SIMONE DE BEAUVOIR, LA VIEILLESSE

Paris, Gallimard, 1970.

Par Lucie Lequin

Relire *La vieillesse* vingt ans après sa publication soulève de nouvelles questions. L'ouvrage est à la fois toujours d'actualité et un peu désuet. La première raison en est que la vieillesse vient plus tard de nos jours ; la cinquantaine nous semble loin de la sénescence. Ou est-ce tricher que de repousser toujours un peu plus loin la vieillesse ? Il faut pourtant, selon Simone de Beauvoir, apprendre à nous reconnaître dans les vieilles gens. C'est pour lever la conspiration du silence qui entoure la vieillesse que la philosophe a écrit. Elle dénonce le sort que la société réserve aux vieillards qui deviennent « rebuts », « pur déchets » et trop souvent indigents. Vingt ans plus tard, les mêmes mots s'appliquent, sauf que l'on sait que les indigents sont la plupart du temps des indigentes.

Simone de Beauvoir soutient qu'on ne peut définir la vieillesse, car toute définition masquerait les différences, qu'elles soient biologiques ou pécuniaires, qu'elles participent de la classe ou de l'espace (temporel ou physique). La vieillesse est un phénomène biologique, culturel et transhistorique.

Dans la première partie du livre, Simone de Beauvoir envisage la vieillesse de l'extérieur. Elle examine ce que la biologie, l'anthropologie, l'histoire, la sociologie contemporaine nous enseignent sur le vieillissement. Elle montre que dans les sociétés primitives, tout comme aujourd'hui, la condition des vieillards dépend du contexte social et que la manière dont on les traite dévoile souvent les vérités masquées qui sous-tendent une société et hélas, souvent son indécence. Dans la société occidentale, seul l'individu qui rapporte compte. Se soucier du sort des vieillards, c'est remettre en question ce principe inhérent à notre mode de vie, c'est remettre en question la société, d'où le mutisme face au vieillissement. L'intérêt de cette partie est de nous permettre d'entrevoir à travers le temps et l'espace ce qu'il y a d'inéluctable dans la condition de vieillesse. Les deux chapitres historiques demeurent les plus stimulants. Simone de Beauvoir utilise le concept de la lutte des classes pour différencier le quotidien des vieillards exploités de celui des vieillards exploitants.

Cependant, les deux chapitres contemporains à l'écriture, soit le premier, sur la biologie et la vieillesse, et le quatrième, sur la vieillesse dans la société, sont démodés : les statistiques ont changé depuis vingt ans ; la gérontologie s'est développée et la représentation de la vieillesse a changé, en partie du moins. Il nous faut replacer ces chapitres dans un contexte historique. L'auteure déplore que l'histoire raconte la vieillesse au masculin. Pourtant, elle ne parle que des hommes privilégiés qui ont laissé des traces. Elle ne considère ni la variante du sexe ni de la race. Au fond, son étude représente le point de vue traditionnel et masculin de l'extériorité. On ne pourrait aujourd'hui écrire un tel chapitre sans tenir compte des femmes et des diversités culturelles.

Dans la seconde partie du livre, Simone de Beauvoir décrit comment les vieillards intériorisent leur situation et y réagissent. La révélation de l'âge vient des autres. À partir du moment où la personne vieillissante accepte ce classement extérieur, elle règle son comportement selon les normes de son milieu. Elle se censure. C'est ainsi que la société impose la chasteté à la femme âgée sans conjoint. Ici et là dans cette partie, Simone de Beauvoir s'engage de façon plus personnelle. Elle alterne le « nous » et le « je ». Elle se révèle un peu et dévoile ses images sur la vieillesse, des images en mouvement, non figées.

Simone de Beauvoir décrit la vie quotidienne des vieillards et les maux qui l'accompagnent : la névrose, la tristesse, l'incapacité de s'autocritiquer, la déchéance, l'incuriosité, l'ennui, le sentiment d'inadéquation. Comme dans la première partie, c'est par le biais de la vie des grands hommes qu'elle explore ce passage de la vie. Einstein, Freud, Michel-Ange, Churchill, Hugo, Tolstoï et de nombreux autres lui servent de référents. Elle ne s'attarde à la vieillesse que d'une seule grande femme, Lou Andréas Salomé. Elle parle aussi un peu de la vieillesse particulière des femmes, mais elle en parle dans la généralité : les femmes ne sont jamais complaisantes devant la vieillesse; la vieillesse des femmes est une délivrance; elles peuvent enfin se soucier d'elles-mêmes...

Est-ce vraiment le manque de documentation qui a poussé Simone de Beauvoir à parler de la vieillesse au masculin ou est-ce la peur de trop se regarder vieillir ? L'auteure admet que la représentation de la vieillesse par le biais des grands hommes ou de leur vie est partiale et partielle, mais elle en reste néamoins tout près. La vieillesse qu'elle décrit est triste, pessimiste, quasi insupportable, malgré quelques passages où elle affirme son amour de la vie. Mais pour faire réagir, agir, ne faut-il pas dénoncer et provoquer ?

THE BALANCING OF THE CLOUDS: Paintings of Mary Klassen

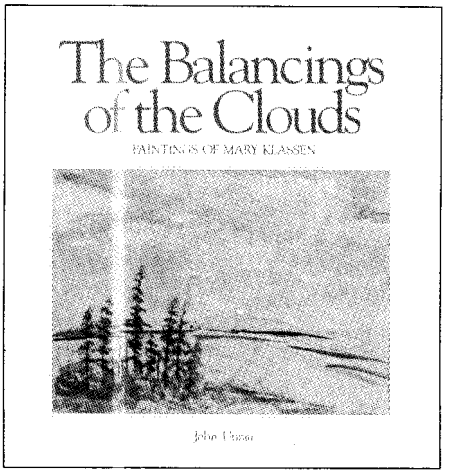
John Unrau. Winnipeg: Wildflower Communications, 1991.

By Helen Lucas

The moment you take *The Balancing of the Clouds* into your hands and thumb through it, you feel the power of the book. John Unrau, a son of the artist and a Rhodes Scholar, begins the book with "I cannot remember a time when one or two of my mother's paintings were not present as part of my daily surroundings." He goes on to tell of his mother's life and work.

She was born in a Mennonite village in the Ukraine in 1918, and with her family moved to a farm in Saskatchewan when she was nine. At eighteen with her brother she moved to Saskatoon and began to study painting with the noted artist Ernest Lindner.

A gifted artist and a deeply religious young woman, she wrote, "I wanted to paint but at least as much I wanted to be active at the church and was also looking forward to growing up and having a home and family." She married, had four children and when she could she continued to



draw and paint.

However, this is not a book about the frustrations of 'Diapers and Drawings.' In fact, the power of the book lies in its lack of conflict and in its lack of pretence. It is about a woman artist who did not need to define what 'artist' meant. She was what she was, someone who pursued a "simple life, home happiness and beauty." She worked her painting into her life whenever it was possible, but with a gentle urgency to express herself rather than a desperate one to prove a point. It is a life of joys and sadness, like most lives.

What makes this life memorable as well as her talent as an artist, is her exquisite spirituality. To read some of the things she has said makes one realize that the paintings reproduced in the book have the same simplicity and directness of someone standing in an open field, speaking directly to God. The palette is limited, the horizon is low and the sky is vast. The viewer's eye is directed upwards to the light and to God.

These however are not all pretty paintings. They can scream as much as they rejoice. They are not done for decoration, but for communication. There is too much respect for the world around her to treat it as decoration: "Trees are so mysterious they awaken a feeling of awe in me. They live so much longer than I. Their heads and branches are lifted up to the light. They are peaceful enough for birds to rest in their branches without fear."

To grow up on the Prairies, to live amidst all that vastness, gives most Prairie people an inherent loneliness that they live with all their lives. This is so apparent in Mary Klassen's paintings. It is there even in the most lighthearted works. It is in the poignant way she uses her lights and darks, and in the way her shapes seem to gather together to comfort each other. You must spend some time with each painting; if you do not, its richness escapes you. Its subtleties are its power.

There is something quite moving about a son gathering together his mother's work and presenting it to the world. In this way the book breaks new ground. John Unrau, as a scholar, has also analyzed the work and where he felt it necessary has given us his interpretations. Perhaps he feels that the analytical segments make it a more valid art book, though they make the reading less flowing.

Through all of this it is impossible to ignore one basic fact—and why should we?—that his book is a son's tribute to his mother. Her paintings and her words speak for themselves, and it is indeed a life to be applauded. The book is a beautiful gift to the rest of us.

Helen Lucas is a painter, born and raised in Saskatchewan, who lives outside Toronto.

LIVING THE CHANGES

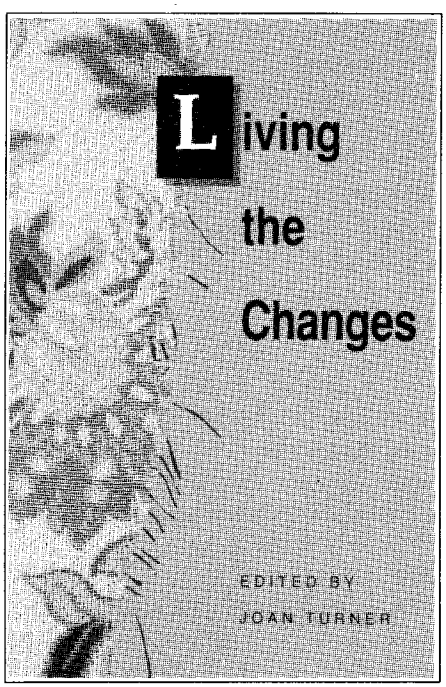
Joan Turner, ed. Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 1990.

By Lisa Schmidt

Essentially a book by and about Canadian women, *Living the Changes* is a feminist anthology that aims to help "bridge the gap between academia and the public" by providing a forum for writers, social workers, street kids, academics and artists ranging in age from nine to 73 to explore issues relevant to women living in Canada today.

Among others, topics covered include: sexual harassment, new reproductive technologies, addiction to heroin, body image, giving birth, sheltering battered women and being an older lesbian.

That writings on a wide variety of contemporary issues have been assembled between two covers is a refreshing change from the usual form that many anthologies take, where one topic is discussed to the exclusion of all others. Adding to the distinctiveness of this approach is the use of a variety of literary forms, ranging from poetry to personal memoirs to academic studies, through which these issues are addressed. For instance, Uma Parameswaran explores the immigration experience to Canada in her poem "Mangoes to Maples," whereas Sari Lubitsch Tudiver recounts her mother's addiction to prescription pills as a backdrop for her critique of the pharmaceutical industry.



A number of contributors have estabished reputations in the worlds of politics, the arts and literature: the names of Evelyn Lau, Mary Meigs, Rosemary Brown and Di Brandt will be familiar to many readers. Others have academic credentials, including editor Joan Turner who wrote the introductory and closing chapters.

British writer and anthology editor Amanda Sebestyen once commented: "Every book is haunted by ghosts of perfect books it may have been." *Living the Changes* is no exception.

In her introduction, Turner emphasizes at least twice that this book represents authors of different races, cultures, religions, sexual orientations and ages—a "tapestry" of Canadian women. In spite of the fact that most of the contributors reside in Manitoba, Turner has in fact managed to create such a tapestry. But as evidenced in her wide-ranging statement about women's work in Canada "where most of us now work on computers in our homes and offices..." and the absence of contributors from the ranks of working class and unemployed women, Turner neglects to join the skein of class difference into her tapestry. The result is an uneven weave.

To be fair, one of the more powerful pieces in this anthology is a poem contributed by 'Candy,' a pseudonym chosen by a young woman who has experienced life on the streets. She writes:

> *She stands in the shadow peeking out of the door./ Innocence corrupted, a 14-year old whore./ Innocence rejected, purity defiled./ Who will come forward with love for this child?*

This is writing straight from Candy's life, from her pain—not a feminist thesis on childhood prostitution, but a living picture of what life is like for thousands of young women who live on the streets of Canadian cities. It belongs in this book.