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Sex, Love, and Letters: Reading Simone de Beauvoir, 1949-1963

“ C’est ce contrepoint que j’aime, sous jacent dans tout votre livre, cette sarabande d’appétits jamais rassasiés.”

[“What I love is this counterpoint that runs through your whole book – this sarabande (a sarabande is a slow and particularly sensual dance) of desires that are never satisfied”].¹

We know a *lot* about Simone de Beauvoir. We know about the centrality of *The Second Sex* to second wave feminism around the world. We know about her life, which came to represent a seductive mix of political commitment, literary accomplishment, human possibility, and female independence. We know about the dark side of that life: the way she enabled Jean-Paul Sartre and disabled young women attracted to him, her or both.² We know (from the *Nouvel Observateur*'s issue published in January 2008 on the centenary of her birth) what she looked like naked, from the back.³

¹ Letter to Simone de Beauvoir, 12 novembre, 1954.

² See, recently : Ingrid Galster, *Beauvoir dans tous ses états* (Tallandier, 2007), including good essays on Beauvoir's life under the occupation; Susan Rubin Suleiman, *Crises of memory and the Second World War* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2006); Margaret Simons' introduction to Simone de Beauvoir, *Wartime diary* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2009); Sylvie Chaperon, *Les années Beauvoir : 1945-1970* (Paris: Fayard, 2000); Christine Delphy and Sylvie Chaperon, eds., *Cinquantenaire du deuxième sexe : Colloque international Simone de Beauvoir* (Syllepse, 2001). The unpleasantness of “the Family” is handled succinctly in Louis Menand, “Stand by Your Man,” *The New Yorker*, September 26, 2005, reviewing Hazel Rowley, *Tête-à-tête : Simone de Beauvoir and Jean-Paul Sartre*, (New York: Harper Collins, 2005);

³ *Le nouvel observateur*, January, 2008, creating a scandal reminiscent of the one that greeted *The Second Sex* in 1949. The photo, by American photographer Art Shay, and accompanying article are at <http://bibliobs.nouvelobs.com/2008/01/02/simone-la-scandaleuse>.

Much of what we know, however, concerns Beauvoir's long term philosophical legacy and gives short shrift to post-war France. *The Second Sex* (1949) was deemed to be "ahead of its time" by a sympathetic writer in the 1950s, trying to explain her contemporaries' hostility to the work.⁴ However appealing that shorthand, it ill suits book and writer so engaged in the historical present. *The Second Sex* was produced in, addressed to, and read in a world haunted by the war and its humiliations, roiled by colonial and anti-colonial violence, and polarized by the cold war. The density and drama of the moment pulled the author and her argument in different directions; she suggested analogies between gender and racial subjugation and then undercut them, for instance, and used oddly overdrawn comparisons with the United States to make her points. Historical context brings out new dimensions of Beauvoir's arguments as well as renewing our understanding of the post-war period.⁵ This essay, too, aims to historicize, via a remarkable and unexplored archive of letters Beauvoir received from readers.⁶ Beauvoir was an avid letter writer: we have hundreds of her letters to Jacques-Laurent Bost, Nelson Algren, and Sartre.⁷ But it seems particularly important to attend to the less famous but no less avid letter-writers whose views are unknown, and who sought to engage her, sometimes in interestingly unpredictable ways.

⁴ Geneviève Gennari, *Simone de Beauvoir* (Paris, éditions universitaires, 1958), p. 112.

⁵ See Judith G. Coffin, "Historicizing The Second Sex," *French Politics, Culture & Society* 25, no. 3 (Winter 2007): 123-148.

⁶ "Simone de Beauvoir: lettres reçues," Manuscrits, Occident, Bibliothèque nationale de France. Many thanks to both Mauricette Berne and Anne Mary for their help with this archive. At the library's request, I have omitted names to protect the authors' anonymity. Berne and Rebreyand articles.

⁷ Simone de Beauvoir, *A transatlantic love affair: letters to Nelson Algren* (New York: New Press, 1998); with Bost, Sartre's student and her lover off and on from 1938 to 1947, Simone de Beauvoir, *Correspondance croisée: 1937-1940* (Paris: Gallimard, 2004); Simone de Beauvoir, *Lettres à Sartre, tome 1: 1930 - 1939* (Gallimard, 1990); Simone de Beauvoir, *Lettres à Sartre, tome 2: 1940 - 1963* (Gallimard, 1990). Sartre apparently did not save letters to him from ordinary people.

The readers' letters cast a different light on the French philosopher's work. Scholars have canvassed French critics' early reactions to *The Second Sex*, often showing that her pioneering projects ran into hidebound and misogynist resistance. The letters make a different point: *sympathetic* readers found and responded to some of the same aspects of the work that irked reviewers. These letters also invite us to read *The Second Sex* as the readers did: not usually as a stand-alone text, but alongside Beauvoir's fiction and memoirs. They allow us to hear Beauvoir's arguments, often deemed mandarin and abstract, as they resonated for persons in situations (to use the existentialist term) of joblessness, unwanted pregnancy, facing a marriage or love gone bad. They take us from high intellectual history to mass culture, from existential womanhood to the "courrier du Cœur," or the "letters from the heart" that were such a popular feature of the postwar women's press.⁸ They bridge author and audience; writing and reading; the histories of philosophy, autobiography, and introspection.

The letters offer rare, close-up views of persons struggling to write about subjects from contraception to sexual abuse and frustrated desire. Their ability to do so was limited by ignorance, isolation, inhibition, by having no language that seemed appropriate, and indeed by a sense of themselves as ordinary.⁹ They are a window onto the language and experience of sexuality and sexual feeling. They are revealing about intimacy, confidences, and the bonds that they can create. If, as British historian Carolyn Steedman argues, "past forms of cognition and affect are to some extent retrievable, and it is one of our jobs to interrogate them," documents like these may help historians pursue

⁸ Marcelle Ségol and Hélène Gordon-Lazareff, *Marcelle Ségol. Mon métier le Courrier du coeur : . Préface de Hélène Gordon Lazareff*, 1952.

⁹ On ordinariness, see Anne-Claire Rebreyend, "Sur les traces des pratiques sexuelles des individus "ordinaires". France 1920-1970," *Le Mouvement social*, no. 207 (June 2004): 57-74

such elusive quarry.¹⁰ They open onto social history as reconceived by French cultural historians like Judith Lyon-Caen, who calls for a history “attentive to individuals and to ways in which the self is constructed.”¹¹ They may help us sketch a more intimate social and cultural history of the postwar period.

The archive holds thousands of letters and is still being catalogued. I focus here on the first fifteen years, from 1948 to 1963.¹² These letters are fewer, fresher and less formulaic. The “condition of women,” feminism, and sexuality had not yet emerged as readily recognizable topics about which one might appropriately write to Beauvoir. By the mid 1960s, letters poured in from political activists, scholars and journalists writing articles or organizing conferences on feminism. Before that time, the readership and letters were much more varied and, as we will see, their politics interestingly oblique.¹³

I do not claim that this archive is complete. Beauvoir’s heirs removed the letters from her well-known friends and acquaintances. Other letters surely fell by the wayside, for Beauvoir simply stashed them in boxes. She discarded the envelopes, complicating the process of dating and cataloguing that continues at the Bibliothèque Nationale. In her memoirs Beauvoir reported that *The Second Sex* brought a spate of ugly and insulting letters. Only a few such letters are here. We do find some anger, an odd erotic poem, and

¹⁰ *La lecture et la vie: les usages du roman au temps de Balzac* (Tallandier, 2006). Carolyn Steedman, “State Sponsored Autobiography” in Becky Conekin, Frank Mort, and Chris Waters, eds., *Moments of modernity: reconstructing Britain, 1945-1964* (London: Rivers Oram Press, 1999) 41.

¹¹ Judith Lyon-Caen, *La lecture et la vie : les usages du roman au temps de Balzac* (Paris: Tallandier, 2006).

¹² The archive holds around 2500 letters for 1949-1975; I estimate 250 for the years I consider here.

¹³ On elite culture and the mass media, see Tamara Chaplin, *Turning on the Mind: French Philosophers on Television* (Chicago, 2007).

few pornographic asides in the letters. *The Second Sex* did create a scandal, but scandal is not the story to emerge from this collection.¹⁴

The letter-writing readers are not necessarily a representative sample of Beauvoir's public. They are, though, a varied and intriguing group: middle aged and young; male as well as female; writers and aspiring writers, teachers, clerical workers, women at home, school girls, university students, factory workers, doctors, psychologists and psychoanalysts, and a handful of childhood friends trying to reconnect. The letters testify to Beauvoir's global following, and to a globalizing moment in culture, for they are datelined Tunis, Rio, Jerusalem, Lausanne, Warsaw, New York, Iowa City, Mexico City, Bogota, and Zagreb, although some of the most interesting come from provincial France. The letters' very materiality captures all kinds of moments and feelings, different educations and social standing. Readers sent postcards, holiday greetings, professional business cards, clippings of reviews and pictures (which have not been kept). Most wrote by hand, which was considered more formal and polite than typing. Some did so fluidly and at great length, others with obvious difficulty, crossing out words and phrases, and using notebook paper. I discovered one letter that made it easy to envision how it – and others – had actually lain on Beauvoir's desk. On the back someone has written a shopping list for a gathering, apparently hosted by Beauvoir, for 8 friends: "1 bottle vodka, 3 bottles whiskey, 1 foie gras for 8, 3 bottles of champagne; 1 bottle of Bourgogne (Bost), caviar, and petits pains" – this in 1950!¹⁵ We knew that Beauvoir lived well and drank hard, but this letter seems a particularly vivid artifact of her life.

¹⁴ For instance, July 21 1949, Jan 19, 1950. Simone de Beauvoir, *La Force des choses, tome I* (Gallimard, 1976) On the immediate reception, see Chaperon, *Les années Beauvoir* ; Galster, *Beauvoir dans tous ses états*; Coffin, "Historicizing *The Second Sex*."

¹⁵ June, 1950.

Did Beauvoir answer the letters? She marked a few “Repondu.” Many of the letter-writers thanked her for replying to them. In a handful of cases, such as one young man starting his military service in 1957 who asked her to be his “marraine de guerre” [“war godmother”], they corresponded for many years.¹⁶ She refused to answer the many love letters and proposals of marriage she reportedly received. “Poor dear me keeps getting strange letters,” she wrote to Algren early on, in 1949.¹⁷ She seems to have treated many of her correspondents, however, kindly and with respect.

Of course to look at Beauvoir through the eyes of readers is to see her at her best. More important, the letters show Beauvoir’s readers at their best: eager to demonstrate their attentiveness and intelligence, to explain they had read her exactly as she would have wanted them to, and to model themselves on her characters.¹⁸ As Lyon-Caen says in her brilliant study of readers’ letters to Balzac and Eugene Sue, “Les lettres de lecteurs ne racontent jamais des expériences réelles de lecture” [“Readers’ letters never tell the real experiences of reading”].¹⁹ Nor did they necessarily recount their real experiences of life. Bound up in an intense and vividly imagined relationship with the author, they sought to distinguish themselves from other readers and to tell their stories in eye-catching ways. In the process they may have disguised as much as they revealed. Author, reader, and their relationship are all idealized or stylized, though no less significant for that.²⁰ How the letters in this archive fit into the histories of reading, the protocols of letter-writing, or intimacy and self disclosure – how they compare with letters to Rousseau, Sand, or

¹⁶ 7-7-57. War godmothers supported soldiers by writing letters. The practice began during World War I.

¹⁷ Beauvoir, *A transatlantic love affair*, 305. See also 296, 289.

¹⁸ See, for instance, 12 novembre, 1954; 6 mars, 1956.

¹⁹ Judith Lyon-Caen, *La lecture et la vie: les usages du roman au temps de Balzac* (Tallandier, 2006), p. 120. On the interpretive issues see L-C, chapter 2 and the beginning of chapter 4 ; Robert Darnton, *The great cat massacre and other episodes in French cultural history*, (New York: Vintage Books, 1985); Anne Marie Sohn on medias; and Philippe Lejeune, *Le pacte autobiographique*, (Paris: Seuil, 1996).

²⁰ Lyon-Caen, p. 192

Balzac— are some of the issues here. They are beyond the scope of one essay, but I shall touch on them to suggest lines of research and reflection.²¹

1. Mass culture, writers, and readers

“ Madame de Beauvoir, J’ai le plaisir de me compter parmi les admiratrices les plus ferventes de votre œuvre et de votre personnalité!!” [“I have the pleasure of being among the most ardent admirers of your work and personality!!”]²²

In the 1950s, Beauvoir burst into the world of literary stardom. Celebrity fused her philosophical work, her fiction, and her persona. In this she resembled the other existentialist writers and like theirs her ideas came in challenging forms (*The Second Sex*, 1949) and accessible ones. *America day by day* (1948) was an easy read on a popular postwar topic. *The Mandarins* (1954) won many readers and a blizzard of publicity even before it was tapped for the Goncourt prize that year.²³ These successes paved the way for the even more popular *Mémoires d’une jeune fille rangée* (1958), *La Force de l’âge* (1960), and *La Force des choses* (1961). “Je viens de terminer votre livre, *Mémoires d’une jeune fille rangée*, et je veux vous dire quel bouleversement il m’a apporté” [“I have just finished your book, *Memoirs of a Dutiful Daughter*, and I want to tell you how it turned me upside down/ bowled me over”], was a characteristic response from one reader in 1958 who, like others went on to “devour” all of Beauvoir’s work, including

²¹ Roger Chartier, *Forms and meanings: texts, performances, and audiences from codex to computer*, New cultural studies (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1995); Darnton, *The great cat massacre*.

²² 13 septembre, 1958.

²³ Björn Larsson, *La réception des Mandarins : le roman de Simone de Beauvoir face à la critique littéraire en France* (Lund: Lund University Press, 1988). On celebrity, see Lenard Berlanstein, “Historicizing and Gendering Celebrity Culture: Famous Women in Nineteenth-Century France,” *Journal of Women’s History* (16, 4) Winter 2004: 65-91; Vanessa R. Schwartz, *It’s So French!: Hollywood, Paris, and the Making of Cosmopolitan Film Culture* (University Of Chicago Press, 2007); Tamara Chaplin, *Turning on the mind : French philosophers on television* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007); George Cotkin, *Existential America* (Johns Hopkins Press, 2003).

The Second Sex.²⁴ Readers frequently spelled out how they understood the connections between the different works. “Congratulations!” telegraphed an admirer from Brussels when Beauvoir won the Goncourt prize: *Les Mandarins* est “une victoire de vos idées”[“a victory of your ideas”].²⁵ A reader who had recommended Beauvoir’s writing to her book group, declared : “Je n’avais pas de doute pour le choix d’écrivain après avoir commencé *Le Deuxième sexe* encore moins ayant lu *les Mandarins*, ce dernier complétant d’une manière si exquise et chaleureuse le grand aperçu objectif et scientifique de la femme du “*Deuxième sexe*” [“I had no second thoughts about my choice of writer once I started *The Second Sex*, and even fewer once I had read *The Mandarins* – the latter is such a delightful and warm complement to the sweeping objective and scientific overview of the woman in *the Second Sex*”].²⁶ Readers connected the author’s life to her arguments: “ Il est bon que ce livre [*The Second Sex*] soit écrit par vous, qui mettez aussi en pratique les qualités qu’on refuse en général à la femme” [“It is good that this book was written by you, a person who embodies the very qualities one refuses to ascribe to a woman”].²⁷

Readers skipped from one of Beauvoir’s books to another; they read articles in *Elle*, excerpts and reviews in *Le Figaro*, *France Soir*, and *L’Express*; they saw her profiled in *Match*, interviewed in *l’Humanité*, and photographed in *Jours de France*. She appeared on the television show *Lectures pour Tous*.²⁸ Some were appalled by the press’s

²⁴ 29.10.58

²⁵ 8/12/1954 Brussels.

²⁶ 21 sept, 1956.

²⁷ Lausanne, 13 janvier, 1960.

²⁸ Fonds Beauvoir, Dossier, 1954, notes about photographes in *Match* and *Jours de France*. On television, to which only a handful had access, see Chaplin, 57. By 1956 Beauvoir had been put on the Vatican’s index, along with Sartre and Françoise Sagan. When a Canadian radio station cancelled an interview with Beauvoir, a disappointed listener protested: “it is inconceivable and unacceptable to say that we French Canadians are not ready to deal with objections to religion, which is why they cancelled your interview. Doing so is an insult to intellectual and moral freedom. Please don’t hold this against us.” Montreal, 23 novembre, 1959

fascination with Beauvoir, like one woman who angrily asked why *Elle* had run a story about such an “egotistical and cerebral monster.” Thankfully, she continued, the magazine countered Beauvoir’s deplorable view of marriage as an “alienation of liberty” and a “corvée” with a feature story on the opposite page about two happy girls and their mother. The letter-writer hoped these two sides of *Elle* would never meet, that the young girls would be lucky “... en leur lucide simplicité, de ne pas vous entendre, Madame, de ne pas vous comprendre. Décidément, ce magazine est bien fait – il corrige cela par ceci” [“...in their lucid simplicity, not to hear you, Madame, not to understand you. Decidedly, this magazine is well done. It corrects with one hand what it does with the other”].²⁹ Reading, then, often meant reading *about*— and even that needs to be understood in the largest sense. The *Elle* subscriber could reconstruct a debate from the pages of the magazine; another letter writer cheerfully acknowledged that she had studied only Beauvoir’s horoscope.³⁰

The letters provide a snapshot of postwar literary culture. That culture invested French letters, writing, and philosophy with prestige and perhaps outsized hopes for the redemption of France’s status in the world. The postwar moment also brought new mass cultural forms in which the republic of letters found outlets: more, and more varied, radio programming; live television broadcasts of important events, which raised television’s profile, though audiences were very small; and above all glossy weeklies featuring personalities, world events, sports, and, splashy visuals.³¹ Women’s magazines, the

²⁹ She sent another copy of the letter to *Elle*. 24-9-60 Haute Garonne.

³⁰ 1st letter, dossier janvier-juin 1957

³¹ Ibid.; Alice Kaplan; Sullerot. *Histoire générale de la presse française*, vol. 5, 423-6. Morin, *Essai sur la culture de masse* (Paris, 1962) Ménie Gregoire, « La presse féminine, » *Esprit* (juillet-août, 1959). Marc Martin, *medias et journalists de la république* ;

fastest growing sector of the press, exemplified the new style journalism. Culture traveled faster, and the existentialists were among its most popular representatives.³² Writers' images and arguments were refracted through the kaleidoscope of this new media, with its faster pace, greater commercial pressures, larger audiences, and heightened expectations. Beauvoir's press representative at Gallimard, her publishing house, pleaded for pictures and quotes she might feed to the press. Nescafé asked Beauvoir to endorse their coffee. Letter-writers requested autographs and photographs, the better to visualize her life and person. "I have often seen your name, and I see excerpts and photos of you in the papers," wrote one for whom names, books and photos did not suffice: "That is why, I think, that I am writing to you." "Il n'y a pas de disques avec votre voix, n'est-ce pas?" ["There aren't any records with your voice, are there?"]³³ For some – usually men— her reputation made her familiar and more approachable: "Sur une photo récente, vous m'avez paru moins lointaine et j'ai osé vous écrire" ["In a recent photo, you seemed less distant and I dared to write to you"], wrote one.³⁴ "A one martini girl!," joked another, alluding to *Time* magazine's coverage of her memoir. "Je ne vous en veux pas pour les cafés, vous savez," he added, "C'est peut-être à cause de cela qu'on peut vous écrire avec aisance, comme à une personne quelconque" ["I do not hold the cafés against you, you know," he added, "This is why one can write to you easily, as one would to an ordinary person"].³⁵ "Simone de Beauvoir, Vous appartenez à nous toutes, c'est

³² Beauvoir and Sartre's visits to the United States ; *America Day by Day*, etc.

³³ fev 1960. By 1959 Beauvoir was theorizing stardom as well as enacting it. Simone de Beauvoir, "Brigitte Bardot and the Lolita Syndrome," *Esquire*, August 1959; Edgar Morin, *Les stars*, 3rd ed. (Paris]: Editions du seuil, 1972)

³⁴ 7-7-57

³⁵ 16 mars, 1956.

pourquoi je ne vous appelle pas Madame” [“Simone de Beauvoir, you belong to all of us, that is why I do not call you Madame”].³⁶

Most correspondents, though, did not believe she was “just anyone;” to the contrary, they were acutely self-conscious of the distance between them.³⁷ They apologized for their inability to write, for being too “lyrical”³⁸ or, very often, “childish” (*puerile*): seeking advice and intimacy from a powerful person as if she were a parent and unable to recognize, as an adult surely would, the gulf that separated them from a philosopher-writer. One so loved *Memoirs of a Dutiful Daughter* that she could not “résister à l’envie un peu puérile de vous répondre” [“couldn’t resist the slightly childish desire to respond to you”]: she allowed herself to imagine that Beauvoir had written to her.³⁹ Another letter-writer was particularly articulate about the difficulty of striking the right tone and the self-expressive traps into which one could so easily tumble. She had started her letter to Beauvoir three times:

Pour réduire la distance entre la “femme de lettres – écrivain célèbre” que j’imaginai et l’étudiant anonyme dont je ressentais durement les limites et le peu d’avenir, je donnais dans le grand style et la rhétorique à tel point que cette écriture gourmée m’empêchait avant plusieurs pages d’en arriver au fait.

[To reduce the distance between the “women of letters”—the famous writer who I imagined – and the anonymous student, all too aware of my limits and my unpromising future, I put on the grand style and rhetoric – so much so that my starchy prose kept me from getting to the point for several pages].⁴⁰

³⁶ 26.12.58

³⁷ See L-C, p. 247.

³⁸ 27 janvier, 1961.

³⁹ 13 février, 1959. My italics. “Je n’ai que 19 ans, ne vous étonnez pas de ma puérité.” Liège, 11 mai, 1957.

⁴⁰ Paris 11/II/1961. The reader echoed Beauvoir’s language : “Il l’avait d’abord trouvée si gourmée qu’il lui avait dit en riant : “Vous prenez la vie avec des gants de chevreau glacé ” (Mém. j. fille, 1958, p. 302)

This evocation of the perceived distance between the woman of letters and the anonymous reader, however stylized, nonetheless highlights the courage of many of these ordinary readers.

Let me say a few more words about tone and approach, for the intensity of feeling and self-dramatization in these letters is striking. A great many readers opened their letters saying that they had not wanted to write, or that they had resisted the impulse to do so, but that they had been unable to help themselves. The gesture was partly a tribute to the author, whose work had touched them powerfully enough to sweep away their resistance and hesitation—in the process it had perhaps transformed them into characters she might admire, willing to conquer their fears of insignificance, take risks, or put “honesty ahead of pride.”⁴¹ In other words, they partly paid tribute to themselves. Readers imitated Beauvoir’s own terms (like “puerile” and “starchy”) and her tropes: “J’ai longtemps hésité à écrire un livre sur la femme” [“I have long hesitated to write a book on women”], opened *The Second Sex*; remarks about the “imprudent adventure” of writing about oneself prefaced *La Force de l’âge*. Readers were not sure they understood their contradictory feelings, not sure the subjects they wanted to raise were appropriate. Whatever the different motives and meanings, the effect is one of inner turmoil, or an excess of feeling that needs to be released. (*épancher*, to pour out, recurs throughout.) And this rhetorical effect calls forth another, of intimacy and trust.

The letters’ surprisingly intimate tone was also a response to Beauvoir’s self presentation. Beauvoir was never far from the center of her work. *The Second Sex* (1949) began as an experiment in existentialist autobiography and emphasized “lived

⁴¹ “Mais j’aurai passé la franchise avant la fierté.” 27 janvier, 1961.

experience.” Beauvoir asserted that the Parisian intellectuals in *The Mandarins* (1954) were not her actual circle of friends, but this only encouraged guessing games: “J’ai le sentiment de vous connaître depuis deux ans, cela tient à un livre. Voulez-vous bien me dire dans quelle mesure vous vous êtes livrée dans les Mandarins ?” [“I feel as if I’ve known you for two years, and all thanks to a book. Could you tell me how much of yourself you have put in the *Mandarins*?”]⁴² Another reader wrote: “I loved the Mandarins. I think you are Anne: intelligente, compréhensive, féminine et principalement humaine” [“intelligent, understanding, feminine and, above all, human”].⁴³ They believed she was down to earth, with a “wide angle of vision,” and, often, “*comprehensive*,” able to understand everything.⁴⁴ “Votre intelligence m’intimide, en même temps qu’elle m’inspire confiance car vous devez être très compréhensive” [“Your intelligence intimidates me but at the same time it inspires trust, because you are very understanding”].⁴⁵ “Ce que je voudrais vous connaître!! [“I think you must resemble Anne : How I would like to meet you!!”]⁴⁶ They described their reading in similarly intimate terms, as if they had lived (and often slept) with her characters and her books: “Je viens de passer 2 jours au lit avec pour merveilleux compagnon votre dernier livre...” [“I have just spent two days in bed with, as a wonderful companion, your latest book...”]⁴⁷

Je sors d’un merveilleux tourbillon: la lecture des “Mandarins”, je tiens à vous remercier de cette passion que j’ai pu mettre à la lecture de ce livre. Pendant toute une nuit j’ai vécu au milieu des Dubreuilh et au côté d’Henri Perron... j’espère

⁴² 1957, no date. Larsson, p. 30.

⁴³ Sao paulo 1957, no date.

⁴⁴ le 28 dec. 57

⁴⁵ 1 janvier, 1955.

⁴⁶ 1957, no date.

⁴⁷ 14 janvier, 1959

ne pas être déçue par vos autres oeuvres passées et à venir que je vais m'empreser de lire.

[I'm coming out of a marvelous whirlwind, the reading of *The Mandarins*, I want to thank you for this passion that I could feel while reading of this book. For an entire night, I lived among the Dubreuilh and next to Henri Perron.... I hope to not be disappointed by your other earlier works and your future ones, which I will rush to read].⁴⁸

Readers wanted to move from text to author, “de connaître le visage réel de celle vers qui je me projetai si entièrement dans l’imaginaire, et d’écouter sa voix...” [“ to know the real face of the person toward whom I have projected myself so entirely in the imagination and to listen to her voice...”]⁴⁹

Projection, identification, and longing for attachment escalated with Beauvoir’s memoirs: *Mémoires d’une jeune fille rangée* (1958), *La Force de l’âge* (1960), and *La Force des choses* (1961): “I didn’t have to read your memoirs to admire you, but they permitted me to love you.”⁵⁰ A (male) doctor was also smitten: “Madame, Peut-on solliciter vous connaître?” [Madame, Would it be possible to meet you?]⁵¹ Professions of recognition and self recognition poured into Beauvoir’s mailbox. Readers wrote that they were born in the same year, to the same kind of household, that they had also broken with the Church, that they wanted to write, that they were “free” or, on many occasions, that they were stunned to find on Beauvoir’s pages exactly what they had written in their own diaries.⁵² Even discussions of ideas passed through the medium of identification. One reader wrote to assure the philosopher (and, seemingly, herself) that she had not stolen Beauvoir’s ideas: “Je me suis simplement aperçue que les vôtres concordaient avec les

⁴⁸ Liege, 11 mai, 1957.

⁴⁹ Paris 11/II/1961.

⁵⁰ 25-2-59

⁵¹ Paris 13.12.58 – after reading JFR

⁵² 17.XI. 1958; 13 février, 1959 ; 26 novembre, 1960.

miennes et j'en suis heureuse; c'est pourquoi je me suis permis de vous écrire" ["I simply realized that your ideas fit with mine, which made me happy. This is why I took the liberty of writing to you"].⁵³

As readers themselves remarked, Beauvoir offered them a flattering mirror. If so many rushed to recognize themselves in her, it was with a swell of pride, or because she offered them a better version of themselves: "Tout ce que vous dites dans vos mémoires je l'ai ressenti, j'aurai aimé pouvoir le dire mais je m'explique fort mal." ["Everything you say in your memoirs I have felt; I would have liked to have been able to say it, but I explain myself very poorly"].⁵⁴ Another wrote that:

Jamais encore je n'avais lu dans une autobiographie féminine... des lignes aussi lucides, aussi courageuses, aussi dépouillées de camouflage condescendant à l'entourage et à soi-même. J'ai été une petite fille comme vous, une jeune fille comme vous! Ce que des milliers de femmes pensent sûrement – avec orgueil – en vous lisant...

[Never had I read in a female autobiography... lines that were so clear, so courageous, and so free from any camouflage – ...[from the kind of self disguise that condescends to oneself and those around you]. I was a girl like you, a young woman like you! This is what thousands of women surely think – proudly— when they read you...]⁵⁵

Literary scholar Nancy K. Miller has shown how often reading memoirs becomes "interactive remembering," "The path of identification provides one of the major byways along which interactive remembering moves. You follow the threads that take you back, even if then there was no story, just the loose threads you see now woven into a readable

⁵³ 22/11/60.

⁵⁴ 3 mai 1959.

⁵⁵ Montréal 27 janvier, 1961

fabric, material for another story: your own.”⁵⁶ The Beauvoir letters perfectly illustrate Miller’s point. *Memoirs of a Dutiful Daughters* brought in scores of letters on childhood. *The Prime of Life* did the same for the war, where the memories were even more painful and complex. A Jewish man, whose *resistant* father had been shot just before the Liberation, wrote a letter in which anger and accusation are tangled with familiarity:

...you and this war— you managed (to be sure, I am not talking about material comforts) – to work things out pretty easily. What I envy the most is your life from 20 to 30 because never, at any point, were you obliged to do something you didn’t like. To confront the unthinkable, to waste your time and to fight...It [the war] is monstrous and it awakens so many thoughts ...with everything that happened during this war, I think you were lucky. That said, you always went straight to what seems to me the real life, and this is why, even if, of course, given the same circumstances, I would have of course acted differently, at no point from the first line to the last, did I ever feel you were a stranger].⁵⁷

The letters make vivid the wide range of forms that “interactive remembering” could take: from painful to nostalgic, passive, or energetic. Take one startling example: an almost offhand letter from a young woman in Germany who had never read a word of Beauvoir, but learned about *Memoirs of a Dutiful Daughter* in a Catholic newspaper. “Would you like to write the history of MY life?” she asked.⁵⁸ This was perhaps the most lopsided (and least interactive) engagement with the book, but a revealing extreme: the

⁵⁶ Nancy K. Miller, "But enough about me, what do you think of my memoir?" *The Yale Journal of Criticism* 13, 2 (Fall 2000), pp. 421-436.

⁵⁷ Paris 27 -12 -60. I He does not assimilate her to Nazi occupiers, but suggests that hers was a sadly familiar form of passivity. This subject deserves another article, in progress.

“vous, de cette guerre, (je ne parle pas naturellement sur le plan matériel) vous vous en êtes assez facilement arrangée.... Ce que je vous envie le plus, c’est surtout votre vie de 20 à 30 ans, dans la mesure où pas une minute, vous n’avez été obligée de faire ce qui ne vous plaisait pas. De faire face à des impondérables, de gâcher votre temps et lutter... C’est immense, et elle éveille en soi un tas de réflexions... avec ce qui s’est passé pendant cette guerre, je crois que vous avez tout de même eu de la chance. Ceci dit, vous êtes allée toujours droit à ce qui me semble être la vraie vie, et c’est pourquoi, même si bien sûr, en de mêmes circonstances, j’aurais agi souvent différemment, à aucun moment, de la première à la dernière ligne, vous n’avez été pour moi une étrangère.”

⁵⁸ 1958, undated.

reader-writer bond ranged from recognition (I know you!) to affinity and shared experiences (I am like you!) to a more passive and trusting (tell my story!) Most of the letter-writers believed Beauvoir uniquely well qualified to interpret their feelings, understand their families, and give public significance to their lives. The German letter-writer simply turned over her biography; others used Beauvoir's life to reconsider and to rewrite their own.

Projection, identification, and imagined intimacy ran both ways. As Miller puts it, the author wishes "to be— somehow—encountered in this way, found on that particular shelf."⁵⁹ Beauvoir actively elicited her readers' responses. In an eye-catching passage from *The Prime of Life* that set out her goal as a writer, Beauvoir imagines her voice reaching readers almost unmediated, entering their hearts, and in the process attaining literary (and not only literary) immortality.

Pénétrer si avant dans des vies étrangères que les gens, en entendant ma voix, aient l'impression de se parler à eux-mêmes; voilà ce que je souhaitais. Si elle se multipliait dans des milliers de coeurs, il me semblait que mon existence renouée, transfigurée, serait, d'une certaine manière, sauvée.

[What I wanted was to penetrate so deeply into the lives of others that when they heard my voice they would have the impression they were speaking to themselves. If my voice were multiplied through thousands of human hearts, it seemed to me that my existence, reshaped and transfigured, would still, in a manner of speaking, be saved].⁶⁰

This was strong stuff, melding religious and psychological imagery and inviting readers to identify with her and exchange experiences. Her very language, "pénétrer," bespeaks a willful entry into intimate connection. It is not surprising to find many readers citing the

⁵⁹ Miller, 423. Memoir is "the record of an experience in search of a community."

⁶⁰ *La Force de l'âge*, (Gallimard, folio edition, 1960) p. 644. My translation. This passage is in some ways a response to her readers, for by 1960, Beauvoir was keenly aware of her audience. On the feminist dimensions of this autobiographical impulse, see Miller, *Subject to Change*, 55.

phrase back to her— or to see the desired response getting out of hand. As one reader explained, she now felt *entitled* to know Beauvoir, and to be kept “au courant.” If her feelings were running amok, the author bore responsibility for them:

... j’aimerais pouvoir me retrancher derrière une réserve pleine de dignité – Mais je ne sais pas attendre : je n’ai jamais su – J’ai participé à tant de moments de votre vie, ce livre [*La Force de l’âge*] a précisé tant de choses qui, pour moi étaient restées floues, que je n’en suis que plus déçue d’être sans nouvelles de vous.

Vous parlez de “pénétrer dans des vies étrangères.” Ce but, que vous atteignez, vous crée des devoirs et je ne peux plus, moi, vous considérer comme une étrangère.

A tel point que lorsque je lis votre nom dans les journaux concernant des choses que j’ignore, je suis aussi furieuse de n’être pas au courant que si j’avais des droits sur vous –

Voilà peut-être des réactions qui vous déplaisent et que vous n’avez pas envisagées. Je ne m’en sent pas responsable–

[I would like to retreat behind a dignified reserve... But I do not know how to wait: I never knew how...I have participated in so many moments of your life, this book [*La Force de l’Age*] has clarified so many things that have been blurry to me, that I am even more disappointed to be without news from you.

You speak of “penetrating into the lives of others.” You have reached this goal, and it gives you responsibilities for you, and speaking for myself, I can no longer consider you a stranger.

To such an extent that when I read your name in magazines about things of which I’m unaware, I’m so angry not to be up to date— it’s as though I had rights over you.

There: reactions like these are probably unpleasant, and you had not envisioned them. But I do not feel responsible –]⁶¹

This epistolary relationship echoes that between Rousseau and his readers memorably analyzed by Robert Darnton.⁶² As Rousseau invited readers to share in the valorization of sincerity and feeling, Beauvoir’s readers were drawn into imagined intimacy, shared memories, and the effusion of emotion. The requests for photographs,

⁶¹ 30.11.60 Here’s another, text : ?

Votre renom littéraire, et, bien davantage encore, le fait que la lecture du 2ème sexe ait réveillé en moi des sentiments profonds.... Je mets en vous beaucoup d’espérance, et vous me décevez cruellement si vous ne m’accordez ni la confiance ni l’appui que j’attends de vous. 19 avril, 1960.

⁶² Darnton, “Readers Respond to Rousseau: The Fabrication of a Romantic Sensitivity” in *The great cat massacre and other episodes in French cultural history*. See also Charles Taylor, *Sources of the self: the making of the modern identity* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1989), ch. 17.

for more “news” and for more intimate details, however, seem distinctive to mass culture (or middlebrow?) and twentieth century forms of celebrity. The author-reader relationship built not only on texts but on news coverage, profiles, candid photos, interviews on radio and television; it was enmeshed in the web of “mediations, communications, and contacts” that sociologist Edgar Morin considered constitutive of mass culture in his time.⁶³ Some of the letters to Beauvoir plainly recall letters to movie stars, with their over-identification and “fetishistic” search for information. “Every news item whispers a little secret, one that allows the reader to possess a little intimacy with a star,” as Morin wrote.⁶⁴ Beauvoir was hardly a hapless victim of this culture. She was aware of her iconic status and quite adept at managing it, perhaps because what was being produced was not only celebrity, but the prestige of French culture and of existentialism as its new representatives. And if some of the letter-writers were star struck, they did not necessarily lack resources, ideas, or ambition. Still, the mass culture of the 1950s, which meshed well with Beauvoir’s insistently autobiographical self presentation,⁶⁵ heightened the impression of intimacy.

2. Sexuality and feeling

Let us turn from how readers wrote to what they wrote about, from an intimate tone to intimate subject matter. Work, the war in Algeria, Beauvoir’s writing on the U.S. or China, articles in process, getting published: these are some of the subjects readers raised. The trials and tribulations of writing preoccupied many of Beauvoir’s correspondents. Writing was a point of identification, a shared passion, a source of

⁶³ Morin, *L’Esprit du temps*. 136.

⁶⁴ Morin, *Les stars* 83. See also Luhmann and Schwartz.

⁶⁵ Mass culture continued to endow writers with star power. Many correspondents saw themselves as writers; others showed off their prowess as students, sending “notes de lecture.”

prestige in post-war France and so in some cases a way for readers to project themselves into what, as we have seen, appeared to be a charmed circle of literary figures.⁶⁶

Sexuality—broadly understood— was by no means the only or even primary topic of concern, but it occasioned some of the most unexpected and interesting letters. This section moves thematically through issues readers raised, but also through readers with different capacities for self expression.

One of the earliest letters came from a woman pharmacist writing to add her own testimony to Beauvoir's arguments in *The Second Sex*. She had found the book fascinating, and read both volumes carefully, "chapter by chapter." Beauvoir had observed that women had two confessors: the priest and the doctor. But in women's everyday lives, wrote the letter-writer, the neighborhood pharmacist mattered even more. Trained in medicine but more accessible than a doctor, for their counsel was free and readily available in the course of women's daily errands, pharmacists like herself found themselves besieged by "confessions" and requests for information and help.⁶⁷ Women asked her general questions about health for themselves and their families, and more specific ones about sexuality, especially, in her words, frigidity, unwanted pregnancy, and abortion. She had observed first hand how often women induced early abortions with quinine or uterine injections that escaped detection by doctors or hospitals – and criminal inquiries from the state. Beauvoir's discussion of abortion became one of the most incendiary parts of *The Second Sex*. Yet the woman pharmacist contended that abortion rates were even higher than Beauvoir's figures suggested, and the crisis even graver.

Laws banning contraception, in place since 1920, in her view had catastrophic

⁶⁶ Berne, "Elles écrivent" and Lyon-Caen, 252-4.

⁶⁷ Carton 1, 20 mars, 1950 (This one has "repondu" on it, as do several others) from la Verenne, Stl Hilaire – Seine. Lucienne Graillot

consequences: they made sexual pleasure impossible, ruined marriages, and turned French women old before their time.⁶⁸ She cited one of her customers, a 29 year old woman who reportedly had had 4 children, 10 miscarriages, and “no pleasure, ever.” Her husband’s days off were “torture,” the customer had said, “I know that I must do my duty and besides, my husband is young, but I am afraid.” As the pharmacist grimly observed, the husband was young at age 29 – his wife was not.⁶⁹

The pharmacist wrote to report, from the outside. Alone with her at the pharmacy counter her clients were like “beasts caught in a trap.” “They do not dare demand in public what they weep for in private,” she wrote, not very sympathetically, “Is there a minority that dares? I would like to know.”⁷⁰ Fatalism, passivity, and notions of virtuous maternal suffering muffled protest. To those who touted the heroism of French motherhood, she retorted harshly, and in revealingly post-war language: “Il faut donc bien se garder de se prendre pour une manière d’héroïne si l’on s’est sorti “honorablement” de cette épreuve. Quand on a bien accouché, on est tout juste capable de bien mourir mais l’inquisition, la Gestapo... c’est autre chose... et de très différent.

⁶⁸ The 1920 law criminalized “propagande anticonceptionnelle” and prosecuted anyone who “décrit ou divulgué, ou offert de révéler des procédés propres à prévenir la grossesse ou encore de faciliter l’usage de ces procédés” Levy.

⁶⁹ 20 mars, 1950. Beauvoir, like Jacques Dérogy a few years later, estimated between 500,000 to 1 million abortions annually. *Le Deuxième Sexe*, vol. 2, ch. 6, p. 330 and Dérogy, *Des enfants malgré nous* (Paris: Les éditions de Minuit, 1956) p. 17. Historian Anne-Marie Sohn is skeptical of these “chiffres choc” and considers 200,000 is more plausible. She agrees, however, that abortion rates rose dramatically in both the inter- and post-war period. *Chrysalides*, vol. 2, pp. 905-907.

Beauvoir’s own letters to Nelson Algren testify to abortion’s central role in middle-class sexual life. She wanted their relations to be “free.” “If I had caught a baby, I should have gone to some surgeon and it would have been quickly fixed up.” She seems to have known several doctors who performed abortions, and referred women and men to them. She had heard, however, that more modern contraception was available in the United States and was relieved to be fitted for a diaphragm in New York en route to Chicago. Deidre Bair, *Simone de Beauvoir: A Biography* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1990) 373. CHECK THIS. Beauvoir, *A transatlantic love affair*, p. 298. See also Elizabeth Badinter in Catherine Rodgers, pp. 64-5.

⁷⁰ “Devant moi ce sont souvent des bêtes prises au piège mais devant la société elles n’osent revendiquer ce qu’elles pleurent pour avoir en privé... Cependant y a t il un noyau qui ose? J’aimerais le savoir.”

[...Just because one gets through the ordeal of childbirth “honorably” does not mean that one can claim to be some kind of heroine. When one has given birth, one may have learned to suffer, but the inquisition, or the Gestapo... that is another thing and very different].⁷¹

Women and medical experts were not the only ones who wrote to Beauvoir about contraception. One of my favorite letters in the archive came in 1957 from a man, married for six years, already the father of four, and intent on learning what Beauvoir knew about birth control. The letter is detailed, matter of fact, at once well-informed and revealing about the human costs of ordinary ignorance. The author, too, is an interesting character: while he adopts a preemptory tone vis à vis Beauvoir, he sympathizes with his wife’s confusions and, as he says, her sense of being dominated by bewildering biological facts:

Madame,

Ce que je veux vous demander est bien simple : vous parlez à plusieurs reprises de “ femme bouchée ” de bouchon qui semble assurer l’immunité de la femme – Ma question est donc ou pourrais-je me procurer une telle sécurité – ?

Je vous dois cependant quelque justification. Marié en 51, j’attends mon 4^{ème} enfant en janvier prochain. Le premier est celui du mariage, le deuxième, une imprudence mais le troisième a été conçu 2 jours après la fin des règles, le 4^{ème} l’écoulement n’avait pas encore cessé. Vous comprendrez que ma femme ait peur maintenant plus que jamais de ce fait biologique qu’elle ne comprend peut-être pas parfaitement mais dont elle a eu à subir les effets.

Ma seule ressource, si nous voulons pouvoir conserver quelques relations naturelles, est donc de trouver une protection sans défaillance que n’offre certes pas la Méthode Ogino.

J’attends donc de vous que vous me donniez une adresse à laquelle je puisse me procurer cet instrument, si toutefois ma requête ne vous semble pas importune ni insolente.

p.s. et, si possible, la dénomination exacte de cet engin.

⁷¹ 20 mars, 1950. Many female commentators shared this sense that French women needed to become “modern” and that they would have little role in the process.

[Madame,

what I want to ask you is very simple: you speak on several occasions of a “blocked woman” or a plug that seems to protect the woman.⁷² Here is my question: where can I obtain such protection?

Perhaps I should explain myself. Married in [19]51, I’m expecting my fourth child next January. The first one was from our marriage, the second was from carelessness, but the third one was conceived two days after the end of [my wife’s] period, and the fourth when the flow had not yet ended. As you can imagine, my wife is now more afraid than ever of this biological fact that she does not entirely understand but the effects of which she has to suffer.

If we want to continue to have some natural relations, my only option is to find a reliable/failsafe protection; the Ogino method [the rhythm method] certainly does not offer that.

I would like you to give me the address where I could obtain such an instrument if, of course, my request does not seem rude or tiresome.

p.s. If possible, give me the exact name of this device].

He enclosed a picture of his children.⁷³

It is a remarkable document, and not what one expects in a letter to Simone de Beauvoir! At the time it was written, discussion of abortion and contraception had picked up in France, sparked in part by journalist Jacques Dérogy’s (Jacques Weitzman) high profile investigative study *Des enfants malgré nous* (1956). Prefaced by Dr. Weill-Hallé, head of the newly founded Maternité heureuse, Dérogy’s book offered the shocking statistic that in any given year French women had as many abortions as live births.

L’Express’s well known co-editor, Françoise Giroud, reviewed Derogy’s book and took to the television as well, denouncing the “conspiracy of silence and denial” that

⁷² The author seems to be referring to a diaphragm, which was available only in England, Switzerland, and the U.S. It could not be sold or even brought into France. Thanks Dr. Cecile Goldet, who worked with Planning Familial in the 1940s and 50s, for discussing the period with me. Contraception was legalized by the loi Neuwirth in 1967 and abortion by the loi Veil in 1975.

⁷³ Le 30-11-57 Thiers. Ogino-Knaus calendars, which explained how to calculate the safe periods in one’s menstrual cycle, were developed by a Japanese doctor and an Austrian sexologist. Derogy, 197-198. See INED study, 1956 for widespread ignorance about any contraceptive methods at all. Melanie Latham, *Regulating Reproduction: A Century of Conflict in Britain and France* (Manchester University Press, 2002). The best and most detailed study of France is Martine Sevegrand, *les enfants du bon Dieu: les catholique francais et la procréation au XXe siècle* : Paris, Albin Michel, 1995.

surrounded abortion and allowed lawmakers to continue to criminalize contraception.⁷⁴ Very few references to these debates surface in the letters; the subject was still “obscene” and, more important, Beauvoir did not at that point particularly affiliate herself with the cause.⁷⁵ The letters from the 1950s, like the one from this man and the pharmacist, are less documents of a movement taking shape than vivid glimpses of sexuality in a world where contraception was illegal and reliable information about contraception a rare and valuable commodity that circulated quickly through semi-clandestine networks of knowledge. It is revealing of the atmosphere of the time that as Beauvoir began to publish on sexuality, men and women furtively visited her apartment and the editorial offices of *Les temps modernes* to ask for addresses of abortion providers.⁷⁶ In this moment, information mattered more than argument. Still, that a “family” man, a father of four, would write to a well-known woman writer about birth control testifies not only to a widespread hunger for knowledge, but also to an emerging sense that such knowledge was legitimate, that it was no longer confined to the world of midwives, brothels, or erotic books, which had for long been the realms of France’s reputed sexual knowingness.⁷⁷

Since we do not usually imagine Simone de Beauvoir dispensing advice to ordinary people, it is striking to see how many letters “importuned” her for help. Even before the memoirs invited the kinds of intimacy considered in section I, *The Second Sex*,

⁷⁴ *Des enfants malgré nous*, preface by Dr. Marie-André Lagroua Weill-Hallé (Paris: Les éditions de Minuit, 1956), p 17. Weill-Hallé went on to found Planning Familial. Derogy’s articles were in *Libération*; the FG book review “Les malades de samedi,” in *Express* 15 février, 1956. Marie-Françoise Lévy, “Le mouvement français pour le planning familial et les jeunes” *Vingtième Siècle. Revue d’histoire*, 75, juillet-septembre 2002, p. 75-84.

⁷⁵ 1961 – no date. See also 20.01.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 263, 289-90

⁷⁷ On the twilight between outlawed and acceptable, see Anna Clark, “Twilight Moments,” *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 14, no. 1/2 (January 1, 2005): 139-160.

The Mandarins, and her public persona persuaded many that she was “understanding” about women of “all conditions” or the “paradoxes of modern society.”⁷⁸ Readers asked for help finding work and apartments. They wrote of conjugal unhappiness – of a husband’s jealousy or abusiveness, of boredom, of meeting a new partner, of marrying young in order to escape her parents’ home only to find herself trapped in marriage, of class differences that created marital tensions, of divorce and the courage it would take to initiate one.⁷⁹

Many letter writers described their disillusionment with myths of romantic love, marriage, and motherhood, echoing Beauvoir’s themes. “Depuis vos premiers livres, puis *le Deuxième Sexe*, puis les mémoires, enfin leur 2^e tome, je veux vous ‘parler,’” wrote a 39 year old woman, divorced, mother of three, weary and discouraged. “I admire how you have escaped the big traps of life: having children, being jealous, leaving work, breaking up... In reading your books I have the sense of having wasted my life.”⁸⁰ One woman offered a particularly painful (though terse) account of how love and family had gone wrong in her life. It is as if Beauvoir’s account of motherhood with its physical and psychological perils enabled her to describe her own experience as “half catastrophic:”

Je vais vous exposer le problème au sujet duquel je voulais vous consulter... Après quelques “expériences malheureuses” dont je n’avais pas su tirer la leçon, je me suis mariée; sans les connaître exactement, *j’étais décidée à prendre mes risques, et à faire encore une fois confiance à l’amour*. Les naissances successives de mes deux enfants absorbèrent toutes mes forces physiques et psychiques ; la seconde naissance fut une demi-catastrophe : l’enfant était affligée d’une malformation congénitale du visage ; opère à l’âge d’un an et se développant normalement, elle reste très marquée. J’ai été profondément troublée par cet événement ; je n’ai pas encore pu élucider *la complexité de mes sentiments pour ma fillette*.

⁷⁸ “la misère des femmes de toutes conditions ” “ la situation souvent paradoxale faite à la femme seule dans la société modern. ” 31 octobre, 1957; 29/8/57.

⁷⁹ 29/8/57; 30/11/57; 1 mai, 1958; 18/10/61. Have couple of extras here.

⁸⁰ dec-1960.

... la lecture de deux de vos livres. (*l'invitée* et *Le Deuxième sexe*) m'a replongée dans mes réflexions, *dans un vertige de lumières et de solitude*. [vertige= vertigo, or dizziness – of loneliness and solitude] [Italics mine]

[Let me explain the problem about which I would like your advice. After certain “unhappy experiences” from which I did not know how to learn a lesson, I got married; without knowing exactly what they were, I had decided to take the risks, and to trust in love one more time. The successive births of my two children absorbed all my physical and mental energy: the second birth was a “semi-catastrophe:” the child was afflicted with a congenital deformity of the face: although she was operated on at the age of one and developed normally, she remains very marked. I was profoundly troubled by this event: I have not yet managed to come to terms with the complexity of my feelings toward my daughter.

...reading two of your books has plunged me, again, into reflection, into a **dizzying spell/ vertigo of illumination and solitude**]⁸¹

Having an ill or handicapped child was a relatively common experience, but it was rarer to acknowledge a tangle of love and repugnance toward the afflicted child or to confess to feeling not only inadequate as a mother but resentful about motherhood.

Other letter-writers were even more overwhelmed by their emotions and memories – so much so that their letters recall nineteenth-century tropes of fallen women who had fallen, or had been led astray by their “passions.” The language, though, is not of moral failure, but psychological despair, of love, sex, and marriage being sabotaged. “Je dois dire que la jeunesse, tant vantée par bien des gens, fut pour moi une période épouvantable, où on est entraîné par ses passions dans des gouffres affreux dont on essaie en vain de sortir... [I must say that youth, which people find so wonderful, was for me a dreadful period when the passions drag you into a ghastly abyss from which one tries in vain to escape...]⁸²

Another, wrenching to read :

⁸¹ Paris 2 décembre, 58

⁸² 13, 10, 58. Do we need more on what « passion » meant ? See Horowitz and Luhmann.

..... je ne sais toujours rien – *l'amour cela aussi est saccagé dans un milieu comme le notre*. Je sors le dimanche je vais au bal du samedi vulgairement – quelle tristesse et je flirte – jamais je ne me serais donnée pour un empire. J'ai 20 ans et je garde cette chose en moi pure – peut-être en ai-je souvent envie – mais je suis bourgeoise....

“ je voudrais tant que vous me compreniez. Si je pouvais vous avoir là devant moi alors je le sais vous trouveriez les mots pour me faire parler mais sur ce pauvre papier ”

Vous ne pourriez jamais me comprendre, vous, quelle vie magnifique – libre – oh ! ... tout paraît facile quand je vous lis et pourtant moi je ne peux vous exprimer tout ce que je ressens.

[...I still know nothing— a milieu like ours destroys love. I go out on Sunday, I go crudely to a ball on Saturday —it's so depressing and I flirt—but never would I let myself be seduced. I am twenty years old and I guard this thing in me pure— maybe sometimes I have the desire to—but I am a bourgeois...”

“I would like so very much for you to understand me. If I could only have you before me, I know you would find the words to make me speak, but on this poor piece of paper...”

“You could never understand me, you with your wonderful and free life—ah! Everything seems so easy when I read you and yet I can't express to you everything that I feel].⁸³

Many of the letters in the archive were penned in anguish. Lonely, isolated, and trusting Beauvoir's intelligence and humanity, the letter-writers rushed to confide in her. “ D'où ma décision, Madame, de venir vous exposer mon cas... ” ;⁸⁴ “ Pardonnez moi, Madame, je ne voulais pas écrire là ma confession ni vous importuner, mais vous qui semblez connaître la misère des femmes de toutes conditions – dites-moi sincèrement ... ;⁸⁵ “ Pour moi, c'était important de vous écrire ;⁸⁶

To discuss contraception was risky; to recount betrayed promises of love, marriage, and motherhood was painful. Sexual feeling was even more difficult. By the 1950s, strong currents of medical and journalistic opinion (from *l'Express* to *Elle* and

⁸³ Sans date 1961

⁸⁴ le 31 octobre 1957. »

⁸⁵ 29/8/57

⁸⁶ 14 juin 58, Sans date 1961 ; see also 27 janvier, 1961 and 25-2-59.

Marie Claire) were deploring French girls' ignorance about sexuality and blaming it on French mothers, who were presumed to preside over such things. They sounded the same chords as the pharmacist cited above. Adolescents and their mothers may have been less clueless than experts and the press suggested. Still, letters in this archive testify to a widespread "pudeur" (modesty, restraint) and to real discomfort concerning sexual feeling. For instance, one reader of *The Mandarins* was shocked by the mother-daughter conversations in the novel: she could not imagine such frank and intimate dialogue in her own family. The novel, which seemed to be set in a different moral universe, prompted self reflection.⁸⁷ She had long believed that her "austere moral code" was responsible for her "inability to be happy" ["inaptitude à être heureuse"]. But Beauvoir's characters, while liberated from convention, appeared equally unhappy: they wept, suffered, and went mad. Perhaps, the reader concluded, frustrated longings were part of the human condition. She put it beautifully : "C'est ce contrepoint que j'aime, sous jacent dans tout votre livre, cette sarabande d'appétits jamais rassasiés ["What I love is this counterpoint that runs through your whole book – this sarabande [a sarabande is a slow and particularly sensual dance) of desires that are never satisfied"].⁸⁸ "Appetite," "passion" – this was explicit as any letter writer got until at least the mid 1960s.

A middle school teacher from Belgium began her letter as follows, an excellent illustration of how one would struggle to ask a question about sexuality – in this case arousal and orgasm – without using any of those terms:

J'ai tellement remanié cette lettre que je dois me décider à l'envoyer telle quelle. Je la voulais brève pour ne pas vous *importuner* trop et parce que je ne

⁸⁷ "Toutes ces femmes qui couchent au petit bonheur, ce n'est pas non plus mon genre. » CHECK Nadine-Anne in *Mandarins*.

⁸⁸ 12 novembre, 1954.

cède pas à un besoin d'épanchement. D'autre part, certaines explications vous permettraient de juger combien j'ai besoin d'aide.

La sagacité de vos observations, le courage et la générosité de votre position intellectuelle vous montrent évidemment capable de donner à l'objet de ma lettre (je ne me décide pas encore à l'énoncer simplement) sa réelle importance.

.... Je désire que vous ne me jugiez pas désinvolte à votre égard si je m'adresse à vous pour obtenir des renseignements d'hygiène.

[I have redone this letter so many times that I must make up my mind to send it as it is. I wanted it to be short so as not to bother you, and I did not want to give in to a need to pour out my heart. On the other hand, when I explain myself you will be able to judge how much I need your help.

The wisdom of your observations, the courage and the generosity of your intellectual position show that you clearly can recognize the importance of the subject of my letter (I cannot yet make up my mind to just set it out)...

I hope that you will not consider it inappropriate if I turn to you for information on hygiene].⁸⁹

Only on the second page did this letter writer reach the subject: she had never felt either “love or voluptuous excitement” and no one had ever made her “frémir de désir” [“quiver with desire”]. A combination of reticence and confusion made it impossible for her to say more than that on paper; she asked Beauvoir to meet with her in person. A remarkable number of correspondents from the 1950s did the same. Beauvoir could write about the specifics of “l'éroticisme de la femme” [“women's eroticism”], masturbation, and vaginal pleasure, using terms quite acceptable in scientific and medical discourse, but none of the readers could bring themselves to use remotely the same language.⁹⁰

Finally, several readers found themselves almost unable to write. They were torn between their inability to name their problems and the need to break out of their silence. They trusted Beauvoir to understand. Here are three:

28 decembre, 1957

⁸⁹ 3 decembre, 1952. Conjugal hygiene was a common 19th century term.

⁹⁰ *Le Deuxieme sexe*, vol II. Pp 146-7. See also letters from May 16, 1961 (in English) and undated, 1961, cited above.

Madame,

Excusez-moi, je vous prie, de la liberté que je prends en vous écrivant – j’ai lu votre beau livre “le deuxième sexe” et je pense que vous seule pouvez me donner conseil. –

J’ai à résoudre un difficile problème d’ordre conjugal et familial – je me sens, par moments, bien seule et très découragée. Je répugne à m’adresser à un courrier du Coeur quelconque. [We will return to this phrase.] Je pense que vous pouvez me conseiller utilement et sagement car vous avez une vue générale, très compréhensive de tous ces problèmes. Si cela ne vous dérange pas trop, pourriez-vous me fixer rendez-vous?

[Please excuse me for the liberty I take in writing you. I have read your excellent book, the Second Sex and I think that you are the only person who can give me advice.

I am facing a difficult problem, one that is conjugal and familial. I sometimes feel quite alone and very discouraged. I cannot bring myself to write to some Courrier du Coeur. [Lit = letters of the heart; a magazine advice column.]. I think that you can give me advice that would be useful and wise, because you have a very general, very understanding view on all these problems. If it would not be too much trouble, would you be able to meet with me?]⁹¹

19 avril, 1957

Chère Camarade, et j’ose dire amie,

Votre livre le deuxième sexe m’a passionnée. Je l’ai lu et relu plusieurs fois, je l’ai offert à plusieurs personnes et je l’offrirai encore sans me lasser. J’ai également prêté les Mandarins, et je le prêterai encore. Je suis une usineuse qui n’a même pas son certificat d’études...

J’ai derrière moi, un passé de misère, une enfance sans père, des aventures abominables qui me paraissent difficile à écrire, à décrire.

...
Ce que je désire, c’est avoir votre adresse personnelle, pour vous faire certaines confidences, que l’on réserve d’ordinaire aux amis.”

Je désire votre portrait dédié. J’y tiens absolument.

Si un jour je vais à Paris où je pense que vous habitez, j’irai vous voir.

[Dear Comrade and, if I may, friend,

I found your book *The Second Sex* fascinating. I have read and reread it several times, I have given it to several people, and will give it again without growing tired of it. I’ve also lent *The Mandarins*, and I’ll lend that again. I am a factory worker without a high school diploma...

⁹¹ 28 dec., 1957.

I have behind me a wretched past, a childhood without a father, and some abominable adventures. [aventure = adventure, but also love affair] which I find difficult to write about or describe.

What I would like is your personal address, to be able to confide in you, to talk about things that one usually reserves for friends.

I would like your photograph, with your signature. That is very important to me.

If one day I come to Paris where I think you live I will come to see you].⁹²

1961, undated

Peut-être mon cauchemar est quelque chose d'ordinaire, mais je haïs mon père, il est... oh, vous le pensez bien. La prostitution, c'est rien... sainte Marie-Madeleine, j'avais 12 ans, c'est rien vraiment. Mais ça... je veux mourir....

[Maybe my nightmare is just something ordinary, but I hate my father, he is... oh, you can imagine. Prostitution is nothing... Saint Mary Magdalene, I was 12, that's really nothing. But that... I want to die. [ellipses hers]]⁹³

To read these letters is to see, close up, how much isolation and ignorance

compounded sexual unhappiness, the humiliations and torments of abusive families, the vulnerabilities of young women who needed to be protected by – or from – their fathers.

It is also to see the resonance of Beauvoir's analysis of women's sexuality as a bundle of fears, repulsions, and impossible (or at least systematically frustrated) desires. In

Beauvoir's analysis, sexual initiation was something like a formative failure: an experience suffered rather than initiated, often violent, which sealed a young woman's alienation from her body and her personhood. Sexuality was a "terrain of truth" for women, and it was rough territory.⁹⁴ All these readers refer to *The Second Sex*, and one would not have to have read the whole book to have gotten the picture: skimming a few

⁹² 19 avril, 1957.

⁹³ Sans date 1961

⁹⁴ ("l'intervention du male... constitue toujours une sorte de viol," *Le Deuxieme sexe*, vol. 2, p. 147. Trauma or at least failure of first sexual relations produces frigidity. Young women's psycho/erotic development halted at the stage of fruit verte; they stop being virgins well before they become women. *The Second Sex*, 374 and repeated by B apropos American college women in *America Day by Day*). On 19C eroticism, see also Corbin, *harmonie*, 438 ff.

pages at a kiosk or reading excerpts in a magazine would suffice, for memorably graphic passages on sexual violence, psychological trauma and erotic frustration jump off virtually every page of the chapters on sexuality in the second volume. These chapters brought a firestorm of critical outrage, but they allowed some readers to articulate what was almost unspeakable.

Anne-Marie Sohn, one of the best historians of private life in France, argues that Beauvoir's rendition of female sexuality was dated. Beauvoir drew heavily on nineteenth-century sources such as the diaries of Marie Bashkirtseff (1860-1884) and Countess Sophie Tolstoy and Balzac's *Physiologie du Mariage* – the latter perhaps an especially poor guide to women's sexual feeling in the mid *twentieth* century.⁹⁵ By the time of *The Second Sex*, honeymoon nights in which a young virgin found herself handed over to a man she had not chosen (Beauvoir's phrase)⁹⁶ were rare, even in the French countryside. Church teaching and parental controls had already lost force in the late nineteenth century, and the two world wars weakened them further. Arranged marriage was a relic of the past. Women as well as men put more emphasis on choosing their partners and invested more time in the courting that entailed. In the countryside mobility and sociability rose; the towns and cities offered the erotic tutelage of the movies (*un baiser américain* meant a kiss on the lips) as well as dance halls and parties. Everywhere magazines and more advertising aimed at women invited more spending on hygiene, cosmetics, clothing – in a word, on the female body, which in turn encouraged more

⁹⁵ Houel and Sohn, discussing this chapter in Galster, 307. Sohn, *Du baiser à l'alcove*, and *Chrysalides*, 2 vols. *Le Deuxieme sexe*, vol. 2, 235-6. Beauvoir also drew on Stendhal, Proust, and Colette.

⁹⁶ *Le Deuxieme sexe*, vol. 2, p. 156.

sexual activity.⁹⁷ *The Second Sex*, then, does not provide a social history of mid-century sexuality. On the other hand, and I think Sohn would agree, letters in this archive show that Beauvoir's analysis of sexual unhappiness struck a chord. So did the open discussion of female desire. Beauvoir's images of pleasure were not particularly poetic or creative – there is a lot of “shuddering” and “ardor” in addition to Beauvoir's famous description of female arousal as “the soft throbbing of a mollusk” (“molle palpitation d'un coquillage”).⁹⁸ That they were yoked to aspirations to existential fulfillment may have made them more compelling.⁹⁹ The “sarabande of desires” did not confine itself to sexual desire; it included longing for decent relationships, meaningful work, and escape from an unhappy family, and so on.¹⁰⁰

The readers' letters, however, also caution us against sweeping conclusions about the practices, knowledge, or language of ordinary people, testifying instead to the

⁹⁷ The new sexual regime brought new vulnerabilities; a young woman needed to negotiate a relationship without getting pregnant. Should she get pregnant, she needed to procure an abortion, get herself married, or turn to her family. According to a 1911 study of several French departments, 60% of marriages came after pregnancy. While traditional conceptions of morality and sin may have faded, Sohn argues, social reputation still mattered enormously. To be considered “legère” was to court opprobrium. On how women of different social classes, regions, and employments dealt with these matters. Double standards created contradictory expectations: on the one hand extra marital sex was increasingly tolerated and expected; on the other a woman's virginity still had value, considered a gift, or form of dowry for girls or women with few material resources. Such contradictions did not vanish with time; a 1964 study reported that 72% of those interviewed were in favor of virginity but 50% of them were not virgins. In other words, whatever they had done themselves, they believed it hadn't worked. Anne-Marie Sohn, *Du premier baiser à l'alcôve : la sexualité des Français au quotidien, 1850-1950*, Collection historique (Paris: Aubier, 1996) 227, 237-238.

⁹⁸ SS, 386; DS2, 165. See also 151-4 on girls' search for pleasure and the myth that men “awaken” women. “l'appel incertain et brulant de sa chair” 154 Beauvoir was as interested in love and how it became a trap, encouraging women to settle for less as she was in sex. She considered Brigitte Bardot's erotic or sexual style – self conscious, even aggressive -- a healthy antidote to French mystifications of femininity. Lolita Syndrome.

⁹⁹ Note the existential and romantic investment in sexual pleasure by the late 1960s. A young woman wrote in her diary that she had read *The Second Sex*. Later she wrote that she had slept with her boyfriend. “I wish that our union had been perfect: I so much wanted an orgasm. » Association pour l'autobiographie et le patrimoine autobiographique, doc. 869, p. 131. Cited Rebreyend, pp. 69-70.

¹⁰⁰ Sohn, big book, 256-7.

varieties or the singularity of what Beauvoir called “lived experience.”¹⁰¹ Even the small sample they represent reveals the effects of very different levels of education – or personal resourcefulness. They illustrate very different stances toward sexuality: impatient and determined (the husband seeking reliable birth control); overwhelmed (his wife); reflective about conflicting feelings and what they might suggest (the woman who wrote of the “sarabande of desire” in Beauvoir’s novel), and conflicted and desperate (you will never understand, your life has turned out so differently). Finally, sexuality itself was often less the issue than the way it was enmeshed in different predicaments – social, psychological, familial, emotional – from which these individuals were seeking to extricate themselves.

In sexuality perhaps more than in other realms, experience (in both senses of the word) and knowledge were particularly dependent on family, milieu, class, gender, age, religion and religiosity and some combination of all these. Homosexuality, to which we find only a few fascinating references, provides a case in point. A young man from Mexico City wrote Beauvoir to thank her for taking bold stands. “Le monde est tellement pesant et inconscient. Votre indulgence – à l’endroit des homosexuels en particulier – est précieuse. Je souhaiterais que vous écriviez sur eux.” [“The world is so oppressive and indifferent. Your tolerance towards homosexuals in particular is valuable. I wish you would write about them”].¹⁰² Young, cosmopolitan, and self-confident, he was able to wield a modern vocabulary of sexuality without being overwhelmed by fear and

¹⁰¹ Alain Corbin, M. Zancarini-Fournel, Judith Lyon-Caen, and other French historians have become increasingly focused on to understand the relation between individual and collective experience. See Rebreyend, “Sur les traces des pratiques sexuelles des individus “ordinaires”. France 1920-1970.”, p. 60.

¹⁰² 16 mars, 1956

confusion. Contrast this with a letter from an older woman in Neuilly, the outskirts of Paris.

L'oeuvre que je viens de lire [*Second Sex*] a été écrite il y a 6 ans.....

Oh non, je ne suis plus jeune. A la tombée de la nuit toutes les portes se ferment. Les quelques clés qui me restent sont bien inutiles : “ Fermé à cause du décès. ” ”Parti sans laisser d’adresse. ”Laissez-moi entrer pour quelques minutes. Car j’ai si froid parmi les mâles et les femelles. Je cherche un oiseau rare qui, avant de se sentir “ mâle ”ou “ femelle ” a conscience de son état d’être humain. Cet oiseau rare se rencontre, paraît-il, assez souvent chez les mâles, mais pour l’approcher il faut être du même sexe. Le retrouver parmi les femmes ne serait possible que pour les personnes du sexe opposé. Que faire, dans ce cas ? Je sais que vous en êtes un. Pourrais-je vous parler ? Bien sincèrement à vous.

[The work I have just read (*the Second Sex*) was written 6 years ago.

No, I am no longer young. At nightfall all doors close. The few keys I have left do me very little good. “Closed - Deceased.” “Left no forwarding address.” Let me come in for a few minutes. Because I am so cold among males and females. I am looking for a rare bird who, before feeling male or female, is conscious of being human.¹⁰³ It seems that this rare bird is found often enough among men, but to approach it one has to be of the same sex. Finding such a bird among women would only be possible for persons of the opposite sex. If this is the case, what can be done? I know that you are one. Could I talk to you?”¹⁰⁴ (1956)

Beauvoir must have answered the letter, for the woman wrote again, explaining in a less disoriented way that “tout en étant absolument normale je n’entre dans aucune catégorie” [“while I am absolutely normal I do not fit into any category”].¹⁰⁵ The contrast between the tone and the images in the two letters remains striking: the man from Mexico City is able to write “homosexuality” while the other struggles with more formal “allusion and metaphor.”¹⁰⁶ We glimpse radically different ways in which sexual identity and feeling might be voiced and lived. As Foucault pointed out long ago, the issue is not silence, but

¹⁰³ Translated this way in order to avoid gendered pronouns.

¹⁰⁴ 3 avril, 1956 and 21 novembre, 1956. NEED TO ALSO FIND NOVEMBER 1956 letter from transgendered. See Reyberend, 66.

¹⁰⁵ Nov 21, 56.

¹⁰⁶ Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Vol. 1: An Introduction* (Vintage, 1990), p. 17.

“the different ways of not saying such things, how those who can and those who cannot speak of them are distributed, which type of discourse is authorized, or which form of discretion is required in either case.”¹⁰⁷

3. *Courrier du Coeur*

Let me bring the readers’ letters into dialogue with the highbrow critics’ reactions on the one hand and popular commercial culture on the other. One reviewer of *The Second Sex* in 1949 called the book “un manuel détaché et froid” [“a detached and cold manual”]. Women readers would never recognize themselves in “les vitrines du muséum d’histoire naturelle de Mme de Beauvoir” [“in the windows of Mme de Beauvoir’s museum of natural history”]. He reproached Beauvoir for not writing like a woman. “J’estime sérieusement qu’une femme ne peut avoir des chances d’émouvoir des hommes, et surtout des femmes, que si, traitant de la femme, elle en parle en femme” [“I am persuaded that a woman can only move men and, especially, women if, when discussing women, she writes as a woman”].¹⁰⁸ Many reviewers, however, argued just the opposite, objecting not to Beauvoir’s detachment but to her autobiographical tone. François Mauriac huffed that subjects such as “the sexual initiation of a woman” were not a serious subject for literature and philosophy. Mauriac also famously wrote to one of the junior editors at *Les Temps Modernes* that he now knew “much about the vagina and clitoris of your boss,” a crude reaction to the self-revelatory tone as much as the subject of the book.¹⁰⁹ The well-known journalist Françoise Giroud found Beauvoir’s

¹⁰⁷ Ibid, 27.

¹⁰⁸ Raymond las Vergnas, “Le troisième sexe” *Les Nouvelles Littéraires*, 8 septembre, 1949. In Galster, pp. 191-194.

¹⁰⁹ For details on the exchange, see Ingrid Galster, *Textes*, 22 and 294-6. On how sexuality and the shame of the war were entangled in Mauriac’s campaign, see Coffin, “Historicizing *The Second Sex*.” Mauriac complained that the erotic scenes in *The Mandarins* made him want to “vomit” (*L’Express*, 13 November 1954), 16.

autobiographical style in *The Mandarins*, especially the sex scenes, “embarrassing;” others deemed it “unrestrained,” and women’s literature.¹¹⁰ Hannah Arendt, invited to review the English language manuscript of *The Second Sex* for Knopf, lamented Beauvoir’s “preference for a very dubious kind of confession literature [that] lower[s] the level of discussion.”¹¹¹ That a woman would write about sex as a woman, with an emphasis on “lived experience” proved one of the most disconcerting features of all her work, and pushed at the limits of propriety. Yet critics were neither simply obtuse nor blindly misreading; readers who loved Beauvoir’s work read it much the same way. Beauvoir’s subject and her emphasis on experience (often her own) invited letters that were confessional, and self-revealing.

The French historian Mona Ozouf puts it bluntly: *The Second Sex* reads as if it were “an immense courrier du cœur...”¹¹² One could object to the analogy. Beauvoir confronted subjects, from homosexuality to abortion to sexual violence, unacceptable in advice columns of magazines. Beauvoir’s themes were not women’s romantic disappointments but rather their self deceptions, traps, and failures.¹¹³ Beauvoir’s work presented sexuality as an existential minefield or high-stakes adventure; the French women’s press, by contrast, steered clear of the subject. Love, a sentiment that cultivated

¹¹⁰ L’Express, 15 janvier, 1955, p. 3 [Similar themes in reviews in Galster 197 \(Nadeau and Marie-Louise Barron, who compared *The Second Sex* to tabloids like *Confidences*, *Sexual Digest* and *Amour Digest*. Toril Moi, *Simone de Beauvoir: The Making of an intellectual woman* \(Oxford and Cambridge: Blackwell, 1994\). Elizabeth Fallaize, “Narrative Strategies and Sexual Politics.” *Simone de Beauvoir: a critical reader*. London and NY, Routledge, 1998 pp. 199-200. Beauvoir distanced herself from anything like a women’s tradition, but that did not deter critics. See Larsson, *la reception*, 43-44. “Mme de Beauvoir partage, avec les écrivains femmes en général un grand difficulté à se restreindre, à composer son récit.” René Tavernier in *Progrès*, cited Larsson, p. 128.](#)

¹¹¹ Letter from Hannah Arendt to Knopf. December 16, 1952. Knopf collection, 1177.21 Harry Ransom Center, University of Texas at Austin.

¹¹² Mona Ozouf, [Les mots des femmes : essai sur la singularité française](#) (Paris: Fayard, 1995), p. 295.

virtue, selflessness, and happiness in the everyday, inundated the women's press. Sexuality – which that press considered “egotistical pleasure” – was off limits.¹¹⁴

On the other hand, sharing confidences and believing that confusions, wounds, anxieties, and what some would consider errant sexual desires were not singular– these *were* features of the “*Courrier du Coeur*.”¹¹⁵ “...en vous lisant j’ai ressenti la chaleur d’une voix amie” [“reading you, I felt the warmth of a friend’s voice”].¹¹⁶ Readers with no “head for metaphysics”¹¹⁷ trusted that she would take their confidences seriously. The letter-writer I cited earlier underscored that she could not write to an ordinary advice column; another apologized for treating Beauvoir as if the philosophe were “une correspondante du courrier du Coeur!”¹¹⁸ The “advice column” provided a point of reference, or a map of the communicative terrain of mass culture and the public discourse about private feelings. That Beauvoir’s work as well as readers’ responses to it deploys some of the conventions and tropes of romantic melodrama – “aventures abominables,” “gouffres affreux,” (frightful abyss) “tourbillon” (whirlwind) – testifies to the importance of popular culture in readers’ reactions to Beauvoir. “Au moment où j’écris ceci, j’entends la voix d’un employé de la gare, annonçant le train pour

¹¹⁴ Menie Grégoire, “La presse féminine, la femme et l’amour » *Esprit* (juillet-août, 1959) : 17-34; Marcelle Ségol and Gordon-Lazareff, *Marcelle Ségol. Mon métier le Courrier du coeur* (Segal wrote the courrier du Coeur at Elle for forty years) ; Evelyne Sullerot, *La presse féminine.*, Collection Kiosque.; 22; (Paris, A. Colin, 1963) and Morin, *L’esprit du temps*

¹¹⁵ Morin, *L’esprit du temps*; Sullerot, *La presse féminine*; Christian Delporte « Au miroir des Médias, » in *La culture de masse en France de la Belle Époque à aujourd’hui* Jean-Pierre Rioux and Jean-Francois Sirinelli, eds. (Paris, 2002).

¹¹⁶ 1961, n.d.

¹¹⁷ 19 janvier, 1958.

¹¹⁸ 18 juin, 1964, cited Rebreyend, 60.

Paris – quel supplice...” [“At the moment that I write this, I hear the stationmaster announcing the arrival of the train for Paris – what torture....”]¹¹⁹

Readers’ letters to Beauvoir are eloquent on the dynamics of cultural taboos, personal inhibitions, shame, and trauma. But they also cast light on the flip side of those taboos, namely powerful bonds of trust between the writer and her readers. The French historian Gérard Vincent suggests studies of private life focus *less* on religious prohibitions, censorship, and denial and *more* on the ties that bind persons who guard secrets, whether social groups, families, villages, or, presumably, other “imagined” communities. “Le mot secret est ambigu,” he argues, “il désigne aussi bien le non-dit absolu qu’un certain type de communication entre initiés.” [“The word secret is ambiguous, for it denotes both that which remains completely unspoken and that which is subject to a certain type of communication among initiates.”]¹²⁰ That certainly seems to be the case in the deep sense of identification and community between Beauvoir and her readers. Even when stammering, even without a vocabulary for sexuality, the readers’ confidence that they could share secrets –that they were initiates – could be powerful and reassuring.¹²¹

4. Politics?

¹¹⁹ 14 juin 58. This one was written on paper torn from a notebook. Here’s the whole thing.

Il me faut tout d’abord vous remercier de tout mon Coeur de votre délicatesse – car, enfin, vous devez avoir autre chose à faire que répondre aux lettres du genre de la mienne –Pour moi, c’était important de vous écrire –.

Et maintenant, cette lettre qui vient de vous –

See also Moi points how this way of finding meaning in every moment creates a kind of existentialist melodrama that begins to sound like popular romantic fiction. Toril Moi, *Feminist theory & Simone de Beauvoir*, The Bucknell lectures in literary theory 3 (Oxford, UK: Blackwell, 1990), p. 88. and *Making*, 98-104.

¹²⁰ Gérard Vincent, “Secret de l’histoire et l’histoire du secret” in *De la Première Guerre mondiale à nos jours*, ed. Antoine Prost and Gérard Vincent, vol. 5 of *L’Histoire de la vie privée*, ed. Philippe Ariès and Georges Duby (Paris: Seuil, 1987) 178, 181, 184.

¹²¹ Beauvoir spoke of creating a “creating fraternity with words” in *La Force de l’âge*.

Confidences instilled confidence; it is tempting to speculate that identifying with Beauvoir became a way to forge a new female, and, eventually, feminist identity. Do these letters illustrate the processes by which, in the famous shorthand of second wave feminism, the personal was becoming political? There are good reasons to resist this analysis, first among them Beauvoir's open ambivalence about feminism. *The Second Sex* maintained that unlike civil rights or anti-colonial struggles, feminism could not be a real movement; that "women do not say "we;" until the 1970s she considered the subjugation of women too deeply embedded in other structures to make feminism viable as a political force.¹²²

The readers themselves advise interpretive caution. What did they take away from Beauvoir's work? A classically existentialist call to shoulder individual responsibility and to grow up. "Il aide à devenir adulte" ["It helps one to grow up"].¹²³ "Merci de votre si belle lettre ! Vous avez raison.... Ce dont j'ai besoin, *c'est de sortir de mon adolescence, non de m'y calfeutrer!*" ["Thank you for your wonderful letter... You're right... I need to leave my adolescence behind, not to burrow into it"].¹²⁴ They heard a call for personal courage. Without *The Second Sex*, one reader might never had taken on "l'épreuve du réel." [the trial of the real.] Another sighed that "Si j'avais lu le livre quelques années auparavant j'aurais trouvé plus de courage" ["If I had read this book several years earlier, I would have found more courage"].¹²⁵ Beauvoir's example

¹²² See Beauvoir's own account in of her relationship to feminism in *La Force de l'âge*, p. 654 and *La Force des Choses*, vol. 1, pp. 258-268; Gennari, 68; Toril Moi, *Simone de Beauvoir : the making of an intellectual woman*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), p. 210. Mona Ozouf puts it nicely: Beauvoir wrote about femininity like a war correspondent, from the margins. 307

¹²³ 26 novembre, 1954

¹²⁴ 9 juin, 1958. See also (from Sweden, n.d. 1958) Votre mérite est d'avertir de ce qu'il y a au bout [du chemin] tout en laissant à chacun le souci de trouver la sienne propre. 31 December. 1961

¹²⁵ 13/10/58

sustained some during crises: “... j’ai lu votre livre à un moment limite, où j’étais à bout” [“I read your book in a border-line moment, when I was at the end of my rope”].¹²⁶ The story of Anne (in the *Mandarins*) “m’a beaucoup aidée dans une situation difficile où je me suis trouvée” [“helped me a great deal when I found myself in a difficult situation”].¹²⁷ A grandmother of three wrote to say that JFR (*Mémoire d’une jeune fille rangée*) had helped her guide her granddaughters through the ’âge où le monde des adultes est une découverte repoussante...”¹²⁸ Readers spoke of newly widened horizons, a “door open on the world, a fuller life.”¹²⁹ “...vous tirez de la vie des richesses que nous soupçonnons mais qui nous effraient.”¹³⁰

Above all, readers felt summoned to feeling fully and mastering those feelings. “You encourage me to understand the feelings that trouble me rather than repress them,” wrote one. They used her characters to think about themselves, as did this enthusiastic reader of *The Mandarins*.

Celle que je préfère est sans doute Anne, et je dois dire que son histoire m’a beaucoup aidée dans une situation difficile où je me suis trouvée. Ainsi j’ai lu et relu maintes fois certains passages du livre, et je ne me fatigue jamais à m’imaginer ces personnages et à entendre leur conversation si intelligente et révélatrice. Rarement un roman m’a fait tant réfléchir comme le vôtre.

[The one I prefer is probably Anne, and I must say her story helped me tremendously in a difficult situation in which I found myself. So I have read and reread countless times certain passages of the book, and I never get tired of imagining these characters and hearing their intelligent and eye-opening conversation. Rarely has a novel made me reflect as much as yours has].¹³¹

¹²⁶ 22 xT 56

¹²⁷ from Sweden, n.d. 1958

¹²⁸ 14-10-60.

¹²⁹ 15 sept 1960; See also 2 juin, 1961. from Bogota.

¹³⁰ 22-II-1961.

¹³¹ Note that she read and reread the works, an intensive reading. (from Sweden, n.d. 1958)

They felt called on to write about themselves, as an “affirmation,” “deliverance, or way to bring order to themselves.”¹³² One quarreled with Beauvoir about what she plainly interpreted as an (implicit) summons to write about her past. She might speak of her childhood freely, but, she said, “I would have no desire to speak of it in writing, and no impression that it would either ‘do me good’ or help me see clearly.” Why had Beauvoir written her memoirs: to “relive” part of her life or to “exorcize” it? “Je m’excuse de l’indiscrétion de ma question, ... je n’avais aucunement, je vous l’assure, l’intention de vous poser lorsque j’ai commencé cette lettre...” [“I apologize for my indiscrete question; I assure you that I had not the slightest intention of asking it when I began this letter”].¹³³

A few readers did mention feminist politics or purpose, like the pharmacist cited earlier, who hoped an “orage libérateur” [“liberating storm”] would sweep away the ban on contraception... Marcelle Auclair, novelist and founder of *Marie Claire* believed *The Second Sex* might “open eyes.”¹³⁴ And one 32 year old working woman wrote this classic tribute to *The Second Sex*.

Merci. Merci pour vos bouquins, pour la ‘Morale de l’ambiguïté’ et alors – et surtout – merci pour *le Deuxième Sexe* que j’ai lu il y a quelques années.... C’est [DS] autre chose – c’est un énorme pavé dans la mare aux grenouilles – c’est un coup de tonnerre dans un ciel artificiellement serein – c’est l’esclave qui regarde ses chaînes. Je n’exagère pas – je sais, moi, fille de 32 ans, culture moyenne, situation économique idem, les résonances profondes que votre lucidité et votre fierté d’être humain femelle (femelle, oui mais être humain aussi et d’abord) ont éveillées chez nous pas mal de jeunes femmes – surtout celles qui travaillent, bien sûr – aussi les autres.

[Thank you. Thank you for your books, for the “Ethics of ambiguity” and then – above all -- thank you for the *Second Sex*, which I read a few years ago...It’s

¹³² 30 janvier, 1959

¹³³ 8/11/58

¹³⁴ 12 janvier, 1958

something else—it is an enormous rock in a frog pond...it is a clap of thunder in a deceptively serene sky—it is the slave who looks at his chains. I am not exaggerating—I'm a 32 year old woman, average culture, economic situation ibid, I know the profound resonance that your lucidity and your pride of being a female human being (female, yes, but a human as well or above all) have awakened in us –quite a few young women, especially those of us who work, of course, but others as well].¹³⁵

For every letter imagining some kind of feminism, however, there was another that explicitly ruled it out of court. One politically active reader chastised Beauvoir for emphasizing ethics and individuality over collective action, but found a women's movement unimaginable. "Of course I don't think you should have called women to create a revolutionary party!!"¹³⁶ Beauvoir's hesitantly drawn analogy between the subordination of women and class, colonial, or racial domination was almost completely ignored by highbrow reviewers of *The Second Sex* – and most of the letter-writers as well.¹³⁷ The emancipation of women was hopeless: "The proletariat will fight for itself; so will black people; but this 'negre' will not change UNTIL MEN WANT HER TO CHANGE."¹³⁸ A Canadian journalist had visited James Baldwin in Chicago and reported cheerfully asking Baldwin what he thought of the analogy between civil and women's rights. He found it offensive.¹³⁹

One remarkable letter, however, shows the argument landing. It came from a young woman named Odile, who enthused in a slightly scattershot fashion about her children, existentialism, Communism, Sartre, and Beauvoir's fictional characters who "continuent à vivre avec moi au point d'en être parfois agaçantes!" ["continue to live

¹³⁵ 18 juin, 1957

¹³⁶ 10 mars, 1950.

¹³⁷ See Coffin, "Historicizing The Second Sex."

¹³⁸ 17 mars, 1960. (The caps are hers.)

¹³⁹ 12 septembre, 1961 Je dis en français à Baldwin : "Ne croyez vous pas que le problème noir rejoint celui de l'ouvrier, de la femme, etc... il me fustige du regard "Vous ne serez pas tuée vous demain..."

with me – to the point where they become tiresome!”] She also recounted her discussion of *The Second Sex* with her friend Fanny, a doctor whom she greatly admired. Fanny had written her on the subject, and Odile enclosed Fanny’s letter along with her own. “Dear Odile,” Fanny wrote, “I am eager to seize this opportunity to clarify my ideas on *The Second Sex*, this rich and new book. I read it when it came out, with enthusiasm: it expressed...and so beautifully what I could only think]. Chère Odile, Je saisis avec empressement cette occasion de mettre un peu au clair les idées sur DS, ce livre si riche et si neuf. Je l’ai lu, quand il a paru, avec enthousiasme: il exprimait... ce que je ne pensais que confusément. Je l’ai relu deux fois depuis—Fanny objected to the psychoanalysis in *The Second Sex*, but she praised Beauvoir’s history and, especially, the sections on “lived experience.” “As for *your* objections,” Fanny wrote (we do not know what Odile’s objections were) they would apply to struggles for liberation –

...cela ne va évidemment pas sans inconvénients ni danger (voir la décolonisation en train de se faire). Mais cela ne doit certes pas empêcher ni retarder l’entreprise de libération, et le poids des fautes éventuellement commises retombe sur les oppresseurs, et non sur les opprimés – l’apprentissage de la liberté se fait d’ailleurs étonnamment vite, l’histoire le montre.

[...of course none of this happens without drawbacks or dangers (look, for instance, at the decolonization that is under way). But this certainly should not prevent or slow down the business of liberation, and the weight of the mistakes that may be committed falls on the oppressors, not on the oppressed—the apprenticeship of liberty happens surprisingly fast, as history shows].¹⁴⁰

Fanny was writing in February, 1958, as French public opinion was turning against colonialism and the war to repress rebellion in Algeria, and three months before the crisis of the war brought De Gaulle to power. She took seriously Simone de Beauvoir’s larger arguments about forms of domination. She used the events unfolding in Algeria (which

¹⁴⁰ February 4, 1958.

Beauvoir, of course, had not mentioned) to evoke the tumult and upheaval that might result from women undertaking to dismantle their own subordination, and provocatively suggested that like the colonizer, men might have to suffer the injuries that flowed from the uprising's excesses.

The unfolding of the Algerian war and the example of anti-colonialism made concrete Beauvoir's larger argument about structures of subjugation. In the letters, though, the tone remained personal, the focus introspective, and the voice from the interior.¹⁴¹ "Je trouve précieuse pour toutes les femmes votre analyse personnelle si serrée et si fidèle. Cela n'avait pas été fait de cette façon avant vous. (Et je suis très freudienne pourtant)"¹⁴² You speak to "mon four intérieur."¹⁴³ Womanhood was being rethought as a complex of feelings at once psychological and cultural.

The passage from the personal to the political, however, was not brightly lit, and Beauvoir's work did not necessarily point in that direction; to the contrary. On this, one last example: an American woman who had an extended correspondence with Beauvoir. An unabashed fan, she was articulate and fluent in French. Like many letter writers, she wanted to meet Beauvoir in person – and unusually, it seems, she did. "Thank you so much for meeting with me!" she wrote at the end of 1961, plainly inspired. While interested in feminism, other issues appeared more urgent to her: studying religious and sexual taboos and prohibitions, the mythology of gender, and – her first priority – excavating her own past.

Maintenant je suis sûre que je ferai de la psychanalyse. Je tiens à faire des études sur la foi religieuse, et surtout sur les questions sexuelles, la femme en particulier.

¹⁴¹ Heinama, in *Cinquantenaire du deuxième sexe*, sous la direction de Christine Delphy et Sylvie Chaperon . Paris, Syllepse, 2002

¹⁴² Montréal, 27 janvier, 1961.

¹⁴³ Lyon, 27 janvier, 1961.

Pour l'instant j'ai bien des soucis avec le féminisme. Mais cela reste sur le plan des discours, de l'abstraction – deux de mes amis étudiants... sont décidés à s'attaquer au *DS* dès la rentrée. Je suis bien contente.

[Now I am sure I will do psychoanalysis. I want to study religion and, especially questions of sexuality, women's sexuality in particular. For the moment, I have many concerns with feminism. But that is still abstract, on the level of discourse. Two of my student friends... have decided to tackle *The Second Sex* as soon as the fall semester begins. I am very pleased].¹⁴⁴

Sometimes, then, the personal simply led to more of the personal.

Still, there is a politics of struggling to find a voice and, thus, in these readers' seemingly modest but moving efforts to breaking out of their loneliness, to glean more information, to bridge the distance between themselves and the kinds of freedom/liberty that Beauvoir represented. There is also a politics to the way in which Beauvoir provided resources, discursive and other, to those hemmed in by isolation, by ignorance, and a sense of themselves as unexceptional or unworthy of interest.¹⁴⁵ There is a politics to the author-reader relationship, which in this case could be (or seem) intimate without being egalitarian. These readers may have trusted Beauvoir, but they nonetheless cast her, alternately, as a celebrity, a model, and an oracle. The politics of these letters, then, pointed in different and sometimes contradictory directions.

CONCLUSION

“Qui saura jamais pourquoi, de France en Amérique, un jour, les femmes se sont mises à bouger du dedans?” [“Who will ever know why women, from France to America, began,

¹⁴⁴ 31 december, 1961.

¹⁴⁵ Rebreyend, “Sur les traces des pratiques sexuelles des individus "ordinaires". France 1920-1970.” Helen Lefkowitz Horowitz, *Rereading sex : battles over sexual knowledge and suppression in nineteenth-century America*, 1st ed. (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2002)

one day to stir from within?”] asked Menie Grégoire, journalist, expert on women’s issues and host of an enormously popular radio program on psychology, sexuality, and the family.¹⁴⁶ Grégoire pointedly did not mention Beauvoir, but the letters canvassed here provide evidence of those stirrings. Indeed the Beauvoir archive could be seen as the predecessor to the astoundingly rich collection of 100,000 letters addressed to Grégoire’s radio program from 1967 to 1984. Grégoire’s listeners and letter-writers apologized less and wrote more, for by her time –and with her help – psychology and self disclosure had moved to center stage in mass culture.¹⁴⁷

Françoise Giroud suggested a similar contextualization. Little love was lost between the two women, but Giroud defended Beauvoir against scornful critics. In a 1955 column in *L’Express*, she argued that Beauvoir, like Françoise Sagan, mattered not because they shattered taboos on sexuality (that had been done by D.H. Lawrence), but because they wrote about sex as women.

Et puis, tout doucement, voilà que les femmes se mettent à parler. Et chacune des phrases qu’elles livrent compose une nouvelle image, à peine ébauchée, mais dont on perçoit déjà qu’elle ne se superpose pas à la précédente.”[i.e. that picture drawn by men ... Alors dix lignes ici, vingt lignes là prennent l’incomparable valeur du document... Car il ne faut pas s’y tromper, c’est d’une révolution qu’il s’agit.”

[And then, very slowly, women start to speak. Each of the sentences they utter creates a new image, and though it is barely a sketch you notice that it cannot be superimposed on the one that came before it.... Ten lines here, twenty lines there – all take on the incomparable value of a document.... Because, make no mistake, this amounts to a revolution].¹⁴⁸

¹⁴⁶ Ménie Grégoire, *Telle que je suis* (Paris: Laffont, 1976), p. 227. The letters collected by Martine Sevegrand in *L’amour en toutes lettres : Questions à l’abbé Viollet sur la sexualité (1924-1943)* also belong in this tradition, but seem to me of a different genre than the letters to Beauvoir.

¹⁴⁷ The Neuwirth law of 1967, which legalized contraception, not only permitted discussion, it gradually changed the terms of debate, for contraception did not itself deliver either gender equality or sexual pleasure, it made new set of expectations possible. New “semantics of intimacy”

¹⁴⁸ *L’Express*, 15 janvier, 1955, p. 3

From this perspective, the readers' letters to Beauvoir also document the "revolution" that in Giroud's view transformed "suffragism" into women's liberation, with its emphasis on psychological self transformation and defying cultural prohibitions. Yet the letters as I read them also would have us underscore how much feminism as a movement would struggle to separate itself from therapy *tout court*. After all, "the personal is political" was coined in the late 1960s precisely to *disentangle* feminism from a culture of therapy.¹⁴⁹

This archive of letters, though, matters to other histories, those of reading, letter-writing, and even introspection. Letters to writers are a well-established genre. Since the eighteenth century readers have written to authors, and for many reasons: to intensify the reading experience, to feel close to a person of letters or stake one's own claim as a writer, to acknowledge what the Romantics cast as the powerful beckoning voice of the artist.¹⁵⁰ The letters to Beauvoir sound strikingly like letters to Rousseau and to Romantics like George Sand: readers identified with characters, asked if they were real, and commented on them as a way of making them their own. "Does Julie live?" (to Rousseau); "je suis redevenue petite fille avec vous, j'ai refait le diable aussi..." (to Sand, *re Histoire de ma vie*).¹⁵¹ Reading was interactive, eliciting memories, identifications, and

¹⁴⁹ "One of the first things we discover in these groups is that personal problems are political problems. There are no personal solutions at this time." Carol Hanisch, "The Personal is Political" in the Redstockings collection *Feminist Revolution* -- her essay is dated March 1969 (204-205).

¹⁵⁰ Many of the schemas once applied to the history of reading have fallen by the wayside. The argument that *intensive* reading (of the Bible, for instance) gave way to *extensive* reading (of novels and history, in the 18th century) no longer persuades many; nor does the argument that one age read for pleasure (in the sense of aesthetic cultivation) and another for distraction and escape. See Darnton 249, Chartier, 14-17

¹⁵¹ L-C 90-100 for excellent discussion of the "Rousseau phenomenon" and Romantic letter-writing in general. Also Darnton, Lejeune, *Le pacte autobiographique*, and Miller.

community. [A century of rethinking the self, however, stood between the 18c novel of feeling and 20C existential autobiography?]¹⁵²

Rousseau cast himself as a pioneer in the realm of self disclosure: “I have entered upon a performance which is without example, whose accomplishment will have no imitator. I mean to present my fellow-mortals with a man in all the integrity of nature; and this man shall be myself.”¹⁵³ In the twentieth century, autobiography had become the “genre of choice” for authors and the public, and in Carolyn Steedman’s words “a structure for enunciating the self and also a mode of cognition” that was encouraged in larger cultural contexts. Steedman looks, for instance, at exercises assigned schoolchildren in the 1950s asking them to write about vivid first-hand experiences. Beauvoir’s readers’ struggles to write about themselves, about which many were so articulate, register both this larger “incitement to autobiographical discourse” and the real difficulties it posed for ordinary people, especially women, accustomed long taught to conceal or be embarrassed about their thoughts.¹⁵⁴

¹⁵² Rousseau’s touchstone was feeling or sincerity: “the congruence between avowal and feeling” in Lionel Trilling’s formulation. Feelings needed to be extracted from encrustations of society and civilization but were not, themselves, problematic: for Rousseau social manners were artificial, but feelings were genuine, simple, and true. The twentieth century would conceive of these matters very differently, and Beauvoir’s readers’ letters register the transformation: feelings were both frightening and fear-ridden, tangles of inadmissible or unarticulated desires, and not simply concealed but repressed and thereby distorted -- by society and class, by familial or patriarchal structures. [What to read on romantics and feeling?] For the Beauvoir readers, plumbing one’s feelings, then, let alone mastering them, could not be a matter of simply opening one’s heart. Trilling contrasts Rousseauian “sincerity” with twentieth-century “authenticity,” a term that “suggests a more strenuous moral experience... a more exigent conception of the self and of what being true to it consists in.” Lionel Trilling, *Sincerity and authenticity* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1972), p. 11. See 29 janvier, 57; 13 fevrier, 1959.

JJR: on how to avoid the corruptions of reading; read alone, don’t parade your reading; solitude and reflection and calm. Disturbances come from without, from society. *La Nouvelle Héloïse*, cited in Darnton, *The great cat massacre and other episodes in French cultural history*, p. 231. Vs Beauvoir on need for engagement.

¹⁵³ Jean-Jacques Rousseau, “THE CONFESSIONS OF JEAN JACQUES ROUSSEAU,” 1767, <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/3913/3913-h/3913-h.htm#1>

¹⁵⁴ Steedman, “State sponsored autobiography.” “for a subject class taught to hide and to be ashamed of thoughts, autobio is terrifying.” Kate Millett, in Elaine Marks, ed., *Critical essays on Simone de Beauvoir*, *Critical essays on world literature* (Boston, Mass: G.K. Hall, 1987), p. 200.

Let me also situate these letters in relation to Judith Lyon-Caen's thought-provoking study of readers' letters to Honoré de Balzac and Eugène Sue in the 1830s and 40s. Lyon-Caen argues that readers used the novel much as authors intended them to, to decipher an "opaque" society, where rules, codes, and identities had been blurred by the revolutions of 1789 and 1830.¹⁵⁵ Critics called Balzac's *Comédie Humaine* or Sue's *Mystères de Paris* dangerous and immoral: readers would ruin their taste contemplating tales of unscrupulous journalists, grasping young men from the provinces, prostitutes, and criminals; reading novels with such distorted views of society would inflame social hatreds. Lyon-Caen does not mock those worries, but historicizes them and brings out their logic, she argues that while novels did not sow revolution, they did provide readers with a framework in which to understand their aspirations and (limited) possibilities. She also argues that we see the realist novel as a project of "social knowledge," one no less significant than contemporaneous undertakings: the beginnings of statistical social science, Villermé's great social surveys, panoramic literature— and, we can add, paintings and drawings of the period as well.¹⁵⁶

We see similar dynamics in Beauvoir's relations with her readers, though in a very different historical moment and a different cultural register. Beauvoir's readers often read in the way that she herself suggested... "pénétrer." Like Balzac's readers they thoroughly blurred the line between reading and life. Their readings, like those of Rousseau's and Balzac's readers, often validated many critics' warnings: that Beauvoir's

¹⁵⁵ For instance, those writing about Balzac's *Physiologie du mariage* (remember this is the book Beauvoir cites) didn't dream of love; they wrote about how dreaming of love would accomplish nothing. Conclusion to chapter 4.

¹⁵⁶ Christophe Prochasson, "lectures," *Mil neuf cent* 26, no. 1 (2008): 163-165. Judith Lyon-Caen, "Enquêtes, littérature et savoir sur le monde sociale en France dans les années 1840," *Sciences humaines: Revue d'Histoire des Sciences Humaines* 2007/2, no. 17: 99-118.

subjects (in her fiction and memoirs as well as *The Second Sex*) smacked of the trivializing, narcissistic concerns of the tabloids, and the depoliticizing popular psychology of the women's press. For Beauvoir's readers, the subject was not the "angoissante opacité du monde" ["distressing opacity of the world"], but rather the opacity of the interior and feeling. Finally, if, as Lyon Caen puts it, literature belongs in the history of "savoirs sur la société," Beauvoir's writing – *and the letter-writers' work with that writing* – belong alongside other post-war social knowledge projects allied to what Lionel Trilling called "the laborious discipline of research to discover where [the self] might be found."¹⁵⁷ Examples would include not only psychoanalysis, which is what Trilling had in mind, but a whole middle-brow culture saturated with popular depth psychology, with questionnaires that invited you to discover your personality, marketing studies and audience surveys that probed the public's desires and identifications. The terrain for such knowledge still included social structures and relations; in this sense Beauvoir and her readers were heirs to Balzac and his. But social knowledge – and the self knowledge that it encouraged -- now encompassed both the family as a psychological formation and sexuality: mid twentieth century territory that nineteenth realism left unexplored.

¹⁵⁷ Trilling, *Sincerity and authenticity*, p. 5.