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Alison T. Holland. *Excess and Transgression in Simone de Beauvoir's Fiction: The Discourse of Madness*. Farnham, UK and Burlington, Vt: Ashgate, 2009. viii + 222 pp. Notes, bibliography, and index. \$99.95 U.S. (cl). ISBN 978-0-7546-5152-9.

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The last two decades have witnessed increasing attention to the philosophical depth of Simone de Beauvoir's work. In many cases, however, her novels are either treated as more-or-less realist fictional depictions of women's "lived experience" (in fact, often of Beauvoir's own biography) or as applications of her philosophical views on literature and feminism. Beauvoir herself encouraged both approaches, not only in essays but also in extensive memoirs that seemed to offer an "official reading" of her life's work. Beauvoir's novels were infrequently treated according to structuralist or post-structuralist methods since she had little sympathy with the rise of these critical paradigms.[1] Moreover, she was skeptical of feminists who located oppression in symbolic rather than material structures or wished to liberate a specific female difference in symbolic forms.[2] These views further reinforced a younger generation of feminists' suspicions that Beauvoir's literature took the "side" of male representation, if not philosophy, and must therefore be transcended.[3] Although critics enthusiastically explored textual slippages in the novels of canonical male thinkers with far more conventional theories of representation, Beauvoir's fiction was treated as if it were undeconstructible.

Alison Holland's *Excess and Transgression in Simone de Beauvoir's Fiction* attempts to liberate Beauvoir from the category of mere *écrivants*, as Barthes referred to writers whose commitment to a cause overrides attention to the polyvalence of language—the medium in which the world and the causes are first defined (p. 157). Co-editor with Louise Renée of a previous scholarly collection (*Simone de Beauvoir's Fiction: Women and Language*), Holland argues that there is a textual complexity to Beauvoir's novels, mirroring as well as evoking the unsettled emotional states of her characters and requiring an equally complex work from readers.[4] Holland does not take a clear side in the debate over the possibility of an *écriture féminine* and avoids much psychoanalytic speculation. However, she does show that Beauvoir's novels thematically and syntactically display the linguistic instabilities and contradictions that thinkers such as Foucault and Derrida identified with "madness" in the history of philosophy and that feminists such as Kristeva and Cixous identified with the "semiotic" or "feminine" aspect of historically masculine symbolic structures (p. 160).

Beauvoir regarded literature as the creation of an ambiguous and unfinished textual world in which separated individuals could overcome the oppressive solitude associated with freedom.[5] Indeed, her views are not as far as might be imagined from Barthes' own depiction of the "writerly" (*scriptible*) novel which forces the reader to choose from a multiplicity of possible interpretations.[6] Beauvoir notoriously disagreed with female readers, however, about the extent to which her characters were admirable or self-deceptive.[7] Shoshana Felman's discussion of madness in early work by Foucault and Derrida helps Holland to explain the discrepancy between Beauvoir's intentions and readers' responses, as well as readers' tendency to identify in an overly simple, positive manner, with characters she believed were existentially flawed.[8] Holland finds repeated examples of what Felman calls the "madness" or undecidability of literary representation at work in the stylistic devices through which

Beauvoir conveyed women's efforts to preserve--or discover--their identities in romantic and family situations.

Excess and Transgression in Simone de Beauvoir's Fiction examines four of Beauvoir's best-known novels: *L'Invitée*, *Les Mandarins*, *Les Belles Images*, and *La Femme Rompue*. In doing so, Holland engages with previous critics such as Terry Keefe, Jane Heath, Mary Evans, Elizabeth Fallaize, and especially Toril Moi. Each book depicts women who struggle with familiar feminist issues such as professional or creative work, sexuality, and motherhood. Although none of them directly applies ideas from *Le Deuxième Sexe*--after all, *L'Invitée* predates it by six years--the female characters in each novel suffer emotionally from social demands associated with masculinist ideals of femininity, as well as from their own narcissistic need to see themselves successfully fulfilling or resisting these demands. In memoirs, Beauvoir talked about her debt to American modernist novelists such as Dos Passos and Hemingway, especially their techniques for presenting changes in point of view.[9] Holland, however, shows that motifs making female characters' emotional experience and decision-making real for the reader are drawn from a wider range of literary periods, especially the Gothic, and through specific stylistic devices such as repetition and unexpected tense changes.

In her reading of *L'Invitée* and *Les Mandarins*, Holland stresses Beauvoir's use of Gothic conventions such as supernaturalism, doubling of characters, and an obsession with death. She also shows Beauvoir's characters engaging in luridly emotional interpretation of situations, particularly those in which challenges to selfhood are experienced as murderous threats or occasions for madness, catastrophe, and suicide. Holland meticulously documents Beauvoir's references to color, sound, and smell; sensations of claustrophobia or mobility, as well as characters' exaggerated admiration for (or loathing towards) one another and feelings of being manipulated by forces they do not understand.

While characters in the first two novels struggle against the horror of losing faith in the writer's profession or losing stable meanings in everyday thought and speech, *Les Belles Images* and *La Femme Rompue* foreground the role of language as a social system giving women a feeling of greater or lesser agency. In her reading of these later novels, Holland's working understanding of "madness" and her methodology focus primarily on Beauvoir's use of syntax, repetition, punctuation and tense to portray conflicts internal to her female characters' self-understanding. Sometimes the approach is frankly statistical, as when Holland identifies forty-four instances of repeated images and sentence fragments in *Les Belles Images* that convey the main character's growing sense of unreality (pp. 133-143). In all four novels, Holland also demonstrates that Beauvoir's use of these conventions is deliberate by noting occasions on which they are turned into objects of parody or humor.

As a study of the formal characteristics of Beauvoir's literary fiction, *Excess and Transgression* is an original and possibly indispensable resource for future scholars. The patterns and tactics Beauvoir used to produce specific effects of character and narrative temporality are exceedingly well documented. Moreover, I applaud Holland's general intuition that Beauvoir's novelistic writing is no more immune to implication in a general theory of textuality than any other body of work, whether by a novelist or philosopher. What is more troubling is the way that these original analyses are fitted into a theoretical frame which seems disjointed and may strike many readers as out of date or obscure unless they are familiar with (and appreciate) structuralist and post-structuralist literary theory.

Holland generally argues that the emotional instability of female characters--and the techniques used to portray them--are "symptomatic" of a madness proper to language itself (e.g., p. 115). But many readers (especially those unfamiliar with Felman's essays) will want to know how transgression and madness are to be understood here. They may also ask what kind of order language is transgressing or rendering mad. Since the era of psycho-pharmacology has largely replaced the normalizing force of psychoanalysis, the link between madness and a text's excess over representation may not be culturally self-evident. The meaning of madness also slips in Holland's own text: referring sometimes to the felt

disruption of selfhood (pp. 179-181), sometimes to the failure of determinate meaning (p. 23), and even to self-parody (p. 132). The reader familiar with Beauvoir's philosophy, on the other hand, will be uncomfortable with Holland's use of "ambiguity" as a synonym for madness or linguistic undecidability. Nor am I persuaded that the textual "madness" of a late twentieth-century French novel can be equated with literature's place among the emergent philosophical, penal or medical discourses of the seventeenth century, as Holland briefly claims with reference to Foucault's *History of Madness* (p. 21).

Drawing on Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, Elizabeth MacAndrew, Fred Botting, and Freud's essay "The Uncanny," Holland defines the Gothic in terms of the (unsettling) priority of feeling over reason, ambivalence, suspense, fear at the dissolution of self, supernaturalism, cruelty, and "unnatural" sexuality, especially incest (p. 29). Discussing the historical dimension of the Gothic would only have strengthened this aspect of her analysis. An English literary genre born shortly before the French Revolution, the Gothic can be understood as Western literature's ambivalent backward glance toward abuses of feudal and religious power, which eventually became identified with psychological horror. Holland's identification of Gothic themes and motifs in Beauvoir's novels is convincing and innovative. She notes that while writing *L'Invitée*, Beauvoir was reading Artaud's adaptation of Lewis's *The Monk*, a classic English Gothic novel (pp. 28-29). But during the same period, Beauvoir also reported a fascination for urban news and the psychological puzzle posed by crimes of passion.[10]. Might she not have been influenced less by the English Gothic than by the Surrealist or Decadent motifs in her cultural environment, which can be traced to similar roots (for example, in the life and work of Sade)? Insofar as the genre self-consciously refers to history, Holland's exploration of Gothic elements seems to conflict with her trans-historical approach to language and madness.

On the other hand, it seems likely that Beauvoir would have regarded her use of these motifs not as "Gothic" but as illustrating certain beliefs about the nature of consciousness in relation to its objects, canny or uncanny, cognitively integrated or dissociated. Although Holland's focus is not Beauvoir's philosophy of literature, engaging with it would not necessarily have harmed her insights regarding style and genre. It may be that to bring her readers onto a common phenomenological terrain, Beauvoir found it natural to borrow conventions from the romantic literature of sensibility, including the Gothic. These conventions would have given readers unfamiliar with twentieth century philosophy—or who shared Beauvoir's aversion to philosophy understood as "system" building—a ready language for subtle realities of temporal, introspective, and intersubjective lived experience.[11]

Regardless of her specific authorial intentions, Beauvoir had a profound intuition about the extent to which women felt themselves to be moved and sometimes tormented by unseen and unfair powers. These often derive from assumptions about gender built into women's self-understanding, their expectations of life and love, and the everyday behavior of those around them—male and female. Many phenomena of gendered power overlap with phenomena of undecidability in language—phenomena which also make it possible for writers to exert power and for readers to find their own power in assuming or resisting literary characters and their worlds.

According to Sartre's character Garcin, Hell was other people. Beauvoir's novels depict the ways in which dependence on the perception of others can be hellish for women raised with certain traditional forms of self-understanding—fearing dissolution if the others turn away but also experiencing any self in excess of the perceptions of others as an uncanny intruder. This insight in itself makes Beauvoir a critic of Sartre's willingness to remain within the possibilities and limits of the phenomenal sphere. Holland's study deepens our appreciation of Beauvoir's fiction and illuminates these important psychological and philosophical, as well as linguistic problems. It also opens paths for future research situating Beauvoir's treatment of contemporary themes with respect to older traditions such as the Gothic. In sum, the theoretical difficulties mentioned above do not detract from this book's excellent research on Beauvoir's stylistics or the value of an English-language study confronting Beauvoir's novels with post-structuralist methods.

NOTES

- [1] Simone de Beauvoir, "Mon Expérience d'Écrivain," in Claude Francis and Fernande Gonthier, eds., *Les Écrits de Simone de Beauvoir* (Paris: Gallimard, 1979), p. 449.
- [2] Alice Schwarzer, *After the Second Sex: Conversations with Simone de Beauvoir*, trans. Marianne Howarth (New York: Pantheon Books, 1984).
- [3] For example, Jane Heath, *Simone de Beauvoir* (New York: Harvester/Wheatsheaf, 1989).
- [4] Alison T. Holland and Louise Renée, *Simone De Beauvoir's Fiction: Women And Language* (New York: Peter Lang, 2005).
- [5] Simone de Beauvoir, "Que Peut la Littérature?" in Jean-Edern Hallier and Michel-Claude Jalard, eds., *Que Peut la Littérature?* (Paris: Union Générale d'Éditions, 1965), 76-79; and Beauvoir, "Mon Expérience d'Écrivain," p. 457.
- [6] Roland Barthes, *S/Z* (Paris: Seuil, 1976).
- [7] Simone de Beauvoir, *All Said and Done (Tout Compte Fait)*, trans. Patrick O'Brian. (New York: Paragon House, 1993 (1972)), pp. 122-128.
- [8] Shoshana Felman, *Writing and Madness [Literature/Philosophy/Psychoanalysis]* (selections from *La Folie et la Chose Littéraire*), trans. Martha Noel Evans, Shoshana Felman, and Brian Massumi (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1985 (1978)), especially chapters 1-2.
- [9] Simone de Beauvoir, *The Prime of Life (Force de L'Âge)*, trans. Peter Green (New York: Paragon House 1992 (1960)), pp. 113-115.
- [10] Simone de Beauvoir, *The Prime of Life*, pp. 113-115.
- [11] Simone de Beauvoir, *The Prime of Life*, pp. 178-179.

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