10/31/07 Beauvoir, "Myths: Of Women in Five Authors"

- So far in this thread, we centered on a particular controversy: is the concept of authorial intention, or "authorial meaning" as Hirsch has it, necessary for the interpretation of a text, or are the public norms of language sufficient to give a text a meaning on its own? That disagreement might obscure the degree to which Hirsch and Wimsatt and Beardsley agree: both Hirsch and Wimsatt and Beardsley focus on determining the meaning of the text itself on its own terms; Beauvoir, and nearly all feminist critics after her, is trying to do something quite different.

- B is, in essence, trying to show how women are represented in the texts of five male authors. In all the texts but in different ways, women are represented as the Other through whom the male fulfills himself or against whom the male defines himself. In looking at the texts in this way, she is working "against the grain" of the text: trying to see what it assumes about gender, how it represents gender, rather than what it says in its primary emphasis. This piece is certainly not an attack on authorial intention; it is probably not possible to deduce from it what de Beauvoir's views are on authorial intention; but it is also not trying to determine authorial intention; it is, as I say, "doing something different."

- My contention is that this "doing something different" has to a large degree been the fate of authorial intention. The debate over it has largely died out; most literary scholars just aren’t that interested in the issue any more. If Barry is right in his generalizations about post-NC theory, then authorial intention lost. The claim that “meaning is contingent” is directly in opposition to authorial intent: if meaning is contingent on the reader, then the author is irrelevant; if it is contingent upon language as a structure, the author is irrelevant; if it is contingent upon discourse, then the author is probably relevant, but only as a sort of nexus through which larger structures of meaning work themselves out. But for the most part all this has been worked out without reference to authorial intention per se. With some exceptions, post-NC theorists haven’t made the case that authorial intention is bogus, as Wimsatt and Beardsley did; they just did something different. That leaves the concept very much up in the air, in an unsatisfying way.  

- what we’re going to try to do today: make the sides speak to one another. I’ve chosen Simone de Beauvoir because she’s arguably the first feminist critic, that is to say, the first feminist to write about literature from a feminist framework. In fact, she’s writing over a decade before Hirsch. Now by the time feminism gets to, say, Kolodny, we can be sure that there is overt disagreement. Hirsch says that understanding—which is prior to criticism—that is, assessing its value. But Kolodny argues the reverse: the reason that women’s writing has not been understood is because it has not been valued. It is easy to see that Hirsch would vehemently disagree that “insofar as we are taught to read, what we engage are not texts but paradigms” and that Kolodny would disagree just as vehemently with Hirsch. But Simone de Beauvoir, as I say, predates either of the other critics. So here’s the question: is this “doing something different,” this “reading against the grain,” necessarily in contradiction with Hirsch’s view?
Discussion questions on Simone de Beauvoir and E.D. Hirsch

1) Would Hirsch consider what Beauvoir is doing in her article legitimate?
2) If WE think what Beauvoir is doing is legitimate, what would we have to give up or alter, if anything, in Hirsch’s view?

Passages in Hirsch to consider:

1392 “it would be futile…to attempt a rigorous banishment of all judgment, but this fact does not…entitle us . . . to submit as serious textual commentary a disguised argument for a particular ethical, cultural or aesthetic viewpoint.” (Would Hirsch say that’s what Beauvoir is doing?)

1392 understanding is prior to criticism; does this appear to be the case for Beauvoir?

1392 “most serious faults of current criticism” are its “subjectivism and relativism” (would Hirsch accuse Beauvoir of this?)

1392 if criticism is to be objective... (is it POSSIBLE for criticism to be objective?)

1393 meaning/significance distinction; does this authorize what B does? See 1394: “to fuse meaning and significance . . . destroys the basis both for any agreement among readers and for any objective study whatever.”

1394 inner horizon/outer horizon distinction (might we consider Beauvoir’s kind of criticism a case of determining the outer horizon of texts?)

1394 “Is it proper to make textual meaning dependent on the reader’s own cultural givens?” (Hirsch says no; would he accuse Beauvoir of making this mistake?)

1403 a fundamental flaw in a different kind of criticism is that it “overlooks the problem of emphasis”; would Hirsch say that, in working against the grain of the text, Beauvoir overlooks the emphases of the tests?