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Acknowledging the Other:
Reading, Writing, and Living
in *The Mandarins*

Simone de Beauvoir's *The Mandarins*. A realist novel from 1954 about a bunch of French intellectuals in the immediate postwar era, successful in its day, but a text that still hasn't quite made it into the canon of twentieth-century literature. Among academics today it's mostly read by Beauvoir scholars, political theorists, and specialists in postwar literature. But now its moment may have come. Although *The Mandarins* is packed with political conflict, it is devoid of moralizing and punitive judgments. This novel is politically radical but not politically correct, if by that we mean full of a judgmental, holier-than-thou attitude. In the age of internet trolls and tweetstorms, this feels liberating.

We meet the characters in 1944, at a party celebrating the first Christmas after the liberation of France. Giddy with optimism, they are convinced that France will become socialist, a leading nation in a new, radical Europe, beholden neither to the Soviet Union nor to the United States. By the time the story ends, in the early fall of 1948, history has dashed their dreams. It has taken less than four years for the bonds among a close-knit group of Resistance fighters to disintegrate. Friends who once risked their lives for one another have become political enemies. The Cold War has begun, and France has chosen to side with the capitalist West. The country stands revealed as a murderous colonial power, guilty of massacring 100,000 Madagascans with unprecedented brutality. As erstwhile Nazi collaborators crawl out of the woodwork and return to prominence, the characters watch, and shudder. They consider exile, silence, even suicide. Yet in the end, they decide to stay, speak, and struggle.

Beauvoir's political issues aren't ours. She isn't writing about #metoo, or global warming, or Donald Trump, but about the purges

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of Nazi collaborators, French colonialism, and the Cold War. Yet her questions are still urgent. Can literature make a political difference? How should we respond to political failure? How do we respond when our friends make different political choices than we do? How can we live with others in times of intense political strife? For frustrated radicals today, Beauvoir's account of her anti-fascist, anti-colonialist, and anti-capitalist characters' political setbacks and defeats makes for compelling reading.

I am not going to analyze the politics in the novel. Rather I'll focus on the protagonists' generosity, their openness to the reasons and explanations of others. The absence of denigration is all the more striking because the characters are so far from perfect. Mired in bad faith, depression, and madness, they lie and commit perjury. Some of them literally get away with murder. One might expect such characters to fling political and personal recriminations at one another. One might also expect the novel to criticize them. Yet they don't, and it doesn't.

This does not mean that conflicts disappear. On the contrary, the characters argue heatedly, disagree violently, and refuse to back down. Rather than giving up their own point of view, they prefer to break with old friends. Yet they still try to take their interlocutor's point of view seriously, and generally make an effort to see what the other sees. *The Mandarins* expects its readers to respond to its characters in the same way: in spite of their flaws, we are to "enter their world," as Sonia Kruks puts it, and see them as men and women of good will.¹ We may abhor vigilante justice and recoil at the idea of murdering ex-collaborators, but the novel still expects us to understand why the character called Vincent does precisely this, and why the protagonists prefer to help him get rid of a body rather than go to the police.

The novel conveys this attitude not simply by describing human relationships, but by discussing literature, particularly writing and reading. In these discussions it sets up explicit parallels between book-to-reader and person-to-person communication. Throughout the novel Beauvoir interweaves her own theory of literature with the

1. Kruks is the only other critic I know who has picked up on this. In her fine discussion of political judgment in *The Mandarins*, she notes that "Beauvoir does not invite her readers to sit in judgment on Henri. . . . [But rather] invites us to enter Henri's world." Sonia Kruks, "Living on Rails: Freedom, Constraint, and Political Judgment in Beauvoir's 'Moral' Essays and *The Mandarins*," in *The Contradictions of Freedom: Philosophical Essays on Simone de Beauvoir's The Mandarins*, ed. Sally J. Scholz and Shannon M. Musset (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2005), 82.

question of how to relate to other people, how to live in a world with others. (In this essay, I use the term “literature” in Beauvoir’s own, rather wide sense: for her, the category comprises not just fiction, including both the novel and theater, but also memoirs, autobiographies, and literary essays.²)

The Mandarins wants us to recognize that our existence is fundamentally interwoven with that of others. In this respect, this novel continues Beauvoir’s life-long investigation of freedom and otherness. Already in her first philosophical essay, *Pyrrhus and Cineas* (1944), she writes that for our lives to have meaning, we need the responses of others, understood as free subjects. Without the judgment and responses of others, my appeals, my writing, my actions will neither succeed nor fail, they will simply be meaningless: “Only the other’s freedom can make my being necessary. My essential need is therefore to face free human beings. My project loses all meaning, not if they announce my death, but if they announce the end of the world. The time of contempt [*mépris*] is also that of despair.”³ I take Beauvoir to mean that to despise others is to think of them as lesser beings, and therefore as unworthy of judging my own actions. Such others are no longer free subjects for me, for I have reduced them to mere objects in my world. But then I doom myself to emptiness, which will breed despair. This idea is also fundamental in *The Mandarins*.⁴

In this essay, I want to get clear on how Beauvoir thinks about reading, writing, and living with others in *The Mandarins*. I also want

2. In “Littérature et métaphysique” Beauvoir juxtaposes theater and the novel. See *L’existentialisme et la sagesse des nations* (Paris: Nagel, 1948), 105, and 122. Trans. by Véronique Zaytzeff and Frederick M. Morrison as “Literature and Metaphysics” in Beauvoir, *Philosophical Writings*, ed. Margaret A. Simons, Marybeth Timmermann, and Mary Beth Mader (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2004), 263-77. In her lecture “Que peut la littérature?” Beauvoir includes “roman, autobiographie, essai” in the concept of literature. *Que peut la littérature?*, ed. Yves Berger (Paris: Union Générale d’Editions, 1965), 84. For an excellent account of Beauvoir’s literary theory, see Yi-Ping Ong, “Simone de Beauvoir’s Theory of the Novel: The Opacity, Ambiguity, and Impartiality of Life,” *Philosophy and Literature* 39/2 (2015): 379-405, and also Ong, *The Art of Being: Poetics of the Novel and Existentialist Philosophy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2018).

3. Simone de Beauvoir, *Pyrrhus et Cinéas* (Paris: Gallimard, 1944), 96; trans. by Marybeth Timmermann as *Pyrrhus and Cineas*, in Beauvoir, *Philosophical Writings*, 129, translation amended.

4. I have learned much about *Pyrrhus and Cineas* by working with Heather M. Wallace on her dissertation tentatively titled “Avoiding Ambiguity: Simone de Beauvoir and the Problem of Others’ Minds.”

to figure out what this novel expects of its readers. At the end, I'll consider, briefly, the implications for literary theory. But first I must introduce the text.

WRITING IN DARK TIMES

Beauvoir began writing *The Mandarins* in the fall of 1949, just as the second volume of *The Second Sex* was going to press. The novel caused her a lot of trouble. She had to rewrite it from scratch several times, and ended up working on it for five years. Published in 1954, *The Mandarins* won the Goncourt Prize, and became an international best seller. The U.S. reception of the 1956 translation was lukewarm, no doubt because Beauvoir's socialist sympathies did not endear her to American reviewers at the height of the Cold War.⁵

The Mandarins splits the point of view between Henri Perron, resistance hero and editor of the wartime underground newspaper *L'espoir* ("Hope"), which he wants to turn into an influential voice in French political life, and Anne Dubreuilh, a successful psychiatrist married to the cultural icon Robert Dubreuilh. Henri's sections are told in the third person, Anne's in the first. As the action begins, Henri is in his mid-thirties, Anne is closing in on forty, and Robert is twenty years her senior. Anne and Robert have an eighteen-year-old daughter, Nadine. At the end of the novel, Nadine marries Henri and gives birth to their daughter, Maria.

The Mandarins has two over-arching plotlines. The first is political and concerns Henri's efforts to keep *L'espoir* radical and independent from all political parties, including Dubreuilh's fledgling political movement, the SRL. (The reader never learns what the initials stand for.) His efforts fail, and right-wingers take over the paper. Robert and Henri fall out over the question of whether to publish the truth about the Soviet labor camps. In the end, the SRL fails too.

The second plotline is personal, and concerns Anne's love affair with an American writer, Lewis Brogan. Anne's refusal to move to the United States embitters Brogan. He takes it out on her, and the affair ends. An important subplot involves Paule, Henri's live-in lover, and also a good friend of Anne's. Once a promising singer, Paule has

5. One of the most thoughtful American essays on the novel was written under a pseudonym by an ex-Communist, the blacklisted director and screenwriter, Abraham Polonsky. See [Timon, pseud.]. "The Troubled Mandarins," *Masses and Mainstream* 9 (19 August 1956): 35-47.

abandoned her career and turned her passion for Henri into a cult of love. Their break-up pushes her into madness. Paule is a sympathetic, but at the same time scary portrait of *The Second Sex's* "woman in love."

At the end of *The Mandarins*, the principal characters have suffered comprehensive political defeat. They must acknowledge that they are "impoten[t]" intellectuals, citizens of a "fifth-rate nation" (TM, 516; LMb, 339).⁶ Anne falls into a deep depression, and Henri contemplates exile. *The Mandarins* is an exploration of failure, in love as well as in politics.

The characters don't give up, but they do scale down their ambitions. They learn to base their actions not on grand ideals, but on preference. This seems to hold for love as well as for politics: Henri marries Nadine not because he is overcome by a grand passion for her, but because he decides that he prefers her.⁷ Realizing that wherever he goes, he'll never escape from the misery of the world, Henri decides against exile, and agrees to co-found a radical weekly magazine with Robert.

On the brink of suicide, the depressed Anne hears the voice of her daughter. Realizing that her suicide would traumatize her family, she refuses to inflict that pain on them: "Because I am not deaf, I'll once more hear people calling to me . Who knows? Perhaps one day I'll be happy again. Who knows?" she thinks in the novel's closing lines (TM, 610; LMb, 501). The novel ends, then, with the principal characters recommitting to living in a world of others. Henri chooses political solidarity, commitment, and struggle in France; Anne understands that she is not a monad, that every human existence is entangled with the existence of others.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

Beauvoir's comparisons between reading/writing and listening/talking invite us to think of reading as an act of acknowledgment. I take

6. Quotations are from Simone de Beauvoir, *The Mandarins*, trans. Leonard M. Friedman (New York: W. W. Norton, 1956 [1991]). References will be abbreviated to TM, and given in the text. TA means "translation amended." I also provide page references to the French edition of *Les Mandarins*, 2 vols., (Paris: Gallimard, 1954). References to the French text will be abbreviated to LMa (vol. 1), and LMb (vol. 2).

7. Elizabeth Fallaize is excellent on the theme of preference in *The Mandarins*. See Fallaize, *The Novels of Simone de Beauvoir* (London: Routledge, 1988), 88-117.

the term “acknowledgment” from Stanley Cavell. In his works, acknowledgment stands as an alternative to skepticism, but I will not go into that dimension of Cavell’s thought here.⁸ Acknowledgment is a form of action. It names expressions and behavior that respond to the utterances and actions of others. Our acknowledgement of someone else is therefore expressive in its own right. In particular, it reveals how we take ourselves to be situated in relation to that person. To acknowledge someone is to show that we see how it is with her, to show that we understand the “plight of mind and circumstance” that gives rise to her actions, choices, and utterances.⁹ In *The Mandarins*, Beauvoir goes out of her way to show not just that love and friendship require acknowledgment, but that writing too calls for acknowledgment.

Although I take the concept of acknowledgment from Cavell, I don’t see myself as imposing his philosophy on Beauvoir’s novel. Rather, I build on my own work on reading and acknowledgment, which draws on both Beauvoir and Cavell.¹⁰ The parallels between Beauvoir’s existentialism and Cavell’s ordinary language philosophy are striking. Both Beauvoir and Cavell are obsessed with the idea of the Other; both insist on the importance of the concrete situation and the particular case; both consider everyday life as a site of philosophical insight; both see human existence as fundamentally marked by separation; and both find literature and philosophy to be mutually constitutive. (These similarities are not the result of direct influence, for Beauvoir never read anything by Cavell, whose first important philosophical paper was published in 1958, and Cavell never discusses Beauvoir.¹¹) But Beauvoir and Cavell have different views on language, and on what philosophy is. Cavell’s life-long concern with

8. Cavell’s first major essay on acknowledgment is “Knowing and Acknowledging,” in Stanley Cavell, *Must We Mean What We Say?* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 238–66. For a discussion of the concept, and its uses for literary criticism, see chapter 9 in Toril Moi, *Revolution of the Ordinary: Literary Studies after Wittgenstein, Austin and Cavell* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2017), 196–221.

9. Cavell, “Knowing and Acknowledging,” 240.

10. See Moi, “The Adventure of Reading: Literature and Philosophy, Cavell and Beauvoir,” *Literature and Theology* 25/2 (2011): 125–40, reprinted in *Stanley Cavell and Literary Studies: Consequences of Skepticism*, ed. Richard Eldridge and Bernard Rhie (New York: Continuum, 2011), 17–29.

11. Later in life, Cavell certainly learned a lot about Beauvoir, for his graduate student Nancy Bauer wrote her dissertation on Beauvoir, which she turned into a brilliant book, *Simone de Beauvoir, Philosophy, and Feminism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001).

skepticism is largely absent in Beauvoir, just as Beauvoir's feminism is largely absent in Cavell.

Beauvoir doesn't use the term "acknowledgment." But in *The Second Sex* she uses the terms "recognition" and "reciprocity" to indicate the need for a subject to recognize the other as both an object and as a subject. (The problem for women under patriarchy, she famously argues, is their status as *absolute* Others, without reciprocity.) Beauvoir took the term "recognition" from Hegel. Cavell gets "acknowledgment" from Wittgenstein. In German, both appear as *Anerkennung*. The difference between the two, as I read Beauvoir and Cavell, is that while Cavell defines "acknowledgment" as a form of action, a specific *response* to the behavior and expressions of the other, Beauvoir's "recognition" can, at least in theory, remain a purely mental or cognitive state of mind. However, in the aspects of *The Mandarins* that interest me here, Beauvoir explicitly describes her characters as responding to the claims of others. To use the term "acknowledgment" for this dimension of her novel is not, in my view, to impose an alien thought on Beauvoir, but to bring out a nuance in her own thinking.

READING

To make sense, writing, like any other project, requires others. In *Pyrrhus and Cineas* Beauvoir notes that every use of language is an appeal to the freedom of the other.¹² *The Mandarins* develops the point: "If others don't count," Henri says to himself, "it's meaningless to write. But if they do count, it's wonderful to gain their friendship and their confidence with words; it's magnificent to hear your own thoughts echoed in them" (TM, 112; LMa, 167).

Henri's pleasure in hearing the "echo" of his own thoughts from his readers doesn't mean that those readers can't question and challenge him. On the contrary, their questions will be all the more interesting and pertinent precisely because they have that echo in their mind. His joy, rather, expresses a dream of response as friendship, and also a dream of a world in which there are others whose judgments and responses make our own actions meaningful. We see the same attitude in Henri's debates with Robert: their ability to acknowl-

12. See *Pyrrhus et Cinéas*, 104; *Pyrrhus and Cineas*, 133.

edge the other's point of view—to see what the other sees—certainly doesn't always lead to agreement.

Conversely, even when they praise her, readers can fail the writer. In the fall of 1944, just before the action of *The Mandarins* begins, Henri published a novel received with a veritable “symphony of eulogies” (TM, 129; LMa 192). But Henri feels unacknowledged. He thinks the critics have misunderstood him. To Paule he says that “the public had liked a completely different book from the one he believed he was offering them” (TM, 129; LMa 192). His avid readers have failed to grasp what motivates his novel. Yet Anne tells him that no book has moved her as much in twenty years. So *some* readers will acknowledge the work. Writing carries the same risks as politics: all we can do is to act (or write) according to our best judgment, shoulder the risk of failure, and keep going.

At one point, Henri has been roped into signing this misunderstood novel at a charity event attended by the bourgeoisie he detests. He doesn't think much of their reading skills, particularly not in relation to characters: “How hard they are on the characters in a novel!” Henri thought. “They don't allow them a single weakness. And how strangely all of them read! I suppose that instead of following the road laid out for them, most of them go wandering blindly through the pages [...]” (TM, 287; LMa, 444). Good readers, he implies, follow the indications laid out for them. If they do, they will stop looking for perfection in literary characters, but rather try to understand them. If they refuse to follow the text's indications, they will simply not see what the writer sees, nor will they experience the “spell” [*envoûtement*] of literature.¹³ But then the reading will not change them, personally or politically, for they will have remained securely within their own, enclosed, monad-like position. Such readers will have learnt nothing, for they haven't made the effort of acknowledgment, they haven't tried to understand why the work is as it is. This effort may, of course, lead to rejection and critique, but then that critique will be more significant than ordinary misreadings. If good readers are eager to let literature enlarge—and thus change—their world, they will complain when the work fails to do precisely that.

13. The reader is *envoûté* (“bewitched”), Beauvoir writes in “Littérature et métaphysique,” 106; “Literature and Metaphysics,” 270.

Beauvoir developed similar ideas about reading in a 1964 lecture called “*Que peut la littérature?*” In this talk, she distinguishes between “information,” which, however illuminating, does nothing to jolt me out of my own position, and “literature,” which she defines as writing that makes me “change universe”; writing that makes “an other truth” mine, “without ceasing to be other”; the “only kind of communication capable of giving me that which cannot be communicated, capable of giving me the taste of another life.”¹⁴ But again, she insists that readers often fail writers. Only a sincere, attentive, and open-minded reader will truly sense the “taste of another life.” When she does, that reader experiences the “miracle of literature”; she sees the world as another sees it.¹⁵

In “*Que peut la littérature?*” Beauvoir calls this “changing of universe” *identification*. As a concept of identification it is quite original, for she has in mind the feeling of shifting out of one’s own world (“universe”). This happens when I am so engrossed in a work that I feel as if I see the world from its (or its author’s or its protagonist’s) point of view. To identify in this sense is for a moment to occupy the position from which the other sees the world. It is to catch a glimpse of the situatedness of the other: to understand what the world looks like to her.

A good reader remains herself —she doesn’t abandon her own views, beliefs, and principles without careful consideration — but she is also willing to open herself up to the writer’s vision, to try to see what she sees, to follow her on her adventure. Through the act of generous reading, the reader grasps the situatedness of the other, she understands how the world feels to a different human being.¹⁶ For Beauvoir, this is why literature alone is capable of overcoming our fundamental existential separation from one another.

WRITING

The characters in *The Mandarins* constantly discuss literature and politics. They detest the erstwhile Nazi sympathizer Louis Volange’s attempts to depoliticize literature by pontificating about “pure literature,” and the need for literature to return to “beauty, poetry, truth” (TM, 271-72; LMa, 420). They also deplore writing setting out

14. All quotations are from *Que peut la littérature?* 82-83, my translation.

15. *Que peut la littérature?* 82.

16. For more on *Que peut la littérature?* see Moi, “What Can Literature Do? Simone de Beauvoir as a Literary Theorist,” *PMLA* 124/1 (2009 January): 189–98.

to toe the Communist Party line, as is evident in the satirical scene in which the Communist Party writer Lenoir reads a long dramatic poem in alexandrines about a young man tempted by bourgeois resignation. (Alexandrines in the 1940s! In the cause of the working class!)

The characters want commitment, but they want authenticity and freedom too. They believe that committed literature can take many forms, that it doesn't have to be about explicitly political topics, and that authentic accounts of existential experiences in themselves challenge readers and audiences to see the world differently. But because Beauvoir focuses on the acts of reading and writing, *The Mandarins* also gives a compelling account of reading and writing as models for and examples of communication with others.

The Mandarins shows how Henri comes to write a play he calls *Les survivants* ("The Survivors"). Given that Beauvoir herself long used "The Survivors" as a working title for her novel, I assume that Henri's thoughts about reading and writing also apply to *The Mandarins*. Telling the story about the genesis of Henri's play, Beauvoir emphasizes his wish to make it possible for the reader to see the world from a position not normally their own. In the same way, she also shows that Henri regains the wish to write when he lets his imagination go to work on a powerful personal experience, so that he himself comes to see the world afresh.

In August 1945, Anne, Robert and Henri go on a bicycling holiday in the South of France. Having given up writing in order to spend all his time on politics, Henri has spent the last four months stuffing himself with factual knowledge. One day, they learn that the Americans have dropped an atom bomb on Hiroshima. Appalled, they talk about nothing else for a week. After struggling up a steep mountain road, they reach a plateau where, instead of the usual villages and farmhouses, they see burnt-out ruins. They have reached Vassieux-en-Vercors, the site of France's most important and long-lasting uprising against the Germans, brutally repressed in June and July 1944:

"It doesn't help to know," said Anne. "You only think you know."

They stood motionless for a moment and then cautiously began descending the rocky road upon which the sun was beating down in all its fury. For a whole week they had been talking of Hiroshima, repeating figures, exchanging sentences great with ghastly portents. Yet nothing stirred within them. And then, suddenly, a glance was enough. Horror was there, and their hearts shrank. (TM 245-46; LMa 378-79)

What is it to know something? Henri realizes that their discussions had turned Hiroshima into information; the unthinkable destruction caused by the atom bomb had become numbers and graphs. But here, the horror of wartime atrocities becomes real to them: the heat of the sun, the stark spectacle of the ruins produce an immediate physical and emotional effect, the kind of knowledge that only literature can convey.

They have arrived in Vercors just as the military commemoration of the first anniversary of the German atrocity is ending. The French army, which includes a regiment of black soldiers from Senegal, is out in full force.¹⁷ After the soldiers have left, the villagers eat and talk. "At St. Roch," one survivor tells our characters, "the Germans locked both men and women in the church, and then, after setting it afire, they allowed the women to come out. Two of them never did" (TA; TM 247; LMa 381).

As far as I can tell, this particular story is fiction. However, French readers in the 1950s would have thought not just of Vassieux, but of Oradour-sur-Glane, the site of a horrific massacre on 10 June 1944 in which 642 villagers, including 247 children, were killed. After locking up women and children in the village church, the Waffen SS threw hand grenades inside it. They imprisoned the men in several barns, set fire to them, and shot anyone trying to escape the flames.

On hearing the story of St. Roch, Anne feels sick and throws up. The shaken Henri is overcome by the futility of his efforts at self-education, for they have done nothing to help him face the experience of the villagers of St. Roch. As two women dressed in black, carrying red roses for a gravesite walk by, he begins to wonder how the widows of St. Roch — the ones who left their husbands to die in the burning church — feel now. Have they forgotten? Have they remained fixated on that awful moment?

"Suppose one of those women had loved her husband, really loved him," Henri asks himself. "What would all the speeches and fanfares in the world mean to her?" (TM, 249; LMa, 384). The question stirs him, provokes passionate thoughts and emotions, in ways that all the dead information he has been ingesting did not. He imagines the woman, standing in a room, refusing to participate in the ceremonial of commemoration: "'Come now,' Henri said to himself, 'I made up

17. At the end of July 1945, there was in fact an official military commemoration of the uprising in Vassieux. Beauvoir displaces the event by a few weeks.

my mind to stop writing.’ But he remained motionless, his eyes stared blankly off into space. It was absolutely necessary for him to decide what would become of that woman” (TM, 249; LMa, 384). When he returns to Paris, he begins to write a play.

What makes Henri return to writing? An overwhelming emotional experience, to be sure. But also the need to understand another human being. For when he hears of the horrors of St. Roch, he begins by inventing a character. Fiction arises from reality: a glimpse of two women in black, some red roses, the story of a real massacre, a military commemoration. He wants to grasp this scene as it might feel to his fictive widow, he wants to see it from her point of view. Henri’s writing is, as Beauvoir puts it in her 1946 essay “Literature and Metaphysics,” *une recherche*, an exploration, investigation, research: an attempt to learn something about the world.¹⁸

Beauvoir doesn’t think of writing as the simple expression of the writer’s own subjectivity. Nor does she believe that a writer can only write about people like him- or herself. For her, the act of writing is an appeal to others, understood not as objects, but as freedoms, subjects. She sees both reading and writing as efforts to open up and enlarge the world, and thus to learn something about it. A great novel or a brilliant play invites the reader to join the author on a journey of exploration and discovery, to share an “authentic adventure of the mind.”¹⁹

TALKING AND LISTENING

The Mandarins compares talking and listening among friends to writing and reading. The same commitment to trying to see what the other sees surfaces in Henri’s attempts to understand his younger friend and Resistance comrade Lambert, who has fallen under the spell of Volange’s aestheticism. The upper-class Lambert reproaches Henri for preferring “human documents” to “pure” literature. Lambert himself aspires to write about nothing; he wants to justify the banal and the unimportant by the sheer power of his style (see TM, 281; LMa, 434). Henri understands the younger man’s struggle to find meaning and direction, and decides that he needs to find time for a genuine conversation with him. But what would he say? How can he tell Lambert what to do?

18. Beauvoir, “Literature and Metaphysics,” 271. (The English translation has “search” for *recherche*.)

19. Beauvoir, “Literature and Metaphysics,” 272. See also Moi, “The Adventure of Reading,” 133-34.

The trouble, as Henri sees it, is that writing attempts to express existence and not a “universal ethics,” such as communism or Christianity: “But the meaning one gives to one’s own life is another story. I couldn’t explain that in a few sentences; I would have to make Lambert see the world through my eyes,” Henri sighed. And that’s precisely where literature is useful — to show the world to others as you yourself see it” (TA; TM, 275; LMa, 425). Henri wants to give Lambert an opportunity to feel what it is like to inhabit the world differently. The goal of Henri’s conversations with Lambert merges with the goal of the literary writer: to make the other see what he sees. (According to Cavell, this is also the goal of the philosopher.)

Nobody sees the world from a universal, God-like point of view. The world, in any case, isn’t the sort of thing that can be grasped in its totality. (Drawing on Sartre, Beauvoir calls it a “detotalized totality.”²⁰) Each human being is always *situated*, bound to a specific time and place and to specific experiences. Our view of the world overlaps with, but is never quite identical to, that of others. It follows that to express one’s own existence one can’t simply introspect: “The truth of one’s life is outside oneself, in events, in other people, in things; to talk about oneself, one must talk about everything else” (TM, 275; LMa, 426). To describe the world as one sees it is also to describe oneself.

Suddenly Henri asks himself why he couldn’t write a novel in which he would “tell a story of today in which the readers would find their own worries, their own problems? Neither demonstrate nor exhort, but bear witness” (TM, 275-76; LMa, 426). To bear witness is to convey as sincerely as one can one’s own situated experience. Bearing witness means paying intense attention to others and to the world. With this in mind, Henri begins to write a new novel, which sounds quite similar to *The Mandarins*.

There is one obvious difference between responding to literature and responding to others. In most cases, readers don’t get to share their responses with the author. And they certainly don’t get to tell characters how they respond to their words and behavior, or to intervene in the literary or theatrical action.²¹ The readers’ task is not to act, but to observe, understand, and acknowledge.

20. See, for example, *Que peut la littérature?* 77 and 88.

21. For a magisterial account of our relationship to characters on stage, see Cavell, “Knowing and Acknowledging,” in *Must We Mean What We Say?* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 326-44.

In real life, acknowledgment has concrete consequences. The difference between a good and bad relationship, between friendship and mere co-existence, turns on the presence or absence of acknowledgment of the other. When Henri tells Robert that he committed perjury in order to save the life of his lover, Josette, Robert pauses, and says "You must have had a difficult moment" (TM, 518; LMb, 343). Robert does not remain silent. He does not turn away. He acknowledges Henri's plight. The two then launch into a quarrel about the possibility of personal morality in an unjust world. But they quarrel as friends.

The various love affairs and marriages in *The Mandarins* are more complicated. Does Paule's increasing madness make her impervious to acknowledgment? Or is it rather that Henri doesn't even try? In *The Mandarins*, sex appears to undermine friendship and the acknowledgment that goes with friendship. While Robert certainly acknowledges Anne, the two of them live in a sexless marriage. And while Anne leans over backward to understand Lewis's situation and needs, there is not much evidence that he does the same for her. She speaks of her wish to be his friend, but I am not sure that Lewis is capable of thinking of a desired woman as a friend. But all this would require a separate essay. Here I shall only look at Henri's marriage to Nadine.

Readers of *The Mandarins* often express disappointment that the dashing Henri ends up marrying the unpleasant Nadine. And although we are told that they have an active sex life, they don't seem to be living a great passion, as Henri once did with Paule, and as Nadine did with her young Jewish lover Diego. As a counterpoint to this, the novel provides a detailed account of Henri's effort to acknowledge Nadine. Nadine doesn't trust that Henri loves her. She feels unlovable, and in many ways she is. At 17, she was traumatized by the loss of Diego, who was deported and killed by the Nazis. She is selfish, proud, temperamental, willful, easily offended, quarrel-prone, quick to fly into a rage, and equally quick to sulk. But she is also intelligent, honest, fair, and intensely loyal. Nadine is tormented by what she thinks is a secret, namely that she got pregnant on purpose. Now she believes that Henri only married her because of the pregnancy.

Aware of all this, Henri struggles to find a way to let Nadine know that he knows how she got pregnant, but without humiliating her. Nadine's self-loathing makes her want to hide her thoughts and feelings. Henri reflects: "Yes, that was what made it difficult to love her: even with her own baby she kept her distance; she still remained shut

up in herself" (TM, 572; LMB, 436). Henri wants to show her that he sees how it is with her, and still loves her. Yet he needs to do this as her husband, not as a father responding to a petulant child.

He begins by letting her know that he knows that she got pregnant on purpose. Nadine responds with her usual self-loathing: "You knew all along!" she said. "Don't tell me I don't disgust you!" But Henri shows that he also sees her courage and her commitment to his freedom: "But look here, Nadine, you'd never have let me marry you if I hadn't honestly wanted to; you'd never have blackmailed me" (TM, 599; LMB, 481). They go on to discuss the underlying issue: Nadine's conviction that Henri doesn't really love her. At the end of the conversation, Henri feels that something has shifted in her. Henri's acknowledgment is an invitation to Nadine to emerge from her suspicion and her hostility and come out into the open. Maybe she'll take him up on it.

IMMERSION, IDENTIFICATION, AND CRITIQUE

The Mandarins is an inquiry into how to live. It is also an investigation into reading and writing. Beauvoir's novel expresses both Beauvoir's vision of the complex and depressing postwar political world but and her literary theory. Given her insistence that the reader's task is to follow the leads laid down by the author, to relate to the text as to real life, that theory may seem curiously old-fashioned to some.²² And given that just about every student of literature has been warned not to treat characters as if they were real people, Beauvoir's invitation to do just that may come across as simply bizarre.

In "Literature and Metaphysics" Beauvoir writes that a good novel has the power to "bewitch" the reader, to make her "respon[d] as if to real events [événements vécus]."²³ Readers of *The Mandarins* are clearly expected to respond to Beauvoir's novel as if the events and characters were real. They are encouraged to let themselves be engrossed in her characters and her world-building. This, surely, is one reason why professional literary critics have kept a certain distance from Beauvoir's novel: it simply doesn't live up to dominant

22. Beauvoir, "Literature and Metaphysics," 270; "Littérature et métaphysique," 106; translation amended.

23. For more on this, see Moi, "'Nothing Is Hidden': From Confusion to Clarity, or Wittgenstein on Critique," in *Critique and Postcritique*, ed. Elizabeth S. Anker, and Rita Felski (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2017), 31-49. An expanded version makes up chapter 8, in Moi, *Revolution of the Ordinary*.

notions of what “literariness” is. I think this points to a problem in literary studies, not in *The Mandarins*. Ever since it first became a profession, academic literary criticism has had a formalist bent. By “formalist” I simply mean a tendency to consider formal analysis as the very hallmark of professional reading skills. This is true whether or not the formal reading is used for historical or political purposes or whether it remains focused on purely aesthetic features. Professional critics know how to analyze form; identification and immersion are for amateurs.²⁴

This attitude has also led professional critics to assume that a spellbound reader who responds emotionally to a literary text must be an uncritical reader. Critique requires suspicion, it is assumed, and suspicion requires distance, not absorption. Such critics may easily assume that Beauvoir’s account of reading and writing in *The Mandarins* is incompatible with politically radical reading.

If we assume that critique requires us to approach every text in a spirit of suspicion, that it prohibits us from opening ourselves to the author’s vision, then such an attitude is incompatible with Beauvoir’s literary theory, just as it is incompatible with her understanding of how to live and work with others. She doesn’t believe that all books are good. Rather, she implies that suspicion must be earned through the reader’s engagement with the author’s adventure. The same is true for acceptance, agreement, or admiration.

There is nothing in Beauvoir’s aesthetics to prevent readers from engaging in critique. It is clear, for example, that Henri sees through the political and literary obfuscations both of Lenoir’s communist verse drama, and Lambert’s and Volange’s advocacy of a literature of pure form. But the best critique will be done by readers who have made a genuine effort to follow the writer on her adventure. The task of the critic is to give an account of that adventure. A reader’s capacity for immersion and identification may be as intellectually illuminating as her capacity for suspicion. Far from being the opposite of acknowledgment, critique requires acknowledgment.

24. I discuss the history and theory of this attitude in Moi, “Rethinking Character,” in Amanda Anderson, Rita Felski, and Toril Moi, *Character* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, forthcoming 2019).