

The Age of Discretion

BY SIMONE DE BEAUVOIR

Simone de Beauvoir is an outstanding French writer and an ardent supporter of the modern existentialist philosophy which declares that "existence precedes essence." In other words, it asserts that man exists first then creates his own essence. Existentialism is opposed to fatalism and determinism; it denies the existence of a "pre-existing human nature" because it states that man "makes himself" or shapes his own personality, unhindered by in-born tendencies which, if they exist, should not overrule him.

Existentialism is the philosophy of realism, of lived experience and self-analysis. While it makes use of psychological theories, it emphasizes human freedom as a goal and denies the Freudian theory that man is enslaved to congenital, physiological instincts or subconscious factors. It equally denies the marxist idea of man's subordination to the laws of history or to those of economic necessity.

Simone de Beauvoir, a friend and associate of the French philosopher, Jean-Paul Sartre, has written several books in the form of research studies, essays and novels in which she has expounded her ideas and tried to prove that existentialism is a humanist philosophy, asserting the dignity and worth of man and woman and their capacity for self-realization through reason and self-confidence.

In "Age of Discretion," the first of her three stories contained in *La Femme Rompue*, the author analyzes a woman writer who, at about the age of sixty, becomes the prey of a persistent worry bordering on nervous depression. The sources of her worry were manifold; her last published book, on which she had worked very hard, did not receive from readers the response that she expected. This aroused her fear that her intellectual vitality was drying up as a result of age. Her son, Philip, whom she had tried to shape in her own mould, had disappointed her. Instead of preparing a Ph.D. thesis which would ensure him a permanent position at the university, he preferred a technological post in an industrial organization where he would earn double what the university offered him. In his choice he was probably influenced by his young, superficially educated wife. The mother had tried to inculcate in him the principle that money is of secondary importance in one's life but here she had failed. After a hot discussion with him, a complete break ensued. Though he tried to mend things up, she categorically refused to forgive him.

Another cause for her worry was her husband, André, whose love for her seemed to cool off at the same time as did his interest in scientific research and the outside world. He did not agree with her on completely breaking with his son but, to a certain extent, kept a neutral attitude. When he proposed for both of them a recreative trip away from Paris she refused to go with him and he did not insist, thus confirming her doubts regarding his adjustment to old age. Left to herself, she started to ponder about her failures and to blame herself for nourishing an empty dream of continuous progress.

Back from his trip, André looked cheerful and

refreshed. This time she agreed to accompany him on a visit to her mother-in-law who lived alone in a near-by village. At 84, the old woman seemed more lively and optimistic than her daughter-in-law. "It is because I have an ideal to live for," she explained, "a party to adhere to, while you two do not believe in anything." To this André retorted by saying that he did believe in something.

— What? asked his mother.

— I believe that human suffering is something abominable; that it is our duty to try to wipe it out. Everything else is unworthy of consideration.

— Since the world is full of suffering, inserted his wife, why not exterminate it altogether with the atomic bomb? Why don't we seek immediate annihilation of suffering through a general suicide?

— Because, answered André, I like to dream that life may be possible without suffering.

André's answers surprised his wife. After all, he was not so indifferent and imperturbable as she had thought. He was sensible to human needs and did not lose faith in the possibility of a better future. An explanation followed which showed her that she had been taken up with a series of misunderstandings that brought her down. Her husband's love did not cool off but he was suffering from boredom and needed a change of atmosphere. He did not insist on taking her with him on the country trip because he respected her freedom. He said that her disappointment with her last publication was not entirely justified. She had made a false start because she had embraced too wide an ambition. If she resumed her attempt and persisted in her endeavour she would obtain better results. "As to me," he added, "I have a definite plan for the immediate future. Further than that I do not like to think."

After a moment of reflective silence, the woman asked:

— What about Philip? Do you think I was harsh with him?

— Possibly. You had no right to impose on him your negativism. I know that he shares our revolt against world injustice but he refuses to see the world with our own eyes. He believes in action and he thinks that service to others could take many forms. It could not be monopolized by one system or one group.

— Do you think I should make up with him?

— He would be very sad if you did not. Or what use would this attitude of yours be?

The conclusion that they both reached reassured her: "We are together, this is our lot. We shall help each other to live this last adventure from which there is no return. This might make it more tolerable. We have no alternative."

(1) In the collection entitled: *La femme Rompue*, Gallimard 1967.