

Life-Story: Document and Solidarity in the Memoirs of Simone de Beauvoir

A life is such a strange object, at one moment translucent, at another utterly opaque, an object I make with my own hands, an object imposed on me, an object for which the world provides the raw material and then steals it from me again, pulverized by events, scattered, broken, scored yet retaining its unity; how heavy it is and how inconsistent: this contradiction breeds many misunderstandings (*Force of Circumstance*, 276).

The making of a life-story

In the Interlude which comes between Parts I and II of *Force of Circumstance*, Simone de Beauvoir's third autobiographical volume,¹ she reflects on what a peculiar object a life is. The peculiarity accrues when it is viewed not so much as a thing lived, but rather as an object of ongoing written representation - an object amenable to that double publicity entailed by the telling of one's own life-story in a published memoir. For the author, some of this peculiarity must inevitably be reflected back onto the life lived, because as the project of writing a memoir gets under way and life infuses the page, so will the prospect of the written record begin to infuse the experience of living. Certain experiences will take on the aspect of a theme, certain events the significance of an aberration, a confirmation of a pattern, a turning point, a nemesis, and so on, even while they are being spontaneously lived. We know that even as a little girl, if out of sheer romanticism, de Beauvoir thought of her life as a 'lovely story' in the making. Later, when relating her and Sartre's only slightly more mature sense of total personal freedom, she says, 'I still wanted my life to be "a lovely story that became true as I told it to myself", and touched it up improvingly here and there in the telling' (*Prime*, 363). This feeling was finally tempered during the German Occupation, when she describes herself as being 'at last prepared to admit that my life was not a story of my own telling, but a compromise between myself and the world at large' (*Prime*, 484). Whether as 'lovely' and embellished, or as radically free, or as a compromise with circumstance, then, it seems that de Beauvoir consistently entertained a sense of her own life as a living story.

This is nothing if not appropriate for a writer with existentialist commitments, though the life-as-life-story stance is really only an exaggerated version of what it is in any case like to live a meaningful life - a life with a particular narrative shape. The story-like shape of any life means that the appropriate method of understanding and representing it is as narrative in form. Thus it is to be conceived not synchronically in terms of Being, but diachronically in terms of Becoming. And how else might one hope to understand the nature of a Becoming than by *narrating* it? This conception of life is in tune with de Beauvoir's anti-essentialist insight, which gains its most famous expression in the opening line of the second book of *The Second Sex*, 'One is not born, but rather becomes a woman'.² This is the mature version of her early suspicion of essentialist identity categories which expressed itself in impetuous form when she was a young teacher: 'One day she [Olga] asked what it *really* meant to be a Jew. With absolute certainty I replied: "Nothing at all. There are no such things as 'Jews'; only human beings." Long afterwards she told me what an impression she had created by marching into the violinist's room and announcing: "My friends, none of you exist! My philosophy teacher has told me so!"' (*Prime*, 165). This is an important marker in de Beauvoir's intellectual development, for it presents us with the naive precursor to her mature view. She recalls her ill-judged remark with embarrassment (460), but she also explains:

I was right to reject essentialism; I knew already what abuses could follow in the train of abstract concepts such as the 'Slav soul', the 'Jewish character', 'primitive mentality', or *das ewige Weib*. But the universalist notions to which I turned bore me equally far from reality. What I lacked was the idea of 'situation', which alone allows one to make some concrete definition of human groups without enslaving them to a timeless and deterministic pattern. But there was no one, outside the framework of the class struggle, who would give me what I needed (*Prime*, 165-6).

De Beauvoir's presentation of the incident as a stage in personal intellectual development exemplifies the manner in which she shapes her self-narrative with the contours of story-telling. One of the most important ways in which she crafts the story of her life is by recounting intellectual commitments, or their passing, as phases in a development, a maturation. Furthermore, the story told gains a special sonorousness through a counterpoint

between such personal developments and events on the grander scale of world history. Momentous world events are in a kind of harmony with personal ones because the individual is affected by and responsive to them, and the result is that de Beauvoir's individual life-story is punctuated by the rhythms of history.³ The very advent of war, for instance, is not only symbolically but causally connected with the dawning of historical consciousness for her:

With all the naïveté of a child who believes in the absolute vertical, I thought that there was an absolute truth governing the world.... In the peace which had been granted us, justice and reason worked like a yeast. I built my happiness on firm ground and beneath immutable constellations.

What a misapprehension this was! It was not a fragment of eternity I had lived through but a transitory period, the pre-war years (*Prime*, 599).

If representing a life requires presenting a story, then while this does not altogether preclude a thematic presentation (as is given in *All Said and Done*), it does make a plain chronological telling the more natural. Sticking to chronology allows the passage of the years to tell its own tale; it minimizes the role of the writer-as-interpreter who would telescope and reorganize her glimpses of self to create an overall self-portrait, and instead it emphasizes the idea of temporal process and transformation - the passage from then to now. De Beauvoir touches on this in the Interlude to *Force of Circumstance*:

why have I subjected myself to chronological order instead of choosing some other construction? I have pondered this matter, and I have hesitated. But what counts above all in my life is that time goes by; I grow older, the world changes, my relation with it varies; to show the transformations, the ripenings, the irreversible deteriorations of others and of myself - nothing is more important to me than that. And that obliges me to follow obediently the thread the years have unwound (276).

In the final volume, *All Said and Done*, de Beauvoir's attitude to her life is almost completely retrospective with little sense of an ongoing journey, a future with promise; and so it is fitting that she should abandon the chronological form there for a thematically organized narrative with a distinctly 'closing' feel to it: 'I no longer feel that I am moving in the direction of a goal, but only that I am slipping inevitably towards my grave' (Prologue). But in the earlier volumes, the different discipline of chronological mapping is called for. Particularly in *Memoirs of a Dutiful Daughter* and *The Prime of Life*, which account for her childhood and early adult life, the distance of age between the mature author and her former selves strongly recommends the chronological approach. No longer having direct access to the girl or young woman she once was, the literal-minded discipline of chronological documentation allows de Beauvoir responsibly to locate her subjects within a shared personal history. It allows her to place them in a single Becoming, and thus to rediscover her former selves in their proper context. This narrative strategy is well-designed to allow the thread of years to be rewoven while preserving the integrity of the little girl or younger woman she once was.

In *Memoirs*, the young Simone's girlish sense of great things to come generates a skipping teleological momentum in the narrative, and this is enhanced time and again by de Beauvoir's authorial shaping of her story. *Memoirs* constructs the young Simone as a figure of deep-felt yet frustrated rebellion against the arbitrary constraints of bourgeois propriety. Thus, for instance, one evening while staying at La Grillière, Simone is as usual out alone in the countryside, but this time returning home late and almost missing supper. As a punishment her mother prohibits her from going beyond the bounds of the estate all the next day:

I spent the day sitting on the lawns or pacing up and down the avenues with a book in my hand and rage in my heart. Over there, outside, the waters of the lake were ruffling and smoothing, without me, without anyone to see: it was unbearable. 'If it were raining; if there were *some* reason for this silly prohibition,' I told myself, 'then I could resign myself to it.' Here, once more, boiling up inside me, was the rebelliousness that had expressed itself in furious convulsions during my early childhood (*Memoirs*, 126).

This sort of rage is made more bearable through the passionate alliance with her beloved friend Zaza. But the intimacy with Zaza itself has its special narrative import bestowed upon it less through the presentation of their living common-front against the irrationalities of a bourgeois upbringing than through the significance given to Zaza's death and the superceding of this female-female intimacy by the female-male intimacy with Sartre. As Ursula Tidd points out, each of these couples - Simone and Zaza, de Beauvoir and Sartre - is founded upon an opposition to bourgeois values, so that 'Beauvoir constructs her autobiographical representation of selfhood...through two different relations to the Other: reciprocity (with Zaza and Sartre) and conflict (in opposition to the bourgeoisie)'.⁴

Symbolically, what Zaza succumbs to in death is the suffocating weight of bourgeois convention. She dies, from it is unclear quite what, at a time of unsustainable anguish on her part over her conventionally inappropriate love match with Jean Pradelle (Maurice Merleau-Ponty). As a qualification, it should be said that de Beauvoir's presentation of Zaza's demise as connected to bourgeois restrictions is not black and white. Although the symbolic connection is undoubtedly there,⁵ it is not created at the expense of fairness to the people concerned. It should not be overlooked that de Beauvoir is careful to cast the mothers of both Zaza and Pradelle in a flexible and humane light. It is just that these qualities come too late:

Madame Mabile put her [Zaza] to bed and called the doctor; she had a long talk with Pradelle: she didn't want to be the cause of her daughter's unhappiness, and she was not opposed to their marriage. Madame Pradelle wasn't against it either; she too didn't want to cause anyone unhappiness. It would all be arranged. But Zaza had a temperature of 104° and was delirious (*Memoirs*, 359).

This due fairness dispensed, *Memoirs* closes with the death of Zaza and with de Beauvoir's testimony to her experience of what these days we might identify, glibly perhaps, as a kind of 'survivor guilt':

The doctors called it meningitis, encephalitis; no one was quite sure. Had it been a contagious disease, or an accident? Or had Zaza succumbed to exhaustion and anxiety? She has often appeared to me at night, her face all yellow under a pink sun-

bonnet, and seeming to gaze reproachfully at me. We had fought together against the revolting fate that had lain ahead of us, and for a long time I believed that I had paid for my own freedom with her death (*Memoirs*, 360).

Whatever the clinical explanation of Zaza's death, it marks the end of Simone's dependence on adults, and the end of a female-female intimacy that makes way for an alliance with a man who is destined to become de Beauvoir's new primary 'other'. Shortly before recounting the events culminating in the death of Zaza, and preparing the way for the sense of transition with which the book ends, de Beauvoir quotes her diary entry regarding her first meeting with Sartre, so as to make it very clear how important a figure he is to be in her life: "Why am I overwhelmed by this meeting, as if something had *really* happened to me at last?". Something *had* happened to me, something which indirectly was to shape the whole of my life to come: but I wasn't to know that till later' (*Memoirs*, 311). Thus the end of *Memoirs* is no kind of closure but precisely an opening up to an exciting future that promises a new alliance, but where de Beauvoir's excitement - and even her experience of the freedom in store - remains indelibly tinged with a pained awareness that such an escape to independence is not the fate of every young girl.

One might be tempted to link the mournful inflection attending de Beauvoir's new-found independence with her acute and life-long fear of death⁶; but the loss of Zaza and the mark it leaves on de Beauvoir's experience of freedom is not recounted in these terms. The bereavement is a tragic offence against the passionate solidarity which grounded the two young girls' personal relationship; it has nothing to do with the horror of mortality *per se*. It is not until much later, during the war, that a particular death is to cause de Beauvoir the experience of being confronted as if for the first time by the absolute finality of our mortal condition. It comes with the news of the death of her young neighbor and friend, Bourla: 'Never before had I been brought up against the ghastly uncertainty of our mortal state in so irrefutable a way' (*Prime*, 579). The significance of Zaza's death is less abstract than this, less about the human condition and more about the particular social condition of helplessness in the face of the bourgeois constraints which Simone and Zaza suffered together in solidarity. Thus the loss of Zaza is both more personal and more political than any abstract shock of the mortal. It took a feat of political imagination to regard the bourgeoisie as waging

a war on women, whereas the outrages of the actual war which stole Bourla from the world took a more readily recognizable form.

In these subtly different presentations of her encounters with death, as in the depiction of her childhood rages and ultimate passage to personal independence, we see de Beauvoir making a story-teller's use of chronology - shaping and coloring her self-narrative as she goes.

Mechanisms of self-narrative

De Beauvoir knows not simply to tell a 'lovely story', but rather to tell a broadly truthful⁷ story of a situated personal development, a life in history - a Becoming. The telling of a life-story where there is psychological distance between author and subject opens up a space for irony as a means of comment and criticism. Irony is the key technique of self-narration for de Beauvoir, and this is so most of all in the earlier two volumes where there is the greatest distance of age and outlook between author and narrated self. In *Memoirs* the irony often takes an openly self-mocking (though always affectionate) form. She writes, for instance: 'I went round sticking the flags of the Allies in all the flower vases. In my games I was always a valiant Zouave, a heroic daughter of the regiment. I wrote everywhere in coloured chalks: *Vive la France!* The grown-ups admired my devotion to the cause. "Simone is an ardent patriot," they would say, with proud smiles. I stored the smiles away in my memory and developed a taste for unstinted praise' (*Memoirs*, 27). Here of course she is mocking not only herself but also the grown-ups whose attitudes the young Simone's behavior reflects.⁸ Later, in *The Prime of Life*, the irony is also often mocking in tone, though perhaps less indulgently so, for she is talking about young adults now. For example, she describes her and Sartre's brattish idealism in suitably sardonic tones: 'Man was to be remoulded, and the process would be partly our doing. We did not envisage contributing to this change except by way of books: public affairs bored us. We counted on events turning out according to our wishes without any need for us to mix in them personally' (*Prime*, 15). The ironical tone is the channel for the critical attitude needed to spice the chronology, and it generates the wry intellectual personality that breathes the life into these volumes. Without it there would be little critical tension between author and narrated self, and the life-story would be flattened into a laborious linear documentation. The wry smile of de Beauvoir the ironist is a crucial

counter-balance to the earnestness of de Beauvoir the documenter.

The particular mechanism of irony involves three parties: the author whose irony it is, the reader who shares the joke, and the narrated subject who is thereby cast in a certain light. But the overall mechanics of story-telling, of which irony is a part, involves a fourth essential party, and that is the constructed reader. Any actual reader may take a different interpretive view of things from that of the reader-position constructed for her in the text. For example, when de Beauvoir explains her life-long assumption that her husband would have to be her 'superior' the author explains:

Why did I insist that he should be superior to me? I don't for one moment think I was looking for a father-image in him; I valued my independence...; we would be two comrades. Nevertheless the concept I had of our relationship was influenced indirectly by the feelings I had had for my father. My education, my culture, and the present state of society all conspired to convince me that women belong to an inferior caste... If in the absolute sense a man, who was a member of the privileged species and already had a flying start over me, did not count more than I did, I was forced to the conclusion that in a relative sense he counted less: in order to be able to acknowledge him as my equal, he would have to prove himself my superior in every way (*Memoirs*, 145).

Emphasized here are the conditioning influences of education, culture and society, but previous glimpses of de Beauvoir's relationship with her father make plain the more personal psychological mechanism by which it came to be that her self-esteem depended upon a certain identification with him. For the manner in which her father encouraged and praised Simone's intellectual achievements relied upon a symbolic annihilation of her feminine person: 'Papa used to say with pride: "Simone has a man's brain; she thinks like a man; she *is* a man."' (121). Further, the objectivist classification 'superior' - and its inevitable counterpart, 'inferior' - reflects an essentializing style of judgement (perhaps especially characteristic of French culture, though certainly not exclusive to it) which makes peculiarly treacherous territory for a budding woman intellectual. Such a categorial, objectivist frame of reference for intellectual ability is one which well nigh forces serious students to rank

themselves in these judgmental terms; and in a climate where the woman intellectual is an interloper into a symbolically and actually masculine territory it would take an astonishing ego to categorize oneself as among the nascent superiors of the game, let alone to withstand the hostility such boldness would be likely to inspire. This quite general feature of the intellectual culture surrounding de Beauvoir seems likely to be a significant factor in her repeated and sincere pronouncements of her inferiority to Sartre. I think this is part of the explanation why she found it 'comfortable' to insist on looking up to him, even with respect to a characteristic as dull as his 'stubbornness' over an avowed ambition to keep up the writing no matter what: 'As I saw it, the resolution which Sartre displayed set him above me. I admired him for holding his destiny in his own hands, unaided; far from feeling embarrassed at the thought of his superiority, I derived comfort from it' (*Prime*, 26).

There is one episode in particular where any reader with a smidgeon of feminist consciousness (especially if one has had experience of life as a philosophy student) will surely find that the reader position which de Beauvoir constructs for one is sadly, if instructively, uncomfortable. The episode in question is the 'discussion' of the young Simone's nascent ideas about ethics with her equally young fellow philosophy student, Jean-Paul. Here the actual reader may long for a tone of critical irony to be directed against the young Sartre from the mature de Beauvoir, but instead one finds only ingenuousness. This incident occurs at the Medici Fountain in the Luxembourg Gardens, and it features in *Memoirs of a Dutiful Daughter* as a pivotal moment in the intellectual trajectory of the young de Beauvoir. It has been given a powerful feminist reading by Michèle le Doeuff, and the scene will be most efficiently set by a quotation from Le Doeuff which begins with the relevant passage from *Memoirs*:

'Day after day, and all day long I measured myself against Sartre, and in our discussions I was simply not in his class. One morning in the Luxembourg Gardens, near the Medici fountain, I outlined for him the pluralist morality which I had fashioned to justify the people I liked but did not wish to resemble: he ripped it to shreds. I was attached to it, because it allowed me to take my heart as the arbiter of good and evil; I struggled with him for three hours. In the end I had to admit I was beaten; besides, I had realized, in the course of our discussion, that many of my

opinions were based only on prejudice, bad faith [oh] or thoughtlessness, that my reasoning was shaky and my ideas confused. "I'm no longer sure what I think, or even if I think at all," I noted, completely thrown. My pride was not involved. I was by nature curious rather than imperious and preferred learning to shining.'

There follows a very sad page which shows her 'suddenly uncertain of [her] true abilities' and fascinated by the gang formed by Sartre, Nizan, Aron and Politzer who 'impressed' her for all sorts of reasons, some better than others. It is an astounding tale, which shows that even if one knows an enormous amount of philosophy, one never knows enough to remember, at the right moment, that 'shining' or 'impressing other people' is not the point of it. 'Not being sure' and 'learning' come closer to what is called 'thinking' in the ethics of the discipline.⁹

Le Doeuff's interpretation perspicuously portrays the absurdity of one young man's wholly convincing one young woman, in a single conversation in a park, of the utter worthlessness of her thoughts towards a pluralist ethics. And it brings out the pathos inherent in the older feminist giant of an author's recounting the episode in a way which shows that she remained convinced (hence the factive 'realized') that he was quite right, and that her younger self was indeed guilty of 'bad faith' et cetera in her short-lived hopes for a project in which she aimed - ridiculous! - to take her 'heart as the arbiter of good and evil'. But perhaps we can make a further observation here which adds a new dimension to the pathos. The reason the constructed position may not be comfortable for today's reader is largely thanks to the enhanced feminist consciousness and the increased feminine participation in academic life which de Beauvoir did so much to pioneer. Any woman who has had the experience of being a philosophy student among a majority of young men will find a particular poignancy in the scene recounted, for it is so obvious what's going on. What female philosophy student has not had *that* discursive experience with some clever young man ready to be one's superior if one gives him the least encouragement? One finds oneself audience to a dress-rehearsal of another's emerging intellectual authority, and this typically involves being on the receiving end of a (perhaps naively enthusiastic) barrage of competitive energy still so automatic in many young men and so alien to so many young women, who may or may not have the political and emotional resources to experience the exchange for what it is. De Beauvoir did not have these resources - though she had plenty of personal grit and intellectual

discipline to come out of it well - and so she could not do what one now knows the young woman philosophy student really must do to survive: avoid those conversations, or (better) neutralize their impact by writing them off as 'one of those' - think of them like the rain. This is imperative, for either one finds the resources to resist colluding in a social-intellectual dynamic whereby he is cast as the clever one (if only so that one may avoid the indignity, indeed the tedium, of repeated competitions), or else one risks becoming alienated from the whole enterprise. If one takes such experiences half as seriously as they feel at the time, half as seriously as it felt to de Beauvoir, then one will gradually come to think 'philosophy is not for me'. This is why it now reads so especially poignantly that that is basically what de Beauvoir came to think. She soon moved to identify not as a philosopher but as a writer instead.

That this discursive battering at the hands of an intellectually boisterous friend named Jean-Paul (whose fateful upper hand here incites one to a spiteful reminder that he, unlike her, failed his *agrégation* first time around¹⁰) should have been a pivotal moment in the young de Beauvoir's intellectual path brings to the fore the enormous debt that female intellectuals owe to this woman. It was gender that made her need to be with a man she could regard as her superior; and it was gender which saw to it that she got one. We are significantly indebted to de Beauvoir for the better conceptual and hermeneutical resources we now have to see such quotidian philosophical crushings for the banal gender performances they are. It is, I think, particularly this aspect of the episode which justifies Le Doeuff's sinister interpretation of Sartre's comment, "'From now on, I'm going to take you under my wing'..." (*Memoirs*, 339). For I think it shows that we can accept the interpretation without commitment to Sartre's personally having any sinister motivations. One must not forget, after all, that he was as subject to gender as she was (if never so disadvantaged by it), and consequently stood to lose a great deal in any failure to deliver the discursive performance of a self-styled superior - indeed, according to de Beauvoir's account of her own psychology, he would have risked losing *her*. Gender is the sinister force at work here; less so the ebullient Jean-Paul. There is perhaps a certain poetic equilibrium in all this: if Zaza paid for Simone's freedom, there is a sense in which de Beauvoir paid for ours.

It seems, then, that de Beauvoir moved to identify as a writer rather than as a

philosopher in significant part because of what the Medici incident encapsulates. Nonetheless her decision was surely a good one all told, not least because she had an excellent intellectual complaint against the philosophical enterprise as it presented itself to her:

I did not regard myself as a philosopher: I was well aware that the ease with which I penetrated to the heart of a text stemmed, precisely, from my lack of originality. In this field a genuinely creative talent is so rare that queries as to why I did not attempt to join the elite are surely otiose: it would be more useful to explain *how* certain individuals are capable of getting results from that conscious venture into lunacy known as a 'philosophical system', from which they derive that obsessional attitude which endows their tentative patterns with universal insight and applicability. As I have remarked before, women are not by nature prone to obsessions of this type' (*Prime*, 221).

She is committed to the irreducibly ambiguous nature of reality, and thus to its native resistance to philosophical systematization. A stronger version of this idea is explicit in a comment from *The Prime of Life*, where the point is more general in that it is directed to the inherently systematizing nature of language itself: 'I maintained that reality extends beyond anything that can be said about it; that instead of reducing it to symbols capable of verbal expression, we should face it as it is - full of ambiguities, baffling, and impenetrable' (*Prime*, 145). Thus her scepticism about systematization seems to extend to writing quite generally: the fundamental ambiguity of the world, of life, means it will elude any attempt to pin it down in words. Nonetheless, whereas philosophy as she found it - as calling forth the endowment of 'tentative patterns with universal insight and applicability' - is essentially incapable of making room for ambiguity, more literary forms are better able to leave ambiguity in the picture. Thus, she can say of her own memoir: 'I have attempted to set out the facts in as frank a way as possible, neither simplifying their ambiguities nor swaddling them in false syntheses, but offering them for the reader's own interpretation' (*Prime*, 368).

De Beauvoir is quite clear, then, that she 'didn't want to speak with [the] abstract voice' of the philosopher (*Memoirs*, 208), though there is more to be said about the particular motivations behind her writings of the self. Dissatisfaction with philosophy is a general

negative reason; but the expressed positive reasons are numerous, and often specific to the particular volume. One of her aims in writing *Force of Circumstance*, for instance, was simply to set the record straight as against the mendacious publicity brought by her and Sartre's celebrity. Towards the end of the book, discussing the lies spread about her in the press, she writes, 'It was my desire to establish the truth of these matters that was largely responsible for my writing these memoirs, and many readers have in fact said that the ideas they entertained of me beforehand could scarcely have been more false' (*Force*, 648-9). There again, in *The Prime of Life* she says she hopes to do her readers the service of showing them the biographical background to her work: 'No book takes on its full meaning without the reader knowing the circumstances and background of its inception, and having some acquaintance with the personality of its author. By addressing my readers directly I hope to perform this service for them' (*Prime*, 8). After that, she goes on to make a further case, this time for memoir as having a universal significance that can be instructive: 'if any individual...reveals himself honestly, everyone, more or less, becomes involved. It is impossible for him to shed light on his own life without at some point illuminating the lives of others' (*Prime*, 8). These various expressed motivations for writing about her life have a somewhat incidental feel, and although they are no doubt genuine, they do not, I suspect, go particularly deep. There is, however, a deeper and more subtle underlying motivation for her extended self-narrations. I read de Beauvoir as most fundamentally driven to tell her life-story by an essentially ethical motivation: to achieve solidarity with the other selves who lived different chapters of the selfsame life.

Motivations for writing: memoir or autobiography?

If de Beauvoir is motivated to document the events of her life but also to narrate the self by shaping these events as a story, then her writings move between the distinct genres of autobiography and memoir. It would be pointless to pretend that these are precisely differentiated genres on whose boundaries there is unanimity. Nonetheless, I agree with Catharine Savage Brosman's sensible observation that the wide variation in conceptions of autobiography

need not obscure the common purpose of true autobiographies: not just to recount a

life but to illuminate it. By that is meant identifying and scrutinizing those elements which shape a destiny and thereby plumbing the meaning of the self in its temporal trajectory. ...The point is that the linguistic process of verbalizing...becomes the means of, and is one with, the writer's project of self-understanding; the self is 'inscribed' in the text, thereby attaining a new reality that both reproduces and extends the self.¹¹

By contrast, the purpose of memoir is 'to recount the subject's experiences and associated events but to do so without subordinating these to the search for, or portrait of, an inner self. In other words, memoirs are principally the record of what happened to and around the self, not the interpretation of the self'.¹² On this view of the distinction between the genres, all of de Beauvoir's narrations of the self might be more or less categorized as memoirs. However, it is clear that - despite its being the only volume which includes the word 'memoir' in its title - *Memoirs of a Dutiful Daughter* comes very close to being autobiographical in Brosman's sense. Indeed de Beauvoir's own description of her project there echoes Brosman's idea of the autobiographical subject becoming 'inscribed' in the text: 'I took that child and that adolescent girl, both so long given up for lost in the depths of the unrecalled past, and endowed them with my adult awareness. I gave them a new existence - in black and white, on sheets of paper' (*Prime*, 7). It is only in *Memoirs* that de Beauvoir really creates a new persona, through the re-creation of the little girl she once was; and only there that one has the sense of de Beauvoir searching for an 'inner self' in the person of that seemingly long-lost girl. However, these genuinely autobiographical features of the book are in a certain way more the result of necessity than design. They result principally from the great temporal and psychological distance between mature author and young subject, which distance means that de Beauvoir's memory itself cannot do nearly as much work in re-creating this phase of her life as it can the later phases. The distance obliges de Beauvoir to reconstruct much more than to recall, and (though there must always be some reconstruction in recollection) this is what brings the persona of the *jeune fille rangée* to be at one with the text in the way that is, as Brosman says, special to autobiography.¹³

But there is another important difference between autobiography and memoir. It is essential to memoirs, whose primary source must be memory, that they are written by the

subject. That author and subject are one and the same person is not merely true by definition; it is crucial to the point of memoir as a genre, and to the standards by which we may judge its quality and interest. Indeed it is a perfectly excusable feature of memoirs that they might never transcend a keenly subjective outlook - that is their distinctive prerogative. By contrast, autobiography is simply the auto-version of biography. The auto-biographer will naturally have a more privileged access to the resource of memory than the biographer, but that is merely an advantageous side-effect of the (so to speak) chance identity of author and subject. In auto-biography, this identity does not affect either the point or the received virtues of the genre, which are fundamentally those of biographical writing in general: objectivity, impartiality, explanation, illumination. If this is right, then auto-biography is to be conceived as biography which happens to be written by the subject, whereas in memoir it is essential that author and subject are one and the same. This is not unconnected to the distinction which Brozman emphasizes: the project of creating a persona, a portrait-in-words of an inner life, is a project one can only take on from a fairly objective (if thoroughly informed) stance; whereas the project of recounting experiences drawn from memory must start with a distinctly subjective stance - the stance of the person who had those experiences first-hand. Though shaped with hindsight and recounted with the writer's sense of story, it is crucial to the point of memoirs that they originate in that first-hand participation in a life which constitutes its being one's own.

It should be clear that the necessarily first-hand, subjective origin which I am claiming is essential to memoir, and inessential to autobiography, has nothing to do with any claim that the first-hand stance brings any special access to the truth of the life. On the contrary, de Beauvoir is right to infuse her text with a sense of the opacity of memory and the special difficulties of self-understanding. This explains why she often emphasizes that her project is precisely not to *know* herself, or to present an *interpretation* of the self - self-portrait is the autobiographer's burden - but rather simply to present her story so that readers may come to their own interpretations. Indeed, there is some reason to think of the reader as having better access to the subject of memoir than the author herself:

I still believe to this day in the theory of the 'transcendental ego'. The self (*moi*) has only a probable objectivity, and anyone saying 'I' only grasps the outer edge of it; an

outsider can get a clearer and more accurate picture. Let me repeat that this personal account is not offered in any sense as an ‘explanation’. Indeed, one of my main reasons for undertaking it is my realization that self-knowledge is impossible, and the best one can hope for is self-revelation (*Prime*, 368).

Acknowledging the opacity of the self, then, she aims to make her own acquaintance over time by telling her story and making her past selves exist for others through the publicity of the written word: ‘I wanted to make myself exist for others by conveying, as directly as I could, the taste of my own life: I have more or less succeeded’ (*All Said and Done*, 463). These twin motives of getting to know herself by acquainting others with her story constitute de Beauvoir’s principle means of establishing solidarity with past selves. The task of telling her story, however, depends upon a more straightforward project of self-inquiry: there are gaps to be filled, questions to be answered. Indeed it is as if she is repeatedly drawn to extend her memoirs on to the next volume by the allure of as yet unanswered questions - notably, for instance, those implicitly posed at the end of *Memoirs of a Dutiful Daughter*. This is reflected in the Preface to *The Prime of Life*, where she explains:

I had no plans for taking this project any further. ...When I had completed my *Memoirs of a Dutiful Daughter* no voice spoke to me out of my past, urging me to continue the story. I made up my mind to turn to some other task; but in the event I found myself unable to do so. Beneath the final line of that book an invisible question mark was inscribed, and I could not get my mind off it. Freedom I had - but freedom to do what? What new direction would the course of my life take as a result of all this fuss and commotion, the pitched battle that had culminated in victorious release? (*Prime*, 7).

Moved by the appetites of a reader, de Beauvoir-the-author is repeatedly impelled to embark on the next chapter in her life-story.

Unity in solidarity

Getting to know oneself through opening oneself up to others can be a difficult task. That ‘strange object’ - that ‘scattered, broken’ thing that is a life - is all one has to go on, and

de Beauvoir certainly seems to have had a sense of a self which was broken up and unintegrated. Not necessarily in a bad way, however. At one time she experiences a sense of fragmentation simply as a result of her emerging public persona. On the warm reception of her first novel, *She Came to Stay*, she recalls, ‘One literary columnist, discussing new books from Gallimard, referred to me as “the firm’s new woman novelist”. The words tinkled gaily around in my head. How I would have envied this serious-faced young woman, now embarking on her literary career, if she had possessed any name other than my own - but she was me!’ (*Prime* 558). This happy, everyday self-alienation does not go very deep, and the strangeness of public recognition is dispelled by plain habituation: ‘I had grown used to living inside a writer’s skin and nowadays scarcely ever caught myself looking at this new character and saying: It’s me’ (*Force of Circumstance*, 46). Self-alienation occurs in a less happy form, however, when the experience of being ‘old’ crashes in on her: ‘One day I said to myself: “I’m forty!”... The stupor that seized me then has not left me yet... When I read in print Simone de Beauvoir, it is a young woman they are telling me about, and who happens to be me’ (*Force*, 656).

Self-alienation, then, can be positive or negative for de Beauvoir, but if one is specifically looking for connections between her sense of unintegrated identity with the nature of her ‘memorialist’¹⁴ project, then a remark about her past selves in *All Said and Done* is particularly telling. Referring to her project of re-gathering all the fragments of her life in retrospect, she says, ‘I am behaving as though my life were to carry on beyond my grave as I have managed to regain it in my last years. Yet I know very well that “I can’t take it with me.” I shall *all* die’ (*All Said and Done*, 40). She shall *all* die; as she has *all* lived. Her narratives of the self are most fundamentally a project in gathering together all these selves and, mediated by intersubjective exchange with the reader, generating both a serial intra-personal connection and an ethical-political alliance. The connection with the reader and the connection with past selves are part and parcel of the same project, for it is through the special publicity of her life-story being read by others that de Beauvoir may escape solipsistic entrapment in her present.

This seeking of intra-personal alliance is where de Beauvoir’s sense of an unintegrated self finds its positive role, and its ethical point. For de Beauvoir, the possibility

of an ethical attitude towards others - the possibility of solidarity with them - is intimately connected with the disintegration of the self. This, for instance, is how she describes the transformation which a sudden awareness of history caused her to undergo: 'History burst over me, and I dissolved into fragments. I woke to find myself scattered over the four quarters of the globe, linked by every nerve in me to each and every other individual' (*Prime*, 369). That the establishment of solidarity with past selves through the publicity of memoir is a fundamental motivation for de Beauvoir's story is perhaps most obvious in her attitude towards the child she once was: 'I was thinking about my childhood, and one of my earliest memories returned to me: the flower I was accused of picking in Aunt Alice's garden. I thought how much I would love, one day, to write a book that evoked the shade of this little girl from the distant past - never dreaming that I would get the chance to do so' (*Prime* 326). In that episode the little Simone, prior to the intervention of her parents (who come off rather well here, since they rightly take their daughter at her word), has the frustrating experience of being unjustly disbelieved by her aunt over the picking of a flower. This episode resonates with an ambition intrinsic to memoirs: to disclose oneself to a suitably trustful audience.¹⁵ The conditions for this are constructed in the very mechanism of the memoir-text, so as to explain the most literal sense in which the reader is involved in the relations of solidarity which are being sought: the reader, the author, and the subject of the memoir are all placed in those relations of trust that are necessary for successful personal testimony. De Beauvoir bears witness to her life, telling the story of past selves so that they may be properly understood and, where necessary, their various 'distress signals'¹⁶ vindicated. Memoir is in this way premised upon the sort of trust which attends personal disclosure, and this trust facilitates the author's solidarity with her past selves *via* the reader who joins the author in bearing witness. Needless to say, this is not an empirical point about whether or not one might believe everything that is written in memoir, but a point about the relations between the positions of author, reader, and subject which are constructed in the memoir-text.

I hope to have shown that bearing witness by documenting and shaping the different chapters in a single life-story is, for de Beauvoir, most fundamentally a way of establishing lines of solidarity with her past selves. I have offered a reading of her memoirs as a project of intra-personal alignment, both psychological and ethical. The self-narrative aligns the mature author with those younger women with whom she shares a unique life, and to whose

experiences of frustration and injustice she aims retrospectively to bear public witness. Thus while the life-story told is hers alone, still it possesses a special ethical significance, for de Beauvoir's commitment to establishing relations of solidarity with the others of her own past exemplifies her feminist commitment to female solidarity quite generally. It is this ethical impetus at the heart of her self-narrative which ultimately integrates de Beauvoir's story. Indeed it is what integrates her very self, for the achievement of solidarity finally restores the 'unity' to that 'scattered, broken' object that is her life.

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1. There is perhaps some leeway in which of de Beauvoir's writings count among her autobiographical volumes, but it is not I think controversial to categorize the following four as comprising her complete memoir: *Memoirs of a Dutiful Daughter* (London: Penguin, 1959, trans. James Kirkup; *Mémoires d'une jeune fille rangée*, Librairie Gallimard, 1958), *The Prime of Life* (London: Penguin, 1962, trans. Peter Green; *La Force de l'Age*, Librairie Gallimard, 1960), *Force of Circumstance* (London: André Deutsch and Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1965, trans. Richard Howard; *La Force des Choses*, Librairie Gallimard, 1963), *All Said and Done* (New York: Paragon House, 1993, trans. Patrick O'Brian; *Tout Compte Fait*, Editions Gallimard, 1972). She also wrote two semi-auto/biographical works, *A Very Easy Death* (London: Penguin, 1969; trans. Patrick O'Brian; *Une Mort Très Douce*, Librairie Gallimard, 1964), and *Adieux - A Farewell to Sartre* (New York: Pantheon, 1984; trans. Patrick O'Brian; *La Cérémonie des Adieux*, Gallimard, 1981].

2. The French is better: 'On ne naît pas femme: on le devient' (*The Second Sex* (London: Pan Books, 1988; trans. H. M. Parshley; *Le Deuxième Sexe*, Éditions Gallimard, 1949)).

3. In the Introduction to *Force of Circumstance*, she says, 'the way in which history has happened to me day by day is an adventure quite as individual as my subjective development' (v-vi).

4. Ursula Tidd, *Simone de Beauvoir, Gender and Testimony* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 130.

5. Later, in *All Said and Done*, de Beauvoir refers to Zaza's death in very strong terms, as a 'murder by her environment, her milieu...' (10).

6. See, for example, *Memoirs*: 'One afternoon, in Paris, I realized that I was condemned to death. I was alone in the house and I did not attempt to control my despair: I screamed and tore at the red carpet' (138); and in *Prime*, 578-9 where she talks of 'Night's black terrors...'; and see 603.

7. Truthfulness does not entail total disclosure, for it is compatible with (indeed, considered as a virtue it implies) discretion: 'I must warn...[readers] that I have no intention of telling them

everything. I described my childhood and adolescence without any omissions. But though I have, as I hope, managed to recount the story of my life since then without excessive embarrassment or indiscreetness, I cannot treat the years of my maturity in the same detached way... There are many things which I firmly intend to leave in obscurity' (*Prime*, 8).

8. On de Beauvoir's use of irony, see Tidd, *op.cit.*, 112-116; and Jo-Ann Pilardi, *Simone de Beauvoir: Writing the Self - Philosophy Becomes Autobiography* (Westport, Connecticut: Praeger, 1999), 49-52.

9. Michèle le Doeuff, *Hipparchia's Choice: An Essay Concerning Women, Philosophy, Etc.* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991, trans Trista Selous; *L'Etude et le rouet*, 1989), 136.

10. See *Memoirs*, 275.

11. Catharine Savage Brosman, *Simone de Beauvoir Revisited* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1991), 134.

12. Brosman, *op.cit.*, 135.

13. Note too in this connection de Beauvoir's comment that *Memoirs* has a 'fiction-like quality lacking in the later volumes' (*All Said and Done*, 14).

14. She coins this term in the Introduction to *Force of Circumstance* (vi); the French too is 'un mémorialiste'.

15. I therefore agree with Ursula Tidd that de Beauvoir's autobiography is fundamentally testimonial, rather than confessional; see Tidd, *op. cit.* chapter 6.

16. 'I had long wanted to set down the story of my first twenty years; nor did I ever forget the distress signals which my adolescent self sent out to the older woman who was afterward to absorb me, body and soul' (*Prime*, 7).