

## Realizing an Existential Life: Situation, Choice, and Freedom in Simone de Beauvoir's *Memoirs of a Dutiful Daughter*

Simone de Beauvoir's recollections of her early life constitute only the first of four volumes of memoirs and form what Esther Kleinbord Labovitz defines as a true twentieth-century, female Bildungsroman (1). In *Memoirs of a Dutiful Daughter* Beauvoir meets all the criteria for this genre as she describes, in her highly intimate account, the period spanning early adolescence to young adulthood in which the passionate and uncompromising character that the world will come to know is formed. Here are all the themes of a Bildungsroman: questions of self-discovery, sex, education, religious crisis, career, and formation of a personal philosophy. *Memoirs* follows in the tradition of the nineteenth-century male Bildungsroman in which "a more mature, and perhaps wiser, narrator looks back upon the younger, developing protagonist" and in which "the ironic juxtaposition of the double vision serves to create a distance between the two" (Labovitz 7). This structure works well for Beauvoir as she grapples with the question that she will present in a later volume, *All Said and Done* (1972), a question that arises when she ponders the factors that shape an individual's identity and experiences: "How is a life formed?" she asks. "How much of it is made up of circumstances, how much by necessity, how much by chance, and how much by the subject's own options and his personal initiatives?" (Rowley 7) Some of the answers to this question can be found in an exploration of the situation Beauvoir vividly describes in *Memoirs*.

Situation is important when one considers the woman Beauvoir would become by the time she wrote *Memoirs* in 1946. As Hazel Rowley points out in the foreword to the book, she "was keen to consider her own childhood and adolescence through an existential framework" (3). Existentialism demanded an understanding of her situation and required the author to examine, among other elements, her social class, her family dynamics, and her self image, and to then discern either "signs of rebellion" or "moments of compliance." These would be what Sartre and Beauvoir later termed "defining moments" reflecting fundamental choices. Choices would be demonstrated by action and when made freely, would constitute a free life (3). Thus when Rowley looks at Beauvoir's early circumstances in a "stifling, repressive environment" and asks "How was the future existentialist in any way free?" it is Beauvoir's situation, the choices she made, and the action she took that we turn our attention to.

While it is debatable as to which factors played the most significant part in Beauvoir's development, three elements take center stage: the dynamic of her family with its bourgeois values and strict Catholic morals, (both of which Beauvoir would come to reject in favor of a philosophy informed by existentialist tenets); her early exposure to good literature and her access to a superb education; and what Mary Evans in *Simone de Beauvoir: A Feminist Mandarin* calls the "crucial fact of her residence in Paris" (11). While some may insist that Beauvoir's gender figured in her development as well, and while she writes in *Memoirs* that she did not "renounce" her femininity, nor did she feel it "affected her much at all" (Rowley 3). The very title of this first autobiography would seem to throw a challenge to this statement, requiring the reader, as it does, to confront what it means to be a "dutiful daughter," but again, for Beauvoir, gender seems to bow to other aspects of her situation.

*Memoirs of a Dutiful Daughter* describes Beauvoir's journey from sheltered and conventional if over-achieving and eager-to-please schoolgirl, to burgeoning existentialist philosopher and pioneering feminist. The first of the above mentioned elements to play a role in her development is conducive to success on both ends of this spectrum and that is Beauvoir's upbringing in a bourgeois Catholic home. It is an environment that emphasizes discipline, sublimation of the self to higher aspirations and causes, and a rather contradictory but extreme focus on individualism fostered by the Christian belief in a soul. It is a discipline that early on is policed both spiritually and bodily under the severe eye of Beauvoir's mother, and intellectually under the guidance of her father. That her father's "individualism and pagan ethical standards" are "in complete contrast to the rigidity and moral conventionalism" of her mother's teaching (41) in no way diminishes the effect of their influence. Rather, that both subscribe to an underlying code of obedience to a higher standard, be it in "two radically heterogeneous fields of experience," is what will leave its imprint on their daughter.

The early discipline that is instilled in Simone at home and at school by her Catholic upbringing is amplified by the decline in her parent's economic status during her early adolescence, a fall that necessitates strict economy. This shift from the world of material comfort she has enjoyed in young childhood to an environment where rejection of extravagance becomes a moral imperative enforced by her mother influences her later ability to eschew the material in favor of the demands of an intellectual life. Moreover, as Evans points out, it is the economic decline of her family's fortunes during her early adolescence, in fact, that releases Beauvoir from the expectations placed on young women to make a good, i.e. economically beneficial, marriage. The relative poverty of her family excludes them from full participation in the bourgeois society they have aspired to and results in an elevation of her parents' vague standards of breeding and good taste to semi-religious importance. It will be by virtue of their education and their manners that they will be distinguished from the proletariat, not their economic standing (4). This is a significant factor in the future writer's identification of the austere and the difficult with worth and excellence. It is this strict discipline and disregard for the usual frivolities many women engage in, such as excessive attention to fashion and society, that allows Beauvoir to make full use of her considerable mental powers at a young age and to not only excel at the education that is afforded her but to develop a critical and discerning mind while still quite young.

One must continually remind oneself how young Beauvoir is at the time described in *Memoirs*. To even the parents of well-educated children today, her reading list suggests an impressive precociousness. Though the books of her childhood are the conventional ones of her day, Beauvoir is nonetheless "charmed to be an apprentice to the sorcery that transmutes printed symbols into stories" and finds it natural that she should want to "reverse the magical process" (57). As Anne Freadman puts it in her essay "Daddy's Books," "they (books) were the basis, indeed part of the very structure and the material conditions of her outlook, her curiosity, her identity..." Her reading provides models both for what she would like to avoid and what she would like to emulate; she finds in Louisa May Alcott's character, Jo from *Little Women*, her first example of a young woman who, like her, has a horror of housekeeping and a love of books. By adolescence Beauvoir is pilfering her father's shelves for headier fare. These more sophisticated works of fiction by authors such as Alain Fournier and Guy Maupassant help her "break free from the

bonds of childhood” and enter “a complicated, adventurous, and unpredictable world” (110).

If books provide escape from a narrowly defined reality, they also help Beauvoir convert the passivity to which her sex condemns her into active defiance (57). It is during her early adolescence that Beauvoir begins to question the authority of her school-mistresses at the conservative and highly conformist Cours Désir. While the “Unctuous sermons ... solemn twaddle...inflated turns of phrase” lose their credibility with her, literature and history open up new vistas and contribute to her developing political sensibilities, sensibilities that now take a distinct turn towards liberalism. Her desire to write crystallizes during this period and though only an adolescent, she can already claim that she has “long ago decided to devote” her “life to intellectual labours” (140). It is at this time that the author and intellectual that Beauvoir will become is set firmly on her path.

Beauvoir’s determination to make of her love of books a life devoted to the intellect coincides with, and no doubt contributes to, her rejection of the Christian God she has grown up with. This loss of faith creates a void that she needs to fill and it is literature that will allow her “to be a law unto” herself. It will guarantee her an immortality which will “compensate for the loss of heaven and eternity; though there is no longer any God to love her, she will “have the undying love of millions of hearts.” In this way she will recreate herself and justify her existence. Thus, literature takes the place in her life that has “once been occupied by religion” (187). Though she rejects Christianity, however, the Christian ethic of self-denial and brotherly love remains, and is coupled with her desire to write. This dual vocation that insists on realization – to write and to contribute something of value to humankind – gives her a meaning and purpose in life. Reading takes the place of prayer and she delves deeply into Plato, Schopenhauer, Leibniz and, “with passionate intensity,” Nietzsche. The philosophical works she reads resonate with her own deep quest for understanding as she questions the “inexplicable nature of” her “presence here on earth” (222). Despite the awkwardness that comes with adolescence, Beauvoir is clearly in her element now and on her way to “the ever greater intimacy with the world” that she hungers for.

It is not high-minded sentiments alone, however, that influence Beauvoir’s early desire to write. Like her contemporary, Marguerite Duras, Beauvoir recognizes that few avenues are open for women who do not tread the traditional path of marriage and motherhood. While, like Duras, she not only has a burning desire to write but a desire for knowledge and the vehicle by which to express it, to her young girl’s mind, being a writer, in particular a novelist, also seems an accessible career choice. Perhaps most significantly, Beauvoir finds in looking back at her life in *Memoirs* that “studies, books, these things which were dependant upon my will remained the centre of my preoccupations” (146). Unlike Duras however, who exhibits just as strong a will but for whom personal experience is the catalyst that propels her into her future as a writer, by the time Beauvoir finds herself at the more academically challenging Institut Saint Marie, it is her studies that she hopes will represent, not just an offshoot of her life, but her entire life itself (179). And like Duras, who eventually leaves Indochina to pursue the study of law in Paris, Beauvoir sets her sights not just on a degree but on a doctorate. Though, as she moves into young womanhood, she makes tentative exploratory trips into the streets and bars of Paris, she realizes that for her “there is no other salvation than in books”

(293). In this she differs from Duras for whom experience is the fodder for her written work. With Beauvoir, it is always the workings of her mind and inner life.

It is impossible to say to what extent the young Beauvoir's love of books is instilled in her by external circumstances and to what extent it is her "nature." Is it the result of favorable circumstances – the existence and accessibility of her father's library – or her own option and personal initiative? Wherever the answer to this lies, it is certainly the fortuitous accident of her birth in what was perhaps the leading center of intellectual and artistic thought during the early years of the twentieth century that contribute to Beauvoir's success as an intellectual. As Evans correctly states, it is her access to elite educational institutions of the kind not found in provincial towns that supports her move towards autonomy (11). Moreover, as the author so vividly describes in *Memoirs*, the Paris of her youth is a dynamic and energetic milieu where avant-garde movements in theater and the arts as well as radical political and social developments provide ample avenues for intellectual growth. The post-world War I era provides Beauvoir opportunities to hear Stravinsky, discuss Cocteau, attend performances of the Ballets Russes, see films featuring Charlie Chaplin and Greta Garbo, attend exhibitions by Cezanne and Picasso, and ultimately gain entrance to the most cutting-edge philosophical circle of her day – that of Jean Paul Sartre. That she comes of age at a crucial turning point in the history of the arts and sciences and that she does so in the turbulent Paris of the 1920s cannot be ignored as determining factors in her development.

It is partly Beauvoir's vivid portraits of Paris and Parisian life that make *Memoirs* so evocative, but it is even more the voice in which the account is given. If autobiography creates distance between the older narrator and her younger self, as Labovitz asserts, it leaves no distance between author and reader and Beauvoir's telling of her story is warm and intimate. Moreover, the account is as rich in detail and characterization as any finely wrought fiction and when the reader finishes, the myriad friends, relatives and acquaintances described here continue to parade before the mind's eye as if they were our memories and not just Beauvoir's. Indeed, Labovitz claims that "no other volume of Beauvoir's memoirs is shaped so like a novel as this is" (7). While one could challenge the assumption in this statement that there is such a thing as a standard "shape" to a novel, certainly *Memoirs* delivers the end result of good fiction – a great story. If we are deprived of the lyrical effect of metaphor and flashback as they are used, for example, in *Paradise of the Blind*; if we miss the small epiphanies that the symbolism of *The Voyage Out* and *The Bluest Eye* effect; and if our picture of the Beauvoir presented in *Memoirs* is limited by the single viewpoint of the author as compared to the multiple points of view used in *Burgher's Daughter*, we are none the poorer when it comes to the exploration of the inner self that that Beauvoir makes us party to. As in fiction, "autobiography can be viewed "not as factual truth but as wrestling with the truth," (Labovitz 7) and in this respect Beauvoir does not disappoint. While she may have less leeway than Duras does in *The Lover* to wrest poetry from memory, like Duras, she faces her younger self with an unflinching gaze and unabashedly records what she sees.

While one could endlessly debate who gets closer to the truth – the writer who chooses autobiography or the one who chooses fiction - Rowley is right when she says that in reading Beauvoir, "You find yourself wanting to live more courageously, with more commitment and passion (9). Somehow, the fact that Beauvoir did live and that the choices she describes in *Memoirs* actually resulted in a life others would come to take as

a model of freedom, gives more currency to her story. Somehow the fact that her account is all true in a literal sense, however distorted by memory or design, makes the gift of herself that she presents just that much more precious.

## Works Cited

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