15 The Independent Woman

Book II of The Second Sex is called ‘Woman’s Life Today’, and it is, basically, a 400-page proof of the opening sentence ‘One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman’.¹ It is civilization as a whole, says de Beauvoir, which produces ‘this creature, intermediate between male and eunuch, which is described as feminine’.² By means of a copious documentation of the events of childhood, adolescence, sexual initiation, marriage, motherhood, lesbianism, prostitution, middle age and old age, de Beauvoir ventures to demonstrate exactly how society has constructed this Other known as woman.

Part VII, Book II, is called ‘Towards Liberation’, and it contains two relatively short chapters, one on ‘The Independent Woman’, and a conclusion. The independent woman is the woman who is capable of finding in her profession a means of economic and social autonomy. Such women are worthy of study in their own right, says de Beauvoir, because (i) they are the subject of intense debate between feminists and anti-feminists, and (ii) ‘The woman who is economically emancipated from man is not for all that in a moral, social, and psychological situation identical with that of man.’³ The difficulty she faces is that of asserting herself both as female and as a self-determining, or sovereign, subject. And de Beauvoir continues:

She refuses to confine herself to her role as female, because she will not escape mutilation; but it would also be a mutilation to repudiate her sex. Man is a human being with sexuality; woman is a complete individual, equal to the male, only if she too is a human being with sexuality. To renounce her femininity is to renounce a part of her humanity.⁴

In any event, it is precisely because the marks of femininity are socially shaped and imposed that they cannot be renounced or discarded at will. The woman who dresses ‘to suit herself’ will inescapably appear ‘outlandish’. Inversely, the woman who conforms has to ‘insinuate herself into a world that has doomed her to passivity’.⁵ This immersion in passivity is all the more burdensome because women who are confined to the feminine sphere have grossly magnified its importance: ‘they have made dressing and housekeeping difficult arts’.⁶ Men’s attire, by contrast, is basically functional; what
is more, 'nobody expects him to take care of himself; some kindly disposed or hired female relieves him of this bother'.

In addition, says de Beauvoir, the woman wants to retain her womanliness for her own satisfaction; she can regard herself with approval to the extent that she is capable of combining the life she has made for herself with the destiny which her mother, her childhood games and her adolescent fantasies have prepared for her. She has, in addition, entertained narcissistic dreams and expectations:

to the male's phallic pride she still opposes her cult of self; she wants to be seen, to be attractive... Obedient to the feminine tradition, she will wax her floors, and she will do her own cooking instead of going to eat at a restaurant as a man would do in her place. She wants to live at once like a man and like a woman, and in that way she multiplies her tasks and adds to her fatigue.

The independent woman will encounter her most difficult problems, says de Beauvoir, in the field of sex. To begin with, she will suffer from an inferiority complex, born of the fact that 'she lacks leisure for such minute beauty care as that of the coquette whose sole aim in life is to be seductive; follow the specialist's advice as she may, she will never be more than an amateur in the domain of elegance'. The second difficulty, says de Beauvoir, for the independent woman is that she will never be able completely to switch off mentally so as to be in a position to offer herself 'spontaneously' as 'prey', as 'a subtle quivering of the flesh'. The difference in her case is that she knows she is offering herself; she knows that she is a conscious agent, a subject.

Neither, says de Beauvoir, is an independent woman granted the same sexual latitude as her male counterpart. If she exercises her sexual freedom she risks compromising her reputation and her career. At the very least a burdensome hypocrisy is demanded of her. Thus the more solidly she establishes her reputation in society, the more ready people will be to close their eyes; 'but in provincial districts especially she is watched, as a rule, with narrow severity. Even under the most favourable circumstances – where fear of public opinion is negligible – her situation in this respect is not equivalent to man's. The differences depend both on traditional attitudes and on the special nature of feminine eroticism.

One possible avenue which is open to her is to engage in 'one-night stands'. But the risks for her are far greater than for a man. For one thing, the risk of venereal disease is greater 'because it is the man who is responsible for taking precautions against infection'; in the second