

By the Letters

Fear and gloating at a Simone de Beauvoir conference

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January 9, 2008 was the one hundredth anniversary of Simone de Beauvoir's birth, and I was invited to Paris to speak at an international conference celebrating it. It was convened by Julia Kristeva, the justly honored literary critic, feminist writer, and practicing psychoanalyst, in cooperation with Beauvoir's adopted daughter and literary executor, Sylvie le Bon de Beauvoir. The planning committee was international and the invited speakers came from fourteen different countries, so it seemed that everything was primed for a love-fest honoring one of the most influential thinkers and writers of the twentieth century.

Eventually, after the normal academic backbiting and infighting had played itself out, the program unfolded smoothly, with one huge exception that I am certain will go down in biographies and memoirs (with history books sure to follow). I wonder which of the written versions will become definitive, because none of the witnesses can agree on what took place. This was an eerie parallel to my paper topic: I discussed how and what we remember, and how and why we choose the stories we tell, not only to others, but to ourselves.

I have to admit that I've been disturbed by the recent spate of so-called critical and theoretical writings on Beauvoir, most of which reduce her to one of two interpretations: a laundry list of her bed partners, or (even worse) what I call the "ME, ME, ME!" school of criticism, where nothing she wrote has any validity until the speaker filters it through his or her response to it. Most of the "ME" responses remind me of what I say when I'm asked to read a memoir: If you want me to examine the lint in your navel, it had better be colorful. And unfortunately, most of this writing is far from it. I was determined that my paper would not waste a word on her love life, and I certainly wasn't going to trot out any "deep waves of emotion that overwhelmed me when I first read...", to quote from one such hapless, colorless paper.

Instead, I planned to talk about Beauvoir's four volumes of autobiography and whether they were a burden or a boon for historians, biographers, and critics. I had taken to (tritely) calling them the elephant in the room because the passage of time has surrounded them with an aura of literal truth, so that no one can write anything about twentieth-century French history or culture without citing them as a primary source. In trying to assess them, I had read a lot of neuroscientific research about how the brain retains and stores information as well as how it reveals and presents it, not only to the person whose mind is undergoing scans, but to everyone with whom the person communicates. In short, these pictures of the brain show how we must now question almost everything we previously took for granted about what autobiographers, biographers, and historians have told us. Neuroscientists call this mapping the human mental representational system, but the rest of us just call it memory, whether real, false, or reconstructed.

I intended to rewrite that paper, replacing academic jargon with plain English for this article, but something happened at the three-day *colloque*—the French word for conference that we all used—that made what I wrote about the uses of memory come alive in ways that proved the neuroscientists' theses. As the colloque progressed, I was struck by how my highly academic paper about real, false, and reconstructed memory corresponded to the memory and interpretation of a particular encounter between two of the major players. I witnessed the event itself, heard from others differing views of what took place, and then—almost before it was over—I was amazed by how the encounter had morphed into fact.

Confused? Well, so am I, slightly, so let me start by telling you what happened and what triggered the event-to-be-remembered at the concluding dinner in the famed Paris eatery La Coupole. Those who are familiar with the world of Sartre and Beauvoir will recognize the players; those who know recent French intellectual history will

know the bystanders and observers. I'll set the scene by describing them. Julia Kristeva directed the colloque with grace and dignity. Sylvie le Bon de Beauvoir gave it her full cooperation, but she also gave her considerable opinions. Sylvie is a sixty-ish woman, the adult companion of Beauvoir's last years, whom Beauvoir adopted so that Sylvie could inherit her estate and become its executor (only a legal relative could do so in France when Beauvoir died). Sylvie controls all rights and permissions and, for scholars who hope to do research, she is the one who grants access or not. She is the force to be reckoned with in Beauvoir studies, and she is indeed a force.

This partially explains the backbiting and jousting for position as the planning committee set up the program. Kristeva strove for the inclusion of as many persons as could reasonably speak in a three-day session, while Sylvie strove to settle whatever personal scores she held by insisting on some and excluding others. To both women's credit, they compromised, and the roster of speakers was mostly dignified, of high quality, and of interest to the more than four hundred persons who paid 20 euros (30 dollars) to attend. Alas, there were very few young faces among the attendees, who were mostly old and retired pensioners, probably there to relive the glory days of existentialism at the Deux Magots or Café de Flore.

The speaker who drew the largest and most eager audience was Claude Lanzmann, who held the distinction of being the only man with whom Beauvoir ever lived in a domestic relationship. She was forty-four and he twenty-seven when their six years of cohabitation began in a twelve-by-sixteen-foot room in a shabby hotel, with bathroom down the hall. Later, when their affair was long over and they were just good friends, he made his brilliant film, *Shoah*, with most of his financial backing courtesy of Beauvoir.

Lanzmann's talk marked the first session of the colloque. I think the audience was expecting to hear about what it was like for two creative people to live and work practically on top of each other in such a small space, but instead Lanzmann told them coyly about

how good Beauvoir was in bed. He said repeatedly that he was the last of the six lovers she had in her life (hah! little does he know!), and strongly (smirkingly?) he hinted that he was the best.

Then came the bone of contention: He told the audience that he has three hundred letters from Beauvoir, all filled with protestations of passion and undying love, and (with a mock wringing of hands) what, oh what, shall he do with them? The audience gasped in surprise while Sylvie glowered. Lanzmann continued: Rare-book dealers from the United States routinely offer him piles of money, but of course he's French and he wants the letters to stay in France (understood here is that French libraries expect donations and don't pay, and he wants money). Well then, he asks dramatically, shall he publish them? He has the audience on the edge of their seats by now. He pauses before continuing slowly, drawing out every word and enjoying every moment. He would love to publish the letters. After all, the public has a right to read them, but even though he owns the actual paper on which they are written, oh dear, Sylvie owns the copyright and therefore can keep the words from being printed.

The salivating audience groans. To give them just a taste, he infringes Sylvie's copyright by reading one aloud, of the "darling you are a magnificent lover" variety, a love letter typically embarrassing to everyone but the recipient. Sylvie was furious. By reading it aloud, he had, as the lawyers say, published it.

Copyright law is much the same in France as in the United States, and Lanzmann soothed the audience, hungry for more, by saying there might be a solution for the other 299 letters: He could sell them to an American university library, where scholars could read and paraphrase the content in their own writings, thus bypassing Sylvie. Or—again another dramatic pause—he could simply burn them in the fireplace on the next cold night, for after all, they are very, very personal and perhaps they should simply be destroyed.

With his every proposal, the audience moaned or cried out, either in agreement, concern, or fear that the letters would somehow be lost for posterity. Lanzmann toyed with their emotions, smiling

on the podium while Sylvie sat festering in the audience, her cheeks mottled with crimson anger. Kristeva, a kind and soothing presence throughout the often-fractionious colloque, sat tranquilly, her eyes hidden behind dark glasses and her smooth face no doubt reflecting her analytic training as she showed no emotion at all.

If Kristeva's husband, the celebrated critic Philippe Sollers, was in the audience during Lanzmann's talk, I didn't see him, but his was the last presentation of the day. Sollers's topic, like Lanzmann's and almost everyone else's, was ostensibly Beauvoir's love life but was actually more of a meandering Sollerian (to coin a phrase) collection of random witticisms that had as much to do with Soller as with his subject. But never mind; he's smart and charming and he gives good value in everything he says or writes. His leaping, darting reflections on Beauvoir's bed partners and love life in general were light and amusing and a pleasant contrast to the turgid literalism of Lanzmann.

My talk was smack dab in the middle of the day, between these two, the last one before lunch and one hour late because of all the delays caused by various ministers in the Sarkozy government who seized the podium to gush effusively about what Simone de Beauvoir meant to their personal lives. By the time I spoke, the crowd was famished and ready to eat their programs, but to my amazement nobody left. I launched into a serious discussion of the concept of memory and how scientific research requires us to rethink all forms of autobiographical remembering. I talked about one study that examined how one person's memory differs from the memories of all others who shared the same experience. I discussed how memory influences narrative construction, i.e., how memory contributes to the construction of the Self through the creative act of writing about one's self. Interspersed between these two investigations lay one more, of how memory influences and is influenced by what we write in letters or personal communications, what we might call the fact versus the fiction of what our subjects choose to write, and how we, the scholars and readers who study them, choose to interpret them.

I told my audience that we needed to keep in mind the idea of

reconstruction, the term psychoanalysts use to describe the techniques that a person uses to recover the experiences, emotions, and events of his or her past. Scientists tell us that no matter how sincerely—even desperately—a writer of autobiography and memoir strives to discover the “real” reality and the literal truth of his or her Self, it is almost impossible to do so.

I thought about this three days later, when the colloque was ending. The program was running late and still going strong at 7 p.m. when Sylvie began the farewell summation. All the speakers were invited to a celebration dinner at La Coupole that was to start at 7:30, and it was clear we would not get there on time. Nor could anyone change into glad rags, no time even to wash faces or brush hair in the cavernous Refectoire des Cordeliers where the talks were given; everyone would need to rush for the Odeon metro to go straight to the restaurant.

Naturally, everyone hoped Sylvie would just tell us that our papers were brilliant, thank us for participating, and let us get to dinner, but she didn’t. Yes, she paid the ritual compliments, but then she paused for effect. She had a little problem, she told the audience coyly; everything in the colloque had been gloriously positive but there was just one thing that was *sooo negative*—long pause here and much simpering—well, should she or should she not tell the audience what was upsetting her? Of course the audience roared, clapped, and stamped its collective feet. Of course everyone wanted to know what she meant.

It was Lanzmann, she confided. How could he possibly want to embarrass poor dead Simone by publicly reading one letter and publishing the rest—this from the woman who, way back in 1990, had allowed to be published Sartre’s and Beauvoir’s correspondence in which the couple discussed how Beauvoir would pimp her high school students for Sartre’s delectation, and how she, too, would take these young girls to bed so they could compare notes. On and on Sylvie went about Lanzmann’s effrontery, totally losing her audi-

ence’s sympathy in the process. When she finished, the sound was more of footsteps rushing for the metro than of applause for her.

We were all late to La Coupole and were hustled into a private dining room. Those who care about such things busied themselves by pretending to be merely ambling around the tables, while in reality they were busy switching their place cards for more advantageous seating. Kristeva’s table was at the side of the room but no one messed with it since every seat was filled, starting with her husband, and including Sylvie and some of her friends. In the middle of the room where everyone could see them, place cards for Claude Lanzmann and his wife sat conspicuously alone at a table for ten. My French colleagues told me this was intentional, that no other luminaries had been assigned to this table so the Lanzmanns would be surrounded by *hoi polloi*. My table was between the Lanzmann and the Kristeva-Sylvie-Sollers tables, in clear sight of both. The only jousting my friends and I did was to fight over who would get the seat with the best view of both tables.

The Kristeva-Sylvie-Sollers table was fully seated when the Lanzmanns walked in. They stood beside their table, chatting to the few people who dared to brave Sylvie’s disapproval by greeting them. Philippe Sollers walked over to the Lanzmanns and saluted them warmly. Everything seemed peaceful and conciliatory, so everyone at my table relaxed and began to chat as we poured wine and passed bread.

This is where everything I said earlier about memory comes into play, and where I wonder about how an event becomes a historical moment, and how that moment becomes locked into a biographical fact.

Suddenly, a horrendous crash came from the Lanzmann table. Everything was strewn about, chairs were overturned; the people who had moved place cards to sit there were splattered with red wine. They were all rushing to the fringe of the room where the only vacant places at table were left. A grim-faced Sollers strode back to

his table and took a seat with his back to the rest of the room. It was eerily silent; nobody moved; nobody said anything. Nobody except me, girl reporter that I used to be.

“What happened over there?” I asked some of the wine-spattered ones as they rushed past. One said, “Sollers shoved Lanzmann’s wife.” Another said, “Lanzmann’s wife fell against the table.” Another said, “Lanzmann lost his balance, fell, and tipped over the table.” This was all very interesting because I watched Lanzmann leave the room before the brouhaha began and he still was nowhere to be seen. Waiters were scurrying to right the chairs and clean the table. Lanzmann’s wife stood quietly until they had finished; then she and one other woman sat down. The woman promptly attacked her salad and ate diligently. Lanzmann’s wife seemed stunned and sat there frozen. Suddenly, Sollers got up and crossed over to her, sat down, and embraced her. She began to cry, and he began to kiss her and smooth her hair, trying to soothe her. This went on for quite a while.

Then he stood up, pulled her up by her hands, and persuaded her to come to his table, where a place was made, not only for her but also for her husband.

When Lanzmann returned from wherever he had been, he seemed pleased to discover that his place had been set directly across from his mortal adversary, Sylvie. The various courses were served and cleared away; wine flowed as waiters fanned out to all the tables with bottle after bottle. Again there was an unexpected eruption as shouting, finger-pointing, and cursing came from the Kristeva-Sollers table. Sylvie was jabbing her finger and screaming obscenities at Lanzmann. Sollers was pounding the table and shouting, but his remarks were more along the lines of mediation than antagonism. Lanzmann’s deep baritone boomed out from time to time, mostly in what sounded like loud guffaws. The subject was his letters and he was clearly enjoying himself immensely, for only he had the power to decide what would be done with them.

At my table, where the only young scholars who had partici-

pated in the colloque sat, we began to analyze what we had just seen. Our papers had all tried to move Simone de Beauvoir out of her bedroom and back onto an intellectual podium, so our conversation evolved naturally into what actually happened when the table was overturned. What did we see, we historians and biographers from France and America, and how would we recount it when we wrote or talked about it in times to come? Several of the younger scholars were already turning it into memoir, and were busy taking notes on how it affected everything from their digestion to their dignity. Very quickly, our multicultural, multi-age group realized that the only thing we could say with certainty was that a table was overturned, wine was spilled, and clothes were stained.

But who pushed whom? What triggered the push? How could such unseemly anger mitigate so quickly into camaraderie, especially when we looked over at the combatants’ table and saw Lanzmann and Sylvie embracing as if they were each other’s long-lost best friend? What did this mean—that he had given in and surrendered the letters? No, we were told, they were only wishing each other a fond good night, and promising to meet again soon.

An old woman who had been a heroine of the Resistance in World War II (and had probably known Sartre and Beauvoir better than anyone else in the room) shrugged her shoulders as if to say, This is how existential fist fights always resolved themselves. To her, we Americans were naïve to take it seriously.

One of the younger scholars asked if the incident we had just witnessed might someday be written about with the same critical intensity as, say, one of Sartre’s and Camus’s falling-outs. One of my French peers said what a sorry thing it would be if that happened, for it would just show the poverty and paucity of contemporary intellectual argument as compared with those mind-enhancing debates of the mid-twentieth century.

Everyone asked why I was so quiet and not contributing to the discussion. “Because I’m probably going to be the first to get it into print,” I said, thinking of my promise to publish here. As I went

around the room to say my farewells, what to write weighed on me. All I could think of was how differently the multitude of people who witnessed this single event interpreted it. What more could I write than: Somebody was angry, one person shoved another, a table was overturned, wine was spilled, and everyone kissed and made up?

—and, in a paraphrase of the old television quiz show: Will the real reality please stand up!