

Marguerite Andersen

En commençant avec Le Deuxième Sexe, dans lequel les femmes sont décrites comme "hantées par l'horreur de vieillir", l'auteure examine les vues de Simone de Beauvoir sur la vieillesse à travers son oeuvre. La peur de vieillir caractérise les héroïnes de ses romans, et Beauvoir elle-même n'est pas à l'abri de cette peur. La Vieillesse, publié à Paris en 1970, est un livre relativement peu connu, bien que sa parution ait attiré l'attention de la France et du gouvernement français sur les besoins des personnes âgées. Elles y sont décrites de l'extérieur, comme des objets, et de l'intérieur, l'expérience intime de la personne qui vieillit. Le livre évoque également les rapports entre la personne âgée et le temps, la créativité et l'âge, et ce que vieillir signifie dans la vie de tous les jours. La société, d'après La Vieillesse, a une politique criminelle à l'égard des personnes du troisième âge. La possibilité d'une vieillesse digne et communautaire relève encore d'une utopie idéaliste.

While *The Second Sex* has, since 1949, challenged and reshaped society's perception and treatment of women, while Simone de Beauvoir's novels are widely read, her second work of social criticism, *La Vieillesse* (Paris: Gallimard, 1970) remains relatively unknown, even though its publication drew the attention of France and the French government to the needs of older people. Like

The Second Sex, *The Coming of Age* (trans. P. O'Brian. N.Y.: Putnam, 1972) challenges and changes our perception and treatment of an oppressed group. Hence, the importance of *The Coming of Age* seems in no way smaller than that of *The Second Sex*.

Beauvoir had already considered the question of woman's old age in chapter XX of *The Second Sex* (trans. H.M. Parshley. N.Y.: Bantam, 1952). The chapter contains a great number of negative statements which many of us will, in 1984, find offensive. Beauvoir speaks of women "haunted by the horror of growing old" (542), who look helplessly at their degenerating bodies with which they have been accustomed to identify themselves. No longer an object of erotic desire, woman at forty-five has through experience gained a certain independence. But, according to Beauvoir, woman in general does not know how to use freedom. Often intimidated by it, she seeks refuge in her charm, in face-lifts and make-up. While some women may have new pursuits such as studies, faith, travel, love affairs, the exploration of lesbianism, and masturbation, they undertake these pursuits solely to mask the realities of menopausal life. At fifty, when men attain highest positions, woman, says Beauvoir, is "put in retirement" (550). Her wisdom "remains wholly negative . . . sterile," her only way of survival through "stoical defiance or skeptical irony" (561). Forced by society

to play a parasitical role, the older woman is unable to participate effectively in the affairs of the world.

Fear of aging characterizes the heroines of Beauvoir's fiction. In *Les Mandarins* (Paris: Gallimard, 1954), Anne's feeling about age is morbidly and existentially pronounced:

A woman of thirty-nine, a woman of a certain age! . . . My old age is lying in wait for me, no way to escape it; already I could catch a glimpse of it in the corner of my mirror. . . I life up my hair and see white streaks. . . The complexion of my face might still seem supple and fresh but from one moment to the next the mask is going to slip, baring the rheumy eyes of an old woman.

In *La Force de l'Âge* (Paris: Gallimard, 1960), the then fifty-two-year-old writer states that to age is to decline. The short story, "L'âge de discrétion," published in the volume *La Femme Rompue* (Paris: Gallimard, 1967), shows the aging process as unavoidable.

Beauvoir herself is not immune to the fear of old age. In *La Force des Choses* (Paris: Gallimard, 1963), she tells of the consequence of a bicycle accident: "Since my fall from my bicycle, I was missing a tooth; the gap showed and I didn't intend to have it filled. I was old now, I was thirty-six." In the same volume, she admits: "I often stop, flabbergasted, at the sight of this incredible thing that serves as a face. . . I loathe my appearance now" — she was about

fifty-five when the book was published — "the eyebrows slipping down toward the eyes, the bags underneath, the excessive fullness of the cheeks, and that air of sadness around the mouth that wrinkles always bring." Life, in fact, is running out: "Now the hours are all too short as they whirl me on in the last frenzied gallop to the tomb."

But woman is not the only one to become old. Having elucidated the status of her own sex in *The Second Sex*, Beauvoir, now older herself, proceeds to examine the status of the aged which, she feels, concerns both sexes. In *The Coming of Age* she accuses society of cheating everyone by perpetuating the myth of the white-haired and serene sage, by denying the very existence of old age, by hiding in so-called rest homes the decrepitude, poverty, and despair of the old. By virtue or by degradation, she says, the old are forced to be outsiders. Like *The Second Sex*, the book is based on considerable research in various fields, on scientific and literary works, on statistics, letters, diaries, and interviews. It demands that we "recognize ourselves in this old man or in that old woman . . . because we shall feel concerned, as indeed we are" (5).

The author first looks at the decline of the organism and at what medicine and geriatrics have to say on the subject. Next she examines the ethnological data. An examination of historical data reveals to Beauvoir that "speculation upon the subject . . . is considered primarily in terms of men" (89). And the chapter "Old Age in Present-day Society" offers a wealth of information on the status of the old in Western society.

Having thus described the aged from the outside, as objects, Beauvoir deals in Part II of her study with "the Being-in-the-world," with the inward experience of the aging human being. Old age is more apparent to others than to the aging person; when outsiders qualify us as old, we are cut to the quick. And, "whether we like it or not, in the end we submit to the outsider's point of view" (290).

Women seem to find it more difficult than men to accept old age. In

fact, says Beauvoir, "I have never come across one single woman, either in life or in books, who has looked upon her old age cheerfully" (297). Growing old has a feeling of irreversibility. The degeneration caused by senescence is irreparable (302). Living can no longer be taken for granted. As far as women are concerned, their sexuality seems biologically less affected by age than men's. But "all research shows that (older) women have a less active sexual life than men" (347).

In "Time, Activity, History," Beauvoir analyses the older person's relation to time. "The very quality of the future changes between middle age and the end of one's life" (378). A boundary mark is seen upon the horizon. "A limited future and a frozen past: such is the situation that the elderly must face . . . in many instances it paralyzes them" (378). Non-action may be one reaction; another can be "a race against time that leaves . . . not a moment's respite" (379).

The chapter "Old Age and Everyday Life" is one of the most depressing. Beauvoir finds that, in general, the elderly are overcome by the emptiness of their lives. Boredom, lack of delight in one's own works, resignation, and gloom characterize old age.

Contradicting herself to some extent, Beauvoir states that women find it easier to enter old age, as it "does not bring down women from such heights" (475). Therefore older women appear often less withdrawn, more accessible than older men. For women, old age can indeed mean liberation: liberation from children, from a husband, from all sorts of obligations and prohibitions. While many may "cling stubbornly to the values by which they have lived . . . their situation does offer them the possibility of breaking free" (489). Old age also allows intellectual freedom. The risk of punishment or repression having lessened, the individual can feel free to act, provided of course the individual still has projects. But unfortunately, the elderly are often affected by neuroses or psychoses which may prevent them from looking toward the future. In the case of women, melancholy

leads frequently to "a feeling of nothingness" (498).

Beauvoir accuses society of having a criminal old-age policy, of believing in profit only, of burying the aged worker in a "conspiracy of silence" (542). Her book is meant to shatter this silence. It uncovers injustices, misery in no uncertain terms and with proof at hand. Reading it is a shattering experience, is witnessing the destruction of the myth of serenity accompanying age. Beauvoir, the existentialist philosopher, looks with lucidity at facts, faces reality.

She does the same in the book relating the death of her mother, *Une mort très douce*, and in *La Cérémonie des Adieux* (Paris: Gallimard, 1981), which related Sartre's last ten years. Beauvoir has been condemned for the clinical coolness with which she observed her dying mother and Sartre's growing decrepitude. But decay and death are brutal and real adventures to Simone de Beauvoir. Looking at them lucidly meant to learn and know about them, to see their universal significance.

With *Une mort très douce* and *La Cérémonie des Adieux*, Beauvoir completes the existentialist definition of man and woman. Existence precedes essence, says Sartre. In her two books, Beauvoir shows how essence can be lost again in the last years of being, how being becomes nothingness at the end of life. In *Une mort très douce*, the essential mother becomes, in fact, a frail child nurtured by her own daughters. In *La Cérémonie des Adieux*, the great thinker becomes an impotent non-thinker.

Beauvoir's study on aging, as well as her treatment of it in her other books, is faithful to her philosophy, which does not allow myths to cover and mask reality. Beauvoir shows old age as a painful reality against which, like against other ills, we must, as individuals and as a society, fight. It is revealing that Beauvoir prefaced the account of her mother's death with these lines by Dylan Thomas:

Do not go gentle into that good night,
Old age should burn and rave at close of day;
Rage, rage against the dying of the light

and that *La Cérémonie des Adieux* is dedicated to those who loved, love, and will love Sartre. But immortality and eternal youth are possible in the abstract only. In reality, they are not. Reality means aging and dying. It is society's duty, then, to take into account the objective denunciation of old age and death that Simone de Beauvoir's books offer. For it is society's duty to allow men and women to share, with dignity and at any age,

in collective life. Will this happen? Simone de Beauvoir perceives the possibility as an idealist utopia. Let us hope that her perception is too pessimistic.

Indeed, Hélène Pedneault's recent interview with Simone de Beauvoir (*La vie en rose*, March, 1984) reveals that Beauvoir, having espoused her own principle of vigour through collective action, is, at seventy-six, as lively and lucid as ever.

Further Reading:

Jean Leighton, *Simone de Beauvoir on Women*. Rutherford, N.J.: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1975.

Marguerite Andersen is a professor in the Department of French Studies at the University of Guelph, Ontario. Her latest book is De Mémoire de Femme (Editions Les Quinze, Collection Réelles, Montréal).

November 1983: Riding the Bus

Would I like to be known
for my beautiful skin at eighty-nine?
I think rather
than gazing down on bus interiors
in black and white photographs,
with plunging neckline,
I would rather be known
for my poems.
Or pickled eggs,
oral sex technique or
even ancient drunken
performances, or
as a fine dancer.

Rather than my own company
growing rich on women's fear
of the aging of the fragile shell
At eighty-nine may I own
a store of wit and skill,
insights and inventories
of choices and chances,
magic songs, feather fans
and herbal lore. . .
Things I'd rather give away
or share,
than sell.

Gretel Miles

Victoria, British Columbia

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