WRITING COUPLES: READING DEUTSCHER ON SARTRE AND BEAUVOR

ABSTRACT

The figure of the “writing couple” is a useful starting point for thinking about what it is that Max Deutscher does in his book Genre and Void: Looking Back at Sartre and Beauvoir (2003). This particular couple occupies a considerable imaginary space in twentieth century philosophical discussion, and Deutscher’s approach does much to bring it into a contemporary and even very local focus. His desire “to keep [both Sartre and Beauvoir] in motion as part of contemporary thinking” (p.ix) finds expression in an idiosyncratic or “homely reading” that brings the couple back to us anew. A certain “peripheral” vision guides Deutcher’s “looking back”, allowing him to develop Sartre’s and Beauvoir’s work in relation to a new and contemporary horizon. As a consequence, Deutscher’s homely reading engages in ethical ways with their work, bringing to light the wondrous qualities in Sartre’s and Beauvoir’s writing that we have, over time, lost the ability to see.

BIOGRAPHY

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Many of us have thought long and hard about the relation between Jean-Paul Sartre and Simone Beauvoir, *i.e.* as a couple in the various senses of the term: emotional, intellectual, symbolic, and, of course, writing.** The question of the “writing couple” Beauvoir-Sartre (for why should he always come first?) might be a useful starting point for how we think about what it is that Max Deutscher does in his book *Genre and Void: Looking Back at Sartre and Beauvoir.* And I’m led to think so by recalling something that Alice Jardine wrote well over twenty years ago now. In “Death Sentences: Writing Couples and Ideology,” Jardine has the following to say:

> The question of “the couple” has become the object of contemporary philosophical fascination, where *all* metaphysical couples are in the process of being discarded, recoupled differently and urgently: active/passive, form/matter, speech/writing, conscious/unconscious. This work has been pursued by some of us because these couples, intrinsic to the ensemble of symbolic systems in the West ... would indeed appear to be modeled on *the couple*: Man/Woman, Masculine/Feminine ... Couples. We tend to think in couples even when we try very hard not to; we revise the concept of the couple, we re-write it, we mediate it in new ways, but couples are very hard to get away from. It’s just the way we think in the West, have been trained to think—based on the force of the *copula*, of copulation ...
now nothingness.” To be conscious is “to make nothing of” something about being—“to make light of” how things are.”\textsuperscript{xiii} By doing so, Deutscher begins the work of bringing the Sartre of 1943 into a contemporary place and time.\textsuperscript{xiii} Interestingly, he refers to this as a ‘homely reading,’ noting that ‘we shall create at least one very satisfactory and revealing reading if we hear “to nihilate” as “to make nothing of”, or “to make light”.’\textsuperscript{xiv, xv} This homely reading extends to Deutscher’s re-imagining the orthodox ‘being-for-itself’ as ‘living for oneself’, and ‘being-for-others’ as ‘living for others’.\textsuperscript{xvii, xvii} The importance of this imaginative, contemporary rendering lies, Deutscher says, in the fact that we have little way ‘of avoiding the hypnotic effect of reification’\textsuperscript{xxvi} unless we divest the orthodox term of its sedimented aura.

Now it is this homely reading that I think characterizes the heart and soul of Deutscher’s book on Beauvoir and Sartre.\textsuperscript{xvii} It is this desire to render contemporary, to render now—’to keep them in motion as part of contemporary thinking’—that lends it its distinctive tone, its distinctive appeal. We might think of this homely reading, as Matthew Lamb suggests, as a kind of ‘peripheral reading,’ an observing from the peripheries of a metropole philosophy; and this is possibly, as well, a particularly Australian way to read. Just as Beauvoir, in her day, is able to read Sartre from the peripheries—as a woman—finding vistas in his work that other metropole philosophers (such as Foucault) would miss, Deutscher, too, as distant Australian reads with a certain ‘peripheral’ vision (hears with a foreign ear?), and this permits a new and contemporary horizon. No need, then, to kill off the Father. Beauvoir and Deutscher thus escape Foucault’s rather Oedipal fate. Now all of this brings back to mind Meaghan Morris’ piece, published in the year after Sartre’s death, “Import Rhetoric”—concerning the real ‘work’ that ‘we’ do ‘here’ observing/reading from the peripheries, and ‘translating’ what comes ‘in’ from over ‘there.’\textsuperscript{xxviii}

So, Deutscher’s homely reading literally brings Beauvoir and Sartre “home” to “us”—here and now, allowing us to hear their work in new and contemporary ways. And one of the ways that this homely reading proceeds is to turn up the (historical) volume on what passes between Sartre and Beauvoir.\textsuperscript{xiv}

This might help us to understand something of the Beauvoir-Sartre writing couple that Deutscher constructs.\textsuperscript{xxv} From the outset, he wants to capture something of the (unconscious? unintentional? peripheral?) irreverence that Beauvoir’s re-working of Sartre’s terms achieves.\textsuperscript{xvii} Indeed, he writes: ‘Beauvoir’s debt to these terms is less continuous and less intense. I hope to show that in making more connections with biology, economics, history and social circumstances and, not least, sexuality and sexual difference, her use has already shifted a good deal more towards a flexible idiom,\textsuperscript{xxv} an idiom we might think of as grounded in the materiality of the “world.” Now Beauvoir, in Deutscher’s description, re-writes Sartre in a manner which interestingly “anticipates” Deutscher’s own project. She is the voice that inflects Sartre’s words toward the other in a more intimate, and we might say homely, manner. ‘We have seen,’ Deutscher writes, ‘how Beauvoir is subverting (revising or extending) Sartre’s account by subverting (revising or extending) it, then what does this mean for our writing couple? Are we to think of Beauvoir as the one who writes “at home” or who is “at home” in a way that Sartre can never be?’\textsuperscript{xxv} Or are we to think of her as always having the final say? Certainly some have interpreted La Cérémonie des adieux in this manner. Whatever the case, it is worth pondering what we might refer to as the transferential relations Deutscher sets up between Beauvoir and himself. In this book, Deutscher arguably plays contemporary Beauvoir to the Sartre of old. Deutscher identifies with Beauvoir\textsuperscript{xxv} to the point that the famous writing couple comes to live again—to be updated for the modern age. This identification allows Deutscher an unusual intimacy with Sartre’s work—an intimacy that develops a conversational, idiomatic “exchange.” It frees him to speak with Sartre, to listen and then to respond as if conversing—not “simply” reading or reacting.

Now, a psychoanalytic reading might suggest something along the lines that Beauvoir’s maternal voice is spoken for here, allowing a certain access to the Father’s speech. Of course this presupposes Beauvoir and Sartre as mother and father in a slight twist on the traditional Oedipal scheme. Beauvoir, as mother—“at home” and “homely”—re-writes the father’s abstract and antagonistic account of self and other in more generous terms. Beauvoir’s homely revision resists the brutality of Sartre’s public domain. In The Second Sex Beauvoir’s homely re-working of existential themes resists what we might think of as Sartre’s efforts to “domesticate” (her) thought. And it is precisely this “homely” position that Deutscher develops further in his own account. To say this is to suggest, quietly, that Deutscher takes on the mother’s homely role, that he becomes Beauvoir in writerly ways. But, equally, it might be to suggest that Deutscher plays “go-between” (translator) between Beauvoir and Sartre—between mother and father—carefully teasing out the possibility of a continued exchange in imaginary (and imaginative) ways. If this is the case, then Deutscher’s role, or roles, are crucial in our understanding of precisely what kind of writing couple his work constructs.
While much of Deutscher’s account goes on to depict the Beauvoir-Sartre writing couple as one embodying significant (theoretical) tension, or at least as a work in process—a process of initiation (Sartre) and critical revision (Beauvoir)—in his closing remarks, Deutscher re-unites this writing couple in what we might cautiously think of as a kind of idealized (parental?) unity: ‘Allow me,’ he writes, ‘in departing this text, a laudatory remark about Beauvoir and Sartre’s writing that I make in the face of the recurring tendency to disparage any new philosophy by condemning it as “fashionable” or “modish”:’ xxiii The phrase ‘Beauvoir and Sartre’s writing’ suggests—in these final pages—a unity, a construction at odds with Deutscher’s earlier analysis of a couple (or ensemble) comprising two independent writers. ‘Beauvoir and Sartre’s writing’ becomes, briefly, a thing spoken of in the singular—an object both identifiable and secure.

Despite the criticism that Sartre and Beauvoir’s language and method has attracted, they did succeed in clearing a track between a dualism that occludes mentality from view and touch, and a materialism that oversimplifies what is available to perception in the body’s motions and dispositions. This work is now the common inheritance of all philosophers—“serious money” in intellectual terms. And for us of this new century, we need to re-invent this legacy from Sartre and Beauvoir’s domesticated and sexualized phenomenology. For otherwise we seem unable to find an escape route from the legacy of the last century. The dogged alternatives of extreme materialism, or of a mystery in simply being conscious—a dichotomy only exacerbated by “analytical philosophy” xxiv

There is a sense, here, that the unity Sartre-Beauvoir, the couple reunited, serves as privileged moment in the past, capable of projecting us safely into the future. To be sure, we need to rethink this legacy—to re-invent it. But as Deutscher suggests, the advantage of so doing is to avoid the staggering inertia of finding ourselves caught back in between the alternatives of extreme materialism and idealism—a warring couple if ever there was one!

This desire to reunite the couple and have it serve as ground for our own projects of philosophical renewal can be read in the closing passage to Deutscher’s book when he writes:

Beauvoir’s and Sartre’s work is now so far from being fashionable as to be at risk of being appropriated by the conservatism of tradition. But it was the height of “fashion”. It is the space of half a century that frees us to perceive the force of their writing, and thus to resist that conservative appropriation. We can be reminded by their adventures that we must “fashion” philosophy. Otherwise we only hammer at its “perennial problems”. Beauvoir and Sartre challenge us to keep philosophy open to diverse genres of discourse. We can then take our turn in disrupting the illusion that knowledge and understanding are voiced as if by one, unique, speaking subject. At the same time we can play our part in renewing the sometimes-lyrical power of philosophy’s reason. xxiii, xxiv

What emerges from Deutscher’s account of the unity—‘Beauvoir and Sartre’—is the sense in which the Beauvoir-Sartre writing couple continues to function in highly symbolic and imaginary ways. xxv While each of these writers can be and is, of course, considered in his or her own terms, it is the couple united—the two together—that arguably continues to draw our most passionate consideration and reaction. While there are various ways that we might begin to think through the reasons for this attraction, and Jardine, of course, offers some of these, I think that one of the many strengths of Deutscher’s account lies in the way that it perhaps unconsciously brings questions, such as these, to the fore. Deutscher’s own rendering of the writing couple is arguably symptomatic of a cultural fascination ‘based on the force of the copula,’ and simultaneously an invitation to think through what this might possibly mean.

And yet there is more to say. The sub-title to Deutscher’s book—Looking Back at Sartre and Beauvoir—brings us back to what I think of as the ethical gesture of his reading. In “looking back,” Deutscher does a number of things. To begin with, he reminds us of the centrality of Sartre’s work on the “gaze” or “look” (le regard). Simply put, Deutscher’s reading returns the gaze, looking back at the object “Sartre and Beauvoir.” Deutscher frames the couple from the perspective of “here” and “today.” And yet, this is no adequate description of what Deutscher ultimately achieves. To simply return the gaze would be to counter Sartre in wholly Sartrean terms; to remain within the Sartrean universe. And in addition, it would be to trap Beauvoir in this world as well. The self-conscious use of such an over-determined Sartrean motif in any return to Sartre and Beauvoir would mean a framing of their complex and individual works in arguably reductive Sartrean terms.

So, what is it that Deutscher does when he “looks back”? I have, in part, already indicated a possible response to this question. When Deutscher looks back, it is often Beauvoir who is doing the looking (countering, disarming, or neutralizing the Sartrean gaze). Beauvoir’s sophisticated re-workings of Sartre’s ontology provide the gaze that positions Sartre’s work in very particular ways (a looking back at Beauvoir looking back at Sartre?) But this
“looking back” is anything but a simple objectified return of the gaze. It is arguably a regard of an entirely different kind. We might, for example, think of this looking back as a ‘loving regard;’ a look that engages the other in ethical ways, extends the other, entices more from the other. Now, it is this regard, I think, that motivates Deutscher’s own regard—his own looking back. And I want to suggest that when he “looks back” from “here” and “now”—from the antipodean peripheries of French philosophical thought—that this local or homely regard provides him with an ethical space that allows for a reading of an entirely different kind.

Let me suggest that Deutscher’s homely reading allows him to look back at Sartre and Beauvoir in wonder, and that (like Descartes) he is surprised by what he finds. When he looks, he is full of admiration for possibilities that have still to be found within their writing. Rather than imagining that we have said all that is possible, he says that if we look again, we will be surprised by what we might have overlooked. Now to suggest this is, of course, to think of the important work that Luce Irigaray has done in retrieving wonder from Descartes’ work, and it is to think of the work of “looking back” as the ethical space that affords us the time to contemplate in wonder. This contemplation allows us the space/distance/interval to engage the other—in this sense to experience Sartre and Beauvoir anew. ‘Wonder,’ according to Descartes, ‘is the first of all the passions.’ It is ‘a sudden surprise of the soul which causes it to apply itself to consider with attention the objects which seem to it rare and extraordinary.’ It is, perhaps, (in Freud’s terms) an unheimlich encounter that repositions the familiar in a wondrous or even disconcerting way: ‘for we shall only wonder at that which appears rare and extraordinary to us, and nothing can so appear excepting because we have been ignorant of it, or also because it is different from the thing we have known; for it is this difference which causes it to be called extraordinary.’ This unheimlich encounter troubles the certainty of our knowledge of the world. Wonder provides the ‘passion of movement’ that for Irigaray enables us to remain ‘faithful to the perpetual newness of the self, the other, the world.’ Wonder, she claims, is ‘indispensable … to the creation of an ethics.’ It is the ‘point of passage between two closed worlds, two definite universes, two space-times or two others determined by their identities, two epochs, two others.’

In Irigaray’s hands, Descartes’ wonder becomes a model of ethical encounter, and I think that what she sees here is a good way of thinking about what Deutscher’s reading achieves. In his homely reading, Deutscher somewhat paradoxically brings us toward the unheimlich—the unrecognized or not yet recognized elements in Sartre’s and Beauvoir’s thought. In the coupling of Sartre with Beauvoir, Deutscher leaves an interval that allows us to wonder at their difference, and thus to experience them anew. And it is this space, both between Sartre and Beauvoir, and between Deutscher and the two, that makes possible the ground for an ethical encounter—ethics here denoting a willingness to be surprised by what we believe we already know. This wondrous reading slows our impulse to read too quickly, too hastily, offering us cause to ponder the meanings that Sartre’s and Beauvoir’s work might hold for us today. Wonder, too, counters the twin specters of angst and objectifying gaze that haunt the Sartrean text, re-positioning philosophy and philosophical work as an open and optimistic engagement with the other. It is little wonder, then, that Deutscher’s reading inspires the perpetual movement of thought, reminding us that our philosophical work is so much more than simply a means to some already known or imagined end.

REFERENCES

My thanks to Matthew Lamb for his helpful reading of this work.

1 Max Deutscher, Genre and Void: Looking Back at Sartre and Beauvoir (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2003), 169.
2 I say this, but more accurately I mean that of those of us who work on Beauvoir’s writing there is much thought given to the couple Beauvoir-Sartre. Those who focus on Sartre rarely, if ever, consider his work in relation to Beauvoir. “The couple” exists for those of us with a serious interest in Beauvoir’s thought. This situation mirrors, in an interesting way, the arguably asymmetrical writing couple that Beauvoir and Sartre themselves comprise. While each reads the other, there is little direct evidence of this point in Sartre’s own writing. Sartre makes few references to Beauvoir’s writing in his published works. However, Beauvoir famously provides frequent literary references to Sartre’s writing in her own published works. For a discussion of the complexity of influence and reference between the two, see my “Love, Ethics and Authenticity: Beauvoir’s Lesson in What it Means to Read,” Hypatia 25, 2010 (forthcoming).
3 The couple who both write can also be thought of as the couple who, over decades, write to each other as well. Deutscher, Genre and Void.
finds objectification in face-to-face encounters in evitable. In contrast, Beauvoir, by first taking in Hegel’s ‘return[s] to a cell of the past.’ Deutscher, literally brings existential phenomenology back to life. Which is much more than saying that Deutscher merely

My thanks to Crossroads’ anonymous reviewer for help with clarification of this point.

In relation to Le Dœuff’s revisions, Deutscher comments: ‘What we bring into being when we do something in philosophy is a temporary use, a particular inflexion, a bending back on itself, a flexing over and around the objects of pre-existing discourse,’ ibid., xxx.

We could say that Deutscher’s ‘homely reading’ takes its cue from Beauvoir’s and Sartre’s early motivations: ‘Metaphysics is domesticated—”one can write philosophy about anything”. Equally, the domestic takes on a metaphysical aura …’ ibid., xv.

Deutscher’s own idiomatic rendering of Sartre’s terms is central to the success of his homely reading. Expressions such as ‘stuck in the gullet’ and ‘lumpiness’ cross the expanse between Sartre’s existential vocabulary and our own. Cf. ibid., 170–171.

This desire ‘to keep them in motion as part of contemporary thinking’ may involve a (theoretical) mourning for Beauvoir and Sartre, an attempt to symbolize and represent loss in contemporary engagement—one that literally brings existential phenomenology back to life. Which is much more than saying that Deutscher merely ‘return[s] to a cell of the past.’ Deutscher, Genre and Void, xxxi.

In “Infinite Bodily Consciousness” (ibid., 173–195), Deutscher explores what Sartre and Beauvoir, respectively, have to say about the possibility of “the couple.” Here Sartre’s predictable proclamation ‘that I and the Other must fail in our desire to constitute a couple fully grasped by each partner’ is contrasted with
Beauvoir’s discussion of generosity as the possibility of ‘a couple’ between the two. ‘There are various reasons why Beauvoir has placed herself in a better position to take on the possibility of observing and relating to another without “objectification”. She has worked her way through Hegel more thoroughly than did Sartre. She takes on, not just as an **aporia** on which to place a signpost, Hegel’s account of the conflict that arises between one being and another as each becomes aware of the other’s consciousness. She then sets out in a somewhat more hopeful fashion to use Hegel’s realization of the need the “dominant” consciousness has of the one dominated,” ibid., 192.

**xix** Deutscher’s positioning of Beauvoir against Sartre (though not in any simple or straightforward way) is, importantly, inflected through Le Deuff’s historically important readings of this famous writing couple. From the late seventies on, Le Deuff constructs what is arguably a wholly new way of thinking about Beauvoir’s (theoretical) relation to Sartre, and the debt of this intervention is clearly legible in Deutscher’s own account: “[Le Deuff] was amongst the first to show how Beauvoir’s writing amounts to a significant and generous inflexion of the ‘transcendentalism’ of existential phenomenology, whose abstractions of ‘being’, ‘nothingness’, the ‘for-itself’, the ‘in-itself’ and ‘being-for-others’ interact with the sexual imagery and anecdotes to generate a philosophy that appeared essentially misogynist” (p.xxvii). And further: “… Le Deuff distinguishes Beauvoir’s use of existentialist philosophy from Sartre’s, showing how Beauvoir makes phenomenology bend in unexpected directions, able to hear voices not its own and then to say more in response to them” (pp.xxix-xxx). See also my “Love, Ethics and Authenticity: Beauvoir’s Lesson in What it Means to Read”, *Hypatia*, Vol 25, forthcoming 2010.

**xx** Ibid, ix.

**x** Ibid, 250.

**xxi** Deutscher notes that ‘Beauvoir wrapped up [Sartrean] existential phenomenology in current literature, sociology and everyday observation within her revised phenomenology,’ ibid., xxii, n.15. And further: ‘In fact Simone de Beauvoir used a system of phenomenology that in Husserl’s and Heidegger’s hands was blind to sexuality, and in Sartre’s, biased against women in its imagery, structure and anecdote,’ ibid., xxii.

**xxii** Deutscher writes: ‘Beauvoir’s work, some six years after Sartre’s, has begun to shift the field of our thought, experience and preoccupations. The look that objectifies achieves its effect because of a real or assumed power differential between observer and observed,’ ibid., 177.

**xxiii** ‘Where in Sartre’s hands the system of “being-for-one-self” as against “being-for-others” conveys a sense of a threat to myself, Beauvoir built what became a feminism from within such a framework. In describing woman as man’s “Other”, she diagnoses an error based in confusion and men’s self-interest. The “threat” in being observed by another ceases to be intrinsic to the difference between “myself” and an “Other”, becoming an object of critical scrutiny—sometimes farce … [Beauvoir] challenge[s] the idea that we are free simply in being conscious, which would cause the distinction of a liberating and oppressive situation to fall away,” ibid., xxiii. And further: “[Beauvoir] challenges Sartre when he says outright, “It is senseless to dream of complaining, since nothing alien has decided for us what we feel, what we live, what we are”. She argues that one’s situation may make this impossible. Women must act and go beyond a status of subjection, but others may abuse their power and nullify the possibilities for freedom. My freedom lies also in the hands of others,’ ibid., xxiii–xxiv.

**xxiv** For Sartre: ‘Totalisation fails, and this is to say that I can never be “at home” with myself—or with another,’ ibid., xvi. In another vein, Deutscher notes (in relation to Le Deuff’s thought) that ‘nomadic’ thought (paradoxically) allows us ‘to “dwell” in places other than home so that we become “at home” with being able to live as more than a tourist, elsewhere,’ ibid., xxix.

**xxv** Are there moments when Deutscher’s identification runs to Le Deuff? There is a hint of this when he writes: ‘[Le Deuff]’s critique gives new life to the phenomenological tradition,’ ibid., xxxi.

**xxvi** Ibid., 254.

**xxvii** Ibid., 250–251, emphases added.

**xxviii** Ibid., 254, emphases added.

**xxix** Just prior to this Deutscher writes: ‘But Beauvoir and Sartre’s daring adventures in negativity and their searches into the **void** in existence and les petits riens in every moment and detail of everyday life are there, still to stir us from that complacency,’ ibid., 253. In the introduction to the work, Deutscher speaks of ‘their theory’ in the singular, and ‘how they figure’, only to unsettle this somewhat a few lines further on, with ‘their (differently) idiosyncratic appropriations of Husserl’s phenomenology,’ ibid., xv.

**xxx** For a discussion of feminist reactions to the symbolism of the Beauvoir-Sartre couple, see my “Love, Ethics and Authenticity.”

For a exploration of what such a regard might entail, see my discussion of “authentic love” and “authentic reading” in “Love, Ethics and Authenticity.”

In French, Descartes’ wonder is “l’admiration,” denoting a means of escaping the mundane or everyday. In Deutscher’s case, I want to suggest that his “homely” reading has the ability to somewhat paradoxically position our world as unheimlich, or wondrous to behold.


Ibid., 362.

Ibid., 364.


Irigaray, *An Ethics of Sexual Difference*, 74. And further: ‘Before and after appropriation, there is wonder … In order for it to affect us, it is necessary and sufficient for it to surprise, to be new, not yet assimilated or disassimilated as known,’ ibid., 74–5.

In the chapter entitled “Lost in La Motte-Piquet-Grenelle” (Deutscher, *Genre and Void*, 199–220), Deutscher engages Irigaray’s work on wonder (in *An Ethics of Sexual Difference*), reading it—in part—as a ‘response’ to Sartre’s ‘discussion of regarding and being regarded by others,’ ibid., 199. Here he demonstrates the difference wonder can make, pointing out that ‘Irigaray reconstructs the Sartrean grammar of domination. If each person can “wonder” at the other, there will be “two-way predication’,” ibid., 202. From here he goes on to explore another of Irigaray’s ‘responses’ to Sartre in *Entre Deux* (Paris: Grasset, 1997). He writes: ‘Irigaray’s strategy is to relieve the pressure of the masculine-feminine division by working against the division of activity and passivity. Sartre’s consciousness as an active for-itself working upon a passive in-itself implies that women and men, being conscious, are equally active. His persistent identification of the image of the in-itself with the feminine, however, results in a picture of man making himself a for-itself in the very struggle of escaping femininity. Like the in-itself of which it is a trope, this ‘feminine’ now appears everywhere—within his own in-itself, within the feminine in other men, and in women. Irigaray points out how Sartre’s allegations about desire achieve these identifications,’ Deutscher, *Genre and Void*, 211. Cf. Irigaray, *Entre Deux*.

Irigaray writes: ‘This first passion is indispensable not only to life but also or still to the creation of an ethics … This other, male or female, should surprise us again and again, appear to us new, very different from what we knew or what we thought he or she should be,’ Irigaray, *An Ethics of Sexual Difference*, 74.