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Les aventures de l’esprit et la chaleur vivante: a new encounter with Simone de Beauvoir

LORRAINE MORTIMER*

... elle ne dit pas que la libération constitue un gain de bonheur; elle sait qu’”une femme qui s’emploie à vivre’ quitte un vide mortel pour un monde âpre: Le Deuxième Sexe est exempt de discours publicitaire et ne chante pas les charmes de l’indépendance ...

Cet aspect austère du Deuxième Sexe explique d’ailleurs le refus catégorique que bien des femmes lui ont opposé, et lui opposent encore: le livre fait peur, non parce qu’il engagerait à quitter un bonheur que l’on a, mais parce qu’il ne promet pas le bonheur dont on manque. On perçoit, par contraste, la valeur de séduction de l’oeuvre d’une Luce Irigaray, ou d’une Hélène Cixous par exemple: quand on choisit comme thème d’écriture la jouissance féminine, on est assurée, quoi qu’on en dise, de susciter la gratitude.

MICHELE LE DOEUFF

Oh, Nelson! I’ll be so nice and good, you’ll see. I’ll wash the floor, I’ll cook the whole meals, I’ll write your book as well as mine, I’ll make love to you ten times a night and as much in the day, even if I feel a bit tired. Yea, it will be smart to live in a little home of our own, writing and swimming and loving each other.

SIMONE DE BEAUVOIR

We should beware of love: if it could make de Beauvoir stupid, think what it must do to the rest of us.

MICHELLE DE KRETSE

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I first read The Second Sex⁴ in the mid seventies, in Ireland where it was still banned. I cheekily placed my copy, Matisse's Blue Nude on the cover, before the little priest who regularly came to try to convert my partner and me. We liked him. We admired his integrity. From a poor background, he was quite unlike those urbane clerics who talked of everything but religion with the agnostic visitors and settlers to the area where the scenery was spectacular, but, as locals pointed out, could not be eaten.

It was a small political act to read Beauvoir, but there was another reason for reading her – she was a link with things French. And Paris was my next stop. Somehow or other I was going to live there for a time. From the other side of the world, I had anticipated it all my life. I got to Paris and though I never caught a glimpse of the woman herself, ‘Beauvoir’ was part of the general ambience of ‘intellectual’ life, suffused as it was with the smells of metro diesel and black tobacco, the beige buildings and the grey sky.

In my maid’s room in the 16e, I read the first two volumes of Beauvoir’s memoirs. After two hours’ housework each morning, I was free to do as I wished. This included having a clandestine friendship with my patronne’s grown-up children. She didn’t approve of them mixing with the help. Then again, I was unusual as help goes. I had a degree in Anthropology and was clearly serious-minded, reading a lot, going to lectures at the Collège de France. Madame N held me up as an exemplar to her son and daughter, who believed their Romanian-born mother to have been a prostitute who had captured the heart and the fortune of their French father before he died. I dusted or ironed while we talked films and theoretical fashions; or I vacuumed while the enfants terribles sniffed cocaine, all of us listening to Keith Jarrett’s Köln concert on the record player. For the children I was a novelty – a semi-intellectual Australian, whose brain hadn’t been ‘burned up by the sun’. For my part, I thought it was a pity they were rich, already too cynical and bored by their unearned luxury.

At the Collège de France, Barthes gave lectures in his truly honeyed voice, modestly clothed, students sitting at his slippered feet. I didn’t dream that, years down the track, I would take issue with his ‘protestant’ approach to mythology, an approach fundamental to the newly developing academic discipline of film studies.⁵ I walked out mid-lecture on Lévi-Strauss, disappointed. He looked like an anonymous civil servant, speaking about the potlatch and the Kwakiutl Indians. This was old hat. I couldn’t have imagined at the time that this man, who seemed bent on turning the world

into algebra, would become an unlikely intellectual companion for much of my work to come. Interestingly it was Beauvoir, via Susan Sontag, who helped me get to know another Lévi-Strauss, the author of *Tristes Tropiques*, who as a young philosophy student-teacher expounded ‘in his detached voice, and with a deadpan expression ... the folly of the passions’.6 For Lévi-Strauss, as for Lucretius, Sontag suggested, scientific knowledge was ‘a way of learning to let go’.7

And Beauvoir herself? There was a coldness to her writing, a control. She was the bourgeoise who turned against her class but still embodied it. My feminism had been inspired by the splendid young Germaine Greer. Once a Sydney libertarian, she had deserted Australia, but when she came home, ever the performer, she was one of our best – charismatic, beautiful, full of fun as she got the better of provocateurs in the audience. All this with Australian idioms, an Australian accent.

Politically I felt closer to an historical figure like Emma Goldman than I did to Beauvoir, to Emma’s anti-authoritarian leftism, her passion and full-hearted prose. In France, of course, there was Camus, but in the seventies, I only knew him for his spare, cool, absurdist works,8 which had appealed more to the angst-ridden young men in our undergraduate French classes, boys lured by asceticism, which held no attraction for me. It would be years before I discovered a different Camus, the Camus who wrote one of my favourite books, *L’Homme révolté*,9 the scholarship kid who had the ambiguous privilege of being raised in a dirt-poor colonial family; the man hungry for life who was ill much of the time. I could feel a profound kinship with the person who proposed the ‘utopie relative’, who argued that on the grounds of our common humanity we should refuse to compromise with regimes which legitimate murder, instead seeking a provisional agreement between men who want to be ‘ni des victimes ni des bourreaux’.10 Beauvoir, following Sartre, had criticized Camus’s ‘confusion’ of morality and politics, his defence of what she called ‘bourgeois’ values. Camus for his part was free of the corrosive feelings of complicity felt by Beauvoir and Sartre, born into

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7 Sontag, ibid., 73.


10 See Camus’s ‘Ni victimes ni bourreaux’, which appeared in *Combat* between Tuesday 19 November and Saturday 30 November 1946, in particular ‘La Révolution Travestie’ and ‘Sauver Les Corps’ (no pagination available).
the privileged classes. Sharing Camus's 'ethical politics', his 'humanisme têtu', on this front too I felt distant from Beauvoir.11

Apart from these differences, I had also probably listened too much to some of my old teachers, who denounced her stern humourlessness, her taking herself too seriously, her myth-making about herself, Sartre, and their 'necessary' relationship. (Not that one thing she wrote ever appeared on our curriculum.) Then again, in Sartre par lui-même12 she didn't impress me. There she was, number one follower amongst followers. She seemed to interrupt occasionally to have her say – like a wife.

When I left Paris to return to Australia, an image in Boris Vian’s L'Écume des jours stayed with me. It was of ‘la duchesse de Bovouard’ and her entourage, attending a lecture by Jean-Sol Partre.13 For me Beauvoir was more an acquaintance than a companion thinker. A couple of years later, a year into my doctorate which I had thought was on Hollywood film, I encountered a passage from Le Deuxième Sexe14 which was to become a negative catalyst for my work ever since.

* * *

In the early seventies, Sherry Ortner, an anthropologist and translator of Lévi-Strauss, asked: ‘Is Female to Male as Nature Is to Culture?’.15 Her answer to the question was something like ‘Not really, but everywhere it seems that way’. It seemed this way because women were associated with children. Her argument rested squarely on Beauvoirian foundations, quoting in translation the inflammatory passage:

... ce n’est pas en donnant la vie, c’est en risquant sa vie que l’homme s’élève au-dessus de l’animal; c’est pourquoi dans l’humanité la supériorité est accordée non au sexe qui engendre mais à celui qui tue.

Nous tenons ici la clef de tout le mystère. Au niveau de la biologie, c’est seulement en se créant à neuf qu’une espèce se maintient; mais cette création n’est qu’une répétition de la même Vie sous des formes différentes. C’est en transcendant la Vie par l’Existence que l’homme assure la répétition de la Vie: par ce dépassement il crée des valeurs qui dénient à la pure répétition toute valeur. Chez l’animal, la gratuité, la variété des activités mâles restent vaines parce qu’aucun project ne

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12 Alexandre Astruc and Michel Contat, Sartre par lui-même, 1976.
Like Beauvoir, Ortner insisted on the social, cultural and economic context of women’s subordination. But like Beauvoir, she posed the transcendent male project in opposition to woman’s immanence, her ‘enslavement to the species’. Beneath the social gloss, there is a biological hardcore, existentially interpreted and valued. While man creates ‘relatively lasting, eternal, transcendent objects’, woman creates ‘only perishables – human beings’. For Ortner, women wanting to take their place in the social and cultural order were marked by their association with children, who might be considered part of nature. Infants are ‘barely human and utterly unsocialized; like animals they excrete without control, they do not speak. Even slightly older children are clearly not yet fully under the sway of culture.’ It is woman who ‘transforms newborn infants from mere organisms into cultured humans’. And she pays for it dearly.

My problem was that none of these words, these conceptions, came anywhere near the new experience I had had which was right up there with arriving in Paris for the first time: having a child, forming a relationship with him, opened up a new world to me. Freshly confident as a subject, sharing the (literal) shitwork with my partner, how did I talk honestly and accurately about this mutuality, this bliss, when asked about the new experience? In ‘serious’ analysis, how did this development of a sensuously felt, intersubjective adventure get reduced over and over again to the ‘myth’ or ‘ideology’ of motherhood, as if women were dupes of patriarchy to find anything positive in it? (If the idea of ‘pure repetition’ involved in ‘reproduction’ is nonsense, ‘motherhood’ is also a misleading term, implying a condition, even ailment, a state rather than a process – in Beauvoir’s terms, passivity rather than action.) I well knew that other women had been seduced by new babies, but they so often spoke guardedly, apologetically (almost superstitiously), about the good things, as if analysis of the context in which most women had children forbade them full-hearted testimony. A denial, a mutilation, was involved.

This got me thinking about the way so much analysis, criticism and theory was an exercise in disenchantment. There was something wrong with consigning the relationship with children to soap operas, to the syrup-and-sob stories of ‘women’s magazines’, bracketing it out of social theory when it might enrich it, complicating binary oppositions like nature/culture,
body/mind, flesh/spirit, opening up a more complex way of thinking about theory and experience. Of course there were different voices in post-sixties feminism, but Barbara Sichtermann was close to the mark when she wrote of women’s ‘initial militant ignorance on the question of children’.21

And where was Beauvoir here, whose work had inspired so many women, so many landmarks in the feminist terrain? I had remembered that there was much about ‘the servitudes of maternity’ in the translation I had read in Ireland. In La Force des choses, when she wrote about the adversaries of Le Deuxième Sexe, she told us that it was above all for her chapter on maternity that she was attacked. Reasonably, she said: ‘J’aurais refusé toute valeur au sentiment maternel et à l’amour: non. J’ai demandé que la femme les vécût en vérité et librement, alors que souvent ils lui servent d’alibi et qu’elle s’y aliène, au point que l’aliénation demeure, le coeur s’étant tari.’22

Thirty years on from Le Deuxième Sexe, now calling herself a feminist and supporting various French women’s movement initiatives, Beauvoir reiterated her thoughts on motherhood when Alice Schwarzer brought up accusations that she was against it. She did not reject motherhood, but thought that ‘aujourd’hui c’est un drôle de piège pour une femme.’23 She was not against mothers, but against the ideology which expects every woman to have children, and the circumstances under which mothers had to have their children. She was also against the mystification of the mother-child relationship, believing that so much value is placed on the family and children because people generally live such lonely lives. Having a child for the sake of having someone is terrible – for the child as well. As Beauvoir had said so often in Le Deuxième Sexe, there was ‘une certaine vérité’ in all this.

Beauvoir was categorically opposed to new interpretations of ‘féminité’, ‘nature féminine’, and ‘maternité’, to social movements mobilizing women along these lines. For her they constituted a return to the enslavement of women:

La maternité reste toujours la meilleure manière de réduire les femmes en esclavage. Je ne veux pas dire que toute femme qui est mère se transforme automatiquement en esclave: il peut exister des conditions de vie où la maternité n’est pas un esclavage. Mais dans l’ensemble, aujourd’hui, il en est tout de même ainsi ...

... Comme on ne peut pas dire aux femmes que c’est une tâche sacrée de récuser les casseroles, on leur dit: c’est une tâche sacrée d’élever un

22 La Force des choses, 209.
The weight of Beauvoir's argument was that having a child precipitated a fall into a 'tender trap'. Her expressed attitude towards having children and bringing them up was fashioned in reaction to what existed. She advised women not to become mothers.

I felt in my bones there was a problem with this renunciation. In my work on film I was critical of theory that equated abstraction and rationalization with political progress. Immersed in the Frankfurt School and feminists influenced by it, like them I felt the need for enlightenment against Enlightenment, the importance of acknowledging our connection with nature and the promise of something better that children, not yet schooled in instrumental rationality, could elicit in us adults, never completely reconciled to it.

* * *

Though I wasn’t so fond of Beauvoir, something happened in the eighties and nineties which I found disturbing. At a time when dominant theoretical paradigms insisted on the decentred subject, the dethroning of the Cogito and the fiction of the self, an impossible unity of thought and action was often expected of women who had inspired contemporary feminism. The 'mad' side of Mary Wollstonecraft was played down. It was embarrassing – like the contradictions in Emma Goldman, who waged war against masters all her life but like her 'great sister', Mary, could also be ‘the slave of her passion’. And with Beauvoir – well, the problems just kept mounting. We were told that we should do as these women had said, not as they had done.

Yet it seemed to me that if we really wanted to learn something from people who sought to live in freedom and equality, to understand something about actual and possible ways of living, we should get to know them in their fullness, with all their contradictions. The alternative, creating worthy models or characters who play out scripted scenarios, is doomed to disappoint. It usually means enshrining a set of ideals which can’t be lived

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24 Ibid., 120–1.
25 Ibid., 80.
27 See my 'Let's talk about sex: liberty, equality, and ... difficult mutuality', *Arena Journal*, 8 (1997), 141.
up to, but cast a shadow over everyday ‘lapsed’ lives. When the *Lettres au Castor et à quelques autres*\(^\text{28}\) and Beauvoir’s *Lettres à Sartre*\(^\text{29}\) were published, many people who had played around with a little rebellion in their youth but found complacency a better tonic in their middle age, were relieved to learn about the shabby treatment Sartre and Beauvoir had dished out to their ‘petite famille’. The ideal of freedom plus commitment just couldn’t be realized – we could all relax.

A little concerned about the weight of my own criticisms of the pair, particularly of Sartre,\(^\text{30}\) an American friend wrote to me. Besides the brutality, there had been ‘plenty of real love. For fifty years! In spite of all the crap. Don’t you see something impressive in that?’ I did. I think I had been fair to Beauvoir but I hadn’t touched on what was worthwhile, on the contradictory complexity of her life and work.

My resolve to re-read her was boosted by the frequency with which she was presented as some kind of joyless bad mother to feminism, by the way she got ‘dissed’, as my friend put it, by many feminists as well as misogynists. So many undergraduate women, learning about Beauvoir’s outdated ‘humanist’, ‘universalist’ position, revelled in the various attractive feminisms on offer in the cultural supermarket. (Where French academic feminism went, much Anglo-American and Australian academic feminism followed.) But so many of them fell into something like a required female role once they decided to live with a man and have children with him. It was as though they had little emotional, intellectual and ethical sustenance to help them think through different practices beyond the poke-your-tongue-out reaction to male domination. After graduation, in the wider world, all was not ‘jouissance féminine’.

I had a hunch that in *Le Deuxième Sexe* were the seeds of what I would call a ‘difficult feminism’, without guarantees, that involved continuous struggle and courage. Michèle Le Doeuff prepared me for this.\(^\text{31}\) Toril Moi’s treatment of the making of Beauvoir as an intellectual woman was admirably comprehensive – and sobering.\(^\text{32}\) She reminded us of Antoinette Fouque’s summation in *Libération* when Beauvoir died, presenting her as representative of an ‘intolerant, assimilating, sterilizing universalism, full of hatred and reductive of otherness’.\(^\text{33}\) Moi regarded ‘Simone de Beauvoir’ as a very rich

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\(^{30}\) See ‘Let’s talk about sex’, op. cit. and ‘Sweet finitude’, op. cit.

\(^{31}\) See Le Doeuff, op. cit. and her earlier ‘De l’existentialisme au deuxième sexe’, *Le Magazine littéraire*, 145 (February 1979).


\(^{33}\) See Moi, op. cit., 182.
text, claiming we could learn from all of Beauvoir; her life, her essays, memoirs and fiction. Moi’s defence of her subject against many of the unjust and vicious attacks didn’t omit criticism, or deny the florid negativity of her representations of the fleshy and the female in relation to sexuality. She had stressed that ‘Simone de Beauvoir’ was also an unfinished text.34

Since the time of Moi’s writing, Beauvoir’s letters to her American lover, Nelson Algren, have been published, providing a rather more joyful portrait of the woman in love, revealing yet another side of her. It seemed a good time to go back to Le Deuxième Sexe, this time unabridged, this time in her own language. I was in for a surprise.

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Fifty years after its publication seems a good time to destroy Le Deuxième Sexe as a monument and restore it as a living work. Beauvoir’s letters to Algren, many of which were written while researching and writing the book, can provide some insights, some help with this. While Beauvoir knows she would like to write a book about the situation of women as important as Gunnar Myrdal’s American Dilemma about Negroes,35 preparing for her essay, she is enjoying being a student again; reading, learning, thinking about what she learns.36 She has gathered a lot of ‘amusing stories’ to put in it, she tells Algren, working on it while she lives her ‘good girl’s life’37 in Paris, going off to sleep ‘like a decent old spinster’ because he is not there, working ‘savagely’ on the second volume so it can be finished before he comes and disturbs her.38 Despite ‘working crazily’, she won’t get the book finished but it will just have to wait, ‘it does not matter so much’.39 But it is finally completed. And Le Deuxième Sexe is a controversial best-seller.

In La Force des choses, Beauvoir suggested the book could be criticized for its style and composition. She could easily go back and cut it down to ‘un ouvrage plus élégant’, but discovering her ideas at the same time as she

34 See also Judith Okely, Simone de Beauvoir: A Re-Reading (London: Virago, 1986). Okely stresses the ‘concealed ethnography’ in Beauvoir (:105) and the importance of bringing class and race to feminist analysis. She notes that a younger generation of feminists will recoil from Beauvoir’s negative view of motherhood: ‘Whereas in the 1950s and 1960s rejection of or delay in maternity was identified by some middle-class women as a feminist stance, today maternity is explicitly reintegrated within feminism, although it may not be easier in practice’ (:115–16). There is truth in this but the point is ‘ethnographically’ interesting. In Australia, if not elsewhere, the ‘mother’ question remains a tough one. I think the view on maternity varies depending on which feminisms are hegemonic at particular times in particular places. ‘Reintegration’ can look very different, depending where it is found.
35 Beloved Chicago Man, 116.
36 Ibid., 139.
37 Ibid., 84.
38 Ibid., 260.
39 Ibid., 269.
wrote, she couldn’t do better. If I found in her letters to her lover, turbulence and tenderness, humour and vulnerability, a kind of rough charm rendered more charming by her writing in English, I found in Le Deuxième Sexe an intensity and lack of measure which were also appealing. Liking writers who are passionate enough to risk hyperbole, I discovered Beauvoir was no exception. The voice in these two volumes was not of ‘la duchesse de Bovouard’ speaking from her throne, but that of an essayist, constantly finding ‘une vérité’ or ‘une certaine vérité’ in this or that phenomenon or cliché, presenting, along with her historical, scientific and ethnographic data, anecdotal evidence, from women she met and spoke to here and there, even, as she reports it, in the rest rooms of cafés.

I found the ‘difficult feminism’ I was looking for. In plain-style Beauvoir discusses the sheer difficulty of a woman making a choice to be a full human being – a choice which can incur penalties. Rewards are more likely to go to those who abdicate and please. While a man is accorded a certain value by virtue of being a member of the first sex, a woman must win a respect which is not automatically accorded to her, and she must do it endlessly. And endlessly feeling impelled to prove oneself is not conducive to losing oneself in creativity: ‘Pour faire de grandes choses, ce qui manque essentiellement à la femme aujourd’hui, c’est l’oubli de soi: mais pour s’oublier il faut d’abord être solidement assuré qu’on s’est d’ores et déjà trouvé.’ Fifty years later, despite certain changes in the social, political and economic context, this is still too true. In Volume I Beauvoir suggested that the Cinderella myth still had meaning. Everything still encouraged a girl to wait on Prince Charming for fortune and happiness ‘plutôt qu’à en tenter seule la difficile et incertaine conquête’: ‘tant que subsistent les tentations de la facilité – de par l’inégalité économique qui avantage certains individus et le droit reconnu à la femme de se vendre à un de ces privilégiés – elle aura besoin d’un effort moral plus grand que le mâle pour choisir le chemin de l’indépendance.’

This idea of a great moral effort being needed would not be appreciated in much of the academic feminism to come – it would have too much of the odour of ‘moralism’, ‘voluntarism’ and ‘bourgeois individualism’. Indeed, if Beauvoir herself had taken the more materialist position she later said she might have taken, Le Deuxième Sexe could have lost some of its continuing ethical relevance.

Beauvoir’s woman lives ‘toute une région de l’expérience humaine que le
mâle choisit délibérément d’ignorer parce qu’il échoue à la penser’. Rejettant Cartesianism, she knows that in men’s hands ‘la raison devient une forme sournoise de violence.’ She also knows that masculine morality is, as far as it concerns her, ‘une vaste mystification’. ‘L’homme lui assène pompeusement son code de vertu et d’honneur; mais en douce il l’invite à y désobéir.’ Officially, however, he disavows her – ‘il a ses faiblesses, mais qui n’en a pas?’ (Is any of this sounding familiar!?) Cynically, too aware of all his faults, ‘elle voit l’homme de bas en haut comme le valet voit ses maîtres.’ Yet the woman needs this same male to acquire human dignity.

Beauvoir’s portraits of women as vassals, who do not choose the difficult path, is harsh. Their habitual mode is complaint, living ‘dans une colère impuissante’, capable of great cruelty towards their husbands as members of a privileged caste. The husband is ‘une victime d’élection’ since he incarnates the masculine universe. Since the wife is nevertheless an agent, it is in her spoiling power, her ‘puissances de négation’, that she comes into her own.

Ironically, something of the same dynamic can still go on in universities today. Beauvoir had stressed that it was hard for a woman to act as man’s equal so long as equality was not universally recognized and concretely realized. For independent, professional women, to attempt over and over again to have intersubjective relationships with men who think that because you are sexed for them you are sex, not a subject, can be a difficult, Sisyphean task. The role of aggrieved victim can be easier to play, and men, ready for the intermittent verbal bashing, can accommodate feminism as a spoiling strategy. They often don’t know what to make of the more difficult feminism, sometimes taking it to be less serious, less challenging.

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Yet this difficult feminism wasn’t what interested me most in this reading of Le Deuxième Sexe. Once again, Lévi-Strauss made his way into the picture. In her Introduction, Beauvoir had thanked him for allowing her to draw on a

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46 Le Deuxième sexe II, 438.
47 Ibid.
48 Ibid., 439.
49 Ibid.
50 Ibid., 440.
51 Ibid., 442.
52 Ibid., 441.
53 Ibid., 432.
54 Ibid., 433.
55 Ibid., 435.
56 Ibid., 375.
draft of *Les Structures élémentaires de la parenté*.\(^{57}\) His formulation there became central to her essay:

Le passage de l'état de Nature à l'état de Culture se définit par l'aptitude de la part de l'homme à penser les relations biologiques sous la forme de systèmes d'oppositions: la dualité, l'alternance, l'opposition et la symétrie, qu'elles se présentent sous des formes définies ou des formes floues constituent moins des phénomènes qu'il s'agit d'expliquer que les données fondamentales et immédiates de la réalité sociale.\(^{58}\)

This fatal passage from the master thinker who later sought to heal the Nature/Culture divide, taking some responsibility for entrenching a dichotomy which was heuristic, not actual,\(^{59}\) not only scarred Beauvoir's argument, but the feminism of a generation of women, struggling for social recognition and threatened with reduction to nature if they confessed a connection with it.

Six years after the publication of *Le Deuxième Sexe*, Lévi-Strauss concluded *Tristes Tropiques* with a meditation on the folly of the frenzied activity which enslaves man, on the privilege coveted by every society, the opportunity,

vitale pour la vie, de se déprendre et qui consiste – adieu sauvages! adieu voyages! – pendant les brefs intervalles où notre espèce supporte d'interrompre son labeur de ruche, à saisir l'essence de ce qu'elle fut et continue d'être en deçà de la pensée et au-delà de la société: dans la contemplation d'un minéral plus beau que toutes nos œuvres; dans le parfum, plus savant que nos livres, respiré au creux d'un lis; ou dans le clin d'œil alourdi de patience, de sérénité et de pardon réciproque, qu'une entente involontaire permet parfois d'échanger avec un chat.\(^{60}\)

In the section of *Le Deuxième Sexe* which had so upset me, it is this very activity which is valued over 'stagnation', 'répétition' and the 'immanence' of women's lives. Menstruation, pregnancy and birth diminish women's capacity for work, condemning them to long periods of impotence: 'engendrer, allaiter ne sont pas des activités, ce sont des fonctions naturelles; aucun projet n'y est engagé; c'est pourquoi la femme n'y trouve pas le motif d'une affirmation hautaine de son existence; elle subit passivement son destin biologique.'\(^{61}\)

*Homo faber*, meanwhile, is involved in action which transcends his

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\(^{58}\) Lévi-Strauss, quoted in *Le Deuxième Sexe* I, 16, my emphasis.


\(^{61}\) *Le Deuxième Sexe* I, 110.
animal condition: inventing, conquering, appropriating the riches of the world, annexing the world itself.

Dans cette action il éprouve son pouvoir; il pose des fins, il projette vers elles des chemins: il se réalise comme existant. Pour maintenir, il crée; il déborde le présent, il ouvre l'avenir. C'est pourquoi les expéditions de pêche et de chasse ont un caractère sacré. On accueille leurs réussites par des fêtes et des triomphes; l'homme y reconnaît son humanité. Cet orgueil il le manifeste aujourd'hui encore quand il a bâti un barrage, un gratte-ciel, une pile atomique. Il n'a pas seulement travaillé à conserver le monde donné: il en a fait éclater les frontières, il a jeté les bases d'un nouvel avenir.62

Beauvoir's crushingly negative representation of the fleshly and the 'natural', her conception of the vanity of unjustified, unredeemed being (the movement from Catholicism to Sartrean Existentialism wasn't much help here), went along with a kind of Enlightenment delirium, with the ever-progressing man/male driving the heady narrative. It is a narrative which is quite reasonably under suspicion now. But what particularly interested me was what came before and after that passage where it seemed logical to accord superiority to the sex which kills over the sex which brings forth life.

Man's activity has another dimension which gives it its supreme dignity – it is often dangerous. Said Beauvoir:

Si le sang n'était qu'un aliment, il n'aurait pas une valeur plus haute que le lait; mais le chasseur n'est pas un boucher: dans la lutte contre les animaux sauvages il court des risques. Le guerrier pour augmenter le prestige de la horde, du clan auquel il appartient, met en jeu sa propre vie. Et par là il prouve avec éclat que ce n'est pas la vie qui est pour l'homme la valeur suprême mais qu'elle doit servir des fins plus importantes qu'elle-même. La pire malédiction qui pèse sur la femme c'est qu'elle est exclue de ces expéditions guerrières...63

'Pouvoir', 'force', 'fêtes et triomphes', 'éclater', 'dominer' – drawing on Hegel and in the spirit of Nietzsche, Beauvoir's existentialist warrior hero doesn't let his inevitable death creep up on him but risks meeting it head on. (And anyone who reads Beauvoir knows the place ageing, decline and death have in her work.) As much as the achievements of order, reason and cultural projects, it seems to me that it is also undoing, sheer vitality and action heedless of consequences, the violence and splendour of this mythical masculinity, which are valued.

Now Michel Leiris's man in L'Âge d'homme,64 which had inspired

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62 Ibid., 111.
63 Ibid., my emphasis.
64 L'Âge d'homme (Paris: Gallimard, 1946).
Beauvoir, is a more abject figure and the men of the everyday variety in Beauvoir's Introduction are far from these splendid creatures. They are frail, problematic and petty, with a stake in perpetuating the notion of women as other, as secondary, needing some category of persons as inferior to themselves. Highly ambivalent about the valorized first sex, Beauvoir begins her first chapter with the suggestion that the term ‘femelle’ is pejorative, 'non parce qu'il enracine la femme dans la nature, mais parce qu'il la confine dans son sexe'.65 If this sex appears contemptible, hostile to man, ‘c'est évidemment à cause de l'inquiète hostilité que suscite en lui la femme’.66 He finds in biology a justification for this feeling.

Yet very soon we are presented with a different man, at home with his body, identical with it, while woman's fate is dramatically different. The species installs itself in her. ‘De la puberté à la ménopause elle est le siège d'une histoire qui se déroule et qui ne la concerne pas personnellement.’67

The long drama will be played out in pain and blood. Prey of the species, her particular male and her offspring, she may vomit in pregnancy, her organism revolting against the species which is taking possession of her, leaching her of vital nutrients. Grave accidents and dangerous disorders can occur, she may be prematurely deformed and aged by pregnancies and births. Sometimes the child even kills his mother. But these risks, these dangers, are not valued like those chosen by the first sex.

The procreating male is distinguished by ‘un plumage éclatant, d'écaillles brillantes, de cornes, de bois, de crinière, par son chant, son exubérance’.68 His ‘parades séductrices’

manifestent la puissance de vie qui avec un luxe gratuit et magnifique s'épanouit alors chez lui. Cette générosité vitale, l'activité déployée en vue de l'accouplement, et dans le coût même l'affirmation dominatrice de son pouvoir sur la femelle, tout contribue à poser l'individu comme tel au moment de son dépassement vivant.69

If might is not right, it is certainly attractive! But there is no natural hierarchy of values, Beauvoir tells us. Woman's weaknesses vis-à-vis man cannot be denied, but these facts do not carry meaning within themselves – they depend on context.

In her chapter on Infancy, we find a similar mixture of solid contextual arguments about the formation of males and females and evocation of a girl’s viscerally suffered characteristics that seem to carry their own horror. Famously, one is not born a woman, one becomes one; the notion of penis

65 Le Deuxième Sexe I, 35, my emphasis.
66 Ibid.
67 Ibid., 64.
68 Ibid., 59.
69 Ibid.
envy explains nothing, it is because the penis becomes the symbol of virility which is socially valorized that it figures ('splendour envy' might be a more appropriate condition in Beauvoir's eyes); for the girl child there is a conflict between her autonomous existence and her being for another. Her body initially a plenitude for her, she sees her difference from boys transformed into a lack, an inferiority. This same young girl tunes into the fact that it is men who run the world: 'les chefs d’État, les généraux, les explorateurs, les musiciens, les peintres qu’elle admire sont des hommes; ce sont des hommes qui font battre son coeur d’enthousiasme'.

If I disagreed with Beauvoir's take on the servitudes of maternity, I knew what she was talking about here. At the same time as I was working through my own ideas on mothers and children, I was thinking about the films of that lapsed candidate for the priesthood, Martin Scorsese, trying to work out why they got under my skin. They usually involved a move away from the feminine – from women as fleshly, tempting symbols of unredeemed finitude. Yet critical analysis of this movement wasn’t what drove me to examine the films. They struck a chord in me because of their manic energy, their excess, intensity and violence – but all these things that made the heart beat faster were accorded to men. I am not just talking about the violence of the ‘raging bull’, the kind involving bruising and bashing – it had more to do with following a feeling through to an extreme, a violence Beauvoir knew she had in her, which she attests to in her letters and memoirs.

For Beauvoir, who had been ‘une jeune fille rangée’, exuberance itself was barred to girls with the result that ‘leur vigueur inemployée retombe en nervosité; leurs occupations trop sages n’épuisent pas leur trop-plein d’énergie’. Instead of exuberance, for the girl there is ‘horreur’, the recurring word in her text used to evoke the girl’s experience of those body functions associated with assuming her fate. Her periods inspire horror because they precipitate her into an inferior and mutilated category. But the weight of Beauvoir’s prose is on a kind of sensuous hell, where Catholic girlhood meets existentialized flesh, dangerous, strange, (and of course) alienated. And it will get worse: ahead of the girl is the vision of the mother: ‘victime elle est méprisee, mègre, détestée; son destin apparaît comme le prototype de la fade répétition: par elle la vie ne fait que stupidement se répéter sans aller nulle part; butée dans son rôle de ménagère, elle arrête l’expansion de l’existence, elle est obstacle et

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70 Le Deuxième Sexe II, 38, my emphasis.
72 Le Deuxième Sexe II, 46.
73 In Scorsese too, a kind of hyper-sensuousness is conjured up, yet placed, finally, at the service of asceticism. One is reminded of the Spiritual Exercises.
négation."\textsuperscript{74} In a thousand ways, trying to escape this destiny, the girl displays her ambivalence about her sexuality. But usually, her revolt is in bad faith. She engages in self-defeating and self-mutilating behaviour.

Crucially, just when these things are happening with girls, boys are beginning their apprenticeship in violence, their aggressiveness is developing; ‘leur volonté de puissance, leur goût du défi; c’est justement à ce moment que la fillette renonce aux jeux brutaux’.\textsuperscript{75} Violence is forbidden the girl and despite it not playing a huge role in normal times, its threat is a way for a man to experience in his fists ‘sa volonté d’affirmation de soi pour qu’il se sente confirmé dans sa souveraineté’:

\begin{quote}
La violence est l’épreuve authentique de l’adhésion de chacun à soi-même, à ses passions, à sa propre volonté; la refuser radicalement, c’est se refuser toute vérité objective, c’est s’enfermer dans une subjectivité abstraite; une colère, une révolte qui ne passent pas dans les muscles demeurent imaginaires. C’est une terrible frustration que de ne pas pouvoir inscrire les mouvements de son cœur sur la face de la terre.\textsuperscript{76}
\end{quote}

Yet if nature, along with the social order, has been a cruel mother to the girl, allowing her no Promethean aspirations, her passionate élan finds a home in Nature: ‘L’adolescente ne s’est encore annexé aucune parcelle de l’univers: grâce à ce dénuement, il est tout entier son royaume.’\textsuperscript{77} Colette, Mary Webb, Emily Brontë and Anna de Noailles were full humans, free subjects in Nature. Beauvoir’s girl, wanting to leave the parental home, can only accede to adult life by making herself a woman, paying for one freedom with an abdication,

\begin{quote}
tandis qu’au milieu des plantes et des bêtes elle est un être humain; elle est affranchie à la fois de sa famille et des mâles, un sujet, une liberté. Elle trouve dans le secret des forêts une image de la solitude de son âme et dans les vastes horizons des plaines la figure sensible de la transcendance; elle est elle-même cette lande illimitée, cette cime jetée vers le ciel.\textsuperscript{78}
\end{quote}

It scarcely matters that she confuses the adventures of her own heart with the promises of nature: the weight of these passages is with \textit{la vie}:

\begin{quote}
Odeurs, couleurs parlent un mystérieux langage mais dont un mot se détache avec une triomphante évidence: le mot ‘vie’. L’existence n’est pas seulement un destin abstrait qui s’inscrit sur les registres des mairies, elle est avenir et richesse charnelle. Avoir un corps n’apparaît plus comme
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{74} \textit{Le Deuxième Sexe II}, 44.
\textsuperscript{75} \textit{Ibid.}, 82.
\textsuperscript{76} \textit{Ibid.}, 83.
\textsuperscript{77} \textit{Ibid.}, 120.
\textsuperscript{78} \textit{Ibid.}, 122.
This enchanted world was both intoxicating and unexpected. And as Flaubert was to Emma Bovary, Beauvoir was to her pantheistic young girl. But the normal girl must buckle. Only rare women could carry into their adult life the passionate projects of adolescence: ‘en effet, l’enfant rebelle et baroque qu’on avait quittée, on la retrouve deux ans plus tard assagie, prête à consentir à sa vie de femme’. For men it was a different story.

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Predictably, the mythical male satisfies himself in sex without losing his autonomy. Predictably too, the female is no more than ‘une fleur offerte, un fruit à cueillir’. Prey to his predator, penetration is a kind of rape. It is a violence that changes the girl into a wife. There is no reciprocity in the marriage bed. The ‘normal’ sexual act puts the woman into dependence on the male and the species. The now familiar intertwining of the social and the bodily, both detrimental to women, is found here, as is the attempt to pull back from inaccurate generalizations. In fact, Beauvoir tells us, both men and women know the shame of their flesh, its unjustified immanence, its absurd contingency. But it is the female who has her own secret and dangerous life after sex; because of the threat of pregnancy, the woman must clean herself ‘comme on nettoie un vase sale, tandis que l’homme repose sur son lit dans sa superbe intégrité’. Since Beauvoir scholarship has drawn attention to the ‘delirious’ nature of many of the evocations in this section, I will limit my own quotation to one representative passage: ‘l’homme fond sur sa proie comme l’aigle et le milan; elle guette comme la plante carnivore, le marécage où insectes et enfants s’enlisent; elle est succion, ventouse, humeuse, elle est poix et glu, un appel immobile, insinuant et visqueux: du moins est-ce ainsi que sourdement elle se sent.”

79 ibid., 122–3.
80 ibid., 124.
81 ibid., 114.
82 ibid., 149.
83 ibid., 148, my emphasis. See also Moi, op. cit., 168.
But beyond the swamps, suction, leakage and dirty vases, woman feels more, much more. Beauvoir believed that true sexual maturity was possible only for the woman who consented to make herself flesh ‘dans le trouble et le plaisir’. In the intensity of her response, an intensity man does not know, woman submits to a veritable alienation. Catholic Sin of the Flesh and Existentialist Alienation from Consciousness combine their powerful forces, but can’t wipe out female sexual pleasure:

pour beaucoup, cette métamorphose est le moment le plus voluptueux et le plus définitif de l’amour; mais elle a aussi un caractère magique et effrayant ... le bouleversement qu’elle ressent est une transmutation bien plus radicale que la frénésie agressive du mâle. Cette fièvre la délivre de la honte; mais à son réveil elle lui fait à son tour honte et horreur; pour qu’elle accepte heureusement – ou même orgueilleusement – il faudrait au moins qu’elle se soit épanouie en flammes de volupté; elle pourrait revendiquer ses désirs si elle les avait glorieusement assouvis: sinon, elle les répudie avec colère.

On touche ici au problème crucial de l’érotisme féminin: au début de sa vie érotique, l’abdication de la femme n’est pas compensée par une jouissance violente et sûre. Elle sacrifierait bien plus facilement pudeur et orgueil si elle s’ouvrait ainsi les portes d’un paradis.

Beauvoir well knew that this kind of female pleasure had no similarity to the project; there are no ends involved, no clear conclusion. In her ode to feminine sexual bliss, she is as lyrical as any difference theorist:

La jouissance féminine est irradiée dans le corps tout entier; elle n’est pas toujours centrée sur le système génital; même alors les contractions vaginales plutôt qu’un véritable orgasme constituent un système d’ondulations qui rythmiquement naissent, s’effacent, se reforment, atteignent par instants un paroxysme, puis se brouillent et se fondent sans jamais mourir tout à fait. Du fait qu’aucun terme fixe ne lui est assigné, le plaisir vise l’infini ... 

While this grand unhitching demands total abandon, a problem in the relations between the sexes – in society as it is – is that instead of fusion and reciprocity, the male seeks domination. Thirty years later, Beauvoir stresses to Schwarzer that sexuality can be a dreadful trap – that women can find sexuality so enjoyable that they become slaves to men. But Beauvoir already argued in 1949 that in different circumstances, true exchange is possible. Problems created by the asymmetry of male and female eroticism can be resolved when the woman feels the man respects and desires her at

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84 Ibid., 155.
85 Ibid., 155-156.
86 Ibid., 161.
87 Schwarzer, op. cit., 81.
the same time. Freedom and submission are reconcilable, giving and receiving exchange their meaning:

Sous une forme concrète et charnelle, s'accomplit la reconnaissance réciproque du moi et de l'autre dans la conscience la plus aiguë de l'autre et du moi ... le fait est que l'altérité n'a plus un caractère hostile; c'est cette conscience de l'union des corps dans leur séparation qui donne à l'acte sexuel son caractère émouvant; il est d'autant plus bouleversant que les deux êtres qui ensemble nient et affirment passionnément leurs limites sont des semblables et sont cependant différents. Cette différence qui, trop souvent, les isole, devient quand ils se rejoignent la source de leur émerveillement ... Toutes les richesses de la virilité, de la féminité se réfléchissant, se ressaisissant les unes à travers les autres, composent une mouvante et extatique unité.

Can this really be the enforcer of androgyny, the normalizing, universalizing denier of difference? For Beauvoir men and women are the same – and different. In her concluding pages, she admits that man is also flesh and passivity, the toy of his hormones and the species, while woman, like man, is desire and activity. 'Dans les deux sexes se jouent le même drame de la chair et de l'esprit, de la finitude et de la transcendance; les deux sont rongés par le temps, guettés par la mort, ils ont un même essentiel besoin de l'autre.' The fact of sharing the human condition is infinitely more important to Beauvoir than distinctions according to sex but it is a sexed equality that she envisions.

* * *

If in different circumstances Beauvoir could picture this moving and ecstatic unity between a woman and man, she couldn’t do the same for the mother-child relationship. (She is scarcely alone here, even today.) But after my reading this time around, I think there was more to the limit on Beauvoir’s imagining here than I had known.

In the chapter, on ‘La Mère’, again Beauvoir admits that the context of pregnancy and maternity is crucial. They can be lived differently; in revolt, resignation, satisfaction or enthusiasm. Unsurprisingly, the baby is a

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89 See Moi, op. cit., 77 and 182–3 on criticisms of Beauvoir, particularly from Fouque and Irigaray.
90 Le Deuxième Sexe II, 573.
91 Naomi Schor is surely wrong when she says, too absolutely, 'Otherness in Beauvoir's scheme of things is utter negativity ...' and that Beauvoir's analysis precludes theorizing difference, or rather, difference as positivity. See 'This Essentialism which is not one: coming to grips with Irigaray', Differences, 1 (Summer 1989), 45–6.
92 Le Deuxième Sexe II, 301.
parasite and the mother passive. But the opposition between subject and object disappears in the future mother, who might enjoy the whole pregnancy and nursing process ('state' for Beauvoir) so much that she wants to repeat it indefinitely. These women 'cherchent avidement la possibilité d’aliéner leur liberté au profit de leur chair'.93 This 'alienation', this becoming 'flesh', has a kinship with sexuality and the Nature which Beauvoir's girl exalted and became a part of. The woman 'est noyée à nouveau dans le courant de la vie, réintégrée au tout, châfnon dans la chaîne sans fin des générations, chair qui existe pour et par une autre chair'.94 She is accorded the fusion with another that she has longed for – she is 'la vie'. It is as though Beauvoir finds her existentialist self in deep and dangerous waters here, threatened by rapture. The notion of an 'illusion pacifiante' must be brought in immediately in case this all seems too real.95 In lyrical passages drawing on lyrical female writers, she attests to the lure of 'le Tout' but repeatedly insists on its alienated quality. The 'douce bestialité',96 the 'plénitude charnelle',97 the feeling of closeness to life, and fusion with it, in Beauvoir's scenario, must be linked to possessiveness and domination.

Discussing her writing in her 1978 film interview, Beauvoir talks about how essential 'la vie' is to her: to live is primordial for her, while for Sartre writing comes first.98 Once L'Invitée99 was published, she became a writer – but it is as though the primacy of 'La Vie', replete with all its traps, will always beckon. In Le Deuxième Sexe, Beauvoir appreciated the difficulty of enclosing within existing frameworks the new child, 'une existence mystérieuse comme celle des bêtes, turbulente et désordonnée comme les forces naturelles, humaine cependant ... '.100 But if the child inhabits this liminal space, so, surely, does the mother partake of it. And it is in this enchanted and dangerous zone, I think, that the possibility of dissolving reified socio-cultural structures and the risk of being swallowed up by myth coalesce.

Volume I brings out some brutal truths about the significations of the mother/woman for man – and we can assume, I believe, that Beauvoir herself lives, with ambivalence, something of the same relationship to the mother/ woman. Man's horror of his own fleshly contingency, she argues, is projected onto woman. Her first lie, her first betrayal, is that of life itself, which, though it appears clad in the most attractive forms, is nevertheless
inhabited by the ferment of age and death: 'ce que d’abord l’homme chérit et déteste dans la femme, tant amante que mère, c’est l’image figée de sa destinée animale, c’est la vie nécessaire à son existence, mais qui la condamne à la finitude et à la mort. Du jour où il naît, l’homme commence à mourir: c’est la vérité qu’incarne la Mère.'

We are well acquainted with the story of Kierkegaard, one of the Fathers of Existentialism, refusing to marry his fiancée. Beauvoir quotes from 'In vino veritas': 'C’est dans un rapport négatif que la femme rend l’homme productif dans l’idéalité ... Des rapports négatifs avec la femme peuvent nous rendre infinis ... des rapports positifs avec la femme rendent l’homme fini dans les proportions les plus vastes.' Since the categories through which men think the world are constituted from their point of view as absolute, because woman is a mystery for men, she is regarded as a mystery in herself: 'en face d’une vivante énigme l’homme demeure seul: seul avec ses rêves, ses espoirs, ses craintes, son amour, sa vanité; ce jeu subjectif qui peut aller du vice à l’extase mystique est pour beaucoup une expérience plus attrayante qu’un authentique rapport avec un être humain.' For men who would be Gods (and she is referring to the writer Montherlant here), the woman/mother is the great enemy, symbol of contingency, vulnerability, perishability – of the human condition. 'Marcher en songe sur les eaux,' suggests Beauvoir, 'c’est bien moins fatigant que d’avancer pour de bon sur les chemins de la terre.'

It is in Stendhal, for Beauvoir France’s greatest writer, that she finds a way out for women, trapped for worse or better in man-made metaphors. This artist lives amongst women ‘de chair et d’os’. In her letters to Nelson Algren, Beauvoir wants him to share in her response to Stendhal’s work. She was disappointed in his reaction to The Red and the Black, saying that for her part, she doesn’t hate ‘the whole romantic stuff’. She is interested in Julian ‘with the good and silly parts there are in himself’. It is not a realistic novel ‘but it has got reality in its own way.’ For Stendhal, women are neither inferior nor superior to men, but their situation gives them an advantage. Since things deemed important are beyond women’s reach, there

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101 Le Deuxième Sexe I, 267. See also my argument in ‘Sweet finitude’, op. cit., which deals with this same question.

102 Le Deuxième Sexe I, 295.

103 Ibid., 387.

104 Ibid., 314. See also Beauvoir’s discussion of D. H. Lawrence (331–43). Despite his ‘orgueil phallique’, he refuses the sex–brain antithesis and existence which is cut off from its ‘humus charnel’. 332. Beauvoir’s discussion of André Breton and woman (335–64) is also even-handed. His redemptive ‘femme-enfant’, as opposed to the woman who most closely resembles the human, has figured again in various post-modern scenarios.

105 Ibid., 364.

106 Beloved Chicago Man, 314. Here as in notes to follow, I am quoting Beauvoir’s letters as they stand, flawed English intact.
is less risk for women that they will alienate themselves in these things. There is more chance they can keep ‘ce naturel, cette naïveté, cette générosité que Stendhal met plus haut que tout autre mérite’.\textsuperscript{107} What he appreciates in them is their authenticity, the trait that is common to all the women he has loved or invented with love. They are all ‘des êtres libres et vrais’.\textsuperscript{108} Here we are a long way from Beauvoir’s women who are the first to throw themselves at the conqueror’s feet; from the old woman whose wisdom is still only negative, contestation, accusation, refusal, sterility;\textsuperscript{109} from the upper-class women who merit her strongest condemnation: ‘Leur vaine arrogance, leur radicale incapacité, leur ignorance butée en font les êtres les plus inutiles, les plus nuls qu’ait jamais produits l’espèce humaine’!\textsuperscript{110}

In her treatment of Stendhal, Beauvoir reveals her Utopia. It is vitalist and romantic. Stendhal’s women are ‘vivantes’;\textsuperscript{111} they know the source of true values is not in exterior things but in their heart:

\begin{quote}
Inconscientes, pueriles ou profondes, gaies ou graves, audacieuses ou secrètes, toutes refusent le lourd sommeil dans lequel l’humanité s’enlise. Et ces femmes qui ont su préserver à vide leur liberté, dès qu’elles rencontreront un objet digne d’elles s’élèveront par la passion jusqu’à l’héroïsme; leur force d’âme, leur énergie traduisent la farouche pureté d’un engagement total.\textsuperscript{112}
\end{quote}

The portrait of these imaginary women rivals that of Beauvoir’s mythical men, with their risk, their élan, their pushing beyond boundaries. The most difficult constraints to overcome, Beauvoir argues, are those within oneself. Stendhal exalts these women’s ‘hardiesse’,\textsuperscript{113} which is all the more moving since it is scarcely spoken. For this reason it is all the more natural, spontaneous and authentic. Their solitary debates carry more weight than a ministerial crisis:

\begin{quote}
L’homme dit sérieux est en fait futile parce qu’il accepte de sa vie des justifications toutes faites; tandis qu’une femme passionnée et profonde révise à chaque instant les valeurs établies; elle connaît la constante tension d’une liberté sans appui; par là, elle se sent sans cesse en danger: elle peut en un moment tout gagner, ou tout perdre. C’est ce risque assumé dans l’inquiétude qui donne à son histoire les couleurs d’une aventure héroïque.\textsuperscript{114}
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{107} Le Deuxième Sexe I, 368.
\textsuperscript{108} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{109} Le Deuxième Sexe II, 421.
\textsuperscript{110} Ibid., 454.
\textsuperscript{111} Le Deuxième Sexe I, 369, Beauvoir’s emphasis.
\textsuperscript{112} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{113} Ibid., 372.
\textsuperscript{114} Ibid., 374.
Stendhal's heroines are engaged in no less than the ardent quest for the true reasons for living. One of the joys of the lover with whom the novels' author and readers identify, is that he is the witness through whom the secret riches are revealed, and these in turn enrich the lover, transform his life. It is through women, under their influence and in reaction to their conduct that his heroes experience and learn about the world and themselves.

Épreuve, récompense, juge, amie, la femme est vraiment chez Stendhal ce que Hegel un moment fut tenté d'en faire: cette conscience autre qui dans la reconnaissance réciproque donne au sujet autre la même vérité qu'elle reçoit de lui. Le couple heureux qui se reconnaît dans l'amour défie l'univers et le temps; il se suffit, il réalise l'absolu.\(^{115}\)

It is essential for this reciprocal recognition and mutual enrichment that woman in this scenario is not pure alterity. As well as a catalyst, she is herself a subject. Stendhal's heroines are not depicted as functions of his heroes. (How is it forgotten or ignored that at the end of Volume 1, with the help of Rimbaud, Beauvoir makes it clear that men must change if women are to live in freedom without being torn apart?)

In Stendhal's vision, and Beauvoir's, the poetic and the romantic will not be banished from the world. Lovers will still live an adventure full of risks and promises:

Il est remarquable que Stendhal soit à la fois si profondément romanesque et si décidément féministe; d'ordinaire les féministes sont des esprits rationnels qui adoptent en toutes choses le point de vue de l'universel; mais c'est non seulement au nom de la liberté en général, c'est au nom du bonheur individuel que Stendhal réclame l'émancipation des femmes.\(^{116}\)

In the letters to Nelson Algren we find Beauvoir, fully a woman, fully human, negotiating freedom and commitment, experiencing happiness and despair, living what I would call a 'difficult mutuality' with her American lover.

* * *

In *La Force des choses*, Beauvoir quotes from Algren's letters, written only to her. He is largely bracketed out of her account of her life. Her relationship with Lanzmann, her defining one with Sartre, Algeria, all lead up, inevitably, to her aged self, on its way toward the tomb. Wabansia Avenue, where she stayed with Algren, figures, in the final paragraph, as one amongst other experiences never to be resuscitated. But the letters to her 'sweet beloved

\(^{115}\) *Ibid.*, 376.

man with the golden heart', right up until the publication of *Force of Circumstance*, when Algren finishes the relationship, tell a different story. Here is a Beauvoir more playful and humorous than elsewhere, as 'vivante' as any Stendhal heroine.

Quintin Hoare has suggested that in the letters exchanged between Sartre and Beauvoir, it was the touch of Valmont and the Marquise de Merteuil that some readers found disconcerting. Besides the revelations about lesbian entanglements which the elderly Beauvoir had denied in her 'frank' interviews with admirers, her letters to Sartre provided another perspective on her relationship with Algren than that in the memoirs and the fictionalized account in *Les Mandarins*. During her 1950 stay with him, when as an act of self-protection, he attempts to detach himself from her, she is shattered and has her classical reaction of becoming ill. She thinks that these are the last months they will spend together. Her correspondence with Sartre at this time reveals an exercise of will, a killing of the contingent relationship with Algren, its burial accompanied by ritual vows of love between the necessary couple, vows all the more binding for being renewed this way. (Sartre, for his part, is having problems with Dolorès.) Chicago itself, suffused with her relationship to Algren, has something poignant about it: 'Cette histoire, c'est étrange comme je suis en train de la revivre rue par rue, heure par heure, avec la consigne de la neutraliser, de la changer en un passé inoffensif que je puisse garder sur mon coeur sans le renier et sans en souffrir.' She still feels good around Algren and thinks she must let the remaining three months she has with him do their inevitable work:

> Vous voyez que je fais ce que j'avais dit que je ne voulais pas faire: reprendre à mon compte une histoire qui avait été vécue à deux, en faire mon histoire de manière à pouvoir la dominer, la liquider ... Je suis heureuse que cette histoire ait été, telle qu'elle a été. Avec un peu de chance elle finira en douceur.

> Écrivez-moi bien. Ce qui m'aide le plus, c'est que je suis restée ancrée à Paris, près de vous. Alors rien d'autre n'est vraiment important. Et vous, petit, pensez bien que ces tristes jours que vous passez ne sont pas absurdes ou gratuits, mais nécessaires à notre vie ...

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117 *Beloved Chicago Man*, 333.


119 One of the achievements of Deirdre Bair’s biography of Beauvoir was to purge her of humour, despite access to the material in the letters. See *Simone de Beauvoir: A Biography* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1990).


121 See, for example, Schwarzer, *op. cit.*, 118.


124 Ibid., 374–5.
Happy enough, though her existence is a little austere, Beauvoir tells Sartre that it seems absurd for them not to be together and happy, since he is free now and given the feelings Algren has expressed, she is somewhat embarrassed, not knowing exactly why she is there with him: 'Je suis infiniment plus heureuse près de vous ... J'ai l'impression d'être attachée ici par de vieux désirs alors que la nouveauté et le romanesque et le bonheur de ma vie sont avec vous, mon petit compagnon de 20 ans. Je compte les semaines, sinon les heures.' At the end of her next letter, Sartre is her 'cher petit absolu.' But the following year she and Algren are together again.

Early in their relationship, Algren had presumably said something about the difference between her published work and her letters. Beauvoir replied to her 'dearest husband' that she was not two women, the biggest difference between her letters and articles was her writing in English or French. She tried to be 'just as true' when she wrote books or essays as when she told him she loved him. She thought in her heart about the truth of her love for him as seriously as if she were to write an essay about it: 'I give very long, serious thoughts to our love. I think very steadily about all what you give to me, that is so much, and all I do not give to you. Darling, anyway if you stick to the idea that I am two women, be sure they both love you, and maybe the nicest is the most stupid.' Beauvoir is referring to the central problematic fact that will come up over and over again between herself and Algren (and be reworked in Les Mandarins and La Force des choses). She has a life, her work and Sartre in Paris, so she can never give all of herself to Algren, who had to remain a 'faraway love', - while he had wanted to live with and marry her.

If 'stupide' and 'stupidement' had a straightforward, negative meaning in Le Deuxième Sexe, so often referring to immanent states of no value, in the letters things are more complex. Early in their correspondence, she tells him she is 'a little afraid of love, it makes me rather stupid'. But 'stupid', 'silly' and 'foolish' are recurring adjectives in these letters and they are not such bad ones. Like Mary Wollstonecraft, who was not afraid to wear the fool's cap, in private Beauvoir could delight in it fitting her well. Communicating with her lover, freed from the structures of her own language of which she is master, a sweet surrender is possible. 'La Vie' can be celebrated and the world become suffused with that of the lover:

You know, when I speak to you in the streets, when I think about you, I

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125 Ibid., 385.
126 Ibid., 388.
127 Beloved Chicago Man, 118.
128 Ibid., 119.
129 Ibid., 443.
130 Ibid, 74.
131 See 'Let's talk about sex', 142.
always use English. I speak English very much in this way, all day long, and all the English words I hear by chance in the streets or cafés sound tenderly in my ears. You see how silly I become, and I was a clever woman, it was said. So you see how much I love you to have become so silly.\textsuperscript{132}

In her ‘working temperate, mild life’ in Paris, the ‘Wabansia nest’ she has shared with her ‘husband and friend and lover’ comes back to her. It is wonderful to feel ‘such a treasure of emotion, pain, happiness, of burning love in one’s heart’. While it might be ‘silly’ to give such importance to one’s feelings in the light of world events, it is ‘silly, but it is a nice bed-story to tell to myself when going to sleep: faraway, on Wabansia Avenue, there is a man I love so much.’\textsuperscript{133}

The crying that in \textit{Le Deuxième Sexe} is associated with girls and women loving to play the victim,\textsuperscript{134} in these letters is part of Beauvoir’s feeling with body and soul. And crying, which is part of her life, can be met with humour. Algren can be irritated when she does ‘the crying job’.\textsuperscript{135} His ex-wife, Amanda, whom he had decided to remarry, also likes tears, he has told Beauvoir. But, Beauvoir asks, ‘does she use as many of them than I do? Can she cry as long?’\textsuperscript{136} Planning a stay at a time which will be convenient for everyone involved, she gives her word: ‘I’ll be a very decent guest this year, I promise. I shall not cry more than twice a day, not scream more than twice a week, not bite more than once in a month.’\textsuperscript{137}

In 1951, at the end of another period together, Beauvoir congratulated herself on keeping Algren’s friendship. He told her it wasn’t friendship, he could never give her less than love. (The love/friendship question will never really be settled. When Algren dies it is found that he had kept Beauvoir’s letters. When she dies she is buried with his ring on her finger.) On her way back home she writes him the most ‘terrible’ letter he will ever get from her, begging him not to evict her from his heart. She vomits and cries en route, never wanting anything in her whole life as much as seeing him again.\textsuperscript{138}

Algren’s declaration opened up a whole arsenal of intense emotion. From her hotel back in New York, she wrote: ‘Thomas Mann says that before each fit Dostoievsky had a few seconds of bliss which were worth ten years life. Certainly you have the power to give me in a few minutes, at times, a kind of fever that is worth ten years health.’\textsuperscript{139} The violence of feeling behind

\begin{footnotes}
\item[\textsuperscript{132}]\textit{Beloved Chicago Man}, 93.
\item[\textsuperscript{133}]Ibid., 89.
\item[\textsuperscript{134}]\textit{Le Deuxième Sexe II}, 46.
\item[\textsuperscript{135}]\textit{Beloved Chicago Man}, 385.
\item[\textsuperscript{136}]Ibid., 387.
\item[\textsuperscript{137}]Ibid., 422.
\item[\textsuperscript{138}]See ibid., 442–5.
\item[\textsuperscript{139}]Ibid., 442.
\end{footnotes}
Beauvoir’s ‘impassibilité’, her extreme states (‘ou les ténèbres ou la grande lumière’),\textsuperscript{140} are not set apart from nature. The violence and volatility, the ‘storms’, are integral to her being in the world.\textsuperscript{141} Beauvoir’s feeling for Algren bridges the rift between the young girl with her love of Nature and the mature intellectual woman’s sexual love. The letters are full of the overflow that the girl experienced – it breaks down boundaries and dissolves oppositions. After their initial getting together, Beauvoir had wanted to know Algren better, to ‘talk and talk and talk’ with him. ‘Yet love is the most important thing, and it is knowledge too.’\textsuperscript{142} It is possible that besides their loving, ‘Nothing else is wise, maybe’.\textsuperscript{143}

One of the most exciting things about the letters is that we get the feel of a whole life, which is not the same as a uniform, homogenized, rationalized life, lived according to a script dictated by Ideology or a public relations advertisement. Beauvoir and Algren knew that one can’t live ‘just for happiness and love’.\textsuperscript{144} Writing and working were fundamental and their writing and work included political commitment. Beauvoir wanted their work to be a real part of their lives together. Her hard work on the translation of Algren’s second novel resulted in the birth of their ‘French child’.\textsuperscript{145} Beauvoir captures this precious combination of work and love in a letter to Algren after attending an art exhibition:

So I feel good tonight. I think it is a good criterium for literature or art when it makes you deeply feel good for having tasted of it. Your books have this precious quality, and that is what you ask from man or woman too, is it not? Just to feel: well, the world is worth having been done since this can happen in it: this picture, this book, this love, this smile.\textsuperscript{146}

I have argued that despite their feelings of being ‘swept away’ by passion, both Mary Wollstonecraft and Emma Goldman still worked productively.\textsuperscript{147} So did Beauvoir – on Les Mandarins during the 1950 stay, and her essay on Sade\textsuperscript{148} during the month which preceded her ‘terrible’ and ‘foolish’ letter, written as Goldman might have said, ‘at white heat’.\textsuperscript{149}

If some of the letters to Sartre suggested the Marquise de Merteuil, the

\textsuperscript{140} See Lanzmann interviewing Beauvoir in Ribowska and Dayan, \textit{op. cit.}

\textsuperscript{141} See for example, \textit{Beloved Chicago Man}, 43, where Beauvoir vividly describes, after a violent storm in the countryside, her becoming a ‘storm’ herself. As she describes it, such intense states were often fuelled by alcohol. But that is not to say they need be pathologized.

\textsuperscript{142} \textit{Ibid.}, 25.

\textsuperscript{143} \textit{Ibid.}, 238.

\textsuperscript{144} \textit{Ibid.}, 69.

\textsuperscript{145} \textit{Ibid.}, 338.

\textsuperscript{146} \textit{Ibid.}, 178.

\textsuperscript{147} See ‘Let’s talk about sex’, 141–2.


\textsuperscript{149} ‘Let’s talk about sex’, 141.
letters to Algren show a concern for the women he becomes involved with; they show an attempt to deal with her own jealousy, an attempt to be fair. The Sartre who appears in these letters is a generous and good-humoured one whom Beauvoir wants Algren to know. When I watch *Sartre par lui-même* now, I see the old companions, joking about their contributions to each other’s work. There is such humour and genuine affection, despite all the ‘crap’.

Reciprocity was a reality too with her ‘Division Street Dostoyevsky’, the ‘crummy bastard of a local youth’ who does not send her enough of the yellow-paper letters she longs for. It is surprising to me that after reading the letters, so many dismiss Beauvoir in this unworthy ‘gushing’ mode, or, if they are sympathetic, regret her not choosing love, not going for a life with Algren. But if hers and Sartre’s lives were ‘adolescent’ as they are often depicted, free of many of the responsibilities faced by most adults, Beauvoir still knew a terrible truth, one we all have to face – we can’t lead all lives at once. If she could joke about being a faithful and conventional wife with Algren, planning the details of their domestic bliss, this is surely because of the liminality of their relationship, a liminality which heightened her feelings. Six months after the publication of *Le Deuxième Sexe*, planning some time with her ‘hateful male-brute’, she is playful: ‘To tell the truth, I thoroughly admit equality is only a myth, I never sincerely thought you were my equal; I just said that to try to be polite.’

But everything ends – and it doesn’t quite. After their time together in 1960, in Paris and abroad, Beauvoir loves her ‘Dearest beast of Almeria’, her ‘beautiful flower of Istanbul’, ‘as ever and, it seems, for ever’. So it is hard to imagine what was going on inside her when she wrote to Algren about *La Force des choses*: ‘I hope you’ll not be unpleased by what I tell about you, because it was written with all my heart.’ In the memoir itself, the relationship is toned down – to the point of disavowal. Algren reacted negatively, and life, finally, caught up with art.

Beauvoir had told us that she and Algren spent five months together unclouded by disagreement. She didn’t tear herself to pieces over their ‘histoire’ having no future: ‘nous n’en avions pas beaucoup non plus; elle ne me semblait pas barrée, mais plutôt achevée, sauvée de la destruction comme si nous avions été déjà des morts.’ By the way they had

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150 *Beloved Chicago Man*, 290.
154 *Ibid.*, 570. Beauvoir had already written to Algren along the same lines after she ended Anne’s and Lewis’s relationship in *Les Mandarins*.
155 *La Force des choses*, 533.
rediscovered each other, they had effaced ten years, 'mais la sérénité des adieux me rendit à ma vraie condition: j'étais vieille.' She reaffirms her one true success, her relationship with Sartre, intertwining the story of her ageing, and that of the Algerian War (both marked by horror and tragedy – the latter also by profound feelings of complicity and hatred of her class). In the Epilogue, drenched in fatality, it is as if, like Sontag's Lévi-Strauss, she is willing herself to let go:

Oui, le moment est arrivé de dire: jamais plus! Ce n'est pas moi qui me détache de mes anciens bonheurs, ce sont eux qui se détachent de moi: les chemins de montagne se refusent à mes pieds. Jamais plus je ne m'écroulerai, grisée de fatigue, dans l'odeur du foin; jamais plus je ne glisserai solitaire sur la neige des matins. Jamais plus un homme.

If, after this, she was 'un peu éteinte', regarding her response to the Algerian War as the last of her really violent feelings, in the next chapter of Beauvoir's story there was renewal – new pleasures, work and love. But my own journey back through Beauvoir must for now end here, leaving for another time her politics and her relationship with Camus, more than a minor character in her various narratives and a figure of major importance for my own thinking. This year, when *Le Deuxième Sexe* turns fifty, by coincidence, another (ex)-Catholic girl who shocked the Western world has brought out the book she said she would never write. But that is another story too, though there is one conclusion I can reach with confidence. Both Greer and Beauvoir have moved this particular (ex)-Protestant to think and to write about what really mattered to her – to know what Beauvoir lamented too few female scholars experienced: 'des moments féconds où étude et divertissements se confondent, où les aventures de l'esprit prennent une chaleur vivante'.

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156 Ibid., 534.
157 Ibid., 685.
158 See her 1978 interview with Ribowska and Dayan.
159 *Le Deuxième Sexe* II, 543.