

H-France Review Vol. 16 (July 2016), No. 102

Tove Pettersen and Annlaug Bjørnsnøs, eds. *Simone de Beauvoir: A Humanist Thinker*. Leiden, Boston: Brill/Rodopi: 2015. 215 pp. \$75/€58 (pb). ISBN-10: 9004294406

Review by Meaghan Emery, University of Vermont.

By way of introduction to her chapter at the start of part three, “Literature as Laboratory,” contributor Juliana de Albuquerque Katz summarizes the editors’ project as follows:

“It is in the spirit of freedom and in the quest for the political legitimization of our cultural and moral capabilities that we should try to secure a place for the arts and humanities in our societies. Nevertheless, that place will only be safe once we prove the importance and the value of humanistic research, by confronting the arts and humanities with the problems of our own time, demonstrating their transformative potential” (p. 130).

As Albuquerque Katz and her co-authors demonstrate, the twentieth-century writer and philosopher Simone de Beauvoir offers a view on otherness that prepared for and correlates with our time. It is a collection of articles written by an international group of authors that successfully demonstrates the lasting importance of Simone de Beauvoir’s ideas most acutely in their questioning of conventions and beliefs. Beauvoir sought to overturn dominant worldviews, whether through her groundbreaking work *Le deuxième sexe* or editorial selection of literary works for the journal *Les Temps Modernes*, as Stève Bessac-Vaure’s article shows. The contributing authors create a list of key publications for Beauvoir scholars, further including “Littérature et Métaphysique,” *Pyrrhus et Cinéas*, and *Pour une morale de l’ambiguïté (The Ethics of Ambiguity)* as well as a number of her fictional works, *Les Belles Images*, *Les Mandarins*, and *Tous les Hommes sont mortels*. While there are key themes that run through the individual articles and provide coherence, each chapter offers a distinct and sometimes complementary interpretation of these works, which allows for a dialogue between them.

Most importantly, the authors seek to establish Simone de Beauvoir within the humanistic tradition as a pioneer of diversity. Margaret A. Simons includes in her guest foreword an indictment of philosophy departments “where practices rooted in sexism and racism drive away students who could revitalize the field” (p. xi). Not as a representative of that discipline but rather as a beneficiary of an education in French cultural studies, including feminist and post-colonial literatures, I can only attempt to portray the import of this collection to scholars within these areas, which also, like philosophy, engage with questions of ethics, freedom, narrative construction, and subjectivity—all of them core to this production.

Ethics and freedom, in effect, are at the heart of this joint reflection on the lasting relevance of Beauvoir’s philosophical and fictional writings to the humanities. Editors Pettersen and Bjørnsnøs introduce the collection by identifying Beauvoir as “a critical humanist,” meaning that the twentieth-century writer both embraced existentialism’s premise that human beings are free and cautioned against socially constructed hierarchies that privilege some to the detriment of others. They assert her “strong opposition” to unlimited freedom as a model to follow in the context of contemporary globalization (p. 3). Thus, their

inquiry questions the construct of “Man” as well as that of “Superman” in articles such as Samantha Bankston’s, which addresses the freedom intrinsic to Beauvoir’s ethics of ambiguity as an antidote to the “totalitarian feature” of today’s neo-positivist, instrumental reason (p. 95). Pettersen and Bjørnsnøs further point to Beauvoir’s interdisciplinary approach to a given problem as a research method that allows the humanities to overcome the limitations of discreet disciplines and grasp the problem’s complexity. As a result, humanities may more easily “act upon the world” by providing theoretical tools and praxes with which to tackle the world’s challenges, either in university courses or in support of political action and democracy.

Simone de Beauvoir: A Humanist Thinker clearly sets within its sights institutional innovation and democratic change. It is a grand vision that the collection’s authors attribute to Beauvoir herself but which has not yet been achieved; as Barbara Klaw states at the close of the last chapter, “the war for equality for all is not over, and . . . we must not sink into complacency that allows any individual to mistreat another or enjoy unearned privileges” (p. 181). While Bankston’s article attempts to gauge Beauvoir’s influence by drawing links between Deleuze and Guattari and Beauvoir and asserting the formers’ “indebtedness” to Beauvoir’s theory of existential ambiguity in their conception of becoming (and notably the concept of “becoming-woman”), hers is the only attempt at measuring Beauvoir’s impact within the field of philosophy, if only through relational distance. Even Bessac-Vaure’s chapter does not aim to assess the cultural impact of Beauvoir’s editorial choices at *Les Temps Modernes*. He demonstrates the authenticity of her choices, which broke with Sartre’s political sympathy with communist labor movements and the elitist circle of Gaston Gallimard; however, the reach of her contributions as a literary and “cultural mediator” are “difficult to evaluate,” according to Bessac-Vaure, for lack of polls (p. 58). A hesitant French readership might also have had something to do with it. Indeed, Bessac-Vaure makes note of the lower commercial appeal of the published works yet notes that, if written by lesser-known authors, they were chosen “based on aesthetic criteria,” and ultimately delineate a “form of ‘literary philosophy’” due to their existentialist reflection on freedom involving confrontations with death or suicide as well (pp. 61-62).

The editors readily acknowledge Beauvoir’s relative lack of prominence among influential humanist thinkers (p. 7). Their explicit purpose, therefore, is to correct this oversight. One way in which these essays intend to do this is by showing how Beauvoir’s analysis of woman reveals other humanist currents of thought to be incomplete or exclusionary. Gwendolyn Dolske’s chapter is particularly poignant in this regard in her discussion of Beauvoir’s short story “Monologue” and of her novels *Les Mandarins* and *Tous les Hommes sont mortels* with regard to David Hume’s, Immanuel Kant’s, Leo Tolstoy’s, or Albert Camus’s dark contemplations on existence. Gender specificity problematizes a woman’s embodiment since meaning and roles are “bestowed upon woman” rather than formulating a project exterior to herself. Dolske similarly renders more complex Camus’s notion of the stranger by noting Beauvoir’s perspective that “the parameters of woman’s existential quest encompass being both ‘stranger’ to the world . . . and a stranger in a world that does not recognize woman’s freedom” (p. 112). Consequentially, argues Dolske, the “discussion [of ‘life’] must accommodate this, for it propels a unique existential dynamic and struggle” (p. 119). The final essay, a comparative study of Beauvoir’s *Tous les Hommes sont mortels* and Virginia Woolf’s *Orlando* by Barbara Klaw, raises the topics of gender equality and sexual identity through an examination of the narrative strategy’s capacity—both in substance and through structure—to expose male privilege. These two essays taken together illuminate the unique position that *Tous les Hommes*’s character of Régine occupies both as love object and as a Beauvoirian woman character, meaning that a reflection on woman’s agency is implicitly woven into the narrative.

Another way that the authors seek to instate Beauvoir in her rightful place among the great humanists is through a study of Beauvoir’s literary philosophy. Beauvoir saw herself foremost as a literary writer rather than a philosopher, yet these authors examine the ways in which Beauvoir’s writings and the works she promoted embody a humanist philosophy, since, given their existentialist dimension, they were intended to appeal to the freedom of the reader to question social convention and representation, for the good of humanity, as Petterson argues in her chapter. As Bankston posits, Beauvoir resists representational

thought. Her conception of “relational ontology” not only prefigures post-structuralism but also creates a space for diversity in her political and ethical calls to action. While a number of arguments within this collection are compelling, Beauvoir’s literary philosophy is the strongest thread running through the different essays.

Christine Daigle opens up the inquiry by linking Beauvoir to Renaissance thinkers in their rejection of authority and established philosophical systems. While a number of her fellow authors point out inconsistencies in Beauvoir’s thought—for instance, her resistance against dualisms is not absolute, and her reliance on psychological concepts, such as penis envy, in *Le deuxième sexe* weakens the originality of her argument—she is, states Daigle and her co-authors (including here Erika Ruonakoski), a model humanities scholar for her transdisciplinary inquiry, which resists instrumental reason, representational thought, and dichotomies. One always exists as both subject and object, as Beauvoir’s writings show. Furthermore, readers are not handed clear-cut answers but rather are pushed to ponder. Beauvoir’s appeal to readers in *Le deuxième sexe*, argues Daigle, gave a “philosophical foundation to feminism as a political movement” and “can yield positive ethical and political proposals that rest on an ontology that no longer excludes the feminine” (p. 23). In addition, Beauvoir’s conception of the “metaphysical novel” liberates the Other, including the reader, by recognizing its freedom as a prerequisite for the unveiling of reality and of being.

The fundamental project in Beauvoir’s writings is the transformation of social imaginaries that lead to policy reform and structural change. Because Beauvoir’s fictional works are open to divergent readings, their appeal only intensifies. Readers confront quandaries and constantly shifting sympathies since authority and narrative reliability are always in question. According to Louise Renée, this questioning leads to an existential awakening as illustrated through her analysis of the character of Laurence in *Les Belles Images*. This is furthermore true for the critical reader, budding humanities scholar, and future political reformer, the essayists argue.

Beauvoir’s woman characters often struggle to assume their freedom, as these chapters show, but are shaken by circumstance when a parent’s or spouse’s authority is revealed to be unreliable or during cataclysmic events, such as the German occupation of France, that throw lives into disorder. In her chapter Bjørnsnøs refers to a passage from *La Force des choses* in order to contextualize *Les Mandarins*, Beauvoir’s prize-winning postwar novel: “From our collective halcyon, I had fallen, like so many others, to the dusty earth below: the ground was littered with smashed illusions,” Beauvoir wrote (p. 149). This passage, capturing her mindset when she was composing *Le deuxième sexe*, a monumental work of transdisciplinary inquiry that transformed readers’ imaginaries, recounts an existential moment, a rupture and shedding of illusions that Beauvoir henceforth sought to create for her readers. Whereas *Les Mandarins* relays the self-doubt and negativity Beauvoir undoubtedly experienced at that moment, Pettersen, Bjørnsnøs, and their edition’s contributors also wish to show how it can potentially give way to an awakening of ethical and societal proportions. While it is clear from my work as a university professor that *Le deuxième sexe* and others of Beauvoir’s works hold that power, it is also clear that the humanist pantheon is still very much male-dominated, and Beauvoir overlooked. Perhaps it is not as important to address the why, such as the allure of theoretical systems, but rather, as these authors do, to claim for her a place on her own terms while showing how her ideas either enhance or reveal the deficiencies of these systems.

LIST OF ESSAYS

Mark Letteri, “Editorial Foreword”

Margaret A. Simons, “Guest Foreword”

Preface

Tove Pettersen and Annlaug Bjørnsnøs, "Introduction"

Part One: Critical Thinking and Methodology

Christine Daigle, "Making the Humanities Meaningful: Beauvoir's Philosophy and Literature of the Appeal"

Louise Renée, "Existential Awakening in Simone de Beauvoir's *Les belles images*"

Erika Ruonakoski, "Interdisciplinarity in *The Second Sex*: Between Phenomenology and Psychoanalysis"

Stève Bessac-Vaure, "Simone de Beauvoir as Mediator for Foreign Literature in *Les Temps Modernes*"

Part Two: Freedom, Dependence, and Ambiguity

Tove Pettersen, "Existential Humanism and Moral Freedom in Simone de Beauvoir's Ethics"

Samantha Bankston, "Becoming-Ambiguous: Beauvoir, Deleuze, and the Future of the Humanities"

Gwendolyn Dolske, "Embodiment and Contemplation of Death: A Beauvoirian Analysis"

Part Three: Literature as Laboratory

Juliana de Albuquerque Katz, "The Relevance of Simone de Beauvoir's Ethic/Aesthetic Project to the Humanities"

Annlaug Bjørnsnøs, "Representing Time: On the Experience of Temporality in *The Mandarins* by Simone de Beauvoir"

Barbara Klaw, "The Relevance of Woolf's *Orlando* and Beauvoir's *Tous les hommes sont mortels*"

Meaghan Emery
University of Vermont
meemery@uvm.edu

Copyright © 2016 by the Society for French Historical Studies, all rights reserved. The Society for French Historical Studies permits the electronic distribution of individual reviews for nonprofit educational purposes, provided that full and accurate credit is given to the author, the date of publication, and the location of the review on the H-France website. The Society for French Historical Studies reserves the right to withdraw the license for redistribution/republication of individual reviews at any time and for any specific case. Neither bulk redistribution/ republication in electronic form of more than five percent of the contents of H-France Review nor re-publication of any amount in print form will be permitted without permission. For any other proposed uses, contact the Editor-in-Chief of H-France. The views posted on H-France Review are not necessarily the views of the Society for French Historical Studies.