In place of our usual editorial, in this issue we publish differing responses to Simone de Beauvoir's death from two French newspapers.

Robert Maggiori (from Liberation, 15 April 1986)

In 1929 two young people, like many others before and after them, must have rushed across to the rue de Grenelle to see pinned up behind a metal grill the results of the agregation in philosophy. They came away happy. One of them had his name at the top of the list and the other's was in second place. The first was Jean-Paul Sartre, the second was Simone de Beauvoir. Everyone knows that two itineraries had converged here which only death would separate. The verdict of the agregation panel will not be disputed: in philosophy, Simone de Beauvoir will always be in second place, in Sartre's shadow. Unlike Sartre, she would not leave behind "a philosophy", and her writings were not to become a chapter in the history of philosophy.

Simone de Beauvoir wrote how at the age of fifteen she dreamed of the day she would meet a man and be subjugated by his intelligence, his culture and his authority. She found this creative spirit in Sartre. Would it be true to say that Sartre did "subjugate" her to the point where he inhibited any ambition she might have had to do original work in philosophy? To a journalist who asked her whether it was not something of a contradiction, that she who was to become the force behind modern feminism should have wanted to be "subjugated", Simone de Beauvoir replied that her literary work was, from the point of view of creativity, in all respects the equal of Sartre's. But she added, "I was not creative in philosophy. My writing was in other fields; I wrote about people and I affected them and that's enough for me." In her memoirs she is even more frank when she says, "I really was not all that interested in doing philosophy."

So are we to conclude that Simone de Beauvoir, whose literary works are clearly already among the classics, will be condemned, as far as philosophy is concerned, to being no more than a source of footnotes to the philosophy of Sartre? To see the mountains of books about Sartre one would think this was true. Simone de Beauvoir appears in them only in verification, by reference to her autobiography or her novels, of some points concerning the biographical context of Sartre's thought.

Simone de Beauvoir's first book, published in 1943, was L'Invitée (She Came to Stay, 1949). Its epigraph was a sentence from Hegel: "Each consciousness pursues the death of the other." In fact the novel, which broke with the procedures of introspective psychology, could be seen as a metaphysical novel, a kind of fleshing out of themes which were to be popularised by existentialism, themes which were to find a place in Sartre's work later, especially the problematic of the hellishness of other people.

As for Simone de Beauvoir's truly philosophical works, we can cite only Pyrrhus et Cineas (1944), a philosophical tale called Tous les hommes sont mortels of 1946 (All Men are Mortal, 1955), Pour une morale de l'ambiguïté published in 1947 (The Ethics of Ambiguity, 1948), L'Existentialisme et la sagesse des nations (1948) and Privileges (1955) which, infected by the ideological cold war, is an attack on bourgeois idealist philosophy based on good intentions and ignorance of social problems.

No biographer of Simone de Beauvoir has ever estimated the value of this oeuvre very highly. We find in it a "defence and illustration" of existentialism, and an attempt to provide a "material content" for ethics. But there is in it no "original solution" to any of the problems which were debated at the time as they arose from reading Kierkegaard, Jaspers, or Hegel.

Pyrrhus et Cineas dealt with the infinite, God, the other, vocation and the idea of situation. Though Simone de Beauvoir did not renounce it, she did admit that it was a failure: "I thought I had escaped from individualism but in fact I remained engulfed in it. My subjectivism was inevitably accompanied by an idealism which deprived my speculations of any consequence."
Pour une morale de l'ambiguïté, which is perhaps her most important philosophical work, seems to have had a rather ambiguous status in Simone de Beauvoir's own mind. She seemed almost irritated whenever the book was referred to but the problems it raised were at the very centre of her development and that of Sartre. It is quite astonishing to see that Pour une morale raises, and claims to solve, a problem which Sartre himself raised later in Being and Nothingness and which he failed to solve even in his Cahiers pour une morale (Note books on Ethics), namely the problem of ethics. Can existentialism, which is a philosophy of freedom, provide an ethics? Sartre and De Beauvoir shared this problematic but also shared the failure to which it led. "An ethics of ambiguity" wrote Simone de Beauvoir, "would be an ethics which would not rule out a priori that beings could be both independent and yet at the same time be bound to one another, that their individual liberty could forge laws valid for all."

Was this not the very same problem as that raised by Sartre? How can free beings escape from seriality, how can they join together without self-denial, in order to build fraternity without lapsing into terror? That Sartre returned yet again to this question in Cahiers pour une morale, which was published after his death, this question on which the meaning of each life depends, and that Simone de Beauvoir discussed it in her most philosophical work, bears witness to an intellectual adventure lived in common, or rather to a shared life which was in practice - but only in practice - a resolution of the problem. There are many other illustrations of this undertaking, this shared life, from the founding of Les Temps modernes to their anti-colonial struggles, from the defence of litterature engagée to the fight for Algerian independence, from the problem of relations with Marxism and Communism to their support for Maoism: in all this very little separates the itineraries of Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir.

It is well known that each of them retained their freedom of action and freely lived "other lives". But there was no question, no theoretical problem, no moral or political position which was not studied by them together. The publication of their letters to each other demonstrates this. But of this couple each member chose their own way of saying the same thing. One opted for philosophy, the other preferred literature and abandoned philosophy. But if the force of a philosophy were to be measured, as was once thought, by the changes which it brings about in the real world, then it would be Simone de Beauvoir and not Sartre who would be counted the true philosopher. For with The Second Sex Simone de Beauvoir brought about greater changes in the world and in people's attitudes than did Sartre with Being and Nothingness or The Critique of Dialectical Reason. She made real what for Sartre was only a dream, whereas Sartre helped her to make real her enterprise of a shared life. This was truly an osmosis.

(Translated by John Mepham)

An Attentive Philosopher

Michel Contat (from Le Monde, 16 April 1986)

Simone de Beauvoir, with characteristic lucidity, had a clear idea of her worth as a philosopher: she had not, she thought, created her ideas herself, she owed them to Sartre. But, she added immediately and with equal fairness, Sartre's ideas had often been arrived at through discussion with her. To be a privileged partner, a fertile interlocutor of one of the few creative philosophers of the century, this is not to be dismissed. Each of Sartre's two major works bears witness to her contribution, being dedicated simply "To Castro" (this being the nickname which friends had found for her in 1928, being a play on her name, "castor" being French for beaver; the name stuck and Sartre used it for the rest of his life).

"As far as philosophy is concerned, I was aware of my limits. L'Etre et le Neant had not yet come out, but I had read and re-read the manuscript; I had nothing to add to it," she wrote, in explanation of her hesitation in writing a book on existentialism during the war as Jean Grenier had asked her to do. It was her first philosophy book, Pyrrhus et Cineas, and it came out in 1944. It outlined an ethics in the form of a slogan: "liberate liberty". Later, having followed in Sartre's footsteps to arrive at a philosophical-political position close to Marxism, she judged this work harshly as still trapped in individualism. Similarly, she distanced herself from her second philosophical work, Pour une morale de l'ambiguïté in which she gives a rather closed, inflexible version of Sartre's ethical inquiries but which nevertheless remains an excellent introduction to them.

On the other hand, Simone de Beauvoir never apologised for the one of her works which it is impossible to re-read today without real embarrassment, her polemic with Merleau-Ponty (1953), who had attacked Sartre for the ultra-bolshevik position of the articles he wrote as a fellow-traveller of the Communist Party. This essay is reprinted in Privileges together with another polemical text, "La Pensée de droite aujourd'hui" (1945). The first sentence gives us the tone of this work which was the tone of Les Temps modernes at the worst moments of the ideological cold war: "Truth is one: error is multiple. It is no accident that the right preaches pluralism."

Stalinism could be based on such a proposition.

In fact, we should not look for philosophy in these ephemeral works in which intellectual good faith is not always in command, but rather in a novel which does not deserve the oblivion to which its author seems to have consigned it, Tous les hommes sont mortels (1946) (All Men are Mortal). This is the story of a man condemned to immortality, who suffers the martyrdom of being unable to live and to love in the finite time of others, is the most adventurous, the most outraged and the most oddly impassioned interrogation of the human condition ever instigated by this great rationalist author. Many young people would be astonished to find out what an existentialist could make of this science-fiction theme. They would discover there the real Simone de Beauvoir who was not only an intellectual but whose writing was aiedtated by anxiety about death and inspired by a violent appetite for life which she sometimes found frightening. This Simone de Beauvoir was very different and far more likable than the attentive philosopher that she wished to be in the company of Sartre.

(Translated by John Mepham)