

REVIEWS

THE SECOND SEX. By Simone de Beauvoir. Translated and edited by H. M. Parshley. (Jonathan Cape; 50s.)

Le Deuxième Sexe is here made available to English-speaking readers in an admirable translation, with some useful notes on the author's existentialist terminology. Making abundant use of biology, ethnology, history, psycho-analysis, literature, Mme de Beauvoir undertakes an exhaustive analysis of the 'situation' of woman as it has developed through the ages, and of woman herself as determined by that situation. Living in a masculine world, simultaneously idealised and enslaved by man, she finds herself reduced to the status of 'object', she cannot achieve full self-realisation, she remains dependent. Only when she has gained full economic independence, complete equality with man, and complete freedom from the conventional and ethical norms which fetter her erotic life, will she be able to fulfil her destiny.

In Book Two, Mme de Beauvoir examines woman today, and the influences which form her, at every stage of her life from infancy, through adolescence, womanhood, maternity, to the menopause and finally to old age. And the book ends with a picture of woman as, in the author's eyes, she might be and ought to be: the 'independent woman'.

There is much of value in this analysis. It is of course a powerful *riposte* to the 'woman's-place-is-in-the-kitchen' school of thought (not seldom, alas, to be encountered in Catholic circles); it is a trenchant criticism of various male attitudes of mind; it includes some very sound practical judgments on the sexual life (e.g. that 'to crowd [full sexual initiation] all into one night is stupid and barbarous'). Above all, it is the substance of Book Two which is important: this careful scientific elucidation by a woman of what it *feels like* to be a woman is indeed unique, and must be of great value in helping man to understand her instead of inventing her.

Unfortunately, the analysis is inseparably bound up with the thesis of the book; and here there is much to regret. The author's learning does not save her from inaccuracies and half-truths: an astounding reason is advanced for the Church's forbidding of abortion; a stale gibe about the safe-period appears once again; sayings of the Fathers are wrested from their 'situation'—particularly unforgivable in this author; the Church of course is the 'enemy of the flesh'; and where does St Thomas lay down the time at which the foetus becomes animated? Again, whether or no the book paints too black a picture of woman's plight where France is concerned, certainly it must sometimes seem ludicrously unreal to Anglo-Saxon readers; and the feeling of deep rancour which pervades it creates in the end an impression of a sort of universal hostility between the sexes: there

is endless discussion of eroticism, but little of love in the sense of a gradual, reverent, gay and painful discovery of another personality and fusion with it.

One senses also a sort of hatred of maternity: and here we come closer to the book's essential weakness. The differences between man and woman, in the author's view, are due to their different 'situations': change that, give women the same education as men, the same social, economic, political status, and they will be wholly equal. But, since human beings are psycho-physical beings, it is not unreasonable to suppose *a priori* that to the undeniable physiological differentiations there must correspond equally marked psychological differentiations; while *a posteriori* we are entitled to argue from the fact (and if the author had been more fully acquainted with the Anglo-Saxon countries she might have weighed it more carefully) of the emergence of the twentieth-century virago—not of course the woman whose individual vocation it is, because of her psychological predispositions, to adopt a 'male' career and be successful and happy in it, but the new matriarch-type, strident, domineering, hard as nails, repellent to men and women alike, unhappy because *dénaturée*. Marriage should be free, a meeting of equals, yes of course; but of equals in stature and dignity, not of indistinguishables. Girls should have, not the same education as boys, but as good an education as boys. Women and men have the same right to 'transcendence', to creative work, yes; but if teaching is a creative work, by what right does the author deny the same value to motherhood, which includes teaching among its many glories and responsibilities?

But the harmfulness of the book goes deeper than that; for in Mme de Beauvoir's view, to achieve something means always to be *doing* something, making fresh conquests; whereas the primary achievement is on the contrary to *become* something, to be contemplative. And, as she points out, women tend to find this easier than men. It is particularly tragic that, at a moment in history when activism and its fruits are bidding fair to destroy us altogether, and when therefore we need the wisdom of woman and its influence as never before, a book such as this should try to lead woman away from her own destiny—for the achieving of which in its fullness there is still so much to be done—and to urge her instead to assume a travesty of the qualities, and therefore no doubt the follies, of men.

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LES PSAUMES. Traduits par R. Tournay, O.P., avec la collaboration de R. Schwab. Bible de Jérusalem. (Editions du Cerf.)

Anyone who reads or prays the psalms as much as the Catholic should will find this neat little translation and introduction most useful. As in preceding volumes of this series, the translation is from the original, and is of a high order of scholarship and style. The introduction is fuller than