

## THE ART OF FICTION NO. 35

# SIMONE DE BEAUVOIR

Simone de Beauvoir had introduced me to Jean Genet and Jean-Paul Sartre, whom I had interviewed. But she hesitated about being interviewed herself: “Why should we talk about me? Don’t you think I’ve done enough in my three books of memoirs?” It took several letters and conversations to convince her otherwise, and then only on the condition “that it wouldn’t be too long.”

The interview took place in Miss de Beauvoir’s studio on the rue Schoëlcher in Montparnasse, a five-minute walk from Sartre’s apartment. We worked in a large, sunny room which serves as her study and sitting room. Shelves are crammed with surprisingly uninteresting books. “The best ones,” she told me, “are in the hands of my friends and never come back.” The tables are covered with colorful objects brought back from her travels, but the only valuable work in the room is a lamp made for her by Giacometti. Scattered throughout the room are dozens of phonograph records, one of the few luxuries that Miss de Beauvoir permits herself.

Apart from her classically featured face, what strikes one about Simone de Beauvoir is her fresh, rosy complexion and her clear blue eyes, extremely young and lively. One gets the impression

that she knows and sees everything; this inspires a certain timidity. Her speech is rapid, her manner direct without being brusque, and she is rather smiling and friendly.

—*Madeleine Gobeil, 1965*  
*Translated by Bernard Frechtman*

#### INTERVIEWER

For the last seven years you've been writing your memoirs, in which you frequently wonder about your vocation and your profession. I have the impression that it was the loss of religious faith that turned you toward writing.

#### SIMONE DE BEAUVOIR

It's very hard to review one's past without cheating a little. My desire to write goes far back. I wrote stories at the age of eight, but lots of children do the same. That doesn't really mean they have a vocation for writing. It may be that in my case the vocation was accentuated because I had lost religious faith; it's also true that when I read books that moved me deeply, such as George Eliot's *The Mill on the Floss*, I wanted terribly much to be, like her, someone whose books would be read, whose books would move readers.

#### INTERVIEWER

Have you been influenced by English literature?

#### DE BEAUVOIR

The study of English has been one of my passions ever since childhood. There's a body of children's literature in English far more charming than what exists in French. I loved to read *Alice in Wonderland*, *Peter Pan*, George Eliot, and even Rosamond Lehmann.

INTERVIEWER

*Dusty Answer?*

DE BEAUVOIR

I had a real passion for that book. And yet it was rather mediocre. The girls of my generation adored it. The author was very young, and every girl recognized herself in Judy. The book was rather clever, even rather subtle. As for me, I envied English university life. I lived at home. I didn't have a room of my own. In fact, I had nothing at all. And though that life wasn't free, it did allow for privacy and seemed to me magnificent. The author had known all the myths of adolescent girls—handsome boys with an air of mystery about them and so on. Later, of course, I read the Brontës and the books of Virginia Woolf: *Orlando*, *Mrs. Dalloway*. I don't care much for *The Waves*, but I'm very, very fond of her book on Elizabeth Barrett Browning.

INTERVIEWER

What about her journal?

DE BEAUVOIR

It interests me less. It's too literary. It's fascinating, but it's foreign to me. She's too concerned with whether she'll be published, with what people will say about her. I liked very much "A Room of One's Own" in which she talks about the situation of women. It's a short essay, but it hits the nail on the head. She explains very well why women can't write. Virginia Woolf is one of the women writers who have interested me most. Have you seen any photos of her? An extraordinarily lonely face . . . In a way, she interests me more than Colette. Colette is, after all, very involved in her little love affairs, in household matters, laundry, pets. Virginia Woolf is much broader.

INTERVIEWER

Did you read her books in translation?

DE BEAUVOIR

No, in English. I read English better than I speak it.

INTERVIEWER

What do you think about college and university education for a writer? You yourself were a brilliant student at the Sorbonne and people expected you to have a brilliant career as a teacher.

DE BEAUVOIR

My studies gave me only a very superficial knowledge of philosophy but sharpened my interest in it. I benefited greatly from being a teacher—that is, from being able to spend a great deal of time reading, writing and educating myself. In those days, teachers didn't have a very heavy program. My studies gave me a solid foundation because in order to pass the state exams you have to explore areas that you wouldn't bother about if you were concerned only with general culture. They provided me with a certain academic method that was useful when I wrote *The Second Sex* and that has been useful, in general, for all my studies. I mean a way of going through books very quickly, of seeing which works are important, of classifying them, of being able to reject those which are unimportant, of being able to summarize, to browse.

INTERVIEWER

Were you a good teacher?

DE BEAUVOIR

I don't think so, because I was interested only in the bright students and not at all in the others, whereas a good teacher should be interested in everyone. But if you teach philosophy you can't help it. There were always four or five students who did all the talking, and the others didn't care to do anything. I didn't bother about them very much.

INTERVIEWER

You had been writing for ten years before you were published, at the age of thirty-five. Weren't you discouraged?

DE BEAUVOIR

No, because in my time it was unusual to be published when you were very young. Of course, there were one or two examples, such as Radiguet, who was a prodigy. Sartre himself wasn't published until he was about thirty-five, when *Nausea* and *The Wall* were brought out. When my first more or less publishable book was rejected, I was a bit discouraged. And when the first version of *She Came to Stay* was rejected, it was very unpleasant. Then I thought that I ought to take my time. I knew many examples of writers who were slow in getting started. And people always spoke of the case of Stendhal, who didn't begin to write until he was forty.

INTERVIEWER

Were you influenced by any American writers when you wrote your early novels?

DE BEAUVOIR

In writing *She Came to Stay*, I was certainly influenced by Hemingway insofar as it was he who taught us a certain simplicity of dialogue and the importance of the little things in life.

INTERVIEWER

Do you draw up a very precise plan when you write a novel?

DE BEAUVOIR

I haven't, you know, written a novel in ten years, during which time I've been working on my memoirs. When I wrote *The Mandarins*, for example, I created characters and an atmosphere around a given theme, and little by little the plot took shape. But in general I start writing a novel long before working out the plot.

INTERVIEWER

People say that you have great self-discipline and that you never let a day go by without working. At what time do you start?

DE BEAUVOIR

I'm always in a hurry to get going, though in general I dislike starting the day. I first have tea and then, at about ten o'clock, I get under way and work until one. Then I see my friends and after that, at five o'clock, I go back to work and continue until nine. I have no difficulty in picking up the thread in the afternoon. When you leave, I'll read the paper or perhaps go shopping. Most often it's a pleasure to work.

INTERVIEWER

When do you see Sartre?

DE BEAUVOIR

Every evening and often at lunchtime. I generally work at his place in the afternoon.

INTERVIEWER

Doesn't it bother you to go from one apartment to another?

DE BEAUVOIR

No. Since I don't write scholarly books, I take all my papers with me and it works out very well.

INTERVIEWER

Do you plunge in immediately?

DE BEAUVOIR

It depends to some extent on what I'm writing. If the work is going well, I spend a quarter or half an hour reading what I wrote the day before, and I make a few corrections. Then I continue from there. In order to pick up the thread I have to read what I've done.

INTERVIEWER

Do your writer friends have the same habits as you?

DE BEAUVOIR

No, it's quite a personal matter. Genet, for example, works quite differently. He puts in about twelve hours a day for six months when he's working on something and when he has finished he can let six months go by without doing anything. As I said, I work every day except for two or three months of vacation when I travel and generally don't work at all. I read very little during the year, and when I go away I take a big valise full of books, books that I didn't have time to read. But if the trip lasts a month or six weeks, I do feel uncomfortable, particularly if I'm between two books. I get bored if I don't work.

INTERVIEWER

Are your original manuscripts always in longhand? Who deciphers them? Nelson Algren says that he's one of the few people who can read your handwriting.

DE BEAUVOIR

I don't know how to type, but I do have two typists who manage to decipher what I write. When I work on the last version of a book, I copy the manuscript. I'm very careful. I make a great effort. My writing is fairly legible.

INTERVIEWER

In *The Blood of Others* and *All Men Are Mortal* you deal with the problem of time. Were you influenced, in this respect, by Joyce or Faulkner?

DE BEAUVOIR

No, it was a personal preoccupation. I've always been keenly aware of the passing of time. I've always thought that I was old. Even when I was twelve, I thought it was awful to be thirty. I felt

that something was lost. At the same time, I was aware of what I could gain, and certain periods of my life have taught me a great deal. But, in spite of everything, I've always been haunted by the passing of time and by the fact that death keeps closing in on us. For me, the problem of time is linked up with that of death, with the thought that we inevitably draw closer and closer to it, with the horror of decay. It's that, rather than the fact that things disintegrate, that love peters out. That's horrible too, though I personally have never been troubled by it. There's always been great continuity in my life. I've always lived in Paris, more or less in the same neighborhoods. My relationship with Sartre has lasted a very long time. I have very old friends whom I continue to see. So it's not that I've felt that time breaks things up, but rather the fact that I always take my bearings. I mean the fact that I have so many years behind me, so many ahead of me. I count them.

#### INTERVIEWER

In the second part of your memoirs, you draw a portrait of Sartre at the time he was writing *Nausea*. You picture him as being obsessed by what he calls his “crabs,” by anguish. You seem to have been, at the time, the joyous member of the couple. Yet, in your novels you reveal a preoccupation with death that we never find in Sartre.

#### DE BEAUVOIR

But remember what he says in *The Words*. That he never felt the imminence of death, whereas his fellow students—for example, Nizan, the author of *Aden, Arabie*—were fascinated by it. In a way, Sartre felt he was immortal. He had staked everything on his literary work and on the hope that his work would survive, whereas for me, owing to the fact that my personal life will disappear, I'm not the least bit concerned about whether my work is likely to last. I've always been deeply aware that the ordinary things of life disappear, one's day-to-day activities, one's impressions, one's past experiences. Sartre thought that life could be caught in a trap of



words, and I've always felt that words weren't life itself but a reproduction of life, of something dead, so to speak.

INTERVIEWER

That's precisely the point. Some people claim that you haven't the power to transpose life in your novels. They insinuate that your characters are copied from the people around you.

DE BEAUVOIR

I don't know. What is the imagination? In the long run, it's a matter of attaining a certain degree of generality, of truth about what is, about what one actually lives. Works which aren't based on reality don't interest me unless they're out-and-out extravagant, for example the novels of Alexandre Dumas or of Victor Hugo, which are epics of a kind. But I don't call "made-up" stories works of the imagination but rather works of artifice. If I wanted to defend myself, I could refer to Tolstoy's *War and Peace*, all the characters of which were taken from real life.

INTERVIEWER

Let's go back to your characters. How do you choose their names?

DE BEAUVOIR

I don't consider that very important. I chose the name Xavière in *She Came to Stay* because I had met only one person who had that name. When I look for names, I use the telephone directory or try to remember the names of former pupils.

INTERVIEWER

To which of your characters are you most attached?

DE BEAUVOIR

I don't know. I think that I'm interested less in the characters

themselves than in their relationships, whether it be a matter of love or friendship. It was the critic Claude Roy who pointed that out.

INTERVIEWER

In every one of your novels we find a female character who is misled by false notions and who is threatened by madness.

DE BEAUVOIR

Lots of modern women are like that. Women are obliged to play at being what they aren't, to play, for example, at being great courtesans, to fake their personalities. They're on the brink of neurosis. I feel very sympathetic toward women of that type. They interest me more than the well-balanced housewife and mother. There are, of course, women who interest me even more, those who are both true and independent, who work and create.

INTERVIEWER

None of your female characters are immune from love. You like the romantic element.

DE BEAUVOIR

Love is a great privilege. Real love, which is very rare, enriches the lives of the men and women who experience it.

INTERVIEWER

In your novels, it seems to be the women—I'm thinking of Françoise in *She Came to Stay* and Anne in *The Mandarins*—who experience it most.

DE BEAUVOIR

The reason is that, despite everything, women give more of themselves in love because most of them don't have much else to absorb them. Perhaps they're also more capable of deep sympathy,

which is the basis of love. Perhaps it's also because I can project myself more easily into women than into men. My female characters are much richer than my male characters.

#### INTERVIEWER

You've never created an independent and really free female character who illustrates in one way or other the thesis of *The Second Sex*. Why?

#### DE BEAUVOIR

I've shown women as they are, as divided human beings, and not as they ought to be.

#### INTERVIEWER

After your long novel, *The Mandarins*, you stopped writing fiction and began to work on your memoirs. Which of these two literary forms do you prefer?

#### DE BEAUVOIR

I like both of them. They offer different kinds of satisfaction and disappointment. In writing my memoirs, it's very agreeable to be backed up by reality. On the other hand, when one follows reality from day to day, as I have, there are certain depths, certain kinds of myth and meaning that one disregards. In the novel, however, one can express these horizons, these overtones of daily life, but there's an element of fabrication that is nevertheless disturbing. One should aim at inventing without fabricating. I had been wanting to talk about my childhood and youth for a long time. I had maintained very deep relationships with them, but there was no sign of them in any of my books. Even before writing my first novel, I had a desire to have, as it were, a heart-to-heart talk. It was a very emotional, a very personal need. After *Memoirs of a Dutiful Daughter* I was unsatisfied, and then I thought of doing something else. But I was unable to. I said to myself, "I've

fought to be free. What have I done with my freedom, what's become of it?" I wrote the sequel that carried me from the age of twenty-one to the present time, from *The Prime of Life* to *Force of Circumstance*—

INTERVIEWER

At the meeting of writers in Formentor a few years ago, Carlo Levi described *The Prime of Life* as "the great love story of the century." Sartre appeared for the first time as a human being. You revealed a Sartre who had not been rightly understood, a man very different from the legendary Sartre.

DE BEAUVOIR

I did it intentionally. He didn't want me to write about him. Finally, when he saw that I spoke about him the way I did, he gave me a free hand.

INTERVIEWER

In your opinion, why is it that, despite the reputation he's had for twenty years, Sartre the writer remains misunderstood and is still violently attacked by critics?

DE BEAUVOIR

For political reasons. Sartre is a man who has violently opposed the class into which he was born and which therefore regards him as a traitor. But that's the class which has money, which buys books. Sartre's situation is paradoxical. He's an anti-bourgeois writer who is read by the bourgeoisie and admired by it as one of its products. The bourgeoisie has a monopoly on culture and thinks that it gave birth to Sartre. At the same time, it hates him because he attacks it.

INTERVIEWER

In an interview with Hemingway in *The Paris Review*, he said, "All you can be sure about, in a political-minded writer is that if

his work should last you will have to skip the politics when you read it.” Of course, you don’t agree. Do you still believe in “commitment”?

#### DE BEAUVOIR

Hemingway was precisely the type of writer who never wanted to commit himself. I know that he was involved in the Spanish civil war, but as a journalist. Hemingway was never deeply committed, so he thinks that what is eternal in literature is what isn’t dated, isn’t committed. I don’t agree. In the case of many writers, it’s also their political stand which makes me like or dislike them. There aren’t many writers of former times whose work was really committed. And although one reads Rousseau’s *Social Contract* as eagerly as one reads his *Confessions*, one no longer reads *The New Héloïse*.

#### INTERVIEWER

The heyday of existentialism seems to have been the period from the end of the war to 1952. At the present time, the “new novel” is in fashion; and such writers as Drieu La Rochelle and Roger Nimier.

#### DE BEAUVOIR

There’s certainly a return to the right in France. The new novel itself isn’t reactionary, nor are its authors. A sympathizer can say that they want to do away with certain bourgeois conventions. These writers aren’t disturbing. In the long run, Gaullism brings us back to Pétainism, and it’s only to be expected that a collaborator like La Rochelle and an extreme reactionary like Nimier be held in high esteem again. The bourgeoisie is showing itself again in its true colors—that is, as a reactionary class. Look at the success of Sartre’s *The Words*. There are several things to note. It’s perhaps—I won’t say his best book, but one of his best. At any rate, it’s an excellent book, an exciting display of virtuosity, an amazingly written work. At the same time, the reason it has had such success

is that it's a book that is not "committed." When the critics say that it's his best book, along with *Nausea*, one should bear in mind that *Nausea* is an early work, a work that is not committed, and that it is more readily accepted by the left and right alike than are his plays. The same thing happened to me with *The Memoirs of a Dutiful Daughter*. Bourgeois women were delighted to recognize their own youth in it. The protests began with *The Prime of Life* and continued with *Force of Circumstance*. The break is very clear, very sharp.

#### INTERVIEWER

The last part of *Force of Circumstance* is devoted to the Algerian war, to which you seem to have reacted in a very personal way.

#### DE BEAUVOIR

I felt and thought about things in a political way, but I never engaged in political action. The entire last part of *Force of Circumstance* deals with the war. And it seems anachronistic in a France that is no longer concerned with that war.

#### INTERVIEWER

Didn't you realize that people were bound to forget about it?

#### DE BEAUVOIR

I deleted lots of pages from that section. I therefore realized that it would be anachronistic. On the other hand, I absolutely wanted to talk about it, and I'm amazed that people have forgotten it to such a degree. Have you seen the film *La Belle Vie*, by the young director Robert Enrico? People are stupefied because the film shows the Algerian war. Claude Mauriac wrote in *Le Figaro Littéraire*: "Why is it that we're shown parachute troopers on public squares? It's not true to life." But it is true to life. I used to see them every day from Sartre's window at Saint Germain des Prés. People have forgotten. They wanted to forget. They wanted to forget their

memories. That's the reason why, contrary to what I expected, I wasn't attacked for what I said about the Algerian war but for what I said about old age and death. As regards the Algerian war, all Frenchmen are now convinced that it never took place, that nobody was tortured, that insofar as there was torture they were always against torture.

#### INTERVIEWER

At the end of *Force of Circumstance* you say: "As I look back with incredulity at that credulous adolescent, I am astounded to see how I was swindled." This remark seems to have given rise to all kinds of misunderstandings.

#### DE BEAUVOIR

People—particularly enemies—have tried to interpret it to mean that my life has been a failure, either because I recognize the fact that I was mistaken on a political level or because I recognize that after all a woman should have had children, etc. Anyone who reads my book carefully can see that I say the very opposite, that I don't envy anyone, that I'm perfectly satisfied with what my life has been, that I've kept all my promises and that consequently if I had my life to live over again I wouldn't live it any differently. I've never regretted not having children insofar as what I wanted to do was to write.

Then why "swindled"? When one has an existentialist view of the world, like mine, the paradox of human life is precisely that one tries to *be* and, in the long run, merely exists. It's because of this discrepancy that when you've laid your stake on being—and, in a way you always do when you make plans, even if you actually know that you can't succeed in being—when you turn around and look back on your life, you see that you've simply existed. In other words, life isn't behind you like a solid thing, like the life of a god (as it is conceived, that is, as something impossible). Your life is simply a human life.

So one might say, as Alain did, and I'm very fond of that remark, "Nothing is promised us." In one sense, it's true. In another, it's not. Because a bourgeois boy or girl who is given a certain culture is actually promised things. I think that anyone who had a hard life when he was young won't say in later years that he's been "swindled." But when I say that I've been swindled I'm referring to the seventeen-year-old girl who daydreamed in the country near the hazel bush about what she was going to do later on. I've done everything I wanted to do, writing books, learning about things, but I've been swindled all the same because it's never anything more. There are also Mallarmé's lines about "the perfume of sadness that remains in the heart," I forget exactly how they go. I've had what I wanted, and, when all is said and done, what one wanted was always something else. A woman psychoanalyst wrote me a very intelligent letter in which she said that "in the last analysis, desires always go far beyond the object of desire." The fact is that I've had everything I desired, but the "far beyond" which is included in the desire itself is not attained when the desire has been fulfilled. When I was young, I had hopes and a view of life which all cultured people and bourgeois optimists encourage one to have and which my readers accuse me of not encouraging in them. That's what I meant, and I wasn't regretting anything I've done or thought.

#### INTERVIEWER

Some people think that a longing for God underlies your works.

#### DE BEAUVOIR

No. Sartre and I have always said that it's not because there's a desire to *be* that this desire corresponds to any reality. It's exactly what Kant said on the intellectual level. The fact that one believes in causalities is no reason to believe that there is a supreme cause. The fact that man has a desire to be does not mean that he can ever attain being or even that being is a possible notion, at any rate the

being that is a reflection and at the same time an existence. There is a synthesis of existence and being that is impossible. Sartre and I have always rejected it, and this rejection underlies our thinking. There is an emptiness in man, and even his achievements have this emptiness. That's all. I don't mean that I haven't achieved what I wanted to achieve but rather that the achievement is never what people think it is. Furthermore, there is a naïve or snobbish aspect, because people imagine that if you have succeeded on a social level you must be perfectly satisfied with the human condition in general. But that's not the case.

"I'm swindled" also implies something else—namely, that life has made me discover the world as it is, that is, a world of suffering and oppression, of undernourishment for the majority of people, things that I didn't know when I was young and when I imagined that to discover the world was to discover something beautiful. In that respect, too, I was swindled by bourgeois culture, and that's why I don't want to contribute to the swindling of others and why I say that I was swindled, in short, so that others aren't swindled. It's really also a problem of a social kind. In short, I discovered the unhappiness of the world little by little, then more and more, and finally, above all, I felt it in connection with the Algerian war and when I traveled.

#### INTERVIEWER

Some critics and readers have felt that you spoke about old age in an unpleasant way.

#### DE BEAUVOIR

A lot of people didn't like what I said because they want to believe that all periods of life are delightful, that children are innocent, that all newlyweds are happy, that all old people are serene. I've rebelled against such notions all my life, and there's no doubt about the fact that the moment, which for me is not old age but the beginning of old age, represents—even if one has all the resources one wants, affection, work to be done—represents a

change in one's existence, a change that is manifested by the loss of a great number of things. If one isn't sorry to lose them it's because one didn't love them. I think that people who glorify old age or death too readily are people who really don't love life. Of course, in present-day France you have to say that everything's fine, that everything's lovely, including death.

INTERVIEWER

Beckett has keenly felt the swindle of the human condition. Does he interest you more than the other "new novelists"?

DE BEAUVOIR

Certainly. All the playing around with time that one finds in the "new novel" can be found in Faulkner. It was he who taught them how to do it, and in my opinion he's the one who does it best. As for Beckett, his way of emphasizing the dark side of life is very beautiful. However, he's convinced that life is dark and only that. I too am convinced that life is dark, and at the same time I love life. But that conviction seems to have spoiled everything for him. When that's all you can say, there aren't fifty ways of saying it, and I've found that many of his works are merely repetitions of what he said earlier. *Endgame* repeats *Waiting for Godot*, but in a weaker way.

INTERVIEWER

Are there many contemporary French writers who interest you?

DE BEAUVOIR

Not many. I receive lots of manuscripts, and the annoying thing is that they're almost always bad. At the present time, I'm very excited about Violette Leduc. She was first published in 1946 in *Collection Espoir*, which was edited by Camus. The critics praised her to the skies. Sartre, Genet, and Jouhandeau liked her very much. She never sold. She recently published a great autobiography called *The Bastard*, the beginning of which was published in *Les Temps Modernes*, of which Sartre is editor-in-chief. I wrote

a preface to the book because I thought that she was one of the unappreciated postwar French writers. She's having great success in France at the present time.

INTERVIEWER

And how do you rank yourself among contemporary writers?

DE BEAUVOIR

I don't know. What is it that one evaluates? The noise, the silence, posterity, the number of readers, the absence of readers, the importance at a given time? I think that people will read me for some time. At least, that's what my readers tell me. I've contributed something to the discussion of women's problems. I know I have from the letters I receive. As for the literary *quality* of my work, in the strict sense of the word, I haven't the slightest idea.

