

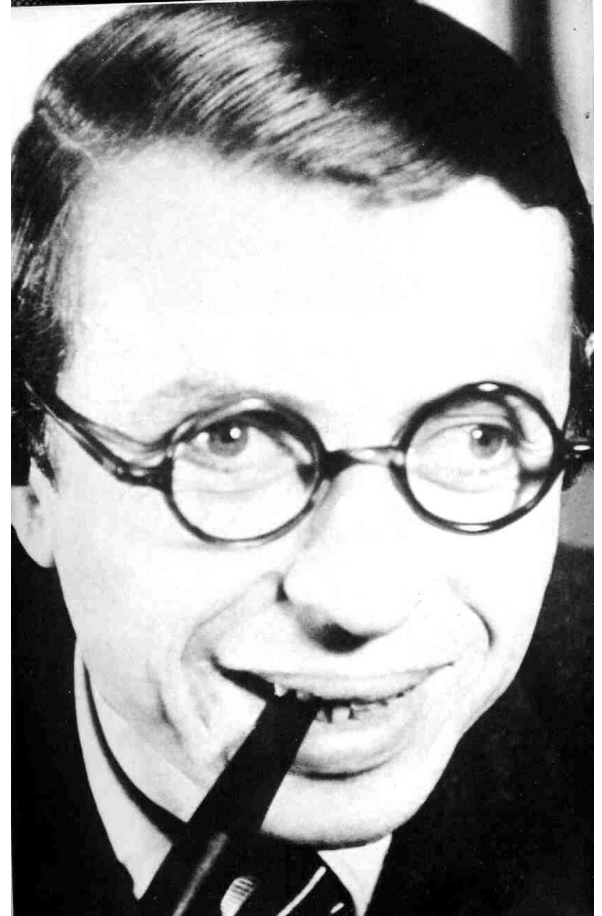
NAUSEA by Jean-Paul Sartre
An Examination of Context and Physical Form

*The kind of people who are eager
for scandal and excitement turn to
[Existentialism], which is intended
strictly for specialists and philosophers.*

—Jean-Paul Sartre, 1949

Such is the dichotomy of Sartre: deride the system, but use it to your advantage. Sartre both embraced and despised the political and cultural worlds he straddled. The feeling, be assured, was mutual. In his philosophy of Existentialism, Sartre defined existence as the responsibility of the individual to actively formulate his or her own path in life and the acceptance of the despair that the reality of that existence bears on the individual. According to Sartre, we each make ourselves through our own choices. Sartre channels Heidegger's concept of angst (his book, *Being and Nothingness*, was a response to Heidegger's essay, "On Being and Time") and Kierkegaard's proto-Existentialist slant (as related in Sartre's 1946 essay, "Existentialism Is Humanism"). Sartre was nothing if not outspoken and did not hesitate to call attention to any hint of hypocrisy he saw in colleagues or peers, allies or enemies. Such outspokenness earned him derision from even those who were otherwise aligned politically and philosophically. His political tirades garnered him more respect in his European literary circles than it did in the United States—which he maligned for being regional and apolitical, but he still managed to capture the attention of Ezra Pound and James Laughlin and his New Directions publishing house.

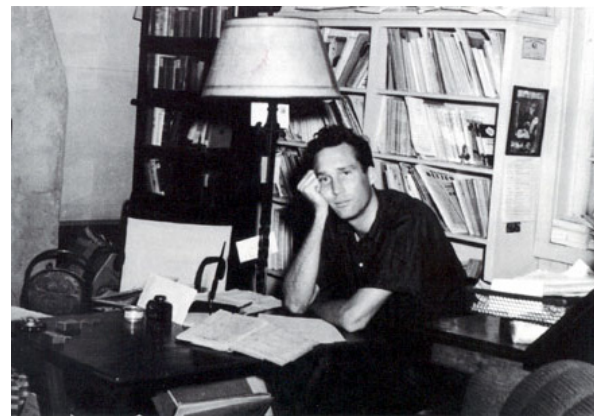
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Jean-Paul Sartre with pipe

Being and Nothingness may be widely regarded as the handbook to Existential thought, but Sartre laid the groundwork for his great treatise on the subject in his first novel, *Nausea*. Set up to mimic a journal, the book follows the story of the fictional French writer, Antoine Roquentin, as “he ruthlessly catalogues his every feeling and sensation about the world and people around him” (from the back cover copy of *New Directions Paperback 82*, 1959). Roquentin becomes more and more violently ill as he comes to terms with the realization of the gravity of existence and his place (or lack thereof) in the world, literally sick from existing. Sartre penned the novel in the early 1930s. It was published in 1939 by Éditions Gallimard, despite being passed by Gallimard’s imprint, *Nouvelle Revue Française*; the same year saw the release of his collection of short stories, *The Wall*. The combination of the two established Sartre’s place in French literary, philosophical, and political circles (of which there was much overlap, as opposed to the comparatively apolitical literary scene in the United States at the time).

Not much is available to relate exactly how Sartre came to publisher James Laughlin and *New Directions*. The assumption can be made that the (in)famous poet Ezra Pound is to be credited. Pound was something of a mentor to Laughlin, who followed the poet around Europe (and would have trailed him around the world, if the fabled depth of his admiration is to be believed) in an attempt to glean something in the way of perceived talent and greater understanding of writing from him. Pound eventually dismissed him as a writer but saw Laughlin’s potential as a publisher, given the latter’s access to a decent source of funding in the form of a well-to-do aunt. Laughlin came from the Pittsburgh steel royalty as his father was a principle in Jones & Laughlin Steel Corporation; great-grandfather James Laughlin had co-founded the family business. Young James found the steel business and Pittsburgh (“narrow, philistine, money grubbing, dirty”) in general not to be to his liking; in his essay, “James Laughlin, Norfolk, and the Shaping of Modern Literature,” Ian MacNiven also mentions the stigma of having a bipolar father undergoing electroshock therapy as a probable catalyst for Laughlin’s departure from and dislike of the Steel City. Laughlin ended up in the house of beloved aunt and uncle Leila and Dicky in Norfolk, Connecticut, which eventually become the headquarters of *New Directions Publishing Corp*.

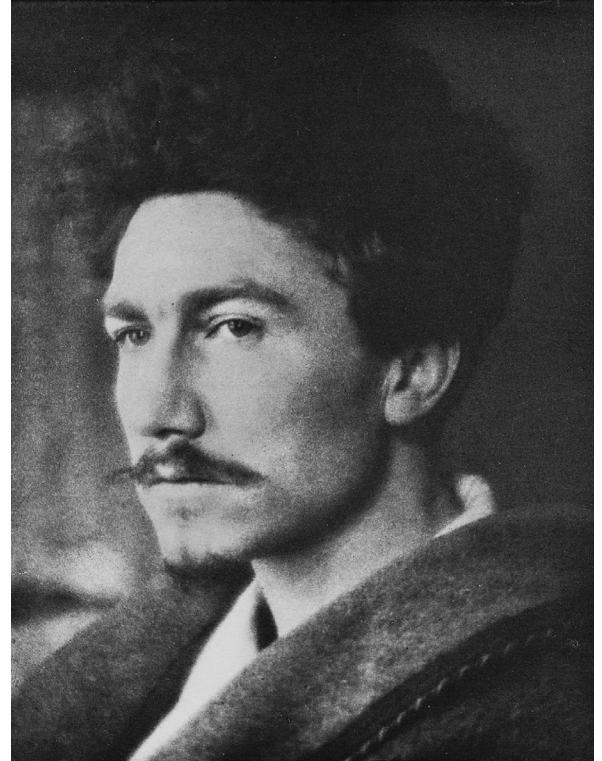


New Directions founder, James Laughlin

Laughlin was a sophomore at Harvard when he published his first book. Following Pound's dismissal of his poetry and encouragement to "do something useful," Laughlin procured the princely sum of \$396 to fund the printing of 700 copies of the eponymous *New Directions in Prose and Poetry*, a collection of works by authors as diverse as e.e. cummings, Henry Miller, Gertrude Stein, Ezra Pound, William Carlos Williams... and Tasilo Ribischka (a *nom de plume* used by Laughlin to publish his own work quasi-anonymously; Ribischka was described as "an Austrian now living in Saugus, Mass., where he is a night watchman at a railroad grade crossing; this gives him lots of time to think"). The volume set the tone for the catalogue that would follow. Laughlin sought out new voices on the fringe of the literary world and built a new aesthetic and raised the bar in terms of what should be expected from an American publisher; Laughlin would edit and publish 55 more of the anthologies.

Pound's travels brought him into contact with writers from all across Europe; a recommendation from him to Laughlin could almost guarantee a place among the roster of *New Directions*; Laughlin did, however, make it clear to Pound that his publishing house was not Ezra's social experiment. Laughlin would always maintain control (although Aunt Leila had been known to have her say when it came to some of the more questionable material; her objections were given to Henry Miller as the reason *New Directions* did not publish *Tropic of Cancer*) and use a discerning, apolitical eye when choosing what to publish. Again, from MacNiven:

As a publisher, I remained strictly apolitical: the Communists Breton and Brecht were on the New Directions list, as was the accused fascist Céline and the anarchist Kenneth Rexroth. He contributed small checks to the campaigns of both Democrats and Republicans, based on personal affinity. If he had a cause, it was to break the embargo on Cuban cigars. The supply



Poet Ezra Pound

1905 - Jean-Paul Sartre born

1914 - James Laughlin born

1915 - Alvin Lustig born

of pre-CastroSupremos that J had stored in his vault in the Winsted bank was running out. Clearly, something had to be done! When H.J. Heinz, III, the son of J's boyhood friend of the 57 varieties, was elected to Congress, J saw an opportunity: President Nixon had made overtures to the great Communist states, and J enclosed a short note to the younger Heinz, along with a \$50 campaign contribution. "Uncle Richard's gallivantings in China and Russia give you a real opening to start in on the MAJOR ISSUE, which is of course, the Cuban Cigar Problem," J wrote. "If he can play footsie with Chou-en-lai, I say he can play enough footsie with Fidel to let us have our good ceegars back."

Laughlin cared most about the quality of the writing; politics and philosophies were secondary in his mind, although he did take exception to Pound's anti-Semitic leanings, refusing to publish some of his more questionable works and soundly rebuking him for his discriminations in private correspondence: "I think anti-Semitism is contemptible and despicable and I will not put my hand in it. I cannot tell you how it grieves me to see you taking up with it" (Barnhisel, 79). It was in this nearly-all-inclusive atmosphere that Laughlin developed the face of modernist literature in the United States.

Paris in the 1930s was a hotbed of literary and political activity. Hot on the heels of the Lost Generation, a new breed of writer adopted the cafes and literary salons of the Left Bank as home. It was here that Sartre held sway over this new generation of Existentialists, pontificating on existence and meaning and the need to take responsibility for one's lot in life. Pound and Sartre most likely crossed paths during this period, prior to World War



Sartre and longtime love, Simone de Beauvoir in 1929 (above) and later in life

1924 - Monotype designs
Fournier, based on Pierre Simon
Fournier's typeface

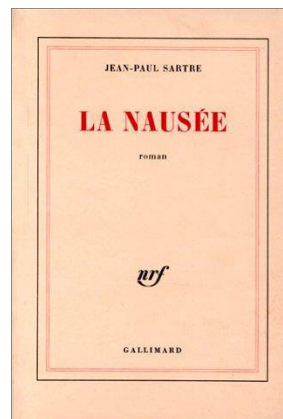
1927 - Paul Renner designs
Futura typeface

Jean-Paul Sartre with pipe

II and the German occupation of France and during or just after the time Sartre would be writing *Nausea*. Sartre would be very much in the public eye at this point; the Gallimard edition of *La Nausée* would be about to drop, and he would be causing quite a stir among the old new literary guard. Simone de Beauvoir, the noted philosopher, writer, and feminist, would be his partner in the assimilation of existential thought into the Parisian literary scene. The two were inseparable, married and polyamorous and of like mind about most things. de Beauvoir would champion Sartre to her students, and he would spread the gospel of Existentialism.

Sartre's political acumen would take an upswing following a stint in the military during World War II; he was drafted at the age of 34, soon after *La Nausée* hit bookshelves in France. Sartre would be taken prisoner in 1940 only to escape in 1941 and form a resistance group which failed. While he sympathized with the Communists, he did not fully buy into the rhetoric and had no qualms about criticizing inefficiencies and hypocrisy he found among their ranks; his thoughts on the subject would take to the stage in his 1948 play, "Les Mains Sales." Communist leaders in France would repudiate his statements by claiming that it was Sartre, in fact, whose hands were dirty. He also did not shy away from his criticism of then General Charles de Gaulle (once remarking on the similarity between de Gaulle's mustache and that of Hitler) which earned him no love from the eventual president. When questioned about Sartre's activities, de Gaulle is famously quoted as responding, "One does not arrest Voltaire," a perhaps begrudging acknowledgment of the author's canonical status among France's literati (the French army was not so diplomatic in their dislike for Sartre; following his admonishment of the French occupation of Algiers, French veterans marched down the street chanting, "Shoot Sartre!").

Not one to be affected adversely by political stance (outside of Pound's bigotry) or the whims of a fickle consumer market, Laughlin acquired the rights to publish an English translation of *La Nausée* in 1949 as part of the New Directions New Classics library. He had recognized a glaring oversight by American publishers by their allowing certain works to fall out of print that he hoped to rectify with the series, as well as introducing new voices to the American public. In a letter to Dylan Thomas, Laughlin expressed a



Gallimard edition of La Nausée

1933? - Sartre writes *La Nausée*

1935 - Laughlin meets Pound in Italy

sentiment about the book-buyers akin to the Sartre quote at the beginning of this essay:

Most buyers are women --- bitches: rather stupid middle-aged women of no background, worried about business, positively hating a book that requires intelligence to read and sell. These creatures I must woo. I must manage somehow to get through their shell and make them break their own rules, make them put a good book, a book of poetry on their shelves. Selling is really a great art, and I am just a novice at it, but it gets into your blood. To size up the buyer at a glance, in the half instant that you have free as you come into the shop, to make instantly your judgment on the line you will take, and then to attack... and not to give way at first defeat but keep at it, trying every little dodge you've picked up from past experience. Anything to leave the books behind you, or rather, come away with an order. It is like some kind of insect depositing pollen where it isn't wanted. You believe in the seed you carry. You feel sure if you can just leave the books in view in the store someone will come in and buy them. But you have first to overcome this Cerberus, this unattractive middle-aged woman with unhappy lines on her face, this symbol of Babbity and stupidity. She is the

Display Ad 324 -- No Title
 Postcard Edition (1924 Current) (1st) Jan 17, 1969
 Postcard Edition (Newspaper) The New York Times (1951 - 2007)
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ND
DIRECTIONS
 paperbacks

NAUSEA
 Jean-Paul Sartre
 Existentialist classic. Sartre's fiction masterpiece. \$1.35

BIRD IN THE BUSH
 Kenneth Rexroth
 "18 inspiring pieces of a splendidly indignant mind."—*New Yorker* \$1.55

THE CONFUCIAN ODES
 Ezra Pound
 Lyric translations of 305 odes of Confucius' Classic Anthology. \$1.45

SELECTED POEMS
 Thomas Merton
 A new selection of poetry. Introduction by Mark Van Doren \$1.35

PORTRAIT OF THE ARTIST AS A YOUNG BOG 95c
 Dylan Thomas

THREE TRAGEDIES \$1.25
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THE CRACK-UP \$1.45
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UNDER MILK WOOD \$1.00
 Dylan Thomas

A COMET ISLAND OF THE MIND \$1.00
 Lawrence Ferlinghetti

THE COLOSSUS OF MAROUSSI \$1.25
 Henry Miller

THE LORD OF THE GREAT IMAGE

New Directions ad featuring the ND Paperback edition of Nausea

1936 - Laughlin founds New Directions

1936 - *New Directions Prose and Poetry* published

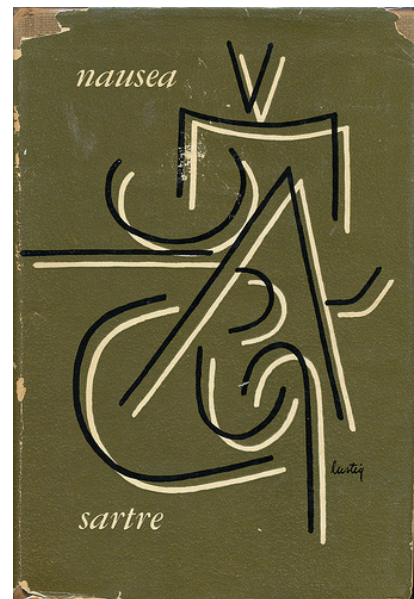
1938 - Gallimard publishes *La Nausée*

enemy, and also the friend. My God how you love her after she has bought something. All your loathing runs away and you are friends. You sit there for a moment after the sale, in a sort of lull after the tempest, and talk a little shop in a soft, pleasant way, with all ferocity out of you and a feeling in you of actual bliss, as though you had just conceived a child.

It is obvious that the difficulty of bringing a book like *Nausea* (as with any of the New Directions titles) was not lost on Laughlin. He did not hold a naïve view of the situation and met head on the complications intrinsic to his endeavor. As Sartre championed Existential works as being reserved for “specialists,” Laughlin battled to supplant the conventional mindset of his customer base with a kernel of specialism, to bring the light of his modernist renaissance to the dusty shelves of the old guard of booksellers. He had rediscovered books by Henry James, William Faulkner, and F. Scott Fitzgerald that were no longer available to the masses, something that is difficult to imagine in the current market. New Classics started as Laughlin’s exercise in leasing the rights for books such as these and repackaging them in a modernist light for a new generation to appreciate, as well as exposing new voices in literature to the American public. The books were published four per year with an option to subscribe for an unbelievable annual sum of just four dollars. Thirty-six volumes were produced between 1944 and 1953. New Directions heavyweight William Carlos Williams held the inaugural position with *In the American Grain*; the final spot went to Garcia Lorca’s *Collected Poems*. New Classics 35 was reserved for *Nausea*. (An interesting note: all research points to the book as being published in 1949; articles and reviews in *The New York Times* are dated from then. However, the official website dedicated to designer Alvin Lustig dates the cover design at 1953.)

Laughlin’s New Classics series, and New Directions in general, defined modernist literature in the United States. His carefully selected titles were

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Nausea 1949 edition, cover by Alvin Lustig

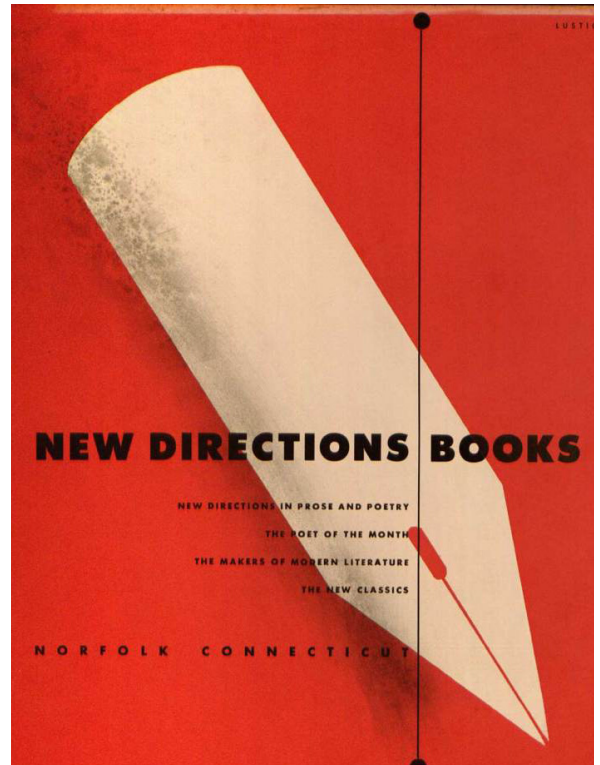
1949 - New Directions publishes
Nausea as part of its New Classics
line

1949? - Lustig designs cover for
Nausea

to represent the best contemporary writers had to offer, as well as key influential works of the past that he felt should not be forgotten. He did not fail to bear visual aesthetics in mind in this undertaking. Each of the thirty-six volumes came dressed in a jacket designed by modernist great, Alvin Lustig. Lustig was a renaissance man of sorts. He was a graphic designer, an illustrator, an architect, and a furniture designer. He came to America to escape Nazi forces in Germany, much like his other modernist peers. Lustig created thirty-six uniquely illustrated covers that coalesced into one cohesive library under his aesthetic eye. Each book shared his style, but none strongly mimicked another in any particular way. Abstract geometric shapes with a handcrafted appeal adorned each edition, all deftly incorporating theme into their design.

The cover of *Nausea* consists of a seemingly simple grouping of lines (Is it a man walking? A face? Should it be open to interpretation? Would an individual's interpretation of the illustration be construed as some sort of commentary on that person?) in black, repeated in white and offset, and floating on a tan background. The title and author name receive the same type treatment, a white italicized font of identical size above (title) and below (author name) the illustration. Both are lowercase and understated. Lustig's signature is the only other bit of writing on the cover. It appears as intended: a serious work of literature, no frills, nothing unnecessary, just smart, expressive design for the discerning consumer of modern literature. Despite its warm reception in its original French release, Laughlin made no attempt to clutter the cover with accolades and blurbs of praise. All trust was placed in the hands of Lustig. It is a cover designer's dream, really, that a publisher would entrust the shelf success of not just one, but a series of thirty-six books to an aesthetic vision unencumbered by marketing copy.

The response for *Nausea* in the United States can be summed up in one word: lukewarm. Writers for *The New York Times* had long been critical of Sartre and his view of literature as "a form of social utility addressed to a specific audience on whom it is intended to exercise an immediate influence" (Szyogi). It may be possible that outside of Existentialist circles in general, Sartre found no sympathy; British critic Philip Thody dismissed all of Sartre's work as invalid because of his interest in the "intellectual battle



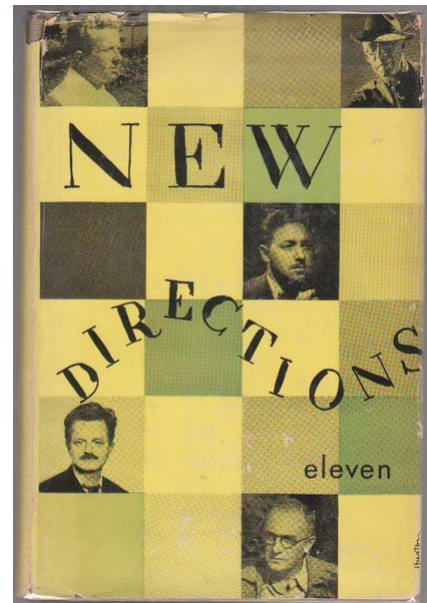
New Directions poster designed by Lustig

1955 - Alvin Lustig dies

1957 - Brownjohn, Chermayeff & Geismar is started

[over] the ordinary things in life” (Szyogi). In a review of the original 1949 New Classics edition of *Nausea*, Vladimir Nabokov belittled the intellectual fortitude of Sartre’s Existentialist movement and questions whether the novel was “worth translating at all.” Nabokov likened Lloyd Alexander’s translation to “a dentist persistently pulling out the wrong tooth” and then proceeded to cite a couple of examples, limiting himself to these due to the space constraints allowed for his article, he claimed, that he found to be reprehensible. Alexander did not receive much in the way of a reprieve when the 1959 New Directions Paperback edition of *Nausea*, which still featured his translation, garnered a review of “serviceable” in Raymond Walters’ “Paperbacks in Review” column in the November 1, 1959, issue of *The New York Times*. By contrast, Eric Sutton’s translation of *The Age of Reason*, another of Sartre’s books published by Bantam and reviewed in that same column, received relatively glowing praise as “felicitous.” Nabokov ended his review (dismissively titled, “Sartre’s First Try”) thusly:

The crux of the whole book seems to be the Illumination that comes to Roquentin when he discovers that his “nausea” is the result of the pressure of an absurd and amorphous but very tangible world. Unfortunately for the novel, all this remains on a purely mental level, and the discovery might have been of some other nature, say solipsistic, without in the least affecting the rest of the book. When an author inflicts his idle and arbitrary philosophic fancy on a helpless person whom he has invented for that purpose, a lot of talent is needed to have the trick work. One has no special quarrel with Roquentin when he decides the world exists. But the task to make the



An early edition of the New Directions anthology

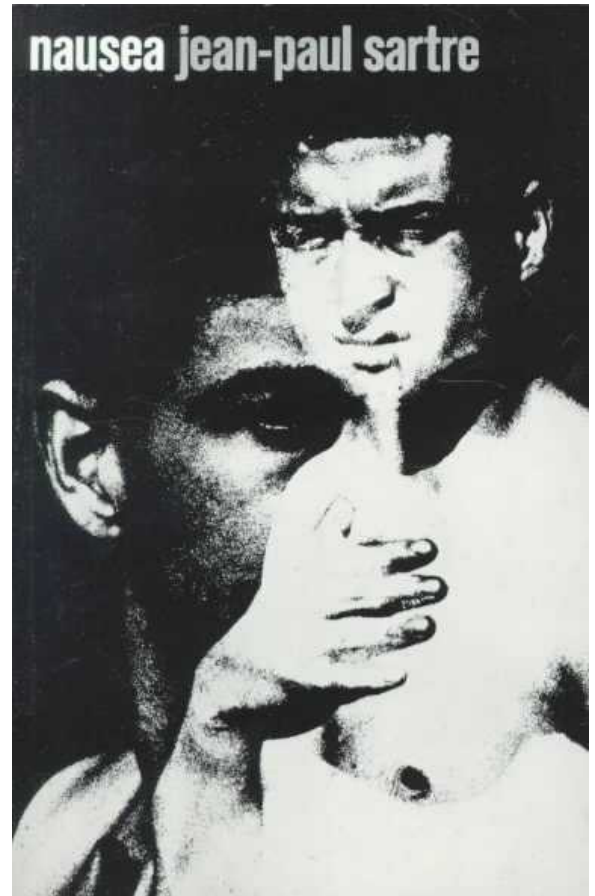
1959 - New Directions publishes the ND Paperback edition of *Nausea*

1959 - BCG designs cover for ND Paperback edition of *Nausea*

*world exist as a work of art was beyond
Sartre's powers.*

In this detraction, Nabokov touches on the dichotomy of Sartre as an author, that of the political/philosophical ideologue and that of the artistic writer. Nabokov's assertion that Sartre comes across as too much of a pundit for his philosophical movement in his literary life reveals much about the state of mind in the American literary circle. Sartre's critique of American literature as being regionalized and, as a result, philosophically and politically impotent may have some bearing if Nabokov represents a majority of those involved in the American scene, if only in Sartre's own mind. The irony of Nabokov's critique, though, is that by the time of the release of the New Directions Paperback edition of *Nausea*, Sartre had fallen out of favor with many of his revolutionary compatriots. Albert Camus, a long time friend and supporter, admonished him as merely a writer who rebels rather than a rebel who writes. Others in the Communist party in France were outraged with his portrayal of the bureaucracy of the party in "Les Moins Sales." And so, where did this leave Sartre? In some philosophical purgatory where he might only retain the attention of a devout few and spark interest among young collegiate minds hungry for new ideas? Or in a pantheon of modern savants, critical of the status quo and unafraid to speak in spite of imminent repercussions? Regardless, Sartre obviously had the backing of Laughlin and the support of a book buying public, however they might be defined, with the release and success of the New Directions Paperback 82 in 1959.

The New Directions Paperback line retained the publisher's proclivity for literary quality and aesthetic appeal at a modest price point. The New Classics library had been available via subscription at four dollars per year, or just a dollar a book. The Paperback editions were priced just above that; *Nausea* could be had for 135 pieces of copper, not bad considering inflation over the decade between its release and that of the original hardcover. At a trim size of seven and a quarter inches by four and a half inches, the book could easily slip into a jacket pocket or handbag, perfect for the student or burgeoning philosopher on the go. Alvin Lustig had suggested a switch to black and white covers exclusively for this line as a way to set it apart from other



1959 cover of *Nausea*, designed by BCG

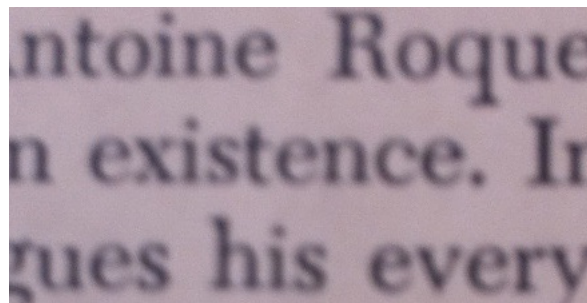
paperbacks on the market. The firm of Brownjohn, Chermayeff & Geismar was chosen to design the cover. Tom Geismar and Ivan Chermayeff had attended the Yale School of Design together in the mid 1950s. They formed BCG in 1957 with Robert Brownjohn, a former student of Chermayeff's father. BCG built its reputation through the design of book covers album, covers, and corporate identities. Photographer Len Gittleman, a friend and collaborator of Chermayeff, provided the cover image, a highly contrasted black and white multiple exposure of a shirtless man. Says Gittleman:

Ivan and I were classmates at the Institute of Design in Chicago in the 1950's. We worked together on several projects while we were students, and afterwards in NYC as well.

I did make the picture. A friend of mine, Michael Train, was my subject. As I recall, the picture was a multiple exposure image. The result was not a planned image, but rather a matter of making many random multiple images, and then finding what seemed to work.

The result is a beautifully stark and cleanly designed cover. The book is adorned with a simple, lowercase title and author treatment in white and gray Wotan Grotesque bold. This font was designed in 1914 by Johannes Wagner and used on both sides of the Atlantic for war propaganda materials. Its clean lines lent itself well to display type for posters and appealed to the modernist aesthetic. The back cover is set in Futura for headings/display and Fournier for the body copy. The interior of the book is set in Fournier, as well, at 10/12 (10 point type over 12 point leading). The foundry Mono-type produced this typeface in 1924 and based it on type cut by Pierre Simon Fournier circa 1742, which he named "St. Augustin Ordinaire" in his *Manuel Typographique*. St. Augustin Ordinaire was a strongly influential typeface

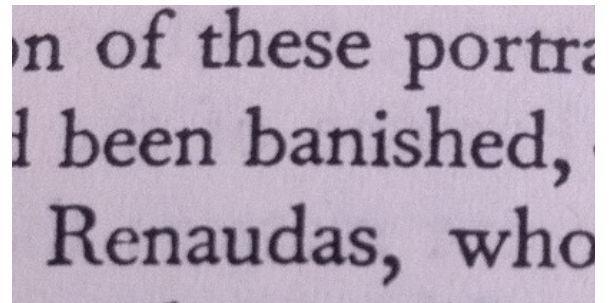
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text from the back cover of the 1959 edition

in the 18th century and considered an early stepping stone to later, modern styles by typographers like Bodoni. Fournier has strong vertical stress and great contrast between thick and thin strokes with little or no bracketing on the serifs. The typeface looks “clean” on the page and provides a comfortable level of legibility. This last bit is particularly important for Nausea and the other ND Paperbacks, as the interior margins are so tight (40 pts/top, ~15 pts/sides, and 60 pts/bottom). By carefully selecting a typeface known for its economic page coverage, the pressure on the eyes of the reader is kept to a minimum, enhancing the possibility for an enjoyable read where form is concerned. Content, unfortunately for those who would echo Mr. Nabokov’s sentiments regarding Mr. Sartre’s abilities, is still subjective.

Overall, the New Directions Paperback edition of Nausea serves its purpose. It provides an affordable option for those seeking Jean-Paul Sartre’s introduction into the literary world. It does this in an aesthetically pleasing manner. It marries form with function in the guise of an easily portable book with no issues concerning legibility. And it continues a legacy of all-encompassing quality established by James Laughlin (and Ezra Pound). I’m sure Aunt Leila was proud.



text from the interior of the 1959 edition

COLOPHON

This essay has been set in Fournier 10/12 with margins mimicking those of the New Directions Paperback 82, Jean-Paul Sartre's *Nausea*. Fournier is known for its legibility and economy of page, which lends itself, as noted before, to an enjoyable reading experience. It has also been noted that content remains subjective so please bear that in mind.