

SIMONE DE BEAUVOIR | *The Second Sex*

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With an Introduction by Judith Thurman



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Introduction

I hesitated a long time before writing a book on woman. The subject is irritating, especially for women; and it is not new. Enough ink has flowed over the quarrel about feminism; it is now almost over: let's not talk about it anymore. Yet it is still being talked about. And the volumes of idiocies churned out over this past century do not seem to have clarified the problem. Besides, is there a problem? And what is it? Are there even women? True, the theory of the eternal feminine still has its followers; they whisper, "Even in Russia, *women* are still very much women"; but other well-informed people—and also at times those same ones—lament, "Woman is losing herself, woman is lost." It is hard to know any longer if women still exist, if they will always exist, if there should be women at all, what place they hold in this world, what place they should hold. "Where are the women?" asked a short-lived magazine recently.¹ But first, what is a woman? "*Tota mulier in utero*: she is a womb," some say. Yet speaking of certain women, the experts proclaim, "They are not women," even though they have a uterus like the others. Everyone agrees there are females in the human species; today, as in the past, they make up about half of humanity; and yet we are told that "femininity is in jeopardy"; we are urged, "Be women, stay women, become women." So not every female human being is necessarily a woman; she must take part in this mysterious and endangered reality known as femininity. Is femininity secreted by the ovaries? Is it enshrined in a Platonic heaven? Is a frilly petticoat enough to bring it down to earth? Although some women zealously strive to embody it, the model has never been patented. It is typically described in vague and shimmering terms borrowed from a clairvoyant's vocabulary. In Saint Thomas's time it was an essence defined with as much certainty as the seda-

1. Out of print today, titled *Franchise*.

tive quality of a poppy. But conceptualism has lost ground: biological and social sciences no longer believe there are immutably determined entities that define given characteristics like those of the woman, the Jew, or the black; science considers characteristics as secondary reactions to a *situation*. If there is no such thing today as femininity, it is because there never was. Does the word "woman," then, have no content? It is what advocates of Enlightenment philosophy, rationalism, or nominalism vigorously assert: women are, among human beings, merely those who are arbitrarily designated by the word "woman"; American women in particular are inclined to think that woman as such no longer exists. If some backward individual still takes herself for a woman, her friends advise her to undergo psychoanalysis to get rid of this obsession. Referring to a book—a very irritating one at that—*Modern Woman: The Lost Sex*, Dorothy Parker wrote: "I cannot be fair about books that treat women as women. My idea is that all of us, men as well as women, whoever we are, should be considered as human beings." But nominalism is a doctrine that falls a bit short; and it is easy for antifeminists to show that women *are* not men. Certainly woman like man is a human being; but such an assertion is abstract; the fact is that every concrete human being is always uniquely situated. To reject the notions of the eternal feminine, the black soul, or the Jewish character is not to deny that there are today Jews, blacks, or women: this denial is not a liberation for those concerned but an inauthentic flight. Clearly, no woman can claim without bad faith to be situated beyond her sex. A few years ago, a well-known woman writer refused to have her portrait appear in a series of photographs devoted specifically to women writers. She wanted to be included in the men's category; but to get this privilege, she used her husband's influence. Women who assert they are men still claim masculine consideration and respect. I also remember a young Trotskyite standing on a platform during a stormy meeting, about to come to blows in spite of her obvious fragility. She was denying her feminine frailty; but it was for the love of a militant man she wanted to be equal to. The defiant position that American women occupy proves they are haunted by the sentiment of their own femininity. And the truth is that anyone can clearly see that humanity is split into two categories of individuals with manifestly different clothes, faces, bodies, smiles, movements, interests, and occupations; these differences are perhaps superficial; perhaps they are destined to disappear. What is certain is that for the moment they exist in a strikingly obvious way.

If the female function is not enough to define woman, and if we also reject the explanation of the "eternal feminine," but if we accept, even

temporarily, that there are women on the earth, we then have to ask: What is a woman?

Merely stating the problem suggests an immediate answer to me. It is significant that I pose it. It would never occur to a man to write a book on the singular situation of males in humanity.² If I want to define myself, I first have to say, "I am a woman"; all other assertions will arise from this basic truth. A man never begins by positing himself as an individual of a certain sex: that he is a man is obvious. The categories masculine and feminine appear as symmetrical in a formal way on town hall records or identification papers. The relation of the two sexes is not that of two electrical poles: the man represents both the positive and the neuter to such an extent that in French *hommes* designates human beings, the particular meaning of the word *vir* being assimilated into the general meaning of the word "homo." Woman is the negative, to such a point that any determination is imputed to her as a limitation, without reciprocity. I used to get annoyed in abstract discussions to hear men tell me: "You think such and such a thing because you're a woman." But I know my only defense is to answer, "I think it because it is true," thereby eliminating my subjectivity; it was out of the question to answer, "And you think the contrary because you are a man," because it is understood that being a man is not a particularity; a man is in his right by virtue of being man; it is the woman who is in the wrong. In fact, just as for the ancients there was an absolute vertical that defined the oblique, there is an absolute human type that is masculine. Woman has ovaries and a uterus; such are the particular conditions that lock her in her subjectivity; some even say she thinks with her hormones. Man vainly forgets that his anatomy also includes hormones and testicles. He grasps his body as a direct and normal link with the world that he believes he apprehends in all objectivity, whereas he considers woman's body an obstacle, a prison, burdened by everything that particularizes it. "The female is female by virtue of a certain *lack* of qualities," Aristotle said. "We should regard women's nature as suffering from natural defectiveness." And Saint Thomas in his turn decreed that woman was an "incomplete man," an "incidental" being. This is what the Genesis story symbolizes; where Eve appears as if drawn from Adam's "supernumerary" bone, in Bossuet's words. Humanity is male, and man defines woman, not in herself, but in relation to himself; she is not considered an autonomous being. "Woman, the relative being," writes Michelet. Thus Monsieur Benda declares in *Le*

2. The Kinsey Report, for example, confines itself to defining the sexual characteristics of the American man, which is completely different.

rapport d'Uriel (Uriel's Report): "A man's body has meaning by itself, disregarding the body of the woman, whereas the woman's body seems devoid of meaning without reference to the male. Man thinks himself without woman. Woman does not think herself without man." And she is nothing other than what man decides; she is thus called "the sex," meaning that the male sees her essentially as a sexed being; for him she is sex, so she is it in the absolute. She is determined and differentiated in relation to man, while he is not in relation to her; she is the inessential in front of the essential. He is the Subject; he is the Absolute. She is the Other.³

The category of *Other* is as original as consciousness itself. The duality between Self and Other can be found in the most primitive societies, in the most ancient mythologies; this division did not always fall into the category of the division of the sexes, it was not based on any empirical given: this comes out in works like Granet's on Chinese thought, and Dumézil's on India and Rome. In couples such as Varuna-Mitra, Uranus-Zeus, Sun-Moon, Day-Night, no feminine element is involved at the outset; neither in Good-Evil, auspicious and inauspicious, left and right, God and Lucifer; alterity is the fundamental category of human thought. No group ever defines itself as One without immediately setting up the Other opposite itself. It only takes three travelers brought together by chance in the same train compartment for the rest of the travelers to become vaguely hostile "others." Village people view anyone not belonging to the village as suspicious "others." For the native of a country inhabitants of other countries are viewed as "foreigners"; Jews are the "others" for anti-Semites, blacks for racist Americans, indigenous people for colonists, proletarians for the propertied classes. After studying the diverse forms of primitive

3. This idea has been expressed in its most explicit form by E. Levinas in his essay *Le temps et l'autre* (*Time and the Other*). He expresses it like this: "Is there not a situation where alterity would be borne by a being in a positive sense, as essence? What is the alterity that does not purely and simply enter into the opposition of two species of the same genus? I think that the absolutely contrary contrary, whose contrariety is in no way affected by the relationship that can be established between it and its correlative, the contrariety that permits its terms to remain absolutely other, is the feminine. Sex is not some specific difference . . . Neither is the difference between the sexes a contradiction . . . Neither is the difference between the sexes the duality of two complementary terms, for two complementary terms presuppose a preexisting whole . . . [A]lterity is accomplished in the feminine. The term is on the same level as, but in meaning opposed to, consciousness." I suppose Mr. Levinas is not forgetting that woman also is consciousness for herself. But it is striking that he deliberately adopts a man's point of view, disregarding the reciprocity of the subject and the object. When he writes that woman is mystery, he assumes that she is mystery for man. So this apparently objective description is in fact an affirmation of masculine privilege.

society in depth, Lévi-Strauss could conclude: "The passage from the state of Nature to the state of Culture is defined by man's ability to think biological relations as systems of oppositions; duality, alternation, opposition, and symmetry, whether occurring in defined or less clear form, are not so much phenomena to explain as fundamental and immediate givens of social reality."⁴ These phenomena could not be understood if human reality were solely a *Mitsein** based on solidarity and friendship. On the contrary, they become clear if, following Hegel, a fundamental hostility to any other consciousness is found in consciousness itself; the subject posits itself only in opposition; it asserts itself as the essential and sets up the other as inessential, as the object.

But the other consciousness has an opposing reciprocal claim: traveling, a local is shocked to realize that in neighboring countries locals view him as a foreigner; between villages, clans, nations, and classes there are wars, potlatches, agreements, treaties, and struggles that remove the absolute meaning from the idea of the *Other* and bring out its relativity; whether one likes it or not, individuals and groups have no choice but to recognize the reciprocity of their relation. How is it, then, that between the sexes this reciprocity has not been put forward, that one of the terms has been asserted as the only essential one, denying any relativity in regard to its correlative, defining the latter as pure alterity? Why do women not contest male sovereignty? No subject posits itself spontaneously and at once as the inessential from the outset; it is not the Other who, defining itself as Other, defines the One; the Other is posited as Other by the One positing itself as One. But in order for the Other not to turn into the One, the Other has to submit to this foreign point of view. Where does this submission in woman come from?

There are other cases where, for a shorter or longer time, one category has managed to dominate another absolutely. It is often numerical inequality that confers this privilege: the majority imposes its law on or persecutes the minority. But women are not a minority like American blacks, or like Jews: there are as many women as men on the earth. Often, the two opposing groups concerned were once independent of each other; either they were not aware of each other in the past, or they accepted each other's

4. See Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Les structures élémentaires de la parenté* (*The Elementary Structures of Kinship*). I thank Claude Lévi-Strauss for sharing the proofs of his thesis, which I drew up heavily, particularly in the second part, pp. 76-89.

**Mitsein* can be translated as "being with." The French term *réalité humaine* (human reality) has been problematically used to translate Heidegger's *Dasein*.—TRANS.

autonomy; and some historical event subordinated the weaker to the stronger: the Jewish Diaspora, slavery in America, and the colonial conquests are facts with dates. In these cases, for the oppressed there was a *before*: they share a past, a tradition, sometimes a religion, or a culture. In this sense, the parallel Bebel draws between women and the proletariat would be the best founded: proletarians are not a numerical minority either, and yet they have never formed a separate group. However, not *one* event but a whole historical development explains their existence as a class and accounts for the distribution of *these* individuals in this class. There have not always been proletarians: there have always been women; they are women by their physiological structure; as far back as history can be traced, they have always been subordinate to men; their dependence is not the consequence of an event or a becoming, it did not *happen*. Alterity here appears to be an absolute, partly because it falls outside the accidental nature of historical fact. A situation created over time can come undone at another time—blacks in Haiti for one are a good example; on the contrary, a natural condition seems to defy change. In truth, nature is no more an immutable given than is historical reality. If woman discovers herself as the inessential and never turns into the essential, it is because she does not bring about this transformation herself. Proletarians say “we.” So do blacks. Positing themselves as subjects, they thus transform the bourgeois or whites into “others.” Women—except in certain abstract gatherings such as conferences—do not use “we”; men say “women,” and women adopt this word to refer to themselves; but they do not posit themselves authentically as Subjects. The proletarians made the revolution in Russia, the blacks in Haiti, the Indo-Chinese are fighting in Indochina. Women’s actions have never been more than symbolic agitation; they have won only what men have been willing to concede to them; they have taken nothing; they have received.⁵ It is that they lack the concrete means to organize themselves into a unit that could posit itself in opposition. They have no past, no history, no religion of their own; and unlike the proletariat, they have no solidarity of labor or interests; they even lack their own space that makes communities of American blacks, the Jews in ghettos, or the workers in Saint-Denis or Renault factories. They live dispersed among men, tied by homes, work, economic interests, and social conditions to certain men—fathers or husbands—more closely than to other women. As bourgeois women, they are in solidarity with bourgeois men and not with women proletarians; as white women, they are in solidarity with white men and not with black women. The proletariat could plan to massacre the

5. See second part, page 126.

whole ruling class; a fanatic Jew or black could dream of seizing the secret of the atomic bomb and turning all of humanity entirely Jewish or entirely black: but a woman could not even dream of exterminating males. The tie that binds her to her oppressors is unlike any other. The division of the sexes is a biological given, not a moment in human history. Their opposition took shape within an original *Mitsein*, and she has not broken it. The couple is a fundamental unit with the two halves riveted to each other: cleavage of society by sex is not possible. This is the fundamental characteristic of woman: she is the Other at the heart of a whole whose two components are necessary to each other.

One might think that this reciprocity would have facilitated her liberation; when Hercules spins wool at Omphale’s feet, his desire enchains him. Why was Omphale unable to acquire long-lasting power? Medea, in revenge against Jason, kills her children: this brutal legend suggests that the bond attaching the woman to her child could have given her a formidable upper hand. In *Lysistrata*, Aristophanes lightheartedly imagined a group of women who, uniting together for the social good, tried to take advantage of men’s need for them: but it is only a comedy. The legend that claims that the ravished Sabine women resisted their ravishers with obstinate sterility also recounts that by whipping them with leather straps, the men magically won them over into submission. Biological need—sexual desire and desire for posterity—which makes the male dependent on the female, has not liberated women socially. Master and slave are also linked by a reciprocal economic need that does not free the slave. That is, in the master-slave relation, the master does not *posit* the need he has for the other; he holds the power to satisfy this need and does not mediate it; the slave, on the other hand, out of dependence, hope, or fear, internalizes his need for the master; however equally compelling the need may be to them both, it always plays in favor of the oppressor over the oppressed: this explains the slow pace of working-class liberation, for example. Now, woman has always been, if not man’s slave, at least his vassal; the two sexes have never divided the world up equally; and still today, even though her condition is changing, woman is heavily handicapped. In no country is her legal status identical to man’s, and often it puts her at a considerable disadvantage. Even when her rights are recognized abstractly, long-standing habit keeps them from being concretely manifested in customs. Economically, men and women almost form two castes; all things being equal, the former have better jobs, higher wages, and greater chances to succeed than their new female competitors; they occupy many more places in industry, in politics, and so forth, and they hold the most important positions. In addition to their concrete power, they are invested with a prestige whose

tradition is reinforced by the child's whole education: the present incorporates the past, and in the past all history was made by males. At the moment that women are beginning to share in the making of the world, this world still belongs to men: men have no doubt about this, and women barely doubt it. Refusing to be the Other, refusing complicity with man, would mean renouncing all the advantages an alliance with the superior caste confers on them. Lord-man will materially protect liege-woman and will be in charge of justifying her existence: along with the economic risk, she eludes the metaphysical risk of a freedom that must invent its goals without help. Indeed, beside every individual's claim to assert himself as subject—an ethical claim—lies the temptation to flee freedom and to make himself into a thing: it is a pernicious path because the individual, passive, alienated, and lost, is prey to a foreign will, cut off from his transcendence, robbed of all worth. But it is an easy path: the anguish and stress of authentically assumed existence are thus avoided. The man who sets the woman up as an *Other* will thus find in her a deep complicity. Hence woman makes no claim for herself as subject because she lacks the concrete means, because she senses the necessary link connecting her to man without positing its reciprocity, and because she often derives satisfaction from her role as *Other*.

But a question immediately arises: How did this whole story begin? It is understandable that the duality of the sexes, like all duality, be expressed in conflict: It is understandable that if one of the two succeeded in imposing its superiority, it had to establish itself as absolute. It remains to be explained how it was that man won at the outset. It seems possible that women might have carried off the victory, or that the battle might never be resolved. Why is it that this world has always belonged to men and that only today things are beginning to change? Is this change a good thing? Will it bring about an equal sharing of the world between men and women or not?

These questions are far from new; they have already had many answers; but the very fact that woman is *Other* challenges all the justifications that men have ever given: these were only too clearly dictated by their own interest. "Everything that men have written about women should be viewed with suspicion, because they are both judge and party," wrote Poulain de la Barre, a little-known seventeenth-century feminist. ~~Males have always and everywhere paraded their satisfaction or feeling they are kings of creation.~~ "Blessed be the Lord our God, and the Lord of all worlds that has not made me a woman." Jews say in their morning prayers; meanwhile, their wives resignedly murmur: "Blessed be the Lord for creating me according to his will." Among the blessings Plato thanked the gods

concrete situation fully. So there is no good reason to believe men when they try to defend privileges whose scope they cannot even fathom. We will not let ourselves be intimidated by the number and violence of attacks against women; nor be fooled by the self-serving praise showered on the "real woman"; nor be won over by men's enthusiasm for her destiny, a destiny they would not for the world want to share.

We must not, however, be any less mistrustful of feminists' arguments: very often their attempt to polemicize robs them of all value. If the "question of women" is so trivial, it is because masculine arrogance turned it into a "quarrel"; when people quarrel, they no longer reason well. What people have endlessly sought to prove is that woman is superior, inferior, or equal to man: created after Adam, she is obviously a secondary being, some say; on the contrary, say others, Adam was only a rough draft, and God perfected the human being when he created Eve; her brain is smaller, but relatively bigger; Christ was made man, but perhaps out of humility. Every argument has its opposite, and both are often misleading. To see clearly, one needs to get out of these ruts; these vague notions of superiority, inferiority, and equality that have distorted all discussions must be discarded in order to start anew.

But how, then, will we ask the question? And in the first place, who are we to ask it? Men are judge and party: so are women. Can an angel be found? In fact, an angel would be ill qualified to speak, would not understand all the givens of the problem; as for the hermaphrodite, it is a case of its own: it is not both a man and a woman, but neither man nor woman. I think certain women are still best suited to elucidate the situation of women. It is a sophism to claim that Epimenides should be enclosed within the concept of Cretan and all Cretans within the concept of liar: it is not a mysterious essence that dictates good or bad faith to men and women; it is their situation that disposes them to seek the truth to a greater or lesser extent. Many women today, fortunate to have had all the privileges of the human being restored to them, can afford the luxury of impartiality: we even feel the necessity of it. We are no longer like our militant predecessors; we have more or less won the game; in the latest discussions on women's status, the UN has not ceased to imperiously demand equality of the sexes, and indeed many of us have never felt our femaleness to be a difficulty or an obstacle; many other problems seem more essential than those that concern us uniquely: this very detachment makes it possible to hope our attitude will be objective. Yet we know the feminine world more intimately than men do because our roots are in it; we grasp more immediately what the fact of being female means for a human being, and we care more

about knowing it. I said that there are more essential problems; but this one still has a certain importance from our point of view: How will the fact of being women have affected our lives? What precise opportunities have been given us, and which ones have been denied? What destiny awaits our younger sisters, and in which direction should we point them? It is striking that most feminine literature is driven today by an attempt at lucidity more than by a will to make demands; coming out of an era of muddled controversy, this book is one attempt among others to take stock of the current state.

But it is no doubt impossible to approach any human problem without partiality: even the way of asking the questions, of adopting perspectives, presupposes hierarchies of interests; all characteristics comprise values; every so-called objective description is set against an ethical background. Instead of trying to conceal those principles that are more or less explicitly implied, we would be better off stating them from the start; then it would not be necessary to specify on each page the meaning given to the words "superior," "inferior," "better," "worse," "progress," "regression," and so on. If we examine some of the books on women, we see that one of the most frequently held points of view is that of public good or general interest: in reality, this is taken to mean the interest of society as each one wishes to maintain or establish it. In our opinion, there is no public good other than one that assures the citizens' private good; we judge institutions from the point of view of the concrete opportunities they give to individuals. But neither do we confuse the idea of private interest with happiness: that is another frequently encountered point of view; are women in a harem not happier than a woman voter? Is a housewife not happier than a woman worker? We cannot really know what the word "happiness" means, and still less what authentic values it covers; there is no way to measure the happiness of others, and it is always easy to call a situation that one would like to impose on others happy: in particular, we declare happy those condemned to stagnation, under the pretext that happiness is immobility. This is a notion, then, we will not refer to. The perspective we have adopted is one of existentialist morality. Every subject posits itself as a transcendence concretely, through projects; it accomplishes its freedom only by perpetual surpassing toward other freedoms; there is no other justification for present existence than its expansion toward an indefinitely open future. Every time transcendence lapses into immanence, there is degradation of existence into "in-itself," of freedom into facticity; this fall is a moral fault if the subject consents to it; if this fall is inflicted on the subject, it takes the form of frustration and oppression; in both cases it is an absolute evil. Every indi-

vidual concerned with justifying his existence experiences his existence as an indefinite need to transcend himself. But what singularly defines the situation of woman is that being, like all humans, an autonomous freedom, she discovers and chooses herself in a world where men force her to assume herself as Other: an attempt is made to freeze her as an object and doom her to immanence, since her transcendence will be forever transcended by another essential and sovereign consciousness. Woman's drama lies in this conflict between the fundamental claim of every subject, which always posits itself as essential, and the demands of a situation that constitutes her as inessential. How, in the feminine condition, can a human being accomplish herself? What paths are open to her? Which ones lead to dead ends? How can she find independence within dependence? What circumstances limit women's freedom and can she overcome them? These are the fundamental questions we would like to elucidate. This means that in focusing on the individual's possibilities, we will define these possibilities not in terms of happiness but in terms of freedom.

Clearly this problem would have no meaning if we thought that a physiological, psychological, or economic destiny weighed on woman. So we will begin by discussing woman from a biological, psychoanalytical, and historical materialist point of view. We will then attempt to positively demonstrate how "feminine reality" has been constituted, why woman has been defined as Other, and what the consequences have been from men's point of view. Then we will describe the world from the woman's point of view such as it is offered to her,¹¹ and we will see the difficulties women are up against just when, trying to escape the sphere they have been assigned until now, they seek to be part of the human *Mitsein*.

11. This will be the subject of a second volume.

Woman's Situation and Character

We can now understand why, from ancient Greece to today, there are so many common features in the indictments against woman; her condition has remained the same throughout superficial changes, and this condition defines what is called the woman's "character": she "wallows in immanence," she is argumentative, she is cautious and petty, she does not have the sense either of truth or of accuracy, she lacks morality, she is vulgarly self-serving, selfish, she is a liar and an actress. There is some truth in all these affirmations. But the types of behaviors denounced are not dictated to woman by her hormones or predestined in her brain's compartments: they are suggested in negative form by her situation. We will attempt to take a synthetic point of view of her situation, necessarily leading to some repetition, but making it possible to grasp the Eternal Feminine in her economic, social, and historical conditioning as a whole.

The "feminine world" is sometimes contrasted with the masculine universe, but it must be reiterated that women have never formed an autonomous and closed society; they are integrated into the group governed by males, where they occupy a subordinate position; they are united by a mechanical solidarity only insofar as they are similar: they do not share that organic solidarity upon which any unified community is founded; they have always endeavored—in the period of the Eleusinian mysteries just like today in clubs, salons, and recreation rooms—to band together to assert a "counter-universe," but it is still within the masculine universe that they frame it. And this is where the paradox of their situation comes in: they belong both to the male world and to a sphere in which this world is challenged; enclosed in this sphere, involved in the male world, they cannot peacefully establish themselves anywhere. Their docility is always accompanied by refusal, their refusal by acceptance; this is similar to the girl's attitude; but it is more difficult to maintain because it is no longer simply a question of the adult woman dreaming her life through symbols, but of living it.

The woman herself recognizes that the universe as a whole is masculine; it is men who have shaped it and ruled it and who still today dominate it; as for her, she does not consider herself responsible for it; it is understood that she is inferior and dependent; she has not learned the lessons of violence, she has never emerged as a subject in front of other members of the group; enclosed in her flesh, in her home, she grasps herself as passive opposite to these human-faced gods who set goals and standards. In this sense there is truth in the saying that condemns her to remaining "an eternal child"; it has also been said of workers, black slaves, and colonized natives that they were "big children" as long as they were not threatening; that meant they had to accept without argument the truths and laws that other men gave them. Woman's lot is obedience and respect. She has no grasp, even in thought, on this reality that involves her. It is an opaque presence in her eyes. That means she has not learned the technology that would enable her to dominate matter; as for her, she is not fighting with matter but with life, and life cannot be mastered by tools: one can only submit to its secret laws. The world does not appear to the woman as a "set of tools" halfway between her will and her goals, as Heidegger defines it: on the contrary, it is a stubborn, indomitable resistance; it is dominated by fate and run through with mysterious caprices. No mathematics can make an equation out of this mystery of a spot of blood that changes into a human being in the mother's womb, no machine can rush it or slow it down; she experiences the resistance of a duration that the most ingenious machines fail to divide or multiply; she experiences it in her flesh that is subjected to the rhythm of the moon, and that the years first ripen and then corrode. Daily cooking teaches her patience and passivity; it is alchemy; one must obey fire, water, "wait for the sugar to melt," the dough to rise, and also the clothes to dry, the fruit to ripen. Housework comes close to a technical activity; but it is too rudimentary, too monotonous, to convince the woman of the laws of mechanical causality. Besides, even in this area, things are capricious; there is material that "revives" and material that does not "revive" in the wash, spots that come out and others that persist, objects that break on their own, dust that grows like plants. Woman's mentality perpetuates that of agricultural civilizations that worship the earth's magical qualities: she believes in magic. Her passive eroticism reveals her desire not as will and aggression but as an attraction similar to that which makes the dowser's pendulum quiver; the mere presence of her flesh makes the male sex swell and rise; why should hidden water not make the dowser's wand jump? She feels surrounded by waves, radiation, fluid; she believes in telepathy, astrology,

divination, Mesmer's *baquet*, theosophy, table turning, mind readers, and healers; she introduces primitive superstitions into religion—candles, ex-votos, and such—she embodies ancient spirits of nature in the saints—this one protects travelers, that one women who have just given birth, another one finds lost objects—and of course no marvel surprises her. Her attitude will be that of conjuration and prayer; to obtain a certain result, she will follow certain time-tested rites. It is easy to understand why she is ruled by routine; time has no dimension of novelty for her, it is not a creative spring; because she is doomed to repetition, she does not see in the future anything but a duplication of the past; if one knows the word and the recipe, duration is allied with the powers of fecundity: but this too obeys the rhythm of months and seasons; the cycle of each pregnancy, of each flowering, reproduces the preceding one identically; in this circular movement, time's sole becoming is slow degradation: it eats at furniture and clothes just as it disfigures the face; fertile powers are destroyed little by little by the flight of years. So the woman does not trust this force driven to destroy.

Not only is she unaware of what real action is, that is able to change the face of the world, but she is lost in the middle of this world as in the heart of an immense and confused mass. She does not know how to use masculine logic well. Stendhal noted that she handles it as skillfully as man if she has to. But it is an instrument she does not often have the occasion to use. A syllogism is not useful in making mayonnaise or calming a child's tears; masculine reasoning is not relevant to the reality she experiences. And in the man's world, since she does not *do* anything, her thinking, as it does not flow into any project, is no different from a dream; she does not have the sense of truth, because she lacks efficacy; she struggles only by means of images and words: that is why she accepts the most contradictory assertions without a problem; she does not care about clarifying the mysteries of a sphere, which in any case is beyond her scope; she settles for horribly vague knowledge when it concerns her: she confuses parties, opinions, places, people, and events; there is a strange jumble in her head. But after all, seeing clearly is not her business: she was taught to accept masculine authority; she thus forgoes criticizing, examining, and judging for herself. She leaves it to the superior caste. This is why the masculine world seems to be a transcendent reality, an absolute to her. "Men make gods," says Frazer, "and women worship them." Men cannot kneel with total conviction in front of idols they themselves have created, but when women come across these imposing statues on their path, they cannot imagine any hand making them, and they meekly bow down before

them.¹ They specifically like Law and Order to be embodied in a chief. In all Olympus, there is one sovereign god; the prestigious virile essence must be gathered in one archetype of which father, husband, and lovers are merely vague reflections. It is somewhat humorous to say that their worship of this great totem is sexual; what is true is that women fully realize their infantile dream of abdication and prostration. In France, the generals Boulanger, Pétain, and de Gaulle have always had the support of women;² one remembers the purple prose of *L'Humanité's* women journalists when writing about Tito and his beautiful uniform. The general or the dictator—eagle eye, prominent chin—is the celestial father the serious universe demands, the absolute guarantor of all values. The respect women grant to heroes and to the masculine world's laws stems from their powerlessness and ignorance; they acknowledge these laws not through judgment but through an act of faith: faith draws its fanatical power from the fact that it is not knowledge: it is blind, passionate, stubborn, and stupid; what it puts forward is done unconditionally, against reason, against history, against all refutation. This stubborn reverence can take two forms depending on circumstances: sometimes it is the content of the law and sometimes the empty form alone that the woman passionately abides by. If she belongs to the privileged elite that profits from the given social order, she wants it unshakable, and she is seen as intransigent. The man knows he can reconstruct other institutions, another ethics, another code; grasping himself as transcendence, he also envisages history as a becoming; even the most conservative knows that some change is inevitable and that he has to adapt his action and thinking to it; as the woman does not participate in history, she does not understand its necessities; she mistrusts the future and wants to stop time. If the idols her father, brothers, and husband propose are knocked down, she cannot imagine any way of repopulating the heavens; she is determined to defend them. Among the Southerners during the Civil War, no one was as passionately in favor of slavery as the women; in

1. Cf. J.-P. Sartre, *Les mains sales* (*Dirty Hands*): "HÖEDERER: They need props, you understand, they are given ready-made ideas, then they believe in them as they do in God. We're the ones who make these ideas and we know how they are cooked up; we are never quite sure of being right."

2. "On the general's passage, the public was made up mostly of women and children" (*Les Journaux*, about the September 1948 tour in Savoy).

"The men applauded the general's speech, but the women stood out by their enthusiasm. Some were literally in ecstasy, singling out almost every word and clapping and shouting with a fervor that made their faces turn poppy red" (*Aux Ecoutes*, April 11, 1947).

England during the Boer War, and in France against the Commune, it was the women who were the most enraged; they seek to compensate for their inaction by the force of the feelings they display; in victory they are as wild as hyenas against the beaten enemy; in defeat, they bitterly refuse any arrangement; as their ideas are only attitudes, they do not mind defending the most outdated causes: they can be legitimists in 1914, tsarists in 1949. Sometimes the man smilingly encourages them: it pleases him to see his measured opinions reflected in a fanatical form; but sometimes he is also bothered by the stupid and stubborn way his own ideas are transformed.

It is only in strongly integrated civilizations and classes that the woman looks so intransigent. Generally, as her faith is blind, she respects the laws simply because they are laws; the laws may change, but they keep their prestige; in the eyes of women, power creates law since the laws they recognize in men come from their power; that is why they are the first to throw themselves at the victors' feet when a group collapses. In general, they accept what is. One of their typical features is resignation. When the ashes of Pompeii's statues were dug out, it was observed that the men were caught in movements of revolt, defying the sky or trying to flee, while the women were bent, withdrawn into themselves, turning their faces toward the earth. They know they are powerless against things: volcanoes, policemen, employers, or men. "Women are made to suffer," they say. "That's life; nothing can be done about it." This resignation engenders the patience often admired in women. They withstand physical suffering much better than men; they are capable of stoic courage when circumstances demand it: without the aggressive daring of the male, many women are distinguished by the calm tenacity of their passive resistance; they deal with crises, misery, and misfortune more energetically than their husbands; respectful of duration that no haste can conquer, they do not measure their time; when they apply their calm stubbornness to any undertaking, they are sometimes brilliantly successful. "Whatever woman wants," says the proverb.* In a generous woman, resignation looks like indulgence: she accepts everything; she condemns no one because she thinks that neither people nor things can be different from what they are. A proud woman can make a lofty virtue of it, like Mme de Charrière, rigid in her stoicism. But she also engenders a sterile prudence; women always try to keep, to fix, to arrange rather than to destroy and reconstruct anew; they prefer compromises and exchanges to revolutions. In the nineteenth century, they constituted one of

the biggest obstacles to the effort of women workers' emancipation: for every Flora Tristan or Louise Michel, how many utterly timid housewives begged their husbands not to take any risk! They were afraid not only of strikes, unemployment, and misery; they also feared that the revolt was a mistake. Submission for submission, it is understandable that they prefer routine to adventure: they eke out for themselves a more meager happiness at home than on the streets. Their lot is one with that of perishable things: they would lose everything in losing them. Only a free subject, asserting himself beyond time, can foil destruction; this supreme recourse is forbidden to the woman. It is mainly because she has never experienced the powers of liberty that she does not believe in liberation: the world to her seems governed by an obscure destiny against which it is presumptuous to react. These dangerous paths that she is compelled to follow are ones she herself has not traced: it is understandable that she does not take them enthusiastically.³ When the future is open to her, she no longer hangs on to the past. When women are concretely called to action, when they identify with the designated aims, they are as strong and brave as men.⁴

Many of the faults for which they are reproached—mediocrity, meanness, shyness, pettiness, laziness, frivolity, and servility—simply express the fact that the horizon is blocked for them. Woman, it is said, is sensual, she wallows in immanence; but first she was enclosed in it. The slave imprisoned in the harem does not feel any morbid passion for rose jelly and perfumed baths: she has to kill time somehow; inasmuch as the woman is stifling in a dismal gynaeceum—brothel or bourgeois home—she will also take refuge in comfort and well-being; moreover, if she avidly pursues sexual pleasure, it is often because she is frustrated; sexually unsatisfied, destined to male brutality, "condemned to masculine ugliness," she consoles herself with creamy sauces, heady wines, velvets, the caresses of water, sun, a woman friend, or a young lover. If she appears to man as such a "physical" being, it is because her condition incites her to attach a great

3. Cf. Gide, *Journals*: "Creusa or Lot's wife: one carries and the other looks back, which is a worse way of carrying . . . There is no greater cry of passion than this:

*And Phaedra having braved the Labyrinth with you
Would have been found with you or lost with you.*

But passion blinds her; after a few steps, to tell the truth, she would have sat down, or else would have wanted to go back—or even would have made him carry her."

4. This is how the attitude of the proletarian women has changed over the century; during the recent strikes in the mines of the North, for example, they showed as much passion and energy as men, demonstrating and fighting side by side.

* French proverb: "What woman wants, God wants."—TRANS.

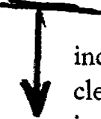
deal of importance to her animality. Carnality does not cry out any more strongly in her than in the male: but she watches out for its slightest signs and amplifies it; sexual pleasure, like the wrenching of suffering, is the devastating triumph of immediacy; the violence of the instant negates the future and the universe: outside of the carnal blaze, what is there is nothing; during this brief apotheosis, she is no longer mutilated or frustrated. But once again, she attaches such importance to these triumphs of immanence because it is her only lot. Her frivolity has the same cause as her "sordid materialism"; she gives importance to little things because she lacks access to big ones: moreover the futilities that fill her days are often of great seriousness; she owes her charm and her opportunities to her toilette and beauty. She often seems lazy, indolent; but the occupations that are offered her are as useless as the pure flowing of time; if she is talkative or a scribbler, it is to while away her time: she substitutes words for impossible acts. The fact is that when a woman is engaged in an undertaking worthy of a human being, she knows how to be as active, effective, and silent, as ascetic, as a man. She is accused of being servile; she is always willing, it is said, to lie at her master's feet and to kiss the hand that has beaten her. It is true that she generally lacks real self-regard; advice to the "lovelorn," to betrayed wives, and to abandoned lovers is inspired by a spirit of abject submission; the woman exhausts herself in arrogant scenes and in the end gathers up the crumbs the male is willing to throw her. But what can a woman—for whom the man is both the only means and the only reason for living—do without masculine help? She has no choice but to endure all humiliations; a slave cannot understand the meaning of "human dignity"; for him it is enough if he manages to survive. Finally, if she is "down-to-earth," a homebody, simply useful, it is because she has no choice but to devote her existence to preparing food and cleaning diapers: she cannot draw the meaning of grandeur from this. She must ensure the monotonous repetition of life in its contingency and facticity: it is natural for her to repeat herself, to begin again, without ever inventing, to feel that time seems to be going around in circles without going anywhere; she is busy without ever *doing* anything: so she is alienated in what she *has*; this dependence on things, a consequence of the dependence in which she is held by men, explains her cautious management, her avarice. Her life is not directed toward goals: she is absorbed in producing or maintaining things that are never more than means—food, clothes, lodging—these are inessential intermediaries between animal life and free existence; the only value that is attached to inessential means is usefulness; the housewife lives at the level of utility, and she takes credit for herself only when she is use-

ful to her family. But no existent is able to satisfy itself with an inessential role: he quickly makes ends out of means—as can be observed in politicians, among others—and in his eyes the value of the means becomes an absolute value. Thus utility reigns higher than truth, beauty, and freedom in the housewife's heaven; and this is the point of view from which she envisages the whole universe; and this is why she adopts the Aristotelian morality of the golden mean, of mediocrity. How could one find daring, ardor, detachment, and grandeur in her? These qualities appear only where a freedom throws itself across an open future, emerging beyond any given. A woman is shut up in a kitchen or a boudoir, and one is surprised her horizon is limited; her wings are cut, and then she is blamed for not knowing how to fly. Let a future be open to her and she will no longer be obliged to settle in the present.

The same foolishness is seen when, closed up in the limits of her self or her home, she is criticized for her narcissism and egotism with their corollaries: vanity, touchiness, meanness, and so forth. All possibility of concrete communication with others is removed from her; in her experience she does not recognize either the appeal or the advantages of solidarity, since, separated, she is entirely devoted to her own family; she cannot be expected therefore to go beyond herself toward the general interest. She obstinately confines herself in the only familiar area where she has the power to grasp things and where she finds a precarious sovereignty.

Although she might close the doors and cover the windows, the woman does not find absolute security in her home; this masculine universe that she respects from afar without daring to venture into it involves her; and because she is unable to grasp it through technology, sound logic, or coherent knowledge, she feels like a child and a primitive surrounded with dangerous mysteries. She projects her magic conception of reality: the flow of things seems inevitable to her, and yet anything can happen; she has difficulty differentiating the possible and the impossible, she is ready to believe anyone; she welcomes and spreads rumors, she sets off panics; even in calm periods she lives in worry; at night, half-asleep, the inert body is frightened by the nightmare images reality acquires: so for the woman condemned to passivity, the opaque future is haunted by phantoms of war, revolution, famine, and misery; not being able to act, she worries. When her husband and son embark on a job, when they are passionately involved in an event, they take their own risks: their projects and the orders they follow show them a sure way even in darkness; but the woman struggles in the blurry night; she "worries" because she does not do anything; in imagination all possibilities are equally real: the train may derail, the operation may

change his attitude, he will cope with it, he will "not let it get him down," while a little setback is enough for the woman to rediscover the universe's hostility and the injustice of her lot; so she throws herself into her safest refuge: herself; this moist trace on her cheeks, this burning in her eyes, are the tangible presence of her suffering soul; gentle on one's skin, barely salty on one's tongue, tears are also a tender and bitter caress; the face burns under a stream of mild water; tears are both complaint and consolation, fever and soothing coolness. They are also a supreme alibi; sudden as a storm, coming out in fits, a cyclone, shower, deluge, they metamorphose the woman into a complaining fountain, a stormy sky; her eyes can no longer see, mist blurs them: they are no longer even a gaze, they melt in rain; blinded, the woman returns to the passivity of natural things. She must be vanquished: she is lost in her defeat; she sinks, she drowns, she escapes man who contemplates her, powerless as if before a cataract. He judges this way of behaving as unfair: but she thinks that the battle has been unfair from the beginning because no effective weapon has been put into her hands. She resorts once again to magical conjuration. And the fact that these sobs exasperate the male provides her with one more reason to indulge herself in them.

 If tears are not sufficient to express her revolt, she will carry on in such incoherent violence that it will disconcert the man even more. In some circles, the man might strike his wife with actual blows; in others, because he is the stronger and his fist an effective instrument, he will forgo all violence. But the woman, like the child, indulges in symbolic outbursts: she might throw herself on the man, scratch him; these are only gestures. But above all, through nervous fits in her body she attempts to express the refusals she cannot carry out concretely. It is not only for physiological reasons that she is subject to convulsive manifestations: a convulsion is an interiorization of an energy that, thrown into the world, fails to grasp any object; it is a useless expenditure of all the powers of negation caused by the situation. The mother rarely has crying fits in front of her young children because she can beat or punish them: it is in front of her older son, her husband, or her lover, on whom she has no hold, that the woman gives vent to furious hopelessness. Sophia Tolstoy's hysterical scenes are significant; it is true that she made the big mistake of never trying to understand her husband and in her diary she does not seem generous, sensitive, or sincere, she is far from coming across as an endearing person; but whether she was right or wrong does not change the horror of her situation at all: she never did anything in her whole life but submit to the conjugal embraces, pregnancies, solitude, and mode of life that her husband imposed on her while receiving

constant recriminations; when new decisions of Tolstoy's worsened the conflict, she found herself weaponless against the enemy's will, which she rejected with all her powerless will; she threw herself into rejection scenes—fake suicides, false escapes, false illnesses—unpleasant to her family and friends, exhausting for herself: it is hard to see any other solution available to her since she had no positive reason to silence her feelings of revolt and no effective way of expressing them.

There is only one solution available to the woman when rejection runs its course: suicide. But it would seem that she resorts to it less than the man. The statistics are very ambiguous: if one considers successful suicides, there are many more men than women who put an end to their lives; but suicide attempts are more frequent in women.⁵ This may be because they settle more often for playacting: they *play* at suicide more often than man, but they *want* it more rarely. It is also in part because such brutal means are repugnant to them: they almost never use knives or firearms. They drown themselves more readily, like Ophelia, showing woman's affinity for water, passive and full of darkness, where it seems that life might be able to dissolve passively. On the whole, this is the ambiguity I already mentioned: the woman does not sincerely seek to take leave of what she detests. She plays at rupture but in the end remains with the man who makes her suffer; she pretends to leave the life that mistreats her, but it is relatively rare for her to kill herself. She does not favor definitive solutions: she protests against man, against life, against her condition, but she does not escape from it.

There is much feminine behavior that has to be interpreted as protest. We have seen that the woman often cheats on her husband by defiance and not for pleasure; she will be absentminded and a spendthrift on purpose because he is methodical and careful. Misogynists who accuse woman of "always being late" think she lacks "the sense of exactitude." In truth, we have seen how docilely she adapts to the demands of time. Being late is deliberate. Some flirtatious women think that this is the way to excite the desire of the man, who will thus attach more importance to their presence; but above all, in keeping a man waiting for a few minutes, the woman protests against this long wait that is her own life. In one sense, her whole existence is a waiting since she is enclosed in the limbo of immanence and contingency and her justification is always in someone else's hands: she is waiting for a tribute, men's approval, she is waiting for love, she is waiting

5. See Halbwachs, *The Causes of Suicide*.

for gratitude and her husband's or lover's praise; she expects to gain from them her reasons to exist, her worth, and her very being. She awaits her subsistence from them; whether she has her own checkbook or receives the money her husband allocates to her every week or month, he has to have been paid, obtained the raise for her to pay the grocer or buy a new dress. She awaits men's presence: her economic dependence puts her at their disposal; she is only one element of masculine life, whereas the man is her whole life; the husband has occupations outside the home, the woman endures his absence every day; it is the lover—even if passionate—who decides on the separation and meetings according to his obligations. In bed, she awaits the male's desire; she awaits—sometimes anxiously—her own pleasure. The only thing she can do is to be late for the date the lover set up; or not to be ready at the time the husband fixed; this is the way she asserts the importance of her own occupations, she claims her independence, she becomes the essential subject for a moment while the other passively submits to her will. But this is meager revenge; no matter how determined she might be to make men stew, she will never compensate for the infinite hours she has spent being subjected to and watching out and hoping for the male's goodwill.

In general, while more or less acknowledging men's supremacy and accepting their authority, worshipping their idols, she will contest their reign tooth and nail; hence the famous "contrariness" for which she is so often criticized; as she does not possess an autonomous domain, she cannot put forward truths or positive values different from those that males assert; she can only negate them. Her negation is more or less systematic depending on her particular balance of respect and resentment. But the fact is, she knows all the fault lines of the masculine system and she hastens to denounce them.

Women do not have a hold on the world of men, because their experience does not teach them to deal with logic and technology: conversely, the power of male instruments disappears at the borders of the feminine domain. There is a whole region of human experience that the male deliberately chooses to ignore because he fails to *think* it: this experience, the woman *lives* it. The engineer, so precise when making his plans, behaves like a demigod at home: one word and his meal is served, his shirts starched, his children silenced: procreating is an act that is as quick as Moses's magic rod; he sees nothing surprising in these miracles. The notion of miracle differs from the idea of magic: from within a rationally determined world a miracle posits the radical discontinuity of an event without cause against which any thinking shatters, whereas magic phenomena are united by secret forces of which a docile consciousness can

embrace the continuous becoming—without understanding it. The newborn is miraculous for the demigod father, magic for the mother who has undergone the ripening in her womb. Man's experience is intelligible but full of holes; that of the wife is, in its own limits, obscure but complete. This opacity weighs her down; the male is light in his relations with her: he has the lightness of dictators, generals, judges, bureaucrats, codes, and abstract principles. This is undoubtedly what this housewife meant when, shrugging her shoulders, she murmured: "Men, they don't think!" Women also say: "Men, they don't know; they don't know life." As a contrast to the myth of the praying mantis, they juxtapose the symbol of the frivolous and importunate bumblebee.

It is understandable why, from this perspective, woman objects to masculine logic. Not only does it have no bearing on her experience, but she also knows that in men's hands reason becomes an insidious form of violence; their peremptory affirmations are intended to mystify her. They want to confine her in a dilemma: either you agree or you don't; she has to agree in the name of the whole system of accepted principles: in refusing to agree, she rejects the whole system; she cannot allow herself such a dramatic move; she does not have the means to create another society: yet she does not agree with this one. Halfway between revolt and slavery, she unwillingly resigns herself to masculine authority. He continuously uses force to make her shoulder the consequences of her reluctant submission. He pursues the chimera of a freely enslaved companion: he wants her to yield to him as yielding to the proof of a theorem; but she knows he himself has chosen the postulates on which his vigorous deductions are hung; as long as she avoids questioning them, he will easily silence her; nevertheless, he will not convince her, because she senses their arbitrariness. Thus will he accuse her, with stubborn irritation, of being illogical: she refuses to play the game because she knows the dice are loaded.

The woman does not positively think that the truth is *other* than what men claim: rather, she holds that there *is* no truth. It is not only life's becoming that makes her suspicious of the principle of identity, nor the magic phenomena surrounding her that ruin the notion of causality: it is at the heart of the masculine world itself, it is in her as belonging to this world, that she grasps the ambiguity of all principles, of all values, of all that exists. She knows that when it comes to her, masculine morality is a vast mystification. The man pompously drums his code of virtue and honor into her; but secretly he invites her to disobey it: he even counts on this disobedience; the whole lovely facade he hides behind would collapse without it.

The man readily uses the pretext of the Hegelian idea that the male cit-

obstinate visions, Joan of Arc was burned at the stake. Nevertheless, even subjected by God's will to men's laws, the woman finds a solid recourse against them through him. Masculine logic is refuted by mysteries; males' pride becomes a sin, their agitation is not only absurd but culpable: Why remodel this world created by God himself? The passivity to which woman is doomed is sanctified. Reciting her rosary by the fire, she knows she is closer to heaven than her husband, who is out at political meetings. There is no need to *do* anything to save her soul, it is enough to *live* without disobeying. The synthesis of life and spirit is completed: the mother not only engenders body but also gives God a soul; this is higher work than penetrating the secrets of the atom. With the complicity of the heavenly Father, woman can make a claim to the glory of her femininity against man.

Not only does God thus reestablish the dignity of the feminine sex in general, but every woman will find special support in the celestial absence; as a human person, she carries little weight; but as soon as she acts in the name of divine inspiration, her desires become sacred. Mme Guyon says that, concerning a nun's illness, she learned "what it meant to command by the Word and obey by the same Word"; thus the devotee camouflages her authority in humble obedience; raising her children, governing a convent, or organizing a charity, she is but a docile tool in supernatural hands; one cannot disobey her without offending God himself. To be sure, men do not disdain this support either; but it loses its force when they encounter other men who make equal claim to it: the conflict finishes by being solved on a human level. Woman invokes divine will to justify her authority absolutely in the eyes of those who are naturally subordinated to her, and to justify it in her own eyes. If this cooperation is useful for her, it is because she is above all concerned with her relations with herself—even when those relations interest others; it is only in these totally interior debates that the Supreme Silence can have the force of law. In truth, woman uses the pretext of religion to satisfy her desires. Frigid, masochistic, or sadistic, she sanctifies herself by renouncing the flesh, playing the victim, stifling every living impulse around her; mutilating and annihilating herself, she rises in the ranks of the chosen; when she martyrs husband and children by depriving them of all terrestrial happiness, she is preparing them for a choice place in paradise; "to punish herself for having sinned," Margaret of Cortona's pious biographers recount, she maltreated the child of her sin; she fed him only after feeding all the beggars she passed; we have seen that hatred of the unwanted child is common: it is a godsend to be able to express it in a virtuous rage. On her side, a woman whose morals are loose conveniently makes an arrangement with God; the certainty of being puri-

fied from sin by absolution tomorrow often helps the pious woman conquer her scruples now. Whether she has chosen asceticism or sensuality, pride or humility, the concern she has for her salvation encourages her to give in to this pleasure that she prefers over all others: taking care of self; she listens to her heart beat, she watches every quiver of her flesh, justified by the presence of grace within herself, like the pregnant woman with her fruit. Not only does she examine herself with tender vigilance, but she reports to her confessor; in days gone by, she could savor the headiness of public confessions. We are told that Margaret of Cortona, to punish herself for an act of vanity, climbed onto her terrace and began to cry out like a woman in labor: "Wake up, people of Cortona, wake up and bring candles and lanterns and come out to hear the sinner!" She enumerated all her sins, proclaiming her misery to the stars. By this noisy humility, she satisfied this need for exhibitionism, found in so many examples of narcissistic women. For the woman, religion authorizes self-indulgence; it gives her the guide, father, lover, titular divinity she nostalgically needs; it feeds her reveries; it fills her empty hours. But especially, it confirms the world order; it justifies resignation by bringing hope for a better future in an asexual heaven. This is why today women are still a powerful asset in the hands of the Church; it is why the Church is so hostile to any measure that might facilitate their emancipation. Women must have religion; there must be women, "real women," to perpetuate religion.

It is clear that woman's whole "character"—her convictions, values, wisdom, morality, tastes, and behavior—is explained by her situation. The fact that she is denied transcendence usually prohibits her from having access to the loftiest human attitudes—heroism, revolt, detachment, invention, and creation—but they are not so common even in men. There are many men who are, like woman, confined within the domain of the intermediary, of inessential means; the worker escapes from it through political action, expressing a revolutionary will; but men from what we precisely call the "middle" class settle in this sphere deliberately; destined like the woman to the repetition of daily tasks, alienated in ready-made values, respecting public opinion, and only seeking vague comforts on earth, the employee, the shopkeeper, and the bureaucrat hold no superiority over their women companions; cooking, washing, running her home, raising her children, the woman shows more initiative and independence than the man enslaved to orders; he must obey his superiors every day, wear a removable collar, and affirm his social rank; she can lie about in a housecoat in her apartment, sing, laugh with her women neighbors; she acts as she pleases, takes small risks, and efficiently tries to attain a few results. She

lives much less according to convention and appearances than does her husband. The bureaucratic world described by Kafka—among others—this universe of ceremonies, absurd gestures, meaningless behavior, is essentially masculine; she has greater purchase on reality; when he lines up his figures, or converts sardine boxes into money, he grasps nothing but abstracts; the child content in his cradle, clean laundry, the roast, are more tangible things; yet, just because she feels their contingency—and consequently her own contingency—in the concrete pursuit of these objectives, it often happens that she does not alienate herself in them: she remains available. Man's undertakings are both projects and escapes: he lets himself be overwhelmed by his career, his personage; he is readily self-important, serious; contesting masculine logic and morality, woman does not fall into these traps: that is what Stendhal appreciated so strongly in her; she does not resort to pride to elude the ambiguity of her condition; she does not hide behind the mask of human dignity; she reveals her undisciplined thoughts, her emotions, her spontaneous reactions with more sincerity. This is why her conversation is far less boring than her husband's whenever she speaks in her own name and not as her seigneur's loyal half; he recites so-called general ideas, meaning words and formulas found in the columns of his newspaper or in specialist works; she brings experience, limited but concrete. The famous "feminine sensitivity" is part myth, part theater; but the fact remains that woman is more attentive than man to herself and the world. Sexually, she lives in a crude masculine climate: she compensates by appreciating "pretty things," which can lead to sentimentality, but also to refinement; because her sphere is limited, the objects she touches are precious to her: by not binding them in concepts or projects, she displays their splendor; her desire for escape is expressed in her taste for festiveness: she enjoys the gratuitousness of a bouquet of flowers, a cake, a well-laid table, she is pleased to transform the emptiness of her idle hours into a generous offering; loving laughter, songs, adornment, and knickknacks, she is also ready to welcome everything that palpitates around her: the spectacle of the street, of the sky; an invitation or an excursion offers her new horizons; the man often refuses to participate in these pleasures; when he comes home, joyous voices become silent, and the women in the family assume the bored and proper air expected of them. From the depths of solitude, of separation, the woman finds the sense of the singularity of her life: she has a more intimate experience than the man of the past, death, of time passing; she is concerned with the adventures of her heart, her flesh, her mind, because she knows that on earth she has but one lot; and also, because she is passive, she bears the reality that submerges her in a more passionate manner, with more pathos than the indi-

vidual absorbed by an ambition or job; she has the leisure and the tendency to abandon herself to her emotions, study her feelings, and draw conclusions from them. When her imagination is not lost in vain dreams, she becomes full of sympathy: she tries to understand the other in his uniqueness and re-create him in herself; regarding her husband, her lover, she is capable of true identification: she makes his projects and his cares her own in a way he could not imitate. She watches anxiously over the whole world; it seems to be an enigma to her: each being, every object, can be a reply; she questions avidly. When she grows older, her disenchanting expectation is converted into irony and an often piquant cynicism; she refuses masculine mystifications, she sees the contingent, absurd, gratuitous reverse side of the imposing structure built by males. Her dependence prohibits detachment for her; but she draws real generosity from her imposed devotion; she forgets herself in favor of her husband, her lover, her child, she ceases to think of herself, she is pure offering, gift. Being poorly adapted to men's society, she is often forced to invent her own conduct; she is less able to settle for ready-made patterns and clichés; if she is of goodwill, her apprehensions are closer to authenticity than is her husband's self-confidence.

But she will only have these advantages over her husband if she rejects the mystifications he offers her. In the upper classes, women are willing accomplices to their masters because they stand to profit from the benefits they are guaranteed. We have seen that women of the high bourgeoisie and aristocracy have always defended their class interests more stubbornly than their husbands: they do not hesitate to radically sacrifice their autonomy as human beings; they stifle all thinking, all critical judgment, all spontaneity; they parrot conventional wisdom, they identify with the ideal imposed on them by the male code; in their hearts, and even on their faces, all sincerity is dead. The housewife regains independence in her work, in caring for the children: she draws a limited but concrete experience from it: a woman who is "waited on" no longer has any grasp on the world; she lives in dreams and abstraction, in a void. She is unaware of the reach of the ideas she professes; the words she rattles off have lost all meaning in her mouth; the banker, the businessman, and even at times the general take risks, accepting exhaustion and problems; they purchase their privileges in an unfair market, but at least they pay for them themselves; for all they receive, their wives give nothing, do nothing in return; and they even more righteously believe in their imprescriptible rights with a blind faith. Their vain arrogance, their radical incapability, their stubborn ignorance, turn them into the most useless beings, the most idiotic that the human species has ever produced.

It is thus as absurd to speak of "the woman" in general as of "the eter-

nal man." And we can see why all comparisons where we try to decide if the woman is superior, inferior, or equal to the man are pointless: their situations are profoundly different. If these same situations are compared, it is obvious that the man's is infinitely preferable, that is to say, he has far more concrete opportunities to project his freedom in the world; the inevitable result is that masculine realizations outweigh by far those of women: for women, it is practically forbidden to *do* anything. But to compare the use that, within their limits, men and women make of their freedom is a priori meaningless, precisely because they use it freely. In various forms, the traps of bad faith and the mystifications of seriousness are lying in wait for both of them; freedom is entire in each. However, because of the fact that in woman this freedom remains abstract and empty, it cannot authentically assume itself except in revolt: this is the only way open to those who have no chance to build anything; they must refuse the limits of their situation and seek to open paths to the future; resignation is only a surrender and an evasion; for woman there is no other way out than to work for her liberation.

This liberation can only be collective, and it demands above all that the economic evolution of the feminine condition be accomplished. There have been and there still are many women who do seek to attain individual salvation on their own. They try to justify their existence within their own immanence, that is, to achieve transcendence through immanence. It is this ultimate effort—sometimes ridiculous, often pathetic—of the imprisoned woman to convert her prison into a heaven of glory, her servitude into sovereign freedom, that we find in the narcissist, the woman in love, and the mystic.

| PART THREE |

JUSTIFICATIONS

The Independent Woman

French law no longer includes obedience among a wife's duties, and every woman citizen has become a voter; these civic liberties remain abstract if there is no corresponding economic autonomy; the kept woman—wife or mistress—is not freed from the male just because she has a ballot paper in her hands; while today's customs impose fewer constraints on her than in the past, such negative licenses have not fundamentally changed her situation; she remains a vassal, imprisoned in her condition. It is through work that woman has been able, to a large extent, to close the gap separating her from the male; work alone can guarantee her concrete freedom. The system based on her dependence collapses as soon as she ceases to be a parasite; there is no longer need for a masculine mediator between her and the universe. The curse on the woman vassal is that she is not allowed to do anything; so she stubbornly pursues the impossible quest for being through narcissism, love, or religion; when she is productive and active, she regains her transcendence; she affirms herself concretely as subject in her projects; she senses her responsibility relative to the goals she pursues and to the money and rights she appropriates. Many women are conscious of these advantages, even those with the lowest-level jobs. I heard a cleaning woman as she was washing a hotel lobby floor say, "I never asked anyone for anything. I made it on my own." She was as proud of being self-sufficient as a Rockefeller. However, one must not think that the simple juxtaposition of the right to vote and a job amounts to total liberation; work today is not freedom. Only in a socialist world would the woman who has one be sure of the other. Today, the majority of workers are exploited. Moreover, social structures have not been deeply modified by the changes in women's condition. This world has always belonged to men and still retains the form they have imprinted on it. It is important not to lose sight of these facts that make the question of women's work complex. An important and self-righteous woman recently carried out a study on

women workers at a Renault factory: she asserts that they would rather stay at home than work in a factory. Without a doubt, they are economically independent only within an economically oppressed class; and besides, tasks carried out in a factory do not free them from household chores.¹ If they had been able to choose between forty hours of weekly work in a factory *or* at home, they would undoubtedly have responded quite differently; and they might even accept both jobs eagerly if, as women workers, they would become part of a world that would be their world, that they would proudly and happily participate in building. In today's work, without even mentioning women who work on the land,² most working women do not escape the traditional feminine world; neither society nor their husbands give them the help needed to become, in concrete terms, the equals of men. Only those women with political convictions, active in trade unions, who are confident in the future, can give an ethical meaning to the thankless daily labor; but as women deprived of leisure time and inheriting a tradition of submissiveness, it is understandable that they are just beginning to develop their political and social awareness. It is understandable that since they do not receive the moral and social benefits they could legitimately expect in exchange for their work, they simply resign themselves to its constraints. It is also understandable that a shopgirl, an office worker, or a secretary should not want to give up the advantages of having a male to lean on. I have already said that it is an almost irresistible temptation for a young woman to be part of a privileged caste when she can do so simply by surrendering her body; she is doomed to have love affairs because her wages are minimal for the very high standard of living society demands of her; if she settles for what she earns, she will be no more than a pariah: without decent living accommodations or clothes, all amusement and even love will be refused her. Virtuous people preach asceticism to her; in fact, her diet is often as austere as a Carmelite's; but not everyone can have God as a lover: she needs to please men to succeed in her life as a woman. So she will accept help: her employer cynically counts on this when he pays her a pittance. Sometimes this help will enable her to improve her situation and achieve real independence; but sometimes she will give up her job to become a kept woman. She often does both: she frees herself from her lover through work, and she escapes work thanks to her lover; but then she experiences the double servitude of a job and mas-

1. I said in Volume I, Part Two, "History," pp. 71-156, how burdensome these are for the woman who works outside the home.

2. Whose condition we examined, *ibid.*, p. 153.

culine protection. For the married woman, her salary usually only means extra income; for the "woman who is helped," it is the man's protection that seems inessential; but neither woman buys total independence through her own efforts.

However, there are quite a lot of privileged women today who have gained economic and social autonomy in their professions. They are the ones who are at issue when the question of women's possibilities and their future is raised. While they are still only a minority, it is particularly interesting to study their situation closely; they are the subject of continuing debate between feminists and antifeminists. The latter maintain that today's emancipated women do not accomplish anything important, and that besides they have trouble finding their inner balance. The former exaggerate the emancipated women's achievements and are blind to their frustrations. In fact, there is no reason to assume that they are on the wrong track; and yet it is obvious that they are not comfortably settled in their new condition: they have come only halfway as yet. Even the woman who has emancipated herself economically from man is still not in a moral, social, or psychological situation identical to his. Her commitment to and focus on her profession depend on the context of her life as a whole. And, when she starts her adult life, she does not have the same past as a boy; society does not see her with the same eyes; she has a different perspective on the universe. Being a woman poses unique problems to an autonomous human being today.

The advantage man enjoys and which manifests itself from childhood onward is that his vocation as a human being in no way contradicts his destiny as a male. The fact that the phallus is assimilated with transcendence means that man's social and spiritual successes endow him with virile prestige. He is not divided. However, for a woman to accomplish her femininity, she is required to be object and prey; that is, she must renounce her claims as a sovereign subject. This is the conflict that singularly characterizes the situation of the emancipated woman. She refuses to confine herself to her role as female because she does not want to mutilate herself; but it would also be a mutilation to repudiate her sex. Man is a sexed human being; woman is a complete individual, and equal to the male, only if she too is a sexed human being. Renouncing her femininity means renouncing part of her humanity. Misogynists have often reproached intellectual women for "letting themselves go"; but they also preach to them: if you want to be our equals, stop wearing makeup and polishing your nails. This advice is absurd. Precisely because the idea of femininity is artificially defined by customs and fashion, it is imposed on every woman from the

outside; it may evolve so that its fashion standards come closer to those of men: on the beach, women now wear trousers. That does not change the core of the problem: the individual is not free to shape the idea of femininity at will. By not conforming, a woman devalues herself sexually and consequently socially because society has incorporated sexual values. Rejecting feminine attributes does not mean acquiring virile ones; even a transvestite cannot turn herself into a man: she is a transvestite. We have seen that homosexuality also constitutes a specification: neutrality is impossible. There is no negative attitude that does not imply a positive counterpart. The adolescent girl often thinks she can simply scorn convention; but by doing so, she is making a statement; she is creating a new situation involving consequences she will have to assume. Whenever one ignores an established convention, one becomes a rebel. A flamboyantly dressed woman is lying when she ingenuously claims she is simply dressing to suit herself, and that is all: she knows perfectly well that suiting herself is an absurdity. Inversely, if she does not want to look eccentric, she follows the rules. Choosing defiance is a risky tactic unless it is a positively effective action; more time and energy are spent than saved. A woman who has no desire to shock, no intention to devalue herself socially, has to live her woman's condition as a woman: very often her professional success even requires it. But while conformity is quite natural for a man—custom being based on his needs as an autonomous and active individual—the woman who is herself also subject and activity has to fit into a world that has doomed her to passivity. This servitude is even greater since women confined to the feminine sphere have magnified its importance: they have made dressing and housekeeping difficult arts. The man barely has to care about his clothes; they are comfortable, adapted to his active life, and need not be original; they are hardly part of his personality; what's more, no one expects him to take care of them himself: some woman, volunteer or paid, delivers him from this chore. The woman, on the other hand, knows that when people look at her, they do not distinguish her from her appearance: she is judged, respected, or desired in relation to how she looks. Her clothes were originally meant to doom her to impotence, and they still remain fragile: stockings run; heels wear down; light-colored blouses and dresses get dirty; pleats unpleat; but she must still repair most of these accidents herself; her peers will never volunteer to help her out, and she will have second thoughts about straining her budget for work she *can* do herself: perm, hairdos, makeup, and new dresses are already expensive enough. Whether she is a secretary or a student, when she goes home at night, there is always a stocking to mend, a blouse to wash, a skirt to iron.

The woman who earns a good living will spare herself these chores; but she will be held to a higher standard of elegance, she will waste time on shopping and dress fittings, and such. Tradition also demands that the woman, even unmarried, pay attention to her home; a government official sent to a new city thinks nothing of living in a hotel; his woman colleague will try to "set up house"; she has to keep it spotless because her negligence will not be excused, whereas a man's will be overlooked. However, public opinion is not the only concern that makes her devote so much time and care to her looks and home. She wants to feel like a real woman for her own personal satisfaction. She only succeeds in accepting herself from the perspective of both the present and the past by combining the life she has made for herself with the destiny prepared for her by her mother, her childhood games, and her adolescent fantasies. She has cultivated narcissistic dreams; she continues to pit the cult of her image against the phallic pride of the male; she wants to show off, to charm. Her mother and other older women have fostered her nesting instinct: a home of her own was the earliest form of her dream of independence; she would not think of discarding it, even when she finds freedom in other ways. And not yet feeling secure in the male universe, she still needs a retreat, a symbol of that interior refuge she has been used to finding in herself. Following docilely in the feminine tradition, she will wax her floors or do her own cooking instead of going to a restaurant like her male colleague. She wants to live both like a man and like a woman; her workload and her fatigue are multiplied as a result.

If she intends to remain fully woman, it also means she intends to approach the opposite sex with the maximum of odds on her side. It is in the area of sex that the most difficult problems will arise. To be a complete individual, equal to man, woman has to have access to the male world as man does to the female one, access to the *other*; but the demands of the *other* are not symmetrical in the two cases. Once acquired, the seemingly immanent virtues of fame and fortune can enhance the woman's sexual attraction; but being an autonomous activity contradicts her femininity: she knows this. The independent woman—and especially the intellectual who thinks through her situation—will suffer from an inferiority complex as a female; she does not have as much free time for beauty care as a flirt, whose only preoccupation is to seduce; while she might follow all the experts' advice, she will never be more than an amateur in the elegance department; feminine charm demands that transcendence deteriorating into immanence no longer be anything more than a subtle carnal throb; she must be a spontaneously offered prey: the intellectual woman knows she is offering her-

self, she knows she is a consciousness, a subject; one cannot willfully kill one's gaze and change one's eyes into empty pools; a body that reaches out to the world cannot be thwarted and metamorphosed into a statue animated by hidden vibrations. The more the intellectual woman fears failure, the more zealously she will try; but this conscious zeal remains an activity and falls short of its goal. She makes mistakes like those blamed on menopause: she tries to deny her intelligence as an aging woman tries to deny her age; she dresses like a girl, she overdoes the flowers, the frills, and the loud materials; she carries childish and wide-eyed mimicry too far. She romps, skips, prattles, acts overly casual, scatterbrained, and impulsive. But she looks like those actors who, failing to feel the emotion that would relax certain muscles, purposely contract antagonistic ones instead, lowering their eyelids or the corners of their mouths instead of letting them drop; thus the intelligent woman, wishing to appear uninhibited, stiffens instead. She senses this, and it irritates her; suddenly an unintended piercing spark of intelligence passes over her totally naive face; her lips full of promise become pursed. If she has trouble pleasing men, it is because she is not like her little slave sisters, a pure will to please; her desire to seduce may be strong, but it has not penetrated into the marrow of her bones; as soon as she feels awkward, she gets fed up with her servility; she tries to take her revenge by playing the game with masculine weapons: she talks instead of listening, she flaunts clever ideas, unusual feelings; she contradicts her interlocutor instead of going along with him, she tries to outdo him. Mme de Staël cleverly mixed both methods with stunning triumphs: she was almost always irresistible. But defiance, so frequent, for example, among American women, irritates men more than it wins them over; it is men, however, who provoke it by their own defiance; if men were content to love a peer instead of a slave—as indeed some men do who are without either arrogance or an inferiority complex—then women would be far less obsessed with their femininity; they would become more natural and simple and would easily rediscover themselves as women, which, after all, they are.

The fact is that men are beginning to come to terms with the new condition of women; no longer feeling condemned a priori, women feel more at ease; today the working woman does not neglect her femininity, nor does she lose her sexual attraction. This success—already a step toward equality—remains, nonetheless, incomplete; it is still much harder for a woman than for a man to have the type of relationship she would like with the other sex. Many obstacles stand in the way of her sex and love life. And the vassal woman is no better off: sexually and emotionally, most wives and

mistresses are radically frustrated. These difficulties are more obvious for the independent woman because she has chosen not resignation but combat. All living problems find a silent solution in death; so a woman who works at living is more torn than one who buries her will and desires; but she will not accept being offered this as an example. She will consider herself at a disadvantage only when she compares herself with man.

A woman who works hard, who has responsibilities, and who knows how harsh the struggle is against the world's obstacles needs—like the male—not only to satisfy her physical desires but also to experience the relaxation and diversion provided by enjoyable sexual adventures. Now, there are still some environments where it is not concretely recognized that she should have this freedom; if she avails herself of it, she risks compromising her reputation and career; at the least, a burdensome hypocrisy is demanded of her. The more she has succeeded in making her mark socially, the more willingly will people close their eyes; but she is severely scrutinized, especially in the provinces. Even in the most favorable circumstances—when fear of public opinion is not an issue—her situation is not the same in this area as the man's. Differences stem from both tradition and the problems posed by the particular nature of feminine sexuality.

The man can easily engage in casual sex that at least calms his physical needs and is good for his morale. There have been women—a small number—who have demanded the opening of bordellos for women; in a novel titled *Le numéro 17* (Number 17), a woman proposed creating houses where women could go and find "sexual relief" with a sort of "taxi-boy."³ It seems that such an establishment once existed in San Francisco; it was frequented only by the girls from the bordellos, amused by the idea of paying instead of being paid: their pimps had them closed. Besides the fact that this solution is utopian and undesirable, it would also probably have little success: we have seen that woman does not attain "relief" as mechanically as man; most women would hardly consider this solution favorable to sexual abandon. In any case, the fact is that this recourse is not open to them today. The solution of women picking up a partner for a night or an hour—assuming that the woman, endowed with a strong temperament and having overcome all her inhibitions, can consider it without disgust—is far more dangerous for her than for the male. The risk of venereal disease is more serious for her in that it is up to him to take precautions to avoid con-

3. The author—whose name I have forgotten, but it is unimportant—explains at length how they could be trained to satisfy any client, what kind of life should be imposed on them, and so forth.

tamination; and, however prudent she may be, she is never completely covered against the threat of becoming pregnant. But the difference in physical strength is also very significant, especially in relations between strangers—relations that take place on a physical level. A man has little to fear from the woman he takes home; a little vigilance is enough. It is not the same for the woman who lets a man into her house. I have been told of two young women, newly arrived in Paris and avid to “see life,” who, after doing the town, invited two seductive Montmartre pimps to a late supper: in the morning they found themselves robbed, brutalized, and threatened with blackmail. A worse case is that of a divorced woman of about forty who worked hard all day to feed her three grown children and elderly parents. Still beautiful and attractive, she had absolutely no leisure time to have a social life, to flirt, or to make any of the usual efforts necessary for seduction, which in any case would have bored her. Yet she had strong physical desires; and she felt that, like a man, she had the right to satisfy them. Some evenings she went out to roam the streets and managed to pick up a man. But one night, after an hour or two spent in a thicket in the Bois de Boulogne, her lover refused to let her leave: he wanted her name, her address, to see her again, to live with her; when she refused, he beat her violently and only left her when she was wounded and terrorized. As for taking on a lover by supporting him or helping him out, as men often take on a mistress, it is possible only for wealthy women. There are some for whom this deal works: by paying the male, they make an instrument of him, permitting them to use him with disdainful abandon. But women must usually be older to dissociate eroticism from sentiment so crudely, because in feminine adolescence this connection is, as we have seen, so deep. There are also many men who never accept this division between flesh and consciousness. For even more reasons, the majority of women will refuse to consider it. Besides, there is an element of deception they are more aware of than men: the paying client is an instrument as well, used by the partner as a livelihood. Virile arrogance hides the ambiguities of the erotic drama from the male: he spontaneously lies to himself; the woman is more easily humiliated, more susceptible, and also more lucid; she will succeed in blinding herself only at the price of a more cunning bad faith. Even supposing she has the means, she will not find it generally satisfying to buy a man.

For most women—and also for some men—it is a question not only of satisfying their desires but of maintaining their dignity as human beings while satisfying them. When the male gets sexual satisfaction from the woman, or when he satisfies her, he posits himself as the unique subject:

imperious victor, generous donor, or both. She wants to affirm reciprocally that she submits her partner to her pleasure and covers him with her gifts. Thus when she convinces the man of her worth, either by the benefits she promises him or by relying on his courtesy or by skillfully arousing his desire in its pure generality, she easily persuades herself that she is satisfying him. Thanks to this beneficial conviction, she can solicit him without feeling humiliated since she claims she is acting out of generosity. Thus in *Green Wheat*, the “woman in white” who lusts for Phil’s caresses archly tells him: “I only like beggars and the hungry.” In fact, she is cleverly angling for him to act imploringly. So, says Colette, “she rushed toward the narrow and dark kingdom where her pride could believe that a moan is a confession of distress, and where the aggressive beggars of her sort drink the illusion of generosity.” Mme de Warens exemplifies these women who choose their lovers young, unhappy, or of a lower social class to make their appetite look like generosity. But there are also fearless women who take on the challenge of the most robust males and who are delighted to have satisfied them even though they may have succumbed only out of politeness or fear.

On the other hand, while the woman who traps the man likes to imagine herself giving, the woman who gives herself wants it understood that she takes. “As for me, I am a woman who takes,” a young woman journalist told me one day. The truth in these cases is that, except for rape, no one really takes the other; but the woman is lying doubly to herself. For the fact is that man does often seduce by his passion and aggressiveness, thereby actively gaining his partner’s consent. Except in special cases—like Mme de Staël, to whom I have already referred—it is otherwise for the woman: she can do little else than offer herself; for most males are fiercely jealous of their role; they want to awaken a personal sexual response in the woman, not to be selected to satisfy her need in its generality: chosen, they feel exploited.⁴ “A woman who is not afraid of men frightens them,” a young man told me. And I have often heard adults declare: “I am horrified by a woman who takes the initiative.” If the woman proposes herself too boldly, the man flees: he insists on conquering. The woman can thus take only when she is prey: she must become a passive thing, a promise of submission. If she succeeds, she will think she has willingly performed this magic conjuration; she will see herself become subject again. But she runs the risk of being turned into a fixed and useless object by the male’s dis-

4. This feeling corresponds to the one we have pointed out in the girl. Only she resigns herself to her destiny in the end.

dain. This is why she is so deeply humiliated if he rejects her advances. The man also sometimes gets angry when he feels he has been taken in; nonetheless, he has only failed in an enterprise, nothing more. The woman, on the other hand, has consented to make herself flesh through her sexual arousal, anticipation, and promise; she could only win by losing: she remains lost. One must be particularly blind or exceptionally lucid to choose such a defeat. And even when seduction succeeds, victory remains ambiguous; thus, according to public opinion, it is the man who conquers, who *has* the woman. It does not accept that she can, like the man, assume her desires: she is their prey. It is understood that the male has integrated the forces of the species into his individuality, whereas the woman is the slave of the species.⁵ She is represented alternately as pure passivity: she is a "slut; open for business"; ready and willing, she is a utensil; she limply gives in to the spell of arousal, she is fascinated by the male who picks her like a fruit. Or else she is seen as an alienated activity: there is a devil raging in her womb, a serpent lurks in her vagina, craving to devour male sperm. In any case, it is out of the question to think of her as simply free. In France especially, the free woman and the easy woman are stubbornly confused, as the idea of easy implies an absence of resistance and control, a lack, the very negation of freedom. Women authors try to combat this prejudice: for example, in *Grisélidis* (Portrait of Grisela), Clara Malraux emphasizes that her heroine does not let herself be drawn in, but accomplishes an act for which she accepts full responsibility. In America, a freedom is recognized in woman's sexual activity, which is very favorable to her. But in France, men's disdain for women who "sleep around," the very men who profit from their favors, paralyzes many women. They fear the remonstrances they would incite, the remarks they would provoke.

Even if the woman scorns anonymous rumors, she has concrete difficulties in her relations with her partner, for public opinion is embodied in him. Very often, he considers the bed the terrain for asserting his aggressive superiority. He wants to take and not receive, not exchange but ravish. He seeks to possess the woman beyond that which she gives him; he demands that her consent be a defeat, and that the words she murmurs be avowals that he extracts from her; if she admits her pleasure, she is acknowledging her submission. When Claudine defies Renaud by her promptness in submitting to him, he anticipates her: he rushes to rape her

5. We have seen in Volume I, Chapter 1 that there is a certain truth in this opinion. But it is precisely not at the moment of desire that this asymmetry appears: it is in procreation. In desire man and woman assume their natural function identically.

when she was going to offer herself; he forces her to keep her eyes open to contemplate his triumph in their torment. Thus, in *Man's Fate*, the overbearing Ferral insists on switching on the lamp Valérie wants to put out.* Proud and demanding, the woman faces the male as an adversary; she is far less well armed in this battle than he; first of all, he has physical force, and it is easier for him to impose his desires; we have also noted that tension and activity correspond to his eroticism, whereas the woman who refuses passivity breaks the spell that brings her sexual satisfaction; if she mimics domination in her attitudes and movements, she fails to reach a climax: most women who surrender to their pride become frigid. Rare are those lovers who allow their mistresses to satisfy their dominating or sadistic tendencies; and even rarer still are those women who derive full erotic satisfaction from this male docility.

There is a road that seems much less thorny for the woman, that of masochism. When one works, struggles, and takes responsibilities and risks during the day, it is relaxing to abandon oneself at night to vigorous caprices. In love or naive, the woman in fact is often happy to annihilate herself for the benefit of a tyrannical will. But she still has to feel truly dominated. It is not easy for a woman who lives daily among men to believe in the unconditional supremacy of males. I have been told about the case of a not really masochistic but very "feminine" woman, that is, one who deeply appreciated the pleasure of abdication in masculine arms; from the age of seventeen, she had had several husbands and numerous lovers, all of whom gave her great satisfaction; having successfully carried out a difficult project where she managed men, she complained of having become frigid: her once-blissful submission became impossible for her because she had become used to dominating males and because their prestige had vanished. When the woman begins to doubt men's superiority, their claims can only diminish her esteem for them. In bed, at moments where the man feels he is most fiercely male, the very fact of his miming virility makes him look infantile to knowing eyes: he is merely warding off the old castration complex, the shadow of his father, or some other fantasy. It is not always out of pride that the mistress refuses to give in to her lover's caprices: she wants to interact with an adult who is living a real moment of his life, not a little boy fooling himself. The masochistic woman is particularly disappointed: a maternal, exasperated, or indulgent complaisance is not the abdication she dreams of. Either she herself will also have to make

* André Malraux, *Man's Fate*—TRANS.

do with meaningless games, pretending to be dominated and subjugated, or she will run after men considered "superior" in the hope of coming across a master, or else she will become frigid.

We have seen that it is possible to escape the temptations of sadism and masochism when both partners recognize each other as equals; as soon as there is a little modesty and some generosity between men and women, ideas of victory and defeat are abolished: the act of love becomes a free exchange. But, paradoxically, it is harder for woman than for man to recognize an individual of the opposite sex as her equal. Precisely because the male caste enjoys superiority, man can hold many individual women in affectionate esteem: a woman is easy to love; she has, first of all, the privilege of introducing her lover to a world different from his own and one that he is pleased to explore at her side; she fascinates, she amuses, at least for a little while; and then, because her situation is limited and subordinate, all her qualities seem like conquests while her errors are excusable. Stendhal admires Mme de Rênal and Mme de Chasteller in spite of their detestable prejudices; the man does not hold a woman responsible for not being very intelligent, clear-sighted, or courageous: she is a victim, he thinks—often rightly—of her situation; he dreams of what she could have been, of what she will perhaps be: she can be given credit, one can grant her a great deal because she *is* nothing definite in particular; this lack is what will cause the lover to grow tired of her quickly: but it is the source of her mystery, the charm that seduces him and inclines him to feel superficial tenderness for her. It is far less easy to show friendship for a man: for he is what he made himself be, without help; he must be loved in his presence and his reality, not in his promises and uncertain possibilities; he is responsible for his behavior, his ideas; he has no excuse. There is fraternity with him only if his acts, goals, and opinions are approved; Julien can love a legitimist; a Lamiel could not cherish a man whose ideas she detests. Even ready to compromise, the woman has trouble adopting a tolerant attitude. For the man does not offer her a green paradise of childhood, she meets him in this world that is common to both of them: he brings only himself. Closed in on himself, defined, decided, he does not inspire dreams; when he speaks, one must listen; he takes himself seriously: if he does not prove interesting, he becomes bothersome, his presence weighs heavily. Only very young men allow themselves to appear adorned by the marvelous; one can seek mystery and promise in them, find excuses for them, take them lightly: this is one of the reasons mature women find them so seductive. But they themselves prefer young women in most cases. The thirty-year-old woman has no choice but to turn to adult males. And she will undoubtedly meet some

who deserve both her esteem and her friendship; but she will be lucky if they do not then display arrogance. The problem she has when looking for an affair or an adventure involving her heart as well as her body is meeting a man she can consider her equal, without his seeing himself as superior.

One might say that in general women do not make such a fuss; they seize the occasion without much questioning, and then they make do with their pride and sensuality. That is true. But it is also true that they bury in the secret of their hearts many disappointments, humiliations, regrets, and grievances whose equivalents are unknown—on the whole—to men. The man will almost surely get the benefit of pleasure from a more or less unsuccessful affair; the woman might well not profit from it at all; even if indifferent, she politely lends herself to lovemaking when the decisive moment arrives. The lover might prove to be impotent, and she will suffer from having compromised herself in a ludicrous escapade; if she does not reach arousal, then she feels "had," deceived; if she is satisfied, she will want to hold on to her lover for a longer time. She is rarely completely sincere when she claims to envisage nothing more than a short-term adventure just for pleasure, because pleasure, far from freeing her, binds her; separation, even a so-called friendly one, wounds her. It is far more rare to hear a woman talk good-naturedly about a former lover than a man about his mistresses.

The nature of her eroticism and the difficulties of a free sexual life push the woman toward monogamy. Nonetheless, a liaison or marriage is far less easily reconciled with a career for her than for the man. The lover or husband may ask her to give up her career: she hesitates, like Colette's Vagabond who ardently wishes to have a man's warmth at her side but who dreads the conjugal shackles; if she gives in, she is once again a vassal; if she refuses, she condemns herself to a withering solitude. Today, the man generally accepts the idea that his partner should continue working; novels by Colette Yver that show young women cornered into sacrificing their professions to maintain peace at home are somewhat outdated; living together is an enrichment for two free beings, who find a guarantee of their own independence in the partner's occupations; the self-sufficient wife frees her husband from the conjugal slavery that was the price of her own. If the man is scrupulously well-intentioned, lovers and spouses can attain perfect equality in undemanding generosity.⁶ Sometimes the man himself plays the role of devoted servant; thus did Lewes create for George Eliot

6. Clara and Robert Schumann's life seems to have had this kind of success for a certain time.

the favorable atmosphere the wife usually creates around the lord-husband. But most of the time, it is still the woman who pays the price for harmony at home. It seems natural to the man that she run the house and oversee the care and raising of the children alone. The woman herself believes that her personal life does not dispense her from the duties she assumed in marrying; she does not want her husband to be deprived of the advantages he would have had in marrying a "real woman": she wants to be elegant, a good housekeeper, and a devoted mother as wives traditionally are. It is a task that easily becomes overwhelming. She assumes it out of both consideration for her partner and fidelity to herself: for she insists, as we have seen, on fulfilling every aspect of her destiny as woman. She will be a double for her husband at the same time as being herself; she will take charge of his worries, she will participate in his successes just as much as taking care of her own lot, and sometimes even more so. Taught to respect male superiority, she may still believe that man takes first place; and sometimes she fears that claiming it would ruin her family; split between the desire to affirm herself and self-effacement, she is divided and torn.

There is nonetheless one advantage woman can gain from her very inferiority: since from the start she has fewer chances than man, she does not feel a priori guilty toward him; it is not up to her to compensate for social injustice, and she is not called upon to do so. A man of goodwill feels it his duty to "help" women because he is more favored than they are; he will let himself be caught up in scruples or pity, and he risks being the prey of "clinging" or "devouring" women because they are at a disadvantage. The woman who achieves a virile independence has the great privilege of dealing sexually with autonomous and active individuals who—generally—will not play a parasite's role in her life, who will not bind her by their weaknesses and the demands of their needs. But women who know how to create a free relation with their partners are in truth rare; they themselves forge the chains with which men do not wish to burden them: they adopt toward their partner the attitude of the woman in love. For twenty years of waiting, dreaming, and hoping, the young girl has embraced the myth of the liberating hero and savior: independence won through work is not enough to abolish her desire for a glorious abdication. She would have had to be brought up exactly like a boy⁷ to be able to comfortably overcome adolescent narcissism: but in her adult life she perpetuates this cult of self toward which her whole youth has predis-

7. That is, not only with the same methods, but in the same climate, which today is impossible in spite of all the efforts of educators.

posed her; she uses the merits of her professional success to enrich her image; she needs a gaze from above to reveal and consecrate her worth. Even if she is severe on men whom she judges daily, she reveres Man nonetheless, and if she encounters him, she is ready to fall on her knees. To be justified by a god is easier than to be justified by her own effort; the world encourages her to believe in the possibility of a *given* salvation: she chooses to believe in it. At times she entirely renounces her autonomy, she is no more than a woman in love; more often she tries conciliation; but adoring love, the love of abdication, is devastating: it takes up all thoughts, all instants, it is obsessive, tyrannical. If she encounters a professional disappointment, the woman passionately seeks refuge in love: her failures find expression in scenes and demands at the lover's expense. But her heartbreaks in no way have the effect of increasing her professional zeal: generally she becomes irritated, on the contrary, by the kind of life that keeps her from the royal road of the great love. A woman who worked ten years ago for a political magazine run by women told me that in the office people talked rarely about politics but incessantly about love: one would complain that she was loved only for her body, ignoring her fine intelligence; another would whine that she was only appreciated for her mind and no one ever appreciated her physical charms. Here again, for the woman to be in love like a man—that is to say, without putting her very *being* into question, freely—she would have to think herself his equal, and be his equal concretely: she would have to commit herself with the same decisiveness to her enterprises, which, as we will see, is still not common.

There is one female function that is still almost impossible to undertake in complete freedom, and that is motherhood; in England and in America, the woman can at least refuse it at will, thanks to the practice of birth control; we have seen that in France she is often compelled to have painful and costly abortions; she often finds herself burdened with a child she did not want, ruining her professional life. If this burden is a heavy one, it is because, inversely, social norms do not allow the woman to procreate as she pleases: the unwed mother causes scandal, and for the child an illegitimate birth is a stain; it is rare for a woman to become a mother without accepting the chains of marriage or lowering herself. If the idea of artificial insemination interests women so much, it is not because they wish to avoid male lovemaking: it is because they hope that voluntary motherhood will finally be accepted by society. It must be added that given the lack of well-organized day nurseries and kindergartens, even one child is enough to entirely paralyze a woman's activity; she can continue to work only by

abandoning the child to her parents, friends, or servants. She has to choose between sterility, often experienced as a painful frustration, and burdens hardly compatible with a career.

Thus the independent woman today is divided between her professional interests and the concerns of her sexual vocation; she has trouble finding her balance; if she does, it is at the price of concessions, sacrifices, and juggling that keep her in constant tension. More than in physiological facts, it is here that one must seek the reason for the nervousness and frailty often observed in her. It is difficult to decide how much woman's physical makeup in itself represents a handicap. The obstacle created by menstruation, for example, has often been examined. Women known for their work or activities seem to attach little importance to it: Is this because they owe their success to the fact that their monthly problems are so mild? One may ask if it is not on the contrary the choice of an active and ambitious life that confers this privilege on them: the attention women pay to their ailments exacerbates them; athletic women and women of action suffer less than the others because they pass over their sufferings. It is clear that menstrual pain does have organic causes, and I have seen the most energetic women spend twenty-four hours in bed every month in the throes of pitiless tortures; but their enterprises were never hindered by them. I am convinced that most ailments and illnesses that weigh women down have psychic causes: this is in fact what gynecologists have told me. Women are constantly overwhelmed by the psychological tension I have spoken about, because of all the tasks they take on and the contradictions they struggle against; this does not mean that their ills are imaginary: they are as real and devouring as the situation they convey. But a situation does not depend on the body; it is rather the body that depends on it. So woman's health will not detract from her work when the working woman has the place she deserves in society; on the contrary, work will strongly reinforce her physical balance by keeping her from being endlessly preoccupied with it.

When we judge the professional accomplishments of women and try to speculate on their future on that basis, we must not lose sight of all these facts. The woman embarks on a career in the context of a highly problematic situation, subjugated still by the burdens traditionally implied by her femininity. Objective circumstances are no more favorable to her either. It is always hard to be a newcomer trying to make one's way in a hostile society, or at least a mistrustful one. Richard Wright showed in *Black Boy* how blocked from the start the ambitions of a young American black man are and what struggle he has to endure merely to raise himself to the level where whites begin to have problems; the blacks who came to France from

Africa also have—within themselves as well as from outside—difficulties similar to those encountered by women.

The woman first finds herself in a state of inferiority during her period of apprenticeship: I have already pointed this out in relation to the period of girlhood, but it must be dealt with in more detail. During her studies and in the early, decisive years of her career, it is rare for the woman to be able to make full use of her possibilities: many will later be handicapped by a bad start. In fact, the conflicts I have discussed will reach their greatest intensity between the ages of eighteen and thirty: and this is when their professional future is determined. Whether the woman lives with her family or is married, her friends and family will rarely respect her efforts as they respect a man's; they will impose duties and chores on her, and curtail her freedom; she herself is still profoundly marked by her upbringing, respectful of the values the older women around her represent, haunted by childhood and adolescent dreams; she has difficulty reconciling the inheritance of her past with the interest of her future. Sometimes she rejects her femininity, she hesitates between chastity, homosexuality, or a provocative virago attitude, she dresses badly or like a man: she wastes a lot of time and energy in defiance, scenes, and anger. More often she wants, on the contrary, to assert her femininity: she dresses up, goes out, and flirts, she is in love, wavering between masochism and aggressiveness. In all cases, she questions herself, is agitated and scattered. By the very fact that she is in thrall to outside preoccupations, she does not commit herself entirely to her enterprise; thus she profits from it less, and is more tempted to give it up. What is extremely demoralizing for the woman trying to be self-sufficient is the existence of other women of her class, having from the start the same situation and chances, and who live as parasites; the man might resent privileged people: but he feels solidarity with his class; on the whole, those who begin on an equal footing with equal chances arrive at approximately the same standard of living, while women in similar situations have greatly differing fortunes because of man's mediation; the woman friend who is married or comfortably kept is a temptation for the woman who has to ensure her success alone; she feels she is arbitrarily condemning herself to the most difficult paths: at each obstacle she wonders if it would not be better to choose a different way. "When I think I have to get everything from my brain!" a young, poor student told me indignantly. The man obeys an imperious necessity: the woman must constantly renew her decision; she goes forward, not with her eye fixed on a goal directly in front of her, but letting her attention wander all around her; thus her progress is timid and uncertain. And moreover—as I have already said—it

seems to her that the further she advances, the more she renounces her other chances; in becoming a bluestocking, a cerebral woman, she will either displease men in general or humiliate her husband or lover by being too dazzling a success. Not only will she apply herself all the more to appearing elegant and frivolous, but she will also hold herself back. The hope of one day being free from looking after herself and the fear of having to give up this hope by coping with this anxiety come together to prevent her from devoting herself single-mindedly to her studies and career.

Inasmuch as the woman wants to be woman, her independent status produces an inferiority complex; inversely, her femininity leads her to doubt her professional opportunities. This is a most important point. A study showed that fourteen-year-old girls believed: "Boys are better; they find it easier to work." The girl is convinced that she has limited capacities. Because parents and teachers accept that the girl's level is lower than the boy's, students readily accept it too; and in truth, in spite of the fact that the curricula are identical, girls' intellectual growth in secondary schools is given less importance. With few exceptions, the students in a female philosophy class overall have a markedly lower achievement level than a class of boys: many female students do not intend to continue their studies, they work superficially, and others suffer from a lack of competitiveness. As long as the exams are fairly easy, their inadequacy will not be noticed too much; but when serious competitive exams are in question, the female student will become aware of her weaknesses; she will attribute them to the unjust curse of femaleness and not to the mediocrity of her education; resigning herself to this inequality, she exacerbates it; she persuades herself that her chances of success are related to her patience and assiduity; she decides to use her strength sparingly: this is a bad calculation. Above all, in studies and professions requiring a degree of inventiveness, originality, and some small discoveries, a utilitarian attitude is disastrous; conversations, reading outside the syllabus, or a walk that allows the mind to wander freely can be far more profitable even for the translation of a Greek text than the dreary compilation of complex syntaxes. Crushed by respect for those in authority and the weight of erudition, her vision blocked by blinkers, the overly conscientious female student kills her critical sense and even her intelligence. Her methodical determination gives rise to tension and ennui: in classes where female secondary school students prepare for the Sèvres examination, there is a stifling atmosphere that discourages even slightly spirited individuality. Having created her own jail, the female examination candidate wants nothing more than to escape from it; as soon as she closes her books, she thinks about any other subject. She does not

experience those rich moments where study and amusement merge, where adventures of the mind acquire living warmth. Overwhelmed by the thanklessness of her chores, she feels less and less able to carry them out. I remember a female student doing the *agrégation* who said, at the time when there was a coed competitive exam in philosophy: "Boys can succeed in one or two years; we need at least four." Another—who was recommended a book on Kant, a writer on the curriculum—commented: "This book is too difficult: it's for Normalians!"* She seemed to think that women could take easier exams; beaten before even trying, she was in effect giving all chances of success to the men.

Because of this defeatist attitude, the woman easily settles for a mediocre success; she does not dare to aim higher. Starting out in her job with a superficial education, she very quickly curtails her ambitions. She often considers the very fact of earning her own living a great enough feat; like so many others, she could have entrusted her future to a man; to continue to want her independence she needs to take pride in her effort, but it exhausts her. It seems to her she has done enough just in choosing to do something. "That's not so bad for a woman," she thinks. A woman in an unusual profession said: "If I were a man, I would feel obliged to be in the top rank; but I am the only woman in France holding such a position: that's enough for me." There is prudence in her modesty. In trying to go further, the woman is afraid of failing miserably. She is bothered, and rightly so, by the idea that no one has confidence in her. In general, the superior caste is hostile to the parvenus of the inferior caste: whites will not go to see a black doctor, nor men a woman doctor; but individuals from the lower caste, imbued with the feeling of their generic inferiority and often full of resentment of someone who has prevailed over destiny, will also prefer to turn to the masters; in particular, most women, steeped in the adoration of the male, avidly seek him in the doctor, lawyer, office manager. Neither men nor women like working under a woman's orders. Even if her superiors appreciate her, they will always be somewhat condescending; to be a woman is, if not a defect, at least a peculiarity. The woman must ceaselessly earn a confidence not initially granted to her: at the outset she is suspect; she has to prove herself. If she is any good, she will, people say. But worth is not a given essence: it is the result of a favorable development. Feeling a negative judgment weighing on one rarely helps one to overcome it. The initial inferiority complex most usually leads to the defensive reaction of

* Students or graduates from the Ecole Normale Supérieure, prestigious school of higher education in France.—TRANS.

and lose themselves in order to unite with this other presence: hardly any women venture down these roads Rousseau invented, except for Emily Brontë, Virginia Woolf, and sometimes Mary Webb. And to an even greater extent we can count on the fingers of one hand the women who have traversed the given in search of its secret dimension: Emily Brontë explored death, Virginia Woolf life, and Katherine Mansfield sometimes—not very often—daily contingency and suffering. No woman ever wrote *The Trial*, *Moby-Dick*, *Ulysses*, or *Seven Pillars of Wisdom*. Women do not challenge the human condition because they have barely begun to be able to assume it entirely. This explains why their works generally lack metaphysical resonance and black humor as well; they do not set the world apart, they do not question it, they do not denounce its contradictions: they take it seriously. The fact is that most men have the same limitations as well; it is when she is compared with the few rare artists who deserve to be called “great” that woman comes out as mediocre. Destiny is not what limits her: it is easy to understand why it has not been possible for her to reach the highest summits, and why it will perhaps not be possible for some time.

Art, literature, and philosophy are attempts to found the world anew on a human freedom: that of the creator; to foster such an aim, one must first unequivocally posit oneself as a freedom. The restrictions that education and custom impose on woman limit her grasp of the universe; when the struggle to claim a place in this world gets too rough, there can be no question of tearing oneself away from it; one must first emerge within it in sovereign solitude if one wants to try to grasp it anew: what woman primarily lacks is learning from the practice of abandonment and transcendence, in anguish and pride. Marie Bashkirtseff writes:

What I want is the freedom to walk around alone, come and go, sit on park benches in the Tuileries Gardens. Without this freedom you cannot become a true artist. You think you can profit from what you see when you are being accompanied or when you must wait for your car, your nursemaid, your family to go to the Louvre! . . . This is the freedom that is missing and without which one cannot seriously become something. *Thinking is imprisoned by this stupid and incessant constraint . . . That is all it takes to clip one's wings.* This is one of the reasons there are no women artists.

Indeed, for one to become a creator, it is not enough to be cultivated, that is, to make going to shows and meeting people part of one's life; culture must be apprehended through the free movement of a transcendence;

the spirit with all its riches must project itself in an empty sky that is its to fill; but if a thousand fine bonds tie it to the earth, its surge is broken. The girl today can certainly go out alone, stroll in the Tuileries; but I have already said how hostile the street is: eyes everywhere, hands waiting; if she wanders absentmindedly, her thoughts elsewhere, if she lights a cigarette in a café, if she goes to the cinema alone, an unpleasant incident can quickly occur, she must inspire respect by the way she dresses and behaves: this concern rivets her to the ground and to self. “Her wings are clipped.” At eighteen, T. E. Lawrence went on a grand tour through France by bicycle; a young girl would never be permitted to take on such an adventure: still less would it be possible for her to take off on foot for a half-desert and dangerous country as Lawrence did. Yet such experiences have an inestimable impact: this is how an individual in the headiness of freedom and discovery learns to look at the entire world as his fief. The woman is already naturally deprived of the lessons of violence: I have said how physical weakness disposes her to passivity; when a boy settles a fight with punches, he feels he can rely on himself in his own interest; at least the girl should be allowed to compensate by sports, adventure, and the pride of obstacles overcome. But no. She may feel alone *within* the world: she never stands up *in front* of it, unique and sovereign. Everything encourages her to be invested and dominated by foreign existences, and particularly in love, she disavows rather than asserts herself. Misfortune and distress are often learning experiences in this sense: it was isolation that enabled Emily Brontë to write a powerful and unbridled book; in the face of nature, death, and destiny, she relied on no one's help but her own. Rosa Luxemburg was ugly; she was never tempted to wallow in the cult of her image, to make herself object, prey, and trap: from her youth she was wholly mind and freedom. Even then, it is rare for a woman to fully assume the agonizing tête-à-tête with the given world. The constraints that surround her and the whole tradition that weighs on her keep her from feeling responsible for the universe: this is the profound reason for her mediocrity.

Men we call great are those who—in one way or another—take the weight of the world on their shoulders; they have done more or less well, they have succeeded in re-creating it or they have failed; but they took on this enormous burden in the first place. This is what no woman has ever done, what no woman has ever been *able* to do. It takes belonging to the privileged caste to view the universe as one's own, to consider oneself as guilty of its faults and take pride in its progress; those alone who are at the controls have the opportunity to justify it by changing, thinking, and revealing it; only they can identify with it and try to leave their imprint on

it. Until now it has only been possible for Man to be incarnated in the man, not the woman. Moreover, individuals who appear exceptional to us, the ones we honor with the name of genius, are those who tried to work out the fate of all humanity in their particular lives. No woman has thought herself authorized to do that. How could van Gogh have been born woman? A woman would not have been sent on mission to Borinage, she would not have felt men's misery as her own crime, she would not have sought redemption; so she would never have painted van Gogh's sunflowers. And this is without taking into account that the painter's kind of life—the solitude in Arles, going to cafés, whorehouses, everything that fed into van Gogh's art by feeding his sensibility—would have been prohibited to her. A woman could never have become Kafka: in her doubts and anxieties, she would never have recognized the anguish of Man driven from paradise. Saint Teresa is one of the only women to have lived the human condition for herself, in total abandonment: we have seen why. Placing herself beyond earthly hierarchies, she, like Saint John of the Cross, felt no reassuring sky over her head. For both of them it was the same night, the same flashes of light, in each the same nothingness, in God the same plenitude. When finally it is possible for every human being to place his pride above sexual differences in the difficult glory of his free existence, only then will woman be able to make her history, her problems, her doubts, and her hopes those of humanity; only then will she be able to attempt to discover in her life and her works all of reality and not only her own person. As long as she still has to fight to become a human being, she cannot be a creator.

Once again, to explain her limits, we must refer to her situation and not to a mysterious essence: the future remains wide open. The idea that woman has no "creative genius" has been defended ad nauseam; Mme Marthe Borély, a noted antifeminist of former times, defends this thesis, among others: but it looks as if she tried to make her books the living proof of incoherence and feminine silliness, and so they contradict themselves. Besides, the idea of a given creative "instinct" must be rejected like that of the "eternal feminine" and put away in the attic of entities. Some misogynists affirm a bit more concretely that because women are neurotic, they will never create anything of value: but these same people often declare that genius is a neurosis. In any case, the example of Proust shows clearly enough that psychophysiological imbalance does not mean powerlessness or mediocrity. As for the argument drawn from history, we have just seen what we should think of it; the historical past cannot be considered as defining an eternal truth; it merely translates a situation that is showing itself to be historical precisely in that it is in the process of changing. How

could women ever have had genius when all possibility of accomplishing a work of genius—or just a work—was refused them? Old Europe formerly heaped its contempt on barbarian Americans for possessing neither artists nor writers. "Let us live before asking us to justify our existence," Jefferson wrote, in essence. Blacks give the same answers to racists who reproach them for not having produced a Whitman or Melville. Neither can the French proletariat invoke a name like Racine or Mallarmé. The free woman is just being born; when she conquers herself, she will perhaps justify Rimbaud's prophecy: "Poets will be. When woman's infinite servitude is broken, when she lives for herself and by herself, man—abominable until now—giving her her freedom, she too will be a poet! Woman will find the unknown! Will her worlds of ideas differ from ours? She will find strange, unfathomable, repugnant, delicious things, we will take them, we will understand them."⁸ Her "worlds of ideas" are not necessarily different from men's, because she will free herself by assimilating them; to know how singular she will remain and how important these singularities will continue to be, one would have to make some foolhardy predictions. What is beyond doubt is that until now women's possibilities have been stifled and lost to humanity, and in her and everyone's interest it is high time she be left to take her own chances.

8. Rimbaud to Paul Demyen, May 15, 1871.

one sense, one is always better off being on the side of the defeated; but if she is also of goodwill, unable to be self-sufficient, unwilling to crush the man with the weight of her destiny, she struggles with herself in an inextricable confusion. One meets so many of these cases in daily life for which there are no satisfactory solutions because they are defined by unsatisfactory conditions: a man who sees himself as obligated to maintain a woman he no longer loves materially and morally feels he is a victim; but if he abandoned without resources the one who has committed her whole life to him, she would be a victim in an equally unjust manner. The wrong does not come from individual perversity—and bad faith arises when each person attacks the other—it comes from a situation in the face of which all individual behavior is powerless. Women are “clingy,” they are a burden, and they suffer from it; their lot is that of a parasite that sucks the life from a foreign organism; were they endowed with an autonomous organism, were they able to fight against the world and wrest their subsistence from it, their dependence would be abolished: the man’s also. Both would undoubtedly be much better off for it.

A world where men and women would be equal is easy to imagine because it is exactly the one the Soviet revolution *promised*: women raised and educated exactly like men would work under the same conditions and for the same salaries;² erotic freedom would be accepted by custom, but the sexual act would no longer be considered a remunerable “service”; women would be *obliged* to provide another livelihood for themselves; marriage would be based on a free engagement that the spouses could break when they wanted to; motherhood would be freely chosen—that is, birth control and abortion would be allowed—and in return all mothers and their children would be given the same rights; maternity leave would be paid for by the society that would have responsibility for the children, which does not mean that they would be *taken* from their parents but that they would not be *abandoned* to them.

But is it enough to change laws, institutions, customs, public opinion, and the whole social context for men and women to really become peers? “Women will always be women,” say the skeptics; other seers prophesy that in shedding their femininity, they will not succeed in changing into men and will become monsters. This would mean that today’s woman is nature’s

2. That some arduous professions are prohibited to them does not contradict this idea: even men are seeking professional training more and more; their physical and intellectual capacities limit their choices; in any case, what is demanded is that no boundaries of sex or caste be drawn.

creation; it must be repeated again that within the human collectivity nothing is natural, and woman, among others, is a product developed by civilization; the intervention of others in her destiny is originary: if this process were driven in another way, it would produce a very different result. Woman is defined neither by her hormones nor by mysterious instincts but by the way she grasps, through foreign consciousnesses, her body and her relation to the world; the abyss that separates adolescent girls from adolescent boys was purposely dug out from early infancy; later, it would be impossible to keep woman from being what she *was made*, and she will always trail this past behind her; if the weight of this past is accurately measured, it is obvious that her destiny is not fixed in eternity. One must certainly not think that modifying her economic situation is enough to transform woman: this factor has been and remains the primordial factor of her development, but until it brings about the moral, social, and cultural consequences it heralds and requires, the new woman cannot appear; as of now, these consequences have been realized nowhere: in the U.S.S.R. no more than in France or the United States; and this is why today’s woman is torn between the past and the present; most often, she appears as a “real woman” disguised as a man, and she feels as awkward in her woman’s body as in her masculine garb. She has to shed her old skin and cut her own clothes. She will only be able to do this if there is a collective change. No one teacher can today shape a “female human being” that would be an exact homologue to the “male human being”: if raised like a boy, the young girl feels she is an exception, and that subjects her to a new kind of specification. Stendhal understood this, saying: “The forest must be planted all at once.” But if we suppose, by contrast, a society where sexual equality is concretely realized, this equality would newly assert itself in each individual.

If, from the earliest age, the little girl were raised with the same demands and honors, the same severity and freedom, as her brothers, taking part in the same studies and games, promised the same future, surrounded by women and men who are unambiguously equal to her, the meanings of the “castration complex” and the “Oedipus complex” would be profoundly modified. The mother would enjoy the same lasting prestige as the father if she assumed equal material and moral responsibility for the couple; the child would feel an androgynous world around her and not a masculine world; were she more affectively attracted to her father—which is not even certain—her love for him would be nuanced by a will to emulate him and not a feeling of weakness: she would not turn to passivity; if she were allowed to prove her worth in work and sports, actively rivaling boys, the absence of a penis—compensated for by the promise of a child—

would not suffice to cause an "inferiority complex"; correlatively, the boy would not have a natural "superiority complex" if it were not instilled in him and if he held women in the same esteem as men.³ The little girl would not seek sterile compensations in narcissism and dreams, she would not take herself as given, she would be interested in what she does, she would throw herself into her pursuits. I have said how much easier puberty would be if she surpassed it, like the boy, toward a free adult future; menstruation horrifies her only because it signifies a brutal descent into femininity; she would also assume her youthful eroticism more peacefully if she did not feel a frightening disgust for the rest of her destiny; a coherent sexual education would greatly help her to surmount this crisis. And thanks to coeducation, the august mystery of Man would have no occasion to arise: it would be killed by everyday familiarity and open competition. Objections to this system always imply respect for sexual taboos; but it is useless to try to inhibit curiosity and pleasure in children; this only results in creating repression, obsessions, and neuroses; exalted sentimentality, homosexual fervor, and the platonic passions of adolescent girls along with the whole procession of nonsense and dissipation are far more harmful than a few childish games and actual experiences. What would really be profitable for the young girl is that, not seeking in the male a demigod—but only a pal, a friend, a partner—she not be diverted from assuming her own existence; eroticism and love would be a free surpassing and not a resignation; she could experience them in a relationship of equal to equal. Of course, there is no question of writing off all the difficulties a child must overcome to become an adult; the most intelligent, tolerant education could not free her from having her own experiences at her own expense; what one would want is that obstacles should not accumulate gratuitously on her path. It is already an improvement that "depraved" little girls are no longer cauterized with red-hot irons; psychoanalysis has enlightened parents somewhat; yet the conditions in which woman's sexual education and initiation take place today are so deplorable that none of the objections to the idea of a radical change are valid. It is not a question of abolishing the contingencies and miseries of the human condition in her but of giving her the means to go beyond them.

Woman is the victim of no mysterious fate; the singularities that make her different derive their importance from the meaning applied to them;

3. I know a little boy of eight who lives with a mother, aunt, and grandmother, all three independent and active, and a grandfather who is half-senile. He has a crushing inferiority complex in relation to the female sex, though his mother tries to combat it. In his lycée he scorns his friends and professors because they are poor males.

they can be overcome as soon as they are grasped from new perspectives; we have seen that in her erotic experience, the woman feels—and often detests—male domination: it must not be concluded that her ovaries condemn her to living on her knees eternally. Virile aggressiveness is a lordly privilege only within a system where everything conspires to affirm masculine sovereignty; and woman *feels* so deeply passive in the love act only because she already *thinks* herself that way. Many modern women who claim their dignity as human beings still grasp their sexual lives by referring back to a tradition of slavery: so it seems humiliating to them to lie under the man and be penetrated by him, and they tense up into frigidity; but if reality were different, the meaning sexual gestures and postures symbolically express would be different as well: a woman who pays, who dominates her lover, can, for example, feel proud of her superb inertia and think that she is enslaving the male who is actively exerting himself; and today there are already many sexually balanced couples for whom notions of victory and defeat yield to an idea of exchange. In fact, man is, like woman, a flesh, thus a passivity, the plaything of his hormones and the species, uneasy prey to his desire; and she, like him, in the heart of carnal fever, is consent, voluntary gift, and activity; each of them lives the strange ambiguity of existence made body in his or her own way. In these combats where they believe they are tackling each other, they are fighting their own self, projecting onto their partner the part of themselves they repudiate; instead of living the ambiguity of their condition, each one tries to make the other accept the abjection of this condition and reserves the honor of it for one's self. If, however, both assumed it with lucid modesty, as the correlate of authentic pride, they would recognize each other as peers and live the erotic drama in harmony. The fact of being a human being is infinitely more important than all the singularities that distinguish human beings; it is never the given that confers superiority: "virtue," as the ancients called it, is defined at the level of "what depends on us." The same drama of flesh and spirit, and of finitude and transcendence, plays itself out in both sexes; both are eaten away by time, stalked by death, they have the same essential need of the other; and they can take the same glory from their freedom; if they knew how to savor it, they would no longer be tempted to contend for false privileges; and fraternity could then be born between them.

People will say that all these considerations are merely utopian because to "remake woman," society would have had to have already made her *really* man's equal; conservatives have never missed the chance to denounce this vicious circle in all analogous circumstances: yet history does not go round in circles. Without a doubt, if a caste is maintained in an inferior position, it remains inferior: but freedom can break the circle; let

blacks vote and they become worthy of the vote; give woman responsibilities and she knows how to assume them; the fact is, one would not think of expecting gratuitous generosity from oppressors; but the revolt of the oppressed at times and changes in the privileged caste at other times create new situations; and this is how men, in their own interest, have been led to partially emancipate women: women need only pursue their rise, and the success they obtain encourages them; it seems most certain that they will sooner or later attain perfect economic and social equality, which will bring about an inner metamorphosis.

In any case, some will object that if such a world is possible, it is not desirable. When woman is "the same" as her male, life will lose "its spice." This argument is not new either: those who have an interest in perpetuating the present always shed tears for the marvelous past about to disappear without casting a smile on the young future. It is true that by doing away with slave markets, we destroyed those great plantations lined with azaleas and camellias, we dismantled the whole delicate Southern civilization; old lace was put away in the attics of time along with the pure timbres of the Sistine castrati, and there is a certain "feminine charm" that risks turning to dust as well. I grant that only a barbarian would not appreciate rare flowers, lace, the crystal clear voice of a eunuch, or feminine charm. When shown in her splendor, the "charming woman" is a far more exalting object than "the idiotic paintings, over-doors, decors, circus backdrops, sideboards, or popular illuminations" that maddened Rimbaud; adorned with the most modern of artifices, worked on with the newest techniques, she comes from the remotest ages, from Thebes, Minos, Chichén Itzá; and she is also the totem planted in the heart of the African jungle; she is a helicopter and she is a bird; and here is the greatest wonder: beneath her painted hair, the rustling of leaves becomes a thought and words escape from her breasts. Men reach out their eager hands to the marvel; but as soon as they grasp it, it vanishes; the wife and the mistress speak like everyone else, with their mouths: their words are worth exactly what they are worth; their breasts as well. Does such a fleeting miracle—and one so rare—justify perpetuating a situation that is so damaging for both sexes? The beauty of flowers and women's charms can be appreciated for what they are worth; if these treasures are paid for with blood or misery, one must be willing to sacrifice them.

The fact is that this sacrifice appears particularly heavy to men; few of them really wish in their hearts to see women accomplish themselves; those who scorn woman do not see what they would have to gain, and those who cherish her see too well what they have to lose; and it is true that present-

day developments not only threaten feminine charm: in deciding to live for herself, woman will abdicate the functions as double and mediator that provide her with her privileged place within the masculine universe; for the man caught between the silence of nature and the demanding presence of other freedoms, a being who is both his peer and a passive thing appears as a great treasure; he may well perceive his companion in a mythical form, but the experiences of which she is the source or pretext are no less real: and there are hardly more precious, intimate, or urgent ones; it cannot be denied that feminine dependence, inferiority, and misfortune give women their unique character; assuredly, women's autonomy, even if it spares men a good number of problems, will also deny them many conveniences; assuredly, there are certain ways of living the sexual adventure that will be lost in the world of tomorrow: but this does not mean that love, happiness, poetry, and dreams will be banished from it. Let us beware lest our lack of imagination impoverish the future; the future is only an abstraction for us; each of us secretly laments the absence in it of what was; but tomorrow's humankind will live the future in its flesh and in its freedom; that future will be its present, and humankind will in turn prefer it; new carnal and affective relations of which we cannot conceive will be born between the sexes: friendships, rivalries, complicities, chaste or sexual companionships that past centuries would not have dreamed of are already appearing. For example, nothing seems more questionable to me than a catchphrase that dooms the new world to uniformity and then to boredom. I do not see an absence of boredom in this world of ours nor that freedom has ever created uniformity. First of all, certain differences between man and woman will always exist; her eroticism, and thus her sexual world, possessing a singular form, cannot fail to engender in her a sensuality, a singular sensitivity: her relation to her body, to the male body, and to the child will never be the same as those man has with his body, with the female body, and with the child; those who talk so much about "equality in difference" would be hard put not to grant me that there are differences in equality. Besides, it is institutions that create monotony: young and pretty, slaves of the harem are all the same in the sultan's arms; Christianity gave eroticism its flavor of sin and legend by endowing the human female with a soul; restoring woman's singular sovereignty will not remove the emotional value from amorous embraces. It is absurd to contend that orgies, vice, ecstasy, and passion would become impossible if man and woman were concretely peers; the contradictions opposing flesh to spirit, instant to time, the vertigo of immanence to the appeal of transcendence, the absolute of pleasure to the nothingness of oblivion will never disappear; tension, suffering, joy, and the

failure and triumph of existence will always be materialized in sexuality. To emancipate woman is to refuse to enclose her in the relations she sustains with man, but not to deny them; while she posits herself for herself, she will nonetheless continue to exist for him *as well*: recognizing each other as subject, each will remain an *other* for the other; reciprocity in their relations will not do away with the miracles that the division of human beings into two separate categories engenders: desire, possession, love, dreams, adventure; and the words that move us: “to give,” “to conquer,” and “to unite” will keep their meaning; on the contrary, it is when the slavery of half of humanity is abolished and with it the whole hypocritical system it implies that the “division” of humanity will reveal its authentic meaning and the human couple will discover its true form.

“The direct, natural, and necessary relation of person to person is the *relation of man to woman*,” said Marx.⁴ From the character of this relationship follows how much man as a *species-being*, as man, has come to be himself and to comprehend himself; the relation of man to woman is the most natural relation of human being to human being. It therefore reveals the extent to which man’s *natural* behavior has become *human*, or the extent to which the *human* essence in him has become a *natural* essence—the extent to which his *human nature* has come to be *natural* to him.

This could not be better said. Within the given world, it is up to man to make the reign of freedom triumph; to carry off this supreme victory, men and women must, among other things and beyond their natural differentiations, unequivocally affirm their brotherhood.

4. *Philosophical Works*, Volume 6. Marx’s italics. [Marx and Engels, *Collected Works*, Volume 6. —TRANS.]

Selected Sources

The works listed below are the published English translations that the translators consulted for Simone de Beauvoir’s French quotes, as well as the English-language books and publications to which she makes reference. In some instances, the translators translated Beauvoir’s citations themselves, for example, when she paraphrases an author. But the works are also included here as “selected sources.”

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