

# The Reinvention of the Couple

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Appreciative thanks go to the organizers of this conference, with its eminent body of Sartre specialists and people close to him, for calling on a woman like me, who was neither among his friends nor one of his commentators.

Nevertheless I did briefly meet the members of that formidable couple. During the May events, one day at the Sorbonne, Sartre had ill-advisedly launched into a long speech when a young man in the audience got to his feet and said: 'Sartre, be brief!' Which was quite symbolic. As for Beauvoir, who was greatly admired in the feminist movement, her voice made me freeze. But I do not want to talk about personal anecdotes this evening; in fact I would like to speak instead in a style that will perhaps seem both philosophical and – as I would wish it – personal.

I think it is paradoxical, even incongruous – after the collapse of libertarian ideologies and the fall of the totalitarian Wall and at a time of religious clashes tinged with the seductiveness of the 'Star Academy', cloning and the artificial uterus – to talk about a *topicality* of existentialism. It is right to celebrate the memory of Sartre and Beauvoir, but it would also be good to take the measure of the changing times and the provocative view this gives of our recent past. However, I shall not linger over that aspect either.

At the risk of appearing paradoxical I shall argue that it is the microcosm of existentialism that interests us nowadays, or rather that continues to interest us and continues to carry a message. Existentialism was and remains the laboratory of existence from which emerged the weighty tomes and the theories that stimulated or scandalized our elders. Existentialism tells us less about philosophical and political theories than the manner of living and writing one's desires as historical and political acts. Sartre and Beauvoir inscribed the incommensurable nature of the intimate both in being – as counterpoint to Heidegger – and in time – as counterpoint to Hegel. And so the theme of freedom was conjugated and interpreted in very many ways, and also the mode of expression which, in my view, is finally what remains and is the most infectious: the imaginative mode of expression, literature, as an indicator of that presence of the private both in being in the world and in time.

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So I am going to focus on those ‘remains’, more than on the people that Sartre and Beauvoir were; and, considering the time I have allotted to me, on the following question: what meaning can I give today, as a woman, a writer and a psychoanalyst, to the private existence of Simone de Beauvoir as she appears to me at the start of the 21st century, given the gap, the gulf even, that separates us from her times?

I shall attempt to identify Beauvoir’s presence for me this evening from two perspectives. On one hand, from the understanding Beauvoir has left us of the female, or rather the female-male, how does she situate herself in that duality and what message does she leave today’s young women in that regard? And on the other hand, how should we think of the couple she formed with Sartre? What does that couple have to say to us today? I will leave out the quotations I had planned, which you can find in a version of this lecture published in my latest book *La Haine et le pardon*. For more details on the topic I am dealing with this evening, allow me to refer you to that publication. Beauvoir belongs to what may be considered the second period of world feminism, after the suffragettes. This second period, which Beauvoir initiates, claims a universality and a fraternal equality between the sexes: men and women are equal and this equality is seen as fraternity under the aegis of the universal. The third period, which I and several women here belonged to, emphasized sex difference. Equality of course in the political arena, in the area of rights, but difference as far as mentality, sexuality and creativity are concerned. What can Beauvoir’s universalism say to us today? The idea of the universal is obvious for philosophers. It goes back to the Platonic idea, the *eidōs*; it goes back to Plotinus; it also goes back to the republican ideals of universal order dear to French enlightenment thinkers. I will not enumerate either the many influences or the sometimes considerable differences between these historical and metaphysical variations on the universal. I will merely say that, if we listen to psychoanalysis, the universal is underpinned by three denials: denial of the female body, denial of female homosexuality and denial of motherhood by the cult of the phallus and the great man. Sartre for instance – which is not without ambivalence, aggression or dependence. I am going to concentrate on that for a moment.

We are only too well aware of the episodes of violence, which I will call phobic, scattered throughout Simone de Beauvoir’s *Le Deuxième Sexe*: against the menstruating body, the servitude that is pregnancy, the agonies and abuses suffered by women, the horrors of childbirth, and on and on. But while insisting, for the first time and how courageously, that we are not born but become a woman, the author of *Le Deuxième Sexe* does not fail to reveal her more or less unconscious but often conscious, and even militant, rejection of sex difference as is manifested, among other things, by menstruation, lesbianism, motherhood and menopause. A rejection, then, that is accompanied by a fascination with the phallic power of the muscular body and the destiny of man, ‘infinitely privileged’, she says.

More empirically, even existentially, I will remind you that Beauvoir, who was open to female friendships from adolescence, never recovered from losing the great love of her youth, Zaza, who died early on. I note as well, in that tendency that she insisted on repressing but which is very clear when you read her writing, and which those who knew her are no longer unaware of, her interest in female homosexuality, and that something of it comes through even in the note, made by the inspector who

was a member of the *agrégation* exam board in February 1935, on the subject of Beauvoir's teaching: 'There is something mannish in the young teacher's manner.' We now know about the special relationships Beauvoir had with some of her students – Olga, who became Xavière in *L'Invitée*, Ilitch in Sartre's *L'Age de raison*, Nathalie Sorokine, Lisa Oblanov in *Les Mémoires*, some of whose character traits can be detected in Hélène from *Le Sang des autres*, or Bianca Bienefeld, called Louise Vedrine in *Les Mémoires*. The publication of Sartre's *Lettres* and the *Journal de guerre* in 1990, Bianca Lamblain's *Mémoires d'une jeune fille dérangée* in 1993, the Sorokine affair as revealed in particular by Gilbert Joseph in *Une si douce occupation* and other sources mention the complaint from Nathalie Sorokine's mother, who accused Beauvoir of corrupting minors, a complaint that resulted in the teacher being forbidden to work in the state education system. All that adds up to evidence that gives rise to debate, and there are people who attack Beauvoir, who nonetheless remains the high priestess of feminism and humanism. In any case those complaints and accusations do not leave us in any doubt about the lesbian tendencies of Beauvoir, who dominated and preyed on her own friends and Sartre's lovers, tendencies she camouflaged or repressed, for instance, under the rigid model of Hegelian logic by borrowing from the master/slave image, which is also universal, a rationality intended to justify, repress or sublimate her own dramas of passion. *L'Invitée* from 1941, which is defined for example as a frivolous story of a love triangle, and which turns the camera on the love affairs of the Sartre/Beauvoir couple, contains as an epigraph, not a quotation about jealousy and man/woman and woman/woman relationships, but nothing less than the Hegelian motto 'Each consciousness seeks the death of the other'; it is a way of universalizing what is being said and not of justifying the story of a crime or a suspense novel. That epigraph introduces a universalist metaphysics able to justify the implacable passion, admitted and denied, between Françoise and Xavière. *Les Mandarins* in 1954 includes psychoanalysis in the shape of a character but does not return to the clinical approach to Beauvoir's passions. More than Freud it was Heidegger and Kierkegaard who, throughout her career, were her chosen companions from philosophy, with the result that existentialism never really crossed the border separating metaphysics from Freudian discovery.

Reading Simone de Beauvoir, following her struggle, going with her even into her defences and her sufferings, I remain convinced, however, that Beauvoir speaks her deepest truths. I am neither one of those who accuse her nor one of those who see her as blameless. I think she is a woman who had the audacity and the courage to get burnt by what she says and what she cannot say, and that she makes communicable the truth of desire. That is one of the essential contributions of existentialism, in her form anyhow, to today's culture. The ambiguity of the denials peculiar to Beauvoir as regards motherhood, homosexuality, menstruation, etc., is not explained solely by social and political risk-taking at a specific period. We are probably not yet in a position to assess the extent to which moments in the history of philosophy and politics – which led to breaks in time and destiny (the 18th century or existentialism) – are also risk-taking with sexuality and the truth of desire. Simone de Beauvoir and Sartre tell us nothing else. But that is not all. Every break in society and destiny is underlain by a sexual, mental and psychological risk, but beyond that Sartre and Beauvoir, and the latter in particular, understood with an extraordinary lucidity the

inevitable malevolence of desire, and of her own towards women – objects of her desire and her jealousy. Her melancholy, which is revealed in *La Femme rompue*, or the cruel tenderness for the diminished body of the dying Sartre in *La Cérémonie des adieux*, reveal almost an avowal of indifference, which means that alongside the philosopher talking of universalism in which there are no differences between men and women – they have equal rights and deserve the same respect – there is a writer who in literature gives us a glimpse of a burning, poignant, unbearable difference; and with that the war of the sexes and the war between individuals. Our modernity simply needs to consider that message. It should consider it but are we not still too nervous, too imprisoned in a straitjacket of universalism and a metaphysical philosophy which blind us? Sartre and Beauvoir attacked that metaphysical philosophy not only by their daring thought and behaviour but also by the literature that ran alongside and described that movement.

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The second section I shall describe in order to demonstrate the audacity of their being-in-the-world, which was manifested less by philosophy than by their imaginative writing, is to do with their relationship as a couple. I will give this second part the title 'The man/woman couple revised and corrected'. A few words are required in order to situate the couple as conceived by Sartre and Beauvoir in a study that remains to be written – started here and there but never synthesized. I would like to talk about a history of the heterosexual couple in the West. To be brief I will say that, over and above its Greek, Jewish and Christian antecedents, the modern couple is based on what is called enlightened bourgeois ideology as it was developed by enlightenment philosophers. It is to Rousseau that we owe its form and values. *La Nouvelle Héloïse* describes a disintegrating society and values, of which Roxane and Saint-Preux are the victims. As a response to this disaster Emile invents a new reality: a couple between whom the sexual relation is said to be possible because it is founded in nature. To give the measure of the sexual sense and social effect of this invention of the couple, founded in nature and where the relationship between man and woman is possible, I am saying *couple* as a man/woman duality, man and woman face to face; and not as relations or contracts between two male and female beings who are part of a clan, a patriarchal family surrounded by kinsfolk. This duality should be put into perspective with the thinking carried out in previous centuries about morality on the one hand and its links with despotic power on the other. Thus Rousseau should be read in the light of La Boétie and his *Discours de la servitude volontaire*, and also in the light of Montesquieu's *Lettres persanes* and *L'Esprit des lois*. In the *Lettres persanes*, as in many 18th-century authors' work, in order to satirize the dissolution of the sexual relationship under the monarchy, to mock Versailles, its perversity, its debauchery, writers talked instead about the East. Everything happened in Persia, not Versailles, and this was an immanent critique of the impossibility of sexual relationships in the West. In that context Rousseau's couple seems to suggest an alternative both to sexual pleasure in which the sovereign is abolished – since all women are available in the East, and also in Versailles – and also to the decline of the power of the monarchy. It was necessary to find a way to halt the debauchery and bring up children in a strong moral framework so they would become good citizens.

The miracle invention would be the new couple designed to produce the new subject, the bourgeois, who would guarantee the couple, the parent/child bond and the bond between state and citizen. We already know that the formula is unsustainable, and Rousseau's books demonstrate it. But it can be contested only by debauchery, perversion and crime: Sade versus Rousseau. From Madame de Staël to Colette and *Histoire d'O*, novels written by women constantly depict the problems with the bourgeois couple. As for Beauvoir, she does not deal with the stalemates, attacks of melancholy and erotic arousal of life as a couple with more daring or originality than her peers. Others have gone even further in describing life together – difficulties, horrors and ecstasies. It is jealousy that seems to be the main target for her, right from *L'Invitée*: an important unconscious admission of her fascination, not only with the man from whom woman finds it hard to get free without the experience of psychoanalysis, but also with female homosexuality, envious of the pleasure of the other woman, the indestructible rival, maybe the chief object of desire beyond the man.

Women's exclusion from the political battle, where the place reserved for them is the dead woman in *Le Sang des autres*, is not the least interesting aspect of Beauvoir's novels. Women confronted with man's power and their fascination with other women enter a political context. However, from *L'Invitée* to *Le Sang des autres* and in the later novels, the man/woman relationship is portrayed under the sign of philosophy: each person is responsible for everything before everyone, and it is the slave who creates the master. The theme of the personal creeps into that of solidarity, which then comes to dominate, not without allowing itself to be infiltrated in its turn by the admission of the female narrator's failures and weaknesses. But the genre has been found: where private life and the political meet. And there is more: this transcendence of private life by the political might have become fixed in a call for militant repression. Not a bit of it. Any repression, including in political texts, is transcended. Beauvoir, the indefatigable marcher, does not stop finding paths and links. Love does not last. The absolute couple does not last. Everyone disappoints me. Is there no *Song of Songs* as in the bible or Rousseau? No problem! The single bond gives way to the plurality of bonds. Sartre remains the tutelary centre, but Algren is brought in from afar to unlock the body's pleasure, together with some other men. And that continues to be written down – or not, if we follow Beauvoir's critics, for it is true that many detractors did not like her writing, which for me is still the expression of sexual freedom that has to be written about to be communicated. The most remarkable thing about that experience is that the couple thus deconstructed does not even set itself up as a model, though there are – and will always be – fervent disciples, male and female, who follow what they think is an example. And so we can ask this question: what did Sartre and Beauvoir demonstrate with this deconstruction of the couple? In my view nothing less than the impossibility of man/woman union, which has nonetheless been maintained and attempted in all its forms. It is impossible, but let us be in the possible of that impossible, with and beyond the concern to maintain the bond, that of a recognition and esteem between autonomous individuals, without a religion of love but with an acknowledgement of differences and that ultimate politeness which is concern for the physical integrity of the other, their health, sensitivity to the other and their work – Sartre's work from Beauvoir's perspective, Beauvoir's work from Sartre's – which even includes the

caustic stare, the word that hits home, what we can read in the descriptions of Sartre's dying body. It is not about glorifying love, the support of the religious bond, but glorifying the bond of thought between independent beings who have taken and still take the risk of being. An exchange of ideas beyond erotic understanding and misunderstanding, the couple, Sartre and Beauvoir style, is a debate. This vision of the couple as possible debate follows on from the love bond as it is lived, played out and described in the 20th century: the headlong love and passionate exhilaration celebrated by the surrealists and, in a different way, by mystics such as Georges Bataille. But all that is relegated by Sartre and Beauvoir to the archives of history, to childishness and the mirage of narcissistic regression. It is merely the faded trappings of a secular religion. I like to see Sartre and Beauvoir as the most irreligious beings in our modernity, who managed to shatter the glorification of love underlying amorous exhilaration, all the while keeping the couple alive; not the couple as ecstasy but the couple as a debate. The couple shattered in the light of day: maybe, not really, with things not said, or censored, victims deplored by many, mistresses. But do you know of any others that still continue, in the full light of day, with that kind of freedom? Perhaps in crime but certainly not with the dignity that those two have passed down to us. Personally I see, in that exhibition of the couple that is possible in the impossible, not a heroism but an extraordinary generosity. And to come back to our title: 'What do they leave us with, what do they pass on to us?', I would say they pass on that generosity if we stay on the personal level. It is the appropriate word for the art of living that is able to maintain in the world's eyes the possibility of a dialogue between autonomous individuals, with and beyond sex. Not Rousseau's couple as the foundation stone of the state and procreation, but the couple as nuclear dialogue of the social bond that we have yet to invent. After Sartre and Beauvoir the couple as a space for thinking is uncertain, risky; it requires extra intelligence of us so freedom does not irresistibly become that slide towards killing the other, towards 'hurting the other' at all costs. The couple as a space for thinking, or thinking as dialogue between the two sexes, is that not utopia indeed? Is that not what we have still to do? Universalism, fraternity, all the myths of communal cohesion that we have all wanted to celebrate, with those tomorrows that were supposed to sing too, well, all that splits into two. No universalism, no fraternity unless we have invented a harmony from that impossible that is the couple.

How many of us can do that today? We all know there are hardly any, which is why I pay tribute to the esteem, the disagreement and the generosity that Sartre and Beauvoir have passed down to us.

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Translated from the French by Jean Burrell

### Note

1. Lecture given on 24 November 2005 at Unesco on the occasion of the conference 'What do Jean-Paul Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir have to say to us today?', organized in the context of the programme 'Pathways of Thought'. We are grateful to Unesco for allowing us to reproduce it.