

1-1-2008

Narcissism, Abjection and the Reader(e) of Simone de Beauvoir's Les Belles Images

Margaret E. Gray
Indiana University–Bloomington

Follow this and additional works at: <https://newprairiepress.org/sttcl>



Part of the [French and Francophone Literature Commons](#)



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 4.0 License](#).

Recommended Citation

Gray, Margaret E. (2008) "Narcissism, Abjection and the Reader(e) of Simone de Beauvoir's Les Belles Images," *Studies in 20th & 21st Century Literature*: Vol. 32: Iss. 1, Article 3. <https://doi.org/10.4148/2334-4415.1666>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by New Prairie Press. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Studies in 20th & 21st Century Literature* by an authorized administrator of New Prairie Press. For more information, please contact cads@k-state.edu.

Narcissism, Abjection and the Reader(e) of Simone de Beauvoir's *Les Belles Images*

Abstract

Discussions of Simone de Beauvoir's last novel, *Les Belles Images* (1966), tend to be in the mode of apology. The characters are shallow—runs the typical claim—the plot (essentially, Laurence's gradual awakening to her own "belle image" identity of feminine clichés as fulfilled wife, devoted mother, successful professional) flimsy and predictable. Yet, in studying a specular dynamic of narcissism and abjection within the novel, we become aware of the discomfiting ways in which our own scorn for Laurence and her world is anticipated by the text. As we attend upon the dismantling of Laurence's "belles images," we are made to witness the undoing of our own narcissism. Along the way, we acquire new understanding of an important aspect of this specular relationship: the novel's slippery use of the pronouns "I" and "she" to refer to Laurence, in an unstable grammar that has confounded critics. These pronouns and their imbrication are only too pertinent, I argue, for the reader's relationship to Laurence, and for the ways in which the reader's "I" sets itself loftily apart from Laurence's "she." Yet, in dismantling the reader's assumptions along with those of Laurence, the text offers each a new way forward, beyond the crippling confines of narcissism and abjection.

Keywords

Simone de Beauvoir, *Les Belles Images*, belle image, feminine clichés, wife, mother, narcissism, abjection

Narcissism, Abjection and the Reader(e) of Simone de
Beauvoir's *Les Belles Images*

Margaret E. Gray
Indiana University–Bloomington

Discussions of Beauvoir's last novel, *Les Belles Images*, tend to be in the mode of apology.¹ It is not a great novel, runs the general tone; it may be Beauvoir's most literary, but it isn't her best. The characters are shallow, the plot (essentially, Laurence's gradual awakening to her own "belle image" identity of feminine clichés as fulfilled wife, devoted mother, successful professional) flimsy and predictable. It is hard to love *Les Belles Images*. It seems that Beauvoir's own dislike for the technocratic bourgeoisie she depicts has been inherited by her readers, visible in the dismissiveness with which they assume that this portrait of frenzied postwar technocratic and consumer "arrivisme" has nothing to do with them.² Yet it must be observed that the image-saturated technoculture castigated in *Les Belles Images* has only become more extreme in the contemporary West, making the world of *Les Belles Images* dangerously pertinent. Moreover, I would venture to ask—as many of Beauvoir's middle-class readers find themselves in circumstances analogous to those of her heroine, Laurence, negotiating webs of personal and professional responsibilities—can we be sure that our own approaches to our lives are any more self-aware, any less anesthetized, than Laurence's? We would certainly, of course, promptly assert that they are. We ourselves are much more self-reflective about our own conditioning than Laurence is, much more aware of the coercion of familial, social, economic and historic factors that produce our subjectivities. Yet the nagging possibility remains that Laurence functions on some level as an allegory of social conditioning that exceeds one's aware-

ness of it. As such, Laurence bears the ominous implication that, whatever our level of awareness, it is inadequate to the conditioning from multiple sources that exceeds us in ways we cannot fully grasp.³ As a fictional character, Laurence is easily dismissed by our readerly narcissism; passive and pitiable, she has nothing to do with our superior selves. As an allegory of social conditioning, however, she becomes dangerously pertinent, making it harder to maintain the barrier between the world of *Les Belles Images* and our own.

An exploration of this syndrome of readerly narcissism—a narcissism consolidated by our “abjectification,” or dismissal, of Laurence—offers a new solution to the stylistic problem that has haunted discussion of this novel: the narration’s slippery and oscillating use of both “I” and “she” to refer to Laurence. Ultimately, a careful reading of narcissism, abjection and the way they inflect the novel’s two principal pronouns, “I” and “she,” offers new possibilities for both Laurence and her readers. Indeed, reread backwards via Judith Butler’s work on the construction of gender, Laurence is no longer a passive victim of her very specific milieu, but instead, an everywoman typifying the plight of middle-class women in post-industrialized cultures. From a Butlerian perspective, Laurence is uncomfortably emblematic of ourselves: condemned to carry out public and personal roles in performances that are socially and politically coerced. Whereas *Les Belles Images* tends to be read in terms of a sixties, postwar ideology of images that manipulates its characters, a Butlerian reading points to the novel’s ongoing relevance: indeed, a discomfiting relevance that diminishes the distance between ourselves and Laurence.⁴ In the novel’s slippery and interchangeable “I” and “she” grammar, the boundaries between these pronouns are undone, just as our own narcissistic confidence in the difference between ourselves and Laurence, between our own lofty “I” and her abjectified “she,” evaporates.

And it is only appropriate, after all, that Butler be enlisted in revising our reading of *Les Belles Images*, given Butler’s own debt to Beauvoir. Quoting Beauvoir’s well-known position in *Le Deuxième Sexe*—that one is not born a woman, rather, one becomes a woman through social conditioning—Butler goes on to make her landmark argument for gender as “a stylized repetition of acts” (GT 179). The illusion of a gendered essence, suggests Butler, becomes perceptible

within the necessary discontinuities or failures to repeat. It is in these gaps that the constructed nature of gender becomes clear, exposing the “phantasmatic effect of abiding identity as a politically tenuous construction” (GT 179). Later, in *Bodies that Matter*, Butler further emphasizes the constraint, even the coercion, through which gender is produced. As repetition, iterability, it is not performed *by* a subject, but is rather “what enables a subject.” Gender, argues Butler, is “a ritualized production, a ritual reiterated under and through constraint, and through the force of prohibition and taboo” (BTM 95).

Equipped with Butler’s argument for gender as gaps, discontinuities, and failed repetition, I would like to turn to the ideological construction of femininity in *Les Belles Images*. Butler has claimed that “Beauvoir’s theory implied seemingly radical consequences . . . that she herself did not entertain” (GT 142). Perhaps Beauvoir herself did not, but, I will argue, her texts indeed did. In particular, it is through certain mirror scenes in *Les Belles Images* that what Butler calls “the phantasmatic effect of abiding identity” becomes visible.⁵ And yet, far from suggesting failure, the discarding of such a phantasmatic identity is the only authentic conclusion for Laurence. It is only once the “belle image” of bourgeois femininity—the beloved wife, devoted mother and successful professional—has been dismantled, only once the false “I” has been jettisoned, that Laurence can face a new and open future authentically.

Such a reading of failed repetition within *Les Belles Images* might begin with a certain mirroring—unwelcome, to be sure, but apparent—between Laurence and her mother, Dominique. For although Dominique is cast as the cold, manipulative and grasping woman who must be rejected by Laurence in her own quest for self, there are many uneasy resemblances between the two.⁶ We notice here the vulgar gender parody of Dominique’s impersonations, as she attempts to mimic, yet only succeeds in pastiching, other successful women. For Dominique lives utterly and entirely within roles, exteriorizing the role-playing of all identities. Spurned by the middle-aged Gilbert for a nineteen-year-old, Dominique clings all the more resolutely to her role-playing. Her subsequent return to the husband she had rejected as mediocre has nothing to do with her own feelings for him, but is simply the most socially acceptable role now available to her. Indeed, assessing this option, Dominique

seems to be summarizing a script as she says, meditatively, “Deux époux qui se retrouvent après une longue separation pour aborder ensemble la vieillesse, les gens seront peut-être étonnés, mais il ne ricaneront pas” “Two spouses who become reconciled after a long separation to approach old age together, people will perhaps be surprised, but they won’t snicker” (178).

Yet the very crudeness and vulgarity of Dominique’s frantic feminine parodies alert us to those of Laurence; we begin to see that Laurence becomes only a slightly more subtle gendered caricature. Laurence’s obsession with fixing her daughter’s friend Brigitte’s hem, for instance, replicates Dominique’s obsession with creating a “belle image” of her own daughter, Laurence. The very topography of Dominique’s life anticipates Laurence’s: professional success, the triangular configuration of husband and lover, even the two daughters. Furthermore, Laurence’s moral dependence upon her father is perhaps merely a more noble variation of Dominique’s social dependence upon her fabulously rich, fabulously suave companion, Gilbert. A certain coldness becomes characteristic of both Laurence and Dominique, a dangerous analogy linking the two. Yet, just as Laurence’s very indifference and distance toward her mother seem dangerously similar to Dominique’s, such qualities also represent, paradoxically, an unconscious effort to distance herself from that engulfing similarity. Even as Laurence rejects her mother, cruelly likening Dominique’s suffering to the inarticulate grating of crayfish claws (52), such repudiation seems symptomatic of Dominique’s own tenuous effort at self-construction. Laurence’s self-creation, in other words, seems suspiciously dependent upon the rejection of Dominique’s; in Laurence’s own effort to distance herself from her mother, Dominique is too obviously “abjectified.” Laurence, I would argue, becomes, however unwillingly, a constrained, coerced pastiche of Dominique. For Dominique’s self-construction is built upon repudiation: repudiation of her own impoverished childhood, repudiation of her inadequate (in Dominique’s arriviste terms) husband. Suggestively, the opening Sunday afternoon scene at Feuerolles, Gilbert’s country estate, finds Laurence looking into a mirror, but not at herself. Rather, she scrutinizes her mother’s reflection in the mirror: a curiously ambiguous and imbricated image of mother and daughter to which I will return.

And yet, we begin to realize that Laurence is not only a pastiche of Dominique, but in fact a walking collection of pastiches. Laurence claims confidently, for example, that she has surmounted the problems that led to her past breakdown: “J’ai explicité le conflit . . . il ne me déchire plus. Je suis au net avec moi-même” ‘I have understood the conflict . . . it no longer upsets me. I’m at peace with myself’ (44). Such confidence in a teleological, ultimate moment of conclusive resolution invites our suspicion; for this is the discredited position occupied by Laurence’s husband, Jean-Charles, with his technocratic confidence in an ever-improving future.⁷ Laurence’s certainty that she has resolved the problem of her past is implicitly designated by the text as the facile, masculinist position she ought to reject. In affirming “I’m at peace with myself,” Laurence too parodically mirrors Jean-Charles in her over-confident sense of consolidation and resolution of problems: an over-confidence effectively dismantled, as we will see, by the text’s final line, “[E]lle ne le sait même pas” ‘she doesn’t even know’ (183).⁸

However, additional parodic repetitions are apparent. Laurence’s concluding self-denying investment in a different future for her daughter Catherine suggests the saintly maternal caretaking role incarnated by Marthe, who abjectly absorbs all unappealing tasks. We remember her line at Feuverolles, as Laurence and Dominique repair to Dominique’s room to primp: “Je m’occupe des enfants” ‘I’ll take care of the children’ (15).⁹ Marthe’s offer prompts Laurence’s scornful judgment, “C’est commode: depuis qu’elle est entrée en sainteté, elle accapare toutes les corvées” ‘How useful: since she’s become saintly, she grabs all the chores’ (15). Laurence’s ultimate abdication in favor of an improved future for Catherine represents the coalescence of two positions: that of Marthe, the maternal saint, and that of Jean-Charles, the technocratic meliorist. However, having already discredited these positions, the text, as we shall see, invites our suspicion of Laurence’s putative solution.

Parody, Repetition and Death

I would like to return to the novel’s opening scene at Feuverolles, where Laurence and Dominique repair upstairs to primp in front of a mirror. The multiplying feminine images in the mirror—Dominique imitating other women, Laurence studying the mirror’s

reflection not of herself, but of her mother—become, in the space of a short paragraph, overwritten by death as the text takes us from a feminine ideal to death's specter:

La parfaite, l'idéale image d'une femme qui vieillit bien. Qui vieillit. Cette image-là, Dominique la refuse. Elle flanche, pour la première fois. Maladie, coups durs, elle a tout encassé. Et soudain il y a de la panique dans ses yeux.

The perfect, the ideal image of a woman who ages gracefully. Who ages. *That* particular image is refused by Dominique. But she flinches for the first time. Illnesses, hard blows, she's absorbed it all. And suddenly, there's panic in her eyes. (16)

Old age with attendant, impending death has begun to inhabit Dominique's image in the mirror. We might usefully recall here a suggestively similar imbrication of the mirror and death in the fate of Ovid's Narcissus, who pines away and dies in front of his own reflection. Yet Narcissus, himself overwritten by death, haunts not only Dominique in this scene, but Laurence as well. For, like Narcissus, Laurence does not realize that she is being seduced by an *image*. Just as Narcissus cedes to the beguiling charm of his own reflection, so Laurence is beguiled by an Althusserian social ideology that "hails" her—positions her—as fulfilled wife, devoted mother, successful professional. Curiously, then, Laurence herself is implicated in this particularly dense scene of mirroring, parody and death. Studying her mother's image rather than her own, Laurence is apparently unaware that the mirror unites the two women in a common and morbid destiny: a death-in-life existence enslaved, like Narcissus, to an image. The mirror's suggestion of inevitable death stalking Dominique thus also implicates Laurence, who effectively languishes unaware in front of a seductive self-image she is unable to recognize as such.

And yet, in this bedroom scene at Feuverolles, a third gaze focuses on a mirror that is, suggestively enough, a mirror with three facets, as though prompting us to account for this implicit third presence: our own. As we follow Laurence's gaze following Dominique's, our own implication within the narrative's dynamic of nar-

cissism and abjection becomes apparent. For the very dynamic of abjection that characterizes Laurence's rejection of her mother is only too suggestive of our own response to Laurence herself: our tendency to dismiss her as unaware, unreflective victim of her times. And just as Laurence seems beguiled—we might even suggest, virtually anesthetized—by her unquestioned identity as a “belle image,” so too, runs the unsettling implication of this scene, are her readers. Indeed, just as Laurence represents an only slightly more subtle version of Dominique's feminine parodies, perhaps we as readers are as unconscious of our own coerced gendered performances as Laurence herself. Our own narcissistic “I” as readers, suggests this mirror scene, is dangerously implicated in the abjectified “she” with which we safely keep our distance from Laurence.

It is this nexus of parody, mirroring and death that I wish to pursue in several additional scenes.¹⁰ Consider, for instance, the description of Laurence and Jean-Charles in a relaxed moment at home. Laurence works on publicity projects at her desk while Jean-Charles reads a journal, a cashmere sweater draped loosely across his shoulders. Aware of the scene's visual grace, Laurence recasts it as advertisement: “Quelle jolie image publicitaire” ‘What a charming publicity image’ (20). The scene is effectively mirrored, replicated, but in a repetition that fails, in Laurence's faintly ironic assessment. Her perception is not only alienating, but parodic: for the “charming publicity image” corrupts the scene, its spontaneous grace vulgarized by the commercial objective with which Laurence invests it. Yet further parodic repetition is then proposed, however, establishing even greater distance. From within the scene itself, we are taken out and made to follow an outsider's gaze back into this domestic interior. For Laurence imagines a couple walking outside in the evening, glancing idly through the window at herself and Jean-Charles in their scene of domestic harmony and tranquility: the whole in warm tones of black, red and yellow, highlighted by the reds and yellows of a bouquet of dahlias. The scene originally evoking tranquil, domestic happiness ultimately, becomes, through progressive distancing—first as Laurence's advertisement, then through the imaginary gaze of distant outsiders—a fixed and frozen cameo, styled and lifeless. Such an implicit death is confirmed by Laurence's reaction to the dahlias: “Tout à l'heure, quand je les ai cueillis, c'était

des fleurs vivantes” ‘A little while ago, when I picked them, they were living flowers’ (21). From Laurence’s scorn to the reifying gaze of strangers, death overtakes and petrifies this domestic scene.

In yet a third mirror scene overwritten by death, Laurence forces a smile as she allows Jean-Charles to fasten an expensive and unwanted necklace around her neck, emblem of her yoke as bourgeois wife and mother. In a tiny boutique called “Manon Lescaut,” we find an ironized inscription of l’Abbé Prévost’s 18th-century account of an all-powerful, all-surpassing passion. Here the immortal love that unites Manon Lescaut and Des Grieux despite all obstacles seems parodically replicated in a bourgeois union: the “parfaite image du couple qui s’adore encore après dix ans de mariage” ‘perfect image of the couple who still adore each other after ten years of marriage’ (141). Viewing herself and Jean-Charles in the mirror, Laurence thus coldly assesses such perfect bourgeois happiness with ironic remove, the way strangers would perceive the couple. The verb used to describe the fastening of the necklace around Laurence’s unwilling neck, “assujétir,” also evokes domination and subjugation—confirming the fastening upon Laurence of the perfect bourgeois couple in as unwelcome an imposition as the expensive necklace.¹¹ Recalling Manon’s own death from exhaustion in the New World, one might further read in the fastening of the necklace an image of strangulation and asphyxiation. As a contemporary and ironized Manon, a bourgeoisie and passionless Laurence is being stifled by her own image.¹² Yet at the same time, the dangerously unconventional, even antisocial force embodied by Manon, who poses such a threat to the established order that she is shipped off to the New World, might be read as an exhortation to Laurence: a pointed suggestion that it is time to rebel against her vapid life of “belles images.”¹³

A final scene involving the Narcissus topos of the deadly self-image brings the novel to a close. Laurence has just, essentially for the first time in the novel, imposed her will and won an important concession from Jean-Charles on behalf of their daughter. Catherine will not be sequestered from the cruel truths of the world, as Laurence herself had been, but will be allowed to spend her Easter vacation with her all-too-alert and informed friend, Brigitte. Yet, in this closing scene, Laurence appears to revert to her pattern of submission to Jean-Charles, through weary feminine and linguistic

clichés. Thinking “[p]our moi les jeux sont faits” ‘[f]or me, the die is cast’ (183), she brushes her hair, primps, and says to Jean-Charles with a forced smile, “[m]oi non plus, je n’aime pas te contrarier” ‘[m]e neither, I don’t like to upset you’ (183).¹⁴ The overdetermined feminine gestures of this highly clichéd boudoir scene seem appropriate to her attitude of resignation. Laurence appears here to accept herself as nothing but a “belle image,” acquiescing to playing her assigned role. The last lines of this scene—also, and significantly, the final lines of the novel itself—seem to confirm Laurence’s resignation; she both resolves that her daughters’ futures will be different from her own fate, and remains uncertain as to precisely what this difference will be: “[m]ais les enfants auront leur chance. Quelle chance? elle ne le sait même pas” ‘[b]ut the children will have their chance. What chance? She doesn’t even know’ (183).

Hesitating between the “I” and the “she” throughout the narration in a slippery grammar that continues to haunt critical analyses of the novel, the text concludes with the more distant “she.” Thus, while *Les Belles Images* has been read enthusiastically and triumphantly as the awakening and assumption of a self (Waelti-Walters 30), or as the assertion of freedom and authority (Brosman 92), this final boudoir scene evokes a self that has usually been seen as more social, more derivative, less authentic. It has therefore prompted most critics to read the novel’s ending, generally, as disappointing, ambiguous at best: falling far short of a full assumption of self and agency on Laurence’s part with an assertive use of “I.” Instead, the scene has led most critics to stress the limits to which Laurence is able to take her life, her resolve and her awareness. “Laurence is able to question the language of stereotype,” suggests Fallaize, “but she can substitute no more than a fragmentary voice for its pervasive presence” (125), while Keefe agrees that Laurence’s unsatisfactory situation remains essentially unchanged (28). Test offers an even more sobering reading, suggesting that “La glace reflète . . . l’image de la femme figée dans l’épaisseur et la temporalité de son rôle, quel qu’il soit, et la vérité du temps qui passe et de la mort” “the mirror reflects . . . the image of woman fixed within the confines and temporality of her role, whatever that role may be, and the truth of passing time and death” (26). Quoting Laurence’s conviction that the die is cast as far as her own future goes, Marc Bertrand argues for

an impression of complete failure on Laurence's part (53). Failure is also read into the novel's closing line by Vargas Llosa; "Beauvoir ends the tragedy of Laurence," he concludes lugubriously, "with this gloomy sentence" (58).

As opposed to these essentially triumphal or defeatist camps, I would like to propose a new reading, however: one cautiously, hesitantly, positive, in favor of a tentative new beginning for Laurence, but a beginning *without* ready answers, whether positive or negative. Having established and rehearsed the Narcissus topos of self-image, mirroring and death, Beauvoir's text brings Laurence's various pastiched roles to paroxysm in this culminating mirror scene. We notice that her dressing-table gestures replicate Dominique's pastiches of the feminine "belle image," as does her forced smile at Jean-Charles, accompanied by the simpering "Moi non plus je n'aime pas te contrarier" 'Me neither, I don't like to upset you' (183). Laurence's insistence on Catherine's future reproduces Marthe's maternal self-abnegation, as well as Jean-Charles' future-oriented optimism. The various coercive pastiches that have reduced Laurence to a "belle image" have all been brought before the mirror to die in preparation for a new order; heavily overwritten by death throughout the text, as we have seen, the mirror now displays not so much a collection of demure feminine clichés, as—instead—a convulsive "danse macabre."

Suggestive of this possible new order is the text's use of "she" in the final line, "elle ne le sait même pas" 'she doesn't even know' (183). If we consider the "I/she" alternation that inflects the narration as itself a sort of mirroring—the text's ultimate specularity—it is tempting to read yet another death into the text's closing opposition of the two pronouns. Critics have tended to understand "I" as the more authentic expression of Laurence's own voice, and "she" as the image constructed of her by others (Brosman 88; Keefe 31). However, arguing convincingly that simply saying "I" doesn't provide access to subjectivity, Raija Koski suggests instead that the pronoun "est rempli de toutes les projections masculines qui construisent l'identité de Laurence" 'is filled with all the masculine projections that construct Laurence's identity' (57). Similarly, Butler's rejection of the myth of "abiding identity," her apologetic use of "I" as a "grammatical fiction" (BTM 99)—help us to see in Laurence's "I" just as phantasmatic a

construction as the “she” projected upon her by others. And indeed, the whole distinction between the social “she” and the private “I” begins to crumble under the fluidity of their exchange, as Fallaize has suggested: a fluidity facilitated by the narration’s use of the present tense (120). Laurence’s “I” becomes a site of phantasmatic assembly, its deluded certainties revealed as fictions. Therefore, in a deft turning of grammatical tables, I would argue, “she” becomes, curiously, the pronoun of authenticity and renewal, while “I” is revealed as a fictitious construct, an illusion in demise.

Pursuing these implications, we have the sense that Laurence is at last moving beyond all parodic repetitions to embrace the new, the unknown, the risky, the unscripted. Rejecting the parodic roles that offer only false solutions, “she” is thus the subject who then becomes invested with any possibility for agency and change; and the fact that “she” does *not* have a ready solution is a first step toward overturning empty, pastiche roles. For all other characters in the novel *have* opted for such solutions, all discredited by the text: Jean-Charles’s technocratic, futuristic optimism, “Papa’s” complacently deluded humanist values, Dominique’s role-playing, Marthe’s self-abnegating piety. In the novel’s final scene, we see the overturning of Jean-Charles’s facile, unquestioned faith in the future; the repudiation of the father’s humanist, male-centric past; the demise of Dominique’s frantic feminine mimicry. Within this dynamic choreography of exploded roles, it therefore seems all the more promising—rather than defeating—that the novel’s last line emphasize indeterminacy. Reread via Butler, this open ending, indicating that Laurence doesn’t know her future, her role, or even her next move, only seems—at last—an authentic assumption of the gendered condition, which is, of course, the condition of all identity, with its risk, uncertainty and improvisation.

Enlisting Butler’s notion of failed repetition has helped us to see the involuntary pastiche that reduces Laurence to a social puppet. Yet a series of mirror scenes carries out the death of such a puppet, and introduces a new, unscripted order. As a coerced and incoherent pastiche of various positions portrayed and condemned in the text, Laurence remains passive, even paralyzed, destined to be a perpetual victim. After establishing a topos of mirroring and death, however, the text, in a closing scene, carries out the demise of the

old imitations. Pastiche that had crippled Laurence are played out in front of the mirror, in a boudoir scene that becomes not demure, but convulsive, explosive. In the novel's closing lines, Laurence—no longer trapped within the ready solutions of those around her—now faces openness and uncertainty. Rather than a journey toward self-awareness and discovery, Laurence's itinerary can be read precisely as the ironization of such a journey. At this ironic level, Laurence's story demonstrates the delusion, the fiction, of such fantasmatic self-awareness. It is precisely the *absence* of deluded self-awareness here—precisely the dismantling of the myth of abiding identity—that carries new hope and possibility for Laurence, as it does for us all in a post-Butlerian climate. For with the novel's closing line, Laurence is no longer the abject victim with whom we refuse all connection, but instead, a contemporary, a friend, a sister like ourselves. This newly aware and authentic “she” explodes the abjectified “she” with which we had dismissed Laurence. Through the progressive revelation of the deluded pronoun “I,” we find the delusions of our own “I” questioned, along with its narcissism, our armor against Laurence. “She,” in becoming a more authentic “I” for Laurence, subtly breaks down and infiltrates the reader's own “I.” We connect to her through this more authentic pronoun: a pronoun that, in becoming a less deluded site for subjectivity, offers possibilities for renewal to both Laurence and her readers, ourselves. In jettisoning the false images and scripts that have crippled her, in opening herself to the risk and unknown of an uncharted path, Laurence becomes, indeed, an involuntary model for the reader. A more constructive Narcissus, she invites us to read ourselves into her image, to re-examine our own lives and roles, and to move beyond the crippling, disfiguring mirrors of the social fun-house: beyond the death-in-life confines of false self-knowledge.

Notes

1 Since the extant English translation of the novel by Patrick O'Brian retains the French title, I have done so here. All translations from the French, however, from the novel as well as from critical discussions of it, are my own. An earlier version of this essay was presented at the 9th International Conference of the Simone de Beauvoir Society, “Engaging with Simone de Beauvoir,” St. John's College, Oxford University, 2001. I am grateful to the

organizers, Elizabeth Fallaize and Ursula Tidd, for the invitation to participate, and for the valuable exchanges I enjoyed there.

2 Beauvoir herself summarizes her project with obvious ambivalence, pointing to her effort to maintain her distance from the culture she evokes, but which is nonetheless her own (172). Beauvoir's own attitude is replicated in critical discussions of *Les Belles Images*; "we are sickened by the class of people on display" suggests Terry Keefe, for example (7).

3 In a precedent for my attempt to read Laurence as an allegory for the production of subjectivity that exceeds the subject's awareness, Ursula Tidd proposes precisely to read the autobiographical 'I' of Beauvoir's memoirs as "produced through the negotiation of discourses of class, nationality, race, religion, gender and sexuality" (65).

4 The connection between Laurence and Butlerian performativity is also made by Allison Holland, who suggests that Laurence "self-consciously performs 'woman' (being a woman) yet fails to integrate fully the definition of womanhood and finds herself wanting" (153).

5 While Françoise Rétif suggests that it is often via mirror images that Beauvoir's heroines recover self-confidence and awareness of their own power (73), I will argue the contrary: that is through a mirroring dynamic that Laurence acquires a new and authentic sense of her *lack* of power, and of the need to face the future without ready answers.

6 The problem of self-differentiation from the mother is analyzed by Laurie Corbin in the context of Beauvoir's autobiographical writing; Corbin explores what she calls "a fear of a mother-daughter complicity" (49). For this, Corbin draws, as I do, on Kristeva's concept of abjection as a means of separation. While Corbin does not address the mother/daughter relationship in *Les Belles Images*, her demonstration of this problem in the biographical context of Beauvoir's own relation to her mother implicitly supports my argument for a similarly problematic dynamic of self-differentiation in the fictional relationship of Laurence and Dominique.

7 As Catherine Brosman puts it, "Jean-Charles is a meliorist whose historical determinism is no less monolithic than a Marxist's" (89).

8 Terry Keefe points to the patent falsehood of Laurence's assertion that she has overcome the troubles of the past, but does not link this confidence to Jean-Charles's technocratic optimism (30); such an optimistic assertion, however, necessarily echoes Jean-Charles's futurist confidence.

9 Keefe emphasizes the difference between Marthe's and Laurence's approaches to raising children—"Marthe serves to bring into the book ideas about the Christian upbringing of children that Laurence can be shown as firmly rejecting" (13)—without pointing to any uneasy coalescence between Marthe's and Laurence's ultimate maternal self-abnegation. Waelti-Walters, however, comes closer to suggesting Marthe's sanctified domesticity (27), while Mary Lawrence Test affirms that Laurence, at age thirty, renounces any life of her own (26).

10 Holland points to the "dense network of symbolization" provided by mirror scenes in *Les Belles Images*, reading in them Laurence's effort to find herself through refracted images. Holland concludes that, "In her final gesture, it is as though Laurence truly sees her self for the first time" (156). I would like to nuance Holland's claims, however, by linking the mirror to death, and by demonstrating the demise of Laurence's stale parodies in favor of a more risky, unscripted, undeluded future. In my argument, Laurence does not "truly see [. . .] her self for the first time," but sees, instead, self as myth: the *unconstructed*, eternally improvised and uncharted nature of identity that makes any unified notion of self a fiction.

11 The phrase "assujettir le collier" refers to the act of fastening, of securing or making fast the necklace, but the verb "assujettir" also means, significantly, "to subjugate."

12 Holland has also identified a dynamic of stifling and suffocation associated with Laurence; she traces it not through images (such as strangulation implied by the unwelcome necklace), however, but rather to a narrating practice that evokes breathlessness and feelings of suffocation. Such suffocation is suggested, argues Holland, by "something obsessional in Laurence's apparent compulsion to catalogue her environment, perhaps in an attempt to gain some semblance of control over it" (120).

13 I am grateful to my colleague Guillaume Ansart for reminding me of the social threat embodied by Manon, thus inspiring me to read the name of the boutique, “Manon Lescaut,” as an implicit exhortation for Laurence.

14 Elizabeth Fallaize points to the linguistic cliché of Laurence’s conviction “[p]our moi les jeux sont faits” ‘[f]or me, the die is cast’ (183), seeing in this tired phrase yet another indication of the limits that confine Laurence (NSB 125).

Works Cited

- Beauvoir, Simone de. *Les Belles images*. Paris: Gallimard, 1966 (1989).
- . *Les Belles Images*. Trans. Patrick O’Brian. New York: Putnam, 1968.
- . *Le Deuxième sexe*. Paris: Gallimard, 1949.
- . *Tout compte fait*. Paris: Gallimard, 1972.
- Bertrand, Marc. “Les Belles Images ou la tentation de l’indifférence.” *Simone de Beauvoir Studies* 9 (1992): 49–54.
- Brosman, Catherine. *Simone de Beauvoir Revisited*. Boston: Twayne, 1991.
- Butler, Judith. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. New York: Routledge, 1990.
- . *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of “Sex.”* New York: Routledge, 1993.
- Corbin, Laurie. *The Mother-Mirror: Self-Representation and the Mother-Daughter Relation in Colette, Simone de Beauvoir, and Marguerite Duras*. New York: Peter Lang, 1996.
- Fallaize, Elizabeth. *The Novels of Simone de Beauvoir*. New York: Routledge, 1988.

- Holland, Allison. "The Quest for Identity in the Later Fiction of Simone de Beauvoir." In *Women in Contemporary Culture: Roles and Identities in France and Spain*. Ed. Lesley Twomey. Bristol: Intellect, 2000.
- . "Simone de Beauvoir's Writing Practice: Madness, Enumeration and Repetition in *Les Belles Images*." *Simone de Beauvoir Studies* 15 (1998–1999): 113–24.
- Keefe, Terry. *Simone de Beauvoir: "Les Belles Images"/"La Femme Rompue"*. Glasgow: U of Glasgow French and German P, 1991.
- Koski, Raija. "Les Belles Images de Simone de Beauvoir: La Femme et le langage." *Simone de Beauvoir Studies* 9 (1992): 55–59.
- Prévost, Abbé. *Histoire du chevalier Des Grieux et de Manon Lescaut*. Paris: Gallimard, 1972.
- Rétif, Françoise. *Simone de Beauvoir: l'Autre en miroir*. Paris: L'Harmattan, 1998.
- Test, Mary Lawrence. "Simone de Beauvoir: Le Refus de l'avenir: L'image de la femme dans *Les Mandarins* et *Les Belles Images*." *Simone de Beauvoir Studies* 11 (1994): 19–26.
- Tidd, Ursula. *Simone de Beauvoir: Gender and Testimony*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1999.
- Vargas Llosa, Mario. "Simone de Beauvoir: Les Belles Images." *Making Waves*. Ed. and trans. John King. New York: Penguin, 1998.
- Waelti-Walters, Jennifer. "Plus ça change: *Les Belles Images* in the Perspective of *Le Deuxième Sexe*." *Perspectives on Contemporary Literature* 4 (2) (1978): 22–31.