Louisa May Alcott and Simone de Beauvoir "Two Dutiful Daughters"

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> "What started as a comparative study between two women authors, turned into a triangle about Louisa, Beauvoir and myself" (Francois, 2012:1).

Alcott is almost unknown in the academic world but Beauvoir as a young girl read her and the American author seemed to have played a seminal role in the story of the life of the French woman intellectual for whom Alcott's best-seller *Little Women* (1869) was actually worth, not one, but several mentions in the first volume of Beauvoir's autobiographical writings, *Memoirs of a Dutiful Daughter* (1974). These paragraphs that Beauvoir dedicated to Louisa are very enlightening and they will provide the main arguments and points discussed in this paper. Apart from them, time and space are also discussed here.

Let's start with place: New England, on the one hand; Paris, France, on the other hand. Louisa crossed the pond a couple of times and in fact, France came to become quite well-known to her as shown in the letters collected in the volume *Little Women Abroad* (2008). Even more interestingly, France, and especially the French Riviera or the countryside near Paris, are settings often resorted to for their exotic or romantic nature by Louisa in her blood and thunder stories and novellas. As to Beauvoir, America was no stranger to her. From quite an early age, Beauvoir was able to read in English – in fact, *Little Women* is mentioned in its English title in Beauvoir's autobiography, not in the faulty French title. After the Second World War, as her reputation was emerging after the publication of her first works, Beauvoir began her visit to the United States and gave conferences at different colleges on the Eastern and the Western Coasts. Besides Sartre's nickname for Beauvoir was "castor", the French word for beaver. The nickname was inspired by the proximity in pronunciation between Beauvoir's last name and the English word (which shows that Sartre also had a good knowledge of English), but it was also motivated, by the well-known industrious character of beavers, a feature Sartre recognized and appreciated in Beauvoir.

The discussion may appear somewhat more challenging when we consider the fact that these women lived in two different centuries and that the younger one was actually born 20 years after the older one had died? Yet France between the two World Wars retained some of the characteristics usually associated with the Victorians. All questions related to sexuality and to the body were still very much tabooed and French women had to wait until 1944 to finally gain the right to vote. This is the context in which Beauvoir was born and raised, the daughter of a very Catholic mother and a bourgeois father very much attached to social conventions - according to him, a woman was what her husband made her. In the *Memoirs,* the mother of one of Beauvoir's girlfriends uttered: "being a spinster is no vocation – respectable girls are supposed to marry and become "good (house) wives". It sounds quite like the kind of shared wisdom expressed in Louisa's lifetime.

With reference to the legacy of Louisa's powerful voice, Elaine Showalter's book, *Sister's Choice* (1991), devotes a whole chapter of her study to Little Women and concludes it with suggestions and arguments about famous women writers, who embraced Louisa as their spiritual godmother and as an inspirational character. Among the writers mentioned by Showalter are Adrienne Rich and Joyce Carol Oates and also Simone de Beauvoir. Showalter quotes two or three sentences from Beauvoir's Memoirs and her only point is to illustrate the idea that Louisa's voice reached far beyond the limits not only of New England, but also of the United States. What I would like to do is delve into the complete quotations from the Memoirs mentioning Louisa and see to what extent the idea of an intellectual filiation between the two women writers makes sense. All quotations are taken from the first half of the Memoirs when Beauvoir deals with her childhood and early adolescence.

1."[T]here was one book in which I believed I had caught a glimpse of my future self: Little Women, by Louisa M. Alcott. The March girls were Protestants, their father was a pastor and their mother had given them as a bedside book not The Imitation of Christ but The Pilgrim's Progress: these slight differences only made the things we had in common with the March girls stand out all the more. (…) they were taught, as I was, that a cultivated mind and moral righteousness were better than money; their modest home, like my own, had about it – I don't know why – something quite exceptional. I identified myself passionately with Jo, the intellectual; brusque and bony, Jo clambered up into trees when she wanted to read; she was much more tomboyish and daring than I was, but I shared her horror of sewing and housekeeping and her love of books. She wrote: in order

to imitate her more completely, I composed two or three short stories. I don't know if I dreamed of reviving my old friendship with Jacques, or if, rather more vaguely, I was longing for the barrier between my own world and the world of boys to be broken down, but the relationship between Jo and Laurie touched me to the heart. Later, I had no doubt, they would marry one another. (…) But the thing that delighted me most of all was the marked partiality which Louisa Alcott manifested for Jo. As I have said, I detested the sort of grown-up condescension which lumped all children under the same heading. The defects and qualities which authors gave their young heroes seemed usually to be inconsequential accidents: when they grew up they would all be good as gold (…) But in Little Women Jo was superior to her sisters, who were either more virtuous or more beautiful than herself, because of her passion for knowledge and the vigour of her thought; her superiority was as outstanding as that of certain adults, and guaranteed that she would have an unusual life: she was marked by fate. I, too, felt I was entitled to consider my taste for reading and my scholastic successes as tokens of a personal superiority which would be borne out by the future. I became in my own eyes a character out of a novel. I invented all kinds of romantic intrigues that were full of obstacles and setbacks for the heroine. One afternoon I was playing croquet with Poupette, Jeanne, and Madeleine. (…) Suddenly I was struck motionless: I was living through the first chapter of a novel in which I was the heroine (…) I decided that my sister and my cousins, who were prettier, more graceful, and altogether nicer than myself would be more popular than I; they would find husbands, but not I. (…) something would happen which would exalt me beyond all personal preference; I did not know under what form, or by whom I should be recognized for what I was. (…) I was convinced that I would be, that I was already, one in a million." (Memoirs of a Dutiful Daughter, p.89-91)

2. "I had always been sorry for the grown-ups' monotonous existence: when I realized that, within a short space of time, it would be my fate too, I was filled with panic. (…) No, I told myself, arranging a pile of plates in the cupboard: my life is going to lead somewhere. Fortunately I was not dedicated to a life of toil at the kitchen sink. My father was no feminist (…) But after all, necessity knows no law: 'You girls will never marry,' he often declared, 'you have no dowries; you'll have to work for a living.' I infinitely preferred the prospect of working for a living to that of marriage: at least it offered some hope. There had been people who had done things: I, too, would do things. I didn't quite know what; astronomy, archaeology, and paleontology had in turn appealed to me, and I was still toying vaguely with the idea of writing. But these projects were all in the air; I didn't believe enough in any of them to be able to face the future with confidence. Already I was in mourning for my past.

This refusal to make the final break with the past became very clear when I read Louisa M. Alcott's Good Wives, which is a sequel to Little Women. A year or more had passed since I had left Jo and Laurie together, smiling at the future. As soon as I picked up the little paper-backed Tauchnitz edition in which their story was continued I opened it at random. I happened on a page which without any warning broke the news of Laurie's marriage to Jo's young sister, Amy, who was blonde, vain, and stupid. I threw the book away from me as if I had burned my fingers. For several days I was absolutely crushed by a misfortune which had seemed to strike at the very roots of my being: the man I loved and by whom I had thought I was loved had betrayed me for a little goose of a girl. I hated Louisa M. Alcott for it. Later, I discovered that Jo herself had turned Laurie down. After remaining unmarried for a long time, and after many trials, many mistakes, she met a professor, much older than she was, and endowed with the highest qualities: he understood her, consoled her, advised her, and in the end married her. This superior individual, even better than Laurie, coming as it were from the outside and becoming part of Jo's life, was the incarnation of that supreme Judge by whom I hoped one day to be acknowledged: all the same his intrusion upset me." (Memoirs of a Dutiful Daughter, p.103-105)

The first thing that emerges from these lines is the voice of the author – a confident and strong voice, a voice that clearly reminds us of Louisa's own promise to herself at the age of ten that she was going to do something grand. It is also quite clear that, in search of a role model, the young Beauvoir capitalizes on the common points between her own education and that of Jo. Beauvoir finds in Louisa's alter ego a potential example to be followed and also, a comforting character telling her that there is nothing wrong, for a girl, not to naturally embrace domesticity; there is even a suggestion that gender roles are not to be fixed and that "the barrier between (Beauvoir's) world and the world of boys" should "be broken down." Beauvoir's reading of Little Women clearly coincides with the beginning of her adolescence, which she sees as a heart-breaking transition between the innocent paradise of childhood and its loving friendships, and the depressing experience and vision adulthood brings about.

It is quite a coincidence that both Louisa and Beauvoir would end up systematically writing about their life experience to provide inspiration and material for their autobiographical fictions. *The Mandarins* (Beauvoir ,1954), which was awarded the Prix Goncourt, is analyzed as a roman à clef portraying Beauvoir's groups of intellectuals in France in the aftermath of the Second World War. It can then come as a surprise that the

two women authors were in fact very protective of their self-image and of the way future generations were going to remember them. Anna Alcott, Louisa´s eldest sister, made sure that Ednah Cheney's biography of Louisa, published one year after Louisa's death, would operate as a kind of official biographical reference. Beauvoir, who died childless, yet took the precaution to adopt Sylvie Le Bon, soon to be Beauvoir, a disciple who had become a close friend, to make sure her legacy would not be distorted.

Louisa was for a long time associated with the image of "Duty's Faithful Child", in the words of one of her father's sonnets, and Beauvoir is forever to be associated with the dutiful daughter of her memoirs, but as new writings are being discovered and published, other alternative identities show up for both women. Just as the French title for Louisa's best-known novel is totally inaccurate – the March sisters do not have a doctor for a father – the English translation of the title of Beauvoir's first autobiographical volume is not accurate either. While the adjective "dutiful" conveys the impression of an obedient girl, eager at showing respect for her elders, the original title and the French expression *"une jeune fille rangée"* are much more ambiguous, as the past participle *"rangée"* rather reveals a reluctant submission with social conventions and a renunciation of the fun, entertainment and innocent recklessness usually associated with childhood. In fact, both Louisa and Beauvoir resorted to irony and sarcasm to suggest how distanced they were from any conventional gender role.

Another common point between Louisa and Beauvoir is related to their both having sisters. Louisa had three, Beauvoir had one, but in both cases, the sisterhood was fundamental to their life experience and construction of self. *Poupette*, the nickname for Beauvoir's younger sister Hélène, turned out to be a very successful artist, who once had the opportunity to illustrate her elder sister's early publications. It was Simone who actually financially helped her younger sister, paying for art classes and the material supplies she needed. Once again, we have a direct echo to Louisa and her little sister May's story.

Feminism appears to be the connection between Alcott's and Beauvoir's works. *The Second Sex*, published in France in 1949 and in 1953 in the United States, is considered as the Bible of feminism. The book is divided into two volumes – the first one is about myths and facts, the second is about life as women experience it. And the key argument Beauvoir develops along those several hundred pages can be summed up in the formula: "one is not

born a woman, but becomes one." What she means here is that there is no feminine mystique, nothing natural and innate to women's role and social image; all this is a cultural construction, brought about through history, the history of the eternally repeated and reinforced subjection of women to men through myths. A quick study of one of Louisa's passages can be appropriate here as it illustrates this Beauvoirian assertion word for word. The first pages of *A Long Fatal Love Chase*, one of the most recent findings of the Alcott canon, set the action for the love chase about to take place between fair and young Rosamond and tyrannical Tempest. Here is the description of the first real meeting between the two protagonists:

"Lounging in his easy chair, Tempest regarded her with an expression of indolent amusement which slowly changed to one of surprise and interest as the girl talked with a spirit and freedom particularly charming to a man who had tried many pleasures and, wearying of them all, was glad to discover a new one even of this simple kind. Though her isolated life had deprived Rosamond of the polish of society, it had preserved the artless freshness of her youth and given her ardent nature an intensity which found vent in demonstrations infinitely more attractive than the artificial graces of other women. Her beauty satisfied Tempest's artistic eye, her peculiarities piqued his curiosity, her vivacity lightened his ennui, and her character interested him by the unconscious hints it gave of power, pride and passion. So entirely natural and unconventional was she that he soon found himself on a familiar footing, asking all manner of unusual questions, and receiving rather piquant replies." (A Long Fatal Love Chase, p. 6-7)

The tension of nature versus culture is at the heart of the passage. What the reader is given here is Tempest's subjective point of view on Rosamond; it is quite clear that Alcott resorts to the narrative technique of internal focalization and shows us Tempest's thoughts about Rosamond and his projection unto her of what femininity means to him. It is all the clearer as Rosamond's voice is totally absent from the passage: we are told that "the girl talked" and yet nowhere are her words to be seen on the page.

At the time when she wrote *The Second Sex*, Beauvoir was a very happy woman, a woman deeply in love – no bitter feeling is to be read in her book, just the description of women's situation and the myths and ideologies that contribute to maintaining women in their inferior lot. In some of Louisa's stories, the impression of an actual war of the sexes comes forward very clearly. Let's take the example of the story entitled "Countess Varazoff", published in July 1868 in Frank Leslie's *Lady's Magazine* right at the time when

Louisa was writing chapter after chapter of *Little Women*. The story takes place on the French Riviera, in Nice, and dramatizes a power struggle, sexual and political, between the Polish exile Irma Varazoff and her Russian conqueror Prince Czertski. Though they get married it very quickly appears that the Countess manipulated the Prince's feelings to obtain the liberation of her old Polish guardian, imprisoned in Russia for political treason. She aims at radically destroying the Prince's prestige: the so-called Countess is doubly a slave: she is subjected to her political conqueror but the Countess is also no countess at all, but the girl of a peasant. By marrying her, the Prince is forever stained with a shameful mismatch. The story is a direct illustration of the dialectic of master and slave exposed by Hegel, the German philosopher, in his writings. The reason why Hegel is mentioned is because Beauvoir's, and Sartre's, philosophical system was much inspired by Hegel's ideas and because Beauvoir uses the master-slave dialectic in to show that the distribution of gender roles is harmful to both men and women as it confines them to a conformity in which each one is in fact the slave of the other; what's at the core of the dialectic of the master and the slave is the fact that the master is totally dependent on his slave, a situation the slave can use to his own profit, as clearly shown by the example of Countess Varazoff. And since women's lot is to be expressed through the semantics of slavery and subjection, it is interesting to note that both Louisa and Beauvoir came to realize and articulate women's social inferiority in connection with considerations about the institution of marriage.

In order to expose the myth of the feminine mystique, Beauvoir condemns two fundamental social institutions – marriage and motherhood. According to her, marriage is not woman's only destiny – spinsterhood can be a vocation (as exemplified by Louisa's short portrayal "Happy Women"), or, there is a possibility to adapt matrimony and transform it according to the particular situation and ambitions of each woman and man. The couple Beauvoir formed with Sartre can supposedly be seen as a model of what this redefinition of matrimony can lead to; Beauvoir and Sartre were linked by a pact in which each one was the necessary love of the other, which did not preclude the possibility for "contingent loves", as they put it. As Louisa never married, and as we do not have any information as to her love life, no comparison can be drawn here. Yet one point can give her redefinition of the family. Plumfield or the sisterhood at the end of Louisa's novel

Work are clear indications that Louisa subscribed to the idea that family is not only about shared blood, but also about shared affection; likewise, Sartre and Beauvoir built around themselves what they called the "little family" – an entourage of former students (Sartre was also a high school teacher before WWII and in fact, some of Beauvoir's girl students married some of Sartre's boys) and disciples for whom they develop a whole system of support, financial and emotional.

With reference to motherhood and its demystification we have to consider that when Beauvoir wrote *The Second Sex*, the idea of chosen motherhood was a totally inexistent concept. Deprived of contraception, the only solution women had to prevent their having children was to resort to illegal abortions, with their more than usual fatal consequences. Pregnancy was no less dangerous, and Beauvoir keeps repeating those ideas to show why women became inferior beings – women are not to be naturally defined by their body and hormones, but their lack of access to medication and contraception MADE them the slaves of their body. Now, a discussion about abortion is nowhere to be found in Louisa's fiction, but the female body is a constant topic of interest. The beginning of *Eight Cousins*, in that respect, is very revealing: before the arrival of her uncle, who is a doctor and who is to be her guardian, Rose is for some time under the supervision of her aunts and it is quite clear that Rose gradually falls into some kind of depression under their influence; they make her think, as they were themselves taught, that because a woman, she is weak and inclined to apathy. Beauvoir thought that women's history is the story of a legacy of cultural clichés passed down from mothers to daughters and at some point in *The Second Sex*, Beauvoir clearly states that according to her, a girl raised by a man manages far better than a girl raised by her mother; this might be somewhat over simplistic but what should be kept in mind is the idea that those clichés about female weakness, established through culture, became such a part of women's vision of life that they finally came to appear as if brought about by nature. By revealing their historical origin, Beauvoir aims at denouncing them. As to motherhood, no author seems to be farther from denouncing its mythical quality than Louisa. And yet we cannot refrain from noticing that many of Louisa's heroines are orphans, and more often without a mother than without a father. What might be read between the lines is the fact that Louisa was well aware of the dangers of pregnancy – hadn't she been sent away to Grandfather May at the age of 5 or 6 while her mother was

recovering from yet another miscarriage? Louisa herself was supposedly marked by the morose state of mind of her mother while expecting her.

In search of a solution for women to become independent and free, Beauvoir asks for contraception, the right to abort, and expanded professional opportunities for women. Financial independence is, for her, the key to women's freedom – at least, that's her point of view in *The Second Sex*, a point of view she revised in the 1970s in the light of conservative mentalities despite the huge legal progress made. This is in direct echo to Louisa's own considerations in connection with the character of Phoebe, for example, in *Rose in Bloom*; once Phoebe is professionally successful and independent, she becomes worthy of Archie. One radical difference between Louisa and Beauvoir, though, is to be seen in the issue of women's suffrage. For Bronson Alcott, women's right to vote was THE reform, the change that would open up all other evolutions and progress for women. Louisa inherited that vision and it explains her impatience at women's apathy and lack of commitment in Concord when women could finally register to vote for the board of education; her "feminist letters", notably published by Madeleine Stern in *Louisa May Alcott: From Blood and Thunder to Hearth and Home*(Stern 1998), are quite revealing in that respect. Women's suffrage, on the contrary, was never part of Beauvoir's agenda – she clearly states in her Memoirs that she was totally apolitical before WWII; when her political awareness emerged, in its aftermath, France had finally voted the law to give women the right to vote.

All things considered, Alcott and Beauvoir in their own way advocated for better-educated women who would be able to make choices for themselves; to that purpose, they accepted to live lives that were as much in accordance as possible with their beliefs and ideas, no matter how detrimental for them. Beauvoir presented herself as the best suited woman to write a portrait of women's situation – a woman herself, she had the emotional commitment necessary to the task, but at the same time, her eccentric way of living also put her at a sufficiently critical distance from women in general. Though it would be tempting to oppose topsy-turvy Louisa and elegant, intellectual Beauvoir, it would be just to consider that these two women exemplified the female experience of life in all its aspects. Beauvoir was Parisian born and is often seen as the ultimate urban woman; and yet, that woman loved hiking in the mountains. Some passages in the *Memoirs* about the childhood

summers spent in Meyrignac, the grandparents' estate in Corrèze, in central France, are striking echoes to some passages from Louisa's journals when, roaming the countryside, the little girl "got religion". In the same way, though an atheist, Beauvoir kept all her life a kind of fascination for grandiose natural landscapes as they gave her a sense of the sublime.

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