

# BEAUTIFUL LOSERS

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## **Bless the weather**

Simone de Beauvoir was not in touch with her feelings. In her novels and essays, they feel stunted and are clumsily expressed. But her letters to her Chicago lover Nelson Algren tell a different story. “Paris seems dull, dark, and dead” she writes on 18 May 1947, after their first separation.

Maybe it is my heart that is dead to Paris. My heart is yet in New York, at the corner of Broadway where we said good bye; it is in my Chicago home, in my own warm loving place against your loving heart ... With you pleasure was love, and now pain is love too. We must know every kind of love. We'll know the joy of meeting again.

Why the gap between letters and published work? She herself put it down to language. It was good to write in English, she told Algren, for then she was not doing literature but speaking directly. It is notoriously hard to write of sexual love but in her letters, unburdened by her public persona, she did it beautifully. She did it *incidentally*. Like death, like the sun, sexual love may not be stared at without falling prey to hubris. Reading Faulkner's *Wild Palms*, she gasped in awe at the novel's indirect yet real erotic intensity. In *The Mandarins*, her 1954 novel dedicated to Algren, where he puts in an appearance as Lewis Brogan, their love is portrayed with intellectual detachment. Even the scene of their first sexual encounter, tenderly recounted in the letters, is rendered in the novel with a frosty touch of irony. The narrator finds it amusing to meet in the flesh what she sees as a classic American type, the self-made leftist writer. Yet even in this mannered book she captures one essential trait, seeing him as a man who while making no claims on life is nevertheless animated by great

hunger for it. Despite the stilted tones, the novel conveys her love for someone who could be both passionate and modest at the same time.

If her letters to Algren are unremittingly beautiful, perhaps that's because she was writing to him, because she couldn't speak to anyone the way she spoke to him. Until meeting him, the thirty-nine years old Simone was a provincial, bourgeois woman who had lived a bookish and sheltered life – convent school as a child, philosophy student at the Sorbonne, then a teacher and a writer who had remarkably succeeded in carving a place for herself in the Existentialist Boy Club of Paris Left Bank.

Imagining their love, I see pleasure held, and the very endgame of teleology suspended. Call it bracketing if you must. I see a momentary exit from the linear trajectory of being-towards-death punctuated by the obligatory *petite mort* at the end of each love-making; I see a refusal to climb up the Ladder of Success and the related anxiety of 'making it', of building a new a Stairway to Heaven. I see them walking arm in arm, each of them in turn skipping a step to harmonize with the other's rhythm; I see her gently mocking him for pulling an umbrella that's too small under the icy drizzle of the Chicago winter night. He marvels at her skin, the beauty of her slender curves, 'the power of a woman's body', he says in a whisper, 'a flower of the mountain', quoting Molly's monologue in Joyce's *Ulysses*. She liked his wispy whispery shimmering voice and the beautiful lines. But that's just me, daydreaming of Simone daydreaming of having Nelson, feeling tired the next day but good tired. It's just me, daydreaming of Nelson daydreaming of Simone and her beauty; he's tired too but it's a welcome tiredness as a tangible memory of her.

Things became difficult – how could they not? They ached for one another and there was an ocean in between. Their long-distance flame roars in spells of heaving love-making in hotel rooms and getaways. Then it shimmers unsteady under a cold sky, in drawn-out spaces of

daydreaming, where a pain builds that no lyrical praise of the spiritual beauty of longing can ever mend.

Bless the weather that brought you to me  
Curse the storm that drives you home

When things got hard they fell back on their shelter of choice. Call it secure base, if you must. For her, it meant loyalty to Sartre, her constituency of readers, her increasingly public persona. For him, devotion to his doomed and glorious mission as the Dostoevsky of Division Street, the deprived area of Chicago of Polish and Italian immigrants that gave him inspiration. When Simone spoke in defense of Paris (“I could not live just for happiness and love, I could not give up my writing . . . in the only place where my writing and work may have a meaning”), Nelson shot back in defense of Chicago: “My job is to write about Chicago and I can only do it here”.

### **The Poet of Perdido Street**

“I made myself a voice for those who are counted out” (Algren in a letter to Max Geismar).

As he saw it, Chicago “had only two sides, the wrong and the wronger”. He lived with (and among) junkies, petty thieves, sex workers, hustler, drifters, dealers and the whole array of the dispossessed and unrepentant inhabiting the city, adding grim beauty and urgency to its streets and alleys. His short stories, collected in *The Neon Wilderness* and his novels, e.g., *A Walk on the Wild Side*, burned with a different intensity than what fuelled the more rarefied Parisian literature hosted by *Les Temps Modernes* and its New York equivalent *Partisan Review*. Up until the success of his novel *The Man with the Golden Arm*, Algren made a better living as a dealer at the poker table than as a novelist, and could boast of a fairly unique reason for ending up in jail: stealing a typewriter. He wrote agonizingly, realistically,

influenced by Zola, Chekhov and Russian realists such as Kuprin (1870-1938). He was the poet of the streets, the poet of losers.

The entwined destinies and random encounters depicted in *A Walk on the Wild Side* are punctuated by a rhythm that is now lyrical, now staccato, both aching and sharp, not unlike the cadence of the twelve-bar blues:

You've been had, you've been paid for, you've been rented by the minute. Now anything goes no matter how wild so long as it keeps off the Storyville Blues. It was cocaine, it was whiskey – who wouldn't get the blues? It was brawling in the alleys, it was falling on the floor. It was everything to give and not a thing to lose. It was men, it was gin, it was all night long. It was have a ball and spend it all – 'Daddy, buy me one more drink and do just what you want with me.' That was what they called fun on old Perdido Street.

He couldn't stand schlock, stayed well away of happy endings, and hated the cheesy film version Hollywood made of his novel *The Man with a Golden Arm*, with Frank Sinatra in the main role. His stance is one of compassion without sentimentality – more Chekhov than Dickens, for he conspicuously lacked the latter's taste for the moralizing redemption that one fine day (a Sunday?) will make respectable citizens of us all. Among the young sex workers mercilessly and violently exploited and manipulated by their pimps, "the coaltown and the cotton-mill kids took to it easiest of all", because to them hard times meant nothing: "they had never known any other kind" (ibid). They were not frightened of law, jail or sickness. They would deride bespectacled professors, pious men of God and the dapper lawyers too who came along to peep and stare and take a furtive bite of the forbidden crop.

A deranged preacher harangues a congregation of bums on a street corner; they all know he's only a poor lonesome fellow whose wife left. Yet like an existential trainer at an existential training course he has them enthralled with the fear of hellfire just as first-year trainees are spellbound by the high fees and the crawling angst haunting their genteel case studies.

### **Hunger for reality**

De Beauvoir loved New York but was ill at ease there among the intellectuals of *Partisan Review*. In 1947, the year of her journey through the States via train, plain, car and Greyhound bus, the first frosty winds of the Cold War could be felt in both France and the US. At a time of strong polarization, some felt compelled to support the USSR while others chose the US. A third way, what she and her fellow-travellers Sartre, Merleau-Ponty, Camus and others were seeking, was hard to find. The once-radical New York writers opted instead for American ‘democracy’, sympathizing with the curbing of rights to suspected Communists and with other measures that amounted to the first wave of political witch-hunt and unwavering conformity that was to follow shortly with McCarthyism. They were also snobbishly rejecting the realism of American writers so loved by the Europeans – Steinbeck, Hemingway, Dos Passos, Richard Wright – in favour of authors seen as psychologically more astute and sophisticated: Henry James, Melville, Faulkner, Thoreau.

De Beauvoir was hungry for American reality – and for American realism. This is how the name of Nelson Algren came up; it was someone the New York intellectuals couldn’t stand alongside the murky, raw riches of his vision. De Beauvoir made sure to seek him out as soon as she got to Chicago.

### **Friday evening magic**

When his phone rang that Friday evening, Nelson was making himself dinner. He didn’t recognize the heavily accented voice and hang up. The phone rang three more times. ‘Wrong number!’ he shouted the second and third time, annoyed, but on the fourth he heard an operator saying ‘Please stay on the line, Sir’. Then a woman spoke, saying she was passing through Chicago and would he like to meet. Her accent was French. Uninterested, Algren was about to hang up a fourth time when the woman mentioned his close friend, the black

Chicago writer and Paris expatriate Richard Wright, as well as his other friend Mary Guggenheim. He agreed to meet her at *Le Petit Cafe* in the Palmer House Hotel. He boarded the El, came out at Monroe station and walked east towards the posh hotel. He entered the lobby; there were thick carpets on the floor and an elaborate mosaic of gold, alabaster, and green tile on the ceiling. He looked around, found the entrance to Le Petit Cafe and saw a pale and slim woman in a white coat and a green scarf around the neck, her dark hair pulled up on top of her head. She was standing there with a copy of *Partisan Review* in her hand. Nelson hesitated; he stood in a corner watching her for a moment, trying to get a sense of her. Finally he came forward and introduced himself. Her name did not ring any bell; conversation was difficult: his French was the slang from his days in the army; plus, his Chicago twang was incomprehensible to Simone. He talked about the war, and then suggested they go out – not to the jazz clubs, too dull in his view, nor to a burlesque, but somewhere, he said, where you have probably never been to. She eagerly accepted for she was by then thoroughly fed up with the mercantile glimmer of five-star America. They went to a small club that by midnight filled with all sorts of people, many of them so dirty, Beauvoir was to remark later, that she thought their bones too were grey. Nelson introduced her to a woman behind the bar. Turns out she knew everything about French literature and asks Simone about Sartre and Malraux. De Beauvoir was stunned. The woman runs the bar as well as a shelter, Nelson later explained, and spends her free time reading and getting high, going back and forth between hospital and prison. Then it was high time to go to his place. They made love, Simone later wrote, first because of comfort (she was saddened by the poverty she'd seen), and then because of passion. She later told Algren that in defence of existentialism in his discussion with the writer Louis Bromfield he should say the following: 'I know Simone de Beauvoir and when she is in bed with me, she does not look hopeless or nihilist'. They talked; she told him of her passionate interest in the situation of women in

world; he suggested she makes a book out of the essay she was then writing: the seed of *The Second Sex*.

### **The meaning of success**

Algren's life was ruined by grim avatars of conformity such as J Edgar Hoover, infamous director of the FBI, and the self-declared paleo-neo-con Norman Podhoretz, who grumbled that for Algren "bums and tramps are better men than the preachers and the politicians". This is the very same Podhoretz now eulogizing Donald Trump's wonderful 'patriotism' Algren was guilty of not believing in the American dream but being instead determined to describe the rage and wit, the love and despair that animated the wretched of the earth and those inhabiting the slums and whorehouses and blues dens of Chicago. Ahead of the 1960s, he depicted (and lived first-hand) the drifters' refusal to swear by the claptrap of 'success' and the self-defeating scramble to 'making it'.

It is scary to look at his life: talent, compassion and refusal to submit can demolish a person in the same way as mediocrity and compliance can. There was a long FBI file on Nelson Algren: his allegiance with the Communist Party, his contributions lefty magazines – all duly and doggedly documented. Publishers dropped him; travel outside the US was denied.

In striking counterpoint to Algren's, you could think of de Beauvoir's as a success story. Think again. Her name and quotes (and all too often misquotes and misinterpretations) adorn many a book on existential therapy. The glory of the 'leading intellectual' may amount to their name printed in a university handout and quoted by the trainee anxious to pass a case study, a viva, a dissertation. Her trenchant case in *Ethics of Ambiguity* for emancipation and responsibility, her appeal to leave the metaphysically privileged existence of children and stop delegating our power, freedom and responsibility to those in authority is all the more poignant at a time when heads of state and heads of government are everywhere elected who

are themselves the embodiment of immaturity, privilege and conceit. Her appeal continues to fail because stupidity is perpetually in love with the trappings of power. What makes it still valid, however, is that it is now our turn to enact our own splendid failures. There is value in *creative failure*. Creative failure constitutes, uncannily, the best response to capitalism's *creative destruction*, to a capitalist machine that, in Deleuze & Guattari's words, "works by breaking down".

In the more relatively private domain of intimate relationships, creative failure may point at loves that although not lasting, not sanctified or endorsed by either marriage or cohabitation remind us of love's infinite ways to dance its dance tune and leave its indelible mark even when every signature is but a signature on water. Too often we hear in our clients' stories how this love or that marriage 'failed' against a normative dictate of what constitutes 'real' love.

In one of her letters, dated 2 June 1947, Simone wrote: "I cry because I do not cry in your arms" When she was buried, she still wore the silver ring Nelson Algren had given her.

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An extended version of this article will appear as a chapter in the forthcoming *Re-Visioning Existential Therapy: Counter-traditional Perspectives* (Routledge), a collection of essays from practitioners around the world. [www.manubazzano.com](http://www.manubazzano.com)