

BEAUVOIR, MERLEAU-PONTY, AND THE PHENOMENOLOGY OF RELATION

This essay addresses the way in which Simone de Beauvoir's first novel, *L'invitée* (1943), anticipates certain thematics in *Le deuxième sexe* but does so in a more phenomenological and less dialectical fashion. Like many of her contemporaries (Jean-Paul Sartre, Albert Camus, Georges Bataille, Maurice Blanchot, Pierre Klossowski), Beauvoir wrote both philosophy and fiction, and often these two genres are hard to distinguish. Just as *L'invitée* is frequently read as a mouthpiece for existentialist philosophy, so *Le deuxième sexe* is itself a mouthpiece for a continued investigation of some of the themes first introduced in fictional form in *L'invitée*, most notably—and what will be at issue here—a phenomenology of relation to others. Whereas *L'invitée* concerns an intricate trio of relationships modeled after Beauvoir's own experiences with Sartre and Olga Kosakiewicz, most of Beauvoir's discussions of relationships in *Le deuxième sexe* concern the two-person couple, primarily heterosexual. While *Le deuxième sexe* overtly addresses woman's relation to man in the couple, as well as spaces where woman is independent of this construct, *L'invitée*, through the inner reflections of the character Françoise, explores more broadly woman's relation to others. It is this phenomenology of how to perceive and relate to others, a phenomenology blatantly at issue in *L'invitée*, that is, I will argue, the unresolved subtext of *Le deuxième sexe*.

Merleau-Ponty on *L'invitée*

Of signal importance to this argument is Maurice Merleau-Ponty's exceptional response to *L'invitée*, "Le roman et la métaphysique," collected in 1948 in *Sens et non-sens*, just before the appearance of *Le deuxième sexe* in 1949. Through a series of reflections on the novel's central trio—Françoise, Pierre, and Xavière—Merleau-Ponty hails *L'invitée* as signaling "la fin d'une littérature 'morale'" (49) and the beginning of a metaphysical literature, one that suggests new ethical dimensions of human interaction.

On one level, *L'invitée's* plot is not entirely atypical: it is that of the love triangle gone awry. Françoise and Pierre, both thirty, are an independent Parisian couple. They have an open relationship; Pierre has affairs on the side, which he recounts to Françoise; they seem unshakable—until Françoise introduces her twenty-year-old friend Xavière into the picture. For a time they are a happy trio, until

Xavière's unswerving apathy and selfishness challenge the very foundation of the bond between Pierre and Françoise. Unexpectedly, Pierre falls in love with Xavière, and even more unexpectedly, Françoise becomes jealous—a sentiment she thought she had transcended—and takes a melodramatic revenge. As Merleau-Ponty so perceptively concludes, it is not the plot as such that provoked the accusations of immorality leveled at this novel when it appeared. Rather, it was the characters' failure to react in a "normal" way that was so disturbing:

Ce qu'on leur reproche, ce n'est pas tant leurs actes: car après tout l'adultère, les perversions, le crime remplissent tous les livres, et les critiques littéraires en ont vu d'autres. La moindre sous-préfecture connaît plus d'un ménage à trois. Mais un ménage à trois est encore un ménage. Le moyen d'admettre au contraire que Pierre, Françoise et Xavière ignorant si complètement la sainte loi naturelle du couple et (d'ailleurs sans ombre de complicité sexuelle) essaient honnêtement de former un trio? Même dans les sociétés les plus strictes, le pécheur est toujours admis parce qu'il fait partie du système et que, comme pécheur, il ne met pas en question les principes. Ce qu'on ne supporte pas chez Pierre et chez Françoise, c'est un désaveu aussi ingénu de la morale, c'est cet air de franchise et de jeunesse, ce manque absolu d'importance, de vertige et de remords, c'est, en un mot, qu'ils pensent comme ils agissent et agissent comme ils pensent. (68)

In Merleau-Ponty's reading, there is no conclusive morality that wins out in the end. The situation is, in his words, "overdetermined." While certain of Françoise's reactions typify those of "l'amoureuse" (according to the chapter of this title in *Le deuxième sexe*, which will be taken up momentarily)—her jealousy, her taking on a new lover, etc.—she simultaneously *does more* than this. She also continually *reflects*, as if from a slight distance, on how these unprecedented actions open up a new dimension of her self, and works to integrate these observations into a new self-perception and new ways of relating to Pierre and Xavière.

For example, in the following passage from *L'invitée*, we witness a complicated series of inner reflections sparked by Françoise's jealousy:

Bien des fois, elle avait été traversée de jalousie, elle avait été tentée de haïr Pierre, de vouloir du mal à Xavière, mais sous le vain prétexte de se garder pure, elle avait fait le vide en elle. Avec une tranquille audace, Xavière choisissait de s'affirmer tout entière; en récompense, elle pesait lourd sur la terre et Pierre se tournait vers elle avec un intérêt passionné. Françoise n'avait pas osé être elle-même, et elle comprenait dans une explosion de souffrance que cette hypocrite lâcheté l'avait conduite à n'être rien du tout. (359)

Françoise is first presented as toying with jealousy and beginning to turn against Pierre and Xavière. Instead she forces an emptiness upon herself in order to avoid such negative reactions. In comparison to Xavière, who is at every moment defiantly and irrepressibly herself, Françoise ends by experiencing a comparative lack. Yet this is but one moment, and Françoise well knows that the situation and her perception of it may change. But it is precisely *this process* of observing herself change that Françoise is here coming to terms with. Rather than deducing a clear moral lesson from the situation (e.g. jealousy cannot be combated, or, repression is inevitable), she leaves such moral conclusions in abeyance. Instead she becomes a more discerning observer of the cycle of emotions to which she initially thought herself immune. While she does not make a pronouncement about the situation itself, she accompanies herself through a metaphysical crisis, which is arguably more instructive.

This interior scenario illustrates Merleau-Ponty's assertion that "Le drame n'est donc pas psychologique, il est métaphysique" (56). Moreover, because of the exemplary metaphysical attributes he finds in *L'invitée*, "Dès lors la tâche de la littérature et celle de la philosophie ne peuvent plus être séparées....D'autre part, une littérature métaphysique sera nécessairement, dans un certain sens, une littérature amoral" (48-49). It is this metaphysical quality of Beauvoir's literature, a literature ultimately indistinguishable from philosophy, that is, I will conclude, also embedded (though less directly) in *Le deuxième sexe*.

While Merleau-Ponty highlights the fundamental impossibility of the lofty constructs with which Pierre and Françoise initially conceive their atypical relationship, he reiterates that this failure is not so much the fault of the characters and their actions as it is a shortcoming in the very relational concept of the couple. After detailing the difficulties of the construct of the trio, he writes,

[Le trio] est impossible—pas beaucoup plus qu'un couple après tout, car dans le couple chacun reste en complicité avec soi-même, l'amour que l'on reçoit n'est pas le même amour que l'on donne. Même à deux, l'unité des vies immédiates n'est pas possible, ce sont les tâches, les projets communs qui font le couple. Pas plus que le trio, le couple humain n'est une réalité *naturelle*; l'échec du trio (comme le succès d'un couple) ne peut pas être mis au compte de quelque prédisposition naturelle. (61-62)

Merleau-Ponty thus underscores the way in which *L'invitée* dismantles the seemingly natural dialectical reciprocity of the couple in favor of a different form of relationality, one that marks a contingent and non-dialectical system of ethics. In this fashion, Merleau-Ponty locates the real novelty of *L'invitée* not so much in its treatment of the situation of the threesome, but in the way the primary couple (Françoise and Pierre) disavows traditional morality and embraces a new phenomenology of relating to others. He summarizes these high praises most boldly in the final lines of “Le roman et la métaphysique”:

Mais plutôt que la situation insolite des trois personnages de *L'invitée*, on ferait bien de remarquer la bonne foi, la fidélité aux promesses, le respect d'autrui, la générosité, le sérieux des deux principaux. Car la valeur est là. Elle consiste à être activement ce que nous sommes par hasard, à établir cette communication avec autrui et avec nous-mêmes dont notre structure temporelle nous offre la chance et dont notre liberté n'est que l'ébauche. (71)

What “Le roman et la métaphysique” illustrates surpassingly is the importance of a phenomenology of relationality—as opposed to a dualistic psychology—in Beauvoir's early fiction, a genre not fundamentally distinct from her philosophical writings. As Sara Heinämaa argues in “Simone de Beauvoir's Phenomenology of Sexual Difference” (118), Beauvoir is not only to be classed as a philosopher, but one whose work is very much indebted to Edmund Husserl and in dialogue with Merleau-Ponty (and both over and above Sartre). In an analysis of Beauvoir's 1945 review of Merleau-Ponty's *Phénoménologie de la perception*, Heinämaa notes that Beauvoir and Merleau-Ponty are in accord in their non-dualistic interpretation of Husserl's work (118). It is also interesting to note that Beauvoir's *Pour une morale de l'ambiguïté*, published in 1947 between *L'invitée* and *Le*

deuxième sexe, presents a similar opposition to dualisms or antinomies. Particularly in the chapter “Les antinomies de l’action,” Beauvoir repeatedly opposes a separation of means and ends, of past and present, and even the positive and negative moments of the Hegelian dialectic. Just as Merleau-Ponty’s reading of *L’invitée* shows the absolute dualism of the couple to be broken down and mixed with uncertainty, so too in *Pour une morale de l’ambiguïté* are dialectical oppositions renounced in favor of a politics of uncertainty and constant questioning:

Pour que le retour au positif soit authentique, il faut qu’il enveloppe la négativité, qu’il ne dissimule pas les antinomies entre moyen et fin, present et avenir, mais qu’elles y soient vécues dans une tension permanente.... Mais nous pensions aussi que ce qui distingue le tyran de l’homme de bonne volonté, c’est que le premier se repose dans la certitude de ses buts, tandis que le second se demande dans une interrogation incessante: Est-ce bien à la libération des hommes que je travaille? (192-193)

Rather than opposition, or even resolution, it is the day to day process of reflection and questioning—what might be called a daily phenomenology of relation—that is of utmost concern.

Phenomenology of Relation in *Le deuxième sexe*

Given such a disinclination towards dualism in Beauvoir’s earlier work, how is this played out in the only slightly later *Le deuxième sexe*? The latter work certainly appears to be less phenomenological and more dualistic in its intricate mapping of woman’s subordinate relation to man. Certainly its mode of argumentation is more dialectical—a point is approached and supported through many examples and lines of analysis, some working in opposition to the others—and its overall message is anything but ambiguous or uncertain. Furthermore, while literature and philosophy (or literature and phenomenology) become inextricable in *L’invitée*, they are curiously separated in *Le deuxième sexe*. The entire study is filled with literary references, but they are used as support for the overall argument. While *L’invitée* is more literary/phenomenological and *Le deuxième sexe* more critical/dialectical (not that these qualities are necessarily at odds), I will argue in what follows that the phenomenology of relation to others outlined in *L’invitée* is not abandoned in *Le deuxième sexe*, but instead divided and displaced onto several distinct moments in the concluding chapters. The chapters

“L’amoureuse” and “La femme indépendante” together depict the set of relations to both self and other that in *L’invitée* are condensed in the character of Françoise. While “L’amoureuse” dissects the psychodynamics of the relation between the woman in love and the male lover, parts of “La femme indépendante” touch on the independent woman’s relation to herself (though it is often a relation of self-deception!)

In “L’amoureuse,” Beauvoir paints a none too heartening portrait of the woman entangled in a heterosexual romance, with examples ranging from unnamed acquaintances to Hugo’s lifelong mistress Juliette Drouet to scenes from authors such as Colette, Baudelaire, Proust, and Benjamin Constant. She depicts scenarios where women sacrifice all they have to submit themselves to the will of the man they adore. Beauvoir notes that this phenomenon is akin to mystical devotion, which is the topic of the short chapter that follows. Such a relation of idolatry entails the giving up completely of the woman’s being so as to be all the better possessed by the man. While the man’s life retains other focal points, the woman renounces all else in order to be swept up in one all-consuming relationship. Beauvoir repeatedly emphasizes how the woman seeks a type of self-abandonment that is out of the question for the man. She writes of “L’amoureuse” that

Elle s’abandonne d’abord à l’amour pour *se* sauver; mais le paradoxe de l’amour idolâtre, c’est qu’afin de se sauver elle finit par *se* renier totalement ; Son sentiment prend une dimension mystique.... Ce qui se fait jour ... c’est le désir d’une radicale destruction de soi-même abolissant les frontières qui la séparent du bien-aimé: il ne s’agit pas de masochisme, mais d’un rêve d’union *extatique*. (2: 388)

While Françoise in *L’invitée* desires to some degree such a melding of herself with the person of Pierre, the dynamic is constructed so that the loss of self is mutual rather than one-sided. Here, the idea is that *both* Françoise and Pierre will be so truly the same person that they will simultaneously be free to see other people.

Although the situation in *L’invitée* turns out to be less reciprocal than Françoise initially believes, and although she does come to question the particular gender dynamics of this imbalance, she also questions the metaphysical possibility of two people ever being as

one—or, for that matter, as Merleau-Ponty points out, of one person ever being the same person. In other words, Françoise is in some sense in the position of *Le deuxième sexe*'s “amoureuse,” but because of her self-questioning and uncertainty, is never as readable a character as the literary women Beauvoir cites as support for her analysis of the woman in love. It is interesting, for example, that she does not cite George Sand's *Lélia*. Beauvoir does note certain contradictory aspects of “l'amoureuse,” such as the fact that she may turn on the adored male in an instant and suddenly regard him as a usurper (2: 395) or may desire that the man always be present but then resent him if he does not go out and make his place in the world (2: 400). Yet, according to the distinctions set out by Merleau-Ponty in “Le roman et la métaphysique,” these contradictions indicate more of a psychological tit-for-tat than a metaphysical engagement. Paradoxically, then, Beauvoir's own literary example presents a more nuanced and metaphysical case than any of the examples she draws upon in “L'amoureuse.”

In a parallel fashion, Beauvoir's treatment of jealousy appears more developed in *L'invitée* than in the section on jealousy in “L'amoureuse.” She maintains in the latter that the woman's single-minded and self-annihilating relation to the man will result in irreparable jealousy on her part and the inability to interact happily with other women: “Dans l'incertitude, toute femme est une rivale, un danger. L'amour tue l'amitié du fait que l'amoureuse s'enferme dans l'univers de l'homme aimé; la jalousie exaspère sa solitude et, par là, rend encore sa dépendance plus étroite” (2: 408). While Françoise arguably falls prey to such a fatal jealousy at the end of *L'invitée*, when, in a strange twist, she murders Xavière, the extraordinary aspect of her relationship with Pierre is that it is predicated on the absence of jealousy. It is in this fashion that Xavière comes happily into the picture as the third party for the twosome, indeed is even sought out by Françoise. While jealousy in some sense gets the best of Françoise, I think it is more interesting to consider how absence of jealousy figures much more prominently in the triangle overall. Jealousy, then, is multifaceted in *L'invitée* in a way that it is not in *Le deuxième sexe*.

While “L'amoureuse” has a narrower phenomenological focus than *L'invitée*, this focus expands when we take “L'amoureuse” into consideration alongside the concluding sections of *Le deuxième sexe*, grouped under the heading “Vers la libération.” In the penultimate chapter of *Le deuxième sexe*, “La femme indépendante,” Beauvoir

devotes most of her discussion to demonstrating how the very construction of womanhood makes it nearly impossible for a woman to be truly independent, for such an attempt at independence (whether it be independence from a relationship or independence through a career) necessarily entails pitfalls that end up by making the woman dependent all over again. Nonetheless at the end of this chapter, Beauvoir gestures to the act of self-expression through creative work as a possible route to some form of independence. While she does not expound on this at length in *Le deuxième sexe*, we might view Françoise, who has somewhat of a career as a writer, as an illustration of how this form of independence operates. It seems to me, however, that Françoise's truer and more original form of self-expression comes out in the way she engages and perceives others. Indeed, while experiencing feelings of love and jealousy, and of dependence and independence, she interiorizes and reflects on them with such rigor that the feelings themselves are transformed into something else, namely self-expression through intense self-contemplation in the act of relating to others.

In this fashion, Françoise integrates aspects of the woman in love and the independent woman so that they fuse to become something both novel and more positive. This something is the woman-as-philosopher, or the "intellectual woman" in Toril Moi's sense, who creates new modes of freedom by at once engaging in the very activities of the woman in love and the woman struggling to be independent yet by also reflecting on them in such a way that new perceptions and modes of being woman are created in this very form of reflection. In this sense, then, *L'invitée* synthesizes, *avant la lettre*, different aspects of *Le deuxième sexe* and places them in a more hopeful and positive register.

Conclusion

Yet, there is more. For it is precisely the possibility for woman to *perceive* phenomenologically that gets voiced in the conclusion to *Le deuxième sexe*. Such a perception is, as with Françoise, linked to a certain ambiguity of self combined with an ambiguity of sexual difference. In questioning the interpretive merit of the castration complex and the corresponding idea that this complex reveals woman's desire for masculine transcendence, Beauvoir writes of woman that

Son voeu est, nous l'avons vu, beaucoup plus ambigu: elle veut, d'une manière contradictoire, *avoir* cette transcendence,

ce qui suppose qu'à la fois elle la respecte et la nie, qu'à la fois elle entend se jeter en elle et la retenir en soi. C'est dire que le drame ne se déroule pas sur un plan sexuel, la sexualité d'ailleurs ne nous est jamais apparue comme définissant un destin, comme fournissant en soi la clé des conduites humaines, mais comme exprimant la totalité d'une situation qu'elle contribue à définir. (2: 483)

Though inserted into a study of the determinative effects of sexual difference, this passage emphasizes that such difference is itself part of the larger crisis of self and other that constitutes human relationality. In this regard, *Le deuxième sexe* might be said to develop one angle of a larger phenomenological picture, one that is developed more in its entirety in *L'invitée* but to which *Le deuxième sexe* gestures in selected moments.

One final such moment in “Vers la libération” points again to the way in which the ambiguity generated by a struggle with the self comes to be projected onto the opposite sex:

Dans les combats où ils croient s'affronter l'un l'autre, c'est contre soi que chacun lutte, projetant en son partenaire cette part de lui-même qu'il répudie; au lieu de vivre l'ambiguïté de sa condition, chacun s'efforce d'en faire supporter par l'autre l'abjection et de s'en réserver l'honneur. Si cependant tous deux l'assumaient avec une lucide modestie, corrélative d'un authentique orgueil, ils se reconnaîtraient comme des semblables et vivraient en amitié le drame érotique. (2: 499)

It is such a commitment to living out an erotic drama in a state of friendship that sustains the relationship between Françoise and Pierre in *L'invitée*—and ultimately makes it more remarkable than any of the literary or historical relationships Beauvoir cites in *Le deuxième sexe*. It is not altogether fair, however, to hold *Le deuxième sexe* to the lofty metaphysical self-reflexiveness of *L'invitée*, for its goals and methods are not the same and not strictly comparable; though, as I hope to have shown, traces of one text are certainly discernible in the other. It is rather the tension of the comparison itself—one stemming from a fundamental incomparability—that best reflects and mirrors the tensions Merleau-Ponty immediately located in *L'invitée*: one's various points of relation to an other in whom one is deeply invested are no more and no less convoluted and unreadable than one's relation to self

(and for this inseparable from one's self-relation). It is the task of phenomenology to perceive and to broaden the parameters of these difficult comparisons and relations.

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