

Authorial Freedom

Umbhali is writing a serial novel. Each month she sends a new chapter draft to her editor, Zhidao, who is her most enthusiastic supporter. After a week of feedback and revisions, the chapter goes to typesetting, and within a few days appears in the next print issue of *Life* magazine, where it is consumed by thousands of voracious readers eager to find out what unfolds next in the life of her leading protagonist. And then the process starts all over again. When Zhidao originally approached her for this project, Umbhali had hoped to write several chapters ahead – or perhaps even complete a full manuscript before the novel began to publish. But you know, life intervenes, and before she knew it, she was here: barely staying on top of each deadline as they unfold.¹ She has a kind of working plan or expectation about where the novel will go, but from time to time she’s had to revise the plan in light of the way that her book has grown, chapter by chapter – as well as in order to accommodate the occasional bout of writer’s block.²

This month Umbhali is working on chapter eight. Her protagonist is a young Frenchman during the second world war whose family has been torn apart by the ramifications of the conflicts of his time. After an idyllic youth described in the first two chapters, in chapter three his brother was killed in the German offensive. And then chapters four through six follow the progression of his father’s sympathies for the Nazis and the resulting breakdown of his parents’ marriage, and in chapter seven he has just learned of how he can travel to England to join the Free French in their struggle to liberate his homeland. Readers of *Life* love it, and several blogs and TikTok accounts have sprung up speculating about where the story will go next, and why. Umbhali has had a plan, of course, about where things will go next³, but now she isn’t sure.

¹ ‘However, if Da-sein “exists” in such a way that there is absolutely nothing more outstanding for it, it has also already thus become no-longer-being-there. Eliminating what is outstanding in its being is equivalent to annihilating its being’ Heidegger in Stambaugh (ed.) (1996, 236).

² ‘Between the past which no longer is and the future which is not yet, this moment when he exists is nothing’ de Beauvoir (1948, 7).

³ ‘Thus, human spontaneity always projects itself towards something’ de Beauvoir (1948, 25).

Through the first seven chapters, Umbhali's writing has been driven by her plan to write a classic heroic arc.⁴ In order to grow into a hero who can build on but also transcend wartime heroics to go on to help heal the continental rift, her protagonist must have both cause for revenge (for his brother) and experience with deteriorating interpersonal conflict (between his parents), and so it is this arc for which she has been setting him up. But then she begins reading some of the fan discussions of her work. According to one fan theory, *Free to Be Me* is not a heroic narrative, but an analysis of original sin. On this theory, war is the root of all evil, and the next logical step is for the protagonist's loving act of staying home to support his mother to itself be corrupted by his regrets for not joining the resistance into a source of resentment that eventually destroys even that relationship. *Nice*, (she thinks to herself, pumping her fist) *if readers can be that unsure about which way the story is going, then I've done a great job of establishing dramatic tension!* And then she thinks again – *oh, no* – *what if I can make the book even better, if I follow this other plan, instead of my original plan?* And now she is stuck.

Once it is completed, *Free to Be Me* will of course have a complete narrative arc. It may turn out to be a heroic narrative – or it may turn out to be an analysis of original sin. It could end up as a social critique, or as a complex metaphor. Later interpreters will decide which of these is the best interpretation of the text, and Umbhali's intentions may be neither here nor there.⁵ For example, her protestations that the book is not a metaphor for the social anxiety attached to coming out of the closet may only support the interpretation that she is herself too socially anxious about coming out of the closet to recognize that this is the book that she has been writing all along. Whether or not, and to what extent, this is so, is what is disputed by literary theorists who disagree about the significance of authorial intent. But in the meantime Umbhali's intent and her own interpretation of what she is doing have everything to do with the choices that she makes in writing each chapter.

But her *past* intent has nothing to do with it.⁶ Although it might be easier for Umbhali to stick to her original plan than trying to devise a new and better plan, that is completely irrelevant to the question of how to complete the best novel that she can. This question – every writer's question – is constrained only by what she has written before. Now, if Umbhali had gotten her act together well enough to draft the whole book in advance, then it would be even less constrained. Then, she could have taken the feedback from a writer's workshop and re-written earlier chapters to better fit with any change in plans about how to finish

⁴ 'Da-sein always exists for the sake of itself. "As long as it is," up until its end, it is related to its potentiality-of-being" Heidegger again in Stambaugh (ed.) (1996, 236).

⁵ Contrast Dennett (1992, 106).

⁶ 'There is no inertia in consciousness' Sartre (1956, 61).

the book. But in her actual circumstances, it is too late for this. The earlier chapters are already circulating in print, the active topic of animated discussions on TikTok.⁷

Still, Umbhali is not quite in the same position as her readers. Both she and her readers must work with the same seven chapters of existing material, in trying to imagine where the book could be going. They will both therefore have access to the same range of imaginative possibilities, plus or minus failures of imagination. But some of those possibilities are more distant than others. The version of the story on which it turns out to be an allegory about gun-control legislation in Texas may be, for example, a little bit hard to get to from where the story has begun, while the version on which it is just an illustration of Sartrean existential choice is in contrast hard to avoid.⁸ Readers trying to interpret the book as it unfolds will need to temper their hopes for the best version of it that they can imagine with the realism of expectations about which of these paths are more likely. But Umbhali suffers from no such constraints. If she can discern an ending for the novel that *she can make* to fit with the first seven chapters, then she is in a position to adopt an interpretation that would only fit with that ending. The core difference between Umbhali and her readers is that she is the one who gets to write the ending down, and thus the only one with the power to make it so.⁹ Indeed, she cannot help it, even if she disavows that this is what she is doing. Even if she stops writing, that is itself a way of ending the novel.¹⁰

Now, of course Umbhali can't write down just any ending. She cannot, for example, simply abandon her protagonists in France during the second world war and start over with twenty-four chapters of romantic comedy set in Constantinople just before its fall. Whatever she writes down from this point forward needs to make sense with what she has written before, and its failure to integrate with what has come before will make a serious mark against the overall quality of the novel, even if whatever comes next would have been excellent, if it were self-standing.¹¹ But Umbhali has a deep kind of freedom to decide which among the many eligible interpretations of the first seven chapters will remain eligible after each successive chapter. She doesn't get to exercise this freedom simply by intending one of these interpretations, of course. But she does exercise it by writing down new words that make some of the existing possible interpretations more plausible, and others less plausible, or even no longer eligible at all.

⁷ "We shall call this character of Da-sein... the *thrownness* of this being into its there" Heidegger in Stambaugh (ed.) (1996, 135).

⁸ Sartre (1946, **.**). (*Existentialism as a Humanism*)

⁹ If man [...] is indefinable, it is because at first he is *nothing*. Only afterward will he be something, and he himself will have made what he will be" (Sartre 1946 [2001, 293]).

¹⁰ "When he wants to escape his destiny, he is still freely fleeing from it" de Beauvoir (1948, 24) (summarizing Sartre).

¹¹ Compare Marusic, this volume.

The more that Umbhali reflects on this, the more that she is struck by the depth of her freedom to decide the future of her novel. Torn by her protagonist's conflict between supporting his mother and going to fight for the Free French, it occurs to Umbhali that she could use chapter eight to reveal that chapter seven was actually a dream sequence, and there is no realistic opportunity to escape to England to join the resistance. Or maybe now is the right time to reveal that the protagonist has been in denial about his own disability that would prevent him from serving. Or his mother dies in a tragic accident that removes the need to make a choice. As the author of a serial novel, the text of the first seven chapters of Umbhali's novel are fixed, but what has actually happened during the space of that narrative is not.¹² Chapter eight is not too late to reveal that the novel's narrator is unreliable, or for a flashback that changes the most natural interpretation of events, or even for the words, "And then he woke up."

The open possibilities are a bit heady for Umbhali, so she makes a fresh pot of tea while she stares at the words "Chapter Eight" on her word processor screen. And then she starts to reflect on how she would have felt seven months ago to learn that her future self wasn't going to stick to the original plan, which makes her start to feel uneasy.¹³ On the one hand, she has no intention to change her plan for the novel at all unless she is confident that it will be an improvement over her original plan. And she hardly thinks past-Umbhali could be upset that the novel will end up being even better than she had originally envisioned. But on the other hand, if she has changed her mind already after only seven months, then this makes her start to doubt whether she might end up changing her mind several times more, over the course of another twenty-four planned chapters.

It's not precisely that Umbhali is afraid that the novel might end up being even better than her new plan envisions. After all, present-Umbhali can hardly comfort past-Umbhali that there is nothing to object to because the novel has improved while refusing to be comforted by future-Umbhali that it has been improved yet again. Rather, what unnerves her about the prospect of future Umbhali changing the plan yet again, is that it undermines her confidence that she now has the freedom to select among the possible interpretations for the novel by virtue of the fact that she is the one who gets to write down its ending.¹⁴ She does not, it turns out, get to just write down its ending – writing down its ending is a process that will be extended in time, and present-Umbhali needs the cooperation of future-Umbhali in order to be able to do so.¹⁵

¹² Jones (2008).

¹³ Schroeder (2019, 154-156).

¹⁴ 'Thus I cannot genuinely desire an end today without desiring it through my whole existence, insofar as it is the future of this present moment and insofar as it is the surpassed past of days to come' de Beauvoir (1948, 27).

¹⁵ As emphasized in Schroeder (2019).

So writing her novel is a cooperative project between Umbhali and her future self. It requires trust, but she can also constrain her future self by what she writes down in chapter eight.¹⁶ By the time she gets to chapter twenty-six, the options for future-Umbhali are going to be substantially limited, unless her editor Zhidao authorizes thirty more chapters. The constraint provided by the past is therefore the very thing that gives Umbhali power over the future.^{17,18}

Realistically, of course, Umbhali does not have complete power over what goes into each chapter. Since she is not self-published, she also has an editor, and realistically, Zhidao must go along with Umbhali's proposed change in plans, in order for it to have a realistic chance of working. Zhidao could refuse to approve the new chapter, or he could simply edit out the line "And then he woke up," making it even harder for Umbhali to reverse course than before. If she is sufficiently clever and resourceful, Umbhali can gradually drop enough subtle hints that escape Zhidao's notice until he is forced to acknowledge that the best way to complete the novel as currently written (say, after fifteen chapters) is along the lines of Umbhali's new plan. But in order to do so, she must find a way to continually successfully straddle her old plan and her new one until she can get Zhidao on board.

So we've seen that as the writer of a serial novel, Umbhali has a lot of power over how it will be interpreted – not because she gets to choose the interpretation, but because she gets to write down what is interpreted.¹⁹ This difference is important. Even when Umbhali's choices about which words to write down as part of her text are guided by her current interpretation or bundle of possible interpretations of where the novel is going, the question of whether or not any of these end up being the right interpretation is not up to any interpretive act on her part or the part of anyone else. The question of which interpretation is the correct one is ultimately to be determined by the facts about whatever text she ultimately writes down. So in that sense text precedes interpretation.

¹⁶ Sartre (and Marusic – compare especially Marusic (2015)) might contend that the very idea of trusting yourself to do something in the future is a way of being alienated from yourself. But here I find myself less pulled by this thought and more by what I find in Heidegger and de Beauvoir about the ways in which we project ourselves into the future. To be is to be free, but it is also to be situated – and one of the central ways that we are situated is in time. So to deny that we will also later be situated in time and still free is I think to misidentify the scope of our freedom. It is true that when we decide we decide *for* what to do in the future, but ignoring the fact that we *will* be then free again and unbound by the decision we make now constitutes, I would argue, itself a kind of bad faith about the facts that *that will be us* and that, in Sartre's terms, there is no inertia in consciousness.

¹⁷ The centrality of fidelity to the past in extending agency across time into the future is a central theme in Luca Ferrero's work – for example, especially in Ferrero (2006), (2010), (2022).

¹⁸ Highest courts of review, such as the United States Supreme Court, face a similar challenge when confronting the fact that it is within their power to overrule even some of their own past decisions. The more freely they abandon earlier cases as incorrectly decided, the more they take away their own power to set principles that can speak for the future. Respect for precedent is therefore the way of being guided by the past that empowers the court to guide the future. Compare Schroeder (ms, chapter seven).

¹⁹ Contrast Schechtman (1996).

But we have also seen that Umbhali's power over her novel is not absolute. It is softly constrained by what she has already written – not in the sense that the future must match how we have already understood the past, but in the sense that the future must give us a new understanding of that past. It is constrained by the way that she must cooperate with her own future self, but she has enough power to entice her future self's cooperation to sustain the asymmetry between her position to interpret her own novel and the position of hopeful readers. And it is constrained by her need for cooperation from others who must collaborate with her on producing and publishing the novel, though sometimes the lack of others' vision and confidence can be overcome with sufficient resourcefulness. As an author she is free – wholly undetermined by her prior plans – but she is also constrained.

Umbhali's position as an author could be a metaphor for existentialist freedom. But I believe, and want to suggest, that we should instead understand it as a model. It is no coincidence, on this view, that Umbhali's authorial freedom bears some of the central characteristics of existential freedom, because choice is authorship, and lives *are* much like serially authored books. The main difference is that to move from books to lives, we simply need to identify the author *with* the book.

What you and I have in common with Umbhali's novel, I believe, is that we are each what I call *interpretive works in progress*. An interpretive object, in my terms, is an object that is unified in whatever way makes it most interpretable as the kind of thing that it is. Interpretive objects are no more puzzling than natural objects, artifacts, biological objects, or functional objects. Each of these kinds of objects is unified in different kinds of way. Natural objects like rocks and galaxies are unified by the fact that their parts are more cohesive with each other than with other things. Biological objects like cells and ecosystems are unified by the fact that their parts participate in systems of self-maintenance. Artifacts are unified by acts of artifice, and functional objects are unified by the participation of their parts in a common function. Interpretive objects are no different, except that what unifies them is whatever makes them most interpretable.

If you google 'rocks that look like animals' you will find great candidates for interpretive objects. If a rock looks enough like an eagle, then there is an interpretive eagle in the rock, and it contains just those parts of the rock that make it most interpretable as an eagle. Novels are also interpretive objects – not because they are *constituted* by anyone's interpretation, or because we like to interpret them, or even because their function is to give us something to interpret²⁰ – but because what answers the question as to which version of the text is the correct one and which variants count as translations or reprintings rather than fan

²⁰ Eco (1979).

fiction is itself an interpretive question. It is answered in whatever way makes the work most interpretable as a novel.²¹

You and I, I want to say, are also interpretive works. More can be said to argue for this, but here I simply want to suggest that this can explain why Umbhali's story sheds light on key existentialist themes.²² The question of how far we are extended in space, time, and possibility is itself interpretive – a matter of working out what makes us most interpretable *as a person*. Of course, just as different things make something more interpretable as a novel than as an eagle, similarly different things make something more interpretable as a person than as a novel. But persons are *doers*. They exercise agency, responding to the situation in which they find themselves by rising above it or answering it in some way. They are protagonists who find themselves in and respond to their predicaments.²³

Unfortunately, the world in which we find ourselves does not have any perfect Kantian agents. That is why the closest thing that we can find is us: imperfectly embodied agents. Imperfectly embodied agents are not straightforwardly or perfectly persons. But we are *interpretable* as persons. And that is as close to the Kantian ideal of personhood as anything gets. Fortunately, like all interpretive objects, we are defined in whatever way makes us *most* interpretable as persons – as protagonists. So the line between protagonist and predicament – between freedom and facticity – is not set in advance, but is itself an interpretive matter – set in whatever way gives us the *most* freedom that we can be interpreted as having, in view of our lives as a whole. As Heidegger says, 'the that of facticity is never to be found by looking'.²⁴

But we are not just any interpretive objects. The text of our lives extends into the future as well as the past. So we don't experience our lives as wholes, like completed novels. Nor do we experience our lives from the outside, like the readers of Umbhali's serial novel reading one chapter at a time as they come out. Rather, we experience our lives *from the inside*, much as Umbhali experiences writing her text while her serial novel is in progress.

Like Umbhali's novel, the true interpretation of the events in chapters one through seven doesn't *change* as she adds later chapters that provide more interpretive material. Rather, the correct interpretation of our pasts gets to be fixed *by* what goes on to happen in the remainder of our lives. Like Umbhali, we have no power to make any interpretation of our lives correct by fiat or preference or self-image. But we do have the power to realize who we are by living out the life that makes that interpretation true.

²¹ Schroeder (ms, chapters I-2).

²² For some of the more, see Schroeder (2022) and Schroeder (ms, chapters 4-6 and 9).

²³ As Kant argues in section 3 of the *Groundwork*, making a choice *requires* seeing yourself in this way.

²⁴ Stambaugh (1996, I35).

Similarly, like Umbhali, we lack *total* power to determine the course of our lives. We are socially embedded, and require the cooperation of not just our future selves, but of family, friends, colleagues, fellow citizens, and the luck of events. All of these things figure into the text of our lives, and sometimes become constraints that we must work within – and sometimes quite sharp ones.²⁵ But the participation of other people in our lives doesn't just get in our way. It is true that if Zhidao is an unhelpful editor, then he can prevent Umbhali from writing a better novel. But if he is a good editor, then he can enable her to write a better novel than she otherwise could – and similarly for the TikTokers whose ideas Umbhali is considering. Because you are unified by whatever makes you the most interpretable as a protagonist, and protagonists are distinguished by what they *do*, cooperation with others can extend the scope of your agency, and hence expand the boundary between freedom and facticity.²⁶

In his novel *Nausea*, Sartre devotes extended attention to what might look like a distinctive problem for the account that I am offering – a problem that arises from the reflexivity of an author writing their own text – precisely the difference that I have acknowledged separates us from Umbhali's novel in progress. Umbhali is not a character in her own story. Or even if she is, not everything that she does in real life becomes *ipso facto* incorporated into the interpretive text of her novel. So when Umbhali puts into effect her revised plan for her novel to be an allegory for original sin, the fact that she got this idea from TikTok does not itself become part of the text. But in contrast, if Umbhali is going through a mid-life crisis and trying to work out whether to stay in her marriage or abandon it to go study World War II historical sites for the sake of her novel, if she gets the answer from a TikTok video that fact will always be part of her story.

In *Nausea*, Sartre's character Antoine Roquentin is living in a small town Bouville, researching and trying to write the biography of a historical figure. As gradually becomes clear, Roquentin is quite attached to the idea of being the kind of scholar who is so devoted to his intellectual project that he would spend his life devoted to it in a small town literally translated 'mud-town', and this is a central part of the motivation that keeps him there persisting with his project. But as also becomes clear, the kind of scholar who Roquentin aspires to be in his self-image is the kind of person who is motivated by *their project* – not in order to be the kind of person who would be so motivated. The very act of trying to live out the interpretation of what he would like his life to be turns out to be tragically inconsistent with success at living out that interpretation.²⁷

²⁵ Compare Melo Lopez, this volume.

²⁶ Compare Dover and Gingerich on Beauvoir's account of the commitment to the freedom of others, this volume.

²⁷ Compare Hieronymi (this volume, **).

It follows from Sartre's observation, I think, that the reflexivity that is introduced when we move from the model of Umbhali, who is not identical to her novel, to the model of persons like you and me, who *are* identical with the interpretive object constituted by the text of our lives, turns out to limit our ability to shape our lives according to our vision of who we would like to be that Umbhali doesn't face. But you might think that something stronger follows from Sartre's *Nausea* point.²⁸ You might think that it means that we can *never* succeed in moving forward in a way that is informed by our understanding of who moving forward in this way makes us. Or even more strongly, you might think that this shows that persons are not interpretively constituted, as I have claimed, since self-knowledge would require identifying this interpretation, which this problem shows to be impossible.

I'm not persuaded, however, that either of these two conclusions follows. For one, if existence truly precedes essence, then there is *something* to the shape that essence takes as a consequence of our existence. Sartre's *Nausea* point limits our power to enact our vision of what we aspire for this essence to be, *no matter what* we say that our essence as persons ultimately amounts to. But it does not prevent us from having a partial grasp on what kind of person we are becoming through our choices, and it does not prevent the kind of biographer who Roquentin aspires to be from recognizing this about himself.

But I want to say something stronger, as well. What an interpretation of you as a person must do, is to separate you as protagonist from the predicament in which you find yourself – it must separate your freedom from your facticity. It does this in space, potentially counting your prosthetic hand or your Google calendar as parts of you if they extend your agency in the right way, and counting your lung tumor as not part of you but as part of your predicament, even though it is inside your body. It does this in time, drawing a line before which you did not exist and another after which you will be no longer. It does this in possibility, telling us what kinds of changes you could have survived – and in this sense literally constituting your essence in the traditional philosophical sense. And it does so in *quality* – separating the moods and motives through which you exercise yourself as protagonist from those that interfere with or limit your agency. It locates you as signal in a world of noise.

In Sartre's story, Roquentin fails to be the kind of person who he aspires to be, and he fails in part because this is who he is trying to be and that kind of person would not do what he did out of the motive of trying to be that way. But this is so only in part. It is because as the rest of Sartre's novel makes clear, the *best interpretation* of Roquentin makes this motive central to Roquentin's agency as a protagonist in the story. The story does not make sense of how he responds to events or what he does without it. But that does not

²⁸ Thanks to Beri Marusic for pressing me consistently and forcefully on this point.

mean that there could not be a different character who also acts out this plan for who they wish to be but succeeds.

All kinds of things make a causal difference for what we do – how much sleep we got the night before, whether we are in a bad mood because we were cut off in traffic, or our current level of potassium. There are always such causes to our actions, because we are imperfectly embodied as agents. So we are free not because our actions do not have such causes, but because interpretability as an agent requires drawing a line between which of these causes interfere with our freedom and which of them constitute it. The motive to realize one's self image as a devoted scholar is no different. Whether this motive is facticity or freedom is for the remainder of the story to reveal. The fact that Sartre writes the rest of the story so to reveal it does not mean that a different story could not have gone differently, even though we know from a scientific point of view that the protagonist would not have stayed in Bouville if not for that motive.

The metaphysics of interpretive objects therefore validates some of the central claims of existentialism. Existence precedes essence because an interpretive object is constituted by the best interpretation of something else. The existence of the text grounds the existence of the best interpretation, but the essence of the best interpretation is not fixed until the text is fixed. Things that seem important to the story in early chapters can turn out by the end to be small distractions, and things that seem small asides in early chapters can turn out to be pivotal moments by the end. The completed novel's essence may be to be an analysis of original sin, and if so, that is because this interpretation of the novel best ties together what it accomplishes. But back when Umbhali had only completed seven chapters this essence was not determined; it was only in prospect.

Likewise, I say, your essence is fixed by whatever boundary between freedom and facticity allows makes you most interpretable as a protagonist. The existence of the events of your life grounds the existence of the interpretation on which you are most a protagonist, but the question of which interpretation this is – and hence of what your essence is – is not settled until the events of your life are settled. You may have some idea of what this interpretation is that you are trying to live out, or you may not. So *you* may have some interpretation that precedes the text, just as Umbhali has a working interpretation that guides what she writes down. But your interpreting yourself in some way does not make that interpretation true. The only way that you have of making it true is to act it out, and as Sartre's *Nausea* point shows, even that may fail. It is prior only as telos, not as ground. So your essence will be what best ties together what you accomplish. It

will be whatever makes you the most free. But because the full text of your life is not yet written, the full story of your essence has likewise yet to be determined.²⁹

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