

RESPONSE TO TORIL MOI

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To begin, as is customary, but also as I truly feel, I would like to thank our graduate students for organizing this conference, part of the now established series of gatherings on such pertinent and challenging topics. Their effort makes us all periodically gather in order to hear, sometimes speak, and always think, react and converse afterwards. I am also grateful to them for putting me on the spot, after a year of absence, on an issue so close to my heart. Finally, my gratitude goes to Toril Moi for motivating me to re-read Simone de Beauvoir's classic, and for challenging me to clarify to myself my position on theory, including feminist theory, and its/my relationship to the body.

As I was thus reading Beauvoir and Toril Moi's theorizing on Beauvoir, it became clear to me that, independently of my will my own response could only take the form of a narrative, personal and somewhat autobiographical. This necessity stems from my conviction that all utterances have an eminently personal, subjective, and embodied foundation. From the first word of any response (and what utterance is not one?), the mighty "I" is looming, linguistically and egotistically, over the structure of my argument: "you say . . . therefore I think . . ." And that personal pronoun, even if left unsaid, designates the locus of my utterance: my body as it stands here. Human, female, of a certain age, of European descent, rather short, carrying my ethnic heritage and my personal history in its own particular blend of lightness and heaviness, of comfort and shyness, of poise or embarrassment. There is no utterance of mine, as universalizing as it might sound, that does not draw from that particular body

its tone, its point of view, its style, its direction, its perspective. No sentence in which a careful reader would not be able to somehow uncover my body, draw it out, imagine it and build a partial identification with me, through their embodied mind. And if I wish, as Toril Moi, to ignore or have others ignore its color, shape, sex or place in a particular project of mine, it will be solely for reasons of textual economy or of style. Because, as central as my body is to me, it might not be of interest to my audience or readers. I might therefore choose to erase its traces in my text, write instead of speaking, use typing rather than handwriting, lean on acquired habits (such as a certain impersonal, universalizing phrasing), avoid the first person pronoun or use a language which ignores sexual difference. And yet, as hard as I cover it up, my body will remain in my words as a hidden origin, an origin “under erasure,” present/absent for others to recover in their reading if they so wish, or if they cannot help it.

The same stands, in my opinion, for a narrative versus a theoretical discourse: stories are my primary experience, the form through which I apprehend the world, the one that my mind stores most easily. I am full of stories, indeed *I am* my stories, from the shortest ones (one sentence stories, or propositions), to the longest (the story of my life). The very appearance of “I,” or “she” and “he,” for that matter, leads to a first verb, and thus to a narrative. To not resort to it is again only a secondary gesture, an erasure, a matter of convenience, of economy, of style. It can also be a strategy for reaching towards the audience (one used by philosophers more than by novelists, for instance). With some people, it might be an acquired habit, a second nature. With me it is mostly an issue of time: my “story” gets less and less narrative or personal as I work longer on it. My alter ego scolds me: “Come on, you’ll bore these poor people. Enough of yourself!” Then I prune: I cut out the superfluous, the unaesthetic.

As there was little time for such pruning in this case, you’ll have to hear how I re-read Simone de Beauvoir’s *The Second Sex* this time, forty years after she wrote it and twenty years after I first read it. For that, I must quickly sketch out that first encounter. She (myself, at that time) is the daughter of an oxy-moronic couple. The father: a self-made intellectual man of

peasant extraction in whose culture a wife must never be called her first name in public, an act considered improper because of its strong sexual connotations. A man who had to change in order to accommodate an enlightened wife, and then two growing and educated daughters. A man whom I liked to call in protest a "socialist family monarch." The mother: an ex tom-boy, who wanted to be an agrarian engineer and settled for medicine as more feminine, who met her future husband in the partisan ranks in World War II and for a while refused to marry him because marriage was a reactionary institution. She, their daughter, a product of these two backgrounds and of an idealistic socialist education based on sexual equality (boys and girls in my class welded metal and studied astronomy, as well as domestic economy). *En somme*, nothing unusual for the country and the time. She, therefore, not so subjected to norms as to not find Freud's intellectual acrobatics around female sexuality highly suspicious ("He is crazy!"), not so liberated as to not read him with worry ("Am I normal, then?"). If I remember well, she races through Beauvoir's account with a mixture of enthusiasm and distaste: enthusiasm for Beauvoir's pugnaciousness, displeasure to see her own situation as a woman so fully represented in *The Second Sex* (boredom, narcissism, the eternal issue of "looks," etc.), and a vague distaste for the author's uneasiness with womanhood, both in her theoretical and more personal writings. She is so fascinated by Beauvoir's narrative that she gulps it down in one piece, and so uneasy that she wants it all finished as fast as possible. She wants to get over it.

That pretty much sums up her stance towards feminist theory in the next twenty years: fascinated, wants to get over it. And she finds out—like Brecht did in respect to politics which he hated—that in order to close the subject she has to get into it some more, and then some more. In this story of mine, feminism continues to serve as the ground which the young woman keeps crossing in order to build her own house elsewhere, the memento which marks her own intellectual path. And Beauvoir's figure remains that humble, partly negated, partly ingested symbolic maternal body on which she erects, then disseminates, gathers and undoes again her own feminine[?], female[?], post-feminist[?], exiled[?],

evolving[?], just scattered[?] subjectivity. . . . It is the background that goes without saying for that avid mind who learns the art of reading from Derrida or de Certeau, verbal histrionics from Lacan, social questioning from Foucault, who gags on Kristeva's *La révolution du langage poétique* (left unfinished) and who admires Luce Irigaray's (to whom the above metaphors are clearly a reference) graceful impertinence towards the unpalatable: "Because in relation to the working of theory, the/a woman fulfills a twofold function—as the mute outside that sustains all systematicity; as a maternal and still silent ground that nourishes all foundations—she does not have to conform to the codes theory has set up for itself" (365). She discovers anew Beauvoir's sentence "One is not born a woman but rather one becomes one" when Judith Butler gives it a new twist. She realizes that her allegiance to theory is resolutely aesthetic, since the beautiful must indeed be the good (a connection guaranteed by classical Greek in which the word *theorein* signifies: to contemplate the universe's beautiful order). In such an allegiance, she may "take pleasure" in reading theory, as Toril Moi words it, but decides not to write it unless she can make it beautiful (no success yet). She slowly comes to understand the very fine line between freedom and necessity in these matters, and learns to make a choice out of personal limitations. And sometimes, she just plays truant to issues, reads Montaigne *because*, grabs a good novel, or sets up house and cleans it, or grows her garden, literally and metaphorically.

And now I come to the point in my story in which *vingt ans plus tard* I go back to Beauvoir. What does it give? The personal investment is less strong. In some ways, I must say it, *The Second Sex* has become obsolete. Obsolete in a good way: it can be taken for granted. It is no longer the discovery of a dutiful daughter gone feminist, but the story that your mother has already told you, or made you read. It has faded into the background for new subjectivities to form. My alter ego whispers the silly slogan of the Virginia Slims add: "You've come a long way baby." We all have, indeed. The epistemological and moral ground has shifted quite a bit since Beauvoir's account: women's history now exists and is shedding some myths and creating new

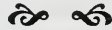
ones, as all histories tend to do; great contemporary literature is no longer male, and even the old literary canon has been somewhat refurbished; no longer do the bourgeois mothers in France carry on the same kind of domestic terrorism on their daughters; men who still propound the "mother or whore" theory have become the laughing stock and Montherlant can be laid to rest as not such a great period writer. . . . For that, I feel gratitude toward Simone who laid the foundation and allowed us to forget it under our busy constructions.

On another level, however, an ambiguous relationship still persists and I may choose to deny it, tempted by Toril Moi's generous reworking of Beauvoir's contradictions, or I may decide to explore it. The decision is a matter of allegiance, versus freedom, a freedom that one might see as impertinence. In other terms, again, a matter of mood or of economy of speech. A friend tells me "I don't like Simone de Beauvoir. She is like a *concierge*." I do not ask what she means, because I think I understand it in my own way: a *concierge* is a repository of endless small curious anecdotes about people. And I must admit my own fascination with Beauvoir's countless short narratives which constitute, for instance, her imaginary prehistory of womankind, or of female animal species. This time, what strikes me is not so much the naive conviction of the stories, but their sheer number, the collector's impulse, the incredible totalizing will behind them. I see Simone de Beauvoir as possessed by a collector's passion. The little girl growing into an old woman, *la petite fille appliquée*, *la jeune fille rangée*, *la jeune agrégée*, *la vieille dame un peu dépassée* telling bed-time stories to herself, to her students, to her nieces and their daughters, to all little reading girls (and boys). And I am reminded of another totalizing genre, the universal histories such as, say, Bossuet's, where I found the same fast succession of compressed narratives, invoked with eagerness to prove a point of faith. And with the somewhat cruel glance of a daughter at her mother, I say to myself: "She is aging. And she's not aging too well." But I am also aware that, as a mother of a kind, Beauvoir made possible my forgetting, her stories ground mine, "mon destin s'enlève sur le fond du sien."

And I want here to add to the verb *enlever* another set of connotations which resonated in me as I enjoyed Toril Moi's careful chiseling of its significance in Beauvoir's sentence. A military expression of the seventeenth century—"enlever un quartier"—made me check the *Trésor de la langue française* which quoted a few more meanings to the verb *enlever*: 1. "to get a hold of a military position, to master it by force" as in "enlever une tranchée d'assaut"; 2. "to obtain, to gain that which is the object of a combat, or competition" as in "enlever de haute lutte" (to win with flying colors); 3. "to perform a piece of music in a fast or powerful manner, like a virtuoso" or, in general, to provoke enthusiasm as in "enlever les suffrages" (to carry the votes). In its reflexive form, *s'enlever* also means "take one's flight" as in "prendre son envol" or "to start running" as in "prendre le galop." These meanings give us more food for thought: they carry connotations of a forceful appropriation of something contested, its mastering through struggle and through a carefully devised strategy. To the idea of mastery can be added that of movement, swiftness, and impetuosity. And though I heard from some French friends that *s'enlever* was simply part of the current philosophical parlance of the fifties, I would rather see in it, whether intentional or not, a new semantic opening: the assertion "I am a woman" is being appropriated by me, Simone, as my stronghold, through struggle, forcefully and impetuously, yet thanks to a carefully devised strategy. Such an appropriation of female destiny suscitates enthusiasm and carries off the votes. And likewise upon my assertion and my body of work "*s'enlève tout existence féminine singulière*"—every particular female existence can be mastered and appropriated by its subject.

As regards that process of self-appropriation which has indeed been under way since Beauvoir wrote *The Second Sex*, I would like to conclude with a quotation. In her book, *Politique des sexes*, Sylviane Agacinski reminds us that humans come in two versions, without either being the negative of the other. "The logic of mixity," as she chooses to call it, "posits that a woman is not a man (an often stated fact), but, also, that a man is that individual who is not a woman (a less often stated fact)" (50, my translation). Thus, the sexual alternative is not played out be-

tween that which is present or absent, except in the sense in which the lack is twofold. Each of the two sexes is deprived of what the other has or is. In this perspective, there is no unilateral castration, as it were. In a way, sexual difference comes out of the logic of lack, in another, it suggests the idea of a double castration. Neither man nor woman is “the entire human.” And although, in answer to Beauvoir and to Toril Moi, I do not think it is possible to exclude the gendered body from any manifestation of subjectivity, insofar as subjectivity is rooted in the body, today that is no longer a limitation for women any more than for men. I believe that, in respect to any male universalizing gesture, theoretically at least, the subject is closed. What remains, of course, is politics. . . .



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*Ce serait le moment de philosopher et de
rechercher si, par hasard, se trouvait ici
l'endroit où de telles paroles dégèlent.*

Rabelais,
Le Quart Livre

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