In the first half of this book I set out to prove (a) that Simone de Beauvoir made, and was therefore capable of making, her own distinctive contribution to existentialism; (b) that she began to do so in the early 1940s; (c) that her most distinctive and characteristic contribution to existentialism was to have developed an existentialist ethics; and (d) that this ethics has interesting affinities with some of the views expressed by Merleau-Ponty during the mid-1940s, and that it diverges from just about everything that Sartre said to a degree that I called oceanic.

There are two things that I want to take from this sequence of argument. The first is that by early 1947 de Beauvoir has completed her own version of existentialism: this existentialism, I want to stress, is hers and hers alone. Second, I see her, as she approaches the writing of The Second Sex, as a considerable philosopher in her own right. The fact that she did not hold such a high opinion of herself does not particularly bother me; on this issue, as on various others, I am happy to follow Marx’s advice that we should not judge an individual according to the opinion she has of herself. The fact that others, including many of my own contemporaries, have a low opinion of de Beauvoir, at any rate as a philosopher, is, I think, a sad reflection on teaching practices in philosophy. I am reminded of the ruthless exclusion of Marx from otherwise reputable histories of philosophy, a signal case of politics imposing on our subject. The equally ruthless exclusion of de Beauvoir from anthologies of existentialist prose, and from collections of critical essays on existentialism, was no less political: the enemy within needed to be silenced as much as the enemy outside. It is time to end this shameful episode in the history of philosophy, and if this book makes even the smallest contribution to the achievement of that goal, I for one shall be delighted.

*The Second Sex* sets out to answer one question: Why are women consigned to the category of the Other? De Beauvoir gives two quite different answers to this question. (1) Women are consigned to the
category of the Other because they are the females of the species. (2) Women are consigned to the category of the Other because, having been raised to become women, there is no other category they could possibly occupy. Michelle Le Doeuff is certain, or at any rate convinced enough to be willing to bet money on it, that de Beauvoir herself did not have much time for the first of these two answers, and that to fill the explanatory vacuum it leaves in its wake, she had to write a second volume. But if de Beauvoir was that unhappy with Volume 1, why did she publish it? The conclusion that I have drawn is that de Beauvoir sees merit in both answers, and that therefore she regards neither answer as conclusive.

It is tempting to read The Second Sex as two completely separate volumes, the first written by an epigone who had overdosed on Sartrean masculinism (Cottrell, Elshtain, Lloyd, Okely, Soper, Gatens, Moi), the second by a sociologist who has turned her back on Sartrean ontology, or at the very least on the pathological misanthropy of Sartrean ethics (Le Doeuff mainly, also Moi). But I am inclined to resist this temptation, accepting neither the ‘decent woman’ hypothesis, that of the paragon who was always prepared to listen to people and, in marked contrast to Sartre, never descends to concocting nasty little stories about them, nor the orthodoxy that de Beauvoir was incapable of developing a philosophy of her own, needing constantly to draw inspiration from Sartre’s writings. If, as I have argued during the first half of this book, de Beauvoir produced her own existentialist philosophy from the early 1940s, then she followed her own philosophical lights, not Sartre’s, from the outset. The core of her existentialism is her ethical theory (not, pace Le Doeuff, her moral intuitions and common decency). Her ethical theory is located in her writings from 1943 to 1947, where she alerts us to the tragic ambiguity of human existence, where she identifies an absolute evil (un mal absolu) and reintroduces into moral philosophy an interest in the everyday virtues and vices. (There is a tragic ambiguity, for instance, in the fact that society relegates women to the role of domestic and reproductive slaves, and yet it is precisely these same women who are entrusted with the function of rearing children.) The scope of the theory is augmented in various ways in The Second Sex, for example, in her meditations on ‘a truly socialist ethics’ which will be ‘concerned to uphold justice without suppressing liberty, and to impose duties upon individuals without abolishing individuality’. This is the philosopher who sets about writing, and who completes the writing of The Second Sex. The fact that she draws