

## An Essay Concerning Beauvoir, Cavell, Etc.

NANCY BAUER

This is the story of my coming to read *Le Deuxième Sexe*<sup>1</sup> in the rather unusual way that I do.

I was raised, as it were, in the Philosophy Department at Harvard University as part of the last generation working seriously under the tutelage of Stanley Cavell. Though Cavell's tastes in philosophy were strikingly wide-ranging, crisscrossing the divide between analytic and continental philosophy, not to mention genres and mediums, there were limits to his tastes, as there of course are in every person's case. He was interested in Heidegger, but not in European phenomenology more generally. (The one thing I recall him saying about Sartre was this offhand remark, perhaps something he had heard or read before, during a seminar: "Sartre thinks it's very important that no one can die my death for me. Well, no one can take my bath for me, either.") He was interested in the great film actresses of Hollywood's golden period—Katherine Hepburn, Barbara Stanwyck, Irene Dunne, Bette Davis, Ingrid Bergman—and even thought of them as, in their own way, philosophers on screen; but he was not as interested, at least publicly, in women writers. He did engage with feminist thinkers in his own writing about film, but he was concerned in those moments mostly to worry about what he experienced as a certain theoretical rigidity in feminist film theory and what he saw as its failing to allow the objects of its criticism breathing room and to give his own way of thinking, which he saw as very much sympathetic to women's concerns, a chance.

Anyone familiar with Cavell's writing knows that he is a thinker with highly idiosyncratic tastes: Wittgenstein and J. L. Austin, yes; but also Emerson and Milton and Shakespeare and Pascal and Kierkegaard and Samuel Beckett and George Cukor and Clement Greenberg and *La Traviata*. All of his students admired his trust in his own tastes and the range of his passions. His ability to appreciate the things he loved

---

1. Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, trans. H. M. Parshley (London: Vintage, 1997).

was contagious, and more often than not we found ourselves in love with what he loved. But—and no one was more aware of this fact than Cavell himself—there was also a great danger here, since it was singularly difficult to figure out a way to go on from our teacher. We could hardly dare to trust that the idiosyncratic things that we loved would bear up under the sort of extreme philosophical scrutiny to which Cavell subjected his own interests. Secretly, perhaps, we were afraid that their failure to withstand this pressure would kill these passions for us. Cavell believed completely in us and in what we cared about, but he could not make us believe in ourselves. He worried endlessly about how we would get on once we left his protective wing.

In 1991 I had been working with Cavell for several years and was struggling to get my doctoral dissertation off the ground. I was absolutely smitten—I am still absolutely smitten—with J. L. Austin's writing and his philosophizing from ordinary language; if anything, I think, I am even more in love with Austin than Cavell himself is (though this perhaps has to do with Cavell's having been, literally, a student of Austin's). And yet I have found it—I still find it—painfully difficult to go on with Austin; though I have written extensively about him, I often find myself simply pointing to his writing and admiring it. As a graduate student, I was completely stuck. I was also pregnant with my first child. So I experienced my being stuck as a kind of intellectual barrenness, as though I had only so much creative power to expend and was using it all up on my impending motherhood.

In spite of, or perhaps because of, my having watched my own mother, excellent middle-class, mid-20<sup>th</sup>-century woman that she was, devote her entire life to raising her children, I had always taken for granted that I would not follow in her footsteps. It struck me as obvious that feminism was an inflection of a basic quest for human rights on the earth in which, I thought, by definition all decent people participate; and I saw the enterprise of having a say in how things are, outside one's home, as fundamental to feminism. But here I was, despite having been lucky enough to secure a place in a top PhD program in philosophy, inducing a sea-change in my domestic life and with absolutely nothing to say.

Then, a month or so before my due date, an unusually well read graduate student colleague of mine, whose tastes in reading never failed me—a friend who was an admirer of Cavell's, but not quite his student—urged me to pick up Michèle Le Do-

euff's *L'étude et le rouet*, brilliantly subtitled, "*Des femmes, de la philosophie, etc.*"—as though this was the beginning of a list of things that naturally belonged together. The title alludes to a choice made by Hipparchia of Maroneia to abandon her spinning wheel (that is to say, her womanliness, as it was conventionally understood in her time) in favor of becoming a professional philosopher—and doing so on equal terms with, and wearing the same clothes as, her husband. The book itself is a profound reflection on the human impulse to philosophize, which, for Le Doeuff, means the impulse to follow one's own train of thought, to open oneself up to whatever the "etcetera" of one's thinking turns out to be, and on how and why this impulse has historically been co-opted and distorted by theoreticians and system-builders and pedants—that is to say, by men. In other words, Le Doeuff's topic is why philosophy in the best sense of the word is so difficult, especially for those who have traditionally been excluded even from the debased ("professional") form of the enterprise.

Throughout *L'étude et le rouet*, as she demonstrates what it looks like to let one's thought genuinely wander philosophically, Le Doeuff finds herself returning to the case of Simone de Beauvoir, and particularly to Beauvoir's relationship with Sartre. In effect, Le Doeuff's question is how Beauvoir managed to produce as profound and original a philosophical meditation as *Le deuxième sexe* and yet to present herself in *Mémoires d'une jeune fille rangée*, published ten years later, as, still, fundamentally a disciple of Sartre's. I found Le Doeuff's fascination with Beauvoir absolutely riveting; and I was stunned to realize that *L'étude et le rouet* was, in retrospect, the only thing I'd ever read that struck me at one and the same time as thoroughly feminist *and* thoroughly philosophical.

There was on my bookshelves from my undergraduate years studying social and political theory a fairly pristine copy of *The Second Sex* (in English); I had read, on assignment, perhaps two or three chapters of the book. In what turned out to be my good fortune, though it seemed like a curse at the time, I gave birth to a daughter who slept very little and only in short bursts, and whose father's biological rhythms and predispositions, completely opposite to mine, neither mirrored hers nor invited my interfering with his deep slumber. In the middle of each night, the baby strapped into a carrier on my chest, I walked endlessly around our big loft, trying to soothe her to sleep, with *The Second Sex* in one hand and a flashlight in the other. (The baby is

now 21 years old, and an unusually intellectually creative writer and feminist; I like to imagine that her sleeplessness was a function of her trepidation about coming into a world uncongenial to women and that Beauvoir's fortifying words somehow leapt from my brain and heart to hers during those quiet, intimate hours.)

It took me a year, and a huge amount of needling and coaching from another dear graduate student friend, to confess to Cavell that I had abandoned the work on Austin, at least for the nonce, and was poised to write—to try to write—a meditation on philosophizing as a woman in the mode that Simone de Beauvoir had, by example, taught me to understand it. Austin claims in his gorgeous essay “A Plea for Excuses” that philosophers, in their attempts to plough the same old field over and over again, often deplete the soil in which good ideas can thrive; the trick, he says, is to find a virgin plot in the same general region that will allow for genuinely productive “field work,” as he put it. To my relief and delight, Cavell, whose students were loathe to stray from the territory in which he had planted his own flag decades earlier, was thrilled to be able to call me a neighbor.

In certain obvious respects, however, I was very ill-suited to work this particular soil. While I had had some truck with 19<sup>th</sup>-century German philosophy and with Heidegger and had studied various French thinkers from Lacan up through Deleuze, Derrida, and the second-wave feminists, I had mostly been trained in the Anglo-American analytic philosophical tradition. Save from having been exposed to some Camus in high school and about 100 pages of *Being and Nothingness* in a college survey course, I knew basically nothing about French phenomenology and its existentialist inflection. Then again, this meant that I hadn't fallen into the habits of those better educated than I was in these matters: it was all new to me—a doubly virgin field—and in some respects, I think, my ignorance served me well.

For example, having read *Le deuxième sexe* very carefully before taking on *L'être et le néant*, I was struck immediately not by Beauvoir's indebtedness to Sartre, obvious as in some respects it is, but to her astonishing originality. *Le deuxième sexe* begins with what I see as a feminist appropriation of the first two of Descartes's *Meditations*. In the second meditation, after the method of doubt has culminated in his inability to doubt his own existence, Descartes gets on to the business of asking himself what sort of existent he must be. His strategy at this juncture is to start with

common sense: he is a man. But what, then, is a man? Descartes reasons that insofar as he can doubt that his body exists, even while being unable to doubt that he himself does, the body cannot be an essential component of a man's being. Beauvoir in the introduction to *Le deuxième sexe* highlights the fatefulness of this move: insofar as one is a woman (whatever that will turn out to mean), one's body cannot be ignored, since what Monique Wittig called "the mark of gender" is written on it. It's as though Beauvoir is correcting a wrong turn taken at the very beginning of the modern philosophical era, one that foreclosed the possibility of philosophizing about what it means to be a woman, or *as* a woman.

Like Descartes, Beauvoir launches *Le deuxième sexe* in a sea of skepticism. In the first paragraph of the book, she asks, "Y a-t-il même des femmes?" and then goes on to provide some good reasons to think that the set defined by the category "woman" is null (*DS* t. 1, 13). But at the same time, she sees, this term is central to our conceptualization of our daily experience of the world. So since it seems as though women at least might exist, we need to ask: what is a woman? Beauvoir's own cogito follows this quasi-Cartesian question and its skeptical underpinnings. She writes, "Si je veux me définir je suis obligée d'abord de déclarer: 'Je suis une femme'; cette vérité constitue le fond sur lequel s'enlèvera toute autre affirmation" (*DS* t. 1, 16). I take Beauvoir to be vowing that, in the hundreds of pages of phenomenological investigation to follow, she will lose sight neither of the reality of her own body nor of her experience as a woman. This experience must ground her philosophical work, not because she is the ultimate woman, the very best specimen, but because the work must answer to the question of what it is to be *any* woman, and the case she knows best is her own.

Had I not been a student of Cavell's, I doubt that this move of Beauvoir's would have left me thunderstruck—as it continues to do. For a major theme of Cavell's work, which lies at the heart of a commitment to *moral perfectionism* that he sees running throughout the history of Western thought (from Plato to and through, for example, Dante, Shakespeare, Marx, Emerson, Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Freud, and the best films of Hollywood's "golden era"), is the idea that each human being is, for better or worse, potentially an exemplar of the species. Each of us *models* a possible way of living a human life, one that may or may not inspire others to transform their own. There is no formula for being human or for being an exemplar; whether

you are or are not is a matter of whether others find themselves attracted to your way of negotiating your life. Cavell observes that you can also serve as your own exemplar, as when you find the courage, perhaps through your attraction to the witnessing of a person (or author or artist) you admire—a person through whom, whether you are known to her or him or not, you feel *befriended*—to desire transcending your present state toward another. For Cavell, the term “perfectionism” does not suggest that the moral life consists in trying to become a faultless human specimen; there is no such thing. Rather, it points toward the particular dissatisfaction we feel about our own lives, however comfortable or settled, when we encounter someone who stands for us an exemplar of a better way of being human, and the pull we feel toward become a further self. This productive form of dissatisfaction is to be contrasted with ennui, or cynicism, or anomie—a stultifying state of mind (or *Befindlichkeit*, in Heidegger’s argot) that Cavell understands as the source of the sort of skepticism so vividly expressed, if not endorsed, in the *Meditations*.

Steeped in Cavell’s thought as I was, I was primed on first reading—and, I must admit, on every occasion after—to construe the opening pages of *The Second Sex* not in existentialist terms, but perfectionist ones. (The philosopher Simon Glendinning has argued, to my mind very convincingly, that Cavell’s philosophizing ought to be seen as fundamentally phenomenological, insofar as it takes human experience in its broad strokes and fine details as the touchstone of philosophical thinking. So perhaps my inflecting Beauvoir’s views as I did was not wholly a function of my particular education.) I saw Beauvoir, in her pastiche of the opening moments of the *Meditations* and its climaxing in a cogito taking the form “I am *a woman*,” to be marking *The Second Sex* as a quintessentially perfectionist text. What Beauvoir was saying, I thought and still think, is that she recognizes her condition, her self-definition, to be that of a woman, which is to say that of a human being whose social identity and self-understanding cast doubt on the nature of her existence. But at the same time she sees herself as an exemplar, that is to say, an ordinary human soul dissatisfied with her present condition who seeks a further state of self characterized not by faultlessness but by wisdom, and by what Emerson, in whose writings Cavell finds perhaps the richest and most precise expression of moral perfectionism, would perhaps call cheerfulness.

Beauvoir does not presuppose that others will regard her likewise. She takes no pains in *The Second Sex* to sell her reader a bill of goods. Instead, her strategy is, in part I, to show that women's second-class status throughout most of history has no justification and, in part II, to lay out, in great detail, a variety of everyday modes of living as a woman in such a way that many readers will see themselves in her thick descriptions and will experience a desire to live otherwise—that is, to transcend their present selves. The crowning achievement of the book is a function of Beauvoir's ability to reveal to each reader the temptations and attractions of her current state, all of which are wont to yield, at least from time to time, certain thin, if still real, moments of happiness (as when someone congratulates you, implicitly or explicitly, for fulfilling the norms of femininity) and at the same time to leave us feeling as though our current way of living is intolerable. The book thus constitutes a form of encouragement: it literally imbues us with the courage not to settle for fleeting bursts of happiness and to crave freedom. Unlike the author of *Being and Nothingness*, Beauvoir does not construe any complacency or compliance with the status quo on the part of women in terms of *mauvaise foi*. She does not see our capitulating to social norms as a moral fault. Rather—and here, *very* unlike Sartre—she is sketching the contours of a particularly insidious, intractable, and efficient form of *oppression*, one that relies, as all forms of oppression do, on extreme punishments for failure to follow the rules and, as only the most abiding do, on huge rewards for toeing the line.

Reading Beauvoir with Cavell revealed for me Beauvoir's tremendous compassion in *The Second Sex*. Readers less inclined to admire the book find this idea absurd; they claim, variously, that Beauvoir doesn't really like, or is even repulsed, by women; that she is moralistic or contemptuous of women's choices; that she has a horror of the body and of motherhood; that she puts men on a pedestal and urges women to be like them. But these critics simply are not reading well; they are, I think, distorting a thread in the book that runs parallel to the thread of compassion, one that constitutes what you might identify as its moral pull. This pull is not something that Beauvoir imposes on the reader, as though from on high; rather, it is a function of the way that her descriptions of women's lives cause the reader to feel as though *by her own lights* she is not living a life that's genuinely her own. This recognition is bound not to be pain-free. For, as Cavell has taught me, when an author or artist

brings us to feel dissatisfaction with our present ways of being human, we are greatly tempted to ward the anguish off by attempting to locate its source in the work, rather than in our own hearts. This philosophical claim lends itself to a decidedly Sartrean inflection. But I have learned from Simone de Beauvoir that the sin of reading poorly is an occasion not for contempt or despair, but for mercy.