

## GERMAINE BRÉE LOOKS AT THE EXPANDING FIELD OF BEAUVOIR STUDIES

The Simone de Beauvoir Society is probably the most lively, far-reaching society dedicated to a literary figure active today - and there are many. What is astonishing is the broad international base of its membership and the diversity of their interests. I follow both newsletters and the series of *Beauvoir Studies* with keen interest. They show no sign of the parochialism and "inner-circle" mentality that make so many publications of that kind rather dull. Much praise for this is due to Yolanda Astarita Patterson who is largely responsible for the dynamism and quality of the society, its meetings and publications, and for the continuity in its high standards of scholarship.

Of late I have looked back over the past to explore the question of the nature of the interest in Simone de Beauvoir revealed over the course of the years and how it has evolved. I think I have discerned a pattern. There has always been an interest in Simone de Beauvoir's *Memoirs* primarily; it overshadowed the interest in her novels and her one neglected play. But without any doubt as we read article after article, what emerged as the years went by was the image of Beauvoir as a "liberated" woman whose life exemplified her "existentialist" principles. Those were more or less clearly understood, but the parallelism between thought, life, and ménage was seldom questioned. It became a critical stereotype.

Much was done to free Beauvoir from the constraining comparisons to Sartre. For instance, moving beyond questions of philosophy, Volume Four of the *Simone de Beauvoir Studies* (1987) set Simone de Beauvoir's work within the frame of what we might call feminine literary space - the writings of Rudi Gernreich, Anna Seghers, Anais Nin, Marguerite Yourcenar, Nathalie Sarraute, Christiane Rochefort. This, as I felt it, was a rich approach, opening up new perspectives on the social and historical configuration in which Simone decided to become a writer and in which she forged for herself the myth of her uniqueness.

A myth is not a lie; the young Simone could not know the still invisible writers of her generation. Her myth was merely an inevitable facet of the social myth that men wrote "literature," not women. It was a felicitous enlarging of Beauvoir criticism. A great blow to the image of Beauvoir, the model of feminist emancipation, came with the flood of previously unpublished letters and the monumental biographies of Sartre, Algren, and Beauvoir herself. There has been some lamentation on the consequent loss of Beauvoir as icon, model, almost saint, and displeasure at the discovery of a reality beneath the myth of a perfect love. I feel that, to the contrary, our new knowledge reopens the whole field of critical inquiry into the process, the "messy" processes, whereby a writer shapes the images she offers to others.

We have heard enough of Simone de Beauvoir as "mother of us all." Rather than accept that overused stereotype, I find it more intellectually stimulating to analyze the struggles and evasions Simone had to confront to escape from an obsolete social frame and make her own way. She needed the admonitions and principles she voiced so peremptorily if she was to catch up with the times. When the reassessment of the person in the light of fact has been carried out, I am sure there will be no dearth of new readings of the Simone de Beauvoir corpus of texts; and I know that we shall find them in the lively Beauvoir Newsletter and *Studies*. One can only be grateful that they keep us so well up-to-date and thereby keep Simone de Beauvoir a living figure, not only in our academic or feminist milieu, but in all parts of the world.



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