

# The Changing Face of Age

by Jennifer Waelti-Walters

The prime importance of Simone de Beauvoir's work lies in the frank immediacy with which she has borne witness to the world around her. A sensitive observer of society, a thinker and at the same time a woman with an irrepressible zest for living every day to the full, she has captured, in her writing, the movement of a great part of the twentieth century. And, in keeping with the three aspects of her personality she has recorded her reaction to anything she has found important in three different ways.

She usually deals with a question first in a fictional form, thus making her thought accessible and applicable to a wide public. Then she researches and analyses the problem presenting her result as an essay. Finally, she publishes her personal awareness and reactions in her mémoires. The treatment of old age--a theme which has run through her work since the early 1940s --is no exception to the process laid out above.

As we may expect from a writer who draws the theme and characters of her novels directly from her own experience--and modifies both as little as she possibly can while making her point--Beauvoir does not begin to think about old people until she feels herself to be aging. There are no elderly characters in the early novels. Those we find in Les Bouches inutiles and All Men are Mortal are clearly there because they are necessary to the moral issue at stake for the protagonist; they are not developed as important characters in either work. It is very interesting to note, however, that they are not present in the source material: The author tells us that she took the story from Sismondini's Italian chronicles and indeed in the original we find mentioned only the poor, the children and the women.(1) Clearly Simone de Beauvoir wishes to make the point that society considers the aged useless and casts them off quite easily. The Simone de Beauvoir of these early works is still young and so she thinks of old people only as an established part of society who hold a certain collective position as they wait to die; yet she is already aware of their situation.

As the author gets older so her protagonists age also. In The Mandarin



Photo by Anne Fulton

we see a number of middle-aged characters at a turning point in their lives which precipitates most of them into an awareness of their advancing years.

Robert Dubreuilh at sixty is the oldest of the characters. An author and political activist he is conscious first of a great urgency in his work, a feeling that time is lacking (and this attitude is one which Sartre shared at this period, we are told). (2) Meanwhile his wife, a psychiatrist, observes first a physical change in him:

Suddenly, it was plain as day: he looked worn out. His eyes were bloodshot, his skin gray, his face puffy. "After all he isn't young any more," I thought anxiously, Oh, he still wasn't old, but nevertheless he couldn't allow himself his former excesses. The fact of the matter was, however, that he did work excessively, and indeed even more so than before, perhaps to prove to himself that he was still young. (3)

Next she notices a change in his attitude:

Now he feels his age; he needs certainties, and in the immediate future. (4)

With age has come a sense of a limited future for oneself and an unlimited future in which one has no part.

Dubreuilh states this himself later:

Robert nodded. "You're right; something doesn't ring true. And

I'll tell you what it is: I'm too old."

"What's your age got to do with it?"

"I realize only too well that many of the things I once set store by are no longer important; I'm being led to want a future very different from the one I used to imagine. Only I can't change myself, and therefore I see no place for myself in that future." (5)

This awareness of his age creates in Robert Dubreuilh a double-sided crisis of creativity and activity. On the one hand he wants to accomplish as much as possible, on the other he feels out of touch with his time ("Let's say I have a dated youth.") (6) and this brings a sense of futility which drains his desire to work. The problem is an intellectual one, concerning the usefulness of a certain course of action at a time when he is faced with defeat and opposition and Dubreuilh's statement that he will stop writing and live like everyone else is the reflection of a temporary state of depression. He never seriously considers ceasing the activities that have been his life.

Anne, his wife, has a very different attitude to her situation. She persists in the statement that her active life is drawing to a close and that all that remains for her to do is to kill time until her death.

Reason said to me, "My life is

over." But against all reason, I still had a good many years to kill.(7)

"She'd [Paule] be like myself, like millions of others: a woman waiting to die, no longer knowing she's living."(8)

Although she disclaims all coquetry, all interest in clothes and social occasions, nonetheless, she fears the loss of her looks most of all:

. . . Old age is awaiting me; there's no escaping it. Even now I can see its beginnings in the depths of the mirror. Oh, I'm still a woman, I still bleed every month. Nothing's really changed, except that now I know. I ran my fingers through my hair. Those white streaks are no longer a curiosity, a sign; they're the beginning. In a few years, my head will be the colour of my bones. My face still seems smooth and firm, but overnight the mask will melt, laying bare the rheumy eyes of an old woman. Each year the seasons repeat themselves; the wounds are healed. But there's no way in the world to halt the infirmities of age.(9)

It is in the light of this fear of old age and sense of finality that she allows herself to enter wholeheartedly into an affair. And she is quite conscious of her own intentions:

After years of abstinence, I had

been hoping for a new love, and I had very deliberately brought this one about. I had magnified it out of all proportion because I knew my life as a woman was drawing to a close.(10)

This attitude would seem reasonable perhaps if Anne Dubreuilh were the same age as her husband and if, like her friend Paule, she lived for love and her attractiveness to a lover, but Anne is a mere thirty-nine years old and a successful professional woman and a psychiatrist to boot. It is true that she tries to justify her attitude in terms of a refusal of compromise but all she does, in fact, is reaffirm her previous statements:

I hasten to tell myself, "I'm finished, I'm old." In that way, I cancel out those thirty or forty years when I will live, old and finished, grieving over a lost past; I'll be deprived of nothing since I've already renounced everything. There's more caution than pride in my sternness, and fundamentally it covers up a huge lie: by rejecting the compromises of old age, I deny its very existence. Under my wilting skin, I affirm the survival of a young woman with her demands still intact, a rebel against all concessions, and disdainful of those sad forty-year-old hags. But she doesn't exist any more, that young woman; she'll never be born again, even under

Lewis's kisses.(11)

The discrepancy between the attitude of a man of sixty and a woman twenty years younger is flagrant. The man sees himself in terms of intellectual vigour and political relevancy; that is, how useful he is to his society, while a woman of similar education is governed solely by the state of her sexual attributes--her face and her fertility--to the extent of ceasing to consider herself a woman once she has passed the menopause. Her career, her life count for nothing in the face of her usefulness to a man--and this in her own estimation.

Admittedly a woman is made aware of her advancing age by the physical change within herself but the resulting denegation of herself and her achievements shown by Anne Dubreuilh are caused by the conditioning given to women that Simone de Beauvoir described previously in The Second Sex.

A woman learns to define herself in relation to a man and her social status depends on his. Hence she sees herself largely in terms of her attractiveness and sexuality. When these are jeopardised--by loss of fertility and aging--then she runs the risk of losing her man and with him her position in the world. Anne is not clearly aware of this. Although she sees the change in people's attitudes to Paule--a woman alone is patronised, a woman suspected of searching for a man is mocked, an elderly

woman is a mockery of her own youthful self--she does not draw the obvious conclusions. Her reactions and fears are born of her upbringing and conditioning and they are all the more unsettling because Anne is a psychiatrist and yet does not recognise the source of her own troubles.

We see in Anne the beginnings of Dominique Langlois in Les Belles Images who, although she has a successful career and is at the top of her profession, is unable to conceive of herself as a whole person if there is no man whose life she shares. Anne has the attitude without being aware of the repercussions. Dominique is extremely aware of the social pressure involved. Neither analyses the cause of her panic at the thought of growing old.

Like her characters Simone de Beauvoir is very conscious of her advancing years and this consciousness together with a distaste for the thought of being old were present already when she herself was barely forty. (The second part of The Force of Circumstance is punctuated regularly by the statement "I am getting old"). Her symptoms and actions were similar to those of Anne Dubreuilh--at thirty-nine she began an affair with Algren and followed it with another at the age of forty-four with Claude Lanzmann--but her own presentation of her situation is much clearer than any she put in her novels. It is fundamentally the same situation, however, and nowhere does she seem to find it

strange that she should consider her life drawing to a close at an age when a man would be considered in his prime.

The major discussion of the problem comes in The Force of Circumstance which opens with a young person's view of old people--"Young women have an acute sense of what should and should not be done when one is no longer young."(12) This is the censorship we have seen in Nadine and we realise that the prudence Anne Dubreuilh ascribed to herself is one that Simone de Beauvoir is practising in reality. It is strange to read from the pen of the author of The Second Sex:

Now, at forty-four, I was relegated to the land of shades; yet, as I have said, although my body made no objection to this, my imagination was much less resigned. When the opportunity arose of coming back to life, I seized it gladly.(13)

Here she is falling into the attitude of which she is so conscious elsewhere--that of assessing her whole life in terms of her sexuality. Within the context of French society--as indeed we see in The Mandarins and later in Les Belles Images--it is extremely difficult for a woman to live in a way that is not to a certain extent dictated by her appearance. And we see to our surprise, and to Simone de Beauvoir's own, that she has not been able to free herself of such conditioning with regard to herself. Concerning Elsa Triolet she

writes:

At the time, I said to myself: "But she's wrong. An old woman isn't the same as an ugly woman. She's just an old woman! In the eyes of others, yes; but for oneself, once past a certain stage, the looking glass reflects a disfigured face. Now I understood her.(14)

The mirror is the focal point that brings home once again the discrepancy between self and other. For Beauvoir, and later for the narrator of "The Age of Discretion,"(15) the self is a young woman. When she stops to think she realises that her attitude to the world has changed but still her perception of herself is the one she had at the time of greatest activity, greatest accomplishment. She writes:

Old age. From a distance you take it to be an institution; but they are all young, these people who suddenly find that they are old.(16)

The transition is a period where the changes are ignored, brushed aside, avoided. Beauvoir herself managed to do this with the help of Lanzmann:

Lanzmann's presence beside me freed me from my age. First, it did away with my anxiety attacks. Two or three times he caught me going through one, and he was so alarmed to see me thus shaken that a command was established in every bone and nerve of my body never to yield to them; I found the idea of dragging him already into the horrors of de-

clining age revolting. And then, his participation revived any interest in everything.(17)

When I had first known him [Lanzmann], I was not yet ripe for old age; he hid his approach from me. Now I had found it already established inside me. I had still the strength to hate it, but no longer to despair.(18)

She says that she does not despair, but the violence of her reaction belies her words. Her attitude to her face is but one example:

I often stop, flabbergasted, at the sight of this incredible thing that serves me as a face....I had the impression once of caring very little what kind of figure I cut. In much the same way, people who enjoy good health and always have enough to eat never give their stomachs a thought. While I was able to look at my face without displeasure I gave it no thought, it could look after itself....Perhaps the people I pass in the street see merely a woman in her fifties who simply looks her age, no more, no less. But when I look, I see my face as it was, attacked by the pox of time for which there is no cure.(19)

From the outside, the change in her appearance is normal, for herself it is the indication of approaching death. All her life Simone de Beauvoir has been haunted at intervals by the metaphysical

effects within her own life but now death is a perpetual companion:

Death is no longer a brutal event in the far distance; it haunts my sleep. Awake, I sense its shadow between the world and me: it has already begun. That is what I had never foreseen: it begins early and it erodes.(20)

The idea that she is finite changes the author's attitude to the world. She is being detached from activities she enjoyed because she will not do them again, from places she loved because she will not see them again, from taking action against things because the revolt will soon be forgotten. Because her future is limited and other people will occupy her world there seems little point in shaking off the apathy she feels towards the time that is left. Beauvoir transmits her emotion with great power and the picture she paints is doleful indeed.(21) The world has disappointed her; she no longer has time either to change it or to change her commentary upon it and her personal future frightens her. Her reactions are complex as she struggles simultaneously against the brevity of her future and the period of waiting before death:

Memories grow thin, myths crack and peel, projects rot in the bud; I am here, and around me circumstances. If this silence is to last, how long it seems, my short future.

And what threats it includes! The only thing that can happen now at the same time new and important is misfortune. Either I shall see Sartre dead, or I shall die before him...Sometimes I want to finish it all quickly so as to shorten the dread of waiting.

Yet I loathe the thought of annihilating myself quite as much now as I ever did.(22)

The only alleviation of her anguish Simone de Beauvoir finds is in her writing. At first she felt a growing sense of urgency,(23) then the simple therapeutic need to write(24) and finally she finds that in writing she transcends time--not in a belief in the immortality of the printed word but in the work involved in making a book:

The writer nevertheless has the good fortune to be able to escape his own petrification at the moments when he is writing. Every time I start on a new book, I am a beginner again. I doubt myself, I grow discouraged, all the work accomplished in the past is as though it never was, my first drafts are so shapeless that it seems impossible to go on with the attempts at all, right up until the moment--always imperceptible, there, too, there is a break--when it has become impossible not to finish it. Each page, each sentence, makes a fresh demand on the powers of invention and requires an unprecedented

choice. Creation is adventure, it is youth and liberty.(25)

But the problem lies in the last sentence--the act of creation is an adventure, it is youth and freedom--and whether an old person is able to continue to invent and create. After all Beauvoir writes immediately before this passage "To grow old is to set limits on oneself, to shrink" and once one is defined can one surpass oneself? This is the question posited in "The Age of Discretion." The narrator of the story is a literary critic whose new book has just been adjudged a repetition of her earlier work. Her husband is a scientist who has not had an innovative idea for fifteen years. The story is somber but the narrator is more reconciled to her fate than Beauvoir was in The Prime of Life. The message would seem to be that one should keep an interest in something and that one should reduce the scale of one's projects and enjoy every day as it comes:

Do not look too far ahead. Ahead there were the horrors of death and farewells: it was false teeth, sciatica, infirmity, intellectual barrenness, loneliness in a strange world that we would no longer understand and that would carry on without us. Shall I succeed in not lifting my gaze to those horizons? Or shall I learn to behold them without horror? We are together: that is our good fortune. We shall help one another to live through this last adventure, this adventure

from which we shall not come back.  
Will that make it bearable for us?  
I do not know. Let us hope so. We  
have no choice in the matter.(26)

Given the violence of the upheaval in her personal life, and given her awareness of the probability that her situation is common to many, it is not surprising that Beauvoir should set out to document her experience and present her findings to the public. The result is The Coming of Age. Just as she explored her female condition to produce The Second Sex at a time when women desperately needed help to slough off their inferior position in society, so now, at a time when the number of old people in the western world is increasing while the respect paid to experience diminishes because of technological advance, she is in a situation which enables her to present the case of the elderly both from inside and out. This opposition of self and other gives its form to her thesis for she offers a picture of the general situation and also the intimacy of a number of case histories.

What she finds in others reinforces the experience she has already depicted in her novels and her mémoires--except that most people do not have the financial and intellectual privileges which enable them to fend off the anguish as well as Beau-

voir has been able to do. And we have felt the trauma she has undergone. What then of the others? So she looks at society in the light of this problem--as she has many times before in her life when facing some scandalous event--and comes to the conclusion that something is badly wrong in society when the vast majority of people are deprived of their usefulness as citizens and thus, frequently, of their self-image and self-esteem a mere two-thirds of the way through their lives. We remember the comment concerning retirement in "The Age of Discretion":

Retired: it sounds rather like rejected, tossed on to the scrap heap. The word used to chill my heart. . . I have crossed other frontiers, but all of them less distinct. This one was as rigid as an iron curtain.(27)

Once again Simone de Beauvoir has been sensitive to a problem, the exploration of which serves many people beside herself. Once again she translated first into the impersonality of fiction feelings that she was later prepared to discuss personally. Having thus brought a given situation to the attention of her readers and prepared the ground, she has again provided a valuable contribution to the understanding of an abusive situation. She may not think that writing justifies her existence(28)but many of her readers would certainly disagree with her.

NOTES

1. J.L.C. Sismondi de Sismondi, Histoire des républiques italiennes du Moyen Age (Paris, 1809), Vol. 4, pp. 264-5.  
(1305-6) However, Tolosato des Uberti and Agnello Guglielmini, rectors of the besieged town, beginning to run short of food, forced the poor, the children, widows and almost all low class women to leave Pistoia. It was a terrible sight for the citizens, left in the hands of the enemy and to see the gates closed behind them. (p. 264, my translation)
2. Force of Circumstance, trans. Richard Moisar (London, 1968), p. 444. All further references will be to this edition.
3. The Mandarins, trans. L.M. Firedman (Cleveland and New York, 1956), p. 212. All future references will be to this edition.
4. Ibid., p. 223.
5. Ibid., p. 436.
6. Ibid., p. 353.
7. Ibid., p. 80.
8. Ibid., p. 447.
9. Ibid., p. 86.
10. Ibid., p. 529.
11. Ibid., p. 537.
12. Force of Circumstance, p. 291.
13. Ibid.
14. Ibid., p. 493.
15. The Woman Destroyed, trans. Patrick O'Brian (New York, 1969), p. 14.  
In earlier days I never used to worry about old people: I looked upon them as the dead whose legs still kept moving. Now I see them--men and women: only a little older than myself.
16. Force of Circumstance, p. 672.
17. Ibid., p. 297.
18. Ibid., p. 480.
19. Ibid., pp.672-3.
20. Ibid., p. 673.
21. Force of Circumstance, pp. 669-74.
22. Ibid., pp. 673-4.
23. Ibid., p. 444.
24. Ibid., p. 666.
25. Ibid., p. 671.
26. Ibid., p. 85.
27. The Woman Destroyed, pp. 14-15.
28. Force of Circumstance, p. 666.  
Despite this undertow of disenchantment, though all idea of duty, of mission, of salvation has collapsed, no longer sure for whom or for what I write, the activity is now more necessary to me than ever. I no longer believe it to be a "justification," but without it I should feel mortally unjustified.

DEAR DOUR

May I avenge Dear Dour  
In poverty?  
Would the winds of the last rebellion  
Muster the sea?

Shall I blow my steam in the air  
Till snow falls down hot?  
May I avenge Dear Dour?  
I may not.

Jean Hillabold