

SIMONE DE BEAUVOIR, MARY MC CARTHY AND THE "WOMAN" INTELLECTUAL

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I should like to initiate discussion of "intellectuality" in general, of the "woman" intellectual in particular, from evidence provided by two quotations: the first concerns some cultural icons of the ancient world, the second emanates from a cultural icon of the twentieth century. In *The Development of Logic*, William and Martha Kneale link the beginnings of logic to developments in geometry. First we are told that "the Egyptians had discovered some truths of geometry empirically [,"] and then we are informed that it was the "great achievement of the Greeks . . . to replace this empirical study by a demonstrative *a priori* science" (3).

Now as we all learned in high school, one of the great names in ancient Greek geometry was Pythagoras, indeed, that very same Pythagoras whom Simone de Beauvoir quoted as ironic overture to *The Second Sex* (1949): "There is a good principle which created order, light and mind, and there is an evil principle which created chaos, darkness and woman (translation mine)."

I imagine that anyone reading this article would readily agree that such an observation is remarkably disobliging. Still, it can not in any way affect the properties of triangles and it does not permit us to either confirm or disconfirm the validity of Pythagorean mathematics.

And it is precisely in connection with the Pythagorean school of mathematics and of cosmology that the Kneales let us in on something very interesting, namely that "[h]ere . . . we have the beginning of intellectualism, the doctrine that the most important faculty of man is his intellect and that truths which can be learnt only by the use of the intellect are in some way more noble and fundamental than those learnt by observation." The co-authors then opine that "[w]e may regret the evils of *a priori* metaphysics which were brought into the world by this doctrine, but it is only fair to say that it gained influence because the discovery of *a priori* knowledge naturally excites the admiration of intelligent men" (3).

A considerable number of centuries later, Albert Einstein -- if a statement that I copied off the wall in the Engineering building of my university is any proof -- believed the following: "Where the world ceases to be the scene of our personal hopes and wishes, where we face it as free beings, admiring, asking and observing, there we enter the realm of Art and Science."

And it is at the metaphorical crossroads of what is communicated by these two quotations so distant from each other in time and space that I, for my part, would locate the site of "intellectualism" or, in a more extended sense, "intellectuality." What this "intellectuality" appears to do for the Pythagorean school and for the Platonism it nourished in the ancient world and what it appears to do for Einstein in the modern world is to present us with the illusion that we can, in some way, escape the constraints of our mortality, protect the vulnerable, individual self from "the thousand natural shocks that human flesh is heir to." It is "intellectuality" -- unhampered speculative reasoning -- that might perhaps free us from the immanent, contingent world, powerfully evoked in Sartre's *Nausea*, more obliquely in Beauvoir's *The Blood of Others* (v. comments Beauvoir 1960: 555-7) and bring us to a pure, cold Otherworld of Being where Logos, the creating and/or observing Mind is all.

So if we are indeed "rational mortal animals" as the ancient logical categories would have it, then the lure of intellectuality is that it allows us -- or appears to allow us -- the hope that if we sufficiently highlight the rational, we may dim or even extinguish -- in

whole or in part -- the mortal.

I should now like to extend the argument and claim that if this is generally the case for rational mortal animals of either gender, then it is particularly the case for women in a very special way.

The Second Sex may not be everyone's idea of the perfect feminist pronouncement but I believe that detractors and defenders alike would concede that at least every so often Simone de Beauvoir came up with some pretty sharp remarks. I am sure we can all easily retrieve from the voluminous depths of that philosophical polemic the aphorism that "one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman" (1989: 267). This has become a classic, feminist *sententia*, embodying canonic wisdom.

I should like to extract, however, from this same voluminous polemic a different comment --or, rather, set of comments -- much less frequently cited and not all that easy to find, embedded as they are in the magma of state-of-the-art 1949 biological observations about the presumed "Destiny" of women: here, we find a series of statements concerning women and their linkage to the "species." Thus: "the female renounces [individuality] for the benefit of the species, which demands this abdication" (1989: 23) or else "Hegel is right in seeing the subjective element in the male, while the female remains wrapped up in the species (23) and maybe "the species takes residence in the female and absorbs most of her individual life" (24) and above all "it has been well said that women 'have infirmity in the abdomen'; and it is true that they have within them a hostile element -- it is the species gnawing at their vitals" (30) and so on and so on.

Now statements of such a vehement nature are certainly matter for debate, but if Simone de Beauvoir is at least partially correct and if it is indeed the case that the natural state of female mammals, human or otherwise -- unlike the natural state of human males - may be seen as a form of biological enslavement requiring abdication of individuality for the benefit of the species, then we may reasonably argue the following:

Whatever the attraction of "intellectualism" or "intellectuality" may or may not be for men, its attraction for women may very well be the escape it offers -- or appears to offer -- from what is perceived by some as an onerous type of indentured servitude.

So perhaps it is time to get down to particulars and consider what sort of choices may be made -- or, rather, what sort of choices have been made -- by some of those who define themselves both as women and as intellectuals.

The paradigm cases are Mary McCarthy (1912-1989) and Simone de Beauvoir (1908-1986), two "dark ladies," as the language of the period might have it, -- and who, indeed, showed a marked physical resemblance --, woman writers of roughly the same generation whose life and work continue to generate controversy.

This coupling is not fortuitous. When McCarthy died, *Le Quotidien de Paris* called her "one of the pioneers of feminism" [as well as] "the American Simone de Beauvoir" which, as Carol Brightman, the more recent of the two McCarthy biographers remarks, "showed how much they knew" (cited 516, translation mine).

And, indeed, the two women detested each other cordially. "In *America Day by Day*," says Brightman, "de Beauvoir undoubtedly has McCarthy in mind when she mentions 'that beautiful and cold novelist who has already gone through three husbands and several lovers in the course of a cleverly laid out career'" (346).

And McCarthy returned the compliment, not only in *Mlle Gulliver en Amérique* where, according to Brightman, McCarthy's "deep ambivalence" for the 'new America' "is project[ed] onto Simone de Beauvoir at the end of the essay" (338) but even more explicitly, "nearly thirty years after the 'Prettiest Existentialist' first visited New York." In 1980, six years before Beauvoir's death, McCarthy expressed herself thus: "'How dare she talk about injustice to women, and how as a woman she's been deprived when she has put herself on the map solely by attaching herself to Sartre, *solely. Sartre et moi. He made her . . . She's not utterly stupid . . . she would be a good 'B' student somewhere in the intellectual world . . .*" (342, Brightman's italics).

Of course, it is only fair to point out that just because McCarthy considered

Beauvoir parasitic, it does not automatically follow that she was particularly enamoured of her Sartrean host: "I would have loved to have met [Camus] . . . but the opportunity didn't arise. I was less interested in Sartre and least of all in Simone de Beauvoir" (cited Brightman, 329-330).

This comment dates from the late 1940s, when, on both sides of the Atlantic, Existentialism was the great intellectual vogue. However, twenty or so years later, during the Vietnam war, McCarthy's remarks were even more pointed: she claimed that the celebrated pamphlet *J'accuse*, would not "have influenced events if 'Zola had been signing manifestos every other day like Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir'" (Gelderman, 1988: 287).

Sartre, for his part, was equally direct. According to his biographer John Gerassi (1989: 35), he "carefully avoided [McCarthy] because, he said, she was "an arrogant imperialist witch."

And as far as someone from my particular generation is concerned, the Beauvoir-McCarthy coupling is certainly not fortuitous. Mary McCarthy was part of the cultural furniture of a New York adolescence in the 1950s. Simone de Beauvoir offered - or appeared to offer - that same generation of bookish young women the image of a life in which conventional and iconoclastic choices could be integrated and reconciled: love and work, the emotional and the intellectual, a man and a career.

Beauvoir aggressively renounced motherhood, was profoundly uninterested in housekeeping and, as McCarthy had pointed out, had a non-marital, life-long relationship with Jean-Paul Sartre. This life-long relationship has become the stuff of legend, although in recent years this particular legend is increasingly being called to account.

McCarthy, a "dedicated cook who mad[de] everything from scratch" (Gelderman, xiii), accumulated one son and three stepchildren, all this in the course of marrying four times -- as Simone de Beauvoir had pointed out. Now Husbands I, III, and IV can be said to have been more or less in private life, but Edmund Wilson, Husband II, dominated American literary criticism for a good part of the twentieth century. Nevertheless, although it is possible to name Mary McCarthy without feeling it necessary to immediately call up Edmund Wilson, it is very rare, especially for the general public, -- although perhaps now becoming less so -- to name Simone de Beauvoir without automatically connecting her to Jean-Paul Sartre.

Neither of these two women was a particularly "womanly" writer. *The Second Sex* generated acrimonious debate as soon as it appeared, whereas "'Bloody Mary' . . . was a woman whose critical performances, in person and in print, frequently filled reviews of her work with references to scissors, swords, and knives" (Brightman, xiv).

Both women practised a variety of literary genres and the bodies of work they left intersect but do not coincide. Both were novelists and the fictional works of both are often treated as *romans à clé*, but novel-writing is perhaps more central to McCarthy's work than it is to Beauvoir's. Both wrote autobiographies and, indeed, comparison between *Memoirs of a Dutiful Daughter* and *Memories of a Catholic Girlhood* appears almost mandatory, but the writing of autobiography is perhaps more central to Beauvoir's work than it is to McCarthy's. Both wrote on politics and both were members of the political Left but it was not quite the same Left and McCarthy became a political animal earlier than did either Sartre or Beauvoir. McCarthy also produced art and theater criticism, genres not usually associated with Beauvoir.

Then, too, although McCarthy was drawn to philosophy and established life-long friendships with the philosophers Hannah Arendt and Nicola Chiaromonte, she was not a technically trained philosopher. Beauvoir, of course, was -- although you might not always know it - and her name, like that of Sartre, is indissolubly linked to Existentialism.

Now this Existentialism, as Sartre and Beauvoir expounded it, is a very strange creature. Like the good child of Romanticism it is, it argues according to what the "New Rhetoric" of Chaïm Perelman and Lucie Olbrechts-Tyteca would call a "locus of quality" (1971: 89-93), valuing as it does the concrete, the particular, the specific, the "situated."

However, it has its own form of a *a priori* metaphysics: the set of premises underlying the "existentialist ethics" inhering in *The Second Sex* (1989: xxxiv-xxxv) would be a case in point. It also does its own form of distance-taking. We know from *Being and Nothingness* (1966: 784) that the "For-Itself" is a "useless passion" for it can never coincide with itself. And we know from *She Came to Stay*, Beauvoir's first published novel, that when Françoise the protagonist kills Xavière the adversary, she does not kill a corporeal human being, she kills rather the Existentialists' version of Pascal's "thinking reed," a "consciousness" (1943: 503).

Beauvoir's intellectualism, of course, can also take more traditional forms. In *The Second Sex*, for example, she speaks of those fortunate women -- presumably like herself -- whose "detachment . . . allows [them] to hope that [their] attitude will be objective" (1989: xxxiii).

And as for McCarthy, it appears she practised an even more radical form of intellectual objectivity. Alfred Kazin remarked that she "had a 'wholly destructive critical mind [and] seemed to regard her intelligence as essentially impersonal . . . always surprised that her victim, as he lay torn and bleeding, did not applaud her perspicacity'" (cited by Brightman, 317). It should be observed that comments like these were inspired by *romans à clé* such as *The Oasis*, wherein members of the group linked to the *Partisan Review* were presented in a less than admirable light and so Kazin is a clearly hostile source. Nevertheless, his comments about the relationship between intelligence and impersonality are suggestive: from such a linkage we may reasonably infer that one possible definition of intellectuality is as that operation by which *pathos* is diminished so that *logos* may be triumphantly affirmed.

It is, however, with regard to the feminist movement that differences between Beauvoir and McCarthy are most apparent. McCarthy not only denounced Beauvoir *per se*, she also denounced feminism for its "'self-pity, shrillness and greed'": "'feminism is bad for women . . . [I]t induces a very bad emotional state'" (Brightman, cited xviii and 343). Now, Beauvoir, as author of *The Second Sex*, helped, of course, to engender modern feminism and modern feminism turned the last part of her career into that of a feminist.

Can it be said that one of these women writers is more important than the other?

If it were absolutely necessary that a choice be made, I would probably come down on the side of Beauvoir. McCarthy was certainly a strong literary presence and a distinctive voice, but Beauvoir was also that and --not always to her advantage -- she has become to a much greater extent a mythic and cultural paradigm. The contradictions between life and work, heart and head, *pathos* and *logos* she so dramatically encapsulates define fundamental aspects of the human condition and they concern us all.

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