

The Contradictions of Freedom

Philosophical Essays on
Simone de Beauvoir's
The Mandarins

Edited by

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and
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“This girl pays the penalty for having had personal relations with the Germans. Here, in the Montelimar area, France, French civilians shave her head as punishment.” Smith, August 29, 1944.

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CHAPTER 8

Love, Theory, and Politics

Critical Trinities in Simone de Beauvoir's The Mandarins

Jen McWeeny

Simone de Beauvoir's *The Mandarins* (1999b), first published in 1954, is a story of the personal, theoretical, and political trinities that characterize a group of intellectuals in post-World War II France. The central trinity of the novel is that comprised of its two narrators (Anne Dubreuilh and Henri Perron) and the character that each sees herself or himself in relation to—namely, Robert Dubreuilh. This triadic structure is repeated over and over again in the interpersonal relationships of the novel's characters, in the theoretical questions that dominate the characters' thoughts, and in the political poles that loom behind the plot of the story. For example, there are more than seven love triangles mentioned in *The Mandarins*, the most prominent of which is the triangle of Anne, Robert, and Lewis Brogan. In addition, the backdrop of World War II fuels the plot's philosophical problem of trying to reconcile one's abstract intellectual commitments with one's political practice and personal relationships. Furthermore, on a political level, *The Mandarins* tells a tale of the opposition between Soviet communism and American capitalism from the perspective of French socialism.

The trinities in *The Mandarins* are "critical" trinities because Beauvoir's evocations of them serve to form an image of the movement of life, theory, and history that stands in critical juxtaposition to the movement characterized by Hegel's master-slave dialectic and progression of history.¹ In her philosophical works, Beauvoir criticizes Hegel for excluding woman from the dialectic (1989, 435; 1949, 2:235),² for reducing woman to a mere negation of man (1989, xxi),

for ignoring the ways in which one's situation influences the possibilities for the expression of one's subjectivity (1997, 84), and for his optimistic notion that an individual is a mere moment of a unified history (1962a, 266).³ These criticisms raise the question of whether Hegel's theory of interpersonal and historical relationships, which also appears to possess a triadic structure, can allow for the separateness and uniqueness of the three terms while situating them within a framework that is exclusive, based on mirrored opposition, inattentive to differing subjectivities, and universalizing. Since the image of relationships that derives from the trinities of *The Mandarins* does not fall prey to these criticisms, one could take this image as a basis for formulating the beginnings of a theory of personal, conceptual, and historical relationships that is an alternative to that of Hegel. The idea that such a theory can emerge out of *The Mandarins* is a sensible one in light of the fact that in her literary writing Beauvoir depicts women, not as she would want them to be, but as she saw them (Beauvoir 1987, 278). As such, the female characters of *The Mandarins* are literary answers to the questions that drive the discourse of *The Second Sex*: "What place has humanity made for this portion of itself [woman] which, while included within it, is defined as the Other? What rights have been conceded to it? How have men defined it?" (1989, 65). Thus, the trinities in *The Mandarins* are "critical" in a second sense of the word in that they are essential for understanding Beauvoir's theories as presented in *The Second Sex*.⁴ This understanding in turn uncovers the need for theories, practices, and lives that are capable of creating freedom in the midst of oppression. Such a creation depends upon recognizing the interplay between the personal, the theoretical, and the political that is exemplified in Beauvoir's writing. As she herself intimates, "I see myself reflected no less in *The Second Sex* than in *The Mandarins*, and vice versa" (1987, 332).

The Gifts, Withdrawals, and Solitudes of Love

Nearly all of the characters in *The Mandarins* partake in one or more love triangles throughout the course of the novel. The most prominent love triangles are those that are in part constituted by each of the two focal characters—namely, those of Anne, Robert, and Lewis, and of Henri, Paule, and Nadine. The plot also consists in the love triangles between Nadine, Lambert, and their dead lovers (Nadine, Lambert, and Diego; and Nadine, Lambert, and Rosa), of the love triangle between Nadine, Lambert, and Henri, and of the love triangle between Henri, Paule, and Josette. Personal relationships that take the form of a trio are relationships in which each individual must inevitably view the couples she or he is involved in from the perspective of an outside observer. The adoption of this third-party perspective makes it impossible for one to see an Other as simply a negative or positive reflection of oneself and for one to see

oneself as a mere reflection of an Other.⁵ As a result, triadic personal relationships are not constituted by oppositional struggles for recognition, but by gifts, withdrawals, and realizations of absolute separateness.

The relationships that comprise the amorous trinities of *The Mandarins* are not oppositional because a relation between three parties cannot be theorized in terms of simple negations. In *The Second Sex*, Beauvoir claims that the master-slave dialectic does not involve true opposition because, within the dialectic, the Other is a mere negative reflection of the Self and thus neither term confronts a distinct freedom (1989, 64–65). Judith Butler rightly summarizes Beauvoir's critique as follows: "The self-asserting 'man' whose self-definition requires a hierarchical contrast with an 'Other' does not provide a model of true autonomy, for she [Beauvoir] points out the bad faith of his designs, i.e. that the 'Other' is, in every case, his own alienated self" (1998, 37). Within a trio, the conflation of the Other and the Self that hinders true autonomy is impossible because each member is never able to look at the Others from the confines of her or his own perspective and thus cannot project her or his own negative Self onto that Other. Lewis comes to this painful realization when Anne refuses to forgo her life in Paris for the sake of giving herself entirely to him. Although Anne tells him "I don't love you any less because other things mean something to me" (Beauvoir 1999b, 462), Lewis's inevitable imaginings of Anne's separateness and of her other life without him eventually cause him to be unable to love her. The ever-present image of France and Robert hinders Lewis's capacity to look at Anne and see his own reflection. By loving Lewis for three months a year, Anne avoids an identity that is constructed solely in relation to one man. In doing so, she follows one of the liberatory proposals Beauvoir makes in *The Second Sex*: "To emancipate woman is to refuse to confine her to the relations she bears to man, not to deny them to her; let her have her own independent existence and she will continue none the less to exist for him also: mutually recognizing each other as subject, each will yet remain for the other an *other*" (1989, 731). However, Lewis's inability to love Anne within the context of the type of reciprocity proposed in *The Second Sex* implies that love is not yet a space where woman is recognized as an autonomous subject with her own unique desires.

Through a disruption of one's capacity to see the Other in the terms of the Self, triadic relations make one aware of one's own unavoidable separateness from other people and of the impossibility of a higher union. According to Beauvoir, this separateness is an ontological fact of the human condition that Hegel's dialectic fails to acknowledge. In *Pyrrhus et Cinéas* Beauvoir writes, "In vain Hegel declares that individuality is only a moment of becoming universal. . . . [Man's] very effort to pull himself up from the earth only digs him his place there" (1962a, 266; my translation). Later in the essay, Beauvoir claims that a "higher reconciliation" of opposed freedoms is not possible,

because there can be no free actions unless humanity is “a discontinuous succession of free men who are irremediably isolated by their subjectivity” (285; my translation). Beauvoir summarizes her view when she writes, “Freedoms are neither unified nor opposed, they are separated” (282; my translation).⁶ For Beauvoir, the acknowledgment that one is essentially separate from others serves as the impetus for action and responsibility, because it is a recognition that one’s life does not derive its meaning from that which stands outside of it. Anne’s entrance into a love triangle denies her an identity that can be derived from mirrored opposition. Thus, Anne must recognize herself as standing alone and as such, she realizes her responsibility for constructing her own identity. Similarly, Nadine’s birth, by changing the couple of Anne and Robert to a familial trio, forces Anne to acknowledge her separateness from Robert. Anne narrates, “I hadn’t wanted her [Nadine]; it was Robert who wanted to have a child right away. I’ve always held it against Nadine that she upset my life alone with Robert. I loved Robert too much. . . .” (Beauvoir 1999b, 69). Likewise, Henri’s love for Josette is what finally makes Paule realize that he no longer loves her and that she is interminably alone. Anne’s realizations of separateness that take place in the personal sphere carry over into her political thoughts as well. While trying to calculate the worth of her political action in terms of numbers of lives at stake, Anne concludes, “One man plus one man doesn’t make two men; it will forever make one plus one” (359).

If freedoms are neither unified nor opposed, but separated, as Beauvoir suggests, then what is the impetus for human relationships? In short, any connections between individuals must be chosen and continuously sustained. For Beauvoir, not only is it possible for separate consciousnesses to exist in reciprocity where each recognizes the Other as Other, but their very independence from each other is the condition of reciprocal recognition (1989, 731). On this view, to love someone is, at base, a choice, not an inevitable desire for recognition. Thus, the character of a relationship is determined by the attitudes of its individual members; a relationship never has a character all on its own. These attitudes may change as the situation of the individual changes. In the absence of inevitable unifying or opposing forces, human relationships exist and decay as a result of gifts and withdrawals. Anne begins to realize this character of relationships after the end of her affair with Lewis: “. . . I had never understood that love is always undeserved. Lewis had loved me without any valid reason; it hadn’t surprised me. Now, he no longer loved me; neither was that surprising, it was even very natural” (1999b, 542). Love triangles, by extracting one from the mirroring perspectives of a couple, are reminders that human relationships exist for no a priori reasons. The notion that relationships and their members are constituted by chosen gifts and withdrawals runs in direct contrast to Lewis’s Hegelian notion of manhood. For him, a man is “above all, someone who doesn’t resign himself to things, someone who has desires and who fights

to satisfy them” (460). For Beauvoir, a lover does not fight people or things to satisfy her or his desires because in those situations where two people “think they confront one another, it is really against the self that each one struggles” (1989, 728). Instead, a lover must assume the ambiguities of her or his situation. In other words, a lover should not fight to define and manipulate the other or to extract love from the other. In a relationship of reciprocal recognition, each “remain[s] for the other an other” (731) by respecting the gifts and withdrawals that the other chooses.

The triadic image of relationships presented in *The Mandarins* is not just characteristic of Beauvoir’s fictional romances. When pondered in the context of their own non-monogamous yet committed “arrangement,” it is no wonder that Beauvoir discusses how she and Jean-Paul Sartre were both repeatedly drawn to the question of how a third term would affect a binary relation (1962b, 286–313). One of the times in which Beauvoir and Sartre were faced with difficulties because of their arrangement was during Beauvoir’s affair with Nelson Algren, which is recounted “very approximately” in *The Mandarins* through the relationship of Anne and Lewis (1987, 133–35). However, the “third party” who came closest to dissolving Beauvoir and Sartre’s companionship was one of Beauvoir’s students, Olga Kosakiewicz. Both Beauvoir and Sartre got along so well with Olga that after they met her, they resolved that “from now on we would be a trio and not a couple” (Beauvoir 1962b, 291).

Beauvoir’s first novel, *She Came to Stay* (1999a), which relates many of her experiences as a member of the trio she comprised with Sartre and Olga, is in many ways a premonition of the literary and philosophical themes put forth in *The Mandarins*.⁷ In her autobiography, Beauvoir claims that *She Came to Stay* is, in part, her attempt to describe her own threatening realizations, which resulted from her experiences in the trio, that people are unavoidably separate individuals (1962b, 313) and that other people have “rational awareness” that is capable of passing judgment (381). *She Came to Stay* is frequently interpreted as a psychological account of the relationship between Françoise and Xavière that takes the form of a literary depiction of the novel’s epigraph from Hegel: “Each conscience seeks the death of the other.”⁸ However, *She Came to Stay* is not so much the story of two opposed consciousnesses as it is the story of the trio of Françoise, Pierre, and Xavière. Structurally, the novel repeats its triadic theme through its trio of narrators (Françoise, Gerbert, and Elizabeth), its trio of female characters (Françoise, Elizabeth, and Xavière), and its second romantic trio (Françoise, Gerbert, and Xavière). In particular, *She Came to Stay* is a description of the ways in which Xavière (the third party, the “X,” the invited stranger) mediates the consuming relationship between Françoise and Pierre so as to enable Françoise to come to her own subjectivity. At the start of *She Came to Stay* Pierre tells Françoise, “You and I are simply one. . . . Neither of us can be defined without the other” (1999a, 25). In contrast, following Xavière’s death,

the final lines of the novel run, “[N]ow nothing separated her [Françoise] from herself. She had chosen at last. She had chosen herself” (1999a, 404). The interposition of a third party between Françoise and Pierre, a situation that is ultimately rendered eternal through Françoise’s crime, allows not only the character of Françoise but also Beauvoir herself to arrive at subjectivity. Beauvoir thus reflects on the ending of *She Came to Stay*: “[A]bove all, by releasing Françoise, through the agency of a crime, from the dependent position in which her love for Pierre kept her, I regained my own personal autonomy” (1962b, 410). Hence, in Beauvoir’s own life and in her novels, the third party encourages one to observe one’s relationships from a different point of view. This fresh observation disrupts identities based on mirrored opposition or visions of an inevitable synthesis, and as a result serves as the basis for freedom and subjectivity.

The Problem of Reconciling Theoretical, Political, and Personal Commitments

The triadic structure of the personal relationships in *The Mandarins* is repeated in the philosophical problem that each of the characters must solve: How does one reconcile one’s abstract intellectual commitments, one’s political practice, and one’s personal life? This theoretical trinity is rendered concrete in the three character types—namely, lover, intellectual, and activist—that all of the novel’s characters move between. The very difficulties that the characters have with separating their intellectual, political, and personal commitments disrupt the notion that these spheres can be separated at all. This inseparability is exemplified most by the fact that Anne’s three lovers in the novel (Scriassine, a Russian journalist; Robert, a French intellectual; and Lewis, an American novelist) easily map onto the political and theoretical poles of the novel. The content of what her lovers write, combined with the place that these lovers occupy in Anne’s own life, suggests that Scriassine symbolizes the Soviet Union and political practice, Robert symbolizes France and intellectual pursuits, and Lewis symbolizes the United States and the sphere of personal, intimate, bodily relationships. The plot of *The Mandarins* is driven by the ways in which the climate of postwar France makes manifest the mounting incompatibility of these three spheres, and thus, the plot is also driven by a growing need to reconcile them.

Scriassine, who explains to Anne that because he is an outsider he is able to observe the situation of French intellectuals with more clarity than they are able to observe themselves (1999b, 38), is prescient of this need at the start of the novel.⁹ From his unique perspective, Scriassine tells 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” (39). Scriassine’s words highlight how the presence of war disturbs and occupies one’s identity by placing one’s abstract, symbolic pursuits in conflict with one’s own existence and the existence of particular others. In response to this occupation, French intellectuals must construct an identity that retains meaning in the midst of this conflict. Scriassine tells Anne that the people of Russia, Austria, and Germany have already experienced the struggle that ensues from the incompatibility of theoretical, political, and interpersonal spheres. He confesses that although he would like to have written literary works, writing anything but factual accounts of political regimes was “out of the question,” because “to continue to take an interest in things cultural in the face of Stalin and Hitler, you have to have one hell of a humanistic tradition behind you” (39). However, Scriassine’s turn to political practice is not capable of ameliorating the intellectual’s impasse, because this impasse is not simply a result of the conflict between the pursuit of art and political participation; it is also a result of the conflict between either of these activities and particular human lives. Lambert points out the similarities between intellectual and political endeavors when he tells Henri, “In politics, all you’re concerned with are abstract things that don’t exist—the future, masses of people. But what is really concrete is the actual present moment, and people as separate and single individuals” (147). In other words, one must remember, like Anne does, that what is most horrifying about Stalin and Hitler is neither their political regimes nor the theories that found them, but rather that they have murdered concrete people like Rosa and Diego.

The character who struggles most explicitly with the philosophical problem of reconciling intellectual commitments, political practice, and particular lives is Henri, who, as the head of the independent journal *L’Espoir*, is faced with many difficult decisions.¹⁰ Henri, Robert, and Luc constitute the trio of socialist journalists who run *L’Espoir* and who struggle with the question of whether or not to ally their paper with the Communist Party in order to keep it going. They also struggle with the decision of whether or not to print a story about the existence of communist-run concentration camps, because they fear that the capacity of the Communist Party to counter capitalism, which they see as the greater of two evils, will be weakened. Both decisions raise the philosophical problem that Scriassine articulates at the beginning of the novel of whether one should compromise one’s abstract intellectual and moral commitments for the sake of influencing the end result of a particular political situation. And, like Scriassine, Henri sees the problem as dialectical in structure; he desires to quell the tension between his theories and the inevitability of political practice. Likewise, Vincent and Sézenac also situate their struggles within a dialectic of theory and practice. But, as foils to Henri and Robert, the two younger men privilege action over theory with their involvement in *épuration* activities.¹¹ While Vincent is a man of action who kills ex-collaborators and

uses their money to fund socialist journals, Henri refuses to accept Vincent's money and insists that one must be true to one's theoretical commitments despite the consequences of that allegiance. However, both Henri and Vincent cannot see beyond the dialectical tension between theory and political practice to the invisible third term that is a particular human life. Because of this blindness, neither extreme of killing, on the one hand, or defending abstract values, on the other, provides a solution to the problem.

Alternatively, the female characters of *The Mandarins* do not see their own psychological struggles as constituted by the opposition between abstract theory and political practice, because their womanly situations do not allow them access to this dialectical construction. Anne, Paule, and Nadine exist almost entirely within the private, personal sphere. Most importantly, none of the female characters write. Paule, who was once a well-known singer, no longer works and puts all of her energy into her relationship with Henri. Nadine, who had no desire to work at the start of the novel, eventually becomes a secretary for her father and spends most of her time moving in and out of romantic relationships. The one time in the novel when Nadine does attempt to be of some public consequence by helping Vincent with an *épuration* mission, she fails miserably because she is unable to walk a significant distance, and Anne ends up having to retrieve her from a roadside ditch in the middle of the night (Beauvoir 1999b, 215–16). Likewise, Anne's attempt to enter into the public realm through work is an ironic one, because her work as a psychoanalyst entails that she develop and sort through personal relationships. Even her intellectual conversations are personal in that she comes to the defense of Robert rather than to the defense of an abstract intellectual theory or political practice (39).

The fact that the female characters in *The Mandarins* inhabit the private sphere of personal relationships echoes Beauvoir's criticism that Hegel's dialectic lacks a place for woman. Eva Lundgren-Gothlin describes this understanding as it is articulated in *The Second Sex* when she writes, "Passages in the *Phenomenology of Spirit* lead the reader to conclude that women are not conceived of as participants in the struggle for recognition. Women belong to the private sphere, and the question of their self-consciousness is of no interest to Hegel" (1996, 72). By relegating woman to the private sphere and emphasizing the importance of man's move to the public sphere, Hegel mistakenly conflates woman's struggle for recognition with that of man (Beauvoir 1989, 64–65) in the same way that Paule mistakenly conflates her own identity with that of Henri. In attending to the lives of particular women, who are positioned outside of the dialectical struggle that seeks to reconcile theory and political practice, Beauvoir sheds light on the fact that human relationships move with more complexity and ambiguity than the movement of Hegelian thesis, antithesis, and synthesis. *The Mandarins* is a novel that describes, with detailed attention, the lives of outsiders. Because it is an attempt to articulate the human particu-

larities and ambiguities that exceed words and current intellectual theories, *The Mandarins* can be likened to the postwar party in its opening scene. As Anne tells Robert: "[W]e went to a very peculiar party tonight, with all the dead who weren't there" (1999b, 49). Anne then rejects Robert's suggestion that the deaths of those killed in the war served some purpose when she states, "It's fine for the living, this system by which everything leads to something else. But the dead stay dead and we're constantly betraying them; they don't lead to anything" (49). To avoid this betrayal, one must evoke those particular people who, like casualties of war, elude purposeful, theoretical, and idealized frameworks of comprehension. In this spirit, Beauvoir remarks that she made none of her female characters "feminist heroines," because she sought to represent, not the exceptions of her sex, but women as she saw them (1987, 278).

The male characters' blindness toward the notion that the impasse between intellectual theories and political practice must be reconciled with particular human lives mirrors the failure of Hegel's dialectic to describe the role of woman as involved in the struggle for recognition. Just as acknowledging woman is able to demystify Hegel's dialectical struggles for recognition, Anne's position outside of the theoretical dialectic between theory and practice renders her able to diagnose the problem in a way that the men who are struggling with it are unable to see. In *Force of Circumstance*, Beauvoir explains that she self-consciously placed Anne in the roles of narrator and witness to the relationship between Robert and Henri (1987, 273). Beauvoir writes, "Anne, being profoundly involved in the conflicts I was recounting while remaining outside them, envisaged them from an entirely different point of view than either Dubreuilh or Henri" (276). As witness, Anne situates a public, seemingly dialectical struggle in terms of personal contexts. Her viewpoint is an embodiment of the idea that the struggle between theory and political practice inevitably takes place upon a field of personal, private relationships. Man to man dialectics and dialectics of ideas that apply only to the public, masculine sphere overlay and obscure the womanly realm of personal relationships—just as in *The Mandarins*, Henri and Robert's theoretical problems overlay and obscure the particular lives of individuals who are suffering in postwar Europe. Nadine enacts this critique of male intellectuals when she fumes at Henri, "How can anyone love an intellectual! You have a set of scales where your heart should be and a little brain at the tip of your pecker. And fundamentally . . . you're all just a bunch of fascists. . . . You never treat people as equals; you deal with them according to the dictates of your little consciences. Your generosity is simply imperialism, and your impartiality, conceit" (1999b, 172). Woman, in particular, is adversely affected by the dangers of theoretical and political abstractions. The conflation of woman with an abstract category, especially one that is defined by man, masks her very particularity as a being who "incarnates no stable concept" (1989, 143) and, hence, enables sexist oppression. Volange

makes the unique relationship between woman and abstraction explicit when he drunkenly tells Henri, "Women are part of your humanism. . . . You screw them just like any other man" (1999b, 391). Volange's words recognize the irony of humanism: in fighting for the abstract freedom of all human beings the particular situations of certain social groups are rendered invisible and thus their political needs are obscured as well.

Sartre's discussion of the third party in the *Critique of Dialectical Reason* (1978) also focuses on the role of an invisible third in relation to the dialectic.¹² Sartre situates his discussion of the third within his personal experience of watching two manual laborers working on opposing sides of the same fence from his hotel while on holiday. On his view, only a third party can give meaning to the reciprocity of two dialectical terms. Sartre claims that "it is only the third party in fact who can, through mediation, show the equivalence of the goods exchanged and consequently of the successive acts" (1978, 108). This reciprocity is actualized by the third party, because only an observer would be capable of putting the two terms in objective comparison. Because the third party is able to situate dialectical relations within a given social context, it is capable of disclosing the interactions between individuals and the ways in which the surrounding society and history shape those individuals. Sartre makes this point clear when he claims, "A binary formation, as the immediate relation of man to man, is the necessary ground of any ternary relation; but conversely, a ternary relation, as the mediation of man amongst men, is the basis on which reciprocity becomes aware of itself as a reciprocal connection" (109). In sum, for Sartre the third party, like the female characters of *The Mandarins*, situates various dialectical struggles within their social and historical contexts and points to that which defines or eludes the boundaries of those struggles.

The conclusion of *The Mandarins* implies that the philosophical problem of reconciling intellectual, political, and personal commitments has been temporarily resolved by the male character's movement toward the personal sphere and the particular human lives that constitute it. When Henri's allegiance to his intellectual commitments is tested because he must choose between lying and saving the life of his lover, Josette, Henri lies. However, Henri remains unconvinced that he has made the right choice. He wonders whether losing *L'Espoir* is the price that he has to pay for "trying to hold on to a private life when political action requires a man's whole being" (Beauvoir 1999b, 512). Even though Robert refuses to tell Henri what he would have done in his place, his refusal on account of the fact that he would have to be told "everything in detail" (518) in order to make a meaningful decision reinforces the existentialist idea that there are no moral or political absolutes. Since old French humanist values cannot even retain their worth in the face of changing political and historical situations, good intellectual decisions must be made by taking the particularity of a situation into account. Robert says, "You can't lead a proper life in a society

which isn't proper. Whichever way you turn, you're always caught" (518). Henri appears to recognize the importance of taking particularity into account when he decides to remain in a romantic relationship with Nadine. Thus, after the failure of their intellectual and political bonds, Robert and Henri finally end up in a familial bond, which is largely responsible for the promising air surrounding the male characters at the end of the novel. As a result, the conclusion to the novel is a disruption of Hegelian gender roles in regard to men. However, although the male characters find the personal sphere, the female characters do not move to the political or theoretical spheres. Thus, the women are unable to partake in the hopefulness that results from a reconciliation of the intellectual, political, and personal realms.

Political Trinities and the Movement of History

Just as Hegel's master-slave dialectic can be interpreted as a paradigmatic account of both personal relationships and of the relationships that move history, the critical trinities of *The Mandarins* offer an image of relationality that is at once personal and historical. Paralleling the way in which Anne, as third-party witness, provides the milieu within which Robert and Henri's friendship unfolds and the way in which the private sphere is the milieu that situates the tension between intellectual commitments and political practice, in *The Mandarins* French socialism serves as the milieu within which the political dialectic of American capitalism and Soviet communism unfolds. Thus, socialism, like woman and like the French nation, plays the role of a third party that stands outside of a dialectical struggle and gives contextualized meaning to the opposition between its two terms. Because of their unique external position, the socialists must assert themselves, not by choosing a side of the struggle to align themselves with, but rather by assuming an attitude toward the entire struggle itself.

Although the political struggles that history is based upon often appear to be dialectical in nature, upon a closer inspection they often depend on the exclusion of an invisible third term. Robert gives symbolic voice to history's tendency to exclude the people who are subsumed by these seemingly dialectical relations when he laments the fact that French socialism never even had an opportunity to contend with communism or capitalism: "The game was between Russia and the United States from the start. We were completely out of it . . . we were trapped" (Beauvoir 1999b, 514). Robert's words are reminders that political struggles are not merely based upon positive assertions and binary oppositions; they also exist through the erasure of certain social groups and certain political ideas. To conceptualize the movement of history as involving three distinct terms is to pose the question of who has been excluded and why. The asking of this question is a way to give voice to the silenced third party that

serves as the ground upon which historical struggles are fought. In this light, *The Mandarins* can be read on all of its levels as a description of the field upon which dialectical struggles take place. In the novel, this field has many faces: France, socialism, personal relationships, woman, the Jew. Likewise, in contemporary politics, the question of the invisible third party is just as pertinent as it was when *The Mandarins* was first published fifty years ago. For example, the Third World provides a physical and symbolic milieu for developed nations to play out their struggles by serving as a space where factories, war, and environmental pollution are deposited. In addition, the US "War on Terror" is currently being fought between rich American men and rich Middle Eastern men upon fields of civilians (many of whom are women, people of color, and impoverished) who neither understand their justifications nor support them. Because the particularity of the existences of these civilians finds no expression within contemporary political discourse and media representations, their experience is one of erasure. Similarly, Anne feels the erasure of herself and of France most vividly when she observes a discussion that her American friends have about World War II: "It was their war they were talking about, a war in which we had been only the somewhat pitiful excuse. Their scruples concerning us were like those a man could feel toward a weak woman or a passive animal" (552). Anne's likening of the French people to a woman or an animal emphasizes the idea that theoretical articulations of what it means to be human often render the subjectivities and desires of particular people invisible.¹³ The binary oppositions of man and woman, the United States and Soviet Union, and theory and political practice are all abstract articulations that obscure the true ontological structure of human to human relationships. In pointing this out, *The Mandarins* embodies Beauvoir's repeated claims that particular lives in all of their ambiguity exceed theoretical and political representations. In *The Prime of Life* she writes, "I had always maintained that words could not fully express the physical essence of reality" (1962b, 313). The power to oppress is gained through the production of a distorting representation that is widely distributed along with an enforced forgetting of the discrepancy between words and life. In *The Second Sex* Beauvoir claims, "Representation of the world, like the world itself, is the work of men; they describe it from their own point of view, which they confuse with absolute truth" (1989, 143). To attend to the particularity of individual lives in one's experiences and in one's writing is to remember the fields upon which dialectical struggles are fought as well as the discrepancies between abstractions and particular lives.

When the particularity of the third party's situation is considered, one is able to see that history does not progress only as a result of dialectical oppositions. In *The Ethics of Ambiguity* Beauvoir criticizes Hegel for conflating the modes of free expression available to the slave's will with those available to the master's will. Beauvoir describes the difference between the two as follows: "In

these two cases the given is present in its surpassing; but in one case it is present insofar as it is accepted, in the other insofar as rejected, *and that makes a radical difference*" (1997, 84; emphasis added). She adds that Hegel's mistaken assumption that the master and slave both seek to affirm themselves "is what allows one to regard the future of the world as a continuous and harmonious development" (84). Beauvoir thinks that Hegel's formulation of the master-slave dialectic only describes positive movements that are necessarily acceptances of a given system. However, because the slave has "no other issue than a negative one," his or her very situation must be eliminated before he or she can choose positively (85). In other words, because the slave's desire is not affirmative, the slave is trying to free himself or herself from the system itself; she or he is not struggling for recognition within that system. In this respect, the third party is like the slave, because, as a witness who is outside of the dialectic, the third party is able to come to its own subjectivity, not through participation in a binary opposition, but by confronting the decision of whether to be complicit with or to revolt against the dialectical system itself. Anne's analysis of the final fight between Nadine and Lambert makes manifest the idea that those who are socially positioned differently must come to their own subjectivity differently: "[A] male, to win the dignity of adulthood, must know how to kill, must make others suffer, must suffer himself. Girls are weighed down with restrictions, boys with demands—two equally harmful disciplines" (1999b, 378). Even though the weight of demands and restrictions are equally as harmful, they nonetheless have a different character, because while Lambert is told how to participate in a given system, Nadine, like woman in Hegel's dialectic, is not allowed access to that system at all. Confined to her role as observer, Nadine cannot oppose anything. On the other hand, because Lambert is a recognized term in the political system from the start, insofar as he acts and desires he is demonstrating an acceptance of that system. In a sense, all of the characters in *The Mandarins* as well as the reader, as survivors of war and the Occupation, are third-party witnesses to the atrocities of World War II. During the Occupation, the French people literally served as the milieu upon which the war was fought. Because of the survivor's position as witness, she or he must decide whether or not to be complicit with the human constructions, both abstract and concrete, that permitted the horrors of World War II. One's decision to revolt against those human theories and actions will not enter one into a dialectical struggle for recognition, because one's position as witness makes the myopia necessary for such a relation impossible. From the perspective of an occupied witness, Hegelian optimism is nearly unthinkable. As Beauvoir writes, "Revolt is not integrated into the harmonious development of the world; it does not wish to be integrated but rather to explode at the heart of the world and to break its continuity" (1997, 84).

Even though all of the characters in *The Mandarins* are surviving witnesses to the war, the lives of the female characters, as third-party witnesses on

the political, theoretical, and personal levels as well, are poignant expressions of the decision that characterizes their one opportunity for subjectivity: to be complicit or to revolt. The suicidal gestures that all of the female characters make are symbolic embodiments of the fact that woman, in particular, is faced with this decision.¹⁴ While the male characters act in ways that manifest acceptance for the existing social and political systems (e.g., Vincent and Sézenac kill; Robert, Henri, and Lambert either affirm or refute war and human suffering through their writing), the female characters Paule, Anne, and Nadine reject the system by focusing their acts of violence on themselves. These suicide attempts are recognitions of the futility of taking a stand within the binary structure that is characterizing present social and political systems. Woman has no stake in the outcome of the discursive and political structures that use her and affect her; like France, she has been out of it from the start and loses either way. In *The Second Sex*, Beauvoir claims that the relation between man and woman is different than the relation between master and slave, because “woman also aspires to and recognizes the values that are concretely attained by the male” (1989, 65). She then qualifies this statement when she writes, “He [man] it is who opens up the future to which she [woman] reaches out. In truth women have never set up female values in opposition to male values; it is man who, desirous of maintaining masculine prerogatives, has invented that divergence” (65). If society will never change in a way that will allow women their own desires and values, then the fact that all of the female suicides in the novel fail is somewhat tragic, because it is a denial of woman’s only opportunity for freedom. Beauvoir herself sees Anne’s decision to go on living as a submission “to their conventions and their lies” and a betrayal of “real life” (1987, 283).

At the end of *The Mandarins*, when Anne is on the brink of suicide, she describes her reason for coming to that point as follows: “It isn’t because of those men who are being murdered almost everywhere in the world, nor because of the war hanging over us: whether you’re killed or whether you die doesn’t make very much difference. And everyone dies, at the same age, at about forty” (1999b, 606). Anne considers suicide because she thinks that her existence does not count. On the surface it seems that Anne’s problem is a human one that will manifest itself regardless of whether one is a woman or not, for mortality is an aspect of each human life. However, due to the failure of social, political, and historical conceptualizations to realize woman’s experiences, she feels an existential crisis more deeply than man does. While life itself, as a movement toward death, does not recognize the existence of individual men, society affirms this existence with language and theories that correspond to a man’s sense of himself as subject. Hegel’s theory of dialectic, by excluding woman, is a perfect example of a widely held theory that recognizes male as subject and denies woman’s individual subjectivity. In regard to woman, theories, society, and life do not recognize her individual existence. Beauvoir’s theory, espoused in *The Second Sex*,

that woman lives life as both subject and object is made manifest in the female characters of her novels: “The drama of woman lies in this conflict between the aspirations of every subject (ego)—who always regards the self as the essential—and the compulsions of a situation in which she is the inessential” (1989, xxxv). Elaine Marks explains the divergences between the dramas of the male characters in Beauvoir’s novels and “the severe, nearly fatal bouts of anguish” (1973, 9) that the female characters experience when she writes that “all the male characters work constantly at a project which absorbs and distracts them” (9). More specifically, the characters of Anne, Paule, and Nadine consider and attempt suicide because they lack hope. Literally, Anne, Paule, and Nadine lack *L’Espoir* (“Hope”), the independent journal that Henri and Robert produce. None of the female characters in *The Mandarins* write, whereas all of the male characters in the novel are authors both literally and figuratively. The absence of a space where Anne, Paule, and Nadine’s experiences can find expression directs them toward suicide. Toward the beginning of the novel Anne insightfully notes that for Robert, “[r]enouncing writing would be suicide” (1999b, 56). Likewise, for the female characters of *The Mandarins*, their exclusion from the philosophical and political struggles that write history means their suicides. Because woman, like France, is merely occupied by the conceptual dialectical struggles that shape human life, she becomes Anne’s image of herself: “a woman waiting to die, no longer knowing why she’s living” (447).

The trinities in *The Mandarins* are evocations of the personal, political, and theoretical relationships that Beauvoir witnessed in postwar France; they are not idealized pictures of these relationships. These evocations bring to light the notion that social, theoretical, and political relationships are often theorized dialectically even though these very dialectics are fundamentally dependent upon the erasure of a third party. But these erasures are not inevitabilities. No one is a “spotless victim of historical necessity” (Beauvoir 1999b, 516). Third parties are oppressed and rendered invisible because of chosen actions. Likewise, humanity will only arrive at peace and solidarity through chosen actions. The political dialectic of Soviet communism and American capitalism subsumes French socialism, the philosophical dialectic of intellectual theory and political practice perpetuates itself at the expense of particular lives, and the dialectic of love subsumes woman. The way for one to counter these erasures is to write them. When the third party writes its own experiences, the terrors of humanity come to light, as does the need for their remedy. Beauvoir exemplifies this type of writing in *The Second Sex*, where she describes her task as follows: “[F]rom a woman’s point of view I shall describe the world in which women must live; and thus we shall be able to envisage the difficulties in their way as . . . they aspire to full membership in the human race” (1989, xxxv). And Beauvoir exemplifies this type of writing even more so in her literary works. A literary work, in particular, is an especially apt medium for writing the third

party, because it is capable of evoking individual lives in all their specificity and ambiguity. The critical trinitities of *The Mandarins* serve as reminders of the fact that there are no ideal couples, whether in terms of love relationships, political oppositions, or Hegel's dialectic: there are only particular lives. As such, they are reminders that for any solidarity or reciprocity to occur, one must assume responsibility for its construction.

In conclusion, through a juxtaposition of Beauvoir's philosophical descriptions of woman's experience in *The Second Sex* with her narrative attempts to re-create this very experience for her readers, a more coherent interpretation of her notions of personal and political relationships can be formulated than through a consideration of *The Second Sex* alone.¹⁵ The critical trinitities in *The Mandarins* give an account of the movements of personal and historical relationships that exceeds Hegel's dialectical account. By giving voice to the unmentionables that Hegel excludes from his dialectical relations, Beauvoir ends up describing a new theory of relationality that does not have opposition at its center. Instead, the triadic theory that emerges from *The Mandarins* makes a space for gifts, withdrawals, and solitude. This triadic theory also recognizes that individuals who are positioned differently socially and historically will have different avenues available to them to realize their subjectivities. Specifically, third parties who are positioned outside of various dialectics—for example, woman, intellectuals, socialists, the French people—realize themselves through the choice of whether to be complicit with or revolt against the systems that they are observing. Descriptively speaking, history progresses, not through oppositions, but through chosen erasures. The excluded third party serves as the field upon which the meanings of various oppositions congeal. When one is remembering this third party, one is also recognizing the inevitable interplay between the personal, the theoretical, and the political. This critical remembrance would disrupt the contemporary political arena, just as *The Mandarins* disrupts the notion that a war has been, or could ever be, won. Thus, the individuals of this contemporary world should foster the sorts of disruptions that give third parties voice as they live through and struggle against Scriassine's prophecy: "American imperialism, like Russian totalitarianism, requires unlimited expansion. In the end, one or the other has to win out. . . . You think you're celebrating the German defeat, but what you're actually witnessing is the beginning of World War Three" (Beauvoir 1999b, 41).¹⁶

Beauvoir claims that "a writer's business is not to transcribe thoughts and feelings which constantly pass through [her] mind so much as to point out those horizons which we never reach and scarcely perceive, but which nevertheless are there" (1962b, 732–3). The excluded, silenced third parties of life are these horizons. Writing the third party is a way to undertake the political work of changing the theories, politics, and people that are responsible for these erasures. Perhaps for this very reason Beauvoir was able to write *The Mandarins* in the

aftermath of World War II. She confesses, "[I]n the face of the H-bomb and the hunger of millions words seemed futile; and yet I worked at *The Mandarins* with a furious doggedness" (1987, 277). But one can never be sure of the results of one's actions before one undertakes them. And one can never be sure of the social and political situations that will be available to one in the future. At the end of *The Mandarins*, Anne intimates that on her granddaughter's "inscrutable little face I again see my death" (1999b, 607–8). The future of woman as it is actualized through the relation between her present and her past is especially uncertain and ambiguous because of the enduring stability of oppression and the discursive, practical, and personal structures that support it. This uncertainty is rendered concrete with the birth of the final trinity of the novel: that of woman's past (Anne), woman's present (Nadine), and woman's future (Maria). As uncertain as woman's future is, this ambiguity is what characterizes human existence and as such is inescapable. This ambiguity allows for the possibility of freedom through the formation of concrete relationships in which the notions of responsibility and failure become present. Thus, on personal, theoretical, and political levels, subjectivities and the moral actions that stem from them are fostered by that which exposes this ambiguity rather than denies it. Following this notion, the depressingly accurate conclusion to the novel points out the ever-present horizon that is often, yet unnecessarily, masked by the practice of philosophy and by the way it theorizes itself: "Who knows? Who knows?"

Notes

1. Comments and encouragement from several people helped me to create this piece, and to those people I give many thanks. I follow Beauvoir in using the word "evocation" to describe *The Mandarins* (1987, 274), because it emphasizes that Beauvoir's novels should not be interpreted as containing the definiteness of a philosophical theory. In *Force of Circumstance*, Beauvoir explains that *The Mandarins* is not "a novel with a message" (1987, 282) and that one of the essential purposes of literature is "to make manifest the equivocal, separate, contradictory truths that no one moment represents in their totality, either inside or outside myself . . ." (275).

2. I cite Beauvoir's original French text in addition to the English translation, because Parshley's translation omits a large section of text at this point. The omitted portion includes a lengthy quotation from the French translation of Hegel's *Phenomenology of Mind* that highlights Hegel's description of woman's inability to possess individuality and desire, and thus to participate in the struggle for recognition.

3. Because an analysis of the validity of Beauvoir's interpretation of Hegel is not directly relevant to my claim that *The Mandarins* can be read as an answer to her criticisms of his master-slave dialectic and theory of history, such an analysis will not be undertaken here. See Lundgren-Gothlin (1996) for a detailed discussion of Beauvoir's Kojévian interpretation of Hegel, with which I am in agreement.

4. As Elaine P. Miller rightly explains with reference to *The Second Sex*, “given the seemingly ineluctable triumph of Hegel’s dialectical method” (2000, 135), the task of “endeavoring to articulate a feminine subjectivity that cannot be reduced to oppositionality (if this is at all possible), namely, a sexual difference that is not articulated in terms of conflict and resolution” is imperative to the formation of a positive feminist stance (135).

5. This impossibility is exemplified when Beauvoir writes that when she tried to see Olga Kosakiewicz through Sartre’s eyes, she “felt she was playing [her] own emotions false” (1987, 306). In other words, adopting a third-party perspective took Beauvoir out of the framework for comprehension implied by her own subjectivity.

6. Beauvoir’s early claim that freedoms are neither unified nor opposed could be interpreted as discontinuous with the characterizations of woman in terms of oppositional struggles for recognition (1989, 65) and in reference to the Heideggerian notion of *Mitsein* (1949, 1:32) that she later presents in *The Second Sex*. Nonetheless, I find these claims consistent, because I believe many of Beauvoir’s characterizations of woman in *The Second Sex* refer only to the discursive way that woman has been defined and categorized and not to the ontology of woman, which is the subject of her earlier claim. For discussions of whether and how Beauvoir appropriates Hegel and Heidegger’s philosophies in *The Second Sex*, see Bauer (2001), Bergoffen (1997), Hutchings (2001), Lundgren-Gothlin (1996), and Miller (2000).

7. In *Force of Circumstance*, Beauvoir recounts her discovery that parts of *L’invitée* (*She Came to Stay*) recur “word for word” in *The Mandarins* (1987, 428–29).

8. For example, see Marks (1973, 77) and Barnes (1998).

9. Scriassine is also an “insider” to all three of the novel’s political poles. He fled Russia for Austria, and in turn fled Austria for France, eventually becoming a naturalized French citizen. He had also been living in America for the past four years (1999b, 38). His resulting ability to assume concurrently inside and outside perspectives gives his character a prophetic air.

10. Beauvoir’s choice of “L’Espoir” as the name for Henri’s journal provides her with a symbolic way of representing the problem of reconciling one’s theoretical, political, and personal commitments. In *The Prime of Life*, Beauvoir writes that in 1937 she and Sartre read André Malraux’s *L’Espoir* with great excitement, because Malraux “was tackling themes hitherto ignored in literature, such as the relationship between individual morality and practical politics, or the possibility of maintaining humanist standards in the thick of war” (1962b, 388). She continues, “Total war was utterly to abolish the whole pattern of humane relationships which so concerned Malraux, and by which we ourselves set such great store” (388–89).

11. Elizabeth Fallaize defines the *épuration* as “the ‘purge’ or meting out of justice to those who had collaborated with the Germans during the war” (1990, 88).

12. Sartre’s one-act play *No Exit* (1976) is in many ways a preview to his discussion of the third party in the *Critique*.

13. Butler’s discussion of the relationship between representations of humanity and the recognition of particular human lives has helped me to articulate here how this relationship plays out in Beauvoir’s phenomenology. See Butler (2004, 128–51).

14. Although Nadine does not make an explicit suicide attempt like Anne and Paule do, I consider her reckless motorcycle ride to be a youthful premonition of the

suicide attempts of the older female characters in the novel, because the ride is Nadine’s confrontation with her exclusion from the public, masculine world. Anne says, “[T]he motorcycle remained in her [Nadine’s] eyes the symbol of all the masculine pleasures of which she wasn’t the source and in which, to make matters worse, she was unable to share” (Beauvoir 1999b, 369).

15. Beauvoir makes this distinction between writing as description (philosophy) and writing as re-creation of an experience (literature) in “Littérature et métaphysique” (1946). See also Holveck (1999).

16. Robert explicitly refers to Scriassine as a prophet (Beauvoir 1999b, 45).

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CHAPTER 9

Simone de Beauvoir on Achieving Subjectivity

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In 1938, Albert Camus joined the staff of the left-wing newspaper *Alger Republicain*, and within a short time reviewed two works of fiction that crossed his desk, both of them authored by a certain Jean-Paul Sartre. While Camus found Sartre to have "remarkable fictional gifts" as well as "the toughest and most lucid mind," he warned of the dangers in constructing a philosophical novel: "[T]he philosophy need only spill over into the characters and action for it to stick out like a sore thumb, the plot to lose its authenticity, and the novel its life" (Camus 1968, 199). Camus spotted this tendency in Sartre's work. Simone de Beauvoir was determined to avoid it in her own fiction. Whereas Sartre insisted upon the "transparency" of writing in *What Is Literature?* (Sartre 1988), Beauvoir tells us that in her novels "I set great store by nuances and ambiguities. . . . Existence—others have said it and I have already repeated it more than once myself—cannot be reduced to ideas, it cannot be stated in words; it can only be evoked through the medium of the imaginary object; to achieve this, one must recapture the surge of backwash, and the contradictions of life itself" (Beauvoir 1965, 319). Beauvoir's favorite novel, *The Mandarins*, successfully withstands, I believe, any temptation to reduce character to idea, and manages to evoke richly a specific historical situation and characters struggling to make sense of their lives in that situation. Indeed, the relation of characters to their situation is tightly drawn without denying freedom. Her characters have "character," not in an essentialist sense, but as carrying the effects of their personal histories in a profound way. Her main characters are conflicted by multiple strains of past negotiations with others and happenings in their lives. For Beauvoir, these people are clearly shaped by life