

BARBARA CASSIN AND OLIVER FELTHAM

INTERVIEW

*Barbara Cassin's domicile, Paris, 21<sup>st</sup> June 2022*

**O**liver Feltham: The first time I came across your work was when somebody sent me a translation that I now think came from your *Vocabulaire* – it was the article on rhetoric. I had thought the original came from *L'effet sophistique* but I looked through it afterwards and it wasn't exactly the same thing. You were working on the weave of discourse and threads – it was for the *Routledge Encyclopedia of Rhetoric*, and a Canadian was organising the whole thing.

*Barbara Cassin*: No no, I wrote it specially for him.

*Oliver Feltham*: Oh. Okay. Well apparently you weren't so happy with the quality of the first draft of the translation done by somebody else, and so someone sent it to me and I had to fix it. When I was doing that translation – because I hadn't come across your work yet – I thought it was quite astonishing; it was a type of writing that made me think the author had been inspired by Derrida but had done something quite original – because most people inspired by Derrida in the English-speaking world make a kind of imitation. Every now and then you mention Derrida in your oeuvre, not very often, but I wonder whether there isn't a connection, an influence, a link between your work and Derrida's oeuvre, something particular that stays with you.

*Barbara Cassin*: Well that's slightly odd because, how can I put it, Derrida's great works, all his great books, I know them and I knew Derrida quite well, but I didn't feel like getting caught up in all that. I had already been caught in Heidegger's net, so falling back into the same kind of thing wasn't worth it – even if, obviously, it was different to Heidegger, but all the same, that line of thinking relates more to Heidegger than to Deleuze or Lyotard. I didn't know Deleuze very well – though his work was very important to me – yet I knew Lyotard very well and Derrida quite well. Actually, one could say that I use Derrida the most now, with the benefit of distance, and especially, fundamentally, his *Monolingualism of the Other*, which is fantastic, and which really inspired me from the outset. There's a way in which I'm able to work *a parte post*. In a similar manner I knew Lacan well, had known

him for a long time – he asked me to give him a course on doxography, so we knew each other – but there again I didn't really feel like getting caught up. But I was able to write *Jacques le sophiste* simply because Lacan was more different to me than Derrida. For Derrida there would be no point in doing that; besides, he's not a sophist, not at all.

*Oliver Feltham:* Despite what some say about him.

*Barbara Cassin:* Not even a little bit. Despite what he says about himself in the *Monolingualism of the other*, well, what he says others say about him.

*Oliver Feltham:* I remember one of his essays which really struck us during my undergraduate education in Australia – “Signature, Event, Context” on...

*Barbara Cassin:* On Austin.

*Oliver Feltham:* Yes, and especially the polemic with Searle.

*Barbara Cassin:* That's a pain in the arse. I read it of course, and there are things from Derrida that I've kept from “Signature, Event, Context”, but that fight bored me to tears.

*Oliver Feltham:* Just the other day I was reading your essay on Lacan's “L'étourdit” along with Badiou's. There's a connection between the existence of ambivalences [*equivokes*], in our discourse and the appearance of the point of enunciation, the moment of the subject as soon as s/he states something. I don't quite understand it yet: what is the direct link between...

*Barbara Cassin:* The link is the signifier. In other words, when you speak, and you hear, and you pronounce, there are some signifiers circulating, and there can be ambivalences solely at the level of the signifier, otherwise it's a question of homonymy. Hang on, that's not quite right. The perception of ambivalences in psychoanalysis is obviously linked to the signifier.

*Oliver Feltham:* But does one need the cut of the analyst's interpretation to...

*Barbara Cassin:* No.

*Oliver Feltham:* ...mark the signifier as signifier, no?

*Barbara Cassin:* No... You can be your own audience, your own wall. You can do it like Lacan; that is, play on the signifier, put the signifier to work. Anyway, this is always what you do when you write.

*Oliver Feltham:* Yes I've seen that. I wrote two books on Oliver Cromwell and it took a friend to point that one out to me. I have another question...There's a kind of conceptual object which...Your work on equivocal signifiers fascinates me. I have worked a lot on Locke on political conflicts and the link to equivocal actions. That is, there is an action and people cannot find the right word for the action. There is a conflict in a community over what has just happened. For example, the American air-force talks about ‘collateral damage’ whilst in Pakistan people say “No, that was

a civilian massacre! Even if you say it was a mistake, it's still a civilian massacre". I wonder whether there is a link between this object which is already in Locke's *Essay on Human Understanding* and your work on the question of ambivalences and the production of a new consensus in the work of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa.

*Barbara Cassin:* Tell me again what you think about Locke so that I have it in mind.

*Oliver Feltham:* Locke says, first of all, that the difference between our knowledge of substances and our knowledge of actions is that there is no archetype for actions, because we or our culture invented the words. This is what he calls a 'mixed mode', that is a set of different properties. For example, parricide is a mix of 'murder', 'father', 'voluntary act', 'not in the context of a war', etc. There are names for each culture, and they have to be passed down to the next generation, but there is no substance, no model for them in reality. So first he says there is no problem with truth because we all agree, we made up these names, it's pure convention, so it's a kind of nominalism. Then he recognizes that there is a problem with truth – because it's the epoch of the great religious wars – in that there is no agreement on the names of certain actions, especially in the case of a conflict. Something has been done and the two sides cannot manage to come to agreement...

*Barbara Cassin:* Even on the thing, the name to give to the thing, so on the thing.

*Oliver Feltham:* Yes.

*Barbara Cassin:* Well of course with Desmond Tutu. I have citations where people say exactly that: the difference of names was what disturbed the appellants, and drove them to a point at which they no longer knew what to do because there was no longer any common or stable language. This is the signature of *stasis*, of civil war, since Thucydides: changing the meaning of words, designating as 'terrorists' both those who are guilty of terrorist acts and those who struggled using legal and pacifist means. Of course, I agree entirely. But those are, how can I put it, voluntary ambivalences. There is a name from one point of view but all the same the other knows that something is named in this manner for the other. That is what is disturbing, that's what drives people mad: that something can be called 'murder' or 'extreme prejudice', or 'legitimate defence'.

*Oliver Feltham:* Well for Locke it's certainly bound up with his diagnosis of faction, with the work of *stasis*.

*Barbara Cassin:* Yes. In South Africa, what was indicated under the term 'defence' was a murder! The appellants knew this and it drove them crazy. They no longer trusted anything, not even language.

*Oliver Feltham:* So there is a kind of semantic disturbance.

*Barbara Cassin:* A profound disturbance. For Lacan a joke is nonsense within sense, but here it is more than that. It's – well how can I put this – it's the inscribing of a standpoint within language. That is very disturbing when we supposedly

share a common language, and then one realizes to what point the inscription of a standpoint produces language. That's a real question. As soon as this kind of thing occurs you are obliged to be political, that is, it is up to you to be the measure of language. It's your job to say "this means that", so at that point you are committed.

*Oliver Feltham:* It's also a question of power, or of the capacity to impose or transmit one's own interpretation of words.

*Barbara Cassin:* But that's precisely the point: it's not an interpretation, it's a fact. That's the problem: it takes place at the level of facts. One cannot say that it's prejudice or harm, it's murder. It's your job to inscribe the fact in language: you are responsible at that point. The measure is you. You are the measure of language in that situation. And so you have to say "Excuse me, but this is not a prejudice", or "Excuse me but you did not fondle her, you raped her".

*Oliver Feltham:* Straightaway that leads us to a particular understanding of the role not just of intellectuals but of people in the public sphere, in public encounters.

*Barbara Cassin:* Yes. Public and private. Everywhere.

*Oliver Feltham:* The other question that struck me about your oeuvre...When I began to write an article on your work it was on something that is not central to it: theatre. I did this because I found so many references, so many metaphors. For instance, when speaking of the sophists you often say "between liturgy and happenings" and I have also found a fair few 'primitive scenes' in your oeuvre.

*Barbara Cassin:* Oh yes? Do tell.

*Oliver Feltham:* Well there's the 'decision of sense', then there's the scene between Gorgias and Parmenides in the *Treatise of Non-being*.

*Barbara Cassin:* Yes.

*Oliver Feltham:* It seems to me that you also have a theatrical way of setting up the context, the situation of your oeuvre, especially of *L'effet sophistique*, in that there is a grand combat, it seems, a grand combat between logology and ontology, between a consistent relativism and universalism, between the principle that there is no sexual relation, and the principle of contradiction. So I have several questions here: we can say that you have allies in this struggle, this combat, because there's Nietzsche, there's Lyotard, there's Novalis, Lacan, Tutu, and all the sophists of course, and then there are others, who are not really enemies, but they are certainly identified as targets, like Apel and Habermas. If one were to continue this combat, what would follow, what kinds of consequences, for example, for teaching philosophy?

*Barbara Cassin:* I believe that if things were to change, it would begin with translation. So if I were a professor of philosophy now I wouldn't put up with readings not also being given in their original language. That's how I would work, how I would begin, because that is a consistent relativism (*relativisme conséquent*).

I think it would do some good to measure the other in that manner. I would start there, now, and I would do the same thing with literature too. But maybe not because if you're a professor of French literature you're a professor of *French* literature. But I wouldn't put up with my children, and my grandchildren, reading 'Bilbo le hobbit' without knowing that it's not French. That drives me up the wall.

*Oliver Feltham:* I see. The other question tied to that, to that attention to translation, well, there was a phrase that struck me at the end of *L'effet sophistique*, that kind of imperative or call to arms which is the "breaking down of barriers between genres".

*Barbara Cassin:* Of the *logos*, yes.

*Oliver Feltham:* I saw...well, first of all it's quite evident in your oeuvre because there are essays...What about if we look at the French situation now, there are a few authors who work in different...

*Barbara Cassin:* In different domains.

*Oliver Feltham:* Yes, in different domains. Badiou is an example but he's a little exceptional. You have really worked between the two, between philosophy and fiction.

*Barbara Cassin:* Here's the thing though: for Badiou each genre is pure. For me genres are porous. That's the big difference. When Badiou writes theatre, he writes theatre. So, it can be very bad theatre. When he writes philosophy, he really writes philosophy, when he writes poetry, he really writes poetry, and they can be bad poems. Writing for me is only ever one thing, to speak is only ever one thing. So I always thought I wasn't a real philosopher in the way in which philosophers are real philosophers; that is, writing philosophy alone. When I write philosophy within philosophy, I also write because the poetry of language resonates. I write philosophy differently than I would if I were solely a philosopher. Besides, it's a problem because I also paint. If I was really a painter...

*Oliver Feltham:* Really?

*Barbara Cassin:* There are heaps of paintings by me in this room (*indicates them*). If I were really a painter I would put up with painting badly so as to paint better. If I were really a painter, I would not stop with a painting as soon as it pleased me. I would continue because I would need to learn and continue and go further and make things. You see, I only allow myself to think like that in philosophy. Perhaps that's how I'm a philosopher. It's the only thing that's different with literature. With literature as soon as I start to like it, I stop. Painting, I stop when something starts to take shape: don't touch because you'll make it worse.

*Oliver Feltham:* But isn't it also because there's a history, because you have, like everybody within the philosophical institution in France, a history

*Barbara Cassin:* We have to give an account of ourselves, that's for sure...

*Oliver Feltham:* There are accounts to be given, and authorities...

*Barbara Cassin:* Of course, that's all true, but let's say I was appointed as a philosopher and I found this profession fantastic because in this profession you could ask completely bizarre questions; you could be paid to ask whether God exists. I love this. But that didn't stop me from having the impression when I was a philosophy teacher – I wasn't a philosophy teacher for long in highschool, because the teaching conditions were unbearable. I had two children, I had been appointed a long way away, a two-hour train ride, well, it was impossible, just impossible. So I did philosophy at *Ecole Postes and Communications* (a school) or in a day clinic. The first year after my work experience I really taught philosophy but not for an entire year because I was sent on early maternity leave. I was pregnant and what with going from one classroom to another one I ended up climbing twenty floors a day, which didn't bother me at all but the workplace doctor did not approve. So I spent eight months of happiness teaching philosophy to philosophy classes with no idea what I was doing, that is, writing things on the blackboard, doing Ancient Greek with them, letting myself focus on what I thought was important. The result of all that, after all, was that my first year of teaching was in a very difficult highschool at Porte de Vanves – I think I tell this story in a book somewhere – and the headmaster called me to his office. I was scared of course and he told me “I have two things to say to you. First you must not smoke in class. Second the Maths teacher's son told his father that he has never been so happy in class.”

*Oliver Feltham:* How great was that?

*Barbara Cassin:* There you go.

*Oliver Feltham:* This whole thing of giving an account of yourself...What's odd is that there has been this boomerang of 'French theory' through the English-speaking world, precisely because of a lot of translations Lyotard and Baudrillard and Foucault at the end of the 1970s in Australia.

*Barbara Cassin:* Are you Australian?

*Oliver Feltham:* Yes. English-Australian but I spent twenty years in Australia. So there was this boom of creativity in the all the humanities disciplines and there were attempts at 'ficto-criticism'. In the 1990s the imperative was to disturb the boundaries of genres, and I came to Paris in 1995, as if to Mecca, to go to Derrida and then Badiou's course. I was shocked to find out just how marginal Derrida and especially Badiou were in relation to the philosophical institution here, and just how conservative it was at the level of what could be said and written.

*Barbara Cassin:* Terribly conservative, and all the more so at the CNRS (National centre of scientific research) because one had to prove that one was a scholar, which was extra-complicated. At least when you are teaching you can, how can I put this, seduce – you have the right – but when you are a scholar you have to prove that you are doing research that no-one else has done previously. So you publish a text that no one has ever published or understood.

*Oliver Feltham:* So you have to make your mark, you have to leave...

*Barbara Cassin:* Yes, And then the *agregation* (the exam to be appointed as a highschool teacher) is an odd thing.

*Oliver Feltham:* Yes I am participating in the jury of a graduate school tomorrow as an ‘international expert’ and I still don’t quite understand the admission criteria. Often the *agregation* counts for something.

*Barbara Cassin:* It shouldn’t. That’s obvious. I’m not an ‘*agregé*’ you know (*someone who passed the agregation exam*). When I entered into the CNRS people said ‘Be quiet! Don’t let anyone know!’

*Oliver Feltham:* I also wanted to know with ‘consistent relativism’, didn’t it interest you...didn’t you find anchors in other relativists in the history of philosophy apart from Lyotard? You mention Quine for example.

*Barbara Cassin:* Sure, why not? But for me it’s really on the basis of Protagoras that it gets interesting. It’s that definition that immediately leads to politics. I could have done some great work with Françoise Balibar on the relative, relation, relativity, relativism: we began but then stopped. One can work with scholars. But all that involves different kinds of tension. In actual fact, I haven’t looked for other anchors.

*Oliver Feltham:* Because you already have them in your own material.

*Barbara Cassin:* Because in the end an anchoring in Ancient Greek, and Ancient Greek philosophy, is what matters to me. It seems to me that I have an expertise there which I can put to work which is far more substantial than in the rest.

*Oliver Feltham:* It seems to me that you liberated yourself from Heidegger’s weight quite early on.

*Barbara Cassin:* Yes (*emphatic*).

*Oliver Feltham:* Because you have your own Greeks.

*Barbara Cassin:* Yes. I’m in the middle of putting together a collection of articles for the ‘Bouquins’ series, and I regret not having included my first article which was “Can one be presocratic in a different manner?”. Different to Heidegger...

*Oliver Feltham:* There’s another important connection that I’ve noticed here and there in your work and it’s René Char and Francis Ponge. Both of them are there. What I haven’t managed to understand is Ponge’s position in your thinking – does he bring something, is he a reference in a...

*Barbara Cassin:* I use what I find. Take Ponge’s poem on homonymy as the “optimum of writing”, each word used in each of its meanings, to please a whole range of people from metaphysicians to cooks – well, it’s so fantastic I use it. That’s all. But it doesn’t mean anything. Besides I really enjoy reading Ponge but I use little things, little snippets which match up with my own little snippets. Char was completely different. Char was true love, that’s very different.

*Oliver Feltham:* In Ponge there's this project to find a way of describing, to try to find in language the means of expression. In *Le rage de l'expression* there was that entire pine forest: what struck me was the way he repeated the same descriptions so as to grasp, to try to communicate, to identify, I don't know, the texture of that pine forest. He had the project of grasping the essence of things in language whereas you with your attention to the signifier and the way you have of undoing the decision of meaning: those two things don't go together so well.

*Barbara Cassin:* To grasp the essence of things – but if one grasped it another way? If one grasped it with words, it is already another way of doing it. It is a completely un-Platonic way of going about things: to grasp the essence of things with words is already sophistic. So after you bar essence, it bars itself. The first scene...

Barbara Cassin searches in a folder, finds an envelope and draws out of it the first book that she composed and printed. It is in a small format and consists of around 24 pages. Its first pages consist of a palimpsest of texts printed over each other at different angles.

*Barbara Cassin:* This is the first book I made in my whole life.

*Oliver Feltham:* Right.

*Barbara Cassin:* Come and look at how it's put together. I did the typesetting and printed it. It begins like that, with the blotting papers which are used to wipe the ink, and then slowly the text emerges, becomes readable. There is the text like this and the footnotes are also texts which are sometimes in the body-text, inside it, and sometimes added, transcribed in two ways: like a poem, or like prose. I made this first book when I was, maybe, twenty-five, and I sent it to two people: Derrida and Lacan. Lacan wrote back straight away saying "I like the first pages" (the unreadable blotting papers) (*laughs*) and Derrida responded a year later "Dear Mademoiselle, blah blah blah..." It's funny no?

*Oliver Feltham:* And that was before you identified a direction for yourself, or was it just...

*Barbara Cassin:* At the time I was doing a review of poetry murals.

*Oliver Feltham:* Were you inspired by art, by something in the world of contemporary art at the time?

*Barbara Cassin:* It was just after May '68! I did it with two friends, one of whom became a professor of art history, who ended up there, because we were twenty at the time. The other taught visual arts at Vincennes.

*Oliver Feltham:* When Vincennes (Université Paris 8) was still actually at Vincennes?

*Barbara Cassin:* Yes.

*Oliver Feltham:* I have another question but it's a bit broad. It's again based on this grand combat that I read into your work. In the beginning, especially in *L'effet*

*sophistique*, logology reminded me of grammatology because it's a grand project launched with great momentum, and there was also the rewriting of the history of philosophy on the basis of sophistic. Once one has understood ontology as having been constructed out of a play on syntax, what exactly emerges as the project of rewriting the history of philosophy? Because, in the contemporary philosophical landscape, there are other projects, like Deleuze's, of doing a minor history of philosophy, there's Badiou who makes his choices, with this entire apparatus of the four conditions of philosophy, such that either it's antiphilosophy, or philosophy doesn't exist very often; Heidegger's project with ontotheology, Derrida with the metaphysics of presence. Each time it's different: the relation between the one and the other is different which entails all kinds of things at the level of strategy and tactics. I wonder whether there isn't a form, a way of outlining, ahead of time, what might be made out of such a rewriting of the history of philosophy.

*Barbara Cassin*: One thing is certain: it'll shift the perception of the excluded. We will understand differently why they are excluded. So it draws the borders of philosophy. It draws borders in relation to the most serious material I had found: the relation between sense, nonsense, ab-sense, the principle of identity, the principle of contradiction, the principle of reason... How can we speak differently? I don't know how to speak differently. It's very interesting to look at how we might speak differently, and whether, in speaking differently, we'd still be within what could be called 'philosophy' – love of knowledge, or whatever – but involved in a tradition that allows itself to be rethought, by dispossessing it of its universality. That's always what's at stake. Who believes themselves universal and why?

*Oliver Feltham*: Obviously you've travelled a lot for work. In other countries with other traditions have you seen the borders of philosophy differently?

*Barbara Cassin*: First of all I saw, for example, analytic philosophy at work in certain universities in Brazil and Germany. I understood there that nothing could get through, one could not get anything through: it was dense. The other did not have its place, that's for sure. I saw this kind of thing take place because it's all political, of course, academic politics and strategic. So when I was the president of the CNRS committee responsible for philosophy, I started out by finding it quite unfair that there was no place for analytic philosophy. So I made a place for them, I opened things up: by which means, they ended up firing everyone. Well, that's how I saw it in the end. No-one new could enter unless she or he was one of them. That was unbearable. Now perhaps that's also what occurs in phenomenology – it's not impossible – except I'm 'borderline' in phenomenology and so no-one dared fire me, but in analytic philosophy I'm not borderline. I'm not speaking only of myself, I say 'I' but...

*Oliver Feltham*: But in Germany isn't the situation a bit different?

*Barbara Cassin*: Those that I saw in relation to the *Dictionary of Untranslatables* found it insufferable.

*Oliver Feltham:* Really?

*Barbara Cassin:* Yes. Not everyone but basically those who had a little power, yes. Because in a certain manner the place was already occupied by Gadamer so it wasn't worth adding another.

*Oliver Feltham:* So there's one place alone for someone who works on discourse, the nature of words, language, and then there's not enough room...

*Barbara Cassin:* There you go, that's it!

*Oliver Feltham:* Only one can be tolerated.

*Barbara Cassin:* How can I put it? That's my external perception.

*Oliver Feltham:* The question you work on, and which appears in the epistolary text with Badiou – and you also cite Catherine Malabou on this – this question of being a woman and being a philosopher in relation to the universal. At one point you say...I read...there's a text which isn't a letter at the end of the book. I jumped over the contents page, so I was a bit confused at one moment.

*Barbara Cassin:* I don't remember any more.

*Oliver Feltham:* It becomes a little more programmatic as if you got a bit cross with each other towards the end (*laughs*).

*Barbara Cassin:* Oh, I didn't notice that.

*Oliver Feltham:* Yes, after eight letters each, you say "Enough. Now we're going to cross the t's and put the dots on the i's, and we're going to set out the problem with your universal Alain." It's much more programmatic, a little less playful.

*Barbara Cassin:* I have no memory at all of what I said there.

*Oliver Feltham:* There are a series of points you make. You say there aren't really any women in the history of philosophy. They can be counted on the fingers of one hand: Hypatia and Hannah Arendt. I thought...you see we've found ourselves in the same situation now. I work at an American university. After Black Lives Matter we started working a lot on the question of diversity and inclusion (which, by the way, is only one way of working on Black Lives Matter, but anyway). We had some students who said "Look this is all fine but we can't find ourselves in your curriculum, there are only Europeans". Once one starts to expand the curriculum it's clear that one can start studying other authors from other countries and other continents, except one has to let go of what's called 'philosophy' as a signifier. The stakes become very complicated at that point: there's a thin line between being colonial a second time over by saying we're going to recuperate the other's discourse and say 'that is philosophy, but in their manner' and so one's engaging in a kind of operation of capture to nourish European philosophy, which is a kind of imperial vampire and.... Or one multiplies the names of discourses that interest us. It's a completely open project. Nobody knows the right directions.

*Barbara Cassin:* The person with whom I work on more or less those questions is Souleymane Bachir Daigne. He has two models of the universal: the overview universal, as Levinas has it, and the lateral universal, from Merleau-Ponty. For him this second universal is that of translation. In the end perhaps it's not so much a question of multiplying names as one of lateralising positions, allowing positions to be drawn from the outside and more in a blurred way. For me the norm is the blurred. As soon as you make hard distinctions, that scares me. Yet when Badiou says "No! No, that is not philosophy!" it kind of calms me down. That's how I'd put it.

*Oliver Feltham:* I thought that if there weren't many women in the history of philosophy, there are, after all, many women who have written but under other names, other discourses: mysticism for example.

*Barbara Cassin:* Yes but that's precisely the problem: someone says "that is not philosophy". It is normal for a woman and not difficult, I mean there's no fight to be had – to write a novel or be a mystic. There is no fight, it's okay. No more than for making a chicken casserole! It's okay. You are clearly fulfilling your role, and you can go one better by also giving birth. Yet when you say 'I am a philosopher', then things get serious, and complicated, because at that moment you become more masculine than men. You do philosophy that is even more in conformity to the rules. In a certain manner, if you look at which women-philosophers entered into the College of France, it's even worse than the men-philosophers. All of that is quite simple.

*Oliver Feltham:* I think that Badiou says himself in his autobiography somewhere that at the time at Rue d'Ulm (Ecole Normale Supérieure) people boasted about having a system, a theory, so as to seduce women. The theory was the phallus.

*Barbara Cassin:* Absolutely, yes.

*Oliver Feltham:* It's not the car it's the theory?!

*Barbara Cassin:* That's how it works. But already the Sartre-Beauvoir couple changed things a little, because he had the theory but after all, what did she have? The theory plus her lovers. So it's okay (*laughs*), in a certain manner. She also had her theory.

*Oliver Feltham:* Right, and moreover there's an entire inheritance, a lineage of de Beauvoir which is easily as strong as Sartre's, especially overseas.

*Barbara Cassin:* Absolutely.

*Oliver Feltham:* Everyone knows *Le seconde sexe* [*The Second Sex*].

*Barbara Cassin:* That's right. *Deuxième*.

*Oliver Feltham:* Oh. Yes. Sorry. *Le deuxième sexe*.<sup>1</sup>

*Barbara Cassin:* No you're right! It should be called "The Second Sex"...unless there are more than two sexes. That's the interesting thing. No-one ever understood why she called it 'le deuxième sexe' and not 'le second sexe'.<sup>2</sup>

*Oliver Feltham:* This phrase that you wrote about breaking down the barriers of genre – Penelope Deutscher immediately understood it as breaking down gender barriers. She played on the two meanings.<sup>3</sup>

*Barbara Cassin:* Quite. But we agreed on that point.

*Oliver Feltham:* People have tried to pay more attention to questions of gender for quite a while now, not necessarily in the world of philosophy, but in the world of critical theory in the English-speaking world.

*Barbara Cassin:* Not in France at least, but it is getting there! Just as Derrida was imported into the Anglo-Saxon world, here critical theory, comparative literature, feminism and Black Lives Matter are being imported, even if they already existed, but they are making a big comeback as imports.

*Oliver Feltham:* It's so strange, for example, with Luce Irigaray who was huge for us but she is not really present in the French scene.

*Barbara Cassin:* Because she is very unfashionable. I knew her quite well. When something is fashionable it becomes unfashionable. It so happens that in France she was quite fashionable.

*Oliver Feltham:* I suppose that was tied to a reading of Lacan.

*Barbara Cassin:* Yes.

*Oliver Feltham:* I was talking to Jacques Lezra about that dialogue with Badiou because obviously you are allies, you edit a book series together, you are far more open than normal editors in French publishing houses. How did you meet?

*Barbara Cassin:* We met after I wrote *The Decision of Meaning*. At that time Seuil [the publishing house] published a type of collection about the noteworthy books of the year. I had just published *The Decision of Meaning* on book Gamma of Aristotle's *Metaphysics*, and we had asked Stanislas Breton to review it. Badiou was at the book launch for that 'annual philosophy directory', and we met, and he told me he thought my book was important, and then we worked together. Because that was the moment when Ricoeur left, François Wahl also, and Badiou was looking for someone to take on his series with him "L'ordre philosophique", and he wanted it to be a woman.

*Oliver Feltham:* Was this a long time at Seuil before it all fell apart, the scandal?

*Barbara Cassin:* Yes. We left Seuil when they refused François Wahl's book. That's how it happened, it was that simple. Alain Badiou intimidated me, and at the same

time I found it highly amusing. He was always incredibly generous. We've got on very well ever since, whatever our differences might be.

*Oliver Feltham:* Seen from abroad your points of agreement are much stronger.

*Barbara Cassin:* It's possible.

*Oliver Feltham:* The work on Lacan will be especially important.

*Barbara Cassin:* Seen by his French political friends, they gave him a bollicking for working with me!

*Oliver Feltham:* Aren't you Maoist enough?

*Barbara Cassin:* (*laughs*) No!

*Oliver Feltham:* But wouldn't that reduce slightly the field of possible allies, if one had to be the right kind of Maoist?

*Barbara Cassin:* That's it...But, English Lacan, it's incomprehensible!

*Oliver Feltham:* Yes! I had a project with a friend to translate "L'etourdit", so we spent two or three days on it, but we ended up saying no, it's impossible.

*Barbara Cassin:* But it is possible, you should do a bilingual translation, the English text, and footnotes like this (*Barbara Cassin indicates very long notes*). That would be very interesting, even if you only ended up doing three pages, three pages like that...

## Notes

1. The original title of de Beauvoir's book in French is *Le deuxième sexe*.
2. For ordinal numbering in French, 'seconde' is used when there are only two items, whereas 'deuxième' is used when there are more than two items.
3. *Genre* in French means both genre and gender.