Traces of War

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SECTION B

Writing the War:  
Sartre, Beauvoir, Camus
Que signifie au juste le mot guerre? Il y a un mois, quand il a été imprimé en grosses lettres dans les journaux, c'était une horreur informe, quelque chose de confus, mais de plein. Maintenant, ce n'est nulle part, ni rien. Je me sens détendue et vague, j'attends, je ne sais pas quoi.

(Beauvoir, La Force d’âge, p. 461, quoting a journal entry written on 3 October 1939)

‘Jamais nous n’avons été plus libres que sous l’occupation allemande’ (Situations, III, p. 11). This was Sartre’s provocative summary of the Occupation shortly after the liberation of Paris in August 1944. If we do not progress any further into the article of which it is the first sentence, ‘La République du silence’, we might suspect that for Sartre and his friends, and by extension perhaps for French people in general, the Occupation was not so bad after all. Indeed, with a degree of provocation to match Sartre’s, the historian and novelist Gilbert Joseph has argued that Sartre and Beauvoir had, as the title of his book (to which the title of this chapter refers) puts it, une si douce occupation. According to Joseph, Sartre and Beauvoir’s Resistance activities never got beyond talk, and they were careful not to put themselves in real danger. They spent the Occupation pursuing their literary careers and sexual conquests, cementing their intellectual credentials and enjoying a high time. If some of their wartime writings (such as Sartre’s play

1 The text in the journal entry is slightly different. See Beauvoir, Journal de guerre, p. 69.
Les Mouches and Beauvoir’s novel Le Sang des autres) and some of their post-war statements implied support for and maybe even active participation in the Resistance, this was all part of their self-serving self-mythologization. Joseph reports that on one occasion he asked the historian of the Resistance, Henri Noguères, why his monumental five-volume Histoire de la Résistance en France never mentions Sartre, only to be told bluntly: ‘Parce que Sartre n’a jamais été un résistant’ (Une si douce occupation, p. 366). In a subsequent letter, Noguères underscored his earlier statement: ‘Je maintiens qu’en une vingtaine d’années consacrées à des recherches et des travaux sur l’histoire de la Résistance en France, je n’ai jamais rencontré Sartre ou Beauvoir’ (quoted in Une si douce occupation, p. 366).

Joseph’s account has been criticized on a number of grounds, ranging from factual inaccuracy to wilful misinterpretation. In this chapter I aim neither to dismiss it out of hand nor to endorse it. Regarding Sartre’s description of the Occupation as a period of unprecedented freedom, we do not have to read far into ‘La République du silence’ (reprinted in Situations, III) to discover that this freedom is neither as agreeable nor as counter-intuitive as the initial statement might lead us to believe. In the second sentence Sartre refers to French civilians’ loss of rights and the mass deportation of workers, Jews and political prisoners. The French were nevertheless free, in Sartre’s sense, insofar as the Occupation confronted them with the human condition stripped down to essentials, in constant proximity to death. French men and women had to decide for themselves who they were or who they aspired to be: ‘Et le choix que chacun faisait de lui-même était authentique puisqu’il se faisait en présence de la mort, puisqu’il aurait toujours pu s’exprimer sous la forme “Plutôt la mort que …”’ (Situations, III, p. 12). Through oppression, the human subject could discover freedom in its existential, existentialist sense.

This position concords with the view of freedom elaborated by Sartre in his major philosophical work of the Occupation period, L’Être et le néant (1943). Because it was published under the censorship regime of

2 Joseph refers to the original five-volume edition, which was subsequently reissued in a ten-volume revised and expanded edition.

3 LaMarca, for example, comments of the book that it ‘cannot be judged as completely reliable and definitely not as unbiased’ (‘Guilt and the War Within’, p. 40), citing in support a mistake about the date of the birth of Camus’s twin children.
the Occupation, the book could not refer explicitly to the Second World War or the German presence in France. Nevertheless, it is no great leap to suggest that its historical context to some extent informs Sartre’s insistence that the essential aspect of human relations is conflict rather than fellowship (p. 481). And if Sartre does not specifically mention the war against the Germans, he does discuss war; indeed, I suggest that he plays on the ambiguity of the French *la guerre*, which can refer both to war in general and the specific war which would inevitably be on the minds of his first readers. In the section of the work devoted to freedom and responsibility, Sartre argues that (the) war is a human situation for which we must take total responsibility. The war is *mine*, and in choosing it, in deciding not to reject it, for example by suicide or desertion, I choose myself and the person I want to be: ‘vivre cette guerre, c’est me choisir par mon choix de moi-même’ (*L’Être et le néant*, p. 613). In typically uncompromising style, Sartre declares that ‘On a la guerre qu’on mérite’ (*L’Être et le néant*, p. 614) – a phrase which is echoed both in his *Carnets de la drôle de guerre* (pp. 161–62) and his novel *La Mort dans l’âme* (p. 95). Sartre insists that the subject is free even – perhaps especially – in times of war, even though its freedom brings with it a terrible burden of responsibility:

> Ainsi, totalement libre, indiscernable de la période dont j’ai choisi d’être le sens, aussi profondément responsable de la guerre que si je l’avais moi-même déclarée, ne pouvant rien vivre sans l’intégrer à ma situation, m’y engager tout entier et la marquer de mon sceau, je dois être sans remords ni regrets comme je suis sans excuse, car, dès l’instant de mon surgissement à l’être, je porte le poids du monde à moi tout seul, sans que rien ni personne ne puisse l’alléger. (*L’Être et le néant*, p. 614; emphasis original)

In this dense sentence, the subject appears to be totally free, choosing the sense of itself and its period even if it could do nothing to prevent the war and, by implication, the Occupation. Atlas-like, I bear the whole world on my shoulders; but this weight does not inevitably crush me. Sartre says that if I am without excuse, I should also be without remorse or regret. This terrible freedom and this total responsibility at least leave me immune from accusations about past mistakes or misdemeanours. I can turn my back on everything except my freedom and responsibility. I can find a liveable accommodation with the harsh reality of war.

Sartre’s argument in this section of *L’Être et le néant* anticipates what he would say in the later article ‘La République du silence’. There is, however, one striking difference. In the passage from *L’Être et le néant*,
Sartre repeatedly uses the first person singular. Forms of the first person occur 11 times in the sentence quoted above, and Sartre draws attention to it through the emphasis on ‘ma situation’. ‘La République du silence’, by contrast, opens with the first person plural: ‘Jamais nous n’avons été plus libres que sous l’occupation allemande’ (emphasis added). The heroic solitary subject has been subsumed into the collective experience; rather than speaking just on its own behalf, it speaks for all. The first person plural refers to the inhabitants of occupied France as distinct from those who lived in unoccupied countries. Sartre gives his readers an account and an interpretive framework for their own experience. In terms of Ricœur’s hermeneutics, he provides them with the means to configure and reconfigure what they had lived through. What explains or justifies this shift from the isolated first person to the collective plural? ‘La République du silence’ itself raises this issue explicitly. Sartre says that 35 million people were affected by the Occupation: ‘Comment parler en leur nom à tous? Les petites villes, les grands centres industriels, les campagnes ont connu des sorts différents’ (*Situations, III*, p. 17). At this point Sartre poses, but does not decisively resolve, the question discussed in Chapter 1: who has the right to speak on behalf of others, and more specifically to unify the disparate experiences of a population which included résistants, collaborators and the morally indifferent? I shall return later in the current chapter to the problems raised by this passage from the first person singular to the first person plural.

**What did you do during the war?**

So what did Sartre and Beauvoir do during the war? One answer to the question is that they wrote; indeed, they wrote a very great deal. Their writings included conventional literary and philosophical works: Sartre worked on the *Chemin de la liberté* sequence of novels, wrote the plays *Les Mouches* and *Huis clos*, and published his philosophical magnum opus *L’Être et le néant*; Beauvoir published her first novel, *L’Invitée*, and wrote her second, *Le Sang des autres*, as well as the philosophical essay *Pyrhus et Cinéas*. They also wrote other, voluminous texts not meant initially for public dissemination, but some of which are now available, such as Sartre’s *Carnets de la drôle de guerre* and *Lettres au Castor*, and Beauvoir’s *Journal de guerre* and *Lettres à Sartre*. Before the war, Sartre was the reasonably well-known author of the novel *La Nausée*, the short story collection *Le Mur* and some philosophical essays; Beauvoir was an
obscure philosophy teacher. By the end of the war, Sartre was one of the leading writers and thinkers in contemporary France, and Beauvoir had established herself as an important novelist and intellectual. After the war, they would continue to write about the period in both fictional and autobiographical form, notably in Sartre’s novel *La Mort dans l’âme* and Beauvoir’s *La Force de l’âge*, the second volume of the autobiographical series begun with *Mémoires d’une jeune fille rangée*.

In literary terms, the war was a fantastic opportunity for Sartre and Beauvoir: it gave them lots to write about. If this formulation sounds unnecessarily cynical, there is some justification for it in the texts which Sartre and Beauvoir produced during and about this period. Sartre’s *Carnets de la drôle de guerre* is remarkable for its near total lack of any sense of the danger of war. He writes and writes and writes, and to be honest sometimes it is not very interesting. The same could be said of Beauvoir’s *Journal de guerre*. The historical circumstances may have been momentous, but the day-to-day experience was banal. Sartre was eventually taken as a prisoner of war. Beauvoir was anxious and anguished about his fate, though actually life in the POW camp doesn’t seem to have been a bad experience for him. He made friends and wrote a play, *Bariona*, and was then freed because of his poor eyesight, which allowed him to claim that he was not a combatant.

Back in Paris, he attempted to set up a Resistance group under the name Socialisme et liberté, but not much really happened. In occupied France, Sartre and Beauvoir devoted themselves to their careers: Sartre’s *L’Être et le néant* would become the key work of French existentialism, and the plays *Les Mouches* and *Huis clos* consolidated his position as a literary author, while Beauvoir worked on her novels *L’Invitée* and *Le Sang des autres*. Although they despised the collaborationist Vichy regime and suffered from cold and hunger, there is no evidence that they were actively, seriously involved in the armed Resistance. Their works certainly refer to the war, directly or indirectly: *L’Invitée* concludes with a murder by gassing while *Le Sang des autres* openly espouses the cause of the Resistance; *L’Être et le néant* places conflict at the heart of the human condition and *Les Mouches* depicts the violent overthrow of tyranny. But there is something safely literary about this. No one really dies.

Towards the end of the Occupation, as Beauvoir recounts it in *La Force de l’âge*, she and Sartre were warned – by Camus – that they

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4 For a short account of Sartre’s time as a POW, see Martin, *The Boxer and the Goalkeeper*, pp. 176–79.
should move from their current residences. So they stayed for a while with the writer Michel Leiris and his wife. As Beauvoir puts it, ‘c’était charmant de séjourner à Paris chez des amis’ (p. 674; emphasis added). It was charming. Beauvoir’s choice of word here is remarkable. This account omits any sense of fear or danger. The war appears as a mild inconvenience because it forces one to move house. But let’s look on the bright side: at least one can have a lovely time by staying with one’s charming friends. All in all, the Occupation doesn’t sound too bad.

So what changed?

A commonplace of French writing during and about the ‘drôle de guerre’ – the period between the declaration of war in September 1939 and the outbreak of serious fighting on the Western front in May 1940 – is the sense that war is everywhere and nowhere; it changes everything and is yet somehow invisible, not real. The so-called ‘phoney war’ doesn’t quite exist, even though it dominates every moment of the lives of those called up (like Sartre) and those who longed for them to return (like Beauvoir). We know we are at war, but where do we see it? Early in his Carnets de la drôle de guerre, Sartre writes that ‘La guerre n’a jamais été plus insaisissable que ces jours-ci. Elle me manque, car enfin, si elle n’existe pas, qu’est-ce que je fais ici?’ (p. 35). The phrase ‘Elle me manque’ is quite shocking: it would be better, Sartre suggests, if the war were more palpable, more violent, more deadly, so that conscripts such as Private Sartre could really believe that something were actually happening. They might even die. Anticipating Ricœur (see Chapter 6), Sartre describes the war as a kind of enforced sabbatical or even a premature retirement: ‘je suis entièrement libre et parfaitement seul: c’est une retraite’ (p. 35).

And yet, this near-invisible war will leave nothing untouched. It marked the beginning of a process involving experiences as a POW and in occupied France which would see Sartre turn from an individualist anarchist into the committed public intellectual who has not been matched in France before or since. His pre-war novel La Nausée caustically mocked the delusions of politicized humanism; his post-war work Qu’est-que la littérature? became the most infamous manifesto of commitment. So the experience of war changed Sartre definitively. His Carnets de la drôle de guerre refer to the ‘rupture entre [sa] vie passée et [sa] vie présente’ (p. 383); and this ‘rupture’ has as much to do with his attitudes and beliefs as with his everyday routines. In her retrospective
memoir *La Force de l’âge*, Beauvoir also stresses that the war marked an irreversible change in her life. She summarizes the war years as a time when everything was transformed:

> non seulement la guerre avait changé mes rapports à tout, mais elle avait tout changé: les ciels de Paris et les villages de Bretagne, la bouche des femmes, les yeux des enfants. Après juin 1940, je ne reconnus plus les choses, ni les gens, ni les heures, ni les lieux, ni moi-même. (p. 684)

Nothing can be the same again. The beliefs which sustained the pre-war world have been swept aside: ‘la violence était déchaînée et l’injustice, la bêtise, le scandale, l’horreur. La victoire même n’allait pas renverser le temps et ressusciter un ordre provisoirement dérangé; elle ouvrait une nouvelle époque: l’après-guerre’ (*La Force d’âge*, p. 684).

This presents an image of the war as an absolute turning point. It is perhaps surprising, then, that the text which announces this is itself so placid. It bears none of the structural, semantic or grammatical signs which might mark it out as a trauma text (such as those discussed in the following chapter, in relation to Camus’s *L’Etranger*). In relative tranquillity, Beauvoir reflects on her life and its meaning. And although she claims that nothing could be the same again, actually the balance she draws is quite complacent. The Liberation saw her established as a major literary and intellectual figure: ‘mes espoirs triomphaient’ (*La Force d’âge*, p. 685). Even when she endeavours to look at the bleaker side, she is surprisingly sanguine and self-congratulatory: ‘je me rétablissais dans le bonheur; tant de coups reçus: aucun ne m’avait fracassée. Je survivais, et même j’étais indemne’ (*La Force d’âge*, p. 686). Beauvoir presents herself as simultaneously completely changed and utterly untouched (‘j’étais indemne’) by the experience of the war. What Beauvoir reflects here is, I suggest, the paradox of the Second World War: it affects every aspect of life, yet it is also absent, intangible; everything is changed, yet nothing changes. Beauvoir emerges from it a different person, but also indemne, more confident in herself than ever.

The texts of Beauvoir and Sartre give some credibility to the accusation that the Occupation was, for them, rather gentle. Their situation and their texts can be contrasted with those of two other major post-war figures, Marguerite Duras and Robert Altelme, who were married at the time of the war. There are some parallels between the experiences of the two couples. Just as Beauvoir was separated from Sartre during the phoney war and his period as a POW, Duras was separated from Antelme when he was deported to Buchenwald as a member of the Resistance. All
of them wrote extensively about their respective experiences: after the war, Antelme published *L'Espèce humaine*, one of the earliest and most important French accounts of life and death in the concentration camps. In 1985 Duras in turn published *La Douleur* (supplemented in 2006 by her *Cabiers de la guerre et autres textes*), which recounts her anguish as she awaited news of her husband’s fate, and his eventual return. Duras was separated from Antelme as Beauvoir was separated from Sartre. But the differences in their experiences and their texts are as important as the parallels. While Sartre had what was relatively speaking a danger-free time in the phoney war and as a POW, Antelme was deported as a member of the Resistance and came close to death; and while Beauvoir’s concern for Sartre is evident in her *Journal de guerre* and *La Force de l’âge*, it does not approach the palpable anguish of Duras’s *La Douleur*.

Moreover, the issue of intelligibility further illustrates the difference between the two couples. Both Sartre and Beauvoir refer to the difficulty of explaining life during the Occupation to those who did not live through it. In Beauvoir’s account, when Sartre returned from the POW camp, they had difficulty understanding each other’s experiences: ‘il arrivait d’un monde que j’imaginais aussi mal qu’il imaginait mal celui où je vivais depuis des mois, et nous avions l’impression de ne pas parler tout à fait le même langage’ (*La Force d’âge*, p. 548). Sartre echoes this problem of communication in his article ‘Paris sous l’Occupation’, in which he refers to the difficulty of describing the experience of incarceration and then Occupation to those who have not lived through it: ‘Je rentrais de captivité et l’on m’interrogeait sur la vie des prisonniers: comment faire sentir l’atmosphère des camps à ceux qui n’y avaient pas vécu? […] Aujourd’hui, je me trouve devant un problème analogue: comment faire saisir ce que fut l’occupation aux habitants des pays qui sont restés libres?’ (*Situations, III*, p. 16). For both Beauvoir and Sartre, the problem of communicating unfamiliar experiences proves difficult, but not insurmountable. With creative effort from the narrator and good will from the listener, the gulf in understanding can be overcome. By contrast, in the Preface to *L’Espèce humaine*, Antelme describes a much more fundamental disruption of narratability and comprehensibility experienced by himself and fellow deportees:

Nous voulions parler, être entendus enfin. […] Et dès les premiers jours cependant, il nous paraissait impossible de combler la distance que nous découvrions entre le langage dont nous disposions et cette expérience que, pour la plupart, nous étions encore en train de poursuivre dans notre corps. […] A peine commencions-nous à raconter, que nous suffoquions.
A nous-mêmes, ce que nous avions à dire commençait alors à nous paraître inimaginable. (p. 9; emphasis original)

Here, Antelme powerfully expresses a double impossibility: first, the chasm between the deportees and their potential listeners is too great to be overcome; and second, crucially, the horror of the experience occasions a crisis in self-belief. The survivor’s own experience becomes unimaginable, unintelligible to himself. His testimony, his past, no longer belong to him, as if they had not really happened. Beauvoir’s and Sartre’s cautious acknowledgement of the difficulty of communicating experience is radicalized by Antelme and other survivors into a fundamental crisis of narrative, witnessing and subjective integrity. But then, what they lived through in the concentration camps was far more extreme than the shortages and cold sometimes suffered by unpersecuted gentiles in occupied Paris.

**Where’s the trauma?**

The wartime writings of Sartre and Beauvoir and their post-war works which refer to the war traverse and describe traumatic times, but they are not what would normally be called ‘trauma texts’. They are too syntactically and structurally placid, too secure in their writing positions. They are thus quite unlike, for example, Camus’s *L’Etranger* which – I shall suggest in the next chapter – can be described as a trauma text, immersed in the experience of defeat and humiliation, even if it never once openly refers to the war. Writing, for Sartre and Beauvoir, is an act of witnessing, and it is also an act of resistance against trauma rather than an engagement with it. In *La Force de l’âge*, Beauvoir describes how, during some of the darkest days of the war when she had no news of Sartre, she stopped working on her first novel. Returning to writing represents a defiant affirmation of meaning in life and literature:

> Je décidai de me remettre à écrire: il me semblait que c’était un acte de foi, un acte d’espoir. Rien n’autorisait à penser que l’Allemagne serait vaincue […]. Mais je fis une espèce de pari: qu’importaient les heures vainement passées à écrire, si demain tout sombrait? Si jamais le monde, ma vie, la littérature reprenaient un sens, je me reprocherais les mois, les années perdus à ne rien faire. (*La Force d’âge*, pp. 536–37)

Literature is on the side of values and sense: by writing, Beauvoir holds out the hope that Germany will be beaten and Sartre will return,
even if all the available evidence suggests the contrary. The despairing senselessness of trauma is lived in silence; writing, for Beauvoir, bears witness to the conviction that meaning and hope are still possible.

Writing, then, is the opposite of despair. One might say that it is disavowal in the Freudian sense: acknowledging unspeakable suffering without surrendering to it or perhaps even confronting it. This is not to say that there is no real trauma in the actual lives of the authors. Nothing gives us the right to say definitively that Beauvoir suffered less as she waited for Sartre than Duras did as she waited for Antelme. Duras’s *La Douleur* is a trauma text because it enters into the experience without restraint or apology, letting it seep into every aspect of its textual and thematic existence. By contrast, the formal and emotional poise of Beauvoir’s writing indicates a determination not to succumb to trauma and the attendant collapse of meaning, values and selfhood. Nevertheless, it is important to the argument of this book that trauma, and specifically the trauma of war, sometimes needs to be read in the less palpable traces it leaves behind, in a text’s reticence, for example: in what it lets us see despite itself, as it were.

An instance where this may be seen is provided by an episode to which Beauvoir refers briefly, almost casually, in *La Force d’âge*. Before and during the first part of the war, Beauvoir made her living as a teacher, first in Rouen and then in Paris. However, after 12 years of teaching, she notes, ‘Mes classes m’amusaient moins que par le passé’ (p. 617). In June 1943, she was relieved of her teaching duties after the mother of a former pupil made a complaint about her. In Beauvoir’s account, the complaint came about because she had supported the young woman, here named Lise, in her decision not to marry a wealthy boyfriend, whom she did not love, and to live instead with another man. This is what Beauvoir tells us:

La mère de Lise, furieuse que sa fille eût laissé échapper un parti avantageux et qu’elle vécût avec Bourla, m’enjoignit d’user de mon influence pour la renvoyer à son premier amoureux; sur mon refus, elle m’accusa de détournement de mineure. Avant-guerre, l’affaire n’eût pas eu de suite; avec la clique d’Abel Bonnard, il en alla autrement; à la fin de l’année scolaire, la directrice au menton bleu me signifia que j’étais exclue de l’Université. (p. 617)

A footnote informs us that Beauvoir’s right to teach was restored after the Liberation, but that she did not return to the profession (by this

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5 Biographers refer to her as Nathalie (or Natasha) Sorokine.
time she could support herself by other means). In the main text, she comments that she was not ‘fâchée de briser avec une vieille routine’ (p. 617). She was, after all – as she has informed us – enjoying her professional obligations less than she had (‘Mes classes m’amusaient moins’); and she reassures us that she soon got a job working for the radio, without quite knowing how it happened: ‘Je ne sais par quel truchement j’obtins une situation de “metteuse en ondes”’ (p. 617). And that’s the end of the matter.

Even biographers sympathetic to Beauvoir concede that her account of events is incomplete to say the least. Deidre Bair describes it as ‘evasive’ (Simone de Beauvoir, p. 279). Danièle Sallenave agrees that Beauvoir gives ‘une version peut-être édulcorée des faits’ (Castor de guerre, p. 269). She also points out how Beauvoir astutely suggests that there was a political dimension to her professional downfall. Before the war, Beauvoir says, the accusation would have gone no further. Her dismissal (persecution?) during the war makes her a victim of the Occupation, as if she were being hounded by Nazi occupiers and collaborators. Abel Bonnard, to whom she refers here, was a minor writer with fascist tendencies who became Minister of Education under the Vichy regime. So, in Beauvoir’s version of events, she was guilty only of giving good advice to a young woman who did not wish to marry someone she did not love; the case would not have been pursued had the Nazis not been in power; she was exonerated after the war; and she was not particularly bothered because she did not wish to continue her teaching career in any case. It is almost as if her dismissal were a welcome occurrence.

Although the biographers Bair and Sallenave observe that Beauvoir’s account is manipulative and deficient, they do not worry much about the darker side of this incident. The more sensationalist biographer Carole Seymour-Jones is less guarded in confronting the underlying issue: Beauvoir had a sexual relationship with her former pupil, and she provocatively describes Beauvoir’s interest as ‘paedophile in nature’ (A Dangerous Liaison, p. 274). But even Seymour-Jones passes over the episode quickly, spending only two pages on it. To modern ears, now that we know more about the appalling extent to which prestigious figures have used their position to exploit, abuse and silence underage victims, I wonder whether this whole episode needs to be revisited. Was Beauvoir the victim of a malicious mother and a collaborationist regime, or an abuser of minors and a sexual predator who used her position as a teacher to seduce young girls, and then to procure them for her friends?

Although Beauvoir passes over the episode in a single, relatively short
paragraph, Gilbert Joseph devotes 25 pages to it in his highly critical *Une si douce occupation*, quoting at length from relevant documents held in the Archives du rectorat de Paris (pp. 197–222). These documents show that the investigation into Beauvoir extended over 18 months; and far from taking the dismissal as lightly as she implies, Beauvoir wrote a letter formally protesting against the decision and insisting on her innocence (quoted in *Une si douce occupation*, p. 222). Another interesting issue arises from these documents. In Beauvoir’s account, the mother of her friend Lise accuses her of ‘détournement de mineure’. It is important to note that this is not a sexual crime in itself, though behind it may be a hint at the sexual relations between Beauvoir and her former pupil. ‘Détournement de mineur(e)’ refers more specifically to the crime of removing a minor – who might have passed the age of sexual consent but not of civil majority – from the orbit of those who have legal authority over him or her, such as the parents. In this case, it is likely that the man with whom Lise was living, Bourla, would have been more guilty of ‘détournement de mineure’ than Beauvoir. The documents quoted by Joseph show that the accusation was actually ‘excitation d’une mineure à la débauche’, a rather different matter which, if proven in a court of law, could have led to Beauvoir’s imprisonment. The allegation here is that Beauvoir had sexual relations with Nathalie Sorokine and encouraged her to sleep with her male friends. This was vigorously denied by Nathalie and Beauvoir, and by Sartre and Jacques Bost, who was Beauvoir’s lover at the time. Even so, Gilbert Gidel, the Rector of the University of Paris, concluded from the enquiry that Beauvoir and Sartre were not morally fit to teach in secondary education, and wrote to the Ministry of Education requesting their dismissal. Beauvoir was informed on 23 June 1943 that she had been relieved of her functions, though no action seems to have been taken against Sartre.

My point here is not to retry a case in which the rights and wrongs are complex. Nathalie Sorokine was 20 at the time of the initial complaint: legally still a minor, but certainly no longer a child. Sartre, Beauvoir and their friends unquestionably lied to protect themselves, but they presumably did not believe that they had any debt of truthfulness to the collaborationist authorities which were pursuing them. What I want to stress, though, is the disparity between Beauvoir’s brief, sanguine narrative of the episode and the much longer account given by Joseph

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6 When questioned in the course of the enquiry, Bost nevertheless insisted that he had never been Beauvoir’s lover. See Joseph, *Une si douce occupation*, p. 215.
with the support of archive documents. Beauvoir makes light of the episode, hints at an element of political persecution, misremembers (on a generous reading) the nature of the accusation and seems relatively pleased to have been dismissed from her teaching job so that she can develop other interests, and ultimately secure her literary career. The documents quoted by Joseph suggest that, lurking behind Beauvoir’s almost cheerful text is something potentially much more dangerous: the accusation was more serious, the enquiry was protracted and it could have resulted in imprisonment; this in turn could have brought Beauvoir to the attention of the occupying German forces, with potentially horrifying consequences.

In this instance, the availability of other versions of the episode allow us to measure the gap between the said and the unsaid in Beauvoir’s text. This will not always be possible, but it nevertheless allows a provisional conclusion which will be important throughout this book. The calm surface of Beauvoir’s short narrative covers over something potentially far more disturbed and disturbing, which we can nevertheless glimpse with some effort. The text contains the concealed but legible traces of a story it does not tell.

Whose war is it anyway?

Sartre and Beauvoir would apparently sometimes complete each other’s sentences, as if they were one person in two bodies; and it is tempting to write of them as if they were a single entity, though of course they were not. Although they lived through much of the Occupation in close proximity to one another, sharing opinions, food and lovers, the meaning of the period is not the same for both of them. In literary terms, it marked the beginning of Beauvoir’s career as a successful novelist, with the publication of her first novel, L’Invitée, and the completion of her second, Le Sang des autres. In a sense, it marked the end of Sartre’s career as a novelist. It is true that he continued to work on his Chemins de la liberté cycle during and after the war, publishing L’Âge de raison and Le Sursis in 1945, and the final completed volume La Mort dans l’âme in 1949. But it is striking that La Mort dans l’âme ends with the German attack on France in 1940 and the first experiences of French

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7 On the history of the composition of the cycle, see Grell, ‘Les Chemins de la liberté’ de Sartre.
prisoners of war. Sartre would continue for a while to work on what would have been the fourth volume of the cycle, which would take his characters into the later war years and the Occupation, but he would never complete it or, for that matter, any other work of prose fiction. For Sartre, the novel ends when the war begins.

Something of this sense of an ending can be seen in the last appearance of Sartre’s principal character, Mathieu, in the final lines of the first and longest part of *La Mort dans l’âme*. Through three volumes, Mathieu has expostulated and postured, and resolutely failed to achieve any kind of meaningful freedom. Now, with the Germans approaching, rather than surrender or attempt escape, he takes arms in a stance that appears to be both murderous and suicidal (though in the unfinished fourth volume of the cycle we discover that, against all odds, he would in fact survive). Mathieu’s desire to kill does not come from any patriotic urge to defend his country. For years, his acts have been futile, stolen from him, mere gestures at freedom; now, he can accomplish something definitive: ‘Il avait appuyé sur la gâchette et, pour une fois, quelque chose était arrivé. “Quelque chose de définitif”, pensa-t-il, en riant de plus belle’ (*La Mort dans l’âme*, p. 236). In killing a man, he kills Man, destroys a world in which he was a failure, and appears likely to bring his own life to an end. As we see him for the last time, he believes he has finally achieved freedom: ‘Il tira: il était pur, il était tout-puissant, il était libre’ (p. 245). Here, Sartre’s character, his novel and his career as a novelist reach a point where they have not much further to go.

The war allows Mathieu to become free. The statement that ‘il était libre’ might remind us of Sartre’s claim, quoted at the beginning of this chapter, that the Occupation allowed ‘us’ (‘nous’) – presumably the French people – to realize an unprecedented freedom. This returns us to the question of who this ‘we’, this collective totality, can be, and who can speak on its behalf. For the author of ‘La République du silence’, the experience of the French people during the Occupation is difficult to understand and recount, yet nevertheless intelligible and recountable; it is not the same for everyone in every part of France, and yet to a significant degree it is shared. And Sartre, as its pre-eminent interpreter and mouthpiece, can write of ‘us’ because he speaks on behalf of all, or at least of most. It is as if he wanted to rival even De Gaulle as the voice of the French nation.

Mathieu, though, is free but alone as he disappears from Sartre’s novel. There is no sense here that he acts, shoots or thinks on behalf of a settled or potential collectivity. On the contrary, the novel hints
that the war cannot be about ‘us’ and ‘them’ because there is no ‘us’:
‘Mathieu bâilla: il regardait tristement les types noyés dans l’ombre; il
murmura: “Nous”. Mais ça ne prenait plus: il était seul’ (La Mort dans
l’âme, p. 116). Later, Mathieu’s isolation is further underscored: ‘Tu ne
fais rien comme tout le monde, poursuivit Longin. Même quand tu te
soûles, ce n’est pas comme nous’ (p. 143). If there is a ‘nous’, Mathieu is
not part of it. He may or may not be free at the end, but in no sense is he
free with others, alongside others, and entitled to speak or act on their
behalf. Moreover, the very form of the novel reinforces the separateness
of the main characters and the incommensurability of their experiences
of the war. It recounts scenes from a number of lives united in time but
by little else. Everyone has his or her own war. No overarching purpose
and no authoritative voice come to unite the strands of the narrative into
a meaningful whole. Sartre’s last novel gives us stories but no Story, no
final or even provisional interpretation that could justify the secure use
of the first person plural.

We can see in the writings of Sartre and Beauvoir a tense enactment
of the endeavour to make sense of the war. They want to witness for
themselves and to speak for others, to tell their own stories as if they
know and command their meaning. Yet alongside community there is
separation; alongside freedom there is oppression. No story quite holds;
other stories peep or burst out, changing any meaning into something
quite different. Was Beauvoir the victim of persecution by an angry
mother and collaborationist authorities, or an abuser of the young who
escaped lightly? Is Mathieu free, or still futile? Does the Occupation
bring us together or pull us apart? Does the war change everything, or
leave everything pretty much as it was? And did Sartre and Beauvoir
have, in the end, a very gentle Occupation? My current answer to this
question is: yes and no. Sartre sums it up nicely, referring to the daily
experience of horror: ‘Me comprendra-t-on si je dis à la fois qu’elle était
intolérable et que nous nous accommodions fort bien?’ (Situations, III,
p. 24). It was intolerable, and entirely tolerable. What is perhaps most
impressive about the texts of Sartre and Beauvoir during this period is
their willingness to bear witness to, and to inhabit, their own contra-
dictions, and the contradictions of the Occupation.

In more general terms, this might mean that recounting one’s past
entails interminably creating and recreating a life story which by its
nature can be narrated in innumerable ways. Paul Ricœur’s notion
of ‘identité narrative’ is instructive here. Ricœur suggests that both individual and communal identities – insofar as we can know them – entail narrative. In telling stories about our lives and the histories of our communities, we tease out their potential sense and coherence. Central to this view is the acceptance that narrative identities are never stable, fixed, definitive and flawless. On the contrary, ‘l’histoire d’une vie ne cesse d’être refigurée par toutes les histoires véridiques ou fictives qu’un sujet raconte sur lui-même. Cette refiguration fait de la vie elle-même un tissu d’histoires racontées’ (Temps et récit III, p. 356). The stories which individuals or communities tell about themselves may contradict one another and change over time. The disputed legacy of the Second World War in France, and cases such as those of Sartre and Beauvoir, give abundant evidence of such inherent instability. Lucidity consists in acknowledging and trying to analyse the conditions, causes and consequences of the ambiguities and contradictions borne by the stories that mean the most to us. That may be a lifelong undertaking for us as subjects, citizens and readers.

1 See in particular Ricœur, Temps et récit III, pp. 355–59.