

PENGUIN MODERN CLASSICS



Simone de Beauvoir

Old Age



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Simone de Beauvoir was born in Paris (above the Café de la Rotonde in Montparnasse) in 1908. Her father was a lawyer of conservative views. She took a degree in philosophy at the Sorbonne in 1929 and was placed second to Jean-Paul Sartre, who became her firm friend. She taught in the *lycées* at Marseille and Rouen from 1931 to 1937, and from 1938 to 1943 was teaching in Paris. After the war she emerged as one of the leaders of the existentialist movement. Her first novel, *L'Invitée*, was published in 1943, and in an essay, *Pyrrhus et Cinéas*, published in the following year, she developed some of the major themes of existentialism. *Le Sang des autres* appeared in 1945, when she also had a play, *Les Bouches inutiles*, presented at the Théâtre des Carrefours. There followed *Touéâtre des Ca sont mortels* and *Pour une morale de l'ambiguïté int mortels* and years later she published her famous two-volumes later she f women, *The Second Sex*, and in 1954 won thmen, *The S court* with her novel *The Mandarins*. After thurt with her *The Long March* (1958), *Memoirs of a Dutie des autres ar* (1959), *Djamila Boupacha* (with Gisèle Halimi); *Bouches her of Life* (1963), *The Blood of Others* (1964), *F. There in cumstance* (1965), *A Very Easy Death* (1966), *Le Sanges Images* (1967), *La Femme Rompue* (*The Woman Destroyed*, 1969) and *All Said and Done* (1974). Her last book was *Adieux: A Farewell to Sartre*. She travelled widely in Europe and America.

Simone de Beauvoir died on 14 April 1986. In her obituary, *The Times* said, 'Simone de Beauvoir was always a very readable writer and a very likeable person. Her honesty, her sincerity, her almost Victorian high seriousness, commanded widespread respect.'

SIMONE DE BEAUVOIR

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TRANSLATED BY
PATRICK O'BRIAN



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INTRODUCTION

When Buddha was still Prince Siddhartha he often escaped from the splendid palace in which his father kept him shut up and drove about the surrounding countryside. The first time he went out he saw a tottering, wrinkled, toothless, white-haired man, bowed, mumbling and trembling as he propped himself along on his stick. The sight astonished the prince and the charioteer told him just what it meant to be old. 'It is the world's pity,' cried Siddhartha, 'that weak and ignorant beings, drunk with the vanity of youth, do not behold old age! Let us hurry back to the palace. What is the use of pleasures and delights, since I myself am the future dwelling-place of old age?'

Buddha recognized his own fate in the person of a very aged man, because, being born to save humanity, he chose to take upon himself the entirety of the human state. In this he differed from the rest of mankind, for they evade those aspects of it that distress them. And above all they evade old age. The Americans have struck the word death out of their vocabulary – they speak only of the 'the dear departed': and in the same way they avoid all reference to great age. It is a forbidden subject in present-day France, too. What a furious outcry I raised when I offended against this taboo at the end of *La Force des choses*! Acknowledging that I was on the threshold of old age was tantamount to saying that old age was lying there in wait for every woman, and that it had already laid hold upon many of them. Great numbers of people, particularly old people, told me kindly or angrily but always at great length and again and again, that old age simply did not exist! There were some who were less young than others, and that was all it amounted to. Society looks upon old age as a kind of shameful secret that it is unseemly to mention. There is a copious literature dealing with women, with

children, and with young people in all their aspects: but apart from specialized works we scarcely ever find any reference whatsoever to the old. A comic-strip artist once had to re-draw a whole series because he had included a pair of grandparents among his characters. 'Cut out the old folks,' he was ordered.¹ When I say that I am working on a study of old age people generally exclaim, 'What an extraordinary notion! ... But you aren't old! ... What a dismal subject.'

And that indeed is the very reason why I am writing this book. I mean to break the conspiracy of silence. Marcuse observes that the consumers' society has replaced a troubled by a clear conscience and that it condemns all feelings of guilt. But its peace of mind has to be disturbed. As far as old people are concerned this society is not only guilty but downright criminal. Sheltering behind the myths of expansion and affluence, it treats the old as outcasts. In France, where twelve per cent of the population are over sixty-five and where the proportion of old people is the highest in the world, they are condemned to poverty, decrepitude, wretchedness and despair. In the United States their lot is no happier. To reconcile this barbarous treatment with the humanist morality they profess to follow, the ruling class adopts the convenient plan of refusing to consider them as real people: if their voices were heard, the hearers would be forced to acknowledge that these were human voices. I shall compel my readers to hear them. I shall describe the position that is allotted to the old and the way in which they live: I shall tell what in fact happens inside their minds and their hearts; and what I say will not be distorted by the myths and the clichés of bourgeois culture.

Then again, society's attitude towards the old is deeply ambivalent. Generally speaking, it does not look upon the aged as belonging to one clearly-defined category. The turning-point of puberty allows the drawing of a line between the adolescent and the adult – a division that is arbitrary only within narrow limits; and at eighteen or perhaps twenty-one youths are admitted to the community of grown men. This advancement is nearly always accompanied by initiation rites. The time at which old age begins

1. Reported by François Garrigue in *Dernières Nouvelles d'Alsace*, 12 October 1968.

is ill-defined; it varies according to the era and the place, and nowhere do we find any initiation ceremonies that confirm the fresh status.² Throughout his life the individual retains the same political rights and duties: civil law makes not the slightest difference between a man of forty and one of a hundred. For the lawyers an aged man is as wholly responsible for his crimes as a young one, except in pathological cases.³ In practice the aged are not looked upon as a class apart, and in any case they would not wish so to be regarded. There are books, periodicals, entertainments, radio and television programmes for children and young people: for the old there are none.⁴ Where all these things are concerned, they are looked upon as forming part of the body of adults less elderly than themselves. Yet on the other hand, when their economic status is decided upon, society appears to think that they belong to an entirely different species: for if all that is needed to feel that one has done one's duty by them is to grant them a wretched pittance, then they have neither the same needs nor the same feelings as other men. Economists and legislators endorse this convenient fallacy when they deplore the burden that the 'non-active' lay upon the shoulders of the active population, just as though the latter were not potential non-actives and as though they were not insuring their own future by seeing to it that the aged are taken care of. For their part, the trade unionists do not fall into this error: whenever they put forward their claims the question of retirement always plays an important part in them.

The aged do not form a body with any economic strength whatsoever and they have no possible way of enforcing their

2. The feasts with which some societies celebrate people's sixtieth or eightieth birthdays are not of an initiatory character.

3. Mornet, the public prosecutor, began his indictment of Pétain by reminding his hearers that the law takes no account of age. In recent years the 'inquiry into personality' that comes before the trial can emphasize the age of the accused: but only as one feature among all the rest.

4. *La Bonne Presse* has recently launched a periodical intended for old people. It confines itself to giving information and practical advice.

rights: and it is in the interest of the exploiting class to destroy the solidarity between the workers and the unproductive old so that there is no one at all to protect them. The myths and the clichés put out by bourgeois thought aim at holding up the elderly man as someone who is different, as *another being*. 'Adolescents who last long enough are what life makes old men out of,' observes Proust. They still retain the virtues and the faults of the men they were and still are: and this is something that public opinion chooses to overlook. If old people show the same desires, the same feelings and the same requirements as the young, the world looks upon them with disgust: in them love and jealousy seem revolting or absurd, sexuality repulsive and violence ludicrous. They are required to be a standing example of all the virtues. Above all they are called upon to display serenity: the world asserts that they possess it, and this assertion allows the world to ignore their unhappiness. The purified image of themselves that society offers the aged is that of the white-haired and venerable Sage, rich in experience, planing high above the common state of mankind: if they vary from this, then they fall below it. The counterpart of the first image is that of the old fool in his dotage, a laughing-stock for children. In any case, either by their virtue or by their degradation they stand outside humanity. The world, therefore, need feel no scruple in refusing them the minimum of support which is considered necessary for living like a human being.

We carry this ostracism so far that we even reach the point of turning it against ourselves: for in the old person that we must become, we refuse to recognize ourselves. 'Of all realities [old age] is perhaps that of which we retain a purely abstract notion longest in our lives,' says Proust with great accuracy. All men are mortal: they reflect upon this fact. A great many of them become old: almost none ever foresees this state before it is upon him. Nothing should be more expected than old age: nothing is more unforeseen. When young people, particularly girls, are asked about their future, they set the utmost limit of life at sixty. Some say, 'I shan't get that far: I'll die first.' Others even go so far as to say 'I'll kill myself first.' The adult behaves as though he will never grow old. Working men are often ama-

zed, stupefied when the day of their retirement comes. Its date was fixed well beforehand; they knew it; they ought to have been ready for it. In fact, unless they have been thoroughly indoctrinated politically, this knowledge remains entirely outside their ken.

When the time comes nearer, and even when the day is at hand, people usually prefer old age to death. And yet at a distance it is death that we see with a clearer eye. It forms part of what is immediately possible for us: at every period of our lives its threat is there: there are times when we come very close to it and often enough it terrifies us. Whereas no one ever becomes old in a single instant: unlike Buddha, when we are young or in our prime we do not think of ourselves as already being the dwelling-place of our own future old age. Age is removed from us by an extent of time so great that it merges with eternity: such a remote future seems unreal. Then again the dead are *nothing*. This nothingness can bring about a metaphysical vertigo, but in a way it is comforting – it raises no problems. ‘I shall no longer exist.’ In a disappearance of this kind I retain my identity.⁵ Thinking of myself as an old person when I am twenty or forty means thinking of myself as someone else as *another* than myself. Every metamorphosis has something frightening about it. When I was a little girl I was amazed and indeed deeply distressed when I realized that one day I should turn into a grown-up. But when one is young the real advantages of the adult status usually counterbalance the wish to remain oneself, unchanged. Whereas old age looms ahead like a calamity: even among those who are thought well preserved, age brings with it a very obvious physical decline. For of all species, mankind is that in which the alterations caused by advancing years are the most striking. Animals grow thin; they become weaker: they do not undergo a total change. We do. It wounds one’s heart to see a lovely young woman and then next to her her reflection in the mirror of the years to come – her mother. Lévi-Strauss says that the Nambikwara Indians have a single word that means ‘young and beautiful’ and another that means ‘old and ugly’. When

5. This identity is all the more strongly guaranteed to those who believe they have an immortal soul.

we look at the image of our own future provided by the old we do not believe it: an absurd inner voice whispers that *that* will never happen to us – when *that* happens it will no longer be ourselves that it happens to. Until the moment it is upon us old age is something that only affects other people. So it is understandable that society should manage to prevent us from seeing our own kind, our fellow-men, when we look at the old.

We must stop cheating: the whole meaning of our life is in question in the future that is waiting for us. If we do not know what we are going to be, we cannot know what we are: let us recognize ourselves in this old man or in that old woman. It must be done if we are to take upon ourselves the entirety of our human state. And when it is done we will no longer acquiesce in the misery of the last age; we will no longer be indifferent, because we shall feel concerned, as indeed we are. This misery vehemently indicts the system of exploitation in which we live. The old person who can no longer provide for himself is always a burden. But in those societies where there is some degree of equality – within a rural community, for example, or among certain primitive nations – the middle-aged man is aware, in spite of himself, that his state tomorrow will be the same as that which he allots to the old today. That is the meaning of Grimm's tale, versions of which are to be found in every countryside. A peasant makes his old father eat out of a small wooden trough, apart from the rest of the family: one day he finds his son fitting little boards together. 'It's for you when you are old,' says the child. Straight away the grandfather is given back his place at the family table. The active members of the community work out compromises between their long-term and their immediate interests. Imperative necessity compels some primitive tribes to kill their aged relatives, even though they themselves have to suffer the same fate later on. In less extreme cases selfishness is moderated by foresight and by family affection. In the capitalist world, long-term interests no longer have any influence: the ruling class that determines the fate of the masses has no fear of sharing that fate. As for humanitarian feelings, they do not enter into account at all, in spite of the flood of hypocritical words. The

economy is founded upon profit; and in actual fact the entire civilization is ruled by profit. The human working stock is of interest only in so far as it is profitable. When it is no longer profitable it is tossed aside. At a congress a little while ago, Dr Leach, a Cambridge anthropologist, said, in effect, 'In a changing world, where machines have a very short run of life, men must not be used too long. Everyone over fifty-five should be scrapped.'⁶

The word 'scrap' expresses his meaning admirably. We are told that retirement is the time of freedom and leisure: poets have sung 'the delights of reaching port'.⁷ These are shameless lies. Society inflicts so wretched a standard of living upon the vast majority of old people that it is almost tautological to say 'old and poor': again, most exceedingly poor people are old. Leisure does not open up new possibilities for the retired man; just when he is at last set free from compulsion and restraint, the means of making use of his liberty are taken from him. He is condemned to stagnate in boredom and loneliness, a mere throw-out. The fact that for the last fifteen or twenty years of his life a man should be no more than a reject, a piece of scrap, reveals the failure of our civilization: if we were to look upon the old as human beings, with a human life behind them, and not as so many walking corpses, this obvious truth would move us profoundly. Those who condemn the maiming, crippling system in which we live should expose this scandal. It is by concentrating one's efforts upon the fate of the most unfortunate, the worst-used of all, that one can successfully shake a society to its foundations. In order to destroy the caste system, Gandhi tackled the status of the pariahs: in order to destroy the feudal family, Communist China liberated the women. Insisting that men should remain men during the last years of their lives would imply a total upheaval of our society. The result cannot possibly be obtained by a few limited reforms that leave the system intact: for it is the exploitation of the workers, the pulverization of society, and the utter poverty of a culture confined to the privileged, educated few that leads to this kind of dehumanized old age. And it is this old age that makes it clear that everything has to be

6. This was written in December 1968.

7. Racan's phrase.

reconsidered, recast from the very beginning. That is why the whole problem is so carefully passed over in silence: and that is why this silence has to be shattered. I call upon my readers to help me in doing so.

PREFACE

Hitherto I have spoken of old age as though that expression stood for a clearly defined reality. In fact, as far as our own species is concerned old age is by no means easy to define. It is a biological phenomenon – the elderly man's organism displays certain particularities. It brings with it psychological consequences – certain forms of behaviour are rightly looked upon as being characteristic of old age. And like all human situations it has an existential dimension – it changes the individual's relationship with time and therefore his relationship with the world and with his own history. Then again man never lives in a state of nature: in his old age, as at every other period of his life, his status is imposed upon him by the society to which he belongs. What so complicates the whole problem is the close interdependence of all these points of view. Nowadays we know that it is pointless to study the physiological and the psychological aspects separately, for each governs the other; and as we shall see, this relationship is especially clear in old age – the chosen realm of psychosomatic disturbance. Yet what is termed the individual's psychic or spiritual life can only be understood in the light of his existential situation: this situation, therefore, also affects his physical organism. And the converse applies, for he experiences his relationship with time differently according to whether his body is more or less impaired.

Lastly, society takes into account the aged man's personal make-up – his decrepitude or his experience, for example – when it allots him his role and his position: and conversely. The individual is conditioned by society's theoretical and practical attitude towards him. An analytical description of the various aspects of old age is therefore not enough: each reacts upon all the others and is at the same time affected by them, and it is in

the undefined flow of this circular process that old age must be understood.

That is why a study of old age must try to be exhaustive. Since my essential aim is to show the fate of the old in our present-day society, it may seem surprising that I should devote so many pages to the place they occupy in what are called primitive communities and to that which they have occupied at various periods in the history of mankind. But although old age, considered as a biological fate, is a reality that goes beyond history, it is nevertheless true that this fate is experienced in a way that varies according to the social context: and conversely, the meaning or the lack of meaning that old age takes on in any given society puts that whole society to the test, since it is this that reveals the meaning or the lack of meaning of the entirety of the life leading to that old age. In order to judge our own society we have to compare the solutions it has chosen with those adopted by others through space and time. This comparison will allow us to distinguish that which is inescapable in the state of the aged; to see how far and at what cost these hardships can be eased; and hence to gauge the responsibility of the system in which we live with respect to these hardships.

Every human situation can be viewed from without – seen from the point of view of an outsider – or from within, in so far as the subject assumes and at the same time transcends it. For the outsider, the aged man is the object of a certain knowledge: the aged man himself experiences his condition at first hand – he has an immediate, living comprehension of it. In the first part of this book I shall adopt the first viewpoint: I shall examine what biology, anthropology, history and contemporary sociology have to tell us about old age. In the second I shall do my best to describe the way in which the aged man inwardly apprehends his relationship with his body, with time and with the outside world. Neither of these two inquiries will enable us to define old age *per se*: on the contrary, we shall find that it takes on a great many different aspects, no one of them being a function of the others. Both today and throughout history, the class-struggle governs the manner in which old age takes hold of a man: there is a great gulf between the aged slave and the aged patrician,