

## LITERATURE AS A MEANS OF COMMUNICATION: A BEAUVOIRIAN INTERPRETATION OF AN ANCIENT GREEK POEM

## LITERATURA COMO UM MEIO DE COMUNICAÇÃO: UMA INTERPRETAÇÃO BEAUVOIRIANA DE UM ANTIGO POEMA GREGO

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### ABSTRACT

The aim of this article is twofold. Firstly, it explicates Simone de Beauvoir's views on literature as a means of communication. Secondly, it draws from her theoretical framework to illuminate the discussion on mortality and death in a poem by an ancient Greek woman epigrammatist, Anyte. These two goals are combined by the fact that for Beauvoir one of the most important tasks of literature was to break down the solitude of human existence by sharing the most intimate and painful experiences, such as the death of our loved ones. I will argue that Beauvoir's insights help us understand literature and its most profound, communicative dimension. On the other hand, taking the Beauvoirian framework to a field unknown to it before will elucidate its potential as a tool for literary analysis. Finally, the dialogue the article establishes between two women authors, Beauvoir and Anyte, will provide us with a more detailed understanding of the meaning of death in human existence and in literary communication.

**KEYWORDS:** Beauvoir; Anyte; literature; communication; separation; death

### RESUMO

O objetivo desse artigo é duplo. Primeiramente, explica as visões de Simone de Beauvoir sobre a literatura como um meio de comunicação. Em segundo lugar, baseia-se em sua estrutura teórica para elucidar a discussão sobre mortalidade e morte em um poema de uma epigramatista da Grécia antiga, Anyte. Essas duas metas se combinam pelo fato de que, para Beauvoir, uma das tarefas mais importantes da literatura é abater a solidão da existência humana ao compartilhar as experiências mais íntimas e dolorosas, como a morte de nossos entes queridos. Argumentarei que os *insights* de Beauvoir nos ajudam a entender a literatura e sua dimensão mais profunda de comunicação. Por outro lado, levando a estrutura beauvoiriana para um

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campo desconhecido a ela até então, elucidarei seu potencial como uma ferramenta para a análise literária. Por fim, o diálogo que o artigo estabelece entre duas autoras, Beauvoir e Anyte, provê-nos com um entendimento mais detalhado do sentido da morte na existência humana e na comunicação literária.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Beauvoir; Anyte; literatura; comunicação; separação; morte

## Introduction<sup>1</sup>

No longer, as before, flapping your fine-feathered wings,  
will you awaken me from bed at daybreak –  
for as you slept, a marauder approaching secretly  
killed you, one claw easily piercing your throat.<sup>2</sup>

These four lines evoke a shared life in the past, a loss and an act of violence. The poem speaks to us, despite the fact that it was written approximately 2300 years ago, and despite the numerous cultural and linguistic questions that complicate its analysis. What is this phenomenon of communication through literature that is brought forward by the epigram, written by Anyte of Tegea, an ancient Greek woman poet? And what does the epigram communicate to us?

I will illuminate these questions by discussing Simone de Beauvoir's views on literature as a space of intersubjectivity and communication. Conversely, I hope to shed light on the less explicit corners of Beauvoir's thinking using Anyte's poem as an example and touchstone. For this reason, the analysis will not concentrate on the historical and linguistic ambiguities of the poem, but rather on the philosophical questions it helps us investigate.

<sup>1</sup> I wish to thank Tua Korhonen for her help in the writing process of this article. My interpretation of Anyte's poetry owes a debt to her expertise in Greek studies as well as to the work she did for our joint presentation in the conference arranged by the Arachne network at the University of Gothenburg, Sweden, 25<sup>th</sup> October 2012. I also want to thank Ulrika Björk for her comments on an earlier draft of this article.

<sup>2</sup> Οὐκέτι μ' ὡς τὸ πάρος πικιναῖς πτερύγεσσιν ἐρέσσων / ὄρσεις ἐξ εὐνῆς ὄρθριος ἐγρόμενος / ἧ γάρ σ' ὑπνώοντα σίνις λαθηδὸν ἐπελθὼν / ἔκτεινεν λαιμῷ ῥίμφα καθεὶς ὄνυχα. (*Anthologia Graeca* 7, 202.) The translation presented above is a modification of Diane Rayor's translation: "No longer, as before, plying with whirring wings, / will you awaken me from bed at daybreak – / for as you slept, a marauder approaching secretly / killed you, one claw easily piercing your throat." [RAYOR (ed.), 1991, p. 128.] Kathryn J. Gutzwiller's translates: "No longer as before will you rouse me from bed, / flapping your thick wings as you awake in the morning. / A marauder, coming stealthily upon you as you slept, swiftly / placed his claw on your throat and killed you." (GUTZWILLER, 1998, pp. 64–65.)

Beauvoir's discussion on literary communication revolves around the questions of solitude and sorrow, which makes it particularly helpful in the interpretation of Anyte's epigram. What is more, the themes of loss and mortality are central to both authors. Another motive for my attempt to bring Anyte and Beauvoir together is establishing a continuum of female voices across the centuries and millennia. Similar continuums of male voices – analysing Plato through Heidegger or Aristotle through Brentano, for instance – appear as a norm in the field of philosophy, partly owing to the fact that virtually no texts by ancient women philosophers have survived to our days.<sup>3</sup> While this “natural” bias need not prevent us from appreciating ancient Greek philosophy, I wish to outline a different kind of continuum, one that criss-crosses between the fields of literature and philosophy and has two textual anchors: Beauvoir's lectures on the question of literature and the above-cited poem by Anyte.

In their own time both Anyte and Beauvoir were relatively well-known authors. On the other hand, both were endowed with epithets pertaining to their position in the male-dominated cultural field: Beauvoir was, somewhat disparagingly, called *Notre-Dame-de-Sartre*, while Anyte was called much more appreciatively “the female Homer”.<sup>4</sup> Yet both deserve recognition as innovative writers in their own right. Beauvoir wrote a plethora of fictional, autobiographical and theoretical works, all imbued with her own interpretation of the philosophy of existence. As for Anyte, there is only a little information about her life, nor did her fame as a poet live on through the ages as Sappho's did. Nevertheless, more intact poems by Anyte have been preserved to us than by any other woman poet of Ancient Greece, Sappho included. A few of the poems attributed to Anyte are not very likely hers, yet about twenty of them are considered authentic. In addition, Anyte is regarded as the inventor of two subgenres of epigrams, the pastoral epigram and the animal epigram.

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<sup>3</sup> Nevertheless, during the past few decades many women philosophers have entered into dialogue with Plato's character Diotima of Mantinea, who appears in *The Symposium* (e.g., IRIGARAY, 1994, NYE, 1994, and TUOMINEN, unpublished manuscript). These scholars fully acknowledge the problematic of Diotima's status: even if she were a historical figure, to us she can only speak through Plato's Socrates (see, e.g., IRIGARAY, 1994, p. 81, LEHTINEN, 2010, p. 195, 227).

<sup>4</sup> This does not mean that we have a multitude of references to Anyte as the female Homer. In fact, there is only one reference by a later epigrammatist, Antipater of Thessalonica, who not only called her “the female Homer” but also one of “the nine muses” or “craftswomen of eternal pages” (*Anthologia Graeca*, Loeb ed. III, AP 9, 26). Gutzwiller suggests that Anyte may have been the first epigrammatist to “project a distinct literary persona”, accomplishing this by “setting herself, as a woman and an inhabitant of largely rural Arcadia, in opposition to the anonymous composer of traditional epigram” (GUTZWILLER, 1998, p. 55).

Despite the broad timeframe of the article my focus is simple: communication over time by means of literature. I will start by discussing Beauvoir's views on this communication, while the end of the article is dedicated to analysing Anyte's poem and to exploring the question how literary descriptions of loss can reduce the solitude of a grieving subject. In this connection I will also draw from Beauvoir's description of her mother's death, published under the title of *A Very Easy Death* (*Une mort très douce*, 1964). It will turn out that even though Anyte's poem appears to be about a bird, it is in many ways comparable to Beauvoir's memoir of her mother's death: both speak about mortality and the harsh corporeal reality and abruptness of death.

## Someone is Speaking to Me

Beauvoir dealt with the question of literary expression and communication in three important lectures. This question was developed in parallel ways in all the lectures, with the difference that the idea of communication became even more central in the two later lectures.

The first of these lectures was "Roman et métaphysique", which was later revised and published under the title "Literature and Metaphysics" ("Littérature et métaphysique", 1946).<sup>5</sup> The second, "What Can Literature Do?" was part of the exchange between the proponents of the engaged novel – including Beauvoir – and those of the *nouveau roman*. The round-table was organised by a Communist youth journal *Clarté* in 1964. (HENGEHOLD, 2011, p. 192.) The third lecture, "My Experience as a Writer" ("Mon expérience d'écrivain", 1979), was given in Japan in 1966.

The argument Beauvoir puts forward in "What Can Literature Do?" is, as I interpret it, the following: Communication exists in everyday life, but there is a separation at the heart this communication. The separation is based on the fact that everybody has their singular situation. Everybody has their own personal history, cultural background, their "world", even if the other's world intersects mine and is connected to it. In other words, everybody has their own perspective, and everybody is a consciousness separate from the others, for themselves the only subject that

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<sup>5</sup> Margaret A. Simons points out that there is some confusion about the exact place and date of this lecture (2004, p. 267n1), but it seems to have been given in Paris.

says “I”.<sup>6</sup> As Beauvoir puts it: “[e]ach person’s life has a unique flavour that, in a sense, no one else can know”.<sup>7</sup> Beauvoir also subscribes to the Heideggerian idea of individuation through an authentic relationship to one’s own death: “I will die a death that is absolutely unique for myself”.<sup>8</sup> Nevertheless, this separation inherent to subjectivity is partly overcome by the fact that it is common to everybody. The role of literature is to facilitate communication within separation, or, in other words, grant us access to the other’s world, to the first-person perspective of the other. (BEAUVOIR, 1965, pp. 76–81; 2011b, pp. 199–200.)

At the same time, the communicative reading experience implies that “someone is speaking to me” (*quelqu’un me parle*), namely the author, who through his individual style imposes his presence and his world upon me (BEAUVOIR, 1965, p. 79; 2011b, p. 200). Rejecting the theories of the *nouveau roman*, Beauvoir insists that identification is paramount: “[I]n order for the reading to be gripping, I must identify with someone: the author. I must enter into his world and his world must become mine” (BEAUVOIR, 2011b, p. 201).<sup>9</sup>

Beauvoir’s use of the term “identify” in the context of entering “the other’s world” is not quite unproblematic, however. In “My Experiences as a Writer” she extends its use: when one enters another world one identifies either with the protagonist or with the author (1979, pp. 455–457; 2011c, pp. 295–297). Even so we can doubt if identification is the same thing as entering the world of the other, for after all identification seems to imply similarity: I find something in common between my own experiences and the character’s, I feel as if I was similar to that character. In this sense, one could identify with one character and not so much with another.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> According to Beauvoir, this separation of consciousnesses is something that has already been investigated by Descartes, who universalises a singular truth when he posits the *cogito* as the foundation of all knowledge (BEAUVOIR, 1979, p. 456; 2011c, p. 296).

<sup>7</sup> Il y a un goût unique de la vie de chacun, qu’en un sens personne d’autre peut connaître. (BEAUVOIR, 1965, p. 79.)

<sup>8</sup> Je mourrai d’une mort qui est absolument unique pour moi [...] (BEAUVOIR, 1965, p. 78.) Heinämaa argues that Beauvoir accepted Heidegger’s the idea of one’s own death as the basis of meaning constitution but rejected his view that responsibility of one’s own life comes only by facing the possibility of one’s own end; instead, Beauvoir agrees with Emmanuel Levinas in that a properly human life requires reaching beyond one’s own time, towards future generations (HEINÄMAA, 2010a, 84). Beauvoir’s explicit critique of Heidegger can be found in “Pyrrhus and Cineas” (“Pyrrhus et Cinéas”, 2003, pp. 253–258; 2004b, pp. 113–115).

<sup>9</sup> [P]our que la lecture prenne, il faut que je m’identifie avec quelqu’un : avec l’auteur; il faut que j’entre dans son monde et que ce soit son monde qui devienne le mien. (BEAUVOIR, 1965, p. 82.)

<sup>10</sup> On identification, see OATLEY, 1999, KEEN, 2007, pp. 93–96, 169 and KEEN, [hup.sub.uni-hamburg.de/lhn/index.php?title=Narrative Empathy&oldid=1726](http://hup.sub.uni-hamburg.de/lhn/index.php?title=Narrative+Empathy&oldid=1726)

Nevertheless, mere recognition of the familiar does not describe the relationship to “other worlds” exhaustively. A literary work can, for instance, show us the events through the eyes of a cold-blooded killer, whom we find repulsive and difficult to identify with, even if we are forced as it were into his situation by narrative techniques.

Of course, “entering the other’s world” is a multi-layered phenomenon.<sup>11</sup> I think Beauvoir is right in claiming that one reference point is the author: a literary work refers beyond itself to its original source, another subjectivity, who through his or her singular literary style allows the reader to undergo imaginary experiences that are “as complete and disturbing as lived experiences”, as Beauvoir points out in “Literature and Metaphysics” (1948, p. 105; 2004c, p. 270). According to Beauvoir, the average reader does not “see” the protagonist’s world but is aware that it is the author who presents his or her own world (1965, p. 81; 2011b, p. 201). It could be argued, however – and Beauvoir appears to waver on this question in “My Experiences as a Writer” –, that a literary work offers more than one perspective for the reader to relate to: not only that of the author but also that of the narrator, all the characters, and, some would say, the implied author.<sup>12</sup> Nevertheless, if we stick with Beauvoir’s idea that reading literature implies being spoken to, this speech would seem to refer outside the text, towards the author.

This does not mean that the author dictates his views to us. In Beauvoir’s view, all literary works are essentially a search, which – in opposition to scientific writing – operates on the level of non-knowledge and communicates the meaning of lived experience to the readers (BEAUVOIR, 1965, p. 85; 2011b, p. 202; 1979, p. 441, 455; 2011c, p. 284, 295). A novel has to reconstitute this experience “as it appears prior to any elucidation”, with all its ambiguities and contradictions, which means that within it different attitudes to life can be brought together and contrasted with one another. The meaning of an artwork cannot be fixed: a novel does not say “act” or “don’t act” – it describes a dimension that is “beyond words”. The fact that a literary text does not make arguments is for Beauvoir a question of human freedom: the freedom of the reader

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<sup>11</sup> Perhaps this phenomenon could be better described with the term “literary empathy”, but there is controversy over the definition of this concept (see KEEN, 2007).

<sup>12</sup> Theorists such as Gérard Genette have pointed out that the author implied by the text, that is, the *implied author*, may differ a great deal from the actual author. For instance, the actual author may be more conservative than what the text would lead us to think. Others argue that the concept of the implied author is unnecessary. (On this debate see Schmid, [hup.sub.uni-hamburg.de/lhn/index.php?title=Implied\\_Author&oldid=1991](http://hup.sub.uni-hamburg.de/lhn/index.php?title=Implied_Author&oldid=1991).) It is more apparent, however, that the *narrator* is not the same thing as the author: the narrator is a tool the writer uses to tell the story and can differ in all sorts of ways from the author. The fact that it is still possible to confuse these two is taken advantage of and played with by authors such as Bret Easton Ellis (in *Lunar Park*).

is guaranteed by preserving the ambiguity of lived experience in the text. (BEAUVOIR, 1979, pp. 441–447; 2011c, pp. 284–289; 1948, p. 105; 2004c, p. 270). In point of fact, the reader reacts as if he was faced with lived events:

He is moved, he approves, he becomes indignant, responding with a movement of his entire being before formulating judgments that he draws from himself and that are not presumptuously dictated to him. [...] The reader ponders, doubts and takes sides; and this hesitant development of his thought enriches him in a way that no teaching of doctrine could.<sup>13</sup> (BEAUVOIR, 2004c, p. 270.)

In “My Experience as a Writer” Beauvoir describes this same phenomenon: the reader goes back and forth between the literary world – the world of the protagonist or that of the author – and his own world, without ever leaving the latter completely. When “in the other world”, the reader forgets himself and abdicates his “I” in favour of the one who is speaking, claims Beauvoir. (1979, pp. 455–457; 2011c, pp. 295–297; 1965, p. 82; 2011b, p. 201.)<sup>14</sup>

Beauvoir also insists that in order to be able to write a book, the novelist must leave the purely anecdotal or psychological level and reach a universal one. In this context, she is following Sartre’s presentation of the singular universal,<sup>15</sup> a concept that can refer both to human existence itself and to the literary work. For Sartre, this concept refers to the two-sidedness of the relationship between the universal features of an age and the singular features of an individual: an individual reflects the universal aspects of his time and the universal aspects can only be realised through singular individuals. According to Sartre, the singularity of each human being is

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<sup>13</sup> Il est ému, il approuve, il s’indigne, par un mouvement de tout son être avant de formuler des jugements qu’il tire de lui-même sans qu’on ait la présomption de les lui dicter. [...] Le lecteur s’interroge, il doute, il prend parti et cette élaboration hésitante de sa pensée lui est un enrichissement qu’aucun enseignement doctrinal ne pourrait remplacer. (BEAUVOIR, 1948, pp. 106–107.)

<sup>14</sup> While Beauvoir does not analyse this “hesitant development” or back-and-forth movement in more detail, it is possible for us to elucidate it with the help of Husserlian concepts: the reader has a pre-reflective, non-thematic awareness of his own world as the primordial one, while the literary world is the theme of his consciousness. There are, however, moments when the reader is less immersed in the text and moves to a reflective stage in which he may compare his own experiences with those of the character’s, for instance. If he continues reading, he will most likely become immersed again, until there is another moment of reflection. And so on. (For Husserl’s discussion of pre-reflective awareness in the context of time consciousness see, e.g., HUSSERL, 1968, pp. 390–430.)

<sup>15</sup> In the beginning of her Japanese lecture “My Experience as a Writer”, Beauvoir sets as her goal to illustrate through her own work the idea of the singular universal, which Sartre had discussed in the lecture he had given before her. Both Beauvoir and Sartre gave three lectures during their trip to Japan. In Sartre’s case, all of them were published under the title “A Plea for Intellectuals” (“Plaidoyer pour les intellectuels”, 1972a). The last part of this article, “Is the Writer an Intellectual?” (“L’écrivain est-il un intellectuel?”) is the “counterpart” of Beauvoir’s “My Experiences as a Writer”.

irreducible to history, and yet history conditions each human being “rigorously”.<sup>16</sup> (SARTRE, 1972b, p. 190; 1974b, p. 168; CRITTENDEN, 1998, p. 31.) A book is a singular universal:

the literary work must testify to the paradox of man in the world, not by providing information about men in general (which would make the author no more than an amateur psychologist or sociologist) but by simultaneously objectifying and subjectifying being-in-the-world – being-in-*this*-world – as a constitutive and unsayable relationship between everyone and everything, and between each man and all others.<sup>17</sup> (SARTRE, 1974c, pp. 277–278.)

Hence, the universalising process of writing still maintains the aspect of singularity, and this is what makes a literary work special in comparison to a scientific text (BEAUVOIR, 1979, p. 441; 2011c, p. 284; SARTRE, 1972a, pp. 434–435; 1974c, p. 270). In other words, both singularity and universality have their place in a literary work. For instance, when Beauvoir describes her mother’s death, she is dealing with a singular event which nonetheless also has a universal aspect: when the readers read her book, they recognise their own experiences of losing their loved ones, even if the details are not the same (BEAUVOIR, 1979, p. 456; 2011c, pp. 296–297).

For both Beauvoir and Sartre the task of literature is to communicate the lived meaning of existence. It is as if a literary work gave us access to other consciousnesses and their contents, to the other’s experience from the inside while in everyday life we are confined to empathising with the other’s gestures and the words he may choose to utter. Yet Beauvoir’s view of intersubjectivity in literature does not seem to involve a straightforward idea of *recreating* one’s consciousness in the reader: the writer can never *control* the meanings that the literary work brings about in the reader.<sup>18</sup> Beauvoir does say that consciousnesses can *communicate* with each

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<sup>16</sup> In his lecture on Søren Kierkegaard, Sartre attributes the idea of the singular universal to Kierkegaard. For Kierkegaard the paradox revolved around the historicity of Jesus. (SARTRE, 1972b; 1974b.) On Beauvoir’s views on singularity and universality, see also BJÖRK 2008, p. 135.

<sup>17</sup> [L]’objet littéraire doit témoigner de ce paradoxe qu’est l’homme dans le monde, non pas en donnant des connaissances sur *les* hommes (ce qui ferait de son auteur un psychologue amateur, un sociologue amateur, etc.) mais en objectivant et en subjectivant simultanément l’être dans-le-monde, dans-*ce*-monde, comme relation constitutive et indicible de tous à tout et à tous. (SARTRE, 1972a, p. 445.)

<sup>18</sup> Beauvoir refers repeatedly to the idea of literature as the privileged place of intersubjectivity, attributing this idea to Marcel Proust (BEAUVOIR, 2011b, p. 201; 1979, p. 456; 2011c, p. 296). I doubt, however, if she agreed with all the aspects of the Proustian position on literary communication. It has been suggested that in Proust’s view – or to be precise, in Proust’s narrator’s view – the writer has to recreate their own consciousness by means of the text so that it can be re-lived by the reader (EPSTEIN, 2004, p. 225–227). From this perspective literary creation involves grasping the essential in the experience, namely the network of sensations and underpinned meanings pertaining to a certain



other through literature, however (1979, p. 456; 2011c, p. 296). Of course, it is possible to claim that consciousnesses communicate with each other all the time, through everyday encounters, speech and gestures, and that in the strict sense there is, in fact, no communication except communication between consciousnesses, that is, between the body-consciousnesses that we are. But this is not what Beauvoir means. The remarkable feature of literature is that it offers the position of another “I”, otherwise beyond our reach, for us to experience. Or to put it in yet another way, it is the separateness of subjective existence that is overcome.

Beauvoir argues also that a painful experience makes one particularly isolated (BEAUVOIR, 1979, p. 456; 2011c, p. 296–297). According to her, authors write about suffering to break down the isolation caused by their own suffering. And when readers read about experiences similar to their own, the particular solitude caused by suffering is broken down. Beauvoir concludes that literature helps us communicate in “what is the most solitary in us and by which we are tied in the most intimate manner to the others”. (1979, pp. 456–457; 2011c, pp. 296–297). Elsewhere she writes:

If literature seeks to surpass separation at the point where it seems most unsurpassable, it must speak of anguish, solitude, and death, because those are precisely the situations that enclose us most radically in our singularity. We need to know and to feel that these experiences are also those of all other men.<sup>19</sup> (2011b, p. 205.)

In other words, it is no coincidence that authors speak about painful experiences that seem to avoid conceptualisation: it is their task to bring about communication in the areas that are the most difficult to access otherwise. Beauvoir argues that this communication happens not only between the authors and their readers, but also between the readers themselves who – all in their

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situation. When we experience a particular moment in reality, we are aware of all these things, but only in the fringe of our consciousness: the focus of our attention is elsewhere. Nevertheless, we can accidentally recover the underpinnings of that moment or – in more phenomenological language – its lived meaning, when something like a taste or a smell triggers a memory in us. The task of the author is to explore these meanings and provide the reader with a similar network of associations as the author has. This is done with the help of numerous departures from the main story line to incidents that do not as such have much to do with the story but serve to create associations. (EPSTEIN, 2004.)

<sup>19</sup> Si la littérature cherche à dépasser la séparation au point où elle semble le plus indépassable, elle doit parler de l'angoisse, de la solitude, de la mort, parce que ce sont justement des situations qui nous enferment le plus radicalement dans notre singularité. Nous avons besoin de savoir et d'éprouver que ces expériences sont aussi celles de tous les autres hommes. (BEAUVOIR, 1965, p. 91.)

own ways – are touched by the same literary descriptions (see BEAUVOIR, 1979, pp. 455–456; 2011c, p. 496).

It could be argued, of course, that sharing the most painful experiences is not limited to writing and reading or to artistic exchange in general but also happens through other forms of art and in confidential conversations. Yet there are many hindrances built within everyday communication, which make it particularly difficult to dwell on what is painful: protecting oneself and the other from awkward moments, keeping up a façade, avoiding shame and embarrassment, and the demands of reciprocity. When we read a novel or a poem, however, there are no such demands or threats, and, paradoxically, the loneliness of the experience contributes to the breaking down of solitude. We can read at the pace we wish, dwell on the words we find touching, compare silently our own experiences with the ones described in the text, break into tears without anybody trying to console us and thereby taking us away from that sorrow that we may need to feel again in order to be able to feel at all.<sup>20</sup>

I have now outlined the role that Beauvoir gives to literature in the alleviation of solitude. The solitude she discusses is inherent in subjectivity, but the experiences of loss and sorrow can even increase it. Literature preserves the ambiguity of lived experience and allows us to relate to fictional descriptions as if they were real-life events. Through the act of reading we find out that others have similar experiences as we do and that they go through as painful experiences as we have done.

Sometimes this experience of connection reaches beyond centuries and millennia: a poem by an ancient author has survived to our days and addresses us as if it had been written yesterday. This is where we will turn next: to a concrete example of literature that speaks to us, Anyte's age-old epigram. While Anyte's poetry is interesting for its own sake, it will also help us develop further the theme of literary communication. I will start the next chapter by giving some background information on Anyte's poetry and continue from there to a more detailed investigation of communicating loss by means of literature.

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<sup>20</sup> Keith Oatley writes about the power of literature in a similar vein: “Occasionally, when story structure, discourse structure, and associative structure occur in special configurations, meetings of literature can occur at the right aesthetic distance, so that we experience important emotions (our own, not those of the characters). On such occasions, as well as experiencing intimate and specific emotions we can think about them, perhaps even understand them for the first time.” (1999, p. 452.)

## Communicating Loss and Facing Death: Anyte's "Bird Epigram"

The poems that have survived to our days from Anyte's œuvre were presumably written in the beginning of the Hellenistic era, around 300 BCE. All of them are epigrams, hence belonging to the genre which started as dedications inscribed in votive offerings, and, most notably, as epitaphs, that is, as short texts inscribed in tombstones. By Anyte's time epigrams had become partly detached from their connection to tombstones, and, through her work, epigram became even more freed from its utilitarian function (GUTZWILLER, 1998, p. 74). This detachment is particularly evident in Anyte's pastoral epigrams, which are completely devoid of connotations with death. Nevertheless, five out of her seven animal epigrams deal with death and loss, as do her epigrams honouring departed daughters and warriors.

While balancing between the sublime and the ordinary is typical for epigrams, in Anyte's work this balancing act is executed in a particularly subtle way. It has also been claimed that the balancing takes place between the masculine heroic and feminine domestic writing traditions of her time (GREEN, 2005, pp. 139–140). In a transgressive manner, Anyte combines high-style, Homeric language with "humble" and untypical topics like animals,<sup>21</sup> lower-class people, young girls and women (GUTZWILLER, 1998, p. 55, 69). Interpreters have also seen her stylistic quotes from heroic tales to describe the death of animals as an ironic appropriation of the patriarchal literary tradition (GREEN, 2005, p. 148). But if this were the case in all its simplicity, then her animal epigrams would be nothing but parodies of the more noble epigrams dealing with humans. Yet they appear to be written in total sincerity. What is more, they show us Anyte at the height of her creative powers, while the epigrams dealing with human death seem more conventional.<sup>22</sup> It is as if animals as a topic liberated her from eulogising the deceased, allowing her to depict the actual bond with the deceased and the event of death in its stark reality.

The chosen poem starts with a nostalgic description of the good old days during which the narrator and the lost animal were together. In the third line the "marauder" or ravager (*sinis*) is introduced, and the fourth line, which is also the last line, reveals the cruel end of the narrator's

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<sup>21</sup> Anyte's animal epigrams deal with a dog (1), goat (2), cicada and cricket (1), horse (1), dolphin (1), and, presumably, a bird (1).

<sup>22</sup> On the other hand, Green points out that Anyte's epigrams on young girls combine the lamentations typical to women's poetry to the heroic tones of men's poetry, thereby also transgressing the limits between the masculine and the feminine traditions. (GREEN, 2005, p. 145.)

winged friend.<sup>23</sup> As such the poem is a good example of the non-declarative way in which good literature makes things present, as Beauvoir argues. Even though Beauvoir does not discuss the case of poetry, it seems clear that the aspect of ambiguity is often even more pronounced in poems than in prose.

Within Anyte's poetry, which often leaves a lot of space for different kinds of interpretations, this particular poem is even more enigmatic than most others: its characters are defined only vaguely while the relationship between them comes to the fore. Interpreters have not even been able to agree on which animal this creature with flapping wings (or "rowing with wings", *pterugessin eressein*) is. Diane Rayor suggests that the animal is a cricket or cicada, which were common pets in Greece, and that the "marauder" could be "an animal or perhaps a child" (1991, p. 190). Nevertheless, there are reasons to doubt this kind of interpretation of the winged animal. For instance, it would seem slightly awkward to talk about an insect's throat (*laimos*). Kathryn J. Gutzwiller suggests that the killed animal is a cock and the killer could be, for instance, a fox, a weasel or even a human being (1998, p. 65).<sup>24</sup> As "flapping wings" is a typical epithet associated with birds, the winged friend could indeed be a bird, even if the precise species is left unclear.<sup>25</sup> On the other hand, it is not out of the question that the winged friend is not even an animal but something more abstract: love, which was personified as the winged Eros.<sup>26</sup> In addition, it should be taken into consideration that translating *pykinos* as "fine-

<sup>23</sup> In point of fact, many of Anyte's animal epigrams have a very similar structure. About a dog, presumably a particular type of Locrian hound, she writes: "You, too, once perished by a thickly-rooted bush, / Locris, swiftest of puppies who love to bark. / Such pitiless poison was thrust into your nimble limb / By a viper with iridescent neck." (GUTZWILLER, 2005, p. 63, translation GUTZWILLER.) ὄλεο δὴ ποτε καὶ σὺ πολύρριζον παρὰ θάμνον, / Λόκρι, φιλοφθόγγων ὠκυτάτη σκυλάκων / τοῖον ἐλαφρίζοντι τεῶ ἐγκάθετο κόλωφ / ἰὸν ἀμείλικτον ποικιλόδειρος ἔχισ. (POLLUX: *Onomasticon* 5, 48.) In this epigram things unfold in the same order, with the difference that the act of killing comes before unmasking the killer.

<sup>24</sup> About the discussion on the species of the killed animal, see also GUTZWILLER, 1998, p. 65n48.

<sup>25</sup> Louise Calder has argued that, judging by the Greek images, the Greek may have allowed many birds indoors and kept them as pets (2011, p. 91). In view of this, the bird of the poem might have spent the night in the same quarters with speaker. A kind of predecessor for Anyte's description can be found in *The Odyssey*, in which Penelope tells about a dream in which she laments for the loss of her geese (*Od.* 19.603–612). (See CALDER, 2011, p. 92.) Even though the dream is interpreted in *Odyssey* as symbolic, the scene has resembles the one in Anyte's poem: Penelope has loved to watch the geese, but an eagle kills them.

<sup>26</sup> I am thankful to Tua Korhonen for pointing out this interpretation, which presupposes detaching oneself from the most literal reading: while Greek mythology shows Eros wounding others with his arrows, he is not wounded himself, unlike the winged creature in the poem. I will not follow this line of inquiry; yet I argue that choosing it would not change everything about the interpretation. Even if we were to abandon the idea that Anyte's poem is about death as such or more specifically about the death of a bird, it seems evident that it still tells us about loss, and

feathered” is already a choice for a bird-like character, for *pykinos* means “thick” or “dense”, even though Homer used it to describe the plumage of a seabird. For the sake of convenience and because I think interpreting the lost companion as a bird would be coherent in the context of Anyte’s poetry, I shall refer to it as a bird and ask the reader to keep, nonetheless, other options open.

These considerations go to show some of the textual ambiguities that pile up particularly when we are dealing with a poem as old as this. In the previous chapter we saw that Beauvoir insists on preserving ambiguity within a literary work. However, the ambiguity she discusses cannot be reduced to the ambiguity of characters. Her point is to say that human existence itself is ambiguous and that certain things can be approached – even if never exhaustively described – only through literary expression. In this sense, the exact nature of “you” and “the marauder” is less essential than what the poem appears to speak about: the merciless fact that a defenceless companion has faced a violent death.

Anyte does not write simply: “A fox killed our bird and now I am sad.” Instead she describes the moments during which the bond with the bird has been formed. Now that the winged friend is dead, the speaker of the poem experiences its death through absence: the morning comes without the activities of the bird, there is no perception of flapping wings as there has been until now. The difficulty of losing the other to death has to do with the incomprehensibility of absence, and Anyte allows us to see – or, perhaps better to say: *live* – the structure of that absence through this particular case. The reader may not be a bird-lover, but if he has lost anything important to him in his life, he will be able to recognise the structure of loss in Anyte’s poem. If he has lost a close human or animal to death, reading the poem may reactivate precisely that experience of loss.

The solitude of facing mortality does not lie only in the fact that “only I can die my own death”, as philosophers of existence put it, but also in the experience of grief: it is *my* world that is shattered and has to be restructured, not anybody else’s – the loss that others may suffer is never exactly the same as mine, they can never completely share my grief. The singularity of the experience of the other’s death is apparent in Anyte’s poem: the way the bird and the morning are

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the violence of this loss is made comprehensible by verbal images involving a physical threat. In the lived experience these phenomena become intertwined: losing love due to the beloved’s act of will or to death are both terrifying events which at least temporarily strip our lives of meaning.

intertwined is unique to the speaker's experience, it is part of a vast network of experiences, the meaning of which is put into question by death.

On the other hand, the death of the other, when it is a close other, with whose life our own is intertwined, makes us sensitive to the phenomenon of mortality as such, and to our own death as something inevitable.<sup>27</sup> Yet, literature gives us a special possibility to deal with the horrific reality of death.<sup>28</sup> While the second-person singular is a commonly used device in epigrams, in Anyte's bird poem it makes the death of the bird even more personal: we do not only participate in the experience of losing a beloved but also in the experience of facing death itself in all its harshness and abruptness. As readers, to whom the writer speaks, we are put in the position of the deceased one, and as living bodies we have an embodied understanding of the threat that is directed towards one's throat. In this way, the poem permits us to experience the horror of a violent death as something that awaits ourselves as well as the wretchedness of losing a companion.

This double exposure to death – witnessing and confronting – is, up to a point, recognisable from the lived experience, through our attempts to empathise with the last moments of the deceased.<sup>29</sup> It is terrifying to think of death as something real, as something that will actually happen to us or to those close to us. This is why it is so easy to stick to an abstract understanding of death's inevitability.<sup>30</sup> Sometimes, however, we witness the death of our beloved, and even if we do not, his or her death forces us to think about its reality and details we never wanted to imagine. This is when we empathise with the dying one, and are crushed by the brute facticity of the event: the suffering, the slow process of pining away or the suddenness of a

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<sup>27</sup> This point was taken up by Martin Heidegger, who argued that while the death of the other may make us aware of the finitude of life and prompt us to think about our own lives as finite, the other's death is still ontologically secondary to our own death: facing authentically one's own death as "a possibility of the impossible" means understanding it as a cessation of all one's projects and the end of one's world (HEIDEGGER, 1976, §52–§53, pp. 340–354; HEINÄMAA, 2010b, p. 99).

<sup>28</sup> As for Anyte, Green suggests that there is textual evidence for arguing that some of Anyte's animal epigrams do in fact join the tradition of epigrams in reflecting upon the question of mortality in general (GREEN, 2005, p. 149).

<sup>29</sup> It is important to see that the death of a loved one is never simply his or her death. It also signifies the disintegration of the world as we knew it: meanings are no longer structured in the same way they used to be – meaninglessness gains ground while some new connections are made (see HEINÄMAA, 2010b, p. 105).

<sup>30</sup> As Heidegger says, we know we will all die, but we tend to think that death will not come just yet, not to us (1976, §51, 336). In a similar vein Beauvoir states about her mother that she knew in principal that her mother would die, but it was as if that would happen in some legendary time, not in this reality (1964, p. 29; 1990, pp. 18–19).

stroke, an accident or even a murder, the horror of the inanimate body, which still appears to us through the possibility of spontaneous movement but no longer moves.<sup>31</sup>

Anyte's bird epigram spells out the specificity of dying by describing the way the animal has died: "a marauder approaching secretly / killed you, one claw easily piercing your throat". Revelation of the cause of death was not rare in the epitaphs in general, but Anyte does not dwell on this matter in those epigrams of hers that deal with prematurely deceased girls. I argue, however, that literature dealing with the specificity of death reveals more to us about death and mortality than do more elevated and abstract accounts. In the end of *A Very Easy Death* Beauvoir points out that one does not die from old age but always from something, and this something makes us aware of the abruptness and brutal inevitability of death: "Cancer, thrombosis, pneumonia: it is as violent and unforeseen as an engine stopping in the middle of the sky." Yet, the fact that one has to die one's singular death is universally shared, as is, according to Beauvoir, the violence of death, no matter how well prepared we are to face it: "All men must die: but for every man his death is an accident and, even if he knows it and consents to it, an unjustifiable violation."<sup>32</sup> (BEAUVOIR, 1990, p. 92.)

While this phrase is partly meant to underline the human specificity as "a thinking reed" or "rational animal",<sup>33</sup> Beauvoir's choice of words elsewhere in the book brings out the similarity of the fates of human beings and non-human animals. She describes her mother's condition by comparing her to an animal: "she clung ferociously to this world, she had an animal dread of

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<sup>31</sup> I have argued elsewhere that a dead body still bears a resemblance to a living body and invites us to empathise with it kinaesthetically (RUONAKOSKI, 2011, p. 113). In Husserlian terms, the unity of the primal impression, retention and protention becomes broken when the protentions pertaining to a living and moving body are no longer fulfilled. (See HUSSERL, 2001, pp. 4–44.) In this sense, the death of the other shakes our existence even on the perceptual level.

<sup>32</sup> Un cancer, une embolie. Une congestion pulmonaire : c'est aussi brutal et imprévu que l'arrêt d'un moteur en plein ciel. [...] Tous les hommes sont mortels: mais pour chaque homme sa mort est un accident et, même s'il la connaît et y consent, une violence induite. (BEAUVOIR, 1964, p. 164.)

<sup>33</sup> In *The Ethics of Ambiguity* Beauvoir refers to Montaigne, according to whom death essentially defines our lives, and continues: "Man knows and thinks this tragic ambivalence which the animal and the plant merely undergo. A new paradox is thereby introduced into his destiny. 'Rational animal,' 'thinking reed,' he escapes from his natural condition without, however, freeing himself from it." (BEAUVOIR, 1976, p. 7.) Ce tragique ambivalence que l'animal et la plante subissent seulement, l'homme la connaît, il la pense. Par là un nouveau paradoxe s'introduit dans son destin. "Animal raisonnable", Roseau pensant", il s'évade de sa condition naturelle sans cependant s'en affranchir [...] (BEAUVOIR, 2003, pp. 11.)

death” (1990, 14), “there was all the sadness of a defenceless animal in her eyes” (1990, p. 57).<sup>34</sup> Anyte’s animal epigrams show us that on the fundamental level we share the violence of death with non-human animals. Even if they may not reflect upon mortality or face death “authentically” in the sense we can face it, and even if they do not participate in the human world of meanings in the same way as we do, also for them death comes in a specific way and without asking for permission. Also their orientation towards their surrounding world and towards others is put to an end by death: they no longer exist as living, experiencing bodies but have become corpses, without they themselves witnessing this transformation.<sup>35</sup>

In a way, Anyte’s way of describing the bird’s death in its horrific detail does not only illustrate this particular death but all deaths: even though we are not all killed by a human or animal entity, “a marauder”, like the object of mourning in this poem is, death always comes *like a marauder*, a thief, sneaking up on us in the dark, if we are to believe Beauvoir. Anyte presents us with the experience of loss in all its ambiguity and painfulness, prior to all speculations of the afterlife, showing how bonds between living beings are formed and how they become articulated through absence when the other has irrevocably ceased to exist for us as a living body. Doing so, she appears as a kindred spirit of Beauvoir’s, who insists on the importance of dealing with the most painful experiences in literature. When we read the works of these authors, temporal distance is undone and we are spoken to by two unique voices that show us the possibility of communication at the most intimate and subjective area.

## Conclusion

As we have seen, for Beauvoir literature is a privileged place of intersubjectivity, a practice through which it is possible to break down the solitude inherent in subjectivity. According to her, literature provides us with a possibility to enter the other’s world in a way that does not exist in everyday interaction. On the other hand, she sees that our subjective existence becomes particularly isolated when we are faced with unfortunate events, such as losing those

<sup>34</sup> [E]lle était farouchement accrochée à la terre et elle avait de la mort une horreur animale. (BEAUVOIR, 1964, p. 20.) [I]l y avait dans ses yeux toute la tristesse des bêtes sans défense. (Op. cit., 99.)

<sup>35</sup> I will not speculate on the state of awareness in protozoa or other very simple forms of animal life. It suffices to note that the orientation towards their surrounding world manifested by the behaviour of mammals and birds seems to presuppose a certain oneness of experience, constituted through the temporal continuum of experiencing. (See RUONAKOSKI, 2007 and 2011.)



close to us. In Beauvoir's view, a writer must not shrink from the challenge of describing loss but on the contrary, it is her duty to help herself and the others by describing anguish in the face of death.

Drawing from Beauvoir's reflections on literature, I have shown that a poem by an ancient Greek epigrammatist, Anyte, still communicates to us the truth of loss, by discussing it both in its singularity and its universality. Through Anyte's work we can go through the ambivalent emotions pertaining to loss as well as the acknowledgement of our own mortality through that loss. What is more, we can see that on the very basic level all losses involve the similar shattering of the habitual, when the intertwining of the other's actions in the world with one's own is undone by death. The "bird poem" forces us to face the reality of loss: always violent and unforeseen, death comes uninvited, shaking the lived world of those who remain. No longer, as before, *ouketi hōs to paros*<sup>36</sup> – nothing is as it was, and we are left perplexed, vainly orienting ourselves towards the splinters of the broken unity.

As we can learn from Beauvoir, the cruelty of death will never disappear. Yet the communication that takes place by means of literature can make our situation more tolerable and our isolation less absolute.

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<sup>36</sup> After Anyte this kind of beginning became commonplace in epigrams.

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