

## CHAPTER 11

### Salon-Haunters

#### *The Impasse Facing French Intellectuals*

Peg Brand

Artists as well as philosophers may take particular interest in the unique theory of aesthetics espoused by Simone de Beauvoir. Operating below the surface of her more familiar and contentious theories of gender difference, sexuality, and oppression, a unified philosophy of art can be constructed by unearthing shards of evidence that fit together into a cohesive whole. At least three sources function as prime sites for excavation: her award-winning 1954 novel, *The Mandarins*; her densely written 1947 philosophical treatise, *The Ethics of Ambiguity*; and her landmark treatise on gender construction, *The Second Sex* ([1952] 1989).

One of Beauvoir's clearest statements of aesthetic purpose praises the creation of particular types of artwork as a means of helping people face "the truth," for example, the horror of Nazi atrocities. Such works of art, when created correctly, function ethically as guides to self-awareness, proper behavior, and ultimately, the achievement of genuine freedom. When created incorrectly, they serve to glorify their maker and may lead others to unethical ends. The impasse facing French intellectuals is the choice between the two. Beauvoir explores this choice in traditional essay form in *The Ethics* and *The Second Sex*, and also more imaginatively through the fictional characters Henri and Robert in *The Mandarins*. She pits the "comfortable, carefree, esthete's life" ([1954] 1991, 564) of those she derisively calls "salon-haunters" (535) against the difficult life of the humanist intent on helping the world. For Beauvoir, all intellectuals—artists and writers alike—face an impasse that will set them on a freely chosen path toward inaction or action, i.e., toward culture or politics.

This chapter will reconstruct Beauvoir's theory of art through the novel's fictional characters who exemplify the internal struggle intellectuals undergo when facing the impasse: choices of creativity and purpose of life. Within Beauvoir's ethical theory, artists and writers have the potential to play an invaluable role in the improvement of society and the nurturing of individual freedom. While she shows little patience or sympathy for those intellectuals who do not choose the proper course, we can also imagine how strongly she felt the force of this impasse herself and attempted to find a compromise position between the two. This essay will attempt to exhume Beauvoir's "compromise" theory of art from her various writings. Section 1 will address the nature of the impasse for (French) intellectuals and the ways it is constructed out of the past. Section 2 will explore the types of creative productivity Beauvoir advocates while choosing, within the present moment, to move beyond the impasse. Section 3 will explore the artist's problem of self-doubt that is embedded within the process of choosing and that is inevitably encountered by artists as they face the future.

### Out of the Past, An Intellectual Impasse

*[Scriassine to Anne:] French intellectuals are facing an impasse. It's their turn now . . . Their art, their philosophies can continue to have meaning only within the framework of a certain kind of civilization. And if they want to save that civilization, they'll have no time or energy left over to give to art or philosophy.*  
—The Mandarins

This quote, from the first chapter of *The Mandarins*, defines the impasse of French intellectuals who stand on the brink of the future while being firmly rooted in the past. The image provided is of an amorphous French civilization forced to confront the momentous decision of defining its future. Beauvoir stages the problem to reveal the valuable role that historical context plays, revealing her main thesis that all intellectuals—replete with past values and principles and a history of prior actions and choices—face an impasse.

In the words of Scriassine (a writer within the novel who fled Russia and Austria to become a naturalized French citizen), Beauvoir initially poses the impasse as an exclusive either/or situation in which compromise is not an option. Against the backdrop of French civilization and its rich cultural achievements and, most importantly, situated squarely within the turmoil of post-World War II transition, the impasse for French intellectuals is staged as a choice between political activity that is meaningful to the worthy goal of improving society and the contrasting activity of art, literature, and philosophy devoid of political purpose. On this strict dichotomy, the latter has no aim other than the delight and pleasure taken in the pure aesthetic activity of the

enterprise. Beauvoir invokes the classic, historical distinction between the aesthetic response to art (aestheticism: art for its own sake) and its nonaesthetic counterpart. In light of the aftermath of World War II and the spreading knowledge of the Holocaust, the psychological and political rebuilding of France is cast as the necessity of "saving" one's civilization. The urgency of this task elevates it to a level of importance above all others. It is a situation that forces a choice between ethical action, i.e., some form of *doing* in terms of political activity, and unethical inaction, considered here to be synonymous with aesthetics (and presumed to be apolitical).<sup>1</sup>

Scriassine pictures French intellectuals on the brink of their cultural future as if the French are the *only* ones facing such an impasse after World War II. He is engaged in conversation with Anne Dubreuilh, whom he has just met; she is a psychoanalyst and the wife of Robert Dubreuilh, sixty-year-old noted writer and political activist. Assessing other writers in the room, Scriassine ultimately focuses on the contrast of his own work (rooted as it is in the sociohistorical context of Russia and his recent travels to America) and that of Robert, whose work was already well known before the war and who has most recently been immersed in the pressing political activity of the French Resistance. Robert has been keeping a journal for three years, which Anne is urging him to publish. She wants him to continue writing in addition to engaging in political activity, believing he can do both at once. In contrast, Scriassine's initial remarks to Anne express deep skepticism:

"To be able to continue taking an interest in things cultural in the face of Stalin and Hitler, you have to have one hell of a humanistic tradition behind you. But, of course," he went on, "in the country of Diderot, Victor Hugo, Jaures, it's easy to believe that culture and politics go hand in hand. Paris has thought of itself as Athens. But Athens no longer exists; it's dead." (Beauvoir [1954] 1991, 39)

Scriassine represents the viewpoint that motivates Beauvoir's theory of art—namely, the strict dichotomy between aesthetics (culture) and politics. He challenges Anne (and, indirectly, other writers in the room) to explain how an author might engage in meaningful political activity while still remaining a good author, or even a writer at all. That the two are incompatible is apparent from his remarks; if France sets about saving its cherished civilization, it will (ironically) have no time left for cultural production. If France is intent on maintaining an interest in "things cultural" under the belief that culture and politics are mutually compatible, it is self-deceived, much like the long-lost intellectuals of ancient Greece. Why is Scriassine so pessimistic, and how does Anne defend her husband against this negativity?

As the narrator of the novel, Anne is Robert's prime spokesperson and defender. Her immediate reaction is what might be considered "the compromise position" in that she responds, "This isn't the first time Robert's been active in politics. . . . And it never stopped him before from writing" (Beauvoir [1954] 1991, 39). Scriassine actually agrees, noting Robert's past successes, but he continues to hold fast to his prediction for the future:

"The remarkable thing in all of Dubreuilh's works," said Scriassine, "is that he was able to reconcile high, esthetic standards with revolutionary inspiration. And in his own life, he attained an analogous equilibrium: he was organizing vigilance committees at the same time he was writing novels. But it's precisely that beautiful equilibrium that's now becoming impossible." (39–40)

Anne grapples with the harshness of his claim, presenting a rather weak defense—"You can count on Robert to devise some new kind of equilibrium"—but Scriassine is undaunted in his conviction: "He's bound to sacrifice his esthetic standards" (40). He reasons as follows:

[R]ight now we're at the edge of a new era in which, for different reasons, humanity will have to grapple with all sorts of difficult problems, leaving us no time for the luxury of expressing ourselves artistically . . . among other things, art and literature will become nothing more than peripheral divertissements. (40)

Thus, for Scriassine, the arts become a luxury for which political imperatives allow no time. The war, he explains to Anne, was no ordinary war; it was "the liquidation of a society, and even of a world" by which—ultimately—the earth will be "ruled by either Russia or the United States," succumbing to either totalitarianism or imperialism (Beauvoir [1954] 1991, 40). In a paternalistic mode of advocating for the future success of France, he encourages writers like Robert to direct their energies exclusively toward political activities, in order to avoid the inevitability of either US or Russian domination. The model is his own written work—a treatise on Austria under the Nazis. At one point, he defends the political nature of his writing by saying, "Don't you think I dreamed of writing other kinds of books too? But it was out of the question" (39). Clearly, his own work reflected the lack of options he felt due to the pressure of the political weight upon him. Thus Beauvoir uses the character of Scriassine to set the parameters of both debates—political and aesthetic—that serve as the foundation of the novel. Anne is used as the foil to Scriassine, introducing the compromise position between the two political extremes. She advocates good literature that also gives rise to worthwhile political action.

## Living within the Present: Aestheticism or Humanism?

*[Scriassine to Anne:] To make something good of the future, you have to look the present in the face.*

—*The Mandarins*

Beauvoir condemns artists who live the "comfortable, carefree esthete's life" in pursuit of literary success at any cost (Beauvoir [1954] 1991, 564). Avoiding their social responsibilities, these so-called salon-haunters produce artworks that stray far from the path of humanistic concern and improvement. While Anne is introduced to a room full of writers, she analyzes their transparent character and blatant intent to be a literary success:

I had my doubts about their futures; you can't tell at first sight whether someone has or hasn't any talent, but you can tell quickly enough whether he has real reasons for wanting to be a writer. All those salon-haunters wrote only because it's difficult to do otherwise when you're bent on leading a literary life. But none of them really enjoyed the tête-à-tête with blank paper; they wanted success in its most abstract form, and, after all, that isn't the best way of achieving it. I found them as disagreeable as their ambition. (535)

Anne worries that even Robert, a writer of beautiful prose, might be mistaken for a "pure esthete" who is interested *only* in words and "things" for their own sake, and she insists that he truly is a humanist—a writer who delves deeply into personal relations and emotions, and who works toward the bigger goal of the betterment of humankind. It was Beauvoir's belief that such writing can affect other people by bringing about more individual freedom and ethical behavior on their part, resulting in the overall improvement of society. As the character Henri, also a writer, contends, "If you spend the best of your days trying to communicate with others, it's because others count . . ." (Beauvoir [1954] 1991, 385). Let us examine why Beauvoir believes in a theory of art predicated on social responsibility and how she suggests artists engage in such a valuable form of creativity.

Beauvoir takes the opportunity on numerous occasions to flesh out what she means by humanistic writing. Recall Anne's comment that a writer with a conscience, such as Robert, concerns himself with people's problems; he makes them his own and seeks a solution. Seeing it as his role to help "decide what can and what should be the role of an intellectual today," Robert adamantly advocates against silence and inaction ([1954] 1991, 434). "History isn't rosy. But since you can't escape it, you've got to seek the best way of living in it. In my opinion, abstention isn't the answer" (585). In assessing the role of literature, Robert asks, "Why do I write?"

Because man doesn't live by bread alone and because I believe in the need for that added element. I write in order to capture all the things action ignores—the truths of the moment, the individual, the immediate. (435)

One of Beauvoir's main points in aesthetics is that writing and making art are vital to living an ethical life; these are the duties of creative intellectuals; there is no other choice. An American, Philip, says to Anne at one point, "Action—it's the obsession of every French writer!" ([1954] 1991, 563). Action, i.e., some sort of *doing*—provided it is of the right sort—is imperative. Beauvoir is very clear about this in *The Mandarins*, particularly as she tracks an array of characters to document the difficult transition from a world of war to one of peace. Scriassine prophesies that no one can live life as he did before the war. Everything has changed. Henri is another good example of an author struggling with the impasse of what to do after the war. Best friend to Robert, he attempts to return to writing but to stay out of the political fray, in spite of Robert's persuasion to the contrary. Henri relates to another colleague, Lambert, that he is indeed no longer the person he was before the war; he can no longer—in good conscience—write the same type of books he wrote before the war. But Lambert, caught up in the jubilation of the postwar moment, encourages him to write something light:

You ought to show us the pleasant things on earth. And you could also make it a little more livable by writing beautiful books. It seems to me that that is what literature should do. (149)

But Henri's response is "Literature isn't necessarily pleasant," to which Lambert replies, "But it is! . . . Even things that are sad become pleasant when they're done artistically." He adds his reasons for believing so: "After all . . . we fought in the Resistance to defend the individual, to defend his right to be himself and to be happy. It's time now to reap what we sowed" (149). However, like Robert, Henri feels the weight of social responsibility calling him to action and away from writing that is pleasant and beautiful:

The trouble is that there are several hundred million individuals for whom that right still doesn't exist. . . . I think it's precisely because we began to take notice of them that we can no longer stop. (149–50)

Thus human suffering necessitates intervention. Henri tries to write a novel about himself, but admits to having "nothing in common with the person he had been in 1935" ([1954] 1991, 150). Previously he had been selfish,

thoughtless, stubbornly insistent on individualism, and politically indifferent (150). His apparent conversion to political awareness is in jeopardy more than once in the novel, however, e.g., when he wants to move to Italy to live a peaceful and idyllic life in the country.

Moreover, sometimes the main characters switch roles. When Robert becomes discouraged by his lack of success in politics, pronouncing "the impotence of French intellectuals" and the uselessness of writing literature, Henri is the one who bolsters his ego and encourages a return to the fight ([1954] 1991, 514, 517). Toward the end of the novel, they switch roles again; Henri asks, "[W]hat possible influence could we exert? None," while Robert responds, "Nevertheless there are still certain things we could do . . . there's a point on which we could organize some resistance" (574). Henri tries one more time to free his life from politics but again is unsuccessful and ends up writing an article on behalf of oppressed persons: exposing the injustices perpetrated upon them, citing the guilty government parties involved, and divulging information on those who abstained from preventing the atrocities. He condemns "the newspaper which remained silent and the millions of citizens who accepted that silence" (576). Somewhat content with his published essay, he concludes "Now, at least, there are a few thousand who know" and, shortly thereafter, agrees to be part of a committee to work more actively on a solution to the problem (576). He self-consciously and wryly acknowledges his predictable return to politics and political writing: "It's the same old story: every time you do something decent, it leads to new duties" (578).

The final page of the novel is illustrative as well. Anne contemplates suicide, depressed over a lost love in America (recall Beauvoir's dedication of the novel to Nelson Algren, with whom she recently had had an affair in the US). Her final thoughts are a fitting close to a life of observation, where she has watched her husband and her friend, Henri, move in and out of active political life. After reaffirming her own existence—"I am here . . . I am alive. Once more, I've jumped feet first into life"—she summarizes the dictum Beauvoir has intimated throughout: "Either one founders in apathy, or the earth becomes re-peopled" ([1954] 1991, 610). Denying the possibility of apathy and indifference, Anne (and Beauvoir) insists on the urgency of people and their concerns. As Anne concludes, "[S]ince my heart continues to beat, it will have to beat for something, for someone" (610). Being useful to something or someone is the bottom line. Being apathetic, distanced, or aloof from others is less than ethical and an abnegation of one's social responsibilities.

That is the "why" of Beauvoir's humanistic theory of art—why artists should paint, why authors should write. How does she propose they go about it? What are her suggestions for the type of art that should be created? What qualifies as substantive, legitimate, and valuable creativity? As Nadine—the young female character and romantic interest of Henri—states when speaking

of a controversial play Henri has written, "People damned well need to have their memories refreshed" ([1954] 1991, 370). Within the novel, Nadine most clearly expresses the philosophy of art that Beauvoir also revealed in her two nonfiction works, *The Ethics of Ambiguity* and *The Second Sex*.

Originating in the "tragic ambiguity" of the human condition, Beauvoir's brand of existentialism offers a "philosophy of ambiguity" replete with a well-developed ethics that encourages us to face the truths of the past in order to be more fully equipped—in terms of knowledge—to deal with the future. In *The Ethics of Ambiguity* Beauvoir writes of the bonds we share with others:

In spite of so many stubborn lies, at every moment, at every opportunity, the truth comes to light, the truth of life and death, of my solitude and my bond with the world, of my freedom and my servitude and my significance and the sovereign importance of each man and all men. There was Stalingrad and there was Buchenwald, and neither of the two wipes out the other. Since we do not succeed in fleeing it, let us therefore try to look the truth in the face. ([1948] 1996, 9)

This is the crux of Nadine's claim within *The Mandarins* that people need to have their memories refreshed; Scriassine likewise says to Anne, "To make something good of the future, you have to look the present in the face."<sup>2</sup> Art-works are one means of accomplishing such a task. They freeze the past in the present, and provide a continuing means of communication into the future. Beauvoir clarifies in *The Ethics*:

It is existence which they [artists] are trying to pin down and make eternal. The word, the stroke, the very marble indicate the object insofar as it is an absence. Only, in the work of art the lack of being returns to the positive. ([1948] 1996, 69)

As Anne proclaims in the novel, bringing attention to the longevity of art: "As for me, I value books greatly, too much perhaps. When I was an adolescent, I preferred books to the world of reality, and something of that has remained with me—a slight taste for eternity" ([1954] 1991, 55).

Correctly crafted works of art lend a timelessness to truth and its import, and turn the negative human source of tragic ambiguity into something positive and life-fulfilling. In *The Ethics*, Beauvoir analyzes the experiential and enduring nature of art:

One of art's roles is to fix this passionate assertion of existence in a more durable way . . . in telling a story, in depicting it, one makes

it exist in its particularity with its beginning and its end, its glory or its shame; and this is the way it actually must be lived. ([1948] 1996, 127)

What does this entail on a practical level? Beauvoir's theory requires French intellectuals to shun the life of the aesthete, i.e., aestheticism. In *The Ethics*, she creates a vivid image of the Italian aesthete who is "occupied in caressing the marbles and bronzes of Florence," yet who is under the delusion that he remains above, or apart from, the political fray ([1948] 1996, 76). She also condemns her fellow countrymen during World War II who erroneously believed they remained neutral and apolitical: "[T]hose French intellectuals who, in the name of history, poetry, or art, sought to rise above the drama of the age, were willy-nilly its actors; more or less explicitly, they were playing the occupier's game" (76). Rather, she encourages active participation, active *doing* that brings positive results: "Let the 'enlightened elites' strive to change the situation of the child, the illiterate, the primitive crushed beneath his superstitions; that is one of their most urgent tasks" (138).

In *The Second Sex*, she even zeros in on particular styles of writing, advocating social motivation over aesthetic description, particularly for women who write. She bemoans the fact that past women writers—even those of note such as Willa Cather, Edith Wharton, Dorothy Parker, and Katherine Mansfield—have tended to "take inventory without trying to discover meanings"; they have excelled "in the observation of facts," thereby succeeding only as "excellent reporters" (Beauvoir [1952] 1989, 710). Often writing extensively about nature (seen as "a kingdom and a place of exile"), they are "interested in things rather than in the relations of things" (710). Even the writings of Brontë and Woolf, whose works extend beyond description into more serious realms, suffer in comparison to male writers. Writing in the 1940s, Beauvoir suggests that women have not yet learned to write, because they have not yet learned to live.

No woman wrote *The Trial*, *Moby Dick*, *Ulysses*, or *The Seven Pillars of Wisdom*. Women do not contest the human situation, because they have hardly begun to assume it. This explains why their works for the most part lack metaphysical resonances and also anger; they do not take the world incidentally, they do not ask it questions, they do not expose its contradictions: they take it as it is too seriously. (711)

Given that her assessment of women writers is couched in the numerous gender inequities explored in *The Second Sex*, women fall short of the sort of experiences and thought processes men have experienced and exploited for centuries. Summarizing her view on the arts, she says women are deemed less

capable because of their prior lack of opportunities and continuing shortage of freedom.

Art, literature, philosophy, are attempts to found the world anew on a human liberty: that of the individual creator; to entertain such a pretension, one must first unequivocally assume the status of a being who has liberty. The restrictions that education and custom impose on woman now limit her grasp on the universe . . . what woman needs first of all is to undertake, in anguish and pride, her apprenticeship in abandonment and transcendence: that is, in liberty. ([1952] 1989, 711)

Once that is accomplished, women can attain artistic heights equal to that of the greatest male writers. Beauvoir invokes the sentiment of the writer Marie Bashkirtsev, who said, "Without that liberty you cannot become a true artist" (712).

It is interesting to note that the few women that Beauvoir thought capable of artistically expressing themselves at high levels were those independent women who were actresses, dancers, and singers. In discussing their work, she adds another dimension to the characteristics by which great artists/writers/intellectuals excel. Not only must women be fully free to exercise their options, but they must also be free of narcissistic self-obsession in order to concentrate fully on the task at hand. In the last chapter of *The Second Sex*, Beauvoir outlines the hardships of being an independent woman, often caused by lack of passion and depth. She fails to exhibit "a taste for adventure and for experience for its own sake . . . a disinterested curiosity." She does not "lose herself in her projects" ([1952] 1989, 702). American women, in particular, "are not passionately concerned with the *content* of their tasks" but are rather distracted by their individual accomplishments. They chart their meager progress without striving for a larger goal (702). "Woman similarly has a tendency to attach too much importance to minor setbacks and modest successes; she is turn by turn discouraged or puffed up with vanity" (702). When success occurs, "They are forever looking back to see how far they have come, and that interrupts their progress" (702). What is required instead is no easy task:

What woman essentially lacks today for doing great things is forgetfulness of herself; but to forget oneself it is first of all necessary to be firmly assured that now and for the future one has found oneself. Newly come into the world of men, poorly seconded by them, woman is still too busily occupied to search for herself. (702)

Thus we learn to unpack the mystery of "metaphysical resonances," a requirement for women writers in addition to justified anger. Women are encouraged

to think beyond themselves, particularly beyond their own physicality and accomplishments, and to move their thoughts onto another plane. As Beauvoir notes in praising certain actresses, "A great actress will aim higher yet: she will go beyond the given by the way she expresses it; she will be truly an artist, a creator, who gives meaning to her life by lending meaning to the world" (703).

This explanation of the status of women's personal freedom, transcendence over tragic ambiguity, and conquering of natural narcissistic tendencies serves to demonstrate that when facing an impasse, no one can choose a path, much less an ethical path, if she is not fully free. This is undeniably the cornerstone of Beauvoir's existentialist ethics and her analysis of the oppression of women.

But it is also essential to the ethics of that choice that it be predicated upon a concern for others, and not be selfish or myopic. It must be rooted in humanism. Beauvoir advocates a passion for the task at hand and a deep investigation into its intricacies; these can bring one to a level of concern that focuses outside oneself. To make something good of the future, you have to look the present—including oneself—in the face. For women, particularly when Beauvoir was writing in the 1940s, this was a new experience, an unprecedented challenge. When a woman looks the present in the face, she must see herself fully free and sincerely committed to the welfare of others. Doing so will enliven a passionate humanism that rejects the comfortable, carefree life of the aesthete.

It is rather ironic that in *The Mandarins* Beauvoir puts the words of such lofty goals in the mouth of Paula, yet another female character, who was previously weak and dependent, and new to the task of writing: "I don't want to be taken for a society woman who writes for housewives" ([1952] 1989, 536). Beauvoir thus reveals her own worry that her writing might be judged as an example of aestheticism—lighthearted and pleasant—and not humanism. Is it not altogether fitting that she won the highest literary prize in France, the Prix Goncourt, for the novel that voices this concern?

### Facing the Future: Artistic Self-Doubt

*Now I see the impasse. Robert believes completely in certain ideas, and before the war we were positive that one day they would be realized. His whole life has been devoted to enriching them and preparing for their birth. But suppose they're never born? Suppose the revolution takes a different tack, turns against the humanism Robert has always defended? What can he do?*

—Anne, in *The Mandarins*

Anne's realization of this dilemma for her husband clearly indicates not only how an impasse functions within one's personal history and past beliefs but also how internal questioning affects the conviction and confidence with which the actual choice is made. Devoting his life to humanism predisposes

Robert to a promising future, yet Anne imagines her husband at the threshold, looking forward, contemplating the political effectiveness of his actions in two opposing ways: as a man helping to build a future hostile to his values—an undesirable option, given his value system—and as a man insistent on his old values and ideals, yet totally ineffectual. Foreseeing the possibility of artistic and/or political failure, the process of choosing is, in advance, naturally affected by self-doubt and worry.

Beauvoir utilizes a different vocabulary than that of “impasse” when she has Robert utter the words, “We’re at the crossroads” ([1954] 1991, 44) and “We’re at a critical moment of history right now” (47). He dismisses the urgency of finishing his memoirs and rejects Anne’s insistence that “First and foremost, you’re a writer” by responding, “You know that’s not true. . . . For me, the revolution comes first” (46). His determination is underscored when she suggests the compromise position “you can best serve the revolution by writing your books.” In response he proclaims, “[F]irst we have to win the political battle” (47). To Anne, it is as if Scriassine’s dire predictions—that Robert can no longer maintain “that beautiful equilibrium”—have come true. She abhors Robert’s lack of interest in future literary work, particularly in light of a successful twenty-year history of writing. When he adds resolutely that “one book more or less on earth isn’t as important as all that” (46) and “[t]here are a lot of things that have to be prevented before one can afford to amuse oneself writing books that no one might ever read” (47), Anne can only reply, “But a world without literature and art would be horribly sad” (47). She is at a loss to explain his shift in thinking.

Desperate to understand, she sets out to discover the essence of what she believes makes his work so successful, aesthetically and politically. Anne’s musings allow the reader a deeper glimpse into Beauvoir’s compromise theory of art.

I reread all his novels. And I soon realized I had completely misunderstood them the first time. Dubreuilh gave the impression of writing capriciously, for his own pleasure, completely without motivation. And yet on closing the book, you felt yourself overwhelmed with anger, disgust, revolt; you wanted things to change. To read certain passages from his works, you would take him for a pure esthete; he has a feel for words, and he’s interested in things for themselves, in rain and clear skies, in the games of love and chance, in everything. Only he doesn’t stop there; suddenly you find yourself thrown in among people, and all their problems become your concern. That’s why I’m so determined for him to continue writing; I know through my own experience what he can bring to his readers. There’s no gap between his political ideas and his poetic emotions. ([1954] 1991, 56)

Her concluding statement summarizes Beauvoir’s theory of ethical, valuable art. Upon further reflection, Anne comes to the conclusion that Robert must never stop writing (and that she must inevitably and unceasingly play a role encouraging him in his endeavor): “[A]fter all, writing is the thing he loves most in the world; it’s his joy, his necessity; it’s he, himself. Renouncing writing would be suicide for him” (56).

Anne defines Robert as a writer; his written work is his essence. But the humanistic goal of procuring and enhancing individual freedom while striving for improved conditions for society contains the seeds of potential failure that, on Beauvoir’s aesthetic theory, can undermine even the best intellectual efforts. As we have seen, Anne (a psychoanalyst, not a writer, who is still interesting to consider as part of the discussion of lack of confidence) feels useless at the end of the novel and contemplates suicide. Paula, a woman too much in love with Henri (who has deserted her for a much younger Nadine), undergoes much improvement as she takes up writing but worries that she might be writing only for housewives. It is not surprising to see the female characters undergo serious self-doubt, since Beauvoir clearly highlighted woman’s potential lack of confidence and feelings of inferiority in *The Second Sex* ([1952] 1989, 685, 699–701).

It is surprising, though, to see Beauvoir’s two main characters—both male—also vacillate between moments of confidence and self-doubt. She suggests that even under the best of circumstances in which men “naturally” enjoy a position of social and cultural privilege, they too struggle with the erosion of artistic confidence and require support from their colleagues. Recall the shifting roles occupied by Robert and Henri throughout the novel; each attempted to carve out an individual creative niche while at the same time serving broader human interests. Each faltered and sometimes failed, and each questioned the entire enterprise. When they intermittently asked “What is the role of the intellectual today?” or “What use does literature serve?” they were searching for reasons to continue, as was Beauvoir herself. In light of the possibility of artistic failure (which differs from political failure, which is considered a failure to motivate others toward certain ideological goals and action), the two authors routinely struggled with the temptation to abandon writing. Clearly the worst form of artistic failure was the lack of readers; recall Henri’s sense of satisfaction that at least a few thousand had read his article. Voiced even more stridently is the diatribe of a taciturn character named Lewis (Anne’s American lover), who impatiently expresses his thoughts to Anne:

Why does one write? For whom does one write? If you begin asking that, you stop writing! You write, that’s all. And people read you. You write for the people who read you. It’s writers nobody reads who ask themselves questions like that! ([1954] 1991, 480)

Beauvoir's words, "You write, that's all," can mislead one into thinking that facing the impasse is simplistic and easily negotiable. On the contrary, there is nothing simple about the artistic enterprise at all, whether for writers, artists, dancers, actors, or anyone else: male or female. Beauvoir, of course, knew this all too well.

Perhaps the most potent threat to Beauvoir's compromise position that aesthetics can successfully function alongside politics is embodied in Henri's thought, "You don't prevent a war with words" ([1954] 1991, 602). It is a revealing admission that, on the surface, appears to be about the potential failure of the written word on the printed page. Although it can be interpreted in that way, it reveals an even deeper level of pessimism about the enterprise of humanism itself as an ideology. For Henri thinks these words to himself while he is at home, in the quiet and safety of his study, knowing that Robert is out in public, speaking (words) at a political gathering. Beauvoir's description captures both the admiration and jealousy of Henri for his friend: "Henri pictured the hall filled with people, their faces upturned toward Dubreuilh, Dubreuilh bent toward them, throwing out words. There was no room in them for fear, for anguish; together, they were hoping" (602). Henri regrets the fact that he is not there, not actively engaged. "Dubreuilh was speaking out against the war, and Henri suddenly wished he were in his place. . . . Doing something, even though it were only speaking, was better than sitting by himself in a corner with that dark weight on his heart" (602). Thus, in spite of a lingering hope in the power of literature, one can never fully rely on the written or spoken word to prevent disaster. More cynically, one might not even be able to rely on the power of political speech as a worthwhile and successful motivating action. Each has a potential for failure and each requires strength of character that can withstand the nagging self-doubt that can cause not only the abandonment of one's project but, ultimately, the adoption of an avoidance tactic: taking refuge in indifference.

Henri's hesitation to commit to politics and political writing finally evolves into a mature dedication after he has a long discussion with Robert in which Dubreuilh declares, "There's one thing that you must realize . . . and that is that acceptance is always a matter of choice, love always a matter of preference" ([1954] 1991, 584). Henri interprets this to mean that life is about choosing, not about resignation, viz., accepting the *less* desirable choice. He notes the importance of "humanity," which is preferable to all else, in spite of its flaws. He comments on how appropriately the advice pertains to books and works of art, more so than to politics: "The books you want to write are never written, and you can amuse yourself by seeing a defeat in every masterpiece. And yet, we don't dream of a superterrestrial art; the works we prefer command our absolute love" (588).

This is Beauvoir's way of saying that an artist or writer is always beleaguered by self-doubt, can always see the possibility of failure within the work of

art in terms of the effect it may have on an audience. However, the ultimate goal of serving humanity overrides this concern and inspires the artist to continue in her pursuit. As she states in *The Ethics*,

Thus, we can set up point number one: the good of an individual or a group of individuals requires that it be taken as an absolute end of our action; but we are not authorized to decide upon this end *a priori*. . . . To put it positively, the precept will be to treat the other . . . as a freedom so that his end may be freedom. ([1948] 1996, 142)

Within the novel, Robert is seen by Anne as the link between the past, present, and future. She characterizes him as a leader who inspires others but who is still human, complete with doubts and failings. His goal is to enhance the freedom of others and, like other writers and artists, his attempts are valiant insofar as he tries as best he can, within his limitations. Anne lovingly describes him as a bridge between generations as she summarizes the high quality of his work:

What exactly did he stand for to them? He was both a great writer and a man who was part of the vigilance committees, the anti-fascist meetings; an intellectual dedicated to the revolution without repudiating himself as an intellectual. For the old, he stood for the pre-war era; for the young, the present and its promises. He effected the unity of the past and of the future. And no doubt he was a thousand other things to them besides: each loved him in his own way. (Beauvoir [1954] 1991, 222)

## Conclusion

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This essay unearths a cohesive theory of the arts promoted by Beauvoir through three of her best-known literary sources. I cast it as a compromise theory in that it seeks to combine aspects of two opposing modes of creative choice, initially posed by Scriassine: the choice between culture (the "pure esthete" or the salon-haunter) and politics. Cast in historical terms within the subdiscipline of aesthetics, this is the well-known choice between aestheticism and humanism. Anne is the main promoter of the compromise theory of art. Robert and Henri are the primary creators of art, beleaguered with self-doubt, who face the impasse. Clearly, there is much more to the novel than what has been excavated at this point. Along with Beauvoir's *The Ethics of Ambiguity* and



*The Second Sex*, it is rich with suggestion, even provocation. For writers and artists, these are particularly inviting texts. They may contain seeds of truth that need to be faced by artists themselves, as they struggle with the impasse of their own future creativity.

## Notes

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1. The philosophical subdiscipline of aesthetics is known for historically characterizing works of art as interesting apolitical artifacts. This began with the eighteenth-century British empiricists, followed with Kant, and continued into the twentieth century with the aesthetic attitude theorists. The standard recommendation was the adoption of an aesthetic stance of "disinterestedness" toward the work of art: a stance that excluded ethical, religious, economic, or political interest. For a more thorough discussion of Beauvoir's theory of art in light of this historical trend, see Brand 2001–2.

2. It is interesting to note the number of times Beauvoir uses this phrase. For instance, Scriassine uses it again in discussing the seemingly narrow range of political choices open to the French: "You've got to look things squarely in the face" (Beauvoir [1954] 1991, 409). Henri describes friends who have suffered at the hands of the Stalinist regime as "throwing their memories in your face" (410). And Anne reflects, "Happy is he . . . who can look the truth of his life full in the face and rejoice in it; happy is he who can read it on friendly faces" (222).

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## Contributors

**Peg Brand** is an artist and Associate Professor of Philosophy and Women's Studies at Indiana University–Purdue University Indianapolis. She specializes in feminist art criticism, art theory, and gender studies. She has edited *Beauty Matters* (2000), coedited *Feminism and Tradition in Aesthetics* with Carolyn Korsmeyer (1995), and most recently coedited a special issue of *Hypatia: A Journal of Feminist Philosophy* entitled "Women, Art, and Aesthetics" with Mary Devereaux (2003). She is currently working on a book manuscript with accompanying original illustrations entitled *Beauty Below the Surface: Feminist Visual Parodies*.

**Thomas W. Busch** is Professor of Philosophy at Villanova University. He specializes in existential and body politics with particular expertise in Sartre, Merleau-Ponty, and Ricoeur. He is the author of *The Power of Consciousness and the Force of Circumstances in Sartre's Philosophy* (1990) and *Circulating Being: From Embodiment to Incorporation; Essays on Late Existentialism* (1999). He is editor of *Participant Perspective: A Gabriel Marcel Reader* (1987) and coeditor, with Shaun Gallagher, of *Merleau-Ponty, Hermeneutics and Postmodernism* (1992).

**Eleanore Holveck** is Associate Professor of Philosophy at Duquesne University, where she specializes in the existentialism of Beauvoir and Sartre, Kantian ethics, phenomenology, and philosophy of literature. She is the author of *Simone de Beauvoir's Philosophy of Lived Experience: Between Literature and Metaphysics* (2002). Other publications include "Simone de Beauvoir's Desire to Express *la joie d'exister*," in *Philosophies of Desire*, ed. Hugh Silverman (2000); "The Birth of American Existentialism: Hazel E. Barnes, A Singular