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Penelope Deutscher | Essay | 14.04.2016

Dead Camp? Beauvoir on the Life and Death of Femininity

Reading “The Second Sex” with Butler, Brown and Wilson

How¹ has Simone de Beauvoir’s work come to be read from the perspective of feminist theory which postdated her? Since the nineteen-eighties, contemporary feminists have asked whether Beauvoir should be understood as theorist of gender. Is she committed to the equivalent of a sex/gender distinction? Or perhaps her work is more in affinity with alternative uses of the term gender which succeeded the dominance of this distinction, most obviously Judith Butler’s emphasis that sex is (retrospectively) “made” no less than gender a category generated by the opposition itself, retroactively installed with all the cultural significance of the “prior,” the “natural,” the “original”, such that, in this sense, “sex by definition, will be shown to have been *gender all along*”.²

More recently, developments associated with materialist feminism have moved in a new direction. From this standpoint, both Butler and Beauvoir have sometimes been seen, erroneously, as denying that materiality of the body in which contemporary feminist theory is increasingly, and variously, interested. Since a new series of questions has emerged with which to approach the status of biology in Beauvoir’s work, I will argue for a productive reading of Beauvoir giving new attention to some of the distinctive ways in which she sees biology and embodiment as expressive. My aim is not to liken Beauvoir’s work to forms of thought that postdate her, nor to argue that she implicitly anticipates aspects of contemporary materialist feminism. Instead, re-reading Beauvoir from the perspective of contemporary debates about biology and embodiment allows one to consider it from a new optics, and to differently foreground elements within it. Thus I propose an alternative mode of bringing these bodies of work into proximity.

I. Beauvoir on determinism, biology, and freedom

I begin with one possible interpretation of *The Second Sex*’s abstract argument about freedom, according to which Beauvoir would depict a femininity that is not only ambiguous but also, in a sense, dead. Femininity, as described by Beauvoir, is the opposite of vibrant, energetic, renewed, renewing. It drains, it takes its toll, it is associated with repetition —

with a dead repetition, moreover — and in further senses, developed here, it is associated with stasis. But looking more closely at the reasons femininity is considered by Beauvoir a kind of death prompts the question of whether and how one could also identify some forms of furtive, even vibrant life at the heart of this death.

When Beauvoir both argues that women aren't born, but become women and that women are the other³, the number of senses, and contexts, in which women are understood not to be the norm include matters to do with recognition and identity (women serve differentially as the negative pole of masculinity); the disproportionate sexualization of women; economic inequality; the fact that women disproportionately assume responsibility for housework and caretaking roles, even if they also work for a wage. It includes Beauvoir's description of an embodied sense of physical (and general) self-consciousness peculiar to women related to sustained habits of restriction and objectification.⁴

She grounds her corporeally- and historically-oriented analysis in an account of lived embodiment sedimented with long-standing, socially acquired meanings. The French bourgeois feminine corporeality of 1949 is described as forming in interaction with the environment of limited expectations for a girl's capacities and the continuous direct or indirect processes of dissuasion from thinking in terms of the broadest horizons. Here feminine bodies take shape as constrained bodies anticipating what they ought not do. She suggests that this girling of the girl in terms of the "cannot" is not unlike a depiction given by Richard Wright in *Native Son* of a corporeality common to many African-Americans in the United States of the early twentieth century who would see a plane fly high in the sky primarily with the knowledge they would, most likely, never pilot it.⁵ Referring to this passage, Beauvoir argued that for many girls and women the seas, the north and south poles, presented not possibilities but limitations and obstacles, an impeded possibility of adventure. (311)

But why did women ever become the other? (10) With reservations, Beauvoir considered a number of explanations of the historical emergence of the hierarchy of the sexes.⁶ Perhaps some part of the explanation is attributable to women's greater physical weakness and their responsibility for reproduction — but only in a historical sense, and these can be limitations only in a particular context. In other words, it may have specifically been the "biological and economic condition of primitive hordes [that] led to male supremacy". (75) In so-called primitive contexts, pregnancy and child-rearing would have limited women's ability to engage in the activities through which men optimally survived, gained prestige or eventually wealth (hunting and gathering, agriculture, mining, war). Moreover, amongst

early human peoples, “pregnancy, giving birth, and menstruation diminished [women’s] work capacity and condemned them to long periods of impotence [...] they needed the protection of warriors and the catch from hunting and fishing provided by the males”. (86) This could have left women practically dependent on men’s material support and perhaps subordinate to them. If so, women’s responsibility for reproduction would also have had a negative impact on the status they could command. (86) Considered as a matter of recognition, Beauvoir claims that “pregnancy inhibited men from recognizing women as ‘like them’. Because she remained enslaved in the mysteries of life [...] the male did not recognize her as an equal. [...] She kept in his eyes the dimension of *other*”. (86)

Material and economic inequities might over-determine which groups sediment as historically other. The consequences range from the practical — as when women are not able to access the most valuable work — to the realm of value and identity. For example, occupying the position of other, women also sustain, by negative contrast, idealized meanings for masculinity as the norm.

In the context of these arguments, Beauvoir attributes an ambiguous status to biology. Comparing humans with other animals, Beauvoir distinguishes between vital processes and natural functions on the one hand, and “acts that transcend our animal condition”, on the other. Because she assigns birth, breastfeeding, food preparation, cleaning and caregiving to the former category, she does not see women’s traditional role as participating in the transformative and creative activities distinguishing humans from animals:

to give birth and to breastfeed are not *activities* but natural functions; they do not involve a project; which is why the woman finds no motive there to claim a higher meaning for her existence [...] domestic labor [...] locks her into repetition and immanence, day after day it repeats itself in identical form from century to century; it produces nothing new. Man’s case is radically different. He does not provide for the group in the way worker bees do, by a simple vital process, but rather by acts that transcend his animal condition. *Homo faber* [*man as maker*] has been an inventor since from the beginning of time: even the stick or the club he armed himself with to knock down fruit [...] or to slaughter animals is an instrument that expands his grasp of the world [...] to maintain himself, he creates, he spills over the present and opens up the future.(73)

As a result, life processes (including reproduction, breastfeeding, housework) are figured as the processes of a kind of death — they are anything but vital. Instead they are associated with a Sisyphus-like repetition,⁷ a kind of frozen time, rather than continuity or progress in

time: “Eat, sleep, clean... the years no longer reach toward the sky, they spread out identical and grey. [...] Every day looks like the previous one; the present is eternal, useless and hopeless”. (475) They are not seen as opening up the future through valued activity, in at least the following senses. 1) Reproduction merely repeats life. 2) It also involves a repetition of women’s traditional role of nurturance, and in that sense also is not, in her view, creative. 3) Associated with the vivid image of the woman who cleans, only to have to clean again the following day, housework is presented as abhorrently repetitive: pointless and unrewarding:

Washing, ironing, sweeping, routing out the tufts of dust in the dark places behind the wardrobe, this is holding away death but also refusing life: for in one movement time is created and destroyed; the housewife only grasps the negative aspect of it [...]. (476)

In these ways women’s traditional role is associated with stasis: “Suddenly in the kitchen, where her mother is washing dishes, the little girl realizes that ... every afternoon at the same time, these hands have plunged into greasy water... until death they will be subjected to the same rites... every movement threatens her with more thankless work: a child’s somersault is a tear to sew up.” Beauvoir describes life for the woman as no more than a “promise of decomposition demanding more endless work”. (476)

Moreover, with respect to women’s role as other Beauvoir refers also to a “key to the whole mystery”: “It is not in giving life but in risking his life that man raises himself above the animal”. (74) According to this view of how humans claim recognition, and transcend “bare existence”, as when one imposes oneself to the point one is willing to risk life (in war, in hunting, etc.), such modes of existence are traditionally denied to, or not accessed by women. Reproduction is not, or, is not considered, a willingness to risk one’s life in a struggle between humans for recognition. It is deemed a passive subordination to the needs of the “species”. As such, Beauvoir is willing to describe reproduction as lacking in “human value”.

This gives at least four senses in which Beauvoir says of women that their “misfortune is to have been biologically destined to repeat Life” (74), and as such can be associated with a kind of stasis or death in life. She considers housework and all matters of reproduction, broadly construed, necessary, but, given their orientation towards repetition rather than innovation, as providing insufficient goals or *raisons d’être* in life. And in her view, in 1949 the reasons why maternity might disadvantage women were not biological. Yet for historical and vestigial⁸ reasons maternity remains almost inevitably subordinating, such

that child-rearing, when not entirely avoided, should be combined by women with forms of work that offer a more promising source of recognition.

How is biology being figured by Beauvoir in this argument? She will refer to certain biological differences of the sexes but considers that biological “disadvantages” only manifest within the realm of human projects, aims and meanings, and in this sense do not intrinsically determine women’s condition. The inflection is summed up best by the Beauvoir for whom biological facts “cannot be denied but [...] they do not carry their meaning in themselves”. (47) As Moira Gatens puts this, “human being has no fixed nature, no essence, no determined way of being. This does not mean that biology, history and culture are irrelevant to what a human being may become, but such constitutive elements of one’s overall situation cannot dictate *which* meanings, significances and values will be chosen”.⁹ From this perspective, Beauvoir acknowledges certain “facts” while rejecting that their meaning is fixed, as a means of rejecting historical, economic and material determinisms: In this sense, nothing material is a limit on freedom.

On the one hand Beauvoir seems to be conceding too much, as when women’s weakness (not to speak of a great deal of purported physiological and biological data) is acknowledged while being simultaneously refuted (“‘weakness’ is weakness only in light of the aims [humans set for themselves], the instruments at [their] disposal” (Beauvoir 2010, 46). But whether she is referring to biology or conventional attitudes to biology, or contestable interpretations of biology, the combination of these produce women’s situation in the context of which Beauvoir will nonetheless argue that human existents are free.¹⁰

II. Why is Beauvoir not a gender theorist?

Butler, among others, has interpreted Beauvoir’s account of woman as a historical idea and not a natural fact as “clearly underscor[ing] the distinction between sex, as biological facticity, and gender, as the cultural interpretation or signification of that facticity”.¹¹ While such distinctions are to be found in her work, Beauvoir’s view that there are biological facts about sex difference but that they “do not carry their meaning in themselves” can also be distinguished from forms of feminism for which the sex/gender distinction has been significant. The ongoing question of whether to understand her as having articulated a concept of gender remains controversial.¹² This relates not only to a difficulty concerning French-English translation,¹³ but also to the point that the intellectual problem for her is less sex versus gender than determinism, more generally. The possible determinisms Beauvoir staves off include those attributed to “sex” (those of biological determinism). But

no less do they include the realm of social forces commonly associated with “gender”: the impact of social and historical expectations, language, habit, and normative conventions about women’s appropriate traits, role, conduct and character.

For this reason, one might say that what mobilizes Beauvoir is not gender per se, but freedom — freedom in relation to what might otherwise be the determinisms of sex *and* gender. Human freedom is seen in the way that both sex and gender are nonetheless assumed¹⁴ by an existent in singular ways, integrated into one’s values and aims, or projects. To distinguish gender from sex as the conceptually determining issue would take the focus away from this point.

III. Femininity, Paralysis and Vitality

This is how Beauvoir’s treatments of sex, biology, and physiology play a role (along with other possible determinisms) in the articulation of freedom and the rejection of determinism. But it also contributes to a concept embedded in *The Second Sex*: the fate of the *élan vital*, or vitality Beauvoir attributes to all existents. That default attribution is seen when she writes of women as having, like men, a default “robust sensuality”, a “rude and animal nature”, of women who are “sure of [themselves] in a fighting mood,” and “will gladly engage in a duel”. This connects with the image of love, desire, and sexual relations as ideally involving a reciprocal agonism and a productive friction which could assume (or replace) competitiveness. (423)

The Second Sex tells the developmental narrative of girls who are obliged to see such expressions of their original vitality constrained. For this reason, we learn of forms of formative revolt inevitably experienced by both sexes, but with different results:

When a boy revolts against his father or against the world, he engages in effective violence; he picks a quarrel with a friend, he fights, he affirms himself as subject with his fists: he imposes himself on the world; he goes beyond it. But affirming herself, imposing herself are forbidden to the adolescent girl. (367)

According to this account, girls and women receive contradictory messages about the aim Beauvoir associates with all human existence: to impose oneself on the world, to affirm oneself by going beyond its expectations or givens. Even though those same modes are critical if not definitional to human existence, society denies them to girls and women, or such pressures might eventually induce their denying them to themselves in a mode of self-

denigrating resignation.

But because it is contrary to their status as human existents for girls and women to make themselves passive, she describes their doing so as also involving strenuous effort. Her description of the results produces much of the material in the chapters on feminine existence in the “Lived Experience” section of *The Second Sex*. Here we learn that a girl who attempts to render herself docile simultaneously denies but indirectly reengages the mode of imposition on the world whose parallel is identified in the boy’s use of his fists.

The effects are seen in a corporeal ambiguity Beauvoir characterizes as a form of distinctively raging feminine embodiment. She depicts girls and women who have highly contradictory aims and are exceptionally hostile. We are told that “[t]he majority of women suppress their spontaneous impulses out of [the norms of] morality and decency” but that “these impulses flare up in scenes, slaps, anger fits, insults, punishments”. (557)

If they have relinquished a number of active impulses, it is with the expectation that assuming femininity and cultivating the domestic and maternal arts will deliver an alternative and compensating means of being valued. Beauvoir argues that they are inevitably disappointed — and will feel betrayed — on this point. The women depicted in *The Second Sex* are frequently panicked, in various states of rebellion (very often those of passive aggression), or overt anger. We hear of the housework undertaken with such angry zeal that the woman “would like to stop everyone from breathing,”¹⁵ and cleaning up becomes a form of “attack[ing] life itself through the rubbish left from any living growth”. (477) We hear of the mother’s frustration manifesting itself in forms of tyranny and cruelty (556f.), in resentment of, and competition with, her children, and, whether or not she is aware of it, a deadly fury towards her husband.

Beauvoir sees this female hostility and its accompanying disgust manifesting in an elaborate circulating network of affective exchange. Among the instances, she writes of adolescent females feeling “a certain repulsion for the man’s body”, but writes also of how those women who do claim their freedom and are involved in their own projects feel disgust for “submissive” women. (429, 422f.) The references to sexuality in these discussions are not confined to heterosexuality. She describes the hostility of some heterosexual woman towards their homosexual friends, but when she describes same-sex relations between women, these also are variously described in terms of hostility also. (419) In other words, Beauvoir describes most women as dominated by variations of hostility.

Of course, Beauvoir takes humans to be ordinarily aggressive, at least in the sense that they want to impose, go beyond the world and its expectations, use fists if necessary. But the kind of aggression she attributes to women, whether passive or flagrant, is different. It has a specifically thwarted character. Moreover, it is directed at the figures for whom the woman is supposed to solicitously care — lovers, parents, children, friends.

One of the characteristics of Beauvoir's account of this aggression is that it is relatively energetic. It is a highly charged resentment and disgust circulating through human relations and material objects and activities, the work in the home, the relationship to dust, to baked items, to cleanliness, and refracting back against the woman herself and her aims. The phenomenon is also associated with sadomasochistic aims and practices (366f., 476, 478)¹⁶ explicable in quasi-psychoanalytic terms. (476, 478) According to her diagnosis of female "sadomasochistic crazes", "if the girl indulges in them, it means she accepts, through her rejections, her future as woman; she would not mutilate her flesh with hatred if first she did not recognize herself as flesh".

She tells us that whereas the outwardly aggressive boy "engages in effective violence", by contrast the girl "watches herself suffer" and so "can only destroy" (367), for "even her violent outbursts arise from a situation of resignation" (367). Beauvoir associates the very degree of intensity with the degree of resignation. The boy, by contrast, manifests the more ordinary levels of feeling involved in "picking a quarrel with a friend", "affirming oneself as subject with [one's] fists", "imposing himself on the world." Describing the girl's knowledge that "affirming herself, imposing herself are forbidden", explaining her heart must, by contrast, be filled with revolt, Beauvoir concludes that in consequence she can only destroy. Thus we are told "there is despair in her rage [...] violence against herself or the universe around her always has a negative character" (367). In fact, this violence is both negative and complex. It is an ambivalent compression of knowing, believing "and perhaps wishing" for one's own being-sabotaged, and it is described as particularly intense.

In sum, while Beauvoir understands aggression to be human rather than characteristically male, she thinks it is considered ordinary only in men. In women it emerges bound up with exorbitance, extremity and fury against the contradictory demands on them. The feminine version may be outwardly directed in anger (resentment, hostility, withering criticism, punishment of others, sadism), or inwardly directed (self-punishment, self-mutilation, masochism). Whether inwardly or outwardly directed, it is understood as thwarted aggression. And however much it is associated with resignation, Beauvoir sees it as highly active, albeit negatively so:

when she puts a slug on her chest, when she swallows a bottle of aspirin, when she wounds herself, the girl is defying her future lover: you will never inflict on me anything more horrible than I inflict on myself. Destined to be a passive prey, she claims her freedom right up to submitting to pain and disgust. (366f.)

IV. Dead Femininity and Charged Affect

The interesting result is that while *The Second Sex* describes femininity as constitutively disappointed, the quality of resignation described by Beauvoir is anything but “flat” in affect. It may be associated with death in a number of ways, including the repetition, stasis, pointlessness, and lack of creativity she attributes to femininity. Yet one starts to doubt the lack of creativity of these women who would like everyone to stop breathing.

Women may repeat conventional feminine roles, and their work, most obviously housework, is deemed monotonous and mechanical (481). Yet the women themselves could not be so described. Turning oneself into an entity who performs this work appears to involve large amounts of violent passion.

Thus a consistent interpretation throughout the work is Beauvoir’s refiguring of the image of female virtue. The caring, self-sacrificing, house-proud figures giving feminine touches to domestic interiors, the angels in the house, are reinterpreted as elaborately antagonistic, towards others, toward their environments and towards themselves. In 1949, Beauvoir describes women under social and economic coercion to cultivate a dutiful femininity investing themselves in this very thoroughly, in their relationships to love, marriage and maternity, generating an appealing house environment, a feminine appearance, an effort-infused approximation of the good wife and mother. She sees in these efforts not only the ill-recognized anger, but variants on sadism and masochism she suggests compensate for a sense of powerlessness. The woman punishes herself out of a perceived incapacity to punish others, or she punishes others indirectly, or, she punishes herself as a means of punishing others. Quite possibly she sniffs the rage in her rampant goodness and punishes (herself or other) or compensates for it, all the more in consequence.

How best to understand this particular kind of intensity? There are a number of references to Nietzsche in *The Second Sex*, though not to his account of slave morality. But from a contemporary perspective, we could certainly put Beauvoir’s description in dialogue with a number of theorists, most obviously Janet Halley and Wendy Brown, who have argued of *ressentiment*, and raging righteousness, that it “produces a culprit responsible for the hurt

and it produces a site of revenge to displace the hurt” and in its “triple achievement, [...] produces an affect (rage, righteousness) that overwhelms the hurt”.¹⁷ Readings from Brown and Halley¹⁸ have offered acute accounts not only of *ressentiment* but more specifically its characteristic intensity, which Brown interprets in terms of its rerouting distraction — the anger becomes a more dominant force than the wound. The very attachment to the wound thereby succeeds in distracting from the wound.

This phenomenon may not be thoroughly addressed by Beauvoir’s conclusions, yet it is omnipresent in the descriptions of femininity’s violent impulses. In Brown’s reading, the extreme attachment to the wound is one of the poisonous aspects of the phenomenon. This is a Nietzsche-inflected reading of how, in the “attempt to displace its suffering” from hurt to affect, “identity structured by *ressentiment* at the same time becomes invested in its own subjection”.¹⁹ The toxic result, on Brown’s diagnosis, is an “investment in [one’s] own impotence”, whose contradictory, self-belying raging affect (such as intense attachment to narratives of injustice whose concurrent delivery of satisfaction is likely disavowed) functions to “assuage the pain of its powerlessness”.²⁰

Unlike Brown, Beauvoir does not direct her parallel interests in Nietzsche and in women’s situation to the purposes of an overtly Nietzschean reading of the strange intensity she identifies in femininity. But perhaps she would have concurred with Brown’s suggestion that an existence “premised on exclusion and fueled by... suffering... is as likely to seek generalized [...] paralysis”²¹, and it seems both Brown and Beauvoir could at least agree in identifying in this attachment to paralysis its satisfying, and distracting, strong affective charge. For both, the very intensity of feeling intertwines with an attachment to immobility, the whole becoming entrenched and communicated, proliferating habit. Thus it is an option to explore *The Second Sex*’s contribution to this compendium of feminized bodies of *ressentiment*, exploring their affective as well as material life.

V. The Excess of Liveliness in Feminine Stasis

To look back at *The Second Sex* through the lens of questions salient to contemporary theory need not mean losing sight of their different intellectual contexts. Instead we can think of their potential to engage each other, with degrees of resistance. This allows us to consider more closely the excesses to Beauvoir’s own vision of femininity’s stasis, and to see more than the workshop of poison and bad air.

In describing the extremity, Beauvoir describes a kind of theatricality, of exaggeration and

exaggerated performance, verging at times on the melodramatic, the ridiculous, belonging to a different tradition of depictions of femininity more in communication with what eventually came to be associated with camp.²²

Beauvoir was amenable to thinking about femininity as performed. She saw women as “always onstage” (585), “playacting” (271), constantly in the mode of incited dissimulation “taught from adolescence to lie to men, to outsmart, to sidestep them [...] approach[ing] them with artificial expressions” (271). On the one hand, some of these roles were in conflict, as when Beauvoir describes a tension between women’s role as homemaker and their cultivation of an enigmatic impassivity. On the other hand, though sometimes adopting multiple or conflicting roles, she also describes women as at risk of becoming entrapped in these roles. She did not use the phenomenon as a context for rethinking what it was to stage femininity. She appears not to have identified this as an interesting phenomenon in which there may be indirect kinds of creativity. Nor did she see any indication of the possible forms of transformation within femininity’s repetition, although there might have been further potential in her own point that women’s incited self-staging might be self-contradictory.

She left little room for interpreting the bodily irony, the more surprising forms of aestheticization, even the frivolity embedded in her descriptions. Whether she was considering women’s more extreme, belligerent or the highly dedicated versions of femininity, she did not see in the fact of exaggeration, the performed aspects, or the very intensity of sensation, possibilities such as implicit questioning, parody, tacit resistance or inventive adaptivity in relation to the conventions of femininity.

They stifle, letting no oxygen in the room. It is striking how few heuristic alternatives Beauvoir mobilizes for considering the malicious angels of the house.

So, despite her own point that a woman might be attempting to stage both an effect of the ideal housewife *and* a feminine inscrutability, she argues that this staging of “mystery conceals nothing but emptiness” (271). Women’s mystery is that there is no mystery; there are no reserves of interest, complexity or unpredictability to be found:

for many women, the roads to transcendence are blocked: because they *do* nothing, they do not make themselves *be* anything; they wonder indefinitely what they *could have* become. (271)

Yet characterizing femininity's conduct, Beauvoir seems intrigued by its capacity to verge towards extremity, excess, and gestures in bad taste. The girl who wants to avoid a party in the pages of *The Second Sex* will take an axe to her foot. Beauvoir interprets this as the sadomasochistic, refusal of femininity to which she devotes much attention, to be sure. But there is also an element of the ridiculous, and of what a later reader might have identified as camp domestic drama, and an aesthetic quality to which she does not speak.

For Beauvoir, the variants of femininity were infused with hyperbolic emotion and gesture, restricted to household interiors of misery and melodrama. But she looks through such aspects, rather than subjecting them to further interpretation. Describing the enactment of roles by those whose expectations have been repeatedly disappointed, her descriptions exceed her explanation of their deadness by the vividness with which intense chagrin is depicted: the smoldering resentment, the relentlessness of the housewives, their "deep" jealousy, their death wishes, their fury that what they bake is only going to be eaten, their merciless perfecting of houses which are continually sullied by life, their maniacal housework.

We might include here a different scrutiny of some of the most jarring aspects of *The Second Sex* including the same-sex relations between women depicted (as are her depictions of female masculinity) in terms redolent of early to mid-twentieth-century lesbian melodrama.

Women incite each other to incredible violence [...]. Women among themselves are pitiless; they foil, provoke, chase, attack, and lead each other on to the limits of abjection. Between two women friends there is escalation of tears and convulsions [...] demands, recriminations, jealousy, tyranny — all these plagues of conjugal life pour out in heightened form. (433)

But perhaps their very ludicrousness should not be seen as peripheral to *The Second Sex*. It belongs, like the sadomasochism deemed widespread among teenage girls, and wives, and the sensory quality of the revenge narratives, to a distinctive register within the work.

The prose of this register matches the phenomenon it characterizes, favoring the adjectival. Rather than telling us of women who want to please she tells us of women who "ardently" [*ardemment*] want to please men (156/I, 228)²³, we learn not of girls who are merely dismayed by their changing bodies but of girls who are *horrified* [*ont horreur*] by them (317/II, 63)]; not of young women who dislike, but rather who are *revolted* [*révolté*] by the

prospect of sex [315/II, 54], or who feel *disgust* [*degoût*] for their fathers (335/II, 74). Girls are not just shy, rather they become “*pathologically* [*maladivement*] shy,” [321—323/II, 58]. Grown women are not just averse to aging, but face “*doleful*” [*mornes*] hours of depression (623/II, 406), looking towards what is described as the “*desert*” [*désert*] of the future (633/I, 417).

Women develop a *morbid* jealousy towards their husbands [*une jalousie morbide*] (625/II, 406), having cultivated a *morbid* anxiety [*anxiété morbide*] (559/II, 329) about their children, they “*tremble*” [*tremble*] about them overworking (629/II, 411), or they “*ardently*” [*fougueusement*] push their sons in directions such as gallantry (631/II, 414), or they are “*devious, calculating, dangerous* [*intrigante, intéressée, dangeureuse*]” (630/II, 412) about their son’s love interests, or they so “*passionately*” [*passionément*] identify with their daughter (631/II, 414), that in their jealousy they impede this rival’s every life opportunity. Or they try to reincarnate themselves in others, but so passionately [*passionément*] that their generosity also takes a tyrannical [*tyrannique*] form (633/I, 416),

Referring to schoolgirls, inevitably she cites those of Leontine Sagan’s 1931 *Mädchen in Uniform* (355, 358), and of Clémence Dane’s *Regiment of Women* whose desires are “*ardently*” [*des passions d’une brûlante ardeur*] inflamed for their schoolteachers. Describing girls’ sadomasochistic crazes, she describes the girl who “gashes her thigh with a razor, burns herself with cigarettes, cuts and scratches herself” (366). We’re not just told that the housewife likes to collect things for the home, but that “because she does nothing, she *avidly* [*avidement*] seeks herself in what she has” (471/II, 232). Beauvoir refers to their “*capricious* [*capricieux*] sadism (558/II, 329), to the *sauvage* character of their emotions about their daughters [II, 336], we learn of their capacity to beat their sons wildly, only to sob with “*remorse and tenderness*” [*remords et de tendresse*] (554/II, 327). Or women might aim to enslave themselves [*se font les esclaves*] to their offspring (559/II, 329). This is not yet to have mentioned the chapter in which Beauvoir mentions, as a variation on femininity, women mystics who torture their flesh, suck pus from the wounds of patients, lick the stones on a holy path (714). This is the rhetorical context in which Beauvoir recounts: “so as not to go to a boring garden party a girl during my youth cut her foot with an axe and had to spend six weeks in bed” (366).

Certainly, Beauvoir offers an explanation of the viciousness, the anger and the sadomasochism, but not of the drama and excess which accompany these. When Beauvoir takes herself to be describing women’s disappointed expectations, her account is not *about* the tears and convulsions but about women forlornly seeking approval. It refers

incessantly to the affect of avidity, adjectivally marking the difference between seeking approval and *avidly* seeking approval — but without speaking to that difference.

As we saw, Brown, by way of a Nietzschean reading, would have an explanation. The very intensity of the affect functions to overwhelm the wound, distracting from it. At the same time, if these extremes of femininity seem in affinity with what would come to be called feminine camp, Beauvoir's own conclusions would at best have considered this a lifeless form. In her economy of vitality versus dead repetition, femininity is characterized as irretrievably dead — repetitive, resentful, uncreative. And because working and making (rather than mere reproduction) are the areas in which humans impose themselves. Beauvoir identifies nothing creative or productive, nor interesting surpluses of poetics or adroit whimsy with which feminism is reproduced, still less in the role of reproduction. There is no lightness or quickness. The preposterousness or fabulous melodrama does not lead to conclusions about transformation in iteration.²⁴ There are excesses but no play of excesses — the excesses do not play.

More recently, some of the most important innovations in contemporary feminist thought have suspected we could understand the repetition of gender norms otherwise — as bearing more instability, more surprise, more trouble — if not specifically parody, distance, resistance. And certainly, from the perspective of her literal arguments, Beauvoir is not the figure to whom we would appeal for an account of how repetition is never just repetition. But this is also a question of “how to read”. Does one direct an eye at Beauvoir's texts with an interest in what we could call their reserves? Do we mobilize multiple options for thinking about the excesses in which she shows an interest? Asking this question, we can direct attention more concertedly at the lurid detail, the rhetorically striking, but at times also ludicrous passages. Some may be the least discussed moments of *The Second Sex*. But some belong to Beauvoir's most inspired descriptions, as in her celebrated account of the tragically absurd war (described as both sadomasochistic and manic) with the dust and the fluff:

The wife is not called to build a better world; the house, the bedroom, the dirty laundry, the wooden floors, are fixed things: she can do no more than rout out indefinitely the foul causes that creep in; she attacks the dust, stains, mud, and filth; she fights sin, she fights with Satan [...]. Whenever a living being enters her sphere, her eyes shine with a wicked fire. (476)

True, this lively passage is also described as a loss of *joie de vivre*, and as a gloomy vice

which is definitively distinguished by Beauvoir from its alternative: women who, instead, can “generously love life” (477). But I have suggested something captured by Beauvoir in her own prose is overlooked by her — the intensity of attachment and expression with which this gloomy vice is also depicted, the drama, the elaborate stagings, the intensity of rage is sufficiently vital to overwhelm the hurt, the axe seeming to indicate more than just paralysis.

Since she does not make the point herself, Beauvoir’s account is well supplemented by Brown’s view that the affect serves to distract from the resignation. On this view, to attach passionately to the wound stands in for other alternatives, new creations, for seeking one’s own “collective liberation through empowerment”.²⁵ I think we can agree with this insight while still scrutinizing with renewed attention the excesses. For while the intensity alone does not, for Beauvoir, put these women on the side of the vital as opposed to the static, let alone on the side of what Brown would have deemed “self-affirming action”²⁶, something in that intensity does call for further attention: bodily theater, displayed spectacle, grand expressiveness, an exaggeration of effect, or an aesthetics which gravitates not just towards anti-life, but also towards the larger than life.

VI. Endocrine Secretions

This brings me to one further aspect of Beauvoir’s exorbitantly raging feminine bodies:

Her life is spent scrubbing pots and pans, and it is a marvelous romance; vassal to man, she believes she is his idol, debased in her flesh, she exalts Love. Because she is condemned to know only Life’s contingent facticity, she becomes priestess of the ideal. This ambivalence is marked by the way the woman deals with her body. It is a burden, weakened by the species, bleeding every month, passively propagating, for her it is not the pure instrument of her grasp on the world but rather an opaque presence, it is not certain that it will give her pleasure and it creates pains that tear her apart; it contains threats, she feels danger in her “insides”, her body is “hysterical” because of the close connection between endocrine secretions and nervous and sympathetic systems commanding muscles and viscera; it expresses reactions the woman refuses to accept: in sobs, convulsions and vomiting her body escapes her, it betrays her [...] and yet it is her marvelous double, she contemplates it, [...] it is the promise of happiness, a work of art. (656f.)

Because of their consistently negative character, such depictions of female biology are also deemed *The Second Sex*’s more dated passages.

Yet as Beauvoir thinks about the “endocrine secretions and nervous and sympathetic systems commanding muscles and viscera”, the contemporary feminist reader, looking back, might begin to speculate about how this could be read in dialogue with recent directions in feminist theory grouped under the label of new materialist feminisms,²⁷ a question which might lead to Elizabeth Wilson’s *Gut Feminism*.

Read in part through a speculative return to Ferenczi, Wilson has asked how the bingeing and vomiting of bulimia is able to become “functionally autonomous”. According to the heuristic she suggests, it can become “extremely difficult to treat: [because] the organism itself is beginning to think. Distress, anger, need, depression, comfort, and attachment have become primarily organic”. It is true that one way of understanding this claim would be to see a reference to “behavioral intent or cultural transformation or disorder in higher cortical centers or mechanisms of unconscious representation”, which would then translate into physical expression or symptom. Wilson offers an alternative, however, proposing that we instead understand the “vicissitudes of ingestion and vomiting [as] complex thinking enacted organically: bingeing and purging are the substrata themselves attempting to question, solve, control, calculate, protect, and destroy”.²⁸ Thus, Wilson has suggested an analysis should not be limited to describing the gut (or in this case, eating disorders) as *expressing* anger or depression but, instead, *as* angry or depressed.²⁹ This means of understanding bodily affect, and the agency of the nervous system and the digestive system, more specifically, would transform some habits and conventions of feminist theory.³⁰ For, as Wilson notes, somatic conflict has most typically been understood as an expression of conflict lying elsewhere, mentally or psychically, if not specifically unconscious.

So the latter allows a new set of questions to be directed at *The Second Sex*. As we consider Beauvoir’s compendium of highly conflicted feminine bodies, much about her account does appear to be tacitly committed to seeing corporeal and affective conflict as (to use Wilson’s terms) ideational and symbolic. We might attribute to her some kind of translation model, even if she is not overtly committed to a corresponding theoretical model of somatic symptoms. For example, when Beauvoir describes female disgust — at sex, at one’s body, at husbands — as directly manifesting in her vomiting (541), the disgust is still located “elsewhere” —and is expressed somatically. Beauvoir also envisages ideational content not unlike the somatic expressions of the unconscious seen in some understandings of female hysteria. Sometimes an undisguised and very literal thought process for somatic refusal is depicted (“since men like plump women,³¹ I’m going to remain extremely thin”(321). Sometimes the somatic models are causal: as when Beauvoir describes heterosexual

intercourse as upsetting the woman to the point of causing vomiting (186). Similarly she describes constipation, diarrhea and vomiting as expressive of desire, anguish or fear in women (541) translated corporeally.

Yet is this always the case? It's interesting to re-read *The Second Sex* with this question in mind. One is also more alert to different resonances within these accounts in the wake of *Gut Feminism* (2015).³² For sometimes Beauvoir writes of bodies in anguish, and not just as manifesting bodily symptoms "expressing" psychic anguish. Perhaps the best characterization might deem such accounts more promisingly unstable in their philosophical commitments.

Consider, for example, what Beauvoir seems to have in mind when she pictures a woman's stomach pains as the very activity of the species taking possession of her. The woman's vomiting is understood in this context as the "body's revolt against the species taking possession of it" (42). It is understood as "expressing reactions the woman refuses to accept" (657). When we look again, such passages can take on a different tenor. Irrespective of our assessment of Beauvoir's concept of the woman's bodily refusal of her "species being", the recalcitrance does seem to belong more directly to the realm of the "gut". Sometimes, the corporeal itself is, in Beauvoir's work, seemingly in a more direct form of revolt.

So one question is whether some variant of "organic thinking" could be attributed to the high proportion of nauseous and vomiting women of Beauvoir's *Second Sex*. Another is what the French phenomenological traditions might have contributed to these accounts of embodied subjectivity. In reverse direction, what unique contributions does Beauvoir make, through this material, to this intellectual tradition? Can Beauvoir's work contribute to the project of identifying the thought of the nervous system?

Asking these questions, we need not lose sight of the difference between the contextual resonances of biology for Beauvoir, and for Wilson. And I have suggested a form of exchange between these texts through which Wilson's perspective allows us to foreground different elements of *The Second Sex*. Wilson's proposal that the gut is thinking and problem-solving gives us a new philosophical perspective with which to consider Beauvoir's binging and purging feminine bodies and the favoring of feminine excess which emerges in her account. At the same time, once the resources of *The Second Sex* are differently construed through this encounter, we can also reconsider the distinctive contributions of its critical reserves. And this is to think the role of excess differently also. How might we understand that verging towards elaborate exaggeration as a form of the body's style?

Ideally, a rereading of *The Second Sex* through this alternative optics could also produce questions for Wilson. For example, do some of the verbs with which organic thinking is explicated in *Gut Feminism* favor the depiction of more serious rather than ludic or absurd forms of thought? It is understandable that the most powerful version of the argument would take the route of resituating in the nervous system and intestinal the forms of thinking most typically associated with the brain: the more rational or sober forms seen in the reference to intestinal questioning and calculating.

This is not a question prompted by Wilson, nor by Beauvoir's work, alone. My suggestion is that it arises once one explores the excesses³³ in Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* foregrounded by means of the latter's encounter with new interlocutors. Could we also identify the thinking gut as acting not just critically and defensively, not just as the critical thinker, but also as the lurid dramatist, the exaggerator — without being limited to the model of psychic translation, or the ideational gut? In what other terms could we understand its exorbitant styles of thought?

Of course, psychoanalytic accounts have leaned most towards modeling the body as manifesting (through mechanisms analogous to condensation and displacement) a trouble located elsewhere, with components which may be metonymic, ludic, poetic, Wilson turns to Ferenczi for an alternative in this regard. She easily finds in Ferenczi's work an elaboration of fantastical bodily thinking: "I see support for Ferenczi's thesis of a protopsychic substrate that is capable of differentiated, fantastic action (a lump in the throat, a child in the stomach, a penis in the rectum"³⁴). But she locates the Ferenczi who can identify an "organism that begins to think" — not, comments Wilson, a biological expression of the unconscious but a biological unconscious. And it is striking that the material cited from Ferenczi in this regard is more aligned with the ludic, as with his reference to "the stomach and the bowel [that] play puppet games with their own walls and contents, instead of digesting and excreting their contents"³⁵ and to the tricks of the musculature of the intestine.³⁶

So it is through the intersection of Beauvoir and Wilson's guts that I propose the question: what versions of gut thinking could include a focus on the ludic, ludicrous or exaggerated *without* requiring a translational modeling? What might be the equivalent in Beauvoir's work to that biological unconscious which most moves Wilson's discussion towards the direct play and tricks of the intestine?

In describing the gut's moods, rather than understanding the gut as translating psychic

states, it is not surprising that *Gut Feminism* foregrounds discussions of anger, depression and self-destruction. So, too, does Beauvoir, whose vomiting women keep the focus on registers of gut hostility as intense, excessive, exaggerated, and florid.

So let us return to a formulation from Wilson:

The gut is sometimes angry, sometimes depressed, sometimes acutely self-destructive; under the stress of severe dieting, these inclinations come to dominate the gut's responsiveness to the world. At these moments any radical distinction between stomach and mood, between vomiting and rage is artificial.³⁷

We can think about the eloquence of Beauvoir's evocation of intensities of corporeal rage. If there is any kind of gut feminism in Beauvoir's work, her version is *lush*. It is a gut of *ressentiment*, but as such, also lurid gut, vicious, cruel and petty, a comic repeater, perhaps not incapable of mocking (not as a translation, but directly, corporeally) with its very style its own tragedies. Though it is to push Beauvoir's text to its edges to make the suggestion, it might be a gut capable of gut camp.

Reading from the perspective of Wilson's project allows us to intensify attention to such resonances in *The Second Sex*. It is to look in new ways for and at excessive reserves in this well-known text. And it adds to the capacity to think of the questioning, solving, controlling, calculating, protecting and destroying gut, so as to include the flamboyance of some of Beauvoir's protesting feminine bodies, nervous systems, and organs. It is to refract *The Second Sex's* intermittent preference for the language of translation or expression through the alternative proposed by *Gut Feminism*, so as to remodulate the 1949 work's intermittent characterization of more direct forms of bodily thinking, including the intestinal. Doing so, we can foreground Beauvoir's idiosyncratic interest in its expressive exorbitance.

Advance notice about

Differences: Between Beauvoir and Irigaray (ed. Emily A. Parker and Anne van Leeuwen, Oxford, Oxford University Press, forthcoming).

The projects of Simone de Beauvoir and Luce Irigaray rarely are put into dialogue. The first collection of essays to do so, this volume moves beyond the terms of a simple opposition:

that Beauvoir advocates for a humanistic equality of subjects while Irigaray advocates for an exploration of the inherently sexuate specificity of bodies. The volume includes essays that offer a new exploration of the place of the material and the corporeal in Beauvoir's thought. These essays situate Beauvoir's thought beyond the framework of a theory of gender and beyond the framework of humanism. On the basis of these interpretations of Beauvoir, a second group of essays articulate points of dialogue between Beauvoir and Irigaray in logic, ethics, and politics, renewing a critical investigation of under-appreciated moments in their work.

Dieser Beitrag ist Teil eines Soziopolis-Schwerpunkts zum 30. Todestag von Simone de Beauvoir (1908–1986). Weitere Texte finden Sie [hier](#).

Endnoten

1. A version of this essay will also be published in: Emily A. Parker / Anne van Leeuwen (eds.), *Differences: Between Beauvoir and Irigaray*, Oxford 2016 [forthcoming]. For helpful comments on this paper, my warm thanks to Emily A. Parker, and to participants at two events at which first versions were read in 2011 – the “Classics in Feminist Theory Series” at the Center for Gender Studies, University of Chicago – and particularly Linda Zerilli – and the conference “A Matter of Distance: Beauvoir and Irigaray” at the Jan van Eyck Academie, Maastricht, The Netherlands, organized by Emily A. Parker and Anne Van Leeuwen.
2. Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble. Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, New York 1999, p. 8.
3. Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, translated by Constance Borde and Sheila Malovany-Chevallier, New York 2010, p. 283 and 6. In the following, this work will be quoted with pages numbers directly inserted in the text.
4. A focus on sexual violence is a surprising omission from *The Second Sex*.
5. Richard Wright, *Native Son*, New York 1993, p. 17.
6. “By reviewing prehistoric and ethnographic data in the light of existentialist philosophy, we can understand how the hierarchy of the sexes came to be” (71).
7. Beauvoir compares the open horizons of some children: “The child thinks of the future as an indefinite ascent toward some unidentified summit” (475), with the disappointed despondency — or disavowed anger — of those who have discovered that their horizons are, in fact, severely circumscribed: “We know the story of the valet who despondently refused to polish his master’s boots. ‘What’s the point? [...] You have to begin again the next day’. Many still unresigned young girls share this discouragement” (474).
8. “For about a century, the reproductive function has no longer been controlled by biological chance alone but by design.” (524)
9. Moira Gatens, *Beauvoir and Biology: A Second Look*, in: Claudia Card (ed.), *The*

Cambridge Companion to Simone De Beauvoir, Cambridge 2003, pp. 266–285, quotation on p. 268.

10. And, as Julia Kristeva notes, “la liberté dont il s'agit, loin de tout spontanéisme naïf, est une ‘liberté qui doit contester en son propre nom les moyens dont elle use pour se conquérir’” (Julia Kristeva, Beauvoir aux risques de la liberté, in: Julia Kristeva / Pascale Fautrier / Pierre-Louis Fort / Anne Strasser (eds.), (Re)Découvrir L'Oeuvre de Simone de Beauvoir, Paris 2008, 11–16, quotation on p. 11, citing Beauvoir’s Ethics of Ambiguity).
11. Judith Butler, Performative Acts and Gender Constitution. An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory, in: Theatre Journal 40 (1988), 4, pp. 519–531, quotation on p. 522.
12. Elsewhere Butler has rendered Beauvoir’s position as follows: “We never experience or know ourselves as a body pure and simple, i.e. as our ‘sex’, because we never know our sex outside of its expression as gender. Lived or experienced, ‘sex’ is always gendered” (Judith Butler, Sex and Gender in Beauvoir's Second Sex, in: Yale French Studies 72 (1986), pp. 35–49, quotation on p. 39). For her refutation of one of Butler’s (several) readings of Beauvoir, see Gatens’ critique of the ascription of a concept of gender to Beauvoir: “despite the readings offered by Butler and others, it is doubtful whether Beauvoir understood ‘woman’ in terms of gender. If Beauvoir were to have made a sex-gender distinction, there is much evidence in The Second Sex to suggest she would have made it in terms other than those drawn by contemporary feminism” (Gatens, Beauvoir and Biology, p. 276f.).
13. There is no exact French equivalent for “gender”, thus the French context has adapted by incorporated references to the English term “gender”, untranslated. On this question see Stella Sandford, Sex. A Transdisciplinary Concept, in: Radical Philosophy 165 (2011), pp. 23–30.
14. Butler also thought a certain reading of Beauvoir could be offered so as to construe sex as gender: “If the pure body cannot be found, if what can be found is the situated body, a locus of cultural interpretations, the Simone de Beauvoir’s theory seems to ask whether sex was not gender all along”(Judith Butler, Sex and Gender in Beauvoir's Second Sex, in: Yale French Studies 72 ¹⁹⁸⁶, pp. 35-49, quotation on p. 46).
15. Beauvoir also refers to Bachelard on malicious modes of housework: “It is a sad destiny to have to repel an enemy without respite instead of being turned towards positive

aims; the housewife often submits to it in rage. Bachelard uses the word ‘malice’ for it, psychoanalysts have written about it. For them, housekeeping mania is a form of sadomasochism; it is characteristic of mania and vice to make freedom want what it does not want ; because the maniacal housekeeper detests having negativity, dirt” (476).

16. Beauvoir also associates forms of sadomasochism with bad faith (367).
17. Janet Halley, *Split Decisions. How and Why to Take a Break from Feminism*, Princeton 2008; and Wendy Brown, *States of Injury. Power and Freedom in Late Modernity*, Princeton 1995, p. 68.
18. Brown, *States of Injury*, and Halley, *Split Decisions*.
19. Brown, *States of Injury*, p. 70.
20. Brown, like Janet Halley, also foregrounds the “vengeful moralizing” of some forms of women’s (and feminist) resentment (*ibid.*, p. 70).
21. *ibid.*, p. 70.
22. Pamela Robertson has discussed the merits of using the term in a feminist context, suggesting Joan Crawford’s performance of femininity can be seen as camp. She disagrees with those who would restrict the term’s application to more obviously queer or oppositional modes (Pamela Robertson, *Guilty Pleasures. Feminist Camp from Mae West to Madonna*, in: Morris Meyer [ed.], *The Politics and Poetics of Camp*, New York / London 1994, p. 1).
23. The page numbers in the following three paragraphs refer to the English edition of *The Second Sex* and (in cases with two references) to the French original: Simone de Beauvoir, *Le deuxième sexe*, Paris 1949, vol. 1–2.
24. As compared, of course to Butler’s influential account: “If the ground of gender identity is the stylized repetition of acts through time, and not a seemingly seamless identity, then the possibilities of gender transformation are to be found in the arbitrary relation between such acts, in the possibility of a different sort of repeating, in the breaking or subversive repetition of that style” (Butler, *Gender Trouble*, p. 520).

25. Brown, *States of Injustice*, p. 71.
26. *ibid.*, p. 71.
27. For the coining of this term, see Stacy Alaimo / Susan Hekman (eds.), *Material Feminisms*, Bloomington, IN, 2008; and Diana Coole / Samantha Frost (eds.), *New Materialisms. Ontology, Agency, and Politics*, Durham, NJ, 2010.
28. Elizabeth Wilson, "Gut Feminism", in: *differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies* 15 (2004), 3, pp. 66–94, all quotations from p. 82.
29. *ibid.*, p. 79, 84.
30. For her refutation, see Sara Ahmed, *Open Forum Imaginary Prohibitions: Some Preliminary Remarks*, in: *European Journal of Women's Studies* 15 (2008), 1, pp. 23–39.
31. This reads strangely to some contemporary readers.
32. Elizabeth Wilson, *Gut Feminism*, Durham 2015.
33. See also Penelope Deutscher, *The Philosophy of Simone de Beauvoir. Conversion, Ambiguity, Resistance*, Cambridge 2008.
34. Wilson, "Gut Feminism", p. 84.
35. *ibid.*, p. 66.
36. *ibid.*, p. 73.
37. *ibid.*, p. 81f.

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