

Dickinson Lecture
Louise Bogan
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WHAT THE WOMEN SAID

It is sometimes a good thing--a fortunate development--when a piece of writing turns out to be quite different from what its author originally planned. Change of direction, even after a paper is well started is, at best, a sign that the facts involved--and the writer's feeling about the facts--are fairly lively; are not merely a series of cliches or a file of dead notions. They move and breathe, and given their head, often combine and re-combine in interesting and unexpected ways. --I intended this paper which I am about to read to you, to be a description (and an analysis) of the work of certain women poets, chiefly American and of this country, as contrasted to women poets of the past and foreshadowing, to a slight degree, women poets of the future. I soon found that this plan would not work, or rather, that it would work only in the most tiresome and boring way. For to tell the truth, there is very little that one can say about women poets, past, present and (presumably) to come. One truth about them is an open secret: when they are bad they are very, very bad, and when they are good they are magnificent. I shall try to say this little as I go along, and I plan to issue a few warnings at the end of these remarks, and then read you a set of short poems (the magnificent kind) by contemporary American women. But the bulk of my talk will be concerned with the achievement of certain remark-

able women writers who were not poets, but novelists, critics, and (dreadful word) feminists.

The word feminism today conjures up rather unhappy and dowdy figures; the suffragette stands in most young people's minds, I find, as a sort of large, formidable, virtuous virago. But it is a word which has its own honor and radiance; it was lived for, and sometimes died for, by members of several generations of disenfranchised individuals who, far from representing a persecuted minority, stood for one half of the human race. At present, any woman, in the Western world, who wishes to vote, can; although we tend to forget that French women won that right quite recently, in the Liberation under De Gaulle. The majority of Swiss women do not want to vote, for mountain-bred reasons of their own.

The rights of women as citizens, the facts concerning women as creative human beings, are subjects which have accumulated, and continue to accumulate, an extraordinary array of attack and defense--of panegyric and contumely--much of it of unexampled foolishness. At the moment, we are being told by writers in special numbers of periodicals devoted to the situation of the modern American woman, that a new sort of "crypto-feminism" is upon us, and this may well be true; women seem to be fighting a battle against automation, on the one hand, and mixed feeling concerning their freedom and leisure, husbands, lovers and children on the other. The problem of the woman artist remains unchanged. Henry James, in The Tragic Muse,

spoke of that oddest of animals, the artist who happens to be born a woman." Robert Graves has more recently said that women poets have a distinctly difficult problem, since they must be their own Muse. Farther back in time, in ancient manuscripts, in inscriptions chiseled into rock and marble, in ideograms, in hieroglyphics, and, of course, in print, the discussion has gone on: woman's nature, her place in society, her charm and her wiles, her physiological and economic dilemmas, her open and her hidden powers--attracting, from men and women alike (but chiefly from men) overweening praise as well as blame; temper, contempt; false and true witness; and spite. These discussions have reached points of particular sharpness and bitterness whenever mankind as a whole has gone over into a crucially new era--when, for example, the male, at the beginning of the age of bronze and the age of iron, began to swagger about his prowess in war, agriculture, and the hunt; when St. Paul began to preach and send pastoral letters to his congregations, around and about the Mediterranean; and at the beginning of the Industrial Revolution, in England and in France.

A full record of the results of these shifts, insofar as they bore on the position of women appears in meticulously organized detail in Simone de Beauvoir's La Seconde Sexe (Paris, 1949) which I have read in translation. (One frightening moment in my preliminary reading occurred, I might add, when I thought that I was trapped for good, in Mlle. de

Beauvoir's pages,--and I shall return to these.) Of recent years a strong interest, archaeological, poetic and psycho-analytic, has been focussed upon women in pre-history--upon the realm of the Great Mother, upon the rule of the White Goddess--upon the megaliths, the round walls and the circular tombs of mankind at the matriarchal stage. Here, in this silent kingdom of stones, women are invisible except for a few grotesque figurines, but women in historic antiquity are both visible (in sculpture, on vases, on coins) and vocal (in literature and myth). At first their manifestation is double: they cherish and they terrify. Cybele, mother of all the gods, with her crown of towers, brought over by the Greeks from the Asian continent, and to be treasured by the Romans; Isis, in the dark backward of Egyptian time, corn goddess, mother of earth and of heaven, sister and wife to Osiris; the Hindu Kali, wife of Siva, goddess, according to one definition, of "feminine energy," with her necklace of skulls. And it was a woman, who, at Delphi, the center of the Greek world, uttered the words of the god. It was a woman (Socrates'--or was it Plato's?) Diotima, who, in the manner of all good female teachers down the ages, told the philosopher to follow his daemon; it was a female goddess who gave Athens its name. And, in the opinion of a modern Cambridge Hellenist, it was Spartan women who led the fullest, happiest, best adjusted lives of any woman in history. This opinion is rather a blow to the female artist, since Spartan women produced no art of

any kind; Sappho was an Eastern Greek from an island off Asia Minor.

Since the beginning of this year, with this paper in mind, I began to gather together a series of quotations wherein opinions for or against the female nature in general or feminine artistic powers in particular, were expressed; and I want to read you a selection of these directly, without paraphrase. The true woman haters are not represented, since their manias--Strindberg's, for example--are all too evident; and the fanatical champions of women show up rarely, but some of these last will be examined. The more kindly disposed satirists make, of course, if one is on woman's side, the pleasantest reading.

"Women are nicer than men," said Lord Byron. Byron made another and far more famous summation of the (to his mind) essential difference of emotional attitude (at least) between the sexes, but, since that dictum has become a cliché, and I am trying to avoid clichés, I shall not repeat it here. (Women readers, by the way, hated Don Juan when it was first published.) Shaw, who is on the side of women, but critically so (except in the case of St. Joan), in his preface to Man and Superman compares women's relentless energy to that of a boa-constrictor, and in another passage, having first pointed out that in Shakespeare's plays the women always takes the initiative, he goes to the insect world for an example to embellish his argument. "The pretense" and I quote "that woman

does not take the initiative is part of the farce. Why, the whole world is strewn with the snares, traps, gins and pitfalls for the capture of men by women. Men, on the other hand, attach penalties to marriage, etc....All in vain. Women must marry because the race must perish without her travail... It is assumed that women must wait, motionless, until she is wooed. Nay, she often does wait motionless. That is the way the spider waits for a fly." (End of quotation.)

And here is a short passage from a recent, British review of Lewis Mumford's endlessly provocative The City in History, I quote: "The theme of the whole work is the innate dualism of the human race, forever oscillating between the still and silent female principle, life-conserving, loving, anti-rational, and the restless, argumentative male principle, with its addiction to geometry, mass-organization and war." And, to turn to the Mumford book itself, we find, in the author's discussion of neolithic culture, a description of women's place therein. "Neolithic man's concentration on organic life and growth (involved) not merely a sampling and testing of what nature had provided but a discriminating selection and propagation... Domestication means large changes, first, permanence and continuity in residence, and second, the exercise of control and foresight over processes once subject to the caprices of nature. With this go habits of gentling and nurturing and breeding. Here woman's needs, woman's solitudes, woman's capacity for gentleness and love,

must have played a dominating part...Certainly home and mother are written over every phase of neolithic agriculture...It was woman who wielded the digging stick or the hoe: she who tended the garden crops and accomplished those masterpieces of selection and cross-fertilization which turned raw wild species into the prolific and richly nutritious domestic varieties: who made the first containers, weaving baskets and coiling the first clay pots...Woman's presence made itself felt in every part of the village: not least in its physical structures, with their protective enclosures, whose further symbolic meanings psychoanalysis has now tardily brought to light. Security, receptivity, enclosure, nurture--these functions belong to woman; and they take structural expression in the house and the oven, the byre and the bin, the cistern, the storage pit, the granary and...to pass on to the city, in the wall and the moat, and all inner spaces, from the atrium to the cloister. House and village, and eventually the town itself, are woman writ large. In Egyptian hieroglyphics 'house' and 'town' may stand as symbols for 'mother,' as if to confirm the similarity of the individual and collective nurturing function."

Robert Graves, in his endlessly provocative, but more fanciful and illogical treatise, The White Goddess, describes at length the changes which took place at the shift from matriarchy to patriarchy--a shift based, it is now, I believe, generally agreed, by archaeologists and cultural historians alike, on man's growing power over metals; on man's discovery

of the processes of smelting, first of bronze and then of iron. The plough superceded the digging tool, and woman's gentle and wily powers went down before the "sheer dynamism" of man's. Many of the consequences were bitter ones, from the woman's point of view. We hear the full denunciatory male voice sounding in passage after passage of the Old Testament; and we come upon the ancient Chinese concepts of Yin and Yang: Yin, "the female, negative, dark, evil principle as contrasted to Yang, the male, positive, bright, beneficent principle"--terms, Webster tells us, "in a dualism which runs through much of Chinese philosophy, folk-lore, divination, religion, medicine, science and magic." Here we seem to come upon not only the harsh terms of a patriarchy, but of a matriarchy reversed, denied and denigrated.

We do not hear the direct words of women during these harsher periods of masculine power, but we begin to hear their indirect words, long before they were written down. We begin to hear them in Homer--in the words Nausicaa speaks to Ulysses on the seashore, and later, by a pillar of a room in her father's house--dignified and unfrightened; in the words of women sitting by the hearths of their houses, distaff in hand; in the words of Calypso, of Penelope, of Circe (these last two weave, instead of spin). Man's artisanship has now reached the virtuoso stage; what a masterpiece of the smith's art is the shield of Achilles! Man the planner, woman the

improviser; a balance has been struck; it is woman's wisdom as well as man's, that sounds through the Homeric scenes. We are told facts we feel to be true concerning these people; and we recognize female speech, in the mouth of young girls or sorceress. A few centuries will pass before we hear a woman uttering, in matchless form, her own words: Sappho's words, as clear and as straightforward and as moving today as when first spoken.

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The central tenets of extreme feminism since the Industrial Revolution have been based on the claim that absolute male domination has existed, in an unbroken line, since the dawn of time. These tenets are only partially true. That periods of masculine harshness and intolerance came into being in eras of crucial change, is undeniable; that the beginning of the Christian era brought humiliation to womankind we have the words of St. Paul and of the early Church fathers to prove. But at the end of the Middle Ages woman had regained her place as a goddess: according to chivalry, "an ideal, a higher being." Beatrice, this being's apotheosis, through her poet, defines and describes Paradise. And as a reform of Christian life and faith began within the Church, in the late 13th and early 14th centuries, women began to assert themselves in the reforming religious movement. "Awakened to religion, women who only a short time before had been declared by eminent

religious teachers to be without souls, began to record their visions and trances and their mysterious experiences in contact with God, in letters, diaries and memoirs; and in this way there grew up a wholly distinctive literature of ecstatic confession and self-revelation." These works prefigured the supreme mysticism of the great Teresa, the saint of Avila.

I have just quoted the cultural historian, Egon Friedell, who goes on to say: "Here we are in the presence of a fact we shall frequently meet again: that great spiritual movements and emotional revivals very often originate among women. A woman possesses a natural flair for everything that may germinate, every kind of secret growth, everything...which is of the future rather than of the present...[man] is a born professional and expert, but woman is a multiplicity of things..."

The British feminists of the late nineteenth and the early part of the twentieth centuries were fighting free of one of the most restrictive periods in recorded history, so far as the status of women was concerned: the age of Victoria. The strictures of that age had made them harsh and bitter; and we will find Virginia Woolf accusing fathers and sons of depriving daughters and sisters of educations, and of other acts of masculine pride, arrogance and braggadocio. It is heartening to remember, however, that a young woman who died two years before Victoria was born had already invented the

kind of English novel wherein sense and sensibility are, and can be, combined. Jane Austen, who thought of herself as a painter of miniatures, had already placed a cornerstone of prose narrative firmly in its place, in the full light of day, before the (for women) Victorian darkness set in.

The beginning and middle years of Victoria's reign were certainly marked by grotesque excesses of male control, social, political and familial. We now have, in recorded statistics, the number of benighted governesses (21,000 in 1851), and of ill-paid and sweated seamstresses (70,518 over twenty, and 18,561 under twenty, according to the 1841 census) who then struggled for some sort of livelihood. We also have the number--in six figures--of the domestic servants who, in 1841, waited on the Victorian wives, whose husbands had, quite generally, forced them into enervating idleness. Idleness had become, for women, a class badge; if you were the wife of a prosperous man you did nothing, thereby providing a visible sign of your husband's standing and success. (The middle class was beginning to copy the manners and customs of the aristocracy.) "A girl" (and I am quoting a sound recent authority) "was trained for the marriage market like a race-horse. Her education consisted of showy accomplishments designed to ensnare young men. The three R's of this deadly equipment were music, drawing and French. Particularly music. It was an article of faith with mother and daughter alike that music was an infallible method of attracting a husband. Once the Victorian girl was seated at

the piano with an enraptured swain bending over her, the battle was won...And needlework was considered a most lady-like accomplishment." One writer on the period ties in the Oxford Movement with a revival of interest in church needlework. "Curates, particularly, stood to profit by gifts of flowers, grapes, jelly--and altarcloths."

The demand of the Victorian male for innocence--and ignorance--left the Victorian woman untrained in the practical conduct of life. The "bustling Chaucerian housewife," the Renaissance manageress of great estates, had largely disappeared. Girls and women now, except in the rarest instances, took on the servile, flattering manners of the slave. Women, often forced by circumstances to resort to an insidious sort of hidden rule, became past mistresses of the cosseting gesture and the seductive wile. Their clothes--the very nearly unmanageable hoopskirt--the tight corseting--made them into puppets. And they were almost helpless under the law, and trapped for good in marriage. But soon they began to break out into open (or half-concealed) rebellion. Florence Nightingale opened the way: "Her departure for the Crimea lit a torch which was never to be put out. Slowly and surely the status of nursing was raised, and this led women to clamor for [other] professional and business opportunities."

A very nearly complete documentation of the life and surroundings of the nineteenth century English woman has come down to us, through novels written by women's pens. From the

mills of the Midlands to the parlors of the high bourgeoisie; from the Yorkshire moors to the great house, we have it all--written down by women who are training their ears by instinct, and are learning to cast brave and penetrating glances into the hearts and souls of their characters.

Early in the 20th century, the power of women writers to introduce radical innovations into form comes clearly into view. In my reading I was happy to rediscover Dorothy Richardson. Dorothy Richardson, born in 1873, died in obscurity in 1957. The last book of her series of novels (which bears the all-over title of Pilgrimage) was published in the early '30s; and the series, I was delighted to discover, is still in print. Richardson was a crucially important transitional figure, being certainly one of the first, if not the first, novelist to introduce the stream of consciousness technique into English fiction. It is a matter of literary record, that Joyce's A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man first appeared in The Egoist, a periodical published in London, from February 1914 through September 1915. Dorothy Richardson, according to her own statement, quoted by her publishers, began to write Pointed Roofs, the first volume of the Pilgrimage sequence, in 1913. Pointed Roofs was published in 1915; A Portrait appeared in book form the following year.

In 1915 poetry in English had recently experienced the impact of the Imagist group (which included one woman and several Americans). What can be called impressionism struck the novel late; the results were to be astonishing.

Dorothy Richardson's description of the youth and young womanhood of a middle-class English girl, working as a governess and as a clerk, first in Germany and in the English countryside, and then in London, at the turn of the century, is remarkable enough to be considered on its own terms, quite apart from Joyce's chronicle of his own boyhood and youth, in Dublin. In Richardson, from the beginning, and perhaps most purely in the mid-stream of the narrative, we come upon technical innovation always closely allied to the matter in hand; never artificially superimposed; together with a delicacy of perception which sometimes amounts to a kind of clairvoyance. This originality is bound up, it is true, with a certain naivete of mind and with what often seems to be a deliberate awkwardness of expression. "She works with memory," one critic has said of her, "[and] what must amaze most people is the apparently wilful choice of unpicturesque, unpromising, unideal, and in many instances actually unpleasant aspects of reality. Yet all these queer things...are treated by her with their ramifications and convolutions as if they were carefully selected, ideal symbols of human life." And Richardson will go over and over an idea with stubborn insistence; her language sometimes stammers in her effort to project her perceptions and her convictions with adequate force. She possesses "a certain obstinate, humorous, massive, deliberate approach to life which is not in the least degree ashamed of being pedantic."

Her attitude, in what, over the years, turned out to be

a series of autobiographical narratives, is feminist in a very special and unorthodox way. She is not at all obsessed by any fixed notion that men have been continuously out to conquer, subdue and enslave women and she has sharp words for female ruses. In deploring women's flattery of the male she attacks a feminine defense-mechanism, cultivated to a fantastic extent in mid-Victorian society. Woman, she says, should claim her birthright as a being whose knowledge of, and intuition concerning reality, are profound. Richardson's attitude toward the masculine nature and male assumptions in general ranges between pity and irritation. She lived through the pre-1914 suffrage agitation without being in any way involved with its physical violence. For Richardson, the difference between the nature of man and the nature of woman was "abyssmal." Politics and the vote touched the surface only. "These woman's rights people" she says with characteristic forthrightness in Deadlock, the sixth of her volumes, published in 1921, "are the worst of all. Because they think women have been 'subject' in the past. Women have never been subject. Never can be. The proof of this is the way men have always been puzzled and everlastingly trying fresh theories; founded on the very small experience of women any man is capable of having. Disabilities, imposed by law, are a stupid insult to women, but have never touched them as individuals. In the long run they injure only men. For they have kept back the civilization of the outside world, which is the only thing men can make. It is not every-

thing. It is a sort of result, poor and shaky, because the real inside civilization of women, the one thing that has been in them from the first, and is not in the natural man--not made by things--is kept out of it. Women do not need civilization. It is apt to bore them. They keep it back. That does not matter, to themselves. But it matters to men. And if they want their old civilization to be anything but a dreary-weary puzzle, they must leave off imagining themselves as a race of gods fighting against chaos, and thinking of women as part of the chaos they have to civilize. There isn't any 'chaos.'...It's the principle masculine delusion. It is not a truth to say that women must be civilized."

Well, there you have her--in part: the brave little wrongheaded-to-the-majority partisan of her own sex, in her high-necked blouse and long skirt, from which the dust and mud of the London streets must be brushed daily; working long hours in poor light at a job which involves physical drudgery as well as endless tact (she was a fashionable dentist's assistant); going home to a tiny bedroom under the roof of a badly run boardinghouse; meeting, in spite of her handicapped position, an astonishing range of kinds of human beings; going to lectures; listening to debates at the Fabian Society (of which she became a member); daring to go into a restaurant late at night, driven by cold and exhaustion, to order a roll, butter and a cup of cocoa; trying to write, truthfully and as a woman; loving her friends, her country week-ends, her London. And continually

sensing transition; welcoming change; eager to bring on the future. And reiterating: "Until it had been clearly explained that men were always partly wrong in their ideas, life would be full of poison and secret bitterness."

And here is an excerpt from one of her passages of pure "mystic" joy. "For a moment [Miriam] found herself back in her own sense of existence, gazing at the miraculous spectacle of people and things, existing; herself, however, perplexed and resourceless, within it, everything sinking into insignificance beside the fact of being alive, having lived on to another moment of unexplainable glorious happiness."

Innocence. Impatience. Improvisational awkwardness, if you will. But without any doubt we find in this (then) young woman woman's perceptions, in full upward flight, a woman's sense of the worth of her womanhood, richly displayed. "Her work," said Wilson Pollett, in a preface to Deadlock, "was the first definitive expression in the English novel of the whole, self-tortured modern consciousness, together with the precise idiom in which it does its thinking...She masters her subject not by analyzing it from a strategic angle, but by achieving complete identity with it throughout. [This method, this contemporary development] is so completely crystallized in the work of Miss Richardson, its pioneer, that it would stand thereafter as a fait accompli, by virtue of her work alone."

Virginia Woolf (1882-1941), daughter of Sir Leslie Stephen, eminent man of letters, by his second wife, was not an innovator,

in any true sense. She had the faculty, however, of responding to, and absorbing, certain floating and pervasive notions in the literary atmosphere of her time, in a way that combined brilliance with subtlety. She resuscitated the moribund "casual" literary essay, bringing to it "the play of an extraordinary intuition and taste for values." The first volume of The Common Reader, wherein her essays were first collected, appeared in 1925, and a second volume, in 1932, helped to shift the angle of the period's critical approach away from the stiffly factual and didactic toward edged wit and serene and balanced insight. She had definite limitations--she could not, for example, summon the detachment with which she treated figures of the past when discussing her contemporaries: Ulysses was a catastrophe and D.H. Lawrence a vulgarian. She had had the good fortune to be born a member of a literate and articulate circle, and at its best her writing has all the life and vividness of good talk. And her warmth and generosity, happily, are at their best in her portrayal of the talent of English women writers of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. How good she is on the subject of Elizabeth Barrett, later Elizabeth Barrett Browning, for example. "Her mind was lively and secular and satirical," she says, and she goes on to give this Victorian woman full credit for harboring the unlikely ambition of dealing with the life of her time in verse. This ambition was misdirected, but, Virginia Woolf goes on to say, "Aurora Leigh remains, for all its imperfection, a book that still lives and breathes and has its being."

And how perceptive she is on the Brontes. She names Charlotte a poet as well as Emily, (and I quote): "Wuthering Heights was a greater book than Jane Eyre because Emily was a greater poet than Charlotte. There is no I in Wuthering Heights. There are no governesses. There are no employers. There is love, but not the love of men and women. Emily was inspired by some more general conception...Hers [was] the rarest of all powers. She could free life from its dependence on facts:...indicate the spirit of a face so that it needs no body: by speaking of the moor make the wind blow and the thunder roar." And no clearer or more definite praise has ever been given by one woman writer to another than the praise given in Virginia Woolf's long and penetrating essay on Jane Austen to "the most perfect artist among women, the writer whose works are immortal."

Virginia Woolf's own command over the novel was subject to lapses in plan and in power; "To the Lighthouse (1927) and Between the Acts (1941), however, prove her dramatic sense of time and change and of the tragic diversity of human character and loyalties. In these two novels her feminism is in abeyance--a feminism based, as I have said, on the classic (in her youth) concept of woman materially enslaved and creatively baffled by the unbreakable historic dominance of man. In A Room of One's Own (1929), based on lectures given at Newnham and Girton, she stated her case with the most charming scholarship and wit; in Three Guineas (1938) the insistence on masculine

dominance has become obsessive, and the protesting voice shrill. The male--at least the British male--is now seen actually to conspire against the female. Male regalia--those legal wigs, for example--those academic gowns and mortarboards--those religious mitres and copes--were invented, not as the distinguishing signs of a profession (and class) but of a bullying sex. And in the case of military uniforms--here again the British male had the subjugation of sister, mother, sweetheart, daughter, wife, aunt and female cousins to a distant degree, in mind. Those horse-hair plumes, helmets, visors, shining cuirasses, epaulets; that quantity of gold braid; those gloves and hipboots and bright buttons and colored stripes and bindings--even, one might say, by a slight extension of the indictment, all those pistols, swords and medals--had become to Mrs. Woolf, symbols of masculine pride, invented, over the centuries, to keep women in their place.

This kind of **feminism**, which leaps all barriers of common sense, is not found, except in small and rather backward enclaves, in England or America today. But the fact that it continues to exist in France in a somewhat altered form, the work of Mlle. Simone de Beauvoir proves. At moments, as one reads the more argumentative works of this remarkable woman, the atmosphere seems to shift into the region of the fairy-tale, particularly of that fairy-tale in which a girl, working under an enchanter's spell, spins a roomful of straw into gold. In the case of Mlle. de Beauvoir, the task has been reversed: the

gold of life is over and over again transformed into the straw of "existential ethics" (her phrase).

Ostensibly, of course, reason rules. With patient scholarly minuteness Mlle. de Beauvoir sets before us, in perfectly organized passages, her feminist argument, backed up by data based on recorded myth as well as historic fact and on the findings of the sciences. She seems to play her cards with the utmost fairness (given her anti-masculine bias); her evidence bristles with testifiable truths and clear-headed conclusions. But, as she proceeds into the second section of her tireless work, The Second Sex, a faint suspicion arises in the mind of the reader that, even if women were free, Beauvoir considers them unable to conduct their lives with true wisdom and fortitude, or to enter into a true "brotherhood" with men. Her attitude becomes openly ambivalent, somewhere on, or around, her five hundred and sixtieth page. Women chatter; women are forever trying to conserve, to adapt, to arrange, rather than to destroy and build anew; they prefer compromise and adjustment to revolution...But "let the future be opened to them and they [may] no longer desperately cling to the past....Today... woman's situation inclines her to seek salvation in literature and art. Living marginally to the masculine world, she sees it not in its universal form, but from her special point of view. For her it is no conglomeration of implements and concepts, but a source of sensations and emotions...Taking an attitude of negation or denial, she is not absorbed in the real:

she protests against it with words...To prevent an inner life that has no useful purpose from sinking into nothingness... she must resort to self-expression. Then, too, it is well known that she is a chatterer and a scribbler. With a little ambition she will be found writing her memoirs, making her biography into a novel, breathing forth her feelings in poems. The vast leisure she enjoys is most favorable to such activities!" (explanation point mine).

In this manner the later pages of The Second Sex turn rapidly from the comparatively cool and detached exposition which characterized earlier sections, into a series of bitter diatribes against the modern "creative" woman--particularly the woman writer. This writer cheats; she creates mirages; "she will not be capable of sustained and persistent effort; she will never succeed in gaining a solid technique...The majority of women would-be writers, at the moment when [they] think of themselves as most original...actually [do] no more than reinvent a banal cliché."

And, in a final burst of what has turned into an almost unbroken tone of petulance, she says: "Not that these independent women lack originality in behavior or feelings; on the contrary, some are so singular that they should be locked up; all in all, many of them are more whimsical, more eccentric, than the men whose discipline they reject...There are women who are mad and there are women of sound method; none has that madness in her that we call genius."

Nor, we are bound to conclude, will they ever have, even when, in a "supreme victory"...by and through their natural differentiation, men and women [will] unequivocally affirm their brotherhood. In spite of all her protestations to the contrary, we feel, as we come to the end of this extraordinary work, that Mlle. de Beauvoir cherishes, in the deep recesses of her existentially trained self, a dislike, even a contempt, for the enigmatic, the intuitive, the graceful, the tender, the opalescent, the mercurial side of women's nature--the side that truly complements the virtues of the male. The side that has always been involved centrally in the production of women's art, the side that contributes, as one critic has said "to the deeply feminine appeal and enchantment of Berthe Morisot's [and Mary Cassatt's] pictures"; the side which the great women poets have drawn upon; the side which sustains the great women novelists. This feeling is reinforced as, just before we close the book, we glance at its formidable index. I recommend to you, on some afternoon of rain and incipient boredom, the perusal of this index, and the ticking off of the names of women artists listed therein. The gaps and lacunae are shocking. Beauvoir has left out very nearly every woman of any striking genius, down the years of recorded history, and those she has included are given short shrift. On the other hand, she has listed numbers of mediocrities, French, American and British, (chiefly modern) and a good many nonentities (chiefly French). Colette receives the largest number of mentions, which is all

to the good. But where is Louise Labé, the great sonnet writer of Lyons, in the time of the Pleiade? Where is Mme. de Sevigné (a line or two); where is Emily Dickinson (a slighting remark)? St. Teresa is given her due: I quote, "she lived out, as a woman, an experience whose meaning goes far beyond the fact of her sex...But she is a striking exception...What her minor sisters have given us is an essentially feminine vision of the world and of salvation; it is not transcendence that they seek: it is the redemption of their femininity."

Femininity. We close the book, not without a relieved sigh, and turn to a set of remarks written, in the second volume of his autobiography, by Leonard Woolf, Virginia Woolf's husband. "I have always been greatly attracted," he says "by the undiluted female mind. And I mean the adjective 'undiluted' for I am not thinking of exceptional minds, like Cleopatra or Mrs. Carlyle or Jane Austen or Virginia Woolf; I am thinking of the 'ordinary' woman, undistinguished, often unintellectual and unintrospective. The minds of most women differ from the minds of most men in a way which I feel very distinctly, but which becomes rather indistinct as I try to describe it. Their minds seem to me to be gentler, more sensitive, more civilized. Even in many stupid, vain, tiresome women this quality is often preserved below the exasperating surface. But it is not easy to catch it or bring it to the surface. You can only do so by listening to, and by being really interested in, what they say. I think I have taught myself gradually to be interested

in what women say to me, and to listen attentively to what they are saying, for in this way you get now and again a glimpse, or rather a breath of this pure, curiously female quality of mind. It is the result, I suppose, partly of their upbringing which is usually so different from that of the male in all classes, and partly of fundamental, organic differences of sex. And that again, I suppose, is why, as a male, I get a romantic, even perhaps a sentimental, pleasure from feeling the quality."

In women's deportment, we can agree, the brutal, rough, swaggering, masculinized gesture never, somehow, works, the cigars of the young George Sand and the middleaged Amy Lowell to the contrary notwithstanding. And in her writing, the gentle, tender, nurturing feminine nature perhaps precludes ultimate coarseness and harshness, either in tone or in choice of material. Women have never succeeded, for example, in writing true surrealism--a style closely involved with the hallucinatory, the shocking and the terrifying effect; with the calculated irrational and the direct or indirect erotic. A younger generation of women poets have allied themselves with far-out poetic procedures; unsuccessfully. For (and I have researched this subject with some care) these younger women writers, although published side by side, in anthologies and elsewhere, with their far-out brothers, cannot bring themselves to use Anglo-Saxon monosyllables of a sexual or scatological kind. They swear a little, instead. (Even Mary McCarthy, even Caitlin Thomas.) (An exception to this rule has recently

appeared in England. In her long and rather chaotic novel The Golden Notebook, Doris Lessing, born in Persia and brought up in Southern Rhodesia, permits herself every license of language. I recommend the results to your attention).

Fortunately, this limitation in vocabulary does not mean that young women writers today are in any way limited in regard to subject matter. In fact, only recently a young woman of nineteen broke through several taboos formerly prevalent in the British theatre. This was Shelagh Delaney, whose play A Taste of Honey after a great success, both in London and New York, has been made into a most poignant motion-picture. "Down from Salford came this splendid young prophetess," Colin MacInnes, in Encounter, recently remarked.

Like all prophetesses Shelagh Delaney tells the truth--her own truth, both observed and suffered through. For in the case of the woman writer and particularly of the woman poet, every lie--every fib, even--shows, like a smutch on a child's (or on a woman's) cheek. We can, perhaps, at this point draw up a short list of tentative rules. First, in literature (or in any other art) women must not lie. Second, they must not whine. Third, they must not attitudinize (in the role of the femme fatale least of all). And they must neither theatricalize nor coarsen their truths. They must not be vain, and they must not flight or kite in any witch-like way. Nor, on the other hand, go in for little girlishness and false naivete. Nor "stamp a tiny foot at the universe."

So far as form is concerned, they should consider themselves free to move about unhampered by strict rules, keeping in mind, however, the fact that women can be, and have been, superb technicians. Perhaps the long souffle, the big machine, as the French say, is not for them; on the other hand it may lie ahead of them, in the discernible future. One or two warnings concerning form can be issued. A lengthy period should be allowed to elapse before the sonnet-sequence devoted to the triumph, sorrows and bafflements of love, be revived by women writers. I say revived, for at the moment the form is, fortunately, dead. And as it was women who helped to bring such sequences to high brilliance, it was women, in number, who were guilty, especially in England, of its 19th and 20th century decadence. It is a particularly insidious addiction, this fondness for sonnets in a connected series, and one which, Heaven knows, men have shared. Its dangers for feminine talent are apparent: it allows women to go on and on, either praising the lover or blaming him. It also allows shows of complete and utter subservience (women rarely write sonnets in a mood of rebellion). It allows, in fact, infinite, hair-splitting wrangling. And it all too frequently brings in a rather artificial death-wish--a kind of graveyardism--not at all in the true, simple and poignant vein of the complaints of those poor miserable girls, who, in the anonymous ballads, ask for a stone to be put at their head and feet when they lie under the wild goose grasses. Rather a death-wish that smells of the lamp...

What did the women say? Well, they said many things which closely resemble words said by their brothers, lovers, husbands, fathers and sons. They have never issued so many peremptory commands, or drawn up so many propositions composed of abstract terms, as have men. But they have asked, as woman and artist, the same questions men have asked: Who am I? From whence did I come? Is there a design in the universe of which I am a part? Do you love me? Shall I die forever?

Women have said: "The moon has set, and the Pleiades; midnight has passed, and still I lie alone." They have said "I am Heathcliff" and "Circumference is my business" and "No coward soul is mine." They have told great stories--Lady Murasaki and Scheherazade--and, in our own day, Karen Blixen (Isak Dinesen). And a kind of ambiance of anonymous women's poetry and song, floats through every culture: their proverbs, their happy nonsense in Ma Mere L'Oie and in Mother Goose: their chilling improvisations in ballad and fairy-tale--their tenderness in the rhymes devised to quiet a restless child, or put it to sleep.

The blows dealt women by social and religious change were real, and in certain times and places definitely maiming. But the articulate woman has always made it clear that she recognizes those biological and psychic laws which make her, as a modern eclectic analyst has recently pointed out, not the opposite or the "equal" (or the rival) of man, but man's complement.

Women still have within them the memory of the distaff and the loom -- and, we must remember, the memory of the dark, cruel, wanton goddesses. But as she rarely has gone over, in the past, to low complicity or compliance in relation to her companion, man, we can hope for her future.

And she listens, when a truly sibylline utterance falls from a sister's lips, such as the remark of the late Karen Blixen (surely one of the great writers of our or any other time) when she said: "Men and women are two locked caskets, of which each contains the key to the other." She listens to these words, with their ring of mysterious truth, with awe - not terror.