Beauvoir and Writing as the Creation of the Self
Memoirs, Diaries, Biography


In The Cost of Living (2018), Deborah Levy, thinking about her own divorce, reflects on Simone de Beauvoir’s refusal to move to Chicago to live with Nelson Algren: ‘Surely she could write and have happiness and love and a home and a child? She didn’t think so. I had found it quite tricky myself’.1 Levy’s memoir draws from Beauvoir’s demystification of romantic love and motherhood, and its search for ‘a new way of living’ calls for alternative approaches to sustaining loving relationships. In theme and in form, Levy’s memoir resembles other recent autobiographical writings, like Maggie Nelson’s The Argonauts (2016) and Carmen Maria Machado’s In the Dreamhouse (2020). Substituting queer theory for The Second Sex, Nelson and Machado transform the tale of their own ordeals and unexpected pleasures into a manifesto addressed to all those suffering from restrictive gender norms.2 These three books show the continued importance of (auto)biographical women’s writing and feminist conceptions of subject-formation. How are our affective relationships, that determine who we are and how we understand ourselves, pervaded by gendered expectations that shape our desires, while also undermining our affection? How can we write about these relationships – and thus ourselves – in a society that has historically awarded men the prerogative to publish
their autobiographies and to define the terms under which one could publicise one’s life-stories? These questions also crop up when reading Beauvoir’s second volume of *Diary of a Philosophy Student* (2019) and Kate Kirkpatrick’s biography *Becoming Beauvoir: A Life* (2019). Not mere scholarly achievements, these publications are likely to spark new debates that transcend the limits of the – fast-expanding – field of Beauvoir studies and speak to those interested in autobiographical writing as a form of social critique.\(^3\)

Furthermore, within Beauvoir scholarship, these two publications further bolster the case that Beauvoir is not reducible to *La Grande Sartreuse* and produced philosophically original work. The editors of *The Beauvoir Series* (in which the diary appeared) and Kirkpatrick bring new evidence to the table in the form of hitherto unpublished and untranslated texts, such as the notebooks, correspondences, various pieces of fiction and essays. The new material has the great benefit that it not only testifies to Beauvoir’s independence from Sartre as a thinker, but also deepens our appreciation of her wide-ranging oeuvre and rigorous, wholly unique thought.

**Diary of a Philosophy Student, 1928–1929**

Beauvoir kept a diary during various period in her life in which she documented, on a daily basis, which books she read, which performances, films, and exhibitions she attended, and with whom she spent her time. The student diaries, which consist of seven notebooks (one got lost) from 1926 to 1930, have previously been published in French as *Cahiers de Jeunesse* (2008). This treasure trove of information about the intellectual and social landscape of the young Beauvoir is currently translated into English and released in three volumes, the second of which has just appeared. This volume covers the period when she is studying for the *agrégation* (September 1928–September 1929) and chronicles her meeting with Sartre as well as their discussions in the Luxembourg Gardens. For those studying the lines of theoretical influence between Sartre and Beauvoir, this diary is instrumental for mapping Beauvoir’s theoretical occupations prior to meeting Sartre. The second volume, like the first, shows that Beauvoir consistently engages with the question of the relation between self and other, which implies that she did not adopt this theme from Sartre. This is not necessarily to say, as Edward and Kate Fullbrook do, that Sartre adopted ideas from Beauvoir.\(^4\) As Kirkpatrick convincingly argues in her reflection on the Fullbrooks’ hypothesis, such a reading neglects both the ongoing dialogue between the two that makes it impossible
to decide in whose mind certain ideas originated, as well the common French tradition out of which their thinking emerged.⁵

While the diary under discussion provides an overview of the books that Beauvoir read, the theoretical insights do not consist so much in her discussion of other authors’ arguments. Beauvoir readily admits that she is fed up with using her intelligence ‘to accumulate knowledge’ and that her ‘[d]esire for books, paintings, music, and conversation’ takes precedence in her diary, ‘chasing away what is only more or less a verbal game of the brain alone’.⁶ Instead, they can be found in her search for the universal or general (terms she did not yet use at this time) of her concrete experiences. One could add that the student diaries show, above all, how Beauvoir constructs her subjectivity and identity through acts of writing, which links this text to her mémoires.

The interesting question is not if the memoirs correctly reflect what is recorded in the diaries, which wrongly suggests a ‘truth’ that is contained in the entries that might have been lost or distorted in the mémoires; but how Beauvoir’s narration of the self has changed over time, and how she repeatedly reinterprets her contemporaneous notes in light of her shifting understanding of herself. She does so through such concrete acts as re-reading her diary, commenting and making notes on it, and writing summaries of the preceding months and years. It is to the great credit of the detailed annotation by the editors that everyone, not just those with access to the handwritten documents, can trace these activities.

Reading her notes, it is easy to consider her diary-keeping as a preparatory practice for her biography. And yet, this presumption of continuity would neglect, on the one hand, the historical context in which Beauvoir wrote her diary, and on the other hand, her mature conception of biography. As to the latter, Beauvoir asserts that: ‘in autobiography, it is a question of starting from the singularity of my life in order to find a generality, that of my era, that of the milieu in which I live’.⁷ The autobiographies were intended for a wide readership and aimed at disclosing the general characteristics of an historical era. With regard to the historical context of her diaries, it is worth mentioning (as Barbara Klaw does in the excellent introduction to the first volume of the diaries) that Beauvoir is likely to have kept a diary as a child that would have been read by her mother in order to stand guard over her spiritual wellbeing, as was common for French Catholic girls of her class. The diary Beauvoir kept as a student would no longer be of such an explicitly confessional nature (and would no longer be read by her mother) and is instead conceived within a Gidean aesthetics of the self, laden with references to Maurice Barrès’ le culte du moi. These
authors’ proposals of an aestheticized formation of the self provide Beauvoir with the tools to go against the Catholicism in which she was still, to a large extent, submerged.

Beauvoir’s notebook contains, not surprisingly, many false starts that are at odds with the linearity displayed in her diary’s summaries and her chronological autobiography. This contrast is particularly sharp in her preoccupation with Jacques, who was abroad in the period covered by the diary, but is mentioned in most, if not nearly all, entries. In many of those, Jacques figures as an apostrophe that punctuates the moments when Beauvoir affirms her love for him in order to, so it seems, reassure herself; and when she berates his silence, one suspects that her lingering hesitance as to whether she should send him another letter (she wrote two, he none) indicates her growing doubt, but it is hard to single out the point at which she makes up her mind. Significant in this regard is the entry of 10 May (182) which describes a dinner at her aunt’s, who passes on her son’s half-hearted apologies for not writing back, and who mentions Jacques’s refusal to provide for his little brother the next year. While Beauvoir’s unease is palpable, she nevertheless continues her adulation of Jacques in later entries and only states her disillusion four months later (287). Interestingly, Beauvoir relates this event too in Memoirs of a Dutiful Daughter, but then it marks her conclusion that she ‘could perfectly well do without Jacques’. 8 Again, the question is not which account is more correct, but what (she thinks) she is doing when, in her diary, she goes into raptures over Jacques. Given the formative influence of Gide, we might read her diary – as she likely did herself years later – in the light of her approving citation of the author in The Second Sex in a section that demystifies romantic love: “‘In the domain of feeling, what is real is indistinguishable from what is imaginary’, writes Gide. ‘And it is sufficient to imagine one loves, in order to love, so it is sufficient to say to oneself that when one loves one imagines one loves, in order to love a little less.’” 9

What about that other love affair with the ‘incomparable friend of my thought’ who freed her from the bourgeois romance with Jacques? Surely this was not a smooth transition: in September 1929, a few months after meeting Sartre and almost a month after admitting that Jacques could no longer ‘save’ her, she agonizes about ‘the uncertainty of the heart [. . .] that knows so surely how much it loves Sartre, how much it loves Lama, how much it could love Jacques, and each in a different way. But that doesn’t know how to reconcile within itself all of these loves’. 10

The demystification of love that she develops in The Second Sex allowed her to critically assess her love life. Of the three men, however,
the young Sartre receives the gentlest treatment in Beauvoir’s autobi-
ography: she debunks her romanticisation of Jacques and disappro-
ingly describes Maheu’s (Herbaud in the memoir) conservative views
on women and marriage. Yet, Sartre gets off the hook in the sense that
she does not discuss how his youthful ill-treatment of women impacted
her. Even if (as Kirkpatrick convincingly shows) Beauvoir is critical of
Sartre as a lover in private, she does not make her criticism public. With
this qualification, one can still agree with Moi’s observation that ‘it is
as if Beauvoir’s relationship to Sartre remains the one sacrosanct area
of her life, to be protected even against her own critical attention’.¹¹

Consider, for instance, the famous scene where Sartre ‘demolished’
Beauvoir’s ethical ideas in the Luxembourg Gardens, which she de-
scribes in both her memoir and diary.¹² The odd thing is not that
these accounts conflict, but rather that they have remained the same
throughout the years – indeed, after The Second Sex and her rising
awareness of gender imbalances. The event figures in a wider narrative
that she had ‘often felt the need of stronger meat than that to which I
was accustomed’,¹³ by which she means that her previous friends were
not the philosophical and theoretical interlocutors that sufficiently
challenged her. She experienced this need both intellectually and eth-
ically, and voiced it repeatedly in her diary: because no-one matched
her intellectually, she thought, she could withdraw in the ‘ivory tower’
of solipsism.¹⁴ Beauvoir was happy to be intellectually challenged by
les petits camarades (of whom Sartre seemed her the most intelligent),
and their challenge also forced her to take seriously that her interloc-
utor had his own perspective.

But her new friends presented her with more than an intellectual
and ethical challenge: she also jumps on the opportunity to reconcile,
as she would articulate the issue in 1929, her academic successes with
retaining her femininity. When Maheu praises her scholarly achieve-
ments, saying he never met a woman like her, Beauvoir comments:
‘This touches me because it is not due to my exams, but rather to
what I knew how to remain despite them [i.e., feminine]’ (198). And
Sartre, praised for understanding her on her own terms, bluntly told
her that she is ‘unpleasant when I [Beauvoir] speak of philosophy’
(257). This and similar passages describe a tension that is not unique
to Beauvoir but, as she argues in The Second Sex, typical for women
with ambition. If we assume – and I think we should – that Beauvoir
intended her memoir to speak to a wide female audience to disclose
the commonalities of their situation, her omission from these passages
is odd, exactly because she should have known that so many of her
readers could relate to it.
Barbara Klaw is to be applauded for her translation that renders the text highly accessible and her transcription of the original notebooks (the resulting minor differences from *Cahiers de jeunesse* are clearly indicated). Her introductory essay, ‘On Reading Beauvoir’s Early Writings, 1926–1930, as a Philosophy of Self-Help’, argues, as the title suggests, that the diaries broached many themes long before these were discussed in today’s self-help books. For instance, by practising positive thinking – asking herself what she wants and how she wants to feel – Beauvoir, Klaw argues, attracts what she had wished for (7). Or, once Beauvoir had realised what her long-term goal was, she settles on a concrete plan to realize that goal (12).

The essay successfully shows the contemporary relevance of the diaries, and situates them, in a refreshingly unpretentious move, alongside popular self-help books in the same tradition as philosophy as therapy. Yet, one might ask if Klaw neglects the social conditions under which one is spurred to ‘think positively’. Beauvoir would criticise her youthful self for failing to consider her own social position and scold her solipsistic hedonism. Furthermore, self-help books have been criticised as an outgrowth of a neo-liberal rationality in which one is individually responsible for one’s psychological wellbeing. The problem is, in Sara Ahmed’s words, that ‘happiness becomes a disciplinary technique’. In this reading, exhortations to embrace positive thoughts and realise our dreams are criticised because they function as prescriptions that present people who fail them because of their social position as responsible for their failure.

**Becoming Beauvoir**

Kirkpatrick’s respectful depiction of Beauvoir is likely to introduce a new generation of readers to Beauvoir and carefully mines the newly available material, which includes not only the student diaries but also the correspondence with Claude Lanzmann. Kirkpatrick proceeds chronologically, covering Beauvoir’s full life with extra attention for the late 1920s (the period covered by the student diaries) and for her affairs with Nelson Algren and Claude Lanzmann. Kirkpatrick’s hypothesis that the importance of Sartre for Beauvoir should be qualified in light of her many other (romantic) relationships is clearly confirmed by the student diary of 1928–29. But these two books are also complementary, because they invite us to reflect on (auto)biography and the importance of narration for subject-formation. Central to Kirkpatrick’s biography is the ‘becoming’ of Beauvoir, which she pri-
marily (but not exclusively) understands as a form of self-presentation by a public intellectual that strategically anticipates the hostilities faced by women who acquire such visibility. In this reading, Beauvoir’s memoirs carry out a public-relations-offensive that, in close tandem with the gender-biased press coverage, led to the misleading image of Beauvoir as the companion of Sartre, the feminist existentialist.

Kirkpatrick does an excellent job of putting into perspective this image of Beauvoir and showing her readers the theoretical and biographical riches that therefore appear. This discovery applies first and foremost to Beauvoir’s many love affairs and to what Kirkpatrick calls her ‘philosophy of love’. These two are not strictly separable because Beauvoir wants to live her philosophy and philosophise her life. Beauvoir’s many amorous relations and her reflection on how these relations determined her allow Kirkpatrick to decentre the personal and theoretical importance of Sartre for Beauvoir. This approach qualifies the famous pact between Sartre and Beauvoir that they would be each other’s essential love but would be allowed to have contingent lovers. Kirkpatrick’s respectful and comprehensive reading of the correspondences with Bost, Algren, and Lanzmann show that Beauvoir was in private quite critical of Sartre, and accorded her lovers, many of whom became friends, a more central role in her life than that of a ‘third party’ to her necessary relationship with Sartre. Olga Kosakiewicz, Jacques-Laurent Bost, Nelson Algren, Claude Lanzmann, Sylvie Le Bon Beauvoir – in this list, Sartre is better understood as one of the elements, rather than situated outside it.

Kirkpatrick only briefly thematises what she takes to be Beauvoir’s philosophy of love, which is a missed opportunity; furthermore, given Kirkpatrick’s previous publications, she would be very well placed to carry out such a thematisation. Kirkpatrick argues that the central problem in Beauvoir’s 1943 *Pyrrhus and Cinéas* emerges from her observation that many people – and especially women – seek a guarantee of their life’s meaning by devoting it to someone else. This devotion, however, is problematic if it leads one to limit the freedom of the person one is devoted to. ‘So Beauvoir wanted to know – since so many human beings seem to want to be devoted to another – is it possible to be devoted without being a tyrant?’ (200). Love, in other words, is the privileged scene for the enactment of reciprocal relations of recognition, as well as of the drama of misrecognition. Kirkpatrick shows subtly how this theme recurs in *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, which she paraphrases as a rebuttal of (the young) Sartre’s concept of freedom: ‘in order to be free ethically you must use your freedom to embrace the ties that hold you to others’ (241) It reappears in the demystifi-
cation of romantic love in *The Second Sex*. In Kirkpatrick’s discussion of the latter, she asks if Beauvoir herself had experienced the ideal of reciprocal love when she described it in 1949 (259). While Kirkpatrick does not answer the question, her discussion of Beauvoir’s love life suggests that if she had, it would not have been with Sartre but with Bost. On the other hand, Kirkpatrick seems to suggest that she eventually did – with Algren and, in a less complicated way, Lanzmann.

Alluding to Beauvoir’s many lovers and friends, Kirkpatrick tangentially links them to the key concept of ‘becoming’ in the concluding sentences: ‘But if there is one thing to learn from the life of Simone Beauvoir, it’s this: No one becomes herself alone’ (402). Becoming, in this final paragraph, builds on Kirkpatrick’s discussion of Beauvoir’s philosophy of love insofar as it accentuates our dependence on others for having a unique life that we call ours. But ‘becoming’ also serves to deconstruct Beauvoir’s self-stylisation in her diaries. Highlighting the discrepancies between Beauvoir’s (student) diaries and her *mémories*, Kirkpatrick suggests that these result from Beauvoir’s attempt to assuage the misogyny levelled against female public intellectuals: Beauvoir’s trivialisation of her scholarly achievements, her admission that Sartre was intellectually superior, the omission of her many affairs with younger men and women are read by Kirkpatrick as so many attempts by Beauvoir to manage her public image under the condition of restrictive gender expectations. Kirkpatrick makes a point of citing the sexist, derogatory comments levelled against Beauvoir in life and in death. These comments add little to our understanding of Beauvoir, but they renew our admiration for her persistence and indignation at her treatment; furthermore, they call to mind the intense vitriol faced by those defying gender expectations today, leaving us with few illusions about positive changes on the particular point of media attention and misogyny.

This leads me to the second, critical use of the term ‘becoming’: society makes it difficult to pursue one’s own projects if one is a woman. As Kirkpatrick rightly observes, the central tenet of *The Second Sex* that one is not born but becomes a woman, is made more concrete (and thus accessible to a wider readership) in Beauvoir’s memoirs (296). To reframe the issue in Beauvoir’s formulation of her autobiographical project referred to above, the memoirs aim at disclosing the general aspects of the process of becoming that which each girl was socially ‘predestined’ to be: a woman. In Kirkpatrick’s reading, this aim might also have led Beauvoir to certain omissions from her autobiography: commenting on Beauvoir’s account of her early crush on Sartre in her memoirs, Kirkpatrick writes that: ‘it is unclear wheth-
er she was that woman in real life. She may have depicted herself in this ancillary way not out of factual fidelity or narrative necessity, but feminist commitment – because she thought that telling the story in a certain way would give it greater power’ (117).

Reading this and similar passages, one can sometimes be struck by Kirkpatrick’s conjectures about Beauvoir’s reasons for omitting relationships and events from her memoirs. At the same time, exactly because Kirkpatrick allows for various different motivations without decisively settling on either one, her speculations serve to open up a conversation about the difference between Beauvoir as we got to know her from her memoirs and as we are getting to know her from her notebooks and letters.

But this brings me to a second criticism: the risk of taking the diaries as more real, immediate expressions of Beauvoir’s inner sensations, against which the autobiographies are being checked. This worry is compounded by the importance that Kirkpatrick attributes to the opposition between the view of oneself from within and from without, where greater epistemic and ethical importance is paid to the view from within: ‘the life lived cannot be resurrected from the life recounted’.17 As a consequence, Kirkpatrick at times seems to suggest that omissions of specific incidents from the diaries should be attributed to appeasing the ‘view from without’ (which is marked by gender bias) rather than a changed self-understanding. Yet, if the diaries show us one thing, it is that Beauvoir incessantly revised the story of her own life.

Importantly, the status of lived experience is at the centre of debates in feminist theory.18 From a post-structuralist perspective, one could argue that feminist history cannot merely rely on a strategy of recuperating women’s testimonies that have been erased from publicity. While that is undoubtedly important, it wrongly assumes a transparency of these experiences to those recounting them (whether these are historical agents or the historians). In the words of Joan Scott: ‘It is precisely this kind of appeal to experience as uncontestable evidence [the so-called truth of “a subject’s own account of what he or she has lived through”] and as an originary point of explanation – as a foundation on which analysis is based – that weakens the critical thrust of histories of difference’.19

In the case of Beauvoir, this means that we need to consider gender bias not only in the self-censorship in her memoirs, but also in her self-reporting in her diaries. Indeed, Beauvoir’s memoirs carry out part of this latter project, alienating herself from her ‘view from within’ but grasping the conditions under which she felt these experiences.
Autobiography requires, in Beauvoir’s words, not only to re-create ‘one’s knowledge [. . .], a consciousness’ but also to ‘find the context in which this life took shape insofar one was unaware of it’.20 In other words, even if one is not willing to pursue a post-structuralist reading, Beauvoir’s reflections on autobiography provide enough reasons to be critical with regard to the diaries and not to accord them any epistem-ic priority with regard to the autobiography.

**Conclusion**

The release of new material and translations has allowed us to reassess Beauvoir’s intellectual and personal relationship with Sartre, showing her – insofar as this was not yet clear – as a profound and wide-rang-ing theorist and writer in her own right. One can only hope that the volumes comprising The Beauvoir Series will soon appear as paper-backs: while the one-volume edition of the *Cahiers de Jeunesse* is as inexpensive as 30 euros, the three English volumes covering the same notebooks will cost more than 150 euros, which is only too likely to limit their availability to university libraries. That would be a pity, because, as Klaw suggests, these books appeal to a wide audience, and many will be inspired to take up Beauvoir’s diaries after reading Kirkpatrick’s biography.

In conclusion, I would like to sketch two (of the many) possible ways in which these two publications are relevant to those interested in (auto-) biographical women’s writing. First, read alongside recent memoirs by Levy, Nelson, and Machado, they reignite the question of how form relates to subjecthood, and in particular how the sequence of the written work relates to the temporality of the subject. For instance, Beauvoir was aware of the limits and benefits of the chronological exposition of her memoirs but decided in favour of it because it intimates the subject’s experience of time.21 Kirkpatrick shares Beauvoir’s notion of the subject as becoming, and thus also develops a linear plot. Nelson, on the other hand, structures her text around paragraphs rather than chapters that follow associations, but not the unfolding of events. She presents herself as (starting from a subject that is) surprised by physical sensations, shaped by social expectations and, if engaged in processes of change, these do not consist in a (semi-) teleological becoming.

Second, the confessional nature of the diaries and the historical context in which Beauvoir started to write her notebooks allows re-inscribing her position in the vastly expanding scholarship on au-
tobiography. For instance, the proliferating studies of spiritual diaries in (early-) modernity could contribute, if not historically then methodologically, to studying Beauvoir. Furthermore, these studies are likely to raise questions (to put the issue in Foucaultian terms) as to how autobiographical writings are effects of pastoral power or, on the other hand, to what extent their production is a freedom practice in which a subject constitutes itself. In other words: besides facilitating a dialogue across disciplinary boundaries and with other thinkers such as Foucault, the historical contextualisation of Beauvoir’s autobiographical texts deepens our understanding of the ethical, political and epistemological stakes in the production of the self through acts of creative writing.

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Notes

3. This category is wider and arguably at times more pronounced in their engagement with contemporary politics than those working in autobiographical women’s writing, which also entails (early-) modern authors. For a critically acclaimed example of the first, see Didier Eribon, *Returning to Reims* (London: Penguin, 2018).


17. The opposition is first articulated by Beauvoir in her student diaries and significant for Kirkpatrick because, in predating Sartre’s distinction between *en-soi* and *pour-soi*, it demonstrates her intellectual independence of Sartre. Kirkpatrick, *Becoming Beauvoir*, 191, 400.


21. Ibid., 293–294.
