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Together Apart: 
Eavesdropping on Jean-Paul Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir

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A friend of mine was once married to a Russian musician, the lead singer of a band who subsequently became widely known in Russia, you could even say famous. To this day the band’s songs are listened to by millions, stadiums get filled and critics offer their gentle blessings. My friend, unsurprisingly, remembers the long climb to the top – the bullshit, the corruption, the astounding self-absorption. The marriage is long since over. No one, I discovered, much laments its dissolution.

Actually this friend is me. I am the one who once or twice a year, usually in the middle of the night, goes on Google to find out what happened to the man who made it, the man who I once loved and who (because I haven’t learned how to stop) I will keep on loving as a ghost or a stray half-brother. The truth is that I am no longer bothered by my ex-husband’s abundant success. The man has been doing so well for so long that I gave up all my fantasies of his inevitable fall from grace years ago. But I am bothered by my inability to reconcile my knowledge of how his songs affect people with my knowledge of him. Does it matter that millions of people are inspired by bullshit artists, that so often we weep, make life-changing decisions and see truth and beauty to the words of someone rotten at their core?

Not that Jean-Paul Sartre, the birthfather of existentialism, or Simone de Beauvoir, the woman behind the second wave of Western feminism, were con-artists or hollow and self-serving ideologues. I have always thought of them as compulsive intellectuals and writers, as much more than cafe-hopping, salmon-chewing, Rome-vacationing advocates of the underprivileged and downtrodden. Because for all the salmon and Roman holidays and the smorgasbord of Parisian cafes, both Sartre and de Beauvoir worked like horses – or beavers, which was Sartre’s nickname for de Beauvoir – in the pursuit of ideas. They put themselves on the line, stuck their noses everywhere they could and were uncompromising, burning themselves up with big ideas, spending their lives pushing their thinking to the limit – what Sartre called “breaking bones in the head”.

And now I am breaking bones in my head, because in front of me is Hazel Rowley’s Tête-à-Tête (Harper Collins, 416pp; $53.95), an exhaustive dual narrative of a relationship spanning five pivotal decades of the 20th century, an even-handed and systematic account of the glue that bound Sartre and de Beauvoir to each other. “Whether or not we think it is one of the great love stories of all time, it is certainly a great story,” writes Rowley. “Exactly what Sartre and de Beauvoir wanted their lives to be.”

In Russian, there is an expression “to separate flies from cutlets”. Even plain-talking President Putin, a man not known for his flowery idioms, uses it from time to time to refer to the importance of distinguishing between things that matter and things that do
The relationship between Sartre and de Beauvoir, all 51 years of it, was never a private matter. It was a lifelong experiment in existentialist living, a model of an open marriage based on trust, transparency and intellectual camaraderie to which countless mere mortals, including Hazel Rowley, had aspired in thought if not necessarily in action. In this existentialist universe there was no God. People needed to assume complete responsibility for their lives, to accept their radical freedom as the daily hard work. Human beings, Sartre proclaimed, were “condemned to be free”. Relationships were about loving a free and radically autonomous human being, not about possessing them and not about turning to them for salvation.

So Sartre and de Beauvoir made a pact. Their loyalty and love would remain forever with each other but they would have secondary, contingent affairs. Their relationship would be based on absolute transparency. They would tell each other everything. They would respect each other’s freedom first and foremost.

To a large degree, Rowley tells us, they succeeded. They consistently and joyfully upheld the “transparency principle”. Till the end they respected and protected each other’s freedom. And, of course, they involved themselves in contingent affairs, oodles of them. Sartre in particular could not help himself. A year before his death in 1980, virtually blind, uglier than ever before, dropping food everywhere and fully dependent on others, he boasted of having nine women in his life, not counting the Beaver. De Beauvoir, the more sexually passionate of the two, had affairs both with men and women, matching Sartre if not in quantity than in the intensity of her contingent relationships. Yet all these affairs, says Rowley, only solidified the couple’s primary bond with each other. De Beauvoir considered her relationship with Sartre to be the greatest achievement of her life.

In his brilliant review of Edwin Williamson’s biography of Jorge Luis Borges, David Foster Wallace noted: “It often seems that the person we encounter in the literary biography could not possibly have written the works we admire.” What’s more, he continued, “the more intimate and thorough the bio, the stronger this feeling is.” Rowley’s book is both intimate and thorough, and the more I read it, the less I was able to imagine that Sartre, who penned countless mushy, wet, love letters, sometimes to several women simultaneously, in which the world “love” was thrown around like the dirtiest of sluts, was the same person who wrote some of the 20th century’s most important philosophical works. I found it hard to imagine that this same de Beauvoir, with her startling disavowal of moral responsibility for those she herself had tamed, could be considered an uncompromising moral arbiter of a feminist movement. David Foster Wallace’s point is that important works of art transcend their creators and the circumstances of their lives – a crucial fact that most literary biographies fail to capture. This sense of transcendence is missing from Rowley’s book too. As one reviewer has put it, at times Tête-à-Tête reads like “a highbrow Francophile edition of US Weekly”.

not, regardless of how loudly they buzz around in the foreground. Reading Tête-à-Tête, I could not work out where I had glimpsed the cutlets and where I got swamped by the flies. Or perhaps in the end I could not see the cutlets for the flies. Or maybe I was no longer convinced that the two were separate from each other.
Rowley, for her part, is neither judgmental nor contemptuous. She is deeply sympathetic to Sartre and even more so to de Beauvoir, even when she talks of the couple’s moral callousness, of their lies, of their disregard for others, especially the ones they have wooed and insisted on taking under their wings. She is careful not to speak from the moral high ground, nor to condemn. If Sartre and de Beauvoir fell short of their own ideals it has done nothing to diminish their legacy.

I wish I had Hazel Rowley’s disposition. Or maybe I do not wish for that. As I read Tête-à-Tête, I thought Sartre and de Beauvoir were a pair of assholes – admittedly, a pair of assholes with a gift from God. I am not talking about affairs and lies, of people thinking with their genitals, of vanity and self-indulgence. I am talking of a general stance vis-à-vis other people. It is called humility, or a regard for the absolute autonomy and worth of another human being. Existentialists should have known that. Radical freedom calls for radical responsibility. But it also requires radical respect.

The early part of the book, dedicated to the genesis of the relationship, is perhaps the most enjoyable because Sartre is still discovering that his ugliness is nothing compared to the power he can wield with words. The compulsive sharing and retelling of experiences that was fundamental to their relationship can be traced back to Sartre’s mother, Anne-Marie, who was 24 when her husband died, leaving her with 15-month-old Jean-Paul. Until she re-married, mother and son were incredibly close. “I gave myself feelings for the pleasure of sharing them with her,” Sartre would write in his autobiography Words. This unconditional sharing, of the most undiluted of truths and the deepest of joys, made for real intimacy, for the only true love. All through their lives, de Beauvoir and Sartre stayed just a breath from each other by telling each other everything – all the time, in minute detail, with enormous, palpable pleasure.

Olga Kosakiewicz was a student of de Beauvoir’s in the early 1930s. They became friends and then occasional lovers. Eventually she was introduced to Sartre, who pursued her (with little success) and then became her teacher. Olga was soon financially dependent on both of them. As Sartre could not get Olga, he decided to go for her younger sister Wanda. Two years of relentless pursuit, hundreds of desperate love letters and Wanda finally succumbed. Minutes afterwards, Sartre sneaked out to a cafe to write to de Beauvoir. “I left her on her bed, all pure and tragic, declaring herself tired and having hated me for a good 45 minutes.” The pleasure of the long-overdue conquest paled next to the bliss of transforming this moment into a story to share with de Beauvoir. This pattern was to be repeated throughout his life, helped by the fact that Sartre, one of the most celebrated seducers of his generation, did not seem much interested in sex. Of Dolores Vanetti, one of the big contingent relationships in his life, a woman whose divorce he paid for and who was determined to marry him, Sartre wrote (to de Beauvoir, of course): “Her passion literally scares me, since that’s not my strong suit, and she uses it solely to her disadvantage.”

De Beauvoir too derived enormous pleasure from telling Sartre of her other relationships. “When she wrote to Sartre about her love affairs with women,” notes Rowley, “her tone – ambivalent and condescending – was just like his. Part of her pleasure was that she felt almost as if she were Sartre.” Bianca Bienefeld was
another young student of de Beauvoir’s, 17 when she became her lover. Unlike Olga, she could not withstand the charm and persistence of the all-conquering Sartre, falling head over heels with both her imminent suitors. For de Beauvoir, however, the relationship soon proved tiring. “We woke up at 8.30 after a night of passion,” she wrote to Sartre, “and like a sated man I discreetly avoided her caresses. I wanted to have breakfast and work (I feel I can get right into your skin at such moments).” The whole thing was much more about getting into Sartre’s skin than under the sheets with Bianca.

For all his talk of radical freedom and autonomy, Sartre was attracted to what he himself called “drowning women” – so long as they were beautiful, that is. He actively encouraged and sustained their dependency on him – paying their bills, writing plays for them, psychoanalysing them, declaring his undying love and loyalty – an act of remarkable and lifelong multi-tasking he called “the temporary morality”. There was Wanda, “all pure and tragic”, for whom Sartre would write six plays, giving her the only theatrical roles she would ever have. There was Michelle Vian who left her husband, the famous jazz composer Boris Vian, to be with Sartre. There was Evelyne, the sister of Claude Lanzmann, who committed suicide, unhappy in her personal life and, like Wanda, unable to make it as an actress. (Claude was de Beauvoir’s lover for many years – one of the only people in her life who de Beauvoir addressed in the informal “tu”. She and Sartre always used the polite “vous” with each other.) And then there was Arlette Elka’m, a French Algerian girl who was to become Sartre’s adopted daughter and, after his death, the heir and manager of his literary estate. It was Elka’m who caused havoc with Tête-à-Tête, banning Rowley from using Sartre’s most revealing correspondence. As a result there are two versions of the book – the European (with the banned passages omitted or paraphrased) and the American (with the quotes intact because of that country’s much laxer copyright laws).

As for Bianca Bienenfeld, the couple eventually dumped her in 1940, shortly before the Germans came to Paris and the young woman’s life as a Jew was put on the line. Neither Sartre nor de Beauvoir enquired about her whereabouts or wellbeing during the Occupation, and she suffered a major breakdown. Later on her psychoanalyst, none other than Jacques Lacan, would declare that the breakdown was brought about by a sense of deep betrayal – a quasi-parental relationship, established first by de Beauvoir and then by Sartre, had been broken initially by sex and then by abandonment.

After the war Bianca did resume her friendship, though not her sexual relationship, with de Beauvoir. The two women saw each other until de Beauvoir’s death. Then Bianca was to suffer another breakdown as de Beauvoir’s letters, published posthumously, revealed little more than contempt for her. In an attempt to redress the humiliation and hurt, she wrote a book entitled A Disgraceful Affair. The book is heartbreaking – partly because it is so full of fragility and pain, but also because it is so poisonous and badly written. “I could no longer stand to be a passive object described with relish by biographers and lampoonists.”

For Sartre and de Beauvoir, as Louis Menand writes in his New Yorker review of Tête-à-Tête, other people “were, in effect, prostheses, marital aids”. This was how they “slept with each other after they stopped sleeping with each other”. Rowley’s
book, in a sense, re-creates this structure. Other people are backdrops to Sartre and de Beauvoir’s remarkable relationship, their enthralling lives, their brilliant and brilliantly intertwined careers. These others, and ultimately us, are mere eavesdroppers on the couple’s lifelong tête-à-tête.

There is much else to Hazel Rowley’s book besides the affairs: the infamous row with Albert Camus over Sartre’s ambivalence towards the use of violence; the rejection of the 1964 Nobel Prize; the tumultuous relationship with communism and the Soviet Union. There is also the story of the Manifesto of 121, which was signed by 121 French intellectuals – including Sartre and de Beauvoir – demanding independence for Algeria and amnesty for all French soldiers refusing to take up arms against Algerian people. The couple’s stance resulted in death threats being made against Sartre. While the two of them were away in Brazil, de Beauvoir sick as a dog with a suspected typhoid fever and Sartre busily trying to seduce a 25-year-old virginal Brazilian journalist called Christina, 5,000 war veterans paraded down the Champs Élysées shouting: “Shoot Sartre.” Thirty of the 121 signatories were charged with treason. Some lost their jobs and all were threatened with five-year jail sentences.

When Sartre and de Beauvoir returned to Paris, driving via the back-roads from Barcelona, Sartre called a press conference protesting the 30 charges of treason. “If those individuals are found guilty,” he proclaimed, “then we all are. If not, let them withdraw the case.” Eventually the charges were withdrawn. The government was not prepared to put Sartre in jail. “You do not imprison Voltaire,” uttered President de Gaulle himself. After much of the information gleaned from Tête-à-Tête, I desperately needed stories like these to be able to read Sartre and de Beauvoir’s books once again.