Towards a woman's world
Women not only create different works, they create differently; not with less perseverance, but with a greater sense of the relative, the ephemeral.

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I have been robbed of the power of speech. It seems to me that all forms of public expression, written or spoken, have been taken away from me. For a long time I was convinced that this was a personal problem of mine, a sort of inborn handicap. Not to be able to write and communicate ideas explicitly or in a coherent fashion, not to be able to speak up in meetings and assemblies without heart-pounding and blushing wasn't normal, I thought. So I kept quiet. I kept quiet for a long time. Years went by and my life passed with them. Slowly I began to wonder, to ask myself who I was, which rôle
I played in the show that was my own life, whether it was really me who had chosen that rôle. Whatever the rôle might finally be, a growing desire developed in me that it not be a silent rôle any longer.

Learning how to speak, to express ourselves is a long and arduous process, but mainly it is done collectively. It is in women's groups - a lot has been written already in the feminist literature about this phenomenon - that we learn to speak up, to unveil our deepest fears, it is there that we realize that the ghosts that are haunting us are not personal handicaps but are typical of the majority of women. So, it is among women that we learn how to speak our own language. Once we have learned this, to go on to the next step, to create collectively, becomes quite natural.

So, together we speak up. We begin to invent, experiment, create, in order to reconquer our right to self-expression. Our freedom is unlimited since there are no pré-established models for us to follow - women have kept silent for centuries. It is up to us to invent our own language, to mold the words according to our own needs, to render them more flexible, more malleable, less heavy. As for the contents - it's about ourselves that we speak, about our daily lives, about our own experiences. We experiment, we live our stories, our History.

There again we escape all rules and regulations of our society - this society that is accustomed to observe, analyse and interpret
the lives of far-away tribes in Amazonia and Australia but that seems incapable of transforming its own social practice, which, as has been demonstrated in many learned works, leads to rapid and inexorable self-destruction.

There were three of us to make a tentative beginning. Three women, three life-stories so totally different one from the other, three ways of having lost our personal intimate form of expression. You, a professional writer, who woke up to the fact that your working tool, the well-fashioned language of the renowned newspaper, had silenced your woman's voice. You had to be incisive, cold and above all objective in order to compete in a paper made by and for men. And you, my sister, you fight daily for a little free space in the world of science and academicism. How to be a woman, how to act like a woman, yet at the same time produce like a man? As you well know, you are capable of doing it, you have done it: countless papers for the university, neutral and non-committal in style and contents. But today you ask yourself if the price you pay is not too high. And I, wife and mother, I have been dissociated from the productive world for years. I imagined for so long that my salvation would lie in entering that male world, in learning the language and behaviour of those who have "made it".

Our common enterprise turns into an adventure, a happening for each one of us. We set out at random, without a table of contents, without any well-elaborated structures. We want to escape all exterior constraints, we want to create freely. But first we had to learn how.
So we said that we would see each other again in a few days' time, after jotting down on paper the things we wanted to express most, the things that would flow most easily from our hearts and pens. There followed four days of anguish, insomnia, of total frustration. Nothing, absolutely nothing flowed from my pen very easily. A little try here, a little try there, some disconnected sentences, some heavy theorizing imitating models that most obviously weren't mine. Hours, days passed. Clearly I wasn't gifted that way; it would be better to admit this at once. But what if I wrote you a letter, speaking about myself, my fears, my discouragement ...?

We met again with our first efforts, our pieces of paper, still a little hesitant. You, so conditioned by harsh and destructive criticism, ready to reactivate you defense mechanisms; me ready for a quick acceptance of failure ("I can't do it, I give up, as usual ...")

And then suddenly something magical happened. As we told our stories, as we read each other's stories, the contours of our paper began slowly to emerge before our eyes. We who are so different and yet so similar, suddenly we discover ourselves to be in full process of creation, our own creation. The pieces fit together, the picture of our life begins to take shape. We talk, discuss, we work. Work, life, everything becomes one, for a few hours we are taken in by this climate of freedom, we feel whole. I discover that you, too, my sisters, found it difficult to speak with a new voice, in a world where everything is still to be discovered. It is so difficult.
and yet so exciting, to free ourselves from this omnipresent censure-
ship. We had to tell ourselves once more that the critical judgement
of our professors, bosses, husbands wasn't going to destroy us any
longer, since there were at least three of us to believe in what
we were doing.

We are swept along by the current of our common enterprise. We have
touched on a reality which we had sensed for a long time without
quite believing it: women's knowledge, women's history is made and
written through the experiences of each and all women. At this point
the frontiers fall, we are no longer three, we become many. We contact
other women. Two others joined us, because they also needed to ex-
press themselves, and they, like us, were afraid to do it alone. So
they added their voices, their lives, their thoughts, which were
still ringing in our ears after all those long evenings spent together.

And now? How many more will join us? Everything seems possible now.

I would have liked to leave a blank page here, so that another woman
like me, like you, might fill it up. But she would probably need more
than a blank sheet of paper, she would need the faces, bodies, voices,
laughter of other women. She would need more than a simple text talk-
ing about the experience of collective creation. It is an experience
to be lived.
I search, I search, I try to understand.
I try to give what I have lived to somebody, and I don't know who to give it to. But I don't want to keep what I have lived all to myself. I don't know what to do with what I have lived. I am afraid of this deep chaos. If I persever and consider myself real, I shall become lost because I will not know where my new self fits in.
If I pursue my fragmentary vision, the whole world will have to change in order to contain me.

Clarice Lispector
A Paixão segundo G.H.

Women are in revolt. Women are changing. The sweet submissive creatures - gentle virgin, loving wife and mother, kindly grandmother, poet's muse - are undergoing a metamorphosis, revealing the witch, the hysteric, the whore. Women are in revolt: and their revolt is so strong, so irreversible, that the condescending, fondly contemptuous smiles of men - be they technocrats or progressives - are turning into an uneasiness which is the prelude to fear. Beyond a certain point, men no longer understand.

In the early days, torn between certainty and guilt, caught half-
way between our nervousness at belonging to Women's Lib and the point of no return, we still stammered our excuses and explanations. What language to use? How to explain the self-evident - the thing we all knew from experience, the thing we had suffered from so much? How to explain our oppression? We groped for familiar words which might, we hoped, clear the way ahead. We tried our best to fit into the mould of some known and accepted concept. If we pull our elbows in a little bit, we thought, surely one of those concepts will serve to describe us.

So we say: the work we do is unpaid work. In the kitchen, at our daily chores, stitch by stitch we assure the reproduction of labour power and the psychological stability of the family. But the economists ignore us, the GNP leaves us out of account. The activity of the female sex is not work. "Until now domestic work has been treated as a secondary sexual characteristic of women. It has not been considered an economic category."(1)

Economic exploitation, the place of women in the world of labour: the women's movement is very much alive to these phenomena. We demand wages, we insist on being paid. Although some of us oppose it, although we argue fiercely about it because some of us believe that it perpetuates the division of labour, the housewife's wage is one of the demands of Women's Lib. Economic exploitation, division of labour, trade unionism, class struggle: that is the language they understand. Besides, what we're saying is true. So we explain ourselves. And yet we know very well that something more is at issue.
We have been made to feel that we are less than nothing, that we exist only in the image of the Other, that our sole wish and duty is to become the Other, to become Man, model and judge, lord and ideal. Women are supposed to be good for nothing, women are naturally inferior. It is said that the condition of women is the same as that of the colonized peoples: the stolen soul, the refusal of oneself for the sake of fusion with the Other, an impossible fusion which, when it fails, provokes hatred, revolt and desertion. Women are compared to colonized Blacks; it is said that, like the Blacks, they are having their moment of rebellion - the moment immediately following upon frustration, the moment of acute incompatibility which all colonized peoples have experienced. Once the ancestral resentments have been released, women will achieve rationality and normalization, a modus vivendi free from ill-feeling at which all the ex-colonized peoples arrive (but do they?) once they are free to assert themselves. We know all about the history of the colonized peoples it has been as lived, described and theorized upon by men. When men talk about the women's movement they quote Fanon, and we too quote Fanon and invoke the colonized peoples because that way, by analogy, men can at least understand something. So that's another way we express ourselves.

Still, it is not enough. Something else, or at any rate something more, is at issue. However hard we may try to explain our oppression by borrowing known concepts and referring to known situations (the concept of the proletariat, the situation of the colonized) - however successfully we may establish analogies with the political status of
other oppressed categories already recognized as such, we know that such explanations do not cover our lived experience or our suffering. They are not enough. To say what we have to say there would have to be a new language, a science or a non-science, something new, and as yet unknown, to encompass an oppression we have only just discovered in all its enormity.

If our work is unpaid, if it creates a surplus value which our bosses put in their pockets, we are entitled to fight; we have a right to our class struggle. If our territory has been invaded, if we have been robbed of our riches or our souls, if we have been reduced to slavery, we have a right to our national liberation struggle. But if, in the act of love, we feel that the man is raping us instead of loving us; if we cannot achieve orgasm and are afraid to say so; if our bodies and the fruits of our bodies are the property of someone else who disposes of them at will - what is our struggle to be called? Feminism, perhaps. Not to be taken seriously. The collective hysteria of petty-bourgeois intellectual females.

The question comes up at the precise moment when we discover the vacuum of our own identity. For each one of us, this vacuum is not only a psychological and individual experience but also a common one which we undergo collectively as an oppressed group. The oppression, the marginality of women are all too obvious. It isn't by chance that these facts have scarcely attracted the attention of sociologists: people see only what they want to see.

What shall be our starting point in building a common identity
for ourselves? Where are we to obtain our knowledge, the "science" which will be our own and which we shall construct by ourselves—unless we do it from within ourselves? We come to know ourselves and one another in our consciousness-raising groups, our family groups, our mothers' groups, our abortion, psychoanalysis, political, politics-and-psychoanalysis groups—wherever we tackle some aspect of the problems that assail us, wherever we tell our stories in minutest detail, wherever—we no matter what starting point we have chosen—we always end up by talking about our lives, our work, our mother, father, children, men, our bosses at work or in bed. As we tell our stories as women and among women, we discover a new knowledge and we make the experience of new relationships, a world of women very far removed from that of men.

World of men, world of women. A new dichotomy. What is the world of women? Every militant knows the answer and yet it is hard to explain. A feminine way of life? A new look at civilization? It is hard to explain, but all women who have had an experience of life within Women's Lib (which comes closest to life as they imagine it) know without words what they are talking about. Nothing surprising about our wordlessness, since words have been denied us for so long, and since, anyway, words have been perverted into the empty verbiage of the advanced industrial societies. To live inside Women's Lib is to be bathed in the waters of dreams, of utopia, of sensitivity. It is a new emotional experience that resists conceptualization. The world of men—why, it is as it is, we know all about it. But what do we women want? What is this alternative way of life of
which we have tasted and which we cannot or do not want to explain? Often, among ourselves, we say: "men don't understand anything anyway ..." We're sick of trying to make ourselves heard, sick of trying to translate our language (which has so little clarity and logic about it) for men who are so demanding and yet so inadequate, so conditioned by the language of the visible, palpable and quantifiable. Sometimes we catch ourselves wondering whether, the world we're stuck in being what it is, our only way out is not into utopia. The world is out of joint, and we women are living in a time which is not ours, not women's time. How to be a woman?

The world men have created is so strong, so sure of itself, so all-pervasive, so crushing that they cannot even realize that it could be otherwise. Men do not understand their world any more than we do, but they are entrenched in it for better or for worse, settled into it on top of our bodies, our heads, our lives. The world of men, masterpiece of civilization, where does it take us? Women are entitled to ask such questions because they are only partly responsible for this world. They suffer it against their will. Women's time, which used to be the time of marginality and repression, is today the time of clandestinity.

Women are in revolt. Women are banding together. The groups multiply and inside them we live and we learn together. We learn about the world and what the world has made of us; we learn what we are going to make of the world. We learn our archetypes, our biographies, our here-and-now. Women are speaking up, and their voices prophesy a
different world. Women are becoming militant. We have all known those evenings of near-clandestinity when it's quite impossible to explain to the next-door neighbor where it is we're going: the women's group evenings. In my group there were twenty-odd of us and we wanted to engage in politics, wanted to be militants. Each time we met I learned something new. I understood that the old politics were dead and buried. What we talked about was our own lived experience; and if, at the beginning, we still worried about the value and importance of what we were doing, we soon discovered that in doing it we were creating the new politics.

Why is this so difficult to grasp? Why do we feel that we shall never be the same again, that we have escaped from the old world's clutches for good - and yet everything seems to us so blurred and vague? Our complexes go back so many hundreds of years, our need for models to follow is still so strong that we might, perhaps, have preferred to talk about tactics and strategies and alliances, about all the things that smell reassuringly of the old politics. We would have felt safer. And yet, in the end, we persisted in talking to each other about our lives - and everything was changed. Shyness dispelled forever, a taste of freedom on our lips. An event. You cannot describe the nature of this event, you cannot convey it. It belongs to the women's groups. You can write a treatise about celebration, but you won't make people hear the music of the fête.

All this has left its mark upon us - more than that, it has changed us. And yet we are unable to produce - to write, express, make public
our experience. Epics have been written to celebrate the courage of the brave. All revolutions are exalting, except ours. Our revolution is secret, it lies hidden in the dark, humid depths. A she-revolution. It is made up of unforgettable moments which make ordinary life absurd, of an interpersonal warmth which makes the man-made city and its appalling incommunicabilities impossible to accept. It makes us incompatible.

Why can we not produce, or if we do, why with such difficulty? A text is an object, and here I am busily making one. It’s a job. But why do we have to produce, to work at jobs, all the time? Why must we subscribe to a work ethic which is becoming more and more anachronistic and discredited? My group proved incapable of producing, of explaining and justifying itself by its work. Was that an unconscious refusal of the ethic? Was it the pleasure principle - or, as we more simply put it, "having fun", being contented with a few happy moments? But then where is our militancy? How do you militate in a women's group? We have held demonstrations, brandished banners, occupied premises, painted on walls. We even had a strike. We've militated and protested with the best of them and yet I can't help feeling that the real women's revolution is taking place elsewhere - at those evening meetings where we produce so little, let ourselves go, have fun, say "no" to what we do the rest of the day. Where it is always Sunday.

We dream of new ... a new what? Life, militancy, politics? It all adds up to a single whole, that much we know already. But everything
seems so marginal. There are so few of us, we have so little power. We ought to be more efficient. We ought to have a visible enemy with whom to fight a visible battle with tangible victories. But what is a victory? The answer is shrouded in confusion. Efficiency is a ghost, a condition of work ... and of adult work, at that. But we haven't yet got that far.

For the present we talk about ourselves. We look for warmth, tenderness, understanding, perfect concord where all differences are wiped out, nostalgic recollection. We become a unit – child-mother, mother-child; we form a single body: the group. That's pleasure, yes, but a pleasure to be found at the end of a road along which we regress as well as advance, a road made up of our slowly revealed life-histories where, for the first time, we dare to look at ourselves. We see our lives and as we try to understand them we find the point of non-differentiation at which we are all the same thing: a woman. Of course we regress. We have often said so ourselves. We are looking for a state of fusion which will protect us against everything that lies outside us, everything that threatens us. We are looking for the mother, the womb. We regress, but why? Because the adult in us couldn't take it any more, because the adult women that we all were did not exist, we were mere creatures of a world of repression, of fears and desires. We were made of nothing but repression – the repression we had to practice on ourselves in order to be socially accepted, to fit the woman-image required of us. A woman is an adult only under duress. She cannot have an adult identity because she is only an image reflected in the mirror of men. She has no identity. How can we find our iden-
tity in front of a mirror if the image it sends back to us is ready-
made - an image men dreamed up and imprinted on the mirror for all
time? What were we to do, what good was it to us, our imposed iden-
tity of supposedly adult women? We have all had to regress, to un-
make the twisted, jerry-built structure of our identities. We have
had to look back to our childhood - our personal, biographical child-
hood but also our phylogenetic one, our place in civilization. As in-
dividuals and as women we have had to go back to our earliest be-
ginnings in order to understand ourselves and open up the possibi-
licity of a reconstruction - a new identity, this time a genuinely
adult one, genuinely identical with ourselves.

We are only just beginning to walk. We have barely emerged into day-
light. Today we feel less and less need to be among ourselves; we are
beginning to want to do things together. But as we take our first ste
we feel as though we had lost a third leg which stopped us going for-
ward but which also gave us a certain stability, such as a tripod has.
The third leg we have lost is our status as wives and mothers, our
incomparable beauty, the look of approval and appropriation in men's
eyes, our destiny as kept courtesans. We have renounced once and for
all the nasty little competitive games in which we used to indulge,
hurting other women for lack of courage to destroy ourselves. We
have lost so many things that many of us are spinning around like a
ship in a gale. Who is to tell us whether we are right? Who except
ourselves? Here we are, with only two legs to stand on. It's hard.
It's too normal.
So many losses, so many gaps to fill. Our enthusiasm, our exaltation were such that many of us believed - consciously or not - in the possibility of a women's world where we might rediscover our lost security, or at least find compensation for its loss. That world is a world of dreams. It is our never-never land. And yet the dream has left a legacy - that of a better life-experience, an imperceptible change in human relationships. Our experience has not only been regressive. Out of such regression, future perspectives are born. One thing is clear: the world of men isn't our world. We do not want to, we cannot suffer it any longer, because we have known another. The time has come to feminize the world.

1) Isabel Larguie and John Dumoulin, Towards a Science of Women's Liberation, London.
"The abolition of the oppression of women does not, by itself, bring about the abolition of feminine content."

The differences between the sexes do not lie in the same field as the artificial differences which class society has created; nor will they disappear with that society.

Ernst Bloch
The Hope Principle

The women's movement was born generations ago in protest against the exclusion of women from male activities. Many battles have been fought on this front and little by little, although many still remain to be won, the outcome of the campaign has come to seem certain. Schools, universities, the medical and legal professions, science and technology, politics and government, even business and the priesthood in a number of churches are now open to us; and, conversely, the notion that men ought to share work traditionally assigned to women is becoming more and more
widely accepted, if not as yet as widely applied in practice.
Going out to work and making a success of it has brought eco-

mic independence and increased self-confidence to millions of
women. It is a right we must defend. But, the bouquets of Inter-
national Women's Year notwithstanding, we have to admit that our
presence on the economic scene has not made very much difference
to the world at large. All the current values, all the institu-
tions, all prevailing ideas about how society should be organi-
ized, how people should live together, are still unshakably male.
And these institutions, values and ideas are increasingly seen
to be inadequate.

Many feminists today are no longer interested in proving women's
potential equality with men but, rather, in identifying the are-
as in which women have something special to contribute. It is
difficult to attempt to do this without, at first glance, appear-
ing reactionary. We have been told for so long that our role is
in the private and intimate sphere of life (i.e., according to
the male scale of values, the unimportant sphere) that anything
short of a vehement denial must seem like a betrayal of feminist
principles. In this dilemma Marxism, at least in its narrow in-
terpretation, is not much help. In Marxist terms women at home
are not producers; and it is the producers of economic values
who shall inherit the earth. One of the tenets of socialism to-
day tacitly accepted far outside the socialist countries is that
those who do the work should have their say about both the work
they do and its product. The exact range and forms of such co-
determination are still fought and argued over, but its principle is recognized (if only as an object of lip service) throughout the world. The idea of what constitutes economically productive work has not, however, been questioned since Mao in China and Fanon in Algeria put the peasants' revolutionary potential on a par with that of the industrial working class. Today the politically conscious worker or peasant knows that his point of view is not to be ignored; he is no longer overawed by the technician, the manager, the landowner. The producer's point of view matters; that is part of elementary social justice. The women's does not. I believe we should claim our right to share in the running of society, not only as producers of economic goods side by side with men, but also - and more specifically - as the prime producers of human beings.

I do not, of course, mean simply as birth-givers. I mean the long, painstaking and difficult process whereby the newborn baby is transformed into a child ready for school: an immensely important, undervalued job which takes four or five years, and which everywhere in the world is performed by women alone. (There are said to be exceptions in Sweden and elsewhere, but they are too rare and too recent to have had much impact.)

The traditional occupation of women is usually described as "housework, cooking and the care of children". The three are lumped together and no one recognizes that between the first two and the third there is a difference in kind. Cooking and housekeeping are
services; rearing a child is a productive act. I believe that the reason why this difference is ignored is deeply rooted in philosophy and religion. If you believe that man is created in the image of God, it is difficult and embarrassing to admit that man in his early infancy not only does not resemble God but actually does not even look very much like Man; and unless somebody (i.e., some woman) is willing to work long and hard on his body and mind, he never will. (Anthropological studies of children abandoned in infancy and growing up alone, of which Malson's Les Enfants Sauvages is the most widely known, leave us in no doubt about this fact.)

In the early months of a child's life this work is very largely a matter of feeding, and since human beings are mammals it has always been performed by the mother. (A bottle-fed baby can, of course, be tended by a man, but rarely is.) But as the child begins to cut teeth, walk, talk and learn, the feeding component of the job gets progressively smaller. Even a six-months old is already vastly influencable. The person he or she will eventually become (all modern psychology bears this out) is formed between the earliest awakening of consciousness and the time when, filled to the brim with feminine teaching, the child goes off to school. The work that gets done during this period cannot (and this, in my opinion, is a serious flaw in Marxist doctrine) be labelled as mere reproduction. To call it thus is to ignore the transformation which is wrought, to perpetuate the religious idea of the human soul being somehow mysteriously ready-made at birth, and - coincidentally - to belittle the function of women as productive
members of society.

All work is a two-way process: the worker transforms the object, the work moulds the worker's mentality, often without his being aware of it. The biological function of motherhood is played up very considerably in most cultures, mostly, I suspect, because motherhood is something that happens to women, something that is thrust upon them, with or without their consent, by men (frequently referred to in this context as "nature"). Becoming a mother is (or can be represented as being) a rather passive thing. Being a mother during the long, difficult years between the child's birth and the moment when society become interested enough to take a hand is a very active thing indeed. This, perhaps, is precisely the reason for the complete silence maintained around those years. Natasha wanders through the last pages of *War and Peace* with a shit-soiled nappy in her hand, and that is about the extent to which this aspect of life is acknowledged in world literature. Yet everybody, writers, film-makers, philosophers and psychologists included, has experienced those years of life and in fact owes his adult personality to the work done during those years by his mother or some other woman. The silence is so complete that women themselves, in their obliging fashion, have agreed to play down this essential work they do, or at least to forget about it as quickly as possible once it is over. Ask any woman what she was doing while her children were young. Oh, nothing much, she will tell you. I was just a vegetable.
Yet because this work, like all other work done to the exclusion of any other for long periods, moulds the worker's mentality. I believe that women do in fact have a mentality different from men who do not do this type of work. Try living for anything between five and twenty years (depending on the number of children you have and the gaps between their ages) being wholly responsible for another person's life: their health and safety, their intelligence, their emotional and imaginative growth, even their sleep. I suppose a few artists and maybe some scientists who have worked on long-term projects have a glimmering of what it is like; but novels, symphonies and linear accelerators do not get scarlet fever, do not fall off bicycles, do not awaken screaming from a nightmare. Try living with that kind of responsibility for years: will you be quite unchanged by it? And if an entire sex lives through this kind of experience at some time or another, can its mentality be quite the same as that of the other sex which—once its work, however arduous, is done—expects as of right to sleep the sleep of the just?

(Naturally, not all women are mothers or child-raisers. But then not every member of the working class actually works in a factory. The collective experience is so common that no woman wholly escapes its consequences.)

A sense of continuous, endless, round-the-clock responsibility is, then, one of the occupational characteristics of women. The fact that every woman at some time resents the occupation as an en—
slavement - which, more than any other kind of work, it is - alters nothing. During the early years of our children's lives we learn that responsibility is not something you put aside at five-thirty in the afternoon. In those years there is not, as men would have it, a time and a place for everything. Many of us are rendered permanently anxious by the experience even after its object - the baby - has been removed. Many others develop a capacity for enjoyment of freedom, unequalled by men's, which society would do well to learn.

But this is only one of the aspects of the work. There is also a constant element of choice, which may be conscious or not depending on the woman's general level of consciousness, but which is exercised all the time. Just as the food you give your child will build the body inside which he will live to the end of his days, so every word, every action of yours will serve as a model to be copied or rebelled against. The job Pygmalion did on Galatea was nothing compared to what any woman does for any infant in her care.

Next, intuition. Blind people develop a very acute sense of touch, deaf people rely on their eyes, women, by dint of spending years of their lives in the company of people who cannot yet talk, have acquired intuition. But intuition is more than the knack of understanding messages conveyed otherwise than by speech; it is also the ability, when confronted by a whole set of data, to pick out the important one. Intuition is intelligence faster than the speed
of thought. We have it.

Then, a sense of proportion, or if you prefer, a sense of humour. Compared with the importance of maintaining and reinforcing life, that of most other pursuits is small. Because of the collective conditioning I have described, women know this better than men. But men, feeling unsure of their own sense of proportion, do not trust women (or children) to attend to matters of secondary importance, such as order, punctuality, cleanliness and so forth. They have therefore inflated the importance of these things to absurd proportions, have thrust these inflated values upon women, and have complained about the humourlessness of women ever since. When a few women who trust one another get together, the most liberating thing they do is laugh. They laugh at the absurdity of treating unimportant things as important. It would do no harm if such laughter were heard further afield.

All these qualities and many others come into being, develop and grow in the process of the supreme creative act which is the rearing of human beings; and all this time the fathers (always excepting those Swedes and a few other amiable eccentrics) are hovering on the sidelines, waiting for what they consider their child's real life to begin.

Once the child has been sufficiently prepared to enter school, the mother abdicates. Her relationship with the child, from being all-embracing, becomes partial and subservient, similar to that
which binds her to her man but without the shared pleasure of sexuality. Girl or boy, the child graduates into a world whose values are determined and controlled by men. Of course these values are passed down through the woman even during the years of infancy; but because of the lack of interest on the part of the outside world — that freedom from interference which alone makes the work bearable — these values are strongly coloured by the woman's femininity. Then school begins nothing is ever the same again.

Nor should it be. I am not campaigning for an extension of those years at hard labour, far from it. Neither am I asking for a collective medal to be issued to all womankind in belated recognition of services rendered. Still less do I want men to persist in steering clear of the nursery. The qualities I speak of are implanted firmly enough to remain with us if the work which generated them is shared from this moment onward. What I do suggest is that women (not only mothers) should become conscious of the extraordinary range of qualities which they inherit or develop by reason of the unique activity I have tried to describe; that instead of hiding, disguising, suppressing and apologizing for those qualities, they should exhibit them proudly; and that, since they are the essential producers of mankind, they should insist on making their voice as women heard in all the affairs of mankind.
...Because all literature is a long letter to a virtual, present, invisible correspondent, or else a future passion we liquidate, or feed, or seek after. And it has already been said that the interest does not lie in the object, which is a mere pretext, but first and foremost in the passion; to which I would add that the interest does not lie in the passion, which is a mere pretext, but first and foremost in its practice.

New Portuguese Letters

My dear R.,

Will I be really free one day? Shall we, one day, really be free? Where do they come from, tell me, these bonds that are so heavy and so hard to break?

I would have liked to write this letter to my mother. It wouldn't have been the same letter, of course. More's the pity. One day we ought to be able to write such letters to our mothers. But there's
a long way to go yet before that can happen. And yet it seems to me that we're already well on the way. We're on our way, we women, and no one can stop us any more. We're on our way, and sometimes we feel as if we were taking the whole world along with us ... if the world wants to come along.

Sometimes I lose heart. I doubt my strength. An awful lot is expected from us, I think. Above all we expect an awful lot from ourselves. We make demands upon ourselves which are contradictory, irreconcilable, crushing. They crush us because they are all made at the same time.

How to accommodate within the same person the longing for love, affection, security, warmth and the need for autonomy and independence without which we shall never become really free? How - since our children are, for the most part, still confined within the structures of our families, and therefore dependent upon us - how to reconcile their rightful demands with our own needs?

We must have time to ourselves. Time to reorient ourselves, to train and educate ourselves, time to create our world of women: not forgetting the time necessary for the most difficult task of all, that of reorienting the world around us. That's what is so hard: accepting, even encouraging the chaos we create around us. We women, who from time immemorial have been the stable ones, the safe ones, the conciliators, all of a sudden here we are creating havoc everywhere, upsetting the order that was supposed to be so
perfect, so efficient, the peaceful, cosy order of family life.

That's where my mother scores her points. I can tell her that I want to improve my education. She can understand that. The times have changed. I say I want to work, to assert my own personality. Quite right, she says, it's time women enjoyed a bit more economic independence. But if I cast the slightest doubt on my marriage (never mind how unhappy she may have been in hers), if I tell her that my husband and I have stopped being a couple and have become an institution, if I assert my right to sexual fulfilment - if, in other words, I so much as imply that under certain circumstances I might break up my family - she cries out: "Think of the children! Where do the children come into all this?"

Yes, mother, I think of my children a great, great deal. Too much, maybe. I can't rid myself of them - just as you've never managed to rid yourself of me.

What is a mother? What does being a mother mean? You know that until very recently this wasn't a question I ever seriously asked myself. And yet I've been a mother for a long time. I didn't ask myself any such question before I became a mother. To me, that was just "normal". Yet I wasn't, like some of my friends, particularly fond of children. Looking back I think that to have children at the time I had them was a justification of my whole existence. I was not brought up with the thought of "accomplishing" anything in my life, but only of "being" something: being a
woman. And, at the time, being a woman meant to me being a mother, having children.

The utter ignorance with which we launch into motherhood is truly staggering. For many of us, the moment of truth comes sooner or later. For some it comes when, one day, they feel the need to do something other than housework and suddenly realize that they are trapped inside their children's school schedules. For others it comes when they are left alone, the children gone, and there's nothing more to do but dust the chairs and wax the floors... Then they realize that they've never had the time to construct a life of their own.

When I say this I'm talking about myself. School timetables, meals, shopping, washing, mending clothes which for one reason or another have always got holes in them ... My husband tells me that these are practical problems to which an efficient solution can be found. And he's right. He is even willing to help me, as far as possible (he's a very busy man).

Why then does it regularly happen that when a meeting goes on a little beyond the scheduled time, when I've some work to finish, or when I'm in the middle of a conversation with you, I'm suddenly gripped by a deep anxiety? It's like a sort of inner clock that tells me what time it is. Their time. Today we have to have our meal early because she's got her flute lesson. There's the appointment at the dentist's. There's her ballet tights which have...
absolutely got to be bought by Friday - "you promised, Mummy". There are the lines he's been given to write for the fourth time in ten days, it's five o'clock, I said I would help him, and ought not I to see his teacher about it one of these days?

All these are minor problems. I should get better organized.

As I say this, I realize that men are capable of reducing almost any problem, large or small, to a calculable and manageable unit.

For me, going to buy a pair of tights today or tomorrow can't be reduced to the mere act of going to town and making a purchase which, it's perfectly true, could be made no matter when and under no matter what conditions. The fact is that she and I have already discussed several times whether it's really necessary to buy a new pair. The old one isn't all that bad yet. A bit small, of course. We reached the conclusion that when you're dancing it's very important for your body to feel completely free, and also that you like to look nice. The old tights are a bit too faded. And so we set off to make this purchase, trivial of course, but full of meaning for us both, set in a context of intimacy, of understanding one another, of sharing a secret. It has taken us a little time to get there.

So the many small problems of everyday life become for us the emotional sum-total of the day. And we women want to live this emotional life to the full - with our children, with men, with all the people around us. How to reconcile this wish with the struggle of our pro-
professional lives, where we have to prove ourselves all the time, and doubly because we are women - this struggle for which we're often so ill-prepared? How to live this emotional life with men whose mechanisms are totally different from ours, who are made insecure by our demands for relationships of a new kind, our appeals to their sentiments, their tenderness, their gentleness - and with whom we want to make love in a way that will make us completely happy?

We don't want any longer to be servant mothers who only look after their children's material welfare, servant wives who only "keep house", servant employees who are only good for menial tasks. We demand from ourselves and from others that things be done a different way: our way.

Caught daily between our own demands and those of a rationally and efficiently organized male world, we are beginning to rebel, to become troublesome, to put up a fight. We have come off the rails and the world around us, too, is being forced off the accustomed track. Nothing works any more "as it should".

I've already told you how heavily all this weighs on me sometimes. Especially the sense of guilt. When I'm feeling low I say to myself that our mothers made a much better job of it: that it would be so much easier if we got back on the old rails once more ...

Luckily it's too late for that. Luckily you are there when I need you to remind me of it.
And today, as I have done so many times, I confess to you my perplexity in face of the world, my fear, my rage, my thirst for everything. My love that never weary but is no use. My uncertainty about things and people... And I tell you truly: we carry on alone, but we are not as helpless as we were before.

New Portuguese Letters

Sister,

This morning I was still lying half-asleep when I noticed your letter under my door. I had woken up late because I had had a bad night. To tell the truth I had spent the night thinking about all kinds of things - my life, my job, all the million boring little everyday things that I'm sick of. I decided I'd treat myself to a pleasant morning. So I spent it reading your letter and thinking about us.
Shall we be free one day, you ask. And you tell me about your ties, your daily problems as a woman and a mother. You make me feel ashamed to be so privileged. Here I am waking up late with no kids to send off to school, no kids to make dinner for. My only contact with the "practical" side of motherhood is through you - your sudden departures (which I too find frustrating, believe me) in the midst of our conversations. The other side - the intimacy, the shared secrets, the pleasures given and received when you live with a child - all this I know nothing of. I chose not to know it when I decided I wouldn't have any children.

Something you said in your letter struck me as very important and set me thinking. You say you had children without asking yourself any questions: it was the normal thing to do, it was your destiny as a woman, your way of being. Today you realize that you didn't really choose to have them; rather, you accepted a model, you followed so-called "nature" which prescribes that a woman is a wife and mother, and so that's what you became. You've told me often how well you felt during your pregnancies, what joy it was for you to give birth. You've talked less often about your inner conflicts and uncertainties and all the problems of becoming a mother. Today is the first time you ask yourself: what is a mother? I'm not the one to talk about it, and yet I'd like to go back to the very beginning - the choice each one of us faces when she has her first love affair and swallows her first pill. I'd like to go back to that time and tell you how, in my own, very different way, I dealt with this trap they call a choice.
You followed "nature"; I rebelled against it. Living among women as I did, I knew only too well what happens as soon as you have a baby: housework, care of children, humdrum worries, the end of one's working life. My friends who had just had babies all struck me as curiously old. There they were, stuck with their diaper-washing, adjusting their lives to a rhythm which wasn't their own but their babies'. I confess I hadn't a lot to say to them. I was a student, crazy about politics, and even with those among them who were closest to me I couldn't talk about any of the things that were on my mind. I felt that something had been broken, that they were living in a world which was a mystery to me, a world with its own joys no doubt, but one from which, as a childless woman, I was automatically excluded. For my part I can't say I was sorry. Anyway I thought kids were a great bore. That way of life, without newspapers, without films, cut off from the world, was certainly not for me. But men, ah! men were always in the thick of everything. It seemed to me — and the impression wasn't far wrong — that men live right at the centre of the world. Men were active, men were in touch with reality, men were present. They seemed to have power in their hands, and all this drew me towards them. We had something to talk about. Some of them wanted to change the world and that's what I, in my helplessness, wanted too. But they alone had the power to do it. Of course I quickly understood that from that world, too, I was excluded because before anything else I was a woman with all the inadequacies which that implies. At best I was someone who had escaped from the general rule, the exception whose sole purpose is to confirm the rule. And all this steeped
in an ill-defined climate of sensuality because there I was, a woman, an object of sexual desire, but with something else inside her, something disturbing, a wish to be recognized as an equal. An odd wish if, when all's said and done, you also want to be loved as a female. (It's a funny thing, you know, but sometimes I had the impression that this "something else" I had inside me acted as a kind of aphrodisiac, as though the men were saying to themselves: let's see if her assurance doesn't collapse as soon as we're in bed. The irresistible desire to dominate which goes into action as soon as any resistance is offered...)

Despite all this, for a long time men inspired in me a humble admiration, almost a sense of respect, with its inevitable corollary of contempt for other women. In my Manichean mind men represented life. Life meant fulfilling a destiny, and to me, at that time, the destiny had to be political and the accomplishment, intellectual. In order to share in this adventure, you had to be accepted by men. And so that's what I set out to achieve.

Objectively I had to do it because I wanted to keep my job at the newspaper. I had to be efficient and competent. I was competing for this job with men who had done better in their studies than I and who had been carefully prepared to play just such a role in life, while I was merely a usurper, I had no right to be there unless I could prove that I was the best. I liked the job, and so I set about proving that I was the best. I went in for a selection test, passed it, and was called for an interview. Are you married?
Yes. Since when? Three months. In two months' time you'll be preg-
nant and in a year you won't be able to work any more. Is it worth
while training you, investing in you, if presently you're going to
leave us? No, I assure you, I won't have a baby. I don't want one.
Anyhow it's already decided.

It's already decided ... anyhow it's always been decided that a
woman who wants a career, if she wants children as well, is a
nuisance in whom it isn't worth while investing.

I don't mean to say that this trivial incident (how many women had
the same thing said to them and yet weren't put off?) was decisive
in my life. It simply illustrates the kind of incident around
which we take our so-called "decisions". But if it wasn't decisive,
what was it then that made me "choose" not to become a mother?
Here is where I take up your question and turn it around. What
makes us become mothers? All my decisions have been too intuitive.
You know as well as I do that women aren't supposed to bother
their pretty little heads with profound questions. Why, then, you
and not me?

You followed your destiny: I cheated mine because I wanted to make
something different of my life. Yes, my friend, it's your fault
if today I ask myself what I have made of my life. I assure you
that once I knew the answer very well. I wanted to be independent,
a person in my own right. I wanted everything that is usually re-
served for men. I wanted to make an achievement of my life, to
construct it according to my tastes, to take my destiny into my own hands without any of the ties you created for yourself. I got rid of the ties. I tipped the baby out with the bathwater, if you will forgive the crude joke.

I have become a free woman who earns a good enough living to be able to afford waking up late if she's had a bad night. What is it, then, that stops me from sleeping well at night? I said I was thinking about my life and all the 1,000,000 silly worries that I'm sick of ... What is happening to me? Why did your question: shall we ever be free? touch me so deeply?

I've spent my time shedding the constraints which normally imprison women. Other women have household responsibilities: not me. Other women lack the necessary training to earn a living: I've seen to it that my training is first-class. I'm well paid. So what am I complaining about? Why don't I feel, any more than you do, that I am living the life I want to live? You've told me about yourself. Now I'd like to tell you about myself. Taking the floor at a meeting made up of men ... you have to adopt the same style, the same tone, the same language as they. I've become highly proficient in this language, which is foreign to us women. But lately, when I speak, I sometimes feel that my accent is somehow slightly dissonant: a faint memory, perhaps, of my girlhood when I could still giggle, say absurd things, play the fool.

40 I've often heard it said that women have difficulties in expressing
themselves. I think, rather, that women have difficulties in learning the code which the world of men imposes on them. When you speak in public, you blush. Not me. I think, instead, that I turn pale. Sometimes I am overcome by a kind of dizziness, as though, a moment later, I might cry: enough!

What shall I say to you? I am an actress in a social comedy where the troubles of the night before are hidden behind the image of the young, dynamic, efficient woman. It's all very simple. You do your work in your separate little corner, then one day there's a meeting at which everyone is supposed to tell the others what they've been doing. That day you've got to be brilliant, you've got to put on a show because the others are looking at you, judging you. A good show, a good performance. At this kind of meeting I sometimes catch myself wanting to interrupt my own clever babble and say: do you know, yesterday I was afraid of dying. I wonder what would happen if I did it one day? Meanwhile I remain efficient and clever. My future is being decided there, in the middle of that empty prestige game. And in that game there is no room for the fear of death.

Nor for the anguish of living - the longing to realize all one's potential, to be whole. I know this anguish as well as you do. I want the whole of myself to enter into the public side of my life. I don't want to play a role, however noble, anymore. I want to be able to be. I've always wanted to do, and now, more and more, I want to be.
The public side of myself - that's what I've been reduced to. All of us are reduced to this - a public side, a private side. With certain wishes, certain needs which correspond to each of the two sides. How to make these various demands compatible - isn't that what you're asking me? I don't know. But I'm sure that beyond and outside the political problems I've always been concerned with, that question is the political problem of our time.

What a queer society is ours, in which you and I, so alike and so different, feel so equally lost. Neither you nor I have managed to be whole. Both of us have been robbed of something, and we have both, as women, understood this. But tell me, my sister, how shall we reinvent ourselves? What kind of a world do we want?

I can understand why you often lose heart. I do too, as you know better than anybody else. Gone are the days when I had an answer for everything, when there wasn't a problem I couldn't solve. (Remember what I was like at the beginning? I think I often used to fascinate you; and so did you fascinate me, just because you weren't me.)

Everything has become tangled, everything is so difficult ... and yet I still don't in the least feel like having babies. I guess I'll continue to deny that being a mother is the real way to be a woman.
Now that we're both utterly befogged, let me leave you with this question to think about during our permanent insomnia, our perpetual awakening: a real woman is ... what?

Maybe you'll tell me tomorrow, when we go to eat ice-cream together by the lake.
Simone de Beauvoir: You are raising the question of femininity. None of us accepts the idea that there is such a thing as feminine nature; but might it not be that, culturally, women's state of oppression has developed in them certain qualities — as well as certain shibboleths — which are different from those of men?

Sartre: Certainly. But that does not mean that in a more or less distant future, if feminism triumphs, these principles and this special sensibility have to continue to exist.

Simone de Beauvoir: But if we think we possess certain positive qualities, wouldn't it be better to communicate them to men than to eradicate them altogether?

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The task we are embarking on is a curious one: we are going to depoetize, or try to destroy the magic that emanates from the faculty which is sometimes called a sixth sense (as deceptive as the other five) and of which men usually speak with a smile of tender condescension.

Why, since we women claim as our own the poetry, the sensitivity, the feeling which men lack, why then attempt to express the inexpressible? Why try to put our finger on what can't be touched?
Precisely because men take a complacent delight in the idea of this extra "sense" with which women are supposed to be endowed for the greater pleasure of men — yet, at the first shadow of a threat, insist upon the unscientific, unreliable and deceptive nature of this phenomenon.

Yet the phenomenon (which they attribute to our nature as women, but which, in reality, is only the result of our education and specific rôle) is a source of infinite riches, a heritage to be not only preserved but also cultivated. The fact that it illustrates the discrimination we have suffered does not mean that we should stamp it out: on the contrary, we should universalize it, transmit it, inculcate it in the other sex.

What I am speaking of is not just a pleasant psychological characteristic; it is also rich with political promise. The left has adopted new human relationships as its watchword. What, exactly, are these relationships to be? Why cannot their most fervent champions get so much as a foretaste of them in their relationships among themselves? The system? An easy excuse. Society? Come, come ... We women, in and through our feminist movements, have actually begun to experience these new relationships. Who among us has not known those evenings when we almost get high on the understanding that exists between us? When the communication is so intense, so deep, that it makes us tremble?
This understanding is something more than the product of a similar experience of oppression. It is this "something more" that I should like to explain, to make comprehensible. Until the present such things were left unsaid, relegated to the sphere of feeling and sensation, contrasted with cold reason and science. "The feminine is rooted in sensitivity, intuition, nature. The masculine, in intelligence and reason."

We maintain that intuition also forms part of reason and science. The capacity to guess certain things in a totally inexplicable manner is not a mysterious gift women have received from nature. It is a profound (though sometimes an unconscious) knowledge of the psychological mechanisms which make men (human beings)* behave in a certain way: a set of phenomena whose use we have had to learn in order to perform successfully our roles as women.

The first questions we must ask are why and how. Since everyone agrees we have no logic, we may as well leave the "what" till later.

From earliest childhood we have to learn to exercise our charm in order to find acceptance and love. Unlike men, we have to win love; we cannot take it for granted. To know the mechanisms of being attractive is, for us, a condition of social survival. But in order to be attractive we have to understand the other person, we have to guess his hopes, his fears and expectations; we must feel him; we must, in the last analysis, be him. The faculty of identification with another person, thus acquired, is at the root of a fundamen-
tial difference between them and us, a source of perennial conflict due to the forming of two different types of sensitivity.

It is also the source of the social and emotional potential of the "feminine culture" whose existence we assert.

We must totally and violently reject that part of this phenomenon which is intended to fulfil our "woman's rôle", to consolidate our powerlessness, to make of us the selfless servants of others. But the phenomenon as a whole should on no account be rejected. We claim that we possess a potential for social change. This potential must be released.

Within the feminist movements we have experienced an aspect of the alternative. Some of us are still experiencing it. Within this alternative the quality of the relationships allows the practice of a culture from which the objectives of male power have been eliminated: tenderness without rivalry, admiration without jealousy, understanding without selfish interest. Alone among ourselves and in a climate of friendship we are discovering and learning to appreciate those qualities we have so often used to captivate men. The relations which develop between us possess a depth and richness rarely attainable in relationships with men. We discover the delights of reciprocity in sensitivity, gentleness, charm, self-mockery, search for pleasure, transformation of daily life, and much else. Such experiences bear within them the portents of different, new human relations. Why is it that they seem to be more
open to women than to men?

As we have already said, the starting point is that a woman has to win the love of others and, in order to do so, has to learn to attract. The knowledge of others produces within her all kinds of real and potential capabilities which society then seeks to exploit for its own ends, but which could, as the feminist movements have shown, be used to change all human relationships - only partially in the society of today, but completely in a different one.

We are taught to please not only those whom we ourselves find attractive but everybody, all the time. In this way we have acquired the faculty of identifying with all kinds of moods and personalities: anxious or optimistic, self-conscious or self-assured, a moralist or a seducer, an artist, a model housewife, etc., etc. In each case we have to grasp what might be called the emotional logic of the man or woman we are dealing with. From this we learn (generally by implication only, but thoroughly nevertheless) that our own moods, feelings, and ways of behaviour are ones among many, that they are neither the only possible nor the only correct ones. Thus the nucleus of a recognition of the right to be different comes into existence. Is there a better definition than that of tolerance, the most precious quality, perhaps, in all human relations?

In political relations, too, tolerance is a precious quality. Before the emergence of feminism many of us were driven by our con-
victions into various revolutionary organizations. The socialist parties were revolutionary no longer, the communist parties scarcely more so. The movements of the extreme left which had developed out of these parties were and still are closest to our point of view. Yet many of us look back on our participation in those movements as on a time when we were permanently ill at ease. Intolerance, rigidity, lack of attention to others, insistence on absolute submission to the prevailing ideas and behaviour of the group were the rule. We felt uncomfortable without knowing precisely why. But when we found that to distribute a tract, to take the floor at a meeting, to take part in a public demonstration or event cost us an immense and painful effort; when there was no conceivable place where we could confess to such "weakness"; when all this inevitably added up to yet another humiliation - was it not the right to be different that they were refusing us, and, more generally, to everyone other than themselves?

In the feminist movements tolerance isn't always practised, either. For many reasons, the traces of intolerance are still deep. The point I want to make is that only there has full understanding and acceptance of others been achieved at all, if only at rare and special moments; and that, once glimpsed, this possibility then enters more and more as a reality into our daily lives, especially among women.

Women's greater ability to recognize and accept what is different from themselves is due to other causes as well, all similarly
linked to their conditioning. One of these causes is, I believe, the low opinion women have of themselves. Feminism continuously and rightly attacks this undervaluing of ourselves which does such untold damage, maiming and weakening our personalities. Its eradication is and must remain one of the prime objectives of the feminist movement. Yet I cannot help thinking that it is partly responsible for the special ability I have been speaking of. We are unsure of our views, our ideas, our capabilities: therefore we are more able to accept and respect those of others. Is there not a third way between the self-assurance and self-assertiveness of the male and the self-abasement and self-destruction which we so often practise - and could not this third way consist, simply, in self-relativization? And isn't such tolerance one of the components of the relationships which women sometimes establish among themselves, and which ought to be extended further?

These relationships also possess another dimension which is for the most part lacking in relations between men and women, more particularly, in relations within the couple. I mean reciprocal attention. We have been taught to intuit, feel, understand the other, to respond to the other's expectations. Men do not realize that this ability, which we employ to "satisfy" them, in turn calls for a response: that making others happy will only make us happy if those others, in turn, show interest in our happiness. Like men, we would rather not have to ask in order to receive, to explain in order to be understood. We are tired of hearing "feminine" intuition and sensitivity praised to the skies, yet encountering total
insensitivity to our own wishes. We are sick of waiting in vain for those small attentions which we are expected to offer as of right. Among women, such reciprocity exists.

Our ever-ready will to please, our whole upbringing which induces us to concentrate all our interest on emotional relations, have accustomed us always to analyse the people we meet. We also analyse ourselves and see our lives within the context of the lives of other people. Because our social image is the opposite of the courage, strength and infallibility which men are expected to possess, we are more apt to recognize the ambiguity of reality and self, to see the flaws and contradictions in ourselves. We do not share men's attachment to reason and science, their belief that everything is explicable and that everything that is known can be mastered and controlled. It is easier for us to admit that we are sometimes driven by irrational impulses, that our most generous thoughts and actions may be motivated by selfish desires. Men, too, have these impulses and desires, but they prefer to ignore them. It isn't by chance that so many feminists are trying through psychology and psychoanalysis to obtain a better understanding of themselves and of the mechanism at work in human behaviour. Nor is it by chance that some of us have chosen to study the connection between psychoanalysis and politics. It means that with every day that passes, each one of us is becoming more aware of the inner determinism of her actions. It has been taken for granted too long that political analysis and thought lie outside the influence of the emotions, outside the sphere of imagination and desire. We believe
that such knowledge can only make us better equipped for the social transformation without which our liberation cannot be complete.

The sight of men struggling desperately to fit their own interiorized image of themselves often strikes us as comic, even laughable. We can see through their talk and their behavior, their show of culture, to the weaknesses and shortcomings, the fears and desires beneath. Such insight gives us a certain sense of the relative.

Women are closer to existence, to the existential - not only to everyday life but also to the anthropological problems of ageing, sickness, and death. Kept in the margin of society as we are, we have not - as men have - got career ambitions or the exercise of power to help us to pretend that these things do not exist. This may be one of the reasons why the feminist movements set so much store by the pursuit of pleasure here and now. It may explain why women are not afraid to "lose face" if a mere nothing sets them laughing, why they do not disdain light-hearted or even frivolous pleasures. Men, by contrast, are serious, earnest, they carry the future of humanity upon their shoulders, and don't they know it? Have you ever seen two delegates at an international conference collapse into a fit of giggles? Women have preserved a sense of fun, of play, which runs counter to masculine values.

The days are over when we believed that certain qualities were indispensable: self-assurance, culture, intelligence, courage,
efficiency, productivity (the intellectual kind) ... but also beauty, elegance, charm. In those days we were still torn apart by the demands of a society which obliged women to subscribe to a system of masculine values and behavior and to apply another. Again and again we tried to achieve success in the world of men (so closely linked to the world and values of technocracy). And if, again and again, we failed, was it not because our sensitivities, our expectations, our worlds are not the same?

* If that is, in fact, the origin of intuition, it is evident that all human beings, men as well as women, partake of it.
Mens sana in etc...

I have carried you so long
my body
so heavy so stiff
a stranger to me

I have hated you so long
my body
and sometimes
I've loved you.

I've seldom seen you
my body
but I've often looked at you
through the eyes of posters
of mannequins lined up in the windows
of sellers of printed false dreams
in the weary mirrors of men
seeking with groping hands
for their own reflection.

But I've never really
owned you
my body
though you're all I possess.

How could I thus
deny you
while day and night
burdensome
unwieldly
you tear me apart
and sometimes
you make me leap with pleasure.

They have talked so much about you
my lady
that I almost recognize you
and since
after all
you are here
for some time yet
I wonder
Is it too late to accept you
gently
to master you
to possess you
or simply
to love you.

Then maybe
I'll be able
to fuse into you
like the salt in the sea
like the leaves in the winter
like the dead in the earth

Then maybe
I'll be able
to be.

My friend,

You have asked me for a few pages on woman and her body. But I wonder whether it isn't a contradiction to write about women's bodies. Perhaps painting or sculpture would be more appropriate forms of expression and even these should be done with a certain quality of love, so that our image is not turned into a show and so that women can recognize themselves in it. How many women artists have given us such images of ourselves? Are we to rely on art history to
answer this question, especially since we know it to be probably as highly unreliable as history in general, which we know is the history that men tell each other about themselves. The fact is that, except for Leonor Fini, Marie Laurencin, Mme Vigée Le Brun and a few women sculptresses, the only image we get of our bodies is one thrown back at us by men. This is why, at this stage, I think it is more urgent to present women with images rather than with words about themselves.

This probably explains why I was so impressed recently by an exhibition in Lausanne in which a Polish woman showed her beautiful threedimensional tapestries. She had titled most of these large shapes with her own name. Yet both the public and the critics, in their elaborate language, did not seem to understand what this woman was showing. In this world of ours, revolving, as it does, around the male sex, the sight was so extraordinary that people passed by, apparently unaware, as in the famous tale, where the King was naked. For indeed this was what the artist was showing us: the superb intimacy of her sex, spread wide across the full length of the walls. For the first time a woman was showing me how she saw herself. For the first time, through her, I could see myself. I was stunned. At least here was a picture which was not created by man to arouse his own desire of women or to serve as an instrument for the consumer society. I was not an object any more. I was myself, seen from inside, with tenderness, with no social role to play, naked as I hadn't ever seen myself.
But of course you are right. A woman's body is not to be identified with her sex. Therefore, you ask, why identify with this woman's tapestries rather than with Maillol's sculptures, or Renoir's paintings? I do not wish to engage in art criticism about which I am totally ignorant. All I mean is that this woman about whom I know absolutely nothing, whose language I cannot understand talks to me from the inside, that the way she looks at me does not transform me into a show for myself. In other words, through her, I find myself to be a subject and not an object.

I agree that these are abstract and pretentious words, but when I want to speak of what I experience as a woman, language always seems inadequate. It is not tailored to my size. How am I to express my frustration when I find myself observed by a man who claims he is painting me on canvas or writing me into his novel or is simply (as he says) making love to me. I feel that he is looking at me through a prism and that the picture that he offers me, though accurate, is always deflected. For years, I have identified with this image, taking it to be right and pushing myself sideways to merge into it, unaware of the uneasiness this effort was causing me.

The long discussions in the women's liberation groups, where laughter was sometimes intermixed with tears, were a revelation to me. I discovered that this uneasiness was very common, that most women looked upon their bodies as something entirely alien to them and that, although they go through refined subtleties before admitting it, many hate their bodies and fear them, an admission that requires hard consciousness raising.
Like many women, I found some reassurance in this discovery which also came as a liberation. What had been our private secret (our fat legs supposedly made attractive by dark stockings, our oversmall or sagging breasts armoured for years in matronly looking bras) was becoming our common oppression. The personal is political, we said. Privacy is dead. By telling a group of women what until then was confidently murmured into the ear of our best friend, of a priest or of a doctor, we started the Revolution.

This was true. Yet they were only words despite the degree of liberation entailed. Liberating our bodies is something else. I believe it means trying to look at ourselves with new eyes and discovering what we really are without resorting to metaphysics. It means recuperating our sensitivity from social and cultural conditioning, rejecting roles of master-pupil, master-follower, and generally getting away from all power games. Finally it means loving oneself in a world where it is easier to hate oneself to the point of madness than to change oneself or the world around one. It is difficult.

As you can expect, I have no ready recipe. I have tried wearing different clothes - exotic, Edwardian, etc. But changing dresses and make-up does not change the way I look upon myself under these facades. They are fun for a while, relaxing. No more. I also tried sports, dancing, ... even singing. That was fun too, though I often felt co-opted (while skiing for instance) by the very consumerism I was trying to escape.
And then, all along, I was alone, alone with my body. Somebody was
telling me what to do and I did it. I skied at his speed, I sung
at his beat. He taught me how to master my body, my breathing, for
he knew. Like love. He knew that too and taught me. He was the
initiator. He claimed to know my pleasure better than I did. I be-
lieved it, but was this what I was seeking? Was this the way really
to discover myself?

Outside sex, nobody ever touched me except when I was sick of course.
Then, under the protection of white uniforms and sometimes even of
gloves, they would feel me, they would quickly touch my stomach or
my arm and prescribe some chemical or other, or a treatment with
complicated and ice-cold machines. If the distinguished doctor had
held my hand just for a minute he might have cured me just as well.
But this was not the way he understood his role. He had no time
for that.

No, my friend, I have no recipe for the liberation of my body. All
I know, since the word liberation has taken a personal meaning for me,
is that one does not liberate oneself alone and that in this revo-
lution of ours, I need the support, the experience and the tender-
ness of other women to have enough courage to carry on. Also, I
have learned that liberation cannot be taught. I know it sounds
pompous, but I believe what the students said in Paris in 1968:
Freedom, you are not given it. You take it.
This is why, finally, all these gymnasiuums, all these lectures about
sexual liberation may help us a little. But basically they do not
get us very far.

I would rather believe that with all the weight of our ignorance of ourselves, with all our fears of our bodies and of the bodies of others, we should try to search together. As you know, this is what we tried to do in the little group which we called, lacking a better name, the massage group. After all the talk about our bodies, about sex, we wanted it to be first and foremost a non-verbal group.

At first we were very frightened, frightened of being six women together and of remaining silent, frightened of all we vaguely knew about homosexuality. So we put the massage handbook on the floor and one of the women started reading it aloud, sentence by sentence while at the same time another woman would do the prescribed gestures, carefully, tense like a child who is learning to read. The others looked on, completely absorbed by what was happening, sometimes suggesting with a silent gesture a correction, or a possible improvement. Later, when we reached a stage where the handbook was no longer necessary, there were times when we got stuck and with a simple glance or gesture, we could call silently for help. Help was always forthcoming, for the whole exercise was always viewed as a collective one, though silent, most of the time. With time, we learned to relax, to overcome the anguish caused by our own ignorance and by the vulnerability of the other's body. (How many times were we warned by well-meaning friends of the danger we were running. We were told we could hurt ourselves badly(!),
that massage was a very specialized technique taught in equally specialized schools). Anguish was replaced by a kind of reverence for the bodies of others. We learned to enjoy the extraordinary joy of collective silence. Sometimes we relaxed so completely that we fell asleep. We discovered the pleasure of new gestures, the imperceptible language of bodies, which remained a permanent source of wonder. Perhaps, most important, we learned how to see. In this group, I learned little by little that I had never seen a woman's body. As they abandoned themselves or as they performed the slow and rhythmical movements of massage, these women were beautiful and I who thought I knew them so well discovered what their beauty was really about.

How can I describe this revelation to you? Here again, words betray me. I mean that the sagging breasts of one woman, the plump buttocks of another acquired a value that had nothing to do with our previous daily lives. Little by little the pictures in my head about what I thought was feminine beauty dropped away one by one. We had succeeded in creating a free space for a few hours, where we were not on show, where we had no parts to play and where we were content simply to be. In this space we suspended all judgements and from each of us there emanated an entirely new beauty, a beauty of freedom. Seeing it in others I could not help thinking that somehow, I also had a share of it. The discovery was so huge that there was nothing to say. It sufficed to live. In this way we discovered our bodies little by little in a climate of confidence, almost of ignorance, since none of us had practised massage before.
Am I anticipating your questions when I say that we did not make love in this group nor did we practice what is sometimes called sexual massage? We had not established a principle about this. It just did not occur. That's all. There would be a lot to say about feminine homosexuality, but it is too important to be discussed like this, as a side issue. Another time, maybe.

So, we did not make love, and yet we discovered our bodies. Of course, thanks to previous sexual experiences, we had already learned about our bodies in a certain way. But throughout the year when the group met regularly every week, we discovered a whole new geography of our badly exploited bodies. Because we had no precise goal, we were in no haste. Because each in turn gave and received a massage, we had no roles. Because we were all ignorant when we started, we had no master. And thus little by little we learned about our sensitivity, about the quality of each person's touch. We lost our clumsiness which was the fruit of our fears and gave way to pleasure.

For of course we experienced pleasure in all this. And not only pleasure. After a specially hard day, we found a special softness, an indescribable peace in the group. Beyond massage and its gestures as they were listed in handbooks, we rediscovered the gestures of tenderness which are not necessarily those of sexuality. We began to perceive the incredible wealth our sensations held in store for us. We recognized how the sexual life we had led until then had left out a whole range of our sensitivity. Until then we only knew the visible
part of the iceberg. I don't know the reason for this. Maybe it was because of what we thought we knew about our so-called erogenous zones, not to speak of the famous quarrel about our genitality. Maybe it was because men, our usual companions for these discoveries, need, even more than we do, to liberate themselves from accepted ideas both about themselves and about us. This we cannot do for them. It is difficult enough for us to achieve the smallest step towards our own liberation.

The difficulty is made even greater by the fact that one never masters one's body entirely, whatever the effort. Our bodies undergo constant change. It is never a given, once and for all. You believe that you have caught it, that you know how to use it, to dance, to dig your garden, or to make love, just then, all of a sudden, it has changed. Sometimes hair grows on it, breasts appear, or its stomach becomes all round like a balloon. New sensations are felt and you don't know whether they are pleasant or not. One day, all your senses are alive, all your movements are harmonious and soft. You feel beautiful, desirable. The next day you are convinced that nobody wants you any more. You feel old and hideous. The best solution would be to pack up your desires if you have any left. You are frigid, or maybe it's your menopause. You don't know how it has all happened. You have been scrapped. In the meantime, all your life you have listened time and time again to explanations, complete with colored illustrations - front, back and profile - that you were made like this or like that. Yet, you were still perplexed on that famous day you longed for so much, the day when you arrived at the Maternity ward, with your
little bag and heard the midwife yelling so that everyone could hear: "It's all right. No hurry. She (she, that is you, your body), she is only a 5 francs." 2)

You believed you had understood a few things, and in an instant you found yourself reduced to the size of a coin. Not only to the size of a coin, but to its value too. Not very much in other words. Five francs you think to yourself, this is the cervix of my womb. Five francs, this is the way I shall create a new human being. Five francs, this is the image this damned society gives me of my sex. Five francs.

You see, this is why the group was so important to me. And this is also why I was so impressed by the Polish woman's tapestries.

1) Magdalena Abakamowicz.

2) The dilation of the cervix is still measured in French and Swiss maternity wards in these terms. You are told that you have reached five francs or the palm of a small hand. When you have reached the palm of a large hand, delivery is near.
Out of my own ill I have created a future good. My fear now is that my new self may no longer have a meaning. But why should I not let myself be guided by the event? In that way I will substitute probability for fate.

Clarice Lispector

... And, for once, FUN. Having fun as we talk about our lives, our bodies, as we talk with our bodies. Talking, chattering, blurring out everything at once. Thumbing our noses at logic. Just for once, for better or worse, a women's world. We should really have liked to analyse the world of men, to interpret it, describe it, even understand it. We would have liked to talk about all it represents: science as the highest good, the mythification of material progress, quantified bliss.
No doubt we should have poked fun at the technocrats who define reality as that which can be measured, relegating our dreams and all imagination to the limbo of the unknowable. Who are always busy, so that our inner climates, the slowness of our gestures are to them a loss of time. We should have laughed at the earnest life they have made for themselves, monotonous and white like a hospital corridor. Yes, we should have liked to say a word or two about all that.

Instead, just for once, we have indulged in the fun of stammering out our own lives. We have put aside their language and recovered our own. But do not think we haven't thought about the men's world a great, great deal.

Reason and work. Rationalized work. With this magic formula men have conquered nature, put nature at their service, built a kingdom. With this magic formula they have set themselves forever apart from the other species. They have consecrated human nature. Strange that this gigantic effort, with all that it implies of directed libido and repressed desires, should today be seen by many as a failure. The miracles of scientific and technological progress have not succeeded in stifling the nostalgia for the unforeseeable, the spontaneous, a certain longing for disorder.

The techniques of social organization have become techniques of social control. The very order of society has been put in doubt.
Faced with the sorry plight of industrial society, people are be-
ginning to wonder about the nature of this order, about the Reason
which rules this Progress. Whatever became of the civilizing pur-
pose which, with its transcendental impetus, was to have differenti-
tiated man forever from the animal world?

In this world grown inhospitable to the animals that, after all,
we are, the untamed part of ourselves is awakening to demand a
different world with some room in it for non-work and unreason.
May '68 represented the irruption of desires, of unconscious
forces into the world of politics. It was only a promise. The
women's liberation movement, heir of May '68 and of the American
protest movements, is joyfully embarking on the same road. But
why such joy, such ease?

Where were the women in the civilization made by men? Relegated
to the margin, reduced to the status of a domestic animal, compel-
led always to repeat the same labour cycle, a household Sisyphus
condemned to the immanence of daily chores, forced to center her
world upon herself within the confines of her body. Her body her
only adventure, her only exploit, her vital center. Condemned to
anonymity, kept at arm's length from the struggles and achievements
of a tumultuous world, women reproduced their fate for centuries.
Their fate remained the same under the most different civilizations.
Minor, irresponsible beings, they have not been tamed as thoroughly
as men. Kept in a state of perpetual childhood, bracketed together
with children for many purposes, they have remained untamed like
children.
Gifted with unreason, women today are bursting upon the scene. Their movement carries within itself the heritage of their centuries-old experience: that of respect for sensuality, of intimacy with the mysterious, of intuition as knowledge, of perception rather than logical proof, of sensibility against rationality, of aesthetics as the ethics of the future.
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