2013).

<sup>14</sup> Bourdieu, *Esquisse*, p. 270.

<sup>15</sup> Ronald Aronson, *Jean-Paul Sartre*, pp. 286, 290.

conception of the group and ‘mystif[ies] revolution by conceiving it as absolutely discontinuous with the normal course of events’.<sup>16</sup>

Indeed, Sartre himself stresses the radical change between series and group by using the image of a strike of lightning (‘le bouleversement qui déchire le collectif par l’éclair d’une *praxis* commune[...]).<sup>17</sup> This however does not mean that there is no explanation for the emergence of the group, or that it is in no relationship with the *collectif*. The example of the insurrection of the early days of the Revolution demonstrates that the fused group does indeed emerge *out of* a serial collective. The passage suggests that, paradoxically, what constitutes the group is not only the specific action undertaken by a number of individuals (which can seem revolutionary and yet be structurally rooted in seriality) but the dynamic that this movement receives from the historical situation. The act of pillaging the arms deposits, a serial mechanism by which each individual seeks to defend his or her life, is in itself not destined to lead to the creation of the fused group but only does so because of the interaction of the result of this serial activity with the specific circumstances:

C’est que *le peuple de Paris s’est armé contre le roi* [...] la *praxis* politique du gouvernement aliène les réactions passives de sérialité à sa liberté pratique: dans la perspective de cette *praxis*, en effet, l’activité passive du rassemblement lui est volée dans sa passivité, la sérialité inerte se retrouve de l’autre côté du processus d’altérité *comme un groupe uni qui a produit une action concertée*.<sup>18</sup>

The emergence of the group, we can thus note in Sartre’s defence, is neither completely unforeseeable nor is it the automatic result of an action once set in motion. Serial activity is transformed into group *praxis* because of the historical meaning which the result of that serial activity receives from its interaction with external forces: ‘l’acte [...] dont le moteur est la sérialité, se retourne *de lui-même* et dans son résultat en une double signification de liberté’.<sup>19</sup>

On the immediate level of the development of Sartre’s argument in the *Critique*, it should thus

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<sup>16</sup> Alex Callinicos, *Making History: Agency, Structure, and Change in Social Theory* (Leiden; Boston: Brill, 2004 [1987]), p. 213.

<sup>17</sup> Sartre, *Critique*, I, p. 384.

<sup>18</sup> Sartre, *Critique*, I, p. 389.

<sup>19</sup> Sartre, *Critique*, I, p. 389.

be noted that the emergence of the group follows logically from a theory of alienation that focuses on the results of the acts of human beings. However, acknowledging that the immediate explanation of the emergence of the group is coherent does not yet answer the question whether it is an adequate account of social reality.

## 1. 2. Collective consciousness vs. a theory of mediations

If the seriality-group paradigm is coherent in explaining the immediate transition from one to the other, we also need to ask whether the *Critique* offers a framework for understanding the wider conditions in which it is possible for the group to emerge, i.e. whether it provides firstly an adequate theory of the integration of the individual into the social, and secondly a coherent vision of the collective subject. According to the *Critique*, any social field consists of a combination of serial and group structures. The group itself is not characterised by any collective consciousness but by the phenomenon of the ‘mediating third’, which is a concept, as Thomas Flynn summarises, ‘denoting the praxis of the organic individual *as* group member, that is, as communicating identity of interest and purpose [...] without claiming an impossible unity within some superorganism’.<sup>20</sup> Instead, the invention of the concept of the mediating third allows Sartre to conceive of inter-human relations which, instead of being characterised by otherness, reflect truly reciprocal relations. Reciprocity typically constitutes the relationship between members of the group: ‘les membres du groupe sont *les tiers*, c’est-à-dire chacun comme totalisant les réciprocités d’autrui’.<sup>21</sup>

Sartre’s social theory is based on the important role of the singular, and by his emphasis on history as a continuous ‘totalisation détotaillée’, i.e. a dynamic model in which the result of any individual or collective fact is always undone by the existence of other ‘totalisations en cours’.<sup>22</sup> Reciprocity, even though it is seen as the fundamental inter-human relationship, is

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<sup>20</sup> Thomas Flynn, ‘Sartre and the Poetics of History’, in *The Cambridge Companion to Sartre*, ed. by Christina Howells (Cambridge: CUP, 1991), pp. 213–60 (pp. 244–45).

<sup>21</sup> Sartre, *Critique*, I, p. 404.

<sup>22</sup> Sartre, *Critique*, I, p. 156.

therefore no stable fact but its mediation by a milieu of scarcity turns it into a serial relation of otherness.<sup>23</sup> The theorisation of collective activities as competitive movements of group and serial formations thus allows Sartre to conceive of the social without having to rely on any model of an artificially static entity. Social ensembles are characterised by a combination of serial entities and reciprocal group formations.

Identified as the philosopher of mediations *par excellence* by Althusser, Sartre instead conceives of a set of mediations which ensure the unity of the social.<sup>24</sup> Social formations such as the family or language, themselves part of the practico-inert, fulfil a crucial mediating function and are most explicitly investigated in *L'Idiot de la famille*. The question remains however, whether a social ontology which theorises collectivity as relegated to the realm of the practico-inert, or *past* human action, and which distinguishes between absolute reciprocity in the group and complete otherness in the series, is capable of accounting for all social phenomena, e.g. the specific conditions leading to the emergence of the group. Aronson contends that Sartre's social theory in the *Critique* remains individualistic, since it fails to demonstrate the real link between the individual and the series and omits to demonstrate the historical content of examples of seriality.<sup>25</sup> Aronson's criticism is centred on two aspects: firstly, he argues that Sartre's social theory remains inadequate because it takes the individual instead of shared praxis as a starting point.<sup>26</sup> Secondly, he accuses Sartre of insufficiently historicising concepts such as seriality and scarcity, thereby elevating them to an absolute status instead of viewing them as factors amongst others in a more complex matrix.<sup>27</sup> Without fully embracing Aronson's judgement of Sartre's social ontology as individualistic, it seems nevertheless that the social theory of the *Critique* does indeed contain a number of

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<sup>23</sup> Thomas Flynn, 'The Political Thought of Jean-Paul Sartre: Three Essays: I. L'Imagination au Pouvoir: The Evolution of Sartre's Political and Social Thought', *Political Theory*, 7.2 (1979), 157–80 (p. 168).

<sup>24</sup> Louis Althusser and Etienne Balibar, *Reading Capital* [1965], trans. by Ben Brewster (London: New Left Books, 1970), p. 136.

<sup>25</sup> Aronson, *Jean-Paul Sartre*, p. 265, p. 260.

<sup>26</sup> Aronson, *Jean-Paul Sartre*, p. 264–65.

<sup>27</sup> Aronson, *Jean-Paul Sartre*, p. 256.

weaknesses. The following examination of social processes in *L'Idiot* will therefore be conducted against the background of these contentions. Of the wide range of social phenomena and milieus that appear in *L'Idiot* we shall focus on 'reciprocity' and laughter, and their particular implications for the group-seriality paradigm.

## II. Intersubjectivity in *L'Idiot de la famille*

### II. 1. Reciprocity

The concept of reciprocity appears as a counter-value to alienation in Sartre's writings after *L'Être et le néant*, and begins to occupy a central role in his conception of the potential for human co-existence from the *Critique* onwards.<sup>28</sup> In *L'Idiot* it further plays an important role in the relationship between language and truth. As we saw in chapter 1, Sartre in *L'Idiot* stresses language as an activity in order to demonstrate Gustave's passivity as an exceptional case against the rule. His passivity leads him to be permeated by language ('les significations le traversent') rather than actively engaging with names that are presented to him as designating the objects of his surroundings ('sans les reprendre à son compte', *IF*, I, p. 150). Instead of actively communicating, Gustave imitates gestures and repeats the words that he is taught. By passively adopting knowledge in this way he remains in the phase of faith ('croyance'), which Sartre opposes to the realm of Truth ('Vérité') whose creation requires communal activity and reciprocity. Truth, says Sartre here, is an enterprise that Gustave can only undergo as an object ('subir') and not produce as a subject, for he lacks the capability to affirm (*IF*, I, p. 158).

In this context Sartre elaborates further his ideas on language and truth: truth only exists as a communal work produced by reciprocity which begins when one human being actively produces the synthesis of the enunciation of another: 'Entendre la parole, c'est reconstruire la synthèse; c'est la construire d'avance: on comprend à demi-mot, à demi-phrase. La pensée apparaît à la fois aux deux interlocuteurs comme l'objet même en face d'eux [...]' (*IF*, I, pp.

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<sup>28</sup> Flynn, 'Poetics of History', p. 245. The idea of the reign of truly reciprocal relations equally seems to be echoed in Sartre's insistence on fraternity in his conversations with Benny Lévy. In Jean-Paul Sartre and Benny Lévy, *L'Espoir maintenant: les entretiens de 1980* (Lagrasse: Verdier, 1991), pp. 56–60.

158-159). An initial passive belief in the proposition of the other is in the ideal case (but by no means always) immediately transformed into reciprocity through the subject's active affirmation of what was said, 'en présence de la chose' (*IF*, I, p. 162). The absence of this active affirmation, identified as belief, thus appears as the opposite of truth, as an alienation which represents an 'incomplete moment of knowledge'.

The problem of knowledge and comprehension will be further examined in our discussion of the subject's possibility of self-knowledge (chapter 4); for now it will be sufficient to elucidate briefly the implications of the theory of reciprocity and communication for Sartre's approach to collective processes. Firstly, we should note that the idea of a thought which is simultaneously recreated by one person as it is pronounced by another is an expression of a profound concern with the concrete processes of intersubjective comprehension. Without going so far as to claim that Sartre develops a notion of collective consciousness in *L'Idiot*, we can nevertheless note that he conceives of two consciousnesses producing the same idea. By identifying the frequent failure or incompleteness of reciprocity and the persistence of passive belief as a form of alienation, we can further hypothesise that Sartre, through the counter-example of Flaubert, envisages the possibility of a non-alienated form of collective existence in which forms of collective consciousness could be imagined. Thomas Flynn indeed suggests that, even though Sartre never positively embraces collective consciousness, his notion of comprehension (which is intimately connected to reciprocity) brings Sartre close to such an idea.<sup>29</sup> And as Flynn notes elsewhere, in the writings from the *Critique* onwards, reciprocity, takes on the political dimension of a requirement for an ideal, unalienated society.<sup>30</sup>

*L'Idiot* is therefore not unique within Sartre's corpus in problematising the idea of reciprocity; it does however make an important contribution by illuminating its concrete

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<sup>29</sup> Thomas R. Flynn, *Sartre, Foucault and Historical Reason, Volume 1: Toward an Existentialist Theory of History* (Chicago & London: Chicago UP, 1997), pp. 151-52.

<sup>30</sup> Flynn, *Sartre and Marxist Existentialism*, p. 192.

functioning, suggesting a growing concern with the possibility of collective processes of intellection. Sartre here relies on an evolution of his conception of language: volume I of *L'Idiot* posits that there is no pre-linguistic existence, and that the *vécu* is always already language: '[...] le trouble a son origine au niveau difficile où tout discours est un homme, où tout homme est discours [...]' (*IF*, I, p. 19).<sup>31</sup> As a consequence, the moment of reciprocity is possible because thought and intuition (the most immediate moments of the *vécu*) are already language, and therefore part of an intersubjective milieu: '[le langage] c'est moi [...] c'est l'indissoluble réciprocité des hommes et leurs luttes, manifestées ensemble par les relations internes de ce tout linguistique sans porte ni fenêtre, où nous ne pouvons pas *entrer*, dont nous ne pouvons sortir, où nous sommes?' (*IF*, I, p. 20).

Finally, we should point towards two comments that Sartre makes about Gustave's incapacity to engage in the reciprocal creation of truth, as they seem to have implications for our reading of seriality and group in *L'Idiot*. Firstly, Sartre refers to the social nature of truth as a chain of collective operations: 'Gustave, non valorisé, ne peut en aucun cas se considérer comme un maillon absolu dans une chaîne d'opérations collectives' (*IF*, I, p. 161). Secondly, in a footnote two pages ahead, Sartre again invokes the image of the chain when explaining the process of the reciprocal creation of truth:

En fait, il ne s'agit jamais que de la réactivation d'une pensée autre; et *mon* affirmation ne tient sa force infinie que des affirmations en chaîne qui l'ont précédée et qui la soutiennent. N'importe: sans cette étincelle en chaque pensée, sans le *Fiat* qui s'allume ici quand, ailleurs, il vient de s'éteindre, la Vérité ne pourrait que mourir en passant d'un esprit à l'autre; elle serait pour chacun de nous, *vérité étrangère*. (*IF*, I, p. 163, note 1)

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<sup>31</sup> On Sartre's theory of language and its evolution towards a Lacanian position of an unconscious structured as language, see in particular Christina Howells, *Sartre's Theory of Literature*, pp. 171ff and Gilles Philippe, 'Le Protocole préréactionnel dans les manuscrits de "L'Idiot de La Famille"', *Recherches & Travaux*, Traverses 19-21, 2007, 139–50.

Unsurprisingly, the creation of truth, albeit social, remains dependent on singularity; it is only alive because of the ‘spark’ that only individual consciousness can provide.<sup>32</sup> But in addition, those last two quotes from *L’Idiot* portray the kind of social configuration that produces truth as a chain, attributing the role of a member in a chain to the individuals involved in the process. The image of the chain evokes very strongly Sartre’s explanations of seriality in the *Critique*. Like the members of the bus queue, who are entirely interchangeable and therefore only in a relationship of exteriority with one another, one might say that the members of a chain are interchangeable and identical in their otherness to one another. However, we have seen already that the creation and the transmission of knowledge is by no means defined by exteriority, but, insofar as two individuals simultaneously and actively produce the same proposition, it is perhaps the most intimate imaginable social relationship.

An additional complexity thus lies in the juxtaposition of the passage just quoted and of the fact that reciprocity tends to be associated with the relationship between members of the group, not the series. Hence, it can be tentatively concluded that the seriality/group dichotomy is to a certain extent de-stabilised by the depiction of reciprocity and truth in *L’Idiot*. The *Critique* already suggested that social formations are composed of elements of group and seriality at the same time. It now seems that the definition of each of the two processes becomes less clear, perhaps expressing the need for an enrichment of Sartre’s social theory and a partial transcending of the group-seriality divide. Before turning to an examination of collective formations in *L’Idiot* as such, this issue will be questioned further by investigating Sartre’s comments on laughter which contain a very explicit discussion of seriality and group.

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<sup>32</sup> Sartre’s frequent imagery in *L’Idiot* of darkness and sudden irruptions of light will figure more prominently in chapter 4.

## II. 2. Seriality reconsidered: laughter and the ‘human persona’

As part of the process of personalisation described by Sartre, the young Flaubert tends to turn himself into an object of hilarity in various ways. In order to introduce this part of *L'Idiot* entitled “Du comique considéré comme masochiste”, and to elucidate the meaning of becoming a comedian, Sartre begins by developing a remarkable theory of laughter, building on Bergson’s and on Jeanson’s work on this phenomenon (*IF*, I, p. 812). In any collective formation (‘collectivité’), says Sartre, individuals share a certain vision of the ‘human persona’ (‘personne humaine’), which is borne out of institutions, customs and history, and which defines ‘what they are by what they should be and what they should be by what they are’ (*IF*, I, pp. 812-13). When a member of the community, through his or her behaviour, caricatures that vision or reveals it as a lie, the community, threatened in its self-definition, reacts by excluding the member. The members have for example an idea of their ‘French character’, which can be perceived as being threatened by a certain behaviour: ‘c’est dans *mon* caractère de Français, structure socialisée de mon Ego, que je suis contesté et, simultanément, l’ordre national est gravement menacé puisque, somme toute, la personnalité française n’est que le condensé synchrétique de l’histoire et des structures de la France’ (*IF*, I, p. 813).<sup>33</sup>

The concrete content of the vision of what it means to be human may vary; what matters is that an individual will try to dissociate him or herself from the person whose behaviour questions the ‘human persona’, and a collective formation sharing that vision will do so through a diverse range of measures including ‘banning’ or ‘liquidation’:<sup>34</sup> ‘la collectivité, quel que soit son statut antérieur, se constitue en groupe; elle s’unifie par une action dont chaque individu assume la responsabilité entière, elle purifie son intersubjectivité par la suppression de l’élément perturbateur et, pour un certain temps, elle atteint à un degré d’intégration supérieur’

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<sup>33</sup> We should note the high degree of integration of the individual into the social which is expressed in the formulation ‘structure socialisée de mon Ego’, and which adds an interesting dimension to Sartre’s early text *La Transcendance de l’ego*, suggesting perhaps the ego is created in a similar way, but as the result of processes of collective as well as individual consciousness.

<sup>34</sup> Sartre may have the prison system or capital punishment in mind.

(*IF*, I, p. 813). The potential for a rich anthropological study of legal systems could be seen to be taking shape here; our discussion will however be more specifically interested in Sartre's particular usage of the term 'groupe' in this context. Compared to the *Critique* it is surprising that a group, associated with reciprocity and true collective praxis, should constitute itself in what might be seen as a conservative or reactionary (both in the original sense of the word) measure to preserve an element of the status quo.

The picture is further complicated by the advent of laughter itself, which is characterised as a similar phenomenon, i.e. a collective reaction in order to preserve a shared image of 'Man'. In comparison to the previous case, laughter is a 'softer' measure, as it occurs in less perturbing cases, for example that of a drunk person, whose behaviour nevertheless threatens the image of the 'human persona' in that it reveals that the behaviour which is the norm is subject to certain conditions (e.g. not drinking). An objective contradiction – the membership in the human community which the drunk person claims but which I want to deny him or her so as to distance myself – is solved through laughter (*IF*, I, p. 815). Different in nature from the previously mentioned group reactions, laughter is crucially characterised as a *serial* form of behaviour reducing intersubjectivity to exteriority: 'au lieu que le lynchage ou le bannissement sont des actions du groupe qui renforce par elles son intégration, le rire exclut l'objet risible de l'intersubjectivité en supprimant toute relation interne entre les rieurs [...] la morphologie de l'ensemble social que forment les témoins se transforme: le groupe, si groupe il y a, ou la demi-solitude des badauds devient série' (*IF*, I, p. 818).

In a sense, Sartre's theory of laughter as an external chain reaction is much closer to serial reactions described in the *Critique*, for which the prime example is the mass panic of the *Grande Peur* of 1789. While the theory of laughter itself appears to be a fruitful application of the social theory established in the *Critique*, the interpretation of 'banning and lynching' as group reactions seems less plausible. The group from the *Critique*, which, Sartre insists again in

this context, is characterised by ‘pleine réciprocité de tous, grâce à la médiation du tiers’ (*IF*, I, p. 818), is hardly imaginable as a defence mechanism which protects an image of the human persona such as national character which is about to be disclosed as a lie.

It seems further surprising that the emergence of laughter as a serial reaction occurs as a way of protecting the group, the group becoming the normal state of collectivity and seriality the sudden change. Sartre insists that the fundamental relationship between men is reciprocity which is alienated, reified and disguised in the serial behaviour of laughter which establishes an external relationship between them. This is not entirely incompatible with the *Critique*, where reciprocity is precisely defined as the primary human relationship which is alienated through mediation. In the passage on laughter, however, reciprocity appears to be much more permanent than in the *Critique*. One might argue that Sartre’s formulation ‘si groupe il y a [...]’ is more careful and does not quite allow the conclusion that the group is being depicted as the normal state of the collective formation. Nevertheless, the passage does reinforce the impression that the group-seriality divide, through its application to concrete social phenomena, is to a certain extent de-stabilised, perhaps allowing for a greater variety of conceptions of social formations.

Finally, we should point out Sartre’s astonishing preliminary comment at the beginning of the passage on laughter to the effect that hilarity is a transhistorical and polyvalent human form of expression which possesses a primary structure or base (‘structure élémentaire’) from which its different aspects (or historical forms) emerge as superstructures. With this remark, and the subsequent description of the meaning of laughter, Sartre seems to move surprisingly far in the direction of developing a conception of human nature. Sartre thus claims that the primary form of laughter has been preserved and is hidden behind all concrete irruptions of hilarity. And he then announces: ‘c’est ce rire antique et primitif, vieux comme l’humanité,

irruption de la préhistoire dans nos sociétés historiques, que nous tâcherons de décrire: parce que Flaubert veut [...] se faire instituer par lui' (*IF*, I, p. 812).

The *Critique* attributes institutionalised and socialised behaviour exclusively to the accumulation of past human action in form of the pratico-inert, which is then internalised, re-activated and modified by its incarnation in each individual act. Bearing this in mind, it is astonishing that in *L'Idiot* prehistory should suddenly 'irrupt' in contemporary society, precisely lacking mediation by any of the mechanisms outlined in the *Critique*. For a philosopher who so rigorously defended himself against any notion of social 'hyperorganism' or collective consciousness, the argument moves surprisingly close to a notion of collective unconscious. It seems not unjustified to reproach Sartre with an element of incoherent social theory at this point. The passage certainly suggests that Sartre in *L'Idiot* is open to test and develop his social theory from the *Critique* rather than merely preserving it.

### III. Collective formations in *L'Idiot de la famille*

Having discussed Sartre's conception of the social in *L'Idiot* from the point of view of the theoretical conceptions of social structures in comparison with their depiction in the *Critique*, we shall now turn to the interpretation that *L'Idiot* offers of some instances of what might be called collective subjectivity. We shall begin by considering Sartre's depiction of the school system, which, as will be argued, can be seen as paradigmatic for a notion of 'collective subjectivity' implicit in *L'Idiot* and again evoking considerable resonances with Pierre Bourdieu's thought. Subsequently, we shall consider the episode of a protest movement orchestrated by a group of schoolboys at the Collège de Rouen as an example of the formation of social movements. This first part will also introduce themes that are relevant throughout our subsequent analyses of class and the social whole: the importance of failure, of struggle between generations, and the correspondence between the characteristics that

Sartre attributes to the historical situation in the second half of the nineteenth century and his own experience of society after 1968.

### III. 1. The school system as producer of collective subjectivity

We should briefly recall Sartre's definition of subjectivity as a system of internalisation and exteriorisation, characterised by a combination of repetition and invention, as well as by the absence of self-knowledge. This definition of subjectivity, it seems, can be fruitfully transposed to the level of the collective, offering a theorisation of collectivity that enriches the group-seriality dichotomy in the *Critique* whilst continuing to avoid any idea of collective organism or consciousness. In the Rome lecture, Sartre is concerned to demarcate his position against both the Lukácsian and the Durkheimian versions of collective consciousness, insisting once more that in history 'il n'y a que des hommes'.<sup>35</sup> The argument in favour of a notion of a collective *subjectivity* therefore needs to be carefully distinguished from the idea of a permanently constituted collective *subject*, which remains incompatible with the Sartrean framework.

Sartre's description of the school system in 1830 and its effects on Gustave and his fellow *collégiens* implies a reflection on the collective and historical conditioning of subjectivity. Due to the absence of social mobility at the time, claims Sartre, the educational system in the 1830s does not fulfil a selective function but predominantly serves to insert an entire generation of young boys into 'serialised competition', which corresponds closely (and purposefully) to the logic of competition that begins to reign with nascent capitalism more generally (*IF*, II, p. 1126-28). In Sartre's account, education does not simply serve to convey knowledge, but structures the very existence of its recipients. Sartre describes the school as establishing a quantifying and serialising form of intersubjectivity in which competition constitutes each student by 'pure altérité' (*IF*, II, 1125). The system described seems to aim at

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<sup>35</sup> Sartre, *Qu'est-ce que la subjectivité?*, p. 66.

creating a historically conditioned type of human being, modelled on the specific inter-human relations formed by a society based on competition, otherness and self-interest (*IF*, II, p. 1126). The profound nature of this conditioning becomes apparent when Sartre adds in a footnote that the school system should be seen as not forming part of the ‘superstructure’ of society but rather its ‘infrastructure’. It forms the space in which ‘class-being’ is instituted (*IF*, II, 1144, note 1). The boys are structured in a very fundamental way into ‘solitudes rivales et incommunicables’ (*IF*, II, p. 1129).

This form of conditioning is far-reaching in its effects: it dominates the relationship among agents, it ‘reifies’ the relationship between a student and his work, and it petrifies the content of knowledge so as to mould it into the system of competition. Further, it affects the cardinal dimensions of human existence, for temporality becomes quantified accordingly (*IF*, II, p. 1138), and strikingly, the boys are described as being ‘swallowed up’ (‘happés’, *IF*, II, p. 1131) by the school, suggesting that they are affected in an almost physical manner. Merging this description with the framework of subjectivity as internalisation and exteriorisation allows us to view a historically conditioned system, which each agent nevertheless ‘exists’ in a singular way. As we saw in chapter 1, each agent ‘exists’ the internalised being, as Sartre says of Flaubert: ‘il est [...] bourgeois’, and ‘il faut qu’il existe son être’ (*IF*, II, p. 1609). To use the vocabulary of *L’Idiot*, we might say that social conditioning creates a partially shared constitution, which is lived by each agent as individual personalisation. Sartre’s vivid description of the school system thus serves to develop a very detailed and concrete account of the way in which society as ‘detotalised totality’ is generated. A formulation used by Sartre himself, in which he describes Gustave’s incapacity to identify what he has in common with his schoolmates, points towards such a notion of a common or shared subjectivity:

[...] si dans chacun de ses camarades il avait pu voir un autre lui-même, aliéné comme lui-même aux institutions du libéralisme, jeté dans une circularité sérielle que l’appareil d’État a conçu expressément pour introduire aux compétitions sélectives des adultes *sur le marché* [Sartre’s emphasis], s’il avait compris que *la*

*subjectivité* – la sienne comme celle des autres – était ici *l'intériorisation d'une structure d'extériorité* qui définissait chaque terme par son opposition à tous, sans doute eût-il admis que chacun vivait pour soi ... une situation qui leur était *commune* [...] (*IF*, II, p. 1154, emphasis added).

A notion of 'collective' or 'historical' subjectivity allows us to account for the conflict that it creates with alternative models of subjectivity, in this case a 'feudal' rather than capitalist system of internalisation and exteriorisation by which Gustave is conditioned. Gustave's exceptional case consists in the clash between two incompatible forms of existence: 'la temporalité structurée des Flaubert – éternel retour des saisons et des cérémonies, par la féodalité sans cesse réaffirmée –, le constituait hoir, vassal et seigneur futur à ses propres yeux' (*IF*, II, p. 1137). While the feudal existence of the Flaubert family consists of a certain intersubjective relationship characterised by hierarchy, a cyclical form of temporality and a view of individuals as possessing a certain 'qualité', the bourgeois model into which Flaubert is thrown is the exact opposite: seriality replaces the hierarchical relationship between the vassal and the master, quantified time ('la durée physique et bourgeoise des horloges') replaces cyclical temporality and the notion of the quality of a person is replaced by his or her quantified insertion into a system of abstract marks and judgements.

The theoretical significance of the specific configuration of the school system in 1830 seems to be on the one hand the fact that bourgeois subjectivity can be observed in the making and on the other hand the possibility to compare it to an alternative, equally historicised form of subjectivity. If the existence that 'swallows up' the schoolboys is defined as 'bourgeois', we should add that this qualification can be read in the narrow sense of the acquisition of a specific class-being, but also in the larger sense of 'bourgeois society'. After all, the generality of the educational system, if we apply Sartre's logic to later periods, performs the same quantifying conditioning on all members of society. Similarly, the contradistinction between a feudal and a bourgeois form of subjectivity points in the direction

of a more general (and admittedly more vague) sense of historical subjectivity affecting society at large.

Two examples from previous texts by Sartre demonstrate the innovation performed in this passage: firstly, in 1945, Sartre is already concerned with the question of ‘collective subjectivity’ when reflecting on the writer-critic relationship. In ‘La Nationalisation de la littérature’, he says: ‘on ne peut sortir de la subjectivité — non de la subjectivité individuelle mais de celle de l’époque [...] Lire, pour un contemporain de l’auteur, roulé dans la même subjectivité historique, c’est participer aux risques de l’entreprise’.<sup>36</sup> Much later, in an article that prefigures *L’Idiot de la famille*, ‘La Conscience de classe chez Flaubert’,<sup>37</sup> Sartre investigates the acquisition of class-being through a variety of institutions. The article, however, is exclusively concerned with the individual level of Gustave Flaubert, while *L’Idiot* is interested in the collective class-being of an entire generation. Two lines of enquiry of Sartre’s thought, the notion of historical subjectivity mentioned in ‘La Nationalisation’, and the question of an individual’s relationship to her class-being therefore seem to then be combined in *L’Idiot*.

Further, the notion of the ‘Objective Spirit’, which will be considered in more detail in chapter 5, indicates the potential as a mediation enveloping all of society. *L’Idiot* defines the objective spirit as ‘culture as practico-inert’, i.e. the accumulation of past cultural activity in a given period (*IF*, III, p. 43, see chapter 5). The notion of a collective subjectivity, conditioned by a common history but lived in an individual way, seems to be a helpful addition since it highlights the moment of continual renewal of the social realm as *totalité détota*lisée. Additionally, if the emergence of the group in the *Critique* at times appears arbitrary, an account of collective conditioning affecting parts of society, such as a generation, or the

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<sup>36</sup> Jean-Paul Sartre, ‘La Nationalisation de la littérature’ [1945], in *Situations, II* (Paris: Gallimard, 1948), pp. 31–52 (p. 43). We shall return to the idea of writer and reader being ‘roulés dans la même subjectivité historique’ in chapter 5.

<sup>37</sup> Jean-Paul Sartre, ‘La conscience de classe chez Flaubert’, *Les Temps modernes*, 240–241 (1966), 1921–52; 2113–53.

‘collective subjectivity’ shared by author and reader, provides an important tool in theorising the conditions in which group formations can emerge.

Going beyond Sartre, a model of a systematic and collective conditioning of subjectivity seems to provide a helpful supplement to more strictly sociological investigations into social conditioning in specific circumstances. For example, reflections on recent concerns to investigate what, with Sartre, we might term ‘neoliberal subjectivity’ frequently seem compatible with a Sartrean framework. Mary Wrenn recently defined a specific form of ‘neoliberal agency’ as a form of ‘hyperindividualism’ that relegates authentic behaviour to atomised consumer choices and that relies on a lack of awareness of real empowerment. For Wrenn, institutions such as the mass media and advertising have played a particular role of shaping an illusory form of agency since the 1970s.<sup>38</sup> Sartre’s description of the school as conditioning the subjectivity of an entire generation, if applied to more recent institutions, would produce a fruitful point of reference to such investigations. Among Sartre’s contemporaries, the passages we have consulted bear resemblances with Bourdieu’s notion of *habitus*, despite remaining differences between the two thinkers.

### III. 2. Collective subjectivity as *habitus*: Bourdieu and Sartre

Once again we can identify affinities between Sartre’s and Bourdieu’s frameworks. As we saw in the previous chapter, Bourdieu’s *Esquisse pour une théorie de la pratique* develops a notion of a process of internalisation and exteriorisation as constitutive of social practices. Like Sartre, Bourdieu opposes any notion of a collective subject or ‘personnification des collectifs’,<sup>39</sup> and like Sartre in the passages quoted above, he is concerned with the concrete way in which collective practices are engendered. In particular Bourdieu’s famous notion of *habitus* resonates with the common or collective subjectivity that emerges in *L’Idiot*:

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<sup>38</sup> Mary V. Wrenn, ‘Agency and Neoliberalism’, *Cambridge Journal of Economics*, 2014.

<sup>39</sup> Bourdieu, *Esquisse*, p. 255.

L'habitus n'est autre chose que cette loi immanente, *lex insita*, déposée en chaque agent par la prime éducation, qui est la condition non seulement de la concertation des pratiques mais aussi des pratiques de concertation [...]<sup>40</sup>

Both Sartre and Bourdieu insist on the component of temporality. We have already noted Sartre's emphasis on the contrast between the cyclical temporality of the Flaubert family and the 'durée physique et bourgeoise des horloges' in which the school system trains its pupils. Similarly, Bourdieu identifies the role of early education as rendering the body 'temporellement structuré' and as causing it to function according to a socially prescribed succession of events.<sup>41</sup> Moreover, both Sartrean conditioning and Bourdieusian *habitus* function on the basis of being excluded from knowledge. Bourdieu insists in terms that appear almost Sartrean:

Ce qui est ainsi incorporé se trouve placé hors des prises de la conscience, donc à l'abri [...] même de l'explicitation: rien ne paraît plus ineffable, plus incommunicable [...] que les valeurs incorporées [...] par la transsubstantiation qu'opère la persuasion clandestine d'une pédagogie implicite, capable d'inculquer toute une cosmologie, une éthique [...] à travers des injonctions aussi insignifiantes que "tiens-toi droit" [...].<sup>42</sup>

Bourdieu's *habitus* is thus effective as a principle generating collective practices in so far as it is unknown to agents and impossible to fully be formulated as an explicit rule.<sup>43</sup> Equally, the bourgeois subjectivity or class-being transmitted by the school system in *L'Idiot* is impossible to grasp (see also chapter 1 on destiny). Like for Bourdieu the formulation 'tiens-toi droit' is designed to convey a certain *habitus*, Sartre insists that seemingly individual tasks such as homework, completed by each student, are in fact connected to a larger, impersonal structure (*IF*, II, p. 1125). Finally, Bourdieu and Sartre seem to agree on the family's impact on the subject, which is to be classified as stronger than that of the school system: in Gustave's case the persistence of the subjectivity acquired in the family throughout the conflict between this subjectivity and the one moulded by the school demonstrates this concretely. Similarly, in *La*

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<sup>40</sup> Bourdieu, *Esquisse*, p. 272

<sup>41</sup> Bourdieu, *Esquisse*, p. 296.

<sup>42</sup> Bourdieu, *Esquisse*, p. 298.

<sup>43</sup> Bourdieu, *Esquisse*, pp. 300-01. Every explicit formulation of social rules, for Bourdieu, distorts their functioning and is further only necessary for the 'ratés' of the internalisation of habitus.

*Distinction* Bourdieu argues that the conditioning in the family is more important for the acquisition of cultural capital than the influence of the school system.<sup>44</sup>

Despite these similarities, it is of course clear that stark differences remain between Sartre's framework and Bourdieu's. These differences frequently revolve around the centrality of the individual agent. Contrary to Sartre, Bourdieu denies that this involves any 'reactivation of the lived experience of the subject'.<sup>45</sup> As a consequence, Sartre's and Bourdieu's respective approaches to what could be summarised as 'the exceptional' differ markedly. Bourdieu is significantly more concerned with the norm: any exception to the rule defined by the *habitus* is merely seen as a variant leaving the rule intact,<sup>46</sup> and still inscribed in a certain field. Sartre's interest in Flaubert lies precisely in the fact that he represents a genuine exception to the otherwise less problematic constitution of bourgeois subjectivity.<sup>47</sup> It is revealing that when Sartre uses the term *habitus* in the context of the 1830s school system, he does so in order to argue that Flaubert does *not* have enough in common with his classmates in order to be able to turn his resentment into an act that would hurt them.<sup>48</sup>

Nevertheless, the surprising compatibility of Sartre's and Bourdieu's depictions of processes of collective conditioning are an important avenue to explore. They demonstrate, as Vincent de Coorebyter argues, the falsehood of the accusation of 'hyper-subjectivism' levelled against Sartre by Bourdieu, or that of the absence of class-being from Sartre's biographies, articulated by some of Bourdieu's followers.<sup>49</sup> But further, it seems that Bourdieu's framework is capable of delivering insights that are helpful for addressing the questions asked by Sartre in *L'Idiot*. As we shall see now, *L'Idiot* follows the Rouen schoolboys through a period of

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<sup>44</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, *La Distinction, Critique sociale du jugement* (Paris: Les Éditions de Minuit, 1979), p. 22.

<sup>45</sup> Bourdieu, *Esquisse*, p. 272.

<sup>46</sup> Bourdieu, *Esquisse*, p. 285.

<sup>47</sup> We have not had the space in this chapter to review Bourdieu's work as a whole but have instead focused on the period in proximity to *L'Idiot de la famille*. In later texts Bourdieu becomes increasingly aware of the necessity to theorise deviations from the norm which is instituted by the *habitus*. See for example Gisèle Sapiro, 'Pourquoi le monde va-t-il de soi? De la phénoménologie à la théorie de l'habitus', *Études Sartriennes*, Sartre, une écriture en acte, 2011, 165–86.

<sup>48</sup> Bourdieu, *Esquisse*, p. 121.

<sup>49</sup> Ivan Jablonka, *Les Vérités inavouables de Jean Genet* (Paris: Seuil, 2004), p. 10.

struggle, which Sartre theorises as a conflict of generations. Bourdieu's thought on generations, as we shall see, can be consulted as a helpful addition at this point.

### III. 3. The Rouen schoolboys: the failure of a generation in struggle

#### III. 3. 1. The revolt as conflict between generations

Sartre recounts a school student revolt, taking place in 1831, in the college that the young Flaubert will start attending only shortly after the episode. It is orchestrated by a group of students, who, disenchanted with the continuing influence of the church on education despite the promises of the July Revolution, feel that the liberalism defended by their middle-class parents has been betrayed. Led by the 'petit génie politique' Clouet, a small group of boys publicly refuse to attend confession, seeking to cause a scandal to 'awaken the sleeping liberals' (*IF*, II, p. 1333). Two boys are expelled, after which the college rises up in solidarity, attacking teachers and occupying a classroom. Despite the initial upsurge in support amongst the fellow-students, those occupying remain isolated and the combined intervention by the school management, the parents and the National Guard eventually ends the confrontation. Sartre's evaluation of this episode unsurprisingly takes the side of the boys and judges their action a failure in so far as they fall short of defending the values of the Republic, but successful in the sense that their example reveals the real possibility of reversing power relations and challenging authorities:

Quelle kermesse! De la huitième à la philosophie pas un élève qui ne soit aux aguets, retenant son souffle: ils ont osé! ils se dressent contre les grandes personnes et les tiennent en respect, démasquant la faiblesse de l'autorité [...] les grévistes, là-haut, sont en train de changer la vie; s'ils gagnent la partie, tous les élèves seront sujets, les administrateurs et les enseignants deviendront leurs objets favoris. Les enfants au pouvoir! (*IF*, II, p. 1340)

Once more, we can note Sartre's method of dramatisation through the use of short exclamations, the present tense and a perspective which attempts to render the atmosphere in the school at the time. In this instance, the scene is based on facts in the form of testimonies

and school records; but the dramatic rendering is nevertheless an imaginative presentation. Inserting the episode into a theoretical framework, Sartre interprets the Rouen events as the emergence of the group, its constitution as a pledged group, characterised by fraternity-terror and inspired by the Tennis Court Oath, the key example in the *Critique*:

[...] une pratique insurrectionnelle visant à remplacer l'autorité hiérarchique par la souveraineté du groupe assermenté sur chacun de ses membres. Ces jeunes bourgeois s'étaient, bien entendu, inspirés du serment bourgeois du Jeu de Paume. [...] ils avaient démontré qu'un ordre révolutionnaire est possible et légitime, quelle que soit l'unité sociale envisagée tant qu'il demeure le produit vivant et intime du groupe, autrement dit: qu'il n'est rien autre que la totalisation des relations humaines qui [...] sont vécues [...] *intérieurement* (*IF*, II, p. 1348).

Before the boys understand the nature of their undertaking, it is crushed by their parents, the community of the boys is dispersed and they are sent home for the Easter holidays. The process of decline or serialisation which in the *Critique* often automatically affects the group after its constitution, is thus determined by concrete circumstances.

A striking feature of this account is Sartre's reading of the episode as a conflict between generations. He insists repeatedly that the children act in the interest of defending the Republican values that the parents themselves had conveyed to them. In consequence, the parents' collusion with the school management to restore order is perceived by the sons (and by Sartre) as a betrayal: 'ce sont les adultes [...] qui conspirent contre les enfants' (*IF*, II, p. 1342), 'voilà donc les pères contre les fils' (*IF*, II, p. 1340), etc. The parents' role is also crucial as the Easter holidays that the children spend away from the communal milieu of the boarding school will provide the 'brainwashing' and atomisation that will finally diffuse all impulses of revolt (*IF*, II, p. 1342).

Jean Bourgault, in a chapter on Sartre's relationship with Maoist groups after 1968, mentions Sartre's fascination with the young.<sup>50</sup> It would seem that the description of the school revolt, if read in the context of *L'Idiot* as a whole, provides some theoretical

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<sup>50</sup> Jean Bourgault, 'Sartre et Le Maoïsme', in *Sartre et Le Marxisme*, ed. by Emmanuel Barot (Paris: La Dispute, 2011), pp. 81–105 (p. 82).

background to that fascination. In our discussion of the notion of destiny in chapter 1 we have pointed out the generational aspect of that phenomenon: the reverse side of the father's project, we concluded then, is the destiny of the son.<sup>51</sup> We now find the same mechanism transposed to the collective level, perhaps approaching a notion of collective destiny. Further, Sartre now completes the picture by providing an explanation for the fathers' behaviour, which places the episode in the historical situation. The erstwhile Republican fervour of the fathers, argues Sartre, has vanished in the face of the reality of the July Revolution and particularly the Lyon silk weavers' uprisings in 1831. In the face of a working class which threatens bourgeois rule, the middle classes, argues Sartre, sense the fragility of their rule, and opt for an alliance with the old powers (the church and the nobility) rather than unleashing a new terror (*IF*, II, pp. 1344-49).

As Norman Madarasz points out in an introductory remark in an article on the question of generations of Sartreans, Sartre's fascination with childhood stems from the fact that 'the child's view is always forward looking'.<sup>52</sup> Viewed in this light, Sartre at times appears close to expressing a certain essentialism with regard to the young, who almost come to symbolise a pre-alienated or pure state of the subject. The postulation of such a state would of course be incompatible with Sartre's own theory of subjectivity, as we have shown in the previous chapter and in the above analysis of the theory of language. Bourdieu's comments on generational conflicts seem to be a helpful corrective:

[...] les conflits de génération opposent non point des classes d'âge séparées par des propriétés de nature, mais des habitus qui sont produits selon des *modes de génération* différents, c'est-à-dire par des conditions d'existence qui, en imposant des définitions différentes de l'impossible, du possible, du probable et du certain, donnent à éprouver aux uns comme naturelles ou raisonnables des pratiques ou

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<sup>51</sup> The reduction in various formulations to male members of the family of course stems from the concrete example treated in *L'Idiot*.

<sup>52</sup> Norman Madarasz, 'Sartre: Generating Generations', *The European Legacy: Toward New Paradigms*, 8.6 (2003), 759-67 (p. 759).

des aspirations que les autres ressentent comme impensables ou scandaleuses et inversement.<sup>53</sup>

Bourdieu's definition of generational conflicts as resulting from different 'modes of generation' (in the literal sense) leading to conflicting perceptions of what is possible seems perfectly compatible with the model of the collective construction of subjectivity provided in *L'Idiot*. In order to remain faithful to the Sartrean framework, we should add however that the irruption of an event such as the schoolboys' revolt constitutes the emergence of the group. The notion of a certain historically generated subjectivity as constitutive of a 'field of possibles' however seems to provide a step in the direction of rendering the emergence of the group less arbitrary without denying the moment of freedom inherent in the Sartrean conception of such an event. Finally, with regard to generations, we should add that Sartre's insistence on the special position of the young evokes the immediate context of *L'Idiot*, namely the events of May 1968.

### III. 3. 2. The Rouen schoolboys and the 1968 movement

The Second World War is rightly seen as the historical event which converted Sartre to the importance of the social and the political. According to his own account, the events of 1968, in which he prominently took an active part, had a comparably profound effect on his trajectory, as he declared in 1971, in an interview with John Gerassi:

Et j'ai appris. J'ai compris que ce que les jeunes remettaient en question ce n'était pas seulement le capitalisme, l'impérialisme, le système, etc., mais aussi ceux qui prétendaient s'opposer à tout ça. On peut dire que de 1940 à 1968, j'ai été un intellectuel de gauche et qu'à compter de 1968 je suis devenu un homme de gauche intellectuel. La différence, c'est l'action.<sup>54</sup>

The impact of Sartre's 'action' within the movement of May 1968 can be questioned.<sup>55</sup>

Regardless of the effects of Sartre's *prise de position* however, *L'Idiot* reveals a clear concern to

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<sup>53</sup> Bourdieu, *Esquisse*, p. 261.

<sup>54</sup> John Gerassi, *Entretiens avec Sartre* [2009], trans. by Adrienne Boutang and Baptiste Touverey (Paris: Grasset, 2011), p. 489. One might contend that Sartre here understates his political involvement prior to 1968 and simultaneously downplays his intellectual work on Flaubert.

<sup>55</sup> See for example: Margaret Atack, 'Sartre, May 68 and Literature', *Sartre Studies International*, 5.1 (1999), 33–48.

reflect on the events on a theoretical level. The biography has been described by Annie Cohen-Solal as summarising Sartre's entire *œuvre*.<sup>56</sup> It seems nevertheless fruitful to consider the influences on *L'Idiot* of the events that shaped politics and philosophy in France after 1968. In her biography of Sartre, Cohen-Solal seems to pronounce two contradictory judgements: on the one hand she claims that Sartre is actually absent from his surroundings and more concerned with the nineteenth century – absent for Cohen-Solal both from the intellectual challenges posed by Althusser, Foucault and others in the 1960s, and absent from the May events themselves that Sartre so famously appeared to participate in but that, according to Cohen-Solal, never caught his attention as much as his study of the author of *Madame Bovary* did.

Cohen-Solal also concedes that *L'Idiot* expresses a constant *va-et-vient* between the nineteenth century and the events of the late 1960s. She thus quotes a long passage from Sartre's account of the Rouen schoolboys' revolt and suggests that the episode functions as an analogy for student movement that Sartre was himself experiencing. Besides this remark and a small number of critics who briefly point towards Clouet and the 1831 student movement,<sup>57</sup> the analogy has hitherto not received widespread attention from commentators. The convergence between the two moments in Sartre's thinking will therefore be demonstrated in the following.

In the passage from volume II we find numerous formulations that confirm the assumption of a dual concern with both 1831 and 1968 in this passage, and that echo some of the issues that Sartre raised in the texts and interviews related to the May events. For example, the isolation of the young *révoltés* is an issue that features prominently in Sartre's comments on the Rouen schoolboys and on the aftermath of 1968.<sup>58</sup> He uses the identical vocabulary of a

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<sup>56</sup> For example: Cohen-Solal, *Sartre*, p. 599.

<sup>57</sup> Collins, *Sartre as Biographer*, p. 135; Wannicke, *Sartres Flaubert*, p. 177.

<sup>58</sup> For example: Jean-Paul Sartre, 'La Jeunesse piégée' [1969], in *Situations, VIII* (Paris: Gallimard, 1972), pp. 239–61 (p. 242, p. 261).

'ghetto': in *L'Idiot* in order to describe the situation in which the occupying school students find themselves (*IF*, II, p. 1341) and, referring to the students in the late 1960s, in order to demonstrate the isolating effect of the 'Faure' law of 1969.<sup>59</sup> In both cases Sartre criticises the wider conception of education implied in the actions of the so-called humanist ruling class, be it in the shape of the destruction of culture through its submission to the needs of industry in the post-war period or the restoration of order in the Rouen college by allowing the forces of order into a 'temple de la culture' (*IF*, II, p. 1341).<sup>60</sup> Further, the intention that Sartre ascribes (without revealing his sources for this intimate knowledge) to Clouet and his friends, to provoke their fathers, the sleeping liberals, into action in defence of Republican ideals by causing a scandal, or a 'désordre spectaculaire' (*IF*, II, p. 1341) is reminiscent of the Maoist politics to which Sartre was attracted after '68.

Sartre further seems to perform a veiled intervention into a debate that was only beginning at the time of *L'Idiot*. The chapter concerned with the events around Clouet is entitled 'Le Psychodrame', a term often used by those who analysed the events of 1968 as rather superficial. Raymond Aron for example, arguing from a significantly less sympathetic point of view than Sartre's,<sup>61</sup> defines 1968 as a 'psychodrama' in which the main actors merely imitated their favourite historical figures in a 'délire verbal'.<sup>62</sup> For Aron, the student movement simply created a 'spectacle' rather than a real event, and was swiftly ended by de Gaulle's authoritative intervention: 'un homme parle et la comédie est finie'.<sup>63</sup> If we consider Sartre's direct comments on 1968, and if we further take into account his remarks about the Collège de Rouen in *L'Idiot* as a more general reflection on the socio-historical conflictuality of which the educational system is part, the usage of the term 'psychodrama' appears as an attempt to

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<sup>59</sup> Sartre, 'La Jeunesse piégée', p. 241.

<sup>60</sup> Sartre, 'La Jeunesse piégée', pp. 250-53.

<sup>61</sup> Referring, rather pejoratively to students who 'continuaient d'occuper les locaux et de palabrer'. Raymond Aron, *La Révolution introuvable: Réflexions sur les événements de Mai* (Paris: Fayard, 1968), p. 11.

<sup>62</sup> Aron, *La Révolution*, p. 35.

<sup>63</sup> Aron, *La Révolution*, p. 37.

highlight, against Aron and others, the complexity of the events and their profound impact on the lived experience of the agents involved.

Unsurprisingly, Sartre's analysis of the May events puts similar emphasis on the conflict between generations as does his account of the schoolboys' revolt. He might even be addressing the fathers of the Rouen schoolboys as well as the older generation in the 1960s when he launches the appeal: 'Pères, n'oubliez pas: vos enfants sont votre unique avenir. Il dépend de vous que vous les massacriez [...] au nom de l'humanisme [...] Retenez [...] que, si vos fils sont révolutionnaires, c'est parce que vos lâchetés ont fait leur destin'.<sup>64</sup> Kristin Ross's re-examination of 1968 has provided evidence against the view that the logic of the May events is to be equated with their 'afterlives'. Her argument strongly counters views that seek to reduce the revolt to an intergenerational conflict and to thus de-politicise it.<sup>65</sup> Sartre's approach is interesting in this context, for it seeks to theorise the implications of youth and generations, without depoliticising the issue. Instead, as Alexis Chabot remarks, Sartre is highly sensitive to the political component of the issue of father-figures and generations.<sup>66</sup> The mediated form that this reflection takes in the passages on Clouet and his friends allows him to elucidate some of the implications of these questions in a way that is perhaps more nuanced than some of his comments on the events of 1968 themselves.

### III. 3. 3. The aftermath of the revolt: 1831 and 1968

Sartre's interest in the Collège de Rouen episode seems motivated not only by the short moment of revolt itself, but also by the collective processes that take place in the aftermath of defeat.<sup>67</sup> Between 1831 and 1835, says Sartre, the boys are still convinced of the validity of their action, and simultaneously incapable of comprehending their fathers' reaction, i.e. they are unable to see the bourgeois character of the repression stemming from their fear of

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<sup>64</sup> Sartre, 'La Jeunesse piégée', p. 243.

<sup>65</sup> Kristin Ross, *May '68 and its Afterlives* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), for example p. 6.

<sup>66</sup> Chabot, *Sartre et le père*, p. 19.

<sup>67</sup> While to some extent the situations examined in the *Critique* are often the aftermath of victory.

popular power. Having internalised the bourgeois destiny created for them by their fathers (with the help of the conditioning by the school system, as we have seen), they are unable to perceive it as such. What follows is a collective retreat to the imaginary, with which we shall be concerned in chapter 5.

Sartre here seems to be following a twofold enquiry: the episode can be seen as constituting an entire generation of young bourgeois (*IF*, II, p. 1358 and note 3), whose defeat prepares them for the role they are to play in the 1848 Revolution, and for becoming part of the ‘capables’ under the Second Empire, i.e. the professional layers of the middle classes responsible for the elaboration of an ideology that corresponds to the situation in the nineteenth century.<sup>68</sup> As Thomas Flynn puts it, Sartre is now interested in the ‘first, accumulative generation’ of the French bourgeoisie.<sup>69</sup>

At the same time, the schoolboys’ trajectory of defeat appears to be an occasion for the formulation of a wider questioning of the social processes taking place in the aftermath of failure, such as the aftermath of 1968. Sartre explicitly compares the phase following 1831 to the post-1968 period, identifying both as ‘periods of counter-revolution’ in which fathers persecute their sons relentlessly (*IF*, II, p. 1358 note 3). In addition, the notion of failure features prominently in Sartre’s remarks on May. In “L’Idée neuve de mai 1968”, an interview given only shortly after the revolts, on 28 June 1968, Sartre reports having attended a meeting of students in which it was argued that defeat should be accepted. Agreeing with the position held by Cohn-Bendit and others, he contends that only those who believed in immediate revolution could see ‘68 as a defeat, and that in reality the movement was still in a protracted period of struggle. The question, he thought, was how the struggle could be reignited in other

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<sup>68</sup> The *capables* of the 1850s are at one point referred to as ‘techniciens du pouvoir pratique’ (*IF*, III, p. 206). They are therefore not without resemblance with the narrow-minded ‘techniciens du savoir pratique’ rejected in ‘Plaidoyer pour les intellectuels’ [1965]. In *Situations*, VIII (Paris: Gallimard, 1972), pp. 375-455 (pp. 388-390).

<sup>69</sup> Flynn, *Existentialist Theory of History*, p. 188.

forms.<sup>70</sup> We can thus assume that during the creation of *L'Idiot*, Sartre was pre-occupied with the question of the continuation of a movement which had suffered temporary setbacks. The movement in which he was involved himself thus seemed to have posed challenges to his social theory which, in the *Critique*, was more oriented towards the decline of the group once successfully constituted. The elucidation of the Rouen schoolboys' revolt and their subsequent escape to the imaginary can perhaps be seen as a staging of the negative image of the possibilities for the students of Sartre's own time.

In his lecture on intellectuals from 1965, Sartre evokes the mechanisms by which the ruling class creates a certain number of posts for those whom he calls 'techniciens du savoir pratique', thereby significantly narrowing their field of possibilities ('champ des possibles'):

[...] ainsi tout est rigoureusement défini pour le technicien du savoir pratique. Né, en général, dans la couche médiane des classes moyennes, où on lui inculque dès la petite enfance l'idéologie particulariste de la classe dominante, son travail le range de toute manière dans la classe moyenne.<sup>71</sup>

These reflections are made more concrete in Sartre's later criticisms of the education system and they are echoed in his comments on the students of '68 who are seen as rejecting precisely the role of 'technicien du savoir pratique'. Clouet and his friends however, are destined to become the *capables* who in the third volume are explicitly identified as 'techniciens du pouvoir pratique' (*IF*, III, p. 206). The episode of the Rouen schoolboys thus provides Sartre with a source for a social theory that aims at explaining the generational renewal of a – his own – class; but also with a negative, or abstracted image of the revolts that Sartre witnessed himself, and against which these could implicitly be understood. In light of recent explorations of a recuperation of the May events into a 'New Spirit of Capitalism',<sup>72</sup> Sartre's

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<sup>70</sup> Sartre, 'L'Idée neuve de mai 68' [], in *Situations*, VIII, pp. 193-207 (pp. 193-194). Still very optimistic at this point, Sartre's tone has changed noticeably by the time of 'La jeunesse piégée' where, as quoted above, he invokes the fathers' creation of the children's destiny.

<sup>71</sup> Sartre, 'Plaidoyer', pp. 388-90.

<sup>72</sup> Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello, *Le Nouvel Esprit du Capitalisme*, NRF essais (Paris: Gallimard, 1999).

concern with the aftermath of what he perceives as the defeat of a generation is much less idiosyncratic than the lengthy passages about the Collège de Rouen may at first seem.

### Conclusion

As our discussion has shown, *L'Idiot de la famille* provides a rich resource for an understanding of the development of Sartre's social theory. While Sartre operates within the conceptual framework of the *Critique* (and of earlier texts), his engagement with concrete, historical instances of collective processes nevertheless enriches his earlier assumptions. Particularly the clear distinction between the two poles of group and seriality, as we have seen, is challenged by the theorisation of laughter, in a manner that perhaps allows a greater flexibility in the application of these notions. For Aronson, *L'Idiot* is the text in which Sartre was closest to developing an adequate social theory and in which the individual is truly constituted by ideology, the family etc. and not simply influenced by them. It is perhaps not surprising that it is a biography, i.e. a concrete and historical study – of individual and historical subjectivity, we might add – which is able to transcend some of the shortcomings that Aronson sees as stemming from the excessive abstraction of the *Critique*.

Particularly the role of the objective spirit as a concept that can potentially account for the social whole, even if this is not fully developed in *L'Idiot*, seems of crucial importance in the light of Sartre's theorisation of totalisation. For Aronson, Sartre's contribution in this field addresses the very core of an analysis of history. Aronson writes after the publication of parts of the second *Critique*: 'It is time today to ask whether struggles are totalising or detotalising – that is, whether they create a larger, meaningful and developing whole, or whether they amount to nothing at all or indeed dissolve previous totalisations'. *L'Idiot*, by investigating the long-term effects of detotalised struggles and defeat, seems to suggest that collective activity is indeed *both* meaningful *and* always-already detotalised. Sartre's engagement with social ontology and historical events certainly suggests that *L'Idiot* is neither a simple retreat to the

imaginary after the supposed failure of Sartre's social theory and political engagement in 1968 nor that it is 'only' interested in understanding Gustave Flaubert.<sup>73</sup> The failure which is at the heart of *L'Idiot* is *also* Sartre's, and his implicit reflections on the lessons of failure are a mediated attempt to comprehend it. The defeated Rouen schoolboys are portrayed by Sartre as retreating to the imaginary. This development will be discussed in chapter 5, once we have analysed the relationship between subjectivity and the imaginary in Gustave's case.

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<sup>73</sup> Which is Aronson's conclusion, despite his positive remarks on the advances in Sartre's social theory made in *L'Idiot*: Aronson, *Jean-Paul Sartre*, p. 303, p. 343.

### Chapter 3: The Trajectory of *L'Enfant imaginaire* as an Exploration of the Relationship between the Real and the Imaginary

#### Introduction

Tout homme est une fuite de gaz par laquelle il s'échappe dans l'imaginaire. Flaubert était constamment cela. Pourtant, il devait aussi regarder la réalité en face puisqu'il la haïssait, et c'est tout le problème des rapports entre le réel et l'imaginaire que j'essaie d'étudier à partir de sa vie et de son œuvre.<sup>1</sup>

This statement, taken from the interview “Sartre par Sartre” published in *Situations, IX*, might at first sight not be particularly surprising. Although many of Sartre's texts are dedicated to examining different aspects of the imaginary, the real (and its relationship with the imaginary) receives strikingly little consideration – until *L'Idiot*. Like the notion of ‘destiny’, the real also seems to be a concept that is present in Sartre's work but not defined in a systematic fashion. Like ‘destiny’, the ‘real’ has no entry in Noudelmann and Philippe's otherwise comprehensive *Dictionnaire Sartre*.

In *L'Imaginaire* the treatment of the real is straight-forward: imagining consciousness has the option of negating the real, and the description of this negation seems to always presuppose an unproblematic availability of the real. In consequence, the text does not address the question of a definition of the real. In light of Sartre's insistence on the negating freedom of imagining consciousness (to which we shall return in the second part of this chapter), it might be tempting to simply equate the real with being, which is then to be nihilated by imagining consciousness. An analysis of the role of the real in *L'Idiot* hence serves the twofold function of enabling an understanding of the imaginary in the text on Flaubert on the one hand, and of contributing to a retrospective elucidation of the significance of the real in *L'Imaginaire* on the other.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Sartre, ‘Sartre par Sartre’, pp. 118-19.

<sup>2</sup> Bearing in mind, of course, that the meaning of the real may not be identical throughout Sartre's work.

## I. Gustave and the Impossibility of the Real

### I. 1. The passive agent and spatio-temporal ‘desituation’

According to *L’Idiot*, Gustave’s ‘passive constitution’, i.e. his disturbed subject-object relationship with the world, prevents him from ‘realising’ the unity of his existence; instead he defines himself (*se désigne*) as a ‘réalité privée de force et mal liée’ (*IF*, I, p. 148). Praxis, from which Gustave’s passive constitution excludes him, thus plays a crucial role in securing the link between the agent and the real. In Gustave’s case, the weakness of this link between subject and the real is fundamentally endangered, as Sartre says later, for Flaubert ‘la vie est un exil au cœur du réel’ (*IF*, I, p. 171). The real thus appears as something with which a link needs to be established. Passivity, as we shall see now leads to moments which cause the anchoring in the real to disappear, such as moments of *hébétudes*, and Flaubert’s attitude to geographical and historical realities. They are then generalised into a worldview termed ‘desituation’:

[...] il assimile la simple *réflexion* et l’*ascension* verticale conférant à celle-ci un semblant de réalité par ce que j’appellerai des pratiques de *dé-situation*. Sans nier son enracinement ni sa facticité, il essaie d’en contester l’importance [...] en saisissant la conscience réflexive comme l’*analogon* d’une imaginaire “conscience de survol” (*IF*, II, p. 1565).

In the following pages Sartre repeatedly insists on the derealising character of this ‘desituating’ tendency: Gustave, says Sartre, knows that the ascetic moment is derealising, and that his newly discovered figure of the artist who considers the world from the point of view of the unreal is only a role (*IF*, II, p. 1575).

Flaubert’s ‘desituating’ tendency occurs again in guise of the adult’s attitude towards his travels. Quoting from Flaubert’s letters written during his journey to the East in the early 1850s, Sartre argues that Flaubert’s lack of enthusiasm for the places visited is testament to his incapacity to connect to any place. Flaubert really only wishes to return to his home at Croisset, argues Sartre, and to pursue his dream of ‘being elsewhere’ again. Flaubert’s desituating tendency appears in this context very explicitly as passive behaviour: ‘cette

totalisation est la négation permanente et tournante d'une résidence invariable où l'on bouge à peine pour ne pas sentir les liens qui y attachent' (*IF*, II, p. 1567).

As well as spatial detachment, the 'desituating' movement observed by Sartre also contains a temporal moment. A letter in which Flaubert declares that he has no more sympathy for the contemporary working class than for ancient slaves, along with his claims that he is capable of a form of metempsychosis allowing him to experience different moments in history, are used as evidence for Flaubert's wish to see himself as eternal, omnipresent and therefore detached from any real moment in history. Both spatial and temporal detachment are characterised as imaginary attitudes:

Pour se dé-situer dans l'espace il avait inventé l'imagination prophétique qui franchit les distances et livre avant l'expérience les structures essentielles des choses: la même opération, dans le temps, donne la mémoire visionnaire qui s'ouvre sur un passé vécu avant la naissance et laisse échapper des souvenirs de Rome ou de Carthage. Dans l'un et l'autre cas, il s'agit en vérité d'*images*, nées d'une culture [...] mais il a décidé, par une intention souterraine, qu'il les subit au lieu de les produire (*IF*, II, p. 1568).

Desituation, whether spatial or temporal, is thus synonymous with loss of access to the real. The analysis of the phenomenon of 'desituation' hence allows us to draw initial conclusions as to the presentation of the real in *L'Idiot*: as we have seen, Gustave's passive constitution is directly responsible for his tendency to make himself absent from the world, be it in the form of moments of *hébétéude*, or within a generalised worldview which attempts to efface the subject's spatio-temporal fixity. We are thus led to conclude that the real in *L'Idiot* by no means appears as a positively defined and readily available entity; rather, it is negatively defined as a lack, as that to which the subject has no access. If Gustave's desituation is described in terms of a spatio-temporal absence synonymous with derealisation, we can conclude that anchoring in time and space, unavailable to Gustave, are constituent elements of the real.

*L'Idiot* of course also refers to the 'real' in a rather common way, i.e. as the material objects surrounding us and the effective actions we perform on them: this is for example the case in a passage referring to Gustave's condition shortly before the 'chute' of 1844, which describes the luggage Flaubert has packed and the room he has locked as his 'environnement réel' (*IF*, II, p. 1825). Nevertheless, it would be hasty to attribute to Sartre a simplistic position such as the one Lacan ridicules in the Seminar on the Purloined Letter: 'les chercheurs ont une notion du réel tellement immuable qu'ils ne remarquent pas que leur recherche va à transformer en son objet'.<sup>3</sup> Instead, the real in *L'Idiot* could equally be read as a relationship of praxis, which Gustave fails to enter. The object thus loses its real character when it does not stand in a relationship of praxis to the subject: 'l'arbre glisse, inutile apparition, puisqu'il ne s'insère dans aucune praxis' (*IF*, II, 1825).

In a detailed footnote, Sartre then adds that, even for the active agent, the 'field of possibles' is always populated by objects that are located 'à mi-chemin du réel et de l'irréel'. These objects are 'apparitions', appearances, which are perceived but not immediately utilised as real possibilities. They therefore constitute the third category of 'réalisables', a possibility that can be transformed into an option and thus *realised* by the agent (*IF*, II, 1827, note 2). We can therefore conclude that the real in *L'Idiot* is by no means simply to be equated with the world of objects, but is rather dependent on its *realisation*. As we consider Gustave's problematic relationship with the real, it will become increasingly clear that it occupies a highly precarious position in *L'Idiot* and that there are no guarantees as to its availability.

Finally, if we recall the central role occupied by Gustave's passive constitution in the severing of his links with the real, it seems appropriate to refute any notion that out of multiple options Gustave simply chooses the unreal in a process of what Sartre at the time of the *Bandelaire* would have termed *mauvaise foi*. In contrast, *L'Idiot* paints a picture of a subject

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<sup>3</sup> Jacques Lacan, *Écrits*, I, Nouvelle éd (Paris: Ed. du Seuil, 1999 [1966]), p. 25.

radically barred from the real through his passive constitution. In his *Sartre et l'authenticité* Yvan Salzmann, referring to the passage on desituation which we have quoted above, emphasises the inauthenticity contained in Flaubert's praxis of 'desituating' himself.<sup>4</sup> If, on the contrary, as suggested here, *L'Idiot* portrays a fundamental schism between the real and the subject, the notion of authenticity as fidelity to the real becomes untenable. As we shall see now, truth can be added to activity as a further constituent of the real.

### 1. 2. Gustave's isolated incredulity: belief and the impossibility of truth

Chapter II of this thesis, which was concerned with aspects of collective subjectivity, demonstrated that truth in *L'Idiot* is not defined as absolute but as a product of reciprocal interaction between human beings. It is a social product, rendered possible by reciprocity, which is the product of *active* communication ('une œuvre commune et [...] une exigence de réciprocité', *IF*, I, p. 158). While previously we considered this process in relation to Sartre's theory of collectivity, we shall now interrogate its implications for the relationship between the subject and the real. Gustave's passivity, which, as just seen, produces a lack of spatio-temporal fixity of the subject, also accounts for his incapacity to distinguish between truth and belief. Early on in the first volume of *L'Idiot* Sartre insists that the young Gustave, both isolated and inactive, is incapable of affirming any form of truth or knowledge and is instead confined to the realm of belief: 'c'est la passivité qui l'empêche de constituer ses intuitions souffertes en évidences *véridiques*' (*IF*, I, p. 163). This exclusion from knowledge ('savoir') and truth (both terms seem to be used interchangeably in the passage with which we are concerned), presents itself as another aspect of his lack of access to the real.

In the context of Gustave's passivity Sartre defines belief as an early stage of a movement towards knowledge, and one which the subject would normally be expected to transcend: '[la croyance est une] relation intersubjective, [...] un moment incomplet dans le développement

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<sup>4</sup> Yvan Salzmann, *Sartre et l'authenticité: vers une éthique de la bienveillance réciproque* (Genève: Labor et Fides, 2000), pp. 274-77.

du savoir; c'est la présence en nous d'une volonté étrangère unissant des mots dans une synthèse assertorique et qui nous fascine et nous aliène jusqu'à ce que nous en fassions notre propre volonté' (*IF*, I, p. 163). Rather than radically separating belief and truth, this definition identifies the former as an alienation which can be appropriated and thereby transformed into the latter, thus confirming our claim in chapter 1 that Sartre's theory of the subject relies on the coincidence of alienation and freedom. In the absence of the movement that goes beyond belief however, truth for Gustave remains 'le besoin de croire' (*IF*, I, p. 164), and, since he is incapable of transcending language towards the reality it describes, the realm of signs is opaque to him. For the present chapter, it is particularly interesting that the substitution of belief for truth, caused by Gustave's passive constitution, entails a movement away from the real.

In order to clarify the meaning of Gustave's lack of access to truth, Sartre inserts a reflection on the mechanism at work between the actor and the viewer of a theatre play, comparing Gustave's attitude to that of the actor.<sup>5</sup> The comparison is based on Sartre's own observation of actors, who, he claims, fail to represent 'la conduite affirmative' on stage, and in whose acting 'action' gives way to 'passion'. They are thus incapable of expressing a 'jugement basé sur l'évidence', which would create reciprocity between actor and viewer and an appeal to the other's (the viewer's) freedom (*IF*, I, p. 166). Instead both actor and viewer are imprisoned in a world from which *praxis* is banned and which replaces action with gesture (*IF*, I, p. 167).<sup>6</sup> Within the play, there is no truth or untruth; Hamlet's words are not ascertained as true or false by Kean or by the viewer, they are simply believed: 'le seul moyen de faire *par nous* que la pièce existe, c'est de nous en infecter. Contagion affective: l'acteur nous investit, nous pénètre [...] plus nous serons identifiés à lui, plus nous serons près de partager sa croyance' (*IF*, I, p. 167). Both the actor's and the viewer's attitude to what happens within

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<sup>5</sup> The themes of theatre and theatricality is a recurring feature in *L'Idiot* and it can be seen as a pivotal point around which Gustave's relationship with the imaginary is constructed.

<sup>6</sup> The theme of the 'geste' will be discussed in detail below.

the play is thus characterised by belief, transmitted from the former to the latter by processes characterised by passivity ('infecter', 'Contagion', 'nous pénétre').

The unreal space created by the theatre thus appears one-dimensional; its intersubjectivity is void of communication, activity or reciprocity and, crucially, filled with belief instead of truth or knowledge: 'rien n'est su, tout est cru, tout est doublement aliéné' (*IF*, I, p. 168). Of course, Sartre does not disavow theatre as such but qualifies his remarks with the proviso that a play *can* have truth-content of a different kind, namely that which relates to 'the author's profound intention and the reality targeted through [the play's] images' (*IF*, I, p. 167). In addition, the state of suspension of critical judgement in which both actor and viewer find themselves is of course only temporary, whereas Gustave's exclusion from truth and knowledge, which the example of the theatre serves to illuminate, is a permanent feature of his subjectivity. The passage we have so far examined is concerned with the young boy; yet truth will remain unattainable for the passive agent and be substituted by passive adherence to belief (or its reverse side, non-belief).

At this point, it might be contended that by associating the unreal and belief Sartre is not inventive at all and merely applies a principle already established in *L'Imaginaire*. And indeed, in *L'Imaginaire* it seems that the more 'intense' the experience of images becomes (e.g. in the form of the dream or of hallucinations), the more important is the role of belief in their existence.<sup>7</sup> However, the depiction of belief in *L'Idiot* appears to add novel elements in at least two ways: firstly, the notion that subjectivity as a whole becomes affected by processes that in the text from 1940 were limited to very specific situations is a considerable radicalisation of the theory of the imaginary. We shall return to this point below, both in our discussion of imaginisation and when examining the theme of role-playing. Secondly, and more immediately to do with our present concern with the concept of the real, it could be suggested

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<sup>7</sup> E.g. Jean-Paul Sartre, *L'Imaginaire* (Paris: Gallimard, 1986 [1940]), p. 251, p. 291.

that Sartre in *L'Idiot* to a certain extent inverts the focus of *L'Imaginaire*. The process which leads Gustave to completely embrace his status as imaginary child is here viewed by Sartre in its beginnings: the reader of *L'Idiot* witnesses the moment – a kind of breaking point, in which the absence of truth gives way to derealisation. *L'Idiot* enriches what was developed in *L'Imaginaire* by adding the negative example of the failure of the real due to a lack of truth to the positive assertion that imagining consciousness involves belief.

Before addressing the last of our three angles from which the real appears as lack in *L'Idiot*, it seems appropriate to briefly comment on the conclusions concerning Sartre's relationship with religion that can be drawn from this conception of belief. The question of the religious implications of Sartrean destiny was touched upon in chapter 1. John Gillespie recently commented that for Sartre the metaphorical (in this case religious metaphors) is also the real.<sup>8</sup> Despite the undeniable religious connotation of 'destiny', this term can however also be seen as being integrated into Sartre's very particular framework. In this context, Christina Howells's emphasis on negative theology (and her criticism of Jacques Salvan's rapprochement of Sartre and religious mysticism) is perhaps a more accurate account of Sartre's religious metaphors.<sup>9</sup> Without entering this debate in detail, we shall merely point to the potential usefulness of the conception of belief proposed in *L'Idiot* for the discussion of Sartre's relationship with religion.

It should be noted that in the passages treated here Sartre exclusively uses the term 'croyance' rather than 'foi'. His immediate concern is therefore with a specific way of relating to the world rather than with religious faith in its cultural dimension or even Christian doctrine specifically. Nevertheless, the notion of a possible transformation of belief into knowledge seems to establish a hierarchical relationship that subordinates the former to the

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<sup>8</sup> Gillespie, "Les Mots". Sartre and the Language of Belief.

<sup>9</sup> Christina Howells, 'Sartre and Negative Theology', *The Modern Languages Review*, 76.3 (1981), 549–55; Jacques Salvan, *The Scandalous Ghost: Sartre's Existentialism as Related to Vitalism, Humanism, Mysticism, Marxism* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1967).

latter. We might thus conclude that Sartre not only confirms but expands on a rationalist, atheist position; at the same time, as our discussion of ‘destiny’ demonstrated, Sartre’s main interest seems to be neither adhering to nor refuting religious perceptions of the world but recognising their objective influence on forms of subjectivity. Little does it matter (for our purposes) that the form of faith to which Gustave adheres is a negative rather than a positive version of theology – by negatively establishing the psychological structure of belief as a denial of the real, Sartre implicitly delivers a criticism of religion as an exclusion of truth; truth however is by no means the mechanistic Scientism represented by Achille-Cléophas, it is distance of consciousness towards its object, but produced socially by the reciprocal interaction of subjects. Finally, if belief is transcended towards truth, this also implies that what is transcended is not simply replaced but remains present in what supersedes it. The two terms are thus not radically distinct; instead we discover a model of subjectivity that progresses in stages and in which the proximity of an alienating moment and its opposite suggests that the presence of religious concepts in Sartre’s writings should be no surprise at all.

Finally, for two reasons Sartre’s comments on the movement from belief to truth deserve criticism for being rather mechanistic: firstly because ‘truth’ is the only direction available to the movement starting with belief (apart from stagnation in belief), and secondly because Sartre fails to comment on the conceptual relationship between his notion of belief and religious faith more specifically. Octave Mannoni’s theory of belief, which Howard Davies sees as playing a crucial role in *L’Idiot*,<sup>10</sup> can serve to address both problems. In his essay “Je sais bien, mais quand même...”, Mannoni proposes that belief initially adopts the structure expressed in his chapter title: the subject knows about a certain situation but simultaneously adheres to a belief in the opposite. Mannoni’s outlook is compatible with Sartre’s since he

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<sup>10</sup> Howard Davies, ‘L’Idiot des “Temps Modernes”’, *Études Sartriennes*, IV (1990), 209–20 (p. 218).

explicitly refutes any role of the unconscious and describes belief as a process based on denial (*Verleugnung* [sic]) rather than repression (*refoulement*). Mannoni proposes that more emphasis should be put on the element described by the phrase ‘mais quand même’ which constitutes the moment of belief. His model is a dynamic one as it suggests that through a process resembling the institution of the superego belief can be solidified and thereby turned into a fetish and religious faith properly speaking. Interestingly, a movement from imaginary to real is at work at the same time: ‘[...] le moment où la croyance, abandonnant sa forme imaginaire, se symbolise assez pour ouvrir sur la foi, c’est-à-dire sur un engagement’.<sup>11</sup> Mannoni’s perspective, which is simultaneously close to Sartre’s and to a more traditional reading of Freud, thus provides an interesting solution to the problems raised by Sartre’s notion of belief: Mannoni allows for a second trajectory that belief can adopt, namely that of an active ‘engagement’. Secondly, by equating religious faith with this commitment, he seems to simultaneously propose a fruitful model for the relationship between belief (‘croyance’) and faith (‘foi’).

Incorporating Mannoni’s distinction between belief as imaginary and (by implication) the commitment to faith as real would hence represent an interesting nuancing of Sartre’s identification of the unreal and belief. From Sartre’s notion of belief we can however deduce a conception of the real that confirms our hypothesis of the necessity of an intersubjective construction of the real. Jean Améry, in his review of *L’Idiot*, appears to be particularly impressed by the theory of truth that Sartre delivers ‘in passing’. Améry’s summary demonstrates the close connection between the three elements of reciprocity, truth and real: ‘reciprocity, i.e. truth becomes a *terra incognita* for Flaubert, who is incapable of performing any ‘affirmative’ act and who is merely subject to reality and language.<sup>12</sup> Gustave’s state of belief is thus defined as one in which ‘la vie est un exil au cœur d’un réel qui, ni du dedans ni du

<sup>11</sup> Octave Mannoni, “Je sais bien, mais quand même...”, in *Clefs pour l’imaginaire, ou, l’autre scène* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1985 [1969]), p. 17.

<sup>12</sup> Jean Améry, ‘Die Wörter Gustave Flauberts’, pp. 1200-01 (my translation).

dehors, ne peut se donner à voir' (*IF*, I, p. 171). As we shall see now, Gustave's self is equally a 'reality which cannot be seen' and moreover constitutes a case which highlights the essential relationship between the real and its communicability.

### 1. 3. *Le moi indisable*: Gustave and the 'unknowability' and 'uncommunicability' of the self

#### 1. 3. 1. The self as 'estrangement'

Gustave's alienation, which we have discussed in the first chapter, is often represented as a missing sense of self. Sartre explains Gustave's passivity and his resulting alienation from the real and from language as a lack of 'être institué', which could have been – but was not – produced by maternal care. Following his rejection by his father at the age of seven, the boy is thrown into 'une crise d'identification d'une extrême violence parce qu'on lui a volé son être et qu'il n'est plus personne' (*IF*, I, p. 678).

The idea of the possibility of an 'instituted' and unproblematically identifiable self, even if negatively as counter-example to Gustave, might seem surprising, especially in the light of Sartre's theory of the self expressed in *La Transcendance de l'égo*. However, *L'Idiot* identifies the illusion of the self as a necessary one, as precondition for the human project. In addition, in a passage which seems to confirm the assumptions from 1936, Sartre adds that the ego has to be seen as part of the procedures by which truth can be produced:

Ainsi, les différentes formes d'activité ordinairement présentes dans la constitution ou la convocation de l'Ego permettent de considérer l'égologie réflexive comme un secteur du Savoir et de la Vérité [...] En vérité, l'opération suppose une constante réciprocité: c'est ce qui permet [...] de lutter contre l'aliénation et la mystification. (*IF*, I, p. 174-75, note 2)

The ego, if it is not 'allogène' and 'objet extérieur autre' like Gustave's, thus belongs to the register of truth and the real and, if exposed to processes of reciprocity, need not only be ossification and fetish. Thus, the counter-weight that reciprocity acquires in relation to alienation seems to render *L'Idiot* open to Merleau-Ponty's more social definition of the instituted self: '[...] l'institué n'est pas le reflet immédiat de ses actions propres, peut être

repris ensuite par lui-même ou par d'autres sans qu'il s'agisse d'une récréation totale, et est donc entre les autres et moi, entre moi et moi-même, comme une charnière, la conséquence et la garantie de notre appartenance à un même monde'.<sup>13</sup> The significance of reciprocity for the institution of the subject will become clearer when we turn to the theme of play-acting (II. 2. b).

Further, the introduction of the category of truth suggests that in comparison to *La Transcendance*, *L'Idiot* shifts the attention away from an ontological definition of the ego towards an epistemological emphasis on the 'knowability', or the sense of the self. Achille's constitution matters perhaps less than the fact that he never loses the 'sens du réel' (*IF*, I, p. 104). As we shall see, the reality of the self is synonymous with its communicability and knowability. As a consequence of Gustave's missing sense of self, his own person and his entire lived reality is characterised by a sense of estrangement: for instance, the contradiction between Gustave's passive constitution and the demands put on him by his surroundings causes a feeling of 'malaise' or estrangement which 'pushes him to the verge of fainting' (*IF*, I, p. 355). His *hébétudes*, which, according to Sartre, he transcribes in the juvenile short story *Quidquid volueris* as moments of joy and ecstasy, 'throw the child into a terrified *estrangement*' (*IF*, I, p. 229); and finally, to provide one more example, what Sartre calls the 'qualité Flaubert', the pride of being a member of the semi-feudal family unit, is felt by Flaubert as an '*estrangement* continué et institué' (*IF*, II, p. 1195). The fundamental reason for the sense of estrangement that accompanies Gustave throughout his life is very simply the discrepancy between his subjective existence and that of others, since the instrument that could connect the two – language – is missing: 'l'estrangement n'a qu'une explication: il n'y a ni commune mesure ni médiation entre l'existence subjective de Gustave et l'univers des significations' (*IF*, I, p. 24). Sartre's debt to Lacan is openly admitted as he notes firstly that Flaubert's sentiments

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<sup>13</sup> Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Résumé des cours* (Paris: Gallimard, 1968), p. 60.

are in Lacanian terms ‘inarticulables’ and indicates secondly that ‘estrangement’ is Lacan’s translation of Freud’s *Unheimlichkeit* (the uncanny, IF, I, p. 24 and note 1). While our analysis is in perfect agreement with those who, like Grégory Cormann, Marie-André Charbonneau and Christina Howells, insist on the proximity between Sartre and Lacan, it seems that the notion of the failure of the real in *L’Idiot* is as much indebted to Freud’s *Unheimlichkeit* as it is to Lacan.<sup>14</sup>

### 1.3.2. The self as ‘unsayable’

In his article on the theme of the ‘indisable’, Grégory Cormann summarises the various occurrences of the term ‘estrangement’ in Sartre’s texts of the 1960s and 1970s and he concludes that their common denominator lies in the definition of estrangement as an ‘internal distance’ or a ‘gap at the heart of intimacy’.<sup>15</sup> In *L’Idiot* ‘estrangement’ is thus much more closely associated with the failure of the signifying function of language: ‘Insignifiant, on le signifie; on lui signifie ce qu’il est. Mais l’intention verbale reste engourdie [...] Le résultat, c’est l’*estrangement*’ (IF, I, p. 151). Like everyone else, Sartre says, Flaubert feels the need to communicate but words for him belong to the other and can therefore not describe his *vécu* (IF, I, p. 48). Sartre picks up Flaubert’s own characterisation of his reality and of himself as ‘indisable’ and repeatedly insists on the ‘unsayability’ resulting from Gustave’s sense of estrangement.<sup>16</sup> The incapacity to act thus strips the young boy of any means of transcending

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<sup>14</sup> Marie-André Charbonneau, ‘An Encounter between Lacan and Sartre’, *Sartre Studies International*, 5.2 (1999), 31–44; Grégory Cormann, ‘L’Indisable sartrien entre Merleau-Ponty et Lacan’, *Recherches & Travaux*, Traverses 19-21, 2007, 151–76; Howells, ‘Flaubert’s Blind Spot’.

<sup>15</sup> Cormann, p. 160.

<sup>16</sup> Flaubert himself repeatedly uses the unusual word ‘indisable’, while the common term would be ‘indicible’. The fact that an author, who excelled at parodying common forms of discourse by imitating them, invents his own vocabulary in order to designate the failure of language is itself striking and appears to be an expression of Flaubertian irony. Sartre follows Flaubert and mostly uses the word ‘indisable’. We shall do the same, translating it into English as ‘unsayable’. The English alternative ‘ineffable’ seems inappropriate in this context, firstly because it also exists in French and was chosen by neither Flaubert nor Sartre, and secondly due to the slight semantic difference between ‘ineffable’ and ‘unsayable’, namely the connotation of an outward or expressive movement contained in the Latin ‘ef-ferre’. ‘Unsayable’ and ‘indisable’ (or the more common term ‘indicible’) are more neutral in that respect.

the immanence of his immediate lived reality: '[...] il serpente, rivière souterraine, dans l'immanence' (*IF*, I, p. 152).

At the centre of this 'unsayability' Sartre places Gustave's sense of self; in other words, the incapacity to engage in intersubjective communication more precisely originates in an incapacity to name his own person: 'Gustave s'ébahit devant soi, c'est-à-dire devant le mot "moi-même"' (*IF*, I, p. 153); or: 'il ne sait pas se nommer' (*IF*, I, p. 150). As already discussed in depth in chapter 1, he views the unity of his life as generated by an external force, a form of destiny, and himself therefore as a member of a series rather than as an individual (*IF*, I, p. 153). Any attempt to adopt a synthesising attitude towards his own self, hence, results in a disintegration of that self as 'brume vague et floue, indéfinie, parfaitement inutilisable', while his 'désirs profonds' are 'inarticulables' (*IF*, II, p. 1199f). The absence of the 'sayability' of the self negatively reveals the possibility of expressing one's own person as a constitutive factor of the real: the generalised 'ostracism' which Gustave's isolation induces and his increasing conviction that 'ce qu'il ressent est *par principe* indisable' means that 'pour s'être replié sur soi, Gustave n'en demeure pas moins déréalisé' (*IF*, II, p. 911). The resentment which results from what could be seen as his epistemological and communicative isolation causes Gustave to valorise 'l'imaginaire en tant que non-réel et non-être' (*IF*, II, p. 911). We can thus note at this point that the 'knowability' and the 'communicability' of the self are directly correlated to the availability of the real to the subject and that conversely 'epistemological isolation' fundamentally threatens the real.

### 1. 3. 3. The failure of reflexivity

Christina Howells points to the centrality of reflexivity in *L'Idiot* which, referring to the text, she identifies as Flaubert's central 'blind spot'.<sup>17</sup> We have already seen that the creation of the sense of self depends both on reflexivity and on reciprocity and it seems further that the very

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<sup>17</sup> Howells, 'Flaubert's Blind Spot', p. 29.

particular configuration of subjectivity that excludes reflexive consciousness can be expressed in French in terms of the distinction between the two meanings of the English word 'reflexion': 'reflet' and 'réflexion'. Gustave's person is inaccessible to his reflexive consciousness and exclusively presents itself as a reflected image: 'dans la vision de soi-même il y a déjà un jeu de reflets; et se connaître, c'est se *jouer* [...] la sincérité réflexive n'est pas possible' (*IF*, II, p. 1549). Sartre describes in great detail scenes in which the 5-year-old Gustave observes himself in the mirror in unsuccessful attempts to capture his own being. Due to the insecurity associated with his own self, he is keen to perceive himself as the 'real' person that others (originally the father) see in him. As soon as he finds himself in any state of emotion, the child therefore runs towards the mirror in order to find proof of the sincerity of his feelings in his tears (*IF*, I, pp. 678f). The desired result of encountering his own self of course cannot be attained. More precisely, the mirror fails to disclose Gustave's self because it is his being that he seeks to identify instead of his activity (he asks himself 'de quoi ai-je l'air quand je suis innocent?' rather than 'de quoi ai-je l'air quand je pleure?', *IF*, I, p. 679).

In this moment the failure of the identification of the self reveals itself as synonymous with the failure of the real as such, since Gustave will remain confined to the world of reflections (reflets), to images, which he turns into a fetishised form of the ego. If Gustave is portrayed as excluded from reflexivity, Sartre's *Qu'est-ce que la subjectivité?* can help us elucidate this proposition. Subjectivity (defined as a certain way of totalising the world and of reacting to a given situation based on one's individual's history) is characterised by 'non-savoir', and the acquisition of knowledge of one's subjectivity is an objectifying movement that destroys subjectivity.<sup>18</sup> This movement, we can add now, is produced by the reflexivity unavailable to the passive agent who is 'au niveau de la pure subjectivité' (*IF*, I, p. 148). Instead, in Gustave's case reflexivity seems to be substituted by an attitude characterised by adhesion.

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<sup>18</sup> Sartre, *Qu'est-ce que la subjectivité?*, p. 42.

#### I. 4. Preliminary conclusion: the real as activity, truth and communication

In order to draw some preliminary conclusions concerning the conception of the real that underlies *L'Idiot* we can thus note that insofar as the movement towards the imaginary results from the unavailability of the real, the latter appears as fundamentally fragile. For Gustave the real is only present as absence, as that which 'ne peut se donner à voir', in proximity to the Lacanian elusiveness and impossibility of the real. However, it emerges negatively that access to the real is possible for Sartre if articulated through categories such as activity, truth, communication and knowledge.<sup>19</sup> It should be of no surprise that these notions figure prominently in other writings by Sartre that are from the same period but that could be seen as more firmly anchored in the real than *L'Idiot*: firstly, one of the aims of *L'Idiot*, Sartre suggests in an interview, is to show that 'everything can be communicated';<sup>20</sup> secondly, in 1970 Sartre declares in an interview with *L'Idiot international* that the problem of the revolutionary press is its relationship with the concept of truth;<sup>21</sup> and thirdly, the dominance of the theme of activity in Sartre's writings hardly needs demonstrating, since praxis is a prevalent theoretical concern since the *Critique de la raison dialectique* and since Sartre's immediate political interventions can be seen as judgements of certain types of activity (e.g. that of the students or the figure of the intellectual).

The real thus appears as a form of subjectivity rendered possible by certain conditions and further dependent on reciprocal interaction. This observation serves the purposes of our analysis in two different ways: firstly, it clarifies that the real, as understood by Sartre, is not an independently existing realm to be discovered by human consciousness, but dependent on (collective) praxis. Based on this flexible definition of the real as 'that which is to be constructed' we can thus expect a similarly flexible presentation of the imaginary in *L'Idiot*. In

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<sup>19</sup> In a recent article, Patrick Engels has suggested that Sartre develops a form of negativistic ethics, which is implied rather than explicitly posited. Patrick Engels, 'Sartre and Negativistic Ethics', *Sartre Studies International*, 19.1 (2013), 16–34.

<sup>20</sup> Sartre, 'Sur "L'Idiot de la famille"', p. 106.

<sup>21</sup> Jean-Paul Sartre, 'L'ami du peuple' [1970], in *Situations, VIII* (Paris: Gallimard, 1972), 456–476 (p. 474).

so far as the real requires (future) activity, it is far from simply being part of the *en-soi*, then to be negated by the imaginary. By contrast, and this will become increasingly clear in the following chapters, the real and the imaginary are modes in which both being and consciousness (or praxis and the practico-inert) can operate. Naturally, this does not preclude a dialectical relationship between the two, and chapter 4 will be concerned with demonstrating the potential of the imaginary to function as mediation within the real.

## II. Subjectivity Imaginarised

Gustave's turn towards the imaginary, although also a positive choice of becoming *l'enfant imaginaire*, is in the first instance to be seen as a failure of the various categories of the real, examined above. This failure of the real seems to be the conceptual condition for Sartre's theorisation of the relationship between the subject and the imaginary, a relationship that in *L'Idiot* is baptised 'imaginarisation'.<sup>22</sup> The adoption of the term 'imaginarisation', although one of the most striking conceptual innovations made in *L'Idiot*, has so far received relatively little critical attention. Sartre is not the first to make use of the term, but it certainly acquires an original function within his theory of the imaginary.<sup>23</sup> Contrary to derealising or imagining consciousness, which are both limited in scope, imaginisation refers to a process permanently affecting the subject as a whole and, as Jean Bourgault points out, therefore represents a significant conceptual radicalisation.<sup>24</sup> In the following we shall trace the consequences of this development from imagining consciousness to imaginisation before considering the pivotal point around which Gustave's imaginisation evolves, namely the theme of role-playing and the conceptual innovation of the actor as 'centre permanent, réel et reconnu d'irréalisation'.

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<sup>22</sup> As the term is a neologism in French (and its meaning will become clear in the following), we shall follow Carol Cosman's translation by referring to it in English as 'imaginarisation' (or 'imaginarization' in her spelling).

<sup>23</sup> Lacan indeed uses the term, as do a range of other psychoanalysts.

<sup>24</sup> Jean Bourgault, 'Imaginarisation', in *Le Dictionnaire Sartre* ed. by François Noudelmann and Gilles Philippe (Paris: Honoré Champion, 2004), p. 243.

## II. 1. The 'imaginarisation' of the subject: Gustave as *analogon*

### II. 1. 1. Imaginarisation as reaction to a specific situation

Our conclusion that the turn towards the imaginary is not a pure choice but predicated upon a failure of the relationship between the subject and the real is corroborated if we consider the situations in which we see Gustave turning to the imaginary: his situation in the family is the immediate context of the *hébétudes* and even as a young man his continuing dependence on the family, Sartre says, is masked by 'dé-situation imaginaire' (*IF*, II, p. 1674). Gustave's *hébétudes* occur again when he is confronted by the school system and similarly, during his studies, he works 'en se réfugiant cent fois dans l'hébétude ou dans l'imaginaire' (*IF*, II, p. 1707). Sartre claims more broadly that it is a 'fait général' that the world becomes less real whenever we are incapable of responding to it with an act (*IF*, II, p. 666). This emphasis on the situation in which derealisation occurs does not necessarily contradict the assumptions made in *L'Imaginaire*. There already, Sartre stresses the 'être-dans-le-monde' of imagining consciousness, which is always constituted 'sur le fond du monde qu'elle nie'.<sup>25</sup> And even though the image itself, as Sartre insists repeatedly in 1940, does not teach us anything, his claim that imagining consciousness transcends the situation towards something in relation to which it is a lack or a void,<sup>26</sup> suggests that it might be precisely a gap in the real to which imagining consciousness reacts.

Despite this consistency with *L'Imaginaire*, a considerable shift in emphasis is observable. The concluding part of *L'Imaginaire* puts significant stress on the idea that consciousness is only able to relate to the world in a derealising manner because it is free: 'pour qu'une conscience puisse imaginer il faut qu'elle échappe au monde par sa nature même [...] il faut qu'elle soit libre'.<sup>27</sup> At one point Sartre even goes so far as to claim that it is *only* through

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<sup>25</sup> Sartre, *L'Imaginaire*, pp. 356-57.

<sup>26</sup> Sartre, *L'Imaginaire*, p. 359.

<sup>27</sup> Sartre, *L'Imaginaire*, p. 353.

imagination that negation is possible,<sup>28</sup> leading Thomas Flynn to conclude that ‘it is imagining consciousness that reveals the “essence” of Sartrean man, namely, that he is *transcendentally free*’.<sup>29</sup> The freedom of imagining consciousness thus seems to prefigure the importance of the freedom of nihilating consciousness in general and therefore represents an important moment in Sartrean philosophy. François Noudelmann also stresses this prefigurative function of imagining consciousness in *L’Imaginaire*.<sup>30</sup> Sartre himself declares in a conversation with Simone de Beauvoir that his theory of the imaginary led to the discovery of consciousness as *néant*.<sup>31</sup> It would seem hasty, however, to conclude that imagining consciousness and consciousness as such can be equated.

Simply establishing an analogy between the two relationships real/imaginary and being/nothingness, as Noudelmann does, seems oversimplified and would prevent us from recognising the unique characteristics of the imaginary. Christina Howells confronts this problem by suggesting that in *L’Imaginaire* the image ‘is a simple *irréel* or *néant*’ whereas in *L’Idiot* Sartre oscillates between this definition and a more metaphysical one.<sup>32</sup> It could however also be argued that the development of Sartre’s theory in *L’Idiot* reflects back on *L’Imaginaire* and allows us to identify certain tensions already latent in the 1940 text. In *L’Imaginaire* for example there is a particular contradiction between on the one hand the statement made towards the end of the text to the effect that only imagining consciousness possesses a negating capacity, and on the other hand the frequent references to ways in which imagining consciousness can be in a state of captivity.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Sartre, *L’Imaginaire*, p. 358.

<sup>29</sup> Thomas Flynn, ‘The Role of the Image in Sartre’s Aesthetic’, *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 33.4 (1975), 431–42 (p. 440).

<sup>30</sup> He points out that Sartre, in positing the image as negation of the world as a whole by consciousness, probably had Heidegger’s conception of the negation of the existent in mind and was thus himself moving towards defining the freedom of consciousness. François Noudelmann, *Sartre, l’incarnation imaginaire* (Paris: L’Harmattan, 1996), p. 26.

<sup>31</sup> Beauvoir, *La Cérémonie des adieux*, p. 247.

<sup>32</sup> Christina Howells, *Sartre’s Theory of Literature*, pp. 144–5.

<sup>33</sup> It seems to be no coincidence that the passages in which Sartre insists on the freedom of imagining consciousness are to be found towards the end of the text; they thereby appear to directly precede the

The captivated state of imagining consciousness will remain important for our discussion of *L'Idiot*; for now it will suffice to point out that while *L'Imaginaire* stresses the freedom of imagination and the capacity to transcend the world, albeit in reaction to a given situation, imaginisation in *L'Idiot* appears less as a transcending moment and more as a behaviour that offers the only solution in an 'unliveable' situation. This 'unliveable situation', as established above, can be described in terms of the failure of the relationship with the real. In this sense, imaginisation in *L'Idiot* appears closer to the processes described in Sartre's *Esquisse d'une théorie des émotions* from 1938 than to imagining consciousness as it appears in *L'Imaginaire*. In the *Esquisse*, Sartre establishes that emotions are a particular way in which consciousness relates to the world, precisely when faced with a situation in which no other options seem available:

Toutes les voies sont barrées, il faut pourtant agir. Alors, nous essayons de changer le monde, c'est-à-dire de le vivre comme si les rapports des choses à leurs potentialités n'étaient pas réglés par des processus déterministes mais par la magie [...] la conscience [...] se transforme pour transformer l'objet.<sup>34</sup>

In *L'Idiot*, Gustave's patricidal desire is described as a reaction whose structure is similar to that of the emotion, whilst being an imaginary attitude: '[...] la mort du père, bien qu'optatif imaginaire, naît d'une vraie colère. On le sait, toute rage dé-structure une situation invivable: c'est une simplification du problème par la suppression de certaines données' (*IF*, II, p. 1682). Over the course of the present chapter and the following one we shall encounter further evidence for the proximity between *L'Idiot* and *Esquisse*, such as the bodily nature of the emotion and imaginisation as well as their links to the possibility of comprehension. For now we shall merely draw two conclusions from our observation of the development of the theory of the imaginary towards greater emphasis on the dialectic between imagining consciousness and its situation: firstly, the two categories of the real and the imaginary seem

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developments which will take place in the *Carnets de la drôle de guerre*, and which will be more fully formulated in *L'Être et le néant*.

<sup>34</sup> Sartre, *Esquisse*, p. 79.

more closely interwoven and indeed dependent on one another. Secondly, we can note that the presence of the situation in *L'Imaginaire* already attenuates to some extent Merleau-Ponty's accusation to the effect that the image is entirely arbitrary in Sartre's conception. The increased emphasis on the situation in which the image emerges accommodates Merleau-Ponty's demand for a stronger integration of the real and the imaginary.

### II. 1. 2. The imaginisation of subjectivity

If we follow the path of the *enfant imaginaire* traced by Sartre, it becomes clear that the invention of the concept of imaginisation is far from simply being a rhetorical device but constitutes a necessity emerging from Sartre's argument. While the derealising effect of imagining consciousness in *L'Imaginaire* refers very strictly to a sudden attitude that consciousness adopts and whose result is the production of an image, the derealisation of the subject in *L'Idiot* is a more far-reaching process; firstly because its occurrence affects the person as a whole and secondly because a gradual and lasting transformation of subjectivity takes place. As we have seen, the tendency towards the imaginary is a direct result of Gustave's constitution, depriving him of any access to the categories of the real. But moreover, throughout the text we can observe that his relationship with the imaginary intensifies: according to Sartre the choice of the imaginary is the only one available for the passive agent, but a choice nevertheless ('la seule solution valable pour le quiétiste qui s'est fait, *contre le réel*, l'incarnation de ce vitriol, le Néant', *IF*, I, p 447).

Barred from the categories of *praxis*, i.e. of the real, Gustave's turn to the imaginary should in the first instance be seen as a reaction against his conditioning. This is however not an instantaneous transformation; instead the process which *L'Idiot* describes as *personalisation* represents a gradual movement towards an imaginary status of the subject. Flaubert's desire for glory, his experimentation with theatre, the tendency to render himself the object of laughter and his role-playing with his younger sister Caroline all contribute to an increasing

sense of derealisation: ‘ces révolutions perpétuelles accroissent la déréalisation’ (*IF*, I, p. 854). At various points, we see external influences contribute to Gustave’s increased derealisation, such as for example the rejection by the father which for Sartre takes the form of a ‘fall from a golden age’ and which re-inforces the child’s missing sense of self.

This development, which will only be complete with Flaubert’s final withdrawal from reality in 1844, contains a decisive shift resulting from the abandonment of acting in favour of writing: in the early 1830s, says Sartre, the purpose of the imaginary changes for Gustave: while the aim of role-playing and theatre was the *social* production of images for others and was mediated by his own body, the failure of that enterprise then leads him to an imaginary activity that is no longer visible or audible.<sup>35</sup>

L’enfant imaginaire a cherché, jusqu’ici, à lester ses imaginations d’objectivité en les socialisant; après son échec retentissant, il inverse son mouvement, il se donne des affections imaginaires ou bien il assouvit ses désirs par des images, *pour assumer son exil* [...] pour n’être plus du tout réel [...] la non-réalité le terrorisait; il s’enchantait à présent à s’irréaliser [...] Mais parce que ses jeux intimes sont par principe insonorisés il a tranché le lien qui les unissait à sa geste, il en résulte [...] une modification de leur structure [...] (*IF*, I, p. 912)

Imagination at this point becomes a movement increasingly affecting its agent in a movement from the outside towards the inside:

L’intention imageante est inversée: elle était centrifuge et présentait *aux autres* un décor avec Gustave dedans. Elle devient centripète. Non qu’elle ne vise pas un *extérieur* absent ou inexistant. Mais elle le vise *pour en entourer* l’enfant imaginaire, pour établir un rempart autour de lui, pour entourer cet Ego fictif de présences fictives qui lui sont homogènes (*IF*, I, p. 912).

This passage demonstrates a number of central features of the elements that are novel to imagining consciousness in *L’Idiot*: albeit still intentional, as Sartre insists in *L’Imaginaire* (it is still aimed at an external and either absent or non-existing entity), imagination begins to be examined in its effect on the imagining subject. The accelerating factor in Gustave’s movement towards the imaginary is clearly his isolation, compared by Sartre to autism, which

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<sup>35</sup> Gustave of course only abandons acting in favour of writing as far as his immediate artistic activity is concerned. In parallel, play-acting in its various forms remains a feature of his subjectivity.

causes imagination to have a ‘centripetal’ effect that acts back on him. It is in this context that Sartre introduces the concept of ‘imagarisation’ in order to designate precisely the effect that imagination has on the imagining subject. *L’Imaginaire* already established that ‘pour agir sur ces objets irréels, il faut que moi-même je me dédouble, que je m’irréalise’.<sup>36</sup> In *L’Idiot* however Sartre recognises that this aspect of the imaginary remained underexplored in his earlier work (‘Imaginer, c’est à la fois produire un objet imaginaire et s’imagariser; je n’ai pas assez insisté là-dessus dans *L’Imaginaire*’, *IF*, I, p. 913, note 1) and moves it to the centre of attention.

The production of images, in 1940 a temporary attitude that consciousness adopts, thereby becomes the transformation of subjectivity as such: if, as in the Rome lecture of 1961, subjectivity is defined as a non-reflective form of internalising and exteriorising the world, imagarisation appears as a modification of subjectivity as it steers the entire process of subjectivity towards the production of images. The *Weltanschauung* of the artist thus considers reality as a whole ‘from the point of view of the unreal’ (*IF*, II, p. 1575), and Gustave will increasingly consider both external reality and his own lived experience (or *vécu*) as an *analogon* of the imaginary. The *vécu*, says Sartre for instance, is only an *analogon* for Flaubert’s imaginary sexuality (*IF*, I, p. 695-6), and his ‘choix fondamental de l’imaginaire’ is precisely described as being dependent on ‘permanently treating reality as an *analogon* of an unreal universe’ (*IF*, II, p. 1189). This reference to an ‘unreal universe’, in conjunction with the passage quoted at length above, demonstrates further that, contrary to what was established in *L’Imaginaire*, the imaginary in *L’Idiot* explores the notion of an imaginary world or realm. Because the entire world is treated as an *analogon*, an imaginary universe is produced; this universe however, as seen above (‘pour en entourer l’enfant imaginaire’), then forms a permanent imaginary layer around the person. Whereas *L’Imaginaire* only referred to ‘imaginary worlds’ in the sense of a

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<sup>36</sup> Sartre, *L’Imaginaire*, p. 240.

confined imaginary construct such as a theatre play, *L'Idiot*, seems more open to envisaging the imaginary as (quasi-)realm of human reality.

### II. 1. 3. The imaginary 'world' and the dream

The *Critique* defined the realm of the *practico-inert* as the area of human reality that is constituted by accumulated past human action continuing to act on agents in the present. Viewed in this light, it seems possible to interpret the depiction of the imaginary in *L'Idiot* as part of the same process, as the products of imagining consciousness incorporated into the *practico-inert*. The next chapter will demonstrate in greater detail the extent to which *L'Idiot* goes beyond *L'Imaginaire* by exploring the objectification of imagining consciousness rather than simply the production of images itself. But even if we confine our analysis to the young Gustave's immediate relationship with the imaginary, we can already note that Sartre frequently deploys formulations implying a definition of the imaginary as a sector, or realm, of human experience. For instance, in the context of the description of Gustave's reaction to his father, we encounter the formulation that Gustave 's'installe hors du Réel' (*IF*, I, p. 492). While *L'Imaginaire* locates the power of agency on the side of consciousness which creates an image (even though thereby in some cases creating its own captivity) *L'Idiot* approaches the question from the perspective of the force exerted by the imaginary itself: Sartre may applaud Flaubert for describing 'une conscience aiguë qui décide souverainement de ce qui est réel et de ce qui ne l'est pas' but then immediately describes Gustave's exposure to the effects of his own creation: 'l'enfant est *envahi* par l'imaginaire [...]' (*IF*, I, 915-6). The focus thus seems to shift from the subject as producer of the image to the subject being trapped by the image.

If in some sense *L'Idiot* allows for an interpretation of the imaginary as world, it is of course a world which still obeys the basic principles set out in *L'Imaginaire*. There, Sartre uses the term 'imaginary world' in a more confined sense, e.g. when discussing the 'world' of a narrative, that of a dream or the 'monde pauvre' of the schizophrenic. Sartre insists that an

‘imaginary world’ is strictly speaking impossible because a ‘world’ is constituted by objects that are both individuated and linked to a whole: ‘un monde est un tout lié, dans lequel chaque objet a sa place déterminée et entretient des rapports avec les autres objets [...] il faut que [les objets] soient rigoureusement individués; il faut qu’ils soient en équilibre avec un système’.<sup>37</sup> The imaginary rather presents itself as ‘anti-monde’, as it describes the negation of the ‘being-in-the-world’ of consciousness.<sup>38</sup> The imaginary is a ‘world in which nothing happens’.<sup>39</sup> Although Sartre does not use those terms, it seems appropriate to describe the imaginary pseudo-world he depicts as two-dimensional and flat. While in *L’Idiot* the two-dimensionality of the image is not abandoned, the practico-inert accumulation of images produced in the past can account for the apparent consistency of an imaginary world; just as the ‘mot d’amour’, once pronounced, acquires a certain force and becomes ‘un quasi-objet, un produit de culture qu’il faut intérioriser’ (*IF*, I, p. 785) the world of the imaginary is now not simply false and ‘anti-monde’, but ‘quasi-monde’ at the same time.

One of the most detailed descriptions of ‘imaginary (quasi-)worlds’ in *L’Imaginaire* is that of the dream. The cognitive state of the sleeping person is analysed as a succession of images occurring in an intensified state of imagining consciousness. The dream, it seems, is ‘la réalisation parfaite d’un imaginaire clos’<sup>40</sup> in two ways: firstly because the dreaming subject is incapable of leaving his or her state of imagination,<sup>41</sup> and secondly because it is impossible to adopt a reflexive attitude towards the act of dreaming while it is ongoing (‘nous ne pouvons [...] décrire [le rêve] qu’en usant de la mémoire éveillée’<sup>42</sup>). The vocabulary Sartre uses to describe the dream heavily revolves around the semantic field of ‘closedness’ or

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<sup>37</sup> Sartre, *L’Imaginaire*, p. 254.

<sup>38</sup> Sartre, *L’Imaginaire*, p. 261.

<sup>39</sup> Sartre, *L’Imaginaire*, p. 29.

<sup>40</sup> Sartre, *L’Imaginaire*, p. 319.

<sup>41</sup> Sartre, *L’Imaginaire*, p. 317.

<sup>42</sup> Sartre, *L’Imaginaire*, p. 309.

imprisonment: ‘l’attitude imageante [...] s’est enfermée elle-même’;<sup>43</sup> ‘on ne peut absolument plus sortir [du rêve]’,<sup>44</sup> and – as already quoted – the dream is an ‘imaginaire clos’. While *L’Imaginaire* remains confined to describing the actual state of dream, in *L’Idiot* the motif of the dream appears in both its literal and in a metaphorical sense and, as will be argued here and in the fifth chapter of this thesis, it becomes a central feature of the form of subjectivity portrayed by Sartre.

The dream In *L’Idiot* is firstly referred to in a literal sense: Sartre analyses Flaubert’s account of his own dreams and suggests that Flaubert himself intuitively senses the potential access to the self offered by the dream (*IF*, II, p. 1553, see chapter 4). The dream in the actual sense is again considered in a passage concerned with a period in which the young Flaubert and his friend Ernest Chevalier decide that the former would transcribe the latter’s dreams (*IF*, I, pp. 909-11). In addition to these and other references to ‘actual’ dreams, we repeatedly find Sartre employing the term in a larger, more metaphorical sense, describing Gustave’s preference of the unreal over the real as a valorisation of the dream. The form of thought corresponding to ‘l’inaction’ and ‘l’impuissance’, for example, ‘ne peut être que le rêve’ (*IF*, II, p. 1377). The notion of the dream thus comes to designate a more generalised state of subjectivity as Gustave’s imaginary being is depicted as fundamentally conditioned by the logic of the dream:

Or, pour choisir de valoriser le rêve en tant que tel, il faut être soi-même constitué comme un rêve. Seul, un enfant imaginaire peut projeter d’assurer en sa personne la victoire de l’image sur la réalité [...] Il ne suffit pas [...] d’être malheureux pour choisir l’imaginaire. Il faut, tout au contraire, que l’imaginaire vous ait choisi et soit à l’origine de votre malheur (*IF*, II, p. 665).

This passage, taken from the chapter “L’enfant imaginaire” in which the fundamental assumptions concerning Gustave’s imaginisation are introduced, demonstrates very clearly the centrality of the theme of the dream. Being an imaginary child is synonymous with being

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<sup>43</sup> Sartre, *L’Imaginaire*, p. 317.

<sup>44</sup> Sartre, *L’Imaginaire*, p. 319.

(in one's own eyes) pure appearance and with perceiving oneself and the world as if in a dream. The literal and the metaphorical meanings of the dream are of course not entirely distinct. Rather, it seems that Gustave's 'actual' daydreaming, close to the dream of the sleeper, expressed in his *bébétudes*, is deployed by Sartre as a conceptual bridge between the two: Gustave's moments of mental absence are on the one hand described as daydreams and therefore close to the actual, cognitive state of the dreamer described in *L'Imaginaire*, and on the other hand constitute the moments that take Gustave away from reality, towards a perpetual state of dream: 'le moindre déséquilibre le plongent dans l'hébétude; à ce niveau son imaginarisation et l'irréalisation du monde se font ensemble: l'hébétude est prise comme un *analogon* de l'extase [...]' (*IF*, I, p. 667). This proximity between the actual and the metaphorical dream suggests that it is appropriate to refer to the passages dedicated to the dream in *L'Imaginaire* in order to draw some conclusions concerning Gustave's imaginarised state.<sup>45</sup>

The formulations used in *L'Imaginaire* to define the dream fit very neatly those depicting the imaginary child: Flaubert's vision of life as fictionalised destiny, discussed in chapter 1, appears to be close to the dream in which 'chaque moment de l'histoire se donne comme ayant un avenir imaginaire, mais un avenir que je ne puis prévoir, qui viendra de lui-même [...] hanter la conscience [...] contre lequel la conscience [...] s'écrasera'.<sup>46</sup> Further, *L'Imaginaire* posits that the understanding of any image depends on an 'acte de second degré', in other words on reflexive consciousness. In general, this relationship is not problematic, since '[l']image se donne immédiatement comme telle à la réflexion'; it is not, Sartre insists, 'une révélation métaphysique et ineffable'. This uncompromised access that reflexive consciousness has to the (therefore effable) image is of course not given in Gustave's case

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<sup>45</sup> *L'Imaginaire* itself already provides a glimpse of the metaphorical use of the dream, as Sartre indicates when he delineates his definition of the dream as consciousness losing its "être-dans-le-monde" by saying that this is at least true metaphorically. *L'Imaginaire*, p. 329.

<sup>46</sup> Sartre, *L'Imaginaire*, p. 327.

(discussed further in chapter 4); but already in *L'Imaginaire* there is a case in which reflexive consciousness fails to seize images, namely that of the dream. Reflexive consciousness, necessary for recognising the state of dreaming, cannot be produced within the dream, just as Gustave, caught up in a perpetual state of imaginisation close to the dream, fails to reflect on his own self.

We can thus note a complementary relationship between *L'Imaginaire* and *L'Idiot*. In 1940 the dream already served to demonstrate ‘ce que serait une conscience qui aurait perdu son “être-dans-le-monde” et qui serait privée [...] de la catégorie du réel’.<sup>47</sup> In 1971 the example is delivered and the conditional ‘serait’ becomes an affirmative; Gustave *is* the imaginary child captured in a world of dream and thus the incarnation of a previously abstract hypothesis. But conversely, a reading of the chapter on the dream in *L'Imaginaire* helps elucidate Sartre’s deployment of the notion of the dream in *L'Idiot* by revealing the extent to which the dream is an inescapable, imaginary world. In addition, the metaphorical extension of the field of the dream to include forms of subjectivity more generally (and not simply the dream of the sleeping person) seems to respond to Merleau-Ponty’s criticism of Sartre’s description of the dream in *L'Imaginaire*. Disagreeing with the sharp distinction Sartre makes between the dream and the non-dream, Merleau-Ponty instead suggests that dream and being awake are two states that ‘encroach upon one another’ and that our ‘waking relations’ too, have an ‘oneiric character’.<sup>48</sup>

So far, our discussion has omitted a central element of Sartre’s argument concerning the dream in *L'Imaginaire*, namely that relating to the ‘objet-moi’, i.e. the self as it appears in the dream. Bearing in mind *L'Imaginaire*’s ‘objet-moi’ as frame of reference we shall therefore now

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<sup>47</sup> Sartre, *L'Imaginaire*, p. 339.

<sup>48</sup> Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Institution and Passivity. Course Notes from the Collège de France 1954-55* [Paris: Belin 2007], (Evanston Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 2010), p. 207. Annabelle Dufourcq comments that Merleau-Ponty uses Freud against Sartre, attacking the latter for ignoring the significance of the content of dreams. In the case of Flaubert, Sartre certainly does consider the content of dreams, as we shall see in chapter 4. Annabelle Dufourcq, *Merleau-Ponty: une ontologie de l'imaginaire* (Dordrecht, Heidelberg, London, New York: Springer, 2012), p. 202.

examine what can be called the product of imaginisation in *L'Idiot*, and its particular appearance as *role*.

## II. 2. The result of imaginisation: the imaginary ego or subjectivity as role-playing

### II. 2. 1. Gustave as 'centre réel et permanent d'irréalisation'

The importance of the theme of role-playing for the portrayal of Flaubert's imaginised subjectivity has already been touched upon when Flaubert's tendency to be caught up in belief was explained with reference to Sartre's characterisation of theatre as a realm of belief. Flaubert's imaginisation fundamentally revolves around the motives of acting and role-playing, once more themes that are established in earlier texts and widened in scope in *L'Idiot* through the example of Flaubert. In Sartre's early theory of the imaginary of 1940 the actor is defined as a case of imagination which is particular and yet subordinate to the rules of the production of images: just as in the case of a painting the material object is the support, termed 'analogon', for the image which is created by imagination, the actor him- or herself becomes an analogon for the role he or she incorporates. Sartre says: 'l'acteur qui joue Hamlet se sert de lui-même, de son corps tout entier comme analogon de ce personnage imaginaire'. And, discussing the question whether the actor believes in the role, he continues: 'si l'on entend par "croyance": thèse réalisante, il est évident que l'acteur ne pose point qu'il *est* Hamlet. Mais [...] il [...] se mobilise tout entier pour le produire. Il utilise tous ses sentiments, toutes ses forces, tous ces gestes comme *analogon*'.<sup>49</sup> We shall return to this passage, but we can note already that in *L'Imaginaire* the actor's entire person serves as analogon and is therefore derealised in the role; this however is described with verbs denoting the actor's activity and control (se servir, se mobiliser, utiliser).

In *L'Idiot* Sartre cites the Venus de Milo as an example of a work of art which is now defined as a 'centre réel et permanent d'irréalisation' (*IF*, I, p. 787). The novelty of the concept

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<sup>49</sup> Sartre, *L'Imaginaire*, p. 368.

is emphasised heavily by Sartre; we must therefore assume that it is central to the argument. By establishing this definition, Sartre suggests a more permanent link between the analogon and the image than he did in *L'Imaginaire*: the work of art now permanently combines the two elements of being a real objet (the analogon) on the one hand and of giving rise to an image on the other, not only during the moment when imagining consciousness emerges. This inflection of Sartre's theory of the imaginary has to be seen as a result of the growing emphasis that he places on the social and the historical; the Venus of Milo is no longer simply a block of marble because, says Sartre, it has become part of the 'social imaginary' and therefore been instituted as 'incitation permanente à se déréaliser en irréalisant ce marbre en Vénus'. The being of the Venus is the 'pratico-inerte de l'imaginaire' and as such has absorbed past (derealising) human action performed on it (*IF*, I, p. 787).

Although Sartre admits that the situation is more complicated in the case of the actor who is not simply inert matter, he insists that the actor 'resembles the statue in that he is a permanent, real and recognised centre of derealisation' (*IF*, I, p. 788). Sartre in this context takes up the vocabulary of activity that characterises the actor in *L'Imaginaire*: 'il se mobilise et s'engage tout entier pour que sa personne réelle devienne l'*analogon* d'un imaginaire' (*IF*, I, 788). These general pronouncements on the actor are made in the context of an explanation of Gustave's own wish to become an actor. As we shall see in the following, the comparison between Gustave and the actor is articulated in two ways: it is developed in its theoretical implications in a section of *L'Idiot* which deals with Gustave's actual desire to be an actor as a result of the plays he performs as a child. But further, even as this phase ends through the silent disapproval that the father shows for his son's possible acting-career, the actor remains a useful analogy for the conceptualisation of Gustave's imaginisation. The themes of role-playing, gesture and the imaginary self remain central elements throughout the text so that the

short-lived period in which Gustave aspires to be an actual actor is only one facet of his becoming-an-actor in a larger sense.

When Sartre describes the imaginary child's acting-ambition, the active vocabulary used to designate the actor's self-derealisation (*se mobilise, s'engage*) vanishes; in Gustave's case the process is characterised by passivity: 'Gustave [...] s'irréalise [...] à l'aveuglette, sous l'influence de pulsions qu'il ignore [...] en outre l'enfant se perd: telle qu'il la pratique, l'imagination fuse dans le non-être, c'est une décompression d'être [...]' (*IF*, I, p. 788). Using the theory of the actor as a particular kind of image we can thus re-articulate the process of imaginisation by noting that Gustave's entire *vécu* becomes an analogon for his imaginary existence: 'l'enfant fait de son hébétude un *analogon* d'un ravissement [...]' (*IF*, II, p. 1191), or elsewhere: '[...] l'infinie lacune intérieure [...] dans sa *réalité* [...] servira d'analogon pour les passions imaginaires de l'"incarnation"' (*IF*, I, p. 919). Gustave thus finds himself caught up in the imaginary to the extent that his subjectivity is turned into a permanent analogon of the gestures and roles he performs. Two important theoretical conclusions impose themselves: firstly, we can once more observe an increasing integration and interdependence between analogon and image. Secondly, the body, insofar as it is the permanent material support for the incarnation of the imaginary, receives a degree of attention unprecedented in Sartre's theory and becomes a central convergence point of analogon and image. Both points suggest again an increasing proximity with Merleau-Ponty who, in 1949 already insisted (for instance) on the importance of the body of the actor,<sup>50</sup> and who secondly criticised what he saw as a dualism between image and analogon in Sartre.<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> In his 1949-50 Sorbonne lecture 'Psychologie et pédagogie de l'enfant', cited in: Dufourcq, *Merleau-Ponty*, p. 205.

<sup>51</sup> For example: Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Notes des cours 1959-1960* (Paris: Gallimard, 1996), p. 124.

## II. 2. 2. Subjectivity as gesture

If, as demonstrated in the first part of this chapter, the exclusion of the subject from the real is predicated upon the failure of praxis, it follows that the imaginary child will be largely reduced to producing gestures instead of acts. The differentiation between the act, which is part of an active project and intended to modify the real, and the gesture, which is associated with representation, play-acting and the imaginary, appears systematically in *Saint Genet, Comédien et Martyr* where it serves to demonstrate the ways in which the destitute little Jean Genet internalises the social norms of his surroundings by pretending to be a proprietor. Christina Howells remarks that in *Saint Genet*, the ‘geste’, although not intended to engage with the real, can nevertheless have an effect on it. From the effect of the child’s theft to the transformation of the aesthete into an artist, this is clearly visible in the text on Genet.<sup>52</sup> Without fundamentally contradicting this interpretation, one might however argue that the effect on the real is not so much provoked by the ‘geste’ itself, but much rather by the transformation of the ‘geste’ into an ‘acte’. Such a definition would retain the fundamental difference between act and gesture, whilst insisting on the possibility of a dialectical transformation of the *geste* into the *acte*. This distinction may seem to be mere hair-splitting, but its relevance should become clear as we turn to the ‘geste’ in *L’Idiot*.

As a result of Gustave’s increasing commitment to the imaginary, the substitution of gestures for acts is an unsurprisingly recurrent theme throughout *L’Idiot*. Just as in the *Genet*, a gesture in *L’Idiot* can *potentially* be transformed into an act. In a passage dedicated to Gustave’s superficial attempts at studying, Sartre establishes a dialectical and socially rooted relationship between act and gesture. Flaubert as student still envisages performing ‘praxis’ in the real sense; the act of studying law however becomes impossible as soon as it ‘reveals itself in its truth’, namely its class content, and therefore gives way to mere gesture. Gustave only turns the pages of his law books and pretends to read but does not actually perform the task at

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<sup>52</sup> Howells, *Sartre’s Theory of Literature*, p. 80.

hand, hoping that real activity will automatically follow: ‘l’activité s’irréalise en gestes, par l’effort qu’ils lui coûtent autant que par le but qu’ils se proposent [the aim of conjuring up one’s practical ego and taking it by surprise], sont comme l’aurore d’un acte’ (*IF*, II, p. 1711). The conceptual link in this case for the (potential) transformation of the gesture into the act lies in the definition of gesture as passive activity: ‘l’action imaginaire se fonde sur une activité réelle mais imaginaire’ (*IF*, II, p. 1711). Not only is the emergence of gesture seen as a behaviour grounded in a specific situation (the impossibility of the act due to its bourgeois class-content), but moreover, the conceptual mediation of ‘passive activity’ has the effect of explicating the possible transformation of gesture into act by reducing the distance between the two since both are forms of human activity (passive or active). In fact, in an interview from 1960 Sartre already puts forward the idea that Man is always both ‘*un agent et un acteur*’, suggesting that any behaviour is characterised by components of play-acting and of real activity.<sup>53</sup>

In *L’Idiot* Sartre delivers a more precise picture of the transformation of the gesture into an act by demonstrating how a child’s gesture of love towards the parents is – in the ideal case – transformed into reciprocal love. The passage is worth quoting at length, since Sartre here solves a problem that arises from several of his texts:

L’amour filial peut être sincère, c’est-à-dire *ressenti*. La piété filiale, par contre, est une “montre”: l’enfant [...] dit ce que les parents attendent de lui, refait les gestes qui leur ont plu, il est *en représentation*. En ce sens tous les enfants bourgeois sont plus ou moins comédiens. Mais quand les parents répondent à cette “montre” par une autre “montre” et couvrent de caresses le petit cabotin, le rôle tend à disparaître: tout se passe dans la vérité intersubjective du vécu familial [...] Bien accueilli, les mimiques enfantines s’ignorent: elles se dépassent vers leur fin qui est la réponse de l’être aimé: il faut que celui-ci prenne le petit garçon sur ses genoux [...] et l’institue *filz aimé de ses parents* [...] (*IF*, I, p. 674)

The theme of the comedy of love performed by the child appears already in the short story “L’Enfance d’un chef”. There, the little Lucien Fleurier is described as losing his sense of identity as well as any certainty as to the identity of his parents. As Lucien’s sense of reality

<sup>53</sup> Jean-Paul Sartre, ‘Les Écrivains en personne’ [1960], in *Situations*, IX, pp. 9-39 (p. 12).

disintegrates, he becomes convinced that his mother only ‘jouait la comédie [...] Mais il ne savait pas trop quelle était cette comédie [...]’.<sup>54</sup> Having concluded that all human behaviour is only a role, Lucien then compensates for this lack of reality by reinforcing the behaviour of pure gesture: ‘[...] Lucien comprit qu’il n’aimait pas sa maman. Il ne se sentait pas coupable, mais il redoubla de gentillesse parce qu’il pensait qu’on devait faire semblant toute sa vie d’aimer ses parents [...]’.<sup>55</sup> The quest for being in which Lucien subsequently engages and which eventually leads him to find comfort in the supposedly fixed identity of being an anti-Semite and factory-owner, takes the shape of an anti-*Bildungsroman* with a result that appears to be the exact opposite of any notion of authenticity Sartre might have held in the late 1930s.

If this short story is considered from the point of view of *L’Idiot*, it is striking that the notion of the act is absent from it. Indeed, it could be argued that Sartre’s increasing emphasis on society and history, which has the effect of acknowledging *both* the conditioning of the individual by the situation *and* conversely the real effects human activity has on the world, can be articulated in terms of the relationship between the gesture and the act. In the fiction of the late 1930s the absence of the act is testament to the emphasis on the contingent and free nature of human existence. *Huis clos* (1944), on the contrary, affirms the primacy of acts over gestures by having Inès declare: ‘seuls les actes décident de ce qu’on a voulu’.<sup>56</sup> *L’Être et le néant* then theorises the act as well as the role (such as that of the famous ‘garçon de café’), but it does not explain the relationship between the two. While the texts of the 1940s thus seem to posit both the act and the gesture separately, it is only in the early 1950s, with the text on Genet, that the relationship between them begins to be developed. In this phase, the failed attempt to conjure up love through the gesture is taken up again by Sartre in *Le Diable et le bon dieu* [1951]: ‘j’ai fait les gestes de l’amour, mais l’amour n’est pas venu’.<sup>57</sup>

<sup>54</sup> Jean-Paul Sartre, ‘L’Enfance d’un chef’, in *Le Mur*, Folio (Paris: Gallimard, 2009 [1939]), p. 155.

<sup>55</sup> Sartre, ‘L’Enfance’, pp. 158-59.

<sup>56</sup> Jean-Paul Sartre, *Huis clos* (Paris: Gallimard, 1947 [1944]), p. 90.

<sup>57</sup> Jean-Paul Sartre, *Le Diable et le bon dieu* (Paris: Gallimard, 1951), p. 213 (3-IV).

The solution which Sartre finds in *L'Idiot*, namely the theory quoted above, according to which a real sentiment emerges out of the reciprocal engagement in the gesture, represents a considerable development within his body of thought and simultaneously a far more optimistic outlook than the one defended in *L'Imaginaire*, which emphasises the impoverishment of the sentiment resulting from its imaginary re-creation.<sup>58</sup> While in *L'Imaginaire* the discussion of the failed attempt to conjure up a feeling leads Sartre to establish the distinction between real and imaginary feelings,<sup>59</sup> *L'Idiot* opens up the possibility of a movement in the opposite direction, i.e. from imaginary to real feeling. It seems moreover that reciprocity (or communication) constitutes a similarly pivotal point in the process of instituting the real in other analogous transformations: as discussed in the first part of this chapter, the structure of belief is not opposed to the structure of truth but its first stage. Here too, it is intersubjective communication that provides the possibility for the leap that is necessary for the production of the real in the shape of the act.

In *L'Imaginaire* Sartre praises Proust's depiction of sentiments for having shown 'cet abîme qui sépare l'imaginaire du réel, il a bien fait voir qu'on ne peut trouver de passage de l'un à l'autre [...]'.<sup>60</sup> This 'passage', which has now become possible, seems to be evoked also by Merleau-Ponty in his lecture on the institution (in the verbal sense of being instituted) of love. In this lecture from 1954-55 Merleau-Ponty first refutes what seems to be (a caricature of) Sartre's conception of love in *L'Être et le néant*, then identifies a transformation of imaginary into real feeling in Proust's *Albertine disparue* ('Even as imaginary as the beginning of a love is, "in exchange for what our imagination leads us to expect [...], life gives ourselves something which we were very far from imagining"<sup>61</sup>), and finally establishes his own definition of emotions as something that is not simply a project or a vow but that is *instituted*

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<sup>58</sup> Sartre, *L'Imaginaire*, pp. 272-80.

<sup>59</sup> Sartre, *L'Imaginaire*, p. 280.

<sup>60</sup> Sartre, *L'Imaginaire*, p. 280.

<sup>61</sup> Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Institution and Passivity*, p. 35.

through the ‘way questions and answers are linked together – by means of an attraction something more slips in’.<sup>62</sup>

If we consider the transformative capacity of reciprocity we can shed some more light on our suggestion made above that, despite differences, a certain resonance with Merleau-Ponty’s conception of instituted being can be identified in *L’Idiot*. It could be argued that the self (in the ideal, i.e. not in Gustave’s case, at least), is ‘instituted’ to some extent by intersubjective reciprocity: in *L’Idiot* the passage on the possibility of love as a result of the reciprocal gesture immediately precedes Sartre’s description of Gustave’s failed attempt to capture his own self in the mirror, a failure for which, as we have seen, his lack of ‘instituted being’ is responsible. It can thus be inferred negatively that a certain kind of ‘instituted being’ could have occurred instead of the futile move towards the ‘reflet’ in the mirror. There seems to be a possibility for the self to be created by something other than simply the retrospective gaze of reflexive consciousness or the alienating gaze of the other and it therefore acquires a degree of reality previously unthinkable. The ‘instituted self’, if thought as a product of sincere reciprocity, would indeed be open to Merleau-Ponty’s definition of institution (‘la conséquence et la garantie de notre appartenance à un même monde’).<sup>63</sup> At the same time, these reflections do not aim to ascribe to Sartre any notion of fixed self-identity of the subject; merely to reveal the wealth of – unfinished – strands of thought opened up in *L’Idiot*. In addition, we should not forget that Sartre goes no further than simply asserting the transformation of the gesture into the act through love. What happens to what was instituted by this process would be an entirely different matter to discuss; we can assume that, just as the group in the *Critique*, the product of reciprocal human action will be affected by the realm of the practico-inert and is at least in danger of turning into an alienation of the subject. ‘Instituted being’ as a result of

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<sup>62</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *Institution and Passivity*, p. 39.

<sup>63</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *Résumé des cours*, p. 60.

reciprocity would thus be immediately de-totalised and is only possible as a specific moment in a more complex process involving constant movement between reciprocity and alienation.

The gesture in Sartre's theory is thus a highly complex term that develops considerably throughout his work. As the contrast between Gustave and the counter-example of the gesture leading to the act shows, even one text explores very different functions that the gesture can fulfil in the movements of subjectivity. Before we conclude our chapter by highlighting the specific trajectory resulting from the gesture in Gustave's case, one more comment with regard to the theoretical implications of the gesture should be made. When reading "L'Enfance d'un chef" one might be tempted to conclude that the 'geste' is simply a vehicle for the internalisation of social patterns of behaviour; the ending of the short story which sees Lucien joining the ranks of his class and fulfilling the destiny his parents had laid out for him, certainly suggests a presence of the social in Sartre's work long before it is theorised. Vincent de Coorebyter, in an article which highlights the materialist grounding of *Saint Genet*, establishes a proximity between Sartre's and Bourdieu's 'geste':

Sartre montre comment la situation de Genet est *incorporée* par le petit Jean, au sens exact où Bourdieu exigeait que toute détermination sociale soit décrite jusque dans son intériorisation sous forme de gestes et d'*habitus*, de dispositions corporelles et de manières de faire.<sup>64</sup>

The second chapter of this thesis, which demonstrated the proximity between Bourdieu's theory of praxis and the underlying notion of collective subjectivity we identified in *L'Idiot*, would seem to support this statement. Having examined the Sartrean gesture closely, we must however introduce some caution and disagree with the words 'au sens exact' in Coorebyter's formulation. Rather than mere internalisation of socially determined forms of behaviour, the gesture in *L'Idiot* is situated at a pivotal point between active and passive activity, between real and imaginary. Contrary to Bourdieu, Sartre insists heavily on the creative moment in what could be seen as the 'gesture of repetition'. When Gustave simply copies out Molière's plays,

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<sup>64</sup> Vincent de Coorebyter, 'Prière pour le bon usage du Saint Genet: Sartre biographe de l'aliénation', *Les Temps modernes*, 632-634 (2005), 106–39 (p. 118).

Sartre insists on the novelty contained even in the moment of repetition: ‘ce qui vient de lui, c’est le *sens* qu’il donne à ses emprunts, c’est la manière dont il ressent l’histoire [...] c’est une lumière interne [...] Ce que lui donne Molière, c’est le moyen le plus simple de reconnaître et de penser son projet ancien et profond de totaliser le monde et la vie en sa propre personne’ (*IF*, I, p. 864). Juliette Simont points towards similar processes of creative copying in *Les Mots* and *Saint Genet*, insisting on the fact that Sartre discovered the novel element of repetition long before Deleuze.<sup>65</sup>

Further, where Bourdieu is interested in the *content* of a specific pattern of behaviour that is being internalised by individuals, Sartre is at least as much if not more strongly concerned with the *form* of this internalisation. In a passage (considered hereafter in detail) describing the play-acting between Gustave and his younger sister for example, Sartre analyses the effect that the imaginatising component of his roles has on Gustave, but finds it entirely unproblematic that he has no information whatsoever as to the content of their play (*IF*, I, p. 737). Octave Mannoni on the contrary, whose reflections on ‘irréalisation’ in the theatre are in many ways very close to Sartre’s, provides a helpful corrective where Sartre perhaps borders on being too formalistic: Mannoni stresses the importance of social convention for the imaginary effect of any role-playing to be produced.<sup>66</sup> It seems more generally that an integration of some of Mannoni’s insights into Sartre’s theory of the theatre would help nuance what is frequently left rather schematic.

### II. 2. 3. The progression of imaginatisation: gesture, role, persona and imaginary ego

For Gustave, the creation of love as a product of the gesture remains as inaccessible as it is to Lucien, and he is confined to the realm of gestures and passive activity. The theme of the ‘geste’ is introduced systematically in a short chapter in the first volume entitled “La geste du

<sup>65</sup> Juliette Simont, ‘Le Choix originel, destin et liberté’, *Les Temps modernes* 674 (July-Oct 2013), 68-92 (p. 92).

<sup>66</sup> Octave Mannoni, ‘L’illusion comique ou le théâtre du point de vue de l’imaginaire’ in *Clefs pour l’imaginaire*, p. 162.

don” which discusses Gustave’s play-acting for his younger sister, and then again at the beginning of the second volume in a longer part entitled “De la geste au rôle: le Garçon” which is concerned with the formation of the collective role of the *Garçon* incarnated by Gustave and his schoolmates. This use of the feminine noun ‘la geste’ instead of the masculine ‘le geste’ has two effects: the association with medieval poetry firstly roots Gustave’s play-acting within the family in the realm of the lyrical and the archaic;<sup>67</sup> secondly, the repetition of the term ‘la geste’ in both headings indicates a continuity between the two passages which suggests a development from the gesture to the role.

In his play-acting with Caroline a spiral of imaginisation takes place, which increasingly reduces Gustave to the ‘geste’. As the two children play, their entire relationship consists of gestures instead of acts: ‘il n’y a point d’acte ici, tout juste des gestes’ (*IF*, I, p. 726). Gustave begins by over-zealously demonstrating his love for his sister, not unlike Lucien. Like a child playing with a doll, Gustave projects himself into the protected object and the protecting subject at the same time; he thereby perceives his sister’s body as analogon for his own imagined subjectivity and is simultaneously forced to live his own subjectivity on the level of the imaginary (*IF*, I, p. 727, p. 732). Finally, when it becomes clear that Caroline does not depend on his ‘don d’amour’, the imaginary itself becomes the ‘gift’ and he begins impersonating small roles for her amusement. As a result, Gustave will ‘se faire manger tout entier par l’apparence’ (*IF*, I, p. 735), and the transformation of the self into an image will have a lasting effect, making it difficult to ‘redevenir vrai’ (*IF*, I, p. 738).

Gustave’s subjectivity is transformed into a ‘centre réel et permanent d’irréalisation’ and he will keep turning himself into an analogon for various roles, such as that of the *Garçon*, the actor, the author, the *Géant*, the *Prince des lettres*, which he incorporates in the Parisian ‘salons’ during the Second Empire. Gustave is perpetually in a state of ‘représentation’, and as a result

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<sup>67</sup> In this sense the ‘geste’ could be seen as a preservation of the feudal subjectivity of the Flaubert family (see chapter 2).

'les gestes et les dits s'organisent d'eux-mêmes'. Very soon after this passage Sartre then introduces the term 'role': '[...] le cadet des Flaubert n'a cessé de jouer des rôles' (*IF*, I, p. 156). We can therefore assume a development from 'gesture' to 'role'. The role, less spontaneous than the 'geste', is the result of a solidification of the 'geste', organised into a more coherent structure that can be repeated and is socially recognisable. Theoretically, this means that Sartre elaborates his theory of the imaginary by conceiving of imaginary practices that, through their repetition, are absorbed by the practico-inert and acquire a force of their own. We might say that the effect that the imaginary can have on the real, which was already present in *Saint Genet*, is therefore fully theorised in *L'Idiot de la famille*. We should also note that any simple correlation between the imaginary and nothingness and the real and being would fail at this point since the imaginary role keeps being actualised and does not lose its imaginary character.

The roles that Gustave adopts are then integrated into his subjectivity even more permanently. They are further solidified into what Sartre frequently refers to as Flaubert's 'persona'. Already during his incarnation of various theatre roles as a child he internalises the role and the 'personnage' becomes his 'persona' (*IF*, I, p. 783). Similarly, the *Garçon* is not simply a role distinct from Gustave but becomes his *persona* (*IF*, I, p. 774). The Latin term 'persona', which originally designated theatrical masks, was adopted in the 1920s by the psychoanalyst C.G. Jung in order to describe a 'part of the collective psyche', functioning as the social role of the individual similar to a mask and recognised by society.<sup>68</sup> Sartre is of course far from adopting a Jungian perspective, but his usage of the term 'persona' echoes some of Jung's descriptions: it designates a social role with which the individual identifies. Due to his missing sense of self, Gustave is prone to entirely mistaking his *persona* for his

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<sup>68</sup> C.G. Jung, 'Die Persona als ein Ausschnitt aus der Kollektivpsyche' [1928], in *Gesammelte Werke*, 7 (Olten: Walter-Verlag, 1989 [1971]), pp. 164–66.

person: when he incarnates the *Garçon* he is unaware ‘qu’il joue ni que l’Ego exprimé lui appartient à peine’ (*IF*, I, p. 172).

There is not the space here to render Sartre’s entire description of the *Garçon* and his origins. For our purposes of demonstrating the formation of Gustave’s imaginary ego, it will suffice to point out that the *Garçon* is in fact composed of two figures, originally incorporated by two *collégiens*, of which one serves to ridicule the other. Sartre then proposes an ‘Égologie du Garçon’ (*IF*, II, p. 1299), according to which within the role one element corresponds to ‘la spontanéité irréfléchie’ and the other to ‘la réflexion sur cette spontanéité’ (*IF*, II, p. 1297). When impersonating the *Garçon*, Gustave thus substitutes the *Garçon*’s ego for his own, transforming his own reflexivity into an analogon for that of the persona (*IF*, II, p. 1301). Although the impersonation of the garçon is only temporary, we have already seen in the context of Gustave’s play-acting with Caroline that the adoption of the role contributes to a long-term derealisation of the subject. We can now see that, through an inventive re-deployment of his theory of the ego, Sartre portrays the increasing constitution of an imaginary ego. Through the growing solidification of a structure which starts with the child’s recourse to his mirror-image, the complexity of the fetishisation of the imaginary self now becomes apparent. We suggested in the context of Sartre’s remarks on belief that the incorporation of Mannoni’s notion of the transformation of belief into fetish and eventually into commitment to religious faith would be a fruitful endeavour. We thus propose to demonstrate in the next chapter that the fetishised imaginary self becomes precisely that in Gustave’s case: a commitment to literature.

### Conclusion

It has become clear that the real, which appears as rather unproblematic in Sartre’s earlier philosophy, is in *L’Idiot* portrayed as potentially threatened, dependent on its communicability and always to be constituted by reciprocal activity. The function of the real in *L’Idiot* has

allowed us to conclude that it cannot simply be equated to being, as Thomas Flynn and François Noudelmann propose, suggesting that both the real and the imaginary should be seen more ambiguously as avenues open to subjectivity.

The increasing integration of imaginary and real, for instance in the permanent confluence of role and analogon in the actor's body, further demonstrates the radicalisation that Sartre's conception of the imaginary undergoes. Having discussed several aspects of the process of Gustave's imaginisation, it can be observed that *L'Idiot* integrates crucial aspects of Sartre's philosophy since *L'Imaginaire* into his theory of the imaginary. An 'imaginary world', unthinkable in 1940, can now be theorised if seen as the accumulation of past human production of the imaginary. More generally, the imaginary is portrayed increasingly in its power to trap the individual. The subject thus appears not simply as a producer of images but as profoundly subject to the imaginary. Due to particular circumstances, Gustave's subjectivity as a whole is affected by the imaginary. We shall now examine the specific form of objectification of the imaginary that dominates Gustave's life after his acting career is cut short in 1832: writing. We shall therefore investigate in the next chapter the relationship between the imaginary ego and the written word, arguing that further modifications of Sartre's theory of the imaginary can be observed, in particular a de-stabilisation of the maxim of the non-informative role of the image, and that the material product of imagination facilitates both the construction and the comprehension of the self.

## Chapter 4

### Scripta manent: Writing as Focal Point of the Imaginary and the Self

#### Introduction

Within Sartre's *œuvre* a curious separation exists on the conceptual level between on the one hand his strictly philosophical enquiry into the nature of imagining consciousness, chiefly in *L'Imaginaire*, and on the other hand the production, criticism and theorisation of literature to which so much of his own writerly practice was dedicated. The relationship between imaginary and literature, it seems, is elaborated indirectly in the biographies rather than in Sartre's purely theoretical work. *L'Idiot de la famille* in particular offers us important elements, although sometimes only implicitly or in an underexplored manner, which help to unite theoretically the imaginary on the one hand, and the production and the consumption of literature on the other. For the sake of clarity, aspects that are part of an organic unity will be separated: the current chapter (4) will explore the link between subjectivity and writing, while chapter 5 will consider the writer-reader relationship.

Part 1 of this chapter will discuss the implications of the models of writing that are discernable in *L'Idiot* (alienation to orality; inspiration; artistic production). It will be argued that the forms of writing corresponding to the moments in Gustave's literary quest can be read in different ways: read literally they are simply Gustave's attempts to find his own approach to writing. But if we abstract from the level of the immediately biographical, we can read in the phases of Flaubert's literary development a commentary on specifically 'passive' forms of literature that can pertain to a variety of moments in literary history from Romanticism to Surrealism.

Subsequently, the second part of this chapter will focus more specifically on the manifestation of the imaginary in the written text and the development within Sartre's theory of the image that the relationship between writing and the imaginary presupposes. The

discussion of the convergence of self and text and the involvement of the imaginary in these processes will consider four phenomena: self-recognition in the moment of rereading one's text, self-knowledge, self-comprehension, and the creation of an imaginary self. A series of hypotheses will be tested throughout the investigation of Sartre's theory of the imaginary and subjectivity, examined in part 2: if the imaginary plays a mediating role in processes of self-awareness, we might infer that it acquires an 'informative' function, contrary to the principles established in *L'Imaginaire*. Further, we would expect this to be the case only insofar as Sartre's theory of the self has been modified. And finally, it will be suggested that the imaginary additionally acquires a 'productive' function due to the role it plays in processes of self-creation. Beside this discussion of developments within Sartre's theory of the imaginary, this chapter will continually explore resonances between Sartre's notion of writing and positions defended by authors who could be assumed to occupy contrary (Roland Barthes and Maurice Blanchot) or even unrelated (Walter Benjamin) positions.

### 1. *L'Idiot de la famille* as a Phenomenology of Writing

In the following we shall consider three significant moments in Sartre's account of Flaubert's literary evolution, suggesting that they form a typology of writing-practices with implications that go beyond the mere project of explaining the writer Flaubert. Since the completed volumes of *L'Idiot* devote the most detailed discussion to the production of what we would normally call Flaubert's juvenilia, our investigation is confined to the period from Gustave's turn to writing in 1832 to the early 1840s: firstly, Gustave's initial discovery of writing itself as he abandons oral forms of expression; secondly, an attitude to writing characterised by passivity and presented simultaneously in terms of automatic writing and poetic inspiration; and finally, the writing-process as a voluntary alienation of the artist to literature.

Fredric Jameson argues that Sartre's earlier pieces of literary criticism can be generalised into 'chapters of a phenomenology of different attitudes toward, different models of, narrative

time'.<sup>1</sup> Similarly, we shall treat the different moments in Gustave's literary development and their underlying conceptions of literature as significant beyond their immediate context. If abstracted from the biography in which Sartre describes them, they can be seen as forming a typology of literary conceptions, offering surprising connections across literary history.<sup>2</sup>

## I. 1. Writing as the overcoming of oral forms of expression

### I. 1. 1. Writing and orality in *L'Idiot*: Gustave's trajectory

Gustave's first attempts at writing are an opportunity for Sartre to comment on the reluctance with which the new medium is adopted. Sartre maintains that in 1832 Flaubert, desiring to be an actor but being forced to renounce his dreams, turns to writing as a second-best option, an 'austère pis-aller' (*IF*, I, p. 889). Initially, Gustave's writing-practice consists in the adaptation of classical plays for his own productions; he therefore begins by engaging in a form of writing that follows pre-given models and requires only a minimum of activity and freedom, relegating the role of the author to the background (*IF*, I, p. 869). Crucially, the focus on theatricality in Gustave's writing-practice accommodates the continued dominance of the oral: '[...] il subordonne l'action d'écrire à la passion de "gueuler" [...]' (*IF*, I, p. 869). The logic of this attachment to orality, according to Sartre's analysis, lies in the fact that it corresponds to Gustave's passivity, as it is an opportunity to give himself over to inspiration and relegate the creation of meaning to the other, in this case the audience/listener. Oral expression is thus for Gustave associated with passivity, gesture, spectacle.

Sartre sees Gustave's attachment to orality as outlasting the immediate period following the episode of 1832, as it is intimated that Gustave will continue to demonstrate a 'rémanence du sonore' (*IF*, I, p. 904). For Sartre, Flaubert's correspondence shows that written discourse remains the *analogon* of the oral discourse: 'le discours écrit reste [...] l'*analogon* d'un discours

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<sup>1</sup> Fredric Jameson, 'Three Methods in Sartre's Literary Criticism', in *Critical Essays on Jean-Paul Sartre* (Boston: G.K. Hall, 1988), pp. 97–119 (p. 98).

<sup>2</sup> The first part of this chapter will devote more space to the first of these stages, the overcoming of orality, than to the others, since some of our observations regarding the subsequent configurations of writing will be reserved for later parts of the chapter.

oral, les treize volumes de la Correspondence paraissent l'enregistrement d'une conversation d'un demi-siècle' (*IF*, I, p. 878). The designation '*analogon*' indicates the proximity of orality and imaginary in Sartre's account.

### 1. 1. 2. Writing and orality evaluated: Sartre's position in context

If Sartre maintains that in Gustave's case the preference for oral expression is a result of passivity and the incapacity to communicate meaning, this cannot simply be elevated to a rule valid for everyone: '[...] je ne prétends pas opposer le phonème au graphème, *en général*, comme la passivité à l'action. Le langage oral peut transmettre des ordres, [...] des informations [...] c'est même [...] sa fonction pratique' (*IF*, I, p. 870). Nevertheless, having added this qualification, Sartre then makes a series of general claims. Firstly, it is suggested that in the case of speaking the message is immediately absorbed by the listener, producing a physical proximity that alienates the speaker to the ears of the listener ('le locuteur entre dans le locuté par l'oreille: en un sens, il se donne comme une hostie, en un autre il compromet et puis enfin se perd', *ibid.*). The message is thus removed from the control of its producer, who, as a result, is deprived of the self-recognition that could emerge from the confrontation with the materiality of the written text: '[la voix] n'acquiert sa consistance objective que dans l'oreille de l'auditeur et, du même coup, elle nous échappe et se perd' (*IF*, I, p. 871).

This claim is surprising in two respects: firstly, one might expect the materiality of writing to produce a heightened alienating effect. Secondly, the 'adversity' of orality is doubly rooted in the realm of the bodily: the message is absorbed by the ear of the listener, transforming our voice into '*corps pour autrui*' and withdrawing it from our control. An additional physical component comes to play insofar as orality for Sartre has a strong tendency to slide towards gesture and the imaginary which, as seen in the previous chapter, aims less at real communication than at securing the adherence of the public, or in this case the listener: '[dans l'écriture] il n'y a ni physionomie ni mimique ni port de voix qui puissent capter l'adhésion'

(*IF*, I, p. 870). And further, with regard to the rhetorical tricks of using one's voice to one's advantage:

[...] je me soucierai plus de la *montre* que de la force démonstrative de mon discours. Il s'agit moins, en effet, de *prouver* que de fasciner et de corrompre [...] la transmission orale comporte toujours une part de représentation donc de *pathos*: parler, c'est souvent un acte mais celui-ci se transforme en *geste* à la première difficulté. (*IF*, I, p. 871)

Spoken language is dominated by bodily immediacy and is in danger of transforming itself from act to gesture, thus bordering on the imaginary. In the previous chapter we have seen that one of *L'Idiot's* contributions to Sartre's theory of the imaginary consists in its emphasis on the potential for the imaginary gesture to be transformed into real communication through intersubjective action. If the same logic is applicable to oral communication, one could indeed construct an argument in favour of a tendency going against the one described in the above quote: intersubjective proximity could be defined as providing conditions that are particularly favourable to the anchoring of (oral) exchange in the realm of the real and of truth.

Since the publication of *L'Idiot*, there has been an upsurge of interest in the phenomenon of oral communication, such as Paul Zumthor's work, whose interest in oral traditions explores 'l'effet [d'une tradition orale] sur la parole, ainsi peut-être que sur le locuteur et celui qui capte sa voix'.<sup>3</sup> Such an approach could serve to challenge and enrich Sartre's somewhat one-sided comments. One of the most enlightening comparisons can be made between Sartre's observations on orality and Roland Barthes's "De la parole à l'écriture" (1981), which prefaces the print version of a series of conversations recorded for France Culture.<sup>4</sup>

Here, Barthes is concerned with the process of inscription that transforms oral expression into writing. Like Sartre, Barthes defines spoken language as bodily and gestural

<sup>3</sup> Paul Zumthor, 'Pour Une Poétique de La Voix', *Poétique*, 40 (1979), 514–24.

<sup>4</sup> In the present chapter, we shall focus on the phenomenological aspects of Sartre's approach to orality. The historical or diachronic component of this motif in *L'Idiot* would merit additional attention: Sartre, for instance, places particular emphasis on the grapheme and on writing in 'les siècles classiques' (*IF*, I, p. 870). Both the historical and the phenomenological aspect of orality in Sartre could be fruitfully brought into conversation with Derrida's *prise de partie* for writing and his own history of the distinction between writing and orality. See for example Jacques Derrida, *De la grammatologie* (Paris: Les Éditions de Minuit, 1967), pp. 42ff. For an account of proximities between Sartre and Derrida in general, see Howells, *Derrida*; and Farrell Fox, *The New Sartre*.

(‘théâtrale’); and just as *L’Idiot* identifies spoken language as aiming to fascinate rather than to convince, “De la parole” insists on the phatic and interpellating component of orality.<sup>5</sup> Barthes, too, views the written word as allowing a welcome degree of distance and as being more conducive to communication: ‘des “idées”, entités à peine cernables dans l’interlocution, où elles sont sans cesse débordées par le corps, sont mises ici [à l’écrit] en avant [...]’<sup>6</sup>. Where Sartre however confines his comments to the binary opposition between orality and writing, Barthes establishes the triadic structure *parole-écrit-écriture*: while the ‘écrit’, i.e. mere transcription, borders on the sterile, ‘écriture’ is capable of conveying an additional meaning: ‘dans l’écriture, ce qui est *trop* présent dans la parole (d’une façon hystérique) et *trop* absent de la transcription (d’une façon castratrice), à savoir le corps, revient, mais selon une voie indirecte, mesurée [...] par la jouissance et non par l’imaginaire (l’image)’.<sup>7</sup> The differentiation *écrit-écriture* corresponds of course directly to the functions of the *écrivain* and the *écrivain*. We shall return to this distinction in the conclusion to this part (1. 4), where we shall also have the opportunity to clarify the benefit of Barthes’s triadic structure in the context of Sartre’s approach to orality and writing.

### 1. 1. 3. Writing and orality throughout Sartre’s work: towards the collective intellectual?

In an interview on theatre from 1959, Sartre remarks that the public character of a play leads to a loss of control on the part of the playwright: ‘[...] une pièce échappe à l’auteur dès que le public est dans la salle’. And later, with reference to the different interpretations of *Les Mains sales* as an anticommunist play, Sartre comments that, as a result of the public’s interpretation, the play acquired ‘an objectivity which I have been unable to modify since’. In theatre, Sartre concludes, intentions do not count: ‘ce qui compte, c’est le sort. Le public écrit la pièce autant

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<sup>5</sup> Roland Barthes, ‘De la parole à l’écriture’, in *Le grain de la voix: entretiens 1962-1980*. (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1981).

<sup>6</sup> Barthes, ‘De la parole’, pp. 10-11.

<sup>7</sup> Barthes, ‘De la parole’, p. 12.

que l'auteur'.<sup>8</sup> If the public acquires far greater power over the play than *QIL* ever granted the reader of the written text, *L'Idiot's* analysis of orality as offering less control to the producer of the message, due to its immediate absorption by the listener, seems to be a plausible explanation for this assumption.

John Ireland, who edited and commented on a recently discovered lecture on theatre from 1959,<sup>9</sup> comes to a similar conclusion. Ireland's genetic analysis, which compares the transcription of the lecture to Sartre's preparatory notes, suggests that the speaker is conscious of the limited time available in a public lecture and thus of the danger of incompleteness.<sup>10</sup> Ireland seems to imply that the kind of notes Sartre produced are more suitable for further written elaboration than for rendering in oral discourse. Whilst Sartre of course recognised the fruitful potential of direct exchange with his interlocutors, the conference provides evidence for a certain frustration with the oral format; in Ireland's words: 'Sartre a toujours considéré l'oral comme un mode de transmission inférieur à l'écrit'.<sup>11</sup> Against the obvious objection that direct, oral exchange could have the advantage of creating greater proximity between speaker and audience, thus 'democratising' the space of exchange, Ireland quotes the anecdote with which Sartre closes the lecture. In a previous talk on popular theatre in front of students, Sartre recounts, it turned out towards the end of the event, that none of the members of the audience had ever been to the theatre. The supposedly democratic space of oral communication, concludes Ireland, does not necessarily lead to a *real* exchange between the participants. Sartre's lecture on theatre, albeit from a very different angle, thus confirms the reservations *L'Idiot de la famille* expresses with regard to the effectiveness of oral expression. In

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<sup>8</sup> Jean-Paul Sartre, 'L'Auteur, l'œuvre et le public' [1959], in *Un Théâtre des situations* (Paris: Gallimard, 1973), pp. 91–103 (p. 95).

<sup>9</sup> The lecture, probably given in 1959 and therefore before the more famous Sorbonne lecture on theatre from 1960 (published in *Un Théâtre des situations*) provides an interesting picture of the development of Sartre's theory of theatre. In this lecture he expresses a high degree of proximity to Brechtian theatre, while in the Sorbonne lecture, he disagrees with Brecht on the question of the permissibility of the public's identification with the hero of the play.

<sup>10</sup> John Ireland and Jean-Paul Sartre, 'Parler Sur Le Théâtre. Une Conférence Inédite de Jean-Paul Sartre (1959)', *Genesis*, 39 (2014), 101–33.

<sup>11</sup> Ireland and Sartre, p. 106.

a period when other intellectuals, such as Bourdieu or Godard, theorised or practised collective forms of intellectual production, Sartre is made suspicious of such experiments by the very conditions imposed by society.<sup>12</sup>

The frequency with which Sartre displays a disposition towards written and individual production of meaning is further significant with regard to the interpretation of the status of ‘the third Sartre’, especially the controversial 1980 interviews with Benny Lévy. Having lost his eyesight in 1973, Sartre increasingly relies on Lévy’s help in the documentation of his thought and, in the interview series *L’Espoir maintenant* pursues the declared aim of ‘penser à deux’. The reliability of the result has been the object of much controversy, with Simone de Beauvoir’s ‘renunciation of the value of Sartre’s controversial interviews’ on one end of the debate,<sup>13</sup> and Bernard-Henri Lévy’s description of a ‘third Sartre’ who has abandoned all remnants of atheist philosophy in favour of a newly found subscription to Judaism,<sup>14</sup> on the other.

Sartre’s comments on orality in *L’Idiot*, read in the context of his statements in favour of written and solitary expression, could of course be brought into this balance and weigh in favour of the position defended by Beauvoir (and many Sartreans today). In this respect, *L’Idiot*, published shortly before the onset of Sartre’s blindness, would perhaps appear as the true ‘Adieu à la littérature’, the writer’s last act in full control of his work. This would be confirmed by a 1975 interview with Michel Contat, in which the already blind Sartre declares his inability to acquire a new medium of expression: ‘je suis d’abord un homme de l’écrit et il est trop tard pour que je change’.<sup>15</sup> And further on he confirms the adversity of spoken language already formulated in *L’Idiot de la famille*: ‘c’est frustrant une interview [...] parce

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<sup>12</sup> Especially in Bourdieu’s later work. See for example Pierre Bourdieu, *Contre-feux 2: pour un mouvement social européen* (Paris: Raisons d’agir, 2001), p. 38.

<sup>13</sup> Ursula Tidd, *Simone de Beauvoir, Gender & Testimony* (Port Chester, NY, USA: Cambridge University Press, 1999), pp. 169–71.

<sup>14</sup> Bernard-Henri Lévy, *Le siècle de Sartre: enquête philosophique* (Paris: B Grasset, 2000).

<sup>15</sup> Jean-Paul Sartre, ‘Autoportrait à soixante-dix ans’ [1975], in *Situations, X* (Paris: Gallimard, 1976), pp. 133–226 (p. 137).

qu[e] [...] il y aurait beaucoup de choses à dire. L'interview les fait naître comme leur contraire en même temps que les réponses que l'on fait'.<sup>16</sup>

Our reading of *L'Idiot* could thus add to the chorus of those who advocate a certain degree of caution with regard to the Lévy interviews: without having recourse to a speculative disqualification of the reliability of the speakers involved, such as Olivier Todd's formulation of the 'détournement d'un vieillard', one would at least have to bear in mind the status of *pis-aller* that orality had for Sartre. But perhaps more interestingly, *L'Idiot* can equally be used as a contribution to a rather more imaginative position taken recently by Jonathan Judaken. In an article from 2006 Judaken proposes to abandon the question of trying to establish Sartre's 'real intention' in the interviews, and to focus instead on the innovative model of performativity they represent by approaching the collection through a '*hermeneutics of performativity*'.<sup>17</sup> The old question of what Sartre did or did not mean, is thus obliterated by both the dialogic form of and the notion of subjectivity defended in the interviews: for Judaken a collective and dialogical mode of thinking elaborates a new ethics that is thoroughly grounded in the other, rather than in the 'autonomous subject with clear boundaries' that governed, according to him, Sartre's earlier writings.<sup>18</sup>

Judaken's analysis of a reversal between a supposedly unified and autonomous subject in *L'Être et le néant*, and the rootedness of the self in the other in the 1980 interviews is not very convincing as it fails to take into account the complexity of Sartre's theory of subjectivity since *La Transcendance de l'égo*;<sup>19</sup> indeed, Vincent de Coorebyter's refutation of a conceptual rupture seems far more helpful for an understanding of the content of the interviews.<sup>20</sup> However, Judaken's aim seems very fruitful, albeit not fully carried out. He focuses on the

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<sup>16</sup> Sartre, 'Autoportrait', p. 137.

<sup>17</sup> Jonathan Judaken, 'Beauvoir's Blues, Sartre's Jews: Reading "L'Espoir maintenant"', *The Journal of Romance Studies*, 6 (2006), 169–83.

<sup>18</sup> Judaken, 'Beauvoir's Blues', p. 6.

<sup>19</sup> It is curious that the article quotes from no other text by Sartre than the Lévy interviews.

<sup>20</sup> Vincent de Coorebyter, "'L'Espoir maintenant", ou le mythe d'une rupture', *Les Temps modernes*, 627 (2004), 204–27.

performative component of the conversations between Sartre and Lévy, insofar as their approach questions the authority of the individual writer. Sartre comments on the process of composition in the following way:

J'étais obligé de dialoguer parce que je ne pouvais plus écrire [...] Et ça, ça a changé complètement mon mode de recherche parce que jusqu'ici je n'ai jamais travaillé que seul. [...] Tandis que là, nous formons des pensées ensemble. [...] C'était ou une chose abominable, c'est-à-dire *ma pensée étant diluée par un autre*, ou quelque chose de neuf, c'est-à-dire une pensée se formant à deux. J'écris, et les pensées que j'offre aux gens par écrit sont universelles. Mais elles ne sont pas plurielles. [...] *Quand il n'y a qu'un auteur, la pensée porte sa marque*. [...] Voilà ce que m'apporte notre collaboration: des pensées plurielles que nous avons formées ensemble et qui me livrent sans cesse du neuf bien que je sois a priori d'accord avec tout ce qu'il y a en elles.<sup>21</sup> [emphasis added]

If we consider the first of the two italicised passages, we notice that the formulation 'ma pensée étant diluée par un autre', accords with Sartre's reticence towards oral exchange in *L'Idiot de la famille* ('le locuteur entre dans le locuté par l'oreille: en un sens, il se donne comme une hostie, en un autre il compromet et puis enfin se perd', *IF*, I, p. 870). Although *L'Idiot* ultimately opts for the surplus of control offered by writing, the 1971 text already identifies the possibility of generosity ('se donne comme une hostie') opened up by the immediacy of oral communication. In *L'Espoir maintenant*, it could be argued, Sartre is forced to accept the 'diluting' effect of orality (or, in the terms of *L'Idiot*, its effect of self loss), simply because he has no other option. Sartre's position has not changed significantly, but the *praxis* of textual production is profoundly altered as a result of a perfectly Sartrean commitment to the necessity of actively embracing a situation with all its implications. If we now consider the second of the two highlighted passages in the above quote, namely Sartre's reference to the existence of multiple producers of the text instead of a single author, we can only agree with Judaken's hypothesis that the interviews seriously undermine any attempt to define authorship in relation to the intention of an individual subject. The eroding of the authority of the individual author, however, is again not a new phenomenon in the Lévy interviews but, as we

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<sup>21</sup> Sartre and Lévy, *L'Espoir maintenant*, pp. 102-03.

shall see in the next chapter, already emerges from *L'Idiot*, in particular the fourth volume. At this point we can note that a re-evaluation of *L'Espoir maintenant* as focusing on the phenomenology of the act of textual production might be a fruitful addition to the (certainly important) debate about the content of the conversations. Sartre's pronouncements in *L'Idiot* on the physical performativity of speaking would certainly present an essential reference point for such an analysis.

Thus far, we can conclude that Sartre, through his discussion of Flaubert's 'alienation to his voice', broadly posits writing as a more active and controlled and thus preferable form of communication, and orality as a form of expression corresponding to the passive agent. Just as Sartre concedes a form of orality that is more active than the one practised by Flaubert, we may however assume that there is also a form of writing that is perhaps less active than the ideal Sartre lauds in the passages we have consulted.

## 1. 2. Inspiration and *écriture automatique*: writing as passive activity

If Sartre situates the beginning of Gustave's conflicted acceptance of writing in 1832, he continues to trace elements of the 'rémanence du sonore' in the young Flaubert's writings of the following years. The account of the adolescent's mode of writing in particular is characterised by on the one hand inspiration and on the other automatism. The Romantic conception of inspiration, to which, according to Sartre, the young Gustave adheres, is directly linked to the emphasis on the sound of words:

[...] quand il écrit *L'Amant avaro*, les significations produites – ou reproduites – s'empâtent de leur sonorité future. Il est inspiré, dans le moment de la composition [...] [il] s'abandonne à cette voix, et [...] [il] écrit sous sa dictée. Cette conception romantique de l'inspiration, il la connaît – ses lettres en font foi [...] (*IF*, I, p. 871)

Gustave, Sartre tells us, continues to adhere to a Romantic conception of literature until 1837 (*IF*, II, p. 1476). That a young writer in the early 1830s should be influenced by Romantic

conceptions of literature seems hardly surprising.<sup>22</sup> What is striking in Sartre's account is the amalgamation of the standard theme of Romantic inspiration with a form of writing usually understood as a product of the twentieth century, since Gustave's *conception* of the writer as inspired poet goes hand in hand with his *practice* of automated forms of writing. The continuing attachment to oral expression, which causes Gustave to abandon himself to 'cette parole hyperbolique qui se parle en lui sans être parlée', is for Sartre the prefiguration of the Surrealists's automatic writing: 'cet assemblage non volontaire de mots préfigure l'écriture automatique. Pour les surréalistes, cependant, c'est l'inconscient qui s'exprime; pour Flaubert l'obscur produit du langage n'a qu'une profondeur verbale' (*IF*, I, p. 636). The references to automatic writing in the text are numerous,<sup>23</sup> and, although Gustave's aim is not self-understanding, his renunciation of controlled forms of composition, 'ce non-contrôle dirigé', produces a result that is as informative as is the psyche of the author in Breton's conception of the expression of the unconscious: 'des vérités qu'il veut cacher échappent à sa plume [...] il écrit comme on parle sur le divan de l'analyste' (*IF*, I, pp. 880-81).

These remarks in *L'Idiot de la famille* need to be considered together with Sartre's earlier comments on automatic writing. In *QL* Surrealism is described as part of a literary current beginning with the 'knights of nothingness' of the Second Empire, who in various ways all refuse their responsibility, practise ineffective revolt and not revolution:<sup>24</sup> 'on a écrit pendant soixante-dix ans pour consommer le monde; on écrit après 1918 pour consommer la littérature'.<sup>25</sup> In 1948, both Flaubert and Breton are thus condemned for 'dissolving subjectivity' and 'abolishing the border between dreaming and being awake'.<sup>26</sup> Sartre's distaste for Surrealism is already discernable in the earlier short story "L'Enfance d'un chef", where

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<sup>22</sup> Although of course, by the time Gustave has become a reader, the literary field has begun to be dominated by Balzac's Realism. We shall return to the curious absence of Balzac from the literary history that *L'Idiot* sketches in the next chapter.

<sup>23</sup> The composition of the *Mémoires d'un fou*, for example, is described as 'spontaneous'. *IF*, II, p. 1527.

<sup>24</sup> Sartre, *QL*, pp. 140-41.

<sup>25</sup> Sartre, *QL*, p. 138.

<sup>26</sup> Sartre, *QL*, p. 183.

the position of the characters Berliac and Bergère, both adherents to the techniques of the Surrealists, is certainly not portrayed as a viable alternative to Lucien Fleurier's bourgeois destiny, while their literary technique is depicted with mild ridicule: 'je les obtiens [les poèmes], dit Berliac avec nonchalance, par une technique nouvelle, ça s'appelle l'écriture automatique'.<sup>27</sup>

This rejection of automatic writing is somewhat mitigated in *Les Mots*, which is less critical towards Poulou's temptation by *l'écriture automatique* when copying existing stories:

[...] des phrases se reformaient dans ma tête avec l'implacable sûreté qu'on prête à l'inspiration. Je les transcrivais, elles prenaient sous mes yeux la densité des choses. Si l'auteur inspiré, comme on croit communément, est autre que soi au plus profond de soi-même, j'ai connu l'inspiration entre sept et huit ans.

Je ne fus jamais tout à fait dupe de cette "écriture automatique". Mais le jeu me plaisait [...]: fils unique, je pouvais y jouer seul.<sup>28</sup>

Despite its joviality, this passage recounting Poulou's writing-practice provides a starting point for an analysis of the treatment of automatic writing in *L'Idiot*. Like in the Flaubert study, automatic writing is associated with inspiration, which again is defined by a state of voluntary alterity and emerges in a state of passivity (simply copying texts in this case). Further, *Les Mots* interestingly explains the fascination for automatic writing as resulting from Poulou's isolation ('je pouvais y jouer seul'). The autobiography thus offers the first brief sketch of a form of writing elaborated at length in *L'Idiot de la famille*: the attitude of inspiration is adopted during the practice of automatic writing, in a behaviour characterised by passivity and isolation. Contat and Deguy insist on the chiefly moral concern behind Sartre's initial attack on automatic writing.<sup>29</sup> Where *QIL* castigated this procedure for the bad faith with which the writer chooses to abandon responsibility, *L'Idiot*, prefigured in *Les Mots*, is less interested in moral or political attitudes, but rather investigates the young Flaubert's writing-practices in a

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<sup>27</sup> Sartre, 'L'Enfance', p. 181.

<sup>28</sup> Sartre, *Les Mots*, p. 122.

<sup>29</sup> Michel Contat and Jacques Deguy, 'Les Carnets de la drôle de guerre de Jean-Paul Sartre: effets d'écriture, effets de lecture', *Littérature*, 1990, 17–41 (p. 31).

phenomenological analysis of passive writing-practices, similar to the exploration of the passive component of orality.

Sartre's account bears some similarities with Timothy Clark's *The Theory of Inspiration* (1997), one of the very few systematic analyses of inspiration as a literary theme. Clark traces the motif of the inspired poet or author throughout literary history, and he too sees automatic writing as a modern incarnation of Romantic attitudes.<sup>30</sup> Perhaps most interesting for our purposes is Clark's observation of an anti-humanist current running through approaches to inspiration: Nietzsche, according to him, is the originator of a definition of inspiration as a purely 'bodily state',<sup>31</sup> or, quoting Bataille, 'the figure who sees that "extreme states [...] once were motivated by ends" some of which "have lost their meaning [...]" and who will now celebrate such states for themselves'.<sup>32</sup> Nietzsche's description of the 'inspiration' leading to the composition of *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* in *Ecce Homo* is indeed presented as a physical experience during which 'the *body* is inspired'<sup>33</sup>, and in which it is 'as though the things themselves were stepping forward'.<sup>34</sup> This anti-humanist current finds continuation, according to Clark, in the Surrealists, in Blanchot, Celan and Derrida.

A detailed discussion of Nietzsche and his (supposed) successors would of course exceed the present chapter. We should note simply that Clark's account of the history of inspiration, by identifying a shift in attention from the *source* of inspiration, be it individual genius or God, to its execution and *form*, provides a useful pattern with which we can explain the decidedly post-Romantic and modern component that Gustave's practice of automatic writing acquires in *L'Idiot*. Barthes in "La Mort de l'auteur" praises Surrealism for having contributed to the 'de-sacralisation of the author' by proposing a form of writing that trusts 'the hand to write

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<sup>30</sup> Timothy Clark, *The Theory of Inspiration: Composition as a Crisis of Subjectivity in Romantic and Post-Romantic Writing* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1997), p. 192.

<sup>31</sup> Clark, *Inspiration*, p. 180.

<sup>32</sup> In André Breton, *La Clé des champs* (Holland: Jean-Jacques Prévert, 1967), pp. 7-13. Cited in Clark, p. 220.

<sup>33</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *Ecce Homo: How One Becomes What One Is* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), p. 70.

<sup>34</sup> Nietzsche, *Ecce Homo*, p. 69.

down as fast as possible that which the head still ignores'.<sup>35</sup> In Barthes's insistence on Surrealism's transfer of agency from the author to the writing hand, we are reminded of the 'purely bodily state' that Clark's narrative emphasises in Nietzsche's anti-humanist version of inspiration. Maurice Blanchot, who interpreted automatic writing as a subcategory of inspiration long before *L'Idiot* and "La Mort de l'auteur", equally reads the Surrealist enterprise as transforming 'cette main active' into a 'puissance indépendante'.<sup>36</sup> The same abandonment of control to the physical emerges from Sartre's analysis of Flaubert's tendency to 'se réduire soi-même à l'abrutissement sommeilleux d'un système mécanique [...] on se laisse porter, inanimé [...]'] (*IF*, II, p. 1655).

Sartre's description of Gustave's 'automatic' writing process thus resonates not only with *Les Mots* but further with a number of different accounts that equally allow for a definition of 'inspiration' that is not confined to Romantic conceptions of the poet. In an attempt to insert Sartre's discussion of Gustave's inspiration into the kind of literary history written by Clark, we could identify *L'Idiot* as a concrete description of a pivotal point at which Romantic practices are gradually assimilated to an (as Clark would phrase it) modern and anti-humanist framework. Unlike Clark however, Sartre's aim is not to simply describe the recurrence of a specific attitude across literary history; nor does he, as does Barthes in 1968, applaud Flaubert for relinquishing authorial control. If, as we have suggested, one of the innovations made in *L'Idiot* is the formulation of a typology of different modes of writing, Flaubert's version of inspired *écriture automatique* certainly qualifies as a candidate for a place in this typology and, it seems, the label under which it can be categorised is that of passivity.

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<sup>35</sup> Roland Barthes, 'La Mort de L'auteur', in *Le Bruissement de La Langue. Essais Critiques IV* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1984), p. 65.

<sup>36</sup> Maurice Blanchot, *L'Espace littéraire*, Collection Folio Essais (Paris: Gallimard, 2009), p. 236.

### I. 3. Alienation as solution: The Flaubertian artist

If Sartre portrays Flaubert's writing process until the late 1830s as being characterised by an attitude that favours the relinquishing of the author's control to inspiration and, as a consequence, prefers automatic practices of writing, this changes radically in 1837: the attitude of inspiration is replaced by art, while the practice of abandonment gives way to control: '[il] passe de l'immédiat au médié, de l'irréfléchi à la réflexion, du spontané à l'attitude critique' (*IF*, II, p. 1492). The poet cedes his place to the artist, who is an "ouvrier d'art" (*IF*, II, p. 1491), and a mere mediator at the service of art: 'l'oiseau chanteur se fera "ouvrier d'art"' (*IF*, I, p. 1088). This conception of the artist, which Sartre reads in both Flaubert's correspondence and in what we might call corroborating extra-textual evidence ('l'idée est dans l'air', *IF*, II, p. 1490) is presented as a concrete response invented in reaction to both an artistic crisis and the trap which the bourgeois future constitutes for Gustave. This solution is not a liberation, Sartre insists, but a 'counter-alienation': 'il n'échappera à l'alienation qu'en s'aliénant à un autre objet. Il ne peut substituer à l'être-bourgeois qu'un être-pour-l'Art' (*IF*, II, p. 1603).

Insofar as the movement from poetry to art describes the literary conception of an entire generation of writers, Sartre's account is rather congruent with a variety of versions of nineteenth-century literary history inspired by Marxism. The concepts Sartre uses are of course heavily indebted to Marx himself, since the alienation of the artist he ascribes to Flaubert is reminiscent of Marx's notion of the alienation of the worker, developed in 1844<sup>37</sup>, the year of the crisis of Pont-l'Évêque. The description, for instance, 'c'est aliéner l'homme à son produit, sans doute' (*IF*, II, p. 1604) is very close to Marx.

Sartre's account equally resonates strongly with Barthes's comments in the chapter "L'artisanat du style" in *Le Degré zéro de l'écriture* (1953). Barthes poses the problem in terms that are very similar to those that Sartre uses in the third volume of *L'Idiot*, and had already

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<sup>37</sup> In the *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts* of 1844.

outlined in *QIL*. In the 1850s, argues Barthes, literature is confronted with a lack of legitimacy and hence emphasis is shifted from its destination or audience to the process of its production: the ‘valeur-travail’ of literature replaces its ‘valeur-usage’ and ‘valeur-génie’.<sup>38</sup> As does Sartre, Barthes sees Flaubert as being at the forefront of this movement and Barthes’s formulation of a ‘flaubertisation de la littérature’ can in this context provide a useful clue as to Sartre’s view of Flaubert as being ‘au carrefour de nos problèmes littéraires aujourd’hui’ (*IF*, I, p. 8), as suggested in *L’Idiot*’s preface. Beyond the similarities of Sartre’s and Barthes’s respective discussions of *Art for art’s sake*, the comparison between *L’Idiot de la famille* and *Dégré zéro* is further useful for two reasons relating to the assessment of the relationship between Sartre and Barthes. Firstly, it provides a starting point for the following hypothesis, for which we shall attempt to provide evidence throughout the present and the following chapter: in addition to the common recognition of the influence that *QIL* had on *Dégré zéro*,<sup>39</sup> aspects of *Dégré zéro* in return seem to be echoed in *L’Idiot*, perhaps a less noted reversed influence. Secondly, if Barthes’s approach in *Dégré zéro* is frequently close to Sartre’s in 1971-72, this proximity is particularly visible in the circumstance that both texts treat particular literary configurations (be they diachronic or synchronic) from a perspective that is historicising rather than normative or generalising. In his later writings, Barthes will much more readily posit certain attitudes to writing as essence or as norm, while, in an interesting chiasmic reversal, it could be said that over roughly the same period Sartre moves away from the dominance of the normative aspect that his position entailed in 1947.

#### I. 4. Preliminary conclusion: a phenomenology of passive types of writing

If we read Sartre’s comments on the conception of the artist forged by the young Flaubert in conjunction with the analysis of the broader historical and literary situation in the mid-

<sup>38</sup> Roland Barthes, *Le Dégré zéro de L’écriture* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1973), pp. 50–51.

<sup>39</sup> See for example: Aliocha Wald Lasowski, *Jean-Paul Sartre, Une Introduction*, Agora, 312 (Paris: Pocket, 2011), p. 320.

nineteenth century as it is developed in the third volume, the result points us towards Sartre's particular version of literary history. We shall address this historical perspective in our final chapter; for now our vision should remain focused on the theoretical conclusions that can be drawn from the writing-practices surveyed. Despite the undeniable changes in Flaubert's writing-practice, its different phases share one persistent feature, namely passivity. Passivity characterises the oral medium as such, the attitude of inspiration, the practice of automatic writing and, paradoxically, the careful composition of *impersonnalisme*. As we saw in the first chapter, Gustave's subjectivity is constituted as passive by a lack of mother love, and this passive constitution sets him apart from a school system designed to produce a specific type of activity in each student. As a consequence, Flaubert's writing-practice appears as 'activité passive' at every stage. Sartre's typology of writing-practices in *L'Idiot* are thus, we should insist, not to be read as an exhaustive catalogue of writing as such, but instead pertain to the realm of 'passive literature', a conclusion that will be of importance for our understanding of the status of the example of Flaubert within Sartre's own conception of literature in the next chapter. It has certainly become clear that, although Gustave is very specifically constituted as passive agent, forms of writing characterised by passivity are by no means limited to Flaubert's creative process, but resonate with a number of conceptions and movements across literary history.

If in 1959 Barthes criticised *QIL* for having treated literature 'from the outside',<sup>40</sup> *L'Idiot*'s focus on the writing process could be seen as the result of an increasingly 'internal' approach to writing. Indeed, in a short text in which Barthes praises Marthe Robert's reading of Kafka, he applauds her in terms that could equally describe *L'Idiot*: 'Voilà ce que nous dit Marthe Robert: que le sens de Kafka est dans sa *technique*. C'est là un propos très nouveau, non seulement par rapport à Kafka, mais par rapport à toute notre littérature'.<sup>41</sup> And further on: 'à

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<sup>40</sup> Roland Barthes, *Essais critiques* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1964), p. 107.

<sup>41</sup> Barthes, *Essais critiques*, p. 139.

la vieille question (stérile): *pourquoi écrire?* le Kafka de Marthe Robert substitue une question neuve: *comment écrire?*<sup>42</sup> Interestingly, this emphasis on the question *comment écrire?* is not only echoed in Sartre's interest in Flaubert's writing technique, but further, for both Sartre and Barthes this approach comes hand in hand with a widening of the field of criticism.<sup>43</sup> Barthes suggests that Robert's interpretation of Kafka allows literary theory to transcend the old juxtaposition between 'political Realism' and *Art for art's sake*,<sup>44</sup> since Robert attributes to Kafka a form of communication which functions through allusion instead of the 'signe sûr' of symbols.<sup>45</sup> The following passage, in which Barthes again approvingly summarises Robert's hypotheses, is indeed, as we shall see, very close to Sartre's interpretation of Flaubert:

La technique de Kafka dit que le sens du monde n'est pas énonçable, que la seule tâche de l'artiste, c'est d'explorer des significations possibles, dont chacune prise à part ne sera que mensonge (nécessaire) mais dont la multiplicité sera la vérité même de l'écrivain. Voilà le paradoxe de Kafka: l'art dépend de la vérité, mais la vérité, étant indivisible, ne peut se connaître elle-même: dire la vérité, c'est mentir.<sup>46</sup>

To recapitulate, for Barthes's (and Robert's) Kafka, reality is 'pas énonçable', and truth is 'indivisible' and can therefore not be expressed directly but only by 'allusion'. The 'sens' of Kafka's writings can therefore not be communicated through the 'signe sûr' but lies in the *comment écrire*. Very similarly, as seen in the previous chapter, Sartre insists on the ineffable (or 'indisable') character that reality has for Flaubert and his resulting sense of *estrangement*. Flaubert's contribution to literature then stems from his trouble with words, again in opposition to 'les classiques': 'la révolution flaubertienne vient de ce que cet écrivain, se défiant du langage depuis l'enfance, commence, au contraire des classiques, par poser le principe de non-communicabilité du vécu' (*IF*, II, p. 1998). For Sartre's Flaubert too then, the

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<sup>42</sup> Barthes, *Essais critiques*, p. 140. The formulation is significant: it will be central again in "Écrivains et Écrivains".

<sup>43</sup> The interaction between Sartre and Robert seems to have elided the common ground they could have found in her approach to Kafka: Robert's criticism of *L'Idiot* is centred on psychoanalysis and what she perceives as a lack of attention paid by Sartre to the œdipal complex. Sartre, in return, comments extensively on Robert's *Roman des origines, origines du roman*, but is not overly impressed.

<sup>44</sup> Barthes, *Essais critiques*, p. 138.

<sup>45</sup> Barthes, *Essais critiques*, p. 140.

<sup>46</sup> Barthes, *Essais critiques*, pp. 141-42.

possibility of communication lies in the indirect rendering of lived experience rather than in the straightforward use of language as tool (or sign) preached in *QIL*: ce n'est pas le *dire* qui manifeste la pensée de l'Artiste mais la *manière de dire*' (*IF*, II, p. 1624).

We are here at the heart of an important theoretical development in Sartre's theory of literature that has been noted by several critics. Christina Howells in particular reads *L'Idiot* as the most detailed and advanced instance of an evolution that can already be observed in the 1965 interview "L'Écrivain et sa langue" and in the conferences on the intellectual from the same year.<sup>47</sup> In these texts the opposition established in *QIL* between prose that signifies reality by using language as a tool on the one hand, and on the other hand poetry that only renders the 'sens' of experience by treating language in an intransitive manner, becomes considerably more flexible. The uncomplicated and direct communication practised by the prose writer in *QIL* is now exclusively attributed to pure philosophical writing,<sup>48</sup> or to the intellectual in the *Plaidoyer*. Literature, even in the case of prose, on the other hand, is never simply descriptive but always to some extent uses words as objects. Poetic use of language in particular is capable of rendering the part of desire, which is otherwise 'inarticulable'.<sup>49</sup> Poetry is thus capable of communicating a *sens* that can then be transcended towards 'la signification qu'est la prose'.<sup>50</sup>

Our interest here lies with the way in which poetic articulation of the 'sens' of desire is achieved. Sartre says: 'il n'y a pas de volonté d'exprimer le désir, mais le désir se glisse dans cette articulation'.<sup>51</sup> Strikingly, the subject of the sentence is 'le désir', which inserts itself into the text and is expressed involuntarily or, in other words, passively. We can thus conclude that

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<sup>47</sup> Christina Howells, 'Sartre: Esquisse d'une théorie de la lecture', in *Études Sartriennes*. 2-3, ed. by Michel Rybalka and Geneviève Idt, Cahiers de sémiotique textuelle; 5-6 (Paris: Université Paris X-Nanterre, 1986), pp. 159-70. See also Howells, *Sartre's Theory of Literature*, pp. 153-159 and pp. 186ff. See further: Sandro Briosi, 'A la recherche de la totalité perdue: Sartre et la littérature à l'époque de "L'Idiot de la famille"', in *Études Sartriennes*. 2-3, pp. 241-50.

<sup>48</sup> Sartre, 'L'Écrivain', p. 45.

<sup>49</sup> Sartre, 'L'Écrivain', p. 63.

<sup>50</sup> Sartre, 'L'Écrivain', p. 63.

<sup>51</sup> Sartre, 'L'Écrivain', p. 63.

one of the ways in which the 1965 texts on language are to be read in conjunction with *L'Idiot* lies in the fact that through the example of Flaubert's writing-practices Sartre delivers a phenomenology of those passive forms of writing that are particularly apt for rendering 'inarticulable' aspects of lived reality. Simultaneously, of course, as has been noted, Flaubert's poetic (or imaginising, as we shall see, shortly) use of language, judged as a proof of bad faith in the 1940s, has now received a very specific purpose.

The reader will have noticed the proximity between this categorisation and Barthes's distinction between *écrivain* and *écrivain*, to which Sartre refers both in the 1965 interview and in the *Plaidoyer*, and which he proposes to transcend by introducing the notion of the writer who uses both a direct and an indirect register of language.<sup>52</sup> We can now return to Barthes's distinction *parole-écrit-écriture* (see I. 1. 2) in which what is too present in spoken language and too absent in mere transcription, namely the physical, re-enters *écriture* via *jouissance*.<sup>53</sup> This seems useful for conceptualising a similar phenomenon which is only implicit in Sartre's theory: considering that passive forms of writing, which are particularly prone to indirectly expressing *sens*, are comparable to Barthes's *écriture*, it seems that in Sartre's conception too, the physical and oral re-enters the written word. When it comes to Barthes's specification that this happens 'par la jouissance et non par l'imaginaire (l'image)', Sartre would of course much rather affirm that the bodily re-enters writing via the imaginary. Around the question of different modes of expression through writing there is thus a network of influences between Sartre and Barthes that extends, as we have seen, to the shared interest in the question *comment écrire?*

Our first chapter established that, generally, Sartre's increasing concern for an individual's situation mitigates his earlier condemnation of Flaubert's literary non-commitment. We are now in a position to substantiate these findings by suggesting that

<sup>52</sup> Sartre, 'L'Écrivain', p. 45. Howells makes the point that Barthes's *écrivain-écrivain* distinction is inspired by the prose-poetry opposition from *QIL*. See *Sartre's Theory of Literature*, p. 157.

<sup>53</sup> We shall return to Barthes's concept of *jouissance* in chapter 5.

Sartre's evaluation of Flaubert's texts is informed by a detailed observation of the specific practices of writing available to an agent constituted as passive. As a consequence, Sartre's approach in *L'Idiot* is at its most totalising, since any interpretation of the product of a particular praxis is considered in conjunction with the praxis itself. Simultaneously, Sartre's interest in the process of composition is of course accompanied by equal attention to the product of writing and its effects, to which we shall turn now.

## Part II. Writing and the Objectification of Subjectivity: The Written word, the Image and the Self

As we saw in the previous chapter, *L'Idiot* expands the theory of the imaginary beyond mere imagining consciousness and adopts the term 'imaginarisation' to designate a process that involves the subject in a far more profound and lasting manner: Gustave's subjectivity, defined as his specific way of internalising and exteriorising events, can thus be said to be transported to an imaginary level and the term 'imaginary' acquires an additional meaning to designate what we identified as the imaginisation of subjectivity as a whole. Gustave's imaginary subjectivity, which we have seen taking the form of *hébétudes* or role-playing, will now be considered as it becomes embroiled in the medium of the written word, around which imaginisation is increasingly organised: 'les médiateurs entre l'enfant déréalisé et le monde irréel où il se transporte par sa propre irréalisation, *ce sont les mots*' (*IF*, I, p. 923). With the move towards writing, Gustave's imaginary desires and phantasies undergo an important transformation, since they are not excluded from the realm of the imaginary, but are nevertheless modified in their substance: 'l'écriture objective les fantasmes [...] écrits, ils prennent une consistance qui se refuse au rêve sans devenir pour autant des réalités' (*IF*, I, p. 204).

## II. 1. The objectification of imaginary subjectivity

### II. 1. 1. *Se relire*: the self in the text

*L'Être et le néant* establishes the impossibility of being an object for oneself, the unattainable 'en-soi-pour-soi'. *QIL* extends this observation to the writer who, when rereading her text, will never perceive it in its objectivity, and therefore does not transcend her own subjectivity:

Ainsi l'écrivain ne rencontre partout que son savoir [...] S'il se relit, il est déjà trop tard; sa phrase ne sera jamais à ses yeux tout à fait une chose. Il va jusqu'aux limites du subjectif mais sans le franchir.<sup>54</sup>

If in *QIL* the reader is essential to the production of the text, this is in part because writing means 'faire appel au lecteur pour qu'il fasse passer à l'existence objective le dévoilement que j'ai entrepris [...]'.<sup>55</sup> Subsequently, Sartre seems to be increasingly interested in the mediating factors necessary for the objective recognition of one's own subjectivity. *Qu'est-ce que la subjectivité?* avoids the problem of the text, but presents a scenario in which subjectivity becomes objective in the moment it is revealed to us by another person. *L'Idiot* seems to provide Sartre with a very particular test case because of the young Flaubert's isolation. Gustave largely writes for himself, even resents the idea of his texts being read – traversing a rather elongated version of a phase by which every writer is initially affected according to "L'Écrivain et sa langue".<sup>56</sup> As Sartre re-examines the problem of the relationship between the subjective and the objective, the exclusive mediation of writing (perhaps due to an overstatement of Gustave's isolation) presents a very particular laboratory.

*QIL* is only one of numerous instances of the motif of rereading one's own texts; in *L'Idiot* scenes in which Gustave is confronted with the product of his writing are numerous and are explicitly linked to the question of recognising one's own self in that product. Gustave is for example intrigued when the Docteur Cloquet in 1841 advises him to put his texts away and reread them at a later date, claiming that Flaubert would find 'un autre homme' (*IF*, II,

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<sup>54</sup> Sartre, *QIL*, p. 49.

<sup>55</sup> Sartre, *QIL*, p. 53.

<sup>56</sup> Sartre, 'L'Écrivain', pp. 43–44.

pp. 1550-51). *L'Idiot* repeatedly documents the young Flaubert's sense of bewilderment when examining his own texts: '[l']ambivalence de Gustave en ce qui concerne sa nouvelle entreprise se marque par l'alternance de ses enthousiasmes et des dégoûts'. What he has produced is disappointing, 'le dégoût vient après, quand il se relit' (*IF*, I, p. 903). It is the insufficiency of written language in general that Gustave has to grapple with, but he further senses in particular the strangeness of his own doing: 'il s'est abandonné à l'inspiration et ce qui s'est déposé sur le papier, c'est sa "particularité" [...] son incompréhensible anomalie' (*IF*, I, p. 885). Upon examination of his stories, Gustave senses his 'incompréhensible anomalie', thus recognising his experience in the text, and is simultaneously estranged from that experience in its objectified form.

This effect is encouraged by the automated or passive nature of the young Flaubert's writing. If one (seemingly) abandons all control over the process of composition, it seems particularly likely that a sense of surprise will follow, once one considers the product. As a consequence, Gustave's 'writing consciousness' is somewhat split, while the writer in *QL* – an active agent, it has to be assumed – is characterised by a unity that makes later rereading impossible:

Or l'opération d'écrire comporte une quasi-lecture implicite qui rend la vraie lecture impossible. Quand les mots se forment sous sa plume, l'auteur les voit, sans doute, mais il ne les voit pas comme le lecteur puisqu'il les connaît avant de les écrire [...] son regard [a pour fonction] [...] de contrôler le tracé des signes; c'est une mission purement régulatrice...<sup>57</sup>

The terms 'contrôler' and 'régulatrice' clarify the difference between active writing in *QL* and passive literature in *L'Idiot*: the former performs a type of reading whilst writing, thereby operating at a certain level of reflexivity. The passive agent, on the other hand, does not practise 'quasi-lecture implicite' and, as we are led to conclude, is therefore in a better position to practise 'vraie lecture'.

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<sup>57</sup> Sartre, *QL*, p. 48.

If Gustave's passivity sets him apart from the active writer, the movement by which many of Flaubert's juvenilia are produced can be helpfully compared to the production of the ego in *La Transcendance de l'égo*. Here, Sartre defines the ego as 'unification transcendante spontanée de nos états et de nos actions'<sup>58</sup>, located outside the psyche. As Hazel Barnes summarises:

The ego is fabricated out of the psychic residue of earlier experiences, and it is their unity. Most importantly, consciousness *is not* the ego. The ego is not inside consciousness but outside it. Consciousness is separated from the ego in the same kind of nihilating withdrawal that consciousness effects with respect to all of its objects. The ego is the object of consciousness.<sup>59</sup>

If we read the description of the process of literary creation in the young Flaubert's case in this context, it would appear that, just as the movement of consciousness comes first, and then constitutes the ego,<sup>60</sup> Flaubert's passive literary creation constitutes a similarly pre-reflexive form of exteriorisation, only available in its objectivity to posterior consideration. Both the ego and the text thus produced are in a sense created in the absence of reflective consciousness but apprehended/looked back on by it as objects. In the terminology of the *Critique de la raison dialectique* one might re-phrase the analogy to the effect that both text and past *vécu* become part of the realm of the practico-inert, thus acquiring qualities unintended by the producer, a point to which we shall return shortly. As a preliminary conclusion, we should highlight firstly the passive agent's privileged position as practitioner of 'vraie lecture', granting a certain access to the objectivity of his own text, secondly the nevertheless complex co-existence of recognition and estrangement in face of his own text, and thirdly the complex nature of the position of the author.

## II. 1. 2. Objectification as death of subjectivity: Sartre's reading of *Novembre*

Sartre's analysis points towards two instances in which Flaubert experiences a particular shock at the discovery of his own anomaly through the written text, the autobiographical *Mémoires*

<sup>58</sup> Jean-Paul Sartre, *La Transcendance de l'égo*, p. 59.

<sup>59</sup> Hazel Barnes, 'Sartre's Ontology', in *The Cambridge Companion to Sartre*, ed. by Howells, pp. 13-38 (p. 28).

<sup>60</sup> Sartre, *La Transcendance*, p. 63.

*d'un fou* and *Novembre*. Both are composed in a period during which Flaubert is said to hesitate between the rather autobiographical approach of *totalisation en intériorité* starting from individual experience, and *totalisation en extériorité*, adopting an attitude of *survol*. In both cases, Sartre claims that the initial adherence to the former method leads to a disturbing discovery of Flaubert's own subjectivity and is hence abandoned to the profit of the second approach. We shall return to the *Mémoires* shortly, considering the attempt at auto-analysis to which they lead; for now, our attention will be with Sartre's reading of *Novembre* and its resonances beyond the biographical.

Sartre emphasises a break in the story that he identifies as corresponding to a prolonged interruption in the process of composition. About two thirds of the short narrative are written in the first-person perspective of the main protagonist, giving a subjective account of a tortured young man. The narrative then breaks off abruptly, and Sartre argues that the interruption in the story corresponds to a real suicidal crisis in the writer's life that results from the encounter with his insoluble neurosis objectified in the text. The narrative then picks up again, but the perspective shifts to an omniscient narrator who comments on the protagonist's failures, identifying them as the futile endeavours of a young bourgeois, thus transforming the lived experience of the 'Je' into the objectified account of the 'Il'. A brief glance at *Novembre* confirms that the first section indeed expresses a romanticising tendency – Gustave's own experience according to Sartre:

Et moi j'étais dans la foule, comme une algue arrachée sur l'Océan, perdue au milieu des flots sans nombre qui roulaient, qui m'entouraient et qui bruissaient.<sup>61</sup>

In the final part of *Novembre* the distanced narrator who refers to the previous protagonist in the third person judges the style and the content of what was presented previously:

Le manuscrit s'arrête ici, mais j'en ai connu l'auteur, et si quelqu'un, ayant passé, pour arriver jusqu'à cette page, à travers toutes les métaphores, hyperboles et

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<sup>61</sup> Gustave Flaubert, *Œuvres de Jeunesse* (Paris: Louis Conard, 1910), p. 182.

autres figures qui remplissent les précédentes, désire y trouver une fin, qu'il continue; nous allons la lui donner.<sup>62</sup>

Résigné à s'ennuyer partout et à s'ennuyer de tout, il déclara vouloir faire son droit et il alla habiter Paris.<sup>63</sup>

The story ends with the report of the protagonist's death and Sartre insists on the presence of the theme of death and mortality throughout *Novembre*, claiming that it symbolises Flaubert's neurosis (*IF*, II, p. 1754). The author's recognition of his own neurosis not only happens in reaction to the encounter with his self objectified in the text, but further leads him to reinforce that objectification on the level of the text, by ending the first narrator's subjectivity and transposing his first-hand account to the third-person singular.

The movement from the subjective to the objective is thus performed by a change of pronouns, a move from 'Je' to 'Il', a literary device on which Sartre insists several times (e.g. *IF*, II, pp. 1723, 1726, 1728). With regard to the two successive narrators of *Novembre* Sartre says:

[...] des deux subjectivités, la première se referme et devient *objet*; l'autre – car il faut bien, quelquefois, que le témoin inconnu dise je ou moi –, Flaubert entend que nous ne sachions rien d'elle. Elle *se passe sous silence* [...] (*IF*, II, p. 1730)

The impersonal and detached narrator thus invented by *Novembre* appears as a logical corollary of the relegation of subjectivity to the objectivity of the 'Il'.<sup>64</sup> Significant resonances can be discovered between this section of the text and comments made by some of Sartre's contemporaries. Barthes's conclusions in the pages of *Le Degré zéro de la littérature* dedicated to the appearance of the third person singular in nineteenth-century literature are particularly close to Sartre's comments. Barthes distinguishes between 'two opposed ethics' that can be deployed through the third person character. The first, epitomised by Balzac, is rather

<sup>62</sup> Flaubert, *Œuvres de jeunesse*, p. 243.

<sup>63</sup> Flaubert, *Œuvres de jeunesse*, p. 247.

<sup>64</sup> The shift in perspective allows us to explain a comment Sartre makes in the notes for the fourth volume of *L'Idiot*, where we are told that in *Madame Bovary* the encounter between the author and the reader takes place at the level of the narrator, while elsewhere in the biography it is suggested, perfectly consistently, that in the juvenilia this mediation between author and reader takes place at the level of the character. Sartre's comments seem to indicate an attempt to combine narratology and reception theory.

formulaic and realises in the novel ‘une sorte d’état algébrique de l’action’.<sup>65</sup> More interesting for our purposes is the second ethics of the ‘il’, which for Barthes relates to an existential phenomenon (‘la fonction du “il” romanesque peut être d’exprimer une expérience existentielle’<sup>66</sup>). The existential experience Barthes has in mind is precisely the overcoming of the subjective ‘Je’, then transformed into the ‘Il’:

[...] parti d’un “je” qui est encore la forme la plus fidèle de l’anonymat, l’homme-auteur conquiert peu à peu le droit à la troisième personne, au fur et à mesure que l’existence devient destin, et le soliloque Roman.<sup>67</sup>

While the rupture in *Novembre* identified by Sartre is sudden, the transformation Barthes describes is ‘peu à peu’. Apart from this difference however, the similarities between the general development in the novel form described by *Dégré zéro* and Sartre’s close reading of *Novembre* are striking, suggesting indeed that for Sartre too the move from ‘Je’ to ‘Il’ has ramifications beyond Gustave’s literary development. The reader will have noticed the decidedly Sartrean (and Malrucian) overtones in Barthes’s formulation ‘la vie devient destin’. Moreover, Barthes and Sartre agree on Flaubert’s specific role in the invention of a certain type of literary ‘Il’. Barthes thus says:

Entre la troisième personne de Balzac et celle de Flaubert il y a tout un monde (celui de 1848): là une Histoire âpre [...], le triomphe d’un ordre; ici un art, qui, pour échapper à sa mauvaise conscience, charge la convention ou tente de la détruire [...] La modernité commence avec la recherche d’une Littérature impossible.<sup>68</sup>

Barthes’s historical account (in 1953), is of course heavily indebted to *QL*.<sup>69</sup> The passage further reveals agreements with *L’Idiot* on a number of points whilst offering fruitful additions: both describe the appearance of the literary ‘Il’ as resulting from experience; for both the novelistic third person singular, in its Flaubertian variant, represents the denial of that experience; Barthes additionally defines the Flaubertian ‘Il’ as a phenomenon that is firstly

<sup>65</sup> Barthes, *Le Dégré zéro*, p. 31.

<sup>66</sup> Barthes, *Le Dégré zéro*, p. 31.

<sup>67</sup> Barthes, *Le Dégré zéro*, p. 31.

<sup>68</sup> Barthes, *Le Dégré zéro*, p. 32.

<sup>69</sup> Annette Lavers, *Roland Barthes, Structuralism and after* (London: Methuen, 1982), pp. 60-61, p. 67.

symptomatic of modern literature more generally and that is secondly rooted in the experience of 1848. Although the part of the *L'Idiot* immediately concerned with the death of subjective authorship in *Novembre* does not explicitly establish this historical link, Sartre's comments are of course perfectly concurrent with Barthes's insistence on the impact of 1848 on the French bourgeoisie – the biography does situate the literary development of *Novembre* within Flaubert's struggle against his bourgeois destiny. Sartre's assumption of a diachronic correspondence between Flaubert's personal neurosis and the objective neurosis caused by the experience of the Revolution further explains the appearance of the 'Il' as negation of subjectivity/experience as early as 1842, something for which Barthes's less complex historical perspective is less equipped to account.

While Sartre's view of the author in *QIL* could be characterised as both historical and ethico-ontological,<sup>70</sup> Barthes's approach in *Dégré zéro* seems to begin from a similarly historicising starting point that, in Annette Lavers's words, 'shows rather how one or another of the various components of a permanent structure were dominant at certain periods of history'.<sup>71</sup> In his reading of *Novembre*, Sartre's close attention to stylistic detail in its historic dimension, together with the marginalisation of an ethico-ontological conception of the writer's choice, suggests that *L'Idiot* is in some ways closer to *Dégré zéro* than was *QIL*, despite the chronology of publication. Sartre's position on the author-public relationship is thus increasingly historical, while Barthes's later conception of authorship was to become increasingly ahistorical in comparison to Sartre's.

One of the most influential observations on the matter of the third person narrator can be found in Maurice Blanchot's *L'Espace littéraire* (1955). The appearance of the 'Il' as described by Blanchot is as reminiscent of Sartre's analysis of *Novembre* as are Barthes's comments. Blanchot writes:

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<sup>70</sup> Cf. Lavers, *Barthes*, p. 68.

<sup>71</sup> Lavers, *Barthes*, p. 67.

L'écrivain, dit-on, renonce à dire "Je". Kafka remarque, avec surprise, avec un plaisir enchanté, qu'il est entré dans la littérature dès qu'il a pu substituer le "Il" au "Je". C'est vrai, mais la transformation est bien plus profonde. L'écrivain appartient à un langage que personne ne parle, qui ne s'adresse à personne [...] il ne peut plus jamais s'exprimer et il ne peut pas davantage en appeler à toi, ni encore donner la parole à autrui. Là où il est, seul parle l'être [...] la parole ne parle plus, mais est, mais se voue à la pure passivité d'être.<sup>72</sup>

Blanchot thus affirms *in principle* a process that corresponds very closely to what we have been able to note in Sartre's reading of *Novembre*. For Blanchot, literature is defined as that which emerges when the 'Je' is replaced by the 'Il', as a space which is fundamentally isolating, since with the 'Je' disappears the 'Tu'. Literature according to Blanchot seems to mirror Sartre's interpretation of Flaubert's intentions more broadly, as in both accounts we observe the isolation of the writer, the disappearance of the reader (or the desire for that disappearance), and finally literature as passivity (Blanchot) or passive activity (*L'Idiot*). Blanchot's text further allows us to illuminate an aspect that is somewhat under-developed in the passage from *L'Idiot de la famille* with which we are concerned here, namely the effect exerted by literature itself: for Blanchot the isolation of the writer is the 'solitude qui arrive à l'écrivain *de par l'œuvre*' (emphasis added).<sup>73</sup> For Sartre it is the failure of the first parts of *Novembre* that leads Gustave to make the first step towards *impersonalism* through the death of the subjective narrator. In this sense the severing of subjectivity and text also occurs 'de par l'œuvre', to use Blanchot's formulation. But in a more profound sense, it could be argued that in *L'Idiot* Gustave's increasing imaginisation accelerates the movement towards the symbolic death in 1844, foreshadowed by 'cette page désolée' of *Novembre* (*IF*, II, p. 1631, quoted above), just as the 'solitude' of Blanchot's writer is a result of writing itself.<sup>74</sup>

Sartre may not agree with Blanchot in principle, but describes the desire to terminate subjectivity through its objectification with striking similarities to what for Blanchot is a

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<sup>72</sup> Blanchot, *L'Espace*, p. 21.

<sup>73</sup> Blanchot, *L'Espace*, p. 23.

<sup>74</sup> The privileged position of *Novembre* appears to be corroborated by Jean Bruneau, for whom this text ends the juvenilia. Jean Bruneau, *Les Débuts littéraires de Gustave Flaubert, 1831-1845* (Paris: A. Colin, 1962), pp. 7ff.

general fact of literature. Sartre's *descriptions* are thus close to other critics who are associated with opposing theoretical positions, while his *interpretation* of those observations remains distinct. If we consider, as does Sandro Briosi, that the object of Sartre's discussion is not only Flaubert, but the modern artist as such,<sup>75</sup> these similarities on the descriptive level are not surprising. As a consequence, Sartre seems more willing to acknowledge Flaubert's influence on the *esprit objectif* of the twentieth century. If we recall Sartre's description of Flaubert as being 'au carrefour de tous nos problèmes littéraires d'aujourd'hui', we can now concretise our claim that the adoption of an external and objectifying point of view on subjectivity constitutes one of these 'problèmes', or rather conditions. After all, as Contat and Deguy point out, Sartre shares with Blanchot and Barthes 'l'horreur des textes intimes',<sup>76</sup> and he very successfully transforms some of the material from his notebooks, written in the first-person perspective, into 'une fiction à la troisième personne' attributed to Mathieu's fictional character in *Le Sursis*.<sup>77</sup> Sartre's reading of *Novembre* perhaps presents the reader with an originary myth for the severing of the link between subjectivity and text. For Sartre, as for Flaubert, as we shall see now, that link remains complicated but of course continues to exist.

## II. 2. The Impossibility of self-knowledge

Thus far we have established that Gustave's activity of rereading his own writing, particularly in the case of 'automatic' composition, leads to a sudden, if estranged, recognition of his own subjectivity in the objectified text. Sartre seems to identify two interrelated reactions: firstly the desire to end the subjectivity thus discovered in the text, particularly during the composition of *Novembre*, and secondly the urge to analyse and know his self, particularly when writing *Mémoires d'un fou*. According to Sartre, Flaubert's correspondence in this period

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<sup>75</sup> Briosi, 'A la recherche', p. 248.

<sup>76</sup> Contat, and Deguy, 'Les Carnets', p. 27.

<sup>77</sup> Contat and Deguy, 'Les Carnets', p. 22.

reveals a serious attempt at auto-analysis, as a result of the crisis provoked by the composition of *Mémoires d'un fou* in 1838 (*IF*, II, pp. 1525-42) during which Gustave's shocking encounter with his own *vécu* as objectified in the text is particularly intense. *L'Idiot* quotes a letter to Ernest Chevalier, in which Gustave announces his activity of auto-analysis: "je m'analyse davantage, moi et les autres. Je dissèque sans cesse [...]".<sup>78</sup> This effort to know himself however, fails as Gustave 'sent qu'il s'échappe' (*IF*, II, p. 1549). Gustave's endeavour is limited by a certain bad faith, by the means at his disposal, namely a 'scientific' method of investigation inherited from the generation represented by Achille-Cléophas, and by the fundamental impossibility of self-identity.

In the last chapter we saw that the young Flaubert is excluded from a reflective attitude towards his own self, and is instead reduced to the fleeting reflection of his own mirror-image. The attempt at auto-analysis leads him to precisely this conclusion: 'dans la vision de soi-même il y a déjà un jeu de reflets; et se connaître, c'est *se jouer*: l'introspection devait mettre un terme à la comédie, elle la développe au contraire et la sincérité réflexive n'est pas possible' (*IF*, II, p. 1549). Gustave's ego is thus particularly prone to sliding into the unknowability of the role, but the impossibility of identifying one's own self in general terms is unsurprising if we recall that, as we saw in the previous chapter, *La Transcendance de l'égo* posits already the unknowability of one's own ego: '[...] ce qui empêche radicalement d'acquérir de réelles connaissances sur l'Ego, c'est la façon toute spéciale dont il se donne à la conscience réflexive. En effet, l'Ego n'apparaît jamais que lorsqu'on ne le regarde pas'.<sup>79</sup> As Christina Howells remarks, the situation is particularly disturbing and complex in Flaubert's case, but the ego is fleeting and a blind spot for every human being. Consciousness is always its own negation; the subject is split and never self-coincidental.<sup>80</sup>

<sup>78</sup> Gustave Flaubert, letter from 26 December 1838, quoted in *IF*, II, p. 1543.

<sup>79</sup> Sartre, *La Transcendance*, p. 62.

<sup>80</sup> Christina Howells, 'Flaubert's Blind Spot', p. 30.

Despite this seemingly unequivocal rejection of the possibility of self-knowledge by Sartre, we would simplify the position that emerges from *L'Idiot* if we identified Gustave's failed auto-analysis as nothing but a confirmation of a principle in place since 1936. Sartre does not simply re-affirm an ontological position through a concrete case, but further places the limits of subjectivity to become its own object within the historical context. The specific disadvantageous conditions prohibiting self-knowledge in Gustave's case, namely his unwillingness to actually know himself, the faulty methods at his disposal and his isolation, renders the 'unknowability' of the self somewhat less categorical. The unfavourable conditions do not only apply to Gustave Flaubert but are connected to a more general historical situation of the individual agent: the bad faith with which he shies away from understanding his condition, as Sartre insists repeatedly, is to be understood as an unwillingness to grasp his own class position. Secondly, if, as demonstrated in the previous chapter, Gustave's isolation is at the root of his exclusion from the real, we might conclude that intersubjective communication might equally have the potential of granting self-knowledge. Most importantly, while self-*knowledge* remains impossible for Gustave, self-*comprehension*, its counterpart, is perfectly available even to the passive agent.

### II. 3. Self-comprehension

'Comprehension' is a crucial theme throughout Sartre's writings since *Les Carnets de la drôle de guerre*, where Sartre uses a, to him rather unsatisfying, biography of the Prussian emperor Wilhelm II as a starting point for a series of reflections on the practice of biography. He concludes that the historian should not simply consider reality as a series of *faits* (his famous example is the view according to which the emperor's lame arm and his foreign policy are two unconnected facts) but rather consider the historical agent as 'réalité humaine se projetant à travers une série de situations'. Such an approach, Sartre hopes, might uncover a 'rapport

interne et de *compréhension* entre cette politique anglaise et le bras atrophié' (emphasis added).<sup>81</sup> This methodological understanding of 'comprehension' as an approach adopted by the biographer or historian towards her object of study is the first meaning of 'comprehension' in Sartre's work. Following the *Carnets*, Sartre's methodological model of comprehension will be developed further in *L'Être et le néant* where it is the practice to be adopted by existential biography, while in the *Cahiers pour une morale* it is explored as historiographical tool. And finally, as we saw in our introduction, the methodological aim of *L'Idiot* is based on the principle established in *Questions de Méthode*, which proposes the insertion of *compréhension* of the individual *vécu* into Marxist historical study otherwise dominated by mere *connaissance*.

As several critics have remarked, Sartre's recourse to the concept 'comprehension' bears significant traces of the influence of Wilhelm Dilthey and the German 19<sup>th</sup>-century historiographical *Verstehen*-tradition.<sup>82</sup> Rhiannon Goldthorpe further notes the co-existence in Sartre's writings of two meanings of 'comprehension', namely 'the historian's understanding of the agent's praxis, and the agent's understanding of the situation in which he acts'.<sup>83</sup> In *L'Idiot* both meanings, which are of course interrelated, could be said to find their fullest development, but it is the latter sense, i.e. the observation of Gustave's self-comprehension that is particularly novel.

When discussing Flaubert's difficulty with the requirements of the school system, Sartre remarks that the young boy's thinking, as a result of his passivity, is incapable of analysis or conceptualisation, and is instead characterised by a 'mode de connaissance pré dialectique [...] plus proche de la compréhension que de l'acte judiciaire' (*IF*, II, pp. 1133-35). This is developed in much more detail later on in *L'Idiot*, in the section following the description of

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<sup>81</sup> Sartre, *Les Carnets*, p. 365.

<sup>82</sup> See in particular: Rhiannon Goldthorpe, 'Understanding the Committed Writer', in *The Cambridge Companion to Sartre*, ed. by Howells, pp. 140–77; Michael Sheringham, 'Sartre et la compréhension du vécu', in *Fictions Biographiques: XIXe-XXI Siècles* (Toulouse: Presses Universitaires du Mirail, 2007), pp. 275–87. Moreover, Sartre's debt to Hans-Georg Gadamer's contribution to hermeneutics, in particular Gadamer's emphasis on dialogue and communication, would merit a comprehensive discussion for which there is not sufficient space here.

<sup>83</sup> Goldthorpe, 'Committed Writer', p. 165.

Flaubert's failed attempts at self-knowledge. Here Sartre says: 'En contrepartie de l'impossible *connaissance de soi*, il possède une *compréhension* exceptionnelle de ses mouvements intimes' (*IF*, II, p. 1551). In this context, Sartre delivers a definition of self-comprehension that is more general than a mere observation of Gustave's case:

La compréhension est un accompagnement muet du vécu, une familiarité [...], sans explication, c'est une saisie obscure du sens d'un processus par-delà ses significations [...] elle est elle-même vécue et je la nommerai *préréflexive* (et non irréfléchie) parce qu'elle apparaît comme un redoublement sans distance de l'intériorisation. Intermédiaire entre la conscience non thétique et la thématization réflexive, c'est l'aurore d'une réflexion, mais quand celle-ci surgit, avec ses outils verbaux, il est fréquent qu'elle fausse le "compris": d'autres forces entrent en jeu (par exemple, chez Flaubert, le refus du singulier) qui la dévieront ou la contraindront à remplacer le sens par un ensemble lié de significations, les profondeurs entrevues par des généralités verbales et superficielles (*IF*, II, p. 1551).

Comprehension is thus decidedly pre-linguistic (even 'muet'), an involuntary complement of lived reality, and it can be the ground from which reflexivity emerges, to which we shall return in a moment. While the origins of 'comprehension' as method in the *Verstehen* tradition have been discussed in detail by a number of critics, Martin Heidegger's direct influence on Sartre's notion of self-understanding has received less attention. The parallels are however striking: in §31 of *Being and Time* (1926), entitled "Da-Sein as Understanding", Heidegger posits understanding as a primary category of awareness, a 'fundamental existential'<sup>84</sup> which has the 'existential structure which we call *project*'<sup>85</sup> – much like Sartre's understanding is linked to the *vécu* – and self-knowledge for Heidegger, too, is not the product of a process of 'gazing at a point which is the self, but of grasping and understanding the full disclosedness of being-in-the-world *throughout all* its essential constitutive factors'.<sup>86</sup> Sartre himself points towards this debt to Heidegger, first in the *Carnets*, where he refers to the vision that his younger self entertained of his life (see chapter 1 on 'destiny') as 'l'objet de ce que Heidegger appelle

<sup>84</sup> Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time* [1927], trans. by Joan Stambaugh (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1996), p. 134. Martin Heidegger, *Sein Und Zeit* [1926], 11th edn (Tübingen: Maz Niemeyer Verlag, 1967), p. 144.

<sup>85</sup> Heidegger, *Being and Time*, p. 136; *Sein und Zeit*, p. 145.

<sup>86</sup> Heidegger, *Being and Time*, p. 137; *Sein und Zeit*, p. 146.

“compréhension préontologique”.<sup>87</sup> This nod to Heidegger is renewed in the outline of existential psychoanalysis in *L'Être et le néant*, where the method of identifying the *choix originel* of an individual is defined as relying on ‘la compréhension préontologique et fondamentale que l’homme a de la personne humaine’.<sup>88</sup>

### II. 3. 1. Comprehension, writing and the imaginary

The pre-reflexive, and even pre-verbal, aspect of comprehension is thus one of its defining features. Nevertheless – and this is less paradoxical than it may at first seem – in Sartre’s account of Flaubert’s trajectory the medium of self-comprehension is often writing and the imaginary. The entire question of self-knowledge and self-comprehension is of course configured around the activity of writing on a very obvious level, since it is a literary failure (of the *Mémoires*) that instils in Gustave a ‘rage de se connaître’ – ‘rage littéraire, mais vraie’ (*IF*, II, p. 1543), and ‘la transposition esthétique de l’anomalie exige et refuse tout à la fois un développement, chez Gustave, de la connaissance de soi’ (*IF*, II, p. 1510). More profoundly, Gustave’s instinctive self-comprehension manifests itself in the choice of the topic of his writing. In this respect Sartre insists in particular on the fourth chapter of *Mémoires d’un fou* in which Gustave relates two nightmares, a bloodthirsty scene in which the young boy feels threatened by his family, and another dream in which Gustave’s mother drowns in his presence. For Sartre then, it is the decision to relate these nightmares, at a time when the inclusion of dreams in narratives would not have been a widespread literary practice, that constitutes Gustave’s self-comprehension: without being able to verbalise their significance on a reflective level, Gustave ‘en [a] pressenti l’importance secrète’ (*IF*, II, p. 1555), and his correspondence reveals, according to Sartre, ‘l’extraordinaire conscience que Flaubert a de la compréhension de soi’ (*IF*, II, p. 1557).

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<sup>87</sup> Sartre, *Les Carnets*, p. 104.

<sup>88</sup> Sartre, *L'Être et le néant*, p. 614.

As we saw in the previous chapter, Sartre insists that Gustave's lived experience appears to him as 'indisable'; we can now be more precise and add that it is comprehended but not known. Consequently, Flaubert's writing will be tasked with rendering the comprehended *sens* of his *vécu* rather than its known signification. Comprehension, we can now add to the shift in Sartre's theory of literature to which we pointed in part I of this chapter, is the form of awareness necessary for and transmitted by passive types of writing. For instance, the unbearable situation in the family, says Sartre, is rendered on the level of the imaginary, either as descriptions of images of the father's funeral long before his death, or as generalised curses of the entire universe. At the same time, self-comprehension is not only expressed through but is also obtained from the irrealisation of the real, and often through the medium of writing: 'les imprécations de Gustave – parce qu'elles irréalisent le vécu réel – lui découvrent le stress qu'il faudra bien appeler, un peu plus tard, névrose et qu'il finira [...] par comprendre [...]' (*IF*, II, p. 1682, emphasis added). The purpose of the second narrator in *Novembre* is not only to deny the subjectivity of the first, but also to investigate it via the product of imagination, i.e. to 'cerner l'imaginaire et [...] le définir' (*IF*, II, p. 1734).

In the section introducing the obscure comprehension that lies behind Gustave's choice of narrating his dreams in *Novembre*, Sartre moreover approaches the conditions in which comprehension is transformed into knowledge: Flaubert, without access to the 'code' necessary for 'decrypting' his dreams, is led to write them down out of an 'intuition onirique', presenting itself as 'choix littéraire' or 'nécessité subie' (*IF*, II, p. 1553). Sartre thus agrees with Freud that the dream, a product of the imagination, as we know, can grant access to the self and he credits Flaubert for having sensed this possibility 'un demi-siècle avant la *Traumdeutung*' (*ibid.*). It seems to be psychoanalysis that subsequently enables us to transform Gustave's comprehending intuition into knowledge: 'l'inconnaissable devient objet de connaissance dès qu'on est en possession d'une méthode d'interprétation; pour nous, lecteurs du XX<sup>e</sup> siècle, les

rêves de Flaubert sont déchiffrables' (*IF*, II, p. 1553). The method of interpretation is, as we might infer from words such as 'code' and 'decipher' as open to Structuralist readings as it is to psychoanalysis. The method is demonstrated by Sartre himself, who acts as Flaubert's translator: 'traduit en mots, le sentiment "indisable" de Gustave pourrait s'exprimer ainsi [...]' (*IF*, II, p. 1704). Having conceded the 'inarticulable' aspect of desire to Lacan in 1965,<sup>89</sup> Sartre in 1971-72 investigates this circumstance as a fact of subjectivity, and explores theoretically and in practice ways of not only fictionally rendering the 'indisable', but moreover of transforming it into a 'disable' through the intervention of the reader, the other, the analyst.<sup>90</sup> Hence, without much concern for modesty, *L'Idiot* proposes Sartre himself as the representative of 'nous, lecteurs du XX<sup>e</sup> siècle', in an attempt at transposing Gustave's 'indisable' into the realm of truth where 'everything can be communicated'.

Several conclusions can be drawn from this relationship between *compréhension* and *connaissance*: firstly, knowledge appears as the result of a movement that is born out of and transcends comprehension, not as a completely distinct category. In this, Sartre's notion of comprehension again echoes Heidegger's, for whom understanding (in the sense of concrete understanding of a specific fact) and explanation are two forms of cognition amongst others that should be considered as 'derivatives' of 'primary understanding'.<sup>91</sup> In terms of Sartre's theory of subjectivity more generally, we can identify a transcending movement similar to that from 'croyance' to 'savoir', and that from the gesture to the act (chapter 3). Contrary to Sandro Briosi's claim that Sartre's thought is without 'lieux "mixtes"' and instead populated by pure opposites that can at best be reversed,<sup>92</sup> *L'Idiot* presents a number of cases which suggest a classification of human conduct as 'stages', whereby in each case intersubjectivity is the mediation required to perform the movement from one condition to the other.

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<sup>89</sup> Sartre, 'L'Écrivain', p. 63.

<sup>90</sup> These functions overlap heavily, as we shall see in the next chapter.

<sup>91</sup> Heidegger, *Being and Time*, p. 134 ; *Sein und Zeit*, p. 143.

<sup>92</sup> Briosi, 'A la recherche', p. 241.

Secondly, we should return briefly to the question of Sartre's own method of utilising the imaginary within the construction of *L'Idiot*. As we have seen, *L'Idiot* is by no means simply constituted by a chain of imaginary scenes but by an integrated network of imagination, documentation and theorisation. In this we follow Jeanette Colombel's distinction between the Flaubertian imaginary as 'belief' and the Sartrean imaginary as 'play'.<sup>93</sup> Jean Bourgault additionally emphasises the controlled character of Sartre's recourse to the imaginary, which stands in contrast to Flaubert's case in which the imaginary is dominant. We find confirmation of this assumption not only in Sartre's method, but also in his theory of comprehension as requiring insertion into a reflective, analytical framework. Bourgault adds: 'La méthode de Sartre produit une compréhension parce qu'elle refuse de céder à l'imagination, et ce même – et surtout – lorsqu'elle s'appuie sur le pouvoir de l'imagination. Elle en appelle alors à l'imagination contre elle-même [...]'.<sup>94</sup> Both Colombel and Bourgault thus advance different versions of an argument that stresses the difference between the respective usage that Sartre and Flaubert make of the imaginary. Under consideration of Sartre's highly approving comments about Flaubert's self-comprehension, we can add that *L'Idiot* further lays out a theory of the possibility of transcending a state of captivity by the imaginary towards the insertion of comprehension through the imaginary into a framework of reflexivity.

A third conclusion concerns Sartre's theory of the imaginary itself. The passages we have considered suggest that in certain respects information can be obtained from the imaginary, be it from a succession of images such as the dream, or from imagination objectified in writing.<sup>95</sup> It appears that while truth and knowledge pertain to the realm of the real, comprehension is associated, although not exclusively, with the realm of the imaginary (see below). That the product of imagination should provide a certain level of self-comprehension

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<sup>93</sup> Jeannette Colombel, *Sartre, ou, Le Parti de vivre* (Paris: Grasset, 1981), p. 313.

<sup>94</sup> Jean Bourgault, 'Réinventer l'art d'écrire', *Recherches & Travaux*, Traverses 19-21, 2007, 107–23 (p. 115).

<sup>95</sup> Additional examples can be provided for the latter phenomenon: Gustave searches his own self through examining the unreal in *Novembre* (*IF*, II, p. 1734) and he *imagines* suicide and then senses his *real* motifs to take his life (*IF*, II, p. 1731).

is thus to be expected; but as we have noted, these categories interpenetrate one another, and knowledge too, using the appropriate methods, can be obtained from a set of mediations involving the imaginary. The text explicitly uses the categories of the irreal and the real in this context: ‘il faudra attendre plus d’un demi-siècle avant qu’une méthode nouvelle permette de déchiffrer le réel à travers les produits de l’irréalisation’, Sartre says, referring to Gustave’s imaginaryised parricidal desires (*IF*, II, p. 1683). *L’Idiot* thereby introduces what one might call a (limited) ‘informative’ function of the imaginary, i.e. the possibility of obtaining certain forms of knowledge from a procedure that involves imagination. *L’Imaginaire*, of course, categorically denied this possibility, instead insisting on the ‘pauvreté essentielle de l’image’, as a consequence of which ‘l’objet de l’image n’est jamais rien de plus que la conscience qu’on en a; il se définit par cette conscience: on ne peut rien apprendre d’une image qu’on ne sache déjà’.<sup>96</sup> One would go too far in claiming that Sartre abandons this principle in *L’Idiot*; rather, we find confirmation of our hypothesis of a widened definition of the imaginary established in the previous chapter. On the one hand, the product of imagining consciousness in the technical sense still obeys the law of the ‘pauvreté essentielle de l’image’, which *L’Idiot* reiterates (*IF*, I, p. 923). On the other hand, however, it seems that the objectification of the image in the text acquires a certain consistency that enables it to provide information about the self. This is the case, as we shall see at the end of our discussion of comprehension, precisely to the extent to which Sartre’s notion of the self has changed accordingly. For Gustave, as we shall see now in more detail, the form that the comprehension obtained from the image adopts is extremely fleeting and described by Sartre with striking frequency as a sudden light.

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<sup>96</sup> Jean Bourgault, ‘Réinventer l’art d’écrire’, p. 115.

### II. 3. 2. The metaphor of light: comprehension as ‘fulguration’

The images of light and darkness are of course extremely familiar metaphors for themes of knowledge and ignorance, but their appearance in *L’Idiot de la famille* merits our attention due to their role in the relationship between comprehension and the imaginary. Examples of the motifs of ‘fulgurations’, ‘éclairs’, ‘éblouir’ etc. can be found throughout the text,<sup>97</sup> but they occur with particular intensity in the passages concerned with Flaubert’s self-comprehension, namely during the composition of *Mémoires d’un fou*, and the crisis of 1844. If we return to the definition of ‘comprehension’ quoted above (II. 3), we note its ambiguous status within what we might call the spectrum of luminosity, since it contains both the formulation ‘une saisie obscure’, but also ‘l’aurore d’une réflexion’. We shall put aside the component of darkness for now and return to it shortly – in order to explain the involvement of the imaginary in self-comprehension, a closer look at the role of light is required first.

If Gustave’s acquisition of awareness through comprehension could be depicted as ‘enlightenment’, this is not rendered as gradual progress, but rather as abrupt ‘fulgurations’ and ‘éclairs’. Sartre’s descriptions to this effect are frequently substantiated by Flaubert’s own comments, such as the following remark made in a letter to his sister:

[...] à force de m’analyser, je ne sais plus du tout ce que je suis; aussi j’ai perdu la sottise prétention de vouloir me diriger à tâtons dans cette chambre obscure du cœur qu’éclaire de temps à autre un éclair fugitif qui découvre tout, il est vrai, mais en revanche vous aveugle pour longtemps [...]<sup>98</sup>

For Sartre this passage is of capital importance, because it confirms the failure of Gustave’s self-knowledge and ‘l’extraordinaire conscience que Flaubert a de la compréhension de soi’ – a comprehension that, Sartre says, appears as sudden ‘aperception de la personne entière’ which, as he further hypothesises, might emerge ‘dans certains états d’*estrangement* où Flaubert est surpris par ses conduites’ (*IF*, II, p. 1557). These ‘éclairs de compréhension’ (*IF*, II, p.

<sup>97</sup> For instance, when adhering to automated forms of writing, Gustave’s writing is said to be ‘en aveugle’ (*IF*, II, p. 1498), while his texts let his ‘Je véritable’ appear ‘par éclairs’ (*IF*, II, p. 1530).

<sup>98</sup> Gustave Flaubert, *Correspondance*, Supplément I, p. 49, discussed by Sartre in *IF*, II, pp. 1555ff.

1555) are short and uncontrollable movements (indeed, ‘l’intuition n’est jamais préparée et ne peut être reproduite’, *IF*, II, p. 1558). The explanation for their involuntary character seems to be – once more – Gustave’s passivity: because he cannot actively reflect on himself, intuition comes to him in a momentary glimpse. Sartre insists on this phenomenon several times, and it is central to his analysis of the Pont-l’Évêque crisis: in his seizure-like state during a nocturnal journey together with the brother Achille, Flaubert, again in his own words, experiences something resembling “tous les fuseaux allumés d’un feu d’artifice” (*IF*, II, p. 1794). The crisis of 1844, in many ways the culmination of the process of personalisation, seems to produce an extreme intensification of the mental ‘fulgurations’ by which Flaubert had frequently been struck. Interestingly, Sartre identifies in this period the highest degree of self-comprehension, coming as close as possible to auto-analysis (*IF*, II, p. 1797).

13 years after the event, Flaubert then describes the crisis as “tourbillon d’images” (*IF*, II, p. 1855) and Sartre follows him in seeing in the ‘feu d’artifice’ a succession of images, referring to them as ‘les millions d’images et d’idées qui se pressaient dans sa conscience’ (*IF*, II, p. 1794) or as ‘le flux rapide des images’ (*IF*, II, p. 1818).<sup>99</sup> If ‘fulguration’ and image are explicitly associated at this point, their proximity is equally evident in earlier remarks on Flaubert’s ‘éclairs de compréhension’: of the different attitudes that consciousness can adopt in *L’Imaginaire*, the ‘sudden and total aperception’ cited above certainly seems closest to the imagination, which, likewise, ‘se donne tout entière pour ce qu’elle est, dès son apparition’.<sup>100</sup> The analogy can be drawn further, since, just as the image is opposed to vision, which pertains to perception, the ‘fulguration’ is equally described as ‘blinding’ by Flaubert. Sartre explains this ‘blinding’ effect by pointing to the double character of the phenomenon of ‘fulguration’ as both spontaneous comprehension and ‘refus de se connaître’ (*IF*, II, p. 1558). The ‘éclair’

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<sup>99</sup> The 1844 crisis then appears as a densification of imagination absolutely concurrent with *L’Imaginaire*: as Flaubert abandons himself to the ‘flux d’images’, he is in a physical state similar to the beginning of sleep when one frequently experiences ‘images hypnagogiques’ (*IF*, II, p. 1856 and *L’Imaginaire*, pp. 79ff).

<sup>100</sup> Sartre *L’Imaginaire*, p. 25.

itself, in its brevity and ‘blinding’ nature, obeys the law of imagining consciousness outlined in *L’Imaginaire*, according to which any object can be given as *either image or concept*. Immediately, it seems that the image is still ‘une conscience *sui generis* qui ne peut en aucune façon *faire partie* d’une conscience plus vaste’.<sup>101</sup> In its immediate occurrence, imagining consciousness retains its exclusive character; what changes is that imagination is theoretically integrated into a wider dialectic of intuition, comprehension and knowledge, in which it plays a mediating role.

Sartre’s insistence on Flaubert’s ‘fulgurations’ and the (albeit limited) information they provide in the form of comprehension echo another monumental, and also unfinished, text concerned with the nineteenth century in France, namely Walter Benjamin’s *Arcades Project*, written in the 1920s and 1930s and first published in German in its fragmentary form in 1982.<sup>102</sup> In a note in the section entitled “On the Theory of Knowledge. On the Theory of Progress”, Benjamin writes in his characteristically enigmatic style: ‘in the fields with which we are concerned, knowledge comes only in lightning flashes. The text is the long roll of the thunder that follows’.<sup>103</sup> For Benjamin too, the lightning flash (or ‘fulguration’, in Sartre’s words) is closely associated with the image, constituting the foundation for one of his most famous concepts, the ‘dialectical image’, which is precisely ‘an image that emerges suddenly, in a flash’.<sup>104</sup> The *Arcades Project* defines the dialectical image in the following way:

It is not that what is past casts its light on what is present, or what is present its light on what is past; rather, image is that wherein what has been comes together in a flash with the now to form a constellation. In other words, image is dialectics at a standstill. For while the relation of the present to the past is a purely temporal, continuous one, the relation of what-has-been to the now is dialectical: is not progression but image, suddenly emergent. – Only dialectical images are

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<sup>101</sup> Sartre *L’Imaginaire*, p. 37.

<sup>102</sup> The connection between Benjamin and Sartre is almost entirely unexplored, with the exception of brief comments made by Rainer Wanicke (see chapter 5) and Alex Callinicos’s *Making History* (see chapter 2). A comparison of the two authors seems justified, however, by their common interest in synthesising nineteenth-century history, by a set of shared influences such as Heidegger and Proust, and by the fact that some of their work emerges from the same cultural context, i.e. the Paris of the 1930s.

<sup>103</sup> Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project* [1982] (Cambridge, Massachusetts, and London, England: Harvard University Press, 2002), p. 456.

<sup>104</sup> Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, p. 473.

genuine images (that is, not archaic); and the place where one encounters them is language.<sup>105</sup>

Paradoxically, for Benjamin the dialectical image is ‘dialectics at a standstill’ that occurs in a moment of what elsewhere he calls ‘Now-time’, when past and present are crystallised in a sudden ruptural event that breaks with the ordinary time of history.<sup>106</sup> We may now re-visit the theme of Gustave’s ‘dé-situation’, which the last chapter presented as moments in which the real is inaccessible to Flaubert. Sartre quotes a passage from the *Souvenirs* in which Flaubert claims to practise a form of metempsychosis that gives him access to memories from other epochs, ‘de Rome ou de Carthage’. Sartre is clear that ‘il s’agit en vérité d’*images*, nées d’une culture [...] qu’il [...] *subit* au lieu de les produire’ (*IF*, II, p. 1568). On the contrary, Benjamin, who views history’s availability as precarious and only given through fleeting images, might be more sympathetic to Flaubert’s impression and indeed quotes a similar passage by Flaubert approvingly.<sup>107</sup> The conclusions that Benjamin and Sartre draw thus need to be distinguished very carefully. Nevertheless, on the descriptive level they independently produce a strikingly similar observation of a suddenly emerging ‘fulguration’ that has some role to play in wider processes of intellection. We might conclude that Sartre and Benjamin could agree, although phrased in very different terms, that the Second Empire produced a society in which insight was rather gained from momentary glimpses than from steady self-knowledge (see chapter 5). While the parallels mainly fall in the domain of consciousness (for Sartre, the ‘fulguration’ happens in a moment of mental ‘estrangement’, for Benjamin the dialectical image is also ‘the caesura in the movement of thought’<sup>108</sup>), one important difference between them is the extent to which the notion of a suddenly emerging ‘lighting flash’ is part of their *own* respective framework. While Sartre’s observation is limited to the description of Flaubert’s subjectivity,

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<sup>105</sup> Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, p. 462.

<sup>106</sup> Walter Benjamin, ‘Theses on the Philosophy of History’ [1940], in Benjamin, *Illuminations*, ed. by Hannah Arendt (New York: Schocken Books, 1986), pp. 253-64.

<sup>107</sup> ‘Flaubert, who was familiar with [Acadia, the melancholy unavailability of history], wrote [about Salammbô]: “Peu de gens devineront combien il a fallu être triste pour ressusciter Carthage”’. Benjamin, *Illuminations*, p. 256.

<sup>108</sup> Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, p. 475.

for Benjamin the ruptural moment of sudden illumination is located in his own historiographical method.<sup>109</sup> ‘The text that follows the lightning flash’ thus may well designate the historiographer’s text following a sudden realisation. In *L’Idiot* too, however, the ‘éclair’ could be seen as entailing a ‘rolling thunder’ in textual form – be it Gustave’s written re-working of his self or the analysis delivered by others, ‘*nous*, lecteurs du XX<sup>e</sup> siècle’. Despite methodological differences, we should remember that both Benjamin and Sartre, in very different situations, sought to jolt Marxism from its ossified state through a re-engagement with concrete history.<sup>110</sup> In light of Sartre’s overarching aim expressed in *Questions de Méthode* of introducing the method of *compréhension* into Marxist *connaissance*, Benjamin’s concept of ‘dialectical images’ certainly seems helpful in integrating Sartre’s observation of Flaubert’s ‘*éclairs de compréhension*’ into his overall theory of comprehension.

### II. 3. 3. Comprehension as darkness

Metaphors of darkness are in *L’Idiot de la famille* as recurrent as are those concerning light. Terms such as ‘obscur’, ‘ombre’, ‘noir’, and ‘nuit’ come to designate two slightly different circumstances: firstly, comprehension itself is defined as ‘*saisie obscure du sens*’ (see above) and it secondly designates the state of obfuscation in which Gustave finds himself, outside the moments of ‘fulguration’ (in the sense that this state too is accompanied by some form of comprehension, there is no complete opposition between the two meanings of ‘darkness’). When the text renders Flaubert’s point of view (as imagined by Sartre), this is in particular associated with the idea of the unconscious, such as is the case in the passages referring to Flaubert’s auto-analysis after the 1844 crisis. Here, Sartre seems impressed with Gustave’s instinctive turn towards his past in order to identify the origin of his situation, which, unable to find it in his consciousness, he ‘*localisera dans les ténèbres de l’inconscient nocturne*’ (*IF*,

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<sup>109</sup> Benjamin’s editor Rolf Tiedemann describes this as ‘messianism [...] as a kind of methodology of historical research’. Rolf Tiedemann, ‘Approaches to the *Passagen Werk*’, in Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, p. 944.

<sup>110</sup> Sartre, ‘Questions de méthode’, in *Critique*, I, p. 62.

II, p. 1798). For Gustave, ‘les ténèbres figurent l’inconscient, la nuit du non-savoir’ (*IF*, II, p. 1799) and formulations describing his ‘vie nocturne’ (*IF*, II, p. 1836) are repeated throughout the text.

If we recall *L’Être et le néant*, where Sartre refutes the ‘ténèbres de l’inconscient’ in the name of ‘une détermination libre et consciente [...]’ and opposes it to the possibility of *compréhension* of the complex,<sup>111</sup> we might simply consider Sartre’s references to the unconscious as representations of Gustave’s world-view, without being endorsed by Sartre. Even if this were the whole truth, it could still be suggested that Sartre’s observation is valid beyond the biography, treating Flaubert as individual and symbol for a subjectivity (individual and collective) that perceives itself as inaccessible. But although Sartre himself does not endorse the notion of the unconscious, he moves closer to accepting it. In “Sartre par Sartre” he reiterates his rejection of ‘l’inconscient tel que la psychanalyse nous le présente’, whilst however conceding that the *vécu*, defined as ‘l’ensemble du processus dialectique de la vie psychique’ is a process that ‘reste nécessairement opaque à lui-même’.<sup>112</sup> In “Sur ‘L’Idiot de la famille’” he further defines the *vécu* as ‘conscient-insconscient’, specifying that Flaubert’s *vécu* is a combination of ‘illuminations’ and ‘ombre’.<sup>113</sup> Hence, the association darkness-unconscious and light-consciousness to some extent seems to enter Sartre’s own conceptual framework. Without adopting the idea of a somewhat ‘fixed’ unconscious, Sartre establishes a dialectic of the unknown, comprehension and knowledge in which the imaginary plays a mediating role. The relatively unspecific metaphors of light and darkness allow him to paint a portrait of psychic life with the flexibility and overlapping nature that corresponds to the *vécu*.

The imaginary, we can now conclude, can be conceived as acquiring an ‘informative’ function in so far as psychic processes have become considerably more opaque since 1940, now containing regions (l’ombre) to which the imaginary and forms of consciousness akin to

<sup>111</sup> Sartre, *L’Être et le néant*, p. 619.

<sup>112</sup> Sartre, ‘Sartre par Sartre’, pp. 108–111.

<sup>113</sup> Sartre, ‘Sur “L’Idiot de la famille”’, pp. 110–11.

the image (illumination) can provide access. If, as Juliette Simont notes, from *L'Être et néant* onwards existential psychoanalysis goes beyond the notion of a purely external 'ego' created by impersonal consciousness, this is because there is indeed something such as a 'personne' that can be the object of psychoanalysis.<sup>114</sup> The somewhat greater consistency of the human person is at the root of the role played by the imaginary in the discovery of that person.

#### II. 4. The imaginary ego: the creation of the self through writing

Having thus demonstrated that the notion of comprehension allows Sartre to conceive of the objectified form of the image as providing access to the subjectivity which produced that image, another question immediately poses itself: if, as Sartre insists, personalisation and artistic quest are inextricably linked, what is the effect of this process on the imaginary component of Gustave's subjectivity? The previous and current chapters have both shown that an increasing integration of real and imaginary takes place in *L'Idiot*. If this intensified relationship entails the possibility of involving the objectified imaginary in the process of gaining knowledge about the subjectivity that produced it, should this not conversely lead to an even stronger imaginariation of the subject? In other words, if, to some extent, Gustave comprehends himself through the products of his writing, is his self distinguishable from the imaginary? Behind this, of course, lies the question of Sartre's theory of the imaginary, which, as we shall suggest, acquires not only an informative, but equally a 'productive' dimension, in some sense contributing to the creation of the self.

##### II. 4. 1. Memory and the Imaginary

Flaubert's self-comprehension is depicted as an (imaginary) invention as much as it appears as a discovery:

Il ne s'agit pas de dissection, cette fois, mais de reconstitution progressive: on cherche à mettre en perspective l'ensemble disparu, on veut découvrir ses

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<sup>114</sup> Juliette Simont, 'De la conscience impersonnelle à la "personnalisation": Jean-Paul Sartre, 1937-1971', in *Personne / Personnage*, ed. by Thierry Lenain and Aline Wiame, Les Annales de l'Institut de Philosophie et de Sciences Morales (Université Libre de Bruxelles) (Paris: Vrin, 2011), pp. 139–58 (p. 152).

articulations et les fixer par le discours. Dans cette nuit obscure, on croit marcher, on cherche à se *rappeler* une route qui n'a, par le fait, jamais existé et qu'il faudrait *inventer*. (IF, II, p. 1559, emphasis added)

Gustave's project of autobiography, Sartre seems to say, is an attempt to know and define the self through memory but because of the problematic status of self-knowledge, the young writer has to invent as much as he remembers. That self-knowledge, self-creation and memory should be inextricably linked is not very surprising – after all, the retrospective gaze of consciousness that creates the ego in *La Transcendance de l'égo* is of course a form of recollection. Accordingly, Gustave's evoking of memories and their transcription is necessarily a creation and not simply the description of Gustave's self: 'le but premier n'est pas de se raconter mais de trouver les mots qui restitueront l'immédiat' (IF, II, p. 1533). Gustave however, Sartre hints, is not so much attracted by the real but rather by the unreal component of memory: 'Gustave, veut-il ressusciter le passé en raison de sa *réalité* ou parce que celui-ci a cessé d'être réel?' (ibid).

Behind this formulation lies the theoretical problem of the relationship between memory and the imaginary, a problem that Sartre solves in a novel way in *L'Idiot*. In *L'Imaginaire*, Sartre defines memory and imagination as distinct phenomena. In the chapter on dreams, for example, Sartre quotes Maurice Halbwachs to the effect that dreaming consciousness (which, as we saw in the last chapter, is in an extreme state of captivity by the imaginary) radically excludes the real and thus memory: '[...] tout ce qu'elle sent [...] elle ne peut le sentir [...] autrement que sous la forme imagée. Voilà pourquoi, comme Halbwachs l'a montré, on ne se souvient pas, dans le rêve [...] le moindre souvenir *réel* ferait soudain cristalliser devant la conscience toute la réalité [...]'<sup>115</sup> In a recent article on Sartre's theory of the imaginary, Lior Levy argues that even in *L'Imaginaire* Sartre does not satisfactorily differentiate memory and imagination, since many of the qualities that characterise memories and images respectively

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<sup>115</sup> Sartre, *L'Imaginaire*, p. 325.

are in fact similar.<sup>116</sup> Although we do not find ourselves in agreement with all of Levy's assumptions,<sup>117</sup> her suggestion that *L'Imaginaire* implicitly allows for an approximation of memory and image is confirmed in the text on Flaubert, where this approximation becomes explicit.

Having asked whether Gustave turns to memory for the sake of the real or the imaginary, Sartre then reformulates the terms of the choice by adding: '[...] toute évocation du temps perdu est au carrefour du réel et de l'imaginaire' (*IF*, II, p. 1533). Sartre's frequent references to Proust in these passages, as well as his reference to 'le temps perdu', creates another link to Benjamin, translator of *A la recherche du temps perdu*, whose own conception of time and memory ('that wherein what has been comes together in a flash with the now to form a constellation'<sup>118</sup>) is as influenced by Proust as is Sartre's reformulation of the relationship between imagination and memory. In *L'Idiot* the explicit separation of memory and the imaginary is significantly weakened; we may speculate whether or not it is the case of Gustave Flaubert that has led to this development, but other passages in the biography do suggest that the subject matter indeed required a re-invention of theoretical tools. When discussing Flaubert's memories from the 'Voyage en Orient', Sartre notes that the combination of invented and 'real' memories in Gustave's report are the product of an attitude that derealises memory itself: '[...] le passage d'un souvenir [...] à un autre [s'est] opéré par la médiation de l'imaginaire pur' (*IF*, II, pp. 1676-77).

We can thus conclude that Sartre now allows a certain role of the imaginary in the creation of memories, both in Flaubert's individual case and as a general possibility. Gustave, we know, 'wants his ego to be imaginary'; but if memory is not distinct from imagining

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<sup>116</sup> Lior Levy, 'Rethinking the Relationship Between Memory and Imagination in Sartre's "The Imaginary"', *Journal of the British Society for Phenomenology*, 43.2 (2012), 143–60.

<sup>117</sup> Levy's argument relies on the assumption that imagining consciousness is a prototype of what will be consciousness as such in *L'Être et le néant*. Like Thomas Flynn for example, she therefore stresses the liberating effect of the imagination. As we saw in the previous chapter however, the imaginary for Sartre retains a very particular combination of entrapment and evasion from the real that cannot simply be attributed to consciousness as such.

<sup>118</sup> Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, p. 462.

consciousness, it follows that the descriptions of Gustave's 'imaginary ego' are in fact to some extent endorsed by Sartre. Finally, Sartre's own writing-practice is similarly marked by the fluidity of the boundaries between memory and the imaginary: having lost one of the notebooks during the war, Sartre then re-writes it at a later time – his 'journal, reconstruit après-coup',<sup>119</sup> is undoubtedly a testimony that, compared to the original, has to rely on a higher degree of imagination. It is then further 'imaginarised', through its rewriting for *La Mort dans l'âme*.

#### II. 4. 2. The institution of the self through the imaginary

If we consider the adoption of the medium of writing as bringing a new level of materiality to the imaginising spiral, we are in a position to explain the link between artistic creation and personalisation. Gustave's imaginary self-creation firstly occurs within the imaginary, i.e. through the imaginary satisfaction of desires through the stories he produces. At this stage already, the objectification of his imaginary in the text already creates an accelerating cycle of imaginisation: 'quand il écrit, à soi-même futur, déjà tout imaginaire, il jouit dans l'irréel de son irréalisation *prochaine par l'imaginisation* des graphèmes' (*IF*, I, p. 939). Gustave thus 'devient son propre créateur' (*IF*, II, 1534) within the imaginary world he produces. Sartre says: 'l'objectivation dans l'œuvre est un moment de la *personnalisation*: les contradictions [...] de Gustave sont toutes dans son roman mais intégrées imaginativement dans l'objet irréel, qu'il présente et, simultanément, intégrées réellement par le travail comme *moyens* de la création' (*IF*, I, p. 658).

Later, Sartre goes on, Flaubert will have to re-internalise the social dimension of his totalisation in the form of *Madame Bovary*, by becoming 'celui qui a écrit *Madame Bovary*' in the eyes of the public (*ibid*). We shall consider this social dimension and the involvement of the reader in the next chapter; here our focus will be on what could be called the 'instituting' or

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<sup>119</sup> Simont, 'De la conscience impersonnelle à la "personnalisation"', p. 151.

‘productive’ function of the imaginary, especially during the 1844 crisis. We are told that Flaubert entirely gives in to the imaginary, to the point of being overwhelmed by ‘fireworks of images’ during his seizure-like state. Just as, throughout *L’Idiot* Sartre introduces theoretical possibilities of transcending movements (from *croyance* to *savoir*, from *geste* to *acte* etc.), the Pont-l’Évêque crisis is interpreted as such a dialectical reversal: due to the Flaubertian variant of the *Qui-perd-gagne* the continuing process of imaginisation is turned into something irretrievable and therefore real, namely Flaubert’s position as artist:

[...] ce qui est neuf, pour ce jeune homme imaginaire, c’est l’irréparable *réalisé*, le passage *subi* des ruminations et des gestes à une détermination réelle de sa personne [...] avant [1844], il pressentait seulement que [...] la pratique de l’irréel conditionnait dans sa réalité [...]. Le coup de foudre, c’est l’apparition catastrophique du réel [...] la réalité fond sur lui, il en sent le poids pour la première fois de sa vie; la croyance devient évidence [...] (*IF*, II, p. 1800)

The trajectory of the ‘enfant imaginaire’ itself is the best example for the increasing integration of imaginary and real in *L’Idiot*, since the practices that appear to create nothing but an imaginary destiny (see chapter 1) contribute to the production of ‘fatalité’ on the level of the real. In many ways, the imaginary as mediation thus acquires a productive function, in a theoretical reversal that is, once more, influenced by Merleau-Ponty’s emphasis on the proximity of imaginary and real. In *Signes*, Merleau-Ponty writes: ‘elle [l’œuvre] ouvre un champ, quelquefois même elle institue un monde, en tout cas elle dessine un avenir’.<sup>120</sup> Sartre quotes this passage (although not correctly) in *L’Idiot*, adapting it to the effect of the ‘chef-d’œuvre’ (*IF*, II, p. 1493). This cycle, opened up by *Madame Bovary*, will be our concern in the next chapter. As far as imaginary production institutes not only the *œuvre*, but equally the artist, *L’Idiot* bears a surprising resemblance with Barthes’s 1980 lecture series at the Collège de France, in which he claimed that a dialectical solution to the rivalry between life and text was possible: ‘c’est, pour l’écrivain, de faire de sa vie une œuvre’.<sup>121</sup>

<sup>120</sup> Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Signes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1960), p. 91.

<sup>121</sup> Roland Barthes, *La préparation du roman I et II : notes de cours et de séminaires au Collège de France, 1978-1979 et 1979-1980 / Roland Barthes ; texte établi, annoté et présenté par Nathalie Léger.*, Traces écrites (Paris: Seuil, 2003), p. 275.

## Chapter 5

### The Role of the Reader in *L'Idiot de la famille*

#### Introduction

If Sartre's understanding of authorship becomes increasingly complex in *L'Idiot de la famille*, the same can be said about his theory of reading. *QIL*, perhaps most famous for its postulation of a 'pacte de générosité' between reader and author, has been a reference point for literary theory throughout the second half of the twentieth century. If much of the criticism waged against *QIL* relied on an oversimplified understanding of Sartre's ideas, the development that Sartre's theory of reading undergoes in *L'Idiot de la famille* has gone almost unnoticed by those who, like Barthes, sought to shift attention away from the author and towards the reader. *L'Idiot* however dedicates considerable space to analyses of reading processes, and not only makes a crucial contribution to Sartre's theory of reading but resonates with concerns expressed by a variety of thinkers such as Barthes, Bourdieu, and Rancière.

Just as scholarship on *L'Idiot* is still relatively limited, there is very little commentary on the particular issue of the reader. Christina Howells has provided a theoretical account of reading in *L'Idiot*, while reading in Sartre's work more broadly was addressed recently in a collected volume edited by Natalie Depraz and Noémie Parant, including a particularly relevant article by Jean-François Louette.<sup>1</sup> The present chapter aims to contribute to this criticism by focusing in particular on those passages in which Sartre 'progressively' describes (or imagines) scenes of reading as they might have happened. We shall investigate several reading practices narrated by Sartre (Gustave as reader, the schoolboys' encounter with Romantic texts, and Flaubert's collaboration with Bouilhet), as well as Sartre's sociological

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<sup>1</sup> Howells, 'Sartre: Esquisse d'une théorie de la lecture'; Jean-François Louette, 'Petite tératologie de la lecture selon Sartre', in *L'Écriture et la lecture: des phénomènes miroir? L'exemple de Sartre*, ed. by Natalie Depraz and Noémie Parant, *Rencontres philosophiques*; no. 2 (Mont-Saint-Aignan: Publications des Universités de Rouen et du Havre, 2011), pp. 83–95.

remarks on the public during the Second Empire. Through these examples, we shall seek to demonstrate the importance of the reader in *L'Idiot*, the intensified integration of reader and author, and the increasingly historicising approach that Sartre adopts towards the author-reader relationship.

### I. Flaubert as reader: the imaginary identification with the author

In his chapter entitled 'Petite tératologie de la lecture selon Sartre', which surveys the most prominent readers to be found throughout Sartre's body of work, Jean-François Louette points out that Sartre's portraits of reading could be approached both from a phenomenological and from a genetic (i.e. concerning the acquisition of the skill of reading) perspective.<sup>2</sup> This distinction is far from straightforward in *L'Idiot*, since Sartre's account of Gustave's initial difficulties with language foreshadows the subsequent depictions of reading and writing processes. The episodes showing Gustave as reader should therefore be prefaced by a reminder of Sartre's insistence on the passive agent's difficulty in deciphering language in general, constituted not only by an attachment to words as objects but also by the 'entêtement à ne jamais rentrer tout à fait dans l'univers du discours' (*IF*, I, p. 26). A bad interpreter of spoken language, Gustave's capacity to understand the written text is equally insufficient.

The first detailed description of Flaubert as reader occurs relatively late in the biography, namely two thirds into the second volume, where Sartre portrays Gustave's attitude in front of his law books as a student in the early 1840s. Based on the distinction between 'acte' and 'geste' (see chapter 3), Sartre here identifies Gustave's 'studying' as mere gesture. His engagement with his law books is mere pretence, an 'irreal action' in that it is almost entirely passive (*IF*, II, p. 1711). A first definition of reading is provided negatively at this point, i.e. as that which Gustave refuses to accomplish, namely the act of synthesising and recomposing the text. Instead, Flaubert places himself 'au plus bas' of the different levels of reading, at that

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<sup>2</sup> Louette, 'Petite tératologie', p. 83.

of a proof-reader who does not synthesise the text beyond isolated sentences. Sartre identifies this form of reading as ‘quasiment passive’, and, although the passage strictly refers to Gustave’s passive reading of the *Code civil*, this observation is generalised by adding that ‘la lecture d’une œuvre littéraire, chez Flaubert, n’est jamais *agressive*, elle ne se réduit pas aux significations abstraites: celles-ci lui parviennent à travers l’activité de sa passivité’. Implied in this passage are thus already two forms of passive reading: the lowest form of purely ‘material’ reading applied by Flaubert to his law books, and a second kind of passive reading, in which the meaning of the text is apprehended passively and not by ‘aggressively’ transcending the signifier towards the signified (*IF*, II, p. 1713). While the opposition between ‘aggressive’ and ‘passive’ resembles Roman Ingarden’s categorisation of active and passive reading (the latter activity involving ‘no intellectual attempt to progress from the sentences read to the objects appropriate to them and projected by them’<sup>3</sup>), Sartre’s version of passive reading seems to imply a form of cognition close to comprehension ([les] significations abstraites [...] lui parviennent à travers l’activité de sa passivité’, *ibid*).

Two further passages dedicated to Gustave’s attitude to literature help us to explore *L’Idiot*’s panorama of (passive) reading processes. Firstly, we are presented with the phenomenon of rereading, a theme that, as Louette describes, reunites those protagonists in Sartre’s texts who read in order to experience what they already know.<sup>4</sup> Gustave, after 1845, in a renewed period of literary uncertainty during which his *hébétudes* return, extensively rereads classical texts to the point of knowing them by heart (*IF*, II, pp. 2042ff). Insisting that Gustave is perfectly capable of attentively reading texts by Bouilhet or Colet, Sartre insists that the young writer habitually returns to his favourite classics (such as Shakespeare, Racine,

<sup>3</sup> Roman Ingarden, *The Cognition of the Literary Work of Art*, Northwestern University Studies in Phenomenology & Existential Philosophy (Evanston Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 1973), p. 38.

<sup>4</sup> Louette highlights three instances of rereading: 1. *Les Mots* characterises the grandfather as someone who only rereads what he knows already and hence as ‘bad reader’. 2. A letter to Simone de Beauvoir describes the ‘classical reader’ as someone who is no longer curious, for whom ‘une page de livre [...] suffit’. 3. The *CDG* describe Gide as a classical reader, whose texts aim to produce their effect through rereading, while Sartre himself advocates ‘la lecture moderne’, in the course of which ‘les mots se brûlent’. See Louette, ‘Petite tétatologie’, pp. 89-90.

Rabelais) seeking the aesthetic pleasure of individual scenes that he knows already, without reading the text in its entirety. The type of reading practised here by Flaubert is again contrasted by Sartre's own synthesising reading ('restituer l'unité d'un sens intentionnel à travers la diversité des significations', *IF*, II, p. 2044). Flaubert instead reads in order to experience moments of aesthetic pleasure derived from the imagination: 'Flaubert *lit pour accéder à l'extase*' (*IF*, II, p. 2045). Instead of 'deciphering' the text, Flaubert is said to pretend to read in order to find material for his 'onirisme dirigé'. The aim of rereading is thus simply to 'provoquer le rêve' (*IF*, II, p. 2046); the passive act of reading is accompanied by the dream of reading: 'il ne lit plus, il rêve qu'il lit, il imaginarise le langage et prend les mots pour prétextes, laisse vagabonder son imagination' (*IF*, II, p. 2050). While reading and dream are always associated for Sartre,<sup>5</sup> Gustave's reading pushes the oneiric character of reading to the extreme. The result is an 'irréalisation du second degré' (*IF*, II, p. 2054), implying that the imaginary world produced by reading becomes the *analogon* for a secondary act of imaginarisation.<sup>6</sup> Sartre insists that this 'oneiric reading' nevertheless maintains a relationship with the text:

La lecture onirique est et reste une lecture: la 'passivité irréalisante' lui a permis [...] de saisir, au dépens de l'ensemble, ce qu'on pourrait appeler des *harmoniques imaginaires*, inaccessibles à l'analyse critique et rebelles à la "compréhension" mais correspondant malgré tout à des intentions profondes de l'auteur [...] et se révélant [...] au lecteur qui déréalise les phrases et prétend lire entre les lignes. Car, en dehors de ce que l'auteur a "fait passer" dans une page, il y a ce qu'il a rêvé d'y faire passer et qui ne se révèle qu'au rêve (*IF*, II, p. 2052, emphasis added).

As so often in *L'Idiot*, it is not entirely clear at this point whether Sartre presents what he imagines to be Flaubert's perspective, or whether he himself adopts the position outlined.

Even though the direct communication with the author achieved through dream-like reading

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<sup>5</sup> Sartre, *L'Imaginaire*, p. 326.

<sup>6</sup> Where *L'Imaginaire* posed the relatively simple dual relationship between image and *analogon*, *L'Idiot* allows for a spiralling acceleration of imaginarisation, that will find its extreme point in the kind of 'imaginary without image' or 'degré zéro de l'imaginaire' that, as is the case in the 1844 crisis, is ultimately subject to a dialectical reversal into the real.

must pertain to Flaubert's view of the situation, Sartre clearly concedes that oneiric reading nevertheless presents a form of reading, accessing the text exclusively through 'harmoniques imaginaires', which, interestingly, are not only inaccessible to analysis, but are even 'rebellious' to comprehension.

It seems that Sartre's theory of literary communication, which is increasingly open to including the comprehension of a 'sens', is hereby pushed towards its extreme: Flaubert does not learn much from these reading practices, and only obtains a minimum of comprehension, like an amateur playing Chopin, says Sartre, who gains a certain '*compréhension* peut-être assez précise mais "indisable" de sa [celle de Chopin] sensibilité" (*IF*, II, p. 2043). Quoting Flaubert's report of his rereading of a scene in *King Lear*, Sartre seeks to demonstrate that Flaubert not only fails to grasp the 'sens dialectique' of the play, but even the fundamental details of the plot (the number of mad characters involved in act II, scene 3). Hazel Barnes dedicates an entire article to this passage and proves both Sartre's errors in criticising Flaubert's interpretation of the passage, and the ways in which Sartre's own conception of mental illness can serve to substantiate a reading of *King Lear* closer to Flaubert's than to Sartre's.<sup>7</sup> Sartre's depiction of 'oneiric rereading' seems to hesitate as to the degree of comprehension that can be obtained from the 'harmoniques imaginaires'. Barnes's correction does not necessarily render Sartre's theoretical construct untenable; her insistence on Flaubert's grasp of the details of the play rather pushes the balance in favour of comprehension, or even knowledge, suggesting once more a link between the real and even the most removed form of imaginisation.

'Oneiric rereading' has an effect on the real in a second sense: Gustave finds in his rereading of classical texts a 'magnifying identification' (*IF*, II, p. 2046) with their authors who are conjured up as imagined roles (*IF*, II, p. 2044), and he simultaneously constructs his own

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<sup>7</sup> Hazel Barnes, 'Flaubert and Sartre on Madness in *King Lear*', *Philosophy and Literature*, 10.2 (1986), 211–21.

role as author. Sartre suggests that the familiarity with the passage that is being reread allows Gustave to grasp it ‘irréellement comme son propre produit’, as if he were rereading his own text (‘il se relit par anticipation’, *IF*, II, p. 2053). We saw in the previous chapter that the ‘dédoublement’, i.e. the particularly split nature of Gustave’s subjectivity allows him to adopt an attitude of ‘vraie lecture’ towards his own texts, while in *QL* the self-adherence of the reader (presumably an active agent) makes any perception of his own text as objectivity impossible and only allows ‘quasi-lecture’ of his own texts. In *L’Idiot*, it is as though oneiric reading produced an even greater dissociation by allowing an amalgamation of the two forms of rereading. Flaubert’s own identity as author, constituted by a reversal of the imaginary into the real, is for Sartre based on this two-fold practice of rereading: ‘chez lui, la relecture prime la création’ (*IF*, II, p. 2053). Gustave is not only portrayed as a reader who becomes an author, which of course is true of all authors, and certainly of Poulou in *Les Mots*, but in his very person the two functions, reader and author, are indistinguishable, as he writes for the sake of rereading and (re-)reads in order to imaginarily adopt the role of the author: ‘la vocation d’écrivain se manifeste aussi bien – et peut-être d’abord – comme vocation de lecteur’.

While Flaubert’s rereading of Shakespeare is discussed in the context of his literary development between 1845 and 1847, the letters used as evidence range until the mid-1850s, suggesting that the phenomenon is not just a temporary occurrence in Sartre’s view. And indeed, Flaubert’s reading-practice in general is likened to the dream much earlier in *L’Idiot* already: Gustave [...] est [...] un enfant imaginaire; le rêve, c’est l’emplacement vide et béant d’une impossible praxis. On comprend que la lecture, pour cette âme pithiatique, soit un véritable envoûtement: il se laisse posséder par le rêve d’un autre’ (*IF*, II, p. 1377). Just as in the case of writing, passivity has a very particular effect on reading, too. Passive and oneiric reading is however not only described as a product of Gustave’s particular constitution, but it is paradigmatic, as we shall see now, for most readers observed in *L’Idiot de la famille*, and

acquires a social and historical component that makes it relevant beyond a simple determination of Sartre's theory of the imaginary.

## II. The Rouen schoolboys as readers: the imaginary identification with the character

In chapter 2 our discussion of Sartre's theorisation of 'generations' touched upon the long description of Flaubert's classmates and their thwarted rebellion. As a result of this failure of historical agency, a 'passage à l'imaginaire' takes place: 'vaincue mais indomptée, brûlée de rage et de haine, "cette jeunesse" va transporter la lutte sur un autre terrain' (*IF*, II, 1367). This escape to the imaginary initially takes the form of sessions of reading Romantic texts, which a small group of boarding school students, an 'elite', secretly practise together at night. Once more we can draw significant theoretical conclusions – this time with regard to Sartre's understanding of reading – from what is woven into the 'progressive' method of staging events as they might have happened.

Though less permanently than Gustave, his classmates too are in a state of passivity, which turns them into 'rêveurs en puissance' (*IF*, II, p. 1377). Their reading is also characterised by a 'postulation onirique' (*IF*, II, p. 1378). The schoolboys' state of mind is described in terms that are strikingly similar to Sartre's descriptions of Gustave's imaginisation (see chapter 3), namely those of a heightened power held by the imaginary over the subject, and by a state of 'belief' and 'adherence'. Temporarily constituted as passive by the historical situation, the Romantic reader relinquishes the freedom to produce images, and is instead 'mobilisé à produire celles [les images] qu'on lui propose'. Much like Gustave, the children are temporarily swallowed up by the imaginary: 'l'imaginaire écrit, torride, impitoyable, est une image totale d'un bout à l'autre virulente, qui exclut toute liberté de concevoir autre chose qu'elle [...]' (*IF*, II, p. 1382). The metaphors with which Sartre describes the imaginary ('torride', 'impitoyable', 'virulente') emphatically underline the forcefulness of this encounter with the written text.

If we compare this description to those in *L'Imaginaire*, we observe a significant evolution of Sartre's conceptualisation of the relationship between the imaginary and reading. *L'Imaginaire* merely offers short and somewhat contradictory remarks about reading: in one instance the emergence of the imaginary is relegated to pauses in the reading process, while another passage defines reading consciousness as 'hybrid' ('mi-signifiante et mi-imageante').<sup>8</sup> From this rather unsatisfying first definition, an evolution of Sartre's theory of reading takes place, many elements of which emerge with *QIL* and are fully developed in *L'Idiot de la famille*. The previously quoted article by Christina Howells lays out the theoretical framework of this development (in particular the possibility of subsuming language as a whole to the imaginary and communication via the *sens* of writing) and we need not repeat these arguments in detail. However, a close comparison between the passage describing Romantic reading and *QIL* will allow us to draw a number of important additional conclusions.

In some ways, the schoolboys' reading echoes the situation in *QIL*, where the reader is equally in a state of passivity, belief and dream during the act of reading. In the text from 1948, however, passivity is the result of a constantly renewed exercise of freedom ('le lecteur se fait crédule [...] le propre de la croyance esthétique c'est d'être croyance par engagement [...] A chaque instant je puis m'éveiller et je le sais; mais je ne le veux pas: la lecture est un rêve libre').<sup>9</sup> The schoolboys too, says Sartre, could 'in principle' abandon the book, and wake up (*IF*, II, p. 1383), but this possibility is far more distant in the Romantic variant of reading. This heightened captivity by the imaginary is primarily conditioned by their particular situation, which pushes them towards an imaginisation of their struggle. The reader's 'agreed' passivity is less free because it is provoked by an external factor, the historical situation.

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<sup>8</sup> Sartre, *L'Imaginaire*, p. 134.

<sup>9</sup> Sartre, *QIL*, pp. 56-58.

*L'Idiot* therefore unites a historical and a phenomenological account of reading, two aspects that were present but unrelated in *QIL*. The passages in *QIL* from which we are quoting at this point could be said to deploy a phenomenological approach to reading, without however taking into account the specific situation of the reader. In later chapters, Sartre's discussion of the reading public will be more historical, but this is never brought into conversation with the presentation of the reading process itself. In *L'Idiot*, on the contrary, Sartre's phenomenological account of reading emerges from a historically situated analysis. Incidentally, it would seem that Edward Casey's claim to the effect that *L'Idiot* is part of Sartre's Marxist and therefore non-phenomenological phase, is only tenable if one discounts the attempt made in *L'Idiot* to historicise phenomenology.<sup>10</sup>

The differences between Romantic 'oneiric' reading and the ideal reader in *QIL* are particularly illuminating if we consider the respective ways in which the reader is invested in the text. In 1948 Sartre insists that the subjectivity of the reader animates the fictional world: 'l'attente de Raskolnikoff, c'est *mon* attente, que je lui prête'.<sup>11</sup> As a consequence, the activity of the reader is ensured, and his participation in the act of creation is merely 'guided' by the author. The relationship between character and reader, which in *QIL* is dominated by the latter, is inverted in the case of Romantic reading. In the Romantic hero the schoolboys find an imaginary version of the ideals that proved to be 'irréalisable' as a result of their 'political' failure (*IF*, II, pp. 1377-78). During their nocturnal reading sessions, they revive those ideas by 'incarnating' themselves in the text. They project their ego into the third-person character, and (imaginarily) adopt the character's 'moi' as the product of their own reflexive consciousness:

Lorsqu'ils disent "il" ou "lui", ces mots prennent un sens neuf et complexe puisque sans perdre leur pouvoir de distanciation, ils apparaissent comme des "Je" ou des "Moi" qui n'osent dire leur nom [...] la lecture apparaît comme une

<sup>10</sup> Edward S. Casey, 'Introduction', in *The Phenomenology of Aesthetic Experience*, by Mikel Dufrenne, trans. by Edward S. Casey, 1 edition (Evanston Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 1973), p. xvi, note 2.

<sup>11</sup> Sartre, *QIL*, p. 52.

réflexion imaginaire dont le réfléchi serait le *vécu* du [personnage] [...] (*IF*, II, p. 1381)<sup>12</sup>

If we apply the framework of *La Transcendance de l'égo* to this process, a particularly pronounced split between the ego and reflective consciousness can be observed, allowing the ego to be replaced by the *vécu* of the character.<sup>13</sup> Hence, instead of animating the text with their own *vécu*, as does the reader in *QL*, *L'Idiot's* young consumers of Romantic literature adopt the character's *vécu* as their own. Further, *L'Idiot* ascribes the reader's 'incarnation' in the character exclusively to Romantic texts, by clarifying that other novels do not require this procedure and instead allow the reader to remain 'pur témoin de ce qui se passe' (*IF*, II, p. 1380). In the case of the schoolboys' reading, however, their disposition towards passivity coincides with the particular demands made by the text: 'les romantiques, eux, réclament sa complicité: [le lecteur] est compromis; bousculé par les événements imaginaires que sa lecture constitue' (*IF*, II, p. 1380). Writer and reader are both relatively passive, and colonised by the novel's protagonist: 'scripteur et lecteur se rencontrent au niveau du personnage qu'ils suscitent par leurs efforts conjugués: pour chacun d'eux, le rêve qui l'occupe – le *même* rêve – est celui d'un autre' (*IF*, II, p. 1385). *L'Idiot* thus describes a situation in which a passive reader encounters an equally passive author in a joint moment of alienation to the protagonist, while in *QL* the very functioning of literature depends on the activity of both. There, the reader's trust in the author, which is the basis for the 'pacte de générosité', is dependent on the author's status as active and rational agent: 'si je devais soupçonner l'artiste d'avoir écrit par passion [...] ma confiance s'évanouirait'.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Whilst reading, Sartre goes on, they are under the illusion of having achieved 'l'en-soi-pour-soi enfin réussi'. This remark is accompanied by a footnote, adding that this impression represents 'l'illusion propre aux incarnations' (*IF*, II, p. 1381). The manuscript of *L'Idiot de la famille* reveals that Sartre added this footnote at a later editing stage, suggesting that he took great care to emphasise the general implications of this case study of reading. Throughout the passage Sartre refers to 'la lecture romantique', which suggests that his observations are applicable beyond the Rouen schoolboys' relationship with literature. See: Manuscript of *L'Idiot de la famille*, Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France, NAF 28405.

<sup>13</sup> The third person pronoun, a synonym for the end of authorial subjectivity, as we saw in the previous chapter, now becomes a moment of alienation for the reader.

<sup>14</sup> Sartre, *QL*, p. 61.

Further, the descriptions of the reading-processes in *QIL* and in *L'Idiot* manifest differing relationships between the reader and what could be termed the 'possible' and the 'necessary'. In *QIL* the reader is said to progress through the text 'dans la sécurité', since he knowingly follows a path created by the author.<sup>15</sup> Despite this voluntary passivity however, says Sartre, the ideal text allows an 'engagement imaginaire dans l'action'.<sup>16</sup> Therefore, freedom may render itself passive, but the action in which the reader engages on the level of the imaginary reverses this passivity into activity and even works against bad faith:

Comme l'activité s'est faite passive pour mieux créer l'objet, réciproquement la passivité devient acte [...] C'est pourquoi l'on voit des gens réputés pour leur dureté verser des larmes au récit d'infortunes imaginaires; ils étaient pour un moment ce qu'ils auraient été s'ils n'avaient pas passé leur vie à se masquer leur liberté.<sup>17</sup>

*QIL* thereby expresses an extraordinary level of faith in the imaginary, but also in the external situation, which, one should add, surely needs to be conducive to such a movement from imaginary activity to authenticity. To rephrase the situation in terms borrowed from *L'Idiot*, the engagement with fictional 'necessity' (the rigidity of the plot) opens up a *real* field of 'possibles' (possibilities). Logically, this is only conceivable if the 'possibles' are 'réalisable'. In *L'Idiot*, the effect of the schoolboys' reading is the exact opposite of this positive outcome in *QIL*: due to the reader's passivity, reading does not provoke an 'engagement dans l'imaginaire', but 'le triomphe de l'engagement imaginaire sur le libre jeu de l'action' (*IF*, II, p. 1383). The schoolboys' incarnation in the character increases their absorption by the 'necessity' of the plot.

Any fictional world, Sartre insists in *L'Imaginaire* and in *L'Idiot*, fundamentally excludes the 'possible', which belongs to the realm of activity in the real world. For the school students, however, fictional necessity and real possibility become indistinguishable, and, upon 'awakening' from their dream-like reading, they remain 'vampirisé' by the character, seeking to

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<sup>15</sup> Sartre, *QIL*, p. 60.

<sup>16</sup> Sartre, *QIL*, p. 67.

<sup>17</sup> Sartre, *QIL*, p. 58.

make the fictional imperative a reality (*IF*, II, pp. 1416-18). The ‘necessity’ of fiction, transposed into the real world, however, reveals itself – once more – to be ‘irréalisable’: ‘rien ne va plus quand [...] ils tentent de *réaliser* pendant la veille [...] le personnage funèbre qui les vampirise’ (*IF*, II, p. 1419). In reaction to the resulting frustration a new level of imaginatisation takes place: following Gustave’s initiative, they collectively invent the character of the ‘Garçon’ whom each of them incarnates at times. The situation could hardly be any more different from the one laid out in *QL*: there, the reader’s understanding of the ‘possible’, a category of the real, is enhanced as a result of reading, whereas the schoolboys’ consumption of Romantic texts contributes to their lasting imaginatisation.

Finally, we should note that this episode not only explores what is perhaps the most alienated form of *L’Idiot*’s panorama of reading processes, but it further provides Sartre with an arena in which the future public, as well as the future author, is born. Gustave as we saw earlier, tends to ‘incarnate himself’ in the author, while his future readers adopt the *vécu* of the fictional character as their own. Contrary to Sartre’s affirmation in “Les Écrivains en personne” to the effect that everyone is a potential writer,<sup>18</sup> *L’Idiot* in some respects insists on the distinct trajectories of writers and readers (at least in the nineteenth century). The episode of the Rouen schoolboys suggests that *L’Idiot* is not only a biography of a writer but also that of his readers, of which Louis Bouilhet is a particular type.

### III. Louis Bouilhet, the first reader of *Madame Bovary*

The notes for volume IV of *L’Idiot* reveal Sartre’s reading of *Madame Bovary*, and his reconstitution of the process of composition through a detailed examination of Flaubert’s literary activity roughly between the initial composition of *La Tentation de Saint Antoine* and *Madame Bovary*. Sartre’s analysis puts curious emphasis on the role played by Louis Bouilhet in the creative process. Gérard Genette equally notes Bouilhet’s influence but is interested in the

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<sup>18</sup> Sartre, ‘Les Écrivains’, p. 39.

counterfactual, i.e. in the passages that were censored by Flaubert's friend, while Sartre is concerned with precisely the result of his intervention.<sup>19</sup> Bouilhet and Maxime Du Camp famously reject *Saint Antoine*, and suggest that Flaubert should write what would today be called a 'Realist' novel, based on a topic taken from the *faits divers*. For Sartre, *Saint Antoine* is characterised by Flaubert's 'alienation to orality', and by an excessive amount of images.<sup>20</sup> Like *Madame Bovary*, *Saint Antoine* is a book on the imagination, but, judges Sartre, a failure because it fails to create an opposition because real and imaginary (*IF*, III, p. 794). Because *Saint Antoine* is '*imaginaire pur*' it is incomprehensible to Du Camp and Bouilhet. Sartre is dismissive of the allegation that Du Camp and Bouilhet immediately influenced the choice of topic for *Madame Bovary* (*IF*, III, p. 760); he does however place considerable emphasis on Bouilhet's influence during the composition of *Madame Bovary* itself.

The relevance of Bouilhet's influence is evidenced by Sartre's plan to view Bouilhet's letters to Flaubert held by the Louvenjoul library (*IF*, III, p. 760),<sup>21</sup> and by his intention to include an entire chapter on Bouilhet in the final version of the fourth volume (*IF*, III, p. 780). Sartre calls their relationship a 'collaboration' (*IF*, III, p. 790), he searches Flaubert's letters for indications of the friend's influence and finds considerable evidence. For Flaubert, says Sartre, style is exaggeration and metaphor, while Bouilhet imposes the maxim of using 'peu d'images et celles qu'on accepte doivent être *bonnes*' (*IF*, III, p. 788). If, as Bouilhet judged, *Saint Antoine* resembled a 'foirade de perles', Sartre concludes that Bouilhet crucially helped in providing the string that holds the pearls together. The significance of Bouilhet's role for Sartre seems enormous: he acts as 'magister', thanks to whom 'Flaubert échappe à ce qu'il y aurait de trop spontané, de trop subjectif dans son travail (*Saint Antoine*)' (*IF*, III, p. 807), and crucially, 'Bouilhet devient son *goût*' (*IF*, II, p. 808).

<sup>19</sup> Gérard Genette, 'Silences de Flaubert', in *Figures 1*, Points Essais (Paris: Seuil, 1966), pp. 223–43 (p. 235).

<sup>20</sup> Marielle Macé interestingly reads Sartre's own style as 'métaphorisation incontrôlée et obsessionnelle'. See: Marielle Macé, *Le temps de l'essai: histoire d'un genre en France au XXe siècle* (Paris: Belin, 2006), p. 189.

<sup>21</sup> Many of these were subsequently published in Jean Bruneau's edition of Flaubert's correspondence.

It is made clear that Bouilhet does not write a single line of *Madame Bovary*; Sartre is therefore far from attributing the role of co-author to him. The significance of the collaboration lies not so much in the quantity but in the nature of the friend's contribution. Bouilhet's contribution, we might conclude, decisively increases the 'understandability' of the text for the public, by reinforcing those elements that contributed to the 'misunderstanding' of *Madame Bovary* as a Realist text. While the first three volumes of *L'Idiot* ascribe Flaubert's success to the correspondence between Gustave's subjective neurosis and the objective neurosis of the Second Empire, the influence of the 'ami-censeur' adds further nuance by destabilising the idea of individual authorship.

From the point of view of biographical accuracy, Sartre's overall account of the creation of *Madame Bovary* seems problematic in some respects: while literary influences such as Flaubert's exposure to Romantic poetry and drama is well-documented (e.g. *IF*, II, pp. 1370-74), the author's literary influences after 1844 are largely ignored. In particular Flaubert's significant engagement with Realism in the period leading up to the composition of *Madame Bovary*, well documented for instance by Pierre Bourdieu or Philippe Dufour,<sup>22</sup> is neglected entirely. Indeed, in an article that is otherwise a simplifying attack on *QL*, Robert Artinian convincingly points to the blind spot that Balzac seems to represent in Sartre's literary history more generally.<sup>23</sup>

If Balzac's greatest presence in *L'Idiot* can be observed in the notes for the fourth volume, we might speculate that Sartre's strictly textual analysis was less able to avoid considering Balzac's influence, while the largest parts of *L'Idiot* paint a picture of Flaubert as being almost exclusively influenced by and overcoming Romanticism. Textual analysis thus proves to be an important control mechanism for literary biography. Sartre's preferred

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<sup>22</sup> Bourdieu, *Règles de l'art*, esp. pp. 155ff. Philippe Dufour, 'Flaubert lecteur: une histoire des écritures', *Flaubert: Revue Critique et Génétique*, 2009.

<sup>23</sup> Robert W. Artinian, 'Sartre's Nineteenth Century: A Critique of his Criticism', *South Atlantic Bulletin*, 37.1 (1972), 39-45 (p. 43).

designation for Flaubert's generation of writers as post-Romantic is testament to a particular vision of literary history establishing a lineage of 'passive' literature reaching from Romanticism to Surrealism via Flaubert and to some extent marginalising Realism. A closer examination of Flaubert as reader of Balzac would have disturbed the picture to some extent; and the underestimation of this influence may have encouraged Sartre to have recourse to the figure of Louis Bouilhet in order to be able to account for the process by which *Madame Bovary* is crafted in such a way that it bears sufficient resemblances with the Realist novel.

Moreover, the important role accorded to Bouilhet in creating *Madame Bovary* points towards the crucial importance of the reader in *L'Idiot*. Sartre's declared project in the fourth volume is an analysis that proceeds in 'layers', starting from the novel and its first readers, then moving to the next generation of readers (*IF*, III, p. 769). The 'first readers' named by Sartre range from Taine to Leroyer de Chantepie; but we might contend that Sartre's account actually posits Bouilhet as the first reader of *Madame Bovary*. If we follow this assumption, the notes from the fourth volume allow us to theorise a degree of integration of reader and author unprecedented in Sartre's literary theory, since the reader becomes a physical presence and censoring instance in the writing process itself. Bouilhet, a bourgeois reader, is additionally well-placed to play the role of censor through his own writing-practice. His role, it seems, lies in shaping the production of the text by incarnating the desires of the bourgeois public in the enclosed space in which the text is created. It appears thus that in Bouilhet not only the hypothetical first reader, but the bourgeois reader more generally is incorporated into the writing-process: if Bouilhet becomes Gustave's *goût*, it could be concluded that the taste thereby introduced is precisely that of the future bourgeois readership.

*L'Idiot* thus not only confirms the importance of the reader posited in *QIL* by reaffirming that literature is 'dual' (*IF*, III, p. 204), but further traces the concrete presence of the reader in the creative process. Through the Rouen schoolboys Gustave's future readers are present

when he experiments with Romantic texts, and together, Sartre says, they ‘enter post-Romanticism’. Reader and writer are thus integrated at an unprecedented level, as the parallel movement and common conditioning of their subjectivities reveals any notion of an independent author to be a myth. François Noudelmann makes a similar point in order to reject the accusation that Sartre reanimates an authorial interpretation à la Sainte-Beuve:

L’écriture sartrienne dément cette relation simpliste, Flaubert étant décrit comme traversé par d’innombrables déterminations et investi par l’imaginaire de son lecteur critique. Et Sartre sait justifier cet entrecroisement en affirmant qu’un texte n’existe toujours qu’en situations sédimentées: celle de l’époque de son auteur, en synchronies, diachronies, anachronies, et celle du temps de ses lecteurs.<sup>24</sup>

In this scheme, Bouilhet represents the first of the ‘sedimented situations’ of the text. If Roland Barthes has Sartre in mind when he attacks those who ‘condamne[nt] la nouvelle écriture au nom d’un humanisme qui se fait hypocritiquement le champion des droits du lecteur’,<sup>25</sup> this criticism certainly seems unfair.

#### IV. The reader of *Madame Bovary*: the public during the Second Empire

##### IV. 1. Objective neurosis

While different processes of reading are described throughout the *L’Idiot*, the third volume seeks to analyse the literary situation during the Second Empire in a systematic manner. The success of *Madame Bovary*, which might be seen as a rather banal fact, or as a mere sign of its ‘quality’, is of capital importance to Sartre. Flaubert’s first successful novel, according to Sartre, is *the* novel of the Second Empire because its author’s subjective neurosis corresponds to the ‘objective neurosis’ and to a desire for ‘neurosis-reading’: ‘si *Madame Bovary* apparaît aux lecteurs de 1857 comme *le livre* de leur époque et [...] comme *leur* livre [...] c’est que [...] le public ne peut admettre qu’une œuvre de fascination: la lecture [...] est, à l’époque, ou languissante ou névrotique’ (*IF*, III, p. 418). The consumption of *Madame Bovary*, then, clearly pertains to the case of neurotic reading.

<sup>24</sup> François Noudelmann, ‘Sartre et la tentation *Bovary*’, *MLN*, 122.4 (2007), 797–807 (p. 799).

<sup>25</sup> Barthes, ‘La Mort de L’auteur’, in *Le Bruissement*, p. 69.

As we touched upon in chapter 2, Sartre's argument here draws on a historical analysis of the bourgeoisie: as a class in power the bourgeoisie has lost its claim to be the defender of universal values, and it has moreover experienced its own otherness in the conflict with the working class in 1848. As a result, Sartre argues, the bourgeoisie refuses to 'know itself' and produces an ideology of 'false ideas' (*IF*, III, p. 37). We have of course already encountered this 'blind spot' that the bourgeoisie's own class-being represents for itself: it is an important element of Gustave's refusal of self-knowledge and of the Rouen schoolboys' inability to understand their failure. As a consequence, society is characterised by an 'objective neurosis' or 'neurosis of the 'Objective Spirit' (*ibid.*).

To some extent, the correspondence between subjective and objective neurosis allows *Madame Bovary* to become an 'objective' work, without the marks of the excessively subjective, i.e. neurotic. The public's own neurosis confers a status of 'false objectivity' upon the text (*IF*, III, pp. 27-37). Sartre thus relativises the notion of literary success. Moreover, the affinity between Flaubert and his public is lived during the reading process: the public is able to experience a moment of misanthropy which it senses in Flaubert's work, whilst being able to pretend that *Madame Bovary*'s supposed Realism expresses their own 'Scientist' interest, itself part of the bourgeoisie's 'false ideology' for Sartre. The correspondence between Flaubert and his readership could be read as an elaboration of Sartre's remarks on historical subjectivity made in 'La Nationalisation de la littérature'. As we saw, Sartre suggests that one is always enclosed by the subjectivity of one's epoch: 'on ne peut sortir de la subjectivité — non de la subjectivité individuelle mais de celle de l'époque [...] Lire, pour un contemporain de l'auteur, roulé dans la même subjectivité historique, c'est participer aux risques de l'entreprise'.<sup>26</sup> The correspondence between reader and author, now allows us to fully understand Sartre's claim of a 'programmation' of Flaubert in accordance with the Second Empire.

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<sup>26</sup> Sartre, 'La Nationalisation', in *Situations, II*, p. 43.

The theory of a correspondence between author and readership is certainly a consistent one, although its validity should perhaps be ascertained by applying it to other situations. Sartre, for example, does not explain the lasting success of *Madame Bovary*, well beyond the end of the Second Empire. In this respect, the debate about Flaubert's grammatical mistakes that emerged at the beginning of the twentieth century could be mobilised as evidence in favour of Sartre's argument.<sup>27</sup> Traugott König also reflects on this question, hypothesising that it follows *Madame Bovary*'s continued success that the social conditions described in *L'Idiot* are still valid. Unfortunately, Sartre does not address this question, but sustains his claim of a correspondence between Flaubert and the Second Empires through two theoretical innovations: the development of his sociology of literature and a concrete account of 'neurotic reading'.

#### IV. 2. A sociology of literature

Volume III of *L'Idiot* defines the literary field as a sector of the 'esprit objectif', which is defined as 'culture as practico-inert' (*IF*, III, p. 48), Sartre defines the reading public as the mediation which integrates any text into the 'esprit objectif'. At the same time, each individual reader forms part of a serialised collective, in which his or her reading always appears as both *internal* (i.e. personal and solitary) and as *external*, i.e. in the awareness that alternative readings are performed by others at the same time. Any book is therefore a *social object* through the very process of reading: 'l'écrit laisse apercevoir à travers lui la Société' (*IF*, III, p. 51). Sartre thereby extends the author-reader relationship from *QIL* to a ternary structure connecting the author, the reader, and the readers amongst themselves. This theoretical construct, which we might see as an 'ontology of the literary field', then serves to explain the concrete historical process by which *Madame Bovary* is integrated into the 'esprit objectif'.

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<sup>27</sup> See Gilles Philippe, 'La Querelle sur le style de Flaubert', in *Sujet, verbe, complément: le moment grammatical de la littérature française, 1890-1940* (Paris: Gallimard, 2002), pp. 47-66.

In *QIL* Sartre establishes the opposition between the ‘real’ public (‘le public réel’) and the ‘virtual’ public (‘le public virtuel’), the currently existing public available to an author and the potential public that is beginning to appear on the horizon.<sup>28</sup> Although this distinction remains relevant throughout Sartre’s texts, volume III of *L’Idiot* introduces a further specification by opposing the ‘real’ to the ‘natural’ public. In this distinction, the ‘natural’ public is a subcategory of the real public that is particularly favourable to the type of literature in question (*IF*, III, p. 205). While the ‘real’ public, similar to its definition in *QIL*, is constituted by the bourgeoisie during the Second Empire, the ‘natural’ readership of *Madame Bovary* is a more narrowly defined group, the *capables* or *capacités*, the professional parts of the middle classes who, according to Sartre, elaborate bourgeois ideology in the 1850s.

Sartre argues that the bourgeoisie entertains a ‘fausse conscience’ (*IF*, III, p. 220) of itself, seeking to conceal its own class-being. The group whom Sartre identifies as *capables*, are tasked with the elaboration of this ideology. Their affinity with neurosis-literature is particularly intense, for they themselves are at the heart of the creation of an ideology that responds to a social neurosis. Without following Sartre through his entire account of the bourgeoisie under the Second Empire, this model is interesting with regard to the analysis of the reading public. By identifying the *capables* as being especially attracted to the misanthropy of the ‘knights of nothingness’, Sartre is able to explain the contradictory reception of *Madame Bovary*: while the ‘natural public’ accepts the texts unequivocally,<sup>29</sup> the ‘real public’ is initially scandalised and puts Flaubert on trial. Eventually, however, the text convinces the larger readership: ‘c’est pourtant l’art qui leur convient’ (*IF*, III, p. 311).

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<sup>28</sup> Sartre, *QIL*, pp. 158-59.

<sup>29</sup> Sartre produces no empirical evidence for the adoption of the text by its natural public at this stage, but he intended to study the relationship between *Madame Bovary* and its first readers in the fourth volume. A study of the early reception of Flaubert’s writings would certainly be a fascinating test of Sartre’s theory of the spreading of a text through layers of society.

#### IV. 3. 'Lecture-névrose': oneiric reading as characterisation of the Second Empire

Sartre maintains that post-Romantic writers aim at 'derealising' the readers, forcing them to 'incarnate themselves' in the character or to identify with the author (*IF*, III, p. 328). Post-Romantic reading thus mirrors aspects of reading processes by which the young Flaubert and his classmates were conditioned, and it is equally characterised by an intense state of 'envoûtement onirique' (*IF*, III, p. 323). The reader, in this process, transposes his real hatred for humanity onto the level of the imaginary (*IF*, III, p. 332), and, while reading, discovers his own misanthropy in a moment of short and provoked neurosis. (*IF*, III, p. 327). Post-Romantic reading does not lead to any 'prise de conscience', nor does it entail a moment of real communication between reader and author (*IF*, III, p. 333). Nevertheless, in a movement that echoes Gustave's self-comprehension via the imaginary, the reader acquires a non-verbal sense of his own experience, or, as Barthes phrases it, Flaubert's writing touches a 'sixième sens'.<sup>30</sup> In *L'Idiot*, this moment of understanding is again described as a sudden strike of lightning: 'ils découvrent l'intention subversive de l'Artiste et comprennent sans mots, dans un éclair aveuglant, que c'est aussi *la leur*' (*IF*, III, p. 315).

The three reading processes with which we are concerned in this chapter, namely Gustave's reading, the schoolboys' Romantic reading, and 'neurotic reading' practised by the bourgeoisie during the Second Empire are not identical, but in all cases the reader is relatively passive, identifies with the author or 'incarnates himself' in the character and enters a dream-like state of imaginisation. Sartre's emphasis on Romantic reading and the post-Romantic public as 'nocturnal' expresses the particular gap between the reader and reality. Through these descriptions Sartre establishes a panorama of passive and fundamentally uncritical forms of reading. Despite the obvious differences in approach, scope and style that exist between *L'Idiot* and Barthes's *Le Plaisir du texte* (1973), the form of reading practised by Flaubert's

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<sup>30</sup> Barthes, *Le Degré zéro*, p. 52.

public at times resembles Barthes's category of 'plaisir', which he opposes to 'jouissance'.<sup>31</sup> Similar to Sartre's emphasis on the reader's 'incarnation' in the text, Barthes stresses the physical aspect of reading. His formulation of the pleasure of the text as the moment 'où mon corps va suivre ses propres idées' could well describe the self-abandonment experienced by the readers presented to us in *L'Idiot*.<sup>32</sup> Their reading is further close to the 'pleasure of the text' in the imaginising moment; the alternative, for Barthes, is a form of 'jouissance' which 'retire le texte des imaginaires du langage'.<sup>33</sup> And finally, the processes of collective imaginisation in *L'Idiot* in many respects read like a wide-ranging criticism of consumer society ('société de masse'), of which Sartre is far more sceptical than he was in *QL*. For Barthes too, aesthetic experience acquires a social significance, since 'jouissance' is made impossible by mass society due to the petty-bourgeois character of that society.<sup>34</sup>

Barthes does not entirely neglect the specific conditions in which a text is produced. Nevertheless, in *Le Plaisir du texte* the power granted to the text itself is far more prominent than it is for Sartre. In *L'Idiot*, reading practices are a result of the confluence of multiple factors, including the situation, the reader, the author, and, as a result of these, the text. Each reading practice observed both reflects Sartre's interest in the phenomenology of reading and contributes to his literary history.<sup>35</sup> Neurotic art thus provides access to a certain level of the workings of society: '[...] une œuvre de haine [...] dit la vérité de l'époque à un certain niveau superstructurel [...] sans l'Art-Névrose, elle [la profondeur du "cœur humain"] eût été vécue sous un voile et jamais produite en pleine lumière' (*IF*, III, p. 320). Although Sartre is careful to add that not all layers of society are illuminated by art, we can identify a correspondence

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<sup>31</sup> The two categories are neither entirely distinct nor clearly defined; broadly speaking one could define the pleasure-provoking text, as being far less challenging to the reader than the bliss-provoking text. The two categories evolve out of the distinction between the readerly and the writerly text established in *S/Z* (1970).

<sup>32</sup> Roland Barthes, *Le Plaisir du texte*, Points Essais, (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1973), p. 27.

<sup>33</sup> Barthes, *Le Plaisir du texte*, p. 47.

<sup>34</sup> Barthes, *Le Plaisir du texte*, p. 53.

<sup>35</sup> *L'Idiot*'s comments on Romanticism and Romantic reading would merit a study of their own.

between the Second Empire and the reading practices adopted by its ‘enlightened elites’. Or, in Genette’s words: ‘une époque se manifeste autant par ce qu’elle lit que par ce qu’elle écrit’.<sup>36</sup>

Just as a desire for derealisation and a dream-like state characterises post-Romantic reading, the dream becomes a metaphor for the Second Empire as such. Particularly at the end of the third volume of *L’Idiot*, in passages concerned with Flaubert’s reaction to the Prussian invasion and the end of the Empire, the society under Napoléon III is repeatedly described as false and imaginary. Sartre quotes a remarkable letter to George Sand in which Flaubert expresses his disappointment about the illusory character of a regime in which “tout était faux: fausse armée, fausse politique, fausse littérature [...]”.<sup>37</sup> Sartre follows Flaubert in this judgement, characterising the Second Empire as ‘rêve collectif’ and ‘irréalité collective’ (*IF*, III, p. 571), whose *salons* constitute a framework conducive to the derealisation of the individual who constantly plays a role. This aspect of Sartre’s account of nineteenth-century history is again reminiscent of Walter Benjamin, who claims that in the nineteenth century ‘collective consciousness sinks into ever deeper sleep’.<sup>38</sup> Additionally, just as Sartre’s narrative sees the reading public as gaining a glimpse of its own truth through art, the ‘dreaming collective’ for Benjamin ‘communes with its own insides’ through its cultural products, in this case the Arcades.<sup>39</sup> In Sartre’s account however, the imaginary appearance of society is firmly rooted in the real, regardless of its self-perception. Sartre describes a society that ‘joue la comédie, mais elle la joue dans le monde où elle est ancrée’ (*IF*, III, p. 572). Because the dream does not really contest being, failure, which occurs in 1870, is inevitable (*IF*, III, p. 572).

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<sup>36</sup> Gérard Genette, ‘Structuralisme et critique littéraire’, in *Figures 1*, p. 169.

<sup>37</sup> Gustave Flaubert, *Correspondance*, VI (Paris: Conard, 1930), p. 161.

<sup>38</sup> Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, p. 389.

<sup>39</sup> Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, p. 389. However, while Sartre’s characterisation exclusively concerns the Second Empire, the period described by Benjamin begins with the July Revolution. The comparison thus highlights the extraordinary impact Sartre attributes to the moment of 1848. More recently, David Harvey’s account of Haussmann’s transformation of Paris emphasised the continuity between the July Monarchy and the Second Empire, which seems to corroborate Benjamin’s periodisation. See David Harvey, *Paris, Capital of Modernity* (New York: Routledge, 2005).

#### IV. 4. The responsibility of the reader

These remarks are essential to our understanding of the situation of nineteenth-century writers and readers in *L'Idiot*, but, in comparison to Benjamin and other Frankfurt School thinkers, Sartre is of course much less inclined to subscribe to a view of a situation that is totalitarian and inevitably subjects all of society to a dream-like state. Instead, the third volume contains the clearest postulations of the activity of the reader. Paradoxically, it is because of the generalisation of his dream-like state that the post-Romantic reader is led to activity:

L'envoûtement onirique, quand il est le but de la lecture, ne s'obtient et ne se maintient que par des opérations incessantes du lecteur, qui, loin de se borner à un simple décodage, tente de prévoir à l'intérieur de la fiction, et constitue, pour chaque personnage et pour tous, un avenir en *inventant* les intentions futures de l'auteur, c'est-à-dire en transformant à la limite le lecteur en auteur [...] par un libre dépassement du donné [...] à quelque époque que se situe le livre [...] l'écrivain [...] doit [...] nous abandonner tôt ou tard [...] et nous laisser faire seuls le travail (*IF*, III, p. 323).

The emphasis on the creativity of the reader in this passage is remarkable and even goes beyond what was advocated in *QL*: instead of participating in the creative act along with the author, the reader is now abandoned by the author and alone with the text, not unlike the reader imagined by the later Barthes. Just as Sartre's account of the nineteenth century as a dream-like society can be read as a mediated criticism of twentieth-century consumer society, the emphasis on activity within passivity is close to Jacques Rancière's insistence on the activity produced by the seemingly passive spectator.<sup>40</sup> Further, by highlighting the 'inventive' component of the reader's own creation of the character's trajectory, Sartre outlines a situation that is at least different from, if not in contradiction to, his account of the schoolboys' Romantic reading. He is closer at this point to critics who view the novel as an organisation of 'possibles' instead of pure fictional 'necessity'.<sup>41</sup> We might add, with Sartre,

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<sup>40</sup> Jacques Rancière, *Le Spectateur émancipé* (Paris: La Fabrique, 2008), p. 19.

<sup>41</sup> Such as Albert Thibaudet's analyses of literary 'possibles', or more recently studies undertaken by Marielle Macé.

that the dimension of the ‘possible’ in the novel is a category that depends on the reader’s concrete capacity to actualise it.

Flaubert’s readers are *both* ‘possessed by the author’ *and* engaged in the act of ‘freely inventing the misanthropy they find in the text’ (see previous quote). As a result, Sartre comes to the important conclusion that they are as responsible as the author: ‘nos capables sont aussi criminels que les chevaliers du Néant’ (*IF*, III, p. 324). The much-debated question of Sartre’s moral condemnation of Flaubert’s non-commitment can now be reviewed in this light. Firstly, it is obvious that Sartre’s attitude towards Flaubert has changed since his accusation of Flaubert and the Goncourt brothers as being responsible for the repression of the Commune,<sup>42</sup> or since *QL*’s famous footnote enumerating Flaubert’s political errors.<sup>43</sup> In “Sur ‘L’Idiot de la famille’” Sartre is willing to recognise a more profound engagement in Flaubert, a literary engagement that is committed to expressing ‘le monde entier’.<sup>44</sup> In one sense therefore, the condemnation of Flaubert is attenuated because the developments in Sartre’s literary theory allow him to theorise the way in which Flaubert indeed totalises his epoch.

Secondly, historicisation replaces the category of morality to a large extent. The Second Empire is the particular milieu in which Flaubert strives. *Madame Bovary* is a masterpiece because it corresponds to the objective neurosis of its readers, without which it would be seen as a pathological text (*IF*, III, 29). Hence, there is a decidedly relativist component to Sartre’s reading of Flaubert. Just as it would be misleading to interpret Flaubert in *L’Idiot* as Sartre’s ‘whipping boy’, it would be equally simplifying to claim that Sartre expresses unqualified support for Flaubert’s achievement, a position to which Hauke Brunkhorst seems close.<sup>45</sup> Instead, Flaubert’s literary technique is dependent on its public, after whose disappearance in 1870 he experiences an incapacity to ‘derealise language’, and a ‘réveil du langage’, i.e. an end

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<sup>42</sup> Jean-Paul Sartre, ‘Présentation des “Temps Modernes”’, in *Situations, II*, pp. 8–30 (p. 13).

<sup>43</sup> Sartre, *QL*, p. 165.

<sup>44</sup> Sartre, ‘Sur “L’Idiot de la famille”’, p. 112.

<sup>45</sup> Brunkhorst, pp. 39–42.

to his dream-like existence (*IF*, III, p. 643). The evolution that *L'Idiot* brings to Sartre's theory of literary communication of course has ramifications beyond the case of Flaubert and his readers; but these developments are not independent of the milieu of the neurotic 'refus de savoir' that is the arena for their elaboration.

Critics have suggested that Sartre's characterisation of Flaubert's writing as 'neurosis literature' underestimates the critical or subversive potential of his texts. Focusing primarily on the social criticism that he identifies in *L'Éducation sentimentale* of 1869, David Gross insists on the utopian and optimistic elements in Flaubert's writing.<sup>46</sup> Similarly, Dolf Oehler reads *L'Éducation sentimentale* as a 'literary punishment of the bourgeoisie',<sup>47</sup> thus situating himself amongst those who prefer an interpretation of Flaubert as a producer of an 'anti-bourgeois aesthetic' to Sartre's notion of 'neurosis-art'. Sartre's reading of *L'Éducation sentimentale* would certainly be an enlightening addition to this debate, and we can once more hypothesise that a closer engagement with the period after *Madame Bovary* might have produced a more nuanced analysis. Nevertheless, in the context of volume III of *L'Idiot* a complete opposition between 'neurosis-art' and 'anti-bourgeois aesthetic' seems artificial. Sartre certainly does not deny the anti-bourgeois components of Flaubert's writing, but he situates them firmly within the limits imposed by the subjectivity of his time.

Finally, Sartre's appreciation of history is of course not entirely relativist, and he continues to be critical of a pretence of 'non-communication' that only serves the dominant classes (*IF*, III, p. 307). However, the sociology of reading developed in the third volume attributes a significant portion of that responsibility to the reader, who integrates the text into the 'objective spirit'. *L'Idiot* can thus be read as a wide-ranging review of reading processes that identifies the reader's involvement in the creation of the text on many levels, even in the most passive and dream-like forms of literary consumption.

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<sup>46</sup> Gross, David, 'Sartre's (Mis-)Reading of Flaubert's Politics'.

<sup>47</sup> Dolf Oehler, *Ein Höllensturz der alten Welt* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1988), p. 332.

### Concluding remarks: Reading *L'Idiot de la famille*

The present examination of subjectivity in *L'Idiot de la famille* has sought to demonstrate the epistemological engagement on the part of Sartre: the biography thus reveals a strong concern for the status of the human subject, for an adequate theory of collective formations, for the relationship between subjectivity and the imaginary in its particular manifestation of literature, and for the interpretation of the events of 1968. We can thus conclude that the text is not evidence of Sartre's 'absentéisme' in the period of the composition of *L'Idiot*, but testament to a series of very real concerns, albeit reflected upon in a mediated fashion.

However, the question of the relationship between *L'Idiot* and its own epoch and public nevertheless deserves to be asked. Contrary to the popularity of *L'Être et le néant* or Sartre's plays, *L'Idiot* still has an extremely limited readership, although growing again among specialists. Frequently, commentators have pointed towards the objective problems that this text creates for potential readers: its length, lack of subdivisions, opaque subheadings and the absence of clear referencing are all arguments that can be mobilised against Sartre. These contentions are not simply complaints about form: Ronald Aronson points out, despite his recognition of the merits of *L'Idiot*, that the text violates all rules of communication and therefore fails to live up to the ideal of the mutual respect between author and reader.<sup>1</sup>

Sartre of course already faced (less nuanced) criticism for his engagement with Flaubert from Philippe Gavi and Pierre Victor (Benny Lévy), who insisted that it would have been more useful had Sartre produced a 'popular novel'.<sup>2</sup> Elsewhere, Sartre seems to mirror their reproach by suggesting that *L'Idiot* was indeed a book written for and in the language of the bourgeoisie. He reasons, correctly of course, that these are the only tools available to a philosopher in his position. When he adds 'je suis un enfant terrible de la bourgeoisie qui doit

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<sup>1</sup> Aronson, 'L'Idiot de La Famille: The Ultimate Sartre?', pp. 130–31.

<sup>2</sup> Jean-Paul Sartre, Philippe Gavi and Pierre Victor, *On a raison de se révolter* (Paris: Gallimard, 1974), p. 71.

être récupéré',<sup>3</sup> we might suspect that he perhaps over-emphasises the bourgeoisie's interest in its 'enfant terrible'.

In a sense then, we might be led to conclude that, outside very narrow academic circles, *L'Idiot* has no readership. This is of course true of much scholarly work, and only problematic in so far as it contradicts Sartre's own demand for the intellectual's involvement in all issues of society. In response to Gavi and Victor, Sartre gives a slightly different answer, suggesting that future societies would decide over the fate of *L'Idiot*.<sup>4</sup> He reiterates this argument in an interview from 1970, i.e. prior to the publication of the biography, when asked about the relative popularity of *Les Chemins de la liberté* and *L'Idiot*:

[...] c'est un problème dont je n'arrive pas à sortir. Est-ce qu'il ne doit pas y avoir un type de recherche et de culture qui ne soit pas directement accessible aux masses et qui trouve pourtant des médiations pour arriver aux masses? [...] est-ce que c'est un ouvrage qui est nécessairement destiné à être englouti, ou au contraire est-ce un travail qui, à longue échéance, peut encore servir? On n'en sait rien. Par exemple, je n'aime pas ce qu'écrit Untel, mais je ne peux pas affirmer que celui-là ou un autre ne sera pas récupérable par les masses un jour et pour des raisons que nous ne voyons pas aujourd'hui. Je n'en sais rien, comment puis-je le savoir?<sup>5</sup>

These remarks may seem naïve if read as an expression of a belief in the imminent possibility of what *QIL* postulated as a literary utopia in which the 'real' public is constituted by all of society. But these comments could also be read as an awareness of the openness of history, reflecting Sartre's understanding of the dynamic and transitory nature of forms of subjectivity to which a particular text corresponds. Sartre's reflections on the correspondence between text and public, necessary for the insertion of the *œuvre* into the objective spirit, might explain the limited readership of *L'Idiot*. Josette Pacaly's suggestion that the Flaubert study appears as pathological could then be accompanied by a definition of the pathological as not corresponding to the 'objective spirit'.<sup>6</sup> In this logic, Douglas Kirsner, following Herbert

<sup>3</sup> Jean-Paul Sartre, 'Justice et état' [1972], in *Situations, X* (Paris: Gallimard, 1976), pp. 48-74 (p. 62).

<sup>4</sup> Sartre, Gavi, Victor, *On a raison*, p. 71

<sup>5</sup> Jean-Paul Sartre, 'L'Ami du peuple', pp. 469-470.

<sup>6</sup> Josette Pacaly, *Sartre au miroir*, p. 443

Marcuse, has attributed the success of the earlier Sartre to the notion that post-war Existentialism embodied the 'collective neurosis' of its time.<sup>7</sup>

*L'Idiot de la famille*, on the other hand, insofar as it attempts to invent a new genre, a *roman vrai*, which equally pushes the boundaries between the 'intellectuel' and the 'écrivain', may be a utopian text (in the actual sense of the word). While the differing degrees of popularity of Sartre's texts are relevant within his own framework of a theory of communication between author and public, *L'Idiot* is certainly a rich resource for scholarly engagement, perhaps precisely because of its limitations.

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<sup>7</sup> Douglas Kirsner, 'Sartre and the Collective Neurosis of Our Time', *Yale French Studies: Sartre after Sartre*, 68 (1985), 206–25.

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