REREADING BETWEEN THE LINES: A POSTSCRIPT ON

LA FEMME ROMPUE

Il peut paraître étrange qu'un auteur ne sache pas exactement ce qu'il a écrit. Mais le fait est qu'il suit une certaine ligne et qu'il est plus ou moins aveugle au fond sur lequel cette ligne se dessine.1

Critical approaches to Simone de Beauvoir’s final fiction, La Femme rompue, have over the past fifteen years moved from an adoption of Beauvoir’s reading to a more critical awareness of her use of language. Terry Keefe’s pre-feminist approach follows Beauvoir’s injunction that we should criticize the women characters for their self-deception.2 Anne Ophir, writing for Denoël’s ‘Collection Femme’, although also following in Beauvoir’s footsteps, tries to show how the women characters are not entirely to blame for their problems, which are due as much to a patriarchal consumer society as to inherent self-deception.3

Recent work by Toril Moi and Elizabeth Fallaize on La Femme rompue has laid stress on narrative strategies, and shows how in the third story, ‘La Femme rompue’, Beauvoir fails in her attempt to persuade the reader to ‘read between the lines’ and criticize Monique. Moi’s argument is that the failure is due to Beauvoir’s upsetting of the detective genre,4 and that this is aggravated by the first-person-singular narration which intensifies Monique’s suffering, thereby eliciting sympathy rather than criticism from the reader. Fallaize argues in a similar vein that Beauvoir’s adoption of a romance ideology familiar to the readers of Elle (the magazine in which the story was first serialized) was bound to encourage identification rather than critical distance.5

Fallaize’s recent book on Beauvoir traces the move in the fiction from a reliable third-person narrative voice, into which the first-person voice of female characters intrudes as an interlude, to a distinctly unreliable first-person female narrative voice in the two late works, Les Belles Images and La Femme rompue. The reasons for this change, Fallaize suggests, could be, first, Beauvoir’s anxiety of authorship, her

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1 Simone de Beauvoir, commenting on Ophir’s interpretation of La Femme rompue, in Anne Ophir, Regards féminins: Condition féminine et création littéraire, Collection Femme (Paris: Denoël & Gonthier, 1976), p. 11.


3 ‘La société de consommation […] est le contexte implicite dans lequel se déroulent mes trois récits […]. Je n’ai guère cherché à éclaircir le rôle des hommes’ (Simone de Beauvoir, in Ophir, p. 12). Other feminist critics have gone further. This is what Carole Ascher has to say about Murielle’s guilt in the central story, ‘Monologue’: ‘Although I read the character of the mother as nasty, unpleasant, and self-deceiving, I don’t, in fact, see that de Beauvoir has proved Murielle’s responsibility for her daughter’s suicide. There was a father, a stepfather, a younger brother, who must have contributed to the girl’s misery’ (Carole Ascher, Simone de Beauvoir: A Life of Freedom (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1981) pp. 176–77).

4 ‘She has […] given Monique the role of quasi-paranoid reader of signs normally reserved for the detective. So how can the reader guess that she is in fact the culprit?’ (Toril Moi, ‘Intentions and Effects: Rhetoric and Identification in Simone de Beauvoir’s The Woman Destroyed’, in Feminist Theory and Simone de Beauvoir (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990), p. 78).

perception of fiction as a male domain, an anxiety which is to some extent diminished by the writing of the autobiographical texts between *Les Mandarins* and *Les Belles Images*, and secondly, a renewed interest, due mainly to the Algerian War, in the ‘situation’, in how individuals maintain themselves in bad faith, which necessitates first-person mythmaking narratives.6

It is the first of these two reasons which interests me here, since it suggests that there is a subtext operating in the late fiction, a subtext familiar to the modern reader: that of the impossibility of fiction. It is a point made by Moi concerning one of the three stories of *La Femme rompue*, the final story from which the collection takes its name, when she points out how our view of the story may well be substantially different from Beauvoir’s:

Beauvoir claims that one of the clues to Monique’s guilt is the fact that she constantly contradicts herself, whereas ‘post-modern’ readers tend to see this confusion not as a sign of her stupidity or blindness but as an excellent illustration of the treacherous, deconstructive nature of all language. To the same readers, Monique’s increasing epistemological helplessness does not necessarily signal her specific lack of insight, but rather a correct insight into the unstable nature of knowledge in general. (‘Intentions’, p. 78)

I would like to suggest that this comment could be applied not just to ‘La Femme rompue’ but to the collection as a whole; all three stories illustrate the impossibility of fiction in general. There is a way, however, in which the stories also illustrate the peculiar difficulties that a woman writer in the late 1960s faced in coping with the possibility of fiction. In other words, my underlying argument will be that for a woman writer the impossibility of fiction intersected (and may still intersect) with the impossibility of writing, in that she is caught within a male tradition of writing.

As Fallaize has shown, anxiety concerning language manifests itself in ‘the dissolution of narrative structure in Beauvoir’s fiction and the loss of authority of the character-narrator’, and this ‘can be seen to be closely associated with the gradual emergence of the figure of the “negative” mad woman’ (*The Novels*, p. 181). The impossibility of fiction and the impossibility of writing merge in *La Femme rompue*, articulated not just around the figure of the mad woman, as Fallaize suggests here, but also in a specific and insistent set of images: images of vision, and images of entombment, which serve to support the figure of the mad woman metaphorically. The second half of this paper will focus on these images. I first attempt to show how all three stories sketch out the mytheme of madness — the disintegration of the protagonist in a claustrophobic room — as an allegory of the struggle of the writer with language.

*The madwoman in the attic*

Fallaize points out the common features of the three stories: ‘The ways in which these three women use words to build myths about their roles as wives and mothers, to conceal from themselves the passage of time, to cover over the difficulties that they have in relating to their bodies, become an insistent pattern — an indication of a common “situation” as women’ (*The Novels*, pp. 171–72). The ostensible subjects are a nameless female narrator (whose ‘mirrors’, her mother-in-law and her ex-student, are called Manette and Martine respectively), Murielle, and Monique. The curious

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6 Elizabeth Fallaize, *The Novels of Simone de Beauvoir* (London: Routledge, 1988); see in particular the final chapter, ‘Points of Departure’ (pp. 175–85).
duplication of names beginning with M is perhaps not fortuitous, since the three protagonists have much in common. Quite apart from the similarity of their general situations, stressed by Beauvoir herself, and those mentioned by Fallaize above, there are two other parallels which interest me here. The first of these is the fact that each of the stories focuses on a woman’s crisis of identity, a crisis which is a proto-madness (in each case, not just in the case of the middle story) and which occurs within the claustrophobic confines of a room. The room functions as a critical space, a space of crisis, of disorganization, but also (and this is the second parallel which I shall discuss) a space of potential transformation, in which writing has a crucial although problematic part to play.

The first parallel between the three protagonists is the crisis which occurs in a locked or lonely room. The crisis of the academic in the first story, ‘L’Age de discrétion’, occurs when the book she has written, and which she thinks is remarkably original, an honest critical communication with her readership, is poorly received. She locks herself in her room to reread it, and comes to realize that the book has failed in what she set out to do; it has not communicated any new ideas. The book is inadequate, and her identification with her writing makes her feel inadequate, as a result of which she goes through a crisis, a sort of proto-lunacy. Her perception is destabilized: ‘Un rien me fascinait, m’obsédait.’7 She loses control first over her past: ‘Je m’étais plus ou moins imaginé que ma vie, derrière moi, était un paysage dans lequel je pourrais me promener à ma guise [. . .]. Non’ (p. 65); perhaps more significantly for an academic, she even loses her hold over language: ‘Les mots se décomposaient dans ma tête [. . .] c’étaient des bruits, dénués de sens’ (p. 66).

Murielle, in the middle story, whom we imagine pacing up and down her flat as others enjoy themselves for the New Year, is quite obviously disturbed. Monique, in the final story, combines elements of the two other women. Like the first, she loses control over the past: ‘J’ai cherché un refuge dans notre passé’ (p. 151); ‘décidément il a changé’ (p. 157); ‘je croyais presque que le passé allait renaître’ (p. 161); ‘une révélation foudroyante: le temps passé’ (p. 163); ‘ma vie derrière moi s’est toute entière effondrée’ (p. 193); ‘je n’ai rien d’autre que mon passé’ (p. 213), and so on. She too becomes obsessed visually; the raindrops on the window are like ‘des animalcules qui pour des raisons mystérieuses obliquent à droite, à gauche, se faufilant entre d’autres gouttes immobiles, s’arrêtant, repartant comme si elles cherchaient quelque chose. Il me semble n’avoir plus rien à faire’ (p. 210); ‘Tous les objets, tous les meubles autour de moi ont été décapés par un acide. Il n’en demeure qu’une espèce de squelette, navrant’ (p. 232). She too locks herself in her room (‘J’ai choisi de me terrer dans mon caveau’ (p. 221)) to reread what she has written (her diary and her letters).

Her crisis is more acute than that of the woman of the first story, however, in that a descent into madness is sketched out, which reminds the reader much more of Murielle. Apart from the insistent questioning of her image, which, as I shall show, is an important feature of Murielle’s problems as well, she drinks (p. 222), dopes herself (p. 233), does not wash (p. 222), and fantasizes about becoming mad (‘devenir folle: ça serait une bonne manière de me défiler’ (p. 239)) and about committing suicide (p. 222); this disorganization of her usual routine is accompanied by a literal

7 Simone de Beauvoir, La Femme rompue (Paris: Gallimard, 1967), p. 57. I am using the ‘Folio’ edition; all further references are in the text.
disorganization of her body as she has an early and overlong period: ‘J’ai recommencé à saigner ce matin, quinze jours plus tôt que je ne l’aurais dû’ (p. 233). After a couple of reminders that the haemorrhage is continuing (pp. 235, 237), we learn that it eventually stops some twenty-three days later (p. 239).

I write therefore I am

The second parallel between the three protagonists is that each of them is, or tries to be, a writer, and that for each of them writing is literally a life-saver: ‘Je ne pourrais pas vivre sans écrire’, says the woman of the first story (p. 20). ‘Il me fallait ce geste de ma main pour m’assurer que j’étais encore vivante’, says the third (p. 223). ‘Je devrais raconter ma vie’, says Murielle, the purpose being to make a catch: ‘Je raurais un tas d’hommes à mes pieds [. . .] peut-être j’en recontrerais un qui saurait m’aimer’ (p. 90). Such rigorous parallels encourage the kind of reading I have suggested, that the stories articulate a problematic relationship to words.

The relationship of the academic to words in the first story is, as one might expect, intellectual and distanced; she believes in rationality, dismissing the possibility of non-communication on the very first page. Her attitude to language is best exemplified by what could be seen as a metaphor for her writing: Ça m’amuse de rester longtemps penchée sur une grille où virtuellement les mots sont présents, bien qu’invisibles; pour les faire apparaître, j’use de mon cerveau comme d’un révélateur; il me semble les arracher à l’épaisseur du papier où ils seraient cachés. (p. 20)

She is in fact referring to crosswords; but the godlike originating power she ascribes to herself, as well as the emphasis on the intellectual operation involved, is emblematic of her approach to her own writing. She applies interpretative grids to texts by (male) writers, such as Rousseau and Montesquieu, seeking above all to be original.

The remainder of the story shows how mistaken she was in all her assumptions: she was not being original, non-communication does exist, the intellect is less important than an indefinable and intuitive otherness (it is her husband’s tone of voice that brings them back together again, not the words he actually speaks (p. 78)). One cannot help feeling that the academic is being punished for her desire to transmit a very male academic tradition: apart from her books on Montesquieu and Rousseau, as Fallaize points out (The Novels, p. 159), she is constantly quoting from literary or philosophical texts by male writers. Even when she and her husband are reunited, she has recourse to one of the originary texts of the romance tradition, Aucassin et Nicolette, citing two lines from one of the songs which appropriately celebrates the reunion of the two lovers. This is unintentionally ironic, however, since Aucassin et Nicolette is a spoof on courtly love. Beauvoir’s comments on the story suggest that she wished to convey a muted optimism but the comic context of Aucassin et Nicolette, I would suggest, undermines the reunion between husband and wife. Moreover, the commentary on the lines quoted echoes the beginning of the

8 ‘L’échec est surmonté, le dialogue rétabli, parce que même dans la crise qu’elle traverse, l’héroïne conserve l’amour de la vérité’ (Simone de Beauvoir, Tout compte fait (Paris: Gallimard, 1972), p. 143).
story, and firmly points to the trap common to the women of all three stories: the refusal to accept the passing of time:

‘Etoilette je te vois — Que la lune trait à soi’. Je retrouvais les vieux mots dans ma gorge, tels qu'ils avaient été écrits. Ils m’unissaient aux siècles anciens où les astres brillaient exactement comme aujourd’hui. Et cette renaissance et cette permanence me donnaient une impression d’éternité. La terre me semblait fraîche comme aux premiers âges et cet instant se suffisait.

(80)

As she had said right at the beginning of the story, only to be proved wrong, ‘le monde se crée sous mes yeux dans un éternel présent; je m’habitue si vite à ses visages qu’il ne me paraît pas changer’ (p. 11).

In the second story, Murielle fantasizes about writing. I have already quoted part of the passage; I did not, however, quote the section where she links it to her longing to be an inauthentic image. Writing, for her, is indissociable from the creation of an image: ‘Qu’est-ce qu’ils râleraient en voyant mon nom et ma photo dans les vitrines’ (p. 90). This is consistent with her desire to be an object of the male gaze: ‘Les types sifflaient quand je passais des lunettes obliques sur le nez un foulard d’Hermès sur la tête’ (p. 87); ‘on passera ma photo dans Vogue’ (p. 97); ‘C’est chic deux belles filles en décapotable cheveux au vent [...] Mais seule! à mon âge de quoi on a l’air sur les plages, dans les casinos, si on n’a pas un homme avec soi?’ (p. 107). For Murielle, writing is a fantasy of the image, a fantasy in which her living-room dream-space is transformed into a shop-window where she is imprisoned within walls of glass, a mannequin for male consumption.

In the final story, writing is neither the creation of an origin and imposition of rationality as in the first story nor, at the other extreme, the search to imitate and impose an image, as in the second story. Writing becomes the lament for the impossibility of the image. Monique’s image of herself as both Good Wife and Good Mother disintegrates: ‘Je n’ai pas rendu Maurice heureux. Et mes filles ne le sont pas non plus’ (p. 251). This leaves a vacuum: ‘Est-ce que je sais que je suis?’ (p. 237); ‘J’ai perdu mon image’ (p. 238). It is writing’s mission to find a substitute; the psychiatrist ‘a insisté pour que je reprenne ce journal [...] Il essaie de me rendre de l’intérêt pour moi-même, de me restituer mon identité’ (p. 239). There is no indication that this might work, and indeed the other ploy suggested to Monique, that she should find work, is somewhat ironic, since it involves writing fiches from past issues of a medical journal for a man who is preparing a history of medicine (p. 241). This is ironic, since Monique is being asked metaphorically, as it were, to rake through her husband’s past (he is a doctor), when she is supposed to be finding herself.

The three stories allegorize the search for an authentic mode of self-expression. The intellectual’s approach, the hysteric’s approach, the respectable middle-class woman’s approach — these attempts all fail, catastrophically. This allegory of the quest for authenticity is supported by the almost inevitable metaphor of vision. In simple terms, to be authentic is to be so true to yourself that you are transparent (if self = self, they cancel each other out, something like a double negative). As Monique says about her relationship with Maurice before her crisis, ‘nous étions l’un pour l’autre une absolue transparence’ (p. 129). This echoes the first page of the first story: ‘En gros nous n’ignorons rien l’un de l’autre’ (p. 9), and is a theme of the middle story as well: ‘Ils n’aiment pas qu’on voie clair en eux; moi je suis vraie je ne joue pas le jeu j’arrache les masques’ (p. 97).
All three protagonists insist on metaphors of vision (in which I include images of light/opacity, sky/earth, sun/dark). These images form the metaphoric fabric of the failure to achieve an authentic mode of self-expression.

In the first story, ‘L’Âge de discrétion’, the crisis of non-communication between the protagonist and her son and then between herself and her husband gives rise to a significant comparison: ‘Quelque chose vacillait dans ma tête. Comme lorsqu’on a reçu un choc sur le crâne, que la vision s’est troublée, qu’on aperçoiit du monde deux images’ (p. 42). Troubled vision underpins the narrative; there is a distinct development through the story from the brightness of daylight, passing through the warning of danger by neon light, to the rejection of painful bright light, as can be seen in the following extracts:

J’ai regardé tourner sur le fond bleu du ciel une grue couleur de minium. J’ai suivi des yeux un insecte noir qui traçait dans l’azur un large sillon [...]. Hier soir, je remontais le boulevard Raspail et le ciel était craméoi; il me semblait marcher sur une planète étrangère où l’herbe aurait été violette, la terre bleue: les arbres cachaient le rougeoiement d’une enseigne au néon. (p. 17)

Derrière la vitre, l’enseigne au néon sautait du rouge au vert, les yeux de la grand muraille brillaient. (p. 30). (The discussion with André about their son.)

J’ai bu un verre de vin, les yeux blessés par la cruelle lumière du néon. Philippe, c’était fini [...]. Mon cœur était glacé et morne comme une chapelle désaffectée où ne rougeoïe plus la moindre veilleuse. (pp. 41–42)

Je regardais le ciel, les maison mal reblanchies. [...] L’excès de mes loisirs en me livrant le monde m’empêchait de le voir. Ainsi par les chauds après-midi, le soleil fusant à travers des persiennes fermées fait briller en moi toute la splendeur de l’été; il m’aveugle si je l’affronte dans sa crudité torride. (p. 58)

Le soleil me vrillait les tempes. (p. 70) (The walk with her husband.)

Je regardais à nos pieds des toits de tuiles, baignés de clair de lune, sans raison, pour le plaisir de les voir. (p. 80) (The reconciliation.)

Ne pas regarder trop loin. Au loin c’étaient les horreurs de la mort [...]. Réussirai-je à ne pas lever les yeux vers ces horizons? (p. 83)

The moonlight mentioned in the penultimate extract functions as a metaphor for uneasy compromise both with her husband and with herself. In the second story, ‘Monologue’, moonlight functions both as a metaphor for madness and as a metaphor for an inauthentic absolute, an illusory purity. It is bound up with the clichéd opposition between mother-earth/father-sky.

The 14 July celebrations which Murielle recounts towards the beginning of her monologue is the neurotic centre of this complex of images. She recalls being forced to watch her little brother on his father’s shoulders enjoying the fireworks, whereas she is on the ground ‘pressée entre leurs corps juste à la hauteur de leur sexe dans l’odeur de sexe de cette foule en chaleur’ (p. 88). Murielle’s mother is the repository of diseased sexuality for her: ‘Je ne voulais pas que ma fille devienne une putain comme ma mère’ (p. 95), mainly because of the double jealousy Murielle feels towards her; the mother preferred Murielle’s brother to her, and still seems to be enjoying a healthy sexual relationship, whereas Murielle cannot: ‘Moi je trouve que dès cinquante ans il faut avoir la décente de renoncer; j’ai renoncé bien avant depuis mon deuil’ (p. 105). The ground is infected by others; like sexuality, it represents disease: ‘Comment se garder un corps propre dans un monde aussi dégueux on est
contaminé par tous les pores de la peau et pourtant j’étalais saine nette je ne veux pas qu’ils m’infectent’ (p. 95). Insidiously, the connexion is made between the mother, sexuality, disease, and the earth, whereas the father is connected with the sky, and represents parental love for Murielle: ‘Mon père m’aimait. Personne d’autre’ (p. 90). The moon functions, like that other sky image, ‘le merle blanc’ (p. 106), as a pale reflection of the purity Murielle associates with her father: ‘Je l’aimais la lune elle me ressemblait; et ils l’ont salie comme ils salissent tout [. . . ] j’étalais propre pure intransigeante’ (p. 89); ‘Il est impeccable en ce moment ce salon net lustre brillant comme la lune d’autrefois’ (p. 101); ‘Je suis trop propre trop blanche’ (p. 105).

The opposition between earth and sky is also starkly drawn in the recollection of her own daughter’s funeral: ‘L’affreux souvenir le ciel bleu toutes ces fleurs Albert en larmes devant tout le monde on se tient bon Dieu. Moij’ai me suis tenue et pourtant je savais que ce coup-là je ne m’en relèverais jamais. C’étalais mo qui’en enterrait. Je suis enterrée. Ils se sont tous ligues pour m’enfoncer’ (p. 99; my italics). We can note in passing the insistence on appearances, but it is Murielle’s hysterical identification with her dead daughter which is the more interesting aspect of the passage, since it echoes the development in the first story from open sky to darkness. It also picks up and develops what I shall call the gothic theme. In the first story, there was the comparison by the narrator of her heart with an empty chapel, an unusual image, given her propensity to rational analysis and abstract conceptualization of her mental states. In the middle story, Murielle sketches out a favourite gothic theme, that of being buried alive. Edgar Allan Poe is the writer one immediately calls to mind in this context, and he is mentioned in the final story.

The final gesture of the narrator of the first story was to avert her eyes from the horizon of the future. Murielle’s more hysterical version of that is first to fantasize a cataclysm which would sweep the world away (p. 100) and secondly, and finally, to conjure up the vision of the Last Judgement, the ultimate partition between sky/earth, where she would watch others suffer from her privileged position in Paradise (p. 118). Throughout this story, then, the emphasis has been on how Murielle appears to others, and on hysterical oscillation between purity of vision and absolute freedom on the one hand, associated with the gaze of (God) the Father, and, on the other, disease, sexuality, and entombment, associated with the (whore) Mother.

‘La Femme rompue’ opens with an ascent. Monique climbs the stairs of the central pavilion of the Salines of Ledoux to contemplate the ‘simulacre fantastique’ which they represent (p. 122). Toril Moi points out how the Salines could be seen as a ‘rather heavy-handed authorial metaphor of Monique’s ignorance of her situation or as a first hint of the bleak final image in the book’ (‘Intentions’, p. 74). In fact, the final story opens with a double metaphorical ascent, since Maurice’s plane takes off ‘avec la brutalité d’un adieu’ (p. 122), an image echoed at the end of the story, as is the Salines image, by Monique’s descent into Orly after her trip to Lucienne in New York. Between these two images of ascent/descent, various stages are sketched out, with an emphasis on vision, as was the case in the first story in particular. Within a few lines, for example, there is another double ascent, involving Monique on both occasions. In the first, she climbs the spiral staircase of the Sainte-Chapelle: ‘Il y avait des touristes étrangers et un couple qui regardait les vitraux, la main dans la main. Moi j’ai mal regardé’ (p. 126). In the second, she rushes up the stairs to her flat, commenting on the lack of light coming through the curtains (p. 127). This kind
of image helps to structure the opposition between sky/clarity of vision on the one hand and earth/opacity on the other. The darkened flat suggests that Monique cannot see into her situation (as she will realize much later); her lack of attention to the play of light through the stained-glass windows suggest the difficulty she will have in seeing beyond her situation, as will be made explicit in the final lines of the story.

Such implicit metaphors give way to rather more melodramatic oppositions between sky/golden age on the one hand and rude awakening on the other:

— Oui, Monique, il y a une femme dans ma vie.

(Tout était bleu au-dessus de notre tête et sous nos pieds; on apercevait à travers le détroit la côte africaine. Il me serrait contre lui. "Si tu me trompais, je me tuerais.") (p. 131)

Il faisait un tendre ciel d’été, au-dessus des derniers feuillages d’automne. (La pluie d’or des feuilles d’acacia, sur une route rose et grise, en revenant de Nancy.) Il est monté dans la voiture, il a fait tourner le moteur et je regardais ma place à côté de lui; ma place où Noëllie allait s’asseoir. (p. 150)

L’autre nuit, en rêve, j’avais une robe bleu ciel et le ciel était bleu. (p. 237; at the height of the identity crisis.)

As we can see, in these passages clear (and, in one case, golden) skies are associated with the golden age of the past which Monique cannot understand has changed. These function in a similar way to the funeral scene in the middle story, and will be followed by the obvious metaphor of falling throughout the remainder of the story: ‘Je tombais, je tombais et je me suis retrouvée complètement brisée’ (p. 171); ‘Ma vie derrière moi s’est tout entière effondrée’ (p. 193); ‘L’affreuse descente au fond de la tristesse’ (p. 203; my italics).

The other major image echoes the gothic image of entombment found in the middle story:

Je me suis réveillée, c’était encore la nuit; je sentais le poids des ténèbres, j’étais dans un corridor, je m’y engouffrais, il devenait de plus en plus étroit, je respirais à peine; bientôt il faudrait ramper et j’y resterais coinçée jusqu’à ce que j’expire. (p. 193)

Je pense à la nouvelle de Poe: les murs de fer qui se rapprochent. (p. 242)

The final few pages lay great emphasis on vision. As Monique says to Lucienne, ‘Je veux voir clair dans mon passé’ (p. 247), only to discover that a life is ‘opaque’ (p. 248). When Lucienne asks her how she sees herself, she says, ‘comme un marécage. Tout s’est englouti dans la vase’ (p. 251). The final melodramatic passage with its short sentences and abrupt tense change (‘je me suis assise devant la table. J’y suis assise’ (p. 252)), where the narrator is sitting in her flat staring at the closed door of the future, combines elements of the gothic (‘il n’y a que cette porte et ce qui guette derrière’ (p. 252)) and the closure suggested by the other two stories (the first narrator’s refusal to look at the horizon of the future, the second’s hysterical fantasy of the Last Judgement).

Conclusion

I started from Fallaize’s suggestive analysis of a development in Beauvoir’s fiction from the early novels, where female characters are less dominant narratively, to the late works, where they are dominant, ‘negative’ mad woman characters. What I have tried to show here is that it is not just Murielle in the central story, ‘Monologue’, who illustrates this ‘madness’, but all three of the protagonists in La
All three wrestle with the problem of who they are, all three also try out different types of discourse in their search for authenticity. Indeed, one could even argue that the stories are organized dialectically in this respect: rational analysis is posited in ‘L’Age de discrétion’, whereas its opposite, a discourse of hysterical identification, operates in ‘Monologue’. These, then, are two extremes, and the function of the final story is to resolve the distance between those extremes; the blind self-justification typical of Murielle is slowly and carefully exposed to Monique’s consciousness by the very process of writing, just as in the first story it is writing which provokes the crisis (the reception of the new book) as well as partially resolving it (the sentimental quotations from Aucassin et Nicolette).

All three discourses fail in the search for authenticity, and the failure is metaphorized as a kind of madness. The protagonists lock themselves in closed rooms, which, I would suggest, is a metaphor for the prison-house of male narrative. Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar have explained how nineteenth-century women ‘were in some sense imprisoned in men’s houses’ and that it could be said that figuratively, women writers were ‘locked into male texts’, with the result that ‘spatial imagery of enclosure and escape’ is characteristic of their writing. They link this with the ‘female Gothic’ as defined by Ellen Moers. It may seem surprising that I have picked out certain images which suggest that Beauvoir’s writing could be in some way gothic; but then consider how her protagonists are trapped, and how this is expressed in images of entombment, madness, and fear. Moreover, gothic protagonists are not infrequently ‘split personalities’; Beauvoir’s protagonists suffer from the split between the ‘ideal’ wife and mother, as defined by patriarchal society, and an awareness that they cannot achieve the ideal. They believe that they can see their situations clearly, that those situations are freely chosen, that their actions are purely conceived within those situations. I hope to have shown how the stories rely on complex series of images which underline the gradual dismantling of such illusions. What comes across is that clarity, purity, and freedom are all associated with the male, and with a vanished golden age, whereas women are associated with opacity: the opacity of vision but also the opacity of the body, sexuality, entombment.

It is a depressingly familiar catalogue. As Beauvoir herself pointed out, she was criticized by feminists for giving such a pessimistic view of women’s situation. She countered: ‘Je ne me sens pas astreinte à choisir des héroïnes exemplaires. Décrire l’échec, l’erreur, la mauvaise foi, ce n’est, me semble-t-il, trahir personne’ (Tout compte fait, p. 145). I conclude by suggesting that she could not have done other than present a pessimistic view, given the absence of a strongly articulated tradition of women’s writing, which did not emerge until the 1970s. If fiction is problematic in

9 Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination (New Haven, CT, and London: Yale University Press, 1979), p. 83. 10 Ellen Moers, Literary Women (London: Allen, 1977), Chapter 5, ‘Female Gothic’ (pp. 90–110). Moers defines the dominant mode of ‘female Gothic’ as a text whose protagonist is ‘simultaneously persecuted victim and courageous heroine’ (p. 91). Beauvoir clearly did not intend the (woman) reader to idealize her protagonists, but readers in fact constructed, and still construct, a gothic reading of Monique (at least) as both victim and heroine. (I am not of course suggesting that Beauvoir’s text could be defined as gothic, merely that it contains elements of gothic which highlight the problem of a woman writer’s possible sense of entrapment within a male tradition.) 11 See Elizabeth MacAndrew, The Gothic Tradition in Fiction (New York: Columbia University Press, 1979), Chapters 2 and 3.
the modern period, writing then becomes doubly problematic for a woman writer; she is no less entombed than her 'heroines'.

It is a situation neatly encapsulated by the epigraph which opens this paper, and which was written in 1976, where Beauvoir refers to herself in 1967 as an unavoidably male auteur ('il'), 'blind' ('aveugle') to a background ('fond') which in fact did not exist until the mid-1970s. The strongly articulated tradition of women's writing established in the 1970s at least gives a woman writer the possibility of escaping from the entombment of patriarchal fictions, and conceiving (of) real heroines rather than sad, mixed-up gothic monsters.12

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12 I am grateful to Margaret Atack for her constructive comments on the first version of this article.