

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 on 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

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

5. See second part, page 126.

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 of 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

for was, first, being born free and not a slave and, second, a man and not a woman. But males could not have enjoyed this privilege so fully had they not considered it as founded in the absolute and in eternity: they sought to make the fact of their supremacy a right. "Those who made and compiled the laws, being men, favored their own sex, and the jurisconsults have turned the laws into principles," Poulain de la Barre continues. Lawmakers, priests, philosophers, writers, and scholars have gone to great lengths to prove that women's subordinate condition was willed in heaven and profitable on earth. Religions forged by men reflect this will for domination: they found ammunition in the legends of Eve and Pandora. They have put philosophy and theology in their service, as seen in the previously cited words of Aristotle and Saint Thomas. Since ancient times, satirists and moralists have delighted in depicting women's weaknesses. The violent indictments brought against them all through French literature are well-known: Montherlant, with less verve, picks up the tradition from Jean de Meung. This hostility seems sometimes founded but is often gratuitous; in truth, it covers up a more or less skillfully camouflaged will to self-justification. "It is much easier to accuse one sex than to excuse the other," says Montaigne. In certain cases, the process is transparent. It is striking, for example, that the Roman code limiting a wife's rights invokes "the imbecility and fragility of the sex" just when a weakening family structure makes her a threat to male heirs. It is striking that in the sixteenth century, to keep a married woman under wardship, the authority of Saint Augustine affirming "the wife is an animal neither reliable nor stable" is called on, whereas the unmarried woman is recognized as capable of managing her own affairs. Montaigne well understood the arbitrariness and injustice of the lot assigned to women: "Women are not wrong at all when they reject the rules of life that have been introduced into the world, inasmuch as it is the men who have made these without them. There is a natural plotting and scheming between them and us." But he does not go so far as to champion their cause. It is only in the eighteenth century that deeply democratic men begin to consider the issue objectively. Diderot, for one, tries to prove that, like man, woman is a human being. A bit later, John Stuart Mill ardently defends women. But these philosophers are exceptional in their impartiality. In the nineteenth century the feminist quarrel once again becomes a partisan quarrel; one of the consequences of the Industrial Revolution is that women enter the labor force: at that point, women's demands leave the realm of the theoretical and find economic grounds; their adversaries become all the more aggressive; even though landed property is partially discredited, the bourgeoisie clings to the old values

where family solidity guarantees private property: it insists all the more fiercely that woman's place be in the home as her emancipation becomes a real threat; even within the working class, men tried to thwart women's liberation because women were becoming dangerous competitors—especially as women were used to working for low salaries.⁶ To prove women's inferiority, antifeminists began to draw not only, as before, on religion, philosophy, and theology but also on science: biology, experimental psychology, and so forth. At most they were willing to grant "separate but equal status" to the *other* sex.* That winning formula is most significant: it is exactly that formula the Jim Crow laws put into practice with regard to black Americans; this so-called egalitarian segregation served only to introduce the most extreme forms of discrimination. This convergence is in no way pure chance: whether it is race, caste, class, or sex reduced to an inferior condition, the justification process is the same. "The eternal feminine" corresponds to "the black soul" or "the Jewish character." However, the Jewish problem on the whole is very different from the two others: for the anti-Semite, the Jew is more an enemy than an inferior, and no place on this earth is recognized as his own; it would be preferable to see him annihilated. But there are deep analogies between the situations of women and blacks: both are liberated today from the same paternalism, and the former master caste wants to keep them "in their place," that is, the place chosen for them; in both cases, they praise, more or less sincerely, the virtues of the "good black," the carefree, childlike, merry soul of the resigned black, and the woman who is a "true woman"—frivolous, infantile, irresponsible, the woman subjugated to man. In both cases, the ruling caste bases its argument on the state of affairs it created itself. The familiar line from George Bernard Shaw sums it up: The white American relegates the black to the rank of shoe-shine boy, and then concludes that blacks are only good for shining shoes. The same vicious circle can be found in all analogous circumstances: when an individual or a group of individuals is kept in a situation of inferiority, the fact is that he or they *are* inferior. But the scope of the verb *to be* must be understood; bad faith means giving it a substantive value, when in fact it has the sense of the Hegelian dynamic: *to be* is to have become, to have been made as one manifests oneself. Yes, women in general *are* today inferior to men; that is, their situation provides them

6. See Part Two, pp. 135–136.

* "*L'égalité dans la différence*" in the French text. Literal translation: "different but equal."

—TRANS.

with fewer possibilities: the question is whether this state of affairs must be perpetuated.

Many men wish it would be: not all men have yet laid down their arms. The conservative bourgeoisie continues to view women's liberation as a danger threatening their morality and their interests. Some men feel threatened by women's competition. In *Hebdo-Latin* the other day, a student declared: "Every woman student who takes a position as a doctor or lawyer is *stealing* a place from us." That student never questioned his rights over this world. Economic interests are not the only ones in play. One of the benefits that oppression secures for the oppressor is that the humblest among them feels *superior*: in the United States a "poor white" from the South can console himself for not being a "dirty nigger"; and more prosperous whites cleverly exploit this pride. Likewise, the most mediocre of males believes himself a demigod next to women. It was easier for M. de Montherlant to think himself a hero in front of women (handpicked, by the way) than to act the man among men, a role that many women assumed better than he did. Thus, in one of his articles in *Le Figaro Littéraire* in September 1948, M. Claude Mauriac—whom everyone admires for his powerful originality—could⁷ write about women: "*We* listen in a tone [*sic!*] of polite indifference . . . to the most brilliant one among them, knowing that her intelligence, in a more or less dazzling way, reflects ideas that come from *us*." Clearly his female interlocutor does not reflect M. Mauriac's own ideas, since he is known not to have any; that she reflects ideas originating with men is possible: among males themselves, more than one of them takes as his own opinions he did not invent; one might wonder if it would not be in M. Claude Mauriac's interest to converse with a good reflection of Descartes, Marx, or Gide rather than with himself; what is remarkable is that with the ambiguous "*we*," he identifies with Saint Paul, Hegel, Lenin, and Nietzsche, and from their heights he looks down on the herd of women who dare to speak to him on an equal footing; frankly, I know of more than one woman who would not put up with M. Mauriac's "tone of polite indifference."

I have stressed this example because of its disarming masculine naïveté. Men profit in many other more subtle ways from woman's alterity. For all those suffering from an inferiority complex, this is a miraculous liniment; no one is more arrogant toward women, more aggressive or more disdainful, than a man anxious about his own virility. Those who are not threatened by their fellow men are far more likely to recognize woman as a

7. At least he thought he could.

counterpart; but even for them the myth of the Woman, of the Other, remains precious for many reasons;⁸ they can hardly be blamed for not wanting to lightheartedly sacrifice all the benefits they derive from the myth: they know what they lose by relinquishing the woman of their dreams, but they do not know what the woman of tomorrow will bring them. It takes great abnegation to refuse to posit oneself as unique and absolute Subject. Besides, the vast majority of men do not explicitly make this position their own. They do not *posit* woman as inferior: they are too imbued today with the democratic ideal not to recognize all human beings as equals. Within the family, the male child and then the young man sees the woman as having the same social dignity as the adult male; afterward, he experiences in desire and love the resistance and independence of the desired and loved woman; married, he respects in his wife the spouse and the mother, and in the concrete experience of married life she affirms herself opposite him as a freedom. He can thus convince himself that there is no longer a social hierarchy between the sexes and that on the whole, in spite of their differences, woman is an equal. As he nevertheless recognizes some points of inferiority—professional incapacity being the predominant one—he attributes them to nature. When he has an attitude of benevolence and partnership toward a woman, he applies the principle of abstract equality; and he does not *posit* the concrete inequality he recognizes. But as soon as he clashes with her, the situation is reversed. He will apply the concrete inequality theme and will even allow himself to disavow abstract equality.⁹ This is how many men affirm, with quasi good faith, that women *are* equal to men and have no demands to make, and *at the same time* that women will never be equal to men and that their demands are in vain. It is difficult for men to measure the enormous extent of social discrimination that seems insignificant from the outside and whose moral and intellectual repercussions are so deep in woman that they appear to spring from an original nature.¹⁰ The man most sympathetic to women never knows her

8. The article by Michel Carrouges on this theme in *Cahiers du Sud*, no. 292, is significant. He writes with indignation: "If only there were no feminine myth but only bands of cooks, matrons, prostitutes, and bluestockings with functions of pleasure or utility!" So, according to him, woman has no existence for herself; he only takes into account her *function* in the male world. Her finality is in man; in fact, it is possible to prefer her poetic "function" to all others. The exact question is why she should be defined in relation to the man.

9. For example, man declares that he does not find his wife in any way diminished just because she does not have a profession: work in the home is just as noble and so on. Yet at the first argument he remonstrates, "You wouldn't be able to earn a living without me."

10. Describing this very process will be the object of Volume II of this study.

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.

Conclusion

“No, woman is not our brother; through negligence and corruption, we have made her a being apart, unknown, having no weapon but her sex, which is not only perpetual war but in addition an unfair weapon—adoring or hating, but not a frank companion or a being with *esprit de corps* and freemasonry—of the eternal little slave’s defiances.”

Many men would still subscribe to these words of Jules Laforgue; many think that there will always be *Sturm und Drang* between the two sexes and that fraternity will never be possible for them. The fact is that neither men nor women are satisfied with each other today. But the question is whether it is an original curse that condemns them to tear each other apart or whether the conflicts that pit them against each other express a transitory moment in human history.

We have seen that in spite of legends, no physiological destiny imposes eternal hostility on the Male and Female as such; even the notorious praying mantis devours her male only for lack of other food and for the good of the species: in the animal kingdom, from the top of the ladder to the bottom, all individuals are subordinated to the species. Moreover, humanity is something other than a species: it is a historical becoming; it is defined by the way it assumes natural facticity. Indeed, even with the greatest bad faith in the world, it is impossible to detect a rivalry between the male and the female human that is specifically physiological. And so their hostility is located on that ground that is intermediate between biology and psychology, namely, psychoanalysis. Woman, it is said, envies man’s penis and desires to castrate him, but the infantile desire for the penis only has importance in the adult woman’s life if she experiences her femininity as a mutilation; and it is only to the extent that the penis embodies all the privileges of virility that she wishes to appropriate the male organ for herself. It is generally agreed that her dream of castration has a symbolic significance: she wishes, so it is thought, to deprive the male of his transcendence. Her

wish, as we have seen, is much more ambiguous: she wishes, in a contradictory way, to *have* this transcendence, which presupposes that she both respects and denies it, and that she intends both to throw herself into it and to keep it within herself. This is to say that the drama does not unfold on a sexual level; sexuality, moreover, has never seemed to us to define a destiny or to provide in itself the key to human behavior, but to express the totality of a situation it helps define. The battle of the sexes is not immediately implied by the anatomy of man and woman. In fact, when it is mentioned, it is taken for granted that in the timeless heaven of Ideas a battle rages between these uncertain essences: the Eternal Feminine and the Eternal Masculine; and it is not noticed that this titanic combat assumes two totally different forms on earth, corresponding to different historical moments.

The woman confined to immanence tries to keep man in this prison as well; thus the prison will merge with the world, and she will no longer suffer from being shut up in it: the mother, the wife, the lover, are the jailers; society codified by men decrees that woman is inferior: she can only abolish this inferiority by destroying male superiority. She does her utmost to mutilate, to dominate man, she contradicts him, she denies his truth and values. But in doing that, she is only defending herself; neither immutable essence nor flawed choice has doomed her to immanence and inferiority. They were imposed on her. All oppression creates a state of war. This particular case is no exception. The existent considered as inessential cannot fail to attempt to reestablish his sovereignty.

Today, the combat is taking another form; instead of wanting to put man in prison, woman is trying to escape from it; she no longer seeks to drag him into the realms of immanence but to emerge into the light of transcendence. And the male attitude here creates a new conflict: the man petulantly “dumps” the woman. He is pleased to remain the sovereign subject, the absolute superior, the essential being; he refuses to consider his companion concretely as an equal; she responds to his defiance by an aggressive attitude. It is no longer a war between individuals imprisoned in their respective spheres: a caste claiming its rights lays siege but is held in check by the privileged caste. Two transcendences confront each other; instead of mutually recognizing each other, each freedom wants to dominate the other.

This difference in attitude is manifest on the sexual as well as the spiritual level; the “feminine” woman, by becoming a passive prey, tries to reduce the male to carnal passivity as well; she works at entrapping him, at imprisoning him, by the desire she arouses, docilely making herself a thing; the “emancipated” woman, on the contrary, wants to be active and prehensile and refuses the passivity the man attempts to impose on her.

Likewise, Élise and her followers do not accord any value to virile activities;* they place flesh above spirit, contingency above freedom, conventional wisdom above creative daring. But the “modern” woman accepts masculine values: she prides herself on thinking, acting, working, and creating on the same basis as males; instead of trying to belittle them, she declares herself their equal.

This claim is legitimate insofar as it is expressed in concrete ways; and it is men’s insolence that is then reprehensible. But in their defense it must be said that women themselves tend to confuse the issue. A Mabel Dodge attempted to enslave Lawrence by her feminine wiles in order to then dominate him spiritually; to show by their successes that they equal a man, many women strive to secure masculine support through sex; they play both sides, demanding both old-fashioned respect and modern esteem, relying on their old magic and their fledgling rights; it is understandable that the irritated man should go on the defensive, but he too is duplicitous when he demands that the woman play the game loyally whereas he, in his hostility and distrust, refuses to grant her indispensable trump cards. In reality, the struggle between them cannot be clear-cut, since woman’s very being is opacity; she does not stand in front of man as a subject but as an object paradoxically endowed with subjectivity; she assumes herself as both *self* and *other*, which is a contradiction with disconcerting consequences. When she makes a weapon of both her weakness and her strength, it is not a deliberate calculation: she is spontaneously seeking her salvation in the path imposed on her, that of passivity, at the same time as she is actively demanding her sovereignty; and this process is undoubtedly not “fair play,” but it is dictated by the ambiguous situation assigned to her. Man, though, when he treats her like a freedom, is indignant that she is still a trap for him; while he flatters and satisfies her in her role as his prey, he gets annoyed at her claims to autonomy; whatever he does, he feels duped and she feels wronged.

The conflict will last as long as men and women do not recognize each other as peers, that is, as long as femininity is perpetuated as such; which of them is the most determined to maintain it? The woman who frees herself from it nevertheless wants to conserve its prerogatives; and the man then demands that she assume its limitations. “It is easier to accuse one sex than to excuse the other,” says Montaigne. Meting out blame and approbation is useless. In fact, the vicious circle is so difficult to break here because each sex is victim both of the other and of itself; between two adversaries confronting each other in their pure freedom, an agreement could easily be

* *Bold Chronicle of a Strange Marriage.*—TRANS.

found, especially as this war does not benefit anyone; but the complexity of this whole business comes from the fact that each camp is its enemy's accomplice; the woman pursues a dream of resignation, the man a dream of alienation; inauthenticity does not pay: each one blames the other for the unhappiness brought on himself by taking the easy way out; what the man and the woman hate in each other is the striking failure of their own bad faith or their own cowardice.

We have seen why men originally enslaved women; the devaluation of femininity was a necessary step in human development; but this step could have brought about a collaboration between the two sexes; oppression is explained by the tendency of the existent to flee from himself by alienating himself in the other that he oppresses for that purpose; this tendency can be found in each individual man today: and the vast majority give in to it; a husband looks for himself in his wife, a lover in his mistress, in the guise of a stone statue; he seeks in her the myth of his virility, his sovereignty, his unmediated reality. "My husband never goes to the movies," says the woman, and the dubious masculine pronouncement is engraved in the marble of eternity. But he himself is a slave to his double: what effort to build up an image in which he is always in danger! After all, it is founded on the capricious freedom of women: it must constantly be made favorable; man is consumed by the concern to appear male, important, superior; he plays so that others will playact with him; he is also aggressive and nervous; he feels hostility for women because he is afraid of them, and he is afraid of them because he is afraid of the character with whom he is assimilated. What time and energy he wastes in getting rid of, idealizing, and transposing complexes, in speaking about women, seducing, and fearing them! He would be liberated with their liberation. But that is exactly what he fears. And he persists in the mystifications meant to maintain woman in her chains.

That she is mystified is something of which many men are conscious. "What a curse to be a woman! And yet the very worst curse when one is a woman is, in fact, not to understand that it is one," says Kierkegaard.¹ Attempts have been made to disguise this misfortune for a long time. Guardianship, for example, was eliminated: the woman was given "protec-

1. *In Vino Veritas*. He also says: "Gallantry is essentially woman's due; and the fact that she unconsciously accepts it may be explained by the solicitude of nature for the weak and the disadvantaged, those who feel more than recompensed by an illusion. But this illusion is precisely fatal . . . Is it not an even worse mockery to feel freed from misery—thanks to one's imagination, to be the dupe of imagination? Woman certainly is far from being *verwahrlost* [abandoned]; but inasmuch as she never can free herself from the illusion with which nature consoles her, she is."

tors," and if they were endowed with the rights of the old guardians, it was in her best interest. Forbidding her to work and keeping her at home is intended to defend her against herself and ensure her happiness. We have seen the poetic veils used to hide the monotonous burdens she bears: housework and maternity; in exchange for her freedom she was given fallacious treasures of "femininity" as a gift. Balzac described this maneuver very well in advising a man to treat her as a slave while persuading her she is a queen. Less cynical, many men endeavor to convince themselves she is truly privileged. There are American sociologists seriously teaching today the theory of "low-class gain," that is, the "advantages of the lower castes." In France as well it has often been proclaimed—albeit less scientifically—that workers are indeed lucky not to be obliged to "present well," and even more so tramps who could dress in rags and sleep on the streets, pleasures that were forbidden to the comte de Beaumont and those poor Wendel gentlemen. Like the filthy carefree souls cheerfully scratching their vermin, like the joyful Negroes laughing while being lashed, and like these gay Arabs of Sousse with a smile on their lips, burying their children who starved to death, the woman enjoys this incomparable privilege: irresponsibility. Without difficulties, without responsibility; without cares, she obviously has "the best part." What is troubling is that by a stubborn perversity—undoubtedly linked to original sin—across centuries and countries, the people who have the best part always shout to their benefactors: It's too much! I'll settle for yours! But the magnanimous capitalists, the generous colonialists, the superb males persist: Keep the best part, keep it!

The fact is that men encounter more complicity in their woman companions than the oppressor usually finds in the oppressed; and in bad faith they use it as a pretext to declare that woman *wanted* the destiny they imposed on her. We have seen that in reality her whole education conspires to bar her from paths of revolt and adventure; all of society—beginning with her respected parents—lies to her in extolling the high value of love, devotion, and the gift of self and in concealing the fact that neither lover, husband, nor children will be disposed to bear the burdensome responsibility of it. She cheerfully accepts these lies because they invite her to take the easy slope: and that is the worst of the crimes committed against her; from her childhood and throughout her life, she is spoiled, she is corrupted by the fact that this resignation, tempting to any existent anxious about her freedom, is meant to be her vocation; if one encourages a child to be lazy by entertaining him all day, without giving him the occasion to study, without showing him its value, no one will say when he reaches the age of man that he chose to be incapable and ignorant; this is how the woman is raised, without ever being taught the necessity of assuming her own existence; she

readily lets herself count on the protection, love, help, and guidance of others; she lets herself be fascinated by the hope of being able to realize her being without *doing* anything. She is wrong to yield to this temptation; but the man is ill advised to reproach her for it since it is he himself who tempted her. When a conflict breaks out between them, each one will blame the other for the situation; she will blame him for creating it: no one taught me to reason, to earn my living . . . He will blame her for accepting it: you know nothing, you are incompetent . . . Each sex thinks it can justify itself by taking the offensive: but the wrongs of one do not absolve the other.

The innumerable conflicts that set men and women against each other stem from the fact that neither sex assumes all the consequences of this situation that one proposes and the other undergoes: this problematic notion of "equality in inequality" that one uses to hide his despotism and the other her cowardice does not withstand the test of experience: in their exchanges, woman counts on the abstract equality she was guaranteed, and man the concrete inequality he observes. From there ensues the endless debate on the ambiguity of the words "give" and "take" in all relationships: she complains of giving everything; he protests that she takes everything from him. The woman has to understand that an exchange—a basic law of political economy—is negotiated according to the value the proposed merchandise has for the buyer and not for the seller: she was duped by being persuaded she was priceless; in reality she is merely a distraction, a pleasure, company, an inessential article for the man; for her he is the meaning, the justification of her existence; the two objects exchanged are thus not of the same quality; this inequality will be particularly noticeable because the time they spend together—and that fallaciously seems to be the same time—does not have the same value for both partners; during the evening the lover spends with his mistress, he might be doing something useful for his career, seeing friends, cultivating relations, entertaining himself; for a man normally integrated into his society, time is a positive asset: money, reputation, pleasure. By contrast, for the idle and bored woman time is a burden she aspires to get rid of; she considers it a benefit to succeed in killing time: the man's presence is pure profit; in many cases, what interests man the most in a relationship is the sexual gain he draws from it: he can, at worst, settle for spending just enough time with his mistress to perform the sex act, but what she herself wants—with rare exceptions—is to "dispose of" all this excess time she has on her hands: and—like the shopkeeper who will not sell his potatoes if one does not "take" his turnips—she only gives her body if the lover "takes" hours of conversation and outings into the bargain. Balance can be established if the cost of the whole matter does not seem too high to the man: that depends, of course, on how intense is his

desire and how important to him the occupations he sacrifices; but if the woman demands—offers—too much time, she becomes completely importunate, like the river that overflows its banks, and the man will choose to have nothing rather than to have too much. So she moderates her demands; but very often a balance is found at the price of a twofold tension: she believes that the man *has* her at a bargain price; he thinks he is paying too much. Of course this explanation is somewhat humorous; but—except in cases of jealous and exclusive passion where the man wants the woman in her entirety—this conflict, in tenderness, desire, even love, is always present; the man always has "something else to do" with his time, whereas she is trying to get rid of hers; and he does not consider the hours she devotes to him as a gift but as a burden. Generally, he consents to tolerate it because he knows he is on the privileged side, he has a "guilty conscience"; and if he has any goodwill, he tries to compensate for the unequal conditions with generosity; however, he gives himself credit for being compassionate, and at the first clash he treats the woman as ungrateful, he gets irritated: I am too generous. She feels she is acting like a beggar while she is convinced of the high value of her gifts, and this humiliates her. This explains the cruelty of which the woman often shows herself capable; she feels "self-righteous" because she has the bad role; she does not feel any obligation to accommodate the privileged caste, she thinks only of defending herself; she will even be very happy if she has the opportunity to display her resentment to the lover who has not been able to satisfy her: since he does not give enough, she will take everything back with fierce pleasure. Then the wounded man discovers the total price of the relationship whose every minute he disdained: he agrees to all the promises, even if it means he will again consider himself exploited when he has to honor them; he accuses his mistress of blackmailing him: she blames him for his stinginess; both consider themselves frustrated. Here too it is useless to allocate excuses and criticism: justice can never be created within injustice. It is impossible for a colonial administrator to conduct himself well with the indigenous population, or a general with his soldiers; the only solution is to be neither colonialist nor military leader; but a man cannot prevent himself from being a man. So here he is, thus guilty in spite of himself and oppressed by this fault that he has not committed himself; likewise, she is a victim and a shrew in spite of herself; sometimes he revolts, he chooses cruelty, but then he makes himself an accomplice of injustice, and the fault really becomes his; sometimes he allows himself to be destroyed, devoured, by his protesting victim: but then he feels duped; often he settles for a compromise that both diminishes him and puts him ill at ease. A man of goodwill will be more torn by the situation than the woman herself: in

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.]