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Simone de Beauvoir, *Diary of a Philosophy Student: Volume 1, 1926-27*. Barbara Klaw, Sylvie Le Bon de Beauvoir and Margaret Simons, with Marybeth Timmerman, eds. Translation, notes, and annotations by Barbara Klaw. Champaign, Ill: University of Illinois Press, 2006. xi + 392 pp. \$40.00 U.S. (cl). ISBN 978-0-252-03142-7.

Review by Shannon M. Mussett, Utah Valley University.

At the age of eighteen, a young woman who would later become an icon for twentieth-century French existentialism, feminism and literature includes the following warning in her private diary:

“Nothing is more cowardly than to violate a secret when nobody is there to defend it. I have always suffered horribly from every indiscretion, but if someone, anyone, reads these pages, I will never forgive him. He will thus be doing a bad and ugly deed. Please respect this warning despite its ridiculous solemnity.” (p. 53)

At once, the reader of this work is placed in a difficult yet scintillating position: do I dare go on? Simone de Beauvoir (1908-1986) was a key player in twentieth-century French philosophy, fiction and politics. Working alongside other such great French intellectuals as Jean-Paul Sartre, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Albert Camus, Claude Lanzmann, and many others, Beauvoir was a pioneer in pre and post-World War II European thought.

One of Beauvoir’s many accomplishments during her prolific literary and philosophical career was the writing of her autobiographies.[1] These memoirs, spanning her life from childhood to old age, are unique productions based somewhat on her original diaries and largely on her recollections and reconstructions of the past. They are rich meditations on her fellow philosophers, artists and political activists and provide glimpses into the vicissitudes of an emerging modern Europe. For all that they offer, however, they are not the original reflections of the author but rather the highly selective and polished presentations of Beauvoir and her cohorts that Beauvoir actually wanted us to see.

Barbara Klaw, Sylvie Le Bon de Beauvoir, Margaret Simons and Marybeth Timmerman have given the world a remarkable gift. As Le Bon de Beauvoir, Beauvoir’s adopted daughter, informs us, the *Diary of a Philosophy Student: Volume 1, 1926-27*, is part of a larger project—the Beauvoir Series—which brings together work by Beauvoir spanning from 1926 to 1979. Much of what is collected in the Beauvoir Series has been lost to time, some of it only recently translated into English and some, such as the current diaries under discussion, were never meant to be read. What does it mean then for us to read these diaries, found by Le Bon de Beauvoir in 1986 and donated to the Bibliothèque Nationale in 1990 for the purposes of furthering scholarly research in Beauvoir studies? For now, this remains an open question.

This volume is organized, annotated and contextualized superbly. The translation is excellent and Klaw has clearly taken special care to preserve the philosophical meanings of certain key terms and ideas. Le Bon de Beauvoir opens the book with a short yet poignant Foreword, which is followed by an Introduction by Simons, wherein the latter continues her lifelong quest to rectify the editorial and philosophical injustices done to Beauvoir and her work. What follows are two excellent essays: “The Literary and Historical Context of Beauvoir’s Early Writings: 1926-27” and “Beauvoir’s Early

Philosophy: 1926-27” by Klaw and Simons respectively. These essays serve both to prepare a reader not necessarily well-versed in Beauvoir’s life and times for what is to follow, as well as to entice the expert into treating the diaries as legitimate and highly relevant expressions of Beauvoir’s thought. Additionally, Klaw has so thoroughly annotated, researched and explained the key figures and ideas mentioned in the diaries that virtually any educated reader will feel comfortable with Beauvoir’s own extensive references, quotations and allusions.

Simons opens the Introduction with the observation that “some readers may be surprised to find a teenage diary included in a series on the philosophy of Simone de Beauvoir, but a fully annotated, scholarly translation of Beauvoir’s student diary, dating from her years as a philosophy student at the Sorbonne, has been a key part of the Beauvoir Series from the beginning”(p. 1). It is true that most of us would shudder to think of our diaries, written during some of the most awkward and embarrassing years of our lives, being included as part of our literary corpus. However, what becomes almost immediately evident is that these are no ordinary diaries. In fact, they often stand on their own as penetrating insights, not only into the mind and heart of Beauvoir as she gained her intellectual and social independence, but into the human condition as such.

One is oftentimes dumbfounded by the depth of feeling and intellectual acumen of this young woman. True, in numerous passages, Beauvoir spills enough ink and tears lamenting her unanswered love for her cousin, Jacques Champigneulle, to remind us that these are the private thoughts of a teenager. But how many of us wrote of our own teenage heartbreak in such overt philosophical language: “You, so close and yet so far, the only one who, I feel, is like myself, elusive [*insaisissable*] and yet so easy to grasp, simultaneously the most ‘self’ and the most ‘the other’” (p. 229)?

Not only does Beauvoir offer sensitive observations on life, nature, love, class and gender, but she fills her diaries with quotations from the great minds that she is reading at the time. Verlaine, Claudel, Mallarmé, Bergson, Wilde, Cocteau, Gide, and others pepper her diaries like keys into the inner workings of her character. Analyzing the quotations chosen by Beauvoir is itself enough to occupy scholars for years.

One of the most fascinating threads to follow through the diaries is Beauvoir’s struggle with philosophy. Her own efforts to gain independence from her family, her class, and her gender, are mirrored in her gradual move toward philosophy as a way of life. Since these diaries provide us with a picture of Beauvoir as she begins to seriously study this discipline, we are taken on a journey beginning in ambivalence and moving into an acceptance of her intellectual abilities and passion for life. In 1926, she asks, “Philosophy? Finally I will perhaps find new reasons to like it” (p. 65) and later, “Philosophy would be fascinating if there were no exam to prepare and if one could devote oneself to it in depth. But I am no longer intellectual enough” (p. 179). In a profound moment of existential boredom she exclaims: “Philosophy, what ridiculous irony; what do Kant and Maine de Biran matter to me, and the principle of causality is stupid” (p. 186).

However, for every rejection of philosophy as problematic in itself or as a life choice, she later moves to embrace it wholeheartedly.

In 1927, with many months of study under her belt, Beauvoir reflects on her intellectual progress over the past year and decides that she has developed a “serious philosophical formation that perhaps accentuated even more my tendency to consider each thing in its aspect of totality, and that sharpened my (alas!) too penetrating critical mind and my desire for rigor and logic” (p. 232). Later she imposes a strict program onto herself by demanding: “Don’t do philosophy as a game anymore. Systematize my thoughts and believe in the value of thought” (p. 288). Finally, the woman who has struggled against her desire to marry and live a comfortable aristocratic life decides:

If I marry, my philosophy will have to be taken with me. This is essential, so much so

that in order to possess it, I would almost accept not getting married. No, because love is from life, and my philosophy must be taken from life. Marvelous intoxication of thought, solitude of the mind. I will dominate the world (p. 296).

And of course, this proclamation resonates profoundly as it is well known that Beauvoir eschewed marriage in favor of an open relationship with her intellectual and romantic partner, Sartre.

Given the recent intense debates over influence and philosophical originality surrounding Beauvoir and Sartre's dynamic and complicated relationship, it would be remiss not to mention it. However, as one turns the pages of the diary, there emerges the realization that, *there is no Sartre*. The woman developing into one of the greatest minds of the twentieth century before our eyes has not yet met the man who would travel with her through the rest of her productive life. This absence gives tremendous support to what such scholars as Simons and Kate and Edward Fullbrook have been arguing for years: namely, that much of Beauvoir's later philosophy and literature were original and not mere copies of her more famous male companion.[2] As these diaries precede Beauvoir's introduction to Sartre by more than two years, the text is haunted by his notable absence. This work already contains many of Beauvoir's ideas on intersubjectivity, ethics, feminism, existential anxiety, and literature.[3]

Granting that Beauvoir was an intellectual quite independently of her relationship to Sartre, one is no less thunderstruck by the insertion of a marginal comment on August 1, 1927. Beauvoir, who reread and commented on her own diaries over the years, had originally written in a moment of her recurring despair over her lack of true love, "I felt faint with sadness, thinking that after eighteen months of such passionate love affairs, I found myself with an empty heart and knowing that *the one who would fulfill everything* doesn't exist" (pp. 298-99). In the margins, Beauvoir later writes: "*Sartre-1929*" (pp. 298-99).

Returning to the opening quotation, wherein Beauvoir warns us against reading what follows, one cannot help but recall Max Brod's refusal to incinerate Kafka's unpublished works. Although Beauvoir had never asked something so drastic of Le Bon de Beauvoir, we would assume that she had meant us to read her autobiographies (which are based upon the diaries) and had never intended for us to read the diaries themselves. But how much richer and more profound her corpus becomes with the addition of these priceless writings. So much so that perhaps the teenage intellectual would forgive us our indiscretion and take solace in the fact the publication of her diaries will only further elevate her philosophical and literary legacy.

NOTES

[1] *Simone de Beauvoir*, *The Force of Circumstance*, Vol. I: After the War, 1944-1952. Translated by Richard Howard (New York: Paragon House, 1992). English translation of *La force des choses* (Paris: Gallimard, 1963); *The Force of Circumstance*, Vol. 2: Hard Times, 1952-1962. Translated by Richard Howard (New York: Paragon House, 1992). English translation of *La force des choses* (Paris: Gallimard, 1963); *Memoirs of a Dutiful Daughter*. Translated by James Kirkup (Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1963). English translation of *Memoirs d'une jeune fille rangée* (Paris: Gallimard, 1958); *The Prime of Life*. Translated by Peter Green (New York: Lancer Books, 1966). English translation of *La force de l'âge* (Paris: Gallimard, 1960).

[2] For a taste of the debate surrounding the volatile issue of influence between Sartre and Beauvoir see Kate and Edward Fullbrook, *Simone de Beauvoir and Jean-Paul Sartre: The Remaking of a Twentieth-Century Legend* (New York: Basic Books: 1994) and Margaret Simons, "Beauvoir's Philosophical Independence in a Dialogue with Sartre," *Journal of Speculative Philosophy* 14, no. 2 (2000): 87-103 and Beauvoir and the Second Sex: Feminism, Race and the Origins of Existentialism (Lanham, Md: Rowman and Littlefield, 1999).

[3] Although 1927 brought Beauvoir into a close friendship with another fellow philosopher, Merleau-Ponty, she shows herself confidently developing her own ideas in distinction from his conservatism and religiosity.

Shannon M. Mussett
Utah Valley University
shannon.mussett@uvsc.edu

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