

Ambiguity and Artificity: Beauvoir and an Existentialist Ethics of Translation

SHAYNA FEDERICO

In a novel, indeed, there are no perceptible givens other than the form of words printed in black on white paper. Nothing limits the inventiveness of the author, but nothing supports the imagination of the reader either.

– Simone de Beauvoir, “The Novel and the Theater”

Introduction

Although it has proven integral to the work of English-speaking Continental philosophers, translation – more often than not – recedes far into philosophers’ perceptual backgrounds, either taken for granted or intentionally ignored. Nevertheless, translation has not, and in fact it *cannot*, disappear from philosophical practice entirely. The more we attempt to push translation under the surface and condemn it to the limited gloss of a translator’s note, the more we risk obscuring the intellectual clarity we have built our careers seeking.

My primary goal here is that of reorientation: in turning toward the works of Simone de Beauvoir, I hope to sketch out a preliminary existentialist ethics of translation. In this paper, I synthesize Beauvoir’s various writings on literature to argue that translators must radically assume the fundamental ambiguity of the task of translation through insisting on *making it visible* to the reader, rather than attempt to “overcome” it. Translators can thus productively embrace the tensions that arise from the simultaneous desire to honor and replicate the source text and the necessity of interpreting and therefore altering it.

Many of the basic ideas about translation central to this paper are resonant with the views of a number of interlocutors in Translation Studies, though I hope to give them new life here through my engagement with Beauvoir, who is traditionally discussed in Translation Studies only insofar as it is to adjudicate between the veracity of the various translations of *Le Deuxième Sexe*. I discuss this literature in Section 1 in order to lay the groundwork for my discussion of Beauvoir’s view of writing as a manifestation of ambiguities surrounding singularity and intersubjectivity, as well as the partiality of written truth in Section 2. Section 3 adapts the existentialist notion of the situation to help develop my notion of “artificity” in effort to describe the competing sense of freedom and constraint from which the translator must make their choices. Finally, the paper concludes by considering practical ways for translators to make the fact of translation more visible in their work, which serves both radically assume the ambiguity of translation and to co-constitute a shared textual world in a manner that embraces existentialist notions of temporality.

1. Adjudicating *Le Deuxième Sexe*: Current Perspectives on Translating Beauvoir

Much of the current consideration of the relationship between Beauvoir and translation focuses primarily on *Le Deuxième Sexe* in effort to adjudicate between “right” and “wrong” translations, a

discursive paradigm which I will argue is revealing of limits tantamount to dominant perspectives in Translation Studies more broadly.¹ Originally published in French in 1949, Beauvoir's *Le Deuxième Sexe* was first translated into English as *The Second Sex* by Howard M. Parshley in 1953. Thirty years later, in 1983, Margaret A. Simons famously and to much success initiated an onslaught of critical consideration Parshley's translation with the publication of her article "The Silencing of Simone de Beauvoir: Guess What's Missing from *The Second Sex*." In this painstakingly well-researched article, Simons highlights the simultaneous depth and breadth of Parshley's abridgments and editing of his translation of *Le Deuxième Sexe* and their significance for the English reception of the text. Though Parshley himself acknowledges that he "ha[s] done some cutting and condensation here and there with a view to brevity, chiefly in reducing the extent of the author's illustrative material, especially in certain of her quotations from other writers," the precise moments in the text at which such alterations were made are not marked (Beauvoir, trans. Parshley, *The Second Sex* xxli-xlii). The reader, thus, has no clear way of knowing what material was excised or substantively altered by Parshley, the effect of which (even if not intentionally so) is that the reader is left to presume that the text Parshley presents to the reader as *The Second Sex* is precisely as Beauvoir herself would have written and intended it if she wrote it in English. As Simons argues, the consequences of Parshley's covert interventions have been significant. The philosophical import and intellectual rigor of Beauvoir's *Le Deuxième Sexe* were in many ways obscured by Parshley, and both the book and Beauvoir herself were subject to a barrage of criticisms based on tenuous textual foundation (without many people even realizing it).

In "While We Wait: The English Translation of *The Second Sex*," Toril Moi contends that Parshley's lack of philosophical training led to a series of mistranslations which damage the integrity of Beauvoir's original *Le Deuxième Sexe*. Moi systematically sets out a series of instances in which the specificity of the existentialist use of "words that also have a perfectly ordinary everyday meaning" is lost on Parshley, resulting in what Moi characterizes as outright mistranslation (1013). For instance, Moi analyzes the translation of the French *authentique*. As Moi points out, *authentique*

is a common French word, which usually can be translated as "genuine," "real," or "authentic," according to the context (an "authentic" Louis XVI chair, a "genuine" signature, etc.). But in Beauvoir and Sartre's vocabulary, an "authentic" act is one that is carried out in good faith, that is to say, one that does not try to deny freedom and the responsibility that comes with freedom.... When Parshley freely transforms Beauvoir's "authentic" into "real," "genuine," and "true," he turns her questions about women's freedom into moralizing sentimentality. (1014)

For Moi, the imprecision of Parshley's treatment of *authentique* risks importing an air of metaphysics into the text, that directly contradicts Beauvoir's existentialist commitments. Beauvoir, as a result, appears to the English reader as far less thorough, rigorous, and systematic than the original French reveals her to be.

While both Simons and Moi have proven invaluable in revitalizing Beauvoir Studies in the American academy and have prompted a remarkable amount of insightful scholarship, their outlooks on Parshley's translation of *Le Deuxième Sexe* are, in my view, emblematic of a broader phenomenon in Translation Studies. In particular, both Simons's and Moi's articles presuppose the possibility of an *ideal* translation which *perfectly* captures the essential truth of *Le Deuxième Sexe* and places the sole responsibility of achieving this goal on the translator. This perspective is not especially uncommon. See for instance, Allan Bloom's preface to his translation of Plato's *Republic*.² Here, Bloom describes himself as providing "a literal translation" in hopes that the serious student of Plato will thus "be emancipated from the tyranny of the translator, given the means of transcending the limitations of the translator's interpretation, enabled to discover the subtleties of the elusive original" (xi). In conceiving of the translator as "a medium between a master whose depths he has not plumbed and an audience of the potential students of the master who may be much better endowed than is the translator," Bloom implies that the source text possesses a fundamental truth which the translator

ought not to purport to understand to any exceptional degree but is nonetheless obligated to faithfully render (xi). Although Simons and Moi themselves do not explicitly lay out a prescriptive translation ethics, their criticisms of Parshley reveal an implicit understanding of the role of the translator to be something similar to Bloom's view of himself as the translator of Plato's *Republic*.

But as Anna Bogic's "Why Philosophy Went Missing: Understanding the English Version of Simone de Beauvoir's *Le Deuxième Sexe*" points out, Parshley was far from the sole person responsible for this translation. Parshley was under explicit instruction by his superiors at Alfred A. Knopf – the American publishing house that commissioned his translation of *Le Deuxième Sexe* – to emphasize the book's scientific elements to the detriment of its existentialist ones (Bogic 153). Bogic's argument is based on her study of over 150 letters between Parshley, Blanche Knopf, and Harold Strauss (Knopf's editor-in-chief), which "reveal just how influential the editor's input was in the translation process... Parshley's struggles with the philosophical concepts and his requests for help," and his ultimately unfulfilled desire to discuss the material with Beauvoir herself (158). Although none of this makes Parshley or his translation beyond criticism, it illuminates the complexity of the situation of the translator, particularly as it pertains to questions of facticity and freedom of choice.

In 2011, Simons's and Moi's calls for a retranslation appear to have been answered, at least in principle, when Vintage Books commissioned Constance Borde and Sheila Malovany-Chevallier to undertake a new translation of *Le Deuxième Sexe*. Meryl Altman praises Borde and Malovany-Chevallier for their systematicity and attention to detail, despite herself acknowledging a degree of inevitable imperfection due to the sheer magnitude of their task (128). However, as Sylvie Chaperon and Marine Rouch point out, many Beauvoir scholars remain dissatisfied (185–6). Moi herself ironically ends up expressing a preference for Parshley's initial translation, alleging that Borde and Malovany-Chevallier's translation has "three fundamental and pervasive problems: a mishandling of key terms for gender and sexuality, an inconsistent use of tenses, and the mangling of syntax, sentence structure and punctuation" ("The Adulteress Wife" 108). Nancy Bauer expresses a similar disappointment with Borde and Malovany-Chevallier's "highly unidiomatic word-by-word literalism that hampers the flow of Beauvoir's argument in which the new translation is decidedly superior to the old" (115). The upshot seems to be a slightly chaotic one, which as Altman points out, can most charitably be attributed to the fact that each commentator brings with them a series of intellectual and interpretive biases which underlie their assessment of both the Parshley and the Borde-Malovany-Chevallier translations (and, I would also add, even to Beauvoir's original French) (128–9). In what seems to be yet another instance of the classic quandary "damned if you do, damned if you don't," philosophers and translators alike may well feel inspired to ask: what is there left to do?

2. Beauvoir on the Intersubjectivity and Partiality of Writing

What is intriguing about the general trajectory of Beauvoir scholars' discussion of translation is how the underlying presuppositions about the essence of a text and the solitary responsibility of the translator, in fact, contradict Beauvoir's own conception of the intersubjective quality of the written text. Across her various shorter essays and speeches on writing and literature, Beauvoir describes written texts as shared worlds that bridge the gaps between our singular experiences of the world. Nevertheless, the ambiguity produced by a simultaneous singularity and intersubjectivity necessarily means that every written truth remains, at best, a partial one. In "New Heroes for Old" – an article that was, notably, originally written in English and intended for an American audience (Fallaise 94) – Beauvoir describes the ambiguity of existence that results from our simultaneous and inescapable individuality and intersubjectivity:

There are these two aspects of truth that it is important to set forth together: the conditioning of the individual by his organism, his period, his country, the economic, social, and political structure of the society to which he belongs, and at the same time the autonomy of his thought and the singularity and importance of his personal identity. You cannot define an individual without defining his relationship

to the world, for it is only in the midst of the world that he realizes himself. But still, the world is not an indistinct mass; it is inhabited by individual consciences [consciousnesses]. (120)

What Beauvoir enumerates here is generally called the *situation* by existentialist philosophers: a way of describing how each person is differently positioned based on near-infinite social and historical contingencies, and thus has a unique subjective experience of the world *even insofar* as their world is constantly influenced by other subjects. While the idea of the *situation* appears across a range of existentialist texts, in “New Heroes for Old,” Beauvoir is specifically speaking to how different epochs both produce and demand new forms of writing (Fallaize 95). Texts themselves are not written in a vacuum; they do not appear to us from nowhere or no one. They are, instead, created by individuals who are “condition[ed]... by his organism, his period, his country, the economic, social, and political structure of the society to which he belongs,” or his *situation* (120).³ Even insofar as the writer aims to establish himself singularly, he is always already bound up in the world in which he is writing. It is through the productive tension of this ambiguous relation that the writer “realizes himself” as a writer and the text is realized as something that is legible to and meaningful for its readers (120).

No less integral to Beauvoir’s account here is the fact that “the world is not an indistinct mass” composed of faceless, anonymous replicas of each other. The world is instead co-constituted by “individual consciences [consciousnesses],” each of whom are entangled in a contextual web of signification, defining their situation and personal history, and thus informs their perception of and engagement with the text (120). The specificity of each reader brings something singular to the same text – no two people will read or understand any given text in the exact same way. In fact, it is this relation which gives a text a meaning, transforming it from mere letters on a page into a *novel* or a *work of philosophy* as such. It is through the fact of our intersubjective entanglement that “literature is going to find its justification and its meaning,” precisely “*because* these situations [between individuals] are not closed to each other” (“What Can Literature Do?” 199; emphasis added). Beauvoir insists:

We are not monads. Each situation is open unto all the others and it is open onto the world, which is nothing other than the swirling [*tournoiement*] of all these situations which envelop each other.

So we can communicate; we can communicate across the world which is a totality, although detotalized, this world which exists for us all and which allows us to agree upon what is green and what is red, for example. (“What Can Literature Do?” 199)

It is through this communication that we are able to bridge the gap between and assume the ambiguity of our simultaneously separate existences. As Gail Weiss argues, one of the most fundamental ambiguities for human existence for Beauvoir is the fact that there is always already an “ongoing tension between my understanding of my experience as being unique to myself alone and, conversely, my understanding of my experience as something that is shared with others” (283). Beauvoir continues on:

I who am speaking to you am not in the same situation as you who are listening, and none of those who are listening to me is in the same situation as his neighbor. He did not come here with the same past, nor with the same intentions, nor the same culture. Everything is different all these situations which, in a way, open onto one another and communicate with each other, have, all the same, something that can not be communicated through the means taken at this moment: lecture, discussion, or debate. (“What Can Literature Do?” 199)

Communication, thus, attempts to and yet is always already destined to fail at overcoming the singularity of each of our situated existences. There will always be moments at which language fails, and there is simply no possible combination of words that could convey in its entirety all the richness of an idea, experience, or phenomenon.

Writing, then, is an economy of *partial* truths: since “[i]t is impossible for a writer to reduce reality to a fixed and complete spectacle that he might show in its totality[, e]ach of us grasps but a moment

of it: a partial truth" (Beauvoir "What Can Literature Do?" 199). But even as partial truths, communication – particularly through writing – is a worthy and productive endeavor, given how it facilitates the co-constitution of a shared world. Even as writing affirms our singularity, it simultaneously refutes any genuine appeal to solipsism, since:

Literature – if it is authentic – is a way of surpassing the separation [of individuals] by affirming it. It affirms the separation because when I read a book – a book that counts for me – someone is speaking to me; the author is part of his book... the author must impose his presence upon me. And when he imposes his presence upon me, he imposes his world upon me at the same time. ("What Can Literature Do?" 199)

Writing is, therefore, a necessarily intersubjective and collaborative endeavor for Beauvoir, and one which takes on great importance for the ways in which human existents strive to make existence meaningful. Although this may seem, in a sense, obvious, the manner in which Beauvoir lays out the intersubjective stakes of writing have significant implications for our understanding and practice of translation precisely because of how it *radically rejects the contention that any given text contains an essential metaphysical truth* which can be made wholly distinct from its author, reader, and/or translator. Put otherwise, the upshot of Beauvoir's discussion of writing is that the text does not possess a meaning on its own – its meaning instead emerges *through* its relationship with its author and its reader. This emergence of meaning, I argue, undergoes another transformative layer when the text is translated from its original language.

3. "Artifacticity" and the Textual Situation: Constraints Faced by Translators

Arguing that the meaning of a written work emerges through its being read does not, however, entail conceiving of the reader as a sole constituting consciousness; the text does not gain its meaning according to the reader's will alone. The reader is thrown into a textual world that they themselves did not create and is, subsequently, tasked with making sense of it while simultaneously being constrained by the facts of text. So, too, is the situation of the translator. The goal of translation is to render the source text legible in a new language, which necessarily entails also producing a text that is meaningful, one that *makes sense*. While there is something undoubtedly generative about translation, it is distinct from writing a work anew. Even though the translator is faced with what feels like an endless series of choices, these choices are always already constrained by the source text – a phenomenon I call "artifacticity." The source text as a particular artifact provides an immutable layer of facticity that defines the translator's situation. The landscape of possible choices is constrained by the facticity of the source text; the translator's freedom is far from unfettered.

What does it mean to say that the situation of the translator – and therefore, the economy of choice – is constrained? How, then, does this figure into an existentialist ethics of translation? As Beauvoir tells us:

An ethic is not created in a void: it presupposes a metaphysic.⁴ As soon as a man asks himself How should I act? He is led also to ask Why thus rather than otherwise? In whose name? Who am I? What is this world into which I thrust my decision? He feels free because he must choose; but he also feels his freedom limited precisely because the necessity of choice has been forced upon him. What, precisely, is liberty? ("New Heroes for Old" 118)

Why choose this word rather than another? Why rearrange the structure of this sentence and not that one? In so doing, what is gained and what risks being lost or obscured? In the case of the translator, "the necessity of choice" is structured by the facticity of the situation: the original text in itself; the grammatical "rules" and structure of the arbitrating text's original language and the language into which it is being translated; the translator's theoretical and working knowledge of both these languages; the passage of time between initial publication and translation, which begets its own linguistic shifts and evolutions.

The translator's choices are thus constrained on these and many more levels, which is exacerbated by Beauvoir's aforementioned contention that writing is only ever capable of transmitting partial truths. But within this so-called problem lies its very solution: "[a] partial truth is a mystification *only if it is taken for the whole truth*. But if it is taken for what it is, well, then it is a truth, and it enriches the one to whom it is communicated" ("What Can Literature Do?" 199; emphasis added). Even a partial truth, on Beauvoir's account, can be illuminating *so long as it is recognized as such*. Following this sentiment, it is imperative that readers of translated texts be especially aware of the fact that they are reading a translation and that this will inevitably impact their reading and understanding of the text. This does not mean that there is nothing to be gained from reading a translated text, simply that what *is* gained is different from that of the original text by virtue of the fact that – in being translated – the text becomes its own distinct artifact. Only if you want to read exactly what the author wrote must you read it in the original language, but even then, this does not mean that you will understand it in its entirety exactly as did the author – its truth will remain partial regardless of the language in which you read it. This, however, does not negate that some translations may provide more partial truths than others, and that, as such, we may come to prefer some translations to others. Rather, in taking up this sentiment from Beauvoir, my hope is simply to demonstrate that if the goal of the translator is to completely honor the "whole, essential truth" of the source text, then the translator is both destined to fail in their attempt and to mislead their readers along the way. As Emily Wilson writes in her translation of Homer's *Odyssey*, "[t]ranslation always, necessarily, involves interpretation; there is no such thing as a translation that provides anything like a transparent window through which a reader can see the original" (86).

Every textual artifact is also a temporal one, and as such "exist[s] in a time, a place, and a language that are entirely alien from those of the original" (87). Since "[a]ll modern translations are equally modern," Wilson argues that:

The question facing translators and their readers is whether to try to disguise this fact, through stylistic tricks such as archaism and an elevated, artificially "literary" register, or to underline it, and thereby encourage readers to be aware that the text exists in two different temporal and spatial moments at once. (87)

Wilson illuminates how the translator's ethos contributes significantly to the textual artifact they go on to create through their translation. In what Beauvoir and her existentialist contemporaries would consider an act of bad faith, the translator can attempt to deceive the readers about their interventions in the text, or they can radically assume the ambiguity of their task and translate the text in a manner that "encourage[s] readers to be aware that the text exists in two different temporal and spatial moments at once" (87). The former is not only an act of bad faith, but also directly at odds with Beauvoir's understanding of temporality, which she also conceives of us fundamentally ambiguous. As Weiss puts it, Beauvoir argues that "human existence does not unfold wholly in the present but is defined by the ambiguity of existing in the present, the past, and the future simultaneously" (283). The artifacticity of a text possesses a similar temporal structure. It shapes the translator's situation, contributing to their reception of the text and resonating with the linguistic resources at their disposal.

Conclusion: Visibility and Assuming the Ambiguity of Translation

On a broad level, I argue through Beauvoir that we ought to radically assume the ambiguity that the process of translation brings to a text, the interpretive element of which inevitably adds a new layer of facticity to the source text which transforms it into its own unique artifact. Rather than attempting to overcome or flee from this artifacticity – a move which Beauvoir would consider an act of bad faith – translators ought to *radically assume* it through making the process of translation *visible*. In attempting to fade into the background, translators obscure the strong presence they impose upon the text and, instead of being invisible, take on a more spectral role. How much ink

have philosophers spilled critiquing Beauvoir when their gripes are, in fact, with Parshley or Borde and Malovany-Chevallier? While it would be an overstatement to say that this scholarship has been produced in vain, it has nonetheless often been misguided and contributed to the strained ambivalence with which Beauvoir has been treated in the American academy.

Practically speaking, there are numerous ways to make the fact of translation more visible and therefore, to provide all of the resources for the reader to be more informed about the artifacticity of what they are reading. While the use of para-text has become more common in translated texts, it is not always included. It is striking that Beauvoir's *Pour une morale de l'ambiguïté*, for instance, is completely uncommented upon by its English-language translator Bernard Frechtman. The effects of Frechtman's illusion of anonymity and even of his silence in his translation is all the more troubling given how, to date, his is the only English translation of *Pour une morale de l'ambiguïté*. Frechtman's translation is, as a result, generally considered authoritative, opaque and has gone largely uncommented.

In the vast majority of translated philosophical texts, the para-text is often conceived of and deployed rather narrowly. For one, it is a foreword or a translator's note. At other times, a footnote here or there which explains a textual reference. On my account, such para-texts can be useful but are insufficient by themselves. It is far less common for translators to acknowledge, let alone defend, the choices that they have made in translating a text; although this is the precise sort of justification that is necessary to illuminate the level of discretion and intervention that the translator has on the text that they have produced. In the "Volume Editors' Introduction" to their translation of selections of the works of Gabrielle Suchon, Domna C. Stanton and Rebecca M. Wilkin, for example, explain their decision to translate *liberté* as "freedom" and *les Sciences* as "the human sciences" (50). But there are also moments where it can be important to comment upon the translation of more *prima facie* "banal" words, and so translators should feel empowered to use footnotes liberally throughout the body of the text so that they can provide the reader with more clarity. This approach is especially useful where the context prompts translating the same word differently. Such a practice may have allowed Frechtman, for example, to avoid much of Parker's criticism over his inconsistent translation of the term *singularité*. Similar confusion can also be avoided by including more terms in their original language in the body of the text, denoted by brackets. While brackets are often reserved for more key terms, they can also be an incredibly useful translation tool. At others, they can become an immense difficulty and source of confusion for the translator. In moments where it seems that almost no word is good enough, bracketing the original term can provide the reader with the opportunity to struggle through the text along with the translator – instead of experiencing a solitary frustration that may simply result in there not being two directly equivalent terms between the two languages.⁵

In making translation visible, the translator is able to (1) radically assume the ambiguity of their task and (2) work toward the shared creation of a textual world that projects the text forward rather than condemning it to the immanence through attempting to fix it in its original form (an act that is already destined to fail within an existentialist temporal schema). Regarding the first point, making translation visible avoids the bad faith engagement of the translator pretending that they are simply a mediator or a messenger of the text and that it is possible for them to disappear, but also allows them to claim responsibility for the laborious task that is required to interpret a text so that it is legible to a reader in another language. Moreover, engaging in visible translation practices allows the translator to put their cards on the table, so to speak. Doing so does not only carry the potential negative consequences of making the translator more vulnerable to increased criticism from their readers, but also opens up increased opportunities for praise and fruitful intellectual conversation about the content of the translation. Regarding the second point, making translation visible also allows the translator to leave their imprint on the text and bring to the fore the collaborative nature of philosophical practice, which, as discussed in this paper, Beauvoir argues is core to the form of writing and communication itself. The translator is, then, able to rightfully claim their place as a co-constitutor

of the shared textual world the original author may have initiated, but which inevitably takes on a life of its own as time continues to march forward. In this way, translation and translators project the text forward into a future yet unknown and yet to be defined.

Villanova University, USA

Notes

- ¹ A notable exception to this is Emily Anne Parker's "Singularity in Beauvoir's *The Ethics of Ambiguity*," which examines the implications of Bernard Frechtman's inconsistent translation of the French *singularité*.
- ² To be clear, neither Simons nor Moi explicitly set out a translation ethics in their commentary on Parshley's translation of *Le Deuxième Sexe*, and yet their argument is ultimately quite resonant with what Bloom states far more explicitly.
- ³ I use the masculine pronouns here following Beauvoir, as is typical by French writers. This is not, however, indicative of my belief that only men are writers, nor is that – I presume – a belief held by Beauvoir herself.
- ⁴ It is important to note that Beauvoir's appeal to metaphysics here is not one of alignment with traditional Western metaphysics, in which the first principles of things are determined entirely exterior to human existence. It is, instead, a softer sense of metaphysics in which any ethic would post a first principle that is created by human existents.
- ⁵ As Olga Castro argues, paratext often have a strong ideological bend which can shape the reader's perception of the text. Even so, what can be so beneficial about the use of paratext is that it puts this ideology out in the open for the reader to engage with critically, rather than hiding the ideology which is already at play behind-the-scenes as part of the translator's situation, thus already influencing the translation choices that they make.

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