



Existentialism, Resistance, and The Second Sex

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Dedicated to Pat Grimshaw

The Second Sex was not the result of a 'sudden revelation', as Beauvoir claimed in her *Memoirs*, but rather the culmination of an existentialist project implicit in all her previous work. The circumstances surrounding Beauvoir's decision to write *The Second Sex* are well known. During the summer of 1946, having finished *The Ethics of Ambiguity*¹ and in the midst of strains in her relationship with Sartre, she was at a loss for her next book. She thought of writing something about herself, but Sartre suggested that she first consider her condition as a woman.

"For me", I said to Sartre, "it never really mattered". "All the same [he said], you weren't raised in the same way as a boy. You'll have to look into it more". I looked and I experienced a revelation: this world was a masculine world, my childhood had been nourished by myths forged by men, and I hadn't reacted to them at all in the same way I should have done if I had been a boy ... I went to the National Library to do some reading, and what I studied were the myths of femininity.²

Still, these issues did not preoccupy her. She began research at the National Library, but early in 1947 she undertook a four-month lecture tour of the United States. She loved New York, hated American cocktail parties—for the first time she experienced the men talking to her on one side of the room, the women together on the other side—and fell into a profound infatuation with the American novelist, Nelson Algren, a leading member of the Chicago school of realism. The intense feeling she had for Algren threatened to swamp her lifelong commitment to Sartre and, with great difficulty, she overcame it. (In any case, Algren appears to have been a more traditional male than Sartre; it seems unlikely that he could have given her the liberty she needed.)

She took six months to publish her American diary³ before returning to the question of women. When she resumed work, she went with her usual incredible speed. Out of her emotional confusion and her (re-)discovery of the condition of women, both in her studies and her life, *The Second Sex* emerged in 1949.⁴ The entire work took less than two years. 'I owed my efficient working methods', she said, 'to my university training', a reassuring comment for today's beleaguered university staff.⁵ The chapters on 'Sexual Initiation' and 'The Lesbian' appeared in the May and June issues of Sartre's journal, *Les Temps modernes* and, also in June, there appeared the first volume, which ended with these chapters. The second volume appeared in November. (In the English abridgment, that became Parts V–VII.)

I

The Second Sex was to be not only her most celebrated work but also the most profound and practical application of existentialism. Beauvoir located the oppression of woman as a category not in inequality or difference, but in woman's inability to live authentically, to transcend herself, to move out of herself and to realise herself in the world, through assuming the burden of choice. This is summed up in what Toril Moi calls 'perhaps the single most important passage in *The Second Sex*'.⁶ Woman is 'a free and autonomous being like all human creatures', but she 'finds herself living in a world where men compel her to assume the status of the Other. They propose to turn her into an object and to doom her to immanence since her transcendence is for ever to be transcended by another consciousness which is essential and sovereign'.⁷

Women undergo and submit to the world, man's world. That is how they 'become women', Beauvoir's original premise—'*on ne naît pas femme, on le devient*'⁸ (literally 'one is not born woman, one becomes it': the French original conveys much more powerfully the sense that being a woman is a condition or situation). This famous phrase, however, is only her premise. The more radical part of her argument is that women do not feel responsible for the world. Their fulfilment is in procreation and service, not in action on the world. Thus they remain immanent, immured within themselves: their mental action takes place within their own minds and does not move out to act on the world. Their lives are thus inauthentic. For women to attain self-realisation, they must have a project, they must grasp the world and act upon it.

The book was a runaway best-seller, but it received a mixed critical response and, by a link that seems strange today, it made her an object of fear and loathing among the bourgeoisie. Suddenly people—not intellectuals and writers but ordinary solid bourgeois—who recognised her in restaurants snickered or made rude comments, assuming that anyone who would write about such matters was a slut. Mauriac, to her astonishment, wrote to one of the *Temps modernes* team, 'I learned everything about your boss's vagina'.⁹ It is a measure of what her book accomplished that such reactions are now so hard to understand.

II

There is no doubt that Beauvoir experienced 'a revelation' when she considered the condition of women in general as opposed to her own position. She herself had, as she says, 'cumulated the advantages of the two sexes'. After publication of her first novel, 'my entourage treated me simultaneously as a writer and as a woman [*comme un écrivain et comme une femme*—emphasis orig.]. Indeed, as she pointed out, it was that speaking position that made possible *The Second Sex*.¹⁰ So, at the conscious level, the realisation that she had transcended the immanence inherent in her situation as a woman no doubt came as a shock. Already, however, all her work pointed to woman's transcendence or to the practical problem of self-realisation, even if in somewhat inchoate form. That is my argument here.

The three novels she had published by this time were all fundamentally concerned with woman's quest for transcendence. No doubt, from today's perspective, Beauvoir's choice of heterosexual sex as the metaphor for transcendence could annoy. Yet, is sex not the heart of the issue? Is it not in or approaching the sex act that the most fundamental questions of power and self-realisation reside? From today's perspective too,

making airheads the female protagonists of all three novels is annoying. (Françoise, the heroine of *She Came to Stay*, is supposed to be an intellectual, but she behaves like an airhead.) But on the one hand, was this not the position of woman? And on the other hand, was this not the problem for Beauvoir? A corollary to my argument is that not until she achieved reconciliation of her two positions, until she could be simultaneously a writer and a woman, could she create powerful, intellectual women, write them into her world or become one herself.

Beauvoir's first published novel, *She Came to Stay*, dealt with the love triangle that developed between Sartre, Beauvoir, and one of her students, Olga. In the novel, she later observed, she killed off the student, enabling her to maintain a friendship that was jeopardised because Sartre's intense interest in Olga appeared to go beyond 'contingent' love. Women are the major protagonists and one can discern a feminine sensitivity to their position. (By 'feminine' I mean simply a sense of woman's condition at the time. This is not necessarily related to biological sex. Indeed, one could argue that many authors have successfully created characters of the other biological sex: Austen's Darcy or Hardy's Tess come to mind. My point is rather to refute the notion that Beauvoir had not assumed her position as a woman or was unable to be sensitive to the position of ordinary women.) Toril Moi has suggested that *She Came to Stay* struggles to find a way in which a woman can be authentic in sexuality, exploring the then new problem in writing of how a woman 'can successfully flirt or seduce and still remain in good faith'.¹¹

To make this argument, Moi goes into an intense analysis of the sensual high point of the novel, a chapter in which the Beauvoir character seduces a younger man. Moi makes clear that what is really going on here is finding an authentic way for a woman to realise desire. For a man, the realisation of desire is inherently authentic, that is, it is in tune with self (or, as some would now say, we always have sex on our minds). For a woman, as Other, as object of desire, to reach out and act so as to attain her desire is an inherent impossibility. The chapter shows the difficulty Beauvoir faced in achieving this seduction (which reflected real life). And, although Moi does not say so, this may be one reason why Beauvoir was involved in more lesbian than heterosexual one-night stands in the early years of her relationship with Sartre: in lesbian relations, a woman can authentically express active desire more easily.¹²

Ironically, *She Came to Stay* falls short artistically in large measure because even today many readers have trouble with the women's groping, hesitating conversation. That women's conversation is, or rather, was more indirect in relation to sex is, however, precisely the point. The women in the book do not have access to the direct language of desire as do the men because women of the 1930s did not enjoy such access. The book also falls short because of its ending, in which the Beauvoir character kills her rival by turning on the gas as she leaves the other's room. To readers expecting realism, this ending is a shock and many finish the book unconvinced. But the meaning is crystal clear:

Alone. She had acted alone: as alone as in death ... Her act was her very own. "It is I who will it." ... She had at last made a choice. She had chosen herself.¹³

Can there be any clearer statement of the existentialist ethic, any way more forcefully to put it in woman's perspective, any way more forcefully to invert the normal behaviour expected of women, that they choose to support others?

III

The Blood of Others, Beauvoir's second novel, and in many ways her masterpiece,¹⁴ marks a further evolution on the path toward giving women a chance to make an active choice for themselves. It is a Resistance story from a woman's point of view. Its form is resolutely modern: alternating narrative voices and flashbacks, a form which betrays the influence of the cinema Sartre and Beauvoir enjoyed so much. Its content is an existentialism born of the Occupation and not of intellectual discussion. Indeed Beauvoir commented, 'I had written my novel before I had encountered the term Existentialism; my inspiration came from my own experience'.¹⁵

The Occupation, Beauvoir now saw, posed a stark moral choice. Accept the Germans' demands, if only in the name of a lesser evil, or combat them. Both choices carried grave risks. H  l  ne, the heroine of the novel, characterised Beauvoir's own shift from an apolitical stance to commitment. Beauvoir portrays H  l  ne with the severity she reserved for her own failings, making her a flirt who begins the affair at the centre of the book by an act of bad faith, getting a man to steal for her a bicycle she says is hers. By this act she obtains both the bicycle and the lover.

"Yes, I want it and I must have it", said H  l  ne ... She pinched one of the frail spokes between her fingers, she tested the brick-coloured tyre—it was as hard as iron—how strange to think that it was only a thin tube filled with air! H  l  ne stood back a little from the bicycle; how proud and free it was ... H  l  ne's head was burning, her lips and hands were trembling with desire.¹⁶

We can note here how subtly and powerfully Beauvoir exploits the Freudian potential of the bicycle in which is conflated both H  l  ne's desire for the bicycle itself and for the man it represents. She is choosing instead of being chosen and she is choosing what she wants, doubly. Again, the point can hardly be made more clearly.

Her lover goes into the Resistance. She is on the verge of collaborating, even of going to Berlin with a German soldier. The sight of a Jewish child being taken from her mother overcomes her indifference, but it is the sudden existential realisation that by collaborating she is being untrue to herself that changes her. She joins her lover in the Resistance. She develops 'through the authenticity of the project she adopts. Thus she achieves transcendence only after she is separated from her lover and makes her own independent decision to resist'.¹⁷

He, however, is consumed with guilt because each act of Resistance he organises brings vicious Nazi retaliation, not only against the resisters themselves, but also against hundreds of innocent 'hostages'. She dies of wounds from a Resistance mission. On her deathbed, which frames much of the novel, she assumes the burden of choice, the classic existentialist path to transcendence. When her lover blames himself, she replies, 'It is I who wanted to go'; 'you had no right to decide for me'. And she extends this assumption of choice to their relationship: 'I chose you', she tells him.¹⁸ This was existentialism applied to the Resistance, but the heart of the issue is not H  l  ne's Resistance act but her regaining authenticity through assuming the burden of her action; she redeems herself from the inauthenticity of the feminine wile she used to gain her lover by making the choice frankly and explicitly. She has found the language in which to express desire and to assume choice. At the heart of the choice is not the Resistance but, just like Fran  oise in *She Came to Stay*, the choice to act for herself, the choice of herself.

IV

Beauvoir's third novel, *All Men Are Mortal*,¹⁹ most confused and annoyed critics at the time and remains her most contested novel, though most admired by many of her fans. The critics disliked the mix of realism and magic, which today should not pose a problem, in the key male character, Fosca, who turns out to have been born in the thirteenth century. His immortality has drained him of all emotional affect. This is what makes him attractive to Régine, the female protagonist. Like Hélène at the beginning of *The Blood of Others*, Régine is a beautiful but vain, smug, and self-satisfied actress, thinking only of herself. The key is that Fosca's utter lack of affect makes him the desirable Other to Régine and she determines to seduce him. She takes a very active role in the seduction and the sex, but the seduction is inauthentic and the sex is therefore unsatisfying.

Critics have trouble with this or (like even Toril Moi) they dismiss it. But it seems obvious that, once again, Beauvoir is putting to the fore the question of sex involving Otherness and trying to find an active, assertive, fulfilling and authentic role for a woman to play in achieving fulfilment of her own desires. That Régine is unsuccessful is inherent in the inauthenticity of her act but also in Fosca's immortality, his lack of humanity. He stands in for the eternal feminine, Régine for the man who never finds satisfaction because he is copulating only with the Other, not reaching the person because his construction of the Other blinds him to the human being.

V

The other component of my argument is that Beauvoir was deeply involved in developing existentialism at this time. She herself wrote that her project until *The Second Sex* was 'to provide existentialist morals with a material content'.²⁰ All her other works were existentialist. Her play, *Useless Mouths*, translated as *Who Shall Die?*,²¹ opened to a fairly favourable reception in October 1945. One critic compared it to Camus' recent success, *Caligula*, adding that Beauvoir's play was of better construction, a remark that Beauvoir thought increased Camus' hostility to her.²²

Useless Mouths deals with a topic that emerged from the Occupation experience, the maintenance of authority through food distribution and the moral problem of who will die for want of food, particularly if groups of people are arbitrarily selected to die of starvation. The problematic is existentialist, the sensibility is feminine: food provision is one of the few aspects of life where women have always had a significant role. Deirdre Bair remarks that the manuscript of the play was destroyed by food. Beauvoir wrote the play during the Occupation. She dedicated it to her mother and gave her the manuscript. Her mother used most of the sheets to wrap jars of preserves.²³

The two other major works written by this time were both treatises in existentialist philosophy. *Pyrrhus et Cinéas*²⁴ appeared in 1944. It was an attempt to translate the existentialist doctrine of Sartre's *Being and Nothingness*,²⁵ which had appeared the year before, into something readable. I have often wondered why *Pyrrhus et Cinéas* has fallen into disfavour. (I have not discovered an English translation.) It is a more profound and more readable introduction than the standard text, Sartre's lecture 'Existentialism is a humanism',²⁶ though that, too, is now only available in English from an obscure publisher. Above all, it is a much more solid piece, really getting to the issues. Writing her *Memoirs* a decade later, Beauvoir viewed both *The Blood of Others* and *Pyrrhus et Cinéas* as attempts 'to define our true relationship with other people'. She concluded 'that,

whether we like it or not, we do impinge on other people's destinies and must face up to the responsibility which this implies'.²⁷ That ethic is, in Beauvoir's eyes, one for which women ought to be as apt as men, if indeed there can be any distinction. They were not so apt when she was writing. Including them was part of Beauvoir's contribution to existentialism.

*The Ethics of Ambiguity*²⁸ was an effort to add the existentialist ethics Sartre had failed to include in *Being and Nothingness*. The concern with morality reflects, I think, Beauvoir's experience of the Occupation, particularly her confrontation with Sartre when he returned to discover she had signed the oath of allegiance to Vichy, declaring that she was neither a Jew nor a Free-Mason. One could also argue that ethics are a feminine practicality. It was not a success and has not worn well, any more than has *Being or Nothingness*.

Both these books are at one level inauthentic in that they interpret or complete Sartre's project. This may be unfair—it was also Beauvoir's project and she made a significant contribution to *Being and Nothingness*—but I think that at the fundamental level, Beauvoir had to deal with existentialism on women's terms. No doubt she helped Sartre, but however great the extent of her contribution, it was not as a woman, but in a sense as a man. She was not cumulating her positions but rather being the writer and not the woman. What she needed, when she finished *The Ethics of Ambiguity* in June 1946, was a project that reflected her authentic speaking position, that enabled her to address the issues of women's transcendence that had underpinned all her fiction and her life in philosophical terms that were her own. After *The Blood of Others* and *Pyrrhus et Cinéas*, Beauvoir had come to the conclusion that responsibility for others required action of one's own, but felt herself, as she put it, 'wholly incapable of action. This impotence was one of the main themes I tackled in *All Men Are Mortal*'.²⁹ This, I am arguing, was the heart of the matter. *All Men Are Mortal* could not resolve the issue because she had not yet resolved the issue of the impotence imposed on women. Still less could *The Ethics of Ambiguity* resolve the problem, for it was a gloss on Sartre's project, not entirely her own. She herself was deeply dissatisfied with *The Ethics of Ambiguity* but burning to write: 'I felt the need to write at the ends of my fingers, and the taste of words in my throat, but I didn't know what to write'.³⁰

That is when Sartre sparked the revelation by telling her to look at her condition as a woman. The revelation that resulted from looking at the condition of women led to the conscious realisation of her own position and the resolution of the dilemma. *The Second Sex* works so well because she cumulated her two positions in it and extended them to women and indeed to all humanity. Once she had done this, although it would be 25 years before she would call herself a feminist, she was able to put an intellectual woman at the heart of her next novel.

As she was finishing *The Second Sex* and struggling to reconcile her love for Algren with her commitment to Sartre, Beauvoir began a novel about love that became one about love, commitment, and politics. It was her masterpiece, *The Mandarins*,³¹ which won the Prix Goncourt in 1954. The genius of this sprawling novel is to move simultaneously on both personal and political levels without trivialising either. It is surprising that despite Beauvoir's canonisation in recent years the novel remains unrecognised; it is one of the masterpieces of this century, precisely because Beauvoir placed a deeply intelligent woman at its core and made it simultaneously her story and the story of the failure to build the world she and her friends sought. Anne, the protagonist, does not have to develop into a fully human being as do the protagonists of the three previous novels; she is one at the beginning of the novel. The novel instead tells of how she tries, with her

friends, to put her imprint on the world. She fails—they all did—but she is an actor, she is transcendent.

That was only possible because Beauvoir had bridged the gulf between her two speaking positions, reconciling the writer and the woman. It transformed Beauvoir and it continues to transform us.

NOTES

1. Simone de Beauvoir, *Tous les hommes sont mortels* (Gallimard) Paris, 1946; *All Men Are Mortal, a Novel*, Leonard M. Friedman (trans.) (World Publishing) Cleveland, 1955; Simone de Beauvoir, *Pour une morale de l'ambiguïté* (Gallimard) Paris, 1947; Simone de Beauvoir, *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, Bernard Frechtman (trans.) (Philosophical Library) New York, 1948.
2. Simone de Beauvoir, *La force des choses* (Gallimard) Paris, 1964, vol. I, p. 136.
3. Beauvoir, *La force des choses*, vol. I, p. 259; Simone de Beauvoir, *L'Amérique au jour le jour* (P. Morihien) Paris, 1948; Simone de Beauvoir, *America Day by Day*, Patrick Dudley (trans.) (G. Duckworth) London, 1952.
4. Simone de Beauvoir, *Le deuxième sexe*, 2 vols (Gallimard) Paris, 1949; Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, H.M. Parshley (trans., ed.) (Jonathan Cape) London, 1953.
5. Beauvoir, *La force des choses*, vol. I, p. 259.
6. Toril Moi, *Simone de Beauvoir: the Making of an Intellectual Woman* (Blackwell) Oxford and Cambridge, MA, 1994, p. 155.
7. As translated by Moi, *Simone de Beauvoir*, p. 155; cf. Beauvoir, *Le deuxième sexe*, vol. I, pp. 34–5; Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, p. 29.
8. Beauvoir, *Le deuxième sexe*, vol. I, p. 287 (my translation); cf. Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, p. 295.
9. Beauvoir, *La force des choses*, vol. I, p. 261.
10. Beauvoir, *La force des choses*, vol. I, p. 264.
11. Moi, *Simone de Beauvoir*, p. 133.
12. Moi, *Simone de Beauvoir*, pp. 133–42.
13. Simone de Beauvoir, *She Came to Stay: a Novel* (World Publishing) Cleveland, 1954, pp. 408–9.
14. She thought the contrary: see Simone de Beauvoir, *The Prime of Life*, Peter Green (trans.) (Penguin Books) Harmondsworth, 1965, p. 544.
15. Beauvoir, *The Prime of Life*, p. 567.
16. Simone de Beauvoir, *Le sang des autres: roman* (Gallimard) Paris, 1945, p. 37; Beauvoir, *The Blood of Others*, Roger Senhouse (trans.) (A.A. Knopf) New York, 1948.
17. Deborah Zion, 'The Formation of a Concept of the Feminine in the Works of Simone de Beauvoir, 1943–1954', honours thesis, University of Melbourne, 1983, p. 20.
18. Beauvoir, *Blood of Others*, p. 237.
19. Beauvoir, *Tous les hommes sont mortels*; Beauvoir, *All Men Are Mortal*, Friedman (trans.).
20. Beauvoir, *The Prime of Life*, p. 549.
21. Simone de Beauvoir, *Les bouches inutiles: pièce en deux actes et huit tableaux* (Gallimard) Paris, 1945; Simone de Beauvoir, *Who Shall Die?* Claude Francis and Fernande Gontier (eds) (River Press) Florissant, MO, 1983.
22. Deirdre Bair, *Simone de Beauvoir: a Biography* (Summit Books) New York, 1990, p. 311.
23. Bair, *Simone de Beauvoir*, p. 268.
24. Simone de Beauvoir, *Pyrrhus et Cinéas* (Gallimard) Paris, 1944.
25. Jean-Paul Sartre, *L'être et le néant, essai d'ontologie phénoménologique* (Gallimard) Paris, 1943; Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness: an Essay on Phenomenological Ontology*, Hazel E. Barnes (trans.) (Methuen) London, 1957.
26. In *Existentialism and Humanism*, Philip Mairet (trans.) (Methuen) London, 1948; (Haskell House), Brooklyn, 1977.
27. Beauvoir, *The Prime of Life*, p. 607.
28. Beauvoir, *Pour une morale de l'ambiguïté*; Beauvoir, *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, Frechtman (trans.).
29. Beauvoir, *The Prime of Life*, p. 607.
30. Beauvoir, *La force des choses*, vol. I, pp. 133–4.
31. Simone de Beauvoir, *Les Mandarins, roman* (Gallimard) Paris, 1954; Simone de Beauvoir, *The Mandarins*, Leonard M. Friedman (trans.) (Fontana) London, 1960.