Le Drame Personnel de l'Histoire: Simone de Beauvoir's La Force de l'âge *and* La Force des choses

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In a letter to Jean-Paul Sartre dated 8 January 1940, Simone de Beauvoir raises a number of issues pertinent to discussions of French national identity during the Second World War:

> Je ne sais pas s'il faut s'assumer comme Français [...] on ne pouvait se solidariser avec les juifs persécutés d'Allemagne comme on le ferait pour les juifs de France et que le fait d'être «en situation» il fallait compter les frontières? J'y réfléchirai (Mais il me semble que cette assomption n'entraîne pas plus le patriotisme que d'assumer la guerre n'entraîne le bellicisme); il s'agit (ou non?) en ce cas d'atteindre à des objets universels, idées, œuvres, etc., à travers une position historique et singulière. Maintenant il faudrait définir la position et la limiter et voir à quoi ça engage [...].[1]

In her subsequent autobiographical writings, Beauvoir pursues her questioning of the gap between the universalist language and values of existentialism and the imperatives of nationalism; and, closer to home, confronts the anxieties about political responsibility that the intellectual has to resolve during periods of crisis. *La Force de l'âge* (1960) and *La Force des choses* (1963) offer a means for the author to re-examine questions of national identity in the context of her representations of self as writer and intellectual, and also in the context of her recording of a collective 'history in the making'.[2] To what extent do depictions of periods of unrest, such as the Occupation and Liberation of Paris, and the Algerian war, which articulate both the personal and public concerns of the writer, help us to understand the complexities of

identity and identification and enable us to re-evaluate her representations of familiar historical events?

The 1990s have seen a number of highly controversial publications which question the nature of Sartre and Beauvoir's political commitment during the Occupation.[3] Issues which have come under particular scrutiny include Beauvoir's (reluctant) co-operation, in line with colleagues at the Lycée Camille-Sée and elsewhere, in signing papers which declared that she was not a freemason or a Jew, (*FA*, 478), and her employment with a national radio station.[4] The author deals with such questions in *La Force de l'âge* and makes explicit her condemnation of the Vichy regime, admitting that her early idealism and naïveté later became a source of shame: 'Je demeurai pénétrée de l'idéalisme et de l'esthétisme bourgeois. Surtout, mon entêtement schizophrénique au bonheur me rendit aveugle à la réalité politique. Cette cécité ne m'était pas personnelle: presque toute l'époque en souffrait' (*FA*, 372).[5] The criticism which such statements have attracted, with regard to the ethical stance they imply (setting aside, generally, any interest in their literary qualities) cannot be ignored. However, a focus on more general notions of testimony and confession, particularly as they relate to women's experience within the grand narratives of History, and a more elaborate questioning of the nature of autobiographical writing, have of late given rise to a number of more sympathetic studies exploring Beauvoir's autobiographical works.[6] Critics commenting on Beauvoir's attitude to the Algerian war have ranged from those who, like Leah Hewitt, argue that she remained politically voiceless, very much in the shadow of Sartre, to those who emphasise the importance of Beauvoir's autobiography from a postcolonial point of view.[7] Among the latter, Julien Murphy has argued that critics such as Deirdre Bair are wrong to cite Beauvoir's interest in Algeria as incidental and dependent on Sartre, as this downplays her pro-Algerian stance. In Murphy's eyes, Beauvoir's crucial intervention with support for Algeria's women rebels was 'a part of her political independence from Sartre, and wholly her own'.[8]

The precise nature of Beauvoir's political engagement and the historical veracity of her accounts are not the focus of the present essay. Rather, I propose to place the emphasis on the author's presentation and assessment of herself and her relationship to French history in *La Force de l'âge* and *La Force des choses* in an attempt to trace the links between public and private spheres and to understand the development of her position.[9] The autobiographical texts constitute both textual constructions of self, whether as writer, lover or activist, and narrative representations of key historical events in France – a broad canvas, on which different textual selves, and public and personal histories, can be drawn and juxtaposed. I shall argue that the writing act itself plays a central function in both texts in forging Beauvoir's sense of her own identity, and in denoting a crucial shift from depictions of the narrator as distanced spectator to accounts that affirm her involvement in historical processes as an active participant.

Initial discussions of *La Force de l'âge* will focus on the dual narrative perspective, which presents an older and wiser narrator acting as both historian and judge of her younger self during the period of the Occupation.[10] The older narrator shows how the period of the Occupation marks a turning point in making her aware of her identity, not as an individual free to act as she pleases, but as part of a collective French identity subject to external pressures and constraints. Issues of both political engagement and personal involvement come to light, as public and private concerns can be shown to mirror each other at key moments in the text, and serve to complicate initial presentations of an existentialist self. In tracing the different narrative voices in the text, a pattern emerges which suggests that Beauvoir's sense of identity in both *La Force de l'âge* and *La Force des choses* is constantly under threat.

The writing project offers the means for Beauvoir to describe her transformation from horrified spectator during the Occupation to outraged participant during the Algerian war, and to explore issues of political commitment and personal responsibility. In *La Force des choses*, her involvement with Djamila Boupacha during the Algerian war enables her to find her own politicised voice in the text, breaking free from the 'nous' she shared with Sartre. Equally important for the reader, the act of writing a virulent self-critique in the two volumes presents us with Beauvoir's re-assessment of her understanding of French national identity. I hope to show how in *La Force de l'âge* Beauvoir identifies with the French nation during the Occupation insofar as its identity is under threat. In *La Force des choses*, this identification is challenged and the author's focus on her alienation from a specifically French identity becomes striking. The move from identification to alienation is further complicated by the older narrator's perspective in her role as 'judge', as she berates her earlier apoliticism and aligns herself with her fellow French citizens in her criticism of attitudes adopted during the Occupation and the Algerian war. Beauvoir's two volumes, I propose, resist the presentation of a seamless linear History, revealing a more nuanced series of public and personal histories in which she makes explicit some of the difficulties involved in weaving together autobiography and historical event.

Identity Crises in *La Force de l'âge*

La Force de l'âge follows a strict chronology, from Beauvoir's bid for freedom from family traditions and conventions in 1929, to her situation at the end of the Second World War. The beginnings of her life with Sartre and her first attempts at writing novels are described in detail in the text. This volume also presents the author's rejection of bourgeois privilege, which had already been articulated in *Mémoires d'une jeune fille rangée* (1958), and her desire to embrace existentialist philosophy, as the narrator declares that she has become more politically and philosophically aware.

Beauvoir eschews her bourgeois past (*FA*, 36), and this is compounded by her refusal to be associated with any 'ready-made' collective identity, in the form of social, political or professional groupings: she does not want to be associated with the teaching profession, nor with political groupings such as the *Parti Communiste* (*FA*, 140), and claims to be a stranger to practical political activity (*FA*, 168). She insists that the category of 'être humain' is the most important, as opposed to more specific categories such as 'Juif' – a claim that will later come under scrutiny by the older narrator, who with hindsight criticises her earlier universalist vision, justifying it as a reaction against her father's 'ideologies' (*FA*, 172). The older narrator's self-critique plays an important role in enabling a distance to be established between her earlier abstraction and apoliticism, and her subsequent emphasis on the concept of 'the situated self', which is so crucial to her later understanding of subjectivity.[11] This dual narrative perspective highlights Beauvoir's awareness of how her conceptions of freedom change in response to historical and personal events, and makes her search for her own sense of identity into a structuring principle of her autobiography.

The use of the date 1939 to mark the end of part one of *La Force de l'âge* is significant. At this point the author surveys the ten-year period described in the first part, offering an important critique and reassessment of her personal story in the context of the history which is to follow. This creates a split identity, as the 'new' writing self diverges from the one evoked in the text (*FA*, 381). This duality is emphasised in the concluding pages of the book when Beauvoir reaffirms the transformational effects of the Occupation period with respect to herself and her relations with others: 'Après juin 1940, je ne reconnus plus les choses, ni les gens, ni les heures, ni les lieux, ni moi-même' (*FA*, 613).[12]

Concerns with the war and the changing political situation in France mirror personal crises, particularly in her relationship with Sartre. This relationship is structurally fundamental to the narrative, in its influence on the way Beauvoir maps her political and public selves, and in the ways it presses her to trace a different, more private self. Sartre's presence in the text can be shown to bring a number of public and private concerns together, as connections during wartime between personal concerns and collective experiences are established. His absence at key moments during the Occupation can also be shown to act as a catalyst in the development of Beauvoir's writing self. Different sets of doubled voices emerge and intersect in *La Force de l'âge*: Beauvoir writes her collective history with Sartre, but also explores the relationship between her younger, idealistic self and older, more judgmental self. These perspectives will now be traced in detail in order to show how they reflect the concern of the writer to communicate to her readers her material encounters with history.

In *La Force de l'âge* the narrator introduces her younger self, Simone, as a 'jeune fille rangée', depicting her early sense of optimism and freedom,

which is underlined by the repetition at the beginning of the text of the same word which had closed *Mémoires d'une jeune fille rangée*: 'liberté'. The older narrator's critique of this younger self includes explicit references to her lack of interest in political issues prior to the outbreak of the Second World War, which is contrasted with Sartre's perspective: 'Créer, pensait-il, c'était conférer au monde une nécessité […] selon moi, il fallait plutôt lui tourner le dos' (*FA*, 45); 'Sartre parti pour Berlin, je me désintéressai tout à fait des affaires publiques' (*FA*, 162).[13]

The presentation of such a critique highlights the selfishness of her earlier preoccupation with personal concerns, to the extent that the pain of leaving Sartre blinded her to the fate of others living in far more precarious circumstances: 'Dans le train, je me reprochai avec fureur mon aveugle optimisme, mon entêtement à mes projets. […] Cette fois la guerre semblait inévitable. Je refusai furieusement d'y croire; une catastrophe aussi imbécile ne pouvait pas fondre sur moi' (*FA,* 344–45).[14]

The older narrator's self-flagellating criticisms of her refusal to confront reality contradict her presentation elsewhere of the Beauvoir-Sartre partnership as an existentialist success story. This presentation takes the form of a narrative in which 'nous' is used insistently to describe shared beliefs and a joint engagement in a mutually-constituting project: 'Nous abordions toute situation avec l'idée qu'il nous appartenait de la façonner sans nous plier à aucun modèle. Nous avions inventé nos rapports, leur liberté, leur intimité, leur franchise […]' (*FA,* 370).[15] Their relationship is described as a necessary love, and their pact of honesty promises to free her from false hopes and empty scruples and guarantee her, through Sartre, absolute security (*FA,* 27–31). Their compact enables her, she claims, to ignore the past, and even to repress her anguish about the death of Zaza, her close friend and alter ego (*FA,* 31). Yet almost immediately her security appears threatened, anxiety returns, and the narrator starts to suggest a disunity within the existentialist couple, a growing threat to her sense of her own identity, from the side of her ally and mentor. With no sense of disproportion, Beauvoir writes her personal catastrophe into the contemporary scenario of national betrayal. The presence of Sartre in the narrative threatens the narrator's own sense of identity, as she finds herself positioned 'Other', or in existentialist terms, in the place of the dreaded *en-soi*.[16]

Political pacts between states and the threat of war are paralleled with personal pacts of honesty and loyalty with Sartre. His relationship with Olga, the Russian pupil who forms the third part of the 'trio', cast its shadow over Beauvoir's happiness at a time when the Stalin-Hitler pact was striking fear into the hearts of many Frenchmen. The writing records both the loss of Sartre's undivided attention and his symbolic position of 'ally' in a time of impending war, using a terminology which echoes the political situation between France and Russia: 'Pendant ces journées il ne pensait plus à moi comme à une alliée, et cette discordance empoisonnait l'air que je respirais'

(*FA,* 269–70).[17] As the political situation worsens, the trio is presented in increasing difficulties, as if private and public events were mirroring each other (*FA,* 294). The threat which Olga poses to Beauvoir, as a non-Western, same-sex outsider, is juxtaposed with the threat of war and the fear of the unknown potential of the Eastern bloc, articulating a sense of exclusion and dispossession (*FA,* 267). There is a blurring of boundaries between personal and political: 'la situation politique, ses rapports avec Olga. J'eus peur' (*FA*, 282).[18]

Rather than bringing the private into the public sphere, a technique Estelle Jelinek identifies as generic to women's autobiography, Beauvoir does the opposite, masking private concerns by couching them in narratives concerned with public events.[19] If history is understood to signify both *Histoire* and *histoire*, as both public account and private constructions, then this opens the texts up to readings which take into account the interconnections, rather than oppositions, between the public and personal narratives.

This juxtaposition of public and private spheres may also be analysed in more detail from the perspective of Beauvoir's multiple representations of self. The fragmentation of narrative voice is emphasised in the author's critique of her earlier idealism, and further reinforced by her use of the term 'schizophrénie' to describe her blind optimism that her life could be envisaged in terms of a *pour-soi* existentialist self, in control of events and immune to external threats.[20] Here the narrator's own 'refus de l'Histoire' (*FA*, 372) is mirrored by the schizophrenic state-of-mind of a nation reluctant to face another war. Beauvoir describes her refusal to accept the impending reality of war, and links her individual blindness – and her lack of political awareness – to that of her whole generation (*FA*, 372). Her apprehension of the loss of a former confident self has as its backdrop the crisis of identity suffered by France under German occupation: 'Je ne voulais pas admettre que la guerre fût imminente, ni seulement possible. Mais j'avais beau faire l'autruche, les menaces qui grandissaient autour de moi m'écrasaient' (*FA*, 327).[21] The weight of history forces her to make a radical reassessment of her place in the world: 'Soudain, l'Histoire fondit sur moi, j'éclatai […]. Plutôt, je cessai de concevoir ma vie comme une entreprise autonome et fermée sur soi; il me fallut découvrir à neuf mes rapports avec un univers dont je ne reconnaissais plus le visage' (*FA*, 381–82).[22]

The realisation that her own 'story' has to be inextricably linked to a collective history is brought into sharper focus by the charge of 'schizophrénie' discussed earlier. The older narrator notes, describing her younger writing self, that events had changed her, and that the 'schizophrenia' of which Sartre accused her had finally succumbed to reality: 'J'admettais, enfin, que ma vie n'était pas une histoire que je me racontais, mais un compromis entre le monde et moi […]' (*FA*, 498).[23] The narrative structure highlights the connection between the evolution of individual identity and the individual's engagement with the collective, national destiny. The older narrator, now

participant in history, renounces her earlier belief, as naïve spectator, that her insertion into the grand narratives of history could be unproblematic: 'En 1929, je croyais, je l'ai dit, à la paix, au progrès, aux lendemains qui chantent. Il fallait que ma propre histoire participât à l'harmonie universelle; malheureuse, je me serais sentie en exil: la réalité m'eût échappé' (*FA*, 33).[24]

The means by which Beauvoir becomes an active participant in history as opposed to a distanced spectator is, then, the act of writing. Writing, which enables her to offer both an analysis and a construction of personal experience, is combined with a theorisation of her increasingly public role as writer, a stance which is confirmed towards the end of *FA* with the author's reference to the publication of *L'Invitée* as a defining moment in propelling her into the public sphere. This new-found identity as writer which emerges during the Occupation enables Beauvoir to make an existentialist claim to have finally achieved authenticity, in the form of the older, wiser, and more politicised self constructed within her autobiography, recognising her roots ('mes racines'), and accepting her situation (*FA*, 614).

Writing (during) the Occupation

Depictions of the Occupation provide a stark contrast to earlier evocations of the young narrator's new-found freedom from parental control. The idea of conquering new territory through travel that is reinforced in the early chapters of *FA* and labelled a new kind of freedom (*FA*, 87) contrasts with the restrictions of travel in wartime.[25] These earlier *fuites* had often been accompanied by lyrical descriptions which offered an alternative representation of self not tied to the 'nous' narrative voice or trapped in disabling self-definition as 'Other', but an exultant, vigorous body, in a real material landscape.[26] The war narrative, in contrast, depicts the stifling constraints of the Occupation in Paris and the author's realisation that freedom is now necessarily limited: 'L'espace comme le temps s'était contracté. Deux ans plus tôt, Paris occupait le centre d'un monde largement ouvert à ma curiosité; la France aujourd'hui était une résidence surveillée, coupée du reste de la terre' (*FA*, 515).[27]

She is unable to choose exactly where she should go, just as, privately, her desire to have exclusive rights to Sartre and the ability to impose her influence on others is thwarted. Mary J. Green argues that Beauvoir's loss of identity makes the production of a coherent narrative impossible and that her journal is a record of the experience of waiting for the return of an absent 'other'. For Green, the situation portrayed in the wartime journal could be defined as a 'feminine one'.[28] I would argue rather that it is in the absence of Sartre and the narrative constructed as 'nous' that Beauvoir finds her own voice as writer.

Writing during the period also raises the fraught question of publishing practices. As Eva Lundgren-Gothlin has noted: 'The fact that the beginning

of their own fame coincided with the German occupation may be considered compromising for Sartre, Beauvoir and Camus. The German occupation had created space in the cultural arena, since many authors and artists had fled, been killed or incarcerated, and others simply refused to publish.'[29] However Lundgren-Gothlin also makes the important point that Beauvoir had discussed the question of political commitment in her memoirs and had argued, as Lundgren-Gothlin notes, 'that she and Sartre were following a tacit understanding among leftist intellectuals about how to behave in occupied France [...]', adding that 'neither Sartre nor Beauvoir exaggerated their contributions to the Resistance during the war'.[30]

With Sartre absent, Beauvoir explores what it means to be a committed woman intellectual and finds her own voice as writer.[31] Her urge to write is fuelled by both the external horrors of war and an overriding sense of failure: 'La littérature apparaît lorsque quelque chose dans la vie se dérègle [...]. Mes consignes de travail demeurèrent creuses jusqu'au jour où une menace pesa sur lui et où je retrouvai dans l'anxiété une certaine solitude' (*FA*, 374).[32] This is reiterated at the end of *La Force de l'âge* when the narrator reflects upon the necessity of the writing act:

> C'est seulement quand *une faille* s'était creusée dans mon expérience que j'avais pu prendre du recul et en parler. Depuis la déclaration de guerre [...] la littérature m'était devenue aussi nécessaire que l'air que je respirais (*FA*, 621) (my emphasis).[33]

The necessity to write spurs her on to write a *journal intime*, as war memoir in its recording of day-to-day events, but also as a means for personal self-expression, as a response to anxiety and loneliness (*FA*, 390). Writing is an escape from the bleakness of the present and immediate future; and in her *romans engagés* Beauvoir is able to tackle questions of autonomy, responsibility and commitment, most notably in *Le Sang des autres*, where Hélène, in whom Beauvoir claims to have put more of herself (*FA*, 559), is accused of being indifferent to her own fate and that of the world, viewing the Occupation with the serene impartiality of History (*FA*, 556).

La Force de l'âge contains many passages describing the substance of Beauvoir's fiction. Emphasis on this fictional output appears to offer an alternative medium through which the narrator can express frustration or fear, relating to her personal circumstances or the political realities of the time. The writing of her 'période morale' is described as the point at which 'l'Histoire m'a saisie pour ne plus me lâcher' (*FA*, p. 368).[34] In this way Beauvoir personalises a collective experience and presents the various stages of both her political and personal *prises de conscience*.

This volume of the autobiography might appear at first glance to offer itself as a theoretical testing ground for existentialist presentations of self. Beauvoir systematically constructs and contrasts her pre- and post-war

scenarios, and presents existentialist models of the self-in-the-world and self-as-writer, emphasizing projects founded in freedom and action. Yet it is the material historical moment of the Occupation which is the key turning point in *La Force de l'âge*, and which forces the narrator to confront important ethical questions concerning her understanding of herself, her relationship to others and her role as writer. The older Beauvoir's frustration with her earlier imperfect understanding of the individual's role in society finds expression again in 1966, in a lecture delivered in Japan. Here she comments on her depoliticised identity and classes herself disparagingly with the rest of her French bourgeois intellectual contemporaries: '[…] entre 1929 et 1938 j'étais dépolitisée, je me suis très peu occupée de politique; eh bien! si j'avais à refaire la deuxième partie de mes mémoires, *La Force de l'âge*, je mettrais bien davantage l'accent sur cette indifférence; elle me définit comme une intellectuelle bourgeoise française de cette époque-là, les intellectuels français de l'époque étant pour la plupart dépolitisés […]'.[35] With the benefit of hindsight, Beauvoir asserts, she should have emphasised even more strongly her material betrayal of history.

From One War to Another: *La Force des choses*

Questions raised by the narrator in *La Force de l'âge* about political engagement and its representation in writing are pursued in *La Force des choses*, which spans the period following the Liberation to the Algerian war. The emphasis in *La Force de l'âge* on participation in historical processes is developed further as the narrator increasingly questions and ultimately rejects any identification with a French national identity, associated with the wrongs of imperialism. Public and private boundaries remain blurred, but Beauvoir's public persona as writer becomes more prominent, since she has by this stage won the *Prix Goncourt* for *Les Mandarins.* This influences her perception of her duty to society to speak out, as she comments: '"Votre histoire, on la connaît", m'a-t-on dit aussi, "car à partir de 44 elle est devenue publique"' (*FC*, 7).[36]

The narrative describing political events, often through the collective perspective of 'nous', becomes more dominant and offers a point of contrast with the singular narrative voice which increasingly articulates the narrator's confrontations with the realities of her ageing, gendered self.[37] These dual narrative voices continue to run through *La Force des choses* as in *La Force de l'âge*, whether opposing younger and older selves, or public and private selves. The fact that *La Force des choses* opens with the end of the Second World War and concludes with the resolution of the Algerian war is not coincidental. Attaching significance to these events by presenting them at the beginning and end of the autobiography places an emphasis on the textual remembrance of death and war, by implication an ineradicable source of guilt for those who have survived, and the Algerian war, although not the

sole focus of *La Force des choses*, serves as framework and canvas for Beauvoir's exploration of what it means to be French.

I have shown how Beauvoir re-enacts the period of the Occupation in *La Force de l'âge* in order to chart her progression from spectator to participant. In *La Force des choses*, she reiterates this theme, emphasising in the opening pages both a personal and public involvement in political events, and explicitly situating herself within this dual framework: 'Mêlée beaucoup plus que naguère aux événements politiques, j'en parlerai davantage; mon récit n'en deviendra pas plus impersonnel [...] la manière dont au jour le jour l'histoire s'est donnée à moi est une aventure aussi singulière que mon évolution subjective' (*FC*, 7–8).[38] This involvement is developed further as she presents herself as an estranged participant in France's colonial history. 'Je me sentis radicalement coupée de la masse de mes compatriotes' (*FC*, 325) is how the narrator describes her response to the battle of Dien Bien Phu in 1954, and France's history with Algeria forces her to re-assess her situation in her own country, as she considers her position as alienated 'Other': 'On m'avait traitée [...] d'anti-française: je le devins. Je ne tolérais plus mes concitoyens' (*FC*, 390).[39]

Through the eyes of the tortured Algerians the narrator views herself 'avec les yeux des femmes vingt fois violées, des hommes aux os brisés, des enfants fous: une Française' (*FC*, 391).[40] This alignment with those who are responsible for torture demonstrates the extent to which self-identity and national identity do not coincide, as the narrator describes herself as 'la sœur des tortionnaires, des incendiaires, des ratisseurs, des égorgeurs, des affameurs; je méritais leur haine puisque je pouvais dormir, écrire [...]' (*FC*, 406).[41] Being against one's own country, and exiled within it, becomes the focus of her attention (*FC*, 430), and her sense of self is threatened as she finds herself situated as 'Other' to the patriotic French citizen. De Gaulle's referendum is described as a collective suicide (*FC*, 472), which finally cuts her off from her own country (*FC*, 479).

The Algerian war is a 'drame personnel' (*FC*, 681), and in a letter to Nelson Algren dated 2 January 1959, Beauvoir discusses its impact on herself and Sartre, bringing their sense of disaffiliation and alienation to the fore: 'À cette France nouvelle nous n'appartenons plus, nous nous sentons devenus étrangers dans notre propre pays'.[42] Personal concerns mirror anxieties about political events as Beauvoir describes her own despondency: 'On n'a guère le cœur à la littérature, dans cette France-ci. Et puis, je vieillis ... Parfois la pensée que je pourrais ne plus vous revoir me fiche un coup au cœur'.[43]

A sense of alienation had already been prefigured in Beauvoir's earlier descriptions of trips abroad, for example to the United States in the 1940s, where identifying herself as French was presented in negative terms: 'Une Française: ça signifiait une suspecte, une ingrate, presque une ennemie' (*FC*, 245).[44] The narrator's response to events bound up with France's colonial history is presented as one which opposes what she perceives to be the

dominant Gaullist point of view. An emphasis on the relativity of history mirrors the strategy adopted in *La Force de l'âge*, drawing attention to the subjective nature of Beauvoir's representation: 'Un communiste, un gaulliste raconteraient autrement ces années; et aussi un manœuvre, un paysan, un colonel, un musicien' (*FC*, 9).[45]

Parallels are drawn between this period and the Occupation. In both cases a sense of confinement predominates and the narrator reinforces the fact that she feels alienated from her French compatriots: 'J'avais aimé les foules: maintenant même les rues m'étaient hostiles, je me sentais aussi dépossédée qu'aux premiers temps de l'occupation' (*FC*, 391).[46] The French uniformed officers inspire the same feelings as the sight of swastikas did during the war (*FC*, 407), and Paris becomes in the eyes of the narrator an occupied city again, with the focus now on the painful ties which bind her to the occupiers – her fellow citizens (*FC*, 407).

As was the case in *La Force de l'âge*, this loss of autonomy and an increasing sense of alienation from her environment provoke the author's return to the writing of her diary. It becomes the 'journal d'une défaite', referring not only to Beauvoir's perception of the failures of France's foreign policy but possibly also referring, in the private sphere, to failed relationships with both Algren and Lanzmann.[47] They are figured differently – Algren belongs to another continent, Lanzmann to another generation (*FC*, 306) – but both represent for Beauvoir radical alternatives to the allegiances she shares with Sartre and their particular generation of intellectuals in France.

Personal crises and a growing frustration with political events are juxtaposed as in *La Force de l'âge*: 'J'assistais, impuissante, au jeu de forces étrangères: l'histoire, le temps, la mort. […] Hostile à cette société à laquelle j'appartenais, bannie, par l'âge, de l'avenir, dépouillée fibre par fibre du passé […]' (*FC*, 615).[48] Numerous meditations on the ageing process highlight Beauvoir's confrontations with an embodied self, and this, in turn, influences her perception of her place in the world: 'je vieillis, le monde change, mon rapport avec lui varie; montrer les transformations, les mûrissements, les irréversibles dégradations des autres et de moi-même, rien ne m'importe davantage' (*FC*, 296–97).[49] The sense of irreversibility expressed here contrasts with the existentialist framework based on freedom and choice which was elaborated in earlier sections of the autobiography, and brings the question of the *embodied* self in history to the fore.

However, the writing act also offers an escape from such confrontations with ageing and death, and depictions of Beauvoir as writer contrast with the descriptions of a lost or misrepresented self common to both *La Force de l'âge* and *La Force des choses*. A distinctive feature of Beauvoir's representation of this writerly self is her explicit condemnation of the Algerian war. This grounds her in a narrative of engagement which no longer depends on collaboration with Sartre. In *La Force des choses*, Beauvoir describes instead her participation with the lawyer Gisèle Halimi in the defence of Djamila

Boupacha, an Algerian activist who wanted to press charges against her torturers. The act answers both her need for a personal sense of involvement and her desire to make public affirmation of her political identity as activist in her own right. Together, Halimi and Beauvoir drew attention to the case in their publication, *Djamila Boupacha* (1962). In the fourth volume of the autobiography, *Tout compte fait* (1972), the emergence of a politicised female self will be further reinforced by Beauvoir's narratives of her involvement with the *MLF*.

In conclusion, *La Force de l'âge* and *La Force des choses* offer a history of Beauvoir's *prise de conscience* through the thematic framework of key historical crises in France. These in turn mirror the author's personal and public concerns, manifested in various narrative voices ('je', 'nous', 'on') to the extent that contrasting narrative identities are explored in conjunction with different representations of France: as a nation under threat during the Occupation, for example, or as an imperialistic threat to other nations. The act of seizing history through the autobiographical writing project represents the author's engagement with the world around her, and her denunciation of a solipsistic self, as participation in political struggles offers 'l'impression de *mordre sur* l'histoire. [...] j'ai des liens avec l'ensemble du monde' (*FC*, 679–80) (my emphasis).[50]

But reflections of these experiences also reveal Beauvoir's negotiations of her identity as a French woman intellectual. She takes up the challenge to respond to the reductive and stereotyped presentations of herself as woman intellectual in the public sphere, satirizing received ideas that being an intellectual in some way precludes an existence as an embodied female self: 'Souliers plats, chignon tiré, je suis une cheftaine, une dame patronnesse [...]. Je passe mon existence dans les livres et devant ma table de travail, pur cerveau. [...] L'essentiel est de me présenter comme une anormale' (*FC*, 676–77).[51]

Does Beauvoir present a gendered history? The juxtaposition of personal stories and 'grand narratives' presents a complex intertwining of her encounter with her younger self and her reconstruction and exploration of a collective history. She challenges public/private dichotomies and undermines genre conventions for autobiography. In writing her life history, in terms of both a singular experience and a collective engagement (whether with Sartre, or with various political groupings), Beauvoir seeks to identify and to understand her role in society and relationship to others, revealing in the process the limitations of existentialism in her encounters with her situated self. The stance of the older narrator in both volumes serves as salient reminder that reactions to history, personal and universal, necessarily involve the writer as judge and as historian, but also as embodied self. In this respect Beauvoir's willingness to take on these roles, and to reveal in her writing the interplay between personal and universal concerns, results in a life history which is a valuable account of the evolution of a woman intellectual in twentieth-century France.

Notes

1 'I don't know if one should assume oneself as French [...]. Weren't we saying that one couldn't have the same solidarity with the persecuted Jews of Germany which one would have with the Jews of France, and that the fact of being "situated" necessarily also included frontiers? I'll think about it (but it seems to me that assuming this no more implies patriotism than assuming the war implies being a warmonger). In this case it's a matter (or isn't it?) of attaining universal objects, ideas, works etc. through a singular, historical position. What's now needed is to define the position, and limit it, and see what it commits you to' (*Lettres à Sartre, 1940–63*, ed. by Sylvie Le Bon de Beauvoir [Paris, 1990], pp. 25–26; see *Letters to Sartre*, translated and edited by Quintin Hoare [London, 1991], p. 247).

2 References to *La Force de l'âge* (Paris, 1960) and *La Force des choses* (Paris, 1963) will be abbreviated to *FA* and *FC* respectively. All subsequent quotations are taken from these editions. Page numbers will follow in brackets. Translations into English are taken from *The Prime of Life*, tr. Peter Green (London, 1962) and *Force of Circumstance*, tr. Richard Howard (Harmondsworth, 1968).

3 For a highly critical (and widely refuted) view of the author's and Sartre's position during the Occupation see Gilbert Joseph's *Une si douce occupation* (Paris, 1991). C. Duckworth's 'Reading Goethe while the bombs are falling', *The Weekend Review*, Australia, 21–22 May 1994, and S. Rockmore's 'Simone de Beauvoir: Égoïsme ou solidarité?', *Simone de Beauvoir Studies*, 12 (1995), 73–79, also explore the question of Beauvoir's political commitment. For a balanced assessment of Beauvoir's political engagement, see Ingrid Galster, 'Simone de Beauvoir face à l'occupation allemande: Essai provisoire d'un réexamen à partir des écrits posthumes', *Contemporary French Civilisation*, 20:2 (1996), 278–93.

4 Having got herself a job as features producer on a national radio network, she followed, she claims, the unwritten code of her fellow-intellectuals (*FA*, 554–55). She explains: 'On ne devait pas écrire dans les journaux et les revues de zone occupée, ni parler à Radio-Paris; on pouvait travailler dans la presse de la zone libre et à Radio-Vichy: tout dépendait du sens des articles et des émissions' (*FA*, 528).

5 'I remained riddled with bourgeois idealism and aestheticism. Above all, my emotionally ambivalent obsession with happiness blinded me to political realities. This blindness, however, was not peculiar to me; it was a characteristic and almost universal failing of the period' (p. 288).

6 Ursula Tidd explores the nature of the testimonial project, arguing that 'it can be viewed as an affirmation of history and as an attempt to respond to an important ethical problem of her time: how to bear witness for the Other', in *Simone de Beauvoir: Gender and Testimony* (Cambridge, 1999), p. 146. See also Mary J. Green, 'Writing War in the Feminine: de Beauvoir and Duras', *Journal of European Studies*, 23 (1993), 223–37; and Christine Ann Evans, '"La Guerre, Madame, ce n'est pas pour vous": Simone de Beauvoir's Readings of World War I and II', *Simone de Beauvoir Studies*, 16 (1999–2000), 87–99.

7 Leah Hewitt, *Autobiographical Tightropes*: *Simone de Beauvoir, Nathalie Sarraute, Marguerite Duras, Monique Wittig and Maryse Condé* (Lincoln, 1990), p. 33.

8 Julien Murphy, 'Beauvoir and the Algerian War: Towards a Postcolonial Ethics', in Margaret A. Simons (ed.), *Feminist Interpretations of Simone de Beauvoir* (Pennsylvania, 1995), pp. 263–97 (p. 277).

9 For an interesting exploration of the relationship between autobiography and history, see *Écriture de soi, écriture de l'histoire*, edited by Jean-François Chiantaretto (Paris, 1997).

10 Paul Ricœur discusses the respective roles of judge and historian in his forthcoming study *La Mémoire, l'histoire, l'oubli* (Paris, 2000). In an extract presented in

a special issue of *Esprit*, (2000), 266–67, he writes: 'Le juge et l'historien, en croisant leurs jugements, éclairent et relativisent par cette dialectique externe la place et la portée du discours historique. À cet égard, le conflit entre un jugement historique sensible au contexte, aux structures organisationnelles et à l'action collective, et un jugement judiciaire privilégiant la responsabilité individuelle, s'inscrit pleinement, à l'occasion des grands procès du XXe siècle, dans le cadre d'un «dissensus civique» [...] qui suscite [...] d'interminables discussions et controverses sur le passé' (p. 49). See also Tidd's detailed exploration of the 'testimonial quality of Beauvoir's memoirs', *Simone de Beauvoir*, pp. 143–54.

11 See Toril Moi's analysis of 'The Body as a Situation', in *What Is A Woman And Other Essays* (Oxford, 1999), pp. 59–83, and Margaret A. Simons' exploration of Beauvoir and Sartre's changing perspectives regarding questions of identity and race, in *Beauvoir and* The Second Sex: *Feminism, Race and the Origins of Existentialism* (Lanham, 1999), pp. 46–54.

12 'After June, 1940, I no longer recognized anything – objects, people, seasons, places, even myself' (p. 473).

13 'The creative act, in his view, meant assuming responsibility for the world [...] whereas I felt one must turn one's back on it' (p. 38); 'After Sartre had left for Berlin, I lost all interest in public affairs' (p. 127).

14 'All the way in the train I reproached myself furiously for my blind optimism and my obsessional preoccupation with my own private affairs. [...] This time war really did seem inevitable. I faced this prospect with furious incredulity; so lunatic a catastrophe could not possibly happen to *me*' (p. 267).

15 '[W]e did approach each new situation in the belief that it was up to us to tackle it for ourselves, without adapting ourselves to any model. We had pioneered our own relationship – its freedom, intimacy, and frankness' (p. 287).

16 Sartre's association of the en-soi and the 'feminine' are elaborated in *L'Être et le néant* (Paris, 1943): 'Le visqueux c'est la revanche de l'En-soi. Revanche douceâtre et féminine qui se symbolisera sur un autre plan par la qualité du sucré [...] Le visqueux sucré est l'idéal du visqueux; il symbolise la mort sucrée du Pour-soi [...]' (p. 701). Michèle Le Dœuff explores such images from the perspective of masculinism in her study of Sartrean existentialism in *L'Étude et le rouet* (Paris, 1989).

17 '[H]e no longer thought of me as an ally during this period, and such a rift between us poisoned the very air I breathed' (p. 209).

18 '[T]he political situation, his relationship with Olga. I felt scared' (pp. 218–19).

19 E. Jelinek, *Women's Autobiography: Essays in Criticism* (Bloomington, 1980).

20 See references to 'schizophrénie' in *FA*, pp. 97, 121, 154, 614. Toril Moi argues that it is 'only when Beauvoir's "schizophrenia" started to fall apart that she truly came to writing' (*Simone de Beauvoir: The Making of an Intellectual Woman*, p. 230).

21 'I refused to admit that war was even possible, let alone imminent. But it was no use my playing the ostrich; the growing perils all around crushed me beneath their weight' (p. 254).

22 'Then, suddenly, History burst over me, and I dissolved into fragments. [...] Later, when I ceased to regard my life as an autonomous and self-sufficient project, I was obliged to rediscover my links with a universe the very face of which I had forgotten' (pp. 295–96).

23 'I was at last prepared to admit that my life was not a story of my own telling, but a compromise between myself and the world at large' (p. 385).

24 'In 1929 I believed and said so – in peace, progress, and a glorious future. My own experience had to partake of this universal harmony; if I had been unhappy I should have felt myself an exile, and reality would have eluded me' (p. 28).

25 Claire Cayron explores these narratives in detail in *La Nature chez Simone de Beauvoir* (Paris, 1973).

26 See for example descriptions of the author's expeditions in *FA*, p. 205, pp. 309–10, p. 369, p. 511.

27 'Not only time but space had contracted. Two years before, Paris had occupied the center of a world which for the larger part lay open to my curiosity; but now France was Occupied Territory, and cut off from the rest of the globe' (p. 398).

28 'Writing war in the feminine: de Beauvoir and Duras', *Journal of European Studies*, 23 (1993), 223–37 (pp. 231–32). Green rightly emphasises the importance of studying texts written by women about the Second World War: 'The war memoirs of de Beauvoir and Duras add the testimony of women's writing to the reconstruction of historical memory, making readable a forgotten text of the collective experience' (p. 237). She explores the feminine experience of war and the ways in which women's accounts 'intersect with the long dominant master narrative of Gaullist history' (p. 225), noting that women played a very minor if not absent role in writing the official French history of the war in the aftermath of the Liberation (p. 224), and that 'largely absent from the public rhetoric of heroism and victory are the private realities of death and deprivation, which Joan Scott has identified as characteristic of women's accounts of war' (p. 225). See Joan Scott, 'Rewriting history', in M. Higonnet, J. Jenson, S. Michel and M. Collins Weitz (eds), *Behind the Lines: Gender and the Two World Wars* (New Haven, 1987).

29 Eva Lundgren-Gothlin, *Sex and Existence* (London, 1996), p. 35.

30 *Ibid.*, pp. 35–36.

31 E. Houlding argues that it was Beauvoir's experiences during the occupation which led her to reflect upon the meaning of sexual difference in her own life, in 'Simone de Beauvoir: From the Second World War to The Second Sex', *L'Esprit créateur*, 33:1 (1993), 39–51 (p. 41).

32 'Literature is born when something in life goes slightly adrift. […] My schemes of work remained futile dreams till the day came when that happiness was threatened, and I rediscovered a certain kind of solitude in anxiety' (p. 290).

33 ['I]t was only when my experience cracked and showed faulty that I was able to take a step back and discuss it in perspective. After the declaration of war […] literature had become as essential to me as the very air I breathed' (p. 479).

34 'History took hold of me, and never let go thereafter' (p. 285). This period includes publications such as *Les Bouches inutiles* (Paris, 1945), *Le Sang des autres* (Paris, 1945), and *Tous les hommes sont mortels* (Paris, 1946).

35 'Mon expérience d'écrivain', *Les Écrits de Simone de Beauvoir* (Paris, 1979), pp. 439–57 (p. 452). ('Between 1929 and 1938 I was depoliticized, I hardly got involved in politics. Well, if I were to rewrite *La Force de l'âge*, the second volume of my memoirs, I would put far more emphasis on this indifference, as it defines me as a French bourgeois intellectual of that particular period, French intellectuals of the period being for the most part depoliticized' (my translation).)

36 '"Everyone knows your story," I've also been told, "it's become public property since '44"' (p. 5).

37 Karen McPherson refers to a 'policing away' of the female self in the autobiography in 'Generic Boundaries Transgressed', *Simone de Beauvoir Studies*, 6 (1989), 5–12 (p. 9).

38 'Involved much more than hitherto with political events, I shall have more to say about them. My narrative, however, will not become more impersonal on that account. […] the way in which history has happened to me day by day is an adventure quite as individual as my subjective development' (p. 5). The link between personal and collective histories is repeated in the text. See for example, 'Je savais à

présent que mon sort était lié à celui de tous [...]' (*FC*, p. 14); 'En 43–44, j'étais investie par l'Histoire, et c'est à son niveau que j'entendais me placer [...]' (*FC*, 75).

39 'I felt myself radically cut off from the great mass of my compatriots' (p. 314).

40 '[T]hrough the eyes of women who had been raped twenty times, of men with broken bones, of crazed children: a Frenchwoman' (pp. 381–82).

41 'I was just one of the people who were torturing them, burning them, machine-gunning them, slashing their throats, starving them; I deserved their hatred because I could still sleep, write [...]' (p. 397).

42 *Lettres à Nelson Algren: Un Amour transatlantique, 1947–64* (Paris, 1997), p. 575. (See *Beloved Chicago Man: Letters to Nelson Algren, 1947–64*, compiled and with a preface by Sylvie Le Bon de Beauvoir (London, 1998), p. 541).

43 'You don't feel like writing in this kind of France. Then I feel I get old ... and sometimes I have a pang in the heart when I think I could never see you again' (*ibid.*, p. 541).

44 'A French woman equalled someone suspect, ungrateful, almost an enemy' (pp. 237–38).

45 'A Communist, a Gaullist, would describe these years differently; so would a labourer, a farmer, a colonel, a musician' (p. 7).

46 'I had liked crowds once; now even the streets were hostile to me, I felt dispossessed as I had when the Occupation began' (p. 381).

47 The separation with Lanzmann follows de Gaulle's referendum in 1958, and comes at a time when Sartre's health is also of concern.

48 'I was merely an impotent onlooker watching the play of alien forces: history, time and death. [...] Hostile to the society to which I belonged, banished by my age from the future, stripped fibre by fibre of my past [...]' (p. 602).

49 'I grow older, the world changes, my relation with it varies; to show the transformations, the ripenings, the irreversible deterioration of others and of myself – nothing is more important to me than that' (p. 288).

50 '[I]t gives me the feeling that I do have some little effect on history. [...] I have connexions with the world as a whole' (p. 667).

51 '[F]lat heels, tight bun, I am a chieftainess, a lady manager [...]. I spend my existence with books and sitting at my worktable, pure intellect' (pp. 663–64).

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