

Review Article

Death, Old Age, and Femininity:

Simone de Beauvoir and the Politics of La Vieillesse

In 1949, in *Le Deuxième Sexe*, Simone de Beauvoir was one of the early spokesmen (-women) of the most recent upsurge of feminism. Her argument then was that in the course of human history woman's role has been that of "objet" and only rarely that of "sujet". As did Engels, Simone de Beauvoir recognized how closely tied into questions of political economy was the problem of the rights of the second sex in the world of the Others, the men. At the same time she refused to be intimidated by the so-called "givens" of biology. For her, anatomy and physiology were not destiny, and to argue that the womb, the menstrual cycle, and the menopause were the ineluctable limitations on woman's freedom to be "sujet" was for Mme. de Beauvoir one more species of "la mauvaise foi". No less than man was woman "poursoi", freedom.

Since the appearance of *Le Deuxième Sexe*, in such works as *Les Mandarins*, *La Force des Choses*, and *Une Mort très Douce*, her readers have seen Mme. de Beauvoir increasingly concerned with another "destiny". Now, in her latest work, *La Vieillesse*,* she has kept a promise made in *La Force des Choses* and given us a work on a topic that some of her readers have considered to be her particular obsession. Even more than in her book on women, Simone de Beauvoir is concerned in *La Vieillesse* with the political economy of her problem. Perhaps this book will also come to be seen as the tocsin of some new liberation movement, this time of the old. But *La Vieillesse* bears the stamp of the deepened interest in limitations that has characterized French Existentialism since the early 1950s. One finds this concern in a book dedicated to Mme. de Beauvoir in 1960 ("Au Castor"), Sartre's

**La Vieillesse*. By Simone de Beauvoir. Paris: Gallimard, 1970. Pp. 640.

Critique de la Raison Dialectique, a work that some critics have seen as an admission of the failure of Existentialism. *La Vieillesse* has certainly been influenced by the *Critique's* Marxism, but in both works there is still a good deal of *L'Être et le Néant*. The givens and limitations of old age, however, are much more compelling and depressing than those of femininity, and in *La Vieillesse* Mme. de Beauvoir is given a tougher run for her money: wrinkles, senility, physical decay and—most important of all—the gradual disappearance for the aged of the future that had made sense of the existentialist “projet”, all serve to mock the freedom of the aged “pour-soi”. In this respect *La Vieillesse* reveals a new dimension of that concern of Phenomenology and Existentialism with the human body. It treats a feature of the body not found in the work of Sartre and Merleau-Ponty: the body in decline.

Simone de Beauvoir does not wish to be accused of having slighted the facts of old age, and much of her book bears witness to a wide reading in the literature of science, medicine, anthropology, and history on the topic of aging. An assessment of her understanding of their interpretation of the subject must come, of course, from the relevant specialists. Certainly she does not make light of their gloomy picture, and it is clear that in so far as this book is concerned the anti-scientific tone that some readers have detected in Existentialism is nowhere in evidence. If such a “new” respect for science does exist in *La Vieillesse* it may well represent the fifteen-years debate in France between adherents of Sartrean Existentialism and those of the Structuralism associated with Claude Lévi-Strauss.

By comparison with old age, death is something “très douce”. “Et en effet”, says Mme. de Beauvoir, “plus que la mort, c’est la vieillesse qu’il faut opposer à la vie. Elle en est la parodie” (565). She will have nothing to do with the banalities that make of old age the golden time of life, that period when one can contemplate from afar the vanities of the young. Too overwhelming is the evidence that she finds in the lives of the old, of Goethe, of Tolstoy, of Pétain and others, that in old age vanity merely finds new forms. She cites the literary evidence that sees (in the few times it looks at the aged) the foolish desires for those joys that the treason of the body now denies to the old: power and sex. Physical decline has stolen much of both, and the author supplies interesting commentary on the sexuality of the old. The flesh may be weak, but the urge is still there—as, for example, Goethe found to his dismay when he met Mme. Szymanowska. The sadness of sexuality for the aged, in the author’s opinion, is a function of the meaning of sexuality in general: “c’est . . . une aventure ou chaque partenaire réalise son existence et

celle de l'autre d'une manière singulière; dans le désir, le trouble, la conscience se fait corps pour atteindre l'autre comme corps de manière à le fasciner et à le posséder. . . ." (338).¹ This recalls, of course, the Sartrean account of sexuality from *L'Être et le Néant*, and we see how the old come to their condition by reference to the young; for sexuality is the means by which the person's "qualités viriles ou féminines sont affirmées, reconnues: il se sent valorisé" (338). But with the coming of what the author calls the involutions of old age, it becomes much more difficult to continue in this "projet" of fascinating the Other's body with one's own. Age shockingly transforms the body, and mutual fascination increasingly gives way to mutual shame. For the old person there is now a double burden as physical decline is coupled with memory: "Le vieillard souvent désire désirer, parce qu'il garde la nostalgie d'expériences irremplacables, parce qu'il reste attaché à l'univers érotique qu'a construit sa jeunesse ou sa maturité: c'est par le désir qu'il en ranimera les couleurs pâlistantes" (339).²

This reading of the lived experience of the old is part of the second section of *La Vieillesse*, called "L'être-dans-le-monde". In the first part of the book, however, Mme. de Beauvoir deals not with the phenomenology of old age but with the problems from the vantage point of what she calls "l'extériorité". Many of the problems posed for this admirable book come from the thoroughness with which she treats her subject from the outside. The evidence of biology, of anthropology, and of history reveal why there is the conspiracy of silence that Simone de Beauvoir finds around the problem of growing old. No matter whether one looks to societies with or without history (the "hot" and "cold" societies of Lévi-Strauss), the depressing signs of old age create a supreme difficulty for those who bear them. Mme. de Beauvoir is at pains to tell us that if history shows us societies that starve, ritualistically kill, or confine to nursing homes their aged, it also shows us societies that treat the aged with dignity. But she will not build optimism on special cases, since in all societies the decline of the body makes of the person who declines an object for the Others, the young. In all cases the aged are a special kind of problem, and it becomes more and more difficult for them to remain "sujet".

Nor is the author sentimental about the aged themselves. Indeed, it is often their own callousness towards the children they have raised—to cite an example from certain extremely poor societies—that turns the adult offspring against the now useless mouths of their aged parents. But even here the problem of callous treatment of the young is often a result of the collective's anxiety before "la rareté". It is the physical weakness of old age that makes useless

mouths. In other societies it is the decline of vitality coupled with the lifelong fear of one day "being without" that makes the old impose on these societies the heavy hand of gerontocracy. The aged population limits the young in so far as it is itself limited by the involution and sclerosis of body and mind. We seem to circle forever around the flame of political economy.

Involution and sclerosis. Hardening of the arteries and of the mind, these are what array themselves against "l'optimisme moralisateur de Platon et de Ciceron, contre les prétentions des vieillards à la sagesse . . ." (170). Mme. de Beauvoir is careful, however, not to forget those moralists "dans les sociétés historiques" who did not turn away from the harshness of old age with platitudes on their lips: "J'admire que Montaigne, jetant par-dessus bord les clichés traditionnels et lénifiants, refuse de prendre aucune mutilation pour un progrès et de tenir pour un enrichissement la simple accumulation des années" (172).³ In her comments on Montaigne she faces one of the paradoxes that give her the small hope that men are not doomed only to mutilation: "C'est au moment où il se sent diminué qu'il est le plus grand. Mais sans doute n'aurait-il pas atteint cette grandeur sans la sévérité qu'il exerce contre lui-même" (172).⁴ (One finds this paradox elsewhere—in Gide's diaries, for example, or in the old age of Renoir or of Goya.) Mme. de Beauvoir also offers a theory to explain why writers seem to find it difficult to be creative in old age—not only the weakening of the libido but also the conflict the author claims that writers live between their imaginary selves and the real world, finally resolved, after a fashion, in old age, make literary creation difficult for the old. I find it an unconvincing argument, since the decline in what Flaubert calls "l'alacrité" comes to us all; and one might argue that we all live a tension between the imaginary that we seek to realize and the reality that works to de-realize the visionary. But her case here rests to a great extent on the techniques of writing and the differences that exist between writing and other professions, e.g., politics or painting.

Beautiful old age comes to no one. But buoyed as she is by the example of a Montaigne or a Gide, the dismal view from exteriority does not lead Simone de Beauvoir to despair. One's being-in-the-world can still be what one chooses it to be, she argues, if certain conditions are fulfilled. An obstinate inertia is not one of them. Certain of the aged become caricatures of themselves while leading others to believe, falsely, that they have come successfully to grips with "la vieillesse": "Ils ont commencé par vouloir en vue d'une certaine fin. Maintenant ils veulent parce qu'ils ont voulu. D'une manière générale, chez eux, les habitudes, les automatismes, les scléroses se substituent aux inventions"

(566).⁵ The "projet" is a form of activity, and mere submission to old age is not activity. Such passivity is one result of the contraction of the future that comes to the old:

Le vieillard, lui, sait que sa vie est faite et qu'il ne la refera pas. L'avenir n'est plus gonflé de promesses, il se contracte à la mesure de l'être fini qui a à le vivre. En effet, la réalité humaine est affectée d'une double finitude; l'une est contingente et ressortit à la facticité: l'existence a un terme qui lui vient du dehors. L'autre est une structure ontologique du pour-soi. Dans le dernier âge, l'une et l'autre se révèlent ensemble, et l'une par l'autre (399).⁶

There is, Mme. de Beauvoir believes, another solution, that of continuing to pursue "des fins qui donnent un sens à notre vie: dévouement à des individus, des collectivités, des causes, travail social ou politique, intellectuel, créateur" (567). One day death will come and with it our life will become our destiny, but in the meantime the first condition for victory over old age is to remain engaged in the world. In view of the evidence she cites of the many burdens of old age one might well argue in response to Simone de Beauvoir that she has shown only too well the progressive transfiguration of "pour-soi" into "en-soi" to make her concluding optimism very compelling. Perhaps such a reply is a form of bad faith. Perhaps it is only a tribute to that proclivity in Existentialism to make facticity and the limits of the situation seem more real than the freedom it celebrates.

Mme. de Beauvoir has placed her other condition for victory over old age within a context almost equally forbidding. She realizes that the possibilities for pursuing real ends are accorded to "un poignée de privilégiés". In the entirety of *La Vieillesse* there is no example of a project towards such ends among the un-privileged, the poor. Certain statesmen, scientists, painters, and writers may have surmounted the barriers raised by time, but for the rest Mme. Beauvoir sees only misery (not only of poverty), solitude, and "une anxiété généralisée". The evidence she cites seems to reinforce her claim: in societies with history the worst ravages of old age are notoriously reserved for deprived classes (in societies without history, most often it is among those peoples who suffer from deprivation that old age is most degrading). The mass of men have always lived lives made desperate by meaningless activity. Old age is merely a form of *imprimatur* that stamps the nightmare of alienation with an official seal:

Quand il échappe aux contraintes de sa profession, il n'aperçoit plus autour de

lui qu'un désert; il ne lui a pas été donné de s'engager dans des projets qui auraient peuplé le monde de buts, de valeurs, de raisons d'être.

C'est là le crime de notre société. Sa "politique de la vieillesse" est scandaleuse. Mais plus scandaleux encore est le traitement qu'elle inflige à la majorité des hommes au temps de leur jeunesse et de leur maturité. Elle préfabrique la condition mutilée et misérable qui est leur lot dans leur dernier âge (568).⁷

How to make men of the aged? "La réponse est simple; il faudrait qu'il ait toujours été traité en homme." One must make society over, for if man had not been atomised from childhood, "clos et isolé parmi d'autres atomes", he would not be exiled finally into old age. Like Sartre, Simone de Beauvoir is oppressed by that terrible creator of bourgeois solitude, possessive individualism: "La vieillesse dénonce l'échec de toute notre civilisation."

The extraordinary difficulty of this final "projet", the re-making of civilization, haunts the analysis of how one cures the exiled of old age, and much of *La Vieillesse* is itself concerned with the all-too-well-known facts of the place of exile in our world, the old-age home. And yet much of this book also reveals, at the level of one "vécu", that of Simone de Beauvoir, how the difficulty of growing old can come to haunt one of the privileged. For *La Vieillesse* allows us to glimpse how she has lived her own growing old—the sense of "déjà vu", the deaths of friends ("les monuments funèbres qui jalonnent mon histoire").

They were wrong, those who saw in Existentialism only a modern form of despair. They had ignored the incredible optimism that found in the project a means for attaining real values in a world bounded by "non-sens". Although it is written in the glum style characteristic of Simone de Beauvoir, *La Vieillesse* maintains much of the spirit of that optimism. But in old age one Existentialist, at least, has found a tougher opponent than in other forms of determinism, and the horns of optimism have been drawn in ever so slightly: "A 65 ans, on n'a pas seulement 20 ans de plus qu'à 45. On a échangé un avenir indéfini . . . contre un avenir fini" (400). The force of the biological "données" is not itself weakened by a vision of a new society. No matter what the society, at the level of the personal, of the existential, time brings together the contraction of the future and the decline of the body.

If her success in describing old age from the vantage points offered by exteriority and being-in-the-world seems to weaken Mme. de Beauvoir's suggested cures for this malady that comes of long life, this is not to deny her humane refusal to accept the old only as the objects that their age would seem

to make of them. She is even willing to grant to optimistic and blind moralists of the past a certain measure of worth, in so far as their wishful and false perceptions of old age derived from a valid vision of the "ought", if not of the "is". In the ideal society of Simone de Beauvoir, old age would disappear *as a malady* (it recalls Marx's vision of the disappearance, in communist society, of the division of labour):

Comme il arrive en certains cas privilégiés, l'individu, secrètement affaibli par l'âge, mais non pas apparemment diminué, serait un jour atteint d'une maladie à laquelle il ne résisterait pas; il mourrait sans avoir subi de dégradation. Le dernier âge serait réellement conforme à la définition qu'en donnent certains idéologues bourgeois: un moment de l'existence différent de la jeunesse et de la maturité, mais possédant son propre équilibre et laissant ouverte à l'individu une large gamme de possibilités (569).⁸

If Mme. de Beauvoir is correct in her diagnosis of "la vieillesse," then it would seem that the vision of health she offers in place of the illness may have to wait that time when "society regulates the general production and thus makes it possible for me to do one thing today and another tomorrow, to hunt in the morning, fish in the afternoon, rear cattle in the evening, criticize after dinner, just as I have a mind, without ever becoming hunter, fisherman, shepherd, or critic".⁹

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NOTES

1. ". . . it is ordinarily an adventure in which each partner realises his existence and that of the other in a singular fashion; in desire consciousness loses its translucidity and makes itself body in order to attain the other as body so as to fascinate and possess the other. . . ." [Cf. Sartre, *L'Être et le Néant* (Paris: Gallimard, 1943), pp. 456 ff.]
2. "The elderly often desire to desire because they keep a nostalgia for irreplaceable experiences, because they remain tied to the erotic world that they built in their youth and maturity: it is through desire that they will restore to their memories the colours now gone pale."
3. "I admire how Montaigne, throwing overboard the soothing traditional clichés, refuses to take any mutilation for progress and to hold the mere accumulation of years for enrichment."
4. "It is at the moment when he feels himself diminished that he is greatest. But doubtless he would not have attained this grandeur without the harshness that he brings to bear against himself."

5. "They began by willing with a certain end in view. Now they will because they have willed. In general among these people, habits, automatisms, and scleroses serve as substitutes for inventions."
6. "The elderly know that they have completed their lives and that they shall not live them over again. The future is no longer alive with promises, but it shrinks now to the dimensions of that completed being who has to live it. Indeed, human reality is burdened with a double finitude; one aspect is contingent and belongs to facticity: existence has a limit that comes from outside. The other is an ontological structure of the *pour-soi*. In the last years both reveal themselves at the same time and by means of each other."
7. "When retirement frees a man from the constraints of his occupation all he perceives around him is a desert. It was never given to him to engage himself in projects which would have peopled the world with ends, with values, with *raisons-d'être*.

There lies the crime of our society. Its "old-age" policy is a scandal. But more scandalous still is the treatment that it inflicts on the majority of men in their youth and maturity. It pre-fabricates the mutilated and wretched condition which is their lot in their final years."

8. "As it happens now in certain privileged cases, an individual, secretly weakened by age, but not yet diminished in appearance, would one day be overcome by an illness which he could not fight off. He would die without having undergone degradation. The final years of life would then truly conform to the definition given by certain bourgeois ideologues: a moment in existence different from both youth and maturity but possessing a balance of its own, while leaving open to the individual a wide range of possibilities."
9. Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The German Ideology* (New York, 1947), 22.

See *Le Nouvel observateur*, Spring, 1970, for an interview in which Mme. de Beauvoir discusses some of the problems raised in her book.

VALEDICTORY

The editor wishes to express regret for delays, due to circumstances beyond his control, in recent issues, and to thank those contributors whose articles and reviews have been advanced or postponed in order to bring the present issue closer to its assigned date. In submitting his resignation, he wishes to thank those colleagues, contributors, and correspondents whose interest and assistance have provided encouragement for a decade and a half, and to bespeak the same interest in the work of his successors.

C. L. B.