

SIMONE DE BEAUVOIR: A PERSONAL VIEW

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For members of my generation who personally experienced and somehow managed to survive the German occupation, a writer like Sartre carried an almost mythical aura, for in our minds he came to embody the French Resistance as well as a philosophy of political and moral commitment and unflinching responsibility for one's actions. The notions of engagement, bonne foi and mauvaise foi had special meaning for us, because the war experience had placed so many of us in situations where each choice and decision carried the gravest consequences of life and death for ourselves as well as for others. Politics and ideology, we felt, could not be set above or apart from literature and art. No wonder, therefore, that Sartre should have become the standard-bearer for those of us who came to intellectual maturity right after the Liberation. We eagerly read and passionately discussed each of his political and literary essays, novels, and plays. And those of us with a stomach for abstract and abstruse philosophical theorizing courageously waded through his Being and Nothingness.

Looking back now, it seems almost inevitable that, having hardly embarked upon my graduate studies at Columbia, I almost immediately decided to write my Master's thesis on Sartre's three-volume (but unfinished to this day) war novel, The Roads to Freedom. This was in 1953, after all, not yet a decade after the end of the war. What was especially striking in Sartre's novel was the almost brutal directness and stunning authenticity with which he depicted the events leading up to the so-called phony war, when French and

German armies remained poised in a kind of suspended animation for more than six months, and its catastrophic aftermath, the blitzkrieg or guerre éclair, when the German divisions invaded France with lightning speed.

That Sartre succeeded in recreating the peculiar atmosphere surrounding these circumstances in the most familiar, immediate everyday details, through characters memorable for their pungent physicality and intellectual vacillations, and by means of a powerfully blunt style could only reinforce a rapidly growing fascination with an author who, it seemed to us, did not speak from some chronological or esthetic distance but from an experiential and hard-won knowledge of an ugly, violent reality which had marked us all for life.

Reading Sartre was an initiation into truly contemporary, modern French literature. We had been brought up on the classics, as well as on nineteenth-century novelists and poets, and more recently we had discovered, mostly on our own, such twentieth-century masters as Proust and Gide, as well as authors who have by now lost much of their luster, notably Jules Romains, Roger Martin Du Gard, and Georges Duhamel. When I learned that one of our Professors at Columbia, Jean-Albert Bédé, had been a classmate of Sartre at the Ecole Normale Supérieure, I felt encouraged in my choice of this particular topic and selected him as the director of my Master's thesis.

The revelation of Simone de Beauvoir came only after that of Sartre. In those days she was invariably discussed rather condescendingly in literary circles as a loyal follower and disciple of Sartre rather than as a

first-rate author in her own right. To most of us women in academia with our shaky sense of identity and deep-seated insecurities it took a near-quantum leap to overcome prejudices and myths regarding our gender and to accord Simone de Beauvoir the kind of serious attention she so fully deserved. I remember only too well the derogatory remarks male professors were wont to make (to this day even, in some cases) about her, both as a writer and as a person. Simone de Beauvoir soon became the writer women in academia engaged in a lonely and uphill struggle against traditional prejudices turned to in their quest for intellectual and moral guidance.

We had learned from personal experience as graduate students in the fifties that all too often factors that had little to do with ability and hard work played a determining role in furthering one's academic career. And that gender played such a role was brought home to us in very concrete ways.

While we read with enthusiasm all of Simone de Beauvoir's works, we found her Second Sex particularly illuminating, for here was a bold and wholly new analysis of what it means to be a woman biologically, sociologically, and historically. And for the first time, we were introduced to a new kind of literary criticism (what would eventually become feminist literary criticism) in those chapters in which the author traces the myth of woman according to five writers: Montherlant, D.H. Lawrence, Claudel, Breton, and Stendhal.

Beauvoir's autobiographical volumes had special meaning for us as well. Here was a memoir by a woman who had boldly and fearlessly assumed

independent selfhood and authorship, and who retraced for her reader each step of her patient, passionate quest. Here we were also made to relive with an unforgettable immediacy and concreteness a world about to plunge into war. Equally compelling was her vivid depiction of a highly-charged intellectual French milieu that had by then acquired a mythical aura for us. But more importantly, here was the first full-fledged autobiography by a woman writer since George Sand's Story of my Life.

Simone de Beauvoir demands a definite relation of literature to life; and truth to life cannot help having profound ethical import. We her readers have followed her trajectory with loyal, even fanatical admiration because each of her works addresses an existential dilemma, but none perhaps with more uncompromising honesty than her autobiographical and personal essays. And few have spoken about growing old and about dying with comparable power, lucidity, and compassion.

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