
H-France Review Vol. 13 (April 2013), No. 40

Margaret Simons and Marybeth Timmermann, eds., *Simone de Beauvoir: "The Useless Mouths" and Other Literary Writings*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2011. xi + 408 pp. Notes on contributors and index. \$50.00 U.S. (hb). ISBN 978-0-252-03634-7.

Review by Ashley King Scheu, Eckerd College.

Because of the manifold registers through which Simone de Beauvoir spoke—literary, philosophical, political, feminist, ethical—scholars of the past have often missed or not completely heard her voice. Up until the 1980s, for example, many valued her novels and yet assumed that Beauvoir was simply the philosophical disciple of her longtime companion and sometimes lover, Jean-Paul Sartre. Thus, before the work of critics like Michèle LeDoeuff, Toril Moi, and Margaret Simons, just to name a few, scholars largely ignored Beauvoir's clear philosophical originality and did not hear her philosophical voice.[1] This problem was compounded for Anglophone readers who did not have access to the original French versions of Beauvoir's texts. After all, as Margaret Simons first pointed out in 1983 in her groundbreaking "The Silencing of Simone de Beauvoir: Guess What's Missing from *The Second Sex*," serious flaws in the 1953 Knopf translation of Beauvoir's seminal work effectively erased Beauvoir the philosopher from its pages.[2]

Here, in "*The Useless Mouths*" and *Other Literary Writings*, Simons and Marybeth Timmermann, along with a collection of translators and commentators, continue the work that a few dedicated scholars began in the 1980s by ensuring that anglophone readers have access to thoughtful, complete, scholarly translations of Beauvoir's oeuvre.[3] In fact, this collection of translations allows a new voice to speak in English, one that has been all but lost recently in the decades of fruitful work done uncovering Beauvoir, the philosopher: the voice of Beauvoir, the literary critic and aesthetic thinker.[4] In this volume, beside two new translations of Beauvoir's fiction, English-speaking readers can now hear the subtleties of a Beauvoir clearly engaged in the pursuit of defining the purpose and value of literature in her time. Even those reading Beauvoir in French do not have access to such a wide array of her aesthetic writings and literary criticism all in one volume, and perhaps having them gathered together in this manner will encourage French-speaking scholars to stop and listen to her unique literary voice as well.

The editors of this collection would have done it more justice if they had chosen a title like *Simone de Beauvoir's Aesthetic Theory and Other Literary Writings*. As it stands, the current title places an undue emphasis on a play that had already been translated and that many hold to be one of Beauvoir's weaker literary works, nor does the title sufficiently indicate that, within this volume, English readers will finally be able to engage in a comprehensive way with Beauvoir, the literary theorist.[5] Whereas the collection does have two new translations of Beauvoir's fiction, the vast majority of texts in this volume reveal a Beauvoir *thinking about* literature rather than *writing* literature, a fact which is not made clear in the book's overall presentation. These texts include prefaces to novels, essays, articles, recordings, and presentations on aesthetics, and even—an unexpected gem—the notes of a young and inexperienced Beauvoir from the late 1920s working toward a novel that would never come to fruition. In these translations, Beauvoir is thinking through largely aesthetic questions about the value of literary works; about how one can successfully mobilize literature for philosophical, political, and ethical ends; and about where she stands in relation to other aesthetic theorists, ranging from introspective writers of the

early twentieth-century like André Gide and Marcel Proust to the 1960s proponents of the *nouveau roman* or new novel such as Alain Robbe-Grillet, who strongly opposed the then ascendant existentialist notion of committed literature or *la littérature engagée*.

This volume has a certain flow, although the overarching organization of the materials is not always clear. For instance, it makes sense to follow Beauvoir's play, "The Useless Mouths," with articles she wrote on theater, thus pairing Beauvoir's only play with her contemporaneous attempts to think through the aesthetics of this genre. And yet the reader jumps from fiction to essay, from Beauvoir's aesthetic thinking in 1960 when she was responding to *Tel Quel* to her beginnings in 1928 when she was concerned with freeing herself from what she calls *Gidismes*, or a writing style inherited from the immensely popular André Gide. Such an organization does allow the reader to see certain unexpected continuities. For example, the two members of a quarrelling couple who alternatively narrate her 1960 "A Misunderstanding in Moscow" eerily resemble the two cinematic screens she discusses in the late 1920s "Notes for a Novel" onto which would be projected the respective points of view of two people locked in an embrace. And yet the current organization gives no sense of the progression of Beauvoir's ideas over time nor does it distinguish between the very different kinds of literary writing—fiction, criticism, aesthetics—included in this volume.

What shines through in all of these different kinds of literary writings—and what the translators and commentators often highlight—is Beauvoir's clear sense of literature as a privileged site of intersubjectivity, one in and through which she could creatively engage philosophy, ethics, and politics. This is what unifies her different literary voices across time. From the beginning, in her "Notes for a Novel," written more than ten years before she would see her name in print on the shelves of a bookstore, Beauvoir wanted her fiction to bring different subjects together in a way that would allow them to communicate but would also leave them separate, intact. Hence we see the first instance of a familiar strategy on Beauvoir's part: the juxtaposition of two limited perspectives that portray each character's inner thoughts and feelings in alternating narratives. This has the effect of allowing these two characters to "talk" to one another through the structure of the work while still preserving the reader's sense of them as individuals with a particular history and limitation.

As she progresses into what she calls her "moral period," which spans the greater part of the 1940s, the unfolding horrors of World War II force her to recognize that she is not a monad or a completely enclosed individual cut off from the rest of the world, but that her fate is inextricably intertwined with that of the rest of humanity. Thus she moves from worrying about the ways in which a couple could share a world to finding ways to portray through fiction how we are individuals bound to one another by our situation.[6] Whereas "The Useless Mouths" dramatizes this discovery through its thinly veiled references to the penury and genocide of World War II—the inhabitants of the medieval village in this play are under siege and starving to death, and so they must decide whether or not to sacrifice the women, children, and elderly so that the men may survive—it also constitutes one fictional iteration among many in which Beauvoir affirms the political and ethical importance of recognizing our ties to others rather than taking refuge in a false individualism.[7]

Her aesthetic writings of the same period reflect a sense that literature as a medium encourages the reader to enter into a human community, to share a sense of general human truths, without losing sight of individual human beings or of her own subjectivity in the process. Thus in "An American Renaissance in France," Beauvoir writes that "the true mission of the writer" is to "describe in dramatic form the relationship of the individual to the world in which he stakes his freedom" (p. 110), and in "New Heroes for Old," she describes how World War II has produced a new awareness of one's relationship to the world and thus a new kind of fiction. Post-war novelists, she writes, "have felt the hard pressure of history. They have learned that the universe is not made up of separate cells which can be separately described....They know that their substance is not distinct from that of the world that surrounds them" (p. 115). Thus, for Beauvoir, writers must turn to a kind of writing that highlights a character's ties to

her historical moment, to her personal history, and to other human beings rather than simply describing, à la Proust, the introspective states of an individual. This idea, not incidentally, both coincides with and allows the beginning of committed literature, or literary works with a very distinct political engagement, for often the world in which a character lives is a political and ethical world born of a very specific historical moment.

In her later writings, Beauvoir fights to defend these literary ideals against critics who would like to deny her idea of presenting a character in relation to a very specific historical world—critics, in other words, who would attack the notion of committed literature—and against critics who would oppose the idea of literature as communication.[8] Hence, the first few lines of “Misunderstanding in Moscow” seem to speak directly to new novel critics: “She looked up from her book. How irritating all these old refrains on non-communication were! If we really want to communicate, we manage to do so more or less successfully” (p. 219). What follows these lines is the description of two people who misunderstand one another but who then save themselves and their relationship through language, through true communication. Such a sense of the ways in which the words of literature allow people to communicate comes through in Beauvoir’s aesthetic writings of the time, as well. Thus, in “What Can Literature Do?,” she writes: “I think that at this moment we are communicating. I think that I say what I say, and that is what you hear. This is a true relationship created through language, which is opacity but is also a signifying vehicle common to all and accessible to all” (p. 199). In other words, as with the “Notes for a Novel,” fiction, for Beauvoir, solved one of her greatest philosophical problems: the problem of being able to connect with the other without losing oneself to her or effacing her particularity in the process.

Guiding the reader through this rich landscape of Beauvoir’s literary writings are insightful commentaries offered in introductions that precede each work and in carefully done scholarly footnotes. Some problems do arise within this meticulous work. For example, Liz Stanley and Catherine Naji, the translators of “The Useless Mouths,” often sacrifice literary quality to the preservation of philosophical ideas in their translation thus causing Beauvoir to sound clunky, as if she were a bad writer, when they could have opted for a more natural-sounding translation with a footnote explaining the philosophical subtleties that could not be conveyed in English.[9] Furthermore, Stanley and Naji’s eagerness to share the play’s philosophical meaning with the reader leads to footnotes that impose a definitive and authoritative philosophical reading on the text rather than allowing the reader to discover such a reading for herself.[10] And yet, their translation generally remains true to the spirit of Beauvoir’s play, their commentary offers a nuanced reading of the ethics involved in marking certain groups in society as inherently useless, and no such issues appear in the texts that follow.

On the whole, we should thank Simons, Timmerman, and the contributors to this volume, who have been attuned to the silencing of Simone de Beauvoir and who have worked diligently to allow English-speaking audiences to hear Beauvoir’s unique literary voice. Now it is up to us to mine these rich resources for a clearer, more comprehensive analysis of Simone de Beauvoir’s unique aesthetics, criticism, and fictional work.

LIST OF ESSAYS

Margaret A. Simons, “Introduction”

“The Useless Mouths (A Play)” - Introduction by Liz Stanley and Catherine Naji

“Short Articles on Literature” - Introduction by Elizabeth Fallaize

“Existentialist Theater” - Introduction by Dennis A. Gilbert

“A Story I Used to Tell Myself” - Introduction by Ursula Tidd

“Preface to *La Bâtarde* by Violette Leduc” - Introduction by Alison S. Fell

“What Can Literature Do?” - Introduction by Laura Hengehold

“Misunderstanding in Moscow” - Introduction by Terry Keefe

“My Experience as a Writer” - Introduction by Elizabeth Fallaize

“Short Prefaces to Literary Works” - Introduction by Eleanore Holveck

“Notes for a Novel” - Introduction by Meryl Altman

NOTES

[1] See, for example, the following works: Michèle Le Doeuff, *Hipparchia's Choice: An Essay Concerning Women, Philosophy, etc.*, trans. Trista Selous (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991); Margaret A. Simons, *Beauvoir and The Second Sex: Feminism, Race, and the Origins of Existentialism* (New York: Rowman and Littlefield, 1999); and Toril Moi, *Simone de Beauvoir: The Making of an Intellectual Woman* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008). Other important Beauvoir scholars who have convincingly argued for the philosophical originality of *The Second Sex* include Kristana Arp, Nancy Bauer, Debra B. Bergoffen, Edward Fullbrook, Kate Fullbrook, Sara Heinämaa, Terry Keefe, Sonia Kruks, Eva Lundgren-Gothlin (also known as Eva Gothlin), Ursula Tidd, and Karen Vintges.

[2] Margaret A. Simons, “The Silencing of Simone de Beauvoir: Guess What’s Missing from *The Second Sex*,” *Women's Studies International Forum* 6/5(1983): 559-564. As Simons points out, this erasure comes about through abridging the text without indicating the cuts to the reader and through inaccurate translations of philosophical terms. Since Simons published her article, later articles on the deficiencies of the 1953 translation have surfaced, the most famous of which was the following: Toril Moi “While We Wait: The English Translation of *The Second Sex*,” *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 27/4(2002):1005-1035. For the original translation, see Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, trans. H. M. Parshley (New York: Knopf, 1953). Recently Knopf has commissioned a new edition of *The Second Sex* in English: Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, trans. Sheila Malovany-Chevallier and Constance Borde (New York: Knopf, 2009). This translation is unabridged and is much more attuned to the philosophical nuances of Beauvoir’s text.

[3] It is worth pointing out that “*The Useless Mouths*” and *Other Literary Writings* is part of the Beauvoir Series, a larger collaborative effort led by Simons to publish English translations of Simone de Beauvoir’s works in comprehensive volumes organized according to their subject matter, ranging from Beauvoir’s early diaries and her philosophical writings to her political writings, and, here, her literary writings. The other volumes already published in this series are as follows: *Philosophical Writings*, *Diary of a Philosophy Student: Volume I, 1926-27*, and *Wartime Diary*. Also projected in this series is *Political Writings*, which is due for publication in July. When completed, the series will comprise seven volumes in all according to the publisher’s website. These volumes include previously published material as well as works that have never before been seen in English, and their content ranges from more lengthy diaries and fictional works to shorter articles, essays, prefaces, and notes.

[4] Of course, critics have been talking about Beauvoir’s literary works, but they rarely include a discussion of Beauvoir’s aesthetic theory. One of the most notable works on Beauvoir’s literary works is the following: Elizabeth Fallaize, *The Novels of Simone de Beauvoir* (New York: Routledge, 1988).

Notable exceptions include the following: Eleanore Holveck, *Simone de Beauvoir's Philosophy of Lived Experience: Literature and Metaphysics* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2002); and Toril Moi, "What Can Literature Do? Simone de Beauvoir as a Literary Theorist" *PMLA* 124/2 (January 2009):189-198.

[5] Beauvoir describes in her memoirs a somewhat tepid reception for the play when it came out. See Simone de Beauvoir, *La Force des choses* (Paris: Gallimard, 1963), vol 1, p. 77. In their introduction to this new translation, Naji and Stanley do question whether negative reviews came from faults in Beauvoir's play or from the fact that it was being reviewed by close-minded, traditional critics, and they argue that the play's importance lies in the way it marks a clear shift in Beauvoir's philosophical ideas. See pp. 25-26.

[6] For Beauvoir, as for Jean-Paul Sartre, situation is a philosophically loaded term. It highlights the ways in which we are always free to choose how we respond to the world around us but that we cannot choose that world. Thus our situation comes to represent our personal history, our particular historical moment, our social and socio-economic status, our sex, and the others with whom we live. While we can always choose to respond differently to these different factors, we cannot deny their existence or their effects on our lives.

[7] Other instances in which Beauvoir meditates on these kinds of ideas include Beauvoir's 1945 novels *The Blood of Others* and *All Men Are Mortal*, and these literary ideas reflect those found in her philosophical essay of the same time period, *The Ethics of Ambiguity*. See Simone de Beauvoir, *The Blood of Others*, trans. Yvonne Moyse and Roger Senhouse (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1986); Simone de Beauvoir, *All Men Are Mortal*, trans. Leonard M. Friedman (Cleveland, Ohio: World Publishing, 1955); and Simone de Beauvoir, *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, trans. Bernard Frechtman (New York: Citadel Press, 1976).

[8] Beauvoir's reference to communication here clearly challenged the new generation of writers who were starting to question committed literature and who were denigrating any kind of literature that was conceived of as a form of communication. For example, Roland Barthes, in his essay "Écrivains et écrivains" (translated into English as "Authors and Writers"), distinguished between the creative use of and work upon language done by authors while lambasting writers' instrumental use of language as a supposedly transparent means of communication. Hence, here, Beauvoir is pushing back against a critique that would paint her as a writer and not an author. See Roland Barthes, "Authors and Writers," in *Critical Essays*, trans. Richard Howard (Evanston, Ill: Northwestern University Press, 1972), pp. 144-145.

[9] For example, in order to preserve the philosophical idea of necessity implied by the French question, "Est-il nécessaire que je l'aime," Naji and Stanley have translated it with "Is it necessary that I love him," a question that sounds strange to an anglophone ear, as if it were written by a non-native or by a less accomplished literary writer than Beauvoir.

[10] For example, they claim that one line in the play "positions [one of its main characters] as the principle of solipsism personified" (p. 83, footnote 15), and they later characterize another statement as "another expression of being disengaged, or désengagement on Jean-Pierre's part, and again gestures toward the betrayal of Jesus" (p. 84, footnote 29).

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ISSN 1553-9172