Simone de Beauvoir (1908–1986). Beauvoir is not a systematic or academic writer and she does not present any theory of art or any doctrine of aesthetic experience. She is, however, a philosophical thinker, and her works include original reflections on the task of the artist and the novelist. These she develops not only in her existential-phenomenological essays, but also in her great novels, *L’invitée* (1943) and *Les mandarins* (1954). Even her multivolume autobiography (1958–1972) includes philosophical discussions of the nature of fiction and literature. Thus Beauvoir trains our thinking on art and literature both by her scholarly texts and by her fictional works.

The usual notion is that Beauvoir chose art and left philosophical reflections to JEAN-PAUL SARTRE. This is a misconception based on superficial readings. In truth Beauvoir did not think that such a choice was necessary, but struggled to combine critical thinking with fictional and poetic forms. She believed that philosophical reflections and artistic constructions are not in opposition, but serve the same end: the expression of the metaphysical truth about the human condition.

Beauvoir abandons what she calls “systematic philosophy” ([1946] 1948: 103–4; [1985] 1999: 93). By this she means the attempt to build a conceptual system that would cover the totality of life, knowledge, and being. This is part of philosophy but not all of philosophy; there are other alternatives open for those who wish to serve reason in its self-inspection. Instead of constructing a theory or a doctrine, the philosopher can “experiment” with experience and study its variations and limits. Moreover, philosophical thinking and literary constructions can merge to form a “metaphysical novel.” The paradigmatic example of such hybrid forms is the Platonic dialogue, but Beauvoir also refers us to the works of Søren Kierkegaard (1813–1855), Fyodor Dostoevsky (1821–1881), and Franz Kafka (1883–1924) (Beauvoir [1946] 1948: 117–8).

Beauvoir’s view of the relation between literature and philosophy is indebted to her close contemporaries, Jean-Paul Sartre (1905–1980) and MAURICE MERLEAU-PONTY (1908–1961), but more fundamentally to Kierkegaard’s philosophical-literary work. Kierkegaard’s concept of existence is the source of Beauvoir’s basic view of human life as an ambiguous movement between two poles: eternity and finitude, particularity and ideality, solitude and sociality, subjective and objective (Beauvoir, 1947: 119). She explicates her existential approach in *Pour une morale de l’ambiguïté* (1947). In “Littérature et métaphysique” (1946), she argues that philosophy and literature both aim at understanding the paradoxical condition of human existence in their own peculiar ways. A purely philosophical work aims at capturing the essential structures of human life, and a purely fictional work discloses individual lives and alternative perspectives “in their complete, singular, and temporal truth” (Beauvoir [1946] 1948, 119). However, the greatest works in the traditions of philosophy and literature serve both ends: they succeed in grasping “the essence at the heart of existence.”

Moreover, the philosopher who pursues essences depends on the work of the novelist. Philosophical theorists need fiction to widen their view of what can be experienced and how. The theorist begins his/her reflections by using the results of his/her own imagination, but in the attempt to discover unfamiliar forms of experience, she soon runs to the limits of his/her own capacities. Beauvoir argues that personal...
memories, dreams, and observations are weak and limited resources when compared to the power of literature. It is only written fiction that opens to us fields of experience that overcome what we can see and remember (Beauvoir [1946] 1948: 107–9; 1955: 195). In this way, Kafka’s novels and Lewis Carroll’s storybooks as well as the Marquis de Sade’s pornography all serve philosophical ends (Beauvoir [1946] 1948: 115, 123; 1955, 64). Novels and other fictional works help us to overcome the limits of actual experience, memories, perceptions, and dreams.

Beauvoir also argues that the work of the novelist is itself an experimental enterprise. The writer does not know or determine in advance what will happen in the novel. The story is a result of experimentation with language, reasoning, and imagination. The novelist sets up the stage and outlines the characters, but rather than inventing their lives, the writer lives with them, discusses with them, takes sides, and runs risks. Thus as the work proceeds, the novelist sees new truths appear and new questions unfold (Beauvoir [1946] 1948: 112–3).

The main difference between the writer and the theorizing philosopher is in relation to language. The theorist forms abstract concepts by defining and limiting the meanings of ordinary language and thus aims at capturing the essential structures of all experience. The novelist, on the other hand, accepts ordinary language expressions in their full richness and ambiguity and uses all their resources to communicate the complexity of particular lives, as well as their mutual separation and dependence. The aim is not to idealize any particular life or experience, but to communicate the unavoidable singularity of life itself.

Literature and philosophy also relate to the essential forms of experience differently. Whereas the theorizing philosopher uses fiction to train him/herself to intuit the essential structural features of experience, the novelist uses fiction, reality, and language to present lives as singular wholes, as “singular universals,” to use Beauvoir’s existential terminology (Beauvoir 1972: 163, cf. Sartre, 1947). This does not mean that the novel merely describes an internal reality or a closed world of a solipsistic subject. On the contrary, the world and others are implied in any individual life, however solitary, private, or self-centered it may be. Even the life of Gregor Samsa, the main character of Kafka’s Die Verwandlung (1915), is a life with others—a life in their disdain and rejection.

In “Le roman et la métaphysique” (1945), Merleau-Ponty argues that Beauvoir’s L’invitée is a paradigmatic example of the metaphysical novel: it reaches the fundamental structures of intersubjectivity by bringing together the lives of three individuals, François, Pierre, and Xavière. The book is not just a story of a triangle or of two rivals; it is composed of three incompatible but simultaneous couples, Françoise and Pierre, Françoise and Xavière, and Pierre and Xavière. Moreover, each couple is presented from two separate perspectives. The experiences of love, jealousy, and deception are not framed for any psychological ends, but in the interest of understanding the dependence that we all have upon other persons. Merleau-Ponty argues that Beauvoir’s novel discloses the tension between the couple having a shared universe and full intersubjectivity having the world as its environment. Beauvoir’s work shows that the problem of the other is merely a particular case of the problem of others—in the plural (Merleau-Ponty, 1964: 113)

In Beauvoir’s account, the intersubjective relation is always also a relation between sexed bodies—men and women. In Le deuxième sexe (1949a), she develops an existential-phenomenological analysis of the relation and hierarchy between the sexes. The main argument is that philosophy and literature—as well as science and religion—neglect women’s experiences, and thus offer falsely universal and falsely objective accounts of the human condition. The task of a feminist thinker is then to attend to women’s expressions and experiences.

For Beauvoir, women’s literature is largely underdeveloped. There is no alternative literary or scholarly tradition of women (Beauvoir, 1949b: 241). This view was later challenged by Beauvoir’s followers in America and on the Continent. Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, for example, traced out a “female literary tradition” in their extensive work, The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination (1979). On the Continent, Beauvoir’s reflections on sexual difference and literature were developed further by Luce Irigaray (1930–), Hélène Cixous (1937–), and Julia Kristeva (1941–). In contrast with the Americans, the French feminists connected the Beauvoirian heritage to HEIDEGGER’s idea of destruction, and argued that the task is not so much to discover or establish a feminine tradition, but rather to destroy or deconstruct the concepts as they are handed down to us by the androcentric tradition. Thus, feminist scholars should
The early texts of Cixous, Irigaray, and Kristeva function as instances of feminine writing, but also reflect on the nature and genesis of this stylistic form. The best known of these texts are Irigaray’s “Ce sexe qui n’en est pas un” and “Quand nos lèvres se parlent” (1977). Cixous’ well-known essay, “Le rire de la méduse” (1975), was originally written for a special issue of the journal L’arc dedicated to Beauvoir. Cixous starts her reflections on feminine writing by stating: “Woman must write herself: must write about women and bring women to writing, from which they have been driven away as violently as from their bodies—for the same reasons, by the same law, with the same fatal goal. Woman must put herself into the text—as into the world and into history—by her own movement” (Cixous, 1975: 39).

**Bibliography**


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