

REPLACING THE OLD HEROES: BEAUVOIR'S DEFENCE OF THE EXISTENTIALIST PROTAGONIST

Beauvoir, Simone de. Anciens et nouveaux héros. In: LECARME-TABONE, Éliane; JEANNELLE, Jean-Louis (eds.). **Simone de Beauvoir, Cahiers de L'Herne.** Paris: Éditions de L'Herne, 2012, p. 134–139.

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ABSTRACT

In her article “Anciens et nouveaux héros”, included in L'Herne collection of texts by and on Simone de Beauvoir, Beauvoir elucidates the birth of the metaphysical novel and protagonists typical to it against the backdrop of the French psychological novel. Beauvoir's descriptions shed light on the post-war literary scene in France as well as on her own stylistic ideals. Protagonists of the metaphysical novel are, according to Beauvoir, defined by their attitudes towards basic metaphysical problems rather than by their temperament or social position.

KEYWORDS: Beauvoir; literature; protagonists; metaphysical novel

Simone de Beauvoir's article “Anciens et nouveaux héros” is one of those in which she analyses literature in terms of freedom and intersubjectivity. The article was first published in an American magazine *Town and Country* under the title “New Heroes for Old” (1947). In it as well as in a slightly earlier essay, “Literature and Metaphysics”

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(“Littérature et métaphysique”, 1946), Beauvoir defends the philosophical or “metaphysical” novel against the charges presented by critics. The charges were twofold: writers of the metaphysical novel were criticised for smuggling too much theory into novels, as well as for not creating psychologically complex characters but ones that exemplify particular metaphysical problems.

According to Beauvoir, the dissatisfaction of the critics is not based on a lack of high-quality novels but on the gap between the old and new styles of writing. She describes the development of different kinds of characters in relation to the changing social and historical context, illuminating simultaneously the diverse ways in which human freedom is expressed in texts from different eras. In Stendhal’s realist and romantic works she finds heroes who demonstrate a decided belief in their ability to choose their own path despite all obstacles. With the turn of the century and the advent of naturalism, however, writers turn their gazes from the individual to social groups. The individual appears as a small cog in a big machine. He will not set out to conquer the world but turns inward to study his own heart and his position under social restrictions.

Nevertheless, the approach of “psychological novels” remains problematic in Beauvoir’s eyes due to the writers’ lack of a general historical perspective and the erroneous belief that when they are describing the emotional turmoil of the young bourgeoisie they are studying mankind in its entirety. Yet the critics of her time expect writers still to engage in ahistoric ruminations over the inner life of the privileged. According to Beauvoir, however, post-war writers “have felt the hard pressure of history”¹ and acknowledge their ties to the rest of the world. For this reason they tend to put more emphasis on exterior conditions than on an individual awareness of these conditions.

Even so, claims Beauvoir, the only way to make a historical situation comprehensible is through an individual point of view: the reader has to be able to “identify” himself with another consciousness. Despite this, the emphasis is on the historical event itself, not on what an individual makes of it. For this reason the hero must be sufficiently anonymous, indeed “hardly more than a witness”. Rather than describing the individual’s thoughts and emotions, the writer concentrates on the individual’s actions and

¹ This and other quotations are taken from the original English text, republished in *“The Useless Mouths” and Other Literary Writings* (2011) within the second chapter, “Short Articles on Literature”, pp. 113–123.

on what he sees. After all, the emotions of the individual are insignificant when he relates the horrors of war, suggests Beauvoir.

Very often, however, the hero has to face his own responsibility and freedom and perform an act that he alone can choose. At this point Beauvoir makes a distinction between psychological motivation and ethical choice: the post-war writer is interested in the latter, and the breakdown of old rules and values makes it all the more pressing. The question of the right action leads to metaphysical considerations of one's identity, and the nature of suffering, choice and freedom. In Beauvoir's view this explains the strong presence of philosophy in French post-war literature. Philosophical novels, such as Jean-Paul Sartre's *The Roads to Freedom (Les chemins de la liberté, 1945)* – and no doubt also Beauvoir's own works – differ, according to her, from “novels of observation” but also from philosophical tales of the classic French tradition. The latter are written as allegories, whereas the metaphysical novel aspires to evoke living, complex, unpredictable characters and situations.

Here as well as in “Literature and Metaphysics” Beauvoir insists that metaphysical novels are not written to exemplify theories and cannot be called “thesis novels”. The authors' philosophical view of the world shows in the way they define characters: instead of social position or temperament the emphasis is on the attitude of the heroes towards life and death and the existence of others. To reveal these attitudes, it is not necessary to create characters who are aware of philosophical problems, for even “the most ignorant, the most thoughtless” have a sense of their existence and connection to others.

According to Beauvoir, the metaphysical novel also puts a great deal of weight on corporeality, for as the war has taught, human dramas are bodily dramas, ones of “hunger, fatigue, disease, and pain”. The purpose of describing the humble bodily functions is not to debase mankind, argues Beauvoir, but to give a truthful description of existence.

Finally, Beauvoir suggests that despite their differences contemporary French novelists are unified in their attempt to express the paradoxical condition of humans, namely that man is a thinking reed, as Pascal puts it: in spite of their utmost fragility it is characteristic for human beings to try to appropriate the world through their consciousnesses.

Yet the post-war circumstances are particularly demanding: “Never have the forces of the universe, united to crush mankind, seemed to us heavier; but never, just the same, has the fact of our power to hold the universe at a distance through conscience [consciousness] and moral liberty seemed more important.”² Here she is practically paraphrasing *The Ethics of Ambiguity* (*Pour une morale de l’ambiguïté*, 1947), in which she writes: “The more widespread their mastery of the world, the more they find themselves crushed by uncontrollable forces. Though they are masters of the atomic bomb, yet it is created only to destroy them. [...] Perhaps in no other age have they manifested their grandeur more brilliantly, and in no other age has this grandeur been so horribly flouted.” Interestingly though, in “New Heroes for Old”, the emphasis is different: while the beginning of *The Ethics of Ambiguity* underlines the fact that *despite* their freedom humans feel powerless in the face of external forces, in “New Heroes for Old” the consciousness and freedom of humans appear as powerful and important *despite* the crushing forces of the universe. The restless and experimental streak in the contemporary novel is finally, for Beauvoir, a sign of vitality and a manifestation of human freedom: “Only things that are dead and embalmed remain identical with themselves.”

All in all, “New Heroes for Old” complements in an interesting way the picture we have of Beauvoir’s views on literature on the basis of “Literature and Metaphysics”, some other short texts from the 1940’s, her presentations from the 1960’s, and her memoirs. While “Literature and Metaphysics” underlines the way in which the ambiguity of the lived world is evoked within the metaphysical novel, in “New Heroes for Old” Beauvoir discusses in a detailed and insightful manner the historical background of the protagonists in this type of novel. This text may also explain some peculiarities in Beauvoir’s own literary style. Her interest in narrating the events and situations rather than thoughts and feelings of characters may very well show in the way she ploughs through centuries of historical events in *All Men Are Mortal* (*Tous les hommes sont mortels*, 1946), and in the distant tone of her memoirs.

On the other hand, it is intriguing that already at this point she attributed such an important role to embodiment in literature. After all, bodily experience is central to her

² The editors of *The Beauvoir Series* have pointed out that Beauvoir has probably used the English word *conscience* under the misapprehension that it means also *consciousness* as the French word *conscience* does.

moving descriptions of Anne's love affair in *The Mandarins* (*Les Mandarins*, 1954) and of her mother's death in *A Very Easy Death* (*Une mort très douce*, 1964). Also, the idea that the reader has a relationship to another consciousness through literature, is present in this early article. Beauvoir elaborates this idea in her later presentations "What Can Literature Do?" ("Que peut la littérature?" 1965) and "My Experience as a Writer" ("Mon expérience d'écrivain", 1979).³ The former is also included in L'Herne collection and makes a good reading together with "New Heroes for Old". The comparison of these texts will elucidate how Beauvoir's adversaries changed from conservative critics to proponents of the *nouveau roman*. Yet Beauvoir's lucidity in her analyses of literature remains, which makes one regret she did not write even more texts in the genre of literary theory.

³ The latter presentation was given in Japan in 1966 but published only in 1979, in *Les écrits de Simone de Beauvoir*.