Question 1: What does it mean to you to write at the end of the twentieth century?

—How can I answer that question when I don’t even understand what you’re asking me? What does it mean to me to live now? Well, it means, here I am, living in the twentieth century! How do you expect me to know what it would mean to live at any other time? In any other century? That’s the only thing I know, what can I say? So it means that—well, I’ve lived through a couple of important historical moments, some in my childhood, which I still remember, and then some really good moments, like in the sixties. Now we’re in an extremely frightening period: the eighties. So, what does that mean to me? I’m pretty up on history and current events. I’m like a sponge that soaks up whatever’s going on around me, so I have to deal with whatever goes on in the century I’m in. I’m afraid I don’t know how else to answer your question.

Question 2: Is it valid of value to write as a woman, and is it part of your writing practice today?

—A lot of stupid things have been written about “writing as a woman,” especially in reference to biology. You can’t determine what biological differences are; they’re so overlaid with culture that it’s absolutely impossible to get a clear picture of them. And it’s stupid to try, so I’m not going to talk about biology. Besides, I’m not sure I believe in biological differences. People do have different experiences, of course, but writing as a woman is like writing as a black, or writing as a coal miner, a samurai, an Indian Buddhist, or the head of some huge corporation. Each person has certain material to work with that isn’t exactly the same as the material of the person next door. That’s what writing as a woman means to me: I have a certain material to work with. But that doesn’t mean that there’s a specificity to the writing. I could just as easily have given you the response you got from Sarraute: “I’m not a woman writer; I’m a writer.”

—(A) It’s interesting that you say that.

—I’m a writer. And so okay, let’s see. . . . My material is . . . well . . . there is an experience peculiar to being a woman, just as there’s one peculiar to being a coal miner.

—(A) And how has that experience crossed over into your writing? I ask that because there are many women who responded—and I mean that in the strongest sense of the word—to your works, to your books. Take Les Stances à Sophie, for example: that book has a lot to say to me, as a woman.

—Yes, take something like Les Stances à Sophie, which deals with a classical marriage, quite a typical one really. It’s a blueprint, that book, a kind of blueprint of what one encounters in a typical marriage. And what happens in this book most directly resembles my own personal experience: I actually had that kind of marriage. I mean, okay, things are different, everything has changed, but that’s the kind of marriage I had. It’s part of my life experience as a woman.
—(A) That's exactly what I was getting at.
—Because men can't have the experience of being a married woman.
—(A) But, at least in theory, if "all is culture," then it should be possible.
—But it is possible. That's where I agree with Shakespeare: if one is a creator, then one is both sexes at the same time. I have to be able to write about the experience of a dog, or of a cat (but then we're talking about nuances!). A writer should be able to write about ... You know, I wrote a story about two young men who fall in love with each other, who feel passionately attracted toward each other. Do you think that has anything to do with me? Two boys? And if you asked me why I chose two boys, I couldn't answer you. It's because I use whatever material I come across. I had this idea of a young boy who leaves home, who has a traumatic experience, and who realizes that his father is crazy. Well, almost crazy. He's not really crazy; the poor guy is really just like everybody else, but you know, he's in a world of crazy people and that's how it begins ... that's how it is ... so here I've got this boy: what's going to happen to him? He screws around with women, with girls really, and then suddenly, to his own surprise, to his horror, he feels passionately drawn to a young man, a student he didn't respond to at first, but then they get sexually involved. And what was I supposed to do? Talk about experience! What was I going to do? When I realized where things had gotten to ... And I had tried to avoid it, there was something in me that didn't want to deal with all that stuff—but no luck. ... They were in bed together ... they were involved. So that was that. They had fallen into each other's arms! I said to myself: "What am I doing here? What's going to happen next? How am I going to get out of this? What am I getting mixed up in?" And then everybody's going to say: "What are you meddling in?" Especially the homosexuals, they're going to jump all over me. Oh well, there I was. ... I had done it. ... I had invented the whole thing. I had identified myself thoroughly with their experience. Afterward, to give you the whole story, I showed the scene to two homosexual friends of mine, honest guys, nice, cynical, charming, witty. ... I said to them: "Listen, I'd like to know if I've said a bunch of crap. Tell me if I've put in things that are totally silly or unbelievable." So they read it and they said: "But how did you know this? How?"
—(A) That's pretty impressive.
—"How did you know?" But they found something that didn't seem realistic; I won't tell you exactly what it was because it's very, very sexual, very dirty. I said to them: "Listen, I think you're the ones who've got it wrong." And they thought about it and then said: "Good God, who knows? We should give it a try!" So there's my answer to what "personal experience" is all about.
—(A) You mentioned that you "identified" with the experience of the two boys. Do you mean that when you write you have a tendency to identify with the characters in your novels?
—Well, if you take a look at my novels, Le Repas du guerrier, for example, I didn't identify at all with the woman who narrates in the first person. Everyone assumed I was her, but that's not me at all. Le Repas du guerrier was my first novel. As subject matter I took the germ of a story that kept running through my head, a story about the ravages of love on poets. ... 
—(A) Quite a subject!
—Well, you know ... a story about that kind of thing ... I started to write off the cuff using the pronoun "he," and then I realized that it wasn't working. So I took the character who knew the least about what was going on, the most intellectually limited character, who really didn't understand a thing, and that was this woman—sorry, may all women who hear this forgive me, but it can happen. This woman didn't understand a thing, she was completely out of it. When I began using this woman to tell the story, I said to myself: "That's it! I'm finally writing." Not because I had chosen the woman, but because I had chosen the character who was the most marginal, the most limited, the one whose vision was the most circumscribed. Then I knew that I had begun to write. Still, it's clear that the character who speaks for me in the novel is the man.
—(A) Is that true for most of your novels?
—No, but it is for that one.
—(A) It changes? It depends ...
—Yes. The next novel is about a little girl from a big family who grows up in a housing project, which isn't my case at all. I'm an only child. Did I live in a housing project when I was young? No, never. So you see, the only material I took from my own experience was that for a short time I actually did live—or let's say tried to live—in a huge apartment complex when I was a sculptor. Someone gave me a studio there so I tried to live in it. I couldn't, but I gathered some information while I was there. And that's all. Other than that, I don't really identify with the little girl in the story. I use my imagination instead.
—(A) I find your response very interesting, but I wonder ...
—So there's no real identification going on except in *Les Stances à Sophie*, but writing it was also a sacrificial experience.

—(A1) Really? In what way?

—I believed that marriage was completely old-fashioned, that nobody thought about it anymore. But, to my surprise, plenty of my friends were getting married. All around me people were getting married! "They're still doing that," I said. I was pretty naive, I guess; I thought we were living in the modern world; I realized, "No, not on your life! Women are still stuck in the same place! Men are stuck in the same place! How awful!"

—So, to make a long story short, I took off from there to write about marriage. I thought, "Okay, so, we can still write about that stuff." Then I gave myself over to writing a description of marriage. To do that I used my brief—thank God—experience. That's true, I did make use of it . . .

What happened after *Les Stances à Sophie*? I don't know anymore. In any case, from that on I did not write from personal experience. The next novel takes place during the eleventh century. It's about children. You know, I have a way with children. I know how to get along with them, how to behave with them. I like that. I enjoy them.

—(A1) But it's still a part of your practice.

—Writing as a woman is no more valid for me than writing as a man, or as a chimpanzee. If you take the example of the chimpanzees who know how to use a typewriter . . . well, you know, theirs is a specific experience like any other. It's specific to the individual case, I mean. Women don't all have the same experience either. What is all this nonsense?

—(A1) But, as well you know, there are a lot of women in the United States, in Women's Studies and elsewhere—there are also feminists like me, men and women (and more and more men)—who read novels either in order to look more closely at representations of women characters, or in order to analyze linguistically the textual differences between works by women and works by men. According to what you've just said, it's a kind of work that . . .

—Let them enjoy themselves with my style. I hope they get a kick out of it. Let them look for specific stylistic features linked to my being a woman, but these specific features would indicate some kind of biological specificity, and I just don't believe in one.


—Naturally the experience of child-bearing—an experience I haven't had, by the way—is specific to women. I guess that makes me a man.

—(A1) Oh, come on . . .

—Well, what do you want me to say? That's the way it is if you're talking about biology. . . I'm not different from men in this way. I'm just not, case closed. If one wants to look for biological differences, I find that extremely reactionary.


—Oh, well, that . . . cultural differences . . . Naturally there's tons of those. Of course.

—(A1) It's true that there was a tendency to look for "the biological difference," and the two, biological and cultural, are often confused.

—Especially in France. In the United States too?

—(A1) Yes.

*Question 3: Many women writing today find themselves, for the first time in history, at the center of such institutions as the university and psychoanalysis. In your opinion, will this new placement of women help them to enter the twentieth-century canon, and if so, will they be in the heart of this corpus or (still) in the footnotes?*

—That's a complicated question.

—(A1) Yes, rather.

—Wait a minute. What canon? You mean posterity? Being in literary histories?

—(A1) Yes, in literary histories.

—In books studied in school?

—(A1) Survival.

—The canon in that sense is constituted first of all by cooption. There's a good chance that the people who are already in the canon will simply coopt others who are already in the canon. What I'm saying is that it doesn't mean anything. This canon, it isn't . . . there are people, men and women, who aren't in the canon and who are very worthwhile writers, don't you think?

—(A1) Absolutely.

—Right. But still, historically, there are a lot more worthwhile women who didn't make it into the canon because no one paid any attention to them.
— (A)j) Yes.
— There's a considerable number of them. Before, especially. Today that situation is being repaired because there's an old boy's network and now there's an old girl's network to boot. Things are beginning to even out, but within that old-boy, old-girl network. Women will be excluded less often because of that sort of thing.
— (A) Do you think things have changed to that extent?
— There probably won't be as many women who disappear completely.
— (A) Yes, someone did describe this era as that of les femmes en relais, as the moment for women to carry the torch. . . . Which means that these days there are more women in institutions like the university system, more women in publishing, etc., even if they don't usually have the same power as men, at least not in the United States. We get to a certain point and then we're . . .
— But still, since women are doing the work, they have a certain power to affect things.
— (A)j) Yes, that's true. They're going to keep alive a certain number of texts by women. That's the theory, in any case. I have no idea whether in practice . . .
— You know, we're talking about a kind of rite of passage here. Personally, I refuse to privilege texts by women; I privilege good texts. That's what this is really all about, isn't it? I think this equalizing business is a good thing. That's more or less going to be the case in publishing, one of the areas where there's been the most progress, but I would emphasize that that's for the simple reason that publishers can make more money if they publish women's books too. It has nothing to do with being more liberal—in fact, they aren't; but they realize that women's books make money. So, of course, they've been reading manuscripts by women as well as by men for quite a while now. In France, women are being published more frequently, not just since Sagan, but Françoise Sagan definitely advanced women in the publishing world more than Simone de Beauvoir did . . . and there are many others. Things are pretty good right now, so that to get your foot in the door . . . But actually, it'll still be the same thing: there's always little Mafias, networking in the universities, whether we're talking about men or women. And women will have more of a tendency to discover other women than will men. But women will also discover men, I'm sure. It's still a little lopsided, but the problem of women's posterity is going to be taken care of; they're going to be known as a matter of course from now on. Complete disappearance is a thing of the past.
— There were some really serious omissions in the past—there are going to be people who will see to it that those books are sought out and discovered. For the most part, women will be doing it, of course. And that's okay. I read some unknown works that were fabulous.
— (A)j) There's a lot of research of that kind going on in the United States.
— And that research has to be done, that's for sure. You've got to do research, but in order to equalize things, not to privilege one sex over another. Unrecognized quality has to be recognized. That's the level on which it interests me personally.
— (A)j) I'd like to push you just a little further. You said "a good text," and you talked about "quality." What is "quality"? And who determines what it is? There are a lot of feminist critics in the United States who are trying to look again at this question of "quality" because a text can be considered "good" by some people but not by others. So how does one decide?
— Listen, there's the obvious and then there's the subtle, right? Now, there's no denying that during the first wave of enthusiasm over women's writing, a lot of women started writing and they wrote no matter what in no manner what way. Not really no matter what—it isn't as if their ideas were always bad—but in no manner what way. There was so much pitiful stuff written, and here too there was a period during which everyone had to exult over their miseries, you know what I mean? And this literature of experience was abominable. Actually, I was going to use a more vulgar word: they literally spit stuff out, it was truly dreadful, because everyone wanted to talk about themselves . . . which was not lacking in interest, if you will, but when it's not writing, when it's not art, then it's nothing. The effect is lost.
— (A)j) But . . .
— So there was a whole lot of mediocre stuff that came out at a given moment, whether in France or in the United States or in Germany or wherever; a bunch of things that simply weren't very good appeared and were destined to disappear. But that's the obvious stuff; that stuff will disappear on its own. As for the nuances, the small differences in quality . . . It's clear that at a certain point we're just talking about a matter of taste.
— (A)j) And about ideology.
— For men also, you know, some distinctions are made and some aren’t. But my God! the mass of bad literature by men that’s coming out in France these days! How do we come to terms with that? When I see how certain books are such a hit and the guy is always on television whenever we turn around, I'm ready to jump out of my skin! I know it’s shit . . . and then there are the others who don’t know it’s shit. There’s nothing universal about taste.

— (A1) That’s exactly why I reacted to the word “good.”
— There are people who get caught up in the media, who believe all that media hype, and then there are others who don’t . . . What can you do? . . . But still, you can’t set up an absolute standard of what’s good and what isn’t good. I have my standards; there’s a couple of us here who share approximately the same standards. But even among ourselves, we’re very demanding. I have three or four friends who are like that: very demanding, even with one another. One of them said to me once: “Hey, read this, it’s fantastic.” I read it; I said: “Listen, are you out of your mind or what?” You see? You can’t determine an absolute standard in art.

And I’m not even sure that it’s time that determines an absolute standard. Some things will survive that aren’t worth the paper they’re written on.

— (A1) So for you, the fact that until very recently it was men who decided what was good and what wasn’t, that didn’t have any effect on women?
— Actually, I’ve noticed that among critics, in France at any rate—I can’t speak for the United States—the women are just about as sexist as the men.

— (A1) Yes, that’s sometimes the case.
— Once they’ve got a job working for a newspaper they hang onto that job for dear life and just follow the crowd. And if the truth were known, in professional circles there are a lot of people who go along with the status quo, and I mean people who have achieved a certain position, men and women. There are really very few critics of any quality these days. I can’t tell you what’s going on in the United States. As for critics here in France, they’re beginning to calm down now about all that, but there was a period that lasted until just recently when male critics didn’t read women’s books the same way as they read books by men. And sometimes female critics had the same bias. I know some female critics who really hate women, believe it or not, and that’s even worse!

— (A1) I’ve noticed that too.
— That kind of thing is still around. It might go away as time passes, I can’t tell. But bad critics will always be bad. And it’s true that they read men’s books and women’s books differently; it’s one of the things we in France have really suffered from. If you wanted women’s books, you’d find them in the “knitting section,” stuff like that. They threw all the women together. I remember finding myself in the company of Simone de Beauvoir and Françoise Sagan, which is no dishonor, if you ask me.

— (A1) Not at all!
— Yes, but why did they throw us all together? There’s nothing similar about our work, but they threw us together.

— (A1) In the United States, there’s a continuing argument about that; for example, there’s a book called The Norton Anthology that more or less establishes the canon for literature written in English, because it’s used for university teaching. Literature in English—all in one package—just like that. It’s a pretty hefty volume! So two women came along, two feminist critics, and they put together one of these big books just on literature in English by women. Everyone was screaming about it; there were women who said: “But you’re doing exactly what men have always done to women: you throw them all together and publish a big book, but this time against the canon.” Then others, mostly men, said: “But that’s not good literature! Norton shouldn’t have published it.” So people were shouting on all sides. I was more or less in favor of the project just because it made so many people from so many different perspectives shout and get hysterical.

— If The Norton Anthology of Women published work of lesser quality than The Norton Anthology of Men, then no, they shouldn’t do that. But if it’s of the same quality, then you should put them all together.

— (A1) But who decides? That’s the problem!
— Oh well, the editor decides, of course! No, but seriously, when I say “of quality” and “good,” I mean that it’s either well written or it isn’t. “Well written”? I have a concept of what good writing is that has to do with the concept of distance, the concept of internal structure. These aren’t completely vague concepts; after all, you have to keep an eye on things.

Question 4: Today we are seeing women produce literary, philosophical, and psychosocial theory of recognized importance, and . . .
— I can already answer that; to begin with, we’re seeing far too much literary theory being written today, considering literary theory isn’t at all important. The last thing I find important is theory, whether it’s literary, philosophical, or psychoanalytical. Most of the time it’s just nonsense. First there was the terrible period when literature was theoretically analyzed by using autobiography and biography. Now we’re in the terrible period when literature is being analyzed by using—what?

— (A) Post-structuralism?
— Right, that’s it. All that is just a succession of terrible periods with theories that don’t mean a thing. And by that, I mean that these people don’t know what it means to write. They haven’t done it!
— (A) Are there people who write on literature that you do like?
— I don’t think so. I avoid reading that stuff. But I do have a friend in Israel who is an excellent analyst. She analyzes the social and historical situation of the author and then she analyzes the style, the rationale for the style, and the internal structures. That can be done, but for a specific book, one specific work by one specific author. General theories—what should be done and what shouldn’t be done—all the Tel Quel theory, for example—in my opinion it should be put in the trash can. No question about it. It’s wrong. Straight into the trash can because it’s wrong. I’m not saying that people aren’t capable of writing good theory, but only a very few can do it. You have to really be on the inside. There are a couple of people who truly love literature, like . . . well, there’s Marthe Robert. But I find that she tends too much toward the psychoanalytic. Much too much.
— (A) She is a true lover of literature.
— Well, there are literature lovers who have the right to speak about the books they love. In that case, they can look at how the book is constructed. But to know how it’s constructed, you have to ask the author most of the time anyway. Because that’s still the person who knows best.
— (A) I like that expression, “literature lover,” because literary criticism . . .
— They’re what was called “amateurs” in the seventeenth or eighteenth century.
— (A) Exactly.
— The “amateurs.” Now the word “amateur” seems feeble, so we say “lover.” The big fans of literature, who can sometimes make mistakes, you know, have at least tried to understand from the inside. They haven’t tried to validate their own way of thinking, which is what the theorists do when they use the book just as a crutch to prop up their own ideas. Personally, I have to be more explicit about things—why I like reading Faulkner, for example. I had an experience with Faulkner; I used to adore Faulkner—well, not adore—I read a lot of Faulkner, I was fascinated by him. Just after reading Faulkner I started writing. Unfortunately, I started writing Faulkner! They were absolutely abominable. Really horrific. Just bad stuff. Luckily, I realized what I was doing. . . . So I threw them out. And then soon after I heard Raymond Queneau say that he had been tremendously influenced by the Americans, especially by Faulkner. So I said to myself: “Hey, that’s like me. I was also influenced by the Americans.” Not by a single French author, except maybe Queneau. Anyway, soon after that I started to reread Faulkner, thinking, “Let’s see what we find.” Oh my God! First of all, it was badly translated, I didn’t read Faulkner in English, and what I had thought was well translated earlier on I now found racist and puritanical. The point is, I had simply evolved a little. Now I didn’t even find the story interesting. “What is he trying to tell me? What did I see in it before? How could I have been inspired by this stuff?” Oh well, it is structured . . . and basically, without really having understood it at the time, I had felt that it was good writing because it was structured, and it got me away from the blah-blah-blah that I was so used to in my own country.

In his writing there’s a kind of spiral that encircles the hero and presses in on him, corners him; it’s really quite extraordinary. That’s what works in him. I can sometimes make things explicit like that, but without saying that that’s the only thing that works. Don’t get me wrong: that’s how I felt, you see? That’s an experience I had because I had read him a long time ago and then I picked him up again. That’s when I realized why it had had an effect on me.
— (A) Given all this, and getting back to our question, what do you think about the fact that today women are writing more and more, and at the same time . . .
— Theory or writing?
— (A) Both.
— Okay.
— (A) . . . and at the same time we’re seeing a new fluidity between disciplines and between literary genres; that is, even in the university we’re beginning to see that you can’t just say anymore that this is
philosophy and that is history, and so on. We’re beginning to draw things together in new ways in order to ask new questions. People are trying to do interdisciplinary work. Instead of saying, “I’m a historian, I only do history,” we say, “No, I want to work on women’s history but I also want to be an archaeologist.”

—However, literature has remained outside all that you just mentioned. Literature is a separate entity, except when every now and then a philosopher comes along who knows how to write. That happens sometimes, as with Nietzsche, for example.

—(AI) Right, there you go.
—That changes everything.
—(AI) Yes, but it’s rare.
—It’s very rare, and by the way, that’s when he becomes a good philosopher, because there’s only one true form of expression that uses words and that’s writing, not theory or ideology. . . . Ideology, for me, is nothing but the dress. It’s reuse.

It’s a good idea to be interdisciplinary, whether the subject being studied is women or elephants. It’s great to look into absolutely everything when you’re studying a subject. Sure.

For instance, one time I got into a confrontation with some sociologists over large housing projects and their effect on the mentality of the people who live in them, and I started talking about the way the brain works. Their mouths fell open. I said to them, “You don’t know about that, huh? The thalamus? You didn’t study the structure of the brain to be a sociologist, huh? That’s a shame. You should know how the brain functions too.” I didn’t say the entire body, although that’s not a bad idea, is it? Studying the body is fundamental for all kinds of work. I’m completely for interdisciplinary work like that.

—(AI) What we’re trying to get at is, isn’t it possible that there’s a parallel between these two facts: on the one hand women are writing, or at least publishing, a lot more, and, on the other, the frontiers between disciplines are being blurred and people are trying to be more interdisciplinary?

It’s a positive conjuncture, for the most part, even if it can also be negative at times. But the conjuncture of these two facts might be welcoming to women, even if there’s a risk that the fundamental structures won’t be changed.

—But why talk about blurring category distinctions? I’m not so sure it blurs them.

—(AI) Maybe that’s not the right word.
—On the contrary, I think it should clarify them. In any case, I don’t see the blurring of categories in interdisciplinary work. What’s for sure is that it’s about time people were interdisciplinary; classifying things is a result of the nineteenth century, of that rational century, so I don’t see what women have to do with it. Everyone needs to do it.

Question 5: Given what we’ve been saying about the problematic and the politics of the categories of the canon—namely, the previous exclusion of women—and given the questions we’ve addressed here, do you think your oeuvre—is that a wicked question—but do you think your oeuvre will figure in the canon of the twentieth century, and if so, how will it be presented? In your opinion, what will the content of the canon be?

—That is a wicked question, a very wicked one; it’s impossible to answer! I really don’t know! But I can tell you that I’m already being taught in grade school.

—(AI) In grade school? Already?
—Yes, I’m in the textbooks.

—(AI) So you’re already in the high schools too?
—I’m already in the high schools. I don’t know if I’ll go any higher than that, though. I believe I’m the victim of a certain kind of ostracism.

—(AI) Ostracism?
—I mean, a kind of rejection . . . how can I say it? Not racism, because it’s not collective.

—(AI) What kind of rejection?
—It’s not easy to classify me because I’m a straight-shooter, I don’t fit in, I can’t be assimilated. I’m not part of the consensus. So to the extent that the words “canon” and “consensus” can be confused—and they can be, the line between them can get smudged—my work doesn’t stand much chance of being included. I belong more to the poètes maudits, the marginal nonconformist writers. Well, I’m exaggerating a bit. But that’s more or less the category I’d fall into. The idea people have of me in terms of the canon isn’t real positive. I piss people off. And troublemakers aren’t exactly sought after, are they?

—(AI) And in terms of survival? The survival of your work? The fact that your work might disappear doesn’t worry you?
—To tell you the truth, I really couldn’t care less. I did have something happen to me once, though. A friend of mine told me about this
friend of hers who was half crazy. This guy had been sent to fight in the Algerian War even though he was of Berber descent. He deserted from the army and lost his mind. At some point, when he got to a small village, someone lent him one of my books, Les Petits enfants du siècle. It gave him back his courage and calmed him down. He was cured by it; it had a marvelous effect on him, and afterward he felt better. When I heard that I said to myself, “Wait a minute, I’m not down there! He’s 4,000 kilometers away!” It had been a long time since I had written that book, both in time and geography I was miles away. But when I heard that, I said, “God, now I can die happy.”

It was something that pleased me so much. My work kept on when I was no longer writing it, when I was no longer there, in my absence, you see, as if I were already dead. And yet it still had an effect on someone. It’s true that I’m not in the canon, but I was pleased anyway. I was very moved by that story. I said to myself, “I don’t even have to be there. It’s wonderful.” But things don’t happen in literary histories or in literary anthologies; they happen in real life. And so if things like that happen, I’m happy. You can say to yourself, “It’s great! I don’t even need to be there!”

—(AJ) That’s a beautiful story—and a wonderful answer!
—Now that is immortality. I’ve rarely been so moved. It’s not that I seek that out, it’s not that I want it that badly, and, by the way, it’s not being in the canon—it’s people, it’s readers. Because on one level there’s the canon and on the other, there’s readers. So maybe I’m not well regarded as far as the canon goes, but that can’t last long, anyway.
—(AJ) That’s true: things can change.
—Absolutely. Things can change. In terms of my readers, I’ve had fantastic feedback. Really fantastic, and I’m really happy about the feedback. Readers aren’t looking for theory, or for fashions, or for all sorts of difficulties that aren’t there. Readers pick up a book, they’re all alone at home, usually at night. They’re in bed or in an armchair and they’re alone with their book and they get all wrapped up in it... with no intermediaries. They plunge into it... directly. Or they aren’t interested and they put it down, or else they hate it and they write you insulting letters. But sometimes it does them good, they’re happy, they find something in it for themselves. Like I find in my reading. What I want to know is whether the theoreticians and the writers of literary anthologies read books all by themselves at home at night.
—(AJ) Some of them do!

Question 6: Now, people don’t usually have a smile on their face when they’re reading a book that is supposed to be feministic, but they do when reading Les Stances à Sophie, for example. Will this funny kind of marriage between criticisms of masculine society and feminine-style humor help a body of work such as your own be included in the canon or will it act as an obstacle to inclusion?

—I just answered more or less the same question.
—(AJ) In a way, yes.
—It’s an obstacle because not everyone has a sense of humor.
—(AJ) That’s for sure.
—Can assure you, some people weren’t exactly tickled by Les Stances à Sophie.
—(AJ) Oh, really?
—My God, they were furious! Absolutely furious! I had a literary godfather, he’s dead now—may he rest in peace—who made a scene in public over that book. Since I was his literary goddaughter—incidentally, he was more convinced of it than I was—he said to me, “How could you; I nurtured you at my breast, you viper!” Ho boy, he really wrote me off! But I was happy about it.
—(AJ) Was it principally men who reacted that way?
—Oh, sure, especially after Les Stances à Sophie, because they were the target. It was directed against them.
—(AJ) And they knew it.
—The women in the book were absolutely adorable; it was very unfair. The women were utterly charming and delightful but the men... was there a single nice man? Yes, I think she finds one in Italy. Anyway, there were some nice guys but the husband and the husband’s best friend were two typical macho jerks. So not all the readers found that funny; that was certainly an obstacle. More than anything, it’s the people who serve as go-betweens, the media people, the people who serve on literary juries. They wouldn’t have given me a prize for all the world. Those people constitute the primary obstacle, whereas they’re supposed to serve as a liaison between the book and the public. And since it’s normally these people who make the canon... I don’t even know if I’m in the History of French Literature by Mister so-and-so; I
really haven't the slightest idea. And if I am, then what's written about me is favorable.

— (A1) The underlying question is really "Are feminism and a sense of humor compatible?"

— Why yes, of course, my kind at least. But I'm not sure. Perhaps on the one hand but not on the other, you know what I mean? But it's always the same thing: it's the individual that ultimately matters more than the collective in these things.

It isn't because I'm a woman that this kind of thing happens to me. It's because I'm a human being. It's because that's how I am.

You know, there's even a kind of privilege given to women in certain fields, like high-powered academics. It's better to have the advanced degrees than not to have them, wouldn't you say? A degree gets respect! But I came out of nowhere. You see, there's a question of class here, also.

— (A1) Absolutely.

— You mustn't think it's just a question of gender. There's a certain class, the class that has the degrees, a good education, a professor's chair, disciples, students, a whole . . .

— (A1) . . . structure.

— . . . an establishment, a status . . . That stuff's intimidating; without status you're less intimidating to start with. And if on top of that you make trouble, if you have anarchistic ideas, then oh boy . . . . So there's the maligned aspect, the class aspect, and the individual aspect.

— (A1) Yes.

— And then there's maybe the woman aspect. On that score, I'm spoiled!

— (A1) I was just about to say that a few years ago I participated in a panel discussion on "Feminism, Women Writers, and Humor." We all tried to find three or four examples of twentieth-century fiction in French that were both sensitive to the representation of women in fiction and contained humorous passages. And you know what? Besides Les Stances à Sophie we couldn't find a single other book published in France and written by a woman that was really funny and where there was also evidence of a feminist sensibility.

— I guess it's pretty rare then.

— (A1) It's rare.

— On the other hand, it's been said many times that oppression normally gives rise to a sense of humor. But maybe it has to get to an extreme point before you can laugh about it. I remember that in the beginning of the Women's Movement there were about fifteen of us in the same group and a couple of us said, "We're not going to have a demonstration unless it's funny." There can be no revolution or change without a sense of humor. If it's humorless, it's meaningless. You can be sure there's something wrong if it's never funny. But when the lefists, the Maoists, the different Bolshevik groups, people like that, stepped in, it was always completely humorless. We'd say, "If it's humorless, it's botched; it's worthless." Of course, we didn't win; humor never does.

The truth is, humor is a minority, too. It's so rare. I don't know if it's oppression or else an entire culture of wailing, complaining, pain, misfortune, and misery that makes women tend to bemoan their fate, to go around wailing; whereas men in other oppressed groups, blacks, for example, they're sometimes funny. But there's this whole culture of wailing that makes humor off-limits. I recently read some books on incest; they were completely scientific, dreadful, from some Association, etc. I said, "There's no way I'm going to get involved with this stuff because there's nothing funny in it." "What! You want to joke about it?" That's right. I want to be able to joke about it, and if I didn't manage to joke about incest in my last book, then . . .

— (A1) Touching the sacred subject!

— The book's going to make waves; it won't be appreciated. Still, there are things I can't joke about, such as Hitler's concentration camps, Nazism, things like that. Hitler isn't funny. In that particular case I just can't find anything to laugh about. I admit it, I just can't. Maybe that's my mistake, but I just can't. But it's only stuff like that. I don't know if I could joke about the extinction of whales . . . I don't know . . . But if I wrote books on them, they'd probably be funny anyway.

I've allowed myself to do some pretty outrageous things. But not too often. But hey, I try to . . . but you know, I'm very cynical. Cynicism is the source of my humor. It's a kind of lucidity. We don't know all the sources of a sense of humor; it's very mysterious. But I know, I'm completely convinced that this wailing style, all this seriousness, it's totally ridiculous and ineffectual. That's not what's going to change the world.

Question 1: What does it mean to you to write at the end of the twentieth century?

—If I were to answer this question from the point of view of literary history, I would remind us that our century has taught us, more than once, what the revolution of the novel is about. I am thinking of Stein, Proust, Joyce, Dos Passos, Faulkner, Woolf, Sarraute, etc. These are the giants of our century. I always keep them in mind, for they taught us that form is meaning. They taught us to tear off limb by limb a new literary reality from the literary landscape of the time. The accent on form is what is new to this century. And a writer’s work today is on form. But to invent a form that is new and raw is difficult. We aren’t here to make pretty things. We might ask who is writing the new American experimental novel today? Is it not our work as writers to experiment so as to fight the canon, to break it down? A writer never works in (or to be in) the canon. All the above writers were fighting the
canon.

Question 2: Is it valid to write as a woman, and is it part of your writing practice today?

Question 3: Many women writing today find themselves, for the first time in history, at the center of such institutions as the university and psychoanalysis. In your opinion, will this new placement of women help them to enter the twentieth-century canon, and if so, will they be in the heart of this corpus or (still) in the footnotes?

—To say that writers have been excluded from the canon because they are women not only seems to me inexact, but the very idea proceeds from a trend toward theories of victimization. There are few great writers in any century. Each time there was one, not only was she welcome within the canon, but she was acclaimed, applauded, and praised in her time—sometimes especially because she was a woman. I’m thinking of Sand and Colette. I do not think that real innovators have been passed by. In the university, we ruin the purpose of what we do if we make a special category for women—especially when teaching. When we do that as feminists, we ourselves turn the canon into a male edifice.

Question 4: Today we are seeing women produce literary, philosophical, and psychoanalytical theory of recognized importance, and, parallel to this, we are also seeing a new fluidity in the boundaries among disciplines and genres of writing. Will this parallelism lead only to women being welcomed alongside men, or to a definitive blurring of these categories?

—First, I do not think this process is specifically linked to women. Second, I think the disciplines, on the contrary, have strengthened their boundaries.

1 Monique Wittig chose not to answer this question. Her statements in “The Straight Mind” may help to explain her position. See Feminist Issues (1980), 1709–11.
Question 5: Given the problematic and the politics of the categories of the canon, and given the questions we've been dealing with, do you think your occur will be included in the twentieth-century canon, and if so, how will it be presented? In your opinion, what will the content of the canon be?

—That's a provocative question to which no writer with any modesty can respond.

Question 6: Deciding the content of the canon is a classification process that is doubly complicated in your case.

First, given the positive way The Opoponax with its stylistic innovations was received in France, one can imagine that a category will be proposed in order to include it in the canon. But when one adds to this formal experimentation an even more radically other exploration of sexuality, as in Les Guérillères and The Lesbian Body, one can expect to see a complete refusal of your work on the part of the guardians of the dominant culture.

Second, to make this process even more problematic, especially in relation to the questions we have asked you, you refuse the category of woman and declare that you are instead a lesbian. What do you think about the fact that you have been so successful at disconcerting these efforts at categorization?

—First, the question of the canon is a question for literary criticism, not for fiction writers.

Second, there is confusion created when a purely sociological matter is carried over into literary criticism. For example, women are a sociological group whose very existence vis-à-vis the sociological group of men is barely accepted. The fact that these two groups exist in a conflictual political situation is not yet taken seriously, so it is important not to jump ahead, past this essential fact. Lesbians, by their very existence, are fugitive women—people trying to escape their class. It is true that the notion of woman is the ideological aspect, the alienated representation of oneself that seems to emanate from the group but is in fact imported from outside. That is to say: women exist as a class while woman is an imaginary formation (to use an expression by Guillaumin).2 These are

sociological issues. Now to return to the literary problem: I can no longer say I am a lesbian writer than I can say I am a woman writer. I am simply a writer. Writing is what is important, not sociological categories. I do think some changes of form are more open to history than others; but working, writing—for the writer—is an individual process, never a collective one.
